

Gathering Strangers

Davina Moss in Conversation with Karin Coonrod

Karin Coonrod

Director

Davina Moss

Dramaturg

Abstract In this conversation with her dramaturg Davina Moss, director Karin Coonrod lays out her vision for directing *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto. She discusses production strategies, casting choices – including her decision to cast five actors as Shylock – and how her own personal aesthetic influenced the production. The script was adapted for this site-specific production, and Moss explores the decisions made to edit and rearrange the text to tell the story that more interested Coonrod. Finally, the two reflect on how this work experience affected them personally, as Shakespeareans, as Jews (by birth or marriage), and as artists.

Keywords The Merchant of Venice. Compagnia de' Colombari. Karin Coonrod. Shylock. Adapting Shakespeare. Site-specific Shakespeare. Directing Shakespeare.

The story began in 2014, when Karin Coonrod, the New York-based director of Compagnia de' Colombari, was approached by David Scott Kastan and Shaul Bassi with an intriguing proposition. To commemorate a double anniversary in 2016 – 500 years since the institution of the Venetian Ghetto; 400 years since Shakespeare's death – she was tasked with directing the first production of *The Merchant of Venice* inside the Ghetto. She collaborated with dramaturgs Walter Valeri and Davina Moss to tackle a predicament: how to mount a play freighted with historic antisemitism, yet morally centred around Shakespeare's famous Jew, Shylock, and his iconic cry for hu-

manity - which is also a cry for revenge. And how to present a play that speaks to a modern audience while respecting its origins and, above all, the restored, renowned modern Venice Ghetto and the centuries of history within it.

To begin with, Valeri and Coonrod developed a text that spoke most viscerally to the issues and themes that the Ghetto demanded - mercy, outsiders, family and community. They incorporated Italian *commedia dell'arte* to draw out the dark and foreboding humour of the piece. Then, bringing Moss and a group of American and Italian actors together in tandem with the Shakespeare Summer School on San Giorgio, Venice, in 2015, they began workshopping the production, making discoveries about what spoke most powerfully to Coonrod's vision, including the decision to cast five actors as Shylock. The team returned to the USA and continued developing the text while adding new cast members from America, Italy and beyond - some old friends from the workshop, some new collaborators. In 2016, the gathering of strangers met in Venice to rehearse the production. On 26 July 2016, Shylock entered the Ghetto for the first time in history.

In the conversation that follows, Coonrod and Moss, director and dramaturg, discuss the process of creating the production and reflect upon its challenges and achievements.¹

DAVINA MOSS How did you first get involved with the project? What's the background to the 'gathering of strangers' which became *The Merchant in Venice*?

KARIN COONROD I read and re-read an email from David Scott Kastan, the Yale Shakespeare professor and scholar, introducing me to another Shakespearean, Shaul Bassi, of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, by way of Professor Kent Cartwright of the University of Maryland. Shaul had imagined an ingenious and provocative way to wrap together the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto's origin and the 400th of Shakespeare's death: perform *The Merchant of Venice* in the Ghetto itself. With that email, I was being invited into *The Merchant of Venice* project in the Venice Ghetto in 2016. My heart and head pounded with exhilaration and a good measure of trepidation. After all, *Merchant* is a play burdened with decades of antisemitism. The Nazis played it repeatedly to justify their own anti-Jewish killing machines; universities had banned its production; revered scholars openly called this play not worthy of its author for the play's treatment of its larger-than-life character, Shylock.

¹ This production has been extensively reviewed and discussed critically. See for example: Stavreva, Sokolova 2016; Henderson 2017; Cartwright 2017; Bassi 2017; Chillington Rutter 2017; Pellone, Schalkwyk 2019.



Figure 1 Karin Coonrod with Shakespeare actors, scholars and students during the *Shylock Project* seminar in 2015. © Andrea Messana

In summer 2014 I met David and Shaul in London and then went to Venice to encounter the Ghetto itself. I had been there many years before as a visitor and now pondered this new project. The Ghetto represents a thriving hub of Jewish world culture, but also an island, confined and marginalized by the dominant Venetian culture. I found myself wondering whether a performance in this re-born Ghetto of 2016, with its inherent contradiction, might uncover something new in the play and in the culture? Perhaps the exorcizing of Shylock's ghost might send an urgent message that we need to hear now more than ever? How would the neighbors in the Ghetto respond to an American theater company taking the lead in this production?

It became clear in growing conversations with Shaul that a workshop in 2015 would be necessary to lay the groundwork of the production for the commemoration year. We wanted to test out different parts of the play and find our way into it. Thus, at the invitation of Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Fondazione Cini, we took *The Shylock Project* (as we called it) into workshop on Isola di San Giorgio in the summer of 2015. Here I developed my approach to *The Merchant of Venice*, which we retitled *The Merchant 'in' Venice* for 2016. From the United States I brought two actors (Reg E. Cathey and Sorab Wadia) and two dramaturgs (Walter Valeri and Davina Moss) and from Brussels, my directing assistant (Nerina Cocchi); in Venice we found a lively group of fifteen Venetian performers. Over twelve

intense days, the workshop gave me my first opportunity to sketch out the theatrical approach to Merchant.

DM How does this production fit into the arc of your personal aesthetic?

KC When I think about personal aesthetic two things come to mind immediately: working with a tight ensemble of actors who take play and game seriously and the deep simplicity of the design gesture. Yet in this year, 2020, with the Coronavirus pandemic, the global lockdown and the closure of theaters and effective shutdown of live art and culture, I've been thinking about what is the *sine qua non* of the aesthetic since I am doing a lot in the virtual realm where theater meets film. I've been working with Colombari actors to bring our "More Or Less I Am" (from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*) to this new format. With *The Merchant of Venice* I played with Venice itself: the Ghetto, the stones, the sky, the carnival torchlight and masks, the colors of Venice (red), the Jews (yellow) and Belmont (blue). With "More Or Less I Am" we stripped away all the usual design elements: no costumes, no set, no live audience even. What is left? What is the essential thing? Perhaps it is the visceral intimacy of the words as spoken by the soul of the actor trying to cut through to the one who will hear, see. This encounter between the company of actors and the audience is where the play breathes. What is the challenge, provocation or invitation? How do we cut through with the secrets from our serious playing?

So, I am an ensemble director. The serious playfulness of the company of actors is important to me. For example, when I directed *King John* (with Ned Eisenberg as John), the production launched with a children's game - a keep-away-crown toss - in which the crown was seized with glee by King John, who crowned himself and jump-started the play, with his brazen query of the French messenger: "Now, say Chatillon, what would France with us?". Chatillon appeared at the back of the house, the two of them caught in a beam of light through the attendant audience. All the other actors in the company hastily became the new court. The gestures were strong, bold and demanding of an audience.

With *The Tempest* (with Reg E. Cathey as Prospero and Sorab Wadia as Sebastian) the entire company of actors entered the performance space from the back of the house on a mission, moving like a tsunami wave through the length of the space, only stopping when the outside door that let them in shut definitively. They turned around and looked at the audience and a black angel (a member of the stage crew) brought Prospero his staff. Prospero struck his staff on the floor of the space once and spoke out 'boatswain' to which the actor playing Ariel re-

sponded by running up to a huge ball which had been pre-set in the middle of the space and setting it swinging mightily. That action catalyzed the storm, spoken by all the actors where they still stood while the ball - like an earth constellated with light and also like a pendulous lantern on a ship - found its own wild path down the length of the space, thus turning the entire space with its audience into the dizzying ship tossed at sea.

When I directed *Henry VI*, ten actors played the more than sixty characters throughout the trajectory of three plays, beginning with the space enclosed and ending with the black walls of the surrounding theater exposed and angrily scrawled upon with white chalk from the text of the play ending with the image of an upside-down crown in the style of Basquiat. Though the contentions for the crown are there from the first scene, what fascinated me in the actors' occupation of the space was the movement from enclosed medieval space (where there were agreed-upon rules) to the wide-open modern horizons where rules have dissipated and it was every man for himself, where Richard York says "I am myself alone". This is the individualism of the West, where it's gotten us. When the company spoke in the first scenes they spoke in their natural voices; when the space was exposed, they spoke intimately into microphones for intentional cruelty, a kind of roar of individualism at the expense of the community as seen in the future Richard III who denies his own kin when he says, at the close of *Henry VI*, Part III: "I have no brother, I am like no brother" and claims "I can smile, and murder whiles I smile". In the final scene, the Yorks appeared in white, all dancing in the river of Henry VI's blood (it was the first - and only - time in my production of this civil war play that blood was visibly spilled, when Richard killed Henry).

