

★ Culture Theatre What to See

The Play's The Thing: the Horrible Histories of Shakespeare



The Play's The Thing exhibition being constructed at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre. CREDIT: JOHN LAWRENCE

Must-try: the fiery fondue-like hot pot
Sichuan food may be associated with fire, but the cuisine also has more complex flavours to enjoy. [Read more](#)

By **Tim Auld**
18 OCTOBER 2016 - 7:00AM

When I visit on a cool October morning, it's just a few days until the RSC is to open *The Play's the Thing*, a new, permanent, family-friendly exhibition in its Stratford-upon-Avon headquarters, which promises to reveal the behind-the-scenes secrets and stories of nearly 140 years of Shakespeare performances in and around the building.

The Victorian Gothic rooms of the theatre's Swan Wing are a hive of noisy, smelly activity, reverberating to the bangs of a nail gun, as startling as the knocks at Macbeth's gate at dawn, while the air is so loaded with the heady fumes of cleaning solvents that I suspect I might begin, Ariel-like, to float away.

Archivists and conservators worry at the buckles of distressed blue plastic suits of armour, readjust the lie of a silk skirt from a late 19th-century *Lady Macbeth* dress, and unwrap yellowing skulls carefully encased in tissue paper.

Sponsored stories

Million Dollar Luxury Homes You Have to See to Believe
Mansion Global by Dow Jones

This Game Will Eat Days of Your Life
Pirates

But all of this fades away as I step into a pitch-black booth and activate the exhibition's centrepiece, an immersive experience which places you as if on the main stage of the Stratford theatre, facing a screen onto which is projected the audience and an angry-looking Ewart James Walters, in tribal robes, playing the ghost of Hamlet's father in the theatre's current production of the play. I thought I was fated never to play the Dane, but here I am – admittedly reading Hamlet's lines rather woodenly from subtitle prompts – sharing a scene with an RSC pro.



View inside the Exhibition Room showing details from a *Midsummer Night's Dream* production from 1991 at the *The Play's The Thing* exhibition. CREDIT: JOHN LAWRENCE

In truth it's not entirely designed for someone as grizzled as me on my own, because *The Play's the Thing* is really a family exhibition, aimed at parents taking children aged from seven years up. If you were still in primary school, facing Ewart James Walters at close quarters yelling, "If thou didst ever thy dear father love... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder," would make your hair stand up on end.

The brain-child of Geraldine Collinge, the RSC's director of events and exhibitions, working hand-in-hand with Jo Whitford, the RSC's head of exhibitions, the show has a focus that's two-fold: to introduce a new generation of children to Shakespeare; and to offer enough to beguile adult fans with anecdotes and artefacts from the illustrious past of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, which first opened under the leadership of the Benson family in 1879 and became the RSC as we know it in 1961.

In addition to the interactive fun, the exhibition will feature some real heavyweight exhibits, including, until December, the Chandos portrait of the poet, the only picture thought to have been made of Shakespeare during his lifetime, on loan from the National Portrait Gallery, and a first folio of the playwright's work.



Children explore the *The Play's The Thing* RSC exhibition. CREDIT: ANDREW FOX

But for children, the digital aspects will unquestionably be the winners. In addition to the Hamlet experience, there's a dressing-up booth, using Wii technology, which allows a child to stand in front of a screen and dress themselves in costumes, as if in a mirror, from recent productions. There's a screen onto which are projected historic programme covers from the RSC which at first seem to be still, until the faces on them begin to wink or nod at you, before giving way to a stop-go animation of a young girl reciting the chorus speech from *Henry V* ("O, for a muse of fire..."); and there's a cartoon in which a young Billy (William Shakespeare, geddit), travels forward from Elizabethan England to the future to see how he became as famous as he is today.

A lot of it is *Horrible Histories* meets Shakespeare. How do you create the sound of a bone breaking? Snap a fresh carrot. What do you use to mimic the gouged-out eyeballs of Gloucester in *King Lear*? Take a couple of lychees and fling the glistening globules on the stage. What about blood on stage? Today, it's a sugary confection that tastes of candy floss, but until the late 1950s it was real animal blood. In the late 19th century Frank Benson, head of the company, liked to brandish a real dead fish in his mouth when he played Caliban, until the stage manager failed to change the fish from day to day and he'd find himself gumming something hideously rank.

As for skulls, the RSC does possess real ones. The most famous, which will one day appear in the exhibition, was left to the company by the concert pianist André Tchaikowsky (no relative of the composer) on his death in 1982 in the hope that it would be used on stage, and which eventually did make an appearance in 22 performances of David Tennant's *Hamlet* in 2008.



Children explore *The Play's The Thing*. CREDIT: ANDREW FOX

Children may be less beguiled by the array of historical costumes on display, but adults can feast on them while the little ones indulge in the interactive games. We learn that Peggy Ashcroft would settle down between rehearsals to weave chain-mail jerkins. There's Toby Stephens's blood-drenched shirt from *Coriolanus* and a wonderful old-school velvet ensemble that Gielgud wore in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

But the stand-out costume for me is Vivien Leigh's green velvet gown, which she wore as *Lady Macbeth* opposite her husband Laurence Olivier in 1955. Seeing the dress at first hand is a revelation. In black-and-white pictures it looks lush and figure-hugging, but the detailing is lost. In fact, the bodice of the dress was painted with rib bones, lines to emphasise the breasts and a belly button. At the time it caused a sensation. "It was to communicate the sense of the strong woman, that she's muscular, that she's actually very sexy," says Collinge. "It was very much a pioneering moment."



The *Lady Macbeth* costume worn by Vivien Leigh in 1955 on display at *The Play's The Thing* exhibition. CREDIT: JOHN LAWRENCE

Still with the Oliviers, there's a reference to Larry's penchant for coating himself in stage make-up, with a spiky quote from his wife Leigh: "You hear Macbeth's first line, then Larry's make-up comes on, then Banquo comes on, then Larry comes on."

Such "oh, darling" interludes apart, more serious cultural notes are struck, not least by Josette Simon, who will appear at the RSC as Cleopatra next year, reminding us of the struggle that actors from ethnic minorities have had to and still face: at drama school, her tutors told her not to expect leading roles because of her skin tone.

"Telling me I couldn't do the classics was like a red rag to a bull," she explains. She joined the Royal Shakespeare Company and in 1984 became the RSC's first black female lead, in *Love's Labour's Lost*. "It caused a lot of head-scratching: would the audience walk out, saying, 'What's a black person doing in Elizabethan England?'"

The exhibition is permanent and will change as costumes and artefacts are rotated to keep them fresh for the future, with new stories emerging year on year.