A SCENIC VIEW OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM:
PROCESS AND COLLABORATION IN CREATING
A RICH AND THEATRICAL ENVIRONMENT

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A Scenic View of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Process and Collaboration in Creating

a Rich and Theatrical Environment

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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

A Scenic View of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:
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a Rich and Theatrical Environment

by

Elizabeth Ashley Ryan
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts
San Diego State University, 2011

Designing the set for a Shakespearean play is one of the most challenging and exciting opportunities a young designer can have. In my case I was selected to design San Diego State University’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a most popular Shakespearean comedy. This paper explores the collaborative process that built the magical world which the Fairies and Athenian Lovers would soon occupy and all that I learned while collaborating with the director and fellow designers along the way. Early in the process I discovered that “our” *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was not going to be what is traditionally thought of as the classical *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. One of the first elements introduced was the factor that the fairies would be Hippies from the 1960s, and along with this characterization they would have many of the same ideals. In addition to the costumes, the director also was going to incorporate songs into the spoken word of the text of the show, having moments much like a rock concert, giving the show vitality and life that would keep the audience interested in our characters’ plight throughout their various journeys. Along with the 1960s costumes and the rock concert sound, the director and designers wanted to augment all these elements with the “feel” of a rock concert with the brightly colored light beams and atmospheric haze. Also important to the director was the need for the stage to be at a rake so that he could have full use of the stage at all times; to accommodate the large cast of twenty-six actors. The director wanted the fairies to be able to be on stage while the action with the Athenian Lovers and Workman took place in the woods, giving the audience a full view of the often mischievous and entertaining actions of the fairies toward the Athenians. The seated audience’s shallow incline of seats in the audience, just in front of the apron of the stage where the spectators’ seats are bolted, was just not ideal for the show we wanted to create; so by creating this rake we were in essence allowing the audience to have clear multiple views of all action onstage at all times from their vantage point, freeing the director to have several bits of action going on stage simultaneously and the audience wouldn’t miss a beat or a spoken word. Since the stage was such a steep raked stage, it allowed the actors to be further away from the audience but still be seen, so we incorporated early on the use of wireless microphones. By taking all of these ideas and concepts into one it was up to the scenic designer, me, to make everyone’s dreams come true and with a lot of help from some wonderful advisors, designers, and understanding director we did. We created a wonderful production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that was truly consistent with the original vision
and in the end very successful. The DVD of the production is available for viewing in the Media Center of Love Library.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The process of designing the setting for our retelling of William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* provided many challenges. The show was to open April 30, 2010, in the Don Powell Theatre. We began design meetings five months before that date. As I began to think more about what the director and design team wanted, I began to realize that there were certain challenges that the production as a whole had to overcome. This project report explores, in a reflective style, the story behind the development of our production, including within it many of the inspirational images and designed documents created for this project.

Our location, as discussed in one of our initial design meetings, would be the United States of America between the years 1965-1969, during the time of the “flower power” movement. In the script much of the play takes place in the forest and when I had seen the play performed in other productions I had believed many scenes took place in the palace of Athens. So initially I was worried about the challenge of changing of locations. Thankfully in the script this proved not to be true, as all action would take place outside. Then came the explanation of time frame since we were doing the fairies as hippies. The time frame had already been established to be 1960s but the challenge scenically put to me was what makes a 1960s forest look different from a 1690s forest.
We also had the extraordinary opportunity to use a live band, which was an awesome
coup for the production, so it was very important early on to figure out a logical place in
which they could play their instruments and every once in a while interact with the characters
on stage.

