

Scary Shakespeare

Steve Vineberg

The Merchant of Venice,
directed by Trevor Nunn,
London, 2000.

Macbeth,
directed by Gregory Doran,
New Haven, 2000.

ANY YOUNG stage director with half an eye would kill for Trevor Nunn's spatial sense. In his production of *The Merchant of Venice* at London's National Theatre, he uses the broad Olivier stage, an ensemble of thirty-one, and Hildegard Bechtler's ingenious set—three wheeled art deco rectangles that constantly reconfigure themselves on a handsome marbled floor—to sketch environments vastly different in humor as well as style. In this version, set in the 1930s, the circle of hedonistic, irresponsible young Christian men who gather around the profligate young Bassanio (Alexander Hanson)—along with his melancholic, middle-aged mentor Antonio (David Bamber), who inevitably picks up their bills—hang out at a raucous club roughly on the edge of Venice's demi-monde (you think, inevitably, of *Cabaret's* Kit Kat Klub), where the patrons get up at the microphone and provide their own entertainment. This is where Bassanio invites Shylock (Henry Goodman) after Antonio has agreed to the Jewish moneylender's infamous bond—his money against a pound of flesh—to furnish funds for Bassanio's courtship of Portia (Derbhle Crotty). Confused by the layout of the club, Shylock stumbles into the spotlight in the middle of a stand-up routine his former servant Launcelot Gobbo (Michael Wildman) is performing at his expense, complete with imitations of the old Jew. Bassanio and his friends manage to guide Shylock away without his quite realizing what he's interrupted, and they smooth things over again when he overhears Lorenzo (Jack James), one of their crowd, murmur words of praise about his daughter Jessica (Gabrielle Jourdan).

This scene is a triumph of staging panache: Nunn employs the playing area as a physical metaphor for the clash of the Christian and Jewish worlds. Shylock is so glaringly out of his element that he keeps bumping up against invisible walls—walls that the Christian youths can slip through just as the spirits penetrate glass in Cocteau's *Orpheus*. And on their familiar terrain they have the power to confound him. His world is the house he lives in with Jessica; whenever we see him unlock his front door, the massive space between it and the edge of the stage suggests the distance between him and his Christian neighbors. We grow accustomed to the sound of the lock and chain as he shuts it behind him;

when he returns home after Jessica's departure with Lorenzo and finds it open, the moment has so much dramatic force that you can hear the audience suck in its collective breath. Of course, we've already seen the elopement—Jessica scaling the roof of the house as if the only way to escape the suffocating grasp of her father's closed world were somehow to transcend it.

The two worlds meet, uneasily, on the Rialto, Venice's financial district, a wide, undelineated space where Shylock and his adversaries pass each other formally. Their mutual hatred is expressed in silence—except for the times when the hotheaded young Christians, loyal to Antonio after the loss of his ships dooms him to the vengeful terms of the moneylender's bond, pursue Shylock to scream abuse after him, or when Antonio, under arrest, dogs him to his door in a single fruitless effort to beg for mercy. The only place where we feel a mood of genuine warmth is Portia's gracious Belmont estate, where the light is softer (the superb lighting is by Peter Mumford) and where we get the only scant glimpses of any color outside Bechtler's elegantly somber brown-and-black palette. And even here Nunn distinguishes between the expansive salons and the lawns and the pool on one hand and, on the other, the cool, shrine-like room where Portia's suitors ponder which of three caskets contains her portrait—a test of their worthiness, formulated by her now-dead father—while she kneels apart. The god that watches over their selection is Eros; the caskets stand in the shadow of Klimt's *The Kiss*. Nunn's visual ideas are simply amazing. I can't recall a single scene in this *Merchant of Venice* that didn't prompt me to think, My God, this director is a genius.

