




A Dream with Lovers, Fairies, Mechanicals, and Audience HOT

 Eric Minton May 01, 2012

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Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

American Shakespeare Center

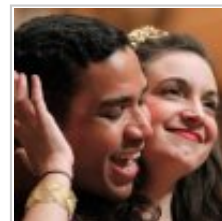
Through June 17, 2012

- Acting ★★★★★
- Costumes ★★★★★
- Sets ★★★★★
- Directing ★★★★★
- Overall ★★★★★



Photos: Tommy Thompson

Bottom, awake from his night of cavorting with a fairy queen in the Athenian woods, expounds on what he calls his most rare vision and determines that he will get Peter Quince to write a prologue about his dream. “And it will be called...” Rick Blunt, playing Bottom, says, drawing out the line to see if he can get the audience to weigh in. “Bottom’s Dream!” a woman shouts from the stalls. Blunt looks at her, pretends to consider the notion, and finishes his line as if he has come to a decision: “Bottom’s Dream!” But then he steps toward the front of the stage and looks right at the woman. “Because it hath no bottom,” he says to her, explaining, *to her*, the real reason for his decision.





Football teams have a twelfth man, National League baseball teams have a tenth man, and the actors of the American Shakespeare Center have an additional player, the audience (a twelfth player for the current eleven-player ASC touring troupe ending its travels with a two-month residency at the Blackfriars Playhouse). The theater's configuration—thrust stage, audience sitting on “gallant stools” on stage and in the lord's gallery above, house lights kept lit—and the company's adherence to original Elizabethan theater practices, including directly engaging the audience, makes seeing any individual performance at the Blackfriars a singular theatrical event. Aside from the woman shouting “Bottom's Dream!” the stars of this production include a little girl who giggles shyly when Helena speaks to her about romance, the man whose face Hermia strokes with her hands searching for Lysander in the dark, the other man whose foot becomes Hermia's pillow, and the couple in the gallery who approve Oberon's plot. As Quince bellows his prologue to Pyramus and Thisbe, the comic moment is made richer by Hermia and Lysander, trained actors, and the audience patron sitting next to them reacting with seemingly coordinated wincing.

All ASC productions use these conventions, but *Dream* is most ideally suited for the medium because of its tone and structure. Consider that when the rude mechanicals stage “Pyramus and Thisbe,” the noble couples meld into the actual audience to watch, and comment on, the players.

The other half of the ASC performance creed is to concentrate on Shakespeare's texts and interpose no concepts. With no sets and no electrical effects, the only “concept” left up to the director is in the dress (costume designer Victoria Depew gives the Athenians Elizabethan costumes, the fairies exotically outfitted as East Indian, and Hippolyta sports a leather-clad huntress outfit) and the movements. Director Kathleen Powers emphasizes movement, from Titania entering in a tableaux of fairies, their dancing seeming to create a multi-faceted being, to the lovers' concisely choreographed but yet rambunctious battle. Michael Amendola is a dervish as Puck, swaying as he listens to Oberon, giddily reacting to the lovers' quarrel, and at the morning's dawn getting the audience to clap along while he performs an acrobatic romping dance just for the fun of it.

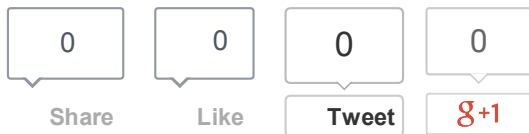
Such text-centric Shakespeare works especially well if you have actors steeped in speaking Shakespeare's verse, a talent evident in this company. Stephanie Holladay Earl makes Hippolyta a most aggressive and obstinate yet loving foil to Theseus, played with authority by Daniel Abraham Stevens. Earl doubles as a bare-midriffed, hip-sashaying Titania who could make most men, spirits, and even gods cower. No wonder Oberon has to drug her to get her to acquiesce to his demands. In an unusual doubling of roles, Eugene Douglas plays both Oberon and Snug, tempestuously macho as the fairy king, painfully shy and constantly emulating Bottom's exaggerated poses and gestures as the joiner. Ronald Peet turns in a triple-headed (or, more accurately, quadruple-headed) performance as an arrogant Philostrate, a confused Peaseblossom, and a seriously self-conscious Flute. As Thisbe, Flute seems to think that standing tiptoe is the way to play a lady, and though he resists the role at first (as Bottom argues to take on Thisbe, Peet's Flute takes the Pyramus script and begins studying the lines) he dedicates his all to playing it well. Thus, when he comes on stage

and hears Hippolyta say “I hope she will be brief,” Peet’s Flute drops character and gives the warrior queen a withering look.

ASC tour troupe veteran Rick Blunt, who gregariously glad-hands the audience entering the playhouse before the play, is born to play Bottom; and his Bottom is born to play Pyramus. Blunt gives Bottom a proud bearing and grand gestures, and Bottom gives Pyramus the proudest of bearings, the grandest of gestures (including creating an “O” with his arms every time Pyramus says “O”), and the cruelest of deaths. It may be as hard to separate Blunt from Bottom as it is to separate Bottom from Pyramus, but Blunt is yet a student of the verse, wringing fresh meanings in addition to big laughs from these 400-year-old lines. Answering Titania’s query of what he would “desirest to eat,” Blunt’s Bottom turns to the luscious lady and in a creepily seductive mode replies, “I could munch your good dry oats.”

Blunt seems to be a direct descendent of the original Bottom, Will Kemp, not only speaking Shakespeare’s lines as written but working the audience with those lines and expertly incorporating audience reactions into his lines. Through the ASC’s productions we see that more than Shakespeare’s words have remained relevant 400 years on; his plays as originally staged still deliver enchanting entertainment and great fun for today’s audiences.

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