

# COMIC MASTER TAKES THE HELM

## *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*.<sup>1</sup> Anyone familiar with Jim Helsing's work as an actor and director will know: no Shakespearean artist can conjure a feast quite like he can.

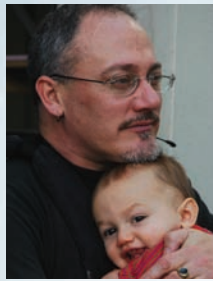
Helsing brings a wealth of experience to the banquet table. He's performed as several of the "rude mechanicals"—the rustic local artisans preparing to entertain at an upcoming royal wedding—Flute (twice), Snout, and Bottom.

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.<sup>2</sup> Yet none of the past productions Helsing participated in were set in Athens, where Shakespeare placed it, creating the ideal opportunity for PSF's production this summer.

For this summer's performance, Helsing and his design team have set the play in Athens in two different time periods. The young lovers—Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius—begin their journey in the Athens of the 1960s: "A blend of *Zorba the Greek* and *Never on Sunday*," a time Helsing describes as an "innocent, romantic time, the late Fifties, early Sixties."



Jim Helsing with his son, James.

When the lovers escape the city for the forest, the setting transforms to ancient Greece. "Those that like their Shakespeare classical will have classical," notes Helsing, "Those that like something different in their (Shakespeare) will have something different."

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," Helsing 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 with PSF) is piqued with his queen Titania and casts a spell on her while she sleeps.

Despite Oberon's irritation, he magnanimously decides to assist Helena, whom he's overheard proclaiming her love for Demetrius, who spurns her. Oberon tells the trickster Puck to enchant Demetrius so he will love her, but Puck enchants the wrong fellow, and merry confusion ensues.

Another group of Athenians, the rude mechanicals, are also gathering in the forest to rehearse their entertainment, a play in honor of the Duke's impending wedding, out of sight from their fellow citizens. The play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, is a love story and features Bottom as Pyramus, a warrior/lover, a role Bottom is most proud to play. When Bottom is momentarily alone, Puck transforms Bottom's head

into that of an ass, frightening away his fellow cast members. Perplexed, Bottom sings a song to himself.

Awakened, and under Oberon's spell, the fairy queen Titania discovers Bottom, falls instantly in love with him, ass's head and all, and commands her fairy attendants to serve him. "Bottom is Shakespeare's Everyman," Bloom writes. "He is at once a sublime clown and a great visionary."

One of the stars of the Philadelphia theatre scene, Scott Greer, is making his Festival 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," Helsing 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, Helsing 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. ■

1. A fixture in the book collections of many PSF staff members, *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook* by Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding is a wonderfully illustrated, reader-friendly volume.

2. Bloom, Harold, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead Books, 1998.



Christopher Patrick Mullen photo by Lee A. Butz.



Carl N. Wallnau photo by Lee A. Butz.