PRAXIS

Lofty Scenes: New Productions of Shakespeare at the New Globe Theatre and the National Theatre of Great Britain

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> "How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
> In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!"
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> —Cassius, *Julius Caesar*, Act Three, Scene One

In the two years since the opening of the New Globe Theatre, a reconstruction of Shakespeare's original Globe based on the surviving historical (and mostly circumstantial) evidence, it has operated on London's South Bank with mixed success near the recently uncovered archaeological ruins of two Elizabethan playhouses, the Rose and Shakespeare's original Globe. The dream of the late Sam Wanamaker, the New Globe offers a unique opportunity for scholars and general audiences to examine performance traditions of the Elizabethan stage and the ways in which they illuminate aspects of Shakespeare's oeuvre. Audiences have flocked to the new Globe, but critics have remained decidedly lukewarm to some of its initial productions. A few have even gone so far as to suggest that the theatre is little more than an Elizabethan-Jacobean theme park offering a quality of production that is inconsistent at best. Two 1999 productions, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Julius Caesar*, illuminate both the strengths and the problems of presenting Shakespeare's plays in a recreation of its original environment, and also go some distance in dispelling quality criticisms. While neither production could be described as definitive, both are lively and intelligently staged and, best of all, make maximum use of the Globe's distinct theatrical characteristics.

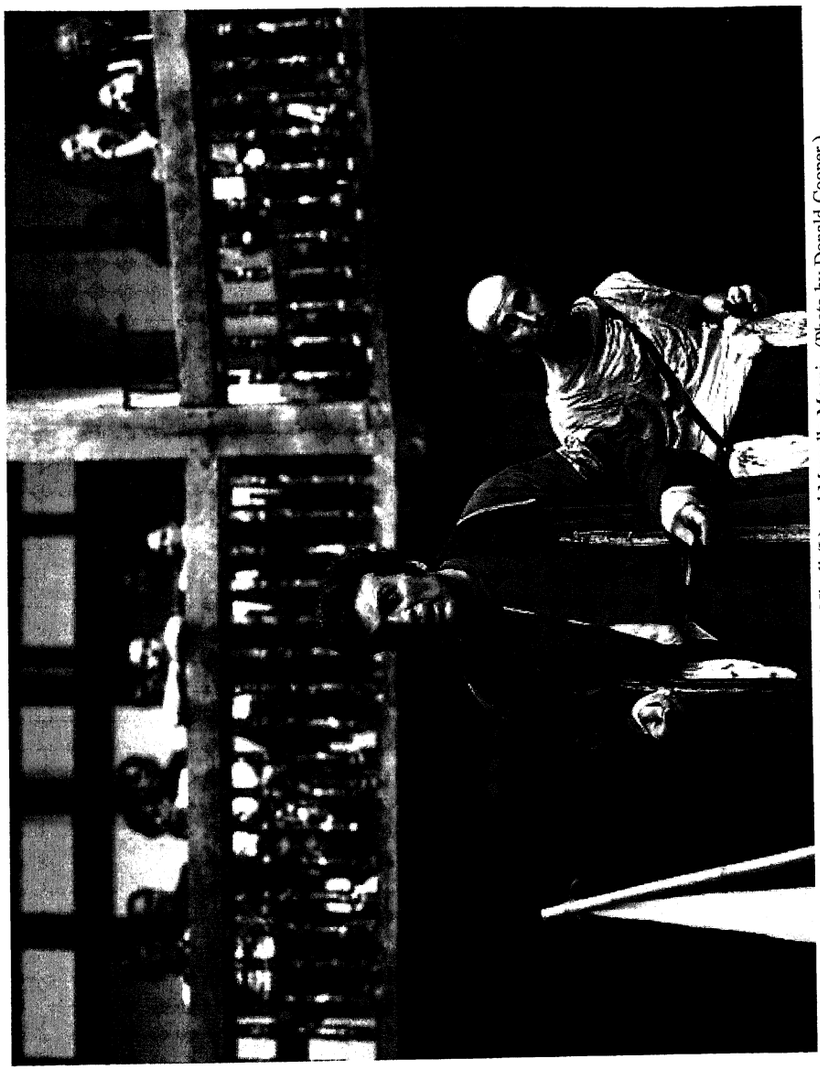
The Globe certainly provides support facilities one might expect to find at a theme park: two restaurants, gift stalls, exhibits, a modern box office, and other amenities are attached to the theatre by a pleasant open-air courtyard overlooking the Thames, with St. Paul's Cathedral looming over the city across the river. The Globe's surrounding environs are attractive, despite being at close quarters with warehouses and other businesses. Within a year, the Tate Gallery will move its modern art collection to a huge warehouse being renovated for it

near the Globe, and London's underground system will open a new Jubilee line tube stop close to the theatre, greatly improving access to the Globe's wonders.

