

Barking mad and all the better for it

A Midsummer Night's Dream St John's College Gardens Saturday, August 15th, afternoon show.

The challenge for a director with this perennial favourite is to keep it traditional but somehow make it anew for the regulars who see it every year. Sean McGrath's solution to this is to make the normally bland four of Demetrius, Lysander, Hermia and Helena* central to the action throughout and to reverse the traditional order I gave the names in and put the girls first and very much on top. (It is a female centric take on the play and far from Theseus having won Hippolyta in battle, in this production that is ignored and Kate Hunter's Hippolyta seems to have him firmly in her control.) The two "H"s were dynamic from the very start, they were never less than verging on hysteria and kept up a breathless pace throughout. The play with more running about for the actors than even an episode of *Dr Who* was even more manic than usual in this production.

Perhaps due to the family-centric nature of this play at the CSF, the emphasis was never on the bawdy elements that proliferate throughout the text. Instead the emphasis was on body humour but without the bawdy. Silent movies were perhaps part of the inspiration in the slapstick sequences and Lysander and Demetrius's choreographed gymnastics in their flopping, spine-defying contortions had us all in stitches.

The men were punch bags to the dominant double "H"s throughout, though perhaps "kicking sacks" would be a more apt description as their testicles were: kneed, kicked, punched, squeezed and generally crunched at regular intervals. Why this is so irresistibly funny to audiences may lead to some serious reflections on humanity but there was no room for anything serious in this fast-paced, strictly for laughs production. The point is it raised laughs long before Shakespeare's time, still does in ours and will do so as "long as men can breathe or eyes can see". You can claim, with total confidence, exactly the same about a man pretending to be woman with enormous fake breasts that clearly balloons, and that are clearly going to be burst with a sword - which they are, after the build-up of a period of teasing.

The *faery* world which is always key in any performance was a mixture of the overarching production ethos of 'silliness to the fore, gloriously funny at all opportunities' and the intriguing take on Puck (Timothy Weston). This was a Puck you've never seen before Puck as an animal, in particular a canine, though with his other-worldly markings and enchanting powers also suitably other-worldly at times. Mostly though, he was dog-like, and his integrations with his master, Oberon (Alex Francis) were totally compelling. We saw 'puppy Puck', 'hound Puck', 'coyote Puck' and Puck the enchanted (with a touch of the Gollum about him, not for the first time at the CSF since *Lord of the Rings* was 'translated' into movies) and enchanting dog. This set up an interesting resonance with Helena's lines (in context, here, stripped of their customary deeply disturbing sado-masochistic tones):

*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.*

Puck's first and last appearances are striking, I don't want to give too much away as you still have time to go and see it – and you should, the laughter is enormous, I thought people around me were in danger of harming themselves so hard were they laughing (me too!) – but where the heck *was* he prior to the show beginning and the opening scenes? Was he where he suddenly appeared from, all along?

I guess that all actors love to be given the role of Bottom, as they always throw themselves fully into it and Stuart Lyddon is no different, giving it his all and performing with great relish.

However the sub plot - although great fun - seemed to be less important than it normally is. I suspect this is the price for the usually dull foursome of young lovers becoming the Fabulous Four in this production. I have never seen a production with that quartet so dominant and perhaps there simply isn't room for three central groupings, especially in a short production. And this was cut, judiciously, to eschew the earthier and more serious elements in favour of non-stop, pell-mell physical mayhem and general good humour. I like my "Dreams" dark and weighty too, but it was refreshing to have a summer's breeze of a performance, light, yes, but endlessly and uproariously funny.

The height of the humour, the close-to-calling-an- ambulance for endangered audience members, was Jon Bolitho-Jones' s Snout. Already by far the funniest of a fun packed afternoon, before his 'voice changed', he then leapt into a sphere of such side-splitting humour that I am grinning inanely as I remember it, sitting here at my keyboard, four days later.

*Respectively: Joseph Emms, Scott Loader, Holly Ashman and Alice Lamb.



Rehearsal photo via Kate Hunter's twitter stream

[Home](#)