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John Orrell

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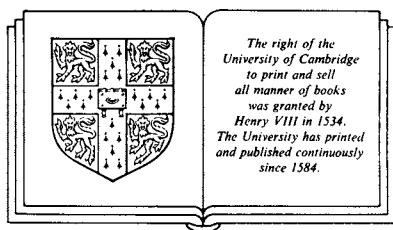
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English theatre design, 1567–1640

John Orrell

Professor of English, University of Alberta



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For Emma

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Preface

The aim of this book is to present the theatres of the time of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson in the light of contemporary architectural thought and building design. Many notable studies have been published on the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre seen from the point of view of the audience, the player and the playwright, chief among them the swelling volumes of Glynne Wickham's *Early English Stages*. Since the publication in 1940 of George Reynolds's *The Staging of Elizabethan Plays at the Red Bull Theater, 1605-25*, great advances have been made in the systematic treatment of play-texts as evidence for playhouse practices and performance techniques. We are now beginning to see the huge fund of theatrical information for the period methodically installed in computer databanks, ready for access, and at least one exhaustive study of the dramaturgy of the whole period is under way. The documentation of individual playhouses has also made some advances, more modest but not without significance. C. J. Sisson, Leslie Hotson and Herbert Berry between them have discovered new information about the Boar's Head playhouse and its players, an institution that emerged only as a fleeting shadow among the papers available to Sir Edmund Chambers when he published his standard history, *The Elizabethan Stage*, in 1923. More recently Janet Loengard has turned up a most important document describing the Red Lion theatre in Whitechapel, dating from 1567; and I have myself published a detailed plan of a theatre set up in the hall at Christ Church in 1605.

The steady accumulation of such documentary evidence over the years is bound to modify our view of the development of theatre design, and the present study is intended in part to incorporate the new information into a broad history of the playhouse structure. But I have also aimed to set the buildings and their theatrical fittings in a context of architectural thought that is not always immediately evident in the documents themselves, nor in the work of the theatrical scholars who interpret them today. Here the studies of the architectural historians are of the greatest value, for they have clarified, in Rudolf Wittkower's accurate words, the *Architectural Principles of*

PREFACE

the Age of Humanism. Not everyone will agree with all of Wittkower's more recondite arguments, but his book is largely a reminder of what is obvious about Renaissance design: that it takes its departure from theories about the ideal proportionality of the cosmos. Nowhere is this more evident than in the theoretical accounts of the design of that most human of social institutions, the theatre, and it is part of my intention to suggest that in the Italy of the cinquecento, and in London too, the design of the playhouse was often influenced by such ideas.

When the experienced designer Simon Basil prepared a scheme for a theatre at Christ Church in 1605 he specified that the auditorium should contain what he called 'a slight Portico . . . of hoopes & firrpoales' at the rear of the seating degrees. 'This portico', he added, 'giues a great grace to all the Theater, & without it, the Architectur is false.' The complete design, that is, constituted a true architecture of the theatre, and it has been my purpose in writing this book to discover what such an architecture might be. For three of the chapters I have risked a sort of literary coyness that I don't much like by venturing titles that use the discontinued word 'goodly': Spenser's 'goodly theaters', Holinshed's 'goodlie devise', and Shakespeare's (or Hamlet's) 'goodly frame'. When it was current the epithet was ordinarily used of someone's personal appearance, or of its representation in a picture, and meant, according to the *OED*, 'good-looking, well favoured or proportioned'. The hard-nosed practical information that is contained in most of the legalistic documents by which we know the details of the theatres' construction leaves little room for such language as this, but in their own way the fusty deeds and contracts do sometimes betray the more imaginative motives of the craftsmen and owners who signed them.

The pursuit of this 'goodly' idea of the theatre has led me to Serlio's book of architecture, and beyond that to the more general theories of Alberti and even of Vitruvius. Here I tread a path that has been little explored by students of the English theatre, even though the trail was blazed long ago in Lily B. Campbell's *Scenes and Machines on the English Stage during the Renaissance*, and more recently revisited by Frances Yates in *Theatre of the World*. That I do not agree with everything in these two remarkable books will be obvious to the reader of the ensuing chapters, but so will the debt that every page owes to their vigorous pioneering work.

In completing the study I have had the generous assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and of the University of Alberta, whose award of a McCalla Research Professorship made the whole thing possible.

