



A Midwinter Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

“Re-seasoned” by
Bonnie J. Monte and
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Directed by Brian B. Crowe

Know-the-Show
Audience Guide

researched and written by
the Education Department of

The
SHAKESPEARE
Theatre of
New Jersey



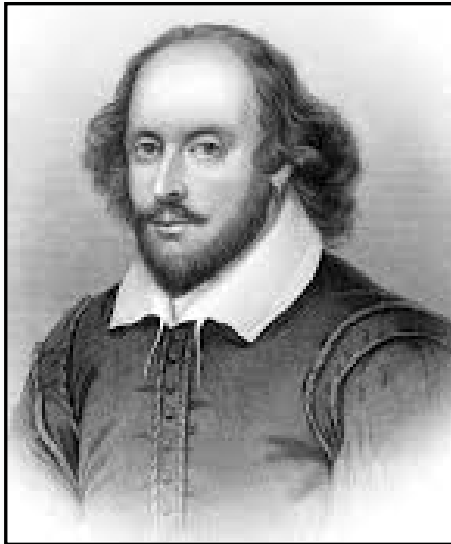
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The Life of William Shakespeare



William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare

was allowed considerable leisure time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-on-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592 he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and King

James I. While they were well-liked, Shakespeare's plays were not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the *First Folio*. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the *First Folio* texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.

A MAN OF MANY WORDS

Shakespeare used over 20,000 different words in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (1,700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them.

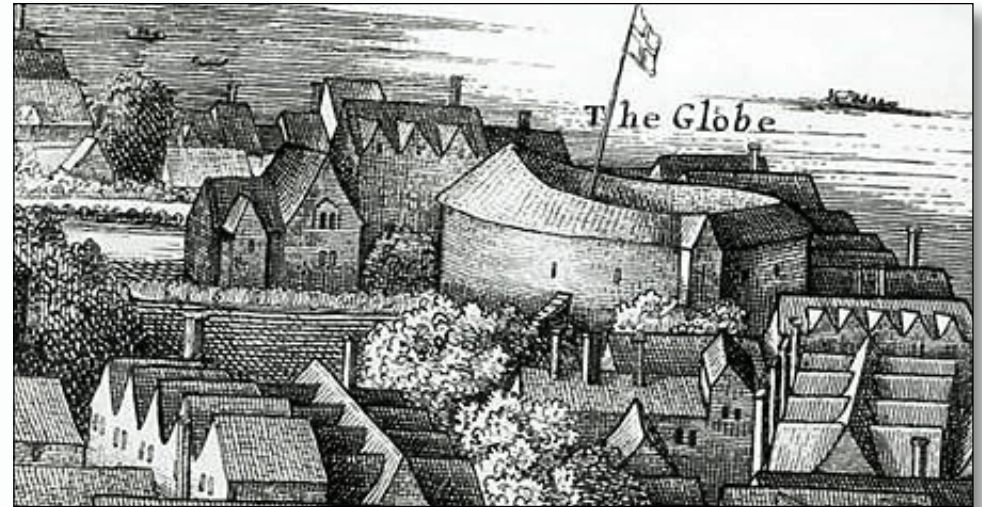
To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the King James Bible uses only 8,000 different words. Homer is credited with using approximately 9,000 different words in his works. Milton is estimated at using 10,000 different words in his works.



Shakespeare's London

London, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, was a bustling urban center filled with a wide variety of people and cultures. Although most life centered around making a living or going to church, the main source of diversion for Londoners was the theatre. It was a form of entertainment accessible to people of all classes. The rich and the poor, the aristocrats and the beggars all met at the theatre. Though often appeasing the church or the monarchy, theatre at this time did experience a freedom that was unknown in previous generations. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous bawdy and pagan references found in Shakespeare's plays. However, his relative artistic license and freedom of expression made theatre extremely unpopular among certain members of society, and by 1642, the Puritan-led Parliament ordered the indefinite closure of London theatres. The ban lasted until the reign of Charles II (1660-1685), who restored theatre to the status it held in Shakespeare's day.

