

## **Producing Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice***

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The first production of *Merchant of Venice* that I worked on, as Technical Director, I reviewed the bill from the dry cleaners when the costumes were cleaned. Our dry cleaner had written *Merchants of Venus* on the invoice. I could only envision this version as some sort of interplanetary porno movie; Shakespeare's lost early draft, perhaps, or an imaginative updating? At any rate, the alternative title has stuck in my vocabulary through subsequent years, study, and other productions. As fascinating as the world of those Venusian merchants might be, I came to Venice to learn about the world of Shakespeare's better-known Venetian merchants.

How much did Shakespeare know about the reality of the world he created in his play? I am not one who supports the view that the playwright himself traveled to the various Italian cities featured in his plays; as worldly-wise as he may have been, the evidence in his Italian plays is too vague to support him as an eyewitness. Did he have good reports to build his settings on? Travel was becoming much more general in Elizabethan times, both for trade and adventure, and travel literature multiplied. First-person reports from actual travelers would have been readily available for Shakespeare to turn into his imaginative worlds. And, of course, Shakespeare wasn't looking for an absolutely true world, but a framework on which to hang his plays. He needed the myth, not the reality.

We know some of the background for the impetus to write a "Jewish" play; the trial and execution of Elizabeth's physician Roderigo Lopez and the success of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* gave this theme currency and popularity. It's easy to understand why the playwright chose Venice; already legendary for extreme wealth, class position, trade, the city exercised a powerful hold on the English imagination even at this early date. Venice also had Jews- not the rare physician, forced converts or vanished exiles Shakespeare might have known in London, but a community of Jews with certain rights and position like nowhere else. Only Venice could give Shakespeare his world of privilege, rich moneylenders, and the laws which bound both.

When we begin the search for a world for *Merchant*, we encounter the translation problem of a 400-year-old play and its view of the world. No matter how faithful one might want to be to the author's original intent, the audience isn't a 16<sup>th</sup> century audience, nor are they likely to be Elizabethan scholars. The audience members will come to the performance with a modern frame of reference, unaware of the vast differences between today's society and that of Elizabethan London or 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice. The Director's Notes in the program can give some help- perhaps a short lesson on attitudes toward usury, something about the status of Jews in Venice or London; but this education will be extremely limited. And there's another group which comes to the production of a play like *The Merchant of Venice* with a modern frame of reference: the actors in the play. Actors need modern references in order to create their characters. The production of a Shakespearean work must include the search for modern analogues to 400-year-old society in order to communicate the work.

Finding modern analogues for performance opens the Pandora's Box of "concept". We've all seen updated productions of varied Shakespeare plays- set in the Civil War, the 1920's, 1880's, the distant future. Some are very successful; Ian McKellan's recent Fascist take on *Richard III* comes to mind. Some are less so; I once saw *Julius Caesar* set in a 1930's factory. Perhaps we could set *Merchant* in some 23rd Century Star Wars concept- we could call it *Merchants of Venus*! No, finding modern ways to explore the world of, say, *Merchant* doesn't necessarily mean we need an arbitrary new "concept". What we need is a complete understanding of the world Shakespeare drew in order to apply our modern minds to our own vision of that world. We have to find the correct modern analogue to give the audience its understanding of Shakespeare's intent, whether the setting for our production is historical Venice or any other time and place.

The director of a production of *Merchant* is free of many of the constraints of literary scholars studying the play; he can come to his interpretation with a preconceived concept and pick and choose a reading to support his focus. He can ignore the literary facts. In so doing, he may risk getting off the beaten path, but he has a strong precedent to follow: Shakespeare didn't really care about the facts either. Shakespeare needed a place to support his plot. And *The Merchant of Venice* is replete with unlikely, silly, and even impossible plot devices; there's the casket choice, the obviously illegal bargain for the pound of flesh, and the rings at the concluding act. The entire thing works only because of the fascinating characters the playwright drew, and these characters could only exist in a very special world.

What kind of world do we need to find for the characters of *Merchant*? They live in a place they view as the center of the universe; the aristocrats' sense of entitlement and privilege is without limit, their smugness at being the right person in the right place at the right time boundless. Where would we find a modern equivalent so we can grasp this world? Perhaps the hotbed of the expatriates in 1920's Paris, or the fashionable world of *Sex and the City* New York would serve. For Shakespeare, only one existing place would accommodate the varied characters of his play. He needed the reality and the myth of Venice.

Within the play, Shakespeare depicts three separate worlds: there's the world of patrician Venice; the world of the villa at Belmont; and the world that brought the NEH Institute together, the trading world of Shylock, the Rialto, and the Ghetto. In the play we see a great deal of the first two worlds; they're full of assorted characters. From the Duke of Venice down, there are seven principal characters inhabiting the world of the aristocrats who are citizens of Venice, plus assorted Magnificoes, retainues, and servants. Belmont not only has Portia and Nerissa but servants and suitors, and practically the whole cast camps out there at the conclusion. There are glimpses of Shylock's home life, with his daughter and apostate servant Launcelot Gobbo, but of the business world of the Rialto and the Ghetto which forms such a vital part of the play we see very little. There is only Shylock's friend and business associate Tubal to fill out that world. To anyone who has visited today's Rialto Market or the Ghetto and done any research into their historical significance, the emptiness of the stage during the bargaining scene is puzzling. Exactly where do Antonio and Shylock meet? Bassanio seeks Shylock out at his place of business; whether Rialto or Ghetto, it's a place of business where both merchant and banker are comfortable. Shylock twice refers to the Rialto as though it is someplace else; at I, iii, l.18 he says, "I understand...upon the Rialto....", and at l. 45, "Even there, where merchants most do congregate...." We must conclude that the meeting takes place in the teeming Ghetto.

