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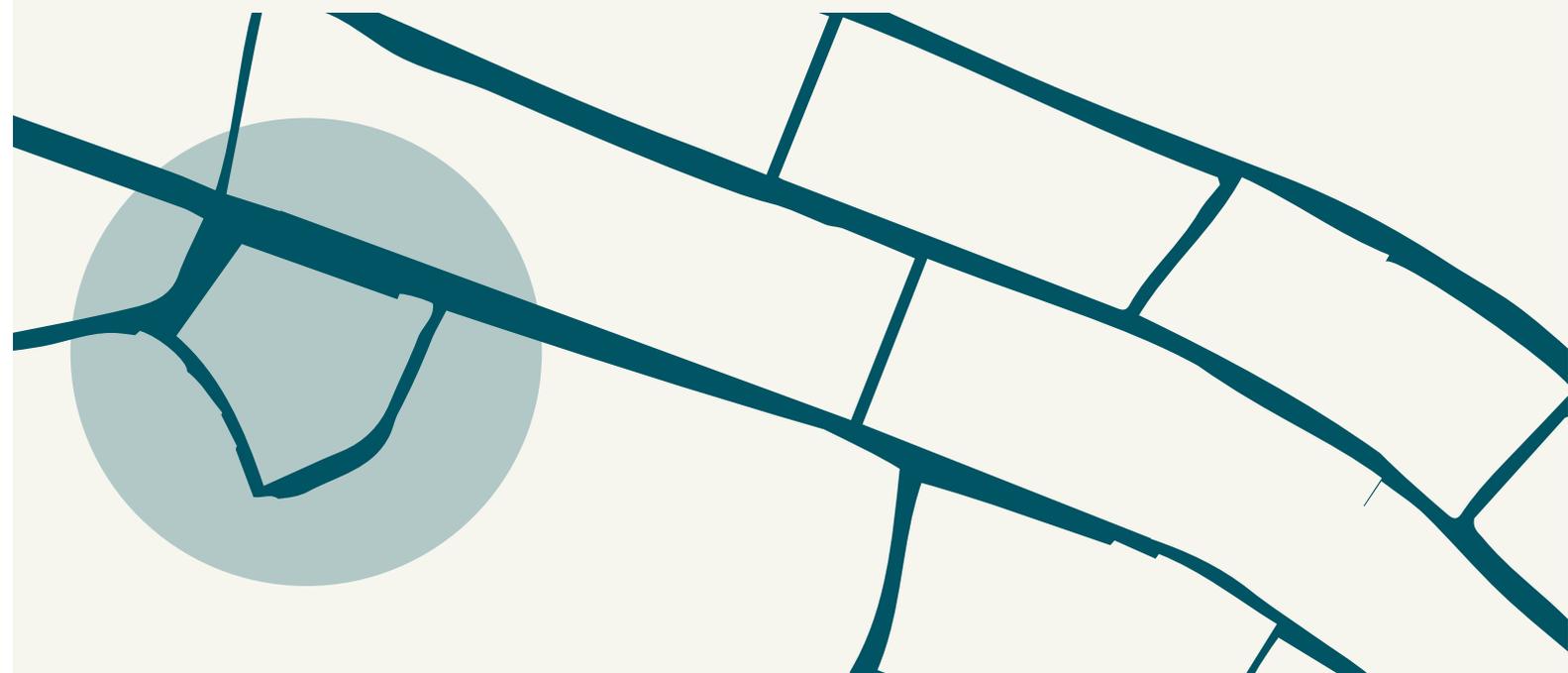
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# The Merchant *in Venice*: Shakespeare in the Ghetto

edited by  
Shaul Bassi and Carol Chillington Rutter



**Edizioni**  
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The Merchant *in* Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto

## **Studi e ricerche**

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## **The Merchant *in* Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto**

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# **Acknowledgments**

This book is a collective effort that celebrates and critically examines another collective effort, a landmark Shakespearean performance that was the centrepiece of an even larger collective effort: the project *Shakespeare In and Beyond the Ghetto* funded by the Creative Europe programme. The partners were Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy, Project Leader), Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice (Italy), Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Germany), Queen Mary University of London (UK), University of Warwick (UK), and Tony Bulandra Municipal Theatre, Targoviste (Romania). Our gratitude goes to all the people and institutions that made both efforts possible in all its various stages. While many are mentioned in the following pages, naming them all would not be possible, so for a detailed record of all the activities and participants we refer our readers to our Shylock Notebook webpage (<http://www.shylocknotebook.eu/>).

Since the formal conclusion of the project, the book has gone through various stages of conception and development, and we want to extend special thanks to Kent Cartwright, Tobias Döring, Elena Pellone and David Schalkwyk for many meaningful discussions.

It is a very sad note to accept that some outstanding individuals who made signal contributions in different forms are no longer with us. The actor Reginald E. Cathey, who rehearsed in the Ghetto in the summer 2015 in the role of Antonio and was a fundamental presence within Compagnia de' Colombari, was eventually unable to play for other professional obligations and died in 2018. The author Clive Sinclair, who was a writer in residence for Beit Venezia - A Home for Jewish Culture and ended up writing a whole collection of stories entitled *Shylock Must Die*, passed away in 2018. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the most influential legal figures of our times, was a galvanizing presence at the 'Mock Appeal' that accompanied the performance in the Ghetto and remained a legendary feminist and an active member of the US Supreme Court until her death in 2020. We have been greatly inspired by their work and example.

This book provides a rich visual documentation capable of evoking many key moments in all the main events. We are deeply grateful to Andrea Messana, who documented all the stages of the production from rehearsal to performance, and Alessandro Grassani, who photographed the 'Mock Appeal'.

Last but not least, we were very lucky to have Bryony Rutter as a formidable proofreader and, at Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Mariateresa Sala as a formidable editor.



**The Merchant *in* Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto**

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In memory of  
Ruth Bader Ginsburg  
“I am not bound to please thee with my answers”  
(*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.64)



## The Merchant *in* Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto

edited by Shaul Bassi, Carol Chillington Rutter

# Introduction

Shaul Bassi

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Carol Chillington Rutter

University of Warwick, UK

Because he was still ten thousand florins short, he went to a Jew at Mestre and arranged a loan on the following terms and conditions: namely that unless he reimbursed the loan, before St. John's day in June, the said Jew could take a pound of his flesh from whatever part of the body he chose.

(Ser Giovanni Fiorentino 1558,  
see Mortimer 2019, 47)

The most famous bond in the history of literature originates in this short passage from Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il pecorone*, written around 1378 and published in Milan in Italian in 1558. Adapting this novella into a play, *The Merchant of Venice*, some forty years later William Shakespeare famously made a number of revisions: Ansaldo became Antonio, the anonymous Jewish moneylender became Shylock, and the loan was converted to three thousand ducats. In historical reality, a more consequential change had occurred over this time. From 1516, any 'Antonio' needing a loan would no longer have to cross the lagoon and go to Mestre (the nearest town on the mainland) to seek the moneylender, because from that date Jews were authorised to live within the body of Venice as long as they remained confined at night within the site of an abandoned copper foundry called *getto* [/'dʒetto/], whose name would acquire a new spelling and pronunciation and become in time a synonym of urban and ethnic separation. Shakespeare does not mention the Ghetto in *The Merchant of Venice*, but the Ghetto is arguably presupposed in the text. While the playwright almost cer-



Figure 1 *The Merchant in Venice* poster designed by John Conklin

tainly never visited Venice, he read and heard a good deal about it, and may have learned of that relatively new Jewish area in the city, as had his countryman and contemporary Thomas Coryat. In the most accurate description of early seventeenth-century Venice left by a foreigner (Whittaker 2013), Coryat made a point of visiting this space that had been legally constituted by the Republic and that enabled the social and cultural dynamics of interaction between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority that are central to Shakespeare's play - interaction unimaginable in Shakespeare's London. There no such spatial, never mind cultural, meeting place existed: Elizabeth I's commonwealth still, officially, excluded Jews.

Shakespeare, Shylock, Venice and the Ghetto came into historic alignment in 2016, a year that marked the coincidence of two historic anniversaries: 400 years since William Shakespeare's death and 500 years since the establishment of the Ghetto. A question began to take form. What better way to address the historic complexities registered in this coincidence than to bring them also into *physical* alignment, to stage the first performance of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto that would have been (fictional) Shylock's (actual) home? The idea developed into a long-term, two-part project titled *Shakespeare in and beyond the Ghetto* funded by the Creative Europe programme and by generous private donors.<sup>1</sup> Its center of gravity was the site-specific production and its satellites a variety of public-facing academic symposia, lectures, spin-off performances and workshops devoted to *The Merchant* and its contemporary relevance. The essays brought together here focus on the activity 'in the Ghetto'.

Initially, the crucial encounter, facilitated by two Shakespeare academics, Kent Cartwright and David Scott Kastan, was with Compagnia de' Colombari, a New York-based theatre company whose name is Italian, casts are multi-ethnic, and vocation is to make *theatre* happen in 'surprising places'. If, as Susan Bennett has argued, "*The Merchant of Venice* tests the relationships produced in, for and among the inhabitants of the play, the spectatorship and the general population" (2016, 5), Colombari was the perfect partner for our project. Thanks to their visionary director, Karin Coonrod, Colombari brought to our collaboration not just a strong artistic vision but an openness to engaging with what else our project set out to achieve, a dialogue with and cooperation among scholars, local communities and Venice's civic and Jewish institutions. *The Merchant of Venice* became *The Merchant 'in' Venice*.

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**1** The partners in the project were Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy, Project Leader), Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice (Italy), University of Warwick (UK), Queen Mary University of London (UK), Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Germany), and Tony Bulandra Municipal Theatre, Targoviste (Romania). An overview of the activities and outputs is available at: <http://www.shylocknotebook.eu>.



Figure 2 Daylight rehearsal in the Ghetto. © Andrea Messana

The production was premised on two fundamentals: to recognise the Ghetto as a palimpsestic site and to resist the nostalgic performance tradition that longs to make Shylock ‘authentic’. Aiming to set Shakespeare and his *Merchant* in the Ghetto, we were conscious of locating him – and it – within that “field of forces” and “genuine struggles” that Sonia Massai has observed are the play’s and playwright’s right location “in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Massai 2007, 7). Her reference is to Bourdieu’s notion of the “cultural field” where “relations of power” play out “struggles for the preservation or the transformation of the established order” and where agency is ascribed to “new entrants”, outsiders who, getting a feel for the cultural game being played on the “field”, become active participants there (1993, 163). In the event, as several of the essays collected here document, Coonrod’s production staged the ‘cultural game’ being played in Shakespeare’s *Merchant* to devastating effect.

If Shakespeare is a global cultural field, the Ghetto is quite literally a field (*campo*, in Italian, is used for all Venetian squares except San Marco). However, once Pope Paul IV decided in 1555 to model all segregated Jewish quarters in the papal territories on the Venetian plan and to call them ‘ghettos’, the name extended in space and time to other ethnic enclaves and countless other physical, psychological, metaphorical forms of limitation and confinement. Today ‘ghetto’ has become, in sociological terms, a cognitive category and a global metaphor, a signifier that has long relinquished its original loyalty to its Venetian signified (Duneier 2016; Schwartz 2019; Cheyette 2020).



Figure 3 Masked Singers and Musicians. © Andrea Messana

To bring Shylock ‘home’ to the Ghetto – a slogan we occasionally indulged in – was, in this perspective, the opposite of an act of ‘localisation’. What we planned, instead, was a creative collision between two global icons, two paradigmatic documents of Europe’s tangible and intangible heritage. The larger ambition was to explore the potential of the play to reflect on the specificity of antisemitism and simultaneously on the translatability of prejudice and tolerance to other geopolitical and historical contexts.

As a palimpsest, the Ghetto today is a site where post-Holocaust melancholy and mass tourism interact with a multi-layered cultural and religious heritage in the context of an increasingly commodified Venice. The trauma of World War II is its most recent defining moment. Two Holocaust memorials (installed in 1980 and 1994) are the only monuments clearly visible at street level and they declare the public civic function of this area. The other historical evidence of the lives lived here is, by virtue of the strict rules imposed by the Republic of Venice in the sixteenth century, hidden from view, so that today in the Ghetto, poignantly but ironically, the deportation and death of Venice’s Jews in the Nazi extermination camps are more legible to the public gaze than any record of the continuous Jewish habitation there over the past five hundred years.

To begin to understand the complexity of this Venetian history – a history that was urgently relevant to our project – one needs to enter the museum that has occupied a corner of the Ghetto since 1954, to read books, to unfold the many layers of Jewish presence in the city

and in much larger national and continental networks. The Ghetto then functions as a screen for the 'beyond'. Other ghettos, especially the deadly ones of Nazi Europe, are projected onto it by historians, museum curators, websites, tour guides, and even occasional visitors who offer different paradigms for interpreting it, paradigms that combine facts, beliefs, reminiscences, prejudices, emotions. A "lachrymose" paradigm (Baron 1964) sees the Ghetto as an alpha of segregation that ends in the omega of Auschwitz. In 2016, this was the narrative used by the few, vocal commentators who took issue with our project to stage what many consider the archetypal antisemitic play in the archetypal Ghetto. Another (apparently more benign but decidedly ambivalent) trope sees the Ghetto as a place of post-Holocaust Judeo-Christian solidarity and identity. This well-intentioned position which sometimes implies the notion of Jews as a model minority suitable for incorporation into 'Western civilization' - unlike, say, the violent, unassimilable African and/or Muslim migrants who have arrived in Venice in recent years - conveniently glosses over centuries of antisemitism expressed in tropes uncannily similar to those now used against the new target groups. The uncomfortable fact is that this interpretation is shared also by some progressive critics who categorise the Jews as European and White and place them unproblematically on the side of the West. A broader solidarity narrative argues for an intersectional paradigm, one that tries to establish an ethical or even historical link between all victims of racism. While these three paradigms focus on the Ghetto as a site of oppression and position its inhabitants primarily as victims, a fourth paradigm that could be termed the 'cosmopolitan paradigm' highlights the Ghetto's role as a contact zone, without in any way playing down the segregation it was designed to enforce. This paradigm stresses the cultural agency of Jews and the place itself as a site of intellectual creativity and resistance, one defined by a distinct local culture but historically capable of producing cultural phenomena that have travelled globally and that have had a significant impact on Jewish history, Jewish-Christian relations and minority rights, beginning with Leon Modena's *The History of the Rites, Customs, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews* (1637) and Simone Luzzatto's *Discourse on the State of the Jews* (1638) (Davis, Ravid 2001).

*The Merchant in Venice* in 2016 wrestled with the legacy of this complex history by challenging the present to encounter Shakespeare's play in a location that would, to extraordinary effect, heighten its language, raise its stakes: a place where his words, echoing off the Ghetto's walls, would literally 'sound' different. The essays collected here document how our project rose to the challenge we set. They give an account of the preparatory stages of the production, of its performance in the Ghetto and its afterlife, of its reception and of how it spilled out as a cultural event beyond the first performanc-

es, told from the points of view of academics, critics, actors, the director, her production team, and a pair of distinguished journalists.

The first half of the book addresses the 'making' of the site-specific production. Shaul Bassi's "'Shylock is Dead': Shakespeare in and Beyond the Ghetto" frames the whole project. He renders an account of the historical context connecting Shakespeare and the Ghetto, a history, he argues, that found its original expression in the writings of nineteenth-century travellers such as William Dean Howells. He then considers the palimpsestic quality of the Ghetto to see how the paradigmatic value that has accrued to its name makes the location susceptible to countless interpretations. In order to do that, he compares Howells's point of view as an outsider to how an early-twentieth-century Jewish Venetian reader interpreted *The Merchant of Venice* and to his own critical perspective as a twenty-first-century Shakespeare critic inhabiting the same social and cultural space in a radically different historical context.

With this background in place, Karin Coonrod's "Gathering Strangers" turns the focus to the foreground. In conversation with Davina Moss, her dramaturg, Coonrod, the artistic director of Compagnia de' Colombari, discusses the process of making *The Merchant 'in' Venice*: production decisions, casting choices - including her decision to cast five actors as 'Shylock, the Jew' - and how her own personal aesthetic influenced the production. Coonrod and Moss discuss how the history of Venetian Jewry affected staging, costuming and linguistic choices, and how the script was adapted to tell the story that most interested Coonrod. Remarkable illustrations of her process - pages taken from her working script, storyboards - show Coonrod in the act of making her adaptation, writing 'back' to Shakespeare, one theatre-maker in conversation with another. She and Moss account for the production's life beyond its original Ghetto performances, playing to very different audiences in a high security prison in the Veneto and a theatre on a university campus in New York. These audiences, they reflect, looking and listening to Shakespeare's *Merchant* from their positions in 'cultural fields' unimaginably distant from each other, added rich layers of palimpsest to this production. Finally Coonrod and Moss reflect on how the experience of making this *Merchant* affected them personally, as Shakespeareans, as Jews (by birth or marriage), and as artists.

The other creatives whose collaboration they depended upon - Frank London, composer; Stefano Nicolao, designer; Peter Ksander, lighting designer - add observations which show that the Coonrod/Moss dialogue was, in fact, a much noisier conversation. It was their 'talk', translated through enactment into the business of performance, that spectators saw when actors were dressed as characters in front of spectators' eyes; or when music on trumpets, clarinets, cellos, a shofar underscored actions intensified by the sound; or when day sank into night,

and lighting cast nightmare shadows onto a house that would shortly be discovered to be monstrously abused, robbed of its human treasure.

The questions that occupied the creative production team are picked up and reformulated in various ways by six of the actors who rehearsed and performed Coonrod's *Merchant*. In "The Actors Speak", Francesca Sarah Toich, Michelle Uranowitz, Paul Spera, Jenni Lea-Jones, Linda Powell and Michele Athos Guidi offer insights that illuminate both the intense work of preparation that went into the production and their overwhelming experience of playing Shakespeare's play in a place so deeply implicated by history. Coming from Italy, India, the USA, France and Wales, speaking five languages, these actors brought national, ethnic, linguistic and artistic diversity to the project, diversity that richly informed and complicated the performances audiences saw. In "Playing the Angles: Finding Shylock and Gratiano", Sorab Wadia expands his fellow actors' observations. He remembers stepping out onto the stones of the Campo de Ghetto Novo, making Shylock's voice heard in that place for the very first time: "Three thousand ducats; well". As one of Coonrod's original 'strangers' who worked on the project across all of its iterations, he gives a jobbing actor's account of this *Merchant* from pre-life to after-life, and from inside the work. For him, the most daunting challenge his director set him was to double Shylock, the dignified Venetian merchant banker of the opening scene, with Gratiano, the spitting Jew-baiter of the rest of the play. These two parts could not, for Wadia, be reconciled. But he discovered in rehearsing and performing them how they - and Shakespeare's play - needed each other.

In the second half of the book, the essays reverse the actors' gaze. They look at the production - and at a number of collateral events clustered around it - from the outside. Kent Cartwright remembers how profoundly Coonrod's site-specific production worked upon him as a spectator and reflects beyond his immediate experience to raise some key questions that emerged from it. In "'The Merchant in Venice' and 'The Shylock Project': Fiction, History, and the Humanities" he thinks back to Max Reinhardt's historic 1934 staging of the play in Venice - though *not* in the Ghetto - to ask, 'What does it mean to locate *The Merchant* in the actual place where some of its action might be imagined to take place?' Coonrod was staging a comedy famous for its antisemitic expressions in a place of symbolic significance to Jews, a place whose tragic history is a result of exactly such antisemitic sentiments as the play exposes in some of its scenes and characters. How, then, do we reconcile the experience of fiction with the claims of history? And what part do the humanities, what part do fictions play in facilitating our ability to talk "together, globally, about a better world, dreaming it into existence"?

In the following two essays, two distinguished British authors of Jewish background share their opinions of a play and a character who

has long haunted Anglo-Jewish identity and culture. In “Shylock Our Contemporary”, the late Clive Sinclair ponders the strange experience of seeing seven Shylocks on a single day in Venice – and offers some wry reflections on this multitude of encounters. The piece takes the form of an itinerary through three separate events: in the Doge’s Palace, an exhibition documenting half a millennium of Jewish history in Venice which featured looped archive film footage of Laurence Olivier playing Shylock; at San Rocco, the performance of the “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech by F. Murray Abraham that was part of the “Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio”; in the Ghetto, Coonrod’s production, that showed spectators five versions of Shylock. These encounters inspire a lively review and a very ironical companion piece to Sinclair’s posthumous anthology, *Shylock Must Die*, a collection of short stories informed by a stay in the city when the British Jewish author was Writer in Residence in Venice as part of a project aimed at ‘re-imagining’ the Ghetto in the new century. In “Shylock’s Mock Appeal”, Howard Jacobson, whose 2016 novel *Shylock Is My Name* adapted Shakespeare’s play to contemporary England, examines in more detail the high-profile event that was staged in parallel with Coonrod’s production and that was commented upon by Sinclair. This distinguished judicial side-show, presided over by U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and argued by practicing advocates, heard Shylock’s “Appeal Against Sentence” in the matter between himself and Antonio. This was, writes Jacobson with decided understatement, “no mere fanciful fringe happening”. Observing that Justice Ginsberg, in reaching her verdict, “found [...] for Shylock” – as “it was inevitable that she would” – Jacobson celebrates the success of Shylock’s “Appeal” which, for him, meant that an “ancient misreading of a famous play had been challenged”.

Carol Chillington Rutter is not so sure. In “Trying Portia”, she points to a curious aspect of this “Appeal”, which, while ostensibly a matter between Shylock and Antonio, it made Portia an appellee in the case, calling her into court to defend the role she had played in reaching the original verdict. What cultural, political, religious needs were being served, Rutter asks, by bringing Portia into court in 2016? Many of today’s spectators of Shakespeare’s play find Portia trying. Specifically, they indict her of failing to offer Shylock the very ‘quality of mercy’ she requires him to render Antonio. But does this signally misrepresent her actions in Shakespeare’s court and misunderstand the available mitigation of mercy? This essay thinks about justice and mercy, and about law, bonds, and love, asking in conclusion whether the verdict Ginsberg handed down simply recuperated antisemitism in misogyny.

Positioned among these essays that are thinking ‘beyond’ the Ghetto performances, Judah Cohen’s “Composing ‘the Jew’s’ Soundscape in Operatic Versions of *The Merchant of Venice*” nevertheless serves as an melodic companion piece to Frank London’s

earlier in the volume. As Cohen shows, London, adapting boisterous carnivalesque music at the top of Coonrod's production, then writing a minor-key signature tune for Shylock, was just the latest in a long line of composers who used musical shorthand to characterise Venice as *La Serenissima* - while positioning the Jew as aurally strange, living "on the margins of European tonality". Cohen focuses on operas spanning a hundred years from the 1870s onwards to isolate five compositional strategies for characterising Shylock's Jewish identity "to show both internal anxiety and external alienation". If, as Shaul Bassi's essay argues, Shylock haunts the political memory of Europe, Cohen's essay demonstrates how profoundly and persistently he echoes in the cultural memory a tune Europe cannot get out of its head.

Even as the lights came down on the final performance of *The Merchant 'in' the Ghetto*, the production and its legacy were moving well *beyond* the Ghetto. First, to the Casa di Reclusione, the high security men's prison located across the Venetian lagoon in Padua, where inmates, many of them lifers, saw a cut-down version of the Ghetto production that brought the trial scene into unsparing focus. In that performance it was twelve inmates who came onstage in the red stoles of the silent 'jurors' whom Coonrod's production cast as 'witnesses' to preside over the trial and Shylock's ultimate humiliation in court. Next, it went to the Theatre Festival of Bassano del Grappa, where the walls of the castello served as the backdrop to the action, offering a surface that captured the events of the play in light and shadow with thrilling clarity. Still later, after re-casting and re-rehearsing, performances on college campuses in New England took Coonrod's production to North America, the Ghetto 'remembered' in the metal police crash barriers placed on those New World stages. In Venice, those barriers had served functionally to mark out the playing space in the open-air campo. In New York, functioning as set, they registered symbolically. They 'remembered' exclusion. They marked a space 'set apart'.

Those crash barriers: in fact, in Venice they did much more than simply mark territory. As the production planted itself in the campo, as it grew day by day with boat delivery after boat delivery along the Misericordia canal, as sky-scraping lighting gantries reached higher and higher and sound boxes ran thick cables across the flagstones, as raked seating rose in metal tiers that seemingly turned their backs on the local community in a semi-circle that cut off half the campo, those barriers came, paradoxically, to stand as the interface between an 'intrusive' cultural event - time apart - and the busy daily life that had to skirt around it - time on-going. It was the children of the Ghetto who made the connection. It was they who were most affected by the intrusion. The campo is their playground: their football pitch; where they kick balls, ride bikes, flick water from the

*fontana*, chase rings round the *pozzo*, ignore shouts of ‘veni qua, veni qua!’. The barriers that divided their kingdom, that told them ‘keep out’, were an obstruction, an offense, an insult. So, the children did what children do: anarchically, they made over the intruder as a party in their own games. They smashed footballs onto metal as if they were proxy goal defenders – with satisfying howls of triumph when the barriers crashed against each other. Later, though, as actors began coming into the space to rehearse, the children grew curious. They draped themselves over the barriers, leaning into whatever odd thing was happening. Or they peered through the bars, staring at this strange ‘zoo’. Still later, during performance, they hung around the far back of the space, the notional ‘off stage’ space, where actors in costume stood waiting to make their entrances, engaging people called ‘Jessica’ and ‘Bassanio’ in lively chatter about who they were and what they were up to. Or they sat. Silent. Cross-legged on the stones of the campo. Gazing through the bars of the crash barriers that now served as a frame, looking into a world where a story was being told about something long-ago, but also about something that mattered now. If *The Merchant of Venice* is to have a future life for the next half-millennium, it must have a current life with the children of today. That is Laura Tosi’s argument in the final essay of this volume. She explores it in “‘Antonio, il Mercante della Nostra Storia’: Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children”. She offers a historicised account of the challenges and difficulties of rewriting this particular play in narrative form for child readers that casts back to the Victorians before discussing the meticulous decisions she made in adapting the story for Venetian, for Italian children today. In particular, her Italian translation might be addressing both the ‘boys in Venice’ who dogged Shakespeare’s Shylock through the streets “Crying ‘His stones, his daughter and his ducats!’” (2.8.24) and the children who passed through the Ghetto in 2016, stopping to hang over the crash barriers to watch Coonrod’s production. What, asks Tosi, are the questions Shakespeare’s play raises that are relevant to their lives?

That question is a compelling one to end on. For just as Shakespeare’s play meant something unforgettable *in* the Ghetto in 2016, so its meaning for the future rests with today’s children, in a place *beyond*.

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## **Part 1. Making *The Merchant* in the Ghetto**



# “Shylock is Dead”: Shakespeare In and Beyond the Ghetto

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**Abstract** This essay relates the genesis of the project that led to the first performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto of Venice in 2016, the year of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death and the 500th anniversary of the foundation of the Ghetto, the site that provided the world with the concept of the 'ghetto'. The essay puts the relationship between Shakespeare and the Ghetto in historical perspective, starting from W.D. Howells's visit to the Ghetto in the 1860s, through the point of view of a young Jewish Italian admirer of Shakespeare before and during Fascism, to the post-War transformations of the Ghetto and the present day.

**Keywords** Ghetto. Shylock. Venice. Antisemitism. Heritage. Holocaust. Memory.

**Summary** 1 Part 1. 1861-1866. – 2 Part 2. 1916-1945. – 3 Part 3. 2013-2016. – 4 Conclusion. 2021 and Beyond.

## 1 Part 1. 1861-1866

Our story begins some time in the early 1860s. Italy had just become an independent nation and Venice was still under Austrian rule when the American consul William Dean Howells visited, by chance, the Jewish Ghetto. In the dedicated section of his book *Venetian Life* (1866), a lively account of the city and its society, he declared it “extremely questionable whether I could get through a chapter on this subject without some feeble pleasantries about Shylock” (1989, 151). *The Merchant of Venice* does not mention the Ghetto, and yet the anonymous Jewish moneylender that Shakespeare had found in Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il pecorone* did not live in Venice; as prescribed by the Republic he

resided in its mainland domain of Mestre. By moving the newly named Shylock to the heart of the city, working and interacting with Christian merchants on a daily basis, Shakespeare was indirectly registering the new urban reality sanctioned by the Venice Senate on 29 March 1516. The city had lost the Battle of Agnadello against the League of Cambrai a few years earlier, and many Jews were among the refugees who had flocked to Venice in the aftermath. Protests arose, in the midst of a political and religious climate of anger and guilt for the recent defeat; many senators argued that the infidels had to be expelled. After long deliberation, it was decreed that the Jews could remain because they benefited the local economy but had to be confined in a large peripheral campo that took its name from the abandoned foundry, the *getto* (Calabi 2017). The Ghetto remained a segregated area until the fall of the Republic in 1797, and by the time Howells set foot there, it was a dilapidated neighbourhood inhabited by impoverished Jews. In previous centuries it had also been a very permeable contact zone that had attracted English travellers such as Thomas Coryat, curious to observe a living Jewish community at a time when Jews were still officially barred from England (Shapiro 2016). For Howells, the obvious association with his readers was the literary myth created by Shakespeare rather than any historical record. *The Merchant of Venice*, as James Shapiro has remarked, was part of a “mini-canon of works most frequently staged, parodied, and updated” that preoccupied American writers regularly between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century (Shapiro 2014, xxvii). Having paid his tribute, Howells was quick to comment on the altered social scenery:

Shylock is dead; [...] if he lived, Antonio would hardly spit upon his gorgeous pantaloons or his Parisian coat, as he met him on the Rialto; [...] he would far rather call out to him, *Ciò Shylock! Bon dí! Go piaser vederla.*<sup>1</sup> (1989, 151-2)

By proclaiming Shylock’s demise, the consul meant that “the present social relations of Jew and Christian in this city render *The Merchant of Venice* quite impossible” (152). The vignette of two respectable bourgeois Venetians exchanging pleasantries in the local dialect was a vivid way of marking the fading of the prejudice that had drawn the boundaries of early modern society:

The Catholic Venetian certainly understands that his Jewish fellow-citizen is destined to some very unpleasant experiences in the next world, but *Corpo di Bacco!* that is no reason why he should not be friends with him in this. (152)

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Shylock, old fellow, good-day. Glad to see you’.



**Figure 1** Shylock #2 (Adriano Iurissevich) and Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz). © Andrea Messana

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By this time, in fact, the social composition and geographical distribution of the Jewish community had been significantly altered. A majority of destitute families had remained in or around the Ghetto, now a comfort zone rather than a forced domicile, while a minority of affluent citizens had become a prominent class of dynamic modernisers eager to fashion a new social and cultural identity for themselves. This 'modern' Jew, writes Howells,

is gathering into his own hands great part of the trade of the city, and has the power that belongs to wealth. He is educated, liberal, and enlightened, and the last great name in Venetian literature is that of the Jewish historian of the Republic, Romanin. The Jew's political sympathies are invariably patriotic, and he calls himself, not Ebreo, but Veneziano. He lives, when rich, in a palace or a fine house on the Grand Canal, and he furnishes and lets many others (I must say at rates which savor of the loan secured by the pound of flesh) in which he does not live. (152)

As Howells's frivolous tone subtly changes, some fairly accurate social notions of Jewish upward mobility become entangled with deep-seated prejudices of hyperbolic financial hegemony and traditional usury. The antisemitism that the American consul had disavowed in his opening scene comes back with a vengeance only a few lines below, with a direct reference to the *Merchant's* most tenacious trope, the 'pound of flesh'. Stereotypes thrive on repetition: while on the one hand Howells was safely consigning theological anti-Judaism

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to the recesses of the historical past, on the other he was contributing to the continuity and dissemination of the discourse of economic antisemitism. Moreover, he was rehearsing more 'modern' theses. His main focus was not Jewish society, but the Ghetto itself, which he went to explore with the intention of showing his readers "something of the Jewish past, which has survived to the nineteenth century in much of the discomfort and rank savor of the dark ages" (153). In his perspective, a visit to the Ghetto was not just a movement in space but a descent in time, in line with new discourses of racial degeneration. He started visiting the place with a "picturesque" and inept guide: "his long, hooked Hebrew nose caught my idle fancy, and his soft blue eyes excused a great deal of inefficiency" and

the manner in which he shouted to the heads of unctuous Jessicas thrust out of windows, and never gained the slightest information by his efforts, were imbecilities that we presently found insupportable. (157)

Howells was ironically revising another old cliché, that of the *belle juive* (Sicher 2017), which had traditionally produced a polarisation of gender in the portraits of physically ugly Shylocks, reflecting externally their spiritual inferiority, vis-à-vis beautiful Jessicas, who could still be saved by their conversion. He concluded on a note of doubt:

I do not understand why any class of Jews should still remain in the Ghetto, but it is certain, as I said, that they do remain there in great numbers. It may be that the impurity of the place and the atmosphere is conducive to purity of race. (159)

Howells's ostensibly liberal approach seems to place antisemitism safely in the dark past of the segregated Ghetto, but his racialised worldview is a clue to why modernity and emancipation did not bring full equality to the Jews of Venice but instead eventually created the conditions for their discrimination under Fascism and deportation to the Nazi death camps, at a time when they had never felt so integrated into Italian society, as our next story illustrates.



Figure 2

Gino Bassi, *Nel terzo centenario della morte di Guglielmo Shakespeare* (Venice, 1916)

## 2 Part 2. 1916-1945

In 1916 a young Venetian Jew enamoured of English culture wrote an essay on the third centenary of Shakespeare’s death, published by an Italian periodical whose agenda was moderately conservative and Catholic. At that time, Shakespeare was far from a defining presence in the national cultural canon; he had been read and commented upon by some of the makers of unified Italy, he had been adapted into opera and ballet by major composers, and he had been staged successfully by famous actors, but he was not as indispensable as he is today, where no main Italian theatre goes a season without a Shakespeare (Bassi 2016). A few months later, the young man’s father, a rabbi and beloved teacher, died, leaving Gino Bassi as the only son of a widowed mother. It is not clear if this premature death spared the 24-year-old the trenches of World War I, which, not too far from Venice, were slaughtering Italian youth in the hundreds of thousands. In that climate, Gino Bassi offered a survey of the life and works of

Shakespeare for the educated reader, praising the ecumenical and universal spirit of the English playwright, a view that was made the mainstream position by the most prominent Italian philosopher of the day, Benedetto Croce. A public intellectual and former liberal senator who had opposed the military enterprise, Croce had isolated himself from the war and concentrated on a humanistic worldview that could reconcile in the realm of literature the European countries that were spilling each other's blood, some of them symbolically recruiting Shakespeare to their ranks (Engler 1991). In 1920 Croce published *Shakespeare, Ariosto and Corneille*, and his publisher testified to a new attention paid to the English author by excerpting his Shakespeare chapter for a monographic volume that came out in 1925, the same year Croce signed the Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals. Croce based his reading on his long-established aesthetic theory of the autonomy of poetry defined as pure 'intuition' devoid of any moral and political aims.

Shakespeare did not toy with ideals of any kind and least of all with political ones; and although he represents magnificently political struggles too, he always supersedes them in their specific character and objective, always reaching, through them, the only thing that profoundly attracts him: life. (Croce 1925, 25)

His countermodel was the 'identity politics' of German critics and their use of *Richard II* as a doctrinaire assertion of the divine right of kings, of *The Tempest* as an apology for European colonialism and particularly of *Othello* as a warning against mixed marriages. The truth of the matter, in Croce's opinion, was that Shakespeare could neither agree nor disagree with "external reality" because he was intent to "create his own spiritual reality" (163). At first sight, Gino Bassi would seem to subscribe to these aesthetic principles, placing Shakespeare at a safe distance from any political involvement:

The personality of the poet abstracts and detaches himself from his creations; he cannot identify with any of his characters, whether tragic or comic; we feel that the Author can be neither the jealous Othello, nor the evil Jago, nor the avaricious Shyloch [*sic*], nor Falstaff the cynical glutton, nor Romeo the ardent lover, nor any of the other characters who populate his scenes. (1916, 10; Author's translation)

Looking closer, he was also trying to portray a subject who could be a model obedient citizen without being xenophobic or indulging in flattery to power:

Indubitably Shakespeare was and was supposed to be by race, upbringing, and the environment in which he was writing, a good

patriot, a loyal subject of the Queen; however in his historical dramas we find no chauvinism, no low adulation, no attempt to veil those historical episodes that could have displeased the audience; among the numerous noble figures of Kings or warriors, for instance, we encounter Richard III, one the most cynical, evil and hideous men who ever existed in real life or depicted in a work of art. (10)

For this young Jewish intellectual, to write about Shakespeare was part of a cultural effort to subscribe to the script of the Italian nation while promoting moderate versions of pluralism and tolerance. However, when it came to providing an example of Shakespeare’s neutrality, the choice fell on *The Merchant of Venice*:

The same could be said about Shakespeare’s attitude towards the Jews. How many discussions, how many disputes about the figure of the merchant of Venice! Was Shakespeare meaning to describe in him the prototype of the money-grubbing man saturated with hatred for the Christian that corresponded to the traditional figure of the Jew in theatre and fiction? Or was not our Author trying to demonstrate that Shylock’s character is the natural outcome of persecutions. (10-11)

Falling into a not untypical fallacy of confusing Shylock with the titular merchant, Gino made a specific point about the Jewish minority, without making his personal involvement in the matter explicit. His ancestors arrived in the Ghetto from some German-speaking territory some time in the late 1790s, and his grandparents may have bumped into Howells when he visited there. In his writing he was trying to negotiate a sort of middle ground where one could simultaneously aspire to be recognised as part of the cultural mainstream while using the symbolic capital of Shakespeare to advocate a more egalitarian and inclusive agenda. Gino would never openly thematise his own identity. His name was not recognisably Jewish. The unrecorded, probably Ashkenazi, surname had been Italianised upon arrival in Venice. He had a Hebrew name (Shlomo) to be used in ritual contexts and turned his own given name Girolamo (that in his ex libris he had anglicised to Jerome) into Gino, and named his three children with, respectively, a Greek (Paolo), a Latin (Luciana) and a Germanic (Roberto) name – the youngest, my father, after Robert Browning. Socially located somewhere between the indigent Jews of the Ghetto and the new aristocracy living on the Grand Canal, his was an educated middle-class family that cherished its religious tradition at home and at the Levantine synagogue in the Ghetto while embracing a secular, national, liberal Italian cultural identity in the public sphere. This was at the time when the Jews called themselves ‘Israelites’ (to

avoid all the negative connotations that had accrued over the word ‘Jew’ and its cognates, witness Shakespeare) and vigorously debated the new ideology of Zionism, seen by some as a necessary national affirmation and by others as a threat to Jewish integration in Europe.

In 1931, Gino Bassi, now a married lawyer and hardly an admirer of Mussolini, became a card-carrying member of the Fascist Party. For some Jews the same gesture was the ultimate act of allegiance to the homeland, the demonstration that they had indeed become like all other Italians. In this case, like that of many fellow citizens, his affiliation was entirely opportunistic: he wanted to improve his professional prospects upon the recent arrival of a third child. When that son wrote his own memoirs seventy years later (Bassi 2004), he provocatively put on the book’s front cover a picture of the father and the three children donning the black Fascist uniforms, decked out for the customary Sunday parade. He did this for two reasons: first, to acknowledge the problematic relationship of Italian Jews with Fascism before the Race Laws, difficult to understand vis-à-vis the better-known condition of Jews in Nazi Germany and in Eastern Europe; second, as he told friends: “so some neo-Fascist will buy the book thinking it is a tribute to Mussolini and will learn something about his crimes instead”.

Those black shirts did not help. In 1938, the Bassi family was in the list of Italian Jews abruptly stripped of their civil rights, a shock for most of them. The eldest son moved to France and then to Palestine, where he would become the founder of a kibbutz, trying to combine his socialist and religious ideals, while the younger siblings continued a now socially segregated life in Venice, going to a newly formed Jewish school following their expulsion from the public educational system. They were patiently waiting for Fascism to go and for better times to come. But when Mussolini capitulated in 1943, much worse times came and the whole family fled to Rome, unaware that the relatives who were supposed to give them shelter had been arrested and deported to Auschwitz on a transport that had left the very day the Venetians arrived in Rome. Gino and his wife Lina acquired fake identities while their children spent almost a year in a Catholic orphanage under false names until the war was over and they all returned to Venice. Their Roman family had all died in Auschwitz. In 1916, Gino had written in the final paragraph of his essay: “Let us approach Shakespeare’s oeuvre and let us quench our thirst at the pure fount of his genius, not with the reverential awe with which we approach a Sanctuary, but with the joyful desire of knowing ourselves better – and our kin [*i nostri simili*]” (1916, 12), a conclusion that emphasised the powers of identification and empathy that he found in the plays. Shakespeare was the bridge that allowed Gino Bassi to connect his (Venetian) Jewish identity to his Italian and European identity, a connection that had to remain implicit. Twenty years later, that bridge collapsed.



Figure 3 Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg) preparing to cut the pound of flesh from Antonio (Stefano Scherini). © Andrea Messana

### 3 Part 3. 2013-2016

William Dean Howells may have been the first to bring Shakespeare and the Ghetto together in print, endorsing deep-seated antisemitic stereotypes while ostensibly dismissing others. Gino Bassi brought Shakespeare and the condition of Italian Jews together implicitly, without mentioning the Ghetto or his own personal investment. He died long before I was born and his English library was silent decoration in the background of my childhood. But somehow English literature became my vocation. I first wrote about *The Merchant of Venice* in a mimeographed newsletter produced by the Venice Jewish Community youth group in the late eighties. Typically, I had not read the whole play, not just because the Italian school system encourages reading only extracts that can be applied to teaching broad historical contexts but also because of my personal inclination to bluffing. What I did not know yet was that in praising Shakespeare's tolerance, I was unwittingly rehearsing my grandfather's position, probably because it still represented the received wisdom on the play. I read his essay as a university student and later I recognised in it an attitude that I had myself internalised over half a century and two world wars after him: to be Jewish in private and within the comfort zone of the Jewish community, and Italian in public. Italy was - and still is - a country that is secular in its constitution but culturally and anthropologically Catholic, even as church attendance has plummeted. After the war, the agnostic Croce had titled his influential essay in praise

of humanism “Why We Cannot Help Calling Ourselves Christians” (1949). Even to be secular, he maintained, meant to be a secularised Christian. Then and now, as old debates about the presence of the crucifix in Italian classrooms and courthouses re-emerge, Jews are still testing the limits of citizenship and secularisation, their history having paved the ground for a discussion of minority rights that now concerns more recent migrant communities. This explains why, even as I entered the professional world of Shakespeare, I initially kept at a safe distance from *The Merchant of Venice*.

In the meantime, the Ghetto was becoming both a public site of memory with the rise of the civic culture of Holocaust remembrance and a security-sensitive area after a Palestinian terrorist attack mortally targeted Rome’s main synagogue in 1982, a condition of permanent surveillance aggravated by 9/11 and unchanged since (Bassi, di Leonardo 2015). The invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was a turning point in the altered Italian mainstream perception of Israel and made Middle Eastern politics more and more entangled with Jewish public discourse. In the same decade, while a renewed Jewish Museum attracted thousands of visitors to the Ghetto, the campo was partially colonised by Chabad, the entrepreneurial group of ultra-orthodox Jews who settled there, fashioning themselves as the authentic local Jews. Their outreach tactics – button-holing passersby and accosting them with their ‘mission’ – were a far cry from the traditionalist and local and private orientation of our community steeped in nostalgia for a fading past.

By the early 2010s the historic Jewish community had never been smaller – nor the Ghetto more popular. Twenty-five years after my first naive engagement with the play, my professional interests and the Jewish cultural activism that I had inherited from my family aligned, fortified by a visceral attachment to our own embattled Jewish community. The forthcoming quincentennial inspired me to propose the first staging of *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto: I was privileged to receive almost unconditional enthusiasm from fellow Shakespeareans and the Jewish community leaders. In order to translate the idea into a solid project there were many challenges, but I strongly felt we should start from a fundamental premise. Precisely because the play was going to be staged in the place where Jews had lived real lives in the sixteenth century, we had to steer clear of the illusion of time travel. Since my early encounter with *Merchant*, I had enjoyed more than once the role of extempore guide to the Ghetto. As Howells’s example shows, the site has long been an important source of inspiration for Shakespeare readers, actors and directors wishing to recreate more ‘authentic’ *Merchants* and redemptively reduce the distance between the stereotypical Shylock and the historical reality of Venetian Jews. Sometimes I felt I played the part of the native informant, the insider entrusted with explaining local culture to the

dominant group and somehow colluding with it, halfway between my passionate grandfather and Howells’s sleazy guide. This experience made me realise the central ambiguity of such an ethnographic approach. Making Shylock putatively more authentic warrants the interpretation that cutting off Christian pounds of flesh might have been historically plausible. This alone made a philological or archaeological reconstruction undesirable. There are intelligent applications of this practice. The Globe production by Jonathan Munby (which symbolically ended its world tour in Venice) definitely pursued the line of a realistic Shylock. But it also included his forced conversion in an added scene that disrupted the comic and idyllic denouement in Belmont and made Jessica regret her own abjuration when she recited the daily Hebrew prayer addressed to the God who ‘forgives abundantly’ (an obvious refutation of the theological stereotype of the vengeful Old Testament God, a subtlety surely lost on the vast majority of the spectators). But in most cases, the reality effects builds an apparatus of verisimilitude that risks validating Shylock’s grotesquely fictional pound-of-flesh violence as a ‘Jewish’ act.

Envisioning a site-specific production in the Ghetto in 2016 we did not know what to expect – that was precisely the point – but for sure we did not want to turn Shylock into a decent human being to honour the memory of the Jews who were ghettoised and later persecuted here. At no point did we intend to recreate the illusion of voyaging back into the sixteenth century: the production was programmatically expected to go precisely against the grain of the antiquarian, nostalgic drive that led Howells and some of his contemporaries to look for historical traces of Shakespeare’s passage through Venice. In sum, bringing Shakespeare to the Ghetto was not meant as a redemptive or restorative operation aimed at aligning fiction and history; on the contrary, it was a dialectical gesture made at a specific geopolitical juncture in the history of Europe when the most sophisticated awareness and development of critical multicultural thinking coexists with the resurgence of populism, antisemitism, and racism as major political vectors. The project was about owning Shakespeare, coping with his disturbing legacy, participating in that fascinating history of Jewish appropriations of the play that Edna Nahshon and Michael Shapiro have aptly defined “wrestling with Shylock” (2017). It meant recognising the public and civic function of the Ghetto as a paradigmatic site. The bold choice made by Coonrod of assigning the iconic role of Shylock to five different actors, of different genders, nationalities and ethnicities to play each of his five scenes (discussed by many chapters here and in Pellone, Schalkwyk 2017), emphasised that he was not just the archetypal Jew but a more complicated figure of alterity.

#### 4 Conclusion. 2021 and Beyond

Many years after his visit, William Dean Howells met Shakespeare ‘in person’. In *The Seen and Unseen at Stratford-on-Avon: A Fantasy* (1914), they discussed, among other things, the rapid ascent of the motion picture and the decline of theatre: “I was down in Venice, last night, at the little theater where you used to see them, and they were doing a Wild West movie piece just as you saw to-day; and it’s the same everywhere in Italy” (93). Today he may be surprised to see there is an Old Wild West restaurant not far from the Ghetto, and everywhere shops are more likely to sell international brands or cheap knick-knacks than to offer any local product. *The Merchant ‘in’ Venice* was a symbolic gesture connecting the local community with theatre visitors, Venetian artistic traditions (such as the beautiful costumes of Stefano Nicolao, one of the few artisans who resists the commodification of Venetian culture and enjoys an international reputation) with the company styles and repertoires, Italian actors with international actors. Since then, the production has travelled abroad, demonstrating that its artistic merit outlives the occasion of its genesis. The fact that the only ‘set’ reutilised for its American debut at Montclair State University were the metal barricades used to demarcate the performing space in the Ghetto is a revealing detail. What was imported from Venice was not some reconstructed historical artefact but testimony of the compromise accepted by the director (who would have loved for the actors and spectators to merge seamlessly with the casual passersby) to comply with safety and security restrictions. And perhaps those imported barricades operated in performances beyond the Ghetto as a sad reminder of ghettoisation.

By forming, over two summers of rehearsal and performance, a temporary ‘heritage community’ – “a group of people committed to sustaining and transmitting to the future generations cultural heritage through public actions” (Council of Europe, Faro Convention, 2005), Colombari reactivated the tradition of cosmopolitanism in the Venice Ghetto and made of the 2016 anniversary a moment to reflect on the past, present and future of the site. Looking back to the production now in 2021 as we enter a new decade in the millennium, the historical distance feels much greater. The political orientation of the production and its prestigious collateral event – the ‘Mock Appeal’ presided by the late US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (and discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume) – embodied the spirit of a very particular era, symbolised by the presidency of Barack Obama and a simultaneous sweeping victory of progressive parties in Italy. Only a few years later, antisemitism is once again a common political currency in Hungary; it is a controversial matter in progressive forces such as British Labour; it has resurfaced in government forces in Italy and in popular movements in France; it provokes Neo-Nazi



Figure 4 Shylock #3 (Jenni Lea-Jones) howls. © Andrea Messana

violence in Germany and the United States; it shows different faces in white supremacists and poisons the rhetoric of some anti-Zionist leftwingers; it informs conspiracy theories on the Coronavirus pandemic; it generates rival definitions by international institutions and academics; it is mobilised by some Jewish and Israeli leaders, sometimes willing to side with right-wing movements and governments against the spectre of Muslim enemies. Old theological debates and knots reappear, showing their uncanny topicality. Overt racism is on the political agenda in many countries worldwide, and new ghettos are created in the form of detainment camps or ships full of hopeful migrants arrested on the seas. The one lesson I certainly took from my grandfather's involvement with *Merchant* is never to allow incidental moments of political optimism to cloud our judgment on the pernicious ability of antisemitism to be reanimated as a persistent cultural temptation and an expedient political weapon in times of crisis.

At the end of his revised edition of his history of the Ghetto, the book that contributed to putting this district back on the cultural map in 1987 and that was reissued on the occasion of the quincennial, Riccardo Calimani proclaimed, once again, the death of Shylock (2016, 488). Like Howells, he had opened his original text with Shakespeare's character to give his readers a familiar point of reference. Thirty years later, his description of the Ghetto sounded more disillusioned and melancholic, an unsurprising perspective for an author who was witnessing his own version of Jewish Venice receding into the past.

