**“Explain this Dark Enigma”: The Queen’s Men and Performance-as-Research in Stratford-upon-Avon**

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In his 2003 TV documentary series, *In Search of Shakespeare,* Michael Wood suggests that during the years before his arriving in London, William Shakespeare may have taken up a position with the Queen’s Men, the royal touring company founded in 1583 by the Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, at the behest of the Secretary of State, Francis Walsingham. When the company first arrived in Shakespeare’s hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon in 1587, they had not long suffered the loss of one of their principal actors, William Knell, who during a stop at Thame in Oxfordshire quarreled fatally with another actor (McMillin and MacLean 160). While it is impossible based on current evidence to prove that Shakespeare joined any particular company prior to his London debut (see Schoone-Jongen 101), the prospect that Knell’s demise may have been Shakespeare’s big break nonetheless makes for a good TV narrative. To illustrate the prospect, Wood invites Greg Doran, then Associate Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, to work with a company of actors to restage extracts of the Queen’s Men plays in Stratford’s Guildhall, now part of the King Edward VI School.

In Wood’s documentary, we see how as they arrive both actors and director immediately assess the space in which they are expected to perform—a long hall some seventy feet long and twenty-two feet wide, open to the rafters and with windows running the length of the west side, occupied by school desks and other furniture (fig. 1). One actor worries about the size of the playing space, while another queries the layout of the chairs. On entering the hall, the space is set up as it has been for many performances by the school’s resident boys’ company, Edward’s Boys, founded in 2003 by Perry Mills. In these boys’ productions, the staging is frequently set against the length of the hall wall, where multiple doors offer a variety of useful access points from the stairs and rooms beyond. However, Doran instinctively gravitates towards the schoolmaster’s chair, located at one end of the hall, observing that “It seems odd not to have King John sat on his throne.” Both actors and director quickly see in the hall a space that offers a variety of staging possibilities, and choose the configuration that seems to be most appropriate. In their scratch performance, the company decides to use the end of the hall, with the schoolmaster’s chair on its raised platform now promoted to throne, and providing the central focus. The audience are then arranged sitting on pupils’ desk benches in rows that stretch to the rear wall of the hall. **[Insert Fig. 1]**

The performance staged by Doran and company was conducted as an illustration for TV of the kind of theater an audience in sixteenth-century Stratford might have enjoyed, and one in which Shakespeare may have had some kind of role, before his arrival in London. The company took the space in which they performed as they found it, and by performing in daylight, with the minimum of rehearsal, hoped to reconstruct(approximately) something of an original performance. However, the visiting RSC troupe and the various iterations of the Edward’s Boys company have chosen to configure the hall space in a variety of ways to suit the needs of their particular productions best. To think that these configurations represent the conditions of an original performance is to remain unaware of the material changes that the Guildhall building has undergone in its long history, and of the local social and political tensions experienced in Stratford during the 1580s and 1590s. It is my contention that these would have had a direct impact on a company’s presentation and an audience’s reception of a particular play.

It remains true that much discussion views early modern theater primarily as a metropolitan phenomenon, despite the encouragement Sally-Beth MacLean’s work on touring, and projects like REED’s *Patrons and Performance* and the Canadian *Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men* might offer to widen our horizons. Editions of texts once performed by companies known to have toured seldom consider touring conditions, or do so as an afterthought. When they do, the supposition that performances designed for London audiences and London spaces were then adapted for a provincial audience and locale underlies editors’ critical examinations of the text (see Peele). Such an approach leads to thinking about staging, if at all, then solely in relation to purpose-built theater spaces in London, for whose configuration and organization the hard evidence remains “elusive” (Gurr, “History” 35). The recent rediscovery and excavation of the Theatre and Curtain playhouses, following the excavation of the Rose and Globe sites in the late ’80s and early ’90s, has begun to offer a fuller sense of the construction of the outdoor London playhouses. While we await further published details on the recent excavations, the discovery that the Curtain was rectangular, not polygonal as previously thought (MOLA), and that the Rose was reconfigured by Henslowe in 1592 (Bowsher and Miller; Foakes 9) further underlines two things. First, metropolitan venues were not as homogenous as once believed—or as suggested by some of the surviving pictorial evidence—and second, unexcavated sites hide surprises.[[1]](#endnote-1) Moreover, we should not forget that even when a large proportion of the site is excavated, the foundations and groundworks tell us little about the building above ground: the reconstruction of the Globe on London’s Bankside claims only to be an academic “best guess” (Gurr, “History” 44), and the above-ground construction was based on evidence from extant standing buildings and information gleaned from the surviving contract laying out the specifications for the Fortune Theater (see Greenfield).

