

SHAKESPEARE

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Director: Marco Ghelardi

Dramatis personæ

Oberon/Theseus
Titania/Hippolyta
Egeus/Quince
Demetrius/ Flute
Lysander/Starveling
Helena/Snout
Hermia/Snug
Bottom/Philostrate
Puck

Stephen Horncastle
Susanna Gordon
Alec Gray
Timothy Weston
Luke Lane
Charlotte Green
Rosalyn Mitchell
Jon Bolitho-Jones
Amanda Madison

This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house; and we will do it in action

A Midsummer Night's Dream probably has the most wildly oscillating performance history of all Shakespeare plays. Originally it was a play that mixed sublime poetry with astonishingly filthy and detailed bawdiness – and was built around other binary opposites: animal lust/romantic love; night/day; reason/madness; order/chaos; reality/dream – and concerned itself with containing the passions unleashed by desire into an ordered society via marriage. Then the Victorians came along and turned all the dark undercurrents off and transformed the fairies into Tinkerbell-like, figures for children's.

The dark side of sex was expunged and that was no small undertaking. The strain of sadomasochism that is announced at the beginning with Theseus':

*Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love, doing thee injuries;*

pokes its head into the play at various points, such as Helena's deeply disturbing lines:

*I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you:
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,*

*Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.
What worser place can I beg in your love,--
And yet a place of high respect with me,--
Than to be used as you use your dog?*

Puck, a.k.a. Robin Goodfellow, was a well endowed character in popular imagination:



Yet he would have been outdone by the well hung Bottom when transformed into the donkey ridden to exhaustion by the lust-driven, bewitched Faerie Queen. The bestiality theme that Helena sprinkled into her masochistic pleas reaches its apex (or nadir, if you were one of the 19th Century censors) in that particular coupling. Alarmed by such themes, those who appoint themselves as moral guardians of all others reduced the play into a children's tale of winsome fancy and turned *faerie* into *fairy*:



All of which leaves the CSF directors with a dilemma. The most child friendly of a family oriented Festival productions cannot easily unleash the sexual core of the play but to have the Fairie world as a happy, safe and comfortable world would make a nonsense of the play as a whole.

Director Marco Ghelardi found a balance. The darker sides of lust were out; the production opens with Theseus and Hippolyta very much a couple silly with mutual love rather than one having enslaved by a conqueror as a captured female trophy. Likewise, there is no hint here as to what

Oberon's desire for the Indian boy might entail, and Bottom was enchanted into sleep rather than physically drained and although Helena wiggled her bottom during the 'spaniel' speech this was more of a fun innuendo than an indicator of the dark themes running underneath the play. She was playing a frisky puppy rather than a plaything on a leash.

Yet the dangerous, anarchic and dark spirit of the faerie world was still very much in evidence, these fairies were dangerous in a steampunk style, be-goggled and even monocled in a manner not unlike



these images:

Puck arose from the midst of the audience to make her entrance in flying helmet and goggles. Amanda Maddison is making something of a CSF trademark of a performance of such roles. In recent years she has brought an electric presence to the Festival and, although all the characters she's portrayed are very different there has been a thread running through most of them. I am not quite sure how to describe it other than perhaps calling it the 'Amanda Effect'. It may also be part of, or have instigated, a wider wave throughout the CSF. I say that because I actually caught more than a hint of it in Feste in this year's *Twelfth Night*. In my [review](#) I described Feste's appearance as 'Bellian' in reference to the director, Simon Bell, and while I still think that is true, it also came across as very much the way I would have expected Amanda to play the role. As to who is influencing whom here, I could not say – perhaps it is a mixture.

I should also note that this particular Puck brought thoughts of home for me as she slipped in and out of a Scottish accent. A mix of accents, especially from 'somewhere other' is appropriate for the character and she even added monkey noises to go along with her striking appearance as she acrobatically performed in flying helmet, goggles, with braids in her hair and painted arms chest. The physicality of her scenes with Oberon was very well done. One imagines a great deal of rehearsing must have been spent getting all the timing right. The fairies all wore top hats and similar costumes and this was a simple yet striking means of separating the mortal from the supernatural worlds and 'peoples'. All the fairies, but of course particularly Titania (Susanna Gordon), Oberon (Stephen Horncastle) and Puck had special powers which were shown by a movement of the hand engendering invisible forces to affect and control someone else.

