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## Shakespeare in Seattle: Much Ado...King John...Hamlet

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Sunday, June 18, 2006; Posted: 4:51 PM - by [Robbie Wachs](#)

### Much Ado About Nothing (Seattle Shakespeare)

After a superb mounting of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, expectations were incredibly high going into Seattle Shakespeare Company's new production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. With the Bard's greatest comedy, a cast of Seattle's strongest thespians, and one of Seattle's most employed directors, this *Much Ado* has all the makings of a hit. Unfortunately, director Rita Giomi's unfocused treatment makes for an uneven evening full of a few highs and plenty of lows.

Though she is one of Seattle's most sought after directors, Giomi often makes key mistakes that prevent potentially brilliant evenings from thriving. Her productions of *Devil and Daniel Webster* at SCT and *Lobby Hero* at Seattle Public both featured key casting blunders and moments of sheer boredom in what should have been unbeatable hits. Giomi makes similar errors with *Much Ado*. Some actors are clearly out of their element and magical moments are wasted. Most problematic is her allowance of extraneous bits of comedy that prevent Shakespeare's language from being heard. The comedy never stems from the dialogue. Attempts for laughter are painstakingly obvious. Giomi never seems to urge her actors to make choices based on text or character. The language is often lost underneath the countless comedy bits. On the surface, this is a harmlessly enjoyable staging. When you dig deep, little depth is to be found.

Giomi is also unable to balance Shakespeare's swift transitions from comedy to drama. These changes are quite jolting, preventing a unified product from emerging. The actors never seem connected to each other. There is little sincerity to be found in this sweet story of love, loss, and deception. Her actors often seem to have been left to their own devices. Giomi's presence is barely visible.



Stephanie Shine clearly understands every word she delivers. Still, she offers a thoroughly unconvincing Beatrice. This *Much Ado* often seems like a vanity piece for Shine. She executes her lines in a repetitive singsong, adds peculiar gestures that rarely match the moments, frequently winks at her audience, and has zero chemistry with Paul Morgan Stetler's confusing Benedick. She fares better than Stetler, who gives a mostly surface driven performance. The pair lacks the spark necessary to ignite Shakespeare's sexiest couple. They clearly need a director to approve and veto their choices. Though they get tons of laughs, there is an overwhelming sense of

insincerity throughout. Little communication is present. There's a lot of acting AT each other.

Equally problematic is MJ Sieber's whiny Claudio. Sieber just isn't a natural fit for the role of tortured hero. His Claudio is more intent on charming the audience than executing the necessary emotions. Alexandra Tavares' marvelously tormented Hero is the highlight of a production full of pointless moments. Seiber is never able to match Tavares' clarity. Their moments together are the most uneven of the bunch. Tavares' star quality is missed every time she is absent. She is one of just a handful of company members who convince us of anything close to the truth. Todd Jefferson Moore is a hilarious Dogberry, using Shakespeare's language as a blueprint for his comedic choices. He gets a rather peculiar partner in Don Darryl Rivera's

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random Verges. Moore's vaudevillian strengths outshine Rivera's crowd-centric choices. Moore's scenes often seem random, mostly because of Giomi's sloppiest work of the night. The remaining ensemble is a mix of refreshing (David Quicksall's precise Don Pedro, Gordon Carpenter's torn Leonato), miscast (Timothy Hornor's grimacing Don John), and underused (the always great Peter Dylan O'Connor and Alycia Delmore in bit parts). This talented ensemble is never on the same page. There is a constant yearning for what could have been.

Scenic Designer Craig Wollam's well-crafted stone creation provides a lovely distraction during the countless yawns of Giomi's lazy execution. Insincerity is clearly the King of this often-pointless revival. The ample opportunities for truthful comedy and rich drama are too often neglected here. When tackling one of the most performed plays of all time, shouldn't the main aim be innovation? This traditionally quaint production is never able to convince or inspire. Count this as a rare misstep for Seattle's go-to place for great Shakespeare. With intriguing new productions of *Macbeth* and *The Comedy of Errors* on the way, Seattle Shakespeare has ripe opportunity to seek redemption.

*Much Ado About Nothing* runs through June 24th at the Center House Theatre. For tickets, call 206-733-8228 or visit [www.seattleshakespeare.org](http://www.seattleshakespeare.org)

**King John (upstart crow)**

In the same week, two all-female productions of Shakespeare plays opened in Seattle. The clear winner of the two is upstart crow's magnificent mounting of the Bard's rarely produced *King John*. Because of the relative obscurity of this history play, director Rosa Joshi and her abundantly talented ensemble are able to use high concepts to full advantage. Shakespeare's tale of the abuse of power remains disturbingly modern. This winning treatment is a precisely aimed political plea. With a sense of helplessness fresh in the minds of many, the work found here is overwhelmingly powerful.

