

## Shylocks's ghosts

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## Shylocks's ghosts

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### Abstract

Compagnia de' Colombari, directed by Karin Coonrod, fashioned *The Merchant in Venice* from the stones of the Venetian Ghetto: Shylock's haunting ghost corporealised under moonlight. This 2016 production followed Max Reinhardt's *Venetian Merchant* in 1934: another lingering ghost of Shylock. These productions intersected in a vision to create bonds between strangers. Looking back on them in the Covid-19 pandemic context of isolation and intolerance, they remind us of the restorative hope in a globalised theatre. This essay engages with the way the Ghetto, Venice and Shylock speak back, inverting the perspective of the 'other', framed by personal reflections of the author-actor playing Nerissa.

### Keywords

*Merchant in Venice*, Shylock, Venice Ghetto, Max Reinhardt, Karin Coonrod, Nerissa

### Résumé

La Compagnia de' Colombari, dirigée par Karin Coonrod, a façonné *Le Marchand dans Venise* à partir des pierres mêmes du Ghetto vénitien: le corps fantomatique de Shylock s'est matérialisé à la clarté de la lune. Cette mise en scène de 2016 succède au *Marchand de Venise* vénitien de Max Reinhardt en 1934 – autre fantôme de Shylock encore présent. Ces mises en scène se croisent dans une vision qui cherche à créer des liens entre étrangers. Revisités dans le contexte d'isolement et d'intolérance créé par la pandémie de la Covid-19, ces mises en scène viennent nous rappeler l'espérance restaurative que peut offrir le théâtre globalisé. Cet article analyse le dialogue qui s'instaure entre le Ghetto, Venise et Shylock, inversant la perspective de l'Autre, tout en reflétant les impressions personnelles de l'auteur-comédien, qui a tenu le rôle de Nerissa.

### Mots clés

*Marchand dans Venise*, Shylock, Ghetto de Venise, Max Reinhardt, Karin Coonrod, Nerissa

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‘Shylock, for the first time in history, will speak his lines under the real windows of the ghetto’.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 2016, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the formation of the Jewish Ghetto in Venice and the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, Compagnia de’ Colombari, directed by Karin Coonrod, fashioned *The Merchant in Venice* ‘from the ground up ... from the very stones’<sup>2</sup> of the Ghetto, with international artists for an international audience: a multi-lingual *palcoscenico internazionale*. A performance uniquely befitting the space, ‘in a way almost impossible anywhere else, investigating its poignant and painful exploration of love and hate, justice, and, above all, what it means to be human’.<sup>3</sup> The resistance to selecting a controversial and potentially anti-Semitic piece for the occasion was overcome by a desire to bring Shylock, the most infamous Jewish Venetian, home: Shylock’s haunting ghost corporealized under torchlight, moonlight and electric light. Gazing through Shylock’s ghost at real Venetian Jews, both past and present, this re-appropriation confronted the myths embodied in the play. This was not a homecoming, but an attempted exorcism. Unafraid to conjure him up, we are still living with his troubling presence. Almost eighty years later, this July 2016 production followed Max Reinhardt’s world-renowned staging of *The Merchant of Venice* in July 1934: another lingering ghost of Shylock. Since Reinhardt there had not been another significant outdoor *Merchant of Venice* in Venice. An Austrian Jew in exile, Reinhardt was invited to stage a play of his choice for the inauguration of the Venice Biennale Teatro in Fascist Italy.<sup>4</sup> Reinhardt mounted *Merchant* in a roiled Europe, in Campo San Trovaso, an idealised realisation of the set he had built in Berlin, for his final time.

Venice, both a concrete and liminal space, inimitably allows theatrical work to exist in the present whilst evoking the past, bending an illusion of linear time to conjure possibilities for the future. Returning the imagined and imaginary setting of *Merchant* to the historical location, both directors moved from imagined space to real space, back to imagined space, dialoguing with the ghost of Renaissance Venice in the surrounding walls, canals and bridges. This was particularly resonant with the Ghetto’s cultural significance as a mythical space in the imagination beyond Venice itself. Shakespeare’s play complicates the notion of home, of belonging, as the Ghetto does: ‘The setting and the play are fundamentally ambivalent artefacts of European civilization, having been both instruments of intolerance and catalysts for cultural exchange’.<sup>5</sup> The paradox of *Merchant of Venice*, ‘a play that continues to travel in time and space’, is that it functions ‘simultaneously as a historical document of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism’ and ‘as a gateway to the complexities of Jewish culture and to ever changing notions of cultural pluralism, community and (post)humanity’.<sup>6</sup>

These two theatrical works, created in radically different political climates, intersected in their vision of bringing life to Shakespeare’s work and its greater gift of human tolerance and understanding. In a world faced with Covid-19, a pandemic of isolation and intolerance, police racial violence, Brexit, the rise of nationalism in Europe, far-right governments, and an increasingly fractured and unstable sense of identity and community,

looking back on these commemorative events reminds us of the possibilities for restorative hope in a globalised theatre in Europe. This essay engages with the ways in which the Ghetto, Venice and Shylock speak back to the world that created the most infamous Venetian Jew, inverting the relationship and the perspective of the 'other'. It is framed by personal reflections as the actor who played Nerissa, offering my feelings, critical impressions and inside perspective, as I floated on the periphery of a *Merchant* that materialised and dematerialised around me.

Reinhardt embodied his reconciliatory vision of Shakespeare's play in a Europe still trying to recover from the devastation of World War I and facing the consequent rise of Nazism and virulent anti-Semitism in Germany and Fascism in Italy; Coonrod staged *Merchant* in a world riven by sectarianism and intolerance in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in France, and a rising tide of violent deaths by shooting in the USA, the home of Compagnia de' Colombari and half of the cast. Coonrod, though aware of Reinhardt's production, knew little of the details, and did not knowingly quote it. There were, however, remarkable crossovers. Venice itself, in poetic exchange with Shakespeare's play, stimulated two different artists to respond analogously. Their vision of Shakespeare intersected in its potential for human communion, making diversity a place of celebration. Reinhardt was one of the main proponents of theatre's capacity to unite people,<sup>7</sup> seeking not only to renew the broken bonds of a humanity fractured by war, but to create new ties to bind them;<sup>8</sup> Colombari brings performers and audiences together, 'transforming strangers into community';<sup>9</sup> Coonrod's *Merchant* was a 'politically conscious, forward-looking international collaboration'.<sup>10</sup> With Venice as a heterotopia, ghosts past and present, buildings creating portals across time, fantasy and fact not only confront each other but lay bare our common humanity – and our common inhumanity.

Ten days before opening. Shabbat dinner. In the Ghetto.

*On such a night ... The moon is shining over the Ghetto, and the cast have gathered, soaking in the awe of the moment. The beauty of Venice, the emotion of coming together to do this historical production ... We embrace each other in the madness of trying to mount this play in three weeks. We have come from all over the globe to do it ... been blown here by the wind from all corners, and the heart and the vision of the director is to make this grand gesture, this moment when we move forward, recognising that we are all outsiders, all foreigners, all aliens, but ultimately all the same ... The commitment to each other, the coming together as a company, the generosity is what lives beyond the story, beyond the play and the moment. All of us together, under the moon, on such a night, heeding and giving the warning. Killing happens without cause, without accountability. Hatred, prejudice, conditional love. We all are guilty of judgment and fear. We all are creators, and victims, of the system. We are all asked to consider deeply the words of the poet. The words of poets. Love. Mercy. And the walls will literally speak to us. For me it is the future of theatre – international, borderless. And what Shakespeare anticipated. We are in the Globe. We are the players on stage, together. And the power of theatre to hold a mirror up and see ourselves. And to break that mirror. Shakespeare challenges that. How we see ourselves. Karin challenges that. We are all accountable to the vision. It is complex. It is*

heart breaking. And it is beautiful. For there is hope. It is not about winning or losing. It is about Mercy. Misericordia. Rahamim.

To share theatre's undreamt-of potential, Reinhardt used the technique of *Sprengung des Bühnenrahmens* – breaking the frame open:

For me the frame that separates the stage from the world, has never been essential ... everything that breaks that frame open, strengthens and widens the effect, increases contact with the audience ... will always be welcome to me. As everything is welcome to me that is apt to multiply the undreamt-of potentialities of the theatre.<sup>11</sup>

Ensemble was central to Reinhardt's work: he began his career as an actor and thought like one. Today and for all time, he believed, the human must stand at the centre of all dramatic art, the human as actor.<sup>12</sup> Destabilising star systems, his work extended into the audience: 'the actor, in the middle of the audience, and the audience itself, transformed into the people, drawn into, become a part of, the action of the play'.<sup>13</sup> Coonrod's work also drew the audience in. Spectators were seated on the stage, under a wall of light. Her theatrical gesture of a large cast, and a further ensemble of 'black angels' and musicians, was Reinhardtian in essence, although not in magnitude (*Everyman* in Salzburg had over 2,000 performers). Coonrod wanted to infect the audience viscerally, to connect with them beyond intellectual provocation. Choric moments bonded performers with the audience, and each other: complicated, twisted bonds. Coonrod invited the cast to share the space, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, to share the time, as something deep and holy:<sup>14</sup> breaking the frame that separates the stage from the world. The ensemble haunted the threshold of their roles as spectator and actor, watching the scenes, talking to people who approached during the performance. Coonrod's *commedia* *Lancillotto* (Francesca Sarah Toich) literally burst out of the frame – *Sprengung des Bühnenrahmens* – by jumping over footlights to speak the newly penned opening lines directly to the audience in *Judeo-Veneziano*: '*Ancuo in Hazer the se sta un gran tananai. Xe rivà do goym a far moscon al banco e i voeva tanti ma tanti magnod*'.<sup>15</sup> The multi-lingual smatterings throughout the play 'recalled the polyglot place of performance and disoriented any audience members wishing to be masters of Shakespeare's text'.<sup>16</sup>

The cast began rehearsal with a cut and re-arranged text: Coonrod's three-dimensional essay, thoughtful and thought-provoking. The first week was spent in intensive table talk, all of us present, director, dramaturgs, designer, composer, voice coach, actors. We uncovered and burrowed, read and debated, exchanged, struggled, endeavoured. Discussing Belmont as 'The Island of Women', Coonrod spoke of the Nigerian girls who had gone missing.<sup>17</sup>

Yes, the women seem to win at the end. And yes, we are tired with a history of not caring about women. And maybe somebody might care that these girls have gone missing! But we must also realise that winning isn't the answer. As Walt Whitman says, 'Vivas to those who have failed'. Poets know there is something bigger than winning.<sup>18</sup>

The cast was asked to mine the humanity, the thoughts bigger than the characters. Coonrod saw no love in *Merchant*; relationships were based on expediency and transaction. Nerissa marries Graziano for convenience, to stay close to Portia. But Portia giving herself to Bassanio reflects the Platonic form of love, worth aspiring to, though never achieved by the self-interested characters. Transcending the details, the prosaic details of flawed human transactions in the play, there was something greater, echoing through the text: 'poets are our prophets. They love, and our work is to live that'.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, that work was painful.

