



EVERYMAN

A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM

William Shakespeare

Edited by John F. Andrews
former editor of the *Shakespeare Quarterly*
Foreword by F. Murray Abraham

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FOREWORD
by F. Murray Abraham

Shakespeare is boring. Let's be honest, isn't that what most people think? It's like going on a diet: you know it's good for you, but you can't wait till it's over – especially with his comedies.

With a tragedy, each member of the audience responds individually, privately, so that while *you* might be moved to tears, everyone around you might be asleep. This doesn't diminish your experience; it rather intensifies the sense of private communication with the actors, the play, and your own feelings. You have become a quiet participant in an evening that may change your life, even though everyone else is snoring – including the actors. I've given bad performances, yet afterwards some of these people would be waiting to thank me and to explain how much the performance meant to them. It is also true that after some of my most brilliant performances people have gone out of their way to avoid me. I believe their responses are sincere, but so are mine. There is simply no way to measure a tragedy during a performance other than privately.

Comedy, however, is public and requires a collective response. When you laugh out loud and everyone else is quiet, chances are you're not going to laugh again. With a tragedy you arrive in a serious frame of mind, and if you aren't carried away in the first act, you trust that by the second act something monumental is going to happen. Even if it doesn't, the material is usually rich enough to promise thoughtful rewards long after the night is over. Comedy can't wait. If you're not laughing in the first act you might not be there for the second. And you're right. If it's a comedy, it should be funny.

But how often have you gone to a Shakespeare comedy that is

so funny you can't wait to see it again? How often have you seen any comedy you really loved? For me, the dry spell between completely satisfying, lusty comedies lasted nearly fourteen years. So much time had passed that I began to doubt my memory, to wonder if perhaps I had imagined the one sweet show that reminded everyone why they loved the theatre. Oh, bits of it would surface from time to time, but never the unity of playwright, company, and audience that vibrates with pleasure. Never, that is, until *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Towards the end of this fabulous play Shakespeare gathers the entire company together with the audience to watch a tragedy performed by amateurs. The moment is designed to focus all attention on six comic characters, the mechanicals, who have been promising to be funny if they only had the chance. It's the moment every comic actor longs for and dreads, where the audience sits back, folds its arms and says, 'Show us your stuff,' and I know that the first actors who played these parts thought the same thing we did, 'If this doesn't work I'm going to wring Shakespeare's neck.'

There was no need to worry. People were rolling around in their seats; they were weeping and shouting with laughter. It's hard to believe a 400-year-old joke could go over so well. The backstage crew would sneak around to the front of the house and stand with the ushers to watch the finale every single time eight times a week. The cast of *Julius Caesar*, which was playing next door, in another auditorium of New York's Public Theatre, would show up in their togas to see as much as they could between entrances.

This gathering together of strangers so that they respond with one mind is nothing less than magic. At certain performances there were audiences spanning four generations, and the nine-year-olds were as delighted as their great-grandparents. They walked out of the theatre with grinning, surprised faces, and many came backstage to let us know they would return to see it again. Why did they insist on telling us? I suppose it was partly encouragement, but I think they also wanted to cling to that

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feeling we had all created together. We had discovered a great playwright who was as immediate and alive to us now as he was four centuries ago. And I promise you, not one of those audiences will ever again say that Shakespeare is boring.

F. MURRAY ABRAHAM's classical repertory extends from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Chekhov. His Shakespearean roles include Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, the title role in *Macbeth*, Iago in *Othello*, and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1984 he won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Salieri in the film *Amadeus*.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO
A Midsummer Night's Dream

A Midsummer Night's Dream has long been one of Shakespeare's most popular works. It probes the very basis of artistic imagination, and it does so with a brilliance that has long made it a touchstone for writers, painters, composers, filmmakers, and philosophers with a compulsion to explore the mysteries of poetic vision. Its place in theatre history includes memorable productions by such influential directors as Samuel Phelps, Harley Granville-Barker, and Peter Brook. Its position in the musical repertory has been secure since the middle of the nineteenth century, when Felix Mendelssohn completed the orchestral score that remains his most popular composition. Its niche in the artist's studio has rewarded us with illustrations by painters of the stature of William Blake, Henry Fuseli, and George Cruikshank. And in our own century its role in the evolution of cinema has been scripted by filmmakers as distinctive as Max Reinhardt, Peter Hall, and Woody Allen.

