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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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Contents

Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

PIERO CAPELLI – <i>Foreword</i>	5
FABRIZIO LELLI – <i>Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy</i>	15
MICHELA ANDREATTA – <i>Piety on Stage: Popular Drama and the Public Life of Early Modern Jewish Confraternities</i>	31
CHIARA CARMEN SCORDARI – <i>Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena’s Diasporic Tragedy L’Ester in Seventeenth-Century Venice</i>	53
ZEHAVIT STERN – <i>The Archive, the Repertoire, and Jewish Theatre: Zygmunt Turkow Performs a National Dramatic Heritage</i>	71
YAIR LIPSHITZ – <i>Nocturnal Histories: Nighttime and the Jewish Temporal Imagination in Modern Hebrew Drama</i>	91
DIEGO ROTMAN – <i>Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)</i>	115

Miscellany

DAVID LUCKING – <i>Stony Limits and Envious Walls: Metamorphosing Ovid in Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	147
CRISTINA CONSIGLIO – <i>Hamlet Overseas. The Acting Technique of Edwin Booth</i>	169

Special Section

PATRICK GRAY – <i>Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: A Reply to Paul A. Cantor</i>	189
ELENA PELLONE – <i>Will Tosh, Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 264</i>	205
NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – <i>Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford (eds), Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies, London and New York: Methuen, 2018, pp. 235</i>	213
SALLY BLACKBURN-DANIELS – <i>A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee’s The Ballet of the Nations</i>	225

ELENA PELLONE*

Will Tosh, *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 264*

Abstract

Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, by Will Tosh, Lecturer and Research Fellow at Shakespeare's Globe, is an account of the conceptualisation, research and early theatrical seasons of the indoor candlelit 'Jacobean' theatre at Shakespeare's Globe. The book is in three parts, theatrically framed by a prologue and an epilogue, with wonderful colour plates showing architectural drawings and performance highlights. It is a powerful introductory panorama of the first few years of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, offering a pleasing insight to a general public and a useful point of departure for an academic readership. The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an under-utilised area of written research, unlike the Globe's main stage, and Tosh invites the reader to take up the questions he has raised for, although it is the first book dedicated to the new Playhouse, "it is certainly not the final word on the subject" (196). Hopefully *Playing Indoors* is a watershed moment, with more books to follow.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare's Globe; Sam Wanamaker Playhouse; Jacobean indoor theatre; candlelight; historical reconstruction; stagecraft; audience response

There is a global pandemic and theatres are under threat in the United Kingdom. The Globe, at the heart of Shakespeare performance, relies on private sponsorship and ticket sales. This precious resource may be endangered. What better moment to consider the deeper expression of research and avantgarde theatre-making that is the realised vision of the American entrepreneur Sam Wanamaker, something that can often be obscured by a giftshop-toting-novelty and Disneyland quality that the Globe can personify?

Will Tosh, Lecturer and Research Fellow at Shakespeare's Globe, has recently released *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse*, an account of the conceptualisation, research and early theatrical seasons of the indoor candlelit 'Jacobean' theatre at Shakespeare's Globe. The book is in three parts, theatrically framed by a prologue and an epilogue, with wonderful colour plates showing architectural drawings and performance highlights. Part

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One is an introductory section on the “Playhouse in Context” featuring the “Origins” and “Reception” of the Sam Wannamaker Playhouse, followed by Part Two on the “Playhouse at Work”, and concluded in Part Three with the “Playhouse and Research in Action”.

Even though Tosh’s language at times is discursive, rather than critical, it is easy to understand the pride and excitement that is the heartbeat of this subjective study of the work at the Wanamaker. There is no overestimating the global significance of the research, the pure joy and magic of watching a play in the intimate candlelit setting, nor the dedication and visionary legacy of the namesake of the theatre, and the practitioners, scholars and artists that have worked, and continue to work, to realise and go beyond his vision. Tosh has provided a much-needed account of the inner workings of this space from various perspectives, and this publication on the Playhouse is a welcome addition to the discourse on Shakespeare’s Globe for researchers and theatregoers alike.