Parts of this book have appeared before in a rather different form, as essays in theatre journals whose editors have kindly given permission for their reappearance here. Something of chapter 6 was published in *Theatre Notebook* 38 (1984), as 'Sunlight at the Globe'; part of chapter 8 was printed in

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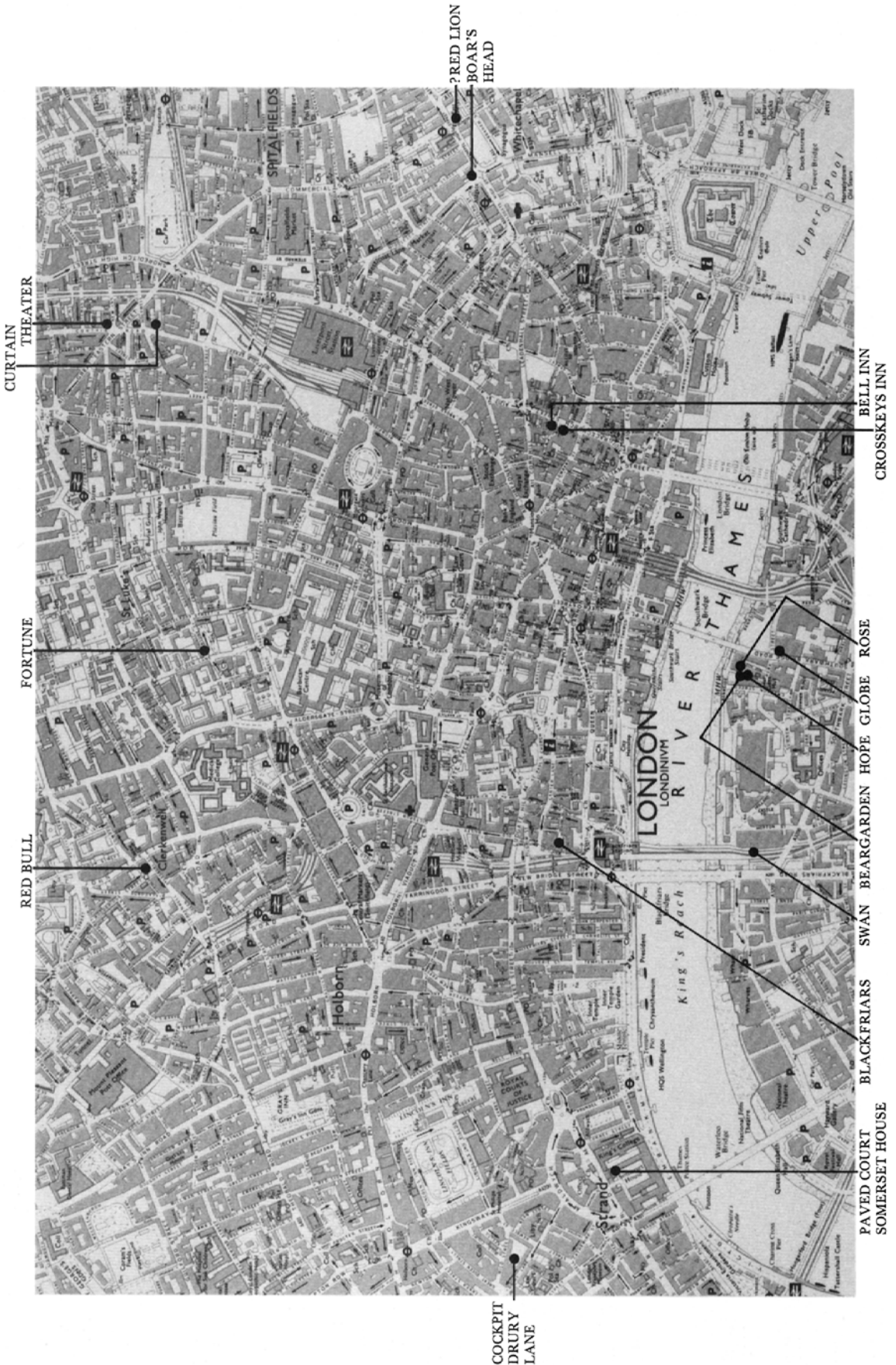
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