

ARTHUR HOROWITZ
Pomona College

*SHYLOCK AFTER AUSCHWITZ: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
ON THE POST-HOLOCAUST STAGE – SUBVERSION,
CONFRONTATION, AND PROVOCATION*¹

Shakespeare wrote several plays that have been assigned the designation ‘problem plays’. These plays have been defined, as rudimentarily as possible, as those “in which point of view is ambiguous”² Often lumped into this uncertain family/genre are *Hamlet*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Measure for Measure*—problematic plays of sober realism, to be sure.

But over this past century, a different varietal of Shakespearean drama has emerged as far more problematic. These plays’ problems are caused by their social emphases far more than by whatever vagueness of viewpoint or characterization might be contained within. Their controversies revolve around matters of sexism, racism, oppressionist/colonialism, anti-Semitism—issues Shakespeare, more than likely barely considered. No matter. *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* have become plays requiring nearly super-human delicacy if they are to be staged today.

These newly considered problem plays interpretation of Shakespeare’s raw material is quite at odds with that which most probably inspired Shakespeare’s original concept. Today, one does not mount a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* without most carefully considering issues of gender, and how a post-feminist world perceives the very notion of a willful, sharp-witted young woman’s necessity for a ‘good taming’. Contemporary productions of *The Tempest* must confront the increasingly negative perception of Prospero, no longer benign father figure, preparing, as he approaches his dotage, to mete out

¹ I would like to gratefully acknowledge the extensive contributions to this paper of Christina Hurtado (Pomona College, ’06). Ms. Hurtado served as my research assistant on the writing of this paper, providing invaluable textual input, encouragement and insight.

² Unattributed, from the Oscar James Campbell, ed. *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* (MJF Books, 1998), 658.

forgiveness to those who have previously abused him, but rather, the archetypal white colonist/usurper, shamelessly wresting the rightful inheritance of third-world, victimized Caliban.

Similarly, the Holocaust has rendered 'traditional' Merchant of Venice productions so problematic as to make them virtually extinct everywhere but in the United Kingdom. Portia's idyllic Belmont is ignored, rejected as romantic obfuscation, all emphasis now focused upon the troubled world of Shylock and the ghetto. The Merchant of Venice's contemporary performance history is awash in guilt, controversy, re-examination and re-interpretation—becoming receptacle for innumerable ethnic, religious and political corrections, adaptations and emendations—subversions and provocations—with adaptors and directors willfully mandating their own standards of positivity and negativity. It is the performance history of these post-Holocaust re-fashionings, and what led to 'Shylock after Auschwitz', that I would like to consider in this paper.

It is certainly noteworthy that the most confrontational and provocative interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice* have been staged by European and Israeli Jewish directors—with Peter Zadek and George Tabori very much in the vanguard. Dror Abend-David, explains the dependence upon Jewish actors and directors as an attempt at 'winning some legitimacy' for the production.³ Certainly most noteworthy in this confrontational approach is Peter Zadek.

Zadek, a German born Jew, migrated with his family to England in the mid-30s. He returned to Germany after the war, and has remained to this day (he is now eighty years old) one of Germany's most controversial and finest directors. He has been responsible for some of the most provocative productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, including a failed 1961 production in Ulm, which regenerated as a thoroughly explosive 1972 production that opened at the Schauspielhaus at Bochum barely two months after the attack upon the Israeli Olympic team in Munich. Zadek used this production as format for returning *The Merchant of Venice* to its 'comedic' origins while featuring a Shylock drawn almost directly from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It was, in Zadek's words, "a purgatorial process," that was intended to force his German audience to confront its past through a display of shocking bad taste. Dennis Kennedy, one of the foremost scholars of Shakespeare in performance, describes Zadek's Shylock 'as a Jud Süß, the snarling, spitting, Nazi stereotype of the German Jew, done in by hegemonic culture'.⁴ In Zadek's conception, Shylock was a middle-aged finagler, who, through ill-advised speculations, lost not only his money, but his daughter. But, this Shylock, like far too many stock speculators and

³ Dror Abend-David, *Scorned My Nation: A Comparison of Translations of The Merchant of Venice into German, Hebrew, and Yiddish* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 193.

