



FINDINGS FROM THE 1995 WORKSHOP SEASON

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This report is based on observing the 45 workshops as well as rehearsal sessions of the Globe Workshop season 1995. This also involved asking actors and directors about their responses to the physical conditions of the theatre and talking to those actors who tested the space as spectators.

There are some fundamental points we need to bear in mind in any assessment of the Globe Workshop Season. They may strike us as obvious; we may have known about at least some of them before the season started, but their implications, what they ended up meaning in practice, has now shown us how much needs to be learned, or re-learned. They have had a direct effect on how the actors and directors and, equally important, the audiences, explored the physical characteristics of the theatre:

1. The stage and heavens were temporary - made out of scaffolding and plywood. It is important to keep this obvious point in mind: one early discovery was that the actors 'backstage' couldn't hear their cues. Another was that people seated anywhere behind the first row of the lower gallery had trouble hearing the actors on stage, when other members of the audience could hear them clearly.

The floor of the pit was three inches lower than it will be and did not have its permanent covering. This affected the acoustics of the building - a lot of sound went straight to the ground.

Seating in the middle and upper galleries was minimal - one bench in the front 'row' of each bay. This meant the audience was disproportionately concentrated in the ground area of the building: whether or not this would have been their choice anyway, the result was to encourage the actors to play to the front, and not to the upper galleries, and not to the side bays of the upper galleries.

2. The modern preconceptions of both the spectators and the actors and directors about the best - and worst - seats in the house affected every aspect of the theatre experience.

3. The related question of the modern actor's training and experience of blocking also affected every aspect of performance.

4. The majority of workshops used texts, and the difference with those where the actors did not have to read their lines, and could feel free to move, speak, gesture and experiment with direct eye contact with the different parts of the audience affected opportunities to explore the space, particularly eye contact with the audience.

5. There was never a full house for any of the sessions: most of the workshops had much less than a third capacity. Also, there were no full performances of plays.

Almost all my findings from the 45 workshops of the five-week season turned out to be related to the kind of expectations the participants brought with them into the theatre: they were everything to do with the mind-set of the theatre practitioners and of the theatre audiences. When it was a twentieth century mind set - set in twentieth century concrete and not sixteenth century lath and plaster and thatch - effective use of the physical space was hindered.

1995 Globe Workshop Season: Part 1

Seating

Theatre goes with sitting tickets headed straight for what they thought would be the best seats in the house - in the lower gallery facing the stage. These are the seats furthest from the stage. Spectators in the seats behind the first row said they often had difficulty hearing the actors. The temporary floor of the middle gallery above them was plywood which had the unfortunate effect of making any sound up there extremely loud. The groundlings headed straight for the ground - sitting on it, not standing. One result of this was that the gap between the stage and those seated in the lower gallery facing the stage felt unnecessarily big to the actors trying to find enough energy to play across this great gap, and the audience straining to hear what the actors were saying. It would be helpful to have the opportunity of testing audibility for these seats with a large capacity of groundlings standing in the pit, and the necessary time for actors to get used to their presence near the stage. This may help to tell us more about the effects on the acoustics of the whole space when the voice and energy of the actors is being 'carried' across a mass of standing spectators and not a concrete-based near-vacuum which the yard often felt like to actors on the stage (Again, we need to bear in mind that the floor of the pit in the Workshop Season was temporary). One director pointed out the implications of having a pit full of seated groundlings: it's a waste of the opportunities which the Globe offers for a new theatre dynamic. Sean Holmes said: "People standing are already energised. They are free to move, freer to interact with one another as well as with the actors on stage", and he also said that his workshop came alive when people stood up in the pit, and the effect was even greater when they were standing right up against the stage. For this director, a full pit and empty galleries would mean the theatre was alive; an empty pit and full galleries, and the space would be dead. The actor's position on the stage

The implications of the assumption that facing the stage means you see and hear everything better seem to have had a considerable effect on how the actors played the space, but this effect itself was compounded by how the actors came on to the stage: they tended to head straight for the very front of the stage. As Sir Peter Hall demonstrated in his workshop when he deliberately walked in a straight line to the very front of the stage, the impulse of the modern actor is to move to the front of the stage.

