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The Merchant of Venice (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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The Merchant of Venice Presented by THOC (Cyprus Theatre Organization) at the Municipal Theatre of Latsia, Nicosia, Cyprus. November 19, 2005-January 15, 2006. Directed by Varnavas Kyriazis. Set by Charis Kafkarides. Costumes by Stavros Antonopoulos. Lighting by Yiorgos Koukoumas. Music by Yiorgos

Rodosthenous. Translation by Errikos Belies. With Neoklis Neokleous (Antonio), Antonis Katsaris (Shylock), Achilleas Grammatikopoulos (Bassanio), Sotos Stavrakes (Lorenzo), Theodoros Michaelides (Graziano), Stella Fyrogeni (Portia), Elena Papadopoulou (Nerissa), Michalis Moustakas (Launcelot Gobbo), Andreas Vasileiou (Old Gobbo), Charis Kkolos (Salerio), Christophoros Christophorou (Salanio), Phoivos Georgiades (Balthasar), Chrysanthos Chrysanthou (Prince of Morocco), Demetris Konstantinides (Prince of Aragon), and others.

Shakespearean productions are few and far between on the island of Cyprus. But five years ago while in Nicosia as visiting professor at the University of Cyprus, I witnessed THOC's excellent production of *Macbeth* in Greek. The Lady Macbeth recalled vividly a performance of that role by the late great actress Judith Anderson, and the staging was both professional and extremely imaginative. Thus, I was eager to attend THOC's production this year of *The Merchant of Venice*. Though I know little Greek, I have studied and taught Shakespeare's comedy intensively over many years and have written several articles about it as well as editing it for Oxford University Press. It therefore felt able to follow the production pretty well, though naturally I cannot comment on the accuracy of the textual translation.

I was concerned beforehand, though, about how Shylock would be portrayed, having heard something since my arrival in September, again as visiting professor at the University of Cyprus, about anti-Semitism in Cyprus. Indeed, when the new synagogue in Larnaca was dedicated [**End Page 63**] in September, one op-ed piece in a Greek language newspaper loudly proclaimed that the Orthodox Church should have prevented its establishment. Discussing anti-Semitism later with my graduate students, however, I was told that the Church opposed all non-Orthodox religions, not just Judaism. I have neither experienced nor witnessed anti-Semitism directly, although some Cypriot Jews have told me it is tough to be Jewish and find work there. Others have said that what anti-Semitism exists is rather submerged and subtle, rather than overt and blatant.



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Figure 1.

The court scene: Yiannos Spanos, Theodoros Michaelides (Graziano), Achille as Grammatikopoulos (Bassanio), Dinos Lyras, Charis Kkolos (Salerio), Christoforos Christoforou (Salanio), Stela Firogeni (Portia), Elena Papadopoulou (Nerissa), in the Cyprus Theatre Organization's production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo by Andonis Farmakas.

As I discovered, there was no cause for concern about the production. It was scarcely anti-Semitic, if at all: I have seen other productions, even those at the RSC, that sinned much more in that direction. Shylock was enacted by an excellent professional actor, dressed mostly in black with a red cap (a requirement for Jews in sixteenth-century Venice). If anything, at times he underplayed his role, rather like Al Pacino in the recent movie, whom he reminded me of repeatedly. But when moved to anger, as in 3.1 by Salerio and Solanio's taunts, or in 3.3, when he sees Antonio being led abroad by the jailor, this Shylock, played by Antonis Katsaris, was agitated and emotional. **[End Page 64]**

But I am getting a bit ahead of the production. After a momentary blackout, the opening scene, as in many recent productions of Shakespeare's plays, was staged as a pantomime by the full cast. Downstage, a church service seemed to be going on, behind which, in a kind of inner chamber below, a synagogue ceremony was performed. The contrast of the two conflicting religions was thereby made explicit and striking. As the ceremonies ended, Shylock entered and Antonio, crossing his path, spat upon him.

Blackout again. The first scene began with Salerio and Solanio sitting at tables with their girlfriends in a cabaret of sorts, the first indication that this director was not going to play up, let alone stress, homosexuality, latent or otherwise, in this interpretation of Shakespeare's play—a welcome change from many recent productions. An early-middle-aged Antonio, sitting by himself, began by complaining of...

tience on a monument" in 2.4; and when Sebastian fell into the sea and emerged as Antonio in 5.1, having literally "made division of [him]self," only to change from a masked priest in African garb back into Antonio upon facing the Duke, Viola, and Olivia for the recognition scene at the end. An African dance, done with native masks, merged into an Irish jig for the imaginative finale; it was a fitting ending for a production that seemed "rather [to] pluck on laughter than revenge."



The Merchant of Venice

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JAY L. HALIO, *University of Delaware*

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