

Much Ado About Nothing

Critics' Pick

Time Out rating: 4 stars!

Tue Feb 19 2013



Theater review by Helen Shaw. Duke on 42nd Street (Off Broadway). By William Shakespeare. Dir. Arin Arbus. With Maggie Siff, Jonathan Cake. 2hrs 40mins. One intermission.

Sigh no more, ladies (and gents), sigh no more. Instead, you should rejoice—and then nip out to buy tickets from Theatre for a New Audience. In a masterstroke, Arin Arbus's frequently charming production of *Much Ado About Nothing* has cast Jonathan Cake as Benedick, and his agile, gleeful performance drives out any possibility—any thought at all—of woe.

Deceptions abound in Shakespeare's Messina. In an atmosphere rife with masquerades and love tricks, Benedick's friends, the prince Don Pedro (Graham Winton) and Claudio (Matthew Amendt), are gulled by wicked Don John (Saxon Palmer) into believing the worst about Claudio's betrothed, Hero (Michelle Beck). Indeed, almost all of the "plot" rests on these machinations, but you'll barely notice. As the marriage-hating Benedick and his sparring partner, Beatrice (the always-magnetic Maggie Siff), turn inevitably toward love, the whole play moves helplessly in their wake. The production has clearly heeded British director Trevor Nunn's comment that the play must be done with "sufficient seriousness." Riccardo Hernandez's set is all shadowy black corners, with one tree and a swing for frolicking; Donald Holder's lighting design scrimps on brightness, then shines the occasional awkward (but necessary) spotlight.

Many actors do fine work—Amendt as fickle Claudio, Elizabeth Meadows Rouse as perky maid Ursula—but others, occasionally left adrift by Arbus, are still finding their footing. It scarcely matters, though, since Cake's confident, outsize high jinks operate as a kind of grounding force. He prompts barking, helpless laughter; he even stage-manages scenes, hustling an actor offstage so that he can get time alone to flirt with the audience. All apologies to Beatrice, but it's a masterpiece of seduction. None of us are left with our modesty intact.

—Helen Shaw



THE NEW YORKER

Goings On About Town: The Theatre

Much Ado About Nothing

The director Arin Arbus and her excellent players in the Theatre for a New Audience present a bold, bifurcated version of the Shakespeare comedy. Before intermission, the show, stuffed as it is with nonstop banter and wordplay, is wonderfully airy and nimble. But in the second half, the mood is palpably altered, as the consequences of the characters' various schemes against one another turn deadly serious, good nature curdling in an instant. Much of this could be played with a wink, but, in exploring the darker implications of the play's jests, the company succeeds in tapping into a wide emotional wellspring. As Beatrice and Benedick, the central sparrings in this progenitor of the modern rom-com, Maggie Siff and Jonathan Cake are whip-smart and fantastically foolish.



Review: Buoyant, zestful 'Much Ado About Nothing'

Associated Press

Tuesday, February 19, 2013

NEW YORK — William Shakespeare's comedy "Much Ado About Nothing" benefits from a lighthearted approach and an evenly-matched pair of verbal jousters to conduct a battle of the sexes. An accomplished, zestful production by Theatre for a New Audience that opened Sunday at The Duke on 42nd Street contains all that and more.

Directed by Arin Arbus, the polished presentation is set just before World War I in Sicily. Arbus, who also directed Shakespeare's "Othello" and "MacBeth" for the same theater company, here creates another dynamic, stylish staging. With minimal set and few props, the eloquent language and the actors' considerable talents become the focus.

Jonathan Cake and Maggie Siff are superb as the reluctant lovers, Benedick and Beatrice, who struggle with conflicting feelings of attraction and anger. They're a joy to watch as they skillfully fling Shakespeare's sophisticated repartee, in what Beatrice's uncle Leonato refers to as "a skirmish of wit between them."

Siff is confident and sarcastic as the woman Benedick calls, "my dear Lady Disdain," yet she also captures the subtleties of her character's ambivalence. Cake enlivens his roguish character with engaging animation, appealing directly to the audience with winning assurance. The scenes where each of them comically crawls around the side of the stage while miming bewildered eavesdropping are masterfully executed.

The other lovers, chaste Hero and proud young Claudio, are given naive sincerity by Michelle Beck and Matthew Amendt. Robert Langdon Lloyd is quite amiable as Hero's father, Leonato, until he erupts sensationally in a furious tirade when Hero is dishonored at her wedding altar.

As annoyingly addled constable Dogberry, John Christopher Jones is quite a scene-stealer, even when John Keating is lurking onstage in his inimitably goofy way. There are several soldiers of various rank, led with gravitas by Graham Winton as goodly Prince Don Pedro and Don John, his scheming, black-hearted brother. Kate MacCluggage and Elizabeth Rouse as a duo of good-humored housemaids brighten the proceedings.

