

Not-So-Royal Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'

[Caelin Miltko](#) | Friday, March 3, 2017



Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" is this semester's play of choice for Notre Dame's Not-So-Royal Shakespeare Company.

"The Merchant of Venice" is a complicated show, and some of its themes are made even more complicated by the current political climate. It tells the story of Antonio, Bassanio, Portia and Shylock. It is half marriage-plot comedy and half confusing commentary on the relationships between Jews, Christians and money.

The play itself is a bit of a paradox. Although it was perhaps progressive for its time, the final scene throws around "Jew" like an insult, and its plot seems to identify Jewishness with greed to a certain extent. Yet certainly, Shylock as villain is not purely evil — his central speech ("Hath not a Jew eyes?") pushes back against a plot that seeks to malign him.

But still, the question remains as to whether the play is really made to stand the test of time.

For the actors' part, the performance put on by the Not-So-Royal Shakespeare company is incredibly well-done. Its acting is impressive, its use of the black-box theater is always fun to see and its performances consistently feature amazing minor parts that truly bring Shakespeare's work to life.

In particular, Candace LeBron-Williams as Morocco and Louise Gregory as Launcelot shine as small comedic parts in the production. LeBron-Williams is hilariously dramatic as Morocco, and her scene is one of the best of the first half. Gregory's interaction with Erik Mickiewicz's Old Gobbo is wonderfully portrayed.

The marriage-plot portion of the play succeeds comedically and theatrically. Mary Elsa Henrichs as Portia and Lydia Costello as Nerissa comprise a wonderful duo, acting their parts with great facial expressions and hilarity. Bassanio (Joe Crowley) and Gratiano (Zach Spitzer) form impressive counterparts.

But any performance of “The Merchant of Venice” cannot be judged on the basis of the lighter aspects of its plot — and in this day and age, it is in some ways not enough to perform the play as it might have been produced in the past.

In some ways, the Not-So-Royal Shakespeare company’s performance is not particularly innovative. The costumes are fairly standard. Compared with “Hamlet” from this past fall, the gender-bending in “Merchant of Venice” is not particularly notable or interesting. The producers likewise made no substantive changes to the setting or timing of the narrative.

It is in the first details that the performance attempts to make its mark. When Jessica (Tori Babcock) looks forward to stealing away with Lorenzo (PJ Harig), she says, “If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife / Become a Christian and thy loving wife.” Babcock’s inflection on the first half of the line makes her seem ambivalent about Christianity, though her Jessica is clearly infatuated with Lorenzo.

Most importantly, however, is the character and performance of the play’s central villain, Shylock. The clearly talented Michael Vaclav plays Shylock with an emotional depth not necessarily inherent in the written character.

The scene where Shylock leaves Jessica behind in his house the night she runs away was, for me, one of the most heart-rending moments of the play. Babcock’s Jessica seemed conflicted, truly sorry to leave her father behind; Vaclav’s Shylock did not seem cruel or greedy, but rather loving as he presented a gift to his daughter and walked slowly off the stage.

The emotion with which Vaclav played Shylock in the first half engendered a sympathy which functioned throughout the play, despite the cruel manner in which Shylock behaves in the final court scene. That scene is difficult — and a major portion of the reason why “The Merchant of Venice” is far from my personal favorite of Shakespeare’s plays — yet undeniably well-performed.

The Not-So-Royal Shakespeare company’s production ends with a baptismal scene which feels a bit like watching someone go to the gallows. As a whole, the performance is moving. It is up to the audience to decide what to do with the experience.

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