



Menu

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Creating "A Midsummer Night's Dream" Involved a Musical Treasure Hunt



A NEW TAKE ON SHAKESPEARE: Gillian Murphy, left, and Ryoko Tanaka star in American Repertory Ballet's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" choreographed by Ethan Stiefel. (Photo by Harald Schrader)

By Anne Levin

For his final performance as a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet in the late 1990s, Ethan Stiefel danced the role of Oberon in George Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A few years later, as a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, he took on the role again — this time in the version by British choreographer Frederick Ashton.

The artistic director of American Repertory Ballet (ARB) since last July, Stiefel is about to debut his own telling of the classic Shakespeare play. Accompanied live by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO), ARB, which is based in Princeton and New Brunswick, presents *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the New Brunswick Performing Arts Center April 1-3.

For Stiefel, the experience of creating the ballet was as much about the music as the steps. After digging into some research, he chose to supplement the original score, written in 1826 by Felix Mendelssohn, with compositions by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who arranged Mendelssohn's music for the 1935 film of the Shakespeare play, directed by Max Reinhardt.

"There is only one recording of the Korngold that exists," he said. "The instrumentation and the orchestration are so interesting. The beauty is that it really weaves into the Mendelssohn. It gives it a contemporary sheen and another level of magic. He takes some of the themes, and he may change the meter or add some saxophone."

PSO Assistant Conductor Kenneth Bean, who will lead the orchestra in the upcoming performances, is equally enthusiastic. "The music is quite special," he said. "The Korngold is all new to me. It fits so perfectly with the spirit of the Mendelssohn. And Mendelssohn wrote it when he was just a teenager. I'm always in awe of these amazing prodigies."

Stiefel credits PSO librarian Elizabeth Thompson with helping to uncover information about Korngold's work. "This really became a passion project for her. She's like a sleuth," he said. "I think it's historic that here in Princeton and New Brunswick, we had this unearthed."

Gillian Murphy, ARB's artistic associate and a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, will dance the role of Oberon, leader of the elves — traditionally done by a male. "It inspires a different way to approach the movement," Stiefel said. Ryoko Tanaka dances the role of Titania, Queen of the Fairies.

For Bean, leading an orchestra at a ballet performance is something new. "I've never done this before," he said. "You still want to prep the music as carefully as you can, as close to what the composer intended. But you also have to give way to the dancers and what they are used to hearing and expecting. We're taking a back seat, artistically."

The dancers and musicians are scheduled to have two rehearsals prior to the performances. "I'm really looking forward to it," Bean said. "Everyone has been so welcoming and nice, so it's been a great experience so far."

With the Korngold additions, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is just over an hour long. "I needed some supplemental music because I wanted the show to be about an hour with no intermission," Stiefel said. "It will have the fullness of a full-length ballet, but done in the way that has a pace and packaging that is accessible and hopefully enjoyable for our audiences."

Several activities are scheduled in conjunction with the weekend's performances. On April 1, from 3-5 p.m., ARB dancers are at the Arts Institute of Middlesex County's First Friday event at Monument Square Park in New Brunswick. A petting zoo, fairy and elf hand-painting, a beginner ballet class offered by the company's affiliated Princeton Ballet School, and the DANCE POWER program are planned. Poetry featuring lines from the Shakespeare work, a live mural installation, and a papermaking workshop are also on the schedule.

Elf, fairy, and donkey-themed face-painting will take place in the lobby of the New Brunswick Performing Arts Center beginning at 1 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, April 2 and 3.

Stiefel hopes to bring *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to additional venues and make it a regular part of ARB's repertory. "We want to do it in Princeton at some point," he said. "Design-wise as well, this is a ballet that could become an early signature of ARB for now, and moving into the future."

The New Brunswick Cultural Center is at 2 Livingston Avenue. Tickets start at \$25. Visit [nbpac.org](https://www.nbpac.org).

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