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Outsiders and Others: The Utah Shakespeare Festival Summer Season 2018

Merchant of Venice

Directed by Melinda Pfundstein
Engelstad Shakespeare Theatre, Cedar City, UT
Performance Date: June 30, 2018

Merry Wives of Windsor

Directed by Paul Mason Barnes
Engelstad Shakespeare Theatre, Cedar City, UT
Performance Dates: June 28, 2018 and July 15, 2018

Othello

Directed by Kate Buckley
Eileen and Allen Anes Studio Theatre, Cedar City, UT
Performance Date: June 28, 2018

Henry VI, Part 1

Directed by Henry Woronicz
Engelstad Shakespeare Theatre, Cedar City, UT
Performance Date: June 29, 2018

Reviewed by JESSICA WINSTON

While it has Shakespeare in the title, the Utah Shakespeare Festival (USF) presents Shakespeare as well as other classic and contemporary plays. The 2018 summer season featured *Merchant of Venice*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Othello*, and *Henry VI, Part 1*, alongside Larry Shue's *The Foreigner*, Dennis O'Hare's *An Iliad*, and the musical *Big River*, an adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn*. As even a cursory glance at this list suggests, the season took up questions concerning the stranger or the outsider: What constitutes an outsider or an insider? Is it possible for people in dominant and marginalized communities to get along? Taking place in the Southern Utah town of Cedar City, USF is an immersive, intimate, destination experience. Many attendees come for several days, taking in two shows per day, and then attending USF's Play Seminars each morning to discuss the previous day's shows. Seeing some of the same playgoers day after day, one starts to get to know others—strangers merge into a little theatre-going community. This environment is an apt context in which to explore issues of communities, and how strangers become insiders, or—in the case of several of the season's Shakespeare plays—do not. The summer season's four Shakespeare

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productions offered technically superb, engaging and quite different explorations of these and other issues.

Except for *Merry Wives*, I saw the Shakespeare productions once for the first preview performance. Technically previews are final dress rehearsals, so there can be adjustments as the season launches. For instance, from the previews to the main season, director Paul Mason Barnes cut or shortened the songs in *Merry Wives*. Nevertheless, preview performances are close to final, so it is possible to record the overall style, tone, blocking, and acting in each show.

The production that most explicitly explored issues of insiders and outsiders was *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Melinda Pfundstein. At first, *Merchant*, which took place on the Festival's outdoor stage, the Engelstad Shakespeare Theatre, seemed like it would be a proficient, but relatively unimaginative rendering of the play. The architecture of this stage deliberately recalls an Elizabethan public stage, consisting of a wide wooden platform, with a permanent back wall with doors and alcove, and a balcony above. In this context, many of the production's technical features alluded to Elizabethan stage practices, with minimal set and props. Flats evoked the carved stone archways of a medieval Italian court. Props included large overhead lamps, representing street lights, which lowered to eye level to serve as the caskets. A curtain pulled across a back quarter of the set symbolized Belmont. A couple of scenes used benches. Also echoing Elizabethan practices, the production featured beautiful sixteenth-century-style costumes: velvet and silk, intricate brocade, detailed buttons. Even characters, such as the Prince of Morocco, who appeared on stage for no more than three minutes, wore elaborate costumes of sumptuous design.

Yet even as this production referred to Elizabethan styles and stagecraft, it thoughtfully merged those references with contemporary theatrical practices and values to create a thought-provoking and moving production. In a play like *Merchant*, which deals explicitly with prejudice, the beautiful costumes imbued every character, even the minor ones, with an inherent humanity and dignity. The casting was up-to-date in terms of gender and race parity. The characters of Shylock, Antonio, Tubal, and Lancelot—men in the world of the text and this production—were played by women, Lisa Wolpe, Leslie Brott, Tracie Lane, and Isabella Abel-Suarez, respectively. Other characters, including Bassanio (Wayne T. Carr), Salarino (Kyle Bullock), Jessica (Aidaa Peerzada), and the Prince of Morocco (Jamil Zraikat), were played by non-white actors. Actors delivered verse lines with attention to meter and modern, colloquial cadences. In the trial scene, Portia (Tarah Flanagan) is at first unsure of herself. Flanagan's Portia thus barrels through the verse of her signal question, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" In long brown robes, Shylock looked totally different from the Venetians, so the query made no sense, and the court reacted with incredulity. Later, Flanagan conveys Portia's increased surety and gravitas by settling into the meter and emphasizing Portia's breathy vowels.

With *Merchant*, it is easy to think in terms of established, even entrenched traditions of interpretation: Shylock is a villain or victim; Portia embodies graceful generosity or prejudiced cunning. In this production, the characters were sympathetic and complex, each deeply committed to their own, sometimes

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inconsistent views of the world. In Lisa Wolpe's powerful rendition—marked by clear, decisive diction—Shylock is an assured, emotionally reserved disciplinarian at home and a successful, confident, even arrogant businessman on the Rialto. Presented this way, it is easy to see why Jessica might flee her father's rigid control. Wolpe's Shylock is not likeable, but it is clear why, having suffered the ridicule of Antonio and the loss of his daughter, he pursues revenge. Leslie Brott's Antonio, with a full head of gray hair and dressed in black, comes across as a mournful, aging bachelor, who in coming to the end of his life, finds an opportunity to play the parent with Bassanio. In this telling, Antonio's longing to help Bassanio blinds him to the hypocrisy of engaging Shylock for the loan. Flanagan's Portia is not openly cruel. Rather, she believes she is doing the right thing, not recognizing her own inconsistencies. After the Prince of Morocco chooses the wrong casket, she expresses her latent prejudice: "Let all of his complexion choose me so." Yet, where other in other productions Portia extends this prejudice to icy interactions with Jessica, Flanagan's Portia warmly accepts Jessica as a guest into her home. In the trial, Portia believes her speech on mercy, not realizing that her terms are unlikely to persuade Shylock. The trial's outcome is not predetermined. As Shylock prepares the knife, Portia furiously rereads the bond, only just realizing that she can use Shylock's literal reading as a precedent to save Antonio's life.

The characters thus believe in—but are also blinded by—their individual aims and worldviews. In this production, injustice stems from such blindness, an idea captured in a final tableau. Antonio, centerstage, looks out at the audience with exhausted, but contented satisfaction. In front of him are the celebrating couples, Portia and Bassanio, Gratiano and Nerissa, brightly lit and beautiful, as though in the happy ending of a fairytale. Meanwhile, on the balcony above, Shylock is stripped of his Jewish gaberdine, experiencing his tragedy in what seems another world entirely. Linking these two worlds is Jessica, whose relationship with Lorenzo has unraveled because Lorenzo cannot accept aspects of her past. The production manifests that story through a clapping gesture associated with those from the house of Shylock. Earlier in Act 5, Jessica had attempted to teach Lorenzo this gesture, but Lorenzo, confused by Jessica's effort, stalks away. In the final moments of the production, Jessica, singing a Hebrew prayer, stands alone on a staircase midway between mainstage and balcony, suspended between the happy couples below and her father above. It is not uncommon to end *Merchant* with such a tableau. In the 2015 production at the Globe Theatre (London), Jessica fell to her knees weeping while her father was stripped to his shirt, and the couples and Antonio celebrated around her. There, Jessica's lament suggested the insensitivity of the Christian community. In the USF production, Jessica suggests its insularity: the plight of Jessica and Shylock does not even register in their happy world.

If Pfundstein's *Merchant* is about the limits of community, in the hands of director Paul Mason Barnes, *Merry Wives of Windsor* is the opposite—a story of communal harmony and inclusivity. In a preview-week Play Seminar, Barnes explained that "merry" means "happy" and "comfortable," and these terms influenced his take on the show: he aimed to present Windsor as a merry community. Although played on the quasi-Elizabethan-style Engelstad stage,

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Barnes set the show in the early twentieth century America, a time associated with merriment and middle-class security in two other musicals set in that periods, *The Music Man* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, works that directly influenced this production's style and sound. The costumes in *Merry Wives* (designed by Bill Black) deliberately recalled the brightly colored striped suits, silk dresses, and petticoats of those musicals. At the top of the set, wooden beams represented the steep, swiss chalet-like gables of Windsor, while the backdrop presented a river scene, with steamboats lazing by. The set thus conveyed the relaxed, holiday pace of the town. To further emphasize the period and tone, Barnes incorporated early twentieth-century songs, such as "Daisy, Daisy, Give Me Your Answer Due," "Moonlight Bay," and "Harvest Moon." Props reinforced this relaxed feeling. At one point, Anne Page (Cailen Fu) and Fenton (Ty Fanning) enter on a bicycle built for two.

