

# After the Dream: Postdramatic Approaches to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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**ABSTRACT:** Adaptations of Shakespeare's work are nothing new, but to what extent theatre practitioners should be able to take liberties with Shakespeare's original texts is hotly debated. Emma Rice's 2016 modern-dress production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a raucous send-up of the beloved classic that took an irreverent attitude toward the original text. Rice, along with dramaturg Tanika Gupta, added plain English lines alongside the Elizabethan text, a controversial move among Shakespeare purists. Julie Taymor's 2014 version of the same play did not alter the text in any way, but it did take a backseat to the visual elements of the show, which included projections, the use of a fly, and striking stylistic cohesion. In this paper, I explore how both Taymor and Rice's respective productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* operate within the post-dramatic – that is, their respective choices to move beyond using Shakespeare's original text as the central element of performance. Using Hans-Thies Lehmann's framework, I will examine how these productions exemplify the "perpetual conflict between text and scene" (Lehmann 145) that infuse elements of the post-dramatic into these productions.

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Adaptations of Shakespeare's work are nothing new to the entertainment industry, but to what extent English-speaking theatre practitioners should be able to take liberties with Shakespeare's original text is hotly debated. As the field of theatre constantly reinvents itself with new styles and approaches to working with text, it only makes sense that playwrights and directors would want to bring texts from the Western cultural canon into an updated format. Shakespeare adaptations are inescapable in Western, English-speaking culture, and it is common

to take well-known Shakespeare plays and uproot them into a different setting than what was originally intended. *Macbeth* in a Cree tribe at the dawn of Western colonialism, *Othello* in a film noir-esque underground criminal ring, and *Twelfth Night* in Victorian England are a few of the adaptations I have personally seen. All of these adaptations, however far they ventured from their original setting, did choose to use the text as the primary element of performance. In both Julie Taymor's and Emma Rice's respective productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, it is clear that Shakespeare's original text is not the focal point of the production.

Emma Rice's 2016 production at the Globe Theatre is a modern-dress version of *Midsummer* that took an irreverent attitude towards the original text of the play. Rice, alongside dramaturge Tanika Gupta, chose to update the text to take place specifically in contemporary England and added in new, plain-English lines alongside the traditional Elizabethan text, going so far as to add in a few jabs at Shakespeare's incomprehensibility in an entirely new scene at the top of the show performed by the Mechanicals. Julie Taymor's 2014 version of the same play could not have been more different – if it weren't for the title, one could hardly blame an audience member for not realizing that they are using the same source material. While Taymor's *Midsummer* doesn't deviate from the original text, it is secondary to her signature visual spectacle. The use of fly-ins, projections, the eerie children's chorus, and an airtight colour palette provided immaculately planned visuals that set the stage for the story. I will explore how both Taymor and Rice's productions operate in the postdramatic – that is, their respective choices to move beyond Shakespeare's original text as the primary guiding element of performance. Though these performances might not be considered postdramatic in and of themselves, I will use Hans-

Thies Lehmann's framework of postdramatic theatre to examine how they lean into the "perpetual conflict between text and scene" (Lehmann 145), and how Shakespeare plays provide the perfect slate for a postdramatic approach.

Hans-Thies Lehmann's definitive 1999 treatise on postdramatic theatre provides an in-depth analysis of developments in theatre since the 1960s that have influenced this new form of performance. While it is a sprawling genre that can encompass many types of performances, postdramatic theatre is, in essence, any performance that moves beyond the text as the central element and sole arbiter of performance. In the introduction to the 2006 English translation, translator and editor Karen Jurs-Munby makes a point of explaining the 'post' in postdramatic: it is not a category nor a "chronological 'after' drama, a 'forgetting' of the 'dramatic past'" (Lehmann 2006, 2), but instead a "rupture" of theatre's relationship with dramatic text. It is a deconstruction of traditional theatre practices and of theatre's relationship with drama, not necessarily a movement away from drama itself. Lehmann also points out the palimpsestuous nature of postdramatic theatre – the writing on the same space over and over again that creates a palimpsest that occurs both during the devising process (if the piece involves any devised elements), and in the recreation and referencing of previous productions. I believe this is the reason why Shakespeare's plays take so well to a postdramatic approach. Shakespeare is perhaps the most iconic writer in the Western tradition, and his stories are so ingrained in English-speaking culture that many, if not most, theatergoers purchase tickets to a Shakespeare production already knowing most of what will happen. This makes Shakespeare so easy (and entertaining) to riff on and try new approaches – directors and dramaturges can take liberties with his work since most audiences walk into *Romeo and Juliet* knowing full well how the story will end. The audience isn't buying a ticket so they can find out *what* happens in the story, they want to see *how* the story is being told. Many productions of Shakespeare plays are also deliberately self-referential either to themselves or to other productions of the same text, such as The Wooster Group's *Hamlet* (where the 1964 Broadway production of *Hamlet* is projected onto a scrim in the back as the actors perform a mirror image of what was being projected), or Emma Rice's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (where one of the Mechanicals in Rice's pre-show scene

mentions that "tiredness and confusion" are typical when watching a Shakespeare play). This self-referentiality is possible because of the audience's (assumed) familiarity with other Shakespeare productions, as well as their assumed attitude towards them.

