

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Phoenix Theatre Company and Writtle CARDS

20.06.12

Reviewer – Michael Gray

Shakespeare would have known and loved local amateur dramatics. Nowadays, village productions of his plays are rare, thanks to waning enthusiasm and higher audience expectations.

So good to welcome this joint effort, directed by Michael Lewis.

Plenty to enjoy, in a version lasting only just over two hours including the interval, with a choice of customized punches. And I don't mean just the hiccups and the wardrobe malfunction when a cummerbund went the way of Thisbe's mantle, to the audible delight of two ladies in row F.

The crew of patches, led by Syd Smith's Quince and Geoff Hadley's Bully Bottom – nicely dressed as tradesmen – came into their own in the excruciating rehearsal and the chaotic "show" – Chris Wright's nervous Flute a particular delight.

Neil Smith and Kenton Church played the testy rivals, their lovers were Leila Francis, who also assisted the director, and Laura Bennett, whose characterization – jealous, frustrated, tearful – was excellent. I liked the way their "weeds of Athens" got more and more distressed during that eventful night in the woods. Other stand-outs in a large cast were Daniel Curley's irate Egeus and Jean Speller's beautifully spoken Titania.

This ambitious undertaking, supported by the RSC's Open Stages scheme, boasted an atmospheric forest, designed by Les Leeds, and some very young apprentices – playing the fairies, mothered by Sarah Wilson's Merry Wanderer, but also lanthorn, dog and Philostrate – shared by cleft-apple twins. The Bard would surely have approved.