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The Merchant of Venice

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Nicholas Viselli portrays Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice" at the Clurman Theater (Source: Carol Rosegg)

In a time where prejudice and "otherness" is rife in the media, a play like **"Merchant of Venice"** renews its relevance to our time. Masterfully poignant with its ability to show bias in the same way we see it now as Shakespeare did centuries ago.

The Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB), formerly Theatre By The Blind, an inclusive company in Manhattan takes on the tragic comedy with enthusiasm this month. The play features seven actors only, five out of the total with disabilities.

TBTB began in 1979 as sighted actors recording plays for the blind and utilizing able-bodies, low vision, and blind actors/writers but in 2008 their mission expanded to include all artists with physical disabilities. A lesson in inclusion as "The Merchant of Venice" preaches.

"The Merchant of Venice" was written somewhere between 1596 and 1598 and forms part of Shakespeare's first folio, referring to some of his first published works.

Although ancient by all accounts, the relevance is eerily modern. Anti-Semitic, "otherness" (re-encountered by Susan Sontag in the last century), and prejudice are some of the most relevant topics on today's agenda: from Obama's stance on Israel, to Hillary Clinton's support of homosexuals.

The play is referred to as a tragic comedy and in Shakespeare's manner, crosses the line between what we feel is sad and what is hilarious. In this case it gets blurred when the overall mood is lit up with moments of hysterical laughs and a happy ending but Shylock's evil somehow clouding it all.

Venice, in its time, was the wealthiest city in the world. Dating to the 16th century, the play opens with wealthy merchant Antonio, a Christian said to be an honest man in his community.

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Bassanio, who although from noble background, has wasted his wealth and so approaches his mate Antonio to fund his journey to Belmont to lure the rich heiress Portia. Antonio, the generous one, promises to cover a bond if Bassanio can find a lender, as Antonio is strapped in his cash flow. Bassanio turns to Jewish businessman Shylock who becomes the guarantor.

Shylock believes Antonio to be an anti-Semite and adds a condition to his loan: although with no interest, if Antonio cannot repay this debt he may demand a pound of flesh from his debtor. Antonio sees this as generous and signs the contract handing over the money to Bassanio who sets off to Portia.

Portia in the meantime has been inundated with wooers and allows them to play a game of choosing in order to win her over. Each of these men is to choose from three caskets -- of gold, silver, and lead. After the failed attempts by previous suitors Bassanio chooses the correct casket and wins over his dearest Portia. But back in Venice Antonio loses his ships at sea and

insolvency looms.

Shylock, fueled by his daughter's conversion to Christianity and his greed, is even more determined to grasp back his debt from Antonio. After attempts by Bassanio to increase the debt amount Shylock adamantly demands his pound of flesh in a court of law.

Portia, dressed in disguise, points out a flaw in the contract that stipulates that none of Antonio's blood may shed in order for the pound of flesh to be given. Further more, Shylock needs to take a pound no more no less and realizes this he simply cannot measure. The happy ending comes when Shylock accepts the financial offer and Portia and Bassanio can return to their romance.

The actors meander between their comedic and utterly grave moments as they each play more than one role. Bassanio, played by Gregg Mozgala, turned on the seducer; Nicholas Viselli tried to scare with

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Shylock (and a range of other stereotypes), as Melanie Boland moved with difficulty in and out of Antonio.

Smart-ass Portia is played with great ease by Pamela Sabaugh and Mary Theresa Archbold thrilled with Nerissa, and more. But Stephen Drabicki was the highlight of the play, as he cruised between characters by defining them particularly well.

TBTB does a good show, with not much thrill, at the Clurman Theatre with minimal props and some contemporary moments in costume. The play is basically about rejects and agreements -- the breaking of contracts, the breaking of relationships and the greed that fuels it all. It leaves the viewer thinking about a sense of justice and a sense of compassion and what on earth can lie between the two.

"The Merchant of Venice" runs through May 13 at the Clurman Theater, 410 West 42nd Street. For info or tickets call 212-239-6200 or visit tbtb.org.

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