⁴ Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 267.

confidence men, emitted an aura of self-assuredness – a sense that he would soon recover, and be back on his deceitful feet very soon. Zadek took it as his charge as a German-Jew to defiantly project this overtly unflattering image upon the stage; one that transcended the uncomfortably gentle ‘hands-off’ mentality that post-War Germany had, up to that time, steadfastly maintained in refusing to bear witness to its ‘Jewish question’. “Who else then?” Zadek protested. “No one else could do so, as in Germany ... no one was able to say anything bad about a Jew ... as long as one could not accept the Jewish gangster, one could not accept the Jews.”⁵

While striving to ‘win their legitimacy’, post-Holocaust productions and adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* have caused major re-considerations and re-shapings of the character of Shylock and a profound re-examination of the semiotics and implications of the ‘pound of flesh’ within a post-Auschwitz context. This leads to the observation, that, since the Holocaust, *The Merchant of Venice* has perhaps become as much ‘history play’ as ‘problem play’ – a history play about the relationship between Jew and Gentile. For anecdotal evidence, I point to Avraham Oz, who recounts that within days of the opening in Israel of his 1972 Hebrew version of the play, the Israeli Open University contacted him, appealing for the rights to include passages from his text in one of its new classes. The course, however, was not part of a drama or literature curriculum; it was to be a part of a program in Jewish history.⁶

In her article “Shylock’s Return – The Transformation of Guilt into Compensation or: The Symbolic Exchange of Reparation”, Sigrid Weigel acknowledges the play’s paradigmatic role in the historic bond of Jew to Gentile. But Weigel goes further, arguing persuasively that Shylock and Antonio’s ‘impossible exchange of flesh and money’ has become a contemporary abstraction of Holocaust guilt through ‘the tangible concept of debt, reparation and conciliation.’ Weigel writes: “Shylock’s name marks the bloodstained boundary of equating flesh with money, as his return signifies, within the later history of the Holocaust, the places in which the delinquency of the sought transformation of guilt into compensation becomes visible”.⁷ The connection of Shylock to the Holocaust, and the ‘pound of flesh’ to concentration camp atrocities, has led to adaptations and offshoots of *The Merchant of Venice* that have re-set the play within the environment of *kristallnacht* Germany and inside the Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps.

⁵ Quoted by Abend-David, 194.

⁶ Avraham Oz, “Transformations of Authenticity: *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel,” in Dennis Kennedy, ed., *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56.

⁷ Sigrid Weigel, “Shylock’s Return – The Transformation of Guilt into Compensation or: The Symbolic Exchange of Reparation”, cited and translated by Dror Abend-David in *Scorned My Nation*, 170.

Post-Holocaust productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have been mounted where Shylock is a concentration camp prisoner, a banker, a Victorian gentleman, a black man, and an undercover Israeli soldier—any means by which he can be perceived more sympathetically. When Shylock is portrayed as villain, as by Zadek, it is done, ironically, Shylock as archetype. Of course, there is the traditionalist argument grounded in the Shakespearean scholarship of M. C. Bradbrook and many others that Shylock is indeed an archetype—the archetype of the medieval villain—man reduced to beast. There is also an alternative tradition that dictates that Shylock “is a comic villain who receives a suitable punishment in the best tradition of the *comedia*.”⁸ And, in order to resurrect either the darkly malevolent or quasi-comical villain and convert Shylock (an interesting word choice when one considers Portia’s sentence), into sympathetic victim, a variety of re-writes, re-stagings, and re-deployments of Shakespeare’s text become essential.