Together with Scenic Designer Jennifer Zeyl, Joshi has created a disturbing world full of betrayal, murder, and regrets. The inevitable comparisons to the Bush administration evolve naturally. Melanie Taylor Burgess' smart costumes suggest current political leaders without force feeding obvious similarities. Joshi expertly moves her actors across Zeyl's steel chessboard creation. The playing area is splattered with the markings of battle. The blood-stained floor is a reminder of the careless decisions of the past and present. Zeyl lifts the audience high above the stage, making us spectator and court. There is a perfect blend of classical and modern to be found in every element of this ambitious venture. Joshi reveals *King John* to be a timeless work. This brisk outing never lets its audience go from a fiercely disturbing clutch.

A perfect blend of Equity and Non-Equity performers, this remarkable ensemble is a flawless unit. Gender is quickly forgotten as you slowly realize that these talented women are the best choices to play these roles. Period. Amy Thone is an appropriately flawed King John. She gives a cerebral performance that is equal parts bumbling, confident, and heartbreaking. Thone's passion for Shakespeare is apparent from start to finish. She walks a fine line between sympathetic and loathsome. This is a master artist at her best. Thone gets an excellent sparring partner in Gretchen Kritch's powerful King Phillip. In a welcome return to Seattle, Kritch is a maniacal wonder. She executes everything with a fiery gusto that is a sight to behold. The only obvious gender comment of the night comes from Peggy Gannon's engrossing Phillip the Bastard. Gannon reconstructs the role as a roaring bull dike out for the kill. Her finely crafted monologues highlight a performance full of unrelenting fire. Betsy Schwartz is a shining centerpiece as the King's helpless nephew Arthur. Schwartz is absolutely heartbreaking to watch. Ki Goldberg gives an appropriately gigantic reading of Arthur's mother Constance. Her descent into madness is simply stunning. Sarah Hartlett and Aimée Bruneau are impressive (as always) in their double-roles. From top to bottom, this is one the best acting companies in recent memory. It is a pleasure to see such crafted communication. Each actor pours every ounce of their being into roles that would likely be mundane if traditional choices were made. There is an unmistakable uniqueness to every performer that is hard to forget. This is what theatre is and should be.

This *King John* ranks as one of the most important, entertaining, and inspiring outings on any Seattle stage this year. The presence of this mammoth production will be felt for years to come. Joshi and company are clearly a



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force to be reckoned with. Hopefully their next venture is not too far in the future.

### ***Hamlet (Animus Theatre Project)***

The second all-female Shakespeare is an uninspired, pointless mounting of the Bard's oft-seen *Hamlet*. Because the work is so well known, Animus Theatre Project is never able to push past the preconceived notions of this classic text. This *Hamlet* often appears to be an excuse for girl-on-girl action. Pointless touching and fondling frequent this night of sheer pain. Director Ryan Brown's pretentious staging is avant-garde at its worst. Flashy ideas are never backed up with any sort of substance. Actors become set pieces as they don transparent fabric to create the illusion of art. This "experimental" mess should have stayed in the rehearsal lab.

Brown nearly grasps what Shakespeare is all about. Most of his actors do not. Though she looks age appropriate, Erica Chiles-Curnutte is a shtick heavy Hamlet played completely on the exterior. Chiles-Curnutte makes an awful lot of emotional faces, never backing up anything with the truth needed to convince. She plays Hamlet like a SNL sketch on a lesbian cruise. There is a reason Hamlet is cast older in most productions. It takes years of craft and life-experience to grasp quite possibly the trickiest role in the history of dramatic literature. The talented Lisa Hopp gives a lesson in over-acting as she yells her way through Brown's most misguided ideas. As Claudius and the ghost of Hamlet's father, Hopp screams like a banshee with a confident gusto that never seems completely appropriate. To give Hopp credit, she is often forced to act aside clearly inexperienced actors who don't seem to grasp Shakespeare, theatre, or humanity itself. Though some of director Brown's choices are intriguing, his actor's inability to execute the simplest gesture prevents brilliance time and time again.

Shakespeare's masterwork is barely recognizable in this misguided blur of an evening. This is an aspirin necessary night of screeching, howling, and unintentional giggles. Nothing makes sense in this wretched lesson in Shakespeare gone horribly wrong.

**Top: Stephanie Shine as Beatrice and Paul Morgan Stetler as Benedick  
Photo by: John Ulman**

**Bottom: Amy Thone as King John Photo by: Peter Dylan O'Connor**

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Robbie is a California native, and has lived in Seattle for the past four years. His love for theatre began after seeing his High School's production of *Bye Bye Birdie* and Bette Midler's television *Gypsy* in the same week. He attended Western Washington University, where he studied drama. Other areas of study include Absurdist, Postmodern, and Children's Theatre. He has a deep passion for Musical Theatre, and is an avid collector of Cast Recordings.

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