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CONSTRUCTING SHYLOCK: POST–THEATRE TALKS AS SECONDARY PERFORMANCE SPACES IN BAY AREA PRODUCTIONS OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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The Merchant of Venice involves the harsh treatment of the Jewish money–lender, Shylock. In Shakespeare's now controversial play, the few times that Shylock appeared onstage in the Bay Area, he could not exit the theatre at the end of the play. After the applause, he stayed onstage in the form of a post–theatre discussion to negotiate his identity with the audience. The audience then proceeded to perform a critical analysis of Shylock's role and shaped the way he would be remembered.

The post–theatre talk has become commonplace in western theatre as a means of giving the audience a stronger connection with a theatrical performance. While most performance theory scholars claim this interactive space between actors, directors, and audience as a post–production means of reconciling the performance, this paper explores how it serves as an equal space of the performance itself in constructing the cultural meaning of the text.[1] In the case of *The Merchant of Venice* in the San Francisco Bay Area, post–theatre talks are not merely forums of reconciliation; they are integral sites for the shaping of a problematic character.

From 2000–2001, two theatre companies produced *The Merchant of Venice* in San Francisco and Marin counties. One hosted a panel–led symposium to discuss the religious issues that surround the play, and the other had a rabbi speak at post–theatre talks. These were the only productions of *The Merchant of Venice* in San Francisco and the North Bay Area in the last fifty years until a dramatic reading in December 2008, which also advertised a post–theatre panel. In Bay Area productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jewish money–lender, Shylock, is such a divisive and controversial character that the play alone is insufficient to satisfy the audience.[2]

The Perception Of Shylock

The Merchant of Venice has been labelled Shakespeare's 'most controversial' play because of the problematic character of Shylock. Gareth Armstrong, author of the one–man show *Shylock*, says 'More has been written about Shylock than any other Shakespearean character except Hamlet' (9). He attributes the play's shift from comedy to problem play to Hitler himself, stating: 'Hitler loved *The Merchant of Venice*. So…the play will never be quite the same again' (51).

Linking the problematic aspects of the Shylock character and plot to associations with Hitler and the Holocaust, Armstrong locates the controversy in cultural history rather than holding the playwright responsible.[3]

By contrast, a number of other theatre practioners identify derogatory attitudes within the text. Aaron Davidman, Artistic Director for The Jewish Theatre, feels that the main problem of the play is the comedy with Shylock as the fool. Davidman says, 'Shylock is the imagined Jew of the Elizabethan era. We get to laugh at him in the entire play'. Stuart Bousel, Artistic Director of No Nude Men, blames not Shakespeare's characterisation, but Shylock himself: 'I do think that Shylock is a villain in the end because he is given so many opportunities to back down and he can't, he won't. He's a sympathetic monster'. Whether Shylock is interpreted as a fool or a monster, sympathetic or merely inconsistent, the faults of his character are linked overtly to his religious affiliation. Shylock's Jewishness is key to his identity. Shylock is referred to as 'the Jew' twenty–six times in the play and as 'Shylock' only nineteen times.[4] Stephen Orgel comments that Shylock's Jewishness serves 'as a principle of explanation for his character, and of justification for his treatment at Portia's hands' (149).

Shylock, as the representative Elizabethan Jew, is depicted with questionable motivations, causing some to conclude that the entire play is anti–Semitic.[5] Harold Bloom proclaims the play to be 'a profoundly anti–Semitic work' (171), adding that: 'it would have been better for the last four centuries of the Jewish people had Shakespeare never written this play' (190). Yet Erin Merritt of Woman's Will views not just Shylock but the entire play as difficult. She says, 'I don't really feel it is anti–Semitic. The Christians are really poorly behaved' (Merritt). These views find problems within the play, but others attempt to understand the treatment of Shylock as Christian charity for the salvation of Shylock's soul. Edelman acknowledges the argument that Shylock's conversion may have been interpreted as Christian mercy, but he says the 'forced baptism would have been associated with the Spaniards, who had just tried to murder the Queen, and with the Papacy, which had excommunicated her in 1570' (4). Forced individual conversions were rare, and much hinges on the tone and staging of Shylock's 'I am content' after losing his religion and his money (IV.i.392).