In my ensemble aesthetic, everyone in the company is necessary; no one is an 'extra'. The company creates a kind of 'game' world through which the story is told. Perhaps it is because my aesthetic emerges from a great deal of engagement with the medieval mystery plays as 'ludi' or games that I value the company collective equally sharing the story brought to that great encounter with an audience. In some respects, this game aesthetic has more in common with the experimental drama of the mid-twentieth century (Beckett, Ionesco etc.) than the commercial psychological theater since then, with its naturalistic system of lead actors around which the others rotate in and out of the performance. In many cases with my work the actors are always present witnessing the action, thus creating waves of listening, which is another thing I believe Shakespeare was always sculpting, modeling for us: listen! ("Look with thine ears!"). In the Jewish Ghetto, it was important to have an audience inside

an audience since the Ghetto itself was alive with its daily comings and goings.

I want a theater that goes beyond the confines of civility, as Dionysus – the god of the theater – beckons us. This means mining the extremes of the inner thoughts of the characters into a full humanity, not controlling them. It means also encouraging the actors sometimes not to love their characters at the expense of their ugly secrets, the judgments and bitterness the characters themselves feel and express. In most of Shakespeare's plays, the characters utter very far from civil discourse in their words. This requires fierce and honest embodiment, demanding an actor to venture into vast inner reservoirs that will give an audience relief – catharsis – in the hearing and witnessing. These honest human portrayals vibrate against a strong architectural frame built by the director: that is the active aesthetic I work on with every play.

With *Merchant* I began the play upbeat with a sense of 'come-dy tonight!': all the company entered the space preparing the audience for an evening of high-spirited singing and dancing. The cast included fifteen actors and six musicians. We also involved five onstage crew, whom we called 'black angels' (or *angeli neri*) dressed in sleek black, who performed all the onstage costume changes, brought the props on and off and even stepped into a scene when necessary. This sense of fun from the get-go was important to composer Frank London and me. The high-spirited comic intention could then stand in sharp contrast with the unfolding of the play and begin to frame its exposure of hateful antisemitism.

DM Did you use this game aesthetic in the realizing of Shylock?

KC Absolutely. This is a play about the community of Venice – but the moral center is revealed in how the Venetian citizens treat Shylock, the stranger, the outsider who lives among them. I wanted to make this play alive in the twenty-first century, to open up the role of Shylock to what is both Jewish and universal, to *feel* the experience of the outsider. So, I engaged five actors, one in each of the five Shylock scenes: 1) Shylock, the merchant (played by Sorab Wadia), making the bargain with Antonio; 2) Shylock, the father (played by Adriano Iurissevich), at his home with daughter Jessica; 3) Shylock, the grieving parent (played by Jenni Lea-Jones), facing his loss and giving his famous "hath not a Jew eyes" speech; 4) Shylock, the widower (played by Andrea Brugnera), as part of a community with Tubal; 5) Shylock, the killer (played by Ned Eisenberg), at the trial. These were actors of different gender, nationality, age, ethnicity – outsiders of all stripes, whom we would recognize and identify with today. I wanted to convey the universal themes



Figure 2 The Five Shylocks under the Ghetto tree. © Andrea Messana

of humanity Shakespeare and Shylock hand to us, still retaining the essential Jewish identity of Shylock. When not portraying Shylock, the five actors each played other characters in conflict with Shylock as part of the game aesthetic. This required the audience to decide between the hated and the hater. For example, the actor playing Shylock #1 also played Graziano, so the audience witnessed in the fluidity of these actors the shifting winds of human feeling.

I understand that five actors playing Shylock is a sharp turn from the traditional one-actor portrayal – something I had to abandon to gain a twenty-first century opening into the play – to how we confront hierarchy and discrimination today. What was at stake was opening the role without diluting the emotional power of Shylock. One way I countered that was by gathering the five actors playing Shylock on stage in key moments of the play, what you might say was a unified or shared Shylock, a group of five as one, and a way to make the ‘other’ – the five playing Shylock – a voice crying out to the supremacist citizenry. The five Shylocks gave the production a framing power, a trajectory, a kind of galactic arc that could only be rattled by the humanity of each actor’s deeply mined performance.

All of this – a large company striving for what is larger than all of us together, provoking an audience, derailing ourselves from the received notions of the play by activating the fluidity of role and action – is central to my aesthetic. I can think of a play as an argument, and there should be no element of set design, costume, music, lights that does not urge the provoca-

tion forward. For instance, all the costume changes happened in the presence of the audience for complete transparency of the sleight-of-hand game. There was a ritual to the playing of Shylock, since each actor playing Shylock also doubled, meaning that he had to be 'remade' as Shylock. The moment of transition was accompanied by music while the new Shylock was ceremoniously dressed - in view of spectators - by two black angels, carrying in the desert cloak and the golden sash. It was an action that could be seen from all over by the Ghetto audience and any onlookers who happened by. The transparency engaged the shared participation of the audience. Nothing was hidden.

DM How did the history of Venetian Jewry affect staging, costuming and linguistic choices?

KC This became an obsession. In fact, 'Ghetto' - that word - never appears in the play. Shakespeare didn't seem to know about the Ghetto, but he knew about the Rialto and he knew about moneylending and bonds. Yet in this place we had an opportunity to stage the play in a way that could not be replicated elsewhere. When the floor of the stage is the very stones of the Ghetto *campo*, sedimented with the vibrant culture and history, is there anything to add? We thought not. The Ghetto stones resounded, echoed with the very life that made any decorative accessory a mere depletion. With this in mind, Peter Ksander - the set and light designer - and I felt our job was to design the play into the *campo* itself, to inhabit Venice with Shakespeare's text and actors. Instead of building a stage, we placed the audience on stadium seating at one side of the *campo* to gaze at the historic facades of the Ghetto, including two of its six synagogues. As darkness fell, our stage set was a wall of lights pointed on the actors in the Ghetto. During the performances, life went on, not quite as usual, as a steady stream of passers-by at the *campo* perimeter stopped to watch, customers at the nearby Upupa Restaurant listened from the side and Ghetto inhabitants with their own exclusive box seats on surrounding balconies waited for the play to begin.

That year, 2016, was the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto, which formalized the discrimination against the Jews as Other. Ironically, the Venetians needed the Jewish banks and loans for their thriving commerce but confined them to an island now known as the Ghetto Novo with a strict sundown curfew: the gates were locked at the expense of the Jews. Still, the Jews had endowed their Ghetto life with richness and depth, family, tradition, learning and a thriving culture. For the full humanity Shakespeare gives his Shylock, it seems to me in some way he grasped this.

With Stefano Nicolao, the Venetian costume designer (Stefano, a three-time Oscar nominee and local treasure), we went with a fluid design in which the clothes could be changed quickly by the black angels in the sight of the audience – an Elizabethan silhouette with modern accoutrements: zippers, snaps etc. We mixed male and female. We talked about the identifying marks and colors of the Jew in Venice at the time of the sixteenth century. Both red and yellow had been used historically, but we preferred yellow in strong opposition to the red of Venice worn by the *nobili*. The Duke at the trial we decided would be clothed in a massive red cloak that would look like blood against the stones. We provided the onstage audience red stoles in solidarity with the Duke at the trial. Hence, as ‘Venetian citizens’ they shared his entitlement and his aloof power, like a red sea of blood against Shylock sashed in yellow. I wanted an operatic gesture with the yellow mark to signify that the actor was changing from a previous character to Shylock, witnessed easily by all. I avoided the armband or the star of David. I wanted the ‘mark’ to cover the entire core of the body. Stefano’s Japanese-like golden-yellow silk sash wound around the torso and tied in the front. The stigma became a thing of beauty, worn with dignity.

Frank London, a jazz trumpeter and co-founder of the New York klezmer band, The Klezmatics, was our composer. He is deeply versed in Jewish folk music and conversant with all forms of popular and classical music. He and I talked about how scholars had frequently written about Shylock’s dislike of music. For us the only evidence for this was when Shylock warns his daughter against listening to the drum and the wry-necked fife at the time of the carnival. Sure, Shylock was a strict *single* parent who didn’t want his daughter to be seduced by the carnival music – and anything attached to the dominant culture. Was that so strange? It did not indicate he was a music hater. Frank composed theme music for Shylock for the ritual changing and from a high rooftop played a plaintive trumpet lament at the moment of Jessica’s flight from her father’s house.

