

## ACTORS' ROUNDTABLE

### ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2011 Production of *A Midsummers Night's Dream*

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**Featuring:** Fred C. Adams (Director), Betsy Mugavero (Hermia), Matt Mueller (Lysander), Ben Charles (Puck/Philostrate), Kym Mellen (Hippolyta/Titania), and Max Robinson (Bottom)

**F**lachmann: Welcome, everyone, to the final event in the Wooden O Symposium, our roundtable discussion with the director and several actors from our Fiftieth Anniversary production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Fred, let's start with you, sir. How long have you been planning this production of *Dream*, and how close is it to your original concept?

**Adams:** My last Shakespeare directing gig in this space was in 1981, when I was twelve [laughter], and I directed *Hamlet*. After that time, most of my work has been over in the Randall Jones Theatre for the directing I've done and the roles I've played. So it was like coming home for me to be in this space. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the first Shakespeare play I saw at the age of five. I never, ever forgot it. This was my fourth go around on the play, and I got some of it right this time.

**Flachmann:** You certainly did. It's brilliant [applause]!

**Adams:** I think the seed for it happened about four years ago when I took a tour of festival patrons over to Shakespeare country. We do it every spring, and we spend a day at Hampton Court Palace. There was this huge weeping willow, which was in

bloom, and it was just breathtaking. As I stood there looking at this beautiful tree with a breeze ruffling through it, I could imagine fairies peeking out of it. Not with headdresses that got caught in between the tendrils, I might add [laughter]. And I just tucked that image away and thought someday I would love to have that be the set of a production of the play. How close is the tree that you saw last night to what I had envisioned? You have to understand that the production is really an ensemble effort. The biggest laughs, the biggest audience reactions in it actually come from actor-generated moments. For example, the girls running around the building: Betsy [Hermia] and Bre [Sudia, Helena] came up with that idea and asked if we could try it. And the audience just absolutely howled. The long sword was Snug the Joiner's inspiration. Our props department brought all the wooden swords so we could pick one for Bottom to use, and Snug saw it and asked us to keep that one for a while in rehearsals. He broached the idea to the cast, and it worked beautifully. And much of the pantomime that Puck does with the Imps was all generated by Ben Charles and those two little boys. My original intent (thank goodness they didn't let me do it!) was to have sixteen children who were to be involved in every moment of the play [laughter]. I had also asked for a set of identical twins for Puck, and I got them! We've only got one of them here today [laughter]. When Puck says he'll put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes, I wanted him to run off, and an identical twin dressed exactly the same way with a flower would run on from the opposite side of the stage [laughter]. I couldn't do that, but they got me a wonderful Puck who fills the entire theatre [applause]. That gimmick was not nearly as successful as what Ben has been able to do. I wanted a show for a six-year-old's first visit to a Shakespeare play. I hope you had fun with it [applause]. I had such a great time.

**Flachmann:** Thanks Fred. We're off to a terrific start. Speaking of children peeking through the trees, Kym, I wonder if you could talk about working with two of your own children in the show.

**Mellen:** Sure. One of the fairies, the one who acts like Peter Pan, Moth, that's my nine-year-old, Ellie, and then the little changeling child is actually my daughter Brookie. She just turned seven last Friday. Matt Mueller [Lysander] came to her McDonald's birthday party [laughter].

*Mueller:* I had a Happy Meal. It was awesome [laughter].

*Mellen:* People ask whether it's difficult to act with your children on stage. Are there discipline problems? No, there haven't been thus far. You may not realize that there are people who are hired to watch the children backstage. They are officially called "child wranglers" [laughter]. The children themselves have been quite professional. They bring all that child-like wonder, spontaneity, energy, and puckishness to the stage, but they are also professional in the sense that they each have their cue cards, and they knew their lines before we did. In fact, they know all our lines now.

*Robinson:* And they'll correct you if you're not right [laughter].

