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Reversing Midsummer: Alexander Ekman's Dance-Theatre Adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Abstract I: Questo saggio analizza *Sogno di una Notte di Mezza Estate* di Alexander Ekman, un ambizioso progetto di teatro-danza che il celebre danzatore e coreografo svedese ha realizzato per la *Royal Swedish Opera* di Stoccolma nel 2015. L'allestimento di Ekman sovverte la commedia shakespeariana portando in scena il tradizionale festival svedese di mezza estate con le sue danze in cerchio attorno al "maypole", mescolando il balletto con canti e riti popolari, nonché nuovi dispositivi tecnologici per la performance. Nell'analisi mi focalizzo sull'innovativa "trama" coreografica di Ekman che, sebbene il coreografo stesso ritenga essere distante dalla commedia di Shakespeare, si rivela in realtà essere una riproduzione ravvicinata o "gioco" tra realtà (Atto I) e sogno (Atto II). In secondo luogo dimostro come, attingendo da temi tipicamente shakespeariani, Ekman riesca a destabilizzare modelli e paradigmi patriarcali e di dominio, in modo da poter abbracciare visioni di *partnership* (Eisler 1988) della realtà, che molto hanno da suggerire sulle nostre verità più intime e nascoste.

Abstract II: This essay focuses on Alexander Ekman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an ambitious dance-theatre project that the renowned Swedish dancer and choreographer produced for the *Royal Swedish Opera* of Stockholm in 2015. Ekman's performance "reverses" Shakespeare's comedy by bringing on stage the traditional Swedish midsummer festival with its ring dances around the maypole, while mixing ballet with chants, popular rites and new technological devices. In my twofold analysis, I focus first on Ekman's innovative choreographic "texture" which, despite the choreographer's assertion that it is completely detached from Shakespeare's story, is in reality a close reproduction or "play" between reality (Act I) and dream (Act II). Second, I show how drawing from Shakespearian themes, Ekman destabilises world dominator and patriarchal views in order to embrace imaginative partnership visions of reality (Eisler 1988), which have much to say about our most intimate and concealed truths.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Alexander Ekman, Partnership Studies, performance and adaptation.

1. Introduction: Transcoding Shakespeare Through the Art of Dance

Dance critics and literary scholars today all recognise the influence that William Shakespeare's works played on the dramaturgical 'voice' and creative insight of most dance producers in history and around the world (Isenberg 2016, 2023; McCulloch & Shaw 2019; Chevrier-Bosseau 2020). Choreographers dealing with the Bard's plays engage in a challenging endeavour that either allows them to be acknowledged in the plethora of dance innovators or to rework a universal 'stage' that may determine their failure.

Shakespeare continues to inspire generations of performance-makers, choreographers and dancers (Burnett, Streete & Wray 2011). In two articles that I published on balletic representations of Shakespeare (Mantellato 2020, 2022) I have emphasised how one of the most challenging aspects of "transcoding" and "transmediating" (Salmose & Elleström 2020; Elleström 2021) – from the written play to choreographic movements and gestures – is the ability to remain 'faithful' to the text and therefore to the Bard's world. The process of adaptation inevitably reduces or blurs some of the features that Shakespeare brought to the fore in his works. This occurs firstly because ballet needs concision and the presentation of 'readable' scenes that are easy to interpret without the aid of the spoken voice¹. Secondly, because in adapting a text for dance performance, choreographers may wish to consider the socio-cultural scenario in which the production will take place (Russell-Brown 2011), to speak about and to the audience who will be attending the ballet².

Frequently, when revising a text for dance, choreographers follow the expectations and desires of their public, such as the urgency to deal with specific issues or cultural instances of the present³. In this case, "intertextuality"⁴ as a form of textual decoding of dance (Adshead-Lansdale 1999) may be put into dialogue with other theoretical frameworks to uncover significant aspects addressed in the production. Indeed, as Isenberg suggests:

Story-telling ballet, as it passes through our visual, auditory, and kinetic senses, bypasses the cognitive-analytical routes of verbal comprehension, arousing emotional participation, meaning, and understanding in us (more intensely during live performances) both kinesthetically and empathetically (Isenberg 2022: 190).

¹ Adshead-Lansdale explains that the 'embodied' quality of the language of dance shows how "verbal language cannot be the 'primary modelling system', capable of translating all expressible content" (Adshead-Lansdale 1999: 9).

² In this regard I concur with de Marinis when he argues that a dance text is usually characterised by shifts between co-textual elements, which are the internal regularities of the dance (with its technique and structural forms), and contextual features, which respond to cultural content and contexts in which the performance will take place (De Marinis 1993).

³ As Judith Hamera suggests: "performers remake themselves, often literally, corporeally. But more than this, they reshape possibilities for intimacy. They alter time and space, regulate or reconceive gender norms, fashion ways of entering or evading personal and cultural history. They tactically deploy the transcendent and the ineffable to act out, or dance with, the contingencies of the here and now. Dance technique puts aesthetics into motion" (Hamera 2011: 4).

