



Katie Get Your Gun: Frolicking through the Wild Wild West in Bard on the Beach's *The Taming of the Shrew*

by Meredith Beales

For the production: *The Taming of the Shrew* (2019, Bard on the Beach). Performance attended: 2019-09-20.
See production details at the end of the review.

CHOOSING A SETTING FOR *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*, A PLAY BOTH BELOVED FOR ITS COMEDY AND notorious for its sexism (or is it making fun of sexism?) is always a challenge. In the summer of 2019, Vancouver's [Bard on the Beach](#) Festival revived its 2007 "spaghetti western" production. Set in the wild American West of 1870, [Lois Anderson's *Shrew*](#) balanced the rollicking comedy of the fightin' leads, Katherine (Jennifer Lines) and Petruchio (Andrew McNee), against the fizzy romance of Bianca's (Kate Besworth) courtship, giving both almost equal stage time and weight. By setting the performance in the nineteenth century, Anderson's *Shrew* highlighted the misogyny of the play while also distancing the audience from it. Though Anderson's characterization of Katherine and Petruchio's relationship as the squabbling leads of a Wild West romantic comedy occasionally evaded some of the more difficult aspects of Shakespeare's text, her restoration of Kate's agency in the final act allowed the performance to end by embracing an uproarious new vision of their romantic partnership.

Performed on the BMO Mainstage, the largest of the tent-theatres that characterize Bard on the Beach's summer-long festival set in a seaside park, the performance appeared at first to be all comedy. The set was on two levels, built with wooden timbers and several doors and windows, evoking the Wild West seen in old movies. The women wore corsets and the men broad-brimmed hats and holsters at their hips. So far, so entertaining. The play began with a large ensemble of actors moving through the set, apparently going about their daily lives. But then Katherine showed up, and we heard the first word: "Shrew!" It was repeated, again and again. Each time, Katherine would turn to look for her taunter, but she could never identify any single person. In the program notes, the director described her vision for the play as "Town and woman are pitted against each other" (11). Through much of the play's first half (there was a single intermission, just after the wedding scene), every public scene in which Katherine appeared repeated some version of this discord; she was visibly excluded and often mocked by the townspeople whenever she appeared onstage. In all other ways, though, Katherine seemed entirely conventional: she was dressed in the long skirts and basque-bodice

corsets of the day, and her dull green-and-blue dress and long wavy brunette hair functioned as a foil for Bianca's sunflower dress and curls. Katherine was separated from the rest of the cast, but only after we observed the townspeople's mistreatment of her.



Figure 1. Susinn McFarlen's Baptista and Kate Besworth's Bianca, accompanied by other angry duped townsfolk. Photo credit: Tim Matheson.

By contrast, the scenes in which Bianca was wooed by her many lovers were pure frothy delight. Kate Besworth bounced her skirts and her curls while Lucentio (Kamyar Pazandeh) sidled up beside her with a knowing grin. Pazandeh played Lucentio with foppish charm, turning an obsequious smile on Baptista (a gender-swapped role played by Susinn McFarlen), his Cheshire-cat-like smirk turning into a knowing flirt when he and Bianca practiced "Latin" together. Pazandeh's Lucentio easily out-manoeuvred the hapless Hortensio (Anton Lipovetsky), who was shoved out of the way—often quite literally—by his fellow suitor-tutor. Despite clothing both of them in black academic robes and hats, the production highlighted the differences between the two—Pazandeh usually stood back, his long hair brushing his shoulders, while Lipovetsky's glasses slid off his nose whenever he was shoved aside. Their scenes seemed straight out of a screwball comedy—Lucentio and Bianca would pretend to paw at the air between each other and giggle with utter confidence at the outcome of their romance—with a frothy and uncomplicated courtship that seemed silly in the best possible way.

The first meeting between Katherine and Petruchio echoed much of the screwball energy of Bianca's plot. Katherine, having chased Bianca off the stage, reacted to Petruchio's wooing in much the same way as she would react to it throughout the rest of the play: when Petruchio said something she deemed outrageous, Katherine paused and stared at him, a long, uncomfortable moment in what was otherwise a lively production. The energy of this first wooing scene mostly stayed high—at one point, the sofa, a red-and-gold-striped antique with wooden legs, was flipped over as Katherine evaded Petruchio's advances—and it all seemed part of a game, except for those long, almost inexplicable, pauses. The production used these pauses to emphasize moments when a modern audience might expect Katherine to make a response, one that the play's text does not actually offer. For example, Katherine paused to consider Petruchio's proposal. The pause signalled that the production was willing to acknowledge a problem, an elision in Shakespeare's playtext: Katherine makes no explicit response to the proposal. These pauses allowed the production to signal that there was something worth *pausing over* but did not do the work of outlining what an appropriate response might be. The use of theatrical pauses echoed the production's overall approach to the difficult elements of Shakespeare's text: the pauses conveyed the production team's awareness of difficult or unexplained moments in the text, but did not offer a solution, alternative, or response to them. Katherine's wordless response to Petruchio's proposal may have been intended to illustrate the dawning of mutual attraction, but if that was the expected interpretation, it would have been helpful to make that attraction clearer to the audience.

