

# UC Merced

## UC Merced Previously Published Works

### Title

A Midsummer Night's Dream by The Royal Shakespeare Company with Poulton Drama at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and: A Midsummer Night's Dream by Shakespeare's Globe at Shakespeare's Globe, and: A Midsummer Night's Dream by Pendley Shakespeare Festiv...

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6ch6m14n>

### Journal

Shakespeare Bulletin, 35(1)

### Author

Brokaw, Katherine Steele

### Publication Date

2017

### DOI

10.1353/shb.2017.0008

Peer reviewed



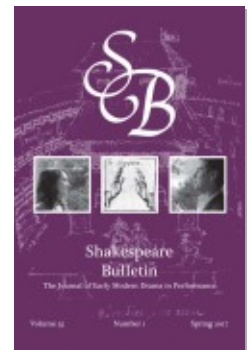
PROJECT MUSE®

---

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by The Royal Shakespeare Company with Poulton Drama at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, and  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare's Globe at Shakespeare's Globe, and:  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Pendley Shakespeare Festival at Pendley Manor (review)

Katherine Steele Brokaw

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 35, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 148-156 (Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2017.0008>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649801>

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Presented by **The Royal Shakespeare Company** with **Poulton Drama** at the **Royal Shakespeare Theatre**, Stratford-upon-Avon, and in venues across the UK. February 24–July 16, 2016. Directed by Erica Whyman. Designed by Tom Piper. Lights by Charles Balfour. Music by Sam Kenyon. Sound by Andrew Franks. With Ayesha Dharker (Titania), Lucy Ellinson (Puck), Laura Harding (Hippolyta), Anthony Henry (Bottom), Jack Holden (Lysander), Cathy Lloyd (Quince), Chris Nayak (Demetrius), Mercy Ojelade (Hermia), Chu Omambala (Oberon), Sam Redford (Theseus), and Laura Riseborough (Helena).

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Presented by **Shakespeare's Globe** at **Shakespeare's Globe**, London, England. April 30–September 11, 2016. Directed by Emma Rice. Dramaturgy and lyrics by Tanika Gupta. Set by Börkur Jónsson. Costumes by Mortiz Junge. Music composed by Stu Barker. Choreography by Etta Murfitt. Sound design by Simon Baker. With Ankur Bahl (Helenus), Margaret Ann Bain (Flute/Philostrate), Nandi Bhebhe (First Fairy/Starveling, and Hippolyta/Titania Understudy), Edmund Derrington (Lysander), Tibu Fortes (Cobweb and Starveling Understudy), Ncuti Gatwa (Demetrius), Meow Meow (Hippolyta/Titania), Sheema Mukherjee (Musician), Katy Owen (Puck), Edith Tankus (Snug), Lucy Thackery (Quince), Alex Tregear (Snout and First Fairy Understudy), Zubin Varla (Theseus/Oberon), Anjana Vasani (Hermia), and Ewan Wardrop (Bottom).

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Presented by **Pendley Shakespeare Festival** at **Pendley Manor**, Tring. August 3–7, 2016. Directed by Peter Fanning and Peter Broad. Musical direction by Kai Everington. Set and props by Bianca Martin. Movement direction by Sophie Sweetland. With Jack Blackburn (Lysander), Alex Chard (Demetrius), Teddy Corbett (Puck/Philostrate), Samantha Cooper (Quince), Stephen Davies (Bottom), William Eley (Theseus/Oberon), Sofia Greenacre (Hippolyta/Titania), Dannie Harris (Helena), Tayla Kenyon (Hermia), James Sheldrake (Snout), and Tom Williams (Starveling).

KATHERINE STEELE BROKAW, *University of California, Merced*

In the summer of 2016, I saw three live productions and one made-for-TV movie of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the UK. In addition to viewing the *Dreams* of three major cultural institutions—the RSC, the Globe, and the BBC—I visited Pendley Shakespeare, an amateur festival in rural Tring. Focusing primarily on the live productions, this essay is a meditation on three related issues: the way that *Dream's* imaginative

openness invites theatrical experimentation and the representation of queer identities; the slippery status of the categories of professional and amateur; and the way productions of *Dream*—in the summer of Brexit—express ideas about what it means to be British in the twenty-first century.

