

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***A Midsummer Night's Dream*, presented by Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London,  
2016**

Lisa Hopkins  
Sheffield Hallam University  
[l.m.hopkins@shu.ac.uk](mailto:l.m.hopkins@shu.ac.uk)

Directed by Emma Rice. With Ankur Bahl (Helenus), Margaret Ann Bain (Flute/Philostrate), Nandi Bhebhe (First Fairy/Starveling), Edmund Derrington (Lysander), Tibu Fortes (Cobweb), Ncuti Gatwa (Demetrius), Meow Meow (Hippolyta/Titania), Katy Owen (Puck), Edith Tankus (Snug), Lucy Thackeray (Quince), Alex Tregear (Snout), Zubin Varla (Theseus/Oberon), Anjana Vasan (Hermia), and Ewan Wardrop (Bottom).

This terrible production infuriated on every level. Ironically, the thing that caused most outrage on the Globe's comments board – changing Helena to Helenus – was actually one of the better things about it: no, the decision didn't make a lot of sense given Emma Rice's stated aim to put more women on the Globe stage, but Ankur Bahl's sweet, vulnerable Helenus was one of the stronger performances, and he and Ncuti Gatwa made a more credible couple than some Demetriuses and Helenas I've seen. It was not the fact of the change but the reason given for it that maddens, which is that Demetrius would not have been fickle if his lover hadn't been a man, and hence socially inappropriate in some circles. While this chimed with the production's Bollywood feel and stated interest in honour killings, it is both obviously not true (over the course of history, some men have ditched some women) and also symptomatic of Rice's apparent conviction that she knows better than the play, which she seems to regard as an incomprehensible farrago. Before the production even opened, Bottom, here recast as a health and safety officer, warned the audience against sunstroke, observing that its principal symptoms are tiredness and confusion, both of which are likely to be provoked by a Shakespeare play. It is a sad state of affairs if Shakespeare's Globe starts proceedings by apologising for Shakespeare, and

it is bad business to denigrate your own brand: somebody really ought to remember Gerald Ratner and the prawn sandwich.

The production remained in the same vein throughout, playing everything possible for laughs and manically changing the text, including replacing 'Athens' by 'Hoxton' because the audience was presumably too stupid to cope with long words like 'Athenian'. (Is it all going to be like this? Will future productions show us something rotten in the state of Dulwich, and will Lear offer Goneril Ealing?) This is a play with some magical lines in, but with the honourable exception of Zubin Varla none of the cast could speak verse for toffee, and the language was consistently marginalised or massacred. Nor was it replaced by anything worth having: at one point the man in the moon brandished a balloon and said 'It's a visual concept. Why is everyone so hung up on text?', but ironically the direction was so inept that much of the action could not even be seen from some seats (if you don't believe this, buy a ticket for seat E10 in Bay A of the Lower Gallery and see how you get on). This, and the audience's collective failure to move or clap at the interval because it had not been clearly signalled, testified to a total lack of understanding of how the Globe actually works. Rice's only idea seemed to be to get everyone down to their underwear as often as possible in the apparent belief that this is funny, and to add in so much song and dance (including a rendition of 'Space Oddity') that proceedings were dragged out to three hours. For me, the only worthwhile moment of those three hours was when Lucy Thackeray's Rita Quince clutched a tambour to her breast and said 'Mark Rylance gave me this'. He gave Shakespeare's Globe something too, but that something is in danger of being tarnished by travesty and silliness.