Part I
The Drama in Context

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The Post-1660 Theatres as Performance Spaces

Edward A. Langhans

Give actors the two boards and a passion that they say is all they need, and they will tear it to tatters to no avail unless they have a good play, a responsive audience and a workable performance space. This collective entertainment, as Jocelyn Powell has called it, cannot be really effective unless these interdependent elements of player, place, play and playgoer are properly balanced (1984: 15). It's a wonder, then, that great theatre ever happens at all, but it can and sometimes it does. Since a number of memorable plays came out of the Restoration period and stood the test of time, theatre then must have had some good things going for it. Indeed, it did, and it helped shape our modern theatre in some important ways.

We may think of Shakespeare's Globe and the plays written for it as the beginning of theatre as we now know it in English-speaking countries, but our roots may lie more in the theatre of Charles II. Shakespeare's sweeping, sprawling playwriting, the open-air, sceneryless playhouse and all-male company for which he wrote, and the variegated audience he appealed to are really not much like the standard professional theatre of today. It is to the Restoration we owe, for better or for worse, relatively small, roofed theatres, scenery, artificial lighting, actresses, small-scale drama – usually comedy that concerns itself chiefly with private rather than public matters, and audiences that are selective though not necessarily aristocratic, and educated though not always smart.

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 theatrical activity in London was not just revived but reinvented. Between then and the end of the century five different but similar theatres were in use: Vere Street (opened in 1660) and Lincoln's Inn Fields (1661), both converted indoor tennis courts seating perhaps 400, and then Bridges Street (1663), Dorset Garden (1671) and Drury Lane (1674), all larger and built from the ground up. It was touch and go financially for Restoration theatres, yet a remarkable number of good plays were written and produced in the space of some forty years. Side by side with new plays in Restoration London were regular revivals of old drama, including most of the best from Shakespeare's time. Doctored though many of them were, they worked effectively in small, roofed playhouses, before audiences they were not written for, and with scenic embellishments their authors never intended. To give them credit, Restoration managers set a pattern of attention to the drama of the past, and the tradition is still with us. At first they produced revivals because old plays were all that were available; they continued the habit because it pleased audiences and actors and was both good theatre and good business. There was also at the Restoration another novelty: actresses, for the first time in English public theatres, played the female roles, changing English drama forever. So much attention over the centuries has been given to the bawdiness of Restoration times that its importance as a period of reinvention and a transition from the old to the modern theatre is sometimes forgotten.

But we are in a pickle. No theatre from the period has survived, and we have only a few tantalizing scraps of evidence to help us: diaries, the observations of foreign visitors to Restoration playhouses, a little pictorial material, incomplete accounts and performance records, some promptbooks, and intriguing but sometimes baffling stage directions in plays written during the period. One of our sources is the diarist Samuel Pepys, an inveterate 1660s playgoer for whom the theatre was a mistress he was unable to resist. After eighteen years of Puritan suppression the theatres had to attract, in addition to the aristocracy, a new audience of middle-class, upwardly mobile types like Pepys, people who loved socializing and craved entertainment. But Pepys closed his *Diary* in 1669, before the best of Restoration drama was written. So this is shaky ground we're treading on, and we should proceed with caution. (Fortunately, there are several helpful guides to staging: Holland, Lewcock, Milhous and Hume, Muller, Muller-Van Santen, Powell, Rosenfeld, Southern, Styan, and Visser.) Our focus here will be on the features common to most of the Restoration playhouses: the scenic area and the working of scenes and machines; the forestage, where so much of the action in the best plays took place; and the auditorium, which was almost a performing space in itself.

The Scenic Area

The term scenic area is modern; Restoration playwrights in their stage directions often referred to the space behind the curtain line as the 'scene' – a word that can be misleading, since it was also used to designate a subdivision of an act in a play as well as the scenery itself. The scenic area and related spaces like offices, shops, rehearsal halls, dressing (tiring) rooms and a 'Green Room' (a lounge; called a 'Scene Room' in Pepys's day) occupied roughly half the building. Pepys made a backstage visit to the Bridges Street theatre in 1666, which should have told us all we wanted to know; he

> walked to the King's play-house, all in dirt, they being altering of the Stage to make it wider – but God knows when they will begin to act again. But my business here was to see the inside of the Stage and all the tiring roomes and Machines; and endeed it was a

> sight worthy seeing. But to see their clothes and the various sorts, and what a mixture of things there was, here a wooden leg, there a ruff, here a hobby-horse, there a Crowne, would make a man split himself to see with laughing. . . . But then again, to think how fine they show on the stage by candle-light, and how poor things they are to look now too near-hand, is not pleasant at all. The Machines are fine, and the paintings very pretty. (19 March 1666)

Like many of our sources, Pepys left us dangling, but a few backstage tidbits are better than none. If he walked onto the stage at Bridges Street did he feel tipsy? He should have, for the floor was not level. Our terms upstage and downstage derive from the days when stages were raked – sloped gradually upward from front to back, conforming to the use of perspective in the scene painting.

