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A Midsummer Night's Dream Come True

by Richard Ciccarone
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If you are a regular patron of live theatre or have friends who are actors, there is no way you have escaped at least one production of Shakespeare's ubiquitous summer staple. I am, of course, referring to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Before one can review California Shakespeare Theater's production of this play and truly appreciate its magnificence, I must digress to frame why this particular production is so spectacular. Please bear with me as I offer some brief historical context.

Often with Shakespeare, directors feel that modernizing the text equates to putting on Armani suits, using guns instead of swords and calling it a day.

The play is really three plays in one: the lovers, the fairies and the mechanicals. Each one has its own distinct personality and narrative, and they all intersect throughout the show.

The lovers are usually laden with physical gags that rarely pay off and with characters so one-dimensional that the Orinda air would carry them into the hills watched by the uncomprehending cows.

The fairies usually range from the saccharine sweet, overly whimsical pixies played by interns or understudies to dull supporting buttresses for a director's unsupportable idea (how about skinhead fairies - yes, that's been done).

And finally, and most painfully, the mechanicals ... dear lord, the mechanicals. The "comic relief" of the show is rarely comic and a relief because their play signals the end of our own. Having seen so many mediocre to poor *Midsummers*, I was, to say the least, reticent to attend this one. But had I skipped this production, I would have missed one of my favorite theatrical experiences in many, many years.

Aaron Posner's inspired creation at the California Shakes is nothing short of brilliant. Even the rather sloughy exposition in the first few scenes, which must be furnished to give the audience the story essentials, found a new breath and life.

The lovers in this production had a wonderful mixture of youthful arrogance and unapologetically selfish indulgence that I found rather endearing.

The mechanicals, an ensemble effort lead by Danny Scheie as Bottom, broke every clichéd mold in the antiquated text and showed that the "rude mechanicals" needn't be the object of haughty derision at their low intelligence, but instead enjoyed as quirky, misguided amateur artists. These mechanicals weren't bores, they were actually people you might enjoy spending time with. Finally, Oberon and Titania, (Keith Randolph Smith and Pegge Johnson) the fairy king and queen imbued everything those roles demanded yet rarely seen: regal, sexual, intelligent and spirited.

Often with Shakespeare, directors feel that modernizing the text equates to putting on Armani suits, using guns instead of swords and calling it a day. They fail to understand that by simply painting a thinly veiled limn of design over the work, you won't get very far. To truly modernize Shakespeare, you must contextualize the beating heart of the work itself. In this case, Mr. Posner found that the beating heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the mischief and humor and, to my eternal gratitude, gave it a new life.

