



ArtSmarts

2002-2003 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

AQUILA THEATRE COMPANY

March 21, 2003 11:00am

Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this teacher's guide helpful in preparing your students for the Aquila Theatre Company's matinee presentation. The guide provides information about the company, play background and synopsis, a biography of William Shakespeare, and some discussion topics for students. Also included in the guide is a review of theatre conventions and audience protocol.

Your students will be seeing a guided tour of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is not a condensed version of the play. An actor will be introducing the main characters and providing a narrative link between key scenes, which are acted out in full costumes with the full set and props. The presentation will be followed by a question and answer session.

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The Aquila Theatre Company



The Aquila Theatre Company has gained an international reputation as one of the foremost producers of touring classical theatre. The company presents fresh and inventive productions, using both British and American performers. Founded in London in 1991 by Peter Meineck, the company has won both critical and academic acclaim for its work worldwide, which includes extensive touring throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada.

Last year, Aquila was named Company in Residence at the Center for Ancient Studies at New York University. The company has also performed at more than 150 North American theatres and universities. The Aquila Theatre Company for Young Audiences is currently working with the Lincoln Center Institute presenting classical drama to schools and theatres in New York and across the country.

Adapted from the introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
edited by Russ McDonald, *The Pelican Shakespeare*

Written in approximately 1595, about five years into William Shakespeare's career as a playwright, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* marks the beginning of his artistic maturity. A sign of that development is his insistence on scrutinizing everything – each event, character, word, idea – from several sides. He prompts the audience by developing a complex structure of parallel stories, complementary characters, and opposing themes. The Athenian court, where the action begins, is associated with the law, with reason, with civilization, property, parents, daylight.

The wood outside Athens, to which the action moves, is the realm of magic, liberty, lovers, dreams, night. Theseus and Hippolyta preside over the mortal world, Oberon and Titania over the fairy kingdom, and each couple may be seen as a mirror image of the other, one mannerly and reasonable, the other passionate and volatile. Since they never appear onstage at the same time, the two pairs are often portrayed by the same actors, a doubling that implies the commingling of logic and sensuality.

Shakespeare contrasts the young lovers in a different way. Helena and Hermia are physical opposites, the one tall and fair – the Elizabethan ideal of beauty ironically embodied in the rejected Helena – the other short and dark. He also reverses the cliché of female fickleness. Both young women remain faithful to their initial lovers, even though Lysander and Demetrius seem very much alike; here it is the men who transfer their affections, Demetrius once and Lysander twice.

Day and night, male and female, law and liberty, reason and imagination, scorn and sympathy – all these contrasts make up a vibrant imaginary world. Shakespeare inspires his audience to wonder at the complexity of human affection, to shift allegiance emotionally and intellectually, and ultimately to recognize the contribution of conflict to the creation of harmony.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

Set against a classical Athenian backdrop, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deals with the universal theme of love, and its attendant complications: passion, lust, frustration, depression, confusion, and marriage. The plot focuses on three parallel stories: the trials and experiences of two sets of lovers, the world of the Fairy King and Queen and their servants, and a group of rude craftsmen attempting to stage a production of "Pyramus and Thisbe" for the wedding of the Duke of Athens.

A Play Synopsis

Source: Shakespeare Resource Center

<<http://www.bardweb.net/plays>>

Lysander loves Hermia, and Hermia loves Lysander. Helena loves Demetrius; Demetrius used to love Helena but now loves Hermia. Egeus, Hermia's father, prefers Demetrius as a suitor and enlists the aid of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, to enforce his wishes upon his daughter. According to Athenian law, Hermia is given four days to choose among Demetrius, life in a nunnery, or a death sentence. Hermia, ever defiant, chooses to escape with Lysander into the surrounding forest.

Complications arise in the forest. Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of Fairies, are locked in a dispute over a boy whom Titania has adopted. Oberon instructs his servant Puck to bring him magic love drops, which Oberon will sprinkle in the Queen's eyes as she sleeps, whereupon Titania will fall in love with the first creature she sees upon awakening. Meanwhile, Helena and Demetrius have also fled into the woods after Lysander and Hermia. Oberon, overhearing Demetrius's denouncement of Helena, takes pity upon her and tells Puck to place the magic drops on the eyes of Demetrius as well, so that Demetrius may fall in love with Helena. Puck, however, makes the mistake of putting the drops in the eyes of Lysander instead. Helena stumbles over Lysander in the forest, and the spell is cast; Lysander now desires Helena and renounces a stunned Hermia.

