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HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: 'Much Ado?' Really. 'Really Really?' Not Really.

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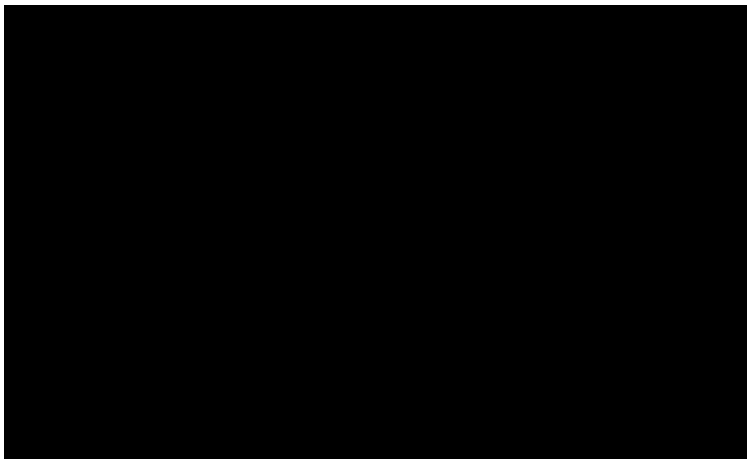
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING *** out of ****
REALLY REALLY * out of ****

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING *** out of ****
THE DUKE ON 42ND ST.

One of Shakespeare's most performed and yet most frustrating plays, *Much Ado About Nothing* features young lovers you don't really want to see get together. But if you've got a battling Beatrice and Benedick, the night is sure to be rescued. That's certainly the case with this new production by Theatre For A New Audience and director Arin Arbus, a team responsible for some of the best Shakespeare in recent years.

Maggie Siff and Jonathan Cake are the two wits who are the last to realize they are fated for each other. The play is set in Sicily before World War I to no particular effect. But their barrage of insults and put-downs is as devastating as trench warfare and just as fruitless: neither one gains any ground on the other until their friends whisper in their ears that it is true love masked by the poison gas of their disdain.

Siff begins a little sourly, perhaps, but after the laying of the trap (in which she is hidden in bushes and turns a sound of astonishment into the cooing of a bird), Beatrice is ready to be won. We're already won over by Cake's Benedick. He's an actor with exceptional appeal, combining a romantic's heart with a Nathan Fillion-like ability to not take himself too seriously. Their inevitable coming together is wholly satisfying.



Arbus has taken to heart Trevor Nunn's admonition that he's never seen this play done with sufficient seriousness. (Though one wonders what was stopping him from doing so himself.) She has a gift for simple, elegant choreography in her staging that keeps us focused on the characters and the text. Her *Much Ado* is set at twilight, not for the sake of

romance but rather for the gloomier prospect of the end of the day (and perhaps the dawning of war). This keeps the dark heart of the play from being such a shock. Claudio (Matthew Amendt) falls instantly in love with the lovely Hero (Michelle Beck) and just as instantly is tricked into believing she is a trollop. He denounces her at their wedding and she swoons. The world is told that Hero is dead and Beatrice demands that Benedick prove his declared love for her by killing Claudio. Frothy fun it's not.

The main stumbling block to enjoying *Much Ado* -- and one not quite surmounted here -- is that you don't much want Claudio to get Hero back. He certainly doesn't deserve her. Amendt does not figure out a way to play Claudio's foolish anger to make us empathize with him. And Hero's decision to marry him anyway leaves us cold, despite Beck's appeal in a thankless role. Shakespeare missed an opportunity towards the end when Claudio believes he is marrying another woman in Hero's place. He should have declared his unworthiness more fully, explained to this veiled woman how unworthy he was of Hero, how he should have doubted his eyes before he doubted her heart. Alas, Shakespeare is not around to take my notes.

On the positive side, the essentially serious tenor of the evening allows the real pain that Claudio causes to be given its due weight. Saxon Palmer finds a strong, straightforward malice to animate the scheming Don John, the bastard who manipulates Claudio into believing he has been cuckolded. This dark matter also, oddly, allows the humor of the play to come across more naturally and not as the odd interruption it can sometimes be.

As the bumbling Dogberry, John Christopher Jones avoids playing to the crowd and milks more laughs because of it. His assistant Verges is captured to hilariously serious effect by John Keating, who has the hair and crazed demeanor of a young Christopher Lloyd here, watching Dogberry with admiring intensity and echoing his every word in a way that makes sense of this hanger-on. With admirable versatility, Keating also plays the serious Father Francis, a character who has some hellaciously long and expository speeches he delivers with ease.

But it's Beatrice and Benedick who remain in our memory thanks to two performers who charm right to the very end. In an amusing bit of business, they are the last to leave the stage, with Beatrice wanting to go one way and Benedick the other. They pantomime bickering until he finally pulls her off to one side... and then a moment later she crosses back the other way and he follows helplessly behind.

REALLY REALLY * out of **
LUCILLE LORTEL THEATRE**

One struggles to understand what drew director David Cromer to this over-stuffed, under-baked nonsense of a play that desperately pushes buttons in hopes of creating some drama. His recent triumphs include *Tribes* and *Our Town*, but this drama by Paul Downs Colaizzo offers nothing for Cromer to work with.

Similarly, Zosia Mamet has shown great taste in landing parts in movies like *The Kids Are Alright* and memorable roles on TV shows like *Mad Men* and *Girls*. Perhaps the lure of her first leading role convinced her to tackle the character Leigh in a show that would inevitably be compared to David Mamet's *Oleanna* and found wanting.

