A Midsummer Night’s Dream, July 8 – August 2

By Lisa Higgins

“No Shakespearean comedy offers such a feast of magic, humor, music, and spectacle as A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” according to The Essential Shakespeare Handbook. Anyone familiar with Jim Helsinger’s work as an actor and director will know: no Shakespearean artist can conjure a feast quite like he can.

Helsinger brings a wealth of experience to the banquet table. He’s performed as several of the “rude mechanicals”—the rustic local artisans preparing to entertain at an upcoming royal wedding—Flute (twice), Snout, and Bottom. The Festival’s upcoming production marks his third round directing the play.

“The more experience you have, the more each production becomes a tapestry of all the favorite pieces you’ve ever seen,” he says. “At the same time, you’re looking for new people with new ideas to weave into the play.”

Proclaimed by Shakespearean scholar Harold Bloom as “(Shakespeare’s) first undoubted masterwork, without flaw...one of overwhelming originality and power,” the play was set in ancient Athens, an ideal locale for breaking the boundaries of reality and illusion. Yet none of the past productions Helsinger participated in were set in Athens, where Shakespeare placed it, creating the illusion. Yet none of the past productions Helsinger participated in were set in Athens, an ideal locale for breaking the boundaries of reality and illusion.2

In the city palace, Duke Theseus and Hippolyta are planning their wedding, just four days away, when they are confronted by Hermia and her father who are in conflict over who Hermia should marry. Hermia wants to marry Lysander; her father has chosen Demetrius. Reminded by the Duke that she should obey her father or suffer death, Hermia and Lysander flee to the forest. Helena tells Demetrius of their flight and then purses him for his love as he pursues Hermia into the woods.

Once in the forest, the fairy kingdom of magic reigns. “The element of magic is conveyed through music, dance, and lighting—it’s not magical in the sense of a magician’s magic. The forest is magical in the sense of beauty,” Helsinger says, noting that “more than half of the characters are not human.” Oberon, king of the fairies—to be played by Christopher Patrick Mullen (a role that marks his 24th debut as Bottom). “I’m excited to introduce PSF audiences to this super-talented actor and I hope some Philadelphia audiences familiar with Scott will come to see him and discover PSF, too,” Helsinger says. “I must say, I’m looking forward to seeing his Bottom.”

Festival favorite Carl N. Wallnau will play two roles: Peter Quince, a friend of Bottom’s, and Egeus, Hermia’s father.

The Schubert Theatre provides an exceptionally dynamic venue for Midsummer’s magic and comedy, Helsinger says, noting that the play ranks as one of his favorites. “You come into any production of Midsummer and you know that audience is seeing the playwright at his best, and you know you’re going to make someone in the audience into a Shakespeare fan.”

Perhaps Midsummer works its greatest magic of all with its audience. “Comedy is very life affirming and healing,” notes this master of comedy and weaver of Midsummer dreams.
