

# Collaborative Spectacle: Designing *The Merchant* in the Ghetto

Frank London  
Composer

Stefano Nicolao  
Costume designer

Peter Ksander  
Environment and lighting designer

**Abstract** Karin Coonrod describes Compagnia de' Colombari as an 'international collective' that 'generates spectacle wherever we go' – a collaboration of energy, creativity and theatricality nourished by different cultures, histories, traditions, disciplines and techniques. In this chapter we hear from three theatre makers whose collaborative work on *The Merchant 'in' Venice* shaped the 'spectacle' of this production. Designing its costumes (Stefano Nicolao), music (Frank London) and lighting (Peter Ksander), they established how this production looked and sounded and designed a world for the actors to inhabit.

**Keywords** Designing Shakespeare. Site-specific design. Theatre design. Costume design. Lighting design. Music design. The Merchant of Venice. Compagnia de' Colombari.

Karin Coonrod describes Compagnia de' Colombari as an “international collective” that “generates spectacle wherever we go”<sup>1</sup> – a collaboration of energy, creativity and theatricality nourished by different cultures, histories, traditions, disciplines and techniques. In this chapter we hear from three theatre

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1 <https://www.colombari.org/>.



Figure 1 The company enters the Ghetto Novo. © Andrea Messana

makers whose work on *The Merchant in Venice* shaped the ‘spectacle’ of this production from different points on the creative, cultural, and geographic globes. Frank London, a New York-based composer and musician specialising in the instrumental music tradition of Klezmer, writes about coming to this project through a conversation about music with the Venetian Jewish cultural community, but finding for the score a musical vocabulary (Fellini, Corelli, Bartok) that worked in deliberate counterpoint to any expectation of ‘Jewishness’. Venetian-born costume designer Stefano Nicolao is a master-craftsman who works in the traditions of *commedia dell’arte* and historical Venetian fashion: his creations are sumptuous, dramatic, witty – spectacular. Nicolao gives an insight into the development of costume designs and motifs which were at once historical and modern, Venetian and universal; clothing that was both exquisite artifact and functional ‘play’-wear. American set and lighting designer Peter Ksander is a long-time collaborator with Karin Coonrod, working nationally and internationally on her projects such as *Laude in Urbis*, and *Orfeo*, both performed on the streets of Orvieto, Italy. Ksander writes about the challenges and possibilities of creating theatrical space within public space – of taking the common place and making it spectacular.



Figure 2 Composer and trumpet player Frank London and the other musicians. © Andrea Messana

## Frank London – Composer

Composing for theatre can be a hugely rewarding assignment and working on Karin Coonrod's production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (or *The Merchant 'in' Venice* as we called it) was a revelation and a gift. My job as a theatre-composer is not to simply follow my own musical inclination or muse, but to support the director's vision. As I quickly learned, Coonrod is a visionary director who pays ultimate respect to the text, studying it assiduously, sticking close to the original (the actors were instructed to pronounce all the archaic syllables in a word in order to hear Shakespeare's rhythms), while interpreting the text in radical ways that are highly political and social, and chronotopic, related to time and space. Her direction and instructions as to what she is trying to elicit from a scene are clear; it is my job to listen closely to her and find ways to put them into the musical composition. As Karin's ideas are so informed and insightful, I learned more about the play itself than I have ever experienced working with other directors. Following are some random thoughts and recollections of what was truly one of the most aesthetically and creatively complex and engaging experiences I've had in my career.

