LEE STRASBERG, a founder of the Group Theatre and the great teacher of the American Method, famously advised his students never to “use”—for generating tears, etc., in a dramatic scene—personal/historical material less than seven years in the personal/historical past; otherwise, the Emotion Memory (the death of a loved one or some like event in the actor’s life that can, when evoked through recall and substitution, hurl open the floodgates, as they say, right on cue, night after night, even during a long run)—this material, being too close, as it were, might overwhelm the artist and compromise the total control required to act the part or, more to the point, act it well; might, in fact, destabilize the play; if, at that moment, it becomes impossible for a wailing performer to pull it together; if, in other words, the performer remains trapped in affect long after the character has moved on to dinner or the battlefield—when this happens, then you can be sure that delirious theatrical mayhem will follow.

What is the point in all this? Strasberg was wrong. Seven years are not enough, a fact I discovered recently during a twilight performance of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” presented on the college green to commemorate the founding, a hundred and fifty years ago, by the Reverend William Trevor Barry—my great-great-grandfather on my father’s side—of the small liberal-arts institution that bears our family’s name and our seal. I am Reginald Barry, Dean of Student Life and Wm. T. Barry Professor of Speech and Drama at Barry College, so naturally it fell to me to direct our commemorative, barefoot production of Shakespeare’s great festive comedy. While I was at it, I decided to serve up some ham myself, as Lysander. What would a skinny, balding, unmarried, and childless forty-six-year-old Lysander—a Ph.D. with hair on his back—mean within the context of an otherwise college-age show? I’m not sure I can answer that question. Normally, Lysander would be essayed by some good-looking lacrosse goalie waiting his turn to date-rape the beautiful, waifish Mary Victoria Frost, our Hermia, only a sophomore herself and already the finest actress we’ve had in my time at Barry, a sure candidate for Yale or Juilliard if she can ease off the drugs. I might stand in as Egeus or Theseus, or maybe Oberon, King of the Faeries, if I felt up to it. But high-concept casting is a director’s prerogative. Two seasons ago, we mounted an all-male, all-nude “Taming of the Shrew.” People said it really increased their appreciation for the radical potentials in Elizabethan drama.

And so, the play. Four adolescents turned out by law and their parents into a green world governed by spooks, all playing—children and their phantoms—at love and nighttime evil.

The adolescents were me, Mary Vic—
toria Frost, Sheila Tannenbaum, as Helena, and Billy Valentine, as Demetrius. Sheila, a junior, plays character parts when she’s not playing basketball for the Lady Bears, and I knew she’d make an acceptable if not entirely agreeable Helena, with her big hands and lurching walk and brown eyes too far apart on an otherwise bent-looking, asymmetrical face; but Valentine represented a casting risk. Valentine is a certain kind of blond-haired, upper-middle-class boy—the type is familiar at any private school in the land, I would imagine—a sarcastic, wiry little underachiever who, on the basis of no evidence, is rumored among his peers to be a genius.

“Don’t come to rehearsals stoned, Billy,” I warned this kid before first read-through.

“Stoned, Mr. Barry?” He laughed. The previous Friday, a bunch of us had found ourselves lying around on the sofas in my office in Lower Hancock, getting wasted on some of Billy’s very strong homegrown.

“We’re here to work,” I told him now, and he said, “Don’t you think I should be playing Puck?”

“You want to direct this show, Valentine?” I asked him. “No? Then let me worry about casting.”

“Hey, Mr. Barry. Everything’s cool. It’s just that Martin can’t read his script. I mean, he can’t see.”

Billy Valentine had a point. Putting Martin Epps in as Puck was like putting, well, I don’t know what into what. How can you defend a totally blind Robin Goodfellow tapping his way around the stage with a telescoping cane, except in theory?

Dramaturgically speaking, the theory was sound enough, I thought; and so I opened up rehearsals by reciting it—in somewhat oblique form—to my cast. There they were, the “drama mafia,” down in the windowless Hancock Hall basement, twenty-five or thirty hungover Lovers, Royals, Spirit Wraiths, Merry Men, stagehands, set techies, and walk-ons, all dressed in late-spring cut-offs and oxford-cloth shirts and sheer halter tops, almost every one of this lot—except Martin Epps, the blind boy—inhaling drags off cigarettes; it was a bored, blasé-looking crowd. “Genuine vision, expressed artistically by Shakespeare in the character Puck, is more than the ability to open your eyes, take a look around, and see what’s wrong with your life,” I announced to these oversexed dope addicts.