But Shylock is not dead. As long as the theological-political-economic entanglements that Shakespeare distilled in this unruly *dramatis persona* resurface in the present, this character who manifests extreme hate and extreme love will continue to haunt us under ever new circumstances. My grandfather Gino probably attended the famous staging of *The Merchant of Venice* that Max Reinhardt brought to Venice in 1934. I had the chance to discuss that famous production with another member of the family, then a young 17-year-old spectator. What she remembered in her nineties was not the lavish scenography still praised by theatre historians but a harrowing cry from Shylock. The relation between this recollection and her later experience as a persecuted Jew under Fascism must remain the subject of speculation. But it certainly informed my thinking about our project to stage *The Merchant in Venice* in 2016. Eighty years after Memo Benassi cried out in Reinhardt's production, Jenni Lea-Jones, the woman who, as Shylock #3, spoke "Hath not a Jew eyes?", cried out again, in one of the most arresting moments of the production. Shylock is not dead; (s)he is still screaming.

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# Gathering Strangers

## Davina Moss in Conversation with Karin Coonrod

**Karin Coonrod**

Director

**Davina Moss**

Dramaturg

**Abstract** In this conversation with her dramaturg Davina Moss, director Karin Coonrod lays out her vision for directing *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto. She discusses production strategies, casting choices – including her decision to cast five actors as Shylock – and how her own personal aesthetic influenced the production. The script was adapted for this site-specific production, and Moss explores the decisions made to edit and rearrange the text to tell the story that more interested Coonrod. Finally, the two reflect on how this work experience affected them personally, as Shakespearians, as Jews (by birth or marriage), and as artists.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Compagnia de' Colombari. Karin Coonrod. Shylock. Adapting Shakespeare. Site-specific Shakespeare. Directing Shakespeare.

The story began in 2014, when Karin Coonrod, the New York-based director of Compagnia de' Colombari, was approached by David Scott Kastan and Shaul Bassi with an intriguing proposition. To commemorate a double anniversary in 2016 – 500 years since the institution of the Venetian Ghetto; 400 years since Shakespeare's death – she was tasked with directing the first production of *The Merchant of Venice* inside the Ghetto. She collaborated with dramaturgs Walter Valeri and Davina Moss to tackle a predicament: how to mount a play freighted with historic antisemitism, yet morally centred around Shakespeare's famous Jew, Shylock, and his iconic cry for hu-

manity - which is also a cry for revenge. And how to present a play that speaks to a modern audience while respecting its origins and, above all, the restored, renowned modern Venice Ghetto and the centuries of history within it.

To begin with, Valeri and Coonrod developed a text that spoke most viscerally to the issues and themes that the Ghetto demanded - mercy, outsiders, family and community. They incorporated Italian *com-media dell'arte* to draw out the dark and foreboding humour of the piece. Then, bringing Moss and a group of American and Italian actors together in tandem with the Shakespeare Summer School on San Giorgio, Venice, in 2015, they began workshoping the production, making discoveries about what spoke most powerfully to Coonrod's vision, including the decision to cast five actors as Shylock. The team returned to the USA and continued developing the text while adding new cast members from America, Italy and beyond - some old friends from the workshop, some new collaborators. In 2016, the gathering of strangers met in Venice to rehearse the production. On 26 July 2016, Shylock entered the Ghetto for the first time in history.

In the conversation that follows, Coonrod and Moss, director and dramaturg, discuss the process of creating the production and reflect upon its challenges and achievements.<sup>1</sup>

DAVINA MOSS How did you first get involved with the project? What's the background to the 'gathering of strangers' which became *The Merchant in Venice*?

KARIN COONROD I read and re-read an email from David Scott Kastan, the Yale Shakespeare professor and scholar, introducing me to another Shakespearean, Shaul Bassi, of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, by way of Professor Kent Cartwright of the University of Maryland. Shaul had imagined an ingenious and provocative way to wrap together the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto's origin and the 400th of Shakespeare's death: perform *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto itself. With that email, I was being invited into *The Merchant of Venice* project in the Venice Ghetto in 2016. My heart and head pounded with exhilaration and a good measure of trepidation. After all, *Merchant* is a play burdened with decades of antisemitism. The Nazis played it repeatedly to justify their own anti-Jewish killing machines; universities had banned its production; revered scholars openly called this play not worthy of its author for the play's treatment of its larger-than-life character, Shylock.

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<sup>1</sup> This production has been extensively reviewed and discussed critically. See for example: Stavreva, Sokolova 2016; Henderson 2017; Cartwright 2017; Bassi 2017; Chillington Rutter 2017; Pellone, Schalkwyk 2019.



**Figure 1** Karin Coonrod with Shakespeare actors, scholars and students during the *Shylock Project* seminar in 2015. © Andrea Messana

In summer 2014 I met David and Shaul in London and then went to Venice to encounter the Ghetto itself. I had been there many years before as a visitor and now pondered this new project. The Ghetto represents a thriving hub of Jewish world culture, but also an island, confined and marginalized by the dominant Venetian culture. I found myself wondering whether a performance in this re-born Ghetto of 2016, with its inherent contradiction, might uncover something new in the play and in the culture? Perhaps the exorcizing of Shylock's ghost might send an urgent message that we need to hear now more than ever? How would the neighbors in the Ghetto respond to an American theater company taking the lead in this production?

It became clear in growing conversations with Shaul that a workshop in 2015 would be necessary to lay the groundwork of the production for the commemoration year. We wanted to test out different parts of the play and find our way into it. Thus, at the invitation of Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Fondazione Cini, we took *The Shylock Project* (as we called it) into workshop on Isola di San Giorgio in the summer of 2015. Here I developed my approach to *The Merchant of Venice*, which we retitled *The Merchant 'in' Venice* for 2016. From the United States I brought two actors (Reg E. Cathey and Sorab Wadia) and two dramaturgs (Walter Valeri and Davina Moss) and from Brussels, my directing assistant (Nerina Cocchi); in Venice we found a lively group of fifteen Venetian performers. Over twelve

intense days, the workshop gave me my first opportunity to sketch out the theatrical approach to Merchant.

DM How does this production fit into the arc of your personal aesthetic?

KC When I think about personal aesthetic two things come to mind immediately: working with a tight ensemble of actors who take play and game seriously and the deep simplicity of the design gesture. Yet in this year, 2020, with the Coronavirus pandemic, the global lockdown and the closure of theaters and effective shutdown of live art and culture, I've been thinking about what is the *sine qua non* of the aesthetic since I am doing a lot in the virtual realm where theater meets film. I've been working with Colombari actors to bring our "More Or Less I Am" (from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*) to this new format. With *The Merchant of Venice* I played with Venice itself: the Ghetto, the stones, the sky, the carnival torchlight and masks, the colors of Venice (red), the Jews (yellow) and Belmont (blue). With "More Or Less I Am" we stripped away all the usual design elements: no costumes, no set, no live audience even. What is left? What is the essential thing? Perhaps it is the visceral intimacy of the words as spoken by the soul of the actor trying to cut through to the one who will hear, see. This encounter between the company of actors and the audience is where the play breathes. What is the challenge, provocation or invitation? How do we cut through with the secrets from our serious playing?

So, I am an ensemble director. The serious playfulness of the company of actors is important to me. For example, when I directed *King John* (with Ned Eisenberg as John), the production launched with a children's game - a keep-away-crown toss - in which the crown was seized with glee by King John, who crowned himself and jump-started the play, with his brazen query of the French messenger: "Now, say Chatillon, what would France with us?". Chatillon appeared at the back of the house, the two of them caught in a beam of light through the attendant audience. All the other actors in the company hastily became the new court. The gestures were strong, bold and demanding of an audience.

With *The Tempest* (with Reg E. Cathey as Prospero and Sorab Wadia as Sebastian) the entire company of actors entered the performance space from the back of the house on a mission, moving like a tsunami wave through the length of the space, only stopping when the outside door that let them in shut definitively. They turned around and looked at the audience and a black angel (a member of the stage crew) brought Prospero his staff. Prospero struck his staff on the floor of the space once and spoke out 'boatswain' to which the actor playing Ariel re-

sponded by running up to a huge ball which had been pre-set in the middle of the space and setting it swinging mightily. That action catalyzed the storm, spoken by all the actors where they still stood while the ball – like an earth constellated with light and also like a pendulous lantern on a ship – found its own wild path down the length of the space, thus turning the entire space with its audience into the dizzying ship tossed at sea.

When I directed *Henry VI*, ten actors played the more than sixty characters throughout the trajectory of three plays, beginning with the space enclosed and ending with the black walls of the surrounding theater exposed and angrily scrawled upon with white chalk from the text of the play ending with the image of an upside-down crown in the style of Basquiat. Though the contentions for the crown are there from the first scene, what fascinated me in the actors' occupation of the space was the movement from enclosed medieval space (where there were agreed-upon rules) to the wide-open modern horizons where rules have dissipated and it was every man for himself, where Richard York says "I am myself alone". This is the individualism of the West, where it's gotten us. When the company spoke in the first scenes they spoke in their natural voices; when the space was exposed, they spoke intimately into microphones for intentional cruelty, a kind of roar of individualism at the expense of the community as seen in the future Richard III who denies his own kin when he says, at the close of *Henry VI*, Part III: "I have no brother, I am like no brother" and claims "I can smile, and murder whiles I smile". In the final scene, the Yorks appeared in white, all dancing in the river of Henry VI's blood (it was the first – and only – time in my production of this civil war play that blood was visibly spilled, when Richard killed Henry).

In my ensemble aesthetic, everyone in the company is necessary; no one is an 'extra'. The company creates a kind of 'game' world through which the story is told. Perhaps it is because my aesthetic emerges from a great deal of engagement with the medieval mystery plays as 'ludi' or games that I value the company collective equally sharing the story brought to that great encounter with an audience. In some respects, this game aesthetic has more in common with the experimental drama of the mid-twentieth century (Beckett, Ionesco etc.) than the commercial psychological theater since then, with its naturalistic system of lead actors around which the others rotate in and out of the performance. In many cases with my work the actors are always present witnessing the action, thus creating waves of listening, which is another thing I believe Shakespeare was always sculpting, modeling for us: listen! ("Look with thine ears!"). In the Jewish Ghetto, it was important to have an audience inside

an audience since the Ghetto itself was alive with its daily comings and goings.

I want a theater that goes beyond the confines of civility, as Dionysus – the god of the theater – beckons us. This means mining the extremes of the inner thoughts of the characters into a full humanity, not controlling them. It means also encouraging the actors sometimes not to love their characters at the expense of their ugly secrets, the judgments and bitterness the characters themselves feel and express. In most of Shakespeare's plays, the characters utter very far from civil discourse in their words. This requires fierce and honest embodiment, demanding an actor to venture into vast inner reservoirs that will give an audience relief – catharsis – in the hearing and witnessing. These honest human portrayals vibrate against a strong architectural frame built by the director: that is the active aesthetic I work on with every play.

With *Merchant* I began the play upbeat with a sense of 'comedy tonight!': all the company entered the space preparing the audience for an evening of high-spirited singing and dancing. The cast included fifteen actors and six musicians. We also involved five onstage crew, whom we called 'black angels' (or *angeli neri*) dressed in sleek black, who performed all the onstage costume changes, brought the props on and off and even stepped into a scene when necessary. This sense of fun from the get-go was important to composer Frank London and me. The high-spirited comic intention could then stand in sharp contrast with the unfolding of the play and begin to frame its exposure of hateful antisemitism.

DM Did you use this game aesthetic in the realizing of Shylock?

KC Absolutely. This is a play about the community of Venice – but the moral center is revealed in how the Venetian citizens treat Shylock, the stranger, the outsider who lives among them. I wanted to make this play alive in the twenty-first century, to open up the role of Shylock to what is both Jewish and universal, to *feel* the experience of the outsider. So, I engaged five actors, one in each of the five Shylock scenes: 1) Shylock, the merchant (played by Sorab Wadia), making the bargain with Antonio; 2) Shylock, the father (played by Adriano Jurissevich), at his home with daughter Jessica; 3) Shylock, the grieving parent (played by Jenni Lea-Jones), facing his loss and giving his famous "hath not a Jew eyes" speech; 4) Shylock, the widower (played by Andrea Brugnera), as part of a community with Tubal; 5) Shylock, the killer (played by Ned Eisenberg), at the trial. These were actors of different gender, nationality, age, ethnicity – outsiders of all stripes, whom we would recognize and identify with today. I wanted to convey the universal themes



Figure 2 The Five Shylocks under the Ghetto tree. © Andrea Messana

of humanity Shakespeare and Shylock hand to us, still retaining the essential Jewish identity of Shylock. When not portraying Shylock, the five actors each played other characters in conflict with Shylock as part of the game aesthetic. This required the audience to decide between the hated and the hater. For example, the actor playing Shylock #1 also played Graziano, so the audience witnessed in the fluidity of these actors the shifting winds of human feeling.

I understand that five actors playing Shylock is a sharp turn from the traditional one-actor portrayal – something I had to abandon to gain a twenty-first century opening into the play – to how we confront hierarchy and discrimination today. What was at stake was opening the role without diluting the emotional power of Shylock. One way I countered that was by gathering the five actors playing Shylock on stage in key moments of the play, what you might say was a unified or shared Shylock, a group of five as one, and a way to make the ‘other’ – the five playing Shylock – a voice crying out to the supremacist citizenry. The five Shylocks gave the production a framing power, a trajectory, a kind of galactic arc that could only be rattled by the humanity of each actor’s deeply mined performance.

All of this – a large company striving for what is larger than all of us together, provoking an audience, derailing ourselves from the received notions of the play by activating the fluidity of role and action – is central to my aesthetic. I can think of a play as an argument, and there should be no element of set design, costume, music, lights that does not urge the provoca-

tion forward. For instance, all the costume changes happened in the presence of the audience for complete transparency of the sleight-of-hand game. There was a ritual to the playing of Shylock, since each actor playing Shylock also doubled, meaning that he had to be 'remade' as Shylock. The moment of transition was accompanied by music while the new Shylock was ceremoniously dressed - in view of spectators - by two black angels, carrying in the desert cloak and the golden sash. It was an action that could be seen from all over by the Ghetto audience and any onlookers who happened by. The transparency engaged the shared participation of the audience. Nothing was hidden.

DM How did the history of Venetian Jewry affect staging, costuming and linguistic choices?

KC This became an obsession. In fact, 'Ghetto' - that word - never appears in the play. Shakespeare didn't seem to know about the Ghetto, but he knew about the Rialto and he knew about moneylending and bonds. Yet in this place we had an opportunity to stage the play in a way that could not be replicated elsewhere. When the floor of the stage is the very stones of the Ghetto *campo*, sedimented with the vibrant culture and history, is there anything to add? We thought not. The Ghetto stones resounded, echoed with the very life that made any decorative accessory a mere depletion. With this in mind, Peter Ksander - the set and light designer - and I felt our job was to design the play into the campo itself, to inhabit Venice with Shakespeare's text and actors. Instead of building a stage, we placed the audience on stadium seating at one side of the campo to gaze at the historic facades of the Ghetto, including two of its six synagogues. As darkness fell, our stage set was a wall of lights pointed on the actors in the Ghetto. During the performances, life went on, not quite as usual, as a steady stream of passers-by at the *campo* perimeter stopped to watch, customers at the nearby Upupa Restaurant listened from the side and Ghetto inhabitants with their own exclusive box seats on surrounding balconies waited for the play to begin.

That year, 2016, was the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto, which formalized the discrimination against the Jews as Other. Ironically, the Venetians needed the Jewish banks and loans for their thriving commerce but confined them to an island now known as the Ghetto Novo with a strict sundown curfew: the gates were locked at the expense of the Jews. Still, the Jews had endowed their Ghetto life with richness and depth, family, tradition, learning and a thriving culture. For the full humanity Shakespeare gives his Shylock, it seems to me in some way he grasped this.

With Stefano Nicolao, the Venetian costume designer (Stefano, a three-time Oscar nominee and local treasure), we went with a fluid design in which the clothes could be changed quickly by the black angels in the sight of the audience – an Elizabethan silhouette with modern accoutrements: zippers, snaps etc. We mixed male and female. We talked about the identifying marks and colors of the Jew in Venice at the time of the sixteenth century. Both red and yellow had been used historically, but we preferred yellow in strong opposition to the red of Venice worn by the *nobili*. The Duke at the trial we decided would be clothed in a massive red cloak that would look like blood against the stones. We provided the onstage audience red stoles in solidarity with the Duke at the trial. Hence, as ‘Venetian citizens’ they shared his entitlement and his aloof power, like a red sea of blood against Shylock sashed in yellow. I wanted an operatic gesture with the yellow mark to signify that the actor was changing from a previous character to Shylock, witnessed easily by all. I avoided the armband or the star of David. I wanted the ‘mark’ to cover the entire core of the body. Stefano’s Japanese-like golden-yellow silk sash wound around the torso and tied in the front. The stigma became a thing of beauty, worn with dignity.

Frank London, a jazz trumpeter and co-founder of the New York klezmer band, The Klezmatics, was our composer. He is deeply versed in Jewish folk music and conversant with all forms of popular and classical music. He and I talked about how scholars had frequently written about Shylock’s dislike of music. For us the only evidence for this was when Shylock warns his daughter against listening to the drum and the wry-necked fife at the time of the carnival. Sure, Shylock was a strict *single* parent who didn’t want his daughter to be seduced by the carnival music – and anything attached to the dominant culture. Was that so strange? It did not indicate he was a music hater. Frank composed theme music for Shylock for the ritual changing and from a high rooftop played a plaintive trumpet lament at the moment of Jessica’s flight from her father’s house.

Our international company included Italians, Americans, Australians, Romanians, French, thus making our stage international, a *palcoscenico internazionale*. And this brings up the question of language: we played the play in English with the *commedia* scenes in Venetian dialect. I plunged into various dialects of European and Italian Jewry that would have been spoken in the Ghetto from the sixteenth century onwards and played with incorporating that into Shakespeare’s dialogue. We were not aiming either to authenticate or stereotype Shylock; rather, as often happens with persons in a strange land, to charge the

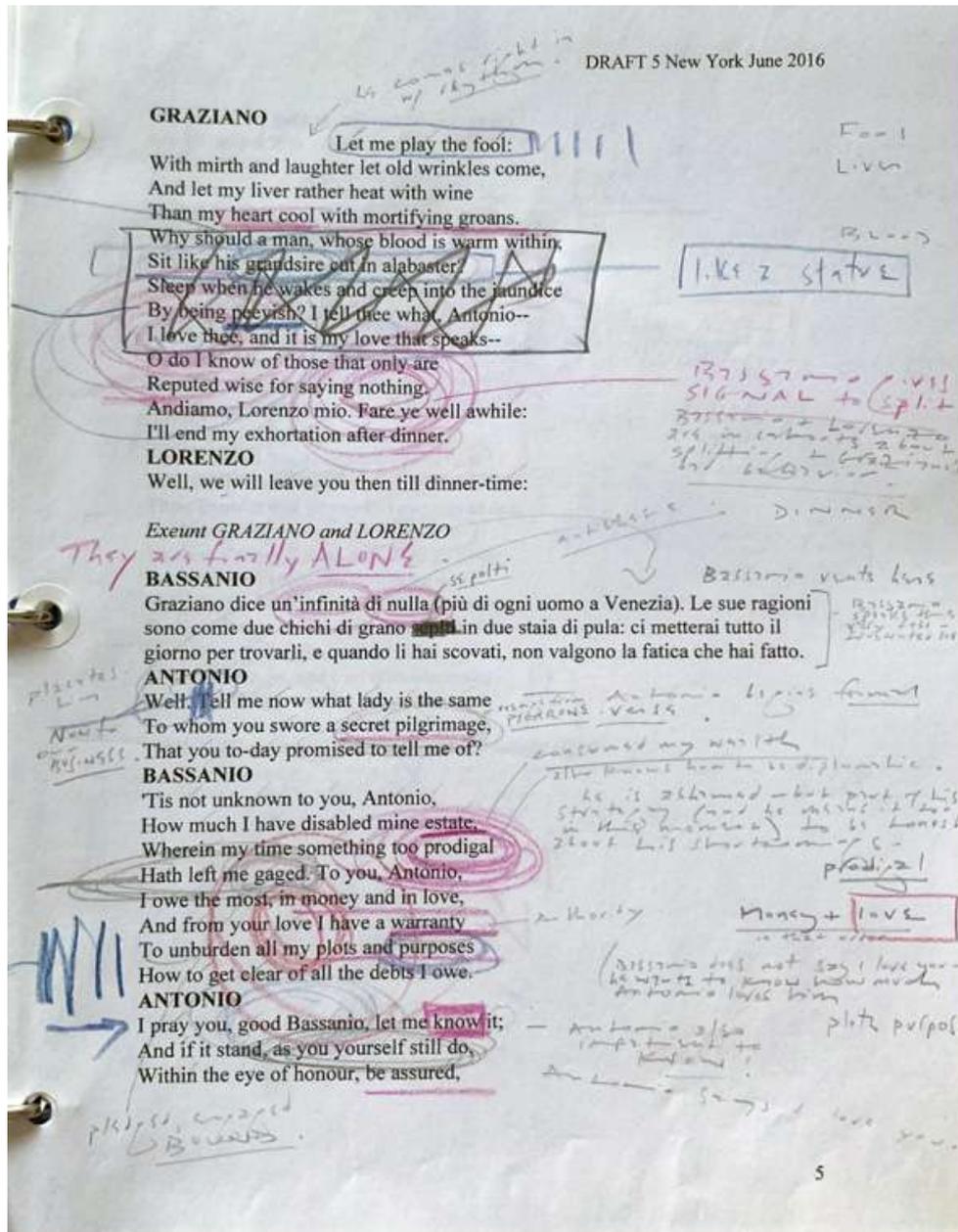


Figure 3a Karin Coonrod's promptbook

heightened emotion of certain moments with fragments of tribal mother-tongue talk – Yiddish, Ladino, or Giudeo-Veneziano. For instance, towards the end of the first Shylock scene when Bassanio shows concern about the business relationship with the outsider Jew, Shylock addressed Abraham in Yiddish – “Ah, *Vader Avram*” – then continued in English. In the second Shylock scene we included a phrase of Ladino when Shylock spoke intimately to his daughter: “Jessica, *m’ija*, | *Mira a mi casa*” (Jessica, my girl, look to my house). And the third Shylock, when deeply lamenting the departure of Jessica in the hearing of Salanio and Salarino, cried out in Giudeo-Veneziano “*Me fia*” instead of

CHANGES of costumes for Portia, Nerissa 5/12/16  
DRAFT 5 New York June 2016

SCENE 2 Belmont. A room in PORTIA'S house. (MUSIC: violins)

Enter PORTIA and NERISSA from upstage trees

PORTIA  
By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is weary of this great world.

NERISSA  
You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are: and yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore, to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.

PORTIA  
Good sentences and well pronounced.

NERISSA  
They would be better, if well followed.

PORTIA  
If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces: it is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me! the word 'choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike: so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?

NERISSA  
Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations: therefore the lottery, that he hath devised in the three chests of gold, silver and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love. But what warmth is there in your affection towards any of these princely suitors that are already come?

PORTIA  
I pray thee, over-name them; and as thou namest them, I will describe them; and, according to my description, level at my affection.

NERISSA  
First, there is the prince Neapolitano.

PORTIA  
Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse; and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts, that he can shoe him himself. I am much afeard my lady's mother played false with a smith.

Handwritten notes and annotations include: 'CHANGES of costumes for Portia, Nerissa 5/12/16', 'DRAFT 5 New York June 2016', 'SCENE 2 Belmont. A room in PORTIA'S house. (MUSIC: violins)', 'Enter PORTIA and NERISSA from upstage trees', 'PORTIA By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is weary of this great world.', 'NERISSA You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are: and yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore, to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.', 'PORTIA Good sentences and well pronounced.', 'NERISSA They would be better, if well followed.', 'PORTIA If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces: it is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me! the word 'choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike: so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?', 'NERISSA Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations: therefore the lottery, that he hath devised in the three chests of gold, silver and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love. But what warmth is there in your affection towards any of these princely suitors that are already come?', 'PORTIA I pray thee, over-name them; and as thou namest them, I will describe them; and, according to my description, level at my affection.', 'NERISSA First, there is the prince Neapolitano.', 'PORTIA Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse; and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts, that he can shoe him himself. I am much afeard my lady's mother played false with a smith.', 'Annotations: 'Bella', 'The system', 'Excess', 'MODERATION', 'SLAM DUNK', 'RARE', 'THE WILLS', 'NEW GAME', 'RULES', 'face card?'.

Figure 3b Karin Coonrod's promptbook

'my daughter' or 'mia figlia', the typical Italian. These expressions created an urgency, intimacy and mystery in his relationships, seen and unseen.

From Shaul Bassi, the Jewish Venetian Shakespearean and our indefatigable host for all the *Merchant* revels, we learned that only the Ashkenazi Jews were allowed to lend money, hence the 'real' Shylock would have been Ashkenazi and would have attended the gorgeous Scuola Grande Tedesca - German synagogue - in the Ghetto, built in 1528. The five windows of the German synagogue looked down on our playing space and it felt like a continuous blessing.

In the 2015 workshop, we went to the Banco Rosso in the Ghetto, where Shylock would have been a moneylender. Next to it is a house often affectionately referred to as 'the Shylock house', a private house, shuttered tight for years, owned by a gentleman in Parma. Not knowing then what it was called, I wanted one of its windows to be the window that Jessica (played by Michelle Uranowitz) opened when Lorenzo came to take her away. Getting the permission to un-shutter this particular window was a major time-consuming effort, requiring a trip to Parma to negotiate a price. Thanks to my inexhaustible assistant, Nerina, it happened. The result for our audience was the enchantment of an actual window in the Ghetto opening wide as part of the 'set' and for the Venetians, the added satisfaction of seeing this singular house in the Ghetto activated with life.

DM What were the key points of the adaptation?

KC The decision to privilege Shylock's story informed the adaptation, with the exploration of the full humanity of the character. To accomplish this, we truncated some of the Portia scenes at Belmont and freely made cuts throughout the play. Our adaptation of *Merchant* is played in eighteen scenes with a prologue and a coda. As I was working on the storyboards with Peter Ksander, the light and space designer, we realized that the play came unhinged at the *cri de coeur* of Shylock, right about dead center of the play. In performance, the play came to a full stop. Before this moment, the play moves along in a bantering way and after this moment it is clouded with danger.

DM We also moved several scenes around to re-distribute the Portia material throughout the play, intercutting back and forth between Venice and Belmont. We cut enough to allow the play to be performed in under two hours with no interval - it was important for us to capture our audience in the magic and not let up. The pacing of this play is very interesting: at times it can feel like it's running away from you in the Venice scenes, but then Belmont is more languorous. And then the trial comes and the play stops short - it is as if the stage becomes a crucible, or perhaps a set of scales holding the play in a moment of balance. What were the key moments of the Shylocks coming together and how did they develop?

KC A vital question for me was *when* and *how* to bring them all together and *why*. There were two heightened moments that emerged as our rehearsals unfolded, calling for the convergence of the five Shylock actors: one was dead center and the other at the play's finale. Here is how that all came about. In the 2015 workshop we rehearsed the five Shylock scenes with four men and one woman, each playing one of Shylock's five scenes, in the spirit of testing and experimenting. It became

clear to me that Shylock's realization of Jessica's flight from her father's house would peak with a wordless lament, a huge howl by Shylock. Would not a woman, with her earthy, maternal humanity, be the best to express this unfathomable grief and rage at the loss of a child?

I asked one of our Shylocks - Jenni Lea-Jones - to improvise a keening wail, pulling from memory or imagining lamenting women in Ireland, Italy, Greece, Israel, from all over the world. Hearing her anguish slowly unleashed, the air in the room completely changed. We all sat speechless. This was the way forward. In Jenni's bottomless cry we heard not only Shylock, but the bitter agony of all parents, fathers and mothers, all disenfranchised persons, the voice of the voiceless. This was the play's turning point. Now the metaphorical knives were out, and through the remainder of the play everyone knew that, even if those knives were sheathed, they would surely come out again.

By the time of the production, this scene became fully realized. In a large circle around the center of the stage space, the five actors, transforming into Shylock, were dressed in the golden-yellow sashes while all around and through them the full company had become the mocking, jeering Venetians, speaking the cruel gossip-ridden passages normally spoken by Salanio and Salarino in Shakespeare's text. (This derision had become so ugly that one of the actors asked me if this were 'allowed' in the Ghetto and I responded by saying it was *necessary*.) The five Shylocks started slowly walking toward each other - as if to gain strength from each other - and when they came very close together, Lea-Jones as Shylock #3 unleashed her intense grief-stricken howl. At this moment all cacophonous sound and movement - the entire Ghetto - was slammed into stunned silence.

One French painter, Marie Malherbe, in residence in the Jewish Ghetto was so stirred by this silence that she wrote a poem in response: "hurle savage, sanglot terrible | râle totale et viscéral | a faire tordre les muscles des pierres | et la chair torturée des maisons | qui en rond | gardent les trous de mémoire". (for the full poem, *A Midsummer Night's Scream - Un Cri dans le Ghetto*, see Appendix).

Shylock's rage was born and grew unchecked in a vacuum of anguish and loneliness: his daughter gone forever and in cahoots with Antonio's boys, the citizens' mockery. Shylock had experienced 'Christian' revenge and warned Salanio and Salarino, "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction". He was minting the thought of revenge in the moment of speaking it.

I imagined another gathering of the five Shylocks at the end of the play. It was important to me to bring Shylock back in the

final moments of our production to slice through the final badinage at Belmont. Shakespeare leaves us with the resolution of the rings and the Portia story, but I was following the other arc in the play and wanted the audience to confront Shylock as the stage went dark. In the final scene, Portia, the one who takes on the patriarchy and beats it at its own game, wins, yet I wanted the audience to know the emptiness of that 'win'. So instead of hearing Antonio, Bassanio and Graziano's exclamations of surprise at Portia's accomplishment, the five actors playing Shylock, one by one, implicated the audience. Together they reappeared at the ending with a reprise of the strange hallucinatory speech sure of his 'right' within the laws of Venice that he made in the courtroom in front of the Duke - a speech without reason, but with, perhaps, the vicious knowledge of experience. He repeated it now:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have  
A pound of carrion flesh than to receive  
Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that.  
But say it is my humour. Are you answered?  
What if my house be troubled with a rat  
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats  
To have it baned? What are you answered yet?  
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,  
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,  
And others when the bagpipe sings i'th'nose  
Cannot contain their urine; for affection,  
Masterless passion, sways it to the mood  
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:  
As there is no firm reason to be rendered  
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,  
Why he a harmless necessary cat,  
Why he a woollen bagpipe, but of force  
Must yield to such inevitable shame  
As to offend, himself being offended;  
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,  
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing  
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus  
A losing suit against him. Are you answered?  
(4.1.39-61)

I wanted our production of this transactional play in this time and space in the twenty-first century to be a wake-up call. This is why the final sound in the production was the sound of the shofar, the wake-up call of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new



Figure 4 Reg E. Cathey and other actors rehearsing in 2015 on the Rialto. © Andrea Messana

year festival, after each actor playing Shylock spoke “Are you answered?”.

DM Let’s talk about our work on the Bond scene between Shylock and Antonio.

KC Early in the play (Act 1, Scene 3) there is an exchange between Shylock and Antonio that jumped out at me and is indeed telling. Shylock has been approached by Bassanio with the request for the loan of a sizeable sum, 3,000 ducats, which we translated into about half a million dollars. (He had to get a ship, retinue and gifts to go to Belmont. No small enterprise to impress Portia the rich girl.) After Antonio enters the scene (probably annoyed that Bassanio had gone to Shylock for the loan), Shylock is thinking aloud about the sum and the rate: “Three thousand ducats. ’Tis a good round sum. | Three months from twelve; then, let me see, the rate”. He is rudely interrupted by an impatient Antonio who wants to get the bond and get out of there pronto: “Well, Shylock, shall we be beholden to you?”. Shylock certainly reads this as arrogance because his response is a catalogue of all Antonio’s abuses: ““You call me [...] cut-throat, dog [...] Hath a dog money? Is it possible | A cur can lend three thousand ducats?”. The sarcasm is fantastic here. Yes, it is what we all feel when experiencing injustice from one who is dominant and easily exonerates himself (not unlike white supremacy of which there is now increased awareness and discussion of its assumptions).

In our work on the scene in the 2015 workshop with Antonio (Reg E. Cathey) and Shylock (Sorab Wadia), we pushed it even further. With Shylock’s “This is kind I show” he held forth his

hand to shake and Antonio came close to him and threatened him with spit. The visceral nature of Antonio's loathing was brought home. In our production not only was Antonio devoid of mercy, but also imperious and inhumane to the person from whom he needed to borrow money. If Antonio, the representative and successful merchant in Venice, assumes this attitude, how do others behave?

The forfeit settled on between Antonio and Shylock had a piece of laughter in it, like locker room talk between businessmen, even salacious: "let the forfeit | be nominated for an equal pound | Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken | In what part of your body pleaseth me". Shylock was not thinking to kill Antonio here. At this point both men knew that Antonio's ships would come in, as they always had. At this moment the small satisfaction is that Shylock would have a piece of paper with this written on it, to laugh at later. We spent a lot of time working this scene, showcasing it around Venice to stir up attention for our project the following year.

DM Now let's talk about the trial scene as a crucible at center of play.

KC In our production, there is an interaction in the trial where humiliation, dignity, oppression, defiance converge. It is that flashing instant of confrontation: Shylock #5 (played by Ned Eisenberg) with his knife, his eyes swimming in vindictive hatred, about to take the pound of flesh from Antonio, and Antonio offering himself not as victim, but as a dare - let's see if I've really turned you into an animal - and the audience, I believe, unsure of what will happen, and wondering are we through with humanity, is it gone? Shylock dropped his knife, breaking the threatening tableau on "I'll stay no longer question". He looked at Antonio (played in 2016 by Stefano Scherini) and started to laugh in a knowing way about the system and its limitations, thus pulling Antonio into a shared laugh. The two adversaries, more alike than different, caught in this strange cynical chortle, seemed to be once again restored to the existing conditions of the corrupt mercantile landscape, as if to say, 'business as usual'. End of play, perhaps. Still laughing, Shylock began walking out of the courtroom - back to the status quo - only to be stopped by Portia's soft and steely "Tarry, Jew". Here's the crux. Portia (played by Linda Powell) had been watching the merchants' laughter from the side like a hawk. It is the moment in which Portia - her leadership and the play itself - could go in various directions. She could do *anything*. She could find it within herself to be inspired by her own previous 'quality of mercy' advice and say, 'let's make a change, let's be reconciled, let's find a new way forward', urging the Duke in this path. She

could deliver a warning reprimand to both merchants in the name of the Duke.

Here was the opportunity. What would she say? Would she call Antonio and Shylock into a new accord, underpinned with a promise from both parties? No. Instead, she unleashes her punishment against the Jew, “The law hath yet another hold on you”. She sharpens her revenge and tightens the vice around Shylock’s short-lived liberty. Her imperative use of the word ‘mercy’ was only spoken to require it of him, and when he does not acquiesce, to humiliate him: “Down therefore and beg mercy of the Duke”. Had she been truly a remarkable woman, she would have called upon mercy – of which she speaks (“’Tis mightiest in the mightiest”) but does not show – and the entire court would have had the opportunity to be drawn into an unforgettable action of reconciliation.

But rather than show this radical mercy I believe she gathers the already visible hatred against the Jew demonstrated in the court and perpetuates revenge to win the day. She says earlier about mercy: “it doth teach us all to render | The deeds of mercy”. Yet Portia, from her disguised place of power and authority, does not choose to render mercy, but rather pulls Antonio into the game: ‘What mercy can you render him, Antonio?’ When he enforces Christianity on Shylock, it means that Shylock will no longer belong to any community at all – neither Jew nor Christian. He will, I believe, forever be branded as an outsider, a liminal creature, pariah-like. The vile power imposed on him drives out any mercy that may have been. With trickster logic, Portia pushes the punishment of Shylock to its extreme, giving him a comeuppance beyond his wildest imaginings. By the time Shylock is definitively dismissed by the Duke, Shylock is humiliated and stripped of all he is.

As we played it in the Ghetto, Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg) was facing the audience downstage until the moment of departure when he turned upstage to see the entire court composed of the acting company and onstage audience as jury, some fifty people in red facing him. He passed through them, almost like the Israelites through the Red Sea. In the North American production at Montclair, the theater’s configuration informed the opposite choice: as Shylock (played by Steven Skybell) walked out through the audience, the entire company plus audience members all in the red regalia in solidarity against Shylock had ventured far downstage to watch his exit. Many nights there were vitriolic hisses from the Venetian characters in the company.

DM Let’s talk about the prologue and how you added a passage from Ruzzante, the sixteenth century Paduan playwright, something that interested all the Shakespeareans and made the

Italians - especially the Venetian Italians - laugh aloud. That was something that came out of your work with dramaturg Walter Valeri.

KC Yes, our *Merchant* production had two dramaturgs hovering over it: Walter Valeri from Forlì, Italy, with whom I had worked at the American Repertory Theater on Pirandello, and you, a Jewish Shakespearean from Yale!

In preparation for the production of the play, Walter and I read through the *commedia* scenes of the play - everything with Lancillotto (Launcelot) and, of course, Gobbo. We read aloud in English and he could not stop giggling, thinking Shakespeare a great thief of the *commedia*. We then read it in Italian (the translation by Sergio Perosa is what I had on hand) and in Italian it came even more alive. It was important to me since we were playing in Venice - the city that basically launched the *commedia dell'arte* and had influenced Shakespeare's comic dramaturgy - that we should be playing these scenes entirely in Italian. Walter, a poet and translator, said he could take on these sections and spice them up. Since Walter had for many years been a close associate of Dario Fo, he brought to our table a consummate knowledge of the whole tradition of *commedia* and introduced us all to Ruzzante (actual name: Angelo Beolco). Ruzzante, an actor and playwright from the first half of the sixteenth century from Padua, was essentially the father of *commedia dell'arte*. He was known for his scatological orations. We decided on the short love oration, *Amore an?* I wanted that scamp Lancillotto, as a kind of interlocutor for the audience, to speak first, so he began with this oration. Lancillotto (played by Francesca Sarah Toich) set the whole trajectory in motion with "Amore an?", a comedic questioning of traditional courtship. The last lines of the oration are questions: "*Amore an? L'amor no fa diventar balerini, canterini, gagiardi e salterini? Amore an? Ma chi cancaro sarae quell disgrassià che no vorà parlar d'altro, che d'amore?*" (Love? Doesn't Love make us dancers, singers, tumblers and leapers? Who the devil would that devil be who ever wanted to talk of anything but Love?). After these final questions were posed by Lancillotto to the audience - and increasingly interrupted by the company - the wild uncontained spirit of love was sung and danced by the entire company.

Inspired by Nino Rota for this rousing opening number, Frank London had a blast setting the text to music. We were in agreement about striking a comic note from the top with the whole company making a rollicking musical entrance into the playing space, followed by Lancillotto rousing the audience further with the Ruzzante oration. This, then, set up the high relief for Antonio's moodiness in the opening line. *The Merchant of*



Figure 5 Karin Coonrod with Michelle Uranowitz/Jessica during rehearsal. © Andrea Messana

*Venice* is called a comedy. Yet, when Antonio starts talking, he's a 'want-wit', as he complains to Salanio and Salarino. I wanted to put his malaise in relief with the high-spirited gossipy world of Venice, of which all his 'boys' - Bassanio, Graziano, Salanio, Salarino, Lorenzo - play an integral part.

DM Speaking of the world of the play, I think that moment of the dueling tenors was a great moment. How did that come to be?

KC In our Scene 9 (Shakespeare's 2.6), Lorenzo called on his gang of high-spirited boys to back him in his bride snatch, taking Jessica from her father's house in the middle of the night. Sworn to punctuality, they showed up on time. But Lorenzo was late for his assignation. The boys were masked and ready for the carnivalesque revels, but as they impatiently awaited him, Salanio, killing time, suddenly sang his lines mocking Lorenzo's lateness in high operatic style. Graziano picked up the style and, not to be outdone, responded. Their operatic dialogue developed into a hijinks competition before the audience. In the rollercoaster of the performance, this was the comic respite before the darkness. The two tenors threatened to hijack the play down another path with the audible approbation of the audience, when Lorenzo arrived.

When I came upon this text, it screamed of wanting to be sung aloud in Italian. With two engaging tenors playing Graziano (Sorab Wadia) and Salanio (Enrico Zagni), I realized they could

sing their mockery in operatic Italian. Composer Frank London greeted the moment with aplomb and set the exchange in operatic form, an homage to Italian opera, to the dueling tenors such as Pavarotti and Domingo or Carreras and Lanza, a celebration of being in Italy. Every night we wondered who would hold the final note longer, Graziano or Salanio?

DM Let's talk about Jessica's trajectory.

KC Shakespeare gives just a single reference to Leah - Jessica's mother and Shylock's wife - by Shylock when he realizes that Jessica had stolen her mother's turquoise ring: 'I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor.' A vital, intimate world is painted in that one sentence, that simple memory. It voices how much is missing in Jessica's world, as well as Shylock's. We had imagined that Leah had died some five years before, just as Jessica was entering her teenage years. With the loss of Leah, Jessica lost the mother's understanding in these critical years of a young woman's development. Rather, she was raised by an over-protective over-strict single father (with his share of troubles in the secular marketplace), a man suspicious of the outside world and suspicious of any male interest in his beautiful daughter (a common sentiment among fathers). Perhaps we empathize with Jessica's rejection of her father's ways.

Jessica, ready to rebel, finds commonality with Lancillotto who brings the outside world inside their house, her long-time playfellow with whom she can complain, 'Our house is hell'. She escapes to be with Christian Lorenzo, drawn to the city's festivities and the flash and excitement of taboo love - but only to find the emptiness of that world. Several of Lorenzo's actions added up for me: his lateness for their elopement, his appointing her the torch bearer of the group (the most perilous position in dangerous dark Venice) as well as Shakespeare's intimation that very likely Lorenzo is really after her for her money ("what gold and jewels she is furnished with").

Their 'romantic' scene (Shakespeare's 5.1) - which we played at spiritual cross purposes - began after Lorenzo, smoking a cigarette, watched closely as Jessica carried two candles downstage, a reference to the Sabbath candles. It's a small gesture, but it resonates of the cost of her exchange for this new life. At the end of the play, in the next-to-final scene, after Portia's return home, Jessica says nothing, only watches. For me in any Shakespeare text, silence speaks loudly in contradiction (the young women in *Love's Labour's Lost* during the Nine Worthies scene, Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) to the action on stage. At the very last moment of the play, Jessica gave our production its coda, and perhaps an answer, or an echo, of

Shylock's howl, making a silent scream of agony against the secular world she had entered.

DM Did you feel the need to confront the reputation the play has in some quarters of antisemitism?

KC The question of antisemitism is inevitable, and front and center for any director tackling *Merchant*, because the play has long held a troublesome reputation. In the thirties in Germany, it was played to advocate for Hitler's anti-Jewish agenda, with Shylock portrayed as a comic villain, a despicable, avaricious and murderous Jew. That casts a long shadow and some in the Jewish community asked why I would want to produce an anti-semitic play? Today, there is a revisionist counter which casts Shylock as a tragic victim. I wanted to lift Shylock out of these caricatures and understand him as someone Jewish, but also representing the universal outsider. My perception is that this is true to Shakespeare, who wrote Shylock as a complex character, not a one-dimensional villain or victim. When Shylock is first introduced he is treated as a second class noncitizen, despised. But soon the audience sees him crying out for recognition of his humanity. Shakespeare does not stop there and reveals Shylock as fully human, sympathetic and deeply flawed. Shakespeare is never easy. We may want to remember Shylock's humor, his recognition of a world outside the present world (his calls to Abraham, Jacob, Daniel), his sense of irony, his sharp wit. But there is also his anger, his vindictiveness, his hatred for what has been done to him.

I think the audience feels all of this - and some may even be rooting for Shylock to take his revenge. There is the ultimate question of whether Shakespeare wrote an antisemitic play, or whether those who saw the opportunity chose to use it for their antisemitic ends? There is no question but we see Shylock endure humiliations that look like rank antisemitism. Shakespeare is not hiding the rough and inhuman treatment of Jews that existed in Venice - the location of the first ghetto. Still, I just don't see Shakespeare's understanding of people to be so limited as to set up Shylock in such a stock, stereotyped role. To play Shylock that way would be to erase the density and the existential depths of Shylock's most famous speech. In bringing this play to the very Venice Jewish ghetto the fictional Shylock inhabited I was very aware of the reputation of *Merchant*, and the duality of acknowledging the play's portrayal of antisemitism while capturing Shylock's full humanity - in all its qualities - and the larger message confronting all of us.

DM For me, it's exactly that: the best productions of *Merchant* respect Shylock's humanity without shying away from his frailties and failures - sure, he makes his house 'hell' for Jessica, but

he is also tender towards her, and expresses tenderness for his deceased wife. He felt to me like many Jewish fathers I knew: not fun for their teenage daughters, but not evil in their boots. He felt very rounded as a figure. I don't believe that a play with a speech like "Hath not a Jew eyes?" can be antisemitic in its bones - Shakespeare is too smart for that. He knows what he's doing; he's arguing, it seems to me, for a human kind of respect, one that respects the person no matter who they are or what they've done - just as Shylock should not be mistreated. Nor *ought* he to exact vengeance: neither the Jew nor the Christian is let off the hook. So as a Jew, working on this production helped me exorcize the ghost of Shylock who has haunted my upbringing, showing me the character's humanity, and that it is the world's projections of him, and not the character himself, I must fear.

KC Yes, Shylock is a troubling character and profoundly human, spilling far beyond the caricatures of comic villain or maudlin victim. It is as if Shakespeare is more and more engaged by Shylock as he writes his character, bringing out all the contradictions and heightened moments we've talked about, a stranger in a strange land. And it is as if Shylock, more and more like Shakespeare, has both the living and the dead as his audience; as if he speaks beyond the scene, to open up the whole landscape of the visible and invisible, addressing not just the past in Abraham and Jacob but the future, in audiences yet to come. I never stop working on this play with every opportunity we are given to present it to new audiences. Since the production in the Ghetto, I've read two authors I want to mention here. The first is James Baldwin who cheered me mightily in what he writes about Shakespeare and his knowing of his characters:

The greatest poet in the English language found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love - by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him. (2010, 68)

So much of the creation of character on stage depends on how a character listens. A lot of time is spent discussing what a character says. But how does that same character listen to someone else lecturing, pontificating, lording it over another for the benefit of the many auditors? How does Shylock listen to Portia's lecture on mercy, "Then must the Jew be merciful"? Shylock's response is "On what compulsion must I?" "Must", a repetition of Portia's definitive argument, even gets the iambic stress in the rhythm. Not only is Shylock resisting Portia's imperative

ACTORS	PROLOGUE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	EPILOGUE
ACTOR 1	X																			
ACTOR 2	X																			
ACTOR 3	X																			
ACTOR 4	X																			
ACTOR 5	X																			
ACTOR 6	X																			
ACTOR 7	X																			
ACTOR 8	X																			
ACTOR 9	X																			
ACTOR 10	X																			
ACTOR 11	X																			
ACTOR 12	X																			
ACTOR 13	X																			
ACTOR 14	X																			
ACTOR 15	X																			
ACTOR 16	X																			
ACTOR 17	X																			
ACTOR 18	X																			
ACTOR 19	X																			
ACTOR 20	X																			

Figure 6 Karin Coonrod's scene distribution

tone; he then listens hard to Portia eloquently speaking her convenient mercy. Ned Eisenberg (Shylock #5) and I talked about this. Shylock's Jewish theology and tradition is packed with commands for mercy ("What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God", Micah 6:8). The Venice of the play is completely devoid of mercy until one of their own is compromised and then it is required of the Jew. Sure, Shylock is a bad Jew, but Portia is a bad Christian, like all the rest of the cast of Venetian characters. Shylock sees right through Portia's convenient speech on mercy. He's no fool.

In my view, Shylock is above the understanding of everyone in the play except for Portia: they see eye to eye. When Portia enters the courtroom as a young lawyer, announced as Balthasar, it is only Shylock (knowing the story of the prophet Daniel) who makes a quick leap to a similar sounding Belteshazzar (the name the Babylonians gave to the prophet Daniel). When it seems that the young lawyer favors Shylock he says: "A Daniel come to judgment, yea a Daniel!". Later, Graziano lampoons Shylock's reference: "A Daniel [...] I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word".

Shylock is the killer bent on going all the way, bent on pulling out the heart of stone in his enemy, this Antonio, this representative of a duplicitous and avaricious transactional culture. I understand Shylock's blindness to reason in this moment. With the flight of Jessica to Antonio's boys, it's an ounce of pressure

too much. With a bitter history of no access to the public square, Shylock's brain fills with the dark cloud of rage, blind to reason. Yes, I *know* this Shylock too. A scholar I very much admire is Kenneth Gross who likens Shylock to Shakespeare and imagines Shakespeare colorfully riffing on this likeness:

Shylock is I and I am Shylock. The two of us are caught between worlds, between earth and air, matter and spirit. We both fed on shared and secret resources of desire, fear, sorrow, shame, and resentment, thrusting these into sharper and more volatile forms, forms by which we both hide and strip bare our hearts. We thereby take revenge upon those whose powers are more literal, who have power to hurt and rarely hold it back. I am content, like Shylock, to offend, myself being offended. I, like Shylock, lay claim to the hearts of my audience, sign with them a contract for a pound of flesh to be cut off from nearest their hearts. As Shylock does, I claim flesh from those who are my doubles, though they do not see how like me they are, as Antonio does not see his own likeness to the Jew. I surprise my own hearers with their hearts. Like Shylock, I want their heart in exchange for my heart... Shylock is not just myself, but what I might be. Shylock is what I would be if I truly exposed to you what it is my plays cost me, and if I made clear what it is they ask for in return. What I want from you is profit of a fantastic sort, nothing as simple as the return of money for a pleasing spectacle. What I want from you who watch or want to want, is your heart, both flesh and blood at the same time. I give you my own heart in return, though under a disguise. I give it to those whom I hate for knowing nothing of what it costs me to write as I do. (2006, 16)

Getting at the throbbing heart of the play is what it is all about for me in directing a production of a Shakespeare text. More than any other play I have encountered, this play engages the outsider Jew to expose the hypocrisy of Christendom's heart.

DM Your final gesture was to project the word 'Mercy' (and its translations) on the walls of the Ghetto in the final moments of the performance. Where did this gesture originate?

