

## R E V I E W

**MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING**, *First Folio Shakespeare Festival, at the Peabody Estate at Mayslake.* This play is hard. If Beatrice and Benedick take over, the plot gets lost. If they don't, its grim goings-on make the work a comedy only by definition: it ends in marriage.

First Folio Shakespeare Festival gets the balance right by combining a good concept with superior acting. Director Alison C. Vesely sets the play in the American southwest after the Civil War, a surprising yet illuminating choice. The prince feuding with his bastard brother (Jim Johnson and James Houton) are recast as a Union colonel and his ex-Confederate brother. The exceptional Paul Slade Smith as Dogberry draws on generations of comic sheriffs—who doubtless drew on Dogberry. The period makes for wonderful music: the soldiers enter singing “Marching Through Georgia,” and resi-

dent composer Michael Keefe brilliantly resets a Shakespeare song to “Shenandoah.” Sean Grennan was born to play Benedick, taking pratfalls yet somehow maintaining his dignity, and Mary Ernster’s easy swagger as Beatrice suggests Annie Oakley getting a man with the gun of her wit. This well-matched comic pair powers the play without overpowering it.

The only problem is the choice of villains. Despite a PC director’s note about exploring multicultural tensions, making the villains Mexican seems a route to easy laughs at people with funny accents and dark skin, not to mention a cheap shot at “hot-blooded” Latinas. Rene Ruelas as Conrade and Aaron Jose Muñoz as Borachio do the best they can given the director’s Frito Bandito prejudices; their ultimate repentance goes beyond caricature to real remorse. —*Kelly Kleiman*