Our international company included Italians, Americans, Australians, Romanians, French, thus making our stage international, a *palcoscenico internazionale*. And this brings up the question of language: we played the play in English with the *commedia* scenes in Venetian dialect. I plunged into various dialects of European and Italian Jewry that would have been spoken in the Ghetto from the sixteenth century onwards and played with incorporating that into Shakespeare’s dialogue. We were not aiming either to authenticate or stereotype Shylock; rather, as often happens with persons in a strange land, to charge the

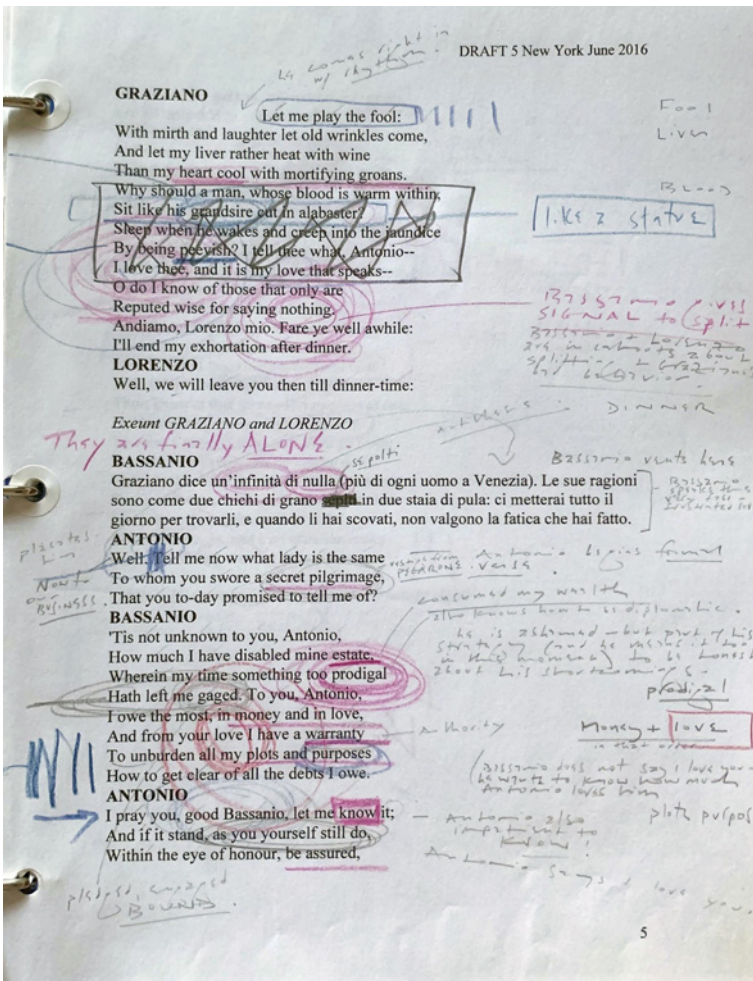


Figure 3a Karin Coonrod's promptbook

heightened emotion of certain moments with fragments of tribal mother-tongue talk – Yiddish, Ladino, or Giudeo-Veneziano. For instance, towards the end of the first Shylock scene when Bassanio shows concern about the business relationship with the outsider Jew, Shylock addressed Abraham in Yiddish – “Ah, *Vader Avram*” – then continued in English. In the second Shylock scene we included a phrase of Ladino when Shylock spoke intimately to his daughter: “Jessica, *m’ija*, | *Mira a mi casa*” (Jessica, my girl, look to my house). And the third Shylock, when deeply lamenting the departure of Jessica in the hearing of Salanio and Salarino, cried out in Giudeo-Veneziano “*Me fia*” instead of

CHANGE of costumes for Portia, Nerissa & Gratiano
DRAFT 5 New York June 2016

SCENE 2 Belmont. A room in PORTIA'S house. (MUSIC: violins)

Enter PORTIA and NERISSA from upstage trees

PORTIA
By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is awear of this great world.

NERISSA
You would be sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are: and yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore, to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.

PORTIA
Good sentences and well pronounced.

NERISSA
They would be better, if well followed.

PORTIA
If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces: it is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O, that the word 'choose!' may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike! so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?

NERISSA
Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations: therefore the lottery, that he hath devised in the three chests of gold, silver and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will, no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love! But what warmth is there in your affection towards any of these princely suitors that are already come?

PORTIA
I pray thee, over-name them; and as thou namest them, I will describe them; and, according to my description, level at my affection.

NERISSA
First, there is the prince Neapolitano.

PORTIA
Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse; and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts, that he can shoe him himself. I am much afraid my lady's mother played false with a smith.

Handwritten notes: "CHANGE of costumes for Portia, Nerissa & Gratiano", "DRAFT 5 New York June 2016", "SCENE 2 Belmont. A room in PORTIA'S house. (MUSIC: violins)", "Enter PORTIA and NERISSA from upstage trees", "PORTIA: By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is awear of this great world.", "NERISSA: You would be sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are: and yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore, to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.", "PORTIA: Good sentences and well pronounced.", "NERISSA: They would be better, if well followed.", "PORTIA: If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces: it is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O, that the word 'choose!' may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike! so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?", "NERISSA: Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations: therefore the lottery, that he hath devised in the three chests of gold, silver and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will, no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love! But what warmth is there in your affection towards any of these princely suitors that are already come?", "PORTIA: I pray thee, over-name them; and as thou namest them, I will describe them; and, according to my description, level at my affection.", "NERISSA: First, there is the prince Neapolitano.", "PORTIA: Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse; and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts, that he can shoe him himself. I am much afraid my lady's mother played false with a smith.", "Handwritten annotations: 'The System', 'Excess', 'Moderation', 'SLAM DUNK', 'HEAR?', 'Nerissa starts GAMES', 'PORTIA: I will describe them', 'RULES', 'face card?'.

Figure 3b Karin Coonrod's promptbook

'my daughter' or 'mia figlia', the typical Italian. These expressions created an urgency, intimacy and mystery in his relationships, seen and unseen.

From Shaul Bassi, the Jewish Venetian Shakespearean and our indefatigable host for all the *Merchant* revels, we learned that only the Ashkenazi Jews were allowed to lend money, hence the 'real' Shylock would have been Ashkenazi and would have attended the gorgeous Scuola Grande Tedesca - German synagogue - in the Ghetto, built in 1528. The five windows of the German synagogue looked down on our playing space and it felt like a continuous blessing.

In the 2015 workshop, we went to the Banco Rosso in the Ghetto, where Shylock would have been a moneylender. Next to it is a house often affectionately referred to as 'the Shylock house', a private house, shuttered tight for years, owned by a gentleman in Parma. Not knowing then what it was called, I wanted one of its windows to be the window that Jessica (played by Michelle Uranowitz) opened when Lorenzo came to take her away. Getting the permission to un-shutter this particular window was a major time-consuming effort, requiring a trip to Parma to negotiate a price. Thanks to my inexhaustible assistant, Nerina, it happened. The result for our audience was the enchantment of an actual window in the Ghetto opening wide as part of the 'set' and for the Venetians, the added satisfaction of seeing this singular house in the Ghetto activated with life.

DM What were the key points of the adaptation?

KC The decision to privilege Shylock's story informed the adaptation, with the exploration of the full humanity of the character. To accomplish this, we truncated some of the Portia scenes at Belmont and freely made cuts throughout the play. Our adaptation of *Merchant* is played in eighteen scenes with a prologue and a coda. As I was working on the storyboards with Peter Ksander, the light and space designer, we realized that the play came unhinged at the *cri de coeur* of Shylock, right about dead center of the play. In performance, the play came to a full stop. Before this moment, the play moves along in a bantering way and after this moment it is clouded with danger.

DM We also moved several scenes around to re-distribute the Portia material throughout the play, intercutting back and forth between Venice and Belmont. We cut enough to allow the play to be performed in under two hours with no interval - it was important for us to capture our audience in the magic and not let up. The pacing of this play is very interesting: at times it can feel like it's running away from you in the Venice scenes, but then Belmont is more languorous. And then the trial comes and the play stops short - it is as if the stage becomes a crucible, or perhaps a set of scales holding the play in a moment of balance. What were the key moments of the Shylocks coming together and how did they develop?

KC A vital question for me was *when* and *how* to bring them all together and *why*. There were two heightened moments that emerged as our rehearsals unfolded, calling for the convergence of the five Shylock actors: one was dead center and the other at the play's finale. Here is how that all came about. In the 2015 workshop we rehearsed the five Shylock scenes with four men and one woman, each playing one of Shylock's five scenes, in the spirit of testing and experimenting. It became

clear to me that Shylock's realization of Jessica's flight from her father's house would peak with a wordless lament, a huge howl by Shylock. Would not a woman, with her earthy, maternal humanity, be the best to express this unfathomable grief and rage at the loss of a child?

