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978-0-521-58215-5 - The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre

Edited by Deborah Payne Fisk

Excerpt

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I

EDWARD A. LANGHANS

The theatre

Our will and pleasure is that you prepare a Bill for our signature to passe our Greate Seale of England, containing a Grant unto our trusty and well beloved Thomas Killigrew Esquire, one of the Groomes of our Bed-chamber and Sir William Davenant Knight, to give them full power and authoritie to erect Two Companys of Players consisting respectively of such persons as they shall chuse and apoint; and to purchase or build and erect at their charge as they shall thinke fitt Two Houses or Theaters.¹

So began the draft of a warrant, dated 19 July 1660, allowing two courtiers of Charles II to have shared control of the London public theatre. The document went on to authorize Killigrew and Davenant to give performances with scenery and music, to establish ticket prices and employee salaries, and to suffer no rival companies. This draft, written, remarkably, by Davenant himself, served as the basis for a warrant a month later stating essentially the same thing and directing the two new managers to be their own censors of plays. By 1663 they had been granted definitive patents not only empowering them to run the only official theatres in London but giving that authority to their heirs or assigns. Not until 1843 were the patents rescinded, and even today Drury Lane Theatre and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, derive their rights from the royal grants of the 1660s.

That Davenant was allowed to draft a document giving powers to himself and Killigrew shows the strength of their position. Killigrew, called the King's jester, had the court connections; Davenant, who held an unused patent from 1639, had the theatrical experience. There were other theatrical companies in England in 1660; only one, under George Jolly, posed a threat, and he ended up running, for the two patentees, a "nursery" for young actors. These courtiers, then, were largely responsible for what the early Restoration theatres were like, who came to them, and what kind of drama was encouraged. They were each allotted specific pre-1660 plays to

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perform and allowed to decide what new plays would be produced. The theatre world was all before them.

The companies

England had been without official theatrical activity for eighteen years, though there had been sporadic attempts at illegal performing. Gone, or nearly gone, was the general enthusiasm for theatre that in earlier days had encouraged entrepreneurs to build seven public theatres between 1576 and 1605 in a London of 200,000 people. Though greater London by 1660 had a population of about 500,000, the potential audience after years of Puritan dominance was probably small. The theatres used by various transient companies just before and after the Restoration of the monarchy were leftovers from before the Civil War – the Red Bull, Salisbury Court, and the Cockpit or Phoenix in Drury Lane. Killigrew and Davenant worked temporarily in those relics but elected not to make them permanent theatrical homes. Instead, they opened new playhouses seating about 400 and built within the walls of roofed tennis courts. These were tiny – as small as 25 feet wide by 75 feet long (about the size of a modern court) and no larger than 42 feet by 106 feet – with spectator benches along one side and private seating at one end.² Davenant and Killigrew may have selected small buildings in reputable neighborhoods because they anticipated a limited, aristocratic audience that would prefer intimacy and would not fill larger houses. Having both spent time on the Continent during the civil strife in England, they were surely familiar with the tennis-court theatres that were popular across the channel.

The two managers approached their building renovations in different ways. Killigrew chose to construct within his tennis court in Vere Street a sceneryless stage, with U-shaped seating on perhaps two levels, and a benched pit on the auditorium floor. His alterations must have been minimal, for he had his King's Company performing there by 8 November 1660, only two months after the Crown granted him permission to proceed. It could hardly have been a very fancy or even comfortable theatre, though the diarist Samuel Pepys praised it as "the finest play-house, I believe, that ever was in England."³ (We should remember, however, that Pepys had precious little playgoing experience at the time.) The first dramas Killigrew staged were old, since no new plays were available. He even began with males playing the women's roles, just as in the old public theatre days.⁴ Killigrew, who grew up in Shakespeare's London and is said to have played bit parts at the Red Bull when he was a boy, may have assumed that the new theatre of the Restoration would be pretty much like

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the old. Or he may just have been anxious to get his business going quickly. In any case, the Vere Street Theatre probably looked something like the old “private” theatre in the Blackfriars that Shakespeare’s troupe had used for winter performances, though Killigrew had had no special connection with that playhouse. His decisions must have seemed sensible at the time, but within a year after opening his Vere Street house he had to lay plans for a new theatre, built from the ground up.

