OSF's ‘Much Ado’ is definitely about something (delightful)

Before entering OSF's Bowmer Theatre to see the company’s 80th anniversary production of one of The Bard’s most enduringly popular romantic comedies, “Much Ado About Nothing,” I asked myself:

What could they possibly do (with this “Much Ado”) to re-imagine this evergreen gem in new ways that could unexpectedly surprise and delight me?

That question was instantly, visually answered upon stepping inside the doors and beholding scenic designer Scott Bradley’s whimsical pink blossoms cascading down in a canopy of delicate, mobile strands over center stage.

From that moment on, you know that in, spite of being set in “the present” in the original script’s city of Messina, the audience could still expect some sweet elements of timeless, fairy tale magic.

Of course, “Much Ado” has always been known as the verbal showcase of dueling wit between its pair of reluctant lovers, Beatrice and Benedick as well as the love, lost and regained, of another couple, Hero and Claudio.

Honor (a woman’s virtue and a man’s pride) are at the center of the play’s theme; and the lust for power and station in the world (at any cost to others in order to attain it), swirl about throughout. But just when everything looks darkest for the eventual outcome, there is outrageous humor intertwined as “good” prevails over the “evil” plots of ambitious people — and love indeed conquers all.

Costume designer Kara Harmon (as well as whoever chose the contemporary properties), has created some of the most outrageously funny — mixed with stunningly gorgeous — character-driven out-

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— BETTI WEBB TRAUTH —

Don John (Regan Linton) lays a plot with her followers, Conrade (left, Armando McClain) and Borachio (Barret O'Brien). Leah Anderson also charms as Beatrice’s wronged cousin, Hero, whose father (a suitably stern Jack Willis) Leonato, Governor of Messina, initially disowns her. As Claudio (young lord of Florence) and Hero’s intended husband who is tricked into shaming her during their wedding ceremony, Carlo Albin is pleasant, but not quite up to his role’s emotional demands.

In particular, Danforth Comins’ Benedick is so endearing (especially when it comes to his brilliant, over-the-top physical comedy), you can’t wait until he and his equally excellent and sharp-tongued, ironic romantic sparring partner, Christina Clark’s Beatrice, finally get together. They’re both terrific!

Don John (Regan Linton) lays a plot with her followers, Conrade (left, Armando McClain) and Borachio (Barret O’Brien).

“evil” plots of Don John, Borachio and Conrade; and Tyrone Wilson as Friar Francis and two other roles.

In addition, outstanding comedic standouts (playing the clueless local watch) are Rex Young as the doltish Dogberry, leader of the watch; Eileen Desandre as his sidekick mother; Cesar Perez Rosas as Hugh Oatcake; and the delightful OSF debut of Lucas Lee Caldwell as George Seacoal. They’re all, collectively, an absolute hoot!

This thoroughly entertaining production was deftly directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, who obviously knew exactly what she wanted — and got it. Yi Zhao’s lighting design adds just the right visual touches, along with the well done audio contributions of composer and sound designer Chad Raines; and Jacyln Miller’s choreography livens things up from start to finish.

OSF’s “Much Ado About Nothing” is a real charmer, and a show that all ages will love. So see it. The run continues throughout the end of the 2015 Season.

For information and ticket reservations, go to osfashland.org or call 1-800-219-8161.

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