Bottom Gets a Life: Michael Hoffman's Contribution to the Shakespeare Film Canon

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To Dream the Possible Dream

For writer/director Michael Hoffman, filming a big-screen version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a dream come true: Hoffman himself played Lysander in the Idaho Shakespearean Festival's inaugural production; shortly thereafter, he studied renaissance drama as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, during which time he directed an acclaimed interpretation of the play there. Having subsequently directed such successful films as *One Fine Day* (1996), *Restoration* (1995), and *Soapdish* (1991), Hoffman's return to *Midsummer* was inevitable.

A modern *Midsummer* was also a dream for Twentieth Century Fox executives hoping to bank on Hoffman's experience and talent. By all accounts, their investment seemed a sure bet. For one thing, Hoffman had good timing: Shakespeare's plays have never been more cinematically popular than during the 1990s: nearly thirty English-language versions of twelve plays in the last seven years—a third of which have been romantic comedies.[1] In addition, there was a general perception that *Midsummer* had not been filmed with any great distinction for sixty-five years. Therefore, a fresh, technologically enhanced re-presentation was due.

Promising, too, was *Midsummer*'s perennial popularity as the crown jewel of Shakespeare's comedy canon. Leslie Urdang, director and co-founder of New York Stage and Film Company, notes that *Midsummer* is consistently a "favorite for school productions" and "the one Shakespeare play everyone seems to know."[2] And even if not everyone actually knows the play, many believe they ought to, just as they ought to know *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*, for example. Hence, both the Shakespeare-sure and the Shakespeare-shy would stand to benefit from an updated adaptation.

Further ensuring his success was Hoffman's star-studded cast (his own "dream team," if you will), many of whom were experienced Shakespeareans: Kevin Kline (Bottom) played an acclaimed Hamlet at the 1990 New York Shakespeare Festival (which he then directed for television); Christian Bale (Demetrius) appeared in Branagh's 1989 *Henry V*; and Dominic West (Lysander) was Richmond in Loncraine's 1995 *Richard III*. Others had done pseudo-Shakespeare: Rupert Everett (Oberon) played Christopher Marlowe in the 1998 Oscar®-winning *Shakespeare in Love*, while Michelle Pfeiffer (Titania) starred in *A Thousand Acres* (1997)—*King Lear* set on an Iowa farm. Finally, Calista Flockhart brought to the screen what might be termed "Ally McBeal appeal": notoriety for her character in the Emmy®-winning comedy of the same name.

May the Farce Be with You

Still, Hoffman's project had risks. Analysts wondered whether the Shakespearean film market had hit a point of diminishing returns. Would audiences be fired up for yet another remake, or were they burned out on Branagh? Hoffman knew that even if the production itself were deemed successful by cast, crew, creditors, and critics, its fate was ultimately in viewers' hands: several promising Shakespeare ventures failed miserably at the box office. There were additional obstacles: purists would probably—if not predictably—object if Hoffman were too liberal in his interpretation, while George Lucas's much-anticipated *Star Wars* prequel—slated to open a mere five days after *Midsummer*—cast a menacing shadow over Hoffman's film's debut, threatening to eclipse whatever brilliance he might otherwise display. How would audiences recently exposed—and now accustomed—to Lucas's state-of-the-art special effects respond to Hoffman's comparatively modest magic? Could the farce resist "the Force"? *Herald-Times* reviewer Eric Pfeffinger saw Hoffman's challenge in terms of marketing: Hoffman had to convince a modern movie-going audience that "this film full of poetry and magic and forest nymphs is, in fact, a comedy."[3]

Anticipating such obstacles, Hoffman had to devise creative ways to keep his dream from dissipating; his *Midsummer* not only had to be worth watching: somehow it had to contribute uniquely and meaningfully to the play's long film tradition. His solutions were creative: a late Victorian setting; a "fairy bar," in which viewers glimpse sprite night life; bicycles which transport not just lovers, but Puck; a mud wrestling match between Helena and Hermia; and digitized "fairy-flies."

