Sam Wanamaker Playhouse – review

Seventeen years after the completion of Sam Wanamaker’s rebuilt Globe, a painstakingly recreated Jacobean indoor theatre has opened next door, complete with oak frame, ornate roof and 17th-century lighting...

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The reconstruction of Shakespeare’s Globe theatre, which opened in 1997 and was designed by the late Theo Crosby, could be pure kitsch, a Madame Tussauds-grade piece of tourist tat. That it is not, that it manages to be a serious and adventurous theatre, is down to its artistic direction, but also to its fabric. There is the striking, daring fact of it being open-air in a soggy climate. There is also its literal-minded pursuit of thatched-roofed, green-oak authenticity with a conceptual rigour that would make it worthy to enter the collection of the nearby Tate Modern. It is so quixotic, in a post-industrial context like nothing Shakespeare knew, that you can only be impressed.

Now a 340-seat Jacobean theatre has been created in the Globe complex, called the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse after the American actor who fought heroically for decades to get the Globe rebuilt. Planned long ago, it occupies a brick shell – built to house it at the same time as the Globe itself was reconstructed – which has been temporarily inhabited by education spaces and other uses. It stands close to the wooden O, slightly downstream and slightly set back from the Thames waterfront.

The playhouse is designed by the architect Jon Greenfield, who worked for Crosby and has been involved with the Globe since 1986, in collaboration with Allies and Morrison, and it raises the stakes again. It is a roofed-over space, intimate and intense, where the people in the best seats – to the sides of the stage – are in touching distance of the actors. With a mythological ceiling painting and trompe-l’oeil decorations, it also risks being an architectural waxwork. As with the 1997 Globe, the risk is averted.

Several of Shakespeare’s plays, including The Tempest, were performed in this type of theatre, but it doesn’t occupy the public imagination the way that the Globe does. A lot of people had some rough idea of what the latter looked like, even before it was rebuilt, but may not have known that such a thing as a playhouse even existed. Indeed, its recreation relies on sketchy evidence – two sheets of drawings that fell from a book in the library of Worcester College, Oxford, in the 1960s. It aims to be an "archetype" of what such theatres were generally like, rather than a reconstruction of any one in particular.

Once thought to be by Inigo Jones, and from the early 17th century, the drawings are now attributed to his pupil John Webb, in about 1660. So the dates are a bit off, although they are believed to be a reasonable indication of what theatres would have been like half a century earlier. Their level of detail is limited, so ornament has to be interpolated from such things as the grand stairs of country houses like Knole and Chilham Castle.
The important element is the layout – the proximities of performers and audience, the flat stage embraced by galleries, and the absence of fly-towers or wings, which require the audience to conjure a scene not from scenery but from words and a few props. Also the oak-framed construction, which in Shakespeare's time was simply an easy and humble way to put up a building, and which might sometimes be disguised to look like stone, but which now is striking for its smell and warmth, its irregularities and warps, for its closeness to nature.

Then there is the return to the 17th-century use of candlelight in indoor theatres, which will play a similar transformative role in the playhouse to the open air in the Globe. The light makes an architecture of atmosphere that was once commonplace and is now unexpected. Although the new playhouse has the facilities for more modern lighting, it also has naked-flamed candelabra descending from the ceiling, candles in sconces and, if desired, in the hands of actors. It changes the space, picking out spots of gilt, and facets and angles of decoration, as intended by Greenfield.

To have candles in a timber structure is not out of the best-practice rulebook for health and safety in modern theatres, and its achievement is due both to the sophistication of smoke detectors and the patience and creativity of the fire consultant Andy Nicholson, the fire brigade and various other relevant authorities. It is unusual to credit fire consultants in reviews of buildings, perhaps wrongly so, but here the contribution is vital: without the combination of wood and flame, which makes the interior feel like a kind of boat, floating in shadow, more than half the point of the project would be lost.

As well as the playhouse interior, the foyers and connective tissue of the Globe complex have been rebuilt. The scale of the theatre's success was unanticipated, such that these spaces needed enlarging. There has also been a change to Crosby's original approach, which was to design the supporting structures in an eclectic range of different styles, as if the Globe really had stood for 500 years, with successive accretions over the centuries. The new foyers are designed by Allies and Morrison in a wholesome modernist style, which might be thought to be adding another Crossyesque layer of time, but rather sobers up an ebullient, wayward composition, and brings an imprimatur of respectability.

In all this there is, as its creators acknowledge and embrace, a strange play of authenticity and illusion, a switchback of unreal/real/unreal. A complete recreation of the experience of a 400-year-old theatre is impossible – even if you could get every molecule of the construction absolutely right, you still could not recreate the stenches, the clothes of the audience, their mindset, the surrounding city. So the auditorium itself becomes a kind of stage set, a fiction willingly entered into, that becomes more strange and fantastical the more realistic its historical reconstruction attempts to be.

At some point you have to cross a threshold, from the present into this imaginary hybrid time. With the 1997 Globe these transitions are somewhat raucous and abrupt; with the playhouse this is done by wrapping it with a neutral corridor such that the interior becomes a bubble, detached and secluded, something like entering a cinema in an unusually high-quality multiscreen complex.

But the greatest value of these theatres is in the licence that heritage gives to the unfamiliar. Audiences wouldn't tolerate getting rained on, or the absence of modern
stage effects, if it wasn't in the name of history. A candlelit modern theatre would risk looking affected and twee. As it is, the Globe's theatres are surreptitiously radical, which saves them from being waxworks. The Globe complex is a peculiar place, and sometimes awkward in its transitions, but it is good-peculiar.

_The first two productions at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse - Ellen Terry with Eileen Atkins and The Duchess of Malfi - open on 12 January and 14 January respectively_

...This article was amended on 18 January to include an additional mention of Allies and Morrison

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