



# **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

## **Education Pack**

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This Education Pack was written by **Beth Flintoff**  
Additional Material from **Richard Warren, Robin Belfield & Spark Notes**  
Photographs by **Nobby Clark**

# To Teachers

This pack has been designed to complement your visit to see Propeller's 2009 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at The Watermill Theatre and on national and international tour.

Most of the pack is aimed at A-level and GCSE students of Drama and English Literature, but some of the sections, such as the Quiz, may be of use to teachers teaching pupils at Key Stages 2, and 3. The section on 'Themes' may also be useful to Higher Education students.

While there are some images from the production as well as the rehearsal process, the pack has been deliberately kept simple from a graphic point of view so that most pages can easily be photocopied for use in the classroom.

Your feedback is most welcome, please email any comments you have to [outreach@watermill.org.uk](mailto:outreach@watermill.org.uk).

Workshops to accompany the production are also available. You can call me on 01635 570927 or email me at the above address for further information.

I hope you find the pack useful.

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Deputy Outreach Director

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# Propeller

## Introduction by Edward Hall

'Propeller is an all male Shakespeare company which mixes a rigorous approach to the text with a modern physical aesthetic. We look for as many ways as possible to inform the physical life of the production with the poetry of the text, and we give as much control as possible to the actor in the telling of the story.

The company is as all companies should be: defined by the people in it and not owned by an individual. Indeed, I find it hard to describe Propeller when we are in between shows, as I become aware of our identity only when looking at our work, which I hope changes all the time.

We want to rediscover Shakespeare simply by doing the plays as we believe they should be done: with great clarity, speed and full of as much imagination in the staging as possible. We don't want to make the plays 'accessible', as this implies that they need 'dumbing down' in order to be understood, which they don't. We want to continue to take our work to as many different kinds of audiences as possible, and so to grow as artists and people. We are hungry for more opportunity to explore the richness of Shakespeare's plays and, if we keep doing this with rigour and invention, then I believe the company, and I hope our audiences too, will continue to grow.'



Puck and the Fairies  
*Photo: Nobby Clark*

# Synopsis

Lysander loves Hermia, and Hermia loves Lysander. Helena loves Demetrius; Demetrius used to love Helena but now loves Hermia. Egeus, Hermia's father, prefers Demetrius as a suitor, and enlists the aid of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, to enforce his wishes upon his daughter. According to Athenian law, Hermia is given four days to choose between Demetrius, life in a nunnery, or a death sentence. Hermia, ever defiant, chooses to escape with Lysander into the surrounding forest.

Complications arise in the forest. Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of Fairies, are locked in a dispute over a boy whom Titania has adopted. Oberon instructs his servant Puck to bring him magic love drops, which Oberon will sprinkle on the Queen's eyelids as she sleeps, whereupon Titania will fall in love with the first creature she sees upon awakening. Meanwhile, Helena and Demetrius have also fled into the woods after Lysander and Hermia. Oberon, overhearing Demetrius's denouncement of Helena, takes pity upon her and tells Puck to place the magic drops upon the eyelids of Demetrius as well, so that Demetrius may fall in love with Helena. Puck, however, makes the mistake of putting the drops on the eyelids of Lysander instead. Helena stumbles over Lysander in the forest, and the spell is cast; Lysander now desires Helena and renounces a stunned Hermia.

In the midst of this chaos, a group of craftsmen are rehearsing for a

production of "Pyramus and Thisbe," to be played for the Duke at his wedding. Puck impishly casts a spell on Bottom to give him the head of a donkey. Bottom, as luck would have it, is the first thing Titania sees when she awakens; hence, Bottom ends up being lavishly kept by the Queen. Oberon enjoys this sport, but is less amused when it becomes apparent that Puck has botched up the attempt to unite Demetrius and Helena. Oberon himself anoints Demetrius with the love potion and ensures that Helena is the first person he sees; however, Helena understandably feels that she is now being mocked by both Demetrius *and* Lysander (who is still magically enamoured of her).

Finally, Oberon decides that all good sports must come to an end. He puts the four lovers to sleep and gives Lysander the antidote for the love potion so that he will love Hermia again when they all wake up. Next, Oberon gives Titania the antidote, and the King and Queen reconcile. Theseus and Hippolyta then discover Lysander, Hermia, Helena, and Demetrius asleep in the forest. All return to Athens to make sense of what they think is a strange dream. Likewise, Bottom returns to his players, and they perform "Pyramus and Thisbe" at the wedding feast (which has since become a wedding of three couples). As everyone retires, fairies perform their blessings and Puck delivers a tender epilogue soliloquy.

