Production Notice

The Merchant of Venice at the Utah Shakespeare Festival

by Jim Volz. Published in 2018 Issue 1.


The Merchant of Venice has often riled audiences, critics, and contemporary human rights activists for its anti-Semitism, its less-than-Christian approach to inclusiveness, and its troubling onstage world of bitterness, taunting, and gross family and financial politics. In a Summer 2018 production that could be ripped from the headlines of Fox News, Utah Shakespeare Festival director Melinda Pfundstein lets the words carry the day and allows the audiences to make all the obvious connections to America’s current divisiveness, legal atrocities, financial disasters, and relationship woes.

Figure 1. Photo by Karl Hugh. Copyright Utah Shakespeare Festival 2018.
A powerful performance by veteran actor Lisa Wolpe as Shylock certainly sets the pace for a rich
telling of the story and a hilarious turn by Geoffrey Kent as the Prince of Arragon adds some wel-
come comic relief to the generally bitter story of disastrous money-lending, romance and fortune
seeking gone sour. Ms. Wolpe’s Shylock—nuanced, logical, and hard-hitting—befuddles con-
cerned citizens and lawmakers alike.

Pfundstein has a steady hand and carefully blends transitions, lilting music, humor, and pathos
while allowing the action to unfold and march on to its inevitable, if not always surprising,
conclusion.

Knowing that most of the Utah Shakespeare Festival audience members know the plot, Pfund-
stein doesn’t succumb to the melodrama of Shylock’s demand for the execution of his bond,
Jessica’s abandonment of her father, the lovers’ loss of their rings, or the suitors’ ill-fated se-
lections of all that glitters.

Apollo Mark Weaver’s simple, yet clever set design allows the action to move quickly and freely
on stage. Bill Black’s costumes are interesting, character-defining, and wonderfully fun when the
occasion calls for it. Michael Pasquini’s lighting design adeptly manages the Englestad Shake-
speare Theatre’s outdoor daytime-to-sunset realities while creating mood and clarity. Sound
designer Joe Payne and Music Director Brandon Scott Grayson combine forces to create a unique
world for Venice.

_The Merchant of Venice_ was the highlight of the season for this reviewer, who also attended _The
Merry Wives of Windsor, An Iliad_, and _Big River_ making for a diverse and sometimes spellbinding
weekend of repertory in one of America’s premiere Shakespeare Festivals.

**Links**

Utah Shakespeare Festival. [https://www.bard.org/](https://www.bard.org/)
Production Details

General

Title: The Merchant of Venice
Year: 2018
Theater Company: Utah Shakespeare Festival
Theater: Engelstad Shakespeare Theatre
Start Date: 2018-06-30
End Date: 2018-09-07

Cast

ANTONIO: LESLIE Brott
SALARINO: KYLE BULLOCK
SOLANIO: TY FANNING
BASSANIO: WAYNE T. CARR
GRATIANO: JOSH INNERST
LORENZO: JOSH JEFFERS
SALERIO: KEATON DELMAR JOHNS
STEPHANO: PAUL MICHAEL SANDBERG
PORTIA: TARAH FLANAGAN
NERISSA: BETSY MUGAVERO
BALTHAZAR: MICHAEL ELICH
SHYLOCK: LISA WOLPE
JESSICA: AIDAA PEERZADA
LANCELET GOBBO: ISABELLA ABEL-SUAREZ
TUBAL: TRACIE LANE
PRINCE OF MOROCCO: JAMIL ZRAIKAT
PRINCE OF ARRAGON: GEOFFREY KENT
SINGERS: KEATON DELMAR JOHNS, COURTNEY McMULLIN
DUKE OF VENICE: TRACIE LANE
MAGNIFICOS: GEOFFREY KENT, JAMIL ZRAIKAT
ENSEMBLE: SARA FUNK, CHAD HENWOOD, KEATON DELMAR JOHNS, COURTNEY McMULLIN

Creatives

DIRECTOR: MELINDA PFUNDSTEIN
SCENIC DESIGNER: APOLLO MARK WEAVER
COSTUME DESIGNER: BILL BLACK
LIGHTING DESIGNER: MICHAEL PASQUINI
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOUND DESIGNER</td>
<td>JOE PAYNE</td>
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<td>MUSIC DIRECTOR</td>
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<td>GEOFFREY KENT</td>
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<td>STAGE MANAGER</td>
<td>BRYAN SOMMER</td>
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*Utah Shakespeare Festival—The Merchant of Venice*  
Jim Volz