



## Screening Shakespeare's Shoreditch

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**Abstract** This short article charts the filming of a documentary about Shakespeare's early career in Shoreditch. It thinks about the gentrification of sixteenth-century Shoreditch and the impact it had on Shakespeare's career.

**Keywords** Shakespeare, Shoreditch, Theatre, Gentrification



**Still: from 'Shoreditch: Shakespeare's Hidden London' (2017)**

Shoreditch, 1580: rough, edgy, unsparing, and fun. Shoreditch, 1600: expensive, emptying, with its reputation for entertainment on the wane. Four hundred or so years later (in September 2014), anti-gentrification protestors

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attacked a new cereal café in Shoreditch. They also vandalised a nearby estate agent. The protest – known online as a Fuck Parade – was apparently organised by a group called Class War who explained their actions in a short statement: “We don’t want luxury flats that no one can afford [...] We don’t want pop-up gin bars or brioche buns, we want community”.



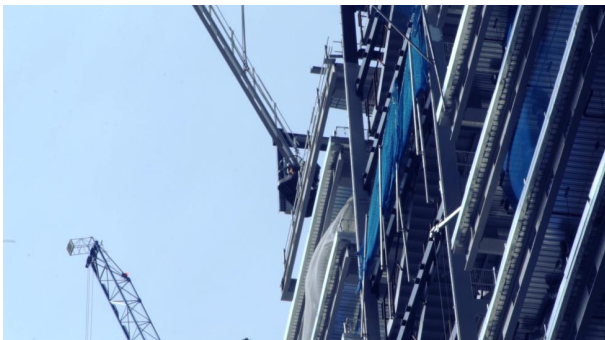
**Still: Interviewing Peter Tatchell about gentrification today**

In 1580 Shoreditch couldn’t offer many brioche buns, but it was home to one of the most important pop-ups of all time: The Theatre. This was perhaps the first freestanding purpose-built public theatre in England. It helped cement Shoreditch’s reputation as an entertainment district – a place to have sex (in one of its many brothels), or a drink (in one of its many taverns), or a stroll (in one of its many green spaces). The Theatre was a risky venture. It was expensive, without much recent precedent, and plagued by contractual loopholes and circumscriptions. Indeed most London residents would have bet upon The Theatre being a pop-up disappointment. It would have taken supreme confidence to imagine that it might survive for a year, especially when its prototype (The Red Lion playhouse in Whitechapel) seems to have lasted little more than six months. Yet it was such a success on opening that, one year later, another theatre opened two hundred yards away. It was at this second theatre – named The Curtain – that William Shakespeare began his London career, (probably) premiering plays like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry V*. Tap-houses sprung up to provide refreshment to audiences, and the owner of The Theatre was repeatedly fined for running an illegal “tippling-house” nearby. All of these venues combined to make Shoreditch an increasingly lucrative place for landlords. In 1596 The Theatre reached the end of its lease, and its (putative) landlord’s demands for more rent (as well as a complicated dispute about ownership) meant the venue was dismantled in the winter of 1598.

In 2008 archaeologists from the Museum of London announced that they had found The Theatre's remains after a series of excavations around New Inn Broadway. Three years later they announced that they had also found the remains of the Curtain Theatre. The Curtain site was already earmarked for development by Galliard Homes, who were proposing forty storeys of luxury apartments now made all the more expensive by their richly historic location. The apartments are currently retailing on Galliard's website for £500,000 to £1.5 million. As I write, archaeological excavations are finishing; the developers will soon move in to complete construction. Over the last few years in Shoreditch, then, history has seemed to be chasing its own tail: the kind of landlords who priced the original theatres out of Shoreditch are now proposing to make money from their freshly-discovered remains.



**Still: MOLA excavations of The Curtain Theatre site, Shoreditch**



**Still: Galliard Homes development of The Curtain Theatre site**

There have been happier notes. The news about Shoreditch's Elizabethan past has reoriented public perceptions of Shakespeare's career. Where previously all eyes were focused on the Globe and the South Bank, attention has now turned a little more to Shoreditch – helped by local innovations like RIFT\_'s 'Shakespeare in Shoreditch' festival. It seemed to me, then, that last year – the

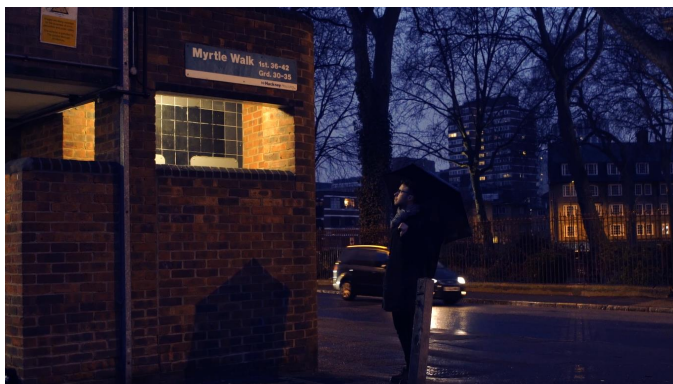
four hundredth since Shakespeare's death, in case you hadn't been reminded enough – was an opportunity both to explore an understudied area of Shakespeare's career, and to reflect on the gentrification of East London from a longer historical perspective.



