

## *The Merchant of Venice* on (Polish) Stage: The Past (Tense)?

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**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to consider a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Poland after the publication of Jan Gross's *Sąsiedzi* [Neighbours] (2000), which rekindled, or perhaps started, the discussion on the nature of the Polish-Jewish relations. Furthermore, the play itself is considered difficult in the post-Holocaust era. For these reasons, it seems interesting to discuss Szymon Kaczmarek's production (2019) and the director's handling of this dramatic and cultural 'hot potato'. Although Kaczmarek does not refer to Gross's publication directly, yet he uses the fate of Jewish and female characters in the play to comment on the marginalised in present-day Poland.

It may seem that *The Merchant of Venice* belongs in the past and one can write about the play's performance history mainly in the past tense. Małgorzata Sugiера (1997, 7) has observed that *Merchant*, next to *The Taming of the Shrew*, is very difficult to stage or film after 1945:

Two plays by Shakespeare ignite considerable controversies and require radical ideological revisions: *The Taming of the Shrew*, with its clearly misogynistic images of marriage and ways of establishing male domination; and *The Merchant of Venice*, with its antisemitic appeal, equally unacceptable to the sensitivity of present-day recipient.

It is debatable, though, if one can call *Merchant*<sup>1</sup> unambiguously antisemitic (while there is no denying the fact that *Shrew* is misogynistic). The play may be read as antisemitic, as its discriminatory potential is both manifest and latent; be that as it may, the text is certainly controversial, especially after the Holocaust. For this reason, it has become another "problem play" for the Western culture and Shakespeare scholars in general, and contemporary Polish culture in particular.

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1 Henceforth we will use the English title: *The Merchant of Venice* to refer to this production.

The problematic nature of *Merchant* has also been observed by others. For example, John Drakakis (2010, 121) signals the text's particular dependence on the context of its staging: "the *Merchant of Venice*, perhaps more than most Shakespearean texts, was submitted to the forms and pressures of the time." Drakakis further (2010, 129) quotes Dennis Kennedy to emphasise the radical caesura of 1945: "The events of the Second World War have ... 'completely transformed our ability' to read the play. Indeed, he [Kennedy] argues that 'since 1945 we have been in possession of a new text of the play, one which bears relationships to the earlier text but is also significantly different from it.'" In other words, the interpretation, staging or filming of the play calls for a fundamental revision, especially in the presentation of not only the character of Shylock, Jewish-Christian relations, but also – as Szymon Kaczmarek's production from the Witkacy Theatre in Słupsk, which we intend to discuss in this article, shows – the role and position of female characters and the "Venetian romance" (Orgel 2003, 154). It is also necessary to note the performance history of the play in Poland after 1945. Significantly, Kaczmarek's version counts thirteen in the Polish post-war performance history, according to our census, with only two before 1989 (in 1958 and 1970) and five after 2001.<sup>2</sup>

The years 2000/2001 mark another significant caesura in the difficult Polish-Jewish relations: Jan Gross's publication of an account of the murder of Jewish people in Jedwabne by the Poles: *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Polish Jews in Jedwabne, Poland*, which fuelled an uneasy discussion about Poles' responsibility for Jewish deaths in WWII, and its official acknowledgement by the Polish authorities 60 years after the pogrom, in 2001. These events were followed by such films as the Oscar-winning *Ida* (dir. Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013) or *Pokłosie* [Eng. *Aftermath*, dir. Władysław Pasikowski, 2012], all of which further deepened the lingering notorious stereotype of a Pole as a Jew-eater in the West (as opposed to the stereotype of the heroic Jew-saving Pole in Poland). Yet another significant circumstance must be considered here: the literal, physical absence of the Jewish community in Poland after 1968 resulting from the communist-driven campaign to force Poles of Jewish origin to leave Poland,<sup>3</sup> following the severing of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967. Admittedly, the situation, after 1989,

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2 See Anna Cetera's (2015, 248–294) "Kupiec wenecki na polskiej scenie" [*The Merchant of Venice* on Polish stages]. Interestingly enough, in independent Poland (after 1918 and before 1939) *Merchant* was performed three times.