The plot, aptly summed up by the title, contains the usual Shakespearean mixture of disguises, identity mix-ups, villainous deceit, non-villainous deceit and an innocent party wrongly accused. That's followed by a faked death, some comical, bumbling rustics and eventually, remorse, joy and a few merry jigs.

"Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably," Benedick tells Beatrice rather belatedly, but in this buoyant presentation, the audience wouldn't have it any other way.

Much ado about two: the lovers sizzle onstage

★★★

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI

February 18, 2013

Watch out: There's a hot new couple in town! Maggie Siff and Jonathan Cake are so irresistible in "Much Ado About Nothing" that they would make the most embittered divorced believe in love all over again.

The pair bring piercing intelligence and winning charm to the play's leads. The downside is that the energy in Arin Arbus' production for Theater for a New Audience flags every time the stars aren't onstage.

Things don't augur well for the bickering Beatrice (Siff, best known as Dr. Tara Knowles on "Sons of Anarchy") and Benedick (Cake, Broadway's "Medea"). They're engaged in "a kind of merry war," says Beatrice's uncle, Leonato (Robert Langdon Lloyd), "a skirmish of wit."



Gerry Goodstein

Jonathan Cake and Maggie Siff are terrific as Shakespeare's battlers. Yet these two share more than they think. They're both pleased with their own sharp tongues, and are convinced they're above affairs of the heart.

"I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me," Beatrice tells Benedick, echoing his professed conviction.

According to the Great Laws of Romantic Comedy — which "Much Ado About Nothing" essentially wrote up back in the late 16th century — this can mean only one thing: Beatrice and Benedick are fated to fall in love.

OK, so they do have to be tricked by their friends to realize that, but the payoff is all the sweeter. It's just great fun to watch Cake's manly officer turn into a befuddled, lovestruck puppy, and Siff's headstrong Beatrice melt into a puddle of happy goo — she had delivered similar nimble turns in "The Taming of the Shrew" last year.

The show, set in pre-WWI Sicily, complete with wandering accordion player, isn't quite as nice to the second set of lovers. As with Beatrice and Benedick, the relationship between Hero (Michelle Beck) and Claudio (Matthew Amendt) is influenced by gossip and eavesdropping. In their case, though, the consequences are tragic.

Like many Shakespearean men, Claudio is quick to question his betrothed's purity, and he cruelly humiliates her in public. Then, as so often happens, he gets the second chance he really doesn't deserve.

Beck and Amendt handle their scenes well enough, but you can't help counting the minutes until Benedick and Beatrice return. When these two equally matched opponents discover they are equally matched lovers, the theater radiates with joy.

Jonathan Cake and Maggie Siff Feud and Frolic in TFANA's *Much Ado*

By Alexis Soloski *Wednesday, Feb 20 2013*

Flowers wilt. Chocolates molder. Card stock yellows. Shakespeare knew—in his comedies and tragedies both—how abruptly even the purest love can sour into jealousy, hate, indifference. And yet, in the late plays particularly, he also shows how miracles renew love. But in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a prickly comedy of 1598 that a contemporary rightly described as "most excellent," it doesn't take any magic to turn abhorrence to its opposite. Just scheming, love letters, gossip, and, in the current Theatre for a New Audience revival, a splendid performance by the dishy Jonathan Cake.

Cake plays Benedick, a gentleman soldier recently returned from a successful skirmish in Don Pedro's army. Some years ago, he and Beatrice (Maggie Siff) attempted amours, but that former passion has since curdled into a teasing dislike, "a skirmish of wit." Beatrice announces herself an enemy to all ardor; Benedick declares he would prefer anything to marriage. But everyone around them, including the rather dull young lovers Hero (Michelle Beck) and Claudio (Matthew Amendt), conspires to match them. And happily the trick succeeds.

Much Ado is a play that reminds us how little we know our own hearts—let alone anyone else's. It is a comedy that keeps threatening to slide into tragedy. (Harold Bloom called it "nihilistic.") Only chance occurrences (an overheard word, a discovered letter) ransom laughter from tears. Arin Arbus, who directed a *Taming of the Shrew* last year that also starred Siff, doesn't have a natural ear for the funny stuff, and she can't make the dreary subplots catch fire. But she delivers brisk and lucid productions and often shows, as here, a terrific instinct for casting.

Siff is fine and clever, though perhaps a rather more brittle Beatrice than the text suggests. Yet if you saw her in last year's show, you can relish knowing that here, at least, is one shrew left contentedly untamed. The play never censures her spirit, and even when she and Benedick acknowledge their affection, the quips keep coming. "Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably," says Benedick.

