



The Architecture of Blackfriars Theatre and Society

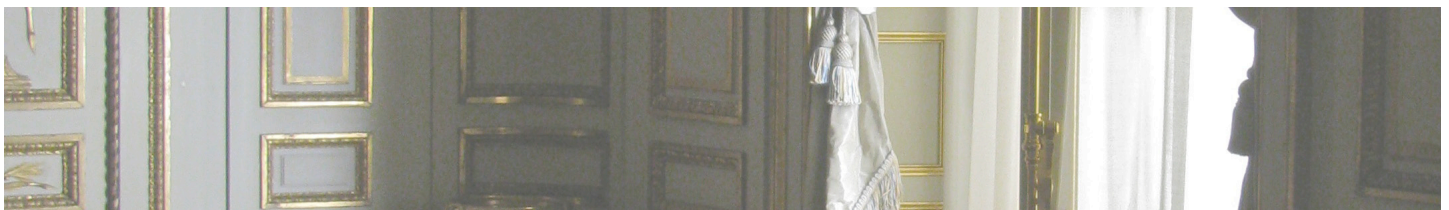
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How was Blackfriars Theatre architecturally distinctive from public theatres in sixteenth century England, and how did these differences display social class?

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought significant changes to English drama and society. One aspect of this change in English theatre was its effect on the architecture of playhouses in the seat of English drama: London. There existed significant architectural differences between the public theatres of London and the Blackfriars Theatre, a model example of a private theatre. These differences in theatre design can be examined to determine social class and its relationship to the theatre. By analyzing textual and pictorial evidence on architectural elements such as the stage design and placement, the organization of seating, and the overall layout of the theatre, as well as other factors such as exposure to nature and geographical location, the physical attributes of these theatres reveals preexisting conditions of social class in this important period in English drama.

One of the prominent architectural features that distinguishes the Blackfriars Theatre from the public theatres is the placement and nature



of the stage platform. In the public theatres, such as the Swan, the stage was surrounded by audience members on all sides. As seen in Figure 1, a 1596 drawing of the Swan theatre by Johannes De Witt, the stage platform itself was surrounded on three sides by a pit (Gurr 18). Galleries lined the circumference of the theatre, while behind and above the stage there existed “lord’s rooms” (Gurr 18, 21). Because the audiences in these public theatres encircled the playing space, the productions were usually performed in the round. This meant that the actors did not play to a specific direction, meaning that all attendees of the play received an equal part in the viewing experience.

The stage at the Blackfriars Theatre was different: instead of being completely surrounded by the audience, the stage platform at the Blackfriars Theatre was at one end of the hall, meaning most of the audience was on one side of the stage (Smith 310). A detailed speculative drawing of the Blackfriars Theatre (Figure 2) is included in Irwin Smith’s *Shakespeare’s Blackfriars Playhouse*, and this drawing showcases the design of the Blackfriars Theatre (Smith 310). According to Smith’s drawing, there existed a standard playing space as well as a second and even a third level platform, all at one end of the

hall. This design is similar to the proscenium arch style of theatre design that many theatres utilize today. As in today’s theatres, the seats closer to the stage platform were probably more expensive than those in the rear of the theatre hall.

What this means is that the Blackfriars Theatre would have been more suitable to the upper class than the public theatres in regards to the placement of the stage and its design. In the public theatres, the stage was in a central location and gave an equal viewing experience to all of its attendees, regardless of social class. The audience members who saw plays at the public theatres were given a reasonably good vantage point for viewing the action on the stage. The stage in the Blackfriars Theatre was at one end of the hall, meaning there was a significant difference in the quality of the viewing experience for those closer to the stage versus that of those near the back of the hall. This allowed the upper class, those who had money and power, to attain the best seats.

The organization of the seating in the Blackfriars Theatre was also different from that of the public theatres. In public theatres, such as James Burbage’s *The Theatre*, after paying the entrance fee, “you went in by the entrance doors

directly into the yard... Once in the yard you could choose to enter the galleries for a seat, and if you wanted more privacy and cushion you could pay once again for a room in the galleries closest to the stage" (Gurr 17). This system allowed patrons to pay for the amount of comfort that they could afford, meaning that the lower class patrons could enter into the pit and watch the play on their feet, the upper class patrons could pay a little extra money to gain a seat in a gallery, and the most esteemed members of society attained seats in the lord's rooms. What is interesting in this is that the patrons who have paid the least, which is most likely those in the lower class, would have been closer to the stage platform than those wealthier patrons who could afford seats in the galleries. From this observation, it is clear that being able to show wealth by sitting in the galleries was more important to the upper class than actually appreciating the play to its fullest by being closer to the action.

In the Blackfriars Theatre, the organization of the seating was a little different. The stage platform was large, nearly forty feet in width, because it was built to accommodate not only the actors, but also "to accommodate an unknown number of stage-sitters" (Smith 306). According

to Smith's research and illustrations, playgoers could purchase a seat at a stool on the side of the large stage. Other scholarly work suggests that "Blackfriars plays were performed on a small, crushed stage in the midst of spectators who took boxes around or stools on the stage itself" (Stern 47). So, while the size of the stage is still a matter to be questioned, it is agreed that sitting stools existed upon the sides of the stage. It would also seem that these seats on the stage would have been the most desirable of the seating choices. A 1632 newsletter by John Pory held in the Public Record Office shows that members of the upper class would have been the inhabitants of these stools on the stage (Berry 48). In this newsletter Pory writes:

"There lo made my lord Thurles of Irland also doe the like satisfaction to Captaine Essex. The occasion was thus. This Captaine attending and accompanying my Lady of Essex in a boxe in the playhouse at the blackfryers, the said lord coming upon the stage, stood before them and hindred their sight. Captain Essex told his lo:, they had payd for their places as well as hee, and therefore intreated him not to depriue them of the benefitt of it. Wherevpon the

lord stood vp yet higher and hindred more their sight. The Capt. Essex with his hand putt him a little by. The lord then drew his sword and ran full butt at him, though hee missed him, and might have slaine the Countesse as well as him” (Berry 48-49).

This passage introduces us to another seating option existent in the Blackfriars Theatre. Just as in the public theatres, there were galleries along the sides of the hall and also along the back wall (Smith 310). According to Figure 2, there were three levels of these galleries in the Blackfriars Theatre, with the second and third level galleries extending past the front of the stage platform and over the stools of the stage-sitters (Smith 310). However the above passage from the time period disputes Smith’s drawing. The “boxe” in the piece is one of these galleries. If the lord was close enough to run the captain through with his sword, there must have been a gallery on the first level. Furthermore, if the lord was able to obstruct the view of the captain and his lady by standing up, he must have been directly between the gallery and the playing space. As illustrated in Figure 3, this means that the galleries were “contiguous to the stage and on a level with it” (Berry 50). Having established that point, the stools and the gallery boxes would

have been the seats for the well-to-do members of seventeenth century London society.

Different from the public theatres, the pit in the Blackfriars Theatre also contained seating; there were benches in Smith’s drawings (Smith 310). While it is imaginable that these seats may have been less comfortable than the stools or the galleries, it is easier on the feet than standing for the duration of the play. Figure 4 displays the angle of the sight line from the pit seating to the second level of the playing area (Smith 317). Aside from the possibility that the pit seating may have been more uncomfortable, it is also possible that a person sitting with his neck at this angle would be uncomfortable after a while. The pit seating was the cheapest in the Blackfriars Theatre, just as in the public theatres.

The design of the seating in the Blackfriars Theatre would have been more conducive to the members of the upper class. The public theatres placed the galleries farther away from the action than the cheaper viewing area in the pit. Blackfriars Theatre placed the more expensive seats, such as the stage stools and the galleries, closer to the action than the pit seating. This gave the upper class patrons the ability to acquire the most comfortable seats and be closest to the

action occurring onstage.

One of the factors that influenced these differences in the layout of the theatres is exposure to nature. The public theatres were open to the weather and not very hospitable in the colder months. The galleries in the public theatres had roofs, but they were still exposed to the air. The fact that these boxes had roofs may be another reason why the upper class patrons of the public theatres were willing to sacrifice a seat closer to the action in exchange for a seat in a box farther away. However, Blackfriars Theatre was an enclosed space, meaning that it was not open to the elements and heated during the winter. This difference allowed the Blackfriars Theatre to bring in business during every season of the year, while the public theatres surely saw a decrease in revenue during times of hostile weather conditions.

This difference in exposure to the elements illuminates a difference in social class. The Blackfriars Theatre would have been overall more costly, whereas the public theatres would have been cheaper because they provided less comfort to their audiences. Therefore, the members of the upper class would have been more likely to attend the cushy Blackfriars Theatre, while the lower class citizens would only be able to afford

attendance at the public theatres. Irwin Smith fortifies this argument with this statement from his aforementioned book, stating that, “the private houses were relatively small; they charged admission fees ranging from sixpence to half a crown, and they provided seats for all their patrons; the public playhouses had a far greater capacity, charged fees ranging from a penny to a shilling, and furnished no seats in the pit” (Smith 131). The Blackfriars Theatre was tailored for the upper class, while the public theatres were cheaper and more suited for the lower classes.

The placement of the theatre buildings is significant to the development of the differences between the Blackfriars Theatre and the public theatres. “Many of the private houses were located in Liberties inside the City walls; all the public houses were built in London’s suburbs” (Smith 131). The public theatres, being in the suburbs, would have been away from the center of the city and thus removed from the main sector for economic activity. The Blackfriars Theatre would have been in the economic heart of the city of London, placing the theatre directly in the public eye.

This characteristic made the Blackfriars Theatre more attractive to the nobility and the

wealthy members of society who spent much of their time in the city center. The Blackfriars Theatre would have been “close to the area where the wealthiest playgoers lived” (Gurr 27). This emphasizes that the Blackfriars Theatre would probably have been the destination for theatregoers among the upper class. The public theatres located in the city suburbs, while attended by the wealthy, would have also been frequented by members of the lower class. Merchants and agrarian workers, who inhabited the outer sections of the city, are examples of this lower class. Due to the public theatres being closer to where they lived, they would have been more accessible to the lower class than the Blackfriars Theatre. Of course, the more noble citizens still would have attended the public theatres in fair weather, but they may have found the Blackfriars Theatre to be overall more attractive. Regardless, the Blackfriars Theatre was in the center of London, while the public theatres were in the suburbs. This was a big reason for the differences between the Blackfriars Theatre and the public theatres.

In conclusion, there are several architectural differences in the design of the Blackfriars Theatre and the design of the public theatres. These distinctions point to the disparities in the social classes of the patrons of these theatres. The analysis of the layout of the Blackfriars Theatre and the comparisons between it and the public theatres, especially in regards to the design of the stage platform and the organization of the seating, is valuable in understanding how the architecture influenced whether the patrons were from a lower or upper class. The added analysis of the exposure to nature and the geographical location further establishes these ideas. By examining elements such as theatre layout, stage design, seating organization, exposure to nature, and geographical location, scholars can pinpoint how the division of social classes is reflected in the design and architecture of the Blackfriars Theatre in comparison to the public theatres.

APPENDIX:

Figure 1:



Figure 4:



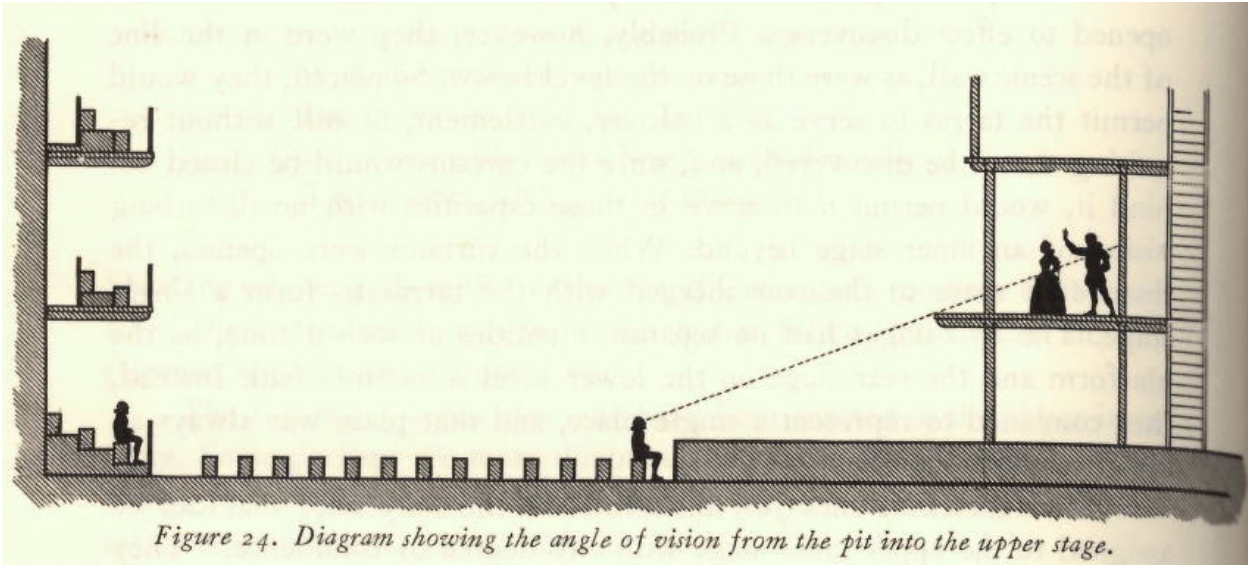
Theatre History I



Figure 3:



Figure 4:



Theatre History I

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