

# Folio fest handles its 'Shrew' with heart and humor

By Richard Christiansen

TRIBUNE CHIEF CRITIC

When Sean Grennan, as a carefree Petruchio, makes his entrance wandering through the lawn audience and asking the way to Padua, you get the idea, right away, that this outdoor presentation of "The Taming of the Shrew" is going to have a few happy surprises.

Sure enough, First Folio Shakes-

peare Festival's production of the comedy is an inventive, funny and finally moving telling of this classic tale of the battle of the sexes.

Now in its third season of summer shows, First Folio is in many respects still an elementary operation. Its wooden platform stage, facing the sloping green of the Peabody Estate in Oak Brook, shows the effects of a tight budget in its serviceable but basic scenery,

lighting and costumes; and some of its actors are just north of being amateurs.

But director Alison C. Vesely, the festival founder and the director of all its productions so far, has a vision of this play that is strong and smart. It never neglects the laughs, but it also puts a welcome emotional emphasis on the comedy's love story.

SEE 'SHREW', PAGE 2

## 'Shrew'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Grennan's buoyant Petruchio and Kathy Santen's smart, albeit shrewish, Kate shape their lines and their actions so that the roughhouse comedy turns into a tender romance, in which the battling lovers eventually become co-equals and collaborators in their marriage.

Together, Grennan and Santen (married in real life) make a terrific team. He delivers his physical comedy and line readings with insouciant ease, getting unexpected big laughs out of even such an ordinary word as "father"; and she endows Kate, headstrong though she may be, with remarkable sweetness and sensitivity. (One of these days, they should have a go at "Kiss Me, Kate," the Cole Porter musical based on "Shrew.")

One example of the production's intelligence is the way it unspools that touchy final scene, beginning with Kate's submissive speech, "I am ashamed that women are so simple..." Those are hard words to swallow in the post-feminist age of the '90s; but Santen treats them as a blithe lecture that Kate enjoys and has carefully rehearsed, winking at Petruchio with pleasure as she revels in the gentle scolding she is giving to obstinate brides.

## Theater review

### "The Taming of the Shrew"

**When:** Through Aug. 15

**Where:** First Folio Shakespeare Festival, Peabody Estate in May-slake Forest Preserve, 31st Street just west of Route 83, Oak Brook

**Phone:** 630-986-8067

For his part, Grennan's Petruchio sits back in awe and respect as he hears her speech. His response to her words, "Why there's a wench! Come on, and kiss me Kate," often played as a cry of macho triumph, in this version is treated as an adoring husband's soft, passionate salute to his mate. And the kiss that caps the line is a long, lingering emblem of marital devotion.

The Petruchio/Kate scenes are the show's highlights, but there are other rewards, as well, including Niki Sarich's spoiled brat younger sister Bianca; Brad Light's doddering suitor Gremio, and Sean Fortunato's Tranio, a servant trying vainly to adopt the posture of a gentleman when he poses as his master.

As with most "Shrew" productions, this one eliminates the two-scene "Induction" that awkwardly sets the stage for the comedy. This, and a brisk pace that speeds

through the monumentally unfunny Elizabethan wordplay, keep the show at about 2½ hours, beyond which time no outdoor Shakespearean presentation should go.

As usual in this lawn party atmosphere, many theater customers are also picnicgoers, bringing along food hampers and candles as part of the experience.

The festival also stocks bug repellents at its small refreshment stand, although "mosquito abatement" provided by Clarke Environmental, given a thank you note in the program, appears to have cut down considerably on insect pests.

In its program, the theater also formally thanks O'Hare Air Traffic Control "for agreeing to route air traffic around our site as circumstances allow." The agreement looks like it's working. On opening night, there was barely a buzz from overhead planes.

Along with a large nearby parking lot and well-lighted portable toilets, these are conveniences that help make outdoor Shakespeare enduring.

Best of all, however, is the sense of discovery in the production itself. There have been and will be more elaborate and better versions of "The Taming of the Shrew," but First Folio's spunky outing has the real thing, a sense of humor and a generous heart.