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THE DUKE'S THEATRE, DORSET GARDENS (From an old engraving)

# CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PLAYHOUSE

BY HAMILTON BELL

II ON THREE PLANS BY SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN

TWO OF THE important London theatres of the seventeenth century are known to have been built by Sir Christopher Wren and the earliest of these is regarded by no less authorities than M. M. Contant and de Filippi as the prototype of the modern theatre.

I have some reason to hope, as this paper will show, that I may have traced a partial plan of one of them at least.

The great fire of London in 1666 wiped out the precinct of the old Whitefriars Monastery and with it a theatre variously referred to as the Whitefriars, Salisbury Court, and the private house in

Dorset Court. The center of the dramatic world had by this time moved westward and was established in and about Drury Lane, between which and Lincoln's Inn-Fields the two patent companies, Killigrew's King's Servants and Davenant's Duke's Servants had taken up their abode, the former in a new theatre in Brydges Street, which was later to be known as the historic Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the latter in Lisle's Tennis Court in Portugal Row. Sir William Davenant had from the very beginning of his career as a manager shown a tendency to mount his productions with con-

siderable elaboration, so that it is rather to be wondered that he remained so long in these confined quarters than that he should about 1668 have availed himself of the opportunity afforded by the clearance in Whitefriars to engage Sir Christopher Wren to build him a new and magnificent play house in Salisbury or Dorset Court. Despite its distance from the fashionable center the convenience of the new site must have offset other drawbacks; by securing a plot of land fronting on the river, then and for more than a century to come, still the great highway of the metropolis, at the head of Dorset Stairs and connected by Salisbury Court and Dorset Street with Fleet Street, always the main artery between the city and the west end of town, he drew his audiences both from the citizens and the Court. Moreover, he was able to set his building in an open square unencroached upon by other houses, a consideration which doubtless weighed greatly in the years immediately following the disastrous fire. This theatre was not finished and opened until 1671, after Sir W. Davenant's death. In three maps of the period, one in the Soane Museum of which I give a tracing, in John Ogilby's map of 1677, and in Morden and Lea's of 1682, the Duke's Theatre is shown occupying this eligible position. The view given of somewhat later date shows the river front of it.

I have nowhere found the dimensions recorded but it is stated to have been larger than Killigrew's first theatre in Brydges Street, which we know to have been 112 feet from E. to W. and 59 feet from N. to S.

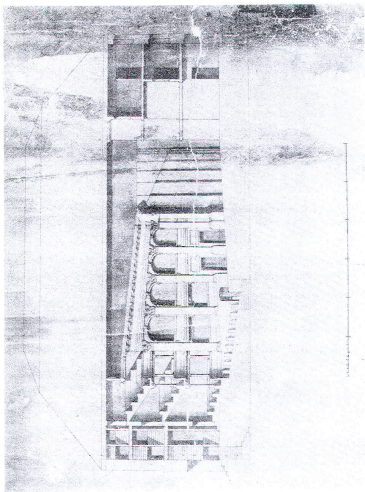
In the first edition of Elkanna Settle's *Empress of Morocco* published in 1673 are several views of the outside and proscenium of this theatre. That of the outside is curiously corroborated by the evidence of the map in the Soane Museum where (the principal buildings being shown in a bird's-eye perspective) the Duke's is readily recognized by its peculiar façade. In the margin of Morden and Lea's map, too, is a little sketch showing it.

The plan in Ogilby's map is large enough for us to trace with ease the

four columns of the front with the steps leading up to it; and the turrets at top. This façade had an overhanging first floor carried on four Tuscan columns forming a portico to shelter the entrance; above these were four Corinthian engaged columns with windows between and crowning the cornice which was carried up in the centre in an arched pediment, were two turrets. The whole composition being dignified, in fine proportion and eminently characteristic of its great architect.