KC I wanted the inanimate walls to talk - like the handwriting on the wall in the Book of Daniel - of mercy. Interestingly, 2016 also coincided with Pope Francis's declaration of the Year of Misericordia. As I see it, there is no mercy in the play. The silent walls of the Ghetto have witnessed this throughout the play (not to mention in actual history and time). As mentioned before, the word itself does not appear until it is demanded

of the Jew (Act 3, Scene 3). Hence the final gesture: after the five Shylocks each asked, “Are you answered?” and we hear the sound of the shofar as a wake-up call to attend Shylock’s “Are you answered?” it was Jessica who from deep space in the Ghetto crossed below the footlights to let out her own outcry against the vacuity and injustice of the dominant culture. At this moment the word Mercy was being projected onto the Ghetto walls as if the inanimate stone walls themselves were pleading with the human fleshy heart of the public: MERCY. MISERICORDIA. RAKHAMIM. רַחֲמִים

DM After our final performance in the Ghetto we also went to the Festival at Bassano del Grappa and then a high-security prison in Padua. I prepared a stripped-down 75-minute version of the text for this prison performance.

KC I remember sitting in between you and Walter at the Bassano performance and realizing that the production could have life beyond the Ghetto. Just seeing the shadows cast on the *castello* wall from the circle of Shylocks was thrilling. The next day at the high security men’s prison in Padua was the grand finale. Dead tired from our unrelenting schedule and having returned very late the night before from the performance in Bassano del Grappa, we were awakened anew by our performance in the prison.

The welcome given us in the men’s prison of Padova, Casa di Reclusione di Padova, stirred us deeply. With Nicola Boscoletti, the facilitator for our performance, we toured the prison bakery where the men were at work baking bread, cornetti, biscotti, all manner of baked goods to be sold in the Veneto region, the profits of which went into individual bank accounts for their time of re-entrance. Upon arrival deep inside the prison we had been greeted with a delectable lunch from their baked goods. Actors are always hungry, but this was no pizza pie snack. Here we were served like kings and queens, *panini* of all varieties, the taste competing with elegance. Nerina Cocchi, my indispensable assistant, had gone a little earlier than the rest of us in order to prep the space and when I turned up she was in tears for the many kindnesses of the inmates and staff in helping her set up the room. She also said “There’s going to be a great lunch”.

As you mentioned, the show was shorter since our mandate was to stay within 75 minutes. So, we excised all the Portia scenes - with the exception of the courtroom. We kept all the scenes with Lancillotto and Gobbo, because they were in Italian and thus easily understood by the inmates. The audience of men vociferously enjoyed that we were fearless. (Francesca Sarah Toich - playing Lancillotto - is a striking young woman who in her male role boldly donned a codpiece and spoke out in a fierce

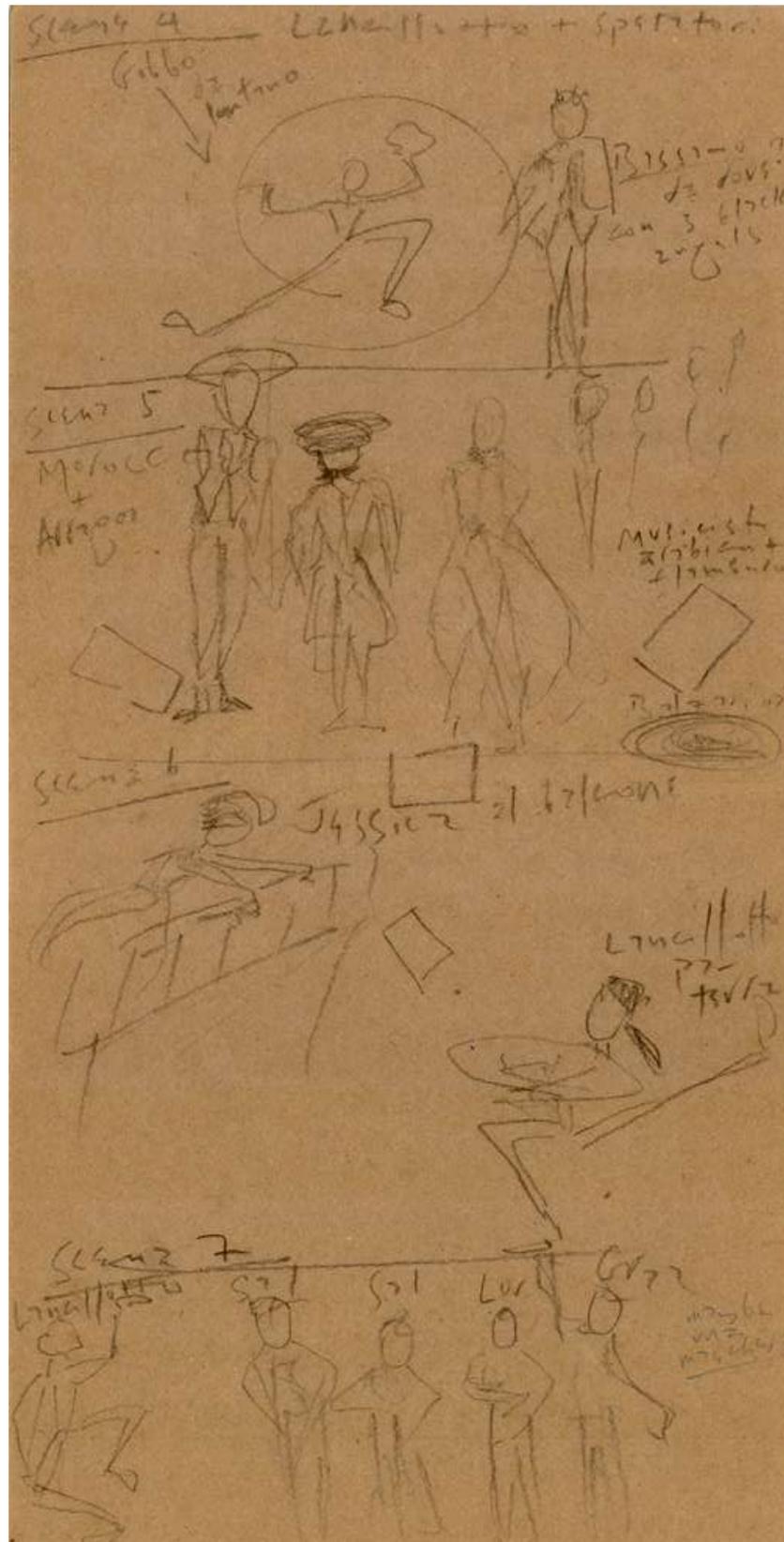


Figure 7 Karin Coonrod's production notebooks

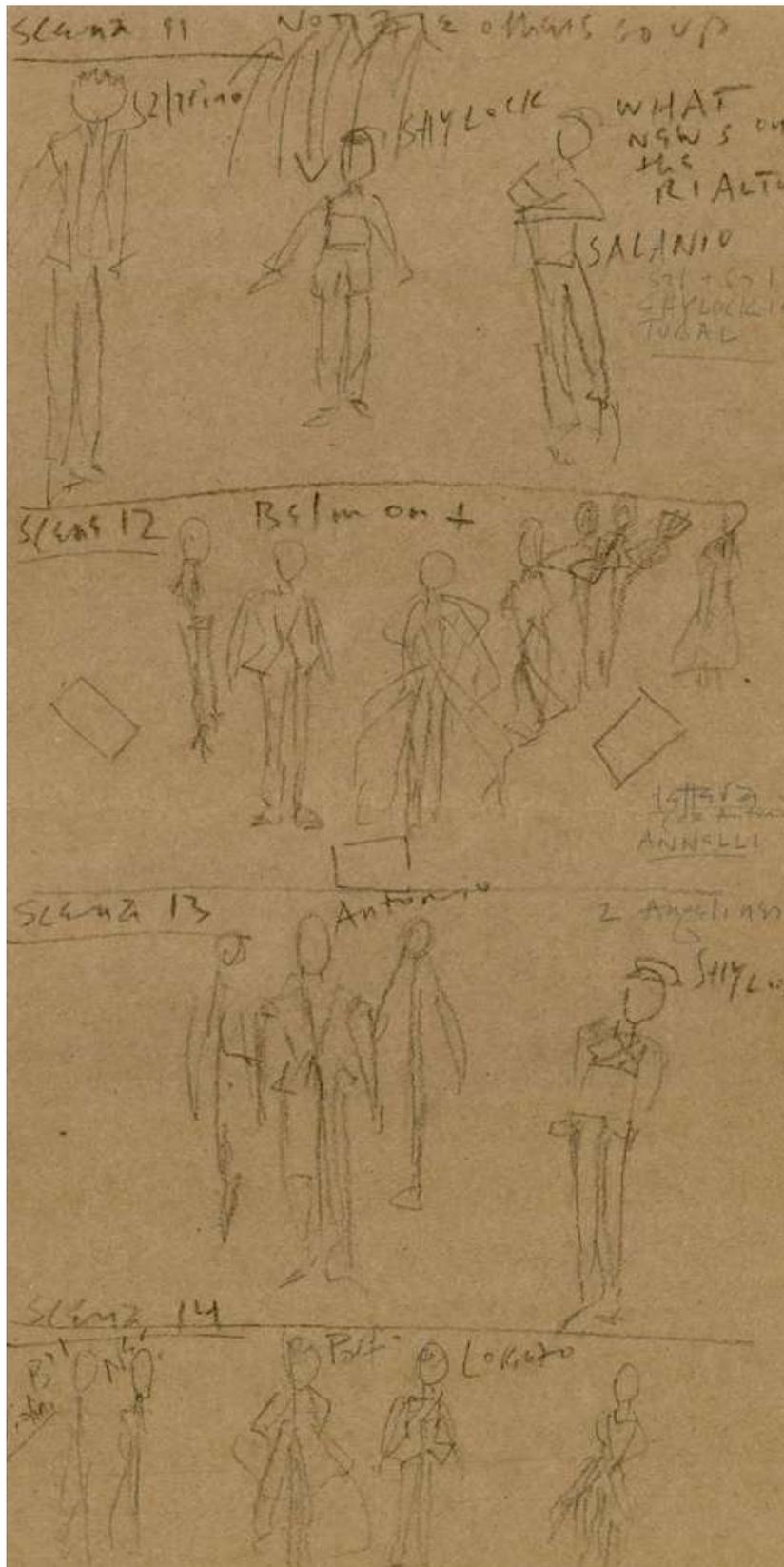


Figure 8 Karin Coonrod's production notebooks

deep voice; Andrea Brugnera playing Gobbo was not afraid to make a cheeky quip about women interpolated from *commedia*). The inmates adored the portrayal of these two characters from *commedia*.

The men in prison had been prepared for our performance of *The Merchant of Venice* by reading and studying the play and watching the Al Pacino film. In the Ghetto performances of the trial scene, we had recruited audience members to stand on stage, draped in red stoles, behind the Duke, to face down Shylock. They made a wall of powerful Venetian solidarity against the 'outsider'. Now, in the prison, we recruited prisoners to make that wall. They came from Teatro Carcere, the prison's drama group, led by Maria Cinzia Zanellato. Draped in the red stoles of 'justice', representing the 'establishment', they stood for 'law' that the scene would demonstrate could be manipulated, used to defeat 'justice'. The irony of these inmates' position in the scene was sobering. Actors and inmates standing side by side in a theatrical action about eradicating the riffraff: somehow all the secrets deep inside each mingled together in this silent shared witness, leaving all of us locked into the memory.

We were allowed to bring all our costumes and props inside the prison walls - including the knife that Shylock held to Antonio's heart and the torch Jessica carries into the carnival. When Shylock held the knife point at Antonio's naked breast, every eye in the room was on it. As it was a sustained moment, attention was palpable. This in turn intensified the dialogue between Portia (Linda Powell) and Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg) in such a way that the two actors made new, spiritually riotous discoveries inside the high stakes created by this particular audience. As their director, I was glad to witness this incarnation.

When the company first gathered to rehearse in the prison, I looked around and saw that our Bassanio (Michele Guidi) was missing. Someone told me Michele was in the men's dressing room. I found him there weeping, saying he couldn't go on. He could play in front of thousands, he told me, but not in front of these prisoners. His eyes were red with grief at their plight. We had all been disoriented by the thickness of walls and the number of gates that clanged shut behind us, then deprived of all our ID papers, phones, money, keys. It was visceral. It was real. It was playing for keeps. All I could quote to Michele was something from Beckett: "We can't go on, we must go on". As Beckett is one of our high priests in the theater, Michele listened. They needed us as we needed them. He went out and played, at great cost, with his heart in his eyes.

We performed in front of an audience of 200 inmates, along with the mayor and some other notables from Padova. Clearly the inmates appreciated the piece, but, unfortunately, we did not have time for a talkback, which I greatly regretted. However, we gathered for a group photo afterwards and then greeted each other with handshakes and hugs.

This was my first experience performing in prison. And it was a first for many of the company. Since then, we've been in American prisons and jails with other works from our repertory, including works by Walt Whitman and Flannery O'Connor. In juxtaposition to our Italian experience, we were not allowed to have any physical contact in the USA prisons and jails, inmates often addressed by their surnames. I've often thought what we in America could learn from the Italian system of incarceration.

DM Our production transferred to North America in 2017. How did it change as it moved?

KC A major change in the North American premiere was the casting, which we wanted to sharpen politically for the Americas. Shylock #3, for example, was powerfully played by an African American actress, Lynda Gravatt. When she howled out her despair and called out the dominant culture on its cruel example, it spoke volumes to an American audience, with our history of racism.

The major design shift was the move of the production to an indoor theater space. For Peter Ksander and me, this was an exciting opportunity to more precisely focus the attention of the audience. Rather than entering from another island of the Ghetto, the actors entered from the back of the house, through the audience, in spirited song. We still surrounded the wide stage space at the Kasser Theater in Montclair with police barriers, as we had in Venice. This time, however, they were more clearly a set piece, not doing double duty as in the Ghetto where they delineated the playing space and divided it from the public space. In the Ghetto the playing space occupied a significant piece of real estate, which included several trees and a beautiful old well in front of the German and Italian synagogues and the sixteenth century apartment buildings of the Ghetto. In the Ghetto we had a wall of lights on stage left; in the Kasser Theater in Montclair the lights surrounded the entire space.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned from the shift to the indoor space occurred in the staging of the Trial Scene, having to do with the use of the barriers onstage. After several days of rehearsal something came to me crystal-clearly in a dream, right before the first preview. In rehearsing the scene itself I began to be irritated by the clutter of actor traffic inside the barriers (all my own doing in the staging), yet amaz-

ingly in my dream I saw the characters – Bassanio, Salanio, Salarino, Graziano – all confined in the ‘gallery’ outside the barriers. There they could move all around the outside of the barriers, but not downstage, until the moment when they gained the brazen confidence to cross. Before this unleashing, the only characters ‘allowed’ inside the power space were the two adversaries, Shylock and Antonio, the Duke and his two magistrates, and eventually Portia and her two helpers, the clerk (Nerissa) and the holder of the legal books (Balzarina). This gave the whole scene its geometric clarity and bold argument. It gave the ‘peanut gallery’ characters just the right resistance they needed to shout their clamorous contempt into the space where the Duke repeatedly tried to keep order. When Portia spoke her second “Tarry, Jew” and let loose her growing hostility, reducing Shylock into a near non-entity, it was at this moment that Graziano, awed by Portia’s attack, slipped into the space physically. With confident quiet gratification he asserted, “Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself”, venturing forward. The others followed suit in the spirit of gang mentality, all spiritually bound together in hate against Shylock, the Jew. The seated audience in the house witnessed a powerful picture of collective xenophobia.

Because we were playing in North America, we had to limit the Italian that was spoken, yet it was necessary for Lancillotto (played with aplomb by Francesca Sarah Toich) to speak in Veneziano to retain the spirit of his character which meant we had to project surtitles. However, I wanted these surtitles to be an expression of the wall’s thoughts in response to Lancillotto’s transgressive strategies and pranks. So the anthropomorphized wall operated as a kind of judgmental interlocutor for the audience, and when Lancillotto went off text (allowed once) into some gritty street vulgarity the wall screamed “censured! censured!”. In this way, the translation is shared, yet there is more fun to be drawn from the moment in the spirit of *commedia*, specifically for an English-speaking audience.

DM To finish, should we say something about how this production has affected us both?

KC *The Merchant of Venice* seems more than ever urgent to be played in our time for its concentration on the power of money, the political marketplace and injustice against the outsider, basically what we are now widely referring to as white supremacy.

The play is full of people we recognize from our own time, all wanting to win, perpetuating an unreflective mainstream cultural ‘Christianity’ that keeps itself solidly in the dominant position through financial power. “Hath not a Jew eyes?” says Shylock after expressing his grief at the flight of his daughter

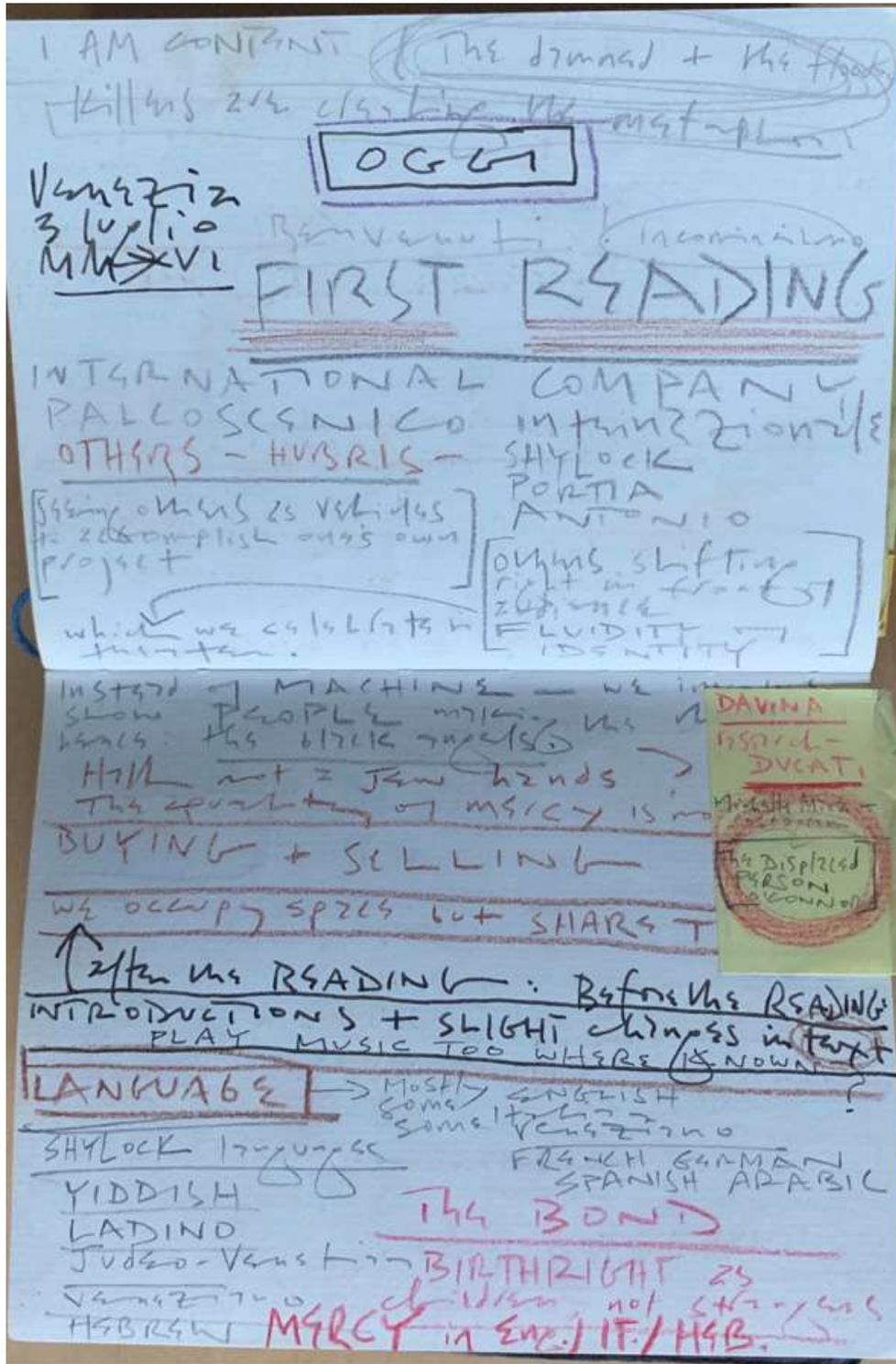


Figure 9 Karin Coonrod's production notebooks: first reading



Figure 10 Monica Garavello as Balzarina. © Andrea Messana

Jessica, knowing that he was ‘had’ by Antonio’s ‘boys’. “The quality of mercy is not strained”, says Portia in the court to Shylock, pulling out all the stops on a plea for mercy, that she herself does not follow.

To work on this play which contains two of the most famous speeches in the Shakespeare canon and see them as poles of understanding in the unraveling of the action – the argument for a convenient mercy on one hand and the plea for a humanity, that’s marked, ironically, by concluding upon a shared instinct for revenge, on the other – has found resonance in the search for the moral center in our own time, thus carving out a strong position that the play is not in fact an embarrassment and unwittingly antisemitic, but rather a play that, through the character of Shylock, exposes the hypocrisy of the dominant culture. Shakespeare’s plays always hold in tension the individual and the community. The interest I encountered for our production amongst Jewish audiences was remarkable in the effort to reclaim the play as a wake-up call to those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The invitation to mint this play in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice, the place that gave the world the name ‘ghetto’, with disparate nationalities of actors who didn’t even speak the same

language, was a challenge I relished with a beautiful team of collaborators.

DM As a Jew, as I've said, this production allowed me to lay to rest an uneasy sense I've always had that Shylock would follow me cruelly through my life. As an artist, this was such a satisfying project because of the collaborations across language, culture and history. We took the best of all the cultures we had in the rehearsal room and – as Venice itself does – used them in harmony to create a production which was thought-provoking but also deeply beautiful. That's how we worked, shaping this play. The aesthetic that Karin, Peter Ksander and Stefano Nicolao created was a joy to behold. I was very proud to be a part of it. And as a Shakespeareanist, I found the five Shylocks an ingenious way to approach one of his greatest, and most troubling characters. It was a privilege, every moment.

## Appendix

### *A Midsummer Night's Scream - Un Cri dans le Ghetto*

Marie Malherbe

(Réflexion sur le *Marchand de Venise* par Karin Coonrod pour les 500 ans du Ghetto et 400 ans de la mort de Shakespeare)

Le Ghetto ce soir est de sortie.  
Sortie étrange, à l'envers, vers l'intérieur de son histoire.  
Les gradins en barres métalliques  
dessinent des cercles concentriques  
comme un cosmos  
en révolution  
dans la prison de sa mémoire.  
Au milieu du ghetto la place;  
au milieu de la place la scène;  
au milieu de la scène la puits  
rond lui aussi  
comme le temps qui s'apprête à tourner  
autour des lumières, des arbres et des mots.

Tout commence comme un plaisant divertissement d'été  
pour public instruit comme il faut.  
Fébrilité de l'avant-fête  
sur les dalles antiques où résonnent  
les bottes des carabinieri et les talons italiens  
des élégantes. On se pâme, on parle, on soupire  
en attendant Shakespeare.

Cigales excitées et buveurs bavards  
continuent leur sérénade tandis que gesticulent  
en préambule  
des saltimbanques d'un autre temps.

Puis au milieu des synagogues, des jeux d'enfants et des maisons  
la trompette d'un homme en noir  
emplit le ciel comme un chophar  
a-t-on sonné l'heure du Pardon?

Les badauds interdits s'arrêtent  
pour déguster quelques bons vers  
suspendus à la nuit dense,  
on regarde encore quelques danses...  
quand tout à coup  
jaillit de la nuit  
le CRI.

On te croyait d'une autre époque  
mais tu pleures encore Shylock?

Hurle sauvage, sanglot terrible,  
râle total et viscéral  
à faire tordre les muscles des pierres  
et la chair torturée des maisons  
qui en rond  
gardaient les trous de mémoire.  
Aboi qui déchire l'histoire;  
qui fouille dans les entrailles  
de ces trop fameuses murailles;  
qui tonitruent et puis se tait.

Silence nouveau  
sur le campo  
léger comme après l'orage...  
Accouché du fond des âges  
le ghettoes a crié son Nom.

Les corps qui bougent,  
les lumières rouges  
tout s'accélère et la spirale  
s'inverse  
enfin ce soir on peut sortir  
des bourreaux et des martyrs,  
car le procès n'est pas fini  
et son nom est MERCY.

Mercy Merci  
Colombari  
par votre farce libératrice  
le ghetto crie ses cicatrices  
et marche vers sa guérison.

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# Collaborative Spectacle: Designing *The Merchant* in the Ghetto

Frank London  
Composer

Stefano Nicolao  
Costume designer

Peter Ksander  
Environment and lighting designer

**Abstract** Karin Coonrod describes Compagnia de' Colombari as an 'international collective' that 'generates spectacle wherever we go' – a collaboration of energy, creativity and theatricality nourished by different cultures, histories, traditions, disciplines and techniques. In this chapter we hear from three theatre makers whose collaborative work on *The Merchant 'in' Venice* shaped the 'spectacle' of this production. Designing its costumes (Stefano Nicolao), music (Frank London) and lighting (Peter Ksander), they established how this production looked and sounded and designed a world for the actors to inhabit.

**Keywords** Designing Shakespeare. Site-specific design. Theatre design. Costume design. Lighting design. Music design. The Merchant of Venice. Compagnia de' Colombari.

Karin Coonrod describes Compagnia de' Colombari as an “international collective” that “generates spectacle wherever we go”<sup>1</sup> – a collaboration of energy, creativity and theatricality nourished by different cultures, histories, traditions, disciplines and techniques. In this chapter we hear from three theatre

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.colombari.org/>.



Figure 1 The company enters the Ghetto Novo. © Andrea Messana

makers whose work on *The Merchant in Venice* shaped the ‘spectacle’ of this production from different points on the creative, cultural, and geographic globes. Frank London, a New York-based composer and musician specialising in the instrumental music tradition of Klezmer, writes about coming to this project through a conversation about music with the Venetian Jewish cultural community, but finding for the score a musical vocabulary (Fellini, Corelli, Bartok) that worked in deliberate counterpoint to any expectation of ‘Jewishness’. Venetian-born costume designer Stefano Nicolao is a master-craftsman who works in the traditions of *commedia dell’arte* and historical Venetian fashion: his creations are sumptuous, dramatic, witty – spectacular. Nicolao gives an insight into the development of costume designs and motifs which were at once historical and modern, Venetian and universal; clothing that was both exquisite artifact and functional ‘play’-wear. American set and lighting designer Peter Ksander is a long-time collaborator with Karin Coonrod, working nationally and internationally on her projects such as *Laude in Urbis*, and *Orfeo*, both performed on the streets of Orvieto, Italy. Ksander writes about the challenges and possibilities of creating theatrical space within public space – of taking the common place and making it spectacular.



Figure 2 Composer and trumpet player Frank London and the other musicians. © Andrea Messana

## Frank London – Composer

Composing for theatre can be a hugely rewarding assignment and working on Karin Coonrod's production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (or *The Merchant 'in' Venice* as we called it) was a revelation and a gift. My job as a theatre-composer is not to simply follow my own musical inclination or muse, but to support the director's vision. As I quickly learned, Coonrod is a visionary director who pays ultimate respect to the text, studying it assiduously, sticking close to the original (the actors were instructed to pronounce all the archaic syllables in a word in order to hear Shakespeare's rhythms), while interpreting the text in radical ways that are highly political and social, and chronotopic, related to time and space. Her direction and instructions as to what she is trying to elicit from a scene are clear; it is my job to listen closely to her and find ways to put them into the musical composition. As Karin's ideas are so informed and insightful, I learned more about the play itself than I have ever experienced working with other directors. Following are some random thoughts and recollections of what was truly one of the most aesthetically and creatively complex and engaging experiences I've had in my career.

Much will be written about Karin's choice to have five actors portray Shylock, but from my perspective the single most important choice was to perform *Merchant* in the Venice Ghetto, outdoors, in the campo, surrounded by the same buildings, synagogues, banks, canals... the environment that existed in Shakespeare's time. The Venice Ghetto informed so many of our choices. In many ways we felt the Ghetto space as a character in the production. Just as the Jewish Ghetto in Venice is famous as being the source of the word 'ghetto', Venice is also ubiquitous with its carnival, a wild masked musical street celebration. Our production opened with the actors and band (two violins, cello, drums, trumpet and keyboards) marching over a canal bridge into the Ghetto Novo as a carnival procession, musically inspired by an imaginary Fellini/Nino Rota version of a classic Italian carnival theme. One hears, feels, experiences 'Carnival in Venice', rooting audience and actors into the spectacle we are going to present. It was Coonrod's and dramaturg Walter Valeri's genius to open the show not with Shakespeare, but with the words of the great Italian writer Ruzzante (Angelo Beolco, c. 1496-1542). His bawdy, carnivalesque poem, featuring the recurring catch phrase "Amore an" (roughly, 'Love, eh?') focuses on the centrality of love as a topic of fascination and conversation. "Who wants to talk about love? [...] who wants to talk about anything else!" Immediately this framed Coonrod's *Merchant* as a dialectic discussion of love (vs power, social roles, family etc.) that is both serious and entertaining.

We processed to our band's 'home' under a lone tree in the campo. This area is also meant to represent Belmont, one of the principal locations in *Merchant*. For Coonrod, Belmont was a feminine space. This was represented in a number of musical ways, some obvious (the music in Belmont was performed by an all-female or female-dressed string trio and toy piano), others subtle. All the music in *Merchant* was originally composed for the production with the exception of Belmont's music, where I adapted classical music. The music in Belmont came primarily from the string trios of the famous seventeenth-century Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli. I had originally planned on using music from the eighteenth-century composer Luigi Boccherini, but switched to Corelli at cellist Serena Mancuso's suggestion. For the record, Mancuso actually lives in the Venice Ghetto and would basically roll out of her apartment and start the show. However, in the penultimate Belmont section, I wanted something more dissonant and atonal, but still in a classical vein, and adapted Hungarian composer Bela Bartok's "Forgatos #38".

Another moment of spatial interaction with the Ghetto occurred during the carnival scene that covered Jessica's night-time elopement with Lorenzo. In order to emulate the chaos of carnival sensorially, I divided the band. While the bulk of the group was playing from our home base, I went into the house adjacent to one of the original



Figure 3 Enrico Zagni and Sorab Wadia as masked singers. © Andrea Messana

banks (the reason for the Ghetto's existence and where, theoretically, Shylock could have operated from), and ran up to a second-floor apartment, where I played trumpet from the balcony. The music I played in this scene was a variant on the 'Shylock musical motif', a recurring theme in the production that calls for further exploration.

The range of emotions and moods in *Merchant* goes from the carnivalesque to the intimate, the exuberant to tragic, and perhaps ultimately the most important and central one is ambivalence. This was most profoundly expressed in my Shylock musical motif, which occurs throughout the production. It is germane to mention here that while I am well-versed as a trumpeter and composer in a wide array of musical styles and genres, my principal reputation is for my work with *klezmer*, or East European Jewish/Yiddish music. This music has a very distinctive sound and ethos, one that is clearly associated with representing Jewishness. Many people assumed that if 'Frank London the klezmer musician' was writing a score for *The Merchant of Venice*, I would use Jewish klezmer music as a signifier, especially to represent Shylock. This was decidedly not the case, for numerous reasons.

There are many Jewish musical traditions in the world and representing Shylock as an eighteenth-century East European *shtetl* (village) Jew in a *kapote* (typical Hasidic black gaberdine jacket) would be

to not only fall into the worst of stereotypes, a crass form of antisemitism, but would diametrically work against the strength of performing in the Venice Ghetto and the power of place. Shylock is complex. The motif, ambivalent and haunting, beautiful but never sentimental, counters a reductive view that Shylock 'hates music' - music being a symbol of being fully human in *Merchant*. Shakespeare's and Coonrod's Shylock demands to be seen as not only complex and completely human, but as a universal 'every-man' or 'every-woman'. The music helps to negotiate this identity.

Shakespeare has many ways of telling us (director, composer) when he wants music in his play. One of the most obvious (short of when he writes, 'Musicians enter') and fun is in the famous lottery scene for Portia's hand in marriage. Portia says, 'Let music sound while he doth make his choice', which is a pretty obvious clue that one should compose a song here, and which explains why there are so many versions of the song/poem, 'Where is Fancy Bred' (aka *Ding Dong Bell*, or as they pronounce it in Venetian, *Din Don Dan*). Keeping with the carnivalesque, entertainment aspect of the production, I chose to compose a very fun, singable tune in a minimalist, quasi-Michael Nyman style, without a shred of musical pretence that this could be a song from Shakespeare's time. This and the 'Amore an' were the two pieces that people left the production humming. (That said, one of my favourite settings of this was composed by the hyper-tonal modernist composer, Elliott Carter, for a 1936 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. It is not particularly 'hummable').

My involvement working on Karin Coonrod's *The Merchant in Venice* grew out of discussions between Shaul Bassi, the organization Beit Venezia (a community of forward looking, arts- and ideas-focused Venetian Jews who want to make the Venice Ghetto a world centre for culture and academia) and myself, about musical ways to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Jewish Ghetto in Venice. Composing and playing in Karin Coonrod's and Compagnia de' Colombari's production was the direct outgrowth of these conversations. Now, five years later, we are unveiling a new chapter in this commemoration, together releasing my latest recording, *Ghetto Songs (Venice and Beyond)*, a collection of music that has emerged from and about the worlds' ghettos. Not surprisingly, the recording - as did the production - opens with my setting of Ruzzante's "Amore an".

## Stefano Nicolao – Costume Designer

Karin Coonrod came to my workshop one day in November 2015, filled with enthusiasm, to meet me and talk to me about *The Merchant of Venice*, a production planned for the following year, to be set in the Campo del Ghetto Novo. We did not know each other but I was instant-



Figure 4 Costume design, 'Bassanio' by Stefano Nicolao



Figure 5 Costume design, 'Portia' by Stefano Nicolao

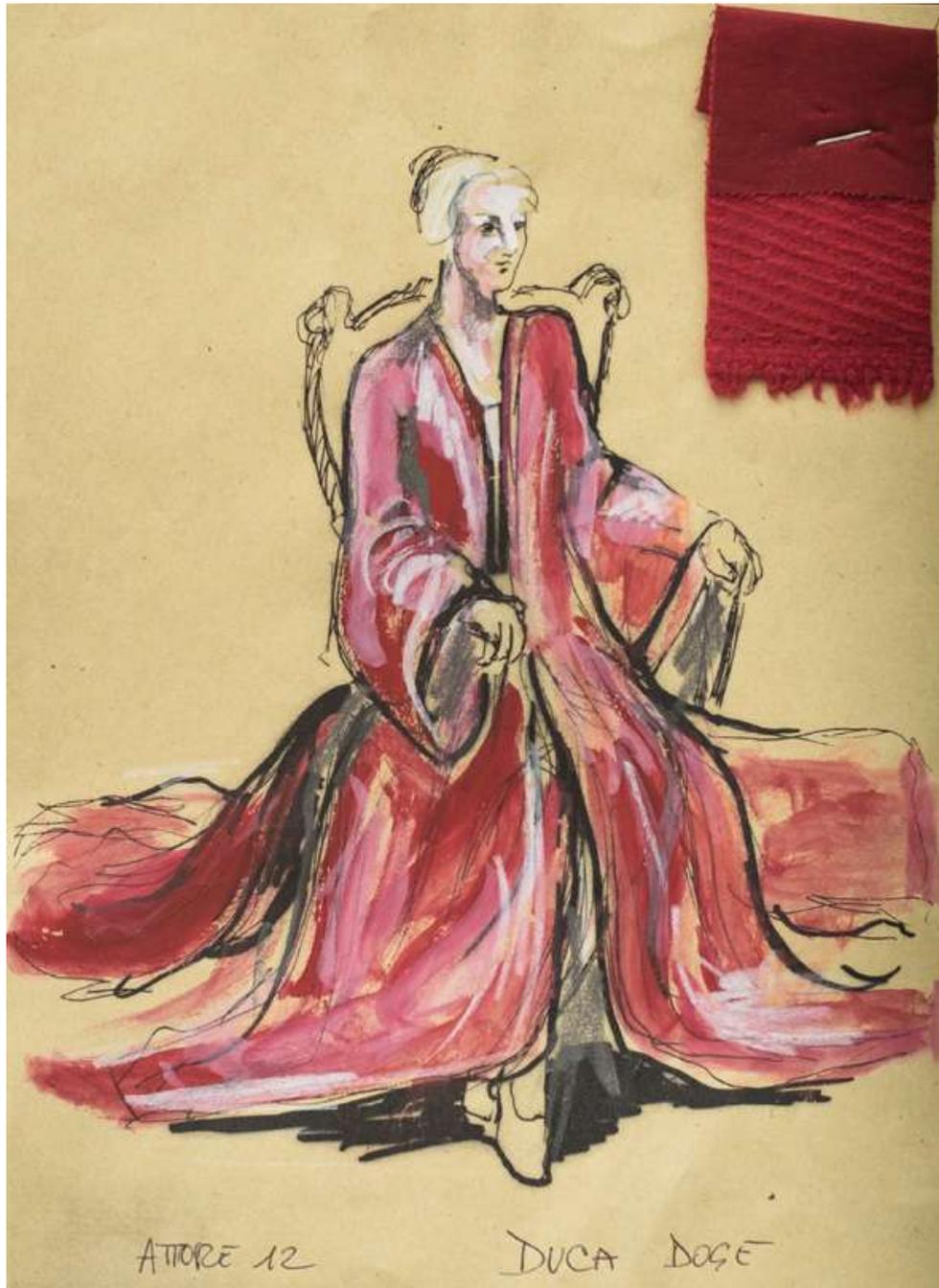


Figure 6 Costume design, 'The Duke' by Stefano Nicolao

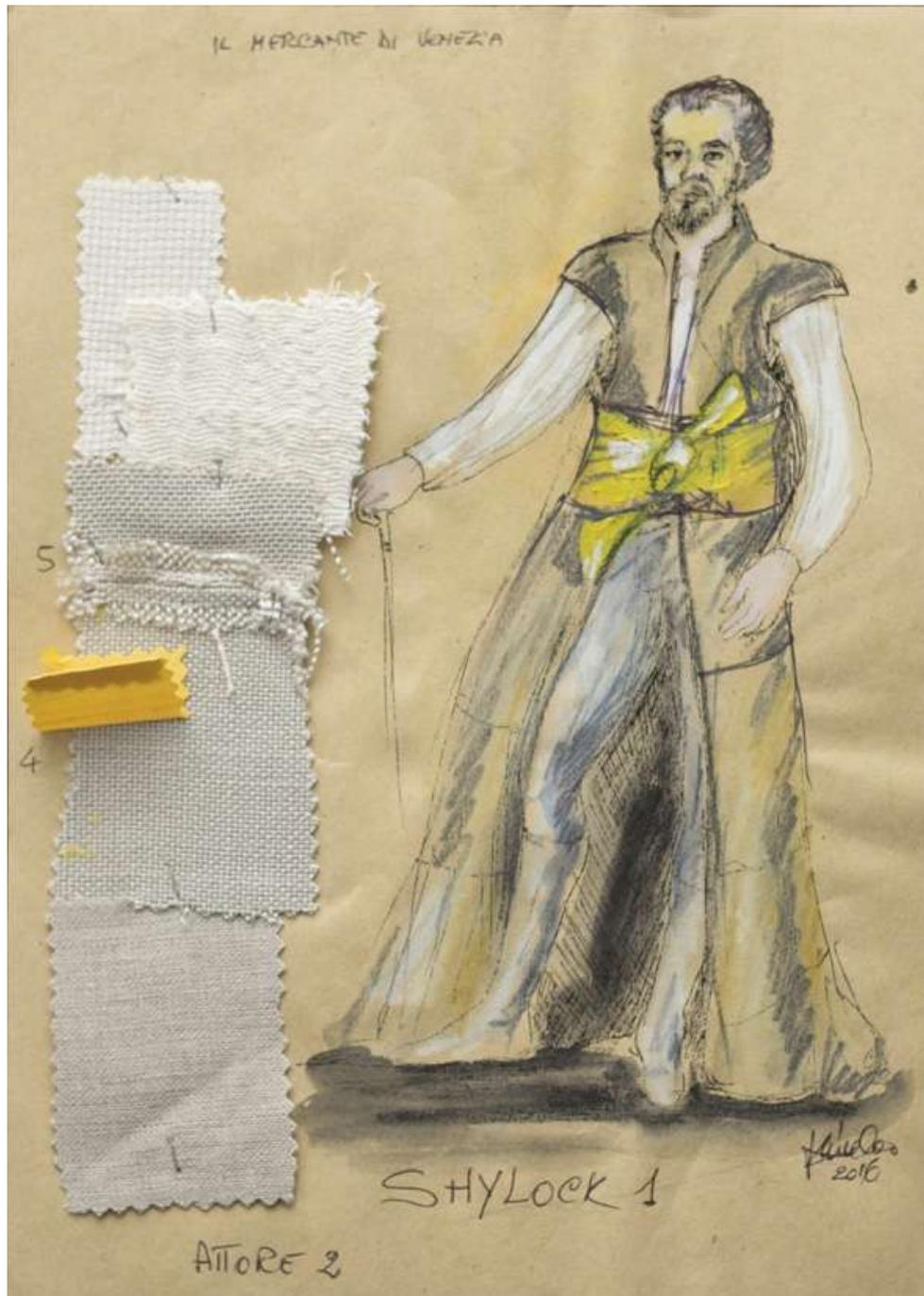


Figure 7 Costume design, 'Shylock' by Stefano Nicolao



Figure 8 Costume design, 'Nerissa' by Stefano Nicolao

ly captured by Karin's vitality, a magnetism that placed us immediately in suspended time and space inside the play and in full creative agreement. I knew the play, I had already made costumes for an earlier production that had a late sixteenth-century setting, and I thought I knew how to reproduce that design, tastefully and accurately.

But then, Karin started describing a world that harked back to the Shakespearean past but that took me on a journey that started in the ancient Jewish world, then reached our own time, an accelerated time travel that suggested the timelessness of injustice and contradiction, of diversity in all its facets, of suffering and offence – a sixteenth-century Venice where our contemporary world in some sort of timeless dimension would be present. She intended to use as her stage the whole Campo de Ghetto Novo. We parted ways with a hug, and we made an appointment for the end of the year in New York, to show some sketches and early ideas for the costumes.

The second meeting made me extremely happy: my portfolio was brimming with ideas. The first thought I had was to distinguish the characters by shape, putting the focus on silhouettes that would remember and evoke the sixteenth century, silhouettes as if seen backlit. Then I divided all the characters into smaller groups by style; next, by colour and fabric. The decision, particular to this production, of having five actors, one of them a woman, play Shylock meant that I had to further distinguish the Jewish world.

All the Venetians, then, men and women, were dressed to be reminiscent of the wealth of the Serenissima, in light-toned costumes, beige and cream, white and hazelnut, linen and textured cotton, leather and organza, silk printed with stencils. Lines were sharply defined, and visible zips made the costume look contemporary, while detachable or loose sleeves evoked the epoch. The women, when they first entered, wore a basic costume of shirt and trousers with small gilets in shades ranging from cream to pearl. As they were transformed from anonymous players into their named characters – Portia, Nerissa – they were dressed (in full view of the audience) in a cut-away organza costume that had a long train. Being transparent, it left the body beneath visible while endowing them with a solemn regality.

Another group was the 'lads'. (Elsewhere, Sorab Wadia describes their costumes as like eighties' 'punk' outfits.) The noble suitors were all in black, with accessories that hinted at their nationalities (like the sombrero Aragon wore), all of them made to look slightly distanced, estranged by the way the design materials and fabrics were applied. The musicians, too, were in black, as were the stagehands (known as the 'angeli neri'), who became black shadows shadowing the actors.

And finally, our Shylocks. The use of the material and the shape were essential to giving us an imaginary route into the history of Jewish society. For some of the five Shylocks we used hemp and linen, fabrics woven on looms to conjure up echoes of the wilderness, col-

oured sand and beige, with strings hanging down; for other Shylocks, we shifted the design to the twentieth century, with echoes of the Shoah. We lined their linen robes with black and white stripes to recall concentration camp uniforms. We then brought into the scene another symbol of difference: the colour yellow. In sixteenth century Venice it was the colour that Jews were forced to wear in their caps, that heretics were dressed in; it was the colour of prostitutes' stockings. In the medieval period it was the colour fools wore; and in the twentieth century, the colour of the stars of David that deportees had to display on their clothes. In our productions, long yellow sashes made of silk became, with an on-stage robing, the investiture of the various Shylocks: they were tied at the waist like armour or, better said, a girdle that forced the black and white stripes, the wilderness robes, and the yellow of difference to press themselves upon the body.

We used another symbol to represent the Council of Ten, one of the major governing bodies of the Republic of Venice: a huge blood-red cloth cloak with a massively long train that, as it spread behind the actor playing the Duke, stained the stones of the campo red. Red stoles were worn by the actors and the extras who were brought into the space to make up the trial jury. (When, after Shylock left the court defeated and humiliated, they divested themselves, dropping their red stoles in a pile, it looked like a mountain of blood.)

We could write many pages on what Karin and I discussed and tried to develop in pursuit of our ultimate goal - because the work on costume ideas and symbolism was a journey of real collaboration. Details that were apparently minimal became large and conspicuous on stage. I am grateful to Ca' Foscari and Shaul Bassi for giving me the opportunity to meet Karin and to work with a wonderful group of actors on this memorable experience.

### **Peter Ksander – Environment and Lighting Designer**

From our initial conversations about the project, Karin Coonrod, the director, and I talked about taking hold of the existing environment and making strange the experience of being within that environment.<sup>2</sup> Site specific staging always requires extra attention be paid to the existing conditions on the ground. One has to think through how the space is currently inhabited, by whom, and the history you are engaging with by setting a piece in that physical context. We wanted to take what was the familiar, daily experience of being in

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<sup>2</sup> I want to extend many thanks to lighting designer Christopher Akerlind, who was involved in the very earliest conversations about the design and some of whose ideas were foundational to what the piece became.



Figure 9 Daylight rehearsal in the Ghetto. © Andrea Messana

the Campo de Ghetto Novo and reframe it in the same way that we were reframing our understanding of the play. By interrupting the flow of activity the goal was to reveal the space (and play) in a new way and to ask the daily routine traffic through the campo to look up and see it anew.

That ‘making strange’ did not necessitate some kind of grand scenographic intervention. The space we performed in is the actual, historical space imagined – though never mentioned – in Shakespeare’s text, and it resonated with the narrative without any extra touch from us. The stones hummed as we engaged with ahistorical events – our bringing of the play to the Ghetto in 2016 – on what would have been the historical site. The spatial intervention on our part needed to avoid obscuring any part of that connection but rather to identify a point of view from which the audience could witness the resonance between past and present, and then we needed to follow through on the logistics that flowed from having made that choice.

The campo is on an island with three bridges connecting it to the rest of the city. The perimeter is lined with tall, multi-storey residences whose heights had been restricted historically by the civic authorities such that as the population grew there after 1516 when the

Jewish population was confined to the Ghetto, the buildings had to be sliced up into more and more storeys, ceilings getting lower and lower, spaces cramped further and further. There is a Jewish Museum in the campo and, at the time we were there, a reconstructed pawn shop in the premises of the Banco Rosso. There were restaurants and other businesses and, in one corner and along another side of the campo are two Holocaust memorials, one listing the name of every Venetian Jew deported from Venice to the Nazi extermination camps. A charged location. For our performances, we wanted to seat at least 250 people, and to accommodate this scale of audience requires a massive, tall seating riser to allow the action to be seen by all. After thinking through all the needs of the text and the limits of the physical space, we chose to set our seating riser, and thus set our point of view, right in the middle of the public thoroughfare in the rough centre of the campo facing south into one of the corners that has no entrance from other parts of the city. This afforded us the deepest space possible – and meant there was no traffic trying to flow across our playing space. The area contained a handful of trees, a well, a *fontana* – a fountain constantly pumping out water – and a couple of benches for us to work with in the staging. Synagogues and houses bordered the upstage areas. The Banco Rosso was to the left of the audience’s field of vision; to the right was an extended truss supporting much of the lighting equipment. The audience and the truss completed a diamond shape with the existing buildings and enclosed approximately a third of the open space in the campo. During the performances this space was marked out with crowd control barriers. Passers-by lined the barriers and neighbours stepped out onto their balconies to watch what was going on. Between performances the barriers coiled in to surround just the truss and audience riser, allowing human traffic an unimpeded flow. But even so, the presence of the performance, something spectacular going on in the campo, was hard to miss.

We confined the rest of the physical production to Stefano Nicolao’s beautiful clothes and the handful of props (caskets, ducats, letters, a couple of big pillows, a knife) critical for the stage action. In a piece that is so much about individual identity and the relationship of that identity to the society and state, anything added to the scene unnecessarily became superfluous. The ‘making strange’ of the environment, within the performance then, was accomplished not by changing what the audience would have seen on a usual day but where they saw it from and through how the existing architecture was revealed through light.

A quasi-verisimilitude is often prized in stage design. (‘Quasi’ being the operative term, since performer audibility, face visibility, and audience sight lines all militate against the notion of the rigorously ‘real’ in any theatre.) Stage spaces, and the light and sound introduced into them, are regularly asked to indicate place and time of



Figure 10 Natural and artificial lighting. © Andrea Messana

day for an audience, as well as to amplify emotional content and make other artistic statements related to the piece. With *The Merchant 'in' Venice* we had *the real* in over-abundance. We were on site, and as we were performing around mid-summer, we started the piece in daylight with the drone of the cicadas filling the air. The performers arrived from around the corner where we were using a school as dressing rooms, arriving in song and dance to begin the performance. With the last beat of the opening music we activated the space by throwing on to their full brightness the footlights we had installed in front of the audience. But, given the remaining daylight, the effect was barely visible on the performers beyond creating a soft glow that warmed the colour of the costumes, arriving as it did from what, in our usual experience, is an unusual angle. Natural directional light is most often experienced from above, or at its most extreme, during sunset, from the side. Light from below, notwithstanding the fact that footlights were a theatrical necessity and convention for centuries, is unnatural or unusual to our modern perception. For our production, this lighting was the opening gesture to set off the non-theatrical reality or experience of the campo from our theatrical intervention in the space.

