

'Midsummer Night's Dream' Mixes success and failure

by NELSON POTTER

The University Theater's production of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" opened last week at Howell Theater and continues in performance through the end of this week. Directed by Harvey Miller, the production mixes success and failure; but its successes are great enough to make it a presentation worth seeing.

The main strengths in this version of the Shakespearean masterpiece are in some individual triumphs in acting and in the costuming.

Among the actors in this production Ric Marsh stands out, as he develops a strongly shaped characterization of Puck. He somersaults, giggles and hops his way about the stage, and seems perfectly to be the fantastic, immortal, disembodied, mischievous fairy he plays.

LINDA VARVEL gives us a strong Helena. Her nicely original reading of this character as having just a bit of the tomboy, the shrew, and the cynic is one way of being just right. She prepares us perfectly for Helena's indignant rejection

ENTERTAINMENT

of the sudden advances of her bewitched lover, later in the play.

Lesser triumphs are won by Laura Ursdevenicz, who is at once voluptuous and regal as Titania, Queen of the Fairies, and Christopher Stasheff, who is properly majestic and unearthly as Oberon, the King of the Fairies.

And the parts of the "rude mechanics," Bottom, Quince, Flute, and the rest, are mostly very well done.

The fine costuming adds considerably to this production. The real, as opposed to the fairy, characters, are mostly given Elizabethan dress; in color and in design, they are beautifully done.

The costumes for the fairies are even better; everything about them indicates the fairies vegetable origin and nature. Puck's and Oberon's costumes seem made of leaves, and the female fairies wear long flowing robes with vague flowerlike patterns of color.

The attendants to Titania move like impetuous and insubstantial flowers through the unearthly half-light of the "dream" portion of the play. The costumes, the lighting, and the "choreography" of the fairies' movements — all these are effects worth seeing.

But beside the substantial strengths of this production must be listed some crippling weaknesses.

ONE PROBLEM that must be overcome in any production of Shakespeare is the difficulty of the language. In the comedies it is hard to get all of the gag lines across. In longer speeches, words tend to get lost in the sing-song rhythm of the metred lines — especially in early Shakespeare. The present production does not succeed in conquering these problems.

Early in the play Oberon and Theseus have long speeches, full of marvelous language — but most of the poetry in what they say is lost because the actors speak them rapidly and with little emphasis.

So many of the humorous lines are lost that most of the amusement in this production of "Dream" comes from the action, and we are left with the impression that, overall, this play is only moderately and occasionally funny.

But more serious and central than the problem of the language is that of conception. There seems to be no over-all conception behind this production, and it very much needs one. This Shakespeare play has the static form of a dream or a fantasy, and so the action alone does not carry us forward.

Perhaps the magical, moonlit central portion of the play ought to never touch reality, so that it is seen as a mere figment or shadow. Perhaps the play might be presented as an essay on the varieties of love. Perhaps it might somehow be made political.

BUT NONE of these conceptions, nor any other, is adopted for this production,

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and thus there is nothing to hold the action together, or carry us forward. The play fails to be an Elizabethan period piece, a pure fantasy, or a philosophical comment on the relation of truth and fantasy because it fails to be any one particular thing at all.

It is not only the play as a whole, but, in some cases, individual scenes that fail to hold together, once again, it seems, because of the director's lack of an overall conception of the scene.

For example, Theseus, the king of Athens, and his Amazon wife-to-be ought to dominate the opening and closing scenes by their mere presence; but the Theseus of this production seems more like "one of the boys" or "a really nice guy, for a king," and thus his scenes lack the center of gravity they need.

And, though Stephen Gains mostly does a very nice job in the important role of Bottom, he plays Bottom's role of "Pyramus" in the very funny final scene, not as a foolish untutored weaver trying to act, but as a skilled actor in a farce absurdly overacting his part. What he does is very funny, but he gets his laughs at the expense of the dramatic consistency of the scene.

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