Sir William Davenant’s approach was different, though he, too, thought small. He also converted a tennis court into a playhouse, but he followed not the private theatre tradition of earlier days but that of the court theatre, which had featured scenery. Davenant’s choice meant that preparing his theatre in Lincoln’s Inn Fields would take time. His Duke’s Company did not begin performing there until 28 June 1661, over six months after Killigrew had opened at Vere Street. Sir William had known the public and private theatres of pre-war London but had also worked, in 1640, with the court masque designer Inigo Jones on the last of the great Caroline extravaganzas, Davenant’s own *Salmacida Spolia*. Just as Killigrew may have intended to use the old private theatres as a model, Davenant seems to have made a conscious effort to introduce to the public the characteristics of the old court productions and in that way bring the English-speaking theatre in line with the mainstream theatrical developments on the Continent. He also elected to have women playing female roles, again as in the court theatres, and four of the eight actresses he hired in 1660 he housed in his own home, which was attached to the tennis court he remodeled. Ironically, Killigrew apparently introduced Restoration audiences to actresses first, at Vere Street as early as 8 December 1660, when a woman played Desdemona in *Othello*.

Though the managers were assured from the beginning of royal patronage and a virtual theatrical monopoly, to fill their houses they had to attract members of the middle social class. Perhaps that helped Davenant decide to equip his theatre with scenery. As Pepys’ *Diary* makes clear, the novelty proved irresistible. Killigrew had to follow suit; his plans for a new theatre included scenes and machines. These managerial decisions were fraught with financial dangers, for roofed theatres and scenic spectacles were expensive. Looking back on the pre-war theatre, an observer wrote “That tho’ the Town was then, perhaps, not much more than half so Populous as now, yet then the Prices were small (there being no Scenes) and better order kept among the Company that came.”⁵

Davenant and Killigrew seem not to have seriously considered the inexpensive route of restoring the sceneryless, open-air playhouses of Shakespeare’s day. Perhaps that kind of theatre could not have been

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successfully revived in the 1660s, especially with two courtiers holding the patents during the reign of a monarch more familiar with French than English entertainments. The continental roofed playhouses, scenery, and actresses were by the mid-seventeenth century so firmly established that Shakespeare's Globe could hardly have been thought of by Davenant and Killigrew as a model for the future – if it was thought of at all. Had the patentees chosen to revive the old public theatre tradition, and had King Charles supported them (neither supposition very likely), the course of English drama might have been very different. The managers and their monarch probably did not stop to consider what effect on the future their decisions would have. By 1667 Killigrew boasted “That the stage is now by his pains a thousand times better and more glorious then ever heretofore. Now, wax-candles, and many of them; then, not above 3*lb.* of tallow. Now, all things civil, no rudeness anywhere; then, as in a bear-garden. Then, two or three fiddlers; now, nine or ten of the best.”⁶ He did not seem much concerned with the drama, only the show.

Restoration acting companies were organized much like those in Shakespeare's day. Davenant and Killigrew were the masters, but though they held royal patents, they did not own the troupes. The companies were businesses, and shares in them were sold to raise the money needed to furnish theatres, hire personnel, and produce plays. Shares could be purchased in the company as an organization, and the holders, mostly the actors themselves, prospered if the troupe thrived. Shares were also sold in their playhouse, but the speculators were often non-theatrical people.

Each company had a permanent cadre of performers who were engaged for the theatrical season, September to June. Following the medieval guild system, master performers helped train the younger ones. Many members of a troupe, along with the house and backstage personnel, were hirelings – employees in a variety of theatrical capacities working for fixed wages. Before the end of the seventeenth century some employees – at first performers only – were granted benefit performances that could, if successful, provide them with extra income. Theatre personnel might also augment their salaries by playing in London or touring the provinces in the summers. Bartholomew and Southwark fairs in August and early September provided further opportunities for performers if they did not mind acting at a “booth” theatre next door to a troupe of rope dancers or prize fighters or conjurers.

