The Taming of the Shrew
Presented by the Synetic Theater at Synetic Theater, Arlington, VA. February 15–March 19, 2017. Adapted by Paata Tsikurishvili and directed by Irina Tsikurishvili. Choreography by Zana Gankhuyag. Costume and set design by Anastasia Rurikova Simes. Lighting design by Brian Allard. Music directed by Irakli Kavsadze. Music composition and sound design by Konstantine Lortkipanidze. With Janine Baumgardner (Widow and Ensemble), Justin Bell (Lucentio), Katherine Frattini (Model and Ensemble), Chris Galindo (Tailor and Ensemble), Zana Gankhuyag (Gremio), Irakli Kavsadze (Baptista), Alex Mills (Grumio), Stephen Russell Murray (Hortensio), Ryan Sellers (Petruchio), Nutsa Tediashvili (Bianca), Irina Tsikurishvili (Katherine), and Scott Turner (Tranio).

Alexa Alice Joubin, George Washington University

Can we entertain the idea that The Taming of the Shrew can be performed and received as comedy in the post-Women’s March US? If so, would the laughter be empathetic and solidary rather than callous? The answer lies in physical theater which is uniquely poised to activate elements of farce in the play. Shrew is one of the Shakespearean comedies that tends to clash with modern sensibilities and is therefore generally considered challenging to stage. The Synetic Theater’s version reminds us that, after all, the foundation of this play is farce, a play-within-a-play to mock the worldview of Christopher Sly the drunkard and to entertain the impersonated lords who derive voyeuristic pleasure from watching Sly gawking at Shrew. The so-called play-within-a-play could also be a fanciful dream of the inebriated Sly.

The Synetic Theater’s ninety-minute dance, musical, and visual feast rendered the comedy in vibrant colors—without spoken words. There was no induction or framing scene, though a fair amount of extratextual material had been introduced. Similar to Synetic’s 2009 production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream which opened with the birth of the Indian boy who transformed into the adult Puck, Shrew opened with a funeral scene in a sober tone, with Baptista and his daughters mourning the passing of his wife. With a stroke of deliberate incongruity, the funeral quickly faded into a series of fast-paced scenes of frivolity and slapstick comedy, as whimsical and kittenish Bianca pranced among suitors and took selfies. The contrast between the opening and subsequent scenes painted Bianca in a negative light. Contrary to traditional images of a saintly, virginal Bianca in Shakespeare’s text, Nutsa Tediashvili’s Bianca was not a particularly likeable character.
Crucially, the production did not invite the audience to laugh at Katherine’s expense. Far from it. We laughed with Irina Tsikurishvili’s Katherine and Ryan Sellers’s Petruccio as they tripped each other over and, in the final scene, as they schemed hand-in-hand for the wager money. The Synetic _Shrew_ did not so much rehash Elizabethan ideologies of gender roles as explore the play’s farcical undertone through the comical self-importance of the male characters around Katherine and through pantomime as a caricature.

As such, Paata Tsikurishvili’s adaptation offered a sympathetic interpretation of Katherine’s seemingly antisocial behaviors in the context of her fashion designer father Baptista’s flamboyant lifestyle and her self-indulgent sister Bianca’s Kardashianesque narcissism. Petruccio was no longer the lone antagonist. With their outsized personalities and retro 1990s costumes set against larger-than-life video projections by Riki Kim on the four gray columns center stage, Baptista and Bianca became the perfect provocateurs in Katherine’s life. Katherine experienced a sense of entrapment in the socialite society in Padua wood, a thinly-veiled metaphor for contemporary Hollywood. Consequently, Katherine distanced herself from the world of Baptista and Bianca, especially the catwalk scene earlier on where Bianca pranced across the stage in exuberant outfits. Her body language and movements were diametrically opposed to those of Bianca who flirted with a large group of suitors who were after her family’s wealth and fame. Bianca’s suitors were portrayed in broad, comic strokes, including a cross-dressing Lucentio and a puppy-like Gremio. While the series of wooing scenes were clearly played for laughs, they also served to underscore Katherine’s contempt, frustration, and possibly jealousy of Bianca’s popularity.

At the core of Tsikurishvili’s reimagined narrative was the relationship between Petruccio, a painter who loses the motivation to paint until he meets Katherine, and Katherine, a woman who discovers her true self and protects it at all costs. The visually-driven narrative in this stage production developed a clear trajectory that charted Katherine’s evolution from a social outcast to a heartbroken wife upon discovering that wager money was behind Petruccio’s marriage with her to a woman who rewrote the rules of the game by collaborating with Petruccio to win the wager in the final scene. The couple danced in competition against and eventually in unison with each other.

