

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***A Midsummer Night's Dream*, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company and
Everyman Theatre at the New Theatre, Cardiff, 28 May 2016**

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Directed by: Erica Whyman. With: Alex Tomkins (Theseus), Laura Harding (Hippolyta), Jon Trenchard (Philostrate), Peter Hamilton Dyer (Egeus), Mercy Ojelade (Hermia), Chris Nayak (Demetrius), Jack Holden (Lysander), Laura Riseborough (Helena), Ayesha Dharker (Titania), Sam Redford (Oberon), Lucy Ellinson (Puck), Theo St. Claire (Titania's First Fairy), Mari Izzard (Peaseblossom), Aimee Gray (Cobweb), Lila Clements (Moth), Ben Goffe (Mustardseed), Steven Smith (Bottom), Cari Barley (Quince), Philip Jones (Snout), Paul Fanning (Starveling), Ricky Valentine (Flute), Henry Nott (Snug).

Erica Whyman's *Midsummer Night's Dream* was part of the RSC's quatercentenary Shakespeare celebrations, and toured England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland before finishing its run at Stratford-upon-Avon. Promotional material declared it 'A Play For the Nation', a bold claim at a time when there is clearly no consensus in the nation about what kind of nation the nation should be, or even if it should be one nation at all. Nonetheless, inclusivity was very important to this production: all posters and flyers showed Chu Omambala, the black actor playing Oberon, posed with either the white actress playing Puck (Lucy Ellinson) or the Mumbai-born actress playing Titania (Ayesha Dharker).¹ Hermia was also black, Demetrius Asian, and Mustardseed a dwarf. In addition, at each stage of the national tour, local amateurs played the Mechanicals, with local schoolchildren taking the parts of Titania's fairies. Perhaps this goal of

¹ Omambala was 'indisposed' the night I saw the production: Sam Redford, due to play Theseus, played Oberon, and Alex Tomkins, one of the musicians, played the Duke.

inclusion was the reason for the 1940s setting: nostalgia for the World War Two era has supplanted Shakespeare and the royal family as the one unifying factor in British life.²

As the action started, the stage was bare, and scenery seemed intended to suggest a disused theatre. Buckets, mops and brooms lay around, and a dusty grand piano that had seen better days. Weights hung from the flies. Part of the unadorned brick wall at the back of the stage had crumbled away, evoking the bombed-out buildings of the Blitz. The intention, it seemed, was not only to link the battles Theseus has returned triumphantly from with the global conflict of 1939-45.³ Whyman wanted to invite comparison between the events of the midsummer night (when barriers come down between the natural and supernatural and between classes, so the fairy queen ends up in the arms of an artisan) and the nationwide festivities of 1945, ushering in Clement Attlee's radical, levelling Labour government. Appropriately, the production's transcendent moment was the climactic bergamask, when the entire company flooded onto the stage, and lord and labourer, child and adult, mortal and immortal all danced joyously together to jazz accompaniment.

With its rigid social and gender boundaries and culture of deference, the 1940s setting seemed perfect for Theseus's lecture to Hermia on the importance of obeying her father. Egeus felt entitled to search Hermia's body for Lysander's 'love tokens' (1.1.29), patting her all over; conversely, Demetrius's horrified embarrassment at Helena's passion for him in the forest seemed entirely in period (2.1).⁴ At the same time, this production suggested the ways in which the war liberated women. Peter Quince was a woman (Cari Barley) in overalls and with her hair tied back with a headscarf, like one of the women who filled the munitions factories in the absence of men.⁵ (Philostrate called the Mechanicals 'hard-handed folk', and the Duke commented on Quince's prologue, 'This lady doth not stand upon points' (5.1.72, 118).) Like Britain in its first age of austerity, the daytime Athenian world the lovers escape from seemed hidebound and restrictive. Only the ladies and the Duke got to sit for Quince's play: Egeus,

² During the EU referendum debate, both sides sought to utilise cultural memories of the war: see, for instance, Chris Johnston, 'Second World War veterans say Brexit risks stability they fought for', *Guardian*, 9 May 2016, <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/09/war-veterans-brexite-risk-stability>>; Tim Ross, 'Boris Johnson: The EU wants a superstate, just as Hitler did', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/14/boris-johnson-the-eu-wants-a-superstate-just-as-hitler-did/>> [accessed 31 July 2016].

