

Before You Read

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Have you ever seen a live performance that was so badly presented it was entertaining?

Two-way Traffic

A live theatrical performance is a two-way relationship between the performers and the audience. Make a list of ways in which the performers affect the audience. Then, next to that list, jot down typical audience reactions to the performance.

Setting a Purpose

Pay attention to how Theseus, Hippolyta, and the other members of the audience react to the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

For wealthy Elizabethans, entertainment was something quite different from today's CD/video/television center. Elizabethans, poor and rich, watched live entertainment. Nobles and members of the royalty could afford to have performers come to their homes. Sometimes they watched knights jousting in courtyards or tennis players competing in special indoor rooms. Often they watched theater. Every year, one of England's great theater companies would be chosen to appear at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. The Queen's Master of the Revels (like Theseus's Master of the Revels, Philostrate) would watch a number of performances and pick the best. Then no expense was spared for the final production. Workers painted elaborate sets and made costumes out of silk and velvet.

Shakespeare's Relevance

Shakespeare writes about kings and queens, fairies, magic spells, and ancient Athens. Yet he is such a keen observer of human psychology that his characters and themes still speak to today's audiences. For example, in the characters of the star-crossed lovers, Shakespeare skillfully illustrates the feelings and actions experienced by two people who are infatuated with each other. At the same time, he shows how silly and ridiculous those actions may seem to someone who does not share these feelings. He sums up the attitude of the outside observer in the often-quoted words of Puck, "what fools these mortals be!" (act 3, scene 2, line 115). These are all feelings that we can relate to today.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

amends [ə mends'] *n.* something done to make up for a fault or mistake

audacious [ô dâ' shəs] *adj.* bold

gait [gāt] *n.* manner of walking

premeditated [prē med' i tāt əd] *adj.* planned

reprehend [rep' ri hend'] *v.* to find fault with

satire [sat' īr] *n.* literary work exposing human vices and shortcomings to ridicule and scorn

transfigure [trans fig' yər] *v.* to change

Active Reading

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Shakespeare uses a number of different techniques to create humor in the play-within-a-play. Use the graphic organizer below to indicate examples of some of his comic devices.

ridiculous metaphor	lily lips (line 347)
excessive alliteration	
breaking the play's illusion of reality	
using the wrong word or name	
repeating a word excessively	

Responding

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Personal Response

Did the play-within-a-play make you laugh? Look back at your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 28 to help you explain your answer. Make a list of some of the more humorous lines in the play performed by Bottom and his actors.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does Theseus think of the lovers' adventure? Is this a reaction you would expect from Theseus?

2. Why does Hippolyta initially seem hesitant to watch the play?

3. Why does Snug, who plays the Lion, make a fuss about proclaiming his true identity?

Responding

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Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In reading the play-within-a-play, we become the audience for the drama played out by Theseus, Hippolyta, and the others. These performers, in turn, form the audience for the reenactment of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. How does observing another audience help you understand the relationship between audience and performers?

5. Modern television shows often create comic effects by having a silly, innocent, or "clueless" character and a sarcastic, knowing, clever character play off of each other. What examples can you think of?

Literature and Writing

Hippolyta's Response

Hippolyta is rather embarrassed at times by how the audience makes fun of the players. At other times she joins in the fun. Imagine yourself as Hippolyta. Write a brief explanation of why the show was so ridiculous and why you eventually came to enjoy yourself.