Unvarnished Shylock reveals truth of Venetian society

By JONATHAN RICHMOND

Shakespeare's Shylock is not the equal of the other characters in "The Merchant of Venice." By Venetian law, he would have been confined to live in the ghetto, a cramped area, demarcated from the rest of the city. He would have been restricted occupationally, driven into usury, one of the few functions he could lawfully serve.

Why should Shylock, despised and abused by the citizens of Venice, pour out his heart to his tormentors? Why should he annul his loan to Antonio simply because Antonio has been foolish? Antonio would certainly never grant Shylock any favor. Why, when his bond is secured by Venetian law, should Shylock not have the justice accorded Christians? The legal system does not grant Antonio mercy from completing his agreement to forfeit; a pound of flesh to Shylock in default of payment, because to do so would be to jeopardize the city's trading status. Why should Shylock be more merciful than the judge who rules in his favor? Why, when his bond is secured by justice under Venetian law, Joseph Vanderway's "Shylock" is re-created from today's frequently fanatic treatment to a cold and dispassionate set of Socratic questions; this is as it should be. No Shylock of dignity would open his heart to tormentors totally lacking in souls of their own. Vanderway's deliberate flashing of the knife in the court and sadistic subsequent wiping of the blade across the sole of his shoe make the heart机能 a beat. His crafty is revealed; in exposing the bitterness of Shylock, it reveals the truth about everyone else.

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The sentimental approach pursued in many contemporary productions of "The Merchant of Venice" casts Shylock as a "hump" character, who pleads passionately that he bleeds like everyone else. This portrayal is an erroneous response to perceived superficial anti-Jewish connotations. On a deeper level it is wrong, for it exposes the truly insulating assumption that Shylock should have feelings that the Venetian lack, that he should be better than the Jews. It is in these moments when Ed goes against the similarity ends. We sell direct.

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