Also after the decision was made to use a raked stage, the prospect of doing rolling
scenery seemed not in the best interest of the show both aesthetically and functionally, and
the director wanted to be able to see the fairies lying on the ground and wanted them to romp
about and often playfully do certain choreographed sequences on stage. A raked open space
seemed the best way to go. I had wonderful direction from my advisor, Ralph Funicello, who
helped guide me through the entire process, and I always felt free to ask his opinion on any
design question I may have had. It was he who really encouraged me to go with my initial
notion with the open space, really encouraging me that from what he too had heard at the
design meeting that was perhaps the solution that would be the most beneficial for the
production. To make sure the rake was not too severe for the actors to perform on we
discussed putting a 3' 0" step unit to make the rake a bit more even and both the top upper
and lower portions of the stage, allowing more safety and freedom of movement for the
actors. Even at these early stages, we were aware that doing a full raked stage on the Don
Powell stage would be difficult from the point of view of the lighting team, since they would
be not be able to use the Genie lift to focus many of their lights, since the stage would be
sloped. We continued to collaborate with the lighting designer and talk through this and many
issues that would arise.

Finally the best and probably the most trying decision we came to was the decision
that everything that happened in the show was “all a dream” so we could forget all
attachment to realism. It was the best because it left me and the other designers very free to create whatever world we chose in the context of our play. It was a most trying decision because all worlds need boundaries, rules, a reason that the sky is up and ground is down. If you go into a project without this basis, it becomes very hard to get something substantial that the audience can grasp onto as a touchstone; the audience needs to understand why and where you are leading them as you journey through the play, and you don’t ever want to lose your audience.

After our initial discussion of the script the designers, directors, and advisors all talked about how William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream would work in the 1960s era. After a few brief minutes we found that it really did fit just perfectly. The play was all about rebellion against the establishment—and people not feeling in control of their own destinies. For example—the Athens lover Hermia who loves Lysander is forced to rebel against her father, Egeus, for he wishes her to wed Demetrius, another young lad, but he is not one of her choosing. But all this malcontent is solved only by her rebelling and running away into the unknown realms of the forest. The fairies with their mystical flower power and fairy dust magic, make it all better. Another aspect of the play were the workers who with their simple straightforward ways do not trust anything that is not true and tangible.

We discussed giving the audience two polar opposites, the hippies and the working class, one group just not understanding the other in any way. The working class were so self-involved with their own importance that any other way of thinking would just be incomprehensible to them and hence invisible, and in the final production I’m glad we were able to bring the reality of our conversations to life and to see them acted out in a few key scenes.
Through collaboration with the director and other designers, we used many elements of the 1960s in our initial research. What was most astounding to me (and I believe to others) was that we were all on the same bandwagon, or Volkswagen bus if you will, extremely early in the process. We fed off each other’s ideas rather well. Many of us had some visual images of the 60s, Woodstock pictures by Peter Max, and references to Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band. We were all in this to make it lovely and amusing. I wanted an entertaining production right from the start and that is what I enjoyed most about the whole process. In the following report I cite many examples of how I used the information given to me in this initial design meeting to eventually make the scenic design a reality. I believe the end result was faithful to the original vision.
CHAPTER 2

THE PRELIMINARY PROCESS

When I first read Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* I got worried, not because I didn’t think I could design the show, but because I had seen the show designed so well, too many times. There was such a preconceived notion about what *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* should look like. At least a dozen undergrads stopped me in the hallway, very enthusiastic about the upcoming production, chattering on about their ideas for how I should make the trees look realistic, and offering helpful hints on how they had accomplished a realistic looking tree stump in their high school’s production. All of this was before we had even had our first design meeting. It was difficult to envision in those early readings how I was going to come up with something fresh and different when it seemed everything had already been done. Also I started to get the feeling that anything too different might just be a disappointment to those who had such a preconceived notion about this classic production. So to make sure I wasn’t missing anything, my first step was to research not just the productions that had been done but more about Shakespeare himself and where this trickling of an idea for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* had flowed from originally, and where and how it had been previously performed. So I began and in my research found out the importance of the imagination and illusion and real versus magical elements. And how the magic of the fairy sprites, changelings, and pixie characters bring into clearer focus the other, more human characters, such as the workman and the lovers.
I also explored the magic that exists not only in the characters but in places, such as the wood versus the kingdom where anything can happen. Just the fact that they are in the forest for most of the play allows the rules that govern everyday life to be whisked out the door and an imagined dream like world has the freedom to develop and envelop the characters.

