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## What the World Needs Now: Love, Humor and the Shakespeare Connection

Kelly Capers  
kelly.capers@bobcats.gcsu.edu

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**What the World Needs Now:  
Love, Humor and the Shakespeare Connection**

A Study of William Shakespeare's Influence on  
Twenty-first Century Romantic Comedy

by  
Kelly G. Capers

A thesis presented to the graduate faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
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## **What the World Needs Now: Love, Humor and the Shakespeare Connection**

What the world needs now is love, sweet love,  
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,  
No not just for some, but for everyone.

“What the World Needs Now”

*Hal David, Burt Bacharach*

In two of his comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, William Shakespeare deals with complex issues of attraction, acceptance and autonomy. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's most original plays and employs fairies and magic to fascinate audiences with new and unusual ideas. Conversely, *The Taming of the Shrew* is an adaptation of a folk tale that began as an oral tradition and takes advantage of the audience's history with this story. Although these plays are different in many ways, they share common elements including the theme of love and the construct of comedy. The link between love and humor in relationships is depicted in both of these plays, and each work reveals how these elements are ingrained in human nature. Because people are empirical creatures, immersion in fictional plots allows them to evaluate situations from a safe distance. For that reason, film is a vital part of the modern wisdom, enabling viewers to simultaneously escape and experience. Offering a profound look at ways partners compromise, resolve conflict and fall in love, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew* have strongly influenced contemporary film and modern romantic comedy (rom com). Two 21<sup>st</sup> Century movies, *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* (2016) and *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003), based on these plays respectively,

illustrate how Shakespeare's work is imprinted on modern media. While both films are inspired by Shakespeare, the creators of these films have reimagined key points to speak to trends of this millennium. By presenting Elizabethan ideals to the modern world in unusual and imaginative ways, these romantic comedies illustrate how the world may change, but human nature stays relatively the same.

Examining *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva* next to their sources, one can see how writers and directors fill in gaps with current social trends. These films are as different from one another as their original counterparts. *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* is formulaic, simplistic, exclusively heterosexual and dominantly middle-class white. It follows very closely a system of plot points standard in a romantic comedy that are discussed in this paper. *Deliver Us from Eva* is a traditional romantic comedy and follows the guidelines of the genre, but its format is more sophisticated, and it offers depth and complexity that is not evident in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream*. This movie is a black cast film that embraces the motifs of class difference and homosexuality. While these films are essentially different, they have significant similarities that make them interesting to evaluate side-by-side. The most notable is that, like all romantic comedies, they stand on the legs of love and humor. Arguably, these elements are vital to the good health and well-being of individuals, successful connection between humans in community and the survival of the species in perpetuity. While it is extreme to think that romantic comedy will alleviate all of the world's ills, the following chapters will illustrate the value of the genre as a palliative and as a model for interpersonal relationships. Likewise, they will emphasize Shakespeare's invaluable contribution to the genre as a result of his profound observations of human behavior by analyzing the rom coms *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva*. Further, this paper will demonstrate that circumstances in the

early decades of this millennium warrant a look how people interact with rom com and explain why what the world needs now are the healing attributes of romantic comedy.

Traditionally, the genre of romantic comedy, has had the reputation of being frivolous, useless and even dangerous. Articles frequently appear in popular media warning against the ill effects of watching rom com. “The Dangers of Romantic Comedy” by Gregory Rodriguez claims that the romantic myths of the past fulfilled a need for people who married largely for security and to gain assets. Published in the *Los Angeles Times*, this article states that those myths are no longer useful in an age where people can marry for love. An article in *Greater Good Magazine*, “How to Stop Romantic Comedies from Ruining Your Love Life” by Tchiki Davis, explains that romantic comedies can foster unrealistic expectations of love and sex, and gives guidelines for the safe viewing of a rom com. There is research to support the arguments of these articles. However, this paper is not intended to dispute the negative aspects of watching rom com, nor is it an attempt to unravel the psychologies of people who enjoy them. Its purpose is to present evidence that rom coms have intrinsic value as models of social behavior and as surrogate entities for personal interaction, and that, contrary to Rodriguez’s findings, the myths of the past are still relevant today. This paper offers evidence that Shakespeare provides a link from folklore to film and as a genre romantic comedy warrants investigation.

In *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream*, Shakespeare’s complex and fanciful story of magic and mixed-up love becomes the quintessential 21<sup>st</sup> Century formulaic rom com. Stripped of layers of characterization and fairy antics, this film lays bare relationship truths about commitment and chemical reaction. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* offers a look at obsession, jealousy, magic and misadventure. As well, ideas cultivated by Shakespeare about trust, fidelity and philanthropy present themselves in this deceptively simple adaptation. *A Midsummer’s*

*Hawaiian Dream* appeals to an audience concerned with a variety of issues including aging, insecurity and ecology. In a romantic and idealized way, this film draws from Shakespeare's intuition and touches on the idea that love is more than infatuation and self-love does not have to be selfish. In an updated twist this production also leans into the modern ideals of conservation and caring for the environment. The love connection transcends human to human and embraces the need to love and care for the planet.

In *Deliver Us from Eva*, Shakespeare's adaptation of the long popular Shrew tales is updated for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience. In a modern world, *The Taming of the Shrew* warrants a serious look at physical and mental abuse as well as psychological manipulation. However, this adaptation shifts power from male to female as multiple couples depict men in various states of subjugation subdued by their fawning adoration of their female partners. A primarily black cast movie, *Deliver Us from Eva* also crosses the borders of racial dynamics in the context of feminine independence and presents the battle of the sexes for an audience concerned not only with gender, but also class, race and education. The addition of matriarchy and a black romance dynamic alter Shakespeare's intentions by elevating the importance of family dependency and sibling devotion. Shakespeare's shrew may have been a harpy who needed behavior modification, but Eva is the backbone of her family and requires a different respect. As a model of social connection, this film illustrates conflict resolution and explores the relationship between self-esteem and compromise as its title character fights to retain autonomy in the process of finding acceptance and belonging.

### **An Old-Fashioned Love Song**

When examining the way Shakespeare has influenced contemporary media, it is worth noting that the Renaissance bears striking resemblance to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Shakespeare was

adapting and creating plays during turbulent times. His audiences were dealing with gender issues as they transitioned from an unmarried queen to a king, and they faced rampant disease including bubonic plague, smallpox and syphilis. They were embroiled in political turmoil and spiritual upheaval during a time of religious reform and frequently on the brink of foreign war. He wrote plays to speak to an audience dealing with conflict and strife. In this respect, his society was living much like people in 2022. That Shakespeare was writing to a society beset with similar problems is significant, but perhaps even more important is that he understood people in general. Early Shakespeare biographer Samuel Johnson said of his acute understanding of human nature:

His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world... they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated.... In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (Raleigh 12)

According to Johnson, Shakespeare wrote not only to Renaissance England, but to the world at large. Because he understood how people think, his works transcend history and stage and are relevant as rom com movies. Therefore, the structure of his plays lends to film adaptation. Gerald Camp explains in “Shakespeare on Film” that his works are particularly adept at accommodating film because, like screenwriters, Shakespeare wrote in scenes, not acts, saying “the plays suggest themselves as material for film because, in many ways, they are similar to film scenarios” (107). Both *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva* illustrate these points about Shakespeare’s adaptability.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare addresses the illogical nature of love and prompts the question, "What is love at first sight?" and even further, why love one and not another? Four hundred years of philosophy has not provided a satisfactory answer, and *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* still grapples with the nature of attraction. Similarly, *The Taming of the Shrew* broaches issues of social acceptance and doing what is expected and tackles the age-old topic of gender dominance. Exercises of feminism including the Suffragette Movement, Title IX and the Equal Rights Amendment have not laid to rest this conflict, and in *Deliver Us from Eva* men and women vie for control. To paraphrase Johnson, Shakespeare is not Greece or Hawaii, nor is he Katherine the Shrew or Eva. He is everywhere and anywhere, everyone and anyone.

Claiming that no one has influenced the genre of rom com more than Shakespeare, Caroline Siede writing for *A. V. Club* says, "Far from stuffy and academic, Shakespeare's plays were written as bawdy, rousing entertainment for the masses." Siede claims that Shakespeare invented every romantic comedy trope people enjoy today and lays at his feet the responsibility for these predictable and sappy films: "It's particularly ironic that Shakespeare has become so associated with snobby elitism when he also created the genre that's most likely to be scoffed at today: the romantic comedy" (Siede). In 1950 Karl F. Thompson wrote of the conundrum of romantic comedy as a banal yet successful genre. He declares that the only reason Shakespeare's comedies prevail is that they are Shakespeare. "Perhaps the only reason these comedies survive and pass as sound literary coin," Thompson explains, "is that they have the mint stamp of Shakespeare's name" (1079). Regardless of one's opinion of rom com as a credible art form, this genre has a following that appears to be steadfast, and Shakespeare's works both directly and indirectly have influenced the modern film industry. *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and

*Deliver Us from Eva*, illustrate both Shakespeare's interpretation of and influence on the love/humor link. Singularly, these dynamics are critical parts of human interaction and not only rely on community for success but are also essential to successful community.

### **Everybody Hurts**

Because interaction is critical for people to thrive, anything that diminishes connection is detrimental to society. Many catastrophes, such as the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, result in a renewed sense of association where people come together to grieve and rebuild. However, the isolation resulting from the Covid 19 pandemic has created a widespread dissolution of communities. People have been forced to pull away from society and community in an effort to stave off the spread of disease at the cost of emotional wellbeing. Although the pandemic as subject matter has not inspired a great deal of romantic comedy movies, it has inspired filmmakers to reevaluate the genre and its popularity. In his article "Why Escapist Movies and Rom-Coms Will Be All the Rage After COVID-19." for *yahoo!news* Brent Lang, Executive Editor, Film & Media for *Variety*, quotes predictions by Milan Popelka, chief operating officer of FilmNation: "People want to escape. Stories that are more uplifting and optimistic will be at a premium. There's more than enough stress in the world, I don't think people will be interested in watching something that adds to their stress levels." Popelka's ideas about uplifting movies speak to the value of taking romantic comedy seriously. While these films may not be brimming with artistic integrity, their very existence can increase quality of life. A benefit of film is that movies become timeless and can influence generations, much like Shakespeare. *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva* are 21<sup>st</sup> Century movies that speak to contemporary concerns such as gender roles and the

environment, but romantic comedies made at the inception of the genre can calm people who use them as an escape from reality.

The disruption of social interaction as a result of the pandemic gives credence to studying the romantic comedy as a comfort catalyst. According to the Mayo Clinic, surveys show “a major increase in the number of U.S. adults who report symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia during the pandemic.” These surveys also indicate an increased use of alcohol and drugs, among people, “thinking that can help them cope with their fears about the pandemic” (Mayo). Likewise, the Center for Disease Control reports the “pandemic has been associated with mental health challenges related to the morbidity and mortality caused by the disease and to mitigation activities, including the impact of physical distancing and stay-at-home orders” (CDC 1049). When people are forced to sequester, or choose to withdraw, the most significant result is loneliness. For this reason, there is merit in looking at the palliative effects of rom com and the relationship that 21<sup>st</sup> Century people have with media, especially film.

In the article “Loneliness Matter: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms,” Louise C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo define loneliness as a “distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one’s social relationships” (1). According to Hawkley and Cacioppo, who studied the implications of and interventions to alleviate loneliness for the National Institutes of Health, loneliness can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease and personality disorder, and its impact can be as far reaching as an increase in suicide and Alzheimer’s disease. “In sum,” they state, “feelings of loneliness mark increased risk for morbidity and mortality, a phenomenon that arguably reflects the social essence of our species” (2). In *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva*, loneliness is a subliminal

state of being for the main characters. Their various situations impair the quality of social relationship and they struggle to set to right their interpersonal encounters. Because these characters successfully overcome their loneliness, viewers can benefit vicariously.

Understanding the way that romantic comedy fills emotional voids in viewers who engage with them can elevate their status as a film classification. If rom com can serve as an interruption of isolation, then it becomes more than a trivial entity. In the same way, if the folktales of antiquity, such as those that inspired *The Taming of the Shrew*, strike a familiar chord, they interfere with currents of loneliness. Hawkey and Cacioppo contend that intervention for loneliness is especially important because, “Human beings are thoroughly social creatures. Indeed, human survival in difficult physical environments seems to have selected for social group living” (9). They include enhancing social skills and increasing opportunities for social interaction among their recommendations for amending the effects of loneliness (8). These are areas where enjoying romantic comedy can be recuperative, and should not be dismissed as detrimental.

