

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

## Film Synopsis

The hot Italian sun beats down on a beautiful villa set in the idyllic Tuscan countryside. Leonato, governor of Messina (RICHARD BRIERS), and the women of his household sprawl on the hillside relishing the summer heat.

Suddenly, Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon (DENZEL WASHINGTON) and his victorious army are seen approaching in the distance, returning from the wars. As the horses gallop towards the country estate, the women rush back to the house, and pandemonium reigns as they excitedly get themselves ready to meet the returning heroes. The men are warmly welcomed as they emerge through the archways of the villa, and seductive glances are exchanged. The wars are over. All can now devote themselves to a period of rest, revelry and match-making.

Don Pedro's close companions are the two lords Claudio (ROBERT SEAN LEONARD) and Benedick (KENNETH BRANAGH). Both men find themselves drawn into romance during their stay in Leonato 's household. Benedick is a proud and confirmed bachelor, famously engaged in a constant -war of wits with Leonato's niece, the strong-willed Beatrice (EMMA THOMPSON). But their spirited parrying of words and vigorous skirmishes of wit hide a deeper attraction. Leonato 's daughter, the lovely and innocent Hero (KATE BECKINSALE) is wooed by the young lord Claudio, only to experience despair when Claudio is deceived into thinking she has betrayed him on the very eve of their wedding.

At the heart of the mayhem is the evil Don John (KEANU REEVES), Don Pedro's bastard brother, who creates the intrigue because of his jealousy of Don Pedro. The villainous plot is eventually uncovered by a chance meeting between one of Don John's drunken conspirators and the local watch; a comic collection of miscreants led by the inept and exceptionally inarticulate constable Dogberry (MICHAEL KEATON).

Meanwhile we watch the amusing progress of the unlikely romance between Beatrice and Benedick, created by the affectionate manipulation of their friends.

Synopsis of "Much Ado about Nothing" - Entertainment Film Distributors.

# Shakespeare - Popular Author

The chances are that even if you have not yet read one of Shakespeare's plays, as a group you probably know quite a lot about him already. In groups, write down on a large piece of paper everything you know about Shakespeare and his plays. The following questions might provide a useful starting point.

Where was Shakespeare born? In which century? Can you name any of the plays he wrote? Do you know the story of any of them? How many characters from his plays can you name? Do you know the names of the theatres he was associated with in London? Has anyone made a film of one of Shakespeare's plays before? Can you name any? Do you know the director's names? Do you know who starred in the film(s)?

Once you have compiled your list, combine your information with other groups. Now, in your groups, see if you can work out why Shakespeare is so well known, and why or how his work has survived for all these years. It's worth considering the difference between a 'well known' and a 'popular' author. And if Shakespeare's plays are not on the best-sellers' list, can you explain why they are read, studied and performed so often?

## Before you see the film

### ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE

When dealing with adaptations from a Shakespeare text, as in the case of "Much Ado About Nothing", we are faced with a specific problem. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries theatre directors have usually adopted an approach to staging the plays which did not exist in Shakespeare's time. They will have sets, often quite lavish, which show the change of scene, period costumes for the actors, special lighting effects. The idea of having sets and backdrops means that between each scene there is a pause whilst the scenery is changed.

In Shakespeare's time, the flow of the play was far more like the flow of a film - as one set of actors left the stage another would appear. Like the film, which has no pauses between scenes, so the audience of Shakespeare's time would not have expected any pauses in the action.

Anyone who adapts a literary text into a film obviously faces problems. These problems can arise not simply from the text itself but also from the attitudes of the audience and the critics.

Let us start with the text itself. One thing that we need to bear in mind is that the plays were originally intended as scripts for actors and not as texts for readers. You are probably studying the text in a lot of detail. Unlike a poem, which is normally written for close reading, a play text is not written for the same purpose. It always assumes that part of the impact will come from what happens on the stage itself.

What other problems do you think would face someone who is adapting a literary text into a film? In small groups write down as many as you can think of.

