

A Kingdom for a Concept

How to reimagine Shakespeare for a new millennium?
Three companies craft their own approaches

A Bollywood-style *Anthony and Cleopatra*. A *fin-de-siècle* Vienna *King Lear*. Orson Welles's storied voodoo *Macbeth*. Ever since the Lord Chamberlain's Men staged *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a medieval mystery play—okay, we made that one up—directors have been devising adventurous approaches to the works of the Bard. In fact, the very concept of high-concept Shakespeare has become something of a cliché. So where does the genre stand in America in the early years of the millennium? *American Theatre* asked three writers—a dramaturg, a producing artistic director and a critic—to report on three recent Shakespeare productions of note.

'SHREW' TAKES A 1950s SPIN IN MUSIC CITY, U.S.A.

BY ROBERT NEBLETT

PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST PROBLEMATIC of Shakespeare's plays for contemporary

audiences to appreciate, *The Taming of the Shrew* often conjures up visions of glorified domestic violence—a picture that (rightfully) disturbs our modern conceptions of love and marriage. Kate and Petruchio's tumultuous relationship traditionally has been portrayed as one of mutual physical abuse, in which the “shrew” is “tamed” by beating her into submission. Nowhere has this made its way into our collective consciousness more clearly than in the popular 1967 Zeffirelli film starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who seem to be acting out their infamously volatile real-life marital squabbles on the screen.

This past March, the Tennessee Repertory Theatre in Nashville explored the comedy of the piece outside of this barbaric interpretive framework by setting it in the idyllic 1950s of America's television past. At the production's helm was producing artistic director David Grapes, whose concept was based upon the supposition that Kate and Petruchio must truly fall in love with one another early on in the play, and that their battling ends when they discover the joys of reciprocal compromise, rather than domination and submission. He wanted actors Anna Stone and Grant Goodman to exhibit Hepburn and Tracy's sexual dynamic, combined with a hint of James Dean's rock-and-roll defiance. Both of the partners refuse to conform to the strictures of a culture that values Bianca's shallow beauty above Kate's quick wit, and they learn that, although they play

by different rules, they *can* play together and make the game of life twice as fun and half as lonely.

Director Grapes, scenic designer Gary C. Hoff and costume designer Polly Boersig created a sort of “Pleasantville” in our Padua, complete with immaculate tract houses, white picket fences and perfectly mown lawns. These visuals provided a historical context in which Kate's rebellious independence is truly a social mystery to those around her, trapped as they are in a post-war status quo. She could be seen as a sort of “Rosie the Riveter” type of woman who refuses to give up her freedom and return to the Donna Reed world of happy domesticity. Petruchio would be conceived as a young golf pro who is reluctant to give up his swinging bachelor pad, but is captivated by the challenge that winning Kate's affections affords, as well as by her substantial dowry.

In this 1950s world, the story and the humor were largely told through music, via original pieces composed by Vince di Mura and a jukebox selection running the gamut from the Everly Brothers to Chuck Berry. Scenes were introduced by announcements from local radio station WBRD 1564 AM—from weather reports (it was always 72 degrees and partly sunny, naturally) to flower-arranging tips from homemaker Ophelia of Elsinore Lane to “Loveline” tips for heartbroken young Romeos in Verona. Props were conveniently delivered to characters by a roller-skating carhop who tempted all of the single men onstage with her sassy, bubble-blowing ways. Masters and servants became prank-loving frat brothers who rode through the streets on scooters and changed identities by stuffing themselves into phone booths and exchanging letter jackets.

The development of the play's mul-



Old fashions please me best: clockwise from top left, Keianna Richard, Miles Aubrey, Brian Webb Russell, Helen Shute Pettaway and Denice Hicks in Tennessee Repertory's *Taming of the Shrew*.

tiple courtships could be traced clearly through dance and music in this Technicolor production. Whereas Petruchio's first encounter with Kate was staged as an antagonistic tango with an unwilling, awkward partner, the Lolitaesque Bianca was given a bluesy lesson in love and music by nerdy Hortensio, now disguised in full Elvis regalia as her amorous tutor Litio. A slow dance at a drive-in movie opened Kate's eyes to the endearing side of her husband's Puckish spirit. Ultimately, the play's finale saw the once-graceless duo wow the guests at Lucentio's backyard barbecue with perfectly synchronized rock-and-roll steps to Gene Vincent's "Be-Bop-a-Lula" before the rest of the cast joined in with a raucous hula-hoop contest.

Since the 1950s middle-America of "Ozzie and Harriet" and "Father Knows Best" may be the closest thing our nation has to a fairy-tale past, the Tennessee Rep production staff relied heavily on pop culture iconography to evoke a world of innocence in which arranged marriages and culturally sanctioned misogyny are not yet seen as questionable practices. By returning to a romanticized yesterday when the barriers between right and wrong appeared so clear, we were able to allow Shakespeare to ask poignant questions about the limits of orthodox values and the innate worth of "a little nonsense now and then." In fact, this is the very lesson Petruchio teaches Kate: Even rebellion has its limits, and life is not meant to be taken so seriously that its many simple joys pass you by.

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