

*The Merchant of Venice* at NYU

Hosts: Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimo and the Bogliasco Foundation

Speaker: Karin Coonrod (Director, *The Merchant in Venice*)

Posted 7 October 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XuyNSwaZkE>

Unofficial Transcript (edited)

Part 2 of 2<sup>1</sup>

COONROD:

So in this time, and in this place, we were going for great, great resonances. There were two times the Shylocks all came together: the second time, I'm not going to tell you about. (That was at the end of the play, and we are going to do this play again, in Montclair, next September, in 2017, so maybe you just have to come and see that.) But I'm going to show now some images that are taken by Andrea Messana, and also some film clips that are taken by Elizabeth Coffman and Ted Hardin, who were there for five weeks capturing everything that we did.

Let's see now: here we go. [28'53"] This is our set, and this is the German Synagogue, and the Italian one is here, and we set our grandstand bleachers here, that seated 250 people, facing—just confronting this architecture. And we had to fight: this little window was a little bit of a house called the “Shylock House”—we found that out afterwards—but in fact, it was the window that I had my eye set on, and I said: “We need to have Jessica appear at that window, and it must happen.” We found out that the man who owned that lived in Parma anyway, and we called him “Parma Man,” and we finally got the window. It took a lot of effort of some of our beautiful team to make that happen, to see that that was essential to the play, because we were not building anything: the actors would tread on the stones with their feet. So that was our set, and you see that is the Campo Nuovo, which is an island within an island, and here, and here, all around—it was extraordinary to report to work.

This [30'28"]: I know that there's been interest in this, so I thought I would show one image of the mock trial that happened. This is from an iPhone: the lawyers, then Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in the middle, with the jury of five judges, James Shapiro on the far right, over there in the bright blue (Stephen Greenblatt was there, too, but we only see James). This was in the Scola San Rocco, covered with Tintoretto's: because of the tremendous sponsorships that we had to do this piece, that was one of the wonderful benefits our beautiful Board and our team of people made happen: Shaul and everybody made it happen. It's great.

These are—I'm going to go through these fast:

- This is in 2015 [31'21"], and you might recognize Reg E. Cathey. He was slated to be our Antonio, and we were working like crazy in 2015 in a little workshop for two weeks, and then his shooting schedule changed

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<sup>1</sup> Time cues linked to slide commentary.

[31'37"], and he couldn't be with us, but we had a wonderful actor called Stefano Scherini, who is an Italian.

- Here's us in 2015 [31'44"]. We also did some rehearsals that the BBC caught, and Reg E. and Sorab and Michele [31'54"], and many of them stayed with us. We once went to the Palazzo Ducale, and actually, Mika took this picture of the rehearsal, right there in the Jewish exhibit in the Palazzo Ducale.
- This is the Ghetto as we saw it in November [32'09"], and of course one big difference: when you're *in situ* and you're on location, you know the trees are going to grow a little, and we were always laughing: well, could we just go out there in the midnight and cut branches? (I say that with impunity now, but no, you couldn't really say that . . . ) But anyway, they did get greener: so we had to think about all that.
- This is the first rehearsal with Frank [32'36"], directing the opening song, and everybody doing the table work [32'43"], and Walter and Davina from Yale [32'46"], and me in the middle making cuts. This is Gigi [32'50"], who's working with Adriano, who played Shylock #2, and Peter Ksander and I [32'54"], looking at a computer rendering of the set. Working *in situ* [33'00"], the days were very hot, so: the memories of the days, and how people sometimes were—there was no air-conditioning for a long time! Anyway, there were a lot of challenges, but the joy of the thing . . .
- Working with Andrea [33'20"]: he was Shylock #4 . . .
- And Jessica and Lorenzo . . . [33'25"]
- Jessica, Stefano (our costume designer), and me, looking at this first fitting of Jessica's outfit . . . [33'28"]
- Then the whole business of how the set gets to the island! [33'39"] I mean, the thing that we didn't think about, and that nobody much thinks about unless you live and have experience in Venice, is that when you're doing something *in situ*, you don't—a truck doesn't pull up to the theater and then back in, and techies come out do all their stuff! No. What happens is: the truck goes to the boat, the boat goes to the island, then the men take the stuff [34'10"] from the boat [34'13"] and wheel it along to the place. (By the way, that's Mark Gianni, before, who is our godfather and *angelo*—enormous *archangelo*, really.)
- And this was taken, I think, by Stefano, of Peter behind me, because we were just so thrilled by the grandstand that was built, and the wall of lights, and we were barricaded—I mean, it was just thrilling; it was really living.
- This is the opening night [34'42"]—taken from someone's iPhone, but I wanted to show this, because it gave you a sense of the audience and what they saw.

- This [34'53"]: we worked under tremendous pressure: three weeks—as anyone in the theater knows, is very challenging. But we did it, and it was remarkably . . . a lot of love was poured into it, a lot of human expense. But it was a joy and it was also a miracle . . . here we're talking about the night before the final dress, when it was—the final dress was sold out, so, the pressure was on.
- The musicians [35'26"]: a beautiful team who sat right in the middle of the space, and then sometimes were involved in the action . . .
- Now this is [33'35"]: these are clips from the opening night, so this is a little piece of film. All right, you're going to see arrival of the famous guests . . . [*Arrival of guests, and brief clips from the play, shown.*]

So just moving on [39'15"], because there's going to be a few pictures and a couple of clips . . .