⁴ Intertextuality as methodological framework for dance productions tries to find correspondences between body-intertext and corporeal allusions that are closely connected to or refer to the source text.

This is relevant for today's productions, in which most choreographers feel the need to be agents for transformation⁵, addressing issues such as the role of humans towards nature, or social exclusion and indifference towards caring or partnership relations.

In this context, the "partnership approach" propounded by Riane Eisler (Eisler 1998, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007; Eisler & Fry 2019) offers a useful perspective for reading and interpreting choreographies and dances that recover, actualise⁶ and promote change against patriarchal dominator views of reality⁷. Eisler is an anthropologist and social activist who advocates for a "cultural transformation" (Eisler 1988: xvi) at the heart of societies, from gender balance to equalitarian attitudes towards the "more-than-human" world, without forgetting the fundamental role that the arts (and artists) have always played in the course of history for promoting messages of beauty and respect for all⁸.

This essay focuses on Alexander Ekman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a visionary and ambitious dance project that the world-renowned Swedish dancer and choreographer produced for the Royal Swedish Opera of Stockholm in 2015⁹.

Ekman's production is a festival of change and transformation, a cutting-edge multimodal piece (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010) of dance-theatre that mixes ballet with popular rites and chants without forgetting to take advantage of new technological devices, such as lighting 'design' and incredible use of stage props, which are widely recognised as some of the most distinctive features of Ekman's success.

In contradiction to Ekman's assertion that his adaptation "has nothing to do with Shakespeare"¹⁰, in this essay I intend to illustrate how the production, in both its structure and unfolding, mirrors and evokes most of the play. Secondly, I analyse strategic dances of the first and second act, particularly the 'Hay' and 'Maypole dance', and the 'REM phase', the adaptation of the 'Dream' as conceived by Ekman. The final aim of this paper is to show how, despite their different expressive 'natures', Shakespearean texts and performative

⁵ Hamera further explains that "the work of dance exposes aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporality, and irreducible difference. The resulting arrangements are processes, not things, hence the use of the gerund: *dancing* communities. They are constituted by doing dance: making it, seeing it, learning it, talking, writing, fantasizing about it" (Hamera 2011: 1-2).

⁶ Eisler's "actualization power" refers to "the power to nurture, support, create, and accomplish things together (power *with* and power *to*) appropriate for the partnership model, as opposed to the power to dominate, inflict pain, and destroy (*power over*) equated with power in the domination model" (Mercanti 2014: 3).

⁷ The Partnership Studies Group (PSG) at the University of Udine, comprising of renowned scholars and artists, applies Eisler's "partnership" methodology to the analysis of world literatures, pedagogy, linguistics and the arts in order to promote messages of care, love and respect for humanity and the environment, <https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/>.

⁸ Scholars and members of the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) have been widely promoting the work of artists, writers and pedagogues for a more peaceful and caring cultures. See: Riem, Conti Camaiora & Dolce (2007); Riem, Conti Camaiora, Dolce & Mercanti (2010).

⁹ In this essay I will refer to Ekman's original version of the show, which was recorded by BEL AIR MEDIA at the Royal Swedish Opera of Stockholm in September 2016.

¹⁰ Quotes from Ekman are transcriptions of his interview on the production made available in the DVD *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a piece by Alexander Ekman and music by Mikael Karlsson, produced by BelAir Classique.

adaptations are interrelated. They tell about the internal and external struggles of the human mind, the relationship between desire and love, and the acknowledgment of our most unconscious and concealed truths.

2. Ekman's *Midsummer*: A Modern-dance Adaptation from Shakespearean References to Contemporary Theatrical Innovations

Ekman's *Midsummer* symbolically begins with a young couple of lovers¹¹. A man, "The Dreamer", is peacefully sleeping in bed when he is abruptly awakened by the sound of an alarm clock. A girl, the "Hostess", walks in and helps him dress while offering him some hay. In the recorded version of the performance, scene II is announced by a subtitle advising that it is "8:00 - Somewhere near Stockholm". The curtain opens to present one of the most remarkable pieces of the production since the entire *corps de ballet* is dancing in unison holding hay. The performers are festive, playful and cheerful. They kneel on the stage floor which is completely covered with hay. Their movements are coordinated and effortless. While holding hay, dancers create arm circles and diagonal movements, repeatedly throwing hay up to the ceiling and promptly bending over towards the floor in other synchronic gestures.

References to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer* are here implicit. The couple appearing at the beginning epitomise the loving pairs who confusedly alternate in the play. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents the story of four young lovers who try to elude society and familiar "order and degree" (Eagleton 1986) by escaping "the sharp Athenian law" (Act I, i, 162: 15).

