Adaptation and Inspiration: A Midsummer Night’s Dream

By Gianna Wichelow

There are few original works that have inspired so many adaptations and imaginative interpretations as Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Of Shakespeare’s original play (dated from either 1594 or 1596), some characters and features of the plot can be traced back to mythological and classic sources. For example, the play-within-the-play about Pyramus and Thisbe comes from Metamorphoses by Ovid, and the transformation of Bottom into an ass is most likely inspired by Apuleius’s The Golden Ass. But the plot of Shakespeare’s play is considered original, and has since inspired several adaptations.

An early adaptation of the play was Henry Purcell’s masque* The Fairy Queen (1692), for which he composed music for interludes. Shakespeare’s words were adapted for the main part of the piece.

A very successful inspiration is Mendelssohn’s incidental music for the play (1843) which included an overture he’d written in 1827. Choreographers Marius Petipa, George Balanchine, and Sir Frederick Ashton used Mendelssohn’s music in three different ballet versions of the story, with Ashton’s being retitled The Dream.

There have also been many visual artists who have created works based on the play. Joshua Reynolds, William Blake, Arthur Rackham, and Marc Chagall, have all painted themes from the play.

In 1960, the great British composer Benjamin Britten was looking for material for a new opera to commemorate the re-opening of the Jubilee Hall, the main venue for the Aldeburgh Festival (which he’d founded in 1948). As he didn’t have enough time to commission a complete new libretto, he and his life/creative partner Peter Pears decided to adapt Shakespeare’s play into an opera.

In 1993, Hans Werner Henze’s Eighth Symphony was inspired by sequences from Shakespeare’s play. Interestingly, Henze’s 1993 opera Venus and Adonis, which was performed by the Canadian Opera Company in 2001, was inspired by Shakespeare’s poem of the same name.

Film versions of the play have been quite successful and plentiful. In 1935, Max Reinhardt directed a Hollywood star-studded version in black and white, with music adapted from Mendelssohn. In 1968, Peter Hall directed a version that had been highly acclaimed on stage when it was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1999, Michael Hoffman directed Hollywood stars Michelle Pfeiffer, Christian Bale and Calista Flockhart in a visually beautiful remake set in Italy.

A recent retelling of the story in film is titled Get Over It (2001) and stars Kirsten Dunst and Ben Foster. It’s set in a high school with the characters acting in a musical production of the play.

Shakespeare’s works are timeless and have moved and delighted audiences for centuries. The best adaptations and interpretations stay true to the original themes while exploring within them. The themes of love and magic in A Midsummer Night’s Dream provide a beautiful framework for creative exploration ensuring many future adaptations and interpretations.

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* Masque
A form of aristocratic entertainment in England during the 16th and 17th centuries.