

# DAVENPORT

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## THEATRICAL ENTERPRISES

### Concept

You have quite an interesting set of concepts working together in your musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. It reminds me heavily of the recent Shakespeare in the Park production of *Love's Labour's Lost* which was transposed into a 20<sup>th</sup> Century college frat house, and retained the actual Shakespearean text while updating the setting and adding music. What strikes me about this is that though *Bam!* adopts an original book rather than employing the actual text of 'Much Ado...', it still feels quite heavily drawn from the source material, with a held-over formality to the customs and manner of speaking that doesn't always feel very modern at all. Almost to the point where the updated language feels unnecessary. I may suggest that the piece would feel fresher if rather than primarily using your considerable talents to translate the bard's language into modern English, you find ways to reference the story a little more subtly in your own way; more what *Clueless* is to *Emma*, or *Rent* to *La Bohème*. There's nothing wrong with simply updating and musicalizing Shakespeare, and you've done a great job of it with *Bam!*. There's a market for this kind of show, especially with Shakespeare focused companies. However, I believe there's an even larger one for a show that stands out as a more self-referencing work. It's the difference between 'based on 'Much Ado'' and 'an updated retelling of 'Much Ado''. And I'm much more interested in the former because even better than seeing a story I already know, jazzed up, is seeing one with a new view point.

### Character/Plot Development

One of the reasons it's tricky to morph Shakespeare's story structure into a musical is that we've come to expect certain things from our musical storytelling that's not as true for plays. For example, it's an extremely intimate, if not self-indulgent act for a character to sing aloud his or her inner thoughts. We have to have characters (or at least one) that we're rooting for and that we like, otherwise these songs can drag down a show. This is why it's common to introduce a main protagonist furnished with an 'I want' song, etc. If the characters are all over the top, heavily stylized caricatures, incessantly bickering, or excessively sweet or evil, we especially rely on a structure designed to provide moments of inner reflection to us as the audience, so that we may relate with the human inside. In *Bam!* I couldn't really find any entry into the story through a character or plot point that I was rooting for. Because Ben has the opening number, and is by far the most 'likable' I want that protagonist voice to be his—and yet it feels as though the main part of the show is taken up with what's to happen with Colt and Honor and the unraveling of Dawn's dastardly plan, which I'm not terrifically invested in because I don't care a lick about Colt or Honor. In fact, I'm more apt to agree with Dawn's assessment of the overly saccharine duo and side with her. This is a feature of Shakespeare's story that we accept when it's Shakespeare but feels out of touch in a present setting. So, suppose we'd like to focus on Ben and Bea a bit more, and how to do that. First, since 'Tripping Along' is one of the only times we hear solely from Ben until again at the end, it needs to do more from a functionality stand-point. I'd recommend either incorporating it into an opening number sequence for all the characters (or making it a group number for all the characters that explores how they've all been 'tripping along' to some extent) and then writing an 'I want' song for Ben, or, writing a new opening and turning 'Tripping Along' into Ben's 'I want' that comes after the opening; but in this case you'd have to more clearly define what that want is; it can't just be a declaration of status quo. Is he maybe being asked to change somehow, take on more? Are people putting

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pressure on him to marry, to grow up as it seems, and he just wants things to stay the same? It's not a strong motivator towards forward action, but it could work. I'd like to hear more of his fears about marriage or change that would inform his decisions to resist Bea, or resist settling down.

We could also see more of this come out on both Ben and Bea's side after they hear about the love they supposedly have for the other—it's a perfect place to explore that inner monologue of panic, joy, disbelief, etc—I felt like this was skimmed on to return to the Honor/Colt drama. This is also an area of the show that could benefit from some additional constructs in their storyline that depart further from the original play. Can there be greater stakes for them to get together, or greater obstacles? It would then tie the whole show together if the Colt/Honor/Dawn drama could mean more for Ben and Bea's arc. Can Ben's allegiance to Don Pedro cause a bigger rift between Ben and Bea that would cause her to ask him to 'choose' between the two families? I'd like to see more repercussions for all involved, Colt, Ben, and Don Pedro, instead of such easy forgiveness. The last piece would be a stronger connection between how what Ben witnesses and is forced to endure through experiencing Colt and Honor's situation, changes his outlook on life and makes him realize that his relationship with Bea is so much more valuable and precious than his life of carefree bachelorhood. This message is there already to some extent, but can be reinforced all the way throughout the show so that the journey is all the more palpable and appreciable.

