CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

Prologue

It is one of the tricks of a child's imagination – and of a scholar's too, if he knows what's good for him – to move like some planetary traveller in space and time across the landscapes of the past. An interest in the theatres of Elizabethan London might bring us in the mind's eye to hover high above the Thames on a bright summer's afternoon, to see the river winding in the sunlight (its gloomy flotsam happily invisible from here); the tide is ebbing, and we can see the pattern of its motion unmoving in the moving water, especially where the starlings of the bridge conspire to stem the flow. Below that thin strip of houses laid perilously across the water the large craft go about their business, docking at Billingsgate or Wapping, making sail to catch the tide, some in the shallows on their beam ends, bottoms up for careening. Above the bridge the Thames is alive with watermen's dows crossing and recrossing the stream, for here the river is less vigorous in its movement, a little like a lake above a dam.

There is a pattern in almost everything when seen from such a height as this. Downstream the Tower marks the end of the city, and beyond it are fields and smallholdings. Mile End is open country. At the northern end of the bridge the lines of traffic fan out among the densely clustered streets and alleys, most of them invisible from our vantage point, deeply shaded narrow clefts between the terracotta fields of tiled roofs. Here and there – but rarely – a tree breaks through. At every corner, it seems, a squat church tower rises a little above the height of the tiled peaks, and sometimes sports a lead-covered spire whose imposing height, though hardly to be comprehended from our point of view, nevertheless lends stereoscopic depth to the scene. Not much of the old city wall is to be seen, but its gates block the main traffic routes at the periphery of the most thickly built-up area. Like the bridge, they impose themselves on the composition before us, for to one side they flank almost solid urban construction, wood, brick and tile, while to the other they look out on the green plots, hedgerows and tentergrounds of the more sparsely populated suburbs.

There is a pattern, too, in the separation of this contained city from its

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

neighbour to the west and south. Beyond Ludgate the densely built-up Strand crowds its jettied houses and innyards beside the courts and formal gardens of the great villas by the river. To the north Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields are what their names imply: a country lane amid rural fields. Yet further west the red brick of St James's can just be made out, but the eye is caught more firmly by the still resplendent ashlar of the aptly named Whitehall to the south, beyond the bend in the river. Here is the biggest of all the villas of the bank, its grounds strung with two-storeyed access galleries, the main courts obvious enough, but between and around them a wondrous huddle of undistinguished rooftops. Further south, there is nothing undistinguished about Westminster, where hall and Abbey ripple their Gothic stonework warmly in the sun.

Almost everything in the scene below us is the work of man. Even the river, to whose soft running the best of Elizabethan poets tuned his song, is channelled a little by human handiwork, in wharf and dock and many-arched bridge. Within its pewter sheen we can now make out, with eyes grown accustomed to the light, the tarnish of outflow from the Fleet as it joins the paler hue of the main stream. Knots of boats tied up beside Whitehall Stairs, Paul's Wharf and a hundred other landing points show how regularly its surface is scored by the activities of the thousands of boatmen who are reputed to make their living from its traffic. The patterns of land traffic too may be seen in the Strand, along Cheapside, the tracks etched deep up Bishopsgate and disappearing into the built-up deck of London Bridge to fan out again on the other side in Southwark, down Borough High Street, along Tooley Street one way and into Bankside the other.

These patterns, like those imposed by agriculture on the surrounding countryside, are assuredly human, but they are no intentional part of a human design. They are the tracks, the spores, of civilization, signs of other designs. The coal landed at St Katherine's dock feeds the furnaces of Gracechurch Street, and lighter, wharf, crane, cart and smoke give evidence of its traffic: the design of the northern miner to produce it and of the London craftsman to consume it in his workshop. The scene below us is crossed and crossed again with the evidence of such collaborative trade. Among the houses near Aldwych a new roof is arising, but like the others it does not address itself towards our point of view. Its shape is an accidental echo of the floors below, and soon it will take its undistinguishable part among the rest, its builders concerned that it should be weathertight and not at all worried about the contribution it makes to our bird's-eye view.

Were we to revisit the scene a mere half-century later we should find rather more evidence of Londoners appearing to address themselves to the skies. The open meadows at Smithfields and Lincoln's Inn would be partly covered, built up in regular terraces and planted in neatly ruled rows of trees, all forming a fine geometric pattern when viewed from above, though

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

perhaps a little monotonous on the ground. The piazza at Covent Garden would be laid out, the model for many a later London square, but there would still be nothing to resemble the astonishing declivities of Nash's time, the emphatic patterns of Regent's Park and Street, though the seminal idea would have been planted: cities should be designed to a plan.