But arguably the film's most unique—and endearing—feature is its Bottom; Hoffman gave his film life by giving Bottom one. In the film's planning stages, as Hoffman considered his adaptation options, he became concerned that it "lacked a center." At various times, he thought of "book-ending" the play by making it Theseus's dream, or Hippolyta's, or even Helena's. But the character to whom he consistently returned was Bottom, prompting Hoffman to wonder, "What if Bottom, as the king of amateur dramatics, has delusions of grandeur about himself as an actor because he doesn't have any love in his life?"[4]

Bottom Bottoms Out

Once Lysander parts company with Helena, and Helena lets loose a few mild expletives, the film cuts to Monte Athena—a "walled village perched on the crown of a high Tuscan hill." The next scene captures the village piazza, during the "hour of the promenade."[5] Contentedly watching the citizenry, drinking campari, is Nick Bottom, looking natty in an immaculate white suit. Grabbing his silver-tipped walking stick, he stands and turns. A café window captures his reflection, which Bottom cannot help but study self-admiringly. The window also mirrors the presence of a beautiful young woman looking in Bottom's direction. In eager response, Bottom turns around to face her, his smile broadening. He tips his hat, eliciting an encouraging smile from her. Then, taking a step forward, Bottom spies another woman—an incensed woman—grabbing a blameless passerby by his lapels and ranting, "Where's my husband? Where's that worthless dreamer?" Avoiding detection, Bottom ducks into a shop entryway until his wife moves on. Winding his way through the piazza, he eventually joins his troupe. Though a motley lot, Bottom is relieved to have found them.

Upon receiving the part of Pyramus, Bottom, noticing a loosely formed crowd around his "stage," caters to their curiosity with a mini-monologue articulated in a rich, deep, crisp voice that carries easily through the hollow village square. He is applauded, prompting more listeners to approach, including the same pretty woman with whom he had flirted at the café. Demonstrating amazing range, Bottom interprets Thisby's role to a second, louder, round of applause. Finally, for an encore, he undertakes the lion's part, directing his growling at two little girls who giggle delightedly at every roar. Bottom has, with little effort and no rehearsal, won over his audience. Then, without warning, he is literally showered with red wine—two large bottles' worth—poured by two young teenagers atop the stage's roof. Stunned and stained, he looks to

his fans for sympathy, who by now are laughing uncontrollably, cruelly, at his misfortune. Even the young woman he had hoped to impress wears an expression of absolute pity. Still dripping, Bottom turns away in humiliation. Empathetically, Quince, using his own handkerchief, gently wipes Bottom's face. In a tender voice, Quince entreats his friend, "You can play no part but Pyramus." As the crowd disbands, he continues, "Pyramus is a sweet-faced man, a proper man as one shall see in a summer's day; a most lovely gentlemanlike man: therefore you must needs play Pyramus" (1.2.68-70).[6] Humbled, Bottom concedes. Replacing his hat, he rises, and exits into the piazza, maintaining an admirable pretense of dignity.

Hoffman's film, rather than entering the forest to present a plucky Puck, follows Bottom home. Entering a poorly-lit, squalid, spartan apartment, Bottom softly ascends the stairs and slips into a bedroom, again hoping to avoid his wife's notice. Immediately sensing his return, however, his wife silently appears as Bottom stoops over a small washbasin to rinse the wine out of his suit. Surprisingly, and in contrast to her public tirade, she says absolutely nothing. Instead, she glares at him in disbelief and disgust. Bottom, himself speechless, can only gesture helplessness by displaying his suit's condition. Mustering the strength she will need to endure not only this episode and its aftermath, but this marriage as well, the wife inhales deeply, turns, and exits. Defeated once again, Bottom exhales, tosses his permanently discolored suit coat over a chair, sits on the edge of what appears to be a single bed, and stares longingly out the bedroom's single window. A sudden thunderclap heralds a heavy downpour.

What's Up with Bottom?

Greater than the sum of his parts, Bottom exhibits a depth in the film that is only hinted at in the play. These scenes combine to form much more than a day-in-the-life of Nick Bottom: collectively, they represent his *whole life*. To his wife, he is not Nick the weaver; he is Nick the weasel. Hoffman, notes *Shakespeare Magazine's* Josh Cabat, "gives Bottom a wife who, though silent, clearly disapproves of both her husband's pomposity and his delusions of theatrical grandeur."[7] To audiences, he is not just Bottom the "egoist, braggart, or buffoon" of many other *Midsummer* productions, nor is he just Bottom the "dreamer, actor, pretender."[8] Rather, this film explores the tragedy in Bottom's private life as much as it preserves the comedy in his public life. He is Bottom the unloved, the rejected—just like (at various times) Hermia, Helena, Lysander, Demetrius, and Oberon. And, as will

be shown, Bottom's deficiencies will imbue both his relationship with Titania and his performance as Pyramus with added meaning.

