



[A Midsummer Night's Dream](#)

A Lyric Hammersmith and Filter Theatre Production

[Royal Exchange](#) , Manchester

Reviewed by [Charlotte Starkey](#) July 2012

Thomas Bowdler, editor of ***The Family Shakespeare***, took his task as a censor to take out of the text words or expressions that 'could not with propriety be read aloud in a family'. It was variously published (1807 and 1818) just in time to anticipate the tastes of some nineteenth century households and his efforts have often been lampooned since then.

A Midsummer Night's Dream
did not escape his eye.

Bowdler was not the first, nor to be the last, to amend, edit, truncate or adapt the texts of Shakespeare's plays. Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) was to be gloriously illustrated in 1899 by Arthur Rackham (the programme gossamer-pink illustration for the Lyric/Filter production evokes that epoch of fairyland innocence).

This Royal Exchange / Filter's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appeared at the opposite pole to Bowdler's prurient concerns. It was a twenty-first century 'bowdlerisation' complete with supermarket shopping bags (is this the first product-placement in Shakespeare?), walkie-talkie, Oberon (Jonathan Broadbent) in blue leotard something akin to Robin (of Batman fame, not Goodfellow of lore, but with a problematic colour sense), a foldaway tent feigning sex, synthesised woodland sounds and pop, some hilarious moments, and, in short, a good circus romp complete with the play's slapstick.

Just to sound simplistic for a moment, if a play four hundred and twelve years old (entered in the Stationers' Register 1600) with a strong carnival comedic narrative happens to inspire twenty first century actors to attempt to **update** it, why not write a new play? After all, if the update is needed, there's clearly something missing at least in the current perception of the original. Just a thought because it is almost *de rigueur* to have a 'contemporary' take on most of Shakespeare today.

This is a vexed question but, to use a musical analogy, Bach may have inspired **Whiter Shade of Pale** but Procul Harum created something new and strongly argued their own disputed authorship of their haunting, enigmatic piece. They never made claims for it to be a 'loose rendition' of Bach's *Air on a G String*. In a line of reasoning not far from this, why rehash Shakespeare for the needs of an audience today? Why not something new and allow the text we have of Shakespeare to exist for our time by speaking from his time in our terms, yes, but with respect for what we inherited? Otherwise

we lose the sense of history – without which we lose our sense of who we are. And certainly a few characters found this out in Shakespeare's play as this production revealed.



Of course, it has recently been possible to study English Literature at some universities and never read a Shakespeare play or, as importantly, see or act in one. It is possible to go through school and never read him. This is central to the problem. Shakespeare is perceived to be inaccessible by some. He must be made 'intelligible' in a modern sense. For that must lie behind the desire to ditch the magic, the mystery, the ambiguities, the paradoxes in Shakespeare. Is there not enough slapstick comedy on television already - for that is one of the main ingredients of this production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? That, along with karaoke-style bawling into a microphone, the Royal Exchange stage became more like a pub scene, or a slapstick comedy show in a riot. All good fun – but ...?

This will not go down well because this production of the ***Dream*** has been given the highest plaudits already in press reviews and the usual blog spots all singing to the heavens from the same hymn sheet about the wonderful comedy of this production. The audience, it appeared, absolutely adored the production. True: it is comic. I myself was laughing uncontrollably at times and the whole auditorium had an undercurrent of spontaneous and genuine laughter.

One problem is a full appreciation of the 'adaptations' in this production does demand an understanding of the original. The theatre is then, paradoxically and in its attempt to capture a 'modern' audience perhaps unused to Shakespeare even, reinforcing the essentially middle-class appeal in which theatre is so often embedded: quite unlike Shakespeare's theatre which appealed to a complete cross-section of his own society for all kinds of reasons. I realise I am thumping a tub here but it is an important point: is the theatre today reducing Shakespeare, diluting the play for the laughs, seeking the current modish politically correct fashion by using Shakespeare's play as a platform for the brilliance of a production? So what happened to the play? If it has to be changed so much, then again ask why was a new play not produced? Is the creative inspiration dead? That is not to say this play was not inventive, innovative. Quite the opposite; but was it Shakespeare? **What happened to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?**

In fairness this production has hit upon one of the most important theatrical points in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

as a play about play-making. That is evident from the opening hilarious preamble (Ed Gaughan as Quince is riotous in this role). The original version has some of its greatest comic moments when Quince gathers his madcap loveable company of would-be actors. Equally, I think this inspired approach shapes the production's essential insight into the play. The programme notes are relevant here: we are told that the team '

played fast and loose with the text

', that much has been cut; that this is essentially an experimental approach to the play.

The play itself, as text, makes comedy out of precisely that in the portrayal of Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snug and the rest around them including Puck. Other recent productions of other plays by Shakespeare have come forward indicating that the production arose out of some kind of collective, corporate, almost at times spontaneous evolution in performance. Certainly a key point for Shakespeare is that 'life is a stage', that all human activity is in important ways an 'act', performance. In this sense all productions are part of an ever-evolving unfolding of meaning that cannot be 'fixed'. The point is, however, that this is precisely what Shakespeare's play is saying; that is what the performance needs to illuminate.

If, in so doing, the performance we are watching is the product of a clever take on itself, almost demonstrating its own production processes and then constructs a new play, we cease to have the play it claims to be. We enter the hall of mirrors but that then makes it open house on the text, to play about with it to suit an interpretation. The play itself, and in the context of his other plays, is given no context. I would imagine a young student coming to this production after studying the play would have some problems in the context of other plays by Shakespeare. It may make **Shakespeare** as a commodity accessible for those seeing one of the plays for the very first time, a hook, if you like; but it is not making Shakespeare's work in his wider context intelligible.

I am aware there are problems in what I am writing. We do know that the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage of Shakespeare, with the competing claims of Marlowe, Kyd, Greene, Dekker and the rest was a motley affair comprising an equally motley gang, that performances did move, change, become something different among rival troupes, pirated editions all living in conflicting proximity to one another. Yet that is far removed from the current trend to authenticate contemporary fashions in lifestyle and comic perceptions through Shakespearean drama. In the later drama of Shakespeare, in their conversely tragic view of life, that very 'performance' role, where life is an 'act', becomes the source of intense tragedy: human beings begin to believe the illusions about themselves they have created. In youth it can be comic (*As You Like It*); in middle age it is sad as in Malvolio; in old age it is unspeakably tragic as in *King Lear*.

