

Post-Performance

Lesson Plans

Handout 3 - Sample Reviews of *The Taming of the Shrew*



Tamed in a Bed

Written by Craig Melson, March 27, 2012

Royal Shakespeare Company

Photos: Sheila Burnett

The *Taming of the Shrew* isn't for everyone, especially for the progressively minded feminist who disagrees with the idea that a feisty, independent woman can be 'tamed' using tactics that Guantanamo Bay residents would find familiar. A triumph of the female against a male oppressor in a deeply conservative society this is certainly not. In fact, Lucy Bailey's production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (like many others) does not even try to present small victories or the actions

of the men as wrong. This production in Richmond, South West London is the fourth stop on a nationwide tour that began in Stratford.

Rather than being ignored completely or only given a brief introduction at the start, the Christopher Sly element is a vital component of the play. Bailey's vision of setting the entire play on a humungous bed evokes the fact that this is all playing out his drunken stupor before him in the bed he is lying in. The set is impressively designed by Ruth Sutcliffe as the bed literally fills up the entire performance area. Nick Holder's turn as Sly is funny and is not 'filler' as it is with other productions that feel obliged to include it. Between scenes you see him rolling and running (in various states of undress) around the bed chasing his love interest, whilst jazz and brass instruments play in the background. Indeed Bailey's true triumph is successfully integrating Sly into the play, rather than doing away with him or relegating him to a sideshow.

Choosing to set the story in 1940s Italy is a masterstroke, as social boundaries and conventions were equally conservative and male dominated as Medieval Padua (watch *Godfather I & II* to confirm this). It also allows costume designer Janet Dench to play around with a range of styles that are effective and give each character an individual feel. The setting is also convenient as it allows music to play a very prominent role. From all over the stage, brass bands enter. The staging is brash, physical and crude, with couples having sex behind shutters, in the bed and ultimately, sex is what seems to tame the shrew. Even Bianca, the virginal princess type who is meant to be the ultimate antithesis of Kate gets in on the action and is manipulative and gets what she wants. Again, this side plot is played up and has a prominent role, and Bailey obviously appreciated the race for Bianca (seductively played by Elizabeth Cadweller) as the ultimate prize and motive. Elsewhere Huss Garbiya and Simon Gregor shine as Biondello and Grumio respectively, playing up their own attributes as to why they deserve Bianca.

On to the main plot itself, Petruchio and Kate are portrayed as very similar and very different. Both are 'going off the rails' on booze and don't have a care in the world, and the way they act, brawl and deliver their lines shows how much they are meant to be together. Of course this takes a dramatic turn after Petruchio essentially abducts Kate and tortures/brainwashes her, and the different tone in the second half reflects this. These scenes are at odds with the rest of the play as a very physical and musical play give way to relative quiet and intimacy. However, Shakespeare wrote these to provide the moral ambiguity the play thrives on, but Bailey could have done more to liven this up. Lisa Dillon as Kate has great stage presence, swearing, spitting and yelling at everyone, but her screams and vocal delivery wear you down after a while and sounds unnatural. She has great chemistry with David Cave's Petruchio, who is excellent, but more could have been done to cast them as rebellious outsiders as opposed to two very annoying teenagers who just play along with the system.

Where this production comes up short is in the emotional point it is trying to convey—what was the lesson (if any) to be learned? The RSC are naturally a bit more traditional with the way they stage productions, but Bailey is imaginative and can come up with grand concepts such as this. This production is relevant and feels modern, with the sharp lighting, sound and music and costumes, but the emotional legacy is not there. It does not want to form a judgement, and the close of the play is confusing. Dillon never changes personas, despite being 'tamed', so we can never feel sorry for her, or support her, as her new role as doting and obedient wife is not reflected in Kate's delivery, dress or manners. Most of this is the text itself, but more thought could have gone in the ending as opposed to leaving it so open to interpretation.

