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By Clifford Bevan

## Wooden S Meets Wooden O

The scene could have been set up by a theatrical director. It is a bright, breezy afternoon in early September. Above an ancient brick wall, maybe twenty feet high, can be seen a row of excited faces. The owners are eating, drinking, waving and calling to friends down below on a narrow cobbled street. Many of these are gazing at the boats making their way up and down the broad river alongside, its water choppy in the wind.

You have the picture. Let's zoom in on the details.

The people looking over the wall are excitedly waiting to go into a theatre to watch a performance. The narrow street is Bankside, so named because it runs along the south bank of the River Thames. The town is London. The theatre is The Globe.

So now, dear reader of the Historical Instrument Section, you know almost all that you need to know. You know where, you know what... but are there any clues as to *when*?

Let's look at the records. Globe Theatre: built 1598-99. Bankside: "one of medieval London's main centres of dissipation." When Henry VIII closed its brothels in 1546, the Bishop of Winchester, who owned them, defiantly drew up a set of rules and set the opening hours. (The girls were known locally as "Winchester geese.")

Forget about the brothels, think about the theatres: The Swan, The Hope, and The Globe, where Shakespeare not only acted but was also a shareholder. Who, then, are the characters in our own opening scene? Citizens of seventeenth-century London, rowed across the river to the south bank to see the newest offering in this circular theatre – maybe Shakespeare's own *Henry V* with its reference to "this wooden O?"

In our own Scene I the characters are



Shakespeare's "Wooden O": the Globe Theatre at Southwark, from a contemporary illustration.

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mainly schoolgirls here for a matinee performance and preparing themselves by drinking Coke and eating ice-cream. They are to enjoy (how much more in the flesh than on the page!) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It could just as well have been the other Shakespeare play in the Globe's 2002 repertory, *Twelfth Night*.

Pause for thought. (Or, as Will himself might have written, "paws for thought: exit pursued by a bear.") The play could equally well have been the season's new offering, *The Golden Ass*, adapted by Peter Oswald for this season of Cupid and Psyche, celebrating the chaotic force of love. One of the sources for the *Dream*, the original Latin story tells of a young man discovering his true nature through being transformed into an ass.

Pause to prepare to turn history topsy-

turny. Oswald rewrites Lucius Apuleius's epic into a modern tale. Well, relatively modern, set in early twentieth-century Italy yet introducing music-hall acts, nineteenth-century farce, age-old stock characters.

Now turn back a few paragraphs: Globe, built 1598-99, the same time as in provincial France, at Auxerre, Edmé Gullaume was developing the serpent as support for plainchant. No chance of a serpent taking part in any of the music in Shakespeare's theatre, then. (First known appearance in a London playhouse was around 100 years later, in 1695.)

What music is required for *The Golden Ass*, in its twenty-first-century manifestation? Well, a spectacular show demands a spectacular band:

clarinet doubling soprano sax, alto sax, two trumpets, one (pea-shooter) trombone, tuba, sousaphone, two percussion and... serpent. Composer and music director Claire van Kampen has modelled it on a Sicilian town band. Some of her music introduces that almost vocal style of melody

heard in many nineteenth-century Italian marches, and there are direct references to Verdi himself in some of the numbers. The serpent, that most vocal of wind instruments, provides a characteristic tone in the middle of the texture and just occasionally in the leading role. A brilliant stroke.

But there is always a downside. The orchestration books don't have too much technical information on the serpent, so Nick Perry, the player, is faced with key-signatures of five flats, solos beginning on B natural (a serpent non-note), whole-tone scales, etc., etc.

But he meets these demands with total success... and after 400 years the wooden S finally meets the wooden O.