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Introduction: the Restoration theatre

When Parliament issued an ordinance against stage plays in 1642, the professional theatre officially died in England until Charles II regained the throne in 1660. During the 1630s theatrical activity in London can be divided into three main areas: 'public' playhouses such as the Globe, the Fortune and the Red Bull, which mostly revived older plays, romances, farces and melodramas for a predominantly lower-class audience; more élite 'private' theatres like Blackfriars, the Phoenix and Salisbury Court, attended mainly by members of the upper and professional classes, from which the majority of new plays came; and the court theatre where, among others, the productions in which Queen Henrietta Maria and her ladies performed were staged. During the Interregnum most of these forms of theatre ceased, although old plays were still performed at times (sometimes in public, more often in private) and occasional new ones composed and staged. A handful of playwrights and players survived into the Restoration, but essentially the professional theatre had to be recreated, along with the monarchy itself, in 1660.

Soon after Charles II returned, he issued patents to two of his followers, Sir Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant, to open theatres. In spite of opposition from other interested parties, these two playwrights, who were courtiers and friends of the king, were given the exclusive right to put on plays for profit and thus for the first time theatrical production in London was limited to only two companies. Killigrew, who was closer to the king, got most of the experienced actors available as well as a virtual monopoly on classic English plays. He formed the King's Company and began to stage plays at the converted Gibbon's Tennis Court. Davenant formed the Duke's Company from novices and less experienced players, but compensated for his disadvantages by arranging for the erection of an impressively equipped theatre with changeable scenery at Lincoln's

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Inn Fields, which was opened in June 1661. The success of this theatre propelled Killigrew into building a new theatre himself, the Theatre Royal in Bridge Street, which opened in 1663.

In spite of the fact that between them Killigrew and Davenant made it virtually impossible for plays to be staged by anyone else, by 1682 the King's Company was in such dire straits financially that it was forced to negotiate with the more successful Duke's Company to form an amalgamation. A variety of factors contributed to the company's demise, including poor patronage, internal dissension, bad financial management and the disaster of their Bridge Street playhouse burning down in January 1672. (In 1671, incidentally, the Duke's Company opened the finest Restoration theatre of all at Dorset Garden, spectacularly equipped with all the best stage machinery.) Its death warrant was signed on 14 October 1682 when its leading actor-shareholders, Charles Hart and Edward Kynaston, negotiated terms with the leading shareholders of the Duke's Company (Thomas Betterton, Charles Davenant and William Smith) and agreed to act for the Duke's Company, assign it their roles in King's Company plays and promote a union of the two companies. The so-called United Company was created and maintained control of all theatrical production for the next twelve years.

Two businessmen, the lawyer Christopher Rich and Sir Thomas Skipwith, purchased control of the new company. They discreetly bought up the Davenant share between 1687 and 1690 and then proceeded to conflict bitterly with the players, reducing their salaries and juggling with profits. Increased bad feeling came to a head in December 1694 when the best players banded together and presented a formal petition of complaint to the Lord Chamberlain. Efforts by Rich and Skipwith to appease the rebels were finally made, but too late. Led by star tragedian Thomas Betterton, the angry players broke away and formed their own company. In March 1695 they obtained a licence to perform and the following month they opened their own theatre, a players' republic, in the remodelled Lisle's Tennis Court. Betterton's company played at this theatre for the next ten years. In this way the competitive two-company system returned to London and continued into the next century.[1] Only in 1709 did a third company begin acting at William Penkethman's new theatre at Greenwich and it was not until the late 1720s that there were six or seven companies performing in London concurrently.

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THE STRUCTURE OF THE RESTORATION THEATRE

While the structure of the different London theatres in use between 1660 and 1700 naturally varied from Killigrew's primitive conversion of Gibbon's Tennis Court in 1660 to the impressive Dorset Garden theatre, all shared a similar design, a design which encompassed significant changes to the pre-Commonwealth playhouses. The Restoration theatre had a proscenium arch, the stage extending in front as well as behind the arch into the main seating area, the pit. There were entrance doors onto the stage for the players in the two sides of the proscenium. The forestage area in front was where the majority of acting took place: the amount that occurred behind the proscenium is still a matter of debate among scholars.[2] Extending away from the stage were tiers of boxes: side-boxes which stretched along both sides of the theatre and front-boxes facing the stage, behind the pit. Above the front-boxes and pit was a gallery, or in some theatres two galleries, the uppermost one the smaller of the two. Benches rather than seats prevailed which made the seating capacity flexible and gave the auditorium an easy informal atmosphere. Lighting was mostly by candles, the forestage illuminated by chandeliers directly above it and by lighted brackets around the auditorium.[3]

