

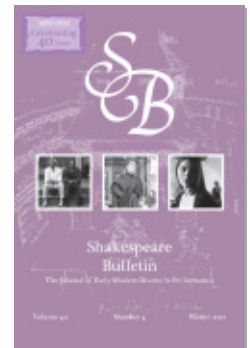


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*What is a Playhouse? England at Play, 1520–1620* by Callan  
Davies (review)

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## Book Reviews

*What is a Playhouse? England at Play, 1520–1620.* By Callan Davies. New York, NY: Routledge, 2022. Pp. xii + 230. Hardcover \$160.00. Paperback \$44.95. Ebook \$40.45.

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The final act of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* features a swordfight that must do more than accompany dialogue. Laertes and Hamlet must swap a poisoned blade, and both characters must be struck by it at some point in the choreography. The stage directions for fencing in the quarto and folio versions of *Hamlet* take the diegetic form "they play" (5.2.258, 266, 283). *Hamlet* captures one way in which Renaissance theater, according to Callan Davies's *What is a Playhouse? England at Play, 1520–1620*, "encompassed and necessitated other forms of expertise and relied on an audience's ability to 'read' other play forms" (83). The central claim of this necessary book is that "play" described a range of interrelated activities affiliated with commercial leisure spaces across England. Davies emphasizes the fluidity of the notion of "playhouse," the multifunctionality and co-dependence of these venues on other recreational institutions. Playhouses come in a range of types situated within what Davies calls an entertainment complex or district rather than constituting a destination unto themselves, changing the way critics might conceive not only of these spaces, but also of the ways in which playwrights might have written for them.

Davies substantially rethinks the early modern playhouse and offers a new critical vocabulary with which to describe its "family" of architectural features (2). He focuses on all the elements that early modern contemporaries could have identified as part of a playhouse rather than on what was not, such as the long-contested "discovery space." Adeptly toggling between archaeological findings and archival witnesses, Davies builds an impressive family tree of venues which traces their development in the context of wider architectural shifts, arguing that "theatre-ness" became a byword for sumptuousness (29). Untangling the modern scholarly platitude of permanence, Davies demonstrates that these venues were designed to be convertible and impermanent, and their "inherent fluidity and flexibility" is attested by the fact that "forms, seats, and benches could be recast anew as suited the play medium at hand" (35). Establishing the plasticity of this architecture early in the book makes it possible for Davies then to take account of

the many branches on the playhouse family line, showing links between pageant houses, game houses, and alehouses; guild, moot, and leet halls; arenas; bowling; fencing; the use of bears, dogs, and cocks; and little considered spaces such as The Almonry, a London boy company venue. In this landscape, it becomes clear that the circular amphitheater is an outlier, an exception rather than the rule. Most evocative in this new vocabulary is Davies's phrase "amphitheatrically accented structures" (36). Not necessarily requiring roundness, these venues combined Greek and Roman traditions with "English developments in house-building, interior decorating and existing environmental features" (36). This new terminology establishes a scaffold upon which further terminology sensitive to the modular and the mobile might be constructed.

The book often aligns playhouse development with broader cultural trends, making these venues seem more a part of a shared mental furniture than I had previously appreciated. In addition to amphitheatricity's emphasis on Classical art, math, and forms, playhouses reflected the practice of "upcycling" in early modern England, as deforestation and the new availability of buildings emptied by the Protestant Reformation provided both new spaces and a need to recycle materials already in use. Rather than standing alone or apart, these venues were more often at the intersections of "leisure precincts" across England (125). In identifying multiple kinds of playhouses existing simultaneously as opposed to crafting an evolution of a single thing called "playhouse," Davies provides a series of regionally specific microhistories that capture something of the phenomenology of these leisure enclaves and anticipate the rise of the flâneur. For example, the early modern council-run sports complex in Congleton, Cheshire, chimes with my personal experiences of more recent urban planning, such as wandering downtown Cleveland, Ohio, on a busy night after a Cavaliers game. Nestled in a bend of the Cuyahoga River, that walkable district is packed with music venues, pubs, and hotels radiating from the large baseball and basketball venues which directly face one another. It is a "multipurpose playplex" not dissimilar from the Blackfriars "play-scape" Davies conjures, a district that was converted from a friary's old cloisters into a series of bowling alleys, tennis courts, dancing and fencing schools, as well as a concentrated hub for new fashions and luxury goods (159).

