

Headlong



SHAKESPEARE'S  
GLOBE

BRISTOL  
OLD VIC

LEEDS  
PLAY  
HOUSE

A Production by Headlong and  
Shakespeare's Globe, with  
Bristol Old Vic and  
Leeds Playhouse



# A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

By William Shakespeare

Directed by Holly Race Roughan

Co-Directed by Naeem Hayat

## Education Pack



# A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM... BUT IN WINTER

**This isn't the classic retelling of Shakespeare's famous play that you might expect.**

**This is a world that's turned on its head - where magic meets manipulation, and mischief meets meaning.**

Pulling *A Midsummer Night's Dream* out of the summer haze and into a snow-covered winter forest, it's the world you know today, but strange and uncanny.

The play's fairytale charm remains - but what lies beneath?

As Shakespeare eerily mirrors our present, this production explores the classic themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: love and magic, dreams and reality with a punchy and political take that propels its relevance to today.

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# A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

## OVERVIEW



# OVERVIEW

## WHY THIS PLAY?

### Why Now? Why This Play?

Because a play about chaos, magic, and power games feels eerily familiar right now. Could Shakespeare have predicted today's world - where snow falls in summer, truth is bent by jesters, and order never quite returns?

### Headlong makes theatre that feels alive to the present moment.

We stage classics as if they were brand new, asking audiences to see stories they think they know afresh.

### A bold reimaging of Shakespeare's most familiar comedy.

This production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leans into its darker, political heart, revealing a world that feels volatile and unsettlingly close to our own.

### Winter in summer.

Staged initially in the candlelit Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in the depths of winter, the seasonal inversion sharpens Shakespeare's theme of a world out of joint, echoing today's climate anxieties.

### A turbulent world where power, desire and reality itself are unstable.

From patriarchal law in Athens to the fairies' battle over a stolen child, the play asks urgent questions about control, autonomy and what happens when nature breaks down.

### A major national collaboration.

Produced by Headlong and Shakespeare's Globe, with Bristol Old Vic and Leeds Playhouse, the production brings together leading theatres across the country, following the acclaimed *Henry V*.

### Created by a daring creative team.

Directed by Headlong's Artistic Director Holly Race Roughan with Co-Director Naeem Hayat, Designer Max Johns, Composer Nicola T. Chang, Lighting Designer Joshie Harriette and Movement Director Malik Nashad Sharpe, the show promises an unsettling, thrilling experience of Shakespeare's comedy as you've never seen it before...



# POLITICAL, THRILLING & QUESTIONING

## How is the play political?

- ❄ The city is ruled by tyrannical law, echoing today's debates about freedom, authority and personal autonomy.
- ❄ The forest is destabilised by a war over a child, forcing questions about who has power over family, bodies and futures.
- ❄ The seasonal upheaval speaks directly to climate anxiety and instability, drawing the audience into a world as volatile as our own.

## How is it thrilling?

- ❄ Staged in the depths of winter in a candlelit theatre, where snow falls in summer and day dissolves into night.
- ❄ A story that tilts between wonder and nightmare, blurring the line between dream and reality.
- ❄ A fairy world that is not safe and whimsical but a dangerous counter-reality that threatens the human characters at every turn.

## What questions is it asking?

- ❄ What happens when the natural order collapses, and who pays the price?
- ❄ How much control do we really have over desire, and how much is manipulated by others?
- ❄ What is the cost of power struggles – in love, in politics, in nature itself?
- ❄ How can comedy sit alongside cruelty, and what does that reveal about us?



# THE PRODUCTION SYNOPSIS

It's Midsummer in Athens and there are just a few short days until the marriage of Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. Celebrations are underway but not for everyone, as Egeus' daughter Hermia refuses to marry her father's choice, Demetrius, because she's in love with Lysander. Egeus asks Theseus to hold up the ancient law of Athens and put Hermia to death if she refuses to marry Demetrius.

To escape the unbending law of patriarchal Athens, the lovers Hermia and Lysander flee from Athens through the magical forest that lies beyond the city. Meanwhile, Hermia's best friend Helena is hopelessly devoted to the uninterested Demetrius and tells him of Hermia and Lysander's plan. They follow the lovers into the woods, which soon embroils the Athenians in a night of desire, fear, spells and transformation.

They're not the only ones there. A company of players made up of the Palace staff, led by maître d' Peter Quince and Executive Chef and budding thespian Nick Bottom, have taken to the forest to rehearse their play for the royal wedding, the tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

The forest is the home to Titania, Queen of the fairies, and Oberon, King of the fairies, and their spirit followers. Oberon and Titania are fighting over an Indian child (which has turned the natural world to chaos). Oberon and his sprite Puck devise a plan to take the child and punish Titania by putting a love potion into Titania's eyes that will lead her to fall in love with a monstrous sight.

Puck encounters the players and chooses to turn Nick Bottom into a donkey; all the other players flee at the sight of Bottom transformed. The plan works: Titania awakes, falls hopelessly in love with Bottom and Oberon is able to take the child. Meanwhile, Oberon decides to help Helena by asking Puck to put the love potion on Demetrius' eyes so that he falls in love with Helena. By misfortune Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and puts the potion in the wrong eyes. Lysander awakes to fall in love with Helena. In an attempt to fix Puck's mistake, Oberon puts the potion in Demetrius' eyes, so now both Lysander and Demetrius are fighting over Helena's love, and nobody loves Hermia.

Finally, Oberon removes the spell from Titania, Puck takes Lysander's potion out of his eyes, and Bottom is returned to his mortal self. Demetrius is still in love with Helena and publicly commits himself to her. The Duke therefore gives Hermia and Lysander his blessing and Egeus is made to accept the decision. Each couple gets married, alongside Theseus and Hippolyta, at a grand wedding where Bottom and the players perform *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*.

# CHARACTERS



Helena / Peaseblossom



Hermia / Mustardseed



Lysander / Moth



Demetrius / Cobweb



Hippolyta / Titania



Theseus / Oberon



Egeus / Quince



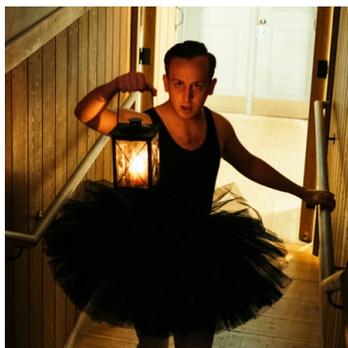
Puck



Bottom



Flute / Child



Faeries



Faeries



# TIMELINE

The play begins four days before Theseus & Hippolyta wedding.

