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FEATURES

Dream Interpretations: Gypsies in Greece and Bee Gees in Burbank

by Steven Sabel | May 31, 2013



Ensemble of "Midsummer Night's Dream" at New American Theatre. Photo by Jeannine Wisnosky Stehlin.

From disco-dancing fairies to mystical Gypsies of 1930s Greece, the summer theater season wouldn't be complete without multiple interpretations of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to quench our appetite for the Bard's most beloved comedy.

Two of the season's first *Midsummers* are opening within the next week at Odyssey Theatre and the Falcon Theatre. Both productions put a distinctive twist on the play and follow a completely different path to telling the classic story.

Mystical Gypsies

"Our production is magical and dangerous. It's not light. It has some grit," says director Jack Stehlin of the New American Theatre production of *Dream*, opening tonight at the Odyssey.

Stehlin and his ensemble are returning to the Odyssey after a "hiatus away" for some years, and the teaming has "never been better than it feels right now," says Stehlin. "There's a new recognition of the value of our collaboration."

New American Theatre dramaturg Alfred Molina and Stehlin have reworked the concept of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in an attempt to mirror the strife between the classes of society in 1930s Athens, Greece.



Jack Stehlin

In Stehlin's production, the fairies capture "a Gypsy element that was prevalent in 1930s Greece," he says. "They represent a flamboyance and flair that eliminates the darker tones, and blends out of the darker aspects of 1930s Greece."

"They provide us with room for possibility that there is mysticism and something magical in the world," he says. In approaching that magic from a director's point of view, "you don't highlight it. You don't gloss over it. You embrace it."

To Stehlin, the key to that embrace comes through the way in which the mortal characters in the play depict the effects of the mythical love spells cast over them. "We are attempting to capture the aspects (of the spell) that will allow the reality to form. The true possession of the spell of love."

Stehlin and Molina work together to blend Stehlin's "more organic" approach to the development of the characters with Molina's expertise in the structure of the text of the play.

"I'm the luckiest guy in the world doing Shakespeare right now with Fred (Molina) on board," says Stehlin. "You can't beat Fred's knack for the architecture of the text."

That architecture is Shakespeare's attempt to provide actors with "a structural path to living it organically," Stehlin says. The path serves as "the final destination" of the actors "experiencing the story playing *them*" — as opposed to them playing the story. "The distance between the text and the experience is reduced through the rehearsal process."

During that process, Stehlin has encouraged his cast of 21 actors from the New American Studio Ensemble to "receive the play."

"My goal, whether we achieve it or not, is to create a moment on stage that is relevant to people's lives," he says. "We're receiving the play, and hopefully it is passing through us in a viable and believable way."

Stehlin embraces the play's humorous elements while also exploring its social aspects of community connection, human reception of joy, and the experience of love, he says. "It's about the freedom of love — to be alive and rejoice in it." He seeks to create a "recognizable experience (for the audience) in an intimate and passionate way."

The play's rustic characters help create that experience.

"They are this idyllic group of actors who find true joy in what they do without competition, envy, self-interest, or resentment," Stehlin says. "It's not a bad thing to ask our community — artistic community and overall society — are you capable of joy?"

"The reception of joy is key to the human experience, and the experience of the play," says Stehlin.



Chelsea Povall. Photo by Jeannine Wisnosky Stehlin.

Disco Fairies

At the Falcon, “it’s a new take on an old subject that we’re redoing,” says Rick Batalla, explaining Troubadour Theater Company’s *A Midsummer Saturday Night’s Fever Dream*.

Batalla is a founding company member of the Troubies, and an original cast member of their ’70s disco take on *Dream*, which returns to the Falcon after a 12-year absence since the production was first performed there in late 2000

and early 2001 (following a production at Miles Playhouse in Santa Monica and two Orange County venues earlier in 2000).

In any concept production of *Dream*, the audience delight in the play can hinge greatly upon the depiction of the story’s mythical characters. Choices about how to play Oberon, Titania, and their royal train of fairy folk, including the mischievous Puck, can be the essential key to bringing a company’s vision of its *Dream* world to life.

