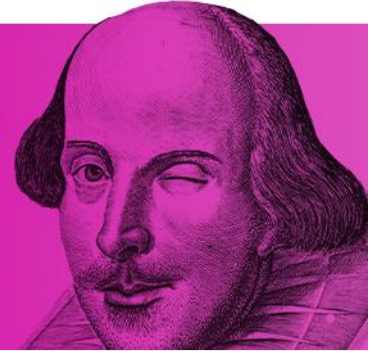


ASIDES



ASIDES 1.2: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Love in Idleness

Date: April 28, 2020

Featuring: Stephen Bennett, Sara B.T. Thiel, Edward O'Brien, William Dick, T.R. Knight, Alec Silver, Alexandra Silber, Adrienne Storrs, Katie Blankenau

Stephen Bennett: You may be wondering what a prairie vole has to do with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. You probably aren't wondering that, and you probably don't even know what a prairie vole is, but we are in a theater, so let's pretend that you have that question so that I can answer it for you.

My name is Steve Bennett, I'm one of the visiting scholars here at Chicago Shakespeare Theater.

Sara B.T. Thiel: Hi everyone, and welcome back to ASIDES, the new podcast from Chicago Shakespeare Theater. I'm your host, Sara B.T. Thiel, Public Humanities Manager at CST, and I'm excited to share today's episode with you. We'll hear Dr. Stephen Bennett introduce Joe Dowling's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed at CST during our 2018-2019 season. Stephen's talk is part of our Pre•Amble program, pre-show talks that take place at CST before most weekend matinees. This Pre•Amble was originally recorded on December 29, 2018.

Stephen's been delighting audiences with his Pre•Amble talks at Chicago Shakespeare Theater for more than 15 years, and we think you'll see why he's an audience favorite.

And now, here's Stephen...

SB: So, what is a prairie vole and what does it have to do with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? I'm so happy you asked that question. Allow me to explain. A prairie vole is a small, mouse-like mammal that is one of the five percent of mammals that are monogamous. They mate for life, which, in the wild is about one year. In captivity it's up to three years. So, it's not a ton of monogamy, but it's enough monogamy that neuroscientist Larry Young at Emory University has decided to study it. And in his studies, Dr. Young has found that "When a female prairie vole's brain is artificially infused with oxytocin, a hormone that produces some of the same neural rewards as nicotine and cocaine, she'll quickly become attached to the nearest male. A related hormone, vasopressin, creates urges for bonding and nesting when it is injected in male voles" ([Source](#)).

So here is where we get to the play in which Oberon, the fairy king, will instruct Puck, his right-hand fairy, to go deeper in order to fetch a special flower that maidens call “love-in-idleness.”

Oberon (Edward O'Blenis)

Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
Fetch me that flower.

SB: So Dr. Young's research suggests that the magical powers of the “love-in-idleness” flower may not be such a fantasy after all, and even as we speak scientists are in fact working on a love potion based on oxytocin. The suggested use that I like the most, and that you may find most useful, is for couples that have been married for many years and are a little tired of each other. They could give each other a dose of oxytocin, and bam! Everybody's in love again. All is good. All right, so enough about prairie voles, let's talk about the play.

We believe *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written in, what some people call Shakespeare's lyrical period: 1595-96. They call it that because this, and the other plays written around then, have much more poetry—much more verse—than the blank verse of before and after. Depending on how you count the plays, and what sequence you put them in, let's say, for the sake of discussion, that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Shakespeare's twelfth play. It's related to his work-at-large in a couple of interesting ways.

This is an original story Shakespeare seems to have imagined and there are only two other plays that are like that: *Love's Labor's Lost*, and *The Tempest*. So, it's one of three plays for which scholars have not been able to identify a clear source—three plays that Shakespeare seems to have invented himself. And the other play that has the most connections to this one is *Romeo and Juliet*, which was probably written shortly before it. Some scholars argue that that order's reversed, but to me it makes the most sense that *Romeo and Juliet* comes first, and then *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There are so many similarities between the two. Marjory Garber, who's one of my favorite Shakespearean critics, calls *A Midsummer Night's Dream* “*Romeo and Juliet* transformed into a comedy.” And let's just think for a minute about all these different similarities that they share.

