

DON'T DOZE THE ROSE

The fight to save the 1587 Rose Theatre rages on the Thames

BY IAIN MACKINTOSH

At 6 am on an unusually warm May morning, 15 May, a crowd of 3,000 linked arms to prevent three huge trucks pouring sand over the recently excavated Rose Theatre. The Rose had been built by Philip Henslowe in 1587, enlarged in 1592 and closed in 1602. It was the first of the Bankside playhouses. All of Marlowe's plays were performed here for the first time and the young Shakespeare probably acted on its stage himself as well as having his early plays, including *Coriolanus* and the *Henry VI* trilogy, staged there.

In 1989 the company was led by Dame Peggy Ashcroft and Judi Dench. In the crowd, many of whom had been there all night, there were a few scholars but the majority were plain Londoners, not only theatregoers but also others who felt that a crime against civilisation was about to be committed.

The developers meant business. On Saturday, the protective cover spanning the excavation site — 15.3 meters x 12.16 meters (50 feet x 40 feet) — had been taken down. A 10-week extension to the statutory allowance for excavation, which had been negotiated on 3 March (the archaeologists had asked for 17 weeks) was at an end. On the north end of the site, between the Rose and the Thames, the augur pile drivers had been at work for weeks preparing the foundations for the north end of Southbridge House, a 10-storey speculative office development which was to replace a recently demolished smaller office block for the 1950s, the cut-off piles of which can clearly be

seen on the plan and in the photographs.

Actors, architects, and archaeologists had been encouraging crowds all night on the loudspeakers. A key player then and now was Simon Hughes, the Liberal-Democratic Member of Parliament for Southwark, where lies the Rose. Their vigil had started a week earlier. We were told to keep off the public highway as that would be an offence, and instead to stand on developer's land on the narrow strip which surrounded the excavation some 3.6 meters (12 feet) below. Here a court order would be needed to eject us — we were to resist threats until the court sat. Professor Martin Biddle told the crowd that the procedures endorsed by English Heritage, the Government authority for historic buildings and archaeology in England, would destroy the fragile Rose. Back-filling, first with sand, then with gravel, then with hardcore before allowing the tracked piledrivers to roll over the site with the aim of peppering it with five feet diameter piles, might be just acceptable with stone Roman foundations on solid earth but would simply crush Tudor brick, timber, and flint set in mud.

The police had to let the first lorry through, but a girl managed to persuade the truck driver to sign the petition to the Houses of Parliament. Dame Peggy Ashcroft, now 82 and a Shakespearean actress of 60 years standing, agreed to talk to the developers' Chief Executive on the telephone. With ever-patient actor James Fox on one side and member of Parliament Simon Hughes on the other, she

gently denied any revolutionary motive and entreated the developer to call off the lorries, at least for a few hours of talk. It was then agreed that two archaeologists and two building contractors would provide a token presence on the site if the demonstrators returned to the public highway. The lorries left. Round One to People Power.

Before noon the speaker of the House of Commons agreed to a private notice question. This is a technical device which would allow the House to debate the Rose immediately on the start of business at 3pm that afternoon. The developers had been locked in meetings with English Heritage and the Department of the Environment (their masters) for four hours hammering out some sort of stay of execution. Finally, in answer to Simon Hughes' question, Nicholas Ridley, the senior Government minister, had to announce that he had conceded £1 million (US \$1.7 million) to pay for the delays on the building contract and the reinstatement of the roof for a 30-day period while options were explored and a decision made. Round Two to People Power.

On site the crowd swelled. A dozen television crews came from all over the world. The British press gave unparalleled coverage. *The Daily Telegraph* cleared the full width of the top of its front page, something usually done for the declaration of war or the death of a monarch, while *The Times* and *The Guardian* gave it five columns, also on the front page. The popular press devoted full