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DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE & DANCE  
FLINT, MICHIGAN 48502-1950  
TELEPHONE: (810) 762-3230  
BOX OFFICE: (810) 237-6520  
FAX: (810) 766-6630  
E-MAIL: [jklets@umflint.edu](mailto:jklets@umflint.edu)

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College of Arts & Sciences  
Dean's Office

Peer Evaluation: A Midsummer Night's Dream  
Directed by Janet Haley

Submitted by Carolyn M. Gillespie

I attended the opening night performance of Ms. Haley's production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the University Theatre on Friday, March 25, 2011, as well as a performance during the second weekend. The houses were nearly 3/4 full and festive, some toting notebooks to record their findings for a range of classes that were taking advantage of a live theatrical event, others clearly family and friends; and not a few from the general population of Greater Flint.

Doing Shakespeare with undergraduates is always a humbling task. The language, so familiar to us by the time we achieve our faculty positions, is still foreign to three quarters of the students who have yet to have taken the course/s in which we deal specifically with the vocal demands of poetic and/or heightened text. Even for those who have taken course work to prepare them, the task is often daunting - and has become more so over the decades. Ms. Haley began the rehearsal process with several weeks of "table" work during which she helped actors inhabit the characters through their language. She was particularly adamant about avoiding "Shake-speak" - the big, phony voices that young actors often adopt when approaching the Bard. She was equally wary about imposing the demands of literary scansion on the cast, leaving that task to the coming course work and concentrating instead on having the actors discover the natural rhythms of the poetry. Since *Dream* is one of the earlier texts, it is almost difficult not to speak the verse "as intended." On opening night, the language was remarkably clear. I was able to understand every character - no mean feat - and impressed with the progress the older students had made since the Shakespeare class was last offered. There were a few actors who rushed their lines and/or fell into persistently declarative line endings (notably the actresses playing *Hermia* and *Helena*), but there were victories in articulation, as well (Kenn Hopkins as a surprisingly vulnerable and sympathetic Oberon, Jessica Flemming as *Titania*, Vaughn Davis as *Lysander*, and Devin McLean as *Demetrius*). The text was skillfully pruned, resulting in a performance script that felt very balanced among the four groups that inhabit the play.

The performance exhibited the Haley hallmarks of beautiful pictures of the actors interacting with the architecture of the student scenic design (Lacie Tate). The fairy world was particularly notable in this regard as the forest set consisted of climbing walls and a central tree unit that allowed them to climb, hang, and perch throughout. They wore costumes so as to be camouflaged against the painted backgrounds. Haley often experiments with very distinct character rhythms, and this production was no exception. Puck (Joshua Clark) was fit and nimble and in constant, rapid motion (except when he was still); the fairies in general moved slowly, at times, almost imperceptibly; each of the mechanicals had a specific rhythm, the most extreme being Matt Coggins as an utterly convincing elderly man who moved like molasses and was hard of hearing. He created not only comedy by poignancy as he trailed the more nimble members of his team out of the various scenes, or laboriously climbed upon a bench to present Moonshine.

I was confused by the physical conception of the production. While each individual piece of scenery had merit, I was hard-pressed to determine why they lived in the same production, even after (or especially after) reading the program notes. The "Athenian" court of this production was converted to the interior hall of Detroit's art deco Fisher Building. The massive lobby extended all the way into the scene shop behind the stage and was impressive and appropriately monumental. The mechanicals, modeled after 1930's factory workers, met in a café with Peter Quince as proprietor and Puck and the First Fairy infiltrating the world of mortals as waiters. The wild wall and massive counter that appeared downstage of a curtain while the Fisher Building panels were rotated into the forests climbing walls, seemed unnecessary and

cumbersome. The forest, on the other hand, was looming and lovely. The practical climbing walls were supported by a forested painted drop re-cycled from *Into the Woods*. The odd note in this setting was another massive three-dimensional unit that was conceived as a tree, a location for Titania's bower and a staging area for the mechanicals' rehearsal. Oberon appeared rather cleverly from inside a large (white?) stump DR through a trap in the pit. The forest was filled with unlikely props - a grocery cart, a garbage can, stuffed animals - the program tells us, the detritus of a decaying civilization - but the connection between the 1930's world of the Fisher Building and this forest's degradation was not compelling. Puck used the various props in amusing, if illogical ways.

All in all, I had a lovely evening in the theatre once I stopped trying to justify conceptual choices. The play unfolded gently and confidently with the highlight of my evening being the Puck/Oberon interaction. I reiterate the point that the language was clear - no mean feat with many actors who were tackling Shakespeare for the first time. The physical work was confident, inventive, and playful. The audience responded with similarly gentle laughter throughout the evening.