



Review

'Love's Labour's Lost' gets Shakespeare into the groove

FSU/Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training's production of "Love's Labour's Lost" comes to life in The Ringling's earthly gardens with rap and slapstick.

By [Marty Fugate](#) | 1:00 p.m. April 10, 2023



Rueben Wakefield, Jackson Purdy, Trezure Coles and Brooke Turner star in the FSU/Asolo Conservatory production of Shakespeare's "Love's Labour's Lost" in the Ringling gardens.

Photo courtesy of Frank Atura

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"Love's Labour's Lost" is the Asolo Conservatory's latest show. You can find it under the banyan trees on The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art grounds. While not officially a musical, the show is stuffed with songs. The plot? Simply put, this is Shakespeare. And one does not simply simplify the Bard. So I'll oversimplify and leave a lot out.

King Ferdinand (Rueben Wakefield), the ruler of Navarre, strives to be a philosopher king. His entourage of three lords are academic aristocrats as well. To sharpen their mental focus, they make an idiotically idealistic vow: For the next three years, they'll cut down on sleep and snacks — and forgo contact with women. With perfect timing, the Princess of France (Brielle Rivera Headrington) shows up with her entourage of three highly desirable ladies.

The King and his men are filled with amorous thoughts — and second thoughts about that vow. They look for escape clauses. If the ladies bivouac outside the palace, that wouldn't be "contact." Or what if we call this a

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diplomatic state occasion, not a cute meet? Semantics aside, the lords and ladies pair up faster than you can say, “Honorificabilitudinitatibus!”

There’s far more to it than that — but the complications aren’t the main attraction. This early comedy, first performed in 1597, is Marxist Shakespeare. “Marxist,” as in Groucho, Chico, Harpo and sometimes Zeppo. “Love’s Labour Lost” isn’t about keeping your vows anymore than “The Cocoanuts” is a study of South Florida real estate scams. The plot is a glorious excuse for Shakespearean silliness.

Director Jonathan Epstein adapted Shakespeare’s play and collaborated with Daniel Levy in farcing it up with songs. There are lots of anachronistic needle drops like The Proclaimers’ “I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles)” and Sheryl Crow’s “All I Wanna Do.” Most songs are Levy’s originals; the majority of those are hip-hop.

I assume Levy and Epstein worked closely together on interweaving tunes and text. Epstein is sensitive to the Bard’s word music; the actual music never gets in the way. The resulting tour de farce is a hilarious romp.

Student actors play multiple roles

Lots of work went into it, but it’s clearly a labor of love.

The cast of second-year student actors play multiple roles. They give it all they’ve got and have a blast in the process.

Wakefield’s King Ferdinand is a man with a natural groove who tries to project gravitas. He can’t drop his guard and just be himself. (Kings don’t do that.) As to his retinue: Jordan Rich’s Berowne is practical and skeptical; Jackson Purdy’s Longaville overestimates his powers of self-control — and thinks three years of abstinence will be a cakewalk; Mikhail Roberts’ Dumard is young, good natured — and not that bright.

Headrington’s Princess of France is a cool chess player in the games of love and politics. As to her entourage: Brooke Turner’s Rosaline is pretty, witty and bright; Sharon Pearlman’s Maria is easily impressed by strutting males; Trezure Cole’s Katherine is hard to please.

Purdy’s hilarious Holofernes is a real live wire — a freelance scholar and his own No. 1 fan. He’s a manic motormouth who bounces around like Tigger bubbling with figures of speech and obscure academic references. (Shakespeare’s clever word play making fun of itself.)

Cole’s Constable Dull is anything but. She’s a cop with no patience for fancy talk. And so bluntly plainspoken, you never know what she’s saying.

Macaria Chaparro Martinez plays Armado, a boastful, angry Spanish knight who wound up in Navarre, is like a refugee from a telenovela. The character’s outrageous Spanish accent is deliberately over the top – as fake as the Sharpie-moustache inscribed on the actor’s face. An ethnic cliché. Yeah, yeah. They know.

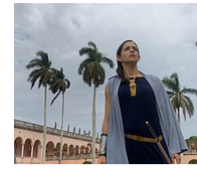
A motley mishmash of costumes

Costume designer April Andrew Carswell goes to town with creative anachronism. Elizabethan, modern and post-modern garb — it’s a motley mishmash, and it’s all good. Alex Pinchin’s sound design amps up the show’s



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rock concert vibe. Eliza Ladd's movement coaching is not just eye candy. This production is filled with leaps, jumps, sexy dances and pratfalls. The actors jump around. They're fun to look at. Thanks to Ladd's talent, nobody gets hurt.

Chris McVicker's lighting and set design strikes the ideal dreamy note. In the real world, the play unfolds in a clearing surrounded by banyan trees. The royal court of Navarre, the Basque countryside ... whatever. It's all in your head. The only set McVicker built is basically a platform. (It's the one the actors leap on.) His revolving colored lights set the mood and create a sense of place. (Mother Nature did an excellent job on the banyan trees, too.)

A host of clever, creative people bring "Love's Labour's Lost" to life in the earthly gardens of The Ringling. Despite all their post-modern cleverness, it's still Shakespeare's play. So what kind of play is it?

A young man's fancy. And a brilliant young man at that.

"Love's Labour's Lost" reminds me of one of The Beatles' early albums. Young Shakespeare's filling his bag of tricks with characters and bits of business that he'll refine later. There are disguises, masks, doubles, a play-within-a-play, heavenly-minded moralists who hinder mortal romance, oafish country clowns, a language-mangling constable and a bloviating know-it-all. (No cross-dressing, but the show's gender-blender casting takes care of that.)

This is a very playful play. It's also sexy, flirty, teasing, bouncy, physical, farcical and very, very funny. The point of the Marxist mayhem seems clear: "Vows are but breath, and breath a vapor is."

Honor is high-minded hooey

In other words, honor and oaths are high-minded hooey. Vows are meaningless. The heart wants what it wants, promises be damned. They're just words in the air.

If a vow gets in the way of romance? Break it. Just do it, baby.

That's the tone of Epstein's direction and Levy's songs, but it's not their invention. Both follow Shakespeare's text.

When the silliness is at its height, the bottom drops out like a hangman's trapdoor. The news arrives that the King of Navarre is dead. The Princess of France is now the Queen.

Suddenly, all the fun and games seem trivial. And wrong. Before any romance, the ladies demand that their swains honor their austere oath for a year. The lords humbly agree.

That twist in the plot blindsided me. I love surprises. Especially when they're Shakespeare's.

Kudos to the talents involved for making it happen.

If You Go

"**Love's Labour's Lost.**" Through April 23. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art's Bayfront Gardens, 5401 Bay Shore Road. \$32. Visit [AsoloRep.org/conservatory](https://www.asolo.org/conservatory).



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Marty Fugate is a writer, cartoonist and voiceover actor whose passions include art, architecture, performance, film, literature, politics and technology. As a freelance writer, he contributes to a variety of area publications, including the Observer, Sarasota Magazine and The Herald Tribune. His fiction includes sketch comedy, short stories and screenplays. "Cosmic Debris," his latest anthology of short stories, is available on Amazon.

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