

The Actors Speak

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Abstract *The Merchant 'in' Venice* brought together an international cast of actors. In this chapter six of them recall the experience of workshoping then rehearsing Shakespeare's play for the site-specific production they brought to the Ghetto in 2016. They think about the pressures of place – speaking *these* lines in *this* location – and of history; the challenges of working in several languages and cutting the script to two hours' running time; the existential trouble of doubling characters who look like opposites; the excitement of inhabiting their roles and reaching their audiences. They reveal the production from the experience of living inside it.

Keywords The Merchant of Venice. Site-specific performance. Performing Shakespeare. Rehearsal. Portia. Shylock. Bassanio. Lancelot Gobbo. Lorenzo. Jessica. Actors on Shakespeare.

Director Karin Coonrod assembled her international company – her “gathering of strangers”, as she called it – across two years and five countries. In the summer of 2015, she workshoped *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice with locally-based actors. The following summer, after auditions in New York and recalls for several actors from the original workshop, Coonrod finalised her cast and began rehearsing in earnest. Her vision: to produce a site-specific performance using a site-specific adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. In her production, for the first time in history, Shakespeare's Shylock would walk across the stones of the Venetian Ghetto to conduct his business with Antonio, the merchant of Venice. Her cast included: Shylock #3/Duke, Jenni Lea-Jones;



Figure 1 Actors waiting to make their first entrance. © Andrea Messina

Nerissa, Elena Pellone; Portia, Linda Powell; Lancelotto, Francesca Sarah Toich; Jessica, Michelle Uranowitz; Shylock #4/Gobbo, Andrea Brugnera; Shylock #5/Tubal, Ned Eisenberg; Bassanio, Michele Athos Guidi; Shylock #2/Arragon, Adriano Iurissevich; Morocco, Matthieu Pastore; Salarino, Hunter Perske; Antonio, Stefano Scherini; Lorenzo, Paul Spera; Shylock #1/Graziano, Sorab Wadia; Salanio, Enrico Zagni. Angeli Neri (stagehands): Roberta Barbiero, Emeline Mele, Alessandra Quattrini, Ziv Gidron, Martin Romeo. Here, six of those actors offer their reflections on this historic production.

Francesca Sarah Toich

Lancelotto

La prima volta che ho parlato con Karin Coonrod è stato in dialetto veneto, e per giunta antico. Lei era seduta davanti a me mentre io interpretavo un pezzo di Ruzzante...

The first time I spoke with Karin Coonrod, it was in Venetian, what's more, in *ancient* Venetian - a speech from Ruzzante. Karin had decided to try something bizarre: to open the play with a monologue from this extraordinary Paduan author of the 1500s.

What does Ruzzante have to do with Shakespeare? Everything - at least as much as *commedia dell'arte* does. Just as we celebrate



Figure 2 Costume design, 'Lancillotto' by Stefano Nicolao

Shakespeare's contributions to the English language, Italian actors recognise Angelo Beolco as the inventor of a Veneto theatrical dialect, a comic idiom full of lewd *double entendres* that revel in the beauty and cruelty of servant and peasant life.

Our dramaturg, Walter Valeri, had the idea of opening the play with a piece of *commedia dell'arte* in mask. He and Karin decided that Shylock's servant, Lancillotto (Shakespeare's Launcelot Gobbo), should kick off the show with a strong prologue by Ruzzante. When they offered me the role of Lancillotto, I was thrilled. For many years I have performed *commedia dell'arte*, and from the beginning, I have always been attracted by the servant roles most. *Commedia* is a very defined style of theatre: there are masters and servants, Arlecchino and Zanni being the servant roles in which I'm specialised. My Lancillotto became a sort of Zanni-Arlecchino but more human and 'freer' because, while he is inspired by *commedia*, he is not a proper *commedia* character. For example, Arlecchino and Zanni always wear a mask, but my Lancillotto only wore one in the first scene. After that, he became a more recognisably 'ordinary' man (though still stylised in his gestures and, of course, still played by a woman), and a confidant for Jessica, Shylock's daughter.

At the very beginning of the show, however, he pounced into the scene like a beast, leaping and screaming in that old Venetian dialect. I was enthusiastic about starting with Ruzzante because I've per-



Figure 3 Francesca Sara Toich as masked Lancillotto. © Andrea Messina

formed his texts for many years, but at the same time I was anxious. I knew that no-one in the audience would understand a word of my speech in that long-disused language. Still, I knew that if I used my body well, if my character, not I, enjoyed himself, every gesture would convey meaning. This was the challenge every night. Servants must bring energy to the *commedia* with ardour, with attention, sometimes sacrifice.