It is worth noting here that, according to Hoffman's original script, there was also a baby Bottom: Nick was a father of a child who was supposed to be crying in the background when Bottom came home. Though Hoffman offers no explanation, the idea may have been abandoned because his character is supposed to be searching for unconditional love and acceptance—something a child could both evoke and provide. It is telling that Bottom has no trouble charming the two young girls watching his performance, if one believes the notion that children are unusually adept at determining adult sincerity and authenticity. Bottom's motives are apparently pure.

Hoffman's Bottom lives in two worlds: a real one characterized by infamy, misery, and hardship; and an imagined one of fame, glamour, and respect. In his introductory scene, Bottom makes sure he is part of the action, situating himself at the right time in the right place. Like the actor he so desperately wants to become, he is dressed for the part and ready for action. Careful viewers will notice that as the camera closes in on Bottom, an actual donkey passes by; in effect, the audience has to get past the ass in order to see the man, the more interesting animal. According to online movie critic Melissa Morrison, unlike the play, Bottom is "not just a source of laughter as an ass unexpectedly enjoying a life of leisure. Here he is given a whole other dimension."[9] There's more to his character—more to him—than meets the eye. Incidentally, the donkey is also pulling a cart; it is a beast of burden, not unlike Bottom.

Unlike other productions which have Bottom angrily abandoning the project as Quince insists he play Pyramus, Hoffman's version offers a softer Bottom, one who gets neither angry nor frustrated. In both the 1935 Reinhardt and 1981 Moshinsky/BBC adaptations, Quince commands a stubborn, resentful Bottom to play the part. In Hall's 1968 RSC version, Bottom gets so upset, he clears a large table of its ware in a single motion and sends chickens scurrying as he storms out. He halts only when Quince gently grabs his shoulder. Noble's 1996 RSC interpretation also has Nick (sporting a black leather motorcycle jacket) abruptly leaving when Quince loses his patience. Hoffman's production is the only one in which Bottom rehearses outdoors before a live audience.

Hoffman's decision to have Bottom doused makes more sense when viewers recall that his film is set in the Victorian period—an

age when appearance and decorum really matter. Commenting on the significance of the locale (which may override any chronology constraints), Hoffman adds, "Italy is the only country in the world where a man is willing to go into debt to buy clothes."[10] In various places of his adapted playscript, Hoffman notes that Bottom's ruined suit was the only one he owned; however, in the film Bottom does wear another, though it is clearly inferior. Interestingly, Hoffman's script originally called for the puckish pranksters to bombard Bottom with donkey dung. The director never explains the change. Perhaps it was to allow Bottom some dignity; more likely, the idea of a dirty Bottom—with all its possible connotations—would have been in poor taste.

The Art of Becoming an Ass

Having entered the forest and persuaded Quince to add the prologue, Bottom distances himself from his fellow actors in order to practice his lines. In Hoffman's version, Bottom stumbles across a top hat and a walking stick capped, strangely, with a donkey's head. Of course, to such an aspiring actor, the props are irresistible. Behind Bottom—and invisible to him—perches Puck, who gently blows a kind of pixie dust in Bottom's direction, which he inhales. As rehearsing continues among the troupe, Bottom enters on cue, and removes his newfound hat to reveal a pair of newly sprung ass's ears.

As was true in Shakespeare's day, Bottom's transformation is great dramatic spectacle—the more exaggerated his appearance, the more comic the scene. In earlier productions, such as Reinhardt's and Hall's, Bottom's head metamorphosed completely into that of a donkey—that is, he touted a snout in addition to the long ears and fuzzy face; only his eyes were unchanged. One advantage to taking the "snout route" is that it offers better "ass smileage": watching Titania kiss Bottom's rubber donkey nose and lips *is* irresistibly funny. James Cagney's new look, for example, "frightens" the troupe's real donkey! There is, however, a distinct disadvantage to having an actor don the whole head, as Hoffman explains: "Bottom as the donkey presented a very specific problem in the film. In many productions the actor applies a mask that completely consumes him. Bottom, the man, goes away. Given the importance of his relationship with Titania, we could not afford to lose him."[11]

The solution for Hoffman (as well as Moshinsky and Noble) was not to let Bottom make a complete ass of himself: the snout was out. As Noble demonstrated, donkey ears alone are sufficient for comic effect (the Bottom in his film even sprouts ears which

break through his metal motorcycle helmet). And in act 4, when Bottom says, "I must to the barber's . . . methinks I am marvellous hairy about the face" (1.22-23), extra facial hair on a human face seems to make more sense. But the greatest benefit is the freedom of expression the head's absence allows the actor. *Midsummer* make-up artist Paul Engelen "enabled Kevin [Kline] to still be Kevin and very present," notes Hoffman.[12] A headless Bottom is a necessarily more exposed Bottom, and therefore may present the greater acting challenge.

