

“Keeping the Dream Alive”: Nicholas Hytner’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2019)

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Introduction: “It’s Actually Shakespeare!”

In pursuit of accessibility, pop culture credibility and a wider market reach, productions of William Shakespeare’s plays by high-profile theatrical institutions often embrace modern features such as contemporary music and anachronistic, extra-textual additions to the playwright’s language. These can appear either ill-suited to the theater’s regular clientele or awkwardly tacked on as a form of conceptual gimmick, intended to lend the play marketability through its attachment to a specific cultural phenomenon. Moments such as these are akin to the repeated scenes from films in which Shakespeare is made relatable by association with fashionable culture, from *Last Action Hero* (1993) to *Hamlet 2* (2008), often with satirical intent behind such portrayals. This was ably demonstrated and parodied in the 2017 Saturday Night Live sketch *Substitute Teacher*, in which host Lin-Manuel Miranda played a high school teacher opening an AP English lesson by earnestly associating Shakespeare with rap music:

TEACHER: Let me ask you a question me hombre? You like hip-hop? You like “dope beats”? Well, what if I told you that the greatest rapper of all time isn’t Tupac, isn’t Biggie, it’s actually—

PUPIL 1: (*interrupting*) Shakespeare?

TEACHER: It’s actually Shakespeare!

PUPIL 2: Yeah, we know. You’re not the first well-meaning sub to try and “reach us” through hip-hop.

PUPIL 1: Let me guess? You were about to open your laptop and perform a rap version of *Hamlet*’s “to be or not to be?” (Saturday Night Live)

Immediately following this exchange, the teacher’s laptop does indeed spew forth “to be or not to be” set to a modern hip-hop beat,

with Miranda's voice clearly discernible. He quickly stifles the sound by closing the computer in the vain hope that this will dispel the idea that his attempt to "reach" the pupils is exactly as clichéd as they believe it to be. Aside from its general lampoon of well-meaning maverick educators, the sketch enacts a specific spoof of its guest star, given the *Hamilton* creator's past as an English high school teacher and his hip-hop musical's Shakespearean connections, both through a direct reference to *Macbeth* in the song *Take A Break* and remarks made by Oskar Eustis, the Artistic Director at the Public Theater where *Hamilton* premiered, who compared Miranda's work to Shakespeare's:

... he's taking the language of the people, and in Shakespeare's case he elevated it to iambic pentameter and in Lin-Manuel's case, he elevated it to hip-hop and rap, and he ennobled it by turning it into verse, and by putting it at the center of the stage (PBS).

As soon as an artist is ascribed with the Shakespearean epithet it fundamentally changes the way in which society views that person and their work, regardless of the individual's knowledge of Shakespeare. Eustis thus implies that *Hamilton* represents a modern equivalent of Shakespeare's history plays by using contemporary language (rap music) to discuss events of the past (America's foundation as a nation). Although it would be inaccurate to define *Hamilton* as a Shakespearean adaptation, Miranda illustrates the playwright's DNA within his project through direct textual references to *Macbeth* and, like Shakespeare, by harnessing linguistic tools that are intended to make historical fact exciting and accessible to a popular audience.

The parodic reach and satirical implication of the *Substitute Teacher* sketch is far wider reaching than hip-hop Shakespeare and Miranda's identity as a modern Shakespearean. It addresses concerns about making Shakespeare's plays and identity as a writer fit any cultural context without care for how this might make audiences feel and could encompass any educator, director or company in danger of pandering to their audience by reinterpreting Shakespeare for a modern setting or form. During the 2010s, for instance, the Royal

Shakespeare Company has occasionally fallen foul of such errors, incorporating a rap battle into the fight sequence between Cassio and Montano in Iqbal Khan's 2015 production of *Othello* without a clear contextual framework.

