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'Taming of the Shrew' skilful, witty

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Why, exactly, are we laughing at The Taming of the Shrew?

The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival does a splendid job with the comedy, which runs until mid-August. The production is skilful and funny, both with the many slapstick elements and the relentless barrage of wit.

And like many modern versions, there is even some attempt to soften the edges of the play's cruelty.

But make no mistake: while Measure for Measure might seem, on the surface, to be the darker of this year's two plays, it is in fact Shrew that should leave the audience more disturbed.

Because when it comes to Shakespeare in the 21st century, one will inevitably reach the point where the appreciation of a masterpiece clashes with revulsion at outdated customs and sensibilities.

Such is the case with Shrew, the tale of the virago Katherina (masterfully portrayed by Alix Sideris), whose violent temper is "tamed" by her new husband Petruchio (Craig Walker in another virtuoso performance).

Katherina, also known as "Kate" and "Kate the cursed," is indeed insufferable as the play begins, tying up her younger sister out of jealousy and breaking a lute over her music teacher's head.

Petruchio's method for taming her (after marrying her for the money) is to be an even fiercer tyrant. By the time he is done with his taming, he has deprived Kate of food and sleep and forced her to call the sun the moon and an elderly man a young virgin.

This kind of treatment turns Kate into an obedient wife, a very model of delicate submission.

In Shakespeare's time, the audience could have seen this as a victory for Kate - a reviled shrew transformed into a gentlewoman, a savage, as it were, given the gift of civilization.

Except that, in the 21st century, women are not possessions, but people, who are supposedly allowed to have the proverbial day from hell, especially when they are marginalized by a coquettish little sister.

Petruchio's methods evoke the torturers at Guantanamo Bay more than a comic figure, and Kate's turnaround has the hallmarks of Stockholm syndrome.

The dilemma for the festival is similar to the one it faced last year, when staging The Merchant of Venice. At the end of that production, Shylock was made to sing a Jewish lament, an adaptation of the play that neutralized its anti-Semitic elements.

For Shrew, director Janet Irwin's remedy of choice is a physical gesture by Petruchio at the end of the play, in which the husband, having just heard his wife's submission speech, symbolically lowers himself to meet her at her level.

In both cases, measures are needed to make the play more palatable, while still reminding audiences that Shakespeare's world is today considered archaic.

But the St. Lawrence festival's Shrew, while thought-provoking, is also brilliantly entertaining. The 1950s staging reminds us that "archaic" is not as far behind as one might think, while adding comic relief with all that doo-wop singing.

Along with Sideris and Walker, the supporting cast also delivers a masterful performance, including Lana Sugarman as the blinking coquette Bianca, Warren Bain as the lovestruck Lucentio and Perry Mucci as the crafty Tranio.

The play's message about cruelty is also adroitly made by Doreen Taylor-Claxton's delivery, as the widow, of a wounding jibe to Kate near the end of the play, a reminder that, in the Padua of the day, words are also instruments of torture.

By then, the viewer is squarely in Kate's corner, and can almost agree with Sideris's view that the following submission speech is a condemnation of the society's inherent cruelty.

This is the second year running that the St. Lawrence festival presents a comedy that forces us to consider how marginalizing a particular group was once considered acceptable. It's a welcome sign that the small local festival, now in its seventh season, is mature enough to take on some weighty tasks.

Shrew runs at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre until August 15. Performances run Tuesday through Saturday at 7 p.m., with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday.

More information is available online at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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