

The activities in this pack are inspired by the rehearsal room process and have been created around Rupert Goold's 2011 production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The activities can work in a classroom (or hall or studio space), either as stand-alone practical approaches to the text or as supporting activities for students seeing the production. They have been designed with KS4 and KS5 students in mind, but can be adapted for other age groups.

More activities on Shakespeare are available in our *RSC Shakespeare Toolkit for Teachers*, available online in the [RSC Shop](http://www.rsc.org.uk/education).

We also run courses for teachers and students, for information visit: www.rsc.org.uk/education

CONTENTS

Making a start	Page 2
Introducing Bassanio and Antonio	Page 3
Exploring Belmont	Page 6
Shylock and public bullying	Page 9
Exchanging the rings	Page 11
A wider context	Page 12
Interview with Tom Scutt	Page 14

These symbols are used throughout the pack:



READ - contextual notes from the rehearsal room



ACTIVITY – Get on your feet for a classroom activity



WATCH - video

ABOUT RSC EDUCATION

We want children and young people to enjoy the challenge of Shakespeare and achieve more as a result of connecting with his work. Central to our education work is our manifesto for Shakespeare in schools; Stand up for Shakespeare. We know that children and young people can experience Shakespeare in ways that excite, engage and inspire them. We believe that young people get the most out of Shakespeare when they:

- Do Shakespeare on their feet – exploring the plays actively as actors do
- See it Live – participate as members of a live audience
- Start it Earlier – work on the plays from a younger age

As an organisation, the RSC has four values. In all our work, whether in staging our productions or in our education work with teachers and young people, we aim to be:

- Collaborative – fostering an inclusive environment
- Ambitious – committing to excellence and taking risks to achieve this
- Inquiring – being thoughtful, inquiring and respectful about the world around us
- Engaging – creating a stimulating dialogue through our work

We also believe in the power of ensemble; a way of working together in both the rehearsal room and across the company enabling everyone's ideas and voices to be heard. Artistic Director, Michael Boyd encapsulates this vision for ensemble in his rehearsal room where actors are encouraged to try out different interpretations of scenes before deciding together on what will be presented to an audience in the final performance.

Making a start



This production is set in modern day USA, Venice being set in Las Vegas and Belmont in a game-show studio. During rehearsals, the actors and director used YouTube clips*, videos of reality game-shows, and modern films to explore the modern day American context. Rupert decided on Las Vegas because it represented the world of commerce and eccentricity that exists within *The Merchant of Venice*. For a more detailed explanation of this choice, read the interview with designer Tom Scutt on page 14.



At the beginning of rehearsals, Rupert Goold wanted the actors to think about the difference between the feelings characters display on the outside to the ones they are feeling inside. They discussed these issues within the reality TV language of being 'real' and being 'fake'. Does Bassanio genuinely care for Antonio or is he merely using him? How much of the bullying of Shylock is genuine dislike and how much is it for show? Are Portia and Nerissa truly angry with their husbands for taking the rings, or are they pretending?

ACTIVITY: What's real, what's fake?



This activity explores the notion of real and fake, helping your students understand the text through the premise of Rupert's rehearsal room exploration.



- Search youtube for clips from game-shows and reality TV shows (clips used in rehearsals came from *Blind Date*, *Paris Hilton's New Best Friend*, and *American Idol*) Show these clips to your class. Discuss how people change when they are in front of the camera. Do they act naturally? Do any elements of personality become exaggerated?
- Ask your class to imagine they've never seen TV or YouTube videos. If they then saw these clips, what would they say were our cultural values? What is being celebrated in these videos (brashness, loudness, beauty, etc)? In rehearsals, actors watched videos and used these values to create their characters.
- Ask your students to create a mask from an A4 piece of paper to represent one of the 'exterior' personality traits are being portrayed by the people in the videos.
- Find and play a YouTube clip of Britney Spears breaking down in an interview with Diane Sawyer (eg: www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4NNx2_Tiw4) This video helped the actress playing Portia approach the role. Discuss the masks your group created, comparing them to the 'exterior' that celebrities put on can often hide emotions beneath the surface. Explain that this idea of inside/outside or real/fake in the media was a driving question behind characters choices in the rehearsal room. Ask the class to think of any other examples of celebrity breakdowns.
- Find and play the YouTube clip *Child Beauty Pageants- Sad Faces and Fake* which was also played in rehearsals: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeGBFqNxewc Now ask your group to draw the *inside* of the mask, based on what they saw in the Britney Spears and beauty pageant clips. Explain that you will be investigating the idea of masks and dual faces (outside/inside) to explore the worlds of Venice and Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*.



