

Andrew Gurr

Squaring the Circle: Comparing the Fortune and the Globe

In the many discussions of the different shapes and capacities of the playhouses of Elizabethan and Jacobean London, insufficient attention has been paid to the impact of differing theatre forms upon the spectators. In this article, Andrew Gurr points out that the first Globe on Bankside, built from the timbers of the Theatre in Shoreditch, and the Fortune, erected for Henslowe's company on the other side of the river, just to the north of the City, were both the work of the same builder, Peter Street. He discusses the differences the shapes of the two playhouses – the Globe polygonal, the Fortune square – had on their construction and the spectators' reception. Because the audience capacity had to be similar, this meant that spectators at the Fortune, especially latecomers, would need to squeeze into corners of the building, with their ability to see and hear what was happening on stage much restricted. In addition to his many books, among them the now classic study, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642* (1992), Andrew Gurr was chief academic advisor in the 'rebuilding' of Shakespeare's Globe on the South Bank. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Reading.

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WHEN, through the year between June of 1599 and June 1600, the carpenter Peter Street set up first the Globe on Bankside and then the Fortune on the other side of the river, his two labours differed quite markedly. For the Globe, he used an existing set of framing timbers taken from the old Theatre in Shoreditch. On the other hand, for the Fortune, he had to get new timbers and to create an entirely new frame, this time not round but square. The Fortune's design was intrinsically simpler and far more familiar to a builder than the Globe's eccentrically rounded frame. Was it built that way because square structures were cheaper than the less familiar shapes such as the Theatre and the Globe, or was it designed to look completely different from its rival on the South Bank?

The Fortune's square shape must in 1600 have created some fresh issues for Street, its designer and builder. The new-built Globe was almost circular, a polygon of most likely about twenty sides. Such a distinctive shape could justify its visitors calling it 'the round Globe', so that from the outside it would have looked completely unlike its immediate successor, the Fortune, even though the same

carpenter built it. For the Globe, Street used the existing framing timbers of the Theatre, built twenty years before by James Burbage (himself once a carpenter). So when he first raised the new Globe on Bankside in 1599, he could afford to ignore the eccentric angles of its frame, and concentrate on its interior features.

The Fortune was a different sort of challenge. Built completely square, though otherwise explicitly planned as a copy of the round Globe, it must certainly have looked from the outside quite different from its immediately popular predecessor. Remarkably, the builder's contract for the Fortune survives, though the accompanying ground plan for it, no doubt having been greatly manhandled during the construction, has not. Dated 8 January 1600, the contract specified that it was

to be sett square and to containe Fowerscore foote of lawfull assize everye waie square withoute and fiftie five foot of like assize square everye waie witiin, with a good suer and stronge foundation of pyles brick lyme and sand, both without and within, to be wroughte one foote of assize att the leiste above the grounde And the saide Frame to

containe Three Stories in heighth. The first or lower Storie to Containe Twelve foote of lawfull assize in heighth The second Storie Eleaven foote of lawfull assize in heighth And the Third or upper Storie to containe Nyne foote of lawfull assize in height / All which Stories shall containe Twelve foote and a half of lawfull assize in breadth througheoute besides a Juttey forwardes in eyther of the saide Two upper Stories of Tenne ynches of lawfull assize, with Fower convenient divisions for gentlemens roomes and other sufficient and convenient divisions for Two pennie roomes with necessarie Seates to be placed and sett Aswell in those roomes as througheoute all the rest of the galleries of the saide howse and with suche like steares Conveyances & divisions without & within as are made & Contryved in and to the late erected Plaiehowse On the Banck in the saide pisse of Sainte Savio^rs Called the Globe With a Stadge and Tyringe howse to be made erected & settupp within the saide Frame, with a shadow or cover over the saide Stadge.

The document goes on to specify that the 43 feet of stage should extend to the middle of the square yard, with oak planking around its sides.

Most scholars have concluded that it had to be made square because the site chosen for it was too small for a circular construction. However, that argument does not fit, given that when it burned down in 1621 and had to be replaced, the second Fortune was built, in the same space, as a polygon. Writing in 1698, the author of *Historia Histrionica* called it 'a large round brick building'. He also specified, however, that it was 'built from the ground' – that is, its foundations were new, and made no use of the former building.

If, as most scholars now presume, the original Globe was twenty-sided, its external shape would have come to something like 73 feet in external diameter. The site chosen for the Fortune gained a structure only 80 square in all, and its inner frame, also square, 55 feet. (The complete builder's contract of 1600 for the Fortune is printed in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 1923, II, p. 436–9.) Allowing for access to its two entry doors and the footpaths to them, not to mention the related brewhouse and tenement buildings beside the theatre itself, that would leave insufficient spare space for anything much bigger.

