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The Maid's Metamorphosis, directed by Perry Mills for Edward's Boys, Théâtre Jean-Claude Carrière and Salle du prêt gratuit (École Nationale Supérieure d'Art Dramatique, ENSAD), Montpellier, 26 and 28 March 2024, various seatings.

Reviewed by: Alice Marion-Ferrand, Janice Valls-Russell and Jean Vivier, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 and Centre national de la recherche scientifique

'Stories within stories – a strange play', was Perry Mills' reaction on reading *The Maid's Metamorphosis* in the summer of 2023 – the production of which was suggested to him by Agnès Lafont and Lindsay Ann Reid, who are preparing an edition for Manchester University Press's Revels Series. This short play, which has been attributed to John Lyly yet was published anonymously in 1600 and performed, according to the title page, by the Children of Paul's, is strange in that it is unexpected yet simultaneously familiar: it is written in rhyming couplets, with numerous musical interludes, stages a limited number of characters whose paths intersect in a wood, and reads like a succession of tableaux which draw on the tropes and conventions of folklore, Ovidianism, Spenserianism and masques, with huntsmen and shepherds, a cruel duke, separated lovers, gods intervening in the fates of the humans, fairies and a seer living as a hermit. This sense of recognition, which brings to mind lines from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and moments in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, gives Mills' subtle staging of this mythological pastoral, which avoids probing the darker recesses of loss and disorientation, the delicate familiarity of elderflower fizz.

(Very) briefly: Eurymine, who loves Ascanio and is loved in return, is taken to the woods to be killed on the order of Ascanio's father the Duke. The servants take pity on her and leave her in the woods where a huntsman and a shepherd befriend her. Apollo tries to seduce her but she asks to be changed into a boy. He eventually changes her back into a girl when Ascanio finds her. She discovers that she is the daughter of a prince living as a hermit, Aramanthus. The Duke relents and accepts the marriage. Additional characters include Ascanio's servant Joculo, the goddesses Juno and Iris, the god Somnus, three Charites (or Graces) and fairies.

Ever-attentive to the text, Mills has woven the play's different moments into a visually coherent whole to offer what is possibly one of Edward's Boys' most poetic productions. It is rather as if, coming after Covid and the 2022 medley of medical scenes, *Trust Me I'm A Doctor!* (reviewed by Gaëlle Ginestet, *Cahiers Elisabéthains* 109, 2022), there were a need to reconnect with affect – even if that thread was never totally broken, since it runs through *Trust Me* with Nashe's beautifully sung and performed funeral litany to provide a link with Edward's Boys production of *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (2017).

Mills introduces fluidity in his production through setting, action and soundscape. The wood, as he writes in the programme, 'is a character in itself', which he includes in the *dramatis personae*: 'The Wood, etc.'. Embodied by members of the company, it shifts in mood and nature, from groups of individual trees, usually formed by three actors, to dense thickets, when the boys close in, through which Eurymine in her long, vaguely Elizabethan dress, progresses with difficulty, and Ascanio and Joculo later push their way, further led astray by the 'Echo-boy'. At other moments, the wood opens out, to allow Eurymine, now a boy in T-shirt and jogging trousers, to run more freely. As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the wood is the locus of transformation; the actors shift in and out of their different roles from being trees, rocks and shrubs into characters and back again. The lighting, mostly a

subtle wash in greens and blues (lighting and sound are by Eddie Mitchell), contributes to the metamorphic mood.

Mills' work on the punctuation of the text enables him to loosen up the rhyming couplets and facilitate understanding. A wide-ranging selection of songs and musical interludes combines older and newer themes, in the Elizabethan tradition, as Simon Smith reminds us in the programme. The repeated calling of Eurymine's name by the company ripples through the play, expanding the echo motif. All this helps to draw attention to the references to sounds, especially birdsong, in the text.

A strong sense of ensemble, which is a defining feature of the company, informs the overall design of the production (movement and choreography are by Struan Leslie). The company remain onstage throughout most of the production. Bunched tightly together, they form the cave from which Iris tries to rouse Somnus (Archie Mathers), joining in and amplifying his loud yawns, before he finally emerges and shows Ascanio (Thomas Griffin) a vision of his son Morpheus as Eurymine (Adriel Vipin), silhouetted in her dress behind a sheet. At other moments, they use long sticks to create the hut of Aramantus (Rufus Round), a doorway, and a celebratory arch through which Eurymine progresses.

There are no sets, and few props besides the sticks: this enables Edward's Boys to travel lightly and adapt to a variety of venues. The actors are dressed mostly in T-shirts and trousers in greens and browns, which serve equally to impersonate trees, shrubs and rocks, woodmen and shepherds. Leaves cling to their clothes and hair, their cheeks and forehead are striped with green and brown make-up. Green gardening gloves and coconut shells become puppets for the fairy scene, accompanied by luminous toadstools, creating the 'fairy circle' and transforming the company into teeming, albeit noisy, fireflies. The Duke's servants (Theo Richter and Charlie Hutton) wear Elizabethan-style costumes in the opening and closing scenes, Silvio the woodsman (Callum Maughan) sports an old tweed jacket and a cap, Ascanio is distinctive in a white shirt (and golden doublet in the final reunion and betrothal scene). In his gown, carrying a tall staff, the blind hermit wheezes and puffs through his long beard. As often, Mills plays on the age and size of the boys. Eurymine and Ascanio are played by two of the youngest members of the cast. The goddesses Juno (Tom Wood) and Iris (Charlie Harwood) are performed by older boys, as are the comic figures Silvio and Gemulo (Cameron Spruce).