* YouTube videos and pop culture references were used consistently in rehearsals so you will find them throughout this pack. Caution is required when using YouTube videos in your classroom. Play the video in full before showing it to your class so that: 1) it is all pre-loaded and will play without buffering and 2) to ensure it contains nothing inappropriate. Also, check the comments section below the video to make sure nothing inappropriate will appear as you play the clip.

Introducing Bassanio and Antonio



In rehearsals the director and actors experimented with the idea that Bassanio is a conman. This idea was based on his repetitive and seemingly manipulative attempts to ask Antonio for money. Based on this choice, the actors explored different ways conmen can manipulate their victims.

ACTIVITY: Bassanio, the con-man



This activity explores Bassanio and Antonio's relationship, looking at it through the lens of Bassanio being a con-man.

- Copy and distribute the worksheet on page 4. Ask students to work in pairs to discuss Bassanio's inner and outer characteristics based on the character facts and quotes given on the worksheet. Ask students to complete the chart at the bottom of the worksheet, encouraging them to think about how a con-man would act. Reference the previous activity of interior and exterior shows
- In their pairs, students choose to be either Bassanio or Antonio. The person playing Bassanio has to choose one thing from their list to play on the outside. (eg: charming). Hand out the edited scene on page 5 and ask students to act it out, emphasising their chosen characteristic. If you have time, ask them to switch between being Antonio and Bassanio in their pairs.
- Next, ask students to add one 'inside' characteristic to act beneath the 'outside'. (eg: 'manipulative' with 'charm'). Ask students to play the scene again. As they work, move around the group and listen. Select a few pairs who've made interesting choices to present their scene to the rest of the group. Discuss how this changes the dynamic of the scene.

Reflection

- Which lines stood out for you and why?
- What outer and inner characteristics seemed to work best, for what reason?
- Did different lines stand out in different interpretations?
- What do these lines say about Antonio and Bassanio's relationship?



The Merchant of Venice

Act 1 Scene 1 - Edited scene

BASSANIO To you, Antonio,
I owe the most, in money and in love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.

ANTONIO I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it;
My purse, my person, my extremest means,
Lie all unlock'd to your occasions.

BASSANIO I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth,
That which I owe is lost; but if you please
To shoot another arrow that self way
Which you did shoot the first

ANTONIO You know me well, and herein spend but time
To wind about my love with circumstance;
And I am prest unto it: therefore, speak.

BASSANIO In Belmont is a lady richly left;
Her name is Portia, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;
And many Jasons come in quest of her.
O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them

ANTONIO Try what my credit can in Venice do:
That shall be rack'd, even to the uttermost,
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.

Exploring Belmont



In Rupert Goold's production, Belmont is re-imagined as a TV game-show set, the reasons behind this choice is discussed in production designer Tom Scutt's interview included at the end of this pack.

In the production, selected Belmont scenes are divided into moments when the characters are live on camera, and when they are off-camera. The director and actors discussed which lines should be on camera and which should be off. The on-camera moments were designated to be more superficial while the off-camera moments more truthful.

In rehearsals, the director and actors watched and referenced different game shows, discussing how human behaviour changes when in front of a camera. They then used this understanding to make interpretive choices on how their characters would play the scene.

ACTIVITY: Lights, camera, action!