Much will be written about Karin's choice to have five actors portray Shylock, but from my perspective the single most important choice was to perform *Merchant* in the Venice Ghetto, outdoors, in the campo, surrounded by the same buildings, synagogues, banks, canals... the environment that existed in Shakespeare's time. The Venice Ghetto informed so many of our choices. In many ways we felt the Ghetto space as a character in the production. Just as the Jewish Ghetto in Venice is famous as being the source of the word 'ghetto', Venice is also ubiquitous with its carnival, a wild masked musical street celebration. Our production opened with the actors and band (two violins, cello, drums, trumpet and keyboards) marching over a canal bridge into the Ghetto Novo as a carnival procession, musically inspired by an imaginary Fellini/Nino Rota version of a classic Italian carnival theme. One hears, feels, experiences 'Carnival in Venice', rooting audience and actors into the spectacle we are going to present. It was Coonrod's and dramaturg Walter Valeri's genius to open the show not with Shakespeare, but with the words of the great Italian writer Ruzzante (Angelo Beolco, c. 1496-1542). His bawdy, carnivalesque poem, featuring the recurring catch phrase "Amore an" (roughly, 'Love, eh?') focuses on the centrality of love as a topic of fascination and conversation. "Who wants to talk about love? [...] who wants to talk about anything else!" Immediately this framed Coonrod's *Merchant* as a dialectic discussion of love (vs power, social roles, family etc.) that is both serious and entertaining.

We processed to our band's 'home' under a lone tree in the campo. This area is also meant to represent Belmont, one of the principal locations in *Merchant*. For Coonrod, Belmont was a feminine space. This was represented in a number of musical ways, some obvious (the music in Belmont was performed by an all-female or female-dressed string trio and toy piano), others subtle. All the music in *Merchant* was originally composed for the production with the exception of Belmont's music, where I adapted classical music. The music in Belmont came primarily from the string trios of the famous seventeenth-century Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli. I had originally planned on using music from the eighteenth-century composer Luigi Boccherini, but switched to Corelli at cellist Serena Mancuso's suggestion. For the record, Mancuso actually lives in the Venice Ghetto and would basically roll out of her apartment and start the show. However, in the penultimate Belmont section, I wanted something more dissonant and atonal, but still in a classical vein, and adapted Hungarian composer Bela Bartok's "Forgatos #38".

Another moment of spatial interaction with the Ghetto occurred during the carnival scene that covered Jessica's night-time elopement with Lorenzo. In order to emulate the chaos of carnival sensorially, I divided the band. While the bulk of the group was playing from our home base, I went into the house adjacent to one of the original



Figure 3 Enrico Zagni and Sorab Wadia as masked singers. © Andrea Messana

banks (the reason for the Ghetto's existence and where, theoretically, Shylock could have operated from), and ran up to a second-floor apartment, where I played trumpet from the balcony. The music I played in this scene was a variant on the 'Shylock musical motif', a recurring theme in the production that calls for further exploration.

The range of emotions and moods in *Merchant* goes from the carnivalesque to the intimate, the exuberant to tragic, and perhaps ultimately the most important and central one is ambivalence. This was most profoundly expressed in my Shylock musical motif, which occurs throughout the production. It is germane to mention here that while I am well-versed as a trumpeter and composer in a wide array of musical styles and genres, my principal reputation is for my work with *klezmer*, or East European Jewish/Yiddish music. This music has a very distinctive sound and ethos, one that is clearly associated with representing Jewishness. Many people assumed that if 'Frank London the klezmer musician' was writing a score for *The Merchant of Venice*, I would use Jewish klezmer music as a signifier, especially to represent Shylock. This was decidedly not the case, for numerous reasons.

There are many Jewish musical traditions in the world and representing Shylock as an eighteenth-century East European *shtetl* (village) Jew in a *kapote* (typical Hasidic black gaberdine jacket) would be

to not only fall into the worst of stereotypes, a crass form of antisemitism, but would diametrically work against the strength of performing in the Venice Ghetto and the power of place. Shylock is complex. The motif, ambivalent and haunting, beautiful but never sentimental, counters a reductive view that Shylock 'hates music' - music being a symbol of being fully human in *Merchant*. Shakespeare's and Coonrod's Shylock demands to be seen as not only complex and completely human, but as a universal 'every-man' or 'every-woman'. The music helps to negotiate this identity.

