

## Crit. By Rick Perrins of Parish Players' "Much Ado About Nothing" – 14/5/09

### Intro.

Staging a Shakespeare play is ambitious because of the difficulties of language & verse speaking but also because of the unbelievable plot twists and that awkward moment in the best Shakespeare comedies where tragedy threatens to overwhelm comedy – the “pound of flesh” moment.

Also a Shakespeare play is something of a blank canvas, so what a director brings to the production, their “vision” if you like, is very important. Broadly a director can take 3 routes:

1. Slavish adherence, e.g. “Julius Caesar” done in togas
2. Slapping on a new concept to the play (which also has its dangers), e.g. “J.C.” in nazi uniform
3. Something less specific but consistent.

This production had a mixture of 2 & 3 – a sort of non-specific Englishness and I thought this was a consistent concept in this production. This is a good choice, I think. Though Shakespeare’s plays are often set in exotic/ romantic locations they are all really about England. The Watch provide a good example – they are a familiar English caricature – the stupid policemen.

### Set

The set was attractive and effective. Its warm colours set the tone for this production, which was strong on emotional warmth. It reminded me of a kind of English country garden with a hint of mock classical. The flowers and the way it was lit gave it a summery feel. It was also a practical set with lots of nooks and crannies for the eavesdropping which is so much a part of this play.

My only query was whether it might have been nice to have had the tabs open as the audience entered, a) because it’s nice for audiences to have something to ponder when they come in b) because I think they start to wonder about what’s going to happen c) because I think theatre should not hide things away wherever possible – a theme I’ll come back to.

### Costumes

As with the set – a lot of care and attention had clearly been paid. This added to an excellent overall visual impression. I liked the “teams” of men and women: the women in their striking maidenly whites and the men in military black with red piping. I thought this emphasised the differences between men & women in this society and fitted nicely with the notion of the battle of the sexes which is clearly in the play. This “teaming” also meant that breaks in the convention were also effective, e.g. Benedick’s transformation into a lovesick boy with his black shirt cleavage, rose and perfume. Also the shambolic costumes of the Watch were a) appropriate for their characters and b) a good visual gag.

### Music

I thought this also worked very well – the folk feel of the music fitted in with the traditional English feel of the play. I really liked the beautiful harmony singing at the beginning and the impressive ensemble singing the “sanctus” as they process to church.

I really enjoyed the moments when the singers and musicians came amongst us. This comes back to my theme of being open and upfront about theatre and avoiding hiding things away whenever possible.

I'm not a big fan of music underscoring action in a play. I thought this worked well for comic effect, e.g. in the funny cameos when Borachio is wooing Margaret but less well when used to suggest Don John's sinister nature. The actor was making a good job of doing this already. It was about the only point in the play that I had difficulty hearing the dialogue.

But singers sang & musicians played well. I wanted to see and hear more, which can only be a good thing.

### Technical

The honest truth is that I didn't really notice that much about lighting or sound but I think that's probably a good thing. Unfortunately techies are a bit like goalkeepers and only remembered when they make a mistake. The few things I did notice included the overall warm and sunny feel to the play, particularly in the first half and some nice, sharp contrasts between light and dark scenes, e.g. the candlelit procession, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Watch scene and the bright scenes that followed or preceded them.

### Acting

I thought the general standard of performance ranged from good to very good. There was nothing that made me wince and much to enjoy in the performances. Technically there were no problems with the projection of the cast and there was a really good sense of understanding of what was being said.

If you haven't got a strong Beatrice and Benedick you haven't got a play. Fortunately you had both. The first moment in which they approached each other from either side of the stage, using words like gunslingers use bullets, until they stood toe to toe, was a great way to start and a nice symbol of their relationship in the play.

Max Perryment as Benedick was convincing in all 3 of the various stages he goes through: from laddish "roaring boy" who has forsworn women through lovesick male and then the difficult transition into macho male, honour bound to defend Hero's honour or lose his beloved. An impressive performance.

Joanna Williams made a similarly effective and impressive 3 stage journey as Beatrice – a mirror image of Benedick's. I made several references in my hastily scribbled notes about the power of her voice. She certainly persuaded me that here was a woman who was not to be messed with.

