

8 Bulls, bears, and actors: the Elizabethan stage

James Burbage and The Theatre. Bull- and bear-baiting yards. De Witt and the Swan. 'My lord's room.' The Globe, the Fortune, and the Hope. The second Globe. Doors, windows, and discovery spaces. Indoor theatres and the Blackfriars.

In England the new Serlian productions were also introduced in the schools and universities, but the strolling players continued to use the medieval styles of production in the halls of manor houses and inns, and in the adapted environments of existing bull- and bear-baiting yards. In 1576, following the licensing of professional performers by the Master of the Revels, James Burbage built a permanent home for his players, The Theatre, in Finsbury Fields, the first of a number of such 'public' or open-air theatres to be constructed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Although there are several illustrations of such theatres, few are reliable, in that the same building may be shown in one instance as circular and in another as multi-sided. All, however, confirm the close resemblance between the built playhouses and the baiting yards – a resemblance which is not surprising when it is realized that some of the buildings were of a multi-purpose nature, being used both as gaming houses and for plays.

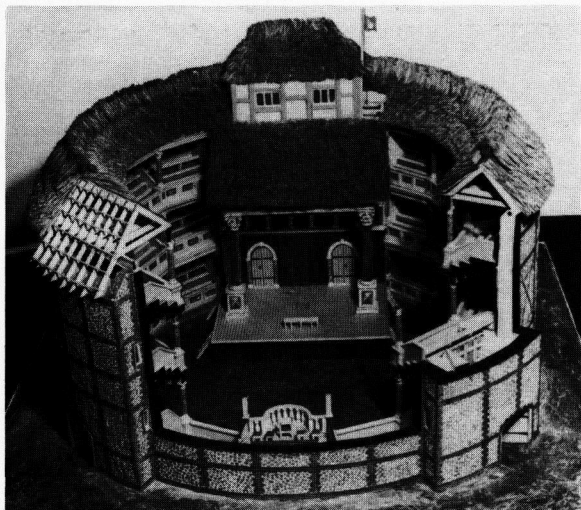
The one theatre for which we have reliable visual evidence is the Swan. Built between 1594 and 1596 by Frances Langley, it was sketched by a Dutch visitor, de Witt, who sent the drawing [96] to his friend von Buchel, together with a description of the building, which he claimed could seat 3,000 persons. He further described it as being built of a 'concrete of flint stones' and supported by 'wooden pillars painted to imitate marble', and suggested that it showed traces 'of the Roman style', as indicated on the copy of his drawing made by von Buchel.

This drawing confirms various written comments regarding such public theatres as The Theatre, the

