

## DISPATCHES

# Encountering the Other in Shakespeare

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Judith Valente

February 23, 2015

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A "them against us" mentality seems to be sweeping the country. All you have to do is listen to the news. Depending on your vantage point, the "other" might be perceived as the police in minority communities, Muslims in Western countries, illegal immigrants at our borders and in our cities.

There is all too much demonization taking place and too few efforts at understanding. This past week in Chicago, a theater troupe from the ecumenical Community of Jesus in Orleans, Mass., has been traveling to various venues offering performances, workshops and panel discussions called "A Pound of Flesh: Exploring Qualities of Mercy When Encountering the Other." The group uses Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as a springboard for that exploration. Sister Danielle Dwyer, director of the community's Elements Theatre Company, calls *The Merchant of Venice* "an uncomfortable, confrontational play.

There is no denying the hate, the prejudice, the blatant superiority." Shakespeare's examination of the "social lepers" of his Elizabethan society—and what it means to belong and to be human—is just as relevant today as it was in his day.

"It seems we as people have an inherent need to have 'an other,'" Dwyer says. "At times I've been the other, and at times I've created the other." Dwyer tries to steer the discussion away from the literary elements of the play—for example, was Shakespeare an anti-Semite and what was his aim in writing this play?

Instead, Dwyer encourages audiences to focus on the play's broader themes and applications. "The larger issue with this work is what happens to 'the other' when that person is not protected." At the various venues where it has been presented, the play sparked discussion about the potential hardships of a religiously-mixed marriage; the effects of an unequal economic system; and the use of legal maneuvering to undergird what is patently immoral. Sound familiar to our own time?

Dwyer's troupe first performed the play or excerpts from it at various venues in New York, including the New School and St. Malachy Church. This week, the group brought the program to Chicago Theological Seminary, Kam Isaiah Israel Synagogue and the Mayer Kaplan Jewish Community Center in Skokie. On Monday, the show will be performed for high school and college students at Dominican University in River Forest.

Each performance is followed by a panel discussion that, at the various venues, has brought together actors, priests, rabbis, English professors, religion writers and diplomats. The Community of Jesus itself is an interesting model of tolerance. It consists of lay members and vowed religious as well as people from a variety of faith traditions. Members of the community aim to live the ancient monastic Rule of St. Benedict in a contemporary setting.

For years, through its Arts In Conversation series, the community has used art as a starting point for theological explorations. The Elements Theatre troupe consists of 15 actors, all volunteers, and some classically trained. The audience response to "Encountering the Other" hasn't always been friendly.

A question Dwyer gets frequently is: why are you doing such a disturbing, uncomfortable play?

She responds, "This story is part of what we are and who we are. This story is a cautionary tale of what happens when human nature and the desire for revenge is released."

I commend the Community of Jesus and its theater group for seeking to be agents of change through art. “Encountering the Other” challenges us to hold a mirror to ourselves and peer into our own prejudices and behavior. By doing so, we are stirred to make new choices, hopefully ones that lean toward mercy.



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Entertainment & Life

## Powerful 'Merchant of Venice' in Orleans

**By Douglas Karlson**

Posted Dec 11, 2015 at 2:01 AM

The attention to detail characteristic of productions at the Community of Jesus begins even before you enter the theater grounds at Rock Harbor, as friendly volunteers carefully direct cars via an elaborate arrangement of blinking lights and flashlights. It's a reminder that great preparation goes into the plays performed by the Elements Theatre Company.

That attention to detail is evident throughout the current production of "The Merchant of Venice," directed by Sr. Danielle Dwyer, and applies to costumes, lighting, set design, stage management, and, oh yes... very strong acting all around.

This tale of hatred and revenge, power and romance has a large cast that delivers finely honed performances. The reviewer faces a dilemma of Shakespearean proportions to single out any one actor's performance without detracting from the others.

Having said that, Dwyer, as Shylock, brings the character to life convincingly, and her performance sparkles with wit and originality. The drama reaches a crescendo in Antonio's trial, where one almost expects Shylock to literally collect his pound of flesh.

