

Platonic Visions on Shakespeare's Wall

By Maria Gaitanidi

In Plato's *Banquet*—and according to Greek mythology—humans were originally created with four arms, four legs, and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, Zeus split them into two separate parts, condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other halves. A relatively young Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1594, just before *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Reading a play as separate to an author's entire corpus of work could be misleading. Can we judge the beauty of a rose bush from just one flower? With such considerations in mind and in hand, two of Plato's dialogues—*The Banquet* and *Phaedrus* which focus (among other subjects) on ideas of Love/Eros—a laboratory began at Shakespeare's Globe in the summer of 2019. The ensemble of actors was mainly chosen thanks to their ability to use Platonic dialogue in order to play with ideas rather than interpret characters in a primarily psychological way. The form of Platonic dialogue allows for a playful exchange between acting partners, freed from the prejudice of a text's 'set' interpretation. Instead of looking into the past to understand and judge characters' words and actions, Platonic dialogue can enable a look into the characters' common ideological perspective in which they hold opposite sides of the argument. The actors take opposite stances towards the idea contained in the scene and use the here and now each night to play anew with each other, both aiming for the realisation of this idea.

A brief example of how we used Platonic dialogue can be seen through this extract from Petruchio's speech about Katharina:

She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house,
My household stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing. (3.2.236-238)

The reading of these few verses can spark endless controversy. However, the questioning suggested to the actors of the ensemble was as follows: what if both Petruchio and Katharina agree on what is a true union—a recovery of the ‘lost half’ of man? In the context of *Banquet*, Katharina represents beauty, wealth and education, intelligence, free will, and independence of spirit. This is, perhaps, an ideal ‘everything’ a partner could want. Woman/Katharina comes to represent the Soul, the inspiration, the form; Man/Petruchio represents action, will, and direct movement. A Soul, as in *Phaedrus*, needs training to let go of material attachments, to recognise its own beauty, its power over the world that surrounds it and is made of it. For that, the material part of the human being needs to be ‘tamed’.

Shakespeare wrote during the Renaissance: he was, surely, well aware of the ancient ideas circulating among the intellectuals and one can easily acknowledge this in *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play about the marriage of the feminine and the masculine in the human soul. As mentioned above, the play is written just a couple of years before one of the most quoted and well-known plays about love in the world: *The Taming of the Shrew* could emerge out of a similar thematic and temporal context. Like the black and white horses that, in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, lead the chariot to see the Ideas, the Soul is torn between Good and Evil and depends on the collaboration of both in order to reach the heights it deserves. The black horse needs taming and is not a separate entity to the white horse, they both need love and they both need to be together (see fig. 1). In Renaissance symbolism, the Sun represents Light, Man, Action—whereas the Moon represents Darkness, Woman, Desire, and Inspiration. One cannot be without the other, and one is by no means submitted to the other. These were the premises proposed to the company when entering Shakespeare’s Globe, as we embarked on the creation of a production for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse to open in February 2020. To write about an experience where the content of a play (‘The Taming of the Human Soul’) transcends the life of the artists



Fig. 1: *The Fall of Phaeton* (1829) by James Ward.

involved by becoming a shared truth—and where the staging process becomes a brutal verification of the play’s words, with Petruccio and Katharina not fitting in the fake world of Tranio and Baptista—demands placing in a text something that belongs only to living action, bound to disappear following its fleeting existence in the moment of its birth.

However, as the times we live in (since exactly the 17th March 2020 in the UK) navigate between the shadows of a not-so-far-away past and the visions of an uncertain future, before the sun sets, there are still some old games of shade and light on the walls of a place that is supposed to be built on the remains of its true predecessor. If in fact the centre of the old Blackfriars Theatre after which the Sam Wanamaker theatre is built was used as a game market in the morning and an arena for the actors in the evenings, then it presents the perfect place for catharsis. The first step of this process was initiated in the encounter of three artists

(Michelle Terry, Paul Ready, and myself); the next was the rehearsals and, consequently, the production as a continuation of rehearsals and not a finished product. This piece of writing might be considered as one step further. Writing may do here what in fact creating within the limits of an institution has done: reveal a fragment or a glimpse of truth, that is only allowed when freedom is a far-away perspective and not a concrete reality.

