

Such Stuff podcast
Season 7, Episode 2: A Christmas Miracle

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another festive episode of Such Stuff.

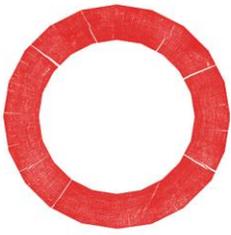
With all the promise of a new year and the renewal it brings on the horizon we wanted to spend a few weeks cosying up against the dark nights and the frosty mornings and take a look at some of the theatre and the storytelling that brings us together at this time of year.

So in this week's podcast, we turn to a snowy story from the history of the Globe Theatre, our very own Christmas miracle. Here to tell the story properly is our wonderful Artistic Director Michelle Terry.

Michelle Terry: It's 1598 and the world is about to turn over into a new year.

[Music plays]

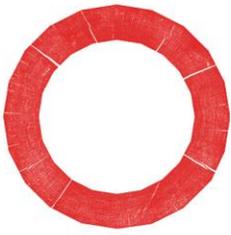
MT: Yet another cold winter in London, and as the nights draw in the great river Thames begins to freeze over. On the north side of the river William Shakespeare and his company of actors, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, perform at the Theatre, a space in the heart of Shoreditch, already Shakespeare has made quite the name for himself, his plays performed by the great actors of his day, including the famous Richard Burbage, and the Burbage's own the Theatre, but they only lease the land on which the theatre is built and when the lease runs out the landlord Giles Allen claims the Theatre for his own. So Richard and his brother Cuthbert come up with a plan, the



lease may have run out but they own the building, they no longer own the land but the timber is there's for the taking, so what is to stop them dismantling the theatre and rebuilding elsewhere, after all, their father James Burbage was a joiner and a theatre man himself, building theatres is in their blood and this is where the story gets a little bit shall we say magical. The Burbages find a new site on the wild shores of Southwark, south of the river in the county of Surrey and outside the jurisdiction of London law and beyond the puritanical eye of the city fathers. So in the dead of night this company of players pull apart the theatre, salvage the timbers and anything else they can find, and drag the dismantled building across the frozen river Thames and make for the southern shores. And as London awakes to the sleepy light of dawn of a brand new year, a brave new world is being built upon the bank of the Thames, the Globe Theatre, this Wooden 'O, where the whole world is a stage.

[Music plays]

IG: And that joyful hopeful note should be where the story ends but it wouldn't be Christmas 2020 without a hearty helping of fake news, because when you start to really think about the story, about how large and heavy a theatre is, and how slippery the frozen ice would've been, and how cold and windy it would've been out there in the dead of night, and how electric lighting wasn't invented for another 150 years, and they wouldn't of been able to see a thing, the cracks in the story and indeed the ice become a little perilous. But never fear we asked the lovely Dr Will Tosh to act as our historical Christmas Scrooge, and help us to get to the bottom of what really happened. The resulting story might be a little less flamboyant but maybe, just maybe it's no less magical. Here's Michelle and Will.

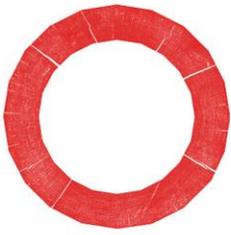


MT: Welcome Dr Will Tosh, Tosh by name Tosh by nature for this episode because I imagine we will have just heard the story of the Globe being carried across the frozen Thames and rebuilt on the south side of the river, we openly declare in the story there is a moment where it starts to get a little bit, well we've called it magical, you may call it something else. But Dr Will Tosh will you tell us the truth.

Will Tosh: So this is me now being kind of the Grinch who stole the narrative of Christmas. OK, so where do we, there is always scope for magic and storytelling, that's where I'm going to start that's my sop to this, but I think it is also true that some of the narrative around, you know the carting of the Globe timbers over the river is not true and has been either exaggerated in the telling, or in fact, actually rises out of a rather quite confused set of testimonies around what actually happened in the course of winter in 1598. So should we take it parts, should we take it bit by bit?