What modern reference can we use to grasp Shylock's character? It must not be European; today all references to European Jewry are overwhelmed by the Holocaust. Shylock and his people may have been persecuted, but within the world of the play, nothing like the Holocaust has occurred. Shylock himself says, "The curse never fell on our nation till now; I never felt it till now." (III, i, 1.75) So our modern analogue must be American, and in today's terms Shylock is a broker or trader. By an odd coincidence, three days before the presentation of this paper a photo appeared in the International Herald Tribune of traders in the oil futures pit at the New York Mercantile Exchange. One of the traders is wearing a yarmulke; leaving aside the irony of Jews trading in oil futures, this is precisely the example we need to show the energy of the market which Shylock (and Antonio) must deal with in the Rialto.

It is at the point of the meeting between Shylock and Antonio that we need the clearest picture of business transactions in Shakespeare's version of Venice. To understand this we must turn to the text. Shylock and Antonio meet as equals; we know this because, until Portia's appearance as Balthazar, the Duke is ready to rule for Shylock. Is there an obvious difference between them? Historically, Jews wore some form of distinction; a yellow hat or badge was compulsory. Is this true in Shakespeare's vision of Venice? Perhaps not; one of Portia's first lines in court is, "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" (IV, i, 1.172) Has Shylock been abused in the past, as he states in his speech beginning "...many a time and oft/ In the Rialto you have rated me...." (I, iii, 1.172ff) Shylock's recounting of his "sufferance" and Antonio's verbal abuse should be read as exaggerations, as ways to push the other's buttons. These men clearly have a history of business dealings; this must be why Bassanio goes specifically to Shylock for the loan. The entire bargaining scene is a lesson in business dealing and each character's speeches are designed to gain an advantage; even the long Biblical story of Jacob's lambs (I, iii, 1.73ff) is told to set up negotiations over the rate of interest and wear down the opposition. The two men are in a wrestling match; any retreat is a feigned weakness to catch the other off guard. Ultimately, each feels he has gotten what he wanted.

Returning to the setting of the bargain, we have a very small view of what must have been a very busy place. In this emptiness Shylock delivers the speech which offers the most difficulty for interpreters of the play and the role. When Bassanio steps aside to greet his friend and benefactor, Shylock is left to address the audience in the "fawning publican" speech. (I, iii, 1.37ff) Delivered as an aside or soliloquy, it's hard to see this speech as anything other than pure, mustache-twirling, tie-Little-Nell-to-the-railroad-tracks villainy. However, if Shylock had an ally onstage, another Jewish banker, the speech could be delivered as a confidence to his friend and not as a general statement of (villainous) principles. And we have a character ready to hand. As Shylock toys with Bassanio over whether he has the three thousand ducats (I, iii, 1.49), he's mentioned in the next breath: the "wealthy Hebrew" Tubal. Could Tubal be present to act as Shylock's onstage audience and foil for this scene, as he does in the first scene of Act III? After all, much of Antonio's posturing in the bargaining scene is simply showing off for Bassanio. Also, when Shylock greets Antonio with his politician's greeting, "Your worship was the last man in our mouths" (I, iii, 1.56), his "our" could then include Tubal.

The simple inclusion of one character in one scene may not fill out Shakespeare's picture to the population density of the historical Venice Ghetto, but it can help bridge the centuries in

portraying the business dealings of the period. And banking with the Jews was big business; Venice itself was getting huge loans from the Jews at the time. It's fascinating to see the BANCO ROSSO sign still extant in the Ghetto today and wonder if that's where real-life Bassanios and Antonios would have met with their real-life Jewish bankers. Would those real-life citizens be as smug and presumptuous as Shakespeare's Venetian privileged class? The 16<sup>th</sup> century audience of the Globe Theatre may have seen Shylock purely as a villain, albeit a fascinating one, and the patricians as the heroes, but it's hard to accept Bassanio and Portia as very wholesome today. The complexity written into Shylock's character has, of course, fascinated generations of actors and their audiences; interpretations today are sympathetic. Giving Shylock a confidante for his otherwise hateful "fawning publican" speech can go far toward allowing a modern sympathetic portrayal.

The format and time restraints of this presentation allow an exploration of only a few aspects of this endlessly fascinating play. Digging further into Shylock's character or exploring the issues of Bassanio's fortune hunting, Antonio's possible sexual attraction for Bassanio (which Shylock may be pointing out when he refers to the "fawning publican" as Antonio greets Bassanio), or Portia's cruelty (amply shown to the suitors, to Shylock and to Bassanio) despite her elevated language; all will have to await another time. I planned my sojourn in Venice with emphasis on finding the basis for the world of *The Merchant of Venice*, both the historical reality and the myth which inspired Shakespeare. Both the work of the Institute and my personal research have been spectacularly productive in achieving this goal. Venice, in all her manifestations, has assumed her role as one of the principal characters of *The Merchant of Venice*.