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Shrew Shines Like a Star

Written by Melissa Crismon, July 28, 2010

The Old Globe

Photos: Craig Schwartz

The Old Globe's merrymaking *The Taming of the Shrew* celebrates the theater's 75th year with surprises, a captive audience and a few stars.

Before the show begins, the servant lads talk to the audience. One explains to the front row that they might get spit on; the really good actors can spit as far as the fifth row. It turns out the front row has its advantages too. When Katherine (Emily Swallow) went to throw her shoe at her father, Baptista Minola (Adrian Sparks), it landed in a lady's hands

almost hitting her face. With some quick thinking, Sparks took the shoe and said, as if to apologize, "You thought you had good seats." As the audience laughs, Michael Stewart Allen (Tranio, at this point is already dressed like his master Lucentio) makes a quirk about the shoe and has the audience roaring. There is seating on stage; a boy about thirteen is nibbled by Petruchio's (Jonno Roberts) horse. The horse goes out of control toward the front row as it lets out a few droppings. Petruchio's servant Grumio, audience favorite Bruce Turk, scoops up the droppings into a bucket. Turk looks into the bucket looking like he is going to throw it at the audience. Instead, out comes glitter. Other special effects include tiny bubbles that the audience tries to catch. The same bubbles create a storm in *King Lear* doing double duty in the Old Globe's concurrent production; everybody's on a budget these days.

Appearing not on a budget is Deirdre Clancy's costume design which is much more flamboyant compared to *King Lear*, in part thanks to Lonnie Gettman, owner of Designer Fabric, who collects exclusive fabric samples from big names in the clothing industry, graciously donating pieces for this show and others. The men are in knickers, high heels and hats. While Swallow and Bree Welch, as sweet Bianca, are in bell shaped wedding dresses with ornate detail.

The scenic design by Ralph Funicello is much like the set up of *King Lear* this time utilizing a bridge lift for a dining table. Unlike other San Diego theaters, the stage hands are never seen except for one exception. After intermission, one of the servant lads notices the "W" in the electric *Taming of the Shrew* sign is crooked and has a stage manager come out to look. A servant lad goes up the stairs to fix the "W" with a cracking, lights flash and a storm of bubbles float into the theater. Anyway, the servant lads played it off well and on went the show.

The chemistry between the leads Katherine (Emily Swallow) and Petruchio (Jonno Roberts) doesn't go unnoticed by the audience. Roberts is a charming and pompous Petruchio, always grinning, smiling and adding to the festive atmosphere. Swallow makes faces, grits her teeth or shows them to the audience like she's a horse, making fists and claws. Swallow and Roberts are likeable as an archetypal husband and wife. Persuasively, the best part—Kate's monologue at the end of the play—Swallow walks toward Roberts as she says, "Why are our bodies soft and weak and smooth," while Robert grins proudly, winning the bet and, best of all, Kate's affection. And off to bed they go.

Supporting actors Jay Whittaker, Michael Stewart Allen added some fun confusion. It's like a "Where's Waldo" picture when following Whittaker as Lucentio (and Edgar in *King Lear*) with his costume changes and character transformations. Allen is pimped out, pretending to be Lucentio, in yellow knickers and cape with sunglasses, high heel shoes and hair shaved in back with long bangs. He is a reminder of Elton John in his "I'm Still Standing" video and you won't get the "Ya, ya, ya!" song out of your head.

Joseph Marcell performs Gremio with high energy and is in on the game of finding a suitor for Kate. Marcell is often recognized for his role as "Geoffrey" on the 90s television hit *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but he is also an accomplished Shakespearean actor who has been on the Artistic Directorate and Council at Shakespeare's Globe for 25 years.

Celebrities were in the audience as well. Ben McKenzie, who played Ryan Atwood from the show *The O.C.* and now works on *Southland* (returning in January 2011).

Watching a production at the Old Globe always feels like you are watching a star in the making. This is definitely a show not to be missed.