



## REVIEW: Palomar's 'Much Ado' a glamorous, charming song-and-dance show

By PAM KRAGEN - Staff Writer | Wednesday, November 19, 2008 11:04 AM PST [∞](#)

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Ryan Balfour as

Benedick and Mollie Samocha as Beatrice in Palomar College's "Much Ado About Nothing." (Photo courtesy of Randy Hoffman).

The Astaire and Rogers films of the '30s are best remembered for the duo's casually elegant dance numbers, but in between their waltzes and fox trots, Fred and Ginger were sparring in a war of words and wit that masked their characters' true passion.

Those films served as the inspiration for director Michael Mufson's charming update of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," which runs through Sunday at Palomar College.

Mufson has transported the setting forward from 15th century Messina, Italy, to what looks like a glitzy 1930s Hollywood soundstage (designed all in gold and silver by Mark Adams), and the soldiers trade in their uniforms and swords for tuxedos and canes. The glamorous resetting also includes several song-and-dance numbers and a parade of luxurious period costumes designed by Kenji Imaizumi for the women.

The plot of "Much Ado" involves two couples in love ---- one a rose-colored pairing that runs aground at the first sign of rocks, and the other a warts-and-all coupling between two love-scarred vets who (whether they realize it or not) are made for one another.

Ryan Balfour leads the cast as Benedick, whose verbal sparring with the sharp-tongued Beatrice (Mollie Samocha) hides a smoldering mutual passion. The warring couple are eventually tricked into admitting their feelings by Beatrice's cousin, Hero (Abigail Arechiga); Hero's maid, Margaret (Sarah Blackmon); Hero's fiance, Claudio (Adam Shea); Hero's father, Leonato (Zach Gardner); and Claudio's kinsman, Don Pedro (Danny Hannify).

The secondary plot involves a more sinister trick by Don Pedro's bastard brother Don John (Sean LaRocca) to convince Claudio that Hero has been unfaithful. When Claudio falls for the trap and publicly humiliates Hero, her family pretends she has died from shame and only the clearing of her name can bring her back from the dead.

As always in "Much Ado," the most interesting characters are Benedick and Beatrice, and Mufson has found an ideal pair in Balfour and Samocha. Balfour has the smooth likability and screwball comic charm of a Clark Gable, while Samocha evokes the regal self-absorption of an attention-craving diva (think Katherine Hepburn in "Bringing Up Baby").

Ibrahim Brewer is a comic standout as idiotic, malaprop-prone constable Dogberry, who, in spite of his very limited brain capacity, manages to uncover the plot laid by Don John, played by LaRocca with the cartoonish evil of a Nazi film villain (heel clicks, crazy cackle and all).

Mufson's direction is fluid and faithful to the script, with an emphasis on visual comedy and gesture to make the Elizabethan dialogue more clear and fun for young audiences. The plot is musicalized with tap-dancing, tangos and songs, including "Steppin' Out" and "Dancing in the Dark," all performed by the game cast. Many of these numbers are performed by Jeffrey Strong, a lithe dancer/singer/choreographer whose dance steps mirror the wooing, winning and warring of the lovers in the play.

And Mufson and his sound design team have used recorded music from the '30s and '40s liberally throughout the two-hour, 45-minute play to create an air of fun, frolic, festivity and (in a few cases) foreboding.

I'm not always a fan of updating Shakespeare's plays to different times and places. The results can be confusing and are often unnecessary, but "Much Ado" is a light, frothy sex farce that fits perfectly in the screwball-comedy era, and Mufson's cast looks to be enjoying every minute they're onstage.

"Much Ado About Nothing"

When: 4 p.m. Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Howard Brubeck Theatre, 1140 W. Mission Road, San Marcos

Tickets: \$12, general; \$10, seniors; \$8, students

Phone: (760) 744-1150, Ext. 2453

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