

= Restoration spectacular =

The Restoration spectacular , or elaborately staged machine play , hit the London public stage in the late 17th @-@ century Restoration period , enthralling audiences with action , music , dance , moveable scenery , baroque illusionistic painting , gorgeous costumes , and special effects such as trapdoor tricks , " flying " actors , and fireworks . These shows have always had a bad reputation as a vulgar and commercial threat to the witty , " legitimate " Restoration drama ; however , they drew Londoners in unprecedented numbers and left them dazzled and delighted .

Basically home @-@ grown and with roots in the early 17th @-@ century court masque , though never ashamed of borrowing ideas and stage technology from French opera , the spectaculars are sometimes called " English opera " . However , the variety of them is so untidy that most theatre historians despair of defining them as a genre at all . Only a handful of works of this period are usually accorded the term " opera " , as the musical dimension of most of them is subordinate to the visual . It was spectacle and scenery that drew in the crowds , as shown by many comments in the diary of the theatre @-@ lover Samuel Pepys . The expense of mounting ever more elaborate scenic productions drove the two competing theatre companies into a dangerous spiral of huge expenditure and correspondingly huge losses or profits . A fiasco such as John Dryden 's *Albion and Albanus* would leave a company in serious debt , while blockbusters like Thomas Shadwell 's *Psyche* or Dryden 's *King Arthur* would put it comfortably in the black for a long time .

= = Introductory : " A lion , a crocodile , a dragon " = =

The distinction between " legitimate " Restoration drama and the Restoration spectacular , or " musical spectacular , " or " Dorset Garden spectacular , " or " machine play " is one of degree rather than kind . All plays of the period featured music and dancing and some scenery , most of them also songs . Restoration heroic drama , for all its literariness , relied on opulent scenery . However , the true spectacular , of which Milhous counts only eight over the entire 1660 ? 1700 Restoration period , was produced on a whole different scale . The spectacular is defined by the large number of sets and performers required , the vast sums of money invested , the potential for great profits , and the long preparation time needed . Milhous calculates a likely requirement of at least four to six months of planning , contracting , building , and rehearsing , to be compared with the four to six weeks of rehearsal time a new " legitimate " play would get .

Previous generations of theatre historians have despised the operatic spectaculars , perhaps influenced by John Dryden 's sour comments about expensive and tasteless " scenes , machines , and empty operas " . However , audiences loved the scenes and machines and operas , as Samuel Pepys ' diary shows . Dryden wrote several baroque machine plays himself . The first , *The State of Innocence* (1677) , was never staged , as his designated company , the King 's , had neither the capital nor the machinery for it : a dramatisation of John Milton 's *Paradise Lost* , it called for " rebellious angels wheeling in the air , and seeming transfixed with thunderbolts " over " a lake of brimstone or rolling fire " . The King 's Company 's Theatre Royal , Drury Lane was not up to lakes of rolling fire ; only the " machine house " at Dorset Garden was , and that belonged to the competition , the Duke 's Company . When the two companies had merged in the 1680s and Dryden had access to Dorset Garden , he wrote one of the most visual and special @-@ effects @-@ ridden machine plays of the entire Restoration period , *Albion and Albanus* (1684 ? 85) :

The Cave of PROTEUS rises out of the Sea ; it consists of several arches of Rock @-@ work adorned with mother @-@ of @-@ pearl , coral , and abundance of shells of various kinds . Through the arches is seen the Sea , and parts of Dover @-@ pier ; in the middle of the Cave is PROTEUS asleep on a rock adorned with shells , & c. like the Cave . ALBION and ACACIA seize on him ; and while a symphony is playing , he sinks as they are bringing him forward , and changes himself into a Lion , a Crocodile , a Dragon , and then to his own shape again ; he comes forward to the front of the stage , and sings . "

How were such effects produced , and how did they look ? The crocodile etc. obviously used the floor trap , but was it an illusionistically painted figure worked with sticks , or a man in a crocodile suit

? There are no extant drawings or descriptions of machinery and sets for the Restoration theatre , although some documentation exists for court masques from the first half of the 17th century , notably the work of Inigo Jones and his pupil John Webb . One reason for the lack of information for the public theatres is that stage effects , and particularly machines , were trade secrets . Inventors of theatrical effects took great pains to hold on to their secrets , and the playhouses guarded their machine workings as zealously as a magician guards her or his tricks .