I enjoyed the business in the mirroring eavesdropping scenes with Benedick lurking in the audience and Beatrice behind the trellis. The playing between the two was strong and I really felt that theirs would be a marriage of equal partners. They really were "too wise to woo peaceably".

Beatrice and Benedick were played by young actors here. There has been a trend for these parts to be played by more mature actors, so it was refreshing to see them played with youthful vim and vigour rather than world weariness.

Hero and Claudio have a much harder job as they have less to play with but I thought the two very young actors did a good job.

Joe Reeves' strength as Claudio was his intelligent understanding of the nuances of what he was saying. This led to clarity in performance. He was good as the starry-eyed and yearning lover and he managed the difficult transformation into vengeful dupe well.

Hero is a tricky role because she is so put upon. She doesn't instigate the action and is much put upon, so she has to do more reacting than acting. Nonetheless I felt that Anne Murray suggested her vulnerability effectively and managed to create audience sympathy for her when she was cruelly denounced then shockingly knocked about.

In this play B. & B. have the best lines and the usual comic interlude from the Clowns is not perhaps the funniest part in this play, being dependent on a great deal of word play. But the Watch here did a good job with the material, raised some laughs and were lively and entertaining. Their costumes were nice visual gags.

Don John is a bit of a one-dimensional character – a “plain dealing villain” – But Oli Court was suitably menacing and malcontented in the role. His skinny jeans set him slightly apart from the other soldiers in the play, suggesting his status as an outsider and real party pooper.

The authorities in this play were good men, kindly and avuncular, adding to the overall impression of warmth in the first half of the play. Simon's Leonato was a slightly baffled but doting father with a strong relationship with his daughter. His tricky change towards her in part two was suitably shocking and Simon managed this hard-to-believe transition very well. Similarly Justin Webster, as Don Pedro, a genial and likeable fixer, while Chris Abbott's Friar was a convincing voice of reason. Toni Conyer, in her brief scenes as Antonia, was a strong female role model in Beatrice's family.

The other young actors were good in the supporting roles. I'm a little reluctant to single any out in case I forget to mention anyone. It was good to see so many young faces on stage and, from what I saw, I would certainly encourage all of them to continue performing.

#### Some small queries re: staging etc.

I liked the way that the cast did most of the stage management in view of the audience, often in a different lighting state. I noticed a couple of breaks with this convention:

1. A blackout to cover a scene change in part 2. I feel that blackouts interrupt an audience's attention and should be avoided wherever possible.
2. Stage managers in their blacks did carry out a couple of scene changes. Should they/ could they have been in a basic costume to keep with the convention that had been established?

I prefer productions, as I've mentioned, to be open about the inherent theatricality of drama on stage – that it is a room in which one group of people perform to another group of people.

Could the table and chairs for the signing of the peace treaty at the very beginning have been pre-set?

Could some of freezes in the excellent masked ball have taken place in the audience?

I'd have liked to see more of the musicians and singers. Could they have mingled among us?

There was a funny cross with the very large truck/ platform at one point. I know it's a small stage but could this have been avoided somehow?

In general I thought the show was slickly staged however and the management of the stage added to the pace and energy of the production.

### Summary

The strengths of this production far outweighed any weaknesses.

- It was well and judiciously edited. I can't remember the last time I saw a Shakespeare play whose first half came in at 55 minutes!
- The "concept" for the play was consistently carried through in acting, set, costumes and music.
- There were many really strong theatrical moments, e.g. the delightful little cameos and freezes in the masque, Borachio's pretend wooing of Margaret, Benedick's transformation, the candlelit procession, comic business in the eavesdropping scenes.
- The first half of this production was cracking – funny and warm in every sense of that word – in the relationships, set, colours and lighting, music.

The second part of this play is tricky. It has the pretend death of Hero, abrupt changes of direction for the characters and a "pound of flesh" moment - when Beatrice tells Benedick to "kill Claudio". I thought the company pulled it off, mainly because of the strong performances of the central characters. Part 1 was perhaps stronger than part 2 but perhaps that's a comment on the play rather than the production.

I haven't specifically mentioned Hugh Edwards, the director, though obviously much of what I've said relates to his decisions. This was a funny, generally pacy and well directed play with a strong cast who seemed to know where they were going. I thought Hugh added value to this play and you can't really ask more of a director than that.