While we don’t know for sure when Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* it is assumed to have been written around 1596 (White 2). The first performance by Shakespeare and his fellow members of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men took place the summer of 1596 at an open-air playhouse built by James Burbage. This was thought to use a ground plan that was polygonal in shape with galleries that were tiered for people to watch. Some would pay to sit and some would pay less to stand. There was also a yard that an audience member could pay much less to stand in to watch the show but it would not be protected at all from the elements of nature as the other two areas were.

According to White in his book, *The Shakespeare Handbook: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,”* the stage was “probably around head-high and perhaps used with stage traps thrust out into the yard, a rear wall to the stage with entrances on the stage. On either side of the stage two doors and possibly a larger central opening; behind which actors waited for their cues. Behind the stage was the tiring house where the actors prepared themselves” (6).

White continues that: “[T]he theater and tiring house was possible protected from the worst of the weather by a roof supported by pillars and perhaps had signs of the zodiac or other planetary images painted on the underside, the roof may also have contained some form of winching gear to lower a throne [or other such apparatus]” (6).
I believe knowing the construction of such a theatre is important because Shakespeare was probably thinking of his venue when working on his play; just as I was thinking of the Don Powell Theatre as the basis for my adaptation. For instance, in the stage direction on line 59 when Oberon and Titania bring opposing forces face to face, it states “Enter Oberon the King of Fairies at one door, with his train and Titania the Queen at another with hers” (Shakespeare 2.1), this stage construction that Shakespeare believed his theater would bring light to the obvious contradiction of why a doorway (a man-made structure) would be in the middle of the woods. In White’s book he also brings us the theory that “other items that are believed to be incorporated into the staging would be the posts that held up the roof; they may have been directly incorporated in the staging to represent trees to sit under, pin things to, or climb” (8).

In all my research there seemed to be three unchangeable factors or conditions that were consistent in Shakespeare’s theatre. The writings by Watkins broke them down the best:

1. A stage or acting area which projected from its background, and on which the action was three-dimensional so the audience could be as closely involved in the action as possible. An actor could stand at the very central point of the playhouse and the audience would not be detached spectators of a remote picture but engaged participants.

2. A background which was permanent and unchanging, basically the same and architecturally constant. The audience entering the playhouse knew what they would see and could ignore the features of the background if the dramatist so wished.

3. A constant and neutral light embracing players and audience alike, so that illusion of light and darkness, weather or atmosphere, or subtle characterizations must be created by the miming, gesture and posture of the actors, and above all the words which the playwright gave them to speak. For instance, Oberon’s cries in the opening scenes “ Ill met by Moon-light, proud Titania” is one such classic example of the power of Shakespeare’s atmospheric creation. (Watkins 18)
Over the years there have been many famous interpretations of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Max Reinhardt co-directed one of the most famous within the 1935 Warner Brothers film. Reinhardt mixed Expressionist and realistic elements along with spectacular effects, lengthy ballets to Mendelssohn’s music and live animals and very realistic wood sets (Griffiths 58). Conceiving of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with these more realistic elements is consistent with many film adaptations of the plays.

The history of the play in stage performance can be defined in year of production by the treatment of the fairies on-stage. At the Royal National Theatre in 1992 the fairies were adults, half naked, dressed in black and prone to slither through the muddy pond that dominated the set. That version is in stark contrast to the long tradition of the fairies attending Titania appearing as full-scale female corps de ballet dressed in white. This tradition still seen today can be traced back to the opera of “The Fairy Queen” in 1692 which included a chorus of fauns, and naiads (Hackett 47). Peter Hall’s film version in 1969 took up the tradition of children playing fairies, but they were dirty urchins covered in mud. In George Devine’s 1954 production at Stratford, his fairies were beaked and feathered. Granville Barker’s fairies at the Savoy in 1914 were very controversial: all the fairies were adult, dressed in exotic costume, and their faces and hands were gilded with “hair like gold, good shaving, beards like golden rope and metallic looking moustaches” (Holland 28).