What the technology and the visual experiences were can only be tenuously inferred from stage directions . Milhous concludes from a review of Dorset Garden performances that " at a conservative estimate " the theatre was equipped to fly at least four people independently , and had some very complex floor traps for " transformations " such as that of Proteus . The plates printed in the first edition of Elkanah Settle 's *Empress of Morocco* (1673) (see detail , top right) are the only pictures of actual Restoration stage sets . Pepys ' mentions of stage effects in his diary , 1660 ? 68 , give the modern reader some help in visualising what audiences saw in the 1660s , and even more in entering into their enthusiasms , but the 1660s were still early days . There are scarcely any descriptions or reactions preserved from the heyday of the machine play in the 1670s ? 90s , although a general idea of its technology can be gathered from the better @-@ documented French and Italian opera scenery which inspired Thomas Betterton at Dorset Garden Theatre .

= = 1625 ? 1660 : Court masques and stealth performances = =

In the early 17th century , moveable " scenes " ? painted wings and backdrops ? and technical " machines " or " devices " for flying and other special effects were used in the masques produced for and by the court of Charles I. In William Davenant 's *Salmacida Spolia* (1640) , for instance , the last of the court masques before the Civil War , Queen Henrietta Maria (pregnant at the time) makes her entrance " descending by a theatrical device from a cloud . " As early as 1639 , Davenant had obtained a royal patent authorising construction of a large new public theatre with technology that would allow such effects and accommodate music , scenery , and dancing . Such an invasion of court @-@ drama technique in the public theatre met opposition from " legitimate " dramatists , and before the opposition could be overcome , the war had closed down the theatres in 1642 .

The public stage ban 1642 ? 60 imposed by the Puritan regime represents a long and sharp break in dramatic tradition , but was still never completely successful in suppressing the ideologically hateful make @-@ believe of play @-@ acting . Performances in grand private houses were not unusual , and could have quite elaborate sets , as can be seen from the extant drawings for the original performance of Davenant 's opera *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) at his home Rutland House . This was public theatre in all but name , as Davenant charged 5 shillings for admission . Some professional actors also managed to scrape a living and evade the authorities in stealth acting companies in London , such as that of Michael Mohun at the Red Bull Theatre . Professional writers from the previous era were growing middle @-@ aged , biding their time , and hoping for the monarchy to be restored . By the later 1650s , it was becoming obvious that that time was at hand , and William Davenant , for example , stepped up his theatrical activities .

= = 1660s : Company competition = =

= = = William Davenant , impresario = = =

When the public performance ban was lifted at the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 , Charles II immediately encouraged the drama and took a personal interest in the scramble for acting licences and performance rights which followed . Two middle @-@ aged pre @-@ Commonwealth playwrights notable for their loyalty during Charles ' exile emerged from the struggle with royal Letters Patent for new , or refurbished , patent theatre companies : Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant . Killigrew was able to take over Michael Mohun 's skilled veteran troupe for his " King 's Company " and to start with " what was essentially a going concern " (Hume) , with the added

advantage of the traditional performance rights Mohun brought with him for practically the whole classic repertory of William Shakespeare , Ben Jonson , and the Beaumont and Fletcher team . The competition , Davenant 's " Duke 's Company " , seemed doomed to a secondary position with its young , scratched @-@ together troupe and scarcely any performance rights . They were only allowed to put on abridged and modernized versions of Shakespeare plays , and a few that Davenant had written . However , Davenant , " a brilliant impresario " (Hume) , was soon able to turn the tables on Killigrew by realising his old pre @-@ Civil War dream of music , dance , and spectacular visual effects on the public stage .

