



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDUCATION PACK

The activities in this pack are inspired by Nancy Meckler's 2011 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They can be used either as stand-alone practical approaches to the play or as supporting activities for students seeing the production. They have been designed with KS3 students in mind, but can be adapted for other age groups.

ABOUT OUR EDUCATION WORK

We want children and young people to enjoy the challenge of Shakespeare and achieve more as a result of connecting with his work. Central to our education work is our manifesto for Shakespeare in schools; Stand up for Shakespeare. We know that children and young people can experience Shakespeare in ways that excite, engage and inspire them. We believe that young people get the most out of Shakespeare when they:

- Do Shakespeare on their feet – exploring the plays actively as actors do
- See it Live – participate as members of a live audience
- Start it Earlier – work on the plays from a younger age

We also believe in the power of ensemble; a way of working together in both the rehearsal room and across the company enabling everyone's ideas and voices to be heard. Artistic Director, Michael Boyd encapsulates this vision for ensemble in his rehearsal room where actors are encouraged to try out different interpretations of scenes before deciding together on what will be presented to an audience in the final performance.

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These symbols are used throughout the pack:



READ

contextual notes from the rehearsal room



ACTIVITY

Get on your feet for a classroom activity

More activities for use in teaching Shakespeare can be found in the RSC Shakespeare Toolkit for Teachers, available to buy at www.rsc.org.uk/shop. The RSC also runs a range of courses for teachers and students; for more information about these visit: www.rsc.org.uk/education

EXPLORING A CENTRAL THEME: OPPRESSION AND FREEDOM

'As she is mine, I may dispose of her.'



Nancy Meckler's production highlights the ideas of oppression and freedom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Hippolyta is an unwilling bride-to-be; Theseus at the start of the play a well-dressed thug and a godfather figure who rules over a dangerous underground world; Hermia bravely defies her domineering father; Philostrate is evidently under Theseus's thumb; and the other Athenian courtiers and servants are sullen and fearful.

The forest experience is Hippolyta's dream escape from this oppression into a place where she has equal rights and she and her partner can work through their issues.

In rehearsal, the cast played a number of status games to explore character choices and develop the contrast between the repressed Athens court and the freedom of the forest.

Here is a sequence of activities which will help students to understand this contrast in the play and relate these ideas to their own lives.

You may want to work in an open space or drama studio and use the sequence as a whole lesson or pair of lessons. Alternatively, you may wish to include segments of the sequence in a broader lesson plan to add a practical dimension. In that case, activities 1-4 would form one unit, 5-7 a second unit and 8-10 a third.



POWER GAMES

Power and status in our lives

1. With students working in pairs, ask them to describe to one another a time in their lives when a situation made them feel confident and able to express themselves well. Then ask them to describe a different situation when they felt inhibited and put down.
2. Working as a whole class, now ask students to volunteer two or three brief examples of the different experiences.
3. Choose one of these and 'cast' it from volunteers. Ask the rest of the class to help you create an image of a key moment from the incident which clearly illustrates the idea of empowerment. Do the same with a moment which shows oppression or a sense of powerlessness.
4. When creating these two contrasting images, pay particular attention to the central figure. How do people stand and move when they are feeling good about themselves, equal to others and able to be expressive? What kind of body language do we use when we are made to feel small, inadequate and possibly fearful?

Exploring status

- Now ask the class to stand and to create with you different levels of status or importance through their body language. They are going to create five levels, number one being very low status (for example, head hanging, feet close together, minimal eye-contact, arms folded, taking up as little space as possible). Number two is slightly higher status; number three sees herself as of equal status to other people (perhaps feet hip-width apart, good eye contact, a smile, happy to meet others). Number four has rather superior body language (chin high, takes up quite a lot of space, hands on hips). Number five is very high status and assumes s/he is boss. If there is one chair s/he gets it.
- Using sticky labels put a number from one to five on the back of each student, making sure that no student knows what their own number is. Ask them to hold very brief conversations, lasting about one minute each, with three other people in turn (perhaps suggesting a topic such as 'plans for the weekend'). But before they begin each of these conversations they should check the number on the back of the other person and relate to them according to that number. If the other person is a five, perhaps s/he is treated with deference. If it is a one it is possible to cut short the conversation and talk with someone more interesting? Time these encounters and cue the students to move on to a new meeting after one minute or so.
- Now ask students to form a line in order of the status level that they think they might be (they still have not seen their numbers) and to introduce themselves in the manner of their status, giving their name and number. When they have done that, they turn and show the numbers on their backs. Have they understood their status by the way others have treated them?
- Show students images from past productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, using the RSC gallery at: <http://www.rsc.org.uk/education/resources/bank/>

Go to:

http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc_how_to_work_with_images_2011.pdf

Using the questions provided under 'Discussing a production' ask them how these images create meaning through the staging choices and character body language.



