

What will an audience
find to enjoy in 'much
ado about nothing'?
essay sample



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Much Ado About Nothing is a short play by Shakespeare, which has comedy, romance, suspense and a lot of drama twisted into several hundred lines of verse. The ending is happy, however, and little has changed albeit two marriages. The play is important, not because of its subject matter, but because it shows us that life itself is similarly enjoyable and foolish – our lives are “much ado about nothing”.

The first thing an audience will find to enjoy in this light-hearted comedy is the excellent stagecraft, which includes setting, costumes and masks. Act II scene 1 from the 1993 production I saw, is an ideal example of the type of stagecraft an audience would get ample enjoyment out of.

As Act II scene 1 opens, the principal female characters, accompanied by Leonato and his brother Antonio, enter a huge courtyard which is part of Governor Leonato's estate. The whole courtyard is strung with fairy lights, which, while illuminating the scene, also add a romantic touch. The beautiful Italian sunset and lively fiddle music, played mostly throughout the dialogue, capture the joyous atmosphere perfectly.

In contrast to all the other females, Beatrice, Hero, Margaret and Ursula are clothed in white dresses. This clearly identifies them to the audience as the leading parts in the play. With the exception of Leonato and Antonio, the leading male characters are clothed in black. As the group saunter towards the centre of the courtyard, Beatrice discusses her idea of the perfect man with the others – a happy medium between Don John who is “too like an image and says nothing” and Benedick who is “evermore tattling”. She then adds jokingly to Leonato “with a good foot and a good leg uncle, and money

enough in his purse". The audience would find this quite comical because Beatrice has appeared so set against romance and marriage, yet she declares that a man who possessed all these qualities would surely "win any woman in the world". However, she then quickly adds "if a' could get her good will" as if realising her mistake, for she has vowed never to marry anyone.

This leads into a conversation about whether Beatrice will ever marry, and Beatrice jests that she will not, for she likes neither men with beards, proclaiming that "I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face" nor men without beards, "what should I do with him, dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman?" This conversation pursues, with Beatrice exasperating Leonato more and more, until the masked revellers make their grand entrance.

The masks are the final and most important feature of the stagecraft. They create the suspense element by disguising the wearer's true identity, and this deception causes both amusement and problems. They also allow the characters to flirt playfully with one another - such is the case for Ursula and Antonio, and Margaret and Borachio. In usual circumstances, Antonio would not dream of acting the way he does with Ursula, but by wearing the mask he can detach from his social and personal responsibilities.

In the production I saw, the director Kenneth Branagh (who also stars as Benedick) replaced Balthasar with Borachio as the character that dances with Margaret. In my opinion, this decision is very sensible because it is

Borachio and Margaret who almost wreak tragedy later in the play (although Margaret does so unknowingly).

The masks provide the most entertainment for Beatrice and Benedick, who are one of the more important couplings during the ball. Pretending that she does not it is Benedick behind his broadly grinning mask, Beatrice delights in thoroughly insulting Benedick to his face, knowing he cannot defend himself or retaliate. She insults his witty humour, calling him “ the Prince’s jester; a very dull fool”.

But because Benedick is supposedly disguised and cannot retaliate, he is forced to listen to Beatrice completely without interrupting her. They cannot bicker with each other as they did when Benedick returned - “ You are a rare parrot teacher” (Benedick), “ A bird of my tongue, is better than a beast of yours” (Beatrice) - and so Benedick cannot just shrug off these comments about him. Instead, their “ merry war” of wits with each other seems to swerve off course and Benedick’s feelings are truly hurt. The audience sees how ‘ psychologically astute’ Beatrice’s comments are, as Benedick keeps repeating them to himself later in the scene, and also when he is complaining to Don Pedro and Hero - “ She speaks poniards, and every word stabs”. The audience will enjoy the fact that Beatrice was able to burst Benedick’s ego, and also the way Benedick reacts to her remarks.