Andrew Gurr has already argued that play texts “must be related to the distinctive repertoire of the company that performed them and the kinds of playhouse the company was using” (Gurr, “Historicism” 72). As archaeological excavation has made earlier speculation over the construction and dimensions of the London venues less secure, it seems appropriate to turn the spotlight on those buildings, which include the Stratford Guildhall, which we know to have hosted early modern performance, and which are still extant. Performance, although ephemeral, was constrained both by the material conditions in which it was situated and by the local social and political contexts of that material space. Therefore, greater understanding of text and performance can only be achieved through studying both the spaces and places that informed and framed them.

I wish to suggest that Stratford Guildhall, and similar buildings throughout the country, offer a unique resource for historians and practitioners of early modern drama. The work of the *Records of Early English Drama* project has shown that visits to provincial towns and performances in the spaces made available there represented common practice for Elizabethan acting companies. The growing success of the London theaters from the 1590s onwards may have meant that they eclipsed touring theater and its practices, but the knowledge that informed and drove the metropolitan playhouses’ rise stemmed from touring traditions. In particular, players’ use of, and response to the demands and opportunities represented by, the playing spaces they had encountered on the road in previous decades must have had a profound influence when they came to settle in permanent bases in the capital, and continued to inform their practices when returning to the road.

When the Canadian “Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men”project began, in 2006, to explore the repertory of the royal company as “a research-creation exercise in theatrical history” (Cockett 230), they worked with a mixture of modern and “original” practices to stage the project’s research into all-male casting and performance of gender, rehearsal practices, and touring venues.[[2]](#endnote-2) Three types of touring venue—a tavern stage, a university stage, and a court stage—were organized in venues in Hamilton and Toronto. The organizers did not, however, choose a guildhall stage, for which considerably less work exists on the organization of performance space.[[3]](#endnote-3) Given the frequency with which the Queen’s Men and contemporary companies visited such venues, and being in a better position to gain access to a guildhall in the UK, my Queen’s Men project therefore sought to take advantage of working in an extant early modern performance venue. Working on extracts from the Queen’s Men play, *The Troublesome Reign of King John,* I sought to address some of the challenges for performance both inherent in the play itself, and in bringing the play to the particular venue of Stratford Guildhall. Working with a company of student actors from the University of York, we ran an initial workshop in the Guildhall, followed by a short rehearsal period in York, before returning to Stratford for two performances in the Guildhall in July 2011.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This essay sets out some of the research that underpinned these explorations, and reflections on the practical experiments we undertook in Stratford. Central to the project was the tenet that buildings must be understood in the contexts of their occupants and the activities they housed, and this approach had implications for understanding both the staging and reception of performance. The essays collected by J. R. Mulryne in *The Guild and Guild Buildings of Shakespeare’s Stratford* offer a comprehensive discussion of the venue and the wider dealings of its occupants; here I offer discussion of the Guildhall space and consider the experiment we undertook there.

**The Guildhall**

The Queen’s Men visited Stratford-upon-Avon in 1587, 1592, 1593, and 1597. In 1587 Stratford was a modest town in both size and economy, and may stand representative of many similar settlements visited by travelling companies. Lying in the heart of the Warwickshire countryside, it sits within striking distance of the main urban centers of the Midlands and Cotswolds. Nearby lay the country seats of two of the most influential nobles in Elizabeth I’s court: Ambrose Dudley at Warwick Castle and his brother, Robert, Earl of Leicester, based at Kenilworth. Surrounded by potentially lucrative stopping places, Stratford was perfectly situated to become an essential break on any route that took in the West Midlands, and in the thirty years between 1568 and 1597 rewards given at more than thirty visits by professional theater companies are recorded in the town’s Minutes and Account Books of the Corporation.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Elizabethan government viewed travelling subjects with sensitivity and some suspicion, particularly larger bands of men that drew crowds to inns and threatened disorder (McMillin and MacLean 13). The regulation of players and performance had grown steadily during Elizabeth’s reign, and the 1572 Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds insisted players could only travel under license and noble patronage. On arrival at a town, companies were required to present themselves to the civic authorities to gain permission to present their plays in the town.

