

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

23 May 2017

Optimist Theatre Announces Cast of Free Shakespeare in the Park's "Much Ado About Nothing"

MILWAUKEE, WIS. – Optimist Theatre, presenter of Milwaukee's Shakespeare in the Park (SitP), has announced details of this July's production of "Much Ado About Nothing." The three-weekend run will feature Kelley Faulkner* and Todd Denning* as Beatrice and Benedick, Michael Stebbins* as Don Pedro, Jonathan Wainwright* as Don John and Jim Pickering* as Dogberry.

The cast for "Much Ado About Nothing":

Bob Balderson as Antonio
Todd Denning* as Benedick
Mohammed EIBsat as Conrade
Kelley Faulkner* as Beatrice
David Flores as Leonato
Ron Scot Fry as Verges
Jennifer Glueckstein as Ursula
Alejandra Gonzales as Watch/Ensemble
Di'Monte Henning as Claudio
Logan Milway as Balthasar/Watch
Emmit Morgans as Borachio/Friar
Bividiana Murguia as Watch/Ensemble
James Pickering* as Dogberry
Michael Stebbins* as Don Pedro
Candace Thomas as Hero
Jonathan Wainwright* as Don John
Kat Wodtke as Margaret
Ben Yela as Watch/Ensemble

*Member, Actors' Equity Association

Actors' Equity Association member Kelley Faulkner, who has been seen numerous times in town at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, will be making her Shakespeare in the Park debut as Beatrice, one of Shakespeare's most celebrated heroines. Faulkner explains that what makes Beatrice so enchanting to her is that "for as deep as her cynicism runs, her compassion and loyalty run far deeper. She's a breath of fresh air in every way--her humor, her independence and her intellect are virtually unmatched amongst Shakespeare's female characters. I'm so thrilled to get to bring her to life this summer."

SitP's production is being directed by Associate Artistic Director Tom Reed and Co-Directed by ML Cogar, who is also the company Dramaturg. Reed co-directed last season's "Julius Caesar," directed "As You Like It" in 2013 and has performed in several of SitP's productions, including as Puck in 2015's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"We want to create an evening of theatre that is going to be entertaining and enriching for everyone, whether first-time theatre-goers, veteran Shakespeare fans, actors new to the profession or experienced artists," explains Reed. "The ethos of Shakespeare in the Park is to emphasize storytelling and make new modern connections to Shakespeare's language. For us, that may take precedence over what might be considered 'standard' approaches or expectations of how the play and characters 'should' be performed." Reed continues, "That said, in crafting the overall production, we rely heavily on the evidence that the script gives us. Our 'Much Ado About Nothing' cast will collaborate to make discoveries that are supported in the text – but, we then look to our diverse company to find personal connections without relying on preconceived notions. So, our story will grow naturally out of the chemistry of our cast; that our cast live right

here in Wisconsin allows their stories to create a play that belongs to both the company and the audience.”

William Shakespeare’s romantic comedy will be performed twelve times over three weekends, with evening performances (8 p.m. curtain) July 6 (Open Invitation Preview Performance), July 7 (Opening), July 8-9, 13-16 and 20-22, and a Noon matinee on Tuesday, July 18. This will mark the program’s 8th season of free, professional theatre for the greater Milwaukee area.

The 2017 season sees Shakespeare in the Park move to the Peck Pavilion at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. The Peck Pavilion is an outdoor performance space on the corner of Kilbourn Avenue and North Water Street. SitP will represent one of the offerings of the LIVE @ Peck Pavilion free performance series. From 2013-2016, SitP performed at the Selig-Joseph-Folz amphitheater in Alice Bertschy Kadish Park, hosted by COA Youth and Family Centers.

The Peck offers exceptional infrastructural support for the performance production and audience experience, with state of the art lighting and sound systems, comfortable seating and central location. In addition, according to Susan Fry, Shakespeare in the Park Executive Director, “This move to Peck represents a quantum leap forward in our ability to connect with inner-city community organizations. The Marcus Center’s success rate in bringing people who may not otherwise be able to experience live theatre – be it transportation, awareness, or desirability issues – is impressive. Blending our programs presents mighty potential.”

With a professional cast based in the Milwaukee area, Shakespeare in the Park offers a top quality theatrical experience free to its audience. The 2017 season is co-presented through the generous sponsorship of Isabel and Alfred Bader Philanthropies, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Herzfeld Foundation and the Milwaukee Arts Board. The LIVE @ Peck Pavilion series is presented with support of The Molitor Charitable Trust. Shakespeare in the Park rehearses at the Pitman Theatre at Alverno College through a partnership with the Alverno Theatre Department.

In its first seven years, SitP has played to more than 15,000 people and employed 200-plus Wisconsin actors, crew, suppliers and vendors. With their 12-performance season of “Much Ado About Nothing”, they expect to attract another 4,000 people in 2017.

About “Much Ado About Nothing”

“Much Ado About Nothing” follows in what was, in the sixteenth century, a popular tradition of stories of lovers mistakenly believing one another unfaithful. Shakespeare had plentiful source material on which to draw when he set his own version down in 1598/99. The comedy achieved immediate and enduring popularity, offering a precursor to the genre of so-called “screwball” romantic comedies of the early film era.