The use of masks also allows Don Pedro to woo Hero on behalf of Claudio. Although Don Pedro himself is not romantically interested in Hero, the audience will enjoy seeing him flirt with Hero because it is the only instance in the play they will see him showing romantic affection.

However, the masks are also used by Don John as a tool to destroy the happiness of Claudio and Hero. Again, Don John and his aides (Borachio and Conrade) pretend not to recognise Claudio, but instead addresses him as Benedick. Don John very easily manages to persuade Claudio that, contrary to their plan, Don Pedro is “enamour’d on Hero” and “swore he would marry her tonight”. Claudio’s gullible and doubting character does not even question Don John’s claims, and his readiness to believe that his friend would betray him is troubling for the audience. Within the space of just a few minutes Claudio, believing that Don Pedro has deceived him, bitterly declares that “Friendship is constant... save in the office and affairs of love” and bids “Farewell, therefore, Hero.”

The masks are a key aid in this scene to the theme of the whole play – what is believed to be real and what is actually real. Without them, Beatrice could not have told Benedick a few home-truths, Don Pedro could not have courted Hero as Claudio, and Don John could not have attempted to sabotage Claudio and Hero’s happiness.

Act II scene 3 from the 1993 production is a good example of comedy which an audience would certainly enjoy. Oblivious to the evil Don John is secretly plotting, Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio devise their own plan “to bring Signior Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection th’ one with th’ other”. At the beginning of the scene, Benedick is wandering aimlessly around Leonato’s huge garden attempting to put up his deck chair, but preoccupied with thoughts of love. He wonders if a man that “hath laugh’d at such shallow follies in others” will one day “become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love”. This then turns his attention to Claudio, <https://assignbuster.com/what-will-an-audience-find-to-enjoy-in-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

who has done just this. He ponders how Claudio, who was “wont to speak plain, and to the purpose (like an honest man and a soldier)” can have transformed into a ‘moony-eyed lover’.

He swears to himself that love would never alter his disposition – “he shall never make me such a fool” – then goes on to dictate a list of qualities a potential wife must have before she would come into his “grace”, such as “rich... that’s certain”, “fair, or I’ll never look on her”. His facetious soliloquy is interrupted, however, by the arrival of “the Prince and Monsieur Love”. The slight French accent and heavy sarcasm used on “Monsieur Love” gives it that little extra touch which makes it comical for the audience. Thinking that Don Pedro and Claudio have not seen him, he decides to “hide me in the arbour” and continues to struggle with his deckchair.

Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio gather around the fountain, and the Friar begins to play his guitar, a soft melodic song, and the three look completely relaxed and contented. Benedick admits temporary defeat with the deckchair, looks at their expressions and says ironically to himself “Is it not strange that sheeps’ guts should hale souls out of men’s bodies?”

As the song finishes, Don Pedro praises Balthasar – “thou singest well enough” – but Benedick remains unmoved, claiming that if “he had been a dog that should have howl’d thus, they would have hang’d him.” Everyone departs the scene except Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio and Benedick.

Acknowledging to each other to begin their conversation, Don Pedro asks Leonato in an obviously loud voice, “What was it you told me of today, that your niece Beatrice was in love with Signior Benedick?” While this question is

not amusing, Benedick's stunned reaction is possibly one of the most comical and entertaining parts of the play. After several failed attempts to erect the deckchair, he finally manages to successfully get it to stand, sits on it... and it promptly gives way as he hears this shocking revelation. Another of Benedick's humorous reactions is his attempt to cover up his indignant cry of disbelief when he hears from Don Pedro he "hath a contemptible spirit". As Don Pedro looks up in mock wonder, Benedick darts behind a hedge and endeavours to imitate a bird call, but it is so unconvincing it is a laugh-out-loud moment of the comedy.

