

Report by Miriam Shein on Shaul Bassi's presentation
"Shakespeare's Venice: *The Merchant of Venice* / *Othello*"

I have the privilege (and challenge) of summarizing Shaul's presentation yesterday of Shakespeare in Venice, specifically *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. I will try to do this as succinctly as possible in order to allow time for the continuation of our discussions today (and to finish in time for the game...)

It is apparently (and surprisingly) unusual to study these plays together, but it seems appropriate that Venice with its tradition of communities of "foreigners" would be the setting for the issues that are raised in these two plays. Shaul suggested four sets of similarities between these works:

1. A search for **ethnographic authenticity** in the interpretation of Shylock and Othello which does not occur to this degree with other Shakespearean characters. This may be a form of compensation to "redeem" these characters, almost a political correctness, to the extreme that black actors play Othello and Jewish actors play Shylock as the ultimate authenticity.
2. A **foregrounding of the body** which is often expressed by a nose on Shylock and some sort of impersonation of the black, the African which draws attention to the racial component in both of these plays.
3. This is often compensated by what Shaul calls the **rhetoric of disassociation** which is an attempt to rid these plays of that racial undercurrent and to claim that they are about other more lofty themes such as love and devotion. (although he finds that the racism usually finds its expression before the end of the production.)
4. Finally, these plays are distinguished by the **response of the audience** to them—the audience's inability to separate fiction from reality and, in the extreme, to jump onto the stage to stop Shylock and Othello.

Shaul then treated us to not one, but six tours of Venice, or tours of six Venices:

1. **Touristic** Venice with conveniently placed sites often having little to do with their "authentic" origins.
2. **Theatrical** Venice which focuses on how the republic used public spaces to perform its power, which ranges from the Rialto where Venetians are always "on stage," Max Reinhardt's pageant of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1934, to Venice in Las Vegas.
3. **Erotic** Venice with its idealization of sex, eros, and courtesans and its ambivalence between the erotic and the moralistic.
4. **Cosmopolitan** Venice with its multi-ethnicity evidenced in objects throughout the city representing i Mori (whatever they are), the ghetto, Fascist propaganda, Africans today in the city.

5. **Esoteric** Venice not only as a place of magic, but more importantly with references to the Kabbalah throughout the city.
6. **Utopian** Venice with its echoes of Giordano Bruno, Paolo Sarpi and Jean Bodin and their enlightened ideas of religious tolerance and co-existence.

To attempt to summarize the discussion which followed this presentation is like a sportscaster trying to tell about a particularly exciting soccer game after it's over. In the interest of time, I will only say that it touched upon different representations of the plays themselves and audience response, the borders between religion and race, the influence of culture on historical authenticity, Venice as setting and even character in these plays. But the context which Shaul established remains the framework for continued discussion.