Shylock is problematicised because of recent history, but he is also misunderstood within the play. When Shylock negotiates the bond, Bassanio does not register Shylock's meaning accurately:

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.
BASSANIO: Your answer to that.
SHYLOCK: Antonio is a good man.
BASSANIO: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

> SHYLOCK: Ho no, no, no, no! My meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. (I.iii.9–17)

This may be exemplary of anti–Semitism, the automatic assumption that a Jew would be antagonistic to a Christian. But I feel it is indicative of Shylock's need for explanation. His words, and what he represents, are subject to misinterpretation by characters and audience alike. Further, in the courtroom scene, in which Portia appears disguised as a young lawyer, she asks, 'Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?' (IV.i.172). Because she has no experience of life outside Belmont, especially the proceedings of a courtroom, this may be a clue to her deception and disguise. Yet I read this as a statement that although Shylock references his 'Jewish gabardine', there may not be an obvious distinction between the Christian merchant and the Jewish usurer. The otherness is not an outer but an inner quality.

Whether the problematic nature of the play results from the text or from a post–World War II audience perspective, the play involves a man who having already lost his wife, loses his daughter, his money, and is forced to give up his religion. Corisa Aaronson produced *Merchant* and associates the challenging portrayal of Shylock with his inability to express grief: 'Shylock doesn't talk about losing love and faith, only about losing money. This won't ever be funny'. While knowledge of Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews provides context for the script, and Shylock's loss is greater than the loss of religion, I agree with Armstrong and others that twentieth–century history further complicates a contemporary reading or viewing beyond the scope of the situation depicted in the text.

The Productions

My discussion focuses on two local San Francisco and Bay Area Shakespeare companies and a one–night performance from 2008.[6] Marin Shakespeare is located in San Rafael, twenty–five miles north of San Francisco. Woman's Will, an all–female Shakespeare company in Oakland, is located sixteen miles east of San Francisco.[7] Marin Shakespeare produced *The Merchant of Venice* in 2000, and Woman's Will did likewise in 2001. No Nude Men, a traditionally gay theatre company, hosted a reading in 2008 at the Exit Theatre in San Francisco.[8] All three theatres advertised and offered discussions on the play.

The Marin Shakespeare Company's production, led by Artistic Director Bob Currier, was set in the Victorian era.[9] Currier did not want to do a concept theme for the show, and he made no cuts from the script. He said, 'I wanted to make sure I didn't spin it one way or the other. I tried to go right down the

middle. I tried to just go by the text'. The only additions he made to the script were at the end.

The Shylock subplot and trial culminates in Act IV, and two scenes later, the play ends at Belmont, with the three newly married couples (Portia/Bassanio, Nerissa/Gratiano and Jessica/Lorenzo) entering the house. Antonio is on stage and typically characterised as isolated if not staged to exit as well. But Currier added a return to the stage for Jessica after the script's final lines in which she recites the Jewish prayer for the dead after the Belmont plot concluded. Magnifying the Shylock/Jessica subplot, the show then closed with a stuffed animal monkey making a sound 'to remind us of Shylock', echoing Shylock's comment after learning that Jessica traded her mother's ring for a monkey (Currier).[10] These two supplements to the script left the audience focused on Shylock and Jessica's separation and Jessica's betrayal of her father. Although he did not stage a concept and intended to adhere rigidly to the script, the added staging of betrayal and loss, at the close of what was once considered a comedy, does in fact alter the interpretation of the performance.

The characterisation of Shylock was not crafted to make him more sympathetic. Matt Henerson, who played Shylock, was a 'very intense, bulldog–like, kind of an angry actor…and of course that work[ed] very well for Shylock'. Currier reports that he 'had to continually keep down on him to control his anger as Shylock has to control his anger in the play'. Although no dialogue was added to the script, some injustices levelled against Shylock were depicted with supplemental blocking. The play opens with a scene between Antonio, Salarino, and Solario. Shylock is not mentioned and does not appear until Scene Three. But in Currier's production, the play began with ancillary blocking in which unnamed characters pour the contents of chamber pots on to Shylock who is standing in the streets below. There is no mention of chamberpots in the text, yet Shylock's claims that Antonio calls him 'misbeliever, cutthroat dog,/ And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine' were not accompanied with such visual displays elsewhere in the blocking (I.iii.108–9). In this way, Currier felt that the offences Shylock narrates were not accentuated beyond the script. I disagree with his contention; the visual of the chamber pots set the tone for abuses toward Shylock, and Currier's deliberate 'reminder' of Shylock's fate may have served to reinforce the injustices rather than cause sympathy for them.

