Julie Taymor's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

David Walsh
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Directed by Julie Taymor; written by William Shakespeare

Julie Taymor's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was screened in a number of movie theaters in North America this week for one night only (on or about the summer solstice). The film was shot during a run of Taymor's version of the play at the Theatre for a New Audience in Brooklyn in 2013-14.

Scholars theorize that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, perhaps for an aristocratic wedding, in the mid-1590s. The comic-magical play, one of the few whose basic outline the dramatist did not derive from another source, has several interconnected plot strands.

Duke Theseus of Athens and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, are making preparations for their wedding day; four young lovers—Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius—attempt to sort out their relationships, in the face of a host of external and internal pressures; Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of Fairyland, are in the midst of a quarrel, with all sorts of implications for the natural world around them; a group of Athenian "mechanicals" (workmen) are rehearsing a play, the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe [a story that resembles *Romeo and Juliet*], to be performed at the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta.

Much of the play takes place in the moonlit woods presided over by Oberon and Titania. Angered at his queen, Oberon has his "sprite," Robin "Puck" Goodfellow, locate a flower whose juice, smeared on the eyes, will make any creature fall in love with the next person—or animal—he or she sees. Puck changes the head of one of the workmen, Bottom the weaver, into a donkey's, and Titania, on seeing him, falls madly in love.

Meanwhile, the four lovers are stumbling around the forest. At first, both Lysander and Demetrius are in love with Hermia, much to the unhappiness of Helena, who adores Demetrius. After Puck drops some of his potion in the wrong eyes, Lysander and Demetrius direct their affections and attentions toward Helena, who becomes convinced that the other three have conspired to play a cruel prank on her.

Bottom passes the time with Titania and her attendant fairies, until Oberon and Puck intervene and restore him more or less to his previous condition. In the end, Oberon and Titania are reconciled, the three other couples find their way to the altar, and Bottom and his fellow workmen stage their play successfully at the wedding reception.

Taymor (born 1952) is best known for spectacular theater stagings, especially of *The Lion King* (1997) and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2010). She has directed a number of films, including *Titus* (1999, based on Shakespeare's bloody *Titus Andronicus*), *Frida* (2002), *Across the Universe* (2007) and *The Tempest* (2010). While visually intriguing, none of these films was an artistic success. *Frida*, about the life of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, was significantly misconceived.

Taymor's work in general has seemed a triumph of style over substance. Fortunately, with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* she has taken on a work that brings her considerable skill to the fore. Imaginatively staged and exuberantly performed, Taymor's effort is largely a delight. If it does not explore the play or its themes deeply, and it does not, it certainly allows an audience to experience something of the work's relentless beauty and poetry.

The play takes place on a stage deeply thrust into the audience at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn. A central image is a giant silk bed-sheet that makes itself into a balloon, a sky, a sort of hammock, a projection screen and a good deal more. Taymor makes great use of lighting, harnesses, trapdoors and a variety of equipment, especially in the Titania-Oberon-Puck scenes.

Kathryn Hunter as an androgynous Puck, who twists herself into any number of poses, is thoroughly engaging, as are David Harewood as Oberon and Tina Benko as Titania. A crowd of small children charmingly represent the fairies. To her credit, Taymor has made the play accessible to contemporary audiences, without sacrificing the original play.

There is something genuinely breathtaking, almost "unbearable" (as I noted in a review of Michael Hoffman's 1999 film version of the play), about the sweetness of the language in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is Oberon to Puck:

Thou rememb'rest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea maid's music?

And further:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and eglantine.

And that sweetness is powerfully brought out here, by Taymor, Harewood, Benko and Hunter in particular.

As we noted in 1999, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is perhaps "the gentlest of Shakespeare's works." That review went on:

"Puck plays his pranks, and Oberon takes his relatively harmless revenge on Titania, but this is not a nightmare, it is a dream born of a warm summer night. Oberon takes pity on Helena, 'a sweet Athenian lady ... in love with a disdainful youth.' Puck says, although mistakenly, of Hermia lying near Lysander: 'Pretty soul, she durst not lie / Near this lack-love, this kill-courtesy.' Later Oberon instructs Puck to prevent a fight between jealous Demetrius and Lysander, and declares his intention to release Titania from her spell, 'and all things shall be peace.' Or, as Puck puts it, even more suggestively, 'Jack

shall have Jill, / Naught shall go ill.'"

