

## The London Stage and the Birth of Democracy

by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

What do we hear, over and over, when we tell friends and associates about the Authorship Question? What's the eternal response? "We have the plays. What does it matter who wrote them?" What can we say to them? "Well, it matters to me." Forget that! This story is a lot more important than who wrote a few old plays!

The fact is that Shakespeare, both the man and his work, lie at the heart of something much greater than just who wrote the plays. It's the center of an important piece of history, not just English history, not just literary history, not just theater history, but the history of Democracy. It stands with such events as the signing of the Magna Carta, the Mayflower Compact, and the Declaration of Independence.

At the heart of this story lies the first impulse towards that fundamental principle of democratic government, freedom of speech, an impulse that burst into being clothed in the English language. An impulse that created the first real manifestation of what we call the Fourth Estate. That created the modern Media. Beginning sometime in March of 1576, the following weeks and months would see the creation of two theaters in London, theaters that would be the first *successful commercial theaters* ever built, it may be, anywhere in the west. The result would be the first push in history towards *functional democracy*.

What do I mean by *functional democracy*?

There were already murmurings of *theoretical* democracy, tracts by Continental philosophers, speeches in Parliament by dissidents demanding the right to preach to their congregations, speeches that only served to infuriate Queen Elizabeth and get them incarcerated. It would take 100 years for members of Parliament to get the power to overrule the monarch. Two hundred years later, when the colonies were organizing after the American Revolution, there was a fight between those who wanted to try some form of democracy and those who wanted George Washington crowned King of America!

Freedom isn't something that trickles down from above. Someone once said, "No one's ever been given freedom, it's something one has got *to take*." The kind of freedom guaranteed by modern democracy was a habit gradually acquired by large numbers of ordinary people, a habit first acquired in the West—in London in the sixteenth century. Modern democratic freedom of speech was born on the commercial Stage in 1576.

So why the Stage? Why not the Press? The birth of the commercial press is certainly part of the story, an important part, in fact the man who later would call himself Shakespeare would be the great moving force behind the birth of the London commercial press just as he was behind the birth of the Stage. But the fact is that in 1576 few Londoners could read. If he was going to use his language skills to become a moving force in the world he was going to have to do it through the Stage

## **The commercial theaters**

To call the Blackfriars theater and Burbage's public theater the first *commercial* theaters is of course a simplification. Whether in churches, village halls, fairgrounds, the halls of noblemen and princes or the great annual gatherings in the north for the mystery cycles, actors had always performed for money, whether by passing the hat or in a donation from the local lord. The difference is that, until 1576, commercial theater was never an industry—nor was acting a profession.

An industry is something that can support a community of adult workers, one they can depend on to provide them and their families with enough to live on throughout the year, year after year, without fail. A professional is someone whose skills can rise above the level of amateur because there is an industry that supports what they do. In fact, until 1576, all but three or four English actors were either amateurs whose livings were all earned at other trades or children who grew up to take up other trades. They may have been good, they may have been brilliant, but they were still amateurs. Those who could be called anything like true professionals were all at Court. And even they were called upon to perform tasks that had nothing to do with entertaining.

## **The Church's big mistake**

Until the 1560s and early 70s, what we have just described was no different than it had been for many hundreds of years up until that time. So what caused the change? Answers to such sweeping questions are usually complicated, but in this case a short and simple answer will do, for the door to the supernova of culture we call the English Literary Renaissance was opened by a single factor, the Protestant Reformation.

For centuries the Catholic Church had provided its parishoners with a regular yearround series of pleasurable events. Month after month, year after year, a parade of rituals surrounding Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and any number of Saint's days, meant that it was rare that more than two weeks went by throughout the year without some festivity that culminated in a banquet on Church grounds or at the local village hall with plenty of food and ale, plus those entertainments rather mysteriously known as "May games." No sooner would one such event be over than planning would begin for the next.

The first change came in the late 1540s when the radical reform government of Edward VI put a stop to most of this "merry-making," eliminating the Corpus Christi processions and banning such rowdy folk figures as the hobby horse, the Green Man, and St. George and the Dragon. Some of these made a comeback under Catholic Mary Tudor, but once Elizabeth took the throne the change began in earnest.

This cultural revolution took awhile to take hold in the more distant shires, but in London, where the Reformation was strongest, the loss was keenly felt. Out of boredom, Londoners began filling the theater inns to an extent never seen before. Where in previous times a play might run out of audience in two or three days, now it could run for over a week. If a play was especially entertaining, a playgoer might even return a day or two later and see it again. And again. And again.

Entrepreneurs took note. Here was a trend, one that might sustain a stand-alone theater. Most interested were forward-thinking members of the grocers guild because crowds meant markets for their wares. Carpenters and drapers were also interested since stages would need props and machinery and actors would need costumes.

The actors, too, were eager for a place of their own where they could build enough of a local audience that they could keep working all year. A stand-alone theater would have a door where someone could sell tickets. No longer could an audience escape without paying. No longer would they have to rely on passing the hat or on the empty promises of patrons, wealthy landowners, or courtiers.

Here then were two communities eager to see stand-alone theaters in or near London, tradesmen who were looking for new markets and the more accomplished acting companies seeking a permanent venue. So it's no surprise to find that it was members of these two groups that get the credit for creating the London commercial stage. The leading figure in this story, James Burbage, belonged to both groups, the carpenters' guild and Leicester's Men.

The horrendous difficulties that the actors and the owners faced over the next two decades in getting these theaters established and keeping them functioning have left plenty of records, as noted by historians. But that this alliance of tradesmen and artists managed first to establish these theaters and then to withstand twenty years of fierce attack by the City, by the Church, by their neighbors, by rival theater entrepreneurs, not to mention natural enemies like bitter winters and the plague, requires something more than a footnote or two.

### **Where are the patrons?**

What never seems to occur to the historians is: how on earth did these two relatively lowly social entities manage this without any real support from above? Even more lowly than the actors and the grocers were the masters of the children's acting companies, poor men with no social standing beyond their very tenuous connections to the Court. Nothing was accomplished in those days without the support of patrons. So where are the patrons in this story? If we take the history of these events as the historians have provided them, we get a picture of bold, courageous entrepreneurs forging a path to the future with now and then a letter from some Lord written to protect some aspect of the theater from imminent disaster.

Most historians are like bird dogs. They go where the paper leads them. Where there's no paper there's nowhere to go. But in some cases, as we all know, the lack of paper is itself a question. Where are the patrons? We should be able to see that nothing so important, so momentous, so disturbing to the status quo could have happened without them. We know who they were, of course, that's obvious. What we don't know is what they did, not just to support, but to make these theaters happen. And we won't know until we come up with a thesis and then look for evidence, for the evidence in this case is far from obvious.

The historians see no connection between these two theaters, both created in 1576. The fact is that Burbage's public arena and the private room at Blackfriars did not appear through a series of unrelated actions, as history would have it. They were the result of a well-planned project on the part of a select group, not just of actors and tradesmen and the masters of the children's companies, but also of high-placed peers and officials.

Common sense alone should tell us that a large scale commercial enterprise like the building of a theater capable of bringing together 2000 or more paying customers every day, all hungry and thirsty and needing to use the bathroom, must have caused a great deal of discussion in a city of 150,000 or so. Because these discussions were not reported in the minutes of any meeting does not mean they didn't happen.

Both theaters would have required careful, involved, behind-the-scenes planning. That such planning took place is most evident with Blackfriars, but it would have taken place with Burbage's theater as well. How else is one to explain why it is that both were created in the year 1576, Burbage's outdoor theater in the spring so that he could take advantage of the long, warm, summer days; Blackfriars by November, when it could provide a warm haven on cold winter days.

### **Two theaters, one goal**

There are coincidences in history, but this is not one of them. A coincidence is when two things that are alike take place at the same time in two different places, but these two theaters were not alike. Their nature, size, and location tell us that each of these theaters was intended for a specific purpose that complemented and augmented the other, a difference that resulted in the close to total coverage of the entire London audience in terms of income, rank, education, and accessibility.

Burbage's Theater was intended for the public, Blackfriars for the educated gentlemen of the Inns of Court. Burbage's was big, Blackfriars was little; Burbage's was outdoors, Blackfriars was indoors, Burbage's was cheap, Blackfriars was expensive; Burbage's was located northeast of the City, Blackfriars was located in the southwest corner of the City, Burbage's was meant for the summer, Blackfriars for the winter. Burbage's provided a home base for the leading adult companies; Blackfriars for the children's companies. Burbage's could seat two to three thousand at a time; Blackfriars no more than 50 or 60.