Both plays have strong authority figures who attempt to order the world. Of course in *Romeo and Juliet*, it's the Prince of Verona. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, it's Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Critic Tony Tanner's description of how the plot is set in motion in *Midsummer* is a good description of *Romeo and Juliet*. He writes: “The blocking...power of paternal prohibition (familiar in comedy since comedy began)... provokes the play, driving young love to stratagems of circumvention... effectively sending all the young lovers away from the palace and in the fairy haunted wood” (Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 126).

Egeus (William Dick)

Be it so she will not here before your grace

Consent to marry with Demetrius,
I beg the ancient privilege of Athens,
As she is mine, I may dispose of her:
Which shall be either to this gentleman
Or to her death, according to our law
Immediately provided in that case.

SB: So, think about how in both plays, strong fathers bring that power of paternal prohibition. Capulet insists that Juliet will marry Paris, and in this play, Egeus commands Hermia to marry Demetrius, or he will exercise his Athenian father's right to have her killed. And you see that in both cases, the daughters refuse, they chose their own lovers and they plan to run away with them.

Think about how Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* is a kind of apothecary or pharmacist. I like to think of him as an amateur anesthesiologist who uses his knowledge of herbs to concoct a sleeping potion so powerful that the sleeper seems dead, which creates so many problems at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, as you will remember. And here, Oberon, the fairy king, is the apothecary. I mentioned earlier how he instructs Puck to harvest some oxytocin and other hormones from the flowers and create a potion first, that will make the person to whom it is applied fall in love with the first person (or creature that he sees). And then also, he creates an antidote that will bring the drugged lover to his or her senses.

Perhaps the most significant connection between the two plays is in the play that the Rude Mechanicals (which I think is a great band name: The Rude Mechanicals)...but it's the name of that group of Athenians—they're "rude mechanicals" in the sense that they work with their hands, they're working people, who are doing a play to celebrate the marriage of Theseus. The play that they choose is called *The Most Lamentable Comedy and the Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, which in some ways is both the original source for *Romeo and Juliet* and a parody of that play.

There are many versions of the story. But if you go back, and back, and back you go to Ovid. And in that original story, Pyramus and Thisbe are two Babylonian lovers forbidden to be together because of a longstanding rivalry between their two families. At the end of that story, Pyramus has a plan to meet Thisbe at a tomb. And he goes there and finds a bloody veil that he mistakenly thinks belonged to his lover. He assumes that she's dead. And so, he stabs himself, and kills himself. Thisbe arrives just a little bit too late, sees her dead lover and kills herself with the same sword.

So, this is obviously the story that Shakespeare reworked and elaborated into *Romeo and Juliet*, but in today's play, it is being performed as a part of the triple wedding celebration that is the climax of the story. The fact that this story is being performed by these amateur actors, this community theater troupe, it's almost like an exorcism of the tragic version of the story, transmuting it into a fumbling, but sincerely well-intentioned celebration as the couples, in this

play, marry.

Nick Bottom/Pyramus (T.R. Knight)

I see a voice: now will I to the chink,
To spy an I can hear my Thisbe's face. Thisbe!

Francis Flute/Thisbe (Alec Silver)

My love thou art, my love I think.

Nick Bottom/Pyramus (T.R. Knight)

Think what thou wilt, I am thy lover's grace;
And, like Limander, am I trusty still.

Francis Flute/Thisbe (Alec Silver)

And I like Helen, till the Fates me kill.

Nick Bottom/Pyramus (T.R. Knight)

Not Shafalus to Procrus was so true.

Francis Flute/Thisbe (Alec Silver)

As Shafalus to Procrus, I to you.

Nick Bottom/Pyramus (T.R. Knight)

O kiss me through the hole of this vile wall!

Francis Flute/Thisbe (Alec Silver)

I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all.