In the productions by Reinhardt and Moshinsky, the transformed Bottom's initial reaction is to hurry over to a pond to check his reflection, the sight of which terrifies him (Cagney's character even weeps uncontrollably). Hoffman's Bottom never sees himself as others do and does not seem ever to realize his condition. For him, his situation really is a pleasant dream, not some horrible nightmare. Also, when Kline says he needs to see the barber, the fact that he does not know just how hairy he is accommodates the line better as naïve understatement than if he had already seen, or fully understood, his condition.

Love for the Ass-king

As Bottom declares his intention to leave, Titania commands a rope-vine to magically bind his ankles, pull his feet out from under him, and suspend him upside down, level with her hanging bower. An attending fairy then cuts the vine, and Bottom falls into the queen's bed, whereupon she straddles and pins him, effectively preventing his escape. What is delightful about this scene is just how quickly Bottom's urge to leave the forest disappears once Titania physically asserts herself. His fall into her bower is effectively a fall into love; Bottom is as instantly smitten with Titania as she is with him, as though he had been the victim of Puck's optical antics. Hoffman's stage directions have Bottom "look[ing] deeply into Titania's loving gaze" and "a tear com[ing] to his eye."[13] This is really Bottom the man, not the donkey or the "lustful animal," as *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert calls Bottoms from productions past.[14] This *Midsummer's* mortal is about to embark not on his first sexual experience, but on his first emotional one—and it overwhelms him. "Rather than being played for purely comic effect," Cabat writes, "his love scene with Michelle Pfeiffer's ravishing Titania has a quality of wistful longing to it that is absent in most productions."[15] Yet keeping the scene from getting too serious too soon, and perhaps permitting Bottom to postpone emotional gratification, Hoffman directs Kline—"the embodiment

of amiability"—to have his character "bashfully parr[y] the passionate advances of Titania."[16]

Continuing the comedy is Bottom's reaction as Titania grants him his own personal staff of attending fairies: Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed. Unlike some other productions in which these sprites are children (or even exclusively male, as in Peter Brook's 1970 RSC production), here they are beautiful young women in what mortals would consider "the prime of life." Comprising for Bottom a virtual harem, theirs is the assignment not to fulfill him sexually but to dote on him, to fulfill him emotionally and socially. The next scene finds him royally outfitted with robe and crown, escorted by his attendants—along a path lined with the rest of Titania's court—toward the waiting queen. Bottom has always wanted to be the center of attention, but this event—a dream within a dream—goes well beyond anything he could have imagined. He is "giddy at being with a dream woman in a dream . . . situation," observes *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewer Peter Stack.[17]

The scenes between Bottom and Titania constitute the film's "emotional core," says *Midsummer's* Anna Friel, who plays Hermia.[18] This "core" sets this film apart from other adaptations in which Bottom is merely a passive recipient of ear scratches and tummy rubs, emotionally unresponsive to Titania's cooing and wooing. The fact that Titania, like Bottom, is experiencing marital strife, makes her attraction to him—despite the supernatural spell—natural and realistic. Bottom's wife and Oberon both dominate their spouses to such a degree that the Bottom-Titania union is understandable, if not justified. Furthermore, Oberon and Titania, as king and queen, live by a different set of rules, observes Pfeiffer. "That's why [her] relationship with Bottom is very liberating in its simplicity."[19] Things are simpler, more liberating for Bottom, too. His relationship with Titania contrasts sharply with his relationship with his wife: with the former, Bottom exerts absolutely no effort whatsoever and gets instant, abundant, unconditional love; with the latter, his efforts—as weaver, as provider—are met with contempt, resentment, and impatience. One doubts that the pension he earns at play's end will placate his wife.

