

## Summer of Shakespeare: Visiting the New Rose

[Oscar Bentley](#) wills away his summer attending Shakespeare's Rose Theatre, finding much to enjoy in the process

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Image: Lunchbox Theatrical Productions

For those of us who had the (mis?)fortune of staying in York all summer, the long month did not leave us unoccupied, with Shakespeare's Rose Theatre opening up in the shadow of the historic Clifford's Tower. Based on its Elizabethan namesake, the Rose was Europe's first "pop-up" Elizabethan theatre. It was constructed using 30 000 cubic metres of scaffolding tubes and cladded to make it look, at least from the outside, an like authentic Elizabethan open-air theatre, painted in a colour called Hamlet it took 30 people three weeks to build. For 12 weeks, two companies played four of the Bard's most famous works to 78 000 people, with a further 2000 visiting Shakespeare's village which surrounded the playhouse.

Company one - the Yorkshire company - put on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Juliet Forster, York Theatre Royal Associate Director, and *Macbeth*, directed by Damian Cruden, York Theatre Royal Artistic Director. While they were both clearly set in the classic Shakespearean settings, both took the text to innovative places. *Midsummer*, my personal Bard favourite and the most popular of the Rose's quartet, reversed the misogynistic tones of the text by genderswapping the fairy king and queen, with Amanda Ryan's Hippolyta becoming Oberon, her foreboding swagger as the fairy king representing the burst of expression and anger of the imprisoned- by-marriage Hippolyta. Being the only explicit comedy at the Rose, the company did really push the humour: I found the Mechanical's performance of Pyramus and Thisbe possibly the best part of the play, despite finding it frivolous in the past.

*Macbeth*, meanwhile, did away with supernatural forces, turning the witches into Macbeth's servants

battling against the establishment, manipulating their master and donning animal skull masks to hide their identities. Most productions cut out Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, but here she is heavily present as the leader of the underclass resistance and doubling as Lady Macbeth's servant. She plays both sides, pulling the strings of power. Praise must go to Richard Standing as Macbeth, who knocks the famous speeches out of the park.

Company two – the London company – put on *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*, both directed by West End director Lindsay Posner. The Yorkshire company may have largely stuck to traditional staging, but Posner switches it up completely. *Richard III* is set in the present, complete with boardroom suits, vaping, orange jumpsuit-clad prisoners, and soldiers in camo uniforms. It also contained the weirdest moment I've ever witnessed in theatre, as the performance began with the entire company sans Richard dancing to 'Come on Eileen' – not your average historical play. Dyfan Dwyfor's Richard positively spits evil, while Shanaya Ra-faat's gender-swapped (as is her other role of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*) Buckingham swaggers as Richard's sidekick. It's the politics and warfare of the 1400s as the politics and warfare of the 2000s, with the updated staging of the Battle of Bosworth being particularly interesting. Meanwhile seeing Richard shot in the head and falling through the trapdoor is genuinely shocking.

*Romeo and Juliet*, the final play of the quartet and arguably Shakespeare's most famous, keeps the action in Verona but transposes it to the 1930s, with the shadow of Mussolini's fascism lurking in the background. Lord Capulet, for example, isn't just the head of a warring family – he's an Italian gangster, with the pinstripe suit and spats to prove it. The play's famous balcony scene is seemingly the true reason why the two-tiered stage was created (even though it is effectively used in other plays too). Alexander Vlahos also offers a refreshing take on Romeo. Yes, he's still the star-crossed lover, with the heart-wrenching "I defy you stars" scene out in force (a phrase he also got a tattoo of), but, in the first act especially, he's also the funny and immature 17 year old.

Shakespeare's Rose Theatre also had a unique space. Having a seat is all well and good (better than good actually if you have to stand up for three hours in the pouring rain for *Macbeth*), but the groundlings were truly where the magic was at, with the action weaving around the audience. Puck ran around and scrambled over people; Birnham Wood approached the stage through the groundlings, Romeo stole beer from the guy stood next to me. If theatre is the most immersive art form, then what better staging could you hope for?

While many national reviews gave the productions mixed reactions at best, the Rose, from my own perspective at least, presented a truly magical experience. James Cundall, Chief Executive of theatre operators Lunchbox Theatrical Productions, has expressed a desire to bring the theatre back next year. Will 2019 herald the sophomore summer of Shakespeare? The Rose smells as sweet.



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