

SAA New Approaches to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Seminar Friday Session Abstracts

Abdulhamit Arvas,
“The Indian Boy in Stage”

This paper will deploy a transhistorical lens to the Anglo-American staging history of the Indian boy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare brings to the fore, with a single stroke of an adjective qualifying the boy as “Indian,” transcultural interactions, abductions, exchanges, as well as intergenerational and interracial desire. While mostly rendered invisible since his first probable appearance on stage in 1692, the Indian boy has at other times appeared on stage as a little boy, or a girl, an adult man, an orientalized teen, an African-American youth, or even a puppet as in a recent Globe Theater production. Like Shakespeare’s other racialized characters, the staging of the Indian boy deserves a specific contextual approach rather than an essentially set parameter. Therefore, tracing Shakespeare’s sexually and racially marked boy in various figurations from early modern to postmodern productions with special attention to historical contexts, I ask: what story does the absent presence of the Indian boy on Shakespearean stage narrate? What sexual and racial histories does the Indian boy’s (in)visibility perform?

Thea Buckley
“Out of these woods do not desire to go” – *Midsommar* as *Dark Dream*: Problematizing Shakespeare’s Psychotropic Comedy

A Midsummer Night's Dream is comedy, as classified in the first folio. While Shakespeare’s early play ends accordingly in unions rather than deaths, its resolution carries darker overtones for many of these characters, with troubles unremedied and threats unaverted. A bitter aftertaste is more common to his later comedies, widely considered ‘problem plays’. Yet few critics have examined *Dream*’s gray areas as marking an early instance of the Shakespearean problem play, presaging or aligning with its typical bed-tricks, forced marriages, and other nonconsensual unions. In particular, alongside its Green Man-esque themes of harvest festivities, fantastical dreams and fairyland magic, *Dream* distills fairytales’ darkness: instances of abduction, transfiguration, drugged ‘seduction’, and dubious conjugal consent. These tropes are equally reflected in Ari Aster’s American folk horror film *Midsommar* (2019). It resets familiar pagan and animistic elements such as the fertility dance, bridal election, ceremonial feasting and ritualistic sacrifice into a traditional Swedish midsummer commemoration at a deceptively elysian off-grid commune. Hosted by the reclusive Hårga tribe, nubile college student Dani (Florence Pugh), her boyfriend and graduate school buddies find their fun summer backpacking-research adventure steadily warping into nightmare trip. As the depressed psychology student grieves both her family’s murder-suicide and her own slowly unfolding bad breakup, the Hårga crown Dani their May Queen, adopting her into the fold. Once realization dawns too late for *Midsommar*’s day-tripping crew that they have been honey trapped on a one-way journey into the woods, the film’s squeamishly graphic treatment of Dani’s companions runs the gamut of folk horror. Consequently, Aster’s devices also reify *Dream*’s folktale-anxieties surrounding abandonment, abduction, defilement, devourment, disfiguration, intoxication, madness, miscegenation, suicide, and transmogrification. Ultimately, both *Midsommar* and *Dream* meditate upon the impossibility of enforcing serenity or balance, whether of season, body, or soul, under a relentlessly cheery midnight sun.

Stephanie Chamberlain

“‘Into the wood’: Refugees and the Search for Justice in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

Following Egeus’s demand that his daughter either yield to his “ancient privilege of Athens” (1.1.41), marry Demetrius or be put to death, Hermia and Lysander flee, seeking refuge with Lysander’s dowager aunt. To reach this place of refuge, however, the two must first travel through the wood, an unknown space, peopled by other worldly beings who are both sympathetic and curious, but controlling of those they encounter. If Hermia and Lysander’s dream is to locate love, choice, and safety a “remote seven leagues” (1.1.160) from the draconian injustices of Theseus’s court, their attempt proves futile. Not only do Hermia and Lysander never make it to the dowager aunt’s, but after a tortuous night in the wood, are forced to concede to Athenian authority and whatever justice Theseus chooses to render.

My paper will examine the plight of the refugee in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, focusing less on the petty, albeit comic squabbles of Fairyland than on a place where the injustices of the Athenian court are uncomfortably duplicated. The dream of a better life far from rigidly patriarchal Athens is never realized. Although Theseus ultimately permits Hermia and Lysander to marry, he yet exercises control. If justice is rendered in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is one that yet retains control over the body and specifically the female body. Indeed, the play demonstrates how badly refugee attempts may end, a point comically, yet tragically underscored by court’s post-nuptial entertainment, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, where two young lovers seeking to escape end up dying.

Kurt Daw

“‘Because It Hath No Bottom’: Re-thinking *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an Intentionally Unstable Theatrical Text”

A Midsummer Night’s Dream has been almost universally read through the editorial certainty that Q1 was set directly from Shakespeare’s holograph draft, a conviction that has given the illusion it is an uncharacteristically stable text. Relying on a classification scheme developed by W.W.Greg to discern the nature of the compositor’s copy, it has long been treated as an established fact that *MND* comes to us almost unmediated from Shakespeare’s (conveniently literary) draft. That certainty no longer seems tenable in the light of twenty-first-century scholarship. Paul Werstine, building on work by William B. Long, has now thoroughly discredited Greg’s classification system by demonstrating there was never any valid evidentiary basis behind it, but the full implications of this scholarship are only beginning to be understood (*Early Modern Theatrical Manuscripts*).

This essay argues that both Q1 and F1 versions of *MND* show clear signs of post-performance literary adaptation, but even as transmitted, the play can and should be reread as a radically unstable stage script. It attempts to show through examination of some representative theatrical moments that the play is, in fact, intentionally so. This paper is a textual argument that the original, authorial form of the play is as a working model that invites—and even requires—theatrical collaboration and that the more determined, stable texts are later adaptations for readers.

Timothy Duggan

“Swander’s *Dreame*: An Examination of an Extant Manuscript from a Radical Teacher-Scholar”

My project is to examine an unpublished manuscript left by Homer "Murph" Swander, an early innovator of the performance approach to teaching Shakespeare. Swander (with Sir Patrick Stewart) co-founded what is now known as Actors from The London Stage. His theory of

teaching Shakespeare has influenced not just ATFLS, but many other proponents of performance approaches. Despite a wide reputation in the 60s-90s as a radical innovator, Swander did not have a prolific publishing record. However, at the time of his death in 2018, he left behind two full-length manuscripts, one of which is a comprehensive analysis of *MND* titled *Dreame: A New Play by Shakespeare*. I have a copy of the manuscript, courtesy of Swander's surviving daughter, and my project is to examine it for any insights that it might offer to us today. My sense from conversations I had with Swander before he died and from talking to his friends Alan Dessen and Sheridan Blau is that Murph so despised the function of editors and was so uncompromising in regards to his writing that he never got close to finding a publishing house for the manuscript. He self-published the monograph in 2012 but didn't distribute it except to a few friends. Swander takes what I would characterize as a deeply naturalistic stance to the script, and my hope is to contextualize his thesis within contemporary framings but to also critically examine his claim that he presents "a play that most lovers of Shakespeare have never read or seen."

Douglas Lanier

"WYSIWYG: Pregnant Errors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"

Scholars have long recognized that fraught relationships between imagination, perception, eros and error are at the heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* concerns. What the characters see (or think they see) while under the imaginative spell of love is riddled with error. In the case of Pyramus and Thisbe, the central subtext of the play, such error leads to tragedy, but for the Athenian lovers the playing out of their imaginative errors in the wood works eventually to purge error's tragic potential of its potency. The resolution of the various lovers' conflicts leads eventually to the restoring of fertile matches and, so portends the fairies' blessing in the final scene, the getting of children. This essay explores how the concern with imagination, perception, and error throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is inseparable from about imagination, perception and error in the act of procreation, that never-directly-represented moment to which so much of the play ultimately leads. Central to my argument is Shakespeare's repeated reference to the theory of "scopogenesis," in which the nature of the child is determined by what its parents see or imagine at the moment of its conception. The possibility of producing a monstrous child is threaded throughout the play, most notably in the form of the changeling and Bottom (the changeling's changeling). Purging the possibility of erotic error and shaping the imaginations and perceptions of the lovers as they approach the nuptial night spring, I argue, not merely from comedy's impetus toward romantic resolution but from what early modernity saw as the real-world consequences of the disordered psyche upon biology.

