The Merchant of Venice
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S
The Merchant of Venice

DIRECTORS
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DESIGNERS
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Directors' Note

Our performance of The Merchant of Venice is set in the Italian sector of New York during the 1920's. Shylock is a high ranking member of the mafia, as well as a money lender. Antonio is a well-established businessman, who is trying to help his friend Bassanio get enough money to attract the attention of Portia, the woman he loves. Bassanio has old connections with the mafia, which leads Antonio to get a loan from Shylock. As the play progresses, problems with his business cause Antonio to become unable to pay back the loan, leading the men to become entangled in the dangers of the mafia underworld.

The costumes used in the production reflect each character's personality as well as their relationship, or lack of relationship, with the mafia. For example, Gobbo, the blind father of Launcelot, is messily dressed with a half-tucked shirt, crooked tie, and cane. This inability to dress himself is indicative of his blindness, and the failed attempt to look business-oriented shows he had a tie to the mafia before his old age. Launcelot's Hawaiian shirt and cheap cigar reflect his lower position within the mafia. He cannot afford the expensive suits worn by the higher-up members of the organization, leading to his disgruntlement with Shylock and his desire to leave the mafia for Bassanio's more legitimate employ. Bassanio and Leonardo are dressed more professionally reflecting their more legitimate business employment, but the lack of full business suits on either man show that they are not too successful, thus necessitating the financial help from Antonio.

We chose to stage the play in this way to diminish some of the focus on the Jewish stereotype that is prevalent throughout the original performance of the play. In our staging, Shylock is still the antagonist but his evilness is not solely based on the fact that he is a Jew. It is then up to the audience to decide whether to blame his many faults on his mafia profession or his religious background. Because many modern viewers tend to not have the strict religious prejudices of Shakespeare's time, the comedy that comes from the portrayal of the stereotypical Jew may not be as amusing in a modern production as it was when it was originally performed. The mafia theme then somewhat masks the potentially offensive religious overtones to make the performance more relatable to the modern audience.

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's comedies, so we want the audience to be primarily entertained by the performance. We also want the audience to come away from the performance looking at the morals of each character without judging them based on racial or religious prejudices. The mafia setting adds a further element of comedy to the production as well as adding another moral layer, which will create an enjoyable, entertaining performance.

Plot Summary

The Merchant of Venice opens with Antonio's friends trying to cheer him, because he has been feeling depressed. Soon after, his dearest friend Bassanio comes to ask for a favor. He wants to marry the wealthy Portia, but needs a loan from Antonio so he can impress her. Antonio does not have the money because it is all currently tied up in his shipping, so they go off in search of a money lender.

The next scene finds us in Belmont, where Portia is complaining to her servant Nerissa about the faults of the suitors who have come to see her. She does not have any choice about who she will marry because her father's will states that her husband will be the first man who chooses the correct chest out of a set of three chests with inscriptions.

Meanwhile Antonio and Bassiano have found a Jewish money lender named Shylock. Despite having an intense dislike of Antonio, Shylock agrees to lend Antonio three thousand ducats without interest. Shylock adds the stipulation that if Antonio defaults on his loan he will owe Shylock a pound of his flesh. Antonio agrees, thinking his ships will be back with profits soon.

Shylock's household staff appears to be unhappy with him, especially Launcelot who secures a transfer to Bassanio's household. As he leaves, Launcelot sees Jessica, Shylock's daughter, who plans to elope with Lorenzo, a Christian. After Shylock leaves, Jessica escapes, stealing a ring and other valuables. The next morning Shylock is desperately searching for Jessica and his stolen goods. He appears most upset about the ring, which was given to him by his wife and had sentimental value. He is cheered, however, by the fact that some of Antonio's ships have been wrecked, so he is closer to getting revenge on him.

Meanwhile, Portia endures two suitors, a Moroccan and the Prince of Aragon. They both fail the chest trial picking the gold and silver chests respectively. As the second prince leaves, Bassanio enters and announces his desire to marry Portia. He picks the lead chest which is correct. During the celebration, Bassanio's friend Gratiano asks permission to marry Nerissa. A letter from Antonio arrives, revealing that he cannot pay his loan and Shylock is committed to cutting out his flesh.

Bassanio and Gratiano rush back to Venice, so Portia and Nerissa decide to dress up as men and follow. The women arrive during Antonio's trial where Shylock is refusing to release Antonio from the penalty. Portia enters as a legal clerk, and after looking over the contract decides Shylock is entitled to the pound of flesh. However, he may only take exactly one pound without shedding blood. Shylock is unable to get out of the contract, so he must forfeit all of his property and convert to Christianity, effectively ruining him.
After the trial, the disguised women coerce their husbands into giving up their rings, which were gifts from their wives that they were never supposed to remove. The women return to Belmont and accuse their husbands of cheating for losing the rings. They then reveal that they were disguised as men, and all characters except Shylock end up happy.

Theme

THROUGHOUT THE MERCHANT OF VENICE ONE OF THE KEY THEMES IS CHOICE, or lack thereof. This is seen time and time again, from Antonio’s choice to take the loan from Shylock to Portia’s inability to choose the man she marries. While the biggest choices create the framework for the play, many of the more abstract choices help to reveal the characters’ relationships, moral values, and personalities.