Davenant was responsible for the major structural innovation on the stage itself, the introduction of movable and changeable scenery behind the proscenium arch. Whereas in the Renaissance the action of a play was basically continuous, without breaks for different settings and backdrops, the Restoration theatre commenced the practice of transitions in the action in which changes of scene were created. Davenant developed the custom of having the curtain drawn back after the prologue was finished to reveal the stage behind the proscenium containing some kind of scene (the forestage was always exposed). The curtain was not drawn again until the whole performance, even the epilogue, was finished; all changes of scene took place in full view of spectators. The creation of each 'scene' involved, not scenery in the sense of a single backdrop behind the players, but an arrangement of sets of shutters in the wings and at the back which could be pushed shut along grooves to create a particular scene, or opened to reveal some kind of action or tableau behind. Thus when a stage direction in a Restoration dramatic text reads '*the scene opens*' it refers to the opening of a set of shutters onto something

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else: '*the scene shuts*' means the shutters were then closed at the end of the 'scene'. There were three and possibly even four sets of shutters to create different scenes. All were placed wide enough apart to allow players to act behind one set and in front of another, permitting a rapid succession of scenes. Scene changes were indicated by the stage manager's whistle or by ringing a bell. A bare stage usually signified the end of an act, any scene change for the opening of the next act occurring just before the action of that scene started. The intervals between acts were probably comparatively short and filled in the early years of the period by music from the orchestra and in later years by songs and dances as well. Neither company went to the expense of creating new scenes for every production. The same basic settings of palaces, groves, forests, lodgings, streets and gardens could be used over and over again.

Davenant also introduced 'machines', devices for flying in objects like chariots and angels to create fast and eyecatching illusions, particularly for operas. The machines were kept in the area behind the proscenium arch and they added further visual interest to the excitement of successive changes of scene. The simplest machines were trap-doors for raising ghosts and devils and for swallowing up evildoers, the most spectacular were the flying machines, allowing people, gods and even flaming monsters to rise and descend. In John Dryden's play *Tyrannick Love* (1669), for example, spirits bent on seducing St Catherine descended singing in clouds. The clouds parted and St Catherine was raised up in her bed while the scene changed to a richly painted paradise. Finally St Catherine's guardian angel came down, accompanied by 'soft musick' and 'with a flaming sword'.[4]

Behind the stage was the scene room where props were kept and where the players rested and waited for their cues. Above this were the dressing-rooms, called tiring-rooms, one for men and one for women, with small private rooms for the stars. These rooms may have been warmed by coal fires and certainly some of the private ones had fireplaces: on 4 May 1667, the Lord Chamberlain ordered the actress Anne Quin 'a dressing roome with a chymney in it to be only for her use'.[5] Any member of the public could enter the tiring-rooms and many did, especially men visiting the actresses. Pepys went backstage on several occasions – once 'to see the inside of the Stage and all the tiring-roomes and Machines'. He was amused by the miscellany of objects in the tiring-rooms, 'here a wooden leg, there a ruff, here a

