

The play's the thing. But what's so wrong with the RSC's plan to also let people have dinner, or catch the last train home?

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"How poor are they that have not patience!". So implores Iago in defence of his slowly unfolding plot. As with so much of Shakespeare's work, the line from *Othello* is one that resonates today. Indeed, it may have been in the mind of the Royal Shakespeare Company when it was considering how best to retain the attention of time-poor audiences this season.

Instead, it chose a different route, and a provocation: one play is to be squished into an 80-minute sprint, for those who don't have the time to sit through the full two- or three-hour rendition. Tamara Harvey and Daniel Evans, co-artistic directors announcing their first season of RSC programming, said this compact show – *As You Like It*, to be performed in the Holloway Garden Theatre – would be ideal for tourists visiting Stratford-upon-Avon.

But is it a provocation, really? Some might call it the "reduced" Shakespeare Company, and scream sacrilege. Even as a lover of the plays in all their messy fullness, I do not see it as any bad thing. There can be an exhilarating focus to a short show. Some trimmed-down Shakespeares are every bit as rich as the originals, if done well. (...)

The RSC's compact play comes with practical benefits that are part of a bigger vision of how to make theatre a more convenient and varied experience: tickets for the new season are cheaper, starting at £10, and *As You Like It* will start at 5pm so visitors can catch an evening train out of Stratford. I have foolishly attempted to come back home to London after a first night at the RSC, and failed. The last train has always left by the time a show closes, which means staying overnight. How many people are put off from going to Stratford because they can't afford the added expenses?

I bet Shakespeare would have welcomed it – ever the businessman, ever the pragmatist and ever so quick to respond to his audiences, as he was. And as the Shakespeare scholar Farah Karim-Cooper has pointed out, radically reimagined productions will not lead to an auto-destruct of the original texts. Those will always be there.

There is no "one" way to watch Shakespeare anyway, just as there is no single way to stage his work. I don't think the original Elizabethan audience would have objected to a shorter show. They were far from reverential, chatting, eating, drinking, and walking in and out of a performance at the Globe whenever it pleased them.

The radical – and welcome – move here is that Harvey and Evans seem to be taking into consideration the whole experience of theatregoing, not just the play in isolation, which can be stressful, from the rushed early dinner to the hair-raisingly long wait in the toilet queue and the squeeze to get to your seats. (...)

The RSC has been struggling to find a fresh direction for a while. Harvey and Evans have come up with new ideas, but it is clear they are not planning on razing Shakespeare's legacy to the ground. (...)

Of course, the play's the thing, and it is why we go to the theatre. But it's not the only reason. Some want to enjoy the full three-hour production with not a word removed; others want to have dinner and chat afterwards, or catch the bus home without having to make a mad run for it. Within this spectrum, a bite-size Shakespeare has its rightful place.