Together these two locations provided theater for every conceivable sort of Londoner and visitor, East end, West end, rich, poor, illiterate, educated. At practically a single stroke, all neighborhoods of the City and all segments of the London populace were being reached by these two theaters working in combination. This could not have been a coincidence.

*So, what's up with the historians?* Not one that I've read has suggested that the men who created these theaters even knew each other, namely, James Burbage, who built the public Theater, and Richard Farrant, Master of the Children of the Windsor Chapel, who created the Blackfriars theater. Of course they knew each other, for both had been

involved in entertaining the Court over the past five or six years at least and probably much longer.

So here's a second disconnect, first between the men who launched the theaters and the patrons of their acting companies, and now between the men themselves. Without such connections there could have been no theaters, so why no evidence?

The answer is one of simple common sense. The lords who acted as patrons of the acting companies that would be using these theaters to make a living for themselves knew that they could not be seen, whether by the public, by the City officials, by the clergy, even by some other members of the Privy Council, to be as heavily involved in the creation of these theaters as in fact they were. They could not be seen to be acting either singly or in concert with each other, with their actors, or with the entrepreneurs who built the theaters. They certainly understood this, and so did their clients.

There are two reasons for such secrecy, the first fairly obvious, the second, more important but less obvious.

First, because the Crown had to maintain peace as best it could with both the Church and the City and because both of these authorities detested and feared the Stage, as the record clearly shows. And by the Church we mean not the Church alone, but the Anglican Establishment, of which the Church was only a part. Some members of the theater project were also leaders in this movement, so that if there were to be a showdown with this newborn Anglican Establishment, the theater project was bound to lose.

In a small community like the government at Whitehall there were bound to be many conflicts of interest. In other words, so long as the councillors who patronized acting companies maintained a hands-off attitude, so long as they seemed to be involved only to the degree that they made sure that the men who wore their livery behaved themselves, they could be seen by the City and the Church as simply doing their duty. In short, it was a simply a case of the less said the better, all around, from the Queen on down.

### **The patrons**

So who were these patrons? From the beginning the strongest mover would surely have been the Earl of Sussex, Thomas Ratcliffe, whose position as Lord Chamberlain of the Household put him officially in charge of the Court Stage. However, in 1572 when he took office, it was Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who, was running the Court Stage, as he had from the beginning of Elizabeth's reign (with perhaps to a lesser extent, Cecil's crony, Sir William Brooke, Lord Cobham). Before Sussex could do anything with the Court Stage he had to get it away from Leicester. However, since the Queen was happy with things the way they were, this would have to be done carefully and by degrees.

Sussex's rivalry with Leicester went deep. Years earlier, when Leicester's father, the Duke of Northumberland, made his power grab at King Edward's Court, the Duke moved his son forward while shoving Sussex aside. Now Leicester's equal in prestige, Sussex was not about to allow Leicester to continue to control the office that was his by right of long tradition.

By 1576, Sussex was already pushing for a marriage between Elizabeth and the French Prince. Once negotiations began, the right atmosphere would have to be provided by the Lord Chamberlain. Sophisticated entertainment would be a necessity for the process of wooing both Elizabeth and the French into an alliance that, Sussex believed, would diminish the threat of war with Spain. The French Court was used to sophisticated plays. Such plays would have to be provided and the acting companies would need places to rehearse and test their plays with real audiences. This at any rate would have been the argument Sussex presented to the Queen.

Now, although Leicester was dead set against the French marriage, he too was interested in seeing a commercial stage in London, if only to benefit the company that wore his livery. If somehow Leicester's Men got elbowed out of the use of a year-round theater space in London, they might not need his services any longer, so whether or not he cared, he was forced to go along with it.

The other two other members of the Privy Council who wished to see these theaters open their doors, were Lords Charles Howard and Henry Hunsdon, both deputies of Sussex in his office as Chamberlain (Chambers 2.92-3). In addition, all three, Sussex, Howard, and Hunsdon, were closely related to each other through their descent from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Norfolk, while Howard was Hunsdon's son-in-law (he was married to his daughter). The three were also related to the young Earl of Oxford, who, although he was not on the Privy Council was the patron of another acting company and was involved in organizing entertainments for Court holidays (xx).