Theseus (Jo Stone-Fewings) courts a reluctant Hippolyta (Pippa Nixon).
Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC

Oppression and freedom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

9. Look at the edited exchange on Page 5 between Theseus and Hippolyta in Act 1, Scene 1. Get students to work in pairs to read the text together. Discuss as a group what the relationship between the two characters might be, how they feel about each other and what is about to happen. Using the work that you have done previously to physicalise status, ask the students to play with the idea of staging the scene to best convey that there is a sense of imbalance.

Next, giving the context of actors playing both parts (i.e. Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania) ask the pairs to read through the text extract from Act 2, Scene 1 between Oberon and Titania and to explore what they think is the status between these two characters? How might they stage that to show the equality?

You could give the context of the rehearsal room from the notes on Page 6 if the students wanted to explore the two scene extracts within that context.

10. Discuss with the class what they have learned from their work. What is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* saying about how we should treat one another, about how the world works best? Are there areas of our own lives to which those ideas might apply?



Oberon (Jo Stone-Fewings) and Titania (Pippa Nixon) reconcile their differences
Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
EDITED TEXT SCRAPS

ACT 1 SCENE 1

THESEUS *Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
Another moon*

HIPPOLYTA *And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities*

THESEUS *Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love, doing thee injuries.*

ACT 2 SCENE 1

OBERON *Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!*

TITANIA *What, jealous Oberon? Fairy, skip hence.
I have forsworn his bed and company.*

OBERON *Tarry, rash wanton! Am I not thy lord?*

INVESTIGATING THE CHARACTERS

'It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream.'



This production is very interested in the transformative nature of dreams. In the opening scene, Hippolyta, unhappy in her enforced relationship with Theseus, escapes into the dreamworld magic forest. Like many dreams this place is populated by people who have surrounded her in the real world, but they are changed; freed from their everyday constraints and inhibitions. The tense and servile Philostrate becomes the naughty, lively Puck. The workers or mechanicals who came to court in the first scene to repair a domestic problem in the cellar are transformed into the amateur actors ambitious for the Duke's approval. Three sullen and unhappy court ladies become the cheerful, curious fairies who attend Titania. Hippolyta herself becomes Titania, Queen of the Fairies, finds her voice and defies the demands of her husband.

In rehearsals the actors spent considerable time developing their 'real life' characters and then discovering the alter egos for those characters who inhabit the magic forest. It was important to the director and cast that the Athens people are detailed and rooted in the real world. By contrast the forest characters are more colourful and less predictable.



MANY OF THE ACTIVITIES BELOW ARE ADAPTED FROM THE ACTORS' REHEARSAL EXERCISES.

Dream States

- Ask students to think of two situations in which they behave very differently – in class and at a party is an obvious example. Ask them to write down five words which describe them in one situation and another five for the other. Perhaps they can illustrate these words with a sketch or stick drawing of themselves or two still picture using their bodies.
- Discuss the nature of dreams with the class. What do they think of the idea that our dreams express either our fears or our hopes and wishes? Does anyone recall a dream which illustrates hopes or fears that they would be prepared to share with the class?
- If students have seen the 2011 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* production, ask them to explore the concept of characters having alter egos in the forest as described above. If they haven't seen the production, describe the idea of the alter egos for them and ask for their views. Does it make sense to them as an approach to the play? Why would a director choose to take this approach? Why don't we keep presenting the same production year after year – why is each one unique? It is important to explain about the doubling in this production and the reasons for it.
- Ask students to choose a character from the play who particularly interests them and have them write a backstory¹ for this character. This can be as brief or detailed as you choose, but it should include information about where the character was born, something about his education, job, family and friends, hobbies and interests and dreams for the future (this last is especially important). Ask them to write this account in the first person.
- Now ask them to make two lists again, this time first of adjectives describing the character as she or he appears in everyday life and second of words describing how he or she would like to be.
- Based on the work on body language and status on Page 3, ask them to create still images of their characters in everyday life and their alter egos in the dreamworld.

¹Backstory: an autobiographical account of a character's life up to the point where he or she enters into the action of the play.

