

Merchant of Venice is, to a greater extent than even *Taming of the Shrew*, a really difficult play, difficult to produce and difficult to watch, particularly for a society that still espouses 21st century secular liberal values. It carries the weight of Elizabethan assumptions that we now recognize as anti-Semitic prejudices; it carries the weight of the KKK and the Dreyfus Affair and the Holocaust, all the brutal stupidity that fills the interim between the point in time that marks the future for the play and the opposite point that marks the past for play's modern-day audience. This isn't fair to the play-as-written, but one of the lessons we've seemed to have attached to this most difficult of Shakespeare's comedies, life isn't fair, especially if you're an outsider looking in.

I was surprised, then, and delighted when I found out the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival was going to bring a production to JCCC's Carlson Center. I was in attendance at the March 28th performance, and despite my misgivings, I thought the production was really about as good as one could expect. The set was brilliant—the subtle suggestion of light reflected off water, the soft curves of the arches and severe lines of the staircases (two sets, meeting at a top platform under the higher arch, suggestive of an M.C. Escher) playing off and against each other, perfectly suited for Venice, a city heavily influenced by the East, an Italian city not quite Italian in the way New Orleans is not quite American. The acting was solid all the way around, particularly Gary Neal Johnson's Shylock and Andy Perkins' Launcelot. There were moments of absolute delight lanced by piercing measures of sadness, and as much as the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival deserves credit for the production, it almost seemed beside the point. The play was at least as much about what was happening in the audience—that self-selected microcosm of local society—as what was happening onstage.

Director Sidonie Garrett did something that I think was brave for a contemporary director—she didn't try to clean up Shakespeare. We tend to want to see ourselves in Great Figures of History; we want Shakespeare, or the Founding Fathers, or Jane Austen to be just like us, to share our concerns and embody our values. We read *Lysistrata* and insist Euripides was a feminist; we read *Antigone* and see her as a religious freedom activist who would have found her place at Plymouth Rock. We share stories about Einstein not doing well in school and ask ourselves what Jesus would do (not realizing he the first thing he'd probably do is ask why decent sandals were now so expensive and German). One of my own students once insisted that Shakespeare had to have known that someday an African-American actor would play Othello. We want to look at others and see the best of ourselves, and so *Merchant* makes us uncomfortable because it suggests Shakespeare was as heartlessly anti-Semitic as the rest of his contemporaries. There are scenes—3.1, for instance, which features the great “hath not a Jew eyes?” speech—when we expect, even hope, to see some contrition in the Christians' faces, some sense of recognition and common humanity. Garrett's production gives us none of that. The Christians—here, Salerio and Solanio—are as blinded by self-satisfaction and prejudice as any other Renaissance Christian.

The audience's reaction to this was interesting. Just a few scenes earlier, much of the audience had laughed along as Solanio mocked Shylock's losses, imitating his cries, running up and down the stairs, his hand against his face, a hooked finger out to signify the crooked nose of Jewish stereotype. In the latter part of 3.1, when Shylock was receiving news from Tubal about his runaway daughter and her Christian husband, much of the audience laughed that he would lament the treasure she was wasting. One gentleman behind me even remarked that “he's more upset about his money than his daughter.” Many,

I'm guessing, didn't catch the significance of the ring his daughter traded for a monkey—a ring that had been a present to him from her mother, when they were just courting; again, there was laughter in the audience. This reaction partly stems from the fact that Shylock seems to meet the expectations that Solanio's mockery set up a few scenes earlier, but I wonder how much of it is also latent cultural stereotypes of the money-obsessed Jew.

In that speech in 3.1, Shylock says to his Christian tormentors, "If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in [revenge]." The audience's reactions (and the gentleman's comment) were interesting in that regard as well. Just like the characters in the play, an attitude we allow Christians becomes a pernicious stereotype in Jews. Shylock seems to equate his daughter, Jessica, with treasure, and we laugh because it seems to confirm our stereotype. Yet in the other main plot, Portia is a posthumous prize in a game of riddles her father has contrived; she is literally the treasure that is won by the chooser of the correct chest. Even her one true love, Bassanio, identifies her first by her wealth ("In Belmont is a lady richly left, / And she is fair, and, fairer than that word, / of wondrous virtues"—1.1), and Portia herself seems to recognize her worth to Bassanio is primarily material, laying out a kind of hierarchy of personal value: "yet for you, / I would be trebled twenty times myself, / A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich" (3.2). Women are a commodity, a vehicle to wealth (just ask Lorenzo, Jessica's husband), but we tend to ignore that fact with the Christian characters while denigrating Shylock. When Shylock loses a valuable ring of great personal significance, it's a joke that his daughter has traded it for a pet monkey; when the Christian husbands lose the rings their wives gave them, their recovery is the path to the happy ending they deserve.

Shakespeare's text ends with that happy ending at Belmont. The newlywed couples are reunited, the ring motif has played out, and they are off to consummate the marriage as good comedic couples should. The last line, in fact, is a crude joke—Graziano tells us that while he lives, he'll "fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring"—a genital joke that probably goes right by the play's contemporary audience. Our discomfort with the twin conversions of Shylock and Jessica, though, has impelled many productions to add a scene at the end. In fact, this play adds two scenes, both mostly in pantomime. The play opens with characters moving around the set, gesturing in conversation. Shylock and a Christian (Antonio, I'm pretty sure, though I didn't write it down at the time) accidentally bump into each other, and Shylock is spat upon. This added scene has textual evidence to back it up, and it helps set the atmosphere of a bustling city riven by ancient hatreds. The last scene, also mostly performed without words, is for us: Shylock in procession, being forced to kneel before an upheld cross; his fumbling attempt at trying to perform the sign of the cross; his impulse to run to his old friend Tubal, and Tubal's rejection of him; and finally Jessica, alone on stage, slyly covering her head, kneeling, and praying in Hebrew.

Other productions have included similar scenes, and it does make me wonder—is it just guilt? Do we fear that without these scenes (which undercut comedy's happily-ever-after, after all), it will look like we're taking the winner's side, advocating for the politically incorrect? Are we trying to save Shakespeare from himself, from discreditable bits (at least in our view) of specifics of his own play and the assumptions of his own time? It's hard to argue that peace, love and understanding have won out, ever. What I'm worried about, though, is that in turning away from the ugliness, in repudiating the

hateful, we become dishonest about our history and our cultural idols and about ourselves. We feel better—who among us doesn't watch films about slavery and assume we would have been one of the abolitionists rather than a passive slave-owner or silent witness? Who among us doesn't feel that we'd be different, like Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*, rather than one of the nameless cavalrymen, slaughtering Lakota families without question? The invented scene at the end of *Merchant* gives us that out—after the laughter and the relief of the reunion at Belmont, we have one more chance to despise the forced conversions and the anti-Semitic assumptions that underlie the beliefs that these conversions are actually part of the comedic formula, the long-wished-for happy ending. This is where Launcelot's scene with Jessica, the one where he tells her she's doubly damned for having been born of Jews, is important, because Launcelot is wrong. According to mainstream theology, Jessica is saved from eternal damnation by her conversion (otherwise, what would be the point?), and assuming his forced conversion sticks (so to speak), so is Shylock. Our endeavors towards mutual respect of cultures and beliefs, towards tolerance of other human perspectives, is our own, not Shakespeare's. There's nothing in the text that suggests Jessica regrets her marriage and conversion, and it's a strange essentialism that seems to warrant our need to make her do so, the gentler side of the Spanish Inquisition's coin, maybe, who also held that the *conversos* could not have undergone a genuine conversion. For whatever reason, we feel much better if the play leaves Jessica secretly performing her family's traditional rites, in obvious personal anguish, only pretending to be the happy wife who converted to her husband's religion. By including this scene, we avoid one complication and create another: her pain, at the end, is our relief. The comedic formula promises a restoration of society, a terrestrial *musica universalis* where each member recognizes his or her part in the social harmony; I find it disturbing that in order to maintain our own contemporary beliefs and commitment to a pluralistic society, we, I, need Jessica and Shylock to quietly remain alienated from their own.