

# Flipping the Coin on Colorblind Casting? Richard Rose on Directing *The Merchant of Venice*

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## Abstract

This interview with Richard Rose concerns the 2007 *Merchant of Venice* he directed at the Stratford Festival in Ontario. With Native actor Graham Greene playing Shylock, the production held the potential to extend the work of recent *Merchant* stagings that have purposefully cast performers of color as a way to examine legacies of colonial oppression and racism far removed from early modern England. However, the production made little obvious connection between Shylock's Jewishness and Greene's Native identity and, as Rose relates, although the actor's own experience of racism was something he could draw on himself to inform the role, they did not discuss this experience explicitly during rehearsal. In the interview, Rose further touches on his decision to have Greene's Shylock grow more outwardly Orthodox during the play, the production's explicit use of religious symbolism to amplify the profound religious antagonism amongst the characters, and the difference between staging *Merchant* at Stratford and producing contemporary drama that deals with historical instances of officially sanctioned anti-Semitism.

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## Introduction

Recent productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have purposefully cast performers of color as a way to examine legacies of colonial oppression and racism far removed from early modern England.<sup>1</sup> The Stratford Festival of Canada's 2007 production of *Merchant*, starring Native actor Graham Greene, held the potential to extend the work of such appropriations. Indeed, as the largest repertory theatre on the continent, one that draws huge audiences from Canada and the United States, the Festival was, and is, in an influential position to interrogate the roles that Shakespearean performance might play in negotiating race within a multicultural society.

Other factors made such an examination appear timely for this Stratford production of *Merchant*. First, by hiring Greene the Stratford Festival hoped to address the longstanding criticism that it fails to place visible minority actors in starring roles.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more important, the violence

that erupted in 2006 and recurred briefly in the summer of 2007 over Native land-claim disputes in Caledonia, Ontario, about one hundred miles from Stratford and adjacent to the Six Nations reserve on which Greene was born, imbued the choice to cast him as Shylock with a significance that was hard to ignore.<sup>3</sup>

The production, however, made little obvious connection between Shylock's Jewishness and Greene's Native identity. In fact, director Richard Rose relates below that, although the actor's own experience of racism was something he could draw on himself to inform the role, they did not discuss this experience explicitly during rehearsal.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Greene's Shylock actually became, as Rose puts it, "increasingly Orthodox": He first appeared in a modern grey business suit and gradually added a kipa, tallith, and a long black overcoat and fedora to become a clichéd image of the Jewish other in the overtly Christian Venice that Rose depicts.

The production did not try to humanize Shylock; Greene made him embittered and largely unsympathetic, just as Rose says the actor saw this character. Nevertheless, the action did suggest the possibility of reconciliation between the two communities by having Jessica (who clearly rejected her conversion to Christianity) and Antonio share a brief, but tangible, moment of sympathy and recognition at the play's close. Richard Monette took this hoped-for recognition even further in his Artistic Director's message, in which he discusses the season's theme of "the outsider," and which appeared in the season's individual play programs. Monette "solves" Shylock's otherness by invoking a vague universalism capable of overcoming all cultural and historical differences: Despite our inability to "know the experience of a Jewish money-lender in sixteenth-century Venice," writes Monette, "So universal is the outsider experience that its depiction brings us, ironically, to a renewed sense of commonality — of belonging itself" (Monette 2007, 3).

Yet if the production did not explore the more unsettling analogies between actor and role, and if Monette suppressed the suggestion that Shylock's outsider experience is not somehow also "ours," this *Merchant* undoubtedly exposed the audience's complicity in extending the play's racism. Rose accomplished this in part through the humor of his suitor scenes, especially Jamie Robinson's portrayal of Morocco. Robinson's Prince embodied contemporary Western clichés about Islam: This robed sheik arrived to the sound of a landing helicopter and pulsating Arabic music and was preceded by a scimitar-waving security detail, one of whom kneeled in prayer when Morocco made his casket choice. Significantly, the sexual magnetism that Robinson exerted over Portia's female servants (one of her maids nearly fainted when he pointed his sword at her), and his failure in the casket contest mirrored the experience of the audience. Theatergoers were able to indulge in this comic fantasy of otherness (the audience thoroughly enjoyed the Morocco scenes at

the two performances I saw), but were ultimately allowed to distance themselves from it through laughter at the defeated Prince. Rose was not naively purveying Orientalist spectacle for its own sake, however, and in this interview he reflects upon how he developed Antonio's forfeiture of the bond into an attack on the marketing of stereotyped cultural identity.

