

Much Ado About Nothing

By William Shakespeare

Directed by Stephen Burdman

NY Classical Theatre

Central Park, 97th Street & CPW (212/252-4531)

Equity showcase (closes June 29)

Review by Charles Battersby

Although *Much Ado About Nothing* is superficially about a romance between young lovers Claudio and Hero and the scheme by the evil Don John and Borachio to end their romance, the real fun of the show is the reluctant romance between Benedick and Beatrice. Just about the only thing needed for a good production of *Much Ado...* is a well-cast Benedick and Beatrice. The New York Classical Theatre not only had a great Benedick (Robin Bloodworth) and Beatrice (Nikki E. Walker), but an all-around solid cast. Not only that, but they also had a clever method of staging the play. The show took place in Central Park. Not on a stage in the park, but all over the park itself. For every scene, the cast moved to a different clearing, with the audience following along on foot.

To keep order, the company had a swarm of ushers following the play, herding the audience to each location. The unique approach to staging was more than a gimmick. In place of actual sets, the company made use of the natural surroundings, staging entrances from over hills and behind bushes. One scene in which Benedick says "I will hide me in the arbor" takes on new meaning when Benedick sneaks behind a real bush and skulks around the park's natural rock formations during the following scene.

Since the audience had to stay on its feet for the entire show, the script has been edited, heavily so. The running time was a little over an hour and a half, but the edits were cleverly chosen and people not already familiar with the play wouldn't even notice the cuts. In addition to the cuts, there were several gratuitous sword fights squeezed into the play, but all were well-choreographed (by J. David Brimmer) and did not detract at all from the dialog.

Because it was outdoors there was little in the way of lighting or sound, though as the sun set during the final scenes, the ushers used flashlights to provide a bit of extra lighting. A single set piece was employed, a gravestone that blended in with the surrounding stonework in the park. The costumes implied that the time was somewhere in the past, but portrayed no specific time period; the men wore non-specific military uniforms that could have passed for any time in any country for the past 300 years. Women wore long robes or dresses that also implied some time in the past, yet again denoted no particular time or place.

Director Stephen Burdman has put together a show that could easily stand on its own in a black-box theatre, without the park gimmick. Nevertheless it truly was fun to see a play while simultaneously frolicking in the park.

It should also be noted that the shorter running time, action-packed sword fights, and outdoor activity made this production an excellent introduction to Shakespeare for children (and grown ups too).

(Also featuring: James Doerr, Carries Specksgoor, Joris Struyck, Kurt Elfman, Thom Rivera, Justin G. Krauss, Lisa Louttit, and Andy Paterson)

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