Of course, there's more to a successful revival of *The Merchant of Venice* than a gift for image-making, even as prodigious a gift as Trevor Nunn's. It may not be too much to say that, at this point in history, any director who attempts to mount *The Merchant* puts his or her reputation on the line. No one's tried it in New York in years, because it isn't worth the stream of letters pouring into the *Sunday Times* protesting it as a vicious, unsalvageable piece of anti-Semitism, and many scholars probably just wish Shakespeare had never written it. You can argue—I certainly would—that it's a reflection of an anti-Jewish culture, and that to write it off is a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, like dismissing *The Birth of a Nation* as racist propaganda. The difference is that, unlike D.W. Griffith—whose name the Directors Guild of America recently removed, in an act of consummate stupidity, from its annual award—Shakespeare's entire oeuvre hasn't been

reduced to a single unfortunate prejudice. Better just to pretend *The Merchant* is an aberration; better to pretend it doesn't exist.

Indeed, if you do revive this play you can't avoid addressing the implications of the text. Shakespeare constructed it as a romantic comedy where the menace of Shylock's bond is the anti-comic element standing in the way of a consummation of the romance—like the Athenian law in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that prevents Hermia from rebelling against her father's choice of husband for her, or the tyrant Duke and homicidal brother who compel the flight to the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. In *The Merchant* the narrative strategy is masked slightly by the one-step removal of the lovers, Bassanio and Portia, from the Shylock plot: it's Antonio and not Bassanio who stands in deadly danger of Shylock's vengeance—Antonio, not Bassanio, is the title character. But the fact that he's risked his life in order to unite his friend with the object of his desire effectively collapses the two storylines, as the play confirms when Portia, disguised as a doctor of laws, solves the legal problem for Bassanio and saves Antonio's life. The cross-dressing (Portia's maid Nerissa also puts on drag for the role of the lawyer's clerk) is, of course, another trademark of this genre. We don't tend to think of the play as a comedy because of the scandal its treatment of Shylock's Jewishness has brought, increasingly, through the centuries, and even if that weren't the case, the Shylock material is so heavy that it throws the comedy out of whack in a way that even the most serious parts of, say, *Much Ado About Nothing* don't. Still, you can see that's how Shakespeare thought of it: after Shylock's failure to extract his bond subjects him to the judgment of the Venetian court and he loses both his estate and his religion, the play sweeps him out of the way for a merry fifth act in which Portia and Nerissa (Ceri Ann Gregory) torment their husbands, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano (Richard Henders), over their having given away their wedding rings as payment to the lawyer and his clerk. Shylock is barely mentioned in Act Five; he exists merely as an unpleasant memory.

Despite Shakespeare's misjudgment of the Shylock story, if you play the play straight it can work on some level. The BBC televised a production in 1972 with Frank Finlay as Shylock and Maggie Smith as Portia, directed by Cedric Messina, that is dramatically satisfying (and, as you might guess, beautifully acted)—or it would be satisfying if you were willing to overlook the fact that the prime element of Shylock's villainy is his Jewishness. We can't, of course; that's why most of us would prefer Jonathan Miller's famous National Theatre production, televised in 1974, where Laurence Olivier (in one of his unforgettable Shakespearean performances) plays a tragic Shylock opposite Joan Plowright's Portia. In order to effect the sympathetic shift, Miller has to wrench the play out of its romantic-comedy structure: the specter of Shylock's double loss—of his daughter to a Christian husband, and of his own Jewish identity when the Duke of Venice compels him to turn Christian

himself—is the obstinate cloud that hangs over the fifth act. Miller doesn't end with Gratiano's last-laugh vow, "Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring," but with Jessica, left alone on stage with the letter that assures her and Lorenzo of half her father's court-pilfered wealth. And off camera we hear Olivier chant the mourner's kaddish—the Jewish lament for the dead, which an orthodox father would have recited in the event of his child's marrying out of the faith. So the final voice we hear isn't that of a lover reunited with his bride, but Shylock's.

