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## KU offers 'Much Ado About Nothing' that is both fresh and timeless

Say “Shakespeare” and you conjure worry in the minds of many — in audience members, who fear they may not get it; in actors, who think it may be too hard; in directors who worry it may be too dated.

You won’t get any of those reactions from Peter Zazzali, who’s directing a new production of “Much Ado About Nothing” that opens tonight on the Crafton-Preyer stage at Kansas University.

“I’ve always adored ‘Much Ado About Nothing,’” he says. “I’ve done it twice as an actor, and the wit is sublime.”

One of the Bard’s sophisticated comedies, “Much Ado” follows two sets of lovers — Beatrice and Benedick, and Hero and Claudio — whose stories interconnect. The former are an unlikely pair who come together to help the latter.

“The two plots weave together nicely,” Zazzali says. “It’s much stronger than many of (Shakespeare’s) comedies.”

Of course, there is always that fear that audiences won’t be keen on watching people speak airy, Elizabethan prose wearing tights and capes. To help, Zazzali has brought this production forward in time to the 21st century.

“No one speaks that way now,” Zazzali says of the language. “No one spoke that way then. To do a traditional Elizabethan version of the play might have been dull and not nearly as engaging for a modern audience.”

That doesn’t mean he thinks Shakespeare has nothing to say in 2014.

“The themes of the play run rife across history,” he says. “Putting it in a modern context causes it to speak to us.”

Zazzali’s version has more than contemporary costuming to bring the play up to date. Shakespeare’s original text features a band of soldiers returning from war and being celebrated as heroes. Zazzali has changed that to a soccer team.

“I thought, given our sports-crazy, KU culture, that would give them something they could root for,” he says.

But Zazzali isn’t interested in rewriting Shakespeare. On the contrary, he has great reverence for the Bard and his work.

“I was interested in the spirit of the words of the play without dumbing it down,” he says. “We made a few cuts to shorten the run time and a few changes to modernize the setting, but the language is very much intact. You can’t do Shakespeare well without paying service to the words.”

Bringing 16th century comedy to a modern audience has other challenges too. One of them was the stage.

“The Crafton-Preyer Theatre is an enormous space,” Zazzali says. “It’s a classic proscenium and a huge audience, which doesn’t lend itself well to Shakespeare. A thrust stage is more suitable for Shakespeare. That’s how it was originally performed.”

But Zazzali was undeterred. Just as he modified the script for contemporary times, he adapted the stage to make the show more intimate.

“I arranged that the set is built from the proscenium ramp down into the audience,” he says. “We’re bringing the actors, the words right to the audience.”

And so the Bard of Avon returns to the KU campus, updated and fresh, timeless and classic. Zazzali sums up the whole thing — the play and the experience — succinctly: “It’s been a delight.”

“Much Ado About Nothing” opens tonight and runs March 1, 2, 7, 8 and 9 on the Crafton-Preyer stage in Murphy Hall on the Kansas University. Curtain is 7:30 p.m, except Sundays, when it is 2:30 p.m. Tickets are available by calling the box office at 785-864-3982 or online at [www.kutheatre.com](http://www.kutheatre.com).

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