

# Theater: Much Ado About Rabe and Linklater

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**MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**PUBLIC THEATER/SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK**

The more often I see Much Ado, the more I really dislike most of the male characters in the play. The more often I see Lily Rabe and Hamish Linklater, the more I really like them. They want to do *The Taming Of The Shrew* and Chekhov together? Bring it on. And toss in *His Girl Friday* and *Adam's Rib* while you're at it. (Why hasn't *Adam's Rib* been turned into a play yet, by the way?).

Rabe and Linklater reteam after their Shakespeare in the Park production of *The Merchant of Venice* and their less interesting Broadway turn in *Seminar*. Naturally, they play Beatrice and Benedick, the wittily squabbling people who hate each other so much you know they're just an insult away from declaring their love. B&B are the forerunners of Tracy & Hepburn, Dave & Maddie of *Moonlighting* and every other romantic pairing of two adults who are smart, sexily self-confident and turned on as much by sparring as by spooning. Rabe and Linklater embody them with ease and are the prime reason to see this light, slight, handsomely produced romance.

Not every Shakespeare in the Park production can be an instant classic like Rabe's *Merchant* with Al Pacino or Rabe's incandescent *As You Like It*. Of course, with Rabe on board you can hope and expect greatness. But this is exemplary SitP: some famed actors in secondary roles, some new actors getting a shot at this storied tradition and some theater veterans like Rabe and Linklater working their way through the canon. The nice thing about not raving over the show is that tickets will be easier to get! And that's something you should always do for Shakespeare in the Park.

Has *Much Ado About Nothing* ever really been about the young lovers? Claudio (Jack Cutmore-Scott) has returned from the wars, a bosom buddy of Benedick and an admired protege of Don Pedro (Brian Stokes Mitchell). He falls instantly in love with Hero (Ismenia Mendes), the daughter of the governor of the town of Messina, Leonato (John Glover). Everyone is pleased with the match except the bastard -- in every sense -- Don John (Pedro Pascal). Through various machinations, he finally convinces the naive Claudio and even Don Pedro that the bride-to-be is a strumpet. Hero is brutally shamed on her wedding day and feigns death to hide her dishonor.

In stark contrast to this melodrama is the engaging sniping of Beatrice and Benedick. The two smartest people in the room, they dislike each other intensely, even though they like nothing better than to antagonize one another, crossing verbal swords at every turn. When Beatrice clumsily if sincerely turns down a proposal from the noble Don Pedro (she thinks at first he is joking), he is gracious but decides to get his "revenge" by pulling his own deception. Everyone conspires to convince each of them that the other is madly in love but wary of admitting it. So these two deceptions run parallel courses, one vicious and cruel, the other benign and ultimately salutary. All will be well -- this is one of the romance plays, after all -- though you may wonder if all deserve a happy ending.

The setting is Italy, which adds romance and an air of ease if little more to the proceedings. The scenic design by John Lee Beatty and costumes by Jane Greenwood are handsome and beguiling. I especially enjoyed the small tomato garden at the front of the stage: somehow stomping around angrily or declaring your love in a tomato garden is inherently deflating in a delightful way. Director Jack O'Brien has preserved essentially the

entire play (no major cuts here) but the pacing is brisk throughout, with one scene flowing smoothly into the next. Certainly the show gains a darker edge in the second act, as it should. But this is by and large a frothy Much Ado and the tone is set from the start with an amusing prologue involving the voice-over welcoming people to the Delacorte and some nonsense involving a large gate.

As the young lovers, Cutmore-Scott and Mendes are pretty but leave little impression. I think the comic relief of Dogberry the constable has amused me all of once and the fine actor John Pankow does not break that dismal streak. Faring much better is Pedro Pascal, who made the most of his small arc on Game of Thrones and does the same here as the villainous Don John. He has stage presence to burn and is assured and forthright as a man who feels no pleasure except in thwarting that of others. Similarly Eric Sheffer Stevens makes a strong impression as Borachio, the willing conspirator of Don John and Zoe Winters (so good in An Octaroon) as his love Margaret. Glover and Stokes Mitchell are typically excellent in their supporting turns.

But Much Ado is one of Shakespeare's problem plays and O'Brien does not try to solve it. The men -- excepting Benedick -- truly behave abominably. Glover's father hears accusations against his innocent daughter and immediately bellows to the heavens that he wishes she'd never been born. Claudio and Don Pedro are deceived into thinking Hero is cheating on the lad, but surely any real man would stand up and confront her rather than skulking away. And if not, at least a gentleman would quietly call off the wedding rather than viciously condemn her in public. When the young lovers are reunited, you can't help wondering why she'd want him back. No nuance is present here to bring out these complexities.

Instead, the mood is quickly lightened and the show ends with a dance. Of course, Beatrice and Benedick have been dancing around each other the entire evening. Seeing Rabe and Linklater actually fly about is a treat. Her razor sharp mind makes Beatrice a knowing delight when sometimes Beatrice's scathing demeanor can be played too bluntly. Linklater's charming bewilderment over this enraging, delightful woman is a similar treat. When his desire has been announced and Benedick says simply, "Serve God, love me and mend," it's a declaration of devotion as moving as any you're likely to hear. Now when do we get the Chekhov?

If you're in New York City, here's the charming Jonathan Groff with tips on how to get your free tickets to Shakespeare in the Park. As he says, a few hours waiting in line is really just a few hours having fun in Central Park, something you should do anyway. Still, it would be even more fun if Groff was there with you, wouldn't it?

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