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Society : Beaufort Players
Production : The Taming of the Shrew
Date : 29 September 2017
Venue : Church of the Ascension Hall, Ealing
Report by : Zena Wigram, district 2

[Show report](#)

It's always lovely to attend a Beaufort Players production, partly because of the warmth of your welcome, and partly because you always offer something just a bit different. This production was even more unusual, being completely cross-cast, and therefore offering some new insights into Shakespeare's text.

In commenting on the performance of a man playing a woman's part (and vice versa) I could use he/she s/he variations, or pluralise everything into 'they', which is helpful for trans or gender fluid people, but nevertheless makes my ex-English-teacher's soul wince. So for this report I will just stick to the gender of the character.

General

It was great to see Shakespeare being tackled again – and this time one of the less straightforward plays. Shrew is by no means my favourite play, but the decision to cross dress it added new layers.

Everyone worked very hard to make the lines sound natural while still being clearly audible. I also admired the consistent energy combined with a determination to make the text meaningful and still keep the pace moving forward: most of the audience, even if they hadn't known the play beforehand, will have had no trouble following the plot and enjoying the story. This was a substantial achievement for a play that is not very well known, to a modern audience unused either to the poetry or to the nuances of Shakespeare.

Players

Sassy Clyde was a wonderfully boisterous Petruchio, speaking all the text clearly, and with a great masculine swagger. He might have added more light and shade to show extra layers to the character in the asides, and one or two of the ad libs were a trifle modern in style - but these are minor quibbles for someone who managed to learn this huge part at, I understand, pretty much the last minute.

Thom Cobb's Katherina had a lovely sincerity, making every word of the dialogue truthful, hinting at her underlying insecurity to help us to sympathise with her even before Petruchio's ill-treatment.

Amina Muneer's Lucentio was excellent from the very opening line, with a perfectly paced steady tempo to help the audience get into the language, and expressive eyes (over his moustache) reinforcing the meaning of every word. I particularly enjoyed the lesson in Act III sc i, where he and

Bianca clearly knew and understood not only the Shakespearean English but also the Latin, and also the rivalry between him and an appropriately earnest Hortensio (Julia Marques) who also used his eyes to excellent effect. Gremio (Maria O'Beirne) was suitably naïve alternative suitor, timing the deliberate thought as well as movement well, though he needed a little more practice with the stick to be truly convincing as an elder walking with its support.

I liked the clarity which Lainy Cobb brought to Tranio's attractive accent, particularly when he remembered not to rush the dialogue. Lucentio and Tranio arranged their role swap really skilfully, reinforcing clearly the motif of playacting and disguise set up by the cross-casting, and continued throughout the play. I also really appreciated seeing his escorting Bianca (Alan Robinson) off in true period style with lowered hands (rather than pseudo-medieval 'chicken-wing' hands at shoulder height). Bianca and Katherina moved confidently in the awkward crinolines, which they'd clearly rehearsed in, and they and Petruchio had also obviously put a great deal of work into the physical fighting scenes. These were cleverly choreographed and executed, and therefore most effective. I hope they weren't too bruised by Saturday night!

Mary Hill was an excellent Baptista, meaning every line of his favouritism for Bianca, bewilderment over Katherina, and gullibility in not recognising any of the other characters in their disguises.

Biondello (Georgina Saunders) brought out the humour of his part, particularly when he remembered not to rush the dialogue, and there was also much fun from the sulky interjections of April Parker's Grumio, and Chris Burns's grumpy Curtis. The other minor characters were played with conviction: Philip Hazeley (servant), Ana Bretes (officer), Krystyna Kobiak (pendant and tailor), Grae Minors (servant and then Hortensio's boisterous widow) and Meera Sarin's dignified Vincentio.

Director

Jane Quill had succeeded in keeping the play moving forward with good levels of volume throughout. Almost everyone had clear enunciation of the tricky dialogue, and the relationships between the characters were authentic.

Instead of Shakespeare's framing device (the beggar Sly treated as a lord, with the page Bartholemew pretending to be his lady), the cross-casting underlined the motifs of perception and disguise. The evening was a good length and the extra scenes weren't missed at all, the play as we saw it standing well as a coherent whole.

All the entrances in the hall were used to full effect, as well as the apron and rostra, to show the various locations. Among a number of clever touches I particularly liked the way as people left through the auditorium they stayed in character, but dropped the volume once 'off stage' so as not to distract from the ongoing plot.

Stage management, lighting, sound, props

As always, the technical aspects of the production were first-class. The stylised 'woodcut' set was designed by Alan Robinson, Thom Cobb and Ana Bretes, constructed by Thom Cobb, Ana Bretes and Chris Burns, and painted by Alan Robinson (how did they find the time?). It was all most attractive, with Baptista's house indicated offstage up left, and a building which took various functions up right. The matching furniture included a particularly clever bench in sections for ease of 'transformation' by stage manager Ana Bretes, and the fireplace with the fire which was 'lit' by Curtis.

Sound designer Roger Dishley's choice of music (Nigel Kennedy's 'My World' album released last Christmas) as usual worked perfectly with the feel of the production, and was – again, as usual! - coordinated perfectly with lights between scenes to indicate changes in time and place effectively. The skilful lighting plot by Jane Quill, Vicky Prior and Pete Balls included a super gradual sunrise before the first entrance from the back of the hall.

Ana Bretes and Vicky Prior rose splendidly to the challenge of a range of appropriate props, including various items flung about the stage, edible food for Hortensio, as well as his long poem, and most effectively broken lute.

Costumes, hair, make-up

Krystyna Kobiak had (yet again) sourced an impressive array of costumes. In the same way as actors in Shakespeare's day, modern elements were used with extras to indicate period, status and character. The generous cream shirts over black trousers and boots worked very well for the men, giving them broad shoulders, with splashes of colour for interest. Coloured cloaks of various kinds indicated disguises.

Differently cut cream shirts with a bright frill across the chest indicated women; these might have been even better with matching sashes around the waists of the wealthier women, to contrast their status with that of the female servants. The cage crinolines were a visual reminder of the restrictions imposed on the women, but their very stylised look was a marked contrast to the realistic look of the men's outfits. Long wigs on the 'girls' and skirts over the hoops – even net or thin cotton if it was considered important to keep the hoops visible - would have made for a more coherent overall look and feel.

Tramio struggled with his 'cloak', and a pin or two might have made his life easier during the first scenes, (to be discarded before the swap with Lucentio). Petruchio's wedding ring was a bit distracting - but congratulations to Kate on adding hers at the appropriate time.

Make-up by Amy Kyprianou and Joanna Masiewicz was first class. The men were all splendidly realistic, subtly made-up and with a range of facial hair suitable to the characters, including disreputable stubble on Gremio and a neat goatee on Baptista – and I congratulate Hortensio for the stylish way he removed the moustache. The coordinated stylised make-up on the women was very effective.

Russell Gilman and Krystyna Kobiak had excelled themselves with the programme, with the cover beautifully echoing the set, and containing a helpful character list, as well as an amusing guide to Shakespearean insults, and an interesting introduction by Director Jane Quill.

Front of house

The team, led by Tania Hunt, offered a warm welcome

Director Jane Quill and producer Elaine O’Sullivan are to be congratulated for having managed to present the play at all, let alone to such a high standard, after overcoming a series of challenges which would have been the despair of any production team. Thank you to all of you for a most successful evening.

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