Many critics feel the most influential rendition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in recent years was the adaptation by Peter Brook, who approached the play with no reference to past productions to that point. Revealing a magical playground of a white box, the walls were enclosed on three sides and the actors could swing and look down from above.
In many written adaptions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* there are three environments that make up the world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: The Palace, The Craftsman’s House, or in our case the Workman’s World, and the Woods. These environments are very interesting, for we see court people and city people, but in the wood and outside of the palace we find no country people. Instead, we meet a cluster of fairies who complete the comic cosmic order responsive to the less than omnipotent Oberon.

Because of the actions in the isolated world of the woods the claustrophobic world of the Palace of Athens is able to change from unhappy to happy. In the play the real world, that of Athens, could not exist without the soothing and magical world of the woods. As T. Walter Herbert writes in his essay *Oberon’s Mazed World*,

In the initial Athens division prevails, aged authority disables young love, the rulers conform to ruthless law, the weather is said to be disastrously bad, and the mentioned gods do nothing. Hermia and Lysander escape. During the great middle of the play the wood looks more and more like a workshop to repair the world. [Events there first reveal the troubles of moral Athens result from trouble among its immortals.] Then Oberon schemes. (14)

Herbert continues, “Despite all blunders he puts his world to rights, filling Bottom with wonder and bringing maturity to Lysander and Demetrius” (14).

It is this aforementioned workshop of the woods that brings forth some of the most important elements of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—that of magic and dreams. The magic of the woods is encapsulated its inhabitants, the fairies. This magic brings even the most grown-up, hard-hearted adult to a standstill when a four-year-old child with a sparkling light in her eyes asks, “Do you believe in fairies?” This simple question is often asked all over the world by the upward looking glistening eyes of every child. Peter Holland writes about a climatic moment where Tinkerbell lies dying, having drunk the poison that Captain Hook
intended for Peter Pan himself. Peter turns to the audience for their help: “Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe! If you believe clap your hands!” For adults in the audience it is a moment of nostalgia and embarrassed sadness, nostalgia for a time when they could believe in fairies and clap their hands in a desperate need to participate in the magic of fairy’s resurrection, embarrassed sadness because they no longer believe and cannot easily pretend to any longer for the sake of a theatrical trick (Holland 24).

It is this nostalgia for childhood that makes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* a success for audiences. The belief in fairies and the magical trickery that comes with them makes everything in the play possible. The woods and countryside would be no mystery to Shakespeare, himself a native a Warwickshire, so he knew many of his attending audience would have also been born and raised outside London. At the time Shakespeare composed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, migration from the countryside into the capital in search of prosperity was taking place on such a scale that it has been estimated that by 1590 one in eight English people would spend part of their lives in London. Shakespeare knew that to many members of the theatre audiences, the fairy-populated world of the woods would be the world of their youth and childhood. Hackett writes that: “Many yearning for a return to a less complicated time of ‘childhood innocence’ then paralleled in the play recreation for its audience of the natural, folk-rituals world which they had left behind to pursue adult aspirations in the rapidly developing and competitive metropolis” (70).

This childlike wonder present in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* among the fairies brings the believability to the possibility of interference from the woodland world. The childhood folklore of the audience members in their own experiences brings legitimacy to the actions of the mischievous Puck and the confounded actions of the Athenians in the forest.
Shakespeare’s fairy-world is more than an adjunct to the palace it is. It parallels reality with its own rules and activities. The confusion of the Athenians in the forest brings into very clear focus the fear and trepidation that existed in the woodland outside of the city limits. This theme not only exists in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* but the theme of the forest being the unknown and magical is a theme that runs through many plays. Bevingtion writes in his book “The forest itself is potentially a place of violent death and rape, even if the lovers experience nothing more than fatigue, anxiety and being torn by briars” (Bevington 25).