Rachel McKendree, as Portia, is particularly affecting as she delivers a deft mix of serious courtroom drama and romantic comedy. She has a strong stage presence and her performance is nuanced and delightful.

Ryan Winkles provides the energy essential for the role of Bassanio, who is the driving force in the play. He is well cast and delivers a pitch-perfect performance. He is well supported with polished portrayals by Kate Shannon as Salerio, Peter McKendree as Solanio, and Peter Haig as Lorenzo.

Christopher Kanaga, as Antonio, in many ways anchors the production with a powerful presence -- as his character is tested to the extreme, and Brad Lussier does quadruple duty, and is highly entertaining, as the very funny Launcelot Gobbo and the Prince of Morocco.

Ellen Ortolani is charming and convincing as Jessica, Shylock's daughter, and Stephanie Haig, as Nerissa, Portia's lady in waiting, delivers a fine performance and is very amusing in her final comic scene, as is Kyle Norman, who plays her love interest, Gratiano.

These are the main characters, but the entire cast, too numerous to mention all, makes this play highly professional and entertaining.

Kudos to Technical Director Chris Kanaga. The set exceeds expectations and really meets Broadway standards (a special carpet depicting 16th century Venice covers the stage), and lighting design and staging are superior.

The Elements Theatre Company has delivered a first-rate production of this Shakespeare classic. My only criticism is that it's a short run.

### **If you go**

What: 'The Merchant of Venice'

Where: Paraclete House, Rock Harbor, Orleans

When: Friday, Saturday, Dec. 11-12, 7:30; Sunday, Dec. 13, 3 p.m. (special luncheon at 1 p.m., panel discussion follows performance)

Tickets: Call 508-240-2400

# A STRIKING 'MERCHANT OF VENICE' FROM ELEMENTS THEATRE CO.

By Ellen Petry Whalen, *The Cape Cod Chronicle*

Even though Shakespeare never goes out of style, in times of uncertainty the Bard's powerful words can ring more true. This is definitely the case today with the world's many dark and tenuous situations, and Elements Theatre Company's commendable "The Merchant of Venice" is trying to shed some much needed light on them.

Upon first examination, the controversial "Merchant of Venice" might seem like an odd choice for the holidays, since anti-Semitism, along with hatred and love, are at its core. Drawing upon similarities more than differences, director Danielle Dwyer explains the show's two-week run is set directly in between the celebratory season of lights for both Jews and Christians.

The two-and-a-quarter-hour tragicomedy begins with the spendthrift and debt-ridden Bassanio (Ryan Winkles) asking his good friend, the royal merchant Antonio (Christopher Kanaga), for money to woo his love, Lady Portia (Rachel McKendree). Having his monies currently tied up in a number of seafaring ventures, Antonio obligingly tells his young, love-crazed friend to find him a lender to secure a loan. The Jewish moneylender Shylock (Danielle Dwyer) has had a long sordid history with the anti-Semitic Antonio, and openly showing his disdain, Antonio surprisingly spits on Shylock. Unexpectedly, Shylock agrees to a loan without interest, but if it isn't repaid in three months, Antonio must freely give a pound of his flesh.

The wealthy Lady Portia is not permitted to choose her husband, as her now-deceased father made a contest of her hand, and suitors from around the world have been trying to win it. Each of their marital fates is determined after choosing between three small "caskets" of gold, silver, and lead. With some cunning, Bassanio chooses well, and he and Portia wed, along with her maiden, Nerissa (Stephanie Haig) and Bassanio's friend, Gratiano (Kyle Norman).