The Prologue begins as an apocryphal account of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s quest to establish an indoor London theatrical playhouse. Tosh is an easily accessible and personable writer and allows the audience to settle in and snuggle up to the early modern fireside drama that begins his tale. But although this becomes a very informative summary of the critical importance the Blackfriars had in shaping the indoor theatricality that influenced modern drama traditions, this book is not an historical account of Shakespeare’s Blackfriars, nor does it wish to be. This is simply a move to bring us to the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse’s complicated beginning. And by page three the book itself settles quickly in. What was the project of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse which opened in January 2014 and which is not a reconstruction of the Blackfriars in the way the open-air Globe relied on historical research for its more or less ‘authentic’ reconstruction? (The American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia claims to have the only existing replica of the early modern Blackfriars.) So, where does that leave the historical performance research of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse? In its own unique expression, as Tosh goes on to reveal.

The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is a “self-styled ‘archetype’ of the indoor playhouses of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline London” (xviii). Tosh gives an evocative description of this intimate theatre that, when the candles are lit “smells like beeswax and timber” (xviii). He informs his reader that the major research project that culminated in the building of the Sam Wanamaker is recorded in detail in *Moving Shakespeare Indoors: Performance and Repertoire in the Jacobean Playhouse*, edited by Andrew Gurr and Farah-Karim Cooper. The inspiration for its construction lies in the collective knowledge of early modern indoor theatres, but, as Tosh politely airbrushes, this comes “with all the scope for disagreement and compromise that such collective knowledge entails” (xix). Ostensibly, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an echo of something Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have recognised as “one of a type” (xix). Tosh proposes something interesting: the Wanamaker is not a replica and raises more questions than it answers, but in its process of engaging with “discovery and recovery” (xx) it “poses questions we have not previously thought to ponder” (xix). Thus, the theatre both casts light on early modern architectural and theatrical traditions and allows actors and creative

artists to “find their own way toward a theatre practice” with spatial intimacy, candlelight and the acoustics of a timber-clad chamber. *Playing Indoors* “records discoveries made on both these fronts” (xx).

Playing Indoors is primarily a collection of testimonies, synthesised by Tosh, of the first three theatrical seasons that represent “the institutional memory of the playhouse’s earliest years” (xx). Tosh outlines that he will use an approach different from conventional performance studies, resolving the difficulty of capturing performance in print by creating an “edited discourse” that reads like a “virtual round table discussion” embracing “polyvocality” (xxiii). It is also an account of the investigative experiments that proliferate the life of the theatre beyond its concerns as a commercial stage. The bibliography has a full list of the interviewees. An appendix includes scripted questions and questionnaires and a link to the material archived and on record at the Globe research library.

Chapter one, “Origins”, offers a general overview of the Globe reconstruction, a literature survey of the academic writing populating the field, and the complicated stages of decisions and revisions for the plans of its ‘sibling’ Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, euphemistically referred to as an “archetypal Jacobean indoor theatre” (3, 13). That is, an ideal pattern recognisable to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, with the aesthetic focus remaining the original Blackfriars: “a composite structure that evoked a version of the playhouse occupied by Shakespeare’s company” (14). The foundations for the indoor theatre, laid during the building of the Globe, based on designs that depicted what was thought to be a small, early modern theatre by Inigo Jones, were later discovered to have been incomplete sketches by his student, replete with unbuildable “anomalies and kinks” (13), of a Restoration theatre. This discovery naturally caused delays in the realisation of the plans. Tosh describes the complex history of how, stuck with erroneous foundations, the indoor playhouse was finally manifest, including the contradictions and compromises that characterised an attempt at historicity based on uncertain evidence and the need to accommodate a modern audience and contemporary and commercial theatrical practice. Tosh outlines this “teleological inevitability” (20) in pleasing detail.

