THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Education Pack
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To Teachers

This pack has been designed to complement your class’s visit to see Propeller’s 2009 production of *The Merchant of Venice* at The Watermill Theatre and on national and international tour.

Most of the pack is aimed at A-level and GSCE students of Drama and English Literature, but some of the sections, and suggestions for classroom activities, may be of use to teachers teaching pupils at Key Stages 2, 3 and also those in higher education.

While there are some images from the production as well as the rehearsal process, the pack has been deliberately kept simple from a graphic point of view so that most pages can easily be photocopied for use in the classroom.

Your feedback is most welcome, please email any comments you have to outreach@watermill.org.uk.

Workshops to accompany the production are also available. Call me on 01635 570927 or email me at the above address for further information.

I hope you find the pack useful.

Beth Flintoff
Deputy Outreach Director

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Propeller
Introduction by Edward Hall

‘Propeller is an all male Shakespeare company which mixes a rigorous approach to the text with a modern physical aesthetic. We look for as many ways as possible to inform the physical life of the production with the poetry of the text, and we give as much control as possible to the actor in the telling of the story.

The company is as all companies should be: defined by the people in it and not owned by an individual. Indeed, I find it hard to describe Propeller when we are in between shows, as I become aware of our identity only when looking at our work, which I hope changes all the time.

We want to rediscover Shakespeare simply by doing the plays as we believe they should be done: with great clarity, speed and full of as much imagination in the staging as possible. We don’t want to make the plays ‘accessible’, as this implies that they need ‘dumbing down’ in order to be understood, which they don’t. We want to continue to take our work to as many different kinds of audiences as possible, and so to grow as artists and people. We are hungry for more opportunity to explore the richness of Shakespeare’s plays and, if we keep doing this with rigour and invention, then I believe the company, and I hope our audiences too, will continue to grow.’
Synopsis

Part One
The merchant Antonio laments that he is sad. His friend Salerio tries to cheer him up, to no avail. More friends, Lorenzo and Gratiano also try and fail. Antonio's friend, Bassanio, informs him that he intends to seek the wealthy Portia's hand in marriage, yet needs financial backing. Antonio, though reluctant, offers Bassanio 3,000 ducats (money) to help him.

Portia laments to her servant Nerissa that she fears a suitor she dislikes will pursue her hand in marriage. Per her late father's will, the suitor must choose the correct of three chests (gold, silver, and lead), and then, if correct, he may marry Portia. She likes none of her six suitors, but wishes Bassanio would come and choose the correct chest.

After much negotiating, Bassanio convinces the merchant Shylock the Jew to lend him 3000 ducats, with Antonio putting up his investments as the bond. Shylock hates Antonio, so he lends the money, hoping Antonio will default on the loan. Antonio, though, has confidence one of his ocean vessels will come to port one month before the three month deadline. Shylock's daughter, Jessica, gives a love letter to Launcelot to deliver to Antonio's Christian friend Lorenzo. In the letter, Lorenzo learns that Jessica will pretend to be a male torchbearer for him at the supper between Antonio and Shylock. Shylock, going to the supper, leaves his keys with his daughter, Jessica, warning her not to take part in the evening's Christian activities. Later that night, Gratiano, Salerio, and Lorenzo meet at Shylock's to steal Jessica. Salerio and his friends taunt Shylock for his predicament of losing his daughter. Shylock then laments of his monetary loss to another Jew, Tubal, yet rejoices that Antonio is sure to default on his loan.

Portia begs Bassanio to wait in choosing so that she may spend time with him, in case he chooses wrong. He correctly chooses the right casket, though, and wins Portia's hand in marriage. To seal the union, Portia gives Bassanio a ring, warning that he should never lose it or give it away, lest he risk losing her love for him. Gratiano then announces his intention to wed Nerissa. Next, Salerio, Lorenzo, and Jessica arrive, informing Bassanio that Antonio lost his ships, and, furthermore, that Shylock is viciously declaring forfeiture of the bond by Antonio.

Part Two
Shylock is determined to take his pond of flesh as forfeiture for the loan. Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as young lawyers and go to court to Antonio's trial. The Duke presides over the hearing wherein Shylock intends to cut "a pound of flesh from Antonio's breast" since the due date has past and that was the terms of the bond, even though Bassanio offers him 6,000 ducats for repayment. Nerissa and Portia arrive. Gratiano, Bassanio, the Duke, and Portia try to dissuade Shylock, to no avail. Yet, Portia points out that the deed calls for no blood to be
shed and exactly one pound to be taken, lest Shylock be guilty of not following the bond himself. Shylock, realizing this is impossible, recants and simply requests 9,000 ducats. Portia then reveals that Shylock is himself guilty of a crime; namely, conspiring to kill another citizen, i.e. Antonio.

As punishment, the Duke and Antonio decide that Shylock must give half his belongings to the court; keep the other half for himself and promise to give all his remaining belongings to his daughter and son-in-law (Lorenzo) upon his death; and become a Christian. With no other choice, Shylock agrees. As Portia (as the doctor of civil law) leaves, Bassanio offers her a monetary gift. Portia turns this down, instead requesting Bassanio's gloves and wedding ring instead. Bassanio, due to his vow, hesitates on the ring, but reluctantly gives it after much prodding by Antonio. Nerissa (disguised as a court clerk), vows to try to get her husband (Gratiano) to give her his wedding ring. Lorenzo and Jessica share a peaceful night together. The next morning, Bassanio, Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa reunite. After quarreling over the loss of rings, Portia and Nerissa admit their ruse and return the rings to their husbands. Further, they inform Antonio that three of his ships have come to port full of merchandise. Finally, they give the deed to Jessica and Lorenzo promising to give them Shylock's money and possessions upon his death.
Main characters

Shylock

Though the play doesn't name him in the title, Shylock is undoubtedly the main character of Merchant. He is, at least in the views of the other characters, a villain. He begins the play as a wealthy Jewish money-lender, scorned by Venetians for making money off charging interest and, even more so, for his religion: the other characters usually refer to Shylock simply as "the Jew." He is subjected in the play to a string of indignities: he is endlessly mocked and taunted by his fellow citizens; his servant leaves him for a poor but Christian nobleman; his daughter steals his money and runs away with her Christian lover; and, finally, he is forced to convert to Christianity. But the play focuses not on the cruelties Shylock suffers but on the one he commits: insisting on the pound of flesh that Antonio has promised him as collateral for a loan. While villains normally transgress the bounds of the law, Shylock's "crime" is adhering to it too strictly - he is condemned for his lack of mercy, and finally, at the play's climax, outwitted in the courtroom by Portia. But it is difficult for many modern readers to think of Shylock as a "villain" at all, no matter how much the other characters insist on it, for he often seems the victim of a pervasive and inhuman anti-Semitism. But neither is Shylock an endearing character: more often than not, he seems petty and cruel. But he is undoubtedly the enigmatic center of this play: as with Hamlet, one's understanding of Shylock dictates one's understanding of a play that orbits around him.

