

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM SYNOPSIS



A GARDEN PARTY

Hippolyta and Theseus have invited friends to a lavish celebration of their wedding. Jovial guests tumble into the garden from a wedding tent. They decide to entertain each other with a play in which to learn of love in all its variety. Props in hand, they slip from the garden into a land that lies between reality and fantasy.



IN A MAGICAL WOOD

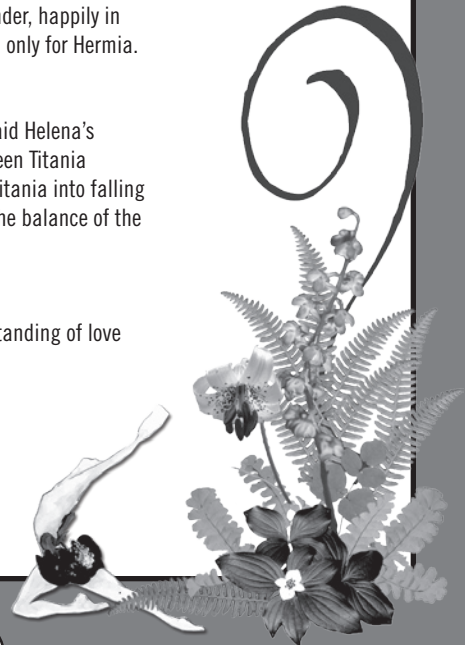
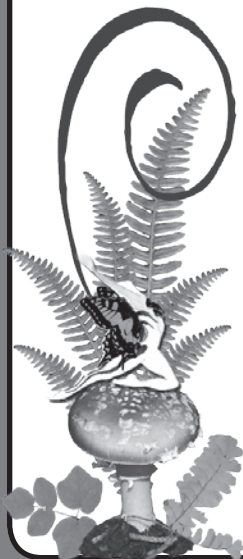
The ancient forest glimmers with woodland creatures—fairies, too, for those eyes that can see them. A band of traveling performers come and go. Oberon, King of the Fairies, appears, quarreling with Titania, his Queen, over possession of a Changeling Boy. Two mortal couples wander by—Hermia and Lysander, happily in love with one another; and Helena, pursuing Demetrius, who yearns only for Hermia.

DEEPER IN THE GOSSAMER WOOD

Oberon commands that Puck, his page, marshal Cupid's magic to aid Helena's plight. But the magic goes awry and chaos ensues. Oberon and Queen Titania continue their quarrel until Oberon angrily summons Puck to trick Titania into falling in love with a donkey. Seeing that the resulting discord has upset the balance of the world, Oberon enlists Puck and Cupid to set things right.

BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Re-affirming their vows, Oberon and Titania reach a deeper understanding of love and harmony is restored.



Costume renderings by Sandra Woodall

Welcome to the Study Guide for Oregon Ballet Theatre's 2007 Fall Student Performance Series. Oregon Ballet Theatre will be performing excerpts from Christopher Stowell's new version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* along with special guests. We look forward to seeing you at the Keller Auditorium at 11:00am on October 18, 2007. Doors open at 10:30am. We hope that you enjoy both the performance and this Study Guide. Please take the time to fill out a new online survey evaluating your experience. You could win a pair of *Nutcracker* tickets! (Instructions on page 4.)

~Kassandra Gruener, *Director of Education and Outreach* and Linda Besant, *Dance Historian*

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INTRODUCTION

I SEE A VOICE...

In Act V of the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the traveling actor Bottom says, "I see a voice..." This line reflects a theme within William Shakespeare's original play and Christopher Stowell's newest ballet—the confusion of the senses. Can you really "see" a voice? Are things as they appear? When you come to the Keller Auditorium on October 18 you will enter a magical world where dancers "tell" the story described in the Synopsis about the adventures and misadventures of mortals and fairies. Although the

beautiful dancers of Oregon Ballet Theatre will never say a word, they will tell the story with their dancing—you will *see their voices in dance*.

This study guide gives you background information on the creators and creative process that influenced the making of this world premiere ballet. It also offers some options for further study that will help students and teachers apply this ballet to Common Curriculum Goals from Oregon Standards for the Arts regarding "Aesthetics and Criticism" and "Historical and Cultural Perspectives."

CREATORS AND INSPIRATION

CHOREOGRAPHER: CHRISTOPHER STOWELL

Christopher Stowell became OBT's second artistic director in 2003, after retiring from his career as a principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet. As a choreographer he has created several ballets to composers as diverse as Maurice Ravel and Cole Porter, including an acclaimed version of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* for OBT in June of 2006. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is his first wholly original story ballet for the company.

Christopher's parents were dancers for George Balanchine at New York City Ballet, and later they directed Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle, so he first encountered ballet versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at a young age. He had always hoped to someday create his own danced *Dream*. "When Sandra Woodall and I were playing with the design models in her studio," Christopher says, "it was like being a kid again, doing exactly what I wanted to do when I was growing up."