Pamela Rutledge, a behavioral scientist and director of the Media Psychology Research Center and Media Psychology faculty at Fielding Graduate University, says “We learned a lot of things during the stress and uncertainty of 2020, including that media can be a wonderful escape into another time and place.” Not only is romantic comedy a form of escapism, but the genre’s repetitive nature feeds the brain stimulating beneficial neurological chemicals. “Our brains love symmetry and completion,” says Rutledge. “The pattern of this genre is comfortingly predictable, like a good ritual should be” (Media Psychology). Evidence that these statements are true is provided by Hallmark, a leading company in the production of romantic comedy, which increased its number of feel-good movies every year from 2010 to 2019, during which time it

went from 6 movies a year to 40. However, escapism is not the only virtue of the rom com. According to Hawkley and Cacioppo, “Humans are such meaning-making creatures that we perceive social relationships where no objectifiable relationship exists (e.g., between author and reader, between an individual and God) or where no reciprocity is possible (e.g., in parasocial relationships with television characters)” (10). Therefore, romantic comedies not only model social skills and social interaction, they can actually stand in as perceived social relationship.

When trying to define love, sociologist and author Brene Brown says, “I confess that I don’t think we’ll ever be able to fully unravel the mysteries of love” (187). Yet, Brown has studied and experimented with this concept long enough to conclude that “love and belonging are irreducible needs for all people” (154). In her book *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, Brown goes further to explain that, “Expanding on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, recent research shows that finding a sense of belonging in close social relationships and with our community is essential to well-being” (187). Brown taps into what Shakespeare knew centuries ago, that although it defies understanding, love is vital and universal. His unraveling of the blindness of love in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or the flouting of societal expectation in *The Taming of the Shrew*, still speaks to audiences through adaptation. For something inexplicable, love has been studied and established as crucial to survival. “What makes belonging essential for us is the fact that we are a social species,” writes Brown. She emphasizes, “We can’t survive without one another” (187). The undefinable mystery of love is the foundation of romantic comedy, and the idea that humans cannot live without companions is the driving force behind this genre. However, the value of romantic comedies is not that they are built on great love stories – drama is adequate for

providing a poignant experience with affection. The cathartic nature of romantic comedy relies on humor.

### **Don't Worry, Be Happy**

Thomas Leitch, in his article, "Laughing at Length: Notes on the Structure of Film Comedy," explains why rom coms work this way: "The comedy of affection, more often called romantic or light comedy, capitalizes on the fact that laughing puts an audience into a benevolent mood" (168). The investment in the rom com experience is grounded in a therapeutic escapism. This benevolent mood is particularly significant to an audience fighting stress or loneliness. In the article, "Please Forget Democracy and Justice: Eritrean Politics and the Powers of Humor," anthropology professor Victoria Bernal states that people often turn to humor and comedy in times of stress to cope with duress: "Humor is sometimes used as a medium for addressing tragic circumstances" (300). However, one of the more interesting points that Bernal brings to light is that humor requires a mutual understanding between speaker and audience to be effective. "Humor is interesting from an anthropological perspective because it is fundamentally a social practice, predicated on a storyteller and an audience," writes Bernal (300). Because both love and humor require reciprocation, they jointly speak to audiences looking for social cues.

The intrinsic link between love and humor has been documented to be more than a byproduct of entertainment. In studies relating humor to the success of relationships, this trait presents as an important signifier in human mating choices and by consequence, the survival of the species. According to Christopher J. Wilber and Lorne Campbell in "Humor in Romantic Contexts: Do Men Participate and Women Evaluate?", humans significantly invested in the production and raising of offspring will consider a "sense of humor" among the highest indicators of a successful mating. "Showcasing a sense of humor," says Wilber, "is rated as the

single most effective mate attraction tactic” (919). These findings based on sociological studies of the relationship between love and humor indicate that as models of the love/humor link, rom coms can meet an innate need for a species that survives on the basis of successful connection and makes connective inroads by using humor as a marker of selection. Love and humor synchronically are vital to the social interaction of humans, and *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva* portray men and women successfully and unsuccessfully navigating coupling and share two notable features. One aspect is that they work on the assumption that men and women *need* connection to be satisfied, and in the case of a true romantic comedy, both lean into the idea that the pinnacle of successful union is marriage. A second shared feature, one that is different from the typical romantic comedy, is that the women are portrayed as the more competent and independent gender, while the men are perceived as needy and fickle. By making this subtle but significant shift, these films address atypical ideas about gender needs.

Shakespeare was a master of adaptation and into each source from which he borrowed he breathed new life revising ancient ideas into dramas that resonated with his contemporaries. Professor and author Milton Crane positions Shakespeare as a superior comic writer and a purveyor of joy: “The point cannot be made too strongly or too often that Shakespeare's comedies have lived because they have shown themselves capable, after nearly four centuries, of giving spectators and readers all over the world the true comic pleasure, which, however one explains it, expresses itself characteristically in laughter” (72). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, one sees the comedic instincts of the original thinker and the adapter. Shakespeare dabbled with the facts of life and unraveled one of the most significant issues of the human condition – social connection. One of the greatest legacies left by William

Shakespeare is his license to adapt. Because he was a borrower, he gives successive generations permission to do the same. *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva*, look at old themes in new ways, re-evaluating how men and women do life in the modern world. Through these films, Shakespeare continues to offer audiences the balm of romance.

**You Make Loving Fun:  
The Healing Value of Love and Humor in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream***

I never did believe in miracles,  
But I've a feeling it's time to try.  
I never did believe in the ways of magic,  
But I'm beginning to wonder why.  
"You Make Loving Fun"  
*Christine McVie*

Choosing William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to adapt as a modern romantic comedy seems at best a calculated risk. At first glance, contemporary rom com appears to be everything that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not -- simple and predictable. Rom coms are replete with anticipated plot points and inevitable happy endings and certain characteristics have become so cliché viewers wait for them, such as the "half kiss," a kiss that is interrupted, or the "look back," the give-away that feelings are sincere. Multiple characters dealing with status, patriarchy and waywardness complicate and clutter *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and this play appears unlikely to fit into a formula that begins with boy meets girl and resolves in a neat happy ending. However, MarVista's campy *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* produced in 2016 effectively boils Shakespeare's play down to pristine formula. Writers Harry Cason and Stephen Beck distill this complex piece with fairies, dukes, weddings, potions and mismatched lovers to 8 main characters in two settings – a forest and an office. Whittling away all but the core story, Cason and Beck take inspiration from Shakespeare's essential lessons about love, loyalty and longing and infuse them with contemporary ideas about aging, self-esteem and environmental stewardship.

Journalist Caroline Siede writing for *A. V. Club* claims that Shakespeare has had a major effect on romantic comedy citing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the pinnacle of that influence. Written in 1594, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has endured as a romance, and its story and characters are still relevant and appealing today. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*," says Siede, "is the urtext for any romance brimming with madcap wackiness." The madcap wackiness that she notes is one aspect of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that resonates with viewers and makes it function well as a modern romantic comedy. It can be argued that Shakespeare understood what psychologist Abraham Maslow would confirm almost 400 years later: after sustenance and air, affection and acceptance are the most essential of the human needs. Early biographer, Samuel Johnson made strong claims about Shakespeare's grasp of human nature and praised his comedy above his tragedy saying it was his forte writing, "his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His comedy pleases by the thoughts and language .... His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct" (Raleigh 19). These instincts tap into the basic human needs and present them in such a way that viewers can experience vicariously rites of community and connection. Because it pivots on two significant emotions involved in lasting relationships, love and humor, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* models appropriate and inappropriate encounters between men and women. Reinventing the play in a simpler fashion, *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* uses humor to depict gender relationships in a love quadrangle of two couples of anthropologists, a subtle nod to the study of human nature.

### **Runnin' Down a Dream**

One of the more outstanding concepts that arises from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that is echoed in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* is what literary critic Northrop Frye refers to as "green world." In his work *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye outlines several elements of comedy

including the role of the green world as a place that characters enter for renewal. The green world Frye explains is, a dramatic setting where the plot is “assimilated to the ritual of the triumph of life and love over the waste land” (182). This space, while often symbolized with a natural mise en scene, is not necessarily a natural setting. It is a place in drama where characters meet (or collide) to learn, grow and be redeemed. Essential it is a place outside of the normal world. According to Frye, “The green world has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires” (183). Dreams themselves can provide comic green space allowing characters to unravel fetters of reality and awake refreshed. Frye contends that Shakespeare is a master of the green world and employs it in a variety of his comedies, most profoundly in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “Thus, Shakespearean comedy illustrates,” writes Frye, “the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from ‘reality,’ but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate” (183). In this respect, the green world is the do-over the human psyche craves.

As a “fertile world of ritual” the rom com as a genre provides that space to the viewer. Writing for *Cinemablography*, Michael Hoffman cites four key elements of the modern rom com: the “Meet Cute;” reflective friends; the Exit and Chase; the Speech and Kiss (Hoffman). According to Hoffman, audiences can count on these elements to appear as reliably as a faithful friend – there will always be an immediate (sometimes inexplicable) attraction between two main characters, a cohort of sidekicks to confide in, conflict that drives one away and forces the other to pursue and a resolution that involves a pledge of love sealed with a kiss. Watching a movie that is predictable, controlled and guaranteed to have a positive outcome allows the viewer to leave reality and live briefly in a world that should be, perhaps could be, but not likely ever would be. However, the respite offered in this green world allows a reboot of the

imagination that often results in a psychological healing. As Frye contends, indulging in rom com essentially allows life and love to triumph over the waste land of reality.

Opening with an attack in New York on September 11, 2001, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century began by ushering in a new level of fear for Earth's global citizens. People somewhat used to a "kinder and gentler" society, adopted a position of high alert, and seeking safety became a priority. If 9/11 prompted a heightened state of fear, the pandemic of 2020 created an enhanced sense of loneliness. Community literally became a thing of the past with the forced isolation resulting from Covid 19. In two decades, the new millennium has presented society with a wasteland of reality – economic crises, political upheaval and racial strife continue to accelerate on a planetary scale. If ever there was a need for a green world, the time is now. For this reason, looking at the tropes of romantic comedy can provide insights into how Shakespeare's use of respite space continues to be pertinent. Regarding the restorative nature of comedy, L. W. Kline writes:

No stimulus, perhaps, more mercifully and effectually breaks the surface tension of consciousness, thereby conditioning it for a new forward movement, than humor. It is the one universal remedy; a medicine for the poor, a tonic for the rich, a recreation for the fatigued, a beneficent check to the strenuous, a shield to the reformer and an entering wedge to the recluse. (421)

As a counter measure to the double shot of fear and loneliness pervading current societies, the genre of romantic comedy provides a balm of joy, and the formulaic nature of *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* illustrates how the comic instincts of the Shakespeare are still effective.

### **Ode to Joy**

In the article "The Psychology of Humor," Kline not only describes the healing values of humor but also describes the conditions for humor to exist. Providing detailed lists of things that

provoke humor and things that do not, Kline concludes that harmony, rhythm and order never provoke humor. Likewise, inanimation is distinctly humorless. For humor, to occur a sense of the unexpected is essential and “humorous stimuli are departures, exaggerations, even violations” of the norm (Kline 434). *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is rife with the unexpected and the out of control, and locked within the confines of rom com criteria, *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* keeps humor at the forefront with unexpected turns. In essence, this film offers a sense of controlled chaos. It is organic, animated and entirely human, but also predictable, accessible and comfortable.

The longstanding formula for rom com makes it an ideal genre for establishing a production/viewer relationship. In a sense, the rom com is an old friend who understands its viewers on a psychological level. Similar to watching a romance on film, Janice Radway describes the phenomenon and benefits of a relationship with romance novels where “women vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who require emotional sustenance and solicitude” (93). In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Radway defines a situation much like the character/audience relationship experienced with film: “the romance community, then, is not an actual group functioning at the local level. Rather, it is a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other” (97). This relationship is important (again, especially so in times of isolation) because, “it performs some of the same functions carried out by older neighborhood groups... Despite the distance, ... women feel personally connected to their favorite authors because they are convinced that these writers know how to make them happy” (Radway 97). Although the romance on screen (or one the page) may be fantasy, the emotional connection to the rom com is real. One of the ways this genre operates effectively as a green world is by enhancing the link

between love and humor that is the foundation of romantic comedy and upholding the value of social connection, which has become more vital in the wake of the Covid 19 crisis. The 2020s are experiencing an environment of loneliness and a dearth of community that rom com can help alleviate. One of the ways this genre works this way is by adhering to simple and predictable conventions.