Meanwhile, Shylock's ungrateful daughter, Jessica (Ellen Ortolani), elopes with Lorenzo (Peter Haig), robbing her father of his fortune and converting to Christianity. In a miserable state, it looks like Shylock's only hope is revenge. When Antonio's note comes due and he is unable to pay, Shylock refuses to show mercy, literally demanding his revengeful pound of flesh, immortalized in the famous lines, "If you prick us do we not bleed? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

Dwyer is unyielding and unflinching as the tragic Shylock, refusing to give the Christians any added pleasure with their blatant malice. Kanaga is a resigned Antonio, accepting his fate with dignity and forgiveness. As Bassanio, Winkles has a playful yet noble approach, loyal to his friend until the end, while McKendree presents a Portia who revels in her intelligence and ability to outwit her husband.

Brad Lussier steals the show, playing the fool in many roles, helping to lighten the cautionary tale. On Saturday, the audience loved his extra flourishes as the insolent servant Launcelot and the eccentric Prince of Morocco.

As usual, Elements' set is striking, with its meticulous reincarnation of late 1500s Venice's colorful, stucco-wall lined villas and an intricate wrought iron fence leading to the Jewish ghetto. The set's foundation is a large rug which runs the length of the stage and is strikingly covered with an ancient map of Venice. Elements' costumes once again delight the senses with original and handmade designs using opulent fabrics like silks, taffeta, and velvets, with many gold and gem adornments.

Next year marks 400 years since Shakespeare's death, and Elements has begun celebrating a little early with their opulent "Merchant of Venice." On Sunday they have an optional pre-matinee luncheon followed by a "thoughtprovoking" panel of experts discussing the "other" in our societies. On Friday and Saturday night, the play is followed by a complimentary wine and cheese reception in their art gallery, beautifully displaying intricate costumes from many past productions.

"The Merchant of Venice" is another highly polished production from the intimate Elements Theatre Company, which, located in The Community of Jesus, is still one of the best kept theatrical secrets on the Cape, along with the fact that students can attend at no charge.

## The Barnstable Patriot

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# Elements Theatre Company presents “Merchant of Venice”

By Barbara Clark / [bclark@barnstablepatriot.com](mailto:bclark@barnstablepatriot.com)

Posted Nov 25, 2015 at 6:24 PM

Updated Dec 2, 2015 at 9:09 AM

For the past year, Elements Theatre Company in Orleans has been focusing on the words and works of William Shakespeare, a major project looking toward the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, to be commemorated in 2016.

The theatre company continues this journey with words as they perform Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” from Dec. 4 to 13 at Paraclet House at the Community of Jesus in Rock Harbor, Orleans.

The theatre company’s publicity material describes “Merchant” as a “cautionary tale of love and hate, mercy and justice” that explores the nature of “prejudice and tolerance [as well as] questions that challenge our own dark sides of unforgiveness, revenge and lust for power.” Audiences will see “the darker side of Venice” in the encounter and conflict between merchant Antonio and moneylender Shylock, the wealthy and sought-after Portia and her suitor Bassanio.

Sr. Danielle Dwyer, the company’s artistic director, spoke about why the famous play has remained popular over several hundred years despite its controversial elements: “I think the controversy in this play is the very reason it remains so popular and I would add relevant. It is the very nature of prejudice and marginalization that seems to be a part of the human existence since its beginning — ‘My tribe is better than yours’ [or] ‘I will dominate you and you will be subject to me.’”

As for the play’s exploration of whether the qualities of mercy and revenge explored in the play are either “Christian” or “Jewish,” she said, “Shakespeare has laid it out very well for us. There is little difference between these two groups of

people, and when the characters are fully inhabited there is little to do but tell their story. In doing this, these glaring issues cannot hide.”

Dwyer, who plays the role of Shylock in the production, said that “motivations of the heart” are central issues for the characters in “Merchant,” noting that the play is underscored by many questions, such as whether Shylock foresaw where his “merry” bond might lead; what is the real nature of Bassanio’s “love” for Portia; and the real motivations for her impersonation and actions at the trial. Dwyer said that these are “delicious and provoking questions to ask and to challenge ourselves with.”

Theatregoers are invited to stay for a panel discussion and back talk with director Dwyer and a panel of guests following the matinee performance on Dec. 6 and 13, with audience comments and questions welcomed.

