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Cal Shake's Closes Season with Much Ado

By Lou Fancher



Danny Scheie (center) nearly steals the show as Dogberry (pictured) and Don John. Photo Ohlen Alexander

characters' lies and deceptions may be veiled, but the stage design is transparent, with wide-plank wood floors and little else to obscure the view. Piped terraces and a slender tree center stage provide no place to hide, a fact Moscone exploits with satisfying comic purpose, especially in a scene involving Beatrice, played by Domenique Lozano.

Lozano, in a role requiring humor, intelligence and a touch of nasty, is impeccable. Like her director, she knows when to toss off a line, when to add or subtract a gesture, and how to make the whole thing look like fun.

Benedick, the man Beatrice loves to hate, and vice versa, is captured with ease and great physical humor by Andy Murray. One scene, in which Murray assumes a humble posture in fragmented, sequential movements, is unforgettable.

Dan Hiatt places another notch in his actor's belt with his performance as Leonato. Hiatt's often cast as a gentleman, albeit one with dark undercurrents, so it's a particular pleasure when he appears in Act II as the dim-witted George Seacole. The trajectory Hiatt must then follow, when he subsequently returns as Leonato and goes from proud father to distraught, egocentric man, is no less moving for having played the part of a buffoon only moments before.

Nick Childress, Emily Kitchens, Catherine Castellanos and Andrew Hurteau assume their roles with convincing, individual sincerity.

Danny Scheie, however, is magnetic. His Act I Don John, is elaborately savage. Scheie is able to express more content with a simple "hmmm," than most actors convey with extended monologues. Amidst a swirling waltz scene, with the cast filling the stage, Scheie draws the eye to the top of the stairs, where he stands, surveying the scene with obvious scorn. It's impossible to look away, even if it means missing the boisterous action below.

Although Moscone, at an Inside Scoop event, referred to the character of Dogberry as an "eek," Scheie makes it all worthwhile. His second act Dogberry reveals the cunning joy Shakespeare has with language and sets the audience laughing with guilty pleasure. If anything is reminiscent of the screwball comedies of the 1930's, this is surely it and Scheie is in full command of the role's self-sacrificing humor.

The laughter and gaiety at the close of Much Ado is a good set-up for next year. The 2011 season will include new versions of Shaw's *Candida* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Joel Sass returns to direct the company's first production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Rounding out the summer with a musical production inspired by *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is a new play, *The Verona Project*.

Shakespeare's romantic comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Jonathan Moscone, plays at Cal Shakes September 12 - October 17. Tickets start at \$20; call (510)548-9666 or go to www.calshakes.org.

Cal Shakes 2010 season, now in the midst of its final production at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater, could be compared to a meal.

Opening with the earthy starter, Steinbeck's *Pastures of Heaven*, the 10th anniversary season kept audiences well-fed with Shaw's spicy *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and an expectedly meaty *Macbeth*, directed by Minnesota's innovate, Joel Sass. Artistic Director John Moscone's frothy, decadent *Much Ado about Nothing*, playing now through October 17, is the perfect ending, with spectacular performances by the cast.

Moscone calls the play "succulent, stylish, and witty," in pre-show talks. While that might predict a pumped-up production, his *Much Ado* is clever and sophisticated. As a director, he has a delicate touch: knowing when to mock, when to charm, and when to just have a rousing good time.

The play begins where *Macbeth* ends: with a sword fight. A bookend in direct counterpoint to the previous production, this sword fight is a fake, a "pretend joust" between friends.

Dan Ostling's set, in a bright, economic maneuver, takes the Scottish play's claustrophobic structures and strips them clean. The

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