The lovers meet the next night - Three days before the wedding

Our version takes liberties with this and sets the play over one day, with Theseus deciding to bring his wedding forward.

<i>Day 1</i>	<i>Day 2</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Act I, Scene 1 Act I, Scene 2	Act II, Scene 1 Act II, Scene 2 Act III, Scene 1 Act III, Scene 2	Act IV, Scene 1 Act IV, Scene 2 Act V, Scene 1
<i>Hermia and Lysander decide to run away tomorrow; the mechanicals decide to meet for rehearsal tomorrow.</i>	<i>The lovers, fairies, and mechanicals convene in the woods; profound nonsense ensues.</i>	<i>Theseus breaks the "dream" of the lovers; the wedding commences, with the mechanicals' performance.</i>

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Oxe hath therefore stretch'd his yoak in vaine,  
The Ploughman lost his sweat, and the green Corn  
Hath rotted, ere his youth attain'd a beard:  
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,

Titania

## Population

- ✧ There was a huge population increase between 1500 and 1650 – doubled from 2.5 million to 5 million

## Plague

- ✧ In 1592–93 there was the first outbreak of the London plague with over 19,000 deaths in London (10% of population)

## *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is written

- ✧ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an early work from Shakespeare, likely to have been written in 1596, around the same year as *Romeo and Juliet*.
- ✧ The play satirises many of *Romeo and Juliet*'s themes, as well as having many references to star crossed lovers (Pyramus and Thisbe, Hero and Leander, Cephalus and Procris)
- ✧ Shakespeare's only son Hamnet died at age 11 in 1596
- ✧ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was likely performed at The Theatre, in Shoreditch and at court.

## Queen Elizabeth

- ✧ It is a very political play if placed in its turbulent time. The sixty year old Queen Elizabeth was not popular, as the virgin Queen had no named heir. She was seen as weak, a theme repeated in the play where Queens must be ruled by Kings.

## Food Shortages & Riots

- ✧ The wheat harvest failed for four consecutive years from 1594–1597. The resulting famine of 1594–1598 was a major food shortage in England. Hoarding was a huge issue, and in 1598 Shakespeare himself was cited for illegally holding eighty bushels of malt or grain.
- ✧ Grain prices increased sixfold whilst wages only doubled.

- ❄ The Oxfordshire rising took place in November 1596, led by tradesmen, like the mechanicals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, catalysed by the bad harvest and common land being fenced off. A small group of impoverished men developed a plan to seize weapons and armour and march on London, they were arrested, imprisoned and executed.
- ❄ The 1596 rioters are reported to have chanted 'they must not starve, they will not starve'. Justice of the peace Edward Hext observed 'the rich have gotten all into their hands and will starve the poor'.

## War

- ❄ England was continually at War in this period including; with Spain, in Ireland, and supporting the Dutch revolt. There was a huge draft. For example, 6000 soldiers were drafted from Kent to Ireland from a population of 13000.
- ❄ Soldiers at Chester mutinied in 1594 and refused to go to Ireland. Martial law was declared and 3 people hanged.

## Fear

- ❄ Given the state of the poorest classes and these uprisings, those with property felt increasingly threatened by revolt, and there was an increased fear of the working class.
- ❄ There was also a boom in publishing of sensationalist literature detailing the many 'crimes' of the poor and homeless (in particular folk who had come to London after being driven from the countryside) thanks to new printing technology. This plays into the idea of the woods as somewhere ungovernable and savage.



# THEMES

## Power and Authority

Athens is ruled by strict, patriarchal law, echoing today's debates about individual freedom, state control, and who gets to decide the rules we live by.

## Gender and Autonomy

From Theseus and Hippolyta's marriage to Titania's resistance against Oberon, questions of women's agency and control over bodies and futures are front and centre.

## Desire and Manipulation

The lovers' choices are never entirely their own, distorted by magic and external forces. This asks urgent questions about how desire is shaped by others in a world of manipulation and misinformation.

## Control

Theseus won Hippolyta by sword, not by love. Lysander is accused of winning Hermia through 'gifts and sweet meats'. Demetrius is fickle with his affection and only loves under enchantment.

## Climate and Environmental Instability

Snow falls in summer, the seasons are inverted, and nature itself is destabilised – a direct mirror of our own climate crisis and its anxieties.

## Violence

The women are all threatened with violence and the risk of sexual assault in the dark of the wood. Puck refers to Bottom as an ass as a 'monster' inflicting something terrible on Titania, something that could harm her.

## Trickery and Transformation

Puck's meddling destabilises reality, creating a world where identities blur and truth is uncertain. It resonates with our moment of shifting realities, misinformation, and blurred lines between fact and fiction.

## Comedy and Cruelty

The play's humour is laced with jealousy, humiliation, and power struggles. This collision of laughter and discomfort mirrors how today's entertainment, politics, and social life often play out in uneasy tension.

## Love

The most sincere moment or expression of love is between Hermia and Helena. Hermia expresses heartbreak, and Helena doubts that Demetrius is truly hers – in contrast, the others all seem fixated on looks.

## Dreams and Reality

The boundary between waking life and dream collapses, reflecting today's sense of instability, disorientation, and the difficulty of knowing what is real.

# SO SWEET A CHANGELING

BY VARSHA PANJWANI

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is unusual amongst Shakespeare's plays for being named after a specific day. Falling on 24 June, midsummer's day marked the advent of summer in the northern hemisphere. Yet, the title immediately shifts our attention from day to night. The play's structure also mirrors the title: brief daylight scenes give way to extended nocturnal episodes. This is because Shakespeare's dream of midsummer was written in the wintry conditions of the mid-1590s when England was under the grip of cold, wet summers. The rivers flooded, harvests failed, and famine swept across the land. The enchanted wood near Athens, where most of the play takes place, is no Mediterranean idyll but a reflection of England's climate, damp and chilly. In Act II, the fairy queen, Titania, laments the 'contagious fogs', rotting corn, and diseased 'murrain flock', reflecting the lived reality of Shakespeare's audience, who confronted ecological crisis in the face of fraying bonds between humans and the natural world. The conditions that plagued Shakespeare's audience are chillingly familiar to us, as climate crisis, crop failure and food shortages arise out of rampant capitalism and resource exploitation. In a world where climate disasters are rife and there is fierce competition for resources, people are displaced and quarrels abound.

