



A Midsummer Night's Dream: Theater for a New Audience

by Holger Syme. Written on 2014-08-02. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: A Midsummer Night's Dream (2014, Shakespeare and Company, USA).

VISUALLY, THIS IS A STUNNING PRODUCTION. THE [POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER](#), OPENED this season, is a remarkable space — a broad and deep thrust four stories high, configurable with all sorts of trap doors and hydraulic elements, and Julie Taymor, unsurprisingly, makes highly effective and imaginative use of all these features. The central element in the show is a vast sheet of silk large enough to cover the entire stage: it first appears as the bedsheets of a tiny bed in which a figure we'll soon recognize as Puck (remarkable: Kathryn Hunter) is sleeping, unfolds from the bed to become a balloon of sorts on which the bed is carried up and away, then winds up as a kind of baldachin over the stage, and then proceeds to twist, fold, and billow, birthing Titania for her entrance, ripping open to let Puck back in, and serving as a projection screen time and time again.

There is something deliciously theatrical in how this piece of fabric works. The effects are always impressive, but they're explicitly effects: the sheet suggests magic, it implies representation, but it also remains visible as a sheet, a huge prop manipulated by stage hands and ensemble members present on stage, visibly handling ropes and carabiner hooks. Sometimes, it's characters doing the handling: a running gag is that Flute is too short to catch ropes flown down to hook onto things and always needs help from Snug (who is gigantic). At one point, Puck elaborately hooks herself into a harness while talking to Oberon. A forest of staves that function mostly as sort-of magical trees are very obviously manipulated from below by on-stage figures, or from above by very noticeable ropes. And the production can get quite clever with this metatheatricality. Oberon's reaction to discovering that Puck has love-juiced the wrong Athenian and has turned a true love false (whatever that may mean) finds its angry expression through a lighting change and an orchestrated stamping of all the twenty-odd staves on stage; Puck responds with gentle mockery by banging just one stave, with her hand. The sound is the same (if less loud); the gesture is pretty much the same (except it's Puck's hand moving the stave, not those of visible and invisible helpers). But the effect is completely

different: when Oberon “makes” all the staves move and “makes” the light change, the gesture “means” magic; when Puck does it, it doesn’t. What the scene draws attention to, though, is the fact that this is not an essential, inherent difference. In both cases, a bunch of human hands stamp a bunch of wooden sticks on the stage floor, but Oberon’s magic (and Puck’s lack thereof) entirely depend on an audience’s swift decision to understand one of those gestures as “magical” and the other as something else, something less impressive.

So that’s all very smart, and actually quite Shakespearean (if in a rather un-Shakespearean medium). And Taymor certainly has a remarkable eye for captivating stage images — the kind of moment ideally suited for a production still. Whether it’s the opening image after the intermission, when the sheet covers the stage, and all the staves form a kind of stylized birch forest for Oberon to wander in, a solitary dark figure in a space as white as Peter Brook’s famous white box set for his RSC *Dream* (David Harewood is playing the Fairy King topless, with gold stripes across his chest and in what looked like very dark body makeup); or the haunting image of a solitary child standing all the way downstage wearing a cardboard dog’s head, which when removed revealed cascades of long, very blond hair; or the hilarious moment when Hermia, in her underwear, finds herself caught between Lysander and Demetrius’s crotches at the very moment when they both have rejected her as an object of erotic desire; or even just the small house upstage that, with its stylized neoclassicist facade, identifies scenes as taking place in Athens, and which before Puck’s final sweeping scene stands, framed by the sheet draped from the fly, against an iridescent indigo backdrop, with all of its five windows lit — all of which go out one by one as the couples turn off their lights.

And yet, although I enjoyed this production, I wasn’t exactly blown away. Despite the impressive visuals, much of the show seemed, visually, like a watered-down version of what Robert Wilson might have done. The colour scheme reminded me of Wilson, and Puck’s make-up in particular, with spiky red hair, white-face, and strong eyebrows, could have been straight out of any of his recent Berliner Ensemble productions. In particular, I was reminded repeatedly of the *Peter Pan* I saw last May. That’s not to say, at all, that I think Taymor is ripping Wilson off. Part of it struck me as fairly clear homage. Part of it is likely just the result of an overlap in their aesthetics. What Taymor adds to the equation in a more overt way than Wilson, and what I appreciated about her take on this kind of aesthetic, is the foregrounded theatricality, the very ostentatious made-ness of her stage images. Wilson, for all his anti-realist program, tends to obscure the mechanics of scenes more, leaning towards a more impervious surface, and as a consequence can easily get glib or facile. I think Taymor’s approach is more interesting.

That said, if there's a similarity between her aesthetics and Wilson's, they have nothing whatsoever in common in their approach to the text. One of the Berliner Ensemble dramaturge's told me last year that "Do we really need that line? Let's cut it!" is the constant refrain of Wilson's rehearsal work. Taymor's *Dream*, on the other hand, is textually faithful to a fault — a few lines have been cut, but the play basically proceeds "as it was written" (as they say). Puck gets a few opportunities to ad-lib (including a glorious parody of Bottom), and stands in for Philostrate, Theseus's Master of the Revels (delivering the part in what sounded to me delightfully like a parody of Mark Rylance), but other than that, little work seems to have gone into crafting a performance script for the show. And that points to this *Dream*'s signal shortcoming: it's a visually inspiring production that takes a deeply uninspiring approach to the play.