³ For the play-within-the-play scene, the Duke's formal evening dress was decorated with medals.

⁴ Act, scene and line references are to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by John Jowett et al., 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

⁵ Nationwide the part was largely played by women: see *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation* <http://www.dream2016.org.uk/character_type/quince/> [accessed 31 July 2016].

Demetrius and Lysander had to stand behind them. When Egeus first introduced him, Demetrius marched forward, clicked his heels and saluted the Duke formally. Apparently only recently demobbed, he maintained a ramrod-stiff posture. By contrast, Lysander was a fashionable young man in a big-shouldered, big-lapelled suit, given to lounging with his hands in his pockets, and probably to the writing of Audenesque verse. It was evident why Egeus, who wore an RAF uniform, thought Demetrius a more acceptable son-in-law.

But as the action shifted from Athens to the forest, there was an explosion of scarlet confetti from the flies and scarlet columns descended onto the stage, apparently to represent trees. Scarlet was to be the defining colour for the forest's magic. Bottom's donkey-head was scarlet; several of the children playing fairies wore scarlet school blazers. When Hermia re-entered searching for Lysander in the wood, she had lost her shoes, a traditional bit of business (3.2.40); but more intriguingly, when Helena re-entered chased by him shortly afterwards, she had acquired a scarlet ribbon in her hair (3.2.122). Titania wore a gold-embroidered dress with one shoulder-strap, suggestive of a sari, that was exactly the same shade of scarlet. As the fairies sang 'You spotted snakes with double tongue' (2.2.9), they opened the grand piano and it became Titania's bower: this was lined with matching scarlet plush, so that when she reclined in it, she seemed to vanish.

Hippolyta also wore scarlet, so that while the parts of Titania and the Amazon queen were not doubled for once, the use of an identical colour for their costumes subtly suggested similarities between the two women. Hippolyta's receptivity to the supernatural marked her apart from Theseus. She listened quizzically to the Duke's speech dismissing the lovers' experiences, eyebrows raised and with the occasional scornful laugh, as if nurturing thoughts that she would keep to herself. From the start she was cold and formal towards Theseus, suggesting that his conquest of her was a work-in-progress. The ducal couple first entered on separate sides of the stage, with red carpets rolled before them, as if making a public appearance; later, horrified at his spinelessness in upholding the sharp Athenian law and forcing Hermia to marry a man she didn't love, she turned her back on him. There was no suggestion that he was a man she was enthralled by, merely one she tolerated. Separate actors also played Theseus and Oberon, and the effect of this was to diminish Theseus: here he was not the usual cool, ironic, dominant figure. With no link to the fairy realm, he became a much more earthbound spirit than Hippolyta: his most eloquent speech dismisses the imagination, suggesting a prosaic mind-set. The decision to render the Duke slightly feeble seemed to give the young lovers more stature, and they were particularly well-played. Chris Nayak delivered Demetrius's speech professing his renewed love for Helena (4.1.163-

75) with unusual gravity and sincerity, as an apology and plea for forgiveness, whereas in most productions this is part of a formulaic tying-up of romantic loose ends.

Overall, it was a deliberately fun and lightweight rendition of a much-loved comedy that the RSC chose for Shakespeare's anniversary. One could compare the tradition of the annual Royal Film Performance, begun in the era when this production was set, and the film historian Leslie Halliwell's comment that the movie for this official occasion is 'chosen [. . .] usually on the basis of what is least offensive rather than best'.⁶ When Oberon seized Titania's hair at 'Give me that boy' (2.1.143), this was one of a very few disturbing moments which did not predominate. Helena's bitter reproach of Hermia for betraying their childhood friendship was kept but drowned out by slapstick; Puck's penultimate speech, evoking the nocturnal netherworld and the prowling of ghosts, was cut to the bone. Here the forest was not a dangerous hinterland full of dark sexual energy,⁷ but a place of literally childish delight, where uniformed infants danced in rings, safe under the supervision of adults. There were times, though, when the implied liberal agenda behind this 'play for the nation' seemed condescending or gauche. When Lysander insulted Hermia by calling her a 'dwarf' (3.2.329), the diminutive Mustardseed ran onstage and smacked his leg. This got a huge laugh from the audience, and Puck encouraged them to applaud. When Lysander abused Hermia (played by Mercy Ojelade) as an 'Ethiope' and a 'tawny Tartar', however, audience laughter stopped dead (3.2.258, 264). The similar moment when Demetrius (played by an Asian actor) praised Helena's skin for being the 'pure congealèd white' of snow (3.2.142) seemed to pass unnoticed.

