

The Merchant of Venice

This classic Shakespeare play was filmed or televised a dozen times last century, but a major international motion picture version of the drama has not appeared until now, with Michael Radford's current mounting starring Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Antonio. Though a major work, it's a contentious one to present these days, with its obvious anti-Jewish elements and its marginalizing of the character of the money-lender Shylock. Presented now in a handsome, well-acted version, this *Merchant of Venice* is well worth seeing and even arguing about.

For this two-hour-plus film, the text underwent significant cuts, but it still builds nicely to the pivotal scene of the case set before the Duke of Venice, wherein Shylock demands his "pound of flesh" as bond from Antonio (Jeremy Irons) who has taken on the debt of his young friend Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes). That scene, played and choreographed intelligently, delivers real impact, derived in equal parts from a real physical threat shown to Antonio, from Shylock's aggrieved, dogged cries for "justice," and from the cool arguments for mercy from Portia (Lynn Collins), masquerading as the young judge Balthasar. The passion of this scene is enough to make its final judgment a searing one.

The principal interest for many filmgoers for this *Merchant* might be to see one of New York's favorite *paisani*, Pacino, assaying the Jew. For those who know the actor mainly as a movie star in contemporary roles, the performance may be a surprise--but it should not be. Al Pacino has always been a theatrical animal; he started that way in New York and has always, at one time or another, returned to the stage when he could. It should be noted, too, that he is no stranger to Shakespeare either, having been in a starry version of *Julius Caesar* several years ago, and having played Richard III on film in the very fine documentary/drama *Looking for Richard* (1996).

So how does he do with Shylock? Part of what is convincing is that Pacino plays his age. Now 64 years old and sporting a scruffy salt-and-pepper beard, he carries the weight of scorn and age that Shylock surely felt (that scorn is felt immediately in an early scene when he is spat upon by the imperious Antonio). His lines come out as rough gravel, with a slight lisp, and the actor's slight stature--to which he adds hunched shoulders--make him a pitiable creature who then comes to appear almost heroic as he fights for his rights before the Venetian court. When, after the clever ruses of Portia/Balthasar, he is defeated, ruined, and finally forced to give up his faith, Radford and Pacino come up with a striking film image the play itself cannot match: Shylock standing alone outside his temple, cap-less and crushed.

The mostly English cast of this multi-country production handles itself well; Jeremy Irons is an appropriately stricken Antonio, while Joseph Fiennes is an appropriately calculating Bassanio. The revelation is the new Lynn Collins as Portia. First off, her face is right out of a Renaissance portrait, and she matches that countenance with wit and smarts as the clever Portia. Even when she dons black robes, wig, and chin stubble as Balthasar, the power of her performance makes you forget that she is the obvious lass-turned-lad that figures in so many Shakespearean plots (and which are so hard to make credible to modern audiences). She is one young English actress well worth watching.

Michael Radford (best known previously for *Il Postino*) also wrote the adaptation for

this film, and, sensing current sensibilities towards anti-Semitism, he tries to mitigate the Bard's take on his money-lender. This version is given a specific date--1596, when Shakespeare likely wrote the play--and opens with titles which provide a context for contemporary audiences, explaining the restrictions on Jewish life (e.g. being confined in the original "ghetto" of Venice) which forced them into the "usury" trade. There are also affecting shots within a synagogue (never seen in Shakespeare) which give some poignancy and gravitas to Jewish life.

Such detail does not deter Radford, however, from also taking advantage of the inherent beauty of Venice itself, its nearby lagoon graced with a villa (where Portia dwells). Even here, however, the tourist Venice is avoided to concentrate on its tight, watery byways, all at the service of the play's drama, while some luscious Renaissance interiors help animate the comedy of the piece. Go to this *Merchant*, not to see displays of Piazza San Marco, but to see the dour Shylock confront sweet Portia. (*The film is rated "R" for some nudity.*)

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