

# Wild and energetic *Shrew* is anything but tame

**Tight direction and bright acting results in an absolute treat**

**Michelle Chang**

On a campus that is so caught up in gender issues, you wouldn't think that a student would risk putting on a play which on the surface seems to be about the submission of women. Well, we can all be thankful that college senior Joey Rizzolo decided to take that risk for his senior honors project. His winning production of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is the event of the weekend and deservedly so.

Rizzolo, in the company of a brilliant cast, has tackled a potentially difficult text (both in literary complexity and political danger) and the effect is nothing short of fantastic.

Shakespeare was a comedic genius in his writing, but the laughs in this production certainly do not rely on word play alone. The comedic elements of the production that are the most effective and memorable come out of Rizzolo's direction, not the text.

Every scene seems laced with delicious comedic subtleties and scene stealing gags delivered by a set of very well developed characters. It also helps that the members of this cast generate a remarkable energy and rapport with each other on stage. They all appear to be having the time of their lives up there, which always speaks well for a production.

The audience cannot help but be taken in by all the fun. In fact, Rizzolo offers a personal refund to anyone who does not at least crack a smile.



On the whole, the ensemble cast of 12 is strong and well versed. College senior Patricia Comstock is an absolute marvel as the play's heroine, Katharina. From the moment she comes charging out on stage, she is filled with fiery rage and defiance. As the show progresses, she still maintains that steadfast level of intensity and strength even as she is being "tamed" down.

Junior Rajeev Punja commands convincing fear into the hearts of everyone on stage as the hot-tempered Petruchio while also playing up his slick, comedic side. Both actors handle Shakespeare's incessant word battles with wit and ease. In one clever scene, a sports scoreboard is actually brought out to keep track of who's winning.

Junior Cory Wallace delivers an all-out hilarious performance as Petruchio's servant, Grumio. The character may be that of an archetypal clown type, but Wallace plays it to the hilt and never fails to crack the audience up, especially with his side expressions. In a major revision of the original play, Lucentio is now Lucentia, giving the love affair between Lucentio and Bianca a scandalous twist. Sophomore Elizabeth Hilton plays the newly defined role with confidence and dashing appeal. Special applause also goes to the ever versatile Sally McGuire, who from the hunchback servant to the snoring

priest to a love drunk Romeo, provides many of the show's most charming gags. Rizzolo also works to engage the audience in other ways. Physical comedy was a standout factor in this production, from hair-pulling fight scenes to the door in the face bit. There was also a lot of chasing and running around, and the actors actually run right right through the audience seats. On the surface, it provides for a more visceral audience experience. But it also works to demonstrate the adolescent nature of the characters and their inability to deal with problems on a mature level.

In another notable choice, the scene where Gremio and Tranio compete for Bianca is turned into a public auction and the audience is actually given auction paddles before the show starts. The auctioneer is of course Bianca's father, Baptista, played by junior Morgan Dowsett who engages in a funny, improvisational interplay with the bidding audience.

This particular decision really serves to bring out the corrupt nature of the father, and ties directly into Rizzolo's framing of this production around issues of love and parenting rather than the usual topics of gender and patriarchy. A scene of a similar poignancy occurs following Katharina's painful wedding ceremony. Instead of the original exeunt, Kate comes back out after having been ushered away by Petruchio. She overhears her father's bliss at having finally married Kate off (even if her husband is slightly mad) and that Bianca can now take her room. They exit the stage merrily and slam the door, at which moment the music cuts off and Katharina is left standing, alone and quite devastated in her abandonment.

This refocusing of the play around these issues is a refreshing decision, but seems to pertain to only parts of this play. Rizzolo expressed that the idea of rites of passage and initiation into adulthood were central themes in thinking about this production.

In watching *Taming of the Shrew*, one felt a sense of thoroughness and detail, which is indicative of the time and care put into this production. However, at times there seems to be almost too many elements thrown in. The set, for example, which consisted of Roman arches against a backdrop of urban graffiti, made its point but did not gel stylistically with anything. The costumes were character driven instead of being period or theme driven, resulting in a lack of cohesion.

There's also a random mix of musical selections, from Snoop Doggy Dog to "Pomp and Circumstance" to "Jungle Boogie." All in all, the production does not suffer much from these free form aesthetic choices, and in fact it seems to add to the show's unpredictable and playful nature.

*The Taming of the Shrew goes up in The Little Theater tonight and tomorrow night at 8 p.m and Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are sold out.*

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**Photo:**

**Playing tricks:** Patricia Comstock and Geoffrey Taylor share a sweet embrace during a comedic moment. *(photo by Pauline Shapiro)*

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