The Globe Theatre, the resident playhouse for Shakespeare's company of actors, was easily accessible to Londoners and an active social center. Actors and performers were also regularly brought to court or to private homes to entertain. Despite their social popularity, actors maintained a relatively low status, sometimes no better than a common beggar or rogue. Most performers were forced to earn a living doing trade work. The aristocracy's desire for entertainment, however, did spur the development of numerous new theatre pieces. Often a nobleman



would become a patron to an artist or company of actors, providing for their financial needs and sheltering them to some degree from official sanctions. In return, the company would adopt the name of the patron. Shakespeare's acting company was originally named "Lord Chamberlain's Men" after their patron, Henry Carey, Lord Chamberlain. Later, under the patronage of King James I, they were known as "The King's Men," an unprecedented honor at the time.

Despite the flourishing of the arts at this time, London was sometimes a desolate place. Outbreaks of the Black Plague (the bubonic plague) frequently erupted, killing thousands of citizens. Theatres, shops, and the government were all shut down during particularly bad outbreaks in hopes of preventing the spread of the disease. Elizabethans were unaware that the disease was being spread by the flea and rat populations, which well outnumbered the human population of London at that time.



Shakespeare's Most Beloved Comedy: An Introduction

Considered Shakespeare's most successful, popular comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has something for everyone. From the regal elegance of the Athenian court to the lowbrow antics of the "rude mechanicals"; from the passion-filled plights of the lovers to the mischievous magic of the fairies, *Midsummer* is sure to please almost any audience. It is the most frequently produced Shakespeare play, and some say it is in performance somewhere in the world every day of the year.

In creating this hilarious, silly, and sometimes deeply moving play, Shakespeare pulled situations and ideas from many diverse sources: merging Greek myth, European folklore, and his own firsthand knowledge of English country life into a tightly-woven roller-coaster ride of a play.

At the heart of the play, as in most Elizabethan comedies, are issues of love and marriage. "Midsummer madness" was a colloquial phrase to refer to someone sick with love, and the play can be seen as a celebration of love's magic (and madness) in many stages: adolescent love, as exemplified by the two pairs of young Athenians; adult love, as seen with Theseus and his bride-to-be, the Amazon queen Hippolyta; and from the perspective of a long-married couple struggling with their less-than-perfect relationship, Oberon and Titania.

As in many of Shakespeare's plays, there is a movement from chaos, conflict, and danger to a restoration of harmony in the human and natural worlds. At the opening of the play, Hermia is given a

choice between marrying a man she does not love, being put to death, or living a life of chastity in a convent. Helena is desperately in love with a man who now refuses her. On a more cosmic scale, the feud between Titania and Oberon over the custody of a human child has turned the weather topsy-turvy. When the fairies begin to intervene in the dilemmas of the humans, this already-troubled world falls further into chaos and disarray. The delusions of love are compounded by the illusions of magic.

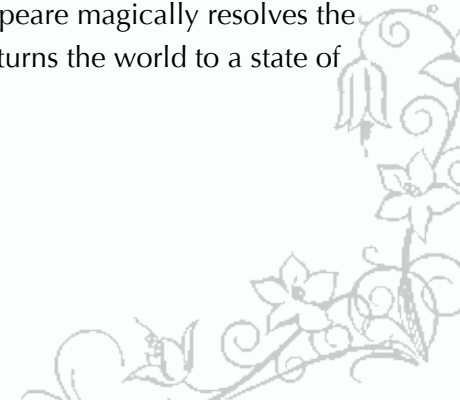
But just as the chaos reaches its peak, Shakespeare magically resolves the dilemmas of humans and fairies alike, and returns the world to a state of blissful, primordial harmony. As Puck puts it:

*Jack shall have Jill;
Nought shall go ill;
The man shall have his mare again,
and all shall be well.*

CRITIC'S CORNER

"Shakespeare uniquely took pains to work out a fairly elaborate and outrageous plot for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Inventing plot was not a Shakespearean gift; it was the one dramatic talent that nature had denied him. I think he prided himself on creating and intertwining the four different worlds of character in the *Dream*."

