



## Much Ado About Nothing at the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern

by Nina Burris. Written on 2016-03-26. Published in 2017 Issue 1.

For the production: *Much Ado About Nothing* (2016, Atlanta Shakespeare Company, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

THE INTERTWINING OF LIGHTEARTED AND SOMBER PLOTLINES IN *MUCH ADO ABOUT Nothing* makes the play more complex than its designation as a comedy suggests. A production of the play is responsible not only for communicating several series of witty interchanges in a manner that resonates with modern audiences, but also for portraying characters with realistic attributes and emotional depth beyond their ostensible comic roles. The relaxed atmosphere of the Shakespeare Tavern encouraged audience engagement in the mixture of exaggerated comedy and sincere emotional displays conveyed by the actors. The introduction and development of the characters, as well as the delineation between comical and serious moments, were largely accomplished through manipulations of sound in various forms.

Several of the actors' voices were particularly suited to their roles and were useful in conveying aspects of their characters. Perhaps the most effective characterization through sound was that of Beatrice, portrayed by Laura Cole, whose husky voice provided an apt vehicle for the delivery of her frequent quips and sharply contrasted the conventional femininity of Nedra Snipes' sighing Hero. Cole's lower voice reflected some of the traditionally masculine attributes applied to Beatrice, such as her aggression toward Benedict, named Benedick in this production and portrayed by Matt Nitchie, and her desire for independence from a spouse, "for the which blessing [she is] at him on [her] knees every morning and evening". Changes in Cole's inflection provided depth to Beatrice's character and illustrated her emotional development. Cole softened her voice and slowed her delivery to express sincerity in Beatrice's promise to "requite [Benedick], / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand". This surprising shift in Cole's voice led the usually lively audience to respond to Beatrice's speech with a moment of silence rather than with the raucous applause given to Benedick's earlier admission of love for Beatrice.

The use of sound to convey attributes of the characters and events of the plot was not limited to the actors' styles of delivering dialogue and speeches. Wordless sounds, music, and audible reactions of the audience all contributed to the understanding and emotional impact of certain scenes. Although relatively few lines are assigned to Hero, Nedra Snipes was able to effectively communicate her character's devotion to her beloved with an exaggerated sigh at the first mention of the "young Florentine called Claudio". Snipes's repeated sighs contributed to the comedy of the first scene, but also established Hero's innocence and fidelity before Borachio and Don John introduced their scheme to defame her. Claudio was similarly characterized in his portrayal by Anthony Peeples, whose recurrent displays of emotion prompted hearty laughter from the audience and later served to heighten their frustration when Claudio, having been deceived, declared Hero "more intemperate in [her] blood / Than Venus or those pampered animals / That rage in savage sensuality". While the inflated lovesickness expressed by Hero and Claudio initially characterized them as comic figures, their infatuated sighs also



Figure 1: Laura Cole as Beatrice and Matt Nitchie as Benedict in the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern production, 2016 (Photograph: Jeff Watkins)

emphasized their youth and sincerity, making the plot to separate them appear especially nefarious as a result.

The musical performances incorporated into the production created appropriate atmospheres for certain scenes and engaged the audience in their emotional contents. Balthasar's song, performed by Adam King and made humorous by the singing of Leah Keelan and Sarah Newby Halicks as Margaret and Ursula, provided an apt preface for the tricking of Benedick. The manner in which this song was performed reflected the ambivalent implications of its lyrics. King sang the first lines of the song clearly and directly, suggesting truth in its claim that "Men were deceivers ever" with regards to revealed and forthcoming events in the plot. However, the entrance of Margaret and Ursula into the song undermined its initially serious tone and prepared the audience for the comical scene in which Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato convince the eavesdropping Benedick that Beatrice "loves him with an enraged affection." The mixture of comic and serious elements in the performance of Balthasar's song mirrored the mixture of benign and malicious applications of deception encountered throughout the play. Reactions from the enthusiastic audience emphasized changes and developments in the characters, and indicated particularly humorous or significant events. The noise level inside the theater rose considerably during the first bout of verbal sparring between Beatrice and Benedick, as their rapid exchange of insults was accompanied by increasing audience laughter. The unusual silence of the audience when Beatrice revealed that Benedick "lent [his heart to] me a while...he won it of me with false dice" aided in the portrayal of Beatrice as an honest and multifaceted character. Such moments of silence from the audience, which were most prominent when Beatrice exchanged her usual wit for emotional expression, revealed the viewers' interpretation of Beatrice and Benedick's union via deception. The reactions of the audience to Beatrice suggested that they perceived her sarcasm as a façade behind which she concealed true fondness for Benedick. They understood Beatrice's claim that she loves Benedick "with so much of my heart that none is left to protest" as an outward expression of long-held feelings rather than the outcome of recent trickery. The audience's applause and cheers for the declarations of love exchanged between Beatrice and Benedick confirmed their acceptance of this positive interpretation.

The application of familiar vocal cadences to the text ensured that none of the comedic or emotional content of the play was obscured through antiquated language. Leah Keelan delivered Margaret's innuendo-laden interchange with Benedick in a suggestive tone, guaranteeing that audiences would grasp the sexual implication in her command to "Give us the swords. We have bucklers of our own". While the production depended on such exaggerated delivery to make the comedy of the play accessible to the audience, this inflated style also allowed for the serious moments of anger and emotional truth to stand out in contrast. In its

intent to convey positive and negative outcomes of deception with humor and honesty, this production of *Much Ado About Nothing* benefited from its lack of subtlety.

*Nina Burris is a junior at Emory University, where she is majoring in English literature and music history. She is a member of the Emory Scholars Program and is the recipient of the Humanities and Music Awards from Oxford College of Emory University. She is currently planning an honors research project on seventeenth-century music dramas.*

## Production Details

### General

Title	Much Ado About Nothing
Year	2016
Theater Company	Atlanta Shakespeare Company
Theaters	The Shakespeare Tavern (USA)
Start Date	2016-03-05
End Date	2016-03-26

### Cast

VERGES	J. TONY BROWN
FRANCIS	J. TONY BROWN
LEONATO	ROB CLEVELAND
WATCH	ROB CLEVELAND
BEATRICE	LAURA COLE
SEXTON	DOUG KAYE
ANTONIO	DOUG KAYE
MARGARET	LEAH KEELAN
BALTHASAR	ADAM KING
WATCH	ADAM KING
WATCH	SARAH NEWBY HALICKS
URSULA	SARAH NEWBY HALICKS
BENEDICK	MATT NITCHIE
CLAUDIO	ANTHONY PEEPLES
BORACHIO	KEVIN ROOST
DON JOHN	CHRIS RUSHING
DOGBERRY	CHRIS RUSHING
HERO	NEDRA SNIPES
CONRADE	DAVID STERRITT

DON PEDRO      JACOB YORK

## **Creatives**

DIRECTOR      LAURA COLE