

# “Give me your hands”

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY

“Give me your hands, if we be friends . . .”<sup>1</sup>

“**D**OYOYOYOYING!” There are two players in this game, facing each other at the center of a circle, one with thumbs and forefingers making an O-shape, miming eyeballs, the kind that in classic-era cartoons leap out on stalks on the cue of love at first sight. One plays Titania, the other Bottom, and the exchange distills the first encounter between the weaver and the fairy queen in three lines (“Doyoyoyoying! / I love thee”; “Nay!”) and matching gestures; Bottom’s task is to prowl the circle, evading Titania’s hungry gaze, hers is to catch his eye. At this instant, Titania is played by an actor, Bottom by a young male teenager, an audience member turned active participant in Flute Theatre’s version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a show devised, as the company publicity states, specifically for autistic young people and their families, as part of the broader mission of creating Shakespeare for inclusive audiences. They play through the sequence three or four times, then swap roles, and they are joined in the circle by more of the ensemble’s six actors, and by more of the dozen or so audience participants. The game lasts for some six or seven minutes, until a gentle ping of a hand-held cymbal, performed by the show’s director, Kelly Hunter, signals that it is time to move on to the next episode, and the next game: “I’ll give thee fairies to attend on thee . . .” (3.1.292).

I shall return to this moment below; first, some context. Flute’s *Dream*, directed by Hunter, designed by Daisy Blower with music composed by Tom Chapman, premiered at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, in October 2017, and has subsequently been performed at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival in Kansas City (January 2018), at the Bridge Theatre, London (February 2018), again at the Orange Tree (October 2018), at the Chichester Festival Theatre

(March 2019) and, in a Catalan version with Spanish actors, at the Teatre Lliure, Barcelona (March 2018).<sup>2</sup> It is the second of the company's full-scale autism-centered Shakespeare productions; the first was *The Tempest*, which was the product of a three-year collaborative partnership between Hunter and the Ohio State University, and which was staged at the RSC's The Other Place in 2014.<sup>3</sup> This in turn grew out of Hunter's workshop practice, developed with autistic young people from the early 1990s onwards; which stemmed, firstly, from what the American late-modernist poet Louis Zukofsky identified as an interwoven thematic preoccupation in Shakespeare's work with love and reason, the eyes and the mind, and, secondly, from what she terms "Shakespeare's heartbeat," the steady (and steadying) pulse of iambic pentameter.<sup>4</sup> Arriving, via Zukofsky, at "Shakespeare's definitions of seeing, thinking and loving," Hunter "stumbled upon the processes that those on the [autism] spectrum find so difficult to achieve," and the mechanism of the heartbeat offered a means of anchoring these sensations within the individual and collective bodies of performers and participants, thereby addressing the "dissociation of body and mind" that is endemic to autism.<sup>5</sup> To briefly summarize: a condition affecting around one per cent of the population in the United Kingdom (two per cent in the United States), autism is a spectrum of abilities, behaviors, and challenges that range from the highest functioning to the lowest; and that are characterized, to varying degrees, by difficulties with (in the terms of the classic "triad of impairments" model) communication, imagination, and social interaction. Its manifestations are as various and diverse as the individuals who inhabit it, and may include, on the one hand, stereotypical, repetitive and socially inappropriate behaviors, limited verbal expression, obsessive special interests, restlessness and physical impulsiveness, and the apparent inability to read the emotions and intentions of others; and, on the other, an extraordinary aptitude for detailed intellectual work, memorization, and creative and artistic (especially musical) expression. Such labels only get us so far; the "dissociation" that Hunter identifies is perhaps better articulated from within the experience of autism itself, as in this account by the (at the time of writing) thirteen-year-old autistic writer Naoki Higashida:

Now your mind is a room where twenty radios, all tuned to different stations, are blaring out voices and music. The radios have no off-

switches or volume controls, the room you’re in has no door or window, and relief will come only when you’re too exhausted to stay awake. To make matters worse, another hitherto unrecognized editor has just quit without notice—your editor of the senses. Suddenly sensory input from your environment is flooding in too, unfiltered in quality and overwhelming in quantity. Colors and patterns swim and clamour for your attention. The fabric conditioner in your sweater smells as strong as air-freshener fired up your nostrils. Your comfy jeans are now as scratchy as steel wool. Your vestibular and proprioceptive senses are also out of kilter, so the floor keeps tilting like a ferry in heavy seas, and you’re no longer sure where your hands and feet are in relation to the rest of you. You can feel the plates of your skull, plus your facial muscles and your jaw: your head feels trapped inside a motorcycle helmet three sizes too small which may or may not explain why the air-conditioner is as deafening as an electric drill, but your father—who’s right here in front of you—sounds as if he’s speaking to you from a cell phone, on a train going through lots of short tunnels, in fluent Cantonese.<sup>6</sup>

Higashida’s evocation of the cacophonous sensorium of autism, a world of stimuli that can be neither filtered nor disentangled, and of rhythms that are fractured and dyssynchronous, offers a clue to the appeal of the steady, grounded pulse of the iambic heartbeat.

Whether in workshop or performance, this beat is both start and endpoint of action, as well as its latent, implicit pulse throughout. The *Dream* begins with performers and children forming a circle on the edges of a large cloth, daubed with swirls of various shades of forest green flecked with russet brown; they may take time to settle (and some prefer to hover beyond the circle, engaged or disengaged after their own fashion). They are watched by a further outer circle of parents, carers, and friends. Hunter initiates the “Heart-beat Hello”: right hand, palm flat, beats softly against chest, a percussive accompaniment to the half-said, half-sung “Hel-lo . . . Hel-lo . . .” that spreads and swells around the inner, then outer, circles, and that is sustained, sometimes, for many minutes, “to give space and time,” as Hunter puts it, “for ‘internal panics’ to soothe.”<sup>7</sup> The sequence is mirrored at the close of the play, which ends with Puck joining hands first with Titania (“take hands with me”), and then with each child in the circle, and spinning; the resettling that follows is a leave taking “Good-bye . . . Good-bye,” again semi-sung, with a descending cadence. Following the “Heart-beat Hello,” the game shifts to “Throwing the Face,” wherein the play’s dramatic personae (the lovers, Titania, Puck, and Bottom), as

well as its emotional palate, are introduced by Hunter and the actors as a series of set facial expressions, caricature masks (Happy, Angry, Sad, Fearful, Disgusted, Surprised), collectively mimicked and “thrown” with a flick of the head from one player to the next. Finlay Cormack, as Puck, leaps into the center:

I'll follow you, I'll lead you a round,  
Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound,  
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a storm;  
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and stir,  
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, storm at every turn.<sup>8</sup>

Turning on a dime multiple times in every line, Puck models each of his transformations in extravagant gesture and sound: a snout fashioned from twisting fists, accompanied by snorting; barks and yelps; the roar of a headless (and so, surely, mouthless?) bear; jazz-hands flashes of lightning; the children play along after their own fashion and with varying levels of engagement and skill. There are three rounds of this, then the performance moves into the first of the adaptation's two worlds, Fairyland (The Lovers follow; of the Mechanicals' plot, Bottom's adventure in Fairyland alone remains). Loosely preserving the outlines of two of Shakespeare's three narrative strands, Flute's *Dream* stages a series of episodes, with each redacted scene first demonstrated by the actors, and then replayed, in the abbreviated form of a game, with the participants. The Fairyland section thus begins with Bottom's metamorphosis, rendered in the terms of the Shadow Game. Two lines set the scene: Oberon's “I am invisible” (2.1.186, here assigned to Puck), and Bottom's defiant declaration that he will “walk up and down” (3.1.261–62). Mimicking and exaggerating his movements, Puck shadows Bottom as he paces the circle, all the while singing a jaunty little air (“Sneaky Pete”):

At intervals, Bottom stops, as if sensing the presence of his stage-invisible stalker, and swivels on his axis while Puck (to the accompaniment of a comedy slide whistle) ducks to his knees; slightly baffled, Bottom resumes the pacing. Once the pattern of pace-turn-duck-pace is established, the player-participants are encouraged into the space to form a ragged crocodile of Pucks and Bottoms, all singing, bobbing, ducking; and then Puck engineers Bottom's asst-transformation by “throwing” the donkey face (a pair of pointing-finger ears) first to the whole group, and then to the Bottom actor: “Eeh Aw!”



