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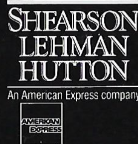

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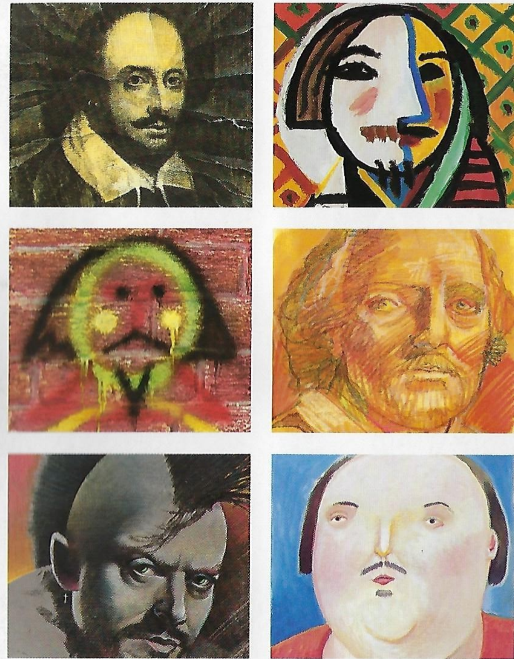

1987-1988 Season

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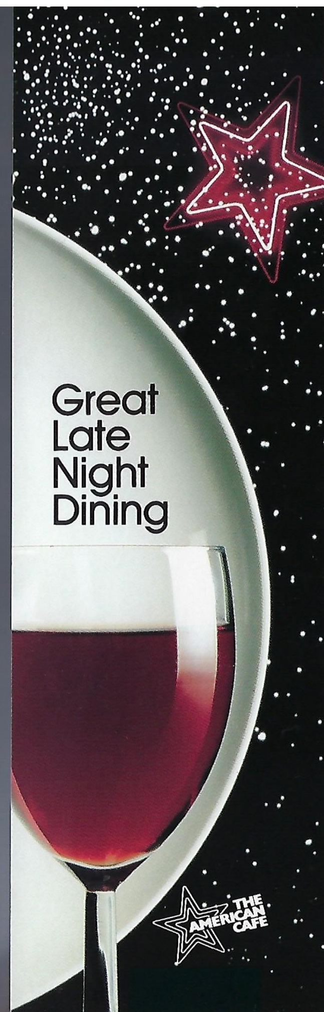

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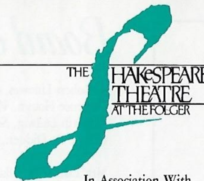

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Mary Ann de Barbieri

Presents

by William Shakespeare

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Michael Langham

Set Design
Douglas Stein

Costume Design
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THE CAST (in order of appearance)

Role	Actor
Antonio, *the Merchant; a prominent ship-owner*	Jack Ryland
Salerio	Michael M. Thompson
Solanio	J. C. Hoyt
Bassanio, *Antonio's friend*	Geoffrey Lower
Lorenzo, *in love with Jessica*	Kevin Black
Gratiano	Edward Gero
Antonio's Servant	Richard C. Thompson
Portia, *a wealthy heiress*	Kelly McGillis
Nerissa, *her companion*	Marcia Cross
Balthazar, *her steward*	Andrew Land Prosky
Casket-Bearers	Brigitte Barnett, Karen Eterovich, Susan Velasquez
Shylock, *the rich Jew*	Brian Bedford
Prince of Morocco, *suitor to Portia*	Robert Jason
Launcelot Gobbo, *servant to Shylock*	John Seidman
Old Gobbo, *his father*	Emery Battis
Leonardo } *Bassanio's Servants*	Tim MacDonald
Fernando } *Bassanio's Servants*	Francis Hodgins
Jessica, *daughter to Shylock*	Michele Farr
Prince of Arragon, *suitor to Portia*	Philip Goodwin
Mother to the Prince	Lucy Brightman
Tubal, *a friend of Shylock's*	Philip Goodwin
Gaoler	Tim MacDonald
Duke of Venice	Emery Battis
Magnificos	Francis Hodgins, Robert Jason
Clerk of the Court	Richard C. Thompson
Stephano, *servant to Portia*	Tim MacDonald
Singers in Portia's Household	Thomas E. Bell, Stan Brown, Bob Burns, Sally Groth, Sarah Kimball, Pedro Porro, Suzanne Wrench.
Servants and Townspeople	Lafontaine Oliver, David Peirce, Pedro Porro

The action occurs in Venice and at Portia's house in Belmont.

