

Playing the Angles: Finding Shylock and Gratiano

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Actor, musician, writer

Abstract Written by one of the only members of Compagnia de Colombari who worked on Coonrod's *Merchant* in all of its iterations, this chapter gives a jobbing actor's account of the 2016 production from its pre-life to its afterlife. For Sorab Wadia, the most daunting challenge was to double Shylock, the dignified Venetian moneylender in the opening scene, with Gratiano, the spitting Jew-baiter of the rest of the play. He could not reconcile the two parts, but he found, in rehearsing and performing them, how they – and the play – needed each other. Being in this play, he thinks, is like finding yourself in a George Braque painting.

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1 First Beginnings

I stand in front of my house. Next door is my bank, located in a safe corner on my home turf, the Ghetto Novo. My arms are outstretched. Two Black Angels ceremoniously invest me in a heavy, full-length linen robe. It's lined with a smoother, striped fabric. The early evening summer sun is still bright. I am looking straight ahead and see clearly everything around me. A plane tree, buzzing with cicadas is on my left. Beneath it sit six musicians, dressed in black, each wearing a black hat adorned with a single feather. Only one of them is playing, a plangent trumpet that beckons me into the space. I hear it.

I feel it deeply in my bones. It helps centre and still me, reminds me who I am, my tribe, where we have come from. But it is not yet time. My dressers are not finished.

On my right is a marble *pozzo* - a well - covered with a metal cap. I become aware of movement. Hovering on the far side of the *pozzo*. It is Bassanio. I catch sight of him out of the corner of my eye. He is waiting for my answer. Let him wait.

Further along is a *fontana*. A constant stream of water issues from its cast iron mouth. Beyond it I see people. People - many people, sitting, standing, leaning out of windows; craning their necks as they pass me by; a man in a uniform holding a keen dog on a short leash - watching. But it is not yet time. Let them wait.

The Black Angels turn the edges of my robe outward to form wide lapels. I hold these in place as they wind a wide, yellow, silken sash around my waist three turns. I tell them to pull this sash tight, to cover my whole abdomen. "Tighter", I whisper through imperceptibly parted lips. I want to feel girded, armoured, protected.

A Black Angel gently strokes me between the shoulder blades. Our signal: the sash is fixed. They leave me. I suddenly feel very alone. I feel the pressure of hundreds of eyes. Watching me. I tuck my hands behind the lapels and then bury them deeper under my armour-sash. I am ready. To do battle with the Christian hyenas.

This investiture: it feels like it has covered a frozen moment that has happened mid-conversation with the Venetian who is now at my elbow. Bassanio. Stepping forward, I break into the present. Through my soft suede shoes I feel every unevenness of the pavement beneath me. I must not, 'nor I will not', falter in front of the Christian. I steady myself and speak without so much as a glance in his direction: "Three thousand ducats; well".

2 Starting the Journey

That line - "Three thousand ducats; well" - is where Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* presses Shylock's play button. That line, as I spoke it, was where our production of Shakespeare's play, set on the stones of the Ghetto Novo in 2016, brought Shylock, after 400 years of wandering, finally home. I was that 'original' Shylock. I was the one who spoke that opening line, who brought Shylock to life for the first time in history in that place, who took his first steps on a journey that would take him - but wait. I have to back-track, to retrace my own steps, to say something of my journey with what would become this production. It had begun two years earlier.

I was working on my first project with the director, Karin Coonrod, *The Tempest*, off-Broadway in New York in the autumn of 2014. While in mid-rehearsal for that show, I asked what her next Shakespeare



Figure 1 Shylock #1 (Sorab Wadia) provokes Antonio (Stefano Scherini). © Andrea Messano

was going to be. She said she had been asked to direct *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice in 2016, a production that would likely be multilingual, Italian, English, and maybe one or more of Ladino/Yiddish/Hebrew; that it would be staged outdoors, on site, as a part of a year-long event marking the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Jewish Ghetto. I was intrigued. I had studied *Merchant* in high school in Bombay where I grew up, and being the first Shakespeare I ever read, it had always held a dear place in my heart. I impishly, but truthfully, told Karin that I had nearly memorised the play in its entirety when I was 16 years old, spoke Italian rather well, and for nearly a decade had been singing in Hebrew behind one of the world's most famous Hassidic cantors in a shul on the Upper East Side. With a wink and I smile I left that information in her lap and sassily sauntered away, not thinking anything further would come of it.

Then it did. After *The Tempest* closed, I got a call asking if I would join a group of actors in her apartment the next day to read *The Merchant of Venice* over wine, olives, cheese and home-baked bread.

“Of course! With pleasure! And what role do you want me to read?”
“Shylock”.

“Excuse me?!”

I was taken totally by surprise. At 45 I did not think myself old enough to play this role... nor famous enough, truth be told. “Oh, don’t worry. It’s only a gathering of friends. We’ll just have fun with it tomorrow!” With less than twenty hours to prepare, it was a good thing

that what I had memorised at 16 still sat comfortably within my memory. But then, I do not think Karin wanted us to prepare. I think she wanted a cold read, a visceral shooting from the hip, delivery straight from the gut.