It begins in a tiresome display of testosterone as three college dudes recover from a wild party the night before. Cooper is played by David Hull, who is rarely allowed to keep his shirt on and has the muscle-bound physique to both make that pleasant and convince as an athlete. Coop is the most aggressively frat boy-ish of the guys, though video game fanatic Johnson (Kobi Libii) isn't far behind. They're both just pleased that their friend Davis (Matt Lauria) finally broke his dry spell and scored the previous night with Leigh (Zosia Mamet). The fact that it's with a girl who is in a serious relationship with their friend Jimmy (Evan Jonigkeit) is a minor inconvenience but nothing more.

But we know something worse than infidelity is afoot because in the opener Leigh stumbled home in a drunken stupor with her roommate Grace (Lauren Culpepper). They

laughed and giggled and knocked things over but when Grace went to bed, Leigh curled up on the couch in pain.

Soon, Leigh is accusing Davis, a guy so sweet and kind he's nicknamed "Good Davis," of rape. Davis doesn't know what to say -- he was so drunk he literally doesn't remember what happened the night before but the idea of raping someone astonishes him. Being Good Davis, he also doesn't want to offend by insisting that something he can't remember doing might not have happened at all. Heck, he doesn't even remember kissing Leigh.

It's no surprise to find out that this accusation is soon colored by confusing information. Colaizzo's story offers up so many twists and turns we soon lose interest. The following paragraph includes some spoilers, though since we're never quite sure what might be true or not, it doesn't seem cheating to cover some of them.

Leigh may be faking a pregnancy with her boyfriend Jimmy and the rape story might be a useful way to explain a "miscarriage." Or Leigh may actually have been pregnant and cheated on Jimmy and now she's had a real miscarriage and claiming rape seems the easiest way out. Or Leigh may be getting revenge on all women since Good Davis apparently wasn't so good and when drunk he perhaps hit his last girlfriend and that's why she left him but Leigh thinks he needs to suffer more. Or Leigh may be jealous because she's always had a crush on Davis but he would never date her so accusing him of rape is sweet revenge. Or Leigh may simply be unhinged since she and her sister Haley (Aleque Reid) were brutalized by their father and have the horrific scars on their backs to prove it.

This dizzying array of possibilities is more about the confusion of the play than the complexity of Leigh, who devolves into an emasculating nightmare Coop and Johnson and Davis couldn't have dreamt up in their most dude-ish dreams. When a play is a mess, it's no surprise that the confusion extends to the tech elements, notably the scenic design by David Corins. It's dominated by a couch and an archway that is moved this way and that to indicate the entrance to apartments and homes but mainly seems to just be in the way.

Literally no one in *Really Really* is sympathetic, which is hardly a problem. Plenty of plays and movies and TV shows involve unpleasant and even villainous people. But no one is compelling or interesting in the least either. Cooper panics and wants to protect his jock status, where he doesn't have to really take classes or graduate but just play and drink and eventually accept the cushy job waiting for him from his dad. Johnson is given a bizarre speech in which he explains what a good friend and person he is while insisting he must keep his distance from Davis because Johnson has spent his whole life barely breathing while he struggles to maintain his reputation. (Though if he's desperate not to be sullied by association with an accused rapist, why the heck does he come over to play more video games?) Jimmy is Leigh's unconvincingly born-again Christian boyfriend who blithely insists she must dump her best friend once they get married.

Said best friend has a wildly uninteresting side plot where she is hosting a semi-annual meeting of a club devoted to future leaders of America. Grace must improvise her big speech when she loses it and talks on and on about the economy and the world we live in and shrinking opportunities and so on, none of it germane or amusing or insightful. It's a credit to Culpepper that she keeps this section from going completely off the rails. But nothing can make sense of her outburst against Leigh. Grace believes Leigh has fabricated the rape charge and they have a falling out. Storming off, Grace says that if Leigh was in fact raped, she hopes it hurt. Huh? Imagine trying to discern your motivation for that little zinger.

Lauria (very good on *Friday Night Lights*) has it even worse as Davis, a passive befuddled character who is asked to make several utterly unconvincing moves late in the play that are thoroughly unbelievable and then simply unjustified given the little we know about him. The actors do their best and it's mainly to their credit that we don't burst out laughing after the fourth or fifth soap-like revelation, from Leigh's sister bizarrely pulling down her jeans so she can wipe her ass on Leigh's couch in disdain when no one is looking to the wildly improbable twists at the end.

Anyone can do anything, of course, and characters can surprise us. But we have to believe in them before they can do that. Colaizzo hasn't done a thing but traffic in broad brushstrokes. Davis can't surprise us since we never for a moment believe Davis or Leigh or any of these characters really exist. Really.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****
Chimichangas And Zolof *
Closer Than Ever ***
Cock ** 1/2
Harvey with Jim Parsons *
My Children! My Africa! ***
Once On This Island ***
Potted Potter *
Storefront Church ** 1/2
Title And Deed ***
Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **
Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **
Rio (NYMF) **
The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *
Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2
Stealing Time (NYMF) **
Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2
Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***
Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2
How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***
Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2
Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2
Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2
Living With Henry (NYMF) *
A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2
The Last Smoker In America **
Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***
Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2
Bring It On: The Musical **
Bullet For Adolf *
Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **
Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **
#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *
Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***

Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
Pieces (FringeNYC) *
The Train Driver ***
Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
Detroit ** 1/2
Heartless at Signature **
Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***
Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **
Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*

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