*Mellen:* If Fred's goal was to provide a magical experience for a six-year-old in the play, multiply that by one hundred for these children, who are acting in the play because they believe in the magic. They show up early, and they race to get into their costumes. They have no complaints about being here an hour before the show to do their dance call. To them, it's a joy and a pleasure to hang around these other professionals whom they love so much, to enter into their world of make believe and imagination, to play with one another. They made instant friendships with each other in the rehearsal room, and I think that shows up on stage. All the girls have huge crushes on Elijah Alexander [Theseus/Oberon]. They'll do anything to get "daddy's" attention. They make him bracelets and buttons and cookies and brownies. And then they love "Uncle Max" [Robinson], as they call him back stage, who bribes them with dollar bills and treats to do their lines correctly and to not talk over his lines [laughter]. Because a few of their performances have grown exponentially, and it's not fun when children upstage you [laughter and applause]. Right, Max?

*Robinson:* A well-known axiom in theater is never to work with animals or children on stage because they are unpredictable, but the experience here has been so good. Incorporating the kids and making them feel, like you said, a part of the whole process and the whole family helps everyone really get a joy out of doing this play. And, yes, you have to keep on top of them, as you have to keep on top of any actor. And sometimes I have bribed them [laughter]. I've given them dollar bills; I've given them little medals. What else have I given them?

*Mellen:* You threaten them [laughter].

*Robinson:* I would never do that [laughter]! But they are certainly intrigued with this grown man putting on all this makeup and these crazy teeth, and they always say, "Can I pull off your tail?" It's a great experience for them to enter into this whole magical realm of theatre.

*Flachmann:* That's excellent. Thank you. I want to get Betsy and Matt talking about the wonderful lovers' scenes that Fred had mentioned earlier. I don't know if it's possible to parcel this out, but how much of each scene was Fred's idea, how much was your idea, and how much is strictly driven by the text? Feel free to answer any part of that question [laughter].

*Mueller:* What I think is so lovely about this production is that it's all textually driven. It was a lot of fun, because Fred had a very clear idea of what this production would look like, feel like, and sound like. So we had a definite structure going in, and once we got the structure down, we were all allowed to play around within it and figure out what was funny and what worked and where this could all go. So it was an ensemble piece.

*Flachmann:* Betsy?

*Mugavero:* I think we're also constantly feeding off what the audience is giving us. We all had a relationship in the rehearsal room, and we brought it out here on stage, but it wasn't until the audience arrived that we were really able to see what works. And Fred has supported everything that we wanted to do, which has been really nice.

*Flachmann:* Do you enjoy sleeping on stage during intermission? I'll bet you guys have some stories about that?

*Mugavero:* We do have people who try to talk to us [laughter]. They say, "psssst" [laughter]. Am I going to turn around and say "yes" when I'm lying there [laughter]? I did hear a young child say when the lights came up for intermission, "This is the best show ever!" And we both went "yeah" [laughter and applause]!

*Adams:* You have to understand that Matt is a member of Actors' Equity, and he has to have his rest time by contract, so we were nervous about how long he's on stage. He's supposed to have some down time, some rest time. I wanted them sleeping on stage. I didn't want to break for intermission earlier because we have a build coming to that moment, and to stop in the middle of

that whole episode with the lovers and then try to resume it, I just thought that would be suicide. But my bladder says you need an intermission [laughter].

*Flachmann:* Thanks for that, Fred. You heard it here folks [laughter].

*Mueller:* As long as I sleep in the approved Equity position, then it's fine for me to do it [laughter].

*Flachmann:* You guys are sharing all kinds of secrets today, aren't you [laughter]? Ben, would you talk about the relationship between Puck and Oberon?

*Charles:* Of course. There's such a rich relationship between Puck and Oberon, and the wonderful thing about this play is that it can be interpreted in so many different ways. When you meet Puck, you find that he serves as a jester to Oberon, so that's his primary function. Working with Elijah has been such a treat. And then the switch from Puck to Philostrate is always fun for me because I get to put clothes back on [laughter]. Puck is always running around, and Philostrate is very rigid and stuffy. He observes more than he participates, which is especially enjoyable during the play-within-a-play at the end when we get to watch all the different "bits" every night.

*Flachmann:* Speaking about adding new "bits" every night, let's get Max's response to that [laughter].