Another thing worth mentioning structurally is that all of your dramatic tension is in the first half of the show. The first act ends at the high point of tension, and rightly so—but act two is simply a speedy unraveling of those details. There's little new complication, except for, if Ben will take the job overseas. But Virgil and Dogberry manage to get the truth out relatively quickly and then it's just a story of putting things to right, which I think could be more interesting with some additional dramatic content. In fact, this story structure seems to break from even many other Shakespeare plays that leave most of the second act for the deepening of misunderstanding, further entanglements with mistaken identity, etc, until the final reveal and resolution at the end of the play. I suppose we're meant to find drama in if Honor will forgive Colt, but it doesn't present much mystery since they have no other personality traits except as the romantic couple in this show—everything working out feels like an extremely foregone conclusion. So again, I wonder if there are further repercussions that can arise in the second act from Dawn and subsequently Colt's actions. Could Dogberry and Virgil have any reason to be fearful (or motivations of their own—and here I'm thinking of Dogberry's crush on Bea) of relaying the news that could hold off the revelation? Might Honor strike off to pursue a career in film after her heartbreak and be more difficult to find? Could there be a deepening of resentments and further hostilities between camps Leo and Don Pedro? Can Dawn's discovery and come-uppance be delivered through the characters we know, rather than her being chased off by Baddass and never seen again? I know taking liberties with Shakespeare's story isn't perhaps your want, which is why it may feel less awkward if the whole piece referenced the story in a much more suggestive way, rather than a literal one.

### **Music/Lyrics**

On the whole your music and lyrics are quite fun. I think there are still moments it can be a little more specific or work a little harder for your story. Making a character's desires or goals more

250 WEST 49<sup>TH</sup> ST. SUITE 301 NEW YORK, NY 10019

212-874-5348 PHONE 212-874-4664 FAX

WWW.DAVENPORTTHEATRICAL.COM

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evident through song, as previously discussed for Ben, is one. Dawn, for example, has her song about how ‘it’s her time to show the world that she’s something’...but *how* is she going to do that? And *why*? What is her plan? More backstory upfront as to why she hates these characters so much could be useful. Make sure as well that there’s an appreciable outcome of some kind for a song. ‘Mr. Nobody’, is a charming song, but I don’t see how it furthers your story—now, if Dogberry decided through it that he was going to make a plea for Bea’s heart, then it would be charming and functional. Similarly, I don’t understand how ‘Turn off the News’ has any relevance to the plot of your show at all. They’re about to have a wedding! Surely there’s gold to be mined in that subject, whether it’s how Honor and Colt feel about that, if her family has any misgivings or worries, how Ben and Bea imagine it would be like in their place, on and on. But since ‘wars, rallies, and riots’ have no impact on these families (at the moment), they’re not inundated to the point that they should have to remind themselves to turn off the news.

Another thing to be careful about is that you don’t simply repeat part of a scene, in song. One example of that is Ben and Bea’s ‘When I Run Into You’. It’s a great song, but they bicker all scene and then the song is essentially also a prolonged bicker. Their verbal sparring is one of the best things in the show, but can be one-noted, so make sure to use it strategically with a variance of tactics behind it. And if the song can reveal something hidden about the characters through the bickering, all the better.

Lastly, I would be very thoughtful about whether or not you want to reveal your musical construct by having characters acknowledge each other’s singing. Because once you have, it’s the new rule for the whole show. If you do, as you do when Colt and Honor sing near the beginning, it’s hard to go back to using music as purely inner monologue. Anytime a character sings when others are present, I assume they can hear them and interact with their song if they choose. I personally feel like it’s a threat to my suspension of disbelief when the singing is pointed out, unless it’s meant to be a performance moment—otherwise the characters aren’t ‘singing,’ they are expressing their thoughts via song, which is a subtle but important distinction.

### **Recommendations**

This is actually quite a strong piece, despite what probably sounds like some extremely constructive criticism. This could be produced tomorrow and do pretty well I’d imagine. It’s a good adaptation, with some genius writing in both book and lyrics. And yet, I think you have the capabilities to make it absolutely great, which I think lies with it feeling like more than a musical retelling (of what I now consider to be) a flawed Shakespearean yarn. The setting and time could help inform this a lot. Why did you choose 1967 Malibu? Other than a music tone at times reminiscent of the Beach Boys, I didn’t get much through the plot or characters that sold me on the time and place. What was going on in California in the 60s that could play into your story? Where was the groovy peace, drugs and love? Does the war factor in more? Even the merchant marines felt like they could have been merchants from any era. I’d love to see the story interact and relate more to the time and setting, if you’re going to use it. The 60s and 70s are also a hard time to emulate musically—there are so many well-known juke box type songs from this period, it’s hard to write new music with this sound that feels fresh. Can you infuse a little bit of a contemporary sound into it while still referencing the time period? You still want the numbers to be a little sexy, which often means asking yourself what people like to listen to currently.

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One of the books I recommend constantly for writers is ['The Writer's Journey' by Christopher Vogler](#). You might want to take a look at that for ideas relating to epic story structure and character function. I believe it would help a lot if we felt more like it was Ben's story and the book may help with ideas as to how to bring out a clearer path for him. I'd also mention that the title '*Bam!*' isn't doing much for you. Even after reading it I don't really understand its application, let alone how a person deciding whether or not they should see your show will decipher it.