Production Notice

*The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice* at the Shakespeare Company, Calgary

by Clifford Werier. Published in 2019 Issue 1.


**Calgary’s The Shakespeare Company** has been mounting a full season of professional Shakespeare and related plays since 1995. Currently led by artistic director Haysam Kadri, the 2019–2020 season featured three Shakespeare plays, including *The Tempest* (September 19–October 5, 2019) and *The Merchant of Venice* (November 28–December 8, 2019), mounted in partnership with the University of Calgary School of Creative and Performing Arts, and a now-cancelled “Roulette Shakespeare” production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, meant to run from May 14–May 31, 2020, in which casting was to be based on the spin of a roulette wheel.

![Image of actors in The Merchant of Venice](image1.jpg)

**Figure 1.** David Haysom, Jamie Konchak, Jaden Sullivan, Amy On, Avital Fertel, Sarah Wheeldon, and Roger LeBlanc in *The Merchant of Venice*. Set and costume design by Jennifer Lee Arsenault (MFA’14), and lighting design by Narda McCarroll. Photo credit: Tim Nguyen.

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*Scene*. University of Victoria. 2019 Issue 1.
The Tempest, directed by Jamie Dunsdon, was produced at the company's usual venue, the intimate Studio at Vertigo Theatre, arranged with audience bleachers on three sides. In keeping with the company's tradition of two-hour Shakespeare with a brief interval, the production moved at a sprightly pace that often sacrificed clear elocution for dizzying speediness.

The company's commitment to equitable casting was evident, especially in the roles of Prospera (Shawna Burnett), Ariel (Alice Wordsworth), Sebastiana (Brianna Johnston), and Gonzala (Valerie Ann Pearson).

Shawna Burnett's Prospera was the most problematic feature of this production, as her performance carried a single emotion throughout the play: simmering and exploding anger. Certainly, questions of anger and forgiveness are at the heart of the play, as Prospero manages both the events on the island and his complex feelings, but this Prospera had only one response to almost everything: to be angry or angrier. Even at the decisive moment when she drowns her magic book, you get the feeling that she would also like to rip out the pages and stomp on the binding. Likewise, her continual torture of Caliban felt particularly sadistic, as she happily gave him extra jabs of her staff-like cattle prod for good measure. Burnett's Prospera also showed very little tenderness toward Miranda, nor did the sweet, fairy-like Ariel fare much better in attracting her mistress's sympathy.

While the comic chemistry of Trinculo and Stephano worked well, the spidery, monstrous Caliban who groveled and lurched over the stage was so oppressed, miserable, and undignified that he failed to generate any sympathy, despite his beautiful descriptions of the island's magical properties. This was in keeping with the general humourlessness of the production, as Prospera's toxic clouds of rage seemed to permeate everything.

The Merchant of Venice, produced at the University of Calgary's Reeve Theatre, featured a mixed cast of professional actors and students. It was a treat to see Seana McKenna as Shylock, as she is one of the most experienced and lauded actors in Canada, having worked as an actor, director and teacher for 40 years, including 27 seasons at the Stratford Festival.

From the moment she walked on stage, McKenna's Shylock expressed a range of conflicting emotions with her body...
language and subtle facial gestures. While she communicated deep reserves of anger from a lifetime of abuse, outwardly she expressed both dignity and intelligence. In other words, watching McKenna’s Shylock was like attending a masterclass in Shakespearean acting: the audience hung on every word because the delivery was so profoundly believable.

The power of McKenna’s Shylock was the production’s best feature but also created a significant contrast between her professionalism and the amateur quality of some of the student actors. To this end, Avital Fertel’s Jessica and Jaden Sullivan’s Lorenzo were particularly problematic, as their delivery had the usual problems associated with students who are learning the craft of speaking Shakespeare. While Jessica and Lorenzo are never easy parts because they are so unsympathetic, in this production they lacked any erotic connection or playfulness. And this same problem of contrasting abilities extended throughout, as the experienced professionals — such as Jamie Konchak’s charming and vivacious Portia — nailed their parts, while the students often struggled with delivery.

**Links**

Reeve Theatre. [https://asc.ucalgary.ca/building/reeve-theatre/](https://asc.ucalgary.ca/building/reeve-theatre/).

The Shakespeare Company. [https://www.shakespearecompany.com/](https://www.shakespearecompany.com/).

Stratford Festival. [https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/](https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/).

Vertigo Theatre. [https://www.vertigotheatre.com/](https://www.vertigotheatre.com/).
Production Details

General

Title: The Tempest  
Year: 2019  
Theatre Company: The Shakespeare Company  
Theatre: The Studio at Vertigo Theatre  
Start Date: September 19, 2019  
End Date: October 5, 2019

Cast

PROSPERA: Shawna Burnett  
STEFANO: Alexander Ariate  
MIRANDA: Anna Dalgleish  
ALONSO: Myron Dearden  
SPRITE: Emma Fleming  
FERDINAND: Daniel Fong  
FRANCISCO: Caleb Gordon  
SEBASTIANA: Brianna Johnston  
ANTONIO: Devin MacKinnon  
CALIBAN: Jonathan Molinski  
SPRITE: Robyn Neumann  
GONZALO: Valerie Ann Pearson  
TRINCULO: Michael Rolfe  
BOATSWAIN: Spencer Streichert  
ARIEL: Alice Wordsworth

Creatives

DIRECTOR: Jamie Duneldon  
SET AND LIGHTING: Narda McCarroll  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Kiana Wu  
COSTUME DESIGN: Victoria Krawchuk  
SOUND DESIGN & COMPOSITION: Chad Blain  
CHOREOGRAPHER: Kunji Ikeda  
STAGE MANAGER: Millie Winzinowich  
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER: Jennifer Yeung
Production Manager: Ajay Badoni
Text & Vocal Coach: Jane MacFarlane

General

Title: The Merchant of Venice
Year: 2019
Theatre Company: The Shakespeare Company
Theatre: The Reeve Theatre
Start Date: November 28, 2019
End Date: December 8, 2019

Cast

Prince of Morocco: AJ Anwar
Launcelot Gobbo: Alexander Ariate
Prince of Arragon, Duke of Venice: Joel Cochrane
Tubal: Myron Dearden
Jessica: Avital Fertel
Antonio: Dean Paul Gibson
Bassanio: David Haysom
Portia: Jamie Konchak
Gratiano: Roger LeBlanc
Salanio: Mackenzie McDonald
Shylock: Seana McKenna
Salarino: Josh Olson
Stephania: Amy On
Leonardo: Barry Owen
Lorenzo: Jaden Sullivan
Nerissa: Sarah Wheeldon

Creatives

Director: Carey Perloff
Set & Costume Designer: Jennifer Lee Arsenault
Lighting Designer: Narda McCarroll
Sound Design & Composition: Peter Moller
Text & Vocal Coach: Jane MacFarlane
Assistant Set, Costume & Props Designer: Elizabet Rachel