Fig. 1. “Sneaky Pete”

As the action unfolds, the sequencing of games at once sustains a sense of narrative momentum, reiterates the thematic coherence of the love-reason-eyes-mind framework, and ensures an incremental and accumulative approach to addressing the challenges of the autistic condition, which can be charted in terms of a movement from low- to (relatively) higher-risk, higher-stakes activities. A key component of the Shadow Game, Hunter stresses, is not just that it allows autistic participants to explore the often hard-to-handle sensation of experiencing someone behind and out of sight, but also the space it affords to play with the classically difficult matter of eye contact (“What we’re actually looking at,” writes Higashida in a formulation uncannily reminiscent of Bottom’s dream, “is the other person’s voice . . . we’re trying to listen to the other person with all of our sense organs”).<sup>9</sup> “With some of these children,” Hunter observes, “the fact that Puck is invisible seems to eliminate their fear of eye contact, as if being unseen renders the eyes unseeing, allowing the child to explore looking into another’s eyes and to experience being looked at without fear.”<sup>10</sup> In the Shadow Game, the impetus is with the feet; in the scene that follows (“Puck’s Petals”), Puck’s enchantment of the kneeling Titania (a tinkle of finger-cymbals as he mime-sprinkles into her sleeping eyes) is conducted *en pointe*. For the actors, such footwork is a way of entering the imaginative and sensorial world of autism; the tendency of autists to tip-toe, and to jump, is well-known—as Higas-

hida puts it, “it’s as if my feelings are going upward to the sky . . . the motion makes me want to change into a bird and fly off to some faraway place.”<sup>11</sup>

It is in this light that we may return to the moment with which we began this account: the “Doyoyoyoying” game played by loves-truck Titania and reluctant Bottom. Again, the challenge of eye contact is centrally at issue, tackling “what for many children is a crippling problem”; the imperative, Hunter insists, is to ensure that “the game is as playful and funny as possible, countering the child’s intense struggle with an equal measure of play and enjoyment.”<sup>12</sup> In a sense, the game is pivotal, and its resonances are neither confined to this scene nor, indeed, to this play. In Flute’s *The Tempest*, the moment plays out at the first meeting of Ferdinand and Miranda, where it is lent a particular poignancy and force by Prospero’s observation that “At the first sight / They have changed eyes” (1.2.440–41): “O you wonder!” (1.2.426), they cry together, “Doyoyoyoying!” In *Dream*, it is the desperate mating-call of the mismatched lovers’ quartet when they are first introduced:

HELEN

We should be wooed, and were not made to woo

I love Demetrius (jealous doyoyoyoying)

DEMETRIUS

I love you not therefore pursue me not

I love Hermia (frustrated doyoyoyoying)

HERMIA

Lysander and myself shall fly this place

I love Lysander (lovesick doyoyoyoying)

LYSANDER

The course of true love never did run smooth

I love Hermia (amorous doyoyoyoying)

The exchange escalates while language degenerates (“woo / doyoyoyoying”; “not / doyoyoyoying”; “fly / doyoyoyoying”; “love / doyoyoyoying”), and the catchphrase becomes the performance’s leitmotif: “Doyoyoyoying/ And run through fire for thy sweet sake”; “Doyoyoyoying/ O Helen goddess nymph perfect divine”; finally, and satisfyingly, the resolution of the lovers’ conflicts is articulated as a musical joke. Released by Puck from the spell, the lovers rise to their feet, caper and prance, and, with a sly nod to Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March, “dong” out the marriage bells as a four-part round:



Fig. 2. “Wedding Doyoyoyoyings”

Following this, Puck’s lifting of the spell (“Be as thou wast wont to be/ See as thou wast wont to see” [4.1.527–8]), Titania’s “What visions have I seen” (4.1.532), and Bottom’s “I have had a dream. . . . The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen . . .” (4.1.658–63) are extraordinarily resonant.

