

The experience of Shakespeare's audience

In this extract from his recent book *Shakespeare's Restless World*, art historian Neil MacGregor describes what the experience of going to a Shakespeare performance might have been like for the audience of his time, focusing in particular on their eating habits.

In the 1590s, if you wanted a good day out of London, you went to Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames, and eating was very much part of the pleasure. You ate when you went to a play [...]

The public theatres of Shakespeare's London were an entirely new form of (very commercial) entertainment, aimed at every section of society. An indication of just how lucrative they were is that money boxes account for nearly one-fifth of the identifiable pottery that has been excavated in Elizabethan theatres; they were as commonplace then as cash-desks or credit card readers today, something every play-goer would have had to walk past before they saw *Hamlet* or *Henry V*.

Unusually for a playwright, Shakespeare himself was a shareholder in The Globe, entitled to a percentage of its profits – it's the main reason he became so rich. The smashing open of money boxes at the end of the day must have been a happy sound for him.

Once the theatre-goers had put their money into the slot and walked into the theatre, it seems that food – the buying and selling, the cracking open and consumption of it – formed a large part of the experience. From the samples that have been collected on site, botanists have identified quite a range of foodstuffs. Nuts were popular, and lots of fruit, dried and fresh: grape, fig, elderberry, plum, pear and cherry. A large amount of shellfish was also eaten: mussels, periwinkles, whelks, even a cuttlefish has been dug up. Oyster shells in particular have been found on the site in large numbers, unsurprisingly, as they were a popular cheap food at the time [...]

In the theatre, all this cheap shellfish was winkled out and eaten, and the shells were then dropped on the floor by the groundlings – the people standing in the yard. In other words, the cheap 'seats' were associated with cheap food. The only drinks we know about at the theatre are beer and ale; when the Globe burned down in 1613, 'bottle ale' was used to extinguish a man's burning breeches.

TIME IN MOTION

- 1 How does the experience described here compare to going to the theatre today?
- 2 Do you sometimes go to the theatre? If so, what plays have you seen?