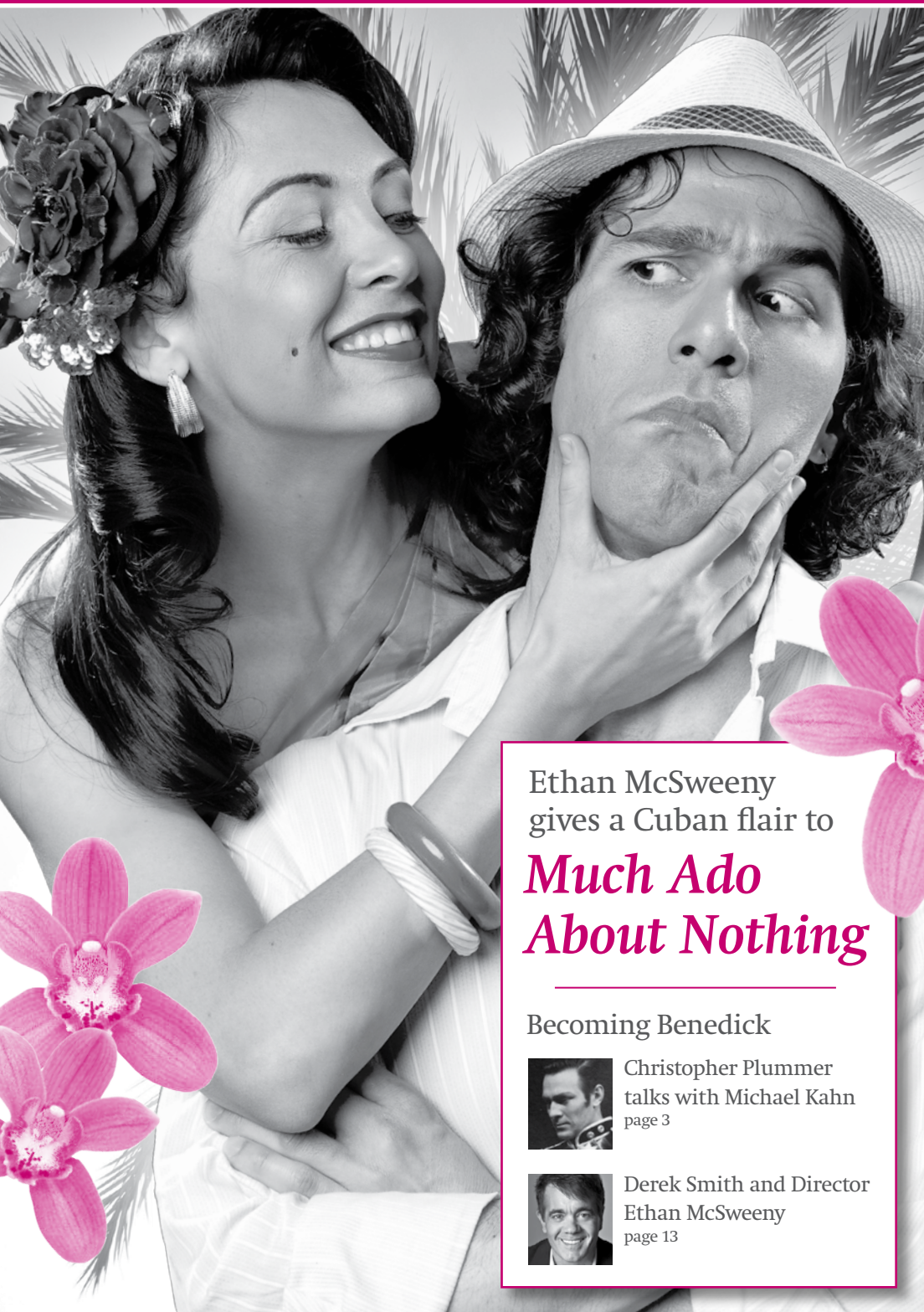


ASIDES

2011|2012 SEASON • Issue 2



Ethan McSweeney
gives a Cuban flair to
***Much Ado
About Nothing***

Becoming Benedick



Christopher Plummer
talks with Michael Kahn
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Derek Smith and Director
Ethan McSweeney
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A publication of the Shakespeare Theatre Company

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Dear Friend,

Welcome to the second play of our 25th Anniversary Season, William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. One of the most beloved plays in the Shakespearean canon, *Much*

Ado is one of the well-springs of romantic comedy, the first of countless works in the Western drama in which a pair of likeminded wits fight their way into love. Beatrice and Benedick, the play's avatars, are remarkably human creations, and their genes can be found in every romantic comedy made to this day.

I was fortunate enough to sit and chat recently with Christopher Plummer, one of the best of the Benedicks in theatrical memory and the recipient of our Will Award in 1990. In this issue, Ethan McSweeney sits with his Benedick, Derek Smith, to discuss the upcoming production in which he joins fellow STC alum Kathryn Meisle (of *The School for Scandal*). There are other surprises inside, including a trip down memory lane to some *Much Ados* of the past.

In addition to our mainstage season, we are bringing a number of outstanding performances and artists to Washington, D.C., this winter. From November 29 to December 4, we will present Oscar-nominated actor John Hurt in the Gate Theatre's *Krapp's Last Tape* for one week only. On December 19, we will host one of our ever-popular ReDiscovery readings with a historic play, *Egmont* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which is all too little performed in the United States. We also continue our collaboration with the NT Live series—upcoming screenings include *The Kitchen* on December 6 and *Collaborators* on December 19. Finally, join us January 17 to March 4 for our mainstage presentation of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, directed by another former Associate Director, PJ Paparelli.

I hope to see you at the theatre!

