

THEATER REVIEW

'The Merchant' is memorable

By Montague Gammon III
Correspondent

The Shakespeare in the Grove production of its namesake's great and difficult comedy "The Merchant of Venice" sails splendidly into the ranks of memorable local productions on intelligent direction and excellent performances.

The merchant is a character named Antonio, whose considerable wealth derives from far flung fleets importing goods to the trading port city of Venice.

With all his capital tied up in several such ventures, he agrees to lend his good friend Bassanio funds to assist Bassanio's wooing of a rich heiress named Portia.

Antonio borrows that money from a Jewish moneylender, Shylock. Embittered by years of anti-Semitism, including

Antonio's, Shylock contrives a harsh contract. Should Antonio's debt not be paid in time, Shylock will be recompensed not with monetary interest, but with a pound of his debtor's flesh.

Bassanio wins the heiress' hand, but all of Antonio's ships are lost or delayed, and the court of Venice upholds Shylock's contract.

Antonio is ready to pay the necessarily fatal penalty when Portia, disguised as a legal scholar, rescues him by turning Shylock's strict adherence to the letter of his own contract back on him. All but the outwitted and vengeful usurer live happily ever after.

This happens amid lots of male bonding and high spirited roughhousing and ongoing romantic comedy, all woven into events that repeatedly assert

going?

What Tidewater Community College's Shakespeare in the Grove production of "The Merchant of Venice"

Where Tidewater Community College Chesapeake Campus, 1428 Cedar Road; and TCC Jeanne and George Roper Performing Arts Center, 340 Granby St., Norfolk

When Remaining performances at 8 p.m. today in Chesapeake, 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday in Norfolk

Cost No charge

More info 822-5219 or www.tcc.edu

the distinction between superficial appearance and true value.

Director Ed Jacob has brought his cast of student and

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community actors to a rare and thorough understanding of the characters Shakespeare created and refined, and given the whole show a delicate balance. Any successful production of "Merchant" must set sympathy for its villain's humanity against acknowledgement that even justly derived grievances can impel evil actions.

Jacob's performers are unfailingly clear in motivation and richly believable throughout. If they have somewhat less superficial grace than highly trained professionals, they create personalities that live without a hint of contrivance. Through their own clarity, the actors make every jot of Shakespeare's dialogue easily comprehensible and enjoyable.

Chief among them is Russ Staggs, whose exquisitely judged and meticulously natural Shylock must rank among the top performances in any memory of local theater. He has chosen every slight tremble of every finger, every glance and every quaver of his voice with the care of a fine jeweler. His graceful acting as this eloquent but vicious victim-turned-villain is truly that of a pro.

The performances of Laura Murphy as Portia, John Caughen as Antonio and Logan Bennett as Bassanio are highly praiseworthy in any company. Equally commendable is the acting in secondary roles by Kim Durfee as Portia's lady-in-waiting Nerissa, by Ed Palmer as Bassanio's friend who marries her, and by the various people who play friends of Antonio, suitors to Portia, servants and officers and citizens.

Matthew Gorris' set, for which Caroline Miller provided well executed scenic artistry, is attractively serviceable. Astin Jones' costuming is well chosen, the uncredited lighting good, and the whole show generally well put together.

Jacob has integrated modern elements of behavior and costume into the play so that they never seem adornments but rather naturally incorporated parts of a coherent creation. This "Merchant's" easy accessibility and emphasis on the script's comedy never come at the expense of sincerity or honesty, and it shows how local Shakespeare can succeed, as theater that is entertaining and enlightening, fun and thought-provoking.

Montague Gammon III,
montague.gammon@gmail.com