Ekman immediately foregrounds the theme of reality versus dream, by titling Act I "The Dream of Midsummer", referring to another textual divide that occurs between Hippolyta and Theseus, respectively the Queen of Amazon and the Duke of Athens, and Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the fairies. In the interview he released for the DVD edition of his work, Ekman suggested:

I studied Shakespeare's version [...] and I thought there were so many characters [that] I did not really connect with the story myself. I liked the energy of the piece, and the comic, the lust and sensuality [...] then I went to India, and [while I] was meditating it suddenly hit me: [my version] should be a Swedish version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's comedies alternate numerous characters and insert double distortions. Indeed, even the most attentive reader or viewer would hardly distinguish the differences between the two loving couples of Lysander-Hermia and Demetrius-Helena since they constantly swap thoughts and guises. Their roles tend to convey disorder and question the stability of male dominator patriarchal structures.

In his adaptation, Ekman presents chaos through peasants' traditions and community rites, in particular the Swedish summer maypole, which frames most of the scenes occurring

¹¹ In the performance libretto attached to the DVD, the characters are named as "The Dreamer" and "Hostess". Nevertheless, in the show Ekman presents all different kinds of lovers and couples, thus hinting at the many loving pairs we find in Shakespeare's play.

in the first act as a celebration for life's renewal. Indeed, scene II metaphorically concludes with a girl looking up in astonishment towards a projected backdrop of the sun. She is soon followed by the *corps de ballet*, which gradually falls into a trance-state symbiotic with nature. The music changes and slows down while the entire orchestra allows the piano (which is played by Henrik Måwe) to perform a solo. Dancers slowly interrupt their frenetic movements while they gradually lay down on the floor, thus connecting to the power of earth's fecundity, in a lyrical modern-dance reminder that emphasises the ground¹².

A sudden rainstorm interrupts the performers' enchantment. They start running and looking for umbrellas in order to set the next scene, the arrival of "Guests" at "10:02". At the beginning of this section, a harmonious duet between two dancers announces the arrival of the singer Anna Von Hauswolff, a fundamental character for Ekman's production even if the rest of the troupe does not notice her appearance. Anna represents one of the first hints that will repeatedly connect the world of the living with the invisible and intangible forces inhabiting the woods. We possibly can interpret the character of Anna as Ekman's direct reference to Shakespeare's Puck or the world of fairies in general. Indeed, the singer's voice is angelic and unearthly, thus adding (in the words of Ekman) "another level, another layer [of meaning] to the piece".

Mikael Karlsson, a Swedish composer with whom Ekman has worked for many of his creations, produced the music for the show. In the first act, the music is mostly harmonious and fully employs the presence of the orchestra on stage in order to accentuate the theme of festivities. Ekman has praised Karlsson's ideas and rhythmical stances, repeatedly stating that their "mutual understanding" resulted in unexpected synchronicities between the "rhythms in my [Ekman's] head" and "the melodies [that he puts] on the top of it". Scene III is certainly a confirmation of this alliance since it foregrounds, apart from Von Hauswolff's chants, the rhythms and accents of the dance, which perfectly match the performers' simple movements with their arms. Hay balls are now rolled on stage while dancers start climbing on them in order to further investigate the instability of their unpredictable exchanges and duets.

At the end of this scene, dancers start clearing up the stage floor while the traditional Swedish summer maypole comes down from the stage ceiling. At "14.00" the section called "Festivities/Ringdanser" can finally begin. I fully analyse the structure of this dance, and the echoes that are connecting it with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*, in the following section of this essay. Apart from the dance, Ekman brilliantly makes use of stage lighting and props in order to represent the cheerful atmosphere of his native country during the annual celebration of summer. Indeed, despite being a symbol of tradition and inherited value for peasant communities, Ekman's maypole is surrounded by modern scenery, such as a typical summer tent, a barbecue and an improvised market at which people may buy garlands.

¹² The connection that dancers actualise with mother-earth is extremely significant for the (r)evolution of modern dance, since it symbolises a "return" to the ground. This inward direction re-connects humans/performers with reality, in contrast with the scopes of classical ballet which advocates for detachment from existence and the embracing of impermanent, ethereal, and ultimately unreal ways of being, sensing and experiencing.

Lighting also, which was designed by Linus Fellbom, is a technical instrument that Ekman fully exploits in order to emphasise important scenes and / or characters or to simply suggest the changing of time during the day. Indeed, as it occurs in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*, Ekman's ballet takes place within a single day, with an emphasis on the distinction between daylight (Act I) and night (Act II) fostering once more the gap existing between reality and fantasy.

The festivities of scene IV end with an unexpected moment for the audience since most of scene V occurring at "15:00" is the representation of "A Toast" to the public and the people who have come to enjoy the show. The scene takes place in the proscenium. The entire *corps de ballet* raises its glasses and cheers towards the audience to 'bring it into' the performative space. As a form of meta theatrical device, Ekman reinforces once more the idea of disruption of order suggested by Shakespeare's comedies¹³. This scene promptly recalls the ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, especially the theatre within theatre that Quince's company and his actors offer in order to celebrate Hippolyta and Theseus's wedding. What follows is an interesting and playful dance of the cups, in which performers can fully demonstrate their strong technical abilities and high level of artistic expertise.