The defining feature of *Merry Wives* are the three tricks played on Falstaff: the buck basket, the witch, and the fairy queen. Yet one issue in the text, and this production, is that there is considerable exposition prior to the first prank, which occurs in Act 3.3, and here over an hour into the show. Barnes used this time to build the idea of Windsor as a jolly place. The show developed this mood in a prologue that, in a vaudevillian style, introduced the period, major locales, and characters, who are divided into citizens, businessmen, and new arrivals. This prologue downplays threats to this merry community. The Welsh clergyman Sir Hugh Evans (Michael A. Harding) and the French Doctor Caius (Michael Elich) appear in the roster of Windsor citizens and businessmen. In other words, they are already insiders. The Londoners, Sir John Falstaff (John Ahlin), Pistol (Josh Innerst), Nym (Kyle Bullock), and Fenton (Ty Fanning), are new arrivals, suggesting that they are simply new, rather than strangers or outsiders. As we enter the play proper, Windsor is characterized by genteel antics: suitors contend over Mistress Anne Page, townspeople foil a duel between Dr. Caius and Sir Hugh Evans over Anne (a confusing plot point in both text and production, since Sir Hugh is not actually a suitor); Mistress Quickly (Leslie Brott) matchmakes; Falstaff sends love letters to Mistresses Ford and Page; Falstaff's hangers-on, Pistol and Nym, reveal his plans to the husbands, Francis Ford (Geoffrey Kent) and George Page (Henry A. McDaniel).

But frivolity started to drag. The second time I saw the show, it was several minutes shorter than in previews, mainly due to the edited musical numbers. But both times, it nevertheless seemed to take too long to get to the Falstaffian plot, the jealousies and tricks, which were genuinely funny here. In these early parts and throughout, however, Geoffrey Kent stood out as the jealous Master Ford seeking to discover Falstaff's designs on his wife. His disguise was especially hilarious, involving a trench coat, red and white checkered tablecloth, an eyepatch, and Scottish brogue.

One perennial question in *Merry Wives* is: How mean are the tricks? Barnes downplays Falstaff as an actual threat to marriage as well as the meanness of tricks. Unlike the lecherous, impoverished, ague-ridden "ton of flesh" that is the Falstaff of *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, John Ahlin's Falstaff is a graceful, rakish, portly, but only slightly down-at-heel aristocrat. He wore a neat, three-piece brown windowpane-check wool suit. Although this suit contrasted with the bright greens,

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russets, yellows, and blues of the Windsor residents, Ahlin's buttoned-up look and graceful movements indicated that, while he was different from others, he had the potential to fit in.

Mistresses Alice Ford (Tarah Flanagan) and Margaret Page (Stephanie Lambourne) were independent women who enjoy a good laugh. In the opening prologue, they carry "Votes for Women" signs, suggesting a good-natured independence reminiscent of Mrs. Winifred Banks in the film *Mary Poppins* (1964). Although they are suffragettes, they are also erstwhile schoolgirls: they seal their plans with an elaborate pattycake sequence. While their tricks on Falstaff escalate in complexity and physical threat, they never harm him. In the second trick, Falstaff disguises himself as the Witch of Brainford, and Master Ford beats him out of the house. Yet here, the multiple thick layers of Falstaff's high-necked, deep purple Victorian-style dress and bustle provided lots of padding. Master Ford's instrument was a thin, heart-shaped wire carpet-beater, which could not deliver hard blows. The actual beating involved only five or six hits, during which ragtime piano music played, all of which suggested a caper, but no real harm. By the end of the play, Falstaff was chastened, and then incorporated into the comfortable merriment of the Windsor community, being invited by Mistress Page to come home to Page's house to "laugh this sport o'er by a country fire."

In a season about insiders and outsiders, *Othello* is a logical fit. Yet, compared to *Merchant* and *Merry Wives*, this production downplayed those issues, emphasizing instead questions of intimacy and whether we can know the minds of others. The production took place in the Festival's experimental studio, the Eileen and Allen Anes Theatre. Here, a long rectangular apron stage took up most of the space, with audience seated on three sides in several, bleacher-style rows, quite close to the stage and at foot- or eye-level with the actors. The setting was an indeterminate, archaic, nineteenth-century-meets-now present. Roderigo (Brandon Burk) wore jeans and trench coat, and a red ascot. The soldiers—Othello (Wayne T. Carr), Iago (Brian Vaughn), and Cassio (Jeb Burris)—each wore black combat boots, black jeans, a navy blue wool peacoat, a white collared shirt, and a blue silk vest. The set's central feature was a pair of imposingly tall doors, wrought out of Moorish-style hexagonal steel lattice. There were few props: some bottles, cups, and daggers, and eventually one very large bed. In keeping with the archaic presentism of the play, director Kate Buckley updated some of the most archaic language, changing "guinea hen" to "harlot" and "pioneers" to "soldiers."

Othello is a streamlined play, with no subplot and two characters dominating the show. Yet Buckley's heavily cut text created an even more fast-paced show that highlighted the actors—their gestures, blocking, and delivery. *Othello* is Iago's play: Iago speaks nearly a third of the lines (versus Othello's 25 percent), and Iago commanded this production too. As Iago, Festival veteran and Artistic Director, Brian Vaughn spoke with purposeful control, and often with a wry smirk. The hallmark of Vaughn's acting (apparent also in his rendition of the Poet in *An Iliad*) is his physical control: he moves with precision and physical economy. In the opening scenes with Roderigo, he shifted seamlessly from dialogue delivered with

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gregarious, insinuating jocularly to asides and monologues, delivered in restrained dispassionate stillness.

In *Othello*, Iago overmatches Othello, and what is true of the play was also true of this production, where Vaughn outshone Wayne T. Carr as Othello. While Vaughn's Iago was characterized by fluid physical control, Carr's Othello was deliberately stiff, conveying that, even though Othello is in major position of authority, he is from the outset not fully at ease in this society and his role. His stiffness is a manifestation of a vulnerability—a subtle lack of confidence—that Iago notices and exploits. But at least in this preview performance, Carr, an accomplished Shakespearean actor who played Pericles to rave reviews at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015, was not yet fully committed to the part, sometimes starting lines twice, or moving backward and forward in a speech. Betsy Mugavero's Desdemona was innocent and self-aware: she wore a pink, gauzy gown, evoking youth and virtue, but over she wore a red shawl, evoking experience and sexuality.

While Buckley cut a lot of the text, she kept many of the most vulgar and racist comments in the play, particularly Brabantio's (Paul Michael Sandberg) forceful railing against Othello in Act 1. Yet strikingly, given the themes of the 2018 USF season, the production did not emphasize Othello's otherness. Rather, this production stood out for its thematic use of the theatrical space to explore the play's juxtaposition of intimacy with alienation and violence. In this small theatre, with such an intense, fast-paced script, and such concentrated focus on the actors, the theatrical space seemed almost claustrophobic, but intentionally so. There are some twenty instances of violence in the play, and in such a small theatre, the tumult transformed theatrical intimacy into distressing proximity. In the final scene, Desdemona met Othello's effort to suffocate her with intense resistance. As an audience member, no more than twelve feet from the bed, the scene was realistic—and upsetting. Later, Cassio sidles up to Othello, gives him a sympathetic look, and then slips Othello the knife he will need to kill himself. In this production, intimacy, while seemingly born of comfort and trust, allows for deceit and creates distress, pain, and loss.

Henry VI, Part 1 does not explicitly take up issues of insiders and outsiders. Rather, it is a play where there are no insiders, as various factions and personalities fight to dominate England and France. In *Othello*, Iago and Othello speak well over half the lines. By contrast, *Henry VI, Part 1* shares out lines across numerous characters, giving no one dominance. In the text, English hero Talbot speaks the most, at 15 percent, but he dies at the end of Act IV. The title character, King Henry, clocks in at 7 percent, and does not appear until the end of Act 2. Joan de Pucelle (Joan of Arc), the most colorful and intriguing figure in the play, speaks only 9 percent of the lines. Beyond the numerous characters, the play is difficult to produce because it deals with the complex history leading up to the Wars of the Roses, and involves a huge number of locations, spread across the warring countries of England and France. The challenge of this play, then, is to make its diffuseness intelligible and engaging. Director Henry Woronicz tackled this challenge by highlighting memorable characters and scenes. Particularly notable were the deftly choreographed battle scenes and numerous vivid tableaux,

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all of which were made more engaging through the lighting design (by Michael Pasquini), with vivid blues, reds, and interesting shadows. Yet overall, the approach to the play seemed more tactical than strategic, resulting in exciting moments that did not quite gel into coherent production.