During the autumn of 1660 , while the Duke 's Company was still getting financed (mostly by means of the actors buying company shares) and having temporary quarters set up , the King 's Company offered a string of well @-@ received productions . Their new albeit traditional theatre in Vere Street was already fully operational . The devoted playgoer Samuel Pepys called it " the finest playhouse ... that ever was in England " in his diary , a sentiment he would need to revise many times over the coming decade , and recorded his awe at seeing Michael Mohun , " who is said to be the best actor in the world " , act on its stage . Davenant was far behind , but daringly put all his capital into the outfitting of a new superior playhouse in Lincoln 's Inn Fields (simultaneously , with great foresight , prying loose the rising young star Thomas Betterton from the King 's Company) , and perfectly hit public taste .

= = = Changeable scenery = = =

Lincoln 's Inn Fields opened on 28 June 1661 , with the first " moveable " or " changeable " scenery used on the British public stage , i.e. wings or shutters that ran in grooves and could be smoothly and mechanically changed between or even within acts . The production was a revamped version of Davenant 's own five @-@ year @-@ old opera The Siege of Rhodes . It is not known who painted the scenes or shutters , or whether continental craftsmen were responsible for the technical construction , but the result was such a sensation that it brought Charles II to a public theatre for the first time . The competing King 's Company suddenly found itself playing to empty houses , as Pepys notes on 4 July :

I went to the theatre [in Vere Street] and there I saw Claracilla (the first time I ever saw it) , well acted . But strange to see this house , that use to be so thronged , now empty since the opera begun ? and so will continue for a while I believe .

The Siege of Rhodes " continued acting 12 days without interruption with great applause " according to the prompter John Downes in his " historical review of the stage " Roscius Anglicanus (1708) . This was a remarkable run for the limited potential audience of the time . As four more acclaimed Duke 's Company productions " with scenes " followed at Lincoln 's Inn Fields in the course of 1661 (including Hamlet) , all highly admired by Pepys , the King 's Company had no other recourse than to hastily commission a changeable @-@ scenery playhouse of their own . Bowing to the inevitable just seven months after the opening of Lincoln 's Inn Fields , Killigrew and his actors signed orders for a new , even more magnificent , theatre in Bridges Street . This theatre , the first step in the war of spectacle escalation of the 1660s , was so full when Pepys and his wife went to see an opera there that " they told us we could have no room " . The large , yet compact , Restoration playhouses , with audience capacities from 700 (Bridges Street) to upwards of 2 @,@ 000 (the next house on the same site , the Theatre Royal , Drury Lane , finished in 1674) , were enormous investments , financed through selling shares in the companies , which were thus bound to make more and more money from ticket sales . Not only the theatres and their technical equipment , but the flats painted for a single performance , the special effects , and the elaborate stage clothes , were extremely expensive . Audiences appreciated both luxury and appropriateness of décor and costume : Pepys was quite capable of going several times to see a play that , as such , he disliked , purely for the pleasure of viewing striking and innovative scenery like " a good scene of a town on fire " . The companies struggled to outdo each other in catering to these expensive tastes , with precarious finances and the ever @-@ present consciousness that the investments could literally burn to the ground in a few hours . When the theatre in Bridges Street did burn down in

January 1672 , with its entire stock of scenery and costumes , it was an economic blow from which the King 's Company 's never recovered .

The Duke 's Company , operating smoothly under what soon became Davenant 's and Thomas Betterton 's joint management , consistently led the way while the King 's lagged further and further behind , moving only in forced response and suffering from chronic management conflict between Killigrew and powerful actor shareholders like Michael Mohun and Charles Hart , who insisted on actor @-@ centred " talk " drama . The difference can be traced in Pepys ' regular preference for performances at the Duke 's , and in his ever @-@ renewed admiration for Betterton 's acting . In December 1667 , the King 's Company even ceased acting for some days because of a quarrel between Mohun and Hart . With the escalation of expense , days with zero takings were a very serious matter . The crowning grand investment of the Duke 's Company was totally beyond the King 's means to respond to : the " machine house " at Dorset Garden .

= = 1670s : Machine theatre = =

= = = Dorset Garden Theatre = = =

An era came to an end in 1668 with two events : Davenant died suddenly , leaving a messy ownership situation for the Duke 's Company , and Pepys ' eyesight forced him to stop keeping a diary . Thomas Betterton , though formally a minority shareholder , continued to run the Duke 's Company , and , in the spirit of Davenant , commissioned the most elaborate of the Restoration playhouses , the theatre at Dorset Garden (or Dorset Gardens) , with a flat for himself on top . Although the Dorset Garden Theatre quickly became a famous and glamorous venue , very little is concretely known about the building and outfitting of it : a vague and undocumented tradition ascribes its design to Christopher Wren . The absence of Pepys ' record means that performance data for the next decades are only patchily known .

= = = " Obligated to the French " = = =

The machines at Dorset Garden and several of the most flamboyant production concepts realised through them were strongly influenced by the French opera and tragédie en machines . Paris was home to the most elaborate visual and musical stage productions in Europe , and Betterton travelled to Paris in the summer of 1671 to learn from the sensation of the season , the comédie @-@ ballet *Psyché* by Molière , Corneille , and Quinault , to music by Lully . " For several things concerning the decoration of the play , I am obliged to the French " , acknowledged Thomas Shadwell in the introduction to his own *Psyche* in 1674 . Even more directly influential were the French operatic visits to London , which sparked off a new interest in opera proper in London audiences . In a brilliant move , the King 's Company , all but bankrupt after the crushing blow of the fire in Bridges Street , invited the French musician Robert Cambert to perform his opera *Ariadne* as one of the first productions at their new playhouse in Drury Lane . The Duke 's Company responded to the visual gorgeousness of this guest appearance with a Shakespearean extravaganza at Dorset Garden : Shadwell 's adaptation of Davenant 's and Dryden 's version of Shakespeare 's *Tempest* , a piece designed to show off the new machinery :

The Front of the Stage is open 'd , and the Band of 24 Violins , with the Harpsicals and Theorbo 's which accompany the Voices , are plac 'd between the Pit and the Stage . While the Overture is playing , the Curtain rises , and discovers a new Frontispiece , joyn 'd to the great Pylasters , on each side of the Stage ... Behind this is the Scene , which represents a thick Cloudy Sky , a very Rocky Coast , and a Tempestuous Sea in perpetual Agitation . This *Tempest* (suppos 'd to be rais 'd by Magick) has many dreadful Objects in it , as several Spirits in horrid shapes flying down amongst the Sailers , then rising and crossing in the Air . And when the Ship is sinking , the whole House is darken 'd , and a shower of Fire falls upon ' em . This is accompanied with Lightning , and several Claps of Thunder , to the end of the Storm .

This multiplication of effects at the very outset of the play served as a shock and foretaste of what the audience would find farther along .

= = = Dorset Garden specials = = =

The technical capacities of Dorset Garden were little used for Restoration comedy , and , while most heroic drama included some scenes that showed off the perspective stage or used some of the simpler machines , spectacle on this limited scale could be just as well staged at Drury Lane . The plays for which Dorset Garden was built , the " machine plays " of the 1670s and 1680s and the operas of the 1690s , were a category to themselves , different from ordinary serious drama : more static , more mythological , much more gorgeous , infinitely more expensive . So elaborate was the scale of these productions , and so long each preparation time , that only five " machine plays " were produced during the 1670s ; yet they were hugely important for the finances of the Duke 's Company , mostly in a positive sense . They were Davenant 's version of Macbeth (1672 ? 73) , Settle 's Empress of Morocco (probably 1673) , Shadwell / Dryden / Davenant 's Tempest (1673 ? 74) , Thomas Shadwell 's long @-@ awaited Psyche (1674 ? 75) , and Charles Davenant 's Circe (1676 ? 77) .

Psyche had not one , but two , extremely elaborate sets for each of five acts . This is the setting for the beginning of Act 3 :

The Scene is the Palace of Cupid , compos 'd of wreath 'd Columns of the Corinthian Order ; the Wreathing is adorn 'd with Roses , and the Columns have several little Cupids flying about 'em , and a single Cupid standing upon every Capital . At a good distance are seen three Arches , which divide the first Court from the other part of the Building : The middle Arch is noble and high , beautified with Cupids and Festoons , and supported with Columns of the foresaid Order . Through these Arches is seen another Court , that leads to the main Building , which is at a mighty distance . All the Cupids , Capitals and Inrichments of the whole Palace are of Gold . Here the Cyclops are at work at a forge , forging great Vases of Silver . The Musick strikes up , they dance , hammering the Vases upon Anvils . After the Dance , Enter Vulcan .