\*\*\*

The popularity and the magical elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* go some way toward explaining why it is, perhaps of all of Shakespeare's plays, the one that most tempts radical and experimental interpretation. It is at once familiar and other; with it, companies can create imaginative fairy worlds while commenting on socio-political changes. The summer's most-watched *Dream* was the one made for and broadcast by the BBC, which was "reimagined" by Russell T. Davies. The BBC *Dream* showed that this most democratic of plays inspires continued experimentation and political expression. It featured the sort of outlandish design elements we would expect from a *Dream* directed by someone who has worked on *Doctor Who*, and it also featured same-sex attraction. In Davies's imagining, Puck's misplaced love juice caused Demetrius to fall briefly in love with Lysander, and the film ended with a wedding kiss between Hippolyta and Titania, able to love as they pleased after the sudden death of Theseus in act five. The broadcast's reception was split along ideological lines: while the conservative *Daily Mail's* headline proclaimed "outrage" over the "PC adaptation," many Britons celebrated Davies's liberal (in both senses of the word) updates. The three staged *Dreams* I saw in 2016, while not quite so radical in their plot deviations, all featured some degree of queering in casting and acting. These and other political choices were at times enhanced and at times undermined by each production's version of postmodern visual and acoustic design.

While Brechtian techniques that make the audience particularly aware of the theatrical work of a production are hardly revolutionary in 2016, metatheatrical design choices can still read as "experimental" to many audience members. They likely did so in the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Dream*, whose tour around the country and use of a rotating cast of local amateurs in the roles of the Mechanicals and schoolchildren as fairies attracted audience members who had less familiarity with Shakespeare and theatrical conventions than the typical RSC audience member. The set for the production was primarily bare. When it played at the RST, the theatre's back wall was exposed, and stage weights, a bright red curtain, ghost lights, and the kinds of floating metal staircases that are

usually found backstage were used to evoke a 1940s theatrical milieu, and to stand in for court pillars or forest trees. The show began with extra-textual music played on a central grand piano by a male musician and a somewhat androgynous top-hatted woman who turned out to be Puck (Lucy Ellinson); this piano was later opened and filled with rose petals to become Titania's bower. If this production was about magic, it was about the magical ability of the theatre to distract wartime England with pared-down storytelling.

As was the case with the other two *Dreams*, the RSC *Dream* featured added music: in this case, played by instrument-bearing fairies and a few visible offstage musicians. The addition of musical-theatre-style song-and-dance numbers, like Oberon and Titania's elaborately staged reunion dance, no doubt added to the audience's enjoyment of the play. But all three of these *Dreams* clocked in at three or more hours, and I couldn't help but wonder if so many production numbers were necessary; or if, at least, smarter cuts and quicker cues could have helped make all of them a little more brief and a little less tedious.

Ellinson's Puck, evocative at once of a male music hall singer and Ellen DeGeneres, read as playfully queer, and her movement through the audience stalls and stealing of patrons' hats and purses was met with guffaws and cheers. While I witnessed a male Bottom, two of the amateur companies who performed with the RSC had female Bottoms. I heard that in these performances, Ellinson's Puck took great delight in the pairing of two women in Titania's bower, and expressed disappointment at Oberon's judgmental "her dotage now I do begin to pity" (4.1.44), which became a line that broke the spell of queer love and began to return the play to the strictures of heteronormativity with which it concludes.

