

Voelker-Orth Perfect Bard Backdrop

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By Barbara Arnstein

Shakespeare in summer is always a joy, and it was a great pleasure to see one of his most popular comedies, "The Taming of the Shrew," performed in the garden of the Voelker-Orth Museum in Flushing on the evening of Aug. 26.

The museum, a restored Flushing home, has gingerbread-house beauty. Its garden includes a large trellis dripping with big bunches of plump purple grapes, and there are beautiful blossoms blooming everywhere.

In this idyllic setting, amid darting dragonflies, The Hip to Hip Theatre Company expertly enacted the comedy concerning two very different sisters: the meek Bianca (Quinlan Pozner), indulged by her father, but prevented by custom from marrying before her older sister does; and the jealous Katharine (Joy Marr), always too angry to attract any suitors.

The story begins with the arrival of Lucentio (Erick Gonzalez), who vows to marry Bianca at first sight, and Petruchio (Jason Marr), determined to marry Katharine as soon as he hears of her (for her money). As Petruchio strives to keep Katharine off-balance with aggravating antics, Lucentio trades places with his servant Tranio (Justin Sease) to achieve his aim, while dealing with Bianca's other suitors, Hortensio (Tom Bateman) and Gremio (Daren Kelly). The action includes hilarious verbal duels, merry misunderstandings and general clever clowning.

Performances of "Shrew" on stage and screen have too often portrayed Petruchio's treatment of Katharine as purely sadistic and yet innately funny, reflecting the simple-minded idea that watching one person abusing another is amusing. Happily, this was a "Shrew" for 2010: the audience was clearly shown, thanks to Joy Marr's sarcastic emphasis of certain lines, that despite Petruchio's madcap courtship, Katharine retains her self-respect by humoring him (like the child he is inside) until his shenanigans cease and their real relationship begins, based on love, and not money.

Jason and Joy Marr brought to their roles the rapport they share in their real-life marriage, and expertise from their extensive acting backgrounds. Justin Sease's comic transformation from an obedient servant to an absurdly self-confident nobleman was a masterpiece of comedy. Erick Gonzalez's Lucentio was nicely romantic. He handled especially well the scene in which Lucentio must alternately woo Bianca and recite Latin phrases out loud to soothe the suspicions of a rival in the room. Aaron Rossini (who greatly resembles Hamish Linklater on "The New Adventures of Old Christine") was consistently hilarious as the silly, frantic servant Biondello. Kudos to the director, Elizabeth Carlson.

Another contemporary change: Petruchio's household servants are female rather than male. A welcome touch: the Shakespearean sonnets recited before the play. Visit the Hip to Hip Theatre Company's website at hiptohip.org. To join their mailing list, email your contact information to contact@hiptohip.org.

The Voelker-Orth Museum is located at 149-19 38th Avenue in Flushing. Tours are conducted on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. It is best to make a reservation. Upcoming events there include harp music on Sept. 12 and Octoberfest. Call (718) 359-6227 for more information.