Background

Just when Shakespeare wrote the play remains somewhat unclear, but most of the evidence points to the same period, 1594–96, when he was completing *Richard II* (whose lyricism has many stylistic similarities with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and *Romeo and Juliet* (which draws on some of the same source material in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and which seems in many ways to have been a tragic companion piece for the love trials treated comically in the world of Theseus' Athens.)

Many scholars believe that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was either conceived or adapted for performance at a noble wedding attended in 1595 by Queen Elizabeth, to whom it pays an oblique compliment in II.i.155–64. If so, while presenting it Shakespeare and his colleagues would have found themselves in a position analogous to that of Peter Quince, Bottom, and the other 'rude Mechanicals' in their rendition of 'Pyramus and Thisby' before Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and his betrothed, Hippolyta. This would have made the play even more amusing than it is without such a context, and it would have added yet another level of irony and complexity to a work whose dislocations of perspective are already too confusing for anything but the most sophisticated dream analysis.

Comment on the Play

Within the play, of course, it is the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta that frames the rest of the action. In the first scene Hermia is told that she has until the day of the Duke's solemn ceremony to decide whether she'll obey her father and marry Demetrius rather than Lysander. In the next scene the Athenian craftsmen who meet to rehearse their 'Interlude' do so because they hope to entertain the Duke and Duchess on the night of their nuptials. And in the third scene we learn that one of the reasons the King and Queen of the Fairies are now quarrelling in the Athenian woods is Oberon's affection for Hippolyta and his desire to be on hand to bless her marriage bed. As the play ends, Hermia's romantic difficulties are resolved, and she and the young man she loves are married along with Theseus and Hippolyta. The 'hempen Homespuns' are thrilled to receive word that their play is 'preferred'. And Oberon and Titania preside over a ritual in which Puck and the other Fairies consecrate the royal Palace and secure the newlyweds from harm.

But if concord prevails at the close of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is achieved only at the price of a great medley of discord. In the opening scene, the Theseus whose sword has tamed the

warring Amazons can resolve the dispute between Egeus and his daughter only by invoking a 'sharp Athenian Law' that forces Hermia and Lysander to flee in a desperate quest for freedom. Once they arrive in the woods, the lovers soon discover not only that they have been pursued there by Demetrius and Helena, but that all four youths are now at the mercy of an invisible Puck whose herbal ministrations, however well intended, turn friends into enemies and faithful lovers into infidels. Meanwhile the fairy quarrel that has disordered the seasons and turned all Nature topsy-turvy disrupts the Mechanicals' rehearsal: 'bully Bottom' the Weaver is 'translated' into an ass, and Oberon's lieutenant arranges for him to spend a night in the arms of a Titania who has been charmed into believing him the most beautiful creature she has ever seen. The result of all these mishaps is a lunatic tangle of misunderstandings in which we are shown that 'Reason and Love keep little Company nowadays'.

But of course that was something that had been clear from the opening scene in Athens. The miracle of Shakespeare's inspired plotting in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that he leads an astonishingly diverse collection of characters – and with them his audience – through an experience of frequently nightmarish madness to an eventual condition of sanity and harmony that can only be described, in Hippolyta's words, as 'strange and admirable'.

It is that capacity for the marvellous – that ability to take even so rock-bottom a sensibility as that of the imperturbable Weaver and transform it into something sublime – that Ralph Waldo Emerson was probably responding to when he referred to Shakespeare as 'inconceivably wise'. How the playwright achieved all his effects in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is surely beyond our capacity to fathom. And that, no doubt, is one of the reasons we keep returning to the play, generation after generation, with such awe and joy.

John F. Andrews