

GOOD TO KNOW!

A curious playgoer's guide



'Spirits of another sort' A history of Midsummer fairylore

The delicate, thimble-sized fairies of modern Western imagination are a far cry from the folklore that inspired Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Elizabethan England's would have interpreted Titania, Oberon, and their clan of fairies in a much more sinister way, and in the centuries following the play's conception, directors have created unique fairy worlds of their own.

ELIZABETHAN FOLKLORE

Early modern fairies were not merely the subjects of childhood fancy; Elizabethans young and old, particularly the commonfolk, believed in fairies as real creatures who inhabited the countryside, lived among caves, hills, and mountains. They believed fairies to be of human size, some with extraordinary beauty in an array of colors, and all were thought to have supernatural powers that they could exert over human beings.

Views on fairy origins varied. They were seen as ghosts, evil spirits, wicked monsters, or the devil himself; alternately, they were considered fallen angels, the souls of dead men and women, or beings inhabiting the third kingdom between heaven and hell. The fairy kingdom consisted of any number of creatures, from aristocratic fairies of Celtic and Roman traditions who rode on horseback to domestic imps concerned with household affairs to mermaids, giants, monsters, and hags. Common fairy characteristics included the ability to shift form and transport themselves overseas, a love of music and dance, and

ability to cause dreams. One of the most common beliefs was that fairies abducted babies and replaced them with changelings.

No matter their form or abilities, Elizabethans considered all fairies to be sinister creatures and believed in many superstitions to ward themselves from their charms, from avoiding fairy rings to offering supernatural visitors a bowl of cream before going to bed.

SHAKESPEARE'S FAIRIES

Midsummer's popularity marked a significant shift in fairylore. Shakespeare conjured "spirits of another sort," as Oberon describes; these fairies are largely benevolent compared to traditional folklore, more mischievous than cruel. They are even physically different from what Elizabeth audiences likely anticipated, as Shakespeare transformed his fairies into tiny creatures, small enough to fan themselves with butterfly wings and hide in acorn cups.

Very little is known about how fairies were represented in the earliest productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although the text gives no real clues as to their costuming, some scholars believe that Oberon, Titania, and their attendants "would have been inspired by Greek attire, as early modern art often mingled classical figures with folktale creatures; this suggestion is borne out through Inigo Jones' illustrations of costumes used in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Oberon*."



One of Inigo Jones' costume illustrations for Ben Jonson's "Masque of Oberon."

FAIRIES ONSTAGE

When Shakespeare's work and other plays returned to the stage during the Reformation period, the fairy world lightened significantly—a tradition that would predominate Midsummer productions for more than a century. The play was initially popularized as an opera, associating the story with spectacular forest scenery, balletic fairy dances, and a famous musical score. Victorian productions frequently cut lines that could be interpreted as threatening or suggestive, cast women to play Oberon's role, and costumed the fairies in gauzy, flowing gowns—removing any possible hints of a menacing supernatural world.

This tradition continued until 1914 when Henry Granville Barker created an otherworldly, ethereal aesthetic for his fairies, costuming them in gold leafed paint instead of tulle. Perhaps the most influential shift in returning to a darker fairy world came with the 1964 English translation of Jan Kott's "Shakespeare Our Contemporary," in which he argues that the Midsummer fairies are threatening and dangerous instead of benign and beautiful, pointing to Puck's devious origins and some of the darker imagery from the text itself.

Since then, directors have imagined a host of fairy worlds, some colorful and playful, others dark and sinister: Peter Brook's fairies were portrayed by circus performers; Robert LePage created a forest of bogs and swampy water; and multiple productions have turned the fairies into animals, birds, and insects.



An illustration from the title page of "The Mad Pranks and Merry Jests of Robin Good Fellow."

"The Mad Pranks and Merry Jests of Robin Good Fellow"

Puck, or Robin Good Fellow, was a household name among Shakespeare's audiences. This early 17th century broadside ballad, "The Mad Merry Pranks of Robin Goodfellow"—excerpted below—describes him as the emissary of Oberon, the Fairy King of the Night, inspiring night-terrors in old women, leading travelers astray, taking the shape of animals, tattling secrets, and changing babes in cradles with elfings.

Thus Robin lived a merry life
as any could enjoy,
'Mongst country farms he did resort
and oft would folks annoy :
But if the maids doe call to him,
he still away will goe
In knavish sort, and to himselve
he'd laugh out hoe, hoe, hoe !

He oft would beg and crave an almes,
but take nought that they'd give :
In severall shapes he'd gull the world,
thus madly did he live.
Sometimes a cripple he would seeme,
sometimes a souldier brave :
Sometimes a fox, sometimes a hare ;
brave pastimes would he have.

Sometimes an owle he'd seeme to be,
sometimes a skipping frog ;
Sometimes a kirne, in Irish shape,
to leape ore mire or bog :
Sometime he'd counterfeit a voyce,
and travellers call astray,
Sometimes a walking fire he'd be,
and lead them from their way.

Some call him Robin Good-fellow,
Hob goblin, or mad Crisp,
And some againe doe tearme him oft
by name of Will the Wispe ;
But call him by what name you list,
I have studied on my pillow,
I think the best name he deserves
is Robin the Good Fellow.

THE CHARACTERS

THE COURT



HELENA



HIPPOLYTA



THESEUS

In love with

?

Betrothed



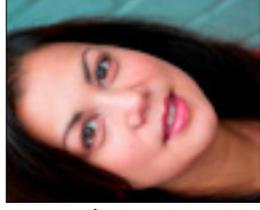
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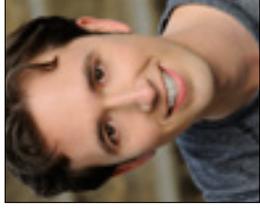
HERMIA

?

Daughter of



EGEUS



LYSANDER

In love with

THE RUDE MECHANICALS



MRS. QUINCE



FLUTE



SNUG



STARVELING



BOTTOM

THE SPIRITS



OBERON



MOTH



MUSTARD SEED



PEASE BLOSSOM



BLOSSOM COBWEB

Servant to



Puck/Robin Goodfellow

Wanted by

The Changeling Child

In care of



TITANIA

Attendants of

(Temporarily) in love with

'Know all that you are like to know'

History and context of *Midsummer*

HISTORY AND SOURCES

Scholars estimate that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written between 1595 and 1598. The Mechanicals' concern over depicting a lion on stage was probably inspired by a pamphlet published in 1594, which described a Scottish feast where plans to bring in a live lion as part of the evening's entertainment were canceled when the organizers realized that the ladies would be frightened by the beast.

The elaborateness with which the play is framed around the royal wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta suggests that it was composed for a real-life wedding of great significance, probably at court. Some historians believe that *Midsummer* was first performed at the 1598 wedding of Elizabeth Gray, Queen Elizabeth's goddaughter, although no record of this has been found.

The sources of *Midsummer* are scattered and diverse. The love story of Theseus and Hippolyta was told in the Knight's Tale of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and more facts about Theseus seem to be drawn from Sir Thomas North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives*, which was used as source material for other Shakespeare plays, and the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is one of the stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

'MISCHIEF IN THE MOONLIGHT'

In *Midsummer*, Shakespeare blends elements of two popular holidays—May Day and Midsummer's Eve—which, though six weeks apart, were not distinct occasions. The two holidays overlapped, encompassing the whole season of warm weather, long days, and fertility.

May Day celebrated spring with a return to the woods at daybreak to gather decorative branches and collect the Maydew believed to confer eternal beauty. On the village green, a tree was adorned or a flower-decked Maypole set up around which the celebrants danced. A Puck-like Lord of Misrule played tricks, a feast was hosted by a Lord and Lady o May, a procession of musicians and dancers enlivened the proceedings, and a play might be performed. If May Day celebrated the natural world and the light of day, Midsummer's Eve celebrated the supernatural and the night. It was a time of fantasy, magic, and heat-driven madness, when apparitions foretold marriage and death. Monstrous shapes danced by the light of bonfires, sometimes made of bones since the resulting stench was thought to banish evil spirits. Torchlight processions wound through London, and women gathered magical flowers for the purposes of bewitchment or prophecy.

Names and Meanings

Shakespeare conferred special meanings to many of his characters' names; the surnames of the Mechanicals, for instance, allude to their professions.

BOTTOM: A wooden spool on which a weaver winds his thread.

QUINCE: Derived from "quines" or "quoins": wooden wedges used in carpentry.

STARVELING: A skinny person (tailors were generally poor and underfed).

SNUG: Referring to the snug joints used by joiners (who, unlike carpenters, do not use nails).

FLUTE: Referring to either Flute's profession of mending bellows—devices that blow air—or his high voice.

THESEUS: Greek for "orders."

EGEUS: Greek for "protection; shield."

Did You Know?

- The British astronomer William Herschel discovered the planet Uranus in 1781—and its two largest moons in 1787, which he named after Titania and Oberon.
- One staging that took place around 1631 broke the Sabbath, causing the actor playing Bottom to be placed in the stocks for 12 hours, still wearing his ass's head.
- Another legendary production took place in 1911, when actor-manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree staged an enormously extravagant *Midsummer*. Real grass covered the stage, and live rabbits scampered around to give the impression of a real forest. The actor playing Bottom became so irritated by being upstaged by a rabbit, that he caught it and made one entrance clutching it under one arm, whereupon it promptly bit him.

'The best in this kind are but shadows' Jeff Gan on Wayang Kulit Puppetry



WSC Avant Bard's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is heavily influenced by wayang kulit: the tradition of Indonesian shadow puppetry. Director Randy Baker was drawn to many of the artistic and thematic elements that wayang kulit encompasses, and Cultural Consultant Jeff Gan was generous enough to answer some questions on this exciting art form.

What is it about this art form that resonates with you?

First, it's an intensely community-focused event. Traditionally, the atmosphere at a wayang performance is strikingly similar to what you might see in the yard of an Elizabethan theatre—it's a popular form of entertainment and the performance itself serves as a place to hang out, chat with your friends, and buy and sell goods.

Second, it's a beautiful example of cultural syncretism. Wayang

uses Javanese animist forms to tell stories that are always drawn from Hindu religious epics to an almost uniformly Muslim society. Many of the Wali Sanga; the nine holy men who introduced Islam to Java, are deeply respected specifically because they used wayang or gamelan to peacefully teach about the Koran. In a time when hard lines are being drawn between religious communities both in South East Asia and the US, the beauty and persistence of wayang

and its attendant forms reminds us that diversity of thought causes culture to flourish.

What are the major elements of wayang kulit?

The word wayang actually refers to a wide breadth of traditions—dance, stick and rod puppetry, shadow puppetry, etc.—that are commonly based on the Vedic epics, like the Mahabharata or the Ramayana. A

Elements of Wayang Kulit

- **Dalang:** the puppeteer
- **Cempala:** a mallet used by the dhalang to knock on the puppet box
- **Keyyak:** metal plates that the dhalang hits with his foot
- **Gamelan:** a traditional Indonesian orchestra
- **Blencong:** a light source
- **Gawang and kelir:** a screen frame and screen

dalang will perform a section of one of these broad epics in the course of a performance. The audience is already familiar with the major plot points which provides a degree of creative flexibility to the puppeteer. As in jazz, if you already know the melody you can really embrace the riffs and the solos. For example, a dalang may use his clown characters to crack jokes about current events and local politics in the community that is hosting the performance before segueing back into these 5th century BCE stories.

Wayang kulit specifically refers to shadow puppetry, which dominates in Central Java and the island of Bali. Puppets are traditionally constructed out of leather and buffalo horn. A single puppeteer manipulates all puppets and provides voices for all characters—and, in certain traditions, conducts the gamelan orchestra with his feet!

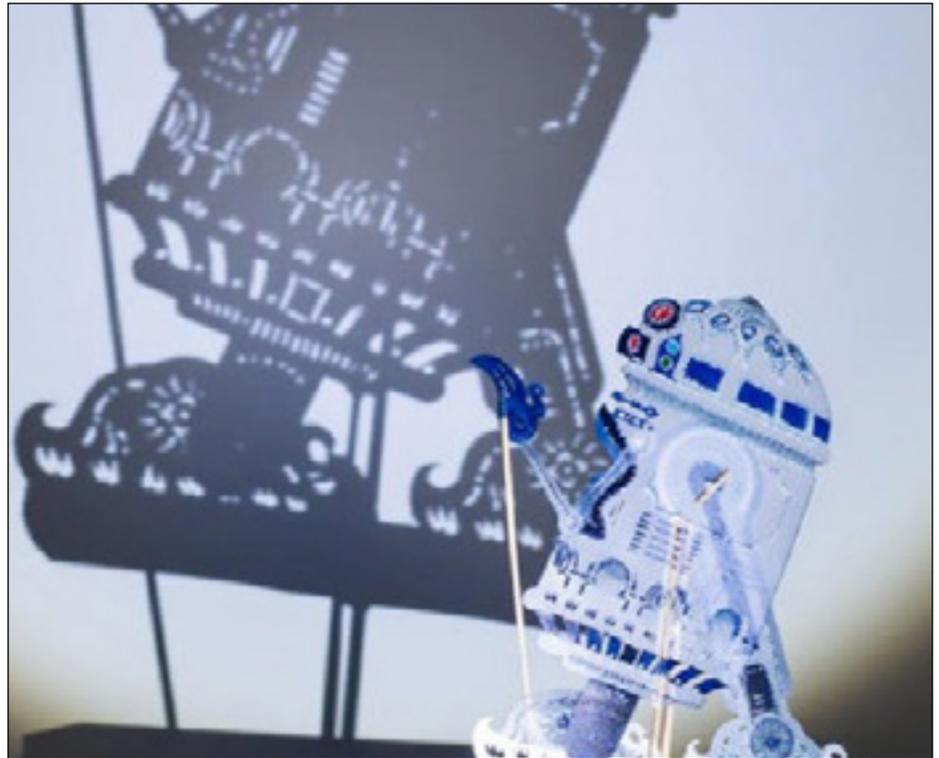
What can an audience expect walking into a performance?

It depends on context. With the advent of large-scale international tourism, performances in the Wayang Museum in Jakarta, the sultan's palace in Yogyakarta, or on Balinese resorts have flourished. In these contexts, a performance behaves more like European theatre, with less improvisation, commentary on current events, and community feel.

Wayang that is embedded within communities tends to be much less formal and much longer. In these cases, it's acceptable to have a conversation with your friends in the midst of a performance, to buy SIM cards from a hawker in the middle of scene, or to come for hour three out of six and leave long before the performance ends.

What are some of the most common stories that wayang kulit brings to life?

Wayang kulit takes its plot from Vedic epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. However the values it expresses are specific to the communities that host these performances. For example, Javanese



Ah Tuh, a wayang kulit character inspired by R2-D2 of "Star Wars." "Star Wars" wayang kulit is gaining popularity in southeast Asia, an example of how traditional artistry is melding with 21st century pop culture.

culture deeply prizes refinement and self-control. A proper ruler is gentle, calm, and utterly in command of his emotions at all times. Thus the character of Rama, prince of Ayodya and in many ways the archetype for a just ruler, is always voiced softly. He usually has his head downturned in modest deference. By contrast, servant characters are louder, are animated with clumsier movements and have bulbous, upturned faces.

Similarly, contemporary concerns are a frequent topic of indirect commentary. In 2001, Ki Enthus Susmono, a pioneering contemporary dalang, famously used puppet versions of Saddam Hussein, George Bush, and a Scud missile to illustrate a passage about the nature of war in the midst of a section from the Mahabharata.

Why does this art form work with Midsummer?

Right off the bat there is extensive meditation on shadows and the nature of reality in Midsummer. "If we shadows have offended..." begins Puck's famous epilogue. The shadow

as a liminal space of contact between our material world and something intangible is of concern to both wayang kulit and Midsummer. Wayang is suffused with an animist tradition of spirits and possession; I was once told that in certain communities, a dalang is thought to leave his body somewhere around the third hour of performance and his physical form simply serves as a conduit for the spirits after that point.

Wayang kulit performances operate within a culture that, despite the dominance of Islam, is still deeply concerned with spirits—angry, helpful, or otherwise. Wayang performances are sometimes used to serve as a ritual of protection or appeasement to sensitive spirits before beginning construction on a project, opening a finished building or road, or to mark an important life event. This resonates with Oberon and Titania's consecration of the three weddings at the end of the play, as well as the rude mechanical's performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe" as wedding entertainment.