

Director's notes – TNT theatre A Midsummer Night's Dream

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM is one of Shakespeare's most original and popular plays. It has no proper source- Chaucer and Plutarch tell tales of Theseus but Shakespeare borrows little of their stories. Instead Shakespeare takes obvious delight in doing just what he pleases! Puck's half-hearted apology at the end of the play is all Shakespeare offers the audience as an excuse for this extraordinary and imaginative work. The play is the last of the true comedies and it seems to me that Shakespeare has exhausted the form and almost plays with it. Classical heroes are mixed with amateur actors, English forest spirits with Roman and Greek fairies, theatre is mocked, love is mocked, tragedy insulted, lust is turned on its head. Lovers and poets are bundled together with madmen. Rhyming couplets prevent us from taking it all too seriously, death is threatened, then waved away. A half man, half beast called Bottom sings horribly for a fairy Queen who promptly offers him at least her heart if not more. It is the task of a director to make sense of this fabulous comic and poetic material, half dream, half nightmare. The danger is that the play splits in three, the magical world, the court and the amateur actors (or Mechanicals as they are known). We have tried to unify the three worlds and expose the deeper themes that Shakespeare explores. We have chosen to start with what is only talked about in the play: the fight between the Amazons and Theseus's (male) Greek army – the battle of the sexes. It seems important to make sense of the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta. The captive Queen of the men-hating Amazons must end up as the willing bride and child bearer of the Duke. If Theseus gives way to Egeus and orders Hermia's death (for the crime of loving Lysander), then he will perpetuate the battle of the sexes. The play resolves this problem, and what could have been a re-run of ROMEO AND JULIET becomes instead a triple wedding of happy and well-matched couples.

However it is vital to see this process as being commented upon by the play of Pyramus and Thisby. If the last Act is not to seem like a separate play or a superfluous comic trifle, then it must relate to the first Act and the potentially tragic end of poor Hermia as well as the conquest of Hippolyta. We have explored this fertile area. The tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby represents what might have happened had Oberon not intervened. Oberon's fairy world too is split by passionate strife. This gender warfare results in a displacement of Nature, and not just the court suffers but the forest too. Winter falls in summer. Oberon and Titania struggle over almost nothing (the favours of an Indian boy), malicious spells are cast which go cruelly wrong. Puck and the Fairies have often been portrayed with too light a touch. These are forest "sprites", earth spirits. Even Puck is as much the famous Green Man as he is a mischievous household demon. He pops up everywhere and we have tried to link him to nature. This is a common Shakespearean theme and particularly suited to the pagan world of the play – not just a classical pagan world but an English one too. "Thou Nature art my goddess!" exclaims Edmund in KING LEAR, and Shakespeare seems to believe in a very clear natural theology, the actions of

man will be reflected in nature, disharmony breeds natural calamity. The spirits are dark spirits. They become lighter spirits of fertility, but they have a cruel edge. Nature is cruel and dangerous as well as a blessing. The forest literally attacks the foolish lovers. The lovers stumble blindly, their behaviour is unnatural and so is Titania's. But finally Oberon takes pity and releases the Queen from her beastly passion, the lovers from their blindness and blesses the womb of the man-hating Amazon. All this is only achieved through the powers of nature, as invested in the Fairies and Puck. I suggest that this is why the play of Pyramus and Thisby is necessary in the last Act: the lovers are redeemed and Theseus dismisses the murderous Egeus but only with the help of the supernatural spirits. The Mechanicals' appalling play is a mirror of their noble audiences's own appalling behaviour. The court laugh at the actors, but they also laugh at a mirror held up to their own folly. The best laughter is to laugh at oneself. That is the function of comedy. We ourselves have not changed so much that A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM is no longer relevant. Man and woman still stare at each other across a dividing wall. We are all fools for love.

Paul Stebbings 2024

