

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

By William Shakespeare

Saturday 9th November 2013 @2.30 & 7.30

Good afternoon/ evening Ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Theatre Royal Plymouth for Propeller's superb multi-award winning production of William Shakespeare's 'A midsummer Night's Dream.'

A spellbinding dream as original and enchanted as any seen on the English stage. Directed by Edward Hall, designed by Michael Pavelka, lighting by Ben Ormerod and sound by Davis Gregory.

Propeller, led by artistic director, Edward Hall, is an internationally acclaimed all-male company famous for combining a methodical and strict approach to Shakespeare's text, while at the same time being highly inventive and mischievous. They bring a fresh, exciting, physical feel to their interpretation of the plays, an interpretation that challenges the audience's imagination.

The running times for this production are 57 minutes for the first half, a twenty minute interval followed by a 66 minute second half.

I am Veyan and will be describing the first half, while my colleague, Pauline will be describing Act II.

In this, Shakespeare's most magical play love and illusion collide when two pairs of would-be lovers become entangled in fairy mischief on the eve of a Royal wedding. Dreams and reality become interchangeable within the romantic chaos that ensues and misplaced passions are ignited as appearances become ever more deceptive. The boundaries blur between what's jest and what is earnest as the relationships between the star-struck lovers are jeopardised by misplaced fairy antics.

This is a story about warring lovers and fairies, playing out their love entanglements on one very magical night in Athens and deep in the surrounding forests.

THE SET

The surreal and imaginative all-white set is deceptively simple. The back of the stage is draped to the ground in white, semi-transparent camouflage netting, upon which, for the forest scenes, shadowy outlines of trees are projected, thus creating an illusion of a moonlit forest. This netting continues around to cover the sides, with breaks allowing for entrances and exits.

A row of white antique kitchen-style chairs suspended about eight foot above the ground, run in a continuous line around the back and sides of the stage finishing with a pair of throne-like settles. The chair seats form a narrow overhead ledge or gantry where the fairies can perch or lie unobserved by the humans in the forest below. The facing settles on either side are supported by misshapen ladder-like towers, which also provide access to the gantry. The chairs and settles are partially hidden by a fine froth of cobwebby white muslin.

The ground and forest floor is dark and woody.

At certain moments, Fairies conjure up a huge sheet of white translucent cloth, which is used for Titania's bower or to cover sleeping Athenian youth.

There are few props other than a magical box. The box is large and square box with a detachable pyramid-shaped lid. The sides collapse outwards with an audible thump before disappearing into the ground leaving no evidence that the box has ever existed.

CAST AND COSTUMES

Firstly, for those of you who haven't experienced one of Propeller's productions before, I should warn you that the hunky thirty-something actors playing females make no attempt at androgyny. There are no fancy wigs, just short back and sides; no false breasts and the cursory nod at make-up comes in the form of a lopsided smear of lipstick, whitened faces or a blob of blue eye-shadow below painted eyebrows.

I am going to give you the list of characters and their costumes, in order of appearance, but first, I should say that the entire cast wear the same base garments worn by the fairies. These consist of corseted white long Johns cut off below the knee with white stockings and black shoes, granddad style tops and codpieces.

The COURT OF ATHENS:

THESEUS – Duke of Athens, is played by tall good-looking, Dominic Gerrard dressed in a black tailcoat over a brocade waistcoat, winged collar and black tie, white breeches and stockings, black shoes and top hat.

HIPPOLYTA – Queen of the Amazons, conquered by Theseus before the play opens, is played by the towering Will Featherstone. Hippolyta wears white long johns with a floor-length train made from a collection of old fur coats, held around the waist by a leather belt. A tiny top hat, complete with flower and veil, perches jauntily on the side of her head, while her neck is circled by a thick band of fox fur.

EGEUS – Hermia's father and advisor to Theseus, is played by David Acton dressed in a black frock coat over a dark embroidered waistcoat, black tie, cut off trousers and a top hat. David also takes the part of the mechanical, QUINCE.

HERMIA, Egeus's daughter, who's in love with Lysander, is played by the somewhat small and stocky young Mathew McPherson, who also takes the part of SNUG the joiner. Hermia is coyly dressed in a demure frilly white blouse, a gathered three-tiered, leafy patterned skirt, has white tights, black shoes, lace gloves and wears a cameo at her neck.

The part of DEMETRIUS – Hermia's suitor is taken by Arthur Wilson. Demetrius wears a black suit, the trousers ending above his ankles, and white shirt. His dark hair is slicked back from his youthful white face.

LYSANDER Hermia's love, is played by Richard Pepper, dressed in ankle length black trousers with a long black cloak lined in scarlet over a white ruffled shirt.

HELENA – Hermia's friend who's in love with Demetrius is played by the very tall and willowy Dan Wheeler. Helena wears a floor-length green striped silk dress with a pale bodice and green leg-o-mutton sleeves.

IN THE STREETS OF ATHENS we find the doltish Mechanicals, or tradesmen, all dressed in caramel-brown mechanics dustcoats, with hats. Woolly hats, tweed flat caps, battered trilbies and peaked cap, and they all plod about in wellington boots.

