



SANTA CRUZ SHAKESPEARE

EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Taming of the Shrew - Week 2: Slapstick Comedy

- DISCUSS! What is slapstick comedy? Think of a movie or TV show that you watched recently that you would describe as slapstick. What are the typical types of characters you find in comedy movies?

The Taming of The Shrew incorporates some elements from the Italian improvisational style of theater, *Commedia dell'arte*, or the “comedy of skills.” In *Commedia dell'arte*, traveling companies of professional actors performed outdoors in public squares, using simple backdrops and props. Each member of the company played a particular **stock character** – the tricky servant, the greedy old man, the young heroine – wearing masks and costumes that defined the character’s personality. The translation “comedy of skills” refers to the skills that the professional comic actors developed: they each had a repertoire of jokes, funny speeches, comic insults, and physical stunts to draw from in their performances. *Commedia* characters can be separated into three groups. There are those with money: the masters, such as Baptista and Petruchio; there are the comedic servants to the masters who do not have money, such as Grumio and Tranio; and there are the lovers, such as Bianca and Lucentio. The friction between each group results in the physical and bold comedy found in *Commedia*. There is a constant power struggle between masters and their servants, usually with the masters being made to look like fools, whether they realize it or not.



Source: Commedia Erudia, Micke Kingvall.

→ ACT! With the genre of *Commedia dell'arte* in mind, in pairs rehearse the following scene from Act 1 Scene 2. This is the moment where we first meet Petruchio and his servant, Grumio. They have just arrived at Petruchio's friend Hortensio's house, and Petruchio is instructing Grumio to knock at his door. How would you stage this slapstick moment? Why and how does the confusion occur? Who looks more ridiculous, Petruchio or Grumio?

Act 1 Scene 2. Padua. *Before HORTENSIO'S house.*

Enter PETRUCHIO and his man GRUMIO

PETRUCHIO Verona, for a while I take my leave,
 To see my friends in Padua, but of all
 My best beloved and approved friend,
 Hortensio; and I trow this is his house.
 Here, sirrah Grumio; knock, I say.

GRUMIO Knock, sir! whom should I knock? is there any
 man has rebused your worship?

PETRUCHIO Villain, I say, knock me here soundly.

GRUMIO Knock you here, sir! why, sir, what am I, sir, that
 I should knock you here, sir?

PETRUCHIO Villain, I say, knock me at this gate
 And rap me well, or I'll knock your knave's pate.

GRUMIO My master is grown quarrelsome. I should knock
 you first,
 And then I know after who comes by the worst.

PETRUCHIO Will it not be?
Faith, sirrah, an you'll not knock, I'll ring it;
I'll try how you can sol, fa, and sing it!

He wrings him by the ears

GRUMIO Help, masters, help! my master is mad.

PETRUCHIO Now, knock when I bid you, sirrah villain!

- ACT! In pairs, rehearse and consider how you would direct another scene of physical violence from Act 2 Scene 1. In this scene, Katherina has tied up Bianca's hands with a rope and is taunting her, demanding that she tell her which of her suitors she prefers. Does this scene mirror the slapstick comedy we have seen in the previous one with Grumio and Petruchio? How are we supposed to feel about Katherina's behavior to her sister? Is it funny or uncomfortable?

ACT 2 SCENE 1. Padua. A room in BAPTISTA'S house. Enter KATHERINA and BIANCA

BIANCA Good sister, wrong me not, nor wrong yourself,
To make a bondmaid and a slave of me;
That I disdain: but for these other gawds,
Unbind my hands, I'll pull them off myself,
Yea, all my raiment, to my petticoat;
Or what you will command me will I do,
So well I know my duty to my elders.

KATHERINA Of all thy suitors, here I charge thee, tell
Whom thou lovest best: see thou dissemble not.

BIANCA Believe me, sister, of all the men alive
I never yet beheld that special face
Which I could fancy more than any other.

KATHERINA Minion, thou liest. Is't not Hortensio?

BIANCA If you affect him, sister, here I swear
I'll plead for you myself, but you shall have

him.

KATHERINA O then, belike, you fancy riches more:
You will have Gremio to keep you fair.

BIANCA Is it for him you do envy me so?
Nay then you jest, and now I well perceive
You have but jested with me all this while:
I prithee, sister Kate, untie my hands.

KATHERINA If that be jest, then all the rest was so. *Strikes her.*

- WRITE! Now that you have practiced acting out these two short scenes in pairs, pick one scene and write a detailed description of how you would direct this scene if you were the director of *Taming of the Shrew*.

Here are some prompts to respond to for this activity:

- What kind of tone would you hope to set?
- How would you expect the audience to react?
- Where would you like the actors to stand on stage?
- How should the actors express what they are saying and feeling?
- Do you view this scene as humorous?



SOCIAL JUSTICE!

- Is it ever ok to hit your sibling? Is either Katherina or Bianca justified in act 2 scene 1? Is “roughhousing” ever acceptable? When does it go too far?
- Have you seen anything in the media recently about domestic abuse comparable to anything we witness in *The Taming of The Shrew*? If you were to cast famous people as Katherina and Petruchio, and Bianca and Lucentio, who would play which roles and why?