**Stills: With Rev Paul Turp in the crypt of St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch**

Assisted by funding from the Wolfson Foundation and in collaboration with students at the London Film School, I made a thirty-minute documentary titled 'Shoreditch: Shakespeare's Hidden London' – a rough cut was shown at last year's Literary London conference, followed by a panel discussion with Dr Sarah Dustagheer and Lord Smith of Finsbury. We interviewed Shakespeareans, the archaeologists responsible for The Theatre and Curtain excavations, and a group of very entertaining drunk people outside a pub. We interviewed Peter Tatchell and Owen Jones about the effects of today's gentrification. We tried unsuccessfully to interview a representative of Galliard Homes. We visited the

crypt underneath St Leonard's Church which contains the bones of many of Shakespeare's first actors. We presented Shakespeare's career in Shoreditch alongside his Shoreditch contemporaries: Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Ben Jonson, the actor Gabriel Spenser, the recusant nobleman Thomas Tresham, and the spy Robert Poley.



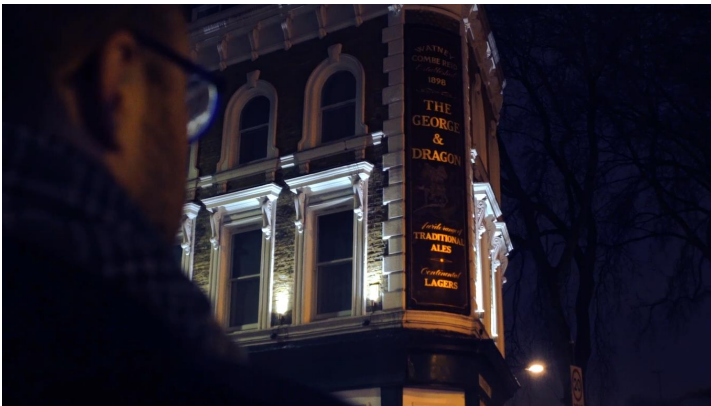
**Still: On Myrtle Walk, Shoreditch – originally home to the Tresham family**

We also restaged the famous oration at the beginning of *Henry V* just outside the Curtain site where it was first performed. A few weeks after we completed that sequence, Museum of London Archaeology announced their discovery that the Curtain Theatre was rectangular rather than (as most people had assumed) round. Shakespeare scholars and theatre historians immediately began to speculate that the initial chorus of *Henry V* – which makes reference to a “wooden O” – must have been added or amended for a later performance at the Globe Theatre rather than being spoken at the Curtain. We wondered whether to reshoot or abandon this section of our film. But then it seemed to us that this was another example of a Globe-centric account of Shakespeare's career, ignoring his life in other parts of London; it was, after all, just as possible that Shakespeare wrote the chorus with an eye to performance at the round Theatre (where negotiations to reopen the venue were underway).

We started and ended the film with a poignant historical parallel. In late 1598, the shareholders involved with the Theatre began to despair about its ever being reopened. Salvation came via a clause in their contract: the land upon which the theatre was built belonged to the landlord Giles Allen, but the building itself belonged to the theatre's manager and impresario Richard Burbage. Allen was out of London, spending Christmas at his country estate. The shareholders knew they didn't have much time, but they also knew exactly what they needed. Piece by piece they dismantled The Theatre; piece by piece they took the timbers to a warehouse at Bridewell Stairs. Months later, once the cold weather had passed, they ferried the materials across the river to build the new Globe Theatre – opened with fanfare in the summer of 1599.

Recently, one of Shoreditch's premier entertainment spots closed: The George and Dragon, a fabulous gay pub on Hackney Road which attracted

everyone from locals to fashionistas to Boy George. When the rent went up the landlords closed the pub, gathered its interiors and moved them further east – to The Queen Adelaide, in the less expensive area of Cambridge Heath. The move was uncannily like that of The Theatre in 1598/9. The location had changed but the furnishings, interiors, materials, and perhaps something of the atmosphere, had remained. So maybe the effects of gentrification – then and now – can be somewhat ameliorated; perhaps gentrification can help to keep creativity on the move, or at least on its toes (though we might conversely wonder whether creativity is a mobile thing – or can have toes). The film concludes, with provocative tongue in provocative cheek, that, in one sense, gentrification gave us the Globe and all that came with it (it's a conclusion I couldn't quite bring myself to, as it were, state). Perhaps, in the words that end our documentary, some things are never quite lost.



**Still: The George and Dragon on Hackney Road, Shoreditch**

#### **Note on Contributor**

Robert Stagg is Lecturer in English at St Anne's College, Oxford. He has work published or forthcoming in *Essays in Criticism*, *Shakespeare Survey*, *Literature Compass* and *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music*. He is currently at work on his first book, provisionally titled *Shakespeare's Defence of Verse*.

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