

Ballet: A Midsummer Night's Dream

Choreography: George Balanchine

Composer: Felix Mendelssohn

The Story

Our story begins on a moonlit night, in the forest near the Duke of Athens' palace. There, where wild thyme, oxlips, and violets grow, the court of the fairies frolic and play! But on this night, Titania, the Queen of the fairies, is quarreling with Oberon, the King. After arguing, Titania goes her way with her fairy attendants in tow, while Oberon orders his most mischievous knave, Puck, to bring him the flower pierced by Cupid's bow. This flower causes anyone under its influence to fall in love with the first person they see! Puck brings him the flower, and Oberon casts its spell on Queen Titania while she sleeps.

Meanwhile, a young maiden named Helena is wandering the forest in pursuit of her love Demetrius. But Demetrius does not love her back and rejects her, leaving her alone in the woods. Oberon sees this and, feeling pity for Helena, orders Puck to use the flower's magic on Demetrius too.

But there is another couple wandering the forest tonight. Lysander and Hermia are very much in love. They are traveling through the woods to elope when they become separated. Puck, eager to carry out Oberon's request, sees Lysander first and casts the flower's spell on *him*, not Demetrius. This would not have mattered if Lysander hadn't become separated from his true love Hermia, but as it happened, Helena stumbled across Lysander first, and as soon as he laid his eyes on her he fell falsely in love! As he begins expressing his affection to a heartbroken and now confused Helena, suddenly Hermia stumbles into the clearing too.

Helena and Hermia were good friends, but now Hermia, shocked and angry at the sudden change in Lysander's affections, begins to quarrel with Helena. Helena thinks Hermia and Lysander are teasing her because Demetrius doesn't love her back, while Hermia thinks Helena has stolen Lysander's love from her!

The fairy knave Puck, watching, realizes his mistake. He finds Demetrius and casts the flower's magic on him now. Demetrius then wanders to where the three lovers are fighting and sees Helena. Much to her delight, he begins showering her with attention and affection. Now both Demetrius *and* Lysander are paying attention to Helena, and poor Hermia is ignored! Lysander and Demetrius, now at odds, start to quarrel over Helena.

Meanwhile, back at the fairy King and Queen's court, Oberon has taken Bottom- a humble fairy weaver- and given him the silly head of a donkey! He leads Bottom to where Titania is sleeping. Upon waking, she sees Bottom and is tricked into loving him, paying him special attention, much to the amusement of the fairy court!! Oberon, his anger subsided, sends Bottom away and releases

Titania from the flower's spell. Puck returns and tells him about the quarreling of the four lovers, and Oberon commands him to release Lysander from the spell and put the lovers at ease once and for all. Puck hurries back to where Lysander and Demetrius are about to fight and casts a thick fog over the forest. Lysander and Demetrius exhaust themselves trying to find each other in the fog, and at last lie down to sleep. Puck uses cunning to guide the four lost lovers together- Lysander beside Hermia, and Helena beside Demetrius, then releases Lysander from the flower's love spell.

When they wake, Lysander sees Hermia whom he truly loves, and all is well between them again. When Demetrius wakes and sees Helena, he is still in love with her and she is overjoyed! The four friends now wonder if the night's events were real, or perhaps just a midsummer night's dream. The Duke of Athens, on riding through the forest, comes across the four reunited lovers and shares in their happiness, hosting a grand triple wedding at the palace for them all!

Oberon and Titania are now united and at peace, and the whole court of fairies celebrate the happy ending of all the lovers' struggles.

The History

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" was Balanchine's first completely original full-length ballet. It premiered on January 17, 1962, at New York City Ballet, with Edward Vilella in the role of Oberon, Melissa Hayden as Titania, and Arthur Mitchell as Puck. Originally a play by Shakespeare, Balanchine not only had a keen interest in Shakespeare's work but was strongly interested in the music Felix Mendelssohn had composed for the play nearly 100 years ago. It was Mendelssohn's score that inspired Balanchine's ballet. Mendelssohn had not written music for the whole play, however, so to fill in the gaps Balanchine selected other's scores of Mendelssohn's that neatly fit into the pattern of the ballet. Act I of the ballet tells the story of the lovers and fairies, while Act II presents the wedding celebrations with strictly classical dance.

Balanchine later filmed the ballet as a movie, this time starring Suzanne Farrell, Allegra Kent, Patricia McBride, Mimi Paul, Jacques d'Amboise, Arthur Mitchell, and Edward Vilella. The movie premiered at the New York State Theater on April 17, 1967. A lighthearted ballet of love and comedy, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" continues to be performed today, transporting audiences to the world of fairies with 'dreamy' forest sets, ballerina fairies bedecked in flowers, and the delicate yet regal Titania herself gracing the stage!