Much Ado About Nothing
by William Shakespeare

Please visit our website at www.idahoshakespeare.org/shakespearience for YouTube links to posts from the director and the cast!
William Shakespeare (1564-1616), English playwright and poet, is recognized in much of the world as the greatest of all dramatists. Shakespeare’s plays communicate a profound knowledge of the wellsprings of human behavior, revealed through portrayals of a wide variety of characters. His use of poetic and dramatic means to create a unified aesthetic out of a multiplicity of vocal expressions and actions is recognized as a singular achievement, and his use of poetry within his plays to express the deepest levels of human motivation in individual, social, and universal situations is considered one of the greatest accomplishments in literary history.

A complete, authoritative account of Shakespeare’s life is lacking, and thus much supposition surrounds relatively few facts. It is commonly accepted that he was born in 1564 and it is known that he was baptized in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England. The third of eight children, he was probably educated at the local grammar school. As the eldest son, Shakespeare ordinarily would have been apprenticed to his father’s shop so that he could learn and eventually take over the business, but according to one account he was apprenticed to a butcher because of declines in his father’s financial situation. According to another account, he became a schoolmaster.

In 1582 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. He is supposed to have left Stratford after he was caught poaching in the deer park of Sir Thomas Lucy, a local justice of the peace. Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway had a daughter, Susanna, in 1583 and twins—Hamnet and Judith—in 1585. Hamnet did not survive childhood.

Shakespeare apparently arrived in London about 1588 and by 1592 had attained success as an actor and a playwright. Shortly thereafter he secured the patronage of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. The publication of Shakespeare’s two fashionably erotic narrative poems Venus and Adonis (1593) and The Rape of Lucrece (1594) and of his Sonnets (published 1609, but circulated previously in manuscript form) established his reputation as a gifted and popular poet of the Renaissance (14th century to 17th century). The Sonnets describe the devotion of a character, often identified as the poet himself, to a young man whose beauty and virtue he praises and to a mysterious and faithless dark lady with whom the poet is infatuated. The ensuing triangular situation, resulting from the attraction of the poet’s friend to the dark lady, is treated with passionate intensity and psychological insight. Shakespeare’s modern reputation, however, is based primarily on the 38 plays that he apparently wrote, modified, or collaborated on. Although generally popular in his time, these plays were frequently little esteemed by his educated contemporaries, who considered English plays of their own day to be only vulgar entertainment.
Shakespeare’s professional life in London was marked by a number of financially advantageous arrangements that permitted him to share in the profits of his acting company, the Chamberlain’s Men, later called the King’s Men, and its two theaters, the Globe Theatre and the Blackfriars. His plays were given special presentation at the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James more frequently than those of any other contemporary dramatist. It is known that he risked losing royal favor only once, in 1599, when his company performed “the play of the deposing and killing of King Richard II” at the request of a group of conspirators against Elizabeth. In the subsequent inquiry, Shakespeare’s company was absolved of complicity in the conspiracy.

After about 1608, Shakespeare’s dramatic production lessened and it seems that he spent more time in Stratford, where he had established his family in an imposing house called New Place and had become a leading local citizen. He died in 1616, and was buried in the Stratford church.

Until the 18th century, Shakespeare was generally thought to have been no more than a rough and untutored genius. Theories were advanced that his plays had actually been written by someone more educated, perhaps statesman and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon or the Earl of Southampton, who was Shakespeare’s patron. However, he was celebrated in his own time by English writer Ben Johnson and others who saw in him a brilliance that would endure. Since the 19th century, Shakespeare’s achievements have been more consistently recognized, and throughout the Western world he has come to be regarded as the greatest dramatist ever.

“Shakespeare, William,” Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2001

Contributed By:

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Much Ado About Nothing is generally considered one of Shakespeare’s best comedies, because it combines elements of robust hilarity with more serious meditations on honor, shame, and court politics. It was probably written in 1598 and 1599, as Shakespeare was approaching the middle of his career. Like As You Like It and Twelfth Night, Much Ado About Nothing, though interspersed with darker concerns, is a joyful comedy that ends with multiple marriages and no deaths.