# William Shakespeare

The person we call William Shakespeare wrote some 37 plays, as well as sonnets and poetry; but very little is actually known about him. What we know about his life comes from registrar records, court records, wills, marriage certificates and his tombstone. There are also contemporary anecdotes and criticisms made by his rivals suggesting that he was indeed a playwright, poet and an actor.

The earliest record we have of his life is of his baptism, on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> April 1564. Traditionally it is supposed that he was, as was common practice, baptised three days after his birth, making his birthday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1564. There is, however, no proof of this at all. William's father was a John Shakespeare, a local businessman who was involved in tanning and leatherwork. John also dealt in grain and sometimes was described as a glover by trade. John was also a prominent man in Stratford. By 1560, he was one of the fourteen burgesses who made up the town council. William's mother was Mary Arden who married John Shakespeare in 1557. They had eight children, of whom William was the third. It is assumed that William grew up with them in Stratford, one hundred miles from London.

Very little is known about Shakespeare's education. We know that the King's New Grammar School taught boys basic reading and writing.

We assume William attended this school since it existed to educate the sons of Stratford but we have no definite proof. There is also no evidence to suggest that William attended university.

On 28<sup>th</sup> November 1582 an eighteen-year-old William married the twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway. Seven months later, they had their first daughter, Susanna. Anne never left Stratford, living there her entire life. Baptism records reveal that twins Hamnet and Judith were born in February 1585. The Taming of the Shrew was probably written later that year. Hamnet, the only son, died in 1596, just eleven years old.

At some point, Shakespeare joined the Burbage company in London as an actor, and was their principal writer. He wrote for them at the Theatre in Shoreditch, and by 1594 he was a sharer, or shareholder in the company. It was through being a sharer in the profits of the company that William made his money and in 1597 he was able to purchase a large house in Stratford.

The company moved to the newly-built Globe Theatre in 1599. It was for this theatre that Shakespeare wrote many of his greatest plays. In 1613, the Globe Theatre caught fire during a performance of Henry VIII, one of Shakespeare's last plays, written with John Fletcher, and William retired to Stratford where he died in 1616, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April.

# Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

## Love & Marriage

Love in its many forms gets an exploration in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – whether it be a mature, regulated marriage between a Prince (Theseus) and his bride (Hippolyta); the young impetuous love of Hermia and Lysander, or the renewal of a relationship such as that between Titania and Oberon. But unsuitable love also features – in bold, physical comedy between Titania and Bottom, and in the darker, more psychologically irrational relationship between Helena and Demetrius. Helena knows that Demetrius has treated her badly, but she can't stop loving him.

*'The course of true love never did run smooth.'* [I.i.134]

As Lysander comments, one of the major themes of the play is the difficulty of love. But the light-hearted tone of the play ensures that this never veers towards tragedy for long. Mostly we enjoy watching the undignified struggles of the Lovers, secure in the knowledge that all will 'come good' in the end.

## Gender

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with a woman presented with a stark choice: marry the man of her father's choice, or spend the rest of her life in a monastery.

Renaissance society was a predominantly patriarchal one – just as the King was the Father of the nation, so the Father was the king of his own family. Any threat to this threatened the whole hierarchy of a structured society.

According to Church doctrine, a father had the right to marry his daughter or keep her a single woman, unless it was against the woman's own conscience.

Marriage, as the means of perpetuating patriarchal power, was important, and rebellion against this was a serious matter. So serious, in fact, that women who rebelled in Shakespeare's plays were often seen as mad. And in the tragedies, women like Ophelia and Lady Macbeth actually *are* mad.

Hermia herself acknowledges that she is being irrational:

*'I do entreat your grace to pardon me,*

*I know not by what power I am made bold,'* [I.i.60]

And Theseus tells her that her father 'should be as a God'.

The serious, threatening reality of the Athenian court is far too heavy and aggressive for a comedy. The

lovers escape male oppression by retreating into the natural, magical world of the forest. But here the order is also threatened by Titania's fight with Oberon. 'Am not I thy Lord?' he asks her – a radical question repeating throughout the play.

