Introduction: Brick, lime, sand, plaster over lath and 'new oaken boards': the early modern playhouse

Writing retrospectively in his three-volume *Itinerary* (1617) of what he had seen with his own eyes during extensive travels across Britain and Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Fynes Morison commented that: 'There be, in my opinion, more plays in London than in all parts of the world I have seen . . . '.[1] It is the task in part of this Introduction to explain why and how by 1617 this was the case. Why had London become the epicentre of an unparalleled theatre industry, with a raft of purpose-built playhouses, competing companies, and playwrights of the stature of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton vying for business from spectators and the publishing houses alike? What made this such an exciting moment of discovery and experimentation, one in which acting styles, the reach of dramatic language, notions of genre, ways of writing and working, and ideas about what might physically and intellectually be achieved on a stage, were stretched almost to breaking point?

From the outset, it must be made clear that the early modern professional theatre with which this study largely concerns itself did not appear fully formed from nowhere. There were much longer traditions and legacies of playing and performance on which early modern theatre was founded and to which it constantly referred and alluded. Janette Dillon has written that

> When audiences saw [the star actor Edward] Alleyn wear a false nose to play Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589–90), they were seeing a continuity with medieval devils; when Barabas fell into a cauldron of his own devising they were seeing a continuity with the medieval hellmouth; when the Porter in *Macbeth* (1605–6) came to open the stage-doors in response to the knocking on them, making a stream of jokes about being a 'devil-porter' opening the gates of Hell to sinners, they knew they were being asked to recall the harrowing of Hell plays from the mystery cycles; and when *Volpone* (1606) opened with an image of Volpone surrounded by heaps of gold, they recognised not only Marlowe's Barabas at the start of *The Jew of Malta*, but also the

> numerous allegorical images of Goods, Money or Covetousness in early moral plays like *Everyman* (c. 1510–19?) or in later ones such as *All for Money* (c. 1572–7).[2]

These continuities were crucially important and form part of the much larger nexus of intertextuality that in part defined the operations and interactions of early modern theatre, an ongoing stage dialogue where plays and playwrights persistently quoted, and sometimes parodied, each other, where they recycled and remade ideas, both their own and others', and constantly riffed on other dramatic moments and experiments that had worked for paying audiences. This kind of connective thinking will shape much of the analysis and reflection that follows.