There is yet more humour when the question, "what effects of passion shows she?" from Don Pedro and Claudio's excited, enthusiastic "Bait the hook well, this fish will bite!", completely stumps Leonato, and his faltering attempts to say something intelligent make the audience smile. Don Pedro's exaggerated cry of "You amaze me" from what Leonato ("the white bearded fellow") has supposedly just divulged, really makes Benedick believe this to be true. The way the whole conversation is exaggerated, such as when Claudio repeats the word 'die' four times and puts so much emphasis on it - "Hero thinks surely she will die... die, if he love her not... die ere she make her love known, die if he woo her" is very comical and all these exaggerations drastically change Benedick's view of both love and Beatrice. When he is alone again the audience sees just how much in his second soliloquy.

Believing that Beatrice is madly in love with him, he decides that "it must be requited". It is like he has to continue their competition by even outdoing and surpassing her in love - "For I will be horribly in love with her." He

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decides there and then that there is no shame in changing his mind - "doth not the appetite alter?" and makes excuses for his previous promises ("When I said I should die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married"). While he has been saying all this, he has been pacing around the garden, but as he comes to leave, he sees a nostril-flared Beatrice thundering down Orchard Alley like a storm cloud. He stops and shrieks "Here comes Beatrice". This will be amusing for an audience, because prior to seeing her he was cocky and composed, but is now very panic-stricken. The words "I do spy some marks of love in her" make the audience laugh because they know that Beatrice is not in love with Benedick in the slightest. He runs back to the fountain and attempts to strike a gallant, sexy pose. On his face is painted a grin that is trying to convey gallantry, romance, intelligence and wit all at the same time. To the audience he looks ridiculous, and even more so when Beatrice just looks at him stonily and says, "Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner."

Benedick, infatuated with his new love, carries on the conversation being complimentary and not at all taunting or rude towards Beatrice, who cannot understand this sudden change in character. Instead of retaliating to her sarcastic remark, he laughs, thinking she's hilarious. Beatrice, on the other hand, thinks he is certifiable. After she has stormed off back down Orchard Alley, Benedick replays the conversation, reinterpreting all of her words and actions as signs of her love for him. From "Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner" he concludes: "there's a double meaning in that".

The love-struck Benedick and the hostile Beatrice display makes very enjoyable viewing for the audience.

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Act III scene 1 is another chance for the audience to enjoy the comedy because it shows Hero and Margaret playing the same trick on Beatrice. As soon as the duo see Beatrice powering down the path, they launch into their carefully prepared dialogue. To grasp Beatrice's attention, Ursula says in a practically shouts at Hero, " But are you sure, that Benedick loves Beatrice so entirely?" which works very well as Beatrice stops dead in her tracks, eyes on stalks. The look of total shock that diffuses over her face is comical in contrast to her expression of perturbation just seconds before.

What is chiefly funny about this scene is Beatrice's reactions to the truths about herself which she learns from listening to Hero and Ursula. They believe " Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes... her wit values itself so highly... she cannot love." Hero believes that however " wise, noble, young, rarely featured" Benedick is, even though " he is the only man of Italy", Beatrice would " spell him backward"; she would always find fault with him. " If tall, a lance ill-headed: if low, an agate very vilely cut" - this reminds the audience of her conversation with Leonato at the masked ball. She " could not endure a husband with a beard", yet a husband with no beard is " less than a man". Ursula suggests that Hero tell Beatrice of Benedick's love for her, but Hero protests, vowing that " if I should speak, she would mock me into air". Therefore, it would be better to let Benedick " like cover'd fire... waste inwardly" rather than expose him to Beatrice's scorn and witticisms.

Beatrice, just as Benedick did, falls for the trick completely. The truths she has learnt about herself wound her pride, and she is stirred to prove Hero wrong; that she does have compassion, just as Benedick was moved to prove <https://assignbuster.com/what-will-an-audience-find-to-enjoy-in-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/>

his accusers wrong. The audience will enjoy that both of them fall for the trick that has finally made them realise they love each other, and that they have both matured in characters upon hearing the opinions of others about them.

Although *Much Ado About Nothing* is a comedy, it sometimes seems only steps away from becoming a tragedy. As well as liking the stagecraft and comedy, the audience would also enjoy the near-catastrophe that is brought about by the villainous Don John.

