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Much Ado About Nothing



One of them is accused of having a good stomach with which to eat what he killed in the wars, and to use his own halting wits to keep himself warm, unlike his horse. The other has a speedy tongue with which to eat all of his killings, and is called a parrot-teacher. Meet Signior Montanto and Lady Disdain, the pseudonyms for the freshly reunited combatants/lovers Benedick and Beatrice, played like a fine counterpoint of melodies by JD Cullum and Torri Higginson in a recent production of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" at A Noise Within.

General Don Pedro (Patrick O'Connell) returns to Messina from the wars, taking with him his finest lieutenant, the brave but soft-spoken Claudio (Brandon Hearnberger) and his illegitimate brother, the contentious and scheming Don John (Stephen Rockwell). The governor of the Sicilian town, Leonato (Apollo Dukakis), invites the soldiers to stay, prompting Claudio to fall straight into love with his daughter Hero (Lindsay Gould). Claudio, being inexperienced in the ways of wooing women, asks Don Pedro to win Hero's love for him at the ball. Being jealous of his brother's influence, Don John conspires with Borachio (Steve Weingartner) and Conrade (Shaun Anthony) to derail the planned marriage of Claudio and Hero. Borachio makes love with Hero's handmaiden Margaret (Danielle Doyen) while Don John leads Pedro and Claudio outside Hero's balcony, making sounds calling for Hero, and proving her unchaste.

Meanwhile, Don Pedro's officer Benedick (JD Cullum) and Leonato's niece Beatrice (Torri Higginson) are being paired together by Don Pedro and company. Benedick overhears Claudio, Pedro, and Leonato discussing how Beatrice is in love with him, and decides to take pity on the woman. Hero confides to Ursula (Abigail Caro) while doing laundry that Benedick is in love with Beatrice. Beatrice, within earshot, decides that his love should be returned. After Borachio's treacherous deed is done, he is taken prisoner by the gang of policemen led by the loquacious Dogberry (Mark Bramhall) and the silent Verges (Mithcell Edmonds) while relating to Conrade the happenings under Hero's balcony.

Next day, Claudio responds to Friar Francis's (Jonathon Lamer) query by denouncing Hero publically supported by Pedro. Leonato accuses his own daughter, only to be stopped by the friar's plan to pretend Hero has died of grief so that Claudio may repent his mistake. Comforted by Benedick, Beatrice asks him to kill Claudio, and he agrees. When Dogberry arrives with the prisoners, Don Pedro and Claudio realize their mistake, while Don John has already fled. Leonato wants Hero's name cleared, and presents his brother Antonio's (Hugh Mason) daughter to marry Claudio in Hero's place. At the funeral pyre, an epitaph to Hero is read, and at the wedding the next morning, Claudio unmask the supposed niece of Leonato, who is really Hero. Claudio and Hero exchange love poems and are married. Benedick asks Beatrice whether she loves

him, and she responds "not really." They are married anyways.

The most hilarious scenes in the play involve the constable Dogberry and his crew, who mix up words and their intended consequence much better than even Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop. There's the Hugh Oatcake and George Seacoal who can read and write, and are good else they "suffer salvation, body and soul." They are supposed to call at the ale houses and wake up the drunk. Dogberry tells his watchmen to take a thief by "showing himself what he is, and [let him] steal out of your company." Every diction is deemphasized by Bramhall, who looks the part, with a handsome beard that bobbles during every speech, such as an emphatically silly one urging babies to wake up their nurse if she's asleep.






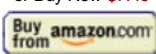
During Dogberry's interrogation of Borachio, he and Verges call themselves "malefactors," and condemn the prisoners to "everlasting redemption" for disgracing Hero. The moment that sent the audience into an uproar occurs when Dogberry asks for the Sexton to transcribe Borachio's latest insult, that of calling Dogberry an ass. He notes that the coxcomb villain is "full of piety," and calls himself a "wise fellow, ..., and what's more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any in Messina, and one that knows the law." Bramhall plays one whose age is suspect, and points at himself as he speaks, as if appealing to the audience. "Masters, remember that I am an ass," he said, "though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass." Later, Dogberry presents the criminals to Leonato as having "committed false reports, spoken untruths, slanders, belied a lady, verified unjust things, and lying knaves" in his "six" charges. Bramhall says this with as mixed up a notion as the play wishes to impart.

Higginson shines as Beatrice by punctuating the dialogue with her own sense of self-righteousness. When Leonato urges her to marry ("Thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue."), she replies by appealing to God ("Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face."). Higginson's tongue is as quick as the dialogue. The entirety of "he that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man: and he that is more than a youth is not for me; and he that is less than a man I am not for him" is said in about five seconds. Beatrice claims the devil will greet her in hell and tell her "get thee to heaven." Benedick is so infatuated with her that he would rather not "hold three words' conference with this harpy (Beatrice)" than "fetch a toothpicker from the farthest inch of Asia" or "bring the length of Prester John's foot." An apt description of Higginson's approach to Beatrice may be Leonato's phrase that "she hath dreamt of unhappiness, and waked herself with laughing." This brand of utter spite between Beatrice and Benedick causes Don Pedro to declare that by bringing Bea and Ben together, he is "undertaking one of Hercules' labor."

If Beatrice was saucy yet intelligent, Cullum's Benedick was rhetorical yet humorous. Before the garden-side revelations, Benedick professes to require for his wife to be rich and wise, or he'll have none; virtuous, or he'll cheapen her; fair, or he'll never look on her; mild, or he won't come near her; and noble, "of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God." Benedick, of course, is all talk. After Pedro et al reveal Beatrice's supposed love (and Balthazar sings "Sign no more, ladies"), Benedick changes his tune from shunning marriage except to a perfect woman to an altered appetite, saying "a man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age," and "the world must be peopled." Of course, Beatrice is now fair ("I can bear them witness"), virtuous ("I cannot reprove it"), and wise ("but for loving me"). Hero, too, prefers Benedick's "death with wit" to "die with mocks" or "die with tickling." Hiding his love behind a toothache, Benedick later eats his words before protesting that he loves Beatrice and volunteering to dispatch Claudio. Even in Benedick's love song to Beatrice, we sense his rhetoric, not passion. "I cannot show (love) in rhyme," he says afterwards, "I can find no rhyme to 'lady' but 'baby'," scorn to horn, and school for fool. As Cullum says it with a mocking despair, "I was not born under a rhyming planet."

When Beatrice and Benedick do finally get together, we sense not so much love but a perfect counterpoint of witticisms. For instance, Beatrice asks "for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?" and "for which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?" Benedick retorts "thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably." Even the marriage is described as "bind me or undo me" by Benedick, who, when the secret love letters of Ben and Bea are exchanged, calls it a miracle: "here's our own hands against our hearts." Of course, in typical Benedick fashion, the marriage is decried as "I take thee for pity," whereas Beatrice is only persuaded by the need to "save your life, for I was told you were in consumption." Even Benedick tells Pedro to "get thee a wife." The pair's magic together is heightened in this production because Cullum's methodical and calm, collected jabs are supplemented by Higginson's fast-paced and perceptive punches. In the end, the music is a balance of soft and low, slow and fast.

"Much Ado About Nothing" is performed by A Noise Within (<http://www.anoisewithin.org/theplays.html>) at Glendale, California, until 21st of May, 2010.

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