In his version Nunn does something different, and more complicated. Like Miller, he faces the problem straight on: he makes the production about racial hatred. The young men's jibes at Shylock have probably never been presented in a nastier light, and David Bamber's demeanor in Antonio's exchanges with Shylock makes it clear that the very sight of the Jew sickens him. Shakespeare provides the reason: Antonio's deep moral objections to one man's growing rich on the financial misfortunes of another. (In the scheme of the play, Jewish equals avaricious.) Nunn layers the ground of their enmity by giving Shylock as much motive for his abhorrence of Antonio as Antonio has for spitting on Shylock on the Rialto. This goes beyond his complaints—which come across as whining in the text—that he's the target of Antonio's publicly demonstrated revulsion; Nunn and Henry Goodman (whose performance has won deserved plaudits) evoke a legacy of abuse. For example, when Jessica mentions to her father before he departs for the evening that there will be masquers in the street that evening, Shylock—affectionate and kind with her only a moment earlier—abruptly slaps her across the face and demands that she lock the door against these revelers. You sense what's altered Shylock's tone: his experience tells him that when young Christian men in a carnival mood venture near a Jewish neighborhood, it's time to worry about a pogrom. Nunn makes sure we understand that there's no one, and no place, that hasn't been tainted by racial hatred. Even Portia, the character we like the best, isn't free from it: her major objection to one of her suitors, the Prince of Morocco (Chu Omambala), is his complexion, and in this production the Prince of Aragon is such a caricature of Spanish mannerism that she can scarcely restrain her giggles. (Neither can we: Raymond Coulthard is hilarious in the part.) I confess I didn't get how a black Launcelot Gobbo played into this concept, and the lengthy exchange between Michael Wildman's Launcelot and Oscar James as his "sand-blind" West Indian dad confused me. There may be something here not immediately accessible to an American theatergoer about the assimilation of a second-generation black man into a racist English society; in any case, Wildman and the Launcelot Gobbo scenes left me cold.

Unlike Olivier, Goodman makes no attempt to soften Shylock's edges—and, with all due deference to Olivier, it's easier to imagine how Goodman's Shylock has not merely survived but prospered in the iniquitous Venetian environment. (What the two perfor-

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mances share is a kind of show-biz caniness—an embedded sense of Shylock as a Yiddish Theater creation.) Goodman wants us to understand this man, but he isn't interested in making us like him. And really, how could we like a moneylender who publicly sharpens his knife to carve up his enemy? Our *wanting* to like him—to contradict the ugly truth in the script—is the impulse that Nunn keeps undermining (when, for example, Goodman's Shylock slaps his daughter, who hasn't deserved it). The production places Jessica in the middle of the conflict. Her bitter, brooding widower father, with his unpredictable changes of mood, has provided exactly the kind of home you can imagine any young woman flying from at her earliest opportunity. And though Lorenzo's world, as Nunn portrays it, is darkened with its own hatreds, it's a warmer one than her father's ghetto-like house, where she's a caged bird. But her lover's world frightens her, and she hangs back, clinging to him, whenever he brings her into his friends' company. It's only in Belmont that she's able to relax and enjoy, for the first time in her life, a little luxury. (Nunn shows her at the pool, tasting her first moments of unrestrained physical pleasure.) She responds gratefully to Portia's kindly solicitousness, surprising her hostess by throwing her arms around her. But the final moments of the production confirm that conversion and Lorenzo's obvious adoration of her can't wear away her Jewish soul. Perhaps in tribute to Miller and Olivier, Nunn ends his production with Jessica and a song: she echoes, with escalating passion, a Jewish ballad we heard her father sing with her earlier.

Nunn keeps us in a state of imbalance about Bassanio's crowd: just when we think we're meant to despise them for their anti-semitic jibes, we can't help being swept up by their loyalty and their companionability. Richard Henders's Gratiano embodies this duality, perhaps, more than anyone else. He's an incessant celebrant, the clown at every gathering; he makes his first entrance snickered, with his pants around his ankles. When he begs Bassanio to take him along to Belmont, Bassanio has to remind him to censor himself in Portia's company. (He ends up astonishing everyone, including himself, and falling in love.) But though Gratiano almost always goes too far, his aggressively masculine party-animal demeanor isn't repugnant; the way Henders plays him—superbly, I think—he's like a high school student you're forever catching in the middle of some idiotic behavior but whose dumb jests crack you up despite yourself. Since Nunn has to deconstruct the play in some way to make it acceptable to today's audiences, it would be easier for him to make Gratiano in particular and the young men in general dislikable—easier for him and easier, certainly, for us. But he doesn't, just as he doesn't make Shylock likable.

