

THE WASHINGTON POST
A JOLLY 'SHREW' THAT'S SHORT ON SUBTLETY
By William Triplett June 18, 1998

Subtlety falls under the wheels of Shenandoah Shakespeare Express's rollicking production of "The Taming of the Shrew." But it's just the thing to see if all you want is a good belly laugh -- and if you can ignore the play's, ah, less-than-feminist implications. Which inadvertently get thrust to the fore as a result of the jolly good time everyone has.

The Express is dedicated to presenting its namesake's plays as much as possible the way Elizabethan actors presented them to their audiences. That is, in natural light, with no set and a minimum of props and scenery. Company members not only acknowledge the presence of an audience, they occasionally interact with it, incorporating spectator responses into the action. And the acting style is, in a word, big. Really big. Shakespeare's comedies can certainly stand up to that style (and just about any other you care to throw at them). Take, for example, the Express's equally rollicking production last year of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" -- not in the least poetic despite the highly poetic language. It was, instead, anarchic and loony and extremely entertaining.

But "Shrew" -- about a man who agrees to marry, well, a shrew of a woman for her dowry, but ends up in love with her (and she with him) -- is a special case. Its theme of forcing women into submission isn't exactly easy to ignore. But it wasn't intended to be the point of the play even when Shakespeare wrote it: Man's dominion over woman was, at the time, simply a given. The point was rather a comic portrait of love developing between the original odd couple. A love that emerges subtly amid the laughs. But if the comedy is too broad and rolls over it, you're left with a man teaching a woman how to behave. **As directed by Ralph Alan Cohen and Peggy O'Brien, this "Shrew" is a cross-cultural carnival, mixing iambic pentameter with sight gags and routines that could have come from Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges and "Hee Haw."** It's a pie in the face of every tedious, academic production or lecture of Shakespeare you've ever experienced. It's also very kid-friendly: Children, as far as I could tell, loved it. For both those things, the Express should be thanked.

In particular, a pat on the back goes to Kate Norris, whose portrayal of Kate, the title character, shows you a great deal of why she's so impossible -- she's genuinely hurt from endlessly losing out to her conniving younger sister, Bianca (Jessica Meyer). As Petruchio, the tamer, Carl Martin is the picture of unflappable self-confidence. Michael Glenn plays Grumio, Petruchio's servant, with a sort of wonderful haplessness. Other fine supporting work comes from Tim Gore, Walter Elder, Jonathon Church and Scott Nath.

Cohen and O'Brien have produced a campy, athletic hoot, but at the expense of the play's soul. The stage antics, which get wilder with every scene, are platforms for Petruchio's will to gain advantage over Kate's. You'll laugh a lot, but heartlessly: The love that eventually develops seems to be the natural result of a woman's recognizing her place, instead of two people recognizing things about themselves. *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Ralph Alan Cohen and Peggy O'Brien. Production design by Susannah Anderson. With Heather Peak, Tom Summers and Kathryn L. Van Meter. In rep with "Richard III" and "Measure for Measure" through July 3 at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Call 202-544-7077. CAPTION: Shenandoah Shakespeare Express's comic acting in "Taming of the Shrew" is inspired, but they may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater.