**A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

**Live introduction to the RSC’s 2016 A Play for the Nation**

Welcome to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s *A Play for the Nation* project.

To mark the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare’s death, the Royal Shakespeare Company is taking *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, his most popular comedy, on tour to theatres across the United Kingdom, beginning and ending in Stratford-upon-Avon. But this is a tour with a difference: at each stop, the RSC has invited a local amateur dramatic company to join a team of professional actors, to play Shakespeare’s six workmen (or ‘mechanicals’, as he called them), who are themselves amateur actors. Local schoolchildren have also been recruited to play the junior fairies in Queen Titania’s train.

When Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1595, he set it in the legendary Greek city of Athens and a nearby wood, although it is clear that what he saw in his imagination was the Warwickshire countryside where he grew up. Today, director Erica Whyman, and designer, Tom Piper, have reset the play in a bombed-out theatre somewhere in Britain not long after the Second World War, and asked us to use our imaginations to transform its bare stage into that wood near Athens with its English flowers and birds. This is the magic of theatre – which is what *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is partly about.

As we take our seats, the stage of the disused theatre looms in front of us, framed by the proscenium arch with its once-elegant gilt moulding now tarnished and chipped. One of its two red velvet curtains still hangs from the top of the arch, looped back on the left to show the stage’s bare floorboards and the crumbling bricks of the surrounding walls. Most of the top half of the back wall is missing: in its lower half, double wooden doors, with a single wooden door each side, lead to the cavernous storage area behind the stage, its walls and rafters only guessed at in the darkness shrouding the building. In the centre, where the wall is highest, a moveable metal staircase leads up to another wooden door, closed like all the others.

The theatre’s grand piano, dusty but undamaged, stands at the front of the stage behind the footlights, with its lid closed and piano stool in position. Another piano stands on the left of the proscenium arch, with its upright wooden back, covered with torn material, turned towards the audience. Beside it are the wooden folding chairs and music stands used by two of King Oberon’s fairy musicians; the other two musicians are seated on the opposite side of the stage, to the right of the arch. Like the four fairies who play musical instruments on stage, the seated musicians are dressed in slightly shabby black and white evening wear, with their leader wearing a red sash round his waist.

Even in its dark and semi-derelict state, the theatre hints at mystery and magic – and it is a truly magical moment when the scene changes from the city to the wood, the curtain explodes, and scraps of red velvet litter the ground like fallen leaves. Six counterweights hanging above the stage drop down, and the folded red fabric inside them is unfurled and drawn up into tall columns that look like slender tree trunks. The two single wooden doors in the back wall glide forward to act as undergrowth, with fairies popping in and out or lurking behind them; and the metal staircase is swung around for fairies to climb on, or sit watching the mortals below, to whom they are invisible.

The costumes reflect nineteen forties Britain, when women’s clothes were generally close fitting and tailored, with knee length skirts, and suits were the norm for all men apart from those engaged in heavy manual work. The fairies’ outfits are more eccentric, but still mostly belong to this time.

Athens is ruled over by **Duke Theseus**. He is an imposing, handsome man with a square jaw and his wavy fair hair cut short and combed into place. His naturally stern expression makes him seem older than he actually is. Theseus is smart in a double breasted dark suit, with a soberly patterned tie, and a crisply folded handkerchief in his breast pocket. He only smiles when he turns to **Hippolyta**, the Queen of the Amazons, whom he is about to marry. She is a handsome woman, almost as tall as him in her red high heels, and with her fair hair worn up in carefully arranged waves. Her scarlet suit has a tailored jacket with petal-shaped lapels, which flares out over her hips above her narrow knee length skirt. Later they both look dashing in tweed riding gear with polished leather boots. They are served by **Philostrate**, a dapper little man in a livery of black tail coat with brass buttons.

**Egeus**, one of the nobles at court, is a senior RAF officer. He is a short man in his late fifties, with a thin florid face and small light brown moustache. The tunic of his blue/grey uniform is loaded with medal ribbons and his peaked cap has the winged badge of the RAF on the front.