Portia

The play's only match for Shylock, in intellect and will, is not one of the Venetian men against whom he struggles, but Portia, a woman from Belmont. Portia begins the play as a young woman still under the command of her dead father. She is required, by his commandment, to marry whichever one of her many suitors succeeds in the lottery her father has set up. But Portia shows, from the beginning of the play, brilliance, cunning, and a scathing wit. The events of the play bear out her status as clever heroine: she rigs the lottery so that her favorite suitor, Bassanio, will win; she makes Bassanio promise to keep a ring and then outwits him into breaking his promise; and, most famously, she dresses as a man to argue a courtroom case against Shylock, thereby saving the life of her husband's closest friend, Antonio. There is no doubt that, despite her occasional nods to being a loyal daughter or wife, Portia is the center of gravity in Belmont. The personalities and intentions of the other characters (except, perhaps, Shylock's) are always overshadowed by hers.
Antonio

The "merchant" of the title, Antonio accepts a contract with Shylock that is the center of the play's action: if he cannot pay back the money which he has borrowed for his friend Bassanio's pursuit of Portia, Shylock will be allowed to cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh. When his merchant ships are lost at sea, Antonio has to forfeit on the loan, and is nearly murdered by Shylock's knife before Portia saves him by a legal technicality. In the play's final scene, a letter arrives announcing that Antonio's ships have finally arrived, and he has his fortune back. But the unresolved question of Antonio's personality is the one that he cannot resolve at the beginning of the play: his sadness. If we accept Antonio's claim that it has nothing to do with his money - a plausible one insofar as Antonio is a generous man who accepts the loss of his fortune stoically - then the cause, many readers conjecture, is Bassanio. Antonio devotes all he has to the younger man's happiness, which suggests, for many, a certain romantic attachment; suffice to say that it is Bassanio, not money, that is the central concern of our "merchant."

Bassanio

Bassanio should be, in theory, the romantic hero of Merchant. The play concerns his successful pursuit of Portia, and the dangers of the bargain his friend Antonio has to make to finance that pursuit. But Bassanio gets by, almost entirely, with the help of his friends: he is able to pursue Portia only because of Antonio's tremendous sacrifices, he wins the lottery only by following Portia's hints, and it is not he but his wife who saves Antonio, who is in danger only because of his willingness to do anything for Bassanio. In Merchant, Bassanio is more than anything the object of Portia and Antonio's tremendous love, and the beneficiary of their intelligence and kindness.

Graziano

Bassanio has a number of undifferentiated friends, but Graziano stands out among them. He is witty, willful, and a little wild. In the opening scene, he is bold enough to scold Antonio for his sadness; he connives to come along with Bassanio to Belmont and manages to woo and win Portia's servant, Nerissa. And it is Graziano's clever and playful lines that conclude the play

Jessica and Lorenzo

Nothing can go wrong for this couple, Shylock's daughter and one of Bassanio's friends: they successfully elope with Shylock's riches; they stay in Belmont, bantering lovingly, while the other characters must return to save Antonio in Venice; and, finally, Shylock is forced to promise all his wealth to them when he dies. Jessica and Lorenzo are almost a model of happiness, the foil against which the other characters' troubles are played out.
William Shakespeare

The person we call William Shakespeare wrote some 37 plays, as well as sonnets and poetry; but very little is actually known about him. What we know about his life comes from registrar records, court records, wills, marriage certificates and his tombstone. There are also contemporary anecdotes and criticisms made by his rivals suggesting that he was indeed a playwright, poet and an actor.

The earliest record we have of his life is of his baptism, on Wednesday 26th April 1564. Traditionally it is supposed that he was, as was common practice, baptised three days after his birth, making his birthday the 23rd of April 1564. There is, however, no proof of this at all. William's father was a John Shakespeare, a local businessman who was involved in tanning and leatherwork. John also dealt in grain and sometimes was described as a glover by trade. John was also a prominent man in Stratford. By 1560, he was one of the fourteen burgesses who made up the town council. William's mother was Mary Arden who married John Shakespeare in 1557. They had eight children, of whom William was the third. It is assumed that William grew up with them in Stratford, one hundred miles from London.

Very little is known about Shakespeare's education. We know that the King's New Grammar School taught boys basic reading and writing. We assume William attended this school since it existed to educate the sons of Stratford but we have no definite proof. There is also no evidence to suggest that William attended university.

On 28th November 1582 an eighteen-year-old William married the twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway. Seven months later, they had their first daughter, Susanna. Anne never left Stratford, living there her entire life. Baptism records reveal that twins Hamnet and Judith were born in February 1585. The Taming of the Shrew was probably written later that year. Hamnet, the only son, died in 1596, just eleven years old.

At some point, Shakespeare joined the Burbage company in London as an actor, and was their principal writer. He wrote for them at the Theatre in Shoreditch, and by 1594 he was a sharer, or shareholder in the company. It was through being a sharer in the profits of the company that William made his money and in 1597 he was able to purchase a large house in Stratford.

The company moved to the newly-built Globe Theatre in 1599. It was for this theatre that Shakespeare wrote many of his greatest plays. In 1613, the Globe Theatre caught fire during a performance of Henry VIII, one of Shakespeare’s last plays, written with John Fletcher, and William retired to Stratford where he died in 1616, on 23rd April.
Sources & Inspiration for the Story

Written sometime between 1596 and 1598, The Merchant of Venice is classified as both an early Shakespearean comedy (more specifically, as a "Christian comedy") and as one of the Bard's problem plays; it is a work in which good triumphs over evil, but serious themes are examined and some issues remain unresolved.

Shakespeare wove together two ancient folk tales, one involving a vengeful, greedy creditor trying to exact a pound of flesh, the other involving a marriage suitor's choice among three chests and thereby winning his (or her) mate. Shakespeare's treatment of the first standard plot scheme centers around the villain of Merchant, the Jewish moneylender Shylock, who seeks a literal pound of flesh from his Christian opposite, the generous, faithful Antonio. Shakespeare's version of the chest-choosing device revolves around the play's Christian heroine Portia, who steers her lover Bassanio toward the correct humble casket and then successfully defends his bosom friend Antonio from Shylock's horrid legal suit.

In the modern, post-Holocaust readings of Merchant, the problem of anti-Semitism in the play has loomed large. A close reading of the text must acknowledge that Shylock is a stereotypical caricature of a cruel, money-obsessed medieval Jew, but it also suggests that Shakespeare's intentions were not primarily anti-Semitic. Indeed, the dominant thematic complex in The Merchant of Venice is much more universal than specific religious or racial hatred; it spins around the polarity between the surface attractiveness of gold and the Christian qualities of mercy and compassion that lie beneath the flesh.

Sources

There are many possible texts that Shakespeare could have used in constructing The Merchant of Venice, and while we can confirm that he relied upon two particular sources, other sources were likely, though not definitely, influences on Shakespeare. His chief source was a tale in an Italian collection entitled Il Pecorone or The Simpleton, written in 1378 by Giovanni Fiorentino, and published in 1565. No known English translation existed for Shakespeare to use, but it is possible, although very unlikely, that someone Shakespeare knew had translated his own private copy and gave it to Shakespeare to read. It is more likely that Shakespeare was more learned than people like to assume, and that he read the text in its original Italian. The story in Il Pecorone tells of a wealthy woman at Belmont who marries an upstanding young gentleman. Her husband needs money and a friend, desperate to help, goes to a money-lender to borrow the required cash. The money-lender, who is also a Jew in Il Pecorone demands a pound of flesh as payment if the money is not paid back. When the money is not paid in time, the Jew goes to court to ensure he receives what he is
owed. The friend’s life is saved when the wealthy wife speaks in court of true justice and convinces the judge to refuse the Jew his pound of flesh. Shakespeare adds the casket story line and Shylock’s usury — in *Il Pecorone* the Jew lends the friend money without interest.

Portia’s suitors and the game of casket-choosing they must play for her hand in marriage are from the *Gesta Romanorum*, a medieval collection of stories translated by Richard Robinson, and published in 1577. Here is an excerpt from *Gesta Romanorum* relevant to *The Merchant of Venice*, as reprinted in the edition of Shakespeare’s play edited by H. H. Furness:

> Then was the emperour right glad of her safety and comming, and had great compassion on her, saying: Ah faire lady, for the love of my sonne thou hast suffered much woe, nevertheless if thou be worthie to be his wife, soone shall I prove. And when he had said thus, he commanded to bring forth three vessels, the first was made of pure gold, beset with precious stones without, and within full of dead mens bones, and thereupon was ingraven this posey: Whoso chooseth me shall finde that he deserveth. The second vessel was made of fine silver, filled with earth and wormes, and the superscription was thus: Whoso chooseth me shall finde what his nature desireth. The third vessel was mad of lead, full within of precious stones, and the superscription, Whoso chooseth me shall finde what God hath disposed to him.