Frank London's wonderful music made things easier. He cleverly wrote an overture inspired by sixties Italian movies (Fellini especially), to which the entire company paraded onstage at the top of the show. This was also a reference to the classical tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, which provides for 'sung' entries by all the characters to immediately attract the attention of the audience. I really felt the powerful support of the whole company singing and dancing onstage alongside me as I burst into the Ruzzante introduction.

Music, mask, and theatrical dialect were not just about adding some Venetian folklore to the show. After all, Shakespeare wrote *commedia* into the play itself, even though those scenes are sadly often cut from stage productions. I remember Karin was surprised by the power of Ruzzante's dialect and even more excited and fascinated when, some days later, I performed the same monologue with the mask and gestures of Harlequin. "What a joy, this *commedia*!" she said.

In Coonrod's version, Lancillotto assumes the important role of clown, demon, schemer and, as Karin said, "Someone who knows everything about everyone, who watches everywhere and knows

his chickens!". One reviewer called me 'an antic', a 'clown in a codpiece'. Initially slightly offended, I began to like that word 'antic'. Lancillotto is exactly that: grotesque, bizarre. Like a cat, particularly mischievous. It is not by chance that the first actors of *commedia* were inspired by animals for their characters, and I, too, drew inspiration for Lancillotto's leaps and gestures from a half-wild cat who knows how to get food from everyone. But Karin suggested a new interpretation when she said to me: "Yes, it's great! But I want more Mick Jagger in your Arlecchino". This was the key that gave me permission to remain in the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, experimenting, however, with an exhilarating contemporaneity. Harlequin-Lancillotto became, at times, a rock star. He danced, jumped and entered the scene possessed by Jagger.

Lancillotto, who goes from serving Shylock to serving Bassanio, is also called Young Gobbo. He and his father, Old Gobbo, a blind, senile beggar, have a hilarious bit of *commedia* slapstick in Act II. The scene is not merely entertainment for the groundlings. Andrea Brugnara, who played Gobbo and also Shylock #4 in the Venice production, put it to me this way: "Old Gobbo is a harbinger of what the Jewish merchant will become when the play is over and he has lost his wealth, his religion, his place in the community. Gobbo is Shylock's double, and his cautionary tale". Likewise, my Ruzzante prologue to our show, mocking and celebrating the madness of love and desire, is a presage of the havoc this party of a play wreaks on its most famous character.

After Venice, I played Lancillotto in America - when I was pregnant to Paul Spera (Lorenzo) whom I had met on set in Venice and who became my husband. It can truly be said that this play, wonderfully, changed my life. I was a Harlequin-Jagger with a six-month pregnant belly and a rather pronounced codpiece. I was following in the tradition of *commedia*, which allowed women to perform onstage, sometimes dressed as men, and afforded them legal protections when pregnant. It was an incredible experience for my body, for my daughter. We were one.

What continues to fascinate me in *The Merchant of Venice* and generally in Shakespearean writing is the rhythm of the verse and how the different characters, speaking their lines, create a symphony. Thanks to Karin and Walter, I was able to add my own personal touch to the symphony, mixing Italian, Venetian dialect and English. I always found my 'masters of the scene', Jessica, Lorenzo, Shylock, extremely responsive to every stimulus. And it was also very interesting to work with actors who do not speak the same language. An understanding of the scene immediately falls beyond words. In the linguistic confusion you cling with joy to the gestures, to the rhythm. And the rhythm of Shakespeare's verse - it's pure music for a Harlequin-Jagger.



Figure 4 Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) plays cat's cradle with Lancillotto (Francesca Sara Toich). © Andrea Messana

Michelle Uranowitz

Jessica

When I recall my memories of *The Merchant 'in' Venice* my heart beats faster and faster. I imagine myself at the very beginning of it all, trudging through a NYC blizzard to audition for the role of Jessica. (Knowing Karin Coonrod as well as I do now, it is no surprise that she would go on with auditions in a city that was entirely shut down due to snow). Then in Venice, climbing the stairs to the exquisite apartment in San Marco where I would be living. Then in the Jewish Ghetto, rehearsing. On our 'stage right' was the Banco Rosso - this would be Shylock's, my father's, home. Above the banco was a small window - a window that would be Jessica's portal into romance and rebellion. It's not often you arrive in the theatre with the set having been laid down centuries ago. It all felt like some fever dream.