In scene VI, Anna the singer finally reappears. This is the moment to celebrate "Midsummer Feast" precisely at "18:00". Candle lights are brought in, while a big table diagonally covers most of the stage. Dancers set up this Midsummer dinner table. They perform in unison jovial and yet sharp movements. Cups are filled with wine while the atmosphere becomes more and more rarefied and subtle. Dancers are called to alternate instances of bewilderment and pleasure with moments of stasis, thus emphasising the inebriating effects of alcohol. Once again, order is disrupted to allow performers to jump on the table and enjoy the blissfulness of carnal encounters. The act concludes with the man, "The Dreamer", smelling a bouquet of flowers before placing it under his pillow and falling asleep. Anna approaches and sings what sounds like a lullaby. According to Ekman:

The first act is pretty realistic [...]. We follow a group of people who are celebrating Midsummer [and] so it is light and fun, and it is a big celebration. [...] Then in the end it turns to the tradition of Midsummer [in Sweden, where] you pick up seven flowers from seven different fields that surround your house and you put them under your pillow before you go to bed and you are supposed to dream about your future love.

Act II is emblematically titled "A Dream of Midsummer" and it begins at "02:03" in the deep phases of the performers' dreams. Scene VII is titled "REM Sleep" and therefore evokes the oneiric activity of the human brain, in the recognised phase of "rapid eye movement". According to neuroscientists, REM phases alternate with NON-REM movements in which dreamers confusedly associate images and occurrences that pop into their mind. In order

¹³ Apart from breaking up the 'fourth' wall of theatre-space, Ekman reinforces here the tradition of dance-theatre, which was firstly theorised by the pioneers of modern dance, such as Pina Bausch. For more information on the "partnership" qualities of this type of performances, which do not deny inter-transdisciplinary connections between the world of arts and dance, see: Climenhaga (2013) and McCormak (2018).

to present the effects of REM sleep, in these very first moments of Act II, Ekman evokes some iconic images and episodes that occurred in the first act, so as to prepare viewers of the performance for a shift of perspective, from reality to dream and imagination. The Dreamer's recollection is blurred and confused. Spectators can enjoy fragments of the maypole festivities, while the summer tent guests are now running away from the barbecue man who tries to kill them all with a gun.

Ekman follows the incongruous functioning of the human mind in the first phases of sleep, also echoing the moment when the young lovers in Shakespeare's play leave the protected walls of Athens and head towards the woods. These references become even clearer when Ekman introduces, in scene VIII ("03:22"), the appearance of overturned trees under which a couple of solo dancers perform a sensuous, rebellious and passionate duet. These scenes are called "Delta Waves", thus recalling the phases that intermittently alternate with REM sleep, in performative segments that are similar to irregular flashing of light-rays.

The confusion of these sections is furthered by the uplifting of the table towards the ceiling. It thus becomes a sailing ship, which dancers contemplate in admiration. As soon as it comes back to the ground, the table becomes a battle ground for two contesting groups of dancers. Two enormous fish silhouettes appear on stage while the performers keep on dancing with tablecloths and chairs. The "Delta Waves" section of the performance is quieter than the previous "REM Sleep" piece. Apart from the soloists' duet, and the falling of trees, the scene is characterised by a change of rhythm, recalling the sound of drums. This part introduces the dance of girl nymphs, reminiscent of Titania's dance with the fairies. In this part of the performance Ekman uses more the technique of classical ballet. Girls are wearing pointe shoes and they dance in unison with high straight legs (*développés*¹⁴) in iconic and suspended movements (such as *attitudes*¹⁵ followed by a lot of *piqués arabesque*¹⁶). The second part of the girls' choreography is characterised by a series of jumps and dynamic gestures. It is a liberating dance, first because it is performed by women with only a single man watching and, second, because all female dancers are wearing men's shirts with their hair loosened, a direct reworking of the canonical rules of classical ballet tradition which obliges girls to have a *chignon* and/or wear tight-fitting costumes.

Scene IX ("05:13"), "False Awakening", is a transition scene that prepares the audience for the conclusion of the performance. Ekman wanted to recall here the last phases of sleep, when the mind tries to summarise in sequential visions what it has experienced in REM

¹⁴ A "développé" is "a smooth, gradual unfolding of the leg. The dancer raises the thigh to the side with the knee bent while bringing the toe of the working leg along the calf to the back of the knee of the supporting leg. The working leg is then straightened to the front, side, or back (arabesque)". See: <https://www.britannica.com/art/developpe> (consulted on 04/10/2023).

¹⁵ An "attitude" is "a position similar to the arabesque except that the knee of the raised leg is bent. The raised leg is held at a 90° angle to the body in back or in front" See: <https://www.britannica.com/art/attitude-ballet-position> (consulted on 04/10/2023).

