

The cast was
really excited by
this article.

Much Ado About Nothing

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This past December, I had the chance to see San Marcos High School's Performing Arts Department production of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. It was produced and directed by Philip Levien, and performed by quite a diverse cast.

Mr. Levien says in describing his class, "It's called 'Sheltered Theater Production' and we're the only ones in the area doing it. It's an arts elective, and each year for the last three years we've done a Shakespeare play using students that are learning English, Special Ed kids and students who are at risk."

The play had been adapted to 1900's so everyone was wearing their Victorian costumes. *Much Ado About Nothing* is a romantic comedy.

Claudio and Hero are engaged, but the evil Don John tries to ruin their wedding. Benidick and Beatrice act like they hate each other but in truth they are in love and by the end of the play they are engaged as well. Because of all the mischief and gossip their friends spread, everything goes a little wild. There's lots of eavesdropping and mistaken identities throughout but that makes for a very funny show.

The kids had the chance to add some of their own dialog and one of the actors, Brian Ruiz, wrote the entire ending to fit their adaptation of the show. Brian, age 17, played two parts, Don John the Villain and Dogberry, the stupid constable. "My favorite part was adding to the play and creating more, making it a personal play, because a lot things I chose to do on stage were things I invented to make my character more real. It gave him more life then just the words that were in the script," says Brian.

The students are lucky to have such an experienced actor for their teacher. Mr. Levien was a professional actor in New York and LA for 20 years. He did a lot of stage work, Shakespeare, contemporary, and over a hundred movies and TV shows. He said "I enjoyed the work but I really like the life that teaching supports. It's a different world. In Hollywood there's this constant looking for work and here everyday you get up there's a new challenge. The kids are looking for some support and guidance, so it's gratifying."

Mr. Levien told me that the teachers at San Marcos have been very supportive. The wood shop provided lumber and helped build sets and the art department let them come in and paint. Marian Azpil and Christy Boozer provided the costumes.

The cast worked very hard to put this show together. There was so much work the kids started coming in at lunch and for two Saturdays as well. Some of the cast members told

me what they liked about being part of this production. Karla Ramirez, age 16, who played Hero, said, "I like performing because I'm a really shy person and I'm not an English speaker, so it helps me a lot." Diego Vasquez, age 16, who played Claudio said, "I liked performing and expressing my thoughts



The Cast of *Much Ado About Nothing* (Photo by Lauren Parsons)

and my feelings. I didn't want to be in that class because I didn't know what to do and how to act but then I started to like it, seeing people acting with romance and all that stuff."

I wondered why Mr. Levien chooses Shakespeare plays? He said, "A couple of different reasons, one, Shakespeare is considered a gatekeeper author. If you want to achieve academic success through collage you'll need to be able to tackle Shakespeare. Two, we need to do our shows within 90 minutes because most of these kids go to jobs after school or they take care of their siblings and cousins. Another reason is that I don't want to privilege one culture over another, because some years I've had students whose native language is Farsi or Chinese, although the English learners are mostly Spanish speakers. We never have to worry because they're all coming to a new language equally. It turns out to be a good mix, the kids get along really well. The English learners end up learning English at a little more rapid pace and then when they go into their next English class they tend to do better with their Shakespeare than they would normally."

UCBS students come and film these classes every year. The Grad students are writing their dissertations on the kind of work they are doing. The Carnegie Foundation (a program that provides ideas, insights and new understanding in teaching) is studying what Mr. Levien is doing and they are building a web site based on the films that have been taken over the last three years.

For Mr. Levien "the best part is almost everyday the kids make me laugh. They're funny and they're filled with life and energy. I'm just really proud of these kids, how hard they worked and what they accomplished."