*On 21–7 we did our first run through, which the Italians call a 'filata'. We did it in the performance space during the day, the hot space with the sun reflecting off the stones and all of us melting in the heat. Questions of blocking became crucial and confusing as things had been blocked and re-blocked many times, mostly in the wrong dimensions in the theatres we had been using for rehearsals. In reality the Ghetto space is very wide and long. And with the ambient miking placed in the footlights, everyone had to rethink profile acting, finding reasons to constantly face the audience. Where am I exiting, what am I doing? The transparent changes in-between scenes needed also to be resolved, as did interlacing in the music, which is a constant presence. Melting in the sun, with pauses large enough to drive a truck through, we ran at two and a half hours. It didn't feel great. We had a one-hour dinner break, then back for our first tech run. During the break there had been a meeting with the director and the dramaturgs, and the other offstage creatives, and a decision had been made to cut the text. In some cases, drastically. After all it was purposed to run at an hour forty-five. Even tightening it all up we couldn't get it down to that. The cuts were given and there was an announcement that they were non-negotiable. It was a brutal cutting. There was a sense of grief in the cast. It was felt that certain lines cut the heart out of the play. Took a pound of flesh. Karin used her key phrase – 'I know my chickens. Trust me. We have something beautiful, but it is too long. Trust me'. One actor refused to take the cuts. It's my scene, he said. Or send me back to Milan – 'It's really too much'. Someone was crying. Amazing and moving moments were cut. The window scene – pared back; 'I'll gild myself with more ducats and be with you straight' – gone; 'On such a night' – halved. The scene where Portia entrusts her house to Lorenzo and Jessica – gone, a beautiful moment of connection in the play: 'I wish your ladyship all heart's content'. 'I wish it back on you. Fare you well Jessica'. Jessica, not infidel. A small heartbeat, a jewel of Shakespearean connection, of love and friendship between women. Nerissa's part had already been cut in the initial edits, so my few additional cuts were not hard to take. But Salarino lost an entire monologue. 'Yes, it didn't further the plot. But we lost some of the poetry', grieved an Italian actor, 'That's what I love, the poetry'. The love story further marginalised. No torture on the rack, no love and confess. Someone moaned, 'There is no seduction left in this play. We may as well do the trial scene and get it over with'. Of course, it was just the grief. Actors invest so much in the character and the words that they speak. So late in the day, committing it to memory, it becomes part of you. Extraneous lines are easy to let go of, but not the core ones, the heart ones. And somehow in Shakespeare it feels like they all matter. The ripple of grief and anger came like a wave but was finally ridden. Actors complain all*

the time anyway, right? Behind the scenes people whinge about the breaking of union rules, asking actors to do twelve-hour days with few breaks, scheduling two weeks without a day off: 'I'm too fucking old for this shit', someone remarks. The actor playing Salarino declares— 'I hate how much actors whinge! We are not down a coal mine for God's sake'.

There are gripes and moans of course, but yesterday Karin gave us a rousing speech, about how many people wanted to be in this project, how all eyes are on it, how we are the few, the happy few.

Applause. Rallying. Game on. Back to giving it heart and soul. 'Trust me. I know my chickens'.

As Karin says: 'We are not scholars. We are artists, poets and we are prophetic. We study and absorb all the information and then we see how it comes through us'.

In 1905 Reinhardt mounted his first production of *Merchant* at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, where, according to critics, 'The Venetian joy of living is the dominant note ... Jewish suffering is only a dissonant note ... Shakespeare's love poetry, which comes alive by moonlight and lovesong and is as fragrant as a dream'.<sup>20</sup> An un-stereotyped Shylock disclosed a 'sermon for tolerance and humanity hidden in *The Merchant of Venice*'.<sup>21</sup> But for Reinhardt, Shylock was not the central character of his comedy; Venice was, at the heart of the play, its main protagonist: 'The hero, focal point, heart ... is Venice. Not Shylock, but Venice. The ever-singing, ever-humming Venice. A city that rejoices with the lust of life, its pleasures and delights'.<sup>22</sup>

This 1905 production became the most influential production of *Merchant* in German history.<sup>23</sup> In the following years, with no fewer than 380 shows, Reinhardt's *Merchant* travelled to Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Munich, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Bucharest, with four more productions in Berlin, until it materialised, for the last time, over a canal in Venice.<sup>24</sup> Despite the Nazis having seized power in Germany, Reinhardt made few changes, his purpose remained enchantment and theatricality.<sup>25</sup> His productions of *Merchant* reflected his wider commitment to a 'humanist world theatre'<sup>26</sup> and an 'attempt to reinstate the formulas of enlightened universalism'.<sup>27</sup>

What I have in mind is a theatre which will again give joy to people – which will elevate them above themselves, leading them out of the grey misery of their everyday lives into the bright and clear air of beauty. It is evident to me how much the audience is fed up with encountering, again and again, their own squalor even in the theatre. Instead, people yearn for brighter colours and a higher sense of being.<sup>28</sup>

In 1934, with Europe grinding towards World War Two, Reinhardt mounted his final production of *Merchant*, a final dream materialised on Venice's canals and bridges. Constructed on his revolve in Berlin, his apparition of Venice, the city that rejoices in its lust for life and pleasure, 'finally found its natural expression'<sup>29</sup> – a rare moment of artistic felicity when the setting of the dramatic action coincides with the site of performance. And Reinhardt took advantage of this possibility.<sup>30</sup> But even on Venice's very stones, Reinhardt still constructed a spectral dream.