It was not till several scenes into the performance that the light from our equipment was necessary in the fading daylight. (Due to the heights of the buildings, none of the late day direct sunlight entered the performance.) At that point, we shifted to take advantage of no ambient light from the sky being available to work with, and we engaged light and shadow in starker contrast. The timing worked such that during Jessica's flight from her father Shylock's house, dark had just fallen, which allowed us to work with real torches, which Lorenzo and his gang had talked about in the previous scene when they were planning their getaway. The footlights now became tools to cast strangely elongated shifting shadows on the buildings, trees and other performers, a design technique we used again to great effect when Shylock discovered Jessica gone. Again, the *real* contrasted with the *strange*.

Being on location meant that we had to bring in any additional infrastructure we would need and, being Venice, all that infrastructure had to arrive by boat. This led to a consideration of what was truly necessary, which led to a compact set of bold lighting gestures, a choice which suited the piece. We decided on a vocabulary that tied location and character to specific colours. These colour choices became the signposts indicating where a scene was taking place and identified our shifting casting of the role of Shylock, played by five different actors in sequence. The Ghetto's pavements are of a light grey stone, different from the colour of the buildings, that reflected each colour of light in turn and became a kind of ground *background*. (When the production was later staged in traditional theatres, we used the back wall of the theatre space to replicate what the paving stones were doing for us in the campo.)

We worked with a warm sandstone-coloured light for scenes taking place in the streets of Venice. This was intended to connect to the colour of the stone used in the buildings around us and to the sodium vapour streetlights still lit and lighting the passages into and out of the campo at the edges of the audience's vision, spaces that were still pulsing with activity as the performance took place. This light was intended, being a tint of the yellow sash worn by the Jewish characters, to help make those sashes pop out in the visual field and connect the actors who were wearing them to this place where they were standing.

A deep red light was used exclusively in the trial scene. The performer playing the duke, whom we had previously seen as Shylock, was identified by a massive red robe, and the red light worked as an extension of the costume and thus of judicial power. Each of the other characters, as well as some of the audience who were ushered on-stage at this point to join the court, were provided with a red stole for this scene. Shylock, with his yellow sash, was clearly marked as the outsider, his yellow floating in a sea of red governmental power. Here again the footlights became a primary tool in our storytelling.



Figure 11 'Mercy' projected onto the Ghetto walls. © Andrea Messana

By simple proximity, Shylock and his various accusers downstage close to the audience were brighter in the audience's field of vision, and they both blocked the light and cast shadows on the rest of the court still glowing red further upstage. As the scene progressed, we shrank the illuminated space until it showed just the single clear light on Shylock and a red wash of light everywhere else. He remained isolated and alone even as the rest of the court surrounded him, looming over him as the judgement was announced.

A rich primary blue light was used to denote scenes that were taking place at Belmont. This was used to light the trees, the stones of the ground in front of the audience, and as much of the space as possible. Beyond signalling a change in location the colour helped emphasise the inertia in Belmont at the beginning of the play and the languid night in the final scenes (and it cut against Jessica's rebuke of Lorenzo as they gazed into "such a night as this..."). Blue being at the far end of the visible light spectrum muted the warmer hues of the buildings and brought forward the presence of the tree, in an attempt to distance the action and build up a contrast from where the production was situated.

Our production short-circuited before the end of Shakespeare's text. Where the text would have us end in weddings and reconciliations after Portia's summing up of all her machinations and news-bringing, which we saw as problematic 'happy ending' territory, in Karin's staging our five Shylocks, dressed again in their robes and yellow sashes, stepped forward to repeat a part of one of Shylock's earlier speeches. As this contrast between injustice and the now subsumed celebrations took place, the blue light and the Belmont stage picture drained away, leaving the cast, illuminated as at the beginning by the footlights, facing the audience. Then Jessica, running at full tilt, suddenly burst through this line-up. She stepped across the footlights into the space of the audience, an attempt to escape the smothering confines of the society and laws of property and propriety that have twisted through the play. A look of horror was on her face. Any remaining illusions were shattered. The real had come crashing back in to mix with the argument contained in the text. The buildings surrounding us, that had become part of our scenic backdrop, returned to the present and the history they had witnessed.

As Jessica stopped short and looked out to the audience, a final blast from a shofar was heard, amplified and echoing through the campo, as the walls began to speak. Our final gesture was to cut the lights and project across the façades of the buildings:

רַחֲמִים / MISERICORDIA / RAKHAMIM / MERCY

Something the play asks us to engage in more fully.



## The Actors Speak

Francesca Sarah Toich  
Michelle Uranowitz  
Paul Spera  
Jenni Lea-Jones  
Linda Powell  
Michele Athos Guidi

**Abstract** *The Merchant 'in' Venice* brought together an international cast of actors. In this chapter six of them recall the experience of workshopping then rehearsing Shakespeare's play for the site-specific production they brought to the Ghetto in 2016. They think about the pressures of place – speaking *these* lines in *this* location – and of history; the challenges of working in several languages and cutting the script to two hours' running time; the existential trouble of doubling characters who look like opposites; the excitement of inhabiting their roles and reaching their audiences. They reveal the production from the experience of living inside it.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Site-specific performance. Performing Shakespeare. Rehearsal. Portia. Shylock. Bassanio. Lancelot Gobbo. Lorenzo. Jessica. Actors on Shakespeare.

Director Karin Coonrod assembled her international company – her “gathering of strangers”, as she called it – across two years and five countries. In the summer of 2015, she workshopped *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice with locally-based actors. The following summer, after auditions in New York and recalls for several actors from the original workshop, Coonrod finalised her cast and began rehearsing in earnest. Her vision: to produce a site-specific performance using a site-specific adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. In her production, for the first time in history, Shakespeare's Shylock would walk across the stones of the Venetian Ghetto to conduct his business with Antonio, the merchant of Venice. Her cast included: Shylock #3/Duke, Jenni Lea-Jones;



Figure 1 Actors waiting to make their first entrance. © Andrea Messina

Nerissa, Elena Pellone; Portia, Linda Powell; Lancillotto, Francesca Sarah Toich; Jessica, Michelle Uranowitz; Shylock #4/Gobbo, Andrea Brugnera; Shylock #5/Tubal, Ned Eisenberg; Bassanio, Michele Athos Guidi; Shylock #2/Arragon, Adriano Iurissevich; Morocco, Matthieu Pastore; Salarino, Hunter Perske; Antonio, Stefano Scherini; Lorenzo, Paul Spera; Shylock #1/Graziano, Sorab Wadia; Salanio, Enrico Zagni. Angeli Neri (stagehands): Roberta Barbiero, Emeline Mele, Alessandra Quattrini, Ziv Gidron, Martin Romeo. Here, six of those actors offer their reflections on this historic production.

### Francesca Sarah Toich

Lancillotto

*La prima volta che ho parlato con Karin Coonrod è stato in dialetto veneto, e per giunta antico. Lei era seduta davanti a me mentre io interpretavo un pezzo di Ruzzante...*

The first time I spoke with Karin Coonrod, it was in Venetian, what's more, in *ancient* Venetian - a speech from Ruzzante. Karin had decided to try something bizarre: to open the play with a monologue from this extraordinary Paduan author of the 1500s.

What does Ruzzante have to do with Shakespeare? Everything - at least as much as *commedia dell'arte* does. Just as we celebrate



Figure 2 Costume design, 'Lancillotto' by Stefano Nicolao

Shakespeare's contributions to the English language, Italian actors recognise Angelo Beolco as the inventor of a Veneto theatrical dialect, a comic idiom full of lewd *double entendres* that revel in the beauty and cruelty of servant and peasant life.

Our dramaturg, Walter Valeri, had the idea of opening the play with a piece of *commedia dell'arte* in mask. He and Karin decided that Shylock's servant, Lancillotto (Shakespeare's Launcelot Gobbo), should kick off the show with a strong prologue by Ruzzante. When they offered me the role of Lancillotto, I was thrilled. For many years I have performed *commedia dell'arte*, and from the beginning, I have always been attracted by the servant roles most. *Commedia* is a very defined style of theatre: there are masters and servants, Arlecchino and Zanni being the servant roles in which I'm specialised. My Lancillotto became a sort of Zanni-Arlecchino but more human and 'freer' because, while he is inspired by *commedia*, he is not a proper *commedia* character. For example, Arlecchino and Zanni always wear a mask, but my Lancillotto only wore one in the first scene. After that, he became a more recognisably 'ordinary' man (though still stylised in his gestures and, of course, still played by a woman), and a confidant for Jessica, Shylock's daughter.

At the very beginning of the show, however, he pounced into the scene like a beast, leaping and screaming in that old Venetian dialect. I was enthusiastic about starting with Ruzzante because I've per-



Figure 3 Francesca Sara Toich as masked Lancillotto. © Andrea Messana

formed his texts for many years, but at the same time I was anxious. I knew that no-one in the audience would understand a word of my speech in that long-disused language. Still, I knew that if I used my body well, if my character, not I, enjoyed himself, every gesture would convey meaning. This was the challenge every night. Servants must bring energy to the *commedia* with ardour, with attention, sometimes sacrifice.

Frank London's wonderful music made things easier. He cleverly wrote an overture inspired by sixties Italian movies (Fellini especially), to which the entire company paraded onstage at the top of the show. This was also a reference to the classical tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, which provides for 'sung' entries by all the characters to immediately attract the attention of the audience. I really felt the powerful support of the whole company singing and dancing onstage alongside me as I burst into the Ruzzante introduction.

Music, mask, and theatrical dialect were not just about adding some Venetian folklore to the show. After all, Shakespeare wrote *commedia* into the play itself, even though those scenes are sadly often cut from stage productions. I remember Karin was surprised by the power of Ruzzante's dialect and even more excited and fascinated when, some days later, I performed the same monologue with the mask and gestures of Harlequin. "What a joy, this *commedia*!" she said.

In Coonrod's version, Lancillotto assumes the important role of clown, demon, schemer and, as Karin said, "Someone who knows everything about everyone, who watches everywhere and knows

his chickens!". One reviewer called me 'an antic', a 'clown in a cod-piece'. Initially slightly offended, I began to like that word 'antic'. Lancillotto is exactly that: grotesque, bizarre. Like a cat, particularly mischievous. It is not by chance that the first actors of *commedia* were inspired by animals for their characters, and I, too, drew inspiration for Lancillotto's leaps and gestures from a half-wild cat who knows how to get food from everyone. But Karin suggested a new interpretation when she said to me: "Yes, it's great! But I want more Mick Jagger in your Arlecchino". This was the key that gave me permission to remain in the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, experimenting, however, with an exhilarating contemporaneity. Harlequin-Lancillotto became, at times, a rock star. He danced, jumped and entered the scene possessed by Jagger.

Lancillotto, who goes from serving Shylock to serving Bassanio, is also called Young Gobbo. He and his father, Old Gobbo, a blind, senile beggar, have a hilarious bit of *commedia* slapstick in Act II. The scene is not merely entertainment for the groundlings. Andrea Brugnera, who played Gobbo and also Shylock #4 in the Venice production, put it to me this way: "Old Gobbo is a harbinger of what the Jewish merchant will become when the play is over and he has lost his wealth, his religion, his place in the community. Gobbo is Shylock's double, and his cautionary tale". Likewise, my Ruzzante prologue to our show, mocking and celebrating the madness of love and desire, is a presage of the havoc this party of a play wreaks on its most famous character.

After Venice, I played Lancillotto in America - when I was pregnant to Paul Spera (Lorenzo) whom I had met on set in Venice and who became my husband. It can truly be said that this play, wonderfully, changed my life. I was a Harlequin-Jagger with a six-month pregnant belly and a rather pronounced codpiece. I was following in the tradition of *commedia*, which allowed women to perform onstage, sometimes dressed as men, and afforded them legal protections when pregnant. It was an incredible experience for my body, for my daughter. We were one.

What continues to fascinate me in *The Merchant of Venice* and generally in Shakespearean writing is the rhythm of the verse and how the different characters, speaking their lines, create a symphony. Thanks to Karin and Walter, I was able to add my own personal touch to the symphony, mixing Italian, Venetian dialect and English. I always found my 'masters of the scene', Jessica, Lorenzo, Shylock, extremely responsive to every stimulus. And it was also very interesting to work with actors who do not speak the same language. An understanding of the scene immediately falls beyond words. In the linguistic confusion you cling with joy to the gestures, to the rhythm. And the rhythm of Shakespeare's verse - it's pure music for a Harlequin-Jagger.



**Figure 4** Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) plays cat's cradle with Lancillotto (Francesca Sara Toich). © Andrea Messana

## Michelle Uranowitz

Jessica

When I recall my memories of *The Merchant 'in' Venice* my heart beats faster and faster. I imagine myself at the very beginning of it all, trudging through a NYC blizzard to audition for the role of Jessica. (Knowing Karin Coonrod as well as I do now, it is no surprise that she would go on with auditions in a city that was entirely shut down due to snow). Then in Venice, climbing the stairs to the exquisite apartment in San Marco where I would be living. Then in the Jewish Ghetto, rehearsing. On our 'stage right' was the Banco Rosso - this would be Shylock's, my father's, home. Above the banco was a small window - a window that would be Jessica's portal into romance and rebellion. It's not often you arrive in the theatre with the set having been laid down centuries ago. It all felt like some fever dream.

There was so much I knew about *The Merchant of Venice* going into rehearsals, and so *little* I knew about the character of Jessica. Portia, yes, Shylock, of course... but Jessica, almost nothing. As a result, I could not have anticipated the enormous impact that playing this role would have on my life. More specifically, as a Jew playing Jessica in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice. My experience in Venice became a sort of cathartic exploration in my own womanhood and ties to Judaism. It was quite emotional to explore the history of this play within the history of this place. And our director, Karin Coonrod, encouraged us, and me, to think about these things in deeply personal ways.



Figure 5 Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz). © Andrea Messina

Playing a rambunctious and rebellious young daughter is not something foreign to me, having been very similar at that age. The opportunity to do it in the carnival setting of Venice made it that much more exhilarating. A shotgun wedding, running away from home, stealing a trunk of ducats – it was exhilarating playing Jessica every evening! During the performances, I would find myself sprinting circuits of the entire Ghetto Novo for two hours straight, up and down steps, quick changes between scenes – and then, after the show, having to trek the long distance home to the other side of the city where I was staying. I loved all of it: how it made my body feel, how it made my muscles stronger – *free!* When I think about the character of Jessica, I think about that very freedom she is searching for throughout the play. It was this very desire that infused my momentum throughout the performance – even on some of the hottest and most humid days. Playing this role also illuminated the ways in which scholars – many of whom offered observation and discussion over the course of the production – perceive Jessica and her quest for freedom. People think about Jessica as the rebellious teenager, the Jew betraying a Jew, a woman resisting the patriarchy! In some cases, what could be seen as the ‘Jessica problem’. Isn’t that the very mistake we make when we misinterpret an adolescent’s burgeoning instinct for independence that has to be gained by rebellion? Yes, rebellion is part of that, and so is lying. But what is also part of it is growth and understanding. For me, Jessica is like any young girl who is finding herself. It is just pretty inconvenient timing. And you may be thinking – ‘she stole hun-

dreds, if not thousands, of dollars from her father!' Yes. There is, too, a *lot* of naivety and ignorance... but as an actor, it clarified the kind of reckoning she has at the end of the play.

I believe Jessica grows up a lot over the course of the play – the same way living in Italy for that time when we were rehearsing and performing *Merchant* allowed for a sense of independence I had been craving myself. She begins to see the world quite clearly – how money plays into decisions, how relationships are complicated, and how men use their power. We are so focused on what does not go right for Jessica – because let us face it, much of it does not go according to plan. But what struck me in playing this character was how much her sense of character grows throughout the course of the play – and it is that very character we recognise that she shares with her dad, Shylock – the way she clings to her bond with Lorenzo. Her relationship to Lancelotto deepens, and her understanding of how she fits into the world becomes clear. It is what I love the most about Shakespeare – the ways in which he plants the smallest nuances of people in his plots.

Growing up, I remember a word I was called a few times – 'JAP' – which stands for a *Jewish American Princess*. It is a term reserved for what people perceive as bratty Jewish girls. Why is it that when a young woman makes demands for herself, or makes choices about what she wants, or even sets limits on what she can take, she is deemed a princess? Jessica, too, could be called such. And sure, there is an element of truth in this. But what I appreciated about Karin's direction of this character was her insistence on Jessica's strength and power. In this way, I learned a lot about myself through Jessica – to tap into my own sense of power by understanding my own lineage. To see that it can be devastating to recognise hate but liberating to detach yourself from it.

In that final scene between Jessica and Lorenzo in Shakespeare's 5.1, they bicker in a verbal showdown, "In such a night..." When Jessica dares Lorenzo to "ask my opinion too of that", she is demanding her force be heard. She is in fact crossing the line, and Karin wanted Lorenzo to feel the threat of that power.

When someone recognises an evil core to the system – a system of lies, of injustice, of hatred – they have the responsibility to warn others about it, or at the very least, to speak up. The final gesture of our production: Jessica emerged from the group and looked at the Venetians, looked at her father, and spun around to face the audience. She opened her mouth, and the Shofar bellowed against the walls of the Ghetto. The walls spoke, yet she could not. A warning, perhaps. A call to arms, the start of war. But maybe, too, the start of understanding? Karin used the walls as surfaces on which to inscribe in four languages the word 'Mercy'.



**Figure 6** Lorenzo (Paul Spera) with (behind) Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) at her open window. © Andrea Messana

## Paul Spera

Lorenzo

As I write this at the end of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is in its ninth month, and wearing a mask in public has become the norm. We don them for protection, not disguise; yet I cannot be the only one relieved when an acquaintance I would rather not have to stop and chat with fails to recognise me on the street. Nor can I be alone in fantasising about what outlandish things I might do under the guise of an N95. All this has gotten me thinking back to Venice, and to the mad masquerades of Carnival season. A historical clue into the delirium that was: forty years after Shakespeare's death, Venetian authorities banned mask-wearers from carrying weapons and from entering churches and convents. We can only imagine what revellers had been doing up until then - and with whom - to merit such a crackdown!

Venice is as famous today as it was in Shakespeare's time for its masks, parties, parades, and performances. If *The Merchant of Venice* is not specifically set during Carnival, masks are certainly the enabler for some of the play's serious shenanigans. "What, are there masques?" exclaims the Jewish merchant, Shylock, as he debates attending a dinner party the play's *jeune premier* Bassanio is throwing in Act 2. Shylock does end up going, but his suspicions are well-founded; while he is out, his daughter Jessica elopes with the character I played in 2016, a young Venetian (i.e. Christian) named Lorenzo. Under the cover of night, masked Lorenzo and his pals show up at Jessica's win-



Figure 7 Paul Spera as Lorenzo. © Andrea Messina

dow to whisk her – and a suitcase full of her father’s cash – away. I like to think of this scene as a wink to the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, except in this version, it is as if the lovers are stealing dad’s convertible, and Romeo has brought his friends along for the ride.

Our director Karin Coonrod chose to really own the heady carnivalesque atmosphere of the play’s second act. The rawness, the racism, the rage and hatred and despair of all that follows, as Shylock vows revenge and fails to get it, became all the more powerful by contrast. As in the opening sequence of our production when the whole company entered as a carnival parade across the Ghetto Novo led by Lancillotto into the playing space, Karin had us, in this scene of the bride snatch, singing, dancing and partying in the middle of the campo. But the jaunty, seemingly innocent *commedia dell’arte* number that introduced Act I gave way to something more sinister in Act II. Then it was day; now it was night, and our lighting designer Peter Ksander’s yellow floodlights were downright eerie. The revellers rolled up in front of Shylock’s house carrying a flaming torch. Costumer Stefano Nicolao’s gruesome masks, inspired by the work of surrealist painter James Ensor, covered every face. In an unsubtle bit of foreshadowing, party-boys Salanio and Graziano conducted a raucous operatic joust, singing about inconstant lovers, killing time until I ran on as Lorenzo. Late to my own *rendezvous galant*. I called out to Jessica’s window – in Venice, a real first-story window in the campo, graciously lent to the production by the apartment’s owners and their dog. Jessica appeared, needed a little convincing (not so hot about having to dress up as a boy), my mates started rushing me and cat-calling, we did not have anyone to

bear the torch, Jessica would have to do... at last she threw down the cash and the jewels and, finally, herself; we kissed, danced, groped, put our masks back on and ran off to the sound of trumpets, spinning round and round, my hands around her waist and the briefcase full of dough safely under my buddy Salarino's arm.

In the play, the couple then disappears for three months. According to hearsay, they have blown all their cash in Genoa and may have swapped a Shylock family heirloom for a monkey. They are reckless kids, and that is how Michelle Uranowitz and I played them. When Jessica and Lorenzo return post-honeymoon, they end up house-sitting Portia's country estate in Belmont, while everyone else is in Venice at Shylock and Antonio's trial. (I am turning the plot and subplot inside-out here, telling the story from our supporting characters' perspectives.) Soon they start to bicker, as Lorenzo becomes jealous of Jessica's clownish servant Lancelotto. He had been her sole companion in her father's household, but he is a domestic, a *Zanni* - an animal, basically. Not that it should be much of a surprise: these Jews do not know how to behave, no sense of propriety, not much better than animals themselves, even if I did marry one... Lorenzo's rancour at father-in-law Shylock, who has dared to challenge Don Antonio's mafia-like hold on Venetian commerce, inevitably turns to Jew-baiting. In Karin's whirlwind staging, a powerful scene we dubbed 'cat's-cradle' immediately preceded the play's famous courtroom drama. Throughout the show, the colour yellow had been suggestively introduced in half a dozen ways through Nicolao's costumes, a symbol and reminder of Jewishness. Jessica had shed her yellow sash when she converted and wed Lorenzo after Act 2. But she retained a fond memento: a yellow ribbon she and Lancelotto used at the beginning of Shakespeare's 3.5 to play cat's cradle. Then, as the scene unravels into a lovers' tiff, Lorenzo shuts Jessica up by snatching away this keepsake and stamping on it. As if to sever her family ties and claim his territory once and for all. Here, Frank London's music turned dark, and Ksander bathed the stage in blood-red light. Everything slowed down, as the gravity of what had just transpired hit the audience all at once. When the action returned to Belmont in Act 5, it was as if something had changed in the very fabric of the stars. Lorenzo and Jessica had gone from giddy, wild-at-heart lovers to a distant couple already waxing nostalgic about what might have been. She hints at regret, accusing her husband of "Stealing her soul with many vows of faith | And ne'er a true one". He calls her "a little shrew" who is "Slander[ing] her love". The masks have come off, but, as with the play as a whole, there is no resolution in sight.

I remember as we rehearsed feeling a constant temptation to climb things. I could not resist trying to scale the columns of the Banco Rosso - the extraordinarily preserved sixteenth-century bank-cum-pawnbrokerage there in the Ghetto that could have been Shylock's



**Figure 8** Jenni Lea-Jones as Shylock #3 and the other Shylocks. © Andrea Messana

haunt – below Jessica’s window. And during the show, I could not go a performance without attempting some new, acrobatic pounce onto the *pozzo*, the Venetian well that lay in the middle of our playing space in the Campo de Ghetto Novo. No doubt I was feeling the giddiness Karin encouraged in her direction, her vision of a play that begins as a mad revel and ends in a bad hangover. The worst morning-after is Shylock’s, of course; Shakespeare knew that the down-trodden and spit-upon most often just get shafted even more in the end. But it is an adventure that leaves a sour taste in everyone’s mouth, including the victors’. Not least for Jessica and Lorenzo, who seem to realise by the play’s end that they may have made a big mistake and are going to have to live with it. These alternating states of intoxication and nostalgia came wrapped in the ghostly whisper of a bard who, as we performed his play in 2016, had died exactly four centuries before, announcing to characters and audience alike: “You are all amazed!”

### Jenni Lea-Jones

Shylock #3

Performing Shylock was one of the most exciting and daunting things I have ever done. The list of famous classic male characters that, as a female performer, you do not imagine you will have the opportunity to tackle is long, and of course, Shylock is pretty high on that list.

In our production, five actors played Shylock, one after another. This was an inspired choice by Karin, I think. Shylock is without a



Figure 9 Jenni Lea-Jones as the Duke. © Andrea Messana

doubt one of the most complex characters in the history of theatre, so using five actors enabled us to highlight some of the very different aspects of this complicated human in a way that one actor may not have managed alone.

Sorab Wadia, playing the first incarnation, brought 'the merchant' to life. The negotiator, the moneylender at the top of his game, a witty wordsmith who understands his business better than anyone. A man in control. Adriano Iurissevich presented us with the patriarch. Here we saw the father in control of his home and his daughter. A loving and stern parent concerned for the safety of his homestead. I performed the 'third' Shylock, after losing Jessica, his daughter, half his fortune and treasured possessions that were gifted to him by his now deceased wife, a lost man in shock. Andrea Brugnera showed us the desperate, revengeful side of Shylock. We saw him learn how his daughter is squandering his money and exchanging his bachelor's ring, given to him by his bride, for a monkey, and we witnessed his fury and his desire to take out his rage on Antonio. Ned Eisenburg rounded off our Shylocks in the courtroom scene with beautiful eloquence. The dignified orator, the intellectual, a man outnumbered, destined to lose, but who will not go down without a fight.

Karin did not want me to be a woman 'playing' a man, nor indeed did she want my Shylock to be a woman. I think we both wanted Shylock to be all genders and no gender at this point in the play. No matter what our intentions were in rehearsal for the final performance, I could not escape the fact that I was, of course, approaching the text as a wom-

an. And looking at this character through my eyes really highlighted certain aspects of Shylock that I had never considered when I had seen him previously performed by men. It made me consider, for example, that he has been both a father and a mother to Jessica, after the loss of his wife. Having to embody both of these roles would, I thought, make him feel the loss of his daughter all the more keenly. It is also important to consider the traditional matri-linear descent in Judaism. After the death of his wife, he will have no more children and, now that his daughter has eloped with a Christian, he will have no purely Jewish grandchildren. He has lost his own line of descent.

This way of thinking enabled me to embody the huge sense of loss, anger and injustice felt when performing Shylock's famous "Hath not a Jew" monologue. At the top of this scene, Karin had all of us Shylocks join together, for the first time in the production. We came into a circle and faced each other. At the same time, the rest of the cast took on the role of our Christian tormentors, wheeling around us, shouting at us, insulting us, spitting at our feet. To feel those words of abuse, to see the anguish on the faces of the 'other' Shylocks, to be both experiencing the situation and witnessing it happening really fed the fire I needed to play that scene. Taking up all of that rage, that feeling of injustice, of grief, my Shylock turned out of the circle, faced the audience and let out an almighty wail!

The wail, or keen, was something that came out of one of the first rehearsals as we workshopped the text in the summer of 2015, a full year before we staged our production in the Ghetto. Karin wanted me to find a sound, a cry for the loss of Jessica. I do not think her initial intention was to use it in the performance, but just to explore a sensation that would carry me into that scene, into the monologue. To bring the sense of loss into those famous words, "If you prick us do we not bleed?" I started with a deep moan, and a rocking in my body. It felt slightly ritualistic, like being at the Wailing Wall. But the more I felt it in the pit of my stomach, the more it started to turn into a primitive, earth-shattering sound of grief, despair and anguish. The feeling in the room when this noise came out was electric. There was no question of it not being used in the performance after that. For spectators and reviewers, Shylock #3's 'wail' was a signature moment.

There is a lot of pressure as a performer when tackling any well-known, much beloved character. You are aware of the history of the part, the shadows of incredible actors who have made this role their own, the thousands of divided opinions about the character carried by scholars, literature lovers and theatre-goers. You carry this information with you into the rehearsals like a sack of bricks and somehow you have to slowly put it down, brick by brick, leave it offstage and walk on with a character all of your own.

## Linda Powell

Portia

Playing one of Shakespeare's most famous women with an international cast in the country where the play was set was a singular experience. I was away from home, out of my routine, and soaking up the newness of... well, everything. Collaborating with Karin Coonrod for the first time and feeling her passion for the work. Diving into the text with Gigi Buffington. Admiring the precision and process and joy of the *commedia* actors in the cast – the expressiveness of their movement and their deep commitment to tradition. Being a part of a disparate group of actors slowly becoming a company. And then of course there was the magic of being in Venice. Those weeks will always feel to me, in their own way, like a rose-coloured dream.

But. My memories also include how hard we worked. How hot it was. How lost we felt when transitioning from our small, safe rehearsal room to the vast outdoor playing space. Leaving the safety of the rehearsal hall is always a delicate transition for an actor but the move to the Ghetto was a particular shock. Faced with the wide-open campo, we had to re-block scenes to fill that space. That meant sacrificing the ability to be close enough to find connection in each other's eyes. We also discovered that the microphones required for amplification could only pick up our voices if we faced forward. Those necessities resulted in a flurry of work to find a more presentational energy than honoured all of the intimate discoveries we had had in our first weeks. In a matter of a day or two we created a new world for ourselves. All while negotiating the cicadas, the tourists, the heat, the threats of rain, and, strongly for me, the pull of history as our make-believe met reality in the stones and windows around us. Spitting 'Jew' disdainfully at my scene partner was one thing in a private rehearsal room, quite another in the middle of the active Ghetto.

Portia stretched me. I went in without knowing much more about *Merchant* than what I remembered from the couple of productions I had seen over the years. I had not been a part of the 2015 workshop so played catch up for a bit with a patient company. As we worked, I grew to love the play's complexity – layers of love, family, religion, commerce, greed and revenge. Our working text had been adapted and redacted strategically to lay bare the characters' inhumanity to one another. Portia was not excused from that harsh light. Karin challenged us to lean into the ugliness of the society, and the transactional nature of its relationships. The tension between that task and the surface impressions that I'd arrived with – Portia as a charming and witty heroine – presented an exciting challenge.

An additional challenge was the sheer amount of text. Our rehearsal period was a short three weeks and I regretted not having arrived in Italy 'off book'. Portia has a lot to say. The word count of



**Figure 10** Portia (Linda Powell) and Nerissa (Elena Pellone). © Andrea Messana

the role is second only to Rosalind of all of Shakespeare's women and of all the *Merchant* characters she speaks the most. I have never been an actor who does well memorising in a vacuum. Words do not stick in my head without being attached to the relationships I am building, the choices I am making and the world the company is creating. As a result, I struggled in rehearsal until the text started to become secure enough that my mind could keep with up with Portia's. Nowhere was that more important than in the trial scene. Even writing from this distance, I can feel the relief when these particular lines finally took root in my memory and I could land them on Shylock:

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.  
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more  
But just a pound of flesh. If thou take'st more  
Or less than a just pound, be it but so much  
As makes it light or heavy in the substance  
Or the division of the twentieth part  
Of one poor scruple, nay, if the scale do turn  
But in the estimation of a hair,  
Thou diest, and all they goods are confiscate.  
(4.1.320-28)

Those are the lines that mark the moment when, as we played it, Portia begins to turn the screws on Shylock. His certainty unravels from there. Those lines and the ones that come after are the ugly coun-



Figure 11 Linda Powell as Portia. © Andrea Messana

terpoint to the elegance of her famous “Quality of Mercy” speech. Once Shylock declines to offer any mercy, Portia shows him none.

I began rehearsals with an assumption of Portia’s righteousness based on what I thought I understood about the “Quality of Mercy” speech. But, ultimately, Portia’s behaviour in the trial scene – while effective – cannot be described as good. I was surprised by the cruelty that emerged as I played it – a cruelty fueled by the passion of the moment and by what I came to understand as a kind of tribalism. She defends the laws of Venice tooth and nail. Her people. Her culture. Her world. Her laws. Shakespeare wrote an incredibly strong woman and Karin was not interested in softening that strength in any way, or in making Portia a righteous saviour.

Some are surprised by Portia’s hypocrisy in the trial scene, but her turn to harsh justice made sense to me especially living the moment to moment of Shylock’s knife on Antonio’s breast as we staged it – poised to cut, tense for an extended theatrical moment that felt like a lifetime. The rage I ended up playing the scene with, however, did surprise me. I vividly remember the late afternoon rehearsal when I felt that energy surface and made a conscious decision to lean strongly into it ‘as an exercise’ – something I do sometimes in rehearsal not because I think the choice is right, but to override my brain and shake things loose. We were all quiet when the scene ended that day. It was ugly. And it felt right. I was taken aback feeling that energy in myself. In early performances, I let the character be taken aback by it too. I would take a private moment to feel some shame,

some shock at what I had done. It was small and probably went mostly unnoticed. Which is just as well. Because as time went on, I let that go. Shakespeare is smarter than that. He draws us warts and all. Holding a mirror up to our nature. And really, how much more interesting to play a human than a heroine.

Portia is beautifully layered. She is daughter, friend, heiress, survivor, bigot, lover, lawyer, and ultimately the winner of the games people play in the play. The final act finds her commanding the world around her, holding the upper hand over her husband, restoring Antonio's ships, flaunting access to knowledge she feels no compunction to share with those around her - including the audience. I loved being in her skin. I had never been asked to inhabit that kind of space. To take that kind of agency. It was thrilling.

### **Michele Athos Guidi**

Bassanio

I remember when I auditioned for Bassanio in the darkness of the theatre academy, the same academy that had hosted me, raised and taught me for three years. And at that moment, I was there with the possibility of getting to work on a Shakespeare part. I thought to myself, "I have to believe; I have to do everything they want", and so I did, believing in my abilities, even losing my way in the text, and having to improvise - in English!

The audition went well and maybe it was because of my courage that they cast me. When I met with the company I could not believe it. I looked like a fish out of water. All those assembled actors; American, English, Italian, Australian, French, Indian - a cosmopolitan group like that which made up the population of Venice at the time of the Republic. All gathered for one purpose only. Bringing to life one of the most complex and significant texts of Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. In Venice. It did not seem real, but I was there. With all of them, script and pencil in my hand.

Then the work started. I remember that the first weeks were tiring, my brain had to go twice as fast to keep up with all the input and rules that Shakespeare's text imposed: old difficult words, respecting the iambic pentameter, underlining words at the end of the lines, and above all, reproducing the English sound in my mouth. All these were the obstacles that I had to train myself every day to overcome. During rehearsals I followed my companions with fascination, especially the Anglo-Saxon ones. The musicality of those words struck me every day, so strong and pure. They remain in my head even today. I have also realised that for me English is a beautiful language, incredibly direct and supple. It can draw extremely vivid and concrete images. It is at the same time stone and crystal, where with a few words



**Figure 12** Bassanio (Michele Athos Guidi) and Antonio (Stefano Scherini). © Andrea Messina

you can say everything. It's like having a range of meanings but having a few keys in your hand. Shakespeare is a master for choosing the right key at the right moment. Compared to Italian, it is less paraphrased and more concrete, it does not always sound poetic like my language, but more pungent. Sometimes it seemed to me I had a sword in my mouth instead of my tongue, and I loved all this.

I played Bassanio, a young Venetian Christian gentleman, who falls in love with Portia, a rich heiress of Belmont, and who to woo the girl borrows money from his dear friend Antonio. It was all easy to imagine. Venice is surrounded by small islands. I imagined one of these - with animals, large buildings, gardens - and that became Belmont, and to go there I needed a boat. Then I found myself at the Rialto market with Antonio talking about food, good wine and business, you understand? In a place that really exists! We were there. I could go to the place that was written in the text! Rialto, the Banco Rosso - everywhere! This was the real magic. We literally followed Shakespeare around the city. In 2015, when we were workshopping the play, we did an impromptu rehearsal in the Rialto market. It was like a stargate, a door in time that opened to allow our contemporary bodies to give life to Shakespeare's fictional characters in the Venetian spaces they would have known. An unforgettable moment.

Wearing the clothes of my character was not difficult. It was enough to observe the modern-day Venetian heirs of Bassanio enjoying the sun, dressed in name brands, wearing leather moccasins, drinking fine wines in the city's prominent bars, pockets full



**Figure 13** Bassanio (Michele Athos Guidi) dressed in red for the trial. © Andrea Messana

of money. Fashion changes but attitudes do not. Bassanio is shrewd and calculating when he wants to be. He knows his goal: to marry the beautiful Portia by any means. The more difficult challenge is to face his moral ideas, to have no mercy for Shylock, to focus only on Antonio and to get around justice at all costs. I am personally far from Bassanio, but it is always a challenge to meet your opposite. There is an intricate relationship between Antonio and Bassanio: an underlying love that is so strong that, during the trial scene, when Antonio's life is at stake, Bassanio is ready to sacrifice everything for his best friend, even the woman he loves. This and the strange melancholy that plagues Antonio in the initial scenes hint at a deep bond between the two characters: a friendship with a foundation imbued with love. Our original Antonio, the actor who workshopped the play in 2015 but was unavailable to rehearse and perform the part in 2016 due to filming commitments was Reg E. Cathey. Some months after the 2016 performance, he died. Maybe that's why, at the thought of him, I carry the weight of a big loss. Theatre sometimes overlaps with real life. And you cannot do anything but accept it. More than Bassanio, I carry with me the torment of Shylock, betrayed by the law, the same law on which he had relied, and that Portia and the Christians used against him. I see my country very much in this. Italy, where the power of money bypasses any form of democracy.

But indeed, working with such a diverse and talented group of international and artistic actors gave me an energy that I had rarely felt before, and every day I thought about how lucky I was and the incredible possibility of living a magnificent experience. Then the

frame where everything took place – that is, Venice – perfectly sealed all these memories, making them indelible. It was one of the most important experiences of my life and the atmosphere that was created on the stage, the very Ghetto of Venice, in front of hundreds of people every night, was simply magical. When we took the production to Padua after our last performance in Venice, to a high security prison, playing the play there broke my heart in pieces. Talking about justice. In a prison in front of all those condemned men. Unforgettable.

I will always be grateful to the Compagnia de Colombari for having chosen me and giving me the opportunity to play and live such an intense experience of life and work that only the magic of theatre knows. I wanted to live it longer. Sometimes I think we should meet again, all of us again, once again on the stage. I miss the faces of my friends. And I miss acting in English. I am trying and I will continue to do it, always taking with me the words of the character of Antonio and the spirit of my friend Reg E. Cathey:

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,  
A stage where every man must play a part,  
And mine a sad one.  
(1.1.77-79)

Where “sad one” means the nostalgia for beautiful things.



# Playing the Angles: Finding Shylock and Gratiano

Sorab Wadia

Actor, musician, writer

**Abstract** Written by one of the only members of Compagnia de Colombari who worked on Coonrod's *Merchant* in all of its iterations, this chapter gives a jobbing actor's account of the 2016 production from its pre-life to its afterlife. For Sorab Wadia, the most daunting challenge was to double Shylock, the dignified Venetian moneylender in the opening scene, with Gratiano, the spitting Jew-baiter of the rest of the play. He could not reconcile the two parts, but he found, in rehearsing and performing them, how they – and the play – needed each other. Being in this play, he thinks, is like finding yourself in a George Braque painting.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Shylock. Gratiano. Rehearsal. Actors on Shakespeare. Site specific performance. Performing Shakespeare. George Braque and Shakespeare.

**Summary** 1 First Beginnings. – 2 Starting the Journey. –3 The Shylock Project: June 2015. – 4 The Merchant in the Ghetto: 2016. – 5 Retrospectives.

## 1 First Beginnings

I stand in front of my house. Next door is my bank, located in a safe corner on my home turf, the Ghetto Novo. My arms are outstretched. Two Black Angels ceremoniously invest me in a heavy, full-length linen robe. It's lined with a smoother, striped fabric. The early evening summer sun is still bright. I am looking straight ahead and see clearly everything around me. A plane tree, buzzing with cicadas is on my left. Beneath it sit six musicians, dressed in black, each wearing a black hat adorned with a single feather. Only one of them is playing, a plangent trumpet that beckons me into the space. I hear it.

I feel it deeply in my bones. It helps centre and still me, reminds me who I am, my tribe, where we have come from. But it is not yet time. My dressers are not finished.

On my right is a marble *pozzo* – a well – covered with a metal cap. I become aware of movement. Hovering on the far side of the *pozzo*. It is Bassanio. I catch sight of him out of the corner of my eye. He is waiting for my answer. Let him wait.

Further along is a *fontana*. A constant stream of water issues from its cast iron mouth. Beyond it I see people. People – many people, sitting, standing, leaning out of windows; craning their necks as they pass me by; a man in a uniform holding a keen dog on a short leash – watching. But it is not yet time. Let them wait.

The Black Angels turn the edges of my robe outward to form wide lapels. I hold these in place as they wind a wide, yellow, silken sash around my waist three turns. I tell them to pull this sash tight, to cover my whole abdomen. “Tighter”, I whisper through imperceptibly parted lips. I want to feel girded, armoured, protected.

A Black Angel gently strokes me between the shoulder blades. Our signal: the sash is fixed. They leave me. I suddenly feel very alone. I feel the pressure of hundreds of eyes. Watching me. I tuck my hands behind the lapels and then bury them deeper under my armour-sash. I am ready. To do battle with the Christian hyenas.

This investiture: it feels like it has covered a frozen moment that has happened mid-conversation with the Venetian who is now at my elbow. Bassanio. Stepping forward, I break into the present. Through my soft suede shoes I feel every unevenness of the pavement beneath me. I must not, ‘nor I will not’, falter in front of the Christian. I steady myself and speak without so much as a glance in his direction: “Three thousand ducats; well”.

## 2 Starting the Journey

That line – “Three thousand ducats; well” – is where Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* presses Shylock’s play button. That line, as I spoke it, was where our production of Shakespeare’s play, set on the stones of the Ghetto Novo in 2016, brought Shylock, after 400 years of wandering, finally home. I was that ‘original’ Shylock. I was the one who spoke that opening line, who brought Shylock to life for the first time in history in that place, who took his first steps on a journey that would take him – but wait. I have to back-track, to retrace my own steps, to say something of my journey with what would become this production. It had begun two years earlier.

I was working on my first project with the director, Karin Coonrod, *The Tempest*, off-Broadway in New York in the autumn of 2014. While in mid-rehearsal for that show, I asked what her next Shakespeare



Figure 1 Shylock #1 (Sorab Wadia) provokes Antonio (Stefano Scherini). © Andrea Messana

was going to be. She said she had been asked to direct *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice in 2016, a production that would likely be multilingual, Italian, English, and maybe one or more of Ladino/Yiddish/Hebrew; that it would be staged outdoors, on site, as a part of a year-long event marking the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Jewish Ghetto. I was intrigued. I had studied *Merchant* in high school in Bombay where I grew up, and being the first Shakespeare I ever read, it had always held a dear place in my heart. I impishly, but truthfully, told Karin that I had nearly memorised the play in its entirety when I was 16 years old, spoke Italian rather well, and for nearly a decade had been singing in Hebrew behind one of the world's most famous Hassidic cantors in a shul on the Upper East Side. With a wink and a smile I left that information in her lap and sassily sauntered away, not thinking anything further would come of it.

Then it did. After *The Tempest* closed, I got a call asking if I would join a group of actors in her apartment the next day to read *The Merchant of Venice* over wine, olives, cheese and home-baked bread.

"Of course! With pleasure! And what role do you want me to read?"

"Shylock".

"Excuse me?!"

I was taken totally by surprise. At 45 I did not think myself old enough to play this role... nor famous enough, truth be told. "Oh, don't worry. It's only a gathering of friends. We'll just have fun with it tomorrow!" With less than twenty hours to prepare, it was a good thing

that what I had memorised at 16 still sat comfortably within my memory. But then, I do not think Karin wanted us to prepare. I think she wanted a cold read, a visceral shooting from the hip, delivery straight from the gut.

The reading went well enough. Although my Shylock was nothing to write home about, I had a blast reading him, and more importantly I realised that at 45 I was perhaps closer to Shylock's age than I had imagined. True, he is usually portrayed by older actors, often white-haired and wizened. But why? He was, after all, the dad of a young girl ready to fall in love and marry; she could be anywhere from 16 to early 20s. And certainly, a man of 45 could be the father of a 20-year-old. Still I had no illusions of headlining Karin's *Merchant!* At the next few readings over wine and cheese, I played several other characters, chief of whom was Gratiano, and maybe a scene or two as Shylock. Even in these early days, Karin never had me read the famous trial scene again. It was always Shylock in Shakespeare's early scenes. These readings taught me more not just about the play but about Karin Coonrod. She is a rare bird in the wilderness of American show business. She nurtures talent, will use actors over and over again, and takes casting risks. She values the ensemble, a company of actors sharing a common vision - where the vision takes precedence over her directorial ego.

### **3 The Shylock Project: June 2015**

The following summer Karin invited me to join a company of actors from around the globe to participate in a two-week workshop of Shakespeare's play as part of *The Shylock Project*, an international summer school organised by Shaul Bassi of Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He had assembled an impressive slate of scholars and practitioners from across Europe and the Americas to think about Shakespeare, Jews and Judaism in Venice, and of course Shylock himself: in history, in performance, from every angle imaginable. We gathered at the Fondazione Cini on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, directly across the lagoon from Piazza San Marco, a little gated heaven, a converted monastery and its cloisters.

Those two weeks turned out to be among the most rewarding and enriching theatrical experiences of my career. Many of us, actors and students, lived together on the island. *The Merchant of Venice* was in the air - we lived and breathed it, constantly talked it, walked it in company of our Venetian counterparts who showed us their - and Shylock's - city.

Getting down to business, we spent days around a table discussing, debating, learning (from each other and from our hands-on scholars); invaluable time digging into the text, characters and relationships.



Figure 2 Sorab Wadia rehearses with Reg E. Cathey in the Ghetto, summer 2015. © Andrea Messana

As Karin's vision deepened, I was able to get on board with gusto, because I began to understand it more profoundly. She was tasked with producing a *Merchant* in a very specific location – the Venetian Ghetto – at a very specific time – now. But a 'now' that somehow respected the multiple histories that collide, sometimes violently, in this play. It was clear that Shylock and his journey were going to be the focus of Karin's production. So it was going to be selective. But then, every production of a Shakespeare play is. His plays are vast. They contain worlds. No single production is going to map the whole territory. They are like Bruckner's symphonies or Bach's fugues. They have multiple themes and voices, so what any interpreter brings out in a production changes what the audience sees and hears. If that were not the case, we would need only one recording of Bach's *B Minor Mass*. No need to hear Maestro Celibidache's Bruckner *Fifth Symphony* and Maestro Haitink's.

Another parallel that kept coming to my mind was visual. Shakespeare's plays are like George Braque's cubist paintings. Moment by moment, the playwright makes us see things from different angles, from different points of view that fracture the narrative moment. Braque would regularly come to mind as I watched Karin quite deliberately swivel the angle on Shakespeare's play. The *Merchant* I had learned in high school? In retrospect, Karin-as-Braque showed me that any portrait of Antonio as unproblematically 'good', Portia as 'wise' or Shylock as 'evil' was cartoonishly facile. Her focus was not on three couples in a romantic comedy; it was on the cutthroat, avaricious, mercantile, xenophobic world in which they lived and on the

fierce mercilessness with which they operated while themselves demanding mercy from others. That word 'mercantile' became a leitmotif in rehearsals, and as we studied the play and learned more about Venice in Shakespeare's time, it picked up more and more resonance.

Facts we collected impacted our understanding. Some were broadly known, such as Jews being restricted in business to banking and the trade in second-hand goods. Others shocked us: Venetian Christians never touched Jews. What impact would this have on Shylock's first meeting with Antonio? Around the table, reading the opening scenes, we had established a working 'knowledge' of Shylock. He was wealthy; a deeply religious man who knew his Old Testament scripture better than the Christians who then mocked him for citing it; who bore himself with pride and dignity even in the face of the insults and indignities the Christians regularly hurled at him; who, a resident of Venice, was treated as an outsider. But, adding to the Braque-ish-ness of the character as Shakespeare wrote him, he was also a man who stated quite unequivocally that he 'hated' Antonio, the Christian merchant, because he loaned money "gratis", thus bringing down the rate of "usance" in the city, and that one day he would like to "catch him... upon the hip" so he could "feed fat" the "ancient grudge" he bore him.

We improvised their first meeting. When Bassanio and Antonio come to me, Shylock, for a hefty loan of 3,000 ducats, and Antonio threatens me with more insults, more baiting, I respond with mollification:

Why, look you, how you storm!  
I would be friends with you and have your love,  
Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with,  
Supply your present wants and take no doit  
Of usance for my moneys,  
And you'll not hear me: this is kind I offer.

"Kind" in spite of the humiliations Antonio has publicly rained down on me:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft  
In the Rialto you have rated me  
About my moneys and my usances...  
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
And all for use of that which is mine own.

Offering the loan, I extend my hand to Antonio so that we may shake on it like men, equals, partners in business. But Antonio is having none of it. Antonio lets me stand with my hand extended for what

seems like an eternity. As if that is not enough humiliation to heap upon my heart, he then goes on noisily to gather a wad of spit in his mouth, looks me straight in the eye and makes as if to hurl it at me. Then swallows. Smirks. And still says nothing.

This gesture: it is loaded with all the more ugliness by who is performing it. My fellow actor in this improv is Reg E. Cathey, an African-American who knows a thing or two about race hatred and the physical language of contempt. What he could not know was that the spit he hawked up in his mouth triggered my own memory. I was 11 years old, walking to the Fraumünster church in Zurich beside my sari-clad mother, Coomi Wadia, from a reception the city's mayor had thrown in her honour where she, an internationally-recognised choral conductor, was going to perform. An old man, muttering loudly in Swiss German, approached us. He spat on my mother's foot. It was the first time I had encountered overt racism. I stared up at my mother. "Keep walking", she said, eyes fixed straight ahead. "We don't engage with such people". That memory, those emotions: I relived them in Shylock three decades later. That moment of supreme indignity triggered my Shylock's countermove. He would fix Antonio by wrong-footing him. He would lend him the money "gratis", without interest. As "a merry sport", he would make the forfeit a joke, a pound of flesh. That is how it happened: the bad seed that would grow into something terrible and twisted later in the play was sown in that one refusal to shake hands. And Cathey's Antonio laughed. Cocksure and arrogant in the fact that he has many ships and much wealth coming his way, he laughed sardonically. In the improv, this triggered something further in me. I began to laugh. It was, after all, just "a merry sport", what I had proposed. That laughter, though, registered two men who had decided to face each other off, to test whose will was stronger.

As we will see, this improvisation survived, was fixed through rehearsal into the production a year later. But in the summer of 2015, I was still discovering not just Shakespeare's play but Shylock's city. Picking up the resonances of historical details. Like the fact that serving as a torchbearer in a late-night walk through labyrinthine alleyways along tiny canals across bridges built without guard rails was a risky and terrible job. What does it say about Lorenzo when he is abducting Jessica - he would say 'eloping' - that he makes her the torchbearer for his rambunctious gang? Thoughtless? Despicable? Then Lorenzo talks a great deal more about the "gold and jewels she is furnished with" than about the woman herself. Think Braque. And a different 'take' on Lorenzo appears: unflattering, unsavoury. Not the colourless male ingenu of the romantic comedy stereotype. But another of the manipulative, greedy people who populate the play - as we came to see it.

As we were becoming more familiar with the script, Karin wanted us to start locating Shakespeare's fictional scenes where they could

have taken place in the real city. So, we left our little haven on San Giorgio and headed to the old market, the Rialto bridge, and most daunting in terms of 'site specificity', the Ghetto Nuovo. Shakespeare never expressly mentions the Ghetto but it would have been the place where Shylock and Tubal lived. They would have banked at the Banco Rosso, which still sits at its original location, next to a building that is referred to locally as 'Shylock's House'. (Well, if Verona's tourist board can erect a sign 'Casa di Giulietta' below a certain balcony, surely Venice is entitled to its own 'Casa di...'). Working in situ in these places had a vibe. It made these people real. When we talked of gondolas, we watched them pass. When we spoke of ships, we saw them sailing across the lagoon. We smelled the salt air. We shoved through crowds on the Rialto. We walked the same stone pavements that were in place in 1590.

Something else emerged in that fortnight of improvisations and workshops. Something that would turn out to be crucial, indeed, would emerge as the performance signature of our production. Because time was limited, because Karin understood how challenging a task it is for an actor to work on a role for the first time, especially one as iconic as Shylock, and because she wanted to see - before she finally cast the part - Shylock in many bodies, she distributed Shylock's scenes among some of us: a sixty-year-old man; a woman in her early thirties; and me. A stop-gap, we thought, until Karin found her dream casting. But across the fortnight, it dawned on us that our director was not stopping a gap. She was opening a highway into the heart of the play. Taking us to Shylock-after-Braque. As things turned out, her production in the Ghetto in 2016 would feature *five* Shylocks. More on this later.

Our work did not stop when our company manager called time on the day's rehearsals. We socialised until late into the night, and the shenanigans we got up to I realise now were more than shenanigans. We were living moments of the lives of the characters we were creating. On one particularly magical evening, one of our Venetian actors, trained in *commedia* and himself a maker of masks, led us on a walk through the city. We wore masks he'd made - Lancilloto the *Zanni's* mask, Old Gobbo, the *Vecchi's* - and performed improvised scenes in the middle of one campo, to the delight of some tourists while other passers-by rolled their eyes. Another evening we went out for prosecco and *cicchetti* (think: Venetian tapas) and ended up singing songs at sunset along the canal outside the bar. The Venetians sang us their songs in their dialect, and not knowing any, I busted out with a Neapolitan classic, *Fenesta che lucive*. It was the best I had to offer. We did not know it at the time, but this little musical caper would have value in 2016 when Karin, independently, came up with the idea of introducing a song in the scene leading up to Jessica's fleeing her father's house.

On another afternoon, looking for a private corner on San Giorgio where I could memorise my lines, I chanced upon the abandoned Teatro Verde. I did not know it was forbidden to be there, there being no 'Accesso Vietato' sign barring the amphitheatre's vomitorium. I walked the length and breadth of the stage, repeating my lines, looking out at the empty seats on one side of me; trees and lagoon on the other; only seagulls for company. This became my hide-away. It was a 45-second walk from my accommodation, and I escaped to it as often as I could. Also unbeknownst to me at the time, speaking my lines in an open-air theatre like this was going to serve me exceedingly well in 2016. All I was thinking was how magical and romantic it was to be memorising Shakespeare in this secret corner of Venice, seemingly a million miles away from the thousands of tourists jostling in San Marco, just two minutes' vaporetto ride across the *bacino*.

On the last night of the summer school, we presented the scenes we had been working on. There was a party on San Giorgio. After the last glass of prosecco was drained and the last hugs hugged, we all went our separate ways, hearts and heads full. For those of us who would be returning in 2016, we would have a year for all this knowledge and all these emotions to reverberate and ferment in us. Priceless stuff. Priceless gifts: knowledge and time.

#### **4 The Merchant in the Ghetto: 2016**

Reassembling the following summer felt like a reunion. New actors in the company - playing Portia, Jessica, Antonio, Tubal, Lorenzo, Aragon, Morocco - were quickly absorbed into our 'Merchant family'. Time again was of the essence. We had sixteen actors to play Shakespeare's 22+ parts (so there would be plenty of doubling, not least by the five actors who would be playing a sequence of Shylocks) and three weeks to get our production on its feet in front of audiences. There was also our 'theatre' to consider: we would be playing outdoors, our audience sitting in steep tiered seating, in the middle of a campo that was a major point of interest for tourists as well as home to the daily lives of many Venetians; a campo where our playing space would be marked out by police barricades to allow the Ghetto's daily human traffic to flow as normal, unintentionally giving free ring-side viewing to any who paused to watch from the barriers or any who dined at the outdoor tables of Ristorante Upupa; a campo that baked under the punishing sun of July and that dined with the noise of cicadas as soon as that sun dipped behind the Ghetto's five-storey houses; a campo where the city would allow us to rehearse only in the final week.

For the first fortnight, then, we worked in a medium-sized, indoor proscenium theatre - but that meant that when we got on site we had to expand into the space, re-block our moves. More problematically,



Figure 3 Gratiano (Sorab Wadia) spits abuse at Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg). © Andrea Messana

moving outdoors to an acoustic nightmare of a space filled with ambient noise, I had to raise my volume and project in a way I did not have to in the rehearsal theatre. I battled to keep the nuances and intimacy I had created for Shylock #1 while having to be much louder. I felt a little straitjacketed in the direction I had to face when speaking: either directly out to the tiered seating where the audience sat or turned towards one of the mics that our sound designer had secreted in various locations like the branches of the plane tree or behind the *pozzo*. I had to be hyper-aware of these elements at all times.

Such technical stuff aside, our biggest, and most absorbing challenge, was the one that challenges every actor of Shakespeare: to bring these characters to life. Or in my case, to bring *two* characters to life, for I was doubling: Gratiano and Shylock. Any way you look at it: a tricky double.

I began the play as Gratiano, but not yet in character, for the company's first entrance was devised *commedia*-style, as if we were a crowd of revellers or troupe of players, crossing the campo into the playing space, raucously singing and dancing behind our sextet of instruments, violins, cello, trumpet and percussion. I detest being myself on stage so I hated this bit and always hung back, having to be dragged (by Jessica) or teased (by Portia) into the festivities. Still, whatever my resistance, what I found satisfying about the party mood of this carnivalesque opening, our singing in Venetian dialect a song about the madness - and ubiquity - of love, that 'everyone is doing it', was how, even as the music faded, it set the tone that Antonio pulled away from in the opening line of the play, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad".

My Gratiano, entering fifty lines later, behind Solanio's and Salarino's fruitless reasoning on what was making the businessman 'sad', took the melancholic bull by the horns: "You look not well, Signor Antonio".

Finding the physical and emotional life of Gratiano had been rather easy for me, given the number of things in him I could personally identify with. Like talking too much, and at the wrong time, poking my nose into people's affairs or giving unasked-for advice. Gratiano is bold and brash and offensive and calls Antonio out in a way no one else of the group does, not just "You look not well" but "You have too much respect upon the world". He is presumptuous, daring to offer the (older, richer, more established) gentleman a warning, "They lose it" - the world - "that do buy it with much care". Gratiano is opinionated - though it is clear he is not the wisest of the bunch. I saw him as a young 'punk' and gave him a buoyant energy and walk, and plenty of talking with his arms and hands, not only because I felt it suited his personality and the words he spoke, but also because it would provide a stark contrast to the Shylock I would be bringing on stage not long after.

Then there was Gratiano's 'POW!' I'm not sure when or how I found the two-handed gesture that became his 'thing': thumb, index and little fingers outstretched, middle and ring fingers bent, then both hands flicked towards each other and out again, accompanied by a yelp, 'POW!' I do remember when I first used it. Antonio has just sentimentally compared the world to a stage "where every man must play a part" and concluded morosely that his must be "a sad one", when Gratiano volunteers for next casting: "Let me play the fool". Then he goes off on a tangent, feeling mighty smart and full of himself, ending "Fare ye well awhile: I'll end my exhortation after dinner". As I made to exit, I felt that 'POW!' coming on, Gratiano's version of 'Ciao! I'm outta here!' That 'punk' gesture was supported by the costume Stefano Nicolao had designed for Gratiano, a grey jacket and buff-coloured trousers accented with suede and zippers. Loads of zippers. Zippers that shout 'punk!' Later, it gave Lorenzo and his gang of 'lads' something to quote, something to play around with while they made their laddish plans to abduct Jessica. I did not use 'POW!' a lot, maybe two or three times, but the gesture helped me hook into Gratiano, both his physicality and his heart, to encapsulate in a single move and word the hubris, joy, abandon and 'fuck you' attitude that characterised my Gratiano. As the American acting guru Sanford Meisner is often quoted as saying, 'An ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words'. In 'POW!' I discovered Gratiano's essential behaviour.

Later, I would have to navigate Gratiano's outspoken racism that emerges more and more dangerously as the play goes on. But for now, exiting our opening scene as Gratiano, I was already shedding the part, beginning to morph into someone very different. Karin had

decided that all of us actors would be always visible to the audience, always 'on', our costume changes fully shown; and she had decided, on the back of the discoveries we had made workshoping the *Merchant* in 2015, that each of Shylock's five scenes in Shakespeare's play would be played by a different actor. So now, while Scene 2 took the play to Portia, to Belmont, in the light of the 'crepuscular hour' - a favourite Karin-ism - with the trees in the campo lit in blue, I watched from the periphery. I found a quiet corner under the arches of the Banco Rosso where I could come down from the brash high of the 'POW!' and start re-centring myself to become Shylock #1.

Shylock's first utterance is clearly mid-conversation. Bassanio has come to ask for a loan, presumably having first gone round all the Christian brokers and now clutching desperately at straws. Shylock is considering. To place us in this moment, Bassanio and I would meet very close to the Banco Rosso while the Belmont scene was in progress, and quietly improvise the conversation we might have been having. As Scene 2 ended, we would split, I would walk to the spot where the Black Angels stripped me out of Gratiano's jacket and invested me in Shylock's robe and sash, and then, as if this investiture covered a suspended time contemplating Bassanio's necessity, "3000 ducats, well" broke the silence, set the scene in motion. Later I would have another moment like this, when Shylock first sees Antonio. Instead of answering Bassanio's cue, "This is Signor Antonio", Shylock goes into a reverie, "How like a fawning publican he looks!" Bassanio brought me back to reality: "Shylock, do you hear?" It was this second 'out of time' experience that Shakespeare wrote for Shylock that gave me, retrospectively, the clue for how to use the investiture.

The investiture centred and settled Shylock #1. It drained from my body Gratiano's wild, punky, insolent, rude, anarchical energy. It forced me to be still - and then stiller. Taking on Shylock's robes, tied tight in Shylock's yellow sash, I became contained, controlled, dignified, strong, upright, proud. My Shylock was urbane, a citizen of Venice; no 'stranger', no 'alien', even if swathed in that yellow sash. Significant clues to my personality and character emerge in my first interaction with the needy Christians. I speak in short sentences: "for three months - well". I repeat what Bassanio is telling me: "Antonio shall become bound - well". I am digesting the information. Strategising carefully. Unrushed. No haste. Enjoying this moment of power I have, the one in whom Bassanio's fate rests. I show that I am plugged in to all that is going on in Venice: "I understand moreover, upon the Rialto...". When provoked by an invitation to dine with the Christians, I quote scripture: "Yes, to smell pork; to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into". I begin my exchange with Bassanio speaking prose, but then when Antonio enters and I regard him as a "fawning publican" who "lends out money gratis" and discover my desire to "catch him once upon

the hip” so to “feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him”, I am speaking blank verse, as though the heightening of my emotion is raising the temperature of my utterance, tightening the tension in my thought. Shylock makes such moves between prose and blank verse throughout the play, and the switch is palpable, like a gear change in a car.

I was able to maintain control, to keep still, recalling my past experience with Antonio (“many a time and oft | In the Rialto you have rated me | About my moneys and my usances”) until I remembered how Antonio spat upon me (“You that did void your rheum upon my beard” and kicked me “as you spurn a stranger cur | Over your threshold”). This was the first time my Shylock let his vitriol show, and it was the first time I made any strong gesture, a kick with my right foot and an outward jab with my right hand. But having done that, I, Shylock #1, had gone too far, revealed too much. So, having provoked Antonio to a reaction that showed his true ugly colours (“I am as like [...] | To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too”), Bassanio looking on in wild dismay, seeing his loan evaporating, I pulled myself back to suave civility (or was it bare-faced sarcasm wrapped in “kindness”?), wrong-footing the Christian yet again: “Why, look you, how you storm! | I would be friends [...] have your love. | Forget the shames [...] | Supply your present wants”. I slipped in the tantalising detail: “and take no doit | Of usance for my moneys”. Bassanio leaped at the offer: “This were kindness”. And out of “This kindness” that I would “show” came the “merry” rider, the forfeit, a “pound [...] of flesh”. Bassanio recoiled. Antonio waved him away: “Why, fear not man! I will not forfeit”. While they cavilled, I commented high-mindedly on “these Christians [...] | Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect | The thoughts of others”. I appeared about to walk away from my offer, telling Bassanio: “To buy his favour, I extend this friendship. | If he will take it, so; if not, adieu”. When we workshoped the play in 2015, I had accompanied these lines with a gesture, a shrug as I extended my hands, palms open, facing each other. The gesture was very ‘me’. It did nothing to my internal state that was different from my regular Sorab-ness. Then in 2016 along came Ned Eisenberg, playing Shylock #5. I watched him in rehearsal bring to Shylock a gesture I have never used in life or on stage. On the line Shylock intends as his exit from the court (“Why, then the devil give him good of it! | I’ll stay no longer question”), Ned’s defeated Jew made a gesture of washing his hands, right hand passing over left, left over right, then both palms held up facing the smart aleck law clerk as if to say, “I am done with all this mess, this sordid affair. It’s over. I have nothing left hidden in these hands. I’m outta here”.

This gesture of Ned’s fascinated me and then it wormed its way into my scene when I said, “If not, adieu”. It was the perfect gesture for the moment. My gestural quotation happened almost involuntarily. In one rehearsal, not planning it, I found myself copying Ned, washing my hands of the Christians and showing them my empty hands:

“adieu”. Unconscious it might have been, but the effects it had on me were profound. The gesture did many things. It completely took me out of myself and into a different Shylock space. It made me feel detached, uninvested (in a good way), and powerful. The subtext for me was, “You want something from me. These are my terms. For once I feel equal to you. These tainted Jewish hands that you won’t shake now have the upper hand. This is my game that I’m proposing. If you want to play it, fine, if not, I have no problem taking these tainted hands and walking right out of here”. The gesture gave me a sense of power, grounded-ness, and superiority that I had not experienced before. Antonio and Bassanio realised they had to accept my terms. Antonio answered instantly, “Yes, Shylock, I will seal unto this bond”. Ah, sweet victory! The first time I did it, I thought the gesture was cute: “Look, I just inadvertently mimicked Ned!” But the more I did it, the deeper it got and the more profound the effect on me and my Shylock.

Besides creating this exciting new internal shift in my Shylock the gesture played another more obvious role. It served very subtly to start connecting my Shylock with Ned’s across the arc of the play. Karin never asked us to make our five Shylocks similar. It was enough for her that we were dressed similarly. She did not want us all doing anything as obvious as limping on the right foot or lisping. She would have called that ‘cheesy’ and nixed it straight away. But she did want us to feel like one organism. And little things like this ‘hand washing’ served to make that happen.

For any actor, what I have just been recounting, the first moments of playing any role, are absolutely crucial. They set up the physicality of the character, the energy, the relationships he has with the other characters, his emotional life. Moreover, a play is a series of moments that lead from one to the other. Moment A must lead to B, which then causes C to happen and so on, and the role will grow organically from your very first words and actions, moment to moment, an inevitable concatenation of causes and effects. So, it is imperative you start off the right way, in the right zone. It is how you get off the starting blocks that determines how you run the race.

Only this was not a solo race, it was a relay. When I exited 1.3, I handed ‘Shylock’ like a baton to the next actor, who would play Shylock #2, who passed the part on to Shylock #3 then #4 then #5. Meanwhile, over the next several scenes I morphed back into the loud-mouthed Gratiano to play Bassanio’s sidekick, persuading him to take me with him to Belmont in pursuit of Portia – what an addition I would be to his wooing party! – then Lorenzo’s sidekick aiding and abetting his elopement with Jessica. Seeing my Gratiano as the lynchpin in both these plots to ‘get the girl’ brought the supposedly ‘romantic’ Belmont plot into ironic alignment with the dodgy ‘steal a wife’ intrigue. It is ironic, too, that Shakespeare in 2.6 puts in Gratiano’s cynical mouth a critique of Lorenzo’s casual habits as a lover. Lorenzo



Figure 4 Gratiano (Sorab Wadia) humiliates Shylock (Ned Eisenberg). © Andrea Messana

has assigned his cronies parts to play in the abduction; pointed out 'the penthouse' under which he's told them 'to make stand'; then he's LATE to his own assignation! Gratiano muses: "it is marvel he outdewells his hour | For lovers ever run before the clock". Salarino gives a "'twas ever thus" response: "O ten times faster Venus' pigeons fly | To seal love's bonds new made than they are wont | To keep obliged faith unforfeited". Gratiano moralises: "That ever holds. Who riseth from a feast | With that keen appetite that he sits down? | [...] All things that are | Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd". That's brutal. Lorenzo has not even snatched Jessica from her dad yet - and already this romance looks like it is headed for the rocks.

Metaphorically, Salarino and Gratiano are tapping their feet, covering Lorenzo's non-appearance, filling in the time with an exchange that gets poetically more and more dense. Karin had a brilliant idea which harked back to that prosecco-and-cicchetti night of call and response singing a year earlier: to extend and fill out this moment even further by casting it in an operatic mode. It just so happened that both I and Salarino are professional singers as well as actors. As an homage to Shakespeare's song-craft and to being in Venice, one of the Meccas of Italian opera, Frank London composed the Gratiano/Salarino exchange as a nod to the 'Duelling Tenors' tradition - Pavarotti vs Domingo; or more recently Brownlee vs Spyres. Our singing became a kind of competition, a sparring, that mimicked the cocky male competition of the play's wooing games. Remarkably, Karin created a space that did not belong to any of the characters, that lifted this moment out time, made it a meta-moment of respite, a musical interlude in the middle of an in-

terval-less production. In the soaring melody, in the harmonies, and in the final high note that we both held to the absolute limits of breath, this meta-moment was just profoundly beautiful. The audience soared with us. And then the next thing happened. The ugly elopement. Staged as a nightmare sequence. People in ugly, grimacing masks. Gangs running. Lurid torches casting grotesque shadows. We had been flying. Now we crashed. Onto the dirty pavement of the Ghetto.

For me doubling Shylock #1 with Gratiano was like - to use that analogy from earlier - being caught in a Braque painting. It made me feel the experience of the play from radically different angles. There is a challenge in playing the most iconic Jew in Shakespeare's canon opposite the most vicious antisemite he ever wrote. In rehearsals I had found the switch problematic, given Gratiano's despicable racism that reveals itself more and more viciously as the play goes on, culminating in the so-called 'trial scene' of 4.1. Screaming vile antisemitic slurs and insults, at full voice - "DOG JEW" - in the middle of the Ghetto Novo was daunting and painful. It made me deeply uncomfortable. Then I realised that Gratiano NEEDED to be in this play in order for Shylock's story to be fully told. Shylock was born into a society filled with Gratianos. Truth be told, playing Gratiano fed my Shylock. Being part of the pack of Christian hyenas circling Shylock in the trial only served to give me a deeper understanding and experience of the insults when I went on as Shylock #1 the next night. "You call me dog and spit upon my Jewish gaberdine" resonated differently after I had experienced the rabid thrill of the vicious pack. My Shylock knew well just how deep, vile, vindictive and profound the hatred being hurled at him ran.

Karin made the audience experience this same collision of emotions too, with another of her brilliant directorial insights. Right at the centre of the play, Shakespeare's 2.8, Salanio and Salarino narrate what went down when Shylock discovered Jessica's elopement, when the "dog Jew" ran through the streets crying "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! | Fled with a Christian!" Karin staged this as a stunning *coup de théâtre* by distributing these lines among the whole company, who ran pell-mell and haphazard across the playing space, shouting out the words, a cacophony of voices in several languages, mocking, sardonically laughing, spitting, displaying insulting gestures that doubled the verbal insults. At the same time, with all this wild madness swirling around us, our five Shylocks came together for the only time in our production. We stood far apart, motionless as the Black Angels dressed us, tied us into our sashes, then moved towards each other slowly, through the storm. We found each other and made a tight circle, 'davening', making the rocking motion that characterises many Jews as they pray, holding each other up, helping the other to cling onto our dignity, our God, our religion, our tribe. That gesture of davening was something I had introduced during re-



Figure 5 Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) elopes amongst a gang of carnival revellers. © Andrea Messana

hearsals, something that came out of my years of singing in Orthodox shuls. But it was also prompted by something Karin wanted from Jenni, Shylock #3, the Shylock who has discovered his daughter has been stolen, a keening that started off slowly, building in intensity until it exploded into a wail, a wail that erupted in Shylock's accusation of the Christian thieves, "You knew!" Karin directed us other four Shylocks to underscore Shylock #3, to start a low, growly moan that crescendoed as we davened. This growl coming out of the pits of our stomachs was probably inaudible to the audience over the yelling of the mob, but no matter. It was for no one else but the five of us to hear and *feel*. This moment of coming together was profound and precious to me. It was the only time we synchronised our bodies and voices, and the only time in the production that we ever touched – and we were directed now to touch as many of the other Shylocks as we possibly could, arms outstretched and wrapped around each other.

The ugly street noise rose to a pitch, the fever built. When the pressure was unbearable, Shylock #3 broke out of the tight circle letting forth an anguished animal howl. The rest of us froze. Caught like Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* in a sculpted tableau, still touching. And we would remain so all through Shylock #3's scene, through the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech. Looking at the other Shylocks was like seeing into a 'mirror with a view': I was seeing myself, but also seeing much more than that self.

As an actor invested – literally and figuratively – in the role of Shylock, I found this production both wonderful and frustrating because while I loved the concept of distributing the role, I hated the

fact that I could never take on the full journey of this man. I tried to live that journey through the other four Shylocks: hawkishly watching #2 and #4 when the first warned his daughter to stay indoors away from the “Christian fools with varnished faces” (Shakespeare’s 2.5) and when the latter spurned Antonio in the street, insisting that he’d “have [his] bond”, the merchant having forfeited. I lived #3 vicariously, being onstage as one of the cluster of Shylocks as #3 turned on Solanio and Salerino (“You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter’s flight”), then threatened the “bankrupt”, the “prodigal” Antonio whose ships had all gone down (“Let him look to his bond”). It was this Shylock too who asked rhetorically why Antonio had “disgrac’d” him, “hind’red” him, “laugh’d” and “mock’d” him, “scorned” his “nation”. And answered, “I am a Jew”. That speech goes on to argue for likeness between Christians and Jews, not difference: both are “fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons”. And the speech drives on to a final likeness: the mutual instinct to answer wrong with revenge. Later, I would watch as Shylock #4 chillingly wished that “my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hears’d at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin”.

What I could not do was live through the trial. Because while Shylock #5 was being tried I was back playing Gratiano, haranguing the Jew when Shylock’s case looked watertight (“no metal can | [...] bear half the keenness | Of thy sharp envy. Canst no prayers pierce thee?”) then baiting him, like some rabid laughing dog, when the lawyer’s clerk – Portia cross-dressed – turned the tables on him (“Now, infidel, I have you on the hip!”; “Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!”).

Now again, playing the vicious antisemite, I had the sensation of being caught in a Braque painting, experiencing the play from yet another angle – a wonderful gift for an actor. The price I paid for this gift was never finishing Shylock’s journey. That said, the one grace Karin gave us Shylocks was, at the end, as a coda, to bring all five Shylocks back. After whatever resolutions, harmonies – or not – were found in Belmont, ‘we’ were given the last words in the production, taken from earlier in the play. We reprised Shylock’s speech from the beginning of the trial, each of us taking separate lines:

You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have  
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive  
Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that.  
But say it is my humour, is it answer’d?  
[...] What, are you answered yet?  
[...] Are you answered?

One after the other, we faced the audience to ask, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”. Then, there was a hair-raising or gut wrenching blast

from a shofar and the word 'Mercy' in three languages was projected, in all its irony, onto the dark and silent façades of the Ghetto.

## 5 Retrospectives

As it happened, I was the final Shylock to ask the question. Coincidentally, then, as I had spoken Shylock's first words in the play, so I spoke his last. More coincidence: as I had been there at the beginning - those readings over wine and cheese in New York 2014 - so I went on to play the part in all further iterations of the production that took it to a prison in Padua, a castle courtyard in Bassano del Grappa, then in 2017 and 2018, on to the campuses of Yale, Dartmouth and Montclair Universities in the USA. I was the only one of Karin's ensemble to travel the whole journey, a journey I hope will continue.

Looking back, I am struck by Karin's vision: her insistence that we would not tie this play up with a pretty romantic bow at the end, that we would explore the ruthless mercantile aspect of *The Merchant*. That we presented to the audience, from the beginning, a Shylock who was urbane, a substantial and formidable Venetian, made the betrayal of him all the more heinous. That I, as Gratiano, was required to shout "dog Jew" so that it reverberated off the façade of the holocaust memorial that faced us across the Campo de Ghetto Novo, made the questions that still remain to be answered by all of us who encounter Shakespeare's play all the starker.

I am struck, too, by how much we actors learned from each other, how well we played together as an ensemble, and the grace and generosity with which all five Shylocks treated each other, not least in ways we borrowed from each other details of performance that 'made' our Shylocks. I took the handwashing from Shylock #5. He took the gesture of tucking Shylock's hands behind his lapels then burying them deeper into his armour-sash from me. Shylock #3 watched the stillness and control of the other four Shylocks and commented: "You four didn't have any extraneous movement". She then used that sense of grounded-ness in the scene after Jessica has fled, starting from a still place that allowed her, still emotional and passionate, to keep control, to avoid the histrionic. The sort of borrowing, quoting and passing on that I am talking about continued, even when the production was restaged in the US. One of my most favourite moments in rehearsal in 2017 happened when Steve Skybell, that production's Shylock #5, saw me do the hand-washing gesture, and thought, "I like Sorab's gesture. It's perfect for a moment in the trial scene". He came up to me one day and said, "Did you see? I put your gesture into the trial!". I told him, "No, that gesture was Ned's. He used it in the trial at exactly that same moment. You didn't steal anything from me. You just took it back to its original home!" It is almost as if this Shylock gesture has

a life of its own, and we were only borrowing it while we inhabited his “Jewish gaberdine”.

Taking a role off the page and onto the stage is what an actor’s job is, and we have tools we use to do so, but much of what we do is ephemeral and cannot be explained. Trying to write an account of the process I am aware that this account is deeply personal, an actor’s view from *inside* the work. What I am also aware of is the sheer magnitude of what we did. This production was a memorial to an event in history: the establishing of the first Jewish ghetto. It took a particular look at one of the most famous Jews in history. It applied a lens to that looking: showing us that what we humans do we still need to think about, to explain, to understand, to ANSWER. I may be the last Shylock ever to speak in the Ghetto Novo. I am grateful and joyful for the responsibility and honour that speaking conferred on me. A memory I cherish. Even as I know some time, somewhere else, Shylock must speak out. Again.

## **Part 2. Taking *The Merchant* Beyond the Ghetto**



# ***The Merchant ‘in’ Venice* and *The Shylock Project*: Fiction, History, and the Humanities**

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**Abstract** The 2016 production of *The Merchant of Venice* staged a comedy famous for its antisemitic expressions in a place of symbolic significance to Jews, whose tragic history has resulted from exactly such sentiments. How, then, do we reconcile the experience of fiction with the claims of history? Certain of the production’s values created the sense of an aesthetically self-contained artifact, yet the performance also took place against the looming, inescapable realism of the ghetto itself – a tension that can be felt, too, in activities related to the production. Illuminated here is the power of humanities public events to reinvigorate, through questioning, the life of the human community.

**Keywords** Aestheticism. Antisemitism. Fiction. Ghetto. History. Humanities. Mercy.

**Summary** 1 The Play of the Moment. – 2 History and Lyricism. – 3 Mercy and the Ghetto. – 4 The Ghetto and the Aesthetic Present. – 5 2016 and 1934. – 6 The Creative Paradox.

## **1 The Play of the Moment**

On July 26, 2016, in the soft light of early evening, before an expectant international audience packed to the hilt in temporary tiered stands, *The Merchant of Venice* was performed in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice for the first time ever.<sup>1</sup> The occasion for the production was the happy convergence of the 400-year anniversary of Shakespeare’s death with the 500-year anniversary of the

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<sup>1</sup> For an important and richly detailed review, see Rutter 2017.

Ghetto's founding. A play famous for its expressions of antisemitism thus confronts the site whose existence and history manifest the effects of those views. So, to attend was to wonder. What does it mean to perform *Merchant*, charged with antisemitic language and characters, in the real Ghetto where a part of its action might be imagined to occur? What influences do history and aesthetic fiction have on each other? What difference is made by a production of *Merchant* with a multi-ethnic and international cast? And what might this event teach us about the contemporary role of the humanities?

At *Merchant's* opening performance, the excitement was almost palpable, with spectators greeting each other, animated by the sense that they were sharing a memorable event, one significant for Venice, the Ghetto and the fraught performance history of this drama. On the fringes of the very public playing area, there was curiosity, too. Tiered seating and stage lamps are unusual sights in the Ghetto Novo (the older and larger of the site's two campos), where the performance took place, and, consequently, tourists and strollers were pausing to gawk and chatter, while a few knowing locals watched out of windows and a sprinkling of customers about to be dispersed from a nearby café lingered attentively. Expectation was in the air.

Perhaps all the more so because the production was the culmination of two years of academic work and of various well-attended public activities, the whole enterprise conceived and organised by Professor Shaul Bassi of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (with an international supporting cast of Italian, British, German, Romanian and American institutions and individuals). A graduate-student two-week summer school, *The Shylock Project*, was taking place concurrently with the production, with a similar month-long summer school having been run the year before. Altogether, over fifty graduate students from Europe and across the globe and some forty international scholars participated - American, British, German, Italian, Hungarian, Israeli and more. Venice's magnificent Cini Foundation, located on the nearby island of San Giorgio Maggiore, collaborated in *The Shylock Project*, opening its doors for the summer school and for many associated events (overseen by Dr. Maria Ida Biggi). In concert with the two summer schools, a wealth of lectures, performances and exhibits, including an exhibition at the Ducal Palace on the Ghetto's history, were made available to Venetians and visitors to the city. The Ghetto production of *Merchant* was mounted by the Italian/American acting company Compagnia de' Colombari, founded in 2004, under the direction of Karin Coonrod (also a theatre professor at Yale University).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The participation of the Colombari company was facilitated by Professor David Scott Kastan of Yale. After its premier in the Ghetto, the Colombari production played else-

This project, then, had value at the educational, scholarly and public levels; a build-up over a period of years and weeks sufficient to attract notice and to create impact; an international reach; a variety of main and satellite activities; and a culminating event both daring and urgent (see Bassi 2017, 73). It thus brought into being a public-academic network of individuals, happenings, places and objects, a network, as we shall see, that also extended across space and time. The undertaking was public humanities on a large scale and at its best. *The Shylock Project* and its *Merchant 'in' Venice* should serve as an inspirational model to all who seek to advocate for literature and the humanities. At a painful historical moment when humanistic disciplines seem easy to ignore, they might well reassert their civic role by making themselves freshly vibrant and visible, irresistible. In this instance, the promoting of humanities content also effected a shift in the understanding of locale, for Venice, that mecca of international tourism, was transformed now into a meeting place for global cultural thinking and the exchange of ideas.

Everywhere, it seems, *The Merchant of Venice* has become the Shakespearean comedy - perhaps the Shakespearean play - of the moment. As Coonrod's Shylock was traversing the Venetian Ghetto, Jonathan Pryce's Shylock was triumphantly striding the boards in New York, in a production, directed by Jonathan Munby, that had originated from Shakespeare's Globe in London. *The New York Times* hailed it as "brooding, powerful" and "eerily attuned to the current troubles that roil the world" (Isherwood 2016). Pryce's *Merchant* visited New York as one of its stops on an international tour that included not only Great Britain and America but also China and Italy. Venice's prominent Goldoni Theatre hosted the Pryce production in October, 2016, to large crowds, barely three months after *Merchant's* Ghetto premier. The play seems to be omnipresent, and not just in the West but also in the post-communist East. Numerous productions of *Merchant* have taken place in recent decades throughout the former Soviet bloc, as Boika Sokolova pointed out in a talk at the World Shakespeare Congress, held in Stratford-upon-Avon, August, 2016. The resurgence of antisemitism in the West before and after the Ghetto production - with neo-Nazi marches in America and Germany - only increases the interest in what we can learn from *Merchant*. This play calls to us.

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where in Italy. It was later performed 19 September-1 October 2017 at Montclair State University; 19 June-23 June 2018 in the courtyard of the Yale University Law School; and 26 June-28 June 2018 at Dartmouth College's Hopkins Center for the Arts. See <http://www.shylocknotebook.eu/>.

## 2 History and Lyricism

But not quite to everyone. Within the Jewish community in Venice, there was general acceptance of the project, despite one member who vocally opposed the idea of staging a potentially antisemitic play in a revered Jewish site. After all, a memorial plaque mounted just yards from the performance space in the Ghetto recognises the Nazi deportation, between 1943 and 1944, of more than two hundred Venetian Jews to death camps, mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Bassi won consent for the project from Jewish leaders by arguing that the strongest response to the play was not repression but confrontation and engagement. Notwithstanding, in the very week of the Ghetto production, an opinion essay by an attorney, Steve Frank, appeared in *The Washington Post*, which called for *The Merchant of Venice's* banning from the stage (Frank 2016). Where Bassi and other scholars consider *Merchant* to be more about antisemitism than antisemitic in itself, Frank disagrees (invoking Harold Bloom). Despite the play's acknowledged popularity, Frank insists that *Merchant's* language, with the single, insufficient exception of the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech, exposes a fundamental antisemitism. To attempt to convert Shylock into a sympathetic or universal figure is to ignore the actual words that characters apply to him: "Every time it is produced, the play introduces new audiences to vile medieval tropes of Jew-hatred" (Frank 2016). That a major American newspaper would dedicate precious column inches to a non-scholar bent on denouncing the play testifies to the power, and the imagined danger, of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The play's "tropes of Jew-hatred" certainly pulsed like shock waves through the Ghetto performance. Actors emphasised the offending words vocally – "devil incarnate", "villain Jew", "currish Jew" – making the language, in that setting, shocking to hear. To its credit, the Colombari production refrained from efforts to sanitise the play or its language. At a panel with three of the actresses during the play's run, Elena Pellone, the production's notable Nerissa, observed that in performance she was self-conscious of *Merchant's* antisemitic insults, for it felt to her as if the Ghetto walls were listening. Speeches acquired, that is, a certain resonance from the façades of the campo, giving Pellone the impression that the Ghetto was bouncing the characters' taunts directly back at the actors, as if the walls were, as Diana Henderson puts it, "a ghostly, echoing character" (2017, 167). For some performers, then, speaking antisemitic tropes in the historic Jewish quarters induced inward cringing, a potentially Brechtian condition in which the actor's relationship to his or her character becomes part of the theatrical experience. Inescapably, the ghostly irony of vile language affronting a quasi-sacred place registered on spectators, too, creating an irregular rhythm of small aural jolts. In this place, simply speaking certain words could have a meta-dramatic effect.



**Figure 1** Salanio (Enrico Zagni) and the five Shylocks. © Andrea Messana

The Colombari performers took their relationship to Venice and the Ghetto as seriously as they took their craft. The summer before, actors had spent two weeks doing preliminary rehearsals in Venice at the Cini Foundation, and otherwise getting a feel for the city's history and its daily life. They even put on brief impromptu pop-up performances of scenes at public sites and outdoor restaurants around the city. A sense of locale found its way into some of the production's theatrical effects, such as when a *commedia dell'arte* performer (the mesmerising Francesca Sarah Toich, playing Lancillotto, substituted for Launcelot Gobbo) led the percussive, carnivalesque, snake-like opening procession of musicians and singing actors - in a city famous for *commedia*, for *carnevale*, for music, and for colourful, winding processions on the Grand Canal. The Colombari production made other allusions across time and space. The processional entrance was followed by a prologue in Venetian dialect (Veneziano) adapted from an early cinquecento farce by the important vernacular playwright Angelo Beolco (known as Ruzzante) from nearby Padua, thus putting *Merchant* in conversation with the history of Italian Renaissance comedy. From a more modern angle, original music was composed for the occasion by Grammy award winner Frank London, who accompanied on the trumpet. London's music and Toich's riveting choreographics continued throughout the performance, helping to give the play its own internal dynamic and aesthetic.

That intelligent conjoining of - and sometimes tension between - the historically resonant and the aesthetically self-contained characterised the evening. The music, dance and other staging values quickly



**Figure 2** Portia (Linda Powell) in Nerissa's (Elena Pellone) lap. © Andrea Messana

established the production's lyricism, signaling that we were no longer in conventional time and space, and the performance continued to draw attention to its theatricality. Black-clad 'black angel' production assistants helped actors change costume on stage. Characters intermittently delivered lines and phrases in languages other than English - including Italian, Veneziano, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew, German, Yiddish and Arabic - reflecting both the determined multiculturalism of the production and, at a distance, what must have been Renaissance Venice's - and within it the Ghetto's<sup>3</sup> - mix of languages spoken by travellers, foreign businessmen and residents. Acting styles varied, too, from the genially conversational Portia of African-American actress Linda Powell to Stefano Scherini's unfortunately bombastic Antonio. Not only multi-racial, the cast was also international - Italian, British, American, French, Australian, Indian - apparent in its noticeable polyglot of regional accents and different rhetorical manners. Thus, the production's stylising was also its globalising. Coonrod seemed to be using the performance's strongly registered lyricism, then, to hold together the company's centrifugal elements.

**3** In Cinquecento Venice, the forced inhabitation of the Ghetto by Jews of Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Levantine heritage would have created its own special sonic jumble of languages and accents. Bassi notes that the group of Jews confined to the Ghetto in 1516 was composed of "mostly newcomers and refugees" (2017, 67).

Thoughtfulness showed, too, in the management of narrative, such as in the well-etched relationships among many characters, especially Jessica and Lorenzo (the sympathetic duo of Michelle Uranowitz and Paul Spera), the former brimming with naïve goodness and the latter interweaving genuine affection with opportunism, typifying the play's moral complexity (Lorenzo, brusque and crude in the elopement scene, became a more sensitive character in Belmont, perhaps under Jessica's influence). Thoughtfulness appeared, as well, in Bassanio's moments of disarming honesty with Portia. It showed further in the way characters, likeable on initial encounter, became self-compromising as the action progressed without their alienating entirely the possibility of our goodwill (or, in the case of Lorenzo, vice versa). Likewise, Coonrod gave us moments when meaning was deftly held in suspense: for example, in the trial scene, after Portia makes her rabbit-out-of-the-hat interpretation of the law – flesh but “no jot of blood” (4.1.302)<sup>4</sup> – and Shylock suddenly recognises that he is defeated, the action hangs still and hushed for a moment, frozen in anticipation, until Shylock starts quietly to laugh, as if it had always been a joke, and the laughter spreads to the Venetians and grows, all tension released – exactly recapitulating the nervous laughter when, in 1.3 he, Antonio and Bassanio had originally agreed to the bond – with the money now ready to change hands, before Portia just as suddenly redirects the course of events with “Tarry, Jew” (342), two possible endings placed in collision.

But the production's most moving effects focused on Shylock. Shylock was played by not one but five performers (one for each scene), four men and one woman, who also doubled in other parts, including the Duke (Jenni Lea-Jones) and, unnervingly, the loud, race-baiting Graziano (played effectively by Sorab Wadia). There is some danger in making Shylock so much the centre of the production, although, as noted, Coonrod carefully developed other aspects of the story. Each Shylock wore an outsized bright yellow sash wrapped around his waist, reminiscent of the yellow badges or headgear that early Venetian Jews were obliged to wear and of the later yellow stars mandated by the Nazis. In general, the costuming for the production was crafted but minimal and suggestive, a vest here, a jacket or tunic there, as nods to characterisation; Lancillotto's trim white costume was embroidered and padded, prominently so in the genital region. Colours were generally white, off-white, or grey. The musicians (whose instruments included drums, violins, a cello, a horn, an accordion and a keyboard) were outfitted variously in black trousers, shirts and tunics. Thus, the bright yellow of the sashes made a statement. It was never far from our eyes and demanded attention,

<sup>4</sup> Quotations are from Drakakis 2010.

in contrast to the actors' otherwise color-neutral dress, the centuries old 'stigmata' of the Jew here aestheticised into lavish folds of vibrant, beautiful fabric.

The five Shylocks implicitly reduced the distinction between the persecutors and the persecuted, since any given actor might slide instantly in or out of each role, Jew or Jew-baiter, judge or judged – sometimes with a sudden vehemence, as if the transformation were disturbingly easily. We are all potential Shylocks, Coonrod seemed to be saying, and all potential antisemites, too (and it may not take much to pull the trigger that activates our prejudices). The effect was especially jarring in the case of Wadia, who enacted the First Shylock of the bond scene as a pleasant-enough businessman with the hint of a Yiddish accent – Rutter terms him “urbane” (2017, 85) – but who also gave us a loud and increasingly repugnant Graziano. Coonrod's five-Shylock device made the notion of character fluid and permeable in a way that invited wondering about linkages. Did something of Shylock's repressed hatred subsequently flow into Graziano? Likewise did qualities drift from Andrea Brughera's comic Gobbo to his “commedia” Shylock (Rutter 2017, 86), or from Ned Eisenberg's cool Tubal to his controlled Shylock? Yet such potential uncanniness was less the case with another role that doubled with Shylock and enforced contrast, for Adriano Iurissevich played Arragon with “charming” humour (Henderson 2017, 171) but then became, as Shylock, a distant but fretful father obsessed with locked doors. Having five different actors play Shylock makes impossible a perfect consistency in, or full realisation of, the character. Shylock's nature shifts and opens itself to new possibilities – urbane, “tetchy”, grieved, comic, self-assured (Rutter 2017, 85-6) – reflecting the choices of each successive actor, with gains and losses to the audience's experience. The sequencing of actors through the role gives the character a dynamic range impossible otherwise, as different actors respond in their own ways to new circumstances, but the tactic loses the shifts and modulations in voice, tone, posture, gesture, and movement that register deepening emotion or changes over time when a lone single actor plays the part. A hybrid Shylock cannot develop. That opaque five-figured character will lack the possibility of a Stanislavskian inner life; we will know him, rather, by his function in the story and by his free-standing and variable expressions of feeling or passion.<sup>5</sup> Hence the inference that we are all potential persecutors and victims comes to the audience more as information, prompted by the director's continual

<sup>5</sup> A rejoinder might be that Shakespeare's characters are not always internally consistent and that dividing Shylock by five only makes manifest what is implicit in the text, so that a rejection of realism offers up other possibilities for theatrical experience and meaning.

substitutions, and less as the distillation of our engagement with the character. The effect is of a piece with the intellectual craftedness and Brechtian self-consciousness of the production.

The device of doubling roles thus exemplified the universalising of Shylock disparaged by Steve Frank in his *Post* op-ed piece – and there was indeed something awkward about universalising this character in a production set so confrontationally in a place that bears witness to the exclusion, persecution and murder, not of an abstract Other, but of a community of real, living people who had made their homes in the very campo where the play was performed. Yet this tension between artifact and context was the Colombari *Merchant's* fundamental and productive condition: how does a play speak for, and to, the past? Indeed, as Henderson questions (2017), what exactly can be the past or the place of the past addressed by the performance, since the Ghetto is palimpsestic, layered with history and experience, and since even quotidian present history – ball-playing children, barking dogs, whispering tourists, sirens, cicadas – finds its way into the performative experience? We cannot quite recover here the scene of our sins, be they the confinements of 1516 or the deportations of 1943.

Yet grief and remorse are still possible. For me and surely everyone else, the evening's most powerful and unnerving moment came hard on the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo. As the couple disappears into a crowd, the five Shylocks emerge together from it (an action inserted into the play before scene 3.1 in which Shylock is taunted by Salarino [Hunter Perske] and Salanio [Enrico Zagni] and meets with Tubal). Of the five actors, the strong-voiced Jenni Lea-Jones (subsequently the Duke) steps forward as Shylock from the back of the acting area and, perhaps driven to the brink of despair by the loss of the daughter, unleashes a cry that starts as a kind of keening but that becomes a prolonged, harrowingly pained, animal howl. With that sound of raging frustration and inconsolable grief, any remnants of a conventional comedy lay in tatters. The howl's immediate provocation is Jessica's repudiation of her home and father, but the sense of loss and betrayal is deeper, greater, more encompassing finally than any proximate cause.<sup>6</sup> It is an unlocalizable grief, a grief like longing, beyond the reach of full articulation, accessible only emotionally and aesthetically. Shylock's searing wail manifested the anguish not only of the moment and the man, but of the ages, too, and here the universalising of Shylock reached a transcendent apotheosis.

<sup>6</sup> Bassi saw in the howl “both empathy with Jewish suffering and [...] a more generalised identification with persecuted minorities” (2017, 75).



**Figure 3** Hunter Perske as Salarino. © Andrea Messina

### **3 Mercy and the Ghetto**

The play closed with the five Shylocks emerging again onstage to re-deliver the Jew's "I have possessed your grace" speech (4.1.34-61) from the trial scene, with different actors reciting different lines, and with "Are you answered?" repeated at the end, as a refrain, by all of them, lined up aggressively downstage, confronting the audience. In the play's last action, as the words "Mercy" (English), "Misericordia" (Italian) and "Rachamim" (transliterated Hebrew) were projected against the Ghetto side wall, Jessica broke away from the other characters, dashed to the front of the playing space, turned toward the Ghetto wall, and threw up her hands as if in desperation or as if to link the audience with the actors before the now-semiotic stones. The refrain, "Are you answered?", was defiant and dramatic, but it left me, for one, a little uncertain about what was meant and how it fit. Shylock's speech comes before the trial commences and is prompted by the Duke's call for the Jew's "commiseration" with Antonio, whom even "stubborn Turks" and discourteous "Tartars" might pity: "We all expect a gentle" - that is, Gentile - "answer, Jew!" (4.1.29-33). Shylock's response issues from a position outside society, Gentile or Jewish, refusing any restraint by communal norms:

But say it is my humour. Is it answered?  
[...]  
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,  
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing

I bear Antonio, that I follow thus  
 A losing suit against him! Are you answered?  
 (4.1.58-61)

He replies, that is, by behaving exactly like a hard-hearted “wolf” (72), marshalled only by his “passion” (50), having turned himself into something worse than what the Venetians had already imagined him to be. In what sense, then, is that behavior any kind of ‘answer,’ as the actors, now less characters and more the Brechtian voice of the performance, confront the audience with a challenge?<sup>7</sup>

But to challenge the audience with “Are you answered?” implies at the most literal level that the audience as a whole had asked a question, which it had not, outside of the implicit theatrical ones of ‘What next?’ and ‘Why?’ So, we must make a double guess: a question and an answer. Shylock’s flawed, monstrous inhumanity asserts itself as perhaps the final response to sustained antisemitic cruelty. The moment was powerful dramatically without being quite satisfying interpretively. Nor did it feel hopeful, for its implicit pessimism seemed out of sync with the spirit, energy and moments of joy in the production. In any event, perhaps the ending was meant to acknowledge the impasse to which our inhumanity threatens to take us, the place where we are answered by the results of our own cruelty. If so, a desperate call for an intervening mercy, in the languages of several nations, feels right.

#### 4 The Ghetto and the Aesthetic Present

As the words for mercy flashing on the campo wall suggest, the real-life Jewish Ghetto was always vaguely present, even as the production created an aesthetic system internal to itself that was, for the most part, detached from the actual place (the production was conceived with the idea that it could travel). Thus, the dramatic effect of the Ghetto was suggestive but mostly indirect; it lingered in our visual background but was thrust only occasionally into the action. The downstage area incorporated the Ghetto’s water cistern, or *poz-zo*, used sometimes for sitting or leaning, while upstage receded into a pair of the campo’s tall, green trees. The acting occurred not on a platform but on the stones of the campo itself. The play was set, in the

<sup>7</sup> Reviewing the staging of Coonrod’s production at Yale University in June, 2018, Steve Mentz notes of the “Are you answered?” reprise that “The acting collective stood for the Jewish identity that Shylock embodied both within the play and in the past four centuries of Western cultural history – but the speech they collectively spoke asserted, with Shakespearean doubleness, an individual’s refusal to submerge his particular selfhood in service to an ethically compromised public good” (2018).



**Figure 4** Shylock #4 (Andrea Brugnara) and Tubal (Ned Eisenberg). © Andrea Messana

farther distance, against the differently colored walls of the Ghetto buildings, with the tallest façade, distinctive for its yellowness, in the middle. Someone familiar with the Ghetto Novo would know that we were looking toward the entrance to the Jewish Museum in one of those buildings, and, within that building, on upper floors to the left and right, rooms that had been converted to synagogues as early as 1528 for the first Jews confined to the Ghetto. You could watch the play from some of them.

On the audience's left, near the playing space, was a building with an old covered portico walkway and, above, a second-story window used for Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo. As the audience shifted its eyes toward that building in order to follow events, I saw there a woman, peering out of a half-lit open window, who hastened away from it as the characters in the campo approached the window to the adjacent room. For a moment, I thought that she was a spectator, someone who lived there and was gazing on the production (not an unreasonable idea, since there were still random spectators here and there in the campo), until I realised with a visceral shock that the woman in the window was actually Jessica, awaiting Lorenzo and then hurrying into the appointed room. The Ghetto had magically entered the play - entered along with Jessica's desire to escape it.

Outside of the elopement, however, the production made little employment of the Ghetto, which functioned more as a mute presence and a metaphoric envelope than as a theatrical set. I queried some Shakespearean colleagues afterwards about their experiences, and

they agreed that, except intermittently, the staging seldom drew their attention to the Ghetto. We were caught up in the play's actions, of course, and especially in the unfolding relationships among characters. The Jewish Ghetto brought momentousness to the event, and the production made oblique allusions to its setting, but the play's self-contained lyricism worked somewhat independently of the specificity of place. I was reminded of that fact during the panel with the three actresses from the production, who talked about their roles, the dynamics between characters, and the perspective of the director without once mentioning the Ghetto until it came up in the session's very last question.

While Henderson in her critical responses to the production wonders about the possibility of the performance confronting history, Rutter sees it as a complex expression of the play's internal thematics of love. The motif of love was registered at the outset by the opening procession's incorporation of a song by Ruzzante celebrating carnal love. In Coonrod's *Merchant*, if Lorenzo grows into love, Bassanio experiences it with sudden wonder, and Portia with surprise followed by whole-hearted surrender (Rutter 2017, 83). For Rutter, the production played out the thematics of love in the binary of Christian and Jew, too, with Wadia's 'urbane' first Shylock seeking sincerely to overcome division: "I would be friends with you and have your love" (1.3.134). Such variations on the theme cover carnality, romance, parenthood, and fellowship, and tell, on the one hand, of growth and joy, and, on the other, of loss and denial, the poignant possibility that fails to come into being. This theme draws history into the conversation as it echoes against the Ghetto walls, but its real locale is the aesthetic here and now - especially so in comedy, which has a present orientation (the philosopher Agnes Heller observes that comedy always takes place in an "absolute present time", 2005, 13).

Viewed differently, however, the production was profoundly, if implicitly, aware of its Jewish setting, as in the yellow sashes and the painful heightening of voices spitting out antisemitic epithets. A Jessica in this setting will likely experience belated regrets about leaving her father, as Uranowitz's splendid Jessica did. This play is in history, and it is not. That ambiguity was caught in the production's last word, "Mercy", a key term from Portia's famous speech within the play-world now projected as a sign of desperate hope against a wall that had stood during the Nazi's forced evacuation of the city's Jews. On one side, the brilliance of *The Merchant 'in' Venice* is that it actualised what we intuitively know, that, at the present moment, this work, metaphorically, can never escape the Ghetto. On the other side, the play in turn frames the Ghetto, even transforms it for a time, as much as the Ghetto frames the play, as the performance's self-conscious aestheticism insists. In that sense, this unusual production intervenes in history, even overrides it, and does so in a way

meant to have residual implications.<sup>8</sup> The play tells its story back to the Ghetto walls, a story that, despite the moral failings of its principals, is now brought to life by a multi-racial and international cast, and has too much of joy, laughter, beauty, lyricism, and even love to forfeit entirely the possibility, however distant, of redemption. If you are seated there in the Ghetto Novo on this July evening, the light of day has now given way to the light of theatre, and the last image it superimposes on the ancient wall is “Mercy”.

## 5 2016 and 1934

The Colombari *Merchant* spoke not only to the present moment but also to the not-so-distant theatrical past. During the Shylock Project summer school, several speakers contrasted the Ghetto production to the famous Max Reinhardt’s *Merchant of Venice*, performed in Venice’s Campo di San Trovaso in 1934, staged for the city’s first Festival Internazionale del Teatro di Prosa.<sup>9</sup> One can examine this site today (as I did soon after the Ghetto production) much as the German director found it. Reinhardt’s production used its historical site differently than did Coonrod’s version. San Trovaso’s somewhat L-shaped square contains the Greek-inspired Church dedicated to Saints Gervase and Protase (Gervasius and Protasius), adjacent to a grassy field and then a canal (the Rio d’Ognissanti). (Near the base of the campo, along the canal, sits a famous gondola boatyard, the Squero di San Trovaso, one of the city’s oldest still in operation.) At a right angle to the church, two *palazzi* form a corner of the campo, with the left palace façade featuring a useful balcony, and the right one leading to a bridge across the *rio*. Against that right façade, Reinhardt built out a portico, with a stage on top, reached by a staircase. With the canal and its bridge, Reinhardt could make use of local dramatic elements; likewise, across the canal, he employed one of the buildings, whose “majestic doors” became the entrance to Shylock’s house (Fischer-Lichte 2010, 226) – Venetians on one side of the canal, Jews on the other (perhaps alluding to the Ghetto). The canal also lent itself to pageantry, for a character such as the Prince of Arragon could use it to make a grand entrance by gondola like a real-life aristocrat. Spectators were arrayed in the San Trovaso Campo and on the *calle* (or street) running along the canal. The site

<sup>8</sup> Bassi sees *The Merchant 'in' Venice* as “an attempt to reconfigure the Ghetto for the future [...] to retrieve its vocation as meeting place, creative arena, contact zone between cultures and place of interrogation” (2017, 78).

<sup>9</sup> My description of Reinhardt’s Venice *Merchant* draws from Fischer-Lichte 2010, 226-9; Speaight 1973, 206-8; and other sources cited subsequently.

must have been crowded. With palaces on either side of the canal available for use as characters' homes, with the purpose-built structure and its acting platform, and with the dramatic bridge over the canal, Reinhardt had an expansive, three-dimensional staging area featuring different kinds of locales. Those elements in combination amounted to a maximal variation on the elaborate theatrical sets of Venice – palaces, bridges, revolving stages – that Reinhardt had devised for indoor performances of his *Merchant* in Berlin,<sup>10</sup> which he had already produced many times since 1905, almost thirty years earlier. The Venetian staging gave full expression to Reinhardt's conception of a theatre that operates on a 'monumental' scale but that retains a physical closeness to the spectators, creating a "desirable immediacy between actor and audience", with performers even moving through the assemblage, so that spectators feel "involved" and theatrical effects are "heightened" (Kahane 1975, 325-6). As Douglas Russell puts it, Reinhardt sought to involve the audience "physically and viscerally" in a vision of total "aesthetic drama" (1985, 21).

Altogether, Reinhardt had located and augmented an eminently Venetian setting, one with architectural elements that could be showcased in performance, as if real Venice were turned into fantasy Venice. The production took place in the same city as the *Ghetto Merchant*, but metaphorically it was a thousand miles away. Reinhardt's version included dance, pantomime, music, singing, torch-lit processions and street noise, amplified by scores of extras. Reinhardt was known for his skill in using crowds, illustrated by the trial scene in which a Christian mob mills threateningly around an impassive Shylock. The costumes were lavish, and Reinhardt's practice was to extend them with tall headpieces and trains of fabric, the presence of the character made bigger by the costume, an effect quite different from Colombari's sashes. The production aimed at the vitality and spectacle of the Renaissance capital that lived in the imagination. If Reinhardt insisted upon an actor-centered theatre, as commentators say, it was one in which character could acquire fantasy dimensions. This San Trovaso extravaganza took place just a few years before Italy's Fascist government began to issue laws discriminating against and segregating Jews (starting in 1938), and just a few more years before Nazis in Germany devised 'the Final Solution' (1942). According to contemporary reports, the production was, in effect, a glorification of Christian Venice – although Reinhardt himself was Jewish.<sup>11</sup> The face of the real thirties city was there in Reinhardt's *Merchant*, but it became finally so overwritten with production values that whatever was gritty and historical was absorbed

**10** On Reinhardt's designs for *Merchant*, see Tollini 2004, 59-64.

**11** Reinhardt apparently took the part of Tubal (Styan 1982, 61).

into myth and fiction, leaving little independent impression. The features of Campo San Trovaso turned into a kind of foil for theatrical staging in all its prodigal splendor. For Reinhardt generally, a production was “an artistic end in itself” where naturalism or “factual reality” gave way to the “vivid” theatrical “[t]ruth of atmosphere and occasion” (Hortmann 1998, 32).<sup>12</sup> Reinhardt’s *Serenissima*, moreover, held a society of “charming, light-hearted, carefree Venetian *nobili*”, but one essentially ‘closed’ to those outside its tight-knit community (Kahane 1975, 333). Although commentators credited the director with allowing the complexity of Shylock’s character to show through, the production was fundamentally a comedy, with Shylock as a socially discordant element in the most serene of Christian Renaissance cities.<sup>13</sup> The Reinhardt *Merchant*, that is, co-opted its real Venetian setting, much in contrast to its more recent heir.

Yet for all their differences, the Reinhardt and Colombari productions shared an uncanny similarity, in that each inserted a pantomimed scene immediately after Jessica’s escape, a scene in which Shylock responds to his loss, although the two insets create different effects.<sup>14</sup> We have noted that in the Colombari *Merchant*, as Jessica disappears with Lorenzo into a crowd, the Shylock quintet emerges from it, with Jenni Lea-Jones stepping forward with a wail of grief that becomes an animal howl, ripping the play from its comic moorings. Reinhardt’s interpolated scene begins with Shylock (Memo Benassi) emerging on the San Trovaso side of the bridge, heading home from his evening with the Venetian Gentiles. He reaches the top of the *ponte*, calls out for Jessica, receives no reply, and moves apprehensively across and into his house, where he ranges from room to room and floor to floor with increasing anxiety, calls out, mutters, staggers moaning onto a balcony, but mostly is heard by spectators in his rising cries of distress within the confines of the house in which he would have fast-bound Jessica. He then departs the *palazzo* and moves back across the bridge, rending his shawl. This Shylock, like Colombari’s, gives vent to the grief of loss and dispossession, if not

<sup>12</sup> According to Hortmann, Reinhardt had a special affection for Shakespeare’s comedies because of “Their romantic affirmation of life, love and joy” and “their imaginative playfulness”, which “coincided with his own philosophical convictions and artistic interests” (1998, 33).

<sup>13</sup> Speaight (1973) offers a description of the production that is worth quoting: “Reinhardt played ravishing variations with light and water. The characters met and conversed on the bank of the canal, and arrived and departed by gondola, the Doge descending from his gilded barge for the trial scene in the piazza. In the last act a garden was improvised on the steps of the bridge [...]. The balconies of Portia’s mansion, the windows of Shylock’s house and the rim of a well which formed part of the natural site, were all used effectively” (208).

<sup>14</sup> The details here regarding Reinhardt’s inset scene draw from Fischer-Lichte 2010, 226-7.



**Figure 5** Morocco (Mathieu Pastore) and Black Angel (Ziv Gidron). © Andrea Messana

with the same transcendent horror and impotent rage as does the later incarnation. Reinhardt recognised fully that the cost of the Venetians' light-hearted and clubby charm came as callous repudiation of the outsider. Notwithstanding, Shylock's suffering here remains contained, played out largely inside the ironic house and thus distanced from the audience, a kind of set-piece. The 1934 *Merchant* was Reinhardt's last production of the play, perhaps because staging it in Venice constituted the apotheosis of his aesthetic vision of the work – or could it have been, even a little, because the pressure of the plot's contradictions had grown too dark, too vivid? In 1933, the year before Reinhardt's Venetian *Merchant*, the Nazis seized power in Germany, and not many months afterwards, the Jew Reinhardt (who had refused to be made an honorary Aryan) was dispossessed of his Berlin theatres. Had the realities of politics made the continued aestheticisation of *Merchant* untenable? One can only speculate. What we can say of Reinhardt's Shylock interpolation, however, is that it uses the theatrical values of the site both to invent an emotionally moving scene of Shylock's human suffering yet also to carefully circumscribe it.

The Colombari *Merchant's* relationship to its site, the Ghetto, was more ambiguous overall than was Reinhardt's to Venice, and the 2016 production granted the Ghetto its own mysterious ambiance, never attempting to swallow it inside a fantasy of the Renaissance's most mythic city. The production spoke across time to Reinhardt's memorable 1934 theatre-for-theatre's-sake incarnation, just as it aimed to speak to the contemporary global world of 2016 and to those con-

verging European cultures of 1616 and 1516. To Reinhardt, the Ghetto *Merchant* responds that we cannot ignore the dark history, past and present, that surrounds a fictional work; to the global world, it yet argues that it is impossible to understand history, or to envision a future, without fiction. The performers confront us: "Are you answered?"

## 6 The Creative Paradox

Shylock's wail and the mute "Mercy" answered, too, in their own ways, the *Washington Post* op-ed call to ban *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet, although the contemporary relevance of this play may demand that it be performed, directors also feel that they must shape their productions as adversarial encounters with *Merchant*, as Coonrod did by introducing Shylock's howl and other devices, or as the Pryce *Merchant* did by interpolating into the ending a mimed conversion scene for Shylock that sentimentalised him (an effect nurtured elsewhere, too, in the production). Simply offering a sympathetic Shylock hardly seems enough for current stage interpretations; an apolitical rendering of the play would surely be deemed a moral failure. Productions sometimes make Belmont a worse place than Venice, turn Antonio into a homosexual martyr (as in a 2015 Royal Shakespeare Company version, directed by Polly Findlay, where he drifted unfortunately towards parody), present the suitors exclusively as tawdry money-grubbers, insist upon Portia as a conniver who, yes, communicates the secret of the caskets to Bassanio through the *Where is Fancy Bred?* song (as Coonrod regrettably did), and end the play not with a semblance of harmony but with shouting matches and blows among the couples, who are all doubtless headed for the divorce courts (as, again, in the 2015 RSC's *Merchant*). Such productions can become, for me at least, more off-putting than engaging, as if the director were shouting over the top of the play.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to establish the right attitude: do we dare, for example, to like Portia? The Colombari production tilted toward the negative but did not entirely lose its balance - and Powell's Portia showed a winning good-humour. Yet the play can strike many as so hazardous, as Frank recognises, that directors want urgently to condemn those elements in it that they consider vicious or hypocritical.

Condemnation was certainly the attitude of United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg towards Portia. As part of the per-

<sup>15</sup> There are comic or quasi-comic plays, such as J.M. Synge's and Sean O'Casey's, whose realism allows for the representation of characters as deeply flawed mortals, even rotters; but the romance and fantasticality in Shakespearean comedy makes that approach difficult.



Figure 6 The trial scene at dusk. © Andrea Messana

formance week, Ginsburg presided over a mock appeal by Shylock, held in Venice's magnificent, baroquely ornate, Tintoretto-frescoed Scuola Grande di San Rocco.<sup>16</sup> The indoor temperature was in the nineties – one of the lawyers joked that he himself had lost a pound of flesh that day from the heat – yet the hall was packed chockablock with hundreds of people watching in rapt silence as the diminutive 83-year-old judge, clutching a fan, dominated the proceedings with her legal brilliance. (The trial was proposed by Ginsburg, apparently at the prompting of *Washington Post* columnist Judith Martin.)<sup>17</sup> In the public hearing, Shylock's Italian lawyers appealed against the Duke's judgment, with Portia as a kind of irregular co-defendant. We might regard this event as a semi-improvisational 'sequel' to the play, this time with another female, but here Jewish, avatar of justice, a third "Daniel come to judgement" (4.1.219). The festivities began with the celebrated screen and stage actor F. Murray Abraham reciting Shylock's two major speeches, and it featured the luminaries Stephen Greenblatt and James Shapiro interviewing each other while the international panel of jurors, a kind of world court, convened off-stage to decide its verdict. Justice Ginsburg at numerous

<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, Ginsburg presided over a similar appeal at the United States' Law Library of Congress in June, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> If only accidentally, the political world of Washington had other slight links to the production: Paul Spera (Lorenzo) is the grandson of Ginsburg, and Linda Powell (Portia), the daughter of former United States Secretary of State Colin Powell. The literary/theatrical and political worlds may sometimes be closer than we imagine.

moments made clear her disdain for Portia's "hypocrisy" and for the heroine's deficient sense of justice and understanding of law. Thus, it came as no surprise that Shylock's estate was returned to him and his forced conversion nullified. The terms of the bond were deemed no more than a "merry sport", with Shylock therefore denying any claim to "interest". For her part, Portia was remanded to the University of Padua for legal training (which, as a form of punishment, drew considerable laughter).

I was as enthralled as everyone else in attendance (despite the oppressive heat and humidity) but also felt a small residue of discomfort. What was most obvious about the event was its genial but pre-ordained – although not thoughtless – weighting in favour of Shylock (which the opening speeches by Abraham made clear). The 're-trial' was good fun and good theatre, and it would have been ridiculous to expect anything but a verdict in Shylock's favor; the antisemitism that has been part of the play's performance history required no less. Likewise, the legal decision that the contract had been entered into only as a "merry bond" and that this condition could not be retroactively changed was a brilliant legalistic stroke. So, real life intervened to right the wrongs perceived in the dramatic fiction, and the present corrected the past.

But the small business of Shylock's attempting to use the legal system to commit murder was conveniently left out of the question (as was the larger issue of treating another human being as chattel, to which Shylock himself alludes in mentioning slavery). Thus, the decision to return Shylock's money and to restore the conditions *ante* the bond gives Shylock a pass (goodbye the legal principle that he who seeks equity must do equity) along with everyone else. Treating the trial scene as if it were a real legal proceeding brought forth a certain kind of justice but left out another, perhaps a little like the make-believe original that it critiqued. The re-trial advanced according to principles of law, which, albeit playfully managed, entailed their own silence regarding the moral nuances of action and character. Outside of the celebratory nature of the occasion, there lingered the sense that legalisms could not get at certain issues raised by drama any better than the drama could obey the strictures of a real legal setting – and such an impression was perhaps an unexpected value arising from the San Rocco event. That creative paradox, the interlocking relatedness of, but mutual resistance between, fiction and history, seems at the heart of *The Merchant 'in' Venice*.

Fiction weaves a tapestry of hypotheses and multivalent truths that are not the aim of historiography; literature is justified on its own terms. Even more, fictional works such as *The Merchant of Venice* are not static or socially remote; they intervene in history, refashion the past, express our sorrow, redirect our thinking for the future, marshal our good will and resolve. They facilitate our talking together,

globally, about a better world, dreaming it into existence – and even their deficiencies can serve that purpose. Indeed, they make it possible to submit a fictional trial to a virtual re-trial, to refashion the outcome, as in a sequel or adaptation. Because of the richness of his work, Shakespeare offers, again and again, one of the best places from which we can reason about our problems. At present, we are witnessing much excellent theorising about the value of literature and of the humanities; we need those defenses. But what Bassi's *Shylock Project* and *The Merchant 'in' Venice* show us is that subjects within the humanities can be not only thought-provoking for the academy but also compelling for the greater public when we present them with scale, imagination and boldness.

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# Shylock, Our Contemporary

Clive Sinclair

Writer

**Abstract** Offering a personal reflection on the experience of seeing ‘seven Shylocks on a single day’ in Venice in the summer of 2016 this essay takes the form of an itinerary through three separate events related to the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Ghetto of Venice. Footage of Laurence Olivier at the Doge’s Palace, the performance of the “Hath not a Jew Eyes?” speech in a “Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio”, and the five Shylocks who appeared in Karin Coonrod’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* performed in the Ghetto, inspire a lively review and ironical companion piece to Sinclair’s posthumous anthology, *Shylock Must Die*.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Shylock. Laurence Olivier. F. Murray Abraham. Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio. The Merchant in the Ghetto.

Believe me, I have no wish to revive traumatic memories, but even so I would like to draw your attention to the two last-minute interventions of the FBI’s James Comey in the 2016 US Presidential campaign.<sup>1</sup>

When Donald Trump hit the stump in the aftermath of Comey’s initial pronouncement on October 28, 2016, I fully expected this triumphant cry to issue from his lips: “A Daniel come to judgement: yea, a Daniel! O, wise young judge, how I do honour thee” (4.1.219-220). The very words, you shall recall, that Shylock utters when Portia – disguised as a Doctor of Law – appears to allow him his infamous pound of flesh. Likewise, when Comey finally announced – on November 6 – that there was no smoking gun after all, I was anticipating Hilary Clinton (or one of her surrogates) repeating Gratiano’s mocking words:

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement*. We are grateful to Haidee Becker and Seth Sinclair for permission to reprint.



“A Daniel still, say I, a second Daniel! | I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word” (4.1.336-337). Of course, no one said exactly that, but the not-so-distant echo of *The Merchant of Venice*’s climactic scene proved (to me at least) that Shakespeare remains – as Jan Kott put it – our contemporary (Kott 1964). Shylock too, I may add. Probably it escaped your attention, but it was only in 2012 that Florida struck the word ‘shylock’ from state statutes restricting usurious lending practices. I have to admit that as a Jew – albeit a bad one – I was very reluctant to cast Trump as Shylock, but try as I might I had to accept that it was the only way to work the parallel. As a matter of fact, my reluctance to allow Shylock his villainy reflects the wider problem of staging *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice, with Shylock as humanity’s ambassador – or, if you prefer, the goody. In this post-Holocaust age of ours it seems the honourable thing to do. But alas for the elevation of Shylock, the play has a fifth act, in which he is all but forgotten in the rush for reconciliation at Belmont. Like it or not President Trump is Shylock *redux*, and Belmont is the White House he usurps in this alternative universe of ours. From this point of view, his victory is Shylock’s revenge. Accepting Shylock as the baddie does allow us to better see Shylock as Shakespeare saw him. For him the Doge’s verdict, especially the forced conversion – which is wholly abhorrent to us – could well have represented an act of redemption, Shylock’s key to heaven. And what would Trump make of the twinning? Well, he would glory in his outsider status, but he would likely find Shylock’s immigrant status somewhat suspect, and would be happy to learn that the Jew was locked away every night – behind beautiful, beautiful walls – in the world’s original ghetto.

Last July I went to Venice to participate in the quincentennial commemoration of its founding, and to check out Shylock on his home turf. It is true that I had seen many Shylocks, over the course of several years, both in London and in Stratford-upon-Avon. But never before had I seen seven Shylocks on a single day. You could object that it was no accident, that I had been on the lookout; Shylocking around, so to speak. Even so you have to admit that it is a lot of Shylocks. Let me count them for you: the first was in the Doge’s Palace, notional scene of the infamous ‘pound of flesh’ trial, and its vexing conclusion; the second was in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, an equally unlikely venue; while the remainder were all in the Ghetto, exactly where you’d expect to find a man like Shylock.

Taken together these three locations formed the stations of an extraordinary day for Shylock and Shylock-watchers: Wednesday, July 27, 2016; itself the climax of two summers of events, orchestrated by Professor Shaul Bassi of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice.

On March 29, 1516 the then Doge – Prince Leonardo Loredan – signed the decree setting aside an area designated to segregate La Serenissima’s ‘precious’ Jews (precious because of their necessary



**Figure 1** F. Murray Abraham delivers Shylock's "Hath not a Jew...?" speech. Seated: James Shapiro and Stephen Greenblatt. © Alessandro Grassani

role as moneylenders), at that time primarily refugees from the Iberian Peninsula. This may not sound terribly hospitable, but it was a big improvement on what Spain and Portugal had to offer. As it turned out the Doge's Palace was the best place to commence my crash course in Ghettoology, being host that summer to an exhibition entitled *Venice, the Jews, and Europe 1516-2016*. Shylock - impersonated on film by Sir Laurence Olivier, no less, from his National Theatre performance in London in 1970 - was an integral component, of course. Flickering on a screen - like some shade in Hades - he was condemned to endlessly repeat his most famous speech. And what a beautifully constructed thing it is, its architecture fully exposed by Olivier's precise intonation. First there comes anger, which apparently cools and mellows into a lesson on shared humanity, then fizzles up again into revenge with menaces: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.65-66). Better watch out Antonio!

Later in the afternoon F. Murray Abraham delivered the same lines - but in the flesh - in the Chapter Room of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. His rendition - no less affecting than Olivier's - tended to emphasise its demand for equal rights, not to mention Shylock's religion:

I am a Jeeeeew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and

cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?  
If you prick us do we not bleed?  
(3.1.53-58)

A wise move, given that Shylock was present in the Chapter Room as the Appellant in a 'Mock Appeal' against the play's original verdict - no pound of flesh, no repayment; on the contrary, forfeiture of property and fortune, and forced conversion.

The location of the 'Mock Appeal' had been well chosen. The Scuola Grande di San Rocco was completed around 1560, four years before Shakespeare's birth. Shortly thereafter Tintoretto won the commission to decorate its inner walls. The canvases in the Chapter Room on the top floor were completed in 1581 (making them contemporary - give or take a decade - with *The Merchant of Venice*). There are three dominant paintings on the ceiling, each depicting a scene from the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land. Surrounding them are numerous panels illustrating further dramatic moments from the Old Testament. Most pertinent to the present case is the near kinetic re-enactment of the Akedah or the Binding of Isaac. White of hair and beard old Abraham stands centre stage, his arms outstretched, as if posing for a version of the crucifixion. Except that his left hand rests upon the shoulder of his naked son, downcast upon the sacrificial pyre, and his right clutches a murderous blade. The latter is primed to deliver the fatal blow, only to be disarmed at the last by the gentle touch of an angel, a sort of Portia *avant la lettre*.

As is well known, *The Merchant of Venice* is always numbered among the comedies, but only because Portia says - as Shylock is about to make the first cut - "Tarry a little, there is something else" (4.1.301). One wonders what kind of God we would be worshipping had Abraham been permitted to proceed with the slaughter? And what kind of play would *The Merchant* have been had Shylock been granted his pound of flesh? Not a comedy, that is for sure. Let us indulge in a little speculation, a little re-writing. After Antonio's bloody demise Bassanio would likely have taken revenge by stabbing Jessica. What next? Well, if I were Shylock I'd have considered poisoning the wells at Belmont (or 'draining the swamp', if you prefer), which no doubt would have provoked a pogrom and the destruction of the Ghetto. Perhaps Portia did him and his fellow Jews a favour after all. This double-bind is yet another impediment to Shylock's up-grade: either he must surrender his fortune and his identity or become a butcher and - like Christopher Marlowe's Jew of Malta - a mass murderer. It would be interesting to see the judges dig him out of this hole. If they could...

While the ceiling belongs to the Old Testament, the walls are the province of the New, featuring episodes from the life of Christ. Thus, the Chapter Room itself is an emblem of one of *The Merchant's* major conflicts: between the religion of the Son, and the religion of the

Father. Another source of friction is, of course, that between mercy – a quality in which Shylock, as a Jew, is supposedly deficient – and justice. Greeting Antonio at the commencement of the trial the Doge (retitled Duke by Shakespeare) has this to say:

I am sorry for thee. Thou art come to answer  
A stony adversary, an inhumane wretch,  
Un capable of pity, void and empty  
From any dram of mercy.  
(4.1.2-5)

Obviously, the large audience at the ‘Mock Appeal’ – it felt like a congregation – had come to hear a less partial consideration. Indeed, when the Justices entered at 5.00 p.m. and we were all instructed to rise, I could not help but remember those ancient days when I accompanied my father to Raleigh Close Synagogue on Yom Kippur (always sweltering in my memory) and we men (and boys) in our prayer shawls rose as our rabbi lifted the holy scrolls from the Ark and paraded them down the aisles. The jurists who marched down the aisle of the Chapter Room were almost worthy of similar respect. First among them was the Honourable (and diminutive) Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States. She was followed by four others: John R. Phillips, US Ambassador to Italy, Professors Laura Picchio Forlati of Padua and Richard Schneider of Wake Forest University, and finally Avvocato Fabio Moretti of Venice. They took their seats before a structure that looked strangely like the Ark of the Covenant.

A Florentine, Manfredi Burgio, represented Shylock. His chief weapon was anachronism, comparing the Alien Statute (Portia’s invention, he concluded, having found no evidence for its existence outside the play) – under which Shylock is first sentenced to death for threatening the life of a native Venetian, then, when his life is spared, paupered (although in fact, half his wealth is returned to him) – to Mussolini’s Racial Laws, which deprived Shylock’s co-religionists of their rights, jobs, assets and lives. (Of 246 deportees from the Venetian Ghetto between December 1943 and August 1944, only eight returned). The judgement against his client, Burgio concluded, “should therefore be reversed *in parte qua*”. Jonathan Geballe, speaking on behalf of both Antonio and Portia, would have none of this: “The Court needs to question the fairness of measuring the legal correctness of the proceedings in the 16th century court [...] by standards developed over the hundreds of years which have passed”. Besides, he added, Venice was “markedly tolerant and accepting towards Jews for its time”, permitting them religious freedom, albeit within the confines of the Ghetto. He pointed to the finale of Shylock’s great speech and argued that the Appellant attended the trial with murder in mind. Why else, he asked, “whet his knife so

earnestly”? Mario Siragusa, lawyer for both the Republic of Venice and Antonio, was of a like mind: “My first comment is that it would not be appropriate to approach the matter with our contemporary sensibility, schooled by history to the atrocious outcome of anti-Jewish prejudice and persecution in the twentieth century”. Instead, he proposed sticking to Venetian law circa 1570.

The aforementioned were the sort of smart-aleck legal minds (I mean this as a compliment) who make you change your opinion at every twist and turn, but when all was said and done, I felt that Shylock would be lucky to win the ‘Appeal’. While the judges retired to deliberate, the platform was given over to two professors, James Shapiro and Stephen Greenblatt, who had twenty minutes in which to turn the spotlight from law to literature, from the court to the theatre. They proved to be a fine double act; if they wanted a stage-name they could call themselves ‘Shablatt’. One – maybe Shapiro – asked us to consider Portia’s motives once she has heard Bassanio – her new husband – declare that he would gladly sacrifice his life and that of his wife to save Antonio. Should she then abet Antonio’s murder, thereby rubbing out a rival, but also running the risk of poisoning her marriage with the gruesome memory of his martyrdom, or should she rescue him, with the attendant danger of his continuing presence? Another – I forget which – referred to the anxieties contemporary productions of *The Merchant of Venice* still create, especially in the United States. He recalled an early rehearsal for the 2007 production in which F. Murray Abraham proved himself “one of the great Shylocks of our age”. Entering the rehearsal room Shapiro or Greenblatt spotted a stern-looking man sporting a yarmulke and pegged him as a spy from the Anti-Defamation League, only to be disabused when he arose – pat on cue – and said: “Three thousand ducats, well” (1.3.1). This led to the recollection of a production by the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, which was in rehearsal when Baruch Goldstein massacred nearly three dozen Muslims at prayer in Hebron, an act which prompted the recasting of Shylock as a West Bank settler who, becoming radicalised, turns both rabbinic and rabid. Jan Kott was right, as if there were any doubt. Shakespeare is our contemporary.

We all rose again when the Judges returned. Their ruling was unanimous according to Justice Ginsburg: the bond – the pound of flesh – was dismissed as a jest, one that no court in its right mind would grant; Antonio was ordered to repay his loan (though he was spared interest upon it); Shylock’s fortune was restored; and his conversion revoked, on the grounds that Antonio, as defendant, had no right to demand it. What could I say? It was Shylock’s lucky day. Furthermore, the court had a particularly harsh reprimand for Portia (though here there was one dissenting voice), perhaps because she acquired her doctorate in less than a week. Anyway, she was required to attend law school at the University of Padua, and further to pursue a Master of Law degree at Wake Forest.



Figure 2 Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg presides over Shylock's 'Mock Appeal' with fellow judge Laura Picchio Forlati. © Alessandro Grassani

The proceedings were rounded off with an invitation from Arrigo Cipriani - owner of Harry's Bar - to endless Bellinis in the vast hall downstairs. This itself was a subtle act of reparation. Writing a brief history of Harry's Bar, Mary Hemingway recorded the following: "As it did to all European hotel and restaurant owners, World War II brought Cipriani [Arrigo's father, Giuseppe] varied and serious problems. Because visiting Americans and British had frequented Harry's Bar, local Fascists spread the word that Cipriani was anti-Fascist and painted a slogan on the building, 'Chiuso per disinfezione' (Closed for disinfection). To his dismay, he was ordered to put up a sign inside: 'Jews not welcome'" (Hemingway 1967).

Professor Greenblatt or Shapiro was right; any given production of *The Merchant of Venice* causes disquiet, especially when that production is in the Ghetto itself. On this occasion the fear did not concern possible charges of antisemitism, but actual charges by armed antisemites. To protect the audience, squads of soldiers were stationed at the Ghetto's entrances, while other teams patrolled its two squares. In addition, a permanent observation post had been established immediately before the Holocaust memorial, with its brick wall, barbed wire, and metal reliefs of humanity *in extremis*. Bleachers had been raised in the Campo de Ghetto Novo. To my mind the most notable feature of the production, apart from its setting (which itself was enhanced by the fading of day into twilight, and the merging of twilight into night, whereupon the chorus of cicadas ceased its chirping), was the fact that

Shylock's role was taken by five different actors. For once it almost made sense of Portia's question upon entering the courtroom, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.170), because we were not 100% sure ourselves. Shylock's most famous lines were lent to Jenni Lea-Jones, who would have us believe that her character had been driven to breaking point, an impression confirmed when she discovered that her daughter had eloped with a Christian, and her keening caused lights to go on in the Ghetto's darkened windows. Explanations for the multiple casting were provided in the programme by various members of the playing company, Compagnia de' Colombari. Its dramaturg, Walter Valeri, put it this way: "We felt an almost 'natural' duty to commit dramaturgical heresy, to transfer Shylock into the body of five actors, make him slip out of his single, unique skin to underscore how each one of us is indeed Shylock". Personally, I would dispute that, unless Mr. Valeri knows something about me that I do not. But, in truth, such an objection was to miss the point of the production. Its director - Karin Coonrod - did not invite her audience to feel, or even to laugh very much (though the play is nominally a comedy, and - in this instance - included fine episodes of *commedia dell'arte*), but to think.

The performance concluded not with the traditional harmony in Belmont but with each cast member repeating Shylock's challenge: "Are you answered?" (4.1.61). Actually, an answer of sorts did appear - like the writing on the wall - spread across several of the Ghetto's tenements: the Hebrew word, *Rahamim*, whose meaning is Mercy. It was all very well for Portia (in this instance Linda Powell) to recite her beautiful lines on how "The quality of mercy is not strained: | It drop-peth as the gentle rain from heaven" (4.1.180-181), but precious little of it fell upon this production's Shylock. Was there one law, then, for Christians, and another for Jews? Were we to be granted justice, but no mercy, because mercy is so alien to us? You could even argue, I think, that such a distinction inspired the very first ghetto, with its unique rules (including a curfew and locked gates). And now we were back there again, in some numbers, insisting that mercy is an essential component of Judaism. My contribution is Exodus 25:21, which places the 'mercy seat' above even God's holy writ.

Let our contemporaries take note, and let the theologians and the lawyers discuss the issue till the last dot of recorded time, the last hurrah belongs to Shakespeare (400 years dead), creator of the world's most famous Venetian.

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## Shylock's Mock Appeal

Howard Jacobson

Novelist and journalist

**Abstract** “What ceremony else?” asks Laertes in Hamlet. This essay raises the same question as regards the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death and recounts Jacobson’s experience of *The Merchant of Venice* events in Venice that year. In particular, he reviews the “Mock Appeal in the Matter of Shylock versus Antonio” held in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, presided by Ruth Bader Ginsburg observing that “there was both absurdity and *gravitas* in having the infamous bond dissected by experts in the field”.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare anniversary. Shylock. Mock Appeal: Shylock v. Antonio. Ruth Bader Ginsburgmbari.

I recall an argument at a dinner party about the relative merits of Peggy Lee’s version of “Is That All There Is?” and Georgia Brown’s.<sup>1</sup> One of us happened to know that Peggy Lee was born Norma Deloris Egstrom in North Dakota, that her mother died when she was four, and that her father was an alcoholic. You had to admire a woman who had fought her way up from that. Someone else said that Georgia Brown was born Lillian Claire Laizer Getel Klot and her father was a bookmaker. Hers too had been an admirable upward trajectory. I loved the smoky disappointment of the song itself too much to choose a version. Let them both sing it. “Is That All There Is?”, I would only have been in my twenties when I first heard it but already I knew that was how I would go on feeling for the rest of my life.

Today I ask the question again, not in a general philosophical way – philosophically I know the answer, anyway – but with specific application to Shakespeare. We are now well into the year marking the 400th anniversary

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**1** This essay was originally presented as a “Point of View” on BBC Radio 4, 23 October 2016, and is accessible online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07z7d5m>.





Figure 1 Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg with judges Fabio Moretti and Laura Picchio Forlati. © Alessandro Grassani

of his death, so is that all there is? “What ceremony else?” Laertes demands to know in Act 5 of *Hamlet* as his sister Ophelia is buried without obsequy or requiem. I demand to know the same: what ceremony else?

I know the anniversary has not gone unremarked. There have been talks, workshops, rewrites of the plays in novel form (one by me, as it happens), mugs, merchandise, window displays. But has there been anything like enough? To do justice to Shakespeare’s genius and all we owe it – every time we look into our souls and find vipers knotted there as well as angels singing, every time the words we use surprise us by the images embedded in them, every time our thoughts take concrete and even sensual form – all else should have been postponed. No play by any another playwright should have been performed. No word of praise for anyone but him. The Olympics ought to have been postponed until 2017. The European Football Championships, the same – or maybe cancelled. I, had I wielded influence, would not have allowed the sun itself to shine for one whole year lest it rival Shakespeare with its refulgence.

The most comprehensive saturation in Shakespeare I have enjoyed has not been in the country of his birth but in the adopted country of his imagination – Italy. This year marks another anniversary for the Italians – 500 years since the establishment of the Venice Ghetto, in commemoration of which *The Merchant of Venice* has just been performed there. People watching from the scaffold seats enjoyed the irony of Shylock returning in triumph to the place where he was reviled, though in fact there is no mention of any ghetto in the play and no evidence Shakespeare knew of its existence. But there is irony

enough in Shylock's having become the presiding spirit of Venice altogether, the person Dickens hoped to see when he visited Venice, and in Shakespeare - who almost certainly did *not* visit Italy - still being able to conjure an Italy-of-the-mind that Italians recognise. Humanity has done well, after all that is happened this half millennium, not only to have survived to see this play in such a place, but to want to see it.

A similar sense of something important persisting against the odds permeated the following evening's event in Venice - a rerun of the civil suit brought by Shylock against Antonio for the redemption of his ghoulish bond. Billed as a 'Mock Appeal in the Matter of Shylock versus Antonio', this was no mere fanciful fringe happening. It was held in the sumptuous Scuola Grande di San Rocco beneath a ceiling of Biblical panels painted by Tintoretto, and just in case we still had not taken the measure of the lawsuit's seriousness - no matter that the appellant and appellee were long dead, indeed had never existed - it was to be heard by the Honourable Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States, flown in specially from Washington.

It was a suffocating late Venice afternoon, the sun seeming to have sucked up all the waters of the lagoon and brought them here to flow again under our clothes. So hot and humid were we, we did not always know our bodies from our neighbour's and when we mopped our brows we were as likely to mop someone else's.

There were about a thousand of us gathered to see justice done to Shylock at last, all fanning with such vehemence that we threatened damage to the precious paintings above. They had been up there a long time. Starting in 1560, Tintoretto finished the ceiling in 1590, six or seven years before Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, though to me hundreds of years could have separated them, so much more modern does Shakespeare feel.

But the fact that we were having this mock trial at all suggests that our ideas of justice have changed since 1597. Earlier theatre-goers found it easier to accept the harsh punishment meted out to Shylock - forfeiture of his fortune and his faith - than we can. Today, Jews are trickier to despise for their Jewishness than they used to be. And we are beginning to read Portia differently too. Once revered for her pretty manners, her mercy dropping as the gentle rain from heaven speech, and her smart evisceration of Shylock, she strikes us less favourably today. If she is so attached to mercy, how come she shows so little of it to Shylock? I rejoice in the revision of Portia and her Sunday School sermonising. The greatest moments in Shakespeare come when characters uncover the meaning of humanity in an act of self-examination. Macbeth has to discover a whole iconography of pity before he can comprehend the profundity of its meaning. Portia merely spouts piety. And we owe it to Shakespeare to notice the difference.

There we were, anyway, waiting for the Honourable Ruth Bader Ginsburg to appear and take control. Appointed to office by Bill Clinton in 1993, and much admired for her jurisprudential wisdom ever since, Justice Ginsburg is a tiny, hooped, indomitable woman of eighty-three. She was hard to discern, when she first arrived, so completely was she encircled by bodyguards twice her height. It must have been hot in there. Nothing like as hot, though, as it must have been inside the Supreme Court robes she wore to process down the hall when the court was finally called to order. We fanned in unison and looked on in awe as she took her position on the bench. A 'Mock Appeal' this might have been, but nobody was going to get very far with her who did not take it seriously.

I will not rehearse the arguments put forward by the attorneys. Suffice to say there was both absurdity and *gravitas* in having the infamous bond dissected by experts in the field. Imagine land agents sorting out Lear's disposal of his kingdom, or a tree surgeon explaining to Macbeth how a wood could come to Dunsinane.

Justice Ginsburg showed her wit. When Portia's counsel defended his client's scant knowledge of the law on the grounds that women in sixteenth century Venice could not get into law school, the judge remarked that she could always have disguised herself as a man.

She found, as it was inevitable that she would, for Shylock. I wanted to rise from my seat and roar my satisfaction, but I was by this time *welded* to it. Portia was reprimanded for her tricksterism and sent for correction to the Law School at Padua University, a suggestion that was met with displeasure by a member of the court who happened to be Professor of Law at Padua University and did not see it as a place of penance.

As for Shylock's original 3,000 ducats - they were to be returned to him, Justice Ginsburg sonorously pronounced, though they would not be subject to interest after 400 years. We could joke now. Some of us even computed how much the interest would have been. We left exhilarated, quickened by the grave comedy.

An ancient misreading of a famous play had been challenged, not by people eager to take offence, but by readers sensitive to the play's meanings. Portia had got hers. And Shakespeare's words burned for another day. Is that all there is?

All right - how much more do I want?

# Trying Portia

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**Abstract** Extraordinary in itself, the 2016 performance of *The Merchant* in the Venetian Ghetto produced an equally extraordinary collateral performance. Staged in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, a ‘Mock Appeal in the Matter of Shylock v. Antonio’ was heard by a bench presided over by Ruth Bader Ginsberg. A curious aspect of the Appeal was that Portia was made an appellee. This essay investigates the decision to try Portia. What cultural, political, religious needs were served by bringing Portia into court? Thinking about Justice and Mercy, law, bonds, and love, this essay asks: when the verdict was pronounced, was antisemitism recuperated by misogyny?

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Portia. The quality of mercy. Shakespeare’s trial scenes. Mock Trial: Shylock v. Antonio. Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Children reading Shakespeare. Adaptation. Shakespeare’s comedies of love. The Merchant of Venice in the Ghetto.

**Summary** 1 Summoning Astraea. – 2 Mock – or Mockery. – 3 “Which is the Merchant Here? And Which the Jew?” – 4 “A Man Withe Owte Mercye”. – 5 Among Schoolchildren.

## 1 Summoning Astraea

Extraordinary in itself, the performance of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* in the Venetian Ghetto in July 2016 produced an equally extraordinary side-show. It was staged in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco beneath Tintoretto’s vast ceiling paintings which unfold over visitors’ heads the Old Testament’s accounts of God’s encounters with mankind while below, on the Scuola’s walls, visitors are surrounded by Tintoretto’s bold representations of the New Testament’s re-encounters. In this place, which privileges both Jews and Christians, an audience assembled to hear the ‘Mock Appeal in the Matter of Shylock vs Antonio’. The case was heard by a judicial bench presided over

by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court. It presented Shylock (proxied by his *avvocato*) appealing against the sentence handed down to him in Act 4 of Shakespeare's play, arguing that "the judgment be reversed *en toto*" and that "all the estates formerly" Shylock's be "returned". A curious aspect of this 'Appeal', ostensibly a matter between Shylock and Antonio, was that Portia, though "not a named defendant in the lower court", was made an appellee in the case, called into court to defend the role she had played in reaching the original verdict.<sup>1</sup> But why try Portia? What cultural, political, religious needs were being served by bringing Portia (via her attorney) into court in 2016?<sup>2</sup>

Of course, many of today's spectators of Shakespeare's play find Portia trying. Specifically, they indict her of failing to offer Shylock the very "quality of mercy" she proposes he "must" render Antonio (4.1.180). But this, I suggest, signally misrepresents her actions in Shakespeare's court while misunderstanding, first, how mercy can be applied as mitigation (and by whom) and second, what relationship mercy has to justice. In preliminary remarks from Fabrizio Marrella, Professor of International Law, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the packed audience at the 'Appeal' were invited to think about Justice and Mercy. *The Allegory of Misericordia* is pictured on Tintoretto's ceiling, and as Marrella reminded us, the story told in Ovid of Astraea (a.k.a 'Justitia', virgin daughter of Zeus and Themis) is built into the very stone fabric of Venice. She might be said to preside over the city, her figure standing atop the Palazzo Ducale. And she is also ubiquitous in manuscript and print, written into the Republic's self-defining civic myth by its chief early modern chronicler, Pietro Contarini. The last of the immortals to live on earth among men through the ages called 'Gold' and 'Silver', Astraea (according to Ovid) finally fled, sickened by man's slide into brutishness, a brutishness figured in the

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**1** All quotation of the *avvocati* is taken from the program document, *Mock Appeal*, prepared for the event. Manfredi Burgio represented Shylock; Mario Siragusa, Antonio; Jonathan Geballe, Portia, with additional quotation of Geballe from personal communication. Quotation of Justice Ginsburg is transcribed from the RAI5 documentary film, *Perché Shylock?*. See <https://www.raisplay.it/programmi/percheshylock/>. In the final edit made for broadcast, this film cut Portia's presence from the proceedings, thereby cutting both her defence and the bench's verdict. It is, of course, notable in this line-up (and indeed, across the entire casting of the 'Mock Appeal', including its 'academic experts' and the actor who came on to confront the audience with an aggressive rendering of "Hath not a Jew eyes") that there was no English voice heard: neither to represent the English law of the period which Shakespeare was manipulating so audaciously nor to represent the "little dramatist from Stratford" himself, as Patrice Pavis makes him (Kennedy 1993, 286-7). Notable, too, was that the single judge to dissent from Justice Ginsburg's sentence on Portia was the only other woman performing in the 'Appeal', Professor Laura Picchio Forlati of the law faculty in the University of Padua.

**2** I gratefully acknowledge input in this essay from Paul Raffield (law), Ryan Service (theology), and Ben Fowler (performance).

death of human love, when, in the Age of Iron, “all proper affection lay vanquished” (Innes 1995, 33). (These metallic ages: are they not uncannily reminiscent of three caskets?) Ovid gives a blunt record of her flight from earth in the opening book of *Metamorphoses*: “Terras Astraëa reliquit” (1.150). The longed-for return of Astraëa, however, would signal the apocalyptic restoration of the Golden Age. Might something like that return happen, our host ventured, in the course of the ‘Appeal’ being staged in the Scuola Grande? Might Astraëa be summoned back to earth? Might affection ‘proper’ to humanity be restored? Might Astraëa preside amongst us wearing the robes of justice – perhaps as a woman?

## 2 Mock – or Mockery

All of Shakespeare’s staged trials are show trials. They are hybrids gesturing at but not conforming to any juridical practice recognised in early modern England. As hybrids, they are positioned in the play to do work far beyond a lawyer’s clerkly office. To subject them, then, to the scrutiny of a mock trial four hundred years later is bound to be problematic. So it was in Shylock’s ‘Appeal’. For one thing, the advocates found it nigh impossible to decide whether, representing their clients, they were arguing from history – ‘real’ law of the 1590s – or from the present – bringing to bear on the case Holocaust memory and modern human rights legislation; whether they were arguing from Venice – and judicial practice belonging to the early modern Republic – or from Shakespeare’s London and its fictive law practice. Shakespeare in his own time was evidently familiar with the business of the Inns of Court (not least, perhaps, because law students were avid playgoers). He was capable of playing fast and loose with legalisms whose entanglements he had been both staging and mocking since, in one of his earliest plays, Dick the Butcher, Jack Cade’s truculent side-kick, proposes launching a new popular order in England with swingeing legal reforms: “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers” (4.2.72). For after all, according to Dick’s preposterous logic, lawyers are the greatest criminals. It is lawyers who, with ingenious (but disingenuous) arguments, arrange for lambs – early modern legal documents being written on parchment made of lambskins – to hang men.

Negotiating tricky positional contradictions, and faced with the sheer mass of contested evidence Shakespeare’s play presents, the Shylock ‘Appeal’ advocates on occasion understandably lost their grip on the plain facts of Shylock’s original hearing. One advocate wrongly claimed that Portia never addressed Shylock by name but always as *the Jew* and that Shylock left the court “deprived of all his fortune”. Another imagined wholly fanciful “commercial practices in London in

the last decades of the sixteenth century” when he proposed that tensions in the play were rooted in anxieties “Londoners felt” about “the financial success that the Jews” were achieving there “in the money lending business”. Elsewhere, they alleged motivations that surely should have been challenged (but were not), for example, that Portia in the trial was “simply playing a sadistic game, cruelly deceiving Shylock until such moment she decided to annihilate him”. They applied promiscuously the concept of presumption, “what Shylock” acting in the scene (or Shakespeare writing it) “must have known”. The “Alien Statute”, for instance, sprung on Shylock with “Tarry, Jew” (4.1.342) must have been fraudulent, one advocate argued, a subterfuge, nobody in Venice seeming to have heard of it before, not even the “alien” Jew. But by that logic, the further claim should have been rejected, that Shylock’s case turns on a mere quibble, “the forfeiture (the blood)” being “an implied term of the bond” which “the parties had surely taken into account”. Shylock is a Jew conversant in scripture. “Surely” he must have known Genesis 9,4-6 and Leviticus 17,10-14, where ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ are separated terms, where the distinction between ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ is no quibble but defined, laid down as law.

Of course, even with the best legal will in the world, an advocate who reads Shakespeare’s trials forensically is bound to come to grief. The ‘facts’ of the matter simply do not stack up. Inconsistencies abound. Gaps yawn. Arguments collapse down narrative rabbit holes. Take the defence made by Portia’s ‘Appeal’ lawyer (accurately quoting one scene of the play) that she “had training” in law “from her cousin, Dr Bellario”. “We know” this, said Counsel, “from Dr Bellario’s letter read aloud in court”. That letter introduces a “young doctor of Rome” as Bellario’s stand-in and assures the court that “Balthazar” is thoroughly “acquainted [...] with the cause in controversy”; that, having “turn’d o’er many books together”, he is “furnished with my opinion” (4.1.150-163 *passim*). But how can that be? Portia – if she is the one meant in that pseudonym – did not visit Bellario. It was her servant – another (perplexingly named) “Balthazar” – whom Portia sent (in an *earlier* scene of the play) hotfoot first to Padua to Bellario to collect “notes and garments” then to “the traject, to the common ferry | Which trades to Venice” to rendezvous with herself and Nerissa (3.4.45-84 *passim*). So, is Bellario’s letter a forgery? Who wrote it? Or is the venerable lawyer in Padua complicit in a legal scam? Teased into asking such questions – by facing the fact that to put such forensic pressure on details that expose inconsistencies in the writing, and that indeed, to treat a theatrical fiction as if it were reality, are fundamentally flawed projects – a mock trial flirts with mockery.

