

## A Shrew for All Seasons

Gideon Lester talks to director Andrei Serban about his plans for The Taming of the Shrew

Romanian director Andrei Serban has been associated with the A.R.T. for more than twenty years. His productions include The King Stag, Three Sisters, The Good Woman of Setzuan, Twelfth Night, and Sganarelle. From 1990–1994 he was Artistic Director of the Romanian National Theatre. Mr. Serban is also internationally renowned as an opera director. A recipient of Ford, Guggenheim, and Rockefeller Foundation grants, he is currently director of the Drama Department of Columbia University.

GL: You directed Twelfth Night at the A.R.T. in 1989. Have you staged many of Shakespeare's other plays?

AS: I directed As You Like It in France, in the real Forest of Arden, and a Measure for Measure at the National Theatre of Finland in Helsinki. I did a Julius Caesar in Romania when I was nineteen years old and still a student. We used the Japanese Kabuki style, building a flower bridge over the audience. Caesar's death was very stylized, performed in slow motion. Today these techniques are old hat, but in Romania in 1968 they seemed political and absolutely unacceptable. It was an enormous scandal and afterwards it was very hard for me to find a job. That was my most daring production ever.

GL: When Robert Brustein asked you to return to A.R.T. to direct Shrew, what was your reaction?

AS: I had never really thought about directing it before. I had seen

several productions of Shrew in the past, and was unbelievably bored. I thought it was a dreadful play. It was only when Brustein suggested it that I finally read it. I found it a very paradoxical play, full of contradictions and questions for our time. It raises issues of gender, sexual politics, and the nature of love and marriage. All these notions meant something totally different for Shakespeare than they do for us today. I imagine him as a man entering the new, modern world of the Renaissance, but coming from the old, Medieval world. When I look at his plays, Shakespeare seems a conservative man. He sees the world from an esoteric, symbolic point of view, rather than in the scientific, progressive style of the Renaissance. The characters in Shrew are allegories, they're symbols. The battle of Petruchio and Kate is not necessarily that of man versus woman, man subduing woman, the woman being the victim. Shakespeare was influenced by the religious Medieval mystery plays and church dramas that were still being performed until about fifty years before he started writing, in which man and woman were allegories for the soul and the spirit. If we look at Shrew from that point of view, the woman, Kate, is the soul that has to meet the spirit. The union at the end of the play is the result of discipline, rigor, work, and taming. But the taming is metaphysical, not sexual political, and that's something we find very hard to connect with. Our world is very different from Shakespeare's. Even so, theatre is a mirror of the essence of human life, and the human values of Shakespeare's play still exist within us. That's what makes it interesting.

GL: So your Shrew will be a spiritual exploration?

AS: It's now impossible for us to stage the Shrew that I think Shakespeare wrote, a spiritual journey much like Dante's. Nobody could understand that today. So we still have to deal with the very

delicate issue of sexual politics, and I'm not quite so sure how I'm going to solve it from that point of view. I absolutely refuse to look at the play from the safe standpoint of political correctness, which says that Shakespeare wrote a play about a victim, Kate, and an oppressor, Petruchio, in which women come out as the victims of men. That's quite untrue; he didn't write that play. There isn't one line that justifies such a simplistic approach. It is this kind of superficial reading that makes political correctness the disaster of our time. But I also don't want to treat the play as a romantic love story. Kate and Petruchio are not Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. They don't play tricks on each other, loving each other underneath it all. I don't know what the relationship is; that's why I'm rehearsing it. The reason I go into rehearsal is that I truly don't know the play. My only hope is that by the time it opens, I start to have an understanding of what the play might mean. Whenever I see a production of mine at opening night, I wish I could start again, because by then I say, "Ah, that's how it should be." Of course it's too late. All theatre should be a continuous work in progress. We can never find the definitive answer; we should just ask the right questions. Shakespeare wrote this play which is controversial, which is paradoxical. It makes us go home and ask ourselves, "What is the relation between two people? What is a sexual relationship? What is love?" I think that's enough for the price of a ticket. And if we can also be entertained in the process, so much the better.

GL: When you worked on *Twelfth Night* at A.R.T., you didn't cut a single line before you started rehearsing. You have already cut the script of *Shrew* comprehensively. Why the different approach?

AS: *Shrew* is a much earlier play than *Twelfth Night*. It may be the second or third play that Shakespeare wrote. The poetry isn't at its

highest here. The language is muscular, the energy is that of a young writer trying to find himself. There are therefore many repetitions and lines which are difficult to understand today, and I don't find them necessary. The plot is a fast-paced, physical comedy that is almost Roman, like that of Plautus or Aristophanes. Language isn't the most important element in *Shrew*. In Shakespeare's later plays his language becomes more sophisticated and therefore needs more attention.

GL: Many directors cut the frame story, which concerns the drunkard Christopher Sly. Why have you chosen to retain it?

AS: The play *The Taming of the Shrew* is acted for Sly; it's like a subconscious dream in which he learns how to tame his own wife. For Sly the play has a moral, but since he wakes up once it's over, the effect is also Pirandellian. Is theatre a reality, Shakespeare asks, or is it a dream?

GL: And in your production, the actors who perform the play for *Shrew* will be members of the A.R.T. company?

AS: Yes. The actors are on tour with *King Stag* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and here they decide to stage one more play. Very soon, though, the modern joke is forgotten. The actors' truck is disassembled and becomes almost like a *commedia dell'arte* stage where the actors perform as if they were in the sixteenth century. At the end of the play it becomes a truck again. The point is that with Shakespeare we can travel in time, bringing modern elements to the play or journeying back and finding out how it was once upon a time. This link between tradition and the present day is a bridge that we very much need. That's why we perform classical plays. The clash between a past ideology and our own is very

dramatic; through it we can understand something of ourselves.

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