Ultimately, Puck – himself practically genderless – utters the final stereotypes: 'Jack shall have Jill, Nought shall go ill'. The final order will be restored, the women will marry who they choose, but only because Theseus, the highest patriarch, agrees.

## Magic & Dreams

As soon as we reach the woods, the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of raucous chaos, pervaded with magical people and their magical powers. It gives the play its sense of festival, of holiday-making, in which the normal order is turned upside down, and the unexpected can happen at any moment.

The human characters try to explain these mystifying events by assuming they have had some sort of a dream. Shakespeare is interested in the workings of dreams themselves – how one loses a sense of time, of purpose, of logic. And this, of course, relates to the experience the audience is having – of witnessing a fantastical illusion in which nothing is quite what it seems.

## Order & Chaos

Theseus and Hippolyta, as representatives of a structured, ordered society, bookend *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the beginning of the play this order is seen as repressive and cruel by the lovers, but at the end Theseus overrules Egeus and allows the happy reunion of the couples to be acknowledged and celebrated by the Athenian court. They appear in daylight, like the antithesis of Oberon and Titania, to bring the magical, unstable world of the forest to an end. Often in productions, the parts of Titania / Hippolyta and Oberon / Theseus are played by the same actress and actor, to underline this parallel.

## The Ending

*'Think no more of this night's accidents / But as the fierce vexation of a dream.'* [V.i.65]

Is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself a dream? The play has several 'endings' – one where the Lovers finally leave the wood, one where the mechanicals' play ends, and then one after Puck makes his final speech. This blurs the distinction between the play's illusion and the reality of the audience going back to their lives.



Puck:

*What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor -  
An actor too, perhaps, if I see cause.' [III.i.731f]*

Any play which itself includes a play is reminding us of the very *nature* of theatre, we are looking at actors looking at actors, and in doing so we are holding up a mirror to ourselves. We're forced to ask questions about ourselves as an audience: what is it like to watch a play? Why do we do it? And how can it change our perceptions of life?

We're asked to believe that the Love Potion on Demetrius' eyes makes him finally see the truth of his love for Helena. Just as Theseus refuses to believe the Lovers' story of what happened in the wood, so we may choose to disbelieve the action we have seen on stage – but that's where we need a little Love Potion ourselves. Perhaps sometimes the very things we think we see with our own eyes need to be adjusted by the magic of theatre....

BETH FLINTOFF

## 'Very tragical mirth'

*A note on the play by Roger Warren*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's most original, eloquent, and skilfully constructed works. Although he took hints from various written sources — from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Plutarch's *Lives* for Theseus and Hippolyta, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for Titania's name and for the mechanicals' play *Pyramus and Thisbe*, perhaps Apuleius' *Golden Ass* for Bottom's transformation — the basic narrative seems, unusually for Shakespeare, to have been his own invention. And although it is a comparatively early play, probably written around 1595, close to *Romeo and Juliet*, which seems to be parodied in the play scene, it is entirely confident in its execution.

Largely because of the subject matter and style, it has been suggested that the *Dream* might have been written for the celebration of an Elizabethan court marriage; but if so, it was also given at the public theatres, since the title-page of the first printed edition (1600) says specifically that it was 'sundry times publicly acted ... by the Lord Chamberlain's servants', the company to which Shakespeare belonged.

The *Dream* is about love and marriage; and Shakespeare adroitly interweaves four distinct groups of characters — the court, the lovers, the mechanicals, and the fairies — in order to dramatise various aspects of lovers' experience. The wedding of the former adversaries Theseus and Hippolyta is the event towards which the stories of the four groups move,

and which finally unites all four in the final scene: the mechanicals have prepared their play *Pyramus and Thisbe* to celebrate the occasion, which also marks the marriages of the four young lovers after their quarrels in the wood, and the fairies' blessing of the palace at the end of the play is a potent image of the harmony, the 'concord', to which the whole play has been moving.

But that concord has only been achieved by characters who have endured extreme discord. Commenting on the apparently contradictory description of the mechanicals' play as 'very tragical mirth', Theseus asks, 'How shall we find the concord of this discord?' The answer seems to be, as always in Shakespearian comedy, to look potential disaster straight in the face. It is as if Shakespeare feels that the resolutions of comedy must be put to the test of harsher experiences if they are to be convincing: the happy ending is the more appreciated if both the characters and the audience are aware of the things that threaten it. Such awareness in no way weakens the humour of the play, but intensifies it by contrast. When Bottom and his companions perform their 'tedious brief scene' before the court, the fatal love of Pyramus and Thisbe is directly relevant to the experience of the four lovers in the wood: without Oberon's benevolent intervention to restore them to their correct pairings, this is how they might have ended up — and an awareness of this may be why they heckle the mechanicals' play so mercilessly.

