

## Rich human subtlety in *The Merchant of Venice*

[Graydon Royce](#), Star Tribune, October 31, 2006

We will never know for certain what was in Shakespeare's mind when he created the enigmatic and disturbing portrait of Shylock -- the tortured soul at the center of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Perhaps, though, that's not the issue in our age of irony and satire, where a film antihero such as "Borat" lampoons anti-Semitism by offering himself as an anti-Semite. Watching Ten Thousand Things' crisp and articulate production of Shakespeare's problematic *Merchant*, the thought occurs that it's less important what Shakespeare intended and more important how we react. Not terribly original, that notion, yet it is particularly apt when confronted with this blunt manifest of injustice, prejudice and fate.

Michelle Hensley, Ten Thousand Things' artistic director, made many wise choices with this production -- so clear and easy to understand, airy and transparent in the playing. Her smartest decision, though, was when she put the money lender Shylock into the hands of Steven Hendrickson, an actor eager to explore the frightening contradictions of human nature. Director and actor have conceived of a Shylock deeply wounded by centuries of contumely, turned bitter and vengeful by his extraordinary awareness of the Jew's place in medieval Venice. Hendrickson takes this cultural backdrop and turns it into a terribly personal portrait, expressing in each spiteful comment and slumped gesture his own wounds. His hurt is deep and he demands our sympathy, yet he would spit it back if it were offered. This is the delicacy of Hendrickson's portrayal, that we are left puzzling over whether he is villain or victim, for in totality he is both.

This is one of Shakespeare's most human stories, so palpable in its use of lucre to explore love, mercy and forgiveness. Hensley's direction illustrates those themes beautifully. Her cast fills each moment with just the right emotion, never spilling over. Stacia Rice mixes fragility with wily strength as Portia, the clever noblewoman who seals Shylock's fate. As her husband, Bassanio, Matt Guidry shows us the



**Ten Thousand Things Theater Company finds the rich human subtlety in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice."**

character's nobility but also his callow thoughtlessness. Again, we are left to wonder -- jerk or great guy? What a wonderful bone to chew on. Of the principals, only David Wiles appears a bit bound by the need to act. Possessed of grand rhetorical and physical prowess, his Antonio stands aloof from the others. Kiseung Rhee deserves a shout for his sweet moment as one of Portia's suitors.

"In the course of justice, none of us achieve salvation," Shakespeare writes. Indeed, this terrific staging reflects in its characters our own shortcomings and complexities. What a treat.