The following paragraphs will describe the elements that composed the dialogue as a process of creation between a London theatre institution, married to a space considered a historical landmark by its visitors, and an artist—this being myself as the director and pedagogue for this process. At the centre of the dialogue is *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The Dialogue Begins

A play traditionally understood and staged as the uncomfortable wedding between Katharina and Petruchio shows the patriarchal taming of a woman through what appears to be a series of humiliations. As ‘appearances tyrannise truth’ according to Plato (*The Republic*, Book II, 365c, 42), commissioning an artist to stage such a play in the aftermath of movements such as #MeToo foretells obvious expectations and risk-taking: it is a play that is bound to contest its surface-level politics and used to critique patriarchy. It is offered to a female director with a cast of well-known actors who are married in real life—including Michelle Terry, Paul Ready, Melissa Riggall, Mattia Mariotti, and James Northcote—who are expected to take the lead roles with the strong desire to invert archaic male/female power dynamics. The reader may already identify the growing frontiers around the production before learning of the practical limitations regarding rehearsals, staging, marketing, PR., and internal production practices.

At this stage one could ask a legitimate question: why accept such a contract? To ask another, illustrative one: why would Petruchio

accept to ask in marriage Katharina after hearing an unflattering description of her character from his old friend Hortensio? To gently remind the reader of Katharina, here are a few lines from Hortensio's speech:

Petruchio, shall I then come roundly to thee,
And wish thee to a shrewd, ill-favored wife?
Thou'dst thank me but a little for my counsel;
And yet I'll promise thee she shall be rich,
And very rich. But thou'rt too much my friend,
And I'll not wish thee to her. (1.2.60-65)

In the long tradition of textual analysis and staging, Hortensio's answer and Petruchio's acceptance signify that becoming rich is the main purpose of this marriage proposal. It is soon forgotten that Petruchio is already wealthy—having inherited from his late father, as he announces when he arrives in Padua. Both the artist, to whom the proposition was made, and Petruchio do not need anything else but to begin the dialogue. Why should seeking a rich wife have one unique meaning? Why does Petruchio search for a wife in Padua? Why not Venice? Verona? Mantua? This is a play written during the Renaissance in Europe: a time of tremendous intellectual and artistic unrest and innovation. As evident in his works, Shakespeare was not oblivious to the spiritual world, its connection to the physical realms, and the influence of the ancient Greek writers on his contemporaries and himself. The binary oppositions present in the world as a totality (here there is no separation between spirit and matter) allow for a rich analysis of the main ideas in the play. Padua was well known in the old world as the centre of knowledge, home to the greatest universities. Lucentio and Tranio arrive in the city to learn: although the master seeks knowledge in books, Tranio advises him to look for wisdom in the experience of the senses.

As a director who has mainly trained and worked in what is perceived by more mainstream producers, actors, critics, and theatregoers as alternative theatre, entering such a commercial theatre

represents huge risk. Like—simultaneously—Lucentio and Tranio, I entered Padua/Mantua: the city of commerce and negotiation. This marriage could not in any way be performed and understood in traditional ways.

The Arrival

Following a ten-year itinerary in the realms of Russian and Polish theatre and an exceptional collaboration with artists exploring physical action and speech as action, during which I had nurtured pedagogical relationships with British actors, this opportunity appeared desirable in two ways: it allowed the actors to perform outside laboratory walls, and the director/pedagogue to expose the work to a wider audience.

The invitation to direct a play by Shakespeare was presented amidst various workshops and lengthy conversations. These were based around different perceptions of the theatrical art in London and abroad; the history of staging Shakespeare; the approach to the actor's craft; and the various ways of analysing text that may reach surprising outcomes when compared to traditional readings—especially in Shakespeare's case.

It was summer, everything seems more beautiful in August by the river Thames. Walking along the Southbank, exploring texts full of myths, and touching on unexpected material for an actor (such as Plato's dialogues) contributed to the mutual agreement between two artists: for the artistic director of the theatre and the director of the play to advance together towards the realisation of something that was promising to be quite unusual. Despite this mutual spoken contract, which, in fact, was never really transcribed into formal writing, limits were not imposed here.

The first narrowing order was pronounced when the casting of the play began and it immediately altered the atmosphere of the whole process. The actors are the core of the work, focusing on the raw human material encountering the text and the space. Selecting the right actors

for such a project can not be done through a simple audition. Even when working for a year or so with an actor, all human material is not appropriate for all kinds of work and vice versa, all kinds of work are not for everyone. Similarly, Shakespeare's plays are made of such fabric that a psychological analysis of the play does not fit its own nature. To give a humorous example, when one buys Prada shoes it is most probably not for the beach or to be worn with shorts (although everything is certainly possible)—it would be better to wear them with a garment worthy of their quality.