In Act I scene 3 the audience can try to understand why Don John tries to devastate Claudio's happiness and destroy Hero's reputation. He is evidently very resentful of his brother's honourable reputation, but would rather be "a canker in the hedge, than a rose in his grace". To show his true, malevolent character "better fits my blood" than to hide in his brother's shadow. He is envious of Claudio's close relationship with Don Pedro by the way in the production he sarcastically says, "the most exquisite Claudio" and this is perhaps why he wants to ruin Claudio's joy. He freely admits to being a "plain-dealing villain", showing his only pleasure is in other people's pain. He, assisted by Borachio, plots to "misuse the Prince, vex Claudio, undo Hero and kill Leonato" (II. ii) by making it appear as if Hero is having sexual encounters with Borachio the night before the wedding. Claudio, ever ready to believe Don John without question, thoroughly believes that Hero has been unfaithful to him, as does Don Pedro.

In the production I saw, the crowd that assembles outside the church to celebrate the wedding of Claudio and Hero is very large. With so many

people to witness Hero's public disgrace makes it even worse for Hero. As the doors open, accompanied by rapturous applaud from the crowd, Leonato and the radiant Hero take the wedding march towards the chapel, blissfully unaware of the nightmare that is about to unfold. Hero's excited, happy smile greatly contrasts with Claudio's stony, hostile glare and the audience is on tenterhooks, waiting for the bombshell to explode.

When the Friar asks Claudio " You come hither, my lord, to marry this Lady", Leonato dismisses Claudio's blunt, curt " No" with a joke, nervously laughing. Although the crowd relaxes again, it is all too obvious to the audience that lightning is yet to strike. The tension rises again when Claudio describes Hero, with extreme force, as a " rich and precious gift." The audience can see he is struggling to keep his composure, and he will not last much longer. Just as he appears calm, he literally throws Hero at Leonato - " take her back again". He calls her a " rotten orange", and by referring to her as a piece of rotten fruit, implies that what was once sweet and pure is now foul and spoiled. Enraged, Claudio storms into the crowd, hurling benches over, professing she has the appearance of a maid - " she blushes" - but in (supposed) reality " she is none: she knows the heat of a luxurious bed" and refuses to " knit his soul to an approved wanton." Leonato, dumbfounded at this sudden proclamation and eruption of chaos, thinks that Claudio means he himself has " made defeat of her virginity", so why should he be making such an exposition?

Claudio, fighting tears, tells him he is wrong. He is not just angry, he is deeply distressed. His voice breaks as he describes how she appeared to him " as Dian in her orb" but is in reality " more intemperate... than Venus."
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Beatrice is outraged at such accusations and immediately jumps to defend her cousin's honour, not questioning her innocence for a moment. As if it is not bad enough for Hero to hear these abominable untruths about her, the respectable Prince, who is unusually icy and unfriendly, affirms Claudio's declaration and a public picture is established of her as an entirely scandalous woman. The odds are stacked totally against her – she is lying almost senseless on the ground while three men (Don John included) of high status tower above her, protesting her a “ common stale.” Overwhelmed, Hero faints, and Claudio and Don Pedro, mistakenly assuming that Hero's sweet and chaste nature is a deceptive exterior to her licentious behaviour, leave the church with Don John without looking back.

They even manage to persuade Leonato, Hero's father, to adopt a similar view of his daughter. Convinced that it is true, he explodes with rage – “ Do not live Hero, do not ope thine eyes” – and disowns her in a speech full of self-pity; he asks himself “ Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes?” In the production I saw, just like Claudio, Leonato both physically and verbally attacks Hero – he grabs her by her hair and flings her away from him, he would rather “ let her die.”

