

Sam Wanamaker and the other South Bank Show

a profile for CUE by ANTHONY McCALL

From Saxon times onwards, the area known as Bankside, on the south side of the Thames, held great importance for City dwellers, who were constrained by strict laws governing public morals and behaviour in London. Regulations outlawing gaming, drunkenness and any other public 'affront' arising from a substantial gathering of people led to Bankside assuming the role of an area of liberation, where people could enjoy themselves without fear of prosecution. For across the river from the City, such laws could hold no jurisdiction.

Access to Bankside was easily achieved from any point on the river front, not just at London Bridge – by ferry: the waterman's trade was so lucrative as a result of this vast traffic that many were prepared to risk prosecution by illegally plying an unlicensed ferry.

I quote from one of Sam Wanamaker's several pamphlets on Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses at his Bear Gardens Museum . . . on the historic Bankside. Not unnaturally, they offer a wealth of concise, easily-digested information on the dozen-odd main theatres, the players and audiences, in roneo'd sheets. I can't resist returning to them to fill in the background history, to explain Wanamaker's devotion to his *idée fixe*, the Globe project.

By the sixteenth century, the popular attractions of bear- and bull-baiting, cockfighting and the 'stews', or brothels, were joined by players' companies, who founded their purpose-built public playhouses. They drew all sections of society and became an immediate success, lasting right up until the Commonwealth. Although theatres were once more permitted after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, it was the end of the long Bankside tradition as the 'Mediaeval Soho of London'. The newly-developed and more fashionable West End of London had taken over as the natural home of Restoration drama, with its own fashions, dramatic themes and stylistic treatment. The Bankside arenas and playhouses had been destroyed by Cromwell and the break-up of the house players' companies brought an end to the Renaissance Theatre. One could have detected little relationship between this new art form and the now outmoded artistic achievement of Shakespeare and his Bankside contemporaries.

So ended a 70-year golden age of British theatre, as we now rightly regard it, beginning in 1576 with James Burbage's playhouse in Shoreditch, The Theater (sic), and ended in 1644 with the Puritan suppression of all

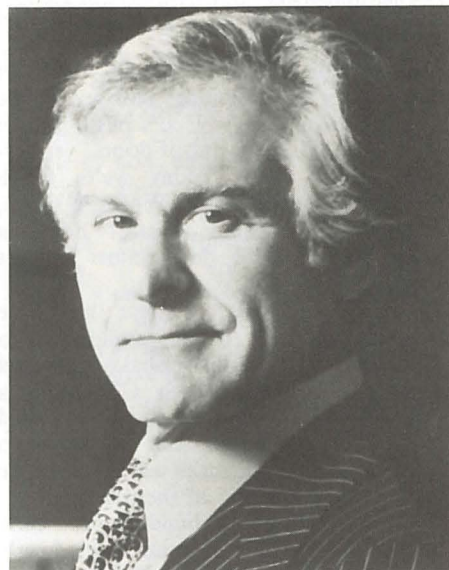
forms of public entertainment. There were at least 11 permanent playhouses open to the public immediately outside the City of London and several halls within the boundaries used, at least in theory, for private purposes, with one-night performances of amateurs.

Rough calculations show that up to 15,000 people could have visited the playhouses in one week in 1595, and more like 25,000 in 1620. Thus, about ten per cent of the population visited the theatres regularly, far more than today.

The Swan (1595-1637), the largest of these playhouses, held some 3,000, or the same as a large Victorian music hall, or three times the modern average. So, with their non-scenic stages and heavy demands on the actors to entertain with their skills alone, the plays were partly accepted as a game. It is through a study of the playhouses themselves and their stage-craft that it is possible to evoke the contemporary appeal of Shakespeare's plays, and others of the period. And it can often invigorate and illuminate today's theatre-craft.

The ingenuity and rapid success of our earliest theatres, and above all their manifest practicality, fascinated Sam Wanamaker from an early age. 'I was inoculated with the disease' he declares jokingly, 'while still at college in Chicago'. Later, he set his heart on acting the great roles, after drama school, and in due course, on recreating that remarkable, crudely-built Globe where so many of the Bard's later works were first performed, 'the greatest theatre since the Greeks' as he calls it.

After a protracted ten-year campaign, rather than the two originally envisaged, it now looks certain that the Globe will rise once again on Bankside. Whether we would have got even this far without the zeal of Wanamaker is a leading question and one to which he replies that he was immeasurably helped by the right timing. The debate over the future of such dockland sites as Bankside arose after the bombing of the War and growing containerisation of shipping turned the former quaysides and warehouses into dereliction. Community and residential groups put pressure on the planning authorities to provide for their needs; whereas commercial interests offered the prospect of higher rateable properties and often higher density of redevelopment, leading to higher income from rateable value, and rates. Since Wanamaker's project could not be classified as residential, it became identified with the unpopular com-



mercial lobby and no amount of persuasion could remove the taint of such establishment associations. At best the Globe was regarded as elitist. Michael Heseltine's decision last autumn however, signalled the final approval for a mixed redevelopment on the site on condition it incorporated the Globe.

The 2.5 acre site will comprise 100,000 sq ft of offices, housing, shops, a restaurant, The Globe and a riverside walkway, which is already being cobbled. (The sight of it gets Wanamaker all excited). The Globe's main function will be educational, a living museum, since for part of the year it will stage productions. They will be during daylight hours, for it lies open to the sky; there will be no 'cheating' like installing electric lights. The entire 'wooden O' will seat 1,000 with room for 600 groundlings in the typical three-tiered circular style of the period. The main fabric is expected to be timber, lathe, plaster and thatch and the price-tag around £1 million, including catering and exhibition areas.

The back-up team comprises Glynn Wickham, Bristol University's head of drama, as historical consultant; Sir Hugh Casson as overall consultant for the erection of the building; and David Yeomans, chief information officer at the Timber Research Association, will advise on 17th century craftsmanship. There may be novel possibilities for running practical courses to instruct in many of the old building techniques, as apprentices observe the long-lost skills during the erection.

'Every scholar of Shakespeare and his contemporaries will benefit from having that building built' asserts Wanamaker. 'And actors, likewise. For much more rural accent were used on-stage at the time; and audiences felt rather like they were at . . . say, the races today. You see, there were very few events other than carnivals, cockfights, bows and arrows, hangings and occasional pageants on the river, in those days. So going to the open-air theatre, you rolled up and took your chances on getting in. Everybody went, rich, poor, noisy, quiet. They sat on bare boards or brought cushions, and sometimes food. An actor