# Playhouse vs. Theatre

By Stanley Vincent Longman



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The idea of putting up a building for the express purpose of presenting plays was a new idea in the late sixteenth century. It had been done before, of course, in ancient Greece and Rome, but the last such building went up probably in the fifth century. Over the next 1000 years, theatre as a social institution gradually disappeared. That of course left no point in building a structure for plays.

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The demise of dramatic art was in large measure the result of the animosity of the Church to any form of theatrical entertainment. In the third century, Tertullian in his treatise *De Spectaculis* condemned drama and all those who participated in such performances. At the end of the fourth century, the Council of Carthage ruled that actors be excommunicated. The deathblow came in 533 when the Emperor Justinian declared theatrical activity illegal. So it is little wonder that society had no use for plays or playhouses for centuries to come.

When society finally again found a use for such things, the new buildings were of two fundamentally different types. One we might call "playhouse" and the other "theatre." The wonderful paradox here is that the building is itself a place, but one that is used to create other places without those other places really being there at all. Doing so requires three "places" within. One is the space occupied by a gathered audience; another is the space on which the players present themselves to that gathering. The third space has no physical presence: it is the collective imagination of the audience. That is where all the virtual worlds of the play come alive. Theatre generically is a house of illusion.

It is on this score that "playhouse" and "theatre" differ. The playhouse taps the power of action and imagery to engage the audience's imagination. Theatre, a word derived from the Greek for a "seeing place," invites the audience to peer through the frame of the proscenium arch into another world richly suggested by scenic elements. Both require the collaboration of the audience. Each has its own way of creating illusion and both emerged in the last quarter of the sixteenth century—the 1570s.

The Elizabethans created excellent examples of the playhouse, including the Globe where Shakespeare worked and the Rose where Marlowe worked. Renaissance Italian courts and academies developed the earliest proscenium theatres. For convenience, the first type will be called the "Elizabethan Playhouse" and the other, the "Italianate Theatre." This paper explores how each of them use devices to create illusion and how the devices evolved.

### The Elizabethan Playhouse

The Playhouse emerged out of medieval staging practices. Ironically, it was the Church that had sought to destroy theatre, and it was the Church that brought it back to life when it began to stage little biblical episodes in front of the high altar. No doubt the Church had no idea it was re-creating theatre, but by the late tenth century the populace of Europe was largely illiterate, the vernacular had replaced Latin, and even the idea of theatre had faded over the centuries, so to enliven the stories of Christ's passion, actors (usually monks) would enact a scene out of the New Testament. The oldest extant example is the so-called "Quem Quaeritis?" trope ("Whom do ye seek?") which tells the story of the three Marys who went to Christ's tomb to anoint the body only to discover that he was not there. Here, translated from the Latin, is the full text of that play:

*(A robed figure representing an angel is at the altar when three others approach. They are the three Marys.)*

    Angel: Whom do ye seek in the tomb, O Christians?

    Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, O Heavenly Being.

    Angel: He is not here; he has risen as he foretold. Go and announce that he is risen from the tomb.[1]

That little scene grew as new scenes were added over the next five centuries, dramatizing first the full story of Christ's passion, then the nativity, and finally stories out of the Old Testament. The staging became more and more elaborate, yet the basic convention is clear even in this humble beginning. The audience is prompted to imagine the altar is the tomb.

This is the rudimentary beginning of the "mansions-and-platea" convention. In order to stage the multiple scenes that eventually covered the span from Creation to the Last Judgment, each scene had its own "place" or "mansion," a scenic element depicting the place. By the thirteenth century, these mansions took up the entire church. Lining the sides of the nave and across the back would be many scenic elements depicting the various locales of the biblical story. The "platea" would be a generalized acting area. (A conjectural reconstruction of the arrangement of mansions and platea in a church can be found in Brockett and Hildy 89.) If a group of actors emerged from a mansion representing Pontius Pilate's palace, the audience would take them for Pilate, Caiaphas, Jesus, and perhaps Barabbas and see them all go to the open acting area and there perform the action that takes place at the palace. The action in the platea is performed as if taking place in the mansion; the audience's imagination makes the transference.

