

Dr Peter Sillitoe, ShaLT

**Collection Enhancement Report No. 8 for the V&A, Theatre and Performance
Department (May 2012)**

The Two Playhouses at Blackfriars

NB: Earlier, the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights the playhouses at Blackfriars. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report picks-out printed works at the V&A that link to Blackfriars. This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location.

There were two Blackfriars indoor playhouses, both housed at the old Blackfriars monastery site in and near Apothecaries Hall. The first, smaller theatre, staged plays by boy actors in an upper room of the building from 1576 until 1584. In the Jacobean and Caroline periods the venue became the most important indoor theatre in London and was the premiere theatrical venue of the age. From 1599 a new Blackfriars theatre staged plays by boy actors and from 1609 to 1642 it was the only indoor theatre of the King's Men or the 'Shakespeare company.'

The First Blackfriars Playhouse

From the mid-1570s there were Elizabethan boy companies performing plays, without any involvement of adult actors. These groups performed in the first indoor hall playhouse spaces, not in amphitheatres like the Theatre or the Curtain. Boy company plays were performed from 1575 to 1584 at St Paul's, the playhouse occupying the Almoner's hall of the old cathedral, whilst the nearby Blackfriars indoor theatre staged plays from 1576 to 1584. The boy actors had to perform before Queen Elizabeth and her court, and so used public performance to effectively practise and hone their skills, which included both singing and acting. Although the boy actors at St Paul's and Blackfriars were socially positioned very differently from the professional male acting companies, it is fair to assume that when Sebastian Westcott started the Paul's company in the 1570s, theatre was most certainly catching on in London. The boy actors were therefore able to participate in this activity for a number of years to paying audiences.

Professionally speaking, the boy actors of St Paul's and the Blackfriars may be compared to the adult companies of Burbage's Theatre and the nearby Curtain, since both kinds of playhouse were staging plays for the entertainment of fee-paying audiences. On the other hand, the indoor boy companies were putting on a rather different kind of drama. Their plays, including those by the leading writer John Lyly such as his 1584 *Sappho and Phao*, were often extremely learned, aiming themselves at the wealthy and influential playgoers of Elizabeth's court and at the nearby Inns of Court, since law students frequently took time out from their studies to take in a new play. In the 1570s, at least, there is nothing to suggest that the boy actors were sharing plays or dramatists with the larger 'public' outdoor Theatre and Curtain playhouses, or the smaller playing spaces of the four inns.

The Second Blackfriars Playhouse

Then, in 1596, realising that the Blackfriars site was ripe for development, James Burbage purchased a £600 freehold on spacious upper-floor rooms at Blackfriars and got to work on building a second purpose-built indoor theatre at the venue. Thus we should really talk about two very different playhouses at Blackfriars, though both were indoor and rather exclusive. Unfortunately, due to complaints from Blackfriars residents, Burbage's sons were unable to stage plays here with adult actors, so a boy company from 1599 was allowed to perform there. Eventually, when the plays put on began to offend the Crown, the boy company was forced to disband, the King's Men now being allowed to perform there from 1609 onwards. Thereafter, until the playhouse closures in 1642, Shakespeare's company were able to switch between indoor playing at the indoors Blackfriars theatre in winter, and in summer to perform at the Globe.

Burbage's vision of the Blackfriars indoor playhouse was physically and conceptually a brilliantly innovative scheme, what leading critic Andrew Gurr has called 'the theatre of the future'. Yet it proved a tricky vision to realise. London adult playing companies had until now performed outdoors throughout the year at the various amphitheatres, but acquisition of the new space made it seem entirely possible for the Chamberlain's to play in an indoor theatre inside the City over the winter months. Although it could only hold a third of the Theatre's audience, the richer, privileged clientele Burbage targeted would pay much more for their indoor seating. However, the well-to-do residents of the Blackfriars precinct strongly objected to a new adult playhouse in their midst and successfully petitioned the Privy Council to cancel the arrangement. The Burbages were therefore left with a brand new indoor playhouse they could not use, unable to open the Blackfriars they actually owned. James Burbage died in 1597, leaving the Theatre and the Blackfriars properties to his sons Cuthbert and Richard.

Although James Burbage had built a new indoor playhouse at Blackfriars in 1596, and was prevented by the Privy Council from putting on plays using adult players (the Chamberlain's Men in this case of course), his son Richard, who inherited the theatre, decided to sub-let the theatre to Henry Evans and Nathaniel Giles. In 1599 the new Blackfriars playhouse opened with a troupe of boy players performing once a week. James Burbage had probably wanted his adult company to perform up to six performances a week, which the grandees who lived in Playhouse Yard (including the Chamberlain's own new patron George Carey) found intolerable. In 1599, a new company of St Paul's boy players was also allowed to perform weekly at their old playhouse in the Almoner's at Paul's in competition with the Blackfriars.

