

The Merchant of Venice

★★★★★ The Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon

Michael Billington

Thursday March 29, 2007

[The Guardian](#)

One solution to this notoriously problematic play is to give it a clear social context. And, by setting the action in a modern, digitised world, Darko Tresnjak's production for New York's Theatre for a New Audience not only vindicates the company's title, but gets to the work's disturbed heart.

You might think that the use of laptops for caskets would only heighten the absurdity of the Belmont marriage-lottery. But, since the choices confronting Portia's suitors are printed out on video-screens, you become more aware of the situation's irony - especially that Bassanio, while plumping for "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath", is actually living on credit. Tresnjak also lends the Belmont scenes a witty life by making Portia's servant, Balthasar, a key player who not only sets up the computer programmes, but tries to date the Prince of Morocco's sidekick.

But it is the Venetian scenes that can be the play's real problem. Tresnjak successfully follows his modern trend by making the city a watery Wall Street: a place where Salerio texts his broker even as he knowingly gossips about Antonio's sentimental parting from Bassanio. F Murray Abraham's excellent Shylock is also a figure of immense outward dignity who has become habituated to, while never accepting, the surrounding anti-semitism. It's also fascinating to note his recurrent use of a white pocket handkerchief: a symbol of his middle-class status, a constant reminder of the spittle he absorbs from Christian bigots and, in the trial scene, a belated source of comfort.

In its visible modernity, the production echoes recent versions by Sellars, Zadek and Nunn. But Tresnjak presents a money-driven world where wealth can never resolve inbuilt racial and religious tensions - something vividly realised in the scene where Kenajuan Bentley's black Launcelot Gobbo first savagely taunts Nicole Lowrance's deracinated Jessica with, and then brusquely brushes aside, his new Wasp master.

The final act also has exactly the right soured romance. Kate Forbes's Portia, still wearing the trousers she donned for the trial scene, realises she's shackled to a bisexual husband. Christen Simon's Nerissa sees that she's married a vulgar lout. And Lorenzo and Jessica are barely speaking. As the guests party to the ironic strains of "Can it be that love has come to stay?", we get a striking image of the disharmony at the centre of this perennially troubling play.