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A smart take on Shakespeare's Shrew

By BILL RODRIGUEZ | May 20, 2008



CO-CONSPIRATORS: Kane and Estrella.

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* gets staged with a frequency approaching that of domestic squabbles. So hearing that the Gamm Theatre is doing it (through June 15) might prompt a lot of been there, seen that, if not been there, done that.

That's a shame, because director Peter Sampieri and the ace troupe are mounting a slam-bang production of the comedy that sparkles with originality, strikes the perfect tone and, for a bonus, even resolves a feminist objection to the play that we can assume is older than the play itself.

You know how the central conflict goes. Being the oldest daughter of Signor Baptista Minola (Tom Gleadow) of Padua, the ill-tempered

Katharina (Jeanine Kane) must be married before her much-courted young sister Bianca (Jillian Blevins) can. Encouraged by a fat dowry plus bribes by Bianca's hopeful suitors, the recently arrived Petruchio (Tony Estrella) takes on the task of taming the spitfire Kate.

That perfect tone is struck by making Padua an Italian-American neighborhood in the early 1960s. Before the action begins, we are softened up by sentimental Italian songs popular at the time, such as "Volare" and "Baca Mi, Bambino." Petruchio enters under a pork pie hat, a cocksure young man with more self-assurance than self-knowledge. Fortunately, cultural stereotypes are kept at a minimum, with no gold chains clinking or dems-and-dose diction interfering with his ambition to "wive it wealthily in Padua."

Blevins's winsome Bianca is courted by the elderly Gremio (Sam Babbitt) and the younger Hortensio (Jim O'Brien). But her main suitor is Lucentio (Josh Short), who exchanges identities with his servant so that he can sneak into her household as a tutor. Secondary characters have plenty of opportunity to wow us in Shakespeare's comedies, especially with such well-stocked Actors' Equity ensembles as the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre. Lucentio's servant Tranio is played by Steve Kidd, who starts out as a crewcut, nasal geek, but he lowers his voice a register and seems to grow a spine as he straightens up to aristocratic stature when he trades identities, a delightful transformation.

Sometimes supporting characters can even take over their scenes. Such upstaging may be a no-no in some circles, but it sure is fun for us when somebody as inventive as Casey Seymour Kim is let off the leash. She plays Grumio, Petruchio's servant, and director Sampieri gives her free reign to mug and mime shamelessly behind Estrella. She's a sort of silent translator behind Petruchio, as though he's afraid his words are rendering his listeners hearing impaired. It's a wonderful touch, which also relates to his nagging fear, in this rendition, that his strutting confidence is mere braggadocio. Dave Rabinow provides extra duty here, not only playing two different servants but providing guitar accompaniment to Kim's occasional background singing. (Wouldn't you love to have someone behind you belting out "Leader of the Pack" when the time was right?)

Of course, the central couple provides the main event. With just an arrow-eyed stare, Kane makes you feel like Katharina is standing with fists on hips or arms crossed and foot tapping. She makes Kate self-righteous rather than shrill. The attitude is: Are all you men crazy, thinking that I'm a property rather than a person?

So we're prepared for the moment that usually makes *The Taming of the Shrew* incomprehensible to modern audiences: Kate's long-incoming but immediate transformation from adamant adversary to dutiful spouse. We have been through the extended, battle-of-the-sexes scene, full of bawdy wit and physical grappling, where Petruchio and Kate fail to convince each other that they are boss. We've been through the reluctant wedding and the husband's campaign to sweetly starve her into submission by pretending to be furious at servants about her diet.



But then comes the brilliant moment of feminist finesse. Petruchio is at a loss fighting her, and while his words are demanding (and thus acted with fury in most productions), here Estrella is pleading, on his knees, a broken man. So in a heartbeat, Kane's Kate can plausibly turn from adversary to co-conspirator. From this point on, she is pretending to be subservient while (wink-wink) they both know what's really going on.

Because of that, this *The Taming of the Shrew* is the smartest interpretation I've ever seen. Don't miss it.



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