For the next seven years the boy companies were therefore very much back in contention as players, bringing to the last years of Elizabeth's reign and the beginning of James's playing that was even more professional and successful than that seen in the first generation of boy actors from the 1570s. These new indoor playhouses adopted a distinctly innovative style with new plays by new playwrights that included John Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*, and Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. Soon the new boy companies became known for playing both challenging political satire and works that put sexualised innuendo into the mouths of the young players. These playhouses also put on the new plays of Ben Jonson, a rising star who would later become King James's leading poet at court. Jonson's own new brand of acerbic comedy had already been played by the Chamberlain's Men in the late 1590s with *Every Man in his Humour* and *Every Man out of his Humour*. This was before he brought his satiric wit before boy player audiences while at the same time continuing his success with adult companies, his *Volpone* being premiered at the Globe by the King's Men in 1606.

It may seem strange that Burbage's plans for an adult playing theatre were turned down while the boys had been allowed to flourish, but it must be remembered that the boy companies were viewed as more respectable, they played less frequently than the adult companies, and they also had little or no reputation for accompanying crowd trouble. It was largely owing to their status as children that the boy actors slipped under the radar in terms of the kind of dramatic satirical attacks the plays written for them were able to put before their audiences, some of them quite openly mocking the court of James (though Paul's boys were less blameworthy in this respect than those of Blackfriars). Although the plays at the Blackfriars and St Paul's could be highly erotic and homoerotic in content, the boy players were seen as relatively harmless, and the kind of entertaining wit this produced allowed the normal dramatic boundaries to be extended.

But the boys were under pressure. Firstly, there was the issue of the 'pressing' of boy actors, the companies being criticized for literally forcing boys off the streets to become actors. Furthermore, controversial plays were put on that caused a stir at court and started attracting the serious ire of the censor Sir Edmund Tilney. For example, in 1605 the Blackfriars company was reprimanded for performing *Eastward Ho!*, an authorial collaboration by George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston, which gave offence to the court because of its anti-Scottish sentiment. Then in 1606 John Day's *The Isle of Gulls* was seen as contentious for its use of political satire against the government. Sir Thomas Edmondson wrote that 'at this time there was much speech of a play in the Blackfriars where, in the Isle of Gulls, from the highest to the lowest, all men's parts were acted of two divers nations.' The boy players evidently found it easy to parody London's courtly newcomers by adopting Scottish accents. Eventually, things came to a head. The political satires of the boys companies drew official disapproval and then outright prohibition, with the St Paul's company ceasing in 1606 and the Blackfriars's boys being officially suppressed in 1608.

In 1608, then, the boy actors had been expelled from Blackfriars and the King's Men were finally set to occupy their Blackfriars playhouse. It was now 12 years after James Burbage had bought the site outright, and built the indoor theatre, only to find the Chamberlain's Men were forbidden from playing there. But times had changed. By 1608 the Jacobean court had substantially strengthened its ties to the playhouses through its royal patronage of playing companies, so it was always likely that the King's Men would eventually be able to perform at the newly-vacated Blackfriars. Once Richard Burbage had done the necessary repairs and created a fresh 21 year lease assigning a share of the new adult playing theatre to those who already had shares in the Globe, including himself, his brother Cuthbert, John Heminges, 'a certain William Shakespeare' and Henry Condell, we know that, after a long plague closure, the actors started putting on plays there in late 1609 or early 1610.

For the first time, an adult company had not one but two playhouses, and one of these finally allowed adult actors to perform in the refined atmosphere of an indoor, candle-lit playhouse with its increased sense of intimacy and élitism. Indeed, the heightened cost of admission to see the King's Men at Blackfriars meant that they now performed regularly for the higher-end of the London theatre audiences. Quite quickly the Blackfriars theatre became associated in the public mind with the richer playgoers and a refined atmosphere, which included the performance of sophisticated music before, during, and after the performances.

By returning to their 1596 plan of having two playhouses, one indoor, one outdoor, the King's Men could now look toward a significant growth in their income, the Blackfriars being close to the rich law students at the four Inns of Court, and also near to James's royal court at Whitehall. The King's Men could afford to use one playhouse while the other one was closed, alternating their playing between the open-air Globe in the summer months with the Blackfriars in the winter. This was a luxury no other playing company could afford, the former Admiral's Men (now Prince Henry's Men) having always performed outside at the

Rose, and continued to do so from 1600 at their new Fortune, all year round. After 1609 all plays by Shakespeare were performed at Blackfriars and the Globe, as well as the plays of rising stars Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher; indeed, Fletcher was groomed as the company's lead playwright and successor to Shakespeare.

Furthermore, during the run of the boy actors at the Blackfriars it had acquired a reputation for music and song, the musicians being very visible to the audience in the stage balcony, and by now having achieved a considerable reputation and status. It has been suggested that music could have been written for the distinguished Blackfriars theatre musicians by composers like Martin Peerson and John Milton (senior). Increasingly after 1609 the King's Men incorporated music into their plays and kept on the Blackfriars music ensemble that they had inherited from the boys' company. It also seems likely that the Globe's gallery would now have become a music room for appropriate performances; in operation and in view, just as it was at Blackfriars.

