Much Ado About My Thesis

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In my experience making theatre is as much about dealing with physical realities and constraints as it is a cerebral artistic experience. Meaning is found in lack of resources and forced problem solving that comes from austerity and loss. In retrospect, my theatrical education was leading up to finding meaning in art during a pandemic.

The process for my production of *Much Ado About Nothing* began with finding a space. After learning that I would not be able to rent LDP's staple of the Van Fleet Theatre I knew that my academic imagining of this play would center around teasing out Shakespeare's comedy and themes in a found space, one has not traditionally lent itself to theatre. I wanted to show that Shakespeare's language could be enjoyable in any space with enough rehearsal and attention to the text.

After considering nearly every space on campus, including parking garages and stairwells in randomly selected academic buildings, I finally choose to reserve the Round Room of the Ohio Union. This room had an equal number of boons and drawbacks. It had the capacity and floor space to hold a large audience, and physical levels that would add visual interest to the blocking, but there was no backstage area and it contained high skylight that drew sound directly upward.

I intended to use the first level of raised platform as an elevated playing space, one where the actors would stand when they were telling stories or behaving in a manufactured way in front of their peers, such as Beatrice's "lead the apes into hell" speech or when Borachio is telling Conrade of his triste with Margaret. This raised platform also served as a way to make concrete certain power dynamics, as our Don John was much shorter than her henchmen, but she could

tower above them while standing on the tiers. The elevated portions of the stage were spaces of heightened reality, where the characters used their words to dictate truth. The curved nature of the room lent itself well to the feeling of being in a panopticon, where one was on display at all times, echoing the characters need to perform for and impress their peers.

The first major challenge to overcome was the lack of backstage space. I originally intended to construct a fabric counting house on the top level of the Round Room to serve as Leonato's house and a place to hide off-stage actors. After our only rehearsal in the Round Room, I realized that there was no way to create this structure in a cheap and visually pleasing manner. In the second half of our rehearsal I was dejected, thinking I was going to have to conceive a completely new way to hide my actors, until I watched them sitting on the top level of the Round Room, observing their fellow cast members. I decided to stop fighting against the constraints of the Round Room, and instead display my actors throughout the run time of the show. While "offstage" their faces would be covered in identical masks, existing in a no man's land between character and person. We called these figures "beings of pure potential" in a Brechtian parlance. They were intended to unsettle the audience, forcing them to question who are the watchers and who are the watched. Instead of fighting against my space, I learned that it could guide my creative process, finding meaning where there was before only frustration.

The space helped me to build meaning as this new conception of watching bolstered a theme I was trying to tease out of the script. Through multiple readings of the text I became interested in the constant state of surveillance the characters find themselves subjected to. Some of this surveillance is intentional, as Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato seek out being seen by Benedick in order to complete their matchmaking scheme, while the mirror image of this scene is played out by Ursula, Hero, and Beatrice. Some of the constant watching is not consensual, as

our Margaret is unaware that her amorous night with Borachio is being viewed by an audience of confused men. The central conflict of the play is based upon nonconsensual voyeurism, with Don John and Borachio's plot revolving around tricking Claudio into watching a performance to confuse him and incite his misogynistic violence. All of these instances of diegetic watching are enhanced by the physical presence of the masked watchers.

The characters are constantly performing for one another, from Benedick's impassioned speeches about cuckoldry and his bitterness towards love, to the rehearsed confrontation between Leonato, Antonio, Don Pedro, and Claudio built upon Friar Francis's plot to find Hero's lost innocence. This performative nature is no more present than in Beatrice and Benedick's first confrontation in the play. Their words and actions are charged with their past history, with the care and sexual tension that can come across as aggression. But there is no chance for reconciliation in this scene because they are actively trying to impress their respective entourages. Their performance is a denial of intimacy as a result of surveillance.

My choice of theme to highlight transferred well to our final format, that of an online video chat. While this wasn't our intention, the actors rose to the challenge and found ways to make the most of the medium. Benedick got close to the camera during his impassioned speeches, while Don Pedro desperately swiped through a dating app. The sense of voyeurism is heightened as it seems like the audience is intruding upon a group of personal friends interacting over the internet.

Choosing to focus on intimacy in a surveillance state isolates and heightens the personal growth that Beatrice and Benedick experience over the course of Much Ado. As mentioned, the performative nature of their relationship holds them back from honoring their feelings towards each other in the beginning of the play, both in their confrontation in scene 1, and their fight at

Leonato's party. Benedick is angry at Beatrice because she insinuates that the only reason his friends keep him around is so that they can laugh at him, calling him "the Prince's jester, a very dull fool." Benedick is enraged by this insinuation because he considers his wit to be one of his greatest qualities, a performance where he can control how he is perceived by his peers and betters.

In both the formats Beatrice and Benedick find intimacy in the face of constant surveillance when they are willing to be vulnerable despite their position as those watched by a chorus of others. Beatrice is able to express her rage at the misogynistic system that harmed her cousin, while a few scenes later Benedick reveals that the reason for his brash and boasting nature comes from a fear of being forgotten after he dies. Both of these moments of characters, who are marked by their ability to mask their emotions by wit and long rambling speeches, being willing to let each other into their pain does not come with the realization that they are no longer watched, but by accepting that their love is not contingent on privacy. It is intimacy despite being surveilled by uncaring eyes.

