

Villanova Theatre, 2019-2020 Season

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A MID SUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Education Guide

Welcome to the **Villanova Educational Theatre Guide** for our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This resource is intended to help individuals, students, and educators gain additional insight to the production. It includes discussion questions to consider before and after the show, as well as suggested activities to help you engage with the show on a more intimate level.

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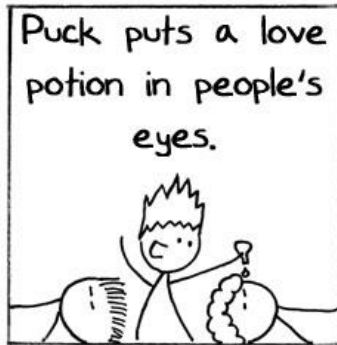
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SYNOPSIS

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (in 3 Panels)



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Act I: Theseus returns to Athens from war, having won his bride Hippolyta in battle. Egeus then enters, complaining that his daughter Hermia loves Lysander—even though she should be marrying Demetrius. Theseus orders Hermia to marry Demetrius, which provokes Hermia to elope with Lysander into the forest. Demetrius follows them, seeking to win over Hermia. Helena, Hermia’s close friend, laments that Hermia has won over both men, and runs after the other three—trying to gain Demetrius’s favor. Meanwhile, a group of tradesmen work together to rehearse a play that they hope will be chosen to be performed at Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding. The mechanicals struggle to dole out parts as Bottom is so confident in his abilities, that he wishes to play everyone.

Act II: In the woods the king and queen of the fairies, Oberon and Titania, are at odds over who gets to use an Indian prince as their servant. In anger, Oberon asks his attendant Puck to obtain a flower that, if rubbed on the eyes, can make people fall in love with the first thing they see. Oberon hopes to trick Titania with the flower so he can win the prince. As Puck goes to find the flower, he sees the four lovers. Demetris spurns Helena, though she fawns over him, and Puck vows to set them right. After getting the flower, Oberon uses the flower on Titania, and tells puck to do the same to “the Athenian youth.” Mistaking sleeping Lysander and Hermia for Demetrius and Helena, Puck uses the flower on Lysander instead of Demetrius. Helena, who has fallen behind in following Demetrius, wanders into the glade and sees Lysander asleep, so she wakes him. The flower takes effect and Lysander falls in love with Helena; he then wanders after her through the forest. Hermia wakes, alone, and goes off in search of Lysander.

Act III: As the mechanicals attempt to rehearse their play, Puck appears. Thinking a funny trick is to be had, Puck transforms Bottom's head into one of an ass. The other mechanicals flee, terrified, and confused Bottom remains behind. Titania, asleep in the same grove, wakes and sees Bottom—falling madly in love with him. She beckons him into her forest bower, and he follows. Meanwhile, the situation with the lovers grows increasingly complicated. Puck and Oberon realize Puck's mistake of enchanting the wrong person, and so Puck uses the flower on Demetrius. Now both men love Helena. Helena believes both to be mocking her, and Hermia accuses Helena of trying to steal Lysander from her. Lysander and Demetrius fight over Helena, and Hermia tries to fight Helena—who flees. Puck deescalates the fighting by confusing the Athenians until they are hopelessly lost. Eventually, the lovers wander back into the glade at the forest edge only to fall asleep, and Puck reverses the potion on Lysander.

Act IV: Titania and Bottom enter, doting on one another until they fall asleep in one another's arms. Oberon and Puck walk into the grove, and Oberon successfully gets Titania to promise him the Indian prince. Satisfied, Oberon undoes the charm on Titania, and Puck undoes the transformation of Bottom. As the sun comes up Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus discover the lovers at the edge of the forest. The youths can only recall the previous night like a strange dream, but now Lysander and Hermia love each other and so do Helena and Demetrius. The group then leaves to prepare for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. As they exit, Bottom wakes and remarks on the interesting dream he just had. At a craftsman's house, the mechanicals worry about their missing leader—as the wedding is about to occur—when Bottom makes his triumphant return in time for their production.

Act V: Theseus and Hippolyta comment on the strange accounts of the lovers in the forest, and the lovers join them to watch a play. The mechanicals enter to put on their production, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The play is acted horribly, and the court make remarks of how strange and funny the performance is. Pyramus and Thisbe are two lovers who must communicate through a chink in the wall (played by one of the mechanicals). When they try to meet, Thisbe is chased by a lion. Pyramus, finding her ripped clothes and thinking her dead, kills himself. Thisbe, finding Pyramus dead, follows him. At the end of the play, the actors dance for the royalty, and all exit for bed. Puck, Titania, and Oberon enter to bless the lovers of the palace, and Puck makes a final address to the audience. He says that if the play has offended anyone watching, they should view it as merely a dream.