However, the audience will be relieved by page 83 because, unexpectedly, the quiet Friar steps him to rationalise the situation. Observing the whole proceeding, he logically determines that Hero cannot be culpable of infidelity from her utterly shocked expressions. Benedick intelligently adds that if Claudio and the Prince have been deceived, “ the practice of it lives in John the Bastard, whose spirits toil in frame of villainies.” Beatrice remains

adamant that “ on my soul my cousin is belied.” All three are striving to
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convince Leonato that Hero is sinless, but it is the Friar whose “ counsel sways (Leonato) in this case” by devising a plan to rescue Hero’s reputation. Hero has been left for dead, so why not “ publish it that she is dead indeed”? When her accusers hear she has died an innocent lady, their fury will convert to remorse, and she will be “ lamented, pitied and excus’d” by all. Grief-ridden and confused, Leonato accepts the plan and agrees to go along with it. The audience can breathe a sigh of relief, as the tragic end that could so easily have happened has been avoided.

As the Friar departs with Leonato and Antonio, and Hero departs with Ursula, Beatrice and Benedick find themselves alone together. The audience will be delighted when Benedick, trying his utmost to comfort her, suddenly confesses he loves “ nothing in the world so well” as he loves her, even though it is “ strange” that his feelings towards her should have reversed so quickly. And when Beatrice returns his affections saying, “ I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest”, the audience will be overjoyed that Beatrice and Benedick, the two sour bachelors, have transformed into romantic lovers. Elated, Benedick asks Beatrice, “ Come, bid me do anything for thee.” However, her response is not exactly what he had in mind.

In an instant, Beatrice’s happy smile has vanished. Looking Benedick in the eye, she speaks slowly and deliberately, the two words that threaten the comic tone of the play: “ Kill Claudio.”

The whole mood of the scene changes. Beatrice is in profound earnest, but a stunned Benedick refuses – “ not for the wide world.” The atmosphere of sweetness and love evaporates as she angrily tries to leave. Desperate not

to undo everything that has just happened between them, Benedick tries to stop her and reason with her, but the full extent of Beatrice's wrath is unveiled. In the production I saw, Beatrice is near hysterical, heaving furniture over as she furiously describes how her "kinswoman" has been unjustifiably "slandered, scorned, dishonoured". She violently wishes "O God that I were a man" for she would "eat his heart in the market place." She does love Benedick, but there is nothing in the world that is more important to her at this moment, than to take revenge upon Claudio. Acknowledging that she "cannot be a man with wishing" she sinks to the floor and declares she will "die a woman with grieving."

Benedick tries again to reason with her, asking her if in her soul she believes that "Claudio hath wrong'd Hero" and Beatrice stops shouting and crying. The mood of the scene changes again as she replies solemnly and slowly, "Yea, as sure as I have a thought, or a soul." Benedick realises all her hysteria has ebbed away and she is not just wildly thinking in the heat of the moment; she is serious. Upon hearing this, Benedick changes his mind and agrees to challenge Claudio. Not just for the wrong he has done Hero, but because his love for Beatrice is so strong. The audience will enjoy the powerful contrasts of love and anger in this scene.

However, although the audience will be glad that Beatrice and Benedick are back together, the tension mounts again, as they think that real tragedy could strike and if Benedick does kill Claudio, it would ruin everything for the main characters. By killing Claudio, Benedick could also kill Hero; to have another huge shock so soon after her traumatic experience could well mean that she could die from shock and anguish, or possibly even take her own

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life. That would have a grievous affect Leonato, Beatrice, Antonio, Ursula and Margaret, and also, by killing Claudio, Benedick is putting himself in a vulnerable position, for he too could be killed. There are numerous repercussions this action against Claudio would produce, and none of them advantageous. But, as it is a comedy, everything turns out well and Hero and Claudio are eventually happily reunited.

At first I was inclined to think that Much Ado About Nothing would be a lot of tedious work, as I am not particularly a fan of Shakespeare, but I have thoroughly enjoyed reading it and I am very glad that I was able to see the 1993 film version. The film was directed in such a way that you could easily understand and not help getting drawn into the plot. I most enjoyed following the relationship of the play's two protagonists, Beatrice and Benedick, and watching them grow as characters. I can say with no hesitation that this comedy is my favourite play by Shakespeare!