

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Directed by Michael Hoffman

Theseus - David Strathairn
Hippolyta - Sophie Marceau
Philostrate - John Sessions
Egeus - Bernard Hill
Lysander - Dominic West
Demetrius - Christian Bale
Hermia - Anna Friel
Helena - Calista Flockhart
Peter Quince - Roger Rees
Nick Bottom - Kevin Kline
Francis Flute - Sam Rockwell
Snug - Gregory Jbara
Tom Snout - Bill Irwin
Robin Starveling - Max Wright
Oberon - Rupert Everett
Titania - Michelle Pfeiffer
Puck - Stanley Tucci

Michael Hoffman's 1999 version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has everything that an audience of the 90's demands: sex, comedy and a wrestling match in a pool of mud. Perhaps the only element of the film that is true to Shakespeare's original play is the language. The language, at that, is overshadowed by the action of the film for the sake of those in the audience that are not well versed in the language of 16th century Elizabethan England. However, not all is lost in the transformation from Shakespeare to Hollywood; Shakespeare may have preferred film to the stage because of what can be added to a film that can not be adequately portrayed on a stage. Perhaps the most daring change made to the original play is the setting.

The movie opens with Mendelssohn's overture while the setting is explained in these words:

The village of Monte Athena in Italy at the turn of the 19th century. Necklines are high. Parents are rigid. Marriage is seldom a matter of love.

The good news: The bustle is in its decline, allowing for the meteoric rise of that newfangled creation, the bicycle.

Is this the most daring plot switch by Hoffman? Perhaps. The addition of the bicycle creates a unique opportunity for the action to move quicker for today's audience of short attention spans that cannot possibly sit attentively through three hours of a language they do not understand. The lovers are now able to chase each other on wheel instead of on foot which makes the action move at a much faster pace, and creates a wonderful comedic scene where Puck has his first encounter with a bicycle and begins to prod at it as if it were at any moment going to strike at him.

The first scene of the film moves to the house of Theseus where his wedding is being prepared for by his household. We encounter two very busy dwarves that seem to be stealing things instead of helping as they go unnoticed with a wheelbarrow of miscellaneous items, including a phonograph bell. We can be almost assured that they are fairies because of their apparent ability of invisibility and their constant companion of glowing gold dots darting in the air around their head for which modern computer technology has created the stereotypical look of fairies. This deduction is later confirmed in the scene where Titania is with Bottom and he shows the fairies how a phonograph works having used one himself earlier in the film. These fairies seem to have the ability to shift size from the full size of a human down to the size where they could fit into a cup (II.I.47-50)

Theseus is then seen overlooking the preparations with satisfaction. He takes a rose to surprise Hippolyta while she is listening to music. She seems pleased by the flower but quickly turns away. Sophie Marceau plays well a very fickle female going from love to spite and back to love again almost at the drop of a dime and continues this tradition throughout the film. David Strathairn plays the regal demeanor of a Duke very well, but the Shakespearean language becomes his downfall. He does not say the lines horribly and completely unconvincing, they just seem to come out uncomfortably and with a lot of effort. This does not ruin his effectiveness as Theseus, Duke of (Monte) Athens, but it does provide an obstacle.

The scene after this is when Hermia's father, Egeus presents Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander before the Duke demanding the law upon Hermia if she does not consent to marry Demetrius. Bernard Hill plays the part of Egeus well. Egeus is played as a very consistent character who is mad to begin with, willing to give his daughter's life for his pride and later still does not approve after his daughter is married and storms out of the wedding celebration to show his disapproval.

Lysander and Demetrius are played straight to the character with little interpretation. Lysander is very bold and defiant; Demetrius is prideful and a bit smarmy. In one scene, however, Lysander is given the love potion on his eyes instead of Demetrius and breaks down crying when Helena rebukes him, much like how Helena acts when Demetrius rebukes her. Feminists would love the character of Hermia because she is strong and bold in standing up to Theseus when she rebukes her father's demands of her; she is much like Lysander's character. She refuses to give into any man's will and chooses to fight for her love and never backs down and only shows weakness through tears when she thinks all is lost.

Helena comes into the scene as she stands outside of Theseus' palace calling to Demetrius while he talking with Theseus and Egeus. Calista Flockhart proves herself well in this film as she accurately portrays the pathetic Helena. Helena as shown in this film is definitely the epitome of pathetic but only made pathetic at the hands of Demetrius from his constant rebuking. It is because of him that she looks down upon her appearance and her demeanor wishing that she were like Hermia so that Demetrius would not look down upon her as he does. She really is a pathetic character and is really comes out through the course of the movie as she chases after Demetrius, and even while he is chasing after her. However, the terrible hair extensions she has attached to her head are very distracting.

