

Much Ado About Nothing: The merry war resumed

David Walsh
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American film and television producer, director and writer Joss Whedon has adapted William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* for the screen. The best-known previous film version was directed by Kenneth Branagh and released in 1993.

The play, which literary historians suggest was written in 1598 or 1599, is a comedy, although it certainly has "gloomy overtones," in the words of one commentator.

Whedon shot his film in black and white and in modern dress over the course of twelve days, at his home in Santa Monica, California, employing a number of actors with whom he has worked before. The results are a bit uneven, and some of the play's strongest moments do not perhaps receive their full emotional or intellectual due, but, all in all, this is an enjoyable effort and, in various ways, preferable to Branagh's more elaborate, sunbaked Tuscan adaptation.

Don Pedro (Reed Diamond), a Spanish prince from Aragon, is set to arrive in Messina, Sicily, along with his officers, Benedick (Alexis Denisof) and Claudio (Fran Kranz), after having defeated his half-brother, the bastard Don John (Sean Maher)—with whom he is now apparently reconciled—in battle.

The governor of Messina, Leonato (Clark Gregg), his daughter Hero (Jillian Morgese) and niece Beatrice (Amy Acker) await Don Pedro and company. Beatrice, the most appealing figure in the play, mocks the absent Benedick. Leonato explains to a third party that, "There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them." A good deal of the work is taken up with the course of this merry war.

Shortly after his arrival in Messina, Claudio announces he has fallen in love with Hero. Don Pedro promises to woo the girl for him, during a masked ball, and broach the issue of their nuptials with her father. For their part, Benedick and Beatrice, who apparently have had some relationship in the past (made explicit in Whedon's version), recommence their "skirmishing."

Don John, bitter toward his brother and jealous of Claudio,

his vanquisher in combat, contrives, with the aid of his confederates Borachio (Spencer Treat Clark) and Conrade (Riki Lindhome), to sabotage the marriage of Claudio and Hero, by blackening the latter's name. Convinced of Hero's wantonness, Claudio denounces her at the altar and she drops to the ground, apparently dead. Don John's accomplices, however, have meanwhile fallen into the hands of the bumbling constable Dogberry (Nathan Fillion) and his nightwatch associates. The villains rather easily confess, setting the stage for an eventual happy conclusion.

The performances in Whedon's film are intelligent and honest, if not necessarily inspired. Acker and Denisof do well as Beatrice and Benedick, bringing a good deal of liveliness and personality to the roles. Gregg, who is generally fine in whatever he does, and Fillion contribute as well. The director-adaptor has thrown a little more sexuality into the mix of this *Much Ado About Nothing* than is usual (including changing Conrade's gender and making the character Don John's lover), but it is not overdone and one has the sense that the writer of the original comedy would not have minded terribly.

The "modern dress" element of the production is not made a meal of and seems more a function of budget and casualness than anything else. Acker, in fact, in an interview claims she didn't know the actors' work on *Much Ado About Nothing* was going to be recorded until she showed up the first day and saw trucks and equipment.

Of course, at the same time, this is not Orson Welles. The direction is unpretentious, but somewhat rudimentary. The camera tends to regard everyone and everything with the same rather impersonal gaze. There are specific intensities and insights in the play that go missing, or threaten to. One longs at times for greater abandon, greater artistic recklessness.

Still, in contemporary Hollywood, occupying oneself with Shakespeare, even in one's "off hours" or "on hiatus," seems an honorable undertaking.

The play itself continues to fascinate us.

The Claudio-Hero strand of the story is somewhat

conventional and occasionally tedious and apparently has respectable roots in various Renaissance Italian sources. We tend to be far more interested in the carrying on of Benedick and Beatrice, whose actions and reactions speak to intriguing themes in Shakespeare's work and trends in Elizabethan life.

Both Beatrice and Benedick first swear up and down that love and marriage are abominations. She: "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me." He: "Because I will not do them [women] the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none ... I will live a bachelor."

Things change rapidly once Benedick's friends trick him into believing that Beatrice adores him and Beatrice's friends convince her that Benedick feels the same. Neither lacks self-regard or has any difficulty imagining he or she is admired and loved. In any event, we have never doubted for an instant the obvious attraction contained in their public repulsion. Benedick and Beatrice are the two most interesting people around and ought to find one another.

In a review of the Branagh film 20 years ago, I wrote: "Shakespeare felt the need to ridicule vestiges of chivalric concepts of love and honor, associated with the ideal medieval knight. Claudio is a perfect subject for Don John's trickery because he is operating on the basis of false and overblown notions ... On the slimmest evidence, Claudio acts to protect his honor at the expense of his love and happiness. This has potentially tragic consequences."

In fact, the words "honour," "honourable," "dishonour" and "dishonourable" appear a total of 20 times in *Much Ado About Nothing*, more than in any other of Shakespeare's comedies written about the same time (*Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*), in most cases, far more.

In fact, the first thing we learn about Claudio is that "much honour" has been bestowed upon him by Don Pedro. Indeed, Benedick is first introduced along the same lines, as a man "stuffed with all honourable virtues."

It turns out the great advantage Benedick and Beatrice have over the other characters is, above all, their extraordinary flexibility, adaptability, changeability. In the play's final scene, Benedick asserts that "man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion," and the play clearly celebrates the fact.

Benedick and Beatrice are works in progress, quite willing to overthrow previous convictions and practices. Once he hears of Beatrice's supposed devotion to him, as well as an account of his own faults, Benedick promises cheerfully to become quite different: "Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending."

Noting that he might possibly be ridiculed for having previously "railed so long against marriage," Benedick continues, "but doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age." Should the jibes of others divert him from his new course? Wonderfully, immortally, he answers himself, "No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married."

When Beatrice overhears a conversation about Benedick's alleged affection for her, which her friends have staged for her benefit, she instantly promises: "Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu! No glory lives behind the back of such. And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee, Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand." Fortunately, the play never suggests any such "taming."

In *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Harold Goddard wrote: "Where faith in the fact can help create the fact, says William James, it would be an insane logic that would deny our right to put our trust in it. If the friends of Beatrice and Benedick had concocted their whole plot out of nothing, as Don John did his against Hero, their means of bringing the two together would not have been 'justified.' But sensing the existence of the seed they brought just enough 'nothing' to bear on it in the form of imaginative sunshine to bring it to the flower of actuality, to give to that 'airy nothing' a local habitation and a name. They merely gave nature a nudge, as it were."

There is something to this, and it speaks to the radical, destabilizing element in Shakespeare's work, created on the cusp of the 17th century. The Soviet critic Aleksandr A. Smirnov argued in the 1930s that an essential characteristic of Shakespeare was "a new morality, based, not on the authority of religion or of feudal tradition, but on the free will of man, on the voice of his conscience, on his sense of responsibility towards himself and the world," a morality associated with "the energy and optimism so characteristic of the Renaissance."

Four hundred years later, the playwright's powerful, beautiful, utterly sincere thoughts and emotions continue to affect us.



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