The repertory system used by the players gave audiences a variety of theatrical fare in a given week, for a different production was usually offered each day. Long runs were unheard of, though a play that “took”

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with the crowd might run several days in succession. The system placed heavy demands on players, for a performer had to hold dozens of roles in his head and be ready to play any one of them on short notice. An advantage was that a company could avoid losing money on an unsuccessful new play or revival, for the bill could be switched and a flop dropped in a hurry. For a new work, playwrights received the profits of a third performance (if it took place), but if the production failed, the play and pay to the author could disappear. Extra expenditure on a lavish new production was a financial strain, though costs could be made up by using scenery from that show to enhance another. The system allowed successful works to support weak ones and encouraged managers to take risks they might otherwise avoid. It was an economical and time-tested way of running a theatre, and new playwrights had a fair chance of being produced.

Davenant was a capable proprietor, and although he died in 1668 and did not live to see the new Dorset Garden Theatre, his company prospered under the leadership of his widow and the fine actor Thomas Betterton. Killigrew, on the other hand, was inept, and his group was in such financial difficulty by 1682 that the Duke's players absorbed the King's, and for over ten years London had only one patent troupe, the United Company. More theatrical outsiders, finding theatre an attractive, though chancy, investment, began buying shares or portions of shares. Control came into the hands of a wily lawyer, Christopher Rich, and his almost silent partner, Sir Thomas Skipwith. The older actors rebelled and set up their own company at the Lincoln's Inn Fields playhouse, where they operated under a license, since Rich and Skipwith, after the King's and Duke's companies merged in 1682, held both of the royal patents. At the beginning of the eighteenth century London had two theatrical companies, but they struggled to survive under Queen Anne, who had little of her uncle Charles's interest in theatre. Further, it was a period of moral soul-searching that altered the tone of playwriting. Audiences were changing as more middle-class patrons were attracted to the playhouses; they preferred greater variety on a typical theatrical bill instead of the performance of just a single play. The trend was toward less risqué dramatic offerings, greater visual spectacle, more song and dance entr'actes, bigger theatres, and larger but less sophisticated audiences. Aristocratic patrons became attracted to Italian opera which, for different reasons, also required larger theatres, greater spectacle, and the expensive talents of singers and dancers. By 1710, when the composer Handel began his London career, the theatre Pepys and King Charles had known and loved was only a memory.

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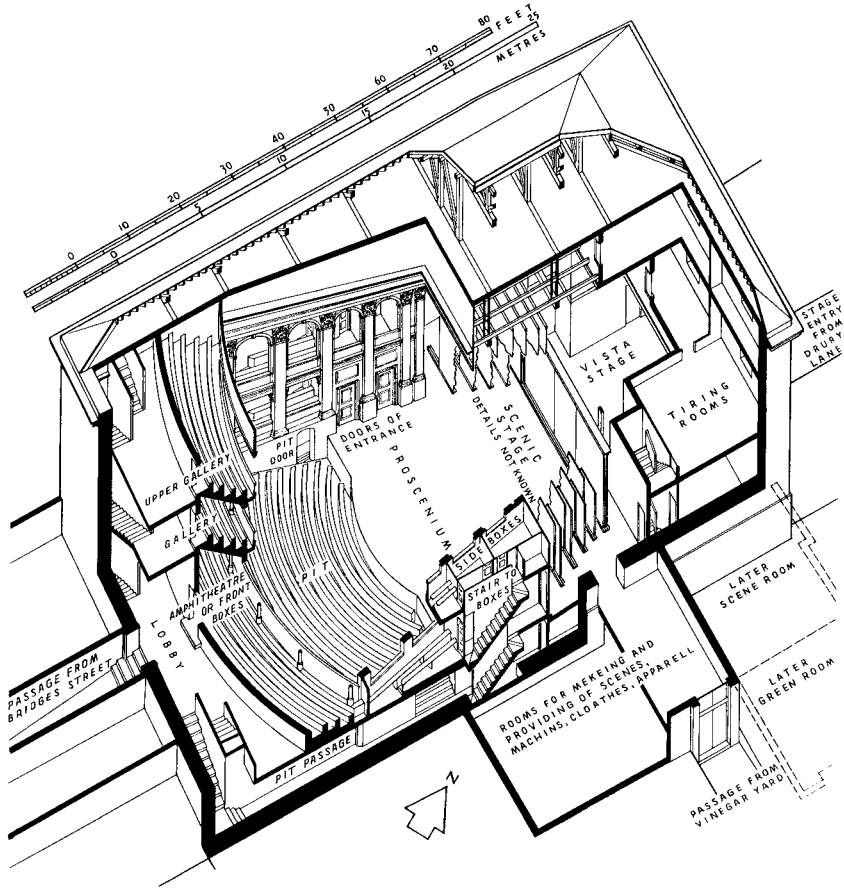