I asked one of our Shylocks - Jenni Lea-Jones - to improvise a keening wail, pulling from memory or imagining lamenting women in Ireland, Italy, Greece, Israel, from all over the world. Hearing her anguish slowly unleashed, the air in the room completely changed. We all sat speechless. This was the way forward. In Jenni's bottomless cry we heard not only Shylock, but the bitter agony of all parents, fathers and mothers, all disenfranchised persons, the voice of the voiceless. This was the play's turning point. Now the metaphorical knives were out, and through the remainder of the play everyone knew that, even if those knives were sheathed, they would surely come out again.

By the time of the production, this scene became fully realized. In a large circle around the center of the stage space, the five actors, transforming into Shylock, were dressed in the golden-yellow sashes while all around and through them the full company had become the mocking, jeering Venetians, speaking the cruel gossip-ridden passages normally spoken by Salanio and Salarino in Shakespeare's text. (This derision had become so ugly that one of the actors asked me if this were 'allowed' in the Ghetto and I responded by saying it was *necessary*.) The five Shylocks started slowly walking toward each other - as if to gain strength from each other - and when they came very close together, Lea-Jones as Shylock #3 unleashed her intense grief-stricken howl. At this moment all cacophonous sound and movement - the entire Ghetto - was slammed into stunned silence.

One French painter, Marie Malherbe, in residence in the Jewish Ghetto was so stirred by this silence that she wrote a poem in response: "hurle savage, sanglot terrible | râle totale et viscéral | a faire tordre les muscles des pierres | et la chair torturée des maisons | qui en rond | gardent les trous de mémoire". (for the full poem, *A Midsummer Night's Scream - Un Cri dans le Ghetto*, see Appendix).

Shylock's rage was born and grew unchecked in a vacuum of anguish and loneliness: his daughter gone forever and in cahoots with Antonio's boys, the citizens' mockery. Shylock had experienced 'Christian' revenge and warned Salanio and Salarino, "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction". He was minting the thought of revenge in the moment of speaking it.

I imagined another gathering of the five Shylocks at the end of the play. It was important to me to bring Shylock back in the

final moments of our production to slice through the final badinage at Belmont. Shakespeare leaves us with the resolution of the rings and the Portia story, but I was following the other arc in the play and wanted the audience to confront Shylock as the stage went dark. In the final scene, Portia, the one who takes on the patriarchy and beats it at its own game, wins, yet I wanted the audience to know the emptiness of that 'win'. So instead of hearing Antonio, Bassanio and Graziano's exclamations of surprise at Portia's accomplishment, the five actors playing Shylock, one by one, implicated the audience. Together they reappeared at the ending with a reprise of the strange hallucinatory speech sure of his 'right' within the laws of Venice that he made in the courtroom in front of the Duke - a speech without reason, but with, perhaps, the vicious knowledge of experience. He repeated it now:

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A pound of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that.
But say it is my humour. Are you answered?
What if my house be troubled with a rat
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
And others when the bagpipe sings i'th'nose
Cannot contain their urine; for affection,
Masterless passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be rendered
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a woollen bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answered?
(4.1.39-61)

I wanted our production of this transactional play in this time and space in the twenty-first century to be a wake-up call. This is why the final sound in the production was the sound of the shofar, the wake-up call of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new



Figure 4 Reg E. Cathey and other actors rehearsing in 2015 on the Rialto. © Andrea Messana

year festival, after each actor playing Shylock spoke “Are you answered?”.

DM Let’s talk about our work on the Bond scene between Shylock and Antonio.

KC Early in the play (Act 1, Scene 3) there is an exchange between Shylock and Antonio that jumped out at me and is indeed telling. Shylock has been approached by Bassanio with the request for the loan of a sizeable sum, 3,000 ducats, which we translated into about half a million dollars. (He had to get a ship, retinue and gifts to go to Belmont. No small enterprise to impress Portia the rich girl.) After Antonio enters the scene (probably annoyed that Bassanio had gone to Shylock for the loan), Shylock is thinking aloud about the sum and the rate: “Three thousand ducats. ‘Tis a good round sum. | Three months from twelve; then, let me see, the rate”. He is rudely interrupted by an impatient Antonio who wants to get the bond and get out of there pronto: “Well, Shylock, shall we be beholden to you?”. Shylock certainly reads this as arrogance because his response is a catalogue of all Antonio’s abuses: “‘You call me [...] cut-throat, dog [...] Hath a dog money? Is it possible | A cur can lend three thousand ducats?”. The sarcasm is fantastic here. Yes, it is what we all feel when experiencing injustice from one who is dominant and easily exonerates himself (not unlike white supremacy of which there is now increased awareness and discussion of its assumptions).

In our work on the scene in the 2015 workshop with Antonio (Reg E. Cathey) and Shylock (Sorab Wadia), we pushed it even further. With Shylock’s “This is kind I show” he held forth his

hand to shake and Antonio came close to him and threatened him with spit. The visceral nature of Antonio's loathing was brought home. In our production not only was Antonio devoid of mercy, but also imperious and inhumane to the person from whom he needed to borrow money. If Antonio, the representative and successful merchant in Venice, assumes this attitude, how do others behave?

The forfeit settled on between Antonio and Shylock had a piece of laughter in it, like locker room talk between businessmen, even salacious: "let the forfeit | be nominated for an equal pound | Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken | In what part of your body pleaseth me". Shylock was not thinking to kill Antonio here. At this point both men knew that Antonio's ships would come in, as they always had. At this moment the small satisfaction is that Shylock would have a piece of paper with this written on it, to laugh at later. We spent a lot of time working this scene, showcasing it around Venice to stir up attention for our project the following year.

DM Now let's talk about the trial scene as a crucible at center of play.

KC In our production, there is an interaction in the trial where humiliation, dignity, oppression, defiance converge. It is that flashing instant of confrontation: Shylock #5 (played by Ned Eisenberg) with his knife, his eyes swimming in vindictive hatred, about to take the pound of flesh from Antonio, and Antonio offering himself not as victim, but as a dare - let's see if I've really turned you into an animal - and the audience, I believe, unsure of what will happen, and wondering are we through with humanity, is it gone? Shylock dropped his knife, breaking the threatening tableau on "I'll stay no longer question". He looked at Antonio (played in 2016 by Stefano Scherini) and started to laugh in a knowing way about the system and its limitations, thus pulling Antonio into a shared laugh. The two adversaries, more alike than different, caught in this strange cynical chortle, seemed to be once again restored to the existing conditions of the corrupt mercantile landscape, as if to say, 'business as usual'. End of play, perhaps. Still laughing, Shylock began walking out of the courtroom - back to the status quo - only to be stopped by Portia's soft and steely "Tarry, Jew". Here's the crux. Portia (played by Linda Powell) had been watching the merchants' laughter from the side like a hawk. It is the moment in which Portia - her leadership and the play itself - could go in various directions. She could do *anything*. She could find it within herself to be inspired by her own previous 'quality of mercy' advice and say, 'let's make a change, let's be reconciled, let's find a new way forward', urging the Duke in this path. She

could deliver a warning reprimand to both merchants in the name of the Duke.

Here was the opportunity. What would she say? Would she call Antonio and Shylock into a new accord, underpinned with a promise from both parties? No. Instead, she unleashes her punishment against the Jew, "The law hath yet another hold on you". She sharpens her revenge and tightens the vice around Shylock's short-lived liberty. Her imperative use of the word 'mercy' was only spoken to require it of him, and when he does not acquiesce, to humiliate him: "Down therefore and beg mercy of the Duke". Had she been truly a remarkable woman, she would have called upon mercy - of which she speaks ("Tis mightiest in the mightiest") but does not show - and the entire court would have had the opportunity to be drawn into an unforgettable action of reconciliation.

But rather than show this radical mercy I believe she gathers the already visible hatred against the Jew demonstrated in the court and perpetuates revenge to win the day. She says earlier about mercy: "it doth teach us all to render | The deeds of mercy". Yet Portia, from her disguised place of power and authority, does not choose to render mercy, but rather pulls Antonio into the game: 'What mercy can you render him, Antonio?' When he enforces Christianity on Shylock, it means that Shylock will no longer belong to any community at all - neither Jew nor Christian. He will, I believe, forever be branded as an outsider, a liminal creature, pariah-like. The vile power imposed on him drives out any mercy that may have been. With trickster logic, Portia pushes the punishment of Shylock to its extreme, giving him a comeuppance beyond his wildest imaginings. By the time Shylock is definitively dismissed by the Duke, Shylock is humiliated and stripped of all he is.

