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Mary L. Hjelm

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Love's Labour's Lost & Won

Directed by Christopher Luscombe

Theatre Royal Haymarket, RSC Limited Run; London, UK

Performance Dates: December 10 (LLL) and December 12 (MAAN), 2016

Reviewed by MARY L. HJELM

When the Royal Shakespeare Company and Director Christopher Luscombe first began contemplating pairing *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing* for their 2014 season, they made note of the similarities between the plays and speculated that *Much Ado About Nothing*—written about the same time as *Love's Labour's Lost*—may have been the retitled or lost *Love's Labour's Won*. The similarities between the two make such a speculation appear more than likely, with the central witty, sparring couples, the large country estate settings, and the inclusion of masks, police, curates, and music. The RSC very successfully highlighted this effect with the inspired use of the same setting for both plays, a single cast, and a period time frame book-ending World War I.



These plays, performed as a pair, are clever and well-paced, each reflecting a genuine slice of history set four years apart, just before and just after World War I. Setting the story in this specific historical period lends clarity to the awkward ending of the frustrated courtships when the four men end the play in uniform and march off to war. The opening scene of *Much Ado About Nothing* harkens back to this grim reminder as it begins in the manor-house-turned-hospital peopled with nurses and army officers. The uniforms which reinforce this connection between the plays quickly disappear, however, as Don Pedro's men return to the matters of wooing.

Choosing to set *Love's Labour's Lost* in the summer of 1914 allows the play to highlight England's prewar gaiety with lawn bowling and an outdoor festival,

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necessary because of the four bachelors' pact which prohibits the French Princess and her entourage from entering Navarre's castle. Luckily, the set, designed by Simon Higlett, is based closely on the Warwickshire estate of Charlecote Park—a setting Shakespeare himself may have known well located only a few miles from Stratford-Upon-Avon and the scene of the mythical deer poaching incident. Both plays make use

of the entire manor house. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, we are taken from the library to the gatehouse and park grounds for a memorably funny sonnet scene between the four men making use of the rooftops where rooflines, chimney pots, and balustrades provide hiding spaces for the budding poets. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, set in winter 1918, the house is first transformed into a post-war officers' hospital and then returned to its purpose as a family home where we are also given additional scenes in the house's chapel and a chance to see Charlecote Park decorated for Christmas. Indeed, the library's holiday tree becomes Benedict's hiding place to eavesdrop on the plotting of his friends. Indeed, Benedict becomes part of the tree itself and, at one point, peeps out from the tree topper, where he accidentally causes the lights to flicker and blow out some fuses in the manor house. Both plays are enhanced by Musical Director Nigel Hess's score which links the two plays through musical cross-references that rely on period influences of Cole Porter and the emerging ragtime as vehicles for love lyrics from Shakespeare's contemporaries Christopher Marlowe and Michael Drayton. Moth's song in *Love's Labour's Lost*, performed wonderfully by Peter McGovern, is a highlight as is the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta-like pageant of the Nine Worthies complete with dancing by the household staff brandishing wooden spoons. *Much Ado About Nothing's* musical theme is heightened by on-stage piano numbers played by guests as part of the ongoing background of holiday revelry *à la* Porter and the Gershwin Brothers.

By casting a single troupe of actors to fill the roster of both plays, the RSC productions suggest that the emotional attraction of the central couples of *Love's Labour's Lost* transfers to *Much Ado About Nothing*, but it is clear that the plays and the characters are different. However, that casting choice also allows for the chemistry between Edward Bennet's Berowne and Lisa Dillon's Rosaline to jump start the battle between their Benedict and Beatrice and lends additional bleakness to the hurt which both actors briefly but skillfully display early on: Beatrice when

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she notes that he only lent his heart to her and Benedict when he complains that her every word stabs. While other actors in other productions may toss these moments away or rely others to explain their previous relationship, Bennet and Dillon give us genuinely poignant moments of regret which do more to convince us that these two have loved deeply than their over-the-top protestations do to convince us that they don't care about each other at all. Bennet and Dillon were a magical pairing in both plays, utterly convincing as three-dimensional characters.



The double casting also allows audiences a rare opportunity to see the range of an actor cast in dual roles played so closely together. Sam Alexander's King of Navarre is charmingly bemused while his Don John is weary, angry, and beaten but not down. His physical manifestation of these characters was markedly different and enhanced audience appreciation of his performance. Tunji Kasim's portrayal of the boyish and teddy-bear loving Dumaine informed his equally boyish but far more credulous Claudio, perhaps preparing audiences for the immaturity of his decisions. Rebecca Collingwood's

Katherine was charming but her Hero powerfully portrayed both the giddiness happiness of new love and depths of rejected despair which that character must reach. John Hodgkinson's effusive Don Armado was nicely balanced with his solid, trustworthy, and admirable Don Pedro. However, Nick Haverson was clearly the comedic star of these plays. His Costard was joyously madcap and his Dogberry was brilliantly inept. Seldom is an actor so carefully in control of his frolicsome characters, eking out every drop of visual and physical humor without edging over the line into caricature or triviality. In both cases, he was enthusiastically anticipated by the audience and very nearly stole the show away from the central plots.

On a personal note, *Much Ado About Nothing* has long been one of my favorite Shakespearean plays and *Love's Labour's Lost* one of my least favorite. However, these productions have changed my mind. I now understand that the failed courtship is not the only thing worth noting in *Love's Labour's Lost* and that development of the characters has much to teach about relationships and nature of waiting, and, perhaps, more, of anticipation. Together, the plays present a

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unified story arc about courtship, reconciliation, hope, and the triumph of true love that makes sense for both.



Mary L. Hjelm is a Professor of English in Palmetto College at the University of South Carolina. Her academic specialty in Shakespeare's drama balances the glory of language and imagination with the leadership, citizenship and professional skills she teaches to students seeking Bachelor of Liberal Studies or Bachelor of Organizational Leadership degrees. Originally raised and educated in the western United States, she has lived in South Carolina for the past 15 years.

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