This activity uses Goold's idea of a game-show to explore elements of superficiality and emotional truth in Portia, Nerissa and Bassanio during Act 3 scene 2.

- Research and compile a selection of YouTube videos of people acting foolishly on game-shows. Select clips of hosts and audiences as well as contestants. Show these clips to your class. Discuss how behaviour changes when people are on camera.
- Explain Rupert Goold's ideas to your group and ask them to imagine that this activity will take place on a TV game-show set. Ask students to stand in a circle and say all together: 'Let the music sound as he does make his choice.' Ask them to say the line in a group as if they are:
 - 1) an overly enthusiastic audience member
 - 2) the super-slick host
 - 3) a contestantRepeat this exercise in the circle but explain that when you call out 'on air', the students will say the line, acting like they are being filmed as the host of the game-show, and when you call out 'off air', they can relax because they're not being filmed. Call out 'on air' and 'off air' a few times as they repeat the line, until the group can feel the difference. Encourage them to reflect the behaviour they saw in the YouTube videos. Discuss how each of the interpretations differ.
- Copy and distribute the edited scene on page 7. Explain that Bassanio is a contestant on a game-show where Portia is the prize. Ask students to stand in a circle and read the scene aloud around the circle, each person reading to the end of the verse line. Discuss any questions about the language.
- Ask students to walk around the room reading aloud only Portia's speech. Call out 'on air' and 'off air', telling them to respond by enacting the speech as if they are being filmed or not, as before. Continue until the entire speech has been read. Discuss: Were there any moments in the text that jarred with this approach, or any moments that worked well? If so, why?
- In pairs, ask students to mark on the page where they think Portia is inwardly reflecting 'off camera' and when she is outwardly showing off 'on camera'. Ask students to then try these choices on their feet, each taking a turn and discussing it with their partner.



Reflection

- How did the performance choices highlight thoughts or emotions Portia is feeling?

The Merchant of Venice

Act 3 Scene 2 – Edited scene

BASSANIO But let me to my fortune and the caskets.

PORTIA Away, then! I am lock'd in one of them:
If you do love me, you will find me out.
Nerissa and the rest, stand all aloof.
Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
Fading in music: that the comparison
May stand more proper, my eye shall be the stream
And watery death-bed for him. He may win;
And what is music then? Then music is
Even as the flourish when true subjects bow
To a new-crowned monarch. Now he goes,
With no less presence, but with much more love,
Than young Hercules, when he did redeem
The virgin tribute paid by howling Troy
To the sea-monster: I stand for sacrifice
The rest aloof are the Dardanian wives,
With bleared visages, come forth to view
The issue of the exploit. Go, Hercules!
Live thou, I live: with much, much more dismay
I view the fight than thou that makest the fray.

Shylock and Public Bullying



In this production, Shylock's famous speech starting 'To bait fish withal' is set in a cafe. The actors and director discussed how setting the scene in a public place heightened the sense of bullying. They aimed to emphasise the emotional truth of Shylock's speech in stark comparison to the public bullying.

ACTIVITY: Shylock in a cafe



The following activity explores the idea of public bullying taking Shylock as an example.

