

The background of the entire page is a blurred, blue-tinted photograph of a person with glasses reading a book. The person's face is partially visible on the left side, and the pages of the book are spread out in front of them. The overall tone is calm and intellectual.

rica

Relaxed performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream':

Views of visitors with dementia to RSC Theatre, Stratford- upon-Avon.

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www.rica.org.uk**



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Rica

Rica (Research Institute for Consumer Affairs) specialises in consumer research with older and disabled consumers. Founded through the Consumers Association, publishers of Which?, Rica became independent in 1991.

It has its own [Consumer Panel – the RicaWatch panel](#) – of over 700 people and is a disability led organisation. Ten of the charity's twelve Trustees have a disability.

Rica carries out [commissioned research work](#) with industry, other charities, service providers and policy makers to improve products and services. With grant funding it also publishes free [consumer reports](#) based on independent research.

www.rica.org.uk

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge the support and contribution provided to this research project by Innovations in Dementia (iD), 'Friends Together' and the Royal Shakespeare Company. The research has been funded by the independent grant making foundation John Ellerman Foundation.

Innovations in Dementia

Innovations in Dementia (iD) is a social enterprise that works with people with dementia, as partners and volunteers, to develop and test ideas that will enhance the lives of people with dementia. iD facilitates DEEP (Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project), which brings together over 50 local groups of people with dementia across the UK.

These local groups all share a desire to change their communities to make them better for people with dementia. Many have expressed a desire to get involved in providing consumer feedback, but do not know how to achieve this aim. This partnership project between Rica, iD and local DEEP groups offers an opportunity to share expertise both locally and nationally to deliver real change for consumers with mild to moderate dementia.

Local DEEP group 'Friends Together'

Redditch and Bromsgrove 'Friends Together' is a proactive group of individuals who have a diagnosis of dementia and meet to support each other and find ways to improve their communities.



The 'Friends Together' group is interested in finding ways to improve services and attitudes to make a better, fairer community for everyone living with dementia in their local communities.

To achieve this aim, the group works together with MPs, local authorities, police, places of education, transport, businesses, groups, and organisations...the whole community.

The group also feeds into the Redditch and Bromsgrove Dementia Action Alliance; some group members attend local alliance meetings, which have had a big impact on what happens in their area. The main purpose of the Redditch and Bromsgrove 'Friends Together' group is to build Redditch and Bromsgrove into a dementia-friendly community. Redditch and Bromsgrove are located in Worcestershire.

Royal Shakespeare Company

The Royal Shakespeare Company has been providing a number of different performances for audiences with different access needs for many years, including captioned performances, audio described performances and performances translated into British Sign Language. In 2013, the RSC conducted its first 'Relaxed Performance' aimed at children with an Autistic Spectrum Condition, sensory and communication disorders, a learning disability, or anyone who would benefit from a more relaxed environment. There has been at least one relaxed performance each year since then.

The production is altered to reduce potential causes of sensory overload and the audience is only located in certain parts of the auditorium so as not to be too near to the band and to allow 'wriggle room' depending on specific needs of those attending. The audience is allowed to come and go from the auditorium as they please (which is not usually the case for RSC performances) and the usual capacity of 1,040 seats has been initially reduced to around 400 attendees.

Introduction

In March 2016, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford-upon-Avon approached Innovations in Dementia (iD) to explore the possibility of involving a local DEEP (Dementia Enablement and Empowerment) group in the review of the services and performance at their theatre. iD contacted Rica, its research partner on a three-year programme involving people with dementia in consumer research. Rica then took the lead on the delivery of the research.

The RSC wanted to investigate ways in which they could assess the suitability of attending the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (RST) for people with dementia. In particular they wanted to find out:

- Are relaxed performances suitable for the needs of those with dementia? If so, could spare capacity be offered at reduced rates to these groups?
- What are the issues with the Royal Shakespeare Theatre for people with dementia which we might be able to overcome and hence make the building itself more dementia-friendly?