M. M. Contant and de Filippi, on what authority they do not say, state, that according to the engravings, this theatre received the light of day from large windows which served to illuminate at once the stage and the salle. As we know, even in Shakespeare's day, the private or entirely enclosed theatres were artificially lit, they would seem to have assumed, not merely that the large windows shown in the façade opened from the auditorium, which is not necessarily, nor even likely to have been, the case; but that the theatre standing isolated had windows on all sides. There is no evidence either for or against this assumption, so far as I know, except that in the minute perspective at the foot of Morden and Lea's map there would seem to be windows on the east side of the building. Their description of the interior is as follows and is obviously based on, and may be checked by, the illustrations in the *Empress of Morocco* mentioned above:

The proscenium was rectangular, without columns, and did not reach to the full height of the salle; between its cornice and the ceiling, above the royal arms, was introduced a sort of box (*loge*) facing the public, flanked by enormous caryatides and surrounded by festoons. This was without any doubt the music room where the orchestra sat. In front of the proscenium to right and left of the space probably reserved for the orchestra were two large doors of the same style as the rest of the theatre and surmounted as in the Theatre of the Tuileries by two tribunes or balconies, making large windows to light the scene, for, according to the engraving the *théâtre*



SECTIONAL "PLAN 81" FROM THE ORIGINAL  
DRAWING BY SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN.  
Proposed for the Bodley Library, built for him  
in 1627-28.

*Fig. 100. Section of the Bodleian and  
Bodley's College, Oxford.*

(in French meaning stage), received the light of day. The boxes, placed behind these two interior balconies, probably ran round the *salle* in two rows, separated by the large windows which are to be seen on the design of the *façade* and which served to light at the same time the stage and the *salle*.

It is amusing to note how innocence of English theatrical usage has led these two French architects astray. As already noted the box with its three curtained openings carried on a projecting shelf-like bracket over the whole proscenium arch was the Music Room, which, as Mr. W. J. Lawrence has ably shown, there is every reason to believe had occupied that position from the days of Queen Elizabeth till even later than the building of the Duke's Theatre; he advances ample evidence to show that in this particular building there is no doubt of the fact.

The space, probably reserved for the orchestra, was the projecting apron, also an English traditional feature, though by the eighteenth century not uncommon in France also. Curiously enough in this very theatre, when Shadwell's opera based on the *Tempest* was given in 1674, "the front of the stage is opened and the band (greatly enlarged for the occasion) placed between the pit and the stage." The fact of this specific instruction appearing in the printed play goes far to prove that the condition for which it provides was exceptional.

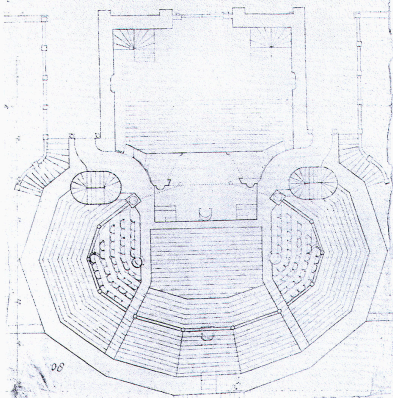
The doors with the balconies over them on either side of the stage are more familiar to them through having existed in the theatre built in 1660 in the north Pavilion of Catherine de Medicis of the Tuileries, turned into a *Salle de Seances* in 1792, when the Convention was signed in it, but their imagination of the rest of the house is fantastic to the last degree; whether in plan ovoid or rectangular, I venture to think probably the former, it was undoubtedly built with the then usual English arrangement of two tiers of boxes, surmounted by a gallery, the *very* private boxes being grouped about the proscenium. In the English theatres of the XVII and XVIII centuries the boxes were not usually partitioned off,

but like our balconies; even when partitioned, single seats in them were sold as in Continental Europe at the present day; even the Royal box, when unoccupied by Majesty, was let to commoners; Mr. Pepys sat there on occasion.

This theatre flourished till the amalgamation of the two patent companies in 1681, when it fell into disuse. The last mention of it I have found is that in 1698 a lottery was drawn in the deserted Theatre Royal in Dorset Gardens. Mr. Lawrence gives 1709 as the date of its final abandonment; though it must have stood for many years after.