Nick Bottom/Pyramus (T.R. Knight)

Wilt thou at Ninny's tomb meet me straightway?

Francis Flute/Thisbe (Alec Silver)

'Tide life, 'tide death, I come without delay.

SB: The critic A.D. Nuttal writes that, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a happy comedy. It performs its apotrope of the violent mythology it draws on." Now "apotrope" is not a word that you hear every day, or maybe ever. It's translated into English from the Greek word "apotropi," which means "to prevent, or to turn away." And the version of the word that you might have heard, or you might sometimes hear, is "apotropaic," which means "to ward off evil." So, you would say, for example, garlic is apotropaic when it comes to vampires.

I'm persuaded by Professor Nuttal's argument that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has an apotropaic relationship to the darkness in *Romeo and Juliet*, and part of the evil that is being warded off, if you will, is the evil associated with sexual desire. This play, *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream, certainly features strong sexual desire as a driving force that threatens to up-end the social order, in both the human and the fairy realms. So, for example, desire leads Hermia to choose Lysander over Demetrius, her father's choice. It leads Helena to betray her best friend in order to gain even a modicum of Demetrius's favor. It leads Titania, high on oxytocin, to fall madly in love with (and dote over) Bottom, the Weaver, who is transformed here into a hybrid donkey-man by Puck. And while it is a driving force in the play, you'll see that, particularly in this production, it's checked (or guided) in ways that allow us to vicariously experience a lot of the pleasure and excitement of desire without the pain and destruction that uncontrolled sexual desire can bring. And I think the best example of that is the story of Bottom the Weaver.

And in this production we have such a sweet and charming bottom as portrayed by T.R. Knight, who will be familiar to many audience members from his role as Dr. George O'Malley on *Grey's Anatomy*, as well as his work on *The Good Wife* and a number of other television series and movies.

So, as you'll remember, Bottom is a member of the Rude Mechanicals. He's the one who's most sure of his prowess as an actor. When Puck watches them rehearsing in the forest, he decides to play a joke on this man, who—you know, you could say, "He's an ass!" And he gets literally turned into an ass. Puck gives him a donkey's head—an ass's head.

Nick Bottom (T.R. Knight)

I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; to fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, and they shall hear I am not afraid.

Singing

When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we see

SB: Mostly for his and Oberon's entertainment, as they watch Titania fawn over Bottom and dote on him.

Titania (Alexandra Silber)

What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?

Nick Bottom (T.R. Knight)

Singing

So darling, darling stand by me
Oh, whoa, stand by me

Titania (Alexandra Silber)

I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.
Mine ear is much enamour'd of thy note,

So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me
On the first glance to say, to swear, I love thee.

Nick Bottom (T.R. Knight)

Methinks, mistress, you have little reason.

SB: Now this subplot has the potential to go to very dark places, when Bottom and Titania retreat to be alone, but Shakespeare never takes us there. Some critics have gone there, most famously the Polish critic and Shakespearean scholar Jan Kott, who published a controversial essay about the pervasive darkness and bestial sexuality of the play. You'll be happy to know that interpretation is very far away from today's production. That's not the family-friendly version. But it is true (and, again one of the great things about Shakespeare) that the play can support that very dark exploration, as well as the much more exuberant joyous one you'll see this afternoon. Bottom responds to Titania's love with a playful naiveté, and he almost seems more interested in the hay and the forest sweets that her fairies are ordered to bring him, than he is in Titania as a sexual creature.

Titania (Alexandra Silber)

Say, sweet love, what thou desirest to eat.

Nick Bottom (T.R. Knight)

Truly, I could munch your good dry oats.

Titania (Alexandra Silber)

I have a venturous fairy that shall seek
The squirrel's hoard and fetch thee new nuts.

Nick Bottom (T.R. Knight)

I had rather have a handful, or two, of dried peas.