### **SHAKESPEARE INTO FILM**

Consider the problems of making a film of a Shakespearean text especially:

- Problems with the language including difficult words and expressions, people's names etc.
- Problems with the setting and context of the play:- How do we make it relevant to contemporary society? How do we cope with very different conventions of courtship and love? How do we "translate" the humour of the play?
- How do we market and sell such a film when the wider audience will *not* know the original text. After all "Much Ado About Nothing" has not been filmed before.

Key decisions were made in preparing the text for filming bearing in mind the obvious truth about film:

- You can easily cut from location to location without having to verbally establish it;

Actions can speak louder than words;

- Cutting some characters' lines will obviously change the balance in favour of others.

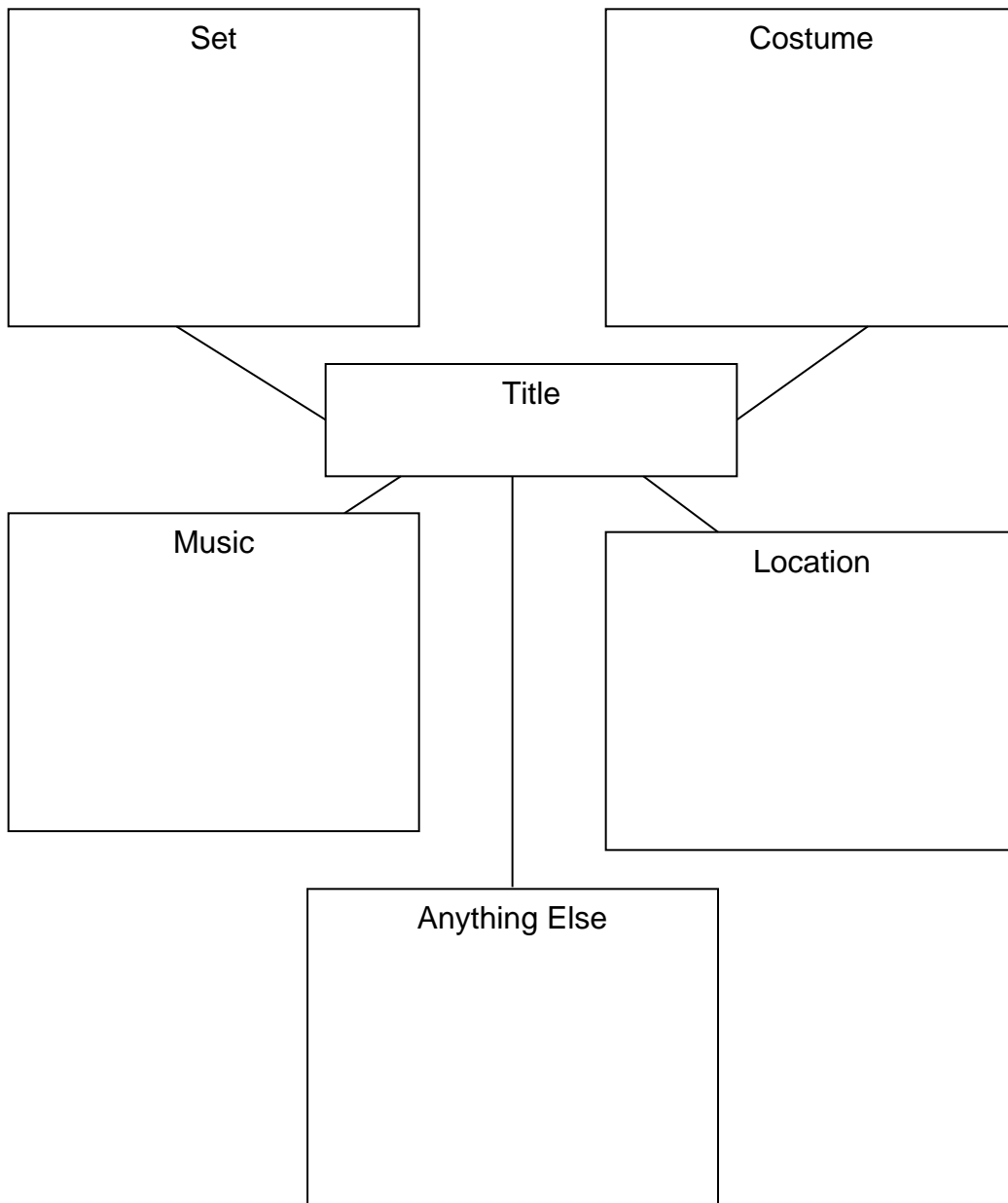
In the chart below write down what you think are the major differences between seeing a film, watching the play in a theatre and reading the text of the play.