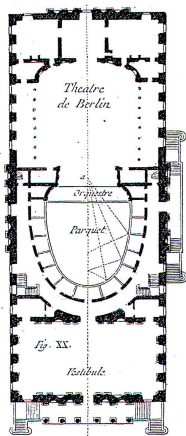
In the Library of All Souls College, Oxford, among the priceless but sadly dilapidated treasure of Sir Christopher Wren's drawings are three plans and one section of theatres; none of these are likely to be studies for the Duke's Theatre but in two of them the auditorium is shell shaped or ovoid and in one it consists of concentric semi-circles of seats in a rectangular hall. In two of these plans and in the section the staircase and lobbies are at the rear of the auditorium, thus cutting off the exterior *façade* with any windows it might contain from the body of the house. The same general arrangement occurs in a plan of Vanbrugh's old opera house in the Haymarket, opened in 1705, which I found in the Soane Museum; there is a tradition, how well founded I cannot say, that Sir Christopher was concerned in the planning of this house also.

To return to his plans at All Souls; Number 80 is a very complete and studied plan for a theatre with a shell shaped auditorium, having eleven sides; the result being that many of the seats would have had a very restricted view even of the "apron," in theatrical parlance that part of the stage in front of the proscenium arch which projects well into the pit, and none at all of the scenery. Indeed, except for the fact that there is indicated a very large and deep stage with a singularly narrow proscenium opening, this would appear to be a study for an academic theatre like the Sheldonian at Oxford, built by the same architect in 1664-9. Pillars and staircases indicate provisions for galleries.



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Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford.)

"PLAN 80," FROM THE ORIGINAL  
DRAWING BY SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN.

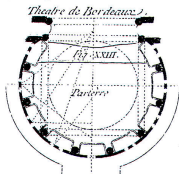


PLAN OF THE ROYAL THEATRE, BERLIN.  
(18th Century.)

As an interesting commentary on the bad sight lines of both Inigo Jones' plan before described and this of Sir Christopher's, we may for a moment take a glance across the channel. In an *Essai sur L'Architecture Théâtrale* par M. Patte, published it is true a hundred years later than the time we are considering, we find a plan of a *projet d'une Salle de spectacles, pour un Théâtre de Comédie* by M. Cochin, Graveur

du Roi, wherein he proposed to adopt the plan of the theatre at Vicenza, giving as his reasons, that in the theatres of his day while the boxes at the back, in the centre of the house, gave the best view of scenery and spectacle they were too far away for the occupants to hear clearly. He proposed to develop the half oval of Vicenza into an entire oval. Having got so far he realized that a large proportion of the spectators would not be able to see into the scene at all, so he planned to build a fixed *proscenium* or scene of architectural features with three large openings, the centre 24 feet wide, the two others 10 feet each, through which the scenes should be visible. He argued that the advantage of this plan would be, first, that every part of the audience would have its own background to look at, but principally that it would facilitate an adherence to the laws of unity and that by it a Temple, a Palace and a Tomb might all be shown at once, in case of the need, not infrequent in the classic tragedies of France for such a *decor simultané*.

M. Patte demolishes this and M. Cochin's other arguments with much cogency, pointing out, among other objections, that his actors would find themselves isolated in the middle of the spectators and in a neutral ground so far removed from the scenery, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to connect them with the particular background appropriate to any given moment; thus indicating his unfamiliarity with the customary British front stage, as it has been called in the Elizabethan play houses or in more modern parlance, apron. This plan was so far as I know never carried out, but the famous theatre of Bordeaux, built in 1773-80, regarded as the *chef-d'oeuvre* of Victor Louis, the architecture must be as bad as this plan of Sir Christopher Wren's, from the point of view of the spectator. Its circular *salle* must make it quite impossible for many in the audience to see any depth within the scene. This theatre, on account of its great architectural magnificence, was not without its effect on the architects of the New Theatre in New York, where a similar state of affairs resulted from the employ-



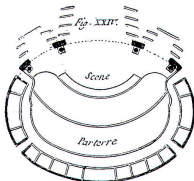
Kindly lent by Brander Matthews, Esq.

PLAN OF THE THEATRE OF BORDEAUX.

ment of a shell shaped auditorium, curiously like this of Sir Christopher's. Although we had a stage depth of nearly 70 feet it was found necessary to confine the acting space and to set any parts of the scenery which were so important to the action of the play as to be necessarily visible to every member of the audience, within a triangle the apex of which could be no further than 21 feet from the curtain line. The blame for this state of affairs should not be laid on the shoulders of the architects, but where it belongs, on those of the late H. Conried, who was responsible for the following conditions:

The proscenium opening was to be 48 feet wide; the front of the first tier of boxes, in which were to be twenty-two boxes each 6 feet 2 inches wide, was to be 65 feet from the footlights; and every occupant of these was to see a spot 30 feet within the proscenium arch. Add to this the requirement that the orchestra floor was to seat 600 persons and it becomes obvious that the only dimension which permitted of expansion was the width.

The proscenium opening had subsequently to be reduced to 42 feet, which was still enormous, and the result was the state of affairs described above. Hence we may see that Wren's plan is not so preposterous as it at first appears since more than three centuries after his death one of the most distinguished archi-

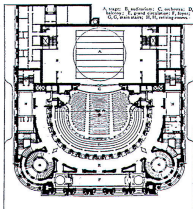


A THEATRE PLAN BY COCHIN.

tectural firms of the twentieth century could perpetrate a similar one.

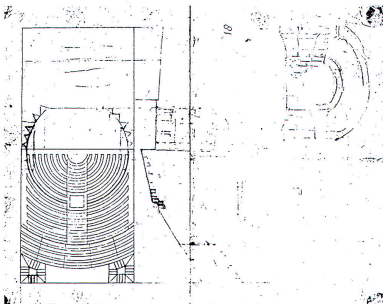
The Theatre Royal of Berlin, of which M. Patte also gives a plan, must have been nearly as bad, although its lines are more like those of the New Theatre; indeed he comments unfavorably on this defect.

The next of the All Souls drawings, Number 82, is a very rough block sketch for a theatre but is much more modern in treatment. The Salle is still of the familiar ovoid shape, the stage apron cut-



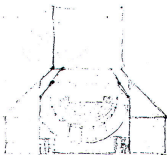
PLAN OF THE NEW (NOW THE "CENTURY") THEATRE, NEW YORK CITY.

Carrère and Hastings, Architects.



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"PLAN 81," FROM THE ORIGINAL DRAWING BY SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN.



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"PLAN 82," FROM THE ORIGINAL DRAW-  
ING BY SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN.

ting clear across its longer side; there are indications of two boxes on a side in the flaring proscenium, but no doors therein; the galleries are carried by columns dividing them into ten bays, in three of which are suggestions of box partitions. The pit seats are indicated by curved lines conforming to those of the house and an enclosure presumably for the orchestra projects from the stage front into the middle of the pit.

Staircases are shown to right and left behind the wall of the auditorium and what are probably two large crush rooms, such as may be found in the older theatres of Europe, extend on either side of the house, passages from them leading to the stage.

The third plan, numbered 81, shows a rectangular building more than twice as long as it is broad; of this the auditorium occupies rather more than half. The pit seats are arranged in concentric semi-

circles and those in the boxes in segments of circles all struck from the same center. In the middle of the house is a square space probably a royal box or dais as provided in Inigo Jones' plans for the Court Masque at Whitehall. The most interesting parts of this drawing are the faintly pencilled suggestions for the section and the elevation of the proscenium arch. This is enormously deep and flaring and would seem to provide for three tiers of four boxes each, on the apron. The arch itself is flattened and segmental. The apron is level, but the stage behind the proscenium line has a distinct rake from front to back and is strangely raised a little above the apron.

The pit slopes up from the front to the beginning of what in those days was called the boxes, though there is no indication of anything above these, where the pitch to the back of the house becomes much steeper. There is a division or railing indicated, cutting off the four last rows of seats from those in the front of this amphitheatrical arrangement. Above these again the section indicates a gallery, only one so far as I can see, rising at the same steep angle to the back wall of the building, over the passage or foyer at the rear of the boxes. It is served by two staircases, one on each side of the house. Over the center of the Salle is indicated either a hanging canopy, above the royal state, though it would seem too high for that, or a corona of lights, or else some sort of central skylight shaft; this is not impossible as we know that there was such a contrivance in the first Drury Lane theatre, the King's house as Mr. Pepys calls it, from his complaints of the rain and hail beating down from it into the pit. The whole plan with its section and elevation seem to me to be of very great interest and importance. But by far the most valuable, as it is the most finished of these drawings, is that numbered also S1, although it has no connection with this plan. This is in every way a familiar scheme for a playhouse of the modern type. It is a complete and thoroughly studied and rendered section of the building and scales 112 to 113 feet in length outside,

