

The Audience–Actor Relationship at Shakespeare’s Globe

PAIGE GRECO



WRITER’S COMMENT: In Peggy Shannon’s Drama 20 class, we were asked to write a 1500-word paper on a theatre-oriented topic of our choice. I had visited the reconstructed Shakespeare’s Globe in London several years before on a summer study abroad trip and have been wholly enchanted by the theatre ever since, so I decided to indulge my obsession and research the history of its reconstruction. Of all the things that the theatre practitioners and scholars at the Globe have learned by reconstructing the space, I found the effect of the architecture of the theatre on the actor–audience relationship to be the most interesting. In my essay I hoped to convey how the theatrical space of the Globe made the audience’s experience of Shakespeare’s work different and more alive than in other, more modern proscenium spaces.

—Paige Greco

INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: Discovering theatrical conventions, learning how they live and breathe within a cultural continuum, and relating this history to a contemporary theatre experience are exciting aspects of Paige Greco’s excellent 2009 essay, “The Audience–Actor Relationship at Shakespeare’s Globe.” Her writing is clear, cogent, and very much alive. Over the years I have read many essays from students writing about historical aspects of theatre and theatrical conventions. While many have been quite good, Ms. Greco’s stands out not only for her excellent writing style and informed research but for her ability to offer a fresh historical perspective for the contemporary reader. Learning about the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre in London is an interesting research topic, but Greco’s inclusion of interviews with contemporary theatre artists who are making this reconstruction come to life sets her essay apart. Kudos to Paige for her excellent work.

—Peggy Shannon, Department of Theatre & Dance

IN SPITE OF THE POPULIST IMPULSES that drove Sam Wanamaker's efforts to rebuild the Globe Theatre in London, there were doubts as to whether the public, or anyone without a scholarly interest in Shakespeare, would even be interested in seeing Shakespeare performed in a drafty, thatch-covered theatre. Former Artistic Director Mark Rylance reflected that "although it's hard to believe now, we were not even sure that anyone would come and stand for a show in this 'old' building. No former reconstruction had dared to have standing room even in warmer, drier climates. What would people do when it rained?" (Carson 104). Throughout its various phases, the reconstruction was treated as a learning experience—a grand experiment in applying historical and archaeological research, re-learning Elizabethan construction techniques and numerous other skills. When asked in an interview whether he viewed this "old' building" as an experimental theatre, Rylance replied, "It has always appeared to me as the most experimental theatre space in England. The space itself is an experiment" (Carson 103).

In order to build the most authentic reconstruction of an Elizabethan playhouse that their combined expertise could produce, Wanamaker and his architect, Theo Crosby, took pains to involve Shakespeare scholars in the planning phases of the Globe project. Wanamaker traveled to universities and conferences to drum up academic and financial interest in the project, while Crosby organized seminars with theatre scholars at his architectural firm to debate, and eventually decide, the final shape the theatre would take. Through the reconstruction of the Globe and the staging of Shakespeare's plays in the resulting authentic replica of the space for which the playwright created his plays, the scholars interviewed by Crosby hoped to test a multitude of theories about Elizabethan stagecraft and Shakespeare's stagecraft in particular. In the midst of the company's experimentation with acting and stagecraft in the finished theatre, one of the most striking discoveries has been in regards to something fundamental: the audience.

Even in the early days of the reconstruction effort, investigating the relationship of the Elizabethan actor to his audience was considered among the paramount reasons to build a theatre. In a paper given at a conference at Wayne State University in 1979, Bernard Beckerman wondered, "What will it be like to stand where the groundlings stood and see the actors loom above us? Or how will it affect our response to sit in one of the better places of the gallery watching them strut past the heads of

the groundlings? Until we live these moments, we cannot know how they might alter our feeling for Shakespearean performance” (Hodges 158). Only by recreating the theatre can we possibly see through the eyes of a playgoer of Shakespeare’s time. In modern theatres, audiences no longer stand at the edge of the stage, the actors’ feet at eye level. We cannot “live these moments” of interaction without a space that mirrors the conditions of the original.