After making contact with RICA and, through them, the local DEEP group, the RSC offered the opportunity to attend one of two performances which they thought might be suitable:

1. The relaxed performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', which allowed for coming and going in the auditorium and had a reduced number attending, although the primary audience were people on the autistic spectrum
2. The captioned performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', which was otherwise an unaltered performance. This would have been near to full and would not allow for coming and going, but had the extra potential benefit of the caption boxes to assist anyone with hearing loss with the text

The local DEEP group from Redditch and Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, 'Friends Together', was keen to participate and provide insight into how the theatre and performance could be made more dementia-friendly. The preference from 'Friends Together' was to attend the 'relaxed performance' on the afternoon of the 14th July.

Seats were provided for the group along with the RICA researchers at no cost. These were on the circle level at one side, which enabled the use of an area not suitable for people with autistic spectrum disorders.

Prior to the visit, a meeting was held between the coordinator of 'Friends Together', the lead researcher from Rica, and the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon. During this meeting the scope of the research was discussed and a walkthrough of a possible scenario made. Other practical issues were addressed at this time.

It is important to note that this participatory research was undertaken in a spirit of collaboration with the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon and was not intended to take the role of an inspection.

The visit

Relaxed performance

The RSC aims to make its plays and facilities reach as broad an audience as possible. To go some way to achieving this it produces a number of accessible plays each year which make small adjustments to performance and auditorium. One of these is the 'relaxed performance', which is described below.

For this performance small changes are made to the play direction, lighting and theatre etiquette.

***"These performances are aimed at everyone but have been designed with the needs of people with an autistic spectrum condition, sensory and communication disorders, a learning disability, or for anyone who would benefit from a more relaxed environment. Performances are adapted with a more relaxed attitude to noise and movement in the auditorium and adapted light and sound in order to reduce anxiety and ensure a safe, enjoyable theatre visit."* - RSC**

It was noted that most of the modifications to the performance would probably benefit people with dementia; however a more relaxed attitude to noise disturbances from the audience might not¹.

Seating for the group was a reserved section in the circle and a 'chill out' area was provided on the same level if needed. See Figure 1

Figure 1 Auditorium seating



¹ In addition to the DEEP groups, a number of other groups with dementia and their carers were invited along to the same performance.

The expert panel of reviewers

The panel consisted of eight members of the local Redditch and Bromsgrove DEEP group called 'Friends Together' [Peter, Paul, Patrick, Mark, Jane, Rose, Mike and Anne]. The panel was further strengthened by five friends and partners of the DEEP group members [Bella, Diane, Erica, Fay and Gary] and two coordinators from the local Alzheimer's Society [Cindy and Carol].

Of the eight 'Friends Together' group members, five were men and three were women. They all had Alzheimer's disease, or another type of dementia, and their ages ranged from the late 50s to the early 70s. All the names used in this report are pseudonyms.

Method

Preparation

Prior to the day of the visit to the theatre, members of the 'Friends Together' group and the coordinators from the Alzheimer's Society had an opportunity to review the proposed visit scenario. This helped inform the scope and practicalities of the investigation and ensured that the focus of the visit was clearly understood.

Scenario

As much as possible the visit by the panel to the theatre was viewed as a normal visit with no special consideration given except for a heightened critical eye. The panel congregated at the Riverside Cafe and was met by two researchers from Rica.

Introductions and consent forms were handed to the panel and read out aloud. These were signed and returned. A thank-you payment to the panel members was agreed to be pooled to the benefit of the whole 'Friends Together' group, some of which were not present at this visit.

After a short period of informal chat, with the Rica researchers getting to know the panel members, a more formal approach was taken, starting with a brief explanation of Rica's work and of the project. After this, a staff member from the theatre introduced themselves and encouraged the group to be honest and critical in their review of the facilities and performance.

The researchers explained the need to make audio recordings of the panel members' thoughts and opinions throughout the visit. Permission for this was asked for in the consent form. The panel members were reminded of the scope of the visit.

Scope

The scope of the visit was split into two areas for inspection and reflection as follows:

1. The building and facilities

The panel was asked to comment on their experience whilst navigating through the building and to highlight features that were of concern to them. This critical eye was extended to the facilities of the theatre, such as chairs, toilets, box office and stairs. This work was done as much as possible 'in situ' and audio recordings and photos taken as these insights were made.

