

**AA306: Shakespeare : text and performance**  
**AA306/VCR7: Critical interventions**

**Producer: Jenny Bardwell**

**Contributor(s) in the clip: Stephen Greenblatt**

**Clip transcript: AA306 A Midsummer Night's Dream 2**

**Stephen Greenblatt:**

One of the things that I think is quite characteristic, almost a thumbprint of Shakespeare is that he simultaneously does use the lower class characters as comic relief as foils, as characters to be laughed at, and at the same time he almost always catches one up short, and surprises one by the way in which the characters, those characters have their own weird dignity. Take the rude mechanicals in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. They're treated with hilarious unabashed contempt for their absurdity, for their grossness for their failure to understand what a play is, for their hopelessness, and yet they are in a way the great characters from that wonderful play, they're the characters who have the most dignity and they play more than Theseus. Those are characters who actually have some sense of who they are, an indeed it's precisely and typical of Shakespeare that he gives one character in the play, not Theseus, not the upper class lovers, a glimpse of the fairy queen, he gives one human character and that's Bottom, at the lowest of the low, the vision of the fairy queen and that's not an accident in Shakespeare that's because that Shakespeare's playing this fantastically peculiar double game of simultaneously asking us to ridicule these characters and then catching us up short in the ridicule and insisting that they have something which in fact the rest of the fancy people in the play don't have even a touch of.