

Early-morning Dream pleases

A Midsummer Night's Dream

416-975-8555

By William Shakespeare. Directed by Michael Kelly. Until May 27 at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, 12 Alexander St. ★ ★ ★ ★

BY RICHARD OUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC

It takes talent to dream at 10 in the morning.

But there's certainly a lot of talent on display in the Shakespeare In Action production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that I caught up with at yesterday morning's performance for students.

Michael Kelly's company is strong on clarity of speech and full of disciplined performing energy.

That energy comes in handy because seven actors play 21 roles in this cleverly edited version of Shakespeare's classic romantic comedy.

Purists will be happy to see that the play is left largely intact, with only minor roles or incidents being eliminated. But the canny Kelly has wielded a blue pencil with surgical skill and managed to bring the script in at two hours, including an intermission.

At the morning matinee, a packed audience of inner-city students from Grades 6 to 8 hung on to every word, laughed at every joke, and followed every twist of the plot. They also had no trouble with the shape-shifting this sizzling septet kept pulling off throughout the show. A combination of clever staging and an inventive use of shadow play and puppets make it all possible.

Xuan Fraser anchors the production as an earthy, sensu-



PETER POWER/TORONTO STAR

DREAM CAST: The cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Buddies in Bad Times.

ous Oberon, with much of the satyr in his swagger. He speaks the verse with feeling, manages to be amused or touched as the moment demands, and he can hurl his servant Puck in the air with the greatest of ease.

Perhaps that's because Ngozi Paul's Puck is light without seeming airy-fairy, a sensible sprite who just manages to get things slightly wrong.

Jacklyn Francis scores as a hyper-emotional Helen, Anthony McLean as a wittily romantic Lysander, Matt Deslippe as a hair-trigger Demetrius, and Sarah McDonald as a Hermia capable of volcanic outrage.

But if any set of performanc-

es steals this show, it's the rude mechanicals, those prototypical amateur actors always in search of a self-dramatizing scene.

Andrew McMaster comes up with a novel and winning conception of Bottom: the party animal right out of a Blue commercial, willing to swagger his way through every part in the play. His comic invention is prodigious.

Deslippe offers a fine, thin-lipped Quince, with tiny glasses and large sighs of disapproval, yet he keeps the scenes moving along.

McLean's Flute is hilarious, slipping into a Butterfly McQueen tribute when being called on to play a woman, and

capable of the most outrageous double takes.

And McDonald's Snug offers a wonderful study of growing confidence misplaced as her Lion finally roars, and roars, and roars.

The production isn't perfect. Some of the scenery and lighting are a bit rough, and obviously every actor isn't equally skilled in every role attempted. But the batting average is high enough to recommend this show to Shakespeare lovers who can't make the trip to Stratford or wait for the outdoor performances in town to begin.

The play, as always, is the thing.