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FEATURES

In the Mahmood for Dreaming

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April 23rd would have been Will Shakespeare's 426th birthday, had he lived. He would have been deep into his curmudgeonly Methuselah period, having long since stopped play writing and embarked on the far more lucrative careers of lecturing, Japanese advertising, and executive-producing boffo Hollywood film drivel on celebrity power alone. He'd be one of those one-name stars, probably "Shake," and he'd lunch with Spielberg regularly. He'd be tan and fit, because he was, and would still be, a man of his times. Doing the occasional artist-in-residence turn, just to keep his hand in the "art thing," he'd gratuitously oversee hundreds of new conceptual re-stagings of his old stuff to "encourage the kids." But, he would *like* what Mahmood Hakak is doing at TSU with his old comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because it, as Shake himself, is very, very hip.

Before I get ahead of myself, there are a few things that must be laid out so that the magnitude of the *Dream* endeavor is clear. The basic ingredients in this theatrical stew are: a 400 year-old English comedy set in ancient Athens, a Persian director with a penchant for ritual drawn from his ancient, native culture, and a 20th century cast of American theatre students. Add to that a heaping dose of the collaborative fire of artistic imagination, generous and equal portions of tenacity and wit, no small amount of courage, and heat the entire mix to a passionate boil until curtain time. Invite the public, and serve. It is pretty daring cuisine.

Out of the head of Mahmood Karimi-Hakak came the notion of combining these disparate forces in the names of art and entertainment. "Suppose," he says, "there is such a thing as a fairyland, and that once in a blue moon the fairies who live there come to earth just to meddle and have some fun." I get the impression that this is not something that he simply supposes, but in fact, believes. As evidence of the possibility of such mischief, he describes the case of the disappearing keys. "You put them down on the table; you know you put them down on the table, but you go to pick them up and they are gone. You search wildly but they are not to be found. You finally come back to the table and there they are." Fairies' work, he says, eyes ablaze. I check for my keys. So far, so good.



photo courtesy of Fine Arts

Mahmood Karimi-Hakak directs a fanciful *Midsummer Night's Dream* on TSU's Mainstage. Sohayla Vafai, his wife, is an artist.

Anyway, according to Mahmood, these fairy visits are part of a lunar celebration, and happen all the time. And the way in which they most frequently fiddle with the foolish mortal world is by invading their dreams. He says, "You are sleeping, and dreaming an unusual dream. Suddenly, you are awake, sitting bolt upright, looking for the world of your dream." Fairies again, stirring up trouble.

It is the idea of the invaded dream that forms the basis of Mahmood's fanciful staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His premise is that humans are unable to control their dream/destiny, (our destiny is our dream, and vice versa) and are therefore logical and easy prey for a gaggle of fun-seeking spirits out on a lark under the summer moon. So, the human dream of Lysander, Hermia et al, in the world of the play, is invaded by the fairies' reality. Furthermore, the fairies' dream (Oberon, Titania, Puck, and crew) is invaded by the gods' reality, and the logical extreme is that the dream of the gods (Cupid and assorted willful, indulgent deities) is invaded, but by whom is pure speculation. (The idea of a god's keys disappearing is a charming one, however...)

The final invaded dream of the production is that of the audience, whose dream is the play itself, masked as reality. At the end of this fancy, the goal, or hope, of the director and cast is that the audience will leave feeling in their pockets for their keys, or at least wondering, and wanting to dream. Stirring up the stubborn and static ions of underused imagination, the hoped for series of questions is, "Was it reality? Was it a dream? Was it, could it be the meddling fairies?" (I don't think even old Shake could answer that one.) The idea that this is not the typical romp of Puck, however, should be pretty apparent.

Wandering around inside the head of the man who is able to conceive of a "Corporate Fairy Ladder," on which the lower sprites are striving to rise and fill the shoes and jobs of the upper sprites—"I Dream of Jeannie" meets Lee Iacocca, methinks—could prove to be an interesting jaunt. To wit: in response to a question about moving to Baltimore from New York, "Grass! Grass! We actually have grass!" About working with his fellow Towson State theatre professors, "The lack of the interference of egos is new to me, coming from

New York. All of us here are team players, working for the best thing for the students and the school. We have different ways of thinking, but our respect for each other allows us to like or dislike someone's work, but be able to discuss it. We are, after all, here to understand, not agree with each other."

There is a remarkably gentle and persuasive intensity about Mahmood; it is easy to be drawn into laughter with him, easy to listen to him. Imagining what an acting class of his must be like, I ask if there is any central tenet that he tries to deliver to his students; I am not surprised by the answer. "Believe in what you say, and take action in what you believe," he says, serious but smiling. "Find, identify, study, and express what you believe in; you must do things for the love of them." There is something in his open countenance that makes this answer feel like a gift, something to cherish, something hard won and worthy. It is not new information, but his delivery is so convincing and clear that the faintest of heart could not help but feel reassured, and lighter.

In his own work and in the

work of his students, Mahmood looks for originality and the pursuit of perfection, going for the best in what one chooses. What comes out of that pursuit is "great art, and great art is great entertainment." It is not solely a philosophy for the artists and actors, though, he maintains, it is for living. The point gets across early to his beginning acting students; a required text for their class is *Zen and the Art of Archery*, and inevitably the question arises, "What does this have to do with acting?" The response: "It has to do not only with theatre, but your whole life, baby!" I am convinced.

I left his office with an armful of notes and quotes and a decidedly brighter outlook on the day. Refreshed, rejuvenated, I walked a dozen or so steps, stopped, smiled, and went back for my keys.

Come and celebrate the long-life of William Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will be on the TSU Mainstage Friday and Saturday, April 27 & 28, and will continue Wednesday though Saturday, May 2-5. All performances are at 8 pm. Call 830-ARTS for tickets.