Although one of the features of Shakespearean comedy is that no one dies, it would be a mistake to assume that death is absent from this genre. Often, Shakespeare’s comedies are more accepting of death than his tragedies, treating death as part of the natural cycle of life. Much Ado About Nothing is no exception, and Hero’s pretending to die of humiliation makes death more vividly present here than in any of Shakespeare’s other comedies. The crisis that lies at the center of Much Ado About Nothing troubles many readers and viewers, since the play creates a very strong sense of anger, betrayal, hatred, grief, and despair among the main characters. Although the crisis ends quickly, Much Ado About Nothing sometimes seems only steps away from becoming a tragedy.

Indeed, the line between tragedy and comedy is sometimes fuzzy. Many critics have noted that the plot of Much Ado About Nothing shares significant elements with that of Romeo and Juliet. Much Ado About Nothing also shares many features with Shakespeare’s late play The Winter’s Tale, which most critics assign to a different genre—that of problem comedy or romance. Like Hermione in The Winter’s Tale, Hero stages a false death only to come back to life once her beloved has repented.

Although the young lovers Hero and Claudio provide the main impetus for the plot, the courtship between the older, wiser lovers Benedick and Beatrice is what makes Much Ado About Nothing so memorable. Benedick and Beatrice argue with delightful wit, and Shakespeare develops their journey from antagonism to sincere love and affection with a rich sense of humor and compassion. Since Beatrice and Benedick have a history behind them that adds weight to their relationship, they are older and more mature than the typical lovers in Shakespeare’s comedies, though their unhealthy competitiveness reveals them to be childish novices when it comes to love.
SYNOPSIS OF *Much Ado About Nothing*

Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon, pays a visit to Leonato the governor of Messina, while returning from a victorious campaign against his rebellious brother, Don John. Accompanying him are two of his officers, Benedick and Claudio. While in Messina, Claudio falls for Leonato's daughter, Hero; Benedick verbally spars with Beatrice, the governor's niece. The budding love between Claudio and Hero prompts Don Pedro to arrange with Leonato for the marriage.

Meanwhile, the trickery begins as Don Pedro (with the help of Leonato and Claudio) attempts to sport with Benedick and Beatrice in an effort to make the two of them fall in love. Likewise, Hero and her waiting woman help to set up Beatrice. Both Benedick and Beatrice will think that the other has professed a great love for them.

The marriage of Claudio to Hero is set to go. Don John—ostensibly reconciled with his brother—despises Claudio, however, and plots against him. First, he tells Claudio that Pedro wants Hero for himself; next, he enlists the aid of his henchman Borachio and one of Hero's gentlewomen disguised as Hero to stage an encounter that will bring Hero's virtue into question. Claudio falls for the ruse and denounces Hero at the altar. She faints from disgrace and is hidden away while word is sent out that she has died from shame.

Fortunately for Hero, Borachio is arrested while drunkenly boasting of his part in the plan. With Borachio's confession, Hero is to be exonerated. Leonato demands a public apology from Claudio, then tells him that he will allow Claudio to marry one of his nieces in Hero's place—a niece that turns out to be none other than Hero herself. Claudio and Hero are reunited, Benedick and Beatrice will wed alongside them, and they receive the news that the man behind the scandal, Don John, has been apprehended.

~Synopsis from [www.bardweb.net](http://www.bardweb.net)~
~STUDY QUESTIONS~

1. In the context of today’s world and your lives, is it hard to believe that Hero and Claudio really love each other? Why or why not?

2. Shakespeare used verse and prose for specific reasons in his plays. Common characters speaking in common situations usually speak in prose while upper class and socially important characters spoke in verse. Where is verse used and why does Shakespeare use verse so sparingly in *Much Ado About Nothing*?

