

against all odds presents

a ground-breaking new interpretation



the Merchant of Venice

by william shakespeare

programme

directed by Orde

£1



The World is
still deceived
with Ornament

summer 2002 - burton taylor theatre
& new college gardens

why is tonight different from all other nights?

Written between 1596 and 1598, The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's most complex and difficult plays. The play opens in Venice, where the rich merchant Antonio is discussing his ventures abroad. His friend Bassanio asks to borrow money to travel to Belmont to woo a rich lady called Portia. Antonio's assets being at sea, he borrows the money from a Jewish moneylender named Shylock. Shylock, in a "merry sport", agrees to lend him money on the condition that if he doesn't pay it back on time, he can take a pound of Antonio's flesh. To complicate matters, Antonio's friend Lorenzo elopes with Shylock's daughter Jessica, stealing much of his money and other, more sentimental items in the process. It is then heard that Antonio has problems with his merchandise at sea, and Shylock sees an opportunity to take revenge.

It is perhaps no surprise that The Merchant of Venice was Hitler's favourite Shakespeare play, and was performed more than any other throughout fascist Germany, in effect being used as anti-Semitic propaganda. Certain negative Jewish stereotypes are clearly present in the play: Shylock is a moneylender, he seeks revenge on the life of a Christian, he is thrifty and careful with his money. Since the Holocaust Shylock has of course had to be rehabilitated. He is now generally portrayed in a far more sensitive light, and yet certain stereotypes remain. Trevor Nunn's recent interpretation was certainly not anti-Shylock, yet the character was, visually at least, still a stereotypical Jew. He talked with a "Jewish" accent, wore a long black coat and had a big grey beard. It has been our mission from the start to fully rehabilitate the character into a strong, charismatic man, proud of his faith and what he has achieved, close to his daughter, who through other's gross mistreatment of him is pushed slowly into a corner where he can do nothing but strike back at those who wrong him. A tragic hero then, a strong man brought down by others, a Hamlet, a Macbeth even. But certainly not a one-dimensional stereotypical relic of an age of prejudice.

Joe Swarbrick (Launcelot).

The glittering Belmont with golden Portia and the sterling tradesmen of Venice show us a opulent world that steals our thoughts. Shakespeare was a writer of greater depth than glitter, race, skin or money. Beneath the Venetian veneer with it's pseudo-Christian venal lies idolatry of money, greed and theft.

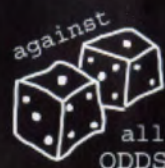
The three caskets put Portia's suitors on trial. The Merchant of Venice puts the audience on trial. The audience watch the suitors arrogance, complacency and love of appearance. Shakespeare then shows us other characters of arrogance and complacency and with the love of appearance and begs us which way we choose. That this play was popular in Nazi Germany shows us that it is easy for us to choose wrong and form our own misguided version of this play.

This totally unabridged version of the play shows the noble Shylock dragged down by the Nobility of State and Capital; moneys are their suit. The merchants who value money above humanity, Belmont where appearance is valued above humanity contrive to ruin what true value there is in their midst, through prejudice, oversight and greed.

This youthful company, established by Orde, director of this production, is from further than Town and Gown, from Iran to Oxford, from professional to the entirely green, each bringing a fresh light to this oft repeated, oft read, but rarely looked-at play. This play about people's pre-suppositions is all too often taken as a play of an evil old Semite. Giving Shakespeare more credit than to be a self-contradictory racist wordsmith, the recycled stereotypes of the play are discarded and the characters played with the complexity of humanity with it's vices and virtues. This is not about the evil cackling pound of flesh Jew, if you don't wish it.

Next year, another Against All Odds Production.

Steve Davy (Gratiano).



the cast

**daniel zappi - shylock**

Daniel wants to be a man. But it ain't easy boy... So - off to clown school to shed that adolescent frown. Yes sir!
Thus...

**john newton - antonio**

Closely linked with the legendary Pegasus Theatre, John has probably acted more than all of us put together, from radio voice-overs to the altogether more sophisticated Twelfth Night.

**nick eglin - bassanio**

For two years now, Nick has been a student of telpathy, telekinetics and other secrets of the mind. So if you feel your chair move, don't worry, he's just lost a little concentration

**gabriella romano - jessica**

Gaby is a dancer extraordinaire, originally from Italy, who hopes to get a scholarship to a top London dance college. All donations towards her tuition fees will be gratefully accepted.

**joe swarbrick - launcelot**

Joe would love a career in either singing, acting or playing the guitar. However, somewhere deep underneath his grotesquely bloated ego he suspects he can do none of these things.

**steve davy - gratiano/gaoler**

Steve, a pseudo-northerner, has always had two loves: rugby league and the taste of beer. The rest of his life is to be dedicated to the study of lager yeast. He also quite likes acting.

**lydia maxwell - portia**

Lydia hopes to spend several years touring with bizarre fringe theatre groups before being picked up by the RSC. She may never be rich, but if you see her playing harmonica outside a tube station, please buy her lunch.

**annie fothergill - nerissa**

Annie studies performing arts and French at Oxford Brookes with Lydia. Once voted smiliest person in her school in St Albans, she plans to drink lots in Bordeaux then become a Blue Peter presenter.

**mehdi niazak - old gobbo**

The funny man from Iran, this is Mehdi's first production. His hilarious portrayal of an old man has to be seen to be believed, and his skills with a hammer have been invaluable in building the set.

**kai buckle - lorenzo/morocco**

Kai did 15 years at European school in Abingdon, and has now been let out on probation. He has learnt the part of Lorenzo in only one week due to tragically foreseeable circumstances.

**zimmy ryan - salerio/portia (new college run)**

After a promising start in the theatre performing in numerous productions, Zimmy retreated to the Chinese mountains and shaved her head. She can now "communicate with non-animal life forms." Nice.

**tom crowther - solanio/arragon**

Tom is a poet and actor who has worked with Zimmy in the company Press Gang, though managing to escape to bizarre spiritual side-effects.

**luigi cibrario - tubal/the duke/stephano**

Luigi is a rootless creature, having lived in Australia, Holland, Italy and Singapore. He is a barman by day and a nuicance drummer by night, and believes he is related to royalty.

**katy boon - salerio (new college run)**

As Lydia jets off to Canada, Katy steps up to the role of Salerio. Having played Ariel in The Tempest, Katy is more than qualified. She enjoys music, festivals and the country of Russia.



director's notes



This production grew out of a play of mine *Antonio, the Merchant of Venice*, and another in draft, *Shylock the Magnificent* (Shylock is the only tragic Hero in Shakespeare that does not die).

Against All Odds was a name suggested by close friends, Kate and Richard, more in jest but it stuck. The cast developed from an invitation by Brookes University's Phil Whitehead to develop a production. As it was out of term time recruitment was problematic - the actors themselves, especially Daniel Zappi, roped in friends; strangers off the street were found; and Reservoir Books was a great dam of talent - customers and staff. New College then came to the rescue with a garden beautiful garden venue. It is a diverse and rich mixture.

The production is set in any time and place. The issues raised then are now and the future. Unfortunately for reasons of time and space I could not develop all my ideas. Yet the entire cast, mostly under 21, have been great. Set and costume designer, Jane Backhouse has been splendid in her work. An interior exterior dialogue; ornament and reality - renaissance clothing over modern dress. Aside from designing she has made all the costumes and helped paint and make the set. Mehdi Niaznak, our youngest cast member has been up all hours painting and using his carpentry skills. Joe Swarbrick has been a brick in assistance, management and especially poster design - a piece which captures an essence of this production.

I hope this is the start of many more AAO productions with them. A very special group of people, with very special talents. All of them. A pity these could not be expressed in the limited space of the programme. But I hope in the limited time we had for rehearsals, and the standard problems (including losing an important cast member a week before opening) you will feel we have all achieved something. I believe Against All Odds cast and members and supporters feel this.

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acknowledgements

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merchant of venice at new college gardens

12th - 16th August £5/£4 concs

Gates open at 6:15, Performance at 6:45

Tickets available from Oxford Playhouse 01865 305305

or at the venue on the night

Entrance via main entrance on Holywell Street

production

orde levinson - director/producer

Orde is a man of many parts - as an art historian, he has written noted works on Cubism and African art. As a playwright, his "Ndilipa Nkoxi" was described by Samuel Beckett as a "moving feat." He also directed Richard E. Grant's first two 16mm films. He has been fascinated with the merchant, and this production marks the culmination of many years work.



jane backhouse - design and costume

Despite being only twenty-one Jane has worked her remarkable talent into the design of several productions, including the recent college production of Peer Gynt. She hopes to marry a Czech poet.



emily unia - marketing manager

An Oxford student with immense organisational zeal, Emily has also acted with Zimmy and Tom in Arcadia at the OFS last year. Our humiliating publicity stunts are all down to her.



other thanks must go to:

Joe for stage management/poster design; Mehdi for set building; Annie for prop management; Nick, Steve, John, Annie, Lydia and Orde for set painting.