REVIEW

MSU presents a dynamic and honestly funny version of 'Much Ado About Nothing'

From left: Rileigh Belle Wine (Beatrice), Kim Seabright Martin (Leonata) and Henry J (Benedick) in Michigan State University Department of Theatre's production of "Much Ado About Nothing."
PHOTO BY HARLEY COOK/COURTESY OF MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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"MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING"
Nov. 15-19
7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday
8 p.m. Friday-Saturday
2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday
Arena Theatre
542 Auditorium Road, East Lansing
theatre.msu.edu

Mark Gmazel

It gets harder and harder to find fully mounted productions of William Shakespeare's works these days. The casts are large, the costumes are sumptuous, and the language is difficult. The skill and training required to pull these shows off successfully is time-consuming and often expensive. When done poorly, one may rest assured that dissatisfied audience members will never willingly see another play by Shakespeare again. Thank goodness, then, for all the effort Michigan State University puts into producing Shakespeare, as the broad smiles and loud laughs of the audience attest to the success of its current production.

Director Deric McNish sets the action in the television sitcom world of "M*A*S*H," an apt juxtaposition that emphasizes the zany pacing of this great comedy. I'm always happy to see updated and translocated adaptations of Shakespeare since his material is supremely malleable and welcomes modern casting practices with ease. Thus, Leonato becomes Leonata, Don John becomes Don Gianna, and the music at the party is, of course, disco.

The entire production moves with excellent drive and energy, the plot remains very clear, and the cast gets all the laughs that are supposed to be there. The set is well-dressed, as are the actors. The action takes place in the round, meaning the audience surrounds the performers. This is very demanding technically since the actors must play all four sides of the stage. However, this challenge is not a problem but rather a strength for this show, as seeing other audience members laughing always encourages more laughs, and the cast is up to the challenge of playing all sides of the audience evenly. The staging is dynamic and robust, including an imaginative use of a "shower."

Henry J leads the way as Benedick, a dashing soldier home from a recent war who doesn't think it makes sense to get married. J is a skilled crowd-pleaser with whom audiences naturally identify, and he handles the monologues and asides of his role like a man who knows his business. Though he's maybe less intellectual than other Benedicks I've seen, so some poetry gets lost, he's charming and quite watchable and brings the audience into his world.

Oscar Quiroz plays Don Pedro, the leader of the victorious army and Benedick's superior. Don Pedro is a thankless role, often not noticed even when done very well, but I appreciate the commanding presence and skilled elocution Quiroz brings to his performance. He's clearly the person you would want in command.

Edgy River LaLonde is a dark and villainous presence as Don Gianna, and Kim Seabright Martin as Leonata is the rock in her scenes. As Benedick's foil, Beatrice, Rileigh Belle Wine has a good command of the language and knows which lines are the famous ones. All the performers are apt in their roles, speak well with diction and clarity and bring individuality and interesting choices to the production.

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LAWRENCE COSENTINO
Senior Staff Writer

I've been writing for City Pulse since the paper started — more than 17 years. I was brought on board to write about music, but the job quickly got out of hand. By now I've written about everything from ants to skyscrapers and met more fascinating and wonderful people than I can count.

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