

A Noise Within making much ado in the 1940s

By Bridgette M. Redman
Pasadena Weekly Staff Writer

It takes courage to love. At the theater A Noise Within, they've devoted an entire season to stories that show people who dare to love.

They've already staged "Animal Farm," "Radio Golf" and "A Christmas Carol." On Saturday, Feb. 11, they'll open William Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," a madcap comedy where several couples travel perilous journeys to wedded bliss.

Remaining shows will be "The Kiss of the Spider Woman" and "The Book of Will."

Director Guillermo Cienfuegos has directed around the country for decades, but "Much Ado About Nothing" is his debut at A Noise Within, which focuses on the classics.

Cienfuegos describes "A Noise Within" as having an inspirational story — the founders and co-artistic directors Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott started the company in several small venues and cleaned houses to keep the theater afloat. Now, they have a facility in Pasadena and are, he said, the premiere presenter of classical theater in Southern California.

"The artistic directors at A Noise Within were just sort of aware of me directing, and they reached out to see if I'd be interested in this," Cienfuegos said.

"It's one of Shakespeare's most wonderful comedies, and I jumped at the chance to be able to do this really great story on this stage. Not a lot of people get that opportunity."

In "Much Ado About Nothing," a group of soldiers returns to Sicily to celebrate their victory. Claudio is eager to propose to Hero, whom he fell in love with before the war. Meanwhile, the sharp-witted duo of Beatrice and Benedick are convinced they shall remain unmarried and snipe mercilessly at each other until their friends and relatives decide to play matchmaker. However, neither couple's path to bliss is smooth, and the comedy is filled with intrigue, passion and surprise twists.

Cienfuegos, who directed an award-winning version of "Henry V" at Pacific Resident Theatre in 2014, said that whenever he is directing, he must find a personal connection to the story beyond it being a great play.

For Henry V, the thing that sparked his passion was that even though it is technically a history play, it was a story about miracles, the miracle of what the soldiers pulled off. He felt that his actors pulling off the show in a tiny 34-seat theater was also a miracle.

"In 'Much Ado,' the connection is that it's a terrifying thing to love somebody," Cienfuegos said. "It's terrifying to let yourself love someone and to allow yourself to be loved by someone because you're making yourself vulnerable. It's scary to have hope. In every way these characters are all — particularly Benedick and Beatrice, but everyone is — dealing with what are they willing to risk? What are they willing to make vulnerable in order to be their true selves and be happy?"

In what he describes as a precursor to the rom-coms of the 1940s, Cienfuegos puts forward Benedick and Beatrice's journey as the blueprint for comedic love stories, from the screwball comedies of the 1940s to the modern comic love movies. The iconic couple can even be seen in such classic sitcom characters as Sam and Diane in "Cheers."

"They've constructed these really elaborate masks to protect their hearts," Cienfuegos said. "And what happens in the play is they slowly, slowly, slowly, without a lot of excitement or enthusiasm, slowly lower the mask just to try to see if they'd be willing to let the other person in. The joy of the play is watching the whole process happen."

This production is set in Sicily just after the island was freed from fascists by U.S. forces in World War II, a move that lets them incorporate swing music and 1940s costuming. Cienfuegos wanted to make the concept of soldiers returning from a victorious battle much more specific in terms of who they were, what the battle was and who the enemy was. The original play takes place in Messina, Sicily, and that setting still felt perfect when moved to the 1940s.

"I thought it'd be wonderful if the play takes place at a time where there was a dark cloud over this part of the world, but now the clouds have parted and we've got some joy to celebrate," Cienfuegos said.

"That way we could make all of the soldiers U.S. forces so that the American audience could relate. I can also use the nostalgia that people have with the music and that time and the events of that war."

He'll be combining swing music with period Italian music. During the masked ball in the second act, the characters will dance a tarantella, a choice designed to celebrate the Italian summer. He said the dance is going to be an exciting moment in the show.

And while he didn't plan it before rehearsals, the specificity of the setting lent itself to character choices by the actors that have contributed to the show's originality. Joshua Bitton, who plays Benedick, is from Queens, New York, while Stanley Andrew Jackson III hails from Houston.

"It started making me think that we're setting this thing in World War II, so these army units were made up of people from all over the country," said Cienfuegos, who is now having



Tensions fly in the madcap comedy "Much Ado About Nothing" featuring Joshua Bifton as Benedick and Erika Soto as Beatrice.

cast members speak with their own accents from Queens to Texas to the Appalachia. "It starts to take on this very familiar feeling. I worried about whether it would be too much of an imposition, but the language is just soaring with these actors bringing their own thing to it. It takes on a personality and specificity that pulls it out of what people might expect to hear when they see a Shakespeare play."

Setting the play in a specific time and specific place, Cienfuegos said, allows the truth of those settings to inform everything in a way that becomes exciting.

The play takes place in approximately 20 different locations, so Cienfuegos said the design team has created a lot of furniture and scenery on wheels that are moved into place like a jigsaw puzzle.

"It is in keeping with the madcap, screwball approach that I'm taking," Cienfuegos said.

"I'm being very fun and whimsical with the whole production so when we go from the front of Leonato's house to the church to the guardhouse where Dogberry and various watchmen stand, it's all created in a really sort of quick and fun and kinetic way."

Other performers include Erika Soto as Beatrice, Alexandra Hellquist as Hero, Wes Mann as Dogberry, Tony Pasqualini as Leonato and Fredrick Stuart as Don Pedro. The scenic design is done by Angela Balogh Calin, lighting design by Ken Booth, composing and sound design by Christopher Moscatiello and costuming by Christine Cover Ferro. Chloe Willey is the production stage manager.

Between the story and the setting, "Much Ado About Nothing" is a highly accessible play for audiences, even those unfamiliar with Shakespeare. It's mostly in prose, and the plot is fun and easy to follow.

"Some people think they're going to be forced to drink some medicine," Cienfuegos said. "This is going to be wacky and fun, and the characters are going to be clearly identifiable. With me, the No. 1 job with Shakespeare is clearing out all the brush so that the audience can really understand and follow it."

Cienfuegos said he enjoys getting into rehearsals and making a mess to see what they can come out with.

"The process is actually having to get in there," Cienfuegos said. "You take apart a play and work on it beat by beat, which to me is the most joyful part. We have a bunch of actors, we have a text, and we're just sort of working through it, messing with it and finding out what every little thing means. That's just pure joy to me. I feel like if there's a heaven, it's an endless rehearsal."

"Much Ado About Nothing" by William Shakespeare

WHEN: Various times Thursdays to Sundays. Previews Feb. 5 to Feb. 10; performances Feb. 11 to March 12

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Boulevard, Pasadena

COST: \$25; \$18 for students

INFO: 626-356-3100, anoisewithin.org