

# The comedy's as you like it

The Reduced Shakespeare Company have been wowing West End audiences with their irreverent take on the Bard for five years. **Veronica Lee** catches up with them

**W**hat's short, funny and five years old? No, not the latest member of the Macaulkin acting clan, but the Reduced Shakespeare Company, about to begin another year in the West End with their 97-minute version of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Abridged). Andrew Lloyd Webber knows a thing or two about long runs in the West End, but it's rare for a non-musical to get a longevity prize. Except, of course, *The Mousetrap*.

RSC's American co-founder Adam Long rocks with laughter at the idea that his brainchild - a sort of Marx Brothers meets Shakespeare on speed - might be bracketed with that old creature. "What matters is that we genuinely connect with an audience," he says.

The RSC came out of early-80s street theatre in California. "There were these Renaissance Faires," says Long, "run by a bunch of deadheads and Ken Kesey leftovers who used to re-create Elizabethan villages in the woods at weekends. I had a stuffed dog that I used to do an acrobatic act with at the time." Some friends were doing a four-person version of *Hamlet*, when the female member of the cast broke her ankle; Long had seen the show twice and offered to go on, donning a wig and false bosoms as Ophelia. He stayed with the group, and he and two of the cast developed the idea that became the RSC. "We were just sitting around one afternoon and a friend suggested we did the complete works of Shakespeare. It sounded like such a funny idea that we said, 'Yeah, why not?'"

That was 1986 and Long, then a political activist and an accountant (no, really), wrote the show with Jess Winfield, a law worker, and Daniel Singer, a graphic artist, never expecting it to be

Short is beautiful... the Reduced Shakespeare Company

"more than a laugh at weekends". They took it to the Edinburgh fringe the following years, and it took off. The RSC toured the US, Japan and the UK, then a year-long residency followed at the Arts Theatre in London, moving to what now looks like their permanent home at the Criterion Theatre at Piccadilly Circus in 1986. On Wednesday they celebrate five years in the West End with a charity gala.

It's probably true that only Americans would have had the chutzpah to meddle with Britain's greatest playwright. "Americans aren't afraid of making fools of themselves," says Long. "But it's not Shakespeare we're sending up, it's ourselves. We're commenting on the mentality of Americans, who can barely deal with anything that's longer than 90 seconds." Perhaps "with no respect for institutions" Long and co were able to cut through to Shakespeare's core. "We first condensed the plots of every play, but quickly realised that that was impossible because we could only devote two minutes to each. Then Daniel worked out that the comedies all had the same plot devices - twins, mistaken identities, fairies' spells - which could be mashed into one massive play - the *Tale of Two Wells* - measured *Gentlemen Lost* in the Merry Wives of Venice on *Midsummer's Twelfth Night* in *Winter*". In their most inspired segment, the histories are presented as an American football game, with the crown of England being passed from one generation to another and Lear being sent off as a "fictional character on the field". Is such minimalising like the high-concept pitch for a Hollywood movie, in which Hamlet would be

"Denmark: crazy place, crazy people"? Long laughs. "We're not quite as canny as that. It's more like a 10-year-old was trying to sell it, so it would be: 'There's this guy and his father's dead and he doesn't know what to

do and he ends up killing everybody and he dies too and it's over."

The RSC's audiences are a strange mix of home-grown fans, school parties and tourists. Now their show forms part of the tourist trail, but also provides welcome slapstick relief for teachers trying to engage bored pupils with the Bard. For their efforts, they are routinely picked on during the show's audience participation section.

The RSC has spawned many imitators; every year, there is a slew of student groups at the Edinburgh fringe with reduced this, abridged that in their titles. Long's perfection of the genre has led to some interesting commissions - he was invited to do a reduced history of the Labour Party for its recent centenary, but had to cry off: "I would have had to use the word 'socialism'. So I passed."

The Reduced Shakespeare Company performs at the Criterion Theatre, London W1. Box office: 0171-369 1747.

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