Tosh increasingly hits his stride as the book develops. Chapter two, “Reception”, considers the generally positive and evocative accounts of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and its opening reception. With many precedents in British theatre of main houses having a smaller studio and more experimental space the addition of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse was familiar. Yet the Globe consciously avoided the hierarchy by having the two theatres run concurrent seasons (20). Circumventing the criticism hurled at the Globe twenty years earlier that it “smacked of veneration and commercialization” (22), the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse was instead applauded as dark, brooding and sensually intimate, perfect for Jacobean tragedy. Tosh goes on to ask the difficult question of how to avoid propagating an uncritical popular enthusiasm for dramatic sensationalism (35). In the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse the “critical heritage of early modern drama, and the significance of contemporary cultural politics and architectural determinism, coalesce” (35). But he points out the need to be wary of a nostalgic co-option and reification of the gender relations and sexual violence of “Jacobean *noir*”, willingly discussing the reasons for the playhouse’s “anxious relationships with the past” (35-6).

Dominic Dromgoole, programming the first season, responded to the space, allowing it to teach the creatives, and asserted that the early productions of well-known Jacobean tragedies were nevertheless “subtly radical” (36-7). Tosh gives a detailed and considered account of what the space demanded, the many tensions, and how its artistic and commercial identity were finally received and perceived (38).

Part Two, “Playhouse at Work”, commences with “‘Fair Lightsome Lodgings’: Initial Responses to the Space”. Moving away from critical reception, this section focuses on the feedback of spectators and artists who worked in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse for the first three seasons: “a user-led oral history of the playhouse’s early years” (45). Part Two is organised “in four themed chapters that explore the nature of the space itself; the specific skills required of actors to perform in the playhouse; the impact of the candlelight; and the significance of the SWP audience” (47). This section is, in Tosh’s words, a “retrospective round-table discussion” which is “the secret history the first years of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, told by the people who made it” (48).

Tosh reflects on the difficulties of selecting and presenting material, comprehensively archived at the Globe research library, for framing an argument, and admits he is not “naïve” enough to consider it possible to discount his “outer frame”, but adds he has “resisted the temptation to decipher or gloss” (48). Tosh continues to address the reader in this personal, uncomplicated and transparent tone, more suited to a general Globe readership than those interested in an intensive scholarly critique. He acknowledges working on these plays as an “embedded scholar employed by the organization” he studies means he cannot profess “disinterested objectivity” (49). Although the transparency and framework are of interest as signposts, sometimes the over-explanation, and pre or post cursory summations, feel extraneous. When allowing the creatives and respondents to drive the narrative, Tosh’s use of short quotes can seem like small cuts or intersections that leaves unsatisfied the desire for a more sustained discourse from the creatives, rather than a conclusive perspective. But it can also be rich and exhilarating to have the cacophony of voices interacting in snippets, trumping a sustained, single voice.

In the “Initial Responses”, Tosh takes us on a whirlwind tour of interlapping views on the early productions and responses to the challenges of the space. At times it is difficult to follow the plethora of names and situations, and it may require a pre-existing knowledge of British actors and the Jacobean plays they are performing. He thinks about “the size and the style of the SWP” and its intimacy yet impossibility of playing democratically to a house that is architecturally divided, with the hierarchical isolation of lesser-paying public. The sub-sections of “feeling at home” and “the impact of beauty” explicate how an expected part of the “constellations of sensations” for performers became an awareness that audiences being struck by beauty were “still acclimatizing to the richness of the room” at the opening of the plays (57). Tosh takes us on a tour of the responses and concerns arising from, *inter alia*, the need to experiment in the space with “unusual exits and entrances”, a desire not to repeat things, and resolving how to present exteriors in such a meticulously defined interior.