Perhaps surprisingly, this *Merchant's* portrayal of Islam did not receive the public criticism that Stratford's 2001 production did when Morocco himself knelt in prayer to Portia. Such criticism was reserved in 2007 for the response that the trial scene elicited. As Rose notes, Anna Morgan, wife of the president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, published an article describing the audience's enthusiasm for Shylock's defeat, which the director had made especially vicious (Morgan 2007). I myself witnessed school groups at a matinee, clapping in unison with the Christians onstage as they jeered Shylock. Rose explains that he was drawing in the audience and forcing them to understand their own part in the spectacle. This strategy may not have been effective with school audiences, but it seems to have worked during the evening show I saw; adult audiences laughed along with the Venetians, but gasped audibly when Gratiano turned particularly nasty.

If audiences can be confronted with their own immediate reaction in the trial scene, is there any reason not to question our construction of the relationship between the historically distant circumstances of that scene and ongoing conflicts within supposedly peaceful North American multicultural society? Rose himself has done such work quite recently in his direction of Jason Sherman's *Remnants*, which adapts the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers to explore Canada's refusal to accept Jewish refugees fleeing from wartime Europe. This sort of questioning is necessary at institutions like Stratford, not because there is any simple or direct relationship between Shylock's treatment and the histories of European expansion in the Americas, but because it is necessary to reflect explicitly on the relationship between contemporary theatrical practice and the world "outside" the theatre.

As Ayanna Thompson writes, "The practices of colorblind casting cannot resolve the larger societal tensions in which they are enmeshed. Instead, the various and often contradictory practices of colorblind casting merely replicate the anxieties our society has about defining race" (Thompson 2006, 8). Confronting larger societal tensions through casting that explicitly addresses race will not immediately resolve larger societal tensions, but it will undermine the rationale that sustains assertions about universal human experience and the belief that race will disappear by assimilating difference to a humanity defined by the performance of Shakespeare. Rose describes his need to keep shifting the audience's perspectives, "to keep the coin spinning." It is a metaphor that could be extended to the Festival itself; it was a major step forward to cast Greene in a leading role, but

it is time to turn the coin once more to see what is on the other side if, or when, Stratford moves beyond colorblind casting.

The following interview with Richard Rose took place on September 17, 2007 in Toronto, Ontario.

### Robert Ormsby's Interview with Richard Rose

*Robert Ormsby:* You have described Antonio's personal motivation for what you see as his "Christ complex," but you use religious imagery to track Christian-Jewish antagonism throughout the production. You even end the show with Jessica's prayer, in which she asks for forgiveness, thereby giving the comic couplings of act 5 a very Lenten tone. What is the significance of the overtly Christian images and settings in the production?

*Richard Rose:* I employed an image system that utilizes the journey or story of Christ just as Easter approaches. This production begins on the last day of Carnival, Shrove Tuesday. Lent is about to begin and later scenes pass through Ash Wednesday, reflect events from Christ's final week and culminate in a Good Friday court scene. Of course, this story has been a source of conflict between Christian and Jewish communities for 2000 years. I was trying to follow Christ's course with the journey of Antonio, beginning in a Carnival atmosphere; I wanted to create this sense of a raucous and paganistic festival at the start of the production to contrast his first line, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad." I positioned Antonio as a reluctant participant in the group ritual dance. Then he progresses into an increasingly isolating and lonely martyrdom, building to the point that he wants to be punished or sacrificed or crucified and, in effect, martyred for his love of Bassanio (as he quite clearly states both in the court scene and in the final scene of the play in Belmont).

Of course, it is perverse behavior, a sort of Christ complex, derivative and manipulative of the story of the last month in Christ's life. I wanted to enhance Antonio's lack of self-knowledge and his obsession with dying for Bassanio in this battle with the Jew. His martyrdom is elevated dubiously to Christ-like proportions in this delusional attempt to mark Bassanio forever. The only way for Antonio to express and get Bassanio to recognize his true feelings of love for him is to play this role as the martyr. Bassanio will never forget him.

