

Shakespeare
Plays
On Tour

Play Guide ~ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The Richmond Shakespeare Festival

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Pre-performance

Sources and history *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

A Midsummer Night's Dream has been called Shakespeare's "first mature play", belonging to the period of transition between his first more imitative plays and his mature festive philosophical vein. Written between 1594 and 1596, it is believed to have been initially intended for a wedding rather than a work for the theater. It was written at about the same time that *Romeo and Juliet* was being performed and seems to be the flip side of the same coin. Both share themes of forbidden love, angry parents and rebellion.

As with many playwrights, Shakespeare appears more interested in a good story than in accuracy. The story does not even take place in midsummer. Though Hippolyta speaks of four days until her wedding to Theseus, the play takes place in the span of one night.

Conversely, *Midsummer* differs from other plays of Shakespeare in its character development, or the lack thereof. In almost all of the other plays the characters come to life in memorable ways. In this play, however, only the fantasy characters (clowns and fairies) appear real. The lovers, in particular, seem interchangeable.

The sources for this play are mixed. The plot line involving Theseus and Hippolyta owes several details to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (a staple in Elizabethan grammar school) and *Plutarch's Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*. The lovers follow the convention in plot seen in many of the plays of Romans, Plautus and Terence. Stories of fairies are everywhere, but Shakespeare might have drawn from Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*. The name Titania also appears in *Metamorphosis*. As for the mechanicals, Shakespeare need have looked no farther than the common working man in London, even among his own playing troupe. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe comes straight from Ovid.

The Elizabethan Playhouse

The Globe, the theater most associated with Shakespeare, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose and the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*) and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men.) The others were all open to the sky (the reason being the need for light- no electricity!).

All of the open theatres had arena type stages (seating on 3 sides), with the poorer audience

members (the Groundlings) standing on the ground right up next to the stage, while the more wealthy sat in galleries in a circular fashion all around the stage. The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like Nascar or WWW wrestling) , with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking - UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience was pretty attentive.

However- there were no intermissions, so they still had to move sometimes. However, they would probably hurry back.

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (Actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to make some reference to a character not on stage- pretty funny then AND now.

Finally - how long WERE these plays? They seem pretty long on the page. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it mentions in the Prologue "the two hours traffic of our stage..". IF the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace- no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal Groundling had the attention span of today's normal 5 year old and liked to throw things.

What makes it great?

Language. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes a great example of why Shakespeare was such a great writer: his use of our language. No one has ever matched the way Shakespeare puts words together to accomplish a goal.

For Example:

OBERON

That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;
Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
Fetch me that flower; the herb I shew'd thee once:
The juice of it on sleeping eye-lids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees.
Fetch me this herb; and be thou here again
Ere the leviathan can swim a league.

So what's the big deal? Do we need to know who Cupid is, or the Leviathan, or love-idleness? Not really. We get the sense of what Oberon's saying even if we don't know for sure. So, it sounds great to the ear if we don't know who these people and places are, AND, this speech also communicates a huge amount of information about the magical properties of the flower Oberon wants. That's a lot for sixteen lines! Add to that the fact that the speech is written in verse, and follows a poetic structure called Iambic Pentameter, which provides Shakespeare's actors with all kinds of information on how to perform this speech. Put all that together, and **that's what makes it great.**

Synopsis

The Duke of Athens, essentially a King in his own town, is getting married. He conquered the Amazons, and soon he will wed their queen, Hippolyta. As he is talking with her, Egeus enters to tell us of his disobedient daughter, Hermia. Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius. Hermia, however, loves Lysander, and they steal off into the woods to flee Athens and marry in secret. Helena enters as they leave and tells us of her long-unanswered love for Demetrius, who hasn't paid her any attention since he met Hermia. Lysander and Hermia tell Helena of their plans to flee Athens, and Helena tells Demetrius. They all chase off after one another into the forest.

In the forest, another disagreement is fermenting. Oberon, the King of the Fairies, and Titania, the queen of the fairies, are having a feud. Oberon wants from Titania a changeling boy, a fairy-like creature who can change his shape. Titania's having none of it. They've gathered to celebrate the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, and their disagreement causes strife throughout all nature.

Meanwhile, a troupe of players, "rude mechanicals," men who work at blue-collar jobs in Athens, are getting ready to perform a play in honor of the Duke's wedding. Bottom the weaver, the lead actor, is chosen to play Pyramus in the play. The men agree to meet in the forest to rehearse where they won't be disturbed.

Oberon, while plotting to bewitch Titania to get the changeling boy (and have a little revenge), sees our Athenian lovers enter the forest, and sees how poor Helena cannot win Demetrius' love. He commands his servant Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, a spirit of magic and mischief, to bring him the juice of a very special flower. When squeezed into the eyes of a sleeping mortal, it causes the person to madly fall in love with the next live creature that he or she sees. Oberon wants to place the juice on Demetrius, so that when he next sees Helena, he'll fall madly in love with her. Oberon sends Puck on his task.

Puck, seeing Lysander and Hermia together, mistakes them for Helena and Demetrius, and puts the love-juice on Lysander's eyes. Helena stumbles over him in the dark forest, and Lysander awakes, instantly falling madly in love with Helena. Lysander chases Helena off into the forest leaving Hermia all alone.

