

THE COMMUNITY COUNCIL
FULL-LENGTH PLAY FESTIVAL, 1971/72

ADJUDICATOR'S REPORT

THE ST. NEOTS PLAYERS

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM by William Shakespeare

The Play

I find it extremely difficult to start to write about this play in a way that will not lead me on to an interpretive discourse that would cover pages. After all, weighty books have been written on this play alone. Certainly, the play ranks as one of my favourites, despite the fact that most of the productions of it that I have seen have been painful to watch. It is the play of Shakespeare's that has probably been 'done', the most either in whole or in part. As far as the latter is concerned the sub-plot of the 'rude mechanicals' is popular because it stands as a unit on its own, provided the transformation of Bottom is omitted. Popularity, however, has probably constituted the biggest disservice to the play itself.

So many groups embark upon a production which is an imitation of one that has impressed the producer sometime in the past. Others see the play as a marvellous opportunity to indulge in a costume spectacular, in which the fairies become pretty but totally meaningless ballerinas. Some cannot resist the temptation to flog the humour of the rehearsal sequences by giving them pure farce treatment, instead of regarding the participants as manual labourers seriously attempting something intellectual for the first time in their lives. Few take a leaf from Peter Brook's copybook and actually get down to reading the play with a clear mind. Only then can one get down to questions like - "what kind of dream is this?" - "whose dream is it?" How does one interpret Puck, when Robin Goodfellow is traditionally an evil sprite? I have seen productions in which the relationship between Puck and Oberon is blatantly homosexual - and it made sense. This was part of an interpretation that originated in Germany, in which the whole play was seen as an eve of marriage erotic dream, containing almost every known sexual perversion.

All this stresses the importance of the producer taking a clear and definite line on the play. The production must be positive, otherwise it will inevitably become a wishy-washy hotchpotch of visually pleasing confusion. The main virtue of the St. Neots Players production was that it did take a clear line, and one that had due regard for the venue and conditions of the performance. The line was one of simplicity, in which all the stress was laid on the clarity of the story. The intermingling of the sub-plots was not allowed to confuse. It is futile to attempt a deep, intellectual approach in a situation where an audience can be attracted from the bar at any point in the action, and where the presentation is that of a shortened version. The cutting of the text, incidentally, was most judicious. Clarity and purposefulness formed the keynote, and the result was most effective.

The Acting

Thesius played by John McCabe - I have rarely seen this part played well. It looks deceptively easy. All you have to do is play it 'straight', which that means. But if you do, you are likely to create a Thesius that is so negative that he is totally devoid of personality. John was off to a good start with a strong stage presence and a good, powerful voice to go with it. His first appearance was imposing and his whole performance was well-controlled. Thesius' function in the first scene is pure

exposition, which gives him little to get his teeth into. He fulfilled this function well, however, - the exposition was clear and meaningful, although the poetry tended to suffer in the telling. Although expository the verse is good. He did, however, do justice to the poetry later in the play. Spontaneity was also lacking in places. There was a moment of anticipation, for instance, when he said "But soft, what nymphs are these" before he had seen anything - a small point but an unfortunate one. John was undoubtedly at his best in the final scene. Here, the personality came over in no small way, and the spontaneity was there. His approach was expansive and his dialogue extremely well-pointed. In total, this was one of the most impressive performances in the production and it should be noted that it was a performance of a character that is among those that have the least to do in the action.

Egeus played by Ted Pygott - This is a short part but the line to be taken and the function of the character is clear and definite. Ted needed more confidence in his approach and more certainty of his lines. Vocal hesitations were weakening and very much at odds with the good physical control and strength that he possessed.

Lysander played by Derek Mayhew - I had the feeling by the end of this performance that Derek had much more to offer than he actually gave. Technically, he gave a great deal. Both vocally and physically he had positive strength and attack, and played with confidence and control. The whole performance went at a cracking pace and he did much to keep the play energetically alive and moving. He projected a good, strong characterisation of Lysander, but it was all a little too surface. Throughout, he was more conscious of words than feelings, and in this sense he needed more commitment. All the outward show was there, but the heart was missing.

Demetrius played by Eric Usher - If any production of this play is to have clarity, a sharp and clear delineation between the four lovers is absolutely vital. If any of these ever get confused in their numerous comings and goings, the audience will be completely lost. There is no doubt that Eric made Demetrius a complete contrast to Lysander and realised the importance of doing so. I felt, however, that he could have effected more contrast between the normal and the spellbound Demetrius, possibly by being more starry-eyed with Hermia. The characterisation was positive enough, though, and all played with an air of not quite knowing what was going on, which was well in keeping.

Philstrate played by Colin Daines - Colin had little to do, but did it adequately. His description of "Pyramus and Thisbe" needed more expression, and his voice control needed more attention. Words tended to be lost on failing breath.

Quince played by Doug Young - The fact that none of the rehearsal scenes were ever in danger of dragging was largely Doug's doing. He played at a good pace and kept things moving. He also resisted any temptation to send the character up. He never regarded Peter Quince as odd or funny, but succeeded in identifying with the man. The result was that the humour was captured and was genuine.

Snug played by Maurice Wildman - Maurice provided a good visual contrast, and his poker-faced concern was a nice touch. His lion mask was most effective and he put it to maximum use.

Bottom played by Tony Gaskell - Tony made the most of his technical experience, but lacked the kind of identification that Doug gave to Peter Quince. He mastered the art of the 'throw-away' line, and was responsible for some very good timing. The audience warmed to him very quickly, and he was always in danger of getting carried away by their

reactions. It was an energetic and lively performance, to which he gave his all. The clowning, which is far from easy, was well done, and the comic was achieved, but Bottom the weaver - the man of the lower working orders - was not.

