

'Merchant of Venice' runs through Oct. 21 at the Cramer Center
By:Valerie Walker
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Say "Merchant of Venice" to anyone who has passed eighth-grade English, and one phrase is guaranteed to come to mind: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

That was all I could think of during the drive to the Cramer Center for Vpstart Crow's latest Shakespearean production, directed by Bob Smith, which opened last weekend. It is a speech memorized by schoolchildren across the English-speaking world, and all I could wonder was how Jay Tilley, as Shylock the Jew, would manage to keep it new. The story of the "The Merchant of Venice" revolves around three men and two women. The three men are Bassanio (Christopher Holbert), Shylock (Jay Tilley) and Antonio (George Kitchen).

Bassanio falls in love with fair Portia (Rachel Lee Poole), but being too poor to court her properly, he tries to borrow some money from Antonio. Antonio is in the shipping business, and, at the moment, all his funds are tied up in inventory out at sea. Unable to loan the money to Bassanio himself, Antonio takes out a loan from Shylock. The terms of the loan are quite strange - Antonio agrees that if, for any reason, he should default on the loan, he will repay Shylock with a pound of his flesh. As the action moves forward, we see the progression of thoughtless cruelties and petty tortures that would lead a rational man to snap and actually attempt to claim his pound of flesh from another as a twisted form of vindication.

"At what point does a human break?" director Bob Smith wrote in his introductory notes in the program. "Where is the Shylock among us? Where is the Andrea Yates? The Seung-Hui Cho?"

The climactic moment of the play is one of the best courtroom dramas in the history of English literature: When the fair Portia disguises herself as a man and a lawyer to argue for Antonio's life.

During this one scene, so many different themes come forward and ask so many questions.

Why does gender matter so much in the way people's ideas and arguments are received? Why do we put so much stock in appearances? What is faith? What is mercy? What is conversion? What does it take to break a relationship with God? At which point in the scene does Shylock commit a mortal sin, and is he ever redeemed?

The courtroom scene also offers a stunning and visually painful Christ image as Antonio kneels and his two friends stand by his side supporting him, holding his arms in the shape of a crucifix so that he can willingly accept his death, a death that is a sacrifice for his friend Bassanio.

Though beautiful in imagery and filled with strong performances, the timing of this production runs slightly slower than a Hollywood movie. If you go, bring a little extra patience. It's worth the effort.

This production also continues the Vpstart trend of setting Shakespeare's plays outside of their original timeframes (this is set in the 1920s).

Sometimes, we wonder why Vpstart continues to shuttle these shows between eras and places. As Colby Coddling (Gratiano) said in the talkback after the Sunday matinee, "all rules were made to be broken."

Sometimes the shifting times and places seem a bit of a stretch just to do something different. But for "Merchant," the change in time did not distract from the story; it was merely a matter of appearances.

During a discussion after the show, Smith said he chose the 1920s because of the sense of boredom that followed World War I - an era when people had the leisure to pursue such casual cruelty.

Smith did not mention it, but it is also difficult to ignore the anti-Semitism that was growing in those years between the wars.

Merchant of Venice is playing at the Cramer Center through Oct. 21. Showtimes are Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$20 for adults and \$15 for students, seniors, and city or county employees. For tickets, go to www.boxofficetickets.com or call (800-494-TIXS).