

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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The Taming of the Shrew

by William Shakespeare

State Theatre South Australia
Playhouse

There is nothing else in all of Shakespeare that has caused the sort of qualms that *The Taming of the Shrew* has over the past twenty years or so. The subduing of the fiery Katherina by her mocking suitor Petruchio and the proofs of her obedience in the final scene have not been welcome spectacles in a time when equality between the sexes and recognition of the entitlement of women has been a central issue in both the private and the public sphere.

The fact that the last high profile presentation of the text was in Franco Zeffirelli's 1967 film with those well-known marital neanderthals Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor playing the leads, only proved the point that this is a play better left out of sight. Look elsewhere for lively women - Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Beatrice in *Much Ado*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Let them be cross-dressed, let them be assertive, let them marry if they must. But never let them obey.

In their final production for the year State Theatre has given us a warmly comic opportunity to reconsider a play that, intelligently handled, still brings both pleasure and provocation. Director Sarah Carradine has reminded us that the Italian setting takes us close to the Commedia dell'arte tradition with its wily servants, foolish suitors and bewildered parents. And names like Grumio and Tranio take us even further back to the Roman comedy of Plautus. *Taming of the Shrew* with a complicated plot of marriage proposals and servant master role reversals draws heavily from the knockabout comedy of stereotypes and extremes.

Designer Dean Hills provides a detailed set in an antique patina of yellows and pinks. Tiled in terracotta, these double level galleries with balcony rooms and romanesque windows are not only a reminder of the excellence of State's workshop but they also serve the intricacy and duplicities of the plot.

Much is made of the play's prologue or Induction section. The drunken Christopher Sly, played with typical exuberance by Geoff Revell, falls into a reverie and wakes in the prompt box served by a Lord, a fantastically dressed Patrick Frost, and a retinue of cone-headed huntsmen and Maxfield Parrish looking servants. Sly is the lens to the performance and a sometimes too overt reminder that we are watching the play in inverted commas.

Sarah Carradine has cast- and Hills has designed - for pacy physical comedy. Steve Greig, who has had a good year at State this season, is all flounce and hair tossing as the over ardent Lucentio and physically hilarious as the servant Walter, removing Petruchio's boots with almost yogic dexterity. David MacGillivray nips up and down ladders with feverish purpose while Rory Walker as Tranio, yet another servant in disguise, pulls a swifty on Tony Poli as the luckless suitor Hortensio.

In other stock roles, Edwin Hodgeman has gravity and good humour as the long-suffering Baptista, father of both the compliantly marriageable Bianca and the defiant Katherina, Patrick Frost works well as Vincentio, despite being dressed in dining room curtains, and Michael Habib's Gremio, looking like a cheerfully large bag of licorice allsorts, is, we are reminded, a pantallone, so no-one would possibly expect him to get the girl.

As Bianca, Caroline Mignone is inventively comic in the scenes with Lucentio and nicely stropky in the final banquet exchanges. Paul Blackwell again shows his flair as the much put-upon Grumio. He gripes and grumbles, is cuffed and exasperated but ever keeps constant to Petruchio. His account, at the beginning Act IV, of Katherina's escalating tribulations is a high point, as is his horseplay at the interval curtain.

The play depends most, though, on getting the levels right between Petruchio and Katherina. Sean O'Shea, veteran of the witty Complete Works of Shakespeare, is a very good choice. He plays Petruchio with a self-mocking comedy reminiscent of Rowan Atkinson. He is not a patriarchal figure or a matinee idol but a clever and sincere suitor who plays fire with fire and then is prepared to woo in quite another key. His is not a victory over Katherina but more a reminder to her that you can be too revved up for your own good. He exceeds her excess but is never violent or abusive. And Rosalba Clemente, in a popular return to

performance, appealingly and skilfully establishes a balance between Kate's intemperance and her need for dignity and respect.

There are some fine moments between them. When Petruchio lifts Kate bodily and places her on a chair, illustrating his legal authority over her, unchallenged by any outsider, it is a disturbing reminder that nothing much has changed. The scene with our bedraggled heroine and Petruchio's servants is a genuinely funny set piece and Katherina's final speech, her statement of the wifely role, counterpointed by the disapproving expressions of Mignone's Bianca and Catherine Fitzgerald as the worldly widow, has a powerful impact. As audience, we are stilled by the directness of Clemente's performance and alarmed at the completeness of Kate's submission.

But this is a play of exaggerated strategies and dissemblance. Christopher Sly has slept through much of the last act and is unlikely to be any wiser about the true nature of human relationships than when he fell down in the street. His extended return to waking reality, an interpolation of new material at the end of the play, is a perhaps too heavy frame around the proceedings since, as in all Shakespeare's comedy, the marriage is not the ending, it is only the beginning -and Kate's strategic agreement is doubtless not the last word in the matter.

In its vitality and ensemble strength State's production is a winner and deserves every success with December audiences. Sarah Carradine has taken a problem comedy and found in it not only real fun but a resolution of some of its thematic tangles. This *Taming of the Shrew* is less about the suppression of a woman by a man than a recognition that, while each voice deserves to be heard, there is also good reason to strive for harmony. What does Petruchio call it? - a quiet life.