If the play scene is the climax of the *Dream* as a whole, the climax of the first half is the meeting between Titania and Bottom. Shakespeare's characteristic technique of juxtaposing contrasting extremes is in full operation here, as the fairy queen falls in love with the ass-headed weaver.

And in the process the scene contributes to the play's dramatisation of love in all its forms: its joys and sadness, its idealism and its selfishness, and the way in which people may fall in love with external appearances — which is why Oberon and Puck squeeze the love juice on to people's eyes.

Between the extremes of love in the *Dream* stands Theseus. He has had a wild past, including, according to Oberon, an affair with Titania as well as with numerous other mistresses; and he himself acknowledges that he has wooed Hippolyta 'with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries'. But now he has become a figure of reason, balanced (possessing a nice sense of irony), a fair law-giver — but a law-giver who can pragmatically bend that law a little when it is in the interests of his subjects to do so. This is made clear in his final judgement on the lovers: towards the end of the play, he does what at the beginning he said he was not able to do, and over-rules Egeus's insistence on the strict application of the Athenian law when he sees that the two pairs of lovers are properly and happily matched.

'The Athenian law': the play, technically, takes place in Athens, and the fairies have come 'from the farthest steppe of India'; but a more English play it would be hard to imagine. This is strikingly apparent in Shakespeare's dramatisation of the fairy kingdom, and in the lyrical language in which he evokes the rural world which the fairies inhabit and from which they draw their power — from potent natural resources like the wild flowers and the 'fair blessed beams' of the sun. That relationship is a reciprocal one, and when Oberon and Titania quarrel, nature itself is thrown into chaos. This is the point of the longest, and arguably the finest, speech in the play, Titania's evocation of the bad weather that has resulted

from her quarrel with Oberon, a speech which builds to a general confusion of the seasons:  
The spring, the summer,  
The childing autumn, angry winter  
change  
Their wonted liveries, and the mazéd  
world  
By their increase now knows not which  
is which.

But if Titania's speech culminates in such grandeur, it can accommodate much more down-to-earth language too: she can communicate the wretched summer the mortals are enduring by alluding to a rural game, cut out of turf that has now become waterlogged: 'The nine men's morris is filled up with mud.' This muddy image summarises Shakespeare's daring in this play: the fairy queen, far from being remotely ethereal, expresses herself in terms of everyday country experience. It is this quality which gives the *Dream* its characteristic flavour, and why, despite the references to Athens or India, it seems to be taking place in an English rural community. From the farthest steppe of India to rural Warwickshire: these extremes focus the range of the play.

ROGER WARREN

## Performance History

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* may have been written for a private occasion, possibly to celebrate a wedding in 1596. By the time it was published in 1600, the title page claimed it had been 'sundry times publickely acted.'

When Samuel Pepys saw it in 1662 he thought it 'the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life.'

Ellen Terry, aged 9, played Puck in 1856 for Charles Kean, and there was a lavish production in 1900 with troops of children as fairies. Revivals in 1905 and 1911 included live rabbits!

Then Harley Granville-Barker created a revolutionary production in 1914 by cutting back the extravagance and using slate-grey canvass screens.

Peter Hall staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Stratford in 1959 and again in 1962, with Judi Dench playing Titania. In 1970, Peter Brook caused a sensation by doubling the roles of Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania.

In 1989, John Caird at the Royal Shakespeare Company directed the play. The wood was represented by a scrap-yard in which the fairies wore clip-on

wings, tutus, big boots, and chewed gum.

A world away from 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology and innovation, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is perhaps one of Shakespeare's most escapist plays for a modern audience, and has proved his most popular play at the box office. The play is open to wide interpretation and the opportunities for imaginative portrayal are endless. Creation Theatre Company in Oxford featured Oberon and Titania on stilts, while cult touring company Ilyria had its fairies on a trampoline. The play has been adapted to opera, film, ballet, and even a swing musical!

