

### Barabas and Shylock: Together on Stage

*The Merchant of Venice is a comedy of affirmation whose subject is love,  
while The Jew of Malta is a tragedy of defeat and negation whose subject is hatred.  
If Shylock is to be compared with Barabas and Jessica with Abigail,  
it must always be in this context (Irving Ribner)*

*The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*: both are Elizabethan plays that feature a Jewish character. However, Barabas and Shylock are vastly different, and the two plays remain very dissimilar. Pairing them in production seems, on the surface, like a good idea, but what do they have in common? Two exotic locales, two renegade daughters, and an emphasis on commerce unite the plays, but their main characters separate them. The two works have been produced together only four times; twice by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford—in 1965 and 1987—and twice in New York—in 2007 by Theatre for a New Audience and in 2009 by the York Shakespeare Company. This paper will examine each of the four reportorial productions in an attempt to ascertain which interpretations—if any—successfully formed a connection between the two works.

#### 1965

The RSC had not produced a non-Shakespearean play since 1952, when it staged Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. However, early in 1964, plans were begun for a production of *The Jew of Malta*, and Paul Scofield was rumored to be considering the role (Zolotow). On October 1, 1964, director Clifford Williams' production of Marlowe's play opened at the Aldwych Theatre in London with Clive Revil playing Barabas. After a successful run, the production was brought to Stratford the following year to run in repertory with *The Merchant of Venice*. Beginning in April of 1965, Eric Porter played the dual roles of Barabas/Shylock to great acclaim; *New York Times* critic Clyde N. Farnsworth declared that "The plays are a *tour de force* for Mr. Porter, who plays

the Marlowe role expansively and for laughs, while expressing the deep torment and resulting vengefulness of Shylock, whose profession is threatened by his intended victim who lends money at no interest.”<sup>1</sup> Farnsworth noted also that the audience appeared to prefer the Marlowe play: “The Stratford audience seemed to enjoy the fire, brilliance and cynicism of Barabas more than the anguished writhing of Shylock.” Another critic raved, “Mr. Eric Porter always adds an extra dimension of acting to any performance in which he appears, and his Barabas was a masterpiece of bravura. Here were all the big batteries of sustained histrionic attack firing their broadsides with mathematical accuracy” (Speaight 317).

Williams’ production of the two plays in repertory broke new ground; the works had never been staged together before. However, not all of the principal actors appeared in both plays; Eric Porter performed the dual role of Barabas/Shylock; Katharine Barker played both Jessica and Abigail, and Peter McEnery enacted the odd pairing of Bassanio/Ithamore. However, Janet Suzman (Portia) and William Squire (Antonio) did not appear in *The Jew of Malta*.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, although both productions were successful and garnered critical praise, the connections between the two plays seem to have been limited to casting and set design. The London Times’ critic remarked on the disconnect:

Externally at any rate several points of contact do appear: one is Eric Porter’s double performance as the Maltese magnifico and the shabby Venetian usurer; Ralph Koltai’s superb set for *The Jew*—massive sun-bleached walls noiselessly interlocking and sliding apart—is echoed in his sets for *The Merchant*; even Marlowe’s white-uniformed Turks crop up again in Shakespeare’s Prince of Morocco whose apology for a delicate *café au lait* complexion now seems quite

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B for production photos.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for a complete cast list of all productions.

superfluous. Beyond these surface marks of resemblance, though, there is no organic connexion [sic] between the two productions; no attempt to follow through Marlowe's assault on Christian hypocrisy with a critical inspection of Shakespeare's Venetian *Herrenvolk*, or to complement Barabas's Machiavellian view of gentile society with a comparable view from Shylock's ghetto.

1987

The two productions in 1987 seemed to have even less cohesion than their predecessors. *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Bill Alexander, appeared on the main stage at Stratford, while Barry Kyle's *The Jew of Malta* was relegated to the Swan Theatre. The casts remained largely discrete; with the exception of John Carlisle, who played both Antonio and the double role of Machevil/Ferneze, only the smaller roles were doubled. Oddly enough, Deborah Goodman, who played Jessica in *Merchant*, appeared in *Jew*, but not in the clearly parallel role of Abigail; instead she appeared as the Nun and the Slave Girl.

Irving Wardle, writing for the *London Times*, asserted that the two plays work together:

The play fits in beautifully with the main house production of *The Merchant of Venice*. In Shakespeare you see ordinary sympathetic people turning like a pack of wolves against an outsider. In Marlowe you see them from the outsider's viewpoint, as stone-faced pharisaical hypocrites, preaching Barabas out of his possessions, and finally dumping him into the furnace he had prepared for their enemies (while also availing themselves of the other side of his plot, and leaving the Turkish army to fry to death, as planned).