Campo San Trovaso, a large square located behind a wooden gondola yard, with a church on one side, bordered by a canal and traversed by a stone bridge, corresponded idyllically to the set built in Berlin. Reinhardt used the natural scenography but embellished the existing edifices with artificial constructions designed by Duilio Torres. The villa of Portia materialised stage left, supported by Venetian-style arches, with a wide staircase and flowered terrace. Stage right, an ornate frescoed building, fabricated for Antonio, arose, as if by magic, by the will of Reinhardt.<sup>31</sup> On the far side of the bank a rented palazzo transformed into Shylock's abode. Reinhardt staged scenes inside buildings, on the bridge and canal, with gondolas and boats creating spectacular arrivals. Evoking the continuous carnival of Venetian life, the production brought together over 400 performers, an orchestra, a chorus, processions in historical and picturesque costumes designed by Titina Rota, masked dancers and long ballet routines choreographed by Janis Osvald Lehmanis.

Location, for Reinhardt, was a place of dream, of fantasy, a spectral portal to transport and transform. His *Merchant* was a grand spectacle, a sensory and saturated experience of festive theatre and music, a mixing of real and mythic Venice, of reality and dream – or dealing with a reality that could only be overcome by believing in a dream: 'Never through the centuries, since it was conceived, has the story of Shylock and Portia had such a background, such a similar atmosphere. Now it really takes place between the palaces from the age of the Venetian Doges, among the canals, immersed in the dim light, with agile and graceful bridges. Reality and dream merge in an unrepeatable way'.<sup>32</sup>

Theatre's ghostly dream merging with the reality of a historical location was also the buzz around Coonrod's production, rebranded *The Merchant in Venice*. The local newspaper headlined: 'Venice, the work of Shakespeare staged for the first time in the location where it is ideally set. The actors invade the square and gaze out of the windows'.<sup>33</sup> The company infused the Ghetto, 'crossing bridges, opening windows, projecting on synagogues, and playing music on terraces'.<sup>34</sup>

Reinhardt augmented location as a dream space, as opposed to the very real and literal palimpsest of the Ghetto. Coonrod wanted the work to be created from the stones up, shoes were flat to ensure that all the actors touched the earth, were anchored to a literal location, whose stones and walls echoed and contained suffering: 'I didn't have to do anything but let the stones speak'.<sup>35</sup> Reinhardt embellished his Venetian stage to create a relationship between artifice and reality, the dream of Venice corresponding to the location. Campo San Trovaso today is an empty space, a space of little significance, not a tourist destination, where Reinhardt's production is a ghostly memory only for the few who recall it, mostly theatre historians and academics. It has passed out of the consciousness of the locals or the tourists. In contrast, the Ghetto, a charged space, a place of pilgrimage, still lives, with ghosts that are almost corporeal, certainly in the imaginations of residents and visitors. Unlike Reinhardt, Coonrod not only evoked the dream of Renaissance Venice, she also engaged in its nightmare. The performing space was no longer neutrally Venetian. The experience, and the enchantment of the Venice stage, was deepened and complicated.



In 1516, by decree, Jewish citizens were confined to an area in Cannaregio, relocated to the only square without a church: 'I was at a place where the whole fraternity of the Jews dwelleth together, which is called the Ghetto, being an island, for it is enclosed round about with water'.<sup>36</sup> The site, where waste from the old copper foundry was formerly dumped – *geto* – became the world's first 'Ghetto', coining a term that now refers to physical and social isolation and exclusion.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the expulsion of Jews from Europe, the Ghetto remained both a prison and, paradoxically, a place of refuge where art, philosophy, literature, religious study and cross-cultural endeavours continued to thrive: 'Being trapped in the ghetto didn't block the imagination, it triggered it'.<sup>38</sup>

Working under the scorching sun, attending to the quotidian needs of blocking, I reflected.

*During rehearsal in the Ghetto there was a moment when the walls rang back to our ears 'dog Jew', 'impenetrable cur', and the cast confirmed later that we had all experienced at the same time a profound sense of shame. I had goose bumps and shivers all over my body. The Ghetto took the words and echoed back their cruelty. When Antonio shouts his line about what could be harder than Shylock's Jewish heart, spoken next to the memorial list of all the Jews deported and killed during the war, we know exactly who could have harder hearts. Us. It is a moment when the play's question is answered. And the Ghetto answers us with its imposing buildings. Its silence. Its five synagogues with their five eyes watching us. With their casements listening to us. And shut. I felt that the Ghetto changed the play, but also the play changed the Ghetto. It opened up to us like a passionate flower in the desert that blooms suddenly. Every night more and more windows were opened. And what was extraordinary was that the house in which Jessica appeared at the window and threw down her caskets – referred to in Venice as 'Shylock's house' – had reportedly not had its shutters opened for over ten years. The owner lived in Parma. He was referred to as 'the Parma man'. Would the Parma man let us use his home as the site of Shylock's betrayal? Even up to three days before the performance no-one was sure we would get permission. And then the word came. And the casement flung open to give the audience one of the most memorable moments of the play. And in our hearts our casements were flung open too. Together. As the buildings changed, as they transformed the play, and as the play transformed us.*

Tonight Shakespeare in the Ghetto for the first time in history! A major event of world theatre.<sup>39</sup>

The company entered from Ghetto Vecchio, dancing and playing instruments, via a small bridge that once islanded the Ghetto Novo with *cancelli* (gates). A second gate used to cordon off the larger bridge at the opposite end of the Ghetto leading to Fondamenta della Misericordia, a fitting gateway to a production about 'mercy'. The gates once opened to the bells of St. Mark's (*maragona*), the bells that marked the rhythms of city life.<sup>40</sup> On 9 July 1797, on Napoleon's orders, the gates were broken into pieces and thrown into flames amidst cries of joy, 'closing' forever to the sound of dancing and music filling the air.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the festive spirit of actors and musicians,

igniting and consecrating the space, resonated with the destruction of imprisoning walls, of our making, and in our minds, to music.

Music and voice interweaved in an echoing harmony reinforced by the walls around us. And threaded through that rough magic was the presence of the people living in the Ghetto, both ghosts of the past, and also shadowy presences, equally spectators and participants in an event that recalled and re-enacted the past even as it made us feel the force of our troubled present.<sup>42</sup>

The project sought to revitalise the cultural legacy of the Ghetto, bring awareness about human rights and create interfaith dialogue. The transference and cultural exchange between the Ghetto and the play were for many academics what distinguished it from innumerable productions:

the way in which the gathering darkness as the evening wore on seemed to be part of the play's design, in the striking moment when Jessica flung open the actual casement of one of those buildings and threw down the suitcases, in the glimpses of ordinary people standing at their windows or sitting at the table inside their apartments while the performance went on ... the production of the *Merchant* in the Ghetto made manifest the fact that the place itself became the location of a particular, vital culture, one that survived all of the pressures upon it, including the pressure to convert, and has somehow endured to the present.<sup>43</sup>

The walls of the Ghetto amplified suffering and complicity, but also embodied this vital culture, honouring resistance, and an electrical current of communal consecration: 'Before the play began, I felt – and the audience seemed to feel – a palpable sense of excitement to be in attendance at such an historic event, and that feeling transcended any of the particular details of the production'.<sup>44</sup> Coonrod's adaptation was manifestly focused through the lens of location:

To see this play performed there in the 500th year of the Ghetto's existence reinforced one's sense of the poignancy of Shylock's baffled sense of the injustice of his treatment by the play's Christian community...[in] this lively, sophisticated and theatrically powerful production ... we were invited rather to sympathise with Shylock's suffering and self-pity than to acknowledge the intransigence of his refusal to exercise mercy.<sup>45</sup>

Yet for Coonrod, unlike Reinhardt, the heart of the play was not the Ghetto. It was Shylock.

Shylock was shared amongst five actors, a different actor for each of his five scenes. What began as an exploratory tool remained, developing layers of poetic implication: Shylock as the quintessential Stranger. 'The Stranger creates a conflict to which I am repeatedly drawn ... I see the stranger through both ends of the telescope: from the far end as Stranger to the community and close-up as Stranger to oneself'.<sup>46</sup> Shylock as everyman, as the outsider, as the slivers of self that are self-persecuting and incongruent, as a portrait fractured and a fractured portrait made whole – 'He is us'.<sup>47</sup> Shylock was

distributed across ‘a young Zoroastrian man [Sorab Wadia], an older Croatian man [Andrea Brugnera], a Welsh woman [Jenni Lea Jones], a middle-aged Venetian man [Adriano Iurissevich], and a middle-aged Jewish American man [Ned Eisenberg]’.<sup>48</sup> This distribution multiplied rather than divided the character, from a range of different embodiments, rippling through the actors to each member of the audience: ‘The audience becomes a sea of Shylocks’.<sup>49</sup>

I couldn’t settle on a famous guy to play Shylock because in my head I could see what they would do ... what better way to truly investigate the character of Shylock, rather than a mere interpretation of Shylock, than by allowing all of us entrance into him ... This way the painful human nature of the character will be highlighted more than the individual performance of an actor.<sup>50</sup>

This was not the first experiment with multiple Shylocks. For example, the famed 1978 George Tabori production in Munich had all thirteen characters playing Shylock, scenes played thirteen different times in thirteen different ways:

By thus staging a variety of possible figurations rather than giving a single interpretation of scene and role, Tabori underscored the bewildering array of interpretations that Shakespeare’s Shylock invites and challenged the idea that any single version could be the correct one. The production drew attention to the contradictory facets the figure had acquired over time, facets that – like a cubist painting – could not be reassembled to form a coherent whole.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to this, the cubist nature and fragmented figure of Shylock, historically accumulated through a variety of famous interpretations, was paradoxically synthesised in Coonrod’s distribution, where the universal was embodied through multiplied singularities.

