

OH, MUST WE DREAM OUR DREAMS AND HAVE THEM TOO?

Part midsummer romance, part May ritual of fertility, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems an endorsement of marriage, patriarchy, and poetry. Adapting the play with great skill, Britten and his partner Pears excised half the text and added but six words summarising the conflict between Hermia and her father in Act 1. The text, then, is Shakespeare's, even if the shape is disfigured by the loss of the balancing court scenes on either side of the wood – but what a different creation is the opera!

Shakespeare's dream is bounded by confident wakefulness and directed toward reason. It opens at court, where Theseus is not able to make the right decision about Hermia and Lysander because reason alone is not adequate to rule in such matters. It takes a night in the forest, and a different sort of rule – the magic rule of Oberon – to bring clarity to the issue, to season the law with an understanding of sentiment. Finally, the court welcomes home poetry, even in the plainly bad poetry of the rustic play, and order in human matters is restored and celebrated – in marriage, that most rational institution, resolving as we fondly hope all sorts of irrational, necessary urges. As Robert Featherston noted in 1582 in his cheerful *Dialogue against Light, Lewde and Lascivious Dauncing*, when nine maidens went out to the wood to fetch May, nine came home with child – so one had somehow to match up the lads of the not-so-gloomy glade with bridegrooms at a punishingly bright city hall the next day.

The opera is set in a darker, needier place, and told with ambivalence about the ultimate value of relationships. With each of its three acts surrendering to lullaby, Britten's opera is so deeply of the dream world that we scarcely know what it is to be awake, when it comes. The two dreamers who tell us what they have dreamt when they think they are awake are Hermia and Bottom: Hermia's terrible dream of the snake is a 'true' dream, and Bottom's 'false' dream is light-hearted even though he is cast in it as an ass. Both dreams mingle desire and anxiety, which to me are the dominant themes of the opera, powerfully registered in the score.

"Oh, must we dream our dreams and have them too?"

Elizabeth Bishop

Distance is almost always cruel to the play of desire. When you remember the desires that once consumed you, even in a dream, have you ever felt – an ass? No wonder Puck scorns the mortal lovers (even a little wistfully): although Britten is at pains to depict the extreme bitterness of the lovers' plight in the wood, their cycles of despair, cruelty and betrayal, they do look pretty droll from the position of comfortable invisibility, whether on stage or in the audience. No less amusing, though far sexier, is the conjunction of Tytania and Bottom, the unanchored coloratura soprano queen and the infantile bass, the very image of vanity and ignorance.

Desire it seems, plays no favourites: you might fall 'mad' for anything, no matter sex or even species, any time you wake. To redeem itself it needs a serious purpose in the scheme of things, like breeding. That's where the anxiety comes in, with attendant seriousness. Why does Tytania forsake the bed of her husband, throwing everything into such a state of chaos (though, to be honest, the petulant faery monarchs seem to enjoy their destructive power just as much as their healing power)? These two are made for each other, as their music makes clear: Oberon's low and difficult register badly needs to soar, and she could do with settling to a more comfortable lyricism. Yet they squabble over a child that neither needs, and which they forget easily. Why? The child's mother, one of Tytania's votresses, 'being mortal, of that boy did die', so Tytania stole him from his unfortunate father, an Indian king, and placed him in Oberon's position in bed. Now there's a thing: does this sound like anxiety about childbirth, that painful consequence of desire and Eve's unfortunate heritage?

For a girl who has defied her father in choice of lover, then made an assignation to meet the same lover in the woods at night, Hermia is exceptionally tidy about sleeping arrangements. Her dream of a snake eating her heart away while Lysander laughs might also suggest she is not all that easy about matters sexual. If I have strayed a bit in suggesting that she is pregnant by Lysander and he unknowing, it is only to make her need for Lysander and her distaste for Demetrius the keener. Such a sense of necessity gives just a little appetite for the way they pair up at the top of Act 3. That is the first moment when the lovers sing ecstatically; up until then Britten has them sing syllabically, like inadequate characters.

Funny as it is, and clever as a parody of operatic styles (as Shakespeare parodies the acting styles of contemporary players), the play within the play is a pretty savage affair, not over optimistic about romantic love.

"...part of the attraction of Britten's art is the knife edge it walks between genuine feeling and the sentimental, between honesty about life's difficulties and a longing for resolution and comfort"

Philip Brett

It is surely an odd piece for a wedding party. But then, when one thinks of it, Theseus and Hippolyta did not exactly enjoy a match made in heaven: she was an Amazon, one of a tribe of women famous for killing their own young because they wanted to stay trim warriors, and she was beaten in battle and subdued into marriage by that serial husband Theseus. Their only son Hippolytus became the love object of his step mother (Hippolyta's successor Phaedra, the sister of another unhappy bride of Theseus called Ariadne and the daughter of a woman who had sex with a bull... but that is all in other operas), fell foul of his jealous father and died miserably. I think the faeries didn't do a very good job of blessing that marriage bed.

Nonetheless, the rustics think it is right to rehearse their play of a lion, a knight and an unlucky lass in the wood. Maybe they want to keep their entry a secret, or maybe they were wary of the Puritans.

