

Review of *Much Ado About Nothing**"Taming the wild at heart"*

by Avril Silk for remote goat on 16/08/18



The entertaining and resourceful Rain or Shine Theatre Company brought Tom Jordan's skilful adaptation and production of 'Much Ado About Nothing' to Cullompton's Corn Barn on an August evening which threatened rain – which mercifully never came to much. As I write my review, the rain is bucketing down, drawing a line under the hottest, longest summer I can remember. A change in the weather – just right for Shakespeare's most loved comedy, as the horrors of war give way to peace.

I have always been fascinated by the time, after war, when the troops return home. The women have had to get on with it, as Leonato (Jayne Lloyd), Beatrice (Pippa Meekings) and Hero (Jasmine Raymond) have evidently done, in their headscarves and serviceable dungarees. Exchanging the danger, sometimes excitement and comradeship of war for the life domestic is a relief for some men but a tame bore for others. Don Pedro (Anthony Young), Benedick, (Peter M. Smith) and Claudio (Jamie Littlewood) have bonded. Some men are made by war – some broken. Don John (Rob Keeves) is broken, as, in a different way, is John Cooper-Evans' unsavoury spiv/chancer Borachio. Nearly all the actors take several parts; even so, from Borachio to Lady Margaret is a leap well accomplished by John Cooper Evans.

The psychology of war and homecoming is used to excellent effect in this production to underpin the high-flying emotions and unease between the characters, reflected in the lesser war between Beatrice and Benedick as they come to accept love, despite their strident protestations against the m-word. At first I found the tone of their banter too full on – but came to see it as a manifestation of the complexity, not just of their feelings for each other, but of the emotional landscape of war and peace. As Pippa Meekings and Peter M. Smith came to an infectious delight in each other – at first completely set up by their mischievous companions – we took pleasure in their personal armistice.

Beatrice and Benedick are also thrown together as Don John and Borachio's cruel, false scandal engulfs Hero, leaving her abandoned not only by her betrothed, but also by her parent. It always jars with me that Leonato initially accepts the slander. I can only relate it to so-called 'honour' killings. Jayne Lloyd brought a powerful emotional range to her character –filled with conflicting emotions of shame and love. I was pleased to note that after the revelation of Hero's innocence, Jasmine Raymond (who also gave us a lovely cameo as a Judge) and Jamie Littlewood were not entirely at ease with each other – far more appropriate, given the betrayal, than false bonhomie. In my book, the couple have a rough road ahead. So – face the music and dance, and find laughter where you can.

Lest I have over emphasised the serious roots of this production, let me assure you that there is much laughter, music and dancing to enjoy. I liked the familiar war-time songs and succumbed completely to the slapstick charms and gormless goofery of the Cotswold Morris Dancers and Watch, ably led by Rob Keeves' Dogberry and Anthony Young's Verges. Their comic interplay was great fun.

Jayne Lloyd designs and makes the costumes for Rain or Shine and this year she surpassed herself. I thought they were fabulous. As ever, the programme was attractive and helpful. The personal 'In Memoriam' list moved me.

Shakespeare gave us the characters, words and emotions – by setting this production at the end of this particular long and terrible war, Rain or Shine gave us an evening of intelligent entertainment emphasising his deep observations of the human condition.