Flute played by John Merry - Here was another good character identification. His concern at playing the part of Thisbe was real enough and the docility of the character came over. The role of Flute, especially when playing Thisbe, is fun to play, and John filled it well.

Snout played by Ian Naylor - There is little for Snout to do but make up the number of this motley band. He is usually played as the 'thickie' of the group. Ian did not do this, and there is no reason why he should. He did however succeed in giving Snout an individuality.

Starveling played by Tom Wright - Tom provided an excellent contrast and an excellent performance, that at times was hilarious. There is no doubt that he made the most of every moment and his sense of comic timing was well utilised. There was always a danger of his overdoing it, but it never quite materialised. He provided a Starveling who was living proof that Peter Quince was really scraping the barrel in putting his play together. Starveling's need for physical assistance to move from one spot to another successfully heralded the risk that he was going to be in performance. It was also a clever touch in that it helped to weld the group together. His presentation of Moonshine, with red-faced indignation at the audience comments, was particularly well done.

Hippolyta played by Thelma Wright - Hippolyta is the most thankless female part in the play. Apart from looking beautiful and good and suitably acquiescent at the side of Theseus, she has little to occupy her, and as a character she certainly doesn't develop. Physically and visually, Thelma filled the role, but the character does have to speak and it was here that the weakness lay. Much more vocal expression was needed. As it was, her voice hit a monotone from which she never deviated. It must be remembered that monotony of any kind spells death to any performance.

Hermia played by Mo Pearce - The major reason for Mo's success is that she plays with the whole self and not just the voice. The result here was yet another very creditable performance, full of life, verve and commitment. Her characterisation was very apposite to the role that Hermia fills in the play. Her interpretation was honest and sincere, and her execution of it was very competent and purposeful, resulting in a most valuable contribution to the impact of the whole production.

Helena played by Pat Salisbury - Pat provided a good and essential contrast to Hermia in both voice and characterisation, the masochistic nature of which came over well. The main aspect that needed attention here was Pat's movement, which was too lateral and repetitive for most of the time. She caught the situation - comedy, however, and projected it with precision and very good timing.

Oberon played by Peter Jepson - Whatever interpretation is placed upon the play, some distinction between the immortals and the mortals is essential. Costume is an aid to this but it is not the complete answer - is done with the costume is of far greater relevance. The visual impact of Peter's costume was considerable (the headpiece was particularly effective) and this set him off to a good start as Oberon. But Peter, fortunately, went far beyond this. His whole performance heightened his interpretation of the character and gave it the essential 'not-of-this-world' quality. His bearing and voice were excellent, and the graceful, express

use of the hands is worthy of separate comment. His whole presence was imposing and effective. It was also a very purposeful performance - his intentions were never in doubt. Everything that he did was sensitively controlled and constituted a most valuable contribution to the play's success.

Titania played by Georgina Ellett - There is much to be said in praise of Georgina's performance, but the distinction that marked the immortal in Peter's performance was not there. Georgina had strength, presence and regality. She had a clear understanding of Titania's purposes and function, and she also had a good ear for the poetry in her dialogue but the 'faery' quality was missing.

Puck played by Jennifer Craig - As with Oberon, the distinction here was fully established. Puck, for me, is essentially male, but in all fairness it must be said that in this production the fact the opposite was the case did not matter. The mischievous sprite was certainly the dominant factor in Jennifer's performance, which was abounding with life and vitality. Her contribution to the pace of the production was considerable. Her dance and movement was extremely well controlled and executed. None of it was forced, but it contained an apposite air of unreality. This was largely effected by her series of postures that were very well devised and held. She successfully signposted the audience through the play through very clear pointing, in which she used her eyes as much as her words. She used her voice and her whole body to gradually build up the ~~image, which is an integral part of Puck and of the play itself.~~ It was a simple interpretation that married perfectly with the simplicity of the production and constituted a most impressive achievement.

Peas-Blossom, Cobweb, Moth & Mustardseed played by Kate Usher, Angela White, Penny Dawes and Pam Flint. - The fairies were simply presented as attendants to Titania, and as such they were adequate. This again fitted the simple style of the production - there were no overtones or undertones. Even Bottom's conversation with them was kept at the level of simple fun. Visually they were effective and this applied particularly to the use of the tree - and vocally they contributed well. They were used largely to adorn the stage and had little else to do, but what they did do was well accomplished.

Production & Staging

There is little control of the setting in these productions. The setting is basically that of the King's Head, which provides a very pleasing, intimate open theatre. What was impressive, however, was the very imaginative use of the space and buildings available. Entrances were such that the action could 'flow' easily on and off the staging. Care had been taken with the dressing of the set, which again had been kept simple. As I have already mentioned, the use of the tree was very effective.

The use of sound was equally effective. This was well chosen and sensitively used. The singing from the tree during Titania's sleep had an excellent ethereal quality. The mixture used of live and recorded sound is very difficult to engineer with success, but it worked.

The costume was well selected and added a great deal of colour to the production. The headgear of Puck, Oberon and Titania was particularly outstanding, although I thought that the donkey mask of Bottom's would have been better had it covered the lower half of the face.

Practically all of what I wanted to say about Vicki Mountfort's production has already been said or implied. This can therefore only stress what was the most impressive. The producer had obviously

taken great pains to preserve clarity throughout the production, and this showed itself in every aspect, through setting, staging, costume, grouping to the actual performances themselves. When there is this much care, the results are always worthwhile. The space available was used to the full, and nothing was allowed to clutter the stage that was not going to be used. The whole production revealed a knowledge of the venue and the audience as well as of the play. This was a simple, uncomplicated production that moved at a cracking pace and captured both the charm and the comedy of the play, which was truly presented as "the fierce vexation of a dream".

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