Andrew McNee's Petruchio was a tall roughly-dressed gunslinger, complete with droopy moustache, shaggy hair, limp neckerchief, and a dusty hat and boots. Prior to the wedding scene he did spiff himself up, appearing onstage in formal wear (or at least, the Wild West version thereof) when he overheard the townspeople insulting Katherine. At that point he paused and undressed, replacing his coat with a fuzzy, furry vest borrowed from his servant Grumio (Joel Wirkkunen), and removing his pants entirely. In this attire, he showed up to the wedding. Katherine had been waiting, clad in bridal white, with less and less patience while the townspeople, Bianca, and her suitors began to whisper that her bridegroom might not actually appear. He showed up, *sans* pants or coat, and she was furious, but she still went offstage and returned married. Shakespeare's playtext withholds the actual wedding ceremony from the audience, and this production did not attempt to fill it in. Marriage, and the marriage ceremony, usually includes some kind of agreement from the bride (this production did not suggest coercion), but neither Shakespeare's text nor this performance illustrated Katherine's agreement to the audience. We saw the lead-up to the wedding, and then were assured it had taken place; Katherine's compliance—whether a demonstration of duty, unacknowledged attraction, or any other possible motivation for agreeing to marriage—was lost off-stage. This elision is Shakespeare's rather than Anderson's, but by following it Anderson did not explain why Katherine agreed to the match. Instead, a fuming Katherine and pant-less Petruchio leave the stage and return wed.



Figure 2. Andrew McNee's glass-raising Petruchio celebrates his future marriage to Katherine with the townsfolk. Photo credit: Tim Matheson

Why does Katherine agree to the marriage? Anderson's production notes insist this is a love match: "This is the story of how this man and this woman fall in love, and then slowly get to know each other, through mis-understandings, and mis-haps" (11). But at the time of the wedding, halfway through the performance, there was little evidence of Katherine's attraction to Petruchio. If this is a love story—the story of how two misfits fall for each other—then the infamous Act 4 "taming" scenes, when Petruchio withholds food and clothing from Katherine, are difficult, as they always are, to fit into a romantic, Kate-centered version of *Shrew*. This is a problem inherent to this play rather than Anderson's production specifically: her suggestion that they "fall in love" and then get to know each other "through mis-understandings" is the most generous possible reading of these scenes, and one that jarred with what happened on the stage.

Any production of *Shrew* that wants to portray Katherine and Petruchio's marriage as a love match must reckon with Act 4, the "taming" scenes. In Anderson's production, Act 4 was set in a Western idyll: after the wedding, Katherine and Petruchio arrived at a camp complete with tents, Grumio and other hangers-on playing banjos, a campfire, and the moon. Bard on the Beach's BMO Mainstage is a large tent with a small opening in the centre of the stage through which the audience could see the ocean and the moon's reflection on it, providing a picturesque backdrop to this rustic pastoral. It was as enchanting a portrait of sleeping in a desert camp as possible. Katherine, of course, was not beguiled by the setting, and the 'taming' began: Petruchio denied Katherine food and clothing, insisting that none of what

was offered was good enough for his new bride. Deprived of food and clothing by her husband, and dusty with travelling, Lines's Katherine, in exhausted frustration, finally removed her tight wedding dress, put on a long man's coat, and fell asleep far off to stage right, while the men sang and strummed banjos around a campfire on stage left. The director's production notes tell us what she intended: this was "the journey towards identity" for a woman who spent her life as an outcast. And certainly, casting off tight, feminine clothing implies the casting off the societal and behavioural codes that require that clothing. But it was not at all clear why Katherine needed to be exhausted and hungry to embrace male clothing. In its synopsis of the performance's story, the program describes this scene in a few short clauses: "After the ceremony, he [Petruccio] whisks Kate away to his property in the desert, where she finds a gang of outsiders and a whole lot of dirt! Kate and Petruccio continue to rail at each other, until they begin to reach an understanding, finally joining forces as a pair of gamblers" (9). The program's summary suggests that this scene represents Katherine's initiation into a society of desert outlaws, but—despite the romantic persuasions of banjo serenades, campfire, and moon—this was not reflected in the staging of the solitary Katherine sleeping off to one side, visually excluded from both the comforts of the men's campfire and the food and feminine clothing for which she has just begged. Again, this is a problem of the play, rather than simply Anderson's direction, but the romantic Western framing of the scene jarred with Katherine's 'taming' and exclusion from the desert campfire. The "understanding" and "joining" of Katherine to Petruccio and his band of gambler-outsiders was nowhere visible onstage. This play is very, very difficult to transform into a love story.

