

Cultural Authority and Gender Politics – Christine Edzard’s *The Children’s Midsummer Night’s Dream*

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Abstract

Christine Edzard’s 2001 *The Children’s Midsummer Night’s Dream*, her second Shakespearean project after her 1992 *As You Like It*, is an independent film *par excellence*. Produced by Sands Films, a company she co-founded, it is an experimental project contesting and subverting authority mechanisms of mainstream filmmaking. Edzard worked with over three hundred amateur performers – children aged eight to twelve from London schools – on a performance of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to produce a children-owned version of the play. This experimental film can be discussed on a number of planes – educational, artistic, cultural, and political – but the main area it touches upon is that of cultural authority. Significantly titled, the film suggests that it both belongs to children, and is addressed to them; therefore, the issues of its educational value with a specific target audience in mind, and of ownership of a significant cultural text, are prioritized. However, the project is also a fascinating material for analysis from the point of view of gender studies, because the age of Edzard’s actors is incompatible with the play’s focus on marriage, sexuality, and domestic power. This paper discusses the way in which the film approaches the questions of textual and cultural authority, and how those questions are informed by the film’s approach to the play’s gender politics.

Keywords: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Christine Edzard; *The Children’s Midsummer Night’s Dream*; William Shakespeare; cultural authority; gender politics; children actor; independent cinema

1. Introduction

Christine Edzard, a film director, writer and producer, co-founder of Sands Films, is an appreciated independent filmmaker, and her *Little Dorrit* (1987) was even nominated for mainstream awards. She frequently adapts literary sources for the screen, and has filmed two plays by William Shakespeare – *As You Like It* in 1992 and *The Children's Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2001. Following the release of *The Children's Midsummer Night's Dream* she had a longer break in filmmaking, returning in 2018 with *The Good Soldier Schwejk*. The IMDb review advertising her new film perfectly reflects upon both the style of her work and her position in the industry: “Here she comes, Britain’s leading independent and 100% original filmmaker, stirring things up again,” and promises that her adaptation of Hašek’s famous novel is “a thoroughly different kind of film than anyone has ever seen before” (“Christine Edzard Rides Again”). Edzard’s Shakespearean films – independent, low-budget, and alternative both interpretatively and formally – have helped build that reputation. However radical, they also contributed to securing her an appreciated position amongst more mainstream cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays.

The Children's Midsummer Night's Dream is a particularly daring project that has stirred a lot of critical attention at the time it was made, and among Shakespearean screen adaptations still remains an unparalleled experiment in contesting and subverting authority mechanisms of filmmaking. The idea is to have over three hundred amateur performers – children aged eight to twelve from London schools – perform a version of William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and thus create a *Dream* that is to be seen as owned by them. A result of Sands Films collaboration with Southwark education authorities, it is a phenomenon that has been discussed on a number of planes – educational, artistic, cultural, and political – but the notion of cultural authority is its clear point of focus. Significantly titled, the film suggests that it both belongs to children and is addressed to them; therefore, the issues of its educational value with a specific target audience in mind and of ownership of a significant cultural text are prioritized. However, the project is not only a fascinating material for the study of authorship. Another area that it complicates is gender politics because the age of Edzard’s actors is incompatible with the play’s focus on marriage, sexuality, and domestic power. Thus, as the film touches upon the questions of textual and cultural authority, these are contextualized in its problematic dealing with the play’s gender politics, offering a troubling take on Shakespeare’s iconic romantic comedy.

The film’s opening sequence shows a group of schoolchildren watching a life-sized puppet performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The camera focuses on the puppets of Theseus and Hippolyta, as well as on the young audience, registering a variety of reactions. Many of the children seem bored or impatient, talking to each other rather than watching the performance, but their level of engagement dramatically changes as they become the actors. Initially indifferent to the professional performance of the puppets, voiced by Derek Jacobi and Samantha Bond, the children gradually become immersed in their own, albeit amateur, production. At first, the young audience simply begins to interfere with the puppet show, which happens, significantly, when the father/daughter conflict erupts. On Hermia’s comment,

“I would my father looked but with my eyes” (1.1.56),¹ a girl in the audience stands up to usurp the line, and initiates the takeover. After Hermia’s intervention, Demetrius and Lysander rise up to eventually get rid of the puppets, and take control over the developing action.