As we played it in the Ghetto, Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg) was facing the audience downstage until the moment of departure when he turned upstage to see the entire court composed of the acting company and onstage audience as jury, some fifty people in red facing him. He passed through them, almost like the Israelites through the Red Sea. In the North American production at Montclair, the theater's configuration informed the opposite choice: as Shylock (played by Steven Skybell) walked out through the audience, the entire company plus audience members all in the red regalia in solidarity against Shylock had ventured far downstage to watch his exit. Many nights there were vitriolic hisses from the Venetian characters in the company.

DM Let's talk about the prologue and how you added a passage from Ruzzante, the sixteenth century Paduan playwright, something that interested all the Shakespeareans and made the

Italians – especially the Venetian Italians – laugh aloud. That was something that came out of your work with dramaturg Walter Valeri.

KC Yes, our *Merchant* production had two dramaturgs hovering over it: Walter Valeri from Forlì, Italy, with whom I had worked at the American Repertory Theater on Pirandello, and you, a Jewish Shakespearean from Yale!

In preparation for the production of the play, Walter and I read through the *commedia* scenes of the play – everything with Lancillotto (Launcelot) and, of course, Gobbo. We read aloud in English and he could not stop giggling, thinking Shakespeare a great thief of the *commedia*. We then read it in Italian (the translation by Sergio Perosa is what I had on hand) and in Italian it came even more alive. It was important to me since we were playing in Venice – the city that basically launched the *commedia dell'arte* and had influenced Shakespeare's comic dramaturgy – that we should be playing these scenes entirely in Italian. Walter, a poet and translator, said he could take on these sections and spice them up. Since Walter had for many years been a close associate of Dario Fo, he brought to our table a consummate knowledge of the whole tradition of *commedia* and introduced us all to Ruzzante (actual name: Angelo Beolco). Ruzzante, an actor and playwright from the first half of the sixteenth century from Padua, was essentially the father of *commedia dell'arte*. He was known for his scatological orations. We decided on the short love oration, *Amore an?* I wanted that scamp Lancillotto, as a kind of interlocutor for the audience, to speak first, so he began with this oration. Lancillotto (played by Francesca Sarah Toich) set the whole trajectory in motion with “Amore an?”, a comedic questioning of traditional courtship. The last lines of the oration are questions: “*Amore an? L'amore no fa diventar balerini, canterini, gagiardi e salterini? Amore an? Ma chi cancaro sarae quell disgrassia che no vorà parlar d'altro, che d'amore?*” (Love? Doesn't Love make us dancers, singers, tumblers and leapers? Who the devil would that devil be who ever wanted to talk of anything but Love?). After these final questions were posed by Lancillotto to the audience – and increasingly interrupted by the company – the wild uncontained spirit of love was sung and danced by the entire company.

Inspired by Nino Rota for this rousing opening number, Frank London had a blast setting the text to music. We were in agreement about striking a comic note from the top with the whole company making a rollicking musical entrance into the playing space, followed by Lancillotto rousing the audience further with the Ruzzante oration. This, then, set up the high relief for Antonio's moodiness in the opening line. *The Merchant of*



Figure 5 Karin Coonrod with Michelle Uranowitz/Jessica during rehearsal. © Andrea Messana

Venice is called a comedy. Yet, when Antonio starts talking, he's a 'want-wit', as he complains to Salanio and Salarino. I wanted to put his malaise in relief with the high-spirited gossipy world of Venice, of which all his 'boys' – Bassanio, Graziano, Salanio, Salarino, Lorenzo – play an integral part.

DM Speaking of the world of the play, I think that moment of the dueling tenors was a great moment. How did that come to be?

KC In our Scene 9 (Shakespeare's 2.6), Lorenzo called on his gang of high-spirited boys to back him in his bride snatch, taking Jessica from her father's house in the middle of the night. Sworn to punctuality, they showed up on time. But Lorenzo was late for his assignation. The boys were masked and ready for the carnivalesque revels, but as they impatiently awaited him, Salanio, killing time, suddenly sang his lines mocking Lorenzo's lateness in high operatic style. Graziano picked up the style and, not to be outdone, responded. Their operatic dialogue developed into a hijinks competition before the audience. In the rollercoaster of the performance, this was the comic respite before the darkness. The two tenors threatened to hijack the play down another path with the audible approbation of the audience, when Lorenzo arrived.

When I came upon this text, it screamed of wanting to be sung aloud in Italian. With two engaging tenors playing Graziano (Sorab Wadia) and Salanio (Enrico Zagni), I realized they could

sing their mockery in operatic Italian. Composer Frank London greeted the moment with aplomb and set the exchange in operatic form, an homage to Italian opera, to the dueling tenors such as Pavarotti and Domingo or Carreras and Lanza, a celebration of being in Italy. Every night we wondered who would hold the final note longer, Graziano or Salanio?

DM Let's talk about Jessica's trajectory.

KC Shakespeare gives just a single reference to Leah - Jessica's mother and Shylock's wife - by Shylock when he realizes that Jessica had stolen her mother's turquoise ring: 'I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor.' A vital, intimate world is painted in that one sentence, that simple memory. It voices how much is missing in Jessica's world, as well as Shylock's. We had imagined that Leah had died some five years before, just as Jessica was entering her teenage years. With the loss of Leah, Jessica lost the mother's understanding in these critical years of a young woman's development. Rather, she was raised by an over-protective over-strict single father (with his share of troubles in the secular marketplace), a man suspicious of the outside world and suspicious of any male interest in his beautiful daughter (a common sentiment among fathers). Perhaps we empathize with Jessica's rejection of her father's ways.

Jessica, ready to rebel, finds commonality with Lancelotto who brings the outside world inside their house, her long-time playfellow with whom she can complain, 'Our house is hell'. She escapes to be with Christian Lorenzo, drawn to the city's festivities and the flash and excitement of taboo love - but only to find the emptiness of that world. Several of Lorenzo's actions added up for me: his lateness for their elopement, his appointing her the torch bearer of the group (the most perilous position in dangerous dark Venice) as well as Shakespeare's intimation that very likely Lorenzo is really after her for her money ("what gold and jewels she is furnished with").

Their 'romantic' scene (Shakespeare's 5.1) - which we played at spiritual cross purposes - began after Lorenzo, smoking a cigarette, watched closely as Jessica carried two candles downstage, a reference to the Sabbath candles. It's a small gesture, but it resonates of the cost of her exchange for this new life. At the end of the play, in the next-to-final scene, after Portia's return home, Jessica says nothing, only watches. For me in any Shakespeare text, silence speaks loudly in contradiction (the young women in *Love's Labour's Lost* during the Nine Worthies scene, Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) to the action on stage. At the very last moment of the play, Jessica gave our production its coda, and perhaps an answer, or an echo, of

Shylock's howl, making a silent scream of agony against the secular world she had entered.

DM Did you feel the need to confront the reputation the play has in some quarters of antisemitism?

KC The question of antisemitism is inevitable, and front and center for any director tackling *Merchant*, because the play has long held a troublesome reputation. In the thirties in Germany, it was played to advocate for Hitler's anti-Jewish agenda, with Shylock portrayed as a comic villain, a despicable, avaricious and murderous Jew. That casts a long shadow and some in the Jewish community asked why I would want to produce an anti-semitic play? Today, there is a revisionist counter which casts Shylock as a tragic victim. I wanted to lift Shylock out of these caricatures and understand him as someone Jewish, but also representing the universal outsider. My perception is that this is true to Shakespeare, who wrote Shylock as a complex character, not a one-dimensional villain or victim. When Shylock is first introduced he is treated as a second class noncitizen, despised. But soon the audience sees him crying out for recognition of his humanity. Shakespeare does not stop there and reveals Shylock as fully human, sympathetic and deeply flawed. Shakespeare is never easy. We may want to remember Shylock's humor, his recognition of a world outside the present world (his calls to Abraham, Jacob, Daniel), his sense of irony, his sharp wit. But there is also his anger, his vindictiveness, his hatred for what has been done to him.

I think the audience feels all of this - and some may even be rooting for Shylock to take his revenge. There is the ultimate question of whether Shakespeare wrote an antisemitic play, or whether those who saw the opportunity chose to use it for their antisemitic ends? There is no question but we see Shylock endure humiliations that look like rank antisemitism. Shakespeare is not hiding the rough and inhuman treatment of Jews that existed in Venice - the location of the first ghetto. Still, I just don't see Shakespeare's understanding of people to be so limited as to set up Shylock in such a stock, stereotyped role. To play Shylock that way would be to erase the density and the existential depths of Shylock's most famous speech. In bringing this play to the very Venice Jewish ghetto the fictional Shylock inhabited I was very aware of the reputation of *Merchant*, and the duality of acknowledging the play's portrayal of antisemitism while capturing Shylock's full humanity - in all its qualities - and the larger message confronting all of us.

DM For me, it's exactly that: the best productions of *Merchant* respect Shylock's humanity without shying away from his frailties and failures - sure, he makes his house 'hell' for Jessica, but

he is also tender towards her, and expresses tenderness for his deceased wife. He felt to me like many Jewish fathers I knew: not fun for their teenage daughters, but not evil in their boots. He felt very rounded as a figure. I don't believe that a play with a speech like "Hath not a Jew eyes?" can be antisemitic in its bones - Shakespeare is too smart for that. He knows what he's doing; he's arguing, it seems to me, for a human kind of respect, one that respects the person no matter who they are or what they've done - just as Shylock should not be mistreated. Nor *ought* he to exact vengeance: neither the Jew nor the Christian is let off the hook. So as a Jew, working on this production helped me exorcize the ghost of Shylock who has haunted my upbringing, showing me the character's humanity, and that it is the world's projections of him, and not the character himself, I must fear.

KC Yes, Shylock is a troubling character and profoundly human, spilling far beyond the caricatures of comic villain or maudlin victim. It is as if Shakespeare is more and more engaged by Shylock as he writes his character, bringing out all the contradictions and heightened moments we've talked about, a stranger in a strange land. And it is as if Shylock, more and more like Shakespeare, has both the living and the dead as his audience; as if he speaks beyond the scene, to open up the whole landscape of the visible and invisible, addressing not just the past in Abraham and Jacob but the future, in audiences yet to come. I never stop working on this play with every opportunity we are given to present it to new audiences. Since the production in the Ghetto, I've read two authors I want to mention here. The first is James Baldwin who cheered me mightily in what he writes about Shakespeare and his knowing of his characters:

The greatest poet in the English language found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love - by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him. (2010, 68)

So much of the creation of character on stage depends on how a character listens. A lot of time is spent discussing what a character says. But how does that same character listen to someone else lecturing, pontificating, lording it over another for the benefit of the many auditors? How does Shylock listen to Portia's lecture on mercy, "Then must the Jew be merciful"? Shylock's response is "On what compulsion must I?" "Must", a repetition of Portia's definitive argument, even gets the iambic stress in the rhythm. Not only is Shylock resisting Portia's imperative

ACTORS	PROLOGUE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	PROLOGUE	EPILOGUE
ACTOR 1	X																				
ACTOR 2	X																				
ACTOR 3	X																				
ACTOR 4	X																				
ACTOR 5	X																				
ACTOR 6	X																				
ACTOR 7	X																				
ACTOR 8	X																				
ACTOR 9	X																				
ACTOR 10	X																				
ACTOR 11	X																				
ACTOR 12	X																				
ACTOR 13	X																				
ACTOR 14	X																				
ACTOR 15	X																				
ACTOR 16	X																				
ACTOR 17	X																				
ACTOR 18	X																				
ACTOR 19	X																				
ACTOR 20	X																				

Figure 6 Karin Coonrod's scene distribution

tone; he then listens hard to Portia eloquently speaking her convenient mercy. Ned Eisenberg (Shylock #5) and I talked about this. Shylock's Jewish theology and tradition is packed with commands for mercy ("What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God", Micah 6:8). The Venice of the play is completely devoid of mercy until one of their own is compromised and then it is required of the Jew. Sure, Shylock is a bad Jew, but Portia is a bad Christian, like all the rest of the cast of Venetian characters. Shylock sees right through Portia's convenient speech on mercy. He's no fool.

In my view, Shylock is above the understanding of everyone in the play except for Portia: they see eye to eye. When Portia enters the courtroom as a young lawyer, announced as Balthasar, it is only Shylock (knowing the story of the prophet Daniel) who makes a quick leap to a similar sounding Belteshazzar (the name the Babylonians gave to the prophet Daniel). When it seems that the young lawyer favors Shylock he says: "A Daniel come to judgment, yea a Daniel!". Later, Graziano lampoons Shylock's reference: "A Daniel [...] I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word".

Shylock is the killer bent on going all the way, bent on pulling out the heart of stone in his enemy, this Antonio, this representative of a duplicitous and avaricious transactional culture. I understand Shylock's blindness to reason in this moment. With the flight of Jessica to Antonio's boys, it's an ounce of pressure

too much. With a bitter history of no access to the public square, Shylock's brain fills with the dark cloud of rage, blind to reason. Yes, I *know* this Shylock too. A scholar I very much admire is Kenneth Gross who likens Shylock to Shakespeare and imagines Shakespeare colorfully riffing on this likeness:

Shylock is I and I am Shylock. The two of us are caught between worlds, between earth and air, matter and spirit. We both fed on shared and secret resources of desire, fear, sorrow, shame, and resentment, thrusting these into sharper and more volatile forms, forms by which we both hide and strip bare our hearts. We thereby take revenge upon those whose powers are more literal, who have power to hurt and rarely hold it back. I am content, like Shylock, to offend, myself being offended. I, like Shylock, lay claim to the hearts of my audience, sign with them a contract for a pound of flesh to be cut off from nearest their hearts. As Shylock does, I claim flesh from those who are my doubles, though they do not see how like me they are, as Antonio does not see his own likeness to the Jew. I surprise my own hearers with their hearts. Like Shylock, I want their heart in exchange for my heart... Shylock is not just myself, but what I might be. Shylock is what I would be if I truly exposed to you what it is my plays cost me, and if I made clear what it is they ask for in return. What I want from you is profit of a fantastic sort, nothing as simple as the return of money for a pleasing spectacle. What I want from you who watch or want to want, is your heart, both flesh and blood at the same time. I give you my own heart in return, though under a disguise. I give it to those whom I hate for knowing nothing of what it costs me to write as I do. (2006, 16)

Getting at the throbbing heart of the play is what it is all about for me in directing a production of a Shakespeare text. More than any other play I have encountered, this play engages the outsider Jew to expose the hypocrisy of Christendom's heart.

DM Your final gesture was to project the word 'Mercy' (and its translations) on the walls of the Ghetto in the final moments of the performance. Where did this gesture originate?

KC I wanted the inanimate walls to talk - like the handwriting on the wall in the Book of Daniel - of mercy. Interestingly, 2016 also coincided with Pope Francis's declaration of the Year of Misericordia. As I see it, there is no mercy in the play. The silent walls of the Ghetto have witnessed this throughout the play (not to mention in actual history and time). As mentioned before, the word itself does not appear until it is demanded

of the Jew (Act 3, Scene 3). Hence the final gesture: after the five Shylocks each asked, “Are you answered?” and we hear the sound of the shofar as a wake-up call to attend Shylock’s “Are you answered?” it was Jessica who from deep space in the Ghetto crossed below the footlights to let out her own outcry against the vacuity and injustice of the dominant culture. At this moment the word Mercy was being projected onto the Ghetto walls as if the inanimate stone walls themselves were pleading with the human fleshy heart of the public: MERCY. MISERICORDIA. RAKHAMIM. רַחֲמִים

DM After our final performance in the Ghetto we also went to the Festival at Bassano del Grappa and then a high-security prison in Padua. I prepared a stripped-down 75-minute version of the text for this prison performance.

KC I remember sitting in between you and Walter at the Bassano performance and realizing that the production could have life beyond the Ghetto. Just seeing the shadows cast on the *castello* wall from the circle of Shylocks was thrilling. The next day at the high security men’s prison in Padua was the grand finale. Dead tired from our unrelenting schedule and having returned very late the night before from the performance in Bassano del Grappa, we were awakened anew by our performance in the prison.

The welcome given us in the men’s prison of Padova, Casa di Reclusione di Padova, stirred us deeply. With Nicola Boscoletti, the facilitator for our performance, we toured the prison bakery where the men were at work baking bread, cornetti, biscotti, all manner of baked goods to be sold in the Veneto region, the profits of which went into individual bank accounts for their time of re-entrance. Upon arrival deep inside the prison we had been greeted with a delectable lunch from their baked goods. Actors are always hungry, but this was no pizza pie snack. Here we were served like kings and queens, *panini* of all varieties, the taste competing with elegance. Nerina Cocchi, my indispensable assistant, had gone a little earlier than the rest of us in order to prep the space and when I turned up she was in tears for the many kindnesses of the inmates and staff in helping her set up the room. She also said “There’s going to be a great lunch”.