In the mid-1970s, British/Jewish playwright, Arnold Wesker, wrote his play, *Shylock*, as ‘alternative’ to Shakespeare’s *Merchant*. In his Preface to the published edition, Wesker maintained that ‘it is impossible to think straight about *The Merchant of Venice*’, citing the Holocaust as ‘ball and chain to all attempts at reason’ (179). Wesker continues:

I revere Shakespeare, am proud to write in his shadow, the world is inconceivable without him and I would passionately defend the right of anyone anywhere to present and teach this play. But nothing will make me admire it, nor has anyone persuaded me the Holocaust is irrelevant to my responses. Try though I do to listen to the poet’s lines, yet I find myself seething at his portrait of a Jew, unable to pretend this is simply another Shakespearean character through whom he is exploring greed, or whatever.⁹

Wesker maintains his principal ‘problem’ with Shakespeare’s Shylock is that Shakespeare’s Jew is unrecognizable to him. This ‘revengeful, hateful, ignorant’ character is unlike any ‘Jew I knew’, says Wesker. So, he took it upon himself to re-fashion Shylock to a more familiar image, one that he could recognize and abide.

In Wesker’s play, Shylock and Antonio are dear friends despite their religious differences. The play opens with Antonio cataloguing Shylock’s books while the two discuss life and philosophy. We learn of Shylock’s joy in no longer needing to keep his prized possession, his library, hidden. While Wesker, like Shakespeare, keeps Shylock’s wife absent, he has given him a sister, Rivka, who lives with Shylock and Jessica and who manages the house. Jessica is granted more freedoms, especially in terms of education, than in Shakespeare’s play.

⁸ Richard E Mennan, “Theodore Komisarjevsky’s Production of *The Merchant of Venice*”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (Oct., 1979), 394.

⁹ Arnold Wesker, Preface to *The Merchant* (London: Methuen, 1983), 177.

Nor, is Shylock a miser. He has generously offered to donate large sums to build a new synagogue for his community, and his home is open to Spanish and Portuguese Jewish refugees. He invites a distinguished scholar to stay with his family. It is this intellectual climate, this love of learning, generosity, care and respect for people that draws Antonio to Shylock. When Bassanio, Antonio's spoiled godson, appears to ask for money, Antonio rebukes him each time Bassanio disparages Shylock's Jewish faith. As in Shakespeare's version, Antonio has no money of his own. However, Shylock gladly agrees to loan him the money, at no interest, and with no penalties. Antonio reminds Shylock that they are bound by Venetian law to have some collateral within the contract, as no Jew can enter into business with a Christian without such a provision. Almost as a jest, they agree to the pound of flesh, a fittingly laughable way of mocking an unjust law.

Bassanio succeeds in winning Portia's love, and Jessica elopes with Lorenzo. Both couples marry. With Shylock portrayed as such a loving, albeit controlling parent, this is a sad and poignant scene. Antonio receives the news of the sinking of the ship, and matters quickly unravel. Shylock is pressured to collect on his bond. He clearly does not wish to do so, but feels that he must set an example, as representative of the Jewish community. In despair and reluctantly, he goes to court. He pleads his case over the jeers of the men that helped Lorenzo take his daughter from him. Lorenzo hurls a satiric version of "Hath not a Jew eyes" in his face, causing Shylock to finally erupt in indignation, calling attention to the assembly's virulent anti-Semitism. He is cited for contempt of court. Portia's "not one drop of blood" warning comes as a relief both to Antonio, and Shylock, who no longer must murder his friend. Shylock congratulates Portia on her intelligence and cunning. However, Portia, the judge, says Venice will riot if Shylock is allowed to go unpunished after allegedly threatening the life of a Christian citizen, even if this is not what has truly occurred. So, in exchange for sparing Shylock's life, the state confiscates his precious library. Distraught, with no daughter, no books, no money, and now friendless, Shylock exits, muttering to himself about a solitary pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The play concludes at Portia's celebratory wedding dinner. The Christians laugh over their newly acquired library. These characters fade into the background as Antonio enters; he and Portia are now friends. They lament the departure of Shylock from Venice, and Portia swears to protect Jessica, by annulling her marriage to Lorenzo. In the garden, Lorenzo, Graziano and Bassanio idly chat about nothing, clearly unchanged by all that has happened, as the play comes to its end.

