

It's a Novel Naval 'Ado' From Shakespeare Festival/LA

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TIMES THEATER WRITER

Navy recruiters might want to take potential officers to Brendon Fox's staging of "Much Ado About Nothing," produced by Shakespeare Festival/LA. The production is set at a cushy country club that appears to be near an American naval base. Young male officers and the daughters of the local brass frolic around the hot tub, the tennis courts and the golf course.

The concept blended perfectly with the production's initial alfresco venue, at Burton Chace Park in Marina del Rey, last weekend. If theatergoers were occasionally distracted by the boats coming and going behind the stage, at least it all seemed appropriately naval.

The production has now moved to Pershing Square in downtown L.A. for two weeks, followed by another fortnight at South Coast Botanic Garden in Palos Verdes. These landlocked locations probably won't create the same site-specific buzz.

But chances are that the production itself will remain as winningly rambunctious as ever.

Big, brash Geoffrey Lower as Benedick and tart-tongued, cigar-wielding Stephanie Erb as Beatrice lead a strong cast whose every word can be cleanly understood. Although few alterations to the text make themselves known, the American accents sound remarkably conversational and natural.

Darin Singleton's Claudio is fittingly awkward and callow. What does Terrilynn Towns' lovely Hero see in him? Oh well, it's easy to suspend disbelief--although the plot twist in which Claudio suddenly buys the malicious gossip about Hero and slanders her at their wedding is a little harder to swallow than usual in this contemporary context.

James Sutorius plays Hero's father, the bigwig host, as younger and more vital than usual, letting his brother (Joe Medalis) provide the perspective of age. As the sibling naval officers, Chris Butler's easily misled Pedro is full of male bonhomie while Rob Nagle's hissable villain gets to hurl a tennis ball into the wings to demonstrate his temper. His chief henchman is played by Zachary Quinto with a lean look and appreciable attitude.

David Manis' Dogberry looks a lot like Goofy and extracts maximum comic mileage from a piece of red licorice, while Tina Sanchez wins the prize for best doubling, moving between a big-busted deputy officer and the thoughtful parson who helps save the day.

Although the show is over-amplified by indoor standards, very few scratches or hums got in the way of the voices at the marina, and the body mikes aren't particularly obvious. Jeff Ladman, like director Fox from the staff of the Old Globe in San Diego, designed the sound.

Set designer Yael Pardess' sunny set looks like an ideal location for R & R, and a rooftop walkway provides ample opportunities for the play's frequent eavesdropping. When Beatrice leans too far to overhear, she falls into the hot tub.

Holly Durbin's costumes range from colorful tropical shirts and shorts to dress whites and evening gowns. Breezy jazz between scenes, composed by Gabe Lopez, as well as a few mock-syrupy string arrangements of standards, keep the mood light and bouncy.

* "Much Ado About Nothing," Pershing Square, 532 S. Olive St., today-Sunday, Wednesday-July 16, 8:30 p.m. Free with canned food donation; seating first-come, first-served, except reservations needed for Thursday's sign-interpreted performance. (213) 489-4127. At South Coast Botanic Garden, 26300 Crenshaw Blvd., Palos Verdes Peninsula, July 20-23, 26-30, 8:15 p.m. \$15 to \$18. (310) 377-4316. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.