The difficulty with the findings on this aspect of the stage plan is that it leads to a circular argument: Do the actors head for the front of the stage because no-one's sitting at the sides or up in the middle and upper galleries? Does no one sit at the sides or up in the galleries because the actors ignore those areas of the auditorium? Unfortunately, many workshop presenters were reluctant to try experimenting with spectators moving from their facing-stage positions to the sides. Some, though, did. It could not be a true test because we would

need a pretty full house for that. But when people tried sitting in what were assumed to be the 'worst' seats, there were some surprises.

The best seats

... are the Lords' Room behind the stage. To sit there and watch and hear the action on the stage was a revelation to a 20th century spectator. You can see and hear everything perfectly. This is a truly significant discovery: it has traditionally been assumed that sight lines from these seats would be severely restricted. Indeed, a very recently published study explains that 'The fact that the rich and aristocratic Elizabethan went to the playhouse to be seen rather than to hear the play is one of the strongest arguments put forward in defence of the theory that the lords' rooms were in the over-stage gallery, because this location would have a seriously restricted viewpoint...'[1] Experience of sitting in such a location has now shown us that our assumptions about this physical aspect of Shakespearean theatre have been wrong. We have yet to found out where else we may have 'got it wrong'...

After the Lords' Room, the extreme bays on either side of the stage on all three galleries are the best seats. Sight lines and audibility are both perfect from these extreme bays when the actors don't play primarily at the front of the stage. Sir Peter Hall showed us the need for actors to remember to play to the sides of the stage by 'pulling' the players back and across from the front of the stage with an imaginary 'rope'. Again, we need to have more opportunities of finding out what would happen with a fuller house, with the actors getting used to the presence of spectators on all sides and to all three galleries.

[1] Jean Wilson, *The Archaeology of Shakespeare: the Material Legacy of Shakespeare's Theatre*, Gloss: Alan Sutton, 1995, p.173

1995 Globe Workshop Season: Part 2

The most powerful position on the stage

... seems to have been at the points where the pillars blocked the two side entrances. One way of confirming whether the position the actors' felt worked best also worked best for the audience, was to stand in the side entrances of the theatre. When you could not see anything and heard only a little, you knew the actors were moving around the stage in the most effective positions for the audience to be engaged in what they were doing. This point needs to be borne in mind when assessing the question of the position of the stage-posts.

Blocking

Twentieth-century Parallel Acting doesn't work at the Globe! The least successful moments on this stage during the workshop season were when you could see a line of actors standing in the front half of the stage, using the pillars as proscenium arches.

Diagonal blocking; moving around a lot, works. Standing still, delivering lines to the audience or your fellow actors, rarely works. (Although I suspect that when this stage is full of movement, the moments of stillness - Cleopatra's 'Marble constant' speech for example - will be more spell-binding because of the rarity of such stillness).

When actors face each other it works for all parts of the house. This is of critical importance when assessing the seats at the sides of the stage on the middle and upper galleries. From here, as long as you can see one actor's face - either speaking or responding, you can be

drawn into what is happening on the stage, and very effectively. Sword fighting/ battles/ duels have an advantage here - opponents don't usually face the same way!

You got the best possible view of sword-fighting - in duels and battle scenes from the Lords' Room and from the extreme side bays of the upper gallery. Every stroke and movement was visible, and you felt totally engaged in the combat. If you've come to watch 'mega box-office draw' Hotspur (Philip Stafford's description of this part) you want to see how good he is.