The children in the audience are initially not overtly interested in what they are watching because the show is static but they also do not seem to understand the weight of the talk on desire and wooing between Theseus and Hippolyta. However, they react lively to the conflict between Egeus and Hermia and are clearly more responsive to the issues of the father’s authority and the daughter’s rebellion. Significantly, it is Hermia, whose “resistance to the patriarchal order [...] provides the play with its organizing energy” (Crowl, 2003, p. 164), that in the film initiates the audience’s rebellion against the puppet performance. Lehmann (2009) argues that Edzard’s way to start the film represents a takeover of authority – the puppets speaking the voices of Jacobi and Bond are replaced by the children, who gradually lose their school uniforms as they merge into the roles they play and “negotiate a new relationship with their identities and bodies, having escaped from British educational orthodoxy and their ‘wooden’ adult mentors” (p. 61). She claims that the use of puppets interestingly highlights how Theseus and Egeus “wield their power with machine-like compulsion, unable to accommodate any deviation from their phallocratic program” (Lehmann, 2009, p. 62). From its beginning, thus, the film is defined by its ideological statement: the symbolic rebellion against cultural authorities and authoritarian ownership of culture. As it progresses, the production further engages with the questions of textual and cultural authority, and the issue of gender becomes a part of this debate. Whether Edzard’s experiment proves successful in its subversive potential is questionable, as this paper will attempt to show.

2. Girls and Boys

From the point of view of gender politics, the film is highly problematic primarily because Edzard’s actors, being children, are neither suitable to render the play’s menacing eroticism, nor able to bring out the nuances of its politics of marriage and domestic authority. Puberty is not of interest in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Hermia and Helena, however young, are not children any more, and although their narratives are defined by the transition from childhood to womanhood, the process is rendered on a social plane as they abandon their peer loyalty to embrace their new roles in marriage. The film’s cast of boys and girls aged eight to twelve brings to the fore entirely different issues. For the girls, it is the beginning of puberty, while the boys are largely still prepubescent.² As a consequence, the age composition of the group visually empowers the girls, who, as Crowl (2003) notes, are physically and mentally more developed than the boys, “taller and more self-possessed” (p. 164). Since the boys look less mature in comparison to the girls, Lanier (2003) claims that the difference “amplifies the impression of callowness from Demetrius and Lysander and lends a subtle girl-power edge to Hermia’s and Helena’s assertiveness” (p. 168). He also notes that at the end of the film,

¹ All play quotes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* come from Shakespeare (1994).

² According to various sources, puberty for girls starts around the age of ten, and for boys, around twelve.

during the mechanicals' performance, it is the girls again who are more active and daring in shushing the puppets (Lanier, 2003, p. 168).

At the same time, however, some of the girls, most notably Helena, are visibly not comfortable with their changing bodies (Crowl, 2003, p. 164), which corresponds to the notion of vulnerability of female bodies that the play addresses. The boys, on the other hand, seem largely oblivious to the issues of young developing bodies, which gives them a sense of ease that might adequately allude to the complacency of early modern patriarchy. The awkwardness of the physical development, one that at once empowers and disables the girls in the film, communicates a sense of tension that is equivalent to the gender issues in the play, even if it does not aim at addressing those issues. Titania's position exemplifies that aspect of the film quite well. In her first talk with Oberon (2.1), the paradox of uneven power distribution is visible – she is considerably taller than him but because he is a stronger performer, confident and at ease with his role, he dominates their confrontation. While in the play this scene of the clash of their authorities can be seen to illustrate female disobedience and an attempt to resist coercive patriarchy and male logic of control and domination, in Edzard's film the moment plays out differently. The quarrel between Titania and Oberon ultimately highlights the impossibility of resistance as the girl's screen presence yields to the boy's more powerful performance. Thus, the scene shows that Titania's potential dominance is only superficial; limited to the fact that she looks a little older and is taller, it proves insufficient and does not manage to win with Oberon's performative energy.