Having five Shylocks amplified something already embedded in Shakespeare’s characters that is irreducible, multi-faceted, and recalls Montaigne’s meditations on the nature of a fragmented self: ‘If I speak variously of myself, it is because I consider myself variously ... and whoever will sift himself to the bottom, will find in himself, and even in his own judgment, this volubility and discordance’.<sup>52</sup> The complexities and contradictions of self or character are explicitly manifested by a Shylock embodied across five actors in an expression of unsentimental humanity. This distribution destabilises the idea that Shylock may or ought to be defined by something essential, the core of which can be expressed only by the centripetal interpretation of a single great actor.<sup>53</sup>

Coonrod realised only subsequently the resonance with five ancient synagogues in the Ghetto, five windows of the synagogues representing the five books of the Torah, and five hundred years of commemoration: ‘all of this is a kind of endorsement to listening hard to what the project wants to BE. It’s radical but it’s thrilling. It’s a fractured portrait made whole by the community’.<sup>54</sup>

At the centre of the play the five Shylocks gather to form a moment of chorus, wailing for the grief of Jessica’s betrayal. As Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) circles the space,

laughing, the torch-bearer with a live flame, with her entourage of men in grotesque masks whistling the opening love-song theme like a terrifyingly absurd Fellini film, the Shylocks form a circle facing inwards. They are dressed ceremoniously in their defining yellow sashes by 'black angels', the visible stage-hands.

Stefano Nicolao's costumes materialised the silhouette of the Renaissance in contemporary form. The colour palette, mixed from the marble and stones, linked the ensemble in a monochrome of creams and greys. For Nerissa, gazing at forms flickering in and out of focus as the sky darkened, the company became like a dream in the moonlight. Costume changes, in full view of the audience, were ritualistic, in-between moments of transformation. Materials of organza and wool and silk sensually transformed me from ensemble member to Nerissa to Balthazar's clerk; being dressed by 'black angels', with my arms stretched out like a crucifix, sacrificed me and liberated me from the roles we play, the roles we must and will play: all performative. Watching the 'other' becoming Shylock or another character compels us to question who the other is, seeing the other, becoming the other, constantly shifting. Binding his core with a large yellow sash marked Shylock for his Jewishness, reflecting the Ghetto's dual sense of imprisonment and protection. Jessica's thinner yellow belt was discarded when tied to the money-filled suitcase that she lowered from her window, purchasing her elopement and abandoning her Jewishness. Yellow is the colour of difference, recalling the badge or beret Venetian Jews were required to wear outside the Ghetto and the star implemented throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, but also the yellow stockings of courtesans in Venice, prostitutes being similarly confined to a district: 'The discourse on usury connected whores and Jews'.<sup>55</sup> Whereas prostitutes were forbidden to wear jewels, 'the earring was a way to mark the presence of a Jewish woman on the street, her pierced ears like a circumcision mark',<sup>56</sup> giving particular meaning to Shylock's cry, 'I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear' (3.1.80–1),<sup>57</sup> as a cry, not for a loss of his wealth, but for the loss of her Judaism.

Once bound in their yellow sashes, the gathered Shylocks build a low keening sound, until Shylock 3 (Jenni Lea-Jones) turns – the others embodying Rodin's *Les Bourgeois de Calais* – releasing two shattering wails: lament of the mother, lament for humankind, lament rebounding from the stones, 'from the unheard voices, captive underneath the stones',<sup>58</sup> of the Ghetto:<sup>59</sup> 'this wail is at the center ... it is almost like the wail of GOD at what we have done to ourselves ... there is the mystery, the ineffable, the theatrical gesture'.<sup>60</sup> The casting of five different Shylocks – 'differing in age, race, acting style, religious convictions, sexual preference, accent, gender, height, weight, hair colour, ear shape' – thus confronted arbitrary categorical difference as a tool of alienation.<sup>61</sup> The outsider is at the heart of the play, but the category is fluid. We are no longer certain what signifies difference or which difference is significant.<sup>62</sup> Something ineffable cannot be distributed. Something common remains. For it is a love bond that Shylock asks for. A pain that wishes to inflict pain on others so that the pain is shared. Shylock wants his bond. He wants his heart. He wants to cut, claw, wound his way into a fraternity. This was highlighted in Coonrod's production as the 'closest contact between anyone is, ironically and shockingly, between Antonio (Stefano Scherini) and Shylock, as Antonio "prepares his bosom for the knife"'.<sup>63</sup> This perverted touch began

with the 'merry bond', Antonio rejecting the offer of a handshake: 'among Christians a contract was sealed with a kiss or with a handshake, contracts with Jews were sealed with a bow, so that the bodies of the parties need not touch'.<sup>64</sup> Shylock and Antonio finally touch, at knife's point.

In 1933, the Nazis forced Reinhardt to divest himself of his German theatres. In exile he wrote a letter bequeathing the Deutsches Theater, not to the Nazi government, but to the German people.<sup>65</sup> Coonrod's *Merchant* existed in a post-Shoah world, in the charged and vulnerable space of the Venetian Ghetto, nightly secured, during the performances, by metal barricades, armed policemen and sniffer dogs. Reinhardt imagined Venice as a carnivalesque dream space, a tapestry of human life, a spectacular *mise en scène*, with characters of equal importance. It was, however, the last time he directed the production.

Reinhardt's Shylock (Memo Benassi) was reviewed by Carlo Lari as 'a human figure, deeply and artistically marked'.<sup>66</sup> As in Coonrod's *Merchant*, the pivotal moment hinged on Jessica's betrayal. Returning home, humming his synagogal melody and laughing to himself, Shylock good-humouredly claps several times, looking up at Jessica's windows and calling to her. Gradually, he discovers that Jessica has fled. Stumbling out of the house, he collapses on the bridge: 'He grabs the shawl about his neck and tears it away, and rends it according to the Jewish rite of mourning ... He breaks down sobbing and whimpering. It gets dark. First intermission'.<sup>67</sup>

Benassi gave a sensitive and acclaimed performance. But the signature musical motif by Victor De Sabata accompanied Antonio; in Coonrod's production the music, composed by Frank London, accompanied Shylock. The 1934 theme was romantically melodic; the 2016 theme was in a melancholic minor key. Reinhardt's musicians were distributed in gondolas, on balconies and flowered rooftops.<sup>68</sup> His symphonic prelude expressed 'the poetry of the morning, awakening amid the murmur of the waters and the tolling of bells'.<sup>69</sup> London's opening carnivalesque song (inspired by Stephen Sondheim's 'Comedy Tonight') ironically subverted comedic expectations.

