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The Satirikon Reworks 'The Taming of the Shrew'

By John Freedman

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Artyom Osipov, above, charms as Petruchio with Agrippina Steklova a delight in Yakov Lomkin's "The Taming."

There is good reason to flaunt the capabilities of the company at the Satirikon Theater, one of the most powerful, agile, accomplished groups of actors anywhere.

Consider Yakov Lomkin's production of "The Taming," a radical interpretation of Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew." Actors are all over the stage, all over each other, and even up and down the aisles among the spectators. It is filled with fights, dances, chase scenes and acrobatics.

Lomkin deftly uses Shakespeare's text to unleash entertaining physical mayhem, although we don't always realize that in the moment. During one transition a great hurricane ensues, as humans, clothing and other stray detritus are blown across the stage at fierce force. Only when the winds subside does Hortensio ask Petruchio "what happy gale" has blown him

into town.

"Such wind as scatters young men through the world," Petruchio replies jauntily.

It's a funny and clever moment that epitomizes the best of this production. But such little triumphs are not always enough to make sense of this story as a whole.

There surely are ways to successfully retell one of Shakespeare's crudest plays, for, if there is one thing we know with certainty, it is that anything is possible in the theater. But as I watched the performance of this story about a headstrong man beating back a headstrong woman, I could not help but sense that the story did not fit the telling of it.

Most likely, we are witnessing a traveling troupe of actors or clowns who spontaneously take on the personae of Shakespeare's characters. Designer Akinf Belov uses covered wagons, the itinerant performers' mode of transportation, as building blocks to form houses, tents and other locations and backgrounds. Most scenes are played out against an aggressive soundtrack of semi-ancient pop songs — "Sunny," "Stairway to Heaven," "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" and others.

Agrippina Steklova's Katharina, the shrew of the original title, is a sight and a delight to behold. She is a force of nature. She is that very hurricane that scatters men through the world. She has smart instincts, she has a heart and she doesn't give a damn if others think she looks like a stick in the mud.

She, by the way, is the first to plant a juicy kiss on Petruchio, although she immediately hauls off and slaps him one good just in case he got the wrong — or the right? — impression.

But as the relationship between Katharina and Petruchio develops, you see Shakespeare's story heading in one direction as Lomkin struggles valiantly to pull it in another.

What Lomkin sought to do with his traveling circus idea was to paint a picture of two eccentrics, two high-strung, opinionated outcasts finding each other in a world of conformists. By pulling them out of any social or historical context and putting them in a play-within-a-play, he sought to give them a new, unfettered freedom. He embraced Shakespeare's sometimes violent descriptions of action, trusting that, by spreading it out more or less evenly among the dueling couple, it would bring us to a place of parity.

But that doesn't happen fully. The cringe factor in Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" remains in force. The browbeating, the shaming, the objectivization of Katharina wears very thin very quickly. Giving her a few counterpunches is just not enough. There is something mean and wrong at the heart of this play, and it takes more than some brilliant performances and smart directorial moves to overcome that.

To his distinct credit, Artyom Osipov is a charming, funny, forgivable Petruchio. This is a young man filled with the energy of the earth. He immediately stands out in a crowd, and he makes great effort to do so. You're willing to believe that he is precisely the kind of person who would cause Katharina to grab and kiss him without thinking. Surely, this is the rare individual that the lonely young woman, under-appreciated in her own home, might have dreamed about.

Ultimately, regardless of what works or doesn't in "The Taming," the Osipov-Steklova pairing is always a joy to behold.

"The Taming" (Ukroshcheniye) plays Thursday and Dec. 11, 20, 25 and 30 at 7 p.m. at the Satirikon Theater, located at 8 Sheremetyevskaya Ulitsa. Metro Marina Roshcha. 495-689-7844. Satirikon.ru*. Running time: 2 hours, 50 minutes.*

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