Harold Bloom





A Change of Season: Thoughts from One of the Adapters

From Joseph Discher's Director's Notes on the original 2002 production of *A Midwinter Night's Dream*:

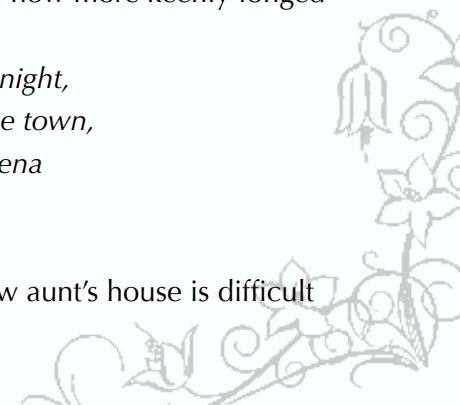
The first idea for *A Midwinter Night's Dream* began several years ago, when as part of the NJSF's* outreach program I was assigned the task of directing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at a middle school in Florham Park, New Jersey with a cast of over forty students (more fairies than you could count!). The performance was set for mid-December, and that, along with the fact that I wanted to give the students an 'in-road' to getting excited about doing Shakespeare and creating a production, made me decide to change the title. I thought, "It's a student production, so I can change Shakespeare a little bit – no one will care, and the cast will enjoy creating a holiday atmosphere around the production." We created a wintry world of hanging frosted tree branches, a couple of fake fir-trees, and a curtain adorned with cut-out paper snowflakes. The cast was costumed in wintry clothing and we changed almost no text – our outreach productions were to be under an hour in length, making it unnecessary. The first *Midwinter* was basically an abridged Shakespeare play in winter coats. But many found the production charming, and it worked well on many levels: the kids were very connected to the fun of the winter idea, the adults identified with the simple beauty and nostalgia of the wintry scenes, the story and the different character groups fit well into the world (mortals susceptible to winter's cold and fairies who were not), and most importantly, the concept created a new perspective on many aspects of a very familiar play without sublimating its style or Shakespeare's intent.

When discussing ideas for the 2002 GRAND MAGIC season, NJSF's artistic director, Bonnie Monte brought up the idea of doing a bona-fide adaptation of *Midwinter*, because she felt it would fit in well with the season's theme, make a holiday show appropriate for the whole family, and fit NJSF's mission for innovative classic theatre. To our knowledge, no such adaptation has been done. I was eager to continue exploring the play as it might exist in a 'winter wonderland', and we set to work creating the adaptation. Delving into Shakespeare's text, we found the task of adapting the play to be both more difficult than we had thought in some ways and easier than we had imagined in others.

Of the over 2,100 lines in Shakespeare's text, less than 100 lines have been changed. Painstaking effort was taken to remain true to the meter of Shakespeare's verse as well as his intent, whether in a scene of poetry or prose. And yet, a great deal of the play that we, as audience members, have heard so many times at a performance of *Dream* seemed, without adaptation, to have new life and meaning against the backdrop of deep winter: Lysander tells Hermia where they will meet and elope. Their past meetings become a fond and distant memory now more keenly longed for:

*Steal for thy father's house tomorrow night,
And in the wood, a league without the town,
Where I did meet thee once with Helena
To do observance to a morn of May...*

And a journey of 'seven leagues' to the widow aunt's house is difficult





enough in fair weather... who would not wish for the 'faint primrose beds' on which Helena and Hermia 'were wont to lie'?

There was a good deal of text, though, that demanded attention if we were to 'winterize' the play. Here are a few examples:

ORIGINAL TEXT

Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth behold
Her silver visage in the wat'ry glass,
Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass...

REVISED TEXT

Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth behold
Her silver visage in the icy glass,
Decking with frosty pearl the frozen grass...

ORIGINAL TEXT

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxslips and the nodding violet grows
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine.
There sleeps Titania, sometime of the night...

REVISED TEXT

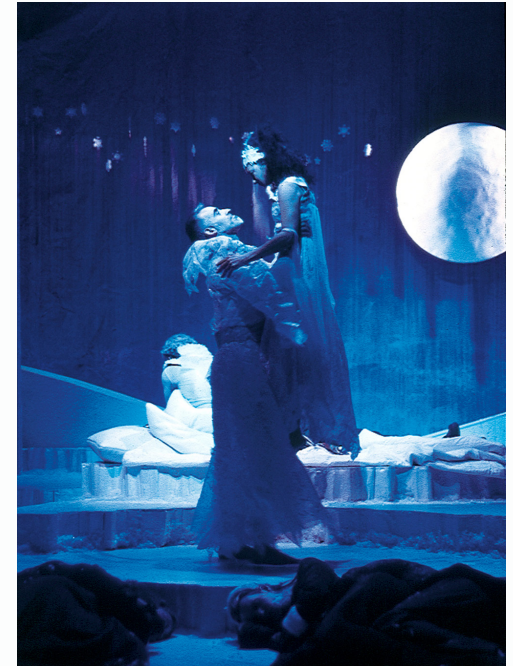
I know a bank where the winter wind sighs,
Where hellebore, the Christmas rose grows nigh,
Quite over-canopied with hanging beads of ice,
Where sprites sweet dreams with music do entice.
There sleeps Titania, sometime of the night...

