

WORTH THE ADO

Greggory Moore Wed. September 23

Long Beach Shakespeare does something good with 'Much Ado About Nothing'



PHOTO by HENRY JOSEFSBERG ESQ.

There are many ways to think about Shakespeare. The worst, though, is as a given—that just because it's *Shakespeare* it has inherent worth. No, Shakespeare was just a guy who wrote plays, and it's for you to determine how good they are and whether each performance is worth the time it takes to watch it.

But a play like *Much Ado About Nothing* and a production like Long Beach Shakespeare Co.'s makes that determination easy. Good play? Check. Worth your time? For sure.

One thing Shakespeare is *not* is realistic. For all his profundity and insight into the human condition, his plays are fanciful. No one ever talked like this, and no concatenation of events was ever so contrived. But in *Much Ado* LBSC fully exploits these facets—as Shakespeare himself undoubtedly did—going beyond asking for suspension of disbelief by doing everything short of diving into metafictional waters to remind you you're watching a play, from addressing more than just asides to the audience to the ludicrous physical unreality of Benedick's and Beatrice's hilarious back-to-back eavesdropping scenes. It's completely unbelievable—and delightful.

This approach helps make the static set and few props function effectively, with subtle but fine changes in lighting being all there is to convey differences of place and time.

A bad cast can sink the best designs, but this one keeps everything afloat. Maurice Shaw plays his Don Pedro with a properly princely bearing, while Benny Briseno and Erica Sims fully animate Benedick and Beatrice's "merry war." Sims is particularly outstanding, with a look and presence that you cannot take your eyes off of.

If there's one element that doesn't come off as it might, it's Dogberry and the Watch, which in general isn't played silly enough to elevate the very low comedy to the realm of funny.

Also, there are also a few moments that seem misinterpreted. When Don Pedro and Claudio arrive in the play's final scene, for example, they are curiously jocular in the midst of what for them is clearly a somber circumstance.

However, these are but small blemishes on a sterling production, one that reminds us that the Shakespeare tradition is worth keeping alive. "God save the foundation," indeed!

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