

WISCONSIN ACADEMY REVIEW SEPTEMBER 2001

MIDSUMMER in October An End of Season Bow

All good endings are beginnings. And all good beginnings are also ends. As we round the seasonal clock from the fulsome days of summer towards the dying days of fall, my thoughts return to one evening last October, one closing night, when Shakespeare -- and a theater's end-of-season ritual -- moved me, like "hot ice and wondrous strange snow, to startled contemplation and to tears.

It was October. We were freezing -- watching theater performed outside at night in Spring Green, Wisconsin. It was madness. Shakespeare would have loved it.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM had been running for four months. What had begun in the open air theater in June was closing in the open-air in October. Only there were hints of snow that night and had been frost several days in a row. It must have been taxing, even for those traditionally stalwart actors -- particularly for gossamer-clad Titania and for Puck, who, aside from an insect-like harness and beribboned capris, had almost nothing on.

At nine o'clock, despite the hour and freezing temperature, we in the audience were also stalwart. We were witnessing the last few moments of the last production of the season at American Player's Theatre (APT). Wife to that production's Peter Quince, (most earnest of the play's "rude mechanicals"), I was bundled in blankets over layers of clothes; I had vowed to endure and bear witness. As a Milwaukee theater producer, actor and playwright, I had seen and been a part of many final curtain calls. But I had never seen -- and had been warned not to miss -- the final moments of the season in Spring Green.

Many Shakespeare festivals, I had heard, have traditions marking the endings of seasons. Sometimes there are candle lighting rituals; sometimes actors are asked to recite their favorite passages from the canon. I had been told there was some ritual at APT, but exactly what I didn't know. If only, only it would be quick so we could all get home. The production was excellent (I had seen it before), but if the audience and players were like me, people would be very, very cold.

Ah. The play was nearly over; Puck, completing his final benediction, began his magical exit off into the blackness of the night. A short curtain call, whatever brief ritual was planned, and soon, I guessed, it would be done. Cars would be warmed. Snug bedrooms would soon bring closure to that night's bracing theater on the hill. The audience was expectant.

Just before the applause died down and before the crowds started surging out the aisles, a man leaped up onto the stage.

"I am the artistic director of APT," he began, his head emerging from the swaddling of a parka. He spoke briskly, energetically -- a good sign, for sure. I could feel the audience strain like a communal body trying to figure it out. What was he doing? Would he ask for money? Didn't that usually happen before a show?

"I would like to take this opportunity at the end of our season to acknowledge some people." What was this?

"Not least of all, the audience -- one of the heartiest audiences we know." A nice touch, and true enough; much laughter. Be quick, be quick -- we're cold; just let us all get home...

"Now before you exit, we would like to acknowledge those seen and unseen workers who brought the season at our theater to life. I would ask all those individuals to come on stage."

A moment of awkward silence. No movement to be seen.

Then, slowly a few people began to trickle onstage. There was the young woman in a headset that ran the backstage crew. Dressed in jeans (black, the color of all backstage workers), still rigged in earphones, she walked shyly on from offstage left. For the first time that evening -- or that summer -- the audience saw her at her work. Then the dresser emerged slowly from stage right -- baggy sweatshirt, cuffs gripped around fingers which must have been bone-cold. (She laced up bodices and fastened cuffs and waistbands for quick costume changes -- and often with magician's speed.) Two light booth operators approached the sacred space with reservation -- like shy fairies forced into the light. An administrator (and wife to a leading

actor) ascended the stage with her family, carrying a sleeping baby, unafraid to claim their space. Their other child, a four-year-old boy recently awakened, sat atop his actor father's shoulders. The family members regarded each other, half-embarrassed, half-amused, then hazarded a look out beyond the blinding lights. The boy stared at the thousand-strong audience, blinked and began a slow, enchanted smile.

More and more people approached the stage, beginning to walk more quickly. Administrative staff, backstage hands, box-office workers, spouses, actors from the other shows, children, they emerged from the crisp blackness of the Spring Green hillside into the pool of blazing light. Illumination reigned. Directors, back from other productions since their APT openings of months before, mounted the stage like returning heroes. Interns in mittens, wives in parkas, lovers visiting from New York... they gathered together like small waters to a swelling river, streaming on to form a cheerful, milling crowd. Smiling and seemingly self-conscious, they looked out into the faces of the monolithic audience, and the audience, no less confused and charmed, looked back.

There we all were together -- one night in October, in a circle of illumination, in a theater on a hill.

For some baffling reason, for me the moment was enormously moving. I overflowed with joyful tears.

Why this emotional response? My husband's part in the play? Though his work in the small role of Peter Quince was good, his participation was not commensurate with what was spilling over in my heart. Well, then, was it the joy of knowing that now that the season was over, he would soon be coming home? Yes, but there had to be more at work. Was it the beauty of witnessing a play about the woods on a lovely Wisconsin hillside? Yes, again -- but again, there had to be more. Was it Shakespeare's text? I guessed that much of the ritual's magic must go back to him. All I knew for certain was that a powerful chemistry had wrapped itself around my soul and was squeezing hard.