The reading went well enough. Although my Shylock was nothing to write home about, I had a blast reading him, and more importantly I realised that at 45 I was perhaps closer to Shylock's age than I had imagined. True, he is usually portrayed by older actors, often white-haired and wizened. But why? He was, after all, the dad of a young girl ready to fall in love and marry; she could be anywhere from 16 to early 20s. And certainly, a man of 45 could be the father of a 20-year-old. Still I had no illusions of headlining Karin's *Merchant*! At the next few readings over wine and cheese, I played several other characters, chief of whom was Gratiano, and maybe a scene or two as Shylock. Even in these early days, Karin never had me read the famous trial scene again. It was always Shylock in Shakespeare's early scenes. These readings taught me more not just about the play but about Karin Coonrod. She is a rare bird in the wilderness of American show business. She nurtures talent, will use actors over and over again, and takes casting risks. She values the ensemble, a company of actors sharing a common vision - where the vision takes precedence over her directorial ego.

3 The Shylock Project: June 2015

The following summer Karin invited me to join a company of actors from around the globe to participate in a two-week workshop of Shakespeare's play as part of *The Shylock Project*, an international summer school organised by Shaul Bassi of Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He had assembled an impressive slate of scholars and practitioners from across Europe and the Americas to think about Shakespeare, Jews and Judaism in Venice, and of course Shylock himself: in history, in performance, from every angle imaginable. We gathered at the Fondazione Cini on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, directly across the lagoon from Piazza San Marco, a little gated heaven, a converted monastery and its cloisters.

Those two weeks turned out to be among the most rewarding and enriching theatrical experiences of my career. Many of us, actors and students, lived together on the island. *The Merchant of Venice* was in the air - we lived and breathed it, constantly talked it, walked it in company of our Venetian counterparts who showed us their - and Shylock's - city.

Getting down to business, we spent days around a table discussing, debating, learning (from each other and from our hands-on scholars); invaluable time digging into the text, characters and relationships.



Figure 2 Sorab Wadia rehearses with Reg E. Cathey in the Ghetto, summer 2015. © Andrea Messana

As Karin's vision deepened, I was able to get on board with gusto, because I began to understand it more profoundly. She was tasked with producing a *Merchant* in a very specific location – the Venetian Ghetto – at a very specific time – now. But a 'now' that somehow respected the multiple histories that collide, sometimes violently, in this play. It was clear that Shylock and his journey were going to be the focus of Karin's production. So it was going to be selective. But then, every production of a Shakespeare play is. His plays are vast. They contain worlds. No single production is going to map the whole territory. They are like Bruckner's symphonies or Bach's fugues. They have multiple themes and voices, so what any interpreter brings out in a production changes what the audience sees and hears. If that were not the case, we would need only one recording of Bach's *B Minor Mass*. No need to hear Maestro Celibidache's Bruckner *Fifth Symphony* and Maestro Haitink's.

Another parallel that kept coming to my mind was visual. Shakespeare's plays are like George Braque's cubist paintings. Moment by moment, the playwright makes us see things from different angles, from different points of view that fracture the narrative moment. Braque would regularly come to mind as I watched Karin quite deliberately swivel the angle on Shakespeare's play. The *Merchant* I had learned in high school? In retrospect, Karin-as-Braque showed me that any portrait of Antonio as unproblematically 'good', Portia as 'wise' or Shylock as 'evil' was cartoonishly facile. Her focus was not on three couples in a romantic comedy; it was on the cutthroat, avaricious, mercantile, xenophobic world in which they lived and on the

fierce mercilessness with which they operated while themselves demanding mercy from others. That word ‘mercantile’ became a leitmotif in rehearsals, and as we studied the play and learned more about Venice in Shakespeare’s time, it picked up more and more resonance.

Facts we collected impacted our understanding. Some were broadly known, such as Jews being restricted in business to banking and the trade in second-hand goods. Others shocked us: Venetian Christians never touched Jews. What impact would this have on Shylock’s first meeting with Antonio? Around the table, reading the opening scenes, we had established a working ‘knowledge’ of Shylock. He was wealthy; a deeply religious man who knew his Old Testament scripture better than the Christians who then mocked him for citing it; who bore himself with pride and dignity even in the face of the insults and indignities the Christians regularly hurled at him; who, a resident of Venice, was treated as an outsider. But, adding to the Braque-ish-ness of the character as Shakespeare wrote him, he was also a man who stated quite unequivocally that he ‘hated’ Antonio, the Christian merchant, because he loaned money “gratis”, thus bringing down the rate of “usance” in the city, and that one day he would like to “catch him... upon the hip” so he could “feed fat” the “ancient grudge” he bore him.

We improvised their first meeting. When Bassanio and Antonio come to me, Shylock, for a hefty loan of 3,000 ducats, and Antonio threatens me with more insults, more baiting, I respond with mollification:

Why, look you, how you storm!
I would be friends with you and have your love,
Forget the shames that you have stain’d me with,
Supply your present wants and take no doit
Of usance for my moneys,
And you’ll not hear me: this is kind I offer.

“Kind” in spite of the humiliations Antonio has publicly rained down on me:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances...
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.