which corresponds so nearly to the known dimension, 112 feet, of Killigrew's first theatre in Brydges Street, Drury Lane, that I am almost tempted to consider it a study for its successor, which Sir Christopher Wren built in 1672-4 after the destruction by fire of the original; there is an additional piece of evidence, if I may give it so weighty a title, to which I shall come in a moment.

In the section before us the stage with its apron and tiring rooms occupies 64 feet with a 3 feet space for the orchestra in front again; leaving 56 feet for the salle and 8 feet for lobbies, staircases, etc.

The stage projects into the pit 17 feet in the form of an apron.

The cornice is carried by an order of Corinthian pilasters, six on a side, with boxes in two tiers (except on the apron, where two doors on each side replace the lower boxes) between them. The fronts of the galleries are curved in plan and the top gallery runs up through the cornice to afford sight lines for the rear seats. It is not easy to decide whether or no the ceiling rested on the cornice or was above it. In the pit, which slopes up towards the back, are ten rows of seats and there are four rows in each of the three galleries. The staircases are all behind the auditorium wall which is shown pierced with doors into the corridor foyer.

The drawing is inscribed "Playhouse." The stage rakes from the front edge of the apron clear to the back of where scenes are indicated as standing, beyond that to the back wall of the house it is shown level; the tiring rooms being thrown forward over this portion of it, i. e., there are none on the stage floor, one on the floor above and one on the floor above again. They have windows looking inward on to the stage as well as out to the air. Over the ceiling of the stage and the house is a loft and an enormous mansard (not shown in section) covers the entire building.

This drawing reopens a question which one was disposed to regard as settled. Mr. R. W. Lowe in his life of Betterton contends for the existence of four permanent doors in the proscenium of the sec-

ond Drury Lane theatre, on the strength of a passage in Colley Cibber's apology describing the cutting back of the apron about four feet by Chr. Rich in about 1696 or '99. It runs: "The former lower doors of entrance for the actors were brought down between the two foremost (and then only) pilasters, in the place of which doors now the two stage boxes are fixt."

This drawing even if not for Drury Lane, which the presence of more than two pilasters would seem to deny, appears to substantiate Mr. Lowe's contention, although I think that Mr. Lawrence, his opponent, has demonstrated that in any case four doors were an exception and that two, one on each side, as in the older Elizabethan platform stage were the rule.

Now for my second piece of presumptive evidence that this is a sketch for Wren's Drury Lane theatre. It will be noticed that there is in the drawing no indication of proscenium or curtain line; a curious hiatus in the cornice would suggest, either that the architect had not thoroughly studied this portion of his design, although the rest of it is so complete that such an hypothesis is almost

untenable, or that the upper part of the proscenium was for some reason unknown, probably theatrical, purposely left bare to be supplied by a temporary drapery or painted valence.

There exists in the British Museum the frontispiece dated 1674 to the French opera of Ariane or the Marriage of Bacchus with which this playhouse opened its door in that year. It shows us a square pilaster based on the apron on either side of the stage opening, of the same type as those in Sir Christopher's section, but fluted, which his are not, and without plinths, which his have. These are drawn in a sufficiently correct perspective but the strip of cornice which connects them has no visible thickness and might easily represent a canvas valence such as is not unusual even in theatres of the present day, to mask the top of the scenes.

I am well aware of the rashness of trusting to these frontispieces to published plays and (particularly in view of the inaccuracy of this one in the matter of the pilasters) should not dream of basing a theory on the bare evidence of one of them. I merely submit that there is a coincidence.



THE FRONTISPIECE OF "ARIANE," SHOWING  
THE PROSCENIUM OF DRURY LANE  
THEATRE, 167-(?).