Reducing a complex story like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to very simple plot points functions well for an audience looking for a relief from stress. In his article "Shakespeare on Film," Gerald Camp discusses the pros and cons of adapting Shakespeare for the screen, and one of the challenges he cites is the difficult task of aligning Shakespeare's poetic language with the often-competing nature of cinematography. Camp contends that a visual medium like film can detract from the lyrical nature of Shakespeare's dialogue, stating, "the plays present difficulties because they are so thoroughly conceived in terms of the Elizabethan theatre with its dated conventions and occasionally archaic vocabulary and with language so rich in imagery that the photographic image is often merely redundant" (108). *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* does not have this problem. The camera work in the opening scene is designed to virtually fly the viewer onto an island to be placed in the midst of a dense forest, ostensibly the sacred Hemolele Forest on Kauai. Despite what is meant to be a lengthy trek around an ancient forest, there is nothing in the scenery to suggest that the characters are not circling same tree. Minimal scenery illustrates how handily this film adapts the play taking advantage of its story to engage the viewer.

Setting the film in a forest mimics the setting of the original play, but creators of *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* adeptly use the setting to include a subtle but on trend update by turning the unsuspecting lovers from young Greeks to contemporary anthropologists, Demetri,

Helen, Zander and Hermione. These scientists who have been hired by environmental lawyer, Tanya McQueen, are attempting to find anything which would save the land from a developer, the aptly described jackass of the production, Nick Button. Fashioned after the character of Bottom, Button is not a bumbler. However, his buffoonery is built on his capitalistic instincts and his deceitful nature. In terms of the eco-critical conversation, this scenario allows the earth itself to be perceived as a character. It simultaneously enters the green world of comedy while being a green world at risk. Fortunately, like all the characters in this film it emerges healed with the hope of a better future. Although the audience is meant to presume that there are high stakes involved if the forest is destroyed, in keeping with the lighthearted ambiance of the movie, Button is never allowed to be too devious, fights are never too violent, and conflict never escalates beyond momentary spats. Unlike the original play, insults are quite mild in this film, and the audience is never left with any lingering bitterness.

### **Sweet Dreams Are Made of This**

In discussing the constructs of romantic comedy both in relationship to Shakespearean comedy and to film, professor and philosopher Stanley Cavell says that an important aspect of both genres is the ability of characters to forgive. In his work *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, he claims the obligation of romantic comedy to “expel jealousy and envy in preparation for a happy ending” (142). Relying on Frye’s green world to uphold this idea, Cavell claims that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* accomplishes this feat by virtue of the dream state associated with the action. The sleeping and awakening are essential to the redemption in the play. “In [*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” says Cavell, “the eyes are analogously closed and opened by what it calls the liquor or juice of certain flowers or herbs used externally” (143). In this respect, *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* operates in the same

way. As long as the egregious behavior is committed under the influence of potions, what happens in the forest stays in the forest. In what Cavell calls, “the winning of a new beginning,” (261) everyone reenters society healed.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the green world is both figuratively and literally green – a dream in a forest. Characters flee the oppression of reality to be overtaken by magic and mischief and emerge relaxed, recharge and recreated. Shakespeare infuses this forest with fairies and potions which enhance the dream experience to virtual hallucination. Although *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* is set in a forest and involves a drug induced dream state, the film adaptation does not press the limits of disbelief as the characters are on a practical mission and their mishaps are neatly explained. Four anthropologists are searching for an artifact in an ancient Hawaiian forest to prevent it from being destroyed for development, and they are consequently drugged by the juices of forest flowers.

Like Oberon in the original play, this forest has a spiritual master, Omaka. This Hawaiian kahuna (wise man) and his mischievous aide, Puka, are the only nonromantic characters in this movie. Together they go into the forest in hopes of finding an ancient tiki to stop the destruction of the native plants that he uses for remedies. Omaka is only roughly patterned after Oberon in the original. He has no vested interest in the fates of any of the characters -- he is only interested in saving the land. Unlike, Oberon, Omaka is opposed to meddling, and it is left up to Puka to create mischief on his own. The only element of magic is Puka's unexplained ability to remove a stain from Button's clothing. This unusual skill is enough to make the viewer curious, but not overt enough to be distracting from the story. While rom com may be modern day fantasy, its appeal is the belief that it could happen. By eliminating the fairies and magic that make the original so alluring, a modern audience looking to believe in love is satisfied that hallucinogens,

not spells and potions, are responsible for any altered states. After all, as Zander explains, “My dad said this is what the 60s were like,” (Cason 36:47-36:49). Taking advantage of mirth in the play, this film illustrates how joy can have a healing effect to both the characters on screen and the viewers participating in their foibles without magic.

Perhaps no more than a play on words, the green world of *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* directly addresses the issues of greening the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Environmental concerns have long been relevant to society and have not waned in the current millennium. Healing the planet, renewing resources and conserving green space are all prevalent pursuits in 2022 as they were when this film was produced. The levels of relational restoration in this rom com range from person-to-person to people-to-planet. Drawing inspiration from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Carson and Beck use the soothing nature of humor to unpack important contemporary values. Unlike Shakespeare, they do so in the confines of analgesic formulaic rom com. From the opening scene, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* promises to be filled with pleasure: “Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments; Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth” (Shakespeare 1.1.13-14). Capitalizing on the prevalent aspect of humor present in this play, the updated version offers the levity of a pair of crisscrossed lovers but eliminates the complicated ideas of jealousy, obsession and patriarchy, focusing on the excitement of finding a new love and rediscovering an old one. When stripped of its complications and layers of subplot, this play fits very nicely into the formulaic specifics characteristic of romantic comedy.

### **This Magic Moment**

The key elements of the modern rom com Hoffman cites are the basis for making the rom com palliative. Predictability is the foundation of the romantic comedy’s healing nature, its green world. Among these elements is the “Meet Cute;” a scene in which an intended romantic couple

meet for the first time. This encounter involves an immediate (and sometimes illogical) attraction by one or both characters, or an intense dislike for each other that the viewer knows will be overcome. For the two couples on the expedition, the Meet Cute in this film has happened in backstory and the plot opens with two couples already in the middle of conflict. Scientists and scholars Professor Schuler (Demetri) and Professor Schuler (Helen) leading their twentieth expedition as a married team, seem to have more passion for the job than each other. Seeing graduate student, Zander, pine for his classmate, Hermione (who ignores him), Helen longs for a time when her husband paid more attention to her. As a competent and career driven woman, Helen struggles with where her autonomy ends and her desire to be accepted begins. Addressing the need for affection, sociologist Brene Brown describes this emotion as “primal” writing, “We want to be part of something – to experience real connection with others” (158). In her book *Atlas of the Heart*, Brown contends that there is a fine line between belonging and interaction with the social group and being true to self and personal conviction.

True belonging happens, according to Brown, only when the group and the self align. Helen illustrates that “we have to belong to ourselves as much as we need to belong to others. Any belonging that asks us to betray ourselves is not true belonging” (Brown 154). Helen grapples with the fact that, while she is experienced and competent, her relationship is no longer exciting. She expresses what most aging women feel, that their best years are behind them and the rather secure routine they depended on may be changing. Brown states that connection is “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued” (169). As Helen (and each of the others) works through her emotions and circumstances in the green world of the forest, she emerges stronger and more confident. In the end, the audience believes that if Helen

can re-spark her marriage – essentially become more highly valued -- maybe there is hope for a renewal of their own mundane relationships.

A twist to the Meet Cute in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* draws inspiration from the original play when Puka drops flower nectar into the eyes of Demetri and Zander. In Shakespeare's play, eyes are a significant motif. In the article "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," R. W. Dent discusses the imagery of eyes in the play and the way they convey the theme of love's irrational nature. "The inexplicability of love's choices was of course a favorite topic for discussion in the age and a favorite theme for Shakespearian comedy," says Dent. He asks, "Why should two particular people fall in love, often at first sight?" (117). Why, indeed? Answering this question within the parameters of the key elements of rom com that Hoffman cites, the Meet Cute takes on new meaning. The rom com adaptation alludes to the eyes motif by recreating a meet cute when the visions of the men are reopened to love. This film gives nod to the imagery when Helen quotes, "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind" (Cason 1:14:10-1:14:22). Although in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* the original meet cute is not witnessed by the audience, the flower juice which is dropped in the eyes of Demetri and Zander essentially open their eyes to love in a new way. The audience is rewarded not only with the satisfying familiarity of formula, but also with something unexpected.

A second principal element that Hoffman cites as a trope of rom com is the inclusion of reflexive friends. These are typically peripheral characters who offer support, encouragement and advice to the central couple working through the foibles of falling in love. The absence of peripheral characters in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* requires the lovers to deal with their own angst and also support their cohorts. Throughout the movie, the role of reflective friends

shifts between couples and strangers. Helen offers wisdom to both Zander and Hermione as an older and presumably wiser companion, and Hermione confides in Button, a stranger to her, after a chance meeting among the trees. Omaka maintains a role as sage, mentoring Puka in the ways of the forest and serving as a champion of the planet. Reflexive friends present in the rom com further enhance its effectiveness as a restorative. While both modeling social interaction and leading to a soothing closure, reflexive friends stand in for community, an especially significant element during times of stress. Differing from the original play, *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* adds a component of compassion. While Shakespeare allows friendships to digress into animosity:

Helena: O, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd!

She was a vixen when she went to school;

And though she be but little, she is fierce.

Hermia: 'Little' again! nothing but 'low' and 'little'!

Why will you suffer her to flout me thus?

Let me come to her. (Shakespeare 3.2.340-345)

the rom com nurtures a deeper understanding. The mild bickering between Helen and Hermione is quickly resolved and they bond together to react jointly as problem solvers. Even Button who is the villain, is a sympathetic character who only seeks money to assuage the aftereffects of a poor childhood. He is greedy but for a good reason.

### **What's Love Got to Do With It**

In comparison to the original, *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* focuses on many aspects of connectivity such as commitment and loyalty within and without marriage. During the Renaissance romance was complicated by the legalities of marriage more so than today.

According to Johanna Rickman in *Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England*, “marriage was crucial to the nobility: it was the primary means for a landed class to ensure both dynastic continuation and legitimate property transfer” (25). The need to be aligned with the correct or proper mate was emphasized, and the mayhem of the mixed-up couples in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* highlights the need to find the right mate. Egeus blatantly claims his daughter as legal property:

I beg the ancient privilege of Athens,

As she is mine, I may dispose of her:

Which shall be either to this gentleman

Or to her death, according to our law

Immediately provided in that case. (Shakespeare 1.1.42-46)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the need for finding the right person hinges more on an emotional desire than legal obligation. In *A Midsummer Hawaiian’s Dream*, the relationship between Demetri and Helen is bound by marriage, but it has gone stale, and the couple has not evolved into a deep abiding love as much as dwindled into a comfortable complacency. They are not at odds; in fact, they work well with each other having careers that intertwine them. Helen exhibits a great deal of agency as a competent archeologist and Demetrius relies on her, but romance is dead.

Contemplating their years together Helen says, “Twenty years of marriage, 20 expeditions. Do you remember our first one? I was the eager grad student, and you were the handsome professor.” (Cason 3:30). “Yeh,” replies her husband, “well, that was years ago” (Cason 3:35).

At this stage in her life, there is for Helen a society, but no real belonging.

Early in the film, the condition of her marriage is of no concern to Helen, but as she sees the energy between Zander and Hermione, she begins to feel isolated in her own relationship.

Watching Helen examine her career and her femininity reaches an audience who may be looking into that mirror. When Puka attempts to “fix” this marital chink using the marry me flower, which Omaka has revealed to him, Zander and Demetri end up drugged and fascinated with Helen. The meddling of the impish Puka unleashes a maelstrom of slapstick as the two men prance and vie for Helen’s attention. When both Zander and Demetri become infatuated with her, Helen experiences too much of a good thing and the comedy ensues. The antics of the men illustrate Kline’s definition of humor as events progress and get out of control.

If the original play presents weightier issues of jealousy, obsession and manipulation, the updated version does not. Staying close to the surface, *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* goes only deep enough to allow the audience to sympathize with the characters. For instance, Hermione and Zander squabble just enough to reveal their insecurities without over dramatizing angst. In a drugged condition, Zander displays a rather ridiculous infatuation with Helen that he does not feel in his normal state. His authentic affection for Hermione is hijacked, and he insults her. Hermione’s narcissism, which is evident from the beginning, and her rebuff of Zander’s attention is explained as an emotional defense resulting from her parents’ unhappy marriage. Her ultimate self-reflection, which arises when Zander turns his love to Helen, makes her vanity palatable. In the original Hermia and Lysander’s dialogue is heated:

Hermia: Why are you grown so rude? What change is this, Sweet love?

Lysander: Thy love? Out, tawny Tartar, out! Out, loathèd med’cine! O, hated potion,  
hence! (Shakespeare 3.2.272-275)

This passionate exchange is too expansive for the gentle Zander and the sensitive Hermione, products of the new millennium. Their exchange translates to her asking what he thinks of her

hair to his reply of, “Meh.” However, this indifference is enough to send Hermione into the woods re-evaluating her emotions.