¹⁶ "Piqués" are "traveling turn[s], the dancer stepping out onto the supporting leg before turning on it". Piqués can be concluded *en arabesque*. Arabesque and attitude are "positions in which the dancer stands on one leg. In arabesque the other leg (called the working leg) is stretched straight out to the back". See: <https://www.britannica.com/art/dance/Basic-steps-and-formations> (consulted on 04/10/2023).

and other deep phases of sleep. Again, spectators can see here some uncanny dances, such as a classical *pas de deux* between a male and a female, and simultaneously another duet performed by a contemporary-dance couple, as if they were competing. The *corps de ballet* reappears in a caterpillar formation that soon separates in order to allow dancers to yell and make weird noises that recall the sounds of fish while frying or swimming. What becomes important in this section is the strength of the *ensemble* that is evoked through the forming of circles performing the same sequences. Dancers are trying to wake up from the contradictions of dream-visions. They call for order and stability of the mind, an aspect which links them to Shakespearean protagonists, who at the end of the comedy long for light, while asking themselves whether their night adventures in the forest were real or unreal.

We can possibly interpret the closing dance of this section as a 'visionary' re-writing of the traditional midsummer dance of Act I. While performers are dancing, the Dreamer reappears on stage dragging his bed towards the corner of the proscenium. Anna is also present and her song is a more vigorous repetition of the lyrics that she sang for the closing of Act I. As becomes clear, Ekman proposes a reiteration of episodes and dances, so as to echo movements, gestures and words that the public can now remember.

The very last scene of the production is a re-evoking of the first scene of the performance, and so it is called "Traditions" happening precisely at "8:00". The episode depicts once again the Dreamer in the act of waking up, disturbed by the sound of an alarm clock. The Hostess walks in once again and helps him dress. Again, she offers some hay and the two walk off of stage through a back door. The finale signals that the performative cycle will constantly repeat itself and that life will continue in a redundant spiralling cycle of recurring occurrences and life transformations.

3. Shakespeare's Festivities and the Role of Traditional Dances for Transformation

Festivities are important features in Shakespeare's comedies (Wincor 1950: 219-240). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these destabilising celebrations are encouraged by those in power. Indeed, both Theseus and Oberon are organising "revels". Periods of chaos and disorder are essential for safeguarding stability, because people in the lower echelon of the dominator patriarchal system can finally experience momentary freedom and reversal of roles. As Barber suggests:

The seasonal feasts were not, as now, rare curiosities to be observed by folklorists in remote villages, but landmarks framing the cycle of the year, observed with varying degrees of sophistication by most elements in the society (Barber 1959: 5-6).

Shakespeare uses festivities to question social categories and show, through the magical voyage of his young protagonists, the strength of a stable, hierarchical order or ordained 'civilisation'.

As the title of the play suggests, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* evokes the middle of summer, a time to celebrate the renewal of the land and the reaping of its fruit. Yet, in the text, there are very few references to summer festivities, since for Shakespeare the most important emphasis of his play is the division existing between the inner (the walled

city) and outer (the wood) worlds of Elizabethan society. I discuss the implications of this psychological and socio-cultural spatial division in the next section, when I deal with Shakespeare's dream. Apart from summer, Shakespeare puts to the fore other moments of change and transformation:

LYSANDER

If thou lov'st me then,
Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow night;
And in the wood, a league without the town
(Where I did meet thee once with Helena
To do observance to a morn of May),
There will I stay for thee
(Act I, i, 163-168: 15).

May and summer are for Shakespeare moments of revelation and awareness. These periods coincide with seeding and planting, therefore suggesting moments of growth and experiential understanding¹⁷. Indeed, when Theseus finds the young couple of lovers asleep in the woods, he promptly suggests to his entourage:

THESEUS

No doubt they rose up early, to observe
The rite of may; and hearing our intent,
Came here in grace of our solemnity
(Act IV, i, 131-133: 95).

Apart from the human 'rational' world, it is in the dark and enchanted spaces of the woods that Shakespeare fully exploits the socio-cultural implications of celebrations. Oberon, Titania, Puck and all the creatures and fairies that dwell in this 'other' dimension are constantly singing, dancing and rejoicing with the land and animal world. These are the places of the irrational, where people are allowed to experience disorder and discover their inner (and secret) instincts, while embracing a new role, a new skin, or simply a new life. Barber suggests:

This more serious play, his first comic masterpiece, has a crucial place in his [Shakespeare's] development. [...] He expressed with full imaginative resonance the experience of traditional summer holidays. He thus found his way back to a native

¹⁷ As Wincor suggests: "A festival play may be any dramatic celebration, but the term is here applied to drama growing out of seasonal rites and worship. As a matter of fact, other festivals may have the same origin [...]. Certainly there is a basic theme in many religious plays, folk plays, and pageants of all kinds; and this theme is what must be traced before we consider how Shakespeare made it into something rich and strange. It begins with primitive man first learning agriculture and being impressed by the momentous transformations that pass over the face of this earth. Changes attended the season, changes that had an apparently magical effect upon growth and life [...]. Fertility magic is the beginning of comedy. The winter mock-death of good things in life is the source of tragedy" (Wincor 1950: 220).

festival tradition remarkably similar to that behind Aristophanes at the start of the literary tradition of comedy. [...] Shakespeare never made another play from pastimes in the same direct fashion (Barber 1959: 11).

