

12. PLAYHOUSES

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DRAMA DOES NOT NEED purpose-built venues. Most of the scripts produced in the 2,500-year history of recorded drama can be performed quite adequately outdoors or within any room large enough to hold the performers and spectators. However, to give large numbers of spectators a reasonable view of the action, and to charge them effectively for the privilege, a custom-built performance space is needed. The ancient Greeks, whose culture flourished in the centuries before Christ, performed their plays outdoors in increasingly sophisticated stone amphitheaters that took advantage of natural hollows in the ground to arrange the audience in an arc around the performers. The Roman culture that flourished in the first 600 years after Christ copied the Greek design but also produced freestanding urban theaters. Instead of putting the spectators in shallow tiers of seats, the Roman urban theater stacked them in a vertical tube of galleries; the surviving Colosseum in Rome typifies this design. The Roman Empire included Britain from the first to the sixth centuries, and in its towns amphitheaters were built for public entertainments of animal and human fighting and drama.

The period between the sixth century, when the Romans left Britain, and the sixteenth century, when the European Renaissance reached it, is commonly known as the Middle Ages, or, to express the same thing in Latin, the medieval period. Other terms, such as the Dark Ages, are misleading because the Germanic cultures of Britain in the early medieval period produced spectacular metalwork (especially jewelry) and epic poetry, and the later medieval period gave us the beautiful poetry of John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer. But compared with the classical Greek and Roman cultures, it produced few durable stone buildings (almost all of them churches) and, as far as we can tell, no purpose-built theaters. The rebirth (or Renaissance) of classical learning began in thirteenth-century Italy and spread across northern Europe, reaching Britain in the early sixteenth century. Such dates are always disputable generalizations, but we can date one aspect of the Renaissance in Britain quite precisely. In 1576, the first purpose-built theater in a thousand years was erected in London.

THE THEATRE

Unfortunately, we do not know which of two theaters deserves the honor of being the first to be built since the Romans left. Most scholars give the prize to a building called the Theatre that was erected in the Shoreditch area. It was constructed by the joiner (that is, woodworker) turned actor James Burbage, father of the

celebrated actor Richard, and his brother-in-law, John Brayne. Nine years earlier, Brayne had dipped his toe into theater building by installing temporary galleries and a stage, with an accompanying tower or turret, in the garden of the Red Lion farm in Stepney, but for the Theatre he and Burbage borrowed heavily to produce something substantial: a timber-framed amphitheater on firm foundations, with a thatched roof and a plastered exterior (Egan). The Red Lion does not count as the first purpose-built venue because it was merely a temporary construction without foundations, built for a particular set of performances.

Burbage and Brayne's decision to call their permanent building the Theatre evoked the old Roman amphitheaters, and visitors to London commented that it looked like one, being virtually round although made of wood and plaster rather than stone. (Anti-Catholic, anti-theatrical preachers used the "Romish" association as a way of disparaging such playhouses.) The stage stood in the open yard, surrounded by standing spectators, and seated patrons were accommodated in the covered galleries that encompassed the yard. Because surviving records of a lawsuit happen to mention them, we know a number of things about the less important Red Lion that we do not know about the Theatre. The Red Lion's stage was five feet high and forty feet by thirty feet across, its turret was thirty feet high, and the galleries were a single story. For the Theatre, we can only assume that the stage was about the same size and height; overall the building was somewhere between eighty and one hundred feet in diameter.

THE NEWINGTON BUTTS PLAYHOUSE

It is just possible that another permanent playhouse was completed before the Theatre. South of the Thames, about a mile into the countryside of Surrey, Jerome Savage, leading actor of the Warwick's Men company, subleased from Richard Hicke a parcel of land that Hicke had leased from the governing body of Canterbury Cathedral. On this site was built a theater that has come to be known by its location in Newington Butts. Savage's lease began in March 1576, as did Burbage's for the Theatre, and we do not know which of them was finished and in use first (Ingram 150–81). Little is known about the design of the Newington Butts theater, but in June 1594 the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men performed eight plays there, including Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and plays called *Hamlet* and *The Taming of a Shrew* that might have connections with Shakespeare's similarly titled plays. In 1594, the ecclesiastical authorities from whom the land was leased

ordered that playing cease, and in 1599 the theater was reported to have been replaced by houses.

THE CURTAIN

Within a year of the Theatre being erected, a similar playhouse, called the Curtain, was put up almost next door. Like Richard Hickes of the Newington Butts, the proprietor of this new theater, Henry Laneman, was a yeoman of the queen's guard (technically her bodyguards), and it seems that Laneman brought in Hickes himself to run the Curtain. When Hickes died in 1585, Laneman entered into a seven-year profit-sharing deal with James Burbage at the Theatre, culminating in Burbage taking over the Curtain, too (Ingram 219–38). A contemporary engraving known as *The View of the City of London from the North towards the South* survives, and it shows the Curtain, confirming that like the Theatre it was a virtually round open amphitheater, with staircases on the outside to give access to the upper galleries – the rows of windows suggest three stories – and what looks like a turret arising from the stage in the yard.

In contrast to these new open-air amphitheatres, yet another venue of quite a different design also came into use in 1576. Richard Farrant leased from Sir William More part of an old Dominican monastery in the Blackfriars district of London and began using it for theatrical performances by boy players. The theaters in Shoreditch and south of the river were technically in the suburbs outside London and not subject to harassment by the antitheatrical city authorities, but the Blackfriars was in the heart of the city. This new venture was able to go on because the monastery was in a liberty, an area with an ancient exemption from city authority, and because the boys' performances could be excused as public rehearsals – part of their education rather than a commercial endeavor – and most importantly because Farrant and his partner William Hunnis, and later John Newman and Henry Evans, kept the audiences small and elite. The venture lasted only eight years, but the Blackfriars would become important again when Burbage took it over in 1596.

The open-air amphitheatres of 1576 – the Theatre and the Curtain, and perhaps Newington Butts, although we have no evidence of its design – set the style for subsequent playhouses. The standard layout was a timber-framed polygon of fourteen to twenty sides forming a roofed seating area on three levels, ranged around an open yard into which a rectangular or trapezoidal stage projected. The whole structure was between seventy and one hundred feet in diameter and could hold around two thousand to three thousand people, divided roughly equally between those standing in the yard and those sitting in the galleries. At the back of the stage were two or three openings into a room behind it, called the tiring house, where the actors changed into their costumes before entering. The wall between the tiring house and the stage, into which

these two or three openings were set, formed the back wall (or *frons scenae*) of the playing space. A balcony set at first-floor (in American counting, second-floor) level in the *frons scenae* could be reached from inside the tiring house and provided a small playing space overlooking the stage, which was useful for scenes involving characters addressing those on the main stage as if from out of a window or atop city walls. A cover over the stage projected from the top of the *frons scenae* and was supported by two posts rising from what we would call the downstage edge of the stage. The stage was not raked (that is, sloped), and standing spectators swarmed around it on all three sides, so the modern upstage/downstage distinction does not properly apply here, although the terms remain useful.

The stage cover was intended primarily to protect the expensive clothing that actors wore in order to realistically represent senior aristocrats and monarchs, and its painted underside was referred to as the heavens. In some of the playhouses (but apparently not the Globe when it was first built), an opening in the heavens allowed characters to be winched down to the stage by rope, a primitive form of theatrical flying. A trapdoor in the floor of the stage could represent a grave for scenes of burial – useful for laying Ophelia to rest in *Hamlet* – or the way down to hell, up from which devils could emerge. Most of these details can be seen in the only surviving picture showing the inside of an open-air amphitheater playhouse, copied by the Dutchman Aernout van Buchell from an original by his friend Johannes de Witt in his letter to van Buchell about his own visit to London in 1596 (Figure 15). It shows the Swan, a playhouse built in 1595 by Francis Langley on the south bank of the Thames.

It was commonly agreed that the Newington Butts playhouse was too far south of the river Thames to be a convenient destination for Londoners seeking an afternoon's entertainment, and in the first decade of playing in permanent venues the Theatre and the Curtain in the northern suburb of Shoreditch thrived.

THE ROSE

In 1587, however, impresario Philip Henslowe built a new amphitheater playhouse on the south bank of the Thames, close to London Bridge. Henslowe's son-in-law was the celebrated actor Edward Alleyn, and with his talent and the plays being written by the sensational new dramatist Christopher Marlowe, the Rose venture rapidly rivaled Burbage's northern operation. In 1592, Henslowe made extensive alterations at the Rose, enlarging the yard and adding a cover over the stage. In 1595, the cover was equipped with a winch for flying.

Over time, the open-air amphitheater playhouses acquired new technology, as when the Globe was retrofitted with a winch for flying characters in 1609. No play written for the Globe before 1609 required a winch, but Shakespeare's next two plays made spectacular use of



15. Johannes de Witt, View of Swan theater, London, circa 1596, as copied by Aenout van Buchel. Reproduced by permission of Utrecht University Library.

one: Jupiter descends on an eagle in *Cymbeline* (1610) and Juno and Ariel-as-Harpy descend in *The Tempest* (1611). The addition of newfangled “geometrical” hinges that allowed a stage door to open “both ways,” as John Webster put it in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), allowed greater flexibility than traditional hinges that would have required the actors to decide whether the door should open into the tiring house or outward onto the stage.

From the early days of playing in the new London venues in the 1570s to the early 1590s, companies seem to have stayed at each amphitheater for relatively short periods, and just as often they performed in the upper rooms or the yards of inns in the heart of the city, where the audiences would be smaller but the conditions more comfortable, especially in winter. In 1594, the authorities banned performances in city inns and licensed just one troupe at each of two London venues: Alleyn’s company, the Lord Admiral’s Men, were to stay south of the river at the Rose, and a new, rival company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, with Richard Burbage their star actor, were to stay at his father’s venue, the Theatre in the north. The Lord Admiral’s Men had the old plays of Marlowe and used freelance writers to expand their repertory. The Lord Chamberlain’s Men included an actor, William Shakespeare, who had recently written a handful of highly successful plays, and for the rest of his career he wrote exclusively for this company, which grew to be the most successful in the land.

The licensing of just two companies gave the pair sole access to the lucrative London market. The two companies’ sharers, including Shakespeare among the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, grew rich in a time of relative economic hardship.

THE SWAN

Others wanted a piece of this action, and in 1595 Francis Langley built an amphitheater playhouse called the Swan, upstream of the Rose. The location was chosen to tempt playgoers who crossed the river southward by boat, landing at the Paris Garden stairs, as they would pass Langley’s new playhouse before reaching the Rose.

THE BOAR’S HEAD

Also in 1595, Oliver Woodliffe leased the Boar’s Head inn to the east of London, and soon he and Richard Samwell began to construct a stage and galleries that turned its yard into an amphitheater. Initially, the stage was in the center of the yard, but it was later moved to abut one of the sides as in the other playhouses.

The Swan was closed by the Privy Council in 1597 after a performance of Thomas Nashe and Ben Jonson’s play *The Isle of Dogs* (now lost), which criticized the government, and Langley tried to become a partner in the Boar’s Head project. The Boar’s Head held only around 1,000 spectators, and during its short life – regular playing there seems to have ended in 1603 – it was the site of extreme tensions between the various parties that had shares in its complex leasing arrangements, most of whom were not experienced in the theater business. Thus it would be fair to say that the Theatre and the Rose were the dominant London playhouses, and the official protection provided by their licensing in 1594 gave them a security the others could not match.

THE FIRST GLOBE

Not long after the formation of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1594, the Burbages at the Theatre had a problem: their lease on the land on which the playhouse stood was due to expire early in 1597. In 1596, James Burbage bought part of the Blackfriars complex that Farrant and others used for boy-company performances from 1576 to 1584, and he set about turning it into a fully equipped indoor hall playhouse that would become the new home for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Local residents of this elite area successfully petitioned the Privy Council to ban this new theater’s use by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, and the Burbages could only defray their losses by leasing it to a company of boy players led by the same Henry Evans who ran the Blackfriars theater twenty years earlier. When the lease on the site of the Theatre expired, the Burbages wisely continued paying their rent while trying to negotiate a new lease. Unable to come to an agreement with their landlord, the company decamped to the nearby Curtain in summer 1598.

The lease on the site of the Theatre gave James Burbage the right to remove any buildings he put up, so if it were still in force he or his successors could take away the playhouse and re-erect it somewhere else. The landlord's acceptance of rent after the old lease expired arguably constituted a *de facto* extension of that lease, and with this legal cover the Burbages employed a master carpenter, Peter Street, to stealthily dismantle the Theatre over a few days, beginning on December 28, 1598. Its main timbers were carted across the Thames to a site opposite the Rose, where they were reassembled to form a new amphitheater playhouse called the Globe. It is possible that Street, who completed his apprenticeship in 1577, had helped in the original building of the Theatre and knew its construction intimately.

Most theater historians think that the only way the timbers of the Theatre could have been put back together was if their main joints were not cut off and remade but rather were carefully taken apart and reused for the reassembly, hence the involvement of the craftsman Street. If so, the Globe would have been exactly the size and shape of the Theatre. The Globe was destroyed in a fire in 1613 but was immediately rebuilt on the same foundations, an operation that again would preserve the size and shape of the building. Thus, the basic design of the Theatre that James Burbage and John Brayne hit on in 1576 seems to have survived through two reincarnations across sixty-six years until the Globe was closed with all the other playhouses as the Civil War loomed in 1642.

THE FORTUNE

We do not have a record of how Henslowe felt about his main rivals moving south to put up a new amphitheater playhouse on his doorstep, but it may be significant that the following year he moved in the opposite direction by contracting Street to build him a new amphitheater north of the river, called the Fortune. The contract to build the Fortune playhouse survives with Henslowe's other papers, and it refers to the Globe as its model in a number of details. Crucially, however, the overall shape was an innovation: this amphitheater was to be square rather than virtually round, with an exterior dimension of eighty feet and an interior dimension (across the inside of the yard) of fifty-five feet, leaving room for galleries twelve and a half feet deep.

Because its contract refers to the Globe directly, theater historians have speculated about how far the Fortune resembled its more famous predecessor. The problem is in deciding whether each specification was given to show where the Fortune was to depart from the Globe or to show in what ways they were to be alike. The contract's phrasing seems to say that, unlike the Globe, the Fortune was to have pilasters (square columns) holding up the stage cover, so presumably the Globe had round (turned) columns instead. But did the Globe also have "strong iron pikes" (spikes) around the yard wall to keep the yardlings

contained in their place? The contract's phrasing could be argued either way.

THE REPLICA GLOBE

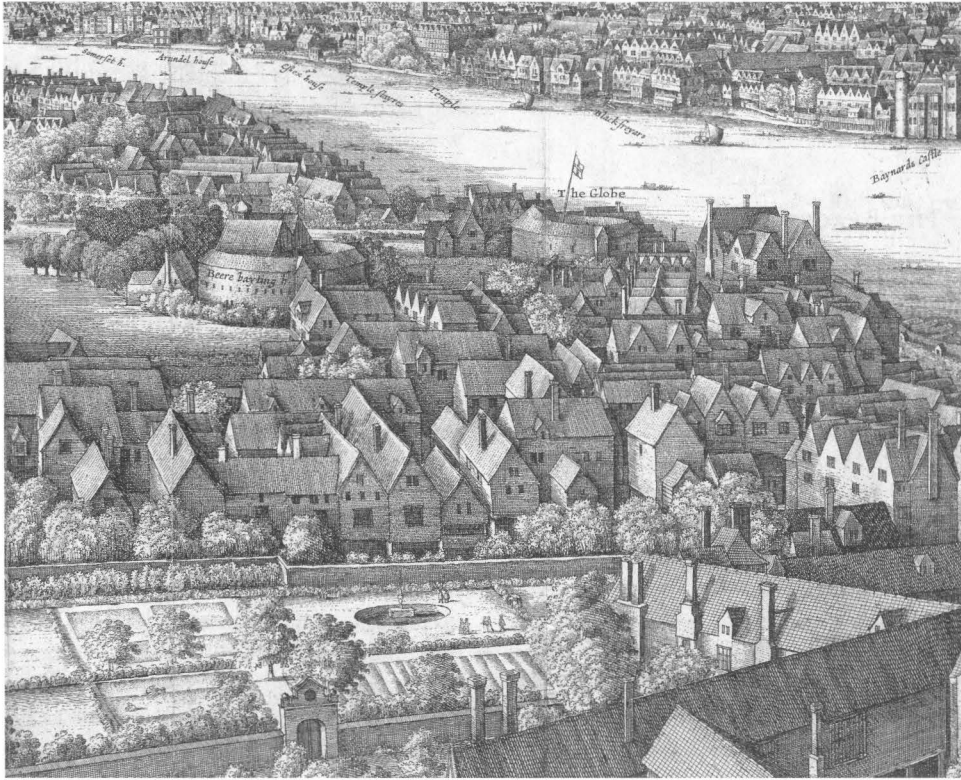
The interior decoration of the Globe replica now standing near the site of the original in south London reflects the current state of historical scholarship. (See Chapter 19, "Stage Directions and the Stage Space," and Chapter 144, "Globe Theater Replicas.") The Elizabethans loved to brightly color the insides of their public spaces, and visitors to the playhouses commented on cunning trick-of-the-eye painting whereby wood and plaster were made to resemble marble and stone. If anything, the Globe replica, which surprises some visitors with its authentic gaudiness, is still too plain: the bright coloring of the stage should be continued around the galleries holding the audience. In the first ten years of its operation (1996–2005), the replica Globe staged productions of high historical authenticity using original practices – boy actors playing female characters, and clothing from the early modern period – but a change of artistic directorship has lowered these standards. (See Chapter 203, "Original Practices.")

Modern directors using the replica Globe are fond of extending the stage farther into the yard (beyond the protection from rain offered by the stage cover) to bring actors closer to the audience, and of having entrances and exits through the yard, pushing excited playgoers aside as necessary. Neither of these things would have been done in the early modern open-air amphitheaters: the actors' luxurious clothing had to be protected from rain at all costs, since it could not be laundered, and the provision of spikes to keep the rowdy yardlings from climbing into the galleries at the Fortune suggests that the yard was no place for an actor to venture during the performance. An authentic practice that could be followed at the replica would be to charge some members of the audience an inflated fee to allow them to sit on stools on the stage (Thomson), since this seems to have routinely occurred from at least the 1590s.

After the Fortune playhouse was erected in 1600, only one wholly new, freestanding amphitheater playhouse was built.

THE HOPE

In 1614, Henslowe, who was joint Master and Keeper of the King's Bears with Alleyn from 1604, had his Bear Garden animal-baiting ring torn down, and in its place a new, dual-purpose playhouse and baiting ring, the Hope, was constructed. To allow for both functions, the stage was removable, and its cover was cantilevered into the main frame rather than being supported by stage posts. An engraving called the "Long View of London," made by Wenceslaus Hollar in 1647, shows the second Globe (constructed in 1614 after fire destroyed the original)

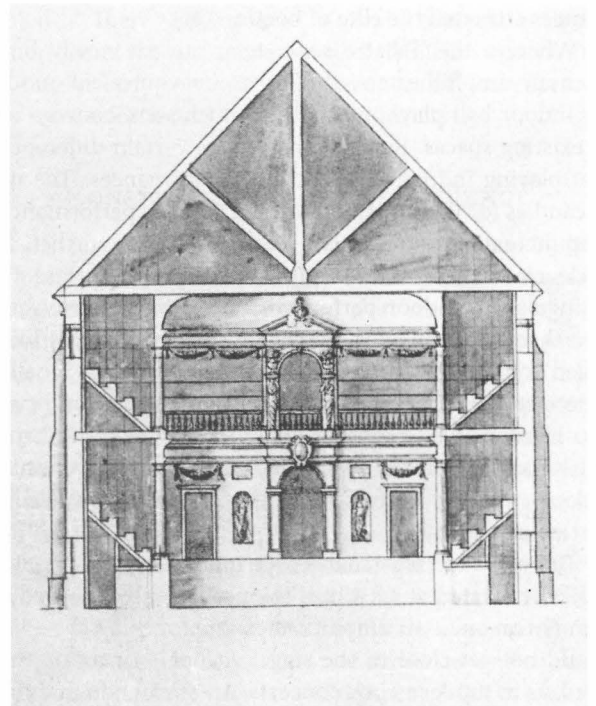


16. Detail of Wenceslaus Hollar, *View of London* (1647) showing the second Globe and the Hope theaters. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

with its huge M-shaped stage cover, and next to it the Hope with its peaked-cap style stage cover (Figure 16); someone adding the labels accidentally switched them, and many modern reproductions switch them back. The Hope's innovative stage cover is the only significant design improvement in amphitheater playhouses that we know about.

THE RED BULL AND THE COCKPIT

Around 1605, actor Martin Slater leased the yard of an inn at Clerkenwell, north of London, and began turning it into a playhouse. Like the Boar's Head, this venture, the Red Bull, was a building conversion rather than a wholly new structure, although there is evidence that some of the construction may have been brickwork rather than the more usual timber used for playhouses. This could explain the Red Bull's longevity – it survived the Interregnum to reopen in 1660 – and its repertory's extensive use of pyrotechnics, which are inherently dangerous in wooden buildings (Griffith). The Red Bull seems to have attracted a more rambunctious audience than other open-air amphitheater playhouses, and the Cockpit (Figure 17) is best known for its patrons' violent revolt when the resident company, Queen Anne's Men, left the Red Bull for the newly built indoor theater called the Cockpit in Drury Lane in 1617. One way to understand this development is as part of a growing bifurcation of theater in London, with



17. Inigo Jones, drawing of a theater, likely the Cockpit in Drury Lane (1616–18). By permission of the Provost and Fellows of Worcester College, Oxford.

the growth of small and expensive indoor hall playhouses in the heart of the city, of which the Blackfriars was the

most successful, which were more attractive to playing companies than the large open-air amphitheatres in the suburbs. Indoor playing was independent of the weather, and the higher seat prices – no one was allowed to stand – more than offset the smallness of the audiences.

THE BLACKFRIARS

The bifurcation of indoor and outdoor drama is easily overstated. In 1608, the boy actors who leased the Blackfriars from the Burbages performed George Chapman's *Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron*, which offended King James, and the company was disbanded, leaving the Blackfriars playhouse vacant. The King's Men took possession, and from 1609 they began to use the indoor Blackfriars in the winter and the open-air Globe in the summer. But there is no indication that they began to split their repertory along such lines. When astrologer and physician Simon Forman saw Shakespeare's new play *The Winter's Tale* in 1611, it was at the Globe, where Forman also recorded seeing *Cymbeline*. Likewise, it was at the Globe, not the Blackfriars, that the King's Men's plays *A Game at Chess* by Thomas Middleton and *The Witches of Lancashire* by Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome proved so popular that the usual repertory pattern of alternation was suspended to allow repeat performances on several successive days in 1624 and 1635, respectively. Moreover, eyewitnesses tell us that these open-air performances attracted the elite of London.

Whereas the Theatre set a template for newly built open-air amphitheatres, there was no equivalent model for indoor hall playhouses, all of which were conversions of existing spaces. But we can surmise certain differences that playing indoors made to the performances. The use of candles for illumination required that the performances be punctuated by intervals – normally four – so that the wicks could be trimmed, relit, or, if smoking unpleasantly, extinguished. Indoor performances were necessarily quieter than outdoor ones, and where musical effects were called for, woodwinds would replace brass. The smaller indoor stages were unsuited to large battle scenes, and even two-handed duels might be awkward. On the other hand, in a small theater, the performance of intimate scenes set indoors, such as we find in domestic tragedies, could be particularly effective.

The entrance fees charged at indoor hall playhouses typically started at six times the usual penny charged to stand in an open-air amphitheater, and for this a spectator would not get close to the stage. At open-air amphitheatres, as at modern rock concerts, an aficionado arriving early could gain a standing space in the yard right against the stage, but the all-seated indoor hall playhouses enabled proprietors to control who went where and so began the modern practice of charging more for seats near the stage. The class distinction arising from high prices was not simply binary, however: only the well off could go to the

indoor theaters, but there is ample evidence that all classes went to the open-air amphitheatres.

The indoor hall theaters placed the stage along one of the narrow sides of a rectangle, and although some seating was provided at the side of the stage, most of the audience sitting in the pit and the galleries was looking in roughly the same direction toward the stage. This enabled the development of perspective scenic effects that, though impressive, tended to distance the actors from the audience; this distancing trend culminated in the proscenium-arch, or picture-book, theaters of the nineteenth century. The aesthetic experience of outdoor performance for an audience that stands and moves around is essentially antirealistic because it makes everyone involved acutely aware of where they are. The actors cannot ignore the audience, many of whom are looking across the stage, watching the performance against a backdrop of other audience members looking across at them. In such a setting, an audience becomes aware of its own reactions, yet individuals are free to take up particular perspectives by placing themselves wherever they like. This is entirely unlike the experience of indoor performance in a darkened auditorium, in which the whole audience is facing approximately the same way, a configuration that tends to atomize spectators without giving them the freedom to find a preferred perspective. Indoor hall playing allowed greater realism at the cost of diminishing the social occasion of a performance. It was owing to the attenuation of drama as a collective, demotic social experience that, after the Restoration of 1660, only the indoor hall theaters were revived.

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