

RECORD REVIEW

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Photo Credit: Richard Termine

HVSF’s ‘Much Ado’ Brings on the Laughter

by Abby Luby

Sharp wit zings through the production of “Much Ado About Nothing” at this season’s Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival. Written in 1598, William Shakespeare’s great romantic comedy is about the quest of young lovers with underlying themes of male and female roles in a patriarchal society. The Bard offers his comedic take on how men and women interact, pausing briefly to reveal moral and gender issues still relevant today.

Director May Adrales sets the play in 1950s America – the post-World War II era when men and women were delegated to particular societal roles. Women growing dissatisfied with marrying, living in suburbia and bearing children is what inspired Betty Friedan’s best-selling nonfiction book, “The Feminine Mystique.” Shakespeare, sheds light on this frustration among his female roles in Renaissance society. In this current production of “Much Ado About Nothing” costumes reflect the times; men wear World War II-style green jackets, tan pants, the sharp oval Khaki Garrison Cap and tailored suits, the women sport pedal pushers, floral print dresses with crinolines, pony tails, up-do bee-hives.

The play opens with Don Pedro (Sean McNall) newly victorious in an unnamed war, arrives at the home of Duke Leonato (Michael Early) accompanied by his bastard brother, Don John (Stephen Michael Spencer). Also with them are Claudio, played by José Gamo and Benedick played by Charlie Semine. Leonato invites the group to stay and attend a masked ball that evening. Right off the bat, Claudio falls for the Duke's young and beautiful daughter, Hero (Alexandra Templer) while Benedick and Beatrice (Tina Chilip) hit the ground running with snappy verbal attacks. Even if you don't catch all the words, the battling couple's intent is crystal clear because actors Chilip and Semine deftly assume their characters and successfully make their banter understood. It's hard to miss the provocative, sexual overtones.

For each couple, love plays out in different scenarios spiced with spoofs and hilarity. Beatrice's slams Benedick with aggressive surety and Benedick doles out his own scathing responses. At the other end of the romantic spectrum is the reticent Claudio, and the shy Hero, where Templer and Gamo portray their characters with great sensitivity. It's their tender and pure passion that incites the villainous Don John and the disgruntled and envious bastard brother of Don Pedro is intent on driving the young lovers apart. Spencer's pointed misery is convincing as is his energy to do mischief.

Shakespeare intended that music and lyrics be an integral part of the play and in keeping with the 1950s we hear big band era swing music, the boogie woogie; the song "Chapel of Love" by the Dixie Cups is heard right before Hero's and Claudio's wedding and after Claudio refuses to marry Hero because of false slander perpetrated by Don John, we hear the 1958 song, "You Cheated You Lied" by the Shields. Later that evening the heartbroken bride is serenaded by Dinah Washington's "What a Difference a Day Makes," the irony in full bloom. By the end when both couples are united, revelry is expressed with a catchy bossa nova dance.

The masked ball lauds Shakespeare's often used theme of comedic mistaken identities. In this production, masks portray recognizable faces from 1950s and 1960s including John Kennedy, Liz Taylor, Richard Nixon and the Honeymooners' Jackie Gleason in his bus driver's cap. But the masks are just a pretense that barely disguise the desire for true love.

Talking directly to and mingling with the audience is frequent, especially by Mr. Semine's Benedick, who sometimes sprints several rows back to engage with the audience. (If you are allergic to that kind of interaction, definitely don't sit in the front row.) Scenes verge on slapstick, especially with HVSF veteran actor Kurt Rhoads as the kooky night constable Dogberry overseeing a group of bumbling police watchmen who, by accident, discover the perpetrator who has slandered Hero. Hilarity reaches a high pitch with Dogberry's lines that tingle with malapropism: he utters "excommunication" when he means "examination," or "auspicious" instead of "suspicious." In several jocular pauses, he hums certain words and are joined by his watchmen in three-part harmony.

Beatrice and Benedick both succumb to intended and planted rumors revealing they really do love one another. They are humbled with a delicate humor and when they come face to face to declare their love, the denouement garners applause and cheers from the audience. When Beatrice asks Benedick to kill Claudio for causing Hero's ruin, Benedick resists but then agrees. Beatrice fiercely lashes out at conventional gender roles, wishing she were a man so she could kill Claudio. "O that I were a man for his sake!... He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing; therefore I will die a woman with grieving."

Viewing this production under the big tent overlooking the magnificent Hudson River lends to the era of the leisured class in Shakespeare's England, where the game of love plays out in a myriad of ways. Within the play's title is Shakespeare's message that much in life shouldn't be taken seriously, including societal roles. This production wraps that message in a joyful, mood leaving us with a lingering wonder about the sundry patterns of love and human interaction.

Much Ado About Nothing runs until August 31st

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