This is not [unlike] the way that Shylock takes his feelings, his hurt, his sense that he is the victim of anti-Semitism, and primarily his pain at his daughter's betrayal, channeling that into a more Jewish identity that he asserts over the course of the play. He starts out as a rather secular Jewish businessman within the Venetian community and becomes (if you like) increasingly Orthodox. The tension between the two of them, what is a Christian identity and what is a Jewish

identity, how you are seen by the people, how you are known to the people is central, and I think "knowing" is the operative verb for me when it comes to the issue of what causes prejudice in this play. They become increasingly divergent and passionate about their religious identities, to the point where one is ready to kill somebody and the other is willing to die for it.

*RO:* By casting Graham Greene, there seems to be an implied parallel between his Native identity and Shylock's Jewishness, yet there is not much in the production itself to sustain this impression. In fact, because Shylock's appearance becomes more outwardly Jewish — almost to the point of his embrace of a cliché — as the action progresses, the parallel seems neutralized or suppressed. What role do you think Greene's own identity had in the production, and how were you anticipating audiences would understand and read the parallel between the identities?

*RR:* The first point is that Graham is an actor. Like any actor, his task is to transform and inhabit a character. His ability to transform himself into the identity of a character called Shylock is more a product of the essence of his actor's mask, his essence — a combination of various aspects that make up his physical, vocal, behavioral, psychological, spiritual, and cultural identity. He was cast because he was first, Graham Greene, an actor who tends to play these kinds of parts or can bring some kind of vision and understanding to this kind of part. Christians, Jews, or Native people or whoever can play Shylock if they have something in them that gives them access to the humanity of the character.

When you are casting Shylock, one of the things I think you are looking for (and the character is in contrast to the rest of company, so you are also casting the rest of the company) is that "otherness" that separates him from that world, whether it's behavior or, say, the color of his skin. Shylock is a loner, isolated in this Italian — Christian — world of Venice. He is isolated by religion and culture, but not by color of skin. Graham wasn't really cast because he is Native, but because he knows something about what it means to be other, and he brings a different angle and an understanding — maybe anger, maybe compassion — to a person like Shylock, who is isolated in a Christian environment.

More important, Shylock requires of an actor someone who understands how to survive as an "outsider" in a world of hypocrisy and who can employ hypocrisy to survive the oppression of the overwhelming majority. At the same time, I wanted Shylock to be a joiner, a person who wants to be part of the society he is in, so initially he's dressed impeccably in a modern Western business suit. He appears to be an acceptable member of Venetian society. One of the things about this Shylock is that he is seeking, despite all the anti-Semitism of Venice, acceptance by this society. He wants to be part of that world; he doesn't want to be an other. He wants to be himself, but also to be recognized and accepted for who he is. I think that is a human trait, and I feel that near the

beginning of the play, he compromises his values in this endeavor when thinking: "How can I get Antonio to like me, to know me, to recognize me for who I am, to respect me?"

I don't think he ever intends to take revenge on Antonio. Maybe he intends to keep Antonio beholden to him and to make Antonio remember always how he broke his business principles and made this loan without interest, but it's only when his daughter's wooed, seduced, and when she steals from him that this escalates to full-blooded revenge. In the first scene, Shylock says that he won't take anything, any interest, but he does need Antonio to acknowledge or to recognize him as a person, as a businessman, and as a Jew, and that is why he proposes the flesh wager. It is a bit of a joke between guys, a way of doing business, an accommodation to the Christian, but also a way of having a hold on Antonio — the hold of an oath. But when Jessica gets taken from him, then what was a jest on his part turns ugly.

Graham has known prejudice, for not being accepted for who he is, but he has also known success. He got the Oscar nomination for *Dances With Wolves* and has accomplished many things as a professional actor. He does understand what it's like to be spat at or insulted or treated in a certain way, and so he brings that information to the part, but we never really talked about it. We talked about what the character is doing in the play, what Shylock's needs are, his progression, his anger, his sense of revenge and his sense of humor — critical in my mind to playing Shylock. We didn't really talk about Native issues, experiences, and politics.

