

The Taming of the Shrew

updated Aug 24

John Cranko's *The Taming of the Shrew* premiered for Stuttgart Ballet in March 1969, starring Marcia Haydée as Katherina and Richard Cragun as Petruchio. Based on Shakespeare's romantic comedy of the same name, the ballet dropped the inebriated Christopher Sly character, for whom Shakespeare's play within a play is enacted, to concentrate on the essential narrative. Other changes include Lucentio tricking Gremio and Hortensio, Lucentio's rivals for Bianca's hand, into marrying prostitutes. Cosmic justice is served in the end when Lucentio discovers too late that it is the beautiful and sweet Bianca who is the actual shrew and not Katherina.

Simple 2D sets were used so that everything could go fast as Cranko hated pauses between scenes. As the ballet is set in Renaissance Italy, Kurt-Heinz Stolze, responsible for the music, took phrases from the sonatas of Baroque composer Domenico Scarlatti, left them in the same key, but interwove them with each other, and then put the story on top. One unusual feature is that every instrument in the orchestra has its own solo.

Cranko was a great fan of Shakespeare's plays and wanted to do *The Taming of the Shrew* because he recognized that Cragun was the perfect Petruchio. To partner him he naturally chose his favourite ballerina and muse Haydée for the role of Katherina as she had a strong stage presence with lots of personality and knew how to act. Cranko worked very quickly to create the choreography but while Cragun immediately adopted the character of Petruchio as his own, exactly as Cranko had foreseen, Haydée struggled. She was used to dancing tragic classical ballet roles and this was her first foray into comedy. She discovered she could be dramatic but not comical. Haydée recalls that she got so frustrated trying to interpret Katherina's character that she finally started crying and said: "*I don't want to do the Taming. I'm not a Katherina, you should find someone else for Katherina. I'm not doing Katherina, I don't want to, I'm leaving.*" As she stormed out of the studio Cranko called after her saying: "*That's Katherina! That's it. You're so angry you're perfect.*"

In June 1969 the Stuttgart Ballet performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City for the first time. The company completed 24 performances over three weeks - the varied programme including Cranko's *Onegin* and *Romeo & Juliet* ballets - with *The Taming of the Shrew* being a real crowd pleaser. Worldwide acclaim followed as the company went on to tour the world. *The Taming of the Shrew* ballet had originally ended with Petruchio and Katherina center stage after their *pas de deux* and the lights fading to blackout. However, Cranko decided he needed a "*feel good finale*" to please an American audience. A *pas de six* was inserted and Stolze pulled music together for the *finale*, the whole addition only being finished less than two days before the New York premiere.

Stuttgart Ballet toured *The Taming of the Shrew* through Australia in Oct/Nov 1974 with Haydée and Cragun in the starring roles. Opening in Canberra, it went on to Adelaide for a full week and then to Melbourne and Sydney as part of a mixed bill which included *Onedin* and Act II from Cranko's own version of *Swan Lake*. (Cranko had unfortunately died suddenly the previous year on a flight back to Germany from the USA).

Although performed by Australian Ballet in 1986, Cranko's full ballet was not performed in Western Australia until September 2008 (by WAB) under then Artistic Director Ivan Cavallari with a restaging in September 2011. Filip Barankiewicz, a star of Stuttgart Ballet, joined an expanded WAB company in both 2008 and 2011 to dance the role of Petruchio, partnered in 2011 by Jayne Smeulders as Kate and following her injury by Yu Takayama. If you missed seeing it then be aware that it will likely not be performed in Perth again as it is no longer in WAB's repertoire, the staging rights having been on sold to Korean National Ballet. However, if you like classic movies, may I suggest viewing Franco Zeffirelli's 1967 film version, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, and which likely influenced Cranko's choreography two years later. According to Google films: "*This Shakespeare inspired movie revolves around a British man who tames his shrewish wife. A romantic film devoted to every man who ever gave the back of his hand to his beloved wife*". Perhaps it is self-evident why this ballet is considered problematic in the 21st century.

Never-the-less, the ballet continues to be performed around the world to enthusiastic audiences. This is because Cranko (and of course Shakespeare before him) knew what every comedian knows – you can deal with taboo subjects, break every convention of good taste, and even express outrageous opinions if you do it using humour. And Cranko's ballet has humour in spades. Stanton Welch, choreographer and Artistic Director at Houston Ballet, recalls how when aged about 16 and before he started ballet training watching this Cranko ballet and laughing from beginning to end. (He later performed in the ballet when dancing with Australian Ballet). I also remember watching WAB's 2011 performance and as the ballet ended a young Norwegian exchange student who was attending her first ever ballet turned to me and exclaimed "*I never knew ballet could be so funny*".

But ballet cannot replicate the original story's wordplay, and it takes a very accomplished dance actress to convey character without slipping into slapstick. So, your experience when viewing this ballet will vary with the cast. Indeed, if it was not for some bravura solos and very challenging partnering with difficult lifts one wonders if this is not pantomime rather than ballet. Perhaps that is the better explanation as to why WAB did not keep its staging rights. If so, that is unfortunate, as although classical ballet should obviously be the core of a classical ballet company's repertoire, it is also financially important to have a few ballets that appeal to the wider public and bring in strong box office returns.