What he does instead is something much tougher: he refuses to resolve the issue. In the courtroom scene, he strips this world down to its meanest, ugliest components—and it's Shylock, with his insistence on carrying through his preposterous bond, who really does the stripping. Everyone expects him to show pity for Antonio at the last

moment—the Duke, Bassanio (who comes bearing Portia's checkbook), even Portia herself in her lawyer's disguise. Only Antonio expects no better from him, and that's the terrible irony in Shylock's stance: he confirms the Christian's worst perception of him. In every other version of this play I've seen, Portia marches into the courtroom, romantic-comic heroine that she is, with the solution to the problem of the bond in her head, pulling it out when her "quality of mercy" speech fails to stir Shylock. The Portia of Derbhle Crotty (a very skillful performer with a lovely Elizabeth McGovern quality) enters the courtroom in the spirit of play, so naive that she hasn't a clue what she'll find there. And really, since she's sent her husband ahead with as much money at hand as she imagines would satisfy any man in Shylock's position, logically she has no reason to think that any other measures will be necessary. So Crotty reads this famous set-piece speech as a desperate improvisation, and when Shylock rejects her plea for mercy, she's stuck. She comes up with the solution—the bond Shylock obsessively sticks to says nothing about taking any blood along with his pound of flesh—at the very last minute, when the moneylender has his knife against Antonio's bared breast. This choice permits Nunn to make the courtroom scene not only unbearably suspenseful, but also naked: violent and charged with hatred. (Among the emotions Nunn churns up is Antonio's sexual love for Bassanio, which he makes recklessly obvious because he figures it's his last moment on earth and he has nothing to lose. David Bamber, whose style is reminiscent of Tom Courtenay's, manages to take his portrayal of the world-weary Antonio right to the edge and even over it without losing us.) At the end, when Portia's quick thinking has rescued him and Antonio names Shylock's punishment for conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, the Christian and the Jew face off, and the depth of their abhorrence for each other makes you tremble. It has the same effect on Portia, who looks like a woman who's peered into hell. Shakespeare can whisk us away to the peace of moneyed Belmont, but in this production we stumble toward it. We feel we've just been through a war, and nothing can ever be the same again.

IT'S EASY to understand why it's so tough to mount a successful *Merchant of Venice*. A thornier puzzle would be to fathom why—beyond the explanations hazarded by theatrical superstition—it's so difficult to make *Macbeth* work in performance. A play so thrilling when you read it that it bounds ahead of you, its language hot-blooded, granite-sculpted, it's more often a bitter letdown in the theater than *Hamlet* or even *Lear*, both of which are less taut and more complex. The recent infamous New York production with Kelsey Grammer was only one of many disastrous *Macbeths*; in fact, it wasn't close to the worst I've sat through. (That hokey prize would go to the one Christopher Plummer and Glenda Jackson starred in more than a decade ago, which threw off directors like a snake sheds its skin; when I

caught up with it, the program listed no one as director, and that's what it looked like.)

So a good *Macbeth* is a cause for celebration. And even if you discount a special case like the movie *Throne of Blood*, Akira Kurosawa's samurai version, there have been a few. Roman Polanski's 1971 film, strongly influenced by the work of the Polish critic Jan Kott, was a highly specialized interpretation of the play. Soaked in mid-century politics and the blood of the Sharon Tate killings, with a young, eroticized pair of protagonists and witchy visions like acid hallucinations, it was nonetheless powerful, and three decades after Manson and Altamont and My Lai, it still holds up. Trevor Nunn directed Ian McKellen and Judi Dench in a legendary production at Stratford-on-Avon in 1976 that, luckily for us, is preserved in a BBC telecast made two years later. In Nunn's *Macbeth*—as in most modern settings of the play, including Polanski's—the Weird Sisters are provokers rather than supernatural inventors; the corruption lies deep in the bosoms of the cruel Thane and his lady, not in the fog and filthy air of the heath above the battlefield where *Macbeth's* heroism earns him the title of the fallen Cawdor, whose traitor's heart he appropriates along with his "borrowed" robes. Yet when *Macbeth* murders the saintly, snowy-haired Duncan (Griffith Jones), there can be no doubt that he's delivered himself up to the forces of evil. The Witches, painting the black cross of the coven on his forehead and back, pouring sticky goo down his gullet and waving *tricky figures before his eyes* that his "heat-figgured" brain converts into phantoms, are mere stand-ins for the evil in his soul. And though in the aftermath of the regicide he proves himself as chillingly efficient a killer on the throne of Scotland as he was in battle, though he and his wife are true partners in darkness—stung into sexual desire by their bloody actions like the blighted couple in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*—still the serpent ends up swallowing them whole. The key to this *Macbeth* is the image of McKellen and Dench left alone on stage after the banquet fiasco, stranded even from each other by the horror they've precipitated. "We are but young in deed," he tells her ominously; the nightmare has only begun. Nunn's *Macbeth*, with its unforgettable pair of performances, is about the wages of murder.

