

SAM KINISON LIVE IN LOS ANGELES

TheaterWeek

July 23, 1990

\$2.00 / \$3.00 Outside NYC

*The Taming of
Tracey Ullman*



Calamity Kate

Tracey Ullman, Morgan Freeman, and director A. J. Antoon take the *Shrew* to the Wild West.

by Gerard Raymond



Martha Swope

Go West Young Shrew: Tracey Ullman with Helen Hunt in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

THE SOUND OF A HORN ECHOES THROUGH THE CANYON. Tumbleweed rolls across the stage. The lights come up on the façade of an enormous barn, throwing into relief a Remington-inspired painting of horses running wild. Two actors enter in 19th-century western garb and begin speaking with a distinct south-western twang. There is a giggle of surprise from the audience. You check your program quickly. There is no mistake. You are watching William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, as directed by A.J. Antoon.

"I first thought of setting the play in Brooklyn in 1958, a sort of a *Moonstruck* family. But after listening to about ten minutes of Brooklynese Shakespeare, the lang-

uage just got in the way," says Antoon. "The south-western accent, however, works just beautifully. "I didn't want in any way to force the concept onto the play. But we

Although his homophobia is strident and indefensible, his anti-feminism has been exaggerated. Despite the rough rides of two marital mishaps, Kinison adulates women and respects their diabolical powers. (The women in the audience were in noisy solidarity with him throughout.) No mention was made of the rape of his girlfriend by a recently indicted personal body-guard—although allusions to the crosses he is constantly being made to bear briefly touched on this event. His acceptance of a society saturated in drugs is philosophic and unpreachy. He makes a sensible plea for the authorities to allow people to indulge in some of their ineradicable weaknesses, and he castigates the hypocrisy of Just Say No platitudes. His prejudices are outrageous, but at the same time liberating. The surreal highpoint of the evening was his allegation that a movie star had signed himself into Cedar Sinai Hospital to have a gerbil removed from his backside, a premise which yielded Kinison's most stratospheric flights-of-fancy.

Crass, obscene, blasphemous but garrulously unabashed, Kinison is also cathartic and hilarious. He plays the house like a reigning Lord of Misrule, dissolving hecklers in short, sharp sprays of deadly pesticide. Lenny Bruce had a subtlety and percipience that is nowhere present in Kinison, but Kinison has a Rabelaisian savagery that is to be found in no other American comic. In his bluntness and unmitigated crudity, Kinison's dissertations on the grossness of our sexual habits are as unflinching as the picture of the human condition we get from Beckett's best short novels.

Throughout his act, the comedian complains that he is denied full-scale exposure in the mass media. But the subversive crackle of his perceptions is the antithesis of everything network television and first-run films feed on. He should be content to be an incorrigible guerrilla-performer; that is what preserves him from the corruptions of nationwide assimilation. □