There was so much I knew about *The Merchant of Venice* going into rehearsals, and so *little* I knew about the character of Jessica. Portia, yes, Shylock, of course... but Jessica, almost nothing. As a result, I could not have anticipated the enormous impact that playing this role would have on my life. More specifically, as a Jew playing Jessica in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice. My experience in Venice became a sort of cathartic exploration in my own womanhood and ties to Judaism. It was quite emotional to explore the history of this play within the history of this place. And our director, Karin Coonrod, encouraged us, and me, to think about these things in deeply personal ways.



Figure 5 Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz). © Andrea Messana

Playing a rambunctious and rebellious young daughter is not something foreign to me, having been very similar at that age. The opportunity to do it in the carnival setting of Venice made it that much more exhilarating. A shotgun wedding, running away from home, stealing a trunk of ducats – it was exhilarating playing Jessica every evening! During the performances, I would find myself sprinting circuits of the entire Ghetto Novo for two hours straight, up and down steps, quick changes between scenes – and then, after the show, having to trek the long distance home to the other side of the city where I was staying. I loved all of it: how it made my body feel, how it made my muscles stronger – *free!* When I think about the character of Jessica, I think about that very freedom she is searching for throughout the play. It was this very desire that infused my momentum throughout the performance – even on some of the hottest and most humid days. Playing this role also illuminated the ways in which scholars – many of whom offered observation and discussion over the course of the production – perceive Jessica and her quest for freedom. People think about Jessica as the rebellious teenager, the Jew betraying a Jew, a woman resisting the patriarchy! In some cases, what could be seen as the ‘Jessica problem’. Isn’t that the very mistake we make when we misinterpret an adolescent’s burgeoning instinct for independence that has to be gained by rebellion? Yes, rebellion is part of that, and so is lying. But what is also part of it is growth and understanding. For me, Jessica is like any young girl who is finding herself. It is just pretty inconvenient timing. And you may be thinking – ‘she stole hun-

dreds, if not thousands, of dollars from her father!' Yes. There is, too, a *lot* of naivety and ignorance... but as an actor, it clarified the kind of reckoning she has at the end of the play.

I believe Jessica grows up a lot over the course of the play - the same way living in Italy for that time when we were rehearsing and performing *Merchant* allowed for a sense of independence I had been craving myself. She begins to see the world quite clearly - how money plays into decisions, how relationships are complicated, and how men use their power. We are so focused on what does not go right for Jessica - because let us face it, much of it does not go according to plan. But what struck me in playing this character was how much her sense of character grows throughout the course of the play - and it is that very character we recognise that she shares with her dad, Shylock - the way she clings to her bond with Lorenzo. Her relationship to Lancelotto deepens, and her understanding of how she fits into the world becomes clear. It is what I love the most about Shakespeare - the ways in which he plants the smallest nuances of people in his plots.

Growing up, I remember a word I was called a few times - 'JAP' - which stands for a *Jewish American Princess*. It is a term reserved for what people perceive as bratty Jewish girls. Why is it that when a young woman makes demands for herself, or makes choices about what she wants, or even sets limits on what she can take, she is deemed a princess? Jessica, too, could be called such. And sure, there is an element of truth in this. But what I appreciated about Karin's direction of this character was her insistence on Jessica's strength and power. In this way, I learned a lot about myself through Jessica - to tap into my own sense of power by understanding my own lineage. To see that it can be devastating to recognise hate but liberating to detach yourself from it.

In that final scene between Jessica and Lorenzo in Shakespeare's 5.1, they bicker in a verbal showdown, "In such a night..." When Jessica dares Lorenzo to "ask my opinion too of that", she is demanding her force be heard. She is in fact crossing the line, and Karin wanted Lorenzo to feel the threat of that power.

When someone recognises an evil core to the system - a system of lies, of injustice, of hatred - they have the responsibility to warn others about it, or at the very least, to speak up. The final gesture of our production: Jessica emerged from the group and looked at the Venetians, looked at her father, and spun around to face the audience. She opened her mouth, and the Shofar bellowed against the walls of the Ghetto. The walls spoke, yet she could not. A warning, perhaps. A call to arms, the start of war. But maybe, too, the start of understanding? Karin used the walls as surfaces on which to inscribe in four languages the word 'Mercy'.