INTRODUCTION TO CHARACTER

The Athenian Court

Theseus: Duke of Athens, engaged to Hippolyta

Hippolyta: Queen of the Amazons, wooed “in battle” by Theseus

Egeus: Hermia’s father, insistent that Hermia marry Demetrius

Philostrate: Master of Revels for Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding

The Lovers

Hermia: In love with Lysander and friends with Helena

Lysander: In love with Hermia

Demetrius: Also in love with Hermia, but his love is unrequited

Helena: In love (unrequited) with Demetrius and friends with Hermia

The Mechanicals

Nick Bottom: A very confident weaver who confuses his language frequently. He gets transformed by Puck and spends a night with the queen of the fairies. Bottom also plays Pyramus, the male lover, in the play-within-the play.

Peter Quince: A carpenter who directs the attempt to put on a play for the royal wedding.

Robin Starveling: A tailor who ends up playing “Moonshine” in the final version of the mechanicals’ play.

Tom Snout: A tinker who plays the part of “Wall.”

Snug: A joiner who plays the part of the Lion in the play; he worries that his roars will frighten the ladies in the audience.

The Fairies

Puck: Also called Robin Goodfellow, Puck is the mischievous jester of Oberon. He enjoys playing tricks on mortals and is responsible for much of the confusion during the play, interweaving the characters together.

Oberon: King of the fairies. Oberon is angry with his wife who possesses a servant he wishes to have as a knight. Oberon’s anger is what causes Puck to obtain the love potion flower and propels the story forward.

Titania: Queen of the fairies. She is tricked by Oberon into falling in love with the ass-headed Bottom and eventually gives up her Indian servant.

TOPICS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Playwright and Historical Conventions

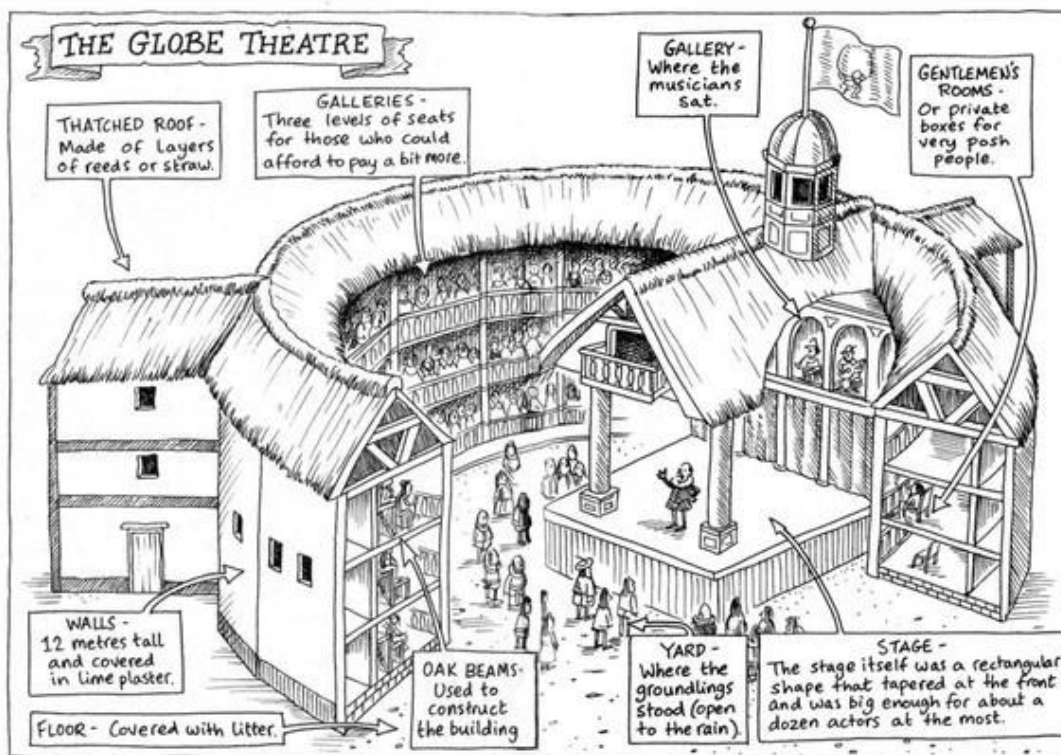


William Shakespeare (1564-1616), England’s most famous playwright, wrote more than 30 plays and 154 sonnets. Though a specific date cannot be attached to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, its allusions to other works of the period date the play between 1595 and 1596. *Midsummer*, along with *Romeo and Juliet*, is one of Shakespeare’s early works which demonstrates his attention to lyricism. Typical of a Shakespearean comedy, *Midsummer* involves love triangles and ends with a dance and a wedding.



