PROSCENIUM

The Taming of the Shrew

By William Shakespeare

The Taming of the Shrew

Wednesday 20th to Saturday 23rd October 2004,
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Cast

Lucentio, suitor to Bianca ..... Julian Wood
Tranio, servant and confidant to Lucentio ..... Robert Ewen
Baptista Minola, a rich citizen of Padua ..... Michael Gerrard
Katherine, his elder daughter ..... Izzie Cartwright
Bianca, his younger daughter ..... Claire Wooster
Gremio, suitor to Bianca ..... Paul Davis
Hortensio, suitor to Bianca ..... Mark Sutherland
Biondello, servant to Lucentio ..... Charles Anthony
Petruchio, a gentleman of Verona ..... Michael Williams
Grumio, personal servant to Petruchio ..... Keith Bayross
Madam Curtis, housekeeper to Petruchio ..... Linda Hampson
Tailor ..... Rob Hurcum
Haberdasher ..... Crystal Anthony
Servants to Petruchio ..... Paul Ewen
..... Hannah Reeves
..... Stewart Thurlow
..... Pauline Anthony
A Pedant of Mantua ..... Richard Kessel
Vincentio, father of Lucentio ..... Colin Hickman
A Widow ..... Lynette Shanbury

Directed by ..... Rod Moor-Bardell

Set designed by ..... Colin Tufnell
Stage Manager ..... Crystal Anthony
Assisted by ..... Pauline Anthony
..... Debbie Jungreuthmayer
..... Anne Gerrard
Lighting & Sound ..... Barney Daley
Costumes ..... Evelyn Moutrie

Sources

'The Taming of the Shrew' probably dates from 1592 and with 'A Comedy of Errors' and 'Two Gentlemen of Verona' is among the earliest of Shakespeare's comedies. A pirate version called 'The Taming of a Shrew', most likely compiled from memory by actors, appeared in 1594. It derives from several sources.

The theme of Bianca and her many suitors came from Ariosto's 'I Suppositi', translated into English in 1566 as 'Supposes' and is the source of all the sub-plots of disguise or 'posing'. The theme of the shrewish woman and how to handle her dates from antiquity – the Greeks had Xanthippe as nagging wife; in the Miracle plays she appeared as Mrs Noah; Chaucer drew her as the Wife of Bath. The crueller dimensions of Elizabethan comedy are particularly striking in the treatment of the 'scold' who is humiliated, silenced, displayed and brought to repentance, a process which reflects the shaming spectacles central to unofficial and legal punishments such as the ducking stool, pillory and stocks.

Marriage

Reflections on the dutifulness of women and children and the supremacy of fathers and husbands are plentiful in the popular sermons (particularly from puritans) and pamphlets of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries:

First reform your own families and then you will be the fitter to reform the family of God. Let the master reform his servant, the father his child, the husband his wife.

England's Looking Glass, 1642

That person, who by the providence of God hath the place of a husband, a father, a master in his house, the same also in the light of Nature hath the principality and sovereignty therein.

William Perkins, Puritan preacher

A wife never carries herself with better grace, reputation and honour than when she shows most obedience and subjection to her husband….As man by obedience is God's image, so is the woman by obedience man's image.

Nicholas Byfield, early 17th century.

If ever thou purpose to be a good wife, and to live comfortably, set down this with thyself; mine husband is my superior, my better; he hath authority and rule over

me; nature hath given it to him…. God hath given it to him.

The Bride Bush, 1617

Modern scholarship explains the economic and social background:

About all that can be said with confidence on the matter of emotional relationships within the 16th and early 17th century family at all social levels is that there was a general psychological atmosphere of distance, manipulation and deference; that marriages were arranged by parents and kin for economic and social reasons with minimal consultation of the children; that evidence of close bonding between the parents and children is hard, but not impossible, to document; and that evidence of close affection between husband and wife is both ambiguous and rare.

Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England

But it must be said that this is not a view of marriage to be found in a reading of the mature comedies of Shakespeare.

Farce or Comedy

Critics, particularly in the twentieth century, have argued fiercely whether 'The Taming of the Shrew' is predominantly a farce which therefore does not engage the feelings of the audience, or a comedy, where the audience's feelings may be a little discomfited. Mark van Doren (Shakespeare, 1939) has no doubt:

Petruchio is hero of a farce, not of a romance. The humour is made from situation: a shrew is to be tamed, a man is found to tame her, and he proceeds to do so by as many devices as can be developed in the time available. The interest of the audience will be in the devices, not in the persons who work them or upon whom they are worked. A certain callousness will be induced in the sensibilities of the beholder, so that whereas in another case, he would be outraged, he will now laugh freely and steadily for two hours.

Neville Coghill (Essay 1950) is equally certain that the play is a comedy and that the business and the characters are clearly motivated:

Katherine is a girl of spirit, yet has to endure a father who has openly made a favourite of her sly younger sister, and who is willing, even more openly, to sell his daughters to the highest bidder. Thus environed, what choice had Katherine but to show her disdainful temper if she is to keep her self-respect.

