

THEATER REVIEW

# 'Much Ado' has much to offer

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

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Beatrice, the proud charmer in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is one of Shakespeare's strongest women.

Perhaps only *The Merchant of Venice's* Portia demonstrates a greater lust for independence and justice, but canny Beatrice (like *Shrew-ish* Kate) balances hers with an equal passion for the games of love.

Even when *Much Ado About Nothing* is updated from the 16th century to the early 20th century, as director Ed Vaughan has done brilliantly at Otterbein College, Beatrice remains a woman ahead of her time.

It's a sad fact, considering the relative lack of progress of the "weaker sex" in gaining equal liberties over four centuries. But it's a happy one for this stylish, well-conceived update of Shakespeare's romantic comedy, which loses nothing in Otterbein's translation.

In fact, this lovely show gains something valuable: an underlined illustration of the Bard's latent insight that patriarchy is a laughable conspiracy of men — truly, the weaker sex — in a doomed effort to

balance their vulnerability to women.

No amount of bickering and bantering — and the 22-member student ensemble bickers and banters amusingly — can obscure the psychologically revealing spectacle of men and women who dare not admit their feelings for fear that such an admission will sacrifice their advantage.

The coy jockeying for power between Ginger Lee McDermott's formidable Beatrice and Bryan Brems' foolhardy Benedick easily upstages the innuendo-plagued relationship between Ian Short's naive Claudio and Nancy Martin's demure Hero.

McDermott gives Beatrice an appealing femininity, but her silky demeanor clothes a steely resolve. She wants love, all right, but only on her terms. When Benedick finally kisses her, she bites his lip. So there.

In an apt use of non-traditional casting, Vaughan has changed the sex of several supporting players — notably Meg Chamberlain's Doania Joan (originally, Don Juan) and her gossip followers, Mary Randle's Conrardia and Melanie Bruno's Borachia.

Not only do these sex changes not harm the play; they actually reinforce the subtext most relevant to a

modern audience: the problematic position of women in a man's world.

This witty, well-mounted production boasts some memorable images, especially a spiffy outdoor costume party with the men in tuxedos and the women in glittering pastel evening gowns that presage the Roaring '20s. Kudos to costume designer Katie Robbins and costume shop supervisor Marcia Hain.

Occasionally, the aristocratic couples dance to the honky-tonky sounds of Scott Joplin — a playful choice that accentuates the story's blithe frivolity. Credit Christopher Corts, on the upstage piano, for the fine music and guest choreographer Doreen Dunn for the nifty two-steps.

Designer John Gutknecht artfully fills the airy garden-party set, outside a tony Long Island mansion, with Greek columns, sandstone steps, vine-covered trellises, pink carna-

## AT A GLANCE

■ *Much Ado About Nothing*, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Shakespeare's romantic comedy. Directed by Ed Vaughan.

■ Major cast members:

Don Pedro ..... Bill Timmins  
Claudio ..... Ian Short  
Benedick ..... Bryan Brems  
Hero ..... Nancy Martin  
Beatrice ..... Ginger Lee McDermott

Witty, stylish update boasts lovely set, sexy 20th century costumes

■ Performances are at 8 tonight through Saturday night and 2 p.m. Sunday at Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., on the Westerville campus.

■ Tickets, \$7.75 and \$8.75. Call 898-1109.

tions and paneled glass doors.

His *piece de resistance*: a working fountain and circular pool onstage — the indolent focal point for much of *Much's* sly humor.