- Introduce movement: Give your students a simple vocabulary of choices to work with by asking, 'Is your character when she moves . . .'

- light or heavy? - swift or slow? - free or bound?
- wide or narrow? - smooth or jagged?

What word would best describe your character's movement? Some examples are:

- hopping - wobbling - striding
- marching - floating - exploding
- slashing - twisting - darting

Ask them work in pairs for this activity and to coach one another.

- Ask students or a group of volunteer students to position themselves around the room as if they were images in an art gallery, using the still image which represents their character in everyday life. Visit these images in turn (all the students except the one you are viewing can join the visiting group, hopping back into position when their number is called). On each visit invite the statue to come to life and move. Then explain that when you clap your hands the statue will magically switch into their alter ego or dream state. Invite this version to move as well. Ask students to guess which characters are being portrayed and what words would best describe them.
- With students working in small groups or as a demonstration exercise for the whole class, interview particular characters about their past histories and plans for the future.



The lovers are confused. Clockwise Demetrius (Alex Hassell), Lysander (Nathaniel Martello-White) and Hermia (Matti Houghton). Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC



An angry Oberon (Jo Stone-Fewings) puts a spell on his fairy wife Titania (Pippa Nixon). Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC

EXPLORING THEATRE CHOICES FOR A *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*: CREATING THE FAIRIES

'I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee.'



The creative team for a particular production usually starts work with some form of the question, 'What is this play about for us now, for our time?' 'What aspects of the text do we want to highlight in our production?' The obvious follow-on question – 'How will we do that?' Inevitably *A Midsummer Night's Dream* raises two related issues: 'What kind of a place, then, is our magic forest?' and 'Who are the fairies?' As with the witches in *Macbeth* the 'Dream Fairies' have been interpreted in a great variety of ways, ranging from scary old men to stropky, gum-chewing adolescents. Nor would the fairies in the original production have been depicted as gentle tutued ballerinas as most Elizabethans believed in fairies and appreciated that they came in all shapes and sizes; they also understood that fairies could be unpredictable and sometimes dangerous.



CREATING THE *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* FAIRIES GIVES YOUNG PEOPLE A SPLENDID OPPORTUNITY TO EXERCISE THEIR CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION. TRY THE SEQUENCE BELOW NOT ONLY FOR THIS BENEFIT BUT ALSO AS A WAY OF SHOWING HOW OPEN TO INTERPRETATION SHAKESPEARE USUALLY IS.

Who are these fairies?

- Look at the images on Page 10 with your students. Ask them for words which describe the different kinds of fairies they see in each. Would they like to meet such people? What might the fairies in each of the images be thinking at this moment?
- Ask them to write one paragraph diary entries for two or three of the fairies in the images. Give them a specific event to write about, such as their first encounter with the four lovers in the forest or Titania's infatuation with Bottom as a donkey.
- Now explain that they are going to create entirely different kinds of fairies. First brainstorm together what kind of forest this is and why you want it to be like that. Is it cold, dark and dangerous or exotic, tropical and unpredictable?

Have students work in pairs or small groups and get them to do any one or a combination of the following:

- Draw fairies that would inhabit such a wood (this should be in colour).
- Costume one or more of their group as a fairy native to such a forest. The costume can be simply indicative of the spirit of the fairy rather than a detailed design.
- Create a still image of their fairies in body language and activity typical of them. This image could come to life with the fairy song from Act 2 Scene 2 (see Page 9).
- Write a short piece of dialogue which represents a typical exchange between two or three of their fairies. This might be a continuation of an onstage event such as Titania's first encounter with Bottom or a plan to make mischief for the lovers. Rehearse and present this.

A SONG FROM
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

ACT 2 SCENE 2

*You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blindworms, do no wrong;
Come not near our Fairy Queen.*

*Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence;
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm nor snail do no offence.*

*Philomel with melody,
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby.
Never harm,
Nor spell nor charm
Come our lovely lady nigh.
So good night, with lullaby.*



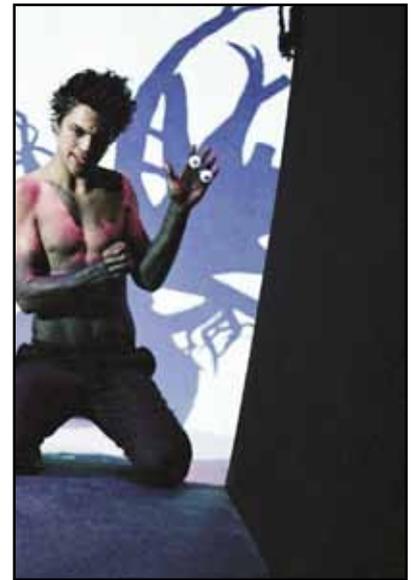
Bird masked fairies, 1954
Photograph by Angus McBean
© The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust



Fairies on Trapezes, 1970
Photograph by Reg Wilson © RSC



Puppet Fairies, 1981
Photograph by Tom Holte © The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust



Puck, 2002
Photograph by Manuel Harlan © RSC



Tough boy fairies, 1987
Photograph by Reg Wilson © RSC



Puck and Oberon, 1989
Photograph by Joe Cocks
© The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

UNDERSTANDING THE PLAY'S STRUCTURE: FOUR WORLDS COLLIDE

'Who is here?'



A Midsummer Night's Dream has a complicated story line. This is because it involves the activities and coincidental encounters of four distinct groups of people. It could be said that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has four major plot lines.

When actors are called to rehearsals of the play, often they are asked to come in their group – the lovers, the fairies, the mechanicals or the Athenian court. Directors sometimes refer to these groups as the four 'worlds' of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because each has such a distinct culture, entirely different from the others. It is the clash of these cultures which creates much of the humour as well as the action in the play. The play's architecture is also responsible for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* central themes, in particular, the movement from rigidity to tolerance, from anger and confrontation to peace and harmony.



Theseus (Jo Stone-Fewings) tells Hermia (Matti Houghton) what will happen if she disobeys her father
Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC



THE SEQUENCE BELOW IS INTENDED TO HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE STRUCTURE AND STORYLINE OF THE PLAY AND HOW THOSE CREATE ITS MEANINGS. HOPEFULLY IT WILL ALSO GIVE THEM A PERSONAL STAKE IN THE PLAY, BY INVESTING IN AND BELONGING TO ONE OF THE FOUR WORLDS. THESE EXERCISES MIGHT SERVE AS REVISION, AFTER STUDENTS KNOW THE PLAY FAIRLY WELL.

FOUR WORLDS COLLIDE

Bringing the four worlds to life

- Ask students to name the four groups of characters involved in the play's action.
- Divide the class into four groups and assign each group one of the four worlds: the Athenian court, the lovers, the fairy kingdom and the workers or mechanicals.
- Ask the groups to do the following for their world:
 - Create a badge which represents their character, their spirit.
 - Create a motto for their group, which might be an adaptation of a line from the play; turn this into a choral piece or chant with movement.
 - Describe what's for dinner tonight for the members of their group.
 - Describe their group's hopes and plans for the future.
- Ask the four groups to present their thinking, their badges and their motto chants to the rest of the class.

- Have them imagine that the four groups will all be attending a village fair, a county fair or a street market. Ask them to choose a specific character from their world and to find reasons for this character's visit. Is Bottom, for example, flogging something which has fallen off the back of a lorry? Is Theseus on a secret visit? Are the lovers having trysts? Are the fairies, invisible, causing havoc?
- In an open space, call characters up one at a time or in pairs and ask them to make a still image representing their main purpose for being at the fair or market. When all are in place, clap the tableau alive, so that there is movement and sound. If this image is allowed to develop into an improvisation, interesting encounters between the worlds are likely to take place.
- An additional exercise would be for each character to create for himself a mini-monologue which could be brought to life while other characters were frozen. As a further challenge, ask students to choose one line from the text either for their character to incorporate into their monologue or to use as what they say when the tableau comes to life. See Pages 14-15 for examples of text scraps for this exercise.



Helena (Lucy Briggs-Owen) begins her forest journey as Oberon (Jo Stone-Fewings) plots his intervention.
Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC

Exploring four worlds colliding

- Divide your space into four areas and send each of the four groups to one of these. This is their symbolic home. If your space is flexible you might ask them to create a structure which represents the spirit of their group – a symmetrical, orderly place with thrones for the court, for example.
- Give one or two scenes to each of the groups to work on. These should be scenes in which more than one world is involved. Act 1 Scene 2, Act 3 Scene 1 and Act 5 Scene 1 are good options. Make sure each group has at least one scene to work on. Ask them to prepare the following:
 - Decide how their group is feeling at the start and the end of the scene. Be clear about what happens to their group in the scene and how they feel about that.
 - Decide which is the most important moment in the scene from their group’s point of view and why it is so important.
 - Create a still image representing that moment.
- Clear a space in the middle of the four worlds and invite one representative from each of the worlds involved in the first chosen scene into that space. Ask that person to explain their group’s feelings at the start and end of the scene. Then have all the members present their images.
- Invite the rest of the class to ‘hot seat’ characters in the images. Ask the class which moment in the scene they think is being represented by each of the groups.
- Talk as a class about the differences between the moments chosen by the different groups for that scene. Why was one moment so important to one group and not to another, for example? What kinds of feelings are running high in this scene? What is likely to happen next? How do these events and emotions take us toward a crisis and eventually a resolution?