The dynamics between Zander and Hermione illustrate many levels of confusion and inconsistency in relationships. Hermione exhibits self-love to the point of arrogance, taking for granted that she has Zander right where she wants him. It is inconceivable to her that she will lose his attention, particularly to her only competition, a married, older woman. When she must look at her own behavior with a critical eye, she realizes that her toying with Zander is not only mean, but also costly. Not a particularly original plot point, but a life lesson worth reiterating – you don’t know what you have until it is gone. Fortunately for Hermione, she learns her lesson in time – a mark of the rom com – and takes the risks necessary for belonging. She confesses her weaknesses and is forgiven. An essential quality to the romantic comedy, according to Cavell.

### **Lean On Me**

One of the concepts illustrated by the relationships between Zander and Hermione and Demetri and Helen is gender capability. In typical romantic comedy, men are depicted as the more stable and competent gender, which is largely why they appeal to women according to Radway. The desire to be relieved of life’s pressures motivates women viewers to gravitate to controlling men. Radway writes:

Passivity is at the heart of the romance experience in the sense that the final goal of each narrative is the creation of that perfect union where the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too, finally recognizes the intrinsic worth of the heroine. Thereafter, she is required to do nothing more than exist as the center of this paragon's attention. Romantic escape is, therefore, a temporary but literal denial of the demands women recognize as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers. (97)

However, *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* upends that notion as Helen and Hermine are both portrayed as more organized and logical even before the men are drugged. In the opening scene, Helen must direct her husband to his trowel, camera and even the glasses he has on his head. During a trek in the woods Demetri continues to take wrong turns until Hermine leads him in the right direction.

This gender dynamic is seen clearly in the third of four key elements of rom com that Hoffman cites as the exit/chase. The exit/chase construct requires that one party flee and the other pursue. The intent of this feature is to show the depths of devotion – how far will someone go for love? In an amusing twist to this trope, the obsessed men escape at random, and the stable women continue to chase after them. These chase scenes illustrate more the humor of the unexpected than the rom com formula. As the men are infatuated with Helen and jealous of each other, the women struggle to keep them from alternately fighting and running off into the woods to gather flowers, thus enacting a convoluted exit/chase scenario. This action is not only a deviation from Shakespeare's play, but it speaks to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience which values the freedom competence affords a contemporary woman. Helen and Hermione can enjoy love for the sake of love not for security or because they are property. This format could possibly be the antidote to Radway's hypothesis that indulging in romance, "may very well obviate the need or desire to demand satisfaction in the real world because it can be so successfully met in fantasy" (212), because it shows competent – not passive – women in a successful and satisfying relationships. In all its madcap frenzy, this modern rom com never wants the viewer to forget that these people are professionals and that although people might be stupid for love, loving someone does not make you stupid.

This scenario also bears out the findings in “Do Men ‘Need’ a Spouse More than Women?: Perceptions of the Importance of Marriage for Men and Women.” an article about contemporary marital views. In 2007, *The Sociological Quarterly*, published findings based on the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households in this article by Gayle Kaufman and Frances Goldscheider. Kaufman and Goldscheider state, “Both men and women agree that it is easier for a woman than a man to have a fully satisfying life without marrying.” They continue: “Both men and women appear to realize the differential benefits of marriage for men, such as the findings that married men are healthier and happier and have higher incomes and more sex than unmarried men.” Furthermore, “marriage may also be tied to cultural conceptions of masculinity, and marriage may even be seen as ‘a rite of passage into manhood’” (42). The obsession the men in *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* have for Helen illustrates this idea that men benefit more from marriage than women. Demetri does not even have to keep up with his glasses because he has a wife to handle that for him. Helen on the other hand, has secured the grant to fund their summer project, keeps up with all the equipment and sets a plan for executed the exploration. Demetri appears to be along for the ride. This conception of Demetri and Helen’s relationship confirms the conclusion that, “Based on our findings, the indication is that people at the end of the 20th century thought that men ‘need’ marriage more than women do” (Kaufman/Goldscheider 43). In the forests of Hawaii, the women pick up the pieces and get things under control, while the men pine for love and connection.

### **Nothing But Flowers**

Displaying the soothing symmetry of romantic comedy, *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* completes its trio of couples with Button and Tanya allowing the audience to witness the conflict and resolution of moral clash. Button is greedy and wants to exploit the island; Tanya is

determined to save it. The two illustrate that opposites can attract, that villains can reform and be forgiven, and love may not conquer all, but it changes a lot. Although they could be considered an aside to the central action, it is this couple who most closely follows Hoffman's criteria for rom com. Button and Tanya exhibit each of these cliches without deviation. A pair of lawyers, their Meet Cute immediately establishes them simultaneously at odds and as potential partners when they face off in Button's office. Adequate opposites, they exhibit enough conflict to repair without being too far apart. When Tanya catches Button in a lie, she makes sure he knows he cannot charm her out of her convictions. "I make a habit of researching all my opponents," (Cason 7:24), she informs him. To which he replies, "Do we need to refer to ourselves as opponents? Or are we simply two earnest people on different sides of the same coin of destiny?" (Cason 7:29) With their destiny in motion, Button heads to the forest to derail the anthropologists' attempts to find artifacts. He is successful in locating a coveted tiki and he tosses it into a pool of water to prevent its discovery. Tanya follows Button in an effort to uncover his true motives. While all of the characters are at large among the trees, Button has a chance encounter with Hermione that is a turning point for her as he stands in as a reflexive friend.

When Tanya gives into fatigue, she sits down and sleeps at the base of a tree. Puka's mischief has gotten the best of him, and when he sees her, he doses her eyes with the marry me flower. She wakes in time to see Button and become infatuated with him. After an awkward seduction, Tanya and Button have a falling out, and Tanya attempts to flee the forest with Button chasing after her. This exit/chase is authentic and leads Button into Hoffman's alleged denouement – the speech/kiss. This element wraps up all the loose ends and is the key to the happy ending. In the end, he confesses his feelings, his crimes and his love – all sealed with a kiss. With the standard formula in place, MarVista's film uses Shakespeare's concepts to explore

some different and more contemporary ideas without breaking the code of rom com. Tanya and Button hold the romantic creed in place, while Helen, Demetri, Zander and Hermione run amok with deviations from the norm.

If the green world of the forest offers a place to heal and be healed, by channeling the essence of contemporary inclinations toward preservation, conservation and green living, this film highlights nature and the human/planet relationship. The film creators build on Shakespeare's use of plants in the play and his motifs of folk lore and herbal medicine, and this aspect of the play relates well to an organics-loving culture rediscovering the values of essential oils. Shakespeare was well acquainted with plants and their uses and in the article "Folk Medicine and the Four Fairies of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*," Lou Agnes Reynolds, and Paul Sawyer explain, "to the Elizabethans no subject, apart from love, was more appropriate to *Midsummer's Night* than folk medicine; or conversely, at no time could a reference to folk medicine be more opportunely introduced than on *Midsummer's Night*" (513). It is no accident that Shakespeare's lovers wander into the woods at this season as, "it was believed that on this night of the summer solstice, plants were granted a magic power that they possessed at no other time of the year" (Reynolds 513). While Shakespeare seems to capitalize more on the magical nature of the night, MarVista's crew highlights the secrets of the forest and the need to steward the planet. *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* leans heavily into the theme of healing and uses the motif of the medicinal plants to enhance that idea.

With three star-crossed couples and a planet to save, MarVista's film takes full advantage of ecology and green thinking to provide an umbrella of reconciliation and the restoration of relationships. While there are three romantic scenarios unfolding simultaneously, the overarching love affair is not man and woman, but human to nature. The ultimate happy ending is the saving

of the forest. In a moment of self-reflection, Button closes his eyes to meditate. When Puka drops the nectar of the marry me flower into Button's eyes he falls in love with the forest. He realizes that the caring for the planet is all that matters, and he gives up his fortune for "malama i ka aina," which means, take care of the land. When he realizes the error of his ways, he reveals that he has found and hidden the artifact that will preserve the sacred forest. This revelation provides closure for all the couples who have experienced an awakening under the canopy of the Hemolele. The real happy ending is that Puka has made a mistake and actually used the wrong flower on Button's eyes. Button's reformation is genuine; he truly is in love with the forest. The film closes with a 500-year-old tiki being restored to a place of honor, an ornament that Helen says in her closing lines represents "the power of healing" (Cason 1:20:39). In *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream*, three couples find healing and happiness, and audiences of this film enjoy the balm of a healing rom com.

After the onset of chaos, there is complete and satisfying resolution – a must for the formulaic rom com. In the end all is set right by a well-timed but practical antidote -- another forest flower and a little rain. True to the formula of rom com, the couples find their true loves, and Button is reformed by the beautiful Tanya. In the ultimate act of social connection, the viewer is led to believe that loving the planet is the real victory. Kissing is just a perk. The implicit moral is that those who care for the environment prevail in the end—heal the land and it will heal in return – an ideal that is driven home when Helen looks to the forest and says, "Thank you. Mahalo."

To comprehend why rom com works as a palliative and as a model for social interaction it is good to understand the nature of both love and humor as social constructs. When looking at the link between these two features one fact is unassailable: neither exists without community.

Likewise, both are essential to healing and good health. The overwhelming stresses that have pervaded the 21<sup>st</sup> Century indicate that the therapeutic nature of romantic comedy is as valuable in this millennium as it has ever been. Regarding love as overtly social, Brown says, “From an evolution perspective connection was about survival, today it’s what give purpose and meaning to our lives” (169). The need to be part of a greater whole is universal and is essential to individual health as well as the survival of the species. “Research shows that ‘people who have strong connections with others are happier, healthier, and better able to cope with the stresses of everyday life,’” says Brown (169). In a world reliant on technology, film has become an effective teaching medium and a way to connect socially. While some critics believe that rom coms merely offer a look at a fantasy life, it can be argued that they operate akin to parable by modeling relationships in story form and teaching lessons. Likewise, rom com both illustrates and serves as a green world for the viewer to enter, encounter and emerge. Leaving the wasteland of reality, audiences can be refreshed in a shower of imagination. In the case of *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* six of the eight main characters struggle with communicating their desires. By working through anxiety on camera, characters allow viewers to deal with their own angst vicariously. If love and laughter are joint social experiences, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* illustrates this relationship well as its character Puck breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly to the audience and essentially including the viewer in the dream referred to in the title: “If we shadows have offended, Think but this, and all is mended: That you have but slumbered here, While these visions did appear” (Shakespeare 5.1.440-443). For the rom com viewer, the dream offers the chance to awake renewed.

## Love is a Battlefield: Confrontation and Compromise in *Deliver Us from Eva*

You're making me go,  
Then making me stay.  
Why do you hurt me so bad?  
It would help me to know --  
Do I stand in your way,  
Or am I the best thing you've had?  
"Love is a Battlefield"  
*Holly Knight / Mike Chapman*

*The Taming of the Shrew* is perhaps Shakespeare's most controversial play. Although this play is intended to be a comedy, on a surface level it can be seen as a bully's field day. From the ambushing of the Induction's drunken Christopher Sly to the animal husbandry of male lead Petruchio's wooing, the play works as a tribute to cruelty, yet it continues to be one of the most consistently performed plays of the Shakespearean cannon. Considering the play's enduring legacy in performance, it is no surprise that it boasts a myriad of film adaptations and has helped define the evolving genre of romantic comedy. In *Shakespeare's Cinema of Love: A Study in Genre and Influence*, R. S. White goes so far as to state that the prevalence and variations of this single play establish a precedent for Shakespeare's influence on the film industry: "There are enough movie versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* to show that its plot played a vigorous role in film history from the early days, and therefore it is not debatable as a Shakespearean contribution to cinema genres" (39). A modern black cast film, *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003), draws heavy from the plot and themes of *The Taming of the Shrew* while updating it to address contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> Century social issues, such as race and gender roles. Set in middle-class America, *Deliver Us*

*from Eva* exemplifies and enhances the themes of familial obligation, social acceptance and conflict resolution outlined in Shakespeare's play.

As an influence on the romantic comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew* has made an impact if for no other reason than its subject matter has remained an ever-fixed mark being filmed, "one way or another, in immediately recognisable versions or forcibly adapted... anew in virtually every year of the medium's history" (White 39). Addressing the sexism rampant in the play, White suggests that understanding the play is not as simple as relegating it to a tome against women:

Given the extraordinary exposure in the modern world of a play that many might regard as objectionable, some feminists have claimed the play is used as blatant propaganda for misogynistic social practices. However, the fact that invariably a strong female lead is chosen, and represented as equally spirited and dominant as the male, indicates that the effect of the play is usually more complex than a straight underwriting of patriarchy. (40)

Katherine's vibrant personality, Petruchio's complicated behavior and the changing attitudes of peripheral characters indicate that this story offers more than merely a wife being beaten into submission. Katherine's acquiescence continues to be a matter of interpretation. Scholars debate whether she is badgered into compliance, or whether she uses a façade of submission to manipulate her husband. This enigmatic situation creates a tension that stimulates the play/audience relationship. When viewers must infer intention, they become invested both in the lives of the characters and in the institution of the art. They themselves become creator by filling in the blanks of motive and outcome.