My heart sank early on, when, after the gorgeous opening with the disappearing bed and a brilliantly choreographed chaotic staging of the preparations for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding, the two characters come and start to speak — and the show switched from a mode of unpredictable creativity to the dull and utterly conventional sound and look of Anglo-American Shakespeare. Verse was dispatched, more or less competently, in various accents, some fake RP, some actual English ones, some mid-Atlantic inflections (not that I care, but it's perhaps worth noting); some verse speakers signalled their investment in psychology by pausing and showing us that thought was happening, though not necessarily at moments when those pauses made sense or when the thinking seemed supported by what they were saying; Shakespeare was being served. I suspect all the actors more or less knew what they were saying, but nothing was happening on stage that suggested that Taymor had any interest in what was being said — let alone in what was being left unsaid.

For all the creative investment in the visual aspects of this show, at its heart is a rather stunning absence of any kind of serious interpretative investment. It's perhaps indicative that the program offer no director's note of any kind — only a set of "perspectives" firmly anchored in the most commonplace and unchallenging takes on Shakespeare's play (as well as a brief biography of the author that, grump-inducingly, sees a need to "acknowledg[e] that there are and have been prominent individuals who continue to question whether the man from Stratford known as William Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him," a note to which a hearty WTF seems the mildest possible response). In German reviews, Taymor's production would be described as "attitude-free." The phrase would not be a compliment. The show creates an atmosphere — an overall oneiric quality, a suggestion that the entire play, as Puck says, may as well just be a dream. But while that's pretty, and pleasing, I do also wonder what it would mean. If the opening image of Puck in his bed is indeed meant to suggest that what unfolds

over the three following hours is “just” a dream, then Taymor, rather oddly, appears to anticipate Puck’s concluding *negative* scenario: that the shadows will offend, and that this offence needs to be forestalled by framing the entire show overtly as a dream, as unreal. (Remember that Puck’s notion of the play as a dream is intended to “mend” the offence the actors may have caused.) But why assume that? And if that’s not the point, what then is gained, or suggested, or implied, by casting the entire play as a dream? (Yes, I know that’s what it’s called. I’ve never really quite figured out why. I would expect a director to at least try.)

Midsummer Night's Dream is an extraordinarily rich text. Taymor gives it an extraordinarily rich visual treatment, but that imagistic riches hardly intersects with the textual. There is darkness in some of the visuals, but the nature of that darkness remains obscure — it certainly doesn’t illuminate, or displace, or really engage at all in any way, deconstructively or constructively, with the text. Instead, the script seems to be accepted as a given: those are the words, this is how they’re supposed to be said, don’t mess with them. These are the pictures: let’s get creative with them! By the same token, I couldn’t help but notice a contrast between the precision of the effects and a relative lack of such precision in the acting, where big moment after big moment wasn’t allowed its due weight or didn’t hit home with sufficient force. This is not the actors’ fault. It’s a question of directorial priorities. (Then again, Kathryn Hunter managed to make her scenes about the performance, even about the character; I don’t know what that says.) Taymor just doesn’t seem all that interested in engaging with the text, or undercutting it (not that that isn’t a form of engagement). For instance, I was delighted to see a Helena who not only, FOR ONCE, didn’t tower over Hermia, but who was also cast against the text’s apparent intent: Hermia is repeatedly troped as darker than Helena in the play, but here, a very English, very blond Hermia is coupled with an African-American Helena perhaps an inch taller than her “dwarfish” friend. The pay-off in the production? Sadly, zero. Lysander’s line about leaving a raven for a dove is thrown away; and Helena throughout walks on much higher heels than Hermia. This may be another clever instance of foregrounding stage reality as an effect achieved by mechanical means, but if so, it comes at the cost of throwing away a chance to complicate Hermia’s obsession with her own supposed shortness. In other words, more often than not, when the production comes face to face with a chance of letting what’s on stage interact with what’s on the page, it simply ignores those opportunities.

The consequence of this oddly (though, in an Anglo-American context, hardly uniquely) schizophrenic enterprise is that the wonderful and the trite live unhappily side by side: there’s Bottom’s ass’s head, a technical marvel and a spectacularly creepy image, basically a human nose and mouth at the end of a long donkey’s nose, fully mobile, operated by two levers that the actor (visibly) manipulates as he speaks. I loved everything about that: it was the most realistic

and the most theatrical translation of Bottom-into-Ass I've ever seen (and again, very clever: Bottom's face and the ass's are a hybrid, because Bottom is, of course, already an ass. And the theatricality of having the actor visibly manipulate his own character's face was of a piece with the production's general approach to its stage magic, so yay for that too). But Bottom's *performance* was a pretty bog standard interpretation of the role, with a New Jersey (I think!) inflection on the standard issue model, but without any especially interesting choices or moments. (By contrast, last summer's Globe production in London was utterly unremarkable as a production, but featured, in Pearce Quigley, an actor who made interesting choice after interesting choice, essentially reinventing Bottom from scratch.) Perhaps I was just in an uncommonly curmudgeonly mood, but Taymor's take on "Pyramus and Thisbe" struck me as one of the least riotous, least creative, and also least funny versions of that scene I've ever seen — and I used to think it was a pretty indestructible vehicle for comedy.

So, in the end, I found this a very unsatisfying production, but also one that seems to me helpfully illustrative of the problem of mainstream Shakespeare in English, perhaps especially in North America. Whatever desire there is for theatrical creativity, for directorial inventiveness, for finding and pursuing an angle of some sort always, it appears, needs to focus on design — it cannot express itself, or work itself out, dramaturgically. The sanctity of the text is such that it leaves directors and actors hampered — a limitation that is more, rather than less, apparent in productions directed by artists as inventive as Julie Taymor, because the contrast between the creative spirit evident in the design and the choreography on the one hand and the uninspiring, painting-by-numbers approach to the text on the other hand is so very stark. Further confirmation, in other words, that Shakespeare has become a problem, for reasons that have nothing to do with Shakespeare.

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