BETH FLINTOFF



Oberon (Richard Clothier) and Puck (Jon Trenchard)  
Photo: Nobby Clark

# The Great 'MND' Quiz

1. Who brings the complaint against Hermia to Theseus in Act I?

- (A) Egeus
- (B) Bottom
- (C) Hippolyta
- (D) Demetrius

2. Who is chosen to play the lion in the Mechanicals' play?

- (A) Bottom
- (B) Quince
- (C) Peaseblossom
- (D) Snug

3. Which of the young Athenians is first affected by the love potion?

- (A) Lysander
- (B) Helena
- (C) Hermia
- (D) Demetrius

4. Which man does Hermia's father want her to marry?

- (A) Lysander
- (B) Demetrius
- (C) Theseus
- (D) Philostrate

5. Where do Lysander and Hermia plan to be married?

- (A) Theseus's palace
- (B) Lysander's aunt's house
- (C) The temple of Diana
- (D) A forest glade

6. What does Oberon want that Titania refuses to give him?

- (A) Her attendant, an Indian prince
- (B) Her magic wand
- (C) Her maid-in-waiting
- (D) Her love

7. Why does Pyramus, in the craftsmen's play, kill himself?

- (A) Thisbe does not love him
- (B) Thisbe has been killed by a lion
- (C) Thisbe has been killed by her father
- (D) Pyramus *believes* Thisbe has been killed by a lion because he finds her tattered garment at their meeting place

8. Of whom is Hippolyta the queen?

- (A) The Pygmies
- (B) The Centaurs
- (C) The Amazons
- (D) The Babylonians

9. How does Puck prevent Demetrius and Lysander from fighting?

- (A) By freezing them
- (B) By transforming their weapons to weeds
- (C) By squeezing the love potion onto their eyelids
- (D) By mimicking their voices and causing each to get lost in a separate part of the forest

10. Which of the women is afraid of fighting?

- (A) Hippolyta
- (B) Hermia
- (C) Titania
- (D) Helena

11. Who does Demetrius love at the end of the play?

- (A) Titania
- (B) Hippolyta
- (C) Helena
- (D) Hermia

12. With whom does Titania fall in love in Act III?

- (A) Snug
- (B) Puck
- (C) Bottom
- (D) Mustardseed

13. What prank does Puck play on Bottom?

- (A) He transforms him into a bear
- (B) He steals his clothes
- (C) He changes his voice into that of a wood thrush
- (D) He changes his head into that of an ass

14. Who first thinks of using the love potion on Titania?

- (A) Puck
- (B) Oberon
- (C) Bottom
- (D) Cobweb

15. Why is the flower whose juice Oberon seeks special?

- (A) Titania has kissed it
- (B) One of Cupid's arrows struck it
- (C) It was a traditional symbol of love in English folklore
- (D) Fairies sleep in it

16. Which of the Mechanicals is in charge of the rehearsals?

- (A) Quince
- (B) Snout
- (C) Bottom
- (D) Starveling

17. In what year was Shakespeare born?

- (A) 1563
- (B) 1616
- (C) 1564
- (D) 1615

18. Who tells Demetrius that Lysander and Hermia are planning to elope?

- (A) Hermia
- (B) Flute
- (C) Puck
- (D) Helena

19. What food does Bottom crave after Puck's mischief?

- (A) Steak
- (B) Kidney pie
- (C) Squirrel
- (D) Hay

20. What are Theseus and Hippolyta about to do before they discover the sleeping lovers?

- (A) Listen to Theseus's hounds baying
- (B) Watch Theseus's falcons hunting
- (C) Watch Theseus's deer roaming
- (D) See Theseus's golden lion

21. How many weddings take place before the play-within-a-play?

- (A) 4
- (B) 2
- (C) 3
- (D) 1

22. Who blesses Theseus and Hippolyta with a magical charm at the end of the play?

- (A) Puck
- (B) Oberon
- (C) Titania
- (D) Oberon and Titania

# Credits

Bottom	<b>Bob Barrett</b>
Snout	<b>Kelsey Brookfield</b>
Helena	<b>Babou Ceesay</b>
Oberon	<b>Richard Clothier</b>
Titania	<b>Richard Dempsey</b>
Flute	<b>John Dougall</b>
Hermia / Snug	<b>Richard Frame</b>
Hippolyta	<b>Emmanuel Idowu</b>
Fairy	<b>Jonathan Livingstone</b>
Quince / Egeus	<b>Chris Myles</b>
Theseus	<b>Thomas Padden</b>
Demetrius	<b>Sam Swainsbury</b>
Lysander	<b>Jack Tarlton</b>
Puck / Starvling	<b>Jon Trenchard</b>
Understudies	<b>Emmanuel Idowu, Jonathan Livingstone</b>