In *Deliver Us from Eva*, director Gary Hardwick along with fellow writers, James Iver Mattson and B. E. Brauner use the format of rom com not only to weave a tale of boy meets girl,

but also to illustrate the complexities of family commitment and in-law relations. Major themes apparent in this film, as in the original play, include sibling obligations, gender roles in marriage and compromise for belonging. Struggling to honor their true natures, main characters, Eva, played by Gabrielle Union, and Ray, portrayed by LL Cool J (now known as James Todd Smith) undergo transitions in an effort to give and receive love. Supporting characters in the form of Eva's three siblings, the Dandridge sisters, and their male partners are embroiled in scenarios that explore gender roles in marriage, child rearing and initiation of sex. As the original does, *Deliver Us from Eva* relies on the safety and ambiguities of humor to reveal deeper truths and to signal attraction. In essence it provides life lessons about connection and conflict resolution. Living and loving in *Deliver Us from Eva* involve duking it out, yet in the end everyone is still standing, and not just upright but standing stronger and standing together.

### **Tale as Old as Time**

When comparing *The Taming of the Shrew* to *Deliver Us from Eva*, it is apparent that humans share a common heritage that is not dependent on time, place or race. The struggles relevant to Katherine and Petruchio in Padua – social acceptance, independence, financial stability – are equally important to Eva and Ray in California. Audiences are not merely then and now, but timeless. Speaking to the corporate nature of humanity Syrian poet Golan Haji states, “Human memory is a collective memory, and we share our experiences through history” (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona). Shakespeare drew from the collected memory when he created characters, and despite the credit given to him for his role in promoting this narrative, *The Taming of the Shrew* is a centuries old story that can be traced to ancient European folk tales. In the article “The Folktale Origin of *The Taming of the Shrew*,” Jan Brunvand writes that the playwright could not have been without some knowledge of the story in its ancient state

concluding, “It follows from the comparative evidence that Shakespeare must have been familiar with the tale as it was developed in oral tradition, and that, ... the ultimate origin of the taming plot was the traditional folktale” (357). Shakespeare wrote a play that appealed to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century audience and responded to the social issues of the day adapting its plot from an age-old tale. The fact that directors are now adapting Shakespeare’s work on screen, positions him as a link between folk tale and film. While this link may at first seem unimportant, it bears noting because it illustrates the nature of the human community. This community is essential to the success of the contemporary romantic comedy formula.

If people draw from a shared history as Haji contends, the commonality of people is the reason art in any form is effective as communication, connection and comfort and the reason formulaic rom com continues to be a popular form of entertainment. In 1952 Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn wrote in their book *This Star of England* that the nature of Shakespeare’s genius could not be contained in one generation, and Shakespeare’s brilliance is more clearly illuminated with the passage of time (viii). Although leaning into hyperbole, the Ogburns’ opinions illustrate the playwright’s influence and his ongoing presence in the mutual human experience. It is not necessarily important that Shakespeare wrote a romantic comedy play for a 16<sup>th</sup> Century public coming to grips with gender power and politics -- his audience was adjusting to a female monarch and reeling from the aftermath of a king who badgered and routinely disposed of wives who presented obstacles to his personal agenda. Likewise, it is not of particular importance that Hardwick produced a romantic comedy film for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century black viewership navigating the ongoing struggle of gender inequity -- this audience is continuing to adapt to a post 9/11 world and contending with new and more complex issues of racial identity. The salient point is that these audiences centuries apart both relate to a story ingrained in the

human experience before Shakespeare or Hardwick ever took breath. It is not important that Kathrine and Petruchio marry in Padua or that Eva and Ray find compromise in California. It is important that Shakespeare understood the significance of love, humor and the nature of the human condition and stood in the gap between oral tradition and cinema.

At the heart of the shrew taming story is the battle of the sexes. Sociologist and scholar Robert Max Jackson has studied the nature of status and social position between the sexes and contends that gender rivalry has ancient and substantial roots. “The search for the origins of gender inequality is as old as thought. All religious and mythological systems contain fictions to explain and justify the relative positions of men and women,” explains Jackson (30). Although unraveling the mysterious beginnings of inequality is nearly impossible, Jackson is certain that the origins of the man/woman conflict lie in socialization, tradition and biology (29). Jackson’s profound statement in his work *Down So Long . . . The Puzzling Persistence of Gender Inequality* is that gender inequity is virtually universal and that there is no significant evidence to support that women prevail in any social order in history: “Anthropologists largely agree that women have never occupied a position of higher status or greater political power than men in any society, anywhere, anytime” (29). According to Jackson this inequality has preoccupied not only modern feminists, but most great thinkers from Aristotle to Marx. (30). For this reason, it is no surprise that battle of the sexes stories like the Shrew tales have been popular since the oral tradition.

While the original tales focused on competitions between men and who best could handle a wife, Shakespeare’s adaptation added a new dimension when the wife was given a stronger voice. Elevating the character of Katherine to a major player and foil to Petruchio, Shakespeare advanced the agency of women. In her article “Shakespeare’s New Shrew” from *The Taming of*

*the Shrew: The State of Play*, Erin Kelly states the importance and innovation of Shakespeare's take on a hackneyed tale. Serving the long tradition of a stakes race between men and classes, the abundant Shrew tales typically focused on men and their abilities to control their women. Oddly, the women who created the chaos were largely left in the shadows. What situates *The Taming of the Shrew* above the tale of abuse and gives it the ambience of ambivalence is the presence and behavior of Katherine. It is through her character that Shakespeare makes clear statements about women and their autonomy. By bringing Katherine to the forefront with personality and vigor, Shakespeare gave voice to women in a new and vibrant way. Discussing the traditions of the Shrew stories, Kelly says:

But such perspectives lose sight of how *The Taming of the Shrew*, by connecting a story of shrew-taming to a generalized exploration of male-female power dynamics, was doing something new. Shakespeare did not invent the shrew-taming story, but neither did he simply bring a version of what already existed in early modern English popular culture to the stage. (20)

Shakespeare established a blueprint for modern romantic comedy by making Katherine a major player. The methodology of flight and pursuit is virtually universal to romantic comedy tradition and the idea of "hard to get" is a staple of this genre. As is evidenced by Katherine, the more valiant the struggle, the more significant is the victory – regardless of who the viewer deems the winner.

### **Bad Reputation**

*Deliver Us from Eva* takes the Shrew figure from merely present to presiding -- she is boss lady, matriarch and ice queen rolled into one. Eva's struggle to lean into vulnerability while maintaining her personal standards illustrates the fine line individuals walk between self-

protection and interpersonal relations. As a model of conflict resolution, *Deliver Us from Eva* explores the relationship between self-esteem and compromise as its title character fights to retain autonomy in the process of finding social acceptance and belonging. Like *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Deliver Us from Eva* is a consummate gender power struggle. However, this adaptation goes beyond banter and manipulation and takes the viewer down a path of compromise and transformation. Unlike the original, the growth of the individuals is not one-sided, nor is it limited to the main characters.

Although Shakespeare alludes to aspects of personal growth such as compromise, there is very little personal development obvious in *The Taming of the Shrew*. He neglects backstory in this play completely, and viewers, if they are interested, must create their own version of Katherine's history. However, *Deliver Us from Eva* saves the audience the bother and Eva is a far more detailed character than Katherine. Eva is given a backstory of financial and parental responsibility as well as heartbreak. She appears to have had an idyllic youth as the high school sweetheart and fiancé of the perfect man, "Lucious Lucius" Johnson. However, Eva's world is shattered when her parents die in an accident, and she must choose between her romance and her responsibilities. Lucius walks out on her when she chooses to support her sisters. For that reason, the subliminal message is that Eva's omnipresence in her sisters' lives is not only an attempt to keep them from potential heartbreak, but perhaps to prevent them from being completely happy in a relationship. Eva's foils are the men in her sisters' lives, and the element of Eva as a maternal figure increases her influence over her sisters and sets her up as a stereotypical mother-in-law figure. She is both sibling and parent in the social dynamic of her associates. This positioning is an interesting twist to the typical rom com trope of reflexive friends as Eva fills the role of star-crossed lover and mentor. It can be noted that in the original Katherine has no

confidant. Her sister is her rival; her husband is her nemesis. The pressure that Eva is under to provide stability and guidance elevates her from the pettiness that Katherine is assigned in the original play.

Although it is not a film dealing with typically racial issues, *Deliver Us from Eva* is a black cast film. As a romance, it fulfills certain criteria that are salient to the themes of connectivity and belonging. Belinda Edmonson argues in her article “The Black Romance,” that the romance genre in literature and cinema evolved and increased in popularity among African Americans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century: “Far from rejecting the genre, it seems that African Americans have an insatiable desire for the romance” (191). Edmonson believes that despite its appeal, like rom com in general, black romance takes a back seat to “serious” themes, but as a popular force, black romance is not independent of dramatic black nationalist themes (193). As an entity, states Edmonson, romance serves the same purpose in the black community as the protest novel. One of the traits of black romance that stands out to Edmonson is what she refers to as romance with lifestyle: “the focus is on professional black women living in beautiful modernist homes.... This is a common thread that unites the films: the celebration of black professional success, and the accoutrements of that success” (203). This theme differs from, “the typical white romance formula, where a lower-status heroine finds love and social mobility with a higher-status man” (203). *Deliver Us from Eva* follows this format where, “the high status of black people, and in particular black women, is the foundation of the romance itself” (203). In her capacity as a shrew, Eva not only dominates her potential lover and her family, but also her community in a position of power as a health inspector.

While Shakespeare’s comedies, including *The Taming of the Shrew*, traditionally feature a wedding as its climax, *Deliver Us from Eva* discards the wedding altogether. The film begins

with a funeral and works backwards. Although the viewer is introduced to Eva as the cause of Ray's death, this façade masks the ultimate trick played on this shrew. The audience is led to believe that Eva has orchestrated Ray's death, when in reality it is an interruption of their courtship. Even before Eva speaks her first lines it is obvious from the mise en scene that this film will address gender dominance and familial boundaries. In the opening at Ray's funeral, Eva and her sisters, are sitting together on a church pew with the corresponding husbands on a row behind them. This placement indicates that the relationship of the siblings is stronger than the bonds of marriage and that the men are clearly in the background of the Dandridge sisters' elite circle. Similar positioning is echoed throughout the film frequently featuring the sisters walking in regimented line with the hapless husbands stumbling behind.

The difference between husbands and sisters is explained by Jacqui Dandridge as comparing apples to oranges. Her husband, Darrel, responds to this analogy emphatically: "Lady I am your husband ... I pledged my life to you in front of God and a bunch of ugly ass relatives I don't even like. I gave up all my wild ways for you... therefore, I demands to be a damn orange" (Hardwick 11:14-11:35). Jacqui is unfazed. This scene is a throwback to *The Taming of The Shrew* where the wedding marks the shift of property. In her book, *Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England*, Johanna Rickman writes of Shakespeare's England as a society of male dominated order, where the ideal woman "readily accepted the authority of her husband and her own inferior status" (11). In this society where marriage was revered more as a legal bond than a romantic agreement, "lawyers began to insist that certain property rights hinged on the production of evidence of a church wedding" (Rickman 17). Ceremonies became increasingly important as wedding guest served as legal witnesses. Darrel's comments are a holdover of this antiquated institution, but his wife's response proves that this argument no longer holds

credence. She is not only noncompliant; she becomes dominant in the encounter. Somehow in Darrel's opinion, witnesses offer a legitimacy to his claims to wife. He has made a public commitment and expects it to carry due weight. In this instance, *Deliver Us from Eva* is following Edmonson's criteria for black romance where women are the stronger gender.

Among a species whose survival depends on successful coupling, it is no surprise that marriage and romance would continue to be a popular topic of entertainment. In 2007, *The Sociological Quarterly*, published findings based on the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households in the article "Do Men 'Need' a Spouse More than Women?: Perceptions of the Importance of Marriage for Men and Women," by Gayle Kaufman and Frances Goldscheider. These findings indicated a significant shift in the ideas of marriage, family and relationships occurred in the United States during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This change in ideology has affected the way that people in general and men and women specifically connect with one another in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. According to this article, "few Americans considered family decline to be a major problem in 1980, almost 10 percent listed family decline as the "most important problem" in 1996" (29). The interesting conclusion that Kaufman and Goldscheider draw is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, men find marriage more necessary and advantageous than women. This modern phenomenon is illustrated by all of the Dandridge sisters who clearly need each other more than they need mates. Conversely, their husbands are insecure and benefit more from the partnerships than the women.