A displaced 'changeling' (a child exchanged at birth by fairies), birthed in the 'spiced Indian air', becomes the cause of a dispute between Titania and the fairy King, Oberon. The boy (a girl in this production) is Titania's but

Oberon wants to acquire him. Titania's refusal to yield the changeling ignites quarrels so fierce that other changes start happening – summers are replaced by winters.

This child is interesting in theatre history as one of the earliest references to an Indian character in Shakespeare's plays. Yet, the figure remains enigmatic, raising questions the play never resolves: Does this character appear on stage? What is the child's age? Titania says that his mother, 'being mortal', died in childbirth, suggesting that he might be an infant, but we don't know how long Oberon and Titania have been fighting over him. What is the child's name, lineage, and the meaning of his Indian birth? Above all, why does this child matter so profoundly that the battle over his custody unsettles the very climate of this land?

When Oberon demands Titania's 'little changeling boy', Titania refuses outright and explains the depth of her attachment. Titania and the boy's mother, a votaress or a devotee, had shared nights in the 'spiced Indian air', moments of laughter on 'yellow sands', and the intimate companionship of pregnancy. The votaress died in childbirth, and Titania says that it is 'for her sake do I rear up her boy;/ And for her sake I will not part with him'. The repeated refrain evokes a deep bond between the two, a fidelity that the 'jealous Oberon' seeks to disrupt.

But, Shakespeare's text also unsettles this tender narrative. Puck claims that Titania 'hath / A lovely boy stolen, from an Indian

king', a phrase that reframes the child not as a memorial bond but as stolen property. The child is not being seen as a person but rather as a surreptitiously acquired commodity, a piece of rich Indian merchandise. Such language belies the ambitions of England in the 1590s, when London merchants had their sights set on the riches of India which, in Shakespeare's time, was a prosperous entity ruled by the Mughals. The London market was seeing an influx of Indian textiles, gemstones, and spices, and merchants like Ralph Fitch described the plenitude of India with a covetous eye in their travel accounts. Merchants like him were also laying the foundations for the East India Company which secured a royal charter by 1600. This company would go on to employ exploitative trading practices and play a huge role in the colonisation of India. Against this backdrop, the language of trade that suffuses Titania's speech rises to the surface. She insists that the 'fairyland buys not the child of me' and her insistence on the votaress' 'womb then rich with my young squire' lays claim to a child who is actually born out of the Indian mother's labour. In Titania's memories, the traders 'rich with merchandise' are entwined with meetings with her Indian votaress.



*Continued overleaf...*

Titania uses beautiful poetry to gloss over a profitable and exploitative mercantile exchange. Placed beside her grief for the votaress, this commercial language reveals the unsettling logic of the changeling: an economy of substitution in which what is precious is taken and replaced by something lesser, where transaction is eulogised as intimacy.

Oberon has other designs for the boy. He wants him as his 'henchman', a role that carries disturbing connotations of servitude and subordination. In this, the play eerily mirrors the forced labour, involuntary migrations, and ruptured families that accompanied Europe's early commercial ventures. Though the archival record is fragmentary and evasive, surviving documents reveal that abduction, enslavement, and exploitative labour were recurring features of expeditions to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Children were especially vulnerable to these circuits of displacement, their futures redirected without consent. Contemporary accounts like Fitch's even claim that in India, families driven by famine and desperation were compelled to sell their children cheaply for survival. Fitch's statement underscores how deeply the logics of commerce and coercion intertwined.

Within the play, Oberon ultimately succeeds in acquiring the child. In Act IV, he tells Puck that, once Titania had been humiliated, 'she, in mild terms, begged my patience' and the child was 'straight' delivered to his bower. After this transfer, the boy vanishes from the play. He does not share in its reconciliations or festivities. The lovers are united, the Duke presides over a splendid marriage celebration, the mechanicals perform their interlude at court, and the fairies bless the nuptials – but the changeling child is absent. Forgotten.

What becomes of him? Shakespeare does not say. But the silence is unbearable. Even as I write this, children are torn from their families by war, by climate disaster, by poverty, by inhumane policies. Against this, we must enact a change of our own; we must dream a future for these lost children. In that dream, the child is no longer a pawn in quarrels that are tearing the earth apart. Perhaps the dream that should guide us is the one never spoken – the dream that the Indian mother who died in labour would have seen for the future of her lovely child.

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Dr Varsha Panjwani is the creator of the acclaimed Women & Shakespeare podcast and author of Podcasts and Feminist Shakespeare Pedagogy. Her introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is forthcoming in 2026 and her monograph *British Asian Shakespeares on Stage* in 2028. This essay first appeared in the programme for the production, and is used in this resource with the kind permission of the author and of Shakespeare's Globe.

A blue-tinted photograph of a snowy forest path. The path is covered in snow and leads into a dense forest of trees with snow-laden branches. The overall mood is serene and wintry.

# **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

## **IN CONVERSATION WITH CREATIVES...**

# IN CONVERSATION WITH CREATIVES...

# THE VISION: THE OLD MADE NEW

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CO-DIRECTOR NAEEM HAYAT

### Headlong makes work that feels urgent. In what ways did you feel *A Midsummer Night Dream* is an urgent story?

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* holds some of the most urgent themes Shakespeare wrote about. Power and how power is disseminated. How power is delivered and enacted in all its different forms. It's got something structurally clear in it that's the gulf between the working classes and the elites. Shakespeare wrote a play that was examining class in a tight and concentrated way, and we've pulled on those threads purposefully and that's what has been exciting about this. This is what feels prevalent now.

### How did the ideas for this version of the play first evolve? What was the process like for you?

Holly and I would read the script separately and then we'd come back together and talk about what it was that initially excited and scared us. We looked at what felt clear to us and what felt challenging. Then we got together with our designer Max and movement director Malik and thought about what it might look like visually.

How do you make it feel like it's being spoken today and not make it feel like it's 200 years old without it feeling too maverick or naïve. Why do we still do these plays and what do we want the

audience to feel? A lot of those core fundamental questions are really important for building the production, and I think there were some things in this version that were tricky to navigate: for example, understanding and visualising what the woods would look like.



## Why do you think Shakespeare's plays are relevant to young people today?

That is a very good question. For me, the simplest way to answer this is Shakespeare really understood the trials and tribulations of being young. Romeo and Juliet is always the play that people reference but Dream captures youthful energy particularly well. You have 4 people who are madly in love with each other and the way they experience the world is very fast paced. Shakespeare understood the vitality and energy and whole heartedness that young people possess, that they're not scared to take risks and are defiant and resilient. The four lovers embody this. Young people have the capacity to speak truth to power and Shakespeare understood that.

I think if you're a young person wanting to feel a connection to someone else that has the same fears and dreams as you do then Shakespeare is a good place to start.

It's no surprise to me that so many other writers have used Shakespeare's plays as inspiration. He's a catalyst for other contemporary writers writing about young people (I'm thinking about films I grew up with: 10 Things I Hate About You; She's the Man; My Own Private Idaho; West Side Story). It's no surprise that it's an adjective to describe something as 'Shakespearean' because he is the baseline for so many of our cultural references.

## How do you build a team around you and how do you communicate your vision?

Holly and I both have the same directorial barometer. You want to be really excited and challenged by the team around you. There's a misnomer about directors only wanting 'yes people' around them so

they go unchallenged. In my opinion, the only way a story will get better is by being challenged, critiqued and embedding healthy discussion into the creative process. It's important to say that this should be done with compassion and kindness because it is a hard job and there's a lot of pressure on you as a director so holding a team that energises you whilst treating each other with respect and kindness is key.

## In what ways do your collaborators influence your overall vision? Do you have an example that illustrates this for this production?

There are multiple ways this can happen. Sometimes it's through music or reference images. Creating a Spotify playlist with the composer to get a tone for the show. We did this with Nicola T. Chang the composer. Listened to a lot of Shostakovich: we knew we wanted to have strings in the palette of Puck.

With Max the Designer we looked at images around the weather, what staging *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in winter would look like.

The creative team watched A LOT of films - Gosford Park; The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and her Lover; Saltburn. The whole process is a petri dish of throwing lots of ingredients into the cauldron, and it slowly starts to bubble and then distil.

The vision is never whole from the start, it gets built as you work with different references, learn more about the context and characters, broaden the creative bandwidth. That's where the creative team come in, they sort of pile lots of different ingredients into a stew and you end up with a dish.

## What advice might you give a young person wanting to re-imagine an old story?

The most practical advice is to read the story again and again; more times than you think you should read it. When you get bored of it, this is when you have the most interesting ideas – you have to break through the dust and cobwebs of the story. Old stories have a lot of baggage and dust on them so to get to the newness of a story, Persistence of reading and re-reading is key.

Fill your brain with as many references and stimulation as possible, you never know where the domino is that opens the story for you: it might be in a gallery, reading another play or story, watching a film. Allow yourself to be surprised by what inspires you.

You will get tired, or bored, or think that there's no new way of telling this story. Part of the process is trying to understand what the choices are that have been made before you and what your unique perspective is. Really, the question you should hold in your head as you're reading the play is 'why do I want to do this play'. The more you explore the story, the more unique the story will be (there's only one of you in the world).

## What was the domino that opened this story up for you?

Conversations that Holly and I had about power and authoritarianism. Looking at the world today we're both aware that there is a slide in certain places towards authoritarianism. Our main question was: how does this happen and how does it manifest. The character of Theseus is a rational actor, one that represents law and order, but we wanted to ask what if Theseus had just come into power, what does that do to a person and why does

Theseus go down the road he goes down.

We also wanted to explore the world of artists. Shakespeare's mechanicals represent normal people who want to be artists. The mechanicals are normally portrayed as 'amateur' but we wanted their aspirations to be a palpable moment in the story, on the question of 'why do artists do what we do', in such a context of political turmoil, art is the anchor, so we wanted the mechanicals to represent this.

There's something about acting and art that gets to the core of people's vulnerabilities and anxieties and there's something about the pureness of Bottoms' performance that threatens Theseus' sense of self. That is the unique pursuit of an artist trying to get to the core of something. Every discipline feels like the thread that is running through it: pursuit of truth and something profound.

We wanted to look at the fragility of the ego. We looked at the picture of the front row of Trump's inauguration – the most powerful people were in the front row. Tells you how power is manifested and where it centres itself.

## What do you hope the audience will take away from this production?

I hope audiences are surprised and if they've seen it already I hope they hear the play anew...and I hope it provokes thought and conversation about some of those themes on power, love and art in an authoritarian time.

I think all of us on the team hope that we've provoked an energised response to Shakespeare.

# IN CONVERSATION WITH CREATIVES...

# SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRICAL LANGUAGE AND WHO'S WHO

DRAMATURG DR FRANK PESCHIER

Aside from the words themselves, Shakespeare used different verse styles to help tell the audience about the various characters in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and their place in the wider dramatic power dynamic and story. *Midsummer Night's Dream* uses many forms, including iambic pentameter for nobles, prose for mechanicals/lower class characters and trochaic tetrameter for faeries. For example, we see Noble Oberon speaking in iambic:

**I know a bank where the wild thyme grows.**

Act 2, Scene 1

Poetic forms are also used to demonstrate characters' relationships to each other. Lovers speak in rhyming couplets when they speak of love, often finishing each other's sentences:

***Hermia:* Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake.**

***Lysander:* And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake.**

Act 2, Scene 2

Elsewhere, we see the mechanicals switch to strained rhyme when performing, demonstrating their failure to mimic the highfalutin style of the upper classes:

**O grim lookt night, O night with hue so black,**

**O night, which ever art, when day is not:**

**O night, O night, alack, alack, alack.**

Act 5, Scene 1

On the next pages are some examples of the 'class' of characters we find in the play, and how language is used to differentiate and illuminate them:



## The Nobles

The court of Athens is a seemingly contradictory place, one where you win wives ‘by the sword’ and can be put to death for love – but also one of great jollity and mirth, triple weddings and quick forgiveness. Recently returned from war with the Amazons, Theseus is about to be wedded to their conquered Queen Hippolyta. His courier Egeus pleads that his daughter Hermia be forced to marry his choice of suitor, Demetrius, rather than her heart’s desire, Lysander. Meanwhile her best friend Helena mourns over the ‘spotted and inconsistent’ Demetrius who previously ‘made love’ to her. It’s all quite a mess, especially with Shakespeare’s rather confusing timeline. In our production Theseus is an unhinged dictator with Hippolyta seemingly along for the ride until she questions her heart. We have kept our lovers young, full of teenage passion and extremes. Their quarrels and interchanging having all the energy and stakes of a Love Island recoupling.

