

3A

THE

# GLOBE THEATRE



H. Bratt

## THE GLOBE THEATRE BY THOMAS WOOD STEVENS

In London, three hundred years ago, the most notable theatre was the Globe—the house in which Shakespeare had worked as a dramatist and an actor, and in which he had been one of the shareholders. The Globe of three hundred years ago, however, was already a play-house with an eventful history. The building which first carried the famous sign of the earth



on the shoulders of Atlas was built, in the winter of 1599, from timbers that had been used in the first of the London theatres, James Burbage's *Theatre*, which had been erected in 1576. The Globe was round, open to the sky, and the galleries were thatched. It was burned to the ground in 1613, the thatch being ignited by the firing of salutes in the performance of the play of Henry VIII. That was two years after Shakespear retired to Stratford. It was rebuilt, in an octagonal form with a tiled roof, and stood until 1644. Thus the building had three successive forms, and a reconstruction of it must take on some of characteristics of each. There are very small and distant representations of the last two forms in the Visscher and Hollar "maps" of London, and some information about its structure in the building contract for the *Fortune* theatre, erected in 1600, the contract calling for certain specifications like those of the Globe.

The stage of Queen Elizabeth's time was unlike that of any modern theatre. We know something of its appearance from a few drawings, all incomplete, and from the stage directions of the plays themselves. It was not a picture frame for scenery, but a platform projecting into the pit, partly sheltered by a roof carried on two columns. Behind this shelter was an inner stage, closed by curtains, with a curtained balcony above it. While the curtains were closed, these inner spaces could be set and re-set, dressed with whatever furniture or properties the ensuing scene might need. There was no place in this plan for painted scenery. The audience included the unlettered as well as the learned—there was nothing so foolish as hanging up a placard to say "This is a Wood" for forest scenes—half the audience would not have been able to read it. But Shakespeare could create a wood in the imagination by sheer poetry—or any other scene his story might require.

All arts live by their conventions, their understandings with their audience. The main conventions of the Elizabethan theatre we read in the plays written for it: "Here is a story,"

they said, "which we will unfold for you in action; we will not pause in the telling; it shall all happen here before you, on this stage, within this wooden O; you shall see its motion, its crossing, its agony; and for your better enjoyment, when the place is necessary to be known, we will tell it, or shape the space behind the curtains to its uses, as a shop, a hall, a lady's chamber, a King's throne room—whatever you need; but all shall be movement and ready word, in body, not in painted semblance." It was at once an enkindling and a creative convention.

In practice, scenery was not required in such a house. The entire outer stage, with back curtains closed, stood for any unlocalized place where characters might meet: it could be indoors or out, but more often out. Open the curtains, and the space within is characterized at once by its furniture: Juliet's chamber or the Friar's cell. Let the actors all step within, and the inclosed room becomes the whole stage; keep the curtains open and let actors speak up- and down-stage, and the fore-stage has simply been added to the apartment within. If one appears above, he is at a window, in a balcony, or on the wall of a fortified city; the position serves for all. Few plays written during Elizabeth's reign have act divisions, or directions giving specific place to the scenes. Most of the divisions and directions in modern editions of Shakespeare are the conjectures of Rowe in his edition published early in the eighteenth century. The actual practice was to close the scene with an exit, and to open the following scene by disclosing the inner stage (the alternations of inner and outer stage are fairly regular) or by other actors, entering by another door, speaking as if on cue. The "continuity" was more complete and flowing than that of the film. Pace was tremendously important. The audience came to get a story in action. All the plays of the period work on such a stage readily enough, if we can only put the convention of our picture frame stage out of our minds.

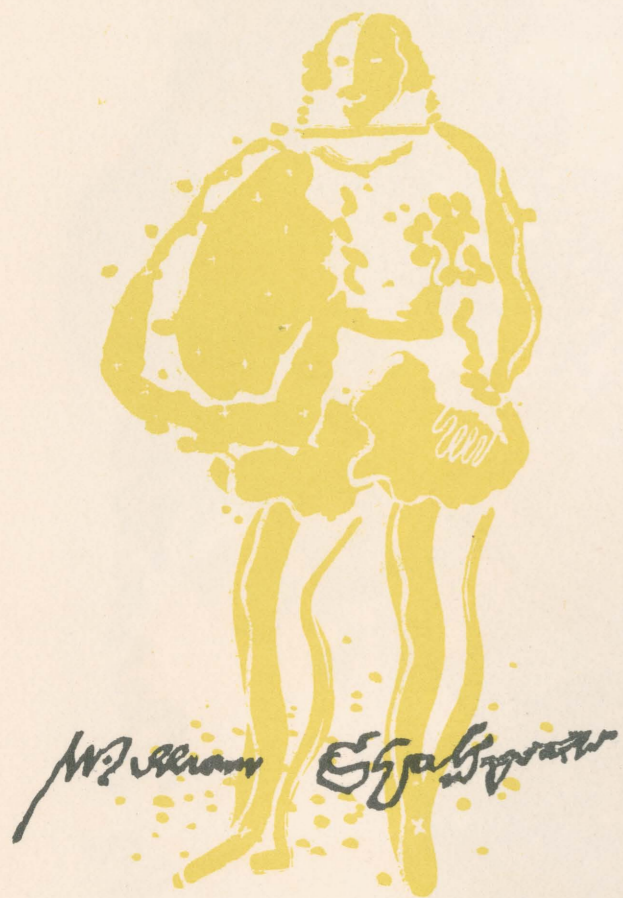
# Globe Theatre



W. Hall

Shakespeare's characters in

the Globe Theatre



All companies of actors had to be under the patronage of some nobleman, and to play as his "servants," or the law of Queen Elizabeth rated them as "rogues and vagabonds." The Burbage company (the Globe), known as the Queen's Men after 1583, became the King's Men after James' accession. The Patron had, usually, little to do with the policy of



the company—he was only a moral guarantor. The Company itself is always a cooperative group. They engage an actor at so many shillings per week. If he is successful enough to become indispensable, he is offered a share, and a share is far more valuable than any salary. Shakespeare's shares were undoubtedly earned by his plays, and possibly his

work in producing them. There was no law of copyright, though a play might be entered at the Revels office and a payment made there to protect it from pirates who might send short-hand writers into the house; such piracy was practiced both by rival theatres and by booksellers. The only real safety was in keeping the manuscript close and secret; this could be done in prosperous times, but let a plague close the theatres, and the actors, after long unemployment, grew needy and would sell their parts, from which the whole might be pieced together. A ready playwright as a shareholder was a great asset to the group as a whole.

Of the acting, we know that it was swift and flexible. Hamlet lays down to the players what a prince with good taste might expect of them. Tripping speech, nothing overdone, nothing too tame, the hokum of the clowns to be kept within reason, and all to please the judicious, not the groundlings. The women's parts were all played by boys, and some of these boys evidently acquired high skill, or Shakespeare would never have written such parts as Cleopatra to be played by them. It has often been said that he wrote the masquerade scenes (Julia, Viola, Rosalind) to get the boys out of skirts, thereby making their illusion easier; the assumption is really absurd: dressed as boys, they would obviously have the greater difficulty in projecting feminine characters.

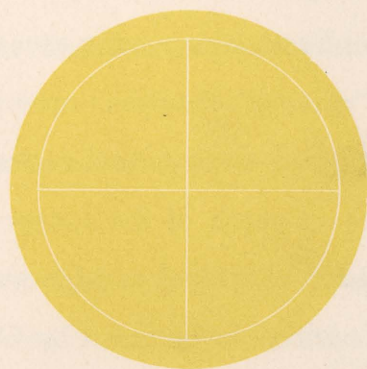
The modern use of the original stage forms began with William Poel, director of the Elizabethan Stage Society in London, and his productions suggest another phase of this matter of the boy actors. Mr. Poel puts all faith in the pitch and modulation of the voice; character is expressed through its "tune." Now this "tune," the characteristic total of the readings, with their pitches and inflections all designed, is the entire vocal expression of a given part. An able and patient director might teach the "tune" to a quick-eared choir boy more easily than to a temperamental actress. Mr. Poel's method, and its results whenever he has been loyally followed by his actors, would seem to indicate that the employment of the boys

was no great disadvantage, though it can only be practiced in a permanent theatre of long standing. Although the theatre lacked the pictorial scenery of the modern stage, it was by no means lacking in color. The Puritans spoke indignantly of the "gorgeous play-houses in the fields," and of the rich dress of the actors as conducive to vanity in youth. The buildings themselves were not bare shells of wood, but ornate in pretended marble and tapestry. The audiences impressed travellers from Italy by their sobriety and dignity—"like an assemblage of princes"—but this refers, probably, to the more privileged members who had seats at the sides of the stage itself.

The actors wore, for the most part, the dress of their own time. The audience saw nothing incongruous in Agamemnon appearing in doublet and hose, though the Roman plays were marked by the wearing of togas over the contemporary dress. A vivid sense of present life, rather than an archaeological faithfulness, was the result.

The plays in the public theatres were given by daylight, and in the summer months. There were smaller "private" theatres, artificially lighted, for the winter seasons, and when the companies played away from London, they played in nobleman's houses or on trestle stages in the court yards of the larger inns. From time to time they were "commanded" and appeared in the royal residences of Elizabeth and James.

All the theatres of London were closed by Cromwell, and remained closed for eighteen years, until, with the restoration, Charles II brought in the dramatic fashions of France and set up Royal monopolies in the theatre. The long dark period under the Commonwealth destroyed the traditions of the great period, and the use of scenery broke the continuous flow of the performance. Not until the recent work of Mr. Poel and his co-workers, among them the directors of the present Globe Theatre in Merrie England, have the plays of our greatest dramatist been given on such a stage as that for which he wrote them.



COLORTEXT PUBLICATIONS · 8 SOUTH MICHIGAN AVE., CHICAGO