But the greatest fly in the ointment was Bottom and his friends. Members of Cardiff's Everyman Theatre company played the Mechanicals, and promotional material emphasised the ground-breaking nature of this mixture of metropolitan professionals and local amateurs, although an Elizabethan might have found it familiar.⁸ There was nothing particularly likeable, or endearing, or even funny about them, however. Other

⁶ Performances began in 1946 (*Halliwell's Filmgoer's and Video Viewer's Companion*, 9th edn (London: Paladin, 1989), p. 957).

⁷ In the 1994 RSC production, for instance, the first half ended with Titania and Bottom rutting in front of all her attendant fairies. Nor is this sexuality something that late-twentieth-century criticism and stage-practice have imposed on early-modern mythology, hence the woodcut of Robin Goodfellow on the title-page of the 1628 chapbook *Robin Good-fellovv, His Mad Prankes, and Merry Iestes* (STC 12016), where he sports a tumescent penis.

⁸ For instance, the original 1592 performance of *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, at Archbishop Whitgift's palace in Croydon, seems to have combined a London-based professional actor in the lead role, scholars from Whitgift's retinue in the smaller parts, and local labourers as supernumeraries (G. R. Hibbard, *Thomas Nashe: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 89-90).

productions have gone out of their way to invest the Mechanicals with dignity,⁹ or to make the audience feel how offended Starveling is, when playing Moonshine, by the constant interruptions from his courtly auditors, or to suggest that, if Bottom is a fool, the rest of the troupe find him one too. Here all were equally idiotic, backing up his every brainwave (such as that he play both Pyramus and Thisbe) with eager nods. Snug, given the wordless part of the lion, was even more gormless (perhaps his confession that 'I am slow of study' suggested this (1.2.63)). Given to shifting awkwardly from foot to foot and sucking his fingers, he was a childlike character. Someone clearly felt that the text does not patronise the Mechanicals enough, and added a touch whereby they all struggled to pronounce 'prologue', as if it were an esoteric word they were unused to. Generally they are at least allowed to dance well, however poorly they stage Ovidian myths for aristocrats, and Theseus's 'But come, your bergamask. Let your epilogue alone' (5.1.354) supports this. Whyman even stripped them of that distinction, by having the whole company perform their climactic dance.

Finally, they were too stupid to register their elite audience's contempt. Left alone onstage after the lords and ladies had departed, they all group-hugged delightedly, blissfully unaware of how ridiculous their performance had been (and of normative behaviour for working-class British men of the 1940s). So the Mechanicals grated on me not just because they were unfunny. Whyman evoked an Orwellian moment when hope lay with the proles, but denigrated them; the production claimed it was breaking down barriers between London and the despised provinces, but instead reasserted them. At a time when the British government has concentrated nearly 50% of infrastructure spending on the English capital, when more and more cultural artefacts, venues for housing them and money to maintain them are moved to London,¹⁰ the only regional voices we heard in this production were those of simpletons. A play for the nation, indeed.

⁹ Barrie Rutter's 1994 Northern Broadsides production introduced them hard at work, the blows of their tools co-ordinated to create music; their casting session had to be squeezed in during a tea-break (Peter Holland, 'Shakespeare Performances in England, 1993-1994', *Shakespeare Survey*, 48 (1995), 191-226 (p. 201)).

¹⁰ *National Infrastructure Pipeline July 2015* <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-infrastructure-pipeline-july-2015>>; Jonathan Jones, 'Museums are now part of Britain's pernicious north-south divide', *Guardian*, 13 January 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/jan/13/museums-art-galleries-spending-cuts-local-authorities-derby-northampton-joseph-wright>> [accessed 31 July 2016]. As if to give a practical demonstration of cultural supremacy, Jones uses 'Britain' and 'England' interchangeably throughout.