

Review: A Midsummer Night's Dream, Charles Sturt University (NSW)

SUZIE GIBSON

Charles Sturt University's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* revels in the incongruity and farcicality of lovers and couplings.



Hannah Armstrong, Janda Nichols and Artie Hotchkies in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Image supplied.

Charles Sturt University's final year Theatre/Media students' take on Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is both whimsical and imaginative. This is suggested at the outset of the drama, outside Charles Sturt's historical Ponton Theatre, where audiences are greeted by a chess board setting and a series of projected images ushering us into a realm of dreams and fantasies.

In the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe's chimerical poem 'A Dream Within a Dream' we are encircled by enchanted lovers, cheeky revellers and mirthful sprites. Artie Hotchkies's mischievous Puck is a standout. Clad in fishnet stockings, black ripped jeans, glitter and feathers, Hotchkies owns the stage as she playfully sprinkles love potion upon Lysander's (Lewis A. Mitchell) and Demetrius's (Riley Holland) sleeping eyelids. Such magic leads to conflict as these young Athenian lovers struggle with feelings of jealousy, anger and confusion.

The haziness and impressionistic experience of dreaming mixed with magic creates much trouble as the young friends Helena (Heather Edmonds) and Hermia (Sonia Dodd) become enemies once they believe that one has either tricked or stolen her lover. Edmonds and Dodd are excellent as Helena and Hermia as they hilariously tussle over a spellbound Lysander and Demetrius.

This leading conflict is complemented by another plot involving a group of actors who enact their own twisted version of a love drama that mirrors the central narrative. This play within a play, or dream within a dream blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

But there are moments of seriousness such as when the former queen of the Amazons Hippolyta (memorably played by Hannah Armstrong) speaks powerfully about the altering of the seasons. In this scene, a film projector screens images of disastrous weather that reminds us of the urgent issue of global warming.

Such gravity is balanced by a great deal of mirth and good-natured absurdity. This is particularly the case with the amateur acting troupe led by Peter Quince (Max Wilson) and Nick Bottom (Julian Pitt). Wilson and Pitt make a great team as their dynamic is evocative of the classical slapstick comedy duo of Laurel and Hardy. A great sense of the burlesque intensifies once impish Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass and during their dress rehearsal Pitt hilariously (and likely-unintentionally) tripped off the stage.

Being a student production there were a few missteps, but these moments were cleverly integrated revealing an impressive level of professionalism. Moreover, in the spirit of this play's meditation upon the fine line between dreams and reality, many of the performers embrace the shifting boundary between acting and being.

Moveable boundaries in this play also include the testing of boundaries and this is perhaps- best conveyed when the queen of the fairies, Titania (also played by Armstrong) under the influence of the love potion falls for the ass-headed Bottom. This situation is not only hilarious and absurd, it also questions another division: the difference between humans and animals.

Another notable performer is Janda Nichols who skilfully plays King Oberon – giving his character depth and a degree of unscripted pathos. Oberon's interactions with his queen Titania are memorable in revealing some of the failings of love when it is mixed with pride.

Charles Sturt University's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* revels in the incongruity and farcicality of lovers and couplings. It also provides wonderful lip sync moments and musical touches. This play also gives audiences pause to reflect upon ideas and issues beyond its realm of dreams and in this way nicely balances gravity and absurdity.

An excellent production rich with ideas and energy.

4 stars: ★★★★★

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Director: Zoe Rodwell

Production Manager: Anna Caldwell

AD7 Prop Design: Emma Van Veen

Shares

Assistant Director & APM: Taylor Dawson
AD/ SM & Choreographer: Brittany Myers
ASM & Costuming: Greygryn Holgate
Costume/ FOH: Saskia Channing
Marketing: Cassandra Hill
Set Design/ LX Operations: Alexandria Viller
Set Design: Danni Rayner
Sounds Design: Lucas Murphy
AV: Natesha Ham
Lighting: Caitlin Cowan
FOH Design: Christopher Monaghan
FOH Design: Joshua Meyers
Theatre Technical Officer and Venue Manager: Karl Shead

Cast

Helena: Heather Edmonds
Hermia: Sonia Dodd
Demetrius: Riley Hollad
Lysander: Lewis A. Mitchell
Oberon: Janda Nichols
Puck: Artie Hotchkies
Titania/Hippolyta: Hannah Armstrong
Snout: Natesha Ham
Snug: Caitlin Cowan
Philostrate: Emily Waterson
Theseus: Joshua Meyers
Flute: Christopher Monaghan
Peter Quince: Max Wilson
Nick Bottom: Julian Pitt
Starveling/Egeus

The Ponton Theatre, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst
29 May–1 June

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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