2. The performance

In a similar fashion to the building and facilities work above, the panel was asked for their thoughts and opinions of the relaxed performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

Unlike the 'in situ' data collection of the building and facilities, these thoughts and opinions were gathered at the interval and after the performance. However during the performance the two researchers were sensitive to the panel's response through observation and note taking.

Sequence of events

Meet, greet and tickets

1. Cafe for introductions, paperwork and lunch.
2. Small groups of panel members visit the box office to pick up their tickets.
3. Panel members report back to the researchers about their experience.

Moving to the auditorium

4. Prepare for the show, visit the toilets if necessary.
5. Make way as a group to the circle.
6. Find seats.

The performance

7. Watch first half of performance.
8. Take an interval break and gather in the side cafe for tea and discuss the performance with the researchers.
9. Retake seats and watch second half.
10. Regather in the side cafe for debrief and a short questionnaire.

Investigation

In addition to the thoughts and opinions volunteered by the panel members the researchers came with a set of prompting questions relevant to each stage of the visit: pre-performance, performance and debrief. These can be found in Appendix A.

Data collection

The two researchers looked for a natural split in the Friends Together group so they could focus on approximately half the panel members each. Although it was recognised that in practice this would be difficult to strictly enact, it did become the approach taken to the observational research.

The researchers also listened to partners and coordinators, which often added different perspective and context to the collected data.

Images, audio and written notes were taken during the day. In addition to this the RSC asked for their feedback questionnaire to be completed by the panel members at the end of the day.

Findings

The panel

The 'Friends Together' members of the panel have a diverse range of background and experiences, which is to be expected from the non-discriminatory nature of dementia. They have been involved in a number of reviews of services and environments in the Bromsgrove and Redditch area and as such are used to giving their thoughts and opinions.

Baseline experience

All but two of the panel members have at one time or another in their lives visited a play at a theatre before. A number spoke of visiting the local theatre at Redditch and of group pantomime outings there. Half of the group had seen a Shakespeare play before.

After the visit

Overall the panel members said they enjoyed the performance, with the majority of them saying they would return.

"I really enjoyed all of it. [Would you come back?] Yes! Definitely"

However one member said it was not his thing.

"They did us proud, but Shakespeare is not really my scene"

The facilities

Riverside Cafe

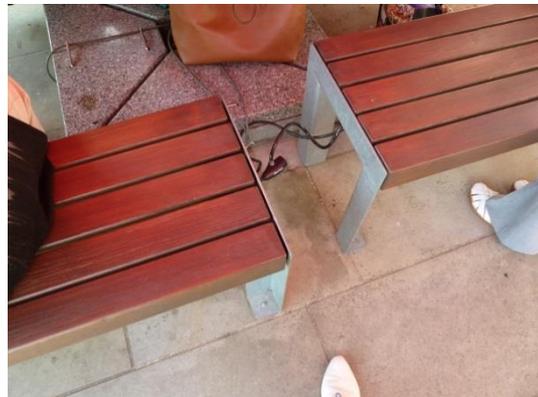
Two large tables outside on the balcony which were reserved for the panel became a 'base camp' for the group, see Figure 2. From here the group took trips to the box office, toilets and cafe counter for lunch and reported back. Having places which are easy to locate and comfortable to wait was appreciated by the group and coordinators.

The food, drink and service at the cafe were all reported on favourably as were the large tables with parasols.

Figure 2 Base camp



Figure 3 Security straps on benches



A trip hazard was noted where benches were secured together with a padlock and security straps. It would be easy for a person crossing this point when leaving or joining the table to be caught by this, see Figure 3. Some forms of dementia can affect people's spatial awareness which can make them prone to trip and slip hazards. The lack of rubbish bins in the outside eating area was also noted by some people.

Box office

The panel members had a general sense of where the box office was - "on this level on the other side of building" - and used the signage in the building to locate it and collect their tickets.

They reported the signs for the box office being placed high above their heads caused them concern about looking up for direction and missing potential tripping hazards, see Figure 44. Small discontinuities in the floor level on route were also picked out as hazardous if their attention was not drawn to them.

The positioning of the box office in the middle of a shop was unexpected and slightly confusing to the group, see Figure 5. Speaking about her partner, one panel member said: “Jim would have gone to Information. It would be ideal if it [the box office] was by the Information [desk]”

Figure 4 Sign to box office



Figure 5 Box office in shop



Toilets

Locating the toilet facilities did cause problems for panel members. The high level hanging signs were not only missed by people (being above normal eye-level), but were also confusing for some when read from the reverse side, see Figure 6.

Figure 6 High level signage



Figure 7 Icons as signs



Temporary paper signs (Female Toilets/ Male Toilets) had been placed on the actual doors to the toilets by the RSC staff, in recognition of confusion about the silver person icons, see figure 7.

Within the toilets, some panel members experienced confusion about how to use the sensor flush and basin. There is no signage or instruction and one member reported that she thought the WC handle had broken off, see Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8 Flush sensor



Figure 9 Tap sensor



Seating and the auditorium

The panel members were asked to make their own way from the cafe to the auditorium. Some panel members experienced confusion at this point – signs above the staircase were marked ‘RST Circle’. It was noted that this did not correspond with the tickets, which were marked ‘Circle’, and might be for a different section of the theatre.

On the first floor, members were directed to the section of the circle where their reserved seats were. Although all the seats in the section were reserved for the panel, some members were keen to match their seat number to the corresponding seat number on their ticket. This task was made more difficult by the seat numbers being small and placed at floor level and obscured when the seat was occupied and down, see Figure 5. Some panel members expected the lettering to be at the end of rows and numbers on seats and looked there.

Figure 5 Seat numbering



Figure 4 Leg room



The high rake, which provided an unobstructed view of the performance, was positively remarked on. Although the seats were comfortable it was noted that the lack of leg room meant there was no room to stretch out aching legs. This can become more of an issue with long seating times, see Figure 4

“I had to stretch my legs out, which got a bit cramped”

Signage

As noted in the previous sections, signage did cause difficulties for many of the panel members. Two aspects in particular were noted:

Location of signage – the very high level of some signs on the ground floor, far above eye level.

Colour contrast – much of the signage is in silver/grey or white, sometimes on a glass background. This is known to be difficult for people with poor sight, including older people and people with dementia.

The play and performance

Once in the theatre the panel had time to settle themselves before the play started, which allowed for any last minute adjustments to get comfortable. The performance was a 'relaxed performance', in which house lights were left up, sound levels were lower and people could come and go into the auditorium during the performance.

The play

Narrative – The scene setting by Puck at the beginning of the play was very helpful and went some way to explain the characters and narrative of the play.

Even with this explanation, many of the panel found the storyline hard to follow, pointing to the need to prepare for Shakespeare.

“Before you see a Shakespeare play you must read it first – the last I saw was ‘Macbeth’ nearly 70 years ago, because I was at school I read it before I came to see it - it helped!”

Booklet – Although the RSC produced and sent to the group both a visual story and extended visual story booklets of the play, the panel members did not get to see these prior to their visit. The panel members were able to view these booklets in the cafe at lunchtime and during the interval. Some remarked on the length of preamble about the theatre and actors before getting to the section 'A short description of the play'. They also felt the tone of the booklet was a little condescending. This booklet was aimed at the 'relaxed' audience and not rewritten specifically for those with dementia.

“The first half was confusing. I couldn't follow the first half – I would come again”

Length – The difficulty in following the storyline was compounded by what the majority of the panel thought to be an overly long first half.

“Perhaps the first half was too long”

“It would have been more relaxed if the first half was shorter”

“First half too long”

This complaint was not held by the entire panel with one member highlighting how they became acclimatised to the language of Shakespeare’s plays.

“By half time I got attuned to the language, so I enjoyed the second half more”

After the interval – The second half of the play was better received by the panel, although some felt it was a little disjointed from the first half. The lighter mood of the second half was received positively, with the music and increased stage activity being particularly liked.

The relaxed performance – The adjustments to the performance to make it more relaxed all worked well for the DEEP group. However some of the noises from other visitors in the stalls were seen as distracting and not so welcome.

“Avoid mixing dementia / old [people] with special needs children - they are different”

This is not to say the audience response of screams of delight and laughter were unwelcome; they were not. The panel reacted positively to these.