So, Wesker substitutes the loss of Shylock's beloved books for Shakespeare's far more severe forced conversion to Christianity. And as a member of the noble 'people of the book', Wesker's Shylock is now shamefully stunned, like Shakespeare's Henry IV, into considering rehabilitation in the form of a voyage to the Holy Land. In this way, Wesker has transformed Shylock into his more honorable, more 'recognizable', and more sympathetic character.

It is difficult to focus upon Post-Holocaust productions of *The Merchant of Venice* without ‘doubling back on oneself’—turn of the century Yiddish-American considerations of the play, pre-Holocaust productions by such notable German Jewish directors as Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner and Erwin Piscator, and *Shylock* as poster boy for German Nazi propaganda, have all strongly informed how the play has been transformed in the shadow of the gas chambers.

As might be expected, the re-fashioning of *Shylock’s* dignity was of primary importance on the American Yiddish stage at the beginning of the twentieth century. Prior to 1900, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Romeo & Juliet* were all more popular on the Yiddish stage than *The Merchant of Venice*. One observer hypothesizes that ‘Eastern European immigrants, who had begun coming to America in large numbers only a decade before, were not yet ready for a serious exploration of a Jew’s position in a Gentile world’. Or perhaps, the Jewish theatre was merely waiting for the right Yiddish *Shylock* to emerge. And, it seems that ‘right *Shylock*’ was found in the formidable persona of Jacob Adler.¹⁰

Once Adler began playing *Shylock*, he felt an obligation to idealize the character. In his autobiography, *A Life on the Stage*, Adler described his understanding of the Jew in history. Adler saw him as “... a patriarch, a higher being, a man who has within him the gathered strength of generations ... a man who sees life through the glasses of eternity ... and so I played him as *Shylock*.” (341.) In 1901, when Adler first played *Shylock*, it was in the manner of British actor/manager Henry Irving, who, as Adler’s contemporary, took on *Shylock* as one of his signature roles. Irving called *Shylock* ‘a bloody-minded monster—but you mustn’t play him so, if you wish to succeed; you must get some sympathy with him.’¹¹ And that became Adler’s approach to *Shylock*, as well. Over time this interpretation gave way to a “*Shylock* of high morality”, a man whose better nature was overcome only by a passion for revenge, a close approximation of Adler’s description of the Jew in history.

Pride, not revenge, became the key to Adler’s interpretation of *Shylock*. Adler’s *Shylock* would want to terrify and humiliate his enemy, but at the supreme moment, Antonio’s life in his hands, he would refuse the murderous pound of flesh. In a 1902 interview, Adler described his sub-text for playing *Shylock*:

His scorn would be the only cut, the only wound Antonio would suffer.
The verdict, of course, goes against him. A ‘quibble’ reverses the case,
Antonio and the court divide the spoils between them and—exit *Shylock*
... But having bought so dearly the right to his contempt for his Christian

¹⁰ Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 172.

¹¹ William Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage* (1915; rpt. B. Blom : New York, 1969),175.

enemies, would he not walk out of that courtroom head erect, the very apotheosis of defiant hatred and scorn? That is the way I see Shylock, and that is how I played him.¹²

In 1903, Broadway producer Arthur Hopkins approached Adler with a curious proposition—a Broadway production of *The Merchant of Venice* with Adler cast as Shylock. But while the remainder of the cast would be speaking their lines in English, Adler would speak Shylock's lines in Yiddish. This was not unprecedented in late nineteenth and early twentieth century performance history. The celebrated Italian Shakespearean Tommaso Salvini (in *Coriolanus* and *Othello*) and France's renowned Coquelin (in *Cyrano*) had previously performed in productions, speaking their lines in Italian or French while their fellow cast members spoke the rest of the text in English. But somehow there seems something almost absurdist about a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock, already designated as the outcast and maligned 'other', further distances himself from his adversaries by speaking the mysterious, guttural language of the ghetto.

