

Trinity Cast Carries 'Merchant of Venice'

When many think of the plays of William Shakespeare, they focus on his male characters, like Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello and others. It's always been my opinion, though, that Shakespeare's women are just as strong as his men, and in some instances even stronger. One play where the women outshine the men is A Merchant in Venice, currently in production at Trinity Repertory Company.



When most talk about Merchant, they think of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender. A somewhat controversial character, he's been played many different ways. Here, it's unfortunately as little more than a poor little victim, constantly whining about his lot in life. Whether it's actor Stephen Berenson's fault or not is hard to say, but the interpretation doesn't make Shylock more human, it makes him weak and creates a far less interesting character.

Antonio and Bassanio, the other male leads, are played by Joe Wilson, Jr. and Stephen Thorne, respectively. Wilson is a powerful actor but could really loosen up a bit at times. His Antonio is too stiff and too serious, too much of the time, not allowing for many levels or nuances in the performance. Although it's hard to discern why these two are such great friends, Thorne makes clear Bassanio's passion for his friendship with Antonio, handling the verse and the emotions very well.

The rest of the male cast is excellent, especially the always-reliable Fred Sullivan, Jr. as Gratiano, and Will Austin as Lorenzo. The first half of the play actually focuses more on the story of Lorenzo and his lady love, Jessica, than it does on the other subplots. The scenes depicting the Lorenzo/Jessica story are the best of the first half.

Jessica, Shylock's daughter who runs away to be with Lorenzo, is played wonderfully by Caroline Kaplan. She and Austin were both excellent in the recent Brown MFA production of Parade and they are equally excellent here. Both are Brown MFA Acting students and if they stick around after graduation, it will be exciting to watch them take on bigger and more challenging roles on area stages.

Which brings us to the leading ladies. First, Rachel Warren as Nerisa, Portia's waiting gentlewoman. Warren is always a joy to watch. Her face is so expressive that her silent reactions alone are worth the price of a ticket. When she speaks, she's just as good or better. Portia, though, is the one

to whom this play belongs, in my opinion. She is, for me, the center and strength of this play.

Luckily, Trinity's Portia is played by an actress more than up for the challenge, Mary C. Davis. Among the cast, she is one of the most skilled and comfortable with the verse, which comes trippingly off her tongue. More importantly, she doesn't just speak the lines, she lives and feels them. In the second half, when the play becomes largely focused on her, she puts it on her shoulders and carries it perfectly.

That second half leaves behind the scattershot, all over the place feeling of the first, dealing instead with one story and one event. Due in large part to the performances of Davis, Warren and the rest of the cast, the second half far outshines the first and ends up as a powerful piece of Shakespearean theater.

The Merchant of Venice, Trinity Rep. 201 Washington St, Providence, runs thru March 11.
www.trinityrep.com