MT: That would be amazing, yeah.

WT: So in the story, we have this idea that the players are playing in the Theatre and within a fairly short period of time they're told they can't use the site anymore and they have to find somewhere new, and then they kind of, they take down their old playhouse. Actually the Lord Chamberlain's Men had vacated the Theatre in 1597, so two years earlier because that's when the dispute over the lease hit, that's the year in which the lease was called into question. So there was this sort of protracted period where no one was using the theatre it was just standing empty, and Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were renting the Curtain, a neighboring theatre at some degree of expense, so they

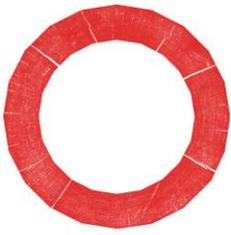


needed to find a way to set themselves up somewhere else permanently and that's what they were kind of doing over the course, over those last years in the 1590s. And they do find somewhere, they find some land on Bankside at the start of December 1598, that's when they decide that that's where they are going to base themselves. And yes Southwark is quite a long way from Shoreditch where the theatre is set up, and it's certainly outside of the city limits which is quite useful, but it's not really the wild west because there's been a theatre there for over ten years at this point, the Rose Playhouse, very successful, very popular, and the area has long been one of popular culture, activities, and bear-baiting, and bull-baiting of bulls, and all that sort of stuff, so it's not necessarily a kind of huge sort of risk for the Lord Chamberlain's Men to settle on the Bankside. Alright so I feel like I'm just, sort of like motoring through the narrative now and destroying ideas left, right and centre.

MT: No it's good, as we dismantle the Globe you're dismantling the myth, so it's, it's very neat.

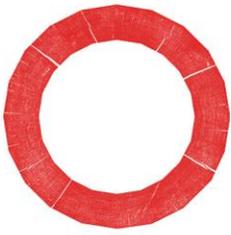
WT: I'm metaphorically dismantling the Globe. The point where you get magical is the exciting part and told so beautifully, but they don't, don't take down the Globe in the dead of night, that happens, it happens during the day [laughs].

MT: [laughs] I mean if I thought about it long enough, I do know that it's so unlikely that a group of maybe six to eight people dismantle this huge wooden construction and even like, what's that program, with Nick what's-his-name, even if you got the entire town to come and do a massive DIY job it would be really hard. I do, in my brain I know that, but my heart says—



WT: –Your heart wants it to be true. So there's probably about 17 people involved in the process, that's testified in later court cases, and the Lord Chamberlain's Men don't dispute that. They turn up it's probably the 28 December which is a Saturday 1598, they're armed, so the Lord Chamberlain's Men take probably the weapons actually that they have as theatre weapons, expecting trouble because they know they're slightly pushing their luck, although in fact the lease that the Lord Chamberlain's Men signed initially, or sorry that James Burbage had signed initially in the 1570s does state that Burbage is entitled to take down and remove any buildings he builds on the site at leased Giles Allen, now that is not a lease that Giles Allen renews in the 80s, 1580s Giles Allen refuses to sign a lease extension on those terms. But initially, years and years ago, Giles Allen had conceded to a lease that said, leaseholders are allowed to remove buildings that have been placed on my land, but nonetheless the Lord Chamberlain's Men turn up armed because they expect a bit of pushback, there is some pushback with Giles Allen's kind of agents or whatever, or friends send him word that these guys had turned up and were dismantling, demolishing the theatre and it probably takes between two and four days to do it properly, that's long enough for Giles Allen to have sent word to say stop you're not allowed to do that but probably not long enough for he himself to get to the site from his house in Essex, he's not mad, he's not gonna want to jump onto a horse and gallop through the snow.

MT: So that bit of the story is true then that as a new year dawns on 1599 over those four days from the 28 of December probably till like the 2 of January or something a brave new Globe is born.