PETER QUINCE – the carpenter, and the mechanicals producer, has Corporals stripes on the arm of his dustcoat and wears a peaked cap.

NICK BOTTOM – the weaver played by Chris Myles, is the only one of the Mechanicals not to wear a coat, instead he has brown canvas trousers kept up by braces and tool pouch around his waist. Hanging from the centre of the pouch is a string-wrapped spindle. When he transforms into an Ass he sprouts long grey ears, wisps of mane about his neck, huge protruding teeth and the spindle elongates to become an enormous dangling willie.

FRANCIS FLUTE – the bellows mender wears a long striped scarf- he’s played by Alasdair Craig

ROBIN STARVELING – the tailor, is played by Mathew Pearson - a tape measure hangs around the neck of his dustcoat.

TOM SNOOT – the tinker arrives with a long pole across his shoulders from which hangs a collection of pots and pans.

SNUG – the joiner, is also played by McPherson.

Living in THE FOREST are the fairies:

OBERON – King of the fairies, is played by the darkly handsome, Darrel Brockis. Oberon is suitably imposing and slightly sinister in a fur collared, floor-sweeping black cloak covered in swirls of glittering sequins. Beneath his cloak he wears black trousers, a white shirt with a wide plum coloured cummerbund.

The part of TITANIA – Queen of the fairies, is taken by the tall, slim James Tucker. Titania is robed in a shimmering translucent long white dress – full skirted with black cobwebby lace sleeves, her neck circled by a deep collar of black cockerel feathers. Her dark hair stands up in a crest above her white face, while her eyes are circled in black.

PUCK, also known as Robin Goodfellow, is a mischievous spirit and servant to Oberon. We first see him at the start of the play, upside-down in a box, waving his red and white stripy legs and sparkly ruby slippers in the air. Over the eclectic tights he sports a corseted white ballet tutu a white vest and red braces. Joseph Chance, leaping and prancing light-footed about the forest, plays him with impish humour.

The anarchic fairies, servants to Titania are clothed in white long johns, codpieces and corsets and have harmonicas on cords around their necks. They cluster in mischievous groups or mince pointy toed with short steps giving them a wickedly camp air as they caper in frisky, yet supposed innocence, through the forest. They go by the names of, PEASEBOTTOM, COBWEB, MUSTARD SEED, MOTH, DRAGONFLY and GLOW WORM.

The music heard throughout the production is played live, on stage by members of the cast.

While the audience are still taking their seats, the fire curtain is up and the set is in full view. The white netting is dimly lit, the magical box stands shrouded in a white cloth in the centre and fairies sit at intervals around the forest floor.

Act one opens to Theseus's Palace in Athens.

Theseus, Hippolyta and attendants arrive, shortly followed by Egeus, Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius.

Celebrations are being planned to mark the marriage of Theseus, Duke of Athens and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, who he has recently been defeated in war. Egeus, a wealthy Athenian, brings his rebellious daughter, Hermia, to Theseus to demand the enforcement of an ancient law, for she is refusing to marry Demetrius, her father's choice, because she is in love with Lysander. And thus begins this tangled tale.

The lights come up on to a prologue scene in the dimly lit forest where fairies loll languidly against trees. A large, loose-sided box with a pyramid shaped lid, stands, partially concealed by a misty white cloth, in a clearing.

Continuing synopsis for Act I . . . if wanted by our patrons

Theseus orders Hermia to obey her father or, according to Athenian law she must face death or enter a convent. Hermia and Lysander deciding to elope the following night confide their plans to their friend Helena, and she, in love with Demetrius and hoping to win his affection, tells him of the plan. That night, all four lovers steal away into the forest.

A group of Athenian tradesmen, led by Peter Quince, are planning to perform a play, 'the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby' at the celebration of the Duke's wedding. To keep their preparations secret, they agree to meet the next night in the same forest to rehearse.

In the forest a marital war rages in the spirit world. Titania, Queen of the Fairies, has adopted a young boy, but her husband Oberon, King of the Fairies is fiercely jealous and wants the boy for himself. Titania has banished Oberon from her bed and company and whenever they meet, they fight.

Puck, Oberon's mischievous servant, and Titania's followers become embroiled in battle. Oberon resolves to torment Titania and sends Puck to find a magic plant, the juice of which, when squeezed on the eyelids of someone sleeping, will cause them to fall in love with the first creature they see on waking. Oberon uses the juice on Titania and she falls rapturously in love with Bottom, one of the Athenian tradesmen who's been bewitched into an Ass by Puck. Oberon also instructs Puck to use the juice on Demetrius so that he will fall in love with Helena, but Puck, mistaking the two Athenian youths, uses it on Lysander instead, who promptly falls in love with Helena...

ActII

Eventually, however, all the enchantments are lifted, the human lovers are paired and Titania and Oberon are reconciled. The three couples are married and Bottom's troupe perform their play at the nuptial celebrations.