Figure 6 Lorenzo (Paul Spera) with (behind) Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) at her open window. © Andrea Messana

Paul Spera

Lorenzo

As I write this at the end of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is in its ninth month, and wearing a mask in public has become the norm. We don them for protection, not disguise; yet I cannot be the only one relieved when an acquaintance I would rather not have to stop and chat with fails to recognise me on the street. Nor can I be alone in fantasising about what outlandish things I might do under the guise of an N95. All this has gotten me thinking back to Venice, and to the mad masquerades of Carnival season. A historical clue into the delirium that was: forty years after Shakespeare's death, Venetian authorities banned mask-wearers from carrying weapons and from entering churches and convents. We can only imagine what revellers had been doing up until then – and with whom – to merit such a crackdown!

Venice is as famous today as it was in Shakespeare's time for its masks, parties, parades, and performances. If *The Merchant of Venice* is not specifically set during Carnival, masks are certainly the enabler for some of the play's serious shenanigans. "What, are there masques?" exclaims the Jewish merchant, Shylock, as he debates attending a dinner party the play's *jeune premier* Bassanio is throwing in Act 2. Shylock does end up going, but his suspicions are well-founded; while he is out, his daughter Jessica elopes with the character I played in 2016, a young Venetian (i.e. Christian) named Lorenzo. Under the cover of night, masked Lorenzo and his pals show up at Jessica's win-



Figure 7 Paul Spera as Lorenzo. © Andrea Messana

dow to whisk her – and a suitcase full of her father’s cash – away. I like to think of this scene as a wink to the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, except in this version, it is as if the lovers are stealing dad’s convertible, and Romeo has brought his friends along for the ride.

Our director Karin Coonrod chose to really own the heady carnivalesque atmosphere of the play’s second act. The rawness, the racism, the rage and hatred and despair of all that follows, as Shylock vows revenge and fails to get it, became all the more powerful by contrast. As in the opening sequence of our production when the whole company entered as a carnival parade across the Ghetto Novo led by Lancillotto into the playing space, Karin had us, in this scene of the bride snatch, singing, dancing and partying in the middle of the campo. But the jaunty, seemingly innocent *commedia dell’arte* number that introduced Act I gave way to something more sinister in Act II. Then it was day; now it was night, and our lighting designer Peter Ksander’s yellow floodlights were downright eerie. The revellers rolled up in front of Shylock’s house carrying a flaming torch. Costumer Stefano Nicolao’s gruesome masks, inspired by the work of surrealist painter James Ensor, covered every face. In an unsubtle bit of foreshadowing, partyboys Salanio and Graziano conducted a raucous operatic joust, singing about inconstant lovers, killing time until I ran on as Lorenzo. Late to my own *rendezvous galant*. I called out to Jessica’s window – in Venice, a real first-story window in the campo, graciously lent to the production by the apartment’s owners and their dog. Jessica appeared, needed a little convincing (not so hot about having to dress up as a boy), my mates started rushing me and cat-calling, we did not have anyone to

bear the torch, Jessica would have to do... at last she threw down the cash and the jewels and, finally, herself; we kissed, danced, groped, put our masks back on and ran off to the sound of trumpets, spinning round and round, my hands around her waist and the briefcase full of dough safely under my buddy Salarino's arm.

