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Callan Davies. What Is a Playhouse? England at Play, 1520-1620. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023

Christopher Highley 

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Callan Davies. *What Is a Playhouse? England at Play, 1520–1620.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023. Pp 230. Paperback, \$48.95 USD. ISBN 9781032138077. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003231127>.

Christopher Highley
The Ohio State University

To the deceptively simple question posed by his book's title, Callan Davies provides detailed and often surprising answers. For too long, he argues, theatre historians have encouraged us to think of the early modern playhouse as a purpose-built, free-standing, circular, or octagonal structure dedicated to the performance of professional plays. But for contemporaries, structures like the Theatre in Shoreditch or the Globe on Bankside would have looked less like innovative and bespoke structures and more like members of a heterogeneous family of buildings and spaces that shared various architectural and functional features. If we remain fixated on the iconic Theatre and Globe, and wedded to related narratives of 'firstness', we miss the great variety of houses and other settings where play of all kinds occurred. Davies's myth-busting is especially helpful in downplaying the notion that the 1570s were particularly revelatory and decentering London in the story we tell ourselves about the 'emergence' of early modern theatre.



In looking at the variety of play 'houses' and related entertainment sites across England, Davies makes excellent use of the publications of REED, the Records of Early English Drama, whose editors have for decades now done the laborious work of tracking down and documenting all surviving references to plays and performances in provincial archives. Davies supplements these published volumes with rare manuscript materials like legal depositions, wills, and other records that he has uncovered in archives like the London Metropolitan Archives.

Most playing spaces, Davies claims, were creative conversions or adaptations of pre-existing buildings and spaces that had to mesh with the built and natural environments that surrounded them. Perhaps the most unusual of playing venues

discussed by Davies was carved out of a disused quarry in Shrewsbury, Shropshire, and 'new made theatre-wise' (33–6, 95–7). Although extant details are frustratingly few, the repurposed quarry included staircases, booths, and movable seating at different levels that looked down on a large stage used for "bearbaitings bullbaitings making Butts [archery] and shooting for stage plays and other plays silver games wrestling Running Leaping, and other like activities and Recreations" (34). The enterprise had been operating for at least a decade before the Theatre and Curtain appeared north of London; the entire 'multiplex' covered thirty acres; and, if Shrewsbury native Thomas Churchyard is to be believed, it could accommodate ten thousand spectators. On the surface, this venue might seem far removed from our conventional idea of an early modern playhouse like the Theatre, but in design, architecture, and purpose it was more similar than different.

Offering a mixture of changing spectacles and entertainments, the Shropshire venue is typical of the provincial play 'houses' Davies examines. All were 'Multi-purpose Spaces' (the title of chapter two). Of course, London playhouses were not single-purpose buildings dedicated exclusively to stage plays either. The Fortune on Bankside famously alternated between plays and bear-baitings with the help of a movable stage. And even the Theatre and Globe featured fencing matches, acrobatics, improvised clowning, and other shows. Still, commercialized forms of entertainment in the provinces were more likely to be mingled and gathered close to one another.

This proximity was the case in Congleton, Cheshire, where Davies reconstructs a 'municipal sports complex' (146). Congleton was a regional centre for bear-baiting (a 'pastime' to which Davies gives welcome attention). Bears, like bulls, were baited in paved and oft-repaired rings (law required all bulls be baited to tenderize their flesh before butchering) and a nearby cockpit structure promoted gambling on cockfights. Judging by the unusual number of alehouses and taverns in town, Congleton catered not just to residents but also to a clientele willing to travel considerable distances. One of the 'playing journeys' (133) that Davies traces to this so-called 'Bear Town' involved several gentlemen from Chester on the far side of the county (144–51).

Davies stresses that Congleton's leisure industry was closely tied to the town's corporate identity and enjoyed the backing of local governing elites — by no means a marginal activity seen as a threat to public order. Davies pushes back effectively on a narrative that sees antitheatrical authorities locked in struggle with greedy speculators and disorderly punters. Another example of cooperation between civic elites and the owners of entertainment businesses is the playhouse

on Wine Street, Bristol. Run by Nicholas and Margaret Woolfe, their venue was a converted series of rooms in a multi-story building that also let rooms, sold food and drink, and served as a family home. Unlike London's public playhouses, the Bristol venue operated with the approval and partly for the benefit of the municipal authorities.

Local churchwardens, aldermen, and a future mayor were involved in running the playhouse, which may even have taken over from the Guildhall in hosting travelling players as well as events sponsored by the city's oligarchy. Davies also notes that Nicholas Woolfe's will made future charitable bequests dependent upon the playhouse remaining a playhouse. Woolfe saw his playhouse as more than a financial concern, but instead as a cherished cultural institution that enriched the lives of his neighbors and formed a focal point of communal belonging (151–5).

The emphasis on the Wine Street playhouse as an individual, family, and communal affair is symptomatic of Davies's insistence that all forms of commercial play be situated within larger material and social structures. Playhouses reshaped their built and natural surroundings, altered patterns of human movement and settlement, and fostered new interpersonal, commercial, and institutional networks. They become, according to the title of chapter four, 'Community Hubs'. Chapter three, 'Crowd Capacities', also shows how the building of the Theatre and Curtain changed the ecosystem of Shoreditch. New access routes were constructed, others blocked, and ancillary businesses emerged, making 'playhouse peripheries [into] vibrant spaces' (115). The development of 'leisure precincts' like Shoreditch gave Londoners opportunities to visit unfamiliar parts of the city and to travel and socialize outside their 'home' circuit (125).

This book will be warmly welcomed by anyone interested in the spatial turn within early modern studies, placemaking, and literary geography. Davies insists with other recent scholars that playhouses must be studied not only in terms of the materials and structures they were built out of and next to but also within their wider material environments. What lay 'within' the circumference of their walls, and even what was staged on their boards, intimately connected with what lay beyond those walls. A critical myopia about the professional London stage, focused on established acting troupes as well as Burbage and Alleyn's playhouses, means we have lost sight of both the variety of playing spaces across early modern England and the multiple forms of entertainment they staged as well as the communal work they performed. Davies's eye-opening answers to the question 'What is a playhouse?' will hopefully inspire future scholars to explore different venues and recreational activities across provincial England.