White’s book goes on to enhance on the point: “In the forest, there are real world dangers, real lions and wolves howling at a real moon. The wood in which much of the play took place is, especially at night, a place not only of magic but a dangerous and forbidding one too, where, to the ominous call of the owl, ghosts—the ‘damned spirits’ which he refers to in the play—appear to roam abroad” (White 84).

As Puck states in the last lines of the play:

> If we shadows have offended,  
> Think but this, and all is mended  
> That you have but slumber’d here,  
> While these visions did appear.  
> And this weak and idle theme  
> No more yielding but a dream. (qtd. in Bevington 129)

The fact that most of the play takes place in the woods in a dream-like atmosphere helps the believability of the magical action. An idea that dreams function on several levels has operated for many centuries. Dreams are faithful interpreters of our inclinations. As ancient authorities maintained, it is a wise precaution to draw from them prophetic instructions for the future. It is also thought that through dreams the Athenian couples can enact their secret desires and work out their buried resentment (Hackett 52).
Also of major importance is the time in which the play takes place. It is four days until the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, with the major action of the play taking place in a midsummer’s night. The Elizabethan customs that surround the observation the rites of May were not confined to May Day (the first of May) but were spread across the summer months and Shakespeare seems more interested in the general sense of time, as we are told four days pass in the action of the play but the play has taken place over two days and a single night.

Overall I decided in my approach to use the grand history of the show to provide a background or at least a basis for the production upon which we were embarking. Even though our production was going to be very different, it was in many ways very much the same as William Shakespeare, who brought a world of fairies and lovers to an audience’s consciousness in a way they would understand. I felt we were doing much the same thing by bringing this imagined world to life in an exciting new way accessible to today’s audience.
CHAPTER 3

HOW AM I GOING TO DESIGN THIS?

Whenever I had a question about designing when I was an undergraduate, my favorite teacher, Julie Ray, would answer each question in the same phrase “Well if it were me . . .” and then she would come up with some brilliant answer and my problem would be magically solved. Over the last few years Julie hasn’t been around so much so I have had to come up with some of my own answers and I have developed seven steps that help me design a production.

1. Percolate
2. Inspiration
3. Parameters/Theme
4. Research
5. Presenting
6. Making It Happen
7. Collaboration

Step one is to Percolate, to bubble up with ideas, to think about all that the director and other designers have told you and all they would like in the production, mixed in with a little bit of knowledge on the subject. Then just sit and simmer for a little bit.

Step two, Inspiration, is to find something, anything that catches your interest—a piece of artwork, a scrap of cloth, a photograph—and look at it in a way that would be useful
for the project you are currently working on, and find a way to express your enthusiasm to everyone else.

Step three is to define the *Parameters* or the rules of what can and cannot exist in your world. Is your world realistic, or is your world not realistic? Is there an overall theme that you want carried throughout your production? Are there important parts of the production that need to be stressed? What is important to the director’s vision of the play?

Step four is the *Research* you need to do. You must try to understand why something is made the way it is, and why it is worn down or built a certain way. Finding out all you can about something, is crucial. This step is most important to me so I do not look like an idiot. I always want to have at least a basic understanding of everything that I am designing. My advisor and teacher Ralph Funicello is especially important in developing this step because he is always challenging me on why something is made the way it is, and unfortunately it’s not quite good enough to just know what something looks like; you have to know why it looks that way, what makes it function the way it does.

Step five is *Presenting* and communicating your ideas clearly to everyone so that everyone understands the design, and what the overall idea is going to be. Whatever medium you use (if it is hand drafting, a Vectorworks CAD program, paint elevation, or sketch) it has to be clear for those who have to build or work from it.

Step six is *Making It All Happen*, getting your drawing to the shops on time and making sure you have paint elevations and anything else that they may need available to them. Most importantly, you must make yourself available for rehearsals, meetings, and phone calls, when someone has a question.
Step seven is *Collaboration* with others. Even though it is numbered seven, it is the most important step, because it helps to talk to another designer or the director about your ideas for the show because maybe they can build on any idea you may have. Maybe they will tell you why that idea is not such a good one because it will make it more difficult for them to accomplish one of their design goals, and you will learn more details about what their design is in the process.
CHAPTER 4

INITIAL DESIGN

I had finished *percolating*. I felt I had researched all I could about the play itself. I began to delve more deeply into step two in my design process, the desperate and frantic search for *inspiration*. To my relief I found some rather powerful images that really inspired me and the rest of the design team. We really used these design meetings to draw up a solid foundation for what would later become the finished production.

The picture by Peter Max (Figure 1) was one of the first I found and remained one of the most powerful for many of the designers. I know the lighting designer in particular really liked it. In addition to the simplicity of the image, the most important aspect of the image to me were the vibrant colors. I loved the oversized sun in the background. Since I was already playing with the idea of a large moon at the back I thought it would be quite a feat to put a multi-colored moon back there, giving the night sky some fun.

Figures 2 and 3 (pp. 17 and 18) are from a festival called “Burning Man.” What attracted me to these structures initially was how they resembled trees but weren’t organic, and they were also brightly colored. They had the brightness of a rock concert and it was interesting how wood could look so different under light. I felt there was something that might be useful about them.

Overall I liked the organic structure of *Portal of Evolution* (Figure 4, p. 18). It had the feeling of an oversized tree or flower without actually being one. I already knew “realism was
Figure 1. Inspirational image: *Better World.*

Figure 2. Inspirational image: *Burning Man.*

hard” and I did not want to go there, but the feel of something organically shaped might be just what I needed.

I was fascinated by the light within the umbrella sculpture (Figure 5). It really made me think of how I could work with the lighting designer to use light in an interesting way. In our production we could make it glow at different times in the show and really give it a life of its own. It really took my breath away.


I loved the glowing quality and interesting shape of umbrellas in Figure 6. They were so interesting and could be shaped in so many different ways. It really seemed like something that could capture the magic that I so needed in the forest scenes.
After presetting these initial pictures at a design meeting, the designer and directors talked more about the direction of the play and decided we were steaming along the same track. I continued to face one of my biggest and most important challenges: what does this world look like? And who are the characters who live there, and how do they live? During this meeting we discussed the exciting possibility of putting up two lighting towers at the back two corners of the stage, and instead of trying to mask them we let them be open and obvious. They were reminiscent of Woodstock or any outdoor lighting concert of the era, since we were in part doing a rock show in addition to a play, we could build excitement and
get a more rock concert feel, such as haze highlighting the beams of light and spotlights roving over the audience.

Feeling encouraged that I had completed to some degree design steps one and two, I continued on to trying to establish the parameters or step three, the overall look of the show. With the stage raked and the lighting towers at the back of the stage I had a great opportunity to use the full width of the stage. We had decided that the ground covering should be realistic-looking grass to add some foundation to the scenes and making this a real world at certain points. I loved the idea of an oversized glowing moon made of umbrellas. I felt that everyone would be able to relate to an umbrella and know what it was. Also since our story was geared toward a younger audience and we were told not to focus on any of the bad elements related to hippies or drugs, I felt an umbrella was very much a protector much like the moon was during the play. But I was hopeful that once the audience got past the fact that there were a bunch of umbrellas on stage, they would let go of our everyday world and embark upon that reality of the stage and get lost in a world that had a moon made of umbrellas. The “umbrella moon” could also be light programmed with different colors and intensities of light by the lighting design and it could be made into a “rock and roll” element. It would become a silent character in the show. The technical director and I then discussed the possibility of its ability to move up, down, left, right, and diagonally across the back of the stage making it something I could program cues for during the action of the play. It would be an essential part of the entire world that we were creating.

The Umbrella Moon became in the end a character in its own right, not only keeping track of the passage of time and day into darkness but also becoming a playful partner to the actors on stage. The moon enhanced their actions and every once in a while the moon was
able to show the powerful magic the fairies possess by being able to be pulled down from the heavens at the snap of a fairy king’s finger.

