



# arts houston

*"We work the Quirk and... Art MATTERS"*

Fall 2008

# Shylock, The Jew Of Venice

## Classical Theatre Company

**T**hough it asked (and re-asked) far more questions that it was willing to answer, Houston's newest theater company launched its inaugural season with a striking old-new spin on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In doing so, it challenged all in attendance to consider whether the Bard was trying to, in some way, humanize one of the worst anti-Semitic stereotypes in all of Western literature – or simply to join in the centuries-old stoning. Set in a Venice of



David Wald as A15111 and Thomas Prior as A6202

several hundred years ago, the question is interesting enough. Set at Auschwitz-Birkenau in July 1944, it becomes a matter of life and death.

John Johnston, executive director of the Classical Theatre Company, stripped away everything not addressing the “Jewish Question” from Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, leaving only a stark drama about a greedy Jewish moneylender whose lack of “Christian” mercy has made his name synonymous with an evil character type. One can act like a “Shylock,” or even be guilty of “Shylocking,” thanks to the power of Shakespeare’s depiction. One might also allow or even support the extermination of Jews, if you read Shakespeare’s script in the least forgiving light.

This Holocaust-themed *Shylock, the Jew of Venice*, was developed by Johnston and others as a theater student exercise in Washington some years back. The basic concept is that two men (presumably Jews) working in the sorting room at Auschwitz are forced to act out the ultimate “anti-Jewish” play for the amusement of their Nazi overseers. This they do, using a truncated but 100% Shakespearean script - but not until after a 15-minute “pre-show” and an equally silent 15-minute opener going through suitcases left by Jews sent to the gas chambers. To say that this gives Shakespeare’s words a different perspective is putting things mildly.

The two sorters, played by two of Houston best purveyors of Shakespeare or just about anything else, David Wald and Thomas Prior, push ahead with the play, taking on men and women’s roles with ease and only a modest change of voice. The “actors” here, in other words, aren’t theater majors auditioning for a part but prisoners who may well be doomed and already suffer from exhaustion, depression and malnutrition. The play’s not really the thing to them, as Shakespeare might observe – it’s only one of the things.

Though cleverly conceived and brilliantly performed (with sensitive direction by Johnston himself), *Shylock* would have done well to deliver a few more answers, or at least a few more suggestions. It moves our hearts at times, but it still leaves entirely open the possibility that by embracing Shakespeare’s cliché of Shylock, we can embrace the years of such clichés in the German media that paved the way for Hitler, the Nazi takeover and ultimately the Final Solution. If you’re going to take the show out of Venice and hand it over to Auschwitz, you might as well take some kind of a stand.

On the other hand, many cities around the world (Houston included) have erected memorials to victims of the Holocaust. Each memorial, in its own way, seeks to give a face and a name to a number whose digits defy the most malevolent imagination. By breathing life and humanity into Prisoner A6202 and A15111, Prior and Wald gave us a living Holocaust memorial we won’t be able to forget anytime soon.

*John DeMers*