

Theater review: Shakespeare Festival delivers clever staging of 'Much Ado'

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Midway through William Shakespeare's beloved comedy "Much Ado About Nothing," a couple of crafty matchmakers assert: "Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps."

But in the case of Nashville Shakespeare Festival's production, it is Artistic Director Denice Hicks who plays Cupid, winning the hearts of her audience with an engaging post-World War II concept, complete with original music.

It's a winning combination. Already one of the Bard's most accessible works, this "Much Ado" transforms Shakespeare's boisterous band of soldiers into all-American sailors, returning home from the Pacific. Leonato's estate is now a swinging supper club, and the iron-willed Beatrice becomes an independent Rosie the Riveter-type who has no need for the wisecracking Benedick -- or any other man, for that matter.

Add in the snazzy score and clever lyrics of Janet McMahan and David Huntsinger and you have a star-spangled celebration that's hard to resist.

As usual, Hicks has assembled a crackerjack cast that includes a nice mix of familiar faces and new talent. Patrick Waller and Evelyn O'Neal Brush are especially strong as Benedick and Beatrice -- perfect sparring partners, who engage in a "merry war" of words, highlighted in Act 1's "You're Way Too Wicked to Woo."

Waller is perfectly cast as Benedick, delivering his lines with a delightful blend of intellect and farce. He works the crowd for ample laughs, using his wonderfully expressive face to punctuate each and every punch line. And thanks to Pam Atha's inspired choreography, he even manages a credible homage to Gene Kelly in the crowd-pleasing "I Will Be Horribly in Love."

Meanwhile, Brush is simply marvelous as the fast-talking Beatrice -- a high-spirited woman who uses the gift of gab as a suit of armor. And though she occasionally offers subtle hints at melancholy, there is little of the bitterness often found with Beatrice.

Steven Fiske and Emily Marie Palmer -- both members of Nashville Shakespeare Festival's superb Apprentice Company -- also are outstanding as the sweet young lovers, Claudio and Hero. Fiske plays Claudio with confidence and broad humor, while Palmer's voice sparkles in numbers such as "When You Say I Do" and "Until This Moment."

Surprise twist

Martha Wilkinson lends her trademark style and energy to the part of Leonata -- Hero's mother and the local governor. It's worth noting this role is generally played by a man. But with the boys off at war, Hick's interpretation offers Leonata as a genial mother of the bride. It's a nice touch that plays to great effect.

With an ensemble this strong, it seems terribly unfair to single out performers. But I would be remiss not to mention the trio of scoundrels who attempt to smudge Hero's good name. Brad Brown (Don John), Ran Cummings (Borachio) and Sawyer Wallace (Conrade) create a comedic stir with "Plain Dealing Villain."

Randall Lancaster and Phil Perry also deliver big laughs as the bumbling Dogberry and Verges, borrowing a page from the Keystone Kops with their rousing Act 2 opener, "We've Got It Covered."

Throughout the proceedings, Hicks demonstrates a keen eye, leaving no detail unexamined. And Nashville Shakespeare Festival's creative team clearly shares her enthusiasm. June Kingsbury's costumes are as exquisite as they are historically accurate -- with bonus points for the fabulous shoes. Aria Durso's hair and makeup are excellent. Jonathan Hammel's set is simple but efficient and nicely complemented by Anne L. Willingham's lighting. And Atha's aforementioned choreography is sure to have you dancing in your seat.

More than a gimmick, McMahan and Huntsinger's music fits nicely with the 1940s theme, while their witty lyrics help enhance and move the familiar story along. A terrific five-piece band -- credited as Leonata's Supper Club Band -- features Music Director Benjamin van Diepen on piano, David Shipps on trumpet, Rick Mraz on saxophone, Tom D'Angelo on bass and Dennis Palmer on drums.

The opening-night performance suffered a few technical issues, with mics cutting in and out at inopportune moments. But these glitches did nothing to dampen the cast's focus and energy. I imagine these wrinkles will be ironed out as the run continues.

Colorful, campy and utterly charming, this "Much Ado" has all the makings of a bona fide hit.

If you go

What: Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents "Much Ado About Nothing"

When: Through Sept. 16. Performances are at 7:30 p.m., Thursday-Sunday (plus Labor Day Monday), with pre-show entertainment beginning at 6:30 p.m. (A special sign language-interpreted performance is set for today.)

Where: The Bandshell at Centennial Park, 2600 West End Ave.

Tickets: \$10 suggested donation

Info: For best seating, arrive at least one hour before curtain. Blankets and lawn chairs are welcome, although bleacher seating is available. Food/drink vendors are available onsite, or bring your own picnic.

Contact: www.nashvilleshakes.org

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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