WT: Well a brave old theatre is taken down because once they take the timber, once they demolish the building and there's some disagreement then about where those timbers go, it is possible that those timbers are taken, rolled over London Bridge and then stored somewhere in Bankside. It's also quite likely and perhaps more plausible, and the historian James Shapiro suggests this, that those timbers are taken to builder Peter Street's warehouse on the north side of the river, where the timbers can be over winter because you can't take great big lumps of timber and leave them in winter out on a building site, you have to put them somewhere.

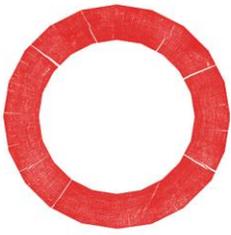
MT: That is a lot of timber.

WT: Oh it's loads yeah, yeah. And you can imagine carts rolling through the city of London, the quiet kind of Christmas struck the city of London in the snow, it's snowing at this point, through those days, as you say those days in the years of 15– the last days of 1598, and the carts are rolling through the city taking this timber, probably to somewhere, to a warehouse somewhere, whether it's over on the south bank or on the north bank, to be left for a few months. Now they definitely 100%, one million percent didn't roll them over the frozen Thames, largely because the Thames wasn't frozen, I mean that's the main reason why they didn't do it.

MT: What!

WT: [laughs]

MT: Really!



WT: Really! So we're told that it was a very cold winter and we're told that the Thames was nigh frozen over, now nigh is like a really crucial word [laughs].

MT: Oh darn.

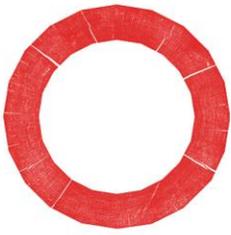
WT: So there's no chance that they would've, that it would've been thick enough to take a heavy, you know half ton timbers across the river. So that 100% didn't happen.

MT: That is disappointing [laughs].

WT: But magic, we can imagine it.

MT: That's right, that's right.

WT: That magic still applies. So we've got, there is that wonderfully kind of, there is that wonderfully magical sense of a building coming down, and in kind of great big sort of wagons rolling through the snowy city streets, but then we do have to slightly press pause and leave those timbers in a warehouse for a few months because it's almost impossible that a constructor of the Globe, Peter Street the builder could've dug foundations in frozen ground, and could've begun the process of building through what was then also quite a cold late winter and early spring. So he almost certainly doesn't start building the Globe until April or May 1599, during which point or period Shakespeare's company is still performing at the Curtain, so they're continuing to rent the Curtain, where they're probably performing, for example, **Henry V**, that's probably performed at the Curtain, so that wonderful opening speech, this unworthy scaffolding, it probably is relating to the aging theatre that they're about to



leave rather than the brand new playhouse, because it's, it's unlikely that the Globe gets finished before late July 1599.

MT: OK because when's the, is the, when's the recording, is it **Julius Caesar** is the first performance.

WT: We think, we think, well, to be honest, it could be anything but it's **Julius Caesar** is summer 1599 it's an early Globe play, it features that astonishing storm through Act I, scene 3, and into which, which seems to perhaps indicate that it's drawing attention to the kind of wonderful new resources that this theatre has, so it may be the first, it may be one in a number of early, early Globe plays.

MT: But there's no date attached to that Will, we don't know what—

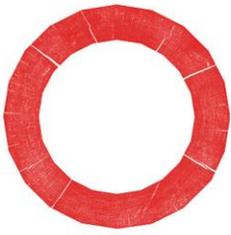
WT: —Well we know it was seen by a visitor to London in Summer 1599.

MT: Yeah.

WT: So it was up by then, it was playing by then. And late July seems a pretty firm and likely date for the completion of the Globe.

MT: Even that is amazing isn't it, from the very end of December within seven months they have dismantled something and re—

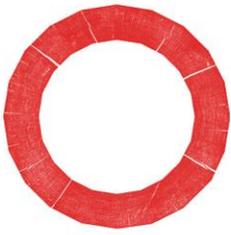
WT: — Well it's less if they are dismantling it in no more than four days, and then they warehouse those timbers and actually they built it from April or May to July, it's like three, four months.