Adler clearly had misgivings about participating in this hybrid staging of the play, but was persuaded by a Zionist compatriot who beseeched him: "... you owe it to the Gentiles! Let them see how a Jew plays Shylock!" Apparently, the results were as mixed as were the languages. In her commentary on (and translation of) Adler's autobiography, Lulla Rosenfeld writes of Adler's Broadway venture: "He had done it as a Jew, and in his own language. It was enough. He went back to his own stage."¹³

But Jewish concern over ways to deal with *The Merchant of Venice* and Shylock was as nothing compared with the disordered state of the play's performance history in Nazi Germany. The play was performed at least eighty-six times in 1933, the year in which Hitler was appointed German Chancellor. After Kristallnacht in 1938, a radio version was broadcast. At that time, a provincial critic proudly hailed, 'Shakespeare's ... feel for racial purity'. It was also in 1938 that adjustments to Shakespeare's plot and text began to be enforced. Nazi writer Hermann Kroepelin determined that the suggestion of Lorenzo's Aryan blood mixing with Jessica's Jewish blood would be in obvious violation of Third Reich law. Kroepelin's solution was to have Jessica abandon Lorenzo before Act IV (and, presumably, prior to consummation of their marriage), allowing her to return to the ghetto to assist her father. Another production turned Jessica into Shylock's 'adopted' daughter, thus putting her credentials as racially full-blooded 'Jewess' into question. All

¹² Jacob Adler, *Jacob Adler: A Life on the Stage*, trans. Lulla Rosenfeld (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 343. (Quote originally appeared in "Jacob Adler—The Broadway Garrick," *Theatre Magazine*, November 1902, 18). See also Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, 175-183.

¹³ *Jacob Adler: A Life on the Stage*, 350

references to Jewish family love and devotion within the play, like Launcelot Gobbo's lines 'most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew!' (II, 3, 10-11) were cut.¹⁴ Ironically, as will be the case with the Jewish Post-Holocaust adaptors of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's text was being plundered, politicized and re-appropriated.

For one 1942 production, a claque was planted in the audience, programmed to literally 'spet upon Shylock's Jewish gabardine' whenever he appeared. But the most notorious of the Nazi era *Merchants* was Lothar Müthel's 1943 production at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Müthel's *Shylock*, Werner Krauss, was an experienced Shakespearean who, ironically, had previously played *Shylock* for the legendary German/Jewish director, Max Reinhardt, in 1921. Here, Krauss, made up in Elizabethan red wig and exaggerated beaked nose that for centuries had marked the character of *Shylock*, and dressed in a soiled yellow tallus over a filthy black robe, moved about the stage—part madman and part village idiot. Krauss employed claw-like gestures of the hands, a splayfooted, shuffling walk, muttering, bawling, spitting, stamping and raging, and, as one Viennese audience member described it, apparently intuiting the intended message, presenting 'a pathological picture of the Eastern European Jew in all his internal and external dirtiness'.¹⁵

The aftermath of this production is perhaps as troubling as was its staging. In 1948, Krauss was brought before a de-Nazification tribunal in Stuttgart. His primary defense for this horrific rendering of *Shylock* (other than what would have been the all-too obvious, "I was just following orders/direction"), was a letter from George Bernard Shaw stating that to hold Krauss responsible for crimes of the Nazi regime was "vindictive stupidity." Krauss was charged with but a "minor offense", paid a fine of £125, and was briefly banned from performing upon the German stage. But the trial had little long-term effect upon his popularity, and he soon began working in German theatre again, where he received numerous honors from both the new German state and German theatre practitioners.

The indelible mark of the Holocaust led to a virtual taboo in regards to performing Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. *Shylock's* negative traits, his role as comic villain, so intrinsic to its prior performance history, in the wake of the near annihilation of European Jewry, rendered the play 'unplayable,

¹⁴ Quotations follow *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown, Arden 2 (London: Methuen, 1955).