If one goes backstage in a proscenium theatre of any vintage in any country – that is, a theatre with a picture-frame stage, like most Restoration and modern theatres – one finds behind the curtain an open space where scenery can be erected. In today's theatre a stage setting, representing a room, let's say, is usually like a box: painted flats forming three walls and the ceiling of the room, with one of the walls removed so we can sit out front and peep at the action. A typical setting is about 30 ft wide by 15 ft deep, and we view it through the proscenium arch (frontispiece), an opening roughly 30 ft wide and 15 ft high. During a performance we pretend that we are seeing real people in an actual room involved in a lifelike activity. In a Restoration theatre almost the same thing happened, for theatres then also had proscenium arches, scenic locales, an imaginary fourth wall and characters involved in dramatic situations. But Restoration scenery, though it might look like a box set from the auditorium (and in contemporary illustrations), was devised on an entirely different principle and used stage space in a very different way.

The locale – a room, forest, street, prison, battlefield, Heaven, Hell – would have been painted in perspective on a series of wings, shutters and borders. Wings were scenic flats or panels about 4 ft to 5 ft in width and of varying heights, three or four of them standing along each side of the acting area parallel to the curtain line, with open passageways between them. Shutters were a pair of wider flats butted together at the centre line of the stage, forming a back wall (backscene) part way upstage. Borders were horizontal scenic pieces stretching across the stage and suspended above each wing and shutter position. The three or four pairs of wings and their corresponding borders formed, as it were, a series of proscenia or picture frames, each successive set being smaller as one moved upstage, creating a perspective vista and at the same time masking the audience's view of the backstage area. The spaces between the sets of wings were for actor entrances and exits (in a forest scene, for example) or for catwalks hanging above the stage to give workers access to hanging scenery and flying devices. Properly painted in perspective to represent a room, such a setting looked for all the world like the real thing, just as a three-dimensional box set would – except this was painted on two-dimensional scenic pieces. It was all a trick, capable of deceiving audiences partly because of the painters' skill and partly because the scenery was lit only by candlelight, so its deceptions and imperfections could not be noticed from the auditorium. This setting made of wings, borders and shutters would not have been any wider or deeper than a box set, but it could do something the box could not: it could change in a twinkling.

Plays from the Restoration rarely confined the action to a single locale, for the English public theatre had long since thumbed its nose at the unities of time, place and action. Both old and new English plays regularly called for multiple locales, and when Restoration theatre managers committed themselves to using scenery in public theatre performances they had to provide for simple, swift changes. The system they adopted, common all over the Continent since the Renaissance and used earlier in the century in English court theatres, was simplicity itself. The wings and shutters just described slid onstage and off in grooves on the stage floor, with steadying grooves suspended from above. There were at least two complete sets of grooves, just an inch or so apart, at each wing and shutter position, so when one stage setting was slid offstage on each side, a second setting was revealed, already standing in the second grooves. When a third setting was required, the first would be pulled completely offstage, out of its grooves, and replaced by a third set.

The stage-floor grooves in which wings and shutters slid were either built up from the raked floor or cut down into it, and grooves for the shutters and for some of the wings ran almost the width of the stage. Some theatres, including perhaps Dorset Garden from our period, had slots in the stage floor instead of grooves; thrusting up through the floor and riding on wheeled carriages in the substage were ladders or poles, to which wings, shutters and other scenic units could be fixed. When the carriages were properly connected to a revolving cylinder, complete stage settings could be moved on and off mechanically.

Hanging above each wing and shutter position were two borders that could be raised or lowered, one for interior settings, showing a ceiling, and the other for exteriors, depicting the sky. If necessary, while a scene was being performed, stagehands on catwalks could completely replace a set of borders. All these painted scenic units – wings, shutters and borders – were light, canvas-covered wooden frames about an inch thick. The borders may have been even simpler: unframed hanging cloths. A whistle signalled stagehands to move a complete setting on or off, and the change, almost always done in full view of the awed audience, would take about five seconds. It was such a marvellous scene-shifting system that it lasted until near the end of the nineteenth century, when three-dimensional stage settings became the fashion, and when, under bright new electric lighting, the old settings that depended so much on the painters' skill looked too much like painted scenery.

The diminishing height of the wings and shutters contributed to the sense of greater depth than a stage really had. Painters placed vanishing points in their designs well behind the back wall of the theatre, making the vista very gradual and allowing actors to work deep in the scenic area without distorting the stage picture. All this, in an age we do not associate with stage realism in the modern sense, was done to fool the audience into believing that what they were seeing was real, even though they knew all along, as we do, that theatre is a fiction for which we willingly suspend our disbelief – if the play and the performers can persuade us to do so.

