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Posted: Wed., Jul. 12, 2000

Much Ado About Nothing

(Burton Chace Park, Marina del Rey; 400 seats; \$18 top) Shakespeare Festival/L.A. presents a play in two acts by William Shakespeare, directed by Brendon Fox.

Beatrice - Stephanie Erb
Benedick - Geoffrey Lower
Claudio - Darin Singleton
Hero - Terrilyn Towns
Don Pedro - Chris Butler
Leonato - James Sutorius
Margaret - Marika Becz
Verges - Matt Doherty
Conrade - Gary Karp
Dogberry - David Manis
Antonio - Joe Medalis
Don John - Rob Nagle
Borachio - Zachary Quinto
Ursula - Darby Stanchfield
Balthasar - Cody Henderson
Pastor - Tina Sanchez

By **[JULIO MARTINEZ](#)**

Shakespeare was having a bit of fun with the title of this wildly witty romp through the aristocratic doings at Leonato's (James Sutorius) sumptuous Italian villa. The term "Nothing" is really his playful pun for the characters' constant "noting" of the actions and motivations of everyone else. Making facile use of Yael Pardess's beautifully wrought multi-level setting, director Brendon Fox adroitly guides an outstanding ensemble through every nuance of the Bard's highly charged escapades, both comic and near-tragic.

The work, authored in 1599, is certainly chockful of quick scrutinies leading to even quicker resolves. Upon observing

young Claudio's (Darin Singleton) infatuation with Leonato's gentle daughter Hero (Terrilyn Towns), visiting nobleman Don Pedro (Chris Butler) decides to court the maiden on behalf of his compatriot. Of course, the resulting courtship is overheard by servants who pass the information on to Don Pedro's coldly malevolent brother Don John (Rob Nagle), who sets in motion a series of intrigues, inaccurate surveillances and false perceptions that nearly destroy the tranquility of Leonato's household.

Riding the crest of all the shenanigans is the hilarious, barbed relationship of Leonato's wasp-tongued niece Beatrice (Stephanie Erb) and Claudio's friend, the erudite, confirmed bachelor Benedick (Geoffrey Lower), who give new meaning to the term "love/hate relationship." Resembling a more sophisticated "Taming of the Shrew" Kate and Petruchio, Erb's Beatrice and Lower's Benedick burrow into each other's psyches with perfectly timed, mischievous repartee.

Complimenting the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick is the more romantically serious relationship of Singleton's Claudio and Towns' Hero. Singleton is quite believable as the callow youth who segues from unabashed adoration to utter contempt when he is duped by Don John into thinking Hero has betrayed him. Towns exudes an appealing vulnerability as a totally virtuous maiden who is driven to near-death by the accusations made against her on her wedding day.

The production is constantly enlivened by the ongoing machinations of Butler's jovial matchmaker Don Pedro and Sutorius' ultra-sophisticated Leonato. But the proceedings vibrate with understated rancor whenever Nagle takes command of the stage. Providing perfect comic relief is David Manis' zany outing as the clownish constable, Dogberry, who quite often steals the show with his monumental destruction of the English language.

The production is enhanced greatly by the dazzling modern-day costumes of Holly Durbin and the evocative, mood-enhancing entr'acte music of Gabe Lopez. Producer, Greg Reiner. Sets, Yael Pardess; lights, Trevor Norton; costumes, Holly Durbin; composer, Gabe Lopez; sound, Jeff Ladman; choreography, Jessica Wallenfels. Opened and reviewed July 2; runs until July 30 (Downtown L.A.'s Pershing Square, July 6-16; Palos Verdes' South Coast Botanic Gardens, July 20-30). Running time: 2 hour, 25 minutes.