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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

Playhouses, play texts and the theatrical language

This book explores the original staging of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries in London's professional playhouses, with special attention focused on the relation between onstage and offstage spaces and on the audience's awareness both of the imaginative world created by the play and the wood, lath and plaster reality of the playhouse itself – that is to say, the balance between fiction and theatre. The play texts themselves are almost the sole evidence as to how they were staged, apart from a few surviving playhouse documents, such as theatrical 'plots' and Philip Henslowe's papers. In this introductory chapter I set out to do four things. First, I survey the structure of the playhouses. Second, I consider the nature of the play texts in relation to the performances of the plays. Third, I turn to the nature of the language in which the play texts are written. Finally, I summarise the particular questions I address in the chapters that follow.

PLAYHOUSES

In order to deal with questions concerning the staging of early modern plays, it is necessary to understand the structure of the original stages and to be as clear as possible about the nature of the acting space in which the actors performed the plays. Important basic features include: shape and size; facilities; the nature of the division between the stage and the backstage area; and the physical relationship between the stage and the auditorium.

In Shakespeare's time, there were two kinds of playhouse: 'public' outdoor theatres where plays were performed in daylight; and 'private' indoor theatres where candles were used to supplement the light from the windows of the auditorium. The public playhouses built in this period were the Red Lion (1567); the playhouse at Newington Butts (1575, closed in 1594); the Theatre (1576, dismantled in 1598); the Curtain (1577); the Rose (1587, enlarged in 1592, demolished by 1606); the Swan (1595); the Globe (1599, rebuilt in 1614, operated until 1642); the Boar's Head (converted from an inn in 1599, the

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leases expired in 1616); the Fortune (1600, rebuilt in 1622, operated until 1642); the Red Bull (converted from an inn, c.1605, operated until 1642); and the Hope (1613, after 1617 mainly used for bear baiting). Although John Brayne's Red Lion did not last long, there is not much doubt that this project had an influence on the design of the Theatre, which he was to build jointly with his brother-in-law James Burbage nine years later. According to the records of disputes between Brayne and his carpenters, the Red Lion consisted of 'scaffoldes' for spectators and a 'stage' with a 'turrett' on it. The stage was large – 40 feet (12.2 metres) wide, 30 feet (9.1 metres) deep and 5 feet (1.5 metres) high – with a 'voyd parte' in it, apparently for a trap.¹

The 1989 archaeological excavations of the Rose site have revealed that the original structure of the playhouse was a regular fourteen-sided polygon about 22 metres across. The depth of each bay, that is, the distance between the outer and inner walls of the building was 3.5 metres (measured centre to centre). The

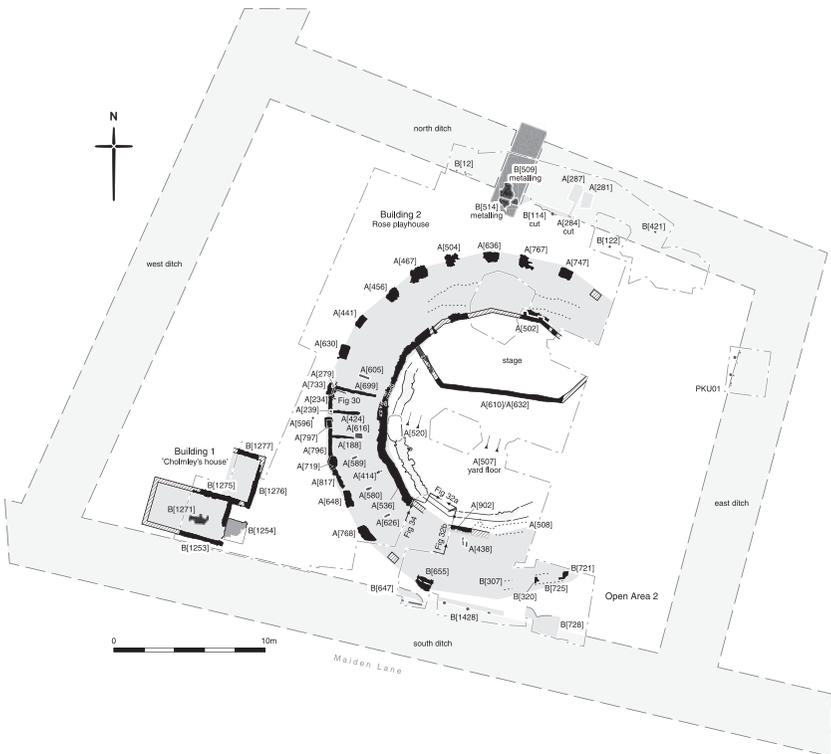


Figure 1a. The Rose Theatre: Phase I (1587–92).