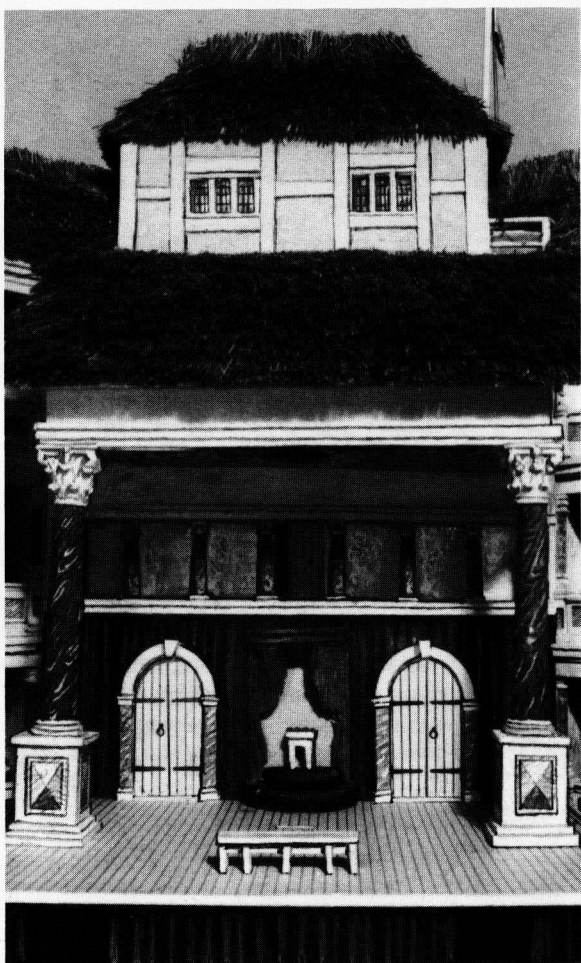


96 The Swan, after de Witt

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Curtain, and the Rose in which mention is made of three galleries, a yard, a tiring house or 'place where the players make them ready', 'my lord's room', and a 'room over the tiring house'. All these features, with the exception of my lord's room, are seen in the sketch. A raised, rectangular stage [97] is set within an open, circular yard where the groundlings stood, surrounded by three galleries, [98] the uppermost being designated by de Witt as a Roman *porticus*.

According to another visitor, Thomas Platter of Basle, the galleries provided additional, more comfortable standing room, but it was also possible to sit. The visitor paid a penny to enter the yard,

but if he wants to sit, he is let in at a further door, and there he gives another penny. If he desires to sit on a cushion in the most comfortable place of all, where he not only sees everything well, but can also be seen, then he gives yet another English penny at another door.

This was no doubt my lord's room, which would have been available when 'my lord' – the member of the nobility required to legitimize a company by his patronage – was not visiting his players.

The various companies of players not only performed in these playhouses, but also toured the country, where they appeared before the screens in the great halls of guilds and also in private houses. It is not unexpected, therefore, that the *mimorum ades* depicted by de Witt should have two doors at stage level and an open gallery above, similar to the hall screens.



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The Swan : 97 general view
98 view after de Witt
99 aerial view

If this analogy is carried further it may be assumed that 'my lord's room' would occupy a similar position to that of the lord of the manor seated at the high table directly opposite the screens. One is indeed tempted to feel that de Witt, having spent his three English pennies, was seated in my lord's room when he made his original sketch.

The rear portion of the stage is sheltered by a roof which was almost certainly ceiled below with a flat, painted 'Heavens' through which ascents and descents, an essential part of medieval performances, could be made, together with Ben Jonson's 'creaking throne' – accompanied no doubt by clouds. Above the roof the tiring house was carried up to form a room containing the machinery needed for the various scenic devices mentioned above. [99]

In 1599 The Theatre was pulled down and its timbers were used to build the Globe on the South Bank, and in 1600 came the Fortune [307], which differed from the other playhouses in being square rather than circular. The circular Hope, however, built in 1613, was designed as a multi-purpose structure to be used both for plays and games. To this end the stage was removable, and since the Heavens could thus not be supported by columns they had instead to be cantilevered at roof level.

Contracts exist for both these theatres, and are of value in providing dimensions for the main measurements of the theatres, and for details of their construc-

tion. The contract for the Fortune states that the stage should project to the centre of the yard, and be 43 feet (13.11m) wide set in a yard 55 feet (16.76m) square. The stage should also be designed in accordance with a plan originally attached to the contract, which suggests that it was not the simple rectangle seen in the Swan.

The Globe was destroyed by fire on 29 June 1613, to be rebuilt the following year. Both the Hope and the second Globe are shown on Hollar's *Long View* [100], where the latter can be seen to have a dual-pitched roof to the machine room, which occupies half the yard space and spans its full width. In the Swan drawing the width of the machine room conforms to the width of the stage, and we may perhaps assume that the stage of the second Globe also conformed to the width of its machine room and occupied the full width of the yard. The stage of the Swan, with its two doors of entry, followed the medieval pattern with its stage or 'plain' surrounded most probably by practical scenic mansions [101] such as are listed in Henslowe's inventory for the Rose: a tomb, Hell's Mouth, a tomb of Dido, trees, mossy banks, and a wooden canopy.

