

## The Taming of the Shrew – Director's Notes

It is not possible to be precise about the dates for most of Shakespeare's plays. It is believed that *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The two Gentlemen of Verona* were his first two plays written in 1590/91.

On the face of it the basic plot flies against all thoughts of political correctness. An unconventional and wild young man tames a shrewish woman by physical and mental cruelty. This was probably what Shakespeare intended at the time. The Globe Theatre was after all next door to a bear bating arena. It would be a shame to abandon the play for this cause because there are scenes and lines of great beauty.

I have in mind the 'back story' for Katherina. She is an intelligent girl born in Padua to a couple living in a society that is shallow and vacuous. Worse still, as a child she is rather plain. Even worse - the couple have a second child, Bianca, who is pretty and superficially attractive. Poor Katherina is ignored by everyone. The only way she can attract attention is by violent rages and this becomes ingrained in her personality. As she grows up she becomes an attractive young woman but all around her know her as a shrew.

Petruchio is himself something of an eccentric. He is new to Padua. He is at first intrigued by the thought of wooing a shrewish woman. When he meets her he sees under the shrewish veneer an intelligent and beautiful woman. I admit that some of his methods will make you raise your eyebrows but I suggest that the ends do justify the means and at the end of the play Petruchio and Katherina develop a true loving relationship.

The most difficult part of the play for modern audiences to accept is Katherina's speech in the final scene when Petruchio orders Katherina to tell the other women what duty they owe to their husbands. Her call for total submission is unacceptable. I am loath to cut from the play because it is a beautiful speech in every other respect. The other women, the widow and Bianca, have just been married along with Katherina in a triple wedding. The widow and Bianca who are considered by all to be model wives have just failed in a show of duty to their husbands. In my production Petruchio will *ask* Katherina to remind them of their duty as a private joke between them. Katherina gets the joke and produces this speech demanding women's total submission to men. During the speech Petruchio and Katherina will be enjoying a joke at the expense of the assembled company. The joke will be all the better, if I can get it to work, if the assembled company take her speech at face value and admire the sentiments. As Petruchio says to the other two husbands – "We three are married, but you two are sped." that is done for.

There are 24 characters in the original script plus some non-speaking extras. It is possible to cut some characters and to double others. It can be put on with 12/13 players.

As with all Shakespeare plays there are not many parts for women in the original text. Some of the servants can be either women or men. Baptista Minola, father to Katherina and Bianca, could be a mother. Some of the men's parts could be played by women. I am thinking particularly of the comic suitor's to Bianca.

I am not going to be concerned when casting by the ages of actors. When has one ever seen a professional production of Romeo and Juliet with Juliet played by a thirteen year old? The actors chosen must be able to present the image of a person of credible age for the part. Petruchio must be a credible suitor for Katherina, Lucentio must be a credible suitor for Bianca, Katherina's younger sister and Baptista must be a credible father/mother to the two girls. I will have an open mind when casting – so go for it!

I am thinking of setting the play in the 1830s. I feel that audiences pay more attention when the period is updated. The play is set in an era of male chauvinism. At least by 1830 the seeds of women's rights were being sown.

I list below the characters with my basic notes:-

**Lucentio**, son to Vincentio and suitor to Bianca. The classic young lover.

**Tranio**, servant to Lucentio. He is wily and quick witted. He has to be male because he dresses up as Lucentio to become a 'comic suitor'. He could be played by a woman.

**Baptista Minola**, a wealthy merchant of Padua. Father of Bianca and Katherina. The part could be played as the girl's mother.

**Gremio**, an elderly wealthy citizen of Padua, in love with Bianca. Although he is a 'comic suitor' I am not sure whether as an old man it could be played by a woman. If anyone can persuade me at the auditions I am willing to give it a go.

**Hortensio**, a gentleman of Padua and suitor to Bianca. As a 'comic suitor' he could be played by a woman.

**Katherina**, the shrewish elder daughter of Baptista Minola. See my notes above.

**Bianca**, the younger daughter of Baptista Minola. She could be played as dumb blond. She could be minx.

**Biondello**, servant to Lucentio. As written he is a slow witted young man. I can see the part played as a bright young woman who hides her intelligent behind a screen of slow wittedness.

**Petruchio**, a wealthy young gentleman of Verona and a friend of Hortensio. Witty but very eccentric. The only man to see the attractive intelligent woman behind Katherina 'shrew'.

**Grumio**, servant to Petruchio. I think he has to be a man played by a man. If he crosses Petruchio he gets hit. This would be distasteful if Grumio were played as a woman or by a woman.

**Curtis**, housekeeper of Petruchio's home in Padua. Can be played as a woman.

**Nathaniel)**

**Philip** ) Servants to Petruchio. To be doubled with Vincentio and Gremio. In the original play there are three more servants. Their lines will be distributed between Nathaniel and Philip.

**Pedant**, a gentleman of Mantua. This part will double as a servant in the Minola household.

**Tailor**. Doubled with Vincentio.

**Haberdasher**. Doubled with Gremio.

**Vincentio**, a wealthy merchant of Pisa and father of Lucentio.

**Widow**. Hortensio marries her on the rebound. Doubled with Curtis.

It is not going to be easy to get the production up and running with the Covid restrictions. If the dates for the relaxation of restrictions run to plan it can be done.

I will be casting during the period 12<sup>th</sup> April to 16<sup>th</sup> May when we are restricted to up to six people meeting outdoors. Most of the basic casting will have to be done by Zoom. One has to see potential Petruchios and Katherinas and potential Lucentios and Biancas together to see if they work together. So we may have some chilly Sunday afternoons. All of this will have to be done at risk. We can only proceed if the major relaxation of restrictions occurs on or near 17<sup>th</sup> May. The provisional performance dates are:-

Rotherfield 29<sup>th</sup> July to 1<sup>st</sup> August

Lurgashall 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> August

I have always believed that auditions should be seen to be fair. I am not sure this will be possible with the Covid restrictions in place. I humbly crave your indulgence. The committee feels that this production carried out in extraordinary circumstances will be good for the Society. It will show our fortitude in adversity.

I have been in two productions of The Taming of the Shrew. I have played Petruchio and Gremio doubled with the tailor. It is great fun. I hope that a lot of people, well at least 13, will be interested. If you are please let me know direct. My email address is [alantower@mansionhouse.myzen.co.uk](mailto:alantower@mansionhouse.myzen.co.uk).