Offering the loan, I extend my hand to Antonio so that we may shake on it like men, equals, partners in business. But Antonio is having none of it. Antonio lets me stand with my hand extended for what

seems like an eternity. As if that is not enough humiliation to heap upon my heart, he then goes on noisily to gather a wad of spit in his mouth, looks me straight in the eye and makes as if to hurl it at me. Then swallows. Smirks. And still says nothing.

This gesture: it is loaded with all the more ugliness by who is performing it. My fellow actor in this improv is Reg E. Cathey, an African-American who knows a thing or two about race hatred and the physical language of contempt. What he could not know was that the spit he hawked up in his mouth triggered my own memory. I was 11 years old, walking to the Fraumünster church in Zurich beside my sari-clad mother, Coomi Wadia, from a reception the city's mayor had thrown in her honour where she, an internationally-recognised choral conductor, was going to perform. An old man, muttering loudly in Swiss German, approached us. He spat on my mother's foot. It was the first time I had encountered overt racism. I stared up at my mother. "Keep walking", she said, eyes fixed straight ahead. "We don't engage with such people". That memory, those emotions: I relived them in Shylock three decades later. That moment of supreme indignity triggered my Shylock's countermove. He would fix Antonio by wrong-footing him. He would lend him the money "gratis", without interest. As "a merry sport", he would make the forfeit a joke, a pound of flesh. That is how it happened: the bad seed that would grow into something terrible and twisted later in the play was sown in that one refusal to shake hands. And Cathey's Antonio laughed. Cocksure and arrogant in the fact that he has many ships and much wealth coming his way, he laughed sardonically. In the improv, this triggered something further in me. I began to laugh. It was, after all, just "a merry sport", what I had proposed. That laughter, though, registered two men who had decided to face each other off, to test whose will was stronger.

As we will see, this improvisation survived, was fixed through rehearsal into the production a year later. But in the summer of 2015, I was still discovering not just Shakespeare's play but Shylock's city. Picking up the resonances of historical details. Like the fact that serving as a torchbearer in a late-night walk through labyrinthine alleyways along tiny canals across bridges built without guard rails was a risky and terrible job. What does it say about Lorenzo when he is abducting Jessica - he would say 'eloping' - that he makes her the torchbearer for his rambunctious gang? Thoughtless? Despicable? Then Lorenzo talks a great deal more about the "gold and jewels she is furnished with" than about the woman herself. Think Braque. And a different 'take' on Lorenzo appears: unflattering, unsavoury. Not the colourless male ingenue of the romantic comedy stereotype. But another of the manipulative, greedy people who populate the play - as we came to see it.

As we were becoming more familiar with the script, Karin wanted us to start locating Shakespeare's fictional scenes where they could

have taken place in the real city. So, we left our little haven on San Giorgio and headed to the old market, the Rialto bridge, and most daunting in terms of 'site specificity', the Ghetto Nuovo. Shakespeare never expressly mentions the Ghetto but it would have been the place where Shylock and Tubal lived. They would have banked at the Banco Rosso, which still sits at its original location, next to a building that is referred to locally as 'Shylock's House'. (Well, if Verona's tourist board can erect a sign 'Casa di Giulietta' below a certain balcony, surely Venice is entitled to its own 'Casa di...'). Working in situ in these places had a vibe. It made these people real. When we talked of gondolas, we watched them pass. When we spoke of ships, we saw them sailing across the lagoon. We smelled the salt air. We shoved through crowds on the Rialto. We walked the same stone pavements that were in place in 1590.

Something else emerged in that fortnight of improvisations and workshops. Something that would turn out to be crucial, indeed, would emerge as the performance signature of our production. Because time was limited, because Karin understood how challenging a task it is for an actor to work on a role for the first time, especially one as iconic as Shylock, and because she wanted to see - before she finally cast the part - Shylock in many bodies, she distributed Shylock's scenes among some of us: a sixty-year-old man; a woman in her early thirties; and me. A stop-gap, we thought, until Karin found her dream casting. But across the fortnight, it dawned on us that our director was not stopping a gap. She was opening a highway into the heart of the play. Taking us to Shylock-after-Braque. As things turned out, her production in the Ghetto in 2016 would feature *five* Shylocks. More on this later.

Our work did not stop when our company manager called time on the day's rehearsals. We socialised until late into the night, and the shenanigans we got up to I realise now were more than shenanigans. We were living moments of the lives of the characters we were creating. On one particularly magical evening, one of our Venetian actors, trained in *commedia* and himself a maker of masks, led us on a walk through the city. We wore masks he'd made - Lancilloto the *Zanni's* mask, Old Gobbo, the *Vecchi's* - and performed improvised scenes in the middle of one campo, to the delight of some tourists while other passers-by rolled their eyes. Another evening we went out for prosecco and *cicchetti* (think: Venetian tapas) and ended up singing songs at sunset along the canal outside the bar. The Venetians sang us their songs in their dialect, and not knowing any, I busted out with a Neapolitan classic, *Fenesta che lucive*. It was the best I had to offer. We did not know it at the time, but this little musical caper would have value in 2016 when Karin, independently, came up with the idea of introducing a song in the scene leading up to Jessica's fleeing her father's house.

On another afternoon, looking for a private corner on San Giorgio where I could memorise my lines, I chanced upon the abandoned Teatro Verde. I did not know it was forbidden to be there, there being no 'Accesso Vietato' sign barring the amphitheatre's vomitorium. I walked the length and breadth of the stage, repeating my lines, looking out at the empty seats on one side of me; trees and lagoon on the other; only seagulls for company. This became my hide-away. It was a 45-second walk from my accommodation, and I escaped to it as often as I could. Also unbeknownst to me at the time, speaking my lines in an open-air theatre like this was going to serve me exceedingly well in 2016. All I was thinking was how magical and romantic it was to be memorising Shakespeare in this secret corner of Venice, seemingly a million miles away from the thousands of tourists jostling in San Marco, just two minutes' vaporetto ride across the *bacino*.

On the last night of the summer school, we presented the scenes we had been working on. There was a party on San Giorgio. After the last glass of prosecco was drained and the last hugs hugged, we all went our separate ways, hearts and heads full. For those of us who would be returning in 2016, we would have a year for all this knowledge and all these emotions to reverberate and ferment in us. Priceless stuff. Priceless gifts: knowledge and time.

4 The Merchant in the Ghetto: 2016

Reassembling the following summer felt like a reunion. New actors in the company - playing Portia, Jessica, Antonio, Tubal, Lorenzo, Aragon, Morocco - were quickly absorbed into our 'Merchant family'. Time again was of the essence. We had sixteen actors to play Shakespeare's 22+ parts (so there would be plenty of doubling, not least by the five actors who would be playing a sequence of Shylocks) and three weeks to get our production on its feet in front of audiences. There was also our 'theatre' to consider: we would be playing outdoors, our audience sitting in steep tiered seating, in the middle of a campo that was a major point of interest for tourists as well as home to the daily lives of many Venetians; a campo where our playing space would be marked out by police barricades to allow the Ghetto's daily human traffic to flow as normal, unintentionally giving free ring-side viewing to any who paused to watch from the barriers or any who dined at the outdoor tables of Ristorante Upupa; a campo that baked under the punishing sun of July and that dined with the noise of cicadas as soon as that sun dipped behind the Ghetto's five-storey houses; a campo where the city would allow us to rehearse only in the final week.

For the first fortnight, then, we worked in a medium-sized, indoor proscenium theatre - but that meant that when we got on site we had to expand into the space, re-block our moves. More problematically,



Figure 3 Gratiano (Sorab Wadia) spits abuse at Shylock #5 (Ned Eisenberg). © Andrea Messana

moving outdoors to an acoustic nightmare of a space filled with ambient noise, I had to raise my volume and project in a way I did not have to in the rehearsal theatre. I battled to keep the nuances and intimacy I had created for Shylock #1 while having to be much louder. I felt a little straitjacketed in the direction I had to face when speaking: either directly out to the tiered seating where the audience sat or turned towards one of the mics that our sound designer had secreted in various locations like the branches of the plane tree or behind the *pozzo*. I had to be hyper-aware of these elements at all times.

Such technical stuff aside, our biggest, and most absorbing challenge, was the one that challenges every actor of Shakespeare: to bring these characters to life. Or in my case, to bring *two* characters to life, for I was doubling: Gratiano and Shylock. Any way you look at it: a tricky double.

I began the play as Gratiano, but not yet in character, for the company's first entrance was devised *commedia*-style, as if we were a crowd of revellers or troupe of players, crossing the campo into the playing space, raucously singing and dancing behind our sextet of instruments, violins, cello, trumpet and percussion. I detest being myself on stage so I hated this bit and always hung back, having to be dragged (by Jessica) or teased (by Portia) into the festivities. Still, whatever my resistance, what I found satisfying about the party mood of this carnivalesque opening, our singing in Venetian dialect a song about the madness – and ubiquity – of love, that 'everyone is doing it', was how, even as the music faded, it set the tone that Antonio pulled away from in the opening line of the play, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad".

My Gratiano, entering fifty lines later, behind Solanio's and Salarino's fruitless reasoning on what was making the businessman 'sad', took the melancholic bull by the horns: "You look not well, Signor Antonio".

Finding the physical and emotional life of Gratiano had been rather easy for me, given the number of things in him I could personally identify with. Like talking too much, and at the wrong time, poking my nose into people's affairs or giving unasked-for advice. Gratiano is bold and brash and offensive and calls Antonio out in a way no one else of the group does, not just "You look not well" but "You have too much respect upon the world". He is presumptuous, daring to offer the (older, richer, more established) gentleman a warning, "They lose it" - the world - "that do buy it with much care". Gratiano is opinionated - though it is clear he is not the wisest of the bunch. I saw him as a young 'punk' and gave him a buoyant energy and walk, and plenty of talking with his arms and hands, not only because I felt it suited his personality and the words he spoke, but also because it would provide a stark contrast to the Shylock I would be bringing on stage not long after.

