National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society	:	Banbury Cross Players
Production	:	Puck
Date	:	11th July 2025
Venue	:	The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District	:	London District 12

 Show Report

I am grateful to Justin Clinch for inviting me to report on Banbury Cross Players' production of Hannah O'Donnell's new play, "Puck". Liz Riley greeted me in the foyer, and provided me with a copy of the rather splendid souvenir programme, while Hannah herself was kind enough to find time for a chat during the interval.

Let's begin by handing out some plaudits. Hannah is a young local author who has written a play: a significant achievement, but a rather private one if that play remains as simply a script. So Hannah pitched her play to the Banbury Cross Players, collaborated with creatives and technicians, selected and worked with her cast, and directed her play in a professionally-run Arts Centre. That really is an immense achievement, as well as a brave thing to do as you are putting your work out there for the public to judge. The Banbury Cross Players also deserve recognition for having the courage to devote one of their three annual production slots to an original work and an inexperienced director, with all the attendant artistic and financial risks. But if every company simply stuck to the established repertory, the classics and the West End hits, how would new art ever be made? How could authors get their work seen or directors learn their craft? The future of the theatre depends on inexperienced authors, directors,

creatives, technicians and actors having opportunities to try new things, to experiment, even to make mistakes. Banbury Cross Players gave Hannah and her company that opportunity.

I always worry when authors direct their own work. Something that looks good on the page and works brilliantly in the author's mind doesn't always translate well to the stage, and that's when you need a director to make the necessary adjustments to realise the author's vision. But there was little evidence here that Hannah had pursued ideas that weren't working. It was clear from talking to Hannah that rehearsals had been very collaborative, and that the views and feelings of the cast had been taken into account. Indeed, some aspects of the play had been reworked to accommodate the casting, and Hannah clearly regarded the script as a work in progress.

"Puck" is a sequel to some of the events in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", and tells the story of King Oberon and Queen Titania's "changeling child". The fairies in the woods outside Athens are joined by a party of young Athenians seeking adventure, and they are not disappointed. While some familiarity with Shakespeare's play probably helps, if only to identify and contextualise the characters at the beginning, no prior knowledge is required. I'm no Shakespeare scholar, but Hannah would seem to have a keen ear for the metre of the Bard's poetry, and her writing echoes the rhythm and phrasing of his work, albeit in more accessible language. "Shall I compare thee to a moonlit night?" indeed! I liked the way in which the fairies spoke more formally, with greater emphasis on precision and rhyme, providing a contrast with the language of the Athenians which I might describe as mannered prose. All the words came across clearly thanks to the actors' careful diction, although some of the actors were more comfortable with the peculiar demands of the poetry than others – a

reflection, perhaps, of the wide range of experience within the company.

Hannah also used some dramatic techniques to differentiate between the fairies and the Athenians, with the fairies encouraged into light, ethereal movements. Unsurprisingly, these were executed rather better by the actors who had some dance experience, and particularly by those characters whose costumes comprised the sort of insubstantial material that floats and flows. Less graceful movements could be easily mistaken for over-acting. The fight scene towards the end of the play proved to be a challenge; realistic stage combat requires a lot of expertise and training, and the company might have enjoyed greater success with a more stylised approach, perhaps involving a rapid sequence of tableaux.

The titular character presides over the action. Zac Lacey-Rousou, playing Puck, proved to be an engaging narrator and energetic participant; his clear diction and feel for the rhythm and rhyme in the poetry underpinned the story-telling and ensured that the text was accessible to all. He wisely steered clear of the more extravagant arm-waving employed by some of the forest-dwelling fairies, opting instead for a mildly melodramatic bent-legged stance; differentiating between the Athenians and the fairies through stage movement was an excellent concept but difficult to realise in practice. Zac has excellent stage presence and was totally confident when addressing the audience directly; he had quite a lot of exposition to get through in the opening scene, but he had no trouble maintaining the audience's interest and engagement. I liked the symmetry afforded to the piece as a whole when Puck also tied up the loose ends in the closing scene.

Puck is assisted by fellow fairies Mustardseed and Peaseblossom, played by Emily Thorn and Kristen Rae, both

making their debuts for the Banbury Cross Players. Their poetic lines proved challenging at times; the metre was too closely adhered to so dialogue lost spontaneity and occasionally sounded like a recitation. But speaking Shakespearean dialogue well is a skill that can take many years to master, and even far more experienced actors can struggle with it. Jem Turner provided some guidance and leadership in the role of Hawthorne.

King Oberon was played with regal hauteur by Adrian McGlynn, thanks in part to the grandeur afforded to him by his rather splendid tunic and cape. The King's authority was primarily projected through his calm detachment; Adrian stood up straight, kept his arms still if not making a purposeful gesture, and focused on ensuring that his pronouncements carried weight. Fredrica Bowkett-Slater, playing Queen Titania, had the twin advantages of dance training, and gauze sleeves to her costume which accentuated her graceful arm movements. There was an ethereal femininity about her, but any suggestion that she was mere arm candy for the King was soon dispelled. She exerted her considerable stage presence to bring out Titania's decisiveness and bravery; when the natural order was under threat she vanquished the powers of evil with minimal fuss, threatening to send The Redcap King to a place so dark that even his own shadow would abandon him. Fredrica was able to deliver her lines with clarity and character, thanks to tonal and dynamic variation, although she was occasionally prone to over-gesture.

Prince Anatole, the "changeling child", was played by Skye McTitherrell. The part was written for a young man, so when a teenage girl was cast in the role Hannah was careful to adjust plot and dialogue to ensure Anatole's adventures in the forest did not acquire unfortunate undertones. There was perhaps a touch of the principal boy in Skye's characterisation, and she

didn't always find the rhythm in the poetry, but her bright, enthusiastic portrayal of the somewhat naive Prince was consistently energetic and engaging. Skye delivered her soliloquies with admirable confidence, and the dialogue between Anatole and Puck flowed well.