There were others, but these four men were the primary patrons of the companies that played at Court prior to the opening of the commercial theaters and all four of them would continue to be closely involved with the Court Stage until they died or until 1604 when King James I finally took the beleaguered Stage under his wing.

### **The missing piece**

So why 1576? Why was it this year rather than another that this coalition of privy councillors, actors, and tradesmen launched these theaters? Why not a year earlier or a year later? What was it about 1576 that made that the right moment for launching something that must have taken months, perhaps years, of planning?

What is needed to create a thriving theater? A theater needs four things: a place to perform, a dependable audience, good actors and good plays. No matter how good three of these are, if one is missing there can be no theater.

We have already seen how the London audience was ready and waiting for a year-round theater. The coalition of patrons, actors, and tradesmen that created the theaters probably had had their eye on both theater locations for the very reason of their audience proximity. They certainly had the actors, both the children who entertained the Court, and the adults who entertained the public, who may have been amateurs but who were ready to turn professional whenever possible..

But what about the scripts? The plays themselves? Ay, there's the rub, for we know nothing about these early plays or who was writing them. We have several titles, but only one manuscript, supposedly written by one of the actors in Leicester's Men. Surely this would have been the sticking point, for without professional actors you're not going to have any such thing as professional playwrights. In fact, *professional* playwrights, that is, men who could hope to actually live on their writing, would not be appearing for 20 years, not until the mid-1590s.

Well, we do know of one playwright, although he certainly didn't consider himself a professional. The Earl of Oxford, termed by Meres in 1598 as "best for comedy," who had spent most of 1575 soaking up the theater traditions of Florence and Venice, was on his way home right at the time that Burbage signed the lease on the Shoreditch property. Oxford had personal connections to both theater locations, the Holywell property that Burbage had just acquired and the complex of apartments in Blackfriars that Farrant was planning to turn into a theater for his children's company.

By breaking with his wife and her family upon his arrival and moving to a location in Broad Street, not far from Burbage's Theater and the two theater inns on Bishopsgate, Oxford freed himself for the kind of writing that writing for both these venues would have required. As for hiding his authorship, such problems lay far in the future, for no one at that time was interested or even bothered to keep track of who was writing the plays they saw at these new theaters.

What I am doing here is simply attempting to show that this Authorship Question is part of a much bigger mystery, one that encompasses every factor involved in the creation of the London Stage. This is a much bigger issue than just who wrote the Shakespeare canon - or the Edmund Spenser canon, or the Robert Greene canon, the John Lyly canon, the John Fletcher canon or the John Webster canon. The mystery extends in all directions.

Why such a mystery?

### **Birth of the Stage**

The short answer is the extremely bad reputation of the theater in the particular moral climate of the period, the puritanism that would eventually lead to twenty years of Civil War. But there is another reason, less obvious because almost never openly discussed, but far more important in the long run, one that had nothing whatsoever to do with either morals or with public health.

Look at the situation from the Crown's point of view: If the Court Stage had the power to affect the thinking and beliefs of the Court community, **how much more power** would the actors *and their playwrights* have with the opening of these two yearround theaters that potentially reached every sector of the London population plus those provincials who came to town during court terms to do business?

There must have been more than one Court official watching this theater phenomenon with anxiety, more than one who understood the tremendous power that had just been

handed over to the actors, who were not known for a strong sense of civic responsibility. However, as long as Oxford, one of their own, was doing most of the writing, and was, as I believe, nominally in charge of what writing was done for these two theaters, they could trust that some measure of control remained in place.

Now look at the situation from the point of view of the actors and the theater managers. Now that they had these theaters generating their income, it was *no longer their patrons who owned their allegiance*, but their audiences. For them to succeed, to pay their rent and put food on their tables, week after week, month after month, it was their audience who must be pleased, whose needs and desires must come first. This is why I say that it was the opening of the commercial theaters that was *the first step towards functional democracy*. For the theaters, the bully pulpit of their times, it was the audiences who would determine what they produced, by voting for a particular kind of play with their pennies.

The Burbages may have felt this pressure, but they never forgot that it was just as necessary to please their patrons, a major factor in their eventual and astounding financial and artistic success, and one they owed largely, it should be noted, to their primary author. So it was not the Burbages who brought about the first real showdown over this new found political power, but their rivals, who were out to take their London audience away from them. And how were they to do that? By producing the most popular play so far in English history.