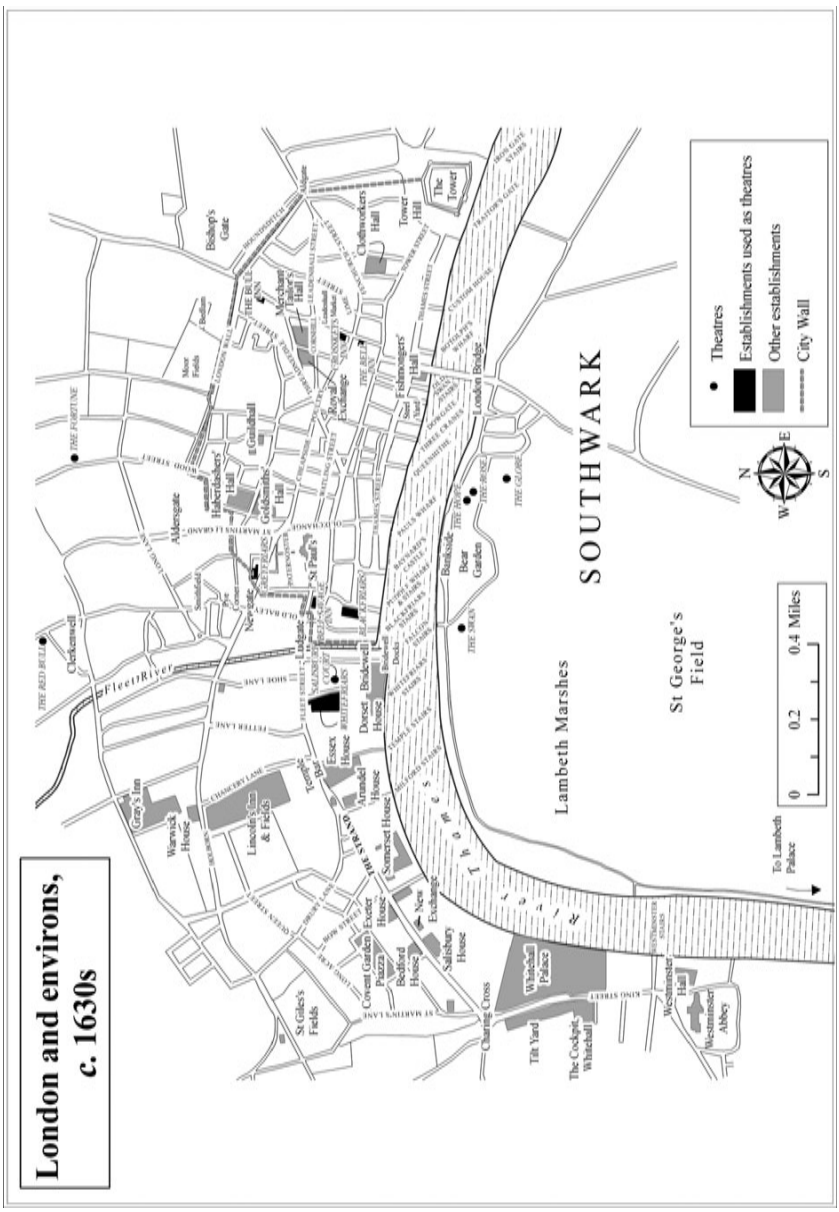
What also rendered the moment on which this study focuses different, and perhaps unique, were the places, the very stages, on which this kind of dialogue unfolded. The temporal parameters of this study stretch, seemingly very precisely, from 1576 to 1642. The year 1576 dates the opening of the Theatre in the Shoreditch region of London, often marked as the first purpose-built commercial playhouse in England, though in practice the Theatre built on the precedent of the Red Lion at Stepney which was the work of the same entrepreneurial mind, that of John Brayne the London grocer, and another playhouse at Newington Butts that had been operating in the decade prior to this. The Theatre was rapidly followed a year later by the Curtain, also in Shoreditch, and by the Rose Theatre and the Swan in Southwark in 1587 and 1595 respectively. Equally famous venues such as the Globe (1599, constructed on the Thames Bankside from the dismantled timbers of the Theatre when that playhouse's lease ran out) and the Fortune (1600) followed in due course and in 1614 the Hope Theatre was erected in the southern suburbs of the City on the site of former bear gardens. As purpose-built playhouses proliferated and formalised their operations, there emerged a series of competing theatre companies.

The year 1594 was another landmark date, this time in the history of company formations. Andrew Gurr has recounted in considerable detail the specific impacts and effects of the formal licensing of two companies by the Privy Council in that year.[3] One was under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain himself, Henry Carey, first Baron Hunsdon, and was linked to the Theatre in the north, and the other under the aegis of another Privy Councillor, Charles Howard, the Lord Admiral (and Carey's son-in-law), at the Rose Theatre in the south on Bankside. Once again, these companies built on previous playing traditions, the practices and aesthetics of the children's companies emerging directly out of the work of the boy choristers who had performed the plays of John Lyly for courtly audiences at Greenwich and elsewhere during the reign of

Queen Elizabeth I, and those of the travelling players who toured the provinces performing in noble households and in inns for payment in the late sixteenth century, the Queen's Men chief among them.[4] It is no mere coincidence that Brayne's Theatre was located on the main road north out of London and that the Newington Butts operation in Surrey was on the main road south. This conscious positioning – the cartography of the professional playhouses as it were – recognised the intrinsic relationship between theatre in a fixed place and theatre in its more mobile touring and travelling identities (for a map of early seventeenth-century London marking the location of the major playhouses, see Figure 1).[5]

These historical legacies and connections are a crucial part of telling the story of what is special or different about the period 1576–1642. Start moments and endpoints will always have an element of the arbitrary about them; as the conclusion to this study will suggest, as well as continuing in a long tradition from medieval and early Tudor performances, early modern commercial theatre did not suddenly and abruptly end in 1642 when an official parliamentary declaration demanded the temporary closure of the public playhouses. The rationale for that closure was initially premised on the grounds of health and safety as tensions grew in the lead-up to what would become the English Civil War, though, of course, there were also underlying religious reasons as the City of London became increasingly fundamentalist in its exercise of the Protestant faith. But theatre did not simply stop because the Globe and its companion playhouses were shut down and eventually dismantled. As usual, deep theatre history reveals a far more incremental and piecemeal narrative of evolution and adaptation as drama found a voice in alternative modes and genres and in alternative modes of performance such as opera.[6] Nevertheless, to my mind, something special does seem to happen between the start and end dates attached to this study and this is directly linked to the construction of purpose-built playhouses and the concomitant professionalisation of the activities of acting, producing and indeed writing plays that followed from that. With so many people taking part in theatre in some way – as commissioners and businesspeople, as performers, as backstage 'hands' producing costumes, feather headpieces, music and props, as writers and adapters, as theatregoers – what emerged was a set of new and ever-growing competencies in this particular art form.[7]