There is not much sign of an intentional plan in Elizabethan London. The ribbons of shadow which mark those of the streets that are visible at all follow something of a Roman grid, perhaps, but it is everywhere modified by an organic growth of lanes and alleys. Here and there a more or less regular courtyard catches the eye, a coaching inn perhaps, or an Inn-of-Court, but these are isolated passages of visual order in the jumbled roofscape. Only the churches seem to be much influenced by deliberate planning, for most of them – by no means all – face one way, like boats anchored in a tidal flow. Among them two stand out: the abbey church at Westminster, and in London the huge pile of St Paul's, dominant at the centre of the scene. Its site is the best in the city, on a rise well above the river. Its tall central tower, spireless since the fire of 1561, rises high towards us, and around it the nave, choir and transepts spread their dark leaded roofs. The whole assembly is cruciform, a plan intended to be read from above, *sub specie aeternitatis*. But churches are not the only buildings in the townscape to give evidence of a notably patterned design. To the north of Bishopsgate, in the fields at Holywell, the Curtain theatre stands, a wooden O, about as large in diameter as St Paul's chancel is wide. It is therefore, from this point of view, an outstanding building, bulky enough to call attention to itself and moreover distinctive in design. To the south of the bridge, not far from the river at Bankside, we can see similar structures: the Globe south of Maid Lane, the Rose nearby and the Beargarden closer to the bank. Further west is the Swan, like most of the others a large building about 100 ft across, polygonal in plan and with a central courtyard largely open to the elements. With the exception of the Beargarden all these wooden rings boast some kind of roof covering part of the yard, always located to the southwest of the frame; and if we peer directly down into the Globe we can see that in the afternoon sun the whole area beneath its roof is in deep shade. The actors are even now at work, but from here they are tiny figures, almost too small for sight. Sunlight penetrates to the framework of some of the galleries opposite them, where part of the audience is visible, attentive to the play and to each other, and not at all to the sky above. They experience, each one for himself, what we can see as a collective fact: the capacity of the building to focus attention inward, from the periphery to the centre. An audience in one of these playhouses is in no need of Jaques' 'inuocation, to call fools into a circle', for they are there already.

At the heart of the city, then, lies the distinctive cruciform outline of the Christian cathedral; at the outskirts, where the congregation of tile and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

thatch gives way to green fields, stand the equally remarkable theatres, all much the same in plan as if built to a standard design, in their roundness vividly contrasting with everything else in view. From a distance, at least, these are the two most noticeable architectural forms to stand out from the largely mediaeval prospect before us. When Inigo Jones drew a panorama of the town for a scene in Davenant's masque, *Britannia Triumphans*, he centred the view on St Paul's – as who would not? – but in the foreground, neatly aligned with the cathedral, he placed the characteristic outline of the Swan. Everything else in his picture is a rectangular box, with or without a pitched roof. Yet in the town itself, if not quite in Jones's image of it, the form of St Paul's is clearly related to the scores of churches which crowd the streets around it. It is linked to them often by a common orientation, and often too by a similarly cross-shaped plan. The theatres seem to find no such echo in the architecture of the rest of London. If we look closely we shall see other round buildings, to be sure. A small tiled amphitheatre in Shoe Lane houses cockfights, and to the west there is the round stone Temple of the Knights of Jerusalem, but these show no obvious signs of kinship with the great polygonal auditoria in the suburbs. The theatres are both distinctive and without obvious parallel. Yet the very particularity of their form, with all the special demands it must have made upon the carpenters who built them, argues that their design was neither an instant whim nor a routine application of commonplace trade practices. Our sight of them from above, like the sight of St Paul's, makes palpable the determined human agency of their design. These are no mere spores of civilization, like the swelling aggregation of sheds and huts beside Tooley Street. Nor are they simply signs of other activity, like the ruts in the lanes or the smoke about Gracechurch Street. They are deliberate human structures, complex in design because they serve a complex human function. Save for the great churches, no other class of building in the prospect announces with such certainty that it is shaped by an idea transcending the utilitarian, or bears so clearly the imprint of the human spirit.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

I FESTIVE THEATRES

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

1
Goodly theatres

So much for mere intuition: we had better come down to earth again, to confront more mundane questions. Granted that the Elizabethan theatres were unusual, outstanding structures, where did the builders find their model? No new type of building is altogether without antecedents, a fact which led the greatest of our theatre historians, Sir Edmund Chambers, to agree with the Victorian idea that the open playhouses had developed from the innyards of such institutions as the Bel Savage, the Bell and the Cross Keys. There – so the argument went – the players had performed their London seasons before the establishment of the Theater in 1576. The innyard formed a ready-made auditorium, enclosed on every side (though open to the sky above) and therefore controllable: no audience could melt away at the sight of a collection box, and the presumed existence of surrounding galleries made for a degree of comfort for those who could pay the extra to command a place in one of them. The stage might be placed against the wall opposite the main entrance to the yard, and rooms contiguous to it made available to the actors for their tiring house. The utilitarian pattern thus established led – it was argued – to the pattern shown in de Witt's famous drawing of the Swan (plate 1), which shows a similar disposition of galleries, stage and yard. Although the Flemish traveller wrote his notes in Latin, and labelled the central floor of the Swan as *planities sive arena*, Sir Edmund was confident enough of the inn theory to suggest the provenance of the English term:

> This is the space ordinarily known as the 'yard', a name which it may fairly be taken to have inherited from the inn-yards, surrounded by galleries and open overhead, in which, in the days before the building of the Theatre in 1576, more or less permanent playhouses had grown up.[1]

Such a theory requires for its proof the existence of sound evidence that innyard galleried theatres did indeed exist before 1576, after which year the presence of the Theater among the entertainment houses of the capital would exert an irresistible influence on subsequent playhouse design. For

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

the Theater was a 'vast' polygonal frame of three storeys of galleries,[2] and without doubt it was the source of the design of the Swan and other public playhouses of the age. Once this model had been constructed in the fields of Shoreditch there was little enough need to look beyond it for examples of how to build, and the surviving carpenters' contracts for the Fortune and the Hope contain many clauses referring questions of design to the existing models (to the Globe for the one and to the Swan for the other).[3] Doubtless the Swan contract, had it survived, would have referred the builder directly to the Theater or its neighbour and near contemporary, the Curtain. Moreover innyard theatres dateable only after 1756 are as likely to have been influenced by the public playhouses as vice versa, and may have little to contribute to our present enquiry.

There can be no doubt that innyard playhouses did exist in London before John Brayne and James Burbage put their heads and their money together to build the Theater, but the evidence does not appear to indicate that they were many or of long standing. The clearest account is given by Richard Flecknoe in his 'Short Discourse of the English Stage', published in Restoration times as an appendix to his *Love's Kingdom*:

> about the beginning of Queen *Elizabeths* Reign, they began here [in London] to assemble into Companies, and set up Theaters, first in the City, (as in the Inn-yards of the *Cross-Keyes*, and *Bull* in *Grace* and *Bishops-Gate Street* at this day is to be seen) . . .[4]

This account appears to indicate an early date for the theatrical conversions, but in fact the first allusion to a play at the Bull dates only from 1578, while at the Cross Keys the earliest such reference occurs three years later.[5] That the yard of the Bel Savage in St Bride's parish was equipped with galleries and used theatrically is indicated by the first edition of William Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent* (1576), in which the system used for gathering money from pilgrims at Boxley Abbey is somewhat loosely likened to the customs at the London houses of entertainment:

> No more then suche as goe to Parisgardein, the Bell Sauage, or some other suche common place, to beholde Beare Bayting, Enterludes, or Fence playe, can account of any pleasant spectacle unlesse they first paye one penny at the gate, another at the entrie to the Scaffolde, and the thirde for a quiet standing.

In a later edition, of 1596, Lambarde stresses the similarity of inn and permanent playhouse by including the Theater in his list of show places.[6] Certainly the Bel Savage was used for entertainments, whatever its structure, but the earliest of plays there anticipated the date of the Theater by very little: George Gascoigne wrote slightingly of the 'merrye Iest' and 'vayne delight' of 'Bellsauage fayre', but not until 1575.[7] The first record of a fencing prize at the Bel Savage is in an entry for 1568, but prizes in earlier

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

1 Johannes de Witt, The Swan theatre *c.* 1596 (copy by Aernout van Buchel).

times had generally been fought in such open courtyards as that at Leadenhall, without benefit of stands for an audience. Lambarde's comment of 1576 remains the earliest evidence of a built auditorium at any of the innyard theatres.[8]

Thus far I have introduced only what might be called 'accidental' records concerning these inns. But there is also a collection of routine bureaucratic documents referring to them, though in disappointingly ambiguous terms. Professor Glynne Wickham, in opening the assault on the innyard theory on which our present discussion is largely based, has reviewed them so thoroughly that here we need only provide a brief summary and echo his conclusions.[9] Beginning with the Parliamentary Act of 1543, a series of Acts of Common Council and Lord Mayor's Precepts reiterated a determination to exercise jurisdiction over stage interludes and other performances, and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

listed the sort of places that were subject to control. The earliest of these proclamations limited the permissible locations to the 'houses' of noblemen, the Mayor and aldermen, gentlemen or 'sad [i.e. grave] Co*mm*iners or hed p*ar*isheners'; to 'the open stretes . . . as in tyme paste it hathe been vsed & accustomed'; and to 'the com*m*en hall*es* of the Companyes fellowshipps or brotherhedd*es* of the same Citie'.[10] No mention here of inns or their yards, but in 1553 the city fathers spelled out more fully that they meant to control playing 'w*ith*in eny p*ar*te of' a person's 'house or houses yarde gardein or baksyde'.[11] Thereafter similar injunctions included the word 'yard' only occasionally, and usually in imitation of the 1553 document.