The versatile wing-and-shutter system could also accommodate discovered scenes. If a stage direction in an old play says that the scene 'opens' or 'draws' or 'closes' or that a character is 'discovered in her chamber' or 'appears in bed', this did not require the lowering of the theatre's main curtain in order to set up a tableau. Instead, the shutters forming the back wall of a room setting, for example, would be drawn off to reveal a new locale in the 'inner' stage behind them. This new space was backed by yet another set of shutters – so that two discoveries in succession could be managed. Even Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre, built within the confines of a roofed tennis court, could have accommodated two such inner stages, each about 4 ft deep and 15 ft wide, towards the back of the scenic area. By the end of the 1600s theatres began using painted drops in place of or in addition to shutters. In narrow theatres shutters could not be used easily in the downstage part of the scenic area because of their width; they might hit the side wall of the building before they could be fully withdrawn from their grooves. Drops on rollers, on the other hand, could be suspended at any point along the depth of the stage, making it possible to create discovery spaces wherever they were needed.

Action could remain within such spaces or be moved downstage once the scene had begun and the locale had been established. Stage directions to 'Come forward' are sometimes placed after a page or so of dialogue, suggesting that the players were reluctant to remain too far upstage for too long. Action in the scenic area may have been about 20 to 30 ft from the nearest spectator, but the deeper reaches of the stage would surely not have been used at all if what was there could not be seen or heard.

We depend heavily on printed stage directions to help us reconstruct Restoration staging, but play texts may not always have been followed in performance, so one must read them warily. In the delightful letter-writing scenes in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675, Drury Lane) the author seems to suggest that the bedchamber with the writing desk is discovered upstage, behind a pair of shutters that just drew open; if so, the fairly lengthy scenes would have been stuck there, for the desk is essential to the action. The King's Company may have decided that instead of a discovery, servants would, as directions in some plays show, simply bring the desk on as the scene changed, place it downstage, and come back to remove it when the scene was finished.

To handle various special effects, most stage floors had trap doors, large and small, some with ladders and others with rudimentary lifts. Stage directions in plays usually said only that a character or object 'rises' or 'disappears'; most playwrights left it to the stage technicians to decide which traps to use. Magical appearances might also be made by having an actor enter between the wings in an interior scene, thus seeming to walk through a side wall. Waves could be simulated by horizontal rotating or sliding pieces painted and shaped to resemble the sea.

More magical and daring than appearances from below or paintings of the ocean were flights above the stage. The simplest flying device was a rope running from offstage up to a pulley under the roof, across to another pulley above the stage, and down to a harness worn by an intrepid performer or a stand-in. Similarly, a platform with people on it, made to look like a chariot or masked with painted clouds, could be slung on ropes, also disguised as clouds, and lowered or raised. Foreign visitors to England were impressed with English scenes and machines. In his *Journal des voyages* in 1666 Balthasar de Monconys said, 'The scene changes and the machines are very ingeniously invented and executed' (26), almost as though the English were doing some things Continental technicians had not tried. From a performer's point of view, the scenic area was a treacherous part of the playhouse, full of things to trip over, get hung up on or fall into; for many of the paying customers it was a wonderland, the whole point of going to the theatre.

Presumably a seasoned author would not request a scenic effect that could not be handled by the theatre for which the play was written. Aphra Behn's successful farce *Emperor of the Moon* (1687, Dorset Garden) contains a sample of what playwrights sometimes asked for in works more dependent on spectacle than wit. Act 3 calls for a crane device that could move a flown object down and forward while opening like an umbrella, plus three other flying machines:

> [T]he Globe of the Moon appears, first, like a new Moon; as it moves forward it increases, till it comes to the Full. When it is descended, it opens, and shews the Emperor and the Prince. They come forth with all their Train, the Flutes playing a Symphony before him, which prepares the Song. . . . [*After the song*] A Chariot appears, made like a Half Moon, in which is *Cinthio* for the Emperor, richly dress'd and Charmante for the Prince, rich, with a good many Heroes attending. *Cinthio's* Train born by four Cupids. The Song continues while they descend and land. They address themselves to *Elaria* and *Bellemante*. . . . [*Later*,] A very Antick Dance. The Dance ended, the Front Scene draws off, and shows a Temple, with an Altar, one speaking through a Stentraphon [*speaking trumpet*] from behind it. Soft Musick plays the while. (63–4)

A page later, as if the stage were not crowded enough, '*two Chariots descend, one on one side above, and the other on the other side*' (65). The play concludes without any of the machines ascending, perhaps because there were not enough hands to move all the flying devices simultaneously. The models the English stage technicians could have used for such machinery were Nicola Sabbattini or Giacomo Torelli, both active on the Continent in the 1630s and 1640s (Hewitt 1958; Bjurström, 1962).

