

Rachelle Solomon 110133123

Prof. L. Lieblein

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Shakespeare's *Dream*, A Canadian Reality

Love. Shakespeare has a lot to say about love, but mind you, so do The Beatles, Neil Young, and Bob Dylan. Montréal's Repercussion Theatre recognizes the universality of the thematic concepts that appear throughout Shakespeare's plays and, in the summer of 2004, staged a distinctive production of A Midsummer Night's Dream\*. Setting the romantic comedy in New France, Director Kevin Orr adapted the words from the 1600's to include music from the 1960's, French and English dialogue and Amerindian mythology. Through this production's staging, characters and setting, as well as the unmistakable element of humour, I discovered a unique theatrical experience that is not only representative of Shakespeare in my Canada, but Shakespeare in my Québec.

I was first introduced to Repercussion Theatre during the summer of 2002 when I attended a performance of The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged at the Vieux-Port in Old Montréal (Appendix B). Even though Repercussion Theatre stages certain shows indoors, they are revered for their Shakespeare-in-the-Park series which, during the summer months, tours the parks of Montréal and the surrounding areas. By moving from one location and community to the next, the production adopts qualities of the environments that the local audiences are familiar with, thus personalizing the

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\* \* Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the 2004 staging of A Midsummer Night's Dream, but have found the production to be very accessible based on my previous exposure to the company, the availability of archival materials, and discussions with those who were present at performances.

theatrical experience. In the case of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the present-day Montréal landscape plays backdrop to the staging that Orr situates in 17<sup>th</sup> century Québec. In establishing this idea, Orr asked himself: What was going on in Canada during Shakespeare's time? Was anything going on in theatre? (Barratt 1-2). These questions gave rise to the concept of the traveling theatre company who set stage on wagons in the village square. (The performances even cut back on technical elements, pushing back curtain time to 6:30 p.m. to perform using natural daylight.) For those unfamiliar with this tradition (which can be traced back to the performance of the religious cycle plays), a historic feeling is created nonetheless; the set-up inherently transports the space and spectator to the past.

The audience, seated around all four sides of a central stage, can also watch action unfold on four smaller stages set between the spectators, around the periphery of the space (Appendix C-3). While a theatre's stage is often off-limits to spectators, Repercussion Theatre invites the audience to sit close to the performers, and even sends actors into the crowd (for example to collect donations). I find this interactive element a callback to Shakespeare's time, when audiences may have been more vocal during performances, speaking directly to the action with their comments. In fact, during the Intermission of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the company calls upon children to get their faces and arms painted so they can help create the magical woods in the play (Appendix A). By engaging the audience in the stage space, Repercussion Theatre is inviting people to personalize the experience; to create their own Canadian-Shakespeare adaptations, some taking on the role of characters and settings in the play themselves!

As is understood from the title, the production is clearly founded in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. The story is Shakespeare's, the characters are Shakespeare's, even most of the dialogue is Shakespeare's . . . just with a twist! The given Synopsis demonstrates the use of creative vandalism, whereby the text has been placed in new context giving it new cultural significance (Sinfield 22):

Le Duke Theseus of New France hopes to solidify Native relations by marrying the Native matriarch, Hippolyta. Meanwhile, the village youth themselves play games of love, as star-crossed lovers from the French and English nobility are thwarted by overprotective parents. (Appendix C-1)

In the context of French culture, Shakespeare's Lysander becomes Lysandre, and accordingly speaks and sings in French from time-to-time. First-Nation troubadours emerge as magical hippie-like characters leading songs infused with messages of peace and love. The bilingual aspect and First-Nation inspired characters and folklore of the performance situate the play within a uniquely Canadian and Québec perspective. These are two elements ingrained in Canada's early history, but Orr also draws from more recent events.

Interestingly enough, Orr describes the village square concept as linked to Montréal's Expo '67, calling the show "Expo 1667" (Appendix C-1). While this is not an image I had originally associated with the set-up, given this information now, I appreciate the significance and wonder if spectators who had attended Expo '67 might have taken notice. My mother speaks fondly of her visits to the Expo that summer; how the world came to Montréal to share their culture, their innovations, and their histories. Canada as a multicultural mosaic is very much represented in this idea, a model that is

reflected in the scripted characters and the talent, both on-stage and behind the scenes. The juxtaposition of these two ‘summers,’ one that is Shakespearian the other embodying Canada and references to popular culture, is done very much in the style of Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann. Luhrmann, who, on a larger scale, has also explored the Shakespearian text [Romeo and Juliet (1996)] by adapting character and setting, is also recognized for his ability to do so in terms of using of music.

An additional connection to the 60’s era is A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s use of popular lyrics and music. By re-assembling and integrating bits and pieces of popular songs, Orr adds modern humour to the play. While comedy is by no means uniquely Canadian, Canadians seem to have a particular affinity with the genre. From Wayne & Shuster to Jim Carrey and Mike Myers, we are a nation that loves to laugh! While some verses are sung in their original form, the context is understood differently. In other cases, original words are adapted to fit the characters and the play. For example, when Oberon criticizes Puck to the tune of Edwin Starr’s War, the words “War, huh yeah/ What is it good for?/ Absolutely nothing” become, “Puck, what are you good for?/ Absolutely nothing/ say it again!.” This type of intertextuality invites recognition of the musical sources and promotes the spectator’s further engagement in the text. By integrating the unexpected Elvis references and flower-power, Orr’s adaptation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream invites an audience who might not otherwise enjoy, understand, or even attend the play, to interact with a Shakespearian work. Just as Shakespeare was re-working texts and tales, this adaptation can appeal to a wide audience of all ages, with varying degrees of knowledge of Shakespeare.

Repercussion Theatre's 2004 production of A Midsummer Night's Dream upholds the company's mandate to create theatre that is accessible and affordable and relevant to today's society (Appendix G-1). All while maintaining a clear foundation in Shakespeare's text, this production's stage environment, characters and setting (in terms of language and content), and the humorous musical element embody the notions of bilingualism, multiculturalism, and history that I associate with being a Canadian. Funded entirely by Canadian institutions and individuals (Appendix C-7), it is clear that Repercussion Theatre is committed to keeping Shakespeare's *Dream* alive in Canada.

Works Cited

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