Film	Play	Text

## SETTING THE SCENE

The opening, or exposition, of any film is important not only because the story begins there, but also because it usually establishes the style of what is to follow.

As you watch the first five or ten minutes, you will probably be able to identify the different elements that help create the mood or atmosphere of the scene. To make your task easier, the chart below sets out the main elements in a box. Before you watch the film, have a go at filling in each box, listing what you expect to see.



## KENNETH BRANAGH'S ADAPTATION

Read the following statements by Kenneth Branagh who is the producer/director and leading actor in the film.

*"The play is one of the greatest romantic comedies ever written. Like many of Shakespeare's comedies it's very earthy and lusty. People seem to fall in love through a fury of summer madness. My intention was to make explicit in the film what is only implicit in the play"*

*"I wanted this to be a fairy tale - beautifully dressed and lovingly photographed - that can also be very frightening at times. Like all good fairy tales, there's a strong dark undercurrent to the story. It's also very, very funny."*

### Task

Bear these statements in mind during your viewing in order to discuss whether you agree with Branagh's feeling about the film and his method of execution.

## After Viewing

### OPENINGS

Starting a film is always difficult, even more so when there is a complicated plot and relationship of characters to establish (and, in the case of "Much Ado About Nothing", the setting of the play is the Italy of Shakespeare's imagination). You might like to compare the opening of "Much Ado About Nothing" with the opening of other film versions of Shakespeare texts, such as Zeffirelli's "Hamlet" or "Romeo and Juliet".

### Task

Look at the opening of the film. Beatrice's voice is heard speaking, "Sigh no more ladies", whilst we see the words writ large upon the screen underscored by music.

- Consider the effect of this bearing in mind that we have already mentioned that the language could pose a problem. How does the actress read the poem? How does it help the character establish a sympathy with the audience?



- We then go to an artist's watercolour view of the villa. Consider this image in terms of an "idealised setting."

- We then go to the real image of the villa which is even more stunning than the picture. In what ways does the image of the real villa correspond or conflict with the

"fairy tale" setting of Mr. Branagh's statement?

- The whole opening section - the soldier's arriving, the bathing and preparations for the returning army to meet the Governor's family and entourage - is invented. Why do you think this is done?



## Identifying Characters

### SHAKESPEARE'S CHARACTERS

Shakespeare's drama has been enjoyed for nearly 400 years. Some people think this success is because the plays are about things which will always be part of human life and experience, which are relevant whatever century the audience live in - emotions such as jealousy, ambition, justice, love or hate. There is an alternative theory that the plays are written in such a way that each age can interpret the plays in its own way.

One example of this is how the heroes, heroines, villainesses and villains of the plays have been viewed in many different ways through the years. Some of the characters that have been despised or thought of as evil in past ages have been liked and admired in the twentieth century.

#### Task

Whether we like or sympathise with a character or not depends on many things. In groups, list as many of them as you can. Here's a few to start you off:

- whether you recognise the type of person a character represents (good, easily led, corruptive, hero, villain, etc.).
- whether you identify in any way with a character - (you may admire the character, feel she/he is unlike you, or perhaps similar to you).
- whether you have inside information (knowing things about a character can affect your level of sympathy).