As you mentioned, the show was shorter since our mandate was to stay within 75 minutes. So, we excised all the Portia scenes - with the exception of the courtroom. We kept all the scenes with Lancillotto and Gobbo, because they were in Italian and thus easily understood by the inmates. The audience of men vociferously enjoyed that we were fearless. (Francesca Sarah Toich - playing Lancillotto - is a striking young woman who in her male role boldly donned a codpiece and spoke out in a fierce

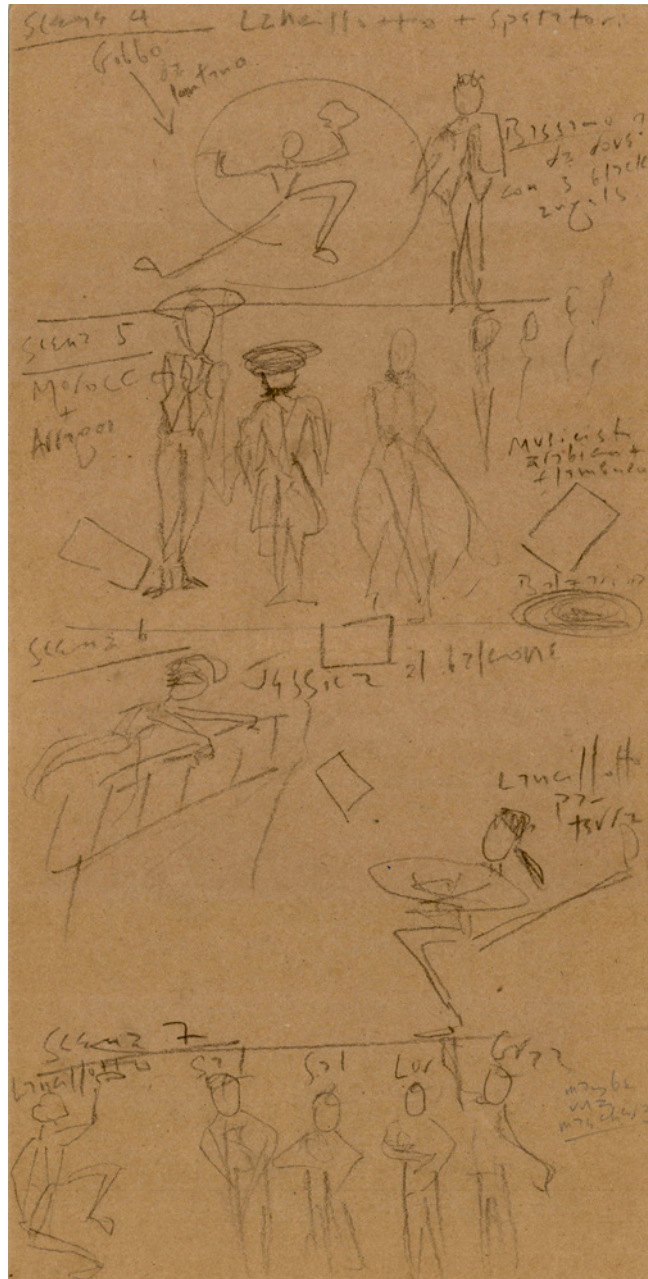


Figure 7 Karin Coonrod's production notebooks



Figure 8 Karin Coonrod's production notebooks

deep voice; Andrea Brugnara playing Gobbo was not afraid to make a cheeky quip about women interpolated from *commedia*). The inmates adored the portrayal of these two characters from *commedia*.

The men in prison had been prepared for our performance of *The Merchant of Venice* by reading and studying the play and watching the Al Pacino film. In the Ghetto performances of the trial scene, we had recruited audience members to stand on stage, draped in red stoles, behind the Duke, to face down Shylock. They made a wall of powerful Venetian solidarity against the 'outsider'. Now, in the prison, we recruited prisoners to make that wall. They came from Teatro Carcere, the prison's drama group, led by Maria Cinzia Zanellato. Draped in the red stoles of 'justice', representing the 'establishment', they stood for 'law' that the scene would demonstrate could be manipulated, used to defeat 'justice'. The irony of these inmates' position in the scene was sobering. Actors and inmates standing side by side in a theatrical action about eradicating the riffraff: somehow all the secrets deep inside each mingled together in this silent shared witness, leaving all of us locked into the memory.

We were allowed to bring all our costumes and props inside the prison walls - including the knife that Shylock held to Antonio's heart and the torch Jessica carries into the carnival. When Shylock held the knife point at Antonio's naked breast, every eye in the room was on it. As it was a sustained moment, attention was palpable. This in turn intensified the dialogue between Portia (Linda Powell) and Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg) in such a way that the two actors made new, spiritually riotous discoveries inside the high stakes created by this particular audience. As their director, I was glad to witness this incarnation.

When the company first gathered to rehearse in the prison, I looked around and saw that our Bassanio (Michele Guidi) was missing. Someone told me Michele was in the men's dressing room. I found him there weeping, saying he couldn't go on. He could play in front of thousands, he told me, but not in front of these prisoners. His eyes were red with grief at their plight. We had all been disoriented by the thickness of walls and the number of gates that clanged shut behind us, then deprived of all our ID papers, phones, money, keys. It was visceral. It was real. It was playing for keeps. All I could quote to Michele was something from Beckett: "We can't go on, we must go on". As Beckett is one of our high priests in the theater, Michele listened. They needed us as we needed them. He went out and played, at great cost, with his heart in his eyes.

We performed in front of an audience of 200 inmates, along with the mayor and some other notables from Padova. Clearly the inmates appreciated the piece, but, unfortunately, we did not have time for a talkback, which I greatly regretted. However, we gathered for a group photo afterwards and then greeted each other with handshakes and hugs.

This was my first experience performing in prison. And it was a first for many of the company. Since then, we've been in American prisons and jails with other works from our repertory, including works by Walt Whitman and Flannery O'Connor. In juxtaposition to our Italian experience, we were not allowed to have any physical contact in the USA prisons and jails, inmates often addressed by their surnames. I've often thought what we in America could learn from the Italian system of incarceration.

DM Our production transferred to North America in 2017. How did it change as it moved?

KC A major change in the North American premiere was the casting, which we wanted to sharpen politically for the Americas. Shylock #3, for example, was powerfully played by an African American actress, Lynda Gravatt. When she howled out her despair and called out the dominant culture on its cruel example, it spoke volumes to an American audience, with our history of racism.

The major design shift was the move of the production to an indoor theater space. For Peter Ksander and me, this was an exciting opportunity to more precisely focus the attention of the audience. Rather than entering from another island of the Ghetto, the actors entered from the back of the house, through the audience, in spirited song. We still surrounded the wide stage space at the Kasser Theater in Montclair with police barriers, as we had in Venice. This time, however, they were more clearly a set piece, not doing double duty as in the Ghetto where they delineated the playing space and divided it from the public space. In the Ghetto the playing space occupied a significant piece of real estate, which included several trees and a beautiful old well in front of the German and Italian synagogues and the sixteenth century apartment buildings of the Ghetto. In the Ghetto we had a wall of lights on stage left; in the Kasser Theater in Montclair the lights surrounded the entire space.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned from the shift to the indoor space occurred in the staging of the Trial Scene, having to do with the use of the barriers onstage. After several days of rehearsal something came to me crystal-clearly in a dream, right before the first preview. In rehearsing the scene itself I began to be irritated by the clutter of actor traffic inside the barriers (all my own doing in the staging), yet amaz-

ingly in my dream I saw the characters – Bassanio, Salanio, Salarino, Graziano – all confined in the ‘gallery’ outside the barriers. There they could move all around the outside of the barriers, but not downstage, until the moment when they gained the brazen confidence to cross. Before this unleashing, the only characters ‘allowed’ inside the power space were the two adversaries, Shylock and Antonio, the Duke and his two magistrates, and eventually Portia and her two helpers, the clerk (Nerissa) and the holder of the legal books (Balzarina). This gave the whole scene its geometric clarity and bold argument. It gave the ‘peanut gallery’ characters just the right resistance they needed to shout their clamorous contempt into the space where the Duke repeatedly tried to keep order. When Portia spoke her second “Tarry, Jew” and let loose her growing hostility, reducing Shylock into a near non-entity, it was at this moment that Graziano, awed by Portia’s attack, slipped into the space physically. With confident quiet gratification he asserted, “Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself”, venturing forward. The others followed suit in the spirit of gang mentality, all spiritually bound together in hate against Shylock, the Jew. The seated audience in the house witnessed a powerful picture of collective xenophobia.

Because we were playing in North America, we had to limit the Italian that was spoken, yet it was necessary for Lancillotto (played with aplomb by Francesca Sarah Toich) to speak in Veneziano to retain the spirit of his character which meant we had to project surtitles. However, I wanted these surtitles to be an expression of the wall’s thoughts in response to Lancillotto’s transgressive strategies and pranks. So the anthropomorphized wall operated as a kind of judgmental interlocutor for the audience, and when Lancillotto went off text (allowed once) into some gritty street vulgarity the wall screamed “censured! censured!”. In this way, the translation is shared, yet there is more fun to be drawn from the moment in the spirit of *commedia*, specifically for an English-speaking audience.

DM To finish, should we say something about how this production has affected us both?

KC *The Merchant of Venice* seems more than ever urgent to be played in our time for its concentration on the power of money, the political marketplace and injustice against the outsider, basically what we are now widely referring to as white supremacy.

The play is full of people we recognize from our own time, all wanting to win, perpetuating an unreflective mainstream cultural ‘Christianity’ that keeps itself solidly in the dominant position through financial power. “Hath not a Jew eyes?” says Shylock after expressing his grief at the flight of his daughter

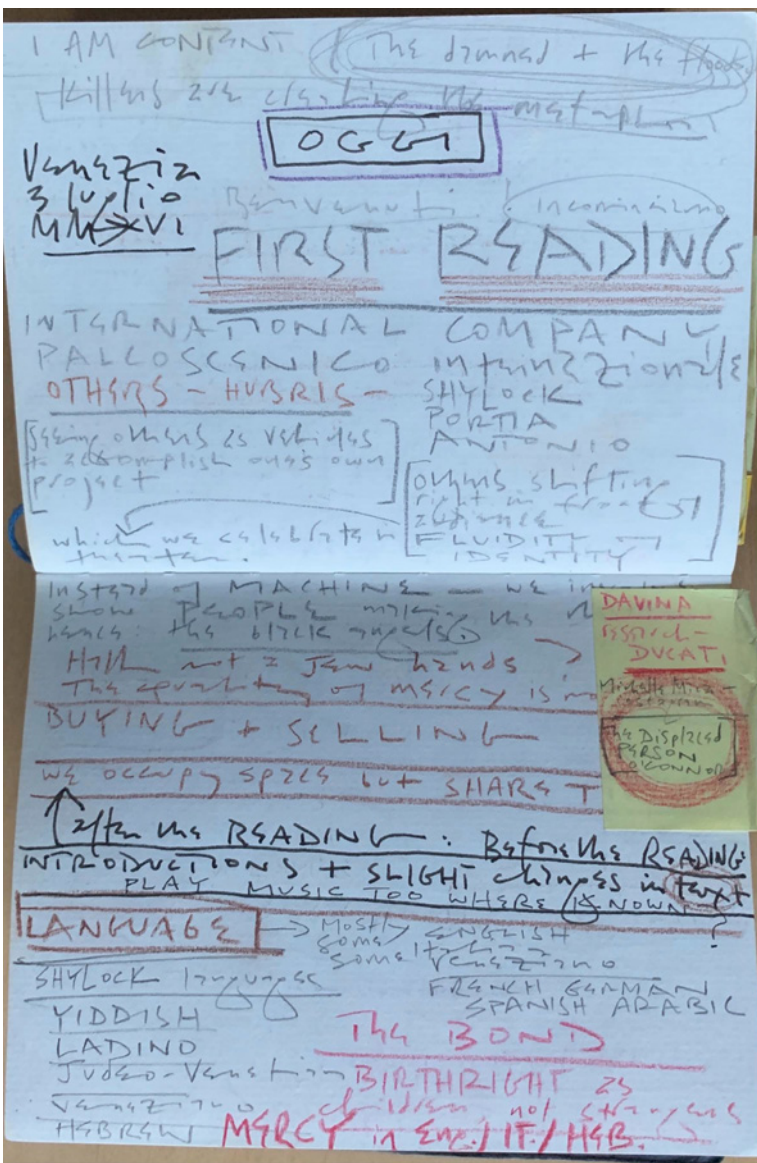


Figure 9 Karin Coonrod's production notebooks: first reading



Figure 10 Monica Garavello as Balzarina. © Andrea Messina

Jessica, knowing that he was ‘had’ by Antonio’s ‘boys’. “The quality of mercy is not strained”, says Portia in the court to Shylock, pulling out all the stops on a plea for mercy, that she herself does not follow.

To work on this play which contains two of the most famous speeches in the Shakespeare canon and see them as poles of understanding in the unraveling of the action – the argument for a convenient mercy on one hand and the plea for a humanity, that’s marked, ironically, by concluding upon a shared instinct for revenge, on the other – has found resonance in the search for the moral center in our own time, thus carving out a strong position that the play is not in fact an embarrassment and unwittingly antisemitic, but rather a play that, through the character of Shylock, exposes the hypocrisy of the dominant culture. Shakespeare’s plays always hold in tension the individual and the community. The interest I encountered for our production amongst Jewish audiences was remarkable in the effort to reclaim the play as a wake-up call to those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The invitation to mint this play in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice, the place that gave the world the name ‘ghetto’, with disparate nationalities of actors who didn’t even speak the same

language, was a challenge I relished with a beautiful team of collaborators.

DM As a Jew, as I've said, this production allowed me to lay to rest an uneasy sense I've always had that Shylock would follow me cruelly through my life. As an artist, this was such a satisfying project because of the collaborations across language, culture and history. We took the best of all the cultures we had in the rehearsal room and - as Venice itself does - used them in harmony to create a production which was thought-provoking but also deeply beautiful. That's how we worked, shaping this play. The aesthetic that Karin, Peter Ksander and Stefano Nicolao created was a joy to behold. I was very proud to be a part of it. And as a Shakespeareanist, I found the five Shylocks an ingenious way to approach one of his greatest, and most troubling characters. It was a privilege, every moment.

Appendix

A Midsummer Night's Scream - Un Cri dans le Ghetto

Marie Malherbe

(Réflexion sur le *Marchand de Venise* par Karin Coonrod pour les 500 ans du Ghetto et 400 ans de la mort de Shakespeare)

Le Ghetto ce soir est de sortie.
Sortie étrange, à l'envers, vers l'intérieur de son histoire.
Les gradins en barres métalliques
dessinent des cercles concentriques
comme un cosmos
en révolution
dans la prison de sa mémoire.
Au milieu du ghetto la place;
au milieu de la place la scène;
au milieu de la scène la puits
rond lui aussi
comme le temps qui s'apprête à tourner
autour des lumières, des arbres et des mots.

Tout commence comme un plaisant divertissement d'été
pour public instruit comme il faut.
Fébrilité de l'avant-fête
sur les dalles antiques où résonnent
les bottes des carabiniers et les talons italiens
des élégantes. On se pâme, on parle, on soupire
en attendant Shakespeare.

Cigales excitées et buveurs bavards
continuent leur sérénade tandis que gesticulent
en préambule
des saltimbanques d'un autre temps.

Puis au milieu des synagogues, des jeux d'enfants et des maisons
la trompette d'un homme en noir
emplit le ciel comme un chophar
a-t-on sonné l'heure du Pardon?

Les badauds interdits s'arrêtent
pour déguster quelques bons vers
suspendus à la nuit dense,
on regarde encore quelques danses...
quand tout à coup
jaillit de la nuit
le CRI.

On te croyait d'une autre époque
mais tu pleures encore Shylock?

Hurle sauvage, sanglot terrible,
râle total et viscéral
à faire tordre les muscles des pierres
et la chair torturée des maisons
qui en rond
gardaient les trous de mémoire.
Aboi qui déchire l'histoire;
qui fouille dans les entrailles
de ces trop fameuses murailles;
qui tonitrué et puis se tait.

Silence nouveau
sur le campo
léger comme après l'orage...
Accouché du fond des âges
le ghettoes a crié son Nom.

Les corps qui bougent,
les lumières rouges
tout s'accélère et la spirale
s'inverse
enfin ce soir on peut sortir
des bourreaux et des martyrs,
car le procès n'est pas fini
et son nom est MERCY.

Mercy Merci
Colombari
par votre farce libératrice
le ghetto crie ses cicatrices
et marche vers sa guérison.

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