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All of this gradually became so complex that the action had to move out of the church into the open air. Typically, the mansions would have been lined up in front of the church with the platea placed in front of them. That arrangement is illustrated in the passion play staged at Valenciennes, France in 1547 (Brockett and Hildy 103). In England, the adjustment took the form of pageant wagons. (For a reconstruction, see Brockett and Hildy 100.) The convention then had the mansions circulating through the town and lining up behind bare platea wagons for the telling of each of the stories.

The Elizabethan playhouse is a clever adaptation of this same convention. By the 1570s, religious drama had been banned, and traveling professional players circulated from town to town, often performing in the courtyards of inns where they could set up a platform stage, place a box office at the entrance and arrange the audience in the yard and the surrounding galleries. In a sense, the first playhouses were inn yards without the inns (Salter).

At one end of the yard could be a platform, a platea, behind which were several entrances: two doors, a curtained alcove (discovery space), an upper balcony and two windows. Moreover, trap doors could allow actors to issue from below stage, as from hell, and the attic area above could permit lowering actors onto stage, as from heaven. In short, this is a microcosm, with earth caught between heaven and hell. In essence, the generalized acting area (platea) stands before several generalized mansions. One group of actors might leave the stage as others appear out of a different doorway. We would immediately look and listen for clues that tell us the new place of the action. King Duncan remarks, "This castle hath a pleasant seat" on arriving at Macbeth's castle; Romeo appears and sees Juliette on the balcony; Iago and Roderigo appear carrying a lantern and speak to Brabantio at his window in *Othello*. All of these engage the audience's imagination to create the virtual places of the action. It is indeed a *play*-house in which we play a part. There is a kind of creative combustion as actors and audience create the world of the play.[2]

One of the most eloquent statements of the conventions on which the playhouse was based is found in the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*, spoken directly to the audience and enjoining them to engage their imagination:

O for a muse of fire that would
  ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to
  act
And monarchs to behold the
  swelling scene!
[…] But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have
  dared
On this unworthy scaffold to
  bring forth
So great an object: can this
  cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France?
Or  may we cram
Within this wooden O the very
  casques
That did affright the air at
  Agincourt?
O, pardon!  Since a crooked
  figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great
  accompt
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these
  walls
Are now confined two mighty
  monarchies,
Whose high upreared and
  abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts
  asunder;
Piece out our imperfections with
  your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide one
  man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think, when we talk of horses,
  that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the
  receiving earth
For 'tis your thoughts that now
  must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there;

jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of
many years
  Into an hour-glass…

### The Italianate Theatre

While the English drew on their own tradition to create a building for plays, the Italians reached back into the distant past of ancient Rome and Greece. Ideas about theatre buildings and about drama emerged from the discovery of long lost ancient documents that began to flood into Italy, especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453: plays by great Greek and Roman playwrights, treatises on the nature of drama, and, most important here, the writings of the Roman architect Vitruvius. There laid out before wondering eyes were the plans and instructions for building a theatre. The whole of the ancient world took on a tremendous appeal as a golden age that might now be repeated; the temptation was too strong to keep from building such structures. Of course, there had long been ruins of Roman theatres to be seen, but they had fallen into such disuse that they served simply as quarries for medieval palaces and churches. Suddenly they made sense as places for production of the ancient plays—an open air semicircular *cavea*, or seating area, a platform stage *(pulpitum)* backed by an ornate façade with five doorways, a large one in the middle, two on each side, and one at each end of the stage. By convention, the audience took the stage to be a street lined by five houses. (A reconstruction of the appearance of the Theatre of Marcellus in Rome can be found in Leacroft and Leacroft, p. 29.)

This new awakening led to a fascination with the physical world and how we perceive it. Paintings from the fifteenth century onwards demonstrate this obsession. There was a wonder in how one could contrive to give a sense of great depth on a two dimensional

surface. These paintings show us human beings standing in a space passing into the distance through false perspective.[3] It was inevitable that the new theatres would find a way to encapsulate such visions of the world.

In 1545, Sebastiano Serlio published drawings of model settings for three types of plays, tragedies, comedies and pastorals (reproduced in Brockett and Hildy, p. 131). They illustrate the style of scenic design emerging in the courts and academies of the time, which eventually led to the invention of elaborate means of changing scenery so that audiences might marvel at the magical disappearance of one world as an entirely different one takes its place. This innovation led to a theatre with three distinct areas: the auditorium as the "seeing place," the forestage as the acting area, and the scenic background.