- Ask students to close their eyes. Explain that you are going to select one person to be the leader by touching their shoulder. Whoever is nominated leader must subtly and silently try to get other people to follow them as they walk around the room. Walk around the circle, touching *everyone's* shoulder, then ask them to open their eyes and walk around the room. Ask them to stop and tell them that you chose everyone! Discuss how they behaved.
- Repeat the exercise, but this time chose no-one. How did this change behaviour? If you feel like your class will not trust you a second time round after fooling them before, you can play the game by singling out just one person. However, by choosing no-one the second time round, there will be a more distinct difference to discuss.
- During rehearsals the company experimented with the idea of bullying Shylock by setting several scenes in public spaces. To explore this with your students, place a chair in the middle of the room and ask students to imagine they're in a cafe. Ask students to stand around the chair. Copy and distribute the text-scrap from this scene on page 9. Explain that these things are said to a man who is Jewish, who has lent money to a Christian, and whose daughter has run away with a Christian. Ask the students to shout the insults in any order to the empty chair. Discuss which words stand out the most.
- Chose a few students to be directors, asking them to place the entire group around the chair in order to create the most menacing atmosphere towards Shylock. Once set, ask the group to read through the text-scrap in the order they are written.
- Ask for a volunteer to say the insults – on their own - to the chair, while everyone else watches. Discuss the difference between the two exercises. Does having everyone in the scene change the nature of the insults as opposed to just one person onstage?
- Ask for a volunteer to sit in the chair, giving them a copy of Shylock's speech (see page 10). Tell the rest of the group they will repeat the insults exercise with everyone around the chair, but this time when the volunteer has had enough, they must break out and start speaking Shylock's speech. Play the scene. Repeat this, but with only one person saying the insults instead of a group. The rest of the group watches. Play the scene and then reflect:



Reflection

- Is Shylock's speech more or less powerful with the group?
- What impact would the speech have if it was said alone on stage?
- Do these staging choices affect the way you understand the language?

Bullying words

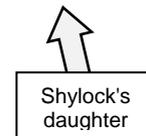
Out upon it, old carrion

Bring thee to the gallows

Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself:

Now, infidel, I have you on the hip.

There is more difference between thy flesh and hers
than between jet and ivory



It is the most impenetrable cur

Can no prayers pierce thee?

O, be thou damn'd, execrable dog!

Thy desires are wolfish, bloody, starved and ravenous

The Merchant of Venice

Act 3 Scene 1 – Edited speech

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Exchanging the rings



In rehearsals, the director and actors discussed the emotional responses of Portia and Nerissa when their husbands give away the rings. They explored how much of Portia and Nerissa's anger is real, and how much it is staged. When are they playing games with their husbands and when are they genuinely hurt?

ACTIVITY: Husbands and wives



- Explain the notion of 'stakes' in a scene (eg: a 'high stakes' moment would be being held up at gunpoint and a 'low stakes' moment would be deciding what to eat for lunch).
- Ask students get into pairs and introduce themselves to each other as if:
 - 1) They have never met
 - 2) They are concerned about making a good impression on the other person
 - 3) If the other person likes them, they might give them a million dollarsDiscuss how their behaviour changed when something was at stake.
Did they change their voice and/or posture?
- Copy and distribute Act 5 Scene 2 (see page 12).
Explain what happens in the scene: Portia and Nerissa are arguing with their husbands. They both gave a ring to their husband, telling him not to give it away. While in disguise as men, they meet their husbands and convince them to hand over the rings to their disguised selves. When they meet their husbands again, un-disguised, they are outraged to find that the rings are gone.
- Read through the scene in a circle, with each student reading out one line.
- Discuss what could be at stake in this scene for the women and the men.
Are they genuinely upset and is their marriage at stake?
Are they trying to teach their husbands a lesson? Or are they merely having fun?
- Put the class into groups of four. Label the groups A, B, or C.
Ask them to rehearse playing the scene as if:
A groups – The women are very upset and fear that their marriages are ruined
B groups – The women are teaching their husbands a lesson
C groups – The women are merely having fun
- After time for rehearsal, ask the groups to showcase their scenes.
Discuss the differences between the three different interpretations.
Now ask the groups to rehearse the scene again but this time they can use any interpretation they choose. Encourage them to mix their choices, showing that many different things can be happening inside a character's mind.
- Ask the groups to showcase their work, then reflect:



Reflection

- What kind of marriage do Portia and Nerissa have with their husbands?
- Which interpretation did the students prefer? Why?
- Did they make any discoveries as Portia and Nerissa's personalities?

The Merchant of Venice

Act 5 Scene 2 – Edited scene

PORTIA A quarrel, ho, already! what's the matter?

