

Merchant of Venice not a 'problem play' for theater

BY DOMINIC P. PAPTOLA, Pioneer Press

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"The Merchant of Venice" is one of those Shakespearean plays that can be difficult for audiences with contemporary sensibilities.

Shylock, the Jewish money-lender who demands a literal pound of his nemesis' flesh when he can't meet his loan obligation, is certainly no prince. But the anti-Semitism of the Elizabethan period is manifest in the play's conclusion: Not only must Shylock forfeit his earthy belongings; he must also become a Christian.

That's hardly PC, but director Michelle Hensley and Ten Thousand Things Theater Company address this anachronistic conundrum by balancing and mixing performances and moods in a cunning way. Pointing up a line here and a scene there, the company creates the idea that, not only do none of these characters have the moral high ground; they're all a little bit nasty.

David Wiles, for instance, plays Antonio — the merchant of the play's title — with a caramelly voice and a warm, upright and innate sense of dignity. But his Antonio feels guiltless — dismissive, even — of his mistreatment of the Jew and makes clear that he won't hesitate to do so again.

Bassanio, the poor young nobleman whose plea for money brings about Antonio's indebtedness to Shylock? Matt Guidry tunes him with charm



Capsule: Ten Thousand Things doesn't have much difficulty with one of Shakespeare's "problem plays."

and gives him no guile, but also equips him with an almost-smirk of entitlement. And Stacia Rice's Portia — who can't help but cock an eyebrow or go up on tiptoes to discover things she's not supposed to know — displays not only whip-smartness but also the well-cloaked petulance of an upper-crust lady whose noblesse carries no oblige.

The show is Shylock's to carry, and Steve Hendrickson does not disappoint. Before he utters a word, his carriage conveys weariness and wariness. His face set in defiance and his eyes are always sharp and bright, never more so than when he sees an opportunity — be it for financial gain or vengeance. He clips and picks at his lines with a clean

and fine-edged precision.

As with all juicy Shakespearean roles, there are plenty of opportunities for scenery chewing, but Hendrickson resists most of these, opting for subtle vibration instead of roaring thunder. His measured and mature performance doesn't give us the definitive word on Shylock, but it's probably not meant to. It seems, rather, to fit into the intentionally ambiguous energy of the piece.

Longtime patrons of Ten Thousand Things productions probably will find this production of "The Merchant of Venice" lacks the galvanizing oomph of the company's best stagings. This is a good effort, if not a great one. Still, it's a thoughtful and thought-provoking look at a tricky "problem play" that breathes with humanity.