3. Do you think Claudio is honorable at the end of the play? What evidence leads you to your answer?

4. From Hero’s perspective, did Claudio always make the right decisions? Why or why not?

5. Many of Shakespeare’s characters use self-examination to understand their motives, obstacles and actions. Which characters, if any, do this in *Much Ado About Nothing*? Explain how each accomplishes this idea.

6. Beatrice is one of Shakespeare’s most wise heroines. She speaks about honor and how difficult it is to be a woman in this man’s world. From male and female perspectives, discuss her anger and comments in Act IV about wanting to be a man.

7. Discuss the character of Don John. Why is he written so broadly to be an obvious villain? How does this character propel the action of the story?

8. In the Shakespearience production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the comic characters of Dogberry and his troupe of ‘helpers’ is cut from the action. Knowing that the major reason for cutting such characters was time, what do these characters do for the actual story of *Much Ado About Nothing*?

9. Discuss the title of the play. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Examine it from the perspective of each of the main characters in the story; Hero, Claudio, Beatrice, Benedick, Leonato, Don John and Don Pedro. How does it apply or not apply?

10. Discuss the merit of this play by William Shakespeare. It is considered to be a comedy. Does that description work well to describe the action of the play? Why or why not?

~ESSAY TOPICS~

1. In some ways, Don Pedro is the most mysterious character in the play. He never explains his motivations. He also seems to have no romantic interest of his own. Investigate Don Pedro’s character, imagine the different ways in which he could be portrayed, and what might be the reason for the way he acts? Why would Shakespeare create a character like Don Pedro for his comedy about romantic misunderstandings?

2. In this play, accusations of unchaste and untrustworthy behavior can be just as damaging to a woman’s honor as such behavior itself. Is the same true for the males in the play? How is a man’s honor affected by accusations of untrustworthiness or unfaithfulness?

~Information from www.sparknotes.com~
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The Idaho Shakespeare Festival has evolved into one of the region’s premier, professional theater arts organizations, directly serving over 105,000 individuals annually. It is governed by a volunteer 41-member Board of Trustees, with 7 additional Consulting Members, 2 co-equal executives and a permanent staff of 9 employees. In addition, the Festival operates as an “artistic home” for over 100 artists and production staff, who are employed during the summer and at other times of the year, such as during the Festival’s spring educational tours.

At the organization’s core is its outdoor summer season which presents classical repertory, focusing on the plays of William Shakespeare, in addition to some contemporary works including musicals. The Festival’s Amphitheater and Reserve, now entering its tenth year of operation, is the venue for over 53,000 audience members who come to Boise from across Idaho and increasingly from other states and countries.

In addition to its seasonal productions, the Idaho Shakespeare Festival provides theater arts programming integrated into the curricula of approximately 95% of the school districts in Idaho, as well as serving parts of Oregon and Nevada. Through its school tours, Shakespearience and Idaho Theater for Youth, the Festival annually reaches over 50,000 children at all grade levels, particularly focusing on children in remote and rural communities.

ISFs Drama School exemplifies the Festival’s attempts to foster life-long learning and appreciation of the theater, providing ongoing classes for students ranging in age from pre-school to adult. The Festival’s Summer Apprentice Program and Residencies are also offered for extended theatrical training. In the tradition of its highly-popular Family Nights, along with Matinees at the Festival serving over 55,000 students in the Amphitheater since 1993, the Festival donates tickets to over 100 non-profit and student groups, has created a special access program for both students and low-income groups, and now makes low-cost access possible for children and young adults throughout the summer season.

Festival staff members also participate in the community, serving on boards and assisting the activities not only of local and regional organizations, but also participating at a national level, where Charles Fee is in his sixth year heading the Great Lakes Theater Festival (Cleveland) and Mark Hofflund serves a presidential appointment to the National Council on the Arts (Washington, D.C.). Both Festival executives have been community leaders in Idaho for the better part of two decades, and both maintain fulltime residency with their families in Boise.