...The fairies of *Midwinter* were winter fairies as connected to nature as Shakespeare's originals. Ironically, the fairies of *Midwinter* are not affected by the cold as much as they are part of it, but their scenes were most textually affected.

A Midsummer Night's Dream may be Shakespeare's most popular play, or at least his most often performed one, and perhaps our intimate familiarity with it is also what made us feel it was ready for a new perspective. When discussing the production and the adaptation, people reacted with great excitement about the idea of a new look at the play, making the adaptation seem increasingly appropriate. But inevitably, the question would arise, "How are you going to deal with the summer references? It's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." Some of my answers have been shown above, but the best answer is to say that this is not a play about summer, nor does its story rely on the summer for relevance. The summer is a vehicle for the passionate madness that ensues throughout the play, but it is easily translated to another time of year associated with revelry, folly, and misrule – *Twelfth Night*, or the feast of the Epiphany. Indeed, many of the characters in *Midwinter* will have their own epiphanies. But most importantly, beyond any season, time, or place, this is a play about the mysterious and transformative power of love, as well as its near magical qualities. Helena says it best:

*Things base and vile holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.*

*When the original production was developed, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey was known as the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival (NJSF).



Mark Elliot Wilson and Sabrina LeBeauf in the 2002 production of *A Midwinter Night's Dream*.

A Midwinter Night's Dream

A Synopsis

SPOILER ALERT: The following includes spoilers about the play.

The story of *A Midwinter Night's Dream* may be best explained by dividing it into its three basic units: the Royals and Lovers, the Mechanicals, and the Fairies.

THE ROYALS AND THE LOVERS:

As Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta prepare for their wedding, Egeus, a nobleman of the town, comes before them to seek assistance with his disobedient daughter, Hermia. Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius, but she wants to marry Lysander. According to the law of Athens, she must marry the man her father chooses or die. Theseus acknowledges that Egeus has the law on his side, but offers Hermia the alternate choice of becoming a nun. Lysander and Hermia decide to run away so they can marry far from Athens. Before they leave, they see Helena, Hermia's best friend, and tell her of their plans. Helena is in love with Demetrius and, in hopes of proving her loyalty to him, tells him of Hermia's escape. As Lysander and Hermia travel through the woods the following night, Demetrius attempts to track them down with the love-sick Helena close in tow. While in the woods, fairies play tricks on the young lovers. Through magic, Demetrius and Lysander both suddenly fall madly in love with Helena. This confusion leads to a quarrel, which Oberon, King of the Fairies, resolves— he

then has his mischievous henchman, Puck, restore the relationships to their rightful state: Demetrius is in love with Helena, and Lysander is in love with Hermia. When they wake the next morning, the Duke overrides the law, and decides to allow Lysander and Hermia to marry. Demetrius, transformed by the evening in the woods, proclaims his renewed love for Helena. They joyously return to Athens and are married alongside Theseus and Hippolyta.

THE MECHANICALS:

Several of the workers of Athens have decided to perform a play for the Duke on his wedding day. Peter Quince, a local carpenter, gathers the five craftsmen thought best skilled to perform the play; Nick Bottom, Francis Flute, Robin Starveling, Tom Snout, and Snug. Bottom, a weaver with great aspirations to be an actor, is cast as Pyramus, a noble young man. Flute, a young man with a high voice, is cast as Thisbe, the lady that Pyramus loves. The group decides to rehearse at night in the woods outside town so that they won't be disturbed. When they meet to rehearse, they too are subjected to fairy pranks. Puck replaces Bottom's head with that of a donkey. This sight frightens the other craftsmen so badly that they run home

ARTISTIC LICENSE: THESEUS AND HIPPOLYTA

Theseus is thought to have been an actual historical ruler of Athens around 1230 BCE. Most of the information about him comes only from legend, which presents him as a great warrior and conqueror, as well as a recreational seducer of women. One of the stories about him tells of his conquest of the Amazons, a tribe of fierce women warriors, and his capture of their queen, Antiope.

