

Interchange

At a time historically when conversation is for the most part a lost art, I am amazed that the only people talking are those trapped next to each other on flights or in prison cells on lockdown, or on sinking ships once the last lifeboat is filled. Conversation is not the penalty for isolation, but often it feels such.

SATURDAY, MAY 10, 2014

WANDA SABIR

African American Shakes presents William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by L. Peter Callender (Assistant director, Donna Simone Johnson) at the Buriel Clay Theater in San Francisco Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m., through May 25

In this closing performance of their 19th Season, African American Shakespeare Company couldn't have chosen a more apt play—pronounced “no thing,” the work is a series of happy and sad mishaps between lovers which as in all comedies, ends well. Set in a literal galaxy—Ryan, the hunter, juxtaposed to Scorpio with Lady Sagittarius counter Leo, the lioness—all floating on a sundae Milky Way.

Windows hang from above forming a canopy overhead and provide a space for character reflection. Other window frames and/or mirrors paper the spaces where the two couples, Beatrice and Benedict, Hero and Claudio make love and war—amidst a backdrop of an actual war—

These battles waged and won, at least for a moment play against a soundtrack of Ella Fitzgerald singing about baskets—flowers and love. The choreography is fantastic—especially the tango Beatrice and Benedict dance (Act V, scene II) while waging one of their many linguistically agile duels—in the hands of veteran actors: Leontyne Mbele-Mbong and Ryan Vincent Anderson, directed by the L. Peter Callender-Donna Simone Johnson team, they never miss a beat. And this is something to be admired most about African Shakes's *Much Ado*, the timing. It is what

makes this performance so remarkable—everything is so precise, yet so well-articulated. The synergy between words and actions, often counter intuitive within a universe where semantic symmetry is crucial, in this casts' adept hands or perhaps I should say, lips, is flawless.

There are tricks and teases as the two characters who have sworn never to marry, Benedict and Beatrice are tricked and snared by the vary offices they have decided never to entertain. A very physical play, at one point Benedict is crawling along the floor at the audience's feet, to keep from being seen; he even joins us occupying an empty seat right next to me—then stealthily creeps along the back of the theater as the Prince or Don Pedro (actor Kelvyn Mitchell), Hero's father (actor Dwight Dean Mahabir) and Claudio (actor Twon Marcel) speak of Beatrice's love for him.

Anderson's “Benedick” is besotted. The same is true for Mbele-Mbong's “Beatrice” who doesn't crawl on the theatre floor but ends up a stool for the two women—her cousin Hero (actress Danielle Doyle) and Ursula (Monica Cappuccini) who speak about Benedict's love for her.

The set designer said the idea for all the windows was to show how open everything is in this world—there are no curtains, nowhere to hide—if I had



Leontyne Mbele-Mbong and Ryan Vincent Anderson, as Beatrice and Benedict.
Photo: L. Peter Callender

time, I would certainly go again—The work is so wonderful, children of all ages would love it and understand it too. We make too much ado about nothings. Better to let go of the small and larger stuff, often we can't change it—birth order or inheritance, so why not celebrate love (smile).

Claudio gets a second chance—this after all is theatre. In life, such is not always possible. A final mention and hats off to Twon Marcel, whose Claudio is so unlike his role in African American Shakes's *Cinderella* this season where he played one of the evil step-sisters. In *Much Ado*, he shows off his creative range! Great acting and lovely solo in Act V, scene III, when he poetically laments his love lost.

The performance ends in a party in honor of the nuptials excellently choreographed by Tom Segal, with Maureen Stone's lovely customs rounding out a lovely performance all around. The play is up at the Buriel Clay Theatre at the African American Art and Culture Complex, 762 Fulton Street (at Webster) in San Francisco, Saturdays at 8 and Sundays at 3 p.m., through May 25, 2014. For tickets and information, call 800-838-3006 or go to www.African-AmericanShakes.org.