

# PYRAMUS and THISBY

by William Shakespeare

*Adapted by Paul Caywood*

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## STORY

The legend of Pyramus and Thisby is known today primarily because William Shakespeare used it in his comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (He borrowed the tale of the doomed lovers from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.) As a part of Shakespeare's play, six workers, sometimes called "mechanicals" or "clowns," decide to present a play for the festivities that will follow the wedding of the Duke of Athens.

In this one-act, we see the mechanicals getting their parts, then rehearsing in the woods the night before the wedding. Of course, these men know nothing about acting or play production, and, as a result, the audience is treated to a rousing, laughable performance by inept, though enthusiastic, actors doing the best they can. They do not think they are funny; on the contrary, they believe they are performing this tragic love story of two Babylonian young people quite well. The play will tell the story of the doomed lovers Pyramus and Thisby -- of how they met at Ninus' tomb, declared their love, and died bloody deaths. But the workers' rehearsal of this sad tale, like their ultimate performance in *Midsummer*, is more tragic than the lovers' untimely deaths! Both high school and junior high school students love this play, either as performers or as audience members. About 30 minutes.

## ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

*PYRAMUS and THISBY*, directed by Paul Caywood, was first performed at Manual High School in Peoria, Illinois with the following cast:

QUINCE - Jim Barnett  
BOTTOM - Ed Bremer  
FLUTE - Dave Mosher  
ROBIN STARVELING - Warren Bailey  
TOM SNOUT - Ron Rockey  
SNUG - Jim Snyder

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**CAST**

*(6 males, or 1 m, 5 flexible)*

**PETER QUINCE:** A carpenter and the author-director of "Pyramus and Thisby."

**NICK BOTTOM:** A weaver, who plays Pyramus.

**FRANCIS FLUTE:** A bellows-mender, who "takes Thisby on himself." *(For humor, the role should be played by a male.)*

**TOM SNOOT:** A tinker, who "presenteth a wall."

**ROBIN STARVELING:** A tailor, who plays Moonshine.

**SNUG:** A joiner, who "roars the lion's part."

**SYNOPSIS OF SCENES**

Athens

Scene 1 - Quince's house.

Scene 2 - The Palace Woods.

**PRODUCTION NOTES**

The workers in the play have made the costumes and collected the properties for their play. They wear dark tights and jerkins (*long shirts*). Vests may be added for a few characters, and hats may be worn by one or two of the men. Wall's costume and the lion's mask should be simple. Wall's outfit is only a jumper with stones painted on it. Lion's mask may be made of either cloth or papier-mâché with rough lion features painted on it. Thisby's costume is a long Greek "jumper" and a very long mantle of flimsy cloth.

**PROPERTIES**

Scene 1 - Long table, six stools, tablecloth, scrolls on the table, almanac (*a book that appears old*).

Scene 2 - Lantern, a bush of thorn, red paint in a can with a small brush, sword and scabbard, small keg.

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### SCENE 1

*(Quince's house. A table is at C with stools around it. QUINCE sits at the R end of the table, looking over a script. STARVELING and SNOUT are at RC. As the CURTAIN rises, the two laugh loudly; likely one of them has just told an off-color joke. FLUTE is at LC, looking off DL. He is obviously irritated; his arms are folded and his foot is tapping. BOTTOM is pacing back and forth DC. As he completes his second crossing, SNUG rushes in and comes to a sudden halt L of Bottom. Bottom glares at him, and Snug looks around with a shy, uncertain smile. Quince, annoyed, rises and comes R of Bottom. He stares at Snug.)*

QUINCE: *(Sarcastically.)* Is all our company here?

*(Hurt, SNUG wanders off by FLUTE.)*

BOTTOM: You were best to call them generally<sup>1</sup>, man by man.

QUINCE: *(Unrolling the script.)* Here is the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit, through all Athens, to play in our interlude before the Duke and Duchess on their wedding day - at night.