There is no question that Flute’s work in Shakespeare and autism is profoundly engaging for those who involve themselves in it, whether as performers, players or observers, and that, at least for the duration of performance time, it can be liberating, even transformational. Reports from parents, carers, practitioners and others testify to the work’s unique beauty and power. Writing about the 2017 Orange Tree performance of *Dream*, a parent noticed how the actors “entered into Tim’s world, rather than demanding that he enter theirs”:

At one point, an actor tapped a repeated single chime on a bell, and in the ensuing silence each participant in turn closed their eyes and turned to follow the direction of the sound. This was a spellbinding, beautiful moment with everyone in the room intensely focussed on each child. The silence and calm was magical. It felt almost religious, as though a sacred space had been created, within which something transformative was happening.

Another parent reports a moment of rougher magic: “When we got home, we had to do the bean [*sic*]/ maypole skit for 15 minutes and then she wanted to sword fight. I love that she wanted to interact with me; even though she was chopping me with a sword—I’ll take

it” (the skit referred to is the ‘Maypole & Bead’ game, which renders Hermia and Helena’s exchange of insults—”thou painted maypole”; “You bead, you acorn” (3.2.297, 331)—as a danced duel of leaps and rolls). Theater artist Michael Whistler, participating in a Kansas City performance, describes the physical and verbal reactions of a young man, “perhaps 17 years old”: “Sometimes he laughs or shrieks wildly at a moment in the play or the games, or rolls full on his back, grabbing his cross-legged ankles,” at other times, he “continues to create rejoinders from non-sequiturs, referencing ‘Rocket J. Squirrel’ and ‘Bagheera’ from *The Jungle Book*.” His response to Hermia’s “I love thee”: “ICEBERG AHEAD!” For Whistler, the realization comes that “these are not non-sequiturs: they are the landmarks within his landscape.”<sup>13</sup>

The harder question to answer is what it is about the work that makes it so affecting. I have indicated some of the elements that make it so amenable to accommodating the autistic condition (and the flexibility, openness and accepting responsiveness of the actors is not the least of these): the strongly patterned and iterative nature of the games align with autistic preference for repetition and predictability; the emphasis on rhythmically coordinated imitation and synchronized action addresses some of autism’s key areas of difficulty, fostering the mutual empathy, interaction, communication (both verbal and non-verbal) and prosociality that the condition is understood to inhibit. To conclude, however, I want to foreground an aspect that has already been noted in the foregoing pages, one that is heard not only in the airs and theme tunes, and in Tom Chapman’s delicately haunting, near-continuous guitar score, but also in the “Helloes” and “Goodbyes” that hover between speech and song, and the “Doyoyoyoyings” that literally turn into a musical phrase: its musicality. The relationship between music and autism has received increasing attention in recent years, both in the sense that (as mentioned at the start of this essay) the condition has been associated with high, sometimes exceptional, levels of musical ability, and in the growing recognition that music making offers many autists a unique and unparalleled means of interaction, communication and self-expression. The reasons why this is so are much-discussed and complex, but are generally agreed to be rooted in the distinctive mental architecture of autism itself. Higashida, again, provides a way in: differentiating the ways in which autists and non-autists (or, if you prefer neurodivergent and neurotypical persons) perceive the world, he writes:

When you see an object, it seems that you see it as an entire thing first, and only afterwards do its details follow on. But for people with autism, the details jump straight out at us first of all, and then only gradually, detail by detail, does the whole image sort of float up into focus. When part of the whole image captures our eyes first depends on a number of things. When a colour is vivid or a shape is eye-catching, then that’s the detail that claims our attention, and then our hearts kind of drown in it . . .<sup>14</sup>