Drawing on the 1639 report of R. Willis about the practices at Gloucester’s Bothall in the 1570s (Douglas and Greenfield 362-63), Siobhan Keenan has described the order of the licensing process as follows: a company presented themselves to the town authorities, and on examination they were granted license to play. Subsequently they performed before the mayor and council in the town hall, at which other citizens were also welcome, after which they are free to play elsewhere in the town (Keenan 15). However, a statute in the York House Books from 1582 states that

now it is agreed by these presentes that players of Interludes now come, and comyng from hencforth to this cittie shall play but twise in the common hall of this cyttie viz: once before the Lord maior and aldermen &c. and thither before the commons (qtd. in Johnston and Rogerson 1: 399).

This might suggest that, at least in some venues, the first performance *itself* constituted part of the licensing process, and only after this performance was a visiting company able to perform to a wider audience. But we can go further: the licensing process was a fundamental feature of touring practice. The act of commanding a performance was a manifest demonstration by the mayor and council of their authority within the town, and established their dominance over visiting companies, even over players in the service of the monarch. Although the Queen’s Men were denied permission to play much less frequently than most, the very process of licensing companies served to insist that in town matters immediate authority lay with the civic powers, no matter how influential a visitor’s patron might be. This is not say that the process was a one-way exhibition of power. In return, the license also provided players with mayoral endorsement, which might help support subsequent performances—it would at least help get the word out for when the company moved to the local inns and other locations about the town. Importantly for authorities concerned with public disorder, by conducting the performance and licensing process in the town hall, the accustomed place for both jurisdictional and business hearings, the setting created “an aura of proper decorum appropriate to performance in the town’s seat of government” (Tittler 143-44). It had the additional benefit of containing the performance within a supervised and controlled space, and allowed the authorities to scrutinize the content of performances before receiving wider exposure.

So when the Queen’s Men first arrived in Stratford in 1587, it was to the Guildhall they went, and there in the upper hall that they offered their command performance. The space which we can visit today does not exactly represent what a company would have found in the 1580s.[[6]](#endnote-6) Extensive archival research and archaeological survey conducted by Jonathan Clark, Kate Giles, and me revealed an extensive program of repairs, developments, extensions and other changes to the hall and the wider complex of buildings from when they were first erected in 1417 through to the twentieth century. While many of the records refer to general maintenance or to technological upgrades, significant changes followed the dissolution of the hall’s medieval Guild and the shift from religious to nominally secular activities. Until the mid-sixteenth century, the southern two bays of the upper hall were partitioned off to provide two service rooms, including a buttery, which facilitated the customary feasts held by the High Bailiff and Aldermen. Around the time John Brownsword was appointed schoolmaster in 1565/6, the service rooms had their internal partition wall removed and the growing grammar school moved from its smaller room next door into the Guildhall itself (Green 81-82; Giles and Clark 155). With the school occupying the two bays partitioned off from the main space at the southern end, only three bays of the upper hall remained for more general use by the Corporation members and their activities.

The full dimensions of the hall are seventy feet long by twenty-two feet wide, but with the partition wall in place the space available to visiting players measures only thirty-eight feet deep, in which the audience also had to sit. Whether they sat end-on to a performance, on three sides, or in some other configuration, there is no direct evidence. The hall seems to have contained forms, or benches--one of which was damaged during the Queen’s Men’s first visit in 1587 (Savage 4: 31), although it is not clear how or at what stage of the proceedings the bench was broken—but the surviving school desks, as well as the schoolmaster’s chair which rather enticed Greg Doran during *In Search of Shakespeare*, are more recent artefacts. There are records of a master’s chair existing at the time; however, it would have resided in the schoolroom. One notable feature of the space confirmed by archaeological survey was the existence of a raised dais platform at the end of the hall. Although this has been since removed at Stratford, they are a common feature in many surviving halls across the country.

