

The Merchant of Venice 1936

William Shakespeare
Watford Palace Theatre and HOME Manchester
Malvern Theatres
17–21 October 2023



Photo credit: Mark Brenner

Ahead of seeing this production, I knew it was already attracting some attention as a jarring reimagining of this well-known text. Indeed, I saw the RSC's 1993 production with David Calder's Shylock as a city banker and this could not have been more different.

Here we're transported to London in 1936, with events set against the backdrop of the rise of fascism across Europe and Oswald Mosley's threats to the Jewish community in the East End. The setting within real history is made all the more poignant by our matriarch, Shylock, Tracey-Ann Oberman's personal connection through her great grandmother Annie's own experiences.

Admittedly, already a fan Oberman's previous work—especially as Aunt Val in *Friday Night Dinner*—I knew that whatever was to unfold before us would be special, and I wasn't wrong. The gender reversal only serves to make Shylock more powerful—she's a passionate, deeply religious woman fighting prejudice at every turn. The audience is invited to share a toast for Shabbat; candles are lit, prayers spoken, and all is calm in her household, whilst outside the unrest and prejudice continues to swell.

Shylock's increasingly hostile enemies come in the form of inebriated toff Gratiano (Xavier Starr), ever-optimistic debtor Antonio (Raymond Coulthard) and his best friend, the rather loathsome Bassanio (Gavin Fowler) who pines for the superior Portia's (Hannah Morrish) hand in marriage—although she is of course willingly wooed via those famous three caskets—"All that glitters is not gold".

The oft-quoted lines are there within the cleverly reframed context—albeit within a clipped running time. It did feel for me however that we hurtled somewhat unexpectedly towards the final scene—culminating in the Battle of Cable Street. We're asked to get to our feet not to applaud, but in a united stand against racism—which is a very different ending to Shakespeare's problematic original piece.

The resulting feelings—particularly when current world events are brought to mind—are slight remnants of shock as you exit—but also a feeling that you've not merely been entertained, but also educated.

The tour continues on to Cardiff, Wilton's Music Hall London, York, Chichester and Manchester before heading back to the Swan on 24 January 2024.

[Theatre review: The Merchant of Venice 1936 at Malvern Theatres \(britishtheatreguide.info\)](https://www.britishtheatreguide.info)