In the play, the couple then disappears for three months. According to hearsay, they have blown all their cash in Genoa and may have swapped a Shylock family heirloom for a monkey. They are reckless kids, and that is how Michelle Uranowitz and I played them. When Jessica and Lorenzo return post-honeymoon, they end up house-sitting Portia's country estate in Belmont, while everyone else is in Venice at Shylock and Antonio's trial. (I am turning the plot and subplot inside-out here, telling the story from our supporting characters' perspectives.) Soon they start to bicker, as Lorenzo becomes jealous of Jessica's clownish servant Lancelotto. He had been her sole companion in her father's household, but he is a domestic, a *Zanni* – an animal, basically. Not that it should be much of a surprise: these Jews do not know how to behave, no sense of propriety, not much better than animals themselves, even if I did marry one... Lorenzo's rancour at father-in-law Shylock, who has dared to challenge Don Antonio's mafia-like hold on Venetian commerce, inevitably turns to Jew-baiting. In Karin's whirlwind staging, a powerful scene we dubbed 'cat's-cradle' immediately preceded the play's famous courtroom drama. Throughout the show, the colour yellow had been suggestively introduced in half a dozen ways through Nicolao's costumes, a symbol and reminder of Jewishness. Jessica had shed her yellow sash when she converted and wed Lorenzo after Act 2. But she retained a fond memento: a yellow ribbon she and Lancelotto used at the beginning of Shakespeare's 3.5 to play cat's cradle. Then, as the scene unravels into a lovers' tiff, Lorenzo shuts Jessica up by snatching away this keepsake and stamping on it. As if to sever her family ties and claim his territory once and for all. Here, Frank London's music turned dark, and Ksander bathed the stage in blood-red light. Everything slowed down, as the gravity of what had just transpired hit the audience all at once. When the action returned to Belmont in Act 5, it was as if something had changed in the very fabric of the stars. Lorenzo and Jessica had gone from giddy, wild-at-heart lovers to a distant couple already waxing nostalgic about what might have been. She hints at regret, accusing her husband of "Stealing her soul with many vows of faith | And ne'er a true one". He calls her "a little shrew" who is "Slander[ing] her love". The masks have come off, but, as with the play as a whole, there is no resolution in sight.

I remember as we rehearsed feeling a constant temptation to climb things. I could not resist trying to scale the columns of the Banco Rosso – the extraordinarily preserved sixteenth-century bank-cum-pawnbrokerage there in the Ghetto that could have been Shylock's



Figure 8 Jenni Lea-Jones as Shylock #3 and the other Shylocks. © Andrea Messana

haunt - below Jessica's window. And during the show, I could not go a performance without attempting some new, acrobatic pounce onto the *pozzo*, the Venetian well that lay in the middle of our playing space in the Campo de Ghetto Novo. No doubt I was feeling the giddiness Karin encouraged in her direction, her vision of a play that begins as a mad revel and ends in a bad hangover. The worst morning-after is Shylock's, of course; Shakespeare knew that the down-trodden and spit-upon most often just get shafted even more in the end. But it is an adventure that leaves a sour taste in everyone's mouth, including the victors'. Not least for Jessica and Lorenzo, who seem to realise by the play's end that they may have made a big mistake and are going to have to live with it. These alternating states of intoxication and nostalgia came wrapped in the ghostly whisper of a bard who, as we performed his play in 2016, had died exactly four centuries before, announcing to characters and audience alike: "You are all amazed!"

Jenni Lea-Jones

Shylock #3

Performing Shylock was one of the most exciting and daunting things I have ever done. The list of famous classic male characters that, as a female performer, you do not imagine you will have the opportunity to tackle is long, and of course, Shylock is pretty high on that list.

In our production, five actors played Shylock, one after another. This was an inspired choice by Karin, I think. Shylock is without a



Figure 9 Jenni Lea-Jones as the Duke. © Andrea Messana

doubt one of the most complex characters in the history of theatre, so using five actors enabled us to highlight some of the very different aspects of this complicated human in a way that one actor may not have managed alone.

Sorab Wadia, playing the first incarnation, brought ‘the merchant’ to life. The negotiator, the moneylender at the top of his game, a witty wordsmith who understands his business better than anyone. A man in control. Adriano Iurissevich presented us with the patriarch. Here we saw the father in control of his home and his daughter. A loving and stern parent concerned for the safety of his homestead. I performed the ‘third’ Shylock, after losing Jessica, his daughter, half his fortune and treasured possessions that were gifted to him by his now deceased wife, a lost man in shock. Andrea Brugnera showed us the desperate, revengeful side of Shylock. We saw him learn how his daughter is squandering his money and exchanging his bachelor’s ring, given to him by his bride, for a monkey, and we witnessed his fury and his desire to take out his rage on Antonio. Ned Eisenburg rounded off our Shylocks in the courtroom scene with beautiful eloquence. The dignified orator, the intellectual, a man outnumbered, destined to lose, but who will not go down without a fight.

