

Much ado
about
everything

A play by Dulc e McCartney

(As performed by Loosely Woven, Sat 22nd November 2008)

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)

NARRATOR	Wayne	
HESTER	Aiyana	Younger sister, sweet and studious
MARY	Jane E	Older sister. Shrewd and cunning.
MRS DELACIE	Barbara	Mother of Mary and Hester. Histrionic.
MRS BRIGGS	Jill	Housekeeper – a bit crafty
OLD ALICE	Noni	Eccentric old lady.
MR BILLINGSWORTH	Tony	Older man.
MR PALING	Paul	Young man, studious.

Props/Costumes

MRS DELACIE

HESTER Book

MARY 3 silver coins. Glass filled with purple liquid.

OLD ALICE Pipe. 2 vials of liquid - one purple.

MR BILLINGSWORTH Wine glasses

Much ado about everything

Dulcie McCartney ~ 2008

Prologue

NARRATOR It is the early days of Autumn but already the cold fingers of Winter are beginning to be felt across the land. At Fairley Manor the aged buildings are beginning to show a lack of repair, and the once beautiful gardens are becoming overgrown for Mrs Catherine Delacie has had to tighten her purse strings. Her husband has been away commanding his regiment for several years and Mrs Delacie has been heard to say:

MRS DELACIE Fighting for King and Country - all very fine. But how can I keep the home fires burning when there is no money being sent home?

NARRATOR This morning she has requested her two daughters to attend her in the large cold drawing room, for the housekeeper Mrs Briggs has been instructed not to light the morning fires to help economise.

Scene 1

NARRATOR Scene 1. Mrs Delacie's two daughters are in the drawing room on a chilly November morning. Hester, Mrs Delacie's youngest daughter, is seated in the bay window in the only patch of sunlight in the room.

MARY I wonder what bee our dear Mama has in her bonnet today. Not more economy measures I hope or we are likely to starve to death!

Enter Mrs Delacie supported by the housekeeper, Mrs Briggs.

MRS DELACIE Oh my dears, you must listen carefully.

HESTER Oh mother, what is it? You look so weary.

MRS DELACIE Indeed, I am. I have not slept a wink. At midnight I was awakened by an eerie moaning.

MARY If you couldn't sleep Mama, how could you have been awakened.

MRS DELACIE Mary, mind your manners! At times you have a very sharp tongue.

HESTER Poor Mama.

MRS DELACIE I constantly lie awake wondering how to keep the household going.

I had just dropped off into a fitful doze when I was awakened by an eerie moaning. Stricken with terror I pulled the covers over my head . . . but then I realised I must investigate.

MARY Why?

MRS DELACIE Trembling I went to the door and looked out. There, in the east wing I could see a ghostly figure swaying about and uttering pitiful noises. Terrified I clung to the door remembering the prophecy.

HESTER What a dreadful experience. But we know nothing of any prophecy.

MARY Oh Mama, do tell us about this prophecy.

MRS DELACIE (*sadly*) My dear children, when the ghostly figure appears in the east wing it is said the spirit of the air, my beloved husband, has come to warn his family that he will never return in person.

MARY Are you sure it wasn't the wind howling round?

HESTER Oh Mama . . .

But what shall we do?

MRS DELACIE I was filled with despair but rallied, knowing that I must think of you girls.

We must find you husbands!

For these long years, while your father has been away, I have remained faithful to him. But now alas, he is gone. I am still reasonably young and said to be attractive and I am sure there would be a gentleman who would be glad to enter into the state of matrimony with me . . . but not with two unmarried daughters to support!

I have a plan to tell you. We are going to have a light, inexpensive but tasty dinner and invite the two most eligible gentlemen in the district.

MARY I think it may take more than a few tasty delicacies to marry us off . . .

But who are the 'lucky gentlemen' you have in mind?

MRS DELACIE Well . . .

For dear Hester it must be the young Mr Paling. They are both bookworms and I am sure he is already quite besotted with her.

HESTER Oh Mama, you do embarrass me!

MARY And me, Mama?

MRS DELACIE My dear, for you there is Mr Billingsworth, an older gentleman but very suitable.

MARY Mama, I have met him in the village and he does not fancy me any more than I fancy him.

MRS DELACIE But he's very well connected Mary and I believe he has three fine ships trading in the islands.

MARY Oh well then. Perhaps I could learn to like him.

MRS DELACIE Now girls, after my disturbed and distressing night I must rest. Help Mrs Briggs with the preparations and then make yourselves attractive for our evening. (*exit Mrs Delacie*)

MRS BRIGGS (*Mrs Briggs edges closer to Mary and then hisses in her ear*) I could tell you something Miss. Something you should know, if you make it worth my while.

MARY If you know something Briggs, you had better tell me without any payment or I shall tell Mama that her precious spirit was none other than you coming up from the cellar having been imbibing our meagre stock of ale with silly old Ned, the gardener!
Now . . . what do you know?

MRS BRIGGS You are a hard one, Miss . . . but I'll tell you the gossip in the village. It is that Mr Billington's ships have all been sunk in a dreadful storm and his fortune is lost.

MARY Isn't that just my luck! I must think of a plan.
And Mr Paling, how is he situated Mrs Briggs? His father is more than comfortably off so his prospects should be good.

MRS BRIGGS But it is Miss Hester who has taken his fancy. He is besotted with her I believe.

MARY Because the two of them like to sit with their noses in books quite oblivious to the outside world!
Hmm . . . I must think of a plan. Mr Paling needs to be brought out of his dream world.
I shall go to the wise woman and buy a potion. A powerful potion!

MRS BRIGGS Do you think you can get a potion strong enough to make you clever?