Egeus’ daughter **Hermia**, is as short and trim as her father. Played by a black actress, she has a pretty rounded face, with her glossy black hair arranged in the fashion of the time, rolled up from the forehead and sweeping smoothly down to the neck. She wears a waist length fitted blue silk jacket over a print dress with a swirling skirt, patterned with yellow flowers against a blue background.

Hermia is in love with **Lysander**, who loves her too, a fair haired young man with a handsome boyish face, only a little taller than she is. He wears a single breasted light grey suit; his jacket is unbuttoned and falls open over his shirt and tie, and sometimes he thrusts his hands into his trouser pockets. To go out walking he changes to a tweed jacket over a Fair Isle pullover. Lysander’s informal clothes and engaging manner couldn’t be more different from **Demetrius**, the young man who is Egeus’s chosen husband for his daughter. Even though he is in a pinstripe suit, Demetrius has a military bearing, standing to attention most of the time, especially in the presence of his elders. He is a compact Asian man, with a rounded clean shaven face, his jet black hair cut short back and sides.

Hermia’s friend **Helena** is Demetrius’ previous girlfriend and still in love with him. Although not particularly tall, she appears so in comparison with her other three companions, especially in heels. Unlike Hermia’s neat elegance, Helena doesn’t make the best of herself clothes wise. Her brown patterned print dress has a thin tie at the waist and hangs limply, disguising rather than flattering her figure. Her brown hair, brushed smooth on top, falls in untidy waves around her pale face and high forehead, her prettiness marred by the unhappiness that clouds her dark eyes.

There is another kingdom, in the wood just outside the city, and it is ruled by **Oberon** and **Titania**, King and Queen of the Fairies, he, in cool white, she, in passionate red. Oberon is a tall lithe black man; his gleaming shaven head, defined chiseled features, piercing eyes and sensual mouth are combined with a languid grace that sets him apart from the scurrying figures around him. He moves in short bursts, coming to rest in watchful stillness. His brilliant white suit is buttoned over his bare chest, with bare feet. Oberon towers over his wife Titania, a petite yet voluptuous Asian woman, with a full face, expressive mouth and wide eyes, glossy black hair tumbling down her back. Delicate gold markings highlight her cheekbones and forehead. Dressed all in scarlet, her tight bodice emphasizes her swelling breasts, above a long silk skirt that sweeps round her bare feet. A chiffon stole flutters from her shoulder.

Oberon is served by the spirit Robin Goodfellow, known as **Puck**. Played by a woman, Puck is a slight nimble creature with an elfin face and short blonde hair brushed into a boyish quiff, often hidden under an oversize top hat. He has bare feet and walks with his toes turned out, so that in his too small black jacket, wing collar shirt, tie, and baggy evening trousers, he might have modelled himself on Charlie Chaplin, without the moustache. Puck’s always letting us in on the story, winking and rolling his eyes with a lopsided smile, treating the audience as part of the landscape as he clambers over them.

Oberon’s four **Fairies** resemble shabby musicians from an orchestra; they each play or carry a musical instrument. They are all young men, wearing dusty ragged tail coats and evening trousers, their white shirts open necked. They also double as footmen in Theseus’ palace.

Titania’s fairies are a motley bunch. Her **First Fairy** looks like another version of Puck. Played by a black actor, he’s as small and quick as Puck, a snappy dresser too, in evening dress with red silk tie and wide black trousers, a trilby perched at a jaunty angle. Smoothly oiled black hair flops above his long face, and round wire rimmed dark glasses perch on his nose. **Peaseblossom**, **Cobweb** and **Moth** are three tall striking girls, their hair worn up in wild topknots, wearing tight black jackets or waistcoats above vividly patterned short silk skirts in black, white or red, flounced out with layers of petticoats. They share their Queen’s confident, challenging manner. **Mustardseed** is of short stature, clean shaven with a square open face, wearing a smart grey double breasted suit and Trilby hat. The fairies lead a band of **Children**, all boys, dressed in the styles of the 1940s, smeared with the vivid scarlet that seems to express the enchantment of the forest. The boys wear jumpers, school blazers or little tweed coats above long shorts. Some have luggage labels attached to their collars, like wartime evacuees.

