

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

Northern Broadsides at the Greenwich Theatre, and touring
(2004)

In his programme notes, Barrie Rutter, the Artistic Director of Northern Broadsides, contemplates whether it was the choice of *The Merchant of Venice*, the company's reputation or serendipity that has persuaded theatres like Greenwich, Glasgow Citizens' and the Georgian in Richmond to receive the company for the first time.

This is comforting as there is no doubt that this is a well-established company not only seeking to be as faithful to the written word as possible, but also offering theatre as an approachable adventure to modern audiences.

Nowadays, *The Merchant of Venice* is a play that is looked at with certain uneasy feelings and an urge to fulfil "political correctness". Here, it is fresh and down-to earth thanks to Barrie Rutter, who also directs and plays Shylock.

Rutter tries to maintain a balance, handling the difficulties and problems sewn tightly into the text. He opens up the hate that is fuelled by intolerance and ignorance, but also reveals the comic, even satiric layers next to the tragic levels, playing out unquestioning love against blind stubbornness.

The evening begins with a *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* chorale (music by Conrad Nelson - whose excellence is best shown in describing atmospheric and emotional moments). This emphasises the Christian majority in Venice, where in fact the first Ghetto was established as early as 1516.

Rutter sketches Shylock as a self-centred man whose heart is apparently run by money alone, by a greed to possess. But Rutter's body language also awakens another man: one who suffers from loneliness and is depressingly trapped within his own prejudices.

This passionate performance gives Shylock a brimming aura. The most chilling moments occur when Shylock is mourning more for his money than for his fled daughter Jessica; when he is sharpening the knife to cut the pound of flesh; and when he falls on his knees in despair, down-trodden and humiliated as his only life-line, his belief, is denied.

Andrew Vincent's Antonio is more of a bloodless, slightly timid, though tall and strongly built man, than an enigmatic merchant, while his friendship with kinsman Bassanio depicts a kind of working relationship. There is though a reasonable balance in opposing Shylock and in sharing a similar entanglement, with business once again substituting for happiness and tolerant understanding.

Unlike other Northern Broadsides productions where the ensemble has acted with wonderfully even strength, without question this time Rutter stands out. He paints his words and moods with iridescent colours in both intonation and timing.

This isn't so well carried through by the other members of the company. Still, Clare Calbraith is a straightforward Portia with a lively Nerissa (Sara Poyzer) at her side. Bassanio (Paul Barnhill) is less of a fortune-seeker than an earthy man, which slightly muffles his attitudes towards Portia (utter devotion) and Antonio (deepest sympathy). Richard Standing's Gratiano shows off an entertaining mix of clown and lout, whereas Jessica (Jo Theaker) has too much of a smiling naïve soul.

Again the set is minimalist - though Emma Barrington-Binns and Guiseppe Belli's white, rather small square and divisible platform (two tiny bridges and a blue carpet symbolize the canals of Venice) is less effective and looks diminished on a proscenium arch stage with black side curtains and back drop.

However, this concept probably works a treat in their home theatre, the Viaduct in Halifax, a magic theatrical crypt-like place with raw walls, high vaults and uneven paving stones. The 50s style costumes don't complement the design either: men in mouse grey, women in loud red - it just doesn't feel entirely right.

The strength of this production lies within Rutter's performance as Shylock and his approach to the play itself - and this is the making of a very worthwhile evening.

"The Merchant of Venice" plays at Greenwich Theatre until 27 March 2004; on tour (Liverpool, Leeds, Buxton, Salford, Bury St Edmunds, Ollerton, Richmond (Yorkshire), Cheltenham) until 29 May 2004

Reviewer: [Verena Winter](#)