

Shakespeare Tercentenary: 1616-1916

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Coriolanus, Act II, Scene II.



Death of Iras. By Anne Demer.

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THE ENGLISH THEATRE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME

No Scenery, No Drop Curtain---Most of the Action on the Platform Called the Fore-Stage; Inner Stage Used When Some Specific Place Was to be Indicated

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES
By Ashley H. Thorndike,
Professor of English, Columbia University.

SHAKESPEARE was twelve years old when, in 1576, the first playhouse was built in London. A new epoch had begun in the modern stage; for this was one of the earliest theatres in Europe to be built as a commercial venture for professional actors. James Burbage, father of the great actor, Richard Burbage, and himself a member of the Earl of Leicester's company of players, leased a plot in the fields to the north of the city and erected there a round wooden building which he called the Theatre. In the following year another playhouse, the Curtain, was built close by, and for over ten years these were the only London theatres.

By the time that Shakespeare left Stratford for London, perhaps enticed away by these same players of the Earl of Leicester, the Rose had been built near the amphitheatre for bear fights on the Bankside, south of the river and just west of the London Bridge. Before Shakespeare was thirty he was acting in Burbage's Theatre, and writing plays for the company, of which he and Richard Burbage continued to be the leading members. In 1598, after some difficulties over the lease, the Burbages demolished the old Theatre and used the timbers in constructing the Globe, near the Rose, on the Bankside. Another playhouse, the Swan, was already there, and years later the Hope was built on the site of the old Bear Ring. The Globe, rebuilt after the fire in 1613, was the best of the Bankside playhouses, but it had new rivals in the Fortune and Red Bull, built outside the city to the north. These were all public theatres built of wood, open to the air, and outside of the city limits and the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor.

Before Burbage built the Theatre plays had been acted in various places about the city, chiefly in inn yards. At court the adult actors had been rather surpassed by companies of children drawn from the choirs of the Royal Chapel and the St. Paul's Cathedral; and these children were also permitted to give public performances. Indeed, in the very year that the Theatre was built the Children of the Chapel opened an indoor playhouse in some of the rooms of the dismantled monastery in Blackfriars. Later the Burbages secured this property, but leased it again to the manager of the children. When in "Hamlet," the traveling players tell the prince of the success of the children actors, they are really talking about this company which in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign was playing at Blackfriars and proving a formidable rival even for Shakespeare and Burbage.

This Blackfriars theatre was known as a "private house" in order to avoid the statutes of the City Government directed against the public theatres, but it differed from them merely in being indoors, with seats in the pit, artificial lighting, and higher prices. In 1608 the Burbages retained possession of the Blackfriars, and

henceforth used it as a Winter theatre, retaining the Globe mainly for the Summer season. Other private theatres were built near by and modeled closely on the Blackfriars. Two of these survived the long cessation of plays during the civil war and the Protectorate, and were reopened in the reign of Charles II. They became the models for later theatres; and so Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and, in fact, all English and American theatres can trace their ancestry back to the Blackfriars.

The companies of actors which occupied these theatres in Shakespeare's time were co-operative organizations. Ten or twelve actors formed a company, leased a playhouse, hired supernumeraries, bought costumes, properties, and plays, and shared in the profits. In order to escape the statutes against rogues, beggars, and masterless men, they were obliged to secure a license from some nobleman, and were known as the Lord Leicester's men, the Lord Admiral's men, and so on. Under James I. the leading London companies were taken directly under the patronage of members of the royal family; and Shakespeare's company, early known by the names of its various patrons, became the King's men.

The leading companies in this way secured a virtual monopoly, which was renewed after the Restoration and continued in force until the middle of the nineteenth century. The companies were under the supervision of a court official, known by the picturesque title of the Master of Revels. The censorship of the plays which he exercised has continued in England until the present day.

During Shakespeare's time there were innumerable companies which wandered about the country or played for a time in the city; but only the leading London organizations contributed much to the marvelous development of the drama. These companies became attached to the permanent theatres, accumulated important repertoires, and often attached to themselves leading dramatists. They were frequently employed to act at court, and during the Summer, or when the plague was raging, they often toured the country. The shareholders in one of these successful companies made large profits and often acquired considerable fortunes.

Among the adult actors two distinct interests soon became dominant, that of the Burbages, and that of Henslowe and Alleyn. Henslowe, whose Diary has been preserved and is one of the chief documents in the history of the theatre, formed a fortunate partnership with his son-in-law, the famous actor, Edward Alleyn. They controlled the Rose, Hope, and Fortune, and various companies of actors, and also the profitable business of the bear-baiting.

Alleyn acquired a large fortune and founded Dulwich College. The Burbages pursued the policy of giving to their associates shares in the leases and buildings, as well as in the profits of the companies, and so Shakespeare came to draw a part



An effort to reproduce the Shakespeare stage, showing action on the fore-stage. Rudolf Christians as Petruccio, Jenny Valliere as Katharine, in this season's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, at Irving Place Theatre

of his income from holdings in the Globe and Blackfriars. Their organization was indeed conducted with great business sagacity. All the members became men of property, and the company maintained an unbroken existence for over fifty years. All of Shakespeare's plays were composed for his associates, and no doubt contributed greatly to the constant prosperity of the company.