Michael Mangan (Shakespeare's Comedies 1996) hedges his bets:

If we allow the definition of comedy to determine our reading of the play, then we must see Kate's journey as being from misery to joy. She starts out as 'froward', 'curst', 'shrewish' – and unhappy in her aggressive rejection of love, marriage and men. Then the right man, Petruchio, comes along and, by a series of stratagems, brings her to realise that her true happiness lies with him: she immediately turns into the perfectly subservient wife, and her story 'endeth in gladness'.

Stage History

'The Shrew' is the only play of Shakespeare's which provoked a 'reply' in his lifetime in the form of Fletcher's 'The Tamer Tamed' (1611), a sequel in which Petruchio, now a widower, is himself tamed by his second wife. This puts both plays in the traditional context of the war of the sexes. Both plays were performed in repertory by the RSC in 2003 with great success.

The play was replaced in the eighteenth century by Garrick's version, 'Catherine and Petruchio', which omits much of the Hero sub-plot, and adds scenes of increasing violence. In one the husband pretends to think his wife's refusal to speak to him is due to toothache and sends for a surgeon to have her teeth drawn, and in another a servant says his master 'shook his whip in token of his love'. But he does insert a speech for Petruchio at the end in which he declares

And be our future lives one gentle stream
Of mutual love, compliance and regard.

Shakespeare's text was finally restored to the stage in the mid nineteenth century and was enormously popular particularly just before the First World War. It was performed for eight successive years at Stratford from 1909 in some measure, it has been suggested,

due to the vote-hungry viragoes who from 1910 were breaking windows and chaining themselves to railings.

Actors

Katherine's reaction to Petruchio and, in particular, her final speech, has occasioned many actors to offer explanation and defence. When Mary Pickford played the part in the 1929 film the Daily News reviewer declared:

the spirit of Katherine's famous advice to wives was contradicted with an expressive wink.

The review in 'Time and Tide' of Vanessa Redgrave's performance in the 1960s commented:

The delicious touch of irony which she adds to this speech amplifies the suggestion that she submits to Petruchio, not because woman must submit to man as her natural master, but because she loves him.

In her book 'Women in Shakespeare', Judith Cook quotes a number actors who have played Katherine:

The overriding fact is that Kate actually falls in love with Petruchio at first sight, and everything she does stems from that.

Peggy Ashcroft

I feel Kate falls in love almost immediately but must fight him on her own level. It is essential to put over a huge sense of fun. You must not send up the part. You have to give all your life and energy to the battles in which you join, remembering that both have met their match and therefore fight as equals.

Jane Lapotaire

In that scene about the moon and the sun we made a useful discovery; if you can laugh <u>with</u> somebody you can't fight them any more. What Petruchio is doing in that scene is teaching a small lesson in humour. We found a particular moment when she realises what he's up to. Their love – combated, spirited, and until this moment, unspoken – can now flourish.

Janet Suzman

Critics and Directors

Bernard Shaw is, as usual, firm and unequivocal:

No man with any decency of feeling can sit it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman's own mouth.

Saturday Review, 1897

In 1979 Michael Bogdanov directed a very violent production and declared in no uncertain terms the interpretation of the play which underlay his production:

It was based on a theory that this is a play about a male wish-fulfilment dream of revenge on women. The humiliation to which Kate is subjected is

what happens in a world ruled and dominated by men, where any woman who challenges male supremacy has to be smashed down by any means possible, until she is submissive, pliant and occupies her rightful place in the world, which is to warm the slippers, cook the meals and come when called.

Michael Billington in reviewing this production praised its theatricality, but questioned:

whether there is any reason to revive a play that seems totally offensive to our age and our society... it should be put back firmly and squarely on the shelf.

Coppelia Kahn, in 'Man's Estate', thinks quite differently:

On the deepest level, because the play depicts its heroine as outwardly compliant but inwardly independent, it represents possibly the most cherished male fantasy of all – that woman remains <u>un</u>tamed, even in her subjection. Would Petruchio enjoy being married to a woman as dull and proper as the Kate who delivers that marriage sermon? From all indications, no. Then can we conclude that Petruchio no less than Kate knowingly plays a false role in this marriage, the role of victorious tamer and complacent master? I think we can.

Whatever doubts are raised by a reading of the play, there is no doubt that 'The Shrew' is usually triumphant on the stage. Even such an archetypal 1960s sexual liberationist as Kenneth Tynan records wistfully:

Dame Peggy plays the last scene, in which the rival husbands lay bets on their husband's obedience, with an eager, sensible radiance that almost prompts one to regret the triumph of the suffrage movement.

About Proscenium

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known "The Tide" by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base, since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, please visit our web site :

http://www.proscenium.org.uk

Our Next Production

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by Michael Frayn

A deeply engaging play about one of the most famous investigations ever conducted by science into the mysteries of the world - and its disastrous ending in the even stranger mysteries of the world within… Frayn at his best exploring human fallibility and the eternal difficulty of knowing why we do what we do…

Directed by Michael Gerrard
Wednesday 26th to Saturday 29th January, 2005
7.45pm Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre