

# British Theatre Guide

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## A Midsummer Night's Dream

William Shakespeare, adapted and directed by Ian Talbot  
Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park  
(2006)

Until last season, when [Twelfth Night](#) stole the limelight, Shakespeares *Dream* had for years been a London summer fixture at the Open Air Theatre. So three cheers for a return to tradition and this revival of Ian Talbots boisterously enjoyable 2004 production.

It is set in an Edwardian high summer of blazers, white togs and camisoles: perfect for family entertainment except for the running time that will detain you until not far short of 11 o'clock and which may cause parents anxiety about last trains.

This unhurried performance starts with the Rude Mechanicals erecting a white roped barrier across what looks like a golf-course green surrounded by tall Regents Park trees: a beautifully manicured lawn complete with small grassy hillocks to the left and right (design by Kit Surrey). Meanwhile John Hodgkinsons Bottom, with an air of professional hauteur and in an immensely long overcoat, busily mows the greensward.

All this is in preparation for the entry of James Wallaces bemused Theseus and Billie Claire-Wright as his betrothed Amazon queen, making their way gingerly down flights of steps cut into a steeply rising sweep of lawn; a dominating feature with a slippery grass surface that will also later prove to be a secret home for Puck (Gerard Carey) and his punk girlfriend (Selina Chilton), as well as a hazardous switchback ride for limber fairies and the four young lovers.

As Titania, Sirine Saba has carried over much of her fractious Katherina from the [Shrew](#), a performance which sits at odds with the erotic elegance of Steven Pacey's austere portrayal of Oberon. And I could have done with slightly less giggling and rushing about by the fairies in bald wigs, dressed like Hogarth's ragamuffins. But vocally they are an absolute joy in Catherine Jayes gorgeous *a capella* settings of the verses.

They also create one of the funnier moments of the evening as they tease Sheridan Smith's prim, long-suffering Hermia before tugging her offstage on a picnic rug; a scene only capped by the sight of her being unceremoniously thrust into real shrubbery at the side of the stage by Dominic Marsh as her erstwhile, otherwise gentle lover Lysander. Hard to believe there will not be some bruises before the end of the run.

The two other lovers are David Partridge's energetic Demetrius and Summer Strallen as Helena who skilfully combines comedy, pathos and dancerly grace (no doubt drawing on her impressive list of credits in London musicals), joining with Smith and Marsh in brilliantly staged and choreographed squabbles (movement by Gillian Gregory) that are the comedy high spots of the evening.

Incidentally, the perfectly synchronised effects by sound designers Gregory Clarke and Colin Pink, add enormously to the impact of the interplay between fairies and lovers.

I am not sure that Hodgkinson is a natural born Bottom, and at times he seems overwhelmed by the sheer bulk of the ass's head, which robs him of his gift for sophisticated, Cleeze-like deadpan comedy. I seem to recall that when Russ Abbott played the role two years ago he was less encumbered by a whiskery effect, mostly leaving his face in view. But there's a neat visual gag as Bottom's flowing brown overcoat is draped over a crouching fairy to create a four-legged pantomime horse, complete with Titania riding bareback.

Some day I hope to see the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude played dead straight, or at least poker-faced, although I can recall an actor in the Thisbe role once getting laughs from a seriously feminine interpretation. With witty costumes and inventive by-play there is no chance of that here, as Hodgkinson mercilessly milks the amdram gags, while Snug the Joiner (Leo Conville) hands out his business cards to the nobs at the palace during the performance.

Finally as a break from tradition the nobles make up the numbers in the Burgomask morris dance, before Puck nicely rounds off proceedings with his brief Epilogue on a bare stage.

But as I have written on more than one occasion, reviewing shows at the Open Air is almost beside the point. On warm nights the magic of play and performance, excellent food and drink in the bars, the stage lights gradually coming up as the sun sets, not to mention leafy susurrations, bird song and cool zephyrs, all offer lucky Londoners all they could wish for, for their own dreamy midsummer night of civilised entertainment.

**Reviewer:** [John Thaxter](#)