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Bard-lite 'Shrew' is quite refreshing

By Jim Farber, Staff writer

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Whether it's an "As You Like It" set in Yosemite Valley or "Julius Caesar" on the steps of City Hall, Shakespeare Festival/LA's productions are known for their visual signatures and adventurous

interpretations of the Bard.

Now in its 23rd season under the direction of Ben Donenberg, the company is presenting an "I Love L.A." hot-wheels take on "The Taming of the Shrew," which plays through Sunday on the plaza of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown L.A., then moves to the South Coast Botanic Garden on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, where it plays Wednesday through July 27.

The first 10 minutes of the production alone are worth the price of admission, as the cast whirls around the stage (and the audience) on an assortment of scooters, skateboards, mountain bikes, roller skates and golf carts. Clearly we are not in Shakespeare's Padua!

In fact, we are in upscale, beachfront L.A., realm of the rich and famous, where surfer dude Petruchio (played with cowabunga zest by Geoffrey Lower) has come to wive wealthy.

The target of his matrimonial ambition is the "shrew," Katherine (tempestuous Sabra Williams), notorious daughter of Baptista (the jovial John Apicella) and older sister of "the fair" Bianca (winsome Amy Handelman).

This beachwear, high-tech concept, which abounds in clever sight gags related to cell phones, text messaging, etc., steers away from the classic battle-of-the-sexes approach to the play.

In Donenberg's view, it's all about negotiation. What begins as a win/lose confrontation

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between wooer and wooed gradually evolves into a mutually beneficial win/win state of acceptance and emotional compatibility.

It's the setting, however, that lends this "Shrew" its visual zest, with video projections (by Andrew Wilder) providing a background of waving palm trees, azure seas, verdant golf courses, expensive condos and freeway overpasses.

The first act is a total delight. The cast, while remaining true to Shakespeare's text (with a few contemporary insertions), really manages to make the play work in Donenberg's L.A. setting.

The performances are consistently crisp, led by Lower and Williams, with strong support from Michael Manuel as Bianca's suitor Hortensio (masquerading as a leather-clad rocker); Lance Davis as old, rich and usually drunk suitor No. 2, Gremio; and Desean Terry as suitor No. 3, the love-struck Lucentio.

Unfortunately, a good deal of the zest that keeps the production aloft in Act 1 deflates in Act 2, as Donenberg resorts to Three Stooges humor. More troublesome is the too quickly evolving bond that develops between Katherine and Petruchio.

Nevertheless, summer Shakespeare under the stars should be an al fresco delight. And this rendition of Bard-lite certainly fills the bill.

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THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

Where and when: Plaza of Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, 555 W. Temple St., Los Angeles, through Sunday; South Coast Botanic Garden, 26300 Crenshaw Blvd., Palos Verdes Peninsula, Wednesday through July 27. All performances are at 8 p.m.

Admission: Cathedral performances: Free with a donation of nonperishable canned food, \$25 for reserved seating. Botanic Garden: \$20 in advance, \$25 at the gate.

Information: (213) 975-9891, www.ShakespeareFestivalLA.org.

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