
The Merchant of Venice

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On the 19th March, I went to view the Charles University Workshop production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*; an evening which turned out to be an enjoyable and interesting endeavour. In looking at it visually, it was a stripped back adaptation of Shakespeare, which in some places I found rather static and flat. However, as a positive, the simplistic and minimalistic setting enabled the audience to focus more on the actors. Having performed Shakespeare myself in the past, I know how difficult it can be, considering English was not the first language of the cast, I was impressed with eloquence and articulacy they infiltrated when performing their dialogue, maintaining the conventions of Shakespeare's iambic pentameter throughout.

An aspect I particularly enjoyed was the interaction between Portia (Kristýna Flanderová) and Nerissa (Teata Binar). Their animated demeanours produced a thoroughly enjoyable dynamic to watch; an energy that filled the stage and thus made it a personal highlight. Flanderová in particular adopted a seasoned and nuanced Portia, demonstrating the vivacious confidence and assertiveness to the character that made her a stand out amongst Shakespeare's various female characters. Matěj Vašíček was also enjoyable to watch, successfully channelling a vibrant energy to Shylock which gave him an undeniable stage presence. Although, I would have admittedly preferred to have had him portrayed as less of an antagonist and given more humane characteristics; with his vengeful acts arising from the mistreatment and victimisation he had received.

I found some outcomes in terms of character representation questionable. For instance, Shylock's speech was too rushed, which was disappointing for me as it is one of my favourite speeches of the play. A decision I found that stuck with me most, however, was the portrayal of the Moroccan Prince. I felt that the choice to use blackface was demeaning to someone of that race, and having him act in an inane conduct moulded him into something to be laughed at by the audience, something I was admittedly uncomfortable to witness as I felt it incited racial stereotypes and insensitivity.

The second half of the play gained more momentum than the first half. The static nature aforementioned had disappeared. There were various scenes showcasing a flowing rhythm that was visually enjoyable to watch. For instance, the ring segment was particularly entertaining, Flanderová and Binar impressed once again with their teasing and mischievous natures that aimed to torment Bassanio and Gratiano's lack of loyalty in trading their rings away. Tomáš Suchánek was particularly excellent in this scene as Bassanio, with his luminous look of discomfort and guilt apparent during Portia's ironic proclamation of her husbands 'loyalty'. In addition, an aesthetic aspect fuelled into the second half was the utilization of singing fashioned from Magdalena Hniličková and Alena Hladká's characters. This was something I greatly appreciated and admired; they may have been minor, unnamed roles, but this element brought a pleasant atmosphere to the stage, creating an enchanting musicality that was almost hypnotic.

Overall, some of the decisions and execution in certain places prevented it from being as good as it potentially could have been. That said; the majority of the cast gave a fine effort, very much maintaining the Shakespeare spirit throughout.

Jennifer Nee is a student of Drama and English and American Literature at the University of Kent. She is currently studying English Literature at Charles University Prague for two semesters. She is a keen reader and writer, prompting her interest in journalism and the publishing sector. Therefore, she wanted to contribute to iForum to gain more experience in these areas, as well as believing it to be a great opportunity to involve herself in the Czech culture; such as exploring their traditional aspects of theatre, literature and cuisine amongst other things. Furthermore, she also believed the iForum to be a chance to interact with other aspiring writers and journalists.