chichester festival theatre

Teaching and Learning Materials to accompany the production of

A Midsummer Night's Dream

By William Shakespeare

Written by **Carl Cerny**



A Midsummer Night's Dream

By William Shakespeare

Contents

Production notes 04

Warm-up tasks 06

- Puck's Spells 07
- Love Triangle 10
- Bottom Knows Best! 13

Practical tasks 16

- Exploring the character of Bottom 16
- Puck's Mischief! 23
- The Love Potion Disaster 28

Creative tasks 33

- Pop Sonnet for Bottom 33
- Lovers' Mixtape 43

Reading tasks 48

- Essay 1 - The Forest: A World Turned Upside Down 48
- Essay 2 - Nature Out of Balance: 53
- An Ecocritical Reading of A Midsummer Night's Dream 53

Discussion Questions 56

Creatives 61

Production Designs 65

- Production Designs 66
- Costume Designs 70

Production notes

This production of ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** is set in 1994, during a period of enormous cultural change in Britain. The recently introduced Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) gave police new powers to stop large, unlicensed outdoor gatherings and effectively brought an end to many of the free rave festivals that had become popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Against this backdrop, our production explores one of the play's central ideas: the conflict between authority and freedom. Just as Shakespeare contrasts the ordered world of Athens with the magical freedom of the forest, this production contrasts a world of rules, hierarchy and tradition with one of music, self-expression and escape.

Many of Shakespeare's characters have therefore been reimagined as recognisable people ('archetypes') who might have inhabited these two very different worlds in Britain during the 1990s.

The Office of the Rt Hon. MP for West Sussex

The world of Athens becomes a formal political office, representing law, order and authority.

- Theseus – Conservative MP for West Sussex
- Hippolyta – His confident and ambitious fiancée
- Egeus – Chief Constable of Sussex Police
- Philostrate – Theseus' personal assistant

The Lovers

The four lovers represent different youth cultures and backgrounds, each bringing their own identity into the story.

- Hermia – Egeus' daughter, raised in a privileged and traditional family
- Lysanda – Hermia's free-spirited girlfriend, curious about alternative lifestyles and the rave scene
- Demetrius – A confident, sporty young man whom Egeus believes is the ideal partner for Hermia
- Helena – An indie and grunge music fan, secretly in love with Demetrius, completing work experience in Theseus' office

West Sussex Conservative Association

The Mechanicals become members of the local Conservative Association, enthusiastically preparing entertainment for Theseus and Hippolyta's celebration.

- Peter Quince – Association chairman
- Bottom – An enthusiastic local entrepreneur with boundless confidence
- Snug – A builder
- Flute – A school student
- Snout – A newly qualified police constable
- Starveling – A sales assistant in a home furnishings shop

The South Downs Free Rave

The enchanted forest becomes an illegal outdoor rave hidden in the South Downs, where music, dancing and freedom replace the rules of everyday life.

- Oberon – DJ and organiser of the rave
- Titania – Oberon's partner, increasingly frustrated by their relationship
- Puck – Oberon's mischievous cousin and fixer
- Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed – Titania's close friends, regulars at the rave
- The Changeling – A younger DJ and charismatic figure within the rave community, whose presence lies at the heart of Oberon and Titania's dispute

Why set *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1994?

Although Shakespeare's play was written over 400 years ago, many of its ideas still feel remarkably relevant. The contrast between authority and freedom, older and younger generations, rules and rebellion, and order and celebration all resonate with Britain in the early 1990s.

By setting the play during the final years of the free rave movement, this production invites audiences to think about the forest as a place where ordinary rules no longer apply. Like Shakespeare's enchanted woodland, the rave becomes a temporary world of music, transformation and possibility—a place where identities can shift, relationships can change and people discover new sides of themselves before returning to everyday life.



Warm-up tasks

The below tasks are intended as warm-up activities for practical approaches to studying the play. They are designed for Key Stage 3-4 students studying ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** but can be adapted for students of other ages studying other texts. Teachers may wish to use these activities in isolation or as part of more developed practical lessons on the play.

Puck's Spells

Focus:

Magic, transformation and loss of control

How to play:

Pupils stand, sit or lie with eyes closed: they are "asleep".
The teacher gives an instruction that changes reality ("given circumstances") when they will awake. Some text-related examples:

- You're suddenly lost in a forest
- Everyone else has turned into an animal
- You're suddenly the king / queen / monarch – you deserve respect!
- Your hands look like animal paws – you're transformed!
- It's show night and you're full of nerves!
- You're running away tonight!
- You're a guest at the wedding of the king and queen!
- You're invisible – nobody can see your mischief



Teacher note

Before "waking", teacher guides students through thinking how they will convey their new reality: movement, gesture, eye contact, use of the space, their emotions. After a count-down from 5, students awake and move around the space according to the rules of Puck's spell. Cycle through a few versions of this to explore some of the play's different scenarios

Extend:

a. Change the scenario suddenly without the “sleeping” phase in-between.

b. Use sound and lighting if available to enhance the atmosphere.

c. Students can begin with this task in silence; add eye-contact; then add simple spoken interactions.

Reflect:

Which scenarios do we recognise from our study of the play?

Which of the situations were easiest, hardest, funniest?

Did it help you to understand the feelings of the play’s characters?

How might it feel if magic controlled your choices?





Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

1. Offer alternatives to closing eyes and moving: Pupils can lower their gaze, remain seated or work from a fixed position. Make closing eyes and moving around the space optional.

2. Use visual and verbal instructions: Display each spell on a card or screen as well as reading it aloud. Use clear visual and/or verbal signals for “sleep”, “wake” and countdowns.

3. Allow processing time: Give a short warning before changing spells and repeat instructions where needed. Pupils who benefit from predictability can be shown the next scenario in advance.

4. Provide flexible ways to perform: Pupils can communicate the spell through movement, gesture, facial expression, signing, speech or sound, or take a director/narrator role.

5. Adapt sensory and spatial elements: Establish clear, accessible routes and personal spaces. Keep sound and lighting effects optional and avoid unexpected loud noises, flashing lights or sudden darkness.

Love Triangle

This energetic warm-up recreates the confusion and shifting relationships between Hermia, Lysander, Helena and Demetrius

How to play:

Ask each pupil to secretly choose:

- one person in the room they "love"
- one person they want to avoid.

They must not tell anyone who they have chosen.

When the teacher calls "Go!", everyone moves around the space, trying to stay as close as possible to the person they love while keeping as far away as possible from the person they want to avoid.

Encourage pupils to keep moving continuously without running or touching anyone. Very quickly, the whole group should become tangled in a constantly changing web of movement.

Reflect

Discuss:

- What happened?
- Why was it so difficult to achieve your goal?
- Did anyone accidentally create a love triangle—or something even more complicated?
- Which characters in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** experience similar problems?



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Extend:

Try one or more of these variations.

a. Silent attraction

Instead of moving closer or further away, players stay spread around the room and communicate their feelings only through:

- eye contact
- facial expressions
- gestures
- body language

How clearly can others recognise who loves whom?

b. Love rivals

Continue the game, but now notice who else seems interested in the same person.

How can you gain your chosen person's attention without speaking?

c. Puck's mischief

Ask everyone to close their eyes.

The teacher (or a nominated pupil playing Puck) quietly chooses one person. Half the class are secretly instructed that this is now the person they "love."

Play the game again.

How does it feel to suddenly receive everyone's attention?

Repeat the activity by secretly asking half the class to avoid the same person instead. How does this change the atmosphere?

d. Four lovers

Choose four volunteers while the rest of the class becomes the audience.

Each performer secretly chooses one person in the group to love and one person to avoid.

Give them a simple situation to improvise (for example, meeting at a party, waiting for a bus, or walking through the forest) for one or two minutes.

The audience watches carefully and then discusses:

- Who seemed to love whom?
- Who was trying to avoid whom?
- Which moments were funniest?
- How did the actors communicate their feelings without explaining them?

Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

1. Offer alternatives to moving around the space: Pupils can remain seated or in a fixed position and indicate “love” and “avoid” through pointing, gesture, cards or other agreed signals. Pairing or choices can also be assigned in advance.

2. Adapt eye contact and body language: Make eye contact optional and encourage pupils to communicate attraction or avoidance through gesture, facial expression, signing, voice or positioning instead.

3. Provide clear visual and verbal instructions: Model one round before beginning and display the rules or use simple “love” and “avoid” cards. Give clear countdowns before starting, stopping or changing the activity.

4. Offer alternatives to closing eyes: During Puck’s Mischief, pupils can lower their gaze, turn away or use a visual signal rather than closing their eyes. Instructions can be given individually using spoken, written or signed communication

5. Provide flexible participation roles: Pupils can participate as performers, observers, directors or narrators. In the Four Lovers variation, audience members can identify relationships verbally, through writing, drawing or choosing from pre-written options.



Bottom Knows Best!

Objective

To explore the comedy created when one character constantly tries to take control while everyone else reacts in different ways.

Focus

Bottom and the Mechanicals (Quince, Flute, Snout, Snug and Starveling)

How to play:

Ask the class to move around the space.

Explain that they are the Mechanicals, a group of amateur actors preparing for an important performance before the Duke.

Assign pupils one of the Mechanicals. One pupil begins as Bottom.

Whenever the teacher calls “Rehearsal!”, Bottom immediately takes charge, loudly giving instructions to everyone else.