Mr. Currier selected the show because he had a Jewish actor whom he felt would be perfect in the role of Shylock; the actor was the impetus for doing the show. When asked about his interest in the play, Mr. Currier said 'I think that since the Holocaust, this play has been put into a different sort of category. Because of the Holocaust, and because there are Holocaust deniers…my defense of doing the play is just that. Because there are Holocaust deniers, we need to continue to do this play'. Like Armstrong, Currier locates the cultural currency of *Merchant* outside of the time period it was written, as well as

outside the Victorian period in which he set his show. The casting and the artistic choices drove his decision, but the political consequences of addressing *Merchant*, and more aptly, of addressing Shylock, could not be separated from the selection of the play.

The year after Marin's production, another appeared in the East Bay. Woman's Will ran *The Merchant of Venice* in 2001.[11] Erin Merritt, former Artistic Director of Woman's Will, founded the theatre to provide greater opportunities for women on the stage. The theatre's mission states a broad non–discrimination policy, striving for a 'triple accessibility at every event: all people must be able to reach our events, afford our events, and relate to our events' (Woman's Will). Despite the political charge of their mission statement, Woman's Will did not select *Merchant* to make a statement about prejudices or injustices, though they later marketed the play on these platforms.

Corisa Aaronson, who both produced *The Merchant of Venice* and played Shylock, recalls that they set the play in the early 1800s in order to 'heighten the romance' (Aaronson). While Merritt rarely does concepts for plays, she acknowledged, 'Having an all–female cast lightens things immeasurably,' automatically making a production more comedic. When asked if *Merchant* could be considered a comedy today, Aaronson replied, 'There is so much comedy in it. Actually, our production is known more for its comedy than anything'.[12]

Woman's Will also claimed they did not show the abuses of Shylock, simply reporting them instead. Shylock was staged as physically isolated, except for his dialogue with Tubal and Jessica. Aaronson commented that as an actor, she started to feel that separation. Aaronson's Shylock was aggressive, showing no hesitation to attack Antonio during the courtroom scene, but Shylock was portrayed in the fullness of his humanity, facing the audience and tearing up for Portia's 'quality of mercy' speech. Shylock was both angry and sad at Jessica's departure, but the 'Hath not a Jew' speech was acted with fury since Aaronson felt it was more powerful to interpret it angrily. While the anger and isolation can be inferred from the script, the staging of a marginalised Shylock adds to the exclusion and therefore the otherness of the character.[13] Like Marin Shakespeare, Woman's Will added blocking to the play's opening; there was one spit before the dialogue began 'near Shylock, not directly at him' (Aaronson), to offer an example of the injustices levelled against him.

Like Marin Shakespeare, Woman's Will wanted a reminder of the Shylock plot at the end of their production. The ending at Belmont in Act V with no mention of Shylock can leave the audience unresolved as to his fate.[14] 'I think in modern times the end is a way for everyone to [laugh] and feel that what they saw didn't just happen, or didn't matter that much' (Aaronson). Attempting to provide catharsis through the presence of Shylock at the play's end, Shylock reappears on stage. In the last moment of the play, Shylock attempts to try to reach out to Jessica, who showed feelings of guilt. The company staged this

moment so that Portia is with Jessica when Shylock returns to look at the happy couples at Belmont. It seemed to Aaronson as if this added moment were the true opportunity for mercy. They left the last moment between Jessica and Shylock ambiguous, wanting to show Shakespeare's exploration of the relationships between parents and children. Although Aaronson intended to illuminate the parent–child separation theme, the sight of a Jew–turned–Christian reaching out to his newly Christian daughter reiterates the religious injustices throughout the play; it is those injustices, not a parent–child theme that would overshadow the post–theatre talks.

Woman's Will chose *Merchant* because Aaronson approached Erin Merritt to direct the play. Aaronson's interest in *Merchant* came from her personal religious exploration at the time. She approached Woman's Will because she wanted to do an all–women's production since there are 'so many juicy roles for women'. Aaronson wanted to play Shylock and, similarly to Marin Shakespeare, having the right person for that role was integral to the initiation of the project.