3 This may be another reason why, before 1989, *Merchant* was staged only once – in 1970.

has changed and the number of Polish citizens claiming Jewish ethnicity rose to 7,353 in 2011 and has been growing since.<sup>4</sup> It is in such a context that we will look at the Szymon Kaczmarek's *Kupiec wenecki*, the winner of the 2019 Golden Yorick award at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival.

Interestingly enough, it is rather difficult to find references to such issues in the reviews of the production. What reviewers emphasise is the modernisation of the play, with its insistence on avoiding the visual splendour of Venice (unlike in, e.g., Michael Radford's film, 2005) or lavish and dazzling historically accurate costumes. The production also shuns highlighting the motives of the power of friendship and love, associated with Belmont and contrasted with the business-like and ruthless image of Venice. Justyna Borkowska notes that the play "was put in modern times, its action set in a harbour city, in an industrial space, and Shylock is presented as an economic immigrant." Kaczmarek himself admits he shows not only contemporary Venice, but one never imagined on postcards or tourists' photos. It is not the Rialto,<sup>5</sup> St. Mark's Square or the canals, but a wharf with concrete-looking breakwater tetrapods and numerous containers with merchandise. Shylock, wearing a tracksuit, unpacks the goods he intends to sell which happen to be wigs. Jessica is working with him. For both of them, the Venetian wharf is a place of hard work, indeed a fight for existence. The external tokens of their otherness are Shylock's sidelocks and Jessica's wig.<sup>6</sup> When Jessica elopes with Lorenzo she takes off the wig and dons a black baseball cap in a symbolic gesture of assuming a new identity and severing links with her Jewish origins.

Antonio and Bassanio are also presented as contemporary characters, yet they are not toiling; instead, for them, the same wharf becomes a beach where they enjoy sunshine and romance as lovers. They are the elite of Venice; clad in smart suits, gold chains with crosses on their necks, and sandals on their feet. Be that as it may, even for them the wharf is *not* some pristine pleasure beach, with deck-chairs and palm trees, but an industrial area. Kaczmarek deprives the characters and setting of the saccharine aesthetics associated with commercials. According to Anna Jazgarska, "Venice (intricately designed by Kaja Migdałek and musically

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4 [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%BBydzi\\_w\\_Polsce](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%BBydzi_w_Polsce) (doa: 30 April 2020).

5 This location is very popular in my Anglophone stage or film versions of the play, e.g. in Fyodor Komisarjevsky's 1932 production with Ernest Daniels's "drunken bridges" (Drakakis 2010, 123) or Radford's visually lavish film.

6 A Chassidic woman is not allowed to show her hair in public and she wears a wig (*sheitel*).

framed by Żeliszław Żeliszławski) boils down to dark alleys of a harbour city full of warehouses and peopled with shady ‘businessmen’”. Interestingly enough, both groups of characters – Shylock and Jessica on the one hand, and Antonio and Bassanio, on the other – occupy the same “backstage” of Venice.

The production explores the marginalised and excluded: Kaczmarek puts his production in contemporary times, highlighting the topical story of migrants, which gradually and naturally led him to the concept of alienation, mainly cultural one. The director is looking in the 16<sup>th</sup> century play for equivalents of contemporary figures of exclusion (due to age, gender, religion, colour) and shows on stage relations which still prove social inequality and class consciousness. (Borkowska)

Otherness and its facets is thus an obvious aspect of the production; in their discussion of the character of Shylock, Stephen Orgel speaks of him as being “conventionally identified as an outsider” (2003, 144), whereas Stanley Wells (2020, 45) brands him a “discordant character.” In the case of Kaczmarek’s production, virtually every figure stands for an “Other,” understood in a general sense: “[t]he existence of others is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007, 154); consequently, each character deviates from what is “normal.” Shylock is a Jew who is deprived of everything by the system; he is a migrant from the East, biblically associated with Eden, yet the Middle East has become a place devastated by turmoil and war, indeed a paradise turned to hell.<sup>7</sup> Antonio is a homosexual who loves Bassanio so much that he is ready to help his lover win the hand of a woman, Portia (Monika Janik). Moreover, Antonio is both gay and anti-Semite, when – together with his lover – he sneers at Shylock.