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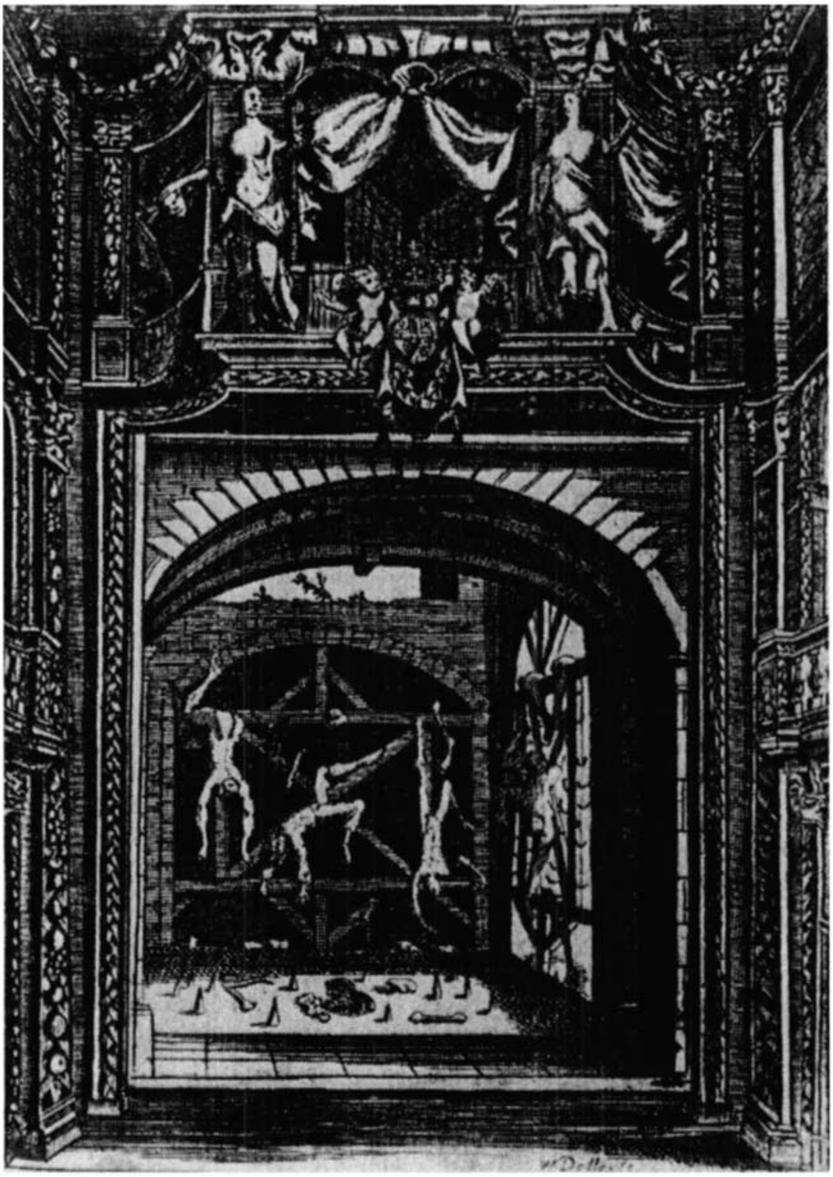

Engraving of a painted 'scene' of prisoners on spikes in the 1673 edition of Settle's *Empress of Morocco*, as used in the 1673 production of the play.

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hobby-horse, there a Crowne'. He visited the private rooms of two of the actors and was struck by the contrast between the fineness of their costumes on stage and their tawdry appearance close to: 'how fine they show on the stage by candle-light, and how poor things they are to look now too near-hand'.[6]

THE AUDIENCE

During the 1660s and 1670s both theatres retained close links with king and court. Charles himself visited both theatres regularly, taking a special interest in both plays and players. Courtiers and others with direct access to the king also visited the theatre a great deal, as well as writing plays for the two companies and patronising other playwrights. However, while Restoration theatre audiences were never as varied as those of Shakespeare's Globe, for example, they were by no means wholly aristocratic. The diary of the ardent theatre-goer Pepys shows that plenty of less wealthy people visited the theatre – civil servants, bureaucrats and other professional men with their wives, as well as a selection from the poorer classes, servants, apprentices and journeymen. Dividing the seating area of a Restoration theatre into four areas, the author of *The Country Gentleman's Vade Mecum* (1699) offers a vivid picture of the various types of theatre-goer. Below the upper gallery containing servants came the boxes – one for the king and royal family and others for 'Persons of Quality ... unless some Fools ... crowd in among 'em'. In the pit were 'Judges, Wits and Censurers ... Squires, Sharpers, Beaus, Bullies and Whores, and here and there an extravagant Male and Female Cit'. In the middle gallery 'the Citizens Wives and Daughters, together with the Abigails, Serving-men, Journey-men and Apprentices commonly take their Places; and now and then some disponding Mistresses and superannuated Poets'.[7] The average audience comprised about 500 persons (the population of London at this time has been numbered at 527,600).[8]