While the RSC production restored Jacks to Jills, Emma Rice's *Dream* at the Globe, which made Helena into Helenus, ended on a defiantly queer note, and one of the production's many interpolated lines pronounced that "Jill will have Jill, Jack will have Jack / No one will need an aphrodisiac" as Oberon and Titania were belayed into the rafters. This was the apotheosis of a production that featured performative queerness, modernized songs and lines, and climbing equipment throughout. Ankur Bahl's Helenus was one of the most-discussed features of this *Dream* (fig. 4). Alas, while his loneliness at Demetrius's rejection was often touchingly portrayed, and while the return of Demetrius (Ncuti Gatwa) to his "natural taste" for his one-time boyfriend in act five made him more sympathetic than usual, Bahl's frequent snaps, head tosses, and other stereotypically gay male gestures distracted from the revelations that

came from this inspired bit of cross-gender casting. Helenus's and Demetrius's relationship—ending as it did in a homonormative wedding—was complemented by the sexually deviant aesthetic of the fairies, who in Rice's formulation were bored Elizabethan pixies who'd been partying for four hundred years. Their costumes combined period ruffs and doublets with nipple tassels, and three of the fairies were men whose aesthetics and body language read as queer. Katy Owen's naughty Puck got cheap laughs by doing lewd moves with a banana. Much of her deviance was more subtle and inspired, though, and she seemed to delight in benign and flirty mischief with Zubin Varla's amusingly embittered Oberon, on whose back she often rode. The casting of "Kamikaze cabaret" performance artist Meow Meow as Titania brought the burlesque into the fairy world, with most critics praising her extravagant sexiness (I saw an understudy perform Titania, so cannot comment).

When Hermia (Anjana Vasan) broke the news of her engagement to Lysander (Jack Holden), her and Helenus's celebratory rendition of "Single Ladies"—complete with Beyoncé choreography—fed the gay-best-friend stereotype but was greeted with huge applause from the audience. It was one of many added songs in the Bollywood-inspired production that contributed to its long running time. By the time the *Mechanicals* were doing superfluous David Bowie covers in act five, I sensed that the tired groundlings wished we could get on with the play. Much of Stu Barker's original music—for example, Lysander's serenade with lyrics from a Donne poem—was a charming East-West hybrid, particularly because of the deft musicianship of the band's sitar player, Sheema Mukherjee, who was seated in the center of the stage's balcony for the whole show. But less could have been more, and the exuberance of Bollywood and the creativity of the cast, with whom Rice had clearly collaborated on the interpolated lines ("It's a visual concept," said Starveling-as-Moon to Theseus), would have still come through had the team not indulged every improvised pop culture reference that made them laugh in rehearsal. Still, though, the production's creative irreverence was its primary charm. It was enhanced by the visual feats that fans of Kneehigh Theatre, where Rice was artistic director before coming to the Globe (and to which she will likely return after her shortened Globe contract expires), have come to expect. The giant party balloons that filled the Globe, Titania's entry from the ceiling in a giant pink dress, and the choreographed chaos of the fairy dances lived up to the 2016 Globe season's "Wonder" tagline.



Fig. 4. Ncuti Gatwa as Demetrius and Ankur Bahl as Helenus in Shakespeare's Globe's 2016 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Emma Rice. Photo courtesy of Steve Tanner.

While Pendley Shakespeare Festival's *Dream* lacked the interpretive and visual boldness of the RSC and Globe shows, this local production featured several similar elements. A jazz band called "Pucker Up" played songbook standards and oldies during the preshow, intermission, and for a few dialogized songs, adding to the play's wedding party aesthetic. The nuptial frame was a particularly apt in-joke at Pendley, given that there was a wedding reception happening across the manor lawn during most performances, and I saw the occasional guest wander over towards the stage area to check out the theatricalized marriages. Teddy Corbett's anarchic Puck was not as disciplined as Owen's, but the fairy world—denoted by black and red colors that eventually marked the lovers, too—did read as deviant and counter-cultural, and two male fairies were in frequent embrace. The final wedding dance (to Prince's "Kiss") saw the flamboyant Starveling (Tom Williams) end up with Snout (James Sheldon), so that all four *Dreams* I saw this summer celebrated gender fluidity and/or same sex love in some way. This surely cannot be said for most contemporary productions of other Shakespearean comedies.