Wardle reviewed *Merchant* separately, drawing no connections between the two productions but effusively praising Bill Alexander and Anthony Sher (Shylock), while denouncing the female

lead: “. . . not since Joan Plowright's governessy Chatelaine have I seen so unappealing a Portia as Deborah Findlay, a stately heiress in ringlets and copious silks.” Gerald M. Berkowitz, writing for *Shakespeare Bulletin*, offered some interesting commentary that might have helped the directors form a connection between the two plays:

The program notes go to some length explaining that a large proportion of Venice's Jews were actually Turkish subjects, and Sher has taken this as one key to his performance, playing Shylock as a Levantine trader. He is first seen reclining, Turkish-style, outside a tent, his clothing, accent, and mannerisms heavily middle-eastern. His instincts are those of the professional trader, affecting an unctuous self-depreciation, even willing to play the fool, but always keeping an eye on the deal. It is immediately evident that Antonio and Bassanio underestimate him, seeing only the clown and toady while we are aware of a mind staying two or three steps ahead, watching for the chance to make a profit (18).

Although *Jew* and *Merchant* did not share a director, the program note about the Turkish connections seems to offer a common denominator for the two plays. Whether or not the two productions built on this association, however, remains unclear.

2007

Theatre for a New Audience, a New York-based company, produces classic plays in its off-Broadway venue; its dual production of *Merchant/Jew* garnered much publicity, primarily because Academy Award winner F. Murray Abraham was cast in the dual role of Barabas/Shylock. This production employed full reportorial casting; every actor appeared in both plays. Critical attention, however, focused almost exclusively on Abraham, especially his performance in *Merchant*. Abraham himself seemed to pay little attention to his role in

Marlowe's play. In an interview with John O'Connor for *Shakespeare Newsletter*, the actor talks exclusively about his interpretation of Shylock, and during a panel discussion for WNYC radio with Abraham, James Shapiro, and TFANA director James Horowitz, *The Jew of Malta* was barely mentioned.

Although the two plays shared a cast, they each had their own director—Darko Tresnjak for *Merchant* and David Herskovits for *Jew*—and the two directors apparently had wildly disparate approaches. Tresnjak set his *Merchant* somewhere in the near future, employing cell phones and computer monitors as props, while Herskovits employed a more traditional approach, setting his *Jew* in sixteenth-century Malta in period dress. Most of the critics agree that *Merchant* was a resounding success, particularly praising Abraham's performance, while *Jew* was a great disappointment. Michael Basile expresses his frustration with the production of Marlowe's play:

In two and one-half hours, there was never a moment in David Herskovits's staging of *The Jew of Malta* that could in any way be called memorable; the production's self-conscious lack of sophistication backfired, and proved two-dimensional: no link to the Tresnjak-Abraham *Merchant* there. Scene design and costume design created a documentary-like version of 1592 Malta—down to the finicky details of ruffled collars and fustian: no link there. The majority of the cast, who proved worthy in Shakespeare's text, seemed to lack the basic ability to convince us that the trials and tribulations of Marlowe's characters were worth our careful consideration: sadly, again, no link of any kind there. (113-14)

Irene Dash expresses a similar disillusionment in *Shakespeare Newsletter*:

Unfortunately, *The Jew of Malta* had none of the depth or greatness of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Theatre for a New Audience. . . . The present

production, directed by David Herskovits, did not seem to have a unity. It includes raucous music that interferes at times, performers who don't seem to belong to the play, an artificiality that suggests an inexperienced cast, although the same actors when seen in *Merchant of Venice* seem to have a presence and an ability to move on stage, belying that observation. Even Kate Forbes, an accomplished actress who showed her skills as Portia, was hardly convincing as Bellamira the courtesan. Only Arnie Burton, who played Ithamore, gave the play a sense of unity. It was his power as a performer, albeit one who only entered in the second half, that invigorated the production a bit. (118)

*The New York Times'* Charles Isherwood likewise praises *Merchant* while he pans *Jew*:

In a performance as daring as it is powerful, Mr. Abraham delves into the shadowier recesses of Shylock's corrupted psyche, making him a little more sinister than sympathetic, sinning as much as sinned against. Mr. Abraham's Barabas, on the other hand, in David Herskovits's antic postmodern production of "The Jew of Malta," comes across as a harmless cartoon, a baddie from an episode of "Scooby-Doo" hardly weighty enough to inspire much hand-wringing from the Anti-Defamation League.

The 2007 production drew much attention from scholars, the media, and the public. Overall, however, the rotating repertory suffered from a lack of unity and the pairing of the plays seems, in retrospect, rather gimmicky.