Figure 1 Isometric reconstruction of Drury Lane Theatre, 1674, by Richard Leacroft

The playhouses

The competition between Davenant and Killigrew in the 1660s became lopsided after the Duke's Company opened their Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre with scenes and machines; the King's troupe needed a new playhouse, fully equipped to compete with their rivals. In 1663 the Bridges Street Theatre opened; eight years later the Duke's Company countered with a larger theatre in Dorset Garden, the most elegant of all the Restoration playhouses; and in 1674, after the Bridges Street building burned to the ground, the King's Company inaugurated, on the same site, Drury Lane (figs. 1 and 2). Not until 1705 did London see another new theatre, though Lincoln's Inn Fields was refurbished in 1695 and brought back into service. The new playhouse, the Queen's Theatre in the Hay-

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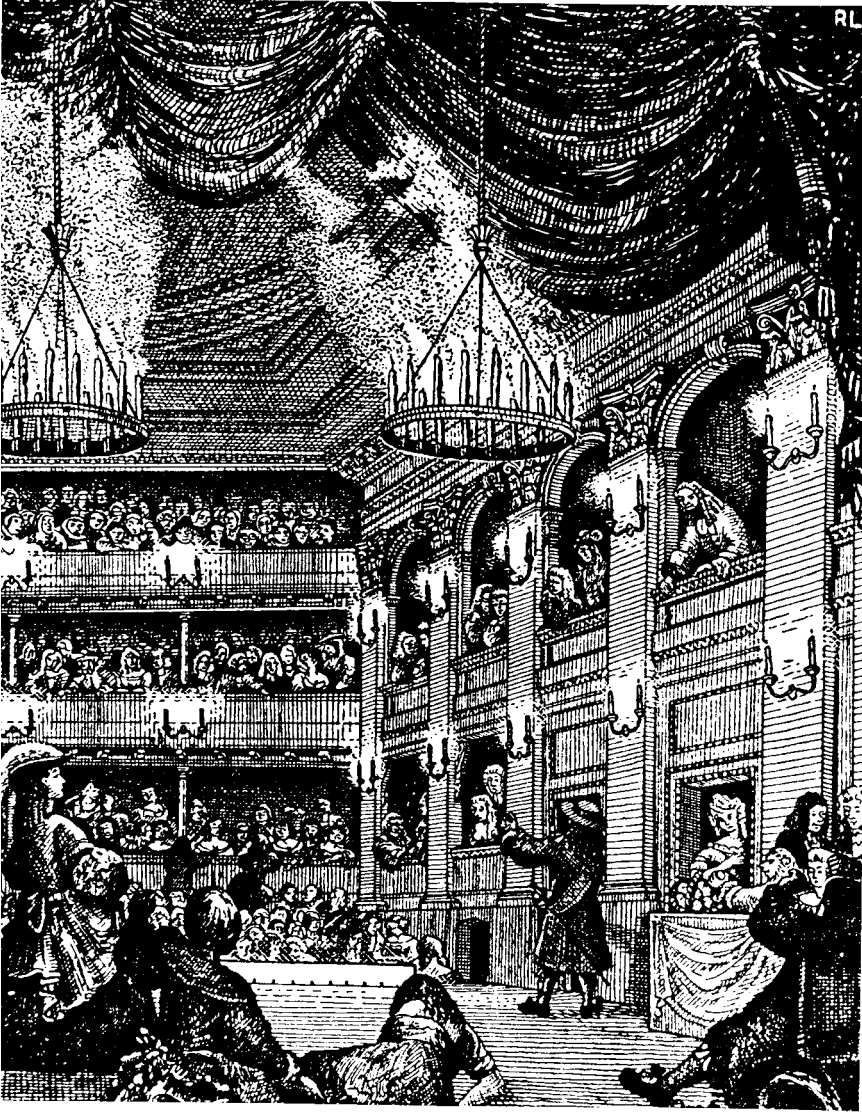


Figure 2 Conjectural reconstruction of interior of Drury Lane Theatre, 1674,
by Richard Leacroft

market, was designed by the playwright Vanbrugh but needed renovations before it became acoustically acceptable for plays. In time, it became a home for opera.