In addition to the aforementioned sources, Shakespeare could have relied upon a play called *The Jew*. No copy of this play exists and the only acknowledgement of it comes from a book called *Schoole of Abuse* (1579), by Gosson. He mentions briefly that a play by that name was once performed at the Bull Inn, but no other details are known. He also could have used a novel called *Zelauto*, written by the English playwright Anthony Munday in 1580. Similarities exist between Jessica and one of the female characters in that text. Lastly, in approximately 1591, Christopher Marlowe wrote *The Jew of Malta*. Marlowe, considered by most to be the greatest playwright other than Shakespeare in the English language, crafted his hero, Barabas, the wealthiest Jew in Malta, no doubt from the same sources Shakespeare used. Barabas is cunning and extremely intelligent, but his intellect prompts his downfall, and he dies in the trap that he set for his enemy. Marlowe's play was a wild success, and its popularity may have been the reason why Shakespeare decided to write his own version of the tale told in *Il Pecorone*.

Mabillard, Amanda, *An Analysis of Shakespeare's Sources for The Merchant of Venice*
Settings

Shakespeare makes use of two distinct settings for *The Merchant of Venice*. Venice, as in Shakespeare's time, is the city of commerce where wealth flows in and out with each visiting ship. Venice is also a cosmopolitan city at the frontier of Christendom, beyond which lies Asia, Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. Society in Venice is a predominantly male world, where the single female, Jessica, is locked up in her house, and can only escape in disguise as a male.

Belmont, on the other hand, is the home of Portia and her mysterious caskets. It is a place of romance and festivity to which the victorious Christians retire at the end of the play. Like the forests in *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Belmont is an idealized "green world" that is removed from the ruthlessness of the real world. Unlike Venice, it is controlled by women (though Portia's dead father lingers).
Women and Men: Their Status

The concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign to most in Shakespeare's day: Adam was created first, and Eve from his body; she was created specifically to give him comfort, and was to be subordinate to him, to obey him and to accept her lesser status. A dominant woman was unnatural, a symptom of disorder.

The medieval church had inculcated a view of women that was split between the ideal of the Virgin Mary, and her fallible counterpart, Eve. Unfortunately, the Virgin Mary was one of a kind, so there was often a general distrust of women; Renaissance and Medieval literature is often misogynistic.

*Adam and Eve* (Detail). Saenredam Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

Men Playing Women Playing Men

Although they took part in plays on the Continent, and participated in the Comedia Dell Arte, women did not act on the English stage in Shakespeare's day. The parts of women, and sometimes of old men, were acted by child actors--boys whose voices had not yet changed.

Children could be apprenticed to a mature actor, who would teach them the art of performance. Several sharers in the Lord Chamberlain's Men started out as child actors. Several of Shakespeare's plays, particularly the comedies, capitalize on the effect of boys acting women-- who then take on disguise as boys.

It is clear that the boys were fine actors, since Shakespeare wrote some major parts for the women in his plays. So popular were the young actors that whole acting companies were created with child performers - the Children of the Chapel...
Royal, and the Paul's Boys. The children's companies played regularly at Court, and used the indoor theatres at St. Paul's and the Blackfriars.

The boys were chosen for their voices, and could be "pressed"-- forced into service, as soldiers were in time of war. They were educated in grammar and rhetoric as well as in singing and acting.

The puritans, who disapproved of the theatre in general, were particularly scandalized by boys cross-dressing as women.

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Prose and Verse

Spectators in Shakespeare's theatre were so delighted with the gorgeousness of language, why did Shakespeare sometimes write in prose? Sometimes, as in *Henry IV, Part One*, there seems a clear division between the formal verse of the court and the rambunctious prose of the tavern...

But there are as many exceptions to this neat division as there are instances when it is accurate. Hamlet's powerful speech "What a piece of work is a man" (2.2.303-16) is delivered entirely in prose, and what are we to make of a play like *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the prosaic, business-obsessed characters of Venice usually speak in verse and the poetic, imaginative characters of Belmont often speak in prose?

One consistent difference seems to be that verse is used when there are passages of high feeling and increased intensity, while prose is often the language of wit and play.

*Witty characters like Falstaff usually speak in prose*
Production history

*The Merchant of Venice* was performed 47 times at Stratford-upon-Avon between 1880 and 1978; in London, 35 times between 1890 and 1914. The play was performed 48 times between 1768 and 1989 on Broadway; and the Internet Movie Database records 17 film and television versions between 1908 and 2004.

**Henry Irving** took on Shylock in 1879, taking Disraeli's tenure as an occasion to play it more sympathetically. Shylock, Irving said, was "the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and the most ill-used." Henry James wrote Irving "looks the part to a charm, or rather we should say, to a repulsion"; but the *Spectator* praised him as "the very image of exhaustion, a victim, entirely convinced of the justice of his cause, he looked like a Spanish painter's Ecce Homo."
Of Edmund Kean’s performance William Hazlitt writes…

MR. KEAN (of whom report had spoken highly) last night made his appearance at Drury-Lane Theatre in the character of Shylock. … Perhaps it was the most perfect of any. Notwithstanding the complete success of Mr. Kean in the part of Shylock, we question whether he will not become a greater favourite in other parts. There was a lightness and vigour in his tread, a buoyancy and elasticity of spirit, a fire and animation, which would accord better with almost any other character than with the morose, sullen, inward, inveterate, inflexible malignity of Shylock. The character of Shylock is that of a man brooding over one idea, that of its wrongs, and bent on one unalterable purpose, that of revenge. In conveying a profound impression of this feeling, or in embodying the general conception of rigid and uncontrollable self-will, equally proof against every sentiment of humanity or prejudice of opinion, we have seen actors more successful than Mr. Kean; but in giving effect to the conflict of passions arising out of the contrasts of situation, in varied vehemence of declamation, in keenness of sarcasm, in the rapidity of his transitions from one tone and feeling to another, in propriety and novelty of action, presenting a succession of striking pictures, and giving perpetually fresh shocks of delight and surprise, it would be difficult to single out a competitor. … We thought in one or two instances, the pauses in the voice were too long, and too great a reliance placed on the expression of the countenance, which is a language intelligible only to part of the house.


Antony Sher (right) played Shylock in a production of Merchant directed by Bill Alexander in 1987. Alexander turned up 'the anti-semetic volume as loudly as possible' (Christopher Edwards, Spectator, 09/05/87). Sher exaggerated the racial traits of Shylock with 'a heavy accent, a shuffling gait, a beard, long hair and exotic clothes' (Spectator, 09/05/87).

David Nathan described Sher as a 'lip-smacking, liquid-eyed Levantine bargain hunter' (Jewish Chronicle, 08/05/87). Sher's mesmerising performance was compared with his previous incarnation of a Shakespeare villain when he played the crookback king in Alexander's 1984 production of Richard III.

This Merchant, with Christians and Jews trading in spit and venom, and a star of David daubed onto the back wall of the set, was a bold attempt to free the play from charges of anti-Semitism. In this production, Shylock is an ugly character who is only responding to the much worse behaviour of his tormentors.
Voss’s Shylock was hailed by some as a rediscovery of the essences of Shakespeare character after the inevitable, albeit understandable, politicisation of Shylock in more recent times. Alistair Macaulay described these ‘essences’ brought out by Voss: ‘He is so naked in his religiosity, in his hatreds, in his money-dealings, in his grief, in his vengeance, that, just as we are about to identify with him, we recoil from him. . . He is awesome and embarrassing’ (Financial Times, 15/12/97).