Elizabethan Playwriting: Playwrights of the Early Modern Era did not write their plays in condensed editions as we write them today. They would instead write the lines for each actor on separate sheets. The actors would only receive their “roll” of the script, which meant they only had their own lines and short cues lines from which to memorize. Often, the actors would have mere days to memorize and stage their productions—usually without the help of a director. Many plays were published many years after their debuts, which meant gathering the rolls from various actors and piecing them together. Our production uses the First Folio (1623) edition of *Midsummer*.

Copyright did not exist in until almost 100 years after Shakespeare’s death. Shakespeare took his stories from many existing sources that may appear as questionable plagiarism today—one need not look further than Edmund Spenser’s *Epithalamion*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, or Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” to see inspiration for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.



Staging Conventions: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would have been performed in The Globe Theatre, which would have been outside and with thrust staging. This meant that performances took place during the day in order to have light, and that audiences were on three sides of the stage close to the performers. Audiences could stand on the ground, pay more to sit in the galleries, or even spend more money for expensive box seats. Actors would interact frequently with the audience and vice versa. Our thrust stage in Vasey allows for a similar intimate experience here at Villanova. Audiences and actors are comparably close to one another, and actors will look audience members in the eye and talk directly to them—which differs greatly from the one-sided distant proscenium staging common today. In Elizabethan England, the companies did not use set pieces for each show, but rather one layout for every production—which is why Shakespeare relied on the imagination of the audience. You will hear characters narrate their location or their travels because there was no set to indicate place and time onstage. Actors would wear costumes indicative of class, rather than pieces accurate to the various places and periods.

Language

Shakespeare used two styles of writing: verse and prose. Verse involves poetic meter and rhyme, where as prose is irregular and more like typical speaking. Shakespearean verse is often written in **iambic pentameter**. Iambs are an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. For example, the word “because” has an unstressed, then stressed syllable—an iamb. Pentameter indicates that there are five iambs per line. When reading Shakespeare, lines are often scanned to see if they are in verse. Look at the following example where curved lines denote an unstressed syllable, and slashes denote a stressed syllable:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

ba DUH ba DUH ba DUH ba DUH

This famous line has five sets of unstressed, followed by stressed syllables—so its meter is iambic pentameter. Why does scansion matter? Why does verse matter? Shakespeare uses verse for specific reasons. Characters speaking in verse come across as high-brow or important, where as those who speak in prose appear uneducated. Some even switch between the two depending on the situation. Scanning lines of a play can indicate how the language reveals the traits or motivations of a character. The mechanicals, for instance, speak in prose to each other as lower-class people but elevate to verse when speaking at the court. The fairies even use their own version of verse (inverted emphasis and shorter lines) to show their otherworldliness.

Practice Activity

Scan the following part of Helena’s speech using the technique from above:

How happy some o’re other some can be?

Through Athens I am thought as fair as she.

But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so:

Discussion Questions:

1. How do we change our language based on to whom we speak? Provide an example. When does this happen in the show?
2. Take a movie you know: *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* for example; what situations would you have a character speak in verse? Why?

Fairies



Historical Fairies:

Today the word fairy is usually associated with wonder, cheerfulness, and magic. The image of Tinkerbell may come to mind as the archetype for what a fairy is—cute, fictional, and perhaps a bit mischievous. Productions of *A Midsummer Night's a Dream* today often reinforce our 2019 view of what fairies are—impish Puck plays funny and magical tricks on humans— but Shakespeare had a different type of fairy in mind when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To the average Elizabethan person, fairies were not only real but also frightening. Fairies were magical and mischievous, yes, but with devious ends in mind. They were seen as fallen angels, pagan souls, or another race of beings. Most societal ills,

such as plagues or poverty, were supposedly caused by fairies. Fairies desired human children and human lives. They would reportedly steal babies in the night and replace them with “changelings—” evil creatures who sought to destroy the family and society. Elizabethans would report their children as having instantly changed personalities, and some people even killed their own children, thinking they were changelings. Some scholars believe that autistic children or those with developmental disabilities were thought to have been identified as changelings.

Fairies could also whisk people away to their kingdom. If one ate fairy food, that person would be trapped among the fairies forever unless they traded away years of their life. Fairy economics often dealt with years of human life for currency. Many times, fairies would even make contracts weighted in years of life with humans—just like the devil. Not just England, but Ireland, Germany, Poland, Scandinavia, Spain, and parts of Africa all have folklore which make reference to types of sinister fairies or changelings.