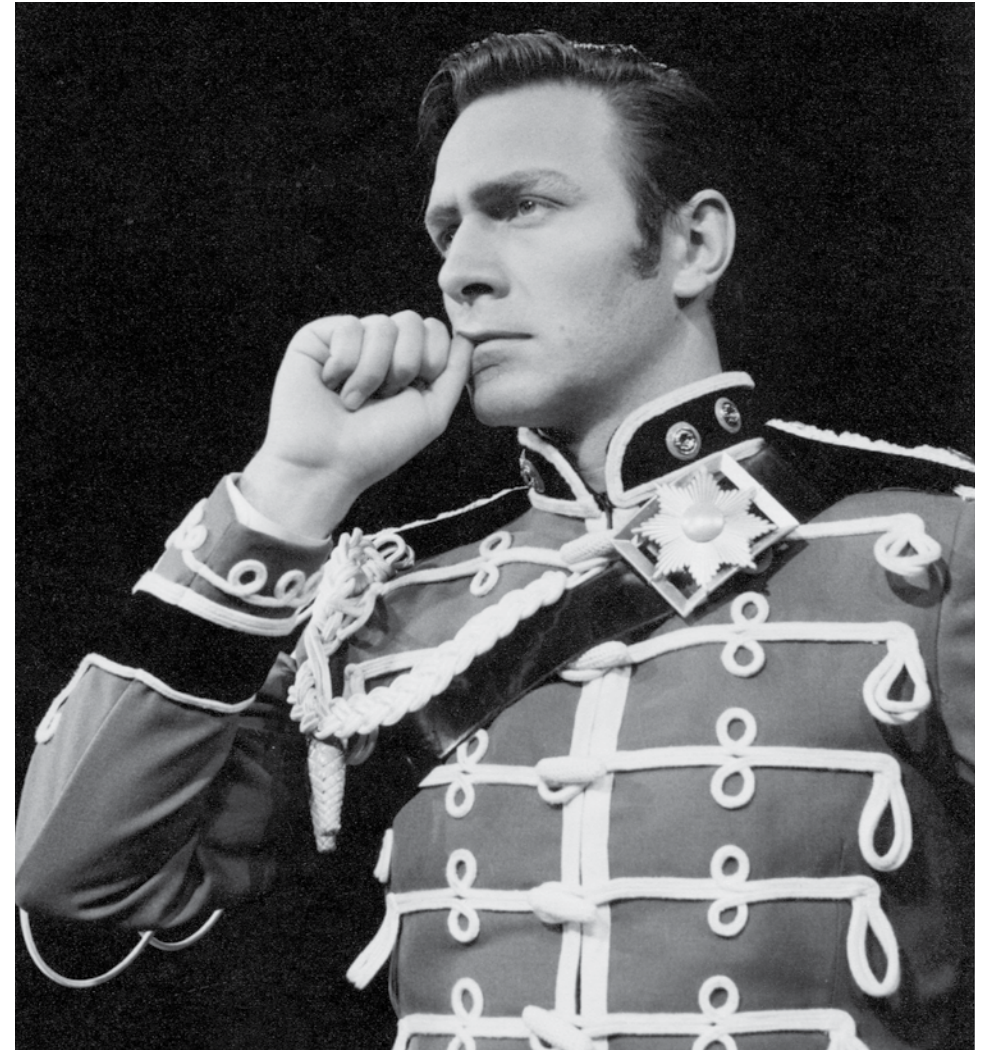
Best always,

Michael Kahn

Michael Kahn
Artistic Director, Shakespeare Theatre Company

How to Become a Benedick

Artistic Director Michael Kahn talks to **Christopher Plummer** about one of his most famous roles



Michael Kahn: So, I'm going to do this little interview with you to talk about Benedick.

Christopher Plummer: Oh, I hope I can be entertaining.

MK: Well you're a famous Benedick. How many times have you done it?

CP: Twice. One in England [at the Royal Shakespeare Company, in 1961] and one in Stratford, Canada [at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, in 1958].

MK: You wrote about playing Benedick, that "It freed me from all outward

influence, and for the first time I was able to find a trust in myself."

CP: Yes. I think that is about right. I mean, even some of the critics noticed it. You remember old Henry Hughes?

MK: Yes, I do.

CP: He was one of the ones that said, at last he's found his own, you know... he's his own master now.

MK: What was it about the role that freed you up in that way?

Photo of Christopher Plummer as Benedick in The Stratford Shakespeare Festival's 1958 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* by Peter Smith. Courtesy of The Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives.

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Cover photo by Scott Suchman.

CP: It was Eileen Herlie [a Stratford company member], actually, who made such a wonderful Beatrice. She suggested this kind of landed gentry farm girl, she was strong and sophisticated. The director, Michael Langham, had set the production in Ruritania, a kind of Austro-Hungarian period, in which—rather like Kenneth Branagh’s movie—it was a landed gentry farm, the county seat to which all the soldiers came back after the war. It was a lovely way of setting the play. It wasn’t ultra sophisticated and it had an earthy quality that was particularly good for Beatrice. I think it was because Eileen came on with such sort of smoke and fire and brimstone, that I decided to underplay Benedick.

Not in the first scene, because that has to be a wonderful shouting match, but later on, Benedick changes. And I suddenly realized that I didn’t have to work so bloody hard, I could just go with the text. Because he has a wonderful arc. He tries to keep on this conceited line of thought,

and then he learns as he goes along, and he’s made human. She makes him human by picking out and showing him his shortcomings all through the piece. So, by the time he’s sympathetic towards her, it’s just before the wedding scene and he just changes completely. I don’t know, it’s as if Shakespeare suddenly wrote a movie. The intimacy and simplicity and economy of Benedick’s responses in that scene are just so modern and so unbelievably *now* that I just went with it. And I found that Larry [Sir Laurence Olivier] and Ralph [Sir Ralph Richardson] and all those people who I had been influenced by so much in the past weren’t necessary anymore. I found my own way of coming on and just obeying the language, which had to be obeyed, at least in terms of making it sound contemporary and real. I learned a hell of a lot from Benedick.

I’ve got to tell you a funny little story. We were doing a dress rehearsal, uninvited, except there were two old guests, Dame Sybil Thorndike and her husband, [Sir]

Lewis Casson, both over 90 and Lewis was very, very deaf. They were sitting in the back row of the festival theater, holding hands very sweetly, and during that famous wedding scene, when Beatrice turns on me, you know that famous speech—“Princes and counties!”—Eileen screams at me. Then there’s a pause after her tirade, and suddenly, a voice that could be heard to New York: Dame Sybil broke the silence by shouting at Lewis, “I said, SHE’S GOT THE GUNS FOR IT, HASN’T SHE?”

