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'Much Ado About Nothing' at the Knightsbridge

Contributed by: Jackie Houchin on 11/5/2007

Once again, the Knightsbridge has lived up to its reputation of being an "experimental theater."

Their new, daringly updated version of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" is a production that will definitely stir up some "ado" among its audiences.

Billed as a romantic comedy even in William Shakespeare's day, this adaptation, directed by **Jim Rice**, bursts with gaiety, wit and charm. It's a lively tale of romance, humor and melodrama - recreated in Santa Barbara, California in the months following World War II. The music is 1940s swing, the dance is Jitterbug, and the songs are in the style of the Andrew Sisters.

The play opens with a nicely harmonized rendition of "Under the Apple Tree" sung by **Jill Gehrke**, **Dionne Nicole** and **Heidi White**. A mixed group of women come together in the courtyard of a hacienda and chat among themselves, waiting for the "boys" to come home.

But when a sailor (**Hans Obma**) arrives bearing a telegram, silence descends. Solemnly, he hands it to one woman who abruptly throws it down. Another retrieves it, reads the message, and then cries out in happy excitement. The others gather around to listen.

But as she begins to read aloud, the audience experiences an aural jolt; for it is the language of Shakespearean England that we hear. So completely have we been enticed into 1940's America, with the setting, the songs and the sumptuous period costumes, that we have forgotten this play was written in the 17th century. Although everything else has been cleverly updated, the language of the Bard has not.

Happily, once the shock is past, the audience will delight in the story and style of this unique production. They will probably need to pay a bit more attention to the dialogue, especially with one or two characters who speak too softly or quickly. But the expressive faces and active body language of the others more than convey the meaning of any missed words or phrases.

Christina Howard's fascinating portrayal of the strong-willed and beautiful Beatrice is a pleasure to watch, while **Joseph Stachura**, as Benedict, steals the show with his comic attempts to resist her charms. When friends scheme to unite these two, sparks fly and passions burn.

July Smith, as the innocent and winsome Hero, is convincing in both her adoration for her lover, Claudio (**Mark Petrie**) and her utter devastation at his venomous accusations. (She does a very believable faint as well.)

JoAnna Jocelyn in her role of mother/Aunt Leonata is a driving force that propels the show. She's able to portray impish delight, outraged fury and smooth deception with equal ability.

Joseph Patrick Bogs, **Chris Roessner** and **Nick Polito** play the Al Capone-like gangsters who add villainy to the frothy plot. Dressed in zoot suits of black, pin-stripe and purple, these three conspire to stop a wedding through deception and guile.

Their opposites, the Keystone Cop-like "watchmen" discover their dark deeds and bring them to justice. **Marco Neves** plays the excitable Dogberry, who cannot help breaking into rapid Spanish when upset; **Julia Morizawa** plays the tiny Japanese, whose comic stance and grin tickle the funny bone; and pert and petite **Shaina Vorspan** is the Watchwoman who interprets for her culturally challenged fellows.

Last, but certainly not least are the characters of Judge Frances, played with a clear Irish accent by **Marti Hale** (Julius Caesar in the previous play), and Don Pedro played by the handsome and talented **Joshua Hayden**.

The Knightsbridge Theatre invites you to experience Shakespeare in a different and daring way, performed by an amazing cast, who, according to the director, "stepped off the cliff every day to fly in this play."

Performances are at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 25.

Tickets are \$25 for adults and \$20 for students and seniors.

Call (323) 667-0955 for reservations.

The Knightsbridge is located at 1944 Riverside Drive (near Los Feliz and the I-5) in Los Angeles.