

WILL & COMPANY

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Art Form: Theatre

Style: Classical

Culture: Western European

MEET THE ARTIST:

Will & Company is a multicultural theatre ensemble with Professional Designation in Arts Education that performs exciting adaptations of some of the world's greatest classic literature. Under the artistic direction of *Colin Cox*, they present major scenes from plays interspersed with narration and background information. Trademarks of Will & Company include physical humor and dazzling swordplay. The troupe performs Shakespeare's perennial favorite *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as adaptations of literatures great works: *Robin Hood*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Homer's *The Odyssey* and Charles Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol*. Will & Company has performed locally at The Geffen Playhouse, The Los Angeles Theatre Center, and El Capitan and tours nationally to present both classic works and original plays on diversity. In 2005, Will & Company was nominated for a GLADD award for their production of *A Pebble in My Shoe*.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

A Midsummer Night's Dream takes place in a mythical Athens where Theseus, the reigning Duke, is preparing to wed his love, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. When the play opens, Theseus has been asked to judge a dispute between Egeus and his daughter Hermia. Egeus wishes Hermia to marry Demetrius, but her heart is set upon Lysander. Hermia decides to disobey her father and resolves to elope with Lysander. They plan to meet in the woods near the city the following night. The woods become the major setting for the play as the action unfolds with two pair of lovers (Lysander/Hermia and Helena/Demetrius); the King and Queen of the fairies and their train; and a group of rustics -- laborers from Athens who are rehearsing a play to perform at the royal wedding. Mischief and magic take place in abundance, but all is set right in the end at a joyous triple wedding celebration.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

William Shakespeare was baptized in his home town of Stratford-upon-Avon, England, on April 26, 1564. It has always been assumed that he was born three days prior to his baptism. He was born in the same year as Galileo and Christopher Marlowe; it was also the year Michelangelo died. Queen Elizabeth I had been on the throne for five years, and the country was in a state of unrest with the threat of Catholic rebellions. But in the rural market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, life went on in a tranquil fashion. William's father, John Shakespeare, was a tanner and glover who went on to become an alderman and mayor in the town; his mother, Mary Arden, had come from a prosperous farming family. William was the third child of eight, but his two elder sisters, Joan and Margaret, died as babies, making him the eldest child. He had two younger sisters and three brothers. When Shakespeare was a boy, he attended the local grammar school where his studies included Latin and a thorough grounding in rhetoric. William married very young at age 18 to Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than he and pregnant with his child. The baby was born six months later and named Susanna. On February 2, 1585 Shakespeare's wife gave birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet would unfortunately die in 1596 at the young age of 11.

What happened to William Shakespeare between 1585 and 1592 is not really known, and they are referred to as "the seven lost years." Some people believe he joined the army; some say he went to sea; some think that he became an actor; most believe that he became a school teacher. By 1592, however, we know that Shakespeare was an established actor in London and had written a number of plays. In all, they total 38 plays, four long poems and 154 sonnets. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a comedy, was written in 1594 in celebration of the wedding of a patron's mother. Written mostly in rhyme, the tale tells a magical story of love lost and gained.

Shakespeare died in 1616 at age 52. In 1623, the First Folio edition of his plays was published in which his great contemporary and rival, Ben Jonson, called him the "Sweet Swan of Avon."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- If you were to describe the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in two or three sentences, what would you say?
- If you had one hour to spend with one of the characters in the play, which character would you choose? Why? What would you talk about?
- Which characters did you identify with most? Which characters did you identify with least? Why?
- Did you like the characters of the fairy kingdom? Were the fairies like those you may have imagined?
- When the relationships between the pairs of lovers got mixed up, did you think they would be sorted out in the right way eventually? Why or why not?
- Was the play performed by the rustics a comedy or a tragedy? Why?
- Did Will & Company's performance stir your interest about the plays of William Shakespeare? Would you like to read some? Would you like to see more of them?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE:

Over 3,000 references to some 180 different species of animals - both real and imaginary - have been identified in Shakespeare's plays. A descendant of farming stock, Shakespeare was steeped in rural tradition and has frequent reference in his works to nature, both flora and fauna. Using *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, make a list of all the animals, insects and plants mentioned in the play.

Examples: lion, ox, horse, cat, bear, boar, hedgehog, owl, finch, sparrow, lark, spider, beetle, worm, snail, snake, moth, peaseblossom, squash, mustardseed, musk-rose, etc. Have students research and bring in pictures of the various species on their list. Plant and animal life inspired much art as well, including embroideries, tapestries, engravings and botanical illustrations. Encourage students to find examples from both visual art and scientific sources.

Legend:

- 🌀 Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- 🌀 Many lines from Shakespeare's plays are quoted in contemporary literature, newspaper articles, speeches, television and film. Have students research and bring in to class two often-used Shakespeare quotations, such as:

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

Lysander, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

"This above all: to thine own self be true."

Polonius, *Hamlet*

- ❖ Play a class game called "Dost Thou Know Me?" in which students take on the characters from the Will & Company performance. Using body movement, facial expression and pantomime, have them take turns conveying the essence of a character's personality and motivations, while the rest of the class tries to guess who they are.
- ▶ Make a drawing or model of the Globe Theatre where many of Shakespeare's plays were performed during Elizabethan times. Label and define the various areas: the stage, the "heavens," the courtyard, the galleries, and the tiring-house (actors' dressing room).
- ❖ Design and make a mask for one of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed) or one of your own creation. Use a variety of materials: clay, cardboard, fabric, glitter, herbs, flowers, shells, etc.
- ⇒ Have students read a review of a theatrical production in the "New York Times" or the "Los Angeles Times." Then have them develop a list of criteria to use to write a review of Will & Company's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- * Have students work together on a group story theatre presentation based on a children's book or poem. Have them create the dialogue and action through group improvisations. Then add the use of simple props and costume pieces. Perform the dramatization for another class.



BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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- Stevenson, Burton. *The Folger Book of Shakespeare Quotations*. Folger Books, Washington, D.C.: 1979.
- <http://www-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/> - Author: Jeremy Hylton, 1995.