The next chapter, “‘Full and Significant Action’: Technique and Craft”, is ded-

icated to the physical challenges of the performer working in the space. “Voice” is one of the initial subsections, crucial to the acoustics of the space and the early modern reliance on language as the driving force for creating physical and temporal scene changes. In response to the “clear acoustic of the space” (73) Eileen Atkins declares that “anybody who has a problem in that theatre vocally should go to voice lessons” (72). The quality of the acoustics means that the space could “take a bellow” and “withstand a whisper” (72). For Dromgoole in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the “language just sang” (72). It was more of a challenge in group scenes, such as the final scene of *Cymbeline*, to ensure that spectators knew who were speaking: “It’s a visual thing”, notes director Sam Yates (75). Again, in this section it may be difficult to keep abreast of the vignettes, the changing productions and the litany of names, but Tosh has compiled a very useful appendix of a “Who’s who?” (200) for a clear and comprehensive reminder of who the creatives are and the roles they play in the productions. Apart from voice, Tosh considers staging, physicality, playing to the upper gallery, and the palimpsest nature of the creative endeavour in the space.

In Chapter five, “‘This Darkness Suits You Well’: Acting by Candlelight” (91), Tosh turns to the central defining feature of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse – the lighting. “Without question, the aspect of the playhouse which had the greatest impact on the craft of its artists, and made the biggest impression on the spectators, was the nature of the lighting” (90). Tosh details the technical apparatus for lighting with candles, as well as the powerful tool candlelight is “for the creation of space, mood and atmosphere” (91). He “analyses the practical, artistic and emotional impact of the candlelight on performers and audience members” and considers the profound effect of “absolute darkness” (92). This chapter is also divided into subsections that look specifically at “Holding fire: Candlesticks, torches, lanterns”; “The candles as ‘lighting rig’”; “Pitfalls and practicalities”; “Look and feel” and “Absolute darkness”. Candlelight is the most distinguishing feature that separates the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse from other British theatres. Tosh does an evocative job of making this section the heart of his book, the way that candlelight lies at the heart of the theatre.

The early productions experimented with reduced lighting levels, inspired by candlelight’s energising quality, its warmth and sensuality, the sacrality, the liquidness and the striking, gasp-inducing beauty. The great challenge was responding to the continual hazard of live flame in a timber structure, densely packed with bodies. Modern actors, unused to the “encumbrance of a lit candle” (93), needed to use handheld light, for self-lighting purposes, stay present in the scene with a “physical hinderance” (95), and keep themselves safe. A generous technique of lighting each other developed, contributing to the style and mood of performance (97). Directors tried to mitigate problems of a darkly lit auditorium cast in shadow by using creative candlelight formations (such as candle footlights), resolving practical issues with anachronistic solutions (99).

Tosh illuminates the complexities, possibilities and early explorations of the relatively unknown potential of the lighting dynamics. After watching shows in the first two seasons, director Caroline Steinbeis and designer Max Jones were keen to experiment with the concept of the blackout and the single flame in *The Broken Heart*, thereby allowing dramatic narrative to echo “an aesthetic of claus-

trophobic darkness” (100). But these experiments, although beautiful, were practically frustrating to carry out, because of the real time that it took to light and extinguish candles. (The American Shakespeare Center has a much more straightforward approach to their candlelit Blackfriars space. They limit the use of the candles to illuminating the plays with shared lighting, without engaging in the more daring, stagey effects that have come to symbolise the lighting choices of Sam Wanamaker productions). Tosh takes us through the various developments, challenges and solutions that grew a creative language and palate using light, liminal shadow and absolute darkness, tracing the decisions of the creatives and the responses of the performers and spectators to the multisensory experience that is candlelit theatre.

