

SUN STAR

Taming of the Shrew

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I have a soft spot in my heart for "Taming of the Shrew," the roller-coaster tale of the cursed Katherine and the stubborn Petruchio who weds her for her dowry and the challenge of taming such a hellcat. Back in the day, this was the first Shakespearean play I was ever in. It was the beginning of my love affair with the bard.

Theatre UAF's production, I am pleased to say (though not really surprised), is leaps and bounds beyond that grade-school theatrical tryst.

It starts off like gangbusters. Joe Alloway and Craig Brookes bring us in with minstrel pizzazz, reminding us early that this play is not to be taken at all seriously. It's a wonderful beginning, so much better than that silly play-within-the-play intro; the songs put UAF's unique brand on the production instantly.

For this is not just a simple retelling of one of Shakespeare's most-produced comedies. Rather, it is a retooling. Director Anatoly Antohin and his cast have allowed themselves to look at Shakespeare's work from a distinctly different angle.

Forget everything you thought you knew about "The Shrew"--the themes, the character's motivation, even the plot. This cast is going to surprise you with just how fresh they can make this 400-year-old play.

Visually, the show is exhilarating. Tara Maginnis and her costume crew certainly had fun with this one. The costumes of the show were a surprisingly congruous mix of period pieces and modern flare. They were delightful, vibrant and outrageous. Some-

times too outrageous. Everyone's outfits were so extreme, so shocking, that in the embarrassing wedding when Petruchio's garb is supposed to be radically humiliating, he instead fits in perfectly with everyone else. Not even his G.I./Barbie monstrosity could stand out as all that odd.

Not wanting to lay it on too thick, the set for the play is beautifully simple. The forced perspective of the stage design projects the action, pushing it into the audiences' lap. Despite the large working space afforded by this design, however, the actors seemed crowded--claustrophobic--even with only one or two of them on stage. It's as if they had confining boundaries that we could not see. And the fourth wall was not the culprit, for this was shattered from the very onset. No, the actors would have done well to spread themselves.

Particularly Alloway as Petruchio's comedic foil, Grumio. He is to be commended for his acrobatic energy, but his combustible character often smothers Petruchio, played by Andrew Cassel, a comedic master in his own right. Alloway's antics are often distracting and lack motivation--perhaps he needs some taming of his own.

As a whole, the cast worked very well together, a well-knit ensemble. Standout performances were delivered by Levi Ben-Israel and Charlie Pierce as the wealthy lover Lucentio and his faithful servant Tranio. These two played so well together, with near-perfect comedic timing. They were such a dynamic pair, I was almost sad to see them separate as the complicated plot developed, but their disguised personas were even more delightful.

Others, unfortunately, were

not as strong. Joe Harris, one of Bianca's ill-fated suitors, had moments of leaping, pirouetting energy, but most of the time he seemed tired--bored almost--simply going through motions he had done a thousands times before.

Most disappointing was Jon Ward as the elderly and eccentric Vicentio. We have seen such great things from Ward in the past, but this time he allowed his over-the-top performance to get in the way--he was often unintelligible, his diction indecipherable.

This department has a nasty habit of taking on more thematically than they can chew. The cast list for this show proclaims that Grumio shares a body with Shakespeare himself--an interesting, and oft-explored concept (we have this strange desire to read Shakespeare into all of his works). But it seems that Antohin perhaps ran out of time and was unable to develop this idea beyond some vague notion of profundity. Besides a Shakespearean collar Grumio sometimes wears and brief moments where the fool is writing down what people are saying, the whole notion of Shakespeare as a character seems to be confined to the playbill.

But not all of Antohin's thematic ideas are similarly lost. We cannot forget Petruchio and Katherine--perhaps not star-crossed lovers, but arguably crossed, and, in this version, definitely lovers.

Andrew Cassel and Jenny Schlotfeldt are the best Petruchio and Katherine I have ever seen. What chemistry! What depth they brought to

their relationship. Incredible actors, both, with a solid grasp of the language and extraordinary understanding, they went beyond the stereotypes of "tamer" and "shrew" and, with Antohin's direction, found reason behind their madcap wooing.

And therein lies the genius of this version of the play--the sheer humanity our heroes bring to their roles, the absolute honesty they bring to their love. For the first time ever, I was made to believe that Petruchio and Katherine actually found true romance in each other's arms. Cassel's "madcap ruffian" and Schlotfeldt's "devil's dam" persona are not merely comedic caricatures but rather the embodiment of a fetishistic lover's game. It is not misogynistic, nor abusive. True, it may not be a love as you and I would express it, but it is a love just the same.

As Petruchio so aptly puts it, "If she and I be pleased, what's that to you?"

I expected stunning visuals and delightful tomfoolery, all of which I got in spades, but Theatre UAF also treated to a new vision of the bard's work. No, it was not perfect, but if you do not go see this play, you will be missing the greatest show I have ever seen on UAF's stage.

Bravissimo!



Photo courtesy of Kade Mendelowitz, Theatre UAF Andrew Cassel and Jenny Schlotfeldt as Petruchio and Katherine (center) spar over some fabric and their love as (from the left) Molly Wilson (Haberdasher), Abraham Fawvor (Tailor), Joe Harris (Hortensio), and Joe Alloway (Grumio) look on. Theatre UAF's delightful production of Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew" performs this weekend in the Lee H. Salisbury Theatre.