Much Ado

How Do We Have to Be?

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The Flight Path to Comedy

BY PHILIPPA KELLY, RESIDENT & PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

Much Ado was written seven years before that other play about sexual jealousy and deception, Othello, and it rehearses the same character configuration: the malevolent perpetrator, the gull (fool), and the unfairly accused woman. At various key points in the action—where we see jealousy engendered from a lie, the shaming at a church altar, and the destruction of a blameless victim—Much Ado begins to veer off into the tragic possibilities that will later be fully realized in Othello.

From another perspective, Much Ado was written about four years after that other tragedy of love, sex, and marriage, Romeo and Juliet, in which the conventionally romantic, lyrically tender, but fragile and very young lovers are destroyed by misunderstandings and ruthless social realities. But in Much Ado, comedy triumphs over the threat of loss. The potentially tragic “conventional” lovers, Hero and Claudio, survive Don John’s plotting. And their survival is largely due to the witty, probing, testing, sharply intelligent, passionate yet mature interrogations of the nature of love by Beatrice and Benedick, which pull the play back into comedy and toward the double wedding fittingly celebrated by that Elizabethan emblem of cosmic harmony, a dance.

“Much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!” says Leonato in Much Ado’s first scene. Shortly thereafter we meet Beatrice, sparring at the expense of Signior Benedick, mocking his soldierly friendships as relationships of no more substance than the passionate affections of a small boy. “There was a star danced, and under that was I born,” Beatrice declares; but there is, in her merriment, a sense of closure or acceptance—a belief that love has passed her by and that there is indeed no use in “joy[ing] at weeping.” “I thank God and my cold blood,” she says, “I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.” We will find, however, that Beatrice’s blood is not cold: In the past she has been deeply wounded by love; and now, as a spinster, she is determined to be merry, since spinsterhood will apparently be her fate.

Beatrice is an early feminist, a woman who says to the tightly-knit, even claustrophobic, society in which she lives, “You don’t get to tell me who I am. I define myself.” Leonato and others, amidst their laughter, tell Beatrice to stop messing around and to find herself a husband. She replies with one of her merry comments:

He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man: and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him

No man is right for Beatrice. She is destined to be herself—not someone’s lover, nor someone’s wife, but defined, instead, by her own words, wielding them with all the skill and swiftness with which a soldier wields his sword. It is through words, indeed, that Beatrice carves her way through others’ assumptions and self-gratifications, taking her place with pride in a world dominated by masculine wars and rules and bravado.

Beside this independent, feisty character, Shakespeare places Hero, a cousin whom Beatrice dearly loves. In the course of the play’s first scene Hero is noticed (“noted”), admired, and bartered for as a fianceé, and her suitor, Claudio, even accepts Don Pedro’s offer to woo and win her for him. This conventional path of wooing is one in which Hero gladly accepts her role, as does Leonato, the delighted father of the bride-to-be. Beatrice applauds her cousin’s choice while eschewing this path for herself, keeping the men at bay with her sharp and witty tongue.

Continued on next page...
A spinster in Shakespeare’s day was very different from today’s financially independent woman, who often remains single by choice. A spinster 400 years ago was a poor creature, usually shunted off into the Church so that she wouldn’t cost her father money or cause him shame. Much Ado’s comic structure allows Beatrice to emerge with some stunningly funny lines as one of Shakespeare’s most attractive characters. Ironically, it is this same comic structure—via intrigue and hilarious implausibilities involving eavesdropping behind hedges—that enable Beatrice to go to a place other that that of the merry spinster. It is a place within the community of love that a comic structure celebrates. A comedy is not just about providing a barrel of laughs: it portrays a society in which everyone eventually takes a place at the table of mirth; everyone takes a twist in the dance of love. A comedy is, in a sense, an ideal world, where our hearts are delighted, our fears of rejection fly away, and our wishes for the communion of love are realized.