Wide-ranging in its attention to the affordances of these precincts and the ways in which their buildings managed crowds, this book is likewise capacious in considering the people of these places. Through numerous case studies, Davies provides a range of alternative motives for going to a play, as such experiences "sit within a history of service, shopping, and victualing" (125). Readers get to travel alongside shoemaker John Sale on his routine for a day of play attendance or overhear as if a fly on the wall during a play day at Widow Dutton's alehouse (134–5). In 2001, Roslyn Knutson critiqued a personality-driven approach to theater history of this period and discouraged thinking in the collaborative terms on which the industry was structured (12–14). Davies seems to have considered this deeply, as the book systematically decenters the presumed maleness

and whiteness of those in front of and within the tiring house. This approach includes comparing English theater venues to those across Europe, a practice expansively employed in Noémie Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness*. The Italian fencing schools that were pervasive in these English entertainment precincts are touchpoints for immigration and national identity, as are the popular tumbling troupes featuring French, Italian, Turkish, and Dutch performers. Playgoers are likewise described in multi-national, -lingual, and -generational terms based on the latest archaeological discoveries of who came to these multipurpose spaces; they ranged from mothers and their children to dignitaries (not just male apprentices) at a time when London was home to more than seven thousand European immigrants (115).

The book's treatment of women is particularly admirable, as early English theater history has tended to be deeply entwined with figures like Philip Henslowe who can so easily serve as surrogates for characters in the play of English playhouse development. Davies provides a model of what it looks like to do fundamentally feminist English theater history in a way that affects his choices concerning archive selection, rhetorical framing down to the sentence level, and even the structure of the monograph itself, which does not simply include a tokenizing single chapter on their contributions. For example, in early chapters, stews are understood not only as sites for sex work, but as complex multipurpose spaces that offered lodging, food, drink, and bearbaiting. Chapter five focuses on the lives of three women as a case study to consider why one might want to build or run a playhouse given its impermanence. Expanding on the pioneering work of Natasha Korda and Clare McManus, Davies presents the stories of three Margarets who employed the latest financial products, co-financed traveling companies, managed venues, and acted as play procurers.

While this book is about places, its comparative and collaborative approach pays dividends in the tricky areas of audiences and theater-makers. Davies's close attention to the affordances of these spaces offers a framework for future critics to see moments where the "plays themselves accommodate the multi-purposeness of the playhouse, not only by integrating music, combat, dancing, and other play elements in the drama but by allowing for wandering attentions" (80). A strikingly refreshing approach to thinking about the rituals of consumption in early modern England is Davies's contention that, given the multiuse quality of these leisure precincts, a play event might have been intentionally activating different interests simultaneously, where one's "attention could be happily divided" in an environment "in which neither play nor plays necessitated quiet, singular, or linear engagement" (73). How might scholars understand swordfights or songs differently, not as tableaux or set pieces, but potentially interacting with other simultaneous activities outside the play event? While it has become a truth universally acknowledged in Shakespeare pedagogy that the study of early modern plays benefits from a sensitivity toward their live, embodied contexts, that this claim of pleurably divided attention does not already have more wider traction in scholarship suggests how far the field may yet come to unsettle assumptions about what one could have done at a play.

Mirroring the book's argument that many options were simultaneously available when early modern people sought out a playhouse, Davies's chapters are co-constitutive rather than linear in their chronology of venue evolution. The first chapter is the lengthiest, sketching out the family tree of playhouse "archetypes" active simultaneously across England into the early seventeenth century (2). The following four chapters each focus on what these variable venue types collectively offered not to individuals but to the groups of people spending time in and adjacent to them. Like so much of early modern theater-making, the book embraces the stochastic and ensemble-driven by being uninterested in theories of origin or influence. Even while at times gesturing toward the possible impact of individual playwrights, Davies is generous in demonstrating the ways in which readier but not always best-suited tools of chronology break down. In his discussion of the unusualness of amphitheaters in the 1590s, those "crucial innovators and influencers in performance and playwrighting—Richard Tarlton, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd—had been dead for several years by the time London saw a third 'round' playhouse and would have known their theatrical scene to be dominated by rectangular, room-, or hall-like venues" (31). In such moments, the book productively teases out a tension in playhouse criticism; if, as it seems, venues like the Globe and Rose were exceptional and out of the ordinary, then they cannot be treated as also a norm or standard playgoing experience. As findings from the last four decades of playhouse archaeological discoveries make their way into the study of early modern drama, this primer to early modern entertainment is positioned to only become more crucial over time.

### Works Cited

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