And, oh, what a Benedick! For those who have seen Cake only in more serious roles, such as Jason in *Medea*, this warm and generous turn will come as a revelation and delight. Even beneath a bushy beard, he is a remarkably mobile and expressive actor, conveying Shakespeare's lightning-fast alterations of thought and emotion without hardly seeming to try. He can make even the most obscure joke seem intelligible. His realization that his only love springs from his only hate is a moment to be treasured. With Cake like this, who needs icing?

The New York Times

Seeking Love When It's in Front of You

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

February 17, 2013

There are occasions when the title of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" seems all too apposite. Such is the unhappy case with the Theater for a New Audience production that opened on Sunday night at the Duke on 42nd Street, spreading mirth only sporadically, thanks primarily to a stylish performance by the British actor Jonathan Cake as an effervescent, audience-beguiling Benedick, a mismatched foil for the sparkle-free Beatrice of Maggie Siff.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Jonathan Cake, back, and Matthew Amendt in
Theater for a New Audience's "Much Ado About Nothing."



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Maggie Siff and Jonathan Cake in "Much Ado About Nothing."

Directed by Arin Arbus, whose "Othello" for the same company still ranks as one of the best Shakespeare stagings I've seen in New York, the production seems determined to underline this comedy's more pessimistic, even gloomy aspects. Although a green tree sheds its leaves in a corner of the set, and proves an amusing hiding place for Benedick during the scene in which his friends trick him into believing Beatrice is besotted with him, the sets by Riccardo Hernandez are stark and minimalist. For most of the running time we are staring at a lighted wooden platform backed by black screens. In pursuing their romantic desires, the characters are often dancing in the dark.

Set in Sicily, in keeping with the text, but updated to the years just before World War I, the production is dominated by Mr. Cake's commanding performance as an exuberant Benedick, whose delight in denigrating the appeal of the married state we quickly come to see as a ruse protecting a heart inwardly beating hard in its desire for companionship.

This becomes clear during the scene in which Benedick lists the myriad attractions any woman worthy of him must possess: addressing the audience with a conspiratorial air Mr. Cake's Benedick begins in a jocular tone, as if he's quite sure of his arguments against the possibility of any woman attaining sufficient perfection.

Soon, however, his manner subtly shifts, until it is touchingly apparent, from the hungry glow suffusing his eyes and the spirit with which he describes his ideal, that this fantastical woman is the long-cherished dream of an ardent if suppressed desire. The model, of course, is the sharp-witted, handsome woman he professes to particularly despise: the formidable Beatrice.

Ms. Siff, who also starred in this company's "Taming of the Shrew," certainly possesses the noble aspect and natural beauty that are on Benedick's long checklist. But she delivers Beatrice's tart aspersions with an air of determined sourness that doesn't suggest either the delight she surreptitiously takes in sparring with Benedick, or the underlying admiration that inspires it. (Too often she seems almost to be returning to full shrew mode.) As a result Mr. Cake establishes a more fluent and affectionate rapport with the audience than he does with Ms. Siff's less buoyant Beatrice.

The combative romance between these two would-be lovers is not the whole of "Much Ado About Nothing" of course. But many of the supporting performances lack delicacy and polish. Claudio, whose instantaneous love for Hero is contrasted with the more wary wrangling of Beatrice and Benedick, is portrayed with stolid simplicity and little palpable feeling by Matthew Amendt. He's well matched, alas, in his emphatic rendering of his character by Michelle Beck's bluntly drawn Hero, who is notably short on pathos and vulnerability.

As Don John, the bastard brother of the prince Don Pedro (Graham Winton), Saxon Palmer is more neurotic than truly

sinister, although his imitation of Richard III is among the few moments of fresh comic inspiration in the production. Others are provided by the splendid stupidity of John Christopher Jones's Dogberry, whose cracked, quavering voice adds an extra layer of humor to his mangling of the English language.

Dogberry's bumbling sidekick, John Keating's Verges, has some frisky funny business too, and he's got a face made for comedy (although he does commendably too in the serious role of Father Francis, presiding over the abortive nuptials of Claudio and Hero). And while the role is minuscule, Elizabeth Meadows Rouse makes the most of her few minutes onstage as Hero's attendant, Ursula, spritzing this usually unnoticeable character with a dithery, dizzy flair.

But with the central roles mostly over- or underplayed (Robert Langdon Lloyd's Leonato is heavy on the angry bluster), the elaborate on-again off-again marriage of Claudio and Hero stirs little interest, and the verbal fencing of Beatrice and Benedick provides only intermittent distraction. You begin to feel that the play is top-heavy with plot and deficient in memorable poetry.

The program features a series of epigraphs from various Shakespeare scholars and directors that are dappled with words we don't usually associate with rom-coms: "nihilistic" (Harold Bloom), "expressions of aggression or sexual hostility" (the scholar Carol Cook). The British director Trevor Nunn huffs that he has yet to see a production "done with sufficient seriousness." Ms. Arbus's version probably wouldn't entirely satisfy him on that front or several others, but not for lack of trying.