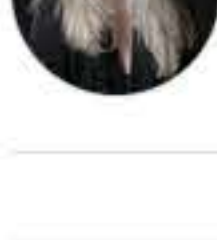


ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

‘Much Ado About Everything Right’: SC Shakespeare’s perfect summer comedy



BY JANA MARCUS

4 hours ago



Quick Take

Filled with infectious comedy, colorful design, inspired music and superb performances, Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" is a joyful season opener, Jana Marcus writes, that proves Shakespeare can still leave audiences laughing four centuries later.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare opens its summer season with an irresistible production of “Much Ado About Nothing,” embracing everything audiences hope for in one of the Bard’s most beloved comedies. Under Charles Pasternak’s confident direction, this colorful, funny and wonderfully acted production overflows with romance, verbal sparring and laugh-out-loud comedy while quietly reminding us that forgiveness might be the hardest act of all.

Before anyone falls in love or hides behind a masquerade mask, the show opens with the cast gathering to sing. Their voices rise through the trees with Shakespeare’s own poem, “Sigh No More, Ladies,” transformed into a lyrical melody by resident composer Luke Shepherd. Within moments, the Audrey Stanley Grove disappears, replaced by a sun-washed Italian seaside village where love, laughter and mischief seem to drift in on the breeze.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz Shakespeare
What: Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing”

When: Through Aug. 30

Where: The Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park, 501 Upper Park Rd., Santa Cruz

Tickets: [Click here](#) or 831-460-6399

By the time the music fades, you already know you’re in very good hands.

“Much Ado About Nothing” follows two very different love stories. The sharp-witted Beatrice and the equally stubborn Benedick spend much of the play insisting they cannot stand one another, while young Hero and Claudio quickly fall in love, only to have their wedding nearly destroyed by the scheming Don John. Through deception, misunderstandings and more than a little comic chaos, Shakespeare eventually guides his characters toward truth, reconciliation and forgiveness.

Jono Eiland’s Benedick is an absolute delight. Some actors play Benedick as the handsome romantic lead. Others lean entirely into the comedy. Eiland effortlessly does both. His comic timing is impeccable, whether delivering one of Benedick’s increasingly hilarious monologues or reacting silently to the absurd situations surrounding him. He has the rare ability to earn laughs before he even speaks, simply through a perfectly timed glance or exasperated expression. Yet beneath all of Benedick’s swagger is a genuinely likable man whose certainty about never falling in love slowly unravels before our eyes. It is a charming, joyful performance that anchors the production.



Charlotte Boyce Munson (left) as Beatrice and Jono Eiland as Benedick in Santa Cruz Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing.” Credit: Photo courtesy of SCS

Charlotte Boyce Munson is every bit his equal as Beatrice. Smart, independent and wonderfully quick with Shakespeare’s razor-sharp wit, she matches Eiland beat for beat. Their verbal duels crackle with chemistry, making it entirely believable that these two fiercely intelligent people are destined to stop fighting long enough to realize they belong together.

Nearly stealing the entire production, however, is Patty Gallagher’s inspired turn as Dogberry.

Gallagher’s cross-gender portrayal of Shakespeare’s hopelessly incompetent constable is comic gold. With absolute confidence, she mangles the English language, misunderstands nearly everything happening around her, and somehow remains blissfully unaware of her own ineptitude. Gallagher never pushes for laughs. She simply commits completely to Dogberry’s oversized self-importance, allowing Shakespeare’s wonderfully ridiculous character to do the rest.



Patty Gallagher as Dogberry, Mike Ryan as Leonato and Dan Donohue as Verges in Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing.” Credit: Kevin Lohman

Equally funny is Dan Donohue as Verges, Dogberry’s loyal but equally bewildered right-hand man. As the perfect comic foil, Donohue matches Gallagher for a wonderfully off-kilter partnership, becoming one of the production’s comedic highlights. Every entrance by the pair is met with anticipation, and every scene delivers.

Mike Ryan brings warmth, wisdom and subtle authority to Leonato, while Allie Pratt’s gentle Hero and Will Block’s increasingly remorseful Claudio provide the emotional stakes that balance the comedy. Paige Lindsey White has obvious fun with Don John’s delicious nastiness, bringing a wink of camp to the role without sacrificing the character’s underlying malice. The result is a villain who is as entertaining to watch as she is disruptive to everyone else’s happiness.

Whether in leading roles or smaller supporting turns, the ensemble performs with remarkable consistency, creating a world where every character feels fully alive.



Will Block as Claudio with the ensemble in Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing.” Credit: Photo courtesy of SCS

One of the production’s happiest surprises comes during the masked dinner celebration.

As flirtation and mistaken identities unfold, couples continue dancing around the stage, keeping the celebration alive without ever distracting from the dialogue. Here, every performer moves with confidence, precision and ease. That’s a credit to choreographer Izzy Pedego.

The best choreography isn’t necessarily the most complicated. It’s choreography that allows every performer to succeed while making them look terrific doing it. Pedego understands that beautifully. The movement feels effortless, stylish and completely natural to the world of the play, becoming another reason the production radiates such infectious joy.

Michael Schweikardt’s scenic design and Erin Reed Carter’s gorgeous costumes complete this inviting world. The stage gradually fills with color as Carter dresses the company in playful striped bathing costumes, elegant suits, flowing summer dresses with matching parasols, striking red-and-black dinner attire and more. Every scene feels thoughtfully composed, creating a production that is as visually inviting as it is entertaining.

Yet beneath all the laughter lies something deeper.

In his director’s notes, Pasternak reflects on what he calls the “miracle” of Hero forgiving Claudio after his public humiliation. He acknowledges that the moment can feel especially painful to modern audiences before adding, “Forgiveness is how the world heals.”

It’s a thoughtful observation, and one that lingers after the curtain call.

Forgiveness is never easy. It asks far more of us than anger or revenge ever could. Shakespeare doesn’t pretend otherwise. Instead, he suggests that healing can only begin when someone chooses compassion over resentment. Four hundred years later, that’s an idea that still feels both challenging and hopeful.

As the company gathers to dance one last time and the lights fade on Messina, you’re reminded of the promise made in those opening moments. There would be laughter. There would be romance. And, if Shakespeare had his way, there would be forgiveness.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare delivers all three in one of its most joyful productions in recent memory.

As the audience rises to its feet, it’s hard not to leave the grove feeling just a little lighter than when you arrived. That’s the magic of this production, and a compelling case for spending an evening beneath the trees.