

Theatre preview: Shakedown presents Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream – King's Theatre

✘ Edinburgh schools have been invited to take part in a new performance project that breaks down, or shakes down, the plays of William Shakespeare and gives high school students the opportunity to make the plays their own on one of Scotland's most celebrated stages.

In the first year of the project, Firrhill, Forrester, Tynecastle, Queensferry and the Royal High Schools will reimagine A Midsummer Night's Dream at the King's Theatre in two performances on Wednesday 28 June.

Each school will perform one act of Shakespeare's romantic comedy, keeping a through-line in design, costuming and direction, but allowing for multiple portrayals of characters in a cohesive and collaborative work. The play will be abridged but the verse will be as Shakespeare wrote it. The opportunity is for students to explore and experience the play for themselves, to work together with students not from their school and to work outside of the school learning environment as the show will be developed and presented at the King's Theatre.

A Midsummer Night's Dream will be directed by Pab Roberts with Music by Gary Cameron and Lighting Design by Heather McLuskey.

Shakedown is a new approach to presenting the works of William Shakespeare created and developed by performer, voiceover, writer and director, Pab Roberts. With the aim of nurturing a

new appreciation of Shakespeare in schools, empowering students and encouraging collaborative working, the project will run over 4 years and invites all Edinburgh high schools to take part.

☒ Picture the Production pitch – Pab Roberts in front of a panel of five Edinburgh school's headteachers and governing alumna. He assures them that, whilst the students and pupils will be celebrating end of public exams, the whole ethos of the production is firmly embedded within curriculum criteria.

A historical perspective will throw light of the down-trodden proletariat (The Rude Mechanicals) and the inherent injustice of an autocratic monarchy, Duke Theseus. The subjugation of the female through the patriarchal paradigm – male actors portraying women, Queen Hippolyta as war trophy. (There's a general murmur of agreement here in that it will at least keep the HMI, Sturgeon and Davidson off their backs if there is any PC blowback.) So far, so good.

'We understand it is one of the lighter Comedies penned by the Englishman, though still suitable for a mixed audience and a more discerning Edinburgh palate?' Pab Roberts assure them it is. 'A brief synopsis perhaps?'

Well, there is chaos in the Fairy world on account of ownership of an Indian Prince. 'Ah, HMI will like that, multicultural issues and migrant slavery!'

The humble artisans prepare a play to celebrate The Duke's wedding. 'Good! Supporting grassroots Arts and reaffirming the solidity of the sanctity of marriage, and then Mr. Roberts?'

Well, then – a young man gets his head magicked in to that of an ass and is seduced by an aphrodisiac crazed Faery-Queen sex-machine. 'Ah! So, sex and drugs but no swearing or violence?' Absolutely not! 'Very well, on you go. I still think Michael Portillo was well shot of that Trainspotting debacle. And he came from Kirkcaldy where they knew a thing

or two about linoleum turf-wars!’

To clear up any possible misunderstandings The Edinburgh Reporter chatted with Pab Roberts –

TER: Trials and tribulations, machinations and manipulations all for the sake of that crazy little thing called love! Were those your selling points? (Guess you kept the bits about donkeys and flowery bower bed romps quiet to start with!)

PR: The selling point really so far as the performers were concerned is that Shakespeare can often appear dusty and impenetrable on the page not because Shakespeare was writing 400 years ago but because theatre is a live art form. By bringing pupils into a study and performance of the play they get an opportunity to experience it multi-dimensionally.

For the schools, the production ticks many boxes on the Curriculum for Excellence: Successful learners, Confident individuals, Responsible citizens, Effective contributors. We are bringing together children from different school years and from different schools to work with theatre professionals on one of Scotland’s largest stages to perform in front of a paying public audience. By the process end every one of those pupils should be buzzing with increased confidence, knowledge and experience. I truly believe drama is a game-changer for learning of all types.

TER: Many have fond memories of their first fearful tread upon the School’s production stage. A logistic nightmare fitting it all into a school’s already manic timetable – so you decide to times that by five! Across a city- and with Shakespeare! Explain your mid-Summer’s madnesses.

PR: The approach has taken 11 months of planning and long-term negotiations with schools to get everyone together at the right points. The bulk of rehearsals are post-exam when most pupils are beginning to explore the following years’ curriculum and the performance is within a couple of days of

the Summer holidays. It fits with the setting of the play too, which is a bonus!

TER: Did the date choose the play or the play chose the date?

PR: To be honest, the curriculum decided the date while the lack of sword-fights in A Midsummer Night's Dream decided the play! Romeo and Juliet is pencilled-in for next Summer and whichever schools want to be involved with that can be assured that creative solutions to eye-gouging have been sought and found.

TER: Auditioning actors can be a demanding business in itself – let alone times five and some tender hearts to uplift or disappoint...

PR: I have been honest from the start with all those auditioning. The adaptation has 37 performers and I couldn't squeeze more in without diluting the experience for those performing. What is important is that kids aren't coddled and, with 140+ auditioning, I had more than enough brilliant talent to choose from. It was genuinely heart-wrenching to turn away some genuine finds but those who are in the cast can be assured that they are the very best of the best. As for those who didn't get selected, it is that they were brave enough to audition which stands them in great stead in years to come. I cannot over state how impressed I was with the auditions.

TER: It's a kind of magic but it is also a bawdy romp. How much did the young actors pick up on this and how much did you feel you might have to sneak past Head Teachers, parents – The Law?

PR: Ha! The Lord Chamberlain's powers have little hold this far from 16th century London. It is certainly no more bawdy than today's fare and no-one knows better the fear and excitement of affairs of the heart than high school pupils. Besides, I can think of no better way to express affection

than through the greatest poetry ever penned in our language.

Everyone in rehearsals has attacked the text with intelligence, wit and humour.

TER: Finally, in absolutely no more more words than you want – explain how you aim to make everyones' Dream come true?

PB: Audience! These actors have given of their time and dedication in bringing a truly great classic piece of theatre to life. Not only do they deserve an audience, the people of Edinburgh deserve to see how bright the younger generation is shining. Tell your friends: "Love's stories written in love's richest books. To fan the moonbeams from [your] sleeping eyes."

King's Theatre Edinburgh Wednesday 28 June 2017, 2.30pm & 7.30pm

<http://www.edtheatres.com/shakedown>