The Mechanicals perform for the court.
From left to right: Bottom (Marc Wootton) and Snout (Chiké Okonkwo).
Photograph by Ellie Kurtz © RSC

TEXT SCRAPS FOR **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

THE WORLD OF THE COURT

'Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments.'

'To you your father should be as a god.'

'Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword . . . '

'As she is mine, I may dispose of her. . . '

*'Either to die the death, or to abjure
For ever the society of men.*

'Come, my Hippolyta. What cheer, my love?'

THE LOVERS' WORLD

'The course of true love never did run smooth.'

'Tomorrow truly I will meet with thee.'

'I love thee not, therefore pursue me not.'

'Hence, get thee gone and follow me no more.'

'She was a vixen when she went to school.'

*'Now I perceive they have conjoined all three
To fashion this false sport in spite of me.'*

'What? Should I hurt her, strike her, kill her dead?'

*'It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream . . . '*

THE FAIRY LAND

'I am that merry wanderer of the night'

'You spotted snakes with double tongue'

'Come not near our Fairy Queen.'

*'I'll put a girdle round the earth
In forty minutes.'*

'I know a bank where the wild thyme grows. . . '

'The Fairy Land buys not the child of me. . . '

'Over hill, over dale . . . '

*'And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.'*

THE WORLD OF THE MECHANICALS

'Our play is preferred!'

'I will make the Duke say, 'Let him roar again!'

'Let me not play a woman – I have a beard coming.'

'If he come not, then the play is marred.'

'I'll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny's Tomb.'

'O Bottom, thou art translated!'

'Let me play the lion, too.'

'Is all our company here?'

INTERVIEW WITH NANCY MECKLER

Nancy Meckler, director of the RSC's 2011 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, talks about the rehearsal period and the production's interpretative choices.

How did you come to choose this play? What is its appeal for you? What relevance does a play about fairies and the laws of ancient Athens and a magic wood have for us today?

I directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* over 20 years ago and so it was very exciting to come back to it, read it afresh, and see so many things in it which really spoke to me today. Whenever I do a classic play I think about those aspects of the story that are timeless and universal. Although it is useful to understand what the play meant to Shakespeare's audience, I feel my task is to connect with the elements which are about our lives today. For this production I became fascinated by the idea, which has often been explored, that Theseus and Hippolyta are dreaming and so the whole fairy world is really their dreams, in which they dream they are King and Queen of the Fairies. Theseus and Hippolyta are actually figures of Greek mythology, so Shakespeare was not setting his play in a real Athens. This gave me licence to come up with a parallel for the glimpse he gives us of a city state where the law is patriarchal and where women are treated as possessions and pawns in the lives of the men.

What were some of the questions you asked yourself as you prepared to direct *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

I was struck by two very early events in the play. First when Theseus says to Hippolyta, 'I woo'd thee with my sword and did thee injury,' and then moments later when Egeus says about his daughter Hermia, 'she is mine and I may dispose of her as I like and if she refuses to marry the man I choose, I want her put to death according to the law of Athens'. I asked myself how I could find a world to set the play in which would bring across the harsh cruelties of this world, which is why I set the play in a gangster world of East London. We created a gangster hangout, with bodyguards and young girl molls, with the idea that when we go into the dream world, they would dream themselves to be freer or more anarchic, but basically less repressed. And so they played the fairies. The four young lovers go into the forest and are so released by the experience that they explore their deepest passions and fears. By the end of the play they are not sure whether they were awake or dreaming. Theseus' right hand man Philostrate is a tense, repressed, taken-for-granted assistant. When he dreams at night, he is Puck and is able to be anarchic and mischievous. In this way, every character in the first scene later appears as a dream self in the "forest".

What qualities were you looking for in your Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania?