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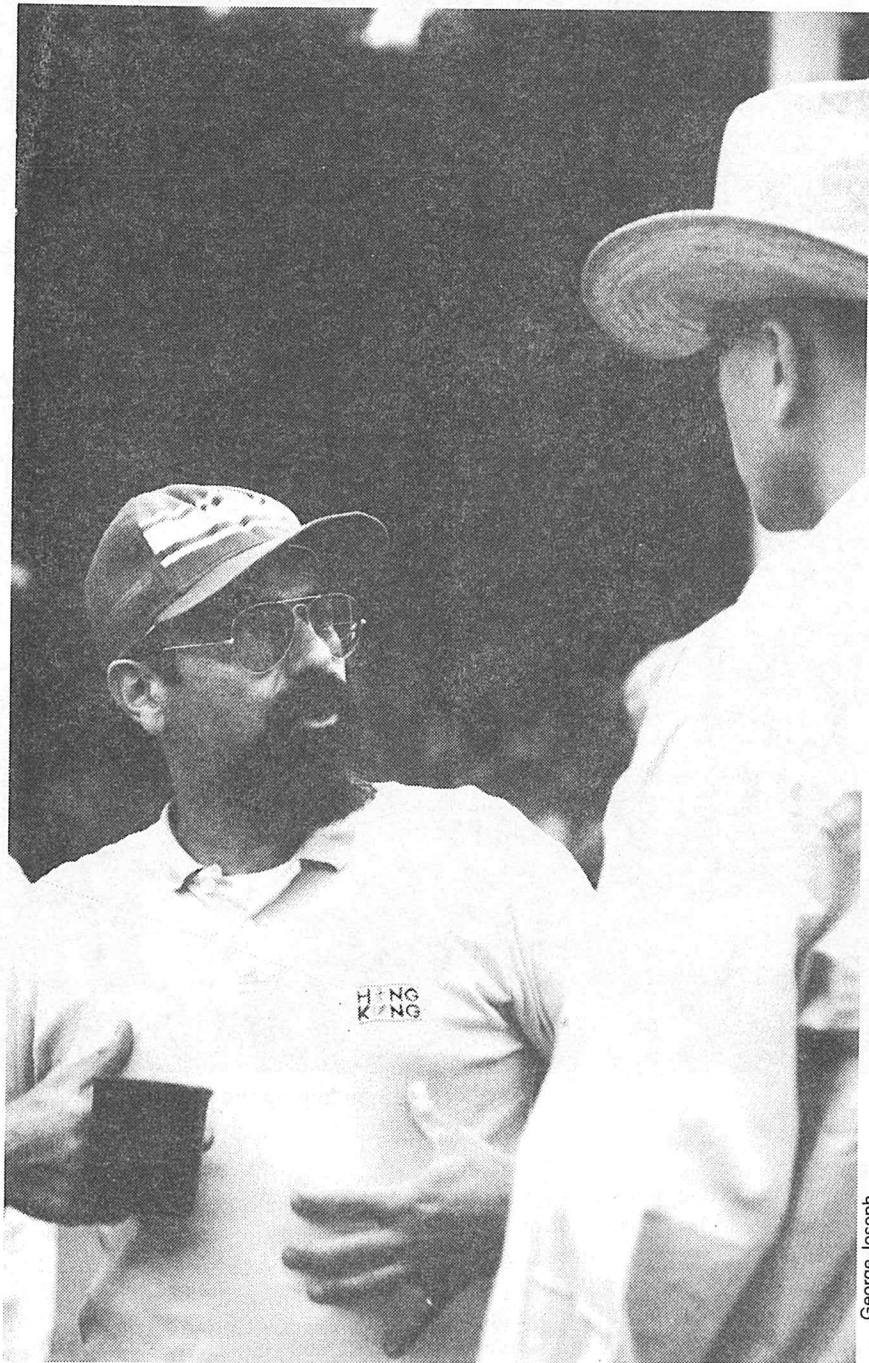
knew this was organically right from the start. The macho attitude of the men, their competitive rivalry, and camaraderie in *The Taming of the Shrew* fit quite well into the wild west setting. There are only three women in the play, and the sense of them being outnumbered by the men, the way they are treated, and the eagerness with which the men are after the young Bianca seems just right in this town."

Antoon kicked off the New York Shakespeare Festival's ambitious Shakespeare Marathon two years ago with a lively production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that he transported to colonial Brazil. "Whenever I do Shakespeare or a classic, I try to find a milieu in which I can make the play more accessible. I have no desire to do a museum piece.

"I want the teenagers in the audience to be intrigued from the moment the lights come up and never have to say, 'What did *that* mean?' " To this end Antoon has taken some liberties with the text. "First of all, I think that Shakespeare did not do a rewrite of this play. In terms of dramaturgy it is carelessly written and wildly confusing. There are lines assigned to people who could not possibly know the information they say. It is not full of great profound human insights the way some of the other plays are, so I felt I had license—but I always respected the meter."

Antoon dropped "thee's" and "thou's," altered references that were too obscure and on a few occasions changed a name or two. But he retained Padua and Verona. "I'm sure there is a Padua, Nebraska—I didn't even bother to look it up. A Verona, Oklahoma must exist."

Another way he hopes to make this play accessible is to tap into the collective cultural history of the audience. "I want what I call American *archetypes*—rather than stereotypes. The British, who have an infinitely longer history than we do, have developed in their



George Joseph

A. J. Antoon, director of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

literature and in their drama characters like the fop and the crotchety old man, which are instantly recognizable. We have some, too, and I tried to put them into this play—Gabby Hayes [the famous character actor who specialized in grizzled old-timers], Gary Cooper, or the town sheriff."

"I always loved the old westerns and the silent movies. This production is based on *Destry Rides Again*

and *My Darling Clementine*." Antoon freely acknowledges he has used images from these movies. "I think you should steal from the best. If somebody has done something that is so on the money you have an obligation, it seems to me, to use it." He also researched the historical background of the period. "I am very intrigued by what the real Annie Oakley or the real Calamity Jane were like."



Martina Swope

Morgan Freeman taming the reckless Tracey Ullman.

Playing Katherine in this production, Tracey Ullman wears pants for a good part of the time and slings a mean gun. Antoon recalls that he saw Ullman throw a tantrum in one episode of *The Tracey Ullman Show* on television. “While playing a Valley Girl she fell down on the floor and did this tantrum when her psychiatrist raised the fee. That’s when I knew she could play the part. She *throws* herself into anything.”

“When Tracey was hired, I wanted an older man to play Petruchio and I asked for Morgan [Freeman]. I think he is sexy and his age is important to me because I want the play to be about Petruchio teaching Kate something. I think Kate needs to be saved. She’s in serious trouble

at the beginning of this play. Brought up in this frontier outpost without a mother, she is far above everybody else in the town. She is on the verge of insanity as a result of extreme frustration and hostility that has built up over the years. She is either going to be locked up or she’s going to end up like Mercedes McCambridge in *Giant*—an embittered old maid for the rest of her life.”

In Antoon’s view, Petruchio is Kate’s only match in wit and intelligence. “This guy comes along and literally sweeps her off her feet, kidnaps her, takes her out of this silly town on a religious retreat.” Antoon, himself an ex-seminarian, is not really joking when he talks about a “retreat.” He laughs and

acknowledges that it was not easy to sell this concept to the actors. But in fact, he believes it is the “key” to the play.

“When Petruchio says that he is fasting Kate and keeping her awake with yelling and screaming out of reverent care for her, it is a serious line and not a braggart macho bullshit line, which is how it is usually played. Petruchio never attacks Kate, unlike her father, who slaps her because she is out of control, and he doesn’t know how to handle her anymore.”

Antoon avoids the modern anti-feminist pitfalls of *The Taming of the Shrew* by establishing that Kate and Petruchio actually fall in love after the “retreat.” Petruchio overcomes Kate’s inhibitions with a deep

“It’s all about sex. It’s all about giving up your will for somebody else’s, especially when you’ve had your own way all your life.”—A.J. Antoon

kiss that lasts for a couple of minutes on the stage. Because of this sexually liberating moment, Antoon feels the turnaround from shrew to pliant wife, can be acceptable to a contemporary audience.

“It’s all about sex. It’s all about giving up your own will for somebody else’s will, especially

when you have only had your own way all your life. It is not a bad thing. In fact it can be a very liberating adventure. I think for Kate, everything changes from that moment. When there is sex involved with somebody that you love, the idea of doing *anything* for them is not abhorrent at all. So when Kate

gives her final speech: ‘Such duty as the subject owes the prince; Even such a woman oweth to her husband.’ I don’t find that a problem. Kate and Petruchio are both unusual and playful people. It’s like they are playing sex games. They are a team and they are going to have a lot of fun.” □

Papp And The Stars

Joe Papp has been criticized for using celebrities to sell the *Shakespeare Marathon*. The *Taming of the Shrew* is the 14th in the series.

“I am not trying to be defensive about it, I think it is wonderful, and I need to do it. We need stars for the American theater. We are competing with all the other media and I want to get people into the theater.

“Ninety-nine percent of the people who are now famous started here. Kevin Kline and Denzel Washington were spear carriers. You can name any of the people who have come back here—Raul Julia, Charlie Durning. They played the smallest roles for years. Meryl Streep started here playing small parts.

“Morgan is part of this theater and I made an artistic decision about Tracey long before she became famous on television. I cast her in my film of *Plenty*. She was so eager to play this part, with all her talent and her background, I *had* to give her a chance, although it is going to be a challenge because she hasn’t been on the stage very much.

“The stars love the theater, that’s why they are here. It doesn’t do much for their careers but it does much for their psyche and the value they place on themselves as actors. I thought it was wonderful to see Michelle

Pfeiffer on stage [in *Twelfth Night* last summer in the Park], even though there were moments that showed she didn’t have enough experience. She is a serious actress, but some people just made fun of her and made it seem like an ego trip, which it wasn’t at all. If you start discouraging people like that you are doing a disservice to the theater.”

Tracey Ullman, star of the hit series, *The Tracey Ullman Show*:

“I am determined not to do the Shakespeare that turned me off, the boring ‘now we are doing Shakespeare, we must all respect it terribly and try to do Royal Shakespeare Company accents’ type of Shakespeare. I hated the RSC stuff. I liked a few of the older actors who used to make it real and understandable, but the others were just enjoying the sound of their own voices. And the girls were always a dead loss for me.

“I like the part of Kate. She is spirited and funny, and unlike the women in most of Shakespeare’s plays, she doesn’t die at the end.

“It feels like when I was doing theater several years ago. You are working for peanuts, but you are doing it because you want to do it. It’s great!”

What will the television audiences think? “I have never done anything they’ve expected me to

do, so I am not much worried about that.”

Morgan Freeman, Oscar nominee this year for *Driving Miss Daisy*:

“There isn’t much of Shakespeare that I can see myself fitting into. I told Joe years ago that I wanted to do Petruchio. I saw Raul [Julia] do it in the Park back in 1980—he was stunning. I had seen the Burton-Taylor film [Zefferelli, 1967]. And I wanted to do it too.

“I think we have managed to make it clear that we have two different colors here. I would never *not* want to be black. Kate sees that a black man has come to woo her and she swallows her tobacco! I see no problem with this historically. One out of every three cowboys in the west was black or Mexican. There have always been wealthy blacks in this country as well. And the interracial situation—believe it or not, they passed a law in Maryland in 1691 trying to outlaw marriages between black men and white women!

“Petruchio is very broadly drawn. He is an only son who has inherited considerable wealth. He is a man of his own weight, and he throws it around with considerable alacrity. Playing this role is going to be sexy, tender, rough, and exciting. It is going to be everything that I wanted it to be.” □