Examples include:

- “Stand over there!”
- “I’ll play the lion!”
- “Let me do that part!”
- “Listen to me!”
- “I’ve got a better idea!”
- “I could play every character!”

The rest of the group reacts in role:

- Quince – calmly tries to organise the rehearsal and keep everyone focused.
- Flute – looks embarrassed or reluctant to perform.
- Snug – becomes confused and keeps asking questions.
- Snout – follows instructions without questioning them.
- Starveling – worries that everything will end in disaster.

Continue the rehearsal for around 20–30 seconds, then pause and choose a new Bottom.

Reflect

Discuss:

- Why is Bottom such a funny character?
- Does Bottom realise he is making people laugh?
- Which reactions from the other Mechanicals created the biggest laughs?
- Is Bottom a good leader—or simply a very confident one?

Extend:

a. Raise the stakes

The Duke is arriving in one minute!

Bottom becomes even more desperate to control the rehearsal while the other Mechanicals react in role.

How does the increased pressure affect the comedy?

b. The wrong instructions

Bottom must now give deliberately unhelpful or ridiculous instructions.

For example:

- "Everybody roar like lions!"
- "Run away!"
- "Let's swap parts!"
- "Everybody freeze!"
- "I'll play every role myself!"

How long can Quince keep the rehearsal on track?

c. Status swap

Play the activity again, but this time Quince is in charge.

How does the rehearsal change when someone sensible leads the group?

Which version is funnier, and why?

d. Perform the scene

Working in small groups, use your improvisation to create a short rehearsal scene lasting one or two minutes.

Try to include:

- Bottom interrupting others.
- Someone misunderstanding an instruction.
- A disagreement over who should play which part.
- One successful moment where the group finally works together.

Perform your rehearsal to the class.

Challenge

Bottom genuinely believes he is helping.

Can you play him without trying to be funny?

Often the biggest laughs come when Bottom is completely sincere and utterly convinced that he knows best.

Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

1. Offer alternatives to moving around the space: Pupils can remain seated or work from a fixed position, using gesture, facial expression, signing or voice to react to Bottom's instructions.

2. Provide clear role cards: Give each pupil a simple card explaining their Mechanical's character and typical reactions. Include symbols, images or example actions where helpful.

3. Adapt spoken participation: Bottom's instructions can be spoken, signed, written on cards or selected from prepared prompts. Pupils can also work with a partner who communicates their instructions.

4. Use predictable signals and processing time: Combine the spoken "Rehearsal!" cue with a clear visual signal, and allow thinking time before each round. Give advance warning before swapping roles or introducing new rules.

5. Provide flexible performance roles: Pupils can participate as Bottom, a Mechanical, director, narrator or observer. During group performances, students can contribute by suggesting instructions, directing reactions or identifying moments of comedy.



Practical tasks

Exploring the character of Bottom



Focus

Bottom's speeches (Act 1, Scene 2)

Learning Objective

To explore how Shakespeare creates comedy through Bottom's excessive confidence, misuse of language, and over-the-top performance style.

Time

20–30 minutes

Resources

Copies of Bottom's lines from the rehearsal scene (particularly his responses to being cast as Pyramus and his offers to play Lion and Thisbe). Available in original or modern translation.

Original

What is Pyramus—a lover or a tyrant?

That will ask some tears in the true performing of it. If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes. I will move storms; I will condole in some measure. To the rest.—Yet my chief humour is for a tyrant. I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split. Now name the rest of the players.

An I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice: "Thisne, Thisne!"

"Ah Pyramus, my lover dear! Thy Thisbe dear and lady dear!"

Let me play the lion too. I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. I will roar that I will make the Duke say "Let him roar again. Let him roar again!"

I grant you, friends, if you should fright the ladies out of their wits, they would have no more discretion but to hang us. But I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale.

What beard were I best to play it in? I will discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your perfit yellow.

We will meet, and there we may rehearse most obscenely and courageously. Take pains. Be perfit. Adieu.

Modern translation

What is Pyramus supposed to be—a romantic hero or a fierce ruler?

Either way, I'll need to do some serious acting! If I play him, the audience had better watch out because I'll make them cry so much they'll flood the theatre with tears. I'll make storms of sadness! Well... maybe not too many tears. Really, my favourite kind of character is a powerful king or warrior. I'd be amazing at that! I could play Hercules brilliantly, or any role where I get to shout and act so dramatically that everyone goes wild. Anyway, who are the other actors?

If I can wear a disguise, let me play Thisbe too! I'd use a tiny little voice:

"Thisbe, Thisbe!"

"Oh Pyramus, my dear love! Your lovely Thisbe is here!"

And let me play the Lion as well! I can roar so magnificently that everyone will love it. I'll roar so well that the Duke will shout:

"Let him roar again! Let him roar again!"

Okay, friends, I admit that if I scared the ladies too much, they might be so frightened they'd want us punished. But don't worry! I'll make my roar gentler. I'll roar as softly as a little dove. I'll roar as sweetly as a nightingale singing!

Now, what beard should I wear for my part? I can use the pale yellow one, the orange-brown one, the bright red one, or the fancy golden-yellow one. Any beard will do—I can play the role perfectly in all of them!

Let's meet together later and practise our play in the woods where nobody will disturb us. Work hard! Learn your lines! Be ready!

Goodbye!

Introduction

Explain that Bottom is one of Shakespeare's great comic characters because he is completely unaware of how ridiculous he sounds. He believes that bigger always means better.

Students will take turns as both actor and director, discovering how different performance choices can make Bottom funnier.

Part A: Identifying the comic opportunities (5 minutes)

Working in pairs, students read Bottom's lines aloud..

As you read, underline or highlight any line where Bottom:

- boasts
- interrupts
- misunderstands something
- exaggerates his abilities
- says something unintentionally funny

Possible examples:

"Let me play the lion too."

"I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me."

"I will aggravate my voice."

Discuss:

- Why is this funny?
- What does Bottom think about himself?
- What does the audience think about him?



Teacher note

Students may notice Bottom's famous malapropism:

'I will aggravate my voice'

when he means moderate his voice.

This is an excellent example of comedy created through a character sounding confident while being completely wrong. There are plenty of other malapropisms to find in Bottom's lines throughout the play.

Part B: The Comedy Scale (10 minutes)

Encourage students to stand up and perform the speeches rather than reading from their seats. Remind them that Bottom is an actor rehearsing a play, so physicality is just as important as the words.

One student performs Bottom. The other acts as director. Perform the speech three times:

Version:

1: Sensible Actor

Play Bottom realistically.

- normal volume
- natural gestures
- genuine conversation

Discuss:

- Is it effective?
- Why or why not?

2: Shakespearean Show-Off

Now increase everything:

- bigger gestures
- louder voice
- dramatic pauses
- excessive emotion

Encourage:

- pointing dramatically
- heroic poses
- chest puffing
- grand declarations

Discuss:

- Which moments became more effective?
- Why?

3: Maximum Bottom

Perform as though Bottom believes he is the greatest actor who has ever lived. The aim is not to make Bottom silly on purpose. Instead, play every moment as though Bottom genuinely believes he is being brilliant.

Encourage:

- melodramatic sobbing
- absurd roaring
- kneeling
- striking heroic poses
- speaking directly to imaginary audiences
- acting out every image literally

The director should continually call:

- “Bigger!”
- “More emotional!”
- “More dramatic!”
- “More heroic!”

until the performance becomes ridiculous.

Part C: Freeze and zoom (10 minutes)

Choose 3–4 moments from the speech.

At each moment:

1. Freeze the action.
2. Decide what makes this moment funny.
3. Choose one acting choice (gesture, voice, movement or facial expression) and exaggerate it.
4. Repeat the line.

Examples:

Text Feature	Performance Choice
Boasting	Huge chest-puffing pose
Malapropism	Confident delivery of nonsense
Roaring	Increasingly ridiculous animal noises
Volunteering for every role	Leaping forward eagerly
Trying to impress others	Constant eye contact with the audience

Ask:

- Does the comedy come from the words?
- The performance?
- Or both?

Reflection

Discuss:

- Which performance choices created the biggest laughs?
- Does Bottom know he is funny?
- Why does Shakespeare make Bottom so over-confident? How does it impact our impression of him later in the play?
- Why do audiences enjoy characters who take themselves very seriously? Can we think of any examples from literature, TV or film?

Extend and develop

Ask pairs to create a “Bottom’s Masterclass in Acting.”

Bottom teaches a group of actors how to perform.

Every piece of advice must be terrible:

“If you’re sad, cry louder!”

“If you’re a lion, roar for five minutes!”

“If you’re a lady, use a very, very high voice!”

Pairs perform their masterclasses for the class.

What this develops

This activity helps students recognise that much of Bottom’s comedy comes from the gap between:

- how brilliant he thinks he is,
- and how ridiculous he appears to everyone else.

Bottom is funny because he never realises he is funny. Shakespeare creates comedy through the gap between Bottom’s confidence and the audience’s understanding. The more sincerely Bottom believes he is a great actor, the funnier he becomes. This is an important principle of comic acting that students can apply to many other Shakespearean characters.





Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

1. Provide accessible versions of the text: Offer the original and modern translation side-by-side, with key words highlighted or supported by symbols, definitions or audio recordings. Allow pupils to work with shorter sections of the speech where appropriate.

2. Provide flexible actor and director roles: Pupils can perform standing, seated or from a fixed position, or take the role of director, narrator or observer. Performance choices can be communicated through speech, signing, gesture, facial expression or assistive communication.

3. Scaffold the comedy choices: Use prompt cards for features such as “boasting”, “roaring”, “malapropism” and “showing off”, alongside cards suggesting changes to voice, gesture, expression or movement. Model one example before pairs begin.

4. Adapt vocal and physical demands: “Bigger” does not need to mean louder or more physical. Pupils can exaggerate through pauses, facial expression, signing, gesture, rhythm, repetition or changes in pace.

5. Offer flexible ways to analyse and reflect: Pupils can identify comic moments by highlighting, pointing, using symbols or choosing from prepared options. Reflections can be spoken, signed, written or discussed with a partner.

Puck's Mischief!

Focus

The interference of Oberon and Puck in the lives of the lovers, Titania and the Mechanicals

Learning Objective

To explore how Shakespeare creates comedy through magical interference, misunderstanding and sudden changes in character behaviour.

Time

20–30 minutes

Set up

Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a simple scene from the play.

Examples:

- The lovers arguing in the forest
- Titania and her fairies
- The Mechanicals rehearsing Pyramus and Thisbe
- Bottom talking to Titania
- Hermia and Helena quarrelling
- Demetrius pursuing Hermia

Select:

- One pupil in the class as Oberon
- One pupil in the class as Puck

These two students do not perform in the scenes initially. Instead, they act as magical manipulators: the unseen "directors" of the forest, secretly influencing events without taking part in the action themselves

How it works

Round 1: Perform

Groups begin performing their scene using a simple script or improvised version. The RSC's excellent playmaking pack is useful for this and is free to download it here.

Allow each scene to develop naturally for around one minute before calling "FREEZE!"

All performers:

- Freeze completely.
- Close their eyes.

Round 2: The magic

Oberon and Puck quietly move around the room.

Oberon and Puck each visit every group.

Each secretly whispers one instruction to one performer in that group.

This means that each group has two enchanted characters, each following a different magical instruction.

Round 3: Chaos

The scene resumes.

Actors must continue performing the original scene while secretly following their new instruction.

The other performers should not stop the scene or ask questions. Instead, they should react in character to whatever unexpected behaviour they witness.

Round 4: Guessing game

After a few minutes:

- End the scene.
- Group members discuss:
    - Who received an instruction?
    - What was it?

How did it affect the scene?

Then reveal the answers.

Repeat with new instructions and different recipients.

Suggested secret instructions

Love and attraction

1. You've suddenly fallen deeply in love with another member of the group. You must constantly try to impress them.
2. You are convinced someone else in the group is in love with you.

Mechanicals-inspired

3. You think another member of the group has turned into a donkey. Try not to panic!
4. You are determined to become the star of the show.
5. You believe you're better than everyone else.

Fairy mischief

6. You can suddenly see invisible fairies everywhere. Try to avoid stepping on them.
7. You think Oberon is secretly watching and judging everything you do. Constantly try to impress him.

Physical comedy

8. You desperately need the toilet but are trying to hide it.
9. Every time somebody says your name, you become dramatically emotional. Cry, gasp, celebrate—anything excessive.

Complete confusion

10. You have forgotten who everybody is. Spend the scene trying to work it out without admitting it.



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Extension 1: Advanced enchantments!

For a second round, allow Oberon and Puck to use more powerful enchantments:
You can only speak in questions.
You are terrified of trees.
You think you're the King or Queen of Athens.
Every statement must be whispered.
You believe everyone is plotting against you.
You think you're in an entirely different play.

Extension 2: Double enchantment!

Now Oberon and Puck secretly enchant the same character.
That actor receives two instructions.
Can they satisfy both?
For example:
You're desperately in love...
...but you've forgotten who everyone is.
or
You're terrified of trees...
...and convinced you're the King of Athens.
That becomes hilariously difficult and mirrors the increasing chaos of Act 3.

Reflection

Discuss:
Which magical instruction was funniest?
Which instruction was hardest to perform?
Which scene changed the most?
How did the other actors help keep the scene going?
Why does Shakespeare use magical interference instead of ordinary misunderstandings?

Extension 3: Director's challenge

Repeat one of the scenes.
This time no one receives a magical instruction.
Can the audience tell the difference?
Discuss:
How much chaos does Shakespeare create through magic?
How much comes simply from the characters' own personalities?
That encourages pupils to think about a really sophisticated point:
Puck doesn't create every problem. He often exaggerates feelings that are already there.

Link to the play

Throughout the play, Oberon and Puck behave almost like playwrights or directors. They stand outside the action, manipulating other characters without those characters understanding what is happening. The comedy comes from watching characters try to continue their normal lives while magical interference creates confusion, mistaken identities, unexpected attractions and absurd behaviour. This mirrors Shakespeare's comic structure, where much of the humour emerges from characters responding seriously to situations that have become completely ridiculous.

Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

1. Offer alternatives to closing eyes and freezing: Pupils can lower their gaze, remain seated or use a visual “freeze” signal. Make closing eyes and moving around the space optional.

2. Provide accessible scripts and instructions: Offer short scripts, modern translations, visual prompts or role cards. Secret instructions can be whispered, signed, written or provided on cards according to individual needs.

3. Allow processing and preparation time: Give clear warnings before freezing, restarting or changing the rules. Pupils who benefit from predictability can receive their enchantment early or have a short rehearsal before continuing the scene.

4. Provide flexible performance roles: Pupils can participate as performers, Oberon or Puck, directors, narrators or observers. Enchantments can be communicated through speech, signing, gesture, facial expression, sound or movement.

5. Adapt the level of challenge: Match enchantments to individual learners and introduce double enchantments only where appropriate. Avoid instructions that create sensory, physical or communication barriers, and allow pupils to choose from alternative prompts.




Photo: Manuel Harlan

The Love Potion Disaster

Focus

Characters, relationships and comedy.

Learning Objective

To explore how Shakespeare creates comedy through mistaken identity, changing relationships and magical interference.

Time

20–30 minutes

Introduction

Explain that one of the funniest parts of ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** is the confusion caused by Puck's mistake. The love potion transforms the relationships between the four lovers, creating jealousy, arguments and misunderstandings. This activity explores how those changing relationships can be shown physically before bringing them to life through performance.

Part A: Relationship map (5–7 minutes)

Choose four pupils to play:

- Hermia
- Lysander
- Helena
- Demetrius

Using lengths of string or ribbon, create a visual map of the lovers' relationships. Each pair connected by love holds one end of the ribbon.

At the beginning of the play

- Hermia and Lysander are connected.
- Helena reaches towards Demetrius, but he rejects her

Discuss:

- Who seems happy?
- Who feels left out?
- Which relationships seem balanced?
- Which do not?

After the love potion

- After the love potion
- Rearrange the ribbons to show the new relationships:
- Remove the ribbon between Hermia and Lysander.
- Connect Lysander to Helena.
- Connect Demetrius to Helena.

Ask:

- What has changed?
- Who is now isolated?
- Which character is likely to feel most confused or upset?
- Why might an audience find this situation amusing?

Part B: Freeze frames (8–10 minutes)

Working in small groups, create four freeze frames showing the changing relationships between the lovers.

1. Before the love potion.
2. After Lysander falls in love with Helena.
3. After Demetrius also falls in love with Helena.
4. The lovers' quarrel in the forest.

Encourage pupils to communicate the story through:

- posture
- facial expression
- gesture
- eye contact
- the distance between characters.

After each freeze frame, ask the class:

- What can you tell about the relationships without anyone speaking?
- Which character appears to have the most power?
- Who seems most confused or isolated?

Part C: Thought tracking (5 minutes)

Tap each frozen character on the shoulder.

When tapped, they speak one sentence in role, beginning with one of the following:

- "I wish..."
- "I can't believe..."
- "Why does everyone..."
- "If only..."

Encourage pupils to remain completely in character and reveal what their character is thinking at that moment.

Part D: Bring it to life (5–8 minutes)

Ask each group to turn their four freeze frames into a short performance.

Each freeze frame should slowly come to life before flowing naturally into the next, showing how the relationships change as the love potion takes effect.

Encourage pupils to exaggerate moments of:

- confusion
- jealousy
- frustration
- delight
- mistaken affection.

Remind them that although the audience finds the situation funny, the characters believe their emotions are completely real.

Discussion

Ask the class:

- Which moment created the biggest laugh? Why?
- Why does the audience enjoy the confusion even though the characters do not?
- Which character suffers the most from Puck's mistake?
- How do the changing relationships drive the comedy?
- If Puck had enchanted the correct person, would the play still be as entertaining?

Extend and develop

A. Genre Challenge

Perform the quarrel scene again in a different style:

- a soap opera
- a reality TV show
- a silent movie
- a musical
- a melodrama

How does each style change the comedy?

B. Director's challenge

Imagine you are directing a professional production.

Choose one relationship you want the audience to focus on.

How can you use:

- movement
- spacing
- eye contact
- gesture
- facial expression

to make that relationship completely clear without changing Shakespeare's story?



What this develops

This activity helps students understand that the comedy of ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** comes from constantly shifting relationships and mistaken identities. By physically mapping the lovers' changing affections before exploring them through freeze frames, thought tracking and performance, students discover how Shakespeare combines movement, character and magical interference to create comic confusion. They also develop an understanding of how actors use body language, space and relationships to tell a story on stage.



Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

- Adapt the relationship map: Pupils can hold ribbons, point, use coloured cards or direct others to show the connections. Avoid requiring pupils to reach towards, touch or move close to another person.
- Provide flexible ways to create freeze frames: Pupils can stand, sit or work from a fixed position, using gesture, facial expression, signing, props or symbols to show relationships. Eye contact should always be optional.
- Adapt thought tracking: Instead of being tapped, use a pupil's name or an agreed visual/verbal cue. Thoughts can be spoken, signed, written, selected from prepared sentence cards or communicated by a partner/ narrator.
- Model and scaffold each stage: Demonstrate the relationship map and one freeze frame before groups begin. Use character cards, emotion prompts and visual diagrams to help pupils follow the changing relationships.
- Provide flexible performance roles: Pupils can perform, narrate, direct or observe the transition between freeze frames. The Genre and Director's Challenges can focus on voice, signing, gesture, facial expression, sound or positioning rather than physical movement alone.

Creative tasks

Pop Sonnet for Bottom

Focus

Love, Shakespearean language, character voice and poetic form.

Learning Objective

To explore Shakespeare's presentation of love by transforming a modern love song into a Shakespearean sonnet written from Titania to Bottom.

Time

30–45 minutes

Introduction: What is a Pop Sonnet?

The writer behind 'Pop Sonnets' takes modern pop songs and rewrites them as Shakespearean sonnets. Take a look at the website or the book.

For example, a Taylor Swift or Beyoncé song might be transformed into a poem that sounds as though it belongs in one of Shakespeare's plays.

The cleverness comes from:

- preserving the original song's meaning
- using Shakespearean vocabulary and imagery
- following the structure of a sonnet

Part 1: Comparing modern and Shakespearean love (15 minutes)

Choose one Pop Sonnet and compare it with the original song lyrics. Examples provided below.

As a class or in pairs, discuss:

Similarities

- What feelings remain the same?
- What ideas about love are preserved?
- Which images appear in both versions?

Differences

- How does the language change?
- Which words sound more dramatic or romantic?
- Does Shakespearean language make the emotions seem stronger?

Discussion

Titania's enchanted love for Bottom is one of Shakespeare's funniest love stories.

Questions:

- Is Titania's love genuine?
- Why is it funny?
- What kinds of things does she say about Bottom that sound exaggerated?



Part 2: Understanding the sonnet (10 minutes)

Shakespeare's sonnets follow a very clear pattern

Structure

14 lines
Broken into:

- Quatrain 1 (4 lines)
- Quatrain 2 (4 lines)
- Quatrain 3 (4 lines)
- Couplet (2 lines)

Rhyme scheme

A Shakespearean sonnet usually follows:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Example:

A Love
B Bright

A Dove
B Night

C Face
D Fire

C Grace
D Desire

E Eyes
F Heart

E Skies
F Apart

G Be
G Me

Sonnet structure guide

Quatrain 1

Introduce the situation.

Titania notices Bottom and becomes enchanted.

Quatrain 2

Describe Bottom's wonderful qualities.

(They don't actually need to be wonderful!)

Quatrain 3

Develop the emotion.

Titania becomes increasingly obsessed.

Final Couplet

End with a memorable declaration of love.

Or perhaps a comic punchline.



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Shakespearean love vocabulary bank

Students may wish to borrow some Shakespearean language:

- My sweet love
- Fair youth
- Gentle heart
- Dear one
- Most noble sir
- Sweet Bottom
- Thou art my joy
- My dearest

Shakespearean pronouns

Modern	Shakespearean
You	Thou
Your	Thy
Yours	Thine

Useful Shakespearean verbs

- Adore
- Behold
- Dote
- Enchant
- Admire
- Cherish
- Worship

Useful Shakespearean phrases

- “Methinks...”
- “Mine eyes...”
- “Thou art...”
- “I do beseech thee...”
- “By moonlight...”
- “My heart doth...”
- “Fair and lovely...”
- “Most wondrous...”
- “O gentle...”
- “What dreams may come...”

Part 3: Writing your own pop sonnet

Choose your favourite love song.

Example:

- Taylor Swift
- Ed Sheeran
- Olivia Rodrigo
- Harry Styles
- Sabrina Carpenter
- Adele
- Bruno Mars
- Any song with strong feelings of love or admiration

Your task

Rewrite the song as though:

- Titania is singing it.
- Bottom is the subject.
- Shakespeare wrote it.
- It follows the structure of a sonnet.



Remember

- Write from Titania's perspective.
- Exaggerate Bottom's wonderful qualities.
- Use Shakespearean language.
    a. You might want to include references to:
    b. the moon
    c. dreams
    d. fairies
    e. enchantment
    f. Bottom's donkey transformation
- Keep the emotion of the original song.

Extension:

At the end of the lesson:

1. Read sonnets aloud.
2. Perform them as though Titania is delivering them to Bottom.
3. Encourage excessive melodrama:
    - kneeling
    - swooning
    - gazing at Bottom
    - dramatic sighing

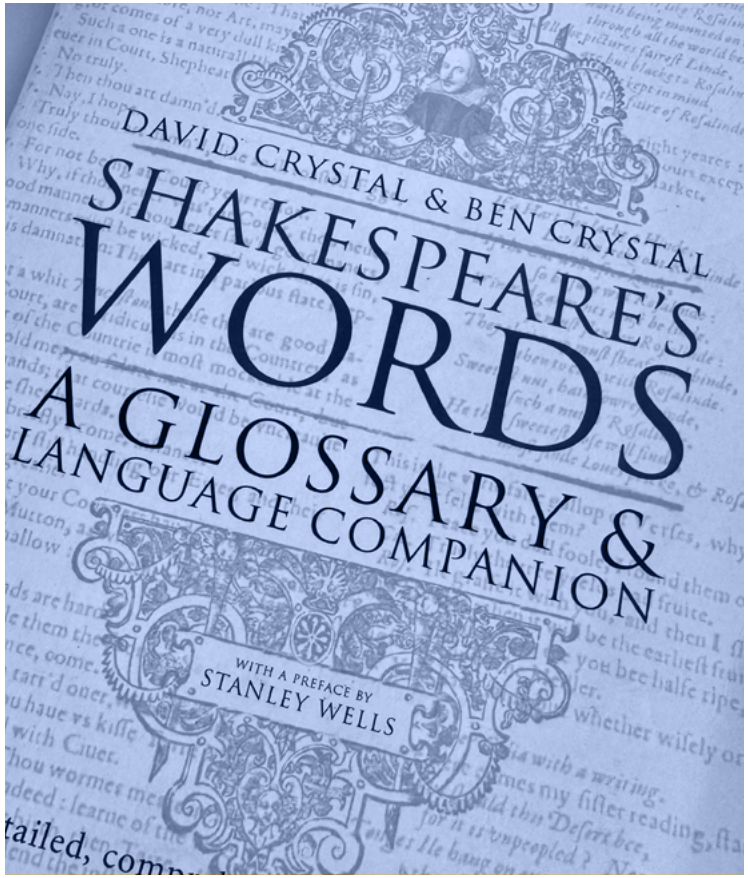
Teacher note

This task encourages pupils to explore one of Shakespeare's favourite forms (the sonnet) while recognising that the emotions expressed in modern love songs are often remarkably similar to those found in Shakespeare's writing. The comic twist comes from applying those intense romantic conventions to one of the play's most absurd relationships: Titania's enchanted devotion to Bottom.

Reflection:

Discuss:

- Which modern songs adapted most successfully into sonnets?
- Which Shakespearean phrases sounded most convincing?
- How does writing in Titania's voice help us understand the comedy of the play?
- Why is the gap between Titania's beautiful language and Bottom's donkey appearance so funny?



Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

- Provide accessible versions of the texts: Offer song lyrics and Pop Sonnets in large print, audio or simplified formats where needed. Highlight matching ideas, emotions and vocabulary to support comparison.
- Scaffold the sonnet structure: Provide a 14-line writing frame divided into three quatrains and a couplet, with rhyme words, sentence starters and Shakespearean vocabulary available for pupils to select.
- Adapt the writing challenge: Pupils can focus on Titania's character and Shakespearean language without having to achieve a complete rhyme scheme. They might write one quatrain or couplet rather than a full sonnet, or work collaboratively with a partner.
- Offer different ways to create: Pupils can write, type, dictate, use speech-to-text, arrange prepared phrases or adapt an existing song collaboratively. Allow pupils to choose from a selection of familiar, age-appropriate songs if selecting their own is difficult.
- Provide flexible ways to share: Reading or performing the sonnet aloud should be optional. Pupils can ask a partner or teacher to read it, use recorded or assistive speech, display the text, or contribute as a director while others perform it.

Lovers' Mixtape

This production of ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** is set in 1994, during the height of Britain's rave and dance music scene. Across the country, people gathered in clubs, warehouses and fields to dance through the night to music that celebrated freedom, friendship and love—making it a perfect setting for Shakespeare's magical midsummer forest. The Conservative government have recently passed the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act and have shut down free raves across the country.

Music often tells stories about relationships. A good playlist can capture someone's personality, hopes and heartbreak just as well as a diary.

Imagine one of Shakespeare's lovers has just bought a brand-new cassette tape and wants to make the perfect mixtape.

What songs would they choose?