While the program's promised transformation of Kate from mocked shrew to gambler was glossed over, at best, in Act 4, her agency in Act 5 led to a delightful comic revenge on the townspeople who had taunted her at the start of the play. Act 5 presented Katherine's transformation into Petruccio's partner and a member of his "gambler" gang as a *fait accompli*: when Kate and Petruccio return to the town for Bianca's marriage, their reappearance was preceded by a lengthy dumbshow illustrating their newfound cooperation in deception. They were now in total accord. When Kate saw a demure black dress trimmed with white in the tailor's window, after some discussion with Petruccio she bought it and emerged enrobed in sober, Puritan-like black. From the audience's perspective, there was no question that this was a set-up. Jennifer Lines played the first part of the final scene with her hands folded, often around a book, and head downcast—perfectly demure, the reformed shrew—though, because we saw her acquire the dress as a costume, the audience was in on the knowledge that her deportment, and the final bet regarding who has the most obedient wife, was all part of a plan concocted between her and Petruccio. When Petruccio eventually won the bet, Katherine pulled off the demure dress, threw on the long man's coat and cowboy hat, shot her pistol in the air, and they both rode off with the money. She was transformed, but into a successful gambler, not an obedient wife. It was a delicious take on the final bet:

Kate and Petruchio were, at this point, partners in crime, successfully bamboozling the townspeople who so tortured her at the start of the play. As a conclusion to the story of her transformation, it was utterly satisfactory, even if the transformation itself was hardly sketched in the previous act. *The Taming of the Shrew's* Act 5, with its apparent transmutation of the shrew into an obedient wife, can be difficult to perform without falling into the misogynist stage history that has long dogged productions of this play. Anderson's characterization of Kate's submissiveness as all part of a successful trick on the townspeople restores her agency and illustrates her newfound partnership with Petruchio. The audience ended the show cheering the two outsiders who hoodwinked the stuffy townspeople, witnessing them ride off with the spoils into a life unrestrained by social expectations. Rather than folding the former shrew into the model of an obedient wife, Act 5 of Anderson's *Shrew* illustrated Katherine and her husband's successful creation of their own alternative lifestyle and loving partnership.



Figure 3. Petruchio greets his future mother-in-law, Baptista, played by Susinn McFarlen. Photo credit Tim Matheson

Staging *Taming of the Shrew* in the twenty-first century is always a difficult task. Is it a satire of sexism? Is it simply a straight-up sexist play? How much agency does Katherine have in her marriage? How can these tough questions be reconciled with the side-splitting physical comedy and captivating flirtations of the wooing scenes, both between the Kate and Petruchio and Bianca and her suitors? Lois Anderson's 2019 *Shrew* offered a portrait of a marginalized woman who came into her own through her relationship with her outsider husband, Petruchio. Though Shakespeare's Act 4 made it difficult for Anderson to delineate fully just

how Kate gains her power, the production ended with the promise, for this shrew, of an egalitarian partnership and many more tricks and pranks to come.

References

Anderson, Lois. "Director's Notes." *Bard on the Beach*, 2019. <https://bardonthebeach.org/2019/the-taming-of-the-shrew/>.

Links

Bard on the Beach. <https://bardonthebeach.org/>.

Lois Anderson's *The Taming of the Shrew*. <https://bardonthebeach.org/2019/the-taming-of-the-shrew/>.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>
<i>Year</i>	2019
<i>Theatre Company</i>	Bard on the Beach
<i>Theatre</i>	BMO Main Stage, Vanier Park, Vancouver
<i>Start Date</i>	2019-06-05
<i>End Date</i>	2019-09-21

Cast

BAPTISTA MINOLA	SUSINN MCFARLEN
BIONDELLA	MING HUDSON
HORTENSIO	ANTON LIPOVETSKY
MAYOR/PIANO PLAYER/GREGORY/VINCENTIO	PAUL MONIZ DE SÁ
MAYOR'S WIFE/HABERDASHER/WIDOW	GHAZAL AZARBAD
GREMIO	SCOTT BELLIS
BIANCA MINOLA	KATE BESWORTH
PRIEST/COWBOY/NATHANIEL	JASON SAKAKI
TRAIN CONDUCTOR/PEDANT	ANDREW COWNDEN
COWBOY/CURTIS/PONY EXPRESS RIDER	AUSTIN ECKERT
SHERIFF/PHILLIP	VICTOR DOLHAI
COWBOY/BARTENDER/NICHOLAS/TAILOR	CHARLIE GALLANT
KATHERINE MINOLA	JENNIFER LINES
LUCENTIO	KAMYAR PAZANDEH
TRANIO	CHIRAG NAIK
PETRUCHIO	ANDREW MCNEE
GRUMIO	JOEL WIRKKUNEN

Creatives

DIRECTOR	LOIS ANDERSON
COSTUME DESIGNER	MARA GOTTLER
SET DESIGNER	CORY SINCENNES
LIGHTING DESIGNER	GERALD KING
SOUND DESIGNER	MALCOLM DOW
ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS	MARC DESORMEAUX
HEAD VOICE AND TEXT COACH	ALISON MATTHEWS

FIGHT DIRECTOR/CHOREOGRAPHER

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER

DIRECTING APPRENTICE

ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER

ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNER

ASSISTANT SET DESIGNER

JONATHAN HAWLEY PURVIS

STEPHEN COURTENAY

REBECCA MULVIHILL

HEATHER BARR

TAI AMY GRAUMAN

ALAIA HAMER

CELESTE ENGLISH

KIMIRA BHIKUM