Rosa Garcia-Periago

"Contributing to Peace in Northern Ireland: Terra Nova's *Midsummer Night's Dream*"

This article examines the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* put together by Terra Nova Productions in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 2019. Terra Nova Productions (directed by Andrea Montgomery) is a professional theatre company known for its intercultural work, already seen in its first engagement with Shakespeare, *The Belfast Tempest* (2016). This challenging intercultural production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was characterized by gender-switched characters, multi-racial casting, and the integration of amateur actors into a professional cast. Alongside these features, the production emphasized Northern Irish legacies.

In response to Northern Ireland's complex history, not least the so-called "Troubles," peace was an underlying imperative in this *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was supported by the European Union's PEACE Programme. This chapter aims to place emphasis on the importance of the socio-political context in this production at several levels, not just at the final outcome. The workshops and intercultural weekends organized for the amateur actors, the rehearsals with the professional cast, the performances themselves and the active engagement with the audience after the performances were all oriented to foster peace. The play becomes the perfect scenario to confront and challenge audiences and all the agents involved; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* brings about a socio-political transformation, and, in the process, is itself transformed.

Marinela Golemi

"Neon Shakespeares: Color Theory and Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"

This article uses color theory to analyze the cultural, cognitive, and affective implications of color in Armela Demaj's 2021 production of *Ëndrra e Një Nate Vere* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) performed at the Metropol Theater in Tirana, Albania. Through color visuals, Demaj distinguished the play's fantastical elements from the courtly. Specifically, the fairy world and fairies appeared in blue/black lighting with neon color patterned leotards and face makeup, surrounded by a starlit sky and wooden trees with neon green leaves. Blended blue and white lights also shined to show how the two worlds collided. Although the language of the production isolated non-Albanian audiences, its colorful visual language communicated and transformed the story. The stage, costume, and lighting colors of the production form an assemblage of local and global color significations that reflects the glocal nature of non-Anglophone adaptations and their audiences. Colors are perceived and felt universally, but their emotional and symbolic value is interpreted locally, just as non-Anglophone Shakespearean adaptations simultaneously embody local and global cultural values. This process is illustrated more vividly through colors that also embody a rainbow of significations. Denoting color as an alternative communicative apparatus to language, I argue that a color conscious methodology more accurately represents the glocal underpinnings of non-Anglophone Shakespeare adaptations. I hope this new color conscious critical approach will help Shakespeare scholars, educators, and theatre practitioners to better understand and create visually intercultural Shakespeare adaptations.

Alexa Alice Joubin

"'All is mended': Creating Queer Spaces in Adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"

The metatheatricality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—framed by the concentric circles of the fairies' world, Bottom's dream, the rude mechanicals' play, and Theseus's court—enables and invites reimagination of social spaces and queer narratives. Several queer adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have emerged in the past 15 years. At the core of these reimaginations are reworkings of the toxic, patriarchal politics at the Athenian court and reparative uses of the "little western flower" with the force to "stir love" of all orientations.

This paper surveys a few queer adaptations, including Sean F. Gray's gender-bending production *A Midsummer Night's Gay Dream* (2013), Luna Alexander's all-male production set in a gay nightclub (2016), Emma Rice's Globe production (2016), and David Kerr's BBC televised film (2016). Many of these adaptations turn Helena into Helenus, and feature some queer moments. While it almost seems a prerequisite in the twenty-first century to be gender-inclusive in stage productions, Anglophone cinema has remained relatively conservative.

Of special interest, therefore, are Tom Gustafson's two films that engage intently and consistently with queer themes even beyond the play's "dream world." The short film *Fairies* (2003) is set and shot in a high school in Chicago, and follows an optimistic arc for its queer protagonist. In 2008, Gustafson expands the short into his feature debut, *Were the World Mine* with the same but more elaborate storyline.

Gustafson uses the tropes of nostalgia (the manipulation of time) and play-within-a-film (the merging of spaces) to construct a queer-positive social space. The former trope reimagines a more hospitable past for queer adolescence and scene. Nostalgia as a storytelling strategy is a form of affective labor that is rooted in reimagined pasts and futurity. The latter trope creates an ideological distance from the socially repressive dramatic actions in offstage moments in the film and within Shakespeare's text.

Beyond its promotion of social justice, reparative performance carries substantial affective rewards, and emotional investment in a story that spurs people into action, echoing what adrienne maree brown's principles of "pleasure activism."

Yu Jin Ko

"Consent and Animation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: From Shakespeare's Globe to the Korean *Madang*"

As scholars have long noticed, violent male conquest characterizes the first instance of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Theseus and Hippolyta), and thus raises the question of consent from the very first scene. As the play goes on, the issue of consent becomes arguably even more prominent and problematic, as love proceeds from, and finds resolution through, injury, sexual humiliation and the unwitting enchantment of a love potion derived from a flower bruised "purple with love's wound" (2.1.167). Hence, even as scholars and theatre practitioners alike recognize the potentially disruptive energies unleashed in the topsy-turvy green world of the forest, they have also struggled with the issue of how to deal with the patriarchal underpinnings of the restorations that make up the happy ending. Put another way, discussions of the play continue to be shadowed and driven by the containment/subversion debate that new historicism ushered in over a generation ago. My essay will try to go beyond the binary poles of this debate by exploring the link the play makes between romantic consent and the audience's imaginative consent to the fiction on stage. I will explore in particular how the participatory energy that is released in amphitheatre spaces and their equivalents might be, and has been, deployed to reconfigure the role of the consensual imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and enable romantic resolutions that elude the play-text's patriarchal foundations. I will look specifically at a Korean adaptation of the play by the troupe Yohangza that addresses the play's gender imbalances by self-consciously setting the action in an animated space of consensual play that recalls the *place* of medieval and Renaissance stages and goes by the name of *madang*.

Kathryn Schwarz

"Falling in Love, with Quarantine"

Romantic comedies engage in notorious exclusions. This is apparent in the fact that the statement 'Antonio is left out' describes two Shakespearean plays; it is apparent in the fact that Alan Sinfield tries to break the pattern by proposing five distinct versions of the *ménage à trois*. These comedies also engage in notorious inclusions, as when Cesario splits into Viola and Sebastian, or when Duke Vincentio proposes to Isabella, or when *As You Like It* summons the god Hymen to ensure everyone is paired. Much good work has counted the costs of coupling and

severing. Here I want to take a step back, and pose a very basic question: what is the difference between inclusion and exclusion? I don't mean to imply that there is no difference, but rather to consider whether it operates where and as we are invited to think. In working this through, I turn to the conceit of passion as disease to trace the omnipresence of quarantine. And I argue that the question is not whether one succumbs to contagion, but what kind of quarantine results. These plays foster the illusion of an opposition between fecund unions and barren remainders. Yet if quarantine segregates atrophic, profitless persons, it confines fruitful subjects even more closely, ensuring that they survive and thrive and breed within their limits. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is particularly aggressive in this sense, with its dueling marital frame narratives, its interchangeable lovers, and its cautionary tales of inapt desire. Everything multiplies, only to narrow to a utilitarian point. Marriage, like pandemic and war, specializes in making persons into math: from the kaleidoscope of many comes one plus one, which might equal two, or one, or one plus the promise of the next. Through the mechanism of addition as subtraction, marriage plots translate capacious desire into strait sex. They do so in the service of futurity, a kinetic mirage sustained by reproduction as ceaseless substitution. In the end, socialized desire presents not the opposition of contagion and quarantine, but the spectacle of quarantine as contagion, an infectious idea with sufficient flex that one size need not fit all. If there are multiple modes of quarantine, some for the fecund and some for the barren, this makes a ruthless social sense. But it might also conjure the ghost of its buried alternative: a mode of mutable, eccentric, commodious attachment that exists only for the short arc of a shared moment, and reveals that a shared moment is all social habitation has to give.