Extravagant technical demands have always been a challenge to stage technicians, who can usually figure out how the impossible can be accomplished. The genre of the day that depended most heavily on spectacular staging was the semi-opera, so called because the main characters were played by actors, not singers. Elkanah Settle's *The Virgin Prophetess; or, The Fate of Troy* (1701, Drury Lane) is loaded with wonderfully baffling specifics about scenery. Act 3, scene 2 is the Grecian Camp; after a few pages of dialogue

> The Scene opens and discovers *Paris* and *Helen* seated upon Thrones between the Scenes; &c. In the middle of the Scenes, and under the second Grand-Arch, a painted Curtain hangs down to the Ground, reaching upwards only thirteen Foot and the like width, the whole Prospect of the Roof of the Scenes being seen about Eleven Foot over it. —— Before this Curtain, upon two Rich Couches, lye two painted Cupids as big as the Life.

Then, after four lines spoken by Paris:

> Here a Symphony playes, and immediately the two Cupids start from their Couches, and flying up, take hold of the upper Corners of the Curtain and draw it up; two more Cupids of the same Bulk absconded [*hidden*] before behind the Couches rising with the Curtain at the two lower Corners.
>
> Here is discover'd a small set of Scenes, being 12 Foot high, and the like Breadth, consisting of three pair of Wings, and a flat Scene [*shutters*]; the Object being a Pallace of *Cupid*, with Blue Pillars, with Silver Bases and Capitals, hung round with Wreaths of Flowers, the inner Prospect terminating in Bowers, Fountains, &c.
>
> The Symphony still continuing, out of this set are drawn forth on each side, two more sets of Senes [*sic*] exactly Unison with the Inner set, the first set being no ways diminsht, and the whole three Prospectives now reaching to Twenty five Foot width. Here the Curtain advances [*rises*] yet higher, and discovers a fourth set of Scenes, over the middle set, in which Cupid sits in Glory; while from the sides of this set spring two Scenes, which cover the two outmost Pallaces. This Machine now filling the whole House, and reaching 24 Foot high, making so many Visto's [*vistas*] of Pallace-Work. (21–2)

Settle seems to be asking for sets of wings and shutters on at least two levels (as used earlier in the century by Inigo Jones in court masques), three vanishing points, and settings within settings, forming one large machine, revealed gradually by a rising curtain (Rosenfeld 1981: 47–8, 64–5). Exactly how it was all pulled off is anyone's guess. English stage machinists and designers, unlike their counterparts on the Continent, did not leave us detailed plans and explanations, perhaps because they wanted to keep their magical art a secret and not spoil the illusion by explaining it.

In addition to the elaborate spectacle described above, Settle also asked for song and dance, scenic transformations, transparencies, cut-out scenes, appearances from below the stage, the goddess Diana flying above, thunder, six white elephants (real? possibly; the eccentric Drury Lane manager had been negotiating for an elephant about this time), Heaven, Hell, Troy in all its splendour, Troy in flames and, to end it all, Helen's immolation. This production was puffed in the press for its technodazzle, delayed in production (because of staging problems?) and unable to draw the expected crowds. The unlucky manager Christopher Rich did not try anything like it again, though it must have seemed like a good idea at the time.

The scenic area, then, was the most elaborate and expensive performance space in a Restoration playhouse, even though many plays, including some of the best, did not exploit its capabilities. There seems to be a pattern in Restoration plays: the better the play, the fewer the stage directions involving technical theatre – as though the more accomplished playwrights, if they had a good play, did not want scenery to steal the scene.

The Forestage

The area between the curtain line and the front edge of the stage has been called the theatre, area, platform, proscenium (to indicate that it was before or in front of the scene) or apron. The modern term forestage avoids confusion and most accurately describes the space before the curtain in a Restoration theatre. The forestage provided actors, singers and dancers with a sizeable downstage, well-illuminated performance space, raked but free of grooves. It was a continuation of the scenic area yet separated from it by the imaginary curtain line, and though it was part of the auditorium, it was just as clearly an extension of the stage. It was a highly practical, versatile and purposely ambiguous space. Playwrights wanting to establish a locale but keep the action close to the audience could use the side walls of the forestage, with their entrance doors, instead of or in addition to the scenic area (Visser 1975: 59). When a locale was depicted by the scenery, the forestage was understood to be an extension of that place, and if the scene changed, the forestage became the new locale. When the curtain was down, the forestage was a neutral area, unless the speaker of a prologue or epilogue gave it a name. It was the actors' most useful and desirable performing space, though spectators could think of it as a piece of their part of the theatre. It served as a vital link between the audience and the performers, the auditorium and the stage, the playgoers and the play.