And the wonders are significant for scholars and general audiences. Aside from its emphasis on Shakespeare's plays, the Globe has committed itself to productions of works by other Elizabethan-Jacobean playwrights. Staged readings or productions of plays by Thomas Middleton, Ben Jonson, and John Fletcher have already been presented, as well as related visiting international productions such as a recent Kathakali version of *King Lear*.

The New Globe has been reconstructed not only to look as the original Globe presumably looked, but construction methods and materials used to build it were approximate to those in use in Shakespeare's day. Wooden beams are pegged into place (no nails are visible), and the galleries and tiringhouse are covered with thatch, the first such roof permitted in London since the Great Fire in the late seventeenth century—the addition of sprinkler system over the roof is a nod to contemporary safety concerns. Plaster walls inside and out are made from the same recipe employed in Elizabethan times, although goat hair replaces the required cow hair—due to centuries of dietary changes, modern cows apparently do not grow coats hairy enough after four-hundred years. Stage pillars are elaborately painted to resemble marble columns and, like other painted decorative embellishments, are in accordance with the sketchy historical evidence. It is Shakespeare *al fresco* and the spectator entering the Globe steps into an environment at once familiar and mysterious, past and present. Its success or failure as a living performance space depends completely on the ability of spectators to adapt themselves to unfamiliar conventions. The resulting wonderment created by the Globe is not dissimilar to that of the charming depiction of the Rose Theatre in the recent popular film, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

Under the guidance of artistic director Mark Rylance, who starred in the theatre's highly-publicized opening production of *Henry V* in 1997, the Globe's permanently fixed structure calls upon skills actors, directors, and designers have rarely needed in the centuries since most brands of western theatre moved permanently indoors. Aside from floodlights employed to illuminate night performances, there are no "artistic" lighting effects and little scenery, aside from the Globe's ornate and permanent stage platform and tiringhouse. The actor must project his unamplified voice over the continual external noises of everything from jets flying overhead to boats floating down the Thames, while attempting to reach the highest of the Globe's three tiers of gallery benches. Actors are at a decided disadvantage in creating subtle effects of voice and movement, but a good director will devise ways to turn the problems of the New Globe into advantages through a thorough understanding of how this theatre space functioned in Shakespeare's day—and what that understanding might lead to in increased understanding of the plays.



The Comedy of Errors, Globe Theatre 1999. Vincenzo Nicoli (L) and Marcello Magni. (Photo by Donald Cooper.)

The first thing that becomes obvious about the Globe in performance is that it eliminates the phony naturalism of so much twentieth century theatre. Modern productions of Shakespeare tend to shrink his plays down from the great poetic, imaginative dreams that they are to the more prosaic level of kitchen-sink realism. The Globe's singular stage offers a blank cube of raw theatrical space that cries out for an artifice that is blatant and unapologetic, as it almost certainly was in Shakespeare's day. The audience is required to listen in different ways, and the elimination of all but minimal stage props and scenic effects places the emphasis squarely on *the actor* and *the word*. Spectators standing in the pit or seated on hard benches in the gallery are visible in the daylight and there is a constant feeling of motion that animates the geometries of the theatre's space. The space itself demands a flexible and unpretentious audience; there is no art-house elitism at the Globe, it is the ultimate populist theatre.

Is the Globe an avant-garde experiment or merely a pedantic scholarly exercise? The 1999 productions of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Julius Caesar* indicate that it is something of both. Certainly dozens of volumes on the questions raised and answered by the Globe's space will be forthcoming, and while it may be impossible to completely recreate the experience of attending Shakespeare's Globe four hundred years ago, it is possible to catch a glimpse in productions that attempt to use the space as it might have been originally intended.

