

A "Merry War": Synetic's *Much Ado About Nothing* and American Post-war Iconography

Sheila T. Cavanagh, Emory University

Abstract

Synetic Theatre, a Washington, D.C. area theatrical company with artistic roots in the Republic of Georgia, has achieved significant renown for its ongoing series of "wordless" Shakespeare performances. Highly choreographed, these "physical theater" productions vary dramatically in tone and presentation, although they each use distinctive costuming, music, and movement in order to offer nuanced interpretations of Shakespearean drama despite the absence of spoken language. Although their style closely resembles dance, they push against those definitional boundaries and encourage audiences to view their presentations as movement-based genre pieces that defy ready categorization.

Shakespeare without Spoken Language

Synetic Theatre, a Washington, D.C. area theatrical company with artistic roots in the Republic of Georgia, has achieved significant renown for its ongoing series of "wordless" Shakespeare performances.¹ Highly choreographed, these "physical theater" productions vary dramatically in tone and presentation, although each uses distinctive costuming, music, and movement in order to offer nuanced interpretations of Shakespearean drama, despite the absence of spoken language. Although their style closely resembles dance, they push against those definitional boundaries and encourage audiences to view their presentations as movement-based genre pieces that defy ready categorization. Beginning with *Hamlet . . . the Rest is Silence* in 2002, Synetic has created award-winning productions of eleven Shakespearean plays, including *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Twelfth Night*. Their eleventh offering in this series, *Much Ado About Nothing*, premiered in February 2015. Set predominantly in Las Vegas during the 1950s, this production uses culturally resonant images and music to offset its lack of dialogue. The result is a performance that is not quite Shakespeare, but that demonstrates how eliminating the verbal can highlight other modes of

communication and enhance the meaning expressed through movement. As dance theorist Della Pollock remarks, "performative writing is *citational*" (Pollack, 92, emphasis in original). Synetic's performances are likewise citational, with meaning conveyed through images and dance maneuvers that are both fresh and familiar.

Messina on the Town

Accordingly, this *Much Ado About Nothing* relies heavily upon shared cultural references in order to present its narrative to audiences who may or may not know the play. In many instances, this strategy emphasizes aspects of the text that recede during more conventional productions, although it also adds interpretive levels to the performance that do not coincide neatly with the details of Shakespeare's drama. The show opens, for example, with Beatrice and Benedick reenacting a famous image closely tied to the celebrations ending World War Two. (For discussion about this photograph in relation to the Synetic Theater's *Much Ado*, see Lacey 2015.) When twenty-first century American audiences view the sailor kissing a woman bent backward in an iconic pose, they are likely to situate the action historically. The choreography surrounding this initial moment confirms that identification, with costumes and dancing reminiscent of Gene Kelly and his sailor companions in *On the Town* (1949). This environment, which firmly contextualizes this *Much Ado* in a specific post-war era, also facilitates a "back-story" scene illustrating a truncated prior romance between Beatrice and Benedick, which is alluded to in Shakespeare's text, but not definitively presented. As Beatrice obliquely remarks to Don Pedro: "Indeed, my lord, he lent it [Benedick's heart] me awhile; and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one: marry, once before he won it of me with false dice, therefore your grace may well say I have lost it" (2.1.242-45). In Synetic's version, Benedick (Ben Cunis) clearly abandons a smitten, but unwitting, Beatrice (Irina Tsikurishvili) after a period of apparent romantic bliss. This Beatrice has ample cause to feel betrayed when Benedick returns from battle. The general upheaval of the war years and the stress of conflicting allegiances contribute to significant personal sorrow for her.

Much Ado in the 1950s

After the energetic and poignant opening sequence that conveys numerous allusions to the Second World War, the production charges forward to the 1950s, where Benedick emerges as a Marlon Brando/James Dean biker and Beatrice is transformed into a singer showcased in her Uncle Leonato's casino. Lights, music, and costuming reflect this new environment, although musical selections are also drawn from more recent recordings (such as Pink Floyd) and period pieces from Elvis, Chuck Berry and others. This shift facilitates striking costuming and appealing