The forestage was a descendant, though altered, of the platform in public playhouses like the Globe and 'private' theatres like the Blackfriars, which was used by Shakespeare's company for winter performances. In 1660 the earliest of the Restoration playhouses, Vere Street, may have been patterned after the Blackfriars, for Vere Street is thought to have been set up in the Elizabethan/Jacobean manner with little or no scenery and with an acting platform perhaps 15 ft square thrusting into the audience's space, partly surrounded by spectators. Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1661 was equipped with wing-and-shutter scenery and, we think, had the first Restoration forestage: not a full thrust – for very few if any spectators would have had seats beside the stage – but a platform providing an acting space about 10 ft deep by 30 ft wide between the scenic area and the audience. Playwrights, players and patrons alike must have been satisfied with this acting area, for all three of the larger theatres, Bridges Street, Dorset Garden and Drury Lane, had sizeable forestages, measuring about 20 ft by 30 ft. Restoration actors thus had two different acting spaces, each with its own characteristics: the scenic area with its depth and sense of locale, and the forestage, a wide, open acting platform. Acting 'within the scene' must have been quite different from acting on the forestage: the first invited characters to use the scenery as an environment, while the second could divorce them from it, treating scenery as a decorative background.

We can only guess how performers used these two different performing spaces. *Hamlet*, considerably cut but not much altered, was a favourite of Pepys and many others when Thomas Betterton played the title part. The 'closet' scene with Hamlet and his mother could have been staged completely within a scenic representation of a chamber. No heavy properties would have been needed, though an illustration from Rowe's 1709 edition of Shakespeare shows a chair tipped over by Hamlet when he sees the Ghost; that piece of stage business was handed down to generations of actors during the eighteenth century. The picture has the Ghost within Gertrude's chamber; he may have entered between wing passageways, seeming to pass through the wall, and left through a scene door or the space between the first wings and the proscenium arch. Polonius could have hidden behind a curtain hanging at the first shutter position. A variant staging might have used the forestage for the Ghost and the scenic area for Hamlet and his mother. The Ghost could enter from a proscenium door, cross the forestage, and exit through an opposite door. The audience would see Hamlet and Gertrude upstage of the curtain line, in depth, as the Ghost moved across the forestage in a separate stage space, seen in width. Restoration playhouses provided players with interesting alternatives.

New Restoration productions normally began on the forestage, with a prologue to warm up the audience. The speaker(s) usually stepped before the curtain to establish a good rapport with the patrons, comment on topical matters, curry favour, plead for the poor playwright, or castigate spectators for their poor taste in playgoing and then beg them for their support. A paying customer willing to be criticized for his behaviour yet anxious to participate in the actor–audience undertaking that was to come obviously had an approach to theatre quite different from today's typical playgoer. The relationship back then between audience members and actors seems to have been like a family, and the actors must have understood just how far they could go before they upset their loved ones. At the conclusion of the prologue, the speaker(s) usually withdrew, the curtain was raised, the stage setting for the first act was revealed, and the performance began. The curtain would normally not fall until the end of the play unless a special tableau had to be set up behind it.

Primary access to the forestage was by permanent proscenium doors, at least one but more often two on each side of the stage, as Sir Christopher Wren's 1672–4 section drawing of a playhouse shows and as stage directions in plays confirm. (If a play seemed to call for three doors on each side, the actors could have used wing passageways or the space between the proscenium arch and the first wings.) In Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675, Drury Lane) the notorious 'china' scene must have been acted mostly on the forestage, with Quack behind a screen in the scenic area, observing Horner's success at playing musical doors. The forestage door assignments may have been:

Door #1, to outside Horner's lodgings.
Door #2, to Horner's chamber (lockable, on the opposite side of the stage from #1).
Door #3, to Horner's chamber the 'back way' (lockable, on the same side as #2).
Door #4, to another part of Horner's lodgings (on the same side as #1).

The doors were near the spectators, so people could follow the twists and turns of the action, and that same closeness was helpful for many of the asides delivered directly to the audience throughout the play.

Witty repartee in such plays as *The Country Wife* would have found in the forestage a perfect delivery platform. Actors could get as close to the audience as they wished, establishing whatever character–audience relationship was appropriate. The forestage must also have been ideal for the stage movements and gestures the players used, which, judging by manuals of the period, were probably what we would consider formal, conventional, dance-like – a series of changing configurations. Just as the scene-shifting system and technical capabilities of most of the Restoration playhouses invited the composition of spectacle plays, the forestage must have encouraged the kind of drama Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve wrote. The playwrights and the playhouses were made for each other – until the profit motive raised its ugly head.

Colley Cibber, who began his acting career at Drury Lane in 1690 and went on to be successful in management there, loved the forestage as an acting space because of its closeness to the audience. When he wrote an *Apology* for his life in 1740 he lamented the 1696 decision of the manager Christopher Rich, who, to seat more paying customers, cut back the forestage and replaced the lower doors on each side with boxes for aristocratic patrons. According to Cibber, the actors lost almost half the forestage.