So bricks and mortar do matter very much to this story. The title to this introductory chapter refers explicitly to the extant contract for the building of the Fortune Theatre in Cripplegate. Signed by Philip Henslowe, Edward Alleyn and Peter Street on 8 January 1600 (we will hear much more of Henslowe and Alleyn both in this chapter and in the discussions that follow; Street, a



1. Map depicting London and its environs with the outdoor and indoor playhouses marked.

carpenter, was also involved in the building of the Globe from the material remains of the Theatre when that theatre's lease ran out, and reappears in the 1614 contract for the Hope Theatre), it set out the need for 'a good sewer and strong foundation of piles, brick, lime and sand' and a stage of 'good strong and sufficient new oaken boards'.[8] These materials contributed to the sense of permanency that attached to these buildings and which gave them a presence in the physical and cultural landscapes of the fast-growing city of London (the population grew from *c.* 15,000 in 1576 when the Theatre opened to *c.* 200,000 by 1642 when the Civil War led to the closure of the public playhouses).[9] In a very practical sense they contributed to the acoustics and sightlines of the performance spaces and therefore to the sounds heard and sights seen by early modern theatre audiences.[10]

Material conditions and the physical features of the stage matter a great deal, then, as do the social, economic and cultural conditions in which early modern theatre took place. As well as being a tale of artistic process and practice, it is telling how often the story of early modern theatre is also one of economics and entrepreneurship.[11] The life-story of Henslowe, best known to us now as the owner-manager of the Rose Theatre though also heavily involved as we have seen in the building of the Fortune, is a useful barometer in this respect. Described in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as a 'theatre financier', he was a freeman of the Dyers' Company and had several active investments in the pawnbroking industry and in starch-making. Henslowe was through and through a businessman; he would, alongside his Rose activities, keep his hand in several property ventures (inns and houses as well as theatres), and for a time he shared a licence as Master of the Bears that were baited in the nearby Paris Garden on Bankside with his star Rose actor Edward Alleyn (who married Henslowe's stepdaughter Joan in 1592).[12] He also left at his death a remarkable set of papers that constitutes accounts and inventories for the Rose and that has given us valuable insight into the quotidian operations of an early modern working theatre.[13]

There is a strong connecting line between the theatres, their owners and their actors, and the artisanal working world of London. Jonson and Middleton had strong links to the Tylers' and Brickmakers' Company and Jonson was a trained bricklayer, evidence of whose work may still rest somewhere in the foundations and walls of London;[14] the Burbage family, father James, who was one of the co-founders of the Theatre in 1576, and son Richard (the latter is, along with Alleyn, a major stage celebrity in this period), linked to the building of the Globe and the acquisition and refurbishment of the second Blackfriars Theatre, had a family background in joinery; Robert Armin, the Chamberlain's Men actor thought to have played parts like Touchstone in

Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1600) and Feste in *Twelfth Night* (*c.* 1601), was a trained goldsmith (and this may explain Touchstone's name, which refers to the way in which gold was tested or 'assayed', and some of the play's more arcane dialogue); John Heminges, manager of the Lord Chamberlain's and later the King's Men, who was involved in the printing of the 1623 folio collection of Shakespeare's plays, had, like John Brayne of Theatre fame, a background in the Grocers' Company.[15] What this kind of detail reveals is how embedded in the everyday operational life of the city the theatre community was and this in turn underscores the value implicit in reading the plays produced by them against the daily life of the city, its practices, its customs, its concerns, its knowledges, its pleasures. The bricks and mortar that built the early modern commercial playhouses direct us back to this sense of a vibrant, working city in significant ways. But, of course, this is only in part a story about brick, lime, sand, plaster and oak. This is also crucially a study of what populated those spaces: companies, players' bodies, costumes, objects and props, music, food sellers, audience members, words, ideas . . . sometimes, as we shall see, even the weather (see Case study A). The story begins, then, with the outdoor theatres, often referred to as amphitheatres and mostly circular in shape (the Fortune and the Red Bull are exceptions to this rule). The repertoire of one particular open-air amphitheatre, the Rose Theatre, home to the Admiral's Men company, is explored in detail in Case study B. Roofless constructions, they could hold up to 2,000 audience members and performances took place in broad daylight and were open to the weather. The stages of these outdoor theatres were largely minimal; with two or three doors at the back enabling entry onto the stage, a gallery space above, and in some cases a trapdoor onto the main stage, what was mostly visible to the eye were the bare boards onto which actors, costumes and props would be transported to make meaning at any given time in the performance.