(Laughter)

MK: Did you and Eileen ever discuss what had happened with Beatrice and Benedick before the play? She says, “I gave him my heart, a double heart for his single one.”

CP: They had met, as far as I’m concerned, but we didn’t really have much time to talk about that, we just barreled in and did it. Michael [Langham], I think, was influenced by Chekhov. It was part of this country society. It was Chekhovian in feeling.

MK: The country house and servants, eating out under the trees.

CP: Right. I thought that was lovely.

MK: What would you say to two actors who are playing Beatrice and Benedick? What would you say are the wonders of the play, and are there any pitfalls there?

CP: I wouldn’t presume to give advice. The only thing I think one must remember is that Benedick must have a real self-deprecating heart in him to be able to grow up, out of this tremendous poser, this macho kind of poser that he’s made himself. And the actor’s got to know that he has to make a fool of himself in the first part. The audience loves that. They just adore his conceit. Because he makes such a blunder and Shakespeare does that so wonderfully. And Beatrice is so much wiser and funnier...

MK: And more mature in everything.

CP: And Benedick really just wants to go out and commit suicide, I mean, it’s just awful. And suddenly, like I learned, he’s got to change, he’s got to suddenly be the most real person on that stage, and the most vulnerable. And then they come back and they flash at each other but it doesn’t work any more. And she recognizes it and feels great sympathy and loves him. Loves him.

MK: That’s lovely. We just went into rehearsal. *Much Ado* director Ethan McSweeney was doing *Dangerous Liaisons* up at Stratford while you were *Prospero* in *The Tempest*.

CP: Oh, he’s so good!

MK: Yeah, he’s doing *Much Ado*, and we started rehearsal today. I’ll let Ethan listen to this because he’s very curious.

CP: I think Ethan is just fantastic.

MK: You know, he was an apprentice here, I’ve known him since he was 17.

CP: Oh, I didn’t realize.

MK: Oh yes, he started out as my intern, before he went to college.

CP: He survived even you!

MK: He survived me as an intern, he survived me as my assistant for four years. So, he has a lot of courage in addition to talent.

(Laughter)

Perhaps the greatest Shakespearean actor born in North America during the 20th century, Christopher Plummer is equally comfortable on stages in London, Broadway and his native Canada. He has been nominated for the Tony Award an outstanding seven times, in six different decades, and won twice. He has also been nominated for an Academy Award and won two Emmys. He was honored by the Shakespeare Theatre Company in 1990, when he received the William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theatre.



Photo of Eileen Herlie as Beatrice, Diana Maddox as Hero, Mervyn Blake as Leonato, Thomas Powys as the Friar and Christopher Plummer as Benedick in The Stratford Shakespeare Festival’s 1958 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* by Peter Smith. Courtesy of The Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives.

The Descendants of Beatrice and Benedick:

Much Ado's influence through the ages

by Laura Henry, STC's Artistic Fellow



Photo of the cast of the 2008 production of *The Way of the World* by Carol Rosegg.

Mirabell and Millamant. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. The most famous couplings in romantic comedy all bear a distinct resemblance to Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Whether the work is a Restoration comedy (*The Way of the World* by William Congreve), a Georgian novel (Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*) or a 20th century Hollywood film (too many to count), the fascination with these archetypal characters has spanned centuries. As scholar Claire McEachern notes, "the popularity of these inevitably allied antagonists is confirmed by their own 'excerptability.'"

EARLY MODERN THEATRE

Much Ado About Nothing has always been one of Shakespeare's most popular plays. The First Quarto of 1600 indicates that it was "sundrie [many] times," "publickely acted" at court. Leonard Digges's dedication to the 1632 Second Folio, one of the rare Early Modern descriptions of a Shakespearean play in performance, declares the play a crowd-pleaser: "...let but Beatrice / And Benedick be seene, loe in a trice, the Cockpit Galleries, Boxes, all are full."

On Charles I's private copy of the Second Folio, the king himself crossed out the title of "Much Ado About Nothing" and scrawled "Beatrice and Benedick" below it.

RESTORATION THEATRE

Restoration comedies by William Congreve, William Wycherley and George Etherege are all dominated by the "gay couple"—a pair of lovers whose attraction is tempered by antagonism. Like Beatrice and Benedick, the heroes of Restoration comedy are critical of social norms and contemptuous of the artificialities of wooing. Wit in these plays is a form of social currency and a means of battling the strictures of society while mitigating real consequences. Not coincidentally, this was also the era of the first female actresses onstage in England, and strong female leads were a source of intense fascination during the period.

In May 1665, Nell Gwyn played Beatrice opposite her real-life lover, star actor Charles Hart, in a role that cemented the appeal of the "gay couple." Warm, witty and impudent, Nell was an archetypal Beatrice. "Nell's and Hart's mad parts are most excellently done," wrote Samuel Pepys, "but especially hers." Nell's life story—she may have been a child prostitute and later became Charles II's mistress—exemplifies the difficulties faced in the period by free-spirited and desirable women.

ROMANTIC NOVELS

Beatrice and Elizabeth Bennet would have liked each other. Think of how similar they are: bright and bold, doubting in love and disposed to judgment. The sparring between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, their initial aversion and eventual affection, follows that of Beatrice and Benedick. The foiling plot of Jane and Bingley's parallel love story owes much to Hero and Claudio, too. *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel which is generally supposed to be the origin of all modern romantic comedy, is indebted to *Much Ado*.

"What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!
No glory lives behind the back of such."
Much Ado About Nothing, act 3, scene 1

"She grew absolutely ashamed of herself.—Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. 'How despicably have I acted!' she cried.—'I, who have prided myself on my discernment!'"
Pride and Prejudice, vol. 2, chapter 13

SCREWBALL COMEDY

As the film critic Andrew Sarris notes, screwball was "sex comedy without the sex." Only talking, *a la* Beatrice and Benedick. Lots of it and at breakneck speed. In 1934, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert brought Beatrice and Benedick onto the big screen. With the onset of talking film, movies like Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, delighted in rapid-fire dialogue and wordplay rife with insults. The dialogue was replete with suggestions of hormones and Freudian complexes that were just entering the popular consciousness—but still seemed innocent enough to make it past the censors.



Alexander Andrews (Walter Connolly): Oh, er, do you mind if I ask you a question, frankly? Do you love my daughter?

Peter Warne (Clark Gable): Any guy that'd fall in love with your daughter ought to have his head examined.

Alexander Andrews: Now that's an evasion! Do you love her?

Peter Warne: A normal human being couldn't live under the same roof with her without going nutty! She's my idea of nothing!

Alexander Andrews: I asked you a simple question! Do you love her?

Peter Warne: YES! But don't hold that against me, I'm a little screwy myself!

(*It Happened One Night*, 1934)

THE ROM-COM

Much Ado's template is, if anything, even more prevalent today, as the battle of the sexes holds an immovable place in popular culture. Beatrice and Benedick are the framework upon which contemporary romantic comedy is built, and their battles have been codified into an immediately recognizable plot structure. Movies like *You've Got Mail* (1998) and *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003) are perfect examples: equally witty, ambitious men and women spar until their battle brings them together. Beatrice and Benedick's model of evenly-matched opponents who become well-suited lovers has become Hollywood's ideal image of love, almost 500 years later.

Warring and wooing, Beatrice and Benedick's presence is felt across the ages. *You've Got Mail* is based on the play *Parfumerie* by Miklós László, in which a pair of enemies unwittingly fall in love through letters. *Parfumerie* also inspired the 1940 film *The Shop Around the Corner* and its musical remake *In the Good Old Summertime*, starring Judy Garland—which was later adapted into the 1963 stage musical *She Loves Me* and staged as a revival by Roundabout Theatre Company in 1993.

The Power of Noting in *Much Ado About Nothing*

by Maurice Hunt

Commentators on *Much Ado About Nothing* usually point out that the words “nothing” and “noting” were pronounced alike in Shakespeare’s time, and that the title can refer to the great stir caused by faulty “noting.” Beatrice and Benedick distrust each other’s professions of love because words can mask or misrepresent all kinds of intentions. Thus when Don Pedro and Hero execute for their own amusement their scheme to have Benedick and Beatrice overhear how much each is secretly loved by the other, they succeed because their words, which were never spoken, seem so plausible.

Compensating for and overcoming this epistemological instability between “noting” and “nothing” poses the greatest challenge to the realization of Benedick and Beatrice’s and Claudio and Hero’s marriages. These marriages eventually occur for two reasons. The first involves Dogberry and his watch providentially overhearing Borachio tell Conrade the truth. “Providentially” is the right word here. Dogberry and the watch sit upon “the church bench,” a hallowed place from which they note Borachio’s treachery. Dogberry, while punchy in his malapropisms, is the play’s most pious character, mentioning “God” no fewer than 13 times. But the admittedly vague suggestion of a providence operating in Messina also depends upon a human capacity, the ability to freeze the unstable spoken word, here and then gone, into writing. The recorded word makes Don John’s guilt incontestable.

The second reason the marriages occur involves the power of the written word over that of the spoken word. Leonato



Shakespeare Gallery folio, “Much Ado About Nothing, Act IV, Scene I”; as engraved by Peter Simon, after the painting by W. Hamilton, 1790.

tells Claudio to write and hang an epitaph upon Hero’s supposed tomb. Read at her tomb, the epitaph’s verse expresses the truth that she was wronged by slanderous tongues. The epitaph thus becomes part of Claudio’s imaginative reconstruction of Hero, which Friar Francis has engineered, such that he is better disposed to love Hero when he learns that she is not dead but alive.

Having learned that their commitment to love each other was a result of Don Pedro’s stratagem, Beatrice and Benedick threaten to revert to their old skepticism about affection. But the discovery of their sonnets, which reveal their honest love for the other, cannot be denied. Much ado can be legitimately made of this kind of noting.

Maurice Hunt is a Research Professor of English at Baylor University where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Shakespeare. His latest books are *Shakespeare’s As You Like It: Late Elizabethan Culture and Literary Representation* and *Shakespeare’s Speculative Art*.

Why Cuba? ¿Por Qué No?

adapted from Ethan McSweeney’s Meet the Cast address

Given that I was just here a few months ago with a *Merchant of Venice* set on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1920s, I don’t want to get a reputation for being the guy who only resets Shakespeare. My responses to *Merchant* and to *Much Ado* are much more a matter of coincidence than of artistic preference.

For me, it’s important to distinguish between setting and concept. It is easy to confuse the two, for audiences and artists alike. All settings are a product of choice—a so-called “original practices” production is as much a choice of setting as a transposition of the play in time and place. A useful setting is a tool for further exploration—it should amplify themes and work with the text to illuminate the story. A concept stands outside the play, asking the play to flex itself to its demands.

Particularly at a theatre dedicated to classics, the director’s obligation is to find a setting that distinguishes itself from past productions, offering variety and insight to an audience already familiar with the work. But we must also make the play work for an audience encountering *Much Ado* for the first time. In this case I had the benefit of having produced a well-received production of the play at the Chautauqua Theater Company, directed by my friend and longtime collaborator Vivienne Benesch. I was so impressed with the opportunities the Cuban setting afforded the play that when Michael offered me the job, I told him I probably would want to explore what we had started in a limited engagement in the summer of 2007 at CTC.

The setting for this *Much Ado* is on a sugar cane plantation in Cuba in the middle of the 1930s. In 1933, 45% of the world’s sugar was produced in Cuba; a few corporations and families were the dominant players. In this case, we’re at

Leonato’s *hacienda*, a rural estate populated by him, his brother and a lot of young women. And into this environment comes an army of eligible men returning from successfully quashing a local uprising. That inciting event gives the play its spark.

Much Ado is a surprisingly naturalistic play for Shakespeare—which perhaps accounts for its significant proportion of prose—and it’s possible to confine the action to a single location like our courtyard. Cuba turns out to be especially felicitous for many reasons—like Shakespeare’s original setting of Sicily, it is an island. And in this case it is a hot and sexy island (it would be hard to imagine *Much Ado* in a cold climate, though I am sure that’s been done). It’s also a society with a certain amount of machismo and rules of conduct defined by gender. And there is already a Spanish flavor laced into Shakespeare’s text: Dons Pedro and John come from Aragon, which was actually along the present-day Spanish coast.