1995 Globe Workshop Season: Part 3

The Actor/Audience Relationship

Many of the workshop directors and actors were keen to use the yard, placing steps at the front of the stage. Audience reaction to this was interesting, perhaps surprising: the groundlings said they didn't feel involved in what the actors were doing when they were moving amongst them. One actor in the Bill Bryden/William Dudley workshop where the stage was used very reluctantly, after playing in the pit for a while, said he felt 'more comfortable in the pit'. Which shouldn't surprise us, because any actor on the stage playing in broad daylight surrounded on all sides by the audience is going to feel exposed and vulnerable. This is how many actors in the season described acting on the stage, including the Bremer Shakespeare Company who for twelve years have toured Europe specialising in daylight performance with no scenery and sets and using very physical playing and staging. Performing fifty to sixty performances a year, they are used to playing new theatre spaces, constantly confronted, as they say, with the challenges of new, strange and often troublesome spaces. Even these actors who, with their experience of the quick-change pace of multiple casting with only a few actors, drawing the audience onto the stage and pushing the stage out into the audience, said that the Globe made the actor feel vulnerable, and together with actors in other workshops, felt this was all part of why the space was exciting.

The familiar - the darkened auditorium, the proscenium arch, a completely passive audience - are not here. And we shouldn't expect the audiences to feel totally at ease with their new role, either. As the actors in one workshop said: if performances in broad daylight make the actor feel more vulnerable, it makes the audience feel vulnerable too. But perhaps not as vulnerable as the actors. One aspect of the audience/actor relationship which began to emerge was a sense that the 'power structure' of this relationship may be rather different at the Globe. Actors moving through the audience at the Swan at Stratford during a performance are moving through seated, passive spectators in a darkened auditorium, which must give the actors a certain sense of control over what is happening in the theatre. At the Globe, the visibility and proximity of the whole audience, and the fact that many members of the audience are standing in the yard means that actors moving through the audience will necessarily feel they have less control.

What needs to be emphasised is that the particular physical characteristics of the new Globe provide a different kind of acting space from the acting dynamic produced by 'open-air', 'promenade', or any other variation on the darkened-auditorium/proscenium arch playing spaces. Even actors who have considerable experience of taking risks, of acting amongst the audience, encouraging audiences to participate in performance, and so on, felt more comfortable in the pit, and often found the stage less than inviting. We have yet to find out whether this is more a question of confronting the unfamiliar than the stage layout (size and position of pillars, projecting frons scenae etc.) being intrinsically non 'user-friendly'.

The sense of a radically new dynamic of the Globe space is not in doubt. A difference in how both actor and audience feel is what many actors, directors and observers of the Workshop

Season believe to be an extremely important finding.

Again and again through the season, the theatre showed us how much there is to learn. Related to this potential change to the actor/audience relationship, is the way in which the Globe space offers radical possibilities for shared experience on the part of the audience. When the yard is packed round with standing groundlings on all sides, the audience can become angry mob, a fearsome army, a threatening force to those on stage. As Mark Rylance said when he asked the seated groundlings to stand up: 'I suddenly feel threatened!' He saw how the audience could become an army.

This theatre seems to require the actors to work harder to draw the audience into a fictitious world, and this at least partly explains, I think, the most frequent comment from actors at every workshop which was that the actor needs so much energy. It was also said that the physical structure of the whole space meant that the audience gave the actors energy too. One actor, when he first stepped on to the stage, looked around the empty theatre saying he couldn't believe the power that was coming to him from the structure itself. So: the twentieth century spectator sitting back in a comfy seat, adopting the mental and physical position which says to the actors: 'OK, entertain me!' has to be unlearned.

The Globe demands, then, not passive spectators, but active listeners. So much about how this space works is to do with this two-way action on the part of actor and audience. Another important lesson. It leads on to the related question of how the actor can find ways of communicating to every section of the audience.

As one workshop director said: "You can see if they're yawning: You have to fight for the audience's attention" (Sean Holmes).

1995 Globe Workshop Season: Part 4

Voice and movement

An understandable assumption of many workshop directors and actors was that the theatre would require the actor to play and speak 'big'. But what emerged was that movement, gesture and voice don't need to be on the grand scale.

Andrew Wade, in his Voice workshop felt that it is not a question of volume, but of pitch, and of finding ways to use what he calls 'the muscularity' of Shakespeare's language. Philip Stafford talked of Shakespeare's language being so powerful "it hurls you bodily onto your opponent". Richard Cottrell, who began his workshop thinking the actors would need to speak very loudly, ended it by saying: "Maybe it's not about speaking loudly". Natural speaking is better than roaring. And one confirmation of this was when one actor sitting in the middle gallery said to the speaker on stage: "You're shouting".

Intimate scenes

Again, as long as actors are facing each other and not parallel, the audience can be drawn into quiet, intimate scenes. The upper gallery extreme side bays provide the best seats for love scenes/ confrontation scenes. Peter McEnery and Peter Egan playing the quarrel scene from Julius Caesar provided almost a test case in how the space could be made to work for all parts of the house. What it showed us was:

1. You don't need to turn to the Globe audience to include them in the dynamic taking place between two actors.
2. Voice. They demonstrated how natural speaking can range from quiet (yet still audible)

tenderness to anger/ frustration/even violence (yet not roaring or bellowing)

3. Gestures do not need to be large to communicate themselves to the upper galleries. Like the most effective use of voice in this theatre - which is clarity rather than volume - effective use of gesture would seem to rely more on strength, precision, meaning it, rather than sweeping or dramatic arm movements.

Another understandable assumption was that internalised acting would be difficult, if not impossible in this space. One of the many happy surprises about this place is finding yourself absorbed in an intimate moment, not only when you're standing a few inches away from the actors on stage, but when you're sitting high up in the top gallery in the extreme side bay feeling that your 'there', right where the emotion is being felt. It looks as though body language is going count for a great deal in this space. Actors who can make even their backs communicate meaning will be able to convey their inner emotions to everyone in the house.

Several times in the season, actors and directors made the point that generalised looking at the audience does not work .

Creating place

More experiments on location setting and scene changes are needed, although several workshops showed how effectively you can create a powerful sense of place on a bare stage with the actors simply looking and being 'there' in their mind's eye.

Mention should be made of some new resonances from the texts which were made possible by lines being spoken on the Globe stage. One example is Hamlet pointing to the cloud whose shape is so very like a whale, which made the spectators crane their necks and look for it in the real blue sky above them.

Music

Philip Pickett's two workshops on music in the Globe provided some happy surprises for the musicians about the music acoustics of the theatre, in particular, singing from balcony was wonderful. Ariel's 'Full fathom five' really did sound heavenly!

1995 Globe Workshop Season: Conclusions

Conclusion

With more opportunities for actors and audiences to try out new ways of playing, new ways of spectating - to have a go and see what happens - we will learn more. It's just as important to keep in mind why we want to learn to use this space. My own feeling is that we're trying to recapture that dynamic that was created in the first Globe, to find out what made Shakespearean theatre exciting, so that we can use what we've learned on live theatre now.

The 1995 Workshop Season has provided some important lessons, the main one being that there is a need for more experimentation with the space, particularly with the specific purpose of exploring the implications of playing to a full house.

I end this report by quoting a few of the comments made by workshop participants - the actors and directors who gave us the opportunity to find out what we didn't know we didn't know. All of them were said in a tone positive and enthusiastic - and with a sense of real

excitement at the challenge the space offered them:

We have to ask: “What do we have to change to play this space?” not: “What do we have to change about this space in order for us to be able to play it?”

“You have to move on this stage”

“It’s against all our training!

There’s no let-up. It’s risk-taking all the time”

“It ain’t Chekhov, is it?”

“People all round the world will have to change their way of acting Shakespeare!”

Spoken to the spectators sitting in the lower gallery facing the stage, while pointing to the sides of the stage: “These are the best seats in the house. Why are you sitting THERE?”

The pillars work! You can hide from anyone anywhere!”

“It’s like starting all over again!”