“The second half made it more interesting by having music, laughter and more activity”

“The second half the mood was lighter”

The performance

Sound – There were instances of the performers addressing different parts of the audience as they said their lines. This led to difficulties with hearing the lines delivered with fluctuating sound levels.

Understanding – The panel was attentive in listening to the words of the play but felt that they would benefit from the delivery being at a slower pace.

“Perhaps if the actors were mic’d”

“Maybe have the lines delivered more slowly and articulated clearer?”

Comment and recommendations

All the panel members had a very positive experience during the visit to the RSC at Stratford-upon-Avon. Their insights and suggestions are given in the spirit of improving the experience of a theatre visit for people with dementia. These recommendations should not in any way be viewed as negative criticism but more as informative of positive design enhancements. These are as follows:

Signage

- Be aware of positioning to avoid diverting attention from obstacles in thoroughfares.
- Make signs unambiguous and large enough to read.
- Ensure they are contextually relevant and are placed where you might expect them to be placed.
- Avoid shiny, reflective, and poor contrast signage.

Performances

- Shorter performance time between intervals.
- More consistent sound levels, maybe through the use of microphones and headphones.
- Slower delivery of lines.
- Inclusion of music and singing².
- A performance specifically designed for people with dementia - but not necessarily exclusively so.

Facilities

- Cater for groups of people by making a space at cafes and bar areas which can be reserved.
- Make it obvious how to use any controls, especially where proximity sensors are used to trigger the flush in toilets or dispense soap.
- Staff awareness and training.

² The production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' did include music and singing, which was well received

Further information

University of Stirling – dementia resources

<http://dementia.stir.ac.uk/>

DEEP guides to support the involvement of people with dementia

<http://dementivoices.org.uk/resources/deep-guides/>

Innovations in Dementia

<http://www.innovationsindementia.org.uk/resources.htm>

The Housing Learning and Improvement Network

<http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/HousingandDementia/Design/>

GOV.UK

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/416780/HBN_08-02.pdf

Appendix A

Sequence of events and prompting questions

1. **Introductions** (all) – mostly done whilst at the cafe

- Introduce self and colleague
- Consent forms – read these out and if happy get people to sign whilst at the cafe
- Participant payment forms
- Rica – a couple of minutes on who we are
- Work – explain points 2 to 6 below
- Outputs – report

2. **Allocate researchers**, one to one half and the other to the other half

- Explain to the whole group that we will be asking questions about the theatre and what their feelings are about visiting plays and shows
 - a. We will be audio recording their answers to these questions and taking notes
 - b. This will be done informally throughout the day, either in small groups or individually, depending how any opportunity presents itself
- Look for any natural split between the groups
 - a. Allocate researchers to mostly concern themselves with one or the other group
 - b. Get to know your group
 - c. Get to know the carers and helpers and record their opinions as well

3. To **investigate baseline** (informally go around your group before the play)

- Do they normally go out to watch plays or shows at the theatre?
 - a. If they do:
 - What sort of performances do they like?
 - Why?
 - Where do they go?
 - Do they go with a friend?
 - How do they get there?
 - What works / what does not work?
 - b. If they don't:
 - Why not?
 - Would they like to go?
 - Practicalities of getting there or the content?

- Do they go to music concerts?
 - Did they read the storyboard booklet?
 - a. Which one did they look at?
 - b. Was it helpful?
 - c. Is there anything about it that they want to point out to us?
4. During the **play**, note:
- Seating positions and preferences
 - Any disturbances within our group – getting upset or fidgety or leaving – and reasons
 - The effect on our group of disturbances from other groups
 - Any emotional responses
 - Sleeping, concentration
5. At the **break**:
- Follow up anything they noticed during the play?
 - Ask if they are finding it enjoyable?
 - Are they managing to follow the plot?
 - Did the storyboard help?
6. At the **end of the show**:
- As before (5)
 - If there were just one thing they would want to change about today's show or visit what would it be? (Go around everyone in the group, person with dementia first)
 - Would they recommend going to see this show to any other friends they might have who have dementia?
 - Will they go again to the theatre?
 - Hand out RSC survey feedback forms
 - Thank them for participating in this research and remind them they will be receiving the report for their feedback