When the five Shylocks discovered Jessica's elopement, London improvised on the trumpet around a heart-sore Shylock theme, from the 'flowered rooftop' of Shylock's house. This was a deliberate response to the view that Shylock's injunction to shut up case-ments signals his dislike of music. He dislikes only certain kinds of music. He is not the man 'that hath no music in himself' (5.1.83). This was the music of Shylock's soul.

The designer Peter Ksander used light to 'activate the architecture of the space, of the history of the stones'.<sup>70</sup> The play started in twilight, the magic hour, and ended in darkness: the moment of darkening coinciding with Shylock losing Jessica, when the play becomes darker and unhinged. 'When we lose the actual sun there is a point where there are no shadows. Not even attached shadows, not even the ones that fall on your faces. And that is the moment we click into artificial light, our own sun, our own way of revealing'.<sup>71</sup> Footlights restored historical theatricality and cast a million shadows. The fluidity of scene changes used a primary colour palette to slip from the isle of Belmont, with golden blue light haloing the trees, to Venice, with an orange, dustier, dirty streetlight, to the court, with blood-red light spilling on the uneven stones.

Reinhardt used the canal for the beauty of lighting effects, focusing, like Coonrod, on the playing spaces with light. But he was criticised for lack of naturalism: 'The spectator

was asked the double work today of erasing the real image and substituting it with another request to the imagination. It was a bit too much'.<sup>72</sup> His stage was not a mirror of reality, but 'a magic world radiating its own light'.<sup>73</sup> Reinhardt created an immersive, sensory experience, with people gazing from the palaces, meta-theatrically entering the play:

The beginning of the opening night performance had to be delayed because the crown prince was late. He landed his *motoscafo* (motorboat) on the bank of the *Rio degli Ognisanti*, which was part of the play's setting and was almost exactly the same spot where the Prince of Aragon's barque would later land. The crown prince disembarked, was applauded by the Italian audience, and mounted the steps to the center of the performance site. Naturally, this was also part of the performance.<sup>74</sup>

Cut to Coonrod's invitation to all: local children hanging on the barricades, faces peering out of windows, people sipping prosecco outside restaurants, the police presence, the international audience... The opening night was also delayed so that USA Justice of the Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was in Venice could preside over the mock trial of Shylock and see her grandson Paul Spera perform Lorenzo. The cast waited by the bridge, charged and stamping, like horses before a race. Ginsburg arrived and ceremoniously took her seat to reverent applause. Naturally, this was also part of the performance.

In Coonrod's trial scene there was a symbiotic relationship between Portia (Linda Powell) and Shylock 5 (Ned Eisenberg), a warmth and rapport, a balancing of wit, reflected in the text with their crafty mirroring of personal pronouns, from the formal to the informal and back again, until the fateful turn when Portia realises that Shylock means to kill Antonio, and she shows no mercy, punishing Shylock by giving him precisely what he asked for: the exacting letter of the law, 'all justice' (4.1.335), and nothing else. Conducting an interview with Powell, F. Murray Abraham remarked on Portia's hypocrisy, 'Shame on Portia', and Powell responded, 'Yes, shame on Portia. And shame on Shylock too'.<sup>75</sup> Shame on Shylock for trying to kill another human being.

Shylock is deemed 'an alien' and forced to convert. Persecution. Devastating, timeless persecution. During rehearsals news reports were filled with harrowing stories of police murders of African Americans, the Black Lives Matter protests and violent retaliations:

Blood literally is running in the streets ... but to hear these words, written ... four hundred years ago ... in this place that is five hundred years old, somehow is uplifting, it's inspiring that we will get through it ... The play's about Justice. Extreme justice and righteous anger. I mean, Shylock's anger is righteous and yet where will it lead him? ... He gets what he asks for. Which is sad, it's tragic.<sup>76</sup>

Shylock is forced to his knees. The cello begins, lamentingly, to pluck Shylock's theme – 'I am content' (4.1.390). He stands and turns. The court has tripled in size as twenty spectators, who were seated under the wall of lights, have risen and stand behind the Duke, draped in red stoles. Eisenberg referred to it as a moment from Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Tippi Hedren turning to see the playground full of crows

waiting to kill her. Shylock faces a sea of red. The corrupt and bloody system. He asks to go home. He walks offstage, parting the Red Sea. Claiming the biblical moment. But the miracle is inverted to horror. The sea parts because no one wants to touch him. It is a beautiful, distended moment, broken by dropped red stoles and the Duke's long red garment. The 'blood' pooled on the stones, like a mass of dead bodies. The trial turns into a Scorsese movie. The boys' club begin their self-congratulatory handshakes and money transactions. The girls club to another side, CEOs taking over the world. The corrupt system has triumphed:

To me Shakespeare was saying that justice is kind of completely malleable and can suit whoever is clever enough to change the meaning of the words ... It's pretty discouraging ... It's just that there seems to be many ways in which justice is not meted out in an equitable way and there are many ways in which language can be shaped and corrupted.<sup>77</sup>

Justice without human compassion. Portia and Nerissa look at each other, slightly sickened by what has happened, how far it went. In this production there is no sense of triumph at seeing what men do in private. Portia mutters, 'Let's go home'. They are changed. They make their way to the candlelight in Portia's window, 'So shines a good deed in a naughty world' (5.1.91). They talk about the moon and the music, they seem less frivolous, as if they are the ones that have been seasoned 'to their right praise and true perfection' (5.1.117).