As is common in other versions, Bottom is spared the humiliation of witnessing Titania gasp at his hideousness when she returns to reality and finds him in her bed. It is a good thing, too, that she is long gone with Oberon before he awakens. In Reinhardt's film, when Cagney regains "consciousness," so to speak, he convulses as violently as he did when he was made an ass. It is

only when he checks his reflection in the pond again that he begins to relax. For him, his experience was more nightmare than dream, and despite the "Bottom's dream" speech—which he is obligated to recite—Bottom is clearly relieved that the ordeal is over.

Dream Analysis

In contrast, Hoffman's Bottom, though initially disoriented, cherishes the thought once he reconstructs what happened. Given the choice to regard the event as either real or imagined, he unhesitatingly picks the former. The tone of his "I have had a dream" speech conveys a sense of pride, as though he were chosen by the gods to experience it. Sitting in the tall grass at the forest's edge, he reaches down and picks up a small nest closely resembling Titania's bower. Inside, he finds a ring, which, upon closer inspection, is identical to the crown he wore as honorary king of the fairies. He then reclines, holding up the gold band, and smiles broadly—"moved by the memory, the glory of it all, the adulation, but mostly the love,"[20] directs Hoffman. It is interesting to note that, upon awakening, Bottom sighs heavily and repeatedly up to the point when he decides that his experience "shall be called 'Bottom's . . . [long pause] . . . Dream'" (4.1.208). Satisfied at having found a way to preserve the memory, Bottom now stops his exaggerated exhaling; instead, he inhales deeply, as though revived and reanimated. Quite literally, he has (been) inspired.

Bottom's memory of Titania—specifically, his memory of her love for him—is what boosts his confidence. He hurries back to the village, and is received by his troupe in what may be viewed as a second reception, parallel to Titania's in that he is again the generously-praised center of attention and is loved unconditionally. The "love bug" he caught in the forest is contagious, and Bottom's first order of business is to inspire his fellow actors to give the performance of their lives.

As he is escorted to the ducal residence by Philostrate, Bottom "is drawn irresistibly to the statue of [a] garlanded goddess. She holds in one hand an earthen jug, in the other a small bowl, very like the one from which he'd drunk Titania's wine. . . . He reaches out to touch the cool white marble."[21] A frustrated Philostrate, anxious to get on with the business of arranging the wedding's entertainment, impatiently suggests they move on, and a distracted Bottom reluctantly returns to his companions, looking back over his shoulder at the statue.

Playfulness within the Play (within the Play)

The next scene finds the Mechanicals sitting on a bench, "waiting, sweating," and wondering whether their rehearsal for

Philostrate will translate into acceptance or rejection. Having heard the verdict, Quince—"the color drained from his face"—enters the hopeful performers' backstage waiting area. "Our play is preferred," he announces to the stupefied troupe. Hoffman's descriptions read, "Fear passes through them like a cold wind. . . . Bottom grabs Snug by the collar as he tries to bolt."[22]

Other productions portray Quince and company as utterly petrified throughout their short performances, granting self-assurance and success only to Flute. In Hoffman's film, much of Quince's prologue is cut, placing the focus—and therefore burden—on the actors. Snout, as the wall, is nervous, but Starveling is as calm as the moon he represents. Appropriately, Snug's part as the lion is courageously undertaken. In fact, he gains enough confidence to remove his lion's head, effectively letting down his guard and voluntarily exposing himself to his audience—suggesting that Snug was heavily influenced by Bottom's transformation. Like Bottom, Snug is amply rewarded for taking the risk: he gets a front-row smile from Helena, a front-row wink from Hermia, the audience's first applause, and the troupe's first compliment via Demetrius's, "Well roared, Lion" (5.1.249).

Unlike his fellow actors, Bottom expects success from the start. He *is* successful, just not as the serious Pyramus he intended to play. To actor Dominic West (who plays Lysander), Quince's *Pyramus and Thisby* is "*Romeo and Juliet* with laughs."[23] For example, Pyramus picks up Thisby's discarded shawl only to discover that Starveling's dog has latched onto it. "Bottom struggles to stay in character as he fights to free it. . . . The dog is sailing around on the end of the scarf like an angry game fish. The fight intensifies. . . . [There is] a great whiplike action. The dog loses its grip and goes sailing into the audience"[24]—and into a repulsed Philostrate's arms! Obviously, this is the kind of slapstick which the troupe could not have rehearsed—and the audience, including the Duke and Duchess, loves it. Pyramus's unwieldy sword—approximately four feet long and several inches wide—is another source of unexpected comedy. Undoubtedly, Bottom fashioned the prop himself, the size of which (suitable only to a warrior of Goliath's stature) is meant to match Bottom's ego. Even partially penetrating a body the size of Pyramus's, such a blade would ensure instant death. Yet the film's audience is somehow not surprised when it takes two complete piercings—punctuated by a resurrection—for Pyramus's suicide to stick. To Kline's acting credit, Hoffman offers very little stage direction for this scene. As Cabat notes, Hoffman considered Kline a "superior actor": so dependable, so

