



Groundlings

From Andrew Gurr, 'Traps and Discoveries at the Globe', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94 (1997), pp 88-89:

To begin with, we know something about the sociology of the Globe auditorium, and its social orientation. We still tend, though, to underrate what one might call the vertical sociology, the physical affirmation of social differences which the design of these amphitheatres embodied.

Those creatures for whom Hamlet invented the term "groundlings"² walked into the playhouse at ground level, and stayed there, in the yard, for the play. Until 1600, a "groundling" was a small ling or fish, a ground-feeding freshwater loach, with a huge mouth for sucking algae from stones. The small body behind the huge mouth made a wonderfully patronising name for the gapers in the yard. Everyone else in the Globe's auditorium rose above them, literally, through Rosalind's pair of stairs' (the two stair turrets and their narrow doors through which everyone exited when the Globe caught fire), by and to the "degrees" the benches in the galleries. From there they literally looked down on the understanders. Even the players had the groundlings at their feet, five feet below them. To the majority of playgoers paying to sit in the galleries, the yard was the place for porters and carters, servingmen and apprentices. You stood to watch the play only if you could not afford a seat and a roof over your head. The yard might even have a family of beggars in it, as John Taylor the water poet noted: "Yet have I seene a beggar with his many / Come in at a Play-house, all in for one penny".³

Opposite and high above that presence was the stage balcony, where, as Marston's cousin Everard Guilpin put it, you can 'See...him yonder, who sits o're the stage, / With the Tobacco-pipe now at his mouth', the gallant, the earl, the ambassador and his party. The best and most costly seats in the circuit of galleries, including what in the Fortune contract Henslowe called the 'gentlemen's rooms' to distinguish them from the lords' rooms' on the stage balcony, were grouped close to and above the stage. With the citizenry and the middle level of affluence ranged round behind the yard in the 'twopenny galleries', the "middle region", there was a clear hierarchy of affluence and social importance. Fletcher,

² *OED* cites Hamlet's as the first time the term was used to describe the audience standing in the yard. At about the same time, in a translation published in 1601, Holland's *Pliny* also identified the word as meaning a ground-feeding loach.

³ John Taylor, *The praise, antiquity, and commodity of beggery, beggers and begging*, (London, 1628).



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writing *The Prophetess* in 1622 for the second Globe, made Geta the clown talk of becoming the emperor or a senator in vertical terms:

We Tilers may deserve to be Senators:
And there we step before you thick-skin'd Tanners.
For we are born three Stories high; no base ones,
None of your groundlings, Master.

His three storeys are the Globe's three levels of galleries, topped with the tiles which in 1614 had replaced the thatch of the first Globe. His joke echoes *Hamlet's* gravedigger with his down-to-earth reference to the survival value of tanners' corpses. "Groundlings", starting with *Hamlet*, became the standard term for Dekker and many others in subsequent years. Beaumont and Jonson, in calling the people in the yard 'understanding men', were more derisive but less actually dismissive. It is a nice question how far the lordly *Hamlet*, using the term in the midst of his sermon to the professionals on how they should act, was at the same time being quietly put in his own presumptuous place.

Socially, in the Globe auditorium the important customers were behind and above the stage, while the lowest level was around what we think of as the front. It was a steeply vertical sociology. This raises such questions as whether the modern terminology, frontstage and backstage, is at all appropriate. Neither is a Shakespearean term. We know that 'upstage' and 'downstage' come from proscenium-arch days with their raked stages. But where is the 'front' of a circle, even one with such a vertical wall and a focal stage?

The sociology of the Globe's auditorium suggests that we should question the cinematic terminology of 'front' and 'back' 'upstage' and "downstage and think rather of socially up and down, inside a cylinder.