Your task

Choose one of the four lovers:

- Hermia
- Lysander
- Helena
- Demetrius

Create a mixtape / playlist of 8–10 songs that tells their story across the play.

For each song, explain:

- Which moment in the play it matches.
- Why the character would choose it.
- Which lyric or mood reflects their feelings.

Your playlist should tell a story

Think about how the character changes.

For example:

1. Life in Athens
2. Falling in love
3. Entering the forest
4. Confusion and arguments
5. Reconciliation
6. The happy ending



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Suggested songs from 1994

These songs were all popular in 1994.

Dance & club classics

- The Rhythm of the Night – Corona (1993/94)
- Dreamer – Livin' Joy (1994)
- No Good (Start the Dance) – The Prodigy (1994)
- Push the Feeling On – Nightcrawlers (1992/94)
- U Sure Do – Strike (1994)
- Move Your Body – Xpansions (1990)
- It's a Fine Day – Opus III (1992)
- Ebeneezer Goode – The Shamen (1992)
- Sweet Harmony – The Beloved (1993)
- Finally – CeCe Peniston (1991)

Pop & love songs

- Love Is All Around – Wet Wet Wet (1994)
- Stay (I Missed You) – Lisa Loeb (1994)
- Without You – Mariah Carey (1994)
- Always – Bon Jovi (1994)
- I'll Stand By You – The Pretenders (1994)
- Baby I Love Your Way – Big Mountain (1994)
- True Love – Elton John & Kiki Dee (1993)
- More Than Words – Extreme (1991)
- Nothing Compares 2 U – Sinéad O'Connor (1990)
- Save the Best for Last – Vanessa Williams (1992)

Feel-good anthems

- Things Can Only Get Better – D:Ream (1993)
- Moving On Up – M People (1993)
- One Night in Heaven – M People (1993)
- Shine – Aswad (1994)
- Life – Des'ree (1992)
- Dreams – Gabrielle (1993)
- Connected – Stereo MCs (1992)
- Live Forever – Oasis (1994)
- Parklife – Blur (1994)
- Saturday Night – Whigfield (1994)

Even bigger challenge

Imagine Puck secretly swaps two songs on your cassette.

How does that completely change the story?

Discussion

Share your playlists with another group.

Discuss:

- Which lover had the easiest playlist to create?
- Which songs fit more than one character?
- Which song perfectly captures the magical atmosphere of the forest?
- Which would make the best song for the closing dance?



Photo: Manuel Harlan



Adaptations

Possible adaptations for inclusive practice:

- Provide a structured playlist template: Give pupils a timeline of the character's journey with spaces for songs at key moments. Character cards or brief plot summaries can support pupils who need help remembering the lovers' stories.
- Offer a smaller selection of songs: Provide a shorter, pre-selected list with song titles, key lyrics and brief descriptions of mood or theme. Allow pupils to choose fewer than 8–10 songs where appropriate.
- Make listening accessible: Provide lyrics or written descriptions alongside audio, and use captions where music videos are shown. Pupils with sensory sensitivities can explore songs through lyrics and descriptions without listening to loud music.
- Provide flexible ways to explain choices: Pupils can write, type, speak, sign, draw, use symbols or select from prepared prompts such as "This song matches Helena because…". Playlists can be created individually, in pairs or collaboratively.
- Offer flexible ways to share: Pupils can present their playlist, display it visually, ask someone else to explain it or contribute as a DJ/director selecting and ordering tracks. Sharing music aloud should be optional.

Reading tasks

Essay 1 - The Forest: A World Turned Upside Down

Entering another world

Shakespeare's ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** begins in the ordered city of Athens before moving into a mysterious forest where magic reigns, lovers lose their way, fairies interfere with human lives, and even a weaver can wake up with the head of a donkey. More than simply the setting, the forest is a symbolic space where the ordinary rules of society no longer apply. Characters escape the restrictions of law, family and social expectation, only to discover new truths about themselves before returning to civilisation.

In Chichester Festival Theatre's 1994-inspired production, this journey from order to freedom becomes especially striking. Shakespeare's enchanted woodland is reimagined as the South Downs during the summer of 1994, where an illegal rave offers young people a temporary escape from authority, expectation and convention. Like Shakespeare's forest, the rave becomes a place where identities shift, relationships change and the ordinary world is temporarily turned upside down. Through this magical landscape, Shakespeare suggests that sometimes people must lose their way before they can truly find themselves.



Photo: Manuel Harlan



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Comedy, carnival and midsummer

Many of Shakespeare's comedies follow a similar pattern: characters leave the ordered world behind and enter a place where the usual rules no longer apply. In As You Like It, the Forest of Arden becomes a place of disguise, mistaken identity and self-discovery. Likewise, the enchanted forest of ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** allows impossible events to happen, creating opportunities for both comedy and transformation. In this production, the South Downs rave performs a similar dramatic function. Hidden from authority and governed by its own customs, it becomes a temporary community where people from different backgrounds meet, social boundaries dissolve and unexpected encounters become possible.

Shakespeare's title would also have carried special meaning for his first audiences. Midsummer celebrations around the summer solstice were associated with bonfires, dancing, music and folklore. Many people believed the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds became unusually thin, allowing fairies and spirits to wander freely. Like medieval carnivals, these festivals encouraged role reversal, playful mischief and a temporary escape from everyday rules.

The production draws an interesting parallel with the rave culture of 1994. Outdoor raves brought thousands of people together to dance through the night, creating temporary communities built around music and freedom. At the same time, the recently introduced Criminal Justice and Public Order Act gave police new powers to prevent gatherings associated with rave culture. Against this political backdrop, the rave becomes a modern equivalent of Shakespeare's enchanted forest—a place where authority is challenged, ordinary expectations are suspended and transformation becomes possible.

Athens and the forest

The contrast between Athens and the forest is established from the opening scene. Athens represents law, order and authority. Hermia is told by her father, Egeus, that she must marry Demetrius, and Duke Theseus supports this demand by reminding her that she must obey or face severe consequences.

In this production, Athens becomes a recognisable world of political authority. Theseus is reimagined as a Conservative Member of Parliament, while Egeus becomes a senior police officer. Their orderly world stands in direct contrast to the freedom represented by the South Downs rave.

Once the lovers enter the forest, certainty quickly disappears. As Lysander observes before entering the woods, "The course of true love never did run smooth." The forest becomes the physical expression of this idea, where love is transformed by magic rather than guided by reason.

Puck's accidental use of Oberon's love potion causes Lysander to abandon Hermia and fall in love with Helena. Demetrius is later enchanted in the same way, leaving Helena pursued by two men while Hermia is suddenly rejected. Helena believes she is the victim of a cruel joke, crying:

> 'O spite! O hell! I see you all are bent
>
> To set against me for your merriment.'

The audience understands that magic—not deliberate cruelty—is responsible. This dramatic irony allows Shakespeare to create comedy from confusion.



Photo: Manuel Harlan

The forest also transforms Bottom, one of Shakespeare's greatest comic characters. After Puck gives him the head of an ass, Titania, enchanted by Oberon's spell, declares:

> 'Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.'

The audience recognises the absurdity of this declaration, while Bottom calmly accepts the Fairy Queen's admiration with complete confidence. Shakespeare creates comedy through the gap between what the audience sees and what the characters believe to be true.

The forest's darker side

Although ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** is a comedy, Shakespeare reminds us that the forest is not entirely safe. Helena is humiliated when both men suddenly pursue her, convinced they are mocking her rather than loving her. Hermia is abandoned by Lysander after the love potion takes effect, while Oberon manipulates Titania into falling in love without her consent. Puck delights in misleading travellers, boasting that he can 'lead them up and down', and Demetrius even threatens violence against Hermia before she escapes.

These darker moments remind us that a world without rules can be both exciting and dangerous. The production's 1994 setting reinforces this idea. For many young people, rave culture represented freedom and community; for others, it appeared unpredictable and unsafe. Like Shakespeare's forest, the rave becomes both a place of liberation and one where ordinary protections temporarily disappear.

The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin described this temporary suspension of social rules as the carnivalesque. During medieval carnivals, hierarchy was briefly overturned before everyday order returned. Shakespeare's forest functions in much the same way. Noble lovers behave foolishly, a working-class craftsman wins the affection of a queen, and supernatural beings manipulate human affairs. Likewise, the rave creates a temporary community where status matters less than shared experience. Although order is eventually restored, both carnival and comedy allow audiences to imagine a different kind of society.

Dreams, theatre and the audience

The forest also represents dreams and the power of imagination. By the end of the play, many characters struggle to explain what has happened. Bottom describes his adventure as 'a most rare vision', before concluding:

'Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream.'

Puck's closing speech goes even further, inviting the audience to imagine that they have simply been dreaming:

'You have but slumber'd here

While these visions did appear.'

The forest therefore becomes a metaphor for theatre itself—a place where audiences willingly believe impossible things before returning to reality.

Shakespeare originally staged the play with very little scenery, relying on language and performance to create the enchanted woodland in the audience's imagination. This production achieves a similar effect in a different way. Music, lighting and the atmosphere of a 1994 South Downs rave replace fairy glades and moonlit clearings, yet the dramatic purpose remains the same. Both settings invite audiences to step into a world where imagination transforms ordinary experience


Photo: Manuel Harlan

Conclusion

Shakespeare's forest is far more than a physical location. It represents a journey away from certainty and towards transformation. Within its boundaries, love becomes irrational, identities become unstable and authority loses its power. Yet this temporary disorder ultimately allows relationships to be repaired and harmony to be restored.