### **Enter Marlowe**

Sometime in 1587, the entrepreneur Philip Henslowe built the second full scale public theater in an even more accessible area than Burbage's. This was the Rose Theater, located in the Southwark district south of the Thames near the old bear baiting arena. Possibly simply by chance, much more likely by conspiracy, shortly after it opened, the apprentice playwright, Christopher Marlowe, and a handful of actors, among them Edward Alleyn, broke with Burbage and went to the Rose where they proceeded to stage Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. Christopher Marlowe had the power to pull in a working class audience and he used it. Oxford, his credit gone, was cast aside, his controls ignored. This was business. Marlowe, Alleyn & Company were determined to make their move, come what may.

*Tamburlaine* was England's first superhit. With the tall, powerful Edward Alleyn spouting Marlowe's mighty line, it seemed the London audience would never tire of it. For as long as the record shows that Henslowe played it, it continued to fill the auditorium and the money-box. It was a phenomenon on the level of James Lucas's *Star Wars*. It's true that as the record also shows, Shakespeare's *Henry the Sixth* was a close contender, but Shakespeare knew how to thrill an audience without outraging the authorities, something Marlowe didn't understand. Or else he just didn't care.

How can it be that for centuries historians have ignored the truth behind the assassinations of Marlowe and his patron, Lord Strange, blandly accepting the obviously cooked up government story with a shrug. Don't such things matter? Just because

there's no evidence of the government's outrage doesn't mean it didn't happen. Of course it happened. This is what we get when mainstream historians ignore literature and literary historians ignore political history.

How could a government, panicked over the safety of its sovereign and an establishment equally worked up over the morals of its constituents, not have taken umbrage at the staged humiliation and execution of a monarch by an upstart shepherd and then, in *Tamburlaine II*, the burning of a holy book *onstage!*. It was supposed to be the Koran, but the English public was illiterate, it knew nothing of Middle Eastern history. It didn't matter what the characters were named or what costumes they wore, for them these plays were based on local events and were taking place in present time.

So why didn't the Crown take action against the play, the theater, and its owners as they did a few years later against the play *the Isle of Dogs* and the Swan Theater? Why wait until the plague closed the theaters and cleared the streets, giving them, or I should say him, the real leader in this cleanup operation, the opportunity to isolate Marlowe, condemn him, and do away with him without any public fanfare?

Because they were afraid of riots.

The Rose and Alleyn were hugely popular, chiefly because of *Tamburlaine*. Had any action been taken against any one of the three, the play, the star, or the theater, there would have been a public outcry on a grand scale.

*The Isle of Dogs*, on the other hand—largely by Ben Jonson, still barely an apprentice—was simply not popular enough to cause riots. The Swan theater was new, no one had yet acquired any loyalty to it, and with the Rose on the south bank and Burbages in the north still functioning, no one would miss it. Most important perhaps, having learned from Marlowe's popularity, those involved were better equipped to see trouble coming and so nip it in the bud.

By killing Marlowe they ensured that Marlowe's final play, *The Massacre at Paris*, would be the last of its kind. By killing Lord Strange the following year, they ensured that henceforth patrons would watch their companies more closely. And it's not as though they hadn't been warned. We know they were because such a warning had been made in print 8 months earlier in *Greene's Groatsworth of Witte*, where it was worded as clearly as it could be without being said in so many words. How was it that Greene put it? That Marlowe better quit his atheistic writing, for "little knowest thou how in the end thou shalt be visited." I can't see how anything could be more obvious than that, particularly in hindsight.

Although most playgoers remained in the dark about their loss, as have the historians ever since, Marlowe's fate would have sent a very effective message at the time to everyone in the theater community. A few months after his death, Tom Nashe praised Christopher Marlowe as "one of the wittiest devils that ever God made," adding, that he had forfeited his life to his belief in "free speech." which may be the first time the phrase "free speech" was used in print.

Such freedom always comes with a price. Marlowe paid the price as have so many writers before and since, but for the English-speaking people, by the mid-1590s the genie we call *freedom of speech* was out of the bottle and—imprison, poison or stab whom they would—for the authorities there was no putting it back. Nor has there been ever since.

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