
MERCHANT OF VENICE

THE HUMANITY OF SHYLOCK

Anticipation was in the air on Saturday night, June 3, as people drifted into the Theatricum amphitheater to witness the season opening of *The Merchant of Venice*.

No longer referred to as an anti-semitic play but rather a reflection of the rank anti-semitism of Shakespeare's time, the Jew, Shylock—spat upon, humiliated and reviled by the Christian populace—finally emerges from the bitterness of his life into an unrelenting rage that only seeks revenge.

Portrayed in all its depth of character by Alan Blumenfeld, Shylock, the moneylender, is handed the opportunity to inflict comparable pain on his persecutors when he demands “a pound of flesh” from the merchant Antonio (Frank Ross) whose debt to him comes due.

The cast of this season's *Merchant* presented this tragic-comedy as only actors at the height of their craft can. Willow Geer as Portia, in love with Bassanio (Colin Simon), turns easily from wealthy heiress, courted by many suitors, to artifice when she and Nerissa (Susan Angelo), her lady-in-waiting, disguise themselves as men, a lawyer and his clerk, to go to Venice and plead Antonio's case against Shylock.

Max Lawrence as Prince of Morocco turns in a priceless cameo as the second suitor for Portia's hand and Maia Luer as Shylock's daughter, Jessica, portrays the treacherous child who steals her father's money and escapes to marry a Christian, with a sweetness that deepens Shylock's already unbearable grief. As he takes his leave of her, she croons a Hebrew lullaby. In the end, Shylock has lost more than everything except his life. To avoid death, he agrees to convert to Christianity and will his wealth to his daughter and her husband.

As all the (Christian) lovers reunite and prepare for a night of revelry, we see Shylock in a darkened corner draw his prayer shawl over his head and recite Shabbat prayers. An officer discovers him and carries him off to jail, probably to be hanged. This is another Geer direction that deepens the plight of Shylock, the man.

“Unlike Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's humanity wouldn't allow him to write an anti-semitic play,” mused Geer, who is perfectly comfortable adding the visuals that compel our sympathy for Shylock.

A note in passing: To give him his due, Marlowe's play is dramatic commentary on the hypocrisy of men in positions of power whose schemes take down, not only themselves, but the innocents around them. The wealthy Jew, Barabas, bad as bad can get, becomes a Machiavellian serial killer whose character lacks the pathos of Shylock.

More than a nod goes to Marshall McDaniel for original music and sound design, as well as everyone behind the scenes, who bring the art of theater to life.

Every year, this ensemble repertory company, proves its worth, as actors performing Shakespeare and contemporary plays, but also as people bring that art to “speak to the social conscience of our modern society.” Immediately following the curtain call, the cast returned onstage where Alan Blumenfeld invited discussion of the play to which the rapt audience eagerly participated. ■

The Merchant of Venice continues through October 1.

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley. For a complete schedule of performances and to purchase tickets; (310) 455-3723; theatricum.com; facebook.com/theatricum; Twitter: @theatricum. Tickets range from \$10 - \$38.50; children 4 and under are free.