Throughout the later Caroline period (1625 to 1642) the King's Men continued exactly as they had under James, the only company to last unchanged in their organisation, from 1594 to 1642. Moreover they enjoyed the unique resource of owning both an indoor and an outdoor theatre. Additionally, Henrietta Maria's four visits to the Blackfriars illustrates the rise of elite female attendance and the growth of indoor styles of playing aimed at female tastes. Elite spectators flocked to the indoor halls, resorts for high fashion as much as for good new plays. The most popular and well-respected of them all, Blackfriars, functioned superbly for the King's Men with their band of new writers, augmented by the classics of Shakespeare and the works of Beaumont and Fletcher and others.

The King's Men continued to attract the brightest of new theatrical talents to write for their Blackfriars and the Globe. Easily the busiest and most self-advertizing of them was William Davenant. He even claimed himself to be an illegitimate son of Shakespeare, since

his beautiful mother was hostess of a tavern in Oxford where, it was alleged, the bard used to stay while en route to his home in Stratford. Then and in the war years later, Davenant was certainly a very loyal supporter of the king. He wrote masques as well as plays for royalty. In the wars, he regularly smuggled arms from Holland for use by the English royalists, and was eventually captured by Cromwell's navy when sailing to Virginia in an attempt to persuade the colonists there to turn and support the king.

In the late 1620s and early 1630s Philip Massinger wrote a long series of plays for the King's Men at Blackfriars. As a Jacobean writer, he had collaborated with John Fletcher and others, but when Fletcher died in 1625 he became the leading King's Men playwright. Thus we can trace a timeline from Shakespeare to Fletcher, with whom he collaborated on his late plays, through to Massinger, whose plays became popular in this later period, starting with his *The Roman Actor* (1626) at Blackfriars.

The rising dramatist Richard Brome, Ben Jonson's protégé, wrote Blackfriars plays in the late 1620s. But from 1631 to 1637 it was Davenant who made himself the main producer of new plays for the King's Men at Blackfriars. He is perhaps the writer best-placed to serve as an example of the rise of elitism in 1630s theatre. His plays were full of fashionable wit and charm, especially his 1633 comedy for Blackfriars, *The Wits*.

Another new writer of this period, John Ford, was trained in law at the Middle Temple, while sometimes writing for the outdoor Fortune. In the Caroline period he began writing more upmarket plays, mostly for the Blackfriars and the Globe. His 1629 play *The Lover's Melancholy* was performed at both the indoor and outdoor playhouses, whilst *The Broken Heart* (late 1620s or early 1630s) was written for the Blackfriars. Another new face, James Shirley, began his dramatic career in 1625 with a play entitled *Love's Tricks* for the new Christopher Beeston-led Queen Henrietta's Men company at the Cockpit. An Irishman, he stayed there for ten years as Beeston's main dramatist, before leaving London and

returning home to write for a new Dublin theatre in the late 1630s. In 1640 he returned to the London theatre scene, replacing Massinger as the King's Men's new leading playwright when he died. He produced six plays before the closure, including *The Cardinal* in 1641 at the Blackfriars.

The Blackfriars remained the outstanding venue, consolidating its enviable position as the leading social and theatrical venue in London from early Stuart times. This success, with the consequent influence of the Blackfriars on later theatre design, affirms the decision of James Burbage to acquire the site for a new playhouse for the Shakespeare company in 1596 as an act of prophetic genius, awful though its immediate consequences were to the Burbages in that year.

Blackfriars and the V&A Collection

The images below (both courtesy of the V&A Museum) are taken from the collection's title pages for two plays. The first (John Marston's *The Dutch Courtezan*) was performed at the second Blackfriars theatre by one of the boy companies, during the period when the Chamberlain's Men could not perform at their new theatre. The second image (John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*) was performed by the King's Men in the Jacobean period, when they were allowed to use both of their playhouses (the Globe and the Blackfriars).

THE
D V T C H
COVRTEZAN.

As it hath been divers times
presented at the Blacke Fryars,
by the Children of the Queenes
Majesties Revels.

Written by IOHN MARSTON.



LONDON,
Printed for WILLIAM SHEARES.

1 6 3 3.

THE
TRAGEDY
OF THE DUTCHESSE
Of Malfy.

*As it was Presented priuately, at the Black-
Friers; and publiquely at the Globe, By the
Kings Maiesties Seruants.*

The perfect and exact Coppy, with diuerse
*things Printed, that the length of the Play would
not beare in the Presentment.*

Written by *John Webster.*

Hora. ——— *Si quid* ———

———— *Candidus Imperti si non his utere maculis.*

LONDON:

Printed by NICHOLAS OKES, for JOHN
WATERSON, and are to be sold at the
signe of the Crowne, in *Paules*
Church-yard, 1623.