The same can be said the building of a theatrical ensemble. Theatre is intimacy under surveillance. It is the vulnerability to make mistakes where there no mediation between watcher and watched. I attempted to model and celebrate this vulnerability within the rehearsal process. There were many times when I felt out of my depth, many times I wondered why Dr. N would let me do this, many times when I leaned on my dramaturge for interpretation questions that I had no idea how to answer, many times I had to ask my friends to help me choregraph a silly dance to a LMFAO song, many times I relied on my actors experience of how blocking felt in their bodies in order to make a directing decision. I learned to trust my team, trust my cast, and in turn they trusted me too. I was careful to keep rehearsals light and engaging while also making

sure we stayed on track. It was obvious to an observer that the cast had fun with the material, so much so that we had to work extra hard on the shortest scene in the play because our Don Pedro couldn't stop breaking during Claudio's slam poetry reading of his epitaph for Hero.

The humor of Much Ado was also highlighted by our choice to set it in 2012. The idea began as a joke, as we talked about how funny it would be to choreograph the dance to LMFAO's hit song "Party Rock Anthem", but the more I thought about it the more sense it made. My experience of 2012 was a time when all of the structural and systemic issues we are aware of now were percolating under the surface, but they did not seem pressing, they weren't spoken about. This experience can also be attributed to the fact that I was a young teenager, but young teenagers today are much more civically and socially aware than most of my peers. All of the societal ills that are at the forefront of discussion and protest, from wealth disparity to overt racism to climate change, were present in the beginning of the 2010s but they were easier to ignore if you weren't personally affected.

The same can be said for the world of Much Ado. This play contains moments of breathtaking societal critique, from Beatrice's "Oh god that I were a man" speech, to the fact that Don Pedro, Benedick, and Claudio are coming home from the frontlines of a bloody war. All of the levity and humor of this play rests atop a vat of misogyny and violence, but as long as Dogberry keeps cracking jokes no one can think about the fact that Hero nearly got slut shamed to death.

Our main way of displaying the time period was with our costume choices. Jenny Morrison headed up our costume team, helping turn my fledgling idea into a set of costumes that highlighted the comedy present in that era of fashion history. They also served as character shorthand for an audience that might be less accustomed to the cultural connotations of a brocade

doublet than a puka shell necklace. In this production it is evident from the moment they step on stage that Claudio is a frat boy up to no good and Hero is a tumblr girl who writes poems on her converse sneakers in sharpie. Beatrice and Benedick's costume choices play with their interpretations of gender, as Benedick is the only one in a full face of makeup while Beatrice switches between a flannel and a suit jacket. Margaret and Ursula evoke Paris Hilton with matching velveteen tracksuits. The watch stray from the early 2010s, but each one looks like they belong in a different war, with Dogberry's tricornered hat and Hugh Oatcake's camo jacket, a look perfect for a confused group of ragamuffins. We also used a cardboard cutout of Josh Hutcherson from the Hunger Games, a notable piece of early 2010's memorabilia, as if he was a decoration in Hero's bedroom. Beatrice hides behind him while eavesdropping on Ursula and Margaret and directs her speech about loving Benedick to his cardboard frame.

Though Much Ado is a comedy and many of the choices I made were in interest in preserving the comedic timing of the play, I was most interested in highlighting the theme of intimacy under surveillance and the violence that Hero faces as a result of sexism. We made sure to highlight the supportive relationship between the women of the play, from their physical defense of Hero's body during her disastrous wedding, to their celebration of Beatrice's relationship with Benedick in the final scene. Teasing out these modern themes has always been my experience working with Shakespeare.

Every LDP production I have been a part of has astounded me in the level of pertinence Shakespeare's text has in modern society. My portrayal of Miranda in The Tempest made me think about the controlling nature of patriarchy even present in loving relationships. I distinctly remember standing onstage during The Merry Wives of Windsor as Anne Page asks her unseen watchers "How many gross faults are hidden under three hundred pound a year?" during the

news cycle where it was revealed that the President of the United States was paying off sex workers to keep silent about his relationship with them. Our production of Romeo and Juliet sought to highlight the structural violence present in Verona's society and the importance of intimacy and connection in the face of pain and manufactured alienation.

My experience in LDP has taught me how the finding of these common values is an effective place to start when crafting an ensemble. When a group is coming from the same standpoint it is easier to foster friendship and an ensemble mindset in a cast and crew. Though it sounds like common sense, projects work much better when everyone trusts each other and assumes positive intent, and I let this idea guide my decision-making process. It was wonderful to see friendships bloom among members of my cast. One of the reasons why I wanted to direct a show for my senior thesis was to create the kind of community I desperately needed as a scared freshman in college and found in the form of LDP's *The Tempest*.

As a result of the community minded nature of LDP my experience in the company has been one of personal growth. This company gave me the chance to expand my knowledge of nearly every aspect of theatre, on both sides of the directing table. I have gained confidence in my ability to make creative and administrative decisions in a supportive environment. I have made lifelong friendships and created pieces of art I am proud to put my name on. I have learned that Shakespeare's words can be used to create joy, tenderness, and laughter in unlikely corners and oddly designed boardrooms. Although this experience did not end the way I envisioned I have hope that one day I'll use what I've learned to bring together passionate, kind, and talented friends and players in a celebration of text that holds meaning in every age.