versatile, that the director was able "to take some real risks with the character."[25]

For his part, Flute plays Thisby customarily straight, speaking "as convincingly as her text allows."[26] What Sam Rockwell brings to it, however, is a rare realism, abandoning the feigned female pitch and replacing it with convincing tears. Quince, who has been wincing throughout the production, now weeps, parentally proud of his prodigy. While the entire audience is silent, Hoffman's cameras remain fixed on the now-sober Lovers, who have been taught "just how thin the line between tragedy and comedy is, and how close [they] actually came to inflicting some serious harm upon one another."[27] Theseus could not foresee how right he would be when he declared to the discovered Lovers in 4.1: "We'll hold a feast in great solemnity" (182)—a statement which assumes new meaning here.

Backstage, as Bottom ponders the ducal dictum, "when the players are all dead, there need none to be blamed" (5.1.336-337), Philostrate enters reluctantly, bearing a note, which Quince takes and reads aloud, in disbelief: "Very notably discharged." Bottom grabs it and holds it up like a trophy for the vindicated troupe's view. "A wave of relief" washes over them, leaving in its wake, "a little bit of dignity."[28] The Mechanicals "succeed in actually accomplishing something, and . . . that's very moving," says their real-life director.[29]

Astrology: A Study of Heavenly Bodies

The film ends with a Bottom on top of the world. Originally, Hoffman envisioned a different ending than the one which now concludes the film:

> Bottom slowly puts away his white suit. His wife appears at the turn, grunts in contempt at his delusions of grandeur. He shrugs. She walks away. Alone now, he hangs his trousers, careful to keep the crease. He feels something in the pocket. It is the little fairy crown from the woods. He turns it over in his hand, a strange little trinket. He blows out his light and goes to his window. One last look at the moon. He sighs. All very strange. But before he turns away, something catches his eye; a light that flits and flies and dances outside his window. As he looks at it, it expands and takes on a form—of Titania, his fairy love, suspended in the air before him. They look at each other with great curiosity. She reaches out her hand and touches the windowpane. He opens it. Then reaching for his hand, she takes the crown and slips it onto his finger, like a wedding ring. She smiles a little sadly, fades, and is gone. Bottom is left smiling too. His eyes fill up with a strange kind of joy.[30]

In the film, after congratulating his friends for a job well done, Bottom returns to his quiet—perhaps now even vacant—apartment; there is no sign of his wife. He looks out his bedroom window—the same one he stared out of before his dream began—savoring his taste of success, and surveying the market square, the site where he will likely spend much of his new pension, and whose clientele will now have to acknowledge his achievement. Putting his hand in his pocket, Bottom pulls out the gold ring he found earlier in the forest and inspects it again. Interrupting his study, however, is a swirling cluster of fairies who, like fireflies, scintillate and hover near his window. Awestruck, Bottom watches as one approaches him and becomes more luminous. The longer the small creature lingers, the more her light intensifies, and it becomes evident that the two recognize each other. As though reluctant to leave, the fairy gradually flies upward, eventually blending with the stars. Without being able to clearly discern her form or features, Bottom knows intuitively—as viewers know—the visitor was Titania, returning to wish her former lover farewell.

Hoffman says nothing about the changes, so one can only speculate as to his reasons. To be sure, having a tiny flittering fairy transform itself into a Pfeiffer-sized Titania would have been exhilarating, but it could have produced a negative residual effect by being too dramatically climactic. In other words, Titania's magnificent manifestation might have detracted from Bottom's less spectacular, yet more poignant, performance. Audiences (particularly men) leaving the theater with only Michelle on their minds would certainly leave with the wrong impression, having been merely entertained, but not morally educated. After all, the story is about his transformations, not hers. Furthermore, it would have meant straying from the storyline beyond what critics, purists, and perhaps even the general public would have tolerated: for example, Titania's "marriage" to Bottom would have made him a bigamist. What would that really mean? Such an ending would not only prevent the expected return to the status quo; it would also create plot knots when it should be tying up loose ends. Put succinctly, "less is more" (a phrase attributed to Shakespeare). As it stands, the heavens which now conceal Titania will serve as an enduring reminder of Bottom's midsummer night's dream. It is thematically fitting that to "see" Titania in the stars, Bottom will have to hold his head up high.

