

Queensmill Students Perform in Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

Review by Francesca Harden, Mother of Tim

Flute Theatre "A Midsummer Night's Dream" / Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond

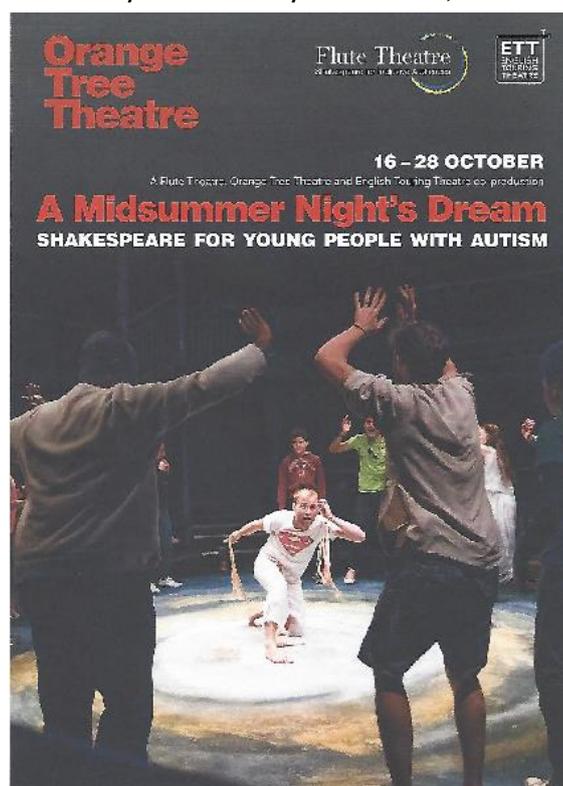
Last Saturday I really didn't know what to expect when I turned up for Flute Theatre's performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with my extremely autistic 18 year old son, Tim. Tim enjoys an inclusive theatre group, loves repeating chunks of Shakespeare (with little idea what it means), and this was described as "an immersive performance specifically for children and young people on the autism spectrum"- so it seemed worth a try.

As always, being in a public place with Tim was panic-inducing, despite the fact that this was an incredibly supportive environment. Even before the start, while the actors and artistic director were warmly introducing themselves, Tim managed to run away from me 3 times – to be retrieved from the auditorium, the ladies' loos and the admin offices. The difference was that no one minded or batted an eyelid, and I was immediately offered help with finding him. That never happens!

The theatre itself is very intimate – a circular stage on which each actor worked with one of the 5 autistic youngsters, behind which carers and parents sat. At the start I experienced familiar feelings – hard to shift ever since Tim was tiny – of feeling intensely anxious

about his behaviour and nervous of being judged as his parent. As Tim galloped around the stage, made loud inappropriate comments and flapped his arms, I fretted repeatedly about whether to take him out and whether he was spoiling it for everyone else.

What was breathtaking, was the way the actors immediately adapted what they were doing, to incorporate what Tim was experiencing and communicating with his behaviour into the performance. In other words, they entered into Tim's world rather than demanding that he enter theirs. Whether he was jumping, talking in a loud Cockney accent, or rocking back and



forth, 2 actors worked with him to incorporate what he was bringing into the show. It worked! He relaxed, he felt accepted for himself, he began to visibly enjoy the sensory games and humorous use of Shakespeare's text. What's more, the same was happening, in different ways, with all the other participants and actors.

After a while I noticed that I had relaxed too, both physically and mentally, in a way that almost never happens when I'm with Tim. My arms and legs had uncrossed, I was leaning forward, mesmerised, and smiling. I could relax because Tim was with people who really "got" him and understood how to work with autism.

At one point, an actor tapped a repeated single chime on a bell, and in the ensuing silence each participant in turn closed their eyes and turned to follow the direction of the sound. This was a spellbinding, beautiful moment with everyone in the room intensely focussed on each child. The silence and calm was magical. It felt almost religious, as though a sacred space had been created, within which something transformative was happening. There was one young lady who had shown little interest in the performance for much of the first half, sitting looking at the floor. She became progressively more engaged, and just before the end she was persuaded to her feet by an actor and whirled in a slow circle, hands clasped. Her face suddenly lit up in a huge smile – but it was the look on her Dad's face, sitting just behind her, that has really stayed with me.