Karin did not want me to be a woman ‘playing’ a man, nor indeed did she want my Shylock to be a woman. I think we both wanted Shylock to be all genders and no gender at this point in the play. No matter what our intentions were in rehearsal for the final performance, I could not escape the fact that I was, of course, approaching the text as a wom-

an. And looking at this character through my eyes really highlighted certain aspects of Shylock that I had never considered when I had seen him previously performed by men. It made me consider, for example, that he has been both a father and a mother to Jessica, after the loss of his wife. Having to embody both of these roles would, I thought, make him feel the loss of his daughter all the more keenly. It is also important to consider the traditional matri-linear descent in Judaism. After the death of his wife, he will have no more children and, now that his daughter has eloped with a Christian, he will have no purely Jewish grandchildren. He has lost his own line of descent.

This way of thinking enabled me to embody the huge sense of loss, anger and injustice felt when performing Shylock's famous "Hath not a Jew" monologue. At the top of this scene, Karin had all of us Shylocks join together, for the first time in the production. We came into a circle and faced each other. At the same time, the rest of the cast took on the role of our Christian tormentors, wheeling around us, shouting at us, insulting us, spitting at our feet. To feel those words of abuse, to see the anguish on the faces of the 'other' Shylocks, to be both experiencing the situation and witnessing it happening really fed the fire I needed to play that scene. Taking up all of that rage, that feeling of injustice, of grief, my Shylock turned out of the circle, faced the audience and let out an almighty wail!

The wail, or keen, was something that came out of one of the first rehearsals as we workshopped the text in the summer of 2015, a full year before we staged our production in the Ghetto. Karin wanted me to find a sound, a cry for the loss of Jessica. I do not think her initial intention was to use it in the performance, but just to explore a sensation that would carry me into that scene, into the monologue. To bring the sense of loss into those famous words, "If you prick us do we not bleed?" I started with a deep moan, and a rocking in my body. It felt slightly ritualistic, like being at the Wailing Wall. But the more I felt it in the pit of my stomach, the more it started to turn into a primitive, earth-shattering sound of grief, despair and anguish. The feeling in the room when this noise came out was electric. There was no question of it not being used in the performance after that. For spectators and reviewers, Shylock #3's 'wail' was a signature moment.

There is a lot of pressure as a performer when tackling any well-known, much beloved character. You are aware of the history of the part, the shadows of incredible actors who have made this role their own, the thousands of divided opinions about the character carried by scholars, literature lovers and theatre-goers. You carry this information with you into the rehearsals like a sack of bricks and somehow you have to slowly put it down, brick by brick, leave it offstage and walk on with a character all of your own.

Linda Powell

Portia

Playing one of Shakespeare's most famous women with an international cast in the country where the play was set was a singular experience. I was away from home, out of my routine, and soaking up the newness of... well, everything. Collaborating with Karin Coonrod for the first time and feeling her passion for the work. Diving into the text with Gigi Buffington. Admiring the precision and process and joy of the *commedia* actors in the cast – the expressiveness of their movement and their deep commitment to tradition. Being a part of a disparate group of actors slowly becoming a company. And then of course there was the magic of being in Venice. Those weeks will always feel to me, in their own way, like a rose-coloured dream.

But. My memories also include how hard we worked. How hot it was. How lost we felt when transitioning from our small, safe rehearsal room to the vast outdoor playing space. Leaving the safety of the rehearsal hall is always a delicate transition for an actor but the move to the Ghetto was a particular shock. Faced with the wide-open campo, we had to re-block scenes to fill that space. That meant sacrificing the ability to be close enough to find connection in each other's eyes. We also discovered that the microphones required for amplification could only pick up our voices if we faced forward. Those necessities resulted in a flurry of work to find a more presentational energy than honoured all of the intimate discoveries we had had in our first weeks. In a matter of a day or two we created a new world for ourselves. All while negotiating the cicadas, the tourists, the heat, the threats of rain, and, strongly for me, the pull of history as our make-believe met reality in the stones and windows around us. Spitting 'Jew' disdainfully at my scene partner was one thing in a private rehearsal room, quite another in the middle of the active Ghetto.

Portia stretched me. I went in without knowing much more about *Merchant* than what I remembered from the couple of productions I had seen over the years. I had not been a part of the 2015 workshop so played catch up for a bit with a patient company. As we worked, I grew to love the play's complexity – layers of love, family, religion, commerce, greed and revenge. Our working text had been adapted and redacted strategically to lay bare the characters' inhumanity to one another. Portia was not excused from that harsh light. Karin challenged us to lean into the ugliness of the society, and the transactional nature of its relationships. The tension between that task and the surface impressions that I'd arrived with – Portia as a charming and witty heroine – presented an exciting challenge.

