

# SF Shakes makes 'Midsummer' magic

**Lily Janiak**

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Michael Ray Wisely as Nick Bottom and Livia Gomes Demarchi as Titania in San Francisco Shakespeare Festival's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Photo: John Western / San Francisco Shakespeare Festival

"Who are they?" one young audience member whispered to an elder.

"Fairies," came the reply.

"Oh," said the inquisitor. Then, after a beat: "Wow."

San Francisco Shakespeare Festival's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" might well inspire many a belief in fairies — or temporarily rekindle one for those who have lost it. For magic suffuses Rebecca J. Ennals' production of Shakespeare's love-juice-splashed romp, which opened Sunday, July 8, at Pleasanton's Amador Valley Community Park, the first stop on its annual regional tour, Free Shakespeare in the Park.

Costume designer Hyun Sook Kim sews magic into the dress of fairy queen Titania (Livia Gomes Demarchi), all gossamery cascades spangled with woodland trinkets, like bugs suspended in thick spiderwebs, and crowned with a feathered collar as beefy as fur. Ennals makes magic ripple through her staging. When Titania and fairy king Oberon (Stephen Muterspaugh) duke it out, in one of Shakespeare's weirder plot threads, over a little changeling they both want (played on alternating performances by Sol De Souza and Vivaan Mudgal), characters speak each new line as if to cast an ever-stronger spell. These curses don't sucker punch only their intended victim; a whole ensemble of hangers-on registers every thrust and parry as if assailed by a tsunami.

A love quadrangle of Athenian mortals is the collateral damage of this fairy fight, as carried out by the mischievous Puck (James Lewis), who's charged with redirecting the four humans' desires with nectar from a magical flower but blunders in the task, sending Hermia (Patricia Austin), Lysander (Akaina Ghosh), Helena (Lauren Spencer) and Demetrius (Ed Berkeley) all lusting after the wrong person.

If not every member of Ennals' ensemble mines range and depth from the text, many excel. When Hermia loses Lysander's affections, Austin assumes the stance of a sumo wrestler and the fury of an ogre. Lewis' Puck, getting his instructions to drop love juice "on sleeping eyelids," laps up each new phrase as if it's the first idea that has ever entered his brain. Michael J. Asberry as Hermia's forbidding father, Egeus, hacks a welcoming path through Shakespeare's thorny syntax, and Spencer's Helena exemplifies why Shakespeare writes so often in monologue. It's not to explain, nor is it to freeze a moment. It's not static at all. It's to puzzle actively from quandary to decision. It's the quicksilver movement of the brain caught and wrestled into tangible, poetic form.

Part of the magic of "Midsummer" is that it isn't all romp. There's mystery and a touch of despair in the way our longings get so easily, so quickly rerouted. One character ends the

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## Can real love come from such tenuous armistice?

Ennals' production doesn't slight those darker qualities. It marvels at them, as does Athenian king Theseus (Muterspaugh): "Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends."

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## More Information



**A Midsummer Night's Dream:** Written by William Shakespeare. Directed by Rebecca J. Ennals. Through Sunday, July 15, at Amador Valley Community Park, 4301 Black Ave., Pleasanton. July 21-Aug. 5 at Memorial Park Amphitheater, 21163 Anton Way, Cupertino. Aug. 11-26 at grounds of Sequoia High School, 1201 Brewster Ave., Redwood City. Sept. 1-9 at Main Post Parade Ground Lawn, San Francisco's Presidio. Sept. 15-23 at McLaren Park's Jerry Garcia Amphitheater, 40 John F. Shelley Drive, S.F. Two hours, 20 minutes. Free. 415-558-0888. [www.sfshakes.org](http://www.sfshakes.org)

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