- This is the opening: a couple of pictures of Francesca Sarah Toich [39'22"], who played Lancelotto . . .
- And now I have something [39'28"]—a little clip of this opening, in Veneziano, here . . . yes, here it goes. [*Clip plays, to 41'32".*]
- This is the first scene [41'33"]—the first Shylock, with Antonio. I really like this shot because it really captures the disgust of Antonio that he will not give the money fast: it just captures that little moment.
- This is a moment of Aragon [41'55"], serenading Portia—it was a little flamenco song; we added—like the earlier piece, with the two dueling tenors, little pieces of music, so we set some of the text to music.
- Here's Lancelotto and Jessica [42'16"], and Jessica and Shylock #2 [42'20"]—Adriano, from Croatia, Sorab is from India, Adriano from Italy and Croatia, really.
- And then the dueling tenors . . . [42'30"]
- This is also a little clip [42'33"], and this is where Lorenzo and Jessica—Jessica comes the window, so . . . and Lorenzo is late—
- And that's the sound [44'34"]—Frank's trumpet that was played on the roof and called the five Shylocks together.
- And this is—these are shots of that [44'50"]: here's a moment of this, that we see the howl, the sounds: I'll stop—here you go. [*Clip plays: 45'03" to 46'37".*]
- So—and the other, Salarino, then comes around [46'39"], and this is just another shot . . . [46'42"]
- This is Andrea Brugnara playing Shylock #4 [46'45"], with Ned playing Tubal at this moment . . .

- And then Portia and Bassanio. [46'53"] After all that happens, then the lead casket is chosen . . . and the looks between the two of them—and I love this shot, too [47'03"], of the two of them, because the eyes—their eyes were always so penetrating, and so it's really exciting—of course, the task was to make it operatic and huge, and that was: when we went to the Ghetto, that was a remarkable challenge, but we wanted, we had done all the work inside [47'23"], and you can see so much of that, still—it would be great to keep doing it.
- Here you can see the letter [47'27"]: we decided that Portia would read it, instead of having him read it, and they all listen, and so forth—the letter that Antonio sends.
- And this is Portia and Nerissa running to the traject [47'38"], to go to Padova, and then to go to Venezia as the lawyers, but you see the androgyny of the costumes, so that there were diaphanous, kind of dresses over trousers, and the fluidity of it, so a man could play a woman, a woman a man, women could play women playing men, and so forth. It was a wonderful game, a wonderful game . . .
- So here's a little piece of yellow string [48'14"] that Jessica still had from childhood, that she kept with her, and was playing cat's cradle with Lancillotto . . .
- . . . and here's Ned Eisenberg, who's with us , as Shylock #5 [48'26"], and I was so excited, because Ned and I had worked before, happily, in *King John*, and he played the title role, and then he played Shylock #5. I wanted to give him this scene, which was so rich, and extraordinary, and fierce.
- And so here we have Graziano attacking Portia [48'49"], as the lawyer—
- Stefano and Ned [48'53"], in that moment in the middle—
- Then, when he's brought back, after the second "tarry" [49'00"]: when he's brought back and he knows that he's done in, actually.
- We also involved the audience [49'11"]. So we had twenty people sitting in the space, but along the side, and at a certain point, I wanted the sea of red. Red represented—everything was a gesture, you know—the red was for Venice, so Jenni, who played Shylock #3, also plays the Duke, with the red cloak, and everyone else had a *stola* (like a shawl, a red stole), and there were some of the Black Angels. These are the beautiful assistants to the scene; they do all the changes: bring the knives, bring the basket, take everything away, change the clothes, and everything right in front of people, so nothing is hidden. Two of them were in charge, Ziv and Alessandra, of bringing the audience to a certain point, so that when Shylock turned around, he would see a sea of people: this idea, like a Red Sea of people, that were decided against him.

- And there's Paul (Lorenzo), and Jessica [50'17"], in the final scene, the final moment [50'21"], with the Shylocks coming forward— [50'26"]

Then, just very quickly [50'28"]: we also did two after Venice. Partly, I wanted to test while we were all together that we could go to two other places. It turned out to be very rushed, and everyone was extremely tired, and I probably was demanding far too much of everybody, but: it was a desire to go to Bassano and to do the play in a beautiful place . . .

So you see, they told us that we really kind of rocked the space a little bit, which made me happy, because we only went there and rehearsed for about two hours. [50'58"] It was a stunning place [51'02"], with beautiful sound, and I was excited because I knew that the play worked outside the Ghetto [51'06"], so you can imagine, because it was hard to tear ourselves away from the Ghetto, but then we did go to Bassano [51'15"], and we saw that it was glorious.

Then, our final performance was in a prison [51'20"]—in the Padova Prison, where the prisoners bake bread. They're known for it: it's called the *Cooperativa Giotto*, and the prisoners bake bread, and it's sold all around Italy, so when the prisoners get out, they're rehabilitated, and only two percent are brought back to prison. Most of them are rehabilitated, and they have something that they're proud of, and I was so overjoyed to have this open up as an experience for all of us.

- So there happened be some speeches . . . [51'49"]
- The inmates coming in . . . [51'53"]

We had about a hundred people, and then—I do have a little clip from this [51'56"]: you see Lancillotto, Michi, who was really overwhelmed [51'59"], and tears. And this [52'04"]: here's a little moment of that final scene, with him, and you see the prisoners: they were also participating in that moment, against Shylock, so some of them are a little bit distracted, looking . . . the Black Angels brought them all into the place, but they also were assisting the scene, so those inmates were working on theater.

[Clip plays: 52'27" to 54'20".]

- And this, you see, all of them, a shot of this, with the inmates joining. [54'23"]

And, yeah, that's it. So we, we—that was our final performance, in Padova, and then the next day everybody left. [54'39"]

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[Q&A follows.]