Historians once argued that the class content of the Restoration audience shifted from largely aristocratic to largely bourgeois during the 1680s, but there is little evidence to support this – citizens as well as aristocrats visited the theatre from the very beginning of our period.[9] What did disappear, however, as the century wore on, was the direct patronage and support of the monarchy so evident at the start. While James II shared his brother's fondness for the theatre, the troubled years of his reign from 1685 to 1689 saw a general reduction

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in theatrical activity. Under William and Mary court support for the theatre dwindled still further: their interest in drama was minimal, as was that of their successor (in 1702), Queen Anne. This lack of court support rendered the stage more vulnerable to attacks by moralists, which strengthened during the 1690s. Indictments were gained against players for speaking licentious or blasphemous lines and Jeremy Collier's notorious diatribe, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) put both theatres on the defensive.[10]

Throughout the period audiences granted performers none of the reverent hush that we associate today with watching a play. The atmosphere during a performance was relaxed and informal; many spectators treated the playhouse like a kind of club and might chat, argue, or even occasionally fight duels while the unfortunate actors and actresses tried to make themselves heard. Pepys, for instance, was severely irritated when 'two talking ladies and Sir Ch. Sidly' talked so much that he 'lost the pleasure of the play wholly'.[11] Of course, fine productions kept the playhouse quiet, but players could never count on an attentive silence and had to be prepared to combat any sort of interruption.

A significant proportion of Restoration theatre-goers patronised the theatre very regularly, at least once a week, knew each other and members of both companies personally and were therefore extremely familiar with the various established modes of drama and with the types of role specialised in by different players. Dramatists wrote with this familiarity in mind, aware that they were creating plays for an audience with preconceptions they could fulfil or frustrate. Sometimes their attempts to change a formula succeeded, sometimes not. A striking example of failure was when the actor Samuel Sandford, a 'low and crooked Person' who always played villains, was unexpectedly cast as an honest man:

> The Pit, after they had sate three or four Acts, in a quiet Expectation, that the well-dissembled Honesty of Sandford (for such of course they concluded it) would soon be discover'd, or at least, from its Security, involve the Actors in the Play, in some surprizing Distress or Confusion, which might raise and animate the Scenes to come; when; at last, finding no such matter, but that the Catastrophe had taken quite another Turn, and that Sandford was really an honest Man to the end of the Play, they fairly damn'd it, as if the Author had impos'd upon them the most frontless or incredible Absurdity.[12]

Ultimately power in the theatre lay with the audience on whose support the existence of the companies depended. All productions

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were subject to fierce, critical examination by highly experienced spectators who damned and applauded with equal vigour.

THE COMPANY

At the head of each company was the proprietor who gained the position mainly by acquiring a patent allowing him to form a troupe and put on certain plays. He assembled a group of sharing players (always male until the 1690s) who took a part of the company's profits after bills and wages were paid. Below the sharers came the players who were merely hirelings with salaries and all the non-acting personnel such as musicians, scene-shifters and machinists, prompters, treasurers, tiring-men and -women and, in later years, singers and dancers.[13]

Companies usually contained between twenty and thirty players, who were recruited from a variety of sources. At the beginning Killigrew procured various actors left over from the pre-Commonwealth theatre – the stars Charles Hart and Michael Mohun, for instance, were apprentices during the Caroline period. Some actors were drawn from the professional classes; Thomas Betterton was well educated and William Smith was first of all a barrister. On the other hand, another leading actor, Henry Harris, was a seal-cutter by profession and the comedian Thomas Doggett was brought up in the slums of Dublin. As time went on a number of men joined the theatre because their families were already in the profession. The recruitment of actresses was more problematic because no woman with serious pretensions to respectability would countenance a stage career, and yet the profession demanded more than women of the brothel class. An actress had to be able to read and memorise lines at speed, to sing and dance to some degree and to emulate a lady's behaviour. This left only a 'narrow middle stratum' of society from which actresses could be drawn.[14] The stratum included women whose good families had come down in the world, like the popular singer and comedienne Charlotte Butler, daughters of tradesmen, like tragedienne Sarah Cooke, and gentlemen's bastards, like Moll Davis. While the most obvious career for the genteel, dowerless female was domestic service, the less respectable job of actress offered better pay and better prospects.