Then there was Gratiano's 'POW!' I'm not sure when or how I found the two-handed gesture that became his 'thing': thumb, index and little fingers outstretched, middle and ring fingers bent, then both hands flicked towards each other and out again, accompanied by a yelp, 'POW!' I do remember when I first used it. Antonio has just sententiously compared the world to a stage "where every man must play a part" and concluded morosely that his must be "a sad one", when Gratiano volunteers for next casting: "Let me play the fool". Then he goes off on a tangent, feeling mighty smart and full of himself, ending "Fare ye well awhile: I'll end my exhortation after dinner". As I made to exit, I felt that 'POW!' coming on, Gratiano's version of 'Ciao! I'm outta here!' That 'punk' gesture was supported by the costume Stefano Nicolao had designed for Gratiano, a grey jacket and buff-coloured trousers accented with suede and zippers. Loads of zippers. Zippers that shout 'punk!' Later, it gave Lorenzo and his gang of 'lads' something to quote, something to play around with while they made their laddish plans to abduct Jessica. I did not use 'POW!' a lot, maybe two or three times, but the gesture helped me hook into Gratiano, both his physicality and his heart, to encapsulate in a single move and word the hubris, joy, abandon and 'fuck you' attitude that characterised my Gratiano. As the American acting guru Sanford Meisner is often quoted as saying, 'An ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words'. In 'POW!' I discovered Gratiano's essential behaviour.

Later, I would have to navigate Gratiano's outspoken racism that emerges more and more dangerously as the play goes on. But for now, exiting our opening scene as Gratiano, I was already shedding the part, beginning to morph into someone very different. Karin had

decided that all of us actors would be always visible to the audience, always 'on', our costume changes fully shown; and she had decided, on the back of the discoveries we had made workshoping the *Merchant* in 2015, that each of Shylock's five scenes in Shakespeare's play would be played by a different actor. So now, while Scene 2 took the play to Portia, to Belmont, in the light of the 'crepuscular hour' - a favourite Karin-ism - with the trees in the campo lit in blue, I watched from the periphery. I found a quiet corner under the arches of the Banco Rosso where I could come down from the brash high of the 'POW!' and start re-centring myself to become Shylock #1.

Shylock's first utterance is clearly mid-conversation. Bassanio has come to ask for a loan, presumably having first gone round all the Christian brokers and now clutching desperately at straws. Shylock is considering. To place us in this moment, Bassanio and I would meet very close to the Banco Rosso while the Belmont scene was in progress, and quietly improvise the conversation we might have been having. As Scene 2 ended, we would split, I would walk to the spot where the Black Angels stripped me out of Gratiano's jacket and invested me in Shylock's robe and sash, and then, as if this investiture covered a suspended time contemplating Bassanio's necessity, "3000 ducats, well" broke the silence, set the scene in motion. Later I would have another moment like this, when Shylock first sees Antonio. Instead of answering Bassanio's cue, "This is Signor Antonio", Shylock goes into a reverie, "How like a fawning publican he looks!" Bassanio brought me back to reality: "Shylock, do you hear?" It was this second 'out of time' experience that Shakespeare wrote for Shylock that gave me, retrospectively, the clue for how to use the investiture.

The investiture centred and settled Shylock #1. It drained from my body Gratiano's wild, punky, insolent, rude, anarchical energy. It forced me to be still - and then stiller. Taking on Shylock's robes, tied tight in Shylock's yellow sash, I became contained, controlled, dignified, strong, upright, proud. My Shylock was urbane, a citizen of Venice; no 'stranger', no 'alien', even if swathed in that yellow sash. Significant clues to my personality and character emerge in my first interaction with the needy Christians. I speak in short sentences: "for three months - well". I repeat what Bassanio is telling me: "Antonio shall become bound - well". I am digesting the information. Strategising carefully. Unrushed. No haste. Enjoying this moment of power I have, the one in whom Bassanio's fate rests. I show that I am plugged in to all that is going on in Venice: "I understand moreover, upon the Rialto...". When provoked by an invitation to dine with the Christians, I quote scripture: "Yes, to smell pork; to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into". I begin my exchange with Bassanio speaking prose, but then when Antonio enters and I regard him as a "fawning publican" who "lends out money gratis" and discover my desire to "catch him once upon

the hip” so to “feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him”, I am speaking blank verse, as though the heightening of my emotion is raising the temperature of my utterance, tightening the tension in my thought. Shylock makes such moves between prose and blank verse throughout the play, and the switch is palpable, like a gear change in a car.

