

THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

The
Taming of
the Shrew

March 2007



Ballet Notes



Cover: Greta Hodgkinson
and Guillaume Côté (2005).
This page: John Cranko with
Stuttgart Ballet's Marcia
Haydée and Richard Cragun
in rehearsal (c.1969).

The Taming of the Shrew

A ballet in two acts after William Shakespeare

Choreography: John Cranko

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Produced and Staged by: Reid Anderson

Originally Reproduced from the Benesh Notation by: Jane Bourne

Music: Domenico Scarlatti, arranged by Kurt-Heinz Stolze,
published by Edition Modern AG

Set and Costume Design: Susan Benson

Lighting Design: Robert Thomson

Assistant to Miss Benson: Marjory Fielding

This production entered the repertoire of
The National Ballet of Canada on February 13, 1992;
Walter Carsen, O.C. totally underwrote the
original production and generously sponsored
the 2006 refurbishment.

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Synopsis

Baptista, a rich gentleman of Padua, has two daughters. The elder, Katherina, an intelligent, outspoken woman, is thought to be a shrew by the townsfolk. What Katherina really resents is the preferential attention paid to her silly, vain sister, Bianca, by everyone. Despite her objections, Katherina is married to Petruchio. Petruchio marries Katherina for her money and sets out to bully her into submission. But who tames whom, the spectator must decide.

Act I

Scene 1: Outside Baptista's house

Three suitors, the cockscomb Hortensio, the silly student Lucentio and the old roué Gremio, arrive to serenade Baptista's pretty, younger daughter, Bianca. Wrapped in large cloaks, each presents her with a token of his love. Gremio gives her a fan, Hortensio a glove and Lucentio a rose. Bianca's older sister, Katherina, interrupts the idyllic scene. Baptista shoos the suitors away, declaring that Bianca shall not marry until Katherina is wed.

Scene 2: A tavern

In a local tavern, the three suitors nurse their battle scars from their encounter with Baptista. Petruchio, a gentleman of more generosity than means, arrives very tipsy and is stripped of his last penny by two prostitutes. The three suitors offer to introduce Petruchio to a rich young woman to save him from poverty. Always game for adventure and wealth, Petruchio accepts their offer.

Scene 3: Baptista's house

Bianca admires the gifts presented by her suitors, her favourite being Lucentio's rose. Katherina arrives to interrupt her sister's happiness. Baptista separates his quarrelling daughters.

Petruchio arrives at Baptista's house and asks for Katherina's hand in marriage, sight unseen! After a stormy and tempestuous first meeting, reminiscent of a wrestling match, Katherina grudgingly agrees to marry Petruchio. Never has a man brought her to such a state of anger, frustration and piqued curiosity. Baptista is exultant.

Meanwhile Bianca's suitors, in disguise, try to win her over, under pretense of giving her singing, dancing and music lessons. Each tries to outdo the other, showing off his skills to no avail. Not surprisingly, her favourite teacher is none other than Lucentio.

Katherina furiously interrupts their romantic encounter and brings havoc to Bianca's schooling. The attacks continue as Katherina and Petruchio are left alone for their first of many matches.

Scene 4: A street

All the neighbours gather to attend Katherina's wedding. They find it hysterical that she has agreed to marry such a man. Bianca's suitors gleefully join them in a playful, silly dance.

Scene 5: Baptista's house

Katherina is dragged to her wedding kicking and screaming by her father. Petruchio arrives late and behaves outrageously. After the ceremony, Petruchio carries his bride off without waiting for the feast that has been prepared by Baptista.

Act II

Scene 1: A country road

The newlyweds, Katherina and Petruchio, travel by horse through a torrential storm toward Petruchio's house.

Scene 2: Petruchio's kitchen

Katherina arrives in her new home hungry, cold and soaked to the skin. Petruchio prevents her from eating under the pretext that the food is not good enough for her and prevents her from warming herself before the fire by smothering it with water. In retaliation, Katherina refuses to go to bed with Petruchio and spends the night on the kitchen hearth.

Scene 3: A carnival

Lucentio bribes two prostitutes to wear cloaks and masks similar to those worn by Bianca. He also distributes a fan, a glove and a rose to each of the women. The disguises work to trick his two rivals, Gremio and Hortensio into marrying the prostitutes, and he is left with Bianca.

Scene 4: Petruchio's house

Still cold and starving, Katherina is at her wit's end with Petruchio, but they finally wear each other down. Exhausted and repentant, the two finally admit that they love each other. Petruchio treats Katherina to a giant feast, which she devours.

Scene 5: A country road

Travelling back for Bianca's wedding on a warm, sunny day, Petruchio indulges in some more whims, but now Katherina has learned how to humour him.

Scene 6: Bianca's wedding

Bianca and the brides of Gremio and Hortensio treat their husbands disdainfully. It is now a transformed, sweet and docile Katherina who shows them how a wife is expected to behave. Left alone, Katherina and Petruchio revel in their new-found love and respect.

Clockwise: Rex Harrington as Petruchio and Martine Lamy as Katherina (1999), Martine Lamy as Katherina with Artists of the Ballet (1992), Karen Kain as Katherina and Robert Conn as Petruchio (1993).