Evidence of Sinister Fairies in *Midsummer*:

The fairy world in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is introduced with Oberon and Titania arguing over a “changeling boy” (II.i.123). Titania says she will raise this Indian boy as her own because his mother died, but Oberon wishes to claim him instead. From a modern perspective, it may appear as if they are arguing over a servant brought from overseas, but the reference to changelings as well as the heat of the argument indicates that much is at stake for Oberon and Titania. The Indian boy represents a valuable commodity that both parties desire as their own—in line with the Elizabethan idea that fairies desire the lives of children. This introduction to the fairy world demonstrates a sinister mood behind the dealings of the fairies, therefore pure mischievousness and Tinkerbell-likeness cannot alone account for the motivations behind their actions.



Our production leans heavily into this element of Shakespeare’s fairies and asks the question, “If fairies were real and scary in Elizabethan England, what is just as frightening to us today?”

Discussion Questions:

1. What serves the role of fairies in society today? Is there a common otherworldly fear we share?
2. What do we find scary in our world today?
3. What tales about fairies have you heard before? How does this historical information color your view of those stories?

Forces in the Play

Power:

Our production plays with the idea of power—who holds the power and why? The play takes place in two settings: Athens and its surrounding woods. Athens is traditionally home of Greek reason and power, as exemplified by Theseus. The forest also has an authoritative set-up in the form of Oberon and Titania. Though the forest and the city are very different places, both still have a power structure within them. Both have rulers and servants, and both have people caught in the middle.



Discussion Questions:

1. What are the power structures and rankings throughout the play? What changes and why?
2. Who holds the power in the various couples of the play? How do people attempt to usurp that power?
3. What indicates to you that someone has power or control during a scene? How do costumes, lighting, and movement change or highlight this area of the text?



Passion:

Often times the forest and Athens are seen as representative of two forces: reason and passion. Our production asks how these places are more similar than different. Passions that already existed in the city are elevated in the woods. Part of what makes the play funny is that we all, as humans, have done crazy things for the sake of love and can identify with the lovers in the forest.

Discussion Questions:

1. What makes the characters act more extreme for love? What is at stake for them?
2. What crazy things have you done for the sake of another person?
3. Which characters act more from their passion and which from their reason?
4. What are moments when the rational characters act impulsively? What are moments when the impulsive characters act reasonably? Why?

Gender:

During Shakespeare's time, only men would be able to act onstage. This meant that all female roles were played by young boys. Our production takes inspiration from this original practice and puts actors into roles contrary to their gender. This gender-swapping asks several questions: What makes a man? What makes a woman? What does society expect of each? How do you "act like a woman" or "act like a man?" Our casting hints at how gender can be a performative act— a put-on display of feminine or masculine attributes that society requires in order to exist as a certain gender. We also ask how power can be obtained and balanced between genders.



Discussion Questions:

1. While watching the play, note how are the roles written as men, but played by women. How does this change the meaning of certain lines and dynamics?
2. What are the roles written as men, but changed into female characters? What does this change?
3. Which roles are still played by men? Why do you think these particular roles were chosen to be cast that way, rather than have an all-female cast (the inverse of Shakespeare's conventions)?

SEEING THE SHOW

Villanova Theatre is excited to have you join us for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We want to offer a few reminders concerning theatre etiquette so that you will experience the best from the actors and production team who have worked hard to create the show for you.

1. Remember to silence or turn off your phone. Please do not place phones on vibrate because this, too, often makes a noise that can be distracting to those around you as well as the performers.
2. Do not send or receive texts during the production. Taking out your phone during the performance to check a text or to send one is distracting to those in the surrounding seats due to the light coming from your phone.
3. Do not take photographs during the performance. This is for the safety of our performers as well as laws surrounding intellectual property. Best to sit back and enjoy the show, taking a mental image for your memory.
4. Refrain from opening candy wrappers or anything that is going to make a noise. This is distracting for those around you who are trying to listen to the performance as well as the actors who are working to create a world on the stage. Please open any candy wrappers or tissue containers or other items that could potentially make a noise before the show begins.
5. Refrain from talking. Again, this is distracting to those around you as well as the actors on stage. When on stage, it is often thought the actors are too far from the audience to hear what is happening. This is far from the truth. More often, actors can hear every movement, laugh, and spoken word.
6. Finally, please refrain from touching actors during the performance. Because Vasey Theatre is a thrust stage, actors often cross in front of audience members. Unless you are invited to do so, you should not touch them.

Thank you so much for making your Villanova Theatre experience the best for all involved.