Actual productions in the New Globe raise the most intriguing issues about the use of its space and production practices, both old and new. *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare's riff on Plautus's *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*, is a play that features a maelstrom of mistaken identities that can either be funny or touching; few productions manage to achieve both moods. This production, viewed at a July 4, 1999 matinee, leans toward broad comedy and employs the Elizabethan concept of a Master of the Play (Kathryn Hunter) and a Master of Verse (Tim Carroll) in lieu of a single director. Hunter stresses the play's possibilities for rambunctious, knockabout farce without completely obscuring either its romantic ruminations or its ultimately moving reconciliation of a long-separated family.

Two Italian actors trained in the traditions of *commedia dell'arte*, Vincenzo Nicoli (Antipholus) and Marcello Magni (Dromio), play the two sets of twins with brash comic panache. For them, *The Comedy of Errors* is a plotless romp and the text is a mere springboard for their wild comic lunacy. To a degree, Hunter gives them free improvisatory rein, a choice that is underscored by her decision to have Nicoli and Magni play both the Ephesusian and Syracusian Antipholus and Dromio. Quick shifts between their two characters cause much amusement, although neither does much in the way of physical changes to definitively distinguish between their two characters. The fact that they are performing in a second language causes some lines to be lost, but in every other way both actors are supremely gifted comics. Nicoli's Antipholus of Ephesus spends much of his time in benign

bewilderment over the comic chaos caused by the unknown (to him) arrival of his long-lost twin brother from Syracuse. Nicoli's Antipholuses and Magni's Dromios come off, as one London critic described them, as a genial John Cleese with an especially clueless Manuel, but their performances also evoke eternal comic images drawn from Aristophanes and *commedia dell'arte* through Shakespeare and Molière to Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the Marx Brothers.

The New Globe requires a lack of subtlety in acting, it offers the opportunity for a rougher, more direct communion between actor and audience. Hunter obviously recognizes this fact and sets about to make maximum use of the theatre's environment. Submerged in-jokes from Shakespeare's text come alive at the New Globe, as when Dromio describes a gargantuan kitchen maid who is in romantic pursuit of him. "She is," he says, "spherical like a globe," and he follows this with a knowing look about the theatre to the delight of the audience. Other amusing staging choices are made to address the close proximity of audience members in the pit. Egeon's trial takes place at the front of the stage, with the old man standing among the groundlings defending himself from threatened execution. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse arrive via a mock boat that winds its way through the pit, causing bystanders to have to create a path for them. This informality encourages the actors and the director to pursue delightfully low comic business. The duel between Antipholus and Balthazar is not fought with swords, but with rubber chickens, and other irresistible cheap laughs dot the action of the play. The outstanding comic set piece is an hilarious tennis match between Antipholus and Dromio that not only underscores and emphasizes the dialogue being delivered by them, but makes an immediate connection for audience members who undoubtedly watched Wimbledon matches on television that very morning. When the impromptu match, which includes Magni triumphantly holding a silver tray aloft as his trophy, ends, Nicoli grumbles, "I knew t'would be a bald conclusion," and in response, Magni whips around to display his own shining bald pate.

Hunter has chosen an Arabian-accented environment, setting the play in Turkey and making Ephesus a place of mysticism and exotic appeal. There is a mysterious "otherness" created that provides this production with an environment that is impressive in itself. Costumes are colorful, the live music composed by Mià Soteriou and played from the tiringhouse gallery underscores the visual scheme with its rhythms, and the few modest scenic embellishments added to change locations around the town of Ephesus are effectively deployed. Adriana, Antipholus of Ephesus's shrewish wife, is played with vibrance by Yolanda Vazquez, but her comparatively few scenes can hardly compete with the inspired clowning by Nicoli and Magni. Jules Melvin is a robust Luciana, Robert Pickavance a doddering Egeon, and Martin Turner cuts an imposing figure as the Duke. Among the remaining players, Avril Clark stands out in her poignant portrayal of the Abbess

who subsequently is revealed to be the long lost wife of Egeon and mother of the twins brothers.

Despite the slapstick nature of the production, Hunter and Carroll also pay close attention to the text. Even with the occasional difficulties in understanding Nicoli and Magni, the dialogue comes through vividly and the more serious aspects of the play manage to assert themselves. The grief of the separated family members and the darker confusions growing out of the loss of self caused by the mistaken identities are certainly given second place in this production, but still surface at particular points, especially in the last scene, with surprising potency. The somewhat abrupt happy ending of *The Comedy of Errors* can seem implausible in more serious productions of the play, but in a broadly comic depiction it is a most satisfying conclusion and underscores a connection to the beauty of Shakespeare's later, more sophisticated romances. When the entire cast ends the performance in a joyous dance, the attendant ovation from the spectators suggests that the profoundest connection between actor and audience has happened.

