

On stage: Troubies recharge Shakespeare with Doobies
Pop music helps retell fractured comedic tale.
BY JEFF FAVRE

Play titles may not seem all that important. But for the Troubadour Theater Company, what to call a show is crucial.

For 11 years, the Troubies, as fans call them, have created insane amalgamations of Shakespeare, screwball comedy and pop music -- and each has sprouted from the title.

There was "Hamlet: The Artist Formerly Known as PRINCE of Denmark," "Fleetwood Macbeth," "Romeo Hall & Juliet Oates" and "A Midsummer Saturday Nights Fever Dream."

The newest title is "Much ADOOBIE BROTHERS About Nothing," which is running at the Miles Memorial Playhouse in Santa Monica, one of the company's two longtime homes, along with The Falcon Theatre in Burbank.

As the title suggests, Shakespeare's comedy "Much Ado About Nothing" has been combined with a dozen hit songs by the Doobie Brothers. The songs have been reworked with lyrics that help tell the story of two couples who, despite much devious behavior on the part of friends and family, manage to fall in love and live happily ever after.

Matt Walker, the company's founding artistic director, who also stars in the productions, has built an ensemble of clowns, acrobats and singers, all of whom are capable of handling Shakespeare's original text, which is sprinkled throughout each production.

"We've had the title 'Much ADOOBIE BROTHERS' for a while now," said Walker, who portrays the evil Don John. "Many of us in the company grew up with the Doobie Brothers, and you can't go wrong with that music."

As with other Troubadour shows, some songs are a perfect fit for the story and others need a shoehorn.

"We're using 'Taking it to the Streets' as a kind of preview," Walker said. "In the play you hear that the brothers Don Pedro and Don John went to war. We use the song to expand that part of the story."

The company wanted to use the Doobies' "Jesus is Just Alright," but the song had no obvious place within the plot. So it's used during the play's masquerade party.

Much of the comedy is derived during rehearsals, as improvised jokes are tossed out by the ensemble. If it works, it stays.

"Over time we've created a Comedia dell'Arte stock company with people who have their root character in which they specialize," Walker explained. "But still I try to mix it up so no one gets pigeonholed. And we are always bringing in new people, which is great, because they have different ideas."

Beth Kennedy has been with the company since 1998.

"I've known Matt since 1991, when we did a play together," said Kennedy, who is tackling dual roles this time, as Borachio and Margaret. "In my first show for the Troubies, Matt said, 'I want you to play the part on stilts. I said, 'I can't walk on stilts. I can barely walk on the ground.' But he's a comic genius so I just do whatever he thinks is best."

Like most of the company, Kennedy performs in various theater groups throughout the L.A. area. She will be appearing in a children's play at The Falcon later this month, meaning for a few weekends she will be performing in both shows.

After more than a decade, The Troubies are more popular than ever, breaking a box-office record at The Falcon with its last holiday production, "Little Drummer Bowie."

"We keep growing through word-of-mouth," Walker said. "And now our core fans are having kids, so it all keeps expanding."

Walker's only real concern these days is running out of titles.

"I'm afraid soon we'll be doing 'Coriolanus with the music of Tori Amos,'" he joked.

Although, given their track record, the Troubies probably could make that work.

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