The Taming of the Shrew:

Shakespeare in Motion

Both of John Cranko's full-length Shakespearean ballets are about the transforming power of love, and have in common Cranko's trademark brilliant pas de deux, his ability to portray character and to tell a profoundly human story through dance, and an undeniable appeal to audiences around the world. But *The Taming of the Shrew* is in many ways the "anti-*Romeo and Juliet*." Silly (with an inspired silliness) and comic, it mirrors its solemn and tragic sibling sometimes scene for scene: a tender wedding with the wise Friar Lawrence becomes a farcical free-for-all with a cartoonish priest; bridesmaids who are an ironic harbinger of death in the one are chased around by a baulky and belligerent bride with a limp lily in the other; a pas de trois depicting the exuberant high spirits of young men in Verona becomes

a vaudeville trio of Chaplinesque buffoons in Padua. Both ballets end in tears, though in one they are tears of sorrow and the other tears of laughter. But above all, unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, Katherina and Petruchio do anything but fall in love at first sight.

For Cranko's virtuoso depiction in dance of the war of the sexes (a favourite theme which Shakespeare revisited in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*) we have to thank Shakespeare's plot, of course, but also the two legendary Stuttgart Ballet dancers on whom the ballet was created: Marcia Haydée and Richard Cragun. A couple offstage as well as onstage, they had a relationship that could be described as tumultuous. It can safely be said that if



this ballet had been created on other dancers, it would have been very different, for Cranko's method of working was to come into the studio, give his dancers an idea of what he wanted rather than specific steps, see what they came up with, and then edit.

Cranko's muse, Haydée, had proven she was a great dance-actress in tragic dramatic roles by creating both Tatiana in *Onegin* and Juliet. But her lively sense of humour offstage led him to cast her in this comic role (which she in fact dreaded at first). Katherina's character also inspired Cranko because she is not the sweet young maiden (far from it!) or disembodied spirit who was the traditional ballet heroine. His ideal ballet heroine was always a woman liberated from "*perpetual virginity...free to be a woman and [then] the male dancers will be free to be men.*" Katherina is intelligent, proud, impatient, scornful, one who doesn't suffer fools gladly. She is also thoroughly disagreeable at first, a woman who has learned that to deal with the unfairness of the world that prefers the pretty and apparently sweet-natured Bianca she must come out with fists flailing or, even more appropriately since Shakespeare makes many "cat" puns on her name, with claws extended. This has become her persona, but it is not her true nature, as the progress of the ballet proves.

Richard Cragun was a strong partner with a virtuoso technique and outgoing personality—the perfect recipe for the swaggering braggadocio of the leading man. Petruccio's role is physically one of the hardest for men in ballet, requiring two big solos and three punishing pas de deux. The second solo, at the wedding in the first act, includes Cragun's famous triple tour en l'air (landing on one foot no less), a feat of virtuosity since the standard tour requires "only" two rotations in the air. As in *Onegin* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the pas de deux that chart the progression in the lovers' relationship are the highlight of the show, with Cranko's typically spectacular high lifts, flips, slides, and off-balance promenades, all of them very demanding on the male dancer. More than one leading danseur, sweat pouring off his brow and arm muscles aching, has probably thought,

"Cranko ballets are so unfair! The guy does all this work—lifting and leaping—and at the end the ballerina gets all this applause!"

It is in the pas de deux that these equally strong-willed protagonists come together, and, as in Shakespeare, "*where two raging fires meet together/They do consume the thing that feeds their fury.*" Their first "fight" pas de deux depicts physically (of necessity, since dance was Cranko's medium) the battle of wits found in Shakespeare. The almost brutal physicality was new in ballet (how often do you see a ballerina put up her dukes or land her partner with a judo throw?). This is in part thanks to the fearless Haydée, who was willing to be tossed around, lifted, and thrown whichever way the choreographer wanted. In the second pas de deux, Petruccio is playing with Katherina (witness the child's game of piling hands on one another); only when he calls a truce and expresses his affection for her is she "tamed"—tamed by love rather than by harsh treatment. The final pas de deux is a true love pas de deux of equals, with Petruccio as well having thrown off his brash persona. It is full of the dramatic lifts that Cranko loved to use (inspired by the dancing of the Bolshoi) to convey ecstatic emotion. In contrast, the ballet's fourth pas de deux, the lovely one between Lucentio and Bianca in the second act, has fewer of these, as if Cranko is depicting a conventionally and perhaps even superficially romantic relationship which will never reach the emotional depths achieved by the originally combative couple. Appearance and reality are important themes in a ballet full of masks, disguises, and mistaken identities; Katherina and Petruccio have seen through each other's disguises and their love liberates them to be truly themselves.

Cranko famously said, "*Some people think...that somehow there is more prestige in attracting only a tiny audience, in order to prove how artistic you are. I could never agree with that...I always want people to enjoy themselves.*" With *The Taming of the Shrew*, as popular now as when it premiered in 1969, he certainly got his wish.

— Katherine Barber

Pierre Quinn as Petruccio with Artists of the Ballet (1992).



Above: Guillaume Côté (2005).

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