## The Faeries

The faeries exist in the woods just outside Athens and are invisible to humans.. unless they choose not to be. They hold the ability to throw sleep and dreams over mortals’ eyes, as well as to charm them with various potions to their whims. Our production utilises what has become the traditional doubling of Oberon/ Theseus and Titania/ Hippolyta to explore the nobles’ shadow-selves. It is Titania who holds the upper hand in the woods, a space of



*Continued overleaf..*

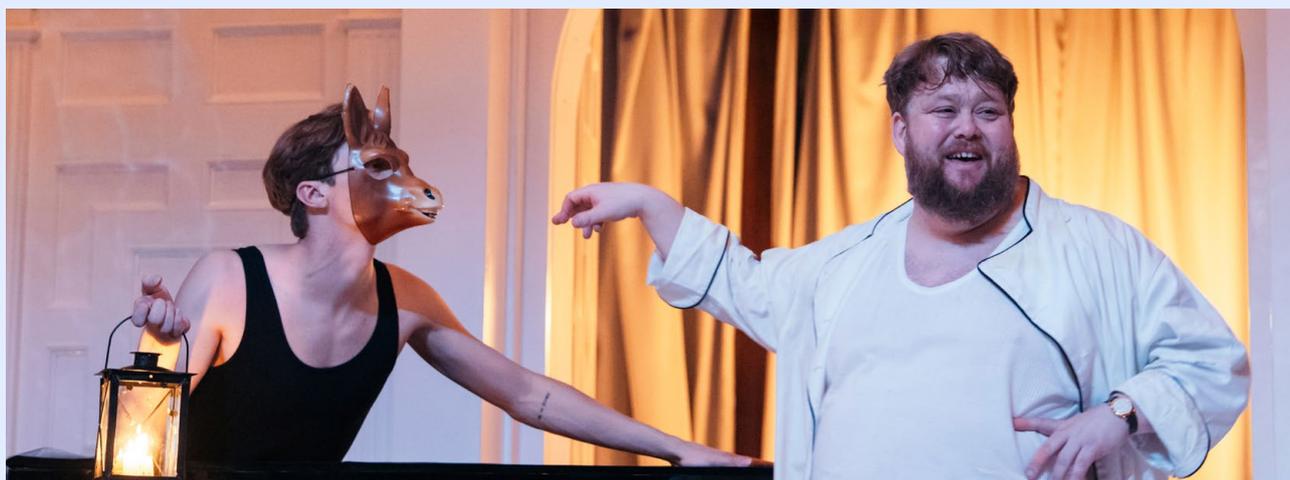
upside down and disorder compared to the control of Athens. Whilst Oberon embodies all of the insecurity and jealousy that Theseus tries to distance himself from through absolute power. Each has their own 'fairy train'. Titania has her Mustardseed, Peaseblossom, Moth and Mustard seed - although maybe not quite as you might expect them - as well as 'the Indian child', who the text tells us the faeries have 'stolen from an Indian King'. Whilst the child is never seen in Shakespeare's original, they form the basis of Oberon and Titania's quarrel, the result of which has been the altering of the seasons. Perhaps, we have hypothesized Oberon's page Puck/Robin Goodfellow was also once such a 'changeling'. We know from the original that this 'knaveish sprite is a shape shifter who can morph from 'very likeness of a roasted crab' to 'horse, hound, hog or fire'. We've taken this one step further with Puck being able to infiltrate the nobles' court, the mechanicals' rehearsals and maybe even the audience...

## The Mechanicals

The Mechanicals, Bottom, Flute, Quince, Snug and Snout (so called because they work with their hands) are traditionally the light relief of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and a commentary by Shakespeare on the silliness of theatre. Their play within a play has them face

many of the same dramatic obstacles that the Kings Players might have encountered themselves: bearded youths playing women, representing moonlight and how to actually bring in a wall. The metatheatricality doesn't stop there as these 'only shadows' perform Pyramus and Thisbe, in itself, something of a pastiche of Romeo and Juliet with its warring families and double suicide.

Whilst we hope our mechanicals haven't lost their humour, our production aims to invite the audience to laugh with Bottom and friends, rather than at them. We see the mechanicals as the heart of the play, the characters with the most to lose, and who put themselves out there for the sake of art. In our interpretation, Bottom is a chef, passionate about his creations - whether that be a chocolate mousse or bringing gravitas to Pyramus. His love for Titania is real, an experience that wakes up an artistic fire within him that years of unappreciation has all but extinguished. Flanked by his protégé, server Flute, and fussy general manager Quince, Bottom's plan is to put on the best version of Quince's (pretty terrible, to be fair), script. Through Holly's staging, we hope that the audience will identify with the Mechanicals, to hear the nobles' heckles as if they were performing rather than sitting with them. Putting on theatre is hard, doing it when you risk execution for anything less than a three star is something else entirely.



# IN CONVERSATION WITH CREATIVES...

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DESIGNER MAX JOHNS

## What inspirations are guiding your approach to designing *Midsummer Night's Dream*?

We started on the basis that that we're staging it indoors in a candlelit theatre in the middle of winter. And so we asked ourselves the question of what that does to the atmosphere of the play, what that does to the mood. There's so much reference to it being a midsummer celebration in this play. And we wondered, what if it is a mid-winter celebration? Or what if we're in the summer and actually the seasons have been turned on their heads and we're experiencing snow and ice on what should be a summer's day?

We looked at lots of films, like, *The Death of Stalin*, for the way it portrays comedy, but in quite a dark context, in a world of corruption and power.

*The Thief, The Cook, His Wife and Her Lover* is another film that has been really inspirational as well, in terms of the sort of world it creates. It is again about power dynamics, sexual power and politics, combining in a world that's quite dreamlike. We found the uncanniness of that world quite inspiring for our production.



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I think for me, the magic in this play is a really big part of it and we've been asking ourselves, what is magic in a world that seemingly doesn't believe in it? This is a play that was written in a time where there's a relationship with the occult and magic, it's a kind of pre-enlightenment piece, and what does it mean now? I think there's something about candlelight that takes us all back to a time where a belief in the magic and the mysterious and the esoteric was so much more in our bones.

### **How will the set serve the story as it shifts between an aristocratic wedding and a darker fantasy of the forest or the woods?**

So, we begin the play at Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding and it's a very opulent four day extravaganza, feasting and celebrating, and it's in their palace in Athens.

Then, when we go into the forest, some of that architectural detail starts to give way to a kind of softness and we had the idea to have curtains that billow in through the open doors like snow drifting in from the cold outside world into the interior.

I think there's often an interesting dynamic at play in Shakespeare plays between forest worlds and urban environments. There's usually a different set of rules at play in both. We see people going into the forest to seek a kind of chaos or capriciousness or an escape. The characters are freeing themselves from the constraints of the society they're in.

I think in this version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we were really interested in how we set up this quite tyrannical world of rigid power structures at the start, which then becomes a motivating factor, a place from which the lovers are



fleeing and seeking exile in the forest. It ups the stakes of the whole thing and offers quite a lot of potential for transformation, because we return to that palace world at the end and no one's quite the same as they were.

### **How will a costume design help carry some of the themes of power and transformation?**

I think there's a strong contrast between the design of the characters in the Athenian world of society, structure, the palace, and the people we meet in the forest. There's an interesting dynamic between magic and social structure. So, we have much more tailored structured clothes in the palace world, and then give way to a much freer, more artistic form of clothing expression in the forest.

Fairies are based on ballerinas. So, we leaned into this idea that they are an almost stereotypical idea of what people picture when they picture a fairy, but



they're in black tutus and they come on in masks at times, they're almost like these flies that zip around the space and land on different things.

We've been looking a lot at military clothing as well. There is a nod to the idea that the play begins with the ending of a war, and this sense that the characters have actually been through something quite traumatic. So we're interested again in those structural powers, the blending of where politics and Military forces combine to create a tyrannical world in which we find the characters at the beginning.

And then we have the third dynamic, which is our mechanicals. That was really fun because we got to play there. We were inspired by amateur dramatics companies and that long history of people staging theatre in a way that is kind of quite rough, and that relies on a suspension of audience disbelief.

### **Will there be a moment in the play where the design and the story will collide most powerfully?**

Our moment of going into the forest is a real moment of transformation. So I think seeing the space subtly transform will be a moment where the way in which that space is used becomes the signifier of the transformation that's taken place. We effectively make it so that the only way people can get on and off the stage is by coming through the audience. We go from being very much in a kind of playing space that's about the stage, to one that's about a shared environment with the audience.

*Continued overleaf...*



# IN CONVERSATION WITH CREATIVES...

# MEET HERMIA

## AN INTERVIEW WITH TIWA LADE

I play Hermia, and she basically kicks off the whole story. She's in love, but her stepdad is forcing her to marry someone she doesn't care about, and he even threatens her with pretty extreme consequences if she refuses. Hermia is usually really sweet and gentle, but this ultimatum brings out a new spark in her. She starts standing up for herself, and that defiance is what sets the rest of the play's chaos in motion.

I love playing a character who's so openly in love. In real life, wearing your heart on your sleeve can feel a little cringe nowadays, but this play reminded me how brave it actually is to express your feelings so honestly—especially when there's a real risk involved.

Growing up, I always found Shakespeare intimidating. The language feels huge and sometimes almost foreign. At first, the challenge was figuring out how to ground the text and make it feel real for

me. I wanted to create a performance I'd genuinely believe if I were watching it, not just recite pretty lines. Once I cracked that, it became a lot more fun.

When I first got the role, one of the most helpful tools for me was *No Fear Shakespeare*. That book honestly saved me. I began by reading the modern translation alongside the original text, which helped me understand the meaning and rhythm without getting overwhelmed. From there, I created my own personal translation—essentially, how I would naturally say the lines in my own words.

I was lucky to have a good chunk of time before rehearsals started, so I used that period to slowly work through the script and begin memorizing. Taking it step by step allowed me to really absorb the language and feel grounded before walking into the rehearsal room.



*Continued overleaf...*



Our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leans into the darker, psychological elements of the story, and for the first few weeks of rehearsal I was very focused on Hermia's fear, her defiance, and the pressures closing in on her. But then Holly (the director) reminded me that: even in a dark world, the light has to shine through. We need to understand what she's fighting for, not just what she's fighting against.

Once that clicked, everything shifted. I started exploring the warmth and playfulness between Hermia and Lysander—their humour, their chemistry, the tenderness that fuels their rebellion. Finding that balance between the shadow and the joy made her feel so much more human to me, and it completely changed how I approached each scene.

Yes. Hermia reflects anyone today who wants to choose their own path and isn't afraid to push back when the world tells them no.

I hope the audience really understands Hermia's story. Even though Shakespeare wrote her centuries ago, I want them to see her as someone who could exist today. A young woman with fire, vulnerability, and agency. Someone who isn't just swept along by the plot, but who actively fights for the life and love she wants.

If the audience can connect with her on that level—root for her, feel protective of her, recognise pieces of themselves or people they know in her, then I feel like I've done my job. I want them to love her, not just as a character in a classic play, but also as a real human being standing in front of them.

Every night, I picture a younger version of myself in the audience. I perform for her. She used to watch Shakespeare and feel shut out from it all, like it was a world she didn't quite belong to.

What I hope people take away is the opposite of that. I want anyone, especially those seeing Shakespeare for the first time to leave feeling welcome, included, and able to find themselves in the story. If this production can open the door a little wider and make someone feel like they're part of this world, then that's exactly what I hope they carry with them.



# IN CONVERSATION WITH CREATIVES...

# MEET BOTTOM

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL KIRRANE

I play the character of Nick Bottom, a mechanical who agrees to perform in a short play for the Duke (Theseus). In our production he is also an executive Chef for the Duke and his wedding to Hippolyta. He goes to rehearse in the woods and falls in love with Titania, and goes on a bit of a journey with her that then helps him Act in the play at the end. He's funny and real and moving (I hope).

I was excited to play Bottom, as he really is an iconic Shakespeare Character. But even more importantly than that I was so interested in dusting off the old script and find a way to make him a 3 dimensional character rather than the two dimensional caricature he normally

can be. It's been thrilling to find directors like Holly and Naeem who wanted to make Bottom a more nuanced character. It's challenging because audiences expect a certain thing that they've seen before so I've enjoyed pushing the character into a new plane.

Before rehearsals I talked to Holly, our director, about some thoughts I had. I read a book by Anthony Bourdain about being a chef that Naeem, our co-director, gave me. We found an awesome song for Bottom to sing in the woods, War Pigs by Black Sabbath. I also like to learn as many of my characters lines before rehearsals as it helps me to be able to play more in the room.