Nothing brings a community together like an external threat, and this was provided by Kate Groves as The Redcap King, a Machiavellian villain bent on vengeance for past wrongs. Kate apparently assists with theatrical make-up, and the uncompromising face paint and striking nails of The Redcap King gave her a head start in establishing character, just as her bloodstained costume spoke of her penchant for violence. The Redcap King's motivations aren't explored in detail so the character is perhaps a little one dimensional, but Kate's ability to project the King's single-minded determination to exact revenge for past indignities helped to energise the narrative, and she spoke the poetry well without employing too many gestures. The Redcap King is able to call on the services of two loyal but simple-minded supporters - henchfairies? - to effect his evil plans. Bruce Walton played the vindictive Porcini alongside Sian Gibson as the violent Girolle, and neither held back in their portrayals of these vicious creatures as they relished every bloodthirsty word and action. They were particularly well characterised when carrying off the unfortunate Daphne.

Bruce popped up again in the role of Bottom, providing a link between this play and "A Midsummer Night's Dream", as well as between the worlds of the fairies and the Athenians. Resplendent in Donkey pyjamas, Bottom is annoyed at being woken by Puck and reminded of events twenty years earlier which you suspect he would rather forget. Bruce brought out Bottom's humanity - his tetchiness at being woken, his imperfect recollections - to deliver a plausible portrayal of this

classic character, and he was very comfortable with the poetry.

The catalyst for the drama is the arrival in the enchanted forest of a party of Athenians, led by Hippolytus, the son of the rulers of Athens in the original play. Hippolytus was played by Rob Durnion, another actor making his debut with Banbury Cross Players, and he brought an appropriate aloofness to the role as he combined a desire to be accepted with an inevitable exceptionalism and a perceived need to prove himself. Rob made good use of his strong physical presence, and benefited from the modest trappings of power incorporated into his costume.

His friends skilfully treated Hippolytus as a mate without losing sight of his authority. Jonathan Muir, another Banbury Cross Players debutant, played Nico, whose grandstanding, attention-seeking antics conceal his affection for fellow-reveller Alister. Nick's personality is fuelled by wine, and Jonathan was able to pitch his performance between mildly intoxicated bravado and drunken melancholy. His nervous, clumsy attempts to express his love for Alister were handled sensitively. Alister himself was played by Martin Crook. A follower rather than a leader, Alister is essentially Nico's sidekick and spends much of the play in his shadow. However, Martin is far too experienced and engaging an actor not to allow Alister's personality to come through, and his thought processes from confused incomprehension to dawning realisation were beautifully portrayed.

If the relationship between Nico and Alister was a departure from Shakespearean themes, then the role of women was also given a much-needed upgrade. There are plenty of strong women in Shakespeare's plays, but for all their mischief-making and manipulation of men, they all too often end up

married off into presumed subservience. Not here they don't. Daphne, played by Immy Tredwell, is a spirited young woman who's not averse to finding a man but it's going to be on her own terms; she's self-confident and assertive enough even to stand up to Titania. Daphne is also quite quick-tempered which meant that Immy's portrayal sometimes felt a little one-paced, but she nevertheless ensured that her character remained engaging and plausible throughout. Lover, impressively portrayed by Lauren Davidson, is at the very heart of this new work. Named in homage to female characters relegated to love interest, Lover is no man's plaything and she sets out her arguments with clarity and reasonableness. Lauren is another actor making her debut with the Banbury Cross Players after a long break away from amateur theatre, but her poise, presence and persuasiveness belied this. She also delivered her lines with tremendous clarity and conviction, and I feel that her warm Scottish accent helped here. It felt as if Lover embodied the story that Hannah wanted to tell, and Lauren's performance in this critical role, including her ability to break through the fourth wall as and when necessary, was at the centre of most of the good things about this original production. Her discourse on the different forms of love, with its echoes of the seven ages of man, was particularly engaging.

The staging of the production was driven by the Theatre Green Book which encourages sustainable practice in the theatre, although I imagine that budget constraints played a part as well. The essentially black box set (by Nik Lester and Richard Ashby) appropriately meant that characterisation and story-telling were at the heart of the production, but the set did feature a grassy mound which flexibly allowed for seating, concealment and different levels as necessary. It helped that the action takes place entirely at night, and the passing of time was cleverly indicated by the projected moon crossing the

back of the stage. The two office chairs felt somewhat incongruous, but they were used imaginatively and are probably back under a desk somewhere by now. The costumes, supervised by Suzi Caisey, were drawn from a wide variety of sources and included an even broader range of eras and styles, but the vision was strong enough to enable the Shakespearean mischief-maker to share the stage with the nobleman from the court of Louis XIV and the contemporary young woman. The lighting and sound were of the quality you would expect from this company in this venue, with gobo effects to conjure up the forest, plenty of haze in the roof to add drama to the lighting design, and some suitably ethereal music integrated into the soundtrack.

This was a fascinating evening in the theatre - an original piece paying respectful homage to Shakespeare's work and the beauty of the language he employed, while continuing some of the storylines established in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and developing its themes in ways to make them more accessible, and perhaps more acceptable, to modern audiences. I have nothing but admiration for Hannah's determination, and I don't doubt tenacity, in writing a play and getting it on stage, and for Banbury Cross Players' courage in presenting new work to their audience despite the evident risks. The performing arts will atrophy without new authors and forward-looking production companies; congratulations to everyone involved with this project.

Andrew Walter
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12th July 2025