I was able to maintain control, to keep still, recalling my past experience with Antonio (“many a time and oft | In the Rialto you have rated me | About my moneys and my usances”) until I remembered how Antonio spat upon me (“You that did void your rheum upon my beard” and kicked me “as you spurn a stranger cur | Over your threshold”). This was the first time my Shylock let his vitriol show, and it was the first time I made any strong gesture, a kick with my right foot and an outward jab with my right hand. But having done that, I, Shylock #1, had gone too far, revealed too much. So, having provoked Antonio to a reaction that showed his true ugly colours (“I am as like [...] | To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too”), Bassanio looking on in wild dismay, seeing his loan evaporating, I pulled myself back to suave civility (or was it bare-faced sarcasm wrapped in “kindness?”), wrong-footing the Christian yet again: “Why, look you, how you storm! | I would be friends [...] have your love. | Forget the shames [...] | Supply your present wants”. I slipped in the tantalising detail: “and take no doit | Of usance for my moneys”. Bassanio leaped at the offer: “This were kindness”. And out of “This kindness” that I would “show” came the “merry” rider, the forfeit, a “pound [...] of flesh”. Bassanio recoiled. Antonio waved him away: “Why, fear not man! I will not forfeit”. While they cavilled, I commented high-mindedly on “these Christians [...] | Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect | The thoughts of others”. I appeared about to walk away from my offer, telling Bassanio: “To buy his favour, I extend this friendship. | If he will take it, so; if not, adieu”. When we workshopped the play in 2015, I had accompanied these lines with a gesture, a shrug as I extended my hands, palms open, facing each other. The gesture was very ‘me’. It did nothing to my internal state that was different from my regular Sorab-ness. Then in 2016 along came Ned Eisenberg, playing Shylock #5. I watched him in rehearsal bring to Shylock a gesture I have never used in life or on stage. On the line Shylock intends as his exit from the court (“Why, then the devil give him good of it! | I’ll stay no longer question”), Ned’s defeated Jew made a gesture of washing his hands, right hand passing over left, left over right, then both palms held up facing the smart aleck law clerk as if to say, “I am done with all this mess, this sordid affair. It’s over. I have nothing left hidden in these hands. I’m outta here”.

This gesture of Ned’s fascinated me and then it wormed its way into my scene when I said, “If not, adieu”. It was the perfect gesture for the moment. My gestural quotation happened almost involuntarily. In one rehearsal, not planning it, I found myself copying Ned, washing my hands of the Christians and showing them my empty hands:

“adieu”. Unconscious it might have been, but the effects it had on me were profound. The gesture did many things. It completely took me out of myself and into a different Shylock space. It made me feel detached, uninvested (in a good way), and powerful. The subtext for me was, “You want something from me. These are my terms. For once I feel equal to you. These tainted Jewish hands that you won’t shake now have the upper hand. This is my game that I’m proposing. If you want to play it, fine, if not, I have no problem taking these tainted hands and walking right out of here”. The gesture gave me a sense of power, grounded-ness, and superiority that I had not experienced before. Antonio and Bassanio realised they had to accept my terms. Antonio answered instantly, “Yes, Shylock, I will seal unto this bond”. Ah, sweet victory! The first time I did it, I thought the gesture was cute: “Look, I just inadvertently mimicked Ned!” But the more I did it, the deeper it got and the more profound the effect on me and my Shylock.

Besides creating this exciting new internal shift in my Shylock the gesture played another more obvious role. It served very subtly to start connecting my Shylock with Ned’s across the arc of the play. Karin never asked us to make our five Shylocks similar. It was enough for her that we were dressed similarly. She did not want us all doing anything as obvious as limping on the right foot or lipping. She would have called that ‘cheesy’ and nixed it straight away. But she did want us to feel like one organism. And little things like this ‘hand washing’ served to make that happen.

For any actor, what I have just been recounting, the first moments of playing any role, are absolutely crucial. They set up the physicality of the character, the energy, the relationships he has with the other characters, his emotional life. Moreover, a play is a series of moments that lead from one to the other. Moment A must lead to B, which then causes C to happen and so on, and the role will grow organically from your very first words and actions, moment to moment, an inevitable concatenation of causes and effects. So, it is imperative you start off the right way, in the right zone. It is how you get off the starting blocks that determines how you run the race.

Only this was not a solo race, it was a relay. When I exited 1.3, I handed ‘Shylock’ like a baton to the next actor, who would play Shylock #2, who passed the part on to Shylock #3 then #4 then #5. Meanwhile, over the next several scenes I morphed back into the loud-mouthed Gratiano to play Bassanio’s sidekick, persuading him to take me with him to Belmont in pursuit of Portia – what an addition I would be to his wooing party! – then Lorenzo’s sidekick aiding and abetting his elopement with Jessica. Seeing my Gratiano as the lynchpin in both these plots to ‘get the girl’ brought the supposedly ‘romantic’ Belmont plot into ironic alignment with the dodgy ‘steal a wife’ intrigue. It is ironic, too, that Shakespeare in 2.6 puts in Gratiano’s cynical mouth a critique of Lorenzo’s casual habits as a lover. Lorenzo



Figure 4 Gratiano (Sorab Wadia) humiliates Shylock (Ned Eisenberg). © Andrea Messana

has assigned his cronies parts to play in the abduction; pointed out 'the penthouse' under which he's told them 'to make stand'; then he's LATE to his own assignation! Gratiano muses: "it is marvel he outwells his hour | For lovers ever run before the clock". Salarino gives a "'twas ever thus" response: "O ten times faster Venus' pigeons fly | To seal love's bonds new made than they are wont | To keep obliged faith unforfeited". Gratiano moralises: "That ever holds. Who riseth from a feast | With that keen appetite that he sits down? | [...] All things that are | Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd". That's brutal. Lorenzo has not even snatched Jessica from her dad yet - and already this romance looks like it is headed for the rocks.