Among its many other attributes, the New Globe unleashes the viewer's understanding of Shakespeare's unparalleled skills as a storyteller. Even with the movement and noise of an outdoor performance, the loss of actor subtleties due to the theatre's size, the lack of electronic amplification, and the dwarfing of the human figure on the tall Globe stage, Shakespeare's characters, language, and plots come through with clarity and impressive vigor. *The Comedy of Errors* makes it clear that the story of an audience-friendly farce works well in the Globe, but is this theatre hospitable to a tragic play that, by its very nature, has a depth of feeling and subtlety in its storytelling that may be bruised by this rough environment? A July 7, 1999 afternoon performance of the "400th anniversary production" of *Julius Caesar* proves Shakespeare's storytelling prowess in what might seem to be less-than-friendly circumstances for a thoughtful drama.

Master of Play Mark Rylance's tight, swiftly-paced production is unfussy in its staging and impressively lucid in its delivery of the text, thanks to the efforts of Master of Verse Giles Block. Although subtleties are easily missed in the Globe, Rylance's fifteen member, all-male, multi-ethnic cast manages to replace subtleties with a vigorous openness and bold clarity of acting.

A timeless play of politics and power, *Julius Caesar* has resonance in almost any culture in which it is presented. Cynicism about politicians in the late twentieth century gives this production an extra level of dark irony that Shakespeare may or may not have imagined. *Julius Caesar* is a work that is consistent in tone, linear in its plotting, and its characters, with perhaps a couple of exceptions, are little more than two-dimensional. The play's linear structure allows for an uninterrupted building of tension, which Rylance and his cast manage to create despite their own imposition of five-minute intermissions at the end of each of the first four acts.

Standing out among the strong cast are Danny Sapani, who plays Brutus with a mellowness and considerable sweetness that is compelling; Richard Bremmer, an especially "lean and hungry" Cassius whose vitality is chilling; Paul Shelley, an imposing actor who plays Caesar with the air of a corporate magnate; and Mark Lewis Jones, whose Mark Antony has a working class roughness that falls away as events cause him to rise as a leader of men. When Jones delivers Antony's speech, he begins *sotto voce* from the tiringhouse gallery and ends reading Caesar's will seated on the assassinated leader's bier. When he lifts Caesar's wound-ridden body and thrusts it toward the groundlings, the impact is electrifying. Calpurnia and Portia are played by Benedict Wong and Toby Cockerell, respectively. Each are effective, but the convention of men playing female roles is difficult for a contemporary audience to accept in a serious play. In comedy, a man in drag is obviously intended to provide amusement; here, however, the spectators seem uncertain about accepting Wong and Cockerell as genuine contributors to the drama. A real Shakespearean laugh is found when Cockerell's Portia states that she has a man's tongue but a woman's might, but otherwise there are occasional titters from the audience at inappropriate moments. The New Globe's 1999 season will conclude with artistic director Rylance playing Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and this should truly test an audience's willingness to accept this particular Elizabethan convention.

The actors in *Julius Caesar* wear a mixture of Elizabethan dress with ancient Roman embellishments added, as was more or less the way it was done in Shakespeare's day. For example, togas are draped over the seventeenth century garb for the assassination scene. Garments and armor used in this production were made at great expense in the Elizabethan tradition by rare craftspeople who retain the methods of centuries ago. Master of Clothing and Props Jenny Tiramani makes the dubious choice of beginning the play with several of the male characters nearly naked, covered only with a few appropriately placed feathers, which, presumably, is intended to suggest the hedonistic life of Rome. Otherwise, Tiramani's mixture of Elizabethan costumes and Romanesque adornments effectively gives the play a foot in two eras in which the issue of tyrannicide would have resonance, something Shakespeare's own audience must have instinctively understood. Tiramani also provides modest props to establish the play's differing locations, as in Act One when two white statues are set into the tiringhouse gallery. Other scenes feature only a bench and six potted trees and a large statue of Caesar is brought on for the assassination scene; a few stools and banners make up the rest. Ghost scenes work well without any lighting effects and, despite the fact that audience members are seated there, live storm sounds and music emanate from the tiringhouse gallery. These roughly created illusions may disappoint contemporary audiences accustomed to a greater degree of visual and aural sophistication, but for this performance of *Julius Caesar* its audience seemed satisfied.

Rylance's staging is intelligent and fully utilizes the Globe's structural features. He has scattered some actors among the audience standing in the pit and, dressed in contemporary clothing (baseball caps, tee-shirts, shorts, with beer cans in hand, etc.), they serve as a claque to encourage the audience in becoming the Roman crowd. Other such direct interactions with the audience include bringing white-bearded soothsayer Jimmy Gardner through the crowd of groundlings to deliver his "Ides of March" warning to Caesar from the pit, underscoring it as a warning from "the people" about excessive hubris. Rylance states in the program for *Julius Caesar* that "Shakespeare must have wanted you to look at each other sometimes while you listened," and this becomes especially evident during the speech-making segment of the play.

Julius Caesar is uncommonly well-suited to this theatre, there is no mistaking that the play was written for a space like the Globe. In this production, the New Globe's intimacy with its audience combines with its epic size to support the play's text. The stoicism of the New Globe's spectators also becomes evident when attending a performance there, but it is well worth the resultant sore back from standing in the pit, or the sore bottom from sitting on the hard and backless benches, for a few hours of drawing a bit closer to Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar* is a surprisingly engrossing performance for a play that critics have often considered obvious and lacking in poetry as compared with Shakespeare's usual standard of lyricism and subtlety. The dark ironies of *Julius Caesar* are efficiently revealed in a production that feels somewhat makeshift and rough-edged, with the strong performances of the cast making up in commitment what the production lacks in splendor. The sharp political analysis and strong plotting of the play hold up well in this production, but unfortunately the battle scenes and an inordinate number of noble suicides in the last part of the play becomes tedious and anticlimactic. Perhaps *Julius Caesar* suffers from its life as a school text, as the play that, unfortunately and unfairly, usually turns off the average high school student to Shakespeare. The play bursts with contemporary relevance, and its soaring rhetoric and frantically driven action overcomes weaknesses of its somewhat uninspired plotting.

Despite flaws in any particular production, it is obvious that the New Globe is far more than an academically dead venue. It has many marvels to inspire and teach artists, scholars, and its audience about the seemingly endless depths of theme, character, and language of the wondrous and often mysterious world of Shakespeare's plays and the vigorous stage of his age.

Further down the Thames, the National Theatre of Great Britain is offering one of its finest seasons in several years, thanks to Trevor Nunn's NT99 Ensemble. Nunn and his actors have made a particular impression on London critics with two of Shakespeare's most problematic plays, *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Fully evident in both of these outstanding productions is Nunn's gift of discovering surprisingly fresh rhythms of character and language within a bold

Troilus and Cressida by William Shakespeare. Directed by Trevor Nunn. Royal National Theatre: Olivier Theatre, March 15, 1999. Dhobi Oparei as Hector (B), Raymond Coulthard as Achilles (T). (Photo by Catherine Ashmore.)

and vivid concept. This might seem like the goal of any good production, but Nunn is a rare theatrical magician.

Many directors have been defeated by the enormous width and depth of the NT's circular Olivier Theatre stage, but Nunn uses its shape, and the long entrances and exits necessitated by its size, to create an appropriately epic scope for one of Shakespeare's most epic plays, *Troilus and Cressida.* It is a work that is inconsistent in tone and not an easy text for any director or actor to face, but in the twentieth century *Troilus and Cressida* has emerged as one of Shakespeare's most produced plays —three different productions were scheduled for London in 1999. Audiences are undoubtedly drawn to its war-soaked Homeric setting, and Shakespeare's bitter and deeply cynical satire on the immorality of war has a resonance with the horrors of modern human conflict.

This lavishly produced *Troilus and Cressida*, viewed at a June 22, 1999 performance, features a strong multicultural cast used by Nunn to underscore the opposing forces in the war between Athens and Troy. The Greeks are white actors dressed in dark leather and metal armor, while black actors wearing soft and flowing robes play the Trojans (except, inexplicably, for a white Pandarus). There are standout performances among the large cast, especially Roger Allam as a thoughtful and practically-minded Ulysses and Jasper Britton, grotesquely scarred and scabbed, as an intensely driven Thersites. Peter de Jersey and Sophie Okonedo as Troilus and Cressida are somewhat less inspired, but more than competent, and the final image of Okonedo's forlorn Cressida left deserted on a bare stage is one of the production's most impressive moments. David Bamber risks playing Pandarus in a foppish, mincing manner, which works effectively within limits, and other strong performances from a particularly macho cast are rendered by Denis Quilley as a wise and weathered Nestor, Oliver Cotton as a preening Agamemnon, and Oscar James as a commanding Priam. Jax Williams's hysterical Cassandra, Daniel Evans's jaded Patroclus, and David Burt's shamed and emotional Menelaus are also excellent.

