



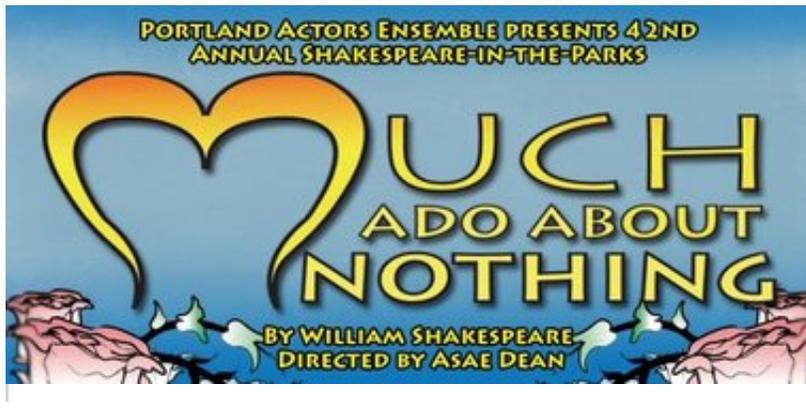
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'Much Ado About Nothing' review: A lively afternoon of Shakespeare in the sunshine

By **Richard Wattenberg**, Special to The Oregonian

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While we've had a cool and cloudy summer, no one could complain about the weather for the Saturday opening of Portland Actors Ensemble's Shakespeare-in-the-Parks production of the Bard's "Much Ado About Nothing." It was a beautiful, comfortable sunny afternoon – ideal for taking in Portland Actors Ensemble's sprightly presentation of Shakespeare's popular comedy.

Sure the company's talented, unflappable actors had to negotiate the cloying ice cream truck music, the chopping-whirling roar of an overhead helicopter, and the shrieking sirens of emergency vehicles, as well as normal park sounds like barking dogs, squawking birds, skate-boarding teens, and partying picnickers. Still, this cheerful band of thespians did just fine. Outdoor productions may lack nuance, but in this case the play's good-spirited fun comes through clearly.

As is generally the case in Shakespeare's comedies, love overcomes all obstacles. The love games begin after a successful military campaign brings the Aragon Prince Don Pedro and his two trusty lieutenants to Messina. Here these two loyal comrades of the Prince, Claudio and Benedick become amorously entangled with the local Governor Leonato's daughter Hero and niece Beatrice. Claudio falls head over heels in love with Hero, but the course of his romance is sabotaged by Don Pedro's villainous brother, Don John. In the end Claudio, who has been led astray by the intriguing Don John, is redeemed, and he and Hero are blissfully united. While Hero and Claudio quickly fall in love, Benedick and Beatrice initially are reluctant lovers, who take pleasure in teasing and mocking each other. At first, both refuse to have anything to do with matrimony, but by play's end, they too find themselves happily coupled.

Much of the comedy's witty word play is associated with Benedick and Beatrice, and Johnny Adkins and Racheal Joy Erickson carry off this good-natured banter with joyful panache – ably playing the best lines of these comic scenes as asides to the audience. Adkins skillfully captures Benedick's ironic humor and well-meaning braggadocio while Erickson's Beatrice is full of merry playfulness. When the action briefly takes on a serious tone, both Erickson and especially Adkins adeptly convey the concerns that drive these characters.

'Much Ado About Nothing'

When: Saturdays and Sundays through Labor Day, 3 p.m. unless noted

Where: Various locations; see website for details

Tickets: Free

Web site: portlandactors.com

Arthur Delaney nicely tracks the swiftly shifting emotions of the passionate Claudio, and Sara Fay Goldman gives us a sweet but grounded Hero. In an interesting bit of casting Goldman also takes on the role of the clownish Dogberry, the police officer and householder who inadvertently helps to undo Don John's plots. Dressed like a Napoleon and humorously goose-stepping around the stage Goldman portrays Dogberry with a broadness and clarity that highlights all the verbal absurdities and malapropisms of this good-intentioned but hilariously ill-equipped officer of the law.

An even more intriguing case of gender blind casting has Jenny Newbry Waters in the role Don John. Waters' melancholic villain may not be as frighteningly sadistic as some villains, but her Don John is fully committed to his villainy. She gives us a Don John who abounds in enthusiastic energy, which is appropriate for an outdoor production where subtlety is less important than moving the action forward.

Director Asae Dean does a superb job of keeping the comedy flowing smoothly. The performance never seems rushed but each scene transitions easily into the next. This well-paced, lively production works especially well in the park setting. Anyone who likes Shakespeare in the sunshine, will find much to enjoy here.

-- **Richard Wattenberg**

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