In Shakespeare's texts, the disruption of order fostered by summer rites and traditional celebrations highlights another fundamental element of human 'nature'. This is the need to re-connect with the power of environment and the more-than-human world, in the acknowledgment that apart from being 'rational' and ground-based creatures, we are also part of a more cosmic (and therefore 'irrational' for humans) system of "relational partnerships" (Eisler 1998, 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019).

In this sense, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a perfect example of how human desire, love and Eros cannot be fully expressed or experienced in the realm of patriarchal order, because they are forces that require an inner and outer voyage into the irrational mind. These are moments of growth, development and discovery which reconnect us with our most intimate and true feelings. These are phases in which we put aside our human need for stability and rejoice in the mesmerising power of life, with all its contradictions, synchronicities, and seemingly 'casual' coincidences. Read from this perspective, it comes as no surprise that Titania's calling to "roundel [and] song[s]" is associated with an interaction with nature. The Queen of the fairies knows that dances and songs have the power to appease human agonies and desires. In her magical world, she will be the only one able to experience metamorphosis, while embracing an irrational and yet mostly 'true' love for an ass.

TITANIA

Come, now a roundel and a fairy song;
Then for the third part of a minute, hence:
Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds;
Some war with rermice for their leathern wings,
To make my small elves coats; and some keep back
The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots and wanders
At our quaint spirits. Sing me now asleep;
Then to your offices, and let me rest
(Act II, ii, 1-8: 43-44).

Two qualities alternate in the world of the fairies. Firstly, the cyclical order of life, change and transformation embodied by Queen Titania, and secondly, the processional and formal system that pervades Oberon's mind and behaviour. In Shakespeare's misogynist society this should not come as a surprise. Yet, I find particularly interesting how Titania's disorder is essential to the structuring of the play and unfolding of the events. Indeed, beside fulfilling Oberon's wish to win the battle with his wife over an "Indian boy", the episode also subverts the order of the unreal world, thus reinforcing once more the ideas of change and transformation at the heart of the comedy¹⁸. These transitions between "dominator and

¹⁸ Significantly, Loomba argues that "mapping colonial and gender structures onto one another, critics have increasingly interpreted the struggle between Oberon and Titania over the Indian boy as 'a gendered contest

partnership systems" (Eisler 1988) of life and experience are also discernible in the reversal of Oberon and Titania's dances, songs and attitude towards festivities (Isenberg 2022: 193-194). Indeed, as Barber suggests:

It seems likely that, as Dr. Johnson argued, there were two songs which have been lost, one led by Oberon and the other by Titania. There were probably two dances evolutions also, the first a processional dance led by the king and the second a round led by the queen. [...] These two forms of dance are associated in origin with just the sort of festival use of them which Shakespeare is making. 'The customs of the village festival', Chambers writes, 'gave rise by natural development to two types of dance. One was the processional dance of a band of worshippers in progress round their boundaries and from field to field, house to house [...] The other type of folk dance, the ronde or round, is derived from the comparatively stationary dance of the group of worshippers around the more especially sacred objects of the festival, such as the tree or the fire. The custom of dancing round the Maypole has been more or less preserved wherever the Maypole is known' (Barber 1959: 138).

In Ekman's choreography these contrasting embodied features are fully exploited in the first act. Indeed, at the beginning of the celebration for the coming of summer everything seems very formal and precise (see, for instance, the group dancing with the hay), while the appearance of the Maypole unveils a more dynamic and challenging form of dance. In my opinion, this diversion fully expresses and indirectly shows the different 'nature' of Titania and Oberon's agency and intent.

In particular, the hay dance is characterised by repetitive movements embodied in unison and focusing mainly on the performers' torso, as if dancers were presenting the beginning of celebrations. The piece follows a formal and structured order in a movement that recalls a "processional dance" to quote from Barber's words. This is an important moment because it prepares spectators, and also performers, for the "chaos" and disorder that will follow. In this sense, the Maypole dance configures as the truest and most subverting moment of change.

The hay dance is solemn and jovial. Dancers are moving precisely in unison as if they were one single body during a communal ceremony. At the beginning of the dance, there is no space for solos or individual characterisation because the final aim of this performative ritual is to connect with the land, thus welcoming abundance and pleading for a good harvest. Dancers are well placed on the ground on their knees, and they individually interact with the land. Sometimes they whisper and scream in a quiet way, as if they wanted to recall songs and ballads that most farmers were playing during harvest or summertime.

Movements of the torso are mostly connected with contractions so that the dancers can perform rounds and circles with the hay they hold in their hands. Indeed, the circle is the most recognisable geometrical form, while the dance is also characterised by falls and

over the proper control of foreign merchandise', as 'a progression both patriarchal and imperial' [...]. The patriarchal will is thus also an imperialist will" (Loomba 2016: 185).



Fig. 1: Alexander Ekman's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Detail of the 'hay' dance (<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/apr/27/alexander-ekman-eskapist-midsummer-nights-dream-review-audacious>, The Guardian Online, photograph by Hans Nilsson, consulted on 13/11/2023).

recoveries and moments of stasis, which are expedients that emphasise the interacting with hay, a fundamental and strategic 'prop' for the aesthetics of this scene.

