

INTRODUCTION

When Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize in 1986, the citation described his play *A Dance of the Forests* as 'a kind of African "Midsommer Night's Dream", with dryads, ghosts, spirits, and gods or demi-gods'.¹ In fact, the two plays have little in common beyond a forest setting with supernatural creatures (of very different types). But the comparison is striking testimony to the classic, almost mythic status *A Midsommer Night's Dream* has acquired in world literature and drama.

The play has marked some telling points of history. It appears to have been acted at a makeshift theatre in the 'model' Nazi concentration camp at Terezin in today's Czechia. A twelve-year-old boy, Štěpán Pollak, recorded two scenes in drawings that survived though Štěpán died in Auschwitz in 1943.² In 1972, Peter Brook's production drew a half-hour's standing applause from the audience in totalitarian Hungary.³ It was a moment's draught of liberty, smuggled in under the aesthetic cover of theatre. In 1990, violence-torn Lebanon saw a dance version in a cedar forest outside Beirut, sharply projecting the mortals as 'playthings for the djinn' of uncontrollable external forces (Caracalla, 10). And past enmities stood suspended when Vietnamese and American actors joined in a bilingual production in 2000, as shown in the documentary film *A Dream in Hanoi* (2002).

A Midsommer Night's Dream may be the Shakespeare play most widely circulated across the globe: not only in direct

1 Presentation speech by Lars Gyllenstein (translated from Swedish): Nobel Prize website, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1986/presentation-speech.html, accessed 26 August 2016.

2 *Dream* was also acted by conscientious objectors in Dartmoor prison after the First World War, and by British prisoners of war in the German prison camp Rotenberg during the Second (Dobson, *Amateur*, 135, 142).

3 Schandl, 101–2. Brook reported that 'The best performances [of his production] lay between Budapest and Moscow' (*Foretgn*, 11).