A third production of *Merchant* occurred in San Francisco in early December 2008. It was a reading, in the fashion of a radio show, performed at the Exit Theatre by a production company called No Nude Men. Stuart Bousel, founder of No Nude Men, cut the Gobbo plotline since he felt it was irrelevant to the discrimination issue that he wanted the reading to explore.[15] Other than this edit, the actors read the full text. Although Mr. Bousel did not produce *Merchant* as a play, he had given great consideration to its staging. He too would not have a 'concept' for the play:

> I think that more so than other Shakespeare plays that can benefit from a staging concept, *The Merchant of Venice* has to be presented as in its moment because I think it's the context that allows for it to be an understandable play. It allows for a certain level of safety. It allows the audience to say, 'Well, we're more advanced than that now'. (Bousel)

In contrast to Marin Shakespeare and Woman's Will, No Nude Men's one–time reading was selected solely for political reasons: a response to California's passage of Proposition 8 in November 2008. Among other things, the proposition banned marriages and blocked civil rights for homosexuals. While some other states had passed similar propositions, and these issues would take the national stage in the following years, the passing of Proposition 8 was a harsh upset to the touted liberalism of the San Francisco Bay Area.

Bousel's *Merchant* addressed inequity, and like the other theatres, Bousel cast Shylock simultaneously with selecting the show. The night's performance raised $1400 from a packed house and the money was donated to Equality California. Although it was a reading, 'It was important to me that people

enjoyed it as theatre, that the justification for this event was the politics behind it and it was really important to me that it actually be enjoyable theatrically' (Bousel). The theatrical experience was given great consideration, but ultimately the play was a tool of activism. Bousel did not directly tie Shylock to activism, despite the fact that some critics have seen Shylock's invitation to Tubal as politically charged, yet Shylock's status as outsider and commoner allowed the audience's to identify with the character.[16]

The Panels

All three theatre companies offered panels or post–theatre talks which resulted in similar discussions about anti–Semitism. Woman's Will advertised their post–theatre talks as specifically focusing on the theme of religious discrimination.[17] On the other hand, No Nude Men used the play as a platform for addressing injustice.[18] Marin Shakespeare did not advertise their symposium to address religion specifically, but the playbill for the show highlighted the problems of the Shylock plot, and the local Jewish Community Center (JCC) hosted the symposium.

The symposium for the Marin Shakespeare Company was held at the Osher Marin JCC in San Rafael toward the end of the show's run. Those invited to speak were a rabbi, a 'hip, young' Episcopalian minister, a nun from Dominican University 'Sister Samuel, who really likes Shakespeare', Currier himself, and Matt Henerson, the actor who played Shylock (Currier). At the symposium, 'I thought we'd talk about *how* we did the play…. I was not there to apologize in any way shape or form…. I was proud of it' (Currier). While Currier maintains that prejudice and anti–Semitism were not his motivations for offering the symposium, he stated that the JCC was selected as a 'neutral ground' for the discussion because of the sensitivities to religion that the play provokes. Although the session had been advertised by both church and temple groups, I disagree that the Jewish Community Center would be perceived as a neutral site for the discussion because, as stated indisputably by its name, its mission is to engage the community in Jewish life.[19] The locus for the symposium informed what would occur that night.

The organisers expected about fifty people, and over two hundred attended. They ran out of chairs and had to bring more in, and when they ran out completely, people stood for the duration of the symposium.

> About a third of the people in that room were there to say, they were there to testify, 'How dare you do this play. How dare you. You should be ashamed to do this play. They didn't care how we did it. They just cared that we did it…. They had come from as

> far away as Lake County, which is one hundred miles to the north…. They came to talk about, they came to testify that this play should not be done. Period. (Currier)

Currier recognised that the strong reaction from the participants came mostly from those unfamiliar with the play, especially with his production: 'Of course a lot of these people had not come to the show'. Currier claims that if they had hosted the talk at the theatre after a show, it would not have been as negative since people would have seen the staging, realised that Shakespeare's themes go beyond anti–Semitism and learned that the production did not portray Shylock in a negative light.

There were three post–theatre talks involving two female rabbis for the Woman's Will production. Woman's Will offers a number of post–theatre talks in an effort to foster a strong connection between the audience and actors. Erin Merritt espouses the notion that 'the audience is part of the play. A colloquium [sic] is part of keeping with the vision of the theatre'. Aaronson decided to have these talks because she thought 'the play is so difficult to digest both for Jews and non–Jews, for everyone. There is such racism in it, both ways'. The rabbi who led two of the three talks 'focused on the historical significance of it. And how she thought it was an important play to do to keep exposing this wound so that it doesn't happen again' (Aaronson). Unlike Marin Shakespeare, the talks were held immediately after the shows, so the audience benefitted from having just experienced the play. But this exposure did not alter the main questions asked in the talks, which were similar to those raised at the Marin symposium: '"Why do this play?" And I said "to have this discussion. To study the past, the myths, the present"' (Aaronson).

In No Nude Men's reading, there was a discussion both before and after the play. Since the event was held in response to a human rights issue, the audience had the performance framed in this context. Denise Battista, a Shakespearean scholar, led a discussion before the show 'bringing up the issues of the heavy father who rules over Portia, of the *other*, and of Shylock being ostracized for being Jewish and the historical basis behind that and how it could translate to gay ostracization in modern times' (Bousel). Mr. Bousel believes it is possible to perform the play without a panel, but with *Merchant*, 'no one is likeable, yet everyone is relatable'. He felt the apex moment was when someone during the discussion asked 'Why are people evil?' For him, anti–Semitism is not the point of the play, but how and why people turn to hatred is one of its key themes. When asked if anyone took the opportunity to rant or rage, Bousel answered, 'To me, the most successful thing about the event was that nobody did that'.

The Secondary Stage

Both Merritt and Currier added reminders of Shylock at the play's end because of the lack of closure the text provides regarding the subplot. Robert Weimann notes that *Merchant* is one of Shakespeare's eleven plays with a 'postponed ending' in which closure is not achieved. In the absence of an epilogue, the brusque transition from the role of Shylock to awareness of the actor who performs the role leaves the audience less able to transition from the enacted play to the performance of entertainment and the realities outside the playhouse.[20]

Despite the intention of all three directors to set the play in the past and portray Shylock close to the text, the marketing of the post–theatre talks was clearly designed to address anti–Semitism today. These post–theatre talks became a second stage for the essentialising of Shylock and for creating the meaning of the character in modern American culture. In the twenty–first century, the audience remains silent until the end of the play; I contend that the stage of the post–theatre talk becomes the secondary stage for criticism to continue characterisation and meaning. Susan Bennett explains that 'reception of a performance can be prolonged by group discussion of all aspects from general appreciation to specific questions to other group members about small details of the production' (165). While true for a number of plays, the discussions of *The Merchant of Venice* were not over 'small details', and the post–theatre talks evolved into performance sites themselves.

Performance theorists have often discussed how performance–sites outside the theatre might create meaning, referring specifically to Shakespeare's plays. James C. Bulman claims there is an 'intersection of history, material conditions, social contexts, and reception that destabilizes Shakespeare and makes theatrical meaning a participatory act' (1), and W.B. Worthen regards the stage 'as one site among many where 'Shakespearean' meanings are produced in contemporary culture' (38). Although Bulman and Worthen recognise the participatory negotiation of Shakespeare in cultural meaning, I am positing that the immediate literal exchange between actors/directors and audiences in the post–theatre talk is not simply another site of exchange, but a continuation of the performance itself.[21]

How can a post–theatre talk be considered a performance? Worthen explains: 'Performance is definitive of the process of cultural negotiation through which works have their continued existence, their ongoing and changing life' (15). This process occurs with the performance itself and with the audience response, but it also occurs in the post–theatre discussion. The speakers on the panels played a role as well; they served to dispel the idea that the play is not worthy of production. Those who attended the panels desired to have their opinions challenged or validated through the role–play of dialogue with the advertised speakers. Despite Currier and Merritt's claims that political

and social issues were not part of their decisions to produce *Merchant,* they became a platform for the consequence of the show. In Bousel's case, the post–theatre talk aligned with his purpose of hosting the reading, but it too changed the performance that had just occurred.

The way in which the symposium changed the meaning of the production is most evident in Marin Shakespeare's shift in explaining the problematic Shylock plot. The playbill acknowledges that a production might be viewed in light of the Holocaust, but cites the commercial success of anti–Semitism in Elizabethan times as a motive for the playwright. The playbill reads:

> To stage literally Shylock's abuse…lays any contemporary production open to charges of anti–Semitism and comparisons to the holocaust…. So why did our Immortal Bard write it? Could his motive have been crass commercialism? You bet! Anti–Judaism was big box office in 1590's London. (Marin Shakespeare Company)

After the symposium, Marin Shakespeare's website describes the event and attributes the anti–Semitism to Shakespeare himself, defending Shakespeare only through his writing:

> Those of us who spend our lives with Shakespeare find it hard to stomache [sic] that he seems to share an almost unconscious anti–Semitism. We are heartened by his beautiful writing that humanizes Shylock and shows the pain anti–Semitism causes. And yet, the play remains problematic. (Marin Shakespeare Company)

This shift in perspective on the intentions of the play signals the negotiation of characterisation made in the secondary stage of the symposium. Joseph Roach aptly points out that 'performance thus entails a compact between actors and audience…a compact that promised the production of certain mutually anticipated effects, but the stipulations of the compact are often subject to negotiation, adjustment, and even transformation' (219).

This 'compact' negotiates identity. All participate, knowingly or not, in appropriating (or rejecting) a canonical text into current cultural norms. Bennett argues that 'how far the audience accepts the proposed receptive strategies will generally depend on some shared socio–cultural background between text and audience, director and audience, production company and audience' (142). In addition to assessing the relationship between text or director/company and audience, I must also explore the primary factors that unite the audience itself.

Every factor of the play–going experience, from transportation to the venue, the venue itself, the cost of attendance, the seat in the theatre, etc. all affect the

heterogeneity of audience response. All three theatres are considered local theatres, with spectators most likely not travelling long distances to the productions. Marin Shakespeare attracts crowds that may bring wine and food to their outdoor amphitheatre while the reading by No Nude Men was marketed to San Franciscans who were politically aware and sympathetic to gay rights.

Two significant factors drove the post–theatre talks of these three performances to the status of performance spaces: religion and education. The Bay Area has a high Jewish population, and although there are no statistics about that population's relationship to the theatergoing public, Friedman, Currier, and Leavitt claim that the Jewish population constitutes a large portion of San Franciscan theatregoers.[22] Robert Friedman is a fifth–generation San Franciscan, and he claims that 'Without the Jewish population in San Francisco, [we] wouldn't have the world class organizations supporting the arts'. Currier further states that 'Jews are well–represented in the theatre–going community in San Francisco' and Leavitt argues that 'The Jewish population is small but greatly supports theatre'. The experience of the artistic directors and their knowledge of their audience confirms that there is a crossover between these audiences and the Jewish population. I also believe that the presence of the Jewish community itself heightens the sensitivity to Shylock.

The second factor relates to the relatively high education level for the region. Bennett's research points to this commonality. Thosby and Withers' research of American audiences showed that while a higher income facilitates greater participation in leisure pursuits such as the arts, the predominant determining factor was level of education (Bennett 103). This is further substantiated by the high percentage of teachers found in the Baumol and Bowen surveys. This suggests, then, that the assumptions of the academic institutions might well play a significant part in determining the cultural product available (in mainstream theatre at least), as well as the horizon(s) of expectations brought to bear by those choosing to attend (Bennett 88).

In the case of San Francisco and Marin counties, the well–educated populace values the tools of a post–theatre discussion not simply to interpret the experience, but to contribute to the essentialising of characters.[23] Clearly, with productions of *The Merchant of Venice* in San Francisco, more is desired than just the experience of the play.

University scholarship values the critical experience, so post–theatrical discussion is paramount. Aaronson expanded on this sentiment,

> This play, without discussion, without commentary at all, it raises so many feelings and so many concerns and so much shame on all parts. I think the shame, maybe that's the word I want. Not to erase or eradicate any of these feelings, but for them not to weigh so heavily, to have the audience as community working with the theatre. (Aaronson)

Aaronson's understanding of the catharsis of the post–theatre talk illuminates the gap between experience and understanding. This greater understanding may be the audience's as well as the director's.[24] Currier commented that he was surprised how 'uncontroversial [the run of the show] was until the night at the synagogue,' and Bousel was shocked 'that after sitting through a two–hour Shakespeare play, people stuck around for an hour afterwards to talk with the panelists. And we kind of had to close it down'. Whatever feelings the play made have elicited from the audience, it was the theatre talk that allowed them to express and explore those feelings. In Elizabethan theatre, 'the audience wielded sufficient influence to successfully demand the day's play be given over for another of their choosing' (Weingust 122). This very power of the audience to shape the play appears in modern society through post–theatre criticism, and in these cases, post–performance character construction.

It is clear from interviews with the Bay Area artistic directors and producers of *The Merchant of Venice* that post–theatre talks become secondary sites of performance. The play cannot simply be performed, but requires participation, discussion, and a forum for criticism. These performances of *The Merchant of Venice* not only invited conversation about anti–Semitism and inequality, but they opened the door and shone the spotlight on our other stage, our critical arena, the post–theatre discussion.

NOTES

[1] Scholar Susan Bennett explains, 'Non–traditional theatre practice tends to stress the importance of the immediate post–production period. A common strategy is to invite discussion between the audience and cast' (Bennett 164). She continues by saying, 'Even in more traditional performances…the buzz of an excited audience, slow to leave the theatre, continues the interpretive process and is likely to enhance the experience of that production in the individual's memory' (Bennett 164). Whether in traditional or non–traditional theatre, a post–show interpretive mechanism is fundamental to completing the theatrical experience.

[2] This is true for the play in general. Charles Edelman contends: 'In recent times, few productions of the *Merchant* can take place without public discussion over whether it should be performed at all' (5).

[3] Scholars agree. Harold Bloom argues that 'the Holocaust made and makes *The Merchant of Venice* unplayable, at least in what appears to be its own terms' (189). Edelman concurs: 'It might be expected that after 1945, no production of the *Merchant* could go on anywhere without at least some recognition…of its contemporary significance' (55).

[4] These figures do not include stage directions, which alternate referring to Shylock by name and as 'The Jew'. He refers to his' tribe' three times and his 'nation' another three. As for the argument that usury is more of an issue than Jewishness, the words 'usury/usurer/usance' are mentioned only three times, compared to the fifty–four references to 'Jew/Jewess/Jewish' and the twenty mentions of 'Christian'.

[5] Scholarship exists that attempts to deduce Shakespeare's feelings and experience with Jews based on *Merchant*. I will not approach this area of research because it is ultimately indeterminate and dangerous, in my opinion, to attempt conclusions about the playwright based on an interpretation of one of his more than 1200 characters. For further inquiry, see Shapiro and Egan.

[6] The city of San Francisco and San Francisco County are the same. The 'Bay Area' is typically used to describe the North Bay (Marin County), San Francisco, and the East Bay (Alameda County). My paper does not include Alameda County, because of its vast size. San Francisco has 765,000 residents, Marin has 247,000 residents, and Alameda has 1.46 million. To note, California Shakespeare Theater (CalShakes), in the East Bay's Orinda (16 miles from San Francisco), has performed *Merchant* four times in the last 25 years. The last two performances were in 1999 and 2006. They have performed four plays a year since 1987. They could not be reached for comment while conducting this research, and unlike the three theatre companies discussed in this paper, mention nothing on their website regarding a post–theatre talk.

[7] The performances of *The Merchant of Venice* by Woman's Will were primarily done in Petaluma (43 miles north of San Francisco) at the Cinnabar Theatre, with one performance in San Francisco.

[8] Nowhere else in San Francisco, Marin, or Alameda, has *Merchant* been performed in the last fifty years. The San Francisco Shakespeare Festival (SFShakes) started in 1983 and has performed 41 plays in the last 27 years. While they have not done *Merchant*, Executive Director Toby Leavitt pointed out that they have also not included the oft–produced *Hamlet* in their repertoire. But in 2000, they put on four plays (the most ever in one year), including Gareth Armstrong's one–man show, *Shylock*. The Jewish Theatre (formerly Traveling Jewish Theatre), a San Francisco–based company, wrote their own plays for twenty years. They do four shows a year and they have not yet incorporated a Shakespearean play into their programmes. Aaron Davidman, Artistic Director, has considered running the play. Both he and Ms. Leavitt stated they would need post–theatre talks to address the religious issues if they ran *Merchant*.

[9] This was the first and last time Marin Shakespeare ran the show. They have put on an average of 2.4 plays a year since opening in 1991.

[10] See *Merchant* III.ii.109–14:

> TUBAL: One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.

> SHYLOCK: Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

[11] Woman's Will has put on two plays a year since it was founded in 1998, typically one by Shakespeare.

[12] This was the only reference Aaronson (or Merritt) made to the comedy in the Woman's Will production. Aaronson said that the comedic aspects that are sometimes staged with Portia's suitors were not enhanced because of ethnic sensitivities surrounding derogatory stereotypes of both Morocco and Aragon.

[13] Shylock mentions his tribe, his nation, and had a confidant in Tubal. But Solanio's repetition of Shylock's response to Jessica's departure, with 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian' (Shakespeare II.viii.15–16) is indicative of his isolation. However accurate Solanio's report is of Shylock's 'passion so confused' (Shakespeare II.viii.11), it unquestionably tells of Shylock suffering alone.

[14] During the long eighteenth century, many productions would end the play after the courtroom scene in Act IV, leaving the ring plot and the trio of lovers out of the ending. The 1879 Lyceum *Merchant* with Henry Irving 'marks a major turning point in the history' of the play, and 'one nearly immediate effect of Irving's success was that the play would no longer be acceptable without Act V' (Edelman 25–26). It is noteworthy that twentieth and twenty–first century productions feel this same need—to end with the Shylock story. Act V is included in all productions I researched in the last fifty years, and additional staging is created to end with Shylock and/or Jessica.

[15] I would argue that Lancelot Gobbo's interaction with his father, Old Gobbo, reveals the injustices toward the blind. Although the scene between young Gobbo and the blind Old Gobbo is comedic, it illuminates society's discriminatory treatment of the vision–impaired, thus adding another group of 'others' to Venetian society.

[16] Jews meet and assemble at the synagogue, and Shylock's invitation to meet Tubal there is consequently a political action (Lupton 83).

[17] 'Synagogues are still defaced, people of color are still grossly overrepresented in prisons and underrepresented in positions of power, lesbians and gays do not have a legal right to marry the person they love, and women make only 72 cents for every dollar made by men in equivalent positions…. The Christian religious bias against Jewry that marked Elizabethan England is mirrored in the play and in the character of Shylock. Post–play discussions will be led by two Bay Area rabbis' (Woman's Will).

[18] 'A one–night only reading of Shakespeare's perpetually controversial THE MERCHANT OF VENICE featuring commentary from premiere West Coast Shakespeare scholar Denise Battista. Following will be an audience discussion led by a panel of writers and artists including world–renowned Jewish–American author and fantasist Peter S. Beagle and John Fisher, Artistic Director

of Theater Rhinoceros, San Francisco's oldest queer theater company. The event is donation only (of any size) and all proceeds go to funding the legal battle to overturn Prop. 8 in California and grant the freedom to marry to all citizens' (Playshakespeare).

[19] The Osher Marin JCC is advertised as 'a place where people can enhance their lives through various activities that reflect the unique values of Jewish history and culture' (Osher Marin).

[20] Weimann borrows this term from Dennis Kay (227). Weimann also cites Susan Bennett's terminology that today's 'post–performance reception' is a modern–day version of Elizabethan epilogues and endings (218).

[21] Bryan Reynolds calls this space of cultural negotiation as 'Shakespace'.

[22] Statistics vary. New York Public Television's website says that San Francisco has a higher Jewish percentage (28%) than New York City (24%) despite higher population numbers in New York. The U.S. Census Bureau states that nationally the USA was 1.7% Jewish in 2007, with the state of California as 3.3% Jewish. Another website lists SF's largest faith groups as of 2000, with Roman Catholic first at 23.3% of the population of SF, followed by Jewish at 6.4% of the population (University of Southern California). Yet adherents.com says the SF Bay Area is 4.1% Jewish in 1990, and another source says the SF Bay Area was 3.1% Jewish in 2001 (American Jewish Committee Archives).

[23] San Francisco and Marin are in the top 1% of most educated counties in America. As of the 2007 U.S. Census data pool, the national average of people over the age of 25 who had college diplomas or higher was 27%. In San Francisco, 50% of the population is college–educated or higher, and in Marin it is 53.5%. As of the 2000 census, of the U.S. and Puerto Rico's 3272 counties, only 0.9% (30 counties total) of counties in the U.S., including San Francisco and Marin, have at least 45% of their population as college–educated and higher (U.S. Census Bureau).

[24] 'Most commentators on Aristotle throughout the history of criticism, assume that, by the term "catharsis", Aristotle is describing the effect of the drama on audience, and that it is therefore the spectators who are purged of pity and fear. There has been no such general agreement about what the spectators are purged of' (Orgel 134).

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