Henslowe's papers list all the props in the ownership of the Admiral's Men, including the following items:

> The Enventory tacken of all the properties for my Lord Admeralles men, the 10 of Marche 1598.
> Item, j rocke, j cage, j tombe, j Hell mought.
> Item, j tome of Guido, j tome of Dido, j bedstead.[16]

These are large-scale rather than handheld properties (though Henslowe's papers also evidence plenty of the latter in the Admiral's Men repository). We might imagine the cage being deployed in a performance of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* or the bedstead in the first-act scenes in *Volpone* where the magnifico feigns his sickness in order to gull fellow Venetians of their wealth or from

which he tries to rape Celia in 3.7. The 'Hell mought' is yet further evidence of those continuities with medieval moral drama that we were exploring a moment ago. Later in Henslowe's list we find: 'Item, j caudern for the Jewe' which is clearly the cauldron into which Barabas falls in Act 5 of *The Jew of Malta* and which has been read by scholars like Dillon in the earlier quotation as a direct throwback to medieval hell-mouth traditions. A later Case study (F) will use a single stage property, a skull, to explore the ways in which objects made meaning on the early modern stage. Henslowe's papers are also testimony to the importance of costumes in the company holdings, and the resonance of this is returned to at several points in the study, when looking at the work of the boy actor (see Case study H) and at the traffic of dramatic materials between public and courtly stages (see Conclusion).

What Henslowe's inventories and accounts help to unveil are the practical elements that make up theatre: props, but also fabrics, craft and the sheer labour that went into the making of these things. In this way we are encouraged to read artisanal as well as authorial presence in the collaborative making of commercial drama at this time. Equally important in the co-production of meaning in the theatre were spectators, and the architecture of the outdoor theatres seems expressly designed to capitalise on this fact. Audiences could see each other during a performance as much as they could observe the actors onstage. They were either seated in galleries or standing in the pit area directly in front and to the side of the stage as 'groundlings' and paid ticket entry prices accordingly. We can see a version of all these particular architectural and socio-spatial details in the much reproduced Johannes de Witt 1596 sketch of the Swan Theatre which depicts a single bench onstage around which and seated on which are two actors in conversation while a third appears to be carrying a halberd (a weapon that has an axe-head mounted on a long wooden shaft) and to be bending over in a gesture of deference which might suggest he is a messenger or visitor of some sort. There are few spectators visible in the de Witt drawing, which has led some to speculate that it is a sketch of a rehearsal, but contemporary accounts flesh out how the theatre might have looked during an actual performance, describing, for example, how food and drink sellers moved around the audience during performances.[17] We need to think what goes on *on* but also *around* a stage when making sense of a live event.

Later discussions of particular plays will consider the impact of the fluid stage space of the outdoor theatres on particular dramaturgic decisions and effects (Case study I), but Stephen Greenblatt captures something important about the exciting sense of sheer possibility it created in his account of the plays of Marlowe:

> the scene changes so quickly at times that Marlowe seems to be battering against the boundaries of his own medium: at one moment the stage represents a vast space, then suddenly contracts to a bed, then turns in quick succession into an imperial camp, a burning town, a besieged fortress, a battlefield, a tent.[18]

The opening Chorus of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1598–9) alludes to something similar when it demands of the audience:

> Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
> Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth;
> For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
> Carry them here and there . . .
>
> (*Henry V*, Prologue, 26–9)