Julie Taymor's 2013 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* holds all of the visual spectacle signature to Taymor's style. With Puck appearing on a fly-in, the billowing fabric surrounding Titania, and the projections of blooming flowers on the back of the stage, this production is not lacking in visual excitement. The show has an almost entirely neutral colour palette, except for Oberon's body paint which shimmers gold and blue in the light. Taymor creates a dreamlike world for the story to exist in, though it is not a light or playful dream like many productions choose to create. The neutral colour palette and children's ensemble of fairies (Taymor dubbed them *Rude Elementals* in the program) create an eerie and almost menacing environment that still manages to feel magical. The movement of the actors also adds to this; Puck's movements feel almost non-human as actress Kathryn Hunter contorts her body while delivering her lines, and the children's ensemble moves and whispers in a menacing manner that added to the uncanny dreaminess of it all. The costume design is also stunning – Titania and Oberon's costumes are ethereal and the sharp whites of Titania's costumes contrast Oberon's dark, glittering body paint and loose pants perfectly. The costumes of the human characters are much less ethereal, but the shared colour palette creates a cohesiveness between the magical and non-magical characters that demonstrated the connection and coexistence of the magical and non-magical world. While the show's aesthetics are unparalleled compared to any other Shakespeare production I have ever seen, overall this production seems to be created for audiences already familiar with Shakespeare, considering the extent to which the text is secondary. The action of the play is clear, but the story and characters feel almost insignificant when they are not the focus of the visual spectacle. The strong visual elements tell the story almost entirely on their own, and the text only exists to provide a canvas onto which Taymor can build her layers of visual storytelling. As Steve Mentz put it, Taymor's *Midsummer* "seemed to care more about spectacle than emotion" (Mentz 309). This was not by any means a poor or incorrect choice, but it is very interesting to witness since most Shakespeare

productions – especially *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – are intensely focused on the characters and the words that they speak due to the text being the most important aspect of the performance. This is certainly not the case here, and with Taymor's unrivalled visual storytelling, it seems as though she barely needed the text at all.

Emma Rice's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the inaugural production of her short and controversial tenure as Artistic Director of the Globe Theatre, was in many ways Taylor's foil. Her version of the play is brash and irreverent with little aesthetic cohesiveness in a performance that generally pleased audiences while upsetting Shakespeare purists. The most controversial move of this production was to add in plain-English lines alongside the traditional text. Some of these lines poked fun at Shakespeare's incomprehensibility and at Shakespeare-lovers' obsession with text. This, admittedly, is perhaps not the ideal move for a production at the Globe Theatre which is dedicated entirely to performing Shakespeare's work in the way they would have been performed during his lifetime, but yet it seemed to resonate with audiences relatively well. In an entirely new prologue to the show, the play begins with "volunteers" from the Globe Theatre presenting the health and safety guidelines to the audience before the show is supposed to begin, and as the prologue goes on, it becomes clear that these volunteers were in fact the mechanicals that would be featured later on in the play. Though Emma Rice's irreverent approach to Shakespeare during her time at the Globe alone could be the topic of an entirely different discussion, it is important to note how even in her production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she seems to want to bypass the Shakespeare-ness of the play entirely. By updating the setting from ancient Athens to contemporary London, swapping Athenian youth for "Hoxton hipsters," Rice makes it clear that she thinks it is high time to move past the confines of the text that she thinks the audience cannot comprehend. While I agree with critic Lisa Hopkins' comment that adding in the plain-English lines and modern-day pop culture references risked making Rice seem as though she thinks the audience is too stupid to understand what is happening onstage (Hopkins 2016), I believe that it was not entirely a misguided choice. The new additions to the play add to the palimpsestuous nature of this postdramatic approach, which only serve to highlight the original writing that had existed before in an interesting way. These new lines created

new moments for the characters that did not exist before and the few jabs at the incomprehensibility of Shakespeare from the Globe volunteers at the top of the play felt decidedly populist, reminding the audience that they did not have to feel bad for not comprehending everything that was going on. I do understand that many critics and Shakespeare purists felt as though Rice was denigrating the original text by doing this, but it remains a fact that many in the general population of occasional theatergoers do think that Shakespeare is difficult to understand even if they might know the general story of the play, so it makes sense that they would be eager to respond to a production that acknowledges and validates their feelings towards Shakespeare. The actors still deliver satisfying performances, and though the pop-culture references and one-liners do feel heavy-handed at times, it was a choice that paid off with a playful and joyous performance.

Julie Taymor and Emma Rice both took drastically different approaches to the same classic text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but they both decided to position the text as secondary to other elements of performance. Rice wanted to remove the potentially daunting Shakespeare-ness of a Shakespeare play altogether by adding contemporary lines and references to the script, and Taymor created a rich visual world that eclipsed the text altogether. Both of these productions were well-received by the public, but there is still resistance from some theatre critics on taking postdramatic approaches to Shakespeare's work. Despite this resistance, the familiarity of theatre audiences with Shakespeare's work makes it ideal to use as a blank canvas for trying new theatrical techniques since its timelessness can be leveraged to bolster new and innovative ideas.

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