

A Midsummer Night's Dream in Almagro

José Manuel González Fernández de Sevilla
UNIVERSIDAD DE ALICANTE

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* has been the Shakespearean play seen most frequently at the Almagro festival. There have been four different productions since 1977. La Cazuela staged *El Somni d'una Nit d'estiu* in 1984. Later David Conville's production was presented by the New Shakespeare Company in 1986. There were two new productions in the 1990s. UR-Teatro staged *El sueño de una noche de verano* at the XVI Almagro Festival. Factoría Teatro presented a new adaptation of the play in 1994 which had a positive reception for its dramatic sense and modern connotations.

El somni d'una nit d'estiu was included in the programme for the VII Almagro Festival. Jaume Bordera's adaptation of this Shakespearean play was staged on September 15, 1984 at S. Agustín's. The production stressed the contemporary dimension of the play for Shakespeare is not "of a time but for all ages". The performance followed Sagarra's translation in verse which seemed to be most adequate to the dramatic needs of the original text. It presented a new dramatisation of love for it has always been thought an essential element of the play. However it was viewed from our historical situation. Hence the sexual component of love became relevant within the theatrical sequence to show the new expectations created by falling in love. Sexual desire was focused on a huge bed which the lovers used to satisfy the hunger for love. It became a sort of meeting point to exchange experiences and frustrations regarding love in a context of magic which gave a special insight into amorous considerations. Sexual appetite, therefore, prevailed since the characters were longing to accomplish all their sexual fantasies in a wood where fairies and lovers sought joy and pleasure. Thus love was experienced as something physical. It was the common desire shared by all those who came to the fairyland in search of all kinds of loving care.

However love was dramatised as a complex human feeling which could not be reduced to mere sexuality because everything in the play showed a dual dimension. The spiritual and the carnal, the human and the supernatural were transferred to a fictional place, to a paradise on earth. Consequently there were both a sense of the permanent and a positive consciousness of the transient, for love and sexuality were presented as expressions of the twofold nature of man. The wood was the place where all these experiences took place and both the magic and the physical were illustrated with every sort of detail. It was where the kingdom of Titania and Oberon displayed all its magical potential which made the woodland bewitched, creating an atmosphere of fear and respect, for it was a place of fantasy and imagination where all kinds of desires might come true. At the same time the wood made the characters feel insecure for the great variety of experiences and contradictions they found surpassed all their expectations. All its inhabitants were afraid of something they could not control. However, they did not try to go away from that fanciful location for it was such an attractive place that they were determined

not to leave.

In the 1990s new productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Spanish groups have appeared on the Almagro stage. UR-Teatro presented its adaptation from the 9th to 12th of July 1993 at the "Teatro Popular". The intention of the production as Helena Pimenta pointed out was to bridge "lo clásico y lo contemporáneo. Mi deseo ha sido conciliar mundos, lenguajes, intentando que cada elemento sea consciente y armonizado"¹. Love was the major topic in the production. It was, therefore, "...el amor, a través de sus diferentes manifestaciones... el verdadero protagonista"² Love was what made sense and gave order and coherence to the whole performance. We should bear in mind that this Shakespearean play "...is, after all, a play about love, about all the difficulties and obstacles lovers encounter..."³. And love showed a positive sexual concern. It was staged not only as a romantic feeling but also as something else. The tensions and anxieties emerging in the course of sexual attraction were central to the dramatization of love and sexual pleasure became a precious thing within the magic fairyland. The actors were well aware of it and tried to make clear their sexual concern through gesture and language.

UR's adaptation of this Shakespearean comedy had some outstanding characteristics which were a consequence of a particular vision of drama. Theatricality was a major element in the play. Theatre was presented in its purest sense. There was a simple stage with few things on it to give an idea of what drama is in its more essential aspects. The set consisted of three wooden screens. And at times they served as house, at others as wall or trees in the forest. They were located at the back of the stage which allowed the actors to move freely from one side of the stage to the other. In this way all the props contributed to a natural performance where words and action were the essential elements. Thus the play showed an unusual cast of actors made up of just six players, three men and three women who managed to interpret the 18 characters of the play. It made the staging much more challenging since such a small cast of actors played all the different roles from the aristocrats to the artisans, from the fairies to the lovers. It was certainly refreshing to see just a single actor playing as many as four major roles. This was a very a difficult task which required acting skills of the highest degree. It was hard to recognize the actors when they changed their roles.