SB: I love how his self-absorption is as much a part of his personality when he is part-donkey, part-man, as it is when he is all man. And Bottom is a very important character in the play. He is only human who is allowed to see the fairies and is a bridge between those two worlds. He's the only character in all of Shakespeare who is transformed like that into a man, or a beast, or a combination of the two.

The sweet innocence of Bottom's relationship to Titania is apotropaic. It wards off the potential evil of this beastly man being in love or lust. Knight's Bottom, or should I say, Bottom, as portrayed by Knight, has a naïve charisma that is hard to miss, and it's clear that both actor and director have a lot of affection for this character. Knight's performance is never condescending, which is something that can happen in productions where the play that the Rude Mechanicals perform receives less time and attention than it does in this production. Dowling really lavishes

time and attention—and really his whole creative crew (costumes, props, the music) on the play-within-the-play—and elevates it in a certain way.

Just as Knight's portrayal of Bottom and Dowling's direction of the relationship between Bottom and Titania are apotropaic of the evils that could be associated with such a union, so the rest of the production is a celebration of desire and affection without much focus or attention on the potential dark side of love, sex, relationships, and marriage. So there's an exuberance—a celebratory quality—to most of the play (and certainly almost all the scenes with the fairies) that exhorts us as an audience to laugh and have good time without worrying that we, or the characters, are going too far, or are in any of the dangers that sometimes get associate with love and sex.

A major component of this exuberance is the music from composer and music director Keith Thomas, who has created a score that is as vibrant and diverse as the fairy forest, with jazz, blues, rock and a lot of '50s doo-wop. And the doo-wop seems especially good at communicating the play's focus on the positive aspects of youthful desire, with it's suggestion of a time when the world seemed more innocent, if only in retrospect, than it would be after doo-wop was replaced by the rebelliousness of rock and roll.

First Fairy (Adrienne Storrs) and Fairies

Singing

Sha-la-la-la-la-doo-wop

La-la-la-la-la-shooby dooby

Sha-la-la-la-la-doo-wop

La-la-la-la-la-doo bop

You snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen.
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
Come not near our fairy queen.
Philomel, with melody
Sing our lullaby.

Luh-luh-luh-luh-luh

Luh-luh-luh-luh-luh

Lullaby, lullaby, lullaby.

Luh-luh-luh-luh-luh

Luh-luh-luh-luh-luh

Lullaby, bye bye.

SB: This very positive celebration of the energy and passion of desire is certainly on display in the choreography of Joe Chavala. I was reading some past reviews of his work and, in one of them, they called him “Fred Astaire on Acid.” He's another frequent collaborator of Joe Dowling

at the Guthrie Theater in Minnesota. His choreography pulsates with the energy, that is a connective theme that also runs running through all of Keith Thomas's score.

The sets for this play were designed by Todd Rosenthal, who is a winner of multiple international awards, including a Tony, and a Laurence Olivier award in London.

So, the play opens in Athens, and for these first scenes, Rosenthal has created a very solid, very authoritarian marble building that communicates the absolute power of Athens, and of Theseus, Athens's Duke. And you'll remember how, right at the beginning of the play, Theseus is called on by Egeus to institute this law about a father's total control over his daughters. That law is hard and cold, and it takes place in front of this building that is very hard and cold.

Notice the transition as the setting of the play moves from Athens to the fairy forest. Those straight lines of the marble Athenian building are slanted, and the classical proportions of that building are obliterated by flowers and foliage that is totally out of scale. The giant flowers tower over the fairies, one on hand suggesting the diminutive size, and on the other, drawing us into a riotous landscape that's a joyful cacophony of shapes and colors.

I love the way Rosenthal describes the set of the forest scenes as a combination of Hieronymus Bosch and *Honey, I Shrank the Kids*. In the excellent "Conversation with the Director" piece in the program, Joe Dowling says that he and Rosenthal turned for inspiration specifically to Hieronymus Bosch's painting "The Garden of Earthly Delights," which is a well-known painting from the 1490s. Like the play, it explores issues of sexuality and desire. It's populated by many, many groups of naked people interacting with a surreal landscape of flora and fauna that is almost Dalí-esque.

