

# Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: An Archival Discovery

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## Abstract

This note describes and analyzes a full-length, archival recording of Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) long thought to be lost, but recently rediscovered by the author. Now preserved on DVD, it is available to scholars at the Royal Shakespeare Company Archives, housed at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon.

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Peter Brook's 1970 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has an iconic place in the stage history of that play and of Shakespeare's plays as a whole. Sally Jacobs's set, a white box with simple doors and a balcony on three sides, exemplified Brook's celebrated concept of the stage as an "empty space."<sup>1</sup> The actors, when not on stage, peered over the balcony or sat with their legs dangling over the sides of the set, watching the action along with the audience but from above, much as the fairies might do. The design and blocking of the production were likewise elemental and abstract. Gone were leafy bowers, gauzy fairy wings, and Mendelsohn's romantic music. The lovers wore modern simple frocks or flowered shirts with white pants, while the fairies wore voluminous satin and taffeta gowns or baggy jumpsuits in brilliant colors — purple for Oberon, emerald for Titania, yellow for Puck. Finally, and perhaps most memorably, the blocking and stage business featured acrobatic circus elements. Oberon and Puck appeared on trapezes; Titania's bower (decorated with crimson ostrich feathers) was hoisted aloft when she slept or enticed Bottom to her bed. Once charmed to sleep by Puck, the lovers awaited the arrival of Theseus and Hippolyta draped on canvas swings, swaying gently fifteen feet above the stage. In addition to trapeze work, the actors balanced spinning plates on wands and walked on stilts. Many critics and directors, including Gregory Doran, current artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, have referred to Brook's production as a "game-changer" in the history of Shakespeare performance, infusing modern performances with

simplicity and greater physicality via the influence of the Chinese circus and Noh drama, among others.<sup>2</sup>

For many years, scholars thought that the archival video made of this production was no longer extant. It was reportedly made in (or taken to) Japan and then lost. Brook himself is no fan of recorded versions of his work, and so there the matter rested, in the minds of most researchers.<sup>3</sup>

In early August 2016, however, I visited the Royal Shakespeare Company Archives, housed at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon. When I asked if there were any recordings of this production, I was handed a set of three DVDs containing the "lost" video footage. The archives have apparently held it for some time, but it has only recently been approved for viewing by scholars. The DVDs appear to be a complete record of a single performance, from the noisy entrance of the company (accompanied by drums and other percussion instruments) to the equally boisterous choreographed curtain call.<sup>4</sup> A single camera, placed in the center of the theater at some distance from the stage, captures the on-stage action, the aerial work, and the participation of the actor-spectators on the balcony over the set. The recording is grainy and often out of focus; some of it is jumpy, slightly off track, but it allows one to get an idea of the blocking and the general feeling of the production. Missing from this black-and-white recording is the role of color in the design, especially the vivid contrast between the jewel tones of the fairy costumes and the white box set. This aspect of the production can be glimpsed in the approximately thirty still photographs held in the RSC archives. It was also on display in the *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* exhibition at the British Library, April-September 2016, which included Titania's green gown, the feathery bower, and images of Puck's voluminous jumpsuit and blue beanie. There are no close-ups or second camera shots in the recording, and the quality of the sound is poor, so the actors' facial expressions and vocal delivery would be difficult to study in detail. Aside from Ben Kingsley as Demetrius, I could not have identified them without the help of the program or other published sources.

While it is a pale record of Brook's achievement, this archival recording allows one to view the stage-space in use and is invaluable for appreciating the physical aspects of Brook's direction and the energy of the audience's response (amply represented on the soundtrack). Scholars who are interested in this production and its influence on stage history have an important new aid to their research.

## Notes

1. In the opening sentences of *The Empty Space*, Brook states, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (1996, 7). The creation of the

balcony for the actors' use when they are not on stage seems a clear embodiment of the second necessity for theater — an audience watching — here doubled, with one onstage and another in the theater.

2. Gregory Doran, remarks at the welcome reception, Ninth World Shakespeare Congress, International Shakespeare Association, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 31 July 2016.
3. For a fresh and full account of this production, its precursors, and its heirs, see Peter Holland, "'The revolution of the times': Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1970" (2016). This book is a companion to the splendid *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* exhibition at the British Library in honor of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death; it ran from 15 April to 6 September, 2016.
4. James Ranahan, Collections Archivist for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, reports that it appears to be a copy of a BETACAM cassette recording of a performance at the Aldwych Theatre, London.

## References

- Brook, Peter. 1996. *The Empty Space: A Book about Theatre, Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*. 1968; reprint, New York: Touchstone Books.
- Holland, Peter. 2016. "'The revolution of the times': Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1970." In *Shakespeare in Ten Acts*. Edited by Gordon McMullen and Zoë Wilcox. London: The British Library. 161-79.