

Appendix D

Acting in the Merchant of Venice

In the course of my acting career I have twice had the privilege of performing in *The Merchant of Venice*, first in the role of Jessica in director David Eppel's 1986 production at Williams College, Williamstown, then as Portia in director Larry Goldstein's 2004 production in the Richmond Shakespeare Festival, Richmond, Virginia. As might be expected, the weight of the character of Shylock profoundly affected each of these productions, but the two directors' radically divergent approaches to both Shylock and the play as a whole had wide-ranging consequences for all other characters and choices we as actors had to make along the way. In this paper I will describe how the differing approaches to the play in each of these productions affected my performances. Because of the topic of the institute and the brevity of the presentation I will concentrate specifically on the way in which my characters interacted with Shylock.

In order to grasp the motivation for these performances it is important to establish an understanding of context. In terms of basic approach to the play, the two productions could not have been more different. The Eppel

production was extremely Shylo-centric (is that a term or did I just make that up?). This director's chief conceptual idea was that an atrocity was committed on Shylock and that the enormity of it, the utter disregard of his humanity, would inevitably come back to haunt the anti-semitic Christians and leave them no peace, even in their hours of greatest joy. Indeed, the anti-semitism was not limited to Shylock but extended to their attitudes towards Jessica, too. To this make his point, Eppel employed many devices, including: creating an immensely congenial persona for Shylock played by an affable and highly sympathetic Howard Patlis, which stood in strong contrast to the negative portrayal of almost every other character; working with costumer Deborah Brothers to create particularly grotesque and lugubrious costuming for the Christian characters to complement the overall nastiness which oozed from them; and, most controversially, leaving an immobile, heart-broken Shylock encased in an on-stage see-through cell throughout the fifth act.

The Goldstein production, by contrast, sought to treat the play as a comedy. The main idea, namely that an injustice was done to Shylock, was the same as in the Eppel production, but his conceptual treatment of the matter was almost opposite. Goldstein contented that Shylock's predicament would

more boldly speak for itself to a contemporary audience if not directly commented upon by the production. Some of the devices used to further this end were: soliciting easy, elegant performances of all the courtly characters while going for real broad comedy from characters like Gratiano and the Gobbos; giving many dimensions, negative and positive, to the character of Shylock, played by an impassioned, fiery and youthful Dan Istrate; moving the action of the play quickly throughout; and using the fifth act to move back light-heartedly to the love story and comic rings business. This last device was a gamble, but one that proved highly effective to judge by reactions we received from audiences outraged by the frivolity following the courtroom scene.

As Jessica in the Eppel production, I was one of the chief betrayers of Shylock's world. To allow this to emerge fully it was necessary to work with the director on some key character choices which enabled the idea. The elopement with Lorenzo played a key role in highlighting the betrayal. If Jessica is deeply in love with Lorenzo, her desire to leave Shylock's home seems natural enough. If, however, she does not love him overly much then Lorenzo becomes her ticket out of the Jewish world and the sense that she is abandoning Shylock is more pronounced. In our production the latter choice

was strongly emphasized. The actor cast to play Lorenzo was anything but a typical romantic hero, and in every domestic scene, my portrayal of Jessica conveyed the sense of being inattentive to Shylock and desperate to flee. Jessica never approached her father with any degree of affection, expressing instead only reluctant obedience and disdain for his world. In those scenes in which Launcelot was also present, much “behind Shylock’s back” business was crafted which included not only the passing of notes but also a sense of genuine affection and conspiracy conveyed through physical gestures such as hand-holding and eye-contact. It was clear in this production that Launcelot was far more than Jessica’s servant. He was a real match-maker and enabler in her quest to leave Shylock. In this same vein, a great deal of attention was paid to Jessica’s theft of Shylock’s possessions. I struggled nightly with a very hefty, large casket, used to convey the idea that Shylock was really being bilked.

In general it was quite difficult to convey, without cynicism, a character motivated so entirely by negatives. My communications with the director came to a head over the issue of Leah’s ring. We hear from Tubal, Shylock’s friend, that Jessica sold a ring, her mother’s betrothal gift to her father, for a monkey. My director suggested that Jessica’s easy parting with

this highly significant object indicated her general flippant attitude towards her former life. I could not accept that and saw the gesture as one which indicated her deep sense of shame and perhaps even regret. Stealing the ring created much guilt, and its burning presence on her finger branded her with an ever-present reminder of her crimes. Jessica gives it up for a monkey to get rid of the reminder. Even though we never see Jessica in this moment, I felt that at least knowing internally that this was her motivation dimensionalized her.