In Italy we noted that such features were being replaced by doors, arranged either in the Terentian manner or in the correct classical way within a *frons scaenae* like that at Vicenza, and it may be assumed that these classical features were now being introduced in England into the theatres of educational establishments and into the

100 The second Globe (left) and the Hope (right)



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indoor or 'private' theatres. Stage directions in contemporary plays call for windows and upper galleries, and a discovery space behind a curtain of sufficient size to accommodate at least twelve people or such furnishings as a table, a bed, and a cupboard. In the indoor theatres this space probably occupied a central position into which most of the audience could see, flanked by doors on either side of the stage, or in the Phoenix (converted by Beeston from a cockpit in Drury Lane), set in the oblique walls like those in the later Cockpit in Court. [110]

The Swan represents clearly the general architectural reaction to the Italian Renaissance in Britain in that, with few exceptions, throughout the greater part of the sixteenth century classical features were

integrated with traditional building techniques, and it was not until the early seventeenth century that Renaissance theories were fully understood and implemented. In 1614, when the second Globe [102] was built, it would have been surprising if the tiring house had not conformed more closely to the classical *frons scaenae* than had been the case in the earlier Swan.

In 1596 James Burbage adapted premises in the Blackfriars, on the western edge of the City of London, which, from 1608, were used by the King's Company in conjunction with the Globe. Little is known regarding this roofed playhouse, but mention is made of side galleries and a gallery facing the stage, but the audiences in the equivalent area to the open yard of the unroofed theatres, unlike their French colleagues in the *parterre* of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, are known to have been seated on benches in what was now called the pit.

Stage directions from contemporary plays mention doors as being 'opposite', suggesting that the doors, probably with windows or balconies above, were set in the side walls of the stage. Such doors, windows, and discovery space could take on any character which the play demanded. As these conventions became accepted, and with an audience confined by the rectangular shape of the hall to a more polarized relationship to the stage, it is reasonable to think that if plays were to be successfully transferred from the Blackfriars to the Globe, then the architectural arrangements of the latter must have begun to conform more closely to the patterns dictated by the roofed playhouse, except in their respective sizes.