There will be one intermission.

Understudies: **Matthew Allen Bretz (Salerio, Solanio), Stan Brown (Prince of Morocco, Magnificos), Bob Burns (Balthazar, Leonardo, Gaoler, Stephano), Jim Byrnes (Duke of Venice, Old Gobbo, Tubal), Karen Eterovich (Jessica), Phebe Finn (Nerissa), Sally Groth (Casket-Bearer), Francis Hodgins (Bassanio, Gratiano), J. C. Hoyt (Antonio), Sarah Kimball (Mother to the Prince), Tim MacDonald (Prince of Arragon), Andrew Land Prosky (Launcelot Gobbo), Richard C. Thompson (Lorenzo).**

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About the Theatre

The Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger was founded in 1970 by O.B. Hardison, then library director, under the name The Folger Theatre Group as a division of the internationally recognized Folger Shakespeare Library. Richmond Crinkley was appointed as the first artistic director for the Theatre. Under the directorship of Crinkley, the fledgling theatre quickly attracted national attention.

From 1972 until 1980, Louis W. Scheeder served as producer for The Folger Theatre Group and firmly established the Theatre's prominence in the nation as a producer of classical and new works.

In 1981, John Neville-Andrews took the helm as artistic producer of the newly renamed Folger Theatre and reaffirmed the theatre's dedication to Shakespeare and the classics.

In January 1985, Library trustees, citing mounting deficits, announced plans to withdraw their financial support and dissolve the company at the end of the season. As a result of considerable public support to save the theatre, Washington lawyer R. Robert Linowes came forward and with the generous assistance of The Folger Shakespeare Library, local foundations, corporations and individuals, assumed the task of raising funds to continue the Theatre's programs.

In 1986, Michael Kahn was appointed as the new artistic director of The Shakespeare Theatre. Today, the newly incorporated Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger operates as a separate, non-profit entity. Located on Capitol Hill, the Theatre has long been recognized for theatrical excellence on a national and international scale. The Theatre presents a dynamic season from October through June to over 65,000 patrons each year, in a beautiful 253 seat replica of an Elizabethan theatre.

The actors of The Shakespeare Theatre are employed under a League of Resident Theatre/Actors' Equity Association Contract. The Theatre employs members of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, United Scenic Artists, and is a member of the Theatre Communications Group, the League of Resident Theatres, the American Arts Alliance, the League of Washington Theatres and the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington.

Program Notes

Although *The Merchant of Venice* is not one of the handful of Shakespearean tragicomedies usually classified as "problem plays," it is in fact a work that has frequently been the occasion of controversy.

Like *Huckleberry Finn*, another staple of our cultural heritage, it deals with sensitive issues—issues that touch on matters of race relations, religious toleration, and human rights—and it occasionally does so in ways that mark it as the product of an era that now seems comparatively "primitive" in some of its social and political values. Notwithstanding the play's many virtues, therefore—among them the fact that it can be shown to be ahead of its time in its handling of precisely those issues that are most likely to disturb a modern theatregoer—*The Merchant of Venice* is now thought by some to be inappropriate fare for today's audiences.

Edwin Booth as Shylock from *Shylock on the Stage* by Toby Lelyveld.

Regrettable though such a view may be, it is certainly understandable. But we will do well to remember that there are many ways of reading and producing *The Merchant of Venice*.