It has been argued that such daises offered actors a natural platform for performance (Keenan 36), and Alan Nelson’s work on university performances might offer some support for this theory. However, the elaborate stages described by Nelson, with scaffolds offering galleries and several levels of seating, were erected for in-house productions by university students occupying their home turf (31, 41- 43). In the civic hall spaces, and seeking corporate approval for an extended stay in the vicinity, an acting company was in a different position. Robert Tittler argues that

In almost all . . . instances, [the mayor’s] presence was intimately bound up with the use of the hall. At least in a metaphorical sense the mayor’s stage, manor house, and work-place, it was also the symbol of his authority and, through him, of the dignity and position of the town itself. (107)

Hall spaces were strictly hierarchical, with a low end giving access to service rooms and kitchens, and a high end where the mayor and aldermen sat on benches and chairs, often on a raised platform, as at Stratford (Tittler 114; Clark et al. 57). Chairs, while becoming more common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were still rare enough pieces of furniture to be seen as seats of honor, and associated with power and dignity, much as were ecclesiastical cathedra, and were bound up with the processes of mayoral investiture and of oath-taking (Tittler 110-14).

Therefore, while Keenan rightly suggests that the upper end of a hall held more status (36), this is precisely the reason that players are not likely to have been permitted to perform there: it is difficult to imagine in such circumstances that a mayor and alderman would cede the locus of their authority to supplicant players. It is far more likely that the council sat in their accustomed places on the benches and chairs at the high end of the hall, while players performed at the low, service end. The modest height and size of a platform in any case would have offered players no great advantage, and offered a substantially smaller performance area. John Wasson’s survey of Devon performances led him to declare that “only two entries out of the hundreds concerning drama in the county suggest that players used anything but the bare floor for a stage” (xxvi). Wasson’s observation has not yet been contradicted by overwhelming evidence to the contrary elsewhere, and while some very limited evidence exists for scaffolds being erected for visiting companies to perform on, for example at Gloucester’s Bothall (Southern 333-40), no record of such can be found in the otherwise meticulous records of the Stratford Corporation. However, whatever questionable benefit a company might gain from using a small platform at the high end of a hall, the spatial organization of the lower end would have provided a more enticing prospect. In halls across the country it is common to find at the low end hall screens, or walls and doorways, with rooms to the rear and sides, which might serve well for the demands of a play, providing easy access and egress, and spaces which might act as a tiring house. This is also the case at Stratford. It is far more likely, then, that the council sat in their accustomed places on the dais platform while the players performed at the lower end of the hall, against the schoolroom partition.

In addition to providing evidence for a partition wall separating the schoolroom from the main hall, the archaeological survey also demonstrated that many of the doors now visible in the hall—and which might otherwise offer potential staging choices—are later additions, while others, including the door to a “prevey,” have been blocked up (Clark et al.62-63). This would have left a corridor passage passing along the length of the schoolroom, giving access to a single door at the rear of the hall which led to a spacious side chamber (fig. 2). The partitioned schoolroom must have had at least one access point, probably from the corridor, and there may have been a second into the main hall space; but neither documents nor the building fabric reveal any details. The side chamber is almost certainly the one recorded from the early 1580s as the “chamber where the Armour hangeth” and “harness chamber” (Savage 3: 84), and it was at times rented out (Savage 3: 64), making it a strong contender to act as tiring-house for visiting players (the alternative being the schoolroom itself). As well as changes to doorways, the original windows were replaced in the nineteenth century and in some cases probably enlarged, and while they likely follow the original fenestration pattern the quantity and quality of natural light in the hall now is somewhat better than in the late sixteenth century (Clark *et al* 54-6)*.* **[Insert Fig. 2]**

The archaeological and historical investigation into a building which might at first glance seem unchanged since Shakespeare first set foot in it as a schoolboy revealed instead a space which has undergone numerous changes, from the superficial to those which fundamentally altered the structure and fabric of the building. In turn, the reinterpretation of the space demanded a different approach to performance in the space. Not least, the assumption that a company would perform on a platform measuring approximately fourteen feet wide by six feet deep was overturned in favor of a space that, when also allowing for a moderately sized audience, measured twenty-two feet wide and twenty-seven feet deep. It was from these starting points that our practical exploration of Queen’s Men plays had to begin.

**Staging *The Troublesome Reign of King John***

*The Troublesome Reign of King John* is one of nine plays identified by Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean as having the securest attribution to the Queen’s Men (86-93). Following a similar structure to the Shakespeare play on the same subject, it depicts the problematic reign of a king who moves between proto-Protestant heroism and tyranny, and must face French territorial disputes, a Machiavellian Catholic church, and internal rebellion. Written around the date of the Armada and the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, and when the successor to Elizabeth was still unknown, the play raised questions of legitimacy, rebellion, invasion, and religious authority that Elizabethan spectators would recognize as key issues of the day.

These were issues with which the Stratford aldermen were intimately familiar. A number of the Corporation’s jurisdictional rights had been contested in the recent past by John Dudley (see Bearman, “Reformation”; Dyer), and the aldermen had chosen to board up, rather than remove, the Catholic murals in their chapel, either as an expense-saving exercise or to accommodate a return to Rome should the occasion arise (Giles et al.). Well aware of political and religious tensions within their own town, the aldermen may have viewed certain scenes of the play with apprehension. As officers of the court, the presentation of due process during the Falconbridge dispute would have been intimately familiar, but the king’s refusal to engage with the law would have caused disquiet. Equally, the independent-minded citizens of Angers, refusing to acknowledge one power over another and seeking to find a reconciliation, must have struck a chord in a town that had struggled to gain a charter of incorporation, and where disagreement with Dudley over legal jurisdiction was still remembered. John’s dying speech, lamenting “[t]he fierce invade of him that conquers kings” (2.8.60), would surely have prompted the aldermen to remember the medieval Dance of Death wall painting, only recently covered up in the Guild Chapel next door. In these contexts, a performance of *The Troublesome Reign* in the Guildhall offers further layers of interpretive possibility.

It is a play that, both in cast size and staging demands, poses challenges for provincial performances. Yet I wanted to resist the automatic assumption made by the play’s recent editor, Charles Forker, that this was a play that could only be staged with the full facilities of a London playhouse (151, n. 191-92). Rather than stage the whole play, my aim was to explore a selection of material to address a narrower set of questions, and to devise methodologies that might inform future research and a fuller production of this or other Queen’s Men plays.

In the first instance, the experiment engaged with the physical practicalities of staging the play in the Stratford Guildhall. Given our new understanding of both the configuration of the hall space and the process of licensing a performance, the northernmost bay of the hall, where the aldermen’s dais platform once stood, was allocated for audience seating. A plain cloth was hung from the beam at the south end of the third bay along the dimensions of the original partition wall separating the schoolroom from the main hall (fig. 3). A gap was left to provide an exit and entrance where the corridor would have run, and without convincing evidence over the existence of a second doorway from the main hall to the schoolroom we opted to remain conservative and rely on the corridor entrance only (fig. 2). This configuration left two bays clear as a performance space. In the absence of direct evidence for the building of a raised platform, or for a curtain suspended at the back of the stage area, I opted to follow a principle of basic requirements, and decided that all staging decisions should be fitted to suit the bare space. **[Insert Fig. 3]**

Addressing the particular demands of this performance space and this play also allows us to extend more general questions which might apply to any venue. First, would it be possible to negotiate the many entrances and exits, sometimes involving large numbers of people, when the hall provided us with only one point of access? Second, would it prove difficult to fit and arrange all seventeen actors on the stage in the largest scenes? Third, in scenes set at town gates, and in the absence of a gallery in the hall itself, how would actors appear “above” or “on the walls”? More generally, I wanted to think about how hierarchy might be displayed spatially, how actors moved through the space, and how they interacted amongst themselves and with the audience.

