

**NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD
FULL LENGTH FESTIVAL 2012**

Group: Phoenix Theatre Company and Writtle CARDS

Venue: Writtle Village Hall

Production: A Midsummer Night's Dream

Date of adjudication: 23rd June 2012

Director: Michael Lewis

Introduction

Written in the earlier part of Shakespeare's playwriting career this play focuses on the conflict love can cause and the intervention of a little 'midsummer madness' to bring about a happy ending. Staging a Shakespeare text presents many challenges, not least weaving together the different strands of the plot into a cohesive whole. I was interested to see how this combined venture would tackle the task. The timing of the show was very apt being performed on the week of Midsummer's Day.

**Front of House
Hall decorated**

Sharon Goodwin, Peter Goodwin
Clare Williams

We were warmly welcomed to Writtle Village Hall and inside were met by helpful and bright decorations on the wall which served as visual prompts for those unfamiliar with the plot as well as being great fun. Some images were nicely followed through from the poster and programme designs

Hall decorated/Poster and programme design

Clare Williams

The programme and posters looked beautiful with their well chosen scenes giving the feel of woodland magic and raising a sense of anticipation in the audience. I also appreciated the cast photographs and clear organisation of the programme details. A thoughtful and imaginative design.

Set design

Les Leeds

The set design appeared to me to take on two approaches. A simple representation of Theseus' palace, using key pieces of furniture along with a suggestion of a canopy was all that was needed to give a formal setting. Behind this was the wood presented by a well painted backdrop which had a particularly effective sky. The use of some very basic 'trees' helped to suggest depth to the wood although stylistically they were not of the same quality as the backdrop. I thought the boxes on either side of the stage worked well serving as seats and resting places for the lovers. Having the court characters seated in the audience for the mechanicals' play really created an inclusive atmosphere and brought us into the play.

Set build

Chris Saxton, Peter Goodwin

I thought the backdrop had been cleverly constructed and I liked the way the canopy was used to become the 'bower' for Titania. Well done.

Costumes

Jan Irving

The costumes were a real mixture with some working better than others. I thought the mechanicals outfits were the best with great details to show the different trades. Their costumes for 'Pyramus and Thisbe' also worked well capturing the spirit of fun and having been borrowed from many sources! I felt the fairies were not so successful, the younger fairies' costumes seemed more like pantomime creatures and needed to have something magical about them. Similarly Oberon and Titania had

nothing to suggest the wildness of the woods nor did they seem co-ordinated with each other in terms of style. Puck's dress also looked more like a pantomime 'good fairy' rather than a mischievous sprite.

The court characters were a combination of military-style costumes and ordinary day wear. The military idea was appropriate but there seemed little co-ordination between Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus whose uniform was totally different. As for the young lovers the men looked good in suits and had the appropriate air of formality, the women looked a bit too casual for such an important setting. The change of clothes for the woods worked well for the lovers with a well staged dishevelment of appearance.

The costumes for the last scene were fine.

Props

Janet Osborne Williams

Some thorough work here to provide all the necessary items. I don't know whether Bottom's head and hooves were really costumes or props but I thought the hooves were an inspired addition to his appearance. I also liked the bag of gifts from Lysander. The props for the mechanicals looked really good and added to the fun.

Stage management

Chris Saxton

This all worked smoothly and unobtrusively, it does seem a shame that success is achieved by not being noticed! Clearly well rehearsed.

Technical team

Tom Harris, Bob Speller, Sharon Goodwin

Lighting was sensitively attuned to the mood and time of day described in the text, the use of warm yellows for the woodland scenes was particularly good. I did wonder why there was a blackout for the mechanicals when they arrive for their rehearsal in the woods it seemed unnecessary to me. Music was used appropriately (although I wasn't sure about Strauss's Thus Sprach Zarathustra???) to help cover some scene changes and for the audience before the show and during the interval all of which helped to sustain the atmosphere.

Juveniles choreography/coaching Janet Osborne Williams, Nick Caxton, Kerrie Charlesworth

The younger members of the cast gave confident performances and the clarity of their vocal delivery was impressive. It is evident they had had been well rehearsed and coached.

Cast

Theseus/Oberon

Andy Millward

Andy has a strong physical presence on stage backed up with a clear and powerful voice. As Theseus he gave a clear impression of authority and formality. As Oberon he maintained this and I would like to have seen more differentiation between the two roles – Oberon's lines indicate more extreme emotions than Theseus but both have depths of passion there was the potential to bring this out more. As Oberon his reactions as an observer were believable.

Hippolyta

Angela Gee

This is a tricky role especially in the first scene where we sense that Hippolyta may have some sympathy with Hermia but has been 'conquered' by Theseus. Angela's bearing was truly regal and lines were delivered clearly but had the potential for a more emotional tone.

Attendants

Jake & Silas Powell

These gentlemen took on their role excellently looking good in their formal attire and contributing to the play confidently.

