

How to Make a Film: an Idiot's Guide

Making the film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream in Lockdown* was a risk, a pleasure, and a venture into the unknown. Asked to write comparing producing and directing a live stage version with a film, I've used quotations from the play to help me explain:

A play there is my Lord, some ten words long

The Wivenhoe Open Air Shakespeare scripts are always somewhat abridged versions, and my 2020 version was trimmed ready for action when lockdown forced cancellation. Some actors had learnt their lines a year in advance! For the 2021 pared-back film, I took a machete to the already-shortened script (Sorry WS). I rehearsed it from a computer printout, rather than constantly see all the crossings-out in my book.

Previous outdoor performances have involved huge casts, live music and massive backstage, lighting and front-of-house volunteer help. Covid meant serious restrictions on numbers. It was heartbreaking to turn away so many helpful and talented people (please come back next year). Characters were merged or removed. Groups were restricted to five actors (and one director). Scenes were sliced, rearranged, and if numbers required, we used voiceover.

Performances usually end in a grand finale, with dancing. Covid rules forbade the entire cast from even being together in one place, and singing was strictly frowned upon. We worked in four main groups using a complex schedule. Fortunately, this play lent itself to that arrangement.

Masters, here are your parts... con them by tomorrow night

Our play was rehearsed and ready in 8 weeks. (Previous productions were still achieved in intensive rehearsal sessions of 3 months or so.) Line learning was rapid (thank you, marvellous cast) and Zoom proved a useful medium. Rehearsals were focused and intense - and we made huge progress in each one. Apparently professional actors learn their lines before rehearsals start - so we were in good company!

Safety concerns limited moving around 'onstage' and filming meant we dispensed with many entrances and exits. As with everything, there are pros and cons to this - but cast safety always had to come first.

Relaxation of lockdown rules towards the end of May enabled a 'dress rehearsal' where we watched each other, even though some scenes were already filmed. There was a fiesta atmosphere that memorable (and damp) Sunday afternoon, and it was a delight watching the cast watching the performance...

Hot ice and wondrous strange snow

We normally rehearse indoors until close to performance date. All our rehearsals this time were outdoors. Despite imagining floating round the garden in sunshine, I got my money's worth from thermal underwear. We endured the coldest April and the wettest May known for years. It snowed. It rained. It was windy. That is, apart from the mini-heatwave the weekend we did most filming, when we were all overdressed.

The timetabling of evening rehearsals depended on sunset times, for obvious reasons.

Masters, spread yourselves

Live performances demand spacing between the actors to fill our large stage area. Distancing was a must this time, too. However, once filming started, we realised the benefits of close-ups. (In a responsible socially-distanced manner, of course.) Close-up shots also enabled much greater voice modulation. The sound on our film is excellent - and accurate (with the usual outdoor distractions going on around us!).

Whilst Titania and Bottom managed to make some 'ear-fondling' look closer than it really was (watch the film!) our four lovers faced huge restrictions. Achieving the lengthy and complicated Act 3, scene 2, in such a humorous manner is a testament to the actors' hard work and adaptability.

I am invisible

Five characters 'sleep' onstage at one time in this play - a logistical nightmare, unless you're a professional theatre with complex technical ability. Easy on film. Magical characters vanished at will!

What beard were I best to play it in?

Costumes were the cast's own, apart from a few brilliant set pieces provided by our otherwise redundant costume team. Cast arrived at and left rehearsals in costume (you may have spotted the odd ivy headdress in the Co-op, or tailed person walking up the High

Street, but this is Wivenhoe) And then there was the need for continuity when a scene had been part-filmed earlier on, meaning some cast members delayed having post-lock-down haircuts!

Give me your hands, if we be friends...

None of this would have been possible without the trust and enthusiasm of the talented and cheerful cast, the whole-hearted support of Clare, my Assistant Director, and the skills of Sameera who filmed and edited the whole enterprise for us. It was such an exciting and happy experience for those of us lucky enough to be involved, during an uncertain and anxiety-filled time. Huge thanks to Sheila and WOAS for encouraging us to try this experiment with no guarantees of a successful outcome!

To watch the free film (donations to The Intensive Care Society if liked), read blogs written by cast members and find out more about the whole process, visit our website:

www.wivenhoeshakespeare.org