McMillin has identified a series of tableaux throughout the play, which appear to demand a statement and reinterpretation of spatial hierarchy, from which patterns of movement and spatial arrangement might be explored (McMillin and MacLean). The selection of scenes in the first instance focused on these moments: King John’s first entrance, the confrontation between the English and French armies in front of the citizens on Angers’ walls, John’s second coronation, the oath-taking by the English rebel nobles on St Edmundsbury altar, and, finally, John’s death bed. Looking at the circumstances of these tableaux, we can identify the types of scenes that surround them, namely oath-taking, legal processes of pleading cases and passing judgement, and lastly, reconciliation.

In rehearsals, we needed a set of protocols to guide actors where to stand, where to move, and when to do so if not indicated explicitly in the text. Clearly, all the decisions taken during the rehearsal process were our own, and not those of the original Queen’s Men. In the first instance we tried to develop principles for movement based on hierarchy. Characters were permitted freedom of movement according to their relative rank. John, being king, was allowed the freedom to move where he saw fit, while others were more restricted according to their status. Queen Eleanor, closest in rank to John, most frequently drew John aside in conference or assumed authority in a scene, admonishing the French Ambassador, Chatillon (1.1.51-61), and steering the marriage pact between Blanche and Lewis (1.4.99-102, 163-67). Senior nobles would situate themselves near the king or the symbol of authority, whether a throne, or an altar. Lesser, unnamed lords, servants, and supernumeraries remained at a distance, often withdrawing upstage or to the extreme sides of the stage space.

However, in key moments this general principle of staging was broken, an example of which comes at the height of the negotiations between the English and French forces at Angers, when the Citizen suggests that John’s niece, Blanche, marry the French Dauphin, Lewis (1.4.80-85). Previously, Blanche has been compelled mostly to observe the main action from the edges of the stage, during which the two kings, Constance and Eleanor, Lewis, Limoges, and Philip the Bastard all clash. Following excursions between the opposing armies, Blanche’s potential power is revealed—the Bastard, who has been promised wealth, lands and titles by Eleanor, sees an opportunity to seal his claim though Blanche. He offers her an appropriate token (1.4.40), but does so outside the focus of the main quarrel between the kings, which seeks to establish whose army won. When the Citizen suggests Blanche and Lewis marry, Blanche is brought forward and immediately becomes the focus of the argument and the obstacle to peace that must be overcome. John asks her if she will take the Dauphin for a husband, but she has to be taken aside and coached by Eleanor while the detail of the marriage is worked out (1.4.131-41). Blanche does not reveal her opinion in speech, but whether this is through canny diplomacy or lack of license is not revealed by the text. However, her movements through the space and interactions with key players offer ways for Blanche to make her feelings known more readily, and in our interpretation her diplomatic response to John was undercut by her silent argument Eleanor in the moment following.

Scenes in which a large number of actors is required on a small stage can pose a challenge. As tempers rise between opposing sides at Angers, the dialogue moves swiftly from King Philip, to John, to Constance, Eleanor, Arthur, Lewis, the Bastard, Limoges, and back. The supporters of each side add to the number of bodies on stage, and in a space the size of the Guildhall it might become impossible to see the principal characters and follow the argument. The only practical way of negotiating such a problem is to introduce a certain amount of movement. The scene is dynamic, and, used at the right times, movement helps convey the growing heatedness of the interchanges, which is then brought to a pause, both verbally and physically, by King Philip’s interjection, “Lordings, forbear” (1.2.167). The rapidly escalating threats and sabre rattling allow a blurring of the strict divisions, if the quarrelling lords leave the safety of their armies to approach each other more closely. Philip’s “forbear” not only pauses the quarrel but resets the spatial division as the armies regroup on either side to show support for their king.

There are examples elsewhere where the physical and fictional spaces are blurred, and these prompted our solutions for the staging of episodes in *The Troublesome Reign* that appear difficult to stage in the Guildhall. The key example we explored was the arrival of the citizens of Angers. The stage direction indicates that they “*appear upon the walls*” (1.2.192). The lack of a physical structure at Stratford, be it a gallery or a raised platform, to serve as a separate space, forced the citizens to enter at the same physical level as the English and French armies (fig. 4). To do so risked admitting the citizens into hostile space; however, as they are not seized by either force, an alternative logic of space must hold true. **[Insert Fig. 4]**

The manner in which the citizens enter the stage, under the context of negotiation, invests in the stage space which they occupy a privileged status, as if, indeed, they still occupied their city walls. In this case, it is understood that they may not be harmed, and that the terms of parley guarantee safe passage. Alternative stagings might suggest themselves—having the actors stand on borrowed furniture or, as I have speculated elsewhere, even going as far as to remove panels in the roof truss above the partition wall (Jones 217-18)—but in a theater predicated on an audience’s use of their imaginary forces, our solution certainly didn’t feel impossible.