The production also emphasized the modernity of the text since the group was very much concerned with the presentation of a contemporary reading of the play related to the Spanish social context in the 1990s. There was a positive manipulation in order to make a meaningful performance within a particular situation. The mechanics' scenes were the most appealing to a contemporary audience for there was a complete reversal of the original dramatic roles. Characters represented social stereotypes of different Spanish regions as well as of other countries. Jordi, the Catalanian, was the director of the interlude, Patxi, the Basque, was Pyramus and an Andalusian girl was Thisbe while a Galician countrywoman played the role of the moon. Irony and language played a decisive part in their characterization. The artisans' preparation and performance of "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" before the Duke and the Duchess of Athens on his wedding-day was the most creative and original part of the whole adaptation. It was when the performance reached its dramatic peak and connected more deeply with present-day expectations.

Language was abused in order to be meaningful within a social situation which demanded new solutions since UR's dramatization of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* showed a positive concern with the social potential of Shakespearean drama whose art demanded once again to be related to a particular time. The verbal component was seriously taken into account and served to delineate the dramatis personae. Then

a very colloquial and informal language was spoken by the artisans as if they were taken out of the streets. Words lost their Shakespearean literary quality and became less poetic but much more theatrical. Moreover the way of speaking greatly contributed to the characters' portrayal. These scenes exploited to a great extent all the features of contemporary language. There was a positive choice of an informal register to present verbal activity as something natural, which brought about a stronger sense of modernity to the performance since it could communicate easily with an Spanish audience. There were many examples of verbal freshness as "Se lo dedico al público en general" or when the Galician countrywoman who played the role of the moon was forced to move her breast up and down while saying "tolón, tolón".

Language and costume were the basic dramatic elements employed to provoke a social consciousness and to criticise xenophobic attitudes against immigrants as in the case of the Pole who was compelled to play the role of a wall during the performance of the love-story of Pyramus and Thisbe. However he took advantage of his minor role to make his protest against racism and to demand a fairer legal system in order to defend immigrants' rights. His protest was made unexpectedly clear when he turned his back at the end of the play-within-the-play and a written piece of cloth could be seen on his jacket saying "No ha la ley de extrangería" with serious spelling mistakes. But social criticism also applied to the Spanish social situation for the traditional stereotypes of the different regions were presented with ironic criticism. They were considered as a negative cliché since they represented an anachronistic view of social prototypes who were no longer valid within a more open society with new attitudes and expectations.

Music and dancing were relevant elements within the framework of the whole dramatic sequence. Both were decisive components in the dramatization of the scenes and episodes in the woodland. Their words were changed into strange and magical sounds. Communication was achieved not only through verbal discourse but also through unintelligible and mysterious sounds which made the wood a magic place. This was the reason why the sounds and music sung by Titania and the Fairies was very special and strange to the human ear. It was a kind of animal-like sound with high-pitched tones with no meaning at all. All this music was accompanied by some particular dancing as shown by Titania and the two fairies whose graceful movements should be highly appreciated for their skill. Thus the production recaptured the idea of the actor as an entertainer or showman.

Costumes also contributed to providing a contemporary insight since the performance was done in modern costumes. All the characters, from the Duke Theseus to Peter Quince or Nick Bottom, were dressed in today's fashion according to their skills and roles. Costumes did not change much during the performance giving a sense of continuity to the different scenes. However the way some characters were dressed on the stage was part of their dramatic personality reinforcing their metatheatrical intention because their satirical portrayal tried to convey particular messages to the audience in order to criticise social stereotypes which were no longer acceptable. Costumes, therefore, became relevant, particularly in the case of Demetrius who was dressed in a white sweater with black glasses representing "the dandified womanizer"⁴. Titania was in red, Hermia was in yellow and Helena in blue, since colours had a symbolic function. Costumes were very simple in design and were never sophisticated to show the characters as simply and naturally as possible.

The production, in spite of following closely the scenes of the original text, left out some episodes, omitted some elements and changed the role of some characters. The changes were due to the small number of actors and the dramatic intention of the production. So Egeus, Hermia's father, and

Philostrate did not appear at the beginning of the play. Theseus was the only character on stage in the opening scene. The number of fairies was reduced to two which had a negative effect on the dramatization of the fairyland. However female characters were introduced in the mechanics' scenes.

A new adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was presented in the XVII Almagro Festival from the 16th to the 19th of July 1994. The production was directed by Denis Rafter and Juan Carlos Ibarra was the responsible for the dramatic text of which, as he points out, "cabe hablar de pocas supresiones, excepción hecha de los parlamentos de Puck sustituidos en escena por la mímica y voces inarticuladas... En otras ocasiones el texto se ha sintetizado buscando la claridad, se ha usado con libertad de expresiones nada literales en base a situaciones y caracteres, o se han sustituido bromas y juegos de palabras difíciles de trasladar"⁵. Rafael Martínez la Fuente's translation was, amongst others, the one used to fix the dramatic text. Prose was employed throughout and verse only appeared on special occasions as in Puck's farewell and in the interlude which dramatised the story of Pyramus and Thisbe.

Factoría Teatro staged the production at the "Teatro Popular", at the same spot where UR Teatro presented its adaptation. The actors belonged to the School of Dramatic Art of Madrid. This amateur group was founded in the "Centro Cultural Galileo" between March and April 1993. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was their first serious attempt to stage a Shakespearean play which made their success more valuable after performing it in different Spanish towns. Drama was thought of primarily as entertainment and joy and this was precisely what the production tried to communicate. The actors showed their interest in sharing with the audience all the magic which the play contains. For this purpose they used all the entrances and doors of the stage making the audience a part of that magic world. There was, then, a positive concern to involve the audience in the dramatic action of the play. Audience and actor, therefore, conformed to a whole theatrical entity which lived through a magic experience together where dreams and fantasies became reality for a while.

Thus the first aim of the production was to prepare the audience who should be carried away to a different world, to a fairyland, full of magic sounds and joyful experiences. And for this reason the play began with a sudden black-out while all the characters were coming into the theatre through different doors and entrances carrying little torches in their hands whispering sweet sounds and singing. At the same time the combination of acoustic elements produced a magic atmosphere for you did not know the location of the different voices. Later each character made his own presentation so that people could be familiar with everyone of them. It was followed by Oberon's introduction, and then all the characters came on to the stage.

The sets, lighting, music, dancing and costumes were those appropriate to the creation of a climax of mystery and beauty. They greatly contributed to the overall effect of the performance on the audience. The stage was divided into three main parts: the background stage, Oberon's ramp and Titania's space. The black backcloths of the background stage had linen cloths of different colours on them. Costumes and disguises were varied and suitable to the personality of the different characters and supernatural beings. These elements had a twofold function: to create a contrast between the human and the magic, and to produce a festive note, since the play deals with love and refers to a different world where man can achieve all his expectations. Thus the interludes, whose theatrical purpose was to bridge the different parts of the performance, contributed to create a happy and cheerful atmosphere.

The production was very much concerned with experimental drama as the group tried to present new visions and give new solutions to the dramatisation of the classics. There were three highly dramatic fea-

tures in Factoria's adaptation at the Almagro Festival. The first one was the woodland, full of dwarfs and fairies, where bestiality was aggressively stressed through Oberon and Puck, who appeared with a lion's head, and through the reinforcement of physical appetite. Moreover gesture, dresses and voices emphasized the longing for sexual pleasure. The second main feature of the performance was the doubling of the role of Titania by Isabel Veiga and Valentina García which gave a richer and more complex insight to this central character.

The third feature was to me the most enlightening and original as it had been widely recognized by critics in previous performances. This was in the scenes where the mechanics appeared giving the performance a stronger contemporary sense. This time all six artisans were women since the number of actresses was greater than the number of actors. There were 18 women and five men to play all the different roles. It meant that the group had more theatrical possibilities to interpret all the characters than UR whose cast was formed just by six people in all. The names were changed as follows in order to make them more meaningful to a Spanish audience:

Colasa, la tabernera	Pyramus
Paca Flauta, la sacristana	Thisbe
Berta Hambrona, la matarife	Thisbe's mother
Tomasa Morritos, la hojalatera	Pyramus's father
Justina, la del carpintero	The lion
Petra, la comadrona	

These characters were a complete theatrical creation for even the language was very peculiar for its colloquialisms. So we heard words wrongly pronounced such as "actroces, atrices, prórrogo, naide, paque, Tisne". It contributed to a colourful performance, full of contemporary references.

As we have seen all these productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been a great success at Almagro's Festival as well as in other Spanish locations. One of the reasons for their positive reception is that "triunfar con el *Sueño de una noche de verano* resulta relativamente fácil, puesto que la magia inimitable e insuperable del texto se demuestra capaz de superar todos los obstáculos"⁶. However you need something else if you really want to reproduce the magic of Shakespeare today. Possibly these adaptations have gone too far in their attempt to make Shakespeare our contemporary. But certainly they have shown us ways to make Shakespeare alive since they firmly believe that he is no longer "un mito"⁷.

NOTES

¹ Entrevista aparecida en el *Mundo* 1.9.1993.

² Julián G. Ibarretxe, *Deia*, 2.2.1993.

³ Tom Matheson, "Celebrating Shakespeare in Style", *Experimental Theatre*, 10, September, 1993.

⁴ Tom Matheson, "Celebrating Shakespeare in Style", *Experimental Theatre*, N°10, September, 1993.

⁵ W. Shakespeare, *El sueño de una noche de verano*, Madrid, Real Escuela de Arte Superior Dramático, 1993, Introduction, p. 12.

⁶ Alberto de la Hera, “Un verdadero sueño”, *Ya*, 21.4.1993.

⁷ Pablo Caro, *El sueño de una noche de verano*, inicia el ciclo teatral del Festival de Mérida”, *ABC*, 9.7.1993.