### THE DIRECTOR'S ROLE IN SHAPING CHARACTER



When watching rather than reading a play, our sympathy for a character will partly be in response to directorial interpretation. How does a film director build up a character and shape the way an audience feels about her/him? Who are the heroes and heroines, villainesses and villains in the film? What identifies them as 'goodies' or 'baddies'? Does everyone in your class agree, or do some like a baddie and dislike a goodie? Is it easy to classify every character, and label them in such simple terms? What do we risk by referring to characters as either 'good' or 'bad'? Given that a director can manipulate the way we feel towards a character, would it be possible for her/him to influence an audience's feelings so as to make them like the most evil villain or dislike the saintliest heroine?

Choose two characters from the film, one female and one male. Using the column marked 'like' show how you could use the effects listed on the left to make the audience like the characters. Then fill in the 'dislike' column showing how you could try to influence the audience into disliking a character.



FEMALE \_\_\_\_\_

MALE \_\_\_\_\_

	LIKE	DISLIKE	LIKE	DISLIKE
Costume				
Lighting				
Music				
Set				
Entrance				
Make-up				
Hair				
Camera shot/angle				

Consider the problems posed to the director in depicting the following relationships and events in the film's storyline:

- It is a love story between two sets of people. One set of loves, Hero and Claudio, are already established at the start of the film. One set, Beatrice and Benedict, are 'difficult' people but obviously suited.
- Beatrice and Benedict are 'set up' by their friends and all goes well with them until the problems with the relationship of Hero and Claudio
- Hero and Claudio are 'set up' by the jealous half brother of the Duke-Don Pedro.
- It is the resolution of the Hero/Claudio relationship which brings Beatrice and Benedict back together.



## **CLAUDIO**

A conscious decision was made to strengthen the character of Claudio in the film.

- How was this done? Consider the use of camera on him, music which accompanies him and his 'framing' in the film.
- His character was made less arrogant than in the play and more sympathetic in the film. Having considered the problems above why and how was this done?

## **HERO AND CLAUDIO**

Some of the smaller complications and byways of the plot concerning Hero and Claudio are ironed out e.g. In the Masked Ball Sequence, Claudio is led to believe by Don John that Don Pedro is wooing Hero on his own account but this is not left to develop as it is in the play but tied up at that moment. How does this affect:

- The narrative drive of the film
- The portrayal of Don Pedro, Don John and Claudio?

## **MARGARET**

The part of Margaret in the film is dramatically changed. We hardly see her except in the general household scenes, briefly at the ball and at the end as one of the veiled women. Likewise, we only see her in long-shot when Borracio is pretending he is making love to Hero at the window.

- Why do you think this scene was made so graphic when in the play Hero is accused of merely being seen *talking* to another man?
- Elizabethan ideals of Honour and Courtly Love are very different to our own. How does this affect the feeling of the film?

Claudio and Don Pedro actually witness the love scene and react to it. Why do you think this is done?

## **DON JOHN**

The character of Don John speaks very little in the piece, yet he is often focused upon and we see him at his most malevolent in the interior settings of the villa.

- Why do you think we see him massaged in the firelight?
- What effect on the audience is meant to be achieved by seeing him striding through dark corridors.

## **THE WATCH**

- How would you describe the portrayal of Dogberry and Verges in the film? How effective was it for you. Did you find it funny?
- In the play the Watch scenes happen all together. Why do you think they were split up in the film?



# 'The Look'

## USING SETTINGS

Compare the tone of the scenes set inside the villa with those outside the villa: the scenes set in daylight with those set at night. How do these link with the themes of deceit, deception, revelation and resolution in the film? (considering specifically the masked ball, the wedding in the open air, the veiled women, the capture and unmasking of the villains.)



## DEALING WITH THE AUDIENCE

- There are sections in the film where certain characters are pretending situations for other characters e.g. the revelations of Beatrice's love for Benedict as revealed by Don Pedro and Claudio in the garden. The audience has to know the actors are pretending, the characters they are duping must not. This is more easily established in the conventions of the theatre. How well do you think it succeeds in the film?
- Soliloquy is very difficult to do on film. Again when Benedict and Beatrice are addressing the audience in the cinema how well do you think this works?