Loveday Ingram’s 2001 RSC production of The Merchant of Venice cast Ian Bartholomew (right) as Shylock. Set in late Victorian times, this Merchant began its run on the Pit stage at the Barbican, went onto the Swan Theatre in Stratford, and then onto an international tour. This production was described by several commentators as a return to a more romantic interpretation of the play where Shylock’s character was less angry and less prominent.
Jerry Tallmer talks to Michael Radford about his film version of *The Merchant of Venice* with Al Pacino

“That’s really interesting — I just started to think I was finally old enough to play Shylock,” the 62-year-old *Pacino* had said when, at lunch, “Angels in America” (TV) producer Cary Brokaw threw on the table the idea of a movie of *The Merchant of Venice.*

The merchant of Venice is of course not Shylock, for Jews are not permitted to be merchants in 16th-century Venice. The merchant is Antonio, who seeks to borrow money — a lot of money, 3,000 ducats — on behalf of his needy young friend Bassanio, who is seeking the hand of the fair Portia. When Antonio’s merchant ships, laden with riches, come in to port, the debt to money-lender Shylock will be repaid. Meanwhile, there’s the small matter of a bond . . .

“There are two questions,” says Michael Radford, director of the hard, clean, uncluttered “Merchant of Venice” stunningly shot in Venice with Pacino as Shylock

“One, does Shylock really think he’s going to get his pound of flesh? Obviously not. In his heart of hearts, it’s just his way of saying: ‘[Expletive] you for spitting on me.’”

“And the second question is: When Portia goes into that courtroom dressed as a lawyer, does she know how it’s going to turn out? Why does she drag out the
whole business like that?


The earlier Portia, the Portia of all that nonsense of the suitors and the caskets, is to some minds (mine) not much more than a spoiled, silly schoolgirl. But now —

“Portia grows through the trial. She realizes she’s married this shallow guy, Bassanio, who’s going to spend the rest of his life in bars and so forth.”

And not just in bars. In beds. Maybe in bed from time to time with none other than the Antonio, his savior, who’s so austerely played (as if with toothache of the soul) by the estimable Jeremy Irons. The film underwrites the probability of this with a quick, in-passing mouth-to-mouth kiss between the two men.

“I don’t think Bassanio was in love with Antonio,” said Michael Radford as he took a few minutes out from a clutch of television interviews during what the film world calls a “junket” here in New York a little while ago. “Antonio is in love with Bassanio. … If you don’t see a homosexual relationship between Antonio and Bassanio, you’ve got nothing for Portia to fight for.”

The director who is also the screenwriter of this “Merchant of Venice” has been quoted as wryly saying he fashioned the script “with my collaborator William Shakespeare. He just contributed the dialogue, the plot, the story, and the characters, and I did all the rest.”

But now Radford said: “Well, I did a number of things. One of the most crucial was I looked at many Shakespeare movies.”

Did you like any?

“Not many. Even in the Orson Welles ‘Othello’ you don’t get to know Othello, you don’t get to feel for him.”

With Radford, and with Al Pacino, you do get to know Shylock, and you do get to feel for him, not only when he’s crushed by Portia’s verdict and sentence but even before that, when his daughter Jessica (Zuleika Robinson) runs off with her gentile boyfriend, Lorenzo (Charlie Cox) and her father’s ducats.

“Shylock is a man who can tolerate any abuse because he can make his way through it. He’s most proud of his heritage. But when his daughter breaks the faith, it’s too much for him.

“That happens all the time in Britain,” said Radford. “While we were making this film, a man in Yorkshire, an Afghan, murdered his daughter for marrying a
Christian. And he was heartbroken. Not a bad man. It was just that his world was torn apart.

“That’s what happens to Shylock. But what you cannot do is take the miseries of your race on your shoulders and go on a one-man mission of revenge.

“Anti-Semitism in Shakespeare’s time was a different sort of anti-Semitism than what the Russians and the Germans put everybody through in the 20th century. I don’t know where Shakespeare’s sympathies lie, and I don’t care, because I’m making this film in the 20th century.

“Shakespeare wrote the most heartfelt of pleas for humanity and put them in the mouth of Shylock. Just last week in London, a man in the audience at a preview stood up and said: ‘I am a Muslim, and I totally identify with Shylock.’ That was music to me,” said Michael Radford. “Human psychology has not changed over the centuries.”

He points out that Shylock was Shakespeare’s “first great, flawed, doomed tragic hero. Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Antony all came later.”

He also points out that, contrary to the belief that Shakespeare never met or saw a Jew, he had in fact, as a spectator, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, attended the trial, in London, for espionage and treason, of the Queen’s physician, a Portuguese Jew named Rodrigo Lopez, who was subsequently executed at Tyburn.

“A complete frame-up,” said Radford. “Shakespeare saw villainy heaped on Lopez because he was a Jew. It’s feasible that something happened, that he then sat down and wrote that speech, the one that sums up all humanity.”

\[Hath\ not\ a\ Jew\ eyes?\ Hath\ not\ a\ Jew\ hands,\ organs,\ dimensions,\ senses,\ affections,\ passions?\ Fed\ with\ the\ same\ food,\ hurt\ with\ the\ same\ weapons,\ subject\ to\ the\ same\ diseases,\ healed\ by\ the\ same\ means,\ warmed\ and\ cooled\ by\ the\ same\ winter\ and\ summer\ as\ a\ Christian\ is?\ If\ you\ prick\ us,\ do\ we\ not\ bleed?\ If\ you\ poison\ us,\ do\ we\ not\ die?\]

Source: from an article by Jerry Tallmer
Credits

Antonio  Bob Barrett
Salerio  Sam Swainsbury
Bassanio  Jack Tarlton
Gratiano  Richard Frame
Lorenzo  Richard Dempsey
Portia  Kelsey Brookfield
Nerissa  Chris Myles
Shylock  Richard Clothier
Prince of Morocco  Jonathan Livingstone
Tubal/Arragon  Thomas Padden
Lancelot Gobbo  John Dougal
Jessica  John Trenchard
Duke Of Venice  Babou Ceesay
Monsieur Le Bon/Preacher/Understudy  Emmanuel Idowu

Director  Edward Hall
Designer  Michael Pavelka
Lighting Designer  Ben Ormerod
Tour Relights  Richard Howell
Music  Propeller
Additional Arrangements & Music  Jon Trenchard
Text adapted by  Edward Hall & Roger Warren
Interview with Edward Hall – Director

What is a director for? The job broadly falls into two categories. One is an organiser, organising entrances, exits, design, costume, lots of practical parts of directing, which is like being a sort of big administrator. And the other part, broadly, of a director’s job, is to help release and discover the spirit of the play by inspiring what the actors are discovering as they work with the text.

What makes Propeller special and how does that affect the work? The idea of Propeller being something that you can sort of define is not one I adhere to. So I don’t even know if Propeller is special. It’s just a group of actors trying to make wonderful plays work. I think our approach is to try, in the staging of the plays, to be as imaginative as the poetry of the text is, and use all the skills that the actors possess - singing, dancing - to help the story.

Do you have any misgivings about not involving women in the show? Well, we’re an all-male Shakespeare company and I’m sure I’ll direct the play one day with a mixture in the company, but no, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing it!

Why ‘Merchant’? Well The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare’s most stimulating and controversial dramas and we’ve set in a prison called Venice - an environment which brings out the more radical tendencies in human nature, an environment that is fertile ground for the ferocious intolerance that Shakespeare examines.

How do you do it, achieve such a show, such a tour? Fourteen actors and two plays touring from Liverpool to as far a field as Tokyo, and all on a shoestring. It would of course not be possible without an enormous amount of support from all quarters and I am thrilled that Coutts Bank has extended its generous sponsorship of the UK leg of our tour. Delivering big classical plays on a weekly touring basis is not an easy thing to do but it remains a passionate belief of mine that we keep taking inventive and high class classical theatre to seasoned and new theatre goers alike on a widespread regional and international basis. I have a close knit and dedicated group of actors and backstage wizards who delight in going the extra half yard in whichever direction you might take them, so keep coming and keep enjoying the greatest writer that ever lived!
Interview with Michael Pavelka – Designer

What does a theatre designer do?
A theatre designer works closely with the director, actors and other members of a production team to provide scenery and costumes for a performance. Everything you see on the stage – and I mean absolutely everything - has been ‘designed’. All the parts of the design should support the ideas behind the production and often the designer’s view will shape the show’s concept as well as its style and ‘look’.

