



Review of *The Merchant Of Venice*



"Through a Venetian glass darkly"

by Avril Silk for remotegoat on 22/08/14



Venetian glass makers produced the finest mirrors; crystal clear, elegant and beautiful. Rain or Shine Theatre Company's magnificent out-door production of Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' exemplified those qualities. Five hundred years on, and the play's themes of religious prejudice, persecution and usury remain disturbingly relevant. Director James Reynard does not invite us to side with his finely-judged, measured and complex Shylock or with his mainly likeable, ebullient persecutors. As his programme notes say of the characters, 'Few of them actually come across as particularly pleasant people, although, as in real life, they all have positive and negative characteristics.' Even Claire Tucker's wonderfully wise and witty Portia addresses Shylock with a curl of contempt. So the oppressed turn on the oppressors if the opportunity arises; those in need resent their need and transfer that resentment to whoever meets their dependency. Rain or Shine's mirror shows us dark shadows stalking the sunlit Venetian canals as humanity slouches towards a distant dream of compassion and mercy. As in life, there is beauty, kindness and laughter to help defeat despair.

From the start this production evoked Venice wonderfully, from the ingenious, versatile set to the gondoliers. Jayne Meekings' wonderful, sumptuous costumes were a feast for the eyes. As all around us the Devon night grew cold and rainy, we were transported to the warmth and colour of Italy. (Not to say that I wasn't glad of the loan of an extra blanket!) Richard Watson's musical direction played a valuable part in creating atmosphere. Cullompton's Corn Barn is an excellent venue, and the good-natured, appreciative audience added to the pleasure of this event. I would say in passing that two quid for half a cup of frankly vile tea takes some swallowing, but hey.

My companion and I marvelled at the clarity of this production. The issues and plot twists were laid out for us with elegant simplicity. We heard every single word. As clear as a bell. The characters were skilfully differentiated by costume and mannerism, avoiding the pitfalls when actors play several parts. There were no weak links.

Rob Keeves' serious, generous Antonio, facing a terrible fate for love of his friend, was a stunning contrast to his ebullient, puppy-like Gobbo. I who dread Shakespearean clowns with their tedious word-play and vulgarity, warmed to this high-energy performance. Anthony Young as Gratiano and Jayne Meekings as Nerissa gave us earthy, robust humour and were well matched. Michael Skellern's Bassanio was handsome, dashing, irrepressible and irresistible.

As Jessica and Lorenzo, Pippa Meekings and Tyler Coombes did something amazing. They went beyond the text with subtle intelligence to show an ill-advised pairing, rooted in lust and lucre, masquerading as love. We watched Lorenzo fawning on Portia; we saw Jessica's discomfort in the company of his Christian friends with their snubs, and her ambivalence towards her father and evident distress at his fall from grace. Like the whole production, it was intelligent, uncomfortable and honest, however much we were beguiled by beauty and lightened by laughter.