

The Film Production



What would a film made on a shoestring budget look like that was created by amateur actors with no Classics credentials, who were determined to shine? An unlikely group of amateur Shakespeareans created this cinematic vision of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” in the rugged mountains and forests of the Southwest U.S. With women playing some of the male roles, for most of the actors this was their first film work. Opening up the play and leaving film studios behind, Nature takes center stage: high mountain ledges provide the throne for Fairy King Oberon as he looks down upon the antics of the silly lovers, and pine trees provide perches for his servant, Puck. After Puck transforms him with a donkey-head, Nick Bottom suddenly becomes the only mortal who can see, hear and talk with the fairies and their queen, Titania. In moving between mortal reality and the realm of the immortals, Bottom becomes the protagonist of the film. The cast and crew from Virus Theater, led by director Bo Bergström (maker of ten short films and two features), transformed low-budget into a high-creativity fusion of cinematic energy, dynamic editing, distinctive imagery, graphics and tints from the digital paintbox. Unusual locations, dreamlike incongruities and ambiguity may challenge audience expectations about this familiar work.

Bergström says, “I love playing with image, text and music, and this film was the perfect project in which to do that. I love art that is handmade, personal, passionate and stylistically bold. We wanted to communicate something about the human experience that suggests the depth and breadth of Shakespeare, with many different moods, emotions, locations and complications. Our film is a new take on a hallowed comedy that respects Shakespeare’s poetry but is unconventional in its staging and modern-dress anachronism.”

Composer Joseph Rivers’ expressive, sure-handed film score blends Romantic orchestral sounds with non-Western instruments like the erhu, ney, and balaban, whose use often suggests a particular character or emotion. For example, the bansuri (Eastern Indian wood flute) was chosen for Puck since it has a light timbre like a flighty shape-shifter. Besides leitmotifs, his music is rich with effects, textures, and colors. All music heard on this website was written and performed by Rivers for the film. For more about Joseph Rivers, see the Links & Downloads page.

At 157 minutes, our DVD is the most complete version available, and it is the only one with cinematic playfulness that resonates with Shakespeare’s brilliant wordplay.

Shakespeare's Dream

A Midsummer Night’s Dream was written around 1594 or 1595, perhaps concurrently with *Romeo and Juliet*, so the two plays may have been on Shakespeare’s writing table and in his imagination at the same time. *Dream* is the most original in conception and the best-executed of his comedies to date, and in it he offers a funny, self-mocking summary of what he has achieved in comedy and tragedy thus far. *Dream*’s story is similar to *Romeo and Juliet* but in a comic mode, with its “Pyramus and Thisby” parody and joyous laughter transformed from the tears and pathos of *Romeo*.

Is Love a Fantasy...or a Nightmare?

Watch how the ardent lovers Helena, Demetrius, Hermia and Lysander resolve their confusion about who they want. Love is a waking fantasy. Helena says: "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind." Her words suggest that love is a disease of the eye, or at least it's irresponsible. One of our human preoccupations (sometimes interfered with by fairies) is "doting," in which love is the work of the eye only and not the whole mind. Doting is a disordered condition of the imagination, also called "non-rational love," and it originates in an eye uncontrolled by judgment. Intense love induces doting, not the rational, patient pleasure like the love that Theseus and Hippolyta share. In being only lightly individuated characters, Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena suggest in their yearning and pain that love's madness is universal. The human mind, especially that of the royals and lovers, is seen by Shakespeare as irrational, out of control, thankless, unkind and fickle.

But there is a different interpretation of blind Cupid: that love can transcend even sight, the highest of the senses, and is above intellect, and this idea too is present in the film.

As we are blind in sleep, yet filled with visual experience generated from our imaginations, so the lover weaves her fantasies around the object of her affection—in effect, she dreams her beloved into being. But the world of love can be as much a nightmare as a wish-fulfilling fantasy. What happens in the magic forest is a bad dream of love. The consciousness of the lover is a strange blend of dream and wakefulness, prone to illusion, close to madness, and so the forest represents an altered state of consciousness.


And what is the cause of this love-dream? It is a magic potion, the juice of the viola flower applied to the eyes which causes the sleeper to fall in love with the next live creature that s/he sees. We like to believe that our love is due to the innate goodness of its object. Not so in this film. Much of the humor of the romantic shifts in the film derives from the fact that they happen not because any of the lovers became more lovable or virtuous -- but because they had flower juice applied to their eyes. Today, we call this "hormone activity," to which teenagers with their emotional ups and downs are famously prone.

The comedy of the film arises from the disparity between the way the lovers conceive their love and what we know to have been the actual cause.

The love between Hermia and Lysander vanishes in a moment, while Helena and Demetrius will cherish each other as long as the love juice in his eyes holds out. Shakespeare's imagination did not easily conjure up any couple with long-term prospects for happiness, and *Dream* is no exception. Pure love is brief. Marriage is seldom successful. His sense of comedy is laced through with pain, loss, and the threat of death, while his sense of tragedy has room for clowning and laughter. He is pained by humanity, and amused by it; he is like a disappointed lover -- one who had great hopes for humanity, but found his hopes crushed.

Dream or reality?

Whose dream is it that's in Shakespeare's work? One answer is that it's Bottom's dream (or Bottom's weaving), because he is the protagonist of the film and capable of weaving a dream for us. Bottom awakens and he thinks that his real-life experiences in the forest were just a dream...or at least he wonders about it aloud. His "dream" strikes him as an unfathomable mystery; it is beyond words; it has no "bottom." While it is not possible to talk with certainty about a fictional character, we could say that he did not in fact have a dream. He really was converted into a beast-man



A
Midsummer nights
dreame.

As it hath bene sundry times publickely acted, by the Right honorable, the Lord Chamberlaine his seruants.

Written by William Shakespeare.



Printed at London, for Thomas Fisher, and are to be sold at his shoppe, at the Signe of the White Hart, in Fleetstreet. 1600.

and did sleep with the queen of the fairies. However, the answer to "whose dream is it?" is not clear. Puck's epilogue calls it the audience's dream. At a metaphorical level the whole thing was a dream. - Adapted from Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

When Bottom awakens in the magic forest, he reports the confusion of his senses, and his awakened senses fuse in a synesthetic unity: eyes hearing, ears seeing, hands tasting, tongues conceiving. This is synesthesia, an act of the imagination, which provides the inspiration for the film's animation sequence. Earlier, Bottom says "I see a voice. I can hear my Thisby's face." This too is synesthesia.

The Power of Imagination

Film and theatre are two-way processes in which the audience has a vital role -- that of imagination. Acting is a type of transformation: one person intentionally impersonates another. It involves imagination: the actor imagines herself as someone else. And it takes imagination for the spectator to process acting -- to pretend that the person on stage is this or that character. We have the play "Pyramus and Thisby" within the play within the film which features film actors performing characters playing stage characters. Here we observe that all dramatic movies are documentaries about actors pretending. It is an amateurish production, with much crude melodrama, but it hits its mark -- the audience is carried along, despite their mockery. So, even these ham-actors, with their poor script and their sad props, can manage to so transform themselves that a critical audience is carried away. They do it by the transforming power of the imagination.

Theseus says that the best actors are merely surrogates ("shadows") and that all the work of creation is performed by the imagination -- initially the actors', but crucially the audience's. If the lover creates her beloved by means of her imagination, so the filmgoer creates the character by means of his imagination. Accordingly, we see people largely as we imagine them. Imagination informs perception. In Shakespeare's time, *imagination* meant fantasy, a powerful ability but inferior to the sensible rational mind. Theseus's "more strange than true" speech expresses his prejudice against fantasy and imagination as trifles, not to be taken seriously. He calls the imaginal work of poets "tricks."



William Shakespeare, 1610

In Shakespeare, the imagination becomes active, even dominant, and seems to run throughout mental life. Imagination is what unites "the lover, the poet, and the lunatic," in Theseus's words. Dreaming and madness, both frequent in Shakespeare, are the imagination uncoupled from reason. Imagination is a potent source of emotion, and hence action. And it puts creativity at the heart of the human psyche, since imagination and creativity are interwoven.

"When in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the thirty-year-old Shakespeare . . . thought about his profession, he split the theater between a magical, virtually nonhuman element, which he associated with the power of the imagination to lift itself away from the constraints of reality, and an all-too-human element, which he associated with the artisans' trade that actually made the material structures -- buildings, platforms, costumes, musical instruments, and the like -- structures that gave the imagination 'a local habitation and name,' in Theseus's words. Shakespeare understood, and he wanted the audience to understand, that the theater had to have both: both the visionary flight and the solid, ordinary earthiness." -- Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. The final speech of the film, spoken by Puck, reminds the audience of its own role in imaginatively generating the

film it has just witnessed: "You have but slumber'd here while these visions did appear." Has the audience itself been dreaming? It is logically possible to dream that one has been watching a film about dreaming, and take it to be reality. Just as the characters in the film find it difficult to distinguish waking from sleeping, so the audience has the same problem. This is like the conundrum of the man who dreamed he was a butterfly but who may have actually been a butterfly who dreamed he was a man. The audience has been in a dreamlike state by virtue of its imaginative engagement with the film it has just witnessed. As the writer uses his imagination to construct a work of art, so the audience must use its imagination to respond to it as a work of art. And this imaginative process is akin to dreaming.

Many people probably read and attend plays and films in search of other selves. In search of one's own self, one prays, or meditates, or recites a lyric poem, or despairs in solitude. Shakespeare matters because no one else gives us so many other selves, larger and more detailed than any closest friends or lovers seem to be. Shakespeare's personages are so artful as to seem totally natural. - Adapted from Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.