Presented at New York's Jewish Community Center by Catholic director Seth Duerr and timed to coincide with Hanukah, the 2009 productions of Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays seemed ripe for controversy from the start. Duerr sought to recuperate both plays from charges of anti-Semitism, which the company's announcement made clear:

Both plays have been wrongly accused of being anti-Semitic, as a persecuted Jew at each of their centers resorts to revenge. It is the majority of the characters, not the playwrights themselves, who alienate these Jews (along with all outsiders to their culture), forcing them to convert or forfeit all their goods. We are exploring these plays at the JCC to get at the heart of why they are so misunderstood, to reveal the intolerance of the other characters for what it is and to grasp why these stories of bigotry are still, unfortunately, relevant. (York)

Duerr elaborated on his views in *The Clyde Fitch Report*, remarking that "We have to walk a fine line . . . After all, neither play is saying what wonderful people Jews are, but neither one is damning them either."

Hussein Ibish is a Senior Fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) and Executive Director of the Hala Salaam Maksoud Foundation for Arab-American Leadership. Duerr invited him to attend both plays, and Ibish made the following remarks on his blog thereafter:

*The Jew of Malta* . . . was staged in a very straightforward manner. There was no effort to recuperate the character of Barabas, because . . . a sympathetic portrayal of this character is quite impossible. However, the key is getting the audience to go past the dreadful and apparently anti-Semitic character of Barabas with which they are assaulted from the outset to patiently see how the equal or worse villainy

of all the other characters (except, perhaps, his daughter) changes the context and therefore the meaning of what would otherwise be simply a racist caricature against Jews. As with Barabas, Duerr presents Shylock straight, so to speak, directly as suggested by the full, uncut text of the *Merchant*. He doesn't try to reframe or reconstruct the *Merchant* in order to attenuate Shylock's rage, or in any other way exculpate him more than is already present in Shakespeare's script. He also emphasizes the “outsider” status of the Jews and others in both of his productions. In both plays most of the Jews have extravagant Yiddish accents (except for Barabas and his daughter Abigail) and the men wear skullcaps but, unlike the Christians, not ties.

In a message to the *Clyde Fitch Report*, Duerr emphasized that Shylock is not a main character:

*The Merchant of Venice* is named after Antonio, and the largest role in the play is Portia. Despite Shylock's infamy (due to various actor-managers' rude fascination with it), his is a supporting part (5 scenes, under 300 lines). These actor-managers, part of a tradition which I generally espouse, made severe errors with this play, cutting it left and right for the last four centuries.”

Moreover, he sees Barabas for what he is:

Conversely, *The Jew of Malta* is very much about the Jew of the title. He's pretty terrible and the only thing he's done right is to raise his daughter, Abigail, the only symbol of purity in the play. It could be read as anti-Semitic, but only insofar as it's anti-Christian, anti-Muslim, anti-theism-of-all-sorts. The Jews are pretty bad in the play, but the Christians are far worse.

Duerr's clear views on both plays seems to have afforded a unified vision. His cast did not double as many parts, and by using two different actors for Barabas and Shylock, he emphasized that the roles are not as parallel as some directors and actors might like to believe. He correctly identifies Portia as the center of Shakespeare's play, and he offered uncut versions without any tricks, seeking to prove that neither work is anti-Semitic.

## Works Cited

- Basile, Michael. Rev. of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta*. *Shakespeare Bulletin* 25 (2007): 111-15.
- Berkowitz, Gerald. Rev. of *The Merchant of Venice*. *Shakespeare Bulletin* 5 (1987):18-19.
- Clyde Fitch Report*. Accessed 1 Feb 2010. <<http://www.clydefitchreport.com/?p=4701/>>.
- Dash, Irene. "The Theater for a New Audience's *Merchant of Venice* and *Jew of Malta*." *The Shakespeare Newsletter*. Winter 2006/2007. 103,118.
- Farnsworth, Clyde. "Marlowe Shares Stratford Stage." *New York Times* 17 April 1965.
- Ibish, Hussein. *Ibishblog*. 15 December 2009. Accessed 1 Feb 2010.  
<[http://www.ibishblog.com/blog/hibish/2009/12/15/jew\\_and\\_merchant\\_jcc\\_manhattan](http://www.ibishblog.com/blog/hibish/2009/12/15/jew_and_merchant_jcc_manhattan)>.
- Isherwood, Charles. "O, Villian, Villain, Loosed in Elizabethan Minds. Rev. of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta*. *New York Times*. 5 Feb 2007.  
*The Times* (London). The Jews of Marlowe and Shakespeare." 15 April 1965: 12.
- O'Connor, John. "An Interview with F. Murray Abraham." *Shakespeare Newsletter* Winter 2006/2007: 111, 115.
- Ribner, Irving. "Marlowe and Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (1964): 41-53.
- Speaight, Robert. "Shakespeare in Britain." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 16 (1965): 313-24.
- Wardle, Irving. "Swarm of Modern Carnage: Review of *The Jew of Malta* at the Swan, Stratford." *The Times* (London) 15 July 1987:  
*York Shakespeare Company*. Accessed 1 Feb 2010.  
<<http://merchantofvenicejewofmalta.weebly.com/index.html>>
- Zolotow, Sam. "Paul Scofield Considering Role in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*." *New York Times* 23 April 1964: 33.