Rob Howell's setting cannot match the visual excitement of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1986 Crimean War version of the play, or numerous other versions set everywhere from the American Civil War to World War I. However, he provides an impressively stark bloody-brown gravel stage floor which facilitates efficient movement through sundry locales. Howell signals scene changes with the addition of a few distinct draped fabrics and furnishings, especially impressive in its manifestation as Pandarus's lair, and his costumes efficiently solve the problem of visually establishing the opposing armies while also appealing to the eye. Howell's design is supported by Paul Pyant's shadowy and vaguely sinister lighting which helps shape the fluid space. The real triumph, however, is Nunn's. This sometimes confusing play is given a vivid clarity and freshness which allows its

ideas and emotions to flow freely, even when one or another actor may fall short of the mark.

Nunn's skill with Shakespeare's work is even more thrillingly manifested in his exquisite production of *The Merchant of Venice* in the NT's tiny Cottesloe Theatre. This space is the antithesis of the large and formal Olivier Theatre, but Nunn has mastered its small size and makes maximum use of its inherent flexibility. The smallness of the Cottesloe allows Nunn to bring a level of emotional intimacy and visual detail in his staging to *The Merchant of Venice*, seen at a June 30, 1999 performance, that would have been impossible on a larger stage, and the result is of immense benefit to the play itself. One of the most significant problems in a contemporary production of *The Merchant of Venice* is that its intricate plot mixes components of high dramatic intrigue, lighthearted romance, and elements of farce expressed through sublimely poetic language and set into an environment riddled with intolerance. Shakespeare's trademark examination of the bad and beautiful in human behavior is seen through the virulent anti-Semitism of several of its central characters and its victims, which turn out to be everyone. Was Shakespeare an anti-Semite? This question is much debated and remains inconclusive, but the question has made *The Merchant of Venice* one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays in performance in the late twentieth century.

