

5 The fan-shaped auditorium

In January, 1672, the Theatre Royal was burned down in a fire¹ which is thought to have started in the orange woman's store under the stairs at the back of the playhouse. As a result the King's Players were forced to move to Lisle's Tennis Court, which they occupied for two years, while their new playhouse was being erected on the same site as the first to the designs of Sir Christopher Wren. A longitudinal section through a playhouse (fig.60) designed by Wren² has a measured length of approximately 113 feet, which is sufficiently close to the known length of the site of the first theatre, including the open yard, to be generally accepted as being a design for the new theatre.³ Whether it is the design finally adopted is not known, and it has been argued that as the drawing had been twice torn across it had been discarded, but at least some of the features shown appear in later authenticated drawings of this theatre, and it may by now be safely assumed that, even if the precise details are not as built, in the main this section can be taken to indicate the general appearance of Wren's Drury Lane as finally constructed in 1674. Drawings of the exterior show a rectangular building. A map of 1720⁴ shows it divided into six bays each with a tall rectangular window, the whole covered with a hipped roof, and the same features are seen in a map of 1686.⁵ The site was still the same enclosed court approached from Bridges Street and Drury Lane by two narrow passages. Additional land to the south of the theatre connected with Little Russell Court and Vinegar Yard had been leased, c. 1662-4,⁶ on which was erected a scene-room 'for the mekeing and providing of Scenes, Machins, Cloathes, apparell, and other things to be used in or relating to the acting of Comedies, Tragedies, and other Interludes at the said Theatre, or in any other place where the company . . . shall act.'⁷

A drawing of the frontispiece to the play of *Ariane*, as published in 1674, shows the stage opening⁸ separating the proscenium and the scenic stages, flanked by coupled Corinthian pilasters, and with a curved stage front – both features which can be reflected in the Wren section.

The section (fig.60) shows most of the features which so far have only been surmised in