Chichester Festival Theatre's decision to relocate the play to West Sussex in 1994 demonstrates how adaptable Shakespeare's comedy remains. The tension between authority and freedom that shapes Elizabethan Athens finds a modern parallel in the conflicts surrounding rave culture and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. Although the costumes, music and setting have changed, the central idea endures: stepping outside the ordinary world can change the way we see ourselves and others. Like the audience, the characters leave the forest believing they have experienced something dreamlike, only to discover that its lessons remain with them long after they return home.

Essay 2 - Nature Out of Balance: An Ecocritical Reading of A Midsummer Night's Dream

Shakespeare's green comedy

In an age increasingly shaped by climate change, biodiversity loss and debates about humanity's relationship with the natural world, ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** feels surprisingly modern. Although Shakespeare was writing over four hundred years ago, the play repeatedly suggests that human actions and the natural environment are deeply connected. The quarrel between Oberon and Titania does not simply affect the fairy kingdom; it throws the whole natural world into disorder. Modern critics have increasingly explored this relationship through ecocriticism—the study of how literature represents nature and humanity's place within it. Read in this way, ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** becomes more than a romantic comedy: it offers a powerful reminder that when relationships become unbalanced, the environment suffers too.

A world out of balance

The clearest expression of Shakespeare's environmental thinking comes during Titania's famous speech describing the consequences of her argument with Oberon. She explains that because they have quarrelled,

'The seasons alter... The spring, the summer,

The childing autumn, angry winter, change

Their wonted liveries.' (2.1)

The natural order has collapsed. Floods destroy crops, diseases spread, rivers overflow and weather patterns become unpredictable. The traditional cycle of the seasons no longer functions properly.

To a modern audience, these descriptions are strikingly familiar. Although Shakespeare could never have imagined climate change in the scientific sense, his vision of disrupted seasons and extreme weather echoes many contemporary concerns. Nature, the play suggests, is not simply scenery: it is a living system whose health depends upon harmony rather than conflict.

Jonathan Bate and Shakespeare's ecology

Perhaps the leading advocate of ecological readings of Shakespeare is Jonathan Bate, who argues that Shakespeare consistently presents humans as part of nature rather than separate from it. In The Song of the Earth (2000), Bate writes:

'Shakespeare repeatedly reminds us that human culture depends upon the health of the natural world.' (Bate, 2000)

This idea is central to ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***. Athens represents law, order and civilisation, yet it is only by entering the forest that the characters rediscover emotional balance. Rather than presenting nature as something to be conquered, Shakespeare depicts the woodland as a place capable of correcting human mistakes—even if that correction is sometimes chaotic.

Bate has also argued that Shakespeare's forests are places where people are reminded of their dependence upon ecological systems rather than their mastery over them. The forest humbles the lovers, confuses their assumptions and exposes the limits of human control.



The forest as a living character

The forest is far more than a backdrop. It behaves almost like another character in the play.

Unlike the carefully ordered city of Athens, the woodland operates according to its own rules. Fairies influence flowers, moonlight alters emotions and magical plants possess extraordinary powers. Human beings quickly lose their sense of certainty once they enter this environment.

Stanley Wells observes that Shakespeare's comedies frequently contrast 'the artificial constraints of society with the liberating possibilities of the natural world.' (Wells, Shakespeare: A Life in Drama, 1995). The forest represents precisely this alternative world, where social rules dissolve and nature takes control.

Yet the forest is not simply peaceful. It contains danger alongside beauty. Characters become lost, frightened and deceived. Shakespeare reminds us that nature deserves respect rather than romantic idealisation.

Fairies, flowers and environmental imagination

The play's rich botanical imagery reinforces this ecological perspective. Shakespeare fills the forest with wild thyme, musk roses, woodbine, cowslips and violets. Oberon's magical love potion comes not from alchemy but from a flower:

'Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell...

Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound.'

Nature itself provides both the problem and its solution.

Carol Rutter has argued that Shakespeare's woodland is 'a place of transformation, where identities become as fluid as the natural world itself.' (Rutter, Shakespeare and Child's Play, 2007). Flowers, animals, fairies and humans coexist in a constantly shifting ecosystem, suggesting that boundaries between humanity and nature are less fixed than we often imagine.

Comedy with a serious message

Harold Bloom described ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** as 'the most delightful of Shakespeare's comedies,' praising its imaginative freedom and dreamlike energy (Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, 1998). Yet beneath its comedy lies a serious warning. When Oberon and Titania's relationship falls into conflict, the consequences ripple through the entire natural world.

Today we often speak about ecosystems being interconnected. Shakespeare appears to anticipate this idea dramatically. Individual actions have wider environmental consequences, and harmony between people is reflected in harmony within nature.

Why the play still matters

Although Shakespeare wrote long before environmental politics existed, ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** continues to speak powerfully to twenty-first century readers. Its enchanted forest reminds us that humans are not separate from nature but participants within it. When relationships become exploitative or destructive, both society and the environment suffer.

The play ultimately restores balance. Oberon and Titania reconcile, the seasons return to normal and harmony is re-established. Shakespeare's comedy therefore ends not simply with marriages, but with ecological renewal. As Jonathan Bate suggests, Shakespeare encourages us to see the natural world not as a resource to dominate but as 'a community to which we belong' (Bate, The Song of the Earth, 2000). In an era of environmental uncertainty, that message may be more relevant than ever.

Suggested Further Reading

- Jonathan Bate, The Song of the Earth (2000)
- Jonathan Bate, How the Classics Made Shakespeare (2019)
- Harold Bloom, Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human (1998)
- Stanley Wells, Shakespeare: A Life in Drama (1995)
- Carol Rutter, Shakespeare and Child's Play (2007)
- Gabriel Egan (ed.), Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism (2006)



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Discussion Questions

1. Should Hermia obey Theseus at the start of the play?

Hermia is told she must either marry Demetrius, become a nun, or face death.

- Is Theseus being fair?
- Does Egeus have the right to choose his daughter's husband?
- How might a modern audience respond differently from Shakespeare's audience?

2. Why does Shakespeare set so much of the play in a forest?

Why not keep the action in Athens?

- What changes when the characters enter the woods?
- Does the forest reveal people's true personalities, or does it change them?
- Have you ever been somewhere that made you feel like a different person?

3. Is Puck helping people—or just causing trouble?

Puck insists that he is only following orders and having fun.

- Is he responsible for the chaos?
- Would the play have ended happily without him?
- Would you trust Puck as a friend?

4. Are Bottom and the Mechanicals bad actors?

They are often played as comic amateurs.

- Are they actually bad at acting—or just inexperienced?
- Why do audiences enjoy watching their performance of Pyramus and Thisbe?
- Is enthusiasm more important than talent?

5. Should Oberon be forgiven?

Oberon uses magic to control Titania and interfere with the lovers' relationships.

- Does he have good intentions?
- Is it ever acceptable to manipulate someone "for their own good"?
- Does he deserve the happy ending he receives?

6. Is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* really just a comedy?

Although the play is funny, it also contains arguments, bullying, betrayal and moments that modern audiences may find uncomfortable.

- Which moments are funniest?
- Which moments are surprisingly serious?
- Should productions emphasise the comedy, the darker elements, or both?

7. What would happen if the love potion existed today?

Imagine Puck's flower was real.

- Should anyone be allowed to use it?
- Would it make the world happier—or create more problems?
- Who should decide how it is used?

8. Shakespeare's comedies often end with a masque—a spectacular celebration involving music, dancing, elaborate costumes and visual effects, performed to mark peace, marriage or reconciliation. If you were directing the final celebration of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, what music would you choose?

Think about songs that celebrate:

- love
- friendship
- freedom
- new beginnings

Would you choose something joyful, romantic, funny—or completely unexpected? How would your choice change the audience's final impression of the play?

9. Why do people still believe in magic?

Although most people no longer believe in fairies, stories about magic remain incredibly popular.

Think about:

- Harry Potter
- Disney films
- Marvel superheroes
- fantasy novels and games
- Why are magical stories still so popular?
- What does magic allow writers to explore that realism cannot?
- If Shakespeare were writing today, what kind of magic might he invent?

10. Is the whole play just a dream?

Although the play is funny, it also contains arguments, bullying, betrayal and moments that modern audiences may find uncomfortable.

- Which moments are funniest?
- Which moments are surprisingly serious?
- Should productions emphasise the comedy, the darker elements, or both?



Photo: Manuel Harlan



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Creatives



Hannah Joss is Associate Director at CFT. She was previously Resident Director at the National Theatre Studio, a director in the most recent Old Vic 12 cohort, Resident Director at the Almeida Theatre and Baylis Assistant Director at the Old Vic. She is also an Open Door mentor. As Director, her theatre work includes: Choir (Minerva, CFT) Fake Melania (Old Vic), Original Death Rabbit (Jermyn Street Theatre), Carry On Jaywick (Vault Festival/HighTide/UK tour), Paper. Scissors. Stone (Live Theatre, Newcastle), Eigengrau (Kings Head Theatre), The 11th Hour (the Egg, Theatre Royal Bath).

Hannah (Co- Director) on CFT's 2026 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

An insight into the 2026 CFT production from Co-Director, Hannah Joss

How have you approached the themes?