special effects, such as single wheel motorcycles that regularly roar through the scene with lots of light and noise. It also introduces an arena replete with Don John's drug use, Beatrice and Benedick's comic gambling (at one point, they play strip poker), and a host of other images drawn from real or imagined communal cultural associations within the casino realm of Las Vegas. The production offers an array of visually captivating scenes and familiar popular music. As usual, Synetic provides an impressive and entertaining evening of theater. As Rosalind Lacey notes, this company's ambitious choreography always moves in exciting new directions: Irina Tsikurishvili, a nine-time Helen Hayes choreography award winner, has created ingenious dance routines, replete with understated

sexuality, that push the envelope, and go light years further than any previous Synetic production. She breaks boundaries, veering on the edge of chaos. It's as if she is trying to see how far she dare go with her well-trained dancers who she has execute acrobatics, cartwheels, pratfalls and well-timed slapstick comedy. Near a climactic point, the bikers pick up their bikes and twirl them like batons. (2015)

Synetic's *Much Ado* continually keeps audiences wondering what will happen next.

Is It Shakespeare?

Does it, however, present Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*? The answer, as with many adaptations, is mixed. Synetic's Artistic Director, Paata Tsikurishvili, knows his Shakespeare, although he admits to reading the plays more closely in Georgian than in English. He also draws heavily from literary and dramatic critical responses to the plays. Here, for instance, he includes reference to the play's focus on "noting" as part of its investigation of how information is transmitted and interpreted. In addition, Synetic productions do not hesitate to make significant alterations to the plays. Their *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, begins with a woman in labor, giving birth to the Indian boy, who then mysteriously transforms into Puck. This change makes for a memorable opening scene, but cannot be mistaken for a silent rendition of Shakespeare's spoken text. Their *King Lear*, moreover, draws as much from Fellini as it does from the First Folio. Synetic often places concept first, aiming for metaphoric associations in lieu of textual fidelity.

In the case of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Synetic's changes draw attention to Shakespeare's title. Tsikurishvili's Las Vegas bears little resemblance to the Bard's Messina, except that it skillfully portrays a society where flash easily overshadows substance and where comedic dunderheads can triumph over their purportedly sharp-witted superiors. Allusions to *The Wild One* (1953), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and countless Vegas-based films emphasize both the seriousness and

frivolity of the plot. Skirting disaster, the casino-based ensemble demonstrates how the rampant exuberance generated by the end of a war can rapidly transform into threats against future stability. As the close parallels between the stories of *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing* illustrate, tragedy and comedy share close quarters. The manufactured glitz of Las Vegas, coexisting with its reality of lives and ideals thwarted by substances, greed, and failure, suggest that the "nothing" referenced in the title can easily translate into "everything" and can just as readily evaporate. As Susannah Clapp notes in *The Guardian*, Rupert Goold demonstrated something similar in his recent Las Vegas *Merchant of Venice* at the Royal Shakespeare Company and London's Almeida Theatre: "By setting the play in modern Las Vegas, Goold shows capitalism at its kitschiest being invaded by emotional reality" (2014). While these productions have disparate outcomes, the common setting offers similar cultural associations. Las Vegas remains a site overwhelmed by misplaced hopes and rampant illusion.

Las Vegas as Messina?

The sordidness of this environment led some viewers to criticize Synetic's reimagining of this play, however, claiming that none of the characters in this rendition warrant audience sympathy. In the online Theater Critic DC review, for instance, one regular theater blogger bemoaned a perceived need to criticize a generally laudable company:

What really ruined this show for me was how mean and sleazy all the characters are presented. Everyone in the biker gang (as you would expect from a biker gang) is a violent macho asshole. Beatrice, who ought to be portrayed as proud and independent feminist who dislikes Benedick for his cockiness, is instead just bitter and jaded — a semi-celebrity with a chip on her shoulder. Claudio is less of a macho asshole than his friends, but not by much; and Hero is a virginal ingénue . . . sort of. Don John has been given a heroin addiction, which seems pretty clearly to be only a byproduct of his already being an insufferable asshole rather than the cause of it. (2014)

While understandable, given the affection often bestowed upon the characters in this play, this response does not acknowledge the dark undertones regularly present in Shakespearean comedy. *Much Ado's* bustling seaport of Messina may not correlate closely with the tawdry environment of Las Vegas, but Shakespeare's comedies generally recognize the complex, often contradictory, nature of human beings and their creations. Claudio's treatment of Hero can raise eyebrows even in comparatively benign settings. The confused Dogberry's essential intervention in the affairs of this witty group of intellectuals also draws attention. Accordingly, Las Vegas can be used

to exaggerate and make visible the elaborate facades that often silently mask the human foibles represented in this drama. Jaques's jaundiced departure toward the end of *As You Like It* reflects the cynicism that many feel at the unconvincing equanimity reigning over lighthearted productions of Shakespearean comedies, including *Much Ado About Nothing*. The lively banter at the heart of this comedy captures the imagination of many audiences, but that does not denote a setting devoid of complication. Early modern post-war Messina, like its twentieth-century desert counterpart, hides an array of competing ambitions and desires, something this play works hard to display, even as its characters endeavor to distance themselves from such harsh realities.