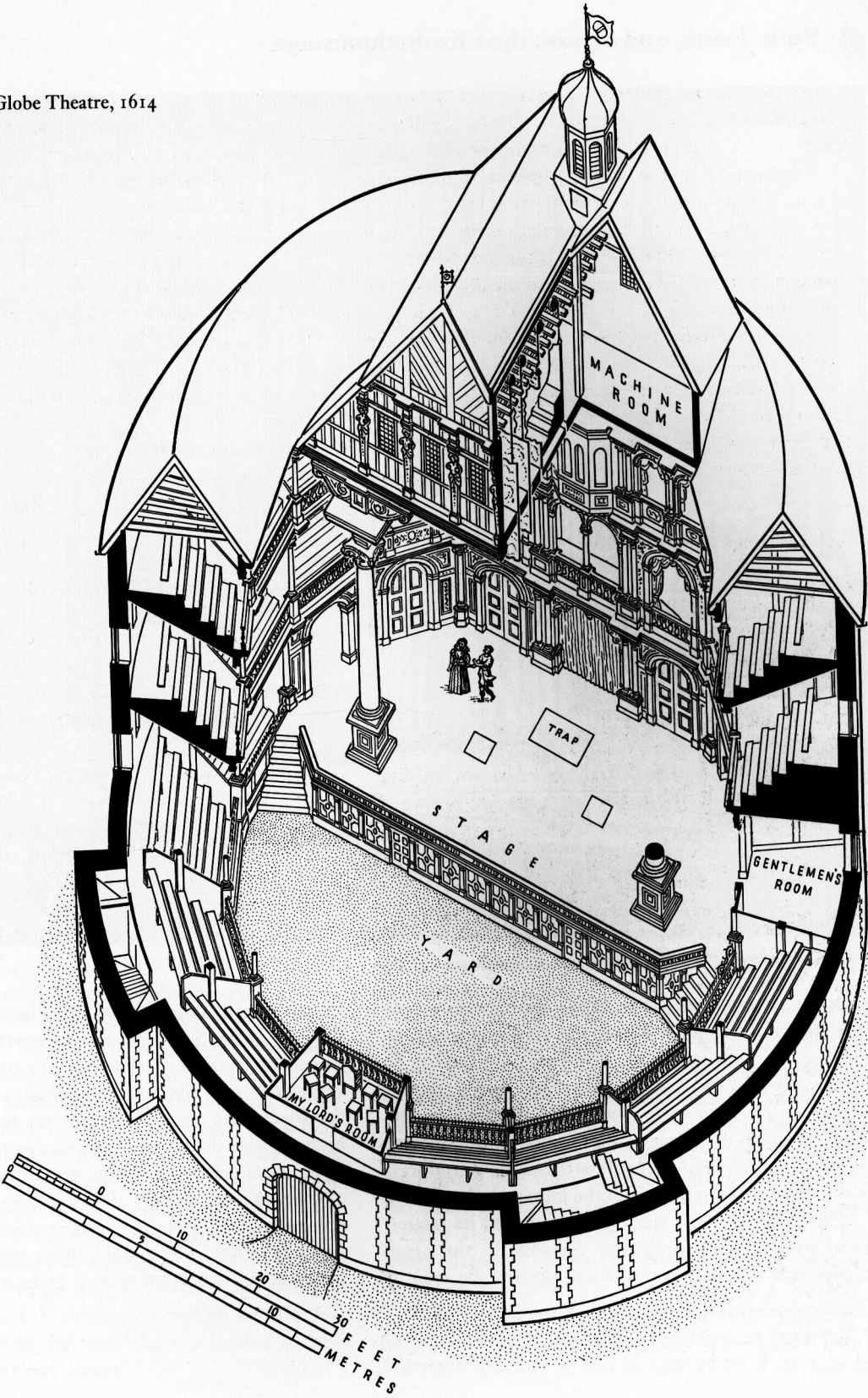
Our reconstruction of the second Globe has a tiring house arranged as a classical *frons scaenae* with a central, curtained opening for use as a discovery space, flanked by two openings with double doors. Two further doors are set in the first oblique facets of the main frame of the theatre. At first gallery level the five openings are reflected by open galleries or windows, and above these are further openings with a central room for musicians – a feature also provided in one way or another in the roofed playhouses.