In reference to remarks made by the actor, director, and playwright John Kani, Gregory Doran explained that *Julius Caesar*, which he relocated to modern Africa in 2012 with a predominantly Black-British cast, was “Shakespeare’s African play” (Royal Shakespeare Company); rather than specifying which particular country the play’s themes of political dissidence and uprising spoke most pertinently to, he offered a dangerously homogenous version of an African political conflict. Although Doran himself doubtless understood the nuances of the different coup d’états to which his production alluded, having worked in South Africa with his colleague and partner Antony Sher on a production of *Titus Andronicus* for Johannesburg’s Market Theatre in 1994, some audience members may have been oblivious to such subtle differences and, therefore, by casting *Julius Caesar* in these general terms, Doran risked reinforcing problematic assumptions about African politics from the predominantly white, middle-class theatergoers who attend Royal Shakespeare Company performances.

‘Are You Sure That We Are Awake’: The Status of the Dream

Nicholas Hytner’s 2019 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Bridge Theatre avoided problems of generalization and cultural pandering by utilizing contemporary reference points, methods of staging and music that rooted Shakespeare’s work in the present without attempting to appear voguish or appropriate popular art for cultural cachet. Following the success of his promenade *Julius Caesar* in 2017—the second production at the Bridge Theatre—Hytner staged *Dream* in a similar fashion, with standing tickets available in the theatre’s pit for those who wanted this immersive experience and traditional seated tickets in the circle and balcony. Similarly, to *Julius Caesar*, the audience were shepherded by stewards at crucial moments in order to accommodate sections of

staging that rose from floor. Meanwhile, a central rostrum served as the play's focal point for larger ensemble scenes that were performed in-the-round. In a design component influenced by Peter Brook's seminal Royal Shakespeare Company production (1970), which made use of trapeze artists and a minimalistic stage design, Hytner also positioned aerial performers above the crowd in the pit, which Peter Kirwan described as "a spectacular and skillful choice especially given the proximity of the promenading audience." This gave the impression that the production was constructed along vertical rather than horizontal lines, due to sections emerging from beneath the audience and performers descending from above, thus contributing to the sense of immersion.

In this essay, I will explore how the Bridge Theatre *Dream* incorporated popular music, cultural references and anachronistic textual additions to Shakespeare's play in order to respond to issues of contemporary gender politics and questions of desire, and to update the play for a modern audience. In an interval feature that formed part of the live theater broadcast of Hytner's *Dream*, the director reflected that productions of this play had been getting darker and darker . . . essentially what happens in the dream is, for the second time, the king gets to humiliate the queen. In the dream, as written, Oberon drugs the queen in order for [her] to have sex with a donkey as part of a revenge against her because she won't do what he says. That's been the basis—that observation—for many excellent, but really disturbing productions of the play. The problem was, for me, that . . . I don't read the play and see it as something sour and dark. I read something that is a celebration, a release . . . the basis of the story is the woman gets drugged by the man to have sex, so I wondered what it would be like . . . if you simply swapped their lives and what effect would that have on the Athens plot; the part that isn't the dream?

First, what exactly does Hytner mean when he refers to "the dream?" Sukanta Chaudhuri remarks that "[t]he status of *Dream* as dream is an obvious critical concern. The dream world can be linked to the fairy world and even to the processes of nature as extended and magnified in the wood" (76). Hytner embraced the notion that

the wood amplifies the emotions of the lovers and mechanicals and that the process of transformation—both physical and emotional—leaves scars on these characters once they return to Athens. The director also employed “the modern practice of doubling Theseus with Oberon and Hippolyta with Titania” (8) but chose to amend Shakespeare’s text further by swapping many of the lines delivered by Oberon (Oliver Chris) and Titania (Gwendoline Christie).

At the beginning of Act 2, Scene 1, when the production shifted from the mortal to fairy world and the audience were introduced to Peaseblossom (Chipo Kureya) and Puck (David Moorst), Hytner inserted the sleeping Theseus and Hippolyta into the conversation between these two fairies. They awoke in separate beds, plagued by these night-time terrors and, Hippolyta, venturing out of her bed, threw off her nun’s habit to reveal a flowing, green dress. Without pausing to acknowledge the character change, the scene moved directly into the first exchange between Oberon and Titania, openly illustrating to the audience the production’s metatheatrical intent. Moreover, by placing the mortal king and queen present at this moment of transition, Hynter implied that the events of the fairy kingdom that are to follow may constitute “the dream” of which he speaks. Throughout the production, the connection between reality and fantasy remained ambiguous, and this became particularly powerful when manipulating and addressing questions of desire between the fairies, lovers, and mechanicals.

