

The Quality of Mercy

Romanian director [Andrei Serban](#) - currently Director of the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies and the acting program at Columbia University - has staged close to a dozen productions at the A.R.T. and returns this season to direct [The Merchant of Venice](#). He spoke recently with A.R.T. Resident Dramaturg [Gideon Lester](#).

[Gideon Lester](#): You've described 1984 as your "year of Carlo Gozzi," in which you directed [The King Stag](#) at A.R.T. and productions of *Turandot* and **The Love for Three Oranges** in London and Geneva. With **Cymbeline** in Central Park, productions of [The Taming of the Shrew](#) at A.R.T. and La Mama, and now [The Merchant of Venice](#), 1998 has become your year of Shakespeare. Was this an accident?

[Andrei Serban](#): Only partly an accident. Shakespeare is not my first language, and for years I was afraid of him. Now I am less intimidated, and ready to approach him, because I realize that everything he wrote contains many levels of meaning. The challenge is to stage as many of these levels as possible.

GL: Can you give an example?

AS: When I directed **Cymbeline**, I discovered that the text contains several plays within it: a melodrama; a romance; an action story; a fairytale; and a deeply allegorical, subtle play. Every night, two thousand people came to Central Park to see our production, and I used to watch the reactions on their faces. Some of them had never been to the theatre before. They come to the park in the summer because it's free and a nice night out - they usually only see action movies - and suddenly they're watching an allegorical, metaphysical play. I always expected half the audience to leave at

intermission; strangely enough they understood a great deal of it, but at the level of the story, of the romance. There were also more sophisticated people in the audience, and it was as if they were simultaneously watching an entirely different play.

GL: The same will be true of Merchant of Venice?

AS: The same is true of all Shakespeare's plays. Look how the reception of **Merchant** has changed. Four hundred years ago, when Shakespeare wrote the play, it was a comedy. Shylock was a commedia dell'arte character with a red beard, red hair, and a huge nose - an allegorical representation of the devil. This didn't bother anyone, because it was recognized as a stage convention. At the time there was no "Jewish question."

GL: You mean that there were very few Jews living in London at the time?

AS: Right. They integrated naturally into a society that was not racist in the modern sense. Four hundred years later, at the end of the apocalyptic twentieth century, we are amazed that Merchant could ever have been comedic; there's almost nothing funny about it. I thought at first I'd treat the play as a romance, a light comedy, but after Auschwitz this really is impossible. On the other hand, I refuse to fall into the easy, politically correct trap of trying to excuse Shylock, as so many productions have done in the past. I'm not interested in using the play as a pretext for talking about racial struggle, where the hatred is pushed to extremes. The play only touches racism subtly; its true subject is much larger than that.

GL: When you directed The Taming of the Shrew for us last season, you said that the subject of that play was metaphysical and revealed through an allegorical narrative.

AS: The subject of Merchant is also allegorical, though it

connects all the different worlds of the play through a key line; the best, most complex, most touching line Shakespeare ever wrote, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd."

GL: The play is a study of mercy?

AS: Yes. All the characters are in a state of confusion and disarray. They are all searching for ideal relationships, ideal patterns of behavior, which they fail to live up to. Antonio presents himself as an ego-less Christ figure, but his interests are actually more human; he's in love with Bassanio and will do anything for him. Then there's Shylock, who at first acts to defend his honor but eventually becomes entirely rigid and inflexible, fanatically sticking to the law in the name of self-defense. He cannot bend to compassion and humanity, and of course he loses. But the Christians, too, are not always compassionate. Portia pleads for mercy but shows none towards Shylock.

GL: And Bassanio?

AS: Portia sacrifices everything for Bassanio. She undertakes an act of incredible bravery for him, but he fails her by giving away her ring, which is devastating. How, we wonder, can she finally stay with him and marry him, when she sees he is so full of inconsistencies? The answer is that she loves him, and she has to accept him, even though a part of him is homosexual. She exercises mercy towards him.

GL: So you see the play as a series of negotiations between expectation and reality?

AS: The play asks how we are to live in an inconsistent world. The fifth act is very touching, when we see the characters working towards a happy ending, towards some sort of happy marriage. At the end of the production, I want us all to walk home knowing that

there are no heroes, there are no perfect human beings, but that gentleness and compassion are essential if we are to live with each other. Shylock is deeply mistaken, but so are they all. They all strive to live up to the great image of perfect love and morality, to be true Christians, and of course they fail. Nobody is a true Christian; no one can easily practice forgiveness or love their neighbors as themselves. We all fail our own high standards, just as Shylock fails to be compassionate and Bassanio fails to be faithful. The play can help us understand our own situation in life. We need to find a way to live with each other despite our contradictions; we all must strive for wisdom and compassion.