An important characteristic of all Restoration theatres, and unique to England, was an apron or forestage – an acting area forward of the curtain, thrusting well into the audience space, with permanent proscenium

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entrance doors on each side. Performers appearing on it stood in front of rather than in the scenic area, though they could, if they wished, move back and use the scenery as an environment instead of a decorative background. The forestage of Restoration playhouses was similar to the platform in Elizabethan public and private playhouses and to the performing space on the auditorium floor in front of court theatre stages. Regardless of the size or capacity of a theatre, an acting space that was part of the auditorium, close to the audience and flanked by spectators, contributed to the feeling of intimacy. The forestage was ideal for plays where words were important, and the retention of the area in Restoration playhouses meant that new authors were encouraged to write plays that were highly verbal and full of wit, with frequent soliloquies and asides to the audience. The forestage was variously called the platform, area, stage, theatre, scene, and proscenium. Colley Cibber, who began his acting at Drury Lane, later lamented the loss in the 1690s of that prized actor's space:

It must be observ'd, then, that the Area or Platform of the old Stage, projected about four Foot forwarder, in a Semi-oval Figure, parallel to the Benches of the Pit; and that the former, lower Doors of Entrance for the Actors were brought down between the two foremost (and then only) Pilasters; in the Place of which Doors, now the two Stage-Boxes are fixt . . . By this Original Form, the usual Station of the Actors, in almost every Scene, was advanc'd at least ten Foot nearer to the Audience, than they now can be; because, not only from the Stage's being shorten'd in front, but likewise from the additional Interposition of those Stage-Boxes, the Actors (in respect to the Spectators, that fill them) are kept so much more backward from the main Audience than they us'd to be: But when the Actors were in Possession of that forwarder Space, to advance upon, the Voice was then more in the Centre of the House, so that the most distant Ear had scarce the least Doubt, or Difficulty in hearing what fell from the weakest Utterance. . . .⁷

Occasionally plays required actors to withdraw from the forestage and relate more closely to the scenery. Some Restoration pieces specify entrances in the scenic area, and many ask for the scenery to open and discover characters already in place. Such action was seen by spectators through the picture frame or frontispiece formed by the proscenium arch. Consequently, stage directions sometimes refer to action "in the scene" – that is, not on the apron but within the scenic area. As the forestage was cut back to increase seating capacity, the unique proscenium doors were also lost, though the proscenium arch itself remained. Denied their forward acting area and its entrance doors, the actors had to retreat into the scenic stage, and that in time led to more realism in staging and acting.

When Davenant began performing in the summer of 1661 at his

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Lincoln's Inn Fields playhouse, he offered scenery that Pepys found "very fine and magnificent."⁸ How fine and magnificent was it, we might ask, for information on Restoration scenery is very scanty. What little evidence we have suggests that English scene painting was not as opulent as that in France and Italy, where opera had spurred great advances in stagecraft.⁹ Still, scene designers and machinists in England and on the Continent worked in essentially the same fashion. Virtually everything then was painted in perspective, giving the illusion of depth and making it possible for Davenant in his little theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields to show spectators what looked like a deep forest, seascape, or street. The scenery was not built in three dimensions but painted on flat, canvas-covered frames called wings, lined up on each side of the stage, with the view closed off about the middle of the scenic area with larger flats: shutters. The wings and shutters stood in grooves on the stage floor (steadied by matching grooves above) and could be slid offstage and on by teams of stagehands; a second set also stood in grooves, directly behind the first, so that when the first set was pulled off, the second was revealed. From these practices came stage directions in Restoration plays that may baffle or mislead a modern reader: scene opens, scene shuts, scene draws. Hanging above the wing positions were horizontal masking pieces, borders, that could be pulled up or down in coordination with the lateral movement of the wings. By the 1690s in England painted drops – large painted cloths, probably on rollers – began to replace the shutters.