BOTTOM: First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on, then read the names of the actors, and so grow to a point.

QUINCE: Marry<sup>2</sup>, our play is the most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby.

BOTTOM: A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry. Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors by the scroll. *(With a gesture to them.)* Masters, spread yourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> GENERALLY – Individually.

<sup>2</sup> MARRY – A very mild expletive, like "Well" today.

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*(ALL except Quince take seats around the table. SNUG sits at the L end, and QUINCE stands at the R end. BOTTOM is seated at his L.)*

QUINCE: Answer as I call you. Nick Bottom, the weaver.

BOTTOM: *(Rises.)* Ready. Name what part I am for, and proceed.

QUINCE: You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.

BOTTOM: What is Pyramus? A lover or a tyrant?

*(BOTTOM has already started acting as he says the words "lover" and "tyrant.")*

QUINCE: A lover, who kills himself most gallantly for love.

BOTTOM: *(Thinking it over.)* That will ask some tears in the true performing of it. If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes. I will move storms; I will condole<sup>3</sup> in some measure. To the rest - Yet my chief humor<sup>4</sup> is for a tyrant. I could play Eracles<sup>5</sup> rarely or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.

*(As BOTTOM roars through the following speech, he approaches Flute, and FLUTE covers against the table. After that, Bottom leans over Snug, and SNUG falls off his stool. Snug struggles to his feet, and Bottom grabs his shirt and delivers the rest of the speech to the terrified fellow.)*

BOTTOM: The raging rocks  
And shivering shocks  
Shall break the locks  
Of prison gates:

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<sup>3</sup> CONDOLE – Wail and lament.

<sup>4</sup> HUMOR - Inclination, present state of mind.

<sup>5</sup> ERCLES – Hercules. In a classical drama, Hercules often ranted, "Tear a cat in," which refers to Hercules' killing a lion.

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BOTTOM: *(Cont'd.)*  
And Phibus' car<sup>6</sup>  
Shall shine from far  
And make and mar  
The foolish Fates.<sup>7</sup>

*(QUINCE has been impatient with Bottom's theatrical display and has made futile gestures, trying to stop him. But the OTHERS are impressed and break into applause when Bottom finishes. BOTTOM bows and returns to his seat, pleased with himself. SNUG scrambles back on to his stool.)*

BOTTOM: This was lofty. Now, name the rest of the players.  
*(Looking away from the others.)* This is Ercles' vein, a tyrant's vein, a lover is more condoling.

QUINCE: Francis Flute, the bellows mender.

FLUTE: *(Rises. Smiling and eager.)* Here, Peter Quince.

QUINCE: Flute, you must take Thisby on you.

FLUTE: What is Thisby? A wandering knight?

QUINCE: It is the lady that Pyramus must love.

FLUTE: *(Surprised.)* Nay, faith, let me not play a woman.  
*(Feeling his chin.)* I have a beard -- coming. *(The other MEN laugh.)*

QUINCE: That's all one; you shall play it in a mask, and you may speak as small as you will.

BOTTOM: *(Rises, puts hand on QUINCE'S shoulder.)* An' I may hide my face, let me play Thisby too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice. *(As Pyramus.)* "Thisne, Thisne<sup>8</sup>."  
*(As Thisby.)* "O, Pyramis, my lover dear! Thy Thisby dear, and lady dear!"

QUINCE: *(Firmly.)* No, no -- you must play Pyramus, and Flute, you Thisby.

BOTTOM: *(His feelings are hurt.)* Well, proceed.

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<sup>6</sup> PHIBUS' CAR – Phoebus' chariot.

<sup>7</sup> FATES – The Greek and Romans believed that the three Fates determined the length of our lives. One Fate held the distaff (a staff holding flax or wool), one spun the thread of life, and the third cut the thread when life was ended.

<sup>8</sup> THISNE – This spelling of Thisby has been long debated. Perhaps Bottom only misunderstood.

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