## Appendix A - Cast lists

<b>2009 York Shakespeare Company</b>		
<b>Actor</b>	<b><i>The Jew of Malta</i></b>	<b><i>The Merchant of Venice</i></b>
Luis de Amechazurra		Shylock
Paul Rubin	Barabas	
Emily Robin Fink		Portia
Brian Morvant	Don Mathias	Bassanio
Jesse Michael Mothershed	Pilia-Borza	Antonio
Emily Rose Prats	Abigail	Jessica
Nate Washburn	Don Lodowick	Lorenzo
Stephen Olender		Launcelot
Tyler Fisher		Gratiano
Matthew Foster	Ferneze	Solanio
Alexander Harvey		Salerio
Whitney Kimball Long		Bellamira

<b>2007 - Theatre for A New Audience</b>		
<b>Actor</b>	<b><i>Jew of Malta</i></b>	<b><i>The Merchant of Venice</i></b>
F Murray Abraham	Barabbas	Shylock
Kate Forbes	Bellamira	Portia
Saxon Palmer	Pilia-Borza	Bassanio
Tom Nelis	Del Bosco	Antonio
Nicole Lowrance	Abigail	Jessica
Ezra Knight	Calymath	Morocco
Christen Simon	Katherine	Nerissa
Kenajuan Bentley	1 <sup>st</sup> Knirght	Launcelot Gobbo
Arnie Burton	Ithamore	Balthasar
Cameron Folmar	Barnardine, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Merchant	Solanio
John Lavelle	Lodowick	Gratiano
Vince Nappo	Mathias	Lorenzo
Matthew Schneck	Callapine	Salerio
Marc Vietor	Firenze	Aragon, Tubal, Duke
Joe Hamel	Friar Jacomo	Duke
Rob Gaines	2 <sup>nd</sup> Jew	Tubal
Jeff Topf	1 <sup>st</sup> Merchant, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Knight	Stephano
Evan Beskin	1 <sup>st</sup> Knight	Leonardo
Jed Charles		Morocco
Richard Zecharia	Ithamore	
Samuel Muniz	Del Bosco	

<b>1987 Royal Shakespeare Company</b>		
<b>Actor</b>	<i>The Jew of Malta</i>	
Anthony Sher		Shylock
Alun Armstrong	Barabas	
Deborah Findlay		Portia
Nicholas Farrell		Bassanio
John Carlisle	Machevil/Ferneze	Antonio
Deborah Goodman	Nun/Slave Girl	Jessica
Janet Amsbury	Abigail	
Michael Cadman	1 <sup>st</sup> Jew/Del Bosco	Salerio
Gregory Doran	Mathias/Bashaw	Solanio
Geoffrey Freshwater	3 <sup>rd</sup> Jew/Friar Jacomo	Gratiano
Bill McGuirk	1 <sup>st</sup> Knight	Tubal
Akim Mogaji	Callapine/Moorish Slave	Balthasar/Officer
Richard Conway		Aragon
Phil Daniels	Ithamore	Launcelot Gobbo
Pippa Guard		Nerissa
Hakeem Kae-Kazim		Morocco
David Pullan		Leonardo
James Fleet	Lodowick	
Stella Gonet	Bellamira	
Barrie Rutter	Pilia Borza	
Peter Polycarpou	Calymath	

<b>1965 - Royal Shakespeare Company</b>		
<b>Actor</b>	<i>The Jew of Malta</i>	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
Eric Porter	Barabas	Shylock
Janet Suzman		Portia
Peter McEnery	Ithamore	Bassanio
William Squire		Antonio
Katharine Barker	Abigail	Jessica
Stanley Lebor	1 <sup>st</sup> Jew, Messenger	Morocco
Patsy Byrne	Bellamira	Nerissa
Charles Kay		Launcelot
Tim Wylton	Friar Jacomo	Balthasar
Jeffrey Dench	1 <sup>st</sup> Knight	Gratiano
Charles Thomas		Lorenzo
John Corvin	Del Bosco	Solanio
Peter Geddis	Lodowick	Salerio
Donald Burton	Calymath	Aragon
Timothy West		Tubal
Tony Church	Ferneze / Machevil	
Michael Pennington	Mathias	

Appendix B - Photo Links

*The Jew of Malta, 1965*

*The Merchant of Venice, 1965*

*The Jew of Malta, 1987*

*The Merchant of Venice, 1987* (type “Merchant 1987” into the search box)

*The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta, 2007*

*The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta, 2009*