

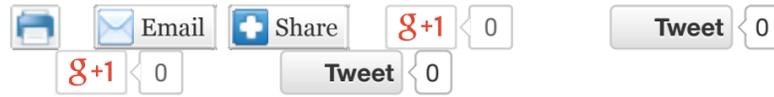


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Cast makes something of 'Nothing'

September 08, 2003 | Tony Perry | Times Staff Writer



SAN DIEGO — She's witty and flirty and accustomed to getting her way. He's good-looking, self-assured and swears he'll never get married, which, of course, means he'll tumble like a sack of potatoes from a speeding truck.

And so Beatrice ("I would rather hear my dog bark at a cow than hear a man say he loves me") and Benedick ("an obstinate heretic in the face of beauty") are the bickering hearts of William Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing." True, they don't have the verbal fire and brawling sexiness of Katharina and Petruchio ("Taming of the Shrew"). Think of them more as the Shakespearean equivalent of "Seinfeld's" Jerry and Elaine, attractive, self-involved, interesting but not quite enough to carry the story without help from memorable side characters.

Director Brendon Fox, whose production of "Much Ado" opened this weekend at the Old Globe, has seemingly realized the television-ness of the play and cast as Beatrice and Benedick two TV veterans: Dana Delany (Emmy winner for "China Beach") and Billy Campbell ("Once and Again"). For Delany, it's a first venture into Shakespeare.

There is strangely little physical chemistry between Delany and Campbell, and Delany's voice does not project well in an open-air venue. Campbell has some campy body language, and Delany's favorite delivery is the wry put-down, the self-satisfied smile and the turn of the head -- all of it the stuff of television.

But these are mostly quibbles in a production that is light and funny and stocked with first-rate supporting players, particularly Tommy Gomez as the malapropism-spewing Dogberry, Ryan Michelle Bathe as the gentlewoman Margaret and Al Espinoza as the evil Don John, brother to Capt. Don Pedro (nicely done by Jeff Woodman).

Gomez, dressed in a delightfully foolish constable's uniform with protruding plumage, mangles the language as wonderfully as any Dogberry before him. "Forget not that I am an ass," he declaims. Not a problem, that.

And his bursts of weirded-out wisdom are memorable, if somewhat incomprehensible. "When two men ride a horse, one must ride behind," he tells us. Words for our time.

Espinoza as the bastard sibling who conspires to convince Claudio (Adam Ludwig) that his betrothed Hero (Erica N. Tazel) is a sleep-around ("a common stale") is definitely hiss-inspiring. He is all villainy and a yard wide, melodrama on the hoof.

When Margaret, in discourse with Hero, slips from high-minded rhetoric to the tones of modern hip-hop, it's one of the night's minor jewels. And Hero's double-take punctuates the humor.

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The play has been updated to an Italian villa just after World War I, with the local troops returning and the civilians ready to shake off the wartime drowsiness. Benedick was a hero, Don John comes home in handcuffs.

The villa, done by scenic designer Anna Louizos, is a sumptuous and inviting setting of light and greenery and helps provide a chance for movement in a play that, in less skilled hands, can get overly talky and static.

For a couple at the heart of the play, Beatrice and Benedick have their best moments when they are apart. Beatrice's comes when she jousts with the nerdy Balthasar (Michael Doyle), and Benedick's when he gets soaked while overhearing his confreres talk about how much the haughty Beatrice really does love him despite her protestations about preferring to "lead apes into hell" than marry.

A churl could note that nearly all the plot devices here -- the battling couple, the deception, the bumbling rustics, the parallel love stories, the villainous bastard, the miraculous return to life of a "dead" heroine -- were done better in other Shakespeare efforts.

Yes, but then as now, entertainment is a business and the Bard had a bill to fill that season. These days they call them sequels.

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`Much Ado About Nothing'

Where: Lowell Davies Festival Theatre, Old Globe Theatres complex, Balboa Park, San Diego.

When: Tuesday-Sunday, 8 p.m.

Ends: Oct. 12.

Price: \$19-\$50, discounts for students, seniors, active military.

Contact: (619) 234-5623 (23-GLOBE).

Running Time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

Billy Campbell...Benedick

Dana Delany...Beatrice

Adam Ludwig...Claudio

Erica N. Tazel...Hero

Richard Poe...Leonato

Jeff Woodman...Don Pedro

Al Espinoza...Don John

Tommy Gomez...Dogberry

Ryan Michelle Bathe...Margaret

Andrew McGinn...Borachio

Michael Doyle...Balthasar

By William Shakespeare. Directed by Brendon Fox. Lighting by Peter Maradudin, sound by Lindsay Jones, scenic designer Anna Louizos, costumes by Linda Cho, movement Bonnie Johnston.

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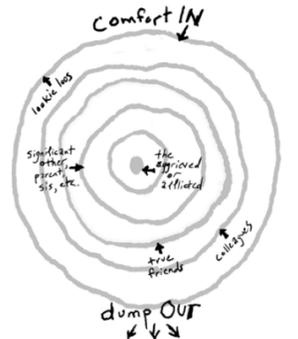
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