

Much Ado About Nothing

Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* is a delectable conversion of the Bard's classic comedy into a brisk cinematic romp. With a mixed American-British cast tumbling in and around a Tuscan villa (standing in for Shakespeare's Messina), the film trims the play to under two hours without violating its lusty spirit. In fact, Branagh--who co-authored the script as well as starring and directing--has given the story line great clarity and logic without watering it down.

Branagh avoids a straight-forward period piece; he is not codpiece-correct like Franco Zeffirelli in his Shakespearean outings. His sturdy soldiers sport vaguely Napoleonic wear, his maids are all in gauzy white. It doesn't really matter what they wear, however, since everyone looks great against the lush green and golden Italian backdrop, which adds its own zest to the film's feel.

The typically Shakespearean plot turns around the love of the young soldier Claudio (an earnest Robert Sean Leonard) for the winsome Hero (Kate Beckinsale), and the resentment felt against Claudio by the sullen Don John (Keanu Reeves). The latter devises a vicious ruse which makes the spotless Hero appear a strumpet to Claudio, and the young suitor coarsely rejects her at the altar, casting her and her family into consternation. A feigned death of Hero likewise shocks Claudio and his mentor, Don Pedro (an elegant Denzel Washington), into remorse and chagrin, until Hero appears anew and--to coin a phrase--"all's well that end's well."

Coiling in and around this basic story line is the everready thrust and parry of Benedick (Branagh) and Hero's cousin Beatrice (a radiant Emma Thompson), those committed antagonists who must, of course, wind up together. The best lines in *Much Ado* are theirs, and Branagh's and Thompson's verbal jousting reminds one of nothing so much as William Powell and Myrna Loy in the *Thin Man* series or Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*. This is the wisecrack on the classical level, and both the principals enjoy its bite--which makes their ultimate reconciliation that much sweeter.

That reconciliation, by the way, is deftly constructed in this motion picture version. Both Benedick and Beatrice, overhearing their cousin's and confrere's remarks about how each adores the other, flit and spin in disbelief among the villa's coiffed gardens. It's a fine dance of double takes. Such choreography plays a significant part in Branagh's vision of *Much Ado*, and he finds some striking visual parallels to Shakespeare. In the opening credits, for example, Don Pedro and his officers boldly fill the screen on dark, turf-chomping steeds, rightly raising the temperatures of the villa's virgins. It's a classic equivalent of *The Magnificent Seven*. Similarly, the revelry of a velvet evening at the villa is achieved with a light and supple camera, suggesting the look of a Venetian masque.

Less deft is the film's handling of the comedic schtick of the dopey constable Dogsboddy (played by Michael Keaton and a set of vile teeth). Dogsboddy's first appearance is just as incomprehensible to us in the theater as it is to his puzzled interlocutors (surely not what Shakespeare intended). His garbled syntax and adjectives are just that--garbled, not funny. His presence, along with that of his

overwrought Three Stooges-like compatriots, bespeaks, for once, of a lack of directorial control by Branagh.

Keanu Reeves, adolescent heart throb, is also less than memorable, perhaps because he has the thankless role of the “bastard” Don John, a perpetual sourpuss who leaves little more than a sour taste. Reeves’s role may be one instance of where cuts in the basic text have left a character too undefined; we simply don’t know enough about Don John and his motivations to fathom his inexplicable bitterness.

Much Ado About Nothing is movie Shakespeare you could take the kids to and give them an invigorating introduction to the Bard. There would be worse ways to guide such youngsters into the original play and the language itself. I suggest this not because Branagh’s version is sugar-coated, but rather because it is sure-footed and sun-dappled.

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