

An Interview with Gregory Couba Director of Snapped Productions' presentation of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

There is so much room for creativity and license when putting together a Shakespeare play, which can be both a blessing and a curse. How have you been approaching tackling *Much Ado About Nothing*?

When I first found out I'd be directing *Much Ado*, at whatever level of familiarity I had with it at the time, I knew that I wanted to take a more contemporary spin on it. After re-reading it a few times, I was convinced that exploring it through a modern lens would be the best way for us to tackle themes which would not only entertain an audience, but challenge us as artists to put our own spin on the play. Even though *Much Ado* is considered a comedy, and there is a lot of funny material in it, I've always thought of it as being more akin to one of Shakespeare's problem plays, like *Measure for Measure*, due to its complexity. I'm not interested in doing a formulaic Shakespearean comedy, with the same old archetypal characters and pushing humor where it isn't necessarily called for just because it's what's usually done and safe. There are some complex situations which arise in the play, and I want to examine them honestly.

You've adapted the script somewhat. What were your decisions surrounding the adaptation?

I didn't make any significant changes to the text. My biggest concern was making the play clear for a modern audience. I cut some of the more distracting, obscure references from Shakespeare's day that I felt weren't useful to us in telling the story we want to tell. I also deleted some characters, combined others, and made some slight changes in the order of certain lines and sections to streamline the plot and better serve our interpretation.

There are strong themes encompassing gender roles in *Much Ado*—what does it mean to be a man, a woman; what are the responsibilities of men and women towards each other, etc. Do you feel these are relevant themes for today?

Of course. They always will be. A large portion of our current entertainment and public discourse has to do with male-female relationships, and as with many themes involving human nature, Shakespeare's plays never fail to shine a light on these issues. When it comes to gender politics, Beatrice and Benedick's relationship is the ultimate case study! Beyond gender politics, I really want to shine a spotlight on the women of *Much Ado* and their experience. Every woman in the play is very smart, and they are often the most insightful regarding male-female relationships. I don't think that can be taken for granted or ignored, so their presence and power in the play will be very important.

Did your ideas about these themes affect the casting process?

Not directly. I was more interested in finding a diverse group of talented actors who I felt would be willing and able to honestly explore those themes, and then present them with enthusiasm and skill. We were interested in actors who could bring more to the roles than the usual and expected. It was actually a very hard process because there are a lot of very talented actors in New York. I even cast a few more people than I originally planned because we didn't want to leave some of the talent we saw unutilized.

You mentioned diversity? Was that important?

Absolutely! The producers and I felt it was extremely important to have a diverse cast. We live in New York City, we're performing in Harlem, and we have access to the actors from all over the world. Shakespeare lends itself so wonderfully to that aim because the ideas and concepts he explores are so universal. If you read the mission statement on the Snapped Productions website, they have a lovely passage about enacting change and moving "forward on the continuum of humanity", which I think is very much reflected in our cast.

You are a personal trainer, as well as a theatre artist, and incorporate much of your knowledge of how the physical human body works into your acting. Will you use this approach in your directing as well?

We're not doing an over-stylized interpretation, but I'll definitely encourage every actor to use their physical instrument to the fullest. I think that theatre, in general, should be more heightened than real life, and the situations and emotions the characters deal with in *Much Ado* are definitely not mundane. Ideally, the actors' physical life will match the heightened emotional levels of the piece in an organic way. Part of my responsibility as the director is to encourage and aid them in making that happen. So, I'll try to use any skills I have to be of service to them, so that we can make great theatre together!

What is it like to collaborate with close, personal friends?

Well, I've been fortunate enough to work with a number of the members of the cast and crew in the past, so for me, it's a pleasure. One of the joys of being in the theatre is the amazing sense of community we share. While creating this unique, special piece of art, you're working with old friends, creating new friendships, and nurturing these relationships while everyone is focused on the goal of putting on a great show. That dynamic (as corny as it sounds!) is one of my favorite things about being in the theatre. And even if you have disagreements, I think there's awareness and a level of respect that you share that reinforces the idea that disparate opinions are not personal, but more about the passion for the project and everyone wanting it to be the best it can be.

What do you want the audience to experience when watching this production?

Well, it is a comedy, so laughs would be good! But, as I mentioned before, there's a lot besides the comedy to enjoy. Most of all, I want people to have an entertaining night at the theatre, and I think there's enough going on to satisfy anyone. I'd be happy if, whether it be through the comedy or the more somber moments, people were stimulated in a positive way by the show.

What do you feel will be the biggest challenge in bringing *Much Ado* to life?

Making sure that everyone involved – and by everyone I mean the director (that’s me!), the actors, the crew, the producers, and especially the audience – will be satisfied, and hopefully, improved in some way by the finished product. That we will create something that matters, and that our *Much Ado About Nothing* has something new to offer. *Much Ado* is not a straightforward, easy, light comedy. We have a plot within a plot (with a subplot thrown in), 17 characters with varying, mutable motivations, two weddings (one of which ends tragically), and a love story that has inspired everything from opera to *Moonlighting*!...But I’m pretty confident that we’re up for the challenge.