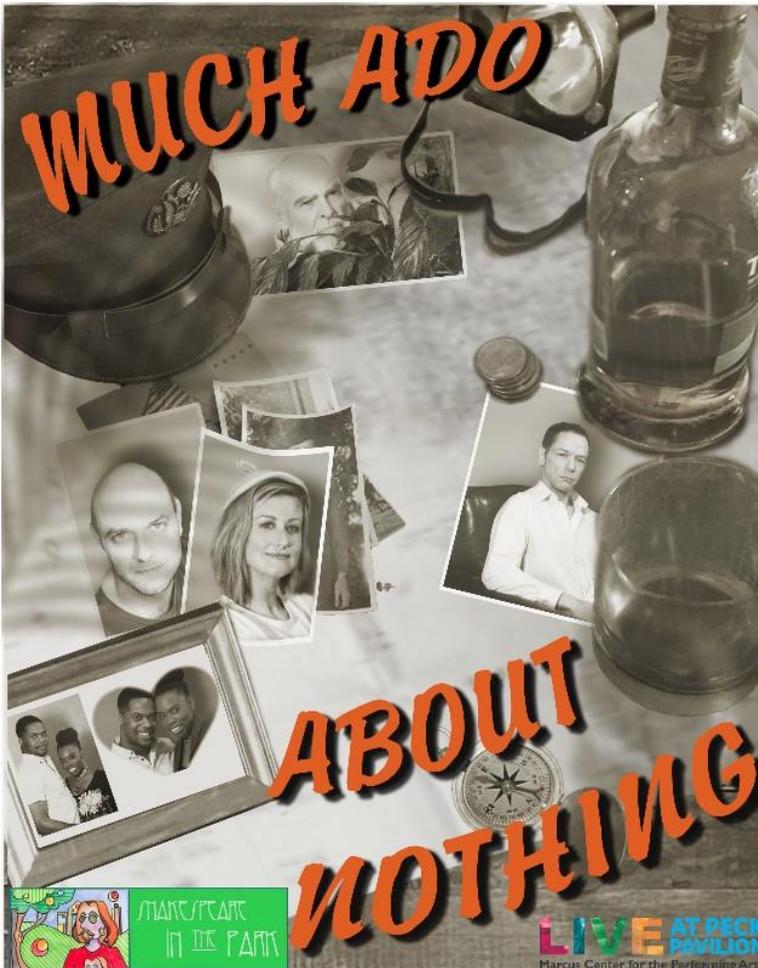
The play features an ensemble of characters entangled by some combination of family, romance and/or competitive envy. Within a tale that runs the gamut from sly pranks and slapstick to heartbreaking betrayal, Shakespeare animates the relationship of Beatrice and Benedick, the principal antagonists/lovers, with particularly clever wordplay and complex emotions.

In Shakespeare’s day, the “nothing” of the title and “noting,” as in to observe or to eavesdrop, were near-homophones. As such, double (and triple) meanings are woven through the dialogue from the very first moment. The simple premise of the title, a great fuss – including a great romance – arising from small moments seen and overheard, belies the larger societal expectations, fears and stereotypes of the sexes that are addressed, questioned and overturned within the action of the story. In particular, Beatrice’s obvious intelligence and yearning to be equal to the men around her – while refusing to marry because she cannot find a man equal to *her* – sets her up as an object of admiration for traits in opposition to those deemed “ideal” in a woman of her era.

About Shakespeare in the Park™ and Optimist Theatre

Optimist Theatre is a 501(c)3 non-profit theatre company; Free Shakespeare in the Park is supported in part by grants from the Wisconsin Arts Board, Milwaukee Arts Board and Bader Philanthropies. In addition to Free Shakespeare in the Park, Optimist Theatre's educational outreach program is "To Be! Shakespeare Here and Now", which has been performed internationally for more than 20 years and for more than 85,000 people.

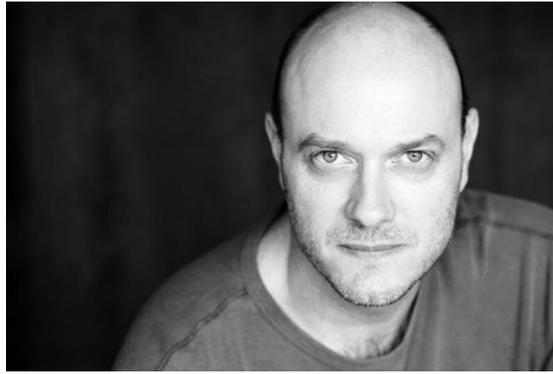
Shakespeare in the Park's goals are to connect with audiences across the economic, ethnic, and experiential landscape by creating art that is accessible to all people. They aspire to educate, entertain, and inspire through creative works of artistic integrity and, in doing so, to serve as a "gateway" theatre experience, bringing new audiences to the arts. To learn more, visit OptimistTheatre.org, or contact Executive Director Susan Scot Fry at SSFry@OptimistTheatre.org or 262/498-5777 or Artistic Director, Ron Scot Fry at RSFry@OptimistTheatre.org or 262/498-9788.



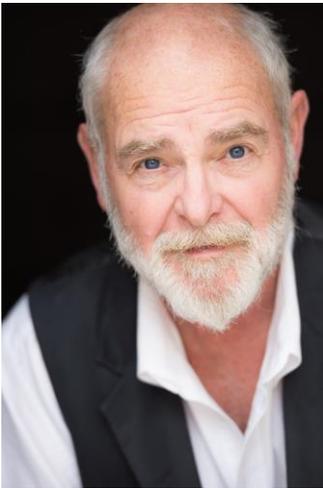
Much Ado About Nothing Poster



*Kelley Faulkner**



*Todd Denning**



*Jim Pickering**



*Jonathan Wainwright**



*Michael Stebbins**



Shakespeare in the Park logo



The Optimist Theatre logo

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