There are other useful parallels, including simmering revolutions and military conflicts. In the play and in our setting, the morality of the Catholic Church is very strong—wooing, wedding and repenting have mortal stakes. And it is a society with distinctions built on class. There are haves and have-nots in this play, and there is a stark divide between the lives of the two groups.

Only Shakespeare and those of us in the audience know that the play is called *Much Ado About Nothing*. To the people in the play, it’s not nothing at all. In fact, what’s happening is at times a life or death struggle. It’s a rich, deep and textured world—a grown-up love story whose heart has a Latin beat no matter where you set it. And we’re looking forward to bringing it to life for you.

Play in Process



Ted van Griethuysen (Dogberry) and Floyd King (Verges).



Bev Appleton (Antonio) and Colleen Delany (Ursula).



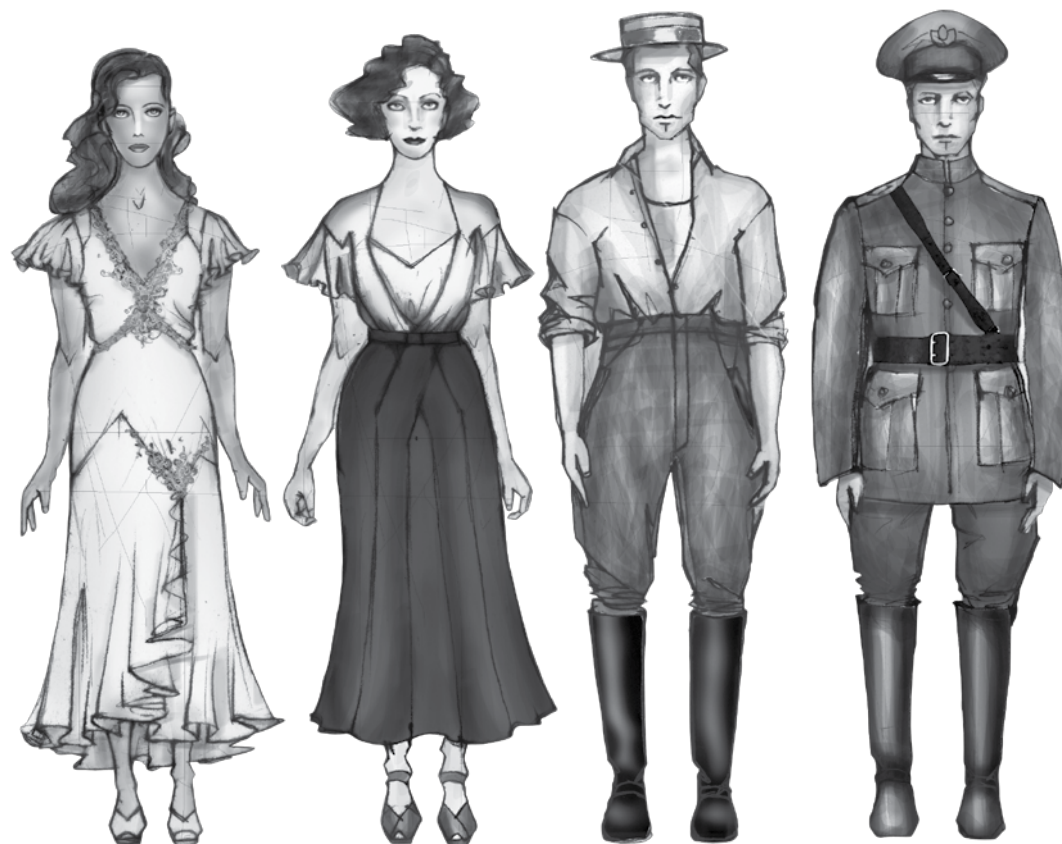
Rachel Spencer Hewitt (Margaret) and Mark Hairston (Borachio).



Derek Smith (Benedick).



Director Ethan McSweeney.

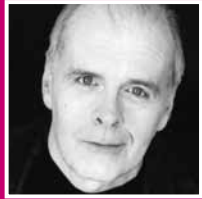


Costume renderings of Hero, Beatrice, Benedick and Claudio for *Much Ado About Nothing* by Clint Ramos.



Set model for *Much Ado About Nothing* by Lee Savage.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING CAST



BEV APPLETON*
ANTONIO



COLLEEN DELANY*
URSULA



RYAN GARBAYO*
CLAUDIO



CARLOS J. GONZALEZ*
JOSÉ FRIJOLÉS



MARK HAIRSTON*
BORACHIO



RACHEL SPENCER HEWITT*
MARGARET



KATE HURSTER*
HERO



FLOYD KING*
VERGES



KATHRYN MEISLE*
BEATRICE



LAWRENCE REDMOND*
FRIAR FRANCIS



MATTHEW SALDIVAR*
DON JOHN



ASHLEY SMITH*
CONRADE



DEREK SMITH*
BENEDICK



ADRIAN SPARKS*
LEONATO



DAVID EMERSON
TONEY*
DON PEDRO



TED VAN
GRIETHUYSEN*
DOGBERRY

PHIL HOSFORD
JUAN HUEVOS

MATTHEW MCGEE
BALTHASAR

AAYUSH CHANDAN, JAMES GRAHAM,
MICHAEL GREGORY, AARYN KOPP, JANEL MILEY,
JACOB PERKINS, ANDREW WASSENICH
ENSEMBLE

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING ARTISTIC TEAM

Ethan McSweeney
Director

Lee Savage
Set Designer

Clint Ramos
Costume Designer

Tyler Micoeau
Lighting Designer

Steven Cahill
Composer and Sound Designer

Elisheba Ittoop
Associate Sound Designer

Marcos Santana
Choreographer

Alison Solomon
Associate Choreographer

McCorkle Casting, Ltd.
New York Casting

Daniel Neville-Rehbehn
Resident Casting Director

Ellen O'Brien
Voice and Text Coach

Drew Lichtenberg
Literary Associate

Jenny Lord
Assistant Director

Joseph Smelser*
Production Stage Manager

Elizabeth Clewley*
Assistant Stage Manager

Gus Heagerty
Directorial Assistant

* Member of Actors' Equity
Association, the Union of
Professional Actors and
Stage Managers.

