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Review on A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Director Tim Supple's production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream last Thursday at His Majesty's Theatre in Perth, performed by the Dash Arts Theatre Company, brought together a multitude of Indian street performers, martial artists, musicians and actors in a wonderfully eclectic and refreshing take on this classic tale of love gone wrong. Stylistic elements were drawn from both western realism and traditionally stylistic Indian theatre. Non-realistic, presentational, physical performances, infused with martial arts and dancing highlighted the Indian flavour of the production. However, this over-physicalisation seemed to be detrimental to the performances of most of the actors, making them less engaging and causing characterization to be slightly two-dimensional or flat. Another notably Indian feature of the performance was the use of no less than seven dialects, in a situation where English was not necessarily given prevalence, but instead held equal importance to the other languages. Although this detracted from the poetic language of a Shakespeare play and one might wonder at the point of performing Shakespeare in another language, the director's purpose came through that storytelling transcends boundaries of language and the world can be united through this ancient tradition. An effectively minimalist set capped off the overall effect and provided symbolic imagery related to themes in the play, such as the chaos of unrequited love demonstrated by the gradual disintegration of the sheets of paper at the back. The whole production, meanwhile, was expertly underscored by three musicians playing a mixture of eastern and western instruments reaffirming the recurring idea of the bringing together of different cultures by art and storytelling.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is the story of two pairs of lovers, forced to flee into the woods outside of Athens by Egeus, the controlling father of Hermia (one of the lovers) who wishes to see her marry against her will. Interestingly, this part of the plot rings particularly true in this production because these sorts of family feuds over marriage are very common in India. As Tim Supple says, "a third of our cast, I would say, have had huge battles over marriage." The unfortunate lovers are then subjected to the mistakes of Puck, otherwise known as Robin Goodfellow, one of the fairies of the wood who serves the fairy king, Oberon. The result is utter confusion and chaos caused by various changes of heart on the part of the lovers. At the same time a group of mechanicals journey into the wood to rehearse a play. They too are set upon by Puck, who causes more mischief, transforming Bottom into an ass. His master, in revenge against his disobedient wife, Titania, makes her fall in love with the monster. Eventually, however, all is set right once again and the various pairs of lovers are placed back in normal monogamous relationships. The main themes that present themselves through this plot are those of the chaos of love and dreams.

The verbal communication in this production is, of course, a cause for much debate due to the effect of speaking in so many different languages. Firstly the use of so many foreign languages is reflective of the fascination Shakespeare had with anything foreign

or exotic (he often set his plays in distant places like Italy and Greece). However, I feel that it defeats the purpose of performing a Shakespeare play if the Shakespearean English is neglected to the point it was in Tim Supple's interpretation. The rhyme and rhythm are completely changed when it is translated, and the metaphors lost upon an English-speaking audience. But most importantly, it makes it almost impossible to understand and this causes the audience to disengage and tune out. During act two of this production, a woman sitting to the left of me had fallen asleep during one of the scenes in the Indian dialects. It is interesting that while some of the poetic language in the play is omitted, some of the most inane lines, spoken by the mechanicals, have been retained. This was because the purpose of the mechanicals in the play is to provide comic relief and it was necessary to retain the English to communicate the humour. This was enjoyed thoroughly by the audience who laughed solidly through the mechanicals' scenes. However, the use of foreign languages also caused me to pay more attention to the modulation in the actor's voices. When listening to this modulation it still seemed that the lines were not being spoken with the appropriate vocal techniques, such as pace, pause and pitch. For example, on the line "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows," Oberon used a fast pace which seemed out of sorts with the poetic nature of the speech and the given circumstances of his plotting Titania's humiliation. If the directorial purpose of the production was to prove language is not a barrier to storytelling, then the way Oberon delivered this line was counterproductive, as he neither lowered his pitch nor slowed his pace to show he was plotting. Thus anyone without a detailed understanding of the script would have been confused by his speedy delivery. Paradoxically, someone with no knowledge of the script would become confused with the plot and get bored and disengage, while, similarly, I found that having detailed knowledge of the script only made me disengage during the snippets in other languages, thinking that as I knew the story anyway, it was unnecessary to listen until more English was spoken.

The most engaging part of the production was the heightened physical performances which incorporated dance, martial arts and impressive acrobatics to create an aesthetically pleasing performance. The non-verbal communication and gesture of the characters was heightened, drawing from the tradition of Indian performing. Tim Supple himself mentions the "fantastic understanding of physicalisation and stylisation" in India. This was important in conveying the meaning of the text as it was often being spoken in foreign dialects. Also, interestingly, there was a sense of sexual menace in many of the scenes between the lovers, which were quite confronting. These sexual expressions, as Tim Supple says "are more vivid and natural" in India, and contributed to the fascinating Indian flavour of the production. Although the acrobatics and twirling and spinning were very entertaining, some of the actor's gestures became too heightened, on the cusp of crossing over into mime in order to make the audience understand the plot. For example, when Helena says "I see you are all bent to set against me for your merriment," she made a wild slashing gesture with her right hand to indicate her anger and frustration with the strong movement. However, the gesture seemed wooden and lacking motivation. She made this gesture as the line was not in English, in an attempt to combine it with her raised pitch and pace to convey her anger, but it seemed rather too heightened, crossing over into mime.

The symbolic, minimalist set, the costumes and the use of music were some of the most enjoyable elements of the production. The set and costume revealed the themes of love and dreams within the play whereas the music highlighted the directorial concept of communication without language. The set was comprised of several white sheets of paper at the back which was broken through unexpectedly in an engaging piece of acrobatics and movement, to reveal scaffolded ash saplings which demonstrated simply the setting of the wood. On the floor was a white silk mat, which was swept away to reveal a striking patch of red dirt, which evoked the forest floor. As the play progressed, the paper at the back became more and more tattered, a symbolic reflection of the increasing turmoil faced by the lovers, the things that “befall preposterously” that so please Puck. This was mirrored by the costume. The lovers in particular stripped layers off as the plot thickened. As well as showing the theme of the chaos of love, their nakedness also betrayed the vulnerability of those in love. It was also interesting that Puck, as a symbol of chaos, wore very little clothing. At the end Theseus had his coat ceremoniously placed back on him, showing the return to normality. The three musicians used a mixture of eastern and western instruments, which demonstrated how entertainment and storytelling transcends cultural boundaries and language barriers to bring humanity together.

Overall the performance was enjoyable for the first half (particularly the mechanicals scenes), but lost some momentum in the second half. It engaged me visually, but I found myself bored by some of the performances which were slightly flat. The performances, with the exception of Bottom, were not particularly well executed, with many characters seeming slightly two-dimensional. The design and production elements of the performance were some of the redeeming features for the production as they were highly symbolic and clearly linked with the directorial purpose. Overall I would give it 6.5/10, but would only recommend it to those with a detailed knowledge of the play.