

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Presented by Shakespeare's Rose Theatre, York,
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Directed by Juliet Forster for Shakespeare's Rose, York. With Gareth Aled (Starveling), Leandra Ashton (Peaseblossom), Antony Bunsee (Theseus and Titania), Clare Corbett (Puck), Fine Time Fontayne (Egeus), Maria Gray (Fairy), Paul Hawkyard (Bottom), Mark Holgate (Demetrius), Emilio Iannucci (Flute), Amy Lennox (Hermia), Rina Mahoney (Quince), Olivia Onyehara (Helena), Jordan Peters (Lysander), Amanda Ryan (Hippolyta and Oberon), Robin Simpson (Snout) and Richard Standing (Snug).

This was a good production which was clearly going to get better. We saw only its second performance, and cast illness had led to Niall Costigan filling in as Lysander, still on book in the first half (though commendably off it for most of the second, and visibly growing into the part). The theatre itself is also a completely new venture, and I had the sense that the cast weren't sure yet of how it was going to work. They needn't worry: they're onto a winner. They had a packed and enthusiastic house, and as I went back in for the second half I heard a passer-by ask a steward almost wistfully, 'Whatever are you all *doing* in there?'.

What we were doing was watching a matinée in York's new pop-up theatre, a version of an Elizabethan open-air playhouse (<http://www.shakespearesrosetheatre.com/>) just next to Clifford's Tower and surrounded by 'Shakespeare's Village', mainly food outlets and a very pretty little garden loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet*. After a slowish start, the production came alive with a dark and magical fairyland, characterised by actors making animal noises, scaling up and down the wooden structure of the stage, and performing some really impressive ropework, including descents from the centrally positioned upper trap. The usual doubling of Oberon with Theseus and Hippolyta with

Titania was imaginatively reversed, with Antony Bunsee making a languorous and high-maintenance Titania; I was reminded of the late and much lamented Propeller Company. A small blonde Hermia nicely complemented a tall dark Helena, and both they and Mark Holgate's Demetrius turned in fine performances, as Costigan's Lysander also bids fair to do if he has to continue in the role.

The mechanicals were more tentative in the early stages, but 'Pyramus and Thisbe' was a joy, with the best Moon I've ever seen descending apparently terrified in a hoop of which he was in fact clearly in perfect control, and some good bits of business with the wall's hole. It ran a fraction too long – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shouldn't really come in at three hours, and the waitress who served us at lunch warned us that some of her colleagues had been to *Romeo and Juliet* and that it was three and a half hours long. However, there have been scores of occasions on which waiters have asked us what we were doing next and we've said 'Going to the theatre', and this is the first time that anyone has ever replied that some of her colleagues had seen it. It was also clear that some of the audience did not know the play well enough to be sure when it was over and thence when to clap, suggesting that a pop-up theatre in a car park really does bring new audiences to Shakespeare, and that they can have a jolly good time while they're there. The only person who got it spectacularly wrong was the costume designer, who had clearly thought, 'Oh dear, the English summer; I'd better wrap them all up warmly or they'll catch their deaths'. In fact, blazing blue skies and a temperature of 31 degrees reminded us why anyone ever thought outdoor Shakespeare was a good idea.