I think I found something in the room in the scenes with Titania. Rather than playing them just comedically, he genuinely falls in love with her and that he can be more vulnerable with her. It allowed me to find a rich vein of vulnerability underneath the bluster. This allowed me to be heartbroken when Bottom wakes up from his dream.

I think Bottom certainly looks like someone who could live in our society today. He is nuanced and masculine and vulnerable but also has that temper that an executive chef would have. He's also a good actor and artists are dangerous to fascist leaders like Theseus. Something that feels increasingly relevant in today's world.

I hope the audience can relate to Bottom, as he feels in this production very human and full of heart. I hope the audience can go on his journey with him, and I can channel for the audience that feeling of a man who is trapped in an authoritarian world and feels escape when he finds himself in love in the woods.

I hope the audience can take away that Shakespeare is such a brilliant playwright, that the plays and characters have way more depth than we might be used to seeing. Our production challenges the audience to see 'Dream' differently.



A misty forest scene with tall evergreen trees and a small cabin in the distance. The scene is dimly lit, with a blueish-green tint. The trees are dense and tall, with some snow or frost on the ground and branches. In the background, a small cabin is visible through the trees. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and serene.

# A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

## EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

# EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

## INTERPRETATION OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM: THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

These activities build an understanding of the social, cultural, historical and political context and how these might influence a creator's decisions when making work, as well as an audience and how that might apply to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

An audience will come with certain expectations of a theatrical performance and are likely to have shared social and political influences. They will also come with individual and personal life experiences and view points.

Understanding what these might be helps to understand how a performance might be interpreted, understood and experienced. It helps to clarify some of the themes and messages that the theatre makers might be highlighting, giving context to the work.

### Activity 1:

**Create:** In small groups, create a still image of a theatrical performance. Some of you will be the actors on stage, and some of you will play the audience. Show these images to one another.

**Analyse:** What was your first thought about what a theatrical performance would look like? What did the stage look like? Where did you place the actors and where did you place the audience? What are the actors doing and what are the audience doing?

What might this tell you about our expectations about a theatrical performance?

**Discuss:** If you have seen the show, discuss the ways that the performance met your expectations and the ways that it might have challenged your expectations? Consider why this might be.



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## Activity 2:

**Discuss:** In pairs, write down a list of as many global events or news stories that you can think of. Agree on a top three that evoke the most feelings. Share these with the rest of the group. Are there any events/ stories that came up more than once? Why do you think that is?

**Create:** Join another pair to make a bigger group. You might choose a pair that selected the same event/ story as you. Split the stage into two areas. In one half, create a scene that shows the global event/ story. On the other, show the impact of that event/ story in someone's day to day. Play around with freezing one side of the stage and animating the other, going back and forth between the global event and the day-to-day scene.

**Analyse:** How do global events impact people in their day-to-day lives? How do you think global events impacted the creative ideas for Headlong's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? What might an audience feel / think about when watching this version of Shakespeare's play?



## Activity 3:

**Create:** Imagine a new character that lives locally to you. They might be based on someone you know, or someone you have seen walk past in the street. They might be a neighbour or colleague, or completely made up.

Either close your eyes and use this as a visualisation exercise or write down some ideas about who they might be:

How old are they? Where do they live? Who do they live with? Do they have pets? Who is in their family? Do they get along? Are they studying or working? Where do they study or work, or where do they go to most days? Who are their friends? Who is their favourite person? Who makes them feel safe? What are they afraid of?

**Interview:** With a partner, take it in turns to ask and answer questions as your character. Think of as many questions as you can to learn as much about each other as possible.

You can use the questions above, and add others.

Here are some ideas for questions that might lead to interesting places. Feel free to ask further questions:

What do they like to have for breakfast? Who made their breakfast today? Who was kind to them today? Did anything or anyone annoy them or upset them today? Did anything happen in school/ college / at work today? Did they hear any gossip today? Did they hear any local news on social media/ on the radio etc....? If they could visit anywhere, where would they go? Do they have a secret wish? What are their worst fears?

**Develop:** This character has just seen Headlong's *A Midsummer Nights Dream*

Write a short diary entry about their experience of going to the theatre. What was it like for them to be in the space and be in the audience? What did they see happening on stage? What did it make them feel or think about? What did they like or not like?

Share these with the group.

**Discuss:** How do you think personal experiences, opinions and ideas impact the way a story / theatre is experienced? What were the differences in responses to the play and why do you think that might be? Were there any shared responses to the play amongst the characters diary entries? Why do you think that is? How do you think this production has been experienced by people local to you and why?

## EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

# RE-IMAGINING SHAKESPEARE: DEVELOPING AND DEVISING IDEAS

*Helena:*

Lo, she is one of this confederacy!  
Now I perceive they have conjoined all three  
To fashion this false sport in spite of me.—  
Injurious Hermia, most ungrateful maid,  
Have you conspired, have you with these contrived,  
To bait me with this foul derision?  
Is all the counsel that we two have shared,  
The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent  
When we have chid the hasty-footed time  
For parting us—O, is all forgot?  
All schooldays' friendship, childhood innocence?  
We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,  
Have with our needles created both one flower,  
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds  
Had been incorporate. So we grew together  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition,  
Two lovely berries molded on one stem;  
So with two seeming bodies but one heart,  
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,  
Due but to one, and crownèd with one crest.  
And will you rent our ancient love asunder,  
To join with men in scorning your poor friend?  
It is not friendly; 'tis not maidenly.  
Our sex, as well as I, may chide you for it,  
Though I alone do feel the injury.

*Hermia:*

I am amazèd at your words.  
I scorn you not. It seems that you scorn me.

**Responding to the text:** In a group, read the text aloud to get a sense of it. You could take a line each so everyone gets a chance to speak and listen to it. Highlight your favourite line. Why did that line stand out to you? What do you think it means?

As a group, choose the line that feels interesting and rich with meaning.

**Developing Ideas:** Write this line down in the middle of a page and write down all the meanings, images, stories, characters, themes and any ideas that the words inspire. Try not to filter ideas at this stage and get as many down as possible.

Circle your favourite. Create a still image that represents or summarises each idea. Rehearse moving between the images.

Show each other your 3 images, going from one to the other. Discuss what meaning, thoughts and ideas the images brought out for those watching. These might inspire new ideas.