I then thought long and hard about how I was going to make this bare green stage look like some kind of forest. I thought a lot about architecture, but then decided that was fairly useless because there is not a lot of time-recognizable architecture in a forest. Then I began focusing on symbols, peace signs and such, but I didn’t feel that was what the play was about scenically and I felt it would just be distracting from what was important—the actors and their actions. Finally I thought about having bubbles form my trees, but then quickly realized that bubbles pop rather quickly and that would probably be distracting to the audience as well. So finally I decided on balloon trees. I really felt they encapsulated what we were trying to express through the play. Balloons are light and airy and are free-spirited and they also have a childlike magic within them. They make you wonder for a moment, “What makes them float like that?” And with lighting I felt they could change color rather easily and make a nice impact. So after a lighting test with the lighting design in the light lab, I began exploring the options of building balloon trees (Figures 7, 8, and 9).

As far as entrances and exits for the actors, were concerned, I wanted to give the director multiple options for the actors. I finally decided on seven staircases, allowing the cast of twenty-six to be able to clear the stage quickly if needed.

So with all these elements newly in place I pulled together a ¼” model (Figure 10, p. 24) for the meeting and put together a few quick renderings (Figures 11 and 12, pp. 24 and 25) for our next meeting.
Figure 7. White balloon test. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.

Figure 8. Green balloon test. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.

Figure 9. Blue balloon test. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 10. Model (1/4") with white balloon trees. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.

Figure 11. Model (1/4") with colored balloon areas. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 12. Model (1/4") with moon. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.

Moving into a rudimentary way onto step five *presenting*, I showed three different options for how the raked stage could be light with the umbrella moon and balloon trees in a 1/4" scale model.
CHAPTER 5

MAKING IT HAPPEN

In the end, it’s all about the Umbrellas. As we moved from the design theory into design fact and the shops received my drawings of the raked stage and projected amount of realistic-looking artificial grass needed to cover it, our budget then became a limiting factor. We all mutually decided that perhaps there was another way to make this show happen. Instead of a more realistic grass floor, which I had felt was important for the grounding for the show, we decided to go for a more Pop-Art feel on the stage. We would want it very bright, green, and fun, very much like my initial research pictures from Peter Max. After two tests with the balloon trees (Figures 13 and 14), it became obvious that the cost and hassle of buying and blowing up helium balloons for a two-week run was simply not worth it. I was beginning to get very worried about the unpredictability of balloons popping at unforgivable moments in the middle of the action of the play. So after some wonderful collaborative advice from my advisor and the technical director we moved forward with what I think was the most beautiful and elegant elements of the show, the Umbrella Trees (Figure 15, p. 28).

I did need to redesign how they were to be built, but with help from the shop and the technical director that went rather quickly. The more difficult part was making sure that I talked it over in detail with the lighting designer and since I had changed this element and these trees were going to affect her lights in unforgiving ways, I needed her input. If they were bumped in the slightest, the umbrella branch would move and she would lose her
Figure 13. Balloon tree test one. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.

Figure 14. Balloon tree test two. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.
lighting angle. So getting the umbrella trees to their correct height and stability of position was a top priority for me going into tech weekend. If the poles were too low they would block sightlines of the audience; if they were too high they would block lighting angles. After some careful modeling and some great help from the shop staff, we got them to hold their positions. But in the end I felt the umbrella trees still brought with them a sense of lightness and airiness that we wanted for these fairy woods. It was the perfect environment for a
midnight romp through the forest where hippie pixies bewitched mix-matched lovers with magical love potion that dripped from mini umbrella flowers.

Tech weekend went rather well overall. We had done preliminary tests on the umbrellas so we knew they took light well and with the lightning designers lights made the whole stage looks just breathtaking. Mostly I was concerned with the large “Umbrella Moon” (Figure 16) that moved mechanically in time to thirteen separate musical cues. The most exciting experience during tech weekend for me was watching my “Umbrella Moon” take its first breaths of life. The moon was indeed able to move diagonally, left, right, up, and down. When it made it first appearance all lit up and grand it gave me goose-bumps because it was such a magical moment. So many people had come together to create this breathtaking vision. There were other parts in the show where we used the moon to show the passage of time or as a comedic effect but each time it was a wonderful addition to the action of the play. I was initially concerned that it might be too distracting but the moon became a partner to the action of the play all the way. We had a few problems, when it swayed back and forth a bit, but after a few discussions with the technical director, we got that all fixed by opening night, and it looked just gorgeous.