Designers usually make drawings and accurate models to share their ideas with everyone else; particularly when working with an ensemble company like Propeller. This time I used computer programmes to model the set instead of building a scale model from card and glue. These will then be used in different ways to realise the actual set, costumes and props. Sometimes the designer will also draw pictures of how the different scenes will look; this is called storyboarding, and helps everyone to see how the designed production will move in time and space as the story is acted out.

The designer will try to oversee as much of the building of the production as possible, attending rehearsals, costume fittings and visiting the workshop where the set is constructed and painted. When all the parts of the show come together in the days leading up to the first performance (or opening night), the designer is on hand to make sure the ideas are completed on stage and make any last minute changes.

It is most important that a designer uses eyes and mind as well as hands!

You’ve designed a number of Propeller productions now. Have you established a different process for working with this company?
This is now my sixth production with Propeller. It’s an ensemble which means that the performers have to have great confidence in how they will physically use the set and costumes. They have to be completely familiar with all the design’s possibilities before the first public performances, which means that the designed pieces should be used as early as possible in rehearsal.

Technically, this is now increasingly complicated as the Propeller company’s productions travel to more and more varied and unusual locations. The sets and costumes have to be flexible to fit in different sized methods of transport (both
lorries and planes for example) and various scales of theatre space. The costumes also have to withstand the wear and tear of a year’s worth of shows.

What has changed over the years is that I now tend to design a sort of ‘tool kit’ of ideas that the director and actors can experiment with and refine. This is very exciting as they will use the elements in ways that I had not originally thought about – many heads being far more inventive than just one. I might start out with a storyboard idea or two, but they are usually for key moments rather than solutions for every scene.

It is great knowing many of the actors well but also absorbing the methods and ideas of ‘new boys’. I have the rare opportunity design clothes that fit a body and movement that are familiar to me and discuss an actor’s interpretation of a part in an easy-going spirit as we have faith in each other’s skills.

In this respect the production design becomes increasingly owned and occupied by the whole ensemble, creative team and production staff. Our aim is ‘total’, integrated and exciting theatre.
‘BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY’

A view of THE MERCHANT OF VENICE by Roger Warren

_The Merchant of Venice_ was first published in 1600; but the earliest reference to the play is an entry in the Stationers’ Register of books in 1598: ‘a book of _The Merchant of Venice_ or otherwise called _The Jew of Venice_.’ So although the play was probably written around 1596-7, it seems to have acquired a alternative title early on; and this probably reflects a theatrical response, attention shifting from the nominal hero, the Merchant Antonio, to the apparent villain, the Jew Shylock. It is a shift that has been sustained in the centuries since. But that alternative title may be a conscious allusion to another theatrical title: Marlowe’s _The Jew of Malta_ (date uncertain, but before 30 May 1593, when Marlowe was murdered). Interest in the Jews was stirred up by the execution in June 1594 of Roderigo Lopez, a Jewish physician accused of plotting to poison the Queen. In response to this topical interest, _The Jew of Malta_ was revived at the Rose theatre in June and July 1594. This play was certainly the most immediate influence on _The Merchant of Venice_: it sets three distinct racial and religious groups against one another, Jews, Christians, and Turks; all three reappear in _The Merchant_, and their values are compared and contrasted in both plays.

_The Merchant_ is a complex mingling of fantasy and reality. Both the main stories it uses, the Bond of Flesh and the Three Caskets, were long familiar in myth and legend. The number three frequently occurs in folk-tale material, as in the three riddles of Turandot, or Lear’s three daughters. Shakespeare seems to have taken the pound of flesh story from _Il Pecorone_ (‘The Simpleton’) by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino (1558), and the caskets from the _Gesta Romanorum_ (revised English translation, 1595, conveniently for the play). But a now lost play, _The Jew_, was said in 1579 to expose both ‘the greediness of worldly choosers’ and ‘the bloody minds of usurers’; so the Belmont and Venice plots may already have been combined on the stage’ and may therefore have provided an immediate theatrical model as _The Jew of Malta_ so clearly did.

Stories from myth and folk-tale are not of course necessarily distanced or remote: they survive because they tell continuing and basic human truths. Hence part of the power (and enduring popularity as well as controversy) of _The Merchant of Venice_. But Shakespeare has intensified that power in the strong vein of reality with which he has dramatized the stories. On one level, Portia is a heroine of romance; but she is also very tough-minded, both in her dismissal of her Moorish suitor and in her turning the tables on Shylock in the trial scene. Her love for Bassanio is passionately and lyrically expressed, but when she says ‘Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear’, her witty word-play brings the commercial values of Venice into the initially contrasted world of Belmont.

Both plots depend on money. Some idea of the financial scale on which the play operates may be gained from a simple comparison. Bassanio borrows three thousand ducats to pay for his wooing of Portia. That was roughly £700 in Elizabethan money. At about the same time as he wrote the play, Shakespeare bought New Place, the
second largest house in Stratford, for £60. In modern money, Bassanio wants around £375,000 to finance his wooing expedition. This financial scale helps to sharpen our sense of the crisis facing Antonio. And there is another interesting glimpse of contemporary reality: usury – charging interest on loans – was forbidden to Christians, so the Jews were used for the purpose – and then reviled for it, as in the play. In fact, though the Jews were the financiers of Europe, very few lived in England; but Shakespeare did not need to look far for a model of a usurer: his own father John was twice prosecuted for violating the law by charging usurious interest. There may be fantasy in The Merchant of Venice, but reality too; and it is upon the balance between the two that the play depends.

At the heart of The Merchant is a tension between justice and mercy; but it is also about love, revenge, intolerance, and the nature of bonds, the obligations of one human being to another. Antonio, whose life is legally forfeit, admits that the Duke of Venice ‘cannot deny the course of law’. The law should be impartial, a safeguard for every citizen. But the law also has to be interpreted: presiding at the trial, the Duke is scarcely impartial, expressing overt pity for Antonio and describing Shylock as ‘a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch’. While Shylock is obviously more complex than that implies, he too uses the law in his attempt to kill Antonio. His legalistic stand is opposed by Portia’s eloquent appeal for mercy; but when she repeatedly comes up against the stone wall of his insistence on the letter of the law, she responds in kind, turning the tables on him with a legal technicality, the drop of blood, and enforces the legal penalties he has incurred. When she asks Antonio what mercy he can show Shylock, Antonio asks the court to spare Shylock the confiscation of his goods – but on condition that he leaves all his possessions to his hated Christian son-in-law and, most controversially of all, that he become a Christian. Is this mercy, or a form of revenge? Shakespeare’s dramatization of the scene denies us any simple black and white resolution: his studied ambiguity here is the most extreme example of his balancing of issues throughout the play.

This tension between the theoretical impartiality of the law and the imperfection of its executants recurs in the treatment of bonds and their outcome. These are of two kinds: bonds of law and bonds of love. Characters enter into bonds for different reasons, but none turn out as expected. Antonio accepts Shylock’s ‘merry bond’ in order to finance his beloved Bassanio’s wooing of Portia, with near-fatal consequences to himself; Bassanio and Gratiano enter into the bond of marriage, symbolised by the rings which they then give away; Jessica breaks her bond with her father by marrying the Christian ‘unthrift’ Lorenzo and converting to Christianity: this last bond, especially, signals trouble ahead.

