

Junior Players Take *The Taming of the Shrew* To Their Phones

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MONDAY, JULY 25, 2016 AT 10:21 A.M.



In the past century, theater practitioners have engaged in a campaign to retranslate the Bard's work from a traditional Elizabethan context into increasingly innovative settings: the Wild West, the Roaring Twenties, post nuclear holocaust, even the moon. This week, the high school artists in Junior Players' *The Taming of the Shrew* will take Shakespeare to an even bolder new place: inside of their phones.

Under the direction of Junior Players alumna Anastasia Munoz, the team has not only embraced a contemporary setting for *The Taming of the Shrew*, but created a unique digital universe for the production, freeing the student ensemble to use all aspects of their social-media dominated lives to inform their character work as actors.

Onstage this approach incorporates iPhones and selfies and a maelstrom of tweets. Offstage, the concept includes a public Facebook group where the fictional characters have interacted with each other organically for weeks while spectators and future audience members follow along.

Some actors were initially a bit skeptical of any adults asking them to incorporate technology into the production. "When I heard 'modern *Taming of the Shrew*' I was thinking, like, 'You want me to say 'hashtag Kate is hashtag mad?'" one student says. But for these high-schoolers, the oldest of whom was born in 1997, a digital persona and online presence has been a reality of their expression. Therefore, creating fully fleshed digital identities for the characters they portray has served as a logical and natural extension of their creative work.

For actress Nicole Cisneros, who plays Bianca, the play's coveted younger sister, this meant retranslating her character into an Insta-famous social media celebrity; a Kardashian of sorts. Her desirability over that of her "shrew-like" sister Katherine is made immediately apparent via Facebook threads. For instance, when Nicole-as-Bianca updates her profile picture, a feeding frenzy ensues as her many suitors battle to win her heart and gain her attention via Facebook comments.

"It's really fun and inclusive and you get to be yourself while being another character," says Cisneros. "You're learning how the character works in your world instead of putting yourself in an old world that was created a

long time ago.”

Because the audience gets to follow along at home, those previously unfamiliar with Shakespeare’s world gain insight into the nuances of each clownish character. “They already have opinions about the characters just from seeing them on the Facebook group,” says actress Maison Kelly. “They’re already like, ‘Oh that’s Hortensio, he’s awful on Facebook. Or Bianca, she’s famous, she posts selfies.’ It settles a lot of exposition before [the audience] comes in.”

For those actors who don’t have many scenes, the digital universe of *The Taming of the Shrew* has provided an environment in which to dig further into developing their characters. For actors such as Rudy Lopez this has also created an opportunity to prepare the audience with weeks worth of backstory prior to the first scene, distributed in real-time updates.

“Since we created the Shakespeare group, I’ve been posting all day saying things like ‘Getting ready to go to New York’ and ‘Off to visit my buddy Hortensio.’ ... It’s really fun getting to interact before the play happens. It develops a life to your character. Instead of it just being a character, it’s an actual human being with a backstory.”

As for bringing the digital universe to life onstage, student designer Alison Sloan stepped in to create the numerous projections required to integrate the social media landscape into the plot.

For instance, under Munoz’s direction, a Twitter thread streams differing reactions to pivotal plot points, serving a function not unlike a traditional Greek chorus.

Sloan’s favorite digital addition helps contemporize the overbearing courtship of the leading man. “Petruccio takes Kate’s phone and changes her relationship status to ‘Engaged’ and goes to her iCalendar and sets the wedding dates,” Sloan says. “So when [Kate] opens her computer, we see a bunch of Facebook ‘Congratulations!’ that just continue to scroll. ... It’s hard work to build but it’s so fun.”

This is not, however, a case of young people finally accepting the relevance of Shakespeare’s work in the modern age. These Junior Players ensemble members are self-proclaimed “theater nerds” from 16 different high schools across North Texas; teenagers who voluntarily dedicate their summers to dutifully annotating, memorizing and performing classical texts.

While none question the immediacy or importance of Shakespeare’s words, many of the young actors are thrilled that a modern influence has provided inroads for their friends who wouldn’t normally make it out to Shakespeare in the Park. “I’ve always loved Shakespeare,” says Kelly. “But now I know I can invite you to this show even if this isn’t your bread and butter; you’re gonna love it. Not that it’s dumbed down, because it’s not; it’s the same text. But it’s more exciting and alive and more accessible.”

The satire of performing their own millennial *mise en scène* is not lost on this group of young actors. Under Munoz’s innovative direction, they are forced to simultaneously embrace being immediately present onstage, while performing an obsession with engaging the world via phones and screens. Kelly did a double-take upon seeing the blocking. “In the opening scene Tranio and Lucentio take a selfie in between a couple lines,” she says. “When I first saw that I thought, ‘Uh, we don’t always take selfies.’ And then I look to my left, off in the wings, and that’s exactly what everyone waiting offstage was doing. It’s very much real.”

Armed with a healthy dash of self-awareness, these actors have seamlessly interwoven their performative identities online with their performed characters onstage. After all, they have lived their whole lives with their own personalized, fictional digital-personas staring back at them; to lend these performative masks to Shakespeare’s text is a natural next step. For this summer, at least, all the digital world’s a stage, and these young men and women are merely players.

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/arts/the-junior-players-take-the-taming-of-the-shrew-to-their-phones-8524010>