

The Strange Couplings of Humour and Violence

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REVIEW: *The Taming of the Shrew* (dir. Tara Notcutt), Maynardville Open-Air Theatre, January–February 2018

This year's annual production at Maynardville saw an all-female cast take on Shakespeare's notoriously difficult comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, at a time when the #MeToo movement has made the pervasiveness of sexual violence a matter of urgent public debate. The complicity of 'ordinary' people in perpetuating patriarchal structures that demean and torment women has become glaringly visible and increasingly a source of outrage, and rightly so. Only the bravest and most skillful of ensembles would dare to make comedy out of this material.

Seven short years ago, but in a different political moment, Roy Sargeant's 2011 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Maynardville made much of the pivotal relationship between humour and violence, too. Staged as farce and imagined as 'adult' entertainment through the Italian circus motif that structured the production, the scenes of gender-based violence in the play became a source of hilarity and imagined titillation.¹ Tara Notcutt's staging of the play this year also drew on humour as a key element in the production's strategy, but in a feat of theatre-making, humour was marshalled in support of a critical perspective on gender-based violence. Through its innovative inclusion of contemporary music and elements of youth culture, skillful characterisation, and comedic timing, the production drew attention to the absurdity of male mating rituals. In one especially hilarious scene, for example, when Bianca's unlikely, aging suitor, Gremio, was invited to present a full account of his estate to demonstrate his suitability as a future husband, he delivered his inventory of treasures as though enumerating sexual conquests, complete with gyrating hips and feral growls, as if to demonstrate his sexual prowess, all set to the sound track of Tom Jones' "Sex Bomb" in a parody of masculine self-delusion. Elsewhere, too, the humour generated empathic identification with those who were most at the mercy of masculinist violence. The laughter was not at the expense of those who were most vulnerable to patriarchal injustice, but in sympathy.

The effect of having masculinity performed so self-consciously in this production by an all-female cast produced a heightened awareness of the performative nature of gendered identity. It allowed audiences in 2018 to observe the effects of the gender system which is under scrutiny in Shakespeare's play in a manner that is in keeping with the theatre-making of its playwright. Elizabethan audiences were schooled in the critical gap between the exhibition of the 'real' body and its representation on stage: given the society's prohibition against women actors, the period's female characters were necessarily played by men or boys. The gap between the body and its representation on stage allows us to recognise the constitutive performance of gendered identity and its position within a policed network of gendered social relations. This consciousness of the representation, set apart from the 'real', makes it possible to notice the changing ideologies of gender difference and family structure that preoccupy

¹ See my review of this production in "A Charming, Troubling Circus: *The Taming of the Shrew*", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 23 (2011): 81–83.

Shakespeare's play. The innovation of Notcutt's all-female cast was therefore not out of sync with the genre. Furthermore, it invited its audiences to recognise the ways in which masculinity comes into being in its performative iteration, as opposed to being anchored in biology, as per Judith Butler's insights into the operations of gender. For Butler, while gender is understood as the "cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes", the sexed body *itself* is constituted through the social meanings associated with gender: "But 'the body' is itself a construction", legible in terms of a system of socially constructed meanings.² Notcutt's production confronted its audiences with the fantasies undergirding the patriarchal system that attributes meanings to rigidly gendered bodies – and with its brutal effects.

Daneel van der Walt's extraordinarily effective adoption of an embodied masculinity, complete with macho swagger, perverse and threatening gestures, and deep-throated accents and sound effects that signalled the ever-present threat of violence underlying the verbal sparring between the two central characters, drew attention to masculinity as a phenomenon in its own right. This became a signature element of Van der Walt's *Petruchio*: sometimes operating as accessories to speech, at other times punctuating the intervals between speech, *Petruchio*'s gestures conveyed the threat of cruelty without inflicting actual physical violence. For example, he frequently extended his hand to take aim at a human target, most often his long-suffering servant Grumio, and simulated an audible explosion as he fired the imaginary gun. His 'taming' was never more evident than at the end of Act 4 Scene 3, the scene in which *Petruchio* denies Kate sleep, sustenance and the garments ordered for her, and contradicts her reasonable articulation of the time with "It shall be what o'clock I say it is" (4.3.193). Here *Petruchio*'s instruction, "Come, my Kate", was followed by a set of palatal clicks, in the manner used to call a horse, in response to which the famished Kate seemed to trot after him.

The figure of Grumio, much-abused servant to *Petruchio*, is a sympathetic and especially knowing character whose class position gives him uncanny insight into the true nature of *Petruchio*'s sinister ways. The laughter generated by Grumio is a function not so much of his risible status as a member of the serving classes, but of his uncanny knowingness. That is to say, the laughter is not at his expense but, rather, takes direction from his astute and wry exposure of *Petruchio*'s capacity for evil. Grumio is not a marginal figure but, by contrast, the most perceptive character. *Tranio*, similarly, is equipped with more insight into the social codes of courtship than his boss, *Lucentio*, and is able to take charge, despite his position of service. While *Tranio* enjoys a more secure position than Grumio in the world of the play, functioning as a side-kick to *Lucentio* and successfully impersonating him, this production's Grumio, who was given a 'Kaaps' accent in a brilliant performance by Ann Juries, was uniquely of this place, despite his position of constant subjugation by *Petruchio*.