No one spoke or even looked up, and I had that terrible feeling I get at the kickoff to any rehearsal period, when I realize how much disappointment lies ahead. I said, “Well, anyway, Theseus, it’s your line to start the play.”

“Who?”

“Don’t you have the cast list?” I asked my sophomore stage manager.

“And we’re all equals.”

“Call me Reg,” I told her. “During the play, we’re all equals.”

She stared at me like she wasn’t quite sure. Unorthodox etiquette is often perplexing for the young. She held up the cast list and waved it—apparently some kind of “theatrical” gesture—in the air
over her head. “Greg Lippincott, you’re Theseus.”

“Oh, is that how ‘Theseus’ is pronounced?” Greg asked. It was hard to believe he was one of the Philadelphia Lippincotts. He took a puff from his cigarette. Snickering could be heard. It took four hours to complete the read-through.

Danielle delivered Martin Epps’s lines to him, and Martin repeated each back, painstakingly, one word then the next, like a spy being briefed on a plan.

“I’ll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes,” recited Danielle. “I’ll put a girdle round about the earth. In forty minutes,” said Martin.

I made a note to ask him to pick up the pace and not tap cadences on the floor with his cane. I made another note, to Jim Ferguson, warning him to avoid inserting “like” into Oberon’s speeches to Titania. I worried about telling the entire cast, “Costumes are designed to suggest historical period and class, while also referring to modern dress. Bottom and his fellow-Mechanics will wear weight-lifting belts over wool tunics with the characters’ names ironed on.”

It had been my idea to depict Shakespeare’s vulgar tradesmen as a team of “Elizabethan” power lifters. I imagined them carrying six-packs of beer hanging from those clear plastic rings. “Let me see Bottom and his men at the front of the room, pronto,” I called out, to begin that day’s walk-through of the play within the play, Act V’s irresistible “tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe.”

Here came Quince, the carpenter; Bottom, the weaver; Flute, the bellows-mender; Snout, the tinker; Snug, the joiner; and Starveling, the tailor—in reality a cluster of political-science and religious-studies majors. These six huddled around me, and I said, “You guys are fuck-ups and you’re ugly. You’re a bunch of functionally illiterate dipsomaniacs, and I’d be amazed if any of you has ever gotten laid. Your own mothers ought to be ashamed of you.”

The boys looked confused, and I knew I had them where I wanted them. It is useful, when directing, to blur the boundaries between actor and role, to inaugurate, with a few stringent words, if necessary, a certain emotional instability; in this instance I was exploiting my students’ routine insecurities in order to lead them to identify with Shakespeare’s motley artisans.

I then gave these Merry Men my cautionary talk about the hardships of a life in the theatre. At some point, I became aware of Danielle—I could see her over Sam English’s big head; she was waving and pointing at her watch, making those gestures and absurd faces people make when they need your attention, yet are afraid of you—so I concluded, “Boys, the point is this. People think the theatre is romantic and magical. And sometimes it is. But most of the time it’s just a pile of crap that nobody cares about.”

“Time for animal improvisations!” Danielle shouted.

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” historians tell us, was probably first presented at a royal wedding held in summer at a house outside London. Presumably, the guests, like wedding guests throughout history, became intoxicated with alcohol and the aphrodisiacal spirit of the occasion. Young couples, wander-
ing in and out of doors, slipping away to flirt or break up or make love, had dramatic counterparts in the unhappy children lost in love in Shakespeare's imaginary grove. How many real lovers woke after the ceremony, hungover and sick, to discover themselves entwined on the lawn with mates met only during the festivities the night before? I wanted to create a world where love is mercurial, unbridled, bestial. In our production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the unmarried lovers would fall asleep after chasing one another through the forest; then, doused with nectar from Puck's flower, they would roll over, rub their eyes, and fuck the wrong person.

"Let's all get down on our hands and knees," I told the cast.

