



This is a repository copy of *Review of Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing (Directed by Robert Hastie for Ramps on the Moon) at the Crucible, Sheffield Theatres, 20 September 2022.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/226403/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Mold, G. (2023) Review of Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing (Directed by Robert Hastie for Ramps on the Moon) at the Crucible, Sheffield Theatres, 20 September 2022. *Shakespeare*, 19 (3). pp. 419-422. ISSN 1745-0918

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2022.2160654>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Shakespeare* on 05 Jan 2023, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17450918.2022.2160654>.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Review of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (directed by Robert Hastie for Ramps on the Moon) at the Crucible, Sheffield Theatres, 20 September 2022

This year it was Sheffield Theatres' turn to lead the annual Ramps on the Moon production. Ramps on the Moon is a collaborative partnership between seven powerhouse theatres and venues from around the UK, who take turns to host productions each year. The goal behind the project is to 'enrich stories, and the ways in which they are told, by normalising the presence of deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people both on and off stage', as the director, Robert Hastie, put it in his programme notes. Sheffield Theatres chose to perform Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, a play that currently seems to be having a moment of particular prominence with the likes of the National Theatre and the Globe both putting on productions during the same run, as well as the RSC earlier in the year. The production took to the stage of the Crucible during its 50th anniversary year.

The play opened with the cast, which was a mixture of deaf, neurodiverse, disabled and non-disabled performers, introducing their character's name and detailing their costume for the benefit of audio description. Their opening lines were interlaced with jokes from the off, with Benedick announcing that he was wearing a blue suit, trainers and 'a chip on my shoulder'. The play was made up of a combination of British Sign Language, Sign Supported English, visual storytelling and physical theatre so each character also introduced what techniques they would be using as each actor differed in this respect.

Although this amount of information seemed overwhelming at first, one soon relaxed as the play began to flow and it became clearer how the story would be communicated. The characters tended to come in pairs whereby one performer signed the lines and the other simultaneously spoke them, swapping for each character's lines, so all grounds were covered at almost any time. As opposed to having audio describers or sign language interpreters placed at the perimeter of the stage, accessibility was built into the roots of the performance. Additionally, each side of the stage had digital caption boards. Emily Howlett, BSL director, and Chloë Clarke, Audio Description Director, ensured that the play considered accessibility at every step of the way, and the accessibility was creatively and relatively smoothly integrated into the performance, which gave it a unique style and warmth. It also meant that audience members did not all receive information at the same time, which created a beautiful canon of laughter and reactions. Being able to experience the reactions of others while standing outside of them allowed you to admire the effect and the joy it was bringing, which alone made the piece quite captivating.

To treat the accessibility and inclusivity of the play as a trope in itself would be to trivialise it. However, it would not be fair to disregard how it enhanced the performance, especially taking into consideration that Ramps on The Moon's overarching aim is to 'enrich stories' through diversity. One instance where the performance style was particularly striking was in the case of Hero. Claire Wetherall (Hero) signed her lines only, removing the verbal voice of Hero's character. In Shakespeare's original the character is quiet and subdued for which she is celebrated. Her modesty earns her the recurring title 'fair Hero' (1.1.278) amongst several of the male characters and her doting lover, Claudio, regards her as 'the sweetest lady that I ever looked on', 'a jewel' (1.1.148-154).¹ Combined with her obedience,

¹ Shakespeare, William. 'Much Ado About Nothing'. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 1395-1462. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.

demonstrated through her professed 'duty to make curtsy and say "Father as it please you"' (2.1.44-45), Hero's silence frames her as the conventional image of an ideal wife and in this production her silence was literalised through the removal of her speaking voice, drawing attention to these problematic gendered stereotypes.

On the other hand, Beatrice is framed as an undesirable wife due to her caustic wit and resistance to men and marriage. Male characters attach her lack of appeal to her speech. Leonato informs her that 'thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of tongue' (2.1.16-17) and Benedick scornfully labels her 'a rare parrot-teacher' (1.1.113) and declares that he 'cannot endure my Lady Tongue' (2.1.242-243), an insulting nickname he gives her that connects his intolerance to her with her voice. By having Beatrice speak aloud and Hero sign, the binary of misogyny whereby silent women are held on a pedestal is put under a spotlight.

