

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Following Darkness Like a Dream

Joanna Chen · Wednesday, September 13th, 2017

William Shakespeare would likely have approved of a recent production I saw of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was not held on a stage in a theater but outdoors in a forest on the outskirts of the Judean Hills of Israel. The bard's words, rendered in Hebrew, echoed through the forest on the evening I visited, artfully woven through additional text.

The magic began as the audience, waiting by the roadside, was led to a clearing inside the forest. It was a hot summer evening, and darkness was descending. As we walked, the excited chatter dissipated and silence fell. I reached for my partner's hand as we made our way into the forest, partly because of the promise of romance and adventure inherent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but mostly because it was dark, and I was afraid of stumbling. I was glad I took note of instructions sent earlier in the week to wear long pants and walking shoes.

A winsome Puck, that "merry wanderer of the night," awaited us on a rock, his eyes flashing mischievously. He took us deeper into the forest, where the 17-member cast stood silently in a half-circle under the trees. The audience magically formed another half-circle opposite the actors, and for a moment we stood there, contemplating each other. The sight was bewitching. Each character was introduced by Puck, and the audience was invited to walk through the forest following one or other of the characters, with the option of switching mid-scene.



The four parallel stories of lovers in the forest—the immortal world of a Fairy Queen and King, a band of craftsmen planning a play, and the antics of forest creatures—all meshed together beautifully in this natural setting. There were no microphones, and voices from different scenes floated through the night, enticing the audience to roam through the forest, or simply sit under a tree and enjoy. The scenes ran simultaneously, reality and imagination merged, laughter and cries filled the air, actors and audience strolled along together. Lysander, one of the lovers, brushed past me as I made my way to the final scene, closely followed by Demetrius. For a moment I was confused: Were they actors or audience? I wasn't sure anymore.

A magical atmosphere hovered over the forest. I caught Puck jumping from rock to rock, I glimpsed Oberon and Titania appearing and disappearing through the trees, and two ethereal fairies fluttered by, their costumes like delicate gossamer wings. In doing so, the true spirit of Shakespeare's comedy was captured. One of the fairies said to Puck, as the moon slowly rose above the forest, burning red in the sky:

*Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Through flood, thorough fire
I do wander every where*

The production was the brainchild of 26-year old Adi Weizman, who recently completed theater studies at a Tel Aviv college. Influenced by the work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, Weizman's aim was to create a production that enabled total immersion of the actors into their natural surroundings. "The experience of theater like this is to blur the demarcating line between fantasy and reality," Weizman told me in a phone interview. "Time and place are both real here, and this was essential to the performance." She also wanted to take the spectators out of their comfort zone, enticing them to explore the play in an unfamiliar environment.

The forest was not just an innovative setting for the production but an integral part of it. "We used the natural resources of the forest—the earth, the dust, the trees, and everything around us," Weizman explained. "This connected us to the very roots of theater, allowing a more primordial experience, both for the actors and the audience."



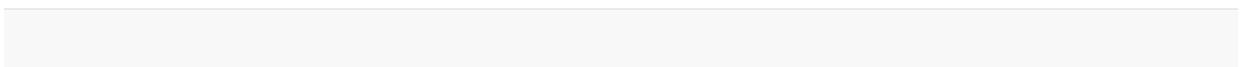
Along with musicians, designers and actors, Weizman worked hard to realize this dream of hers, raising money through Head Start in order to pay for the carefully-placed solar projectors scattered through the forest, for the pocket torches handed to each member of the audience, for the printing of hand-drawn maps and the creation of minimalistic costumes and props. Weizman managed to raise over \$14,000, more than she originally planned, but still it was a complicated and expensive endeavor—permits had to be secured from police and emergency services, stewards directing the audience had to be paid, and insurance policies had to be purchased.

Weizman's greatest challenge was synchronizing the four plots so that they all ended at the same time, in the same place. The characters were "on stage" constantly, with no exceptions. In order to achieve this, dialogue was added to some of the scenes, and taken out in others. All four plots intertwined in the final scene, held in The Monks' Valley, a majestic site of caves carved in the bedrock, used for burial during the Roman era.

When I got home it was close to midnight. I wiped the dust off my shoes and reached for a copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was searching for a quotation that appears at the beginning of the final act, in which Theseus explains to Hippolyta how imagination can turn fiction into reality. I found it—a late summer night's dream, come true:

*And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.*

All photographs by Etan Rosin.



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