So, just as you'll notice a very significant shift from the cold rectilinear order of the Athenian building, to the wild, surreal, fantastic (in every sense of that word) world of the fairy forest. You'll see a similar shift in the costumes, which were designed by Fabio Toblini, who is designing costumes for a Joe Dowling production for the seventh time. This is also the second time Toblini and Dowling have worked together on a production of this play.

Toblini says that when he is working in the theater, he doesn't feel like he's designing clothes, he's creating people. For him, it's not about a costume, it's about the new person who comes to life in these specific clothes. And, in Athens, Toblini has all the men in uniform, and it isn't set in a specific time. Those military uniforms could've been from, really, from any time. You'll see the costumes that the Rude Mechanicals wear are very, very contemporary. So, he has these wealthy Athenians, Lysander, and Demetrius, and Egeus, and Theseus, in these uniforms. He's made the point that there's very little individuality in these early stages. The wealthy Athenians costumes are so similar, that the characters are seemingly interchangeable, and I want to suggest that this deliberate costume choice by Toblini and Dowling picks up another theme of the play—this theme of interchangeability.

So, think about how, Egeus's daughter Hermia loves Lysander, but Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius. And when this plot line is introduced, Lysander protests that he is "as well derived" as Demetrius; "as well possessed." His fortunes are "every way as fairly rank'd." And as he protests that he's just as good as his rival, the play's foreshadowing what will happen a little later in the woods when Oberon sees Demetrius treating Helena poorly, and Oberon says to Puck, "you know, please put some oxytocin in that kid's eye, so that when he opens them, he'll see Helena and her love will no longer be unrequited." And Oberon says, "thou shalt know the man / By the Athenian garments he hath on." Puck makes the mistake. He sees these contemporary clothes, and at a certain point, those four characters all look the same in their underwear, anyway. And he makes the mistake. So, Puck substitutes Lysander for Demetrius, and when he pours the potion in the eyes of the wrong Athenian youth, he sets into motion this plot of the confused young lovers.

This is a minor detail, but a really interesting one. This theme of interchangeability is at the heart of the troubles between Oberon, King of the Fairies, and Titania, his Queen. Oberon and Titania are fighting over a changeling, a child who is substituted for another—just like Helena is substituted as the object of Demetrius's affection when Puck pours the love-at-first-sight potion in his eyes.

And think about how, using the love potion, Oberon substitutes the donkey-headed Bottom for the changeling child as the object of Titania's love and affection. This is a really interesting kind of double substitution, because Bottom is also a substitute for Oberon himself. And you'll see that when Titania is awakened from the spell, Oberon looks pretty good to her, compared to the ass that she's been with.

Director Joe Dowling is kind of the Oberon of this production, overseeing and guiding all of these artistic decisions. He is a fifty-year veteran of the theater and one of today's most accomplished directors. And this is the second time he has directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. The first time was the very first season in the Theater here at Navy Pier. And it's the tenth time that he's directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and you can really see the confidence with which he approached this material, which is obvious in every scene.

So, I began with the prairie vole. I feel a certain obligation to end with him or her, as well. And the thing that I like most about the vole, in the context of our discussion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is that vole, V-O-L-E is an anagram of love, which is definitely the major theme of the play. Love. Thank you.

Sara B.T. Thiel: That's all for now from the ASIDES Team. We'll be back next week with an introduction to our 2018 *Macbeth* directed by Aaron Posner and Teller. Next time you'll hear from one of our newest Pre•Amble scholars, Katie Blankenau.

Katie Blankenau: There is, of course, his wife, whose influence on Macbeth has led one scholar to comment that, "It is as though marital intimacy is akin to demonic possession."

SBT: Have a question about something you heard in this episode? Want to tell us what Chicago Shakespeare means to you? We'd love to hear from you! You can send an email to asides@chicagoshakes.com or leave us a voicemail at 312-667-5631 and we'll respond in a future episode.

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I'm Sara B.T. Thiel and we'll see you next time...