What Much Ado gives with one hand, however, it takes away with the other. At the very moment when Beatrice is taking her own place with Benedick at the table of love (and, it appears, no one is surprised but these two!) a brutal plan is being effected by Don John, Don Pedro’s vile brother, to dishonor Hero at her own wedding altar. Much Ado, at this point, veers toward tragic closure. Hero is wrongfully reviled by her groom and her whole community, with even her own father disowning his bond to her. The only character who never falters in her belief in Hero is her cousin Beatrice, who feels, with passionate intensity, the brutal limitation of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Forbidden by her gender to fight for what she believes in, Beatrice challenges her newly accepted lover, Benedick, to prove his love for her by restoring Hero’s honor: In one uncompromising demand she requires that Benedick be her true lover, Hero’s champion, and his best friend’s killer. How can the comedy recover itself from this dreadful challenge, and from the ruin of lives left, symbolically, at the altar?

The comedy can recover, and it does. And so we see the structure of Much Ado About Nothing conclude in beautiful redemption. Hero must symbolically die to live again: This is the sad truth of a ruthlessly masculine society, in which a woman dies in order for her virtue to be redeemed. In Othello, years later, Shakespeare would have the same thing happen, but in that play’s tragic structure, the virtuous bride is truly killed, truly speaking on her deathbed of her husband’s innocence, and truly damned by this same husband who calls her a liar for trying to protect him. Much Ado threatens this horror, but does not make us go there. Instead we see Hero born again, Claudio repentant, and Beatrice and Benedick take off on their merry way to marriage, their repartee only silenced by kisses.

With thanks to my friend Lynne Soffer for a great conversation.
and a vitriolic Japanese man locked in the trunk of their car. For the rest of the movie, they try to unravel how they lost the groom and the tooth while trying to relieve themselves of the tiger, the chicken, the marriage certificate, and the baby. (Mike Tyson, his face entirely tattooed, appears briefly as the owner of the stolen tiger.)

Upon hearing of my friend’s movie selection, I attempted to dislodge her from this choice through reason, intellect, a feminist cultural critique, an appeal to common sense, a rant against vulgarity, and the dictates of good taste. I did not succeed, so into the cinema I was dragged, wearing dark sunglasses lest someone I know see me so thoroughly debasing myself in public. My head hung in shame and fatal resolution: Dead Woman Walking.

The movie was everything I feared it would be. And yet…it

I thoroughly enjoyed it. In fact, I laughed my head off. I was also ashamed. Very, deeply ashamed.

Later on, at dinner, my friend declared in a loud voice and with a smug grin, “I knew you’d like The 40 Year Old Virgin.”

And yet…

If you peel away the iambic pentameter, the layers of frilly prose, and the sometimes impenetrable use of archaic Elizabethan slang, many of the scenes in Much Ado are about as high-brow as a bromance flick. In Act I, scene I, Claudia, Benedick, and the rest of the “guys” have returned from battle and are discussing women and marriage. Benedick is in love. Benedict poo-poos the idea and denigrates Hero’s looks. He then proceeds to say her cousin Beatrice is better looking, until she opens her mouth:

Claudio: Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?...

Benedick: …methinks she’s too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise. Only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome, and being no other but as she is, I do not like her….

Claudio: …In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.

Benedick: I can see yet without spectacles, and I see no such matter. There’s her cousin, and she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December.

Reading this passage, I was reminded of one of the most popular coincets in the bromance film: dogging each other’s taste in women. As it might be written by Apatow or other bromance writers in the genre known as the “bromance” film, a term coined in the 1990s to explore the deep psychological intimacy between two (or more) men; a form of homosocial intimacy.

Notice Wikipedia’s use of the term “homosocial” in its definition, meaning “of, relating to, or involving social relationships between persons of the same sex and especially between men.” If one uses a big, grad-school word like “homosocial” to describe “bromance,” it makes it sound more legit. One might even be able to justify an interest in bromance films by saying one is merely interested in deconstructing the homosociality of contemporary society as depicted in the genre known as the “bromance” film, a term coined in the 1990s to explore the deep psychological puzzle that is straight-on man-love.

