

## Rowdy 'Shrew' is breathtaking fun

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Benjamin Curns in "The Taming of the Shrew." / Submitted/Michael Bailey

Written by  
**Charles Culbertson**  
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If you're going to do "The Taming of the Shrew," do it right.

At least, that appears to be the philosophy of the American Shakespeare Center, which has staged a spectacularly rowdy and fun-filled version of the Bard's most famous comedy of the sexes. It hums with energy; it wields language like a rapier; it pierces straight to the funny bone; it produces laughter and applause that rock the rafters of the Blackfriars Playhouse.

Director Jim Warren needs to take a bow for giving us a staging that makes absolutely no concessions to the lunacy of political correctness. "Shrew," as Shakespeare wrote it, is about a man who tames a woman in the wildest, most comical way imaginable and finishes off with a concession speech by Kate that tends to give modern feminists the heebie-jeebies.

But for Warren, there is no flinching from the action or soft-focusing of the final speech. We get what Shakespeare wrote, and we get it — as the title of the new program guide announces — "straight up." Which is precisely as it should be. As shrew-tamer Petruchio says in a line that seems to have been written with today's thought-and-speech police in mind: "If she and I be pleased, what's that to you?"

To us, that means a classic of Western drama seen and heard as it was meant to be seen and heard. We also get to experience it at the hands of a cast among which there are no weak links. Everyone's at the top of his or her game. Some roles are bigger than others, but the actors in this cast — who perform double and even triple duty — give the most fleeting onstage presences vibrancy and uniqueness.

The play, of course, centers on Petruchio and Kate, who represent a match made somewhere between heaven and a boxing ring.

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Without top-of-the-line actors in these two roles, not much of anything else would work. And in Benjamin Curns and Sarah Fallon, top-of-the-line is what we get.

Curns is a superb Petruchio. He is physically adept, as he must be in order to cope with the volatile Kate, but more than that, he brings a good-natured, devil-may-care rascality to the role that at once captivates the audience and impels them to root for him throughout the play. Curns gives us a strong man who knows what he wants and knows how to get it, and does so with an irresistible, irrepressible gleam in his eye.

When I think of Shakespeare's shrew, I think of Sarah Fallon. This is the second time I've seen her in this role, and I truthfully can't imagine anyone else who could do it equal or better justice. She brings a full-claws-extended, wildcat vivacity to the role that's breathtaking in its ferocity and an equally impressive demureness to the character once she has seen the error of her ways.

The director was inspired when he cast these two people in the lead roles.

Also, there may be no funnier actors in captivity than Daniel Kennedy, Ginna Hoben, James Keegan, Allison Glenzer, John Harrell, Rene Thornton Jr. and Chris Johnston, who strut their comedic stuff with outrageous glee for the length of the play. Add to this feral mix the talents of Emily Gibson, Jeremiah Davis, Patrick Midgley and Paul Jannise, and you have nothing short of a recipe for complete success.

**E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at [mail@stauntonhistory.com](mailto:mail@stauntonhistory.com).**

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