The Bottom Line

By most accounts, Hoffman made the right decision, as critical reviews of the film were generally favorable. The *San Francisco*

Examiner's Wesley Morris described the latest presentation of Shakespeare's "love rhombus" as a "soap opera on a yo-yo,"[31] while Stack called it a "visual tour de force to brighten eyes."[32] Morrison was pleased that Hoffman "respected the play's language" and used special effects "only occasionally to juice up the fairies' world."[33] Complimenting the director on his choice of filming locations, Cabat claimed that "everyone stayed through the very end of the credits . . . to jot down the names of the towns . . . for immediate vacation planning." He concluded his review by calling Hoffman's work "probably the best attempt ever to put [the play] on film."[34]

That the Shakespeare film canon has just been expanded is a good thing. Flockhart, who plays Helena in Hoffman's adaptation, believes "as long as people are being born and falling in love and getting married and having children and dying, then Shakespeare is relevant."[35] If she is right, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—one of Shakespeare's finest commentaries on love—will remain a perennial favorite with both the reading and viewing public. What Shakespeare identifies and explores in the play, among other things, is not just love in general or in abstract, but specific types or facets of love, its "light" and "dark" sides. Egeus, for example, represents conditional love—and loses his daughter because of it. The four young lovers experience or exhibit capricious and irrational love—and almost lose each other because of it. Oberon temporarily loses Titania to Bottom. Any "love" (if it can be called such) accompanied by selfishness, domination, insincerity, or (emotional) infidelity leads to emotional loss or near loss. Conversely, "truer" forms of love—marked by selflessness, equilibrium, and trust—lead to various kinds of emotional gain: by "letting go" of Hermia, Demetrius rediscovers Helena; by ignoring an oppressive law, Theseus regains Hippolyta's heart; by trusting in themselves (and Bottom), the Mechanicals acquire a confidence previously unimaginable (and therefore unattainable). Even Bottom, in the words of Leslie Urdang (also *Midsummer's* co-producer), "reclaims his dignity from a deeper place in himself that he finds through love."[36] In fact, this motif became so prominent that, as his production took shape, Hoffman came to see the entire play in terms of dignity lost and regained.

Just as he knew laughter is medicinal, Shakespeare also understood love's power to heal. His Oberon and Puck are apothecaries whose herbs and powders ultimately cure Bottom of self-doubt by providing the means through which his dignity (a kind of self-love) is restored. Titania, as the eager provider of

unconditional love and happy recipient of Bottom's idealized love, is his personal nurse, whose function is to promote his emotional rehabilitation.

And, if "love makes fools of us all," as the film's tagline asserts, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a good dose of preventive medicine.

Notes

1. www.imdb.com.
2. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: About the Production," http://www.foxsearchlight.com/midfinal/html/piazzaproduction.html.
3. Eric Pfeffinger, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* Makes the Bard Boring," http://php.indiana.edu/~epfeffin/dream.html.
4. "Production."
5. Michael Hoffman, *William Shakespeare's* A Midsummer Night's Dream (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1999), 9.
6. G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company: 1974); all line references are to this edition.
7. Josh Cabat, "Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare: A Magazine for Teachers and Enthusiasts*, http://www.shakespearemag.com/reviews/midsummer.asp.
8. Hoffman, viii.
9. Melissa Morrison, "William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Box Office Online Reviews*, http://www.boxoffice.com/boxoffice_scr/movie_reviews_result.asp?terms=4402.
10. Hoffman, 17-18.
11. Hoffman, 72.
12. "Production."
13. Hoffman, 5.
14. Roger Ebert, "William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Chicago Sun-Times* May 14, 1999, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1999/05/051404.html.
15. Cabat.
16. Ebert.
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22. Hoffman, 98.
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26. Hoffman, 101.
27. Cabat.
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29. "Production."
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33. Morrison.
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