

'The Merchant of Venice'

Actors' NET presents a powerful and provocative staging of a difficult Shakespeare play

By Anthony Stoeckert
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From left: George Hartpence and DeLarme Landes in *The Merchant of Venice*.

SHYLOCK is probably Shakespeare's most troublesome, and troubling character, but George Hartpence has risen to the challenge of playing the Jewish moneylender in the striking production of *The Merchant of Venice* being presented by Actors' NET of Bucks County in Morrisville, Pa., through June 13.

Scholarly consensus is that Shylock was conceived by Shakespeare as a pure villain. There's a strong anti-Semitic streak in the play, but actors began playing Shylock sympathetically in the 1800s. In Mr. Hartpence's hands, Shylock is smart, funny, vengeful, greedy and heartbreakingly human.

In the play, Bassanio (played by Brian Jason Kelly) wants to pursue the hand of Portia (Kyla Mostello Donnelly), whose late father has set up a quiz to determine who gets to marry her, and she is bound to this strange bit of control from beyond the grave. Bassanio needs some money to impress Portia, but his wealthy friend Antonio (who is the title character, and is terrifically played by DeLarme Landes) doesn't have cash in hand because his ships are at sea.

Those ships will be back soon, so Bassanio goes to Shylock to borrow 3,000 ducats, which is to be repaid in three months — which shouldn't be a problem because Antonio's ships are expected back in two months. But interest doesn't interest Shylock. Instead, he asks for an evil bit of reciprocity in the form of a pound of Antonio's flesh if the loan isn't repaid on time.

Evil that is, but it's not without motivation. Shylock is degraded by almost everyone around him, especially Antonio, who has hurled insults, and even spit on him. Shylock for his part expresses hatred of Antonio because he's a Christian, and because he lends money interest-free, which hurts Shylock's business.

Mr. Hartpence is just terrific in this scene, and funny in his tone and actions — He even aims a subtle flipping of the bird at Antonio. Shylock's hurt and hatred is always present, but without Hartpence going overboard with villainy.

Shylock is the play's most famous character, but Antonio is just as tricky. He's the "good guy" in the play, but his anti-Semitism is unpalatable. Still, Mr. Landes manages to play him as a generous, jovial sort, and a good friend, albeit one with a dark side.

Merchant of Venice was long considered a comedy (it's now often described as a problem play), and this production has some very funny scenes, especially when the Duke of Morocco (Carlo Campbell) takes the test for Portia's hand in marriage. The test involves three boxes, one of which contains a picture of Portia. Pick that one, and you get to marry her. Mr. Campbell has a ball hamming it up as the perfectly nice but eccentric Moroccan prince. Ms. Mostello Donnelly and Maryalice Rubins-Topoleski as her maid Nerissa, also get plenty of laughs during this scene. As Mr. Campbell exaggerates the prince's struggle over what box to open, Ms. Mostello Donnelly's expression ranges from panic to desperation. Both were so funny, that as I looked at one, I was afraid I was missing hysterical antics from the other.

All of the acting in the show is impressive. Ms. Mostello Donnelly and Ms. Rubins-Topole speak the Bard's language with ease and sound contemporary when they talk about the flaws in Portia's suitors. Ms. Mostello Donnelly is wonderful during the courtroom scene when Shylock demands his payment of flesh from Antonio. Portia has to think fast on her feet as she comes up with solutions, but with each solution a new hurdle seems to arise.

With Cheryl Doyle directing, the courtroom scene is one of the best in the play, though it's troubling. Shylock's evilness is on full display as he demands that pound of flesh — even doubling his money doesn't satisfy him. In addition to his religion being mocked, now his daughter Jessica (played by Amada Hecht, who's very impressive) has run off with a Christian named Lorenzo (played by John Helmke, also very good).

Shylock is wrong to demand his pound of flesh (though the law must take some of the blame for recognizing this bond), but after Shylock is cleverly defeated, he is forced to give up his heritage and become a Christian. This results in the play's most powerful moment, and a brilliant breakdown by Mr. Hartpence. But at the same time, the scene made me squirm, because the play's heroes, led by Antonio, pile insults and hurts on Shylock to the point where I felt like I was watching a schoolyard bullying.

We do see a bit of remorse from Antonio after all the play's problems are settled, but let's delve into this a bit. Sure, we could think to ourselves that these characters are products of their times — and of Shakespeare's. But I'm looking at it this way: Antonio is a man who's generous to his friends, but he's a bigot. Shylock is a businessman with an irrational thirst for revenge, and also a victim. Both men are complicated, and *The Merchant of Venice* isn't always easy to reconcile with.

But there's no rule that says great theater has to do that.

The Merchant of Venice by Actors' NET of Bucks County continues at The Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., through June 13. Performances are Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors, \$10 children 12 and under; www.actorsnetbucks.org; 215-295-3694.