Graham brings a quality that makes him distinct from the Stratford Festival actors, which is important, but I just treated him like any actor creating a role, and I think he wanted to be treated like an actor. He wasn't proposing anything political about playing Shylock or turning him into some empathetic example of racial injustice. In fact, the first thing that Graham said about Shylock is, "He's just a horrible old man who's bitter at the way he's treated," and I think that was his route in: Shylock, the curmudgeon, victim of years of oppression, but functioning rather successfully by employing hypocrisy in a hypocritical world that condemned but needed usury. Now, Graham has access to information I don't, to that "other" experience, and I see him bringing it to the production. But his job was to try to act like a Jewish person in Italy at a certain time. That was the job and like any actor, he's got to act that and understand it and get underneath it, just like we're asking Scott Wentworth to act like the wealthy Italian anti-Semitic merchant Antonio or Severn Thompson to act like the wealthy Italian heiress Portia.

*RO:* Although this Shylock does become more outwardly, visually stereotyped as Jewish, there was always the sense that he was being treated in the production in a complex and serious way. By contrast, the suitors seemed to have been purposely caricatured to serve as comic relief.

Were you using the suitors as a kind of humorous counterpoint to Shylock's increasingly narrow sense of cultural or religious identity?

*RR:* Yes, the suitors represent a development of how Portia learns of other cultures and how she encounters, knows, and judges the "other." To my mind, she falls in love with Morocco, or she is infatuated with him. But first, upon hearing of his approach, she starts out with a racist reaction and then, when she sees him she thinks, "Wow, he's kind of interesting — he is kind of hot." I kept coming back to the verb and the action of "knowing" in the production, and I think that there are two ways of knowing. ("To know" and its derivatives are used over 60 times in the play and is the first verb of the play when Antonio says, "I know not why I am so sad . . ."). You can know either by your senses, or you can know by study. We can know what sunlight is by seeing it, but a blind person can know what light is by the study of optics, even though that person can't actually see or experience light. Which is the greater knowledge? Which is the greater depth of experience?

Like anybody who falls in love, there is that moment when you see the other person for the first time and you think/know, "That person is gorgeous! That person is the most significant thing that has ever happened to me." You have no idea what this object of attraction or desire or love is like — you don't know them by study and long experience. Portia is just sixteen-years old and becomes infatuated with Morocco. She stops him from choosing and says, "Let's have dinner together." Morocco is her first love, or some might call it puppy love. And then, as she watches him choose, she's trying to watch how he thinks, who he is. And as she watches him choose, she begins to know him and thinks, "He's actually not that great a guy — he is a bit of a jerk." At the end, she doesn't want him, not because he's black, but because of his "persuasion." And I changed that last word from "complexion."

Complexion, as defined in the OED, means two things. One is the color of your skin, the other is your persuasion, and I changed the final use of complexion to "persuasion" to get that distinction. I didn't think audiences would understand the double meaning of the word and certainly wouldn't grasp the other, archaic meaning. When I moved on to the next suitor, Aragon, he is even more ridiculous, consumed in his pride of being Spanish. In a sense, he is his own cliché, and he comes with a retinue that reflects that cliché in order to sell himself to her. Portia is maturing and sees Aragon for what he is, so from the beginning she doesn't like him, but she's judging him by his looks. When he is choosing the casket her initial opinions are confirmed as she gets to know him. In this scene she says very little — she has learned the value of observation and gathering knowledge. How he chooses tells her more about him, and she then has the appropriate, "informed" reaction.

In comes Bassanio to try his hand, and he is in extreme haste. She hasn't ever talked to Bassanio; she has only seen him once as part of somebody else's train, and she has fallen in love,

she's chosen him by his looks. Bassanio, too, has no real idea of who she is. She wants to choose him and chooses him by cheating with the song — I think she cheats, she enables him — and then she realizes after she's chosen him who he is in the following scene and why he has come to put himself to the test; he has done this primarily to save Antonio's life and, yes, he does love her. Bassanio races into choosing the casket, he does it almost thoughtlessly. She wants to stop him and then, only after he's won does she realize who he is, and Portia goes back to Venice in disguise to solve the court case, but also to know really who Bassanio is, what kind of person he is. She wants to make sure that she married the right guy (was he, like Morocco, a thoughtless, uninformed choice?) and to test him with the ring; he fails that. She really has to force him to make him know whether he really loves her or not, whether he married her for her or for Antonio's sake, which is a test of jealousy.