Down we went. Right away I noticed that Mary Victoria Frost and several faeries appeared to be acting like house cats; these girls arched their backs, projected feline butts into the air, and hissed. Sheila Tannenbaum—who, in Act II, Scene 1, repeats the famous line “use me but as your spaniel, spur me, strike me”—was doing a nice job as a submissive pup, rolling over and sticking out her tongue to lick Billy Valentine slobbering past on his belly. Lion soared and Bottom brayed like an ass, and Sarah Goldwasser, our Titania, responded by rubbing herself against Sam; it was clear that these two had a flirtation in the works. That's something I like to see. Sex makes any show better. "Oink, oink," I said to Mary Victoria Frost.

I love the theatre. I really do. And I adored my cast. They adored one another, too; these boys and girls were becoming—as the days became weeks and the play took its shape—uninhibitedly smitten with one another. It was mid-May, and summer's first warmth was in the air. The basement felt stuffy and hot, thanks to the overheating furnace in the corner.

"We're not out of the woods yet," I announced at the beginning of our third week. "Those of you who haven't gotten off book, you're holding the rest of us up. Demetrius, time your entrances so you don't keep Helena waiting downstage. Titania, less kissing and more teasing when you're giving it up to Bottom in Act IV. Make him work for it.

"Reg?" peeped a voice from the crowd.

It was Sarah Goldwasser, the prima donna.

"Yes, Sarah?"

"When will we get out of this gross basement and start rehearsing on the green?"

"Any day now. Roger and Emil are building the platforms in the trees, and they have to dig the hole for Puck. Once Puck's crater is finished, we'll move the show outdoors."

"Crater?" This from Martin Epps.

"That's right. In our 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' the demons won't merely buzz around like woodland pixies; they'll come right up from the earth to grab us and pull us down to Hell. At any rate, Martin, I don't think your hole will be much of a problem after one or two on-site rehearsals. You'll see," I assured the blind boy.

It was one of those moments when a person (myself, in this instance) says something wholly untoward, and then, becoming aware of the faux pas and its implications, rushes blindly forward—there is no other way to describe this adequately, except as a kind of verbal blindness—excluding additional horrors. "What I mean is... the rest of us will... watch you crawling... covered with dirt and sticks... You can picture it... I don't mean literally..."

"That's O.K., Mr. Barry," said Martin Epps.

"Call me Reg," I reminded him, by way of apology. Then, addressing the room at large, attempting to regain authority: "All right. Let me have all the young lovers over in the corner. Lovers, don't touch the boiler."

Possibly—I should say probably—it was risky of me to attempt simulated sex with undergraduates.

"What do you think, gang? Is this something you feel you can comfortably do in front of an audience?"

Together we sat—Mary Victoria Frost, Sheila Tannenbaum, Billy Valentine, and I—in a cozy circle on the floor. Billy, I noticed, had his eye on Mary; he leaned back beside her, and you could tell he was angling to spy an opening in her blouse and glimpse a breast. Mary spoke.

"How dark will it be?"

"Fairly. By Act III, the sun will be setting. With any luck, it'll be a humid night and the fireflies will be out."

"It's going to be beautiful!" exclaimed Sheila.

I concurred, "That's right, Sheila. When you make love, you're doing God's work on Earth."

After that, we sat for a time. The atmosphere became pleasantly uncomfortable. This sensation of a pervasive, shared emotional discomfort may have been helped along by the presence nearby of the foul-smelling oil furnace, hissing and burning, making the air in our little corner feel sickeningly, suffocatingly warm. Finally Billy broke the tension with a homophobic joke. "Reg, will I have to make out with you?"

"In a manner of speaking, Billy. Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena will trade back and forth in a kind of blind, revolving embrace. Erotic possibility, signifying not immorality but immortality, is the real pleasure for unmarried lovers. So we're going to get it on."

"Like in my dormitory," laughed Valentine.

Later, we all stretched out on the floor and began mapping positions. It was clear that the kids were—experienced in some ways and inexperienced in others. Sheila Tannenbaum chuckled when touched; there was little that was pretty about this rangy girl, yet she was coy and therefore sexy. Billy Valentine was not sexy. It annoyed me to watch him grope Mary Victoria Frost. He had no moves, and she, as far as I could tell, didn't care. I signalled everyone to switch partners, and Mary wrapped her legs around me. I read this as permission to cradle her in my lap. She weighed practically nothing. Was she one of those girls who exist on breakfast cereal and amphetamines? I stuck my face in her hair and breathed her smells of bath oil and nicotine. Oh, my heart. I laid my head on Mary's shoulder and watched young Billy Valentine straddle Sheila. He appeared to be mauling the girl's throat—what was he doing, administering a "sleeper" hold?—until Sheila made an athletic move with her legs, scissoring Billy and bringing him hard to the floor. Thump. Quickly, I leaned over and tugged Sheila toward me, in this way getting two girls and scoring a sexual victory over a boy young enough to be my son.

Billy Valentine sat to the side with his legs crossed and his head down. I had the feeling, watching him, that I was seeing him in an unguarded moment, and in a posture and attitude that ex-
Left to right: Junot Díaz, Rick Moody, Edwidge Danticat, David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Jeffrey Eugenides.
pressed an essential state of his being. I was witnessing, it occurred to me, something like pure sadness; and I would’ve bet money that Billy was the child of divorced, probably alcoholic parents. I cuddled the girls and, in a moment of, I suppose, empathy, told him, “You know, Billy, my mother and father got drunk and argued all the time. The truth is, they were terrible to each other. I thought I’d never get over all that, and I guess maybe I never have.”

For an instant, Billy looked as if he might laugh. But he didn’t laugh. He gazed at me with these big, round eyes that seemed to grow larger and more rounded; and his whole countenance changed, which is to say that, in some way that had more to do with a feeling than an actual look, his expression softened, and he lowered his head.

“Places for Act II, Scene 1!” I called out to Danielle and the cast. “We’re going to run the play from Puck’s line to the faerie, ‘Thou speak’st aright; I am that merry wanderer of the night.’ Puck, you’re downstage left, crawling out of your hole.”

“Thou speak’st aright. I am that merry Wanderer of the night,” intoned my sightless Puck.

“Wait a minute, Martin. Do the line again, this time as if you hate life. Say this line as if you’re alone in the world and you despise yourself.”

“Thou speak’st aright; I am that”—here he paused for an especially long time, as if thinking about a hard problem—“merry wanderer of the night.”

“Listen to me. Puck is not some frollicking clown. He’s Hobgoblin! Beelzebub! Lucifer! Satan, the enemy of love! Puck is a wretched, willfully destructive creature. Let’s do a quick exercise. Repeat after me: I am a wretched, willfully destructive creature.”

“I am a wretched, willfully destructive. Creature.”

“Everything I do creates pain.”

“Everything I Do creates pain.”

“No one loves me.”

“No. One loves me.”

“I’m fucked up.”

“I’m fucked ...”

He was sniffling. His voice cracked. Were there tears? I could not see the young actor’s eyes because they were hidden behind dark lenses. I leaned close to my Puck, in order to growl in his ear, “I wear the number of the beast.”

“Huh?” he whimpered.

I smacked the blind kid on the shoul-
needs to lost children, I proclaimed, “This show you chase the young lovers through the Puck. When we get to the section where 168 THE NEW YORKER, JUNE 21 & 28, 1999 by our movements around the pit will answer. “The circular patterns sketched when the entire stage is nothing but concentrate on your acting and not worry huffed off toward her bower. don’t like it that hard,” she said, and the scene, Sarah.” said, “Reg, will you tell Oberon to stop ser, the regal Titania, marched over and had trouble getting up. Sarah Goldwas-called. Girls took turns climbing. A few Barry College green, our theatre. stage” at the southernmost edge of the shade Puck’s deep hole, dug “center on tree branches and the faeries’ wooden platforms—three plywood decks connected by swaying footbridges, every-thing balanced precariously in the high, heavy oak limbs that reached out to north smelling like rain. Crows perched on trunk branches and the faeries’ wooden platforms—three plywood decks con-nected by swaying footbridges, every-thing balanced precariously in the high, heavy oak limbs that reached out to shade Puck’s deep hole, dug “center stage” at the southernmost edge of the Barry College green, our theatre. “Up in the trees, faeries, let’s go,” I called. Girls took turns climbing. A few had trouble getting up. Sarah Goldwas-er, the regal Titania, marched over and said, “Reg, will you tell Oberon to stop grabbing my nipples in our fight scene?” “Hmm. I think it’s kind of good for the scene, Sarah.” “He does it too hard. My nipples don’t like it that hard,” she said, and huffed off toward her bower. “Here comes the rain,” a boy’s voice beside me exclaimed. “I’d appreciate it if you would concentrate on your acting and not worry about the weather, Billy.” “How are we supposed to do any act-ing when the entire stage is nothing but a hole in the ground?” The boy had a point. And I had an answer. “The circular patterns sketched by our movements around the pit will illustrate mankind’s proximity to the abyss, and this in turn will be a dramatical reminder of the themes of revolution and renewal in English morris dancing, which, you’ll recall from the first week of rehearsal, Billy, is an acknowledged folk source for Shake-speare’s May Day comedies.” I wish I could say I was pleased with this impromptu oration. Purely technical observations concerning the larger im-plications of stagecraft are best left in the classroom, having, out here in the field, as it were, more of a confusing than a clarifying effect. Billy looked de-spairing. Clearly I had been right, during that sex-scene rehearsal the week before, in supposing him to be the child of an unhappy home. I put my hand on his shoulder, and said, in as fatherly a voice as I could concoct on short notice, “I know it’s a mighty big hole, Billy. We’ll all have to be careful not to fall in and break our legs. Sometimes in the theatre, as in life, we do our best work when mainly concerned with not making fools of ourselves.” “That’s typical for a man to say, isn’t it?” declared a woman’s voice. I became immediately tense. The speaker was Carol, who had sneaked up from behind and was standing with her arms crossed before her chest, the posture expressing her confrontational mode, surely an indi-cation that she had been drinking. “Hello, Carol.” “Don’t bother being polite, Reg.” Carol said. “It doesn’t look good on you.” She was weaving slightly, actually swaying in place, much in the manner of an actor impersonating a drunk, I thought. Here was an example of a dramatic cliché’s analogue in reality. “We’re about to begin rehearsal, Carol. I suppose you’ve come to take a few last-minute costume measurements?” “Fuck you.” “Let’s not have one of our scenes, Carol, not out here in front of the boy, please?” “Look who’s talking. If it isn’t the protector of youth himself.” She ad-dressed Billy, “I’ll bet you’re fond of your teacher, aren’t you?” “I guess.” “You guess?” She seemed very un-steady on her feet. Her voice sounded hysterical and mean. “It’s going to rain! Have you ever fucked in the rain? Your teacher likes to fuck in the rain!” “Jesus, Carol.” “He likes to fuck in the rain and he likes it on top of his desk and in cars and on buses!” By now people had accumulated, a circle of actors and actresses, a few passersby, no faculty or fellow academic deans, I hoped, everyone gathered to rel-ish the spectacle of Carol crying, “I was going to have a baby! This man wouldn’t let me have our baby!” Billy, I noticed, wore a surprisingly composed (though somewhat glassed-over) expression, as if he were accus-tomed to violent exhibitionism in adults. He looked as though nothing could be more natural to him than a drunken woman’s fury. “I’m sorry, son,” I said to the boy when Carol eventually ceased yelling. I had the uneasy feeling that I was in some way giving an expert rendering of Billy’s real father, a man who must’ve been lacking—if our episode on the college lawn could be used as an indicator—backbone. “It’s cool,” sighed Billy. Then the rain came. The first drops were followed by wind and a great, rolling thunderclap. Tree branches swayed, and faeries scattered down from their platforms; then forked lightning struck nearby and the sky was instantly, ghostly white. Cast and crew began racing off in different directions. It was one of those thoroughly drench-ing gales that mark the beginning of summer—there was no point trying to stay dry. I reached out and took Carol by the arm, to comfort her and steady her. Rainwater soaked her hair and mat-ted it in clumps. “Let’s go indoors and get you wrapped in a warm towel,” I shouted over the thunder; and she tugged her arm away and staggered to the edge of Puck’s hole. She gave me one of her powerful, inimitable, dis-gusted looks, then leaned over, braced herself with her hands on her knees,
and vomited into the pit. It happened quickly and was over before Billy or I could respond in a helpful way. A couple of heaves and Carol spat out the last. She looked terrible, like a witch in the Scottish play, I thought, or one of those modern descendants of crones on heaths, the living dead who climb from graves in horror movies. She was intensely drunk, of course. To Billy—she was looking mostly at the boy, though presumably Carol was thinking of me, or maybe neither Billy nor me—she said, “Look at you. You make me sick. You’re like your father. He does whatever he wants with people. He’s a shit. There’s no love in this family.”