Eventually, Theseus persuaded his captive to marry him, and she bore him a son, Hippolytus. For this reason, Antiope is also referred to as Hippolyta (the feminine form of her son's name). The marriage did not have the happy ending that Shakespeare implies. The Amazons mounted an attack on Athens, and Antiope/Hippolyta died in the battle, fighting at her husband's side against her own people.



YOU ARE YOUR WORK

In creating each of the Mechanicals, Shakespeare took their occupation well into account. Their vocations are even represented in their names.

BOTTOM, the weaver: A “bottom,” among other things, is a skein of yarn or thread used by weavers.

QUINCE, the carpenter: “Quinces” or “quines” are blocks of wood used by carpenters when building.

FLUTE is a bellows mender: A bellows has a fluted shape, and was used to compress air to stoke a fire or to produce sound (as in a church organ).

SNOUT, the tinker: The spout of a kettle (a common item that a tinker/metal worker would be asked to repair) was often called a “snout” in Shakespeare’s time.

SNUG, is a joiner: The wood that he would join, if he was successful at his craft, should fit snugly.

STARVELING, a tailor: In Shakespeare’s time, tailors were usually depicted as abjectly poor and thus, rail-thin from hunger — in other words, “starvelings.”

to Athens, leaving Bottom alone in the forest. Titania, who has been sleeping nearby, awakes and, through a spell cast by Oberon, falls madly in love with the donkey-headed Bottom. Later, when Titania and Bottom are released from the fairy spells, Bottom believes that he has simply had a wonderful dream and rushes off to find his friends. Reunited once again, the Mechanicals hurry off to the palace and perform their play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, for the Duke and

Duchess.

THE FAIRIES:

When the play begins, Titania and Oberon, Queen and King of the Fairies, are feuding because Titania refuses to give Oberon a child left in her care. Oberon, furious that Titania will not give him the boy, uses a magical flower to place a spell on her. The spell will make the Fairy Queen fall in love with the first creature that she sees when she wakes, no matter how hideous it might be. When she awakes, the first creature she sees is Nick

Bottom, a mortal on whom Puck has placed a donkey’s head. She falls madly in love with the transformed man, and orders her fairies to wait on her new love, feeding and entertaining him. Before releasing her from his spell, Oberon takes custody of the boy. No longer fighting, Titania and Oberon then go with the rest of the fairies to celebrate Duke Theseus’ wedding day.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The name “**Titania**” in reference to the Fairy Queen was not used prior to Shakespeare’s *Midsummer*. In the writings of the ancient Greek poet Ovid, Titania is used as a name for the moon. Shakespeare may have intended to present his Fairy Queen as an incarnation of the classical moon goddess, Phoebe.

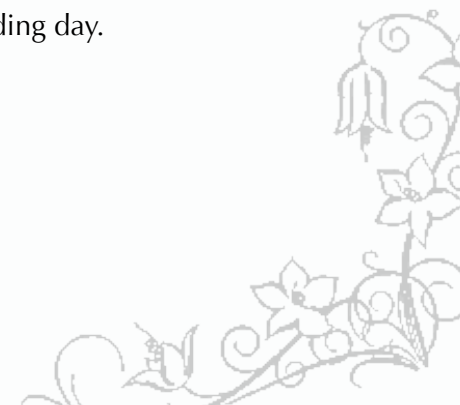
Oberon, on the other hand, was a well-known character from folklore and medieval literature. French authors even went so far as to explain his lineage, stating that he was the son of the Roman conqueror Julius Caesar and Morgan le Fay, the powerful half-fairy queen of Arthurian legend.

ARTISTIC LICENSE: THE MECHANICALS

“These laborers have none of the aura of Athenian aristocrat about them; indeed, they are in every respect, even down to their names, comic Englishmen. This sort of thing is true in all of Shakespeare’s plays. Of whatever nationality or historical period the main characters are represented as being, the lower classes are always portrayed as Englishmen of Shakespeare’s own time.”

Isaac Asimov

Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare





Who's Who in the Play

THE ATHENIAN NOBLES

THESEUS– Duke of Athens, and betrothed to Hippolyta.

HIPPOLYTA– Queen of the Amazons, defeated by Theseus, and now soon to be his bride.

PHILOSTRATE– The principal servant to Theseus and the court.

EGEUS– A noble Athenian and father to Hermia.

HERMIA– A young woman of Athens who falls in love with Lysander against her father's wishes.