They would be careful in that place, where the chief dangers seem to be meeting a bear or becoming pregnant – death and fertility as closely associated as ever. Apart from Bottom, who is bestially ‘translated’, they are not lured so deep into the wood as the four lovers, who literally lose themselves that memorable (but oh! how one fears they will forget, very soon) night.

The lovers are clearly out of place in the sensual, dark place around Tytania’s heady bower; they fumble and circle and sleep, they quarrel and betray and lose bits of clothing, the males as silly as Pyramus, the females as purring and clawed as cats. Only when night is past, when Tytania and Oberon are once again conjoined and the faery life retreats from the wood, do the lovers find one another ‘like a jewel’, a polished reflective surface in which they see themselves loved, but know the lover to be separate from them – ‘my own and not my own.’ Comedy, they say, enables us to talk to one another.

What about the faeries in this wood? Faeries are always the old people, the remnant of an earlier culture, driven by the new culture into obscurity in the wild. In this case we might be thinking of the kinds of earlier inhabitants of the woods imagined by some Puritan settlers of the American colonies and their Cavalier governor, but the particular is not really very important. They are but one kind of unsuccessful colonist, living in fear of the wood behind them, but relying on it for survival. The new culture fears and respects the displaced faeries, because they have some understanding and some power. Approached correctly, their ways complement the reasonable manners of the city, in the same way as dreams may interpret and illuminate daytime conflicts. Going to the wood, one risks meeting oneself as well as others, all irrational and naked, and one has to hope that under the faeries’ influence the meeting is a healing, unifying one.

They are rich concoctions, these faeries: when Oberon sings, it is always of Tytania, all musky and fertile, wrapped in the sheaths that nature winds and unwinds; Tytania’s ecstatic lullaby is hardly less erotic. Britten chose boy sopranos for his junior faeries, seeking a cold, sharp sound, morally ambivalent; the exigencies of touring have inclined us to favour young female sopranos and a counter tenor mixed with local boys and girls, but we bear in mind the colour he sought. As for Puck, I have imagined him a mortal changeling like the Indian Boy, the struggle for whom sends the whole story spinning – so long a captive of the faeries that he does not even know who he is, or what he is. There is something he recalls about these mortals, something that repels, amuses and attracts him. Maybe his bonds are imagined, even, like most of the obligations we feel. He is closest to us in the audience, the jester and not the clown of the piece.

There is a danger with this opera that it may be deemed a success because it is atmospheric and skilful, but for me that is not much of a night in the theatre. For survival, for continuation, for comfort, we are drawn one to another, irresistibly and rarely with much dignity or wisdom; we long for connection, and we fear it; we have an inclination to beget, and an anxiety about being replaced; we are matter, and have learned to disdain it. If Shakespeare’s play is a confident assertion of the place of poetry alongside governing reason, Britten’s lyric version of it dwells more lovingly on contradiction, unease, and uncertain outcomes, while maintaining the character of an innocent entertainment in a small Suffolk hall. The play describes a too-bright court softened by a night in the wood; the opera is born in a dark wood visited by some anxious people, and the wood seems to grow up through the floor of the flimsy, pompous court, when the faeries’ strange blessing silences the clanging, militarist vulgarity of Theseus’ music and the tinny parody of the rustics’ tragedy.

James Conway © 2004

A Musical Note

It is interesting that Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* does not begin, as in the original play, with the court of Theseus, but with the magical, uncertain and possibly threatening world of the forest. Drawn into this world, each character hopes to resolve a conflict. Only towards the conclusion of the opera, at the stroke of Midnight (‘faery time’), do they achieve this.

At first glance it is not obvious the full importance of the number 12 in the context of this opera and to what extent the music is structured by means of a subtle 12-tone technique. This systematic use of all 12 semi-tones within the scale permeates the entire musical language of the work with the exception of the rustics’ ‘play-within-a-play’. Here, significantly, Britten writes a much more straightforward music to parody the Italian operas of Verdi, Rossini, Handel, Donizetti and even Puccini. The progression of string chords and glissandi depicting the ‘breathing’ forest, the sequence of harmonies during Oberon

and Tytania’s argument, the lovers’ uneasy melodies and the rustics’ idiosyncratic music in Act 1, are all based on 12 notes. The magical progression of 4 chords, representing the world of dreams, which underpins the structure of Act 2, the beautiful lovers quartet and the gradual approach of Theseus’ hunting horns in Act 3 provide further examples of Britten’s use of 12 note techniques. Even in the occasional use of ‘sprechstimme’ (literally: ‘speak-voice’), Britten fittingly pays respect to the father of the 12-note technique, Arnold Schönberg.

The 12-note system evolved out of the need to express a sub-conscious, dark, ‘Freudian’ landscape. Britten was not a serial composer in any strict sense; instead, he uniquely adapted these principles as a means to an end, to achieve musical and dramatic cohesion. Britten chooses not to explore a world of nightmares, but rather a twilight world between waking and sleep.

Michael Rosewell, *conductor*

Trees Joanna Parker, 2003