The final scene appears to begin with a lyrical celebration of their love – but the series of mythological love stories which they cite as precedents all ended in disaster. On a wider level, this final scene contains an astonishing contrast. Lorenzo famously celebrates the music of the spheres, something so spiritual that no earthly ears can hear it, as an image of harmony; but the play actually ends, not with harmony, but with a bawdy joke from the character who has consistently represented the most violent intolerance in the play. Here Shakespeare carries to an extreme the contrast between lyrical fantasy and a very down-to-earth reality. To borrow a phrase from Groucho Marx, ‘the contrary is also true’.
The role of the Assistant Director
By Paul Hart

I was invited by Ed Hall (Director of Propeller) to be his Assistant Director on the production of The Merchant of Venice. As assistant my duties include assisting Ed in rehearsals, running rehearsals when the director's away and rehearsing understudies who would replace any ill actors during the shows run. I also help with research for the production, I take notes in rehearsals and work with the Stage Management team who do all the backstage work on the Production.

Rehearsal Diary

The first week of our five week rehearsal process began with the whole team meeting each other. Propeller tends to work with actors that they've worked with previously. In this case, the cast mainly consists of new members to the company. Ed Hall talked a little about what he envisaged at this stage from the production. He revealed through talking about the plays themes of entrapment, divisions and power, his idea of setting the play in a prison. He sensed that this could really heighten the inherent ethnic divisions and hatred in the play, creating a "microcosm of aggression". There was a real sense of encouragement from the ensemble about this idea and everyone fed in thoughts as to how some of the more detailed aspects of this world might operate. For example, the kind of currency used, how location would be represented, the kind of sounds that might be possible within this concept etc.

There was no readthrough, the director assumed everyone had read the play. Instead, work began on the text almost immediately. We began to go through the play allowing the actors to begin the get a handle on the language as well as talking through any cuts that had been made from the original text. The main priority was on making sure we could understand what people were saying. By this point, many of the plays themes were revealing themselves to us and we were building a more collective understanding of how the play might work within it's prison setting.

On the second day of rehearsals, designer, Michael Pavelka talked through his set design showing us pictures that had inspired him and showing us a model box of the set in small scale. He was focusing on the 1930's as a period to set the play in, one reason for this being to avoid an association with the holocaust and to move away from any clichés associated with the play and present it in a new light. Ed commented that everything in the play should be operated mechanically and not with electricity. This all evoked quite a clear atmosphere in which to present the
play. The following day we continued going through the text with Shakespearean expert Roger Warren, focusing on the delivery of the text, making sense of the language and trying to help it make sense for an audience.

By Thursday, the actors were 'on their feet' experimenting with how the play might work in the space. The prison set was laid out with marks on the floor. Ed experimented with a structural device of having the Duke oversee various, crucial moments of the action as if the whole play were actually representative of a trial for its many guilty inhabitants.

Interestingly he also experimented with putting scenes in different places and put huge focus on making the story of the play as clear as possible. We also began thinking about possible framing devices for the piece as a whole. It was becoming clear that the prison setting of the play implied guilt in all of the plays characters, some of these were clear such as Shylock's thirst for revenge, Antonio's unpaid debt and Bassanio's breaking of oaths but it made the other actors think deeper about their characters actions as well.

By the end of the week, we'd made a good start on starting to piece the play together and get a sense of how it might look and feel.
The Merchant `Blog’

During rehearsals Jon Trenchard, who plays Jessica, created a ‘blog’ of his experiences, here is Jon’s fascinating glimpse into the world of Propeller.

Week One

THE BOYS ARE BACK! But you might not recognise them…

It’s been a year and four months since the all-male Shakespeare company, Propeller, were last on international tour, and in that time rumours have been rife about what the next tour might entail. Would we be doing histories, comedies, or tragical-historical-pastorals? Would we still be doing Shakespeare at all? Would the company still be based at The Watermill Theatre now it has a new Artistic Director?

And (the age-old prayer on the lips of any all-male theatre company) was the director finally going to let girls in? Propeller fans will be reassured to learn that the company is back with new blood, getting boisterous with the Bard, bashing the Watermill stage to bits, all-bloke, and rearing to go!

For those of you who have never heard of Propeller and don’t know what all the fuss is about, here’s what you’ve been missing…

Somewhere in the mists of time, a director called Ed Hall got a bunch of blokes together to perform Henry V at a tiny theatre near Newbury called The Watermill. Audiences seemed to like it, so Ed got the same bunch of blokes together to do more Shakespeare, called it Propeller, and the company has been bringing its own energetic interpretations of William’s work to audiences around the world for the last eleven years. But what makes this theatre company really different is that each actor is paid an equal wage, and once he’s been part of the company, he has to sack himself, i.e. he will automatically be offered a role in the company’s next production. This means that over the years the company has built up a long-lasting camaraderie, with many of the actors coming back again and again for more Shakespearean action.

But this year things are a little different. Ed and Propeller continue to produce (The Merchant of Venice and A Midsummer Night’s Dream), but this year only 5 of the 14 actors in these productions are old company members, and the new boys outnumber us severely!

This made the first day of rehearsals this week a little daunting for all involved. I remember my own fears, when I first signed up in 2006, upon hearing about the lads’ various initiation rites – the obligatory leap into The Watermill pond, the 40 company press-ups before every show, etc, etc, all the usual boy stuff – and all true I hasten to add (just to scare the new boys!). But now, the tables are reversed,
and we old dogs are understandably frightened of what new tricks the new kids on
the block will have to teach us. And let me say, that, yes, these new guys do have
new tricks, new talents, new ideas, new skills, and dashing new faces for the
ladies. Same old Propeller, new look. Exciting times ahead…

So, the first day. After the usual meeting and greeting and forgetting everyone’s
names, Ed chats for a bit about his ideas for *The Merchant of Venice*. Something
about a prison. OK. Something about us all shaving our hair off. What?! Is this a
new initiation rite or is he serious? Ed moves us swiftly on to getting to grips with
the text. As usual, this has been skilfully edited by our resident scholar, Roger
Warren. Or as Roger himself chooses to put it, butchered. If Roger has indeed
taken a pound of flesh off this version of the play, it is probably a good job for us
actors: Shakespearean language is about 400 years old and, as you can imagine,
it can be tricky if you’re not used to it, both to speak and to understand. When I first
joined, I recall Ed being very strict with us about how to speak Shakespeare’s
verse. But what’s this? It’s only the first day and I am amazed to find that these
new boys need practically no help with the verse whatsoever. I suspect they’ve
done it before. Personally, I call that cheating. They never taught us how to speak
verse that well in drama school. Apparently, one of these new guys is a champion
street dancer too. Another is a virtuoso violinist. I mean. It just makes you sick. And
they all seem really friendly and fun too. So far, it all seems suspiciously too good
to be true.

I wonder, will all this talent and good-humour last through the rehearsal period until
we preview in Poole in December? I mean, put a bunch of blokes together in a
room for 5 weeks; assign them roles in a play traditionally acknowledged to be
brimming with racism and violence; set it in a prison where that hatred is turned up
full heat and where some of the men are force-feminized into female roles; and ask
them all to shave their heads. Sounds to me suspiciously like a recipe for a reality
TV show. It could get nasty…

Week Two

Week 2 begins with a full head of hair for all. Well, we have battled through week 1,
and so far we have all managed to keep our hair on!

Before we started rehearsing, Ed and the production designer, Michael Pavelka,
decided to set this new production of *The Merchant of Venice* in a place where the
racial tensions and commercial ruthlessness in the play would make sense to a
modern audience: a prison. Michael showed us his definitive model for the set on
day 2 – row upon row of gaol cells. And he hinted to us, as Ed had on the first day,
that it would look great if we all shaved our heads to a number one. Silence. He
shrugged. Well, as far as we the actors are concerned, the set may be decided, but
the hair debate continues…

The first 4 days were not very glamorous, but absolutely crucial in helping
audiences to understand the words. We spent them analyzing the text of the play:
working out what the language means; discovering which words to stress to give the clearest sense of the prose; and hammering out the meter of the verse. And (for those of you who read last week’s blog) don’t worry, those new boys did need a few pointers with the verse after all – as did we all.