With all those suitors, there is an element of affectation, of posing: Know me by how I look, by my retinue, by what train I have. My frame of reference was the world of the fashion runway — all look and affectation — where there is no true experience or knowledge. Everybody is trying to make a big impression, trying to be seen by the other person and known by the other person. You get this showing off that is false, that has nothing to do with life experience, but everything to do with having the right haircut and being very fashionable; affectation and posing that has nothing to do with real knowledge.

*RO:* You provide a very interesting setting for the meeting between Antonio and Shylock in act 3, a market in which Christian, Jew, and Muslim are selling goods and services associated with stereotypical notions of their cultural identities. At least one critic noted that Antonio's violent smashing of the merchants' wares recalls Christ evicting the moneychangers from the Temple. Is your staging of the scene meant, in part, as an attack on the simplification and commodification of cultural identity; does Antonio's act, in a way, address the basis of some of the ideas you are playing with in the humor of the suitor scenes?

*RR:* Yes, exactly, there is a sense that Catholicism has been commodified by the priest selling "Jesus" T-shirts. Morocco, in this scene, has taken on the identity of a gun-runner, and here the Jews lend money or act as money-changers. They are all playing out these roles that somehow have been given to them; possibly they didn't know how clichéd the roles were, but in this market they are playing out commodified stereotypes not of their choosing. The fact that Bassanio marries for money probably, in a sense, drives Antonio mad because he has commodified himself and his love. Somehow, in this world, Antonio's human instinct, his love, has become commodified or measured by money, and he is rebelling against it. Conversely, he has nothing left for himself: He is broke, and he has lost everything. There is a sense that he wants and is able to attack all the hypocrisy



he sees because he has nothing left. This gesture, this addition to his great fall, suggests that he is against the hypocrisy of the people in the market, which is similar to Christ's opposition to the hypocrisy of the money-changers in the Temple. Of course, this is part of his becoming Christ-like — a recognition of how he is transforming his role from victim to martyr.

*RO:* You end, as I mentioned, very seriously with Jessica's prayer for forgiveness, but you also suggest the possibility of an identification between Antonio and Jessica, an apparent message of reconciliation between Christian and Jew. This seriousness and identification between "enemies" appear to be part of a long theatrical tradition of making the play more inclusive, and this inclusiveness is certainly endorsed by Richard Monette in his Artistic Director's note for the production. Yet the production portrayed racial antagonism energetically; the dramatic or even tragic antagonism between Christian and Jew, and comic antagonism between Portia and her suitors, came across powerfully. How were you hoping that audiences at Stratford, specifically, would reconcile these two currents in the show?

*RR:* This has been a very controversial production. I've had critical reaction from the wife of the president of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC). She wrote an article in the *Toronto Star* about the show's anti-Semitism, even though she liked the production. She noted that kids were cheering during the performance as Shylock was humiliated in the court scene, and then the CJC sent somebody to the production. To me that is one side of the coin, and it is important to spin to the other side. That other side is represented by Portia when she turns to Shylock and says, "What forgiveness do you have now?" Their only form of forgiveness is to turn him into a Christian, so hopefully people catch the irony of that. Portia's journey is to understand that things are not so simple. I was pleasantly surprised when I read an affirmative and positive review by a knowledgeable academic in the *Canadian Jewish Tribune*.<sup>5</sup> The best productions must be controversial and must upset our expectations.

My direction of Portia's "Quality of mercy" speech caused some real rancor. This speech happens at the beginning of the trial scene. To my mind, it is not a great speech; it is a sentimental ode to mercy and has nothing to do with the real experience of showing mercy. The words are easy to say and to beautify, but are not easy to live by. Portia's speech is quickly dismissed by Shylock, by Antonio wanting to get on with the execution, and by Bassanio, who thinks he can pay the debt off. Portia is ignored. This speech is the easiest thing in the world to say, and anybody who has been raised a Christian has probably said it or believed it of themselves in their own words. But they are only words and mean nothing until they are tested — tested against Shylock's experience.