In the interval feature, Hytner also addressed the possibility of rehabilitating *Dream*’s image as a positive and celebratory comedy rather than a dark and problematic play. In this aim, he was only partially successful; there were sections of the production that made worrying generalizations about sexual fluidity that belied the attempt to make the production progressive through Hytner’s decision to have the fairy queen, rather than king, serve as the puppet master. In Act 3, Scene 2, Puck interrupted the fight between the four lovers to manipulate them into engaging in two temporary same-sex acts of infatuation. Kirwan observes that the kiss shared between Hermia (Isis Hainsworth) and Helena (Tessa Bonham Jones) became especially problematic by “causing Lysander and Demetrius to

pause their squabbling and run over to gaze ecstatically on the women beginning to kiss,” thereby delivering a laugh through the pornographic joke that two adolescent men will find the sight of two women kissing sexually arousing.

Indeed, the moment drew widespread laughter from the auditorium during the performance that I witnessed, suggesting either that the audience were reveling in this unexpected act of transgression or that they were complicit in “[t]hese cheap gags, fetishising rather than celebrating homosexuality and making it into a joke” (Kirwan). Although these shared moments lent the production an arguably progressive attitude to gender fluidity, the positive intention was significantly undermined by rooting the kisses in a comic context. This missed opportunity and tonal misfire was underlined by the lovers’ final, unspoken scene, when each shared a lingering moment. Lysander, for instance, coquettishly remarked to Demetrius that “yeah, I’ll see you,”¹ thereby suggesting to the audience that the transgression of the forest dream world might continue to linger in the minds of the four lovers.

‘The Opportunity of the Night’: Desire, Hatred and Sexual Politics in *Dream*

In his play, Shakespeare set a precedent for Hytner’s choice to intimate the continuing influence of love-in-idleness beyond the wood, by leaving Demetrius under its influence and in love with Helena. Exploring the rage expressed by Demetrius as a type of precursor to that of Lear or Leontes in later plays, it is possible to gain insight into what he might become, if Puck’s spell ever subsided. Like Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*, Demetrius cannot endow objects with positive desire without reverting to their negative connotations and shows himself to be in a constant state of self-affirmation through this fluctuation between the language of love and hate that dominates sections of *Dream* involving the lovers:

Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show
Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!
That pure congealèd white, high Taurus’ snow,
Fanned with the eastern wind, turns to a crow

When thou hold'st up thy hand. O, let me kiss
This princess of pure white, this seal of bliss. (*Dream*, 3.2.140–5)

To affirm the desire which is “this seal of bliss,” Demetrius has to conjure its opposite, entering into a realm of polarities by juxtaposing “pure white” with the blackness of “a crow.” “Thy lips” become “tempting,” forbidden fruit and, crucially, “that pure congealèd white” demonstrates the negative nature of his case. To a Demetrius under the influence, up is down, down is up and the purity of Helena becomes “muddy,” thereby only increasing his desire for it. Sometimes thought of as the less honorable of the two male lovers, more rash in language and violent in action, Demetrius’s changing passions, unlike the more mild-mannered Lysander, mark him out as a character of feeling, caught constantly between desire and hate, until the two enmesh once the aphrodisiac love-juice takes hold.

Even prior to imbibing the potion, Demetrius’s first words to Helena reveal his intentions. In asking, “where is Lysander and fair Hermia? / The one I’ll slay, the other slayeth me” (2.1.189–90), he juxtaposes violent urges with sexual connotations, especially if we take “slay” to mean overcome by lust, in the modern sense. Thus, Shakespeare demonstrated at this relatively early stage of his career his capacity to provoke the homoerotic undertones of the male desire for combat that would emerge more explicitly in *Coriolanus*, where “the metaphors and images . . . repeatedly worry and weaken the boundaries between fighting and ****ing, between friend and enemy” (Klenbort 226–7). Certainly, such urges, if substantiated in *Dream*, are not explicitly present. However, they do help to convey how Demetrius comes to epitomize this relation between desire and hate in both his actions and language, and how, for comedy to triumph over tragedy, the play moves to exert control over these passions and have him revert back into a state of indifference, with notions of desire quelled and thwarted.