The humour took a darker and more troubling turn in Act 3 Scene 3, when Grumio let us into his world. "Was ever man so beaten?" he declaimed (3.3.2), as he began to interact with the character who is scripted as "Curtis", in this production imaginatively rendered as a sock puppet. Initially a source of humour, this device soon became a more troubling testament to Grumio's ongoing trauma as *Petruchio*'s abused servant, as we bore witness to the impossible situation in which he finds himself, and the accommodations he makes, filled with humour and a form of pathos. Through his interaction with Curtis, this Grumio acted out his own situation of violent ill treatment. For example, he explained the nature of the "cuff" inflicted on Curtis, before telling the tale of the logic of violence to which he himself had just been subjected ("how he beat me because her horse stumbled..."). This scene confirmed Grumio's status as the character most likely to reveal the truth of the violence underlying the social relations within which he is embedded. By the time *Petruchio* arrived, shouting, and Grumio ran off to meet him and his new bride, Curtis had become a symptom of trauma and anxiety, like a child's imaginary friend, hidden from view but constantly present. Juries played much of this scene with her right arm behind her back.

The production exposed uncompromisingly the transactional nature of the patriarchal system that presides over courtship and marriage. The staging added chilling emphasis to *Petruchio*'s proprietorial claim immediately following the marriage service:

2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.6. The question Butler confronts us with is the extent to which the sexed "body come[s] into being in and through the mark(s) of gender" (p.12).

I will be master of what is mine own:
 She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
 My household stuff, my field, my barn,
 My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing.
 (3.3.235–38)

At the end of this scene Petruchio led his bride confidently to Baptista and put out his hand in expectation. Barely able to make eye contact with his daughter, Baptista reached into his pocket and drew out a wallet, which landed with a loud slap in Petruchio's hands. Baptista turned and walked away, eyes cast down, as Kate stared back intensely, recognising the import of the transaction that had just taken place. As Petruchio led his bride away with an ominous, self-satisfied grin, it was only Grumio who showed any spirit, stamping his contempt at the complacent group of wedding guests who looked on in silence. The audience was invited to bear witness not only to the brutally threatening nature of Petruchio's masculinity, but also to the entire social structure undergirding it. The production laid bare the complicity of the beneficiaries of patriarchal social structures, including most notably Kate's own father, and the 'boy's club' in which he has considerable clout, at his daughters' expense. It exposed to view what happens when all remain silent when confronted by misogynistic cruelties enacted in order to establish women's compliance.

One of the most chilling features of the production was the image of Kate we were left with in the final scene, after she was instructed to remove her clothing. In a notable innovation, the word "cap" (5.2.121) in Petruchio's instruction was changed to "piece". The undressing was more extensive, the exposure more shaming, and the demonstration of submission more absolute, as Kate removed her dress. Her undressing led to the exposure not only of much of her body and of her underwear but also of the skeleton-like construction under her outward shape, in the form of the stays. This act of shaming thus also exposed the artifice behind the contrived shape of beauty and the craft involved in creating the ideal image of a bride. We saw the contours of her body through the rigid outline created by the stays. The effect was one of imprisonment. Humiliated in this way, Kate delivered her painful affirmation of wifely duty to close the play.

Alicia McCormick's rendition of Kate's famous monologue was deeply discomfiting. Kate's declaration of allegiance to her "lord", her "king" and her "sovereign" was spoken in a voice that signalled its determination to execute this act of duty, a determination made all the more evident through the trembling, fearful voice that registered the underlying coercion. Begun in this way, with child-like compliance indicating, above all else, the speaker's lack of volition, the scene was redolent of a confession extracted under torture, as Elaine Scarry describes it in *The Body In Pain*: when the prisoner has been subjected to pain and torture her entire world – her relationship to self and to language – "disintegrates".³ This is true, for Scarry, even when a prisoner has been made to articulate a "statement" that bears her name. The confession extracted under torture is not the voice of the prisoner, Scarry argues, but an extension of the voice of the torturer and a signifier of his power, regardless of the words' meanings. Under these conditions, to "assent to words", as Scarry puts it, is "a way of saying, yes, all is almost gone now, there is almost nothing left now, even this voice, the sounds I am making, no longer form my words but the words of another."

In this production, Kate's monologue emerged from such a state of disintegration of self that her professions of wifely allegiance attested only to the degree to which her spirit had been broken. And though the monologue gained strength and conviction as she continued, the faltering effort to complete the performance emptied the words of their primary function as anchors of meaning. The performance itself became the primary truth. The audience (on stage and off) was confronted by the emptiness of words in the face of Kate's disintegration. There were moments of timorousness that interrupted the flow: "weakness past compare" (5.3.174) was spoken through barely suppressed tears, "place your hand beneath your husband's foot" (176) with a tremor suggesting that this image of bodily subjugation was more than a metaphor for her, and "safe" (151) with a hesitation so marked that it begged the question.

3 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.35.

The silence that followed was absolute. Petruchio was the first to break the silence with an ominous clap, before leading her out triumphantly, his power complete. We were left alone with a chastened Hortensio, who, having borne witness to the darker side of this form of violent masculinity, no longer the over-eager wannabee 'bro', was given Lucentio's final lines to close the play. "'Tis a wonder, by your leave, she will be tamed so" (189) was not delivered on stage as an expression of triumph but on the lower level, just a few steps away from the audience.

A sense of disquiet lingered in the silence.

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