

'Merchant' delivers multiple tones of texture

By Rob Cline

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IOWA CITY — When considering Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," it can be easy to get caught up in a single question: Is the play

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anti-Semitic? However, the Riverside Theatre in the Park Company, under the direction of Kristin Horton, reminded a large opening night crowd Friday that the play raises more than a single query and offers more than a single tone or texture.

This production is a success because Horton and her actors delve into the complexities of the play and fully exploit both its humor and its pathos.

The rich yet sad Venetian merchant Antonio (Tim Budd) borrows a significant sum from the Jewish moneylender Shylock (Theodore Swetz) on behalf of his friend Bassanio (Eric Damon Smith). Bassanio needs the money in order to pursue the hand of Portia (Kelly Gibson), an heiress who, by decree of her late father, can only marry a suitor who passes a test he contrived.

As bond for the loan, Shylock suggests, seemingly in jest, that Antonio promise him a pound of flesh should he fail to repay the loan. Confident in his investments, Antonio makes the deal, only to have his hopes dashed and to discover that Shylock fully intends to collect on his grisly bond as

Schedule

- "The Merchant of Venice" runs through July 8 in rotation with "As You Like It" at Riverside Festival Stage, Lower City Park, Iowa City. "As You Like It:" Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and July 5, 6 and 8. "Merchant of Venice:" tonight, Thursday, Friday and July 1 and 7.
- Tickets: \$17 to \$33, Riverside Box Office, 213 N. Gilbert St., Iowa City, (319) 338-7672 or Riversidetheatre.org

repayment for Antonio's past cruelties.

Portia, disguised as a young lawyer, saves Antonio in court. Shylock is burdened with heavy penalties, including forced conversion. Meanwhile, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano (John William Watkins), while successful in winning Portia and her friend Nerissa (Kalen Harriman), nearly lose their loves when they part with tokens of the ladies' affection, which they unwittingly give to the women when they are disguised as men.

While there were some opening night stumbles — lines slightly garbled, dialogue spoken out of turn — the cast was excellent throughout the performance.

Swetz is powerful as Shylock, a conniving, vengeful man who cares more for his money than for his own daughter but who is willing to forego his ducets in order to exact revenge upon An-

tonio. Swetz delivered the famed "if you prick us, do we not bleed," speech both movingly and menacingly — for it is a speech about revenge — and then followed it up with a lament for the money stolen by his daughter, Jessica (Eva Louise Balistrieri), which renders him most unsympathetic.

Swetz is supported by fine performances from all of the principles. Budd convincingly portrays a bigoted man who is also a fiercely loyal friend. Gibson and Harriman delight as they hope for love, dissemble for "justice," and mock for spite.

Shawn Ketchum Johnson's simple set is made up of archways with "supports" that can be slid up and down to create different spaces. It's a clever device, but the unadorned boards are drab and the spaces they define are somewhat unclear.

Lindsay W. Davis' costumes are well-designed, though the fabric choices are occasionally gaudy. David Thayer's lighting design effectively delineated some key moments late in the play.

And what of the play's treatment of Shylock? It's true that the Jew is portrayed as greedy and lacking in mercy. But the Christians are hardly paragons of virtue. Indeed, as is mentioned in the program notes, this is a play in which no one is blameless.

This company of actors does an excellent job inhabiting these multifaceted characters.