### **We are Family**

In the aftermath of their parents' death, the sisters form a protective clan. The oldest, Eva assumes responsibility and develops a maternal instinct. As a means of survival this behavior is necessary and admirable, but overtime it has left the Dandridge sisters stagnated in an immature

clique. They fail to mature as independent women and form an unnatural bond among themselves. Their inability to break familial ties prevents them from committing to their male partners, but it also allows them to become female dependent if not self-sufficient. Although they may not need men per se, they also lose the opportunity if not the ability to find a complete sense of belonging. In contrast to Eva, Katherine's rogue nature allows her to adapt quickly to her changing circumstances and connect with Petruchio, even if only as an adversary. Katherine is not dependent on a social niche to progress.

In her article "'The Right Foundation': Remaking Marriage in a Black Adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*" from *The Taming of the Shrew: The State of Play*, Joyce Green MacDonald addresses the relationships in *Deliver Us from Eva* stating, "It seems, though, that they [the husbands] are connected to the three younger Dandridge sisters in a narrower way than the women are to each other" (201). The relationships between each of the sisters and their husbands make certain statements about gender roles and expectations between couples. In some way each of the relationships seems dysfunctional and intended show the men as needy and greedy and the women as sexually aggressive and manipulative. Eva's sister Kareenah and her husband, Tim, bicker over having a baby. Tim wants to set right the wrongs of his childhood by proving he is not a carbon copy of his alcoholic father. He is committed to his marriage and wants a family. Kareenah, adhering to Eva's advice, believes that the early years of marriage are just a trial run and keeps divorce waiting in the wings as an option if she wants to bail and try something new. If Tim is deluded into thinking that a baby will make him a better man, Kareenah has no real qualms about walking out if the going gets tough. Another sister, Bethany, and her boyfriend, Mike, are at odds about moving in together. Bethany will not allow Mike move in with her without Eva's approval.

The relationship between Jacqui and Darrell illustrates the most peculiar dynamic in that Darrell is a husband who is also child. Jacqui is a student trying to better herself with education, and she reads to her husband, presumably because he is not particularly literate. Jacqui is portrayed as the most shallow and self-centered of the women, and she has no problem using sex as a weapon. Each of these three scenarios show the men as far more invested in romantic relationships than the women. An odd aside is that this narrative sets up the women, especially Eva, as mother figures. According to Edmonson, “the black maternal figure is a figure who haunts... romances. In both black and white narratives, the maternal is inevitably the antithesis of erotic desire” (197). The tension between the sexuality of the women and their caregiving natures creates an odd dynamic for rom com.

As a dominant female, Eva enters the film roaring. Like Katherine, she establishes herself as a shrew from the beginning. Her first confrontation with her brothers-in-law sets the stage for her ongoing war with men. When the men want to watch football and the women want to have a book club meeting, territory is disputed in a battle for the living room. Occupation of the sofa with the television as the spoils gives Eva the opportunity to express in one monologue her life mantra:

This isn't about a book versus a football game, fellas. No, this is about men versus women. Women who aspire to culture and men who aspire to scratch themselves; women who bear the burdens of life and men who create those burdens; women who uplift humanity and men who uplift lap dances. Today is a day for civilized behavior. Today we raise our voices against tyranny, crudeness and playoff games. (Hardwick 6:06-6:42)

The fact that the men reserved the room a month earlier and were not informed of a change in plans, never seems to raise a red flag for a woman who thrives on accountability. Eva's

philosophy is that men are parasites and can be tossed out on a whim. As Mike states while the displaced men stand in a bar, it is “One for all, and all for Eva” (Hardwick 7:41).

### **Love Hurts**

Without a backstory it is difficult to understand Shakespeare’s Katherine. She is obviously motherless and jealous of her sister, but the reasons are unclear. For an Elizabethan audience that she was a shrew was enough. However, Eva’s anger needs more justification to satisfy modern viewers. Anger for the sake of anger is just meanness, and for Eva to resonate with romantic comedy audiences today, she must rise above petty rhetoric. Although her brothers-in-law are convinced that she just needs a man to distract her with sex, their attempts have been unsuccessful. One test subject in Eva’s love experiment has been left stuttering when she breaks up with him:

Do you know that female spiders eat the male when she’s done with them? Oh yeh, they date, they laugh and then she turns his ass into a crabcake. Now while the prospect of biting your head off makes me happy, I am sure that ultimately you are not a happy meal, so I’m moving on to better cuisine. (Hardwick 9:24-9:40)

One of Eva’s saving graces is that her intolerances are not isolated to men for the sake of gender. A formidable career woman, Eva protects the people of Los Angeles as a city health inspector. She also has no problem lashing out at other women if they fail to meet her standards.

Self-described as principled and uncompromising, Eva’s motives go beyond the battle of the sexes, and her true nature is revealed in a confrontation with a restaurant manager:

It’s called principle, Oscar. Maybe the world is in short supply, but I am not. You see, people pay their tax dollars for my principle so they can go into a restaurant and not eat chicken fried rat or bite into a bacon lettuce and ptomaine sandwich. If I slack up on you

then I have to cut everyone a break, and pretty soon the almonds on your salad have legs. If that makes me uncompromising, well, I wear it as a badge of honor because I'm in damn good company. Martin Luther King was uncompromising. Nelson Mandela was uncompromising, and I'm sure your mother was uncompromising -- although the evidence of that is not apparent today. So, why don't you think of me as your mom right now, and mama says, "clean it up!" (Hardwick 23:22-24:00)

Eva is not only looking out for herself and her family, but she is a participating member of the community. By aligning herself with famous black leaders, she is positioning herself as a champion of the people. She is not anti-man, she is merely intolerant of weakness, irresponsibility and deceit. In this respect, she upholds Edmonson's correlation between romance and more dignified genres. As an advocate of the people, Eva transcends rom com, and her actions align with the drama of protest that Edmonson cites.

Having been schooled by Lucius in the ways of rejection, Eva will only accept a man who can support her dreams, acclimate to her family obligations and stand up to her constant tests of dependability and strength. In this way she mirrors Katherine who is searching for someone who can make her feel secure. For these women, only men who can outwit them will do. If the attraction between Katherine and Petruchio strains the viewer's imagination, the chemistry between Eva and Ray does not. In her article MacDonald states:

What viewers and readers of *The Taming of the Shrew* have had to project into a play that would otherwise feel pretty emotionally bleak – the belief that Katherine and Petruchio are sexually and emotionally connected to each other – *Deliver Us from Eva* makes an explicit part of the script. (200)

Eva and Ray are both well written and well-cast to provide a believable romantic duo and to offer a fair look at male/female balance, which is important to the success of the modern romantic comedy. This attraction is convincing as bigger than their individual strong wills, and the audience is not taxed with the need to infer they love each other and are equally matched. Because they are portrayed as aptly suited emotionally and sexually the love/humor dynamic can mitigate the underlying trauma of death and betrayal. This format is essential to the accessibility of the rom com. While Katherine and Petruchio leave questions unanswered, modern formula rom com must provide closure. Eva's move to Chicago to take a new job provides the platform for the exit/chase necessary for a successful conclusion. As a trope of rom com, the exit/chase is essentially the test of true love answering the question, "Just how far will someone go, and fast will they chase to pursue happiness?"

For Ray the pursuit will be a long and winding road. Although Katherine in the original is left with an enigmatic past, Eva's backstory reveals her vulnerability and Ray will have tough obstacles to defeat. Eva has taken a chance on love and experienced pain, and she will not make that mistake again. Opening herself to Ray is a big step for her and she pays for it when he bursts into his own funeral a fully alive liar. Lucius has provided instruction in rejection and abandonment, and Ray fills in the gaps with lessons in deceit and betrayal. However, the balm of rom com can mend all, and the genre relies on nothing if not the adage, "Forgive and forget." Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye describes the circumstances of this phenomenon in *A Natural Perspective* as leaving an egregious past behind as if waking from a dream. Frye speaks to the resolution relevant to rom com saying, "In a typically festive conclusion all previous conflicts are forgiven and forgotten. In ordinary life this phrase is seldom a moral reality" (128). However, rom com is not ordinary life, and this ending is a must.

## **We Belong Together**

For the viewer, this scenario translates into real life as they connect with Eva and her struggle to find love. Social acceptance and belonging are prominent themes in both this adaptation and the original play. In both works, the title characters grapple with the balance of self-esteem and belonging. Where the line between fitting in and autonomy is drawn depends on each woman's personality, yet both feel the pressure of self-preservation. Katherine endeavors to escape an oppressive patriarchy, while Eva strives to regain a sense of trust in others and self-worth. Sociologist Brene Brown believes that acceptance and belonging virtually define human identity and that people need community for survival. "Our yearning for belonging is so hardwired that we often try to acquire it by any means possible, including trying to fit in and hustling for approval and acceptance," (158) states Brown in "Places We Go When We Search for Connection" from *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. That people are willing to sacrifice a sense of self to be part of a larger whole speaks to the significance of society and acceptance. The unfortunate backlash of people pleasing, however, is that individuals eventually either lose their sense of identity, or they fail to conceal it, and lose connectivity with a group that cannot accept authenticity (Brown 158).

For whatever reason that Katherine the shrew rejects social norms in *The Taming of the Shrew*, she walks the line between acceptance and authenticity. Brown describes this circumstance saying, "When we work to fit in and be accepted, our 'belonging' is tenuous. If we do or say something that's true to who we are but outside the expectation or rules of the group, we risk everything" (158). As a daughter, a sister and a woman Katherine is trapped in a community with specific expectations that she cannot, or will not, embrace. Katherine is not hustling for approval. Her struggle is for the opportunity to live authentically. While it would be

difficult to argue that Katherine's shrewish behavior is, or is not, a reflection of her true nature with the evidence provided, it is possible to extrapolate that on some level Katherine seeks to self-actualize. Somehow a girl constrained by the upper-class circle of Padua longs to be heard, seen and appreciated.

However, for Eva the motivations are clearer. The audience knows her history of pain, loss and rejection. Eva's struggle for belonging is hindered by her need for self-protection which causes her to build a wall of "principle" to hide behind. Her uncompromising nature makes it difficult for her to take the necessary risks in order to belong to the social order, whether it be in a family, friend circle or love affair. As a practice, belonging "requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are" (Brown 159). The audience can relate to Eva's behavior perhaps more than Katherine's because she is more transparent. Her ultimate compromises in the end – allowing her sisters to make their own decisions and giving Ray a second chance -- are more palatable because she is seen as leaning into her vulnerability, while Katherine is often interpreted as submitting to abuse. Belonging is important to both Katherine and Eva, but they are intent on holding onto to their values. "We have to belong to ourselves as much as we need to belong to others," states Brown. She continues, "Any belonging that asks us to betray ourselves is not true belonging" (154). If the audience follows Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* to her ultimate conclusion, she illustrates the struggle between submission and self-respect. The rom com format is more forgiving and allows the viewer to embrace the assurance of acceptance.

As extreme as her behavior (and that of her counterpart Petruchio) is, the bottom line is that Katherine rejects conformity and forces her father, her community and her lover to face her head on. It can be argued that Katherine is tamed and has therefore surrendered her identity.

However, it can also be argued that she has entered an arena of vulnerability and has learned how to be present in a relationship that requires reciprocity to enjoy a sense of belonging. While Brown explains the challenges of belonging, White reminds us “Whatever Shakespeare’s intentions (and we can never truly know them), *The Shrew* has the potential to be performed to support married love as companionate, if mutually abrasive, since it provides in its sub-plot a parodic critique of a more conventional, decorous, but dubious courtship. Marriage itself is the event that changes Katherina into a cooperative partner” (40). Her marriage to Petruchio while volatile offers her stability, security and social status. These are perhaps benefits that suit her true nature.

### **The Game of Love**

One way that Shakespeare positions Katherine at an advantage is by amping up elements of humor in *The Taming of the Shrew*. From the verbal banter to the physical slapstick, gameplay smooths many of the rough edges evident in the play. Humor is largely used to mitigate animosity, and the well-matched lead characters rely on the forgiving nature of laughter to say what they mean without saying what they mean. The game essentially allows them a do over in the form of “just teasing” if the truth falls flat. From the onset, *Deliver Us from Eva* embraces love as a game and establishes Ray as a “major player.” The indication is that Ray is a free spirit who never puts down roots. “I never keep a job more than a year,” he explains to his friends. “I was brought up an orphan, no mama, no daddy, no ties. That’s how I do it” (Hardwick 16:05-16:21). Love for Ray is a diversion and sex is for recreation, yet the kernel of hope is embedded in his distaste for the idea of being paid to date Eva: “Time out, I’m sorry. This ain’t my kinda thing. I’m a lover not a con man” (Hardwick 18:52). Yet, it turns out he is. When he sees Eva in action, he can’t resist another conquest. For Petruchio money is enough:

Hortensio, peace! thou know'st not gold's effect:

Tell me her father's name and 'tis enough;

For I will board her, though she chide as loud

As thunder when the clouds in autumn crack. (1.2.93-97)

Subduing Katherine is hardly a challenge as she has no real agency and is property of her father. While Ray can walk away from the money, his ego presses him to the challenge. Explaining why he changes his mind he says, “If I can get that woman, I can go down in the player hall of fame” (Hardwick 24:17-24:20). Ray’s willingness to play the game of seduction sets the scene for his ultimate transformation and his personal growth.

In Marianne Novy’s article “Patriarchy and Play in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” she discusses the significance of male dominance and gameplay in this work. Throughout the article, Novy establishes the gender roles and how Shakespeare uses jest and sparring to establish the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio. Specifically, Novy believes that it is through gameplay that Petruchio both sets up and maintains his power over Katherine, and it is by way of this ongoing game that Katherine is subdued and modified into the conventions of Renaissance society. Gameplay in this work makes it particularly conducive to adaptation as rom com. Adding the element of deceit to the gaming aspect in *Deliver Us from Eva*, allows Eva to be coerced more than subdued. Without the constraints of society, Ray’s only weapon against Eva is lies. Abuse is not tolerated by a modern audience and psychological manipulation will not work on Eva, so Ray simply pretends to lead her into love. Like Petruchio, he clearly enjoys the sport. Unlike Petruchio, he places himself in an indefensible position and ends up losing his gamble. For Petruchio success is gaining Katherine’s consent to go along with the game, but Ray must earn Eva’s trust.

In her article, Novy also contends that the device of gameplay allows Shakespeare to distance himself from taking sides on the issues of marriage and offers him a virtual safety net to escape criticism of his opinions. Novy states that the focus is, “on Kate's movement away from her original rebellion. Unlike the other two changes, this one superficially endorses the social order, but here too details suggest analogies between the social order and a game” (265). The ambiguity of the jest allows viewers to decide what is real and what is a game (Novy 265). Shakespeare cleverly sets up the scenario so that viewers can choose Katherine’s submission as either subjugation or subterfuge. Likewise, Petruchio’s patriarchy can be seen as absolute or a farce:

In summary, the ambiguous combination of patriarchy and play in *The Taming of the Shrew* helps it appeal to spectators who are divided among and within themselves in their attitudes toward marriage...The game context permits Petruchio and Katherine to modulate from antagonists to co-creators of a new world to master and subject, and encourages the spectators to see as most important whichever pair of roles they choose and consider the others as "only a game." (Novy 279-280)

While the sport between Katherine and Petruchio allows the viewer multiple options to interpret the dynamics, and Shakespeare provides an escape route for those who would label the play as a tome against women, *Deliver Us from Eva* works in a more complex way. There is little about it that could be construed as antifeminist as women without question rule the roost either by virtue of personality or sexual manipulation. Quite the opposite, gameplay allows for Ray to experience maturation and to learn the value of commitment and stability.

Coupling Novy’s theories on gameplay with Ray’s personal growth leads to interesting thoughts concerning love and humor. One particularly relevant connection between audiences

and romantic comedy is the significance of the love/humor link, because this link is not limited to the on-screen scenarios but involves the viewer/film relationship. According to research, humor is more than just a joke. Christopher J. Wilber and Lorne Campbell set up sociological studies on the relationship between love and humor and record their finding in “Humor in Romantic Contexts: Do Men Participate and Women Evaluate?” These studies explored the significance of a sense of humor in establishing a connection and in the health of a relationship: “We hypothesized that men are inclined to produce humor to attract prospective romantic partners, whereas women are inclined to evaluate these humorous offerings” (919). Wilber and Campbell conclude that humor works less as a social construct than as an indicator of how successful a relationship will be saying, “observers perceive men’s humor initiation and women’s positive responses to humor as indicative of romantic interest” (919). Humor consistently ranks highly as a desirable trait both for men and women. However, men appreciate humor as a form of acceptance, while women view humor as an indicator of how competent and suitable a mate will be.

Looking at Katherine and Petruchio in this light, the gameplay becomes a vital signifier. As harsh as the game may be, Katherine and Petruchio are participating equally, and Petruchio’s ego is placated by Katherine’s responses. Katherine, whether she knows it or not, is in the process of mate selection, and she evaluates Petruchio’s humor when she enters into the banter. Applying Wilber and Campbell’s hypotheses and conclusions, Petruchio’s risk taking – his horsing around, verbal clowning and ridiculous clothing -- indicates his interest in Katherine. By law and convention this behavior is an unnecessary trouble, so his efforts indicate a level of attraction that on the surface seem mocking. Although she is virtually without options, Katherine needs a mate who will present an extremely high level of fitness and risk-taking potential in

order for her to feel safe and protected. The ongoing battle of the wits is Katherine's process of evaluation, and her eventual acquiescence is the indication that she has found a husband who is fit to mate with. In this sense, Eva is almost an exact parallel to Katherine.

### **Better than I Used to Be**

From the onset Eva is testing Ray waiting to find the flaw. During a picnic scene early in the film, Eva prepares a ridiculously spicy dish of baked beans. Her intention is to separate the "men from the boys." Ray's ability to relish the spicy food is a signifier that he has potential. Throughout the film, Ray's jokes, his singing even his willingness to go horseback riding indicate that he is willing to take risks and keep Eva's attention. If Katherine and Eva are evaluating humor, as Wilber and Campbell claim, their men are correspondingly displaying it. In much the same way that Petruchio signals to Katherine through buffoonery, Ray tests Eva's mettle by deliberately trying to embarrass her. In her article, MacDonald makes much of Ray's attempts to embarrass Eva on their first date. MacDonald references the fact that Ray takes Eva on their first date in his work truck: "He begins by poking at Eva's class status, using the refrigerated truck he drives for his job as a butcher's delivery man to take her on their first date" (MacDonald 199). Eva is surprised by the delivery truck, but this does not "poke" her class, as she snubs the sportscar as unsafe. Likewise, he tries to embarrass her at the restaurant by pretending to choke and coercing her into hugging him. Neither of these actions faze Eva. Although Ray attempts to make Eva uncomfortable perhaps to have an advantage, he is unable to embarrass her. He continues to try to throw her off her game, but she just rolls with the punches. While MacDonald sees this date in such a way that Eva appears vulnerable, it can be argued that this shows her strength. *They* do not choose a restaurant, *she* does. When they leave the restaurant in mid-meal it is because the current operator is a manager who was fired from a

restaurant Eva failed for health code violations. The manager implies that she has tampered with Eva's food out of spite. While Ray encourages her to relax, she demands they leave. She handles the things Ray throws at her and prevails – even triumphs – because he follows her lead.

Likewise, MacDonald refers to Ray's reluctance to have sex with Eva: "But Raymond hesitated, realizing that sex would make him vulnerable" (200). While MacDonald argues Ray's vulnerability, the hesitation to have sex is the first indication that he is growing a conscience. While it is true that Ray is beginning to feel affection for Eva and that sex could deepen that emotion, Ray's struggle is with his guilt at having lied to her. He is less afraid of falling for her than he is ashamed of his behavior. Again, this shows Eva's power over him -- or at least influence on him. This action begins building a theme of redemption that is missing in the original play. Ray will eventually take responsibility for his actions and work to make amends. Admittedly, this change of heart is mostly because he wants the reward of Eva's affection, but he is also willing to lose her for the sake of his honesty. This relationship dynamic illustrates well the initiating and evaluating humor cues Wilber and Campbell studied, as well as the forgiveness cited by Frye. In order to bring both the rom com film and the relationship between Eva and Ray to a successful conclusion, redemption and reconciliation must prevail.

As a result of the ongoing gameplay, both Eva and Ray consistently grow and become better versions of themselves without losing their core values. As Ray's roots begin to set, Eva's walls come down. Yet, as long as Ray is playing at love, the Dandridge household is still out of whack. Ray is clearly an orange bonding with the sisters, but the men are still apples on the outskirts of love. The player must abandon the game for the Dandridge world to be right. In a desperate attempt to regain control, the brothers-in-law fake Ray's death leading to the climax of the deception. With the revelation of the scheme, the rom com formula can unfold to a successful

conclusion. While Shakespeare laid the foundation for the romantic comedy and was a master of the genre, he left a trail of disturbing ideology in the wake of Katherine and Petruchio's antics in *The Taming of the Shrew*. There is no guarantee that this couple will live happily ever after, yet there is no reason to believe they cannot. However, the curtain falls before the eyes of an audience who is left with unanswered questions. This lingering doubt will not do in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – rom com must wrap neatly. Ultimately, *Deliver Us from Eva* proves “the truth will set you free.” When Ray disrupts his fake funeral and exposes the lies, resolution begins. For Eva it may feel like square one, but for Ray it is new territory, and the impetus is now on him to build an honest and mature relationship for the first time. He is no longer a master player. He is now a man. Regarding the viewer/film relationship, the rom com must play by the rules. Any deviation from the norm that does not self-correct will not meet the needs of the audience. The love/humor link that transcends the film requires that the movie live up to the faith the audience has placed in it. There will be no chase scene and happy ending for a film that betrays its partners.

In much the same way that Kathrine and Petruchio's marriage is the domino that sets the community of Padua right, Eva and Ray's breakup begins the mending of the Dandridge family and sets the stage for the final rom com trope, the speech and kiss. This device provides the viewer with both a happy ending and the assurance of a happy future. Eva loosens her hold on her sisters who in turn no longer feel guilty for Eva's sacrifices on their behalf, and each of the three couples make concessions to improve their relationships. Leaning into vulnerability, taking risks and letting old wounds heal, give each character room to discover belonging and provides the rom com audience a model for healthy relationships. Following through the romantic comedy formula provides a sense of wellbeing for the audience.

## I Need Love

The hallmark of a rom com is its happy ending. No matter how fierce the battle rages, there must be the hope of happily ever after. While some believe that this construct results in unrealistic expectations, there is a valuable life lesson in mandatory conflict resolution.

Shakespeare left many loose ends for Katherine and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Audiences are never quite sure of the “whys” and the “what nexts.” Katherine departs the stage in a moment of transition:

My mind hath been as big as one of yours,

My heart as great, my reason haply more,

To bandy word for word and frown for frown;

But now I see our lances are but straws, (5.2.185-189)

Having beaten her sword into a plowshare, Katherine leaves the audience wondering what the looming field holds for her? Is hers an act of conformity or compromise? Is Petruchio a jester or a jerk? When viewing this play, it is up to each person to decide, yet Katherine and Petruchio do come to an understanding and there is a unified front. “Why, there's a wench!” says Petruchio, “Come on, and kiss me, Kate” (5.2.195-196).

Eva and Ray do not force the audience to work that hard. As MacDonald points out, “*Deliver Us from Eva* could have veered off into a truly radical direction – having the sisters throw their partners out, say, and starting over with just the four of them” (202). However, to maintain its status as romantic comedy, the film must indulge the viewer’s appetite for fantasy. Instead of dragging the viewer into illustrations of reality, the film “backs down from its own demonstration that any legitimacy in the men’s desire to have more authority over their own households is overwhelmed by the thoughtless extremity with which they feel entitled to pursue

it" (MacDonald 202). Rom com is a kinder gentler genre. Traveling beyond trope into cliché, Hardwick includes a ride on a white horse. The audience is not put through the paces of interpretation and is simply led to the obvious conclusion that in the battle of the sexes, love conquers all.

Shakespeare went a long way in providing a look at love and marriage in the Renaissance and pitting Katherine and Petruchio against one another has created food for thought for almost five centuries. However, what today's audiences can learn from Eva and Ray that Shakespeare left largely unexplored is the power of trust, redemption and grace. The lessons learned from a relationship with rom com, that cannot be gleaned from the original play include the value of predictability and stability of form. For the viewer looking for a foothold in an unpredictable world, the comfort of answered questions helps settle the mind. Indulging in fantasy offers participants in film watching the opportunity to experience the what-if in the midst of the often difficult what-is. This relationship does not necessarily default to unrealistic expectations but can reset the emotions allowing the link between love and humor to open the imagination. In the end of *Deliver Us from Eva*, Eva is rewarded with a job promotion and is fully self-actualized in a city separated from her sisters, and each sister is able to leave the comfort zone of Eva's watchful eye and make choices of their own. Ray finds peace in the pursuit of stability and wants more from Eva than a player hall of fame trophy. Ray and Eva teach a modern audience that love, and romance are indeed a battlefield, but the rewards are worth the fight.