> [W]hen the Actors were in Possession of that forwarder Space to advance upon, the Voice was then more in the Centre of the House, so that the most distant Ear had scarce the least Doubt or Difficulty in hearing what fell from the weakest Utterance: All Objects were thus drawn nearer to the Sense; every painted Scene was stronger; every Grand Scene and Dance more extended; every rich or fine-coloured Habit had a more lively Lustre: Nor was the minutest Motion of a Feature (properly changing with the Passion, or Humour it suited) ever lost, as they frequently must be in the Obscurity of too great a Distance: And how valuable an Advantage the Facility of hearing distinctly is to every well-acted Scene, every common Spectator is a Judge. A Voice scarce rais'd above the Tone of a Whisper, either in Tenderness, Resignation, innocent Distress, or Jealousy suppress'd, often have as much concern with the Heart as the most clamorous Passions; and when on any of these Occasions, such affecting Speeches are plainly heard, or lost, how wide is the Difference, from the great or little Satisfaction received from them? (Cibber 1889, 2: 84–6)

Windy Cibber exaggerated perhaps, and he couldn't refrain from delivering a lecture on acting, but he was justly concerned. The new stage boxes forced the players upstage, so they wouldn't seem impolite to the new stage-box patrons to their left and right. A sizeable strip of very important acting space had to be left unused. The players did not object to having physical distance placed between themselves and their spectators; that happened whenever they acted within the scenic area, and actors were used to it. But they did not want a gulf between themselves and their audience when they moved out onto the forestage. The actors had previously been able to go right up to the edge of the stage, close to their spectators and just where they wanted to be for asides and soliloquies. Money-minded Rich now denied them that. Further, the loss of two of the downstage proscenium doors meant that the staging of plays like *The Country Wife* had to be changed, with some entrances, exits and stage business forced willy-nilly into the scenic area.

Closely related to the forestage and its doors were the acting areas looking down on it, the lights illuminating it and the musicians posted near it. Above the proscenium doors on each side were acting spaces that could also serve for seating. References in stage directions to characters appearing 'above' or in windows were usually to these areas. Practical windows could have been built into scenic wings, but the permanent forestage features would have been safer for stage business involving ladders, climbing or jumping. Evidence in stage directions suggests that at Bridges Street the acting areas above the doors may have been windows indeed, while those at Drury Lane were balconies. As with many of the traditional physical features of these old playhouses, no two buildings would have been exactly alike.

Like moths drawn to a flame, performers must have been attracted to the forestage, not only because it was a splendid uncluttered acting space, but because that was where the best illumination was from chandeliers and footlights. As far as can be estimated, the amount of light a stage had back then was the equivalent of a 75 or perhaps 100 watt lamp (Mullin 1980: 74). That does not seem like nearly enough light for anyone to see by, but we are dealing here with people who regularly lived and worked under such conditions. The theatre lighting was sufficient for them. Hanging above the forestage were at least two chandeliers; similar fixtures were suspended from the ceiling of the auditorium, spilling some of their light onto the forestage, and there were sconces along the sides and back of the house, between the boxes, to augment the illumination from the chandeliers. Since performances were in the afternoons, daylight coming through the building's windows must also have helped. Onstage, in the scenic area, in addition to more chandeliers, candles with reflectors could be placed behind the wings, throwing light towards the centre of the stage. Though ways had been discovered to dim lights somewhat (lowering perforated canisters over flames or partially covering a footlight trough), dimming as we understand it was not possible; consequently, when a playwright called for a night scene, the audience settled, as in Shakespeare's time, for a character carrying a light of some sort, indicating darkness. But what should we make of stage directions in plays calling for the stage to be completely darkened? Candles and reflectors used behind the wings could have been rotated, throwing the light away from the acting area, and perhaps shields of some kind were lowered over some or all of the candles in the chandeliers above the scenic area if not the forestage as well. Even a partial darkening probably seemed startling to the spectators. This was, after all, an audience that accepted the convention of chandeliers hanging in the middle of a forest. More importantly, if they wanted to believe the stage was dark, it was. They were not as sophisticated as we are.

