

SHYLOCK FOR TODAY

As JULIA PASCAL premieres her new version of one of Shakespeare's most disturbing plays, JUDI HERMAN explores the most famous Jew in drama with her – and with fellow-writer ARNOLD WESKER and actor HENRY GOODMAN

Shylock's demand for his pound of flesh resounds down the centuries – Shakespeare's contribution to the demonising of the Jew. No wonder *The Merchant of Venice* was one of Hitler's favourite plays.

Chillingly, the full title of Shakespeare's play in the 1600 First Folio is *The most excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice with the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Jew towards the sayd Merchant in cutting just a pound of his flesh ...*

So is Shylock simply Shakespeare's crowd-pleasing answer to Barabbas, the exuberantly villainous anti-hero of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*? And even if he is a more rounded character, are the words Shakespeare puts into his mouth asserting his humanity "Hath not a Jew eyes ..." enough to exonerate the writer from a charge of antisemitism and even contributing to the Holocaust?

Post-Holocaust especially, each new production is defined by how it portrays 'the Jew'. Notably, back in 1999 Trevor Nunn directed a production in which Jewish actor Henry Goodman's Shylock, father and widower, an austere patriarch living by his religious beliefs and an outsider in 1920s Europe, gave audiences a chance to understand if not exonerate.

Julia Pascal believes the play should no longer be performed as written. Her solution is not censorship, but a rewrite, injecting new scenes for Shylock and Jessica and, even more radically, a framing device. Her play starts in contemporary Venice, where Sarah, a Holocaust survivor visiting the Ghetto,

comes on a troupe of travelling players rehearsing the play.

Arnold Wesker also believes the play should not be performed. He's gone further and written his own play called simply *Shylock*. He re-imagines Shylock as a sort of Renaissance man, in love with books and learning, a pillar of the Ghetto community. His home is a hub of intellectual life and he revels in the constant flow of visitors; a portrait painter, an architect consulting him over a new synagogue, refugees from the Spanish Inquisition. Wesker does not flinch from showing Shylock's inability to understand Jessica, but he does give him a sympathetic older sister, Rivkah.

When Wesker saw Jonathan Miller's 1970 production, with Olivier's Shylock as a top-hatted Victorian banker, his feelings of unease about the play crystallised into the idea of creating his own. "I wanted to write about a Jew that I recognised. A mixture of George Steiner, Jonathan Miller – and Bob Gavron, an old friend of ours. He conducted business with just a corner of his attention – and he was a bibliophile!"

Wesker's hero does indeed demonstrate this ability. And as the play opens, he's cataloguing the precious book collection he's sequestered for ten years, since a public burning of Jewish books by the Church. And who should be helping him but his oldest friend, Antonio, the Christian merchant.

There's still the problem of why Shylock comes up with the pound of flesh as a pledge against the bond. Wesker must work hard to make this believable but his solution makes sense – thanks to an American postgraduate student. "She discovered one of the pillars upon which the play stands – the contract. Shylock says he doesn't want a contract between friends, but Antonio knows the Jewish community depends on having contracts honoured by the City of Venice."

"Your lives depend upon contract. Do you want the city councillors to respect their contract? Then you of all people must respect their laws behind contract." So Shylock says let's have "a lovely, loving nonsense bond. To mock the law. Barbaric laws! Barbaric bonds! 3000 ducats against a pound of your flesh!"

For Pascal there can be no such motivation for Shylock and she's



Photo: John Haynes

Henry Goodman as Shylock in the National Theatre production 1999

exercised by the question of how he should be played. She wants to challenge the stereotype, so her Shylock has no beard or accent. "He's a tough, attractive, vibrant man," she explains. "I want to show a completely assimilated Jew who just happens to be ghettoised because people say he's a Jew. So he's a man who breaks and goes for the pound of flesh, which of course is nonsense because Jews can't even touch the blood of an animal never mind a human being, but he breaks because of the loss of his daughter ... the strength of his love for Jessica makes him go for the bond."

But the trial scene remains a hurdle. "What do you do with the image of Shylock standing in the court with a knife and scales in front of the bare breast of Antonio?" she ponders. "It's the image of the Jew cutting the flesh of the Gentile. It's the central motif of all antisemitism. It's there in Shakespeare and it's a very cruel and disturbing image."

She looks for more extenuating circumstances for Shylock. "It's self-defence. If someone is attacking you and your daughter is stolen away and you suffer years of humiliation, what do you do? It is justifiable but it's very hard for audiences to deal with that image."