When Oberon discovers Puck's mistake, he places the love-juice on Demetrius' eyes himself, and soon both Lysander and Demetrius are madly in love with Helena. Oberon also anoints Titania's eyes with the love juice, hoping she will fall in love with something nasty and vile.

Meanwhile, Puck stumbles on the "rude mechanicals" who've come to the forest to rehearse their play. Mischievously, he transforms Bottom's head into that of an Ass. Bottom re-emerges and terrifies all his friends, who run off for Athens, leaving Bottom alone in the wood. He sings to show them he is "unafraid" and wakes the sleeping Titania, who immediately falls in love with Bottom, ass-head and all.

Before all these lovers' sights can be restored, we'll see a knock-down drag-out brawl, a man with a donkey's head, the entire play-within-the-play performed by Bottom and his gang, and reunion and peace in the fairy kingdom. Oh, and everyone gets married.

Post-performance

Cool stuff to think or write about for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

For a 2004 audience, all the magic and supernatural characters of the play are pretty unbelievable on the surface. And yet, "Midsummer" continues to be the single most popular play written by the most popular playwright of all time. From 1599 to 2003, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" very well may hold the title of most performed play in the world. Its themes and characters have been written into Symphonic music, Ballet, Opera and Film worldwide.

1. What do you think is the reason for this popularity?
2. Elizabethans had a strong belief that great upsets in the world (weather, the order of nature, etc.) were a sign of great upset in the heavens. What indication of that is there in *Midsummer*?
3. In this play the words "transformed" and "translated" are used. What does it mean and to whom does it happen. (think hard - there are more than one)
4. Theseus says to Hippolyta, referring to his war against the Amazon, that "...I woo'd thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries." Does Hippolyta after physically battling AGAINST him, seem to LOVE him now? Why?
5. Demetrius and Lysander, after their respective flower juice incidents, pursue and praise Helena. How does Helena respond to this sudden attention? Is she happy with this turn of events?
6. Puck suggests in the final speech that, if you did not like our little play, to look at it another way. What way is this (think of the play's title if you're unsure)? Oh, and by the way, what does Shakespeare suggest with the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
7. Why does Helena tell Demetrius about Hermia running away with Lysander?

8. If you wanted to modernize *Midsummer*, how would you portray the Mechanicals?
9. Punishment for girls disobeying parents seems harsh here. Are there any places in the world where the rules are still like that?

People/Happenings in the play

Multiple choice

1. Why are Oberon and Titania angry?
 a) She has something he wants. b) He has been going after other women c) she has sworn to shun him. d) all of the above
- 2) Theseus is ruler of: a) India b) Athens c) Greece d) Troy.
- 3) Demetrius said he loved _____ once.
 a) Hermia b) Helena c) Hippolyta d) Titania
- 4) What does Puck call "mortals"?
 a) endearing b) funny c) fools d) mysterious
- 5) In this play, who gets enchanted?
 a) Bottom b) Titania c) Demetrius d) Lysander e) all of them
- 6) What magical object is used to accomplish this?
 a) lightning b) songs c) mist d) flower
7. Why doesn't the actor playing Lion need a script?
 a) he already knows it b) he's going to share with another actor c) it's only roaring d) he's so good
- 8) Why are the Mechanicals in the woods?
 a) they want to rehearse a play in secret b) they're chopping down wood for Theseus c) they're looking for fairies d) they're ecology nuts.

Matching (match the character with the description or line spoken by him/her/it)

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 1) Theseus | a) ..Oh, hell! to choose love by another's eyes! |
| 2) Egeus | b) This same debate comes from our dissension |
| 3) Oberon | c) I beg the ancient privilege of Athens |
| 4) Titania | d) To you your father should be as a god |
| 5) Hermia | e) Oh that your frowns would teach your smiles such skill |
| 6) Lysander | f) Give me that boy, and I will go with thee |
| 7) Demetrius | g) I am that merry wanderer of the night |

- 8) Helena
 - 9) Bottom
 - 10) Puck
- h) Either death or you I'll find immediately
 - i) I see you all are bent to set against me for your merriment
 - j) Why should you think I should woo in scorn?
 - k) I had rather give my carcass to my hounds.
 - l) my legs are longer for to run away
 - m) Now I see she hath made compare between our statures.
 - n) Give me your hands if we be friends
 - o) Trip away; make no stay
Meet me all by break of day.

Final Question

How does the fact that the British pronunciation of the word "ass" (which is "arse" confuse the major joke of the play?

Special Encore! Trademarks

Shakespeare's primary company probably had about fifteen actors per show, but we know that in the evenings some of the company played on tour. Often playing for patrons in their homes, this smaller troupe of players often had only five or six actors.

Encore! is truly privileged to continue this tradition. Have a look at *Midsummer's* cast of **characters**. How would you cast the show with just five people? How would you cast it with thirteen?

For our summer Richmond Shakespeare Festival at Agecroft Hall, we play with thirteen. Why not come see us this summer? Call 804-232-4000 or visit www.richmondshakespeare.com for more info.