Other parts are played by the Company

## PRODUCTION TEAM

Director **Edward Hall**

Designer **Michael Pavelka**

Lighting Designer **Ben Ormerod**

Music by **Propeller**

Additional Arrangements and Original Music by **Jon Trenchard**

Text adaptation **Edward Hall and Roger Warren**

Relights on tour by **Richard Howell**



The Mechanicals  
*Photo: Nobby Clark*



## Interview with Edward Hall

*The Director of A Midsummer Night's Dream talks about his work.*

**Propeller first performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* five years ago. How has it changed?**

The design is the same in principle, but only two of the cast are the same. I'd forgotten how wonderful it is. My attitudes have changed – I've done more theatre work, and I've grown up, I'm a father now. And as life changes, I find that one's take on the play changes.

**Have you found yourself trying to recreate bits that worked well last time?**

No, it's got a rough shape, but I can't remember *exactly* what we did last time, and with a new cast it's different. It's a revival with the next generation of Propeller.

**In terms of the rehearsal process, how do you start to create the shape of the play?**

It's a gradual process; we work it out as we go along. The actors get to know each other and the play. But I always have a starting point – I tell the actors 'you're coming in from here and let's play the game that you desire her', and we play that for a bit. The actors need to work out what their action is, and what they want to achieve from each line. Shakespeare tells them line by line how their action changes.

**What is your approach to speaking the verse?**

Speak it properly! Five beats in every line, ten syllables, that's a regular Shakespearean verse. To my mind there are no two ways of doing it. You should speak a line of verse metrically as it's written, and any irregularities are there for a reason. You can't ignore how Shakespeare's written it. There are lots of rhyming couplets in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so the first rule is to make it actually *rhyme*. It sounds obvious, but a lot of people don't do it. Sometimes Shakespeare will do a rhyming couplet to mark the end of scene, and sometimes he'll then do another one, and then another one, so you've got three false endings to a scene. Rhyming couplets are often a comic device as

well. *The Merchant of Venice* is more complex as a text because it doesn't follow that kind of pattern.

Once we've got the meter, we find the antitheses (opposites) such as heat and cold, desire and hatred. Sometimes they are in a line, sometimes in a pairing of lines, or in the whole speech. We try to seek these out and bang them against each other, which gives its sense of meaning. It's a device that's very robust, and it works in an outdoor theatre, which was what Shakespeare was writing for. Sometimes the ideas are long – I think they had longer thoughts than we do now, so it takes a bit of practising from the actor. And the end result is that the speech should be quick and light, exactly how Hamlet instructs the players ('Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.' *Hamlet* III.ii.1).

### **Can you describe the rehearsal process?**

To begin with, we do a bit of work on the text and look at the conceptual idea. We talk about the world we're going to create (for example, *The Merchant of Venice* is set in a prison). And then we work on some musical ideas. This takes a week or so, and then the actors start to stand up and move around. The designer, Michael Pavelka, and I create a sort of playground first, which can be used in a hundred different ways. Shakespeare didn't write plays that were intended to be design-heavy, with lots of big sets. So Michael and I try not to nail down big heavy design concepts beforehand. We want to be able to change our mind once we're rehearsing, and once the actors are working in the space.

### **The Propeller performances are often very physical. For example, in the scenes where the Lovers are in the wood the actors are very active on the stage. How do you create this physicality without the help of a choreographer?**

It comes from extending an impulse – if a character has an impulse to attack another one, then we'll see how far it can go. It all comes from the actor's intentions.

When we go out to the woods for example, it's not a nice environment to be in. It's dark and violent. That's because they are there to *find* themselves, but the process is not a comfortable one. Helena won't let Demetrius go, and she's got him there under false pretences. Demetrius is furious that Lysander has run off with his girl. Helena can't walk away from Demetrius, because she wants any kind of physical contact, and she's actually rather masochistic. Lysander talks Hermia into going to the woods, and they both idealise how beautiful it's going to be. And then the first time we meet them she's fainting and he's lost, and they have to have a lie down! It has to be physically tough, so that they find out how they really feel.