Of more consequence to Shylock’s ‘Appeal’ and its verdict than any of this, however, was the agreement reached in a pre-trial hearing to “pare down the controversy”, as Justice Ginsburg put it, by accepting – “although he thinks by right he should have the pound of



Figure 1 Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg presides over Shylock's 'Mock Appeal'. © Alessandro Grassani

flesh" - Shylock's decision "to relinquish that demand". "Very sensibly", Ginsburg concluded, calling the "pound of flesh" forfeiture "a jest, a merry sport". With one stroke of the judicial pen, then, Ginsburg struck out the specific term, the flesh forfeiture, that gives meaning to Shylock's bond in the symbolic logic of Shakespeare's play (of which more, later). The "controversy" was reduced to a commercial dispute over property and 3,000 ducats whose outcome, once bodies and flesh were no longer at stake, could hardly entail imposing religious conversion on the Jew. Unsurprisingly, then, Ginsburg's court reached a unanimous verdict: Shylock's property was returned, the 3,000 ducats repaid, the conversion nullified. The verdict on the "pound of flesh", that it was "a jest", mere "sport", stood, despite arguments from Counsel that Shylock possessed the "*mens rea*, the mental disposition" - which must be demonstrated in early modern English law for conviction - to exact his forfeiture; that he entered the court with a pre-history of "revenge in mind" - as evidenced by 1.3.37-48 and summarised at 3.1.60-66 - and that, in court, he was "prepared to do the murderous deed", as shown by his response to Bassanio's "Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?":

To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there.  
(4.1.120-21)

Some "jest".

Where was Portia in all this? Justice Ginsburg had opened the proceedings summarising Shylock's claims, indicating that "After Shylock's Counsel speaks, we will hear from Counsel for Antonio and the Republic of Venice". Only "finally" did Ginsburg notice Portia, remarking that "although we question whether she" – Portia – "has standing to be a party to this proceeding", "Counsel for Portia" would be "indulged". *Indulged*. A curious term, given that Portia had been *summoned* to appear, summoned, according to her Counsel, to defend against accusations of "raising and enforcing questionable Venetian 'laws' which punished Shylock and turned a civil trial into a criminal conviction" and of "perpetrating a hoax on the judiciary by pretending to be a judge".

Counsel addressed these accusations succinctly, observing: that Portia "refrain[ed] from defending [...] the conversion requirement" (it not being her ruling), which in any case was "not enforceable" and should be "declared null and void"; that, nonetheless, "Shylock's motive was reasonably ascribed to an attempt to seek the life of a citizen"; that Portia "fully satisfied the requirements necessary to qualify as a judge in sixteenth century Venice"; that her rulings were "not reversible based on claims of [...] her application of strict law" for, having found the parties at an "impasse", both insisting "on the law", she first "drew on the doctrine of equity" – the legal term for 'mercy' – "to satisfy the bond while avoiding bloodshed". Only when "stymied at applying equity" had she moved, as Shylock demanded, to "the other doctrine: strict law".

Counsel refrained from noticing that it was Shylock himself who directed "Balthazar's" attention to the strict reading of the bond and to the distinct categories of 'flesh' and 'blood' inscribed within it when, having answered the court that he did indeed have to hand scales "to weigh" Antonio's "flesh", he declined to provide a surgeon "To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death" (4.1.251-254 *passim*). "Is it so nominated in the bond?" he queried, evidently searching the document ("I cannot find it") before persisting, "'tis not in the bond" (4.1.255-258). Shylock's "It". That is the sort of unspecified contractual term a lawyer pounces upon – and perhaps "it" pricks up Portia/Balthazar's ears. Is "it" a "surgeon"? Or is "it" to "bleed to death"? The bond does not provide for a surgeon. But neither does it provide for bleeding to death. "It" provides for flesh – but "it" does not provide for blood.

Ginsburg's court had some questions for Portia's Counsel. Why had his client gone to Venice, passing herself off as a "young doctor of Rome"? Why get involved in Shylock vs Antonio? Counsel hesitated. Shakespeare's play does not say. Portia in 3.4 issues instructions left, right, and centre; dispatches her just-married husband, settles her household, makes saucy jokes about wearing men's clothes, but never discloses her reasons. Counsel improvised: she had to go to

Venice, he said, because the men had made such a hash of things that only a woman could sort them out.

Sitting in the Scuola audience, it came to me: in the court in Venice, dressed as a man, Portia was actually Astraea's proxy.

Ginsburg's court did not see it that way. Unanimous on Shylock's appeal (which entirely vindicated him, the audience responding with vigorous applause), its verdict on Portia, pronounced last, was split, the majority declaring Portia "a liar and a hypocrite" who failed to render Shylock the mercy she requires him to give Antonio, and sentencing her for criminal imposture. (Thus, Ginsburg's court turned this civil hearing into a criminal case - with, evidently, staggering hypocrisy, since such a "turning" was one of Ginsburg's allegations against Portia's "fraudulent" action in Venice.) Her penalty? She was condemned to enrol in a course in law at the University of Padua.

The audience gasped - then erupted in raucous laughter.

My blood froze.

I had heard that sort of mob laughter before, indeed, only the night before - in the Ghetto Novo, at the end of the trial scene in Coonrod's *Merchant of Venice*, when Antonio capped his "mercy" to Shylock with a final surprise "favour", that "[h]e presently become a Christian" (4.1.382-383). The gaggle of jurors, hangers on, interested parties that Coonrod had put on stage to witness the trial gasped - then laughed, in derision, in ugly, despising mockery of the Jew; laughter that exposed, that conveyed ridicule, shame, humiliation.<sup>3</sup>

Now in Ginsburg's court this laughter was turned on the woman. (Elsewhere that summer, Donald Trump was campaigning against Hilary Clinton in the US presidential election he would eventually win. Misogyny was back on the agenda - with a virulent vengeance).

I glanced to where the actor who was playing Portia in Coonrod's production had been sitting - but she was gone. She had a play to put on. What then came to mind was the student who, years earlier, had confessed to me how difficult it was for her, a young black woman, to celebrate the dream of black liberation at the end of Fugard/Kani/Ntshona's *The Island* where men's fantasies of freedom are rendered in the objectification of black women, reduced to "it", to "wet poes", and "you'll fuck it wild!" (Fugard 2000, 220). Sadly, she said, "The last 'niggers' to be freed will be us women". Now, I reflected, was antisemitism to be recuperated in misogyny? Simply trading scapegoats: did that not leave the power structure of the scapegoater still in place?

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**3** Others heard the laughter differently: "For some", writes Ben Fowler who was present at the 'Appeal', "it may have arisen from the great irony of RBG - an advocate of women's equality on the Supreme Court - issuing this sentence" (personal communication, April 2019).

### 3 “Which is the Merchant Here? And Which the Jew?”

It was entirely right, for the commemorative purposes Coonrod’s production was serving, that her *Merchant of Venice* should be Shylock’s play. His point of view was privileged, five actors embodying, in the five scenes Shakespeare gives him, aspects of a character that this production showed him constantly reinventing in reaction to the Christians’ latest humiliations. At the end, her five Shylocks got the last line: a speech interpolated from the trial scene, 4.1.39-61, that ends “Are you answered?”. Here, addressed straight to the audience and repeated over and over, that demand had the effect of turning the play *out*, placing the troubling questions Shakespeare’s *Merchant* asks but never answers squarely in the laps of the audience. Without doubt, Coonrod’s project to ‘bring Shylock home’ was a major cultural achievement. But as the actor playing Portia observed of Coonrod’s direction, “You can push a concept only so far. Then Shakespeare’s play asserts itself” (Rutter 2017, 83). And Shakespeare’s play of *The Merchant of Venice* is not Shylock’s play. It is a play about Christians that uses the Jew as a magnifying glass to scrutinise Christian behaviours.

One of the most telling observations James Shapiro makes in his magisterial *Shakespeare and the Jews* is that early modern “England’s fascination” with the Jews had less to do with anxieties about Jews *qua* Jews or with Jewish conversion than with the “crisis of religious identity produced by England’s break with Catholicism”, a break that “brought into question what before this time had been one of the least troubled aspects of [English] social identity: what it meant to be Christian” (1996, 134). Notionally, English Protestants needed to wheel out the “idea of the stubborn Jew” as a kind of prophylactic to settle their queasy doctrinal stomachs, to reassure themselves that they knew “what it meant to be Christian” (134). Just this sort of “stubborn Jew” had functioned in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* a few years before Shakespeare’s *Merchant* appeared – but not to settle, rather, radically to disturb “what it meant to be Christian”. As religious *agent provocateur* in a world where Christians, Turks and Jews jockeyed for power, Barabas relentlessly satirised Christian “profession” as hollow hypocrisy. In that play, the presiding *genius loci* was “Machiavel”; the playwright’s targets were political. The ‘Christian’ exposed by Marlowe’s “stubborn Jew” was an ideological construct representative of a system of bankrupt “policy”.

Shakespeare in *Merchant* was doing something different. Not writing “savage farce” or “slapstick tragedy” but romantic comedy – a line

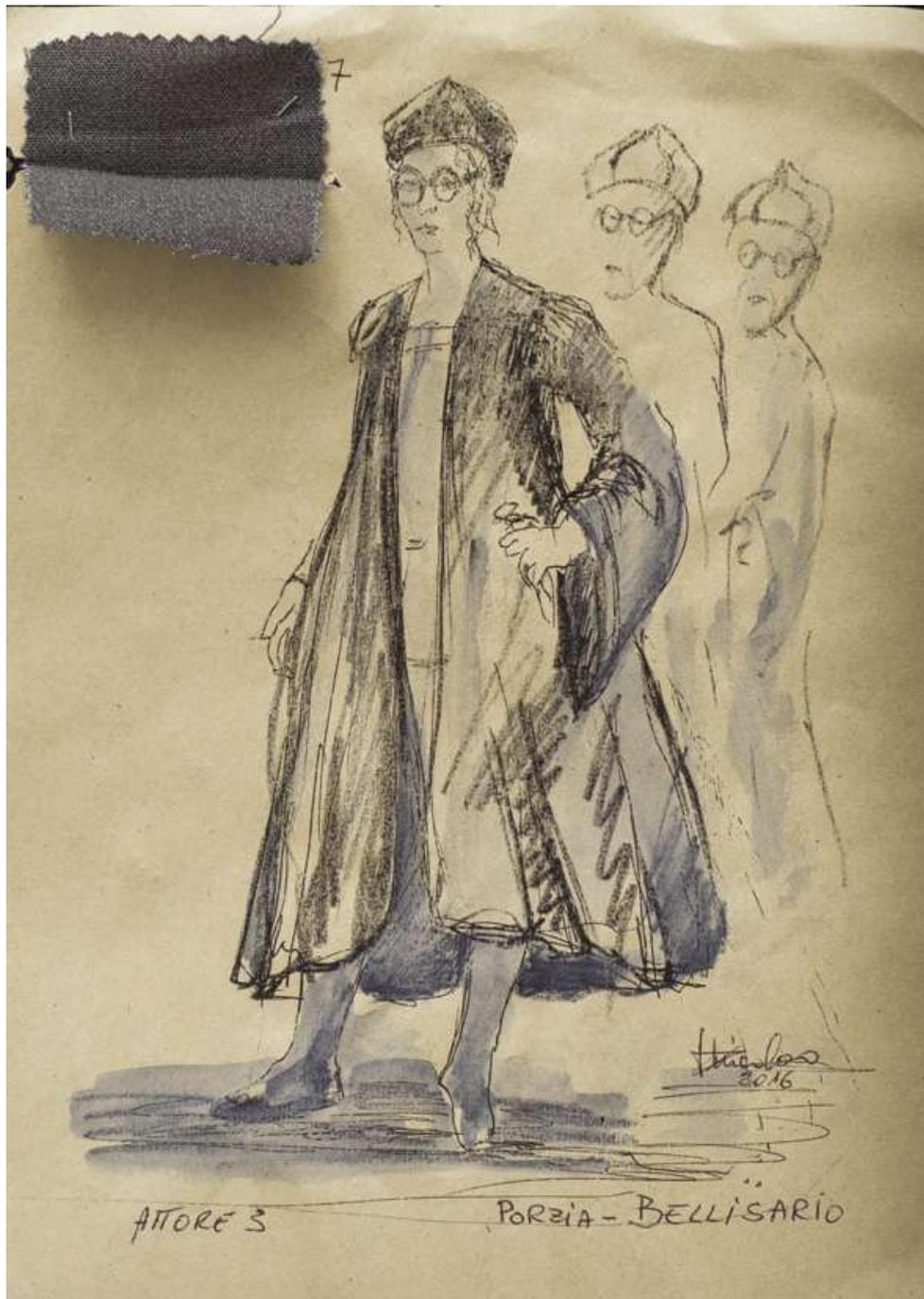


Figure 2 Costume design, Portia as Doctor of Law, by Stefano Nicolao. © Andrea Messina

he would pursue.<sup>4</sup> All of his comedies would be marriage plays that, as such, deal in flesh bonds, that tease out the never less than perplexing, frequently disturbing, nature of love, what 'love is', and that invent theatrical conceits to literalise metaphor: "love is blind" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*); "madness" (*Twelfth Night*); half "politic reign", half sheer gamble (*The Taming of the Shrew*); a search for "my other self" (*Comedy of Errors*); love will "after kind" (*As You Like It*).

In *Merchant*, he is complicating his design. The master plot is the marriage plot, Portia's destiny, which is presented as the play's original 'trial', played out three times across the sequence of suitors tested and tried as each one faces those 'sentences' fixed to the three caskets and makes his choice. In this plot, love is a "lottery" (1.2.28). The risk love requires of you is, terrifyingly, nothing less than to put your life on the line: "Who chooses me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.16). (We should notice, given the terms of the casket test - that is, who "choose[s] wrong" must "swear" "[n]ever to speak to lady afterward | In way of marriage" (2.1.40-42) - that Morocco and Arragon exit the play to personal and dynastic extinction. They're dead men walking.) In marriage, the "contract" is rendered as an "eternal bond of love" (as *Twelfth Night* puts it, 5.1.152), a contract Portia seals in a flesh bond. She gives her "self", who was "but now" "Queen o'er my self", to Bassanio, metonymically in a ring that carries a fearsome forfeit clause: should he "part from, lose, or give [it] away", it will "presage the ruin of [his] love". Bassanio instantly raises the stakes on this contract, making it a reciprocal flesh bond: "when this ring | Parts from this finger, [...] | [...] be bold to say Bassanio's dead" (3.2.169-173, 183-185).

So far, so complicated. But then Shakespeare adds to this congeries another layer of complication, the issue of confessional difference - Jew vs Christian - as it stakes out positional attitudes toward 'love'. Christians, of course, are supposed to have 'Chosen People' status as far as love is concerned. Their chief rabbi, while he was still preaching in Jerusalem, a Jew talking to other Jews, cut through masses of rabbinical debate to answer a Scribe's query about legal precedence. He selected from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 salient verses to condense the whole law into three love relationships: "Thou [...] shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart [...] soul [...] mind [...] strength"; "[t]hou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Mark 12,29-31). God. Neighbour. Self. His final commandment to his followers (as the 1599 Geneva New Testament translates John 15,12) was an

<sup>4</sup> The first is T.S. Eliot's phrase in *Selected Essays*. London: Faber & Faber, 1932, 123, the second, Arthur Lindley's in "The Unbeing of the Overreacher: Proteanism and the Marlovian Hero". *Modern Language Review*, 84, 1989, 1-17.



Figure 3 Portia (Linda Powell) disguised as Doctor of Law. © Andrea Messana

instruction to “love one another”.<sup>5</sup> His death on a Roman cross he offered as a gift of love in fulfilment of a flesh bond: “Greater love than this hath no man, when any man bestoweth his life for his friends” (John 15,13).

The problem with Christians in the play, however (and more generally, in audiences both then and now), is that they do not really ‘get’ love. They do not comprehend its generosity, its unconditionality, its bottomless Bay of Biscay capacity (as Rosalind in *As You Like It* puts it), its kinship to usury (what you give, what you take: the accounts never balance; there is always ‘interest’ on top), the way it asks you to “give and hazard all”. The rabbi had tried to explain. He told a story of a prodigal son (Luke 15,11-31). Who takes his inheritance. Squanders it in the flesh-pots of Egypt. (One thinks about a daughter on the razzle in Genoa, squandering some of her stolen inheritance on a monkey.) Bankrupt, finds himself eating pig-swill. (Have Lorenzo and Jessica run through the whole bankroll when they fetch up in Belmont?) Then decides to take a risk. A *massive* risk. He decides to go home. He will say to his father he is not worthy to be his son and ask to have a place in his house as a servant. What does he expect of the father? Revenge? Flat renunciation of the flesh bond? What happens is astonishing. Seeing the prodigal son coming a long

<sup>5</sup> Throughout, my quotation of the English Bible cites the Geneva version of 1599, accessible online at <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/1599-Geneva-Bible-GNV/>.

way off, the father orders a home-coming party, a feast. The older son complains. He has kept his nose clean. Kept the patriarchal law, his filial contract, followed the house rules, been a dutiful lad – and dad never slaughtered the fatted calf for him. *It's not fair!* The father's answer is an instruction in love: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine". But "It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again: and he was lost, but he is found" (Luke 15,31). The dutiful son, the prodigal son: both are vindicated in 'unrespectful' love.

This parable, along with the one about the lost sheep (Luke 15,4-7) was a cornerstone of Protestant teaching in Elizabethan England. It is quoted in one of the 'daily sentences' at the top of the morning office in the book of Common Prayer that schoolboys like William Shakespeare heard every day of their lives (right up there next to the 'sentence' Marlowe has Dr. Faustus quote in Latin, "If we say that we have no sin...": interesting to consider two schoolboy minds shaped by their attention to these two 'sentences').<sup>6</sup> Of course, how anyone interprets the parable depends entirely on with whom one identifies. The wastrel? Or the law-abiding son who does 'no wrong'? And it depends on whether one can accept that love – as the rabbi taught it – does not discriminate. Love makes nonsense of 'what is fair'. Like mercy, it drops alike on those who deserve – and those who do not.

This parable is also one of the foundational texts in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is lodged in the play's citational substructure, insinuated when Bassanio confesses how he has "disabled" his "estate" with habits "something too prodigal"; picked up in Antonio's reference to his "uttermost", the notion that Bassanio might make "waste of all I have"; taken further when Shylock sheds Launcelot Gobbo onto "one that I would have him help to waste | His borrowed purse" (1.1.123, 129, 156-157; 2.5.48-49). The moment he collects his (latest) loan, Bassanio starts wildly spending it, upholstering his retinue from top to bottom with "rare new liveries" (says Gobbo, dazzled by such "outward show", 2.2.102). Of course, this prodigality is an exorbitant waste: Bassanio does not need "the means | To hold a rival place" with Portia's other suitors (1.1.173-174). The 'trial' she embodies is not that sort of 'show'-y test. Later, Shylock makes prodigality generic of credulous Venetian fools: "The prodigal Christian" is a term that can be applied to the whole lot of them (2.5.15) before it settles on Antonio, the merchant who "squandered" his "ventures [...] abroad" and now has wound up "a bankrupt, a prodigal" (1.3.20; 3.1.39-40). But there is also a suggestion that, more than individual acts of exorbitance, prodigality is built into all human "ventures". Musing sen-

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<sup>6</sup> Quotation of the English Book of Common Prayer is from the 1559 version accessible at: [http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1559/BCP\\_1559.htm](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1559/BCP_1559.htm).

tentiously on Lorenzo's failure to show up on time for his assignation under Jessica's window where he has instructed his gang of masked bully-boys to assemble to help him steal a wife, Gratiano considers how "[a]ll things that are | Are with more spirit chased than enjoyed":

How like a younger or a prodigal  
The scarfed bark puts from her native bay -  
Hugged and embraced by the strumpet wind!  
How like the prodigal doth she return  
With over-weathered ribs and ragged sails -  
Lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind!  
(2.6.13-20)

"One touch of nature", it appears, "makes the whole world kin": in all our endeavours, we are prodigals (*Troilus and Cressida*, 3.3.175). Thus, what started out as a way of figuring the mystery of unconditional 'Christian' love now provides the term for the Christians' shabbiest mercenary practices.

When their actions are held up against the instruction in love that the story of the prodigal son offers them, the Christians' hypocrisy 'in love' is devastatingly exposed. Antonio does not "love his neighbour"; he reviles him, spits on him, "spurn[s]" him like "a stranger cur" (1.3.114). (We remember that in response to further questioning, the rabbi told his Jewish congregation that their "neighbour" was not just the 'kind'-ly Jew who lived next door but the hated 'stranger' Samaritan.) Bassanio makes Shylock (even as he holds out his hand to take his money) a "villain"; Launcelot calls his master "a kind of devil", the Duke, in the trial scene, "stony [...] inhumane", Gratiano, "thou damned execrable dog" (1.3.175; 2.2.21; 4.1.3,127). As bad, the Christians turn love into a commercial transaction. For Bassanio, the "pilgrimage" to Belmont to get a wife is a scheme to "get clear of all the debts I owe", "adventuring" as Antonio "ventures" his "merchandise" (1.1.120, 134, 41, 44).<sup>7</sup> For Antonio, it is "business" that Bassanio should not "[s]lubber" (2.8.39). For Lorenzo, getting a wife is a shifty post-prandial walk around the block, "slink[ing] away in supper-time, | Disguis[ing] [...] and return[ing] | All in an hour". It is playing the thief, taking from "her father's house" not just the daughter but the "gold and jewels she is furnished with", revelling in those "ducats" and cynically mocking the flesh bond he is violating ("If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven...") (2.4.1-3, 31-32, 34). Love, for

<sup>7</sup> It is, of course, one of the most challenging ironies of this play that Bassanio's history of prodigality is precisely what equips him to choose the right casket. He is the man who is prepared to "risk and hazard all": see as evidence of this preparation that screwball story of schoolboy "adventuring" told at 1.1.140.

these Christians, is about enrichment bankrolling consumption. No wonder Shylock would prefer that “any of the stock of Barabas” had been his daughter’s “husband, rather than a Christian” (4.1.292-293).

Is putting the Jew in this play a way of throwing into relief the spiritual bankruptcy, the hypocrisy of the Christians?<sup>8</sup> Another foundational story is narrated – at length, perhaps because Shakespeare’s audience would not have known it as immediately as they did the parable of the prodigal son – and it is as definitive of Shylock’s Jewishness as the other is (supposedly) of Christianity. It is the story Shylock launches with “When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban’s sheep”: a marriage story, a story about flesh bonds; of using your noodle to renegotiate a transaction when what has been “compromised” is *compromised* by sharp practice; a story that ends with a moral, “[t]his was a way to thrive, and [Jacob] was blest | And thrift is blessing if men steal it not” (1.3.67, 85-86). Shylock’s “well-won thrift” is precisely what Antonio “rails” against, calling it “interest” (1.3.46-47). “Thrift” vs “interest”: how words are interpreted defines difference in this play. Of course, the Jew knows all about flesh bonds: “father Abram” gets a couple of mentions from Shylock (1.3.68, 156). The story of Abraham’s obedience, a trial God brings him to in the command to sacrifice his only son – Isaac, a type of Christ – was still being performed in the mystery cycles that survived into Shakespeare’s lifetime. While, crowing about themselves as “Jasons” in Belmont having “won the fleece” (3.2.240), the Christians make light of love’s flesh bond (until it gets terrifyingly real in Act 4), the Jew values it so uncompromisingly that, when it is violated, he turns murderous. When his “own flesh and blood” rebels, when his daughter steals and is stolen, when Jessica turns “prodigal”, he enacts the failure of forgiveness. He plays the older brother’s part in the parable of the prodigal son: he stands by the contract. He wants retribution. Lacking Jessica’s body on which to enact revenge (“I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were heard at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin”, 3.1.80-82), and receiving a stinging ‘prodigal’ account of her (“Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard ...”) twinned with thrilling news of Antonio “wreck[ed]”, “an argosy cast away coming from Tripolis”, is it any wonder that Shylock finds in the body of Antonio a substitute forfeit (3.1.98, 92)?

Given the claims on both sides, is it any wonder that Shakespeare’s Act 4 brings the play to impasse?

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<sup>8</sup> Kent Cartwright astutely notices this irony in how the Christians draw down on their ‘love accounts’: “Antonio fails to love his neighbour but is willing to lay down his life for his friend: a miser in one direction, a prodigal in another” (personal communication).

#### 4 “A Man Withe Owte Mercye”

Philip Henslowe – entrepreneur, businessman, speculator, pawnbroker (one who charged interest on loans), builder of the first Elizabethan playhouse on London’s Bankside, once thought the prototype for Shylock – was a scribbler. He used the cover of his accounts book to practice his signature, write out plague remedies, alchemical diagrams, mnemonics (“when I lent I wasse A frend & when I asked I wasse vnkind”). The word “mersey” appears over and over, alone and in rhyme:

A man with owte mercye of Mersey shall myse  
& he shall haue mersey y<sup>t</sup> Mersey full ys  
(Foakes 1977, f. 1)

One way of reading this is as sententious jingle-jangle, ‘mercy’ carrying the instructive force of ‘a stitch in time saves nine’. But another way is to see in those scribbled repetitions how present in early modern people’s minds – even businessmen’s like Henslowe – the idea of mercy was, framed (not insignificantly) as a calculated transaction, but also (like those plague ‘receipts’) one ‘proved’: you could count on mercy. If you gave it, you would get it.

Still, the giving is *hard*, because mercy is in the gift of the wronged, and the instinct of the wronged is revenge. In that other play that argues “justice” vs “mercy” to a standstill – set in Venice, before Shakespeare was forced by politics to relocate *Measure for Measure* to Vienna – “mortality” stands opposite “mercy” (1.1.44), suggesting that without mercy, there is going to be death. The same idea hovers around Prospero’s gloating: “This hour lies at my mercy all mine enemies” (4.1.263). In the former case Angelo, representing the government, can render mercy to Claudio for wrongs he committed against the state. In the latter, Prospero can choose revenge or mercy in response to wrongs against his person. When Portia-as-Balthazar in the Venetian courtroom looks at the bond, confirms that “the Venetian law | Cannot impugn” Shylock as he “proceed[s]”, and that Antonio, “confess[ing] the bond”, thus “stand[s] within” Shylock’s “danger”, she makes the leap from “mortality” to “mercy”: “Then must the Jew be merciful” (4.1.174-175, 176, 178, 179). “Must?”, asks Shylock. “On what compulsion must I?”. Portia, instead of fixing on the modal verb he’s echoed and interpreting it in the sense of “the only option here, to avoid death, is forgiveness”, follows the sense of Shylock’s “compulsion” to retort, “The quality of mercy is not strained” (4.1.180), “strain”, that is, in OED v<sup>1</sup>8: “To force, press, constrain (to a condition or action)” or (even more suggestively) v<sup>1</sup>9b: “To extort (money, confessions, etc.)”.

There follows what Howard Jacobson (elsewhere in this volume) calls Portia’s “Sunday School sermonising” – a speech another prom-



Figure 4 'Tarry Jew'. Portia (Linda Powell) stops Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg) from taking his forfeit. © Andrea Messana

inent British Jew of Jacobson's generation, Jonathan Miller (neurologist, theatre director, atheist) heard very differently. When he was preparing *The Merchant of Venice* for the Old Vic with Laurence Olivier as Shylock in 1970, "hearing certain speeches in [his] mind's ear", he "saw" in his "mind's eye" an "argumentative" Portia, no sentimentalist or Sunday school teacher, but a "Portia leaning impatiently across the table to say 'The quality of mercy is not *strained*' as if having laboriously to explain what should have been self-evident to someone too stupid to understand" (Miller 1986, 107). Because, of course, although "justice" is Shylock's "plea", he, as a Jew, should not need any instruction in "mercy". Indeed, to align the Jew with Law, the Christian with Mercy is to create a false binary in *Merchant*. "Hesed" appears 250 times in the Hebrew Bible, its semantic range so vast that it would need a team of lawyers to winkle out its exact translation in any single instance (Whitley 1981, 519). The English Bible starting with Coverdale (1535) tried to cover its connotations by translating "hesed" as "mercy", "loving kindness" - which picks up the persistent etymological troping in Shakespeare's play of "kin", "kind", "kindness"; but also "reciprocal love", "mutual assistance", "loyalty according to the covenant" and "strength". In Shakespeare's Act 4 "mercy" is poised against "justice" - thirteen instances of "mercy" and "merciful" against nine of "justice" - in a kind of echo chamber of irreducible claims.

But if these claims are irreducible, how does the play break the deadlock? In *Measure for Measure* the "law" vs "mercy" impasse finds

a “remedy” that mimics the terms of the controversy. The crime of fornication is ironically answered in the bed trick. Just as ironically, *Merchant* takes the same route of mimicry. The obdurate insistence on the strict reading of the law is ‘remedied’ in the prosecution of another law that inserts strict reading into the case, that turns things really nasty – and that swivels the focus onto the Christians, *putting them on trial*. Given the “remedy” of strict forfeiture, what will they do? The Duke renders the “mercy” Portia/Balthazar tells Shylock he must “beg” from the state before Shylock asks for it (4.1.365). But once the state’s claim is settled, there’s still the “wrong” done to Antonio to be answered, the attempt “contrived” on his “life” (4.1.88, 356). “What mercy can you render him, Antonio?” (4.1.374) is a test. Will the merchant who spat upon the Jew, spurned him as a dog, take revenge?

Antonio gives “mercy”. Did Elizabethan audiences hear that mercy as a ‘saving grace’?<sup>9</sup> To audiences today, it feels bitter. In Coonrod’s production, when Antonio added the conversion clause initiating a new series of male-authored contracts, deeds, and forfeiture clauses, Portia and Nerissa traded shocked looks. The city men were at it again. It was time to go home.

It should be noted of Portia/Balthazar’s actions in the trial scene that to object (as Jacobson does) that she does not show mercy is to misunderstand the term. Only the wronged can apply the remedy of mercy. For herself, the test she puts to Antonio in 4.1 is deferred to 5.1 when it is discovered that Bassanio has given away the ring that he was contractually bound – his life at stake – to keep. So now in 5.1 Portia is on trial. What will she do? Stand for law? Her “bond”? Show mercy? In Act 5, if there is a happy ending to *The Merchant of Venice* it depends on the play’s final trial, the trial of Portia – and the choice she makes.

## 5 Among Schoolchildren

Another collateral event attached to the *Shylock In and Beyond the Ghetto* project was a conference, *Hard Words for Children: Shakespeare, Translation and “The Merchant of Venice”*, that wanted to explore whether a children’s version of the play could be created without oversimplifying or neutralising its complex issues, its extreme feelings, its ‘hard words’. Laura Tosi’s magnificent translation – considered elsewhere in this book – was the centrepiece of the

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Coryate, who visited the Ghetto in 1610 and embroiled himself in a heated theological argument with a Venetian rabbi that was fuelled by the Christian’s fear for the eternal salvation of Jewish souls, perhaps would have heard it so. He recorded this encounter in *Coryats crudities* (1611, 234-6).

conference. In preparation for hosting it, I took various re-tellings of *Merchant* for children around my Warwickshire hamlet, asking 7- and 8-year-olds to read the story to me.<sup>10</sup> One of them, a lad who owns his own pint-sized shotgun and goes deer culling with his dad, got to the bit about the “pound of flesh” but not a “drop of blood”. He looked at me, incredulous, to ask, “How’s he supposed to do that?”. When a second lad got to the end of the trial scene, I asked him, “Do you think Portia tricked Shylock?” “Yes”, he answered firmly – no question. “And what do you think about that?” “It was a good trick”. “Why?” “Because it meant that Shylock did not kill anyone”.

Such verdicts as these on Shakespeare’s ‘hard words’ can, I think, stand alongside Justice Ginsburg’s.

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**10** I want to thank Cameron Bryan and Herbert Potts for their contribution to my understanding of Shakespeare’s play.

# Composing the Jew's Soundscape in Operatic Versions of *The Merchant of Venice*

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**Abstract** Opera composers adapting *The Merchant of Venice* have given Shylock a distinctive sound using musical techniques that mark him as a classic outsider. Drawing on the scores of ten of these operas this essay highlights five compositional strategies for characterizing Shylock. Separately, these strategies highlight subtle shifts in the portrayal of Jews across different eras and localities. Together, they point to a deeper portrayal of Jews as figures who live on the margins of European tonality. Shylock in these operas projects an ambiguous social status and lack of alignment with the more consonant world of the other characters.

**Keywords** Opera. Music. Shylock. The Merchant of Venice. Chromaticism. Ciro Pinsuti. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. Otto Taubmann. Jews. Aldo Finzi. Reynaldo Hahn. Josef B. Foerster. Adrian Beecham.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Chromatic Jew. – 3 Strategy #1: Shylock *Tremblant*. – 4 Strategy #2: Shylock and Extended Harmony. – 5 Strategy #3: Jewish Through Musical Quotation. – 6 Strategy #4: The Melodic Shylock. – 7 Strategy #5: André Tchaikowsky. – 8 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

In Shylock, Europe found a musical foil for its 'Jewish problem' on stage. As one of a handful of Jewish characters to grace the nineteenth century stage, including Nathan the Wise, Eléazar (of *La Juive*), Barabas (the Jew of Malta), and Isaac of York (*Ivanhoe*), Shylock offered audiences a vision of the Jew as

a stranger in their midst, channelling ancient affronts and contemporary grievances alongside Shakespeare's more conventional pouting lovers. Edna Nahshon and Michael Shapiro, in their recent collection of essays on *Merchant*, highlight Shylock's role in discourses of nineteenth-century nationalism and twentieth-century antisemitism, with special attention to the English-speaking world (Nahshon, Shapiro 2017). Shylock also holds an important role on the Continent, however, as part of Shakespeare's growing influence there during the nineteenth century. And just as with many other Shakespeare plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and its characters eventually took on musical moorings as composers adapted the work to the prominent state-sponsored form of grand opera.

Opera, and its musical characterisations, sharpen and localise the complex socioethnic issues that surround any production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Nineteenth-century composers already came to the work with a romantic musical shorthand for Venice, where the lilting *barcarolles* of the gondoliers mingled with the masque-like revels from carnival (a period that supported the city's public opera scene from the seventeenth century onward) (Brown, Hamilton 2001; Brown, H. et al. 2001). With *Merchant*, composers had the chance to juxtapose that musical symbolism with music for the looming character of Shylock, and the European anti-Jewish discourse that he represented. Trading off Shakespeare's original language for a more intensely musical environment allowed opera composers and librettists to highlight differences between Christians and Jews through sonic means, while allowing them to offer their own ideas about the genre's relationship to their viewers and sponsoring governments.

In an earlier essay, I focused on four operatic adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* between 1871 and 2014, arguing for the significance of operatic conventions in shaping Europeans' experience of the play (Cohen 2017).<sup>1</sup> From the historical and literary emphasis of that essay, I move here to a deeper musical focus on the representation of Shylock. Composers, seeking to create a continuous fabric of interaction and intervention on stage, gave Shylock a distinctive sound using musical techniques that marked him as a classic outsider. Drawing on the scores of ten of these operas – out of about fourteen known adaptations – I highlight five specific compositional strategies for characterising Shylock. Seen separately, these strategies highlight subtle shifts in the portrayal of Jews across different eras and localities. When viewed together, however, they point to a deeper portrayal of Jews as figures who live on the margins of

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<sup>1</sup> The opera adaptations covered in Cohen 2017, including those by Ciriaco De Pace (1871), Reynaldo Hahn (1935), Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1961), and André Tchaikowsky (1982), are included here as well, though with a different context.



Figure 1 Map of *The Merchant of Venice* opera performances, 1870-1960

European tonality. Projecting chromatic instability, Shylock becomes in these operas an agent of entropy, projecting an ambiguous social status and lack of alignment with the more consonant world of the other characters (including, often, Jessica).

Before proceeding, a brief note. The following discussion includes a number of written score excerpts that offer an efficient graphic prescription for sound in the composers' own musical language. While musically experienced readers will benefit most from these scores, less experienced readers can learn from them as well by observing the spacing, density, and contour of the notes depicting Shylock's themes.

## 2 The Chromatic Jew

Shylock troubles Venice's musical landscape. The Venetian Lorenzo does not directly implicate Shylock as "the man who hath no music in himself" in Act 1. Yet in line with other pathetic or evil characters in Shakespeare's plays, Shylock has no presence in *The Merchant of Venice's* songs or musical cues. For centuries, stage adaptations continued this practice – even composer Gabriel Fauré's now-famous score for Edmond Haraucourt's 1889 French adaptation, eventually compiled into a suite entitled "Shylock", actually lacked music for Shylock himself.<sup>2</sup> And perhaps, by excluding Shylock from European musical practices, Lorenzo sought to make a point: recent research suggests that a broadly practiced, 'Jewish' musical style only emerged in light of mid-nineteenth-century European liturgical reform, and spread slowly (Seroussi 2009, 3\*-24\* ff.). Jonathan Hess notes, for example, that incidental music for different stagings of Solomon Mosenthal's mid-nineteenth century play *Deborah* lack "the augmented seconds or the mournful melodies in minor keys that defined clichés about Jewish music in the twentieth century" (Hess 2018, 181). Similarly, the vast majority of published synagogue music before 1885 mainly utilised common major and minor modes (Cohen 2002). When opera conventions required composers to create music for a Jewish character, in other words, they at least initially had to turn to their own points of sonic reference. Shylock thus gained a contrasting musical exoticism in opera settings, often through an idiomatic series of motivic and vocal patterns that emphasised his ambivalent place in Venetian (and European) society. Composers almost always gave the (male, patrician) Shylock a bass voice, a choice that placed him in a gallery of operatic old men and villains. But just as importantly, composers used chromaticism, particularly in a lower register, as a defining characteristic.

In the world of tonal opera as elsewhere in music, chromaticism – the logical use of all usable tones between scale degrees – served as a temporary deviation from the more stable scale-based qualities of diatonicism. Often this technique helps composers define the relationship between the different characters. Expanding on Carl Dahlhaus' description of chromaticism in Wagner's operas as a blurred diatonic morality, for example, Linda and Michael Hutcheon noted of *Parsifal* (1882) how the diatonicism of "social order and spiritual salvation is consistently interrupted by the chromaticism associated with [the morally base characters of] Amfortas, Kundry, Klingsor, and Parsifal (when he is identifying with Amfortas or dis-

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<sup>2</sup> Haraucourt's versified French setting generally emphasises the romantic Venice over Shylock.

tressed about his mother's suffering and death)" (Hutcheon, Hutcheon 1996, 68). The diatonic/chromatic axis also allowed composers to describe musical interactions between cultural outsiders and insiders, including the relationship of Jews to Christians in European society.<sup>3</sup> Giving Shylock a sonic profile, then, often meant framing his lines as harmonic transitions between other characters' diatonic sections. In an era of developing European nationalism, such a portrayal forces us to think about the ways that opera's oversized costs and affluent venues brought ideas about Jewish identity into the elite Continental cultural economy.

The sections that follow highlight different composers' creative approaches to 'the Jew' as a distinct musical entity within opera's sonic landscape. In addition to showing the nature of each composer's creativity, these strategies also emphasise the enduring strength of Shylock's core chromatic portrayal through harmonic, melodic, and thematic means, even as public understandings of Jewish identity changed, and Shylock's portrayals themselves shifted from outsiders to insiders.

### 3 Strategy #1: Shylock Tremblant

Perhaps the most basic use of chromaticism comes at the level of the single note. By alternating the note with an upper or lower neighbour, an otherwise stable tone gains a quality of uncertainty that can project internal anxiety, restlessness, or ire.

The most direct application of this technique to Shylock belongs to British composer Adrian Beecham (1904-1982), whose 1921 English language setting of *The Merchant of Venice*, composed at the age of seventeen, reinforced his reputation as a child prodigy.<sup>4</sup> Beecham, working with his own adaptation of Shakespeare's text, built his opera around well-conceived melodies, leading writer and critic Aldous Huxley to declare that "[t]unefulness is his gift" at the expense of most other compositional aspects (Huxley 2013, 135). Yet beneath these melodies, Beecham gave Shylock an accompaniment that featured a distinctive 'trembling' quality through chromatic alteration. Preceding Shylock's entrance, Beecham introduced his

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth HaCohen (2011) has described this axis as a longstanding symbolic opposition between Jews' suffering and rage as a destabilising force, and Christian tendencies toward justice and order.

<sup>4</sup> Beecham's work received coverage on a British Pathé newsreel, which emphasised his youth and included short silent snippets from the opera's trial scene ("Shakespeare - in Opera! At the Duke of York's Theatre", 1921). At the same time, Beecham's status as the son of composer and Baronet Thomas Beecham gave him greater opportunities to stage his work: in this case since his mother rented out the Duke of York's Theatre for him.

Nº 4. **Scene.**  
ANTONIO, BASSANIO and SHYLOCK.  
ADRIAN WELLES BEECHAM

Andantino.  $\text{♩} = 72$ .

Voice.

Piano.

SHYLOCK.

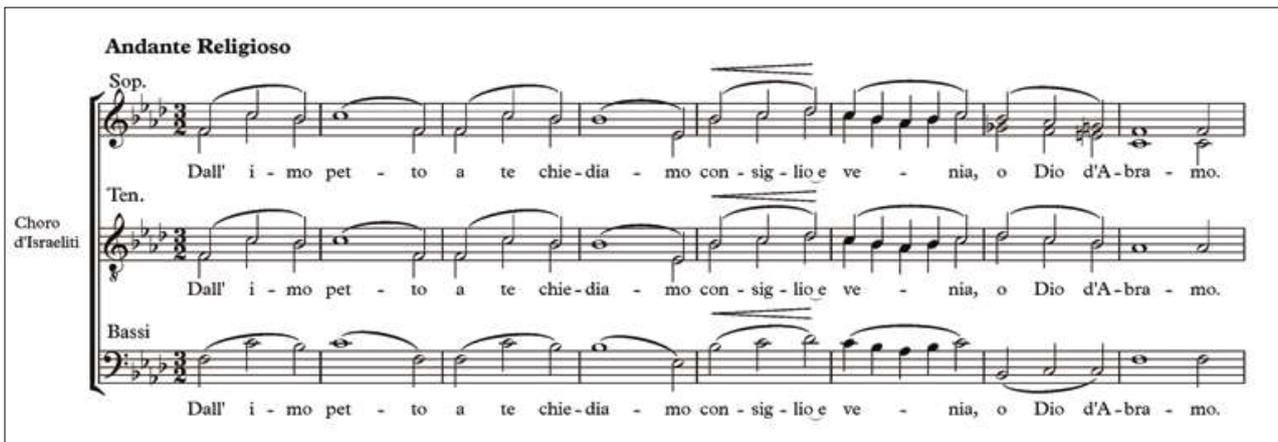
How like a fawn - ing pub - li - can he looks. *ff*

hate him, for he is a Chris - tian. *mp* But more, for

that, — but more, for that. *p* In

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera 'The Merchant of Venice'. It is titled 'Nº 4. Scene.' and is for the characters Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock, composed by Adrian Welles Beecham. The tempo is marked 'Andantino' with a quarter note equal to 72 beats. The score is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and consists of a series of chords and moving lines. The voice part enters with the lyrics: 'How like a fawn - ing pub - li - can he looks.' followed by 'hate him, for he is a Chris - tian. But more, for that, — but more, for that. In'. The score includes various performance markings such as *ff* (fortissimo), *allarg.* (ritardando), *a tempo*, and *p* (piano). The piano accompaniment includes a section marked *ff* and *a tempo* with a melodic line in the right hand and a more active line in the left hand.

Figure 2 Adrian Welles Beecham, Shylock's Entrance from *The Merchant of Venice* (London, 1921)



**Figure 3** Ciro Pinsuti, Shylock Theme from Overture to *Il Mercante di Venezia* (Bologna, 1873, 3). Engraving by Lindsay Weaver

**Figure 4** Ciro Pinsuti, Prayer of the Israelites from *Il Mercante di Venezia* (Bologna, 1873, 331). Engraving by Lindsay Weaver

characters through a largely diatonic and chordal series of interactions.<sup>5</sup> From the moment Shylock's first scene begins, however, the entire musical setting changes to emphasise a set of diminished chords – a stack of four minor third intervals notable for their lack of a clear harmonic direction – only resolving to a major cadence when Shylock declares his hatred of Antonio. Beecham goes a step further in Shylock's next line, embellishing a diminished-seventh chord through wavering neighbour note figures that begin to dominate the rest of Shylock's music. From that point on (at least in the piano-vocal reduction), Beecham settles on this wavering pattern as a calling card for the character, even using it in his absence during the Finale of Act 1 to indicate Shylock's looming presence.

Beecham offers a significant amount of variety to this pattern to retain interest throughout Shylock's major scenes. At times in Act 1 he gives Shylock a vocal accompaniment similar to the other Venetian

<sup>5</sup> All references to Beecham's *The Merchant of Venice* come from the published piano/vocal score (Beecham 1921).

characters, perhaps showing his attempts to simulate the Christian world; though he always returns to his chromatic neighbour-note figure in the end. In Act 3, right before the trial officially begins, Beecham gives Shylock an aria for enumerating his grievances that eschews the chromatic figures in favour of minor-key chords and triplet rhythms. But Shylock returns to form in the trial itself, where Beecham states his agitated figures prominently, and uses them to mark the character until his final exit. In this manner, Beecham's relatively straightforward solution to Shylock's sound – akin to a constant one-half step shifting motion throughout – marks him as a contrast to the (Christian and settled) worldview surrounding him.

Nearly half a century before Beecham, Bologna-based composer Ciro Pinsuti (1829-1888) offered a similar if somewhat more complex approach to Shylock's character in his 1873 opera adaptation (the first full *Merchant* opera on record), contrasting Shylock's internal unsettledness with the more modal outward exoticism of the Jewish community. Pinsuti, whose extensive work at conservatories in both England and Italy likely influenced his decision to set the text, begins his opera with a set of arpeggiated minor-key runs that emphasise a neighbour-note figure. At first, these runs mainly drive the music forward; but they gain a clearer identity later on in Act 1, when Pinsuti uses the same gestures to dramatise Shylock's discovery of his daughter's elopement with Lorenzo (a scene only described second-hand in the play). Throughout the rest of the extended solo scene, Pinsuti utilises this figure over and over again, breaking it into its constituent elements, modifying it to follow Shylock's wildly shifting emotions, and leaving no doubt about its relationship to Shylock's inner thoughts.

Shylock's theme, however, comprises only part of Pinsuti's 'Jewish' music. As a contrast to the frantic neighbour notes, Pinsuti uses a different form of musical exoticism to craft a slower, modal-sounding prayer that evokes ancientness – a unique development in *Merchant*-based operas, and a possible reflection on what Francesco Spagnolo describes as a body of 'traditional' pre-1860s Jewish prayer chants: the "orally transmitted repertoires [that Italian Jewish populations] believed had once originated in the Orient" (Spagnolo 2012, 100\*). This 'prayer theme' begins as a sudden divine appeal during the Shylock's "My daughter – my ducats!" scene, and eventually expands into a full harmonised treatment by Venice's Jewish population. After the humiliation of Shylock's trial, which ends with the forced exile of all Jews from Venice, the Jews intone it a final time while sailing off-stage, eventually drowned out as the others in Belmont come to their own more tonal resolution. In so doing, Pinsuti offers a commentary on the axis between Shylock's individual turmoil and the Jews' collective archaic voice.

The wavering lines in these works offset the aesthetic beauty of smooth melodies and clear harmonies that pervade the rest of both

operas. On one hand, Shylock's trembling musical accompaniment illustrate the Jew's uncomfortable fit with the fantasy worlds depicted in the rest of the comedy. On the other hand, Shylock's characterisation provides a meaningful musical place of textural transition between characters in the scenes where he appears. His 'noise' becomes, in a sense, the liminal space between the realities of the other characters.

#### 4 Strategy #2: Shylock and Extended Harmony

While Beecham and Pinsuti used wavering accompaniments to present Shylock's contrasting personality and emotional arc, other composers gave Shylock unusual harmonies to reinforce his portrayal as a musical alien. For Czech composer Josef Foerster (1859-1951) and French composer Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947), the estranging chord of choice was the dominant minor ninth, a relatively uncommon yet highly charged sound comprising a major third with three minor thirds stacked on top of it. Over the nineteenth century, the chord had been used to denote moments of shock and awe, including the ghastly revelation in Schubert's 1815 setting of Goethe's *Erlkönig* and the end of Strauss's 1896 *Also sprach Zarathustra*. By combining this chord with strategic chromatic runs and distinctive articulations, composers created flexible musical cells that gave Shylock a recognisable sonic profile, while extending but not breaking the overarching tonality of Venice and Belmont.

When Josef Foerster started composing his 1905 version of *The Merchant of Venice*, later known as *Jessika*, he already had some experience writing for Jewish characters. His 1893 opera *Debora*, an adaptation of Salomon Mosenthal's 1849 play of the same name, offered a sympathetic view of a young Jewish woman whose on-again, off-again relationship with a virtuous non-Jewish man eventually ends with the two amicably returning to their own communities. Foerster approached his version of *Jessika* with the same kind of patrician sympathy, as a 'comedy' with a happy ending that emphasised an optimistic form of religious tolerance. As with other *Merchant* operas, Foerster characterised Shylock as a Bass I, and established him from the start as an awkward and often brash character. Shylock's entrance in Act 1 Scene 1, for example – perhaps more properly seen as the Jews' entrance, since his companion Tubal (a lower Bass II) sings first – interrupts an idyllic 6/8 barcarolle-like ensemble scene with a short fanfare that signals an abrupt change in key, tempo, and metre (Foerster 1909, 15).<sup>6</sup> After outlining a dominant minor ninth chord, the cell tran-

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<sup>6</sup> All further references to text and music come from this score, even though it is a German translation (by R. Batka) of Vrchlicky's Czech original.