Chapter six completes Part Two with “‘You Can’t Help But Be Involved’: Audience in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse” (119), which considers audiences’ responses. It looks at “Insistent intimacy”; “Talking to the audience”; and “Preferential treatment?”, addressing the question whether an audience is “a collective entity, or a disparate group of individuated ‘spectators’” (119). Tosh again leads the reader through the challenges and discoveries, with a personable voice, of archived responses from the different perspectives of those watching the shows, remarking that in a historicised space “an audience engages with the early modern drama in a more complex way” (120). The responses capture the sympathy engendered in the multisensory space where the “intimate proximity of the action” is striking (121). But the space could also be rather “too intimate” (123), especially with its associations of the Jacobean erotic. For some spectators there was a “pleasurable twinge of watching and hearing characters suffer” and for others it “went beyond the pleasurable” (124). “The SWP’s insistent intimacy meant that audience members who did not wish to be included had a potentially difficult time” (126). This chapter is a detailed offering of these tensions and engages in other academic analysis of this period of the playhouse’s development, early modern reports of theatrical viewing, crossovers and juxtapositions, and the complexities of voyeurism in many rape, incest and murder scenes that the plays are littered with. Watching a play in Sam Wanamaker Playhouse can be exposing for some audience members who “constitute part of the stage picture” (131). Tosh also reveals the economics of that stage picture since those with the least expensive tickets are hidden and obscured in the cramped upper gallery with restricted “shit” views (134). Spectatorship in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is “non-unitary” (139). All this is presented in Tosh’s accessible style, which draws easily on the wealth of information gathered by the archiving project at Globe research, although this stylistic illusion must conceal the very difficult task of picking and synthesising from an inexhaustible resource. Tosh negotiates this very well, offering a sensory tour of those early plays from the multi-perspective space of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse auditorium and the auditorium of the human souls involved.

In Part Three, “Playhouse and Research in Action”, the last two chapters, “Stagecraft in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse” and “Music and lighting in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse”, are a record of the “discoveries made during a series of public Research in Action workshops in the summers of 2014 and 2015” (143). Tosh offers vignettes of cross-pollinating, intensive workshops between creatives and

practitioners, in which he was involved, in a form of “theatrical ‘essays’” (144). Actors explored scenes following their own instincts together with the suggestions of the audience who were encouraged to move about the auditorium experiencing the action from different seats in order “to expand our understanding of the possibilities of indoor performance” (144). Looking at the relationship among performer, audience and architecture, Tosh considers subjects like the aside on a crowded stage, eavesdropping and concealment, locating scenes outdoors, and spatial possibilities of discovery spaces and backstage. Chapter eight asks how early modern dramatists and actors made use of lighting and acoustic effects in their indoor playhouses. The workshops cover a range of topics, including infernal music; under the stage and far-off music; locating sound; lighting the early modern indoor playhouse; lighting fades and *coup de théâtre*. Although it is impossible not to applaud the workshops, it feels a bit anti-climactic in the telling, with the sense that the excitement would have been in the participation and witnessing, rather than in the reportage. Sentences like “[e]ven for a modern audience, used to electronically-manipulated music, the other-worldly quality of live music that seemed to move around the interior of the Playhouse was powerful” (174), although not failing to evoke the essence of the experiment, do fail to capture the intangible experience of what “powerful” means. Unfortunately, this is a limitation of assessing live performance and workshops, and Tosh comes close to creating, with monochrome words, a sensory mirror depicting the reflections of candlelight, music, actors’ bodies, audience responses and genuine exploration and enthusiasm for knowledge, that must have characterised the extraordinary theatrical life of the early days of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

Tosh concludes his work with an epilogue, a satisfying theatrical structure to a monograph about a theatrical playing space - prologue and epilogue and three parts (acts). He positions his work as a companion volume to *Moving Shakespeare Indoors* and summarises the central focus of the book: it has “asked questions about the knowledge we can gain from reflecting on modern artistic practice in historicized playing space, and examined the challenges posed by practise-as-research when it is used to explore historical performance” (195).

Tosh’s account is an introductory panorama of the first few years of practice of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. It is a short book – some 200 pages – but enough of an appetiser that, covering many different perspectives, gives one a surprising amount of information. Although it is mostly discursive and uncritical, it offers a pleasing insight to a general public and is a useful point of departure for an academic readership that then wishes to explore their research interests in a more profound way in the Globe archives. The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an under-utilised area of written research, unlike the Globe’s main stage, and Tosh invites the reader to take up the questions he has raised for, although it is the first book dedicated to the new Playhouse, “it is certainly not the final word on the subject” (196). Hopefully *Playing Indoors* is a watershed moment, with more books to follow.