GRATIANO About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring
That she did give me,

NERISSA You swore to me, when I did give it you,
That you would wear it till your hour of death
You should have been respective and have kept it.
Gave it a judge's clerk! no, God's my judge,

GRATIANO Now, by this hand, I gave it to a youth,
A kind of boy, a little scrubbed boy,

PORTIA You were to blame, I must be plain with you,
To part so slightly with your wife's first gift:
I gave my love a ring and made him swear
Never to part with it; and here he stands;
I dare be sworn for him he would not leave it

GRATIANO My Lord Bassanio gave his ring away

PORTIA What ring gave you my lord?
Not that, I hope, which you received of me.

BASSANIO You see my finger
Hath not the ring upon it; it is gone.

PORTIA Even so void is your false heart of truth.
By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed
Until I see the ring.

NERISSA Nor I in yours
Till I again see mine.

Alternative Viewpoints

ACTIVITY: Different worlds



- Explain that *The Merchant of Venice* has been set in many different places. Run a Google image search to find a selection of different images from various productions. For RSC past productions: www.rsc.org.uk/explore/the-merchant-of-venice Show your students images from different productions.

- Read out the following quotes from actresses who have played Portia.

Sinead Cusack who played Portia in 1981 at the RSC said:

“ I finally worked out that the great problem for the actress playing Portia is to reconcile the girl at home in Belmont early in the play with the one who plays a Daniel come to judgement in the Venetian court. I couldn't understand why Shakespeare makes her so unsympathetic in those early scenes: the spoilt little rich girl dismissing suitor after suitor in a very derisory fashion. The girl who does that, I thought, is not the woman to deliver the "quality of mercy" speech. ”

Judi Dench who played Portia in 1970 at the RSC said:

“ I don't think there's anything to redeem those people, I'm afraid. Everybody behaves appallingly. As for all that about the ring at the end, I could give Portia a good slap. ”

- Read out the following quotes from actors who have played Shylock.

David Suchet who played Shylock in 1981 at the RSC said:

“ I would interpret Shylock as an outsider, not who happens to be a Jew, but because [he is] a Jew. The Jewish element is unavoidably very important. He's only actually called by his name Shylock six times, [he is called] Jew twenty two. ”

Ian Bartholomew who played Shylock in 2001 said:

“ Shylock is a very complex character; he's an alien in a world where he's forced to put up with insults and intolerance just to do his job. ”

- Now tell students they will stand up to vote on what they would say the play is about, using a scale from 1 to 10. They must move to one side of the room for '1' meaning 'very strongly agree', and the other side for '10' meaning 'very strongly disagree', or stand in a position in between to represent their view.

You, as leader, read out:

The Merchant of Venice is a play about:

- ... love?
- ... bullying?
- ... superficiality?
- ... lots of nice people?
- ... lots of nasty people?

Reflection

- Why did they make their decisions?
- Are there any other themes they think are present in the play?

Interview with Tom Scutt

This is an edited transcript of Tom Scutt, Designer of *The Merchant of Venice* talking to Liisa Spink for RSC Education in April 2011. Reading selections of this interview to your class is a good way to introduce some of the choices made in rehearsal rooms explored within this resource pack. Tom also gives the basis for a design activity within the interview; it is identified by the activity icon.

Liisa: What was the starting point for designing *The Merchant of Venice*?

Tom: We [Rupert Goold and I] first started talking about *Merchant* in Newcastle when transferring our last show [re-staging a show in a different theatre]. We both agreed that it's very easy to be cynical about the play and about the characters within it. It's very hard to love any of them because there is no-one who Shakespeare allows to be completely pure. There is always one point where you question their motives and their desires. Shakespeare holds no prisoners in this play, you question everybody. So it's hard to find out whose story it is you're meant to be identifying with.

