

A Midsummer Night's Director



Christopher Gillett prepares for his first session in the director's chair

With a career in the opera house stretching back 35 years, tenor Christopher Gillett is used to singing on stage – especially when it comes to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he has literally written the book on. But this winter he faces his first stint in the director's chair, as he takes on a production of Britten's opera for Illinois's Lyric Theatre. His first directorial innovation? Actually telling the singers what to expect...



Early this year, I got a surprising email: I had inherited a vast sum of money from an unknown relative in Nigeria.

Actually, it was from the baritone Nathan Gunn, head of the University of Illinois' Lyric Theatre – but it was still surprising because he was asking me to direct Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this coming winter. Apart from something when I was at school, I've never directed before. But the *Dream* is an opera I've performed many, many times – more than any other. I've even written a book about singing it, which Nathan had read, called [*Who's My Bottom?*](#) ([/uk/store/products/1447674936](http://uk/store/products/1447674936)) I'm guessing that's why he thought I'd be a suitable choice.

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I hesitated before I said yes, but once I'd figured out what my general concept would be, and when and where I would set it, I agreed. I'm not going to spill the beans here about the concept except to say that no, I'm not setting it in Greece, and absolutely no-one is wearing a toga. There are no inflatable sex dolls, nor Nazi uniforms, so on the Crazy-o-Meter it will be uncontroversial. However, while it would be considered fairly tame in Europe, it may raise a few eyebrows in the American Midwest. So that's good. I've already had to explain to the faculty why I'm 'not setting it in the period in which it is written'.

As it turns out, I'm discovering that having the concept in your head is the easiest part of the process. In my head, I can see the set, the costumes, the lighting. The hard part is getting everyone else to see what you're seeing. And the Fairies – ah, the Fairies. They give me sleepless night because they are A CHORUS and dealing with a chorus seems to be the most terrifying aspect of a director's work. My solution is to get a choreographer (tick) and she can choreograph the living daylights out of them. They say a good director knows how to delegate.

As the Lyric Theatre is part of the university, I have been assigned graduate students as my design team, and very good they are too. My first task has been to get them to realise what I'm after without me grabbing a sketchpad and saying: 'THIS is what I want!' I have had to allow them the opportunity to come up with their own ideas. For a control freak, this is tough.

All I need now are riding boots, a crop, and a big silk scarf

The very next thing I did after saying yes was to run out and buy notebooks. Directors always have notebooks. So far, they've been useful for those 'Aha!' moments when you're in the shower and you think of something clever to do with, say, the Fairies. And no, I don't take the notebooks into the shower. My daughter, meanwhile, bought me for my birthday Frank Hauser's *Notes on Directing: 130 Lessons in Leadership from the Director's Chair*. So all I need now are riding boots, a crop, and a big silk scarf.

Rehearsals kick off in seven weeks. So far I've had loads of Skype meetings and two days at the university, finalising designs and budgets. Singers never have meetings (except with their agents) and it turns out they're rather fun. If that's work, I'll have a bit more of that in my life, thank you.

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Long before rehearsals begin, I plan to do something unconventional: I'm going to let the cast know what the concept will be. You would think this is the norm, but far from it. As a singer-actor, I've never understood why we are always the very last people to hear the context in which we'll be working. It's always sprung on us at the first morning of rehearsals. 'Hello everybody, we're doing *The Marriage of Figaro* as a play-within-a-play in a Victorian lunatic asylum; let's start the first scene.'

If the show is a revival (like the forthcoming Calixto Bieito *Turandot* in Belfast, [in which I shall appear in my underwear \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/regietheater-director-theatre-is-it-pretentious-or-artistic-august-2015\)](#)), a quick Google search can give you an idea of what you'll be in for. If the show is to be directed by, say, [one of the Alden twins \(http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/classical/article3987541.ece\)](#), you can make an educated guess that you won't be seeing the inside of a powdered wig or hose. But otherwise, we are usually clueless. So, as I think the singers will be a lot more comfortable having some idea of what to expect when they hit the rehearsal studio, I think it's a good idea to tell them.

But the first day is weeks off yet. In the meantime, I'm going to go back to sleepless nights thinking up new gags for the Rustics, especially as I don't think I'll be allowed to use any of the rude ones I already have in mind. That's the Midwest for you.

I'll let you know how I get on.

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