**Many people find the way that Demetrius suddenly loves Helena at the end rather unbelievable. What do you think?**

It's not problematic in my mind because I think Demetrius only loves Hermia because he doesn't want Lysander to have her. I don't believe Helena is ugly, as she's sometimes played, she is just lacking in confidence. Demetrius isn't really in love with Hermia, he's playing one-upmanship and she's got a good dowry. Meanwhile, Helena's father is just 'old Nedar', so he's clearly not rich. Hermia is the catch. When Demetrius wakes up, his memory is that he loves Helena, and it's so beautifully articulated ('But like in sickness did I loathe this food; / But, as in health, come to my natural taste, / Now I do wish it, love it, long for it' IV.i.177-9).

And I don't see why audiences should find it sudden – people get together suddenly all the time! Love is like that.

**Do you ever regret decisions you've made on stage?**

Oh, constantly. That's my job. Then I'll niggle away at it and try and make it better. I never stop working. Nothing is ever perfect, either in idea or execution. Even after the production has opened, I'll keep changing little things here and there. Some things are just like blocked chakras, and once it's up on the stage and we've done a few previews, I'll try and unblock the chakras, to allow for future development. A play is a living organism that is slowly growing, so I go away for a bit and then come back and water it.



**Helena (Babou Ceesay) and Hermia (Richard Frame)**  
*Photo: Nobby Clark*

## Interview with Michael Pavelka – Designer



### What does a theatre designer do?

A theatre designer works closely with the director, actors and other members of a production team to provide scenery and costumes for a performance. Everything you see on the stage – and I mean absolutely everything - has been ‘designed’. All the parts of the design should support the ideas behind the production and often the designer’s view will shape the show’s concept as well as its style and ‘look’.

Designers usually make drawings and accurate models to share their ideas with everyone else; particularly when working with an ensemble company like Propeller. This time I used computer programmes to model the set instead of building a scale model from card and glue. These will then be used in different ways to realise the actual set, costumes and props. Sometimes the designer will also draw pictures of how the different scenes will look; this is called storyboarding, and helps everyone to see how the designed production will move in time and space as the story is acted out.

The designer will try to oversee as much of the building of the production as possible, attending rehearsals, costume fittings and visiting the workshop where the set is constructed and painted. When all the parts of the show come together in the days leading up to the first performance (or opening night), the designer is on hand to make sure the ideas are completed on stage and make any last minute changes.

It is most important that a designer uses eyes and mind as well as hands!

## Exercise 1: Understanding the Character

*Fabulous fact: the famous actor John Gielgud always liked to know what shoes his character would wear!*

When an actor plays a role, it's essential to understand as much as possible about the character. This means looking carefully at the script for clues. If the script doesn't provide all the answers, the actor can, with the guidance of the director, use his or her imagination to fill in the gaps. When you know more about your character, you can start to make him/her a living, breathing person.

Taking your favourite character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, complete the following questionnaire as if you really are that person. Some answers are there in the text; and some you can decide for yourself. Be imaginative!

NAME: .....

AGE: .....

GENDER: M / F

WHERE DO YOU LIVE?:.....

WHAT'S YOUR JOB?: .....

WHAT DO YOU LOOK LIKE?

FAMILY FACTS (eg Brothers / Sisters / Children / Parents ages, occupations etc)

WRITE YOUR OWN CHRONOLOGY eg date of birth, schooling, different jobs, marriage etc.

WHAT ARE YOUR DREAMS AND/OR FEARS?

DO YOU HAVE ANY GOOD HABITS? BAD HABITS?

DESCRIBE YOUR TYPICAL DAY:

ANYTHING ELSE YOU KNOW:

## Exercise 2: Improvisation & Thought Tracking

In this exercise, you are trying to imagine what the characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might have been feeling moments before, or after, scenes that we see in the play.

1. First of all, choose from one of the scenarios listed at the bottom of this page (or create your own).
2. In small groups, read the scene from where the quote is taken.
3. Cast your improvised scene.
4. Prepare for the improvisation – it may help to complete the Character Questionnaire from Exercise 1. You should also briefly talk through any important parts of the scene that you think should happen.
5. Show your improvisation to the rest of the Group. Once it has been performed, the whole class should discuss which bits worked, and which bits didn't seem to work so well.
6. Perform the improvisation again, but this time, any member of the audience can shout 'Freeze', at which point the actors stop and the audience member can ask questions, such as 'What are you thinking?' or 'Why did you walk away at that point', etc.

