

Merchant of irony

Michael Billington on the Hall/Hoffman Merchant of Venice which opened last night

THE first thing to be said about Peter Hall's production of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Phoenix is that it is anything but a star-vehicle for Dustin Hoffman. Indeed Mr Hoffman offers a modest, low-key, small-scale Shylock in a production that, unfashionably, treats the play more as a romantic comedy than a near-tragedy.

Mr Hoffman's Shylock is not in the heroic tradition of Redgrave or O'Toole. In his simple gaberdine and black yarmulka, he cuts a humble figure and his forte is quiet irony. He crosses his eyes in despair when Bassanio misses his lute about the water-rats and the pirates; and, even when Antonio spots directly in his face in the course of borrowing 3000 ducats, he smiles patiently and silkily retaliates by brushing imaginary specks of dust off Antonio's velvet coat.

"Sufferance is the badge of all our trouble," is the keynote of Mr Hoffman's performance. This is a Shylock who is used to hiding his feelings under a benign social mask. But although Mr Hoffman's humorous approach pays handsome dividends — not least in his little smile of triumph to the Duke in the early in the trial scene — it also means a loss of the tragic dimension. What goes missing is what Hazlitt, writing of Kean, called "the hard, impenetrable, dark groundwork of the character of Shylock."

There is pathos when Mr Hoffman says he would not have given his ring for "a wilderness of monkeys" but there is little exultation in Antonio's downfall; insufficient sense of "lodged hate" against his old adversary and, strangely, little sense of horror at the intimation he turns Christian. Mr Hoffman receives the news of his enforced conversion stoically but when he says "I am content" you almost feel he means it. In short, this is a perfectly sound performance full of buoyancy and elasticity of spirit: what it lacks is any strong sense of the character's inveterate malignity.

This is clearly, however, part of Peter Hall's overall intention to redress the current balance which tends to treat the play as a study in racial persecution. Where Bill Alexander's recent RSC production brought to mind images of South Africa in its stress on the way racial oppression breeds violent revenge, Hall's production lo-

icates the play firmly in a Renaissance world. Chris Dyer's pillared set evokes a quinescent Italy, the Christians are seen as mildly unpleasant rather than downright barbarous, and as much stress is placed on Belmont as on Venice. Indeed the most radical feature of this production is that it makes Portia rather than Shylock the centre of the play.

These days the whole casket-episode is normally seen as something of an embarrassment: a kind of 18th century Take Your Pick. Hall, however, turns the separate bids for Portia's hand into an elaborate ritual. Morocco, Aragon and Bassanio are each preceded by masked attendants and appropriate ethnic music; the caskets are held aloft for inspection by black-veiled ladies; and Portia awaits her selection in solemn dignity with her back to us.

Instead of treating Portia as someone tainted by Venetian racism, Geraldine James also plays her, excellently, as a woman of strength and poise. There is a deep gravity about her inquiry of Bassanio, "is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?" Her assumption of male disguise becomes something more than a bawdy joke. And in the trial scene "The quality of mercy" is addressed to Shylock not as a rebuke but as a piece of sweet reason.

Something of the play's darker side inevitably goes missing, as does the feeling that it is money as much as passion that spins the plot. But the gain is that the values represented by Portia (generosity and grace) emerge as dominant.

And, uncharacteristically in West End Shakespeare, there is a cast that bits almost all the way down. Leigh Lawson's Antonio is less the usual latent homosexual than a figure of an explicable sadness. Nathaniel Parker's Bassanio is not so much a fortune-hunting opportunist as simply a callow, romantic youth. And Michael Siberry's Gratiano is not so much an effeminate loudmouth as a figure whose coarse jokes produce a faintly embarrassed silence.

In the end, I don't find it as challenging a production as the Alexander one which pinned down the timeless ugliness of racial hatred. But it is fleet, agile, and well-spoken and reminds us that there is more than a grain of truth in Granville-Barker's view of the play as a romantic fairy-tale.



The merchant's tale: Dustin Hoffman (Shylock), Leigh Lawson (Antonio) and Geraldine James (Portia) at the Phoenix
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Billington on Merchant

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Thu, Feb 27, 2020