Christopher Stowell and Sandra Woodall playing with the set model for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

COMPOSER: FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809 – 1847)

German composer Felix Mendelssohn was truly a child prodigy. As a boy he excelled at the piano and violin, painted well, and was gifted in languages. He was born into a wealthy intellectual family, which provided the young man with an ideal cultural environment for his talents. Mendelssohn composed the "Overture" for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1826, when he was only seventeen years old, a remarkable accomplishment, as it has remained among the most revered compositions of music's Romantic period.



Mendelssohn married and had five children, all while enjoying a prolific career as a performer, teacher, conductor and composer. He wrote the "Incidental Music" for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its famous "Wedding March," in 1843, many years after the "Overture."

SCENIC AND COSTUME DESIGNER: SANDRA WOODALL

Sandra Woodall learned how to sew from her grandmother while growing up in Oakland, California. She enjoyed sewing but aspired to be a visual artist, and graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute in painting. "As a child, I didn't have the idea that I would go into theater and design costumes and scenery," remembers Woodall, whose drawing and painting skills would one day play a crucial role in her career. Now she is one of the world's most respected theatrical designers, having spent over 35 years putting her distinct touch on more than 200 productions.

Sandra and Christopher first met when he was a boy living in Seattle and she was designing costumes for Pacific Northwest Ballet. Their long friendship makes it special for them to work together on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sandra believes that designers and choreographers get the best results by working together from the earliest stages of the work's creation. "When the design grows together with the choreography, that creates the most successful piece," she says with conviction. "Early involvement and allowing the piece to unfold produces the best collaboration."

Sandra is particularly fascinated by nature, from the tiniest insect to the largest tree, and the natural environment inspires many of her best designs. She finds beauty in bugs, leaves, shards of glass, shells, and stones, and often collects them and stores them away, knowing that one day they will inspire an idea for a set or costume.

As she imagined the designs for this ballet, she was drawn to the beauty of the Pacific Northwest old-growth forest. She hiked at Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center, where she painted, sketched, and took photographs as research for her designs for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



Sandra Woodall sketching the old-growth forest at Opal Creek.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564?- 1616) AND A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

William Shakespeare lived during the English Renaissance when there was a flowering of creativity in art, politics, science, and literature. But it was also a time of hardship as bubonic plague ravaged England, including the years directly before the writing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1595, the same year that he penned *Romeo and Juliet*. It is thought that the play reflected London life, which at the time was a bustling sophisticated metropolis, full of aristocrats and commoners whose views were tempered by folk customs and religious change. It is likely that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* celebrates a certain wedding of the

time while it explores many contrasting elements: reality and illusion, waking and dreaming, true and false love, change and transformation.

The play has inspired several other works, including a 1692 opera entitled *The Fairy Queen* and a 1939 musical called *Swingin' the Dream*, which utilized a predominantly African-American cast starring Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman. The earliest known ballet of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was done in 1855 choreographed by Giovanni Corsati.

A DEEPER LOOK

Exploring The Standards for Arts in Education

This symbol  indicates an activity for students.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF TELLING A STORY

Distinguish works of art from different societies, time periods and cultures. Oregon Standards Oregon Standards AR.HC.


While OBT's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is danced, Shakespeare's original version was spoken, punctuated with songs and folk dances throughout the play. At our Student Performance Series we will be joined by actors from a theatre company called **Staged!**. The actors will do an excerpt from Shakespeare's play.

 Research the internet and read a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON ART

Understand how the arts can reflect the environment and personal experiences within a society or culture, and apply to one's own work. Oregon Standards AR.HC.

In the earliest days of creating *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Sandra Woodall visited Opal Creek, where she observed the ancient forest. She was especially interested in the colors and shapes of the plants and the lighting that played within the forest. This attention to detail can be seen throughout the ballet. When you see the costumes you will see that the designs directly reflect her research. Note the fabric swatches and pictures of the costume drawings and their forest inspiration.

 Ask students to observe and take mental pictures or sketch the environment at a local park. Using one of Sandra's line drawings, design an original costume based on the park research.



Costume renderings by Sandra Woodall



USNEA LONGISSIMA: THE LUNGS OF THE FOREST

Usnea longissima, also known as Old Man's Beard, is a kind of lichen that lives in healthy forests in the Pacific Northwest and parts of Europe. If you've ever been hiking in the woods around Portland, you've probably noticed them: they look like long strands of green hair hanging from the tree branches. *Old Man's Beard* can be identified from other lichens by performing a fun and easy test. When gently stretched, a strand of *Old Man's Beard* will separate into segments, and a thin, white underlying band will appear between them. It has a very elastic quality: when released, the segments shrink back together and the white band is hidden once again.

