

***The Donkey Show (Review)***  
**Club Flamingo, New York City**  
**July 17, 2001**

Teetering under a riot of white tulle, a young woman indelicately sipped from a black plastic phallus—obviously not her first cocktail of the evening. Her somewhat more coherent girlfriends explained that this was a bachelorette party and that the bride-to-be was "clueless" as to what awaited her inside the thundering club. As we continued to wait in the increasingly rowdy line, I wondered what might come of a late-night event purported to be a "disco" remake of a Shakespeare comedy. My musings were suddenly diverted by a shouting match that erupted near the entrance between a corpulent bouncer and two figures in bright Spandex jumpsuits and huge Afro wigs. Evidently the two had been ejected for some breach of club protocol, which, as soon thereafter demonstrated by our smarmy doorman, did not proscribe the sale or use of narcotics. For this was Oberon's pleasure palace, a late 70s discotheque, where nonstop dancing, drinking, and drugs promised to transform heavenly dreams into earthly delights on this balmy midsummer night.

We pushed our way through the over-21 crowd toward the far end of the plush club, seeking a place to perch and savor our overpriced drinks. Landing under an expansive palm plant adjacent to the small raised stage, we observed a gathering composed primarily of attractive, smartly dressed couples under 40 as well as pockets of younger men instinctively circling four different, all-female bridal parties. Lacking programs, we presumed that those dressed in contemporary attire (including the four tulle draped brides) were audience members, while those in unmistakable 70s vintage clothing dancing frenetically to the disco beat we took to be performers.

Considerably later than the advertised curtain time of 10:30 p.m., our DJ introduced us to club owner Oberon, easily identified by his white leisure suit, heavy gold jewelry, mane of white hair, and not-so-subtly displayed bags of white powder. ("Mr. Cocaine." Get it?) Next we met Titania, a conflation of Wonder Woman and Lady Godiva, who, with breasts covered only by small butterflies, was escorted through the ill impressed crowd by a lanky, masked fellow on roller skates. (Puck, we eventually concluded.) Throughout, four scantily clad male "fairies" gyrated lasciviously onstage and on the club's tables, with audience members as well as with each other, adding a homoerotic element incongruous with the obviously straight and ambivalent crowd.

With setting confined to Oberon's disco fairy world, the plot of *The Donkey Show* (at least what we could piece together) was extrapolated from the key forest encounters in Shakespeare's tale, e.g., the Oberon-Titania feud, the lovers' escapades, the magical machinations and transformations of the four lovers, as well as Titania and Bottom, not to mention the play's final reconciliation. These encounters were staged throughout the club, as often offstage as on, as the characters sought to elicit both physical and emotional interaction from the hesitant audience. We were approached twice by Helena: the first time when she (the character) lamented her unreturned love, the second time when she (the actor) instructed us to move out of the way so she could begin her next scene atop our table. Such coincidence of actor and character occurred occasionally during the 75-minute event, though evidently for practical rather than conceptual reasons, i.e., usually when the "stage manager" couldn't clear a path or table quickly enough.

Although gender would seem to be central to these characters' encounters, its treatment in this production was most curious: Oberon, Demetrius, and Lysander were played by women, who coarsened their voices and strutted about the club with great machismo. I couldn't detect anything that might suggest some type of gender commentary, be it Elizabethan or 70s; evidently, we were either to be deceived by or accepting of the convention and then surprised during the curtain call when one of the "male" lovers (which one I can't remember) exposes herself and, thus, the convention. (He's really a she!?!?) Yet, the other two women playing men never revealed themselves. What to make of this, I don't know, nor could I explain to my companion, who knew nothing of the original *Midsummer*. Perhaps a twist on the "breeches roles" of centuries past that might titillate this crowd with lesbian inference rather than shapely gams? Or was Manhattan simply not capable of producing enough capable and willing male performers?

Equally curious was the treatment of Bottom, for me one of Shakespeare's most delightful and lovable comic characters. Without the court and the final play-within-a-play, there is no need for the Mechanicals, save Bottom, who must be present in the forest to serve as the object of Titania's bestial adoration. Here, Bottom was played simultaneously by the two jumpsuit rejects we had met in line—women who spoke in affected street dialects while grabbing their crotches and greeting audience members with "high fives" as they sang "Working at the Car Wash." (White women playing black men playing Bottom playing a donkey? *Victor, Victoria* pales in comparison.) For the Bottom-Ass transformation (not seen by the audience), one of the women donned a new, larger Afro with two clumps of hair pulled and shaped to suggest a donkey's ears; the other woman simply bent over and grabbed the waist of the first, and the two ambled about audience and stage braying but with little comical or magical effect.

In this disco *Midsummer*, the threadbare plotline as well as the characters' superficial relationships were conveyed solely by co-opting familiar 70s disco hits sung live by the actors. For example, when Helena is spurned and abandoned by Demetrius, she pleads, "Don't leave me! Don't leave me this way!" and then launches into the familiar Donna Summers hit. Similarly, the singing of "We Are Family" near the end established the themes of reconciliation and unity, but, despite the furtive efforts of the performers, never really included the audience, who never bought into this glitzy artifice. Fun at first, but as a production concept, the convention, like disco itself, fell flat very quickly and became trite, even embarrassing—yet another sophomoric theatrical gimmick lacking the conceptual foundation and imaginative follow-through to sustain an entire show. (At least *Moulin Rouge* afforded stylistic variety, great spectacle, and ingenious editing.)

That the piece is shallow and predictable might be forgivable were it engaging, even moderately entertaining; however, this production commits the greatest of sins: it is simply boring, a fact belied by the gratuitous smiles on the performers' faces and the blasé response of the audience unwilling to join in the danceathon at show's end.

Leaving the club, I passed the bride-to-be from the line. Somehow, she managed to focus long enough to recognize me and then roll her eyes, which I interpreted as a shared verdict of this disaster (rather than a signal of imminent unconsciousness). Fortunately, disco merited a swift death; if only this "donkey" could be euthanized.