Seattle Shakespeare Company's The Merchant of Venice

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My driving route to Seattle Shakespeare Company takes me south on I-5 to Mercer Street, where I turn west and head toward Seattle Center. As I approached South Lake Union on my way to SSC’s production of *The Merchant of Venice* I passed on my right the steel skeletons of two huge office towers being built for Amazon’s sprawling campus owned by billionaire Jeff Bezos. On my left, on a ridge above Mercer, was a row of desolate tents, one of hundreds of “tent-cities” that haunt this astonishingly wealthy city. Not until I was seated in the theatre did I realize that I had just driven past the inspiration for SSC’s bold, disturbing staging of Shakespeare’s play.

The Seattle Center Playhouse is a small space in the basement of an armory, and one hallmark of SSC’s tenure here has been its imaginative use of the cramped facilities. For *Merchant*, set designer Shawn Ketchum Johnson used steel scaffolding that one sees everywhere at construction sites in town. The steel pipes extended from the back of the theatre perhaps fifteen feet forward, then branched left and right to form construction “wings,” suggesting, not just a building, but also an economy being built. At the top of the scaffolding, ten feet above the stage, wooden 1” x 6” planks used by workers lay across the pipes. Large placards depicting various images associated with a bustling economic and educational center—road signs, industrial gears, books, college degrees, movie cameras, construction tools—hung from the pipes, and for the Belmont scenes these were flipped to reveal a plain white side in concert with the bright lights. Most of the action emanated from the back of the stage “into” this constructed space, as if the play were being built even as one envisioned the imagined building rising before one’s eyes.

Desdemona Chiang’s uncompromising vision of how the disparities inherent in this script reflected those her spectators see outside the theatre was immediately evident. Approximately ten minutes before the “play,” i.e., the artistic, theatrical event, secluded away from the wind and rain outside, began, in dim lighting, W. B. Yeats’s “aged man,” a “paltry thing,” not so much “wearing” tattered clothes as a walking bundle of rags, emerged slowly from back stage and hobbled toward the steel pipes stage left. He slowly lay down upon a cardboard mat he was carrying, propped up his walking stick, and set up in front of him a
sign of the kind one sees everywhere at intersections in Seattle. I could not read the lettering, but it probably said “anything will help,” the favorite phrase scribbled on cardboard by destitute people throughout the city. While this ragged man—later to emerge as Old Gobbo—slept, directly across from him Antonio, dressed in a wool coat, casual shirt and slacks, a wool scarf and bowler hat, sat having his shoes shined. This riveting tableau of dichotomous “dumb shows” continued as John Bradshaw, SSC’s Managing Director, walked to center stage to introduce the play, thank community sponsors and spectators for attending, invite us to attend “Bill’s Bash,” SSC’s annual fund-raiser, and remind us to buy season tickets for the upcoming season. The effect was stunning. It was as if—though clearly part of Chiang’s brilliant direction—the intractable disparities that plague this city were overwhelming her company’s ability to present its play about those disparities and the prejudices within societies that have not only produced but also prolonged the evils we still have not eliminated. The “space” of the city was overwhelming not only the “space” of the theatre, but also the play itself.

As Antonio’s young comrades, dressed jauntily in jeans, sweatshirts, and leather jackets, carrying cups of Starbucks’s coffee, charged toward him to open the play proper, they ignored and stepped around and even over Old Gobbo, who remained on stage until the end of the scene. Only the excellent Amy Thome, playing a female Shylock, walking silently among the men, stopped to put a coin on Gobbo’s mat as she walked to her office stage left. No others would give a ducat to relieve a lame beggar. His ragged body spoke volumes as Bassanio praised a lady “richly left” and Antonio recalled his “fortunes . . . at sea” (1.1.161, 177). As the men dashed away to seek adventure and wealth, Gobbo struggled to his feet and, dragging his ripped mat and sign, tottered off stage.

Belmont glittered. Overhead lights reflected off the white placards and Portia’s abundant jewelry, highlighting her floor-length white gown. The caskets were encased in glass, and appropriately symbolic: gold was a small tabernacle; silver a smaller metal box; and lead a round stone. The athletic Jason Sanford as Morocco, accompanied by four of his entourage, introduced himself with a rousing dance worthy of any hip-hop joint in town, then calmly chose the gold casket and humbly exited to his celibate fate. Portia’s “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.78) dripped with bigotry. The Prince of Aragon’s day job was probably working at Amazon: he wore red sneakers, white lounge pants, a red sweatshirt, and bobbed and weaved around stage listening to music through headphones. He raged at his mistake and raced off stage.

Chiang gave Shylock a growing family. In the opening scene a young woman carrying a baby had walked with her, and this woman reappeared in 1.3 as presumably a second daughter. By recasting Shylock as a single woman and grandparent in a contemporary setting, Chiang created and explicitly addressed a more complex setting for this character than I have ever seen. Not only, as I note below, is Shylock a Jewish woman striving to support a growing family among cruel, anti-Semitic men, but she also loses her elder daughter to this rapacious pack who help her spend her spouse’s ring on a monkey. Imagining Shylock as a single woman whose business is ruined at the end of the play; who is forced, on pain of death, to renounce her religion; and who, without knowing Jessica’s reaction to
her forced “deed of gift” believes that she has willingly aligned herself with those who completely destroy her mother’s life, reifies the total devastation that racial, religious, and gender prejudice can produce in an unforgiving capitalist environment. Seeing this mother-daughter relationship destroyed evoked the seminal 2001 production of The Tempest at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in which Prospera knew that her daughter was going to marry into the Italian nobility that had produced men like Antonio and Sebastian. Though these two plays end differently, the sense of maternal loss and, to varying degrees anguish, was palpable in both.

Both daughters, plus Lancelot, were present in Shylock’s “office” stage left when she and Antonio met. Thome wore conservative business attire: a turban wound tightly around her head, a gabardine jacket, and a long woolen skirt. Their initial scene was an intensely disturbing pas de deux of seething hatred by two exceptionally talented actors. Darragh Kennan as Antonio clearly loathed Shylock, and she responded in kind. Antonio et al. froze as Shylock spoke “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.42ff), following which their voices rose as they moved ever closer together until Shylock began circling the sitting Antonio on “Signior Antonio, many a time and oft” (1.3.106ff). At “Shall I bend low and in a bondman’s key,” Shylock mockingly knelt before Antonio, immediately enraging him. Antonio rose and viciously spat out “I am as like to call thee so again” (1.3.130ff), prompting Bassanio to part them lest they come to blows. Jessica, as well as her sister, cowered together as their mother and Antonio quarreled violently. By having Shylock’s extended family present in this scene, Chiang’s choices emphasized that, for all the vitriol exchanged and the latent homicide in her bond, Shylock’s responsibilities extended far beyond herself. While she certainly seeks Antonio’s death, she also, unlike “these Christians,” does give money to beggars even as she risks her very livelihood by foolishly believing that the law will ever deal fairly with her.

Lancelot’s frenetic mini-drama with his conscience contorted his body as much as his mind, and his sand-blind father exploded in joy at finding his son alive. Tim Gouran was a hard-drinking, obnoxious, and ill-mannered Gratiano on steroids, and utterly vindictive toward Shylock in 4.1. As masquers wearing pigs’ faces slithered around the stage, Jessica stole a key from her mother’s writing desk where she had signed the bond with Antonio, and kissed Lorenzo passionately as she handed over boxes of stolen jewels and money. Chiang retained 2.8, where Solanio and Salerio speak of Antonio’s parting from Bassanio and Salerio says on Antonio “A kinder gentleman treads not the earth” (l. 35), suggesting Antonio’s utter lack of self-awareness about his racial hatred of Shylock and the Christians’ inability to see his and their own hypocrisy, arguably a seminal line in the play. When Shylock returned from dinner to find Jessica gone in 3.1, her face was scratched and her coat muddied and torn, suggesting a frantic search for Jessica, perhaps lasting well into a rainy (Seattle) night. Solanio and Salerio baited her viciously and laughed at her intensely emotional plea to assert her common humanity; but the more they railed, the more one wondered why Shylock would claim “common human traits” with such as them. At the heart of this wrenching scene was another level of degradation: male Christians berating, not just any Jew,
but a Jewish woman, doubly damned in a male-dominated business. Tubal’s effort to calm her failed; Shylock ended the scene on her knees, sobbing, broken, and vengeful.