Because Hippolyta is a captured woman, I wanted her to be quite young. I wanted to avoid the joke of the audience finding it funny that an older woman is in love with an ass. I was keen to explore the idea that she experiences her sexual self as a fun experience for the first time in her life. She had been Queen of the Amazons, and so we gave her a parallel back story – that she had been a powerful drug baron, whose family "business" had been overthrown by Theseus. In Theseus/Oberon I wanted someone who could play the repressed gangster and then the released, enraged Fairy King who goes through a gradual transformation in the dream.

Oberon discovers empathy when he witnesses Helena's plight. He becomes generous and tries to help her. He also comes to 'pity' Titania and to feel shame for the sexual humiliation he has put her through. We tried to bring out that journey so that when he wakes up as Theseus, it is as if he has learned about himself in the dream and is a more open, generous version of his earlier self. Although Hippolyta takes us into the dream world, it is Theseus's learning journey more than anyone's.

Why did you choose to set the action in the 1960s?

We chose the late 60's as our period. I wanted to set it in a time when the women's movement was beginning to flower. And also in a time when women were feeling freer than they had in a long time. It was the early days of the pill and everything was changing rapidly. Prior to the sixties, life was very conservative. Young people basically wanted to grow up and become "grownups". Youth culture was just beginning to show it itself. In the same way, our young lovers start off quite conservatively, and then in the forest they let loose and go wild. It is meant to parallel well brought up children of the early sixties going into the era of love and peace, letting their hair grow long, and becoming flower children.

How would you describe your approach to rehearsals?

My rehearsal approach is to create a relaxed and open space so that everyone feels free to make suggestions and try things out. I like to have ideas that come from what is happening in the rehearsal room. I use lots of exercises and improvisation. I invite people in to help with group dynamics, to get people working off each other physically. Of course it is important to set out parameters and make sure everyone understands that finally the decisions have to be mine. As I have to have the overall vision. Otherwise it could be a mess.

How would you describe your fairies and why are they like that?

The girl fairies: we wanted them to be a playful, innocent, strong group of girls. As if the drugged, jaded girls of the gangster world who were so cut off from themselves could experience a lost innocence in the dream world. That is why their costumes looked a bit like dressing up clothes.

The boy fairies: we made them spiteful tricksters, picking up from how some fairies were perceived in Shakespeare's day when people thought fairies were life-sized and scary. Again, the actors based their fairies on dream versions of the bodyguards or characters they played in the first scene.

Your production is full of wonderfully inventive detail. Can you describe for us how a moment you particularly like came to be created?

I thought it would be good to have a moment when we see Oberon's fairies chasing after Titania's fairies and trying to steal the changeling child. The actors came up with the idea of that baby being made of cloth. And each time the boy fairies ran after it, it would dissolve into a cloth and then a new cloth "baby" would appear in the arms of another fairy. It was hard work getting it to work and we also were able to work in the final baby appearance, being a cloth filled with little lights in the shape of the baby. Each aspect of this idea and the way it worked out, came from different people throwing ideas in. Truth to tell, at one point I wanted to cut it as I thought it would never be clear. But the actors pleaded with me to give it a go, and we found that our lighting designer could point out the moment that each new "baby" was created from the cloth. And so it worked. A real collaboration.

Music and dance are features of this production. How were the songs and dances created during the rehearsal period?

Keith Clouston, our composer, spent a great deal of time in rehearsal and also researching music of the period. Once again, there was a lot of discussion and trying things out and making changes to arrive at the final score. Liz Ranken, our choreographer, knew she wanted a strong drum beat for the dance where Oberon and Titania transform back into Theseus and Hippolyta. We felt it was important to see them actually leaving their dream world and re-emerging as their waking selves. And because it was a dance, it heightened the transformation.

You stress in this production the injustice of male dominance and the need to right that imbalance before harmony can prevail. What do you think Shakespeare's view of that issue is?

It was remarkable working on the play to sense Shakespeare's empathy with women. There are so many references to women friendships and loyalty. This theme is threaded through the whole piece and makes the piece feel incredibly modern.

What do you hope the audience will take from your production? How might an experience of your production change us?

I hope they will have experienced the play on many levels – its humour, its humanity, its depth of understanding about relationships. And that they will have an experience of feeling connected to each other and the actors in a way which brings home how life enhancing and communal a theatre experience can be.

PIPPA NIXON INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

AUGUST 2011

Interviewer Mary Johnson

You are playing Hippolyta and Titania in the current RSC production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Nancy Meckler. You are playing two roles – why are the roles doubled in this production?

