

Sean Bartley

Originally performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men as one of the Globe Theatre's inaugural productions in 1599, *Much Ado About Nothing* elicits immediate visions of the witty banter and charming romance of Beatrice and Benedick. The oft-quoted one-liners hurled between the reluctant lovers may have had enormous influence on the subsequent development of comedy on the English stage. In *Shakespeare After All*, scholar Marjorie Garber argues that *Much Ado About Nothing* was the primary source material for English Restoration Comedies, asserting that the play "virtually inaugurated the genre."

In order to help Florida State's student performers grasp the style and speed of the lovers' repartee, director Walter Kmiec instructed his actors to immerse themselves in the Hollywood "Screwball Comedies" of the 1930s. Exemplified by the works of Frank Capra, Ernst Lubitsch, and Billy Wilder, these films too may owe a debt to Shakespeare. American philosopher Stanley Cavell suggests in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* that the razor-sharp verbal sparring of these Screwball films derives from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and other Shakespearian comic works. The sexual tension Shakespeare creates between his witty, intelligent almost-couple resonates in the flirtations of many romantic pairings in contemporary television (*Castle*, *New Girl*, *Bones*) and film (*Admission*, *New Year's Eve*).

The playful matchmaking in *Much Ado About Nothing* raises urgent questions about the institution of marriage and the gender dynamics it proposes. Beatrice and Benedick's stubborn, yet charming courtship counterbalances the irrational jealousy

of Claudio and his gross mistreatment of Hero. Whereas Beatrice is an independently wealthy, empowered adult, more than capable of standing up to Benedick's barbs and deciding her own romantic fate, Hero is a marginalized young pawn in Don Pedro and Leonato's arranged courtship. Her union with Claudio is both a realization of idealized romance and a social contract orchestrated by Leonato and Don Pedro to assure transmission of Leonato's estate, wealth, and family name for future generations. Contemporary directors have an opportunity to explore the tension between Beatrice and Benedick's union and Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato's exploitation of Hero.

By setting *Much Ado About Nothing* in an opulent South Florida estate in the early 1920s, Kmiec and his designers interrogate gender dynamics and the role of marriage in society. Newly independent women like Beatrice enjoyed new freedoms in dress, property law, and voting rights in the American 1920s. But what does Hero's plight tell us about how we value marriage? If *Much Ado About Nothing* comically problematizes the form and function of marriage in the Elizabethan era, how does Hero's story in this production help us question our expectations of women as wives and mothers? Whether as "Flappers" flouting standards of dress and behavior or as Suffragists advocating a complex political platform, American women of the 1920s began a discussion of marriage's role in economic, civic, and political life that continues in force today.