MT: I mean of course I'm gutted that the romanticism of rolling those timbers across the frozen Thames is sadly not true, and even I can't fight the corner on that one because that's just a fact, but I think there's just something about the story even before this time the story is incredible, there's something about the metaphor of that story now as we feel like so much has been dismantled, the idea of that where there's a will there's a way, and excuse the pun like there is our Will Shakespeare, but the will of these people to go this is something we so believe in that we will do whatever it takes to reclaim what is ours, I just think the metaphor of that is such an amazing story of hope and achievement and human capacity, do you know it's just.

WT: I completely agree, and as you say in your story you know these guys, James Burbage and then his sons, they were used to building, they were used to setting up and taking down and building a stage when they needed to perform and getting rid of it when they were done, and this is just that on a much grander scale, much more difficult scale, but it's a real sense of can-do and not messing around isn't it, it's like we can't use the space fine we will reset ourselves somewhere else and carry on.

MT: That story of them taking, like, there is an artistry in building these homes, they are homes, they're not just buildings they're there to house people and life and stories and, there's something about that story, I feel just so proud, like the DNA of who we are that is, that is like that tenacity, it is, it is just, it is the metaphor for now for me, got to keep making, got to keep rebuilding and reimagining. And the



people, you said there would've been about 16/17 people do we know who those people would have been?

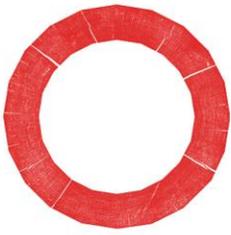
WT: We do, we have names because of these various courts, because of course after all of this Giles Allen takes the Lord Chamberlain's Men to court like numerous times, and it goes all the way up to the star chamber which is sort of the equivalent to taking it to the supreme court and saying I'm still not satisfied can this be, can this be investigated again, and so we get lots and lots of material, some of it contradictory and conflicting which I think is where some of the, the retellings of this story have emerged because certainly some of the, some the testimony seems to suggest that the building was dismantled and re-erected on Bankside kind of overnight, I mean that's the, that's the line that some of the testimony suggests partly because that testimony would've been given three, four years after all this happened and so memories kind of compress and stories are told leaving out little bits, it's not surprising that the story kind of develops. So 17 people are involved in this demolition, Cuthbert and Richard Burbage, the builder Peter Street, a friend of theirs called William Smith, James Burbage's widow and Richard and Cuthbert's mother who's called Ellen, she's the legal leaseholder, and then 12 workmen.

MT: She's the legal leaseholder?

WT: Yeah, yeah.

MT: Ooh there's a story there isn't there.

WT: Yeah, there is yeah, Mrs Burbage definitely.



MT: Ooh that's a, I can feel a play coming on.

WT: [laughs] And we can imagine as well, there must have been involvement from the Lord Chamberlain's Men, they must have clearly have known, they would presumably at some point, over those two or four days, two to four days have drifted in, and Shakespeare would've drifted along to see what was going on, you know he, of course he would, and all of his colleagues would have done. So yeah, so we can imagine, we can put names to faces.

MT: I have to say, I did, I thought I would come into this with gloves on going no they absolutely got it, but you're absolutely right there's zero way they could've got across the Thames, and I think one thing this time has taught us is that we really don't need any more fake news right now do we so, I think we done history and ourselves a service by telling the truth [laughs].

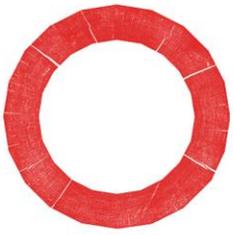
WT: Anytime.

MT: [laughs] Thanks Dr Will Tosh.

WT: Thanks MT.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us but we'll be back next week with another festive episode and our last of the year.



You've been listening to Such Stuff with me Imogen Greenberg, Michelle Terry and Dr Will Tosh.

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