Because I think Nancy's vision was for the play to be Hippolyta's dream, and so when she dreams she becomes Titania, which I suppose is almost like an alter ego, or Hippolyta at her rawest without any guards up to protect her from life. It is set in the late 60s/early 70s, and Theseus has captured her and he is desperate for her to love him. She is willing to marry him, but certainly doesn't want to love him, and so when she dreams she becomes Titania, who is a deeper essence of herself. As a result of their journey and her being drugged, then seeing Theseus, who becomes Oberon in her dream, being able to love here, when she comes back into reality she can love him for real.

So you say she is willing to marry him but not to love him – why is she willing to marry him?

We looked back at the original Greek mythology of Theseus and Hippolyta, and in that Theseus manages to capture Hippolyta and out-trick her, and by doing that, because he has rightfully succeeded in wooing her and winning her, she goes with him. We decided that we wanted to keep that idea, that if he has managed to capture her, in some ways he has won fair and square, and the consequence of that is marriage. But the only power she has is 'I'm not going to love you'.

So if it's Hippolyta's dream and she goes into this dream world, does she go into it with a wish to find a way to marry him that's acceptable, or is there a hope that she might come to love him?

That's an interesting question. I don't think she goes into the dream world in order to find a way to love him. I think that just happens, because when she dreams and she becomes Titania, the changeling child in our production represents her love, which manifests itself in the form of a child. This is the ultimate yearning of a woman – protection of that child – and Oberon wants that love, wants that child. After she is drugged and falls in love with Bottom the donkey, and then gives the child to Oberon, when she is no longer under the power of this dotting drug, and in some ways returns to her purest self, somehow she has given that love to Oberon and all is made right; and again, when she comes out of the actual dream world, somehow through that whole experience she has managed to give over herself to Theseus.

That explains why by the fourth act she can appear arm in arm with Theseus and is clearly happy to be with him, despite having been so unhappy in the first act. Who for you then is Hippolyta at the beginning of the play?

Because Nancy set the play in this underground world – it's sort of non-specific, because she didn't want us to make it very specific – Theseus is supposed to be a drug lord and involved in trafficking and drugs, and Hippolyta is from the same world, not in the same land, perhaps – she is of a different country – but they are of the same status and of equal position in the world. Looking back over the mythology of Theseus and Hippolyta in Greek times, they were both warriors, Hippolyta heading up the Amazon women and Theseus heading up his army, and both of them are quite cut throat in that time. So we thought how do we relate that to an underground world in the 60s, because Nancy wanted to set it in this very dark chaotic world and lifestyle, and also wanted it to be in a time when women were seen as sex objects or objects of ownership and possession. We decided that was where it sets them, but I felt very strongly Hippolyta was her own woman and had this empire where perhaps lots of women worked for her, and they held their own right within the world. Then a book was recommended *The Queen of the South* by Arturo Pérez-Reverte. This is a story about a woman called Teresa Mendoza. A trauma occurred in her life, and through a variety of people she met she managed to rise up in this dark underground drug world, and traffic drugs across half the world, and she is respected by a number of people, huge gang leaders, and I based the character on her really.

So by the fourth act, are you and Theseus going to be together operating a drug world, or have you both gone off to a different place then?

That's interesting. I don't think we ever fully answered that, but they are both transformed, and in some ways I think whatever world they were involved in would have to change because their outlook on the world has changed. In that huge speech Titania has about the forces of jealousy and the world going into disarray, Nancy was keen for us to approach that not only by going through our arguments and dissention as the world rebelled against us, but also I think the worlds that Hippolyta and Theseus were involved in, which are incredibly corrupt and have hugely negative effects on people and life as a whole. I'm not saying that they wouldn't go back to that, but I think the way that they appear in that world would change.

So is Bottom a surrogate for the love she can't express to Oberon because of the war?

Yes, I think the whole thing of falling in love with Bottom is never her choice. It's Oberon who chooses to drug her and sexually humiliate her because of the child, but I think it releases something in Titania to be able to love and to be able to give herself over so freely, so that I am sure when she is returned to her natural state, it has in some way loosened up her feelings for Oberon/Theseus.

And as a result, the effect in the fourth act and fifth acts on both of you has been to make you so gracious and so charming, because at the start Theseus was a bully and you were sullen, and it's quite a journey?