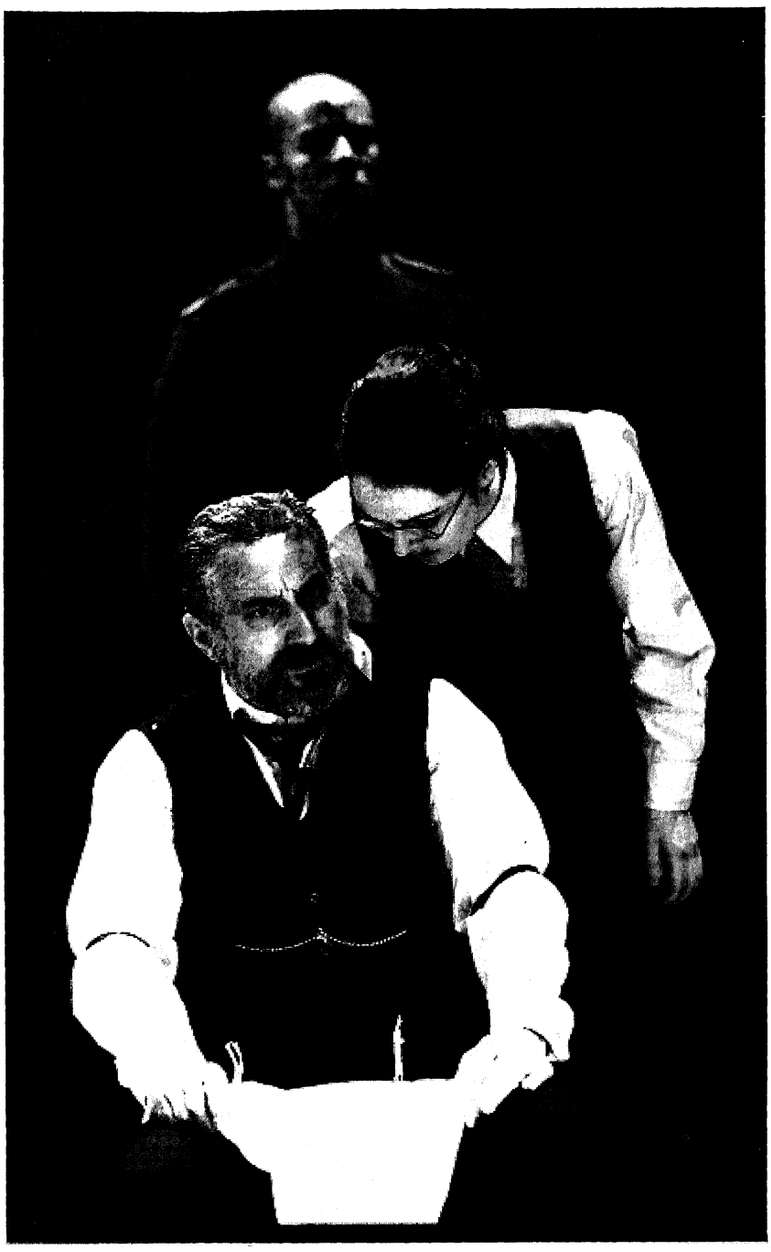
It has, in fact, been nearly thirty years since the National Theatre's last production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which in its 1970 staging served as a vehicle for Laurence Olivier's last stage appearance in a Shakespearean role. He also directed the production, setting it in the gilded 1890s. This choice, coupled with Olivier's impressive physical creation of Shylock, allowed him to present the play, in part, as an homage to Henry Irving, late Victorian England's greatest proponent of Shakespeare's plays—or at least those with a strong role for him. Irving was a definitive Shylock within the expectations of the nineteenth century understanding of this challenging character; he downplayed grotesque and offensive comic elements that had clung to interpretations of Shylock through the centuries, but in his menacing performance there was no question that Shylock was a villain. Olivier brought a tragic grandeur and measure of sympathy to a Shylock who loses everything that has meaning for him. The ages of Olivier's actors were in the fifties and sixties, which had the effect of making the distrust and hatred between the Christians and Jews long-standing and deep-rooted. Mature actors lent a particular melancholic gravity to the play's courtroom machinations, but the parallel romantic elements receded despite Joan Plowright's blowsily ripe and witty Portia. In Nunn's conception of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is by far the oldest character in the play, a man of no more than fifty, and the rest of the actors are, at most, in their early thirties. As such, different values surface and Nunn seizes on them.

The Merchant of Venice is set in the teeming, multi-ethnic marketplace

of sixteenth-century Venice, but Nunn shifts the action to the early 1930s, subtly underscoring both the hedonism of the Christian characters and the distant thunder of fascism and bigotry rising in that period. The undeniably anti-Semitic elements have suggested to some critics and scholars that *The Merchant of Venice* belongs permanently on the shelf, but the particular strength of Nunn's conception is that it directly confronts the play's most problematic features and, to a great extent, revitalizes *The Merchant of Venice* for post-Holocaust sensitivities. He emphasizes the anti-Semitism of the Christian characters and also downplays the fairytale whimsy that has often clung to the romantic Belmont scenes. Without changing a word (although bits of German, Yiddish, and Hebrew are incorporated in Shylock's scenes), Nunn has discovered fresh angles in the virtues and faults of both the Christian and the Jewish characters, and he has effectively blended the play's seemingly antithetical shifts of mood. These problems have stymied other directors, but Nunn succeeds in establishing a violent clash of opposing values in a production that suggests this play would slip effectively into any era in which such tragic conflicts exist.

Early scenes with Antonio and his friends are set in a tawdry cabaret reminiscent of the Kit Kat Club of Christopher Isherwood's *I Am a Camera* and its later musical incarnation as *Cabaret*. Here the wine and prejudice flow freely as the Christians, depicted as the sponging, Jew-baiting flotsam of their society, drink to excess, make crude and prejudiced jokes for their own amusement, and display bisexual tendencies, as particularly evident in a subtext developed between Antonio and Bassanio. Their amoral carousings form a sharp contrast with Shylock's gravity and the deeply religious bearing of his alien Jewishness in their dissolute world. The shameless taunts of the Christians are clearly humiliating to Henry Goodman's excellently portrayed Shylock, who endeavors movingly to remain politely civil in the face of their coarse insults. There are no excessive histrionics in Goodman's poignant, multi-dimensioned, and carefully calibrated characterization. His knowing laughter when he thinks of the terms of his bond is chilling, and his statement that "who, if he break, though mayst with better face exact the penalty" is offered up as an aggressive moral challenge. Through small but significant choices like these, Nunn's production builds steadily in power as the cultural conflicts expand and deepen.

