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 on-stage 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 welcome 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 concerned 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, Pfundstein 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 selections 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 Shakespeare 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.

**Production Details**

**General**

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<th>Title</th>
<th>The Merchant of Venice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theater Company</td>
<td>Utah Shakespeare Festival</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Engelstad Shakespeare Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start Date</td>
<td>2018-06-30</td>
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<td>End Date</td>
<td>2018-09-07</td>
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Cast

ANTONIO
SALARINO
SOLANIO
BASSANIO
GRATIANO
LORENZO
SALERIO
STEPHANO
PORTIA
NERISSA
BALTHAZAR
SHYLOCK
JESSICA
LANCELET GOBBO
TUBAL
PRINCE OF MOROCCO
PRINCE OF ARRAGON
SINGERS
DUKE OF VENICE
MAGNIFICOS
ENSEMBLE

LESLEY BROTT
KYLE BULLOCK
TY FANNING
WAYNE T. CARR
JOSH INNERST
JOSH JEFFERS
KEATON DELMAR JOHNS
PAUL MICHAEL SANDBERG
TARAH FLANAGAN
BETSY MUGAVERO
MICHAEL ELICH
LISA WOLPE
AUDAA PEERZADA
ISABELLA ABEL-SUAREZ
TRACIE LANE
JAMIL ZRAIKAT
GEOFFREY KENT
KEATON DELMAR JOHNS, COURTNEY McMULLIN
TRACIE LANE
GEOFFREY KENT, JAMIL ZRAIKAT
SARA FUNK, CHAD HENWOOD, KEATON DELMAR JOHNS, COURTNEY McMULLIN

Creatives

DIRECTOR
SCENIC DESIGNER
APOLLO MARK WEAVER
BILL BLACK
MELINDA PFUNDSTEIN

COSTUME DESIGNER
BILL BLACK
MELINDA PFUNDSTEIN

LIGHTING DESIGNER
MICHAEL PASQUINI

SOUND DESIGNER
JOE PAYNE

MUSIC DIRECTOR
BRANDON SCOTT GRAYSON

DRAMATURG
ISABEL SMITH-BERSTEIN

VOICE AND TEXT COACH
JEREMY SORTORE

FIGHT DIRECTOR
GEOFFREY KENT

MOVEMENT DIRECTOR
MEGAN BRUNSVOLD MERCEDES

STAGE MANAGER
BRYAN SOMMER