

Slapstick on rye, bitters on the side

The Taming of the Shrew

By William Shakespeare

New Perspectives Theatre Company

New Perspectives, 750 8th Ave., 6th fl. (730-2030)

Equity showcase (closes Nov. 10)

Review by David Mackler, OOB

The Christopher Sly "induction" to *The Taming of the Shrew* is usually jettisoned; or if included, he is usually carried off sleeping. The New Perspectives production took it very seriously, though, and even added a conclusion from a contemporaneous version of the play. It added a surprisingly powerful punch to what would otherwise still have been an extremely satisfying version of Kate and Petruchio's tale.

The Sly story has a dark edge to it, with the Lord (a very well-spoken **Kwaku Driskell**) and his henchmen (a touch of homoeroticism there) taking in the drunken Sly (**George Spencer**) and arranging with a troupe of strolling players to put on a play. They will pretend Sly is a lord, and the Lord's servant Bartholomew (**Erwin P. Falcon**) dressed, against his will, as Sly's wife. But the bitter undertaste is pushed off to the side as a vaudeville/burlesque version of *Shrew* is performed for their, and the audience's, benefit.

And what a production! Leering comics; baggy pants; women in bustiers, high heels, and feather boas; everything played with a wink and a leer; and there was a sound effect for every punchline - horns, whoopee whistles, wood blocks. And while this *Shrew* was *fast* it was also wonderfully clear, with some terrific performances that kept the concept from overwhelming the play. Petruchio (**Ray A. Rodriguez**) had the look of Bud Abbott and the bravura of Groucho Marx, Kate (**Nicole Godino**) was a coarse version of Joan Blondell, Grumio (**Ames Adamson**)'s model was Gabby Hayes, and the breath-takingly funny **Christopher Kirk Allen** was channeling Eddie "Rochester" Anderson for his Gremio. **Stacey Mandeville** was a terrifically bright and sexy Tranio, and she did a fine time step as well. **Monica Asencio** was a Bianca straight from New Jersey; **DeAnna Gonzales**'s Baptista was a sprite with wings. Obviously, an actor's sex only rarely coincided with the character's, and lots of fun was had with fake beards, Asencio and **Annemieke Marie Farrow** in particular. (Farrow also played a great Hortensio.)

And all of this was played to Sly and Bartholomew, who were seated on a lounge in the audience (kudos to Falcon and Spencer for staying in character the whole time), with the Lord enjoying the result of his prank. But the good spirits vanished when Sly rushed the stage near the end, and the rest of the play was performed with the actors clearly on edge. This beautifully set up the coda, which made clear what some people will do for survival and that some people have more money than they deserve.

The thrust-stage set (production designed by **Meganne George**) was mostly suggestions of the time period, and the costumes were wildly eclectic and very effective. With so much going on on stage, the lighting (**Jennifer Collins**) simply kept everything well illuminated, although the suggestion of a street was less effective. Presumably it was stage manager **Katherine West** who helped keep the sound effects astonishingly on cue, and director **Miriam Eusebio** deserves high praise for keeping everything in balance, and mixing broad humor with biting social commentary.

And therein lay the show's real value - for all its vaudeville and circus trimmings, this is a very erudite *Shrew*. Artistic Director/dramaturg **Melody Brooks** has done her job well, almost too well - the better you know your Shakespeare, the more sharpness and depth this production has. Even though it is putatively set in the '20s, it actually had the feel of a '30s Warner Bros. musical - there was plenty to enjoy, but it was framed in reality. Kate and Petruchio get together as always (Kate's final speech was performed as a fan dance) but the glory of this *Shrew* was that it accomplished so much more as well.