Lichens are a fascinating class of creatures called *composite organisms*. This means that if you pick up a lichen from the forest floor, you're actually holding a community of living things from as many as three different kingdoms. All lichens contain a fungus. Since fungi cannot produce their own food, they must feed off of other life forms. In the case of a lichen, the fungus lives with algae, cyanobacteria, or both. The algae and/or cyanobacteria produce food for the fungus, as well as for themselves.

Usnea longissima is a special kind of lichen, because it is very sensitive to air pollution. In places where the air is dirty, *Usnea longissima* cannot survive. It can only live in forests that have clean, healthy air. When you see *Usnea* in a forest, it indicates that the air quality is high and the forest is healthy, so we call *Usnea longissima* an indicator species. Because of its dependence on clean air, people often say that *Usnea* is the "lungs of the forest."

OBT especially likes the idea that dancers must breathe deeply and their costumes pay homage to forest indicators for clean air!



Frequently Asked Questions about BALLET

Why do the guys wear tights?

Almost every activity requires a special uniform of some kind. Just as football players, wrestlers, and baseball players wear stretchy material to help them move with flexibility and speed, ballet dancers often wear stretchy tights so they are able to leap, kick, and stretch as they dance. Another reason tights are worn is so the audience can see the incredible leg muscles that allow them to jump so high.

How do the ballerinas stand on their toes?

Female ballet dancers wear special shoes called "pointe shoes" to help them achieve dancing on the tips of their toes. Pointe shoes are hard at the ends, and are handmade with layers of satin, glue and leather. Dancers must take several years of ballet lessons before they are allowed to wear pointe shoes. With hard work and good training to develop strong ankles and feet, most young ballet students begin working *en pointe* at age 11 or 12.

This ballet has no plot! Or does it?

Some do, and some don't. Ballets with plots, like *The Nutcracker*, are called story ballets. There are also abstract ballets, with a focus on movement instead of a specific story. Abstract ballets are meant to evoke ideas or emotions, and the audience can interpret them many different ways.

How old are the dancers?

Oregon Ballet Theatre's professional company members range in age from 18 to 34, but most are in their early-to-mid-20s. A few of the apprentices, however, are still in high school. All of the dancers began studying ballet when they were children, as it takes many years of dedication to become a professional ballet dancer.

How often do they practice?

Ballet dancers take class every morning for 1.5 hours, and then they rehearse all day. They have Sundays and sometimes Saturdays off, and they have a lunch break. Dancing is their full-time job.

Where are the dancers from?

Oregon Ballet Theatre dancers come from all around the world: Japan, Russia, Canada, and different areas within the United States. There are dancers from Alabama, California, New York, and several who grew up right here in Portland.

APPLAUSE

DO clap after a really spectacular movement. Laugh if the situation onstage is funny. Applaud and yell "Bravo!" at the end.

DON'T boo, whistle, hiss or make noise during the performance. It is distracting and disrespectful of the performers and to your neighbors in the audience.

FOOD

DO eat before you get to the theater if you think you might get hungry before the performance is over.

DON'T bring food or gum into the seating area. It makes noise, trash, and distractions.

TALKING

DO wait. Make a note on your program or a piece of paper if you want to remember something. Tell your friend at intermission or after the ballet is over.

DON'T whisper or discuss things with other people during the performance. Your friends may want to listen to the music or pay attention to the dancers' movement or the story.

DRESS & BACKPACKS

DO dress neatly as a sign of respect to the artists and the theater.

DON'T wear over-powering perfume, big hats, or jingly bracelets. Leave backpacks at school. If you must bring one, you'll be asked to leave it in the lobby.

TAPES, CAMERAS, & WALKMANS

DO relax when the lights in the house (seating area) get dark. Sit back and enjoy the live performance with your eyes, ears, and imagination.

DON'T bring CD or tape recorders or cameras into the theater. The noise and clicking can be distracting to your neighbors, and camera flashes can be dangerous to the dancers.

"Every elf and fairy sprite
Hop as light as bird from brier
And this ditty, after me,
Sing, and dance it trippingly"

- Sung at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



Costume rendering by Sandra Woodall

TAKE OUR SURVEY!

Please take a moment to give us feedback on your experience with OBT's Student Performance Series. Go online to www.obt.org/outreach_sps.htm and click on the "TAKE OUR SURVEY" link! You'll be entered in a drawing to win a pair of *Nutcracker* tickets!

Resources:

Jones, Jen. (2005, Nov. 1). Dance Teacher Magazine. A Day in the Life of Costumer Sandra Woodall.

McMahon Michael. (2001). CliffsComplete Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. New York: Wiley.

Charles, Gerard. (2000). Retrieved January 10, 2007 from <http://www.balletmet.org/balletnotes.php>

Ali Jackiw, Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center

Please direct any questions to:
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