If you are not already cringing, brace yourselves; it’s going to get worse.

You see, I was rereading Much Ado About Nothing the other day and realized that it was a bromance. That’s right, Judd Apatow didn’t invent the bromance.

He stole it from Shakespeare.

A great deal of the script is just this sort of thing, the dudes sitting around having guy-talk about the relative hotness and promiscuity of the local females, scheming to hook up with them, blowing a gasket when they think someone has seduced their intended before they could, scheming to get their friend “hooked up”, and just flat-out gossiping. It’s the male equivalent of a hen party. And yes, there are plenty of hen-party scenes between Hero, Beatrice, Ursula, and Margaret. But the plot hinges on the machinations of the guys and their bromances.

For hundreds of years, Much Ado has been considered a romantic comedy. Turns out, it is also a bromantic comedy, and it is the bromance that creates the real dilemma for Benedick. He finds himself embroiled in a bromantic triangle, wherein he must choose between his girlfriend and his bro.

When Claudio humiliates Hero at the altar, Beatrice bursts into tears at the scene; Benedick offers to do anything to stop Beatrice’s tears, and she replies, “Kill Claudio.” Benedict’s answer is swift and definitive: “Ha! Not for the wide world.” Beatrice responds by wishing aloud she were a man, because she would do it herself. In other words, Benedick isn’t being very manly. Beatrice laments, “O that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curties, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too.” In other words, Benedick’s bromance has emasculated him. The tactic works, too. Benedick changes his mind and makes a gesture towards giving Beatrice what she requests without actually complying. Would he have gone through with it if other events had not interceded? Who knows? Benedict, however, seems greatly relieved that he gets to keep the girl and the bro: the best of both worlds. The bromance and the romance remain intact, providing a “happily ever after” ending that would make Hollywood proud.
Cal Shakes Technical Director Dave Nowakowski—also an accomplished photographer—takes us on a visual journey from the Macbeth set’s drafting phase to its reality on the Bruns stage. Photo at left by Emily Greene. All other photos by Dave Nowakowski.

At left, a rented flatbed truck transports a final load of scenery pieces from our shop in Berkeley, accompanied by carpenter Shay Henley. We unload where the new plaza meets the ring road, which, while not closest to stage, is one of the few flat areas to safely unload in our valley location.

Here we see the hallway wainscoting pattern stamped into a slurry of wet joint compound and glue to replicate the appearance of real stamped tin at a much lower cost.

To the right you can see how the set looks on the second day of installation. Some of the shared elements with the Much Ado set can be seen here.

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Below, Dave uses AutoCAD to check critical dimensions for the installation of Macbeth. New office space in the Simpson Center provides a secure, weather-resistant area close to the stage, saving much of the hassle and expense of paper drawings.

In lieu of the typical photos of us, the artistic and managing directors, that you normally see on this page, here are some other Cal Shakes faces that may be less familiar to you. Pictured (although many are missing) are staff, board, artists, teaching artists, interns, and one Will’s Weeder—the individuals largely responsible for making this theater what it is. We think they’re great, and wanted you to see them for yourself.

Susie and Jon

1. Darcy Brown-Martin
2. Susie Falk
3. Daunelle Raatman
4. Safuurah Kadam
5. Beth Sandelrud
6. Jonathan Meserve
7. Joan Markin
8. Mike Rice
9. Patti James
10. Keshuv Prasand
11. Jake Lucas
12. Vince Rodriguez
13. Jamie Buschbaun
14. Tracy Tilman
15. Carla Pantoja
16. Dark Coven
17. Tiger Neudorf
18. Cassandra Richwell
19. Joyce Fleming
20. Marilyn Langbehn
21. Eden Neuendorf
22. Noralee Rockwell
23. Jessica Richards
24. Naomi Arnst
25. Sheila Yee
26. Emily Greene
27. Samantha Fryer
28. Emily Kitchens
29. David Goldsmith
30. Ian Larue
31. Diane Goldsmith
32. Philippa Kelly
33. Jessica Richards
34. Naomi Arnst
35. Paul D. Sharp
36. Emily Greene
37. Samantha Fryer
38. Dave Nowakowski
39. Emily Kitchens
40. David Goldsmith
41. Ian Larue
42. Dione Fordsmith
43. Jenna Stich
44. Jay Yamada

Turn to page 38 to find out what they all do!
BY JAMES CARPENTER, ACTOR AND CAL SHAKES ASSOCIATE ARTIST

The universe works in mysterious ways indeed. Out of the blue, Cal Shakes recently nominated me for the Lunt-Fontanne Fellowship Program, a weeklong master class and immersion experience at Ten Chimneys, the Lunt-Fontanne summer estate in Genesee Depot, Wisconsin. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne were North America’s premier couple of the theatrical world in their time, and their home, Ten Chimneys, was a haven from the stage, hosting some of the greats of the theater.

The fellowship from the Ten Chimneys Foundation—trustees of the Lunt-Fontanne estate—is given to nine actors from select regional theaters across the U.S., and to one educator, allowing them to meet for a week to dissect and examine Shakespeare’s work in detail. Our instructor was Master Teacher Barry Edelstein, director of the Shakespeare Initiative at New York’s Public Theater.

Our first journey from the hotel to the estate was a quiet one indeed, as we’d all been asked to perform a monologue so Barry could gauge our skills, and were therefore all filled with trepidation—no, terror might be closer to the mark. I volunteered to go second, and then sat down to watch the others perform their pieces.

A huge smile spread across my face. I was in the presence of some truly fine actors—actors all with a love of language, each seasoned in their craft, yet all very different from one another. I found myself delighted and honored to be among them.

During the course of the week we met many times to work on sonnets, scenes, and monologues; but we were also given downtime to spend exploring the remarkable estate, walking in the woods, polishing a monologue in the log cabin they used as rehearsal hall, or swimming a la Noël Coward—sans clothes—in the Lunts’ pool. I’m proud to say that I am among one of the newest members of the Noël Coward Bathing Society.

The inspired instruction and care lavished on us by the staff of the foundation and its president, Sean Malone, left us at week’s end well-fed but hungry for more; inspired, reinvigorated, and filled with wonder that the Lunts’ generosity of spirit remains very much alive. Thank you, Lynn and Alfred.

I am left with a deeper knowledge and keener appreciation of the huge wealth of talent in this nation, and of the riches that exist in our own Bay Area. And here, at Cal Shakes, I see examples of the same generosity that the Lunts embodied in a beautiful new green room and dressing room facility, new landscaping, café, and offices: all signs of growth, of renewal.

Our thanks to all—the Lunts would salute you!

ARTISTIC RENEWAL FROM THE LUNTS TO THE BRUNS

BY JONATHAN MOSCONE, CAL SHAKES ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

This year marks my 10-year anniversary as Cal Shakes’ Artistic Director. I’ve been feted, interviewed, and generally reminded of it by everyone. Even my receding hairline reminds me of it each morning. Sheesh. What is the big deal about anniversaries? I hate that word.

As you can see—and if you know me this will not surprise you—I have neurotized something that is actually quite amazing. I love what I do. I hate saying it, though; I’ve always hated saying it, for it makes me sound like I don’t sweat tears at this job, which I do. As does pretty much anyone who makes theater, or any form of creative expression, happen in the marketplace. Marketplace. That’s a terrible word too. It’s so Warren Buffet. And yes, I know this is a business, and we take money matters very seriously. But still.

Nor do I really like the word art. It’s too general. It lumps everything creative that anyone does into one pile of fancy. And I hate fancy (although I do love nice loafers). I make theater and I work in a business. I tell stories through language and movement, sound, light, clothes, and architecture. I do this with a lot of people and for a lot of people. Theater is what I do, plain and simple. I’ve been doing it professionally since 1993, and unprofessionally since I was two years old; and I will continue to do it until they take the baton away from me and send me to the retirement home for useless directors with no other marketable (ooh, there’s that word again) skills.

