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## 'Much Ado' about sparkling Shakespeare

By John Farrell  
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Shakespeare wrote a bunch of great plays; we can all agree on that.

But when it comes to titles, sometimes he was a little bit weak.

Maybe the title had to be used for publicity long before he finished. Maybe, once he was finished, he didn't really care.

"Much Ado About Nothing," which opened over the weekend at the Long Beach Shakespeare company's Richard Goad Theatre in Bixby Knolls, is one of those plays. You know it's a comedy, but which one?

Save the suspense: It's the play about Beatrice and Benedick, the young would-be lovers who are so caught up in their battle of wits they don't recognize the underlying attraction. They are so busy jabbing each other, fighting with words they only half mean, they can't see the forest for blank verse trees.

In this production, directed with consummate skill and delicacy by the company's co-artistic director, Helen Borgers, the play seems to fill every space in the small Richard Goad Theatre. The walls seem to stretch - the atmosphere is so rich, and hardly a word of the scintillating text is lost.

Credit for that must go first of all to the principals. Benny Briseno is superb as the handsome, witty devil-may-care Benedick, a young lord of Padua, full of himself and his supposed philosophy. Briseno has a powerful, clear voice that delivers every line with authenticity.

Every bit his match is Erica Sims as Beatrice, challenging Benedick, caressing every line, taking every



Benny Briseno and Erica Simms star as young lovers Benedick and Beatrice in the Long Beach Shakespeare Company's "Much Ado About Nothing."

chance for verbal combat but never so involved in the fight that she forgets her duty to the rich language of Shakespeare.

The second romance in "Much Ado," between Claudio (Kevin Williams) and Hero (Nasi Nassiri), isn't fraught with emotional difficulties, but with the plotting of Don John (Lawrence Tunson), the villain of the piece. He wants revenge on his brother Don Pedro (Maurice Shaw) and is prepared to destroy a life to get it.

Leonato (Mike Austin) is governor of Messina and falls for the story of false

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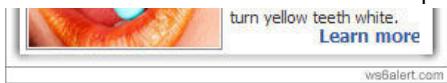


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### 'Much Ado' about sparkling Shakespear...



love, but the intervention of Dogberry, the constable (Carl Wawrina), saves the day, revealing the plot and uniting the lovers.

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Williams and Nassiri are a perfect combination as young lovers, naive and passionate at once. Tunson is subtly evil, a villain without the curtain chewing. Shaw is a powerful presence as Don Pedro, a person on whom authority sits with ease, a leader with every mark of authority, but without any preening.

Austin takes Leonato to new heights, playing his own guitar interludes and composer Edmund Velasco's songs during the performance. The music adds much to the production, even if Shakespeare's lyrics are not quite as good as his play.

Dogberry is one of Shakespeare's great comic characters, and Wawrina has a great time with the character, speaking his confusing lines (he is a Mrs. Malaprop 150 years early) with arch sincerity. He may confuse every third word he speaks, but he is the man whose perspicacity saves the day.

Others in the large cast include Verges (Brando Cutts), Borachio and Friar Francis (both played by Randy Castrejon) and Margaret (Susan Lockwood).

Barbara Josefsburg designed and created the remarkably attractive costumes, from the military uniforms of the returning troops to the elegant gowns of the significant ladies. They add much to the production. Austin adds choreographer duties to his credit with several effective dances at the play's end.

This is a "Much Ado About Nothing" that brings together all the elements Shakespeare used so effectively: spectacle, language, music, song and dance. That it works so well is a tribute to Borgers' delicate touch, to the remarkable gifts of her cast, and to the audience willing to forget, for a few hours, anyway, the rest of the world.

This may be a small sample of the Elizabethan world, but the language and the performances are as big as they get.

#### Much Ado About Nothing

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday through Oct. 24.

Where: Richard Goad Theatre, 4250 Atlantic Ave., Long Beach.

Tickets: \$20.

Information: 562-997-1494 or <http://www.lbshakespeare.org>.

John Farrell is a Long Beach freelance writer.

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