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**Collection Enhancement Report No. 10 for the V&A, Theatre and Performance
Department (July 2012)**

The Cockpit/Phoenix Theatre

NB: Earlier, the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights the Cockpit/Phoenix playhouse. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report picks-out printed work at the V&A that links to the Cockpit/Phoenix. This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location.

The Cockpit opened in 1616 but was damaged by a riot. It was then reopened and gained the additional name of ‘the Phoenix’. It was an indoor theatre built by Christopher Beeston. The playhouse continued to put on plays for London’s elite through to 1642 as a direct rival to the King’s Men and their Blackfriars playhouse.

Veteran Queen’s Men actor Christopher Beeston built this indoor theatre on the east side of Drury Lane at Cockpit Alley, which ran west-east between Drury Lane and Wild Street, and so it was the first theatre in the so-called west end, named after a real cockpit off Cockpit

Alley. Like the Blackfriars and the later Salisbury Court playhouses, it was designed to attract the wealthier members of society (such as courtiers and students from the Inns of Court) and so it was part of the rarified social and theatrical scene that grew up in late-Jacobean and Caroline London.

Red Bull proprietor Christopher Beeston made the entrepreneurial move of emulating the King's Men at Blackfriars, and built an exclusive indoor hall theatre in Drury Lane (the first in the West End of London) aimed at the well-to-do playgoing audience. But on the Shrove Tuesday holiday of 1617, when the apprentices who frequented the Red Bull performances found out that Beeston was moving Anna's Men and their plays to the pricy new Cockpit theatre, they riotously attacked the building, burning and half demolishing it before peace officers intervened, during which one of the apprentices was shot dead. After extensive repairs Beeston reopened the Cockpit (hereafter also known as the Phoenix for being instantly reborn from the flames), and it went on with considerable success as the only serious rival to the Blackfriars until 1629, when the indoor hall theatre stakes rose with the building of the Salisbury Court just below the Strand on the City's western border. This episode demonstrates one aspect of the changing nature of London theatre, as issues of financial ambition, audience allegiance, and a shifting but growing repertory of playing nevertheless went on to engage those who it seems could not do without a theatrical entertainment industry now firmly part of the capital's recreational existence.

In this later Jacobean period and all through the Caroline years the two Beeston theatres had very different reputations. The elite indoor Cockpit attracted a different level of society from those who frequented what was now being called a citizen playhouse, the Red Bull. Yet these two theatres shared plays, players and playwrights throughout the reign of King Charles.

After a long plague-ridden closure of 1625, the Cockpit/Phoenix reopened with a new playing company, now called Queen Henrietta's Men, after Charles's new queen. Reports tell that in August 1628 the king's favourite the Duke of Buckingham went there to see a performance of Thomas Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece*. Although this might not establish the playhouse as being of the same standing as the Blackfriars, the fact that Buckingham chose to be seen at Beeston's theatre is noteworthy. As Charles's right-hand man, who in 1624 had accompanied him on that desperately foolish and secret journey to Madrid to meet Charles's promised wife, the Infanta of Spain, Buckingham was one of the most powerful men in England. Later in 1628 he was assassinated by an aggrieved ex-army officer. His visit marked the Cockpit/Phoenix as one of the leading venues of current theatrical and social activity.

Although Beeston's indoor theatre did well in competition with its glamorous rival the Blackfriars, there is evidence for Caroline playing companies quite frequently moving between indoor and outdoor venues. Red Bull plays were actually printed with a fictionally heightened status as Cockpit/Phoenix plays. Despite continuing outbreaks of plague, all playhouses did good business, and the gap between the indoor and outdoor theatres may not have been as pronounced as many of the gentry seem to have thought. Furthermore, the Shakespearean period did not see a complete end of boy players as is commonly thought. The new Children of the Revels played for a while at the third of the indoor venues, and another new boy company arrived in the later Caroline era. In 1637 Beeston, who may initially have thought boys would be easier to manage than experienced adult players, ejected his adult company and in their place installed the so-called 'Beeston's Boys' at the Cockpit. This

company in reality featured six adult actors, unlike the earlier all-boy companies from the reigns of Elizabeth and James.

The Cockpit/Phoenix and the V&A Collection

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) is taken from the collection's titlepage for *The Witch of Edmonton*, as performed at the Cockpit/Phoenix. Note that the quarto is printed in 1658, several years after the 1642 closure of the playhouses.

The Witch of Edmonton :

A known true S T O R Y.

Composed into

A TRAGI-COMEDY

By divers well-esteemed Poets ;

William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, &c.

Acted by the Princes Servants, often at the Cock-Pit in *Drury-Lane*,
once at Court, with singular Applause.

Never printed till now.



London, Printed by J. Cottrel, for Edward Blackmore, at the Angel in
Paul's Church-yard. 1658.