To enhance the perspective effect, the stage floor in most Renaissance and baroque theatres was raked or sloped from front to back, thus giving us the terms upstage and downstage; similarly, the heights of the wings and shutters decreased. If the perspective was too forced, performers could not move upstage very far or they would ruin the visual effect. The painters adjusted the perspective accordingly by placing the vanishing point not at the back of the scenic area but far deeper, usually well behind the back wall of the theatre building. Most of the scenery any company owned could serve in several productions, though occasionally Restoration plays, especially musical pieces, were given some newly designed scenery to augment stock settings.

Scene shifting was normally accomplished in full view of the audience – *a vista* as the Italians dubbed it – for the changes were part of the show. They were like a dissolve in film-making and took only seconds, signaled by the sound of the prompter's whistle. The front curtain, hanging in British theatres between the scenic area and the forestage, just behind the proscenium opening, was lowered during the performance only when an elaborate tableau had to be arranged. Wing-shutter-border shifting was

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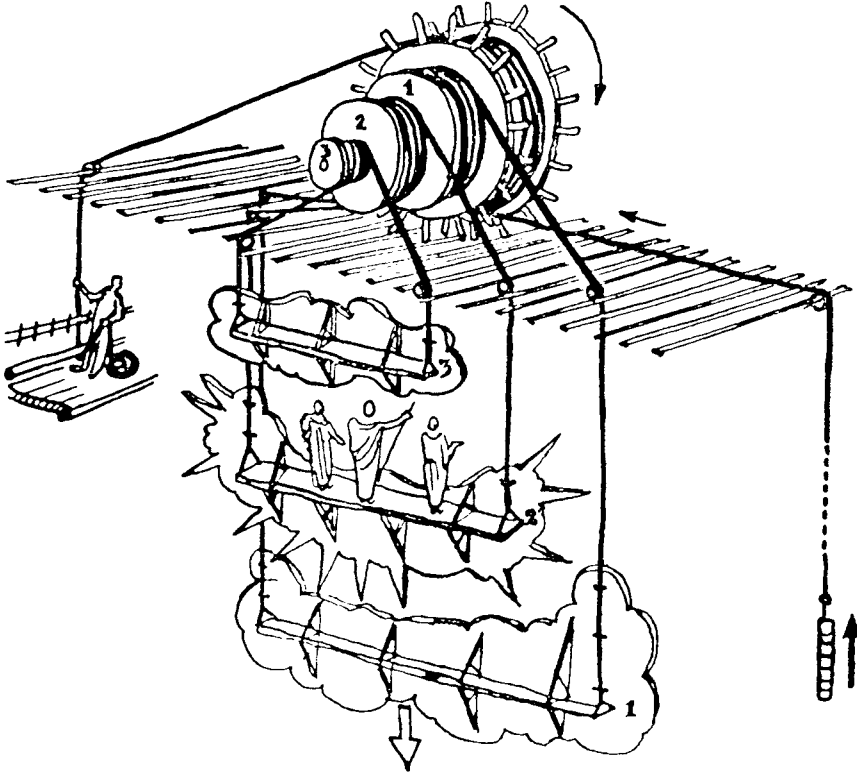


Figure 3 Baroque flying machine from Pierre Sonrel's *Traité de scénographie*

well suited to plays calling for many different locales and for episodes that lasted only a few lines. This meant that plays from the Shakespearean period could easily be produced with scenery and that new playwrights could ask for as many shifts as they wished. Today one can see the stunning effect of changeable scenery painted on wings, borders, and drops at such surviving baroque theatres as that at Drottningholm, Sweden.

Restoration theatres featured not only scenery but also machines for creating aerial flight, appearances from above and below, ocean waves, and other special effects (fig. 3). Many devices, such as cranes and trap doors, traced their roots back to the ancient Greeks, and almost all employed machines common in construction work through the ages. The London companies in their small theatres in the 1660s may not have been able to present London audiences with very elaborate shows, but their larger houses of the 1670s, Dorset Garden and Drury Lane, could handle striking painted and mechanical effects. Here is an example, from John Dryden's opera *Albion and Albanus*: