

PERFORMANCE IN THE CITY: LONDON AND ITALY

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The title of this article is in itself indicative of crucial differences in the ways theatre develops in the renaissance and post-renaissance city. The theatre renaissance occurred in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and it developed in two quite different ways in England and in Italy. In England it occurred through the professional companies and their fixed London playhouse infrastructure (although they did also tour the provinces, particularly when banished from London by plague-related prohibitions). In politically fractured and decentralised Italy, the massive popular theatre phenomenon of the *commedia dell'arte* was the result of touring, rather than fixed, companies (although some of these did later settle down as beneficiaries of royal patronage). So despite the key role Venice and its hinterland seems to have played in the origins of *commedia*, it would be unfair to couple it with London at the expense of Milan, Rome, Florence, or Naples—or even tiny Modena, where the Gonzaga court's patronage was decisive. However despite their differences both of these phenomena were closely identified with the city and city life. Many of the plays are unthinkable and indeed would be unintelligible without recourse to a shared consciousness of what is involved in living in a city in which chance meetings can and do occur; in which daily interactions take place against a background which includes strangers as well as acquaintances; in which identities can be mistaken; in which others can be watched going about their daily business from a position of spectatorial detachment—a spectatorial perspective which is then structurally mirrored in the actor-audience relationship of the performance.

The fixed theatrical spaces of Elizabethan London give rise to another set of considerations, inasmuch as they have a clear relationship to the surrounding cityscape: they signal themselves as dedicated performance spaces in ways that a travelling company's hired hall or trestle stage set up in a *piazza* do not. The most famous (and influential, given its key importance in the calculations that gave rise to the third

Globe reconstruction in London) sketch of Shakespeare's own playhouse was made by the Czech panoramist Wenzel Hollar in the 1630s, not long before the playhouses were razed by the puritans:

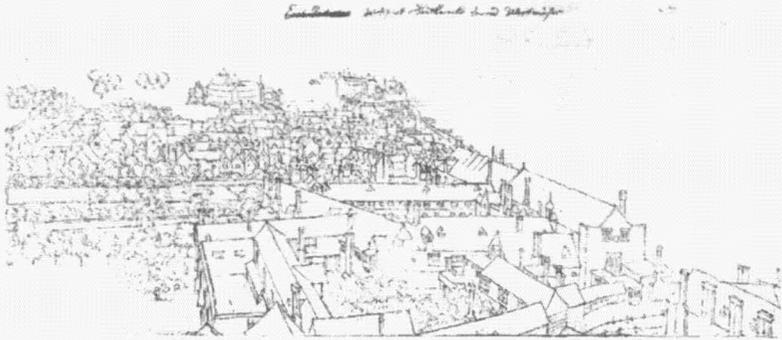


FIGURE 1: Wenzel Hollar's sketch from the tower of Southwark Cathedral, looking west towards Westminst

Hollar shows the second Globe in the middle distance, but unfortunately for the theatre historian he has not lavished particular attention on it: it is just one of the buildings that falls beneath his gaze. He is, however, indirectly interested in the playhouses and indeed all the other prominent buildings inasmuch as they are part of a larger project, the attempt to 'get one's head around' the city visually: the very project of creating large-scale panoramas and picture maps of Europe's major cities indicates in itself a developing shared consciousness of 'the city' as an object of particular interest to those who lived in it. Hollar's famous long view of London, based loosely on this sketch and others, carefully massages the point of view and the buildings visible from it into an idealised and finely-proportioned and balanced layout, as John Orrell has convincingly argued.¹ Hollar's and others' panoramas in no way attempt to turn Europe's cities into the renaissance 'ideal city', but the careful selection of a real point of view (or the invention of an imagined one²), and the shifting and reworking of the buildings for maximum visual effect, betrays a clear consciousness that the city was by now seen as a complex object worthy of a new sort of conceptualisation, visualisation and study.

Where did the playhouses fit into this image/reality of the city? It has been customary to argue that they were self-marginalised and self-marginalising buildings, deliberately located out of the reach of the city and its fathers: within the city walls some inns or monastic buildings were converted into playhouses, but the distinctive polygonal

playhouses that were either built as such or were converted from animal-baiting arenas were all outside the city limits. The Globe was on the Bankside, just west of London bridge, in an area renowned for its brothels and bath-houses and for the taverns that lined the bank of the Thames. Beyond the Globe, further west, was woodland and marsh all the way to Lambeth. Other playhouses were to the north of the city, in Shoreditch (the original Theatre was located there; later the subject of a dispute between landlord and lessees, it was dismantled in 1599 and its timbers ferried across the Thames and reassembled on the Bankside as the first Globe). This first Globe burnt down in 1613 (some fragments of its foundations were uncovered in 1989), and the second Globe was built on the same site in 1614, as Hollar shows.³

However it may not have simply been the desire to avoid council regulations that drove the playhouses beyond the city. There were also considerations of public order: the King's Men, Shakespeare's company, bought the Blackfriars (part of a monastic complex) in 1596, but were unable to perform there until 1608 in the face of local objections to the additional traffic and noise the playhouse would bring to the area.⁴ And not least will have been considerations of a purely real estate nature: these were large buildings, and large parcels of land were easier to find and certainly cheaper on the city fringe.

We should also note in Hollar's sketch that the street which funnelled potential spectators to the Globe lay to its north, to its right in the sketch: this is Maid Lane (now Park St), the street that spectators, having crossed London Bridge, would have followed to the Globe.⁵ Not by accident, then, are the Globe's two external stair turrets (by which spectators gained access to the upper galleries) on this north side of the building (and its stage, under the massive double-gabled cover, on the south side). This is not, despite some scholars' arguments, to do with a solar orientation,⁶ but simply to maximise the flow between building and surrounding streetscape so as to facilitate spectator access. The Rose playhouse, a little further on and on the north side of Maid Lane, had its stage on the north side and its entrances off the street in the south side of the building (it was long-demolished by the time Hollar did his sketch; the other playhouse-like building which he shows beyond the Globe, closer to the Thames, is an animal-baiting arena).

This construction and orientation of the playhouse in continuity with the surrounding cityscape is indicative, and is extended too into the fictional fabric of the plays. There is a scene in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, 3.1, in which Viola (dressed as a young man, Cesario)

tarily out of the fiction and into their own cityscape with the west-east flow of the Thames and its busy water traffic.

My point, then, is that performance in Elizabethan England was not something that was marked off, isolated, insulated, quarantined from the surrounding cityscape in the way we experience performance in a 'black box' theatre. We are accustomed to going through a series of liminal spaces such as foyers, along corridors, up and down stairs and around corners until we arrive into the auditorium itself, by now disoriented—we still know which way is up, but are likely to have no sense of which way is North—and completely soundproofed from all external stimuli. One of the functions of this deliberate sensory deprivation is to take us out of the 'city' so as to facilitate our total concentration on the stage and its fictional world.

An audience grouped in a courtyard around an arena stage, open to the elements, to the light and sounds of the world, keeps its sense of orientation, and any meta-theatrical reference such as the one discussed will only seem normal—a moment of pronounced actor-audience complicity in the shared fiction rather than a harsh jolt back to reality. Bertolt Brecht's term for this is "alienation effect", but here its effect is to spark geographical rather than political consciousness.

This continuity is clearly marked, though in a different way, in the *commedia dell'arte*, the Italian popular theatre, the heyday of which was strictly contemporaneous with Elizabethan theatre. For all sorts of reasons—not the least of which is its partial derivation from Roman comedy—most of the *commedia* scenarios are farces rather than tragedies or pastorals, and portray character interactions in a clearly recognisable cityscape or at least townscape. Generally the stage represents an open urban space—*piazza* or street—with houses (often equipped with practicable doors and windows above) facing onto it. As such the settings mirror the performance-place itself (at least in the earlier tradition of outdoor *piazza* performance), and so too do the physical interaction patterns: characters meet, exchange information etc. in the *piazza/street*, or they communicate with characters inside the houses, most often at the windows. We can see various versions of this in the illustrations in Figure 2 (overleaf):

In this general performance context I have argued that the one literate element in this predominantly oral tradition, the scenario or plot outline, encoded important information about physical interaction patterns to enable the actors quickly and convincingly to portray these patterns,¹⁹ as do Shakespeare and his Elizabethan colleagues in their

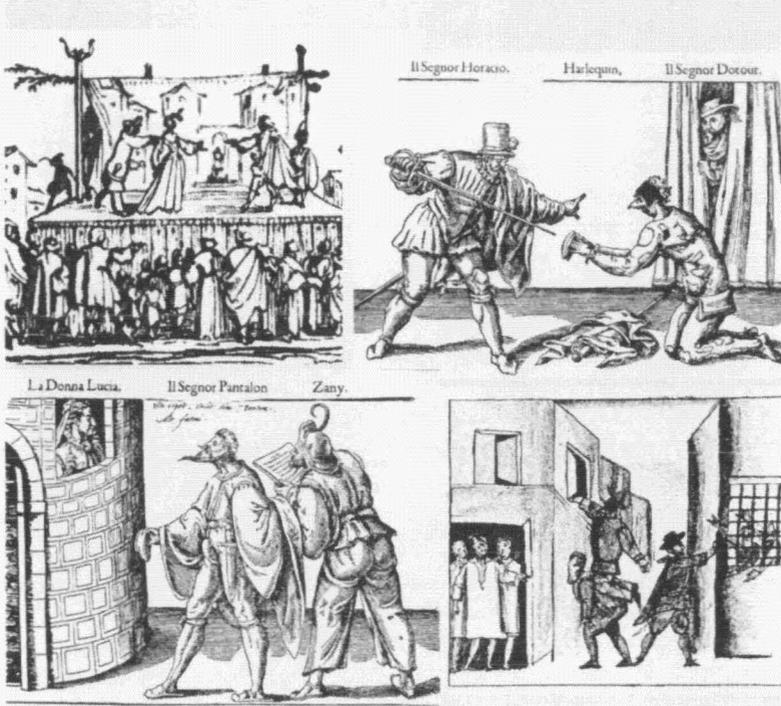


FIGURE 2: A range of commedia dell'arte stagings.

playtexts.¹⁴ The scenario sets out the skeletal structure of each scene, the precise series of 'action units' that are required to drive the plot forward; it provides a textual structure which the actors can consult, and on which they can, drawing from their acting tradition, conventions and prefabricated material associated with their characters, embellish and flesh out the dialogue and action. One simple example from Flaminio Scala's published collection of scenarios from 1611, *Il Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative*, is enough to make this point, enabling us to visualise what seems a quintessentially urban interaction.

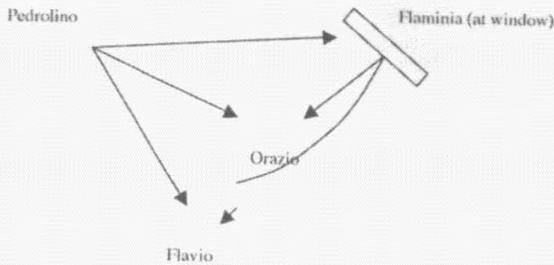
In Day 3, I. 12-13. of Scala's volume one of the female characters, Flaminia, appears at a window, giving rise to a piece of set business which depends on the careful positioning of her two suitors on the stage (in the street) below. Flaminia is being wooed by two brothers, Orazio and Flavio, and first she sees Orazio on stage—but shortly afterwards Flavio enters, unseen by his brother:

FLAVIO *lasciando Orazio nel mezzo, et egli standoli dietro. Orazio saluta Flaminia, la quale, fingendo di renderli il saluto, saluta Flavio, essendo di lui innamorata, dicendo: "signor Orazio, non pigliate gelosia di vostro fratello, perch'io amo voi, e non lui".* [Flavio] enters so that Orazio is in the middle, with Flavio behind him. Orazio greets Flaminia who, pretending to greet him in return, actually greets Flavio (who is the one she's in love with), saying "Dear Orazio, don't be jealous of your brother; it's you I love, not him".

The scene is quite explicit in its directions, requiring a straight line with Flaminia at the upstage window, Orazio centre-stage and Flavio downstage. At this point, Pedrolino, who in this scenario is the innkeeper rather than a servant, enters and sees immediately what is going on. He then goes up to Orazio and alerts him to the trick:

PEDROLINO *che s'avvede come Flaminia finge di parlar con Orazio e parla con Flavio, s'accosta a Orazio e sotto voce li domanda con chi parla Flaminia. Orazio: che ella parla seco. Pedrolino li mostra Flavio, quale gle sta dietro le spalle. Orazio, vedendolo, irato caccia mano all'armi contro di lui; il simile fa Flavio, e, facendo quistione, vanno per istrada. Flaminia si ritira e Pedrolino, ridendo, entra nell'osteria.* [At that point Pedrolino] enters, and realises Flaminia is pretending to talk to Orazio while really addressing Flavio. He goes up to Orazio and quietly asks him who Flaminia is speaking to. Orazio says it's to him. Pedrolino shows him Flavio, who's standing behind him. Orazio, on seeing him, angrily draws his sword; Flavio does likewise and they exit fighting. Flaminia withdraws and Pedrolino enters the inn, laughing.

The scenario's exploitation of the fixity of the character at the window, and its insistence on the straight-line positioning of the other two characters in relation to the window, creates this piece of business, the playwright intent on ensuring the physical/visual effect is clear in performance. This is the arrangement the scenario insists on and requires for the routine to work:



However, the standard 'urban' scenography of the scenarios (whether the houses are represented by flats with practicable doors and windows, or whether the doors are merely represented by gaps in a rear curtain and the windows by a character appearing above the curtain) leads to some inflexibility in representation: often intimate scenes are played out in public space when quite clearly they would logically take place offstage behind closed doors. It is very common for a stern father such as Pantalone to upbraid his recalcitrant daughter Isabella by knocking on his own front door and inviting her out onto the stage to talk about her romantic situation.

This should not be taken as an indication of the 'publication' of the private sphere; it is merely a pragmatic staging solution to the age-old dramaturgical problem of getting onto the stage an offstage event or location without unnecessary complications. Shakespeare does similar things, as we have seen in the example from *Twelfth Night*: instead of Viola being taken offstage into the house to meet Olivia, Olivia is brought out onto the stage, into the garden. However, with the more flexible signifying system in London, the details are different: in *Romeo and Juliet* 1.4-5, the Masquers arrive outside the Capulet house to join the feast. 'They march about the stage', but do not enter the house (i.e. exit the stage): instead 'Servingmen come forth with napkins' (the napkins to signify the impending banquet) and then Capulet and the guests—already arrived and inside the house—come out onto the stage: 'Enter all the Guests and Gentlewomen to the Masquers'. Capulet welcomes the Masquers not by leading them into the (offstage) house, but by bringing his house onto the stage with him—the offstage house is suddenly 'extruded' onto the stage, so not only the Masquers but the audience too are able to join the feast.

By comparing these two early examples of urban comedy (and

Romeo and Juliet is a comedy—it is just that the inefficiency of the Italian postal system leads to an unfortunate ending), we see the beginning of the tendency, then carried forward by the *commedia dell'arte*, towards more rather than less realism in the portrayal of the urban setting. The single most distinctive dramaturgical characteristic of Elizabethan theatre is its scenic flexibility, built on the ability of the stage rapidly to transform itself in the audience's mind—that is without a change of physical scenery—from one fictional signified (a forest, a garden, a street) to another (a palace, a seashore, a room) purely on the basis of dialogic indications. This was a dramaturgy based on a rapid succession of 'scenes' located in different fictional places, each of which is established for the audience not by changes of scenery but by verbal indications and at best a rough iconicity (gallery stands for window, stagepost for tree, stage door for cave opening etc.). The stage and the tiring house wall or *scenae frons* behind it served to stand, by virtue of its neutrality as a signifier, for a variety of signifieds in rapid succession: the neutral canvas of a plain tiring house wall enabled various 'scenes' to be verbally projected onto it.

The *commedia's* adoption of a more concrete set of scenic signifiers (the houses facing the street) leads inexorably to realism; an increasing interest in intimate transactions that would normally take place in private places leads in turn to the desire to more realistically portray those transactions as occurring in those private places rather than somewhat artificially in the street. This is one aspect of Goldoni's reform of the *commedia*, and it leads to scenery and props, and to scenery changes and a completely new way of segmenting performance; it is not by accident that by the twentieth century we end up in the kitchen sink, with (often) little sense—either from the stage set or from the black box theatre in which we sit watching it—of just where in the city the sink, or we, are actually located: the social has been privatised, the city negated. That of course is not the end of the story—to finish with a stage direction: *Enter Bertolt Brecht*.

NOTES

- 1 John Orrell, *The Quest for Shakespeare's Globe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-15.
- 2 Orrell, *The Quest*, pp. 15-16.
- 3 Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 142.
- 4 *The Shakespearean Stage*, p. 46, pp. 155-156.
- 5 Orrell, *The Quest*, pp. 80.

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- 6 Orrell, *The Quest*, pp. 155-6.
- 7 *Twelfth Night*, J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (eds) (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 75.
- 8 *Twelfth Night*, p. 85.
- 9 *Twelfth Night*, p. 95.
- 10 *Twelfth Night*, p. 134.
- 11 Tim Fitzpatrick, "Stage Management, Dramaturgy and Spatial Semiotics in Shakespeare's Dialogue", in *Theatre Research International*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 1-23.
- 12 J.M. Lothian and T.W. Craik (eds), *Twelfth Night* (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 82. This passage also struck Hotson, who believed it to be a reference to the orientation of the stage doors—though he was talking about Olivia's and Orsino's 'houses' in the great hall at Whitehall, where he believed the play was first performed: Leslie Hotson, *The First Night of "Twelfth Night"* (London & New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 139.
- 13 Tim Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia dell'arte: Beyond the Improvisation/Memorisation Divide* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).
- 14 Tim Fitzpatrick, "Playwrights with Foresight: staging resources in the Elizabethan playhouses", in *Theatre Notebook*, vol. 56, no. 2 (Summer 2002), pp. 85-116.