In the midst of this chaos, a group of craftsmen are rehearsing for a production of "Pyramus and Thisbe," to be played for the Duke at his wedding. Puck impishly casts a spell on Bottom, a weaver, to give him the head of a donkey. Bottom, as luck would have it, is the first thing Titania sees when she awakens;

hence, Bottom ends up being lavishly kept by the Queen. Oberon enjoys this sport, but is less amused when it becomes apparent that Puck has botched up the attempt to unite Demetrius and Helena. Oberon himself anoints Demetrius with the love potion and ensures that Helena is the first person he sees. However, Helena understandably feels that she is now being mocked by both Demetrius *and* Lysander (who is still magically enamored of her).

Finally, Oberon decides that all good sports must come to an end. He puts the four lovers to sleep and gives Lysander the antidote for the love potion so that he will love Hermia again when they all wake up. Next, Oberon gives Titania the antidote, and the king and Queen reconcile. Theseus and Hippolyta then discover Lysander, Hermia, Helena, and Demetrius asleep in the forest. All return to Athens to make sense of what they think is a strange dream. Likewise, Bottom returns to his players, and they perform “Pyramus and Thisbe” at the wedding feast (which has since become a wedding of three couples). As everyone retires, fairies perform their blessings and Puck delivers a tender epilogue soliloquy.



Dramatis Personae
(The Characters of the Play)

Theseus, Duke of Athens
Egeus, father of Hermia

Lysander, in love with Hermia
Demetrius, in love with Hermia
Philosrate, Master of the Revels
Quince, a carpenter
Snug, a joiner
Bottom, a weaver
Flute, a bellows-mender
Snout, a tinker
Starveling, a tailor
Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons; betrothed of Theseus
Hermia, in love with Lysander
Helena, in love with Demetrius
Oberon, King of Fairies
Titania, Queen of Fairies
Puck, or Robin Goodfellow
Peaseblossom, a fairy
Cobway, a fairy
Moth, a fairy
Mustardseed, a fairy
Other Fairies, attendants to Oberon and Titania
Attendants to Theseus and Hippolyta

A Sketch of William Shakespeare

Adapted from: Shakespeare Resource Center

<<http://www.bardweb.net/man>>

William Shakespeare's personal history is mysterious. The two primary sources for information on Shakespeare – or the “Bard” as he is sometimes called – are his works and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan England (belonging to the period of Queen Elizabeth, 1568 to 1603). But the many gaps in this body of information tells us little about Shakespeare, the man.

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, allegedly on April 23, 1564, to a glover and leather merchant and an heiress. He was the third of eight children, three of whom died in childhood.

Shakespeare attended the free grammar school in Stratford, which offered a solid literary education. But he never went on to a university (which has stirred some debate regarding the authorship of his works).

Shakespeare was married to Anne Hathaway, 26, on November 18, 1582, at the age of 18. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born shortly thereafter. The couple later had twins, Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet died at the age of 11.

For seven years, Shakespeare disappears from all records, turning up in London about 1592, though it has been estimated that he arrived in London around 1588 and began to establish himself as an actor and playwright. He must have shown promise, because, by 1594, he was not only acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain's Men (called the King's Men after the ascension of James I in 1603) but was a managing partner in the operation as well. The Lord Chamberlain's Men became a favorite London troupe, patronized by royalty and made popular by the theatre-going public.

When the plague forced theatre closings in the mid-1590s, Shakespeare and his company made plans for the Globe Theatre in the Bankside district, across the river from London proper.

Shakespeare's success is apparent when studied against other playwrights of his age. His company was the most successful in London in his day. He had plays published and sold in small-page editions, or “penny copies,” to the more literate of his audiences. Never before had a playwright enjoyed sufficient acclaim to see his works published and sold as popular literature in the midst of

his career. While he was not wealthy by London standards, his success allowed him to retire in comfort to Stratford in 1611.

William Shakespeare died near or on his birthday in April 1616. His legacy is a body of work that has never been equaled in Western civilization. And his enduring words still reach across the centuries as powerfully as ever.

Questions for Students

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending is part of the experience. You can now compare ideas, ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

1. How would you describe *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* to a friend?
2. What did you like best about *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* and why? Was it what you had expected?
3. Who were your favorite characters and why?
4. What were some of the ways you used your own imagination in understanding the plot?
5. Discuss some of the contrasts Shakespeare uses in the play. Think about characters, places, time.
6. Discuss some of the timeless and universal themes Shakespeare brings to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
7. How were the events in the woods outside Athens presented like a dream?
8. Why do you think the work of Shakespeare has endured for more than 400 years?

This Teacher's Guide was written by Merlyn Potters,
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ATTENDING THE THEATER

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately (*note that all matinees now have reserved seating*);
- Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee;
- Please do not use flash photography.

What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.