All of the characters are culpable in the unique world Nunn imagines out of Shakespeare's play, from Derbhle Crotty's aristocratic Portia to the likable Bassanio of Alexander Hanson. David Bamber's Antonio is tormented with an unspoken and melancholy homosexual longing for Bassanio, and he wears little rimless glasses that make him look disconcertingly like Heinrich Himmler. When this Antonio meets adversity, he visibly shrinks before it, and when the question is one of moral complexity he can barely respond. However, it is Goodman's Shylock that provides this production with its soul. This Shylock is neither a villain nor



The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare. Directed by Trevor Nunn, Cottesloe Theatre, June 17, 1999. L to R: Henry Goodman (Shylock), Michael Wildman (Stephano), and Derbhle Crotty (Portia). (Photo by John Haynes.)

solely a tragic figure; he, too, is culpable, but it is a culpability that has grown out of a rage at injustice and the cruel prejudices he is forced to face as an outsider struggling to survive. His understandable rage is more powerful for the frighteningly intense control Goodman displays; he has an uncanny ability to project the suppressed anger and profound despair of a man who faces bigotry at every turn. Nunn and Goodman build on Shylock's troubled relationship with his only daughter Jessica, played with gamin wistfulness by Gabrielle Jourdan. He speaks and sings in Hebrew with her in their home and the feeling that he is under cultural siege is vividly portrayed. Shylock fears that Jessica will be drawn into the society of the Christians, and in one of the production's most powerful moments he loses his hard-won control when he slaps Jessica's face in response to a tardy return home. It is a pathetic gesture exposing his desperation in attempting to hold Jessica to her culture and to protect her from what he perceives to be the moral laxity of the Christians.

Full-length, sharply conceived, and profoundly affecting, Nunn's production of *The Merchant of Venice* suffers only slightly in the traditionally tedious scenes at Belmont focusing on Portia and her suitors. Depicting Portia as a Noël Coward heroine lavishly gowned and sipping champagne, Nunn manages to enliven these scenes by connecting them to the time period in which he has set the play. Portia wittily charms her suitors, some of whom are viewed in a clever, if somewhat distracting, home movie projected on a wall. The ring scene, which usually seems hopelessly anti-climactic following the high drama of the trial, is elevated by Nunn into a crucial test of love and commitment which he views as concerns these self-centered and feckless lovers simply have not faced before.

The trial is staged and played with genuine verve; it is riveting in the shockingly abrupt swing of the fortunes of both sides. One of Nunn's striking touches is to have Tubal exit abruptly in the midst of the scene. This is not indicated in the text, but it serves to further isolate Shylock, whose only ally abandons him. Both sides seem certain of the absolute righteousness of their viewpoint, so when these certitudes are effectively challenged with the debate the resulting dramatic tension is mesmerizing. Small details give the trial a bold clarity. Goodman's Shylock hesitates as he places his blade against Antonio's chest, drawing it back as he fully grasps the magnitude of what he is about to do. In her disguise as the lawyer Balthasar, Portia praises compassion in her famous "quality of mercy" speech, but only moments later she stumbles over the word "mercy" as she warns the miserably defeated Shylock that he survives only at the Duke's will. Finally, Shylock, abandoned by his daughter and stripped of his resources, must also abandon his religious faith as a punishment that is stunningly cruel in its irony. In a final electrifying gesture, Goodman shoves his yarmulke and prayer shawl onto the scale intended to weigh Antonio's pound of flesh—it is clear that the scale of justice is forever tipped unfavorably for the outsider.

Nunn's final moment showing the heartsick Jessica in Lorenzo's arms wailing a Hebrew hymn, not a part of the play's actual text, movingly underscores her heartbreaking realization of the price of abandoning her father and culture, while also once again evoking the storm clouds over 1930s Europe. *The Merchant of Venice*, which begins with Antonio's lament, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad," suggests the emphasis this deeply felt and profoundly engrossing production places on the play's ethical dilemmas, for Antonio is, of course, unknowingly sad about his own moral lapses and the decadent times in which he lives.

It is hard to imagine that any production of a Shakespearean play could truly be called definitive, but Nunn's stagings of *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Merchant of Venice* come as close as imaginable, and the New Globe productions of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Julius Caesar* provide a window into the staging practices of Shakespeare's own time.