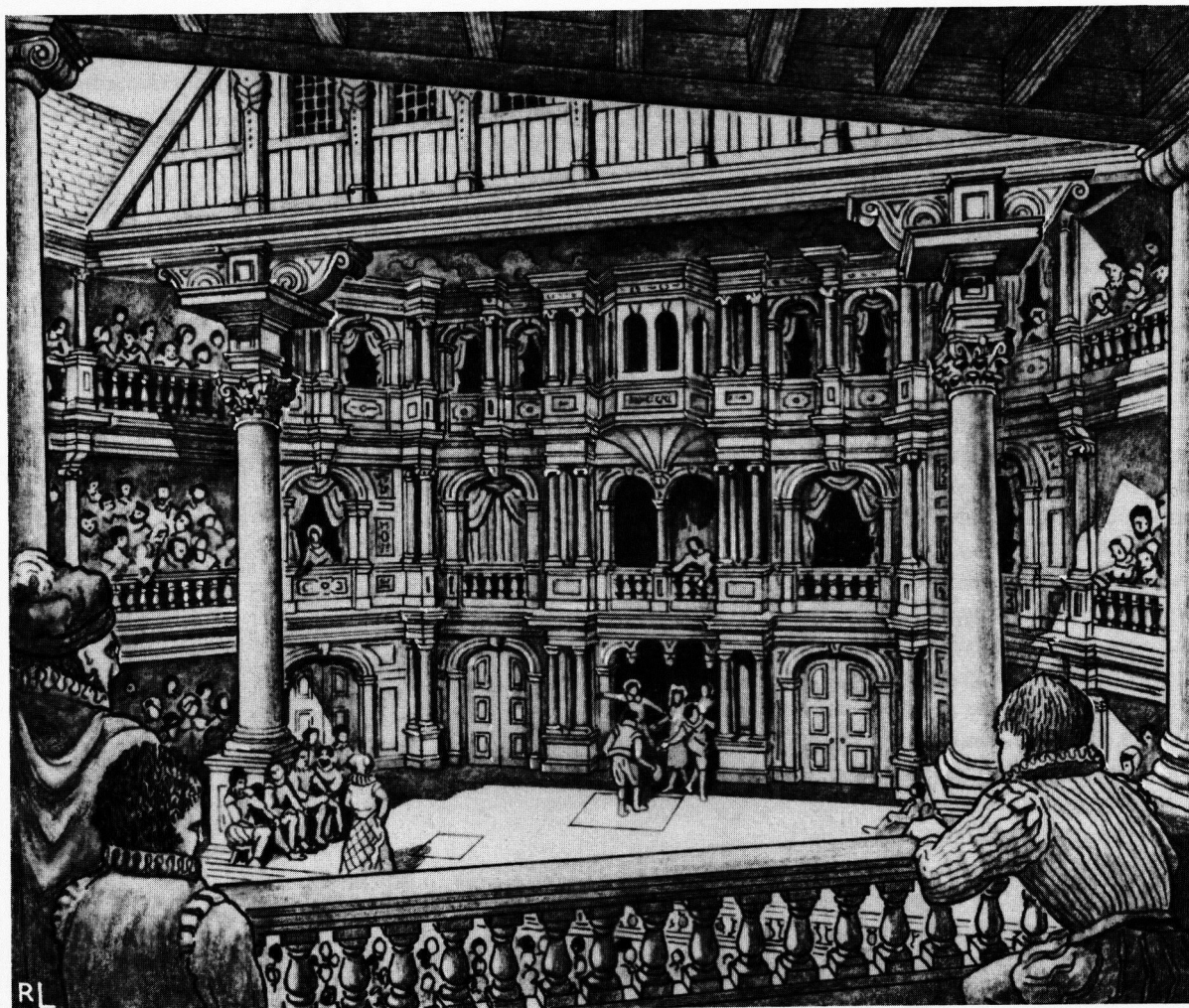
The increase in the number of doorways from the two of the Swan to the five proposed here was made possible by the increased width of the stage, which permitted greater flexibility of movement on the stage and in the use of the upper galleries. Ascents and descents to and from Heaven were still possible, and traps permitted movement through the stage floor. The

101 The Swan, with medieval style mansions



102a The second Globe Theatre, 1614





102b The second Globe Theatre

under-stage space was also approached by doorways directly from the yard, which was now connected to the stage by permanent steps, replacing the ladders of earlier periods. In addition to 'my lord's room', gentlemen's rooms were now included adjoining the stage, to which they gave access, so that the gentlemen could sit on the stage – a habit presumably introduced in the more restricted space of the indoor theatres.

The increase in the size of the stage and its related areas meant a corresponding decrease in the areas occupied by the audience, which can now be seen to

be more axially related to the tiring house than had been the case in the Swan; so each facet of the frame could be separated from its neighbour by partitions to form separate boxes. The provision of benches in the pit at the Blackfriars meant that this area now catered for a higher social class, and the groundlings were banished to an upper gallery facing the stage, where they eventually became the 'gods'. But in the second Globe the groundlings still occupied the reduced space in the yard, although some had doubtless moved to standing spaces at the rear of the seating in the galleries.