The limits imposed by the internal policies of the theatre did not allow for a true selection of who is capable to sustain this kind of process. It is extremely different to hear about something enticing and think it sounds rather exciting and then find oneself in the midst of a production which never intends to deliver an end product but continue to grow throughout the 12 weeks on stage. The various reasons an actor says 'yes' to a job are definitely not in concordance with a project which intends to explore a creative approach, that cannot itself be compounded within the borders of 'art as simply a job'. Let us explain further this rather questionable thought by adding: who truly would see working on a play such as *The Taming of the Shrew* as a 10am-to-5pm, Monday-to-Friday job if they knew that the play speaks about the human soul?

As Russian director and pedagogue Anatoli Vassiliev, my teacher, once wrote in *7 or 8 Lessons on Theatre* (1999), 'everything that we feel is like a heavy machine, something hard to handle. [...] I felt the need for the actor not to dive simply into a story, into a situation, but for whoever creates to be able to introduce their own playing, their own game' (214; my translation).

The Game

What is contained in *The Taming of the Shrew*? The body of the play is made of flesh, bones, and spirit. Petruchio will teach everyone how to abandon everything that has to do with matter, with human recognition

(fame), with acceptance from others. What defines women? Fashion or personal desires? Both Katharina and Petruchio know that it is a personal choice. The game they play however is different. It is hiding behind the rules of their time and of all time. Despite hundreds of years that separate us from its writing, the modern Baptista house, the institutional theatre, is still constructed according to the rules of the time: women must keep their place, freedom is offered to masculinity, femininity is still judged according to male hierarchy, and being different—like Katharina—is condemned by ‘the institution’.

Burdened by centuries of representation, history, and analysis—and buried under expected clichés which in fact serve again and again the same purpose and the same scopes—the content of the play was not revealed to the actors on the first day of the work but progressively through the five weeks of rehearsal allowed by the norm.

Who has dictated the marriage rules for all Katharinas and Biancas of the world? Who decides who is going to be with whom? Who is going to play whom? Who will truly direct? Baptista? Petruchio arrives at his wedding in gypsy clothes, in the shoes of a miser. Who takes him away from the wedding? It is Katharina.

A norm written in contracts, decided by unknown people and stamped by unknowing hands. A norm created amongst other norms, at a theatre space, imposing limits based on the said wisdom of past experiences. As declared by the authorities of the theatre, represented in its majority by non-artists, limits are wanted in order to protect the artists involved in the plays staged, and/or to fulfil the desire for innovation and adaptation to the needs of the 21st-century (needs or new awareness).

Limits are not a curse. In the theatrical traditions originating in the practices of Stanislavski and Grotowski, limits were seen as a window frame to freedom. Stanislavski's only limit imposed, according to Maria Kanebel in *L'Analyse-Action* (2006), were the words of the text: ‘in speech vowels are water and consonants are the borders without which the river becomes a swamp’ (203; my translation).

If Juliet is 16 years old, it is for a reason—not that it matters for the age of the actor but for the given circumstance, the feel of it. If Romeo's family is enemy to the Capulets, he cannot be her nephew. When Juliet asks him to not swear by the moon, the word 'moon' cannot change to 'cross'. Moon bears



within an ensemble of elements given by the author and able to trigger a myriad of sensations as different as the artists who work on the play. The word remains the immovable shell, hosting infinity. If we choose to stage an adaptation of the play, or a performance based/inspired by the play, of course the rules of the game change. The institution in question commissioned this production with the strong desire to see a certain version of the play, with a certain outcome. The author, being Shakespeare, and following him the director, which is myself, have not thought about producers simply wanting one hour and a half of a night out. For Petruchio to tame the human soul, it took three hours in the end: and the taming can still be quite fast. When Petruchio returns home with his newlywed in the play's fourth act, he acknowledges that taming is not without suffering:

Well, I've begun my reign with a carefully thought-out plan, and I have every hope of succeeding. My falcon is now hungry and unfed and must not be given enough to eat until she comes to me. (4.1.162-165)



Figs 2-3: Melissa Riggall (Katharina) and Paul Ready (Petruchio) in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare's Globe, London. Photography by Johan Persson (2020).

In *Criton*, Socrates is given the choice to drink hemlock or leave Athens forever. He chooses to stay and die, having dreamt of the Laws of the City of Athens assuring him that he has not acted against them. For a whole month all actors continued playing while the director was waiting, having already decided for herself, waiting for something to be

completed. Katharina's last speech invites everyone to respect and bow in front of whoever feeds from, whoever feeds the soul, not simply the flesh. If the soul stops being fed, then departure is imminent.

On the 16th March 2020, one day before the closure of the London theatres, Baptista's house of cards fell. Petruchio and Katharina left in peace for Petruchio's home.

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