Dr Peter Sillitoe, ShaLT


The Fortune

NB: Earlier, the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights the Fortune. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report picks-out printed work at the V&A that links to the Fortune. This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location.

The Fortune replaced the Rose as the main Philip Henslowe/Edward Alleyn playhouse. It was located between Whitecross Street, and Golding Lane, at Fortune Street, Clerkenwell, this outdoor playhouse opened in 1600, staging plays by Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman, Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, and Thomas Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday. When it burned down in 1621 it was immediately replaced by a second Fortune, which staged plays until the outbreak of the civil wars in 1642.

In 1600, with the new Globe threatening the livelihood of the smaller Rose, Philip Henslowe and his leading actor Edward Alleyn (also now his son-in-law and business partner) decided to leave Southwark and build a new outdoor playhouse north of the river close to Whitecross Street, a mediaeval market street near today’s Barbican arts centre. Although
square while the Globe was polygonal, it was otherwise modelled on the Globe and built by
the same man, Peter Street.

As with the Globe, the Fortune prospered through to the 1642 closures. In essence,
then, the 1594 duopoly plan remained intact, in which two companies would operate north
and south of the river. The Chamberlain’s Men, the Burbages and Shakespeare now
dominated on Surrey’s Bankside suburbs, the Rose closing down within a few years, while
the Admiral’s Men, Henslowe, Alleyn and the Marlowe plays provided their company with
dominance in the northern suburbs of Middlesex. The Fortune continued the tradition of the
Admiral’s company by playing the Marlowe and Kyd classics from the 1580s and early 90s,
though as we move further into the seventeenth century the Chamberlain’s Men at the Globe
became the leading company in London.

The King’s Men now owned, ran and performed in both the Globe and Blackfriars
playhouses. The other outdoor theatres – particularly the Fortune and the Red Bull and the
older Curtain, all to the north of the City of London – appear now to have gained a strong
reputation for putting on plays that appealed to the lower-end of the market. Theatre
historians have characterised the Fortune and the Red Bull as ‘citizen playhouses’ catering
for the lower orders of the London community who wished to view scenes of sensational
action played at inexpensive outdoor amphitheatres. After about 1600, it does seem clear that
such audiences preferred the old plays. As we have seen, the Fortune continued to put on the
classics by Kyd and Marlowe. Although these plays were anything but knockabout
sensationalism, it is fair to describe them as more violent and exaggerated in tone than were
the plays of Shakespeare and Fletcher being written for the King’s Men by the time the
company started to use the Blackfriars in 1609-10. Indeed, it is easy to visualise a large group
of working men and women enjoying The Spanish Tragedy or Tamburlaine at the Fortune in
the early 1600s, just as the previous generation had done in the late 1580s at the Rose on Bankside.

The Fortune and the V&A Collection

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) is taken from the collection’s titlepage for Thomas Dekker’s *Old Fortunatus*, a play performed at the Fortune in 1600. Indeed, it is thought likely that the play was put on at the opening night of the theatre.
The Pleasant Comedie of Old Fortunatus.

As it was plaied before the Queenes
Majestie this Christmas, by the Right
Honourable the Earle of Nottingham,
and his Servants.

LONDON
Printed by S. S. for William Aspley, dwelling in Paules Church-yard at the signe of the Tygers head. 1600.