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Review of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (directed by Nina Spijkers for Toneelschuur Producties) at Stadsschouwburg Groningen, the Netherlands, 8 April 2019

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Although the year 2019 has not seen the usual high frequency of Shakespeare productions on the Dutch stage, the bard continues to be the most popular playwright in the Netherlands. Oddly enough, after the unassailable leader *Hamlet*, one of the most often performed plays in the past seventy years turns out to be *The Taming of the Shrew* (Heijes 668) and the year 2019 was no exception to this rule with a *Taming* directed by Nina Spijkers for “Toneelschuur Producties”, a professional and subsidized theatre company, which has its home base in the city of Haarlem, but also tours the country with its productions. As the audience filtered in for *Taming*, they were confronted with a stage which resembled a changing room, with a clear differentiation between on the one hand dresses and high-heeled shoes, and on the other hand the usual shirts and jackets. The design (by Katrin Bombe) immediately set the tone for a binary and stereotypical contrast between the sexes, which was further underlined by attributes which accompanied the two sets, such as an iron and a Hoover for the women and an axe and other tools for the men. As the audience had settled in, four female and two male actors entered the stage in their underwear and started dressing, the men as females, and the women as males. The stereotyping was further enhanced as the women strapped on artificial penises, and the men used bras with breast padding.

The approach was part of an ongoing trend of the interchange of gender in *Taming* productions. In 2017, the Dutch Shakespeare Theatre Diever, a semi-professional theatre company directed by Jack Nieborg, produced a *Taming* in which the gender of the actors playing Petruchio and Katherina was determined on the night of the performance. The two main actors had learned both parts but did not know beforehand which part they were going to play on the night. A member of the audience, through a spin of a Wheel of Fortune, determined which actor would play which role that night. The production drew a record number of 25,000 visitors. The 2019 Jo Clifford adaptation of *Taming*, directed by Michael Fentiman, rewrote the play such that the male characters were female and vice versa. The 2019 RSC *Taming*, directed by Justin Audibert, employed an equally straightforward reversal of gender roles, set in a matriarchal past, and in the programme notes the director said he was “interested in seeing what happens when you get female actors to play traditionally powerful male roles, and vice versa”.

Productions of this type address themes such as the social construction of gender roles, the cultural conditioning on which they are based, and the ensuing imbalance of power between the opposing gender roles. One of the potential pitfalls tends to be that, while the gender swap as such may be interesting, the productions rather perpetuate existing, stereotypical perception of gender roles and binary identities, instead of breaking through them and presenting a more fluid picture of gender, power and identity. While at first, I thought this production would fall into this traditional, binary category, the song which was played while the actors were dressing made me doubt my initial

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observation. It was the German song “Komplex mit dem Sex” by the group Stereo Total. On the one hand, the lyrics of the song factually described what was happening on stage as they ran: “I am a woman with a penis, a man with tits”. However, the song went beyond the simple, binary and generally unproductive differentiation, as it continued with the lines “I am masculine, feminine, schizophrenic, hysterical, androgynous, hermaphrodite”. This had me at the edge of my seat, looking forward to an interesting *Taming*, one that would move beyond the traditional gendering and the female-male duality, with or without gender swap.

The play started off as an almost humorous gender-swapping, in which three of the four women, who played the lovers of Bianca (Xander van Vledder), employed over the top stereotypical behaviour, strutting about, farting, using the middle finger, in an effort to reproduce the perception of male behaviour by overdoing clichéd perceptions. Apart from playing the three lovers individually, the three (Linde van den Heuvel, Julia Lammerts and Anne-Chris Schulting) also played the servants and, simultaneously, Baptista Minola as a sort of Greek chorus, which added to the sense that all men more or less conspired together and turned them into an amorphous entity where any specific individual characteristics were submerged beneath their gender.

The element of humour quickly dissipated, however, once Petruchio (Astrid van Eck) entered the scene. There was precious little tenderness in this Petruchio, as scary a character as any I have ever seen, with always the hint of a smile on his face and always fully in control of his actions and emotions, which only enhanced the deliberate cruelty of his actions. He dominated Katherina from the start, which made for interesting viewing, as Petruchio was far smaller and physically more vulnerable than Katherina. It highlighted how taking on a specific gender role would determine the behaviour of both sexes. There was an element of tenderness and dignity to this Katherina (Roeland Fernhout) when we saw that huge body walking very uncomfortably on the high heels, shouting, but simultaneously appearing very vulnerable in the argument with her father, giving a brief, little whimper in her voice as she said “Call you me daughter?” (2.1.280). Katherina would soon be fully broken down, however, by Petruchio, and the brutality of his approach was epitomized in the scene at his house, where Katherina was locked up in what looked like a transparent cubicle. The continuous sound of alarms going on, the screaming in the background, and the lights turning on and off all the time, were reminiscent of the horrible torture scenes that one sees in movies or reads about in newspapers. This was a place where persons were reduced, physically and mentally, to less than zero, and in the end, Katherina was dragged out of the cabin, unconscious and broken-down.

It was not until the final act that the extreme stereotyping of the first four acts moved somewhat to the background, as the actors removed their previous clothes, penises and bras and changed towards a more neutral dress, a kind of tight-fitting black body, which reduced both the stereotyping of the costumes and also the visible characteristics of gender. The characters turned more into neutral, universal human beings, unidentified by gender, and the gender fluidity which the song from Stereo Total at the beginning seemed to foreshadow first found its place here. It was, however, rather tentative, and the dominant feeling left by the production was one of duality and brutality, as perhaps best epitomized in the finale. Katherina was standing on top of the cubicle, as Petruchio asked her to take off all of her clothes, leaving Katherina fully naked on stage as she spoke her submission speech. Katherina reverted visibly back to a man, as Petruchio moved towards her and in what resembled a final deed of breath play, he murdered her, after which he spoke: “Why, there’s a wench” (5.2.185). One could explain the final words of this production in myriad ways. Were these words directed towards Katherina, a “wench” capable of the ultimate submission, death? Were they directed towards Petruchio, as a “wench” who had just murdered someone who had dared to speak these lines? None of the four people I spoke to after the performance, including the director herself, were in agreement about the final lines.

And perhaps the exact meaning as such was far less important than the actual deed on stage. It was brutal, perverse, vicious, and it fit with the fatalistic, black and white *Taming* that had gone before. On the one hand, it was fascinating to see how gender identities were revealed to be social

constructions, which, once taken on, would not only take over but also change and degenerate the individual, whether male or female. One might even perceive an element of revenge in the production, and the production fit the paradigm through which (Dutch) reviewers consider the play. Reviewers currently describe *Taming* in terms such as a “disgusting play” (Lems), or an “incredibly sexist play” (Wensink), and this production was received enthusiastically by the media, as it combined excellent acting with the very topical #MeToo discussion, highlighting the horrors of gender inequality, and launching a frontal attack on patriarchal society. The downside of this production, and arguably of many others in a similar vein, was the seeming inability to break down the everlasting binary discussion on gender. The gender fluidity that the song “Komplex mit dem Seks” at the start of the production seemed to promise never really materialized on stage. The production served to highlight and reproduce existing, dominant perceptions of gender, without exploring the potential of the wide variety and fluidity of individual human beings that the song at the beginning seemed to indicate, a potential that gender-swapping might help to explore. There were no solutions, only problems, and a gender-determined binary straitjacket. The production was a convincing, nightmare vision of what gender did to people, but it left little wriggling room to get out of it and failed to explore beyond the stereotypical duality.

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