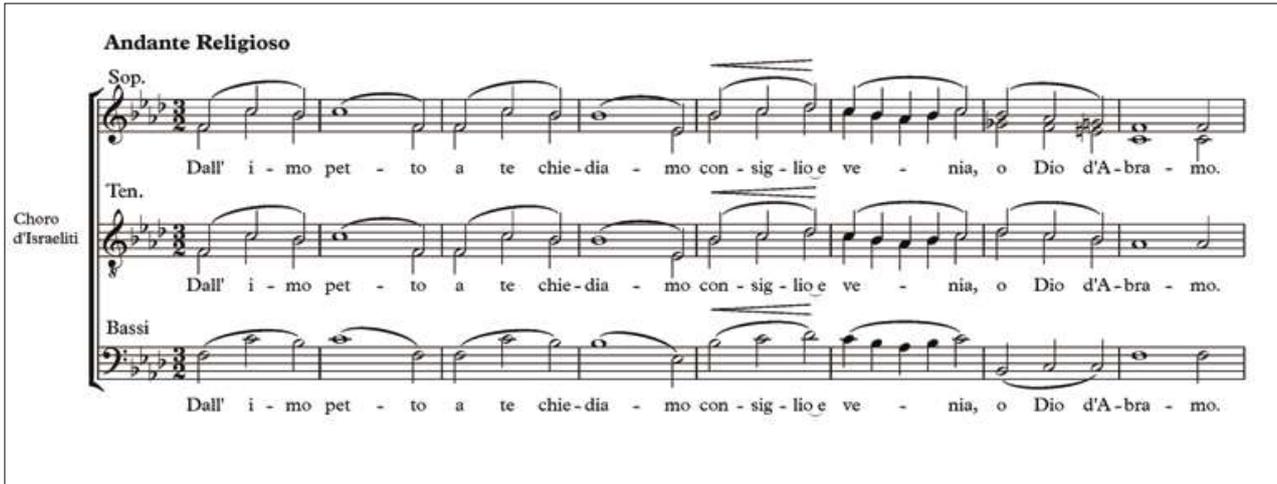
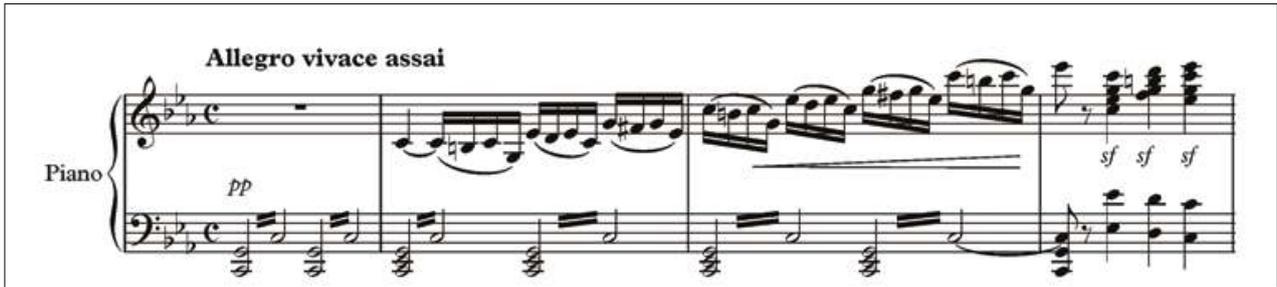


Figure 5 Josef B. Foerster, Shylock Theme from *Jessika* (Prague, 1905)

Figure 6 Reynaldo Hahn, Shylock Theme from *Le Marchand de Venise* (Paris, 1935)

sitions into a short, flowery, tonal resolution, presenting in composite what appears to be a representation of his Jewish characters' contradictory sides.<sup>7</sup> As both Shylock and Tubal attempt to insert themselves into the dialogue, this cell, which introduces each of their first few lines, betrays their success. And as Shylock later faces greater agitation over the willing elopement of his daughter, the Jews' music follows suit with increased numbers of grace notes, angular rhythmic figures, key shifts and accidentals.<sup>8</sup> Foerster becomes creative with

<sup>7</sup> On a more technical level, the first (dominant minor ninth) chord omits the fifth - what would otherwise be an A-natural - though the sound remains recognizable. Ironically, although the next (tonal) gesture begins with the same note as the first (E-flat) it tonicises A-flat Major, a relatively distant choral relation that can be interpreted as highlighting the schizoid nature of the Jews' double-consciousness in European society.

<sup>8</sup> The first appearance of Shylock's music takes place on p. 15 of the published score (Foerster 1909). It repeats, among other places, on p. 22 (harmonically very different), p. 87 line 2 (close to the original version), p. 88 line 1, and p. 91 line 1. The theme also appears during the trial scene, which was added in 1911 (see note below): for example, on p. 171, lines 4-5.

his approaches as well: at times, the 'Shylock' ninth chord loses its tonic and transforms into a chameleonic diminished seventh (which, as noted in the previous section, can resolve almost anywhere). This chordal relationship reinforces Shylock's status as an interloper in European society, who seeks to connect with those around him yet can only conceal his own difference temporarily.

As a comedy, however, Foerster's ending leads to both social and musical reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> In Act 3, Scene 2, the opera's final scene, the ruined Shylock reappears, despondent after his humiliation in the trial, and willing to have a change of heart. Approaching Jessica, he pleads successfully to be accepted back and offers to assume a false name and nationality. The next time Shylock sings, he is nearly consonant with the rest of the cast, joining five other characters and the opera chorus as the romantic triple meter tunes of Venice prevail. Foerster still gives Shylock subtle musical hints of his out-cast status – he begins his part of the sextet one eighth note earlier than Jessica and a quarter note earlier than the rest of the cast, he sings his own character-specific line, and he continues to use financial metaphors to celebrate his reunion with his daughter (including the opera's last line: "My gold is mine again!" [Mein Gold ist wieder mein!]) (Foerster 1905, 232-37). Yet despite Shylock's *faux pas*, Foerster nonetheless appears to promote a philosophy of benevolent assimilation and humanism, treating the qualities that marginalised Jews in society as acquired rather than innate. With effort, Foerster's music implies, Shylock can ease his tensions with Christian society while looking to his daughter's decisions as a means to usher in a new era of integration.

Three decades later, composer Reynaldo Hahn used the same dominant minor ninth chord to represent Shylock in his 1935 opera *Le Marchand de Venise*. Writing as the Nazis consolidated power in neighbouring Germany, the partly Jewish Hahn placed Shylock's musical character at the meeting point of harmonic and melodic conventions. As illustrated in figure 6, Hahn created a musical cell for the character comprising a two-part, repeated sequence. Each part of the sequence features a chromatic upward run as a pair of punctuating chords builds to a dominant minor ninth sonority; at the same time, a lower voice slowly moves in contrary chromatic motion downward over the course of both parts of the sequence, from A to A-flat to G. Taken together, this cell presents, *Tristan*-like, a rich internal logic with a harmonically ambiguous function. Juxtaposed with the

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<sup>9</sup> The original 1905 version of Foerster's opera notably lacked the trial scene – further suggesting the composer's lack of interest in the most anti-Jewish aspects of the play. But Foerster ultimately could not avoid the trial's prominence, and was compelled to restore it for the opera's next staging in 1911.

Renaissance-style setting that Hahn uses to introduce the opera, the cell's motivic density and complexity give Shylock a distinctive presence that precedes his entrance and continues after his exit. The theme's musical material, moreover, becomes the basis of elaboration later on in the opera: not only through small modifications to mark emotional shifts, but also to prepare extended chromatic runs that mark Shylock's two rage arias ("Je le hais" [I hate him] early on, and "Depouillé" [Ruined] after the trial). For Hahn, this musical estrangement remains stubbornly separate, perhaps reflecting the growing castigation of Jews on institutionalised racial terms in contemporary politics. Rather than assimilate at the end of the opera, Shylock defiantly maintains his dissonance, exiting only with a promise to return.

By encapsulating Shylock in a relatively rare, semi-dissonant chord, both opera composers added nuance and structure to their views of Jews' place in European society. Although the two operas embraced different era-based conclusions for the 'problem' of Jewish identity, they agreed on the nature of the difference itself as built into the overall structure of each musical landscape.

## 5 Strategy #3: Jewish Through Musical Quotation

When the German composer Otto Taubmann (1859-1929) wrote his only opera *Porzia* (1916), he went beyond neighbour note figures and unusual chords to characterise Shylock, giving him the incipit of a broadly understood 'Jewish' melody. A professor of music in Berlin's University of the Arts, Taubmann had experience with interpolating well-known melodies into his music, often in the name of nationalism: his 1915 choral cantata *Kampf und Freide* (War and Peace), for example, incorporated the *Deutschlandlied* as a symbol of German national pride and struggle during World War I (Eckhard 1994, 25 fn. 22). His decision to set *The Merchant of Venice* to an adapted libretto by Richard Wilde appeared similarly motivated by nationalism, if not outright antisemitism. To illustrate his dramatic musical battle between the European Portia and the Jewish outsider Shylock, Taubmann turned to the recognisable prayer melody 'Kol Nidre' ("All [Our] Vows") – a piece associated with the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) that featured prominent melodic chromaticism, a minor-mode melody, and the 'Jewish'/exotic augmented second interval in its opening phrases. The prominence of 'Kol Nidre' as a touchstone for Jewish liturgical music had made it an emblem of Jewish sonic identity: Taubmann's (non-Jewish) senior colleague Max Bruch even gave the tune a celebrated cello/piano arrangement in 1880 (Idelsohn 1931-32). Thus, when evoked in *The Merchant of Venice*, 'Kol Nidre' efficiently imbued Shylock with public perceptions of collective Jewish heritage, and provided the subtle justification for a Jewish character to seek revenge for past treatment.

The image shows a musical score for the first system of an interpolated 'Kol Nidre' from the opera *Porzia*. It consists of three systems of music. The first system is for Bassanio (B.), with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Gruß! Grüßt Ihr mich so? Und nennt mich, wack - rer Shylock?". The piano accompaniment features markings such as *stacc.*, *sf p sf*, and *p dolce*. The second system is for Shylock (Sh.), with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Und kennt den Ju - den auf der off - nen Gas - se?". The piano accompaniment includes markings like *sfs*, *f espr. fp*, and *cresc.*. The third system is also for Shylock (Sh.), with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Das nimmt mich Wunder, Herr, und mein Verstand mag nicht dran glauben, daß um...". The piano accompaniment includes markings like *pp* and *p*. The score is written in a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 7 Otto Taubmann, Interpolated Kol Nidre (second system) from *Porzia* (Berlin, 1916)

Taubmann features the tune in the first act, which otherwise exhibits an idiomatic extended tonality endemic to the era. When Bassanio greets Shylock on the street in the hope of receiving a loan for Antonio, Shylock immediately becomes suspicious: “Why do you greet me this way and call me ‘Dear Shylock?’” he responds. Then, with a fully accompanied ‘Kol Nidre’ tune playing underneath, Shylock speaks in a collective mode and asks why Bassanio would “recognise Jews open-

ly on the street?" (Taubmann, Wilde 1916, 21).<sup>10</sup> Later in the conversation, Taubmann again interpolates 'Kol Nidre' in a lower register right before Shylock declares of Antonio "I hate him because he is a Christian" (25). In both cases, the tune underscores a rhetorical shift from individual identity (Shylock) to collective Jewish identity. But the tune also leaves its mark on Shylock. The chromatic three-note 'roll' that introduces each chord of 'Kol Nidre' quickly makes its way into the rest of Shylock's music, especially when he talks of revenge – becoming its own motive epitomising Shylock's own wariness.

Taubmann's work appeared at a time when 'Jewish music' remained a topic of debate. On January 18, 1917, on the page before a review of *Porzia's* premier, a writer for American music journal *The Musical Courier* cast doubt on a local concert billed as 'Jewish Music' by claiming: "strictly speaking there is no national Jewish music: nor can the compositions by Grossman [the composer] claim to be based on Jewish national melodies" ("Jewish Music in the Concert Hall" 1917). Similarly, antisemitic German musicologist Karl Storck made no mention of 'Kol Nidre' in celebrating *Porzia*, but nonetheless lauded the work for its stark musical characterisations, stating: "Here the primordial powers of Light and Shadow are so uniformly pitted against each other in plot, characterisation and music, that it creates a fundamentally convincing structure" (Storck 1919, 72).<sup>11</sup> Taubmann's use of 'Kol Nidre' as a key indicator of Shylock's sonic identity clearly spoke to some audiences; but the symbolic tune also contained inherently the unresolved qualities that cued others in the significant contrasts between the titular hero and the villain of the piece.

## 6 Strategy #4: The Melodic Shylock

In two operas related to Italy's fascist period, Shylock took a decidedly melodic turn for two self-identified Jewish composers. While once again emphasising the Jew's overarching chromatic nature, both Aldo Finzi (1897-1945) in his partly completed opera adaptation and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968) in his completed version opted to represent Shylock through extended, often unaccompanied musical phrases that emphasised the Jew's near independence from Western harmonic structures – and in Castelnuovo-Tedesco's case, conventional rhythms as well.

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<sup>10</sup> "Grüßt Ihr mich so? | Und nennt mich 'wackrer Shylock' | Und kennt den Juden auf der offenen Gasse?"

<sup>11</sup> "Hier sind die Urkräfte von Licht und Schatten in Handlung, Charakteren und in der Musik so einheitlich gegeneinander geführt, daß ein elementar überzeugender Aufbau zustandekommt".

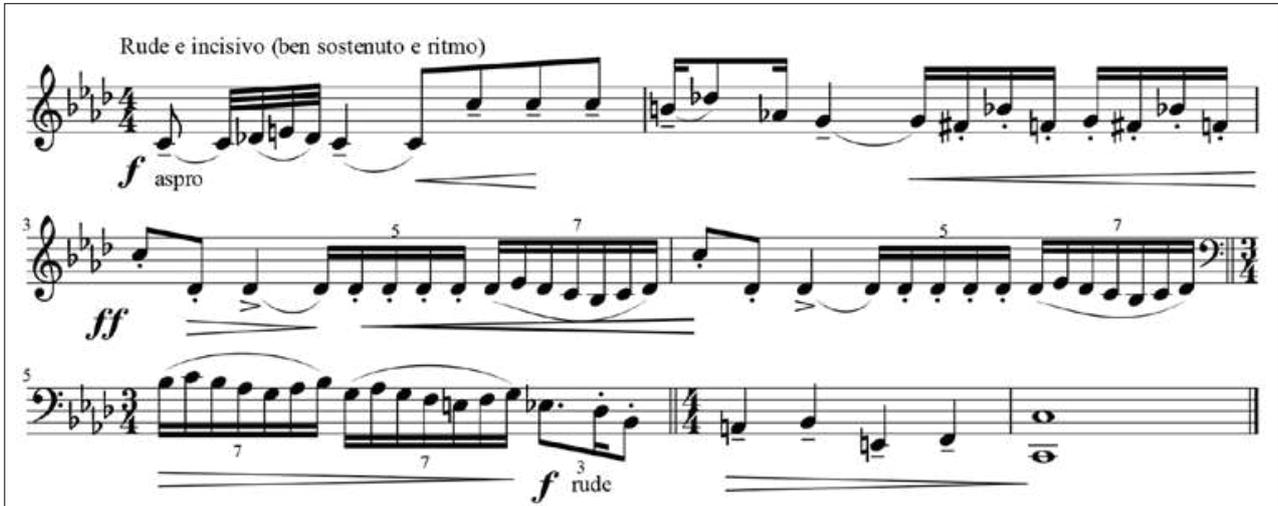


Figure 8 Aldo Finzi, Shylock Theme from *Il Mercante di Venezia* (started 1937)

Figure 9 Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Shylock Theme from *The Merchant of Venice* (1933-56)

By the thirties, ‘Jewish music’ had become a subject of much interest, both through work by Jewish and/or Zionist scholars such as Abraham Z. Idelsohn who sought to define music for the Jewish community, and by anti-Jewish movements that followed nationalist composer Richard Wagner in trying to *exclude* Judaism from Western music (Idelsohn 1929; Loeffler 2009). This two-sided understanding of Jews and music created a narrow path for composers to write Jewish characters into their operas, especially with such notoriety as Shylock. Yet as Jewish composers faced their own narrowing paths in the face of fascism and Nazism, some appeared to see *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock as an appealing option for considering their own dimming prospects in Europe.

Italian-Jewish composer Aldo Finzi began to adapt *The Merchant of Venice* in 1937, the year before Mussolini instituted Italy’s anti-Jewish racial laws. Working initially with librettist Arturo Rossato, Finzi completed only the piano-vocal score for the overture and first act. Despite his Jewish background, Eleonora Carapella suggests, Finzi saw himself and his family as deeply Italian, though his choice of subject leads to speculation about Shylock’s emergence as a symbol of an identity forced upon him by the State. While he almost fled to Chicago in 1938, migration difficulties for his family led Finzi to remain in Italy; and his ordeals evading Nazi capture after their invasion in 1942 may have led to his death from a heart attack in 1945 (Carapella 2004, 311-12).

Finzi's incomplete opera presents what might be best described as a Shylock contour: a motif that outlines a chromatic rise from below, followed by a leap up and a chromatic descent. Most clearly defined in the overture, the contour there consistently completes a major sixth interval, first moving from low E up to G, and then leaping to C and descending chromatically to G#. Finzi continues to use this contour, though with greater flexibility, in Act 1. In the only existing recording of the partial work, the music that sets Shylock's lines provides a similar chromatic rise, leap, and fall pattern, creating wave-like patterns that emphasise Shylock's musical discomfort (Aldo Finzi 2016).<sup>12</sup>

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's version of *Merchant*, meanwhile, straddled the fascist period. He first conceived of his extended melodic theme for Shylock in a 1933 overture he wrote for *The Merchant* while still in Italy. His Shylock theme boldly began the overture as an unharmonised melody nearly half a minute long, played in unison by the string section with an occasional kettle drum for emphasis. Castelnuovo-Tedesco opened with a gesture that outlined a 'Jewish' augmented second leap, both ascending and descending, before transitioning into time-bending runs that include 5- and 7-tuplets. Ultimately the theme covers all twelve tones of the chromatic scale, perhaps knowingly striking an A-natural at the end of the line in the penultimate measure to complete the full set of pitches. When Castelnuovo-Tedesco extended this overture in his completed 1956 opera, this long melodic theme became its own element of Venice's musical world - with the opening augmented second gesture often appearing as shorthand for Shylock himself. It unapologetically strikes against Italian aesthetics of beauty in opera, both during and after the fascist period.

## 7 Strategy #5: André Tchaikowsky

Finally, representing the post-war, and especially the post-1968, revolutionary period, is André Tchaikowsky (1935-1982, born Robert Andrzej Krauthammer), who composed his version of *The Merchant of Venice* with English text between 1968 and his death in 1982. Tchaikowsky, in his writings about this work, openly described his sense of rootlessness both as a Polish-born Jew who survived the Holocaust by taking a fake name, and as an 'old world' Jew who felt out of place in the recently established country of Israel. While his opera takes a decidedly modernist form, Tchaikowsky nonethe-

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<sup>12</sup> The notes to this recording indicate that Finzi altered Shakespeare's ending to give Jessica a stronger identification with her father: Shylock dies of humiliation after the trial, and Jessica steps forward to speak for him, reclaiming - to at least some extent - her Jewish identity. One can only speculate as to whether her final lines would take on the same chromatic contours as her father.



Figure 10 André Tchaikowsky, Shylock Entrance music from *The Merchant of Venice* (1968-82)

less peppers his score with classical exoticisms. When Antonio and Bassanio first meet Shylock, for example, Tchaikowsky introduces a sinewy line that slowly expands chromatically from a single note to a major third. The theme, scored for oboe in the completed version, evokes exoticism, from the Middle Eastern conventions of a maqam slowly expanding from a centre note, to his outline of the Jewish-referencing augmented second interval at the end. Going beyond other composers' characterisations, Tchaikowsky's Shylock spends a good deal of time both emulating and mocking the other characters through imitation, in essence developing his character by serving as a distorting mirror to others. However, the opera ultimately comes to show such efforts as manifestations of insecurity in a world where the hegemonic culture is constantly changing the rules to Shylock's disadvantage.

## 8 Conclusion

Through nearly a century and a half of opera, Shylock the Jew appears as a musically-coloured character, tightly wound and complex yet unable to shake his dissonance with the surrounding, often diatonic society. Through a particular combination of slipperiness and suffering, contrasting with the *barcarolle*-like lyricism of Venice and Belmont, composers reflected the sonic complexities of Jewish identity to show both internal anxiety and external alienation. In this manner, the Jew paradoxically seeks music of his own, yet finds in the end that despite his efforts, his host society denies him resolution, forcing him forever to play the interloper.

In the last several years, both Hahn and Tchaikowsky's *Merchant* operas have received greater interest and new appreciation, perhaps becoming the standard for opera adaptations of *Merchant* in the same way that Verdi's *Otello* and Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* did for those plays. Yet future productions open fascinating possibilities for continued portrayal of the undiatonic Jew, whose very existence appears in these operas as transitional and reactive to the world around him. By looking at this one character and his struggles to establish his own musical foothold in a world that constantly frustrates his efforts, we can gain further insight into the broader map of harmonic, dramatic, and vocal conventions that opera holds in lending relevance and depth to Shakespeare's oeuvre, especially in Europe.

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# “Antonio, il mercante della nostra storia”: Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children

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**Abstract** This essay discusses the challenges of adapting Shakespeare's play in narrative form for young readers. It cites the history of such adaptation, thinking about the 'set of instructions' authors have provided child readers to respond to the problematic elements of the play (usury, religious and personal prejudice, mercenary marriages, homosexual attraction, cuckoldry). It tracks Tosi's experience of translating/adapting the play and examines the narrative and ideological choices she made in her illustrated version (2015). The power of this story for children, Tosi argues, lies in its potential to ask questions relevant to their lives today.

**Keywords** The Merchant of Venice. Adaptation. Narrativization. Children's literature. Charles and Mary Lamb. Shylock. Portia. Lewis Carroll. Translation. Venice.

**Summary** 1 Narrativising Shakespeare for Children. – 2 Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children. – 2.1 Language, *Incipit* and Structure. – 2.2 Shylock, Usury and a Pound of Flesh. – 2.3 Rings, Misunderstandings and Antonio's Loneliness: The Ending.

## 1 Narrativising Shakespeare for Children

Lewis Carroll was, among other things, an enthusiastic theatregoer. He regularly took his child friends to see plays in London, including Shakespeare's. Writing to the actress Ellen Terry in 1880, whose performance as Portia opposite Henry Irving's Shylock he had seen at the Lyceum Theatre some nights

earlier, he asked her to do something to try to fix some lines in *The Merchant of Venice* which he found quite unbearable:

you gave me a treat on Saturday such as I have seldom had in my life. You must be weary by this time of hearing your own praises, so I will only say that Portia was all I could have imagined, and more. And Shylock is superb – especially in the trial scene. Now I am going to be very bold, and make a suggestion, which I do hope you will think well enough of to lay it before Mr. Irving. I want to see that clause omitted –

That, for this favour,

He presently become a Christian.

It is a sentiment that is entirely horrible and revolting to the feelings of all who believe in the Gospel of Love. Why should our ears be shocked by such words merely because they are Shakespeare's? [...] We have despised Shylock for his avarice, and we rejoice to see him lose his wealth: we have abhorred him for his bloodthirsty cruelty, and we rejoice to see him baffled. And now, in the very fullness of our joy at the triumph of right over wrong, we are suddenly called on to see in him the victim of a cruelty a thousand times worse than his own, and to honour him as a martyr. (Carroll 1982, 94-5)

This was at a time when Lewis Carroll was himself considering the possibility of preparing an edition of Shakespeare for girls. In a letter he wrote:

I have begun on *Tempest*, but done very little as yet [...] the method I propose to myself is to erase ruthlessly every word in the play that is in any degree profane, or coarse, or in any sense unsuited for a girl of from 10 to 15; and then make the best I can of what is left. (Ziegler 2003, 107)

Unfortunately, Carroll never completed this project, but the worry of providing suitable material to the young, the wish to protect, instruct and entertain them by erasing, rearranging, simplifying, and clarifying the playwright's words and plots has always been a major concern of all those who have rewritten Shakespeare for child readers.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of my essay I lay out the problems and challenges of adapting Shakespeare in narrative form for child readers, then in the second section I concentrate on *The Merchant of Venice* as presenting specific challenges for adaptors, and I think about the way writers, with different degrees of success, have addressed the complex and

<sup>1</sup> For relevant critical work on adaptations for children see, among others, Stephens, McCallum 1998; Miller 2003; Hateley 2009; Müller 2013; Rokison 2013; and Tosi 2014.

very 'adult' issues that the play raises in the attempt to offer a pedagogically valuable reading experience to the child reader. In particular, in the second part of the essay, and taking into account the context of the history of narrative adaptations of this play (I am using Linda Hutcheon's broad definition of 'adaptation' as "both a product and the process of creation and reception", 2006, 14), I turn to my own experience of adapting the play and examine my own narrative (and ideological) choices.

The history of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for young audiences, which traditionally starts with Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), is very much a story of drama turned into narrative, which, it turns out, has proven a highly durable sub-genre: narrative versions of Shakespeare's plays, often illustrated, are still being written and published in the English-speaking world, despite the other media in which Shakespeare's plays are made available to child readers. Of course, the remediation from drama to narrative has an enormous impact on plot, time/place coordinates, character/setting presentation, and perspective (since, in remediation, an extra-fictional narrator is introduced). Remediation entails making a number of critical decisions about compression and expansion and frequently spelling out what, in the Shakespearean text, is (intentionally) left ambiguous or obscure. Providing motivation for the characters' actions, words and decisions is possibly the most subtly creative of all the strategies devised by authors who wish to make sense of Shakespeare's plays for their readers.

One of the main issues that, from the Lambs onwards, authors have had to address is the relationship between dramatic language and prose narrative, and specifically the degree of linguistic simplification to which the plays should be subjected. What kind of language should the authors choose? Translation into a modern idiom? Paraphrasis? Most Victorian and Edwardian authors used prose narrative, interspersed with Shakespeare's lines. Another issue is relevance: all adapters in one way or another attempt to make Shakespeare meaningful and convincing to child readers across time, cultures and languages.

As far as 'format' is concerned, the Lambs relied on the structure of the short story collection, popular in Victorian and Edwardian times and still producing fine texts to this day, one brilliant example being Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare's Stories* (1985). Other adaptations are characterised by more freedom: they expand Shakespeare's plots by providing extra information, are highly creative and rework the original plays by adding prequels, sequels, and new characters. A Victorian forerunner of this typology, much favoured by contemporary Young Adult novelists, was Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, published in 1850-1852.

## 2 Adapting *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian Children

Despite their different styles and formats, however, all adaptations of Shakespeare share a belief that his plays must be part of a child's culture. Whether Shakespeare is there in a mediated or sanitised version, he is there at least in part to launch the child's accumulation of cultural capital, and the adaptation works not just as an entry point in this acquisitive economy but as a 'bridge' to the original plays. This cultural scenario is, of course, connected to Shakespeare's central place in the English canon via the English school system - which assures his central place in an English-speaking child's experience. In Italy, where Shakespeare is not typically taught in the school curriculum, only recently has there been an interest in thinking about the presence (or rather, the absence) of adapted and retold Shakespeare for Italian children. In 2015 I undertook the daunting task of retelling *The Merchant of Venice* for Italian child readers, in a cultural context in which, despite the play's 'Italian-ness' - its Italian source and Italian setting - the only Italian adaptations available for children were translations of the Lambs' *Tales*, mostly out of print. Even in England, *The Merchant of Venice* is not a popular play in the children's Shakespeare canon, being obviously more complicated to retell than *The Tempest* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the usual favourites for children's adaptations. If that is the case in England, in Italy, the play is virtually non-existent in the children's canon.

In this second part of my essay I recount my experience of translating and adapting the play, addressing very similar linguistic and cultural challenges to those posed to previous adaptors, from the Lambs onwards. For example, I chose contemporary standard Italian for my retelling - which is a common choice for contemporary adaptations in English, as we see at the beginning of Marchette Chute's adaptation which opens, "*The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic comedy, but of a most unusual kind. For the theme is money, and the climax tells of an attempted murder" (1976, 48). Moreover, I was very interested in what kind of instructions, if any, authors through the centuries have provided their child readers so that they could - can - respond appropriately to the problematic elements of the play (a play that speaks of usury, discrimination, mercenary marriages, inter-religious marriages, forced conversion, possibly homosexual attraction, and cuckoldry). In Mary Lamb's version, for example, the omniscient narrator controls the interpretation of the story. We have hardly any access to Shylock's side of things: the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) speech was omitted, Antonio's cruelty towards the Jew was underplayed, and Shylock was given a negative label almost every time he was introduced, a strategy of disparaging the Jew that ran parallel to the 'glorification' of the merchant, Antonio. By contrast, the recent BBC 4 *Shakespeare Retold* series has created an alternative

authorial voice in *The Merchant* via an extra-textual, invented character who is also the story's narrator. A slave boy in Antonio's household, Tomas, witnesses everything that happens and offers the reader/listener his thoughts:

I am Tomas, a slave. People don't notice me - no more than a dog, or a goat. I may be just a slave boy, but I'm human: I see, hear, speak, touch, smell. And when I get together with other household slaves, I listen to their gossip.

Shylock mentions slaves during the trial to denounce the Venetians' hypocrisy, and these words of Tomas's echo the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) speech. But Tomas, like an omniscient narrator, also comments on what he sees as the dangerous choices the adults make in the play. The ending raises some very interesting questions:

Later, I wondered... will Jew and Christian ever be friends? And would I - and slaves like me - ever be free?

The author, Jamila Gavin, has obviously taken liberties with the text but she has made the story speak directly to today's young reader/listener by placing a shrewd young man at the centre of the conflicted world of the story who is even more discriminated against than Shylock and who asks questions relevant to her readers' young lives.

Embarking on *Il Mercante di Venezia*, I found myself engaging in a dialogue with past adaptors and their linguistic and ethical choices while entering into a continuous negotiation between present and past notions of personal freedom, parental control, discrimination and religious conversion.

## 2.1 Language, *Incipit* and Structure

The most obvious linguistic challenge was to rewrite the story in fluent Italian. I worked directly with the English text, consulting no Italian translations, and used mainly indirect speech and summary. Afterwards, I handed the text to the illustrator. Only when the book was in production did I realise that there was a moment in the adaptation when the words and the illustrations parted company: the night of Jessica's flight. I had decided to set that scene during Carnival, which seemed to make sense of the playtext's reference to masks. In my text, costumes and masks were described as colourful:



Figure 1 *Il Mercante di Venezia* book cover. Illustration by Desideria Guicciardini

approfitando del fatto che era carnevale e i giovani veneziani, indossando maschere e costumi colorati, ballavano e cantavano rincorrendosi nelle calli della città.<sup>2</sup>

But in the illustration, they were dark and rather menacing – absolutely appropriately, for the night of Jessica’s flight is dangerous: people use the cover of darkness to lie, cheat and steal. Making this such a nightmarish scene, the illustrator, Desideria Guicciardini, who is highly experienced, imagined something different for this moment in the story. Elsewhere, her Venice was a vibrant place rendered in bright pinks and oranges. The discrepancy between my words and Guicciardini’s illustration was something I corrected in the English

<sup>2</sup> “taking advantage of the fact that it was Carnival time and the young Venetians were wearing masks and costumes, dancing and singing merrily around the city” (unpublished translation – used for Storytelling 2016 season at the Globe).

translation that was used in London in the dramatic reading staged during the Children's Storytelling season at the Globe in 2016 and again in 2017. Now, my young Venetians ("taking advantage of the fact that it was Carnival time and the young Venetians were wearing masks and costumes") just wore masks and fancy-dress.

As is well known, *The Merchant* starts with Antonio's melancholic words to Salarino and Salanio: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" (1.1.1). Now, opening a story for children with a group of men discussing the origin of another man's melancholia is not likely to be very entertaining for the average child (although it has been done, most notably by Ada Stidolph and Leon Garfield). So along the centuries, adaptors, who have a long history of taking liberties with Shakespeare's texts every time the story is adapted, rearranging scenes and abridging, distilling or expanding plot elements (Marchitello 2003), have also devised different ways to introduce young readers to the story. *Incipits* in narrative are nearly as crucial as in drama. In the nineteenth century there was a tendency to introduce the Venice setting as a magical place: Constance and Mary Maud (1913), for example, emphasised the "beautiful marble palaces", revealed the reason that gondolas are black, and compared the splendour of the Venetian vessels with those of the Invincible Armada (267) while Janey Lang explained that there, "the streets are waterways" and told the reader directly, "one day, when you go there [...] you will think you are in Fairyland" (1905, 33). Spenser Hoffmann in 1911 presented Renaissance Venice as "the mistress of the seas", "her trade", "world-wide" (78) (historically not true in the 1590s, though Shakespeare thought it was).

Such opening descriptions of Venice work very effectively as a background to the action - after a description of the "watery city" (Garfield 1985, 75) many retellings emphasise the mercantile vocation of Venice. Other adaptations choose to focus on one character in particular: Charles and Mary Lamb and Mary Seymour opened with a description of Shylock while Lois Hufford started with Antonio. Others open the story in Belmont: Elizabeth Macauley started with the casket scene, Abby Sage Richardson and Ian Serrailier, with Portia. (In the former, Portia's father is "the last of a long line of Venetian merchants who ruled the commerce of the world", 1881, 41.) In these versions the Venice bond plot appears almost as an offshoot of the Belmont casket plot - although, strictly speaking, to start at Belmont is to observe the chronological order of the plot since Bassanio and Portia have met in the pre-history of the story long before Antonio's encounter with Salarino and Salanio.

The problem of the *incipit* is connected to the question of the double setting: the play, most noticeably in Act 1, alternates between two locations, Venice and Belmont. In the first draft of my adaptation I did exactly the same, thinking it would give my narrative some 'movement'. After all, prose narrative allows great freedom, and nar-

rators can leave their characters in one place and find them again a few pages later (as Marchette Chute did in her version, making extensive use of expressions such as "[t]hen the scene shifts to Belmont [...] Back in Venice [...] Meanwhile, back in Belmont", 1976, 48-50). But this alteration interfered with the picture book format of the series I was writing for, a format that puts illustrations across two-page spreads. This in turn meant that the plot had to be divided into longer sequences, making abrupt scene changes quite impossible. My solution was to abandon the original plan of scenic alteration to think instead of a theme, a setting, and a character to be explored in the space of two pages. This allowed me to start with Antonio, as in Shakespeare's play, and his worries, and to rearrange the play as a list of mini-chapters entitled "Shylock", "The Contract", "Bassanio and the Three Caskets", "Jessica's Flight", "Shylock's Revenge", "Sailing from Belmont", "Antonio", "Balthazar", "The Ring", and "Antonio" again to finish. This also allowed me to insert some cliff hangers at the end of each section, to arouse the reader's curiosity. So, after a few introductory words on Venice and Renaissance trade, I had my narrator appropriate Salarino and Salanio's attempts to find a reason for the merchant's melancholia, and I interpolated the metaphors from the play into the mini-chapter on Antonio:

Anche Antonio, il mercante della nostra storia, non poteva fare a meno di pensare alle sue navi, qualsiasi cosa stesse facendo: quando guardava una clessidra gli venivano in mente i banchi di sabbia su cui le navi si potevano arenare, quando soffiava sul brodo troppo caldo della cena immaginava l'effetto del vento e delle tempeste sulle loro vele, quando toccava del marmo o della pietra si ricordava degli scogli su cui potevano incagliarsi, perdendo nel mare i loro preziosi carichi di stoffe, spezie, gioielli.<sup>3</sup>

Having read a number of adaptations that had very patronising narrators, I wanted to avoid this trap. But I could not help producing an external narrator who often asked questions and described actions and motives, and sometimes passed judgements on characters. Even if I tried to resist the force that inevitably pulls toward simplification and polarisation in characterisation (which is typical of the Lambs, and many others), sometimes I could not. I had Bassanio, for exam-

<sup>3</sup> "Antonio, the merchant of our story, couldn't help being reminded of his ships wherever he went and whatever he did. When he saw an hour-glass, he would picture the sand banks and shallows on which his ships could be wrecked; when he felt the summer breeze cooling his broth, he would imagine the harm that great winds and storms may do at sea; when he sat on a stone bench to catch his breath, huge dangerous rocks would come to mind, breaking his vessels' planks and causing them to capsize, scattering their caskets of jewels, colourful silks and fragrant spices into the ocean".

ple, enter the story as a *spendaccione*, a spendthrift. (So much for subtlety!) In terms of characters, there has been a tendency, from the Lambs onwards, to cut some of them. This is inevitable in a picture book which has a limited word length, but all adaptations of *The Merchant*, even in the format of the short story, focus on the central characters. This means that Launcelot Gobbo is usually eliminated (although he is kept by Surtees Townesend and A.B. Stidolph), Portia rarely has the chance to discuss the foibles of her foreign suitors, and Bassanio is often the only suitor put to the test. In my *Mercante* Nerissa is simply a *dama di compagnia* (lady-in-waiting). She does not take part in the trial and there is no Gratiano to marry her at the end. The reason for this was that I worried that a child reader – the book is advertised for 5 to 7-year-olds – might get confused with the multiple weddings and the complicated song and dance over the rings.

## 2.2 Shylock, Usury and a Pound of Flesh

The other problem was whether to expand on the concept of usury and the conditions of the Jews, and whether to introduce the Ghetto – which is not in Shakespeare's play. But, given the fact that the Ghetto, whether mentioned explicitly or not, provides the historical backdrop to the story as the place that gave the world the word for a Jewish enclave, it seemed important, and also even historically plausible, that Antonio should visit Shylock in his 'office' there. Most adaptations have Antonio and Shylock meet at Rialto, as in Serrailier's version, or, like Hoffmann's, they describe a general distance between Jews and Christians: "Jews kept themselves quite apart from the Christians" (Hoffmann 1911, 79). I decided to write a sequence to accompany Guicciardini's illustration that showed Antonio and Bassanio crossing a bridge and heading towards the Ghetto while, on the facing page, the illustration looked through a partially closed gate onto a busy campo, crowded with people dressed very differently from the Venetians the reader had seen so far. I wanted to explain what it meant to be a usurer in Venice and to describe the architectural peculiarity of the place, the tall buildings, that the child reader could see on the page. Lending money was one of the only jobs the Jews were allowed by the Republic of Venice, and their confinement to 'una zona' that segregated them and restricted their living space to a single small island meant that there was no space to build more houses, so houses had to rise taller to accommodate as many people as possible. The description of the houses and of the curfew imposed on the Jews and its implications builds the illusion of time passing: as this explanatory passage comes to an end, Bassanio and Antonio have 'arrived' and are ready to meet Shylock.



Figure 2 Busy life in the Venice Ghetto. Illustration by Desideria Guicciardini

Not insignificantly, the way the relationship between these two friends has been described throughout the centuries is very telling of how adaptors have tried to avoid any hint of ‘impropriety’: Antonio is invariably depicted as a lonely man who has no wife or children and is therefore very fond of Bassanio as a sort of substitute son (Hoffmann even inserted a pathetic parting scene when Bassanio leaves Venice for Belmont). I decided I could not emphasise this great fondness without hinting that Antonio may be a little in love with Bassanio, so instead of going in that direction, I censored my twenty-first century liberal attitudes and downplayed their relationship. In my version Antonio and Bassanio are ‘just’ good friends, spend a lot of time together, and are ready to help each other should necessity arise.

Many retellings have staged the polarisation between Shylock and Antonio from the very beginning. In the *Lambs’ Tales*, Antonio is “the kindest man that lived” while Shylock is “hard-hearted”, a “covetous Jew” in the tale’s opening paragraph (2007, 82); “the merciless Jew” whom Portia confronts when she enters the courtroom; the “unfeeling” and “cruel Shylock” of the trial (see Tosi 2013, 61). In the tradition of the *Lambs*, in Victorian and Edwardian times Shylock was generally portrayed negatively. Mary Seymour’s *Shakespeare Stories Simply Told* (1889), for example, opened with Shylock and his cruelty:

In the beautiful Italian city of Venice, there dwelt in former times a Jew, by name Shylock, who had grown rich by lending money at high interest to Christian merchants. No-one liked Shylock, he was so hard and so cruel in his dealings. (73)

Spenser Hoffmann in *The Children's Shakespeare* (1911) offered another bad Shylock:

the Jews' wealth was built out of the misery and ruin of their fellow-men, and you may be sure that such a means of getting their living made its mark upon their characters, crushing out of them all love, and pity, and mercy. (79)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, contemporary authors have tried to redress the balance and be over-sympathetic towards Shylock. Even allowing for the fact that it is very difficult not to bring our contemporary attitudes into the play, Anna Claybourne went a very long way trying to justify Shylock, to the extent that she actually changed the plot: in her version Shylock is prepared "to make this an interest-free loan" (2004, 117) and gladly accepts the invitation to dine at Antonio's to cement their friendship. It is only after Antonio has insisted on being hostile that he becomes angry and suggests the pound of flesh as a penalty. But even in the late nineteenth century, more sympathetic portrayals could be found: Thomas Carter's (1910) and Surtees Townesend's (1899) versions did not omit Antonio's or the Venetians' ill treatment of the Jews so Shylock's cruelty was motivated if not justified. Sage Richardson built a noble persona for Shylock, "a man of dear, subtle intellect, born to have been a statesman if the state had not refused him" (1871, 49), a description that puts one in mind of Disraeli, who at the time Richardson published her tales, had just completed a brief term as Great Britain's Prime Minister, a position he was going to hold for a much longer period from 1874 onwards. More recently, Garfield has offered an unusual ambivalence in portraying Shylock, perceptively underscoring the reciprocity of hate between Antonio and Shylock but, at one point in the story, describing the Jew in the attitude of a stage villain, rubbing his hands with gleeful anticipation at having the Christian at his mercy.

I had a number of interesting conversations with my editor about what to do with Shylock - I wanted to keep some ambiguity while she kept inviting me to 'make up my mind' about his responsibility in the play. I decided to retain the two speeches that establish that Shylock is discriminated against in Venice - the "many a time and oft | In the Rialto you have rated me" (1.3.102-103) speech which shows Antonio's most unpleasant side, and the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.53) speech that has Shylock claiming, as a Jew, the same human qualities as the

Christians – including their ‘natural’ instinct for revenge. There are some retellings that assume that Shylock asks Antonio to sign the contract because he is hoping to kill him (as Lancelyn Green’s did), thus making him evil from the beginning. I could not make that assumption – what we know about Shylock’s motives is what he tells us in the play, but, like many adaptors before me, I could not resist making a direct connection between the way he was treated and his consequent embitterment and cruelty. So, after the “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (3.1.53) the narrator explains:

Ormai Shylock, incattivito da tutto quello che gli era successo, era pronto a diventare l’uomo rapace che Antonio disprezzava tanto.<sup>4</sup>

A pound of flesh (*una libbra di carne*) was a problem in itself. In Italy the metric system is used, and it is very unlikely that young readers would understand how much flesh would make ‘una libbra’. However, footnotes were not an option (they are very rarely used in children’s books) so I had to rely on the foreignness of the word to convey the unnaturalness of the bond. After all, it is not unusual for children’s writers to introduce in their writing difficult words whose meanings children have to learn, maybe to use those words afterwards. (A.S. Byatt in a *Guardian* newspaper article once confessed that, for her, one of the glories of reading Beatrix Potter was the discovery of unexpected words, such as ‘soporific’ – to describe the effect of lettuce on rabbits – and that this inspired her with the love of words that made her want to become a writer.)

The forced conversion was another educationally challenging event. Some adaptors in the past simply avoided it, ending the trial with Shylock ‘utterly broken by this change in his fortunes’ (Harrison 1938, 55). Others, like the Mauds, justified Antonio:

This last clause [stipulating the conversion] was perhaps not so unkind as it sounds, for the Christians of that day thought no unbaptised person could ever possibly enter heaven; so Antonio may have imagined he was forcing the Jew to that action for his own good. (1913, 296-7)

I did not feel it was necessary for the narrator to pass judgement or justify the conditional clause Antonio added to Shylock’s sentence, as I thought that reminding the reader of the mere facts would be sufficient to convey the impression of a broken and defeated Shylock:

<sup>4</sup> ‘Now Shylock, turned nasty from all the sad things that had happened to him, was ready to become the ferocious man that Antonio had always thought he was’.

Il Doge gli risparmiò la vita ma, dietro richiesta di Antonio, lo obbligò a lasciare parte del suo patrimonio in eredità alla figlia Jessica e a convertirsi al cristianesimo. Shylock, senza più denaro, senza il sostegno della sua religione, senza la sua unica figlia, era stato sconfitto.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between Shylock and Jessica is another crux. Victorian and Edwardian retellings tended to see Jessica as Portia's negative foil: while the heiress of Belmont defers to the eccentric marriage plans of a dead father, Jessica rebels against her living one, steals from him and marries a Christian. How should a child reader be encouraged to read this event? Carter described Jessica as "treacherous and unworthy" (1910, 24), Hudson (1907) denounced her "heartless desertion" (78) and Sage Richardson commented on her "breaking her poor father's heart [...] and filial trust" (559). In my version I made explicit that Shylock would never have consented to the match with a Christian. This justifies in part her decision to elope.

### 2.3 Rings, Misunderstandings and Antonio's Loneliness: The Ending

The sexual puns about the rings of the last act pose a serious challenge to any adaptor for children. As should be expected, from the Lambs onwards, the tendency has been to ignore the detail that Portia may have been given the ring in exchange for lying with Balthazar, to focus only on Bassanio's remorse and Portia's disguise. I did not want to be an exception to the rule, so after my Portia pretends to be very upset about Bassanio's disloyalty in giving away her ring, without further ado she shows him the ring and reveals that she has impersonated the lawyer to save Antonio's life - at which announcement everyone is suitably impressed, surprised and grateful. After these farcical misunderstandings are clarified, endings invariably focus on the happiness of love and of wealth recovered, often with Bassanio and Portia including Antonio in their happiness, as in Townesend's ending:

Bassanio and Portia lived happily together at Belmont for many long years, loved and honoured by all who knew them. They were lucky in having a host of friends, but among them all, not one was more valued and welcomed than the man who had gladly pledged his life to help his friend, Antonio, the Merchant of Venice. (1899, 162)

<sup>5</sup> "The Doge spared his life, but on Antonio's request, forced Shylock to leave most of his property to Jessica and become a Christian. Shylock, now a poor man, without the support of his religion and without his only daughter, had been defeated".



Figure 3 Antonio Leaves Belmont. Illustration by Desideria Guicciardini

As we know, Bassanio and Portia’s fairy-tale happy ending is not matched by Antonio’s. While they enjoy wealth and love, Antonio must be content with the restoration of his wealth – in terms of anything gained, he is not improving his situation but just *recovering* the status and the financial comfort that he enjoyed at the beginning of the play. Because of this, he is excluded from the fairy-tale atmosphere of Belmont, where giving and ‘hazarding all’ wins love as well as social enhancement. So I decided to emphasise Antonio’s loneliness rather than the couples’ celebrations. After all, Antonio is the title role – the play starts with his unexplained sadness, and – I felt – it should end with the recovery of his argosies and his reputation, but also, and inevitably, with his loneliness. And this was the only place in my adaptation at which I actually surmised how the character would feel if he were a person in real life. Bassanio and Portia, as the lady of Belmont announces, will spend the rest of the night going over the events of the previous day. We may add that Portia and Bassanio have not really had time to consummate their marriage because Portia sent Bassanio rushing to Venice after they had heard the news about Antonio – giving her time to devise the rescue plan and put on her disguise. So, what is Antonio doing in Belmont? It is the early hours

and he is alone, like the solitary heron in the lagoon that appears in the last illustration. It is time to go home.

Era ormai l'alba.

Uno stuolo di gabbiani volava sulla laguna azzurrina nella luce del mattino.

Antonio guardò Bassanio e Porzia, abbracciati, che parlavano fitto: le spiegazioni di tutte queste felici conclusioni li avrebbero occupati per ore.

Per un attimo Antonio si sentì completamente solo.

Ma grazie a Bassanio e Porzia era salvo, e salvo due volte: Porzia gli aveva mostrato infatti un'altra lettera, in cui si informava il mercante che tre delle sue navi avevano raggiunto felicemente il porto di Venezia.

Antonio era di nuovo un uomo ricco! Poteva tornare a casa con la sua reputazione e il suo patrimonio intatti.

Volsè lo sguardo verso il mare e pensò alle sue navi, finalmente di ritorno a Venezia da terre lontane, cariche di gemme e tessuti preziosi.

Era il momento di lasciare Belmonte e tornare a casa ad accoglierle.<sup>6</sup>

The real challenge of retelling *The Merchant* for children, now and for Italian young readers, was still, I felt, to make Shakespeare *the child's contemporary*. Even if the story takes us back and forth between the enchanted atmosphere of Belmont and the mercantile world of Renaissance Venice (a different Venice from today's tourist destination where foreigners can still be fleeced), the world of the play is a place where a respectable member of the community can spit on somebody of a different religion, in a public place, without losing any of his respectability. This is a play that refuses the easy polarisations of fairy tale. No one is unambiguously good or bad, and adaptations that choose to transform the ambiguity into a simple allocation of

<sup>6</sup> "It was almost dawn.

A flock of seagulls was flying over the lagoon in the blue morning light.

Antonio looked at Bassanio and Portia, who were hugging and talking incessantly: the explanations of all these events would take hours.

For a moment Antonio felt completely alone.

But thanks to Bassanio and Portia he was safe. More than safe: Portia had showed him another letter from Venice saying that three of his ships had just reached Venice harbour.

Antonio was a rich man again!

His reputation and his capital were intact.

He turned towards the sea, and thought of his ships, safely back in Venice from far-away lands, laden with gems and precious fabrics.

It was time to leave Belmont and go home to meet them".

criminal responsibility to Shylock do both the reader and the playwright a disservice – as do those adaptations that change the text to shift all the burden of responsibility *from* Shylock.

As Edith Nesbit remarked in her Preface to her own retellings of Shakespeare, "the stories are the least part of Shakespeare" (1912, 10). But they are what children enjoy; and the power of this story for children, from the romantic casket plot to the pound of flesh (an indefinite albeit still terrifying quantity for Italian children) could lie in the potential for asking questions such as: what makes one person different from another? What kind of behaviour qualifies a person as an enemy? Where do we draw the line between justice and mercy? Who has the power to decide where that line is drawn? Why is money so important, and what are people willing to do in order to obtain it? These are all questions that the play raises, as relevant to our own society as to the society of the play, questions which I think an adaptation should make explicit to the child, questions, however, that – like Shylock in Shakespeare's play – no adaptation is bound to answer.

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## The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto

edited by Shaul Bassi, Carol Chillington Rutter

# Contributors

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This book records the landmark performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in the Venetian Ghetto in 2016, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death and the 500th anniversary of the Jewish quarter that gave the world the word 'ghetto'. Practitioners and critics discuss how this multi-ethnic production and its radical choice to cast five actors as Shylock provided the opportunity to respond creatively to Europe's legacy of antisemitism, racism and difference. They observe how the place and play stand as ambivalent documents of civilization: instruments of intolerance but also sites of cultural exchange.



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