In spite of the opposition of the Puritans and the city authorities, the drama was well supported by the public. During Shakespeare's lifetime London was a city of something over one hundred thousand inhabitants, and it maintained five or six theatres giving regular drama. Henslowe's company, the Lord Admiral's men, produced about twenty new plays each season, as well as twenty or more from its repertory. A play was not given on successive days, but off and on at intervals during the season; so the theatregoers had no lack of novelty and variety. If the other companies did nearly as well, a Londoner might take his choice of five or six new plays every week, and the total attendance in a month must have exceeded the population. This inexhaustible appetite for plays can be compared only with the popularity of the movies today. Just as we have the whole world of story presented in a new way through the moving pictures, so the Elizabethans had the whole world of secular story presented for the first

time in the drama. After a while their theatres came to appeal to a more restricted class and lost something of this popular support. But in Shakespeare's day the London public was theatre-mad.

The public theatres were usually round, or nearly round, wooden buildings. The pit in the centre was open to the air and was surrounded by three tiers of galleries. The stage was a platform projecting half way into the pit and was provided with a dressing room at the rear and a roof overhead. On the roof was a small building, known as the "hut," from which gods and goddesses, clouds, sun, and so on, could be lowered to the stage.

Admission to standing room in the pit was usually a penny. Another penny was charged for entrance to the galleries—where there were benches. For the boxes or rooms partitioned off from the galleries, or for seats on the stage, the price was sometimes as high as two shillings. These prices must be multiplied by eight or ten in order to obtain a comparison with money values today. Performances were given every day except Sunday, and a flag flying from the hut indicated that a play was to be performed. Some of the public theatres were used for acrobats, fencers, prizefights and even for bear baiting; but the two chief ones, the Fortune and the Globe, permitted only dramatic performances.

A few pictures of the interiors of Elizabethan theatres have been preserved, but they do not give detailed or authentic information about the stage itself. Doubtless it varied more or less in the different theatres, but its main features appear to have been the same. It was a platform projecting into the pit, without any front curtain, and surrounded on three sides by the audience. In the rear were two doors, and between them an alcove, or inner curtain, and surrounded on three sides by curtains, which could be drawn open or shut, disclosing or concealing persons or properties on the inner stage. Above the inner stage was a balcony, also provided with curtains, and in some cases there were windows or balconies over the doors. There were various trapdoors, and in the hut on the roof machinery for managing ascents and descents of deities.

The performance of a play on this stage differed in many ways from one today. There was no scenery and no woman actors. Scenes were introduced in the elaborate spectacles given at court in connection with the court masques, and became customary in these shows about the time of Shakespeare's death; but they were not introduced into the public theatres until after the Restoration. Female parts were taken by boys; and, except in plays given by children's companies, there are usually only two or three important female characters in a play.

It must be remembered, however, that some of the boys who played the heroines had begun acting when 10 or 12 and had gone through a rigorous training in a stock company. Like the Japanese men actors, who have undergone a similar training, they doubtless acquired great skill in their female impersonations. If the boy actors had not been very skillful, perhaps Shakespeare would never have created Juliet and Rosalind and Cleopatra.

Though without scenery, Shakespeare's stage was by no means lacking in spectacle. Large sums of money were lavished on velvets, tinsel, taffeta, and lace; and the amount spent for an actor's cloak often exceeded the sum paid an author for a play. The price for a play was sometimes as low as £5. The costumes were gorgeous, but no regard was paid to historical appropriateness. Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Henry V., and Macbeth all appeared in the current fashions; and Cleopatra wore stags, ruff, and farthingale, after the mode familiar in the portrait of Queen

Elizabeth. What costumes were exhibited by the fairies, mermaids, Venuses, Turks, satyrs and other personages we do not know, but they probably all added to the gayety of the stage picture.

Processions, battles, fireworks, transformations also contributed to the movement and spectacle. Occasional plays borrowed hints from the more sumptuous court shows. "A Midsummer Night's Dream," with its fairies, owes something to the fantastic comedies that the children actors had made popular at court. The "Tempest" borrows some of the machinery and dances from the elaborate masques of the Court of James.

The presentation of a play was considerably affected by the peculiar arrangement of the stage. This has been the subject of much investigation and controversy among scholars. It seems clear, however, that the action was largely on the front stage, and that most of the scenes were devised for this projecting platform. Since there was no drop curtain, the actors had some distance to traverse between the doors and the front. At the close of a scene or an act all retired and the empty stage marked the beginning of a new scene. The bodies of the dead, which were often numerous, must be carried off; and so an Elizabethan tragedy usually ends with a funeral procession.