## THE USE OF CAMERA

- There is a very spectacular shot at the end of the film where the whole last section of the dance from the archway into the garden and eventually up to a huge shot of the landscape is done in one take. This was done by a cameraman holding the camera and travelling with the actors. How do you think the whole sequence was done? Try and describe what you think the cameraman had to do?

- When the song is sung in the garden at the fountain there is another "steadycam" shot mainly around the fountain. How effective was this?
- How did you react to the montage of the happy Benedict in the fountain over Beatrice on the swing?
- What did you think in general to the 'look' of the film?

## Marketing the Film

Every director wants their film to be a success. Identify what you consider to be the audience of the film. How would you market it?

### THE POSTER

Before you try designing your own film poster for 'Much Ado About Nothing', first look at some film posters and make notes on the information included, e.g. title, stars, director, opening date, etc (You can find some good examples in Film Education's Film English Curriculum: Genre' booklet).

Remember a film poster has several purposes:

- to publicise the film
- to attract the target audience
- to give the potential audience an idea of the story.

Think about who you are aiming the poster at - what audience you are targeting. And remember, an effective poster is one that can be taken in quite quickly; people tend to walk or drive past them at speed, no one has 20 minutes to spend looking at a poster.

# Additional Work

## PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- Imagine that you are a member of a company which is thinking of investing in the film of "Much Ado About Nothing" What questions would you want to put to the director and the producer about the possible film? You might want to ask about the possible audience for such a film or how the director intends to shoot certain scenes and who they think would be the best people to play the various roles. What do the producers see as the appeal of the film? What is it about?

- When you have made your list of questions, you could develop this idea further. A number of you in the class will take on the role of the production company and the rest of you will be the financiers. Put your questions to the production group and see if they can think of answers to them. They will need to refer back to the selling point ideas that you have all dealt with earlier.

- Predicting through posters - In any marketing campaign, the poster plays a vital role in enticing an audience into the cinema, or towards a particular video. Look at the poster of "Much Ado About Nothing". Ask yourself these questions:

What age group does it appeal to? What impression of the film does it give? Does the poster suggest the film belongs to a particular genre? Who is featured on the poster? Is the poster black and white or colour? (And why?) Do you know the faces of the actors/actresses? Are they well-known stars? If you know the play that the film is based on, can you work out which characters they portray? If not, can you work out the type of character the poster suggests they play?

- How important is a film's 'type' when you make a decision to see it? What are your expectations of say, a comedy or a tragedy? What sort of situations would you expect to find in these types of stories? Would you go and see this film on the strength of the poster alone? Explain your answer.
- When we go to see a film we have usually formed an impression of what we think it will be like and decided that we will probably enjoy it before we pay out for a ticket. What expectations do you have of the film you are about to watch?

Think about: setting

time period

language

characters - their appearance, hair, make-up, etc. costume

Do you have a strong picture in your mind of the key characters and how they should look? If you do, design a costume for one of these characters. Think about an actor or actress who could play the characters. You could find a picture of them in a magazine and use it to try out your costume design. What sort of person is the main character? In groups, quickly write down all the adjectives that come into your head to describe him or her.

### **POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES**

- Take a vote on whether the class enjoyed the film or not. Look back at your notes and compare what the class said when asked what their expectations were. What does the information show? Can you give reasons for this?
- Imagine you are Shakespeare. You have been brought from the seventeenth century to the twentieth by a newly invented time machine to be present at the film premiere of the play. The film's publicists have arranged for Shakespeare to appear on a popular chat show.
- In pairs, design the questions that might be put to the playwright. Rehearse your interview and present it to the class.
- What do you think Shakespeare would think of the film?

Write a review of the film as though you were Shakespeare or write a letter to the director telling her/him what you think. Try to include some Elizabethan language to give your writing an authentic feel - look at the play for ideas if you get stuck.