A pivotal point for Jessica comes in act III, scene ii. When news comes to Belmont that Antonio's ships have failed and he must pay his bond, Jessica steps forward to assert:

“When I was with him, I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum . . .”

The choices over delivery of this line are many: Jessica might be truly fearful of her father's blood-lust and attempting to warn the court of

Belmont to take his threats seriously; she might be embarrassed into confession by the goading of the previous speaker, Salerio, who needs “backup”; or, as was done in this production, she might be seeking to ingratiate herself to her new Christian friends by exaggerating, if not inventing, a situation to make Shylock look bad. It was most disheartening, then, for my poor Jessica, expecting reward and favor, to receive only the most distant thanks and otherwise frosty treatment by this production’s anti-semitic, bitchy Portia.

It was quite difficult for me to shake the model of this Portia when approaching that role, years later, in the Goldstein production. The challenge presented me was to create a strong, vivacious, intelligent woman, no more bent on crushing Shylock for anti-semitic reasons than crushing Bassanio for feminist ones. In the Goldstein production Portia, as far as she is aware, is acting only in the interests of doing the right thing when she “wins” the court case in much the same way as she is doing the prudent thing when she tests her new husband’s fidelity. Just as I was supposed to act out a social critique as Jessica in the Eppel production, I was supposed to avoid doing so as Portia in the Goldstein production.

It was more difficult than it may seem to meet that challenge, especially since Shakespeare provides text along the way that can be interpreted as intending to show Portia's prejudice. A notable example is her comment to her maid, Nerissa upon hearing that the black prince of Morocco is coming to woo that "if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me" (Act I. sc. ii). If one attempts to excuse the attitude inherent in this comment as one that is simply culturally conditioned in Elizabethan England the effort is problematized by the fact that two scenes later Portia says something completely different to Morocco's face than she did behind his back asserting that if her father's decree had not tied her hands then Morocco "stood as fair as any comer I have looked on yet for my affection" (Act II. sc i.). The director and I had a real clash about whether the former line, originally cut from our text, should be restored. My contention was that allowing this incident of obvious prejudice followed by hypocrisy would give insight into Portia's ability to manipulate those around her and provide real insight into how she works the courtroom later in the play. The line was restored but only after I made the promise (which I made good on) to play it "lightly". Goldstein's claim, which I respected, was that the best way in which to give an audience a view of the ugliness and injustice of prejudice is to show the effortless,

thoughtless way in which it is expressed by those in privileged positions.

Those who are prejudiced, he argued, seldom think that they are. Finally, he asserted, that the impact of the various wrongs and villainies would have resonate more coming from Portia if she were essentially sympathetic to the audience.

This same notion governed the approach to the courtroom scene. Rather than being systematically bashed, Shylock was methodically dismantled. The text, a great clue to the method of delivery, supported this rather frosty approach. While I do not want to provide a lesson in scan, let me very briefly touch upon a couple of items that are almost invariably true when looking at Shakespeare's iambic pentameter. First, a character in a stable frame of mind will speak in an even meter with most of the lines ending after ten syllables, while a disturbed mental framework will occasionally insert lines which have an uneven number of syllables (usually eleven). I will give only one example because of time considerations, but there are others.

Portia:

Tarry a little, there is something else.

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;

The words expressly are “a pound of flesh”.

Shylock:

These be the Christian husbands! I have a daughter

Would any of the stock of Barabbas

Had been her husband rather than a Christian

Second, the calm speaker will usually employ what are known as end-stopped lines in which a thought concludes at the end of a line. The unsettled speaker will continue the thought into subsequent line and often end it in the middle of a line starting a new line in the middle.

Portia:

He hath refused it in the open court.

He shall have merely justice and his bond.

Shylock:

You take my house when you do take the prop

That doth sustain my house. You take my life

When you do take the means whereby I live.

This method of analyzing text is neither scientific nor the only manner in which to approach text-work. It is, however, highly suggestive when trying to gauge one's character's frame of mind and was extremely useful to me when finding my approach to Portia. In this case the evenness of meter and regularity of line helped me to find a Portia who sailed through the courtroom with dignity, aplomb and a certain degree of sang-froid. As I have mentioned above, this approach coupled with the frivolity of Act V in which Shylock was completely "forgotten" by the Christians ultimately created a very chilling atmosphere in which Shylock was anything but forgotten by the audience. His utter erasure and absence in this production spoke volumes more than his literal presence in Act V of the prior production.

These have been my experiences with the play so far. I am now looking forward to the day I get to play Shylock. Any takers?

Thanks.