A Midsummer Night's Dream at The Globe

by Peter Smith. Written on 2008-06-30. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: A Midsummer Night's Dream (2008, Shakespeare's Globe, UK).

A Warning for Fair Women includes the suggestive observation on the correlation between colour and genre: "The stage is hung with black and I perceive / The auditors prepared for tragedy." Jonathan Munby's production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, designed by Mike Britton, took shape around a central contrast: black with its connotations of melancholy, mourning and formality for the court versus vibrant colour with its associations of fantasy, cheer and youth for the forest.

Presiding, ambiguously, over both was a huge, white, spherical moon suspended at roof level above the yard. Tethered on elastic, and illuminated from within, this source of watery light was buffeted up and down by the wind and served to cast indistinct and mobile shadows across the action. The court of Theseus was clearly and unhappily restrained – reflecting his opening lamentation on the delay of his and Hippolyta's nuptials. With its stage pillars shrouded in black and the upstage wall draped in a cloth of the same colour, their entirely black costumes fitted them for this setting of disconsolate sable. The blistering Egeus and the four lovers were all similarly attired and, as they discussed the real possibility that Hermia be executed unless she take her father's part, the colour (as in the quotation from A Warning) suggested the imminence of tragedy. Tom Mannion's Theseus showed real fury with Hermia's (played by Pippa Nixon) feminist intransigence so that it was entirely appropriate that Siobhan Redmond's Amazonian queen, who had earlier given permission for Hermia "to plead my thoughts" (1.1.61) with an approving nod, protectively embraced the young woman shielding her from the onslaughts of ruthless patriarchy. Her haughty exit in a different direction from Theseus' fawning "what cheer, my love?" (1.1.122), made it clear whose side she was on.

The forest outside Athens was as colourful as the court was monochrome. At the top of Act 2, the black disappeared and yielded to a vibrant and clashing palette. The fairies set large purple flowers around a blue disc on the stage floor which echoed the circularity of the moon hovering above. The black drape upstage fell to be replaced with one of diaphanous royal blue and the two arc-shaped walkways, like lunar crescents, which descended from either side of the stage down

DOI: 10.18357/scene00200818460

into the yard, were of the same colour. The fairies were costumed in purple, green, blue or red tutus with torn and rebelliously unkempt lace and fishnets in a post-punk refutation of courtly authority. Puck's parodic tails were turquoise- and white-striped and his hair sported a wave of greenish-blue.

It was not long before the lovers' black costumes yielded to this kaleidoscopic aesthetic. Their disrobing allowed them to reveal shirts, skirts and underwear of bright gold or green and the sexual licence of the forest was implicit in their casting off of formal attire and the exposure of legs and arms. As Helena (Laura Rogers) acted as Demetrius' "spaniel" (2.1.203) she provocatively crawled towards him on all fours and as she lamented her own uncontrollable desire, "I am sick when I look not on you" (213), she lay spread-eagled on the stage her skirts hitched indecently high revealing bare legs in a gesture of complete submission.

The sexual intensity of the forest was emphasised by the erotic presence of Redmond as Titania. (She and Mannion doubled the earthly and the fairy rulers though the fairy kingdom seemed set, vocally anyway, in Edinburgh while Theseus and Hippolyta spoke the English of Windsor Castle.) Provocatively, her bower was a cross between Salvador Dalí's red settee based on the lips of Marilyn Monroe and a large open and sexually suggestive rosebud which had something of the predatory exoticism of Audrey II, the cannibalistic plant from Little Shop of Horrors. Both the little Indian boy and the ass-headed artisan were laid across the crimson bed. As she draped herself among their limbs there was an obvious, though very dark, parallel between her apparently maternal contact with the child and her copulation with Bottom: both were objects of her consummation.

Mannion's Oberon maintained the tyrannical edge of Theseus though here his fury was directed not at a disobedient young woman but against his mischievous servant. Michael Jibson (who had earlier, fittingly, doubled as Philostrate), relished the confusions of the night and maintained a good rapport with the audience, entering through the yard and puffing his way up the ramp to present Oberon with the love-in-idleness. He and Oberon took up spectators' positions, standing on the shelves formed by the bases of the stage columns and watched the confusions of the four lovers over the rotating identities of their various love objects. There were some excellent and carefully choreographed lazzi between them – movement was by Glynn MacDonald. There was a nice touch as Puck attempted to resolve the problems by anointing the eyes of the male lovers with the magic juice. As he bent over each of them, lying on the floor, he plucked out their eyeballs on long elastic threads of red, drew them towards him, sprinkled them and then replaced them. Given that one of the other plays in this season's repertory is King Lear which contains a truly ghastly blinding of Gloucester, there was clearly a crafty nod in that direction.

Pyramus and Thisbe was played at a furious pace and was full of effective comic business. We were returned to the court by the upstage blue cloth being pulled by fairies over the heads of the cooing groundlings. This time the courtiers wore matrimonial white and the presence of the "Hard-handed men" (5.1.72) took place with the women of the onstage audience downstage left and men downstage right in an interesting revision of the convention which usually blocks them as embracing couples – the propriety of unmarried modesty which Theseus laments at the play's opening was still in evidence here.

Against this abstinence, the comic crudity of the inset play was especially effective. The "Wall's chink" (5.1.132) was Snout's spread legs which offered Flute (Peter Bankolé) a disgusted double-take on "Thy stones with lime and hair [acknowledging the proximity of his mouth and Snout's pubic hair] knit up in thee" (190). Snout (Jonathan Bond) wore only the tiniest briefs. Thisbe's subsequent kissing of "the wall's hole" (200) was preceded by Snout's turning his back on Flute so s/he kissed his anus. Paul Hunter's unusually diminutive Nick Bottom was powerfully overacted and he played his suicide as a protracted amputation of toes, fingers, genitals, arms, legs, tongue and eyes before laying on his back, his sword sticking out phallically between his legs. This allowed him to wince with terror as Flute's Thisbe clumsily pulled the weapon out on "Come, trusty sword" (338). There was a lovely detail as the arrogant Theseus condemned the entertainment's author: "if he that writ it had played Pyramus and hanged himself in Thisbe's garter it would have been a fine tragedy" (351). Theseus looked at Bottom as he said this and there was an uncomfortable silence as Bottom gestured to Peter Quince (Michael Matus) with an embarrassed shrug to indicate the playwright. Hastily attempting to cover his tracks, Theseus continued chumily, "and so it is, truly, and very notably discharged", but it was too little too late. The awkwardness of the moment was comically rescued by the incompetence of Snug who ended up dancing on the wrong side of the stage and facing the opposite direction to everyone else in the bergamask – it is Snug who has earlier confessed to being "slow of study" (1.2.63).

The production ended with Oberon's blessing on the lovers – here set to music and Puck's cheeky epilogue. The Globe's trademark jig forced one to wonder, as usual, why the theatre refuses to trust the playwright to end his own plays without populist razzmatazz … one day, perhaps…