We also talked about caricatures, racial stereotypes and stereotypes in general. Shakespeare's characters embody these in various ways and we talked about how to exploit that. It's a controversial play – often very offensive and aggressive – after all, it was designed to be a comedy and we thought it wrong to shy away from the confrontational jokes that Shakespeare writes. Rupert envisaged Shylock in Jewish caricatured costume – a fake nose and ringlets – begging the question do these stereotypes come from within or are they imposed on us?

So from there we tried to find a setting for these ideas. A world that delivers vastly different characters; a world of eccentricity and volatility; somewhere that venom and malice can lurk under a pantomimic veneer. Las Vegas was very quickly on his lips.

We went on to talk about gambling and worth - what is your body worth; what are your loved ones worth; what is your daughter, your family, your jewels worth; how much do you value things? There is the speech from Bassanio about ornament [see page 18] where he identifies that the world is still obsessed with ornament and that one should look for the 'lead' in things rather than the gold or silver. Vegas seemed like the perfect setting for this speech to resonate. It is a world that has 'stars in its eyes'; entranced with beautiful things; things they think are beautiful but maybe aren't. That linked back to the idea of caricature, dress up and what's underneath.

Vegas works because it is a world that encourages stereotype and caricature. In order to survive in it, you have to be the big-busted waitress in hot pants; the pimp with the suit, gold teeth and bling; the centurion at Caesar's Palace; the Egyptian at the MGM. So in our version, you have a Shylock who is trying to fit into a world that resists him and forces him to become a Jewish stereotype. His appearance doesn't fit with the traditional Orthodox Jewish appearance but he is forced into it by the world in which he exists - the world makes people polarise themselves. So at the end, in the trial, you have him wearing the yamaka, and the prayer shawl. He becomes a Jewish character through the play.

In a way all this Vegas dress-up – especially in the 'masque' scenes – may seem a superficial idea but in a way that's entirely the point! Portia is the prize in the Belmont TV game-show *Destiny*. She is seemingly artificial, living a sheltered, plasticised, bubble-wrapped existence like a Barbie; a Jordan; a



Britney. That glazed porcelain face of beauty pageant; an object of obsession and superficial desire. The tension comes when we play with how that artifice breaks and what happens when her cushioned life is ripped open.

How much do you go back to the text to find inspiration for the world you are creating?

There are always two or three key lines or speeches that really speak to me in Shakespeare. Returning to the text throughout the process is very interesting because suddenly some parts that you've never noticed before will speak to you in light of the concept that's been developed.

Interestingly, few of those lines with this production have been Shylock's – it is Portia's story that really speaks to me. Shylock's story becomes a shocking catalyst for Portia's growing awareness of the real world. Lines in rehearsals leap out at you that you have never heard before because you realise how the setting is illuminating these lines and that's when it becomes exciting, because the world you've developed allows people to hear things that have never resonated before.

For me, Bassanio's speech is the pivot point of the entire production. When I designed *Merchant* in 2008 in Bolton, it was a very leaden show. It was totally valid at the time and I took very different things from the text to develop it, but I learned that the main problem one can fall into with *Merchant* is that you will automatically take it very seriously because of the weighty subject matter of racism. That is tricky because it jumps the gun and, I think, what needs to happen with the play is that the audience needs to be disarmed by laughter. Comedy is potentially the strongest way of getting to the heart of the play's gravity. I think that there are a few points where the audience has the rug pulled from underneath them. The pivot point halfway through is Bassanio's speech.

Is this over-the-top, visually-saturated world tied back to the original conversation you had with Rupert where you were cynical about the play and taking it to the extreme?

It comes down to the initial feeling that we both got from reading the text. It's also a response to what I've seen; what Rupert has seen; what we've both done, and the perceived notion of the play - trying to get people to see it in a different way.

It is an offensive and cynical play, it's not just racially offensive, it's also very sexist. What we've produced amplifies this. It's an embarrassingly sexist world: waitresses, bum-slapping and fake boobs everywhere. It's a very masculine world.

This production highlights the sexist attitude present in Shakespeare's play. No-one ever questions the fact that Portia's dad has given her this life sentence of having to marry who he picks from the grave. It's bizarre; even in death men have a hold over women, and it's a man who 'wins' Portia as a prize. That is something that I have never seen highlighted in a production. It's the elephant in the room because it is always the racism that takes precedence, and actually the sexism is just as important.

Did you notice that the production has changed to this sexist emphasis during rehearsals?

The rehearsal room had become somewhat 'blokey', yes! You can smell the testosterone among the blackjack tables, drinks and card-playing. There are plenty of platform heels and miniskirts too. It's unlike any rehearsal room I've ever been in before!

The world affects the process a lot. The giggles and the girliness; the crude jokes and the blokieness - it is polarised. How the world of the play opens up like this can be quite uncomfortable. But the concept only truly works if you push it as far as it can go. There is no amount of stripping back that helps our Vegas setting: it has to be more and more in order for the crash to make sense at the end; the emptiness. It's totally pantomimic and that's unnerving. Just as unnerving as it is to watch Portia portrayed as an inane, seemingly stupid manifestation of male fantasies...

Do you think the play supports that?

I don't think it fights against it. I think Rupert and Susie [the actress playing Portia] have found a brilliant way through it. We are so used to seeing Portia depicted as a wise figure, full of self awareness and dry wit, so it's hard initially to get your head around this new creation. What's brilliant

is that Portia's naivety in our production allows her to talk directly from her heart. The 'quality of mercy' speech therefore comes from a place of complete innocence and connection with God, pure Christian thought.

Do you approach Shakespeare differently than you would a modern playwright?

Yes, massively. But then I find that I approach Shakespeare differently with different directors as well. It's a variable from play to play rather than type-of-play to type-of-play so there are always going to be different stresses.

I enjoy designing Shakespeare because he does allow you to look at the world from a very poetic view. His humanist studies ask you to examine our relationship with the heavens; the earth; what's below the ground; what's coming in on the wind and essentially focus on the elements as prime mover for action.

I often try to link a Shakespeare play to an element; I think it's often at the root of the plays, especially *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is a study of man's attachment to fire, water, air, earth... dust, stars, soil, burning, melting, drowning...so your design process can take you to some wildly exciting places. *Merchant* is an interesting one. There is virtually no talk about these elements. It's predominantly about weight; the body; amounts, measurements and worth. It feels like a conditioned environment that is out of touch with the natural world. It feels very interior and fake.

I'm sure it is very deliberate that the only real effort Shakespeare makes to let the play connect to nature is in the final scene. After the eye-opening trial scene in which a terribly inhuman act is performed upon Shylock, the sky opens up in Belmont and the remaining lovers are forced to scrutinise their decisions under the glare of heaven.

Nature finally comes in to it at the end?

Yes. In *King Lear*, the storm hits and it's a point of realisation; it's the same in *The Tempest*. The eye-opener really doesn't come in *Merchant* until the end when it's ultimately too late. I'm sure that it's deliberate. So the one thing I will try and do, whatever and whomever I work with on a Shakespeare play, is try and draw out these metaphorical acts of natural intervention.

Other performances of *The Merchant of Venice* try to distinguish between Belmont and Vegas, in your production they seem to be set in very similar worlds...

In my last production of *Merchant*, people very much wanted to distinguish between the two places, Venice and Belmont. The design focussed on the difference between gold, silver and lead to portray Belmont, Venice and the court respectively. It was helpful for the storytelling but my realisation was that it's not strictly necessary. Bassanio needs to be 'furnished' to Belmont; he needs Antonio's money to get there. That's the primary thrust of the story so it's easy to get hung up on the fact that Belmont needs to be hard to get to and far away. In this production, Antonio's money is used by Bassanio to pay to get on the *Destiny* game-show. There is still a strong sense of the other-worldly about Belmont here but yes, both Venice and Belmont do share a similar focus and drive: money, commerce, superficiality, desire.

Why did you choose a game-show?