LYSANDER– A young man of Athens who is in love with Hermia; he plots their escape from Athens.

DEMETRIUS– A young man of Athens who has been chosen by Egeus to marry his daughter. Previously, he had a relationship with Helena.

HELENA– A young woman of Athens and closest friend to Hermia. She is in love with Demetrius.

THE MECHANICALS

PETER QUINCE– A carpenter of Athens, and the self-appointed director of the Mechanicals' play.

NICK BOTTOM– A weaver with aspirations of being a great actor. He is cast as Pyramus in the Mechanicals' play.

FRANCIS FLUTE– A bellows-mender, who is cast as the fair Thisbe in the play, despite his protest against playing a woman.

TOM SNOOT– A tinker, or mender of household items made of tin

ROBIN STARVELING– a tailor

SNUG– A joiner, or a builder of furniture

THE FAIRY KINGDOM

OBERON– The king of the fairies

TITANIA– The queen of the fairies

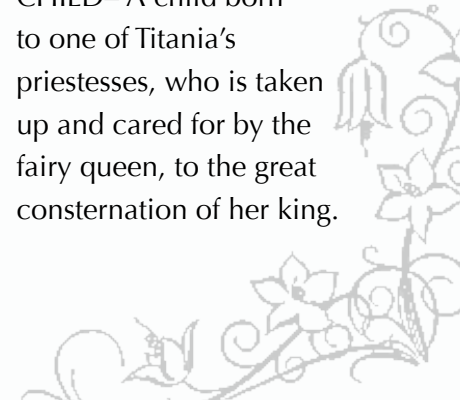
PUCK– Also known as Robin Goodfellow, he is the prankster henchman of Oberon.

FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET

Puck proclaims that he'll "put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes." To do so, he would need to travel over 37,500 miles per hour. That's just over 10 miles per second. In comparison, astronauts orbit the earth in about 90 minutes. Puck is moving more than twice as fast.

THE FAIRIES– Creatures serving Titania.

THE CHANGELING CHILD– A child born to one of Titania's priestesses, who is taken up and cared for by the fairy queen, to the great consternation of her king.





Take a Closer Look

Aspects of Shakespeare's *Midsummer*

TRANSFORMATIONS:

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,

Love can transpose to form and dignity.

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act I. scene i

"Love transforms ordinary people into rare and perfect beings. When we fall in love, we suspend reason and overlook the flaws of our beloved."

Laurie Rozakis

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Shakespeare

Transformations, whether induced by magic or inspired by love, abound in *Midsummer*. There are the obvious transformations, such as Puck's prank on Bottom and the effects of the love charms cast on Lysander, Demetrius, and Titania, but there are also subtler and more profound changes that the characters experience during their night in the forest.

Helena enters the woods lonely, dejected and self-pitying, then finds herself suddenly the object of two men's affection. Through this experience, she becomes aware of how unattractive such an excessive (and obsessive) affection can be—one of the factors that has made her undesirable to Demetrius. In confronting Demetrius, Lysander and Hermia, she seems to find a personal strength and inner beauty that she seemed unaware of before entering the woods.

Lysander and Hermia flee Athens in hopes of finding a "happily-ever-after" life somewhere else. Their bright-eyed naiveté makes them ill-prepared for the challenges they must face as they begin their life together, even a challenge as seemingly simple as a walk in the woods. Their experience in the forest gives them a taste of worldly pain and tests the strength of their love. In the end, they awake as a more mature couple, one possibly more ready to face the real world together as adults.

Several other characters experience similar transformations.

Demetrius, a selfish, "disdainful youth" at the beginning of the play, awakes from the "dream" with a voice of quiet maturity and responsibility. Theseus, who in Athens has insisted on the letter of the law, has a change of heart in the woods and allows love to take its course. Even the self-absorbed actor, Bottom, seems quieter and more awe-struck when he awakes, more aware of the world around him.

NIGHTTIME IN SHAKESPEARE'S DAY

The Elizabethans believed that night was the time of spirits and demons. Though many contemporary thinkers would scoff at such a notion, one must consider what nighttime was like for the Elizabethans. In pre-modern times, the night lacked the artificial glow that chases away complete darkness today. Only the moon, stars, scattered lanterns, and candles illuminated the Elizabethan night.