One of the remarkable themes of the play, bound up of course with great changes in social relations in Shakespeare's time, is the extraordinary and novel malleability of human personality and emotions. Granted that Oberon and Puck intervene supernaturally from time to time, but the four young people, as well as Titania herself, demonstrate that love, for example, is hardly a sentiment fixed for eternity.

Demetrius observes that his love for Hermia—which he was only cured of the night before!—"seems to me now / As the remembrance of an idle gaud / Which in my childhood I did dote upon."

Titania declares her undying love for Bottom at the beginning of one scene ("O, how I love thee! how I dote on thee!") and, only a few scant moments later, once having woken from her "visions," exclaims, "How came these things to pass? / O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!"

As we noted in 1999, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests "a world of infinite possibility. After all, this is the only one of Shakespeare's plays in which a man on the Bottom sleeps with (or by) a Queen, at her instigation no less. In the forest in the middle of the night in a dream all things pass into one another and are transformed, love and hate, man and animal, spirit and matter."

The rapid, dramatic changes of Taymor's set and design have the advantage of suggesting something of this transmutability.

The weakest point here is Max Casella's Bottom, or rather, not the actor, but Taymor's direction. Casella is far too broad, with his clichéd New York-New Jersey accent, and works far too hard for broad and rather cheap laughs.

Shakespeare was not writing his play principally for "mechanicals," for laborers, although they formed a section of his audience. And certainly there is a degree to which the playwright laughs along with Duke Theseus and the rest of the Athenian elite at the artistic-theatrical pretensions of the weaver (Nick Bottom), carpenter (Peter Quince), bellows-mender (Francis Flute), tinker (Tom Snout), joiner (simply "Snug") and tailor (Robin Starveling).

As occasionally foolish as the "mechanical" actors are, however, their essential geniality, solidarity and sincerity come through. Is there a genuinely warmer moment in Shakespeare than that in which Bottom makes his reappearance, after losing his asses' head, among his fellow artisans?

BOTTOM

Where are these lads? where are these hearts?

QUINCE [and the others]

Bottom! O most courageous day! O most happy hour!

BOTTOM

Masters, I am to discourse wonders: but ask me not what; for if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you every thing, right as it fell out.

QUINCE

Let us hear, sweet Bottom.

Essential to the success of the "mechanical" scenes is the workers' spirit of togetherness. Despite their various idiosyncrasies, they stick up for and stand by one another. In Taymor's version, Brendan Averett as Snug, Joe Grifasi as Quince, William Youmans as Starveling, Jacob Ming-Trent as Snout and Zachary Infante as Flute all do well, even memorably. Infante's "death scene" as Thisbe is quite remarkable. On the other hand, portraying Bottom as something of a scene-stealer and "ham," and not simply an enthusiast, is a mistake and detracts from the work.

Whatever intentions he had in his head to begin with, Shakespeare was Shakespeare, and once he began to work through a character's situation, he generally got to the heart of things. We recently noted the comment by Orson Welles that Shakespeare's Falstaff (who appears in a number of the history plays) was "the most completely good man, in all drama." Then Bottom is certainly one of the kindest and most endearing.

He is the favorite of the artisans; during the time he spends away from them in Titania's company, they are at a loss. He has, according to Flute, "the best wit of any handicraftman in Athens," and he is "the best person, too," adds Quince. "O sweet bully Bottom," cries Flute, sadly.

We noted in 1999: "The weaver is unfailingly thoughtful and considerate, and apparently unfazed by any of the astonishing things that befall him. When Titania unexpectedly proclaims that she loves him, he replies, 'Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that.' Nonetheless, it is not unthinkable, for 'to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays.'

"Offered the part of a lover in the workmen's theatrical, Bottom expresses the desire to play a 'tyrant' instead. No one is less fit for such a part. So concerned is he about the ladies in the audience becoming frightened, because a lion appears in the piece, he explains that were he to play the part, 'I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale.'

"Worried as well about the impact on the female spectators of his character killing himself, Bottom suggests adding a prologue in which he will explain that 'we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus [his character] is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. That will put them out of fear.' I think Harold Bloom is entitled to assert in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* that Bottom is 'a sublime clown ... a great visionary ... and a very good man, as benign as any in Shakespeare.'"

In any event, despite the missteps in this regard, Taymor's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is enjoyable and absorbing. It will open more widely later in the year.