These brief examples are evidence enough of the importance of the commercial theatre audiences, who were invoked, spoken to, by means of soliloquies and asides, asked questions of, sometimes even co-opted as citizens and soldiers in scenes needing to provide a sense of critical mass (see a modern reconstruction of this in Figure 2). Active examples might be Mark Antony's funeral oration in 3.2 of *Julius Caesar* (1599), or Henry V's address to his men before the Battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare's eponymous history play (4.3.20–67); the direct address of clowns, fools and malcontents in everything from comedies to the darkest and most macabre of revenge tragedies; the witty and subversive servant Mosca's conspiratorial soliloquy at 3.1 of Jonson's *Volpone* or the cynical monologues of Barabas in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. The list is potentially pages long but combining these particular moments of audience participation with conventional dramatic devices to mark the threshold into and out of plays, we gain a genuine sense of this as theatre interested in, indeed invested in, the art of frame-breaking. The love of 'plays within plays' and other forms of inset drama – for example, in *The Spanish Tragedy* (1585–6), *Hamlet* (1600–1), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590–2), *Volpone*, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1605–6), *The Roman Actor* (1626), *A Jovial Crew* (1641–2), to name just a few – is yet another example of early modern theatre's wish to heighten spectators' awareness of their own position as audience members, as part of the show.[19]

Having thought about the interior space and appearance of the outdoor theatres, it is equally important to register their urban spatial location in London and its adjoining suburbs and the contribution this made both to the experience of theatregoing and the reputation (for good or ill) of theatre as a commercial art form. The newly built commercial playhouses tended to cluster in certain locales: in the suburbs to the north and south of the City, and in

2. A moment of audience participation in a reconstructed outdoor theatre space.

the liberties that existed within the City walls. Liberties were demarcated areas outside of formal civic jurisdiction and so, like the suburbs, allowed for easier planning permissions and enabled the theatres greater freedoms of operation. As already noted, the Theatre and the Curtain were close to each other in the Shoreditch area to the north and then a series of subsequent theatres were built in Southwark in the south, where Paris Garden, known for its bear-baitings and nefarious happenings, and the Clink, with its prison, were both officially liberties. Henslowe would reside near the Clink all of his working life, evidencing the important point made by Dillon that 'Players gradually became an integral part of the parishes where playhouses were constructed.'[20] Arthur Kinney has also noted the convenience of the Thameside location of the Bankside theatres in particular, observing that the Globe was located outside the City walls at Southwark but was a good location, drawing as it did 'on the crowded suburbs and just upriver from the houses of nobility and the palace of Westminster and downriver from the royal palaces of Hampton Court, Greenwich and Richmond'.[21]

At the turn of the century, a new type of purpose-built theatre venue added to the diversity of venues when, firstly through the work of all-children companies, a number of so-called 'indoor theatres' were erected. These are sometimes referred to as 'private playhouses' by scholars; something of a misnomer since in reality they were open to the paying public. St Paul's and the first Blackfriars date from 1575 and 1576. These were across the water from the Bankside amphitheatres and often located in the City itself but were also initially sited in liberties. The Blackfriars precinct, site of former religious houses, is a prime example of this. Dillon notes that the two indoor theatres that emerged on that site (the first Blackfriars in 1576 and the second in 1600, following initial thwarted attempts to open a playhouse there by James Burbage in 1596 when he realised that the Theatre as a playing locale was under threat) converted different parts of the site including the buttery and the dining hall.[22] Burbage had become interested in this location as an alternative to the Bankside theatres since it offered the opportunity for indoor winter performances but he was initially thwarted by opposition from the neighbourhood. This was a wealthy district that was distinctly unsettled by the idea of what a playhouse might do to the tone of the area and organised an oppositional petition accordingly which was submitted to the Privy Council in November 1596 and which spoke of the 'generall inconvenience' a local theatre would represent.[23] Ironically it was the more elite atmosphere of the environs of the Blackfriars precinct that had made this an attractive business proposition to Burbage since it promised a more upmarket and higher fee-paying audience than the open-air amphitheatres in the south. His adult company (by then under the name of the King's Men following the accession of James VI and I in 1603) would eventually take up residency there in 1608 but not before the enterprise threatened to break the Burbages financially. What saved him was the decision in 1597 to dismantle the Theatre wholesale when its lease expired and reconstruct it as a playing space in Southwark close to the Rose Theatre and which he called the Globe.

By the first decade of the seventeenth century, there was also the Whitefriars, where in its opening year 1609 Jonson's *Epicene* was played. Then there followed those indoor theatres that were built and developed their reputation and repertoire towards the end of our focus period, largely during the reign of King Charles I, such as the Phoenix (*c.* 1616, also known as the Cockpit) and the Salisbury Court (1629).The indoor venues were smaller, more intimate, covered and therefore candlelit. They had access to a permanent troupe of musicians, which also impacted on the inclusion of instrumentation and song in plays after 1608 when the Blackfriars began to be the second permanent home of the King's Men.[24] Much useful research has now been done into the ways in which the use of interior illumination (and some of the practical needs