(The gold cupids on the columns are due to come to life and jump off .) The use of perspective scenery and many arches is evident here , creating an illusion of the first court being " at a good distance " and the next " at a mighty distance " . This creation of fake depth was a favourite device , repeated when the scene changed halfway through the act :

The scene changes to the principal street of the city , with vast numbers of people looking down from the tops of houses , and out of the windows and balconies , which are hung with tapestry . In this street is a large triumphal arch , with columns of the Doric order , adorned with the statues of Fame and Honour , & c. beautified with festoons of flowers ; all the enrichments of gold . Through this arch , at a vast distance , in the middle of a piazza , is seen a stately obelisk .

The numbers of performers used , mainly dancers , is clearly staggering compared to the regular comedy or serious play , where the norm was something like 10 ? 15 actors plus a few extras . Although actual numbers are generally vague in these mass scene stage directions , dance scenes like that of the cyclops , and all the cupids who will join them on the floor minutes later , rely on coordination , choreography , and generous collective effects . Of course the many highly paid dancers would be busy in many roles , returning as townspeople after the scene change of Act 3 with most of the gold paint hastily washed off , and entranced looking upwards to see " Mars and Venus meet in the air in their chariots , his drawn by horses , and hers by doves " .

Each production was a gamble . The aspect of the machine plays that posterity knows most about is their economics , as this was what the old prompter Downes most vividly recalled when he wrote his Roscius Anglicanus in 1708 . The scenery alone for Psyche cost more than £ 800 , which can be related to the entire annual box office takings for the company of £ 10 @ , @ 000 . Ticket prices for these performances would be raised to up to four times normal . Both Psyche and The Tempest actually complained of the production costs in their epilogues , hinting pointedly that the public ought to reward the " poor players " for their risk @-@ taking and for offering splendours that had so far been reserved for royal masques :

We have stak 'd all we have to treat you here ,
And therefore , Sirs , you should not be severe .
We in one Vessel have adventur 'd all ;
The loss , should we be Shipwrack 'd , were not small .

...

Poor Players have this day that Splendor shown ,
Which yet but by Great Monarchs has been done .

The audience apparently agreed , transfixed by such sights as Venus ascending into the heavens and " being almost lost in the clouds " , whereupon " Cupid flies up and gets into her chariot , and brings her back " , followed by Jupiter appearing on a flying eagle . Psyche turned out highly profitable . It is altogether a pattern that the 1670s productions did make money , while those of the 1680s and 1690s barely broke even or were actual economic disasters .

= = = Parody : " Fire , apples , nuts " = = =

Even after the King 's Company got their new well @-@ appointed playhouse in Drury Lane in 1674 , they could not take full advantage of it , as they lacked the capital to mount competitive spectaculars . Instead , they attempted to simultaneously capitalise on and snipe at the Duke 's most successful mid @-@ 1670s offerings by mounting several burlesques or parodies of them , written by Thomas Duffett . The records for the mid @-@ 1670s are particularly incomplete , and neither exact dates nor the public reaction to Duffett 's pieces are known , but even the printed versions , pale shadows of Duffett 's travesty spectacles , have proved highly amusing to modern critics . The first of them , The Empress of Morocco , caricatured simultaneously Settle 's Empress of Morocco and the sumptuous new Dorset Garden production of Davenant 's Macbeth adaptation , with Duffett 's three witches flying in over the pit on brooms at the high point of the action , followed by the descent of Heccate over the Stage " in a glorious chariot , adorned with pictures of hell and devils , and made of a large wicker basket " . The Mock Tempest improves on the shower of fire over the audience in the Dorset Garden pseudo @-@ Shakespearean tempest scene with a rain of " fire , apples , nuts " .

