



BWW Reviews: Nashville Shakespeare Festival Updates MUCH ADO With 1940s Style and Swing

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by Jeffrey Ellis



Fun-filled and light-hearted, *Much Ado About Nothing*—the latest Shakespeare-in-the-Park offering from Nashville Shakespeare Festival—offers its audiences a tuneful, sprightly way to celebrate late summer amid all the trappings of theatrical magic, brought to life by a confident, self-assured cast uttering the Bard's timeless words set to the tuneful music and lyrics of Janet McMahan and [David Hunt](#) singer.

Directed with her customary creative flair by NSF artistic director [Denice Hicks](#), the company's 2012 *Much Ado* is set in the salad days of the post-World War II era—the time frame is resolutely established via the score's most infectious song, "The Boys Are Coming Home," which heralds the arrival of Don Pedro and his confederates from their victorious mission. Hicks' clever adaptation of the play (which history maintains was first produced some 400 years ago) offers further proof that Shakespeare's plays are timeless and universal, making the material all the more accessible by contemporary audiences, while it retains the beautiful language amid the unmistakably convoluted tale of the intrigue and vagaries of love, both



impulsively young and otherwise.

Although indicative of the times in which *Much Ado About Nothing* was written (and the original text is set), the plot—no matter how you slice it, or adapt it—betrays the sexist tenor of the times: Times in which a young woman could be believed to die of a broken heart once she is jilted at the altar. Far-fetched and silly, to be certain, it nonetheless provides the potential for wacky hijinks that allow the plot to develop and the characters to be exposed in all their vainglorious unreality.

Hicks transmogrifies the original Leonato and his brother Antonio into the comely matron Leonata (played with her requisite presence and commitment by the always-watchable [Martha Wilkinson](#)) and her sister Antonia (Emily Webb is charming and convincingly conspiratorial as Wilkinson's sister), who welcome the returning sailors to Leonata's, a smart 1940s-era supper club where the music is swinging and the romantic diversions are plenty. Hicks' skilled updating of the show's plot results in a slightly screwball comedy that evokes memories of the very best of [Preston Sturges'](#) film comedies of the time, with Shakespeare's prose and verse shown off by the near-perfect delivery of her assembled actors.

Led by Wilkinson and Webb, the altogether winning cast includes [Jeff Boyet](#) (impeccably authoritative as Don Pedro, the handsome and swaggering war hero), Brad Brown (as his duplicitous and conniving brother Don John), Randall Lancaster (as the bumbling, but ultimately clear-witted Dogberry), [Phil Perry](#) (wonderfully daft and dim as Verges), and Ran Cummings and Sawyer Wallace (who deliver entertaining performances as Borachio and Conrade, the conspirators who expose Don John for the villainous creep he is, which sends him packing).

Evelyn O'Neal Brush and [Patrick Waller](#) are ideally paired as Beatrice and Benedick, the wiser and more-experienced of the two romantic couples at the center of *Much Ado About Nothing*, playing off one another with glib abandon. Brush (whose delivery of her lines recalls Carole Lombard and [Rosalind Russell](#)) with her crisp, sharp articulation) very ably embodies the emerging 1940s feminine archetype: displaying a fiery independence, brandishing her way with words like a rapier. Waller, as charming and fresh-faced as ever, matches her onstage energy in every scene, again proving himself adept at whatever theatrical challenge he is given.

Brush and Waller show off their period style with a sense of flair and studied elegance, resplendently clad in June Kingsbury's picture-perfect costumes—there's just something about the cut of the women's dresses and, let's face it, is there anything that makes a man more handsome than a crisp, white Navy uniform?

[Steven Fiske](#) (as Claudio) and Emily Marie Palmer (as Hero) are sweetly cast as the younger pair of would-be lovers, imbuing their characters with a sense of youthful naivete that exudes a sense of genuine naturalness, thus making the events that befall Claudio and Hero all the more believable.

The rest of Hicks' fine ensemble—which features members of NSF's Apprentice Company, including Sydni Hayes and [Rachel Woods](#), among others—keep the play's action moving as a good pace, the music and lyrics of Janet McMahan and [David Huntsinger](#) providing the requisite musical numbers that lend a confectionary air to the proceedings. Clearly, "The Boys Are Coming Home" is the most easily recalled number of the score, perhaps because Wilkinson and company perform it (featuring [Pam Atha](#)'s swing era-inspired choreography) with such energetic zeal that one feels transported right back to the 1940s. Although much of the score is easily forgettable (and has a tendency to sound the same) there is no denying the composers' obvious affection for the time period's swinging music.

Music director [Benjamin Van Diepen](#) (who was replaced by Rollin Mains for the performance reviewed) and his four musicians—David Shipps on trumpet, Rick Mraz on saxophone, Tom D'Angelo on bass and Dennis Palmer on drums—bring the music to life, sounding for all the world like a much bigger "big band" in the process.

- ***Much Ado About Nothing*. By [William Shakespeare](#). Directed and adapted by [Denice Hicks](#). Music and lyrics by Janet McMahan and [David Huntsinger](#). Choreographed by [Pam Atha](#). Presented by Nashville Shakespeare Festival's 25th Shakespeare-in-the-Park. At Centennial Park Bandshell, Nashville. Through September 16. For details, go to www.NashvilleShakes.org, or call (615) 255-2273.**

pictured: [Evelyn O'Neal Brush](#) and [Patrick Waller](#)/photo by Rick Malkin