One indication of the play's complexity is to be found in the variety of treatments the character Shylock has received over the centuries. At times he has been portrayed as a buffoon, a melodramatic red-bearded villain so confused in his rage over the trick that is played upon him when Jessica elopes with Lorenzo that he can't decide whether it is the betrayal of his daughter, the humiliation he has suffered at the hands of his enemies, or the loss of his ducats that has hurt him most deeply. At other times he has been depicted as an embodiment of the Devil, an inhuman cur with nothing but his malignant hatred of Christian society to motivate his murderous lust for Antonio's life. At still other times, especially during the past century, he has been played as a victim whose desire for revenge is more than justified by the mistreatment he has received at the hands of an insensitive and oppressive majority. Depending on the choices that underlie a given production, in other words, Shylock can range from the chief malefactor in a play that appears anti-Semitic to the tragic protagonist in a drama that appears anti-Christian.

All of which would suggest that there may be something to gain by looking for other ways of approaching *The Merchant of Venice* that have less to do with the issue of racial and religious prejudice and more to do with the play's characters as powerfully realized, deeply passionate human beings.

What, for example, are the differences between those like Shylock who "breed" money from money by lending it at interest, and those like Antonio, the merchant from whom the play takes its name, who "venture" it on enterprises to enlarge the world's known boundaries and expand life's bounty?

Early in the play Shylock praises Jacob's skill in producing "streak'd and pied" sheep from his allotment of his father-in-law's flock. From him the story functions as an illustration of how to increase one's possessions, either passively by "breeding" them, or more actively by outwitting others in a bargain for them, as does Jacob with his crafty "uncle Laban." Antonio interprets this tale from Genesis differently; he sees in Jacob's early manifestation of capitalist ingenuity an example of the risk-taking entrepreneurship that has led him and his fellow Renaissance merchants to fill the seas with trading ships in search of "fortunes."

For Shylock, of course, such "merchandising" is foolishly imprudent. He has only disdain for the free-spending and life-embracing extravagances of the society that surrounds him, and he insists that his daughter and servant "fast bind" the doors of his house to ward off any intrusions from the "prodigal" spirit of Venetian feasting and merrymaking.

At the other extreme is Bassanio, a man who has squandered great quantities of wealth and yet a man who remains so intent on winning "a lady richly left" that he is willing to put at risk the livelihood and indeed the very life of a friend to whom he is already deeply in debt. Are we to see this questing young Jason's behavior as profligate? And what are we to make of a merchant so absolute in his loyalty and so trusting in the whims of Fortune that he will agree to a bargain in which he must yield a pound of his own flesh if his ships fail to return in time for him to repay the three thousand ducats he must borrow from Shylock to finance Bassanio's venture?

Top: Engraving of the Rialto in Venice by W. Palmer from *The Most Excellent Historie of The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare.

Earnest Milton as Shylock and Lydia Sherwood as Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, from *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* by John Russell Brown.

These are the kinds of questions the premises of the play force us to ask ourselves. And they lead in turn to other questions that result from the working out of those premises. How, for example, are we to react to Portia, the heiress of Belmont and the "golden fleece" of many a modern Jason's dreams? Portia would appear to be the ultimate symbol of what the play's adventurers seek to obtain. And yet her freedom and happiness are just as firmly locked in her father's "will" as that of Shylock's daughter Jessica.

When Bassanio comes to make his choice of the three caskets Portia's deceased father has left to test her suitors, he hopes to discern the one that contains his "wondrous" lady's golden portrait. Meanwhile Portia likens herself to a legendary maiden about to be offered on an altar to the gods. "I stand for sacrifice," she declares, and by extension the brave Bassanio must become the Hercules who wins her love by releasing her from captivity. Is it significant that he passes the test by choosing the casket whose motto relates the concept of sacrifice to the concept of venture? And what, if anything, is the relationship between this motto—that one "must give and hazard all he hath"—and the plight Antonio finds himself in as a direct consequence of Bassanio's quest?