While reading the play, we all tried to imagine how the story could be told in a prison setting. Some bits seemed to work brilliantly. It got us all talking about Louis Theroux’s documentary in San Quentin prison, in particular about how this might inform our female characters, and how, by setting the play in gaol, we as an all-male company could play the female characters as men who have feminized themselves.

But by the time we had finished analyzing the text, Ed had had another idea to add to the crucible. “It’s a prison but not as we know it.” A gaol, but with an existential feel. A kind of purgatory perhaps, where Jews and Christians are waiting for judgment, or reliving past arguments to try to achieve some kind of redemption. “Prisoner Hell Block H!”

Great, I thought, that gives me an idea for music. Previously, I’d been thinking, “What can we possibly do with what we have?” A guitar, a violin, a cornet, a flute, a piccolo, an accordion, a snare drum, the spoons, a clarinet kindly on loan, a metallic hittable set, and 14 singing voices? Now my head started brimming with conflicting religious music, Jewish chants, English hymns, and… my personal favourite, Gospel!

Music in Propeller shows is written by the company. Basically, we jam. We come up with some rough ideas, then Ed listens and says, “That’s too American. That’s not up-beat enough. But what was the thing you did with that guitar, I liked that”. At our first music call at the end of week 1, we brainstormed and came up with some simple Jewish klezmer sounds, some traditional Christian hymns, lots of angry
prison percussion, and some heavenly gospel harmony. Ed likes the percussion, he likes the hymns. I just hope he likes the gospel too.

But will this new “Hell Block H” concept mean that we can keep our hair?

Week Three: Behind Bars

In the rehearsal room for The Merchant of Venice, prison life has begun. On Wednesday morning last week, stage management received a delivery of steel bars, and when we came back after lunch, lo and behold, there were two prison cells in the room – tall, imposing and so fresh from the lathe that we all got greasy hands when we touched them. Grown actors could be seen running to the Deputy Stage Manager to ask for wet wipes. Yes, life is tough behind bars.

Constructing our prison cells is just one of the many jobs for our long-suffering stage management team. This year, like the acting company, Propeller has a brilliant all-new SM team: Claire, our deputy stage manager, who will eventually cue the lighting for the show, is currently writing down every decision and move we make in rehearsals (she uses rubbers and tip-ex lots); Dawn, our assistant stage manager, is shopping for all the potential props and instruments Ed says we might need; and Nick, our company manager, is in charge of all the administration of the production, which means he looks after not only the actors, props and set, but also the budget. I always have huge respect for stage management because they not only work gruelling hours doing their own jobs, but also clear up after us actors too. These guys have signed up to a 9 month tour looking after 14 overgrown boys. Good luck to them! They’re going to need it.

At least in this production, they can now lock us behind bars when we misbehave. And there’s been quite a bit of misbehaving! What do you expect? A bunch of blokes. Metal cages, plates and cutlery. Licence to be raucous under the pretence that we’ve been locked up for life. A bit of din is inevitable. And we’ve already broken some crockery. Who in their right mind would invite such chaos? Well, blame the director: Ed Hall.

It’s great to hear the new actors in the company talking about their first experiences of Ed’s direction. “He actually listens to what you have to say!” is their surprised response, after working with some directors who narrowly stick to their own vision. In Propeller, all the actors are called to every rehearsal, and Ed encourages us all chip in with ideas. Of course, he has his vision too and always has the final say, but the rehearsal process for Propeller is essentially co-operative and creative for all. We may well be behind bars, but Ed gives us unusual freedom to help shape the production.

Despite wanting us all to shave our heads, Michael, our designer has also extended us an unusual liberty with this production. He’s asked the actors to write down our own wish list for how to individualise our characters’ costumes, which he will then condense into a coherent overall design. I wonder how many of us have written, “I think my character should have a full head of hair.”
And speaking of the hair debate, I have breaking news! Some of the boys have already been brave enough to bite the bullet and go for a Number One. Yesterday in rehearsals, two brave fathers of two, Chris ‘local Borough Councillor’ Myles and Bob ‘20-years with long hair’ Barrett were both publicly clippered in front of the whole company, as an example to us all. Will their families recognize them now they have gone convict?

**Week Four: Inside Story**

There’s only a week and a bit to go before we open *The Merchant of Venice* to previews in Poole! But we have made lots of progress. We have blocked the whole play to find a shape of how it will work on stage, and are now going ‘in depth’ with the scenes, exploring the details of each moment. Most of the music is now written and arranged too, and I am pleased to announce that the Gospel number is in! Well, for now at least: part of the ‘in depth’ process of week 4 involves changing everything we did the week before, so none of us really know yet how the play is going to turn out…

That’s why this week, as there’s not much I can say about the rehearsal process without giving away the finished product, I thought I’d ask Kelsey Brookfield, one of the new boys to the company who will be playing Portia, to find out how he’s settling in with Propeller.

**KB:** Loving it so far! It’s such a nice feel in the company. Everyone is equal, and we are given the freedom to throw ideas in and collaborate in rehearsals, which means that everyone has ownership over what they are doing. Ed is so calm and open, and he makes everything fresh for the first time. He is not afraid to take tackle problems head on and let us try things out, knowing we can change it later on if it doesn’t work. He makes you feel that you’re on the right path, but that there are more options you can choose too: he keeps you on a path of discovery.

**JT:** And how do you go about preparing to play a character like Portia? How are you finding it?

**KB:** Very challenging. People often think of her as a snobby brat, but actually she’s trapped in her situation and not very happy at all. I’ve also been researching women who have similarities with Portia – Kristin Scott Thomas’s character in Gosford Park has been an inspiration, as has Amy Winehouse!
JT: And how are you getting on as a guy playing a girl?
KB: Heels are the work of the devil! They’re so painful, especially on the back. At first I could only cope with 15 mins at a time, but I can wear them for a couple of hours now. But they really help the character: they make me feel like I’m on show and help Portia maintain a sense of power, even though she’s feeling trapped. The corset is great for posture too. It keeps me upright, and I feel quite royal. But the hardest thing is the heels.

JT: Do you ever feel uncomfortable being dressed like a girl in a room full of guys?
KB: There are times when I think, “I can’t believe I’m doing this!” but everyone just gets on with it and accepts you as your character. There were a couple of sniggers at first though when they first saw me in the wig. [That’s because he looks great in it! JT]

JT: Has playing a girl changed your own attitudes to women?
KB: People have described Portia as snobby and bitter, but when you play her, you see things from her point of view. She sees that the men in the play are childish in their petty quarrels and their cockiness. Bassanio promises everything to her, but he doesn’t deliver. And Portia sees through that. Men are just so predictable! Perhaps to women we are.

JT: How are you feeling about opening in under 2 weeks’ time?
KB: Nervous! But I think the play is in a very healthy position. I completely trust Ed and where he is taking us. It’s a scary journey, but we are learning new ways of playing things daily. By the end of this week, we’ll have a huge variety of stuff to play, and that means that when we’re on the road, we’ll be able to keep the play fresh, and surprise each other on stage.

Somehow writing that last question has made me feel nervous too, so I’d better go and check over my lines again…

Week Five: The Final Frontier.

The deed is done. Last weekend, I finally gave in to pressure from the designer. I asked my hairdresser for a number one.

“Let me get this straight,” she replied as if I was crazy. “It’s the coldest weekend of the year, and you want to get rid of your hair?”
I shrugged. “I’ve got to. It’s for a play.”