*Robinson:* Well, I think Fred was very gracious in allowing a lot of this to be so vaudevillian, which I think Shakespeare probably intended. We never know where the audience is going to be each night during the "Pyramus and Thisby" scene. Some nights are just fantastic: We have to almost purposely stop them from laughing so we can go on with the show [laughter]. It's wonderful to collaborate with Rhett [Guter], who plays Thisby, because we really have fun in the dressing room just thinking about the scene. We'll get together and say, let's try just pausing one second more before we come up with that next line [laughter]. This is the craftsmanship of comedy, comic timing, which I've always found fascinating. So you will never see the same performance. That's the beauty of live theater. It's happening now, at this moment, so the performance you saw will never be seen again. Oh, there may be variations on it, but the show you saw had its own peculiar stamp of identity. And some nights we come back stage and say well, that didn't get as big a laugh as the night before, so let's tinker with it.

You've heard the phrase "milking a laugh," but that's just a matter of taste. How much do you milk a laugh, how much do you extend it with a look or a gesture? Sometimes I've joked with Rhett that there's "milking" and there's "dairy farming" [laughter].

**Flachmann:** That's lovely, Max. While you have the mic, could you talk about the transition from Bottom into the Ass? You had a little help with the dentures, right?

**Robinson:** Fred came up with the idea, and I went to a dentist in town and had him make a specialized set of upper dentures to slip in, very comfortably, for Bottom to get that big buck-toothed, "horsey" look, and doing that automatically makes you speak in a very distinctive way [laughter], kind of goofy, ya' know [laughter]. And so that was half the battle already, putting in those artificial teeth.

**Flachmann:** You have the teeth, but also the change in your body movements and gait.

**Robinson:** Fred decided we didn't want to go with something papier-mâché for the head of a donkey, because you need to see the actor's facial expressions. To help create the role, I looked at videos of donkeys and horses, especially the way they move. The costume puts you in a certain posture, and that posture makes you walk with a specific cadence, and so you take on some aspects of that character. You give an indication of horsiness and how they shake their heads.

**Flachmann:** It's starting right now, ladies and gentlemen [laughter]. It's happening right here on stage [laughter].

**Robinson:** Hee Haw. Hee Haw. O no, it's coming over me again [laughter]. When we are doing Pyramus, Kym and I have this little moment—didn't I see you someplace before [laughter]? You look awfully familiar.

**Mellen:** I'm strangely attracted to you. I don't know why [laughter].

**Robinson:** The whole scenario is so fascinating because we decided this fits in with the nature of dreaming. What's a dream? When do our dreams invade our so-called "reality"?

**Flachmann:** That was added late, wasn't it, and with Fred's permission, of course.

**Robinson:** Didn't we have permission [laughter]?

**Mellen:** We had the audience's permission, so I guess that's what counted [laughter].

*Robinson:* But that's the great thing about live theater—it grows over the course of a run. It would be fascinating if you saw it opening night and then saw the show closing night to see what had changed, what had grown.

*Flachmann:* This is the way the script becomes flesh. These wonderful actors and a great director make all this happen.

*Adams:* Shakespeare puts into Bottom's mouth, when he is the ass, numerous moments for braying. You can literally feel them: naaavery, naaaay, a good naaaybor. Shakespeare obviously wrote in all those signals, and Max is the kind of actor that the minute he saw them, he grabbed them. Everything from the very beginning is generated by Shakespeare's words. That's the kind of writing we get to work with, and we don't even have to pay royalties [laughter].

*Flachmann:* Right. Kym, I wonder if you could talk about your transition from Hippolyta to Titania. The costumes help, don't they?

*Mellen:* O, the costumes help tremendously. From the moment we saw the costume renderings for the play, it was pretty clear what was going on. A good designer can do two thirds of your acting for you from the moment you step on stage. Just the way you are dressed gives the audience a window into the time period, the class, the opulence, the arrogance, the personality, everything. That's especially helpful for Hippolyta. I wear four different costumes. Wait a minute—I can't remember; I'd have to ask my dresser [laughter]. I just go back stage and get naked, and three people dress me [laughter]. But Hippolyta doesn't really have that many lines scripted by Shakespeare, so a lot of that character's arc in her relationship with Theseus is predominately non-verbal, and much of that is created through the costuming. There's a warrior-like, masculine energy to her; she has been conquered and has agreed to marry Theseus, but that doesn't mean he has her respect yet. As the show goes on, she gets progressively freer, more skin shows, more vulnerability, and the fabrics begin flowing more, so the audience is being influenced by the changes that her character is going through. Our job as actors is to respond to all those clues within the text, but also to be open to clues that come from everywhere else, and a lot of that is through the costumes.