The most compelling figures in this production were Talbot and Joan la Pucelle (Tracie Lane). Joan, of course, is the country shepherdess who, having received a vision from God, becomes a French military leader, and spearheads a series of victories against the English. Yet, as her well known story goes, she is eventually captured by the English, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake. In her battle armor, tall with a thick braid of blond hair, Tracie Lane looks the part of a powerful, almost Viking warrior, and in Joan's set piece rhetorical declarations, she sounded the part too—confident and decisive. Yet Lane also imbued Joan with incidental, sweet higher pitches, which gave the character an underlying vulnerability. This vulnerability comes to the fore later in the play, in Joan's famous monologue when her spirits desert her, and it morphs into desperation when, facing torture and execution, she denies her father and pleads for her life. As played by Geoffrey Kent, Talbot was a convincing war hero—dedicated more to his country than to any faction. Kent seems to be an especially well-rounded actor, capable of playing the farcical Master Ford and the heroic speaker and swordfighter Talbot. (He was also fight director for this and three other of the season's plays). Kent also modulated his voice effectively, speaking more softly in the scenes involving Young Talbot, Young Talbot's death, and then his own death. Jim Poulos also presented a memorable King Henry VI, often acting naively and impetuously in the face of his nobles' political squabbles.

Despite the strong individual performances and dramatic moments, some aspects of the production undercut the coherence of the show. For instance, the play took place in the Engelstad, whose gigantic stage provides plenty of space for large battles and other crowded scenes, such as the famous Temple garden scene, in which the nobles pluck white and red roses symbolizing their allegiance to the houses of York and Lancaster. Yet outside of the crowded scenes, the stage was oftentimes nearly or totally bare, with dialogue blocked in a remote corner, the pit, or an aisle. Because such scenes often involved only a couple of characters, such placement emphasized the intimacy of the scenes. Most productions in the Engelstad used this offstage space from time-to-time, and this meant that sometimes not everyone could see every scene. Here, this kind of blocking was used too much, and it was difficult for audience members (including the present reviewer) to see a significant number of scenes in the play.

As is traditional with the English history plays, this production was set in the fifteenth century. The period was evoked less through set design, which consisted mainly of a back wall of brown wooden slats, and tattered French and English flags hanging on the back wall. Instead, period was conveyed in lovely period costumes, thick red tunics for the English and silken blue for the French, designed by Lauren T. Rourk. The music, however, ran the gamut: Gregorian chant in the opening funeral for Henry V, but folk punk in the fight scenes. The first half ended with a beautiful tableau of Joan la Pucelle on the balcony, sword raised, while the Strumbella's "Spirits" played. That song certainly fit the moment:

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“I’ve got guns in my head and they won’t go / Spirits in my head and they won’t go.” Like the blocking, the approach to the music seemed more tactical than strategic, creating exciting moments, but not enhancing a technical or thematic throughline, and here and there drowning out a speech.

Finally, Woronicz’s decision to change the gender of some of the characters diluted the play’s central conflict. As mentioned above, I appreciated the racial and gender parity in *Merchant* cast. There Lisa Wolpe was a powerful and convincing, and male, Shylock. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, she played the soldier, the Duchess of Bedford, changed from a Duke in Shakespeare’s play. Wolpe’s Duchess was a commanding presence on the battlefield. Yet in making the Duke into a Duchess, the production mitigated Joan de Pucelle’s singularity, and then mitigated it even more by casting Tarah Flanagan, also an extremely versatile actor, as another woman warrior, the Duchess of Alençon (a Duke in the original play). Why was Joan so strange, miraculous, and threatening, if there were other women warriors out there already—on both the French and English side, and indeed on the same battlefield with Joan herself? One might imagine using such changes to comment on Joan’s humble social origins, but that did not seem to be the case here.

Overall, the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s 2018 season offered high quality, compelling productions of canonical and rarely played Shakespeare. As I mentioned at the outset, one hallmark of USF is its immersive, intimate feel. Because of the thematic unity of the season, I found the entire Festival, but particularly the Play Seminars, ably led by fellow Shakespeare professors Kate McPherson and Kathryn Moncrief, to be especially thought-provoking, even cathartic. In one seminar, a fellow playgoer sighed aloud: “I just wonder how we can all get along?” The USF Summer 2018 Season seemed to offer an answer: by seeing, and thoughtfully discussing, plays that take on these issues.

Jessica Winston is Professor of English at Idaho State University. She is coeditor of *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies* (Modern Humanities Research Association 2012) and author of *Lawyers at Play: Literature, Law, and Politics at the Early Modern Inns of Court, 1558-1581* (Oxford University Press 2016), which received the Joseph L. Andrews Legal Literature Award from the American Association of Law Libraries. Her current research focuses on Tudor drama in modern performance.