Because Hero uses BSL, in the play's climax, Hero and Claudio's wedding, when Claudio instead reveals her alleged deceit and publicly shames her for being unfaithful, she could not speak aloud to protest her innocence as she does in Shakespeare's text. Through placing her opposite Taku Mutero (Claudio), who was another speaking character, the sound of her silence was made louder. Her voice was replaced with the chiming of the bangles on her wrists, which grew louder and more aggressive as her movements and signing became more vigorous in her passionate plea for innocence. As Claudio denounced Hero as unchaste and she denied this infidelity, their miscommunication was heightened through their differing communication techniques. It was as though they were not getting through to each other, giving the scene a newfound intensity and sense of misfortune. It also reminded audiences of the misogynistic attitudes in the world of the play that lead almost all to side with Claudio and slander Hero. Reimagining and emphasising these harmful stereotypes and gender ideals in a twenty-first century setting took them out of an Elizabethan society and placed them in a contemporary context. Whilst this may suggest that they are still in place today, the play could have been more overt in its questioning of these outworn patriarchal values and structures.

Sheffield Theatres ensured that Shakespeare's rom com was brought into line with a more modern world. They bent the script, inserting the occasional 'mate' here and there, and comically tagging 'I pity the fool', delivered in the style of Mr. T, onto the end of Benedick's speech that sneers at Claudio for falling in love. The largely casual costumes also suggested a present-day setting; Benedick and Don Pedro donned suits styled with trainers and Beatrice sported a freesia yellow Lucy & Yak jumpsuit. The set itself featured a Grand Designs-esque house made of timber and big glass panels that oozed modernity in its style, which was also seemingly perfect for the scenes of eavesdropping and misunderstanding, and yet the set was only truly interacted with once as Beatrice temporarily hid behind one of the ceiling-tall silver birch trees towards the end. The production's use of technology similarly dated it, as props of walkie-talkies were used by Seacole and Oatcake and diegetic sound was used to tell us that the soldiers arrived by helicopter at the play's beginning. Whilst it was clear that the play was set somewhere in the twenty-first century, it was not clear exactly when. The outdated A-Team reference raised questions and Hero and Claudio's marriage ceremonies confused things further. The two weddings consisted of Hero and Claudio standing in a circle of leaves on the floor that the cast had ceremoniously laid out, wearing informal clothing rather than typical modern-day wedding wear. The ritual was not

All quotations hereafter refer to this citation.

akin to any type of contemporary ceremony that I am accustomed to, which put the play in a bemusing realm of time and place – not to mention the cowboy-themed hoedown which temporarily provided the characters with American accents, to complicate things further. The production required more context to avoid its sense of time, place and culture becoming so muddled.

The temporality of the production was flawed in its inconsistencies but the play made its successes in its acting. Daneka Etchells (Beatrice) and Guy Rhys (Benedick) made an amusing double act. Rhys gave an upbeat and jocular performance littered with smirks and jokes, perfectly encapsulating Benedick's cheeky nature. Etchells gave the audience a captivating Beatrice whose deadpan delivery and Cumbrian accent made the lines feel and sound almost brand new. She won the audience over with her charm, especially when she darted amongst the audience as her character was seeking hiding spaces from which to eavesdrop, briefly breaking character to ask those she squeezed by 'You enjoying the show?'

The way that Etchells' autism was incorporated into Beatrice's role elevated the experience. In the moments following Beatrice's famous command, 'Kill Claudio' (4.1.285), to Benedick as the pair stood alone on stage, Beatrice began to cry and could be seen stimming. She banged her hand against her arm repeatedly, evidently in distress. Benedick held her arms still as she wailed and repeated 'Enough, enough, enough' gently but firmly until she calmed. In this tender moment, the audience saw a vulnerable side to Beatrice that audiences rarely see, straying from her droll insults and ostensibly cold-hearted character. Beatrice's performance in the added scene positioned it as the emotional climax of the play and enhanced the chemistry between the couple, as well as being representative of neurodiversity on stage, doing exactly what the project set out to do, and very well.

The refreshing diversity of the production's cast, its rich mix of communication styles, its collaborative and joyous performances and originally integrated accessibility rendered it innovative and a delight to watch. Although the production's discordant setting and cursory look at persistent patriarchal modes sometimes made it feel rushed, Ramps on the Moon have produced a thoughtful and exciting adaptation of Shakespeare that was both enriched and enriching.