A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM, Shenzhen University

This beautifully presented performance won the first prize at this year’s competition and was also awarded the prize for “Best Costume Design”. What was most impressive about this presentation was the way in which it seamlessly united the excellent scenic theatrical elements with a powerfully lucid realisation of the action suggested by the language of the play. The splendid photographic backdrop and the smaller trees in the central area of the stage which helped to give the scene a sense of three dimensional depth created the perfect forest setting required for the chosen scenes. This combined with moon created the evocative setting in which Titania was “ill met by moon light”. The moon was not simply pretty decoration but became an integral part of the action of the play in which the silverly light of this moon created the perfect atmosphere in which magical events were likely to take place. The importance of this magical moon was well brought out by both the changes in lighting and the actors’ relating directly to it each time the moon was mentioned in the dialogue. While not all of the dialogue was as clearly presented as it might have been the nature of the action they were playing was always crystal clear. Titania [Wang Peishan] and Oberon [Weng Kai] for example were very clear when they spoke at normal speed but became less clear when speaking quickly. There were a few poor moments Oberon’s fake laugh on his exit was one such unconvincing moment. Possibly the weakest thing about this otherwise very fine production was the fact that Bottom’s [Zhou Shujun] ass’s head was a rather silly Disney like creation reminding me of Mickey Mouse. What was need was a much more grossly bestial hairy head to emphasise the awful conjunction of this beast with the delightfully feminine Titania. This was in a sense a very traditional production. Not all of the acting was brilliant. Much more could have been done to bring out the comedy of Bottom’s last speech (“I have had a dream”). However, this presentation was so well realized in terms of costuming [except the ass’s head],staging and lighting, and was so well integrated with a genuinely lucid and often very amusing presentation of the text that it created for this judge the most satisfying theatrical experience of the whole festival.
A nice forest backdrop: showing what can be achieved by a simple back-projection of a photo slide. The corn prop in front of the screen gives it a bit of theatrical dimension. Puck's "gossip" speech is energetic and busy with a touch of the generic however: as in the loud laugh with hands on hips, savoring of the "country joke". Titania and Oberon enter for their quarrel scene, both cleverly costumed. Titania is in a white gown and mauve gauze shawl, with a floral or seed pod design. Oberon is on black knee length breeches with a gold tunic and gold gauze cape, topped by a floral wreath (and face paint). His goatee is presumably a theatrical touch making him look strangely caprine. The acting is a little uneven, with Titania tending to dominate. With Titania's exit, Oberon describes the history of the purple flower. Puck mimes Oberon's tale (clutching his throat and keeling over at "of that boy did die"). This gets a laugh but upstages Oberon. There is a very forced belly laugh at Oberon's exit. Titania's bower is charming (a green blanket encrusted with roses). Bottom's asses ears are a rare visual mistake: they look more like rabbit's ears. Titania's reeling in of a reluctant Bottom is a nice touch. The kissing on the couch is a bit steamy (gets a reaction from the audience). Titania's scorn of Bottom on waking is good. She speaks well. Bottom's "most rare vision" is a little slow in pacing and thick of diction at points. The Greek balalaika music and dance is a good ending, though it would have been better if this wasn't the first we had heard of this kind of style.

By Prof. John Gillies
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This was a highly intelligent, and atmospheric, treatment of the play. The narrative was tight and coherent; and the team captured the exotic and wondrous spirit of the play perfectly. I loved the enormous moon that hung at the front of the stage, and which was beautifully lit: this simple prop cast a wonderful magic over the whole scene. I also admired the conscious exoticism and beauty of the production: the vaguely Indian music (which tied in with the theme of the Indian boy) and the gorgeous backdrop that seemed to bring the whole production together. (It is amazing what a director can achieve through such simple scenic effects.) The Shenzhen team chose some very challenging and long speeches in the debate between Oberon and Titania, but managed to find the drama and tension in them—a result, I am sure, of their thinking very carefully about the precise meaning of each and every line. The flowery bank where Titania slept was extremely lovely; and Puck throughout was funny and dynamic. The team’s articulation of the language was generally very good indeed. A thoroughly enjoyable and professional production.