Even scholars who were otherwise enthusiastic about the possibility of recreating the theatrical space of the Globe pointed out that complete authenticity was impossible to achieve. Franklin J. Hildy quotes Edward Everett Hale Jr.’s observation that the audience itself can detract from perfect authenticity: “It is impossible by any act of imagination or anything else to put ourselves psychologically into the time of Shakespeare; and as an audience can never be an Elizabethan audience, so it would be futile to have the play an Elizabethan play, for even if the conditions were correct, we should be incorrect (qtd. in Hildy 31). Even if we get the costumes right, even if we get the theatre right, we cannot transform ourselves into Elizabethan people with Elizabethan mindsets and Elizabethan tastes. No matter what, we are products of our modern culture. Hildy, having engaged this commonly voiced reservation, comes to the conclusion that Hale’s point does not invalidate the scholastic potential of the Globe reconstruction: “But whatever the parameters on uncertainty, the International Shakespeare Globe Centre will be the first working reconstruction to have organized its audience in the same relationship to performers and to each other that prevailed in Shakespeare’s time” (Hildy 31). Hildy points out that the modernity of the audience need not prevent us from gleaned new, practical information about the impact of the space on the way the audience and the actors interact.

When the construction of the theatre, now called Shakespeare’s Globe, was completed in 1995, the actors could begin to test the scholars’ theories. First, though, they would have to learn how to use the building. Since no one had acted in an Elizabethan playhouse in four hundred years, the artistic directorate decided that there would be a short “workshop season” which Barry Day describes as “an opportunity for a handful of actors and directors to try out some of the theories on Shakespearean theatre that had been so far confined to learned dissertations or crude physical approximations” (Day 290). Among this select group was Sir Peter Hall, an eminent director of Shakespeare for the modern stage.

During the workshop season, he realized that the way soliloquies were performed on the modern stage would have to change at Shakespeare's Globe: "Given the design of the stage and the proximity of the audience, he [Hall] was now convinced, the actor would have had to take that audience into his confidence, which would mean moving around the stage, so as to face them all in turn" (Day 296). Given that the daylight flooding into the roofless yard illuminated the audience and the actors equally, it was no longer practical for an actor to ignore the presence of the audience. Hill concluded that Shakespeare had not intended his characters to speak to an empty room, but to the throngs that faced him. As the company of actors produced Shakespeare's plays in the space, many of them, including Art Director Mark Rylance, came to similar conclusions:

Eventually, in my last years, I really came to feel that it was not just about speaking, it was about thinking of the audience as other actors, and not just when you were projecting on them the role of the helpful crowd, like Henry's army or the citizens of Venice at the trial in *The Merchant of Venice*. It was more about the fact that anything they did was like another player on the stage doing something, so they were always there and when you were alone, they were your conscience or your soul. (Carson107)

For both Hill and Rylance, the interaction with the audience afforded by the unique theatrical space of Shakespeare's Globe changed the way they interpreted the role of the audience in the play. No longer were the audience members invisible beyond the illumination of the footlights; they were engaged in the creation of the performance. Since the audience is clearly visible to the performers from the Globe's stage, the interaction between the audience and the actors influences the actors' performance.

Paul Chahidi, an actor in the Globe's company, points out, "The fundamental area in which this theatre reveals so much is in the symbiotic relationship between the words of the playwright, the actor, the audience and the architecture of the building, which are all intrinsically linked; you cannot separate one from the other" (Carson 204). No theatre works without an audience, but in no other theatre does the audience play such a vital role in the performance. In Shakespeare's time, it was not uncommon for the audience to comment on the performance. Given that the actors at the Globe address the audience so directly, as Tim Carroll points out,

the possibility has to be there that the audience will answer him back. The audience does not do it very often, but just occasionally, something interesting happens, such as in Barry Kyle’s 2001 production of *King Lear* when Edmund was wondering aloud which of Goneril or Regan he should take as his mistress (and of course wondering aloud means asking the audience). Someone shouted out “Have them both.” Michael Gould’s response to this was a facial gesture that was unmistakable: “That’s not a bad idea.” (Carson 40)

The audience at the Globe is not passive—the space makes them complicit in the performance. They become, for the actor, a helpful crowd, the sea, or the landscape. From the stage, the varying heights of the groundlings can suggest the gently rolling waves of the ocean or the undulating hills of the countryside. The groundlings also suffer the effects of ill weather along with the actors. For the audience in the galleries, the groundlings become part of the sweep of the stage. Not only can the actors see the audience—the members of the audience can see each other and recognize the *communal* nature of the performance.

Now that there are actors strutting and fretting about the stage, looming over groundlings, we can live the moments in an actual Elizabethan theatre that Bernard Beckerman imagined so many decades ago. In an interview about her experiences with Shakespeare’s Globe, actor and educator Yolanda Vasquez claims, “That is what this space should be about—discovery, about seeing how these plays may have worked in the past, how we can learn from that, what we can do with them now and how we can go forward. Then it does not become a museum or archaic; it is something fruitful and in the moment” (Carson 202). Even though the yard and the galleries are now filled with modern theatregoers instead of Elizabethans, the beams and thatch of Shakespeare’s Globe have allowed us to discover new and different theatrical experiences.

Works Cited

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