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Much Ado About Nothing

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Lily Rabe and Hamish Linklater (Source:Joan Marcus)

The Public Theatre clocks in with another summertime hit with "**Much Ado About Nothing**", the first offering of this season's Shakespeare in the Park series at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park. For the secret of their success, look no further than the lead characters, Lily Rabe and Hamish Linklater.

After several seasons of Anglicized or modernized stagings of Shakespeare's work, it is wonderful to see a solidly Italian production mounted, with an Italian villa as the primary set (thanks to John Lee Beatty for this), with authentic-looking Italian characters and some dialogue spoken in Italian.

Leonato (John Glover) and his family may well be The Sopranos, what with everyone accusing everyone else of treachery and attempting to kill them before making up and reconciling at the end.

For Italian is best when dealing with a play that tells the tale of a soldier falling instantly for a dark-haired beauty, being tricked of her infidelity by a crumbum like Don John, denouncing her at the altar as a slut, grieving for her (fake) death, agreeing to marry her surviving sister and then being convinced of her innocence and ending happily ever after. And if that overwrought, hot-blooded drama isn't enough to convince you that Italians are at the center of this story, then one glimpse of the heavily ruffled, apricot wedding dress Hero dons should do

the trick.

Although the love story between Hero (Ismenia Mendes) and Claudio (Jack Cutmore-Scott) is full of the drama of deception and redemption, it is the barbed-wire romance of Beatrice (Lily Rabe) and Benedick (Hamish Linklater) that really captivates the audience.

The two bat and banter at each other like Petruchio and Katherine in "The Taming of the Shrew," and it is thrilling to behold. Each has a sharp tongue, and underlying, an abiding love for each other that only needs a bit of nurturing before each will say, "I do love nothing in the world so well as you."

Rabe brings Shakespeare's words to life with her plainspoken treatment of the text, and after countless plays spent wondering what the gist of some 16th century jibe was, it's nice to be able to use the actor's context clues to figure out the insult in lines like, "she shall be buried with her face upward."

For in this play, there is much truth when Hero says that, "some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps." An inordinate amount of the play's action revolves around characters talking loudly in orchards in the attempt to misdirect eavesdroppers. Benedick's kinsmen pretend they don't see him lurking in a nearby tree when they speak of Beatrice's undying love for him. Hero and Ursula engage in the same trickery when they speak of Benedick's feelings for Beatrice while she hides in a nearby bower.

And the meddlesome Don John, played by a fabulous Pedro Pascal (fresh from getting his eyes melon-balled in a recent episode of "Game of Thrones") uses this misdirection to malign Hero and warn Claudio not to "knit [his] soul to a wanton."

His evil is counterbalanced with his good-natured but easily misguided brother Don Pedro, played with élan by Brian Stokes Mitchell. This Man of La Mancha is dignified and regal in his bearing, and even treats the audience to a sample of his still very adroit singing voice via a rousing rendition of "Hey Nonny Nonny" with the minstrels.

But this critic can't help but muse on the telling line that, "in a false quarrel, there is no true valor." While Benedick and Beatrice meet each other on equal ground to cut and spar and court and spark, Claudio falls instantly for the first girl he sees upon returning from war, and just as quickly is led to believe that she is a wanton woman. She chooses to "die to live," and feigns death over dishonor until truth is revealed that she is still pure. As for me, I'm not so certain I'd be willing to marry someone who called me out at the altar as a two-bit whore -- or as Don John coined it, "Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero."

Still, I suppose it's far too late now to ask the Bard for feminist revisions, so we must take it as it comes. And with this superb rendition of "Much Ado About Nothing," that's no hard pill to choke down.

"Much Ado About Nothing" runs through July 6 at the Delacorte Theater, Central Park at 81st Street. For information or free tickets, visit www.publictheater.org

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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