MARY You keep a civil tongue in your head! I don't want to be a stuffy, studious person. No, I'll get a potion to make her stupid so he will tire of her.

MRS BRIGGS (*Doubtfully*) But would he turn to you?

MARY I shall get a second draught, one strong enough to make him fall in love with me.

MRS BRIGGS Oh yes. You are clever Miss.

MARY Well, shrewd anyway. (*turning to Hester*) Sister, sister you must help Mrs Briggs to prepare the supper. I have a splitting headache. I simply must take a walk in the fresh air.

HESTER Of course I will help Mrs Briggs. You must be well for our special supper.

Scene 2

- NARRATOR Scene 2. Mary is hurrying along a rough path. She stops in front of a small, roughly made cottage. Outside the cottage, an old woman is seated sucking on an empty pipe.
- OLD ALICE Good day to you my fine Miss. What brings you up here to Old Alice's cottage?
- MARY I need you to help me. They say you can make clever spells and I need a potion. One that will make someone stupid.
- OLD ALICE Do you think you really need a potion?
- MARY It's not for me, you old hag, and keep a civil tongue in your head! I'll have you run out of the village as a witch.
- OLD ALICE If it is not for you, then why do you want it?
- MARY It's for my stupid sister who is so clever she can recite reams of poetry but doesn't do anything useful!
- OLD ALICE Well, I could try but I think better if I have some baccy in my pipe.
(Mary produces a silver coin)
- MARY You can have this for payment. Listen, I also need a second spell. One to make someone fall head over heels in love with me.
- OLD ALICE I think that might need many, many coins.
- MARY I'll give you two silver coins, one for each spell.
- OLD ALICE Four coins!
- MARY Three and that's the limit.
- OLD ALICE You drive a hard bargain. *(She enters the cottage and returns with two vials. Mary throws down the coins and snatches the vials.)*
This one is for stupidity, the purple one is for passion. Now take care that you don't muddle them up!
Mary hurries off peering at the vials.
Old Alice picks up the coins, tests them with her teeth.
Well, my pretty, you got a good bargain. But because you wouldn't pay the proper price, those spells will soon wear off.

Scene 3

NARRATOR Scene 3. Back at Mrs Delacie's house, Mrs Briggs is laying the table and Hester is, of course, reading a book.

MRS BRIGGS Come along, Miss Hester and help me.

(Enter Mr Billingsworth)

MR BILLINGSWORTH I have taken the liberty of entering by the side door. I know there are rumours in the village that my fortune has been lost at sea. In fact, when I met Miss Mary in the village she treated me coldly! So, the invitation to dinner came as a pleasant surprise.

MRS BRIGGS Sir, I am sure you are welcome but as you can see we are not quite prepared.

MR BILLINGSWORTH I know I'm a little early but I wish to speak to Mrs Delacie before our supper if it is possible.

MRS BRIGGS Miss Hester will take you to her mother. She is such a clever, studious girl.

MR BILLINGSWORTH *(aside)* Too studious by half for my liking.
If you would be so kind Hester.

(Exit Mr Billingsworth and Hester. Mary rushes in by the garden door.)

MARY Where is she? I must give her this stupidity potion which I have mixed in this goblet and the purple draught I must give to Mr Paling the moment he looks at me.

(enter Hester)

MARY Here sister, drink this. You are looking pale and wan.

HESTER But . . .

MARY *(stamping her foot)* I got it specially for you, for you are much too tired. *(Hester drinks the potion)*. That's fine, now go into the garden and gather some flowers for the table.

HESTER I do feel dizzy.

MARY You need fresh air. I think Mr Paling is approaching the gate.

Hester exits

MARY When I have Mr Paling in a suitable position, I will give him the drink of purple passion and he will fall madly in love with me.

Enter Hester and Mr Paling. They are smiling and giggling at each other.

MARY Oh Sir, you must excuse my sister. She has become quite scatterbrained this afternoon.

MR PALING It is so refreshing to see her laughing.

MARY But you thought her to be studious.

MR PALING Yes. In fact, I was afraid to ask for her hand because she was so serious. But now, I see she has a lighter side.

MARY Oh, what have I done!

Enter Mrs Delacie and Mr Billingsworth. Mary picks up the purple glass and tries to move nearer to Mr Paling.

MR PALING Oh, Mrs Delacie. Marm, may I ask for dear Hester's hand in marriage?

MRS DELACIE Of course you can. I mean, she is indeed a wonderful girl but I am sure you will be worthy of her.

(Mr Billingsworth moves forward and hands glasses of wine to Hester and Mr Paling.)

MR BILLINGSWORTH Come, let's drink. *(He toasts them)*

MARY But he mustn't.

MR BILLINGSWORTH Come, come Mary. You will surely drink to your sister's happiness. *(he gently forces the goblet of purple passion to her lips. In her agitation Mary gulps it down)*

MR PALING *(to Mrs Delacie)* I will take good care of her.

Mary gazes at the empty goblet in her hand and looks up at Mr Billingsworth.

MARY You are so handsome and congenial.

MR BILLINGSWORTH Mary, you love me in spite of thinking I have lost my fortune.

MARY Oh Sir, were you a humble beggar I could not love you more.
(aside) What am I saying?

MR BILLINGSWORTH I have good news for you Mary. Only one vessel ran aground so my monies are almost intact. Let us ask for your mother's blessing.

MRS DELACIE Indeed, I could not be happier.

I too have good news. The omen was really one of good fortune. I have had news that my husband is safe and returning home and has had an honour bestowed upon him. For his services to his country he is to be knighted and I shall become Lady Delacie.

It is a great day!

They break into song. The couples dance together and as they are joined by Mrs Delacie and Mrs Briggs, the chorus sings "I could have danced all night."

The End