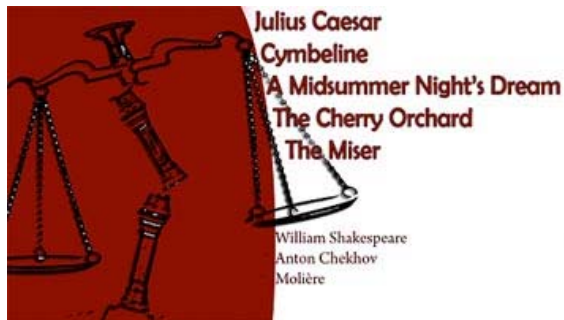


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A Midsummer Night's Dream



If one wanted to make a Shakespeare play into a fantasy sitcom like "Gilligan's Island," the Melora Marshall production at Theatricum Botanicum would fit the bill.

First there is the cast of supernatural characters like Titania and Oberon, whose kingdom of fairies dominates the plot. The mortals indeed seem to be fools to Puck, Oberon's helper, who uses a potion applied to the eyelids to cause any sleeping character to fall in love with the first being she sees upon waking up. The weaver Nick Bottom, for example, has his head turned into that of an ass, but because he is the first being seen by Titania upon waking, he becomes somewhat of a celebrity with the fairies. The mythologies of Rome and Greece are mixed up together, as we meet Theseus and the Amazon Hippolyta getting married, though they never meet the fairies.

And then there's the comedy. There are plenty of moments of brilliance in this production that was never written down on paper by Shakespeare. Most of these moments belong to Peter Quince and his gang of Rude Mechanicals, who rehearse and perform a play called "Pyramus and Thisbe" about two star-crossed lovers. There's Peter Quince with a hilarious look of mock despair whenever his star actor Nick Bottom mispronounces a line or talking about "seeing" a voice or "hearing" a face. There's Francis Flute's wig falling off after he pretends to die in the person of Thisbe. There's everyone yelling at Bottom when his face becomes that of an ass, and he commissions Peter Quince to write him a ballad called "Bottom's Dream."

Much of the comedy is provided by Thad Geer, who does a superb job recreating Nick Bottom. At one point during rehearsal, Bottom decides that not only can he play both a tyrant and a lover as Pyramus, he might as well play his lover Thisbe too, not to mention the lion. Geer gives several renditions of the roar he intended, with one roar funnier than the next. Bottom can easily be played as a knucklehead or dummie, but Geer puts a sense of mock professionalism into the character, making it much funnier when he takes forever to die, trying to dominate every aspect of the scene. It sure reminds me of Ginger, the stranded movie star.

Shakespeare provides plenty of situational comedy as well with the story of a pair of lovers. Lysander loves Hermia, but her guardian Egeus won't allow it, because she intended her for Demetrius, who is loved by Helena. Thanks to Puck's somewhat random attempts to make certain sleeping people love certain people who stumble by, the previously loved Hermia becomes unloved and the previously unloved Helena becomes loved (though she has a hard time believing it's not a joke). Basically, it's a fantastic episode of "Friends."


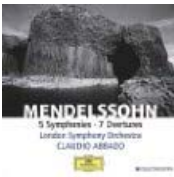

Of the performers who played the four mortal lovers, Willow Geer, who portrayed Helena, is especially engaging. Her pursuit of Demetrius combines physical slapstick (crawling on all fours like a dog to lick Demetrius) with some beautifully rendered lines ("[women] should be woo'd, and were not made to woo"). Her incredulity with Lysander and Demetrius both turning around their hearts to pursue her seems to last longer and longer, until the audience erupts into uncontrollable laughter when she suggests that Hermia is in league with the two men's prank. Overall, the lovers give a great sense of mortals whose feelings are easily transformed by artificial means, the reason that led Puck to label them "fools."

If there's one character that brings fantasy and comedy together, it is that "merry wanderer of the night" Puck, who is hilariously rendered by Elizabeth Tobias. Her costume, along with those of Cobweb, Mustardseed, and Oberon, are works of art in themselves. Making chirping noises befitting of a fairie

continuously, Tobias dashes off some wonderful sitcom material, such as when Puck is commanded by Oberon to look for the magic herb, when she exclaims "I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes." Again when Oberon blames Puck for putting the potion over the wrong man, Puck defends herself by reminding him that he gave only directions to find the person with the Athenian garments, which Lysander and Demetrius both shared. Woops! I can hear the TV audience clapping (or see it).

Puck is played by a woman, as is Peter Quince and Egeus, who are both supposed to be male. This production reinforces the ambiguous sexuality inherent in Shakespeare's work, as analyzed by Douglas Green. It is perhaps this "topsy-turvy world" of the play that makes it a real fantasy. After all, the work ends with the most ambiguous character of all, Puck holding a broom offering an apology: "if we shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended, that you have but slumbered here, while these visions did appear."

Catch the show not on cable but at Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga (www.theatricum.com), where "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is aired until September 7.

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