One aspect of the play where choice plays a varied role is within the marriages. Portia and Jessica represent the two extremes of choice, with Portia relinquishing her control over to her father’s wishes and Jessica eloping with a man that she knows her father will never approve of. Portia’s lack of choice is in itself a choice that she had to make. She chooses to honor her dead father’s wishes despite complaining, “O me, the word “choose” I many neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father” (1.2.17-19). Portia chooses family over her own desires even though she could easily disobey her father’s wishes because he is no longer around to enforce them. In contrast to this, Jessica chooses her own happiness over the harmony of her family. She elopes with the Christian Lorenzo, fully knowing that Shylock will never forgive such a betrayal of the Jewish faith. Jessica chooses the more romantic view of love, but it must come at the sacrifice of her family’s happiness.

The test devised by Portia’s father before he died also represents a major choice for the men who come to marry her. Each suitor is presented with three chests: gold, silver, and lead that bear inscriptions based on what is inside. The first two suitors choose gold and silver respectively and are not successful in their quest to marry Portia. They were rely too much on the outward appearance and situation would be regarded as powerless but shows her inner cunning and strength by outsmarting Shylock in the courtroom while disguised as Balthasar.

Symbolism

❖ THE CHESTS used to determine who Portia will marry are some of the most symbolically significant props of the play. Each chest is made of a different metal and the suitor must pick the correct one based off an inscription. The first chest is gold and reads, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire”, the second chest is silver and reads, “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves”, and the third chest is lead and reads, “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (2.7.16,23,37) The correct choice is lead, which emphasizes one of the major themes of the play—do not judge things by their outward appearance. It is also symbolic of Portia, who based on her outward appearance and situation would be regarded as powerless but shows her inner cunning and strength by outsmarting Shylock in the courtroom while disguised as Balthasar.

❖ Another symbol present in the play is A SET OF SCALES which Shylock intends to use to weigh the pound of flesh Antonio owes him. The scales are symbolic of the legal proceedings taking place because Lady Justice, depicted in many courtrooms, balances scales in her left hand. They represent truth and fairness, as well as weighing the support and opposition for the case. By inquiring about the scales, Portia draws a parallel between herself and Lady Justice and begins to judge the legality and strength of Shylock’s suit against Antonio. Later in the court scene, Portia decrees that Shylock may only take exactly one pound of flesh without any blood and that “if the scale do turn / But in the estimation of a hair, / Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate” (4.1.325-327). The scales then become symbolic of how precarious and risky the pursuit of revenge is.

❖ Throughout The Merchant of Venice SEVERAL RINGS appear, symbolizing a bond or commitment between two characters. The first instance of this is when Shylock hears that Jessica has stolen and sold a ring given to him by his deceased wife. He exclaims, “Out upon her! Thou torturdest me Tubal” and seems much more upset about its loss than he was even about
his stolen gold (3.1.90). This is one of the few times in the play where Shylock seems to have a human, emotional connection with anyone and his wife’s gift facilitates that. Both Nerissa and Portia also give rings to their husbands before they leave to try and rescue Antonio. They symbolize their marriages as well as the connection between them, and both men are warned to never take them off. The fact that the men give them away to Portia and Nerissa in disguise is symbolic of how the mens’ connection to their wives is too easily cast aside.

**Designers’ Note**

*THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IS A PLAY WROUGHT WITH ISSUES OF* morality, justice, and hidden motifs. The film directed by Al Pacino is set in 16th century Venice, which is also the time period of William Shakespeare’s original play. Our group’s version of *The Merchant of Venice* is set in New York in the 1920s; hence, the reason why we chose to manipulate a photo from this era. We began with a different photo initially, but feedback from our first critique allowed us to see that a different photo would better convey the play’s mood. The director’s note described Shylock as a “high-ranking member of the mafia,” which we sought to capture by tracing an image of a well-dressed man in the 1920s alongside an outline of a woman from the same time period. The woman clutching the man’s arm symbolizes both of the women in this play, but specifically Portia. Women are used as pawns in this play, especially to identify one of the major moral codes, which is choice.

For the background photograph, we used Photoshop’s hue and saturation effects, giving the photo a varied brightness and contrast to the figures in the foreground. The juxtaposition of an illustration in front and an antiquated photo behind it combines a modern approach with a traditional one, which was the message we received from our directors.

With our design for this poster project, we wanted to avoid the tendency to over-illustrate or use elements where they’re not appropriate, which can be a challenge. We also didn’t want the poster to feel like an advertisement for a movie. *The Merchant of Venice* is a play with a complicated plot, and by using layers for our poster, we aimed to convey the idea of a play with a lot of underlying problems and moral issues, even if they are not immediately apparent to the viewer at first glance — or in this case, first read.
THIS PROGRAM and the corresponding theater poster were produced as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration between students in two Shakespeare in Context classes and two Graphic Design Two classes at Drake University in Spring 2011. The program is typeset in Chaparral Pro.

THIS PROJECT was conceived and organized by Sarah Hogan (Department of English) and Hilary Williams (Department of Art & Design).