

PUPPET PROBLEMS

Marianka Swain was disenchanted by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Barbican Theatre on February 10

Director Tom Morris and the Handspring Puppet Company had two hurdles to clear with this Shakespeare adaptation, which premiered at the Bristol Old Vic last year: successfully combining the Bard with puppetry and movement theatre, and meeting sky-high expectations following smash hit *War Horse*. This production is resourceful and engaging, but falls short on both counts.

The premise is strong, resolving the mixed disciplines through carpentry enthusiasts Theseus and Hippolyta creating talismans for their upcoming nuptials, which then miraculously spring to life. It sets the tone for a *Dream* that celebrates the rough-and-ready magic in the everyday, with both aesthetics and movement deliberately less polished than *War Horse*.

Unfortunately, that ethos extends to overall

staging and verse speaking, both of which suffer from a muddled approach. The cast seems hamstrung by their puppet alter egos,



Above, David Ricardo-Pearce as Oberon. Below, Saskia Portway as Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

physically constrained and mumbling through the text; this is not a version that savours the poetry and nuance of a rich play, and speech often competes with Dave Price's cloying score.

Laurel Swift's choreography and Andrew Dawson's movement direction

vary from delightful – Puck instantly conjured from “found” objects, namely oil can, basket and saw, while wooden planks are transformed into overarching trees, then stretch into moonbeams – to awkward. The decision to have the company constantly shuffle in the background as a moving forest was poor, and the plank-tapping percussion comes off as *Stomp*-wannabe.

Such clutter is distracting. When they have room to breathe, David Ricardo-Pearce's Oberon is a commanding presence, and Saskia Portway's Titania quivers with righteous anger during her



weirdly topical diatribe about devastating meteorological changes.

Alex Felton's eyebrow-wagging public-school-boy Lysander is stronger in the farcical later stages, while Akiya Henry and Naomi

Cranston, as physical opposites Hermia and Helena, steal the show with their quarrel and illustrate how movement can illuminate text when it acts as reinforcement rather than hindrance.

The rude mechanicals are realised with gleeful abandon, lugging around crude lumps of wood as their puppet selves and riotous in a physically inventive *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Saikat Ahamed's non-English-speaking Snug and Miltos Yerolemu's cod-Greek-accented, very literal Bottom are either enjoyably vulgar or increasingly trying, depending on your comic sensibilities.

At its best, this is an accessible interpretation that nods towards the folkloric roots of the play and the transformative magic of theatre, but it never quite escapes the feel of one art form forced into another. Tellingly, the overstuffed three-hour show ends not with a novel rendering of

Puck's famous epilogue, but with a Disneyfied musical parade instead. Likeable, but something of a cheat. ●

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