Shakespeare has many ways of telling us (director, composer) when he wants music in his play. One of the most obvious (short of when he writes, 'Musicians enter') and fun is in the famous lottery scene for Portia's hand in marriage. Portia says, 'Let music sound while he doth make his choice', which is a pretty obvious clue that one should compose a song here, and which explains why there are so many versions of the song/poem, 'Where is Fancy Bred' (aka *Ding Dong Bell*, or as they pronounce it in Venetian, *Din Don Dan*). Keeping with the carnivalesque, entertainment aspect of the production, I chose to compose a very fun, singable tune in a minimalist, quasi-Michael Nyman style, without a shred of musical pretence that this could be a song from Shakespeare's time. This and the 'Amore an' were the two pieces that people left the production humming. (That said, one of my favourite settings of this was composed by the hyper-tonal modernist composer, Elliott Carter, for a 1936 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. It is not particularly 'hummable').

My involvement working on Karin Coonrod's *The Merchant in Venice* grew out of discussions between Shaul Bassi, the organization Beit Venezia (a community of forward looking, arts- and ideas-focused Venetian Jews who want to make the Venice Ghetto a world centre for culture and academia) and myself, about musical ways to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Jewish Ghetto in Venice. Composing and playing in Karin Coonrod's and Compagnia de' Colombari's production was the direct outgrowth of these conversations. Now, five years later, we are unveiling a new chapter in this commemoration, together releasing my latest recording, *Ghetto Songs (Venice and Beyond)*, a collection of music that has emerged from and about the worlds' ghettos. Not surprisingly, the recording - as did the production - opens with my setting of Ruzzante's "Amore an".

## Stefano Nicolao - Costume Designer

Karin Coonrod came to my workshop one day in November 2015, filled with enthusiasm, to meet me and talk to me about *The Merchant of Venice*, a production planned for the following year, to be set in the Campo del Ghetto Novo. We did not know each other but I was instant-



Figure 4 Costume design, 'Bassanio' by Stefano Nicolao



Figure 5 Costume design, 'Portia' by Stefano Nicolao





Figure 6 Costume design, 'The Duke' by Stefano Nicolao



Figure 7 Costume design, 'Shylock' by Stefano Nicolao



Figure 8 Costume design, 'Nerissa' by Stefano Nicolao

ly captured by Karin's vitality, a magnetism that placed us immediately in suspended time and space inside the play and in full creative agreement. I knew the play, I had already made costumes for an earlier production that had a late sixteenth-century setting, and I thought I knew how to reproduce that design, tastefully and accurately.

But then, Karin started describing a world that harked back to the Shakespearean past but that took me on a journey that started in the ancient Jewish world, then reached our own time, an accelerated time travel that suggested the timelessness of injustice and contradiction, of diversity in all its facets, of suffering and offence – a sixteenth-century Venice where our contemporary world in some sort of timeless dimension would be present. She intended to use as her stage the whole Campo de Ghetto Novo. We parted ways with a hug, and we made an appointment for the end of the year in New York, to show some sketches and early ideas for the costumes.

The second meeting made me extremely happy: my portfolio was brimming with ideas. The first thought I had was to distinguish the characters by shape, putting the focus on silhouettes that would remember and evoke the sixteenth century, silhouettes as if seen backlit. Then I divided all the characters into smaller groups by style; next, by colour and fabric. The decision, particular to this production, of having five actors, one of them a woman, play Shylock meant that I had to further distinguish the Jewish world.

All the Venetians, then, men and women, were dressed to be reminiscent of the wealth of the Serenissima, in light-toned costumes, beige and cream, white and hazelnut, linen and textured cotton, leather and organza, silk printed with stencils. Lines were sharply defined, and visible zips made the costume look contemporary, while detachable or loose sleeves evoked the epoch. The women, when they first entered, wore a basic costume of shirt and trousers with small gilets in shades ranging from cream to pearl. As they were transformed from anonymous players into their named characters – Portia, Nerissa – they were dressed (in full view of the audience) in a cut-away organza costume that had a long train. Being transparent, it left the body beneath visible while endowing them with a solemn regality.