Then she reeled away across the green. Billy and I watched Carol lurch around a corner and disappear behind Lunbeck Hall; then we turned, flustered and embarrassed, two men sharing a burden of humiliation, and walked together in the opposite direction. Rain was in our faces and our hands were buried in our pockets. Wind and water forced our eyes downward. Our shoes squished. Puddles were everywhere.

It was Billy who spoke first. “I doubt if I could run like that if I’d just barfed.”

This comment made me like young Valentine immensely. I told him, “You should have played Puck.”

This was said not so much to avoid the subject of Carol, her outburst and her vomiting, as to assuage feelings of guilt and shame by making an offering of some kind, however small and meaningless. Billy replied, in the right spirit, “Demetrius rocks.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, Billy. Do you have any more of that good, strong dope?” I asked, dripping.

“No, sir. Not on me.”

“That’s too bad.” For reasons I could not name, I went on, “When I was younger, I figured I’d grow up and get married and have children. But now years have gone by, and I’m not young.”

“That’s cool,” said Billy. And he said, “Anyway, you shouldn’t marry someone with a drinking problem.”

“You’re right about that.”

“Mr. Barry?”

“Reg.”

“Reg, do you think she knows about my father?”

Knows what? “She wasn’t talking about your father. She thought I was your father, and you were our son that we never had, and you were growing up to be like me.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yes,” I agreed. But it was true that I’d had the same notion as Carol. “See you tomorrow, Billy.”

“Later, Reg.”

Rehearsal, however, was not to be. Not the next day, or the day after that, or the afternoon following. The storm worsened over the course of the first night, causing trees to fall on power lines, disabling phones and cutting off electricity to homes and college buildings. Classes were cancelled. By morning of the second day, Tuesday, the thunder and lightning had stopped, though the sky remained gray, pouring heavy rain. The country around here is veined with creeks; these grew into deep, fast-moving rivers. The college, safe on high ground, operated minimally on generators. A party spirit prevailed. New couples would subsequently date their union to the week of the flash flood. The disaster occurred on Thursday, when natural dams in the nearby hills gave way, releasing torrents of water derived primarily from melted winter snow. The water crashed down into the valleys, washing away roads, trees, cars, and about twenty people. The National Guard and the International Red Cross landed helicopters on the Wm. T. Barry Gymnasium parking lot. Student volunteers collected cast-off clothing, canned food, blankets, etc. A short time later, it was learned that Harrison P. Mackay, a chemistry professor with forty years at the college, had been a flood casualty. The professor, not well known to me except as a red-faced personage wearing a bow tie, was found lodged in an embankment near the town of Chesterford. An emergency meeting of deans and the president convened; sadness was expressed and a few important memories were recalled. After the meeting, President Farnham took me aside and said, “Reginald, I want you to do that play if the weather clears. Right after our service for Harrison. We’re all going to need cheering up.”

It was in this way that we came to perform “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” on a wet field before an audience of mourners wearing black.

“We’re going to have a tough house,” I said to my young company on the evening of the show.

Folding chairs were set up on the mushy ground. Organ music, a gloomy Episcopalian dirge, drifted in from the church at the college green’s distant end. Harrison’s memorial, under way. Skies remained partly cloudy, and a light breeze blew from the south. Together we stood, cast and crew, in a circle around Puck’s hole. We weren’t holding hands, though we should have been—there was a noticeable feeling, in the group, of apprehension, a communal dread and excitement only partly attributable to normal stage fright. The hole, in the wake of the
week's rains, was a muddy pond. A duck, possibly blown far from home in the high winds a few days earlier, paddled on the surface. Fallen leaves looked like twisted miniature lily pads. These elements—water, duck, vegetation—combined to create a disturbingly powerful scene, a vastly reduced water vista that stood in relation to actual lakes as an artist's easel studies do to fully realized, complex paintings. It was, in other words, an excellent stage-set pond, not at all unlike a classical folly from an English garden—scaled down, deceptively simple, unreal enough to seem mysterious, primordial, sad.

The funeral music was not helping my mood. Jim Ferguson, our sexually aggressive Oberon and a zoology major, pointed out, “That's a female mallard. She's injured. Look at her—she's all crooked.”

It was true. The duck listed in the water. Jim explained, “Ducks are vicious when they're hurt. They host human influenza and other dangerous viruses.”

“Duck?” asked Martin Epps, waving his cane, straying precariously near the water's edge.

I told him, “Don’t worry about the duck, O.K.? To the cast in general, I said, “I’ll need a couple of volunteers to lower Martin into the water when the time comes.”

“Water?” said Martin, splashing with his cane, poking to find the hole's bottom.

The duck paddled weakly. All around me, kids in little groups stared down at it and smoked in that self-consciously erotic way—the dramatic puffs and the stagy, side-of-the-mouth exhalations blown upward into the air like steam escaping so many hot engines—that seems to be an advertisement for the carefree life. I couldn't take it. “Do you kids think you're going to live forever?” I shouted at these innocents. “Do you think life is some kind of holiday? You think that one day you’ll stop being depressed! You won’t ever stop being depressed! No matter how much sex you have!”

As if on cue, bells rang out from the chapel spire. Big wooden doors were flung open, and the first few mourners emerged from the church.

“Places!” cried Danielle.

Faeries tossed away cigarette butts and Royals crouched behind bushes while Mechanicals popped open their first-act beers. Billy Valentine passed Mary Victoria Frost an enormous joint. Martin Epps alone remained before his watery lair. “Billy, Mary, give me a hand with Martin,” I said. “One, two, three.” Up went the blind boy. He was light for a fat kid. He entered the water and said, “Ahhh.”

“Stay put and don’t piss off the duck,” I directed him.

Billy and Mary and I crawled beneath the stage-left shrubs. Billy was about to stash the joint when I stopped him. “Hey, don’t put that away. I need a hit.” Fireflies blinked on, off, on. The audience settled into seats. Sounds of weeping rose from the house. I peeked up and could see, above me, faeries’ legs dangling from platforms in trees, pair after pair of young legs.

“Good dope,” I whispered to Billy.

Then Danielle gave the signal, and Greg Lippincott walked onstage and exclaimed, “Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour draws on apace; four happy days bring in another moon.” Who can listen to that kind of stuff? A moment later came the cue for the young lovers to stumble out and stand before their elders. There was not much ground to stand on, only slippery grass beside the hole, where Martin was sunk in black water to his chin. The crooked duck regarded Martin with crazed eyes. “Full of vexation come I, with complaint against my child, my daughter Hermia,” growled Egeus as faculty, alumni, and a few undergraduates and parents wept tears for Harrison Mackay. Understandably, I felt the need to get a laugh. “The course of true love never did run smooth,” I proclaimed morosely, and at that instant the duck began flapping its maimed wings, and Martin waved his cane wildly, and a gust of wind blew in like a sneeze from God, shaking the trees and blowing hats off heads in the audience. I looked for Carol among the mourners. Where was she? Did she truly
love me enough to have a child with me?

“It’s going pretty well, don’t you think?” I asked Billy when we came off stage at the middle of Act I. We listened respectfully as Helena rattled off her famous speech about being sexually unattractive; and then Bottom and his men took over, rushing out and tackling one another and flubbing their lines—but it didn’t matter what they did, because these characters are probably the most indestructible comic team in all of English literature, and, sure enough, when Bottom crunched Lion in the windpipe with his weight belt the audience let out its first decent belly laugh of the night.

Billy and I hid behind the backstage trees and waited to run out, lie down to sleep on the cold ground, get drugged by Puck, wake up with our hard-ons, and begin chasing each other and/or Mary Victoria Frost and/or Sheila Tannenbaum through the haunted woods.

Billy whispered, “Can I talk to you, Reg?”

“Call me Lysander during the show.”

“I didn’t want you to think, after the other day, you know, that I don’t love my father.”

He seemed maudlin, not at all like a happy comedian eager to chew the scenery. “I didn’t think that. I’m sure you love your father very much,” I assured him.

Saying this made me sad. Billy told me, “My father is not a bad man, no matter what people say.”

Night was falling; the air had grown cold. Puck on his stomach crawled up the bank of his pond, then splashed back down into the water. Faeries on platforms jumped up and down noisily.

Mary and Sheila, one tree over from me and Billy, adjusted costumes and one another’s hair. Up Puck came again, covered in mud. His glasses had slipped from his head, and now his sightless eyes stared wildly; he could not have realized how afraid he looked. “I’ll put a girdle Round about. Earth—” he sputtered as, suddenly, the duck attacked. Martin howled and grasped at the mud and the grass, reaching for a handhold on dry land. It was too late. The duck blasted off the pond and came down hard in a spray of foam on Martin’s pudgy, naked back. Webbed feet slapped the boy’s white skin as the duck gave the coup de grâce with a thrust of her bill into Martin’s neck.

“Thanks for talking, Lysander,” Billy exclaimed. He bolted from behind our oak tree. Sheila Tannenbaum leaped out of hiding and ran after him. “I love thee not, therefore pursue me not,” the boy yelled at the girl.

What is more exciting than kinetic, technical theatre, the impeccable orchestrations of pratfall farce? I say this in consideration of the fact that audience members were leaving their seats and sneaking close, the better to gawk at Puck in his hole. As is always the case during productions of the Bard, a few carried paperback copies of the script. Sticklers. I watched them thumb pages back and forth, no doubt searching for references to a veritable mallard. I have no objection to the public encroaching on the players—during Shakespeare’s time, spectators sat on the stage and became, to a limited degree, implicated in the theatre experience—but in this instance a participatory audience was a safety hazard. Billy, Mary, Sheila, and I had to dodge and weave throughout the better part of Acts II and III. Darting barefoot and more or less naked around people wearing formal clothes had, as an activity, a distinctly anarchic, rebellious aspect—rebellious in the sense that it created, for me at least, the kind of sweaty excitement that comes with dangerous play. I felt free and young. I should say that I felt myself backsliding to a younger state of mind. It’s hard to say what this feeling consisted in—panic and hope, disappointment, shame. I was wearing torn Barry Bears gym shorts and feeling like a teen-ager and running fast, and my feet sank into the earth, and mud splashed my legs. What is more awful and disorienting than adolescence? How had I become so lost and alone? What had persuaded me that I could play a young man’s part? Was Billy pursuing me?

Was I pursuing Billy? The bereaved pranksters came forward into the fray with heads down, I will lead them up and down; they stumbled through a puddle and narrowly missed crashing into President Farnham. “Reginald! This is criminal! Criminal!” the man shouted after me. Then: “Up and down, up and down, I will lead them up and down; I am fear’d in field and town: Goblin, lead them up and down,” Martin Epps sang out magnificently, beautifully, before, at long last, he slid through ooze and disappeared, cane and all, beneath the water.

Bubbles, then silence.

Women and men wearing black lined the banks of the wine-black lake. They appeared, I thought, to be enjoying the show. It must be said that Shakespeare’s genius lies partly in his plays’ ready adaptability to the kinds of high-handed, decadent concepts guaranteed to astonish playgoers and offend the critics. Theatre artists often speak of their disregard for the audience; and it’s a badge of integrity among some in this business to ignore the ostensible needs and desires of that inexpert class the ticket holders. But I think this is a rotten attitude. I’m in favor of putting on a show people will remember and talk about.

Who cared if it was too dark out to really see anything? Who noticed that Mary Victoria Frost was whacked on pot and dropping her best lines? What did it matter if Mustardseed and Moth had stripped off their G-strings in order to sixty-nine atop the tree-house stage set? Puck had sunk, and the important middle acts were nearing conclusion, and this meant it was time for me to cuddle on the grass with Sheila Tannenbaum.

There she was. She looked darling in her black-and-orange cheerleader’s outfit and her mesh tights. She was my Helena, and she came toward me, smiling her awkward smile; and we settled on the wet ground and held one another in the night.

It was time for sleep. Sheila, the Lady Bears basketball star, snuggled warmly in my arms. She made a surprisingly good fit. She rested her head on my shoulder, and we kissed, lightly, and I looked up at trees and saw naked children.

How nice to lie in the grass. Other players, the demons and mere mortals, coupled nearby. It was a world of youthfulness and love. It was our summer at last. Faeries in the old oaks cradled Bottom and their mistress, and you could hear Sam English braying in ecstasy.

Beneath a tree, sprawled face down on the ground, lay Mary Frost, my poor Hermia. She looked so pale, so stuporous. There would be plenty of time, later in Act IV or V or whatever act this was, to wake up, dump Helena, and marry, for a fitting consummation, the right girl.

It was the deep of night, late even for the fireflies. A few appeared here and there. Soon they would be gone. In the meantime, the Lord of Athens lit a cigarette and waited in the wings.