Thereafter, Demetrius and Lysander become somewhat interchangeable in the play’s first scene. It is as though, liberated by the charms of the wood, their characters become more distinct, whilst with their return to the city, they revert to being young,

aristocratic archetypes. The importance of location here, as in *The Winter's Tale*, is shown to be a key device in Shakespeare's portrayal of the interchangeable nature of desire and hate. Both Bohemia and the Fairy Wood represent those locations where uninhibited expression can emerge, whilst Sicilia and Athens, the real world to which all must ultimately return, signify the triumph of the rational over the supernatural. Demetrius, though already concerned with the return to the trappings of city life and its expectations, remains, unlike Lysander, under the spell of the love potion. Drugs work differently depending on their user's psychological state of mind and if their effect in the wood was to enhance his frenzied feelings of interwoven desire and hate, then Shakespeare's provocation of such emotions shifts after Demetrius leaves the dream space. The drug consequently works him into a state of non-feeling, positioning him finally in a state of apathy: the opposite direction to either desire or hate.

From his awakening, Demetrius is merely the puppet of Puck and the audience can only presume that, in relation to Helena, "if marriage is expressive of a physical, emotional, intellectual and . . . spiritual mutuality, an indwelling, then Helena's words hint at a future of unhappiness. Demetrius is still under Puck's spell and will only be Helena's by being perpetually untrue to himself" (Edmondson 259). The reference to Helena's surprise at finding him "mine own and not my own" (4.1.189) suggests that, if ever desire and hate were contained, provoked, and controlled in one being by Shakespeare, then Demetrius represents the playwright's early explorations of the danger involved in blurring lines between those two defining aspects of the human psyche.

Kate Kellaway said of Hytner's production that the "Lysander (Kit Young) and Demetrius (Paul Adeyefa) are cast like dashing brothers who dally, briefly, with one another." In this review, however, she misses the subtle differences between Young and Adeyefa's performances. Joan Stansbury has argued against the perception of the lovers as interchangeable, positing that they "do not simply represent young love in general, but rather distinct attitudes and perceptions which contribute to the whole debate of the play as

to the nature and importance of mutual love, ideally culminating in marriage” (57). Hermia and Helena are easier to distinguish due to the physical difference that Shakespeare indicates in the text and, more importantly, because one is desired while the other desires. Lysander and Demetrius are more often indistinguishable, and it is worth noting how well Hytner’s production succeeded in imbuing them with specific characteristics.

The position of Demetrius as Egeus’s preferred suitor for his daughter and Lysander’s role as a disruptive influence means that a director could opt to depict Demetrius as a sycophantic company man and Lysander as a dangerous beguiler. However, their behavior in the forest, such as when Demetrius refers to “the opportunity of the night” (2.1.217) and “the rich worth of your virginity” (2.1.219) in his first threatening encounter with the pursuing Helena, suggests that he may be the more sexually aggressive of the two men. His language here is potent with threats that intimate to the audience, especially a modern one attentive to the play’s patriarchal themes, that Demetrius is prepared to abandon Helena and expose her “to the mercy of wild beasts” (2.1.228) in the forest and, still worse, use physical force with strong sexual connotations in order to prevent her from following him.

Ironically, given Hytner’s suggestion that his production pushed against the supposed trend of darker *Dreams*, one of its most striking moments was Hermia venturing uncertainly through the fairy woods after being abandoned by Lysander. The scene was darkly lit with an underscore of unsettling ambient music and howls of the aforementioned “beasts.” Paul Arditti’s sound design, coupled with Hainsworth dazedly wandering through the audience, lent the production a temporary horror aesthetic quite at odds with its otherwise carnivalesque atmosphere. However, far from detracting from its impact, this emphasized the unsettling aspects of desire expressed by the lovers by confirming that Demetrius’s words are not an empty threat.