\*\*\*

“Amateur Shakespeare since 1949” is Pendley’s proud boast, and the mixture of drama school students and local actors with day jobs (usually teachers) described in the program for their *Dream* attested to the non- or pre-professional status of the company. The Pendley productions’ short rehearsal periods (three weeks) and shorter runs (a weekend for each of the summer’s two shows) produce, surprisingly, intricate dance and fight choreography and, unsurprisingly, committed and earnest performances from their casts. Tayla Kenyon, for example, conveyed a startlingly emotional interpretation of Hermia’s post-nightmare speech, though not all of the cast’s young actors were as consistently compelling. Most professionals act in amateur productions in their early careers, and Kenyon’s performance was a reminder of how little can separate amateur and professional quality.

That this could be the case became an explicit issue in the RSC *Dream*. The risk of having amateur companies share the stage with seasoned, well-paid RSC actors was that stellar amateur performers—and there were reportedly many throughout the run—exposed the fact that amateurs can potentially be as good as professionals. This wasn’t quite the case with the Poulton Drama group that I saw, and I found myself both cheering on Anthony Henry as Bottom and wishing that the role were being played by a funnier actor. The audience’s awkward chuckles made me think I wasn’t alone, thus exposing the *other* kind of risk involved when a professional company charging £50 or so a ticket uses amateur performers. Nonetheless, the amateur company’s zealous performances made one especially aware of the often mechanical movement and delivery from the well-coached pros, and I was particularly struck by the stiffness of Laura Harding (Hippolyta) and Sam Redford (Theseus), whose relationship seemed defined by little more than a desire to recite well-articulated iambic pentameter to each other. But against the skepticism with which one might have met this uninspired professional acting, the audience was also aware of the high stakes for the amateur actors performing at the RST (which they all did twice in addition to their more local performances on the UK tour), and how they mirrored the stakes for the Mechanicals of performing at court. When “Pyramus and Thisbe” was basically a comic success, the audience cheered extra loudly, knowing that this moment was likely a lifetime highlight for the actors. The use of amateur performers made one aware of an actorly humanity and theatrical love (going to the etymological roots of “amateur”) that one doesn’t always feel at the glossy RSC.



The largest disadvantage of the RSC's amateurs was that many of them were hard to hear, bringing up issues of voice training that are a part of the discourse around the new Globe regime. Rice's decision to mic her actors perhaps sparked more controversy than any other directorial choice (including her addition of stage lighting) by which she deviated from the Globe's longstanding use of Original Practices. One advantage to the mics, supposedly, is that they open up casting to younger actors who haven't been trained to project their voices to the upper circle. Several of the cast's actors were just out of drama school—only slightly older than the Pendley kids—but I'm not sure that meant they wouldn't have been heard without mics. The bigger advantage was that the mics allowed for a fuller instrumental sound to accompany the frequent songs; going forward, I hope the Globe manages to present both amplified and unamplified sound. Needing no mics, I'm sure, were the highly trained pros who portrayed Globe-volunteer-docents-qua-mechanicals: in this production they had day jobs like "Bottom the health and safety officer" (Ewan Wardrop) and "Quince the peripatetic music teacher" (Lucy Thackery; all Quinces I saw this summer were female). Dressed in her Globe t-shirt and fanny pack, Thackery gave a long house rules speech before the show. The speech was peppered with jokes about Mark Rylance's tambourine and given with such polish that the "surprise" that she was actually our Quince actor was anything but: this highlighted the tricky dynamic of pros pretending to be untrained. It seems sometimes that refined vocal technique marks actorly speech to such a degree that it becomes difficult for professionals to portray regular folk convincingly. All three of the live *Dreams* I saw—with their mixtures of young actors, amateurs, and seasoned pros—had me meditating on the potentially homogenizing effects of professionalization.