Another group was the 'lads'. (Elsewhere, Sorab Wadia describes their costumes as like eighties' 'punk' outfits.) The noble suitors were all in black, with accessories that hinted at their nationalities (like the sombrero Aragon wore), all of them made to look slightly distanced, estranged by the way the design materials and fabrics were applied. The musicians, too, were in black, as were the stagehands (known as the 'angeli neri'), who became black shadows shadowing the actors.

And finally, our Shylocks. The use of the material and the shape were essential to giving us an imaginary route into the history of Jewish society. For some of the five Shylocks we used hemp and linen, fabrics woven on looms to conjure up echoes of the wilderness, col-

oured sand and beige, with strings hanging down; for other Shylocks, we shifted the design to the twentieth century, with echoes of the Shoah. We lined their linen robes with black and white stripes to recall concentration camp uniforms. We then brought into the scene another symbol of difference: the colour yellow. In sixteenth century Venice it was the colour that Jews were forced to wear in their caps, that heretics were dressed in; it was the colour of prostitutes' stockings. In the medieval period it was the colour fools wore; and in the twentieth century, the colour of the stars of David that deportees had to display on their clothes. In our productions, long yellow sashes made of silk became, with an on-stage robing, the investiture of the various Shylocks: they were tied at the waist like armour or, better said, a girdle that forced the black and white stripes, the wilderness robes, and the yellow of difference to press themselves upon the body.

We used another symbol to represent the Council of Ten, one of the major governing bodies of the Republic of Venice: a huge blood-red cloth cloak with a massively long train that, as it spread behind the actor playing the Duke, stained the stones of the campo red. Red stoles were worn by the actors and the extras who were brought into the space to make up the trial jury. (When, after Shylock left the court defeated and humiliated, they divested themselves, dropping their red stoles in a pile, it looked like a mountain of blood.)

We could write many pages on what Karin and I discussed and tried to develop in pursuit of our ultimate goal - because the work on costume ideas and symbolism was a journey of real collaboration. Details that were apparently minimal became large and conspicuous on stage. I am grateful to Ca' Foscari and Shaul Bassi for giving me the opportunity to meet Karin and to work with a wonderful group of actors on this memorable experience.

## Peter Ksander – Environment and Lighting Designer

From our initial conversations about the project, Karin Coonrod, the director, and I talked about taking hold of the existing environment and making strange the experience of being within that environment.<sup>2</sup> Site specific staging always requires extra attention be paid to the existing conditions on the ground. One has to think through how the space is currently inhabited, by whom, and the history you are engaging with by setting a piece in that physical context. We wanted to take what was the familiar, daily experience of being in

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<sup>2</sup> I want to extend many thanks to lighting designer Christopher Akerlind, who was involved in the very earliest conversations about the design and some of whose ideas were foundational to what the piece became.



Figure 9 Daylight rehearsal in the Ghetto. © Andrea Messana

the Campo de Ghetto Novo and reframe it in the same way that we were reframing our understanding of the play. By interrupting the flow of activity the goal was to reveal the space (and play) in a new way and to ask the daily routine traffic through the campo to look up and see it anew.

That 'making strange' did not necessitate some kind of grand scenographic intervention. The space we performed in is the actual, historical space imagined – though never mentioned – in Shakespeare's text, and it resonated with the narrative without any extra touch from us. The stones hummed as we engaged with ahistorical events – our bringing of the play to the Ghetto in 2016 – on what would have been the historical site. The spatial intervention on our part needed to avoid obscuring any part of that connection but rather to identify a point of view from which the audience could witness the resonance between past and present, and then we needed to follow through on the logistics that flowed from having made that choice.

