

The Merchant of Venice, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK — review



*May 24, 2015 by: Ian Shuttleworth Makram J. Khoury's smile in his early scenes sums up his interpretation of Shylock. It is broad and unstinting, but utterly hollow; there is no active hostility, but a complete absence of sympathy. Nor does one need to speculate how far this portrait of the Jewish moneylender might be informed by the actor's own identity as a Palestinian: such an unsympathetic Shylock is entirely in keeping with the world of Polly Findlay's production. The question of the play's anti-Semitism subsides here into a world comprehensively devoid of warmth. Technically this is one of Shakespeare's comedies, but I have never seen it so successfully given a hard edge without getting caught up in its own earnestness. Yes, the Venetian gentiles repeatedly spit on Shylock and manhandle him; even Portia herself, in male disguise in the climactic court scene, half-spits at him the lines by which she thwarts his contractual demand for a pound of Antonio's flesh. But no one cares unselfishly about anyone else. Shylock's daughter Jessica soon realises that she and the bag of money with which she elopes are trophies to Lorenzo. Antonio's melancholy is clearly because he allows himself to be used by his beloved Bassanio to finance the latter's wooing of Portia. She in turn seems to be goaded into her final trick, cozening a symbolic ring from Bassanio, by jealousy after seeing him kiss Antonio. A romcom this ain't. It is a world which is alienating but, when one sees the complacent, wealthy Venetians rollicking among themselves, also all too familiar. Patsy Ferran is an appealingly girlish Portia, actively supported by Nadia Albina as her maid Nerissa. Jamie Ballard is a convincing sack of woe as Antonio; Findlay stands him alone onstage as the audience enter for each half, so by the end of the run Ballard will have had time to consider a lot of profound questions in great detail. Emotions in general are pitched high, but they are never emotions that invite us to engage with any figure. Compared to the RSC's current companion production of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, which at least has a strong current of black humour, this is a world just as unyielding and several degrees colder.*