**Create:** Devise a scene based on one or all of your images. Incorporate your line somewhere in the scene as a way of grounding your ideas around your initial inspiration and using the language from the play as part of your work. Rehearse and show these.

**Discuss:** How far away did you travel from the play? Is there a relationship with it still? Explore why this might be, or if you think not, why not? What do you feel your ideas are moving towards?

You are the artist now, what are you discovering about what you're interested in and what you want to say?



# EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

## RESOLVING THE UNRESOLVED: ARTISTIC DECISIONS AND THE CHANGELING CHILD

This character of the changeling child is the cause of the argument between Titania and Oberon but there are unresolved questions around the character of the changeling child.

Read the article 'so sweet a changeling child' together, found earlier in this pack.

Some questions are raised about the child in the article.

### Activity 1:

In a group, decide:

- The child's age
- In Shakespeare's play, the child is a boy, but in the production, the child is a little girl. Decide whether gender matters here for you and your group and what connotations there might be with your decision.
- The child's family- who are they?
- What is the child's social background?
- Who cares about the child?
- What is the meaning of his Indian birth?
- Why does this child matter to Titania?
- Why does this child matter to Oberon?
- Why does fighting over the child unsettle the climate? What could this mean?



## Activity 2:

**Create:** a still image of the moments just after the child is born

Now create a still image of 10 days before this child's birth

**Create:** a still image of 10 years before the child is born

Use a transition to move between your images, starting from the child's birth and moving chronologically backwards, holding your images for at least 5 seconds to make sure they are clear. Think about details like your use of space, levels and facial expressions and what they show about the characters in the image, their thoughts, feelings and relationships with one another.

**Discuss:** what you have learned about the child from this activity. What decisions did you make about them or their background as a group?

**Now create:** an image of the moment Titania takes the child, again consider the details in the image and what they show about this moment and the characters.

Create an image that shows 10 days later  
Create an image of 10 years later  
Create a last image of 100 years later

**Discuss:** what you learned about the impact of the child on others, and the impact of other people on the child.

What decisions did you make about their future, or our future as a whole/

Would you want to change anything and why?

What might some obstacles be to those changes?

## Activity 3:

**Develop:** a scene that explores some of those changes you would like to see, as well as some of the obstacles. Make your characters determined for change while also making the obstacles as difficult as you can.

**Discuss:** what you learned from this? What does it take to change things? Can you relate what you discovered through these activities to the play?



# CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Education Pack was produced by Headlong and written by Tassa DeParis. Designed by Malcolm Reid.

## Creative team

**Writer** William Shakespeare

**Director** Holly Race Roughan

**Co-Director** Naeem Hayat

**Designer** Max Johns

**Composer & Sound Designer**  
Nicola T. Chang

**Candlelight and Lighting Designer**  
Joshie Harriette

**Movement Director**  
Malik Nashad Sharpe

**Fight & Intimacy Director**  
Haruka Kuroda

**Dramaturg** Dr Frank Peschier

**Design Associate / Access Support Worker** Hugo Aguirre

**Costume Supervisor** Jackie Orton

**Origins Assistant Director**  
Sonny Nwachukwu

**Casting Director** Becky Paris CDG

## Cast

**Hippolyta / Titania** Hedydd Dylan

**Egeus / Quince** Jack Humphrey

**Demetrius / Cobweb** Lou Jackson

**Child / Flute** Pria Kalsi

**Bottom** Danny Kirrane

**Hermia / Mustardseed** Tiwa Lade

**Theseus / Oberon** Michael Marcus

**Lysander / Moth** David Olaniregun

**Helena / Peaseblossom** Tara Tijani

**Puck** Sergo Vares

**Ensemble/Cover** Dannie Harris

## Production team

**Production Manager** Jacob Gough

**Stage Manager** Martha Mamo

**Deputy Stage Manager** Rhea Jacques

**Assistant Stage Manager**  
Camilla Hoyos Stuttle

**Head of Wardrobe** Lou Chabot

**Head of Wigs, Hair & Makeup**  
Rosemary Williams

**Headlong**



**SHAKESPEARE'S  
GLOBE**

**BRISTOL  
OLD VIC**

**LEEDS  
PLAY  
HOUSE**

## About Headlong

We're Headlong.

We make theatre with the power to move.

Big, exhilarating productions that use the unexpected to connect everyone we reach, right across the nation.

Whether a work is old or new, there are always different questions we can ask. So our productions are an invitation: to come and see something in a new way. Join us.

Previous Headlong productions include *The House Party*, *People, Places & Things* and *Enron*.

## About Shakespeare's Globe

Shakespeare's Globe is a world-renowned theatre, education centre, and cultural landmark on the bank of the River Thames in London, UK. Founded by the pioneering American actor and director Sam Wanamaker, our site is home to two venues – the iconic open-air Globe Theatre (1997) and the candlelit indoor Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (2014). The Globe Theatre is a unique full-scale replica of Shakespeare's original 1599 Elizabethan open-air theatre, and the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an archetype of an indoor Jacobean theatre.

We celebrate Shakespeare's transformative impact on the world by conducting a radical theatrical experiment. Inspired and informed by the unique historic playing conditions of two beautiful iconic theatres, our diverse programme of work harnesses the power of performance, cultivates intellectual curiosity and excites learning to make Shakespeare accessible for all.

## About Bristol Old Vic

Bristol Old Vic is the UK's longest continuously running theatre and has welcomed millions of people through its doors since opening nearly 260 years ago. Committed to platforming and creating opportunities for the multitude of stories that Bristol and the UK have to offer, Bristol Old Vic offers a year-round programme of inspiring, original new work – including the European Premiere of Matthew López's *Reverberation*, and the new musical *Starter for Ten*. It also has one of UK theatre's biggest learning and engagement programmes and has recently relaunched its artist development programme, including a five-year commitment to new writing. Plus, through Bristol Old Vic On Screen, audiences across the world have seen its productions live or on demand.

## About Leeds Playhouse

Leeds Playhouse has been one of the UK's leading producing theatres for 55 years. It is an award-winning theatre and a cultural hub, a place where people gather to tell and share stories and engage in world class theatre. It makes work which is pioneering and relevant, seeking out the best artists to create inspirational theatre in the heart of Yorkshire. The Playhouse works creatively with the people, artists and communities of Leeds through its innovative sector leading Playhouse Connect programme. Focussing on two key areas - Learning & Skills and Creative Communities - Playhouse Connect engages with thousands of people in the region each year.



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