

By Anthony Stoeckert

# Springing Into the Bard

Actors' NET explores 'The Merchant of Venice'



George Hartpence in last year's *As You Like It*.

SHAKESPEARE has become a springtime tradition for the Actors' NET of Bucks County, and this year the community group has chosen a play that is brilliant, but often-troubling — *The Merchant of Venice*.

Believed to have been written around 1597, the play's title character Antonio (played by DeLarme Landes) is a wealthy and popular merchant. His friend Bassanio believes that he can convince the beautiful heiress Portia to marry him — with a loan of 3,000 ducats from Antonio so that he can make a good impression.

Antonio is rich, but his money is invested in his ships. So he tells Bassanio about Shylock, a Jewish money lender, and permits him to arrange a loan, using Antonio's good name as collateral.

Shylock loathes Antonio — as Antonio often hurls insults at him — and agrees to the loan. But he wants payment of one pound of Antonio's flesh as compensation if the loan isn't repaid. No problem, Antonio says, as his ships will be back in plenty of time to repay the loan.

But those ships get lost at sea, and after Shylock's daughter, Jessica, runs away to marry a Christian named Lorenzo — taking a significant amount of Shylock's money with her — the moneylender demands the pound of flesh he's entitled to by law.

Shylock can be a troubling character for modern sensibilities. He personifies the stereotype of the greedy Jew, and he's the target of endless anti-Semitic insults hurled by the play's protagonists, especially Antonio. Perhaps most troubling of all, the play ends on a supposed happy note (or what would be in Elizabethan times) as Shylock is "redeemed" by agreeing to convert to Christianity, thus saving his soul, in exchange for some of his fortune.

But Shylock is also a victim, and voices one of Shakespeare's most famous, and eloquent speeches, in which he demands to be treated as person ("If you prick us do we not bleed...")

The goal for Actors' NET, which is staging *Merchant of Venice* May 31-June 16 at the Heritage Center in Morrisville, Pa., is to delve into the text to do justice to Shakespeare, and to Shylock, who is a villain, but often a sympathetic one.

"You can't cut out the fact that Antonio behaves, or has behaved, terribly badly to Shylock," says Cheryl Doyle, who's directing *Merchant of Venice* (and who runs Actor's NET with her husband Joe). "That's part of what has to be worked into his character, just as how Shylock responds has to be worked into it. And we have to have, in the long run, some overriding point of view, but not to the point of changing the play."

Complicated as he is for today's theatergoers, Shylock remains a great character, one that actors want to play.

"For everyone who does Shakespeare, there's a bunch of roles on the bucket list and Shylock is certainly one of them," says George Hartpence, who plays Shylock and stars in Actors' NET Shakespeare presentations. "He's one of the most fascinating characters that Shakespeare has written, but it's also one of most problematic plays there is to modern audiences."

He adds that the key to producing Shakespeare for an audience is reading, and re-reading, the text.

"There are so many things you can find within his character and the things that are said by him and about him, that can give you justification for a sympathetic interpretation, but there's one thing you can't forget: Shylock is a would-be murderer," Mr. Hartpence says. "And that's extremely important in this particular play. So you need to be able to accommodate both of those things."

Ms. Doyle says she's not intimidated by Shakespeare, partly because she's been seeing and reading his works since she was around 12.

"We have a remarkable number of people who are quite good at it, and a lot of them have been working together doing it here a lot," she says.

During an early rehearsal for *Merchant*, it was clear that the actors are comfortable with the material. During a scene where Portia and her friend Nerissa discuss Portia's situation — that she can't marry who she wants, but rather he passes a test set up by her late father — Kyla Mostello Donnelly and Cat Miller say their lines with confidence, as if they're modern women talking about relationships during a girl talk session. There's a lot of back and forth between Ms. Doyle and the actors as to how to play these characters.

"There's always a lot of talking in Shakespeare rehearsals," Ms. Doyle says, adding that as a director, clarity in story is her goal.

"That's my goal, to make it clear," she says. "I'm not someone who puts a lot of outside directorial tension on Shakespeare."

The first Shakespeare play the group produced was *Hamlet* in 2001. They followed that up with an even bigger challenge — *King Lear* — and have included a Bard play in most seasons since. Mr. Hartpence even became a victim of the *Macbeth* curse, in 2007, when he ripped tendons in his legs during rehearsals, resulting in a six-month delay.

"I am absolutely a believer in the curse," Mr. Hartpence says. "I was superstitious before, I am a firm believer in it now."

Of that production of *Hamlet* 12 years ago, Ms. Doyle is asked if she was confident that her community group would be able to stage it well. She then talks about that successful opening night.

"I sat there on opening night of 'Hamlet,' which went really really well. First I said to my mother, 'Hey ma, see that's what my incredibly expensive education was for — it didn't get me any money but I can direct 'Hamlet.' The second, I sat down breathing a little heavily and it was over and went amazingly well, and I said, 'My god it wasn't hubris.'"

Now, there's a more immediate challenge the group is concerned with.

"I'm so happy to get a chance to do 'Merchant,'" Mr. Hartpence says. "Because I think when you look deeply at 'Merchant,' the play is about human values, and how being human sometimes gets in the way of human values. Shakespeare does what Shakespeare does beautifully, he takes a mirror and holds it to nature and says here's what people are really like, and here's what people could be like." ●

Actors' Net of Bucks County will perform *The Merchant of Venice* at *The Heritage Center*, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., May 31-June 16. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors (62 and older), \$10 children 12 and under; [www.actorsnetbucks.org](http://www.actorsnetbucks.org); 215-295-3694.