The next scene takes us into the city where the players are meeting for the first time to receive the scripts for the play that they are planning for Theseus wedding day. The first met are Snug and Starveling, then there is a panoramic shot where we see Lysander purchasing a bicycle, no doubt for his plight into the woods. Then we see a man walking with a donkey while the camera pans to the spot where Nick Bottom is sitting in a cafe. The sound a donkey "hee-haw"ing make this bit of irony and foreboding especially effective. The interpretation of their meeting place being outside in the street compared to Quince's workshop as it is written in the original play seems inconsequential to the change made in the overall setting of the film and can be easily dismissed. Having them meet outside gives way to more action. There is a sub-plot being developed as Bottom's wife is looking all over the streets for him while he is avoiding her. This sub-plot is not developed much and is hard to decipher why it is put into the film only to say that it is clear that Bottom and his wife do not have a good relationship. There is some attention given to the fact that Bottom pays a lot of attention to young pretty women in the

street. Perhaps his womanizing character traits help the audience understand why Bottom would cheat on his wife and have sex with Titania--because he is prone to unfaithfulness. It seems sad in this world but it does seem these days that no reason is given or needed for a person to commit adultery. People fall in and out of love all the time; it's no big deal, right? Well, Shakespeare was not exactly a virtuous man, so that can be dismissed as well.

The "players" meet, scripts are handed out and the amateur actor Bottom wants to play all of the parts. Kevin Kline is absolutely wonderful in this role as Bottom. Kline, who jumps at the chance to use grand gestures, is well fitted for the part and interprets the character of Bottom magnificently. However, Bottom becomes very pitiful when two kids dump full bottles of red wine on him to get him to stop showing off to the people passing on the street no doubt for comedic effect. Bottom becomes a ridiculed character and the audience cannot help but feel sorry for him. This part of the scene chosen by Hoffman also shows the wonderful friendship of Bottom and the other players, especially Quince.

From the players we move to back to Helena who decides that she is going to coax Demetrius into the wood by telling him the Hermia has gone to elope with Lysander thereby securing him to her.

In the next scene the audience is introduced to Robin Goodfellow the puck (a.k.a. Hobgoblin). Stanley Tucci does a wonderful job all around playing the mischievous Puck, but perhaps he is not quite mischievous enough. Pucks belong in the same mythical classification as fairies and are sometimes characterized with the same physical features as a satyr having a goat's legs, a human torso and horns. Robin seems to be one of these satyr-type pucks. The spirit that recognizes Robin Goodfellow, after having wondered over hill and dale, seems very tired, which

is convincing of how one might be after traveling all over the world faster than the moon's sphere. The two of them drink until they are drunk and Puck concludes the scene by peeing on the wall, which seems to be another addition of modern comedy which the scene could have done just as well without.

As they two of them part ways Titania comes in with her band of fairies as rocks rent, lakes boil and Oberon enters out of nowhere. The world seems to be falling apart because of the quarrel and contention that exists in their relationship. It is made very clear by Michelle Pfeiffer, who plays a wonderful Titania, that Oberon has come because his past lover Hippolyta is to be married. Again, the language proves to be a barrier to those who are not familiar with Shakespeare and probably would not have picked it up however beautifully Michelle Pfeiffer delivers her lines. Oberon rebukes her for she does not have much room to talk because he knows of her love for Theseus. Rupert Everett does a wonderful acting job as Oberon but at some parts of the film seems much more serious and melancholy and at times almost pouting as he tries to convince Titania to give him the changeling boy. The film does a marvelous job of making in ordinary wood seem very magical with tons of glitter, bright colors and camera tricks to give the fairies an appearance of being able to disappear and reappear out of thin air. Unfortunately, many Rupert Everett's lines are lost in his inability to open his mouth wide enough when he talks which inhibiting good diction and prohibits the audience from understanding a word he is saying. It is probably a good thing that the actors use enough gestures to make the scene understandable.

After Puck has left to encircle the globe looking for this flower that has become purple with love's wound, the first confrontation between Demetrius and Helena occur with Oberon

standing watch. This is the first part of the lover's chase in which they ride after each other, which makes for a much more interesting chase than if they were running after each other on foot. Their quarrel seems very genuine and Helena a very convincing young girl in love with a man that does not return the love as she plays with the horn on his bicycle and is very giddy in his presence. He rebukes her very plainly to his face and she just doesn't get it but loves him even more when he mistreats her and continues to ride after him on her bicycle until she falls off and almost gives up but convinces herself that she still has a chance and continues to ride after him.

Oberon swears that by the end of the night, Helena will flee Demetrius, which is a bit foreboding. He makes his intentions known when Puck returns within the next few seconds. His first intention is to make Titania fall in love with some wild thing that will preoccupy her while he steals the changeling boy. While he is doing this, he entreats Puck to find Demetrius and put the potion on his eyes so that the first thing he will see is Helena.