Music was an essential part of Restoration theatregoing. Musicians played before the show, during some intervals, and within acts as accompaniment for singers and dancers. Machine plays often had extensive musical sections, and works like Dryden's *Albion and Albanius* (1685, Dorset Garden) were proper operas, sung throughout. In the 1660s Pepys wallowed in theatre music, became an amateur musician because of it, and made friends with some of the best musicians of his day. Drawn to the theatres were the best English composers of the time, including, near the end of the century, Henry Purcell. Theatre managers, however, had trouble finding a place to put the band of instrumentalists. At Vere Street they seem to have been in an upper side box near the stage; at Lincoln's Inn Fields they may have been above the proscenium arch or over a forestage entrance door. Killigrew, according to Pepys on 8 May 1663, tried placing the musicians 'below' at Bridges Street – apparently in front of and partly under the stage, much to Pepys's displeasure, because the sound was distorted. At Dorset Garden, judging from illustrations in Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673, Dorset Garden), the musicians had a home above the proscenium arch, a position similar to the music room in Elizabethan playhouses, though for *The Tempest* (1674, Dorset Garden) the band of more than twenty-four instrumentalists was placed in front of and below the forestage (Price 1979: 85).

The forestage, then, was at the heart of Restoration theatres. Its doors were crucial for most important entrances, exits and stage business associated with them; the illumination of the forestage drew the players to it; the musicians, wherever they were placed, were as close to the forestage as the managers could get them; and the acting area of choice for the players and playgoers was that valuable piece of stage real estate between the audience and the curtain line. Colley Cibber sensed that the forestage, because of its closeness to the audience and its appearance as part of the auditorium, was an invaluable part of the actor's character–audience relationship. He felt that anything that forced performers to retreat from their audience would damage a very precious bond actors wanted with their patrons. *Their* audience might become merely *the* audience.

The Auditorium

The 'house' in theatres of the post-1660 period had some common features that varied chiefly in size and shape from theatre to theatre. The audience occupied a cube roughly the same size as the cube encompassing the stage and backstage. There were normally three seating areas: pit, boxes and galleries, each designed for different social classes, with separate entrances and variant prices. The pit, what today we call the orchestra or stalls, had backless benches, placed rather too close together for real comfort when the house was full. Wrapping around the pit on three sides and forming a U, horseshoe or semi-circle, like a modern opera house but smaller, were one or two levels of boxes. These seated as many as twenty people each, with low partitions separating groups of patrons without cutting off their view of the stage. From the relatively few boxes on each side of the pit one could not see the stage fully, but the view of fellow patrons was excellent, which satisfied most people who chose to sit there. Above the tier(s) of boxes were one or two levels of open galleries, again wrapping around the pit and leaving some side seats with poor sightlines. However, seats for most of the spectators, the 'main audience', as Cibber called them, were laid out in a fan shape, with good views of the stage (Leacroft 1973: 89–99). The most distant spectators in the largest houses were probably only 60 ft to 70 ft from the stage. By comparison with the rebuilt Drury Lane theatre of 1794, which could accommodate a crowd of 3,600, Restoration playhouses were very cosy indeed.

The playgoers after the Restoration were not predominantly debauched aristocrats, as was supposed by Victorian critics who thought most of the plays of the time had no redeeming social value and could therefore not have been written for proper people. The great variety in the plays produced suggests an audience almost as mixed as that in Shakespeare's day, and Pepys found at the theatre many of the middle class like himself plus a growing number of 'citizens', 'prentices and servants, including some of his own, who came to performances with him. There were also courtiers and, often, the king and his entourage, but the upper classes seem to have made up a relatively small percentage of the audience; they were, however, a gorgeous lot to behold and understandably, when they attended, appeared to dominate the audience. Towards the end of the century, with royalty less addicted to theatregoing, the audience was less aristocratic. The anonymous satirical *Country Gentleman's Vade Mecum* in 1699 portrays a theatre attendance very like that recorded by Pepys decades earlier: the galleries full of citizens and their families plus servants, journeymen and apprentices; the pit peopled by 'judges, wits and censurers' along with 'squires, sharpers, beaus, bullies and whores', and the boxes decorated with 'persons of quality' (38–9).

There were important differences between Shakespearean and Restoration audiences, however, and they concerned the 'groundlings' to whom Hamlet refers. In the early theatres this lively class of playgoers, paying a penny to stand in the pit, were in the very midst of things and obvious to all; by Restoration times the cheapest places were moved to above and behind the occupants of the pit and boxes, almost out of sight if not out of mind or earshot. They paid a shilling for an upper-gallery seat, a price needed by the managers to cover production costs (especially for scenery, stagehands and lighting) but too high for poor folk. And so it remains today; the groundlings watch movies and television, and live theatre is thought of as for the elite. The Restoration redistribution of the audience space was the birth of auditoria as we now know them. Shakespeare would not understand.

