

# Review: The Taming of the Shrew

BY PATRICK LANGSTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 17, 2009

OTTAWA — North American women, we'd agree, were in a bad way in the 1950s. Trapped in an era of rampant conformity, they were beholden to fathers, husbands, social expectation. Heck, they even had to dress, like Minnie Mouse, in white gloves when they left the house. It was a flat, grey time, and thank goodness for the following decade when the barricades were finally stormed and female individuality and complexity at last liberated.

Whoa - don't judge the 1950s so fast, says Shakespeare. Well, at least Shakespeare when *The Taming of the Shrew* is set in the time of doo-wop tunes and poodle skirts. Which is the case with the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's joyous production of the comedy in Prescott, Ontario, an hour's drive from Ottawa.

Directed by Janet Irwin, this very funny *Taming* features a Kate (a saddle shoed, pony-tailed Alix Sideris) who does change the wildcat ways that had kept men at bay and caused her long-suffering father Baptista (John Koensgen), a gentleman of Padua, endless grief. And, as you'd expect, Kate is tamed by Petruchio (Craig Walker), though this man from Verona, as outsized in his sheer self-possession as Kate is in her cataclysmic temper tantrums, comes courting decked out in jeans, multi-zippered leather jacket and jaunty leather cap like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* rebelling against whatever the burg's got.

All the other pieces of Shakespeare's beloved comedy are present as well. They include Kate's girly and flirtatious younger sister Bianca (Lana Sugarman) and her suitors, the earnest Lucentio (Warren Bain), the self-satisfied Gremio (Greg Kramer, rolling his r's like a character from Gilbert & Sullivan), the stylish Hortensio (Kris Joseph). And, with a uniformly strong cast, Padua bubbles with life as servants and other characters flesh out the story.

What makes this 1950s different from our received image of the period is Kate. A small, ironic smile, an amused flash of her eyes telegraphs the message that yes, she's buckling under to Petruchio and social expectation, but only externally. Initially confused by Petruchio's power over her (Kate, after all, has never before been in love nor met a man who's her equal and more), she quickly realizes that she can fall into place in the divinely ordained social order without losing herself in the process. She can even treat the whole thing as a bit of a joke, one which Petruchio has been in on since the start. Thanks to smart performances by Sideris and Walker alike, Kate and Petruchio operate on two levels simultaneously: one of social convention that cleaves to the divine order and a second, private one where love, lust and equality flourish behind closed doors.

All this makes the 1950s a much more complex time than we usually assume. The next decade didn't abruptly emerge like Athena from Zeus' head. Much of it was there all along, operating through a series of private negotiations and compromises, irony keeping it alive in an era we think of as pre-ironic. Kate and Petruchio may well have owned a bungalow and been happy within it.

So, bring on the shoobie doobie doo: this Taming reminds us it was a glorious thing.

The Taming of the Shrew continues at the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival in Prescott until Aug 15. Measure for Measure runs on alternate nights, and both show on Saturdays. Get there early: performances are in a riverside amphitheatre in good weather, but you'll have to troop to a tent or church in bad. Tickets & times, 613-925-5788 or [stlawrenceshakespeare.ca](http://stlawrenceshakespeare.ca)

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