Many of my notes were prop-related which just amplified the importance in my mind of having a clear deadline and an understanding of duties. Someone needed to be in charge of ordering props. We had to know where the money would come from and when final decisions on items needed to be made at production meeting. The props had to have enough cushion time to allow for shipping and the actors then had enough time to get comfortable working with the new prop. It is better if problems can be smoothed out prior to dress week,
but we were quite fortunate and I had a wonderful team. Most of our orders arrived rather quickly, and actors had enough time to work with new props.

One of the most important elements in the show which I have not discussed yet is the backdrop which was donated earlier in the year by The Old Globe Theater. The backdrop had a wonderful painted day blue SKY scene on the front, augmenting the Pop-Art feeling, but in
the darker forest scenes it had fiberoptic lights that lit up so it looked like stars glowing in the darkness. In the end it was really rather beautiful.

As we continued into dress rehearsal week, I began to see how all the elements of our various design parts were coming together. The costumes, with their 1960s flair, brought a life and vitality to the set that had not been there during the costume-less tech weekend, and the lights made the entire environment come alive with all the magic one would expect in a forest filled with hippie fairies. But not to be left out was the live music, and the hard work of the stage manager and crew. The actors brought the show into its own being. I was very happy about how much the actors seemed to enjoy the acting space in which they performed. They were constantly moving about on it and practicing and seemed quite comfortable in their environment.

Production photos (Figures 17-23) are in Appendix A. The technical drawings (Figures 24-27) are in Appendix B. The DVD of the production (Appendix C) is available for viewing in the Media Center of Love Library.

In the end the San Diego State University production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was a great success with a high audience attendance. Our production was also filmed and played on UCSD TV in 2010, which was a great honor. Looking back upon my experience designing the set I am so proud I was a part of such a wonderful process. When everyone is striving for the same goal, to make the best production possible, I discovered you really can make magic.
ANOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bevington, David. *How to Read a Shakespeare Play.* Malden: Blackwell, 2006. Print. This book introduces a number of Shakespeare’s plays including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the reader in a useful and easy to understand way, focusing first on romantic comedies then on historic plays and finally tragedies.

Blits, Jan H. *The Soul of Athens.* Lanham: Lexington, 2003. Print. A description of act one and act five; the two acts that historically occur in Athens. This book contains a line by line analysis of the meaning of the play’s lines and a more complex description of the characters that speak those lines.

Dutton, Richard. *New Casebooks: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”* New York: St. Martin’s, 1996. Print. This book is about the rebellion from ruling order made by the Athenian lovers who refuse to accept the paring proposed forced upon them and how this relates to the budding women’s movements of the 1960s.


Griffiths, Trevor R. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.* Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1996. Print. This book goes through year by year starting with 1662 as to how the staging of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* changed and grew; in addition, going through the different periods such as the Restoration period.


APPENDIX A

PRODUCTION PHOTOS
Figure 17. Production photo: Night fairies. Photo courtesy Michelle Caron.
Figure 18. Production photo: Hippie fairies. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 19. Production photo: Oberon and Puck. Photo courtesy Michelle Caron.
Figure 20. Production photo: Sleeping Helena.  
Photo courtesy Michelle Caron.
Figure 21. Production photo: The new morning. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 22. Production photo: Opening scene. Photo by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 23. Production photo: Titania. Photo courtesy San Diego State University.
APPENDIX B

TECHNICAL DRAWINGS
Figure 24. Ground plan: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 25. Section of set: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 26. Raked stage: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.
Figure 27. Umbrella moon: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Design by Elizabeth Ryan.