¹⁵ *Shylock der Ostude*, "Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, 19, May 1943. Reprinted in Joseph Wulf, *Theater und Film im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963), 282-3. His translation. See also *Theatre Under the Nazis*, ed. John London (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 245-247, and Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 134-137.

transforming any 'traditional' interpretation into a horrific display of religious insensitivity. If the play was to be done, a reverential attitude towards Shylock was the expedient tactic. And this is how the play was performed well into the 1960s. Shylock became, in the words of Wilhelm Hortmann, " ...very human ... deserving of compassion as a man attached to his religion and his family, and greatly suffering through both".¹⁶ It then fell to European-Jewish, and Israeli directors to re-appropriate the play, re-deploy the characters, and manipulate *The Merchant of Venice* into a host of new forms and contexts. In the case of Peter Zadek's 1972 production, the choice was to confront the archetypal traits and idiosyncrasies of Shylock head-on. But there were other options and other provocations.

George Tabori was a Hungarian-born Jew. Much of his family, including his father, was killed at Auschwitz. Tabori managed to escape, settled in Great Britain, and established himself as a stage director both in England and the U.S. Tabori mounted his production of *The Merchant of Venice* as Performed in Theresienstadt as part of the first season of the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1966. His production may be considered the first Post-Holocaust re-conceptualization of *The Merchant of Venice*. As can perhaps be deduced from Tabori's title, the play was influenced by Peter Brook's production of *Marat/Sade* (full title - *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis De Sade*) a sensation since its premiere in 1964 just two years earlier, and in 1966, still touring the world. Like *Marat/Sade*, Tabori staged his production as play-within-a-play, with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* performed by the inmates of the Theresienstadt concentration camp for an audience of their Nazi prison guards. The play was quite disturbing to its Berkshire audience. Many left the theatre angry. But, as Michael Shapiro observed, it made its audience painfully aware of the 'potential holocaust lurking at the heart of the play'.¹⁷

Tabori's production began with a starved inmate crawling up through a trapdoor and collapsing upon the raked stage. The set, such as it was, consisted of a potato sack curtain strung by wire across the top of the stage, with swastikas along its bottom. A portrait of Hitler loomed in the background. The prisoner/performers, with shaved heads and striped concentration camp uniforms, assembled around the body of their fallen inmate as the Nazi guards arrived, taking their seats in the audience to the accompaniment of the iconic World War II hit 'Lili Marlene'. The prisoners then dragged the starved prisoner's body offstage. The inmates reentered, scrubbing the floor and inching their way towards their Nazi audience. One of the conceits of the production was that the inmate/performers were to consider the entire audience to be their

¹⁶ Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, 257.

¹⁷ Michael Shapiro, "Shylock, the Jew Onstage: Past and Present", *Shofar* 4.2 (1986), 1-11.

Nazi oppressors.¹⁸ The order to begin the performance was given, and the inmates began their desperate performance of Shakespeare's play. Shylock appeared, wearing the infamous false nose, with an orange yarn wig and beard as paltry prison substitutes for the red wig which has epitomized the figure of the devilish stage Jew, kinsman of Judas, since performances of the medieval mystery plays.

The inmates showed defiance as much as they dared. Shylock delivered the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech in an impassioned frenzy, finally ripping off his wig and false nose, to expose his shaved head. The action culminated in Portia's passionate call for 'the quality of mercy'. Throughout the performance, the inmate/actress playing Portia acted as if in a daze, delivering her lines in emotionless meter, staring out vacantly; portraying a victim of unspeakable sexual abuse within the camp. Her unexpectedly fervent plea for justice so enraged one of the Nazi officers that he leaped upon the stage to assume for himself the role of judge. He demanded Shylock to kneel and beg for forgiveness. But Antonio sank to his knees first, with Portia following, until the inmates were all on their knees. Suddenly, Shylock pulled a real knife and prepared to extract his pound of flesh from the Nazi judge. In the mayhem that followed, Shylock attacked the judge and was killed by the prison guards. The inmates slowly, fearfully crawled towards the front of the stage, replicating the slow crawl of the starving inmate whose collapse opened the play. As they reached the stage's apron, there was a sudden blackout. The potato sack curtain was drawn. When the lights came up again and the curtain lifted, all that appeared on stage was a ragged pile of prison clothing.