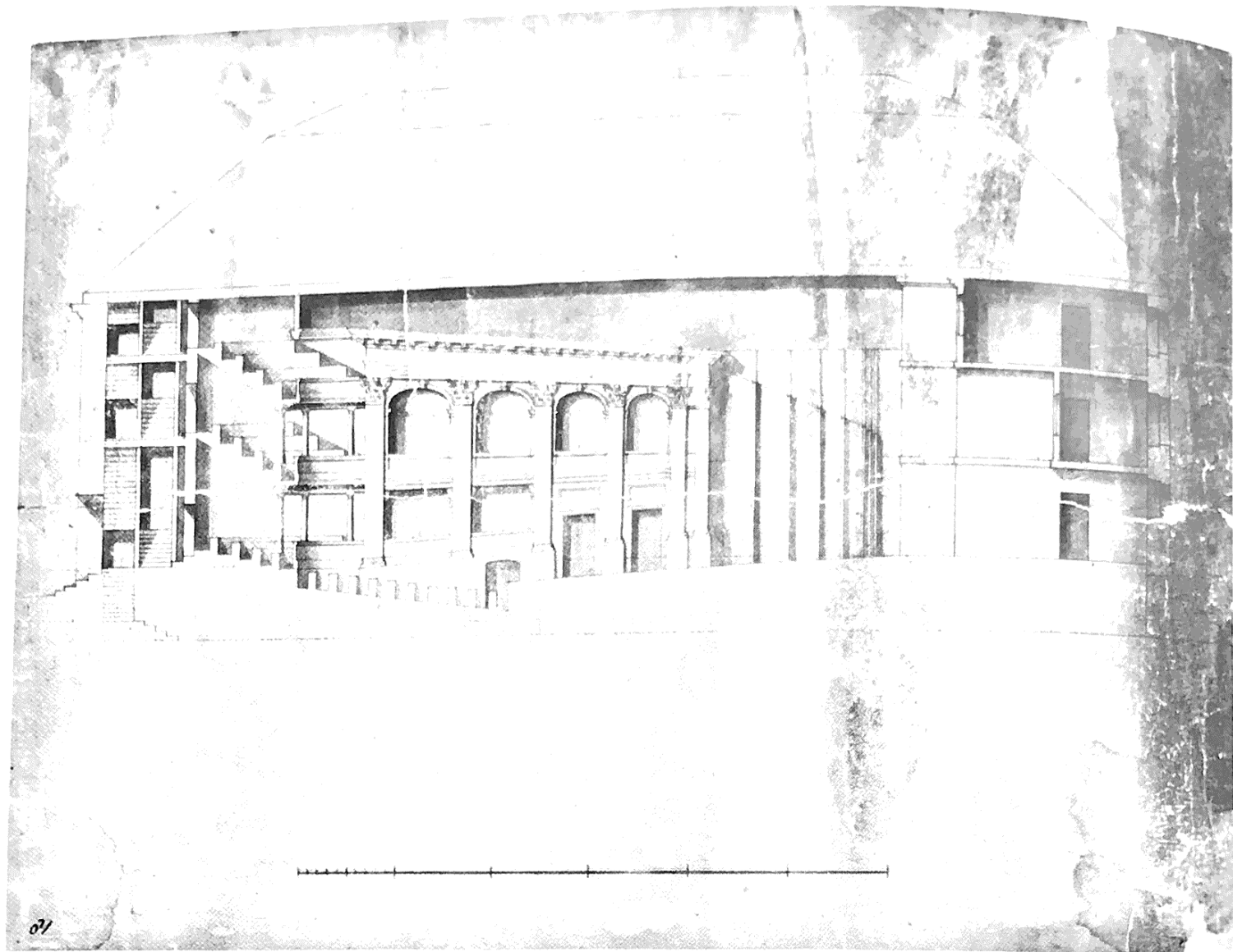


Fig.60. Longitudinal section through a playhouse by Wren

the previous theatres: the sloping pit entered by a door from a passage beneath the side boxes; the two tiers of boxes and the upper gallery, as well as the proscenium doors. The stage combined both proscenium and scenic areas together with what may reasonably be interpreted as a rear vista area flanked by backstage rooms, presumably dressing rooms and a green room, or the actors' social room. Both actors' and scenic stages are on one continuous slope, the rear vista area only being flat. One distinctive feature that is immediately noticeable is the manner in which the side wall of the auditorium was designed to be built in perspective, reducing in height as it nears the scenic area. Here is valuable evidence of the appearance of these various features, which it would be useful to expand if possible; and once again there is written evidence which helps towards this end. By 1696 alterations were made to the building by the management which were described by Colley Cibber in his *Apology* of 1740 as follows:

'It must be observ'd, then, that the Area, or Platform of the old Stage, projected about four Foot forwarder, in a Semi-oval Figure, parallel to the Benches of the Pit; and that 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 fix't. That where the Doors of Entrance now are, there formerly stood two additional Side-Wings, in front to a full Set of Scenes, which had then almost a double Effect, in their Loftiness, and Magnificence.

'By this Original Form, the usual Station of the Actors, in almost every Scene, was avanc'd at least ten Foot nearer to the Audience, than they now can be; because, not only from the Stage's being shorten'd, in front, but likewise from the additional Interposition of those Stage-Boxes, the Actors (in respect to the Spectators, that fill them) are kept so much more backward from the main Audience, than they us'd to be:

'But when 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.'

Colley Cibber's comments describe changes that took place prior to 1696, and these as we have seen included the removal of the front four feet of the stage to increase either the size of the pit, or to create an orchestral area, and the consequent replacement of the 'lower Doors of Entrance' by stage boxes. It may also be noted that Wren's side walls had been drastically altered earlier by the removal of the heavy pilasters, which undoubtedly occupied valuable space into which additional audience could be squeezed, retaining only those 'two foremost (and then only) Pilasters' which had flanked the now removed stage doors. This assumption is warranted by the descriptive comments on the later Adam alterations of 1775 that the feeling of lightness achieved at that time was made possible by the removal of 'the old heavy square Pillars on each Side of the Stage.'¹⁰ If this was the case it would set the pattern for the inclusion of pairs of giant orders flanking the prosceniums of such theatres as Shepherd's Covent Garden (fig.74) and the Bristol Theatre Royal (fig.79). The side walls of the proscenium, incorporating the replaced doors of entrance, had presumably been extended back on to the stage to the position of those 'two additional Side-Wings' which had stood in front of the 'full Set of Scenes'.

A visitor to England in 1698 described the pit as

'an Amphitheatre, fill'd with Benches without Backboards, and adorn'd and cover'd with green Cloth. 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. Farther up, against the Wall, under the first Gallery, and just opposite to the Stage, rises another Amphitheatre, which is taken up by Persons of the best Quality, among whom are generally

very few Men. The Galleries, whereof there are only two Rows, are fill'd with none but ordinary People, particularly the Upper one.'¹¹

This theatre lasted until 1791, but a major alteration was undertaken in 1775, when the Adam brothers completely remodelled the interior, as may be seen from the engraving which they published in their *Works of Architecture*.¹² Three scale drawings relating to this alteration exist in the Soane Museum. The first (fig.61) is titled 'Design of a Ceiling for the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane . . . July 19th, 1775'.¹³ The second is a rejected design for the ceiling¹⁴ and the third a section through the side boxes showing the 'Method proposed for finishing the Front of the Stage which covers the first Curtain and is never changed. The Apotheosis of Shakespear by the Tragic and Comic Muses . . . May 8th, 1775'.¹⁵ All these drawings will be discussed in greater detail when the Georgian theatre is considered. Their

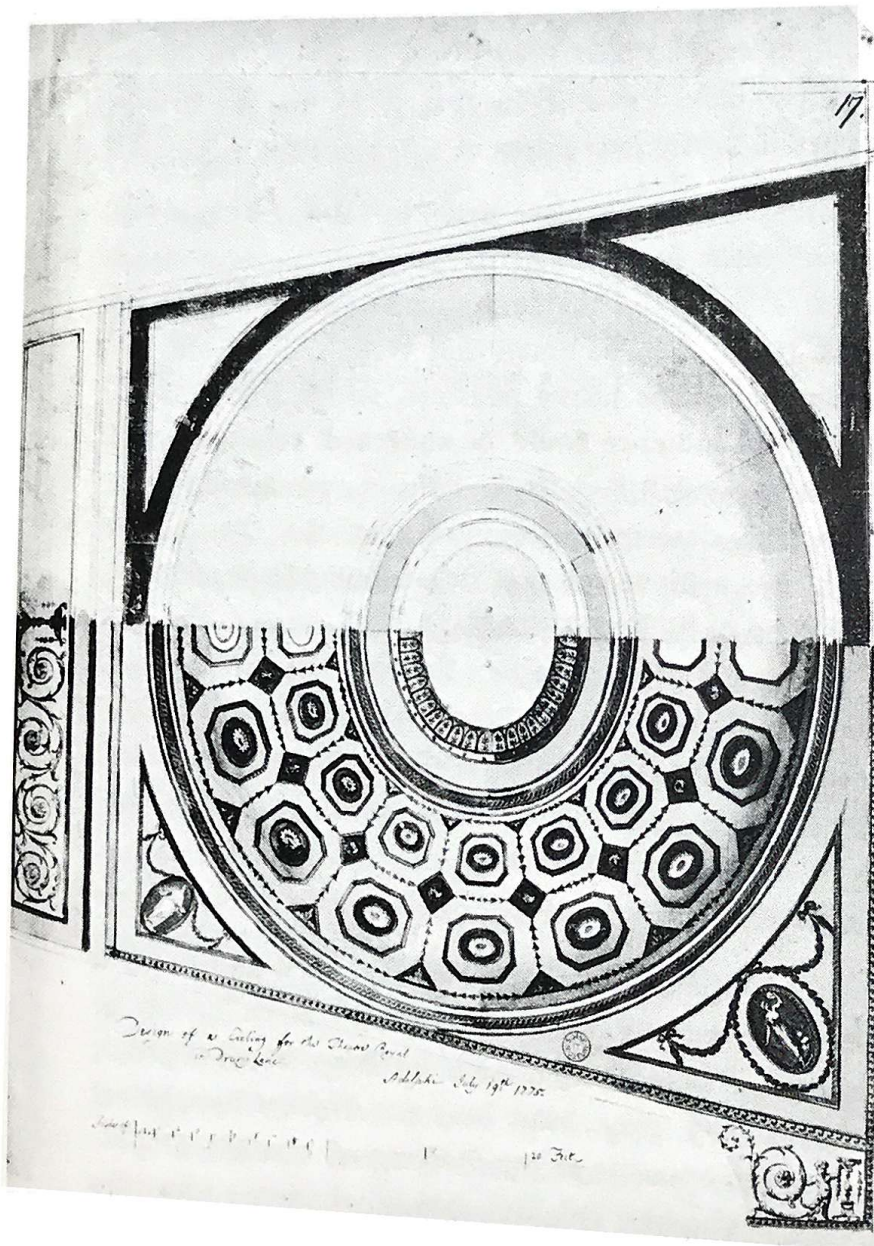
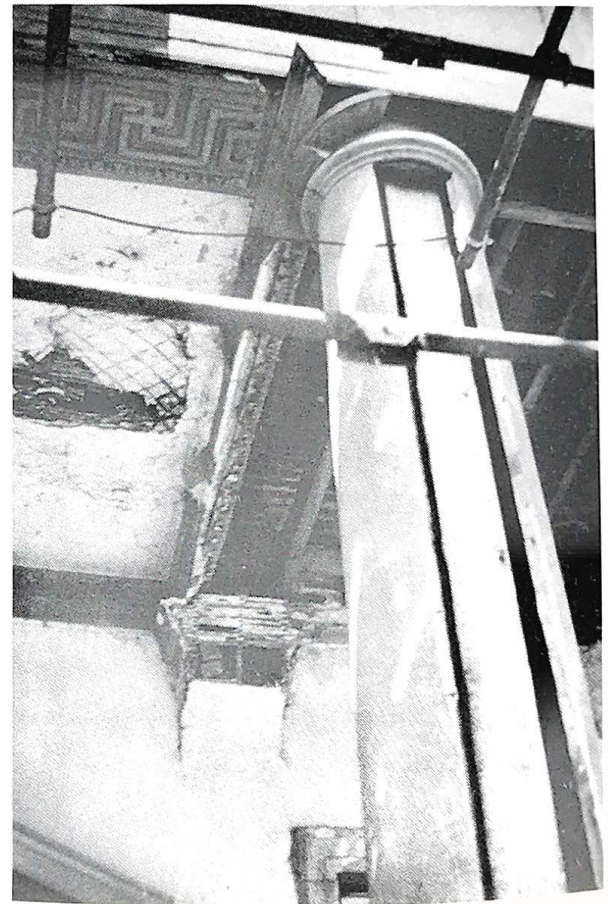


Fig.61. Design for ceiling of Drury Lane, by Robert Adam, 1775

Fig.62. Construction of timber column, c. 1740



present value is in providing the additional information which was required before it was possible to attempt a reconstruction (fig.63) based on Wren's longitudinal section.

It will be noted that the plan (fig.61) shows only the ceiling of the auditorium within the limits of the side boxes, the front walls of which splay outwards so that the auditorium increases in width as one moves away from the stage, the boxes growing correspondingly narrower until, some 36 feet into the auditorium, they curve round to meet the outer walls of the theatre. At this point the ceiling measures an overall width of 53 feet 2 inches, which, when taken with the thickness of the walls indicated on the Wren section, would neatly fit the known width of the site. It has already been noted that the Corinthian order which decorates the side walls of Wren's auditorium decreases in size as it advances towards the stage, providing an illusion of perspective that would be more complete if the walls at the same time sloped inward to the distant vanishing point towards which the vertical lines are converging. Baroque examples of architecture follow this rule¹⁶ and it would be most natural for Wren to design in this manner, indeed it is hard to imagine him designing in any other way given the opportunity to create a complete architectural environment around the perspective scene. This is precisely the arrangement which the Adam ceiling shows, but if Robert Adam was making such sweeping changes as his interior view (figs.81,82) suggests, how can we be sure that his box fronts were built on the same lines as those of Wren's earlier boxes?

In the late 18th century theatres there was an independence of design between the enclosing walls of the pit, which were normally of masonry or brick (fig.104), and the upper structure of boxes and galleries, which were normally of timber. The Guildhall at King's Lynn was adapted in late Restoration times into a playhouse, and until 1949 the structural remains of the proscenium stage could be seen supporting its own plaster ceiling¹⁷. In this example the proscenium ceiling was separate from the ceiling to the rest of the auditorium, which was arranged at a slightly higher level. Three timber posts on either side marked the divisions between a wide box and a narrower proscenium door, and marks on the ceiling indicated that these posts were covered by classical pilasters of timber or plaster similar in their size and form to those indicated by Wren.

It is possible, therefore, that Wren's Corinthian pilasters were built around similar timber posts (fig.62), standing on a solid structural wall separating the pit from the passage beneath the side boxes. An opening in this wall is seen on the section giving access from the pit down steps into the side passage. If one looks carefully at the Adam interior similar entry doors may be noted on either side, although now placed further to the right than is indicated on the Wren section. These, however, stand out as the one feature which is out of accord with an otherwise pleasantly co-ordinated design, intrusively cutting into the rhythm of the box front decoration. Robert Adam is hardly likely to have created such a botched-up job if he had been starting his design completely from scratch, and one is led inevitably to the conclusion that he was attempting to assimilate existing features into his own design, accepting the *fait accompli* of the existing pit wall and passage, as the previous

designers had done before him, when much of Wren's upper structure had been removed, leaving only the two pairs of pilasters flanking the proscenium stage. Adam now replaced this upper structure and 'the old heavy square pillars on each side of the stage' by his own much lighter design. If this is so then we have a link between the earlier and later box fronts, and may assume that Wren's auditorium walls followed the same lines as those indicated on the Adam ceiling plans.

By relating the ceiling plans to Wren's section it is possible to develop a ground plan of his theatre. In preparing earlier reconstructions of this building¹⁸ it had been assumed that the Adam auditorium would have stopped on the same line as that indicated on the Wren section, on the upstage edge of the upper of the twin pilasters. The discovery of a plan of 1778,¹⁹ by Dr Sheppard, showing the enclosing walls of the theatre at that time and the surrounding buildings, also indicates the line of the 'Frontispiece' as being 68 feet from the inside of the west wall on the centre line of the theatre, or 5 feet 3 inches further east than Wren's, a position which makes a great deal more sense of Cibber's comments than did the previous assumption.

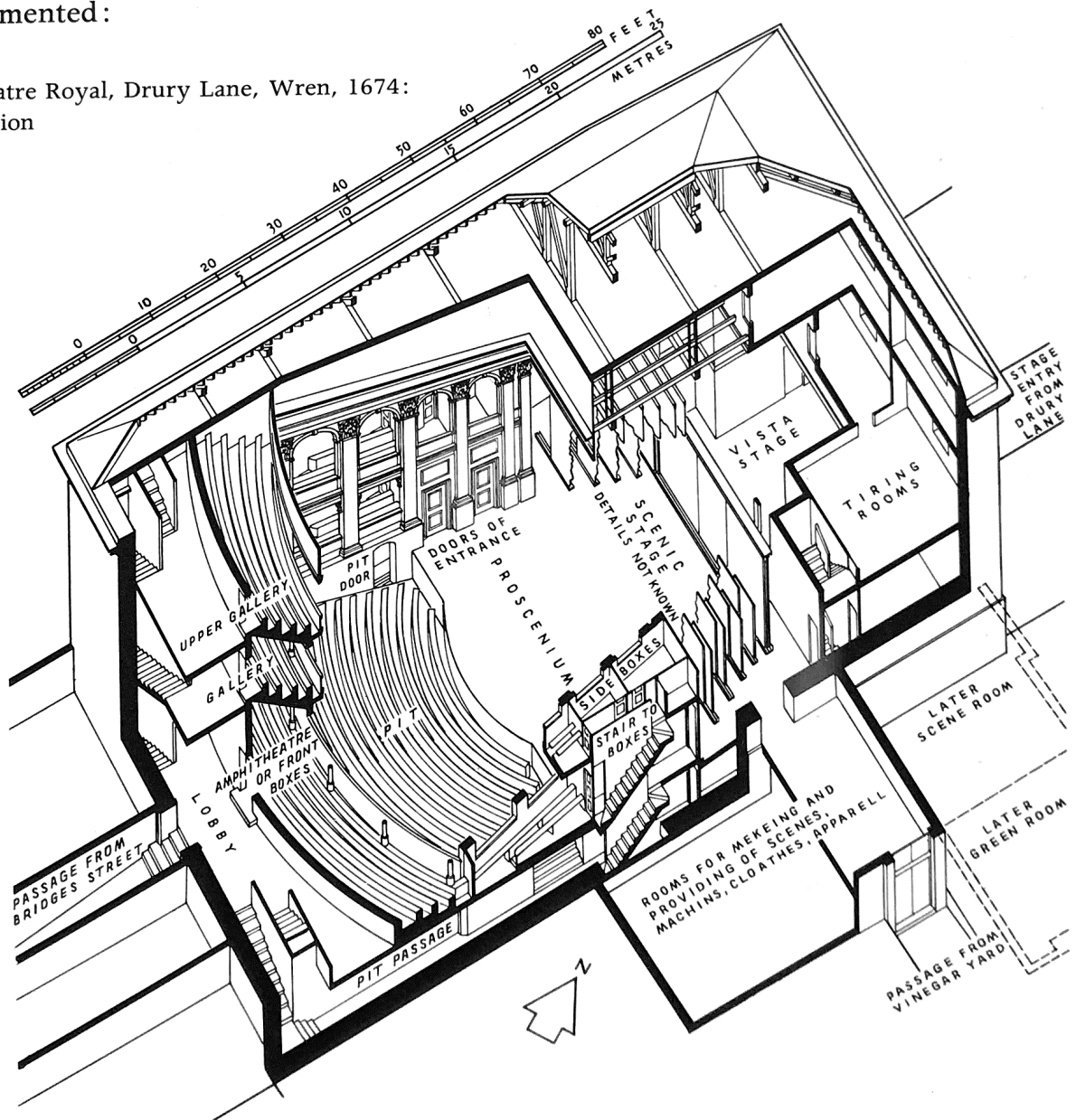
This new position for the ceiling plan, when related to the Wren section, makes only slight differences in the positions of the side walls on plan, but these slight variations are sufficient to permit all the curves on the plan to be struck from a single centre, in place of the numerous centres used in the previous reconstruction. Cibber mentioned that the semi-oval stage front was parallel to the benches of the pit, and, as was noted earlier (fig.57), any informed designer creating a theatre in the classical manner would have attempted to incorporate the closest possible approximation to a semi-circular cavea. The *Ariane* drawing shows a curving stage front flanked by straight faces, and in this new reconstruction the dotted line behind the stage front on the section has been interpreted as representing this straight section of stage front, an assumption that permits the curve of benches and stage front to approximate a little more closely to a semi-circle than did the previous arrangement.

The amphitheatre and gallery fronts were used as the datum for all the curves, as their centre and ends are clearly defined on the section, and the benches and rear wall are concentric with them. The omission of the side passages at upper levels leading from the ends of the foyers to the side boxes – as indicated on the previous reconstruction – permits the bench ends to strike the side walls in the exact positions indicated on the section, with the exception of those in the front boxes where the variation shown on the section is so extreme that it can only be assumed that here there was an error of draughtsmanship on Wren's part. As before, the columns, when transposed from the section, are found to fall into place on the line of the front bench as indicated on the section, and to be spaced regularly across the total distance, so that each column is well positioned to support a structurally feasible section of gallery approximately 10 feet wide. If the end columns appear to play a less constructional part, nevertheless their accuracy of positioning appears to be vouched for by the angle and positioning of the corbel bracket supporting the projecting front of the galleries, one over each column, which may be seen to align with the edge of the outermost of the great pilasters.

The removal of the side passages, included in the previous reconstruction, appears at first sight to leave the side boxes without access, but two other theatres indicate how Wren may have made provision for this. In both Covent Garden (figs.73,74) and the Bristol Theatre Royal (figs.76,79) narrow stairs with straight flights and winders may be seen built into the thickness of the outer walls. Bristol, as will be noted later (p.112), incorporated many features from Drury Lane, and the stairs that are still to be seen (fig.64) and used there may well be one of them.

When Drury Lane was adapted by the Adam brothers 'A Spectator'²⁰ commented that 'The Stairs to the second and third tiers of Boxes I found were projected out of the House beyond the Old Walls, which gives a space to make them much wider and more convenient'. At this time extra space had been acquired outside the theatre, and so it is likely that Wren's boxes were approached in a similar manner to those at Bristol, and such stairs have now been included in the revised reconstruction, providing access to a narrow passage. However, even the improved stairs mentioned above were not acceptable to Tate Wilkinson when he commented:

Fig.63. The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Wren, 1674:
scale reconstruction



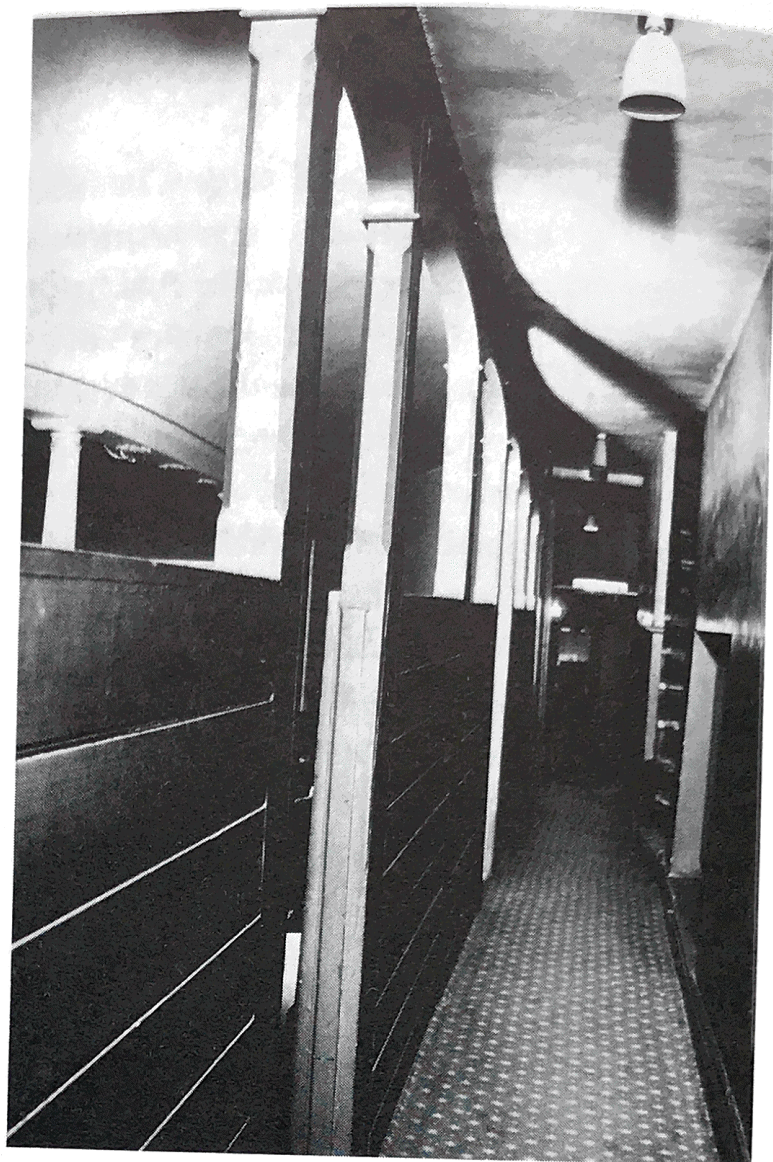


Fig. 64. The Theatre Royal, Bristol:
passage at rear of side boxes

'at present the stair-case to the *Upper boxes* at Drury Lane is so narrow, that should an alarm of fire happen, the persons in the two upper tiers of boxes would be thrown into such confusion, should they open at the same time the different doors, the passage is so strait and they would so effectually block up each other, that not one single soul could escape.'²¹

Wren's suggestion on the section of four side wings and a set of backshutters has been interpreted on the reconstruction to require grooves for these features, with a space beyond for scenes of relieve and a skycloth, and a central bay at stage level running back to the rear wall to provide greater depth when required for special vista effects. Tiring rooms, and no doubt the green room, were probably arranged in the corners of the stage and above the vista area, with stairs, the exact position of which has had to be assumed, leading up to them. The space under the stage must have been used as a machine room from which the stage traps could be worked, together with any other machinery necessary for special effects and the movement of scenery.

The reconstruction (fig. 63) illustrates well the various features of a Restoration playhouse, and its development from the court and public theatres of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The proscenium, or actors' stage, is seen to be completely within the limits of the auditorium, and is approached by four proscenium doors, one pair on either side. The scenic stage is set beyond the limits of the auditorium, from which it is separated by the

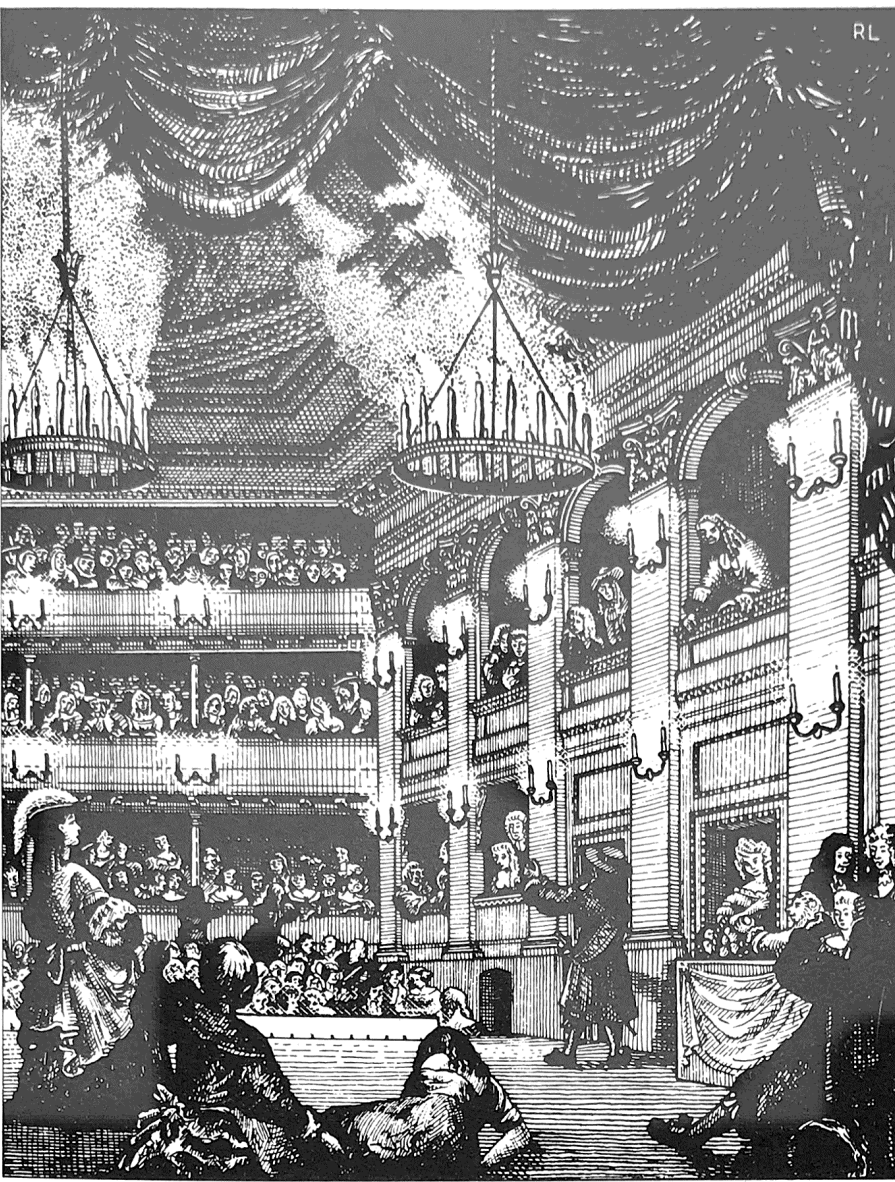


Fig.65. Interior of
Drury Lane, 1674

front curtain, drawn up on either side behind a painted frontispiece, possibly depicting the Corinthian pilasters shown on the *Ariane* drawing, and continuing the lines of the Corinthian entablature across the stage. The auditorium, divided into pit, boxes and gallery, arranged in a fan-shape with its side walls built in perspective, illustrates Swift's description of 1704: 'The Contrivance and Structure of our Modern Theatres . . . the Pit is sunk below the Stage . . . the Boxes are built round, and raised to a Level with the Scene.'²² The majority of seats were admirably placed for viewing and hearing the actor situated on the stage proper within the limits of the auditorium, with the scenery forming a background feature. If the side boxes did not see the scene too well, they were reasonably placed for viewing the actor on his stage. Wren may have considered that their occupants came to be seen rather than to see, and perhaps sacrificed ideal conditions here in order to provide what he obviously considered to be a far more important feature, namely, the continuance of the perspective of the scene into the auditorium so that one would link with the other, especially when viewed from the position of the royal box, which was centrally placed on the axis of the stage in the first tier of boxes, as were the royal boxes in the previous theatres, with the royal crest displayed above. The placing of seats in these side positions would anyway have been an acceptable continuance of the conditions already in existence. One

feature that has had to be omitted from the reconstruction is the nature, and exact position, of any openings in the stage floor, which is known from *The Tatler* of the 26th November, 1709, to have been 'full of Trap-Doors'.²³

The perspective drawing of the interior (fig.65) shows that the view from the extreme side boxes was not so bad as might have been expected from the plan, and it underlines the manner in which the single curve of the amphitheatres gives the majority of the audience perfect viewing conditions of both actor and scene. One can appreciate Cibber's glowing appreciation of this playhouse with the voice of the actor centrally placed in the house, so that the most distant ear could hear the weakest utterance. Indeed, by extending the perspective lines of the scene into the shape of the auditorium Wren managed to arrange his seating with the ideal sight-lines for the maximum number of persons.

During the reign of Charles II, the habit of seating people on the stage appears to have been controlled,²⁴ probably by direct command of the King. Nevertheless it was the habit of gentlemen of quality to make their way backstage to the Green Room and the tiring rooms, where the actresses were no doubt the main attraction. This suggests that there must have been a direct means of access from the auditorium to the backstage, shown on the reconstruction as an extension of the passages serving the boxes. By the end of the century the audience were back on the stage, and in spite of royal decrees that 'no person of what quality soever presume to go behind the scenes, or come upon the stage, either before or during the acting of the play'²⁵ the nuisance continued unabated, so that in 1709 *The Tatler* said of Drury Lane that 'There has not been known so great a Concourse of Persons of Distinction; the Stage itself was covered with Gentlemen and Ladies, and when the Curtain was drawn, there appeared also a very splendid Audience.'²⁶ William Hogarth, illustrating John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (fig.66), shows the audience confined behind low walls or screens, probably of canvas painted to resemble draperies with fringes and tassels.

Fig.66. Audience seated on either side of stage: *The Beggar's Opera* by Hogarth

