

How do you solve a problem like Shylock?

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Julia Pascal

A week to go before *The Merchant of Venice* opens at the Arcola. I've got an extra Jew in it. Ruth Posner. Polish. Child escapee from the Warsaw Ghetto. Long time actor in my Company. She plays Sarah, a woman who goes to the Venice Ghetto today and comes across a group of English actors dress rehearsing *The Merchant of Venice*. She is the watcher. A Ghetto survivor watches the first Ghetto in Europe. Ruth at 78, is the oldest actor in the ensemble. Her accent is still Polish. 'I'm still a bloody foreigner after 60 years here', she often says. I have her meet Valentina, a Ghetto guide at the top of the play. Valentina asks her about her childhood. Ruth talks of her father. Where did he go in the war? Valentina asks. Ruth replies, 'Treblinka'. She is speaking as the character but it is also her own life.

Yes it is audacious, I know it. But the play within a play is also what Shakespeare does so why should I worry if it offends purists. There have been enough straight productions of the play since 1600 so why should I worry about putting another vision across. Why do this now? Maybe I am sick of straight productions that never challenge the implicit anti-semitism in the text.

But is it an anti-semitic text. A week into rehearsal I am shocked at Shylock's lines to the Court where he critiques Venetian (and of course English) society for slavery. The Jew dares to explore white racism. I see the play is both anti-semitic and pro-semitic. What am I to do with the Trial scene. Cutting a pound of flesh from a man is murder. The Jew as murderer is the result of centuries of Catholic Jew-hatred and the propagation of the image of the Jew as Christ-killer. It is in art and literature. Shakespeare could not escape it. But the image of Shylock with the knife held above Antonio's bare breast is awful. I can't dodge it. I can't change the text here or I change the play. I am confronted with the central image behind Hitler's Nazi Germany and all the rumours in the Jesuit document, a forgery alleging a world Jewish Conspiracy called the

Elders of the Protocols of Zion. Hitler loved the play and here I am producing another Merchant. Yes I am adding Ruth playing Sarah who comes from the Warsaw Ghetto. Yes I am adding scenes for Shylock and Jessica. Yes I am showing forced conversions. But is it enough?

Today we rehearse the Trial scene. Roderick Smith plays Antonio and Paul Herzberg Shylock. Rod opens his arms like Jesus on the cross before the knife. I feel paralysed before this image which has haunted me all my life. Jesus' death was always laid at the Jews' door when I was growing up. And here it is again. I can't let it be played this way. Will Shylock go through with the act? We never know because Portia stops it. But before she does I still have to challenge that image. Is it even possible?

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE at the Arcola Theatre
27 Arcola Street, London E8. September 11-October 13.
£13,£9. 020 7503 1646