### Suggested Scenarios

1. *'As she is mine, I may dispose of her;  
Which shall be either to this gentleman,  
Or to her death,' [I.i.44]*

Hermia and Lysander tell Hermia's father, Egeus, that they are in love.

2. *'Here is the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit, through all of Athens, to play in our interlude before the Duke and the Duchess on his wedding day.' [I.ii.4]*

The Mechanicals (Nick Bottom, Francis Flute, Tom Snout, Snug, and Robin Starveling) arrive at auditions in Athens for a play to be directed by Peter Quince.

3. *'And in the wood, where often you and I  
Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie,  
Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,'*

Helena and Hermia have met in the woods for one of their secret meetings. (This could take place either before the events of the play, or after, when they are married.)

4. *'The object and the pleasure of mine eye,  
Is only Helena. To her, my lord,  
Was I betrothed ere I saw Hermia;  
But like in sickness did I loathe this food;'* [IV.i.174-7]

After the events of the play, Demetrius and Helena discuss their strange adventures in the wood, and Demetrius tries to explain how his love for Helena came back so suddenly.

## Exercise 3: Acting as Action

*'The actors need to work out what their action is, and what they want to achieve from each line.*

*Shakespeare tells them line by line how their action changes.'*

Ed Hall

This exercise is designed to get you working in the same way that Propeller's professional actors do on the text.

1. Choose a short section of the play that you find interesting (there are some suggestions below).
2. With a partner, take a part each and read it through. Make sure you understand it all.
3. Now write down some possible actions for each line – this means thinking about exactly what you are trying to achieve when you say it. We've put some examples below to get you started. It will always be a verb, and describe something that you are *doing*. For example, when Theseus says 'Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword' he might be '*adoring*' Hippolyta, or he could be *flirting* with her, or trying to *impress* her, and so on.
4. Now practice saying the lines with your partner, thinking about the action. Try some different actions and see how that changes the way you say it. You can even try some slightly wackier or unexpected verbs, to see what happens.

### Suggested Actions

Here are just a few to get you started ...

Adore  
Rebel  
Chastise  
Flirt  
Seduce  
Humour  
Patronise  
Destroy

Fight  
Confide  
Annoy  
Love  
Cherish  
Organise  
Ridicule  
Humiliate

Belittle  
Impress  
Argue  
Demonstrate  
Teach  
Influence  
Amuse  
Sympathise



## SUGGESTED SECTIONS

1.

**THESEUS**

Go, Philostrate,  
Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments;  
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth;  
Turn melancholy forth to funerals—  
The pale companion is not for our pomp.—  
[Exit PHILOSTRATE.]

Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,  
And won thy love doing thee injuries;  
But I will wed thee in another key,  
With pomp, with triumph, and with  
revelling.

2.

**LYSANDER**

Fair love, you faint with wandering in  
the wood;  
And, to speak troth, I have forgot our  
way;  
We'll rest us, Hermia, if you think it  
good,  
And tarry for the comfort of the day.

**HERMIA**

Be it so, Lysander: find you out a bed,  
For I upon this bank will rest my head.

**LYSANDER**

One turf shall serve as pillow for us  
both;  
One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and  
one troth.

**HERMIA**

Nay, good Lysander; for my sake, my  
dear,  
Lie farther off yet, do not lie so near.

3.

**THESEUS**

What say you, Hermia? be advis'd, fair  
maid:  
To you your father should be as a god;  
One that compos'd your beauties: yea,  
and one  
To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
By him imprinted, and within his power  
To leave the figure, or disfigure it.  
Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

**HERMIA**

So is Lysander.

**THESEUS**

In himself he is:  
But, in this kind, wanting your father's  
voice,  
The other must be held the worthier.

**HERMIA**

I would my father look'd but with my eyes.

**THESEUS**

Rather your eyes must with his judgment  
look.

4.

**OBERON**

Now, my Titania; wake you, my sweet  
queen.

**TITANIA**

My Oberon! what visions have I seen!  
Methought I was enamour'd of an ass.

**OBERON**

There lies your love.

**TITANIA**

How came these things to pass?  
O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage  
now!

**OBERON**

Silence awhile.—Robin, take off this  
head.  
Titania, music call; and strike more  
dead  
Than common sleep, of all these five,  
the sense.