Kinesthetic Shakespeare

Synetic's incorporation of Las Vegas into its production facilitates the kind of interpretative responses to movement described by dance theorist Jane C. Desmond, who argues,

We can analyze how social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of nondance bodily expression within specific historical contexts. We can trace historical and geographic changes in complex kinesthetic systems and can study comparatively symbolic systems based on language, visual representation, and movement. We can move away from the bias for verbal texts and visual-object-based investigations that currently form the core of ideological analysis. (1997, 29-30)

As Desmond recognizes, our propensity for privileging spoken language often leads to a discounting of "complex kinesthetic systems" such as those demonstrated through Synetic's physical theater. However central language remains in more conventional Shakespearean performances, this company's ability to infuse their choreography with pertinent, recognizable cultural references suggests that these stories can be told effectively without vocalization. As Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy comment, moreover, "Interesting theoretical and practical issues arise when the ephemerality of dance gets caught up in the 'permanence' of the written word. That dance cannot be frozen, held still, is its very essence" (1995, 5). Synetic's reliance upon nonverbal cues in order to communicate its Shakespearean narratives enables audiences to interpret such "theoretical and practical issues" as they merge the aesthetic experience of watching a Synetic production with their expectations and experience of Shakespearean drama. In the case of this *Much Ado About Nothing*, these issues include determining how well Shakespeare's play transforms itself into a new generic representation, a revised setting, and a performance that privileges movement and image instead of the excised language.

Desmond rightly notes that many scholars continue to focus primarily upon the spoken word, even though this approach faces increased resistance: "Cultural studies remains largely text-based or object-based, with literary texts still predominating. Even excursions into popular culture are concerned largely with verbal or visual cultural products, not kinesthetic actions" (1997, 30). As Synetic continues to create Shakespeare without dialogue (this next season will include *As You Like It*), they are building a body of kinesthetic material that is intricately bound to its textual origins, yet contradictorily, largely divorced from the words behind their origin. By incorporating communally recognized images into their polished stage design and expert choreography, Synetic consistently presents noteworthy Shakespearean drama, despite the absence of dialogue. The company has earned its widespread critical acclaim as it continues to stretch the boundaries of choreographed, physical theater without words.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Paata Tsikurishvili and to Monica Jilling from Synetic Theater for making Vimeo and DVD renditions of this production available to me.

References

- Clapp, Susannah. 2014. Review of Rupert Goold's *The Merchant of Venice*. *The Guardian*, 21 December 2014. Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/dec/21/merchant-of-venice-review-significance-steams-through> [accessed 16 August 2015].
- Desmond, Jane C. 1997. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." In *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Edited by Jane C. Desmond. Durham: Duke University Press. 29-54.
- Goellner, Ellen W., and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, eds. 1995. Introduction. *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 1-18.
- Lacey, Rosalind. 2015. "Synetic's 50's biker musical *Much Ado About Nothing*." 25 January. Available online at: <http://dctheatrescene.com/2015/02/25/synetics-50s-biker-musical-much-ado-nothing/> [accessed 16 August 2015]. [Synetic Theater program notes cited here.]
- Pollack, Della. 1998. "Performing Writing." In *The Ends of Performance*. Edited by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane. New York: NYU Press. 73-103.
- Shakespeare William. 2017. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Folger Digital Texts. Available online at: <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org> [accessed 22 April 2017].
- Theater Critic DC. "Synetic Theatre — *Much Ado About Nothing*." 2014. Available online at: <http://reviews.theatercriticdc.com/2015/03/synetic-theater-much-ado-about-nothing.html> [accessed 16 August 2015].
- Tsikurishvili, Paata. 2012. Personal conversation. Synetic Headquarters, Crystal City, Virginia.