

Something is fresh and fun in Italy

THEATER REVIEW

'MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING'

By William Shakespeare
 Directed by Fred Sullivan Jr.
 Through Oct. 4, & Nov. 18-29
 Sandra Feinstein Gamm
 Theatre, 172 Exchange St.,
 Pawtucket

BY JANINE WEISMAN

Some directors may have cut the brief exchange between Benedick and a nameless "Boy" that opens Act II, Scene III of "Much Ado about Nothing." But with Fred Sullivan, Jr. in the director's seat, there's nothing trivial about it in a sensational season opening production of William Shakespeare's romantic comedy at Pawtucket's Gamm Theatre.

Sullivan knows how to squeeze laugh after laugh out of the Bard's story of love, intrigue, and tango-ing tongues while also giving us proof to the old adage that indeed "there are no small parts, only small actors."

To wit: Mark McClure's "Boy" alone on stage happily setting up his one-man orchard picnic with falsetto sighs that had the audience in stitches. Enter Tony Estrella's hilariously self-absorbed Benedick who promptly dispatches the boy to fetch a book in his chamber window. McClure's forlorn look and whimper as he packed up his ruined picnic and trudged off won him his own ovation at last Thursday night's performance.

This little gem was just one of many in this great production featuring a large ensemble cast with a few swing-era musical numbers and impressive choreography thrown in. A string of laugh-out-loud moments will make those who swore off Shakespeare in high school English class see the Bard in a whole new light. The actors do an incredible job shaping their characters as human beings with real wants and desires, thus inspiring a love and appreciation for the poetic language they use to speak to each other.

Of course, the setting is still the Italian city of Messina after Prince Don Pedro (Steve Kidd) and his men return from



battle victorious. But Sullivan sets the period in 1945 with men in khaki uniforms and women with curled and rolled tresses wearing beautiful dresses. The troops are invited by Messina's governor, Leonato, (Sam Babbitt) to stay for a month and attend a big masked ball. The celebration is a jitterbugging affair with fantastic footwork in particular by the athletic Kidd and the lovely Amanda Ruggiero who plays Hero, Leonato's daughter.

The action revolves around two sets of lovers — Don Pedro's friend Claudio (Marc Mancini) and Ruggiero's virtuous Hero, and Benedick (Estrella) and Beatrice (Jeanine Kane) — though the latter pair are longtime adversaries who have each separately vowed never to marry. Estrella and Kane are evenly matched in trading barbs and expressing their

loathing for the other. Then, to keep things interesting during his men's sojourn, Don Pedro hatches an ultimately successful scheme to unite them. Estrella and Kane each take separate funny turns as their characters overhear conversations that convince each that the other is in love with them. As a result Kane's begrudging

There's something about

William. Left to right, Amanda Ruggiero, Tray Gearing and Karen Carpenter do it up Andrews Sisters-style with help from Joshua Koopman, David Rabinow, David Tessier, and Zachary LeClair in the Gamm's fresh and funny Shakespeare season opener.

PHOTOS BY PETER GOLDBERG

The Watchman. Tom Gleadow as the constable Dogberry, right, with Chuck Reifler, left, as Verges, is an audience favorite.

declaration that "Against my will, I am sent to bid you come into dinner" achieves a comic effect when Estrella fancies, "There's a double meaning in that!"

We can't have a Shakespearean story without a villain and that role goes to Don Pedro's bastard brother Don John, played with convincing menace

by Kelby T. Akin, who takes pleasure from messing with his brother's friend Claudio. Enlisting the help of two associates Borachio (Kyle Blanchette) and Conrade (Aaron Rossini), they trick Claudio into believing that Hero is not so virtuous after all, thus ruining what was supposed to be a joyous wedding celebration. The comically inept, malapropism-prone grand constable who watches over the city, Dogberry (Tom Gleadow) will help set things right even if his Keystone Cops police force (the hysterical trio of David Rabinow, Joshua Koopman and David Tessier) don't exactly inspire confidence.

Gleadow becomes an audience favorite in carrying out his important duties, particularly in rebuffing Rossini's criticism that he is an ass, and even wins his own applause in the course of the play.

Many of the actors in this production will return to The Gamm stage in November in "Romeo and Juliet" as the theater gives us a double shot of Shakespeare to open its 25th anniversary season. So there's good reason to believe the iconic story of the ill-fated teen-aged lovers will resound with theatergoers as loudly as the thud that occurs when the teeth-clenched McClure returns to unceremoniously drop the book on stage for Estrella. This fresh and imaginative "Much Ado About Nothing" is one rollicking good time.

e Performances are Wed. & Sun., 7 p.m., Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sun., 2 p.m. Tickets \$24-\$40. www.gammtheater.org. (401) 723-4266.

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