The woman is also presented as an “Other” in the production. Portia’s and Jessica’s worth is measured with the money they bring into their relationships. Portia’s father (present in the production on video tapes) treats her like a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder.<sup>8</sup> During the bid she is put in a container and her

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7 Kaczmarek does not create Shylock as an ‘orientalist’, Levantine Jew, like Bill Alexander did in the RSC 1987 production with Antony Sher in the role of the Jew (cf. Drakakis 2010, 137–138).

8 This is of course reminiscent of Baptista Minola’s treatment of Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

image is relayed by means of a camera onto a screen outside the container. There are three containers (equivalents of the play's caskets) and one of them literally holds Portia. This convention reminds one of popular TV shows, like *Storage Hunters*, and the association is of course intentional, as it further commodifies Portia. Jessica's value in Lorenzo's eyes becomes apparent when she brings her lover the money she stole from her father: Lorenzo strips off the mask of a caring husband. In Belmont, he sunbathes in a deckchair while she cooks and serves him meals. Soon she falls victim to domestic violence. Lorenzo thus turns out to be not only a bully, but also an anti-Semite, who in Jessica's presence jeers at her father. Łukasz Drewniak sums up the issue of the "Other" in the production in the following way: "[t]he sensational and fairylike plot of the play on purpose reveals the latent ruthless clash of handicapped members of any community (that of gays, Jews, and women)"; the nature of the handicap in the production consists in depriving of characters of agency as well as social and legal equality.

Kaczmarek's production also addresses the issue of *playing* different social roles in the context of popular culture, including the performance of gender roles. It is clearly visible in the character of Portia, who becomes the central figure next to Shylock, very much in accordance with a theatrical practice dating back, in the Anglophone world, to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In some productions, such as Leslie Reidel's US version from 2016, it is "Portia, not Shylock ... who is the center of the action" (Halio 2020, 54). In the Słupsk production, Portia assumes at least three roles: first that of "a maid" who needs to present herself favourably to the suitors - here, she creates an image of a sex-bomb, puts on the mask of liberated feminine sexuality with heavy make-up, artificial nails, a short, gaudy dress, etc. When Bassanio makes the right choice, she happily joins him instantly removing the make-up and taking off the nails and dress. She metamorphoses - her second role - into a model housewife, a Victorian "angel in the house." Finally, in the third role - that of Balthazar - she assumes a cross-gender identity by putting on a striped suit and emphasising the masculine attributes of her "character." Monika Janik's Portia is so convincing in each and every role that it is impossible to determine her "true" self on the one hand, and what it takes to be a man or a woman, on the other. The illusory nature of representation that the production displays and highlights is further fostered in the use of camera which helps create Portia's identity as a marriageable woman as well as that of her dying father (on his deathbed). Reviewers have also noticed the significance of appearances in the production - Justyna Borkowska finds them

“ones of the key phenomena heavily underlined in the play. ‘Appearances’ refer to people, emotions and situations. They are entertainingly and cleverly shown in ‘Portia’s metamorphosis’ after she won her ‘prince charming’”.

Portia is not the only character whose image and identity mutate and lack clarity; this is also true about Shylock: “Igor Chmielnik’s Shylock is also a synonym of appearances in the production. The Jew does have money but he works very hard to earn it – he sells his merchandise and packs and unpacks the containers himself. He carries packages with wigs, which – though referencing Jewish traditions – are yet another example of appearances” (Borkowska). Like Portia (and his daughter after elopement), he plays different roles, which is especially visible in the trial scene (4.1): Shylock comes to court dressed in the costume of a Chassidic Jew, wearing a fur hat (*shtreimel*) and a black silk frock coat (*bekishe*; equivalent of the play’s ‘gaberdine’), in other words a stereotypical image of a Jew, more precisely an Eastern European Jew.<sup>9</sup> Such a representation of the Jew, coupled with acting reinforcing the stereotype, bordered indeed on parody. This Shylock loses his dignity by trying to replace it with pretended arrogance. This image is as unexpected as it is surprising; it leads to confusion among the spectators. This, as Stanely Wells (2020, 48) observes, is to be *expected*:

All the moments in which the actor [any actor] has the clearest opportunity to play for sympathy, including the ‘hath not a Jew eyes’ speech, and Shylock’s grief at his daughter’s betrayal, have come before this [Shylock’s declaration of his vindictive desire for revenge in 3.3]. In other words, the audience is swayed increasingly during the course of action towards the interpretation of Shylock as a remorseless villain up to the point at which they see him at the words, with his knife poised above Antonio’s breast.

The spectators of Kaczmarek’s production and Chmielnik’s performance are not easily *swayed*, however. When they see Shylock dressed as a Chassid, they are first baffled, then they laugh, which many reviewers found inappropriate as if the audience, like Salarino and Salanio and others, are sneering at the Jew:

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9 This stereotype of Jewry has been deployed in Anglophone productions; Drakakis (2010, 131–132) notes that Jonathan Miller’s 1970 production with Laurence Olivier whose “appearance [was that of] a central European Jew” (132).

Although it is rather difficult to find fault with the production, this is not true about some spectators' reactions. Bursts of laughter accompanied Shylock who in the trial scene appeared dressed in a traditional Chassidic costume, including the characteristic fur hat... Laughter was also heard in the scene when it turned out that the Jew cannot claim his rights only because of his religion. The audience was also clearly pleased in the final scene in which the Jew, by the law, is forced to be baptised. This scene is beautiful and extremely expressive; Shylock resembles here Christ led to crucifixion. (Daniel Klusek)

Irrespective of the didactic endeavours of the reviewer, he manages to capture the nature of the audience's response as problematic.<sup>10</sup> But reproaching the spectators (some of them) with disgraceful conduct may be ignoring the pretentiousness of the image of the Jew and his behaviour (so different from what one has seen so far): the audience observes that Shylock demonstrates his devotion to religion in too ostentatious a manner, which may be found false and exaggerated (another appearance). On the other hand, one needs to consider the director's intention to, as Łukasz Drewniak put it, "release ... in the Słupsk audience unwanted emotions – sneer at the sight of the Jew in a Chassidic dress." Perhaps Kaczmarek did not intend to provoke the spectators as Richard Olivier did, who, in his 1998 New Globe production, had "the audience ... encouraged to hiss Norbert Kentrup's Shylock whenever he appeared" (Drakakis 2010, 151). Yet the combination of the stereotypical image and Chmielnik's strange loss of finesse in his rendering of the figure (to be regained in the scene of the forced baptism)<sup>11</sup> inevitably led to a considerable shift in the audience's response.

John Drakakis (2010, 143; 153) mentions, among others, a number of Anglophone productions in which Shylock puts on / or reveals (elements of) traditional Jewish dress in the trial scene. One of these is David Thacker's 1993 RSC version, which shows Shylock "wearing gaberdine and yarmulke as though he had just rediscovered his Jewish faith, pull[ing] a knife from his executive

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10 Łukasz Drewniak, too, notes that "Kaczmarek releases in the Słupsk audience unwanted emotions – sneer at the sight of the Jew in a Chassidic dress."

11 Stanley Wells (2020, 47) reminds us that "in a production at Shakespeare's Globe of 2015, starring Jonathan Pryce, the director [Jonathan Munby] went so far as to add at the end of the play an episode portraying Shylock's enforced baptism as a Christian."

briefcase" (David Calder's Shylock up to this point was fully assimilated in the Venetian society). It needs to be said that the "gaberdine" means here black trousers, black vest and a white shirt (plus yarmulke). This production was vehemently contested by Arnold Wesker for "'making anti-Semites ... feel comfortable with Shylock because he conforms to the myth they love'" (in Drakakis 2010, 143). By no means is it to say that Chmielnik's Chassidic Shylock may have aroused antisemitic sentiment in the audience. But the image is certainly shocking and "out of joint" on the one hand; on the other, it is consistent with the production exposing appearances which the audience may recognise.

