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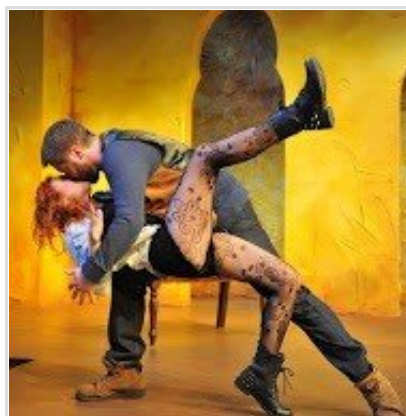
Shrewd Staging at the Philly Shakespeare Theatre HOT



Written by [Jennifer Kramer](#) October 19, 2015

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Taming of the Shrew
by William Shakespeare



Photos: Kendall Whitehouse

The Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre
October 16 - November 1

Acting ★★★★★
Costumes ★★★★★
Sets ★★★★★
Directing ★★★★★



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TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA

TWO NOBLE KINSMEN

THE WINTER'S TALE

SONNETS & POEMS

Overall ★★★★★

For their production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre addresses the elephant (or perhaps the elephant shrew) in the room immediately: their program notes begin with the question "Is *The Taming of the Shrew* sexist?" Director Carmen Khan argues that despite being limited by both the dreadfully unequal social dynamics of the day and his own ingrained prejudices, Shakespeare's intent was to show the evolution of the titular shrew's empowerment, not enslavement, and that the outcome of this infamous battle of the sexes is more subversive than an initial reading might suggest. Meanwhile, the PST's *Shrew* makes use of "original staging practices," mimicking the lighting, length, sets, and costuming of a theatrical production in Elizabethan England – the perfect device to argue that Shakespeare knew what he was doing.

Despite the fact that set designer Bethanie Wampol has literally slapped a fresh coat of paint on her stage from the PST's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the set looks anything but recycled. Its simplicity (a thrust stage and a single line of arches along the backdrop) perfectly fits with the production's original staging practices, while the new shades of goldenrod and orange give the production a warmth that complements the play's high emotions.

Costume consultant Vickie Esposito and costume coordinator Katie Foster contrast the bright backdrop with a cooler color palette – blues, greys, and blacks predominate whether they appear in smartly cut suits, flannel and jeans, or elegant dresses. The production is modern dress in keeping with original staging practices, where

costuming was based on contemporary finery and used to signify each character's social standing as well as personality. Esposito and Foster nicely update this ethos by putting Bianca's suitors in business suits, Petruchio in casual outdoor wear, servants in plaid flannel, and Katherine in the most rebellious (though still stylish) outfits: a parade of dark denim, black shirts, fishnet tights, and a terrifying pair of spike-studded combat boots that both capture her prickly personality and invoke the fear with which others regard her. Petruchio's wedding outfit is an amusing metatextual subversion: besides his hiking boots, he appears only in a bedazzled olive doublet and matching olive and peach puffy short-shorts that would fit perfectly in an Elizabethan production – if he were wearing a shirt or hose with them, that is.

Khan seamlessly incorporates the original staging practices into the production. (All except live music, which is sadly absent.) The universal lighting works well in the PST's intimate space, where asides and soliloquies are addressed to audience members only a few feet away. The pacing is quick, as befits a theatrical style that as they note in their guidelines notoriously pulled off *Romeo and Juliet* in "two hours' traffic" of the stage; it is not, however, rushed. This is helped in part by some judicious editing, which omits the play's partial framing device and trims a few scenes. There are several very funny physical gags – Grumio's teddy bear and Gremio's cane (complete with flask and bicycle bell), Lucentio and Tranio switching clothes and simultaneously displaying their undies as the latter proclaims "In brief, sir," Petruchio and Katherine's hug fights/wrestling matches.

However, the majority of the humor comes from

the quick banter and snappy wordplay expertly bandied by the cast. The fast pacing favors their energy and they embrace the screwball comedy aesthetic while still leaving room for some intriguing character interpretations. William LeDent as Tranio shows a distinct awkwardness at assuming the role of a social superior. Despite his quick thinking, he's caught off guard or intimidated by Padua's upper crust more than once, and his ingrained deference turns his attempts to manipulate the nobility into hilariously stiff performance pieces. Meanwhile, J.J. Van Name manages to make Baptista seem like a mostly responsible parent who genuinely cares for both her daughters, even if she doesn't understand Katherine in the least and has completely exhausted her ideas of how to deal with her.

Like Van Name, Deacon Griffin-Pressley (Hortensio) and Greg Giovanni (Gremio) help defuse some of the play's inherent sexism with the way their characters treat Katherine (Jenna Kuerzi): despite being amusingly terrified, their criticisms generally seemed focused on her disruptive behavior and not at her deviation from a woman's "proper" role. Aaron Kirkpatrick as Petruchio is similarly unchauvinistic. After their first charged meeting, Petruchio clearly shifts from focusing on Katherine's dowry to focusing on winning her as a person; he steadily maintains his outrageous treatment of her (and his staff) but never seems in danger of buying into it.

With Kuerzi's performance, there is no doubt that the shrew in question needs help to change. She is at least as unhappy as her behavior makes everyone else, full of anger and discontent and fully aware that she lacks the social skills to handle her emotions. Kuerzi follows particularly

lame sallies in the exchange of barbs with Kirkpatrick's Petruchio with bouts of self-recrimination, and her Katherine spends much of the play in enraged and frustrated silence because she literally has no idea how to verbally react to the bewildering events and people. Katherine's attraction to Petruchio is obvious from their first meeting, but at their wedding it becomes clear that it has developed into something more. When she entreats him with "If you love me, stay," Kuerzi portrays her as visibly heartbroken when she is denied. Unfortunately, the production never shows Petruchio winning back her trust and love. When she finally accedes to his ridiculous demands in Act IV, Scene 5, it is with the slightly hysterical laughter of someone who has been broken, not mended. Kuerzi shows Katherine's behavior improving without revealing a happy and whole sense of self; her final speech is deeply uncomfortable when all it seems to indicate is someone who has accepted traditional gender roles not from genuine belief in mutual love and respect, but because she finds the alternative poor treatment intolerable – and inevitable.

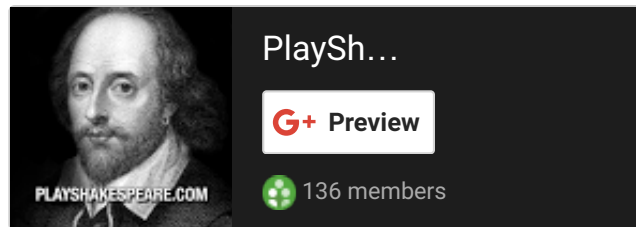
Needless to say, this is not a particularly effective subversion of the play's sexism. It does work well as an unintended expose of the toxic consequences of forcing someone to conform to oppressive gender norms, though this grim ending does not sit very well with the rest of the light-hearted production. The Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre has faithfully reproduced Shakespeare in a modern adaptation of his theatrical practices: it is an excellent showcase for his strengths, but also, unfortunately, for his shortcomings.




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