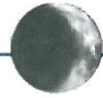


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Posted by John Phythyon March 5, 2014 at 8 a.m.

Review: KU Theatre delights with 'Much Ado'

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Go to see Shakespeare anymore, and you can almost certainly count on it being set at some other time than during the 16th century, when it was written. Kansas University's latest production of "Much Ado About Nothing" follows this trend, bringing the witty comedy all the way to the present day.

To accomplish that, director Peter Zazzali makes one minor change to the script. Rather than have Don Pedro (Joseph Carr) and his comrades be conquering heroes from an ill-defined war, they are instead a soccer team returning to Sicily after having won a national championship.

The show begins with a pre-recorded movie wherein the climactic moments of the soccer match play out, complete with a TV announcer relating the action. The play's comedy is enhanced by this device when players speak in Shakespearean verse after getting fouled and preparing to take a penalty shot.

Once the action moves to Messina, though, it feels very much like standard Shakespeare fare, despite the modern dress. Benedick (Zach Sudbury), a confirmed bachelor, cannot believe his best friend, Claudio (Aden Lindholm), has fallen in love with Hero (Jordyn Cox) and plans to marry her.

Meanwhile, Hero's cousin, Beatrice (Sara Kennedy), delights in insulting Benedick, and the whole town enjoys watching the two spar verbally. Don Pedro, Claudio and Beatrice's father, Leonato (Walter Coppage), conspire to have some sport with the two by tricking each into thinking each is harboring a secret love for the other. Naturally, when Benedick is convinced Beatrice loves him, he falls for her and vice versa.

The whole thing is complicated when Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, John (Alexander Terry), becomes jealous and decides to torpedo Claudio's wedding by making him think Hero has been unfaithful. The ruse works, sending a light and witty comedy into decidedly dark territory, when Claudio impugns her at the wedding and leaves her at the altar. Leonato is set to disown her until Friar Francis (Michael Miller) persuades him to show mercy and concocts a scheme of his own to prove Hero's innocence.

The performances are strong across the cast. Sudbury is clearly having a ball playing the happy-go-

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lucky Benedick. He floats around the stage, firing off zinger and zinger. His reactions when he overhears the rumors of Beatrice's love for him are hysterical.

Likewise, Kennedy revels in the sharp-tongued Beatrice, lobbing her witty insults at Benedick like they were bombs. Kennedy's smooth delivery and mischievous smile light up the stage, allowing us to share in the wicked pleasure she takes from each verbal dart landing on target. By way of contrast, Carr is easygoing as Don Pedro. He is clearly the leader of this band of athletes, and Carr exudes the calm confidence of a man who knows everyone looks up to him.

"Much Ado About Nothing" calls for more range than the average Shakespeare comedy. When it makes a hard turn into tragedy, the cast demonstrates its depth by shifting from jokesters to angry and grieving characters. Kennedy is consumed with outrage and demands Benedick challenge Claudio for his cruelty at the wedding. Sudbury is believably conflicted, trying to decide how to manage his loyalties — to his friend or his love.

Most impressively, Coppage transforms from a jovial, considerate host to an angry, embarrassed father. The fury he conveys toward Hero when he thinks she has dishonored him is palpable and disturbing. Moments later, he appears ready to tear his heart out in grief that this tragedy should befall not just his house but his daughter. Coppage is an Equity actor brought in for the production, and he's at the top of his game as the deeply complex Leonato.

The tragic elements of the play, while gripping and moving, belie the modern treatment. It's difficult to believe in the 21st century that a father would disown his daughter over the unsubstantiated claim (and adamant denial from her) that she had been unfaithful. Likewise, while 16th century Europeans might have believed a woman could die from shame, it doesn't seem like something a modern man would buy. A period treatment might have made those contrivances more reasonable.

But never mind those tiny flaws. "Much Ado About Nothing" is a delightful, rich and thoughtful comedy that is well-acted and pleases on many levels. This is Shakespeare at his comic finest rendered lovingly by a talented, well-directed cast.

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