Asked whether there is something the ensemble hopes the audience will “take away from the play,” Dwyer said, “We are storytellers, and when you start to emphasize one point of the story for the audience, in my mind, it borders on manipulation. [In the panel discussions] I would love to hear from the audience [what is] their takeaway. ... I am very much looking forward to these as they give us a chance to debrief and discuss how do we live with each other, acknowledging the difference and the tensions without giving up or compromising our own values in respect to human life.”

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# CAPE COD TIMES

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Entertainment & Life

## **Element's 'Merchant' seeks to enlighten audience**

By Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll

Posted Dec 5, 2015 at 4:35 PM

Updated Dec 5, 2015 at 4:35 PM

Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" doesn't seem an obvious choice for staging at this holiday time of year until you read a program note for the Elements Theatre Company production by Sister Danielle Dwyer, the director.

ORLEANS – Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" doesn't seem an obvious choice for staging at this holiday time of year until you read a program note for the Elements Theatre Company production by Sister Danielle Dwyer, the director.

She points out that this show straddles both the season of Hanukkah and the Christian season of Advent, and she links the fact that both are celebrations of light to Martin Luther King Jr.'s quote that only light can drive out darkness. Dwyer connects the conflicts in the play between men of two religions, here Jewish and Christian, to the disagreements and danger so present in the world today. She suggests that change could begin if each person looks harder at his/her motivations and choices.

"We offer this play, and these possibilities, as prayers for peace in our world," she says. Or, as the Bible states in the Nativity story, "on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

It's a powerful message, with powerful intentions. Elements honors that by creating a "Merchant of Venice" that is impeccably acted – including by Dwyer in a painted-on beard as male Jewish moneylender Shylock – and beautifully

designed. It's clear that the company has dug deeply into all aspects of this play and era, beginning with painted panels in the lobby to explain the history of the unusual, water-surrounded city that is Venice. The 16th-century set – credited to Hans and Charity Spatzeck-Olsen and Sister Irene Psathas – is full of graceful arches and rich colors, and is built around a floor covered with an ancient map of Venice.

Tone is always an issue with this play, though, and the hero characters' casual and then heated anti-Semitism can be troubling for modern audiences of what is considered a Shakespeare comedy. Scenes of fun bookend a harrowing courtroom conflict in which Shylock is part villain, part victim, and while both moods are superbly played, the script's quick juxtaposition between tragedy and light comedy is an uneasy mix.

The story has three romances and much genial male friendship. Bassanio, whom Ryan Winkles portrays as passionate and full of life, wants to woo heiress Portia, but needs a loan from merchant friend Antonio (Christopher Kanaga, in a complex and touching performance). Antonio wants to help by getting a loan from Shylock and jokingly agrees that Antonio will forfeit a pound of flesh (thus killing him) if he fails to repay.

There is already mutual dislike between the two, but Dwyer's disagreeable Shylock becomes vengeful and determined when his unhappy daughter (Ellen Ortolani) steals money and elopes with her Christian lover (Peter Haig). Bassanio, after a charming scene of winning Portia's hand and love, rushes back to Venice when Antonio's ships are lost and Shylock demands to cut that pound of flesh. Portia, smart and strong in a terrific performance by Rachel McKendree, follows disguised as a man who can interpret the law, tries to get the hate-filled Shylock to show mercy, and when he refuses, turns the tables on him.

Motivations and choices are indeed worth considering in a story made more complex by the religious considerations. To hear characters we come to like and respect easily and venomously spit out the name "Jew" to address Shylock is jarring, as is them turning to playful marital subterfuge so soon after his downfall.

To help connect the issues the show raises about prejudice, revenge, etc., to the troubles in today's world, Elements has put together "Pound of Flesh" panel discussions after each Sunday matinee. Experts on religion, theater, human rights and education will talk in a series designed, according to the group's website, to "create public dialogue on the power of the arts to humanize our culture." More information: [elementstheatre.org](http://elementstheatre.org).

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