The campo is on an island with three bridges connecting it to the rest of the city. The perimeter is lined with tall, multi-storey residences whose heights had been restricted historically by the civic authorities such that as the population grew there after 1516 when the

Jewish population was confined to the Ghetto, the buildings had to be sliced up into more and more storeys, ceilings getting lower and lower, spaces cramped further and further. There is a Jewish Museum in the campo and, at the time we were there, a reconstructed pawn shop in the premises of the Banco Rosso. There were restaurants and other businesses and, in one corner and along another side of the campo are two Holocaust memorials, one listing the name of every Venetian Jew deported from Venice to the Nazi extermination camps. A charged location. For our performances, we wanted to seat at least 250 people, and to accommodate this scale of audience requires a massive, tall seating riser to allow the action to be seen by all. After thinking through all the needs of the text and the limits of the physical space, we chose to set our seating riser, and thus set our point of view, right in the middle of the public thoroughfare in the rough centre of the campo facing south into one of the corners that has no entrance from other parts of the city. This afforded us the deepest space possible – and meant there was no traffic trying to flow across our playing space. The area contained a handful of trees, a well, a *fontana* – a fountain constantly pumping out water – and a couple of benches for us to work with in the staging. Synagogues and houses bordered the upstage areas. The Banco Rosso was to the left of the audience's field of vision; to the right was an extended truss supporting much of the lighting equipment. The audience and the truss completed a diamond shape with the existing buildings and enclosed approximately a third of the open space in the campo. During the performances this space was marked out with crowd control barriers. Passers-by lined the barriers and neighbours stepped out onto their balconies to watch what was going on. Between performances the barriers coiled in to surround just the truss and audience riser, allowing human traffic an unimpeded flow. But even so, the presence of the performance, something spectacular going on in the campo, was hard to miss.

We confined the rest of the physical production to Stefano Nicolao's beautiful clothes and the handful of props (caskets, ducats, letters, a couple of big pillows, a knife) critical for the stage action. In a piece that is so much about individual identity and the relationship of that identity to the society and state, anything added to the scene unnecessarily became superfluous. The 'making strange' of the environment, within the performance then, was accomplished not by changing what the audience would have seen on a usual day but where they saw it from and through how the existing architecture was revealed through light.

A quasi-verisimilitude is often prized in stage design. ('Quasi' being the operative term, since performer audibility, face visibility, and audience sight lines all militate against the notion of the rigorously 'real' in any theatre.) Stage spaces, and the light and sound introduced into them, are regularly asked to indicate place and time of



Figure 10 Natural and artificial lighting. © Andrea Messana

day for an audience, as well as to amplify emotional content and make other artistic statements related to the piece. With *The Merchant 'in' Venice* we had *the real* in over-abundance. We were on site, and as we were performing around mid-summer, we started the piece in daylight with the drone of the cicadas filling the air. The performers arrived from around the corner where we were using a school as dressing rooms, arriving in song and dance to begin the performance. With the last beat of the opening music we activated the space by throwing on to their full brightness the footlights we had installed in front of the audience. But, given the remaining daylight, the effect was barely visible on the performers beyond creating a soft glow that warmed the colour of the costumes, arriving as it did from what, in our usual experience, is an unusual angle. Natural directional light is most often experienced from above, or at its most extreme, during sunset, from the side. Light from below, notwithstanding the fact that footlights were a theatrical necessity and convention for centuries, is unnatural or unusual to our modern perception. For our production, this lighting was the opening gesture to set off the non-theatrical reality or experience of the campo from our theatrical intervention in the space.



It was not till several scenes into the performance that the light from our equipment was necessary in the fading daylight. (Due to the heights of the buildings, none of the late day direct sunlight entered the performance.) At that point, we shifted to take advantage of no ambient light from the sky being available to work with, and we engaged light and shadow in starker contrast. The timing worked such that during Jessica's flight from her father Shylock's house, dark had just fallen, which allowed us to work with real torches, which Lorenzo and his gang had talked about in the previous scene when they were planning their getaway. The footlights now became tools to cast strangely elongated shifting shadows on the buildings, trees and other performers, a design technique we used again to great effect when Shylock discovered Jessica gone. Again, the *real* contrasted with the *strange*.