Metaphorically, Salarino and Gratiano are tapping their feet, covering Lorenzo's non-appearance, filling in the time with an exchange that gets poetically more and more dense. Karin had a brilliant idea which harked back to that prosecco-and-cicchetti night of call and response singing a year earlier: to extend and fill out this moment even further by casting it in an operatic mode. It just so happened that both I and Salarino are professional singers as well as actors. As an homage to Shakespeare's song-craft and to being in Venice, one of the Meccas of Italian opera, Frank London composed the Gratiano/Salarino exchange as a nod to the 'Duelling Tenors' tradition - Pavarotti vs Domingo; or more recently Brownlee vs Spyres. Our singing became a kind of competition, a sparring, that mimicked the cocky male competition of the play's wooing games. Remarkably, Karin created a space that did not belong to any of the characters, that lifted this moment out time, made it a meta-moment of respite, a musical interlude in the middle of an in-

terval-less production. In the soaring melody, in the harmonies, and in the final high note that we both held to the absolute limits of breath, this meta-moment was just profoundly beautiful. The audience soared with us. And then the next thing happened. The ugly elopement. Staged as a nightmare sequence. People in ugly, grimacing masks. Gangs running. Lurid torches casting grotesque shadows. We had been flying. Now we crashed. Onto the dirty pavement of the Ghetto.

For me doubling Shylock #1 with Gratiano was like – to use that analogy from earlier – being caught in a Braque painting. It made me feel the experience of the play from radically different angles. There is a challenge in playing the most iconic Jew in Shakespeare’s canon opposite the most vicious antisemite he ever wrote. In rehearsals I had found the switch problematic, given Gratiano’s despicable racism that reveals itself more and more viciously as the play goes on, culminating in the so-called ‘trial scene’ of 4.1. Screaming vile antisemitic slurs and insults, at full voice – “DOG JEW” – in the middle of the Ghetto Novo was daunting and painful. It made me deeply uncomfortable. Then I realised that Gratiano NEEDED to be in this play in order for Shylock’s story to be fully told. Shylock was born into a society filled with Gratanos. Truth be told, playing Gratiano fed my Shylock. Being part of the pack of Christian hyenas circling Shylock in the trial only served to give me a deeper understanding and experience of the insults when I went on as Shylock #1 the next night. “You call me dog and spit upon my Jewish gaberdine” resonated differently after I had experienced the rabid thrill of the vicious pack. My Shylock knew well just how deep, vile, vindictive and profound the hatred being hurled at him ran.

Karin made the audience experience this same collision of emotions too, with another of her brilliant directorial insights. Right at the centre of the play, Shakespeare’s 2.8, Salanio and Salarino narrate what went down when Shylock discovered Jessica’s elopement, when the “dog Jew” ran through the streets crying “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! | Fled with a Christian!” Karin staged this as a stunning *coup de théâtre* by distributing these lines among the whole company, who ran pell-mell and haphazard across the playing space, shouting out the words, a cacophony of voices in several languages, mocking, sardonically laughing, spitting, displaying insulting gestures that doubled the verbal insults. At the same time, with all this wild madness swirling around us, our five Shylocks came together for the only time in our production. We stood far apart, motionless as the Black Angels dressed us, tied us into our sashes, then moved towards each other slowly, through the storm. We found each other and made a tight circle, ‘davening’, making the rocking motion that characterises many Jews as they pray, holding each other up, helping the other to cling onto our dignity, our God, our religion, our tribe. That gesture of davening was something I had introduced during re-



Figure 5 Jessica (Michelle Uranowitz) elopes amongst a gang of carnival revellers. © Andrea Messana

hearsals, something that came out of my years of singing in Orthodox shuls. But it was also prompted by something Karin wanted from Jenni, Shylock #3, the Shylock who has discovered his daughter has been stolen, a keening that started off slowly, building in intensity until it exploded into a wail, a wail that erupted in Shylock's accusation of the Christian thieves, "You knew!" Karin directed us other four Shylocks to underscore Shylock #3, to start a low, growly moan that crescendoed as we davened. This growl coming out of the pits of our stomachs was probably inaudible to the audience over the yelling of the mob, but no matter. It was for no one else but the five of us to hear and *feel*. This moment of coming together was profound and precious to me. It was the only time we synchronised our bodies and voices, and the only time in the production that we ever touched - and we were directed now to touch as many of the other Shylocks as we possibly could, arms outstretched and wrapped around each other.

The ugly street noise rose to a pitch, the fever built. When the pressure was unbearable, Shylock #3 broke out of the tight circle letting forth an anguished animal howl. The rest of us froze. Caught like Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* in a sculpted tableau, still touching. And we would remain so all through Shylock #3's scene, through the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech. Looking at the other Shylocks was like seeing into a 'mirror with a view': I was seeing myself, but also seeing much more than that self.

As an actor invested - literally and figuratively - in the role of Shylock, I found this production both wonderful and frustrating because while I loved the concept of distributing the role, I hated the

fact that I could never take on the full journey of this man. I tried to live that journey through the other four Shylocks: hawkishly watching #2 and #4 when the first warned his daughter to stay indoors away from the “Christian fools with varnished faces” (Shakespeare’s 2.5) and when the latter spurned Antonio in the street, insisting that he’d “have [his] bond”, the merchant having forfeited. I lived #3 vicariously, being onstage as one of the cluster of Shylocks as #3 turned on Solanio and Salerino (“You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter’s flight”), then threatened the “bankrupt”, the “prodigal” Antonio whose ships had all gone down (“Let him look to his bond”). It was this Shylock too who asked rhetorically why Antonio had “disgrac’d” him, “hind’red” him, “laugh’d” and “mock’d” him, “scorned” his “nation”. And answered, “I am a Jew”. That speech goes on to argue for likeness between Christians and Jews, not difference: both are “fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons”. And the speech drives on to a final likeness: the mutual instinct to answer wrong with revenge. Later, I would watch as Shylock #4 chillingly wished that “my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hears’d at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin”.

What I could not do was live through the trial. Because while Shylock #5 was being tried I was back playing Gratiano, haranguing the Jew when Shylock’s case looked watertight (“no metal can | [...] bear half the keenness | Of thy sharp envy. Canst no prayers pierce thee?”) then baiting him, like some rabid laughing dog, when the lawyer’s clerk – Portia cross-dressed – turned the tables on him (“Now, infidel, I have you on the hip!”; “Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!”).

Now again, playing the vicious antisemite, I had the sensation of being caught in a Braque painting, experiencing the play from yet another angle – a wonderful gift for an actor. The price I paid for this gift was never finishing Shylock’s journey. That said, the one grace Karin gave us Shylocks was, at the end, as a coda, to bring all five Shylocks back. After whatever resolutions, harmonies – or not – were found in Belmont, ‘we’ were given the last words in the production, taken from earlier in the play. We reprised Shylock’s speech from the beginning of the trial, each of us taking separate lines:

You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have
 A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
 Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that.
 But say it is my humour, is it answer’d?
 [...] What, are you answered yet?
 [...] Are you answered?

One after the other, we faced the audience to ask, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”, “Are you answered?”. Then, there was a hair-raising or gut wrenching blast

from a shofar and the word 'Mercy' in three languages was projected, in all its irony, onto the dark and silent façades of the Ghetto.

5 Retrospectives

As it happened, I was the final Shylock to ask the question. Coincidentally, then, as I had spoken Shylock's first words in the play, so I spoke his last. More coincidence: as I had been there at the beginning - those readings over wine and cheese in New York 2014 - so I went on to play the part in all further iterations of the production that took it to a prison in Padua, a castle courtyard in Bassano del Grappa, then in 2017 and 2018, on to the campuses of Yale, Dartmouth and Montclair Universities in the USA. I was the only one of Karin's ensemble to travel the whole journey, a journey I hope will continue.

Looking back, I am struck by Karin's vision: her insistence that we would not tie this play up with a pretty romantic bow at the end, that we would explore the ruthless mercantile aspect of *The Merchant*. That we presented to the audience, from the beginning, a Shylock who was urbane, a substantial and formidable Venetian, made the betrayal of him all the more heinous. That I, as Gratiano, was required to shout "dog Jew" so that it reverberated off the façade of the holocaust memorial that faced us across the Campo de Ghetto Novo, made the questions that still remain to be answered by all of us who encounter Shakespeare's play all the starker.

I am struck, too, by how much we actors learned from each other, how well we played together as an ensemble, and the grace and generosity with which all five Shylocks treated each other, not least in ways we borrowed from each other details of performance that 'made' our Shylocks. I took the handwashing from Shylock #5. He took the gesture of tucking Shylock's hands behind his lapels then burying them deeper into his armour-sash from me. Shylock #3 watched the stillness and control of the other four Shylocks and commented: "You four didn't have any extraneous movement". She then used that sense of groundedness in the scene after Jessica has fled, starting from a still place that allowed her, still emotional and passionate, to keep control, to avoid the histrionic. The sort of borrowing, quoting and passing on that I am talking about continued, even when the production was restaged in the US. One of my most favourite moments in rehearsal in 2017 happened when Steve Skybell, that production's Shylock #5, saw me do the hand-washing gesture, and thought, "I like Sorab's gesture. It's perfect for a moment in the trial scene". He came up to me one day and said, "Did you see? I put your gesture into the trial!". I told him, "No, that gesture was Ned's. He used it in the trial at exactly that same moment. You didn't steal anything from me. You just took it back to its original home!" It is almost as if this Shylock gesture has

a life of its own, and we were only borrowing it while we inhabited his “Jewish gaberdine”.

Taking a role off the page and onto the stage is what an actor’s job is, and we have tools we use to do so, but much of what we do is ephemeral and cannot be explained. Trying to write an account of the process I am aware that this account is deeply personal, an actor’s view from *inside* the work. What I am also aware of is the sheer magnitude of what we did. This production was a memorial to an event in history: the establishing of the first Jewish ghetto. It took a particular look at one of the most famous Jews in history. It applied a lens to that looking: showing us that what we humans do we still need to think about, to explain, to understand, to ANSWER. I may be the last Shylock ever to speak in the Ghetto Novo. I am grateful and joyful for the responsibility and honour that speaking conferred on me. A memory I cherish. Even as I know some time, somewhere else, Shylock must speak out. Again.