Much Ado About Something

Derek Smith talks with director **Ethan McSweeney**

Ethan McSweeney: Derek, we just worked together last season on *The Merchant of Venice*. You hadn't played Benedick before.

Derek Smith: Yes. In fact, this is the first Shakespeare I've ever done in prose. Which really intimidated me at first. But I'm amazed to find how much rhythm there is in it. I didn't think there would be, and I didn't think it would be possible to memorize, but I was wrong. It's very rhythmic. And I love the fact that it's so fresh to me. I have never seen this play, you know. For some reason, I don't even think I saw the movie. But I love middle-aged love stories. Nobody writes them any more.

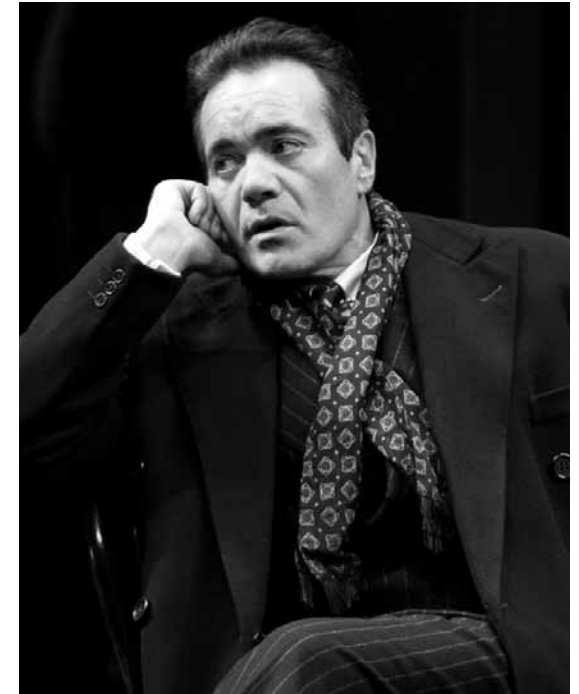


Photo of Derek Smith in STC's 2011 production of *The Merchant of Venice* by Scott Suchman.

EM: It depends on how you define middle. *(Laughter.)* It seems like we're leaning toward versions of these characters that have lived lives already.

DS: I think both Beatrice and Benedick have lived long enough to have put up a lot of walls.

EM: Yes, they have achieved a certain station in life, they're very happy and content with where they are. And this love affair that they find themselves in, it really capsizes them, it takes them out of their safe place. They could stay in their well-defined roles, you know, Benedick the misogynist at the top of the play. There's that line where he even says he is one. He tells Claudio, "do you want me to say what I really think, or would you have me answer as the Benedick you know, who doesn't trust women"...

DS: Well, Shakespeare writes so wonderfully about these layers of denial, in so many plays and with so many characters. He does it in a way that is unparalleled. The human mind, operating on 12 different wavelengths at once, having many thoughts at the same time, and choosing which ones you can actually face in the moment.

EM: Benedick is very suspicious of naïve young love. I guess I am, too...

(Laughter.)

DS: It's hard. You get to be an age where you see the potential for something and you have to really resist all the reasons why this probably won't work. You know, you lose that kind of innocence.



REMEMBER WHEN...?

Derek Smith and his Beatrice, Kathryn Meisle, have appeared together on the STC stage once before, as Lady Teazle and Sir Joseph Surface in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* during the 1994-1995 Season. Photo by Carol Pratt.

There are also those gulling scenes, the way Beatrice and Benedick both hear how they're perceived by others. There are some horrible truths that they both have to hear.

EM: The truth is always horrible. In the second half there are much more substantial scenes between Beatrice and Benedick. In the first half of the play, they spend more time talking

about one another than they spend talking to one another, which is revealing.

And in the second half Benedick shifts over to the other group, which is a really big deal. He leaves this very male-centered, male-bonded world and comes into this much more feminized world of Beatrice and Hero and Messina, and even Leonato and Antonio.

Ultimately, everybody, I think, wants Beatrice and Benedick to figure this out and get together. Even Beatrice and Benedick want it, they just don't know how to do it without sacrificing who they have become, without losing their status.

DS: It would be interesting to see what that first date between Beatrice and Benedick went like if it wasn't couched in tragedy. You know, if it wasn't set against this backdrop of Claudio and Hero. It is sort of like huddling together in a storm. These things come out before they would normally come out. "I love nothing in the world so much as thee."

EM: I think it's directly motivated by what they've just been through. It's London in the Blitz, and suddenly they move quicker, into larger ideas than they were prepared to earlier. Another thing that sticks out to me is that these are the only of Shakespeare's lovers who seem to know each other before the play begins. And that's what's grown up about it. It's not idealized romantic love.

DS: Yes.

EM: That's what we mean when we talk about this play being really grown up. It's love but it's not blind. It's aware. It

does see the end and it knows that love is hard and that mistakes will be made and people will get hurt and they go into it anyway.

DS: I agree. They go into it knowing each other and they come to know a lot about themselves. They really learn a lot about themselves over the course of the play. And by the end they go into this relationship with incredible knowledge and this kind of generosity. I think Benedick is a much more generous man at the end than he is when he begins the play.

EM: You know, Derek, you talk about the play being written in prose...it's a surprisingly naturalistic play for Shakespeare. It's more domestic and natural than so many of his plays. There's no magic in this play. Zippo. I mean, not a moment of it, not even a Friar with a potion, like in *Romeo and Juliet*. I think that's why I wanted to set it in a rural place. It's not a world of super fancy people. It's a rural hacienda. It's not this story of, you know, fancy aristos, running around. It's a play about very human characters with very real flaws who come to learn some very real things about themselves.

Beatrices and Benedicks From the Past: A Sneak Peek

Read the full interviews at Asides Online: Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org



David Selby and Kelly McGillis in STC's 1992 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* directed by Michael Kahn. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Michael Kahn: It was the opening of the Lansburgh, and we were all wearing dinner jackets, like it was the opening of the Lunt-Fontaine. The Washington elite had turned out to support the theatre and were greeted with champagne fountains and gilded lobby décor. The previews went extremely well, but on that first night nobody laughed! The whole event was too important. It killed the comedy flat. One of my friends came out at Intermission and told me how beautiful the flowers in the lobby were. She said nothing about the show. (*Long pause, smiles.*) She's still my friend.