An additional challenge was the sheer amount of text. Our rehearsal period was a short three weeks and I regretted not having arrived in Italy 'off book'. Portia has a lot to say. The word count of



Figure 10 Portia (Linda Powell) and Nerissa (Elena Pellone). © Andrea Messana

the role is second only to Rosalind of all of Shakespeare's women and of all the *Merchant* characters she speaks the most. I have never been an actor who does well memorising in a vacuum. Words do not stick in my head without being attached to the relationships I am building, the choices I am making and the world the company is creating. As a result, I struggled in rehearsal until the text started to become secure enough that my mind could keep with up with Portia's. Nowhere was that more important than in the trial scene. Even writing from this distance, I can feel the relief when these particular lines finally took root in my memory and I could land them on Shylock:

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more
But just a pound of flesh. If thou take'st more
Or less than a just pound, be it but so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple, nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,
Thou diest, and all they goods are confiscate.
(4.1.320-28)

Those are the lines that mark the moment when, as we played it, Portia begins to turn the screws on Shylock. His certainty unravels from there. Those lines and the ones that come after are the ugly coun-



Figure 11 Linda Powell as Portia. © Andrea Messana

terpoint to the elegance of her famous “Quality of Mercy” speech. Once Shylock declines to offer any mercy, Portia shows him none.

I began rehearsals with an assumption of Portia’s righteousness based on what I thought I understood about the “Quality of Mercy” speech. But, ultimately, Portia’s behaviour in the trial scene – while effective – cannot be described as good. I was surprised by the cruelty that emerged as I played it – a cruelty fueled by the passion of the moment and by what I came to understand as a kind of tribalism. She defends the laws of Venice tooth and nail. Her people. Her culture. Her world. Her laws. Shakespeare wrote an incredibly strong woman and Karin was not interested in softening that strength in any way, or in making Portia a righteous saviour.

Some are surprised by Portia’s hypocrisy in the trial scene, but her turn to harsh justice made sense to me especially living the moment to moment of Shylock’s knife on Antonio’s breast as we staged it – poised to cut, tense for an extended theatrical moment that felt like a lifetime. The rage I ended up playing the scene with, however, did surprise me. I vividly remember the late afternoon rehearsal when I felt that energy surface and made a conscious decision to lean strongly into it ‘as an exercise’ – something I do sometimes in rehearsal not because I think the choice is right, but to override my brain and shake things loose. We were all quiet when the scene ended that day. It was ugly. And it felt right. I was taken aback feeling that energy in myself. In early performances, I let the character be taken aback by it too. I would take a private moment to feel some shame,

some shock at what I had done. It was small and probably went mostly unnoticed. Which is just as well. Because as time went on, I let that go. Shakespeare is smarter than that. He draws us warts and all. Holding a mirror up to our nature. And really, how much more interesting to play a human than a heroine.

Portia is beautifully layered. She is daughter, friend, heiress, survivor, bigot, lover, lawyer, and ultimately the winner of the games people play in the play. The final act finds her commanding the world around her, holding the upper hand over her husband, restoring Antonio's ships, flaunting access to knowledge she feels no compunction to share with those around her - including the audience. I loved being in her skin. I had never been asked to inhabit that kind of space. To take that kind of agency. It was thrilling.

Michele Athos Guidi

Bassanio

I remember when I auditioned for Bassanio in the darkness of the theatre academy, the same academy that had hosted me, raised and taught me for three years. And at that moment, I was there with the possibility of getting to work on a Shakespeare part. I thought to myself, "I have to believe; I have to do everything they want", and so I did, believing in my abilities, even losing my way in the text, and having to improvise - in English!

The audition went well and maybe it was because of my courage that they cast me. When I met with the company I could not believe it. I looked like a fish out of water. All those assembled actors; American, English, Italian, Australian, French, Indian - a cosmopolitan group like that which made up the population of Venice at the time of the Republic. All gathered for one purpose only. Bringing to life one of the most complex and significant texts of Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. In Venice. It did not seem real, but I was there. With all of them, script and pencil in my hand.