The speech's beauty is why everybody identifies with it, but the thoughts in the speech are themselves sentimental, superficial, and no playwright of any repute would put it at the beginning of the trial scene if it is meant to be the turnaround speech. To put it there and to see it so quickly ignored indicates the failure of these beautiful, but untrue, words — it is a speech with all the depth of a fashion show. Portia has to go through the journey of the trial and work on her feet to try to figure out what is required to show forgiveness and mercy. Forgiveness occurs rarely; it is sometimes selfish, and she has to struggle to convince the other Christians before learning what it means. Portia may learn more about human hate and why that carries on. Antonio shows no forgiveness; the Christians go so far as to take Shylock's Jewish identity from him. The question is, "Is mercy even possible?" If there is no real mercy, how can there be love? These are not promising terms to base a marriage upon.

Hopefully, I am keeping the coin spinning, to show both sides; I want to show the endeavor of love, its necessity, and its impossibility. That is why at the end I tried to show the struggle of couples trying to break through to each other — some successful, some failing. Jessica's last line is, "I am never merry when I hear sweet music." Who isn't happy when she hears sweet music? She is going back, in my mind, to an otherness. When you think of Jewish canting, it is not sweet in the same way that Gregorian chanting is. This was a major trigger for me when dealing with the relation between this couple (Lorenzo and Jessica) at the end. Jessica says nothing in response to getting the inheritance from Shylock. She's caught in a snare, she's married to Lorenzo, who loves her but in fact may love her only for her money (like Bassanio's relationship to Portia). She made a decision based on looks, and she tried to impress him by stealing her father's money and giving it to him. What kind of relationship is built on that behavior?

Once they arrived at Belmont, having spent all their money eating, drinking, and buying monkeys, that last line of hers is so revealing of where her character is at that moment — husband and wife are profoundly apart in their first principles. Now they really know each other. I wanted to emphasize the idea of the happy and unhappy ending, to keep the coin spinning. When she meets Antonio at the very end, she is making a statement: "I am not stopping being Jewish; I may look and act like a Christian, I am married to a Christian, I am his wife, but I have not forgotten and I am still Jewish — know me."

*RO:* Richard Monette seems to be using Shylock as the main figure to represent the "Outsider," which is the season's theme, and it seems that Stratford is projecting a message that the performance of Shakespeare can serve as an arena of inclusiveness, though this *Merchant* certainly emphasized divisiveness.

*RR:* Right, Shakespeare supposedly provided a happy ending, but he in fact provided a complex ending. What is inclusiveness if you lose your identity? Happiness for one person is not the same for the other. It's not very happy for Lorenzo, as well. It's disconcerting for him. The distance between him and his wife in this production is huge, especially in that scene when he tries to woo her and win her back based on their history of thievery and deception.

*RO:* The evening show that I saw did not have a lot of school kids, so the reaction was somewhat different from the matinee I saw, where the school kids reacted as Anna Morgan suggested. Still, a lot of the audience members at the evening show were laughing with Gratiano, which surprised me. But when he became really vicious, the laughter turned to shock. It was a very interesting dynamic.

*RR:* Yes, and at the end of the trial scene you have Graham as Shylock laughing at Gratiano's joke about having ten godfathers. I believe, at that moment, Shylock is learning to play the game again, to act hypocritically in a hypocritical society; tomorrow, the Christian will be asking him to loan money again. It raises the question, "How do you know who you are in a world that is greased by hypocrisy and contradiction, especially when hypocrisy is necessary?" And in this play, you get people who don't understand themselves; Antonio's first line is that he does not know why he is so sad. Antonio doesn't even know himself and he wants to contradict and suppress his love for Bassanio, because that would be too dangerous or difficult for him. To me, he seems to be a suppressed homosexual; he can't be known as such, he must even hide this from himself, and eventually he turns into this terrible anti-Semite because he can't be at one with himself. His reaction is to destroy the "other" when he, too, is an "other" in Christian society. When you can't be what you are, you become someone quite obsessed. You become a racial cliché, or you become a fascist or an instrument of hate.