The situation radically changes in the added scene of Shylock's baptism. This scene together with Shylock's "Hath a Jew not eyes" (3.1.33) are key elements of the production, also because it is here that the spectator is addressed directly by Shylock. Significantly, both scenes function as bracketing devices in the production. Shylock utters his speech just before the intermission (closure of part one of the production) and is baptised and then left alone on stage at the very end of the production. In the former scene, he faces the audience, looking straight at the spectators, with the auditorium and stage fully lit. He utters the speech alone on stage (Salanio and Salarino are not present) in the form of a soliloquy. It is a liminal moment in the production: the play still lingers on, but the lights above the auditorium signal the beginning of the intermission. A border between fictional and empirical worlds is thus opened. Chmielnik's Shylock stares at the audience, he sees the spectators' faces; they, in turn, cannot pretend (unless they turn their faces away) that Shylock is addressing somebody else. It calls on each and every one of the spectators to revise their views on the Jew, the Other, themselves.

Equally unsettling is the last, mute, scene which is not set in the fairy-tale like, romantic Belmont, but in the space of the courtroom, which now looks like a torture chamber, with Shylock carrying the device of torture: a bowl with holy water. Łukasz Rudziński compared this Shylock to a Christ figure: "The final scene of Shylock's baptism is very distressing: half-naked, sneered at, in a white garb, Shylock resembles Jesus Christ. It is with this image that the artists leave the spectators with." What also makes the scene similar to Christ's passion is the stripping of Shylock of his hat and coat, which he so proudly, perhaps even arrogantly, displayed to the Venetians and the court. Chmielnik's Shylock, again, turns to the audience with a mute reproach in his eyes. Although this time the auditorium lights are off, the burden of this scene, in which baptism is not the



source of life but pain and symbolic death, heavily settles on the audience, who actually *sees* and *hears* (albeit silence) Shylock being utterly deprived of identity and agency. The character's deprivation is echoed in the deprivation of the space: at the back of the courtroom there hangs a paper wall with a crucifix on it. At the play's closure, the wall is torn and the crucifix is askew. Kaczmarek's Venice is a place *deprived* of God. At the same time, this scene achieves a metatheatrical dimension as it makes the spectator think about the nature of stage illusion (the wall turns out to be made of paper); thus, the God of the Jews and the God of Christians are reduced to elements of stage design, theatrical properties, or occasionally elements of costume (a gold crucifix on Bassanio's breast).

The last scene illustrates the unpleasant and bitter truths of which Łukasz Drewniak reminds us in his review:

Who knows, perhaps *The Merchant of Venice* is still the most contemporary of Shakespeare's tragedies [sic!]. Its 'contemporaneity' does not consist in the fact that it contains dramaturgic devices ahead of its time and still profoundly affecting the spectator but in the acknowledgement of the fact that to date we have not managed to cope with cursed involvements, which the Man from Stratford revealed in his drama: intolerance, the role of money in love, the position of women in the world of men. These revenants still haunt us from the stage.

And haunt us they will, one is tempted to say, as Kaczmarek's production, like any artistic endeavour, does not have the power to lay those ghosts to rest. Yet, one does admit the courage of the director to use the text of a play which in the Polish context may seem problematic: not in formal terms but in how it is read today, with its comic and romantic traits radically played down. It is a text which very directly speaks of antisemitism and xenophobia, which, for communities and individuals alike, are always disconcerting and unwelcome. Kaczmarek does not, however, capitalise in a direct manner on the symbol of Jedwabne and Polish-Jewish relations. He carefully avoids engagement in the debate on the Polish responsibility of the Holocaust (like *Pokłosie* or *Ida* have done) and the (lack of) collective memory of the Jews in Poland/Polish Jews. One may find such a treatment of Shakespeare's play rather disappointing, but perhaps Jedwabne has become *so* evident a reference in any narrative regarding Jews in

Poland that there is no need to state the obvious. Rather, the director prefers to focus on the current xenophobic as well as misogynistic (political) milieu of the Poland of 2019 by making Shylock and Jessica immigrants and Jews at the same time, and Jessica and Portia characters without agency.

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