We next see the scene of Titania and her fairies recessing from their duties. Here, the audience is shown some of the strange creatures of the fairy kingdom and perhaps some of the skin and breasts that could have been left out. Oberon enters again for another speech that is barely understandable. The fairy's fascination with things of the mortal world is portrayed well as the two dwarves from the beginning come back with their wheelbarrow full of odds and ends. Oberon is able to get near to Titania by giving a mirror to the fairy standing guard.

The next scene is of Lysander and Hermia as they are wandering through the woods to get to his aunt's house and choose to lie on the ground for the night. A lot of emphasis is put on sex as Lysander strips naked and chooses that he would rather lie with Hermia as he has now stripped down to her under petticoat and girdle. A lot of emphasis was put on the ironic statement of

Lysander's when he said, "Amen, amen to that fair prayer, say I; and then end life when I end loyalty!" This was beautifully spoken and understood so that it was not lost to the audience.

Puck reenters the scene riding a giant tortoise when he sees Lysander sleeping on the ground, mistakes him for Demetrius and then catches a glimpse of Lysander's bicycle thinking it is a monster, he prods at it with a stick. This is probably one of the funnier parts of the film because the audience knows that it will to attack him, but also knows that he has never seen a bicycle before and Tucci does a wonderful job acting like someone who is seeing one for the first time. He does his duty and rides off into the forest on Lysander's bike, wearing his clothes. As he exits, the other lovers come into the scene where Hermia and Lysander are sleeping.

Helena, unable to keep up with Demetrius, stays a while complaining to herself about her looks and how much she envies Hermia. She spies Lysander and wakes him to be sure that he is not dead. Of course, this is the part of the play where everything begins to go wrong and Lysander falls in love with Helena who begins to truly feel what it feels like to be Hermia. He rebukes Hermia, steals her bicycle and rides after Helena girded about with Hermia's dress. Hermia wakes disappointedly to no Lysander and no dress.

The action continues with the players coming to the wood to rehearse their 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. Many things go wrong beginning with Bottom being worried about the ladies being afraid of the killing. Other problems include bringing in moonshine and a wall, which are easily remedied. Puck, riding by on the bicycle, sees the men rehearsing and decides to have a little fun; with a little glitter and magic, Bottom becomes an ass. The other men flee for fear and Bottom now underneath the bed of Titania, begins singing and wakes her.

Oberon's plan is put into effect and Titania falls in love with the ass. Kevin Kline's costume at this point is not a full donkey head, but rather just the ears, a little more hair on the head, much more hair on the face and what seems to be a flatter nose. Bottom becomes frightened by the strange creatures in the fairy kingdom and tries to leave but is forced to stay with Titania. Bottom enjoys his stay with the fairies as he is given much attention by the fairies that seem to know that he is an ugly monstrous mortal but do what she instructs them. Puck tells Oberon of his dealings with Bottom and seems very pleased. Puck also tells him that he found the Athenian (who he thought was Demetrius) and that is done as well.

Oberon becomes very displeased when he finds that Puck was mistaken and placed the love juice in the wrong Athenian's eyes. This seems to fit the character of the Oberon in this version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but Puck only lives to make Oberon smile and it seems that Oberon should have enjoyed the peril that these lovers are going through now. Nevertheless, he is displeased and decides to put the love potion on Demetrius' eyes himself while Puck fetches Helena to bring her to Demetrius.

In the next scene is Bottom as he has gotten ready to lay with Titania and in an almost ceremonial manner meets Titania. Too much emphasis is placed on sex here, but that is all this scene is about. Perhaps not as much emphasis is needed.

After this scene the audience is taken back to where Demetrius lay asleep as Helena enter trailed by Lysander who is now crying, begging and pleading with Helena for her to love him. Lysander at this point resembles much of what Helena was like chasing after Demetrius. Lysander becomes very pathetic. Demetrius wakes to see Helena and begins to love tokens to her which she rebukes thinking that they have both set against her to mock her. This is the part

of the film that gets very physical and would be very pleasing to those in the audience that love to see a fight and may seem unnecessary to an audience of true Shakespeare lovers who have come to see the latest interpretation of a Shakespearean classic. The men chase after Helena while they fight with one another as Hermia enters the scene not understanding why Lysander left her. Lysander rebukes her to her amazement and Helena continues to believe that they are mocking her and rebukes Hermia as well for joining the men. The bicycles prove to be another source of comedy as Helena tries to ride away and the men hold the rear of the bicycle up so that no matter how hard she tries to flee, she goes nowhere. They drop her, Demetrius runs to her aid and Lysander scorns Hermia for the last time before she goes after Helena for stealing Lysander's heart. Insults are traded between Helena and Hermia she goes after Helena and throws her into a pool of mud. To add insult to injury, Lysander keeps Hermia from coming after Helena again by throwing her back into the mud pool as she is getting out. The men grow ever furious and decide that they will fight each other in the wood. Helena runs off to protect herself from Hermia's wrath and Hermia is left astonished to pluck herself out of the mud.