The bright lights of Belmont and Portia’s sparkling jewelry sharply altered the mood. Bassanio appeared quite handsome in a grey suit and white shirt, and as he strode among the caskets and calmly deliberated their messages Portia and Nerissa nervously giggled and held hands stage left, symbolically usurping the space that had been Shylock’s office and abode. When told of the amount that Bassanio owed Antonio, Portia dismissed it as a mere trifle, a pittance, a joke. Once Bassanio opened the lead casket, completing the fairy-tale romance, he and Portia coyly danced around each other before finally rushing into each other’s arms.

In 4.1 Chiang placed Carter Rodriguez, earlier Old Gobbo and now ironically doubling as the Duke of Venice, downstage right, and Basanio’s supporters, an angry mob led by Gratiano, upstage right. This blocking left the center space open, and here guards sat Antonio, handcuffed to a chair, with his back to us. Shylock entered stage right, ambled past the jeering mob, and pleaded her bond before the Duke. From a black bag she produced a large scale that she placed upon the Duke’s desk and a very long knife, which she slowly pulled from its sheath and then whetted on her shoe. Portia and Jessica, in dark suits and wigs, pleaded for mercy and consulted their text books to the right of Antonio, again usurping Shylock’s office/home from earlier. Shylock was thus symbolically “displaced” before the court. As Portia extolled the quality of mercy, she turned to us on “court of Venice,” thus invoking our assent to what followed. When convinced that she was assured of her revenge, of having caught Antonio “once upon the hip,” Shylock confidently strode toward her trembling victim. As if to stifle Antonio’s expected scream, Shylock stuffed a white cloth in his mouth, and then amid shouts from Gratiano et al of “No! No!” drew her knife and menacingly stood over him. Shylock slowly moved her left hand over Antonio’s naked chest, as if marking exactly where she would plunge her knife. Suddenly realizing that her plea for mercy did not deter Shylock, Portia frantically turned pages in a huge law book, then, with impeccable timing, shouted “Tarry, Jew” just as Shylock thrust her knife downward. Audible gasps from spectators, astounded by the timing and terror of the moment, filled the theatre. Even more startling was Shylock’s second lunge at the still bound Antonio after she realized that she had been utterly defeated, not only of her murderous revenge but also of the ducats she had refused in open court. Here was a woman driven truly mad. As a final insult, Portia, with no hesitation, stepped to Shylock and unwound from her head the turban that had identified her as a proud Jewess. Stunned and shaking, Shylock stuffed the scale into her black bag and, carrying it in one hand and the still unsheathed knife in the other, stumbled before us past her office/home and exited stage left.

Amid the jollity, ring games, shipping news, renewed fidelity, money—Bassanio grabbed Portia’s ducats after 4.1—and the play’s guarded comic ending, Chiang reserved one more shock. As the revelers dashed upstage into Portia’s presumably sumptuous digs, Jessica stepped forward and stood still for several
seconds while reading the “special deed of gift, / After [Shylock’s] death, of all he dies possessed of” (5.1.292-93) that she had snatched from Lorenzo. As she finished reading she wept, then crumbled the deed and ran up the stage right vomitorium, directly opposite the others. You that way, I this. Not only has her mother’s life been destroyed, but hers as well.

Chiang’s riveting production employed the entire script to enlarge the play’s painful relevance for the 21st century. Religious prejudice plagues nations worldwide, and Gobbo and his fellows sleep under bridges and construction sites in every industrial city; walking back to my car in pouring rain I passed two huddling under a tarp in an alley where crews are rebuilding the Seattle Opera House. Surely The Merchant of Venice is a play, not a social tract, but in the hands of a skilled and imaginative director it can help us imagine how we might construct far more caring societies.

Notes


Michael W. Shurgot is the author of Stages of Play: Shakespeare’s Theatrical Energies in Elizabethan Performance (Delaware, 1998); editor of North American Players of Shakespeare: A Book of Interviews (Delaware, 2007); and co-editor, with Yu Jin Ko, of Shakespeare’s Sense of Character: On the Page and From the Stage (Ashgate, 2012). He has reviewed Shakespeare performances for The Upstart Crow and Shakespeare Bulletin.