In the dim flicker of these limited light sources, it is easy to imagine supernatural encounters. A dead tree jostled in a breeze can be transformed into a hideous monster, a darting bird can become a fleeing spirit. Because these sights were never seen in the bright daytime, Elizabethans believed that ghosts held domain over the night, and the first signs of the dawn (such as the crowing rooster) chased evil spirits away.



Shakespeare's use of transformations in *Midsummer* guides the audience not only through a series of playful hijinks, but also down a road of personal enlightenment for the characters and, through them, for us.

FAIRY EVOLUTION 101:

The Elizabethans had a very different image of fairies than we do today. When modern audiences picture fairies in their minds (under the influence of the Victorians and especially J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*), they most often see tiny winged creatures, glowing with magic, but frail, beautiful, and kind to humans. This was far from the Elizabethan idea of the Fairy Kingdom, although Shakespeare's play itself played a significant role in creating a more romantic and benevolent image of fairies.

For centuries, fairies were a source of fear and anxiety for many communities. These beings were believed to be forces of nature; fiendish creatures that were sometimes seen as little different than the demons of hell. Fairies were blamed for all kinds of mishaps, from a freak storm that destroyed the crops to a "spooked" horse that threw its rider. At best, their behavior towards humans was prankish, at its worst, malicious and frightening, such as the belief that fairies would steal human babies away by night and replace them with grotesque "changelings."

The Elizabethan fairies evolved from several traditions: Celtic tales of nature spirits and "little people"; Germanic legends of kobolds, gnomes, and dwarves; and the Greco-Roman myths about satyrs, fauns, and nymphs. These remnants of pre-Christian mythologies survived particularly in folktales and oral traditions, but the belief in them, especially in the countryside (such as in Shakespeare's native Stratford) was often real and intense.

Elizabethans had a number of methods for warding off the wrath of fairies: farmers would leave a small amount of fruit or grain unpicked in their fields; others would leave a saucer of cream or a slice of bread out at night. These food offerings were supposed to help placate hungry fairies. Various plants, metals, and symbols were also supposed to provide protection from fairy magic.

We have William Shakespeare to thank, in part, for the "cute" depiction of fairies today. For *Midsummer*, he invented a completely new type of fairy. Titania's attendants (Peaseblossom, Moth, Mustardseed, and Cobweb) are depicted as tiny, almost insect-like sprites associated with flowers, music, and dancing. The *Midsummer* fairies may be mischievous, but they intend no real harm to the humans they encounter. Indeed, the intervention of the fairies ultimately restores peace, love, and harmony in the human world of the play.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Oberon's pranking henchman had a lively and dark existence in folk lore long before Shakespeare included him in *Dream*.

"Puck" or "pook" originally referred to a mischievous demon, or a wicked man. There is also a mischievous phantom spirit in Irish and Welsh lore known as a Pooka or Puca.

"Robin Goodfellow" was a pre-Elizabethan colloquial reference to the Devil.



Sources and History

Scholars estimate that Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written between 1595 and 1598, since it is mentioned by Francis Meres in his book *Palladis Tamia*, published at that time. Other evidence that helps to establish the date when the play was written can be found in the play itself: the character of the lion in the play-within-a-play and the wedding celebration provide the clues.

The Mechanicals' concern over depicting a lion on stage was probably inspired by a pamphlet published in 1594, which described a Scottish feast where plans to bring in a live lion as part of the evening's

entertainment were cancelled when the organizers realized that the ladies would be frightened by the beast.

The elaborateness with which the play is framed around the royal wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta suggests that it was composed for a real-life wedding of great significance, probably at court. Many historians believe that *Midsummer* was first performed at the 1598 wedding of Elizabeth Gray, Queen Elizabeth's goddaughter, although no record of this has been found.

The sources of *Midsummer* are scattered and diverse, derived from both literature and popular folklore. The love story of Theseus and Hippolyta was told in "The Knight's Tale" of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and more facts about Theseus seem to be drawn from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, which was used as source material for other Shakespeare plays. The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is one of the stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The fairy world is both literary and traditional in its sources. Tales of goblins and sprites were common in Elizabethan England, and indeed, Shakespeare had probably heard stories of Robin Goodfellow while he was a child in Stratford. Oberon, the King of the Fairies, was a widespread figure in folklore who had already appeared in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and in other stage and literary works. Titania and the other fairies seem to



Costume renderings by Yao Chen for the Mechanicals in the 2023 STNJ production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



have been invented by Shakespeare from bits and pieces of the beliefs about fairies that were common in his time. The Mechanicals were probably drawn from life—mocking depictions of the “hard-handed” men who made up blue-collar London at the time.