After the prolonged applause subsided, I stumbled up to join those lingering on stage. APT actors, many of them friends, looked at me with some curiosity (I must have had the look of someone shaken). I offered, by way of explanation, "I found it so... I don't know so... "

"So... what?" asked an actor.

"So... I don't know... So -- just -- moving."

"Did you?"

"Yeah," awkward pause. "Both. Both the play and the curtain call."

I tried to gather my thoughts. It was not, after all, some bloody tragedy. Half excusing, half reaching out for someone to understand, I said, "I think it has to do with all of you --" gesturing to a nearby clutch of performers, "and all of them," gesturing out to the now nearly empty house.

"Really?"

Then he and several others turned away to embrace fellow actors. I didn't blame them. After so long a stint together (five months), they all needed to say goodbye. Besides, they, after all, had been on stage; and I had been in the audience. I, not they, had had the benefit of seeing Shakespeare made manifest on that hill.

Then Puck approached and nodded. (He must have been so cold, still nearly naked in the early winter air.) "Yes," he said with understanding. "I know what you mean."

I was grateful.

But what did I mean? As the night wore on, I wondered; I could not throw the question off. What was it that moved and haunted me? I went home still full of bittersweet confusion. I didn't understand the next day, or the next. Not the next week, or the next one. What was it about that closing? What was it about the play?

"I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was... " Bottom laments on his awaking, confused, enraptured. I felt a bit the same.

Time passed. Through the rest of the fall and into the winter, the evening worked on me, and, bit by bit, a

little light began to dawn.

This is not the place and I am not the one to undertake an exposition of the themes of MIDSUMMER. But two thoughts came to me over the course of my wintry cogitations, helping me understand my experience on the hill.

One was the realization that there are strong democratic themes in MIDSUMMER. As the play unfolds, we watch Queen Titania fall in love with a homely weaver; Hermia, despite her tyrant father's will, marries whom she loves; with great grace, Theseus, Prince of Athens, welcomes the rude mechanicals to his royal court. (There they were, the simple, "hard-handed, well-intentioned souls who had never before "labored in their mind. When one of his attendants comments snidely, Theseus gently chides him, "never anything can be amiss,/ When simpleness and duty tender it.)

And that democracy was paralleled on closing night on that hillside in Wisconsin. Offstage met with onstage, actor met with audience, patron with stagehand -- all encircled in the same pool of blazing light.

MIDSUMMER also asks us to explore the question of who is rational and who is deluded -- who is dreaming and who is awake. After his magical adventures have ended, Bottom "wakes" and remembers, foggily, his "dream. (Was it real, was it imagined?) After their adventures in the woods, the four lovers awake from their illusions and from their communal sleep. Realizing truths about themselves and each other, they are ready to engage in a more mature experiencing of love.

Like the play's characters, we in the audience are also clouded by illusion, confused by fantasy and dream. "Lord what fools these mortals be." For the brief period of the play, we are allowed to see from an elevated position (that of Theseus, Hippolyta and Shakespeare); we can see the follies of behavior, the delusions of romantic love. But when the play ends, we must go back to being ordinary mortals. Puck blesses the house, says his final lines, and as the play's characters go off to bed to sleep or consummate their love; and we in the audience must "awake. We find our cars, go home, sleep, and resume our daily lives -- entertained, and perhaps a bit enlightened about humanity and about ourselves.

And I, in reflection, guess that the power of that final evening was synergistic -- a play, a final bow, a ritual of the season, and the cold beauty of an autumn night. All worked together. And in one dramatic moment, both sides of the footlights were made to see each other -- each realizing that the other was a necessary half of an integrated whole. And suffusing all -- like an autumn moon -- was the cool, gracious light of illuminating genius: Shakespeare, offering up, fresh and surprising, the insights of his heart and mind.

All good endings are beginnings. And all good beginnings are also ends. As we steel ourselves for the coming winter, another closing of outside theaters and the first gusts of swirling snow -- we may also cultivate some small hope of renewal. For we know that with winter and the cycle of the seasons, the ancient, moving drama simply continues on. Next March, beneath the underbrush on Wisconsin hillsides, shoots will begin to green again; soon after, ferns will uncurl and secret clutches of umbrella plants and sweet woodruff will begin to blossom. In an outside amphitheater, winter's leavings will be swept aside, seats will be uncovered and repair work will be done. Come a nice day next spring, I will make a pilgrimage to Spring Green, walk up the hill, and imagine what next season will body forth. There will be no one calling "Where are these lads, where are these hearts," whole-heartedly, plaintively, as Bottom streaks through the woods and aisles in search of his friends. Those voices live in memory now. But Shakespeare's greatness lives on, in his words and in almost any place there is a theater -- Sheboygan, Chicago, London, Spring Green -- ready, at the most unexpected moments to tease the mind, awake the spirit, and dramatically open up the heart.