Play on sex and gender is a recurring feature of productions by Edward's Boys and this one was no exception, albeit less flirtatiously than in, say, *The Woman in the Moon* (2018). The availability of sticks inevitably raises a competition between Silvio the woodsman and Gemulo the Shepherd (Cameron Spruce) as to whose is the longer, with a French quip introduced for the benefit of the Montpellier audiences ('C'est le mien!'), as they hold them raised from their crotch; at another moment, after a reference to Priapus, Silvio's servant boy notes that his master swears by 'Silv-anus'.

Clad in a shimmering blue gown and wearing a wig, Juno (Tom Wood) is tall and broad-shouldered, with a deep voice: initial laughter, however, quickly stops, as, holding his arms out, or simply standing still, he simultaneously conveys a regal sense of authority. Summoned by Juno, Iris (Charlie Harwood) cartwheels onto the stage, wearing pink dancer's shorts and a shimmering top with a deep V-neck. The cartwheel is suggestive of Iris' rainbow scarf. Iris' entrance, costume, energy and grace, combining the glitter of a drag-queen and physical prowess, produces a gasp of sheer surprise that swiftly segues into admiration and a form of fascination at the combination of grace and strength. Mills does not hesitate to draw on the various talents of the company's members, whether sports, music, song or dance –

Harwood, an international dancer, offers dance movements at other moments, before drawing attention away from himself by crouching down among the other boys to become a shrub, in the company's true sense of ensemble, while Juno turns into a tree.

Aramanthus is a former prince of Lesbos; Apollo recalls Jove's infatuation with Ganymede as he bemoans the death of Hyacinth, which is enacted in silent mime upstage. The production explores gender as a question of identity, to be played around with, appropriately enough in a comedy. Adriel Vipin endearingly switches in and out of his female and male personae. A staid 'girl' in his Elizabethan gown, with his trainers peeping below the hem to recall his boyishness, he becomes a mischievous lad in T-shirt and jogging trousers, running between the trees, swaggering slightly in the presence of the older men (Silvio and Gemulo), yet touchingly awkward in the presence of Ascanio. The scene between Eurymine-as-a-boy and Ascanio, as they try to fathom out what has happened and how on to move on from there, is both lovely and moving.

Once again (as in 2016, 2018 and 2022), the magic of Edward's Boys crossed the Channel to entrance mixed audiences of non-Anglophone and Anglophone spectators, both young and adult. They performed before a record audience of nearly 500 spectators (two-thirds of them aged 13–21) in one of Montpellier's – and France's – finest, state-of-the-art, eco-friendly theatres, built almost entirely in wood, where the fantastic acoustics welcomed and embraced the players' voices as they performed on a much larger stage than usual. Two days later, they played in an intimate studio theatre space, the *Salle du prêt gratuit* of Montpellier's National Higher School of Drama (ENSAD), which is located in the historic building of a philanthropic institution founded in the seventeenth century to provide financial and other forms of aid for people in need. The audience included drama school students and Robert Cantarella, one of France's leading directors. In a conversation after the production, Cantarella praised Mills' choice of spare design and attention to both the text and the acting, which he likened to Peter Brook's approach; he was impressed by the company's combination of a relaxed attitude and acute knowledge of text, sense of detail and timing, as well as their acting technique which, he said, he would be discussing in a workshop with the drama-school students. The experience was, indeed, all about performance, and transformative for all.

Note: On Edward's Boys, see <https://edwardsboys.org.uk>, which offers access to past productions. The company's tour to Montpellier was funded by their families and the 'Artist residency in a research centre' programme created in 2023 by Florence March, director of the Institut de recherche sur la Renaissance, l'âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL), a joint research unit of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 and the French Ministry of Culture (ircl.cnrs.fr). The cello used during the performances was kindly loaned by the luthier Olivier Calmeille (<https://scordatura.fr>).

Author biographies

Alice Marion-Ferrand is a PhD student at University Paul Valéry, Montpellier, France. She works under the supervision of Professor Florence March at the Institute for Research on the Renaissance, the Neo-Classical Age and the Enlightenment (IRCL), a joint research unit of CNRS, University Paul Valéry, Montpellier, and the French Ministry of Culture. Her research project is entitled 'Religion on the English Comical Stage from the Restoration to the Glorious Revolution (1660-1689): European Sources and Appropriations'.

Janice Valls-Russell is a retired Principal Research Associate of France's National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and a member of the Institute for Research on the Renaissance, the Neo-Classical Age and the Enlightenment (IRCL). As reflected in reviews, articles and co-edited volumes, her research interests lie in the early modern reception of the classics and 20th- and 21st-century adaptations of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. She has co-edited (with Katherine Heavey) *Shakespeare's Classical Mythology: A Dictionary*, for which she authored approximately half of the 200 entries (Bloomsbury, forthcoming November 2024).

Jean Vivier is a Research Associate of France's National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) at the Institute for Research on the Renaissance, the Neo-Classical Age and the Enlightenment (IRCL). His research focuses on adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in 20th- and 21st-centuries productions, with a focus on theatre festivals in southern France. Jean Vivier recently co-authored (with Florence March) a chapter on Shakespeare and tourism in French theatre festivals, published in *Shakespeare and Tourism*, edited by Robert Ormsby and Valerie Clayman Pye (Routledge, 2022).