**All We Need Is Love: Shakespeare's Participating Presence  
In 21<sup>st</sup> Century Rom Com**

There's nothin' you can do that can't be done.  
Nothin' you can sing that can't be sung.  
Nothin' you can say, but you can learn how to play the game --  
It's easy.  
Nothin' you can make that can't be made.  
No one you can save that can't be saved.  
Nothin' you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time --  
It's easy

"All We Need Is Love"  
John Lennon / Paul McCartney

Although it is unlikely that rom coms will solve all the world's problems, there is value in taking this genre seriously. While scholars regard studying themes such as war, death, addiction and oppression as worthy pursuits, love and laughter are often overlooked as unimportant. However, research shows that love and humor are two of the most significant human traits in promoting physical and mental health. They are also integral to the success of interpersonal relationship and contribute to the survival of the human species. Linked, these traits are jointly significant to mate selection and are determining factors in the outcome of a match. According to research Christopher J. Wilber and Lorne Campbell, "humor is a preferred quality in romantic partners to the extent that it signals the possession of fundamentally important traits" (919). Because of their portrayal of these elements, romantic comedies as a genre are a compelling subject for study. In the same regard, folktales are often relegated to the recesses of serious literature and are studied as the quaint and archaic stories of old. It can be easy to dismiss them as cliché, yet Shakespeare has proven that old themes are pervasive in the corporate spirit.

The master adapter, he illustrated ways to revive well-worn tales and reincarnate them for a new age. In the updated mode of romantic comedy film, the fairy tale thrives, and as adaptations the clichés of old continue to resonate with audiences. *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva* illustrate universal themes, and by engaging with them audiences join the common history of humanity.

Critics such as, Tchiki Davis and Gregory Davis, may believe that watching rom coms is detrimental. However, there is significant research to suggest the opposite. Experts including psychologist and social scientist Pamela Rutledge and literary scholar Janice Radway contend that romantic scenarios in film and literature can provide the benefits of respite and perceived community to people often overwhelmed with stress. If people view romantic comedy as how-to guides for doing love, sex and relationship, they are indeed destined to be disappointed. Yet, engaging in and with the romantic comedy as entertainment can be healthy, relaxing and therapeutic. Adaptations such as *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva* provide an interesting look at the value of rom com and the legacy of Shakespeare to the genre. The greatest of his works succeed because he presented characters who reveal the true nature of emotion, and who, for good or bad, tell their story on the world's stage. He understood the universal search for purpose and meaning in a mundane world and the need for love and humor amid conflict and stress. These films reveal that understanding.

In the two comedies upon which these adaptations are based, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Taming of the Shrew*, one can see the array of Shakespeare's imagination and reimagination. Between these two very different plays, audiences witness rejection, betrayal, infatuation and compromise. Struggles among, parents and children, siblings, friends and lovers unfold in a cacophony of relationships. As Samuel Johnson remarked, Shakespeare's characters

“are the genuine progeny of common humanity ... His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion” (Raleigh 12). He created characters from the marrow of commonality who boldly spoke aloud what the rest of the world was thinking during the Renaissance, and continue to think today.

### **I Think I Love You**

While opinions about the value of romantic comedy vary, research has shown that both love and humor are social constructs and neither exists without community. Because these are the elements that uphold the genre, examining their effects on audiences is a credible pursuit. The pandemic of 2020 was not the impetus for rom com as a palliative, but it has allowed scientists and filmmakers to examine how these films work and how they will be reimagined in the future. Covid-19 stagnated community living, shut down public venues and redefined social interaction. People who were used to roaming freely, were unable to mingle, play and even visit the sick. The sudden isolation resulting from a loss of interaction created a void in the human experience as well as a new dependence on media and technology. Not a new phenomenon, loneliness has acquired a new relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and rom com has proven to be an entity to which people turn for respite and recuperation. Although the tropes of romantic comedy may offer peaceful diversion during stress, this genre consistently remains popular. Even during times when these films may wane as a trend, they never completely go out of fashion and maintain a loyal following. Hinging between two powerful emotions, love and humor, romantic comedies touch places deep within the human psyche that are instrumental in promoting individual mental health as well as healthy interpersonal connections.

When exploring the healing nature of love and humor, one can look at the value of Northrop Frye's concepts of the green world and forgiveness. Frye's idea of leaving the wasteland of reality for the renewal of fantasy is illustrated in *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream*. Not only does the theme pervade the film as the characters heal relationships and the planet, but it also can transcend the film as audiences escape into the world of romantic comedy. An interesting point that Victoria Bernal makes is that comedy as a genre is a safe space for the common person. She states that the power of humor "lies in the fact that humor is one of the few spheres of expression that officials do not dominate.... Humor, then, is a language of the people, offering a genre of expression that is not already scripted by the authorities" (307). This safe space is the viewer's green world.

Not only is romantic comedy a form of escapism, but the genre's repetitive nature feeds the brain stimulating beneficial neurological chemicals. "Our brains love symmetry and completion," says Rutledge. The human reaction to rom com is not just emotional but is actually a physical neurological response to stimuli: "Our brains are busy luxuriating in the release of mood-impacting neurotransmitters, like cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin as we respond to the challenges, betrayal, romance, and, of course, the happy resolution of the narrative arc, making an emotionally satisfying journey" (Rutledge). Predictable stories, says Rutledge, "can make us happy, lighten our mood, and leave us feeling good when the storyline ends 'as it should'" (Rutledge). Following the expected patterns of rom com outlined by Michael Hoffman, the Meet Cute, inclusion of reflexive friends, exit/chase scenes and a happy ending, *A Midsummer's Hawaiian Dream* can leave the viewer feeling reconciled and refreshed.

A traditionally white genre, the romance has made advancements into black culture with films such as *Deliver Us from Eva*. In "The Black Romance," Belinda Edmonson contends that

“popular literature should always be taken seriously for what it tells us about our society” (193). In a 2019 interview with Taylor Bryant for *Glamour* writer/director Gary Hardwick comments about *Deliver Us from Eva* in “Where Did All the Black Rom-Coms Go?” Echoing Edmonson’s sentiment, the director of *Deliver Us from Eva*, Gary Hardwick, says, “We can't get all of our entertainment and artistic self-esteem from slave movies and civil rights movies. They tend to tell a different kind of story, and one that is not as germane to modern life as a romantic comedy” (Bryant). Although *Deliver Us from Eva* was marketed primarily to an African American audience, to label it as a “black romance” is limiting. *Deliver Us from Eva* does not preoccupy itself with making racial statements. Far from providing a discussion on race, *Deliver Us from Eva* is much more inclined to provide a tableau for discussing American class structure. The references to employment, property ownership, education and ambition are indicative of late 20<sup>th</sup> Century economic goals and struggles transcending cultural ethnicity, and Hardwick revealed in his interview that *Deliver Us from Eva* was originally written for a white cast (Bryant). While it meets Belinda Edmonson’s description of black romance, with very little alteration this film could be white cast, Asian cast or Hispanic cast – it is a film about middle-class people, any color will do.

Although this film could be deconstructed as a classist film, its true glory is found in its messages about love, romance and family. Hardwick says that since the production of *Deliver Us from Eva* the romance has been largely discarded as a genre in Hollywood. However, he believes, “Laughter releases endorphins and all these other things that make you feel good. If you look at what audiences love and what our country needs, it’s a basic staple of entertainment diversion” (Bryant). Although Hardwick believes this is true for everyone, he believes the black community can benefit specifically, “it's just that much more heavy for us when we don't have

these movies and when we don't have that positive reinforcement” (Bryant). In essence it provides life lessons about connection and conflict resolution.

### **Love Will Keep Us Together**

In an era of shutdowns and isolation as a result of the 2020 pandemic, the corporate need for belonging and interaction has been severely taxed. The movies, *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva*, both illustrate the need not only for romantic love, but also for connection to a larger community. In *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream*, that connection directly includes reflexive friends and extends as far as the environment. In this film the planet becomes a character as people learn not only to love each other, but to love the earth. In *Deliver Us from Eva*, community is most significantly realized in the family circle. Togetherness among characters is integral to the success of these stories and these interactions model the ups and downs of social acceptance. By participating in the antics of romantic comedies, audiences can be invested in the outcome without risk: “The audience's affections are typically enlisted on behalf of a pair of lovers whose romance encounters obstacles: by laughing affectionately at the lovers, or by ridiculing their obstacles, the audience forms a good-natured wish that they will be united” (Leitch 168). In the end, everyone has a place in the social arena.

While arguments that focus on the survival of the species default to male/female relationships, the need for community is not specific to heterosexual interactions. The need for connection is equally viable to familial relationships such as siblings or parent/child, friend circles, and other sexual orientations such as homosexuals and gender-neutral individuals. Although traditional romantic comedy, including *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* and *Deliver Us from Eva*, focus on the romance between 21<sup>st</sup> Century American men and women, the theories applied to rom com are universal and apply to all individuals globally and their need for

love and humor. As ideas about sexual identity and the new norms resulting from the 2020 lockdowns change, rom coms are adapting. Projected themes for rom coms in 2022 include nontraditional gender relations and love in a socially distant world. The rom com as a genre is as fluid as love itself.

As a playwright, Shakespeare was a borrower and a lender. “His adaptations are so effective, memorable, and influential because he rarely relies on a convention without infusing it with some human significance that can operate even when the artifice of the convention is acknowledged,” writes R. S. White. Shakespeare’s ongoing popularity is due to his ability to “remain true to a generic source such as romance while also implying a psychological explanation for the genre’s existence” (White 80). This capacity “is intrinsic to Shakespeare’s continuing currency in theatrical repertoires and popularity with contemporary readers” (White 80). By serving as a link between folklore and film, Shakespeare allows contemporary audiences to connect with themes that are timeless.

At first glance the rom com may appear trivial and unimportant. However, its value lies not in its cinematic genius, but in its ability to calm and heal. Offering a resting place for the mind in a turbulent world, this genre is a green world of recuperation, often standing in as perceived community. These films also illustrate the anxiety of relationships and the necessity of being vulnerable in order to experience the belonging described by sociologist Brene Brown. Characters, such as Helen in *A Midsummer’s Hawaiian Dream* and Eva in *Deliver Us from Eva*, take the risks necessary to belong among their peers. “In a world where perfectionism, pleasing, and proving are used as armor to protect our egos and our feelings,” writes Brown, “it takes a lot of courage to show up and be all in when we can’t control the outcome.” Although these characters must take a leap of faith, the audience does not. By engaging with rom com, viewers

can rest in the knowledge of the controlled outcome. The chaos and angst of relationship unfolds on screen, yet the audience revels in predictability and fulfilled expectation. As an influence on this genre, Shakespeare's understanding of human nature illustrates that what was true in his time is still relevant, and love and humor are what the world needs now.

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## **Song Titles and Songwriters**

- “All We Need is Love” – John Lennon/Paul McCartney, 1967
- “An Old Fashioned Love Song” – Paul Williams, 1971
- “Bad Reputation” – Joan Jett, 1980
- “Better Than I Used to Be” -- Ashley Gorley / Bryan Simpson, 2010
- “Don’t Worry Be Happy” -- Bobby McFerrin, 1988
- “Everybody Hurts” -- John Michael Stipe, et. al., 1992
- “Game Of Love” -- Clint Ballard, 1965
- “I Need Love” – James Todd Smith, et. al., 1987
- “I Think I Love You” – Tony Romeo, 1970
- “Lean On Me” -- Bill Withers, 1972
- “Love Hurts” – Boudleaux Bryant, 1960
- “Love Is a Battlefield” -- Holly Knight /Mike Chapman, 1983
- “Love Will Keep Us Together” -- Howard Greenfield/Neil Sedaka, 1975
- “Nothing But Flowers” -- David Byrne, 1988
- “Ode To Joy” – Beethoven, 1824
- “Runnin’ Down a Dream” – Tom Petty, et. al., 1989
- “Sweet Dream Are Made of This” -- Annie Lennox/ Dave Stewart, 1983
- “Tale as Old as Time” – Alan Menken/ Howard Ashman, 1991
- “This Magic Moment” – Mort Shuman / Doc Pomus, 1960
- “We Are Family” – Bernard Edwards/Nile Rodgers 1979
- “We Belong Together” – Mariah Carey, et. al., 2005
- “What the World Needs Now” -- Hal David and Bert Bacharach, 1965
- “What’s Love Got to Do with It” -- Terry Britten / Graham Lyle, 1984
- “You Make Loving Fun” – Christine McVie, 1977