

Free William

Saratoga Shakespeare Company brings a stylish take on the Bard to downtown Saratoga Springs

BY SHAWN STONE

THREE VENTURESOME GREY DUCKS waddle daintily into the northern fringes of the audience watching *Much Ado About Nothing* in Congress Park, and stop. One quacks. The city's powers-that-be don't want anyone feeding the birds but, clearly, the birds are cruising for a snack. In short order, they are disappointed. The trio turn tail and waddle back into the water by the park's war memorial.

On this warm Tuesday night, on the eve of the opening of the Saratoga Race Course, there is no lack of things to do in bustling downtown Saratoga Springs. Restaurants are busy; outdoor patios are full; people window-shop (or actually shop) along Broadway; and kids ride the carousel. A large audience have instead brought their lawn chairs and blankets to Congress Park to see a play. Yes, it's free—but it's also *good*.

You see, the large crowds that turn out for Saratoga Shakespeare Company's summer performances in Congress Park aren't there to picnic. Except for the odd kid (or journalist), no one pays attention to wandering waterfowl. Folks are there to enjoy the theater, and there's plenty about this Shakespeare-in-the-park experience to enjoy.

The company does their bit to make this possible. As their Web site states, with their "superior" sound system, they can accommodate up to 1,000 people in the audience. It's true. While I don't think there were *quite* that many people on the lawn, the sound was superb—you can hear the actors clearly as far away as the Canfield Casino.

Over their eight seasons in the Spa City, Saratoga Shakespeare have performed, for the most part, comedies, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*. And they've earned kudos from local critics for it. While this makes sense—who really wants *King Lear* on a warm summer evening after, say, mojitos on an outdoor restaurant patio?—it's also more demanding, because, well, comedy is more demanding. That's why this wonderfully timed, cleverly staged production is so rewarding.

Much Ado About Nothing is the story of one relationship that almost goes horribly awry because of familial envy and unjust jeal-



Leif Zurmuehlen

The noble Claudio, deputy to Don Pedro, woos and wins the hand of lovely young Hero. Malcontented bastard Don John, half-brother of noble Don Pedro, decides to prevent the match. Meanwhile, Benedick, another deputy to Don Pedro, swears early on that he will never marry. Of course, this prompts his friends to set in motion a plot to see him married to Hero's cousin, Beatrice. This is perfect, because Beatrice doesn't think all that much of Benedick, or marriage, either.

The wily Bard has written something for everyone. The Claudio-Hero plot provides the melodrama, with flowery protestations of love giving way to fiery proclamations of hate. It's an accessible emotional hook for the audience; it is, however, easy to forget that it's all "much ado about nothing" and go overboard with the drama (as director Kenneth Branagh did in his 1990s film version).

That doesn't happen here, thanks to the cast and director William A. Finlay. When Don Pedro and Claudio (Andy Place and Brian Nemiroff, respectively) are duped into behaving dishonorably, they exhibit as much sorrow as vengeance. (Shannon Rafferty as the aptly-named ingénue-heroine nicely balances womanly passion in her scenes with Nemiroff's Claudio and girlish enthusiasm in the farcical comic scenes.)

The Benedick-Beatrice romance delivers the Shakespearian wit and wordplay; Tim Dugan (as Benedick) and Rebecca

ness with a map on their own, and clearly need the knockabout intervention of friends to get together.

Finally, there is the deliciously lowbrow humor offered up by the constable, Dogberry (Chris Rickett), and his sidekicks. The audience very much enjoyed the bad puns and "ass" jokes (and rightly so).

Saratoga Shakespeare Company have cultivated significant community support, both public and private, for their productions. This year, a grant from the Alfred Z. Solomon Charitable Trust allowed the company to build a new stage, which will be their "permanent, portable playing space." It's impressive for the variety and flexibility of action it can facilitate; it even has a trap door (though this is left unused in the current show). It's reasonable to expect that the company will continue to bring a little culture to the downtown scene for years to come.

The crowd certainly seemed pleased on this evening. At the end of the play, after generous applause, the actors went forth into the audience, literally hat-in-hand, looking for donations. They didn't go away disappointed.

The final performances of Saratoga Shakespeare Company's production of Much Ado About Nothing are tonight (Thursday, July 26) through Saturday (July 28) at 6 PM and Sunday (July