A similar power arrangement defines also Titania's scenes with the transformed Bottom. Bottom is one of the best performers in the cast and manages to present the best of comedy. His conversations with the fairies and comments on scratching make the watching children break out in genuine laughter. Titania, in turn, looks entirely lost in exchanges with him and struggles to get through the sexually charged lines. Bottom in Edzard's *Dream* is clearly the naïve and silly donkey-headed joke of Puck, and he is very convincing as such a comic figure. Titania's erotic world play in the intimate scene with Bottom, however, is impossible to be rendered successfully by a young girl, and she comes across as uncomfortable. Her awkwardness in this scene may correspond to the difficulty in communicating the problematic nature of her attraction to the ass, but while the play gives Titania control of this erotic moment, Edzard's film leaves the confused Titania quite powerless. Titania's power in that scene results from her understanding of and control over the erotically charged lines. In Edzard's film this understanding is missing as Edzard attempts here an innocent depiction of the Titania/Bottom subplot. This choice in itself may be seen as a welcome diversion from adaptations inspired by "Jan Kott's fierce, bestial reading of Titania's encounter with Bottom," such as Adrian Noble's (Crowl, 2003, p. 167). Nevertheless, it fails to address the complexity of the gender-fuelled power struggle between the king and queen of the fairies, which largely depends on the roughness implied in the sexual potential of the bower scene. Edzard here runs against the scene's potential as she seems to be hoping for innocent laughter in a moment that textually relies on innuendoes.

To what extent the delivery of the play's sexual anxieties is problematic for children becomes especially visible by contrast to how much more authentic the film becomes in moments when the children can actually relate to the play. A good example, as already mentioned, is Hermia's

rebellion against Egeus, as issues of parental authority and obedience are understandable to children of that age. Another is Helena's complaint about Hermia's betrayal of their friendship. "There is the real comprehension of sisterly betrayal," Crowl (2003) notes, with Hermia's indignant reply crowning the moment "when the forest confusion comes most alive" (p. 167). The children also make lovely fairies – their singing is sweet, and their laughter and joy genuine – and are truly funny as the mechanicals. But it is not possible for them to convey the sexual menace of Oberon or the erotic tension of the conversations between the young lovers. The film borders on the uncomfortable in the already mentioned erotic jealousy argument between Titania and Oberon, but also when Lysander tries to lie with Hermia and she asks him to keep his distance, or when Demetrius threatens to do Helena harm in the woods. As Crowl claims, "the sexual fears of possession and rejection experienced by Hermia, and the sadomasochism that underlies Helena's worship of Demetrius, are largely lost in the playing of the roles [...] by Edzard's youngsters" (2003, p. 167). The children flatly deliver the sexually- and violence-infused lines that they do not fully understand; consequently, the film fails to reflect the scope of damage inflicted upon the characters undergoing their various ordeals in the magical woods.

The sense of benignness is further enhanced by the portrayal of the forest. The beautiful decorations, dominated by flowers, along with a host of joyful fairies, with Titania and Oberon in spectacular costumes, make the woods an "enchanted garden" (Crowl, 2003, p. 166), not a menacing place contrasted with the safety of Athens' social order. Lanier (2003) appreciates this aspect of the film, and argues that since no threats hang in the air, and no real harm is done, either to the young lovers, or, more significantly, to Titania (p. 169), the charm of the child fairies in the beautiful garden can aim at marking the film's affinity with "a lost golden age of popular Shakespearean performance," one that rejects modern and postmodern stylistics, and their repressive "imperial and gender ideologies" (p. 168). The film, however, does not simply reject the play's gender complexity, but rather follows an inconsistent, or even paradoxical, strategy in presenting it. On the one hand, it is political and ideological in its very nature, as the experiment with the children's performance works to equate the cultural authority of professional Shakespeare with parental, or, more specifically, paternal, tyranny. Hermia's rebellion against her father's will is the moment when the children begin to resist the puppet show, and, as Lanier argues, Hermia's interruption and intervention in the puppets' performance is an act of "double resistance, of Hermia against adult patriarchy and of the student audience against respectful obeisance before a 'proper' display of high culture" (2003, p. 167). As other children in the audience "cheer Hermia and boo Theseus" (Lanier, 2003, p. 167), the young collective rises against a cultural, as well as gender and generational, authority. Lehmann (2009) also appreciates the power of that moment, in this takeover seeing the success of "replacing patriarchal structures of succession with skeuomorphs of emergence" as the children refuse to give in to the puppet show, and, instead, spontaneously break free (p. 62). Lehmann embraces the skeuomorphic quality of the children in that they are the ultimate threshold figures; they are not only on the verge of adulthood, and only performing it, but also on the verge of gender identification (p. 62), being aged in a period that, in early modern society, was in the case of boys a moment of transition from female to male care.