If one looks closely at the choreography, the maypole dance is more dynamic and transformative than that of hay. First, it is performed in a circle, therefore recalling traditional folk group-dances and, second, it is led by a single male dancer, who stands on a ball of hay to manage and incite his fellow companions to join in the celebration.

Just as in Titania's monologue, performers are now standing and dancing in circles. Their faces and gazes can finally meet because the aim of this exchange is a movement from the outer (nature) world towards an inner (human consciousness) and communal space. In this direction, dancers perform their fluid, repetitive and quick steps with an opening of the arms and torso with eyes closed. This is a recognisable signal that embodies an inner journey, the commencement of a transition that will put into question certainties and beliefs.

The process of transformation for regeneration is highlighted in the dance through



Fig. 2: Alexander Ekman's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Detail of the 'maypole' dance (<https://www.barcelonaobertura.com/concert/a-midsummer-nights-dream/>, BarcelonaObertura.com, consulted on 13/11/2023).

loud shouting towards the maypole, while performers start running and dancing towards the middle of the circle, in a communal ceremony or rite that has much in common with native, aboriginal or dervish dances. The goal is to lose geo-temporal coordinates in order to experience and enter in a trance-like dimension. This is the only way to disrupt the dominator patriarchal order and escape from fixed representations and certitudes.

With the passing of time, the dance becomes faster and faster. Performers start jumping, clapping hands and changing directions of movements. Nevertheless, towards the middle of the dance they stop. Indeed, they know that festivities need to be counterbalanced by unpredictability. In this sense, they perform a rather soave round dance which has a lot of similarities with neoclassical ballet. This mixture of styles and techniques is another expedient to foreground disorder and emphasise alteration from what spectators are expecting.

At the end of the dance, a girl joins the male dancer on the hay ball. The *corps de ballet* cheers the couple who have finally re-joined to express the power of their encounter, and in a broader sense the power of love and abundance for the future. This feature connects Ekman's perceptions and insights with Shakespeare's play, because at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all protagonists finally regain their roles. Nevertheless, even if the "order and degree" system of Elizabethan society is restored, their subjects have been able to experience *another*

dimension into the unconscious. In the second part of the performance Ekman investigates the irrational realm of existence, the space where our true inner desires can finally emerge.

4. Reworking Reality: Fantasies and Dreams for a Re-envisioning of the World

With his protagonists going into the woods, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes a physical and yet unconscious voyage into the realms of imagination. As Marshall suggests:

The play swerves away from festive comedy as it radically places in question a social institution that embodies relations of power and stages conflicts of imagination, voice, and vision (Marshall 1982: 557).

As I have already suggested, for most scholars, Act II of the play represents an escape from the "order and degree" of Elizabethan society and therefore an intimate journey into the labyrinths of the self in order to question and negotiate positions of power, which are linked to the repression of human instincts to preserve dominator control¹⁹.

Reworking reality can occur in the 'margins', at the borders of civilisations. These spaces cannot be controlled because they stand outside of 'rational' systems of thought. The wood, in particular, is an unmapped environment, a dark and mesmerising psychic maze, where fears and doubts can finally emerge. The wood mirrors the mind since it is distorted and chaotic. It represents "an-other" world order, the reign of the fairies and Oberon and Titania, who embody the magical couple matching the 'real' Queen and King of Athens.

As in Shakespeare's play, Ekman's second act takes place in an unknown and obscure space. Nevertheless, instead of presenting magical creatures, Ekman decides to rework the atmosphere of the forest with the inner psyche of his dancers, taking them directly into the world of dreams. In Ekman's words:

The second act is a huge dream, and the dream-concept is always very good [...] because you can go wild with your imagination [...]. In the first part of the second act there is a huge nightmare. When I was going through my notes the other day, I called it 'the craziest storm', and that is what it feels like. So we go through a nightmare which is really strong and intense. And then after that it goes into [a sort of] 'wet dream'. And after that it kind of ends up with an absurd land, where you do not know where you are.

Through the dream dimension Shakespeare and Ekman are capable of offering an "other reality", thus realising the disruption of order that protagonists and performers have been looking for since the beginning of celebrations.

Entering the labyrinths of the self requires that the dancers experience their inner desires and aspirations. Overall, Ekman's Act II is elaborate and turbulent since its main

¹⁹ As Frosch emphasises "the action moves from an Athens ruled by harsh fathers to a world of female and maternal power" (Frosch 2007: 487).

function is to present different phases of human sleep, when it is believed we enter into another space. As McCarley suggests:

Sleep may be divided into two phases. REM sleep is most often associated with vivid dreaming and a high level of brain activity. The other phase of sleep, NREM sleep or slow wave sleep (SWS), is usually associated with reduced neuronal activity; thought content during this state in humans is, unlike dreams, usually nonvisual and consists of ruminative thoughts (McCarley 2007: 303).