You can see Nunn's influence on the riveting *Macbeth* Gregory Doran staged for the Royal Shakespeare Company last November, which visited New Haven's Long Wharf Theater in June as part of the International Festival of Arts and Ideas. You can see it especially in Antony Sher's portrayal of the title character. Sher—compact, muscular, with a thick Disraeli beard and eyes like coals—is an earthy, pragmatic *Macbeth*, a *Macbeth* who, like McKellen's, is so grounded in the brutish realities of his warrior life that it's a shock to him when, as soon as he plots to murder Duncan, he loses control of his imagination. The air-drawn dagger, the inability to pray, the voice that cries, "Sleep no more," and finally the ghost at the banquet—these are totems that his realist's mind never con-

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ceived of until he crossed the line from serving his king to betraying him. But though Sher's Macbeth is linked to McKellen's, Doran backs him by underscoring the military side of the play, and that's entirely his idea. Taiko drums sound a tattoo as Macbeth's and Banquo's men, beret-clad, their faces smeared with camouflage dirt, march from the field, literally singing out their praises for their commanders' bravery. (Adrian Lee and Joji Hirota play the live music Lee wrote especially for this production.) Later, when Macbeth whips up a pair of men to hunt down Banquo (Ken Bones) and his young son Fleance (Ben Inigo-Jones), his rough words ("Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men, / As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs, / Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves are clept / All by the name of dogs") have the familiar ring of a drill sergeant's abuse.

This *Macbeth* starts out as a spy story and winds up as a horror show. The Macbeths are a pair of conspirators whispering tensely in the near-dark, turning suddenly silent in the presence of servants, chanting "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" in unison like a mantra to keep them focused. But both Stephen Brimson Lewis's set and Tim Mitchell's lighting suggest a realm beyond their power. They're continually dwarfed by their environment—by the silvery mesh that hovers over the bare stage and the drawbridge that clatters down from the back wall, by the shadows that devour the space in some scenes. Lady Macbeth (Harriet Walter), reading her husband's letter detailing the Weird Sisters' prophecies, paces the length of the stage, while webs of heavy light cross-hatch her path. Evil takes a more distinct form in Doran's production than in Nunn's—it walks the earth, and as the play proceeds, the Macbeths get increasingly spooked. The centerpiece sequence is Macbeth's second encounter with the Witches, whom he seeks when Banquo's ghost disturbs him at the feast. He rushes off, leaving his wife alone in a candle-lit chamber. Though she's berated him repeatedly for his weakness, his capacity for falling prey to imagined phantoms, she stops at the edge of the room to turn back abruptly in a kind of involuntary shudder, as if she too might have heard spectral footsteps. As soon as she's gone, the candles on the table blow out mysteriously and the opening lines of the second Witches' scene resound in the darkness: "Thrice the brindled cat hath mewed, / Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whined." It takes a few moments for the audience to register that the Weird Sisters are hidden under the table. They knock it on its side, swaying and grasping the upright legs like ballast in a tempest-tossed boat. The spirits they conjure at Macbeth's behest are faces trapped behind the elastic upstage wall, like the terrifying demonic images in the film *The Frighteners*.

