THEATER: BPA’s ‘Much Ado’ full of easy-to-swallow laughs

By Michael C. Moore, mmoore@kitsapsun.com


BAINBRIDGE ISLAND — The measure of how good Bainbridge Performing Arts' "Bard at Bloedel" production of "Much Ado About Nothing" isn't how often, or how deeply, it makes you laugh.

It's how much it affects you when things get serious.

Rest assured, there are laughs aplenty in the comedy, one of William Shakespeare's funniest and most deftly constructed. And they come across loud and clear in director Kate Carruthers' somewhat minimalist but very effective production, in which — unlike a lot of community theater-level Shakespeare — nearly all the residents of an visitors to Willie Shakes' 17th-century Messina seem to have a clear comprehension of what it is they're saying, and why. Carruthers (with an assist from text coach Kristi Jacobson) has her cast coming from a place of understanding, which makes the Bard's prose just as digestible as the bring-along picnics in the gallery.

That makes the funny funnier. But it also makes the threats more threatening, the menace more menacing, the serious stuff ... serious-er.

"Much Ado" has a lot of potentially serious stuff, too. There are accusations of infidelity, challenges to mortal combat, hate and betrayal. Amid all the mirth, there are dire consequences to be avoided. The language, and the acting, make you fear for the accused, feel for the wronged and want to hiss aloud at the villains.

For creating and then resolving conflict, though, no comedy writer before or since has been the equal of Shakespeare. Modern playwrights all too often seem to get where they're going in two hours only by Swiss-cheesing their plots and depending on implausibilities and left-field coincidences.

But the Bard don't play 'dat. Amid tangled plots and subplots, most every twist and turn is explained and navigated, most everything made plausible.

And it has to be, for "Much Ado" to go from comedy to potential tragedy and back again. The audience has to believe that the characters would fall for the multiple ruses and deceptions — some good-natured, some with malice aforerthought — visited on them by their fellow Messinians. Most everyone in "Much Ado," no matter how intelligent or otherwise worldly, allows him or herself to be gulled big-time at one point or another. The premises for the pranks have to be just as believable as the solutions, and Shakespeare is successful on all accounts.

BPA is just as successful at keeping all of the underhanded goings-on crisp and clear, both in sequences of witty rapid-fire byplay and in more dramatic exchanges, when lives and futures are truly on the line.

Don John (a wonderfully dour Bob Downing) has it in for young Claudio (Maxwell Levit), and decides to sabotage his union with Hero (a luminous Sarah M. Walsh). As his scheme unfolds, Benedick (Pete Benson) and Beatrice (Kylie Soder) wage a "merry war" of words and insults, each espousing the single life and denying what is obvious to everyone else: That they're equals in intellect and temperament, physically attracted and pretty much perfect for each other. Simultaneously, Don Pedro (Max Martina) has hatched his own prank, to get Beatrice and Benedick to 'fess up about their true feelings for each other.
It all, improbably, makes sense, thanks to The Bard's genius, and — in this particular instance — the work of Carruthers and her generally strong cast, the attractive costumes by Janessa Jayne Styck, the sparse but well-used set pieces by Deirdre Hadlock and Alex King, and the musical contributions headed up by guitarist-vocalist Mark Hoffman.

Starting with Benson, who makes for a tremendous Benedick, the leads all are solid. But while Soder's Beatrice talks to the audience, Benson's Benedick plays them, interacts with them, stepping right through the Fourth Wall to bring himself closer to them. He wins not only laughs, but empathy.

No one has more to do, range-wise, than Levit, whose Claudio must go from jovial to besotted to outraged to remorseful, and all points in between, and all are handled with equal aplomb. I might take Gary Fetterplace (Dogberry) to task for his scenery chewing, except that he's so bleedin' good at it, and never steps out of the realm of what's appropriate.

(A side note: Jacobson played Beatrice to Fetterplace's Benedick in CSTOCK's 2013 production of "Much Ado," but they are crucial contributors this time in supporting roles.)

A couple of actors were hard to hear (several speeches are delivered with the characters' backs to the audience) or understand (in an effort, I think, to be broadly comical).

But line flubs and other foibles were remarkably few, especially considering that the previous night's preview performance was rained out. And the choreography (by Lee Ann Hittenberger) and blocking were crisp, particularly during a sequence when Benedick thinks he's concealing himself from Pedro, Claudio and Leonato (Chris Martinez) as they "bait the hook" on Pedro's prank.

It's a great play, well rendered by BPA for the Shakespeare aficionado and accessible to the neophyte. For the third straight summer, the meadow at Bloedel is well used.

REVIEW

'MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING'

Who: Bainbridge Performing Arts

What: "The Bard at Bloedel" production of the comedy by William Shakespeare

Where: Bloedel Reserve, 7571 Dolphin Drive, Bainbridge Island

When: Through July 24; 7 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays

Tickets: $25-$20

Information: 206-842-8569, bainbridgeperformingarts.org