As the final act starts underway, with rings and quips, love tests and triangles, Coonrod's *Merchant* ends 'by bringing Shylock back onstage as an interlocutor'.<sup>78</sup> The five Shylocks crash right through the fifth act, halting the action of the cynical romantic ending, irrupting into the play and forming a straight-line downstage: 'The mirror is held up to the audience in a direct encounter, a wake-up call'.<sup>79</sup> The five Shylocks share the courtroom monologue, addressing the audience directly, ending with each one repeating, 'Are you answered?' (4.1.61). Ironic, painful, full of the rage of injustice. But this is not the last word of the play. Jessica runs across the stage, breaks through the footlights, joins the audience, turns and stares at the whole company, gathered in a line across the stage, seeking a different world. The musicians and 'black angels' blow Shofars, a cry of pain, a call to the community, and a warning. On the Ghetto walls light projects *Mercy. Misericordia. Rahamim*. As if to say Mercy on us all.

*Yesterday was the prova generale. We met early to do an interview for F. Murray Abraham for PBS. The cast have been doing interviews all week. Every day film cameras are capturing footage for Rai TV, for documentaries, for internet resources and archives. It has global resonance.*

*Working in the sun past our break: an actor leaves. The director emotional and highly tense nearly cries. 'Fine let's forget about it'. Some people have complained about the lack of breaks. But it's magic we are making. Trying to pull it together. Like T. S. Eliot says about roses, we are the flowers who like to be looked at. She is our gardener, and behind the scenes sleepless nights and blood, tears and sweat have gone into tilling the soil, ploughing it and offering it fertile to us.*

*It is a privilege and I could work all day in the sun for it.*

*There is something hauntingly beautiful about the production. Venice, the whole city, was created in a dream-like state. It took dreams and imagination and innovation to make a boggy, uninhabitable marsh into the beautiful Serenissima. And here the walls say miracles are possible, dreams are incarnated. As well as nightmares.*

*Our costumes are transparent. The change to men is ritualistic. We hold our arms up, Japanese style. Like a crucifix. And it is sensual, the disrobing and the robing. Released from one role and bound up again to play another. We are now the bragging jacks.*

*Tweaks and tidy-ups need to happen. Ned forgot the bond and I took it on for him. Line stumbles, wrong exits. But the feeling in the play is of generosity and concentration, of love and magic. The Ghetto hosts this event, creating the miracle of art bringing us together, rejecting the segregation. The play challenges us and the director challenges the play. The moment challenges us, and the practicalities of doing it.*

*But the moon shines. The blue light hits the trees in Belmont. The rings are designed by a famous jeweller. The magic and mayhem. The madness. The Dionysian catharsis. Tears and celebration. The costume designer cries. It is so emotional, so emotional.*

*We all hold hands and bow.*

In a passionate birthday speech, the ‘black angel’, Ziv Gidron, said that the play was an act of healing:

This is doing more than anything ... through art fucking healing the world ... that is what theatre is ... If you take it back to Judaism one of the biggest *mitzvahs* you can do is *tikun olam*, which freely translates into fixing the world.<sup>80</sup>

The Hebrew etymology for mercy – *rahamim* – is derived from *rehem*, ‘a mother’s womb’.<sup>81</sup> Mercy, thus integral to existence, is a concept of fundamental connection. Reinhardt wanted to heal fractured bonds. To lead people out of their grey, everyday existence and transport them into a world of colour, beauty and unlimited potential. Coonrod wanted to give people a wake-up call, a belief in something bigger, away from the cynicism of a romantic ending. A belief in our humanity. A belief in each other.

A spectral dream materialised allows others to dream – dreams that can salvage life from its nightmares:

The play, both as it is written and as it is performed, is the sign of the conviction that art can be a place where truth and love can be salvaged from the vulgarity and brutality of our history – and perhaps a means by which that history can be salvaged from itself.<sup>82</sup>

In these uncertain, destabilised times of continuing intolerance, violence, a world-wide pandemic, forced isolation, closed borders, with the future of theatre itself insecure, looking back on these productions enables us to recall a vision for a trans-national theatre in Europe. Theatre has the transformative power to break down walls between actor and spectator. And the power to break down walls that imprison our thoughts. For Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, and both productions of the play, it is the bond that is the most important. The bond that binds, not the bond that wounds.

The ghosts still linger.



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## Author biography

**Elena Pellone** played Nerissa in Karin Coonrod's *Merchant in Venice*. She is a graduate of Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (Shakespeare), the University of Melbourne, and has an MA from the Shakespeare Institute, where she is currently completing her PhD on Directorless Shakespeare. She has taught at the University of Birmingham, Queen Mary UL, Mary Baldwin University, Boston University (London), University of Würzburg, given papers and directed seminars in Rome, London, Stratford-upon-Avon, Guildford, Warwick, Leeds, Gdańsk, Paris, Verona and Venice, published in *Shakespeare Survey*, *Shakespeare*, *Skenè*, and *Otherness: Essays and Studies*. Elena is the Artistic Facilitator of the Venice Shakespeare Company and Anarkē Shakespeare.