Transposed from the field of vision to that of audition, this richly perceived acoustic and sensory environment is the positive corollary of the overwhelmingly hyperstimulatory soundscape evoked earlier; it is an account of what is variously referred to as (negatively) the “weak central coherence” or (positively) “detail-focused” processing style that is characteristic of autism. For music and autism expert Adam Ockelford, this capacity to prioritize the detail over the Gestalt, at least initially, is one of the traits that enables an autistic person to instantly apprehend the individual notes and pitches within complex musical structures, and also to perceive order in apparent chaos. The result, Ockelford conjectures, is that the autistic’s experience of music is “likely to be very different from that of the majority: more vivid, more intense, more exciting, more exhausting. . . . Each pitch may be like a familiar friend in an otherwise confusing world.”<sup>15</sup>

For Ockelford and others, collaborative music-making creates the potential to address at least two of the three components of the classic triad of impairments, fostering as it does both social interaction and mutually empathic communication; moreover, the emphasis on autistic musicianship as an *ability* rather than a symptom of *disability* is in tune with the broader turn from a deficit model of autism to one of diversity and difference. In the music of Flute’s Shakespeare, there is yet a further dimension; one that reaches into the third corner of the autism triad, and one that music making, perhaps, cannot engage on its own. Activating the “as if” within a musical framework it invites its players to interact, to communicate, and also to *imagine* differently, sometimes with startling results (“I love thee”; “ICEBERG AHEAD!”). On these terms, Shakespeare’s world is a “third space” co-inhabited by the neurodivergent and the neurotypical, owned by neither. It is a space in which to meet, a space to play, and, most of all, a space to dream.

## Notes

My thanks to Kelly Hunter and the members of Flute Theatre for their help with this essay.

1. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.2.76. References to Shakespeare's plays come from Gary Taylor et. al., eds, *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and, where specified, to the unpublished working script of Flute Theatre's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017.

2. The original cast was Tom Chapman, Finlay Cormack, Tas Emiabata, Oliver Grant, Paula Rodriguez, and Katy Stephens.

3. The original cast was Greg Hicks, Chris McDonald, Kevin McClatchy, Mahmoud Osman, Robin Post, and Eva Lily.

4. See Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

5. Kelly Hunter, *Shakespeare's Heartbeat: Drama games for children with autism* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4–5. I am aware that Hunter's identification of iambic pentameter with the human heartbeat (which also has been proposed by practitioners such as Patsy Rodenburg) is open to challenge, as what W. B. Worthen would term a "naturalizing metaphor" which (in his view misleadingly) "appears to enable the body to recapture itself" (*Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 99): more technically, as Derek Mong puts it, "the iamb resembles the heartbeat, but it is no more innate or biologically justified than free verse or another of the world's many meters" ("Iambic Pentameter has Nothing to do with your Heart," *The Kenyon Review*, 16 April 2016, <https://www.kenyonreview.org/2016/04/iambic-pentameter-nothing-heart/>). For current purposes, as I have argued elsewhere, the value of the heartbeat equation, as with any acting tool, lies less in its theoretical or biomedical rigor than in what, in workshop, rehearsal or performance, it manages to get done. See Robert Shaughnessy, "'All eyes': Experience, Spectacle and the Inclusive Audience in Flute Theatre's *The Tempest*," in *Shakespeare: Actors & Audiences*, ed. Fiona Banks (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2018), 119–38.

6. Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump: one boy's voice from the silence of autism*, trans. K. A. Yoshida and David Mitchell (New York: Random House, 2016), 2–3.

7. Hunter, *Shakespeare's Heartbeat*, 5.

8. Flute *Dream*, n.p., cf. 3.1.249–54; "storm" emends "fire" at 252 and 254.

9. Higashida, *The Reason I Jump*, 43.

10. Hunter, *Shakespeare's Heartbeat*, 26.

11. Higashida, *The Reason I Jump*, 76–77.

12. Hunter, *Shakespeare's Heartbeat*, 36.

13. All comments taken from the Flute Theatre website, <http://www.flute-theatre.co.uk/>

14. Higashida, *The Reason I Jump*, 91–92.

15. Adam Ockelford, *Music, Language and Autism: Exceptional Strategies for Exceptional Minds* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013), 226.