It was crying out for it in Vegas! The three caskets - gold, silver and lead, the hyperbolic language Portia employs, the tension of the decision-making for the suitors - or contestants! It's got *Deal or No Deal* and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* written all over it!

It's also the perfect platform to pull the rug out from beneath people's feet. What happens when the prize is won? What happens to this vacuous world when the filming stops? I think that's when Act 5 Scene 1 the final scene really comes into its own, because they are back in Belmont but there's nothing. What is it? It's just the sky and the stars.



What are the elements you looked at behind the choice of Vegas? If someone were to try and set the play in their own country, what are the ingredients they would be looking for?

Money; how money is generated in that world; where is the heart of that cesspit!
Where do greed, daring, racism and sexism find their home?
That is what a casino is - it's a temple to all those things. It enforces all those stereotypes.
The game-show makes an icon of this poor girl in a blonde wig and stupid high-heels and presents her to the world as a model prize.

Maybe it would be interesting to see the play from a more forgiving point of view. Is it possible to present a lighter world with hope?

Another good thing to look at is whose story it is. It's a completely different play if you take it as Jessica's story, Portia's story, Bassanio's story. Antonio, the 'merchant of Venice' of the title, is often sidelined. The play carries his name and yet he tends to get pushed to the side. This poor guy sets the world in motion and then does nothing. It would be interesting to focus on his journey more.

Could you go into a more psychological, interior world for any of those characters and make it more an abstract thing, an expression of those people's minds? It might not just be finding a real-world context to set it in, like in a bank or a jail; it might be about looking at the safes within that bank, and setting in within a safe, or the chips of the casino, or the gaming tables. The play raises more abstract ways of presenting ideas.

A good thing to study in relation to this production is how you play the comedy. I have never seen it done successfully. It often comes across as quite a dark play. It can dangerously pre-empt the tragedy. How can the designer help to avoid this? How do you make it come as a shock or surprise? It is by creating somewhere where people are having a great time?

Can you set it in a playground, a fair, a gym? Where is there energy, bounce and vigour?

Alternative designs are probably a lot more elegant than what we have, because our casino is so unbelievably trashy! But I hope it will serve the comedy. It jars heavily with the design of the RST [Royal Shakespeare Theatre]. Normally I'd aim to do something that marries with the space but the design, like the play, needs to kick against the norm.

Does the theatre's design affect your designs?

Yes massively, you try to make the show make sense with the building.

Because of the nature of the RSC theatres - The Courtyard, The Swan, The RST - you normally get wooden floors, slate floors, grey, black, natural earth. It's all about above and below; a microcosm for the heavens and hell. It all lends itself to earth: bare stones, bare brick spaces. For instance Tom Piper's *Macbeth* will completely feel like that, the whole space unites together and it's stunning. You just can't do that with Vegas! So what you get is bare brick right next to gaudy electric light bulbs and bright blue floors. Brassy walls and palm trees. It should be quite aggressive, but hopefully that will invigorating and liberating...

Tom, thank you!

The Merchant of Venice

Extract from Act 5 Scene 2

This speech is referred to by Tom Scutt in the interview above.

Bassanio So may the outward shows be least themselves:
The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
There is no vice so simple but assumes
Some mark of virtue on his outward parts:
How many cowards, whose hearts are all as false
As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins
The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars;
Who, inward search'd, have livers white as milk;
And these assume but valour's excrement
To render them redoubted! Look on beauty,
And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight;
Which therein works a miracle in nature,
Making them lightest that wear most of it:
So are those crisped snaky golden locks
Which make such wanton gambols with the wind,
Upon supposed fairness, often known
To be the dowry of a second head,
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre.
Thus ornament is but the guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea; the beauteous scarf
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest. Therefore, thou gaudy gold,
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge
'Tween man and man: but thou, thou meagre lead,
Which rather threatenest than dost promise aught,
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence;
And here choose I; joy be the consequence!

All photos by Ellie Kurtz © RSC