The place-headings supplied by modern editors for Shakespeare's plays help the reader to visualize a modern presentation, but are very misleading as to Shakespeare's intentions or as to an Elizabethan performance. The majority of scenes in his or in any Elizabethan play gives no hint as to exact locality. There are no projecting into the pit, without any front curtain, and surrounded on three sides by the audience. In the rear were two doors, and between them an alcove, or inner curtain, and surrounded on three sides by curtains, which could be drawn open or shut, disclosing or concealing persons or properties on the inner stage. Above the inner stage was a balcony, also provided with curtains, and in some cases there were windows or balconies over the doors. There were various trapdoors, and in the hut on the roof machinery for managing ascents and descents of deities.

Specific places could, however, be indicated, if desired, by means of the inner stage and the balcony above it. The balcony represented the wall of a town, the upper story of a house, a tower, or any elevated locality. The inner stage represented a cave, temple, shop, study, or interior room. When Prospero discovered Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess in the cave he drew the curtains and revealed them on the inner stage. The inner stage was further used for many scenes with heavy properties, or for some other reason, requiring a discovery.

The employment of the inner stage underwent a further development in Shakespeare's time, and came to be used more and more for any specified place or for any decided change of scene. If the actors were outdoors, on a street or square, the curtains were closed and the conversation was on the front stage. If they decided to go into a house or tavern they would exit and then the curtains would be opened and the inner stage disclosed with setting for a room. Here the actors would reappear and the scene would have changed from outdoors to indoors.

Or sometimes the inner stage would serve for outdoors. On trees, rocks, and other properties would be placed, making a forest background for the action. Such was the arrangement for the Forest of Arden, where the last four acts of "As You Like It" are represented. But for three very short scenes, the action changes from the forest to somewhere about the court. Then the curtains were closed, concealing all or nearly all of the forest properties; and the brief expository scenes were acted on the bare front stage, which

represented the court or some undesignated locality.

This method of staging is similar to that often used today in Shakespeare's plays and melodramas, or in others with a large number of scenes. The stage is set for a scene at Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, but a painted drop cuts off all but a little of the front, and the scene is transferred to a street or a room. When the drop goes up we are again in the Grand Canyon, or in a new place with elaborate scenery. This method, now becoming somewhat unfamiliar, has been extremely common ever since the Restoration, when curtains or flats opening and closing performed the service of our painted drops. On Shakespeare's stage the rear curtains similarly enabled the dramatist to transfer his scene from indoors to outdoors, or from a neutral to a special locality, from the street in Venice to Portia's house in Belmont, or from the battlefield of Actium to the apartment of Cleopatra in Egypt.

This inner stage is the most interesting part of Shakespeare's theatre because it is so important a link in the development of the modern stage. It connects his dramatic methods with both mediæval and modern practice. In mediæval plays the area of the stage represented any place, but certain stations or structures represented special localities. Many different places could be represented at once by these *domus* or *loci* or *mansions*. Shakespeare's inner stage was the successor of these properties localities, but by means of its curtains it represented these localities successively and at simultaneously. Substitute scenery for settings, and we have a stage fitted to present a succession of different scenes. When scenery was introduced after the Restoration, it was, in fact, placed on the inner stage. The projecting platform still continued, but it was cut down little by little, and the proscenium doors ceased to be used for entrances and exits. The front stage of Shakespeare gradually disappeared and his rear curtains became our front curtains, and his inner stage developed into the picture-frame stage of today.

The theatre of Shakespeare belongs to a transitional period, half way between the mediæval and the modern. Its bare front stage representing undefined locality, its rich but anachronistic costumes, its lack of scenery, and its boys in women's parts are all survivals from mediæval practices. On the other hand, the beginnings of modern conditions are marked by the building of permanent theatres, the development of acting as a regular profession, and the representation of definite localities successively. If Shakespeare's stage is in many respects different from ours, it is less unlike that of Sheridan and Kemble, and still less unlike that of Congreve and Betterton.

Though the English theatre of Shakespeare's time was transitional and experimental, it performed the great service of bringing literature to the public. It relied on the court for protection, but in the main it was a democratic institution. It afforded men of letters an opportunity to earn both money and fame by an appeal to the public instead of to patrons. Its stock companies gave their members a thorough training, and provided actors equal to the varied and difficult impersonations which the dramas required. Before the novel, or pamphlet, or newspaper, the drama became a means for popular entertainment and culture. The plays are not free from the vulgarities and incongruities demanded by a crude stage and a miscellaneous audience; but they also exhibit that freedom of art from restraint and convention, that richness of life, and that ardency of imagination which are encouraged by a changing era and a popular appeal. Shakespeare wrote for a stage that was the home of poetry and for a public that loved the play. Copyright, 1916, by The New York Times Company



The *Taming of the Shrew* at the Irving Place, showing action on the inner stage. ~ Heinrich Marlow as Christopher Sly
First Servant. Will't please your lordship drink a cup of sack?