His final lines to Helena in Act 2, Scene 1, underscore his intentions when he serves her the following ultimatum: “Let me go; / Or if thou follow me, do not believe / But I shall do thee mischief

in the wood” (2.1.235–7). Although Chaudhuri suggests that “mischief” means “serious harm or injury: a much stronger sense than usual today” (165), I contend that quite the reverse is true. As Demetrius makes his exit, Helena’s response, in which she turns Demetrius’s words against him by exclaiming that “in the temple, in the town, the field, / You do me mischief” (2.1.238–9), suggests that the exchange can be played suggestively and, indeed, in Hytner’s production, Bonham Jones delivered it with a level of problematic hysteria and lustful longing. Consequently, the significance of Demetrius’s intended “mischief” has arguably strengthened over time thanks to its contextualization in productions such as this, where it becomes a verbal attack on Helena.

Stansbury perceptively remarks that, at the end of *Dream*, “Demetrius the inconstant doter remains forever enchanted. This is remarkable: he is the only Shakespearian character for whom magic is a permanent condition for happiness. His dream becomes reality” (59). This critical perspective was reflected in Adeyefa’s performance as a suited, mild-mannered Demetrius; he frequently appeared a passive figure in the scenes of conflict, caught in a permanently dazed, dream-like state. By contrast, Young’s Lysander cut a more distinctive, virile, and decisive figure combining the leather jacket garb of actor James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) with singer/songwriter Ed Sheeran’s undersized guitar and contemporary vocal sensibilities. The result was that Lysander emerged as the more dynamic character of the two men which, although strengthening his position as an attractive outsider to Hermia, resulted in the audience gaining little sense of why Demetrius is caught between desire and hatred.

‘Every Day, It’s A Daydream’: Popular Culture in Hytner’s *Dream*

Despite the proclaimed celebratory tenor of this production, it opened on a somber note with a procession of black-clad men and women, who entered the stage singing in plainchant, thus conjuring a funereal mood as opposed to the “nuptial hour” (1.1.1) promised by Theseus’s opening line. The costumes of the female

characters, the audience had been told in the live theater broadcast's opening commentary, were intended to evoke Margaret Atwood's dystopian, feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which has found renewed cultural currency in recent years due to a successful television adaptation and its resonance with contemporary feminist movements such as #MeToo. Hippolyta was thus transported onstage, trapped inside a sleek glass cage that reminded the audience of her status as a captive queen, a fact over which many productions choose to glide.

Not only is Hippolyta prisoner to a conquering duke but Hermia is also greatly mistreated in this opening scene, as it is assumed that she is the property of both her father and intended husband, despite her protestations that she wishes to marry another man of her choosing: a theme with particular resonance for an audience seeking empowered rather than subjugated female characters. The decision to draw out these more insidious themes from one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies by connecting them to memorable feminist imagery in popular culture was, therefore, highly astute.

Another key feature of Hytner's *Dream* were the modern linguistic additions to Shakespeare's text. Although initially jarring in the opening scenes at court, these became natural once delivered by the Rude Mechanicals in their first appearance onstage, perhaps due to them representing the *platea* section of Shakespeare's play, rather than the *locus*. Drawing on Robert Weimann's terminology in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, Stephen Purcell explains that

[t]he spatial functioning of *locus* and *platea* worked something like this: the actor standing upon the scaffold would appear against a backdrop of the pageant stage—the throne, for example—which would localize him in a specific, or at least relatively specific, fictional setting. The actor standing in the *platea* space, however, would have been standing against no such backdrop; behind the actor, the majority of the audience would have been able to see only other members of the audience, and the performance became, by implication, an extension of their own world (19).

It is possible to argue that Hytner's entire production was set in the *platea* space, given the proximity of the audience to the stage and the Bridge Theatre's immersive pit, which allowed actors to interact with the audience in inventive and involving ways, such as when the mechanicals wish to consult a 'calendar' in Act 3, Scene 1, to know whether the moon will shine during their performance. Given the many extra-textual additions to Shakespeare's text already established early in the production, with Lysander, for instance, removing Helena's habit and flirtatiously remarking 'that's more like it' and the first scene between the mechanicals abounding with Bottom's additional remarks, it became entirely natural by this stage for the cast to break out into the audience and decide to consult the Calendar application on an audience member's iPhone.