Foreign visitors were both impressed and put off by London theatres. Most spent more time chiding the English for faulty playwriting than telling us what stage performances were like. But Samuel Chappuzeau in *L'Europe vivante* (1667) was quite taken with the music, dance, scenery, machinery and, of all things, the lighting: the

English troupes thought it a crime, he wrote, 'to use anything other than wax-light to illuminate the theatre or to fill the chandeliers with a material that might offend the sense of smell' (trans. Carole Hodgson, 215). When Cosimo III of Tuscany visited Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre (not Bridges Street, as was once thought) on 15 April 1669, one of his entourage, Lorenzo Magalotti, took notes. The pit was

> surrounded within by separate compartments in which there are several degrees [steps] of seating for the greater comfort of the ladies and gentlemen who, according to the liberal custom of the country, share the same boxes. Down below [in the pit] there remains a broad space for other members of the audience. The scenery is entirely changeable, with various transformations and lovely perspectives. Before the play begins, to render the waiting less annoying and inconvenient, there are very graceful instrumental pieces to be heard, with the result that many go early just to enjoy this part of the entertainment. (Orrell 1980: 6)

Henri Misson in his *Memoirs* in 1698 was struck by the lively behaviour of the pit patrons: 'Men of Quality, particularly the younger Sort, some Ladies of Reputation and Vertue, and abundance of Damsels that hunt for Prey, sit all together in this Place, Higgledy-piggledy, chatter, toy, play, hear, hear not' (1719, trans. Ozell, 219).

Back in the 1660s Pepys had regularly reported similar audience conduct. At one performance, of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* at the Bridges Street theatre on 18 February 1667, the diarist became so enthralled with Sir Charles Sedley's bantering with a masked lady that Pepys 'lost the pleasure of the play wholly, to which now and then Sir Ch. Sidlys exceptions against both words and pronouncing were very pretty'. Shadwell's *A True Widow* (1678, Dorset Garden) has a scene that takes place in a theatre, with audience members behaving obstreperously before and during a performance. Throughout the Restoration period there seems to have been (regularly? occasionally?) a show going on in the audience, as at a sports event. For many people, theatregoing was a social occasion: they could talk to friends, meet new people, criticize the play, make assignations, follow the plot, lose interest, get caught up, turn away, turn back, come, go, hear, hear not. It was all part of their afternoon at the theatre.

For the acting companies, playing to such spectators was a formidable challenge. Common sense would dictate that they should not present plays that had characters speaking directly to the audience, for surely that would encourage the audience to talk back. Yet Restoration plays, following the Shakespearean tradition, invited audience participation; direct address was written into most of them. There must have been a tacit agreement, sometimes broken, that spectators would enjoy the theatrical experience without disrupting it. For their part, Restoration actors had to keep audiences involved but at arm's length. When spectators got caught up in a performance, when their participation was not disruptive but supportive, then their reactions – such as applause or cheers after a well-delivered line – became an important part of the entertainment (Powell 1984: 14–19).

We play it safe. In a modern theatre, we dim the house lights, and customers quiet down, set their sights on the only thing they can now easily see, the stage, and become Peeping Toms. In Restoration days dimming the house was not possible, and no matter how carefully actors tried to control a performance, the playgoers could at any time tip the delicate balance.

What could capture such lively audiences? Scenic splendour, elaborate costumes and spectacular scenic effects often did. Titillating new plays that often satirized their own audiences also did, as did many old plays, retooled for the new playgoers. And it certainly would have taken strong, controlled, larger-than-life acting. Thomas Betterton, Pepys's favourite actor, had that power and magnetism, and he and his colleagues seem to have been capable, most of the time, of galvanizing the spectators into attention. When Pepys saw *Hamlet* on 31 August 1668 at Lincoln's Inn Fields he confessed to his diary that he was 'mightily pleased with it; but above all, with Batterton [*sic*], the best part, I believe, that ever man acted'. The anonymous *Laureat* in 1740 described the actor/character in detail:

> I have lately been told by a Gentleman who has frequently seen Mr *Betterton* perform this Part of *Hamlet*, that he has observ'd his Countenance (which was naturally ruddy and sanguin) in this Scene of the fourth Act, where his Father's Ghost appears, thro' the violent and sudden Emotions of Amazement and Horror, turn instantly on the Sight of his Father's Spirit, as pale as his Neckcloath, when every Article of his Body seem'd to be affected with a Tremor inexpressible; so that had his Father's Ghost actually risen before him[,] he could not have been seized with more real Agonies; and this was felt so strongly by the Audience, that the Blood seemed to shudder in their Veins likewise, and they in some Measure partook of the Astonishment and Horror, with which they saw this excellent Actor affected. And when *Hamlet* utters this Line, upon the Ghost's leaving the Stage, (in Answer to his Mother's impatient Enquiry into the Occasion of his Disorder, and what he sees) – *See – where he goes – ev'n now – out at the Portal*: The whole Audience hath remain'd in a dead Silence for near a Minute, and then – as if recovering all at once from their Astonishment, have joined as one Man, in a thunder of universal Applause. (31)

If that was the kind of acting Restoration theatres inspired, what an experience it must have been for playgoers. It is little wonder that Samuel Pepys could not stay away.

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