

A Midsummer Night's Dream – The Phoenix Theatre Company and Writtle Cards

Performed at Writtle Parish Hall, Saturday Matinee, 23 June, 2012

Director – Michael Lewis

Shakespeare is rarely performed by amateurs and then along come two productions in the same week – *Macbeth* by CTW and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Phoenix/Writtle Cards. I couldn't see the former but the latter was an enjoyable production that seemed to overcome many of the obstacles that would normally make a Shakespeare play a nightmare to produce. Firstly the problem of a large cast was dealt with by two companies joining forces and sharing their skills, agreeing that this joint production would take the place of their usual separately produced plays. The burden of administration was shared between Michael Lewis of Phoenix, who directed and Laura Bennett of Writtle Cards, who produced. The organisation was clearly agreed way in advance because the company was also able to take advantage of the RSC Open Stages opportunity. Thus it was that a cast of nineteen players, including several children, not only successfully performed one of Shakespeare's best known comedies but also had some professional input from the RSC.

Performed on a very small stage by most amateur standards without the benefit of tracks for tabs or wing space to accommodate large props the opening Athens scene was created through the use of a temporary cloth. This came down after Scene 1 to reveal a beautifully painted wooded "backcloth" that was used for all subsequent scenes. This was supplemented by a few tall columnar "trees", a curtained seated area for Titania and two thrones that were brought on and off as appropriate. The play by the mechanicals at the end used a curtained clothes rail to hide the actors and a painted wall for the hilarious lovers' scene. With judicious use of the auditorium for the entry of Theseus and Hippolyta and reserved seats in the front row for their use during the "play" the relatively small stage created an intimate feeling that was very effective.

The cast is too large to review individually so suffice to say that the company coped well with the language and rhythm of the dialogue; diction and audibility were good and the humour was always well developed, especially during the love quartet in the woods and the play at the end. Shakespeare takes some getting used to, especially the intonation of the lines where the temptation sometimes is to "sing-song" through the sections where the metre is at its most strict. Director, Michael Lewis, created a highly entertaining production with a running time of 150 minutes including the interval. The joint-venture approach, if it produces such quality, must be considered again whenever the needs of the play require it. I would be interested to learn if the economics worked out favourably compared with single productions.

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins

Regional representative District 8

NODA East