

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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A biographical note of times long ago. Some events live on despite all efforts to expunge the memory.

Fair Titania

I was Head of the same school, a 13-18 years comprehensive school in the East Midlands, for 28 years – and one term. The extra term is important as, at the time of my retirement I was the longest serving secondary school headteacher in the country – or so The Times in its Times Educational Supplement (TES) announced. That is not the point of this Tale. I just felt like recording it – for historical reasons!

What I have been contemplating today is the reputation the school created and developed over twenty years from 1976 to 1998 for performing plays, musicals and operas alongside foreign schools. This led me to recall some of the comic moments of these ventures.

They all began with my accepting an invitation from our exchange school in Loudun, Western France to perform 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in the Loudun town theatre. We accepted, on condition that the Loudun lycee students would undertake to study the play, fill the stage with walk-on parts, and augment the small orchestra that played a significant role in our production. Their enthusiastic agreement led to our tradition of not performing 'to' our foreign hosts, but 'with' them. It lasted for the next twenty three years....biennial productions performed at home and away. We joined forces with schools in France, Germany, Finland, Ukraine and New York state in the USA....and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, if you count Scotland as 'foreign'!

In some of the links the foreign school was able to send a number of their young actors and singers and instrumentalists over to England to take part in the school's home performances before the tour. It worked particularly well when our annual production was a musical or opera since our partner school invariably relished joining in the singing and the orchestra.

As Head Teacher I naturally felt it incumbent on me to lead the party, an act of sacrifice in the eyes of a few discerning colleagues....a bit of a 'freebie' for the Head according to others. I am not in a position to judge – only to remark that all the tours were in the school holidays, and all required, therefore, considerable commitment from staff....and also from a group of parents who joined in the choruses and orchestras. Generations of students have cause to thank this small army of 'extras'.

In the very first year of the adventure, the year of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', we performed as requested in the town theatre. But while we were there we were invited to take the production to the cultural centre in the old 12th century Abbey of Fontevraud, not far from

Loudun, where the King of England, King Henry II, his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine and their son, King Richard The Lionheart are buried.....a reminder of the old 'close relationship', the entente cordiale between the two countries.

At the time of our visit Fontevraud abbey also housed an 'open prison'. During our daytime rehearsals the 60 strong cast was allowed to rove around the grounds where some of the prisoners had been detailed to sweep leaves off the paths. The sight of such a phalanx of gorgeous teenagers parading round the formal garden in flimsy Tudor dress, was too much for the prisoners.

The sweeping got slower and slower, the piles of leaves got smaller and smaller, the prisoners got closer and closer to the actors. But not only did the brushing get slower and sloppier, the prisoners were prolonging the work and therefore the time needed to complete the job and to remain in the vicinity of the actors, by vigorously shaking more leaves off the trees! Consequently the leaves remaining on the paths always outweighed the ones swept away!

Doing all their shenanigans out of sight of the warders was an example of high management skills by the prisoners....not surprising really, since most of the inmates were there because of crimes of fraud and extortion. Their enterprise only came to an end when spotted by an eagle-eyed Head Warder - a disappointing halt to what the gaolers considered unacceptable conduct.... but which the inmates considered highly professional activity!

During the performance that night disaster struck. The lad playing a hilarious Bottom had the misfortune, in his comic enthusiasm, to trip over backstage during the interval and suffer a mild concussion on the hard stone floor. He was packed off to medical care. But what to do now? There was a large audience of French academics, parents and students and we were only halfway through! There was still the bower scene with Bottom transmogrified into an ass, and about to be kissed by Titania.

My colleague and stage manager, Dave, was in no doubt what had to be done. He thrust the paper-mache asses head at me and said, in a voice that brooked no argument – *'YOU've got to do it!'*

'What! I can't do it!' I yelled, backing off.

'O yes you can. You are the only one who can do it! You are the producer.... And the show must go on! So, here's Bottom's head, and here's a copy of the script.'

He plonked a tatty copy of the Penguin edition into my hands. There was clearly no arguing. In any case Dave had disappeared to tell the audience, aided by our language teacher, what had happened and what they were now going to get – 'a well known actor' who has kindly stepped in.... and who will be playing the part aided by a copy of the script'. Well at least half of that was correct.

So, at the start of the second half the audience was going to be treated to a quite different ass embracing and cuddling Titania... while at the same time holding a copy of the script! I was comforted with the knowledge that at least the new Bottom's identity was shielded by the outsize paper head!

And that is what happened – but not without a last minute crisis! I crept onto the set and settled down in the bower, adjusting the asses head, and uttering a silent prayer.

All should have been well. But this was a school production! When Titania, a 16 year old Year 11 girl, was just about to go on stage she saw who was taking over, She let out an audible gasp and turned on Dave.

'I'm not kissing the Headmaster! I'm not going on! Definitely not!'

Another crisis. But Dave was not a man to mess with. 'O yes you are,' he hissed. 'THIS show goes on...and so do you!'

He then picked up the reluctant Titania and hurled her onto the stage just before the curtain went up.

Meanwhile I was lying in the bower idly wondering where Titania was and blissfully ignorant of the scuffle off-stage. The next thing I knew was a bundle of rags landing on top of me, and a startled Titania whispering... through gritted teeth. 'OK. Let's get on with it, sir.'

And so get on with it we did.

Of course, she carried on being brilliant. Rather too amorous at times, methought! She began to revel in her new-found role as mentor to the Head. She led me round the stage in moves that had never been rehearsed...or even contemplated....and at the apex of our love affair she whispered, 'O just get rid of that book and just snog, sir....make it up....you know it well enough.' She took charge, and, as I said, she was brilliant.

As for me, well let's say that I was right to forbid anyone taking photos! I mean..... one has a reputation to maintain!

Nonetheless, I believe some staff did snap as many photos as they could. I have never seen them...not even now when I am in my eighties! But I know they still exist!

There are some things in life, it appears, that remain desirable curiosities for all sorts of reasons.