= = 1680s : Political spectacular = =

There was no investment in spectaculars during the political unrest of 1678 ? 84 with the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis , lean years for theatre . In 1682 , the companies merged , making Dorset Garden 's technical resources available to Dryden , who rapidly got over his principled objection to the superficiality of " spectacle " and " empty operas " . The orgy of machinery and extravagant visuals that he went on to write , Albion and Albanus (1684 ? 85) , is quoted in the " Introductory " section , with the cave of Proteus rising out of the sea . Here is Juno in her flying peacock machine :

The Clouds divide , and JUNO appears in a Machine drawn by Peacocks ; while a Symphony is playing , it moves gently forward , and as it descends , it opens and discovers the Tail of the Peacock , which is so large , that it almost fills the opening of the Stage between Scene and Scene .

Unusual visual allegory in this Tory panegyric of Charles II and the House of Stuart includes a figure representing the radical Whig leader Anthony Ashley @-@ Cooper , 1st Earl of Shaftesbury " with fiend 's wings , and snakes twisted round his body ; he is encompassed by several fanatical rebellious heads , who suck poison from him , which runs out of a tap in his side . " In an investor 's nightmare , while Dryden 's propaganda piece was in preparation , Charles II died , James II succeeded him , and the Monmouth Rebellion which Shaftesbury had fomented broke out . On the very day of the premiere , June 3 , 1685 , the Duke of Monmouth landed in the west . " The nation being in a great consternation " , recollected Downes , " it was performed but six times , which not answering half the charge they were at , involved the company very much in debt . " This traumatic fiasco ruled out all further operatic spectacle investment until the calmer times after the Glorious

Revolution of 1689 .

= = 1690s : Opera = =

While the monopoly United Company 's takings were being bled off by Davenant 's shyster sons , one of whom , Alexander , was forced to flee the country in 1693 and other predatory investors , Thomas Betterton continued to act as de facto day @-@ to @-@ day manager and producer , enjoying a budget on the scale of Cecil B. DeMille . In the early 1690s , he staged the three real operas of the Restoration spectacular genre , or the shows usually so designated : Dioclesian (1689 ? 90) by Massinger / Fletcher / Betterton ; King Arthur (1690 ? 91) by John Dryden ; and The Fairy @-@ Queen (1691 ? 92) , adapted from Shakespeare 's A Midsummer Night 's Dream by perhaps Elkanah Settle , all of them graced by music by Henry Purcell , and together perhaps a sign of the coming 18th @-@ century vogue for Italian opera . The lavish variety entertainment Dioclesian , adapted by Betterton , with many monsters , dragons , and machines , from Massinger and Fletcher 's History of Dioclesian , was very popular throughout the 1690s and made a lot of money for the United Company . So did Dryden 's much more serious King Arthur , the first operatic entertainment that Hume is prepared to consider an artistic success , with Purcell 's marvellous music a major part of the entertainment and the songs " for once well integrated into the play " .

At the very end of its history , the economics of the Restoration spectacular spiralled out of control with the magnificent production of The Fairy Queen in the 1691 ? 92 season . It was a great popular success , but so stuffed with special effects and so expensive that it nevertheless proved impossible to make money from it . As Downes recalls : " Though the court and town were wonderfully satisfied with it ... the expenses in setting it out being so great , the company got little by it . " Its twelve @-@ foot @-@ high working fountain and six dancing real live monkeys have become notorious in theatre history .

The spectacular play died out with the Restoration period , but spectacle would continue on the English stage as the splendours of Italian grand opera hit London in the early 18th century . The dangerous Restoration economic spiral of the ever @-@ more @-@ expensive machine plays would teach 18th- and 19th @-@ century theatrical entrepreneurs to dispense with playwrighting altogether and minimise the cast , utilising any number of surprising effects and scenes in the dumbshow of pantomime and Harlequin , without attendant costs in music , dramatists , and cast .

There have been a small number of attempts to resurrect the Restoration spectacular as a background to modern cinema : Terry Gilliam 's The Adventures of Baron Munchausen features at its start perhaps the most accurate reconstruction , with painted scenery , mechanisms and lighting effects typical of the period .