Dan Snook and Karen Ziemba in STC's 2002-2003 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* directed by Mark Lamos. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

Mark Lamos: The title, *Much Ado About Nothing*, can mean a number of things. It can mean women's sexual organs, "nothing," it can mean no thing, nothing at all. It can mean noting, being, perceiving, which is what all of Shakespeare's plays are about. *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, they're all about perception. And of course "much ado" makes it sound like they're constantly having a party, which of course they are.



Close and Distant: A Journey to Cuba

Hannah J. Hessel, STC's Audience Enrichment Manager, discusses Cuba's contradictory cultural image



Cuba is a fertile soil in which to plant *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the mid-20th century the Cuban Tourist Commission's slogan was "Cuba—So Near... And Yet So Foreign." It is easy to forget how close we are to our neighbors—less than 100 miles from Key West. The island has become invisible in the cultural imagination: a political vestige of the iron curtain. Yet, we also hold in our minds the lingering memory of something else. We have another picture of Cuba, a picture created before Castro. This picture is tropical, filled with music, rum and cigars, luxurious resorts and rural estates. It is romantic and exotic.

Shakespeare sets *Much Ado About Nothing* in Messina, on the island of Sicily. For Shakespeare, Sicily could be a land that was comfortable yet distant, relatable yet also titillating, a Catholic island where he could place a story of love and honor. In the United States, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, Cuba existed as a similarly imaginary place where someone could escape her everyday life for sensual and swashbuckling pursuits. In films such as *The Cuban Love Song* (1931), *Havana Widows* (1933), *Wife vs. Secretary* (1936), *Week-End in Havana* (1941) and *Cuban Madness* (1946), a visitor to Cuba has their world turned around. The most recognizable version of this reversal is in *Guys and Dolls*. In the 1955 film adaptation of the popular Broadway musical, gangster Sky Masterson takes missionary Sarah Brown on a date to Havana. Plied with Bacardi and forced to dance in a Havana nightclub just distant enough from their New York apartments, prim Sarah Brown becomes reckless and tough-guy Masterson softens. Cuba becomes a transforming space.



Glenda Farrell, Noel Francis and Joan Blondell in a scene still from the 1933 movie *Havana Widows*.

While Hollywood movies showcased the glamorous side of the island, the land was going through its own changes. Just as the U.S. was hit by the Great Depression, the Cuban economy was ravaged. The population, especially plantation workers, students and intellectuals, started demanding action. Small rebellions became nationwide in 1933, when Sergeant Fulgencio Batista led a large-scale military revolt that overturned the sitting government. The United States government supported the changes that came into place through Batista—and Batista turned a favorable eye to U.S. corporations eager to take advantage of the island's deregulated utilities and productive plantations. Yet through these internal struggles the effects on the relationship with the United States was minimal, and tourism continued. In the 1933 film *Havana Widows*, Joan Blondell and Glenda Farrell play showgirls who've come to Cuba on a mission to find wealthy husbands. Hollywood was in the business of making Great Depression audiences forget their worries, and Cuba was just the place to do it. There was no need to look at what was really happening on the island just to the south, especially when rum cocktails still encouraged vacationers to let loose and lose themselves to a Cuban rhythm.

Did you know?

Like many other Caribbean islands, the population of Cuba is a transculturation of the many native, migrant and slave populations that formed the country's history. This mixture of backgrounds at times blended into the populace but more often than not caused conflict. The Spanish colonized, and the British imported a culture of plantations. With the growth of sugar and tobacco as a way of life came an influx of slaves from Africa. Slavery was the building block of the Cuban economy through the 19th century, and the island was the last in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery in 1886. With the end of the Spanish-American War, Cuba declared its independence. Despite this new "Cuba libre," Cuba's economy was still dependent on the exportation of goods that came from plantations.

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The Cuba Libre cocktail came into fashion during the American Intervention (A.K.A. Spanish-American War) of 1898–1900. It is named for the Cuban Liberation Army.

- ½ ounce fresh lime juice
- 2 ounces white rum
- Coca-Cola

Pour lime juice and rum into a tall glass packed with crushed ice. Fill with Coke. Stir well.



For more Cuba-inspired drink recipes visit Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org

Drew's Desk

Notes and Observations from STC's Literary Associate, Drew Lichtenberg



Much Ado About Nothing is one of Shakespeare's most beloved plays and a mainstay of the classical repertory. According to the Arden Shakespeare, the play was staged 35 times at Stratford-upon-Avon between 1879 and 1964 (an average of once every three years), and Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation from 1993 is the highest-grossing Shakespeare movie of modern times. But the play's ubiquity within the dramatic tradition is hard to completely fathom. Consider this: Shakespeare's play, the prototype for romantic comedy as it is currently constituted, is one of the Bard's most atypical plays.

The play was written between 1598 and 1600, making it one of the last of Shakespeare's comedies before the great tragedies of *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet* and the character of Othello. When he would return to comedy, it would be to the much darker "problem comedies" of *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Despite its sunny reputation, *Much Ado About Nothing* actually foreshadows such works.

The play is famous for its story of acid wits in love—the bachelor Benedick and the orphan Beatrice—but its plot revolves around melodramatic machismo and darker passions. Claudio, who anticipates his namesake in *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* in his murderous lover's jealousy, is misled repeatedly by the contrivances of a self-proclaimed villain (Don John, who foreshadows both Iago and his fellow bastard Edmund in *King Lear*). And the Claudio and Hero plot comes perilously close to a tragic ending. Indeed, perhaps it does—it's difficult to play the scene of Hero's shaming and Leonato's raging grief in a comic register. No comedy in the Shakespearean canon ranges wider in tone from the bathetic to the sarcastic, and in none is the balance between the comic and tragic masks a more delicate one.

