

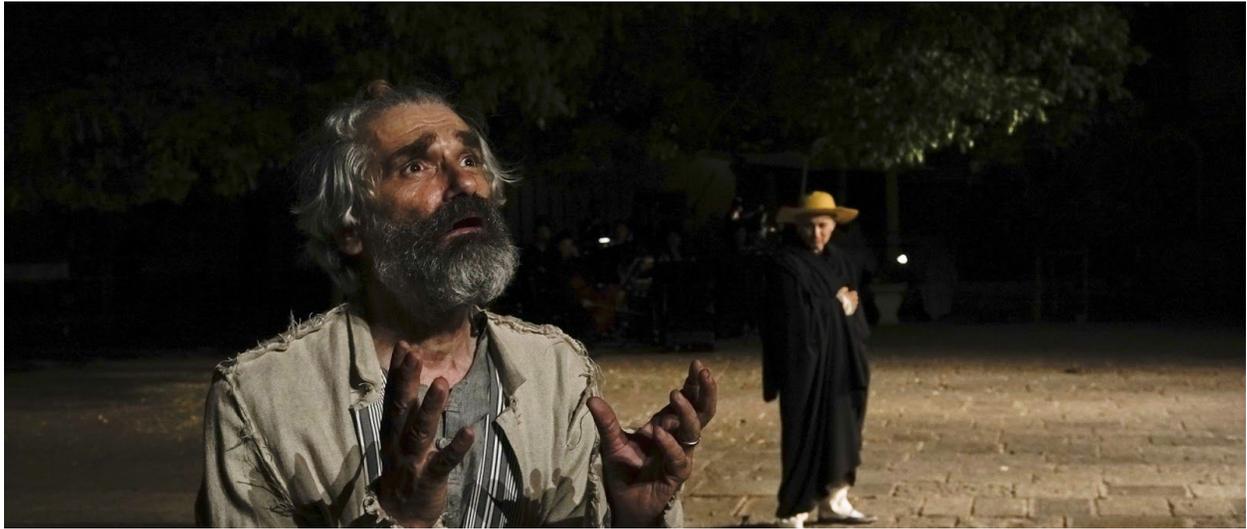
The Merchant of Venice

Directed by Karin Coonrod

Music Composed by Frank London

Dramaturgy by Walter Valeri with Davina Moss

Packet prepared by Student Dramaturgy Apprentice Alyssa Korman



This production is brought to you by Compagnia de' Colombari, directed by Karin Coonrod, music composition by Frank London:

- The company is “an international collective of performing artists, generating theatre in surprising places, they [Colombari], intentionally clashes cultures, traditions and art forms to bring fresh interpretation to the written word-old and new- and commits to any means possible to flesh it out”
- In 2016 it was the 500th anniversary of the formation of the Jewish Ghetto in Venice, as well as the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare’s death.
- The Compagnia de' Colombari and the Ca' Foscari University of Venice joined forces to create a major event in the theatre world: a production of *The Merchant of Venice* to be performed for the first time in the Jewish Ghetto in Venice.
- It has since been performed in 2016, and is now a production of Montclair State University’s Alexander Kasser Theater.
- William Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in 1596-7, and published for the first time in 1600.
- His source for the plot was Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone* (1558).
 - *Il Pecorone* is a collection of 50 short stories written by Giovanni Fiorentino. In one of the stories titled, a merchant of Venice named Ansalado requests a loan from a Jew named Giannetto to give to his “godson” so he can woo “The Lady of Belmonte”. His conditions are that if he does not return the money in time, he is allowed to take a pound of flesh from the merchant. (British Library)

Summary:

It all begins when Bassanio looks to his friend Antonio for a loan so that he can make himself a worthy suitor for a wealthy young heiress named Portia. However, Antonio’s fortune is caught on his ships which were out for trade, so he decides to ask Shylock the Jew for a loan of 3000 ducats (gold).

Meanwhile, in Belmont Portia’s recently deceased father has made a proclamation that Portia will marry the man who can correctly guess which small box, or casket, made of gold, silver, or lead contains her picture.

Shylock agrees to the loan under the condition that if the loan is not repaid within the time that he decides, he has the right to cut one pound of flesh from any part of Antonio’s body as repayment. Even though Bassanio knows this is a bad idea, Antonio signs the bond anyway. At this, Lancelotto (Lancelot), Shylock’s servant, runs away from his master to serve Bassanio instead. Shylock’s daughter Jessica also wishes to run away from her father’s prison-like home and join her Christian lover Lorenzo who has promised to marry her. After

giving Lancelotto a letter for Lorenzo letting him know her plan, she dresses up as a man and sneaks out of the house, taking with her some of her father's gold and jewels.