We have chosen to raise the stakes of the order versus chaos themes in the play by giving it a very specific time and location. We've set our production in 1994 in Chichester following the launch of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act: a very significant part of which was the shutting down of the Free Party scene, including those taking place across the South Downs.

In our version, Theseus is the Conservative MP for West Sussex and Egeus is the Chief Constable of West Sussex Police. In contrast, Oberon and Titania are the King and Queen of the Fairies, they are magic, but they are also presented, in a real-world sense, as 'aristo-bohemian' landowners who throw free parties on their land.

So, much like the Shakespearean forest, not only in the original but in other plays, the South Downs, or the Free Party scene on the South Downs, is a place of lawlessness, transformation, freedom, and change.

How have you approached the characters within the play?

When setting the play in 1994 we wanted to ensure the stakes of the forbidden love between Lysander and Hermia landed so we chose to change the gender of Lysander. This means Egeus is railing against his daughter being in same-sex relationship and, of course, at the time same-sex marriage was illegal. I suppose we're looking at the authenticity of love within The Lovers. In Lysanda and Hermia you have an authentic love that exists between two people, whereas with Helena hers is an unrequited love. I think we are very much running with the idea that Demetrius thinks he's in love with Hermia because the match would be societally advantageous to him. Therefore, his drugging with the Love in Idleness administered by Puck, brings him back to what his authentic love is, which is for Helena, which is why Demetrius remains drugged until the end of the play. Then, of course, you have inauthentic love, a kind of chemically induced love, in Oberon's drugging of Titania and Lysanda.

What are the scenes in your version of the play that you feel represent this production best?

Act 2, Scene 1 where Oberon and Titania meet for the first time, “ill-met by moonlight, proud Titania”, where we see we understand, mainly from Titania, the nature of their conflict, where their conflict has come from. I think we learn about them as people and the kind of world that they exist in. The big accusations that they throw to one another is in the original text: ‘you’ve been with Theseus’ well, ‘I know that you’ve been with Hippolyta.’ So, they are living in a free love world, even back in Shakespeare’s time. In our version, Titania does have one last ditch attempt at a reunion with him to which Oberon replies ‘only if you give me my changeling boy’, which in our version he is not a young child, he’s a party boy, so there is a sort of menage et trois situation going on. She says no, storms off, and then in our version, that takes us into the rave. Oberon hops in Puck’s party buggy, drives upstage centre and all our dancers come down, and we have a really fun bit of choreography with some pounding acid house music.



Photo: Manuel Harlan

What devices might you have employed in your interpretation?

So, whilst we have been very liberal in our contemporary re-setting, we have also been pretty faithful to the text. We have changed bits; we have got words like Chichester and Kingly Vale into the verse, but we have also been really hot on when the lovers go into rhyme and been really specific about us knowing, and the actors knowing, when we move into a different kind of verse structure and why. Who starts the first rhyming of the play? It's Hermia, when she's talking about being with the woman she loves. That has been really useful to driving directorial choices because so much of it is in the text. So, you can start trying to be all fancy with your imagination but actually rooting it back to the language is often the clearest thing to do.

Devices are always there to be clear with your communication to an audience and in our version, we need to first and foremost, be incredibly clear about the story. Secondarily, or just beneath that, we also have to be incredibly clear about the world of our production. For example, we see Oberon melting the flower and collecting the juice from it in a little bottle, so in our version, we take the flower, which is in the text, and then we transfer it into this bottle, which is then used by Puck. The antidote bottle looks the same, but it's a different colour. I think a lot of the devices that we've employed have come about from us saying, okay, so that's what's in the text, that's what we have to communicate from the story, so ow do we, often in a fun way, find a way of landing that in our world? So, for example, when Bottom says look to a calendar, find out moonshine, find out moonshine, Peter Quince gets his Filofax out. So it's just about finding those little flourishes that combine both story and world.



Photo: Manuel Harlan

Why have you chosen to set this production in 1994?

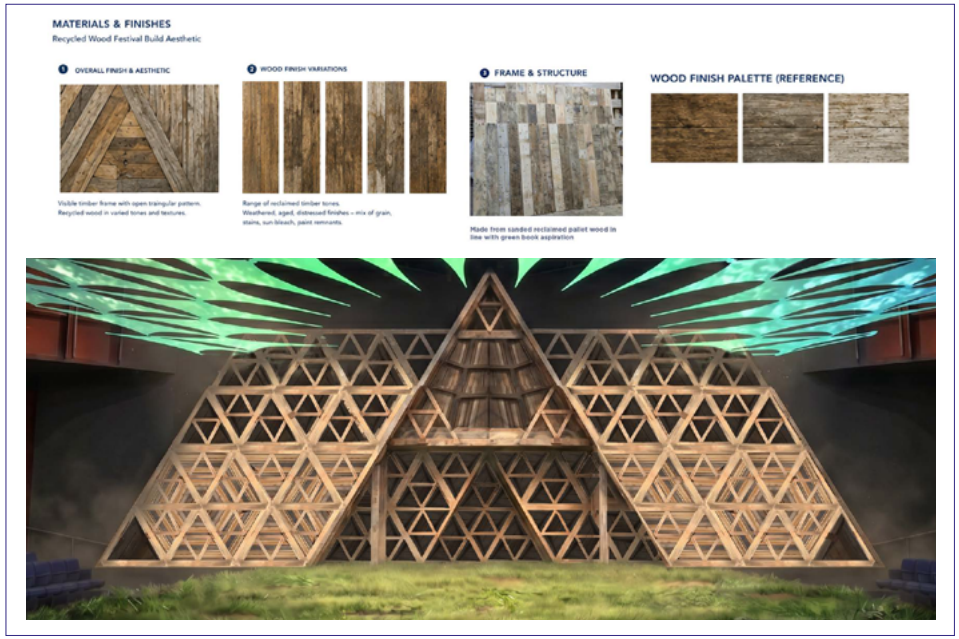
I truly believe if you can find a contemporary, or near contemporary setting, that raises the stakes and makes the story and world clearer to a modern-day audience, you're going to be far more successful in engaging current audiences and, crucially, engaging new audiences.



Production Designs

Production Designs

Set designer Joanna Scotcher



What inspired you to follow a path into theatre?

I have a memory of actors coming into my primary school and doing Shakespeare, and I recall it was very energetic with lots of high emotions and spitting, and then trying to find the text and the words in it. So, I found that world really intriguing, but as a visual designer, discovering that you could actually craft as imaginative new worlds for these plays, is, I think, what really inspired me, , which probably didn't happen until I started going to art school and being a bit more interested in visual and cultural languages as a teenager. So what really inspired me, and having an understanding of Shakespeare, was probably as much music videos in the late '90s, and music magazines that were really big and short films that I was seeing at the arts cinema. I think, if you have to tell any story, you have to be aware of multiple ways to communicate that story vision.

How does design add to the storytelling?

Within Shakespeare's remit, he was writing across continents he'd never visited, over time scales he'd never lived in; So his accounts of the world were from Ovid, who had written hundreds of years before him. So I think it's really important that we don't consider Shakespeare and text, with any correct way to do it, because every version of a new artist or a new set of creatives making it, is built from their own experiences and how they perceive humanity in the world where it sits now, so that's what I think is so beautiful about designing for Shakespeare. The language is so rich that it's so open, and you have to interpret it and it's completely open to interpretations, because at the core of it, it's about humanity and humans feeling. and... that hasn't changed. You can read speeches now in isolation that feel like they're being shouted on the streets of protests and I think if you can embrace the language, and you could be imaginative enough to put it in a different world, something that's familiar and adjacent to our experiences now, the stories exist as much as they did to the people hearing it on the South Bank in the 1500s. So, I think that's the sentiment we should all take into making new work, really.



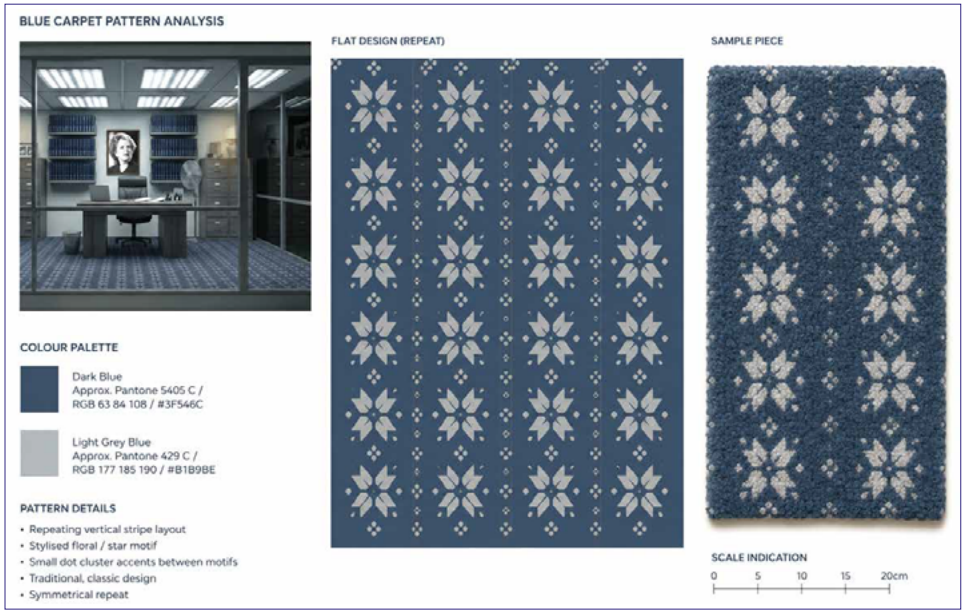
So, what was your inspiration for the design for this production?