The oft-times bland and indistinguishable, a very legitimate way of playing them as the text repeatedly stresses that there is no real difference between Lysander and Demetrius, four Athenian lovers were given full characters here (and were helpfully colour coded by costume to help you keep track of who should really be with whom). Some tremendous rages were in evidence, and well done to all for fleshing out these parts so effectively and amusingly. Tim Weston as Demetrius cutely replayed the spaniel idea from Helena's speech back to her, later in the play, in a very apt and deep moment of physical communication. Helena (Charlotte Green – one of the green clad couple, naturally) and Hermia (Rosalyn Mitchell - blue) were offset in every regard from stature and costume and even accent but bound together in captivating the sun splashed audience at their feet. You had to feel for Hermia when she was manhandled by Lysander and for Helena when she quickly went

from the extremes of loving that fact that Demetrius now adored her to the horror of you thinking it is was all a cruel trick. Charlotte's facial expressions at this point of the play brought howls of laughter from the audience. Luke Lane managed the tricky task of remaining convincing as he was pulled this way and that, both physically and mentally, as Lysander.

The play was studded with lovely deliveries and small flourishes. Here are a few of them, starting with Hermia and lines:

*By all the vows that ever men have broke,
In number more than ever women spoke,*

The pause and knowing look she gave the audience between the lines caused much laughter though it differed along gender lines from nervous admission to rueful agreement.

Another clever pause came when Titania paused after the word "air" in the speech below and Puck loudly sneezed, guaranteeing a loud guffaw as Titania spoke her next line:

*Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound:
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter*

A beautiful mix of spoken and acted humour came with Oberon's gleeful delivery of "I'm invisible" as he ran back to the centre of the stage after going to hide behind a tree before changing his mind as he remembered that he could make himself invisible whenever he wanted to do so.

Always central to the success, or otherwise, of this play is Bottom. Jon Bolitho-Jones, who doubled as Philostrate, rose to this challenge and provided us with a very fine Bottom. This Bottom was quite modest as himself then very good as an over the top Hercules, Thisbe and so forth as he yearned to play every part. He was more than boastful enough when he was acting, but not overwhelmingly boastful all the time as I have so often seen him portrayed. This was a nice change and Jon looked like he was relishing the role as much as we were appreciating it. I certainly hope so as he deserves to be. Bottom's dream speech, one of the keynote speeches of the play, was very movingly delivered, and then, as he approached the end of it, the speech had worked its power on him, as well as the audience, and he began to be himself again. That may well have been my favourite moment from the whole night.

The doubling of all the characters was brilliant throughout; this is one of the many essentials of the CSF that this particular production highlighted so well. Stephen Horncastle and Susanna Gordon were also, as is the norm, Theseus and Hippolyta. They were strikingly different pairs. Theseus' first scene at the beginning of the play was marvellously regal, and his voice carried clear as bell across the evening air as he controlled the proceedings in a stately manner. His Oberon though, had to fight for control of the stage with a mightily impressive entrance from a powerful Titania who revelled in her abilities. For another example of many, Alec Grey was impressively fierce and off-putting as Hermia's father and yet totally *simpatico* as Quince.

Consequently, the rude mechanicals' play was an utter delight. The usually sedate garden echoed to shrieks of laughter. Tim Weston as Flute was absolutely riotous in a shimmering gold dress and high heels but with long manly mane, beard, fetchingly hairy armpits and the deepest voice he could put on. Sometimes the oldest and simplest humour works the best, it would appear, a fact not lost on Shakespeare. Snug (Rosalyn Mitchell) was also absolutely brilliant as the lion, her fear of performing and desperation to be accepted was touching and her long elongated "roar" was priceless.

As each rude mechanical played their part it was wonderful to see the others clustered in the corner silently cheering them on. And their elation when things went well was a joy to watch. If you have not yet seen this production just watch as they accept Snug back into their arms after she performed her part to the applause of Theseus and Hippolyta. Another fine part of the play-within-the-play was having Snug played by a woman as this was very well integrated and lots of humour arose from playing this off the original lines.

Once again, as in the other three plays currently running, music played a key part in proceedings. As did the art of casting spells. More so than is usual even in 'Dream', with spells being the particular way this production did lots of things. So much so that I thought I was going to be able pick an argument with the director when the selection of Pyramus and Thisbe as the court entertainment by Theseus was done by Puck casting a spell to ensure he did so.

This disappointed me as I thought the reason that he chooses it as stated in the text is rather moving:

*I will hear that play;
For never anything can be amiss,
When simpleness and duty tender it.*

However, the same technique was then used to ensure that Thesues and Hippolyta actually enjoyed the nonsense that was being served up for them, which made considerably more sense of the context and following on from that it was used again, this time to fantastic effect, right at the end. A magic spell was cast and Theseus and Hippolyta rose to greet the rude mechanical actors, who were so delighted that the play had been 'a success'. As this took place they all came together slowly and froze into a still tableau in a truly magical way. This also reflected back on the previous uses of 'Puck casting spell over the ruling couple' and so I cannot really moan at the director after all. Dammit, Marco, you have to give me a chance for a moan now and again, you know. Well done, one and all, for making that 'green plot' so effectively your stage.



Director Marco Ghelardi during the interval