When I first saw myself in the mirror afterwards I nearly screamed at the transformation. I sported my new look at rehearsals on Monday and promptly acquired the nickname ‘G.I. Jessica’ after my character in the play. I don’t know what they’re laughing at me for – we are all going to have to look like convicts by the time we open in Poole next week!
The head shaving is just one of the finishing touches we are adding to the production in this final week of rehearsals. So far we have just been rehearsing scenes on their own and occasionally running one act at a time, but now, as we begin to run the play in its entirety, Ed is finally able to check that the overall story we are telling will be absolutely clear to an audience.

Looking back over the last 5 weeks, I can now see the structure of the whole rehearsal process: we started by examining the text and working out how to speak the verse and the prose; then we put the play on its feet to bring it to life, developing characters, relationships, movement and music; and now we are preparing the play for an audience, checking the clarity and pace of the production as a whole, and working out which little enjoyable details to keep in and which to cut out.

There’s still quite a bit of work to do, but morale is high among the troops. We are all very excited to find out what audiences will make of the production next week: the prison mise-en-scene; the racist antagonism running throughout the text; the whole ‘men playing men portraying women pretending to be men’ thing that an all male Shakespeare company inevitably entails; and for me personally, the music (I’ve stuck my oar in quite a bit with this and also written most of the capella harmony arrangements for the boys to sing, so I’m hoping they go down well). Together with A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the production will go on to tour the UK and the world. And it will be especially interesting to see audiences’ reactions in New York, where the play has apparently not been produced for about 20 years because of fears about its racist content. No pressure on us then!

So are we nervous? Well, it’s true that the last week has seen two of our rehearsal chairs hurled and shattered to pieces in moments of dramatic tension, but that’s not down to actors’ nerves. Throwing chairs around is all just part of the boisterous fun and frolics that audiences have come to expect of a Propeller show, and I don’t think this production will disappoint…

But that’s it from me: my final blog recording Propeller’s rehearsals for The Merchant of Venice. I don’t want to give too much away (and of course it’s still hard to know what may end up on the cutting room floor) but I can’t bear to leave you without a few ideas of what you can look forward to when you come to see the production. So here it is – what you’ve all been waiting for – The Trailer!

Venice. Behind bars.
Two religions, both alike in indignation towards each other.
Debt. Violence. And love by lottery. A tale of broken promises, and vows that should never have been vowed.
A prison where all are equal, until love and revenge throw the balance of justice into question.
Oh, and a toilet. And a gospel number. And a bunch of boys with haircuts like Marines!
How is all this possible in one evening’s entertainment?
Come and find out…

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Exercise 1: Understanding the Character

**Fabulous fact:** the famous actor John Geilgud always liked to know what shoes his character would wear!

When an actor plays a role, it's essential to understand as much as possible about the character. This means looking carefully at the script for clues. If the script doesn’t provide all the answers, the actor can, with the guidance of the director, use his or her imagination to fill in the gaps. When you know more about your character, you can start to make him/her a living, breathing person.

Taking your favourite character in *The Merchant of Venice*, complete the following questionnaire as if you really are that person. Some answers are there in the text; and some you can decide for yourself. Be imaginative!

**NAME:** .......................................................... ..........................................................

**AGE:** .................... **GENDER:** M / F

**WHERE DO YOU LIVE?:**.......................................................... ..........................................................

**WHAT’S YOUR JOB?:** .......................................................... ..........................................................

**WHAT DO YOU LOOK LIKE?**

**FAMILY FACTS (eg Brothers / Sisters / Children / Parents ages, occupations etc)**

**WRITE YOUR OWN CHRONOLOGY** eg date of birth, schooling, different jobs, marriage etc.

**WHAT ARE YOUR DREAMS AND/OR FEARS?**

**DO YOU HAVE ANY GOOD HABITS? BAD HABITS?**

**DESCRIBE YOUR TYPICAL DAY:**

**ANYTHING ELSE YOU KNOW:**
Exercise 2: Experiment with the Lines

Each of Shakespeare’s lines can be said in hundreds of different ways, and the actor’s job is to work out which way might work the best. This exercise shows how you can experiment with lines to completely change the meaning.

1. Find a space on your own, and choose one of the short speeches below.
2. Read it through and make sure you understand the meaning.
3. Now write down some adverbs that could possibly apply to the way you could say the speech. The first one has a few suggestions. Don’t worry if you don’t think they would all work! In fact that’s even better. Just write down as many as possible.
4. Now find a partner and try saying the lines in the different ways to your partner. Talk about which ways you like the best.
5. Finally, as a group compare your results, and discuss your findings.

Speech 1: Portia & Bassanio
Portia You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, Such as I am. III.ii.149-150
(Examples: politely, seductively, reluctantly, rudely, aggressively, charmingly, tearfully)

Speech 2: Antonio & Salerio or Solanio
Antonio In sooth I know not why I am so sad. It wearies me, you say it wearies you; I.i.1-2

Speech 3: Shylock & Bassanio
Shylock May I speak with Antonio?
Bassanio If it please you to dine with us. I.iii.29-30

Speech 4: Jessica
Jessica Farewell; and if my fortune be not crossed, I have a father, you a daughter lost. II.v.54-55

Questions to consider:
- What difference does it make to the meaning when you say it in completely different ways? As the actor, how does it make you feel?
- What difference does it make if you are speaking alone or to someone? If your section has someone who isn’t speaking (such as Bassanio in Speech 1) try applying adverbs to the other character as well – what effect does this have?
Exercise 3: Playing with Status

The concept of status is important in *The Merchant of Venice*. The characters are strongly aware of who has money and who hasn’t, who is the most respected in society and who is the least.

1. In pairs, devise a short scene in which status is really important. Here are some examples:
   - A new pupil at school is being bullied by a much older pupil.
   - A customer at a restaurant is complaining about the food to the waiter.
   - The school headmaster is meeting a new student for the first time.
   - A policeman is questioning a suspect.

   Now look at the scenes and discuss who has the most, and the least status. How can you show this physically? Try the scenes with both actors standing, then again but with one person sitting, and the other standing, and swap over. What difference does it make?

2. Now look at the scene below from *The Merchant of Venice*. As a group, discuss what each line means and what each character is thinking.

   Shylock  Three thousand ducats, well.
   Bassanio  Ay, sir, for three months.
   Shylock  For three months, well.
   Bassanio  For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
   Shylock  Antonio shall be bound, well.
   Bassanio  May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?
   Shylock  Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.
   Bassanio  Your answer to that.  I.iii.1ff

3. In pairs, look at the section in detail and give each character a mark out of ten for status (1 being very low, 10 being high) for each line.

4. Now act out the scene in pairs, experimenting with different heights. Try to make the height of the character (e.g. standing, sitting on a chair, kneeling, even lying down) correspond to the status number you have given the character.

Questions to consider:
   - How can you use your body to show a character’s status?
   - What happens if you give a character with low status a physical advantage, e.g. by standing and leaning over somebody?
   - Look at people in your everyday life, such as your teachers, parents and friends. How do we know understand peoples’ status in society?
Exercise 4: Rhythm and Punctuation

‘You do not understand Shakespeare fully ... until you have spoken the text aloud.’ (Cicely Berry)

This is an exercise first created by Cicely Berry, Voice Director at the Royal Shakespeare Company. It looks at how responding physically to the punctuation in a piece of text can open up its meaning.

1. Read the speech below out loud. Make sure you understand what Shylock is saying.

Shylock

How like a fawning publican he looks.
I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for in that low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate
On me, my bargains, and my well-worn thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him. I.ii.38ff

2. Working on your own, walk in a straight line whilst reading the text aloud.

Each time you reach a comma, turn 90 degrees. Each time you reach a full stop or another punctuation mark, turn 180 degrees.

3. Now try the same exercise with the following speech:

Shylock He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! (III.i.49ff)

Questions to consider:

• What sort of path do you follow when reading the speeches?
• How do you feel when you are doing the exercise?
• What are the differences between the two speeches?