



Benedick (Sean Boyd) and Beatrice (Maggie Chapin) rehearse their wisecracks

Funny in Love and War

Smokin' villian, intense wit mark OSU's *Ado*

Shakespeare's been around for a while, so over the past four centuries, directors and actors valiantly have attempted to keep the well-known scripts fresh. OSU's Scott Palmer takes the familiar (to those who have watched the Kenneth Branagh/Emma Thompson movie) plot and words of *Much Ado About Nothing* and adds song, dance, poetry and letters from the mid-1940s to set the play in the U.S. at the end of WWII. Though the actors are fewer than usual (Palmer has rid the script of groundling-sop Dogsberry), the cast comes in at 50 thanks to the swing dancers. In the lush, well-ordered Memorial Union Quad, with the waxing moon travelling across the sky behind the neoclassical building's dome, *Much Ado* serves as a pleasant diversion, well worth the inexpensive ticket and a trip to Beaver country.

Last year's *Romeo and Juliet*, Palmer's first "Bard in the Quad" production, played out on the steps of the MU. In moving away from the building, Palmer and his designers gained the advantages of more seating and the challenges of a much larger space. With actors dancing, running, bicycling and even driving down the eight sidewalks that run

through the quad, Palmer sets up a wide swath for the action, especially during the first act when the outside light proves sufficient to see the characters. The set provides smart touches of the time, with gazeboes decorated with WWII propaganda posters, flags draped over the balustrade of the Memorial Union and set in the ground lining the sidewalks. The excellent costumes (designed by Barbara Mason) reinforce the era of the mid-1940s.

At the heart of any production of *Much Ado* lie the characters of Beatrice and Benedick. Yes, there's a love story of sorts between the young hero Claudio and his love Hero, with some ridiculous drama about the question of Hero's virginity and her father's honor; this plot not only offends modern sensibilities, it lacks compelling characters. When the plot returns to the interplay of B&B, the audience sighs in relief.

Beatrice (Maggie Chapin), a noblewoman whose parents have died and who lives with her uncle, provides entertainment with her whipcrack wit. Chapin pulls off Beatrice's early monologue with joy and élan, and her humorous scenes with Benedick (Sean Boyd) provide the best parts of the night. Boyd can't

quite keep up with Chapin, but he has amusing scenes of his own. Action goes slack during the moments when the two antagonists declare their love (even with Palmer's gutsy substitution of WWII poetry that explicitly outlines the tragedy of working women being fired when the men came home), but interest

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picks up when the two again have an audience for their insults during the final scene.

Hero (Caren Parmenter) looks the part of a young woman in the 1940s, and Parmenter deals well with Hero's annoying whiny scenes. Claudio (Jason Myers) should be younger and far sweeter than Myers acts; in addition, Myers *must* learn to enunciate. His rushed diction doesn't work for the character or with iambic pentameter.

On the other hand, experienced actor Robert Hirsh plays Hero's father and Beatrice's uncle Leonato with calm command both of the role and his relationship to other actors. It's a delicate part because Leonato must switch attitudes so quickly, and Hirsh rises to the task. Tall, skinny Jonathan Pederson doesn't quite work as the commanding Don Pedro; that's more to do with casting than with Pederson. The villain Don John (Peter Platt), like so many of Shakespeare's villains, has the flimsiest of backstories to explain his anger, but Platt performs the part with consummate skill. His disdain for Don Pedro and Claudio shines through, his delight in destroying Hero's reputation as malevolent as his sneering countenance requires. In a wry touch, Don John, alone among the major characters, smokes — clear evidence of villainy.

Palmer found a reference to a character called Innogen in one of the *Much Ado* folios; he brings her in to open the play and at sev-

eral other points to speak "proto-feminist WWII poetry." Vanessa Oberlin, playing Innogen, needs to ramp down her supposed anguish, but her part provides texture and unfulfilled longing, giving more depth to the historical setting. The swing dancers, who scared the audience when the men weren't prepared to support their partners, distract from the action but give that patented summer theater feel to the evening. So bring a picnic, lawn chairs and warm blankets, and enjoy the wit and warmth of Palmer's interpretation of the classic. **EW**

Much Ado About Nothing's start time is 7 pm; the run continues July 26-29 and August 1-5. For tix, call 541-737-2784. Word is that it's selling out quickly; call soon!

Opening Nights

Free to Be ... You and Me

Opens at the Mad Duckling Children's Theatre in Island Park Tuesday, July 31.

Really? They're putting on *Free to Be ... You and Me*? Does that mean wistful parents of all genders and creativity levels will be accompanying their mind-blown children to the theater? Does that mean the uptight gender police will back off again on little kids who like dolls and trucks, cooking and earning money equally — or not at all? We sure as shootin' hope so. Show dates are 11 am July 31-August 4 in Island Park and August 7-11 at Amazon Park. Tix available by calling 346-4192 or at the, er, "door."

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