

Barabas Goes Broadway

by

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Theatre for a New Audience's 2007 season explored Jews as outsiders in pre-modern England with three of literature's most stunning stereotypes: Christopher Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Dickens' Fagin in Neill Bartlett's adaptation *Oliver Twist*. *The Jew of Malta*, directed by David Herskovits, and *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Darko Tresnjak, were performed in repertory with F. Murray Abraham in the leading roles.

Given the fact Herskovits has brought Marlowe's infrequently performed play to the Duke Theater, located on 42nd Street just west of Broadway, the chance to see *The Jew of Malta* was a rare treat indeed. In 2001 Herskovits, the Artistic Director of the Target Margin Theater, directed an adventurous version of Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. But Herskovits' adventurous spirit results in a theatrical experience that, in *the Jew of Malta*, gives Marlowe's artistry a quirky, partial viewing at best.

John Lee Beatty's scenic design effectively explores an early modern Malta where sleight of hand (in this case stage hands) can transform a Jewish home into a Christian nunnery by changing the symbols of religious affiliation. Replacing a Star of David with a cross on Barabas' seized property defines the political and economic nature of the stereotype. The elaborate costumes designed by David Zinn are simultaneously in and out of period with improvisations such as doublets sporting modern lettering reminiscent of the TV sitcom "Laverne and Shirley."

What haunts the production of a difficult play with numerous staging difficulties is that under Herskovits' direction, Marlowe's Barabas, Abigail (Nicole Lowrance), and most minor characters are rendered as caricatures who fill the house with too much laughter. The production bravely aims to provide a post-modern audience with user-friendly access to the complex early modern situation in which invading Turks have besieged Malta, where a money-lending Jew becomes the wronged villain and common enemy of those competing for control. F. Murray Abraham's portrayal of Barabas raises questions regarding the character's motivation and comportment. What the text presents as cunning and revenge by an alien outsider who has been cheated out of extensive wealth so the Governor of Malta can pay tribute to the Turks is, unfortunately, played for laughs. Marlowe's text contains

numerous asides, many of which contain humor, but their purpose is to emphasize rather than dilute the horrific effects of the murder and mayhem we see before us. In this production, however, Barabas' boastfulness over acts of murder and "poisoning wells," as well of his desire for "infinite riches in a little room," come across as self-ridicule which yields a sharper anti-semitism than already exists in the play.

The portrayal of Barabas would have possessed greater dimension had Herskovits not cut the prologue by "Machevill" which sets the tone for the Machiavellian politics that pervade a Malta in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews vie for various forms of power. After all, Marlowe has Machevill take credit in his prologue for presenting "the tragedy of a Jew" whose "money was not got without my means." Cutting this speech helped render a more villainous stereotype since it erased what serves, at least in part, as an alternative explanation for Barabas' self-interest; indeed, his self-interest is no different from the self-interest of the Christians and Muslims, and he has more cause than they in Marlowe's biting study of religious hypocrisy.

Marlowe's dark humor and verbal inventiveness, discussed by Judith Weil and others, have been explained as language that obscures issues such as identity and expected audience response. Here the language has been steered in the direction of slapstick comedy. We know Elizabethan audiences bantered with the company, but in this production it is the cast members who take the initiative with the audience, queering further any sustained sense of the characters. This raises questions about the play's inherent staging difficulties and calls for further commentary on the linguistic, generic, and epistemological components of Marlovian humor, as well as the expectations and responses of audiences who came with the entrenched biases of their society and had them reinforced by staged evil.

The production remains faithful to The Theater for a New Audience's mission of "explor[ing] the classics with an adventurous spirit." But Herskovits' aim to provide his audience with a view of how Marlowe's mind and approach imagined a Jew as an outsider in a predominately Christian world has been obstructed by the props that keep Marlowe in the background. Sadly, while much of the beautiful verse is used in the performance, its music is lost in the din of laughter. We do get a glimpse of Marlowe's artistry in Arnie Burton's rendition of Ithamore. His performance of the Turkish slave with thwarted ambitions is played with the edgy liminality of a soulless picaro. Barabas reminds him "we are villains both./Both circumcised. We hate Christians both./Be true and secret; thou shalt want no gold." Burton's Ithamore makes it clear he needs no reminding. His

double-dealing with Bellamira (Kate Forbes) and Pilia-Borza (Saxon Palmer), and his tragic confession to Ferneze (Marc Vietor) emblemize the pervasive nature of danger in a contact zone where hypocrisy rules above the law.

In lieu of Marlowe's poetry and dramatic complexity, this production presented revenge tragedy and dark humor à la "Saturday Night Live." Nevertheless, it afforded the opportunity to laugh at the foibles of an Elizabethan stereotype who is both victim and victimizer in an early modern culture clash.

The Jew of Malta by Christopher Marlowe
The Theater for a New Audience
The Duke Theater, New York, NY
February, 2007
Director: David Herskovits
Sets: John Lee Beatty
Costumes: David Zinn
Lighting: David Weiner

The cast included:
Barabas: F. Murray Abraham
Ithamore: Arnie Burton
Abigail: Nichole Lowrance
Bellamira/Abbess: Kate Forbes
Selim Calymath/Friar Jacomo: Ezra Knight