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## 'Much Ado' is a Fast-paced Delight

By Lou Fancher



James Carpenter as Beatrice in California Shakespeare Theater's production of "Much Ado About Nothing," directed by Jackson Gay. Photo Alessandra Mello

add-on. Behind the scenes at a wedding, a catering crew tells exaggerated - and not so exaggerated - versions of wedding guests' behavior. While it's well-written by Lin and often clever in simple ways - "Messina's," written on the side of the catering truck is an easy leap to Messina, the city in which Shakespeare set "Much Ado" - the flip between this 21st century prologue and the actual play is cloudy. In this version, actors play multiple roles; male actors play female characters and vice versa: some people may find the additional mélange of old and new eras overly confusing.

At the same time, Lin has trimmed significant portions of the play. The resulting briskness-and the casts' incisive performances-eventually erase any mix-ups and keep the basic plot afloat with dramatic, accelerated flair.

The classic "Much Ado" is a romantic comedy that delves occasionally into issues of class and society but remains primarily centered on Beatrice, a young woman with a wicked wit, and Benedick, an aristocratic soldier. Both claim to have little interest in marriage or each other, but everyone around them knows attraction sizzles between them. A second romance between the gentle Hero and brave but impetuous Claudio takes more stage time but serves primarily to underscore the bitter or steamy battles played out across social classes and between lovers.

They've all been brought together by the triumphal return of Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon. Don Pedro has defeated his brother, Don John, in a recent battle. Gathered at the home of Leonato, the father of Hero and uncle of Beatrice, resentment lurks in every corner. While the upper class folks carve each other into mincemeat, the commoners revel or trip over the leftovers-most notably, Dogberry, the constable of Messina whose verbal foibles have the nobility labeling him "an ass." Through a matrix of lies, eavesdropping and manipulations, public shaming nearly destroys the prospect of love and the possibility peace between family members. Of course, in this Shakespeare play famous for having no one die, all is well by the end and a double wedding promises to be celebratory.

James Carpenter (Beatrice) is most moving, infusing his portrayal of femininity with tremendous grace, nobility and a physicality that is never cliché or self-mocking. Stacy Ross (Benedick) inhabits the oily/prickly dynamic of a man separated from his own self so completely

Love and shame haven't changed in over 400 years.

Words of devotion or degradation written by William Shakespeare in approximately 1598 and hurried onto the stage in Cal Shakes' fast-paced season opener, "Much Ado About Nothing," cut to the "bones" as powerfully as when they were originally crafted.

Adapted by Kenneth Lin and Jackson Gay, the re-imagined 100-minute play has a stellar cast hurling gossip, innuendos and loving declarations at heart-racing speeds in the outdoor theater company's 25th season at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater. If an opening scene fails to do more than alert audiences to Cal Shake's progressive approach to classic theater or folds into flatness or confusion as it introduces overused gender-bending role play, the rest of the action is a jolly jig.

Lin, widely known as a writer-producer of the Emmy-award winning "House of Cards," and Gay, who directs the production, begin Shakespeare's comedic play about gender, class and love with an

that it takes conscious effort to remember this is a woman playing a man - and even more effort to care, when the acting is this good. In a performance Sunday, June 5, Lance Gardner (Ursula, Don Pedro) was infinitely watchable in high-contrasting roles. Anthony Fusco (Dogberry, Leonato) proved himself adept at all levels; charming as Messina's bumbling chief of police and hateful as a disdainful father declaring ownership of his daughter. No wonder he is a staple at Cal Shakes, A.C. T, Berkeley Rep and other Bay Area theater companies.

Eric Flatmo's set that relied largely on mobile props was appealing, if surprisingly underused. Costumes by Karina Chavarin were most effective in Carpenter's bold green jacket that mimicked a miniskirt and the first scene's quick-change hats and jackets used to establish identity. "Much Ado" runs through June 19.

For the complete season and more information, visit <http://www.calshakes.org/>.



Stacy Ross as Benedick in California Shakespeare Theater's production of MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, directed by Jackson Gay. Photo Alessandra Mello

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