Being on location meant that we had to bring in any additional infrastructure we would need and, being Venice, all that infrastructure had to arrive by boat. This led to a consideration of what was truly necessary, which led to a compact set of bold lighting gestures, a choice which suited the piece. We decided on a vocabulary that tied location and character to specific colours. These colour choices became the signposts indicating where a scene was taking place and identified our shifting casting of the role of Shylock, played by five different actors in sequence. The Ghetto's pavements are of a light grey stone, different from the colour of the buildings, that reflected each colour of light in turn and became a kind of ground *background*. (When the production was later staged in traditional theatres, we used the back wall of the theatre space to replicate what the paving stones were doing for us in the campo.)

We worked with a warm sandstone-coloured light for scenes taking place in the streets of Venice. This was intended to connect to the colour of the stone used in the buildings around us and to the sodium vapour streetlights still lit and lighting the passages into and out of the campo at the edges of the audience's vision, spaces that were still pulsing with activity as the performance took place. This light was intended, being a tint of the yellow sash worn by the Jewish characters, to help make those sashes pop out in the visual field and connect the actors who were wearing them to this place where they were standing.

A deep red light was used exclusively in the trial scene. The performer playing the duke, whom we had previously seen as Shylock, was identified by a massive red robe, and the red light worked as an extension of the costume and thus of judicial power. Each of the other characters, as well as some of the audience who were ushered on-stage at this point to join the court, were provided with a red stole for this scene. Shylock, with his yellow sash, was clearly marked as the outsider, his yellow floating in a sea of red governmental power. Here again the footlights became a primary tool in our storytelling.



Figure 11 'Mercy' projected onto the Ghetto walls. © Andrea Messina

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By simple proximity, Shylock and his various accusers downstage close to the audience were brighter in the audience's field of vision, and they both blocked the light and cast shadows on the rest of the court still glowing red further upstage. As the scene progressed, we shrank the illuminated space until it showed just the single clear light on Shylock and a red wash of light everywhere else. He remained isolated and alone even as the rest of the court surrounded him, looming over him as the judgement was announced.

A rich primary blue light was used to denote scenes that were taking place at Belmont. This was used to light the trees, the stones of the ground in front of the audience, and as much of the space as possible. Beyond signalling a change in location the colour helped emphasise the inertia in Belmont at the beginning of the play and the languid night in the final scenes (and it cut against Jessica's rebuke of Lorenzo as they gazed into "such a night as this..."). Blue being at the far end of the visible light spectrum muted the warmer hues of the buildings and brought forward the presence of the tree, in an attempt to distance the action and build up a contrast from where the production was situated.

Our production short-circuited before the end of Shakespeare's text. Where the text would have us end in weddings and reconciliations after Portia's summing up of all her machinations and news-bringing, which we saw as problematic 'happy ending' territory, in Karin's staging our five Shylocks, dressed again in their robes and yellow sashes, stepped forward to repeat a part of one of Shylock's earlier speeches. As this contrast between injustice and the now subsumed celebrations took place, the blue light and the Belmont stage picture drained away, leaving the cast, illuminated as at the beginning by the footlights, facing the audience. Then Jessica, running at full tilt, suddenly burst through this line-up. She stepped across the footlights into the space of the audience, an attempt to escape the smothering confines of the society and laws of property and propriety that have twisted through the play. A look of horror was on her face. Any remaining illusions were shattered. The real had come crashing back in to mix with the argument contained in the text. The buildings surrounding us, that had become part of our scenic backdrop, returned to the present and the history they had witnessed.

As Jessica stopped short and looked out to the audience, a final blast from a shofar was heard, amplified and echoing through the campo, as the walls began to speak. Our final gesture was to cut the lights and project across the façades of the buildings:

רַחֲמִים / MISERICORDIA / RAKHAMIM / MERCY

Something the play asks us to engage in more fully.