Bottom, returning to the stage, was then forced to return to the pit in order to ask, 'unlock your calendar, I beseech you,' thus delivering a rough approximation of Elizabethan language whilst acknowledging the modern security measures of this twenty-first century technology. It not only updated the scene to incorporate the changing sense of what the word 'calendar' means but also gave way to amusing unspoken remonstrations when the mechanicals became side-tracked by looking through said phone at images that the audience could only assume were illicit, taking a group 'selfie'—referred to by Flute (Jermaine Freeman) as a 'portrait'—and finally returning the device to its owner.

Hytner's production also had the capacity to elevate forgotten moments from this frequently performed play, as demonstrated by the address by Philostrate (also Moorst) to the three couples prior to the mechanicals' performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe." Before Theseus selected their play, an array of other options was offered and, rather than pass over these in the audience's anticipation of *Dream*'s grand comedic climax, Hytner instead opted to have actors—who had already featured as fairies—reappear onstage to represent those alternatives. These ranged from a group of women grotesquely entangled in red balloons to a vaudevillian entertainer creating a paper chain of people, all of which was in service of an inspired final gag. Theseus's decision was framed as a reality

television-esque winner reveal, underscored by ever-diminishing lights in the style of *The X Factor* and the dramatic music that erupted once the mechanicals had been selected, reminiscent of *Strictly Come Dancing*. Meanwhile, their purple jumpers, which read ‘RUDE MECHANICALS’ on the back, underscored their position as amateurs amidst professionals.

As Kirwan observed, the staging of “Pyramus and Thisbe” “offered a fine distillation of the production’s ideas, illustrating both a changed Athens and the creative impulses of the Mechanicals.” It began with Quince (Felicity Montagu) delivering her prologue while her fellow actors delivered an “A-level Theatre Studies-baiting” (Kirwan) physical enactment of the play’s narrative to the haunting music of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* (1936). This string arrangement is famously used to emotive affect at the conclusion of the American war film *Platoon* (1986) and this reference point was underscored during Bottom’s elongated death scene as Pyramus, in which he imitated the iconic, Christ-like image of the death of Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe).

The tragicomic dissonance of setting this particular scene to an emotional soundtrack lent it a cathartic quality that corresponded with Theseus’s level of engagement with the performance. Kirwan commented that “[t]he lovers were mocking or hysterical throughout, and Titania veered between ecstatic hilarity and boredom, but a transformed Theseus had learned how to experience wonder, and his generosity of spirit was humbling.” The play-within-the-play contained further references to popular culture, including the inclusion of a “knock-off lightsaber” (Kirwan) that malfunctioned during the death of Pyramus. This served both as a metatheatrical in-joke when it was handed to Christie’s Hippolyta—who has appeared as Captain Phasma in two *Star Wars* films—and as another indication of the mechanicals’ attempt to root their production in the cultural zeitgeist.

A favored technique of directors seeking to connect their Shakespearean production to a modern audience is to incorporate popular music of the period that will either highlight a prominent theme already contained within the original text or encapsulate the

emotions of a specific character. In 2015, for instance, these examples ranged from the urbane to the anarchic; Lyndsey Turner's production of *Hamlet* opened at the Barbican on Benedict Cumberbatch's Prince to strains of Nat King Cole's *Nature Boy* (1948), reminding the audience of this "very strange enchanted boy" and laying the scene for the actor's portrayal of the character as a lost soul. Meanwhile, at the Young Vic, the punk rock remonstrations and defiant lyrics of Alanis Morissette's *You Outta Know* (1995) encapsulated the boiling fury of a mistreated Mariana (Cath Whitefield) in Joe Hill-Gibbin's production of *Measure for Measure*.