Synetic Theater took its name from the notions of kinetic synergy. While well-known for their Helen Hayes Award-winning series of silent Shakespeare performances since _Hamlet… the Rest is Silence_ (2002),
the company’s adaptations are full of music, sound, and kinetic energy. Founded by Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili, a Georgian couple who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1990s, Synthetic Theater focused on telling classical stories through music and dance. In Shrew, music in most scenes highlighted the superficiality of Padua wood. Soulful violin permeated the extended, melancholic scenes where Petruchio painted alone at night.

Two elements stood out in the evolving relationship between Petruchio and Katherine. First, the musically enhanced, physically demanding banter between them mixed calculated cruelty with slapstick comedy to make the taming of Katherine a more palatable caricature. In the banquet scene in Petruchio’s home, set up in the fashion of the Last Supper with a long table facing the audience and Petruchio sitting in the middle, Katherine found herself surrounded by lavish food but was unable to reach any dish. To Stomp beats, dishes were passed among Petruchio and his servants. Katherine hallucinated that the characters around her were humans with chicken heads. Her hallucination was represented by all the characters around her pulling out full-head masks resembling chicken heads in the middle of the dinner. As they swayed like chickens, they continued passing dishes around. In a few minutes they snapped back to reality and hid their masks under the table as if nothing had happened, leaving Katherine in a confused state. The Chaplinesque precision and dark humor added a layer of dramatic irony that is only possible in pantomime such as this.

Secondly, Tsikurishvili added a scene of self-recognition and conciliation between Petruchio and Katherine to convey the idea that true love prevailed. Katherine was annoyed by Petruchio’s sudden burst of passion to paint all night after the “taming scene” and dinner at his house. She discovered by accident that she had been the source of Petruchio’s newfound inspiration and subject of his new paintings. Standing in front of her portraits on the walls, Katherine was moved and fell in love with Petruchio, as her body language and facial expression made clear. The couple danced in unison as they threw paint at each other. A constructed sense of childlike innocence informed this scene.

The production reframed one of the most grueling questions raised by Shakespeare’s narrative, namely the nature of Petruchio’s taming and domestication of Kate, by tracing a new narrative arc that focused on the genuine love between Petruchio and Katherine, who turned out to be a match for each other both in terms of temper and their disapproval—and conversely clever manipulation—of Padua wood’s fame-craving culture. The playbill suggested that the production was driven by the idea that “in spite of past disillusionments, disappointments, failings and selfishness,
love is still possible." The adaptor and director enjoyed the advantage of not having to deal with the ideologically challenging verbal messages in Kate's long "submission speech" which has been variously performed, historically, with an ironic wink or with a tone of defiance in an effort to redeem the now politically incorrect play. In the final scene, Katherine and Petruchio were in on the scheme to win the wager, turning the tables on Paduawood's paparazzi by taking advantage of the culture of scandalous headlines. The couple walked off triumphantly, having delivered, as it were, what Paduawood craved (the couple's marriage as a source of tabloid materials that can be monetized) while keeping their true selves intact.

The Spanish Tragedy
Presented by The Broccoli Project at the Black Box Theater, University of Texas at Austin, TX. April 20–23, 2017. Directed by Who Ray and David Higbee Williams. Music and puppeteer training by James Smith. Lighting by Laura Nagy. Tech by Dana Moore. With Kat Agudo (King of Spain/Isabella/Lorenzo’s Page/Watchman), Casey Allman (Balthazar/Ambassador/Serberine/Hangman/Jacques), Gabe Colombo (Ghost of Andrea), Laura Doan (Bel-Imperia/Spanish General/Bazardo/Watchman), Patrick Greer (Duke of Castile/Horatio/Pedringano/Ambassador), Austin Hanna (Hieronimo/Ambassador), Nicole Harrison (Revenge), and Bryson Kisner (Lorenzo/Pedro/Watchman).

ELIZABETH ZEMAN KOLKOVICH, The Ohio State University, Mansfield

On opening night of a student production of The Spanish Tragedy at the University of Texas at Austin, its directors warned the audience about a "blood splatter zone" and "puppet sex." Although these two delightful spoilers accurately previewed its most memorable parts, the performance was still filled with surprises. This swiftly moving and thoroughly enjoyable puppet version of Thomas Kyd's revenge tragedy demonstrated the value of creative approaches to Renaissance drama.

Conceived and executed by a student group called "The Broccoli Project," the performance began with a man singing the Muppets theme song. The company members and their friends had made all the puppets, and indeed many recalled Jim Henson's style. Lorenzo's dimwitted Page, not quite a frog but resembling Kermit, was a small green puppet with googly eyes and curly hair. Some puppet choices were irreverent,
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