At Belmont Portia has visits from two possible suitors, the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon: they choose the gold and silver caskets, respectfully, but neither finds the portrait. Shylock learns of Jessica's flight and how Antonio's ships have failed. Meanwhile, Portia encourages Bassanio to pick a casket; after choosing the lead casket, he finds the portrait of his beloved. They announce their engagement as Portia's maid Nerissa also announces her involvement with Gratiano. Both women give their soon-to-be husbands rings to signify their engagements. The joy is short-lived, however, when Lorenzo and Jessica share the news that Shylock is determined to have a pound of Antonio's flesh and intends to cut near the heart.

Bassanio returns to Venice and shortly after Portia and Nerissa follow, disguised as men. In court, they pose as a young lawyer and his assistant, while Shylock demands his payment with no show of mercy. When things are found in his favor, Shylock prepares to pierce Antonio's skin. The lawyer points out that there is a loophole within the bond: since his rights are tied to the bond, if a drop of blood is shed, he will be guilty of murder. By the time Shylock decides to concede and to take money to settle the debt, it is too late. He is sentenced to give Antonio half of his wealth and possessions, to consent to his daughter's marriage, and to convert to Christianity.

After, Bassanio and Gratiano are persuaded to give up their rings to the disguised Portia and Nerissa. When the men return back to Belmont the women ask for an explanation for their missing rings. Antonio encourages Portia to forgive Bassiano, which she does, and she gives him the same ring back. When all is concluded, the couples go to prepare for their upcoming weddings.

Commedia Dell'Arte (information gathered from National Theatre):

Commedia Dell'Arte is an archetypal style of theatre using stock characters, as well as stylized improvisational speech and movement.

Commedia began in Venice in the 16th century and was a popular theatre that bridged the gap between street performers and royal theatre. It created a huge influence on Shakespeare's theatre. The style of commedia utilizes the use of improvisation, masks, physical and vocal comedy, and recognizable stock characters. Commedia is still used today and can be found in popular culture.

Commedia characters are typically divided into four main categories.

1. The Servants, or the Zanni
2. The Old Man, or Vecchi
3. The young lovers ,or Innamorati
4. The Captains, or Capitani

In this production of *The Merchant of Venice*, the Zanni opens the show and is used throughout. Lancillotto, Jessica's servant, embodies this Commedia character in his movement and voice.

The Zanni are known as the clownish characters in Commedia. They typically lead with the nose. They are peasants and are extremely curious and enthusiastic. They aim to please. Their masks are typically wooden or leather with a half face, and long noses.



Arlecchino, otherwise known as Harlequin, is another type of Zanni. He is a womanizer, but he is cunning and thinks ahead. He is intuitive and lives in the moment. He is always one step ahead and thinking, "What's in it for me?"



Discussion Question: One character has tendencies of both types of Zanni. Can you name the use of both the Zanni and Arlecchino in this production? Can you think of some other examples of Commedia in Shakespeare's plays, and modern entertainment?

Anti-semitic views of Merchant

"Can a Christian society sustain ethnic and religious diversity? The pound of flesh he exacts, the 3,000 ducats he loans, the revenge he hankers for — Shylock embodies the most entrenched anti-Semitic clichés: The Jews pursue vengeance over mercy; the Jews are inextricably linked to money. To add insult to injury, he is beaten at the most Jewish game, textual interpretation, and has to convert."(Valeri)

Discussion Question: Can you name some of the stereotypes of Jewish people found in *The Merchant of Venice*? Is there a clear answer toward whom the audience should be sympathetic?

Karin's Essay Excerpt

"Rather than concentrating the dimensions of Shylock on one actor's interpretation, I went a different direction, and one consistent with my ensemble company: opening up the character to five actors of different age, size, race, gender, each actor to play one of the five scenes. The point was not to ignore Shylock's Jewishness or to divide his complex character, but to unlock and unveil the common humanity of his being. Shylock the Jew is also Shylock the immigrant, the other, the stranger. True, a five-actor Shylock would demand more of its audience: my hope was that the audience would find itself in Shylock."(Coonrod)

Discussion Question: Do all 5 of the actors playing Shylock represent a different angle of Shylock as a character? How can having 5 Shylocks make this representation clear to audiences?

Sources:

“Il Pecorone, an Italian source for The Merchant of Venice.” *The British Library*, The British Library, 18 Jan. 2016,
www.bl.uk/collection-items/il-pecorone-an-italian-source-for-the-merchant-of-venice.
Accessed 17 Sept. 2017.

Karin Coonrod’s Essay “SHYLOCK RETURNS TO THE GHETTO: Adapting and Directing The Merchant of Venice in the Venice Ghetto”

Walter Valeri (Dramaturg) “Shylock Slips Out Of His Skin”