Perhaps this is why the critics, who in unison proclaim Beatrice and Benedick utterly charming creations, are surprisingly split on the merits of the play itself. (And odds are, if you ask a director about the play after rehearsal, they will tell you that it is far from the Bard's easiest to stage.) It is almost as if Shakespeare, who was so famously fond of choosing equivocal phrases for his titles, is asking the question: is it really "Much Ado About Nothing?" Or is this play, in which a young woman is symbolically killed and resurrected, in which the governor of Messina challenges the visiting Spanish king to a fatal duel, in which lifelong friendships are suddenly broken beyond repair, actually about a very real thing indeed? Shakespeare was always sly about criticizing those in power, but in this play, so indebted to courtly rhetoric for its wit, he paints a far from flattering picture of the verbal games and pastimes of those in power.

I'll let the critics have their say. As always, if you have any questions I am at DLichtenberg@ShakespeareTheatre.org.

What the Critics Said



Paraphrase the dialogue of *Much Ado* in mere utilitarian prose, and you will find speech after speech awkward, superfluous, dragged in by the ears, and consequently irritating and tedious,

fatal to the crispness of the action. The characters lose their glamor: one sees that the creator of the merry lady with her barmaidly repartees and the facetious bachelor with his boarding-house funny man's table talk, was no Oscar Wilde. [...] The subtler strokes of character are wasted because they could be made amusing and intelligible only by the method of comedy; and Shakespeare, great at "drama," farce, and fair extravaganza, had no idea of comedy.

G. B. Shaw (1898)



Much Ado About Nothing is not one of Shakespeare's best plays, but Benedick and Beatrice are the most lovable, amusing, and good people—the best of combinations—he ever created. They

are the characters of Shakespeare we'd most like to sit next to at dinner.

W.H. Auden (1946)



Much Ado About Nothing is a work in which great energy has gone into prose. This, of all Shakespeare's comedies, is the one that best prefigures the comedies of the Restoration. The most

impressive moment in the play is the scene when Beatrice commands her lover to kill Claudio; there is a certain relief involved, for they converse for a moment rather more like persons who have momentarily forgotten their reputations.

Frank Kermode (2000)



This play, with its gaily self-deprecating title, seems virtually to inaugurate a genre. Its urbane pair of lovers,

Beatrice and Benedick, anticipate the glib and genteel barbs of the disillusioned pairs who populate stage and screen, waiting, like their Shakespearean forerunners, to be offered a chance to be, for once, unashamedly romantic.

Marjorie Garber (2004)



Only Beatrice and Benedick, among all the couples of Shakespeare's principal comedies, seem to hold out

the possibility of a sustained intimacy, and then only if the audience discounts their many insults, forgets that they have been tricked into wooing, and assumes, against their own mutual assertions, that they genuinely love each other. [...] It is worth pausing and trying to get it all in focus: in the great succession of comedies that Shakespeare wrote in the latter half of the 1590s, romantic masterpieces with their marvelous depictions of desire and their cheerfully relentless drive toward marriage, there is scarcely a single pair of lovers who seem deeply, inwardly suited for one another. There is no end of longing, flirtation, and pursuit, but strikingly little long-term promise of mutual understanding.

Stephen Greenblatt (2004)

Much Ado About Nothing

PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

- A** AUDIO-DESCRIBED
- C** CLASSICS IN CONTEXT
- D** DIVINING SHAKESPEARE
- M** ASIDESLIVE SYMPOSIUM
- O** OPENING NIGHT
- P** POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION
- S** SIGN-INTERPRETED
- W** WINDOWS
- Y** YOUNG PROSE NIGHT



| SUN | MON | TUES | WED | THUR | FRI | SAT |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|--------------|---------------------|------------|------------------------|
| NOVEMBER | | | | | | |
| | | | | | 25 8:00 | 26 2:00 8:00 |
| 2:00 7:30 | 27 W | 28 | 29 7:30 | 30 7:30 | | |
| DECEMBER | | | | | | |
| | | | | 1 8:00 | 2 8:00 | 3 2:00 8:00 |
| 7:30 | 4 | 5 7:45 O | 6 | 7 7:30 D P | 8 8:00 | 9 2:00 8:00 |
| 2:00 7:30 | 11 M | 12 | 13 7:30 | 14 7:30 Y | 15 8:00 | 16 2:00 A 8:00 C |
| 2:00 7:30 | 18 | 19 | 20 7:30 | 21 12:00 7:30 | 22 8:00 | 23 2:00 8:00 |
| | 25 | 26 | 27 7:30 S | 28 7:30 | 29 8:00 | 30 2:00 8:00 |
| JANUARY | | | | | | |
| 2:00 7:30 | 1 | | | | | |

Want more? Check out [AsidesOnline](http://AsidesOnline.org) for photos, updates and full versions of excerpted articles in this issue. Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org

CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

Join the FREE exchange of ideas! STC's Creative Conversations give our audiences the chance to connect deeply with the work on stage. Whether you are interested in historical background, theological perspective, creative points of view or voicing your own experiences, we have a discussion for you.

WINDOWS ON *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING* **FREE**

Sunday, November 27 from 5–6 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall

Join STC's Artistic staff and a guest scholar as they provide a "window" into this production. This hour-long pre-show conversation articulates the production process through an insightful, lively discussion. Reservations required.

DIVINING SHAKESPEARE **FREE**

Wednesday, December 7 from 5–6 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall

Explore *Much Ado About Nothing's* relevance from a theological perspective. Director of the Institute for Christian Formation at the Virginia Theological Seminary Reverend Roger Ferlo will be joined in conversation by STC's Audience Enrichment Manager Hannah J. Hessel. Reservations required.

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION **FREE**

Wednesday, December 7
after the performance

Extend the experience by staying immediately following the evening's production for a post-performance discussion led by STC's Literary Associate Drew Lichtenberg.

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT **FREE**

Saturday, December 17 from 5–6 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall

Put the show in context with this lively roundtable conversation. The Classics in Context panel gives the audience the opportunity to discuss the production with a team of experts, led by Director of Education Samantha K. Wyer.

ASIDESLIVE SYMPOSIUM: *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

Sunday, December 11 from 10 a.m.–1 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall

Tickets: \$20 Regular, \$15 Subscribers and Donors, \$5 Students (With Valid ID)
Featuring an assortment of scholars and experts, AsidesLIVE will provide inquisitive audience members with a closer look at Shakespeare's comedic masterpiece. Panels will include "The Gender Skirmish," "Changing Times: Havana of the '30s" and a conversation with the artistic team.

**SPECIAL
EVENT**