In some ways the profession of actor was a rewarding one. During the 1660s many players were very close to king and court and throughout the period a number were held in great esteem by

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theatre-goers. The theatre has always been an exciting place to work and never more so than after a hiatus of eighteen years when the profession had to be revived. However, the position of player was never a secure one and an actor's or actress's social standing remained relatively low. (The particularly difficult social position of the actress will be further discussed in chapter 1.) Also, even the sharers, who had more power over their own destinies than the hirelings had, were hedged in by restrictions. Players' contracts forbade them moving from one company to another so they could not sell their services to the highest bidder. When in the summer of 1663 Harris tried to change companies, the king himself ordered him to remain within the terms of his contract.

Compared to present-day performers, the Restoration players were poorly paid. Even the sharers did badly at times, when audience numbers were low and theatrical costs increased. In addition, there were all too many times in the year when for some reason the theatres were closed so that no one was paid anything at all. Probably no players worked for more than thirty-five weeks out of the annual fifty-two. Theatres were closed for the week before Easter, on Fridays during Lent, if a member of the royal family died and when some sort of disturbance took place in the playhouse (even if the players themselves were not involved). Trade also came almost to a standstill in summer when the court and gentry left London for the country. The most difficult time of all came when the plague and fire of London closed the theatres for nearly eighteen months, between 5 June 1665 and 29 November 1666.[15]

In a working week, the Restoration players worked every day but Sunday, rehearsed most mornings, played every afternoon and possibly performed again in a private production for the court at Whitehall in the evening. If he or she failed to appear at rehearsal they might be fined a week's wages.[16] On average, each company performed four or five new plays a year, the rest of their season being composed of Renaissance, Caroline or contemporary revivals. Each theatre seems to have produced between forty and sixty different plays each season.[17] Clearly, in their spare time successful players needed to study their lines: even the best new plays or revivals rarely ran for longer than six days. A leading actor or actress might have to play as many as thirty different parts in the course of a season. During the years from 1673 to 1709 the brilliant Elizabeth Barry is known to have played 142 named parts, with presumably more in cast lists which have not survived.[18] Once a player possessed a particular part

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he or she was expected to be prepared to play it at every subsequent revival, no matter how much time had passed since the last performance. Sometimes when a play proved unsuccessful one day another had to be hastily substituted on the next. Not surprisingly, authors (and Pepys) often complained that the players forgot their lines or ad libbed.[19]

Although the theatres possessed fairly extensive stage wardrobes, players seem to have had to provide personal items such as hats, periwigs, petticoats, shoes, stockings, gloves and scarves. The King's Company shareholders Hart, Mohun and Kynaston made a special agreement on 6 March 1672 that they should be given articles like periwigs, stockings, hats, shirts and cravats new each year,[20] but there was no similar arrangement for the actresses. They possibly relied to some extent on gifts from admirers to sustain their wardrobes. They certainly seem to have succumbed to the temptation of wearing their stage costumes outside the theatre, for an agreement of 1675 between players and manager at the Theatre Royal stipulates, among other things, that

> Whereas by Experience Wee find Our Cloathes Tarnished and Imberelled [*sic*] by frequent Weareing them out of the Playhouse It is thought fitt noe Weoman presume to goe out of the House with the Play House Cloathes or Properties upon Penalty of theire Weekes pay.[21]

If new players received any training at all this usually came either from company shareholders like Thomas Betterton, or, after 1667, from 'nurseries' for young players maintained by the companies at one of the old London theatres. We do not know how many players were trained at the nurseries nor how long these establishments continued after 1682, the last year in which they are mentioned. Barry was unusual in receiving personal instruction from her lover the Earl of Rochester at the beginning of her career. He is supposed to have decided to teach her in under six months to be 'the finest Player on the Stage'.[22] The majority of successful players seem to have appeared on the stage without previous training anywhere. But they still had to work a probationary period of 'three Monethes without Sallary by Way of Approbation' before becoming proper members of the company.[23]

Each actor and actress possessed their own particular parts, written out on scrolls of paper, which they created and retained until they died or retired from the stage (just occasionally, a senior player might 'lend' a part to another when he or she chose not to act in a