

Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing takes a 1930s twist at the Denver Center

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Denver Center Theater Company's "Much Ado About Nothing" has a comforting certainty.

Part of that wink and nudge is of course the work of William Shakespeare. But there's also a whimsical twist to the production of The Bard's comedy, which director Chris Coleman, his tight-knit cast and talented craftsmen bring to the story of Beatrice and Benedict that recalls the snappy wit of 1930s and '40s movies. Think Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant in *The Philadelphia Story*, or Rosalind Russell and, yes, Grant again, in *His Girl Friday*, each of which premiered in 1940.

Benedick (Geoffrey Kent) and Beatrice (Dana Green) battle it out in the aptly twisted Denver Center production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. (Michael Martin Photography provided by Denver Center)

The action was shifted to Messina in Sicily in the 1930s. Things are opening up at Leonato's (Gareth Saxe) estate when the war is over and Don Pedro and some of his men leave for Messina.

With their arrival, there are two rom-com pairings, each contaminated in drastically different ways. Handsome Claudio (Gerrard James) falls in love with Leonato's only child, the beautiful Hero (Jennifer Paredes). Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, plots to destroy their affection. Verbal sparring partners Benedikt and Beatrice are tricked into love.

Like Grant, actor Geoffrey Kent infuses Benedick with a sly and playful physical energy. Dana Green joins Beatrice's elegant ensembles and wry observations. She has the sharper mind of the two. (Last February, Green made an intriguing impression when she portrayed American spy Betty Thorpe in Colorado New Play Summit's "Rubicon," which was directed by Coleman. It's good to see her again.)

An actor with nimble comedic timing, Kent doesn't exactly steal the show, but he levels the playing field and makes Benedick scream. He might not win the prank contest, but he has the audience's loyalty when it comes to being a likable jerk. Nevertheless, Benedikt is not as polite as he imagines. See how easily he falls for Don Pedro's ruse about Beatrice's love for him.

Beatrice is just as easily played by her cousin Hero (Jennifer Paredes) and Hero's servant Ursula (Kate Gleason), who are loudly discussing Benedick's affection for her within earshot. What proves amusing is how easily the prickly, renounced couple give in to rumors of each other's affections.

Not unlike the screwball comedies of the 1930s, *Much Ado* features an independent woman maneuvering a rigged system. Beatrice is a dynamo speaking her mind with carefree and camouflaged wit. But how rigged the system is becomes apparent as the comedy unfolds.

The subplot concerns Hero's all-too-easy defilement by Don Pedro's "bastard" brother, Don John (a subtly insidious Gavin Hoffman). Hero is pretty but doesn't quite live up to her name. And Claudio's own heroism, of which tales reach Leonato's estate just before he arrives from the battlefield, is clouded in the eyes of the audience when he thinks the worst about the woman he has fallen so dearly in love with.

Beatrice (Dana Green) is wise in the swanky Denver Center production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. (Michael Martin Photography via Denver Center)

The cast does their best to mitigate the receding focus on the hero's purity. As Leonato, Saxe takes some of the edge off his betrayal of his daughter by discovering remorse in his duke. As Don Pedro, Rodney Lizcano (a Colorado Shakespeare Festival staple) knows the beats and teases them well to keep the playful humor afloat. Rob Nagle provides laughs as Dogberry, the pleasantly goofy constable who learns of Don John's plan.

That Don John's dark machinations could be foiled so easily and somberly says something about the weakness with which the men were willing to judge Hero. Beatrice never wavers in her certainty about her cousin's character.

From the hanging pink and lavender flower arbors (set design by Klara Zieglerova) to Tom Hagerman's original score and the onstage musical performance of Alexander Sovronsky playing Balthasar and Verges, the production has no shortage of eye and ear candy. Like the production itself, Kevin Copenhaver's costumes have the elegance of the screen in technicolor tones.

when you go

"A lot of noise about nothing." Written by William Shakespeare. Directed by Chris Coleman. Starring Geoffrey Kent, Dana Green, Gareth Saxe, Rodney Lizcano, Gerrard James, Jennifer Paredes, Rob Nagle, Gavin Hoffman, Desirée Mee Jung, Kate Gleason, Thomas W. Ainsworth, Jihad Milhem, Logan Ernstthal. At the Denver Center's Kilstrom Theater in the Helen Bonfils Theater Complex, 14th & Curtis Streets. denvercenter.org or 303-893-4100.

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