Glynne Wickham claimed that 'the square shape of the first Fortune was dictated by that of the existing buildings on the site and questions of economy, and not by choice as a deliberate innovation' (*Early English Stages, 1300 to 1660*, 1972, II, ii. p. 112–15). Up to a point, we have to agree with his conclusion.

The Fortune was built quite close to St John's, where in 1602 the Revels Office was located. This was convenient, since by that date the Revels used to license every play for its public performance. To do that, the company, or at least its senior fellows, had to take each one of their play scripts to the Office, and read the full text out to the Master. He often ordered changes to be made, though usually only to short passages he thought too hazardous for the state's peace of mind. Any play taken on tour had to travel in company with the Master's authorizing letter. No performance could be staged to the public without his acknowledgement that it was fit to be enacted.

The new playhouse's square structure gave its users special problems, chiefly thanks to each of the four corners, where spectators would have had trouble viewing what was being staged, even given the huge space of the stage itself. Its contract, unique because surviving, specifies it as having to be 43 feet wide and 27½ feet deep. This extensive stage would have emerged from one flank of the inner square, presumably from where the tiring-house wall gave the players access, the section of the square behind it providing the backstage area where the players prepared themselves.

At the round Globe, where the most costly seats were on the stage balcony, and no spectator stood or sat more than 30 feet from the players on the stage, everyone had a good view of what was being acted, and reasonable hearing. The square Fortune had the one serious disadvantage, specifically where latecomers had to squeeze into the rear of the four corners of the square. Even from the two flanks alongside the stage the audience's view was restricted.

We do not know whether the seating in the flanking boxes might not have been angled diagonally. If so, that would have

allowed the sitters to face straight outwards towards the open yard and the stage that protruded halfway into it by those 27½ feet. This effect of the square shape cannot have been an unfamiliar difficulty, because the Cross Keys Inn and Boar's Head Inn both preceded the Fortune with their square courtyards, and later the Red Bull was built with the same awkward shape.

Square structures were of course far more familiar to carpenters than was the complex polygon of the many-sided Globe. That, along with the Fortune's more limited area purchased for its siting, must have been the deciding factor in the decision to make it a square. Another consideration, probably taken more seriously then than now, was the disadvantage for the folk sitting in the outer corners of not seeing so well, and (a higher priority) not hearing so well either, compared with those closest to the stage.

In an auditorium lacking seat numbers, the best places were always occupied on a first-come-first-served basis, so one can understand John Chamberlain's complaint in August 1624 that, to see *A Game at Chesse* at the Globe, he would have had to get inside the playhouse at least an hour before the play was due to start (*The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. N. E. McClure, Philadelphia, 1939, II, p. 577–8). But through all the many years before seating became ticketed, the norm was first come, best served with a good viewing and hearing place. There is no record of any complaints from the Fortune's customers about its discomfiting shape. Indeed, there is good evidence that the playhouses were not often filled to the sort of capacity that would necessitate any late-arriving customers having to squeeze themselves into the back corners. Chamberlain's reluctance over *A Game at Chesse* must have been almost unique, like the hugely overcrowded event he complained about.

The square shape of the Fortune might well have had even more traditional thinking behind it. Even experienced carpenters such as James Burbage, who built the Theatre, the first of London's known polygonal structures, and who was a qualified creator of wood and plaster buildings, would have found designing and building the Theatre's polygon a distinctly challenging task.

The very first playhouses were made round because they derived from the primary need for their audiences to surround the stage. The Fortune ignored that need, at least partly because the limited size of the space acquired for it would have made a circular Fortune too small in capacity for Alleyn's desire for it to emulate the new Globe, built using the Theatre's own structural timbers.

The square shape did make the differences from its more or less circular rival obvious, but its audience capacity had to be similar. Alleyn and Henslowe's contract for the Fortune only specified that the stage itself and its attachments should be the same as the Globe's. So long as the Fortune's audience capacity matched its predecessor, they were not bothered by its outside shape. Indeed, they must have found good value in the visible difference between the round Globe and the square Fortune, because nobody approaching either of them from the outside, as all the would-be audiences had to, could ever have mistaken one playhouse for the other.

The regrettable fact that the Fortune's capacity in fact was a little less than the Globe's, thanks to its square shape, would have been compensated for by the recognition that to build another polygon, with its huge assemblage of uniquely shaped timbers, would have cost its financiers distinctly more than a structure using the more routine right angles.