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THEATER REVIEW

A 'Shrew' made for the L.A. lifestyle

Wheeled vehicles and cellphones abound in a sometimes too zippy updating of 'The Taming of the Shrew.'

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There ought to be a SigAlert in effect for the Shakespeare Festival/LA's production of "The Taming of the Shrew." In the hectic opening sequence, a group of actors on wheels is trying to get to a Malibu beach house in a hurry, only to get mired in a nasty onstage traffic jam.

The Bard never had to deal with the CHP in his lifetime. But the cast of this modernized production, now playing at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown L.A., has fully embraced the Southern California lifestyle, particularly our addiction to wheels and the mess it sometimes causes.

The comedy about love and mistaken identity features a large cast of characters brought together by intersecting destinies, emotional U-turns and high-speed chases (of the romantic variety). In short, the play lends itself surprisingly well to the contemporary SoCal interpretation, even if the production's engine stalls noticeably in the second half.

No actual cars make an appearance in this staging; instead, the cast zips around on bicycles, Rollerblades, scooters and a big golf cart, all of which are meant to stand in for the automobile's crucial functions as a transportation vector and totem of social class.

The play's most desired characters are a pair of sisters, Katherine (Sabra Williams) and Bianca (Amy Handelman), who live with their father in a seaside mansion. These Westside princesses -- think Paris and Nicky, only smarter and fluent in verse -- become the objects of conquest for a group of suitors descending on their home with the intent to marry.

Petruchio (Geoffrey Lower) is the smartest and suavest of the bachelors, a bon vivant swinger who falls for the hot-tempered Katherine. Since her father insists that Katherine must marry before Bianca, the other suitors bide their time in a game of switched identities, each trying to win over the more ladylike sister.

The production bends over backward to make the story accessible, including paring down Shakespeare's text to a manageable running time of two hours plus intermission. Ben Donenberg's direction makes ample use of consumer technology, with characters chatting on cellphones and sending text messages.

But by the second half of the play, many of the contemporary winks have lost their novelty and the production feels increasingly strained in its effort to remain hip and upbeat. The cast moves around the stage in a constant state of euphoric panic, emphasizing the physicality of the play rather than the poetry -- a decision perhaps necessitated by the production's wonky amplification system.

Lower is the standout member of the cast, playing Petruchio with wily intelligence and unforced humor. As his eventual conquest, Williams is somewhat less convincing, playing Katherine as fashionably moody rather than truly shrewish -- a rocker chick perpetually posing for an album cover.

The production recovers nicely for the climax, zooming through the play's final scenes. Like a decent joy ride, this "Taming" delivers speed and fun, even if Shakespeare's lyricism gets left behind in the dust.

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