Lehmann's observation on the children's performance of adulthood, as well as their act of rebellion in taking over the authoritative performance, point to the film's subversive potential as it reveals the artificiality of authority granted to people on the basis of their age or qualifications. In the area of gender, the film offers space for subversion, too. Since the children still remain vocally, as well as visually, neutral, rather than clearly defined male or female figures, their performance may help to see gender roles, and subsequent hierarchies, as artificially imposed. However, this reading of the film's potential backfires. The children's performance of authority deconstructs the arbitrariness and artificiality of authority as a social construct, but, by doing so, it invalidates the play's problems as being artificial and, therefore, dismissible. What remains is the only real authority in the film – that of the given child's performance. As a result, the film only empowers the stronger performers, such as Bottom. Although the theatrical distribution of power is not artificial or arbitrary, as it stems from the authenticity and spontaneity of the children's performance, it is still incidental and undemocratic, which may partly invalidate the claims that the production aims at unmasking and destroying imposed hierarchies.

On the other hand, in what Lanier sees as Edzard's "effort to recover a sense of post-cynical innocence and wonder," the film refuses to directly engage the play with "'hard' politics – questions of class, empire, gender, race, sexuality" (2003, p. 169). Depriving the play of its crucial theme of patriarchal abuse, the film becomes a fairy tale of children's rebellion against parental and institutional authority, and its subtle allusions to gender are detectable only for adult viewers. The happy ending, thus, can be seen as complete, as Hermia gets her Lysander, Helena gets her Demetrius, the mechanicals are applauded, and the benevolent fairies rejoice in their magic. In this way, Edzard's film might suggest that when you hand over *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to children, and grant them the freedom to do it in a straight-forward manner, the play will easily defend itself as a pleasing and innocent comedy. Such reading is possible and maybe even welcome, considering the focus on children, but runs counter to the energy of the film's starting point – its engagement with vital social issues, like those of cultural authority. This incompatibility is not resolved, leaving the film swaying between an innocent play of children and an act of rebellion.

3. Authorship and Ownership

Crowl (2003) calls Edzard's film one of the most radical, iconoclastic, and subversive in its decade, precisely in that it is a potential site of resistance to the dominant ideologies of Shakespeare on screen (p. 155). Indeed, featuring a huge cast of children from various schools, *The Children's Midsummer Night's Dream* relishes in the cast's "anonymity, unpolished accents, and racial diversity" (Lehmann, 2009, p. 63), and reveals Edzard's attempt at establishing a new dynamic in the hierarchies of cinematic art and cultural authority alike. The film starts with a confrontation between a democratic audience and an authoritative performance. Shakespeare put in a box stage, "impersonated" by wooden puppets, and delivered by Jacobi and Bond, becomes a metaphor of stable, enclosed, and approved culture provided to passively receiving audiences by authoritarian and institutionalized agents. The film's defining ideological premise is that the children's audience refuses to revere such Shakespeare, and, instead, steals it to remake it their own way. The children's performance may not be adequate, or even

satisfying, but it is theirs, which stresses the audience's rights to take, consume, and transform Shakespeare. Edzard's "populist orientation" of the film, Lanier (2003) claims, is visible in that she "rejects the often unarticulated canons of performance and interpretation [...] that govern 'proper' performance of Shakespeare" (p. 166). The life-sized puppets of Theseus and Hippolyta are wooden, as if to stress that "proper" Shakespeare, in its professional form, is "wooden" (Lanier, 2003, p. 166). Lanier argues that the puppets signify false authenticity, one that precludes presence and spontaneity (2003, p. 166), while the children's rendition, by contrast, is truly authentic, even if inadequate. In this context, it is noteworthy that for many of the performers the project "was their first introduction to Shakespeare," which is all the more significant because, as Edzard explains, some of them could not read (Crowl, 2003, p. 163).