So, I was alive in 1994, not fully formed, but I was definitely alive and aware and going into my teenage years. And when Justin said we're going to put this on the eve of the government clamping down on free parties, and there was legislation in 1994. I have an understanding and a memory of that time, even if it's from the eyes of a young person. But really, it's about authority clamping down on otherness, and I think you see that now, in the media, in the kind of political movement. So, the inspiration came as much from the political context now as it does its historical stating. When I say historical, I've always thought that meant, like, doublets and hose, and something that feels very Shakespearean, but I've realised that if we set it in the '90s we're doing an historic reenactment, we're just doing it from the '90s. Which makes it within reach, but it's also far enough away that we can have some fun with it. So, what's inspiring about it is the music, the fashion, and also this sort of sense of, like, being on the precipice of something happening to you, or stopping you from being young, or expressing who you really are, or the very human processes of falling in love, and people telling you who you can and can't love, and what's correct. So I think that that is the root of it. That what's really inspiring. And then, obviously, the fun bit for a designer, and where we lean into the vibrant storytelling, is that this other world that we fall into is

also a magical one. The rave culture existed as an escape from conservative life and Shakespeare, originally, writes ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** on a midsummer night, which is the thinnest veil between us and the fairy world. It's where your desires, your need to express yourself are most fervent and alive in British folklore and mythology. So, if you put those two things together, it's like decorating a cake and putting the cherry on top. There's so many different visual, expressive, environmental effects that we can put on to express how much people need to dance and be part of a community and be free. It's a bit of a double whammy of a brief.

What were your considerations given the thrust stage?

Well it's just really unique because it is a huge auditorium. So you've got this vast, wide audience looking down, a bit like in an amphitheatre, but it's very low and kind of gentle. So, as a designer, you have to understand the space, and the relationship you're asking the audience to have with the story you're trying to tell on stage. And we're all very aware, sometimes if you sit in a black box, and you look through a prosenium arch, which is end on, you are not aware of everyone, because they're to the side of you, and they're in the darkness. But what's wonderful about, CFT is that you can see people on the other side who are reacting in the same way that you're reacting, and you're much more part of a community of audience, rather than a singular audience, which I think is really exciting. When we are putting rave culture, and alternative communities, and big groups of people on stage, that, hopefully, translates into the audience a bit more. So we're asking the audience to enjoy the music, to enjoy those really expressive moments within the play, where we have these beautiful dance sequences from Jade, and really big choreographic moments, and we're almost asking the audience to be a member of the party. Equally, at the end, when we go back to Athens, it's traditionally a coming together of wedding



ceremony, but we've set it in a 1994 kitch; really grossly opulent wedding scene, where the audience is invited to be a part of the wedding dance, and when you're at a wedding and your family is sitting awkwardly, at the end of the night, wedding dance is when everyone stands up and dances. So again, its being aware of the audience and asking them to be a part of it, and enjoy it as much as the people on stage, rather than sitting back and watching it as an outsider. That's what's lovely about Chichester and its relationship to its audience and the building and the wider building, as well. There's a sort of ethos of inviting people in and to be a part of it. Which, I think, really rings true in the way that it's been directed by Justin and Hannah, as well.

Can you tell us about how you have played with status in your design?

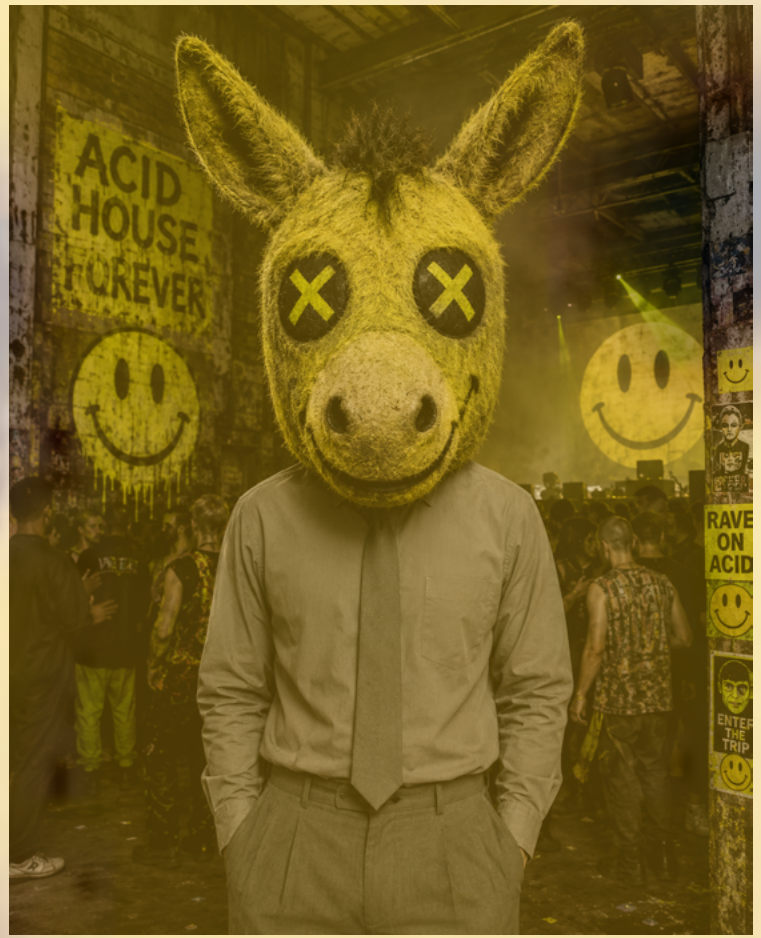
Outside all of the wonderful gifts that this contextualising offers, which is, Conservative Britain, specifically, the Conservative Member of Parliament for Chichester versus, the Ravers on the Downs, and the free love party culture. They have very different statuses within the play. One is authoritative and conservative and in power, and one is rebellious and multiple, and at odds with that power. At the beginning, when we're introduced to Theseus who we've set as the Conservative MP of Chichester. The way he's introduced is with reenacted news footage, which sits on top of a very grey square, and it's the only square part of the set. There is nothing else that is on right angles, and there's nothing else in the set that's grey, just this square, conservative, grey box. It's isolated in the middle of everything else that's going on and it's holding its ground, and we have this BBC news footage that plays out on top, which in filmic language acts as an establishing shot for how we've decided to transpose the play into the 90s context here. So, in terms of staging, putting a square grey box around those characters, I hope very clearly indicates to the audience that they sit in a very square grey, conservative world. The joke is that John Major, who was the prime minister of the time, was characterised as entirely grey and lifeless and without fun and not wanting to step outside the realms of well behaved, prudish, conservative British life. So those people are clearly framed like that at the top of the show.

Then, when the mechanicals appear, they break out of that box and we introduce Titania, Puck and the alternative people who are living very different, free and unprescribed lives, and in our world they're wealthy party people who travel the world and live a life that doesn't need rules. So, everything in their world is very much a festival, makeshift with an eco, DIY aesthetic.

The set resembles, and is supposed to communicate, stages at Glastonbury and festivals in the forest and made from reclaimed wood. It's made out of triangles, so it's got a much more organic, homemade, natural quality to it. The original play is set in the woods, and they escape to Titania's leafy bower, but in our world it's the height of summer festival, and everyone in the rave community is invited. You had to go to phone boxes to call a secret phone number, as we didn't have mobile phones or GPS locators, so you had to call a number, and would get through to an old-fashioned recorded message, where they'd be given directions, and that's how everyone would find the parties. Puck is in charge of those directions, via this old 1990s phone box. There's lots of references to escaping this world, with this contemporary dialogue and if you pick up the phone, you get the directions from Puck and you're invited to be in this other world. And the mechanicals accidentally stumble into this world, but the way I designed their world, is there are sliders in the back, and everything moves and comes and goes. It's very organic, and nothing is square, and no one really knows what's going on, and you're sort of lost within the party. So, the status of these people is that they're free and without limits and slightly in the otherworldly realm of magic, rather than the known world of rules and society.

Download Joanna's storyboards and design deck here

Costume Designs



BOTTOM

Download Ryan's complete design deck here

Costume designer Ryan Dawson-Laight

What was your inspiration behind your choices for this design?

Having done my fair share of Raving in the 90s I remember first hand the aesthetic and tone of these parties. I always start by exploring colour and texture and in this instance I looked at the blurred image of colours. The giant Bottom Donkey head is based on the big yellow smiley face and so my pallet for all things magic and fairy stem from that.

As a costume designer what are the elements you need to consider before starting work on designing for a production?

I always start by reading the script to understand the tone and the worlds being conjured up. My job is to design those worlds through my own lense and aesthetic. I always start by collecting images, sampling fabrics and having deep conversations with the other creatives.

Is it important for costumes to support the storytelling? If so, how do you ensure this is achieved?

Right at the beginning of the process I invite all of the actors into my process. I share my thoughts and I hear theirs. It allows for wider thoughts about what a person might wear in what part of the play.

Anything else you'd like to share about this production and your design work on it?

I have designed many of Shakespeare's plays with a modern twist and I really enjoy finding the most absurd and abstract versions of characters and what they might wear.

chichester
festival
theatre