The revelation that arrived from conducting our performances in the original space of the Guildhall was the way in which our staging decisions were often prompted by observations about how the building could shape performance. The material structure of the building, its posts, studs, and trusses, offered actors a series of reference points to help them move around the space. They also helped frame certain scenes and moments. The stage space, occupying two central bays of the Guildhall, was divided in the middle by a queen post truss. While normally queen post trusses consist of vertical timbers placed symmetrically on the tie-beam of a roof to support purlins, at Stratford the timbers form a “Y” shape, the effect of which was to draw the eye down to an obvious focal point in the center of the stage. This framing of space helped emphasize a particularly powerful position to occupy, and it was around this position that it felt natural to stage the series of tableaux that run through the play, particularly John’s coronation (fig. 3), and the swearing of oaths on the altar at St Edmundsbury. The exchange between the French and English kings in front of Angers, and the arrival of the citizens on the walls, also formed a similar tableau, and moving the citizens forward from the rear of the stage had the added benefit of positioning them directly under the queen post; the building could therefore also give the audience an indication of control and importance within a scene. Furthermore, the power of the central position was mirrored in the audience, where the high bailiff would have sat in his chair directly opposite first the actor-king, and later the Citizen of Angers.

Being confined to a single entrance reduced the options over organizing stage traffic. Our initial worry about the practicalities of making entrances was calmed when we found it was possible to get large numbers on and off without too much difficulty. While a second entrance would undoubtedly have allowed us to make some scene changes swifter, there was no moment where the action was especially hindered by its lack. Perhaps the most unhelpfully lengthy scene changes came as the English and French armies exited, allowing Philip the Bastard and Limoges to return, duel, and exit again, and then re-enter. We do not know what the Queen’s Men might have done had there been two available exits, but if they followed a strict logic of space, still only one doorway might represent the exit to the battlefield and the two armies would still not have been able to exit or enter any more quickly. Of course, there is no reason to suggest that the Queen’s Men would not have had each army exit by a different door if such an opportunity arose.

Frequently, however, the largest movements of actors on and off stage were separated by short coda scenes between two actors. The change between the first and second scene of the play, as the English leave to prepare their voyage to France, and the French antagonists arrive to discuss Arthur’s claim, would demand a high level of traffic across the stage and could cause a bottleneck. Instead, once the majority of the English lords have left, Philip the Bastard remains behind with Margaret (1.1.319), easing the flow of actors off and onto stage. A similar exchange between Arthur and his mother Constance at the end of the fourth scene also permits the English and French armies to exit before they re-enter at the top of scene five. Later scenes follow a similar pattern, and exits involving greater numbers of actors recur throughout the play.

Moreover, in some instances the long corridor from the side chamber-cum-tiring house into the main hall helped make sense of particular entrances, although this may have been a product more of happenstance than design. The notable example comes as the rebel English lords gather at Bury St. Edmunds (2.3). Essex and Pembroke have already assembled and await the remainder:

*Essex*: Now wanteth but the rest to end this work.

In pilgrim’s habit come our holy troop

A furlong hence with swift unwonted pace.

Maybe they are the persons you expect.

*Pembroke*: With swift unwonted gait! See what a thing is zeal,

That spurs them on with fervence to this shrine.

Now joy come to them for their true intent,

And in good time here come the war-men all,

That sweat in body by the mind’s disease.

*Enter [the] Bastard etc.*

Hap and heart’s ease, brave lordings, be your lot. (2.3.18-27)

Essex either sees or reports the approach of Philip the Bastard and other troops, and while Pembroke’s reply might indicate that he sees the group immediately, he has certainly seen or heard them by the time he says: “And in good time here come the war-men all.” Pembroke’s two lines from when he recognizes their imminent arrival gave ample cover for the Bastard and his entourage to enter along the corridor.

