

Sharing The Same Light

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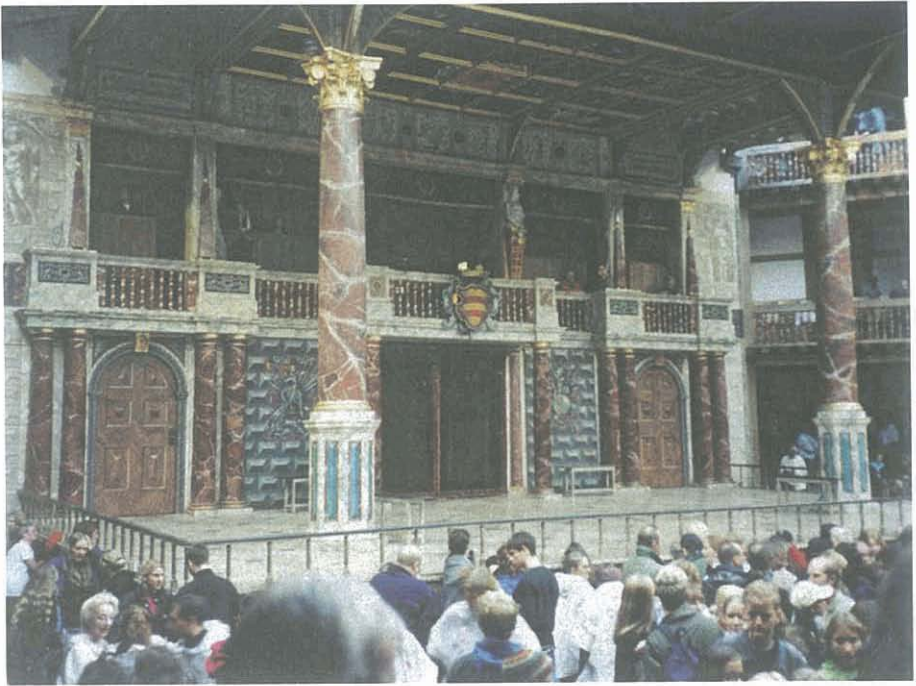
When Shakespeare's Globe Theatre opened on London's Bankside in 1997 it was immediately evident that seeing and hearing a play in this arena was a very different experience to that found in most theatres today. As Director of Design at the Globe until 2005, I designed productions for the Globe itself, for venues originally used by the Shakespeare company four hundred years ago, and later for tours to Japan, Italy and the USA. The experience of working in the Globe affected the design for subsequent tours until it developed into a contemporary style of its own, and this is a brief description of that journey.

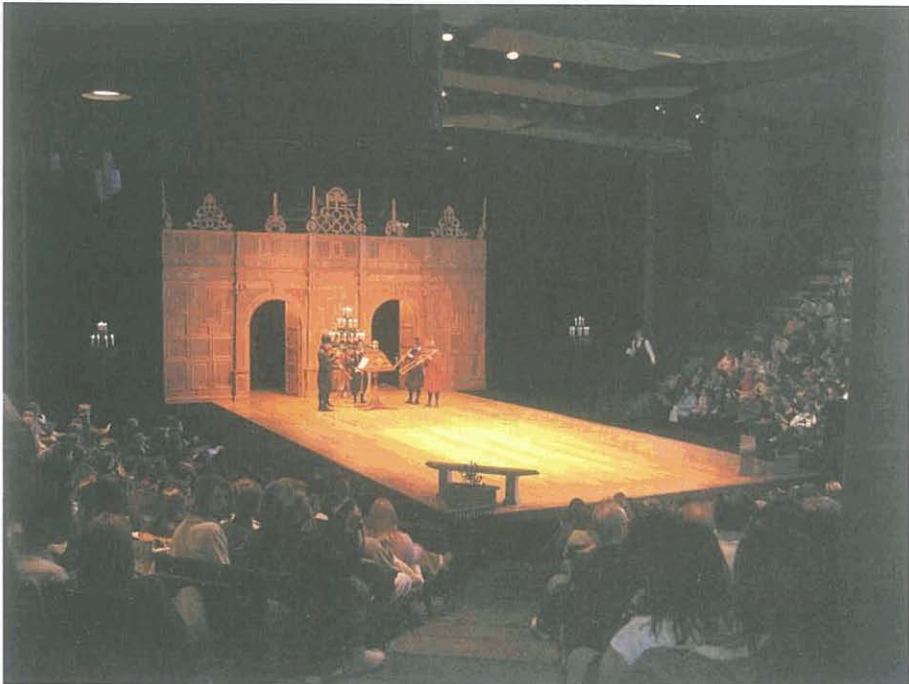
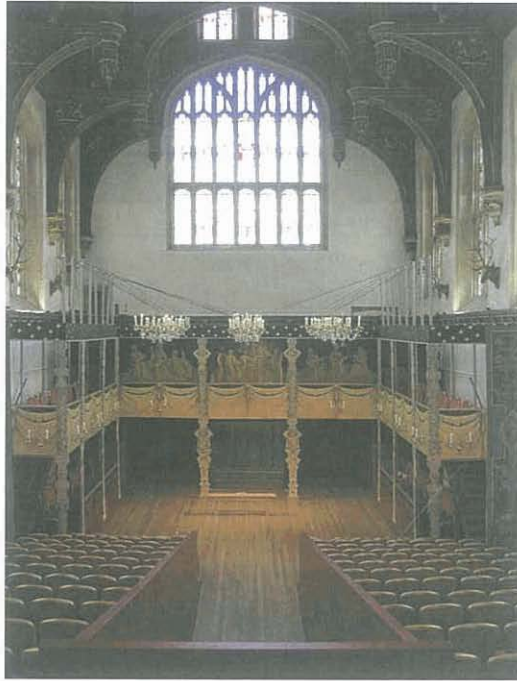
During the afternoon performances in the Globe the audience are lit as brightly (and often brighter) than the players on stage [FIG.1], just as they were in the late sixteenth century. Because of the roof or 'shadow' over the stage, and the orientation of the theatre being such that the sun is behind the stage throughout the afternoon, there is indeed a shadowy quality to the light onstage. Although this is helpfully non-specific for plays where the action swiftly shifts from night to day, gloomy storm to bright weather, or indoors to outdoors, the lack of ability to focus attention on the players by the use of light means that the audience look at whoever is speaking. In other words they listen first and look second, making them much more of an audience than a group of spectators – indeed Shakespeare himself referred to play-going as hearing a play in these three examples,

Theseus: 'I will hear that play'
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, Scene I, line 81

Lord: 'For yet his honour never heard a play'
Taming of the Shrew, Induction, line 96

Hamlet: 'Follow him friends: we'll hear a play tomorrow'
Hamlet, Act II, Scene II, line 541.





Undoubtedly, there were great spectacles and sumptuous costumes to be seen in the outdoors playhouses, but this does not necessarily mean there was an expectation to see everything clearly, and many of the audience seated above the stage or at the sides could not possibly have seen inside the discovery space where sights such as Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess in *The Tempest* were revealed. Hearing the play was of paramount importance and much of the descriptive information given visually in today's theatre was delivered instead by the words of the playwright in Shakespeare's own time.

When invited to play Globe productions elsewhere, we decided to maintain this overall, unfocused lighting on both players and audience, although it proved difficult to use the low levels of light that Elizabethan audiences were accustomed to. In 2000 *Hamlet* was performed in the 1585 Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza [FIG.2] and as a single lighting state was needed, it was decided that it should be quite bright. This meant that even the Spirit of Hamlet's Father appeared in the same lighting as all the other scenes (as had been the case at the Globe), so the atmosphere of dark battlements at night was created simply with the words and the action of the scene. However, in the late sixteenth century performances in the Olimpico would have been much gloomier than in modern electric light. There are high windows around the rear of the auditorium to let in some daylight and many sixteenth century holders remain for oil lamps on the Frons Scenae and street scenes behind, but it would not been bright, by any means.

For later visits to perform Globe productions in the 1570 Middle Temple Hall in 2002 (where *Twelfth Night* was performed in 1602) and Hampton Court Great Hall of 1532-5 in 2004 [FIG.3] we continued the principle of lighting the audience and players equally. In 2003 another invitation had caused us to go further and construct our own playing space to tour the USA. We chose to use elements common to many sixteenth century indoor playing spaces such as Hampton Court and Middle Temple— that of an oak screen with two doorways for entrances, a platform behind it to appear above, and a boarded oak floor [FIG.4]. This flexible kit has been used on conventional stages such as seen here at the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, and also in non-theatre spaces such as warehouses, with seats added around three sides to create a kind of 'hall' set-up.

We made more effort with each one of these ventures to reconstruct the original lighting conditions of these indoor playing spaces by using electric candlelight either above the stage or on standing candelabra, although we were unable to use real flame for reasons of health and safety. This was heavily supplemented by theatrical electric lighting because electric candles give very little actual light to a large area, and nothing like the eerie diffused glow of real flame. On the 2005 Globe tour of *Measure for Measure* in the USA, we played in lower lighting levels than ever before, with a larger proportion of the light coming from overhead electric candles, and this was perhaps our most successful attempt at indoor lighting. Today the enormous power of artificial light is available to make our playing spaces bright, so even on gloomy afternoons when the daylight indoors is dim, the instinct is to make it brighter – because we can. Sadly, what can get lost is atmosphere and perhaps we do not trust the audience of today to sit in a dark interior to hear a play. Elizabethan audiences lived in candlelight and they could not make their rooms as bright as we can. Despite the shortcomings of electric light, all the theatrical experiments with the past described above have gained from the fact that by lighting the audience as well as the players, the play has become a shared event with a less passive audience that is usual for Shakespeare performances, and maybe in the future we will even be allowed to play indoors in natural light and flame alone.

* Photos gently provided by Jenny Tiramani