This is an opportunity to dismantle the hypocrisies of society and re-create a space of/for freedom, encounters and partnerships. Indeed, the dances introduced in Act II are visions and highly intense moments of acknowledgement. Dancers also dismantle and disrupt the techniques that Ekman introduced in Act I. This is the territory of the unknown, a performative and highly creative platform where everything becomes possible and yet remains incoherent.

The last dance occurring towards the end of the Act is emblematic of this change. In my opinion, it epitomises a more liberated version of the circle dances I presented in the third paragraph of this article. As symbols of correspondences, spectators can distinguish again “The Dreamer”, who is a re-envisioning of the man standing in the hay ball in Act I, and the *corps de ballet*. As a reversal of order, the ensemble of dancers is now leading the performance. The Dreamer tries to follow the group, even when it becomes elusive and disorganised. At a certain point, in the same way as it occurred in the hay dance, performers lay back on the floor. This a reinforcement of the idea of communal destinies and aspirations. Indeed, the protagonists start dancing in unison, in formations that recall the maypole dance. The performance becomes very physical as it alludes to sexual poses and embryonic-like movements.

One of the features that mostly characterises this scene is the undressing of the dancers, who now wear only shorts and tops. In this way, the choreography connects firstly with their human ‘nature’, and secondly with their discarding familiar and societal ‘ornaments’. After a call and response section between the male protagonist and the other dancers, a pianist walks in and starts playing the track and musical themes that viewers have enjoyed at the closing of Act I. Anna the singer also reappears singing again the same emblematic song of Act I titled *How Many More of These?* written by the composer Mikael Karlsson:

How many more of these?
How many more?
How many friends like these
have come here before?

This one has barely begun
Has barely begun

How many years like this?
How many springs?

How many rounds like this?
How many rings?

This one has barely begun
Has barely begun

How many drinks like these
can you swallow down?
How many fears of yours
can alcohol drown?

This one will surely go down
Will surely go down

How much faster than this?
How fast can you run?
Our race into the night, my friend
has barely begun.

The message that Ekman conveys, while referencing at the same time Shakespeare's play, is rather clear. The choreographer is drawing from traditional 'irrational' feasts to question life-order and reality and demands whether a change or transformation is possible. Through his production, Ekman is not able to provide an answer for his spectators, yet he prompts everyone to enter into this unworldly and authentic state of mind in order to leave behind judgements and fears. This is only a way to experience a different kind of reality, an imaginative world of fantasies and possibilities where a re-envisioning of dominator systems and views is possible. In this direction Ekman argued:

The piece itself is also like a loop concept, [in which] you have the beginning and the end [like if they were] the same scene and that is kind of like life. Every year we do this silly tradition over and over and over, and then we all have our dark moments in life. When the [protagonist] wakes up, and he has been through all these things, in his mind, and it has been a very tough night for his mind, the girl comes in [and] she wants to do it all one more time.

5. Conclusions

Without acknowledging the real implications of his choreography, Ekman has created a ballet that mirrors and pays respect to his Swedish heritage, society and tradition. The "silly" dances and celebrations he mentions in his interview have an important function for communities at large for they are rare moments of partnership awakening and authentic relations with all existence. These are instances out of the ordinary and supposedly linear and 'rational' world we think we dwell in and therefore incredible spaces to question our lives and perspectives, while also embracing our irrational 'nature'.

In a similar way, Shakespeare's protagonists enter the woods in order to look for a different order and run away from responsibilities and dominator control. Yet, after their

night of reversals and destabilising occurrences, they understand that true change can only occur within themselves, thus interrogating and putting into question their beliefs and certainties. Indeed, as Frosch points out talking about Puck's epilogue:

Rather than answering questions about enchantment and demystification, Puck's epilogue helps us recognize that we have been in a psychological place where such answers are irrelevant. Telling us that the fairies are just actors, but still calling himself Puck and Robin and promising that he will continue to exist in that role, Puck sends us back, refreshed, to the ongoing tension between external reality and internal subjectivity but reminds us that the transitional experience will be there for us in the future (Frosch 2007: 499).

This is a very effective and powerful way of building a partnership world of authentic, confident and caring relations, in which we question world-order and reality. The performing arts, and dance in this case, have the power to dismantle centuries-old disbeliefs in traditions and festivities that aim to re-connect us with who we truly are. These are practices and "artivistic" (Mead 2017) engagements which for both practitioners and spectators can become challenging journeys into ourselves, or imaginative voyages in which everything appears impossible and yet within reach.

Talking about the maypole Swedish summer tradition, Ekman concluded in his interview:

It is a very strange tradition [...] We raise this Maypole in history. I tried to study it and I still do not get what it [is]. We raise this Maypole and we sing songs and we still do this today [...]. Just now, the past summer I was there in my country house with my parents and we were holding hands with all the neighbours and we were singing these silly songs, running around in a circle. It is such a strange thing to do. You know in Sweden we are not really outgoing in our culture. So it is very strange that we suddenly have to do this. Anyway, it is a great exercise for Swedish people to connect and get to know each other.

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