

The Archaeology of Shakespeare: The Material Legacy of Shakespeare's Theatre. By JEAN WILSON. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing. 1995. xii + 211 pp. £19.99

The London acting companies of the 1590s who took up permanent residence at playhouses in Southwark were not the only artists forced to seek refuge beyond the reach of the City authorities. In The Archaeology of Shakespeare Jean Wilson argues that the surviving work of the stone-masons of Southwark, many of whom were foreigners unable to join trade guilds and so required to live and work outside the City boundaries, can help to fill in the unknown details of the interior design of playhouses. Wilson uses tomb-sculpture to provide clues about the decoration of the frons scenae (the back-wall of the stage) before which the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were first performed. The two disciplines were brought into contact not only by their physical proximity but also by a shared desire to import the Classical principles of continental Renaissance design.

In his Art and Illusion in 'The Winter's Tale' (1995) B.J. Sokol argued that the fictional "statue" of Hermione was an allusion to the vulgar work of the Southwark stonemasons, but their best work showed the influence of continental Renaissance Classicism. Wilson believes that the designers of the theatres shared this continental taste and hence some of the stonemasons' surviving works reflect the actual appearance of the playhouse interior. The frons of the new Globe currently being completed on Bankside will be decorated with statues of Classical gods, which indicates that Wilson is thinking along the same lines as the academic committee of the Globe in seeing the decoration as part of a burgeoning Renaissance sensibility rather than a dying medieval tradition.

The important contribution made by Wilson is confined to a small section in the middle of the book. Rejecting the 'hall screen' as a model for the frons because known performances in halls did not use it, Wilson turns to funerary monuments which show features akin to those found on the stage. One may assume that she has searched extensively and it is disappointing that she found so few examples to illustrate her argument. These few are, however, quite compelling as individual cases. The tomb of Lady Savile at St Nicholas Hurst, Berkshire, has a carved representation of the deceased and her family at prayer which forms a tableau vivant 'discovered' by two angels drawing back curtains. This monument is constructed as three bays, with the middle one projecting forwards somewhat. Two other tombs, that of Sir William Clarke at Hitcham, Buckinghamshire, and that of Ninian Burrell at Cuckfield, Sussex, show similar 'discoveries'. Wilson draws a parallel between these designs and the 'jutting forward' of the upper galleries specified in the contract to build the Fortune playhouse, and suggests that the frons had an overhanging upper level from which a discovery curtain could be suspended.

Apart from this contribution to the question of the design of the frons, Wilson's book contains almost nothing new and much that is better presented

elsewhere. The organisation of the chapters is at times quite bizarre, and each is divided into sections which, in the case of 'Acting as a Profession', can be as little as two paragraphs. Such bittiness continues even to the book's final section entitled 'Conclusion' which comprises just four sentences on the last page.

The poor structure of the book could be overlooked as mere eccentricity were it not for some serious lapses of scholarly judgement. The first notable example is in the description of the dismantling and carting away of the frame of the Theatre which all took place 'on the night of 28 December 1598'. If this was done in one night by just 15 or so persons then no wonder the new playhouse they built from these massive timbers, the Globe, was associated with the mythical Hercules. Wilson has overlooked the landlord's legal efforts to stop the dismantling which make it clear that the job took several days. When Wilson confidently gives the size of the Fortune's stage as '43 feet wide by 25 feet deep' she adds no qualification about the depth being a conjecture based on the assumption that the tiring house was contained wholly within the playhouse frame, nor does she refer to a potential conflict between this assumption and her conjecture about a staggered frons.

Taking 'archaeology' in its widest sense, Wilson has strong reservations about the new Bankside Globe. She says that 'to claim that this 'Globe' is any more authentic than Olivier's 'Globe' in Henry V is to mislead' since 'neither is free from the taste of the era which produced it'. Unconscious influences on the choices made by the new Globe's academic advisors will undoubtedly become apparent in the future, but the body of scholarship which underpins Wanamaker's project is far more extensive than that available to Olivier. Wilson endorses A. M. Nagler's dismissal of attempts to reconstruct the interior of an Elizabethan playhouse--due to the lack of evidence 'the undertaking strikes me as hopeless' wrote Nagler-- and therein lies a contradiction, since Wilson's work on monumental architecture is offered as part of just such an attempt.