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# Taming of the Shrew' at Chicago Shakespeare translates romp of an era into modern comedy

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Submitted by [Lawrence B. Johnson](#) on Oct 8, 2017 – 6:33 pm



**Review: “The Taming of the Shrew” by William Shakespeare (and Ron West), at Chicago Shakespeare Theater thru Nov. 12. ★★★★★**

**By Lawrence B. Johnson**

On the surface, the idea of an all-female cast for Shakespeare’s “The Taming of the Shrew” smacks of gimmickry. Framing the story within a contrivance about the women’s campaign in 1919 for the right to vote sounds downright tormented. But to weave such an “updated” story line directly into the play – well, one might ask how such a mash-up warrants the Shakespeare label at all.

But “The Taming of the Shrew,” for modern audiences the most problematic entry in the Shakespeare canon, surely has not been brought to the stage with greater wit, brilliance or plausibility since – oh, since women got the right to vote. This seemingly mad idea, concocted by Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s artistic director [Barbara Gaines](#), is a dazzling delight.



Everything about this radical, riotous venture works, in no small part because of writer [Ron West’s](#) deliciously funny interstitial scenes at a Chicago women’s club where a rehearsal for “The Taming of the Shrew” is in fitful progress.

As women advocating their right to vote clash with police out on Michigan Avenue, this ladies club – which at the outset has not endorsed the voting proposition – presses ahead with its final rehearsal of “Shrew,” the only work by Shakespeare the group has not yet performed. Meanwhile, across town, a rival women’s club (unseen) is likewise preparing its last installment in that hallowed series. It’s a serious race to claim the prize for Shakespearean completeness.

Thus, all the actors play two roles: a “real” persona as member of the club and the character each portrays in “Shrew.” There are frequent stoppages in rehearsal for sundry reasons – some at scene breaks, some for one personal reason or another, some because of the Michigan Avenue tumult. Amazingly, the narrative line of “Shrew” is never lost as director Gaines’ superb cast flashes in and out of its two worlds, that of Shakespeare’s play and that of West’s comedic frame. It takes some chutzpah for a writer to put his work on the stage shoulder to shoulder with the Big S. From the get-go, West’s smart, wry angst-fraught dialogue at the women’s club meets the test, measure for measure.



The key question in an all-female take on “Shrew” is whether a woman can credibly turn herself into the macho, brash, even brutal Petruchio, who wins over the petulant, self-centered Katherine by beating her – indeed, beating her down – at her own game. [Crystal Lucas-Perry](#), striding through her assignment with hell-bent willfulness, is really quite daunting to watch. She rules the stage just as Petruchio means to rule Kate. Not from the moment her Petruchio wanders into view, intending to wive it wealthily in Padua, does one think of this bold fellow as anything but a man to be reckoned with.

[Alexandra Henrikson's](#) peevish Kate is the most intriguing of the women’s club characters in their Shakespeare roles. Though she’s a hellcat in rehearsal, Henrikson becomes a fragile princess the instant the action stops and she steps back into her 1919 persona. Ultimately, she must confront “that speech” – the one near “Shrew’s” end when the thoroughly subdued, most would say subjugated, Kate proclaims her absolute subservience to Petruchio. Kate concedes nothing less than this: that a proper wife should place her hand beneath her husband’s foot. Only for art’s sake does Henrikson’s modern woman agree to speak those words.



It’s easy to believe that [E. Faye Butler's](#) beleaguered Baptista, Kate’s father, would welcome the arrogant Petruchio as just the guy to relieve him of his wild daughter. And Crystal Lucas-Perry, a convincingly gritty Petruchio, pronounces the defiant girl fair and virtuous. Only when Baptista is rid of “Kate

the curs'd" will he choose from among the army of suitors drooling over his beautiful and (outwardly) demure younger daughter Bianca ([Olivia Washington](#)).

Much of the comedy in "Shrew" springs from the furtive competition among Bianca's would-be husbands – a collection topped here by [Hollis Resnik's](#) gnarled but salivating old Gremio. The mere mention of that winsome virgin unfurls Gremio's dripping tongue. Another senior suitor, Hortensio ([Tina Gluschenko](#)), wages a laughter-lofted battle of disguises with the younger Lucentio (a sympathetic turn by [Kate Marie Smith](#)). And Lucentio's clever servant Tranio ([Heidi Kettenring](#) in a vivacious performance) works another angle, disguised as his master, by negotiating generously with Bianca's father.

[Kevin Depinet's](#) splendid set for the women's club complements [Susan E. Mickey's](#) finery for the ladies – who strip off their ample skirts to reveal pantaloons that are just the thing for their characters in "Shrew." As effective lighting always does, **[Thomas C. Hase's](#) scheme works in subtle ways to enhance this show, on both levels of action.** Whether one looks upon this "Shrew" for what it really is, postmodern, or for what it purports to be, protomodern, it's a taming that surely would have drawn belly laughs from the Bard himself.

**Related Link:**

- Performance location, dates and times: [Details at TheatreInChicago.com](#)