“Our fairies are defined by things that rhyme with fairy,” notes Mike Sulprizio, another founding company member of the Troubies, and an original cast member of *A Midsummer Saturday Night’s Fever Dream*.

With names such as Scary Fairy, Dairy Fairy, and Very Fairy, even the members of the Troubies’ band help fulfill the disco element as a wildly costumed chorus of super ’70s performers, incorporating the *Saturday Night Fever* music of the Bee Gees, says Sulprizio. “Each one of them is defined very quickly,” says Batalla.



Lisa Valenzuela, Rick Batalla and Mike Sulprizio in Troubadour Theater Company’s “*A Midsummer Saturday Night’s Fever Dream*” at the Falcon Theatre. Photo by Chelsea Sutton.

But this year’s edition of the show isn’t merely a re-creation of the original production, “We are always topical, so we have to update accordingly,” Batalla says.

“The songs are arranged differently as well, and the show has been completely re-choreographed,” says Sulprizio.

New designers bring a new look and enhanced production values to the show, especially in the costuming, says Troubie veteran Lisa Valenzuela. “I was a regular at the Goodwill in the old days,” she

adds. She first started with the Troubies’ *Dream* as a foley artist and now portrays multiple

characters in the new production.

“We used to shop for all of our own costumes,” confirms Batalla. In incorporating new production values, great care is taken to maintain the essence of the original Troubie charm. “We’re charming. Maybe you’ve noticed,” Batalla says.

“The people who work with us know what the Troubies are all about,” adds Sulprizio.

Troubie shows blend Shakespeare’s text with a musical theme and mounds of improvisational comedy. No two Troubie performances ever come off exactly the same.

Batalla: “At any moment, whatever we rehearsed can be thrown out the window.”

Sulprizio: “On very few of our shows does (director [Matt Walker](#)) rein us in.”

Walker decides on the portions of the Bard’s text that will remain intact. Songs from the musical theme are inserted along the way through the creation/rehearsal process.

Valenzuela: “We kind of all say, ‘this song might be better here than there’.”

Sulprizio: “When we choose the music, it’s all about how the title works and sounds.”

Batalla: “The challenge becomes making it work.”

Valenzuela: “And then we change the lyrics to make it work, and it becomes a win-win.”

Batalla: “I’m going to throw in an extra ‘win’ there.”



Matt Merchant and Matt Walker. Photo by Chelsea Sutton.

They describe their approach to the company and the works they produce as “very Elizabethan” in its likeness to the way a traveling troupe of actors might have worked in Shakespeare’s era. The goal is to find that even mix of humor that appeals to groundlings and the upper classes alike, says Sulprizio. “It’s very true to the original structure of Shakespeare.”

“While we goof around, there’s [still] a moment when we have to be true to the text,” says Batalla. “The stuff that you remember — those iconic moments — are untouched.” So the comedic rewards are twofold — “hitting that joke that Shakespeare wrote centuries ago, and making it work, and getting the laugh — and the improv of a newly discovered joke.”

The disco theme, combined with topical references, opens the door to new humor as Shakespeare’s entendres are “massaged into the disco element” for a new connection to the Bard’s bawdy style, says

Sulprizio.

The Troubies aim for “non-stop laughs,” says Sulprizio. “There are no lulls — just what’s necessary to keep going on,” he says.

New jokes are developed every minute, even during interviews about the show. If a new joke falls

flat during performance, the Troubies have their “outs,” including signature lines of self-deprecation, and “foul flags” that can be thrown to the stage at any time for “unauthorized ad-libbing.”

Sulprizio: “We can’t lose. We’re just having such a great time. It’s infectious,” he says.

Batalla: “I need to hand out penicillin after every show.”

***A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., LA 90025. Opens tonight. Fri-Sat 8 pm, select Sundays. Through June 30. Tickets: \$25. newamericantheatre.com. 310-477-2055.**

***A Midsummer Saturday Night’s Fever Dream*, Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank 91505. Opens June 7. Fri 8 pm, Sat 4 pm and 8 pm, Sun 4 pm and 7 pm through July 7. Tickets: \$27-52. FalconTheatre.com. 818- 955-8101.**

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