Hytner's production doubled down on the power of pop not only to root its audience in the contemporary moment but also to lodge specific moments in the audience's memory. British rapper Dizzee Rascal and American DJ Armand Van Helden's hip-house hit single *Bonkers* (2009) was played during the mechanicals' bergomask and served as a raucous conclusion to their performance. The connection to *Dream* goes deeper, however, than merely selecting a high-octane pop song with crossover appeal, as the opening three lines ably demonstrate:

I wake up every day, it's a daydream
Everything in my life ain't what it seems
I wake up just to go back to sleep,
I act real shallow but I'm in too deep. (Dizzee Rascal)

A prior Shakespearean connection is the song's inclusion during Dizzee Rascal's performance at the opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympic Games, which could be connected to the director Danny Boyle's running theme of *Caliban's Dream* across the event, initiated by Kenneth Branagh's performance at the start of the ceremony of this character's "isle is full of noises" (*The Tempest*, 3.2.130) speech. Bottom shares in Caliban's sense of dreams invading reality and the difficulty in distinguishing between the two, and these lyrics of daydreams, uncertainty, circularity, and authentic feeling triumphing over a shallow impulse accurately encapsulate what Hytner and Arditti set out to achieve with this reinvention of *Dream*, whether or not they were aware of it.

Second, the image of Bottom (Hammed Animashaun) and Oberon (Oliver Chris) dancing merrily to *Love on Top* (2011), Beyoncé's euphoric celebration of triumphant love became an especially significant moment. The song, one of the American singer/songwriter's most famous and affirming tracks, is noteworthy for its structured escalation due to the six ascending key changes that take place across four-and-half minutes. This made it a highly suitable soundtrack to Oberon's sudden and all-consuming infatuation with Bottom, whose acceptance of the unexpected situation without protest or question was ably supported by a love song as celebratory and triumphant as *Love on Top*. It is worth noting here that Hytner's decision to have him behave in this manner, rather than embarrassingly rejecting or attempting to avoid Oberon's advances, was progressive and mature. This transformed the scene into an act of erotic celebration that was simultaneously hilarious and touching.

Moreover, Oliver's dual performance as Theseus and Oberon was arguably the one that showed the greatest change and depth of range throughout this production, moving from a chest-beating alpha, as Theseus, to a fascinating self-examination of fragile and unstable masculinity, as Oberon. The marriage of *Love on Top* and the image of two characters in perfect harmony—despite the enchanted, one-sided nature of the relationship—lent it a tenderness and genuine shared affection that is often lost amidst the sleaze of Titania salivating over the translated Bottom. The absence of the usual smut and donkey gags was, therefore, most welcome, as was the downplaying of the character's donkey ears, which are too often an excuse for lazy physical humor.

Consider, in particular, these two lines taken from Beyoncé's chorus: 'Baby, it's you, you're the one I love, / You're the one I need, you're the only one I see' (Beyoncé). In *Dream*, Titania is drugged by Oberon and, consequently, falls in love with the monstrously 'translated' (3.1.105) Bottom. The decision to have the Fairy King, rather than Queen, become infatuated with Bottom also supposedly poses a different set of questions. How will Bottom respond to the advances of a male being? Does this mean both characters are bisexual? Rather than scrutinize this potential predicament, Hytner

harnessed Beyoncé’s empowering lyrics to signal to the audience that Oberon may truly be falling in love with Bottom rather than merely being under the influence. In this moment, he was truly “the only one” for Oberon and thus provided an escape from the unhappy accord between himself and Titania.

The dual nature of Theseus and Oberon’s identity was underscored in the final scene by the Duke and Bottom sharing a passing moment of recognition. Evidently, this was intended to generate laughter from the audience at the actors’ meta-theatrical awareness of having met before in the drama of the wood. However, given that some productions of *Dream* avoid such cross-pollination between forest and court, it also provoked audible gasps that some memory of those events may still be held by Theseus and Bottom. This *Dream* was, therefore, the perfect metatheatrical tonic for a modern audience tired of female prejudice and being pandered to by institutions who believe they speak their pop culture language. In the pit, the balcony and in cinemas across the country, the production put its audience first and delivered an immersive experience that was palpable even via live theater broadcast.

Note

1. This, and all subsequent extra-textual quotations from Nicholas Hytner’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, are derived from the author’s personal transcripts that were created during National Theatre Live broadcasts at Vue Cinema, Newbury on 2 September 2019 and Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry on 18 November 2019.

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