

Things often work out in mysterious ways. My least detailed review, for reasons explained at the start of it, yielded the most beneficial feedback. The review was of *Much Ado About Nothing* ([here](#)) and in it I wrote about the strong portrayal of Leonato, which was outstanding for a variety of reasons. My recent venture into 'Twittersphere' brought me into contact with the actor who portrayed Leonato so strikingly, Lawrence Ward, and he was kind enough to write to me explaining the rationale behind his interpretation, even though his references and library were back at home and he was busy here at the Festival. Stretching his kindness even further he has allowed me to share his insights on this site.

I have amalgamated Lawrence's main explanation to me with answers he gave to my follow up questions. If you find this half as interesting as I do then you are in for a rare treat.

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### **Much Ado About Leonato** by Lawrence Ward

*'If he could right himself with quarrelling,  
Some of us would lie low'* 5:1:51

Most of the initial character choices for Leonato as I mentioned stem from notions of family, honour and paternal love in a martial age which I have fashioned from a study of the period. My choices regarding martial prowess draw upon the current zeitgeist for darker and more violent depictions of popular characters: Batman, Dark Night; Superman; The BBC's *Musketeers: The Tudors* and the most populist of our time, *Game of Thrones*. For which George RR Martin is said to have drawn upon the Wars of the Roses. However, clues to support these choices are, as always, found within the text and further context is drawn from the editor's introduction to my edition.<sup>1</sup>

Where to begin? I should first point out that I was disappointed to be cast as Leonato. I found presentations of the character to be weak, impotent and as you pointed out, unpleasant. I am a proud father of two daughters and the legendary Electra bond has some foundation. To clarify: The Legend not the Freudian psychosexual conflict. It may be anachronistic to ignore the contemporary notions of social order that possibly lie behind Leonato's often depicted futility. However, I feel that if a young upstart humiliated and destroyed my daughter's happiest day, a riot would ensue.

*'Bring me a father that so loved his child,  
Whose joy of her is overwhelmed like mine,  
And bid him speak of patience'* 5:1:7

The misogynist conceit and cuckold comic references may also indicate to presenters a justification for impotent Leonato. The play is, as Marco informed us, a piece of life seen through the eyes of usually secondary characters, Beatrice and Benedick, and a strong Leonato may overshadow their story. However, as an actor my main purpose is to find the character arc and identify moments of change. Each character goes on a journey and undergoes change within each scene they appear and especially over the whole play.

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<sup>1</sup> *Much Ado About Nothing* (2014) Ed. Claire McEachern, Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury, London.

Further to the above I believe the events in Messina are a moment of peace in a warlike world. Italy was ruled by the Spanish. The Italian wars of 1551-59 were within living memory of the plays publication of 1600 and Elizabethan England itself was a dangerous place. Machiavelli had published *The Prince* less than seventy years before (1532). Soft people in power did not live long.

It is with this maelstrom of ingredients that I approached Leonato coupled with the energy of Marcus Andronicus whom I presented concurrent with the rehearsals for *Much Ado*. I always attempt to find the unforeseen in a character.

Leonato for me, would have been a soldier in his youth and this informs his relationship with his daughters, the people of Messina, the Princes and even the Friar, in our case, Sister.

Leonato did not live past thirty five without knowing how to handle himself. The back story I created had him fighting alongside Don Pedro's father, much in the way Benedick fights for and entertains Don Pedro. This notion feeds into the relationship between them. Andrew Lancaster picked up on this with his own story of Leonato being the 'funny uncle' who taught him how to ride, would pull him up into the saddle and gallop off together across fields, and schooled him in the use of bladed weapons, notions of honour and strategy, all with an atmosphere of fun adventure. We discussed all this after I once quipped 'hows your father' and it grew from there, making so much more sense of the lines. This also spilled into the relationship with Don John. Leonato would have seen them both grow up, settled their fraternal arguments, broke the tension. We felt Leonato to be the Benedick of his day and is now Governor of Messina for services rendered to the Crown.

Having this relationship adds much poignancy to their exchanges. From 'are you come to meet your trouble' (1:1:91) to especially 'upon mine honour' (4:1:86) and their final non verbal reconciliation and forgiveness.

I hope you don't mind the following assumption regarding our generation. We did not know what our fathers witnessed, endured, committed, during their terms of conscription. They did not speak of it until they reached their dotage and only then with ambiguous comments or musings. And I believe it is so with Hero and Beatrice. They have no idea what this bumbling, joking old dad got up to. The scars he carries or the friends he lost, and of course this ignorance on the one hand, protective silence on the other, feeds the air between all three. However, in my scenario, the Sister [Friar] does know of Leonato's martial past. They met possibly on a battlefield where she was ministering and Leonato has a healthy regard for religion. She has been his confessor, his confident, source of advice when raising two feisty girls. And yet he does feel her to be a fool to place faith in the incorporeal when the chips are down. And she knows what he is capable of when the blood is up, hence Leonato's reaction to her personal and angry intervention. Although Lucy and I didn't talk in such depth as I recall, the above are the thoughts I drew upon during the exchange.

This brings me to Leonato's challenge. He has played the gentle fool for many years, surrounded by women, and has used wit and humour to diffuse many a situation until it becomes his nature. He also has a strong sense of duty, honour, faith in the Monarchy. 'Would the two Princes lie?' (4:1:152) A line which echoes the contemporary views of women being weak in relation to resisting sex, either virgin or whore. Leonato is torn to shreds, the son he never had, has accused his virtuous daughter. Has she been fooling him all these years, taking him for a bigger fool than he has played? Thankfully love will out. 'My soul doth tell me Hero is belied' (5:1:42). And it is the exchange with Antonio, cut in our presentation, that informs the audience of Leonato's potent anger. His declaration to Claudio cements the possibility that it was a mistake to wake the sleeping bear.

'I speak not like a dotard nor a fool,  
As under privilege of age do brag what I have done when young,' (5:1:60)

Leonato has the skill-set to disarm and subdue a foe, has done many times using whatever is to hand. Always people bigger than him and mostly people who think they are better than him. And they didn't spit on his daughter on the happiest day of his and her life.

As you observed, Leonato is capable of tearing Claudio in half with his bare hands. Even if the challenge is supposed to be a 'gull', the adrenalin would kick in, blood lust would be rekindled and it is well the Prince intervenes. Leonato, like Benedick, is the chap you'd like to go drinking with for a fun carefree night out and be especially pleased he's by your side if it all kicked off.

In conclusion, I hope the above makes clear why Leonato and the Prince have such a relieved and heartfelt reconciliation at the second wedding. He does feel guilty at deceiving the Prince but needs must. He has an affinity with Benedick, Claudio is in his place, privileged by position or no, and he has regained some of his old self esteem. By now I am extremely pleased to have played Leonato as I'm sure you can see.

Thank you again for your wonderful review.

Lawrence

About Leonato

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In conclusion, I hope the above makes clear why Leonato and the Prince have such a relieved and heartfelt reconciliation at the second wedding. He does feel guilty at deceiving the Prince but needs must. He has an affinity with Benedick, Claudio is in his place, privileged by position or no, and he has regained some of his old self esteem. By now I am extremely pleased to have played Leonato as I'm sure you can see.



Michael Patrick as Benedick and Simon Pothechary as Claudio,  
(photo from Michael's twitter timeline)

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