

Heart rate study tests emotional impact of Shakespeare

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In a world where on-screen violence has become commonplace, Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company is turning to science to discover whether the playwright can still make our hearts race more than 400 years on.

The renowned theatre company has started measuring the pulse of audience members as they are confronted by some of the most harrowing scenes ever written by Shakespeare in the Roman tragedy "Titus Andronicus".

The play, believed to have been written between 1588 and 1593, is a tale of murderous revenge and savagery.

In one scene, a bloodied Lavinia writhes on stage after rapists cut off her hands and tongue.

Audience members have been known to pass out or vomit at the play's shocking cruelty during performances.

Becky Loftus, head of audience insight at the RSC, is spearheading the innovative study to measure reactions to the English Renaissance writer's work.

"It's notoriously Shakespeare's bloodiest play... It can be quite polarising because of the amount of violence in it," Loftus told AFP.

"Are we inured to violence now because of things like (TV show) 'Game of Thrones'?" she said.

The comparative study is being carried out in the theatre and at a live-streaming of the play in a cinema in Stratford—the town in central England where Shakespeare was born in 1564.

"Some people feel that it's never as good to be in the cinema, because you don't get the effect of being in the room and having people act in front of you.

"But then some people say that being in the cinema is like having the

best seat in the house and you get the closer view," Loftus said.

Many participants in the study, including 60-year-old scientist Sharon Faulkner, said they were more engaged in the theatre.

"It appeals to all of your senses. Rather than just visual and hearing, there are the smells. So I think it's much more real," she said.

'Basic human instinct'

At a light-hearted briefing before the performance, one group of participants talked about how they were feeling and were asked to take some deep breaths in their theatre seats before the opening scene.

Faulkner and fellow volunteer Jamie Megson said theatregoers can be passionate about a performance but are usually unaware of their pulses, as black heart rate monitors were strapped to their wrists.

"You get lost in the action of the play, so it's hard to say whether it's been more intense in certain moments than others," said 27-year-old Megson, an English teacher.

Although the full results from the study are not expected until later this year, an initial analysis showed heart rates rising as audience members become aware a moment of violence may be imminent.

"The biggest reaction is the fight or flight—basic human instinct," said Pippa Bailey from Ipsos Mori, a research firm that is helping to conduct the study.

"When something happens you either stay and you fight or you run when the adrenaline comes," she said.

Participants are monitored during the performance and afterwards take part in an exit interview.

"We're doing voice recordings where we will analyse that to see people's emotional engagement in what they're saying" by looking at both the choice of words and the sentiment in their voice, Bailey said.

The RSC has previously relied on questionnaires to try and understand the impact of their productions.

Megson said he was more affected by the interaction between characters, such as when Lavinia's uncle takes her to her father Titus after the brutal attack, than moments of extreme violence such as severed heads being brought on stage.

"It's the acting that's the more shocking element, the emotions that they're showing that's the more intense element, more than the gore and shock factor," he said.

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