enlargement of the playhouse in 1592 entailed dismantling the northern half of the building and reconstructing it farther north (see Figures 1a and 1b). Its stage was surprisingly small both in its original form and even after the enlargement of the playhouse. The original stage projected a maximum of 5.0 metres into the yard, tapering towards the front, where it had an estimated maximum width of 8.2 metres. The new stage was built 2.0 metres north of the first one and its size was much the same as its predecessor's.² The angled *frons scenae*, or tiring-house wall, of the first Rose stage indicates the presence of three doorways in the *frons*. A central opening, covered by hangings, would have been used for 'discoveries' such as the ones in the following stage directions: 'A charge, the cable cut, A Caldron discovered' (Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta* Q1, K2r); 'Curtaines open, Robin Hoode sleeps on a greene banke, and Marian strewing flowers on him' (Chettle and Munday, *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of*

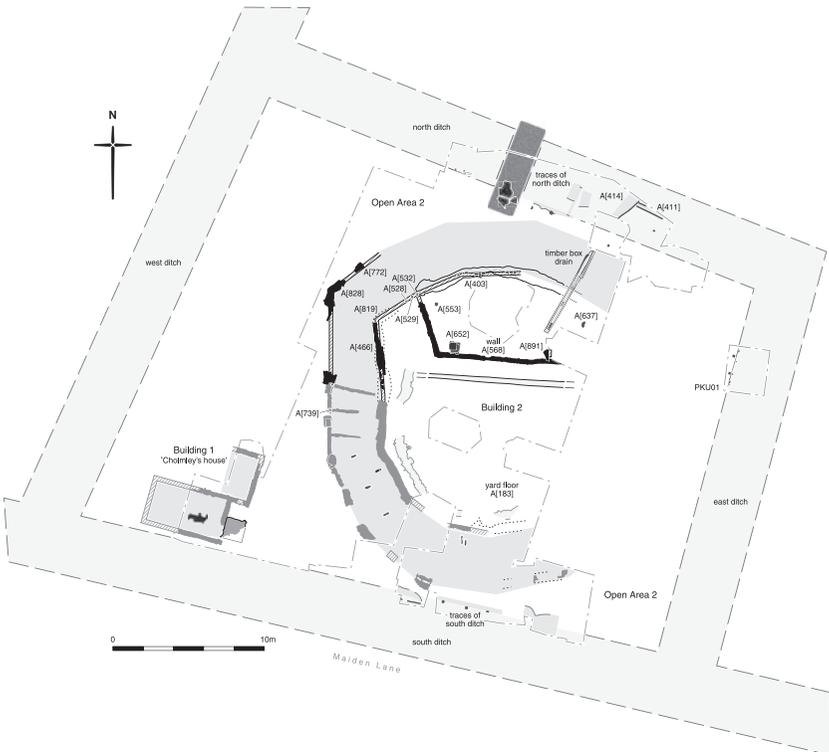


Figure 1b. The Rose Theatre: Phase 2 (1592–1606).

