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Imagining, and Reimagining, the Globe

By JEREMY KAHN

WASHINGTON, Jan. 12 — Of all the debates about [Shakespeare](#), it is perhaps second only to the enduring controversy over the identity of the author himself: what exactly did the Globe Theater, where many of his plays were first performed and his troupe resided, look like?

Did it have 16 sides or 8, 20 or 24? The argument swirls with all the passion of Stratfordians versus Oxfordians, who each claim the playwright as their own.

Over the last 200 years, attempts have been made to reconstruct the Globe on almost every continent. And the theater's basic design elements, such as they are known, have inspired loose architectural interpretations that range from the polygonal Festival Theater in Stratford, Ontario, to a Globe made entirely of ice hundreds of miles above the Arctic Circle in Sweden.

The continuing fascination with Shakespeare's theater and the myriad efforts to replicate its spirit — and, in many cases, its actual form — is the subject of "Reinventing the Globe: A Shakespearean Theater for the 21st Century," an exhibition that opens on Saturday at the National Building Museum here as part of the city's six-month Shakespeare in Washington festival.

For the exhibition, a Building Museum curator, G. Martin Moeller Jr., commissioned five architects to design hypothetical Shakespearean theaters that would evoke the playwright's essence yet be thoroughly modern. The resulting proposals are striking and whimsical and sometimes just a little bit weird, not unlike Shakespearean drama itself.

Before arriving at these contemporary concepts, however, the exhibition walks through a history of the Globe and what can only be termed Globe

mania. In 1599 Shakespeare's acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, paid for construction of the Globe on the south bank of the Thames, in what was then emerging as London's theater district.

But much about the original Globe remains a mystery. There are no surviving contemporaneous renderings of the theater, which burned down after its thatch roof was ignited by a cannon fired during a 1613 performance of "Henry VIII." A new Globe, rebuilt on the same spot, was demolished in 1644 after the Puritan-controlled Parliament ordered the closing of all England's playhouses.

What is known is that the Globe was a polygon (the exact number of sides is a matter of heated academic quarrels) and had an open-air courtyard where audience members referred to as groundlings stood throughout performances. More-affluent theatergoers — including members of royalty on occasion — occupied tiered galleries. It is believed that the theater could accommodate as many as 3,000 people and had a thrust stage that extended out into the courtyard.

This made an intimate performance environment but permitted a minimum of props and scenery. With no electricity, productions took place only during daylight. Attending one was more akin to watching a football game than taking in a Broadway show, with patrons eating, drinking ale and heckling throughout the play.

Over the years, the Globe has inspired an obsession with a kind of architectural séance, a belief that if only an exact replica of the theater could be constructed, then some remarkable new insight into Shakespeare's works would be revealed. In a section titled "The Quest for Authenticity," the show chronicles many of these quixotic efforts. They range from Sir Edwin Luytens's 1912 replica to a 1979 proposal to recreate the Globe in Detroit to a replica built close to the original site in London in 1997, reflecting the best available Globe scholarship at the time.

Another set of theaters, while not intended as replicas, nonetheless seeks to capture what Franklin J. Hildy, a professor of theater at the

[University of Maryland](#), calls “the essence of Globeness.” Among these are a now stalled proposal by [Norman Foster](#)’s firm, Foster & Partners, to convert Castle Williams, the 19th-century fort on Governors Island in New York, into a glass-roofed New Globe Theater.

Yet many Shakespeare companies have chosen performance spaces with characteristics that bear no relation at all to the original Globe. In Shakespeare’s hometown, Stratford-Upon-Avon, the main stage for the [Royal Shakespeare Company](#) is in a 1932 Art Deco building with an interior modeled on a movie theater. The soon-to-be completed Sidney Harman Hall, which will house Washington’s Shakespeare Theater Company, has a state-of-the-art modular design allowing many different stage configurations.

Technology figures prominently in most of the conceptions commissioned for the exhibition. John Coyne, a theater, scenery and costume designer who lives in Connecticut, proposes a “Macbeth” that would be performed simultaneously around the globe. The performance space would be both virtual and real: giant projection screens, positioned around a roughly triangular stage, would display images of actors beamed in from performance spaces hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

The audience, seated in tiered bays, would also see the reactions of their distant counterparts on flat-panel monitors dispersed along the edges of theater balconies.

Inspired by the New York producer Joseph Papp’s vision of bringing Shakespeare to the masses, H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture submitted a design for an irregular trapezoidal glass theater. One rendering shows this Globe plunked down in the middle of Times Square, and another depicts it mounted on a barge, so that the theater could be towed around New York, docking for performances in other boroughs.

Jennifer Siegal, who works for the Los Angeles-based Office of Mobile Design, designed a self-contained theater called the GlobeTrotter, a

tractor trailer that could be transformed into a stage, and be hauled, like an old minstrel show caravan, from city to city.

The paths of three characters during a performance of “Romeo and Juliet,” mapped by transmitters attached to the actors and then crunched through sophisticated software, form the basis of “Playrites,” a proposal by the Los Angeles architect Michele Saeed that winds up with a theater that looks not unlike a crumpled stack of paper.

The New York architect David Rockwell and his firm submitted a design for a “Transparent Theater.” It uses an innovative scaffolding to create a performance space that is open to both the sky and the surrounding landscape. The design incorporates pivoting scrims on which images can be projected. The firm, which has produced theater and Broadway set designs, imagined that the theater could be assembled in almost any location, from Red Square to the middle of the desert.

In whole, this exhibition provides a refreshing and insightful overview of an often overlooked aspect of Shakespeare’s legacy. If all the world’s a stage, it seems, all stages are, at least a little bit, the Globe.