Egeus

Daniel Curley

Daniel made a real impact on his entrance in the first scene and this was sustained by his powerful vocal delivery. His sense of outrage at Hermia was palpable and his reactions helped to animate the other actors' responses.

Lysander

Neil Smith

To begin with Neil seemed a little static but became more animated as the play went on and by the time he was in the woods he seemed to be more relaxed and gestures became more expansive. This helped to make his reactions more naturalistic. In scenes with Hermia vocal exchanges were a little slow but exchanges with Demetrius and Helena felt more spontaneous.

Hermia

Leila Francis

Leila's performance seemed very tense in the early stages of the play and her delivery turned inwards rather than out to the audience. This did improve a little but I would like to have seen a much more outgoing energy to her performance. Gestures and movements were often repeated and they became almost predictable.

Demetrius

Kenton Church

As Demetrius, Kenton provided an interesting contrast to Lysander, more assertive and confident from the start with good vocal delivery. He quickly became relaxed on stage, particularly funny were his facial expressions once he had been 'charmed'. His interactions with Lysander were also very funny.

Helena

Laura Bennett

This for me was the performance which stood out. Laura's quick responses and ability to interpret her lines with emotion really helped to lift the performances of those around her. She has a very engaging stage presence especially when addressing the audience directly. Her performance was also distinguished by her energetic physicality. Well done.

Peter Quince

Syd Smith

Syd's frustrations of trying to direct the mechanicals (especially Bottom) was clearly conveyed to the audience and although a little hesitant at first his performance became more assured as the play progressed.

Nick Bottom

Geoff Hadley

As Bottom, Nick really grew into the part his scenes once 'translated' were particularly good and he used the donkey hooves to great effect. Vocally he managed to suggest the braying through his pronunciation and this worked well adding to the comedy.

Francis Flute

Chris Wright

This is a role which could easily tip into grotesque farce but Chris managed to bring a balance of comedy with a little poignancy as Thisbe. His outrage at being asked to play Thisbe was very entertaining.

Tom Snout

Shelley Goodwin

I really liked Shelley's portrayal of Snout and the wall in their play. She brought a lively air to the part and showed good reactions in the mechanicals' scenes. I also appreciate the fact that Shelley stood in for Emily Wilson where she was understandably less confident but came on wearing her watch.

Robin Starveling

Clare Williams

Clare gave an air of great self-assurance to her character which came across clearly to the audience. It also differentiated her from the other mechanicals. In the play I loved the fact she kept her hat on!

Snug

Helen Langley

This role really presents some challenges as it is a minor role but is so important especially in their play. Helen helped us to feel for Snug with his lack of confidence, especially through her use of body language and gesture. The mask and lion gloves really enhanced her performance as the lion and we enjoyed her character.

Apprentices

Lucy & Jack Charlesworth

These two added to the scenes with confidence and their reactions were totally in keeping with the content.

Puck

Sarah Wilson

Sarah has a very gentle voice and demeanour which doesn't match this character. I really wanted her to be more feisty and playful. Again very clear delivery of lines and an attempt to create an atmosphere of magic,

Titania

Jean Speller

Good, clear delivery from Jean as Titania but physically her performance seemed very restrained, always elegant but not naturalistic. I would have expected a contrast in this especially when she has been 'charmed' by Oberon.

Fairies

Shelley Goodwin, Jack & Lucy Charlesworth, Jake & Silas Powell

Overall this group added to the action in a supportive way especially in the scene where Titania is preparing to sleep. I thought this worked well.

Producer

Laura Bennett

Co-ordinating this demanding production between two groups must have presented its own challenges but it has come together successfully.

Director

Michael Lewis

Assistant director

Leila Francis

It is clear that great deal of time and effort has been spent on the clarity and quality of vocal delivery. All the actors could be heard perfectly and the group is to be congratulated on that. There were a couple of prompts which was a shame, but many of the actors were word perfect reflecting the care taken. However not all the performers really brought the lines to life with varied intonation, emphasis or emotion. Maybe the concern for clarity and accuracy didn't allow time for the development of the other features of the speeches.

Space was utilised very effectively by the direction with entrances from the central aisle through the audience, the use of the boxes on the set for sitting and sleeping and the way the mechanicals play reached out to the audience.

The ensemble scenes with the mechanicals were well rehearsed and supportively performed – we really felt they were a group of friends. Similarly the performances of the younger cast members felt well rehearsed.

The lovers and the fairies I felt needed much more direction to enhance the vocal delivery with emotion and movement. This play demands passion and magic, I wanted to see more of both.

There is no doubt though that the story was made crystal clear to the audience who responded warmly to the production. As a joint venture it seems to have been successful and I hope will encourage the groups to future collaboration.

Thank you for the opportunity to see the production.

Best wishes

Accompanied by

Maggi Fisher

Penny Davidson