

# Bear Garden Shakespeare

Theatric Tourist FRANCIS REID Crosses the Thames

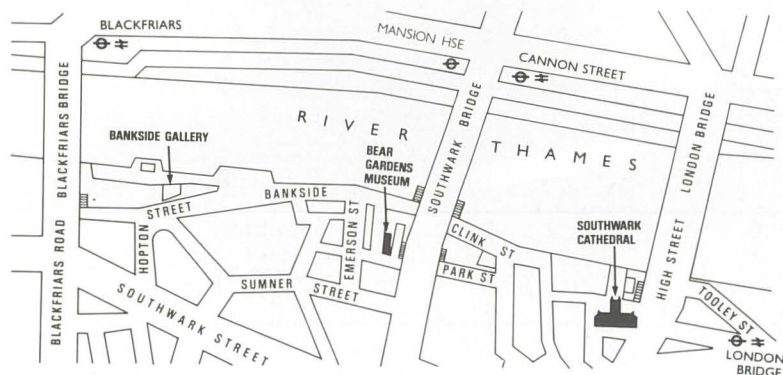
The great days of South Bank entertainment on London's Thames are pre-restoration and post-war. From the puritanical closing of the theatres in 1642 until the institutional opening of the Royal Festival Hall in 1951, the South Bank was an area prominent in commerce rather than the performing arts. However at the turn of the sixteenth century a thriving centre for theatrical and allied spectator arts was located not far downstream from today's cluster of dramatic, music and video houses. Since 1970 it has been an obsession of Sam Wanamaker that a replica of Shakespeare's Globe should arise here on Bankside.

Strangely, the major problem that inhibits action is not the usual one of money but a complex ideological tangle of local com-

an alternative to plays.

Bear baiting was one of the principal recreations of the area which was also notable for its profusion of stews and brothels. The displays in the museum set out to record the total atmosphere as well as the dramatic performances that flourished there. This is aided enormously by visitors' awareness that they are standing on the very spot where it all happened. And the warehouse itself, now painted throughout in red and white, has an air of centuries of toil and sin which have been hastily but barely whitewashed over.

At the entrance, eight feet of stuffed bear welcomes the visitor: not the sort of teddy that anyone would wish to bait or see baited — and therefore a reminder of the difficulty



munity priorities. So it may well be some considerable time before Southwark Bridge funnels a stampede of umbrella carrying theatric tourists eager to experience Shakespeare restored. Meanwhile there is a goodly motive for today's committed explorer to seek out Bankside because, less than a hundred yards from the original site of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, there is **The Bear Gardens Museum of the Shakespearean Stage**.

The museum is housed in a converted Georgian warehouse in Bear Gardens, named after the bear baiting ring which stood on the site until replaced by the Hope playhouse. Indeed the Hope was, in today's terminology, a multipurpose venue with demountable stage to allow bear baiting as

of projecting ourselves back into an understanding of that time. Its effect on me was a resolve that if I want to get any closer to an understanding of Elizabethan audience response, my future will have to include attendance at a bullfight.

The museum's display method is to supplement photographic blow-ups of contemporary drawings and documents with model reconstructions. Inevitably much of our knowledge of the Shakespearean stage is based on conjecture. But scholarship is painstakingly filling in the gaps with a skill which is on a par with that demonstrated by the greatest exponents of criminal detection and forensic science. Being a popular museum, targeted at the casual seeker after a broader understanding



rather than at the specialist concerned with niceties of detail, the captions tend to present their well founded conjectures as if they were facts. This is the right approach: the overall story would be confused and diluted by too much balancing of subtle variations of possible, probable and perhaps.

The graphics present a comprehensive picture — and, because we are standing there, an evocative one — of the actors, the audiences and their playhouses, all set within the context of sixteenth/seventeenth century Southwark society. The models of the playhouses, including the Hope, the Curtain and the first and second Globes, acknowledge their debt to the scholarship of C. Walter Hodges. They would benefit from some clearer indication of scale. A model of a Frost Fair on the frozen Thames will stir anyone whose body chemistry includes the merest drop of red entrepreneurial blood.

The exhibited material includes the growth of indoor theatres like Blackfriars and the masques at Whitehall, and its period ends with the closures of these theatres and the Bankside playhouses in 1642. When theatrical activity resumed after the restoration, it was in the indoor theatres north of the river that the drama and opera developed — leaving Bankside to await the departure of dockland and the arrival of San Wanamaker.

Above the museum there is a reconstruction of the stage of the Cockpit. Doubtless people enjoy themselves acting and watching the productions there, but I find it a poor simulation. Apart from the stage being meaningless without an appropriate auditorium, the construction and painting are shoddy in the wrong sort of way — there is a world of difference between rough (which it should be) and shoddy (which it should not). I would go so far as to suggest that it might just possibly do harm by creating a misunderstanding of just how splendid are the Globe Trust's development plans.

For, in addition to telling the Bankside story, this museum has a function to act as a promotional shop window for the Globe project which will include with its full sized Globe replica a small indoor theatre (the *Inigo Jones*), a pub, restaurant, flats — and a much expanded Bear Gardens Museum. It is a major international theatre experiment and I just can't wait. But meanwhile, the Bear Gardens Museum is well worth a visit.