Yes, but sometimes the play doesn't answer everything, because there are these huge leaps and you have to find these answers for yourself. I think that opening scene can be played in two ways. It can be played so that you first of all see Theseus and Hippolyta madly in love and really excited about their wedding day, which in some ways wouldn't make sense of the fourth and fifth act, when you see them again outside the forest. Nancy was very keen to have the beginning as chaos and as disorder and unhappiness, and she based it on those lines that Theseus says: 'Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,/And won thy love doing thee injuries;/ But I will wed thee in another key,' and then also says to Philostrate: 'Turn melancholy forth to funerals;/The pale companion is not for our pomp.' Yes, she was keen to start the play off confused and not having any answers, and also there is this huge entrance of Egeus coming on with Hermia and again speaking about her as a possession, and asking for her death. Also Hippolyta doesn't speak after her first four lines, and through the exchange with Hermia, Demetrius, Lysander and Egeus with Theseus. There is one bit in the middle of Theseus's speech where, after he has told Hermia what the outcome is going to be, he says: 'Come my Hippolyta: what cheer my love? What does that mean?' I just think she feels a massive connection to Hermia and finds it despicable the way she is being treated.

Did you do any preparation before you went into rehearsal for the two roles, before the formal rehearsal started?

I didn't really, and I purposely chose not to do that, although normally I do. This is the third time I have done the play, so I know the play very well. I have played Hermia twice, but I have never played Hippolyta or Titania. I knew when I met Nancy about the period she wanted to set it in, and I knew the world that she wanted to set it in, but I also thought maybe that's all up for change. Because we had two other plays to focus on, I had given my attention over to those, and was just looking forward to the eight weeks in the rehearsal room to get going. This is the direction she wants to go in, and therefore I can start creating the characters. The only thing I did before the rehearsals was look through the text and ask myself three questions – what do the characters say about themselves, what do they say about other people, and what do other people say about them? And so I looked at the text and found quotes that fitted in with those three questions, but that is all I chose to do.

Can you just describe one of the highlights of the rehearsal period, a moment of revelation or excitement, something that happened?

I think one of the key moments for me and Jo Stone-Fewings in the rehearsal period was when Liz Ranken, who is the movement director for the production, facilitated this moment in the play when we come out of the dream world and into the real world, when I come out of playing Hippolyta and into Titania, and Jo comes out of playing Oberon and back into Theseus. We did that by this transformation dance, because when Titania is awakened from being in love with Bottom the ass, Oberon says to her: 'Then, my queen, in silence sad,/Trip we after the night's shade;/We the globe can compass soon,/Swifter than the wand'ring moon,' and then says: 'let's dance upon the ground where these sleepers are,' which are the two lovers and Bottom, and so we used this dance as a way of turning back into Hippolyta and Theseus. It was a really significant moment for us both, physically disrobing ourselves through this very amicable and togetherness dance and just coming back together in this love dance, an outrageously sexy dance. Then having managed to form themselves back into Hippolyta and Theseus, they find themselves awake in the forest together and not really knowing how they got there. That's a very long-winded way of answering your question, but for us it was a really helpful way to bridge the gap between the final scene between Oberon and Titania, and then seeing Hippolyta and Theseus also finding their love, so that felt very exciting and significant.

How did you become an actress?

I got into acting through school really. I went to a school in Bedford called St Andrew's, and in Year 8 there were some auditions for the school play and I went and auditioned for that. I remember a girl from my year who was in front of me and I thought 'That sounded brilliant and I'm going to do it like that', so I went in and did it how I thought she had done it, and then got the part, which was great, and she got a different part. And through that school and through the drama teacher who directed that play, I then did lots of school productions and lots outside of school, like youth theatre groups and then went to a sixth form school and got into theatre there, which then naturally led on to drama school, through drama school and then becoming a professional actress, so I think I have been involved in acting since I was 12.

You have also been not only in live theatre but on television and in film. Is live theatre your preference?

Live theatre is what got me into acting and found my passion in the first place, so I will always come back to theatre. I love it. I think it is an extraordinary art form and wonderful for an actor because anything can happen in some ways, and you have to find routes through to make that work. We will have been here for seven months and two of those plays in particular we will have played from April through to October and that's a long time to play the same part. But you can continue to find new things and deepen that character, and you don't get that opportunity in TV or film because often you will have a part of the day to shoot one scene and then you will never come back to that scene again or that part or that character, but I really do enjoy doing TV and film and I would like to do more.

Is there something that you hope audiences will take away from Dream?

I really hope that people come away finding they've laughed a lot, and feeling full of joy and full of love for life and theatre.