The idea of invading a "proper" Shakespearean production, one that is assumed to be in the position of cultural and institutional privilege, and taking control of it, is a clear act of subversion and resistance. As the film develops, however, that subversive potential yields to the obvious stage power that inevitably rests with the actors who control the poetry of the play. The fact that the children are amateurs, and that some of them visibly struggle with the lines – sometimes not understanding what they are saying – is disconcerting. Lehmann (2009) calls the children's language "undisciplined" (p. 63), but the problem is not that it is untrained, or with local accents, but that the children deliver the lines flatly, and often display an effort when speaking and moving at the same time. As with any other school play, the film creates a sense of discomfort whenever the visible effort to deliver the memorized lines and to make sense of the space at the same time proves futile. As Crowl consents, the film thus fails, with some exceptions, to provide the thrill of "the experience of watching a child be captured and absorbed by what he or she is saying" (2003, p. 165), as the focus on straight delivery of the lines steals a significant portion of the show.³ Those moments of discomfort are all the more frustrating because they clash with moments of genuine spontaneity and ease when children truly enjoy the act. The appearances of the fairies, especially their dancing and singing, are full of energy, which is naturally released when the actors do not have to struggle with their lines, and are simply allowed to play. The scenes of the mechanicals, with both Bottom and Peter Quince being strong actors, also relish in their sense of enjoyment, and provide striking contrast with the awkwardness of the children who have trouble reciting Shakespeare.

Burnett (2002) argues that the problems with how the children handle the verse actually emphasize "qualities of provisionality and spontaneity" (p. 169), and Lanier (2003) believes they help to recapture "a sense of performance as play" (p. 166). The sense of provisionality and artifice could be appreciated as an experiment in rejecting the authority of professional performance, but it gets disrupted by the more joyful moments, such as the unscripted performances of the fairies, or the scenes with natural actors as Bottom, who deal with the lines well enough to offer more than just delivering them, and visibly enjoy it. It is precisely because these moments clash with each other that the film's subversive take on authority backfires, as ultimately the cultural capital of Shakespeare's language belongs to those who are able enough to speak it. When confronting Oberon about his jealousy Titania struggles with her lines, "tripping over

³ Crowl (2003), by contrast, evokes Mickey Rooney's performance as Puck in the 1935 Reinhardt/Dieterle production, and claims that Edzard's film offers very little of the "crazy energy" that a child performance may bring (p. 165).

the verse's rhythms, looking for pauses in all the wrong places" (Crowl, 2003, p. 166), Oberon completely usurps the power in their scenes, mainly by virtue of his command of the text. The film initially claims that Jacobi or Bond do not have to occupy the position of control over Shakespeare and cannot command the children's imagination. But when the children take over, those who command Shakespeare's lines better control their scenes. Consequently, as Rokison (2013) claims, because some children are not able to deliver their lines with ease or understanding, the film fails at showing Shakespeare as being universal or accessible for ownership by such young amateurs (p. 56). In fact, the experiment turns against itself, because those lapses in delivery create a feeling that "Shakespeare is safest in the hands of trained professionals" (Rokison, 2013, p. 56), which is a negation of what the show initially proposes.

It is the return to those professionals that frames the film. The children's power is still celebrated in the morning, when the two young couples wake up. The fragment of Theseus overruling Egeus is cut, which, as Lanier (2003) claims, allows the film to stress the children's agency instead of focusing on the intervention of an authority figure (p. 168). In the final scene of the "Pyramus and Thisbe" show, however, the necessity to negotiate Theseus's authority returns as the wooden puppets join the children's audience to watch the mechanicals and comment on their performance. Lehmann (2009) notes how poignant it is that the revolutionary aspect of the children's performance must again be mediated by a return to the puppet show:

once their midsummer night's dream meets the morning after, these same children will be subject to counter-education which, if the opening scene is any indication, will take shape as the oppressive hardening process that converts them into adults and, therefore, 'puppets' of the dominant social order (p. 63).

Crowl (2003) sees the ending in a more optimistic way. As the box stage from the beginning is replaced by a more "democratic" arrangement, the puppets, like the children, become the audience of the mechanicals' performance. Moreover, the children watching "Pyramus and Thisbe" turn to the puppets to shush them as the wooden figures throw in their interruptive comments. They take the side of their amateur performing colleagues "against the professional puppets," and "instinctively reject aristocratic attempts to show superiority to the rude mechanicals' efforts" (Crowl, 2003, p. 168). Crowl stresses that this clever way of dealing with the play within the play gives the children a means to turn against "the customary experience of the school 'culture' outing in which it is the adults (their teachers) who impose the shush of silence on their giggles, whispers, and interjections" (2003, p. 168). This act of sabotage may be seen as childish, or ineffective, but it does position the puppets as equals to the children in the audience, giving them all the same voice. Lanier (2003) also notes that the children watch the mechanicals' performance with engagement that is different from that in the film's beginning: they watch "intently and empathically," and spontaneously react to the performance, laughing at Pyramus, or screaming when the Lion appears (p. 168). At the same time, they strongly disapprove of the rude behavior of the "adult" audience – the puppets – which Lanier sees as a reversal of the roles of parents and children; it is the puppets who behave in an unruly way, and it is up to the children "to discipline their ill manners" (2003, p. 168).

The logic of this scene might indeed suggest that the children, having inhabited “legitimate” culture, become empowered by their Shakespearean experience, and can now exert their authority on what used to be the authority at the film’s beginning. Whether this ending can be embraced as the affirmation of the democratic accessibility of Shakespeare is disputable, however, taking into consideration the children’s uneven performance throughout the film, as well as the institutional context of Edzard’s experiment.

4. Between Success and Failure

Lehmann (2009) reads Edzard’s *The Children’s Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an allegory of authorship, which reinvents Shakespeare’s play as one about “political tyranny and patriarchal absolutism” (p. 48) and uses children provocatively to contest approved authorship. Seeing children as the “birthing agents of their cinematic narratives,” and as “repository of subversive codes of conduct” (2009, pp. 49-50), Lehmann argues that Edzard’s film is an example of collaborative authorship, and that its logic illustrates the mechanism of communication in what she calls an “open” system, one that challenges “the *cinematics* of domination,” and depends “on interaction with its surrounding environment to evolve” (2009, pp. 49, 50). In a similar vein, Lanier (2003) sees the film as showing a “more communal and participatory, less elitist and intellectual style of production,” and claims that such a style can be understood as “inherently democratic and authentically Shakespearean” (pp. 168-169).⁴ As the children with their diverse accents and acting abilities embody Shakespeare’s play, they also, Lehmann (2009) argues, “embody the democratizing dream of [...] the feminist filmmaking ‘vernacular,’” which embraces an alternative take on the way in which community is understood (p. 63). Edzard, considered by Lehmann as part of the “feminist filmmaking vanguard,” offers a film in which “children become the site of convergence between cultural assumptions about gender and authorship,” and illustrates “what happens to the equation – indeed, the system – when those terms do not comply with each other” (Lehmann, 2009, pp. 49-50).

This laudatory view of the film highlights and appreciates the radical energy of Edzard’s ideas, but the execution of those ideas is inherently flawed. Whether the children’s performance can truly be appreciated as innocent, amateur, and spontaneous is questionable not only because it too often lacks their ease and enjoyment, but also because it is not entirely innocent. As Lanier (2003) notes, if the film is to be treated as truly a children’s Shakespeare, then it is arguably an illusion because a team of adults – theatre and film professionals, and voice coaches – were involved in the making of it. Moreover, the project is the result of a collaboration with local schools, that is educational institutions. Are not the children, Lanier asks, simply used to oppose institutional authorities as Edzard sees them (2003, pp. 169-170)? The film can be appreciated for its attempts to “reorient the ways in which the Shakespearean corpus is transmitted and appreciated” (Burnett, 2002, p. 167), but is the attempt successful? Edzard’s idea was that the children truly own the play through their spontaneous discovery of it (Burnett, 2002, p. 169), and the multiethnic and unruly cast undoubtedly creates a sense of reclaiming privileged

⁴ Lanier (2003) adds that such a “communal” atmosphere is frequently believed to be typical for the original Globe Theatre performances (p. 169).

culture. What remains problematic, however, is the way in which the enjoyable moments of the children's playful encounter with Shakespeare collide with the moments when they are not at ease, be it with Shakespeare's lines, or with the way they are supposed to manage them. If the film, then, is to be seen as an attempt at a democratic takeover of Shakespeare, those collisions disable the sense that it is successfully achieved.