A Midsummer Night's Dream first appeared in print in a quarto edition in 1600, probably printed from Shakespeare's own manuscript. In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare died, it was reprinted in the *First Folio*, with some editorial changes that seem to have their source in a theatrical manuscript of the play—one that had been used in production.

While it is not known exactly how often this play was performed in Shakespeare's lifetime, the title page of the 1600 quarto boasts that it had been “sundry times publicly acted.” When Parliament reversed the Puritan ban on theatre, *Midsummer* was one of the first plays to be revived, as a lavish musical spectacle. Samuel Pepys, who attended this 1662 production, was less than impressed, calling it “the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life.” Other audiences and directors continued to return to the play however, and it enjoyed a long and varied production history. The opportunity to depict a magical forest often led early directors and designers to pull out all the stops—a production in 19th-century London featured “real rabbits.” Ballets, operas, and artwork based on the play have abounded in England and beyond.

In the 20th century, *Midsummer* began to be adapted to motion pictures. The 1935 Max Reinhardt movie, featured spectacular costumes, flocks of extras, and James Cagney and Olivia De Havilland as Bottom and Titania. More recently, in 1999, director Michael Hoffmann brought together another all-star cast, with Kevin Kline as Bottom and Michelle Pfeiffer as Titania.



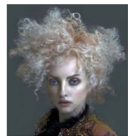
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Kevin Kline and Michelle Pfeiffer in the 1999 film • James Cagney as Nick Bottom in the 1935 film • Victor Jory and Anita Louise in Max Reinhardt's 1935 film • Judi Dench as Titania in a 1968 stage production.





In This Production

Scenic renderings by Brian Ruggaber, Scenic Designer, and selected costume renderings by Yao Chen, Costume Designer, for the 2023 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey production of *A Midwinter Night's Dream* directed by Brian B. Crowe.



Vest with Irregular lapel

Blouse with transparent sleeves



Boots with heels





Commentary & Criticism

WE HAVE ALL ENCOUNTERED FAIRIES:

“Every single person goes into the woods at night and encounters fairies. The question depends upon what you think of a fairy. What sinks most productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the notion of a fairy as a nineteenth-century silly thing. Anytime you walk in the woods alone, they're there. Or when you dream. **If a voice comes to you and says something you don't understand... that's what Shakespeare means by fairy.**”

Peter Sellars, director

AN UNDOUBTED MASTERWORK:

“Nothing by Shakespeare before *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is its equal, and in some respects nothing by him afterward surpasses it. **It is his first undoubted masterwork**, without flaw, and one of his dozen or so plays of overwhelming originality and power.”

Harold Bloom

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human

THE GREAT BALANCING ACT:

“*A Midsummer Night's Dream* balances a feather-light series of romantic entanglements with brief but profound meditation on the illogical appeals of love, dreams, and the very poetry of the play itself. And what poetry!”

Brandon Toropov

Shakespeare for Beginners

LOVE AND MARRIAGE:

“Love and marriage is the central theme: love aspiring to and consummated in marriage, or to a harmonious partnership within it. Three phases of this love are depicted: its renewal, after a breach, in the long-standing marriage of Oberon and Titania; adult love between mature people in Theseus and Hippolyta; and youthful love with its conflicts and their resolutions, so that stability is reached, in the group of two young men and two girls.”

Harold F. Brooks, editor

The Arden Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream

COMEDY V. TRAGEDY:

“**Shakespearean comedy raises the same issues as Shakespearean tragedy, only in a different key and, of course, with a different conclusion.** The tragic tale of *Romeo & Juliet* becomes comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*... On one level, you can uncritically accept the comedies, simply enjoying them for their silliness; on another, you can look further and see how Shakespeare uses comic absurdities to suggest profound human values and concerns.”

Norrie Epstein

The Friendly Shakespeare

HEAVENLY BODIES

What happens to the fairy king and queen after the play? Well, apparently they reside in the heavens.

A German-English astronomer named William Herschel (famous for his discovery of the planet Uranus in 1781) broke the existing tradition of naming heavenly bodies after the Greek and Roman gods. When he discovered Uranus' two outermost moons in 1787, he named them Oberon and Titania.