Then the work started. I remember that the first weeks were tiring, my brain had to go twice as fast to keep up with all the input and rules that Shakespeare's text imposed: old difficult words, respecting the iambic pentameter, underlining words at the end of the lines, and above all, reproducing the English sound in my mouth. All these were the obstacles that I had to train myself every day to overcome. During rehearsals I followed my companions with fascination, especially the Anglo-Saxon ones. The musicality of those words struck me every day, so strong and pure. They remain in my head even today. I have also realised that for me English is a beautiful language, incredibly direct and supple. It can draw extremely vivid and concrete images. It is at the same time stone and crystal, where with a few words



Figure 12 Bassanio (Michele Athos Guidi) and Antonio (Stefano Scherini). © Andrea Messana

you can say everything. It's like having a range of meanings but having a few keys in your hand. Shakespeare is a master for choosing the right key at the right moment. Compared to Italian, it is less paraphrased and more concrete, it does not always sound poetic like my language, but more pungent. Sometimes it seemed to me I had a sword in my mouth instead of my tongue, and I loved all this.

I played Bassanio, a young Venetian Christian gentleman, who falls in love with Portia, a rich heiress of Belmont, and who to woo the girl borrows money from his dear friend Antonio. It was all easy to imagine. Venice is surrounded by small islands. I imagined one of these - with animals, large buildings, gardens - and that became Belmont, and to go there I needed a boat. Then I found myself at the Rialto market with Antonio talking about food, good wine and business, you understand? In a place that really exists! We were there. I could go to the place that was written in the text! Rialto, the Banco Rosso - everywhere! This was the real magic. We literally followed Shakespeare around the city. In 2015, when we were workshopping the play, we did an impromptu rehearsal in the Rialto market. It was like a stargate, a door in time that opened to allow our contemporary bodies to give life to Shakespeare's fictional characters in the Venetian spaces they would have known. An unforgettable moment.

Wearing the clothes of my character was not difficult. It was enough to observe the modern-day Venetian heirs of Bassanio enjoying the sun, dressed in name brands, wearing leather moccasins, drinking fine wines in the city's prominent bars, pockets full



Figure 13 Bassanio (Michele Athos Guidi) dressed in red for the trial. © Andrea Messana

of money. Fashion changes but attitudes do not. Bassanio is shrewd and calculating when he wants to be. He knows his goal: to marry the beautiful Portia by any means. The more difficult challenge is to face his moral ideas, to have no mercy for Shylock, to focus only on Antonio and to get around justice at all costs. I am personally far from Bassanio, but it is always a challenge to meet your opposite. There is an intricate relationship between Antonio and Bassanio: an underlying love that is so strong that, during the trial scene, when Antonio's life is at stake, Bassanio is ready to sacrifice everything for his best friend, even the woman he loves. This and the strange melancholy that plagues Antonio in the initial scenes hint at a deep bond between the two characters: a friendship with a foundation imbued with love. Our original Antonio, the actor who workshopped the play in 2015 but was unavailable to rehearse and perform the part in 2016 due to filming commitments was Reg E. Cathey. Some months after the 2016 performance, he died. Maybe that's why, at the thought of him, I carry the weight of a big loss. Theatre sometimes overlaps with real life. And you cannot do anything but accept it. More than Bassanio, I carry with me the torment of Shylock, betrayed by the law, the same law on which he had relied, and that Portia and the Christians used against him. I see my country very much in this. Italy, where the power of money bypasses any form of democracy.

But indeed, working with such a diverse and talented group of international and artistic actors gave me an energy that I had rarely felt before, and every day I thought about how lucky I was and the incredible possibility of living a magnificent experience. Then the

frame where everything took place - that is, Venice - perfectly sealed all these memories, making them indelible. It was one of the most important experiences of my life and the atmosphere that was created on the stage, the very Ghetto of Venice, in front of hundreds of people every night, was simply magical. When we took the production to Padua after our last performance in Venice, to a high security prison, playing the play there broke my heart in pieces. Talking about justice. In a prison in front of all those condemned men. Unforgettable.

I will always be grateful to the Compagnia de Colombari for having chosen me and giving me the opportunity to play and live such an intense experience of life and work that only the magic of theatre knows. I wanted to live it longer. Sometimes I think we should meet again, all of us again, once again on the stage. I miss the faces of my friends. And I miss acting in English. I am trying and I will continue to do it, always taking with me the words of the character of Antonio and the spirit of my friend Reg E. Cathey:

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.
(1.1.77-79)

Where "sad one" means the nostalgia for beautiful things.

