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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

A pound of fresh in this 'Merchant' Milwaukee Shakespeare shuns the contrived for a wildly intense 'Venice'

DAMIEN JAQUES Journal Sentinel theater critic Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Published: April 24, 2005

Think you know "The Merchant of Venice"? Does Shakespeare's romantic comic tragedy seem remote and contrived? Perhaps you are troubled by the anti-Semitic cloud that has hung over this play for centuries. You must see Milwaukee Shakespeare's intense and compelling production of "Merchant," which opened in front of a buzzing audience Friday night. Director David Chambers' staging is providing the most theatrical excitement seen in the UWM Mainstage Theatre since Sanford Robbins took his Professional Theatre Training Program to Delaware in the late '80s.

Chambers pushes the play toward edgy boundaries, employs wildly fun and in-your-face designs, shifts our perception of Shylock by a few degrees, and elicits a stirring performance of striking clarity and sublime beauty.

A theme underlies all of this. Renaissance Venice was flourishing, and a group of young Christian men were the beneficiaries of the good economic times. The affluence bred arrogance, intolerance and selfish excess.

Moral decay was ripening. Baiting an older Jewish moneylender was accepted sport.

Real and rational

Frame "The Merchant of Venice" in this milieu, and the motivations behind the story's characters become real and rational. Shylock's insistence on taking a pound of Christian flesh rather than money for default on a loan is the revenge of an embittered man.

His famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech is not a plea for sympathy or even understanding but a declaration of vengeance. Asserting that Jews can be just as heartless as Christians, he says, "The villainy you teach me I will execute."

It's a statement of empowerment, and the well-spoken Johnny Lee Davenport plays Shylock with a physical energy and vigor rarely seen in the character. "Merchant" snaps into focus as a play about bullying — on both sides of the conflict.

Romance gets almost equal time and attention in this production because of Molly Rhode's incandescent portrayal of the heiress Portia, whose future is reliant on a series of suitors playing a guessing game. Rhode appears to have been born to play Shakespeare.

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Her clarity of speech and purpose resonates with certainty and strength. Beyond that, Rhode is so deeply into each moment and so emotionally responsive, one doesn't want to take his eyes from her whenever she is on stage.

Portia's eyes are on Bassanio, and the facile Grant Goodman is a worthy prize for Rhode. Tall, blond and handsome, he glides through the role as if he, too, has Shakespeare's words flowing through his veins.

This production resolves the question of why Shylock's daughter Jessica so coldly turns her back on him and rejects her religion to marry a Christian. Jessica is often played as an intelligent and sensitive young woman, but Sarah Sokolovic's take on the character is different.

She portrays Jessica as a teenage airhead. It's all about the cute boy, Lorenzo, played by the genuinely attractive Marcus Truschinski.

Sokolovic's Jessica is a prime example of the aggressive way design informs performances and the entire production. Costume designer Irina **Kruzhilina** places her in attention-grabbing clothes that suggest the character is not exactly worldly and sophisticated.

Costumes are audacious

Kruzhilina's costumes are an audacious collection, with influences from the Renaissance, the surreal and contemporary runway fashions. Throw Mardi Gras into the mix.

Some are as much containers as they are clothing, and the costumes are key partners in the successful creation of superbly realized characters such as Launcelot Gobbo (David Flores), Old Gobbo (Michael Duncan) and Tubal (Bryce Lord).

Scenic designer Darcy Scanlin uses a greatly enlarged photo to trick the eye into thinking it is looking at the façade of one side of an Italian piazza. Frequently changing photographic images are flashed on screens behind it.

Television monitors screen other split-second images. A pulsating industrial sound design created by Josh Schmidt underscores chunks of the show.

Mark Metcalf's portrayal of Antonio, delivered in a low, gravelly mumble, is the production's only disappointment.

IF YOU GO

"The Merchant of Venice" continues through May 8 in the Mainstage Theatre at the UWM Peck School of the Arts, 2400 E. Kenwood Blvd. Tickets can be purchased by calling (414) 229-4308.

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