Thus while the records concerning the attempts to bring play-acting to heel give some countenance to the idea that plays might have been performed in the yards of inns during the 1550s, 1560s and 1570s, they indicate rather more surely that the performances were commonly given within doors. Their witness is sometimes rendered a little obscure by the ambiguity of the terms they employ. In 1574, for example, an Act of the Common Council alluded to the evils of crowds attending plays and getting up to no good 'In greate Innes, havinge chambers and secrete places adioyninge to their open stagies and gallyries'.[12] The phrase 'open stagies' has been taken to signify playing areas open to the sky, but Glynne Wickham cites cognate usages of the word in similar records where it clearly means 'public' as opposed to 'private'. The galleries in question might as well have been indoors as out.[13]

In all the documents only Lambarde's allusion to the system of payment at the Bel Savage gives any certain indication of a genuine innyard auditorium before 1576. If we turn to the provinces we find that the earliest record of a play in an innyard dates from Norwich in 1583, when an affray caused a fatality that was later examined in court. The records reveal that the performance was in the yard: 'this examynate sayeth that on satturnday last in the after noone he was at a play in the yard at the red lyon in St Stephans and hee dyd see three of the players rvnne of the Staige with there Sword*es* in there hand*es*'.[14] There is no suggestion, beyond the mention of the stage, that the inn was specially equipped as a theatre. Moreover the account is not only the earliest we have of an innyard production in the provinces; it appears also to be unique. Perhaps others will yet come to light, but they are unlikely to change the present state of our knowledge very much: before 1576 innyard theatres were rare.

There is little enough reason, therefore, to encourage the view that Burbage and Brayne took their pattern for the Theater from the inns of Gracechurch Street, though obviously it would be absurd to deny the Bel Savage and its like any influence at all. In later years the story is rather different. Of one innyard converted to theatrical purposes we have certain and complete notice. The Boar's Head in Whitechapel was dedicated to use

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10945-1 - The Human Stage: English Theatre Design, 1567-1640
John Orrell
Excerpt
More information

as a playhouse by a number of alterations made there in 1598, alterations which effectively prevented its continuing in the way of the victualling trade and turned it instead into a theatre. The greater part of the inn consisted of a long courtyard on the northern side of the street, just beyond the city bars. An existing gallery on the northeast side of this irregular space was useful for theatrical purposes, but because there were no others already on the site new ones were built on posts across the larger middle part of the court, and a fourth was added against the range of buildings on the southwest side. A stage was placed out in the yard some ten feet away from the forward edge of the southwestern gallery. In this rather minimal guise the Boar's Head took its place, illegally to be sure, amongst the several playhouses of Elizabethan London. It seems to have thrived, for within a year its proprietors regrouped and rebuilt. The galleries of the previous year were torn down and replaced by others which extended three or four feet further out into the yard, though because they were all on posts the area of the yard itself remained unchanged, save perhaps for the space occupied by a tiring house built beneath the new southwestern gallery, against which the stage was now moved to abut. At the opposite side an upper gallery was also introduced. The consequence of all this activity was that an ordinary innyard – which possessed, we should notice, no more than a single narrow gallery before the conversion – became a regular if rather small Elizabethan playhouse with a tiring house to the southwest, a stage located next to it so that its surface should be shaded in the afternoon, elevated galleries on every side so that its players performed 'in the round', and a yard for groundlings, open to the sky.

Everything that we know about this conversion – and that we know so much is largely due to the insistent researches of Herbert Berry[15] – confirms that the design was approached in an *ad hoc*, pragmatic way. It was intended from the start to make an upper gallery over the extended one on the northeast side, and when one of the owners, Oliver Woodliffe, found the builders measuring up for it in 1599 it occurred to him that the whole gallery structure of the theatre might profitably be expanded, and that there was no time like the present for doing it, before work on the upper gallery proceeded. 'I would pull downe this older gallery to the ground', he said, 'and buylde yt foure foote forwarder toward the stage into ye yarde.' He took a lath in his hand to show what he meant: 'yf yt were buylt so farr forwarder then would there be roome for three or foure seats more in a gallery, and for many mo people, and yet neu*er* the lesse roome in the yarde'.[16] So the yard was converted and adapted for good practical reasons, measured roughly with the sweep of a lath over the ground. Another witness testified – for all this knowledge comes from the litigation so fortunately indulged in by Elizabethan theatre folk – that Woodliffe had advised building the new gallery 'foure foote or thereab*outs*' further forward, and in fact when the job was

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org