This was an extreme form of reductive Shakespeare. Some of the audience questioned, whether it was Shakespeare at all, despite the fact that about ninety per cent of Shakespeare's text was spoken. But as political theatre, and as Holocaust memory play, it was chillingly effective.

1972 marked the first time that an Israeli-born director mounted a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Israel, and it too became a matter of great controversy and immediate disapproval for its daring and perceived bias. Like Zadek, the director, Yossi Yzraeli, chose a grotesque Jewish caricature for his Shylock, who evoked unflattering renderings of the Jew of the Middle Ages, with his traditional black robe and large hat. Shylock was clearly singled out as the 'other' in Venice, this dark figure in stark contrast to his blond Venetian adversaries, all costumed in white. Yzraeli cast Avner Hyskiah, a well-known

¹⁸ Anat Feinberg, *Embodied Memory: The Theatre of George Tabori*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 212. See also *Shakespeare in Production: The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Charles Edelman, *Shakespeare in Production: The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63-64, and John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend & Its Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 333.

Israeli comedian, as Shylock, and Hyskiahu delivered his lines in a fumbling, faltering comic cadence. In his subsequent review in *The Jerusalem Post*, M. Kohanski wrote that Hyskiahu's Shylock was, "a shrewd old Jew, his posture, his gait, his manner of speaking reflecting a life spent making shrewd, furtive money deals, a man accustomed to abuse. He delivers his key speech ('Hath not a Jew eyes?') snarling at the two goyim (gentiles), practically spitting in their faces. He is a worm turned, but still a worm."

There was much that was creative in Yzraeli's production. He employed the framing-device of a masked mummers parade, a hearkening back to Passion Play tradition. As part of this opening procession, Shylock struggled to bear the weight of a huge cross. The image of the parade procession was re-visited at the conclusion of the trial scene. Yzraeli also employed puppets extensively. A puppet theatre was set on the top of the back white wall of the stage, with miniature likenesses of the play's characters. These puppets served as a kind of Greek chorus, sometimes providing a visual echo to onstage action, sometimes burlesquing the play's serious moments, and, on occasion, 'providing alternative action.' The puppets were most poignantly employed in a symbolic religious ritual depicting Shylock's forced baptism by his Christian tormentors.¹⁹

Despite the production's innovative stagecraft, it was roundly criticized, primarily for its unsympathetic and caricature-like portrayal of Shylock. Hayim Gamzu, the critic for the highly influential Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* wrote, unapologetically " ...we Jews are practically allergic to a typical anti-Semitic interpretation, which blurs Shylock's cry of pain and protest ..." And sadly, to a 1972 Israeli audience, Yzraeli's production appeared such a 'typically anti-Semitic' reading of Shylock's plight.

In 1969, George Tabori returned to Germany, and in 1978, his next variation on themes from *The Merchant of Venice* was staged, this time titled *Improvisations on Shylock*. Tabori considered this undertaking to be a theatrical meditation on 6,000 years of anti-Semitic injuries. In its original concept, *Improvisations on Shylock* was to be an extraordinarily ambitious cross between a journey piece and guerrilla theatre. In *Embodied Memory*, Anat Feinberg describes the initial plan:

Shylock was to be performed on the site of the concentration camp in Dachau, with the actors as prisoners. Spectators and actors would be bused ... escorted to the Venice-bound train by a Bavarian band. The journey—overtly paralleling the journey that ended in the gas chamber—would be disrupted when SS troopers took the passengers (actors included) by surprise, shoved them into groups, and stitched a yellow star on their coats. On the way to Dachau, scenes from *Merchant* would be performed ... In Dachau trucks would transport the audience from the railway to the camp site. The actors were to perform the play in

¹⁹ Avraham Oz, "Transformations of Authenticity," 67.

the barracks under the permanently menacing presence of the guards. The audience would be taken back to Munich by buses, leaving behind the dim site and the lonely Shylock, only just baptized (216-217).