Oberon entreats Puck to make sure Lysander and Demetrius do not meet each other in the wood and once they have been separated and fall asleep, crush the antidote flower into Lysander's eyes to take from him the cursed love potion. While Puck does this, Oberon plans to go back to Titania to get her changeling boy.

In the next scene after Puck has gotten the lovers where they need to be, we are taken back to Titania and Bottom where they have been up all night and have completely worn out the other fairies who are sick and tired of Titania and this ass. Oberon undoes the love potion in her eyes, and they make love; back in the fairy kingdom, we see fairies examining and playing with

bicycle parts as other naked fairies washing the lover's clothes of the mud. Again, this is more nakedness that the film could have gone without.

The next scene takes us back to Theseus' property in the morning where a hunting party is heading into the woods where they come upon the lovers sleeping (naked) on the edge of the wood. Demetrius confesses that he no longer loves Hermia, but Helena instead. Theseus with the help of Hippolyta decides that the lovers will be married along side them and they ride back to Theseus' house.

In the next scene, Bottom is sleeping alone in Titania's bed, it drops down to the ground and Bottom is left, back to his normal self, pondering the things which occurred to him the night before. The question of whether Bottom was transformed to the small size of a fairy or if Titania was transformed to the large size of a human is answered when Bottom finds the crown that was on his head the night before which is now small enough to fit on his finger. It is safe to say that the fairies transformed him to their size. As Bottom ponders the night's events, he decides that it was a dream and wants Peter Quince to right a ballad of it for him to perform. It becomes less of a dream and more reality when he is walking through Theseus' garden and sees a stone statue that resembles Titania and becomes enthralled with it; he soon remembers what he is there to do and moves on.

We come to Theseus' house next at the wedding feast of the three couples. All is happy, except for Egeus. Theseus decides that they should see 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. The men are excited and nervous, as they are about to put on the play. The story of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' is much like the story of Romeo and Juliet. In this play within a play, many things go wrong: lines are forgotten, everyone laughs at flute and his discourse of Thisbe, words are mispronounced, the

moonshine is not able to shine into the play and must be played by a person, and the dog that comes with moonshine attacks Pyramus and is thrown into the audience. And although Pyramus steals the show with his melodrama and ad-libbing, perhaps the most poignant part of the discourse of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' is when Flute who is fed up with everyone's laughter, shows his true self by dropping his voice to the normal range and forgoing his wig to really concentrate on the drama of Thisbe finding her lover dead. The playing of Thisbe's death was quite moving and even produced a few tears. The play was very well done in this film. The players were given praise from the Duke for their performance. Their reaction to this note of acclaim was shown in two shots: one where the camera was focused on Flute and Bottom kissed his forehead smearing black beard make-up on his forehead before Quince tousled his hair, to a side shot of the exact same actions which just showed more of the players. Perhaps the editor of the film thought that no one would notice their poor attempt to put more shots of this scene in the movie. However, by no means did this small thing ruin the movie.

After this scene, the lovers go to bed and there are a few shots seen of them in bed together which was also unnecessary but is accepted by our society so the film producers were able to get away with it.

The players go home and make merry with drinks and bottom returns to his house of an unhappy marriage. Bottom is seen looking outside of his window where he sees some fairies, presumably the brightest one being Titania, and still remembers longingly the night he spent with her in a dream. The film ends with Puck walking down the street with a broom as is written in the original play.

All is well. The lovers are happy, 'Pyramus and Thisbe' is over and Titania and Oberon have quite quarreling. There are quite a few unanswered questions where the audience is left to assume the answer. Questions such as what exactly is the relationship between Bottom and his wife? What becomes of their marriage? Did his affair with Titania affect his feelings towards his wife? These are some of the questions that arise when a director puts into a film a character into a movie version of a play that has been around for over 400 years and does not sufficiently develop the character. There are no answers to these questions and perhaps the movie would have been better served without bringing Bottom's wife into it.

This movie adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was done very well. It does not entirely stay true to the original play--and who would expect it to? Shakespearean purists would hate this version, but it was adapted very well for a new generation. Some may argue that very little is left to the imagination when a play is put on film, but the combination of the Elizabethan English and the visual effects, made the action easy to follow except for a few places where the actors made their lines unclear. This version was made for the up and coming generation of the 90's. Things were added to make the film more entertaining and not quite so boring as some may see it. The lighting, the action, the story and the music made for a very enjoyable film. It is just too bad that it did not do better in the box office.

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