In the trial scene, Shylock says "I stand for law." Shortly thereafter he says "I stand for justice." Where does this place him in relation to those characters who "stand for sacrifice"? Does Shylock receive the justice he craves? And does the court in fact display a difference in spirit between "the quality of mercy" invoked by Portia and the demand for strict "judgment" represented by Shylock?

Following the trial the play shifts into a different mode, and the transition is signaled by the disguised "judge's" request that Bassanio surrender his wedding ring in gratitude for "this second Daniel's" services. We know, of course, that this little episode is merely a game, Portia's way of giving her new husband yet one more test. But does the "sacrifice" it requires of him have any bearing on the issues dealt with elsewhere in the play?

And finally, how comfortable should we feel in the moonlit magic of the concluding night in Belmont? All the conflicts of strife-riven Venice now feel far away. But are they merely out of time, out of mind? And what about the charmed circle that now enfolds Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia and their entourage? Is it an emblem of this "sweet harmony" alluded to in Jessica and Lorenzo's reflections on the music of the spheres? And if so, is it capable of being extended back to Venice and the broken usurer whose defeat made all this harmony possible?

Engraving of Venice by D.W.C. Cammeyer from *The Merchant of Venice*, as produced at the Winter Garden Theatre of New York, January, 1867 by Edwin Booth.

John F. Andrews

The Afterlife of *The Merchant of Venice* in the British Theatre

The Merchant of Venice shares with *Hamlet* the distinction of having been more often performed than any other of Shakespeare's plays. But *The Merchant* has been highly vulnerable to changing theatrical and social pressures, some of which have so far distorted it that several rescue operations in this century have been needed to get it back to some semblance of the play Shakespeare wrote. Its stage history has been rich, but it has not always been happy.

The play in fact had virtually no stage history for its first hundred and fifty years. But in 1741, Shakespeare's reputation stood high enough for Charles Macklin to restore it to the stage. He was to act Shylock for the next half-century, thus establishing the tradition of the play as a star vehicle. Contemporary accounts of his performance evoke a sullen, malevolent, implacable Jew, terrifying the audience by his ferocity and his portentous silences. But gradually eighteenth-century reasonableness and sentiment began to replace fanaticism and prejudice in the audience's response, and the way was slowly prepared for the great romantic Shylock of Edmund Kean.

On Kean's first night at Drury Lane in 1814, it was clear that the old hostility of Christendom towards Barbary had given place to a romantic fascination with the exotic. It was magnificent - but was it Shakespeare? By Henry Irving's time there was less call for a "protest" Shylock. The civil disabilities of being a Jew had been abolished, England had a popular Jewish prime minister, and the Rothschilds dominated the finance of Europe. In this late-Victorian business world it made good sense (in Shylock's meaning of the adjective) to try to understand the Jewish viewpoint and what was thought to be the characteristic Jewish temperament. Whereas Kean had created his Shylock from within, identifying himself with the experience of being disadvantaged and despised, Irving's Shylock—played, like Kean's, as a romantic martyr—was built up from alternation of stately bearing with volatile passion that he had observed in Jewish traders in the Levant.

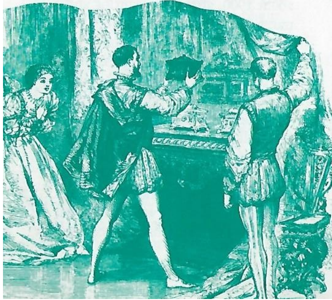
Violet Vanbrugh as Portia from *Shakespeare's Women* by Angela Pitt.

Gondolas and canal bridges were essential to the spectacular magnificence of these nineteenth-century productions which made impossible the rapport between actor and audience that had been the heart of the theatrical experience in Shakespeare's non-illusory playhouse. By about 1900, after brutal cutting and transposing of the text, a kind of synthetic *Merchant of Venice* had replaced Shakespeare's play in playgoers' minds.