By now you may be thinking, “What a complainer.” Well you’re right. I am. And complaining is what got me into directing in the first place. I saw so many productions when I was young and...
Cal Shakes Salutes

BY STEFANIE KALEM, PUBLICATIONS MANAGER

This year, Cal Shakes bid farewell to two members of our community—Harriet Ainsworth, columnist for the Lamorinda Sun, and Dorothy Bowen, staff writer for the Orinda News.

Harriet, 95, died July 30, having written her wide-ranging “Sunbeams” column for the Sun—wherein she frequently covered our annual gala, which she attended for many years—for nearly two decades. Prior to that, the graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University had been a reporter for the Oregonian, freelance for the New York Mirror, and the producer of the radio show “Northwest Neighbors.” Harriet reached the rank of lieutenant in the U.S. Naval Reserve during World War II; as part of Orinda’s cityhood campaign in the early 1980s, she also helped to establish the Orinda Foundation, enabling the city to create its first public park.

Dorothy—whose first stint as a journalist came at the tender age of 9 when she protested the internment of Japanese-Americans on an LA radio station, and who later served as the Contra Costa Sun’s arts editor—passed away on March 2, shortly before her 79th birthday. She was active in the Orinda community as a member of the Friends of the Orinda Library and the Orinda Historical Society, and as a volunteer judge for the town annual creative writing contest. Dorothy reviewed many a Cal Shakes production over the years.

Thank you, Harriet and Dorothy, for all of your wit and wisdom, your generosity of spirit and dedication to your communities. You will be missed.

Subscription Is Dead.
LONG LIVE SUBSCRIPTION!

BY SUSIE FALK, MANAGING DIRECTOR

Fall at Cal Shakes is renewal season. It’s the time of year when we ask those of you who are currently subscribers to take a couple of minutes out of your day to fill out a form, thus reserving your seats and signing on for another season with us. It’s a simple act, but one with tremendous impact.

Having a strong subscriber base enables us to take greater risks with our programming. With an audience already guaranteed, we are less at the mercy of single ticket buyers who—and please, those of you who are single ticket buyers, don’t take this the wrong way—tend to be more review, word-of-mouth-, or weather-driven. Our subscriber base is what enabled us to produce The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby—the biggest undertaking in the company’s history. While the production was universally lauded by critics and audiences alike, prior to opening night and those glowing reviews we had sold fewer single tickets than to any other show in the company’s history. But our faithful subscribers were along for the ride (even though it was the first season wherein we dedicated half of our programming to a playwright other than Shakespeare). They also reaped the rewards of their commitment when the show became the hottest ticket in town and single ticket buyers were turned away.

At every theater conference I’ve attended over the past decade, someone has proclaimed “Subscription is dead!” and panic has ensued. I’ve finally stopped listening because, here at Cal Shakes, that’s far from the case. Eighty-two percent of our subscribers renew each year (roughly 10 percent above the national average). I’d like to believe that we must be doing something right to have earned this loyalty, this trust. The choice of plays; the way in which we approach producing them; the breathtaking beauty of our outdoor location; the way people are made to feel welcome, like a part of the family—these are all the things our subscribers tell us they value about their visits to the Bruns each summer. Of course, there’s also the perks: discounted prices, priority seating, the ability to change your tickets if something comes up.

Whatever the reasons our subscribers renew, we certainly don’t take the relationship for granted. Our audience is intelligent, passionate, adventurous, opinionated, and the reason we are the envy of theater companies around the country. We strive to continue to live up to your very high expectations of us.

So for those of you who have already pressed the “renew” button on our online subscription form, we thank you. For those of you who prefer to do things the old-fashioned way, rest assured that your renewal package will arrive in the mail soon. And for those of you who are here for the first time or the 15th time, and, for whatever reason, have never felt compelled to subscribe, I’d ask you to consider taking our relationship to the next level. If you can’t be convinced, we still welcome you here with open arms. But it doesn’t mean we won’t keep trying...