*RO:* What are the differences between working on a racially charged play by Shakespeare, where the issues of anti-Semitism appear to be something in a past that is not related directly to the immediate historical moment and, say, a work like Jason Sherman's *Remnants*, which confronts Canadians with their own more immediate history of anti-Semitism in barring European war refugees from entering the country? I suppose this goes back to my earlier question about Graham Greene's performance; when interviewed, he related the play to the violence surrounding land claims disputes in Caledonia, Ontario.

*RR:* *Remnants* is about prejudice, as well. Shakespearean language and its complexity is probably the biggest difference. *Remnants* tends to be more of a situational drama in terms of its complexity. I suppose the issues are the same for me, but take different dramatic forms. Then again, I am not sure I can compare the two; they are just two different types of plays struggling with prejudice and mercy. I always find it interesting when doing a Shakespeare drama that five

hundred years have passed and nothing has changed. You can find examples of what happened in his Venice and what people will do for money, love, and acceptance repeated over and over. We seem to advance so slowly as a humanitarian species.

I kept trying to draw parallels between this classical play and the present day. For example, I think about Jessica and [what] it would be like, your daughter taking your retirement savings, all that you have built up to protect yourself so that your kids don't have to take care of you, so that your old age is protected; all that you have taken such great care to preserve and protect. So I try to make sure, when drawing these parallels, that the experience of the performance is relevant today and identifiable to an audience — that they see themselves. That doesn't just mean doing contemporary costumes, but making sure the action and the events of the play have a resonance to an audience today. Audiences' experiences and cultures change over time, so even with *Remnants*, people today have to figure out what the play (pre- and post-World War II) is about to them; we are not living during that time. I direct trying to find a connection between the contemporary audience and these stories — no matter what the age. You can still be in period, but the audience has to feel and identify with the events.

*RO:* I guess I was wondering whether, because we are still closer to the 1930s and 40s than to Shakespeare's time, and because it was Canadians who kept European Jews from coming here when they needed to, there is more of a sense of a contemporary audience's complicity in the racism of *Remnants* than there is in a production of *Merchant* at Stratford. Even laughing at the anti-Semitism suggests that *Merchant* is a risky play.

*RR:* Unless the audience is laughing at the court scene — unless they are thinking that Shylock deserves what justice he got — there is nothing for Portia to do in the final scene. By challenging Bassanio with the test of the ring, she asks the question of a loved one: "Are you true?" What Portia sees in the court scene unmasks hypocrisy and contradiction in a supposedly good Christian society. They should have let Shylock go; he did not have to become a Christian, and they did not have to take all his money and his choice of inheritance. Because Shakespeare sets up Shylock here as such a terrible person, we like to see him bested. So in a way, he becomes "a Jew"; the individual becomes part of a prejudicial picture.

It is important that the audience does laugh, but by having Gratiano spit on him, I hoped that they would laugh and then choke on the laugh — and they did. They laugh once, and then I want to see them pulling back, thinking, experiencing their own joy of revenge, and discovering the feeling of, "That's appalling." The audience is caught in the contradiction of the situation, including the desire for revenge and their own compassionate values. I want them to feel the impulse and then experience the need to wrestle with it as the events of the trial go on. But unless they have those

feelings in the court, with some complexity at the end, I think, there is nothing for Portia to do in the final scene, which is to teach them, to teach the men, the Christians, a lesson. To my mind, Shakespeare is always doing this: setting you up one way, then showing that things do not really happen the way you think. He embraces contradiction and writes with irony. And at the conclusion of this show, there is a happy ending which is not a happy ending. For me the coin has to keep flipping; we see first one side, and then the other.

### Notes

1. See, for instance, Houlihan 2005 and Worthen 1997, 76-96.
2. See Moodie 2003 and Taylor 1999.
3. Greene himself briefly makes this connection. See Morrow 2007.
4. Greene, too, expressed a reluctance to be known as "Graham Greene the Native actor." See Portman 2007.
5. See Ages 2007.

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