A little group of workmen are planning to put on a play for the Duke’s wedding. Their director is **Quince**. She’s a carpenter, a thin woman in her forties, with a scarf knotted on her head, concealing her hair. Quince wears a brown work coat over an old shirt and brown work trousers, and carries a clipboard with the playscript attached. The one who makes the most noise is **Bottom**, a weaver. A stocky man in his fifties, his silver hair is cut short above his broad rosy face. He wears faded denim dungarees and over shirtsleeves, with a red handkerchief tied round his neck, and a long apron. Bottom's never still, brimming with ideas, and determined to share them with everyone; the rest are usually happy to follow his lead. **Starveling**, a tailor, is played by another woman. She is small and very slight, young and terrified, with a pale face and dark hair, partially concealed by a headscarf, tied turban-style around her head.

Flute the bellows mender, Snout the tinker, and Snug the joiner, are also members of the band. **Flute**'s tall with grey hair and a slight paunch, a square, fresh face. He wears a patterned tank top over a collarless shirt and brown dungarees, with a white apron, and a cloth cap. A leather satchel is slung over his shoulder. **Snout** is of average height, with broad shoulders. He also has grey hair and neat features in his handsome fresh face. He too wears a white apron over his shirt and work trousers, and a round white painters' cap hides the fact that he is losing his hair. Finally, the tallest, **Snug**, is also the shyest. He’s a handsome sturdy man with grey hair, an open face, slightly flushed with embarrassment and sheer terror, as he stands, twisting his large hands, his mouth hanging open for words that never quite seem to come. He wears caramel coloured canvas overalls under an old jacket.

**Cast and Production credits**

At Court, **Theseus, Duke of Athens**, is played by **Sam Redford**. He is engaged to **Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons**, played by **Laura Harding**.

**Philostrate**, Theseus’ steward, is played by **Jon Trenchard**, and one of his nobles, **Egeus**, is played by **Peter Hamilton Dyer**. Egeus's daughter **Hermia** is played by **Mercy Ojelade**. She is in love with **Lysander** played by **Jack Holden**, but her father's preferred suitor is **Demetrius** played by **Chris Nayak**. Hermia’s friend **Helena**, played by **Laura Riseborough**, is also in love with Demetrius.

In the wood, **Titania,** the Fairy Queen**,** is played by **Ayesha Dharker**, and **Oberon,** the Fairy King, by **Chu Omambala**. **Puck**, or Robin Goodfellow is played by **Lucy Ellinson**. Titania's **First Fairy** is played by **Theo St. Claire**, **Peaseblossom** by **Mari Izzard**, **Cobweb** by **Aimee Grey**, **Moth** by **Lila Clements**, and **Mustardseed** by **Ben Goffe**. The junior fairies in Titania’s train are played by children from ST Malachy’s School.

The **Mechanicals** are played by amateur actorswho comefrom the Belvoir Players; **Bottom**, a weaver, by **Trevor Gill,** **Quince**, a carpenter by **Maggie Gorman**, **Snout**, a tinker by **Chris Darcy**, **Starveling**, a tailor by **Jessie McGreeevey**, **Flute**, a bellows mender by **Chris Curry**, and **Snug** a joiner, by **Robert McGregor**

Music is performed live on stage by **Oberon's Fairies**; Cello: **Jamie Cameron**; Piano: **Tarek Merchant**; Guitar: **Alex Tomkins** and Flute: **Jon Trenchard**. The **Music Director** is **Tarek Merchant** and the other, seated, Musicians are: **Adam Cross**, Woodwind; **Andrew Stone Fewings**, Trumpet; **Ayse Osman**, Double Bass; and **James Jones**, Percussion.

The **Designer** is **Tom Piper**, with **Lighting** by **Charles Balfour**, **Music** by **Sam Kenyon**, and **Sound** by **Andrew Franks**. The **Director** is **Erica** **Whyman**. Today’s **Audio Describers** are **…………………….** and **……………………..**.

The performance lasts approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes, plus an interval of 20 minutes. Thank you.