The inventive theatricality of this production is its most memorable element, but almost everything else about it is terrific, too. It's played at a break-neck two hours and ten minutes (no intermission); the violence escalates so fast that you barely have time to breathe. Banquo's and Macduff's children make an early appearance as

guests at the banquet honoring Duncan's visit to the Macbeth castle, so they're on hand when his murder is discovered, reminding us that the most appalling manifestation of Macbeth's tyranny over Scotland once he usurps its throne will be his murderous attacks on these innocents. As he greets Fleance playfully, we wonder what kind of monster could send a pair of hit men out to cut down a little boy to whom he's clearly been a kind of surrogate uncle. Later, inquiring of Banquo where he and his son plan to ride that afternoon, Macbeth grabs Fleance and holds him to his chest while his father, understanding the implied threat, looks on in horror. The Macduff castle slaughter—surely the most upsetting scene in Shakespeare, with the possible exception of the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*—is staged in front of a clothesline where Lady Macduff's wash, glistening white, hangs drying in the sun. (Auburn-haired Diane Beck is a gritty, quick-witted Lady Macduff.) Her fearlessly outspoken son (Alistair Strong) eavesdrops behind the laundry when Ross (Paul Webster) warns her she's in danger. Fresh from his bath, he's wrapped in a towel; only moments later, a clot of red on the white weave tells us that one of the murderers has claimed his young life.

The production has a few flaws. A Brechtian Porter (played by Stephen Noonan), delivering his soliloquy as stand-up, with contemporary interpolations (such as a Clinton reference), has the undesirable effect of dissipating the tension rather than enhancing it. (Nunn made the same mistake.) Sher's reading of the "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech is remarkable, and the staging and lighting are very striking—he enters the audience, his figure silhouetted on the back wall—but I have no idea what they're supposed to mean. The final battle is a little (uncharacteristically) clumsy. And, like Bob Peck's Macduff in the Nunn version, Nigel Cooke gives a highly technical performance that doesn't touch the emotional layer of the role. (So far no Macduff I've seen has come close to Dan O'Herlihy's—a single patch of brilliance in the misbegotten 1948 Orson Welles movie.) Otherwise I have nothing but admiration for this latest RSC *Macbeth*—for Harriet Walter's eerie, expressive performance (especially in the sleepwalking scene), for the ensemble work, for the fresh touches. Lady Macbeth washes the battle dirt from her husband's face, setting up a motif that will be picked up in the allusions to the guilty blood that no water can wash away; Macduff is obviously, though silently, incredulous when Macbeth, all rhetoric, verbalizes his alleged dismay at Duncan's death and offers his outrage as an excuse for having dispatched the bloodstained guards. This is a gripping, resourceful production. The colleague who alerted me to it brought his twelve-year-old and his nine-year-old along, and when the lights came up I glanced down to see the kids were bright-eyed with excitement. It struck me that they'll probably always remember their first *Macbeth*—a haunted-house *Macbeth* with an electric current running through it. Chances are, too, that they'll love Shakespeare for the rest of their lives. □

Broadway Revival

What were my lines?
 The spotlight on my face
 made everything pitch
 black beyond the stage,
 invisible.
 Encased in light, I was alone
 and looked at.
 The air too thick with heat, too bright.

What were my lines?
 The packed house held its breath.
 Who was I playing?
 And why were you there
 watching
 from the wings,
 the script I somehow
 knew you had
 by heart
 splayed
 open in your palm,
 one finger pointing
 to the very words
 I couldn't
 for the life of me
 remember?

Wasn't this your
 stage, your part,
 your one
 and only
 home, you liked to say,
 where speech was song,
 and movement dance and
 you were most
 at ease, a "natural,"
 most truly who
 you were
 when you were someone else?
 Tell me,
 I whispered through clenched
 teeth,
 tell me my lines.

And did the silence mean
 you were enjoying this?
 Or were we both
 in being there that way
 just following another
 script
 in which
 my lines were
 these, and yours
 your silence,
 as if
 the theater were itself a stage
 inside
 a theater in which
 I play
 the brother
 who doesn't know his lines,
 and you the actor
 who waits there in the wings,
 who holds the script,
 who knows it all
 by heart and
 will not say.

—Alan Shapiro