Logistical problems arose immediately, and furthermore, Tabori sensed a vital flaw in using the Dachau campsite as part of his theatre space. Dachau had already been transformed into an official Holocaust museum. Tabori called it “so designerly that remembering anything other than the remembering of remembrance is impossible. Walking through there is like going through an illustrated magazine in the dentist’s waiting room” (cited in Feinberg, 217). The decision was made to use, instead, the assembly room of the Munich SS as improvisations on Shylock’s evocative, environmental theatre.

The performance was a Brechtian non-linear collage, with far less of Shakespeare’s text employed than in the Theresienstadt Merchant of 1966. Instead, the staging included an anti-Jewish ballad attributed to Samuel Pepys, the noted seventeenth century London diarist, as well as portions of Holocaust testimony. As in epic theatre, mood was deflected by improvisations and song. A grand piano served as the stage centerpiece. Musician/actor Stanley Walden took on a role somewhat akin to that of the emcee in Cabaret—cuing, provoking, and standing in for actors when they faltered. In all, 13 different actors played Shylock within the performance, while also doubling in other roles. The play consisted of 18 scenes, those that related to *The Merchant of Venice* bore titles like ‘Antonio is sad’, ‘Bassanio needs money’, or ‘Shylock returns home’. Others, like ‘Concentration camp narrative’ and ‘Kristallnacht’ reflected the Nazi experience. The scene depicting Shylock’s discovery of Jessica’s absence was performed twelve times, in soberingly different moods—as slapstick, as silent movie, as circus performance, as music theatre, and most movingly, with Shylock’s thunderstruck realization that Jessica’s disappearance couldn’t possibly “have happened that quietly!”

There have been many other post-Holocaust stagings and adaptations—some effective, some not. In 1995, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war and the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, Hanan Snir, an Israeli director, working with a company of German actors in Weimar, mounted a production, simply titled *The Merchant*. Also set in a concentration camp, three naked prisoners were brought onstage and forced at gunpoint to participate in a staging of *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1999, Tibor Egervari, a Canadian-Jewish playwright wrote *The Merchant of Venice in Auschwitz*, influenced by the experiences of the great Italian writer and Holocaust survivor/victim, Primo Levi. And in 2000, the Genesis Repertory Ensemble in New York, did a version of *The Merchant of Venice* in which 1938 Germany and Vienna were substituted for Shakespeare’s Venice and Belmont, and in which, at the conclusion of the trial scene, kristallnacht begins.

Thus, Shakespeare's Shylock evolves within the eddy of these transformations. We may debate whether this is indeed Shakespeare's character that is enduring through these interpretative manipulations; whether Shakespeare's character can survive these provocations, or even whether Shakespeare's character, with all his portentous 'baggage', warrants preservation at all. Perhaps George Tabori has best summarized the relevance of these explorations – these attempts at equating the character of Shylock and his encounters with the anti-Semitism of the Venice of long ago with the indescribable devastation of the Holocaust. It was Tabori's belief 'that Shakespeare's Shylock stands denuded of everything that makes life worth living or, which is the same thing, that makes death worth dying.' And it is this image of Shylock; as post-apocalyptic subversion of Shakespeare's naked 'unaccommodated man'... and 'poor forked animal' that has allowed for his transformation into the beleaguered Everyman he has become on the post-Holocaust stage.

ARTHUR HOROWITZ teaches Theatre History and Dramaturgy in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Pomona College. His book, *Prospero's 'True Preservers'*, a study of productions of *The Tempest* by Peter Brook, Yukio Ninagawa and Giorgio Strehler, was published by the University of Delaware Press.

© 2007 Arthur Horowitz. All Rights Reserved.

Horowitz, Arthur. "Shylock after Auschwitz: The Merchant of Venice on the Post-Holocaust Stage—Subversion, Confrontation, and Provocation." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 8 no. 3 (Fall, 2007): 7-19