*Flachmann:* Great! Matt and Betsy, you guys also go through character changes in the forest. It seems to me there's

a kind of alchemy in that world, a stripping down physically and metaphorically. What is it about moving into the woods that allows you to become different people, to find yourselves, if I may say that?

*Mugavero:* Well, we run away to be together, but Hermia still wants to be virtuous. And even though they are doing this totally rogue thing by running away, she still has some rules: She wants to be married before she sleeps with him. And when he's not there anymore, the rest of the time I'm fighting to get him back. When I realize that he doesn't love me anymore, I'm still fighting for him to recognize that I am the person he wants to be with. And we have a really nice moment where he hesitates for a second before he says, "I hate you." And I think that keeps me going all the way to the end of the play.

*Adams:* Yes, that's one of the most crucial moments in the play. That's something Matt found in the text himself, and I sat there with tears in my eyes because only a consummate actor could discover that. When Lysander says, "I do hate thee and love Helena" the way Matt did, it just scored a bull's eye.

*Mueller:* I can't take full credit for that. When the magic happens, that's what changes everything. When you get into the forest, it's very "Disney." You get in the forest, and the birds start talking to you. Disney, Shakespeare: It's all the same thing [laughter].

*Flachmann:* There's that wonderful moment, too, when Helena loses her sleeve, which is the first stripping off of costumes. I can just feel the audience thinking, "Oops, the costume malfunctioned." It's a Janet Jackson moment [laughter]. Let's also talk about this magnificent tree with 44,000 leaves. Any challenges in working with the tree?

*Actors:* No [laughter]!

*Adams:* Yes, there were [laughter]. When we first got the tree, everybody got tangled in it. Not just the fairies with their antennas, but everybody else got caught in it, too. There are places you cannot go through the tree because lights are intertwined in the leaves. You go into one of those, and you hang yourself [laughter]!

*Charles:* During the final dress, I came out for my last speech, and the first fairy's headdress was stuck in the tree. All of a sudden everyone starts laughing, and I'm thinking either this is



going really well or it's going horribly [laughter]. I had no idea she was stuck the whole time like a fly that couldn't get out [laughter]. Occasionally, I'll be observing, and the little fairies will get stuck, and Kim will have to come undo them, or they'll undo each other. It's lots of fun [laughter]. When the wind blows through the tree, it just makes the set come alive in a way you don't see happen very often. It's a really great interactive piece of scenery.

*Mellen:* Another wonderful thing about the set is those LED lights embedded in the tree. I don't know if everyone noticed, but they glow green or blue or white depending on whose magic is operating on stage at each specific moment.

*Adams:* The tree begins to glow when Puck arrives. His magic turns the tree green. Whenever Titania is on stage, the tree turns blue, and then for the finale, when all the magic cuts loose, the tree turns green, white, and blue. I think that was the way Donna [Ruzika], our lighting designer, set it up. Originally it was just going to have white lights, but when Donna found out they could change colors, she said who in the heck is going to want white when I can have any color I want [laughter]. We even had red, but we didn't use it.

*Flachmann:* The tree helps you solve a classic problem in the script, which is what to do with Titania after she falls asleep and before she wakes up to Bottom's singing.

*Adams:* The tree was a bit of a problem because it has to swag and unswag, and it cut off much of our acting area. But what the tree adds is that it softened the show for me. It gave a fabric to the show, a "flutter," as Ben said. The leaves are sheer chiffon, so when we light them properly, we can illuminate Titania's bower through the tree during Bottom's singing.

*Flachmann:* The tree swags open, and the slip stage comes down, which is a wonderful way to reveal Titania when she awakens—always a difficult challenge in productions of the play. I wonder if you could talk about the music, too, which was composed by Barry Funderburg, our new music designer.

*Adams:* Barry orchestrated the entire thing. That isn't some symphony playing it: That was Barry doing every bit of the mixing on his own as he shaped the Mendelssohn themes to work for the fairies, Titania, Oberon, and the rustics. Mendelssohn composed the music at the age of fourteen for his twelve-year-old sister, Fanny, for her birthday. That's how the Midsummer Night's

Dream suite came about. It just lends itself so well to the play [applause].

**Mellen:** I think there are two iconic moments where the music especially serves the action of the play. One is the fairies' dance, which in Mendelssohn is performed by a women's chorus and two soprano soloists. I love that magical moment, the little fairy song. And the other is the wedding march. That's the most frequently played piece of music in the world. Every time I'm backstage and I hear that, I feel really excited, like I just married this man. And I think everyone in the audience feels that, too, because the piece is so familiar.

**Flachmann:** I wonder if anyone would like to talk about the value of dreaming in the play? Ben?

**Charles:** When you dream, you get to play out events that aren't possible in real life, which can be very satisfying. It's something we all need to do. It's like a playground for your imagination, and I feel that's very important.

**Mellen:** This is a comedy about magic and love, but dreams can also be quite frightening. That's how our subconscious works out the perversities and violence and inconsistencies in character and everything else we don't understand. And that's one of the reasons I enjoy *Midsummer* so much. Even as a child, when I was drawn to it, it was because it would be so nice to blame the inconsistencies of our emotional lives on fairies. How many of us have fallen in love with asses, and we don't get it until we wake up one morning and all of a sudden turn around and say, "How I do loath his presence now" [laughter]?

**Adams:** Remember, Hermia has been sentenced to death. The father says, "If she doesn't marry this yokel, I want her dead." And that's how we start this "comedy." Almost everybody in Shakespeare's audience knew that the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta would culminate in Hippolyta's death. She would die in childbirth producing Hippolytus, who would eventually be killed because of Phaedra. The Theseus/Hippolyta love affair is one of the great tragedies of Greek history, and the Elizabethan audience knew that.

**Flachmann:** But that's another entire play.

**Adams:** Yes, it's another play which we are not going to do next year [laughter]. But Shakespeare has taken two fairly dark

moments, which we get to address because it's a dream, because we are eventually going to wake up.

*Flachmann:* All comedies go from bad fortune to good fortune or from problem to solution, so that's the progress of the play, and it's part of the joy at the end that we get to celebrate with the characters, whose lives are better because of their journey through the forest. One last question, if I may: What were the most challenging scenes to do, either from the standpoint of the director or from any of the actors?

*Adams:* For me, the most difficult was "I am invisible and will overhear their conference," which Elijah has made it into a joke. He waves his hand and says, "Now I am invisible." He milks it, but he made it work [applause].

*Mellen:* For me, the most difficult is the first scene, since it starts off so seriously, and the audience doesn't know the mythological significance of these characters. Laying out that groundwork is tough.

*Flachmann:* Matt's got the first funny line, don't you think? His "Do you marry him" gives everybody permission to laugh.

*Adams:* And then Hermia squeals, and we got 'em [laughter and applause].

*Flachmann:* Ben, your role is so athletic, and you do such a great job of it, are any moments particularly tough?

*Charles:* Actually, the most challenging piece of the play was working on the speech where I come back and tell Oberon that Titania has fallen in love with the Ass. It's always a challenge to figure out how to do that because I'm giving information to him that the audience already knows, and so figuring out a way that's entertaining and fresh is always difficult. I loved Fred's suggestion of acting it out, which really makes the speech come alive for me.

*Flachmann:* Thanks. Matt?

*Mueller:* The lovers' fight was a bear to put together, which it should be, but it's a lot of fun. We have a great time.

*Mugavero:* I think the most challenging moment for me was right in the middle of the play, when everyone is having fun and laughing, and I have to come on with Demetrius and yell at him. It's hard every night to be the person who says, "You killed my lover, you killed him, you killed him. Right? Didn't you, didn't you kill him?" [laughter] I ask him four or five times in those speeches

if he did it, and that's challenging as an actor because I have to really believe that he may have killed him.

**Flachmann:** Well, we certainly couldn't see any of those "problems" in the production because you solved them so beautifully. Sadly, we're out of time. We want to thank Mr. Adams and the actors very much for talking with us today [applause]. And a special thank you to our wonderful audience. We couldn't do any of this without you. Thanks for helping us make the magic of theatre come alive here every summer [applause].