



Frame Your Mind to Mirth and Merriment

by Julian Gunn. Written on 2014-08-11. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *The Taming of the Shrew* (2014, Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

I CONFESS THAT I WAS A BIT DOUBTFUL AS I SAT DOWN TO THE VICTORIA SHAKESPEARE Company's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play is difficult to stage for a contemporary audience—it seems too resolutely misogynist to give us unalloyed pleasure. It's a tribute to the VSF director and company that the play shines through as the fizzing, popping, mostly delightful entertainment it was clearly meant to be – a play of carnivalesque topsy-turvy inversion, kin to the earlier *Comedy of Errors* or the later, more nuanced *Twelfth Night*.

The play presents disguise and mistaken identity in excess. Everyone is really someone else. Characters generate new identities and then cling to them ferociously, even to the point of Lucentio's father nearly being arrested for impersonating himself. Shakespeare's script foregrounds its own artifice, presenting itself as a play-within-a-play performed for Christopher Sly, a drunkard who has been convinced he is a lord. No one is in the accustomed place. The VSF's production gives pleasing form to this frenzy of misrepresentation.

The production's only set was a miraculous cart that, with simple repositioning, transformed from a sleeping-place for Christopher Sly, to a shelf within the hall of Petruchio's home, to a street-scene door and upper window. This was a delightful device, perfectly suited to a comedy of transformations and disguises. Costumes and props had a simplified Elizabethan aesthetic, which rooted the play in its era. Each scene as played had a reassuringly tight focus. I felt that the actors knew what their purpose was and how the scenes fed into the structure of the play.

As is often the case, secondary characters were cut or combined. The Induction was compressed, and the script's lack of closure in the shell plot was resolved by adding a brief coda from Sly and his companion. At the end of the play, the pair of them strode up over the hill applauding, to the audience's delight. The extra element of cross-dressing in which the Lord's page impersonates Sly's imaginary "wife" was omitted, substituting a female player instead. This smooths out some convolution, but it also removes the opportunity to signal to the audience that the play is aware of gender as a role that can be played (or overturned).

Shrew succeeds or fails on the chemistry between its Katharine and Petruchio, and it is delightful to watch Adrienne Smook and Cam Culham respond to one another, her ferocity wrong-footed by – and wrong-footing – his clownish bullying. Culham's Petruchio is more provocateur and absurdist poet than tyrant, willing to make himself most ridiculous of all. There is some good physical business between Petruchio and Katharine. Smook also doubles – almost unrecognizably – in a brief turn as the Hostess in the Induction.

Julian Cervello is a charismatic and high-energy Hortensio, providing a match for Petruchio's mania. Adam Holroyd's quieter Lucentio is appealing, though he risks being overshadowed by the vitality of his competitor. I might have tried to use staging and timing to establish Lucentio more firmly as the obvious choice for Bianca. Ursina Luther's Bianca is delightful, with some mildly duplicitous business interpolated to foreshadow her later defiance. Alex Judd gives two strong comic turns as Sly and the Pedant, with distinct physical and vocal presences. Susie Mullen is an excellently crotchety Gremio, and Justin Guthrie a believable patriarch. Chloë Mumford, of the junior company, deserves praise for her comedic timing as the Servant and Curtis.

Katharine is presented as strong throughout – she is essentially undefeated, despite the absurd situations Petruchio engineers to “tame” her. I don't particularly want to see a more defeated Katharine (authentic or not), so I liked this directorial choice. It meant that the play, despite its troubling theme, was frothy and delightful to watch – I sat there with a goofy smile on my face most of the time.

The only faltering, I felt, came in Katharine's final speech of obeisance to Petruchio. The scene was well-composed and well-played; Smook delivered her part skillfully. Yet since we, the audience, had been given room to root for Katharine throughout, and since she seemed more or less unbowed right to the end, the final speech, played straight, felt unsupported by the action that came before. This left the ending a little flat for me. However, any director must make the choice she feels is right for her production, and as this was a straightforwardly Elizabethan setting, it may have seemed most appropriate to play the speech straight.

Still – the play provides enough clues that we are in a topsy-turvy world, where people say and do the opposite of what they mean, where everyone is pretending to be someone else, that there is room to play this speech with various levels of ambiguity or irony, roleplay or role-reversal, and still remain true to the tenor of the play and the tone of this production.

This slight regret notwithstanding, I can recommend the VSF production of *The Taming of the Shrew* as a delightful way to spend a summer's evening. May it “frame your mind to mirth and merriment, which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life” (I.ii).

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	The Taming of the Shrew
<i>Year</i>	2014
<i>Theater Company</i>	Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2014-07-14
<i>End Date</i>	2014-08-16

Description

Sweet Bianca has her pick of suitors, but her father won't allow her to get married until her sister Kate has a husband. This wouldn't be such an impossible task if Kate was...a bit nicer. Things are turned around when Petruchio swaggers into town, turns his eye to Kate and they match each other jab for jab in this hilarious battle of wits. The Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival is hosted by Camosun College on the grounds of their Lansdowne Campus. Entrance is off Lansdowne Road.