Huntingdon Q1, F3v).³ The earliest documentary evidence for a stage roof is Philip Henslowe's record of payment in 1595 for installation of a descent machine at the Rose: 'Itm pd for carpenters worke & mackinge the throne In the heuenes the 4 of June 1595'.⁴ But there is clear archaeological evidence that the stage 'heavens' appeared in the 1592 rebuild. In the excavated Rose site there was no sign of any means of supporting a roof over the early form of the stage, while the remains of two pillar bases were found just inside the foundation wall of the later stage front. As a result, the Rose's archaeologist, Julian Bowsher, was convinced that its original stage had no permanent roof, although there might have been awnings or even a small cantilevered cover.⁵ Given that the Rose seems, on archaeological evidence, to have been built in 1587 without any permanent stage cover, it is scarcely reasonable to think that a good ten years earlier, 1576/1577, the Theatre and the Curtain might have originally had a stage roof complete with a descent machine.⁶ In his most recent article, Bowsher reports new discoveries from excavations at the Theatre site. He writes: 'the limited evidence for its size and layout was a surprise. A surprise, because the Theatre remains appear to be very similar to the Rose remains. Its diameter is a similar 23 m, it had a similar *ingressus* feature and, very possibly, an angled stage like that of Rose Phase One. In other words, although the Theatre looks like the Rose, the converse is true; the Rose was modelled on the Theatre, which is itself not a surprise.'⁷ He assumes therefore that the Curtain, built between the two, was also similar, and thinks that there was an early playhouse form represented by these three.

What a public playhouse may have looked like from the inside is best seen in the well-known Swan sketch, which is a copy made by Arend van Buchell of the original drawn by Johannes de Witt around 1596 (see Figure 2). This is the only contemporary drawing we have of the interior of an amphitheatre, although it may be untrustworthy in many ways.⁸ The sketch shows a circular playhouse with three tiers of galleries for spectators. A large rectangular stage projects into a yard and is raised above the ground. The unroofed yard was occupied by standing spectators, or 'groundlings', although no such figures are present in the sketch. The stage has two massive posts, which support the roof over the stage, and above this roof there is a hut. At the rear of the stage is a tiring-house with two round-arched double doors in its façade. They are shut and their hinges clearly indicate that the doors opened on to the stage. Above these doors is a partitioned gallery containing several people who look like spectators. This may be the 'lords' room'. Jonson's *Every Man out of His Humour*, a Globe play, provides a speech that contains the phrase 'ouer the stage, i'the Lords roome' (Q1, F3r).⁹ We know that the tiring-house gallery, when required, served as a place for acting 'above'. It has been much discussed



Figure 2. A sketch of the Swan Theatre, c.1596, copied by Arend van Buchell from a lost original by Johannes de Witt.

whether the Swan's stage had only two doors as de Witt drew it or whether it was equipped with a discovery space as well. Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, which is the only extant play certainly acted at the Swan, provides 'Enter Maudline and Moll, a Shop being discovered' (Q1, B1r) and 'A Bed thrust out upon the Stage, Allwits Wife in it, Enter all the Gossips' (E4r). These stage directions appear to suggest the existence of a central discovery space, although the two doorways shown in the Swan sketch might have served for the events described in these directions.

It has often been assumed that because the framework of the Theatre was reused for the Globe, the size and shape of the two playhouses must have been much the same. However, archaeological excavations at the Theatre and the Globe sites appear to reveal that the Globe was larger than the Theatre, and that, in short, 'the Globe was not merely The Theatre reassembled'.¹⁰ In

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1989 a section of the Globe site was dug by archaeologists, as a result of which John Orrell has suggested that the likeliest interpretation of the archaeological evidence is that the Globe was a twenty-sided polygon about 100 feet (30 metres) across.¹¹ In a book recently published as a report on the Rose and Globe excavations, Julian Bowsher and Patricia Miller observe: 'Theoretically the Globe may have had any number of bays but the 16-sided [25.76 metres in diameter] and 18-sided [*c.*29 metres across] versions appear to align most logically with the limited archaeological remains.'¹²

In 1600 the Lord Admiral's Men moved from the 'littell Roosse'¹³ to the new Fortune. The building contract for the Fortune, between Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn on one side and the carpenter Peter Street on the other, shows that it was built square but that in other respects it was generally modelled on the round – or, to be more precise polygonal – Globe. (Street had been hired for the construction of the Globe by the Lord Chamberlain's Men.) The Fortune contract contains the following clauses:

The frame of the saide howse to be sett square and to conteine ffowerscore foote of lawfull assize every waie square wthoute and fiftie fiue foote of like assize square every waie wthin . . . And the saide fframe to conteine Three Stories in height . . . All which Stories shall conteine Twelue foote and a half of lawfull assize in breadth througheoute . . . Wth a Stadge and Tyreinge howse to be made erected & settupp wthin the saide fframe, wth a shadowe or cover over the saide Stadge . . . And w^{ch} Stadge shall conteine in length ffortie and Three foote of lawfull assize and in breadth to extende to the middle of the yarde of the saide howse . . .¹⁴

This information makes possible some provisional calculations, if we make the assumption that the tiring-house was effectively a continuation of the galleries along the back wall of the playhouse. Since the galleries were 12 feet 6 inches deep, the tiring-house would have been of an identical depth. We know that the stage projected forward from the tiring-house façade into the centre of the yard. Its width was 43 feet, and if we take the phrase, 'to extende to the middle of the yarde' to refer to the exact centre, the distance from the front of the stage to the back of the playhouse would have been 40 feet. If we subtract 12 feet 6 inches for the depth of the tiring-house, that leaves 27 feet 6 inches for the stage itself. On the basis of this calculation, therefore, the stage would have been 43 feet (13.1 metres) wide and 27 feet 6 inches (8.4 metres) deep. But this estimate has been questioned, particularly since the Rose excavations. John Orrell has suggested that the clause 'Wth a Stadge and Tyreinge howse to be made erected & settupp wthin the saide fframe' refers not to the outer walls of the playhouse, 80 feet by 80 feet, but to the inner framework formed by the galleries, that is, to the space within the yard, 55 feet by 55 feet. His view is that

in large open-air playhouses like the Fortune and the Globe both the stages and the tiring-houses were commonly constructed inside the yards. If this were the case, the effect would have been to make the Fortune and the Globe stages wide but comparatively shallow.¹⁵

Analysis of plays that we think may have been written principally for performance at these playhouses suggests that their stages, like those of most other public playhouses, had two main entrance doors and a large opening for discoveries between them, together with a balcony, a trap-door, a roof supported by posts and a descent machine. The number of openings in the tiring-house façade at these and other playhouses is still, however, a matter of dispute.¹⁶ Although Tim Fitzpatrick and some other scholars take the view that there were only two doors to the stage, some plays put on at the Fortune provide examples that seem to imply the presence of three doorways. One example is ‘Enter Vrcenze and Onophrio at seuerall doores, and Farnezie in the mid’st’ (Chettle, Dekker and Haughton, *Patient Grissil* Q1, E3r).¹⁷ In addition, some Globe plays contain scenes that require the use of a central opening. Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter*, 4.1 is such a scene. At the beginning of this scene Alexander is discovered ‘*in his studie beholding a Magicall glasse with oter obseruations*’ (Q1, F4v). He soon ‘*commeth vpon the Stage out of his study with a booke in his hand*’ (G1r). Then he conjures up the Devil and charges him to present the man who has murdered Candy. The Devil descends and sends another devil from under the stage. The newly arrived devil ‘*goeth to one doore of the stage, from whence he bringeth the Ghost of Candie gastly haunted by Caesar persuing and stabbing it, these vanish in at another doore*’ (G2r). At the end of the scene, Alexander exits ‘*into the studie*’ (G2v). In short, in this scene, while the central opening is serving as Alexander’s study, containing a magic mirror and other instruments (probably on a desk), a devil presents the scene of Candy’s murder through the use of two flanking doors.¹⁸ During the early modern period, playhouse design became gradually more sophisticated, with the result that the stages of the Globe and Fortune were better equipped than those of earlier theatres. One sign of this process is that the Fortune contract calls for ‘convenient windowes and lightes glazed’ to the tiring-house.¹⁹ If, as Orrell has suggested, the tiring-house was to be built within the gallery frame, these glass windows may well have been in the tiring-house wall facing the stage. R. A. Foakes observes: ‘Later theatres certainly had practical windows at the rear or sides of the stage, and the Fortune contract would suggest that these were provided there, on the gallery level, along with “lights” or gratings in the stage doors.’²⁰ If, however, the tiring-house was

a continuation of the galleries, the windows would have been in the outer wall of the playhouse.²¹

Some basic information is available about the size and shape of the Boar's Head in its legal documents. It was square in shape and its yard was about the same size as that of the Fortune, measuring 54 feet 6 inches (16.6 metres) by 55 feet 7 inches (16.9 metres). Above the yard were single galleries on the north and south and a double one on the west. Its stage was rectangular, 39 feet 7 inches (12.1 metres) wide and 25 feet (7.6 metres) deep, and equipped with a roof ('coveringe ouer the stage'). There was a gallery over the stage on the east.²² In 1602, the combined company of the Earl of Worcester's Men and Lord Oxford's Men was admitted by the Privy Council as a third London company and allocated to the Boar's Head.²³ In 1605 the company, now Queen Anne's Men, left here, when the Red Bull became available for their use. The Red Bull was square in shape, and the requirements of plays acted there suggest that its stage had two doors, a discovery space between them, a balcony, a trap and a roof equipped with a descent machine and supported by posts, as in the following stage directions: 'At one end' / 'At tother end' / 'At the middle' (Dekker and Massinger, *The Virgin Martyr* Q1, K4v)²⁴; 'Enter Synon with a torch aboue' (Heywood, 2 *The Iron Age* Q1, D4r); 'Earth riseth from vnder the stage' (Heywood, *The Silver Age* Q1, H1v); 'Iuno and Iris descend from the heauens' (*The Silver Age* Q1, F1r). Henslowe's contract for building the Hope stipulates the construction of a dual-purpose house doubling as a theatre and a bear- and bull-baiting arena 'of suche large compasse, fforme, widenes, and height as the Plaie house called the Swan in the libertie of Parris garden'. The Hope had a stage roof which was explicitly to be 'borne or carried without any postes or supporters to be fixed or sett vppon the . . . stage' so that the stage might be removable.²⁵

The private hall theatres built in Shakespeare's time were St Paul's (1575, used until c.1590, then again 1599–1606); the first Blackfriars (1576, operated until 1584); the second Blackfriars (1596, operated as a playhouse from 1600 until 1642); the Whitefriars (c.1606–07, the lease expired in 1614); Porter's Hall (1615, playing ceased there by 1617); the Cockpit in Drury Lane or the Phoenix (converted from a cockpit c.1616, operated until 1642); and the Salisbury Court (1629, operated until 1642). St Paul's playhouse was fitted up in a hall within the precincts of St Paul's Cathedral. The exact location of this hall has not been identified with certainty and some locations have been proposed. For example, Reavley Gair has suggested that the theatre was located in the north-west quadrant of the chapter house precinct,²⁶ and more recently, Herbert Berry has argued that it was in the almonry that was on the south wall of the nave between the lesser south door and the west wall

of the chapter house cloister.²⁷ The playhouse, particularly its stage, seems to have been very small, since the Induction to *What You Will*, a Paul's Children play by Marston, provides a reference to the insufficiency of space for spectators to sit on the stage: 'Lets place our selues within the Curtaines, for good faith the Stage is so very little we shall wrong the generall eye els very much' (Q1, A3r). From the evidence supplied by plays staged at the playhouse, Gair thinks that the façade of the stage had three doors, with windows above the two side doors, and a curtained alcove above the central double doors.²⁸ I am rather dubious about the windows, because references to windows in stage directions, such as '*The Casement opens, and Katherine appears*' (Marston, *Jack Drum's Entertainment* Q1, C2v) and '*Camelia from her window*' (*Jack Drum's Entertainment* Q1, D3r), do not necessarily indicate the existence of windows. The curtained alcove could well have served as the 'casement' and 'window' mentioned in these directions. *Antonio's Revenge*, another Paul's Children play by Marston, has the stage direction '*While the measure is dauncing, Andrugios ghost is placed betwixt the musick houses*' (Q1, K1v), which implies that the upper playing area was flanked by 'music houses'. This is the only stage direction including the term 'music house'. In early modern stage directions 'music room' is more common and this term is always used in the form '*the music room*', implying that there was only one music room in other theatres. The design of the upper level of Paul's playhouse may therefore have been unique.

The first Blackfriars was made by Richard Farrant, Deputy Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal for use by his boy actors, in a room at the old Dominican priory, measuring approximately 26 feet (7.9 metres) by 46 feet 6 inches (14.2 metres). The second Blackfriars was built by James Burbage in part of the Upper Frater of the monastery, the space measuring 46 feet (14 metres) by 66 feet (20.1 metres) internally.²⁹ It had at least two levels of galleries in the auditorium. Stage directions in plays performed at the second Blackfriars suggest that its stage had two doors, a discovery space between them, a balcony, a trap and a descent machine. Chapman, Jonson and Marston's *Eastward Ho*, for example, opens with a triple entrance: '*Enter Maister Touch-stone, and Quick-siluer at Seuerall dores, . . . At the middle dore, Enter Golding discovering a Gold-smiths shoppe, and walking short turns before it*' (Q1, A2r). This stage direction implies three doorways, the middle one large enough to conceal a shop. At first the residents of the Blackfriars area blocked the Lord Chamberlain's Men from playing there, and the playhouse was leased in 1600 to Henry Evans, who established a new Chapel Children boy company in Blackfriars. It was in August 1608 that the adult company, now the King's Men, regained the lease of the theatre, and it was probably in late 1609 or early

1610 that they finally began performing there.³⁰ Thereafter the company played at the Blackfriars³¹ during the winter months and at the Globe during the summer.³² The Whitefriars theatre was built in the refectory of the former Carmelite priory, the dimensions being about 35 feet (10.7 metres) by 85 feet (25.9 metres), longer and narrower than Blackfriars.³³ Staging demands of plays performed there suggest that the stage had two doors, a curtained discovery space, the upper acting level and a trapdoor. Jean MacIntyre observes: 'Because the stage was built in a smaller existing space than Blackfriars, the horizontal scale seems [to] have been reduced so as to maximize space for the paying audience, leading to what the scripts suggest were distinctive modifications: a smaller platform, a proportionately wider discovery space, entry doors set at the very edges of the stage, and a reduced upper playing area.'³⁴ Kelly Steele contends that Blackfriars and Whitefriars plays provide evidence indicating that the upper performance area in both playhouses projected out over the stage and was supported by posts.³⁵ If this conjecture were true, it could account for references to trees and posts in plays acted at these theatres and, more

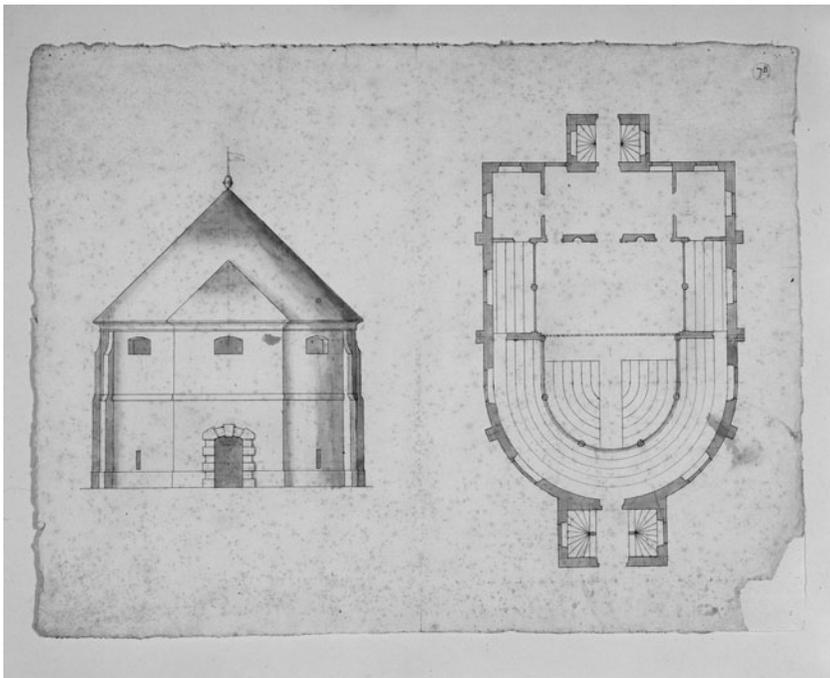


Figure 3a. Inigo Jones/John Webb drawings: elevation and plan for an indoor playhouse.