The single entrance also meant our actors did not have to worry about choosing the right entrance or exit, something which had benefits when working in an unfamiliar space. Boys from King Edward’s School, who joined us for only a few hours of rehearsal prior to the first performance, found this feature particularly helpful. As they were unfamiliar with the play and were relying on the more experienced actors to direct their movements, having a single means of egress simplified matters significantly. This is not an argument for the single entrance model being preferred by the Queen’s Men, nor that they would have had more difficulty staging a play in a venue with more doorways. Nevertheless, being restricted to a single doorway would have demanded appropriate alterations to staging decisions if the company more regularly performed in a differently configured venue.

While describing how a play might have transferred from one venue to the next would require a closer evaluation and comparison of another space, we might still suppose that actors could map their performances onto the spatial reference points offered by the timbers and windows of halls like the Stratford Guildhall offered. Our experience of exploring the hall in the short periods of workshop and rehearsal was one in which actors moved around the space, looking for markers to help orientate themselves and the work they had begun in a studio, noting which floorboards gave particularly ominous creaks. This particular aspect of exploration had not been made an explicit expectation of the actors, but was a product of their own responses to the building in which they found themselves. I make no claims that this directly reflected the practice of visiting companies in the late sixteenth century, but it nevertheless suggests that something close to a phenomenological attention to the peculiarities of the individual space might have a direct and useful bearing on the approach to performance.

**Conclusion**

Investigation into civic halls like the Stratford Guildhall enhances our contextual understanding of their inhabitants and the players and plays they received. Considering the local sensitivities to the political and religious forces of the moment allows us to reevaluate a play which might otherwise be viewed somewhat simplistically as a pro-monarchical, proto-Protestant propaganda piece as one in which fundamental ideas concerning royal and local authority were being explored and, ultimately, left somewhat ambiguous. It reinforces that, in addition to providing entertainment, the Queen’s Men performances also offered a means through which people in the provinces could engage with key political ideas of the moment.

More importantly, the guildhall building’s role as the focus of civic power, and the regulatory nature of the licensing process forces us to rethink the configuration of the performance space. We begin to see how the building and its occupants must have shaped performance choices taken by those players. Of these choices we can have varying degrees of certainty. The archaeology of buildings gives a clearer indication of key features—doors, corridors, screens, platforms and galleries (or their absence)—which at a simple but fundamental level impact the staging of any performance. A clearer understanding of the function and organization of civic events in the hall, of which the licensing process was one, allows us further to narrow the range of configuration possibilities for guildhall performance spaces. The extent to which we can confidently recapture the moment-by-moment performance choices taken by an early modern company remains moot, but when working with actors in the present, asking them to engage experientially with the building, and to explore the particular significances and resonances of the play being prepared had for that space and its occupants, offers new insights, and an additional tool in examining early modern touring drama. The intersection and interrogation of theatre and archaeology, such as that discussed by Sally Barnden in this special issue and notably by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, is not only confined to excavated remains. It can be found when reintroducing performance to spaces, which, like the Stratford Guildhall, survive intact—and untapped—across the country.

**Notes**

1. For a more extensive discussion of the ramifications of the Curtain excavation, see Syme. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a fuller discussion of the “Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men” / “Performing the Queen’s Men” project, see Cockett, and also *Performing the Queen’s Men*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David Kathman has produced a number of pieces on tavern stages (“Inn-Yard Playhouses”; “London Inns”), Alan Nelson’s work on Cambridge offers a model for university stages, while John Astington has suggested an equivalent for Elizabeth’s court (308-09). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The film of the performances is available on the project’s website (“Film”). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Bearman, *Minutes*;Fox; Mulryne; Savage. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The recent work by King Edward’s School to open the space to the public, which has included moving the school’s library from the lower hall to elsewhere on the school campus, and introducing museum interpretation to the rooms in the hall, has done something to recapture the sense of the original spaces. There are, however, a variety of later interventions in to the fabric of the building which mean the rooms remain somewhat distant from what might have been encountered in 1587.

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