Pascal does flesh out what Shakespeare gives us in her new scenes for Shylock and Jessica. She gives Shylock a 'back story' to engage audience sympathy and seizes on the one clue Shakespeare gives about Shylock's past. When his fellow Jew, Tubal, reports Jessica's spending spree with Lorenzo,

Shylock, played by Paul Herzberg, in Julia Pascal's new *Merchant of Venice*



Photo: Ian Cole

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giving a ring she's taken from her father for a pet monkey, he says "Thou torturest me, Tubal: it was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys." From this, Pascal imagines a wife dead in childbirth as the couple try for a son, a bereaved husband refusing to take a new wife even after ten years and a daughter jealous of her dead mother's memory, even as she feels suffocated by her father's love.

She shows father and daughter in an intimate moment at the Shabbat dinner table. "Your mother. The only woman I ever wanted ... And every night I reach out to her empty space in my bed". "Then why don't you take another wife?" "I don't want another wife. All I have in the world ... is you."

Breathing life into Shylock's relationship with Leah may be a woman's take on the play, for Wesker says he did not think about her at all. Yet in Nunn's 1999 production, even without additional dialogue, Goodman suggested his feelings simply by lingering on her framed photograph in the collection on his bureau.

And it was not just looks exchanged between father and daughter that fleshed

out a relationship given in just two speeches that Shylock addresses to a silent Jessica as he entrusts his keys to her and leaves for his dinner with Antonio. Working with Goodman, Nunn subtly interpolated intimate scenes in the Jewish home that Goodman admits proved invaluable in shaping his performance. "Trevor would say 'What are the Hebrew prayers; who would teach the daughter what to do?' and I'd explain the background. I would bring in Hebrew songs and prayers and he would say "We can use a bit of that"". So even Nunn added to Shakespeare to create a more believable Shylock.

For apart from that scene with Jessica, Shylock appears in only four more of the play's 25 scenes. For Goodman, this made him feel surprisingly isolated in rehearsals and reinforced his sense of Shylock as a self-reliant outsider. "And it helped me to rehearse in full garb, black with a fringed garment beneath my waistcoat and a skullcap under my hat, among these people with their casual clothes, leading their casual lives."

Although the world of the Ghetto figures large in both Pascal and Wesker, they're aware, as Goodman puts it "there is no Ghetto in the play. The word

'Ghetto' does not exist! Shylock simply coexists. But now any production of the play brings with it the inevitable sensibilities of audience and actors in a post-Holocaust world."

It is precisely those sensitivities that Pascal addresses through her new character, Sarah, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto engaging with the actors rehearsing a production tellingly set in the early 50s. And Sarah is played by Ruth Posner, a 78-year-old Jewish actor who escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto as a child. Julia elaborates. "I'm looking at the first Jewish Ghetto in Venice in 1516, framing it through the eyes of someone who was in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941, and we are looking at it today. So obviously I am making the point that one ghetto has led to another, that you can't separate the two".

Wesker too is aware of the bitter inheritance left by Shylock. Goaded by the antisemitic Gratiano, who refers to Shylock only as 'the Jew' (as in Shakespeare), Wesker's Shylock turns dangerous. "The Jew, the Jew! ... when, when, when will your hatreds dry up? ... When we come we are strangers, when we go we are traitors. In tolerating persecution we are despised, but were we to take up arms we'd be the world's marauders for sure." With this chilling prophecy, which Wesker wrote in 1976, Shylock draws his knife ...

We are nearing Shylock's ignominious exit. In Shakespeare, he's stripped of his goods and forced to convert to Christianity. Pascal stages this with full Catholic ritual. "He is forcibly converted in front of the audience," she says. More resonances, for Ruth posed as a Catholic to survive.

But Wesker's Shylock is delighted and relieved that Portia finds a way to save his friend's life. When she reveals the law dictates the forfeit of his goods, including his books, Wesker suggests he may quit Venice for Jerusalem. So, if this endlessly fascinating and controversial character were indeed real, his descendants might even now be arguing about Shylock in a café in Haifa or Tel Aviv ...

The Merchant of Venice by Julia Pascal continues until 13 October at the Arcola Theatre, Dalston, London, E8.

Sir Arnold Wesker gives the Parkes Lecture on: *The Birth of a Play – how and why I wrote my play, Shylock* at the University of Southampton on 9 October.

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