

Shakespeare interpretation fine

by Judith Pratt

Bawdy improvisation, gratified by uproarious laughter, marked the performance of **The Taming of the Shrew** Monday night by the Young Vic Company. Shakespeare, dealing farcically with the timeless theme of the battle of the sexes, provides lewd inuendos in the script which are fully exploited by the cast, who also provide an abundance of their own.

Still using the vehicle of 'the play within the play', **The Taming of the Shrew** here is modernized by the Company, by transforming the Shakespearean tinker, Christopher Sly, into a blue-jeaned wayfarer, who storms onto the stage from the audience to complain after the Company's apology for the lack of props. Confessing to his drunken state, he is pacified with a bottle, admitting that he had really come to the theatre, hoping to see Elton John, and then collapsing in a stupor.

Invoking the aid of the audience, placed on two sides of the five-tiered stage, the Young Vic players then have fun at Sly's expense. When he awakens, they address him as lord and perform deeds of homage to the bewildered drunk. Soothing him is his supposed 'wife', whom he immediately commands to bed after being thwarted in his attempts to fondle her. The players then propose to entertain him with a play, **The Taming of the Shrew**, but which to Sly's chagrin, does not feature Glenda Jackson.

True to the script, although obviously an adulteration, **The Taming of the Shrew** proves wondrous entertainment for both Sly, here acted by Barrie Rutter, and the audience. The two plots, under the direction of Denise Coffey, emerge with fluency and ease and the contrasts are vividly illuminated. But whereas Shakespeare's Bianca, sister to cursed Kate, the shrew, is the epitome of the female courtly lover, meek, humble, and angelically beautiful, the Young Vic's Bianca is the antithesis. Here the farce is carried to an extreme, as Bianca giggles wildly, reminiscent of the blond in **Carry On** movies. She flutters and gapes with exaggeration and appears a mindless idiot, her tears easily erased with a bauble from her father. The motivating force behind her suitor's avowed love, and especially that of Luciento, is incomprehensible and ridiculous. But this addition to the

comedy only provides for more antics, both verbal and visual. The courtly love which develops between Shakespeare's Luciento and Bianca is here hilariously parodied as Luciento throws himself to the ground where his love had stood and kisses it passionately, rising only to be reduced into a trance, broken by the efforts of his servant Tranio. They then devise a plan whereby Luciento can be Bianca's teacher, and he and Tranio immediately exchange clothes on stage, a seeming impossibility considering the vast difference in height between them.

Petruchio, out to make a fortune by marrying a rich woman, then appears on stage. Pulling out a Metro Halifax map, he attempts to locate the street in Padua where his friend, also one of Bianca's suitors, resides. Like Tranio, Petruchio's servant Grumio is here played to his utmost comic potential, with rewarding results. Petruchio is introduced to the plot to marry off Katherina and doggedly asserts his intention to wed her despite the attempts to dissuade him.


At their first meeting, the shrew Katherina, played by Joanna McCallum, stalks her proposed husband like a lioness, cautious yet baffled at his intent to marry her despite her brazen and obnoxious behaviour. The verbal battles which ensue are renowned in the theatre, and both McCallum and David Henry parry and thrust with intensity and cunning, witticisms and double entendres with delightful vivacity. Promiscuously testing each other with such terms as cock, hen, tail, tongue, and crow, Petruchio emerges the victor, largely because he is physically more powerful than Kate, and wins the father's permission to wed. At a parting kiss, the script is altered to exaggeratingly soften the character of Kate, and weaken her knees and her resistance to her husband-to-be. Another alteration occurs again when Hortensio, disguised as a music teacher and bidding for Bianca's hand, begins with the opening line from **Twelfth Night**: "If music be the food of love, play on" - when trying to persuade her to learn music rather than philosophy at the hands of Luciento. This half of the play, the wooing and marriage of Bianca, is transformed by the Company into farce reminiscent of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, making the other half, of Kate and

Petruchio, more vibrant, and hence the moral lesson more acute.

All accomplished singers and musicians, the Young Vic Company injects the play with musical spirit and comedy. When disappointed at the late arrival of the groom Petruchio, Katherina, bedecked

with flowers, storms up to the highest tier and assaults the chanting singers with her bouquet and then runs, weeping, to her room. The groom soon arrives, but in rags and sporting a tail, a shovel,

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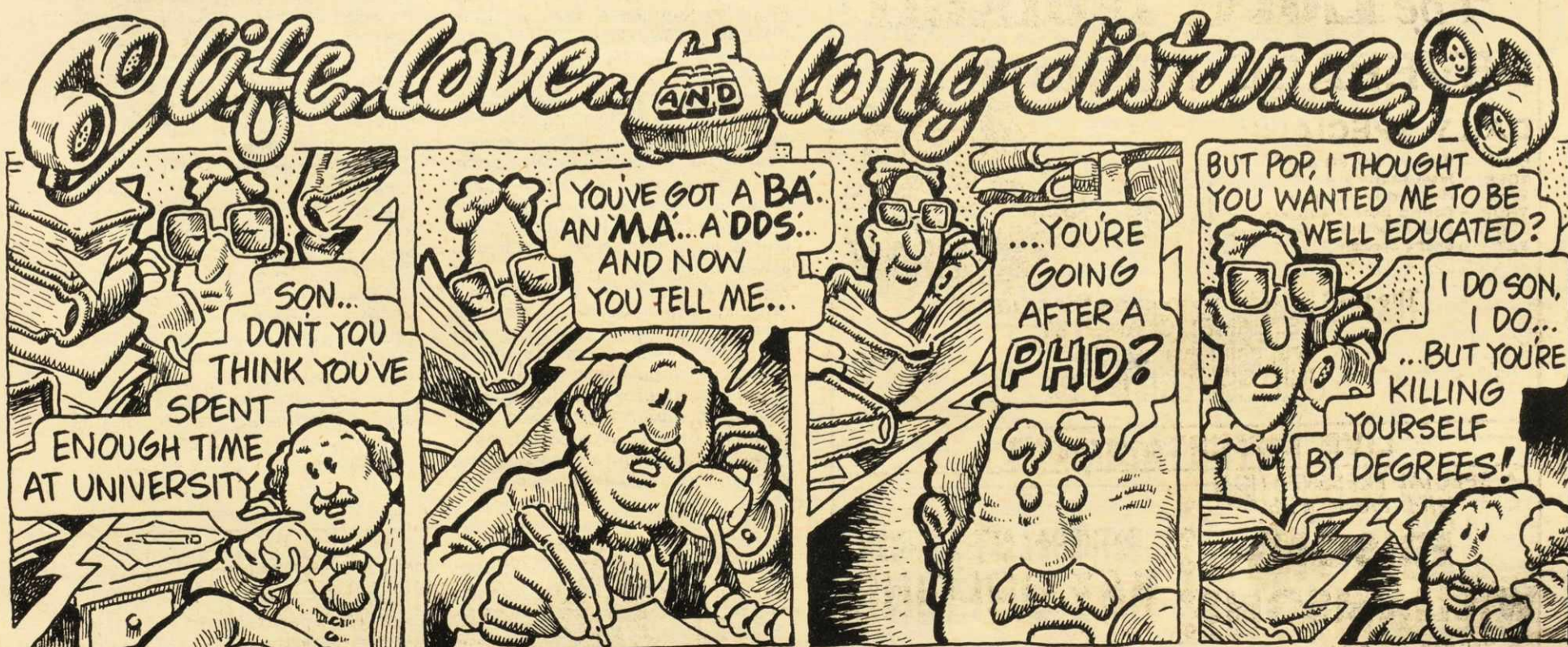


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