Though productions in the grand star-centered and "upholstered" manner continued well into the twentieth century, scenic illusion was slowly giving way to symbolic decors and thrust stages. Between the world wars, the Old Vic offered several productions of *The Merchant* in which it was evident that the company as a group had rediscovered the

subtlety and variety of the whole play. The Shylock, for example, was a mean, warped figure drawn to a scale that enabled the director to give proportionate interest to other characters, especially in the Belmont scenes.

Yet just at the point when the play was relieved of the theatrical pressures which has distorted it in the nineteenth century, social pressures such as had since the time of Kean affected the portrayal of Shylock were suddenly increased. "I am a Jew" now evoked an uneasiness which deepened as the harassment of European Jews turned into persecution and finally into genocide. Whatever his interpretation of the role, the actor of Shylock had to take into account the distress and guilt of a whole generation of playgoers. The problem could be evaded by gracefully fantasticated productions, of which there were several in the next quarter-of-a-century; or it could be frankly confronted, as it was in the National Theatre production of 1970. This bypassed sixteenth century notions of an accursed race and the ungodliness of usury by going to the economic roots of modern capitalism and setting the play in the late-nineteenth-century Venice, the seedy city of T.S. Eliot's Bleistein-with-a-cigar whose enemies held that "The Jew is underneath the lot." It was a resourceful attempt to relate an admiration for the play to disturbing historical events, but in so doing, it had to impose, by many cuts and biases, an overall view of the play which severely diminished the great range of the text.



The roles of Portia and Antonio have been profoundly affected by a further social pressure, that exerted by the sexual revolution in twentieth-century society. The social liberation of women has probably helped audiences better to understand Portia as approximating in some ways to the sixteenth-century "virago," or active woman, and actresses to portray her in the courtroom with some of the straightforwardness of an Elizabethan boy actor. By the nineteenth century, "virago" was a term of abuse, and actresses could not conceive of a woman lawyer as anything but an anomaly. Ellen Terry accordingly had Portia deliver her judgement as the result of a "lightning-like inspiration." Peggy Ashcroft mercifully broke with this tradition, and gave us in 1938 and in 1953 a Portia who had studied her case; if she seemed a little surprised at her own audacity, this only made her a better foil to the inflexible Shylock than some of the severely feminist Portias of recent productions. The sexual revolution has also led to such distortions as Portia balefully hissing out, "Your wife would give you little thanks for that" in a passion of jealousy over a relationship which directors from the 1960s onwards have increasingly tended to show as overtly homosexual. When byplay between Antonio and Bassanio involving "a lot of kissing" distracts an audience from the verbal duel between Portia and Shylock, the play is being wrenched quite as much askew as ever it was in the nineteenth century.

From *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*: "The Merchant of Venice",
edited by M.M. Mahood
Emeritus Professor of English Literature
University of Kent
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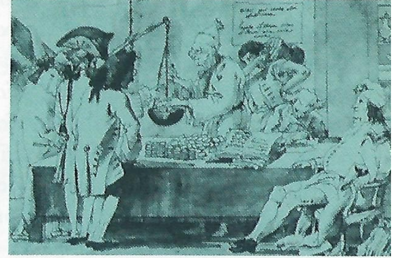
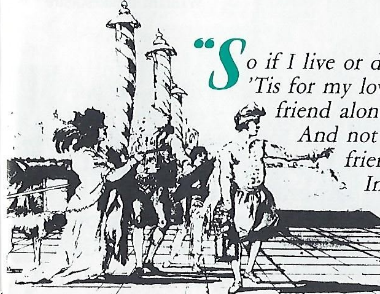
Viewpoints



"As a cousin of mine once said about money, money is always there but the pockets change; it is not the same pockets after a change, and that is all there is to say about money."

—Gertrude Stein



"So if I live or die to serve my friend,
'Tis for my love,—'tis for my friend alone,
And not for any rate that friendship bears
In heaven or in earth."

—George Eliot

Illustrations by Domenico Tiepolo from *The Silver Age of Venice* by Maurice Rowdon.

Opposite page: Bassanio choosing the casket, from *The Most Excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare.