

# A FEMALE SHYLOCK IN THE SNOW

An Essay by Carey Perloff

It all started with a quid pro quo, which is perhaps appropriate for a play built on a transaction (although a far more lethal one than agreeing to direct a problematic play). My production of A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS had been invited to Arena stage for January 2020, and I very much wanted lead actor and Associate Director Haysam Kadri to be part of it. This was difficult for him to commit to as he has three little girls at home in Calgary and runs a Shakespeare Company fulltime. When I asked whether there was anything I could do to make it easier for him to say yes to Arena, he jokingly said, “you could direct a play at my theater”. And it transpired that the play he wanted me to stage was MERCHANT OF VENICE. So began this journey.

I am non-observant but a Jew nonetheless, the daughter of a Viennese refugee mother who fled to America in 1938 and a once religious Jewish New Orleans-born father of Polish-Russian extraction. I have been watching in horror as anti-Semitism has become more virulent around the world in recent years and have had too many difficult arguments about the BDS movement and Israel. So I certainly wasn't looking to delve into MERCHANT OF VENICE. The offer came while I was in Stratford, Ontario, directing Coward's PRIVATE LIVES at the Stratford Festival and renting a house from the inimitable Seana McKenna, a great actress with whom I had collaborated many times. We were sitting at her dining room table when I told her what Haysam had proposed; she remarked that she knew the play well, having played Jessica for Mark Lamos at Stratford and Portia for Michael Langham some years later. At that moment, a little light bulb went off, and I asked her if she'd consider playing Shylock for me. Thus was born the idea for this particular investigation of MERCHANT.

Knowing that Seana was going to play Shylock immediately directed my thinking. In 2016 at Stratford, Seana and I had collaborated on a production of Ibsen's JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN, another dangerous play about money and egomania, in which Christina Poddubiuk had built a costume for her that was indelible: a long black perfectly-shaped velvet dress with a heavy elegant coat, a large expressive hat and a muff. The image of Seana in that dress came into my mind as soon as we started talking about MERCHANT, and I decided to set our production in the late nineteenth century, in a world of mercantilism, industrial growth and frightening pogroms against European Jews. But more crucial than the period was the investigation of what it might mean for Shylock to be female.

I am not always convinced that cross-gender casting helps illuminate Shakespeare; many of the plays focus so specifically on gender that swapping out men for women can sometimes muddy the actual narrative or intent of the play. But in the case of Shylock, who is the ultimate “other” in the play, gender served to crack open the conflicts in fascinating ways. In the innumerable interpretations of Shylock that have occurred over the years, some choose to present a very “foreign” character (often with an accent and wearing some version of Orthodox religious garb), and some choose the “assimilationist” approach in which Shylock looks and sounds just like the Christians but is nevertheless tormented for the sole reason that he is a Jew (an even more frightening example of anti-Semitism). When Portia enters the scene of the trial in Act IV with the question “which is the Merchant, then, and which the Jew?”, a director has to decide whether it’s visually obvious which is which (in which case Shakespeare intended that question to be a laugh line at the expense of a young and neophyte judge), or whether Antonio and Shylock look so similar as to be temporarily indistinguishable (in which case the question is real and the anti-Semitism even more insidious).

In our production, Shylock was a Jewish woman asserting her legal claim against opponents who were not only all Christian but all male. The double “otherness” exposed the deep bias in the play with immediate clarity, and we found that with each scene, Seana’s gender allowed us to hear specifics in the language in startling new ways. We altered some personal pronouns and a few other references (“cheek” for “beard”; “I had it of Leo when I was a maid” rather than “I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor”, and once, out of the mouth of Gratiano, we changed the word “dog” to “bitch”, which, as Seana commented, “became deeply personal and had a startling effect. Accurate and immediately resonant to today’s world, ‘bitch’ is the default slur for any woman who does not comply with expectations”). Otherwise we played the text exactly as written. But what was written immediately started to explode in surprising ways as we began rehearsal. A female Jew is what one might call a “double Other”. If, as Simone de Beauvoir argues in *THE SECOND SEX*, a “fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself”, it is also true, per Beauvoir, that usually the “other consciousness has an opposing reciprocal claim” (i.e. we recognize that people we call “foreign” use the same designation for us) until it comes to men and women. Then, male is always the default and female always the “Other”. Throughout history, Jews have also been routinely characterized as “Other”, suspected of having no loyalty to a given country because our true loyalties lie with our tribe, and considered separate and worthy of suspicion even when we try hardest to “belong”. So when the Jewish Shylock is also a woman, the “Otherness” of the character is indisputable.

Shylock only appears in five scenes in the play, a remarkably small amount of stage time for such an outsize character. The first and longest scene shows the masterful negotiation between Antonio (Dean Paul Gibson) and Shylock to set the terms by which she will lend her three thousand ducats to further Bassanio’s romantic pursuit of Portia.

Poor Bassanio (David Haysam) is wildly out of his depth as he begins the deal-making alone with Shylock; when our Bassanio asked Seana, “will you pleasure me?” she turned and shot him such a provocative look he blushed to the roots of his hair. Finally, Antonio, the master businessman, arrives and takes over. Perhaps to get the men off their guard, Shylock tells them a bizarre Bible story. This tale about Jacob and the parti-colored lambs, which I must confess I have never fully understood, became in Seana’s mouth a hilariously sexual account of how to make anything, from lambs to money, procreate prolifically. What a way to cite Scripture! I had never noticed how specifically the language Shakespeare employs to describe “interest” and “usury” is the language of sexuality and procreation, perhaps in part because one of the many tropes of Elizabethan anti-Semitism was the assumption of perverted sexuality on the part of Jews. When asked mockingly by Antonio: “is your gold and silver ewes and rams?”, Seana’s Shylock replied with a knowing wink, “I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast.” That this was spoken by a woman, a mother of a daughter who knew procreation firsthand, was palpable. Her authority on the matter was unquestionable. Antonio couldn’t help but be seduced both by Shylock’s intelligence and her argument.

And that’s when she began to call Antonio on his hypocrisy and moral turpitude. “Signor Antonio, many a time and oft/ In the Rialto you have rated me/About my moneys and my usances”, she begins, revealing how Antonio has scorned and derided her over the years, “spitting on (her) Jewish gabardine” and kicking her like a dog. When these famous lines are spoken by a woman to a man, the man’s past behavior looks even more cowardly and reprehensible. What are we to make of a man whom everyone admires and honors when he exhibits (and indeed embraces) the worst possible behavior to a fellow businessperson and a woman at that? As Seana got to the lines, “Fair sir, you spat at me on Wednesday last/You spurn’d me such a day, another time/You called me dog: and for these courtesies/I’ll lend you this much moneys?”, Seana smiled, did a deep curtsy, and spoke to her oppressor in the obsequious voice women employ to a man whom they know expects subservience. Antonio was bewildered. How to respond to this complicated woman who was alternatively acidic, witty, and submissive? By the end of the scene, when Shylock coyly proposed that, if he forfeits the bond, he should sacrifice a part of his flesh “to be cut off and taken/in what part of your body pleaseth me”, the castration innuendo was clear and our Antonio was laughing along with Shylock, blushing at her sexual reference. We had circled back to “will you pleasure me?”, and Antonio was happy to be “pleasured” by this interest-free deal. Here was a rich man and a rich woman understanding each other, while the young man who was the cause of the negotiation looked on in rising discomfort.

The famous “domestic scene” with Jessica also took on a heightened urgency when played between a mother and a daughter. Perhaps because mothers know when their daughters are harboring a secret, when they are about to cheat or betray or fall in love, Seana played the scene with a strong current of underlying anxiety. She kept catching

Jessica's eye at odd moments, as if she was well aware that underneath Jessica's acquiescent face, an escape was being hatched. As a woman, she knew what it was to navigate a man's world and find a life outside the home; as a mother, she dreaded losing Jessica; in particular she dreaded the advances of Christian men on her Jewish daughter. She knew how tempting that would be, and how disastrous. Which is one reason she was sorry to lose Launcelot, whom she had trusted to keep Jessica occupied and safe at home.

Thus in her third scene, having lost Jessica and being taunted by two young Christian men in the street, her despair and paranoia over her daughter's abduction was deeply personal. "You knew, none so well, none so well as you", she repeated in despair, as Solanio and Salario mocked her and spit at her feet. In this scene, a remarkable thing happened the first time we rehearsed it in the room. The two Christians were being played by young Canadian students from the University of Calgary (with whom we were co-producing the play), so being on stage with the legendary Seana McKenna was intimidating at the best of times. Here they were, as Solanio and Salario, being asked to taunt and deride this legend. But when Seana began the speech, "he hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million..." leading up to "and what's his reason? I am a Jew", they suddenly stopped smirking. "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions...?" she continued, and as she did, the boys' truculence momentarily drained away. Seana, a woman old enough to be those boys' mother, was calling out their mindlessly biased behavior in a way that they recognized. It was as if she had caught her son slinging racist epithets at a rally and had asked him, "Did you really say that? Do you actually *know* what you are espousing?" That famous speech, often cited as one of the great Shakespearean odes to compassion, actually ends with a frightening call for revenge. So the fact that the youths were arrested into really *listening* to Shylock's complaint meant that her warning that "the villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" was deeply chilling. There would be consequences for their behavior, if she had anything to say about it.

It was in the trial scene that the gender of Shylock felt most potent and the character most exposed. It had not occurred to me how the arguments would shift when both Portia (Jamie Konchak) and Shylock were female. One of the great questions of the play is what it costs Portia, if anything, to finally condemn Shylock with the famous "alien" argument that robs Shylock of her fortune and threatens to kill her in the name of acts against the state. When Shylock is a woman, it initially seems more unlikely, from the point of view of the Christians observing, that she will actually go through with her threat to cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh: how could an elegant woman in a velvet dress accomplish such a thing? But bit by bit, as the trial unfolded and Shylock had the sharpest arguments in the room, as the actual scales came out and the knife got sharpened, it became clear that this Shylock was absolutely intent on, and capable of,

such an act. And the men in the room were incensed. Bad enough that this renegade was a Jew, but that she was a *woman* was indefensible. Weren't women meant to be compassionate by nature? "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew", the Duke advised her in patronizing tones. Of course! Forget the letter of the law: women have been expected throughout history to be gentle, kind and merciful no matter how provoked.

Portia's passionate argument for mercy in the face of Shylock's implacable decision to exact her revenge became a face-off between two powerful women in a courtroom dominated by men. Who would prevail? Again, to quote Seana McKenna, "As I was entering the trial scene, I sometimes had flashback to other male bastions of authority I have faced in other character's courtrooms, the ones faced by Saint Joan, Antigone, Hermione, Catherine of Aragon. Confronting judges not likely to vote in my favour, but convinced that justice was on my side." Shylock the woman deeply admired Portia, the woman disguised as a man; sometimes it was as if she intuited that underneath Portia's male suit was a female body. "Oh wise young judge, how much more elder art thou than thy looks!" she exclaimed. Shylock believed that Portia, unlike the Duke, might be fair to her and follow the law. So when she prepared to cut Antonio's flesh and Portia exclaimed, "Tarry a little!", Seana's Shylock was stunned. What was happening? Exactly what she had always feared. Everyone who has ever felt marginalized from the justice system (from women to people of color) knows exactly how that moment feels when it becomes clear that the goal posts are going to be endlessly moved, and there will be no recourse. When Shylock is told she will have to cede everything she owns to the state and, eventually, to the Christian who stole her daughter, she has only one thing left: her Jewish self. And when that very self is taken away by Antonio ("One thing more, that she will presently become a Christian") there is literally nothing left. Robbed of identity and of money, what remains?

Shylock's exit is one of the strangest in Shakespeare—this previously loquacious character disappears almost without a trace or a word. With a female Shylock, the audience recognized this silence in a visceral way; after all, women have been publicly silenced by men since time immemorial. All that remained at the end of our trial was a weary Jewish woman, with no more language at her disposal, packing her bag and slowly shuffling out of the courthouse. History is full of images of Jews in diaspora, carrying their bags to the next inhospitable spot. Seeing Seana wilt under the weight of that suitcase and leave in complete defeat brought a moment of pause to the Christian men in the room. Until the celebrations and dinner invitations began to flow.

At the last moment, as she was exiting, Seana turned around to look back at the courtroom one last time and saw the entire crowd of Christian men clustered together upstage, staring her down. She was utterly alone. Portia and Nerissa, the other women in the room, couldn't help but feel the poignancy of that wrong. Jamie Konchak, the remarkable actress who played Portia for us, stared riveted after the departing Shylock,

as if in the wake of Antonio's victory, something terrible had been wrought. After all, Portia herself knew the price of giving up her autonomy and power at the moment she agreed to marry Bassanio, and she had clearly relished the opportunity to "become male" in Venice and exercise power over a court full of men. But whom did our Portia end up opposing? A brilliant and powerful woman who was eventually broken by the system. Our Portia clearly recognized the injustice, and brought that sense of darkness back to Belmont, to the infamously strange and difficult last act of *MERCHANT*, in which the characters who have gone through the hell of the trial must return to merriment and Shakespearean coupling in spite of (or perhaps because of) what they have just witnessed.

At the very end of the play when Lorenzo is given the deed indicating that he would miraculously inherit (as Jessica's husband) all that Shylock would die possessed of, the spotlight turned to Shylock's daughter Jessica, the newly minted Christian wife of Lorenzo. Jessica, an alien in a strange land, has married a man who is party to the total destruction of her family's history, wealth and identity. Jessica will most likely never see her mother again, although she will profit in an insidious way by her mother's destruction. It is clear that the forced conversion of her mother to Christianity is just a more explicit kind of violence than her own "voluntary" conversation as Lorenzo's wife. So at the end of our production, as the rest of the group swept into dinner, Antonio and Jessica remained on stage. No one else seemed to notice, or care. Antonio stood alone, looking at the departing Bassanio and realizing he'd lost the love of his life. Jessica, also alone, looked at the deed of gift and realized... what? Did she understand what she had lost? Did she regret the rupture with her mother? Did she trust this brave new Christian world she had chosen to become a part of? In the last moments of the production, Shylock's daughter, up on the bridge, looked out at the world, terrified. What fate was to await her, in this world in which being a Jew was criminal, and being a female Jew doubled the catastrophe?

Two last discoveries. As I was searching for the right sonic world for the play, I happened upon the work of a brilliant female composer from seventeenth century Venice named Barbara Strozzi, whom a very opera-literate cousin of mine had alerted me to. (Someone could write a great play about Strozzi, a single mother of three who had a hugely successful composing and performing career while refusing to marry or behave as Venetian women were expected to). I was immediately drawn to the idea of pairing a female Shylock with a female composer of the period, and Strozzi's music, powerful, lush, and full of longing and rage and desire, fit the bill perfectly. Her music filled the interstices of the play with rich, dramatic musical gestures (remixed and shaped by sound designer Peter Moller) that raised the stakes all round in an unusual way and allowed the score to be carried predominantly by gorgeous female voices.

Coincidentally, the other thing that raised the stakes in this female-centric *MERCHANT* was the presence of Jamie Konchak's two-month old baby. I had cast Jamie as Portia months before, when she was still pregnant, knowing what a complex and powerful Portia she would be. Before we began rehearsals, Jamie was rightly concerned about how she was going to pull off this enormous role with a baby in tow. But Thatcher ended up setting the tone for the room. Among other things, *MERCHANT* is a play about inheritance, a vivid look at the ways bias and hatred are often passed down from generation to generation. When there is an actual baby in the room, a wide-eyed and untainted human being, the question of what we leave our children became very present. Is it necessary to pass on our own hate? Why do we poison our children with our own judgments and prejudices? For much of the rehearsal process, Jamie carried Thatcher in his baby sling on her chest as Portia navigated the casket games, fell in love with Bassanio, argued for mercy in the courthouse, and finally came home to reconcile her new-found wisdom about the injustice of the world with her new marriage to a charming pleasure-seeker. The baby made those conflicts utterly real. Which was perhaps the most surprising gift of all about heading to the snows of Canada to explore a female Shylock in *MERCHANT OF VENICE*.