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This process took a long time, and was not complete until about 1640. But there is a theatre, still extant, that clearly embodies the early attempts: the Teatro Olimpico, built in 1580 in Vicenza, the work of a learned academy of gentlemen who dedicated themselves to the recovery of the ancient drama. The structure includes a seating area modeled directly on the *cavea* of a Roman theatre. It has the look of a genuine Roman theatre building, with four differences. First, the theatre is indoors, with the ceiling painted as the sky. Second, the hall in which the

theatre was built forced the seats to follow an elliptical arc rather than a circular one. Third, the statues on the balustrade at the back are not gods, but the gentlemen of the academy. Finally, where an ancient Roman theatre would have seated 20,000 people or more, this one can accommodate only about 500. Nevertheless, it is a fine tribute to the plans of Vitruvius.[4]

A true Roman theatre would have a stage backed by an elaborate façade with five entrances. The Olimpico has that, too, but four of the five doorways reveal perspectives of streets narrowing into the distance while the central doorway opens on three street scenes. The intent of the academicians was to produce Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* which takes place in Thebes, a city with seven portals, and one is visible at the end of each alleyway. The architect was the famous Antonio Palladio, who died before the theatre's completion; his colleague, Vincenzo Scamozzi, designed the alleyways.

The next step required a more efficient way to create a compelling vision of the world in false perspective. That came with the development of the proscenium arch, a single frame for encasing the perspective scene. There is a theatre extant that illustrates a early version of that feature: it is found in the city of Parma in the Palazzo della Pilotta, built in a hall of the palace in 1618 under the designs of Giovanni Battista Aleotti (Leacroft and Leacroft provide a cutaway view of the Teatro Farnese, pp. 90-91). An advantage the proscenium provided was a means to hide the machinery that moved the scenery in and out of view. Wings could be slid or rolled into view, borders brought down across the top, and a full backdrop flown in from above, creating the look of a complete world.

One more step was required before a full example of the italianate theatre could appear. It came with the emergence of public theatres. Prior to that,

theatres were intended for the use of either learned academies or the ducal courts. With the influx of the public, around the 1620s, some means were called for to stratify the classes by seating arrangements. That produced an auditorium consisting of a series of boxes ringing an open pit and surmounted by an open gallery. This is the so-called "box-pit-and-gallery" theatre. It might serve the duke with an ornate royal box at the back where the false perspective would be best viewed, while the ordinary people would sit high up in the "pigeon roost" of the open gallery. Clearly, attending theatre was as much a matter of seeing the play as it was of being seen—especially for those in the boxes.

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Eventually, the Italianate theatre triumphed. Throughout Europe, Italian architects and scene designers were hired. They built resplendent and ornate theatres and created the machines and scenes to complement the glory of the surroundings. In England, the old playhouses were destroyed or fell into ruins during eighteen years of Puritan rule; with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, new theatres were called for, and those followed the Italian model. That model dominated throughout the European continent and England until well into the nineteenth century.

The invention of electricity, allowing the lights to go out in the auditorium and stage lights to work a hypnotic effect, gave the theatre model a new life.

Until the mid-twentieth century, the proscenium theatre dominated, but challenges came in various forms, such as the arena theatre and the thrust stage. Engaging audience members when they can see one another proved a powerful incentive for more open playhouses, and accordingly most new structures have been built on that principle. Both principles, nonetheless, remain vital today, twin legacies of the marriage of two arts, architecture and drama.

## Notes

1 For a different translation, see Brockett and Hildy, p. 83.

2 For several reconstructions of Elizabethan playhouses, see Leacroft and Leacroft, pp. 53-58. In the process of physically reconstructing the Globe Theatre, several scholars have contributed essays collected in Franklin Hildy's *New Issues in the Reconstruction of Shakespeare's Theatre.*

3 There are many examples of the use of false perspective in the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, among them Andrea Mantegna's "The Dead Christ," Perugino's "Christ giving the Keys to Peter," and Piero della Francesca's "The Flagellation of Christ."

4 See Brockett and Hildy for a photograph and ground plan for the Teatro Olimpico, p.136. Leacroft and Leacroft provide a photo and a cutaway view of the theatre, pp. 45-46.

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