Edzard's film can be approached as a film for children in that children are likely to respond in a lively way to their peers' efforts, and, like the cast, will embrace the innocence and magic of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The question remains, however, how much such viewers can gain from watching the film. Rokison (2013) argues that it is disputable to what extent the film may prove engaging enough, or understandable enough, for young audiences, considering the length of spoken passages, and its lack of visual diversity and interpretative focus (pp. 57, 59). Being a "chaste, innocent and unsophisticated representation of the play" (Rokison, 2013, p. 56), the film becomes precisely that – a representation rather than an adaptation, refusing to interpretively engage with the source. Lanier (2003) claims that by such refusal Edzard nostalgically reaches back to a time when Shakespeare in theatre "was still a genuinely popular art," before it became a site for directorial interpretation, and a realm for cultivating the "standards of 'proper' performance" (pp. 161-162). For Lanier, entrusting children with the performance signals the return of Shakespeare in production to the time of "cultural 'innocence,'" as the children provide a "pre-socialized, innocent" perspective, and experience the play in a new way, "as it really is," without the burden of either directorial interpretations, or the limitations of quality norms (2003, p. 162). The argument, however, is contestable. While largely innocent, the children are not pre-socialized. On the contrary, the school environment, as stressed by the uniforms they wear, provides a very strong context of an institutional event. In challenging the idea of a "proper" and controlled performance, the film fails at delivering a spontaneous and communal show, at times offering a school play, something that is associated with classroom settings where children are taught through theatre. Even if, as Lehmann insists, the film features the children's rebellion against institutional culture and education, their performance is visibly rooted within specific social institutions – school and theatre – of which they are not innocent.

The question of innocence is further complicated by gender related issues. On the verge of puberty, the children may fail to understand the erotic implications of their lines, especially when those implications are framed in Shakespeare's language. Still, they feel awkward in more charged scenes, either because they are aware that there are tensions underlying the verbal exchanges, or simply because their innocence does not allow them to understand, and therefore comfortably perform, some of their parts. Done "as it really is," that is without being adapted to the specificity of young performers, the play still surfaces its gender tensions, which corrupt the innocence and lightness of the children's performance, burdening them with meanings and innuendoes they cannot handle, let alone embrace. What is more, it is doubtful to what extent a Shakespearean play can at all be experienced "as it really is" in this day and age. Disseminated through various channels of education, entertainment, and culture, Shakespeare's better known plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, have forever lost their innocence. They are now palimpsestically layered with cultural readings and interpretations. It can be argued, nevertheless, that a child is still able to see a play for the first time "as it really is," and it has been stressed that the children in Edzard's cast had no prior experience

with Shakespeare. For many viewers of the film, however, this kind of experience has to remain in the realm of nostalgia – an unfulfilled longing for innocence forever lost. Nostalgic evocation of the past through the child figure is certainly an interesting concept, but trying to revive the feeling of unencumbered experience of Shakespeare is a task possibly lost at its very conception.

To embrace Edzard's film critically, then, is to accept it as an experiment in anti-authoritarian ownership that seeks to empower the disempowered through Shakespeare. Being an independent production, Edzard's film remains a strong statement on the idea of authorship and authority, and on the place of Shakespeare in those hierarchies. The experiment, however, is only partly successful. Relying on the children's innocent charm, it excludes Shakespeare's irony, innuendoes, and implications, depriving the play's problems of their impetus, and not offering much, instead. The charm itself, unfortunately, works only occasionally, not because the children's performance is inadequate or amateur, but because the performance seems often enforced on their part. The children actors truly own "their Shakespeare" only when they enjoy performing it, but these are only moments in the film. When they struggle with Shakespeare's text, or with acting itself, their genuine pleasure is not there, but is replaced by awkwardness and effort. When that happens, the play stops being truly theirs, and another layer of the film is revealed – that the children's play is motivated, orchestrated and directed by adults and their institutionalized ideologies. The problem, ultimately, then, is not whether whatever audience – children or adults – can enjoy watching the film, but whether the film communicates the sense of enjoyment on the part of the actors, as that would be the key to see their true agency in owning Shakespeare.

The film's approach to the play's gender politics works similarly to its take on, or against, cultural authority. The play's darker tones related to gender power, eroticism, and sexuality seep through the innocently delivered lines, and sabotage the innocence of the young actors' performance. Likewise, the significance of Shakespeare's language, of professional performers' rendering of the verse, and of educational role of Shakespeare are all highlighted to be contested, but not conquered, by the children's attempt at claiming ownership of culture. The young actors' awkwardness and unease battle with authenticity and spontaneity, and moments of genuine joy at doing Shakespeare their way are interspersed with moments of failing to do Shakespeare on screen. Stage ease and the thrill of acting that occasionally empower child actors highlight the fact that authority rests with able performance, one that embraces and celebrates the poetry of the text. That, in turn, provokes a question whether Edzard's film ultimately cherishes Shakespeare's, or the children's, (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

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