

Joss Whedon & Friends Tackle the Bard in ‘Much Ado About Nothing’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on June 20, 2013 - 10:45am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – While relaxing and catching his breath after the stressful task of filming “Marvel’s The Avengers,” writer/director Joss Whedon didn’t just drink wine, host parties, and take baths in his money. He decided to use his break to make another movie. Changing gears from one of the biggest blockbusters of all time, Whedon called his friends from TV shows and films he had made in the past and put together an adaptation of one of William Shakespeare’s most beloved works, “Much Ado About Nothing.” The result is an undeniably fun diversion, a film that sometimes displays its “hey, let’s make a movie!” status but will be like catnip for fans of Whedon’s ensemble.

As with most of his comedies, “Much Ado” is a web of mistaken identities and confused motivations. “Angel” stars Alexis Denisof & Amy Acker play Benedick & Beatrice, respectively, and Whedon immediately throws Shakespearian scholars for a loop by opening the film with the two of them in bed together. Benedick sneaks out in the morning and Beatrice looks perturbed. Her annoyance at the man who snuck away permeates the first act of “Much Ado” when she encounters Benedick again when he arrives at the home of her Uncle Leonato (Clark Gregg of “The Avengers”) with Don Pedro (Reed Diamond of “Dollhouse”), Claudio (Fran Kranz of “The Cabin in the Woods”), the nefarious Don John (Sean Maher of “Firefly”), Borachio (Spencer Treat Clark), and Conrade (Riki Lindhome, who appeared on, you guessed it, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”).



Much Ado About Nothing

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Claudio falls in love with Leonato’s daughter Hero (Jillian Morgese) but brother Don John deems the girl below his standing and seeks to sabotage their love by having Borachio seduce maid Margaret (Ashley Johnson, who appeared in both “Dollhouse” and “The Avengers”) and

have Claudio mistake the seduction as Hero’s betrayal. Nathan Fillion (“Firefly”) and Tom Lenk (“Buffy the Vampire Slayer”) pop up as Dogberry & Verges, reimagined as ‘70s-style cops/security guards with sunglasses and short ties. True Whedon fans will sit back and wonder where Anthony Head, David Boreanaz, Alan Tudyk, Adam Baldwin, and Felicia Day could have fit in.

To be blunt, “Much Ado About Nothing” was never one of my favorite Shakespeare plays and Whedon and company take such an airy approach to the material for most of the running time that it threatens to blow away on a breeze. Even while Whedon’s film is often very funny and enjoyable, it feels like the casual project that it clearly was. I wanted a bit more rehearsal for some of the actors, a bit more solid filmmaking, and a bit less of that sensation that I was watching something a bunch of friends made for their friends to show at parties. I never disliked “Much Ado About Nothing” – it’s a difficult film not to enjoy at least on some level, especially if you’re a fan of Whedon’s as I am – but it rarely finds that magical place that the best Shakespearian adaptations reach. It’s a pleasant smile and not a hearty laugh.



Much Ado About Nothing

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Part of the problem is that “Much Ado About Nothing” is a very mixed bag of results in terms of performance. On a positive note, Denisof & Acker do solid work as the leads but the film belongs to Fran Kranz and Nathan Fillion. The former really finds the emotional current of Claudio in a way that other actors would have missed while Fillion steals his scenes as comic relief. Gregg & Diamond feel somewhat miscast while Maher goes too broad as Don John, practically twirling a curled mustache in malevolent glee. No one is particularly bad here but it comes back to that sense that some participants took the project more seriously and rehearsed longer than others. A few actors betray the “side project” approach to the piece.

Despite its side project status, it’s a damn entertaining side project. Ultimately, Whedon’s film doesn’t stand with the best modern Shakespeare adaptations but it certainly rises above a good number of them at the same time. It’s a smart, clever diversion in a season dominated by loud blockbusters and CGI extravaganzas. It makes one wish Whedon would get his friends together more often. Somebody remember to call Tudyk next time.

“Much Ado About Nothing” stars Amy Acker, Alexis Denisof, Clark Gregg, Reed Diamond, Fran Kranz, Sean Maher, Jillian Morgese, Spencer Treat Clark, Riki Lindhome, Ashley Johnson, Tom Lenk, and Nathan Fillion. It was written and directed by Joss Whedon. It is now playing in some markets and opens wider tomorrow, June 21, 2013.



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