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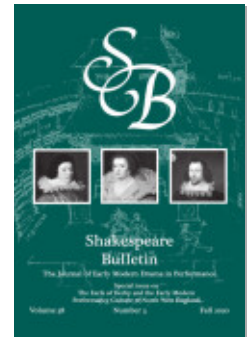
A Midsummer Night's Dream (review)

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Notes

¹In 2011, Crouch had had a similar, semi-scripted interpolation that he would sometimes add: “Let me explain the strategy of the show. I make myself look ridiculous; you laugh; I then attack you for laughing.” However, he had characterized such ad-libs to me as “breakages,” and said he preferred not to have to do them (Purcell, 9).

Works Cited

- Crouch, Tim. *I, Shakespeare: I, Malvolio, I, Banquo, I, Caliban, I, Peaseblossom*. Oberon Books, 2011.
 Purcell, Stephen. *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.



A Midsummer Night's Dream

Presented by the **Back Room Shakespeare Project** on **YouTube**. April 20, 2020. Videography by Alberto Mendoza. Graphic design by Arnel Sanciano. With Courtney Abbott (Hippolyta), Andrea Abello (Hermia), Delia Baseman (Quince), Taylor Bibat (Moth), Katherine Bourne Taylor (Snug), Adam Brown (Flute), Diana Coates (Lysander), Kyle Curry (Peaseblossom), Amanda Drinkall (Fairy), Lawrence Grimm (Egeus), Nick Harazin (Puck), Daniel Kerr-Hobert (Cobweb), Elizabeth Laidlaw (Oberon), Erin O'Shea (Helena), Sam Pearson (Snout), Elizabeth Quilter (Starveling), Xavier Roe (Demetrius), Colin Sphar (Philostrate), Sigrid Sutter (Titania), Samuel Taylor (Theseus), Bethany Thomas (Bottom), Hannah Todd (Fairy), Gage Wallace (Fairy), and Julie Weir (Mustardseed).

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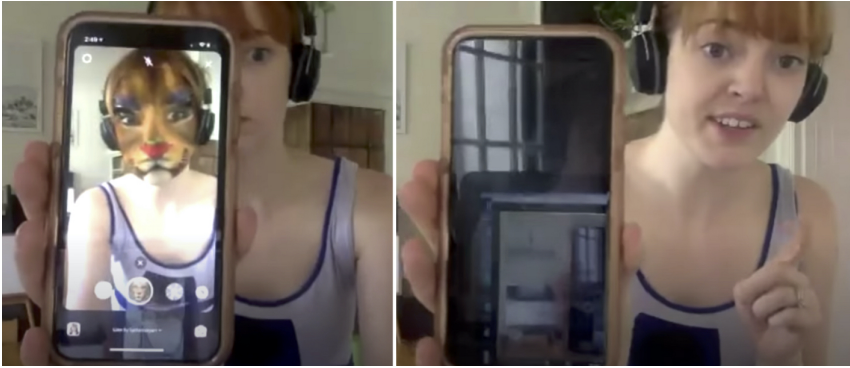
The Back Room Shakespeare Project (BRSP) is interested in creating a particular kind of theatrical experience. For them, the necessary ingredients to release the ideal experience latent in early modern plays are to rehearse once, with no director, then perform as seriously as possible . . . in a bar. The theory is that, under these conditions, audiences and actors can get closer to the kind of play event for which these texts were designed. As the prologue suggested, this is “how Shakespeare would have done Shakespeare.” While the bar was no longer a part of the recipe amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the company had one thing Shakespeare did not in the time of the 1603 plague: the Internet.

Through smart cutting, this *A Midsummer Night's Dream* took the sentiment, “Is there no play to ease the anguish of a torturing hour?”

at its most desperate: the ducal union was resituated as a frame narrative, impacted as it was, like us, by global stay-at-home orders. Backlit by a grey sky, the production opened with Hippolyta on a solitary jog while wearing a surgical mask. She pulled up at a park table covered in COVID-19 social distancing signage in order to take a phone call from Theseus with the opening lines of the play: “what cheer my love?” Rather than a conqueror’s bravado, Theseus was utterly distraught in his lonely apartment, chalking another tick on the wall to mark the weeks since they had last been together. The vocative in “O, methinks, how slow / This old moon wanes” suggested that, although their “nuptial hour / Draws on apace,” in “four happy days,” there would be no solemnities. With the virus spreading all spring and into summer, I was reminded of the email received from a colleague whose long-awaited nuptials, already stymied by medical complications the previous year, had been delayed yet again.

Using the YouTube live premiere feature, the Chicago-based company provided a one-night-only stream of the play in line with their usual practice. Actors from all over the United States participated, filming individual scenes across a variety of social media platforms that were later cut together for the stream. None of the actors were ever in the same physical space with one another, so the usual pub conditions were the only missing element. I had not realized how “white” the majority of streamed performances I had watched over these weeks of quarantine had been (a notable exception being the all-black cast of the Public’s *Much Ado About Nothing* via PBS) until reminded by the inclusive casting of this production across race and gender. Many male characters were played cross-dressed although all original pronouns were preserved. This made possible a new source of conflict for Egeus when both his daughter and Lysander were played by female-identifying actors, and Demetrius male-identifying, counterbalancing the play’s usual heteronormativity. That both Lysander and Demetrius were played by actors of colors ensured that neither could be read as rejected for the color of their skin.

With the new frame device, little actual dialogue needed substantial changing beyond thoughtful cutting. For example, the contagion rhetoric of Titania’s “Forgeries of Jealousy” speech needed no modification to ring with new allusion, as “never, since the middle summer’s spring, / Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead.” With “contagious fogs” of the viral spread “falling in the land, / Have every” worker, like the ploughman, “lost his sweat.” Not only did the speech resonate with the new global experience of quarantine, but it located the blame in fairyland, “their parents and original.” The speech that so often serves only as a set-piece was given



Snug (Katherine Bourne Taylor) is eager to make clear, using both a filter and the reverse-camera mode, that we shouldn't be afraid of the lion's part.

new urgency with explicit links to contagion anxiety. There were of course small dialogue changes in order to complement the range of technologies used as well as to negotiate moments in the plot that call for face-to-face interaction. For example, Helena sent Demetrius a false Zoom link, having promised that it was a secret meeting between Hermia and Lysander. His response:

I love thee not, stop sending me friend requests. I'll block thee, change my passwords, and leave you to Instagram models. I shall do you mischief; I still have those pictures from the Halloween party.

So many of the solutions were simple and elegant, needing nothing cleverer than a slight modification of context to convey the same beat in the story. For example, in order for Titania to discover who she has been sleeping with, Oberon recommended "check your polos [Polaroids]." Similarly, to convey that Oberon was invisible and overhearing everything, the actor simply recorded their scenes on a rooftop balcony, leaning over the edge to suggest watching.

More sophisticated tricks of multimedia integration were used in a refusal to be constrained by Zoom, the favored platform of the many virtual staged readings appearing. For example, the rude mechanicals were right to be worried at being overheard in their Zoom rehearsal, which was hacked by an outside user with braying donkey videos. This instigated Bottom's transformation, constituting one of the production's many Instagram filters so that the performer now sported an ass's head quite effectively, with correct movement in the mouth for dialogue. Bot-

tom then recorded himself singing as part of his Instagram “stories” feed, which happened to be the “first view” upon which Titania landed when awakening. She then used the private chat function so that the whole of their interchange happened by text rather than spoken. Likewise, Bottom confirmed he was alive and well by answering a group text chain from which he had long been absent.

Video filters were used meaningfully to change the appearance of individuals via Instagram and other photo apps, solving a number of basic dramaturgical and material requirements. Puck wore a series of fake mustaches when baiting the Athenian youths. When Snug, the assistant stage manager, conveyed his anxiety about frightening the ladies after taking on the role of the Lion, he positioned himself behind his own cellphone, with both his face and the phone screen facing the camera. Using the reverse-camera function, we were able to simultaneously see both Snug roaring with a quite terrifying lion’s-head filter on the phone screen and his unadulterated form holding the phone itself.

This suturing of a wide variety of streaming, messaging, and remote platforms had primed audiences for the meta-theatricality of the final play within a play. The camera moved between Hippolyta and Theseus, both dressed in wedding finery alongside empty chairs with the missing spouse’s name attached. They used FaceTime to watch together the YouTube premiere of the streaming *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby*, delivered in an email from Philostrate. The countdown font, sound, and graphics looked exactly like those with which we had been greeted earlier, and so we watched Theseus and Hippolyta relive our own experience—“Is it starting?” and “Can you see it?”—of digital viewing. If you watched the live premiere rather than the recording (attended by nearly three hundred and fifty viewers at its height), you could follow the duke and duchess providing all of their metacommentary in the live chat box that had been aflurry with viewers’ comments from the very start. It was at this moment, through the act of collective group watching, separately but together, reinforced by the chat box (a silent feature), that this became live theater rather than a stream of something merely pre-fabricated. Both characters interacted with audience members in the chat so that we were able to follow Hippolyta’s emotional transformation, via text box, from insoluble dismay in the pandemic to hope that we will indeed have weddings, friends, and plays again.

Like the opening prologue, the whole of the company shared the epilogue. Everyone was lit by candlelight in dark homes this time, and