

Citation metadata

Author: Emma Cox
Date: Autumn 2004
From: *Southerly* (Vol. 64, Issue 3)
Publisher: English Association
Document Type: Critical essay
Length: 4,664 words

Main content

Article Preview :

NOEL TOVEY'S 1997 Sydney Theatre Company production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was Australia's first all-Aboriginal performance of a Shakespearean play. Performed at Sydney's Wharf Theatre as part of the Festival of the Dreaming, a landmark event that showcased the work of indigenous artists, particularly from Australia, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* juxtaposed an Elizabethan-style Athenian court with a Dreamtime forest world, thereby creating a dialogue between the play's original performative context and a more recent Aboriginal interpretive framework.

I will analyse the various reviews and critical commentary that surrounded *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These "heard" (and thus culturally influential) responses provide us with an imperfect but fairly indicative picture of the ways in which the production was circulated and read within the broader Australian performing arts culture. Thus, they help to elucidate its cultural meaning and significance as an expression of Aboriginality that took place within a particular socio-historical moment. This receptive meaning was often at odds with Tovey's stated creative and cultural intentions. Such lines of discontinuity will not be read as ways in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was "misunderstood," but rather, will be seen to reveal that its meaning was a contested zone. In this understanding, reception is not an addendum that either comprehends or misconstrues the meaning of an already complete artistic product, but is a key player in the making of meaning. My critical approach not only acknowledges the fact that the relationship between intention and reception is often conflicting, but also recognises the degree to which the consumers of a performative work "own" it, determining what it says, and how it functions.

The cultural narratives--the stream of expectations, preconceptions, and ideologies--that were employed to understand and evaluate *A Midsummer Night's Dream* manifested themselves with particular assertiveness, converging upon questions of agency, racial politics, authenticity, relevance and stereotype. The reasons for this are various. Aboriginal expression is frequently subjected to a noticeably categorising kind of scrutiny within dominant Euro-Australian discourses, whose relegation of Aboriginality to the position of cultural "other" has created an ideal space for concepts such as Aboriginal "authenticity" and "inauthenticity" to gain currency. Critical appraisal from indigenous perspectives rarely receives a public forum; however, the few instances where it did in relation to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* revealed a rigorous concern with the work's socio-cultural implications. The fact that the production represented an unusual context for Aboriginal expression compounded the political intensity of scrutiny from indigenous and non-indigenous quarters. Simply by converging Shakespeare and Aboriginality (two spheres that some would deem ideologically incompatible due to the widely acknowledged connection between Shakespeare and Euro-imperialist authority), (1) *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a cultural anomaly. Thus, it entered into politicised receptive territory. Its Festival of the Dreaming context, which provided clear and explicit ideological and cultural imperatives, further politicised its reception. As well as identifying and examining these receptive narratives, I will reflect upon their cultural power to prescribe particular frameworks for "valuable" or "effective" Aboriginal expression.

Firstly however, it is necessary to...

[Access from your library](#)

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.

Source Citation

Source Citation

Cox, Emma. "Negotiating cultural narratives: all-aboriginal Shakespearean dreaming." *Southerly*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2004, p. 15+. Accessed 7 Nov. 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A134534735

Explore

[Access from your library](#)

Footer

- [About](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

Comment. If you have experience negotiating across cultures, then you know that misunderstandings and even conflict based on cultural differences come up from time to time. By better understanding cultural differences, you can promote smoother, less contentious negotiations, write researchers Soroush Aslani, Jimena Ramirez-Marin, Zhaleh Semnani-Azad, Jeanne M. Brett, and Catherine Tinsley in the Handbook of Research on Negotiation. Specifically, theory and research that categorizes the world's cultures into three prototypes—"dignity," "face," and "honor" cultures—can help us address cultural b 'Negotiating Cultural Narratives: All Aboriginal Shakespearean Dreaming', Australasian Drama Studies Association Annual Conference, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 30 June-3 July 2004. Save to Library. by Emma Cox. • 'Shakespeare, Aboriginality, and Representational Control', Postcolonial Australia Masterclass, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 3-5 September 2004. Save to Library. by Emma Cox. • 'Asylum in Australia: The Border Space and the Nation-State', UnAustralia, Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference, University of Canberra, 6-8 December 2006. Sa In Australian Aboriginal mythology, The Dreaming or Altjeringa (also called the Dreamtime) is a sacred 'once upon a time' time out of time in which ancestral Totemic Spirit Beings formed The Creation. The Dreamtime contains many parts: It is the story of things that have happened, how the universe came to be, how human beings were created and how the Creator intended for humans to function within the cosmos. The expression 'Dreamtime' is most often used to refer to the 'time before time', or 'the time of the creation of all things', while 'Dreaming&