

DREAMS OF A WOOD SPRITE

[Gideon Lester](#) talks to director and choreographer [Martha Clarke](#) about flying, animals, and [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#).

Gideon Lester: [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) is the first Shakespeare that you've directed. When [Robert Woodruff](#) approached you to direct at the A.R.T., why did you suggest this play?

Martha Clarke: For years I've known that if ever I were to tackle Shakespeare, this would be the play. It's the only one I instinctively felt I would understand, being a bit of a wood sprite.

G.L.: How are you a wood sprite?

M.C.: You're not supposed to ask those questions. Let's just say that I understand stories of love, transformation, and projecting one's amorous baggage onto someone else.

G.L.: So the play has been on your mind for a long time.

M.C.: If you can call this a mind! When I was fourteen I played Puck in high school and I still remember great chunks of the text.

G.L.: Before rehearsals began you spent a week working with four actors and a vocal coach, Deborah Hecht. You remarked afterwards that the process had made the prospect of staging the play less daunting to you. What did you mean?

M.C.: Deb investigates text in the same way that I explore physicality. She unpacks its rhythm, shape, energy, and phrasing - in a sense turning it into music. Shakespeare's language can be either energized or contained, like movement. Speaking the verse requires the actor to make sounds - tight and small or long and full - just as a dancer creates a physical gesture.

G.L.: Your work has always bridged the realms of theatre and dance, giving you a unique place in the performing arts.

M.C.: There's a family tree of artists I'm related to, though our work is very different. Meredith Monk straddles music composition and choreography; [Anne Bogart](#)'s theatre is physical and collaborative; I'd be a distant cousin of Pina Bausch; even further from Robert Wilson. I love his lighting, gorgeous design, and spareness, but I suppose I'm more of a romantic.

G.L.: Was there a time when you thought you might gravitate towards theatre rather than dance?

M.C.: I think that's happening now. It doesn't mean that physicality and stage pictures won't always be the heartbeat of what I do, but who knows? I may want to do a Beckett with people stuck in jars. I love the specificity of language, though depending on how it's motivated it can be a forked tongue, saying one thing and meaning another.

G.L.: Your use of physical gesture is also very specific, though.

M.C.: Yes, it's true that a picture's worth a thousand words, though a thousand words can't paint a picture. Choreography is more time-consuming because you have to invent a vocabulary rather than interpreting someone else's. For me it's not something that comes easily; I wait until I feel or see the right thing. By now there's a kind of "Clarke look" in my work.

G.L.: Can you describe that look?

M.C.: It's spare and compact - trimmed down to the bone. It's a blend of the lyrical and the primitive, earthy, and rough. I never deal in pure abstraction, unless the abstraction contains a very specific metaphor. I'm not like Merce Cunningham, whose work is so much about musicality that it's almost balletic. I don't use techniques that come from one school or another; I try to create a physical vocabulary that fits a specific production.

G.L.: How do more abstract choreographers regard your work?

M.C.: As unnecessary! I do work with dance companies - I've choreographed for American Ballet Theatre, for Nederlands Dans Theater, for Baryshnikov - but I feel more intellectually and

emotionally comfortable in the theatre with dancers than with actors in dance companies.

G.L.: You're bringing three dancers whom you've worked with before to fly as fairies in [Midsummer](#). When did you begin experimenting with stage flight?

M.C.: I woke up one morning in 1983 thinking about a Chagall painting of a woman flying through the air with a great armful of flowers, and I decided I wanted that to be me. I thought, why shouldn't I move in the air like that? I wanted to have at least twenty branches of lilacs. Then my former producer called and said that she needed an idea for a grant application in ten minutes. As so often, I looked at my bookshelf and took down whatever caught my eye. I saw a book of Hieronymus Bosch paintings and decided to create something based on his work. We didn't get the grant, but I subsequently made **The Garden of Earthly Delights** [presented at the A.R.T. in 1985] and Chagall's flying lady was transformed into angels and the citizens of hell. It was stunning. Audiences were used to Peter Pan, but I had monsters like winged monkeys and harpies landing on the backs of people as they walked, and a woman hanging on the back of a percussionist, picking up his arms with drumsticks and slamming them into musical instruments.

G.L.: How have your flying techniques evolved?

M.C.: In the early productions the flying was aerial. I'm now exploring how to animate the body on the ground, which means that a dancer can take a step and land eight feet further across the stage. It requires great physical control and a wonderful use of breath to make it feel like a single stride.

G.L.: Flying allows you to extend the physical vocabulary?

M.C.: Yes. In rehearsal I'll say to a dancer, "Spin another two-thirds of a circle, roll down on your shoulder, and stand on a finger." In my imagination I see physical gestures that are not possible without wires. It's like applying techniques from animated cartoons to the human body.

G.L.: There's often a dreamlike quality to your work.

M.C.: My works have always been about dreams, sex, and death. **Vienna: Lusthaus** was about Freudian psychology; **Garden of Earthly Delights** traced a line from innocence to carnality; **Miracolo D'Amore** had an ironic title - it was really about women-bashing. I've done several pieces based on the work of Franz Kafka, who had a strange relationship with sexuality, as did Toulouse-Lautrec, who's my new bedfellow. [Clarke is currently developing a piece about Lautrec for Lincoln Center.]

G.L.: Much of your dance-theatre responds to the work of other artists. Who has influenced your approach to [Midsummer](#)?

M.C.: I use photography and painters and occasionally films for visual inspiration. The set came partly from the rough sparseness of Anselm Kiefer and the surrealist photographer Robert Parke-Harrison. The costumes evolved from Picasso's Rose Period and Goya's Caprichos. It's a little like going shopping, or it's like spin the bottle - suddenly the bottle points in a certain direction and it makes some kind of intuitive sense to me for the production.

G.L.: You've often worked with animals. Can you explain why?

M.C.: Because they can't lie. Every move is well motivated. The movement of crows or horses in a field, or a deer through the woods is brilliant in its perfection. They're not looking at themselves - they're unselfconscious.

G.L.: That's the quality you'd like your dancers and actors to achieve?

M.C.: Absolutely, as though they're living in the moment, totally spontaneous, the emotion grounded in their bodies. I don't like things to look studied. It's about being completely fresh.

Gideon Lester is the A.R.T.'s Associate Artistic Director.