\*\*\*

In addition to being the summer of Shakespeare400, 2016 was the summer of Brexit. Both contexts meant that these shows implicitly or explicitly reflected on what Britishness, including the country's relationship to its most famous writer, means today. The program for the Pendley *Dream*, opening at the end of the summer, included jokes about Brexit and the Queen's ninetieth birthday, yet the production didn't seem explicitly to take on the idea of Britishness. Even so, by featuring an all-white cast playing to a mainly-white audience in the middle of the English countryside, this production did highlight a certain kind of



Fig. 5. Laura Riseborough as Helena, Jack Holden as Lysander, and Chris Nayak as Demetrius, watched by Chu Omambala as Oberon and Lucy Ellinson as Puck, in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2016 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation*, directed by Erica Whyman. Photo courtesy of Tristram Kenton.

rural Britishness and theatergoing, one that the far more multicultural Globe and RSC casts were trying to counteract. If Shakespeare is, as was proclaimed repeatedly in 2016, for all times and all people, then he is for the rural counties who voted for the provincial idea of leaving the EU as much as for the young Londoners who see themselves as global citizens: an idea at the heart of the Globe *Dream*.

Rice's casting was truly multiracial, if not colorblind. Program notes indicated that the Indian ethnicity of Hermia (Vasan) was meant to remind us of arranged marriages ("in London today there are families stopping their children from following their hearts") and even honor killings, a dark note that—particularly with the white and female Owen doubling Puck with Egeus—I'm not sure was fully sounded. At any rate, the fact that nearly half of the actors and a substantial part of the production team were people of color meant that Rice's "love letter to the Globe," as she called this production, was also a love letter to an increasingly Global (at least until 2016) London. The place of "Shakespeare's Globe" in this London and this England was also at stake in a production that fell

just short of mocking the Globe's longtime work in *Original Practices*, with its pseudo-Elizabethan fairies and in-jokes about Rylance. Halfway through her abbreviated tenure, Rice's Globe was a place to irreverently send up the country's historical and cultural past while pointing to a progressive future that brought countercultural expression right to the heart of Southwark.

Still, no *Dream* in the summer of 2016 more explicitly addressed national identity than the RSC's: the production was subtitled "a Play for the Nation" (fig. 5). The play's 1940s setting (Egeus even wore a soldier costume) made me wonder why British nationhood is still so often defined by World War Two. Director Erica Whyman notes in the program that the '40s were a time of "shared purpose"; the far more factional Britain of 2016 couldn't be defined in similar terms. So while the production included many particularly modern British elements—Lysander's send-up of schoolboy poshness; an ethnically South Asian Titania (Ayesha Dharker) and a few Indian-inspired design elements; British school uniforms on the young kids who played extra fairies—its simultaneous nostalgia for the more united Britain of wartime yore belied the notion that the RSC was truly producing a "play for the [current] nation." Watching the professional actors of Britain's best-bankrolled company play Athenians who mock provincial actors (played by provincial actors) because they don't toil enough in their heads was, in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, an unintentionally disquieting reminder that there is much that separates Britons. But the seemingly insatiable appetite for this play—which usually sold out at all three venues—seems to remain a small unifier.

Clearly, then, the three headlines of my meditation on these *Dreams*—experimentation with design and identity politics, amateurism, and nationhood—are bound up in each other when we think about what this most democratic of plays means in the twenty-first century. Perhaps, in the end, *Dream* is particularly suited to expressing the knottiness of modern love; to testing the limits of the inclusive ideals of theatrical communities; and to giving actors, directors, and designers the freedom to make new and relevant meaning out of one of Shakespeare's best-known plays.



### *Romeo and Juliet*

Presented by **Synetic Theater** at the **Crystal City Theater**, Arlington, VA. February 17–March 27, 2016. Directed and adapted by Paata Tsikurishvili. Choreography by Irina Tsikurishvili. Music by Konstantine Lortkipanidze. Set and costume design by Anastasia Simes. Sound design by Irakli Kavsadze and