Shakespeare Performed

The Merchant of Venice: Brazil and Cultural Icons

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The Merchant of Venice. *Presented by Limite: 151 Theater Group at the Teatro Dulcina, Brasilia, Brazil, 11–16 May 1993. Director, Cláudio Torres Gonzaga; Translator, Bárbara Heliodora; Set/Costume Design, Irênio Maia; Lighting, Luis Paulo Nenén and Henrique Leiner; Music Director/Composer, Wagner Campos; Producer, Filomena Mancuzo; Photography, Guilherme Palmeira; Publicity, Délcio Marinho; Responsible for the Brasilia production, Malu Moraes and Edith Carneiro.* CAST: *Shylock, Edney Giovenazzi; Lorenzo, Rafael Camargo; Portia, Gláucia Rodrigues; Nerissa, Andréa Cavalcanti; Launcelot Gobbo, Antonio Gonzales; Bassanio, Edmundo Lippi; Jessica, Flávia Monteiro; Arragon and Morocco, Flávio Antônio; Gobbo, Tubal, and Duke of Venice, Heleno Prestes; Gratiano, Bruno Garcia; Solanio, Jorge Guerreiro; Antonio, Vinícius Salvatori. Original cast of the Rio de Janeiro production: Morocco and Arragon, Gustavo Ottoni; Gratiano, Marcelo Escorel; and Solanio, José Mauro Brant.*

Over the past decade, Brazil has begun to appropriate the principal theater icon of the First World: William Shakespeare. In 1991 I found eleven different productions of Shakespeare plays in the city of São Paulo. In 1992 Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo rivaled London in the number of Shakespeare productions. The 1993–94 season did not fall much behind. In addition, Branagh's *Henry V* has been shown on national television and his *Much Ado About Nothing* has met with popular acclaim.

It was in this context that I saw the Cia Artística Limite: 151's *The Merchant of Venice* at the Teatro Dulcina in Brasilia on 15 May 1993. Limite: 151's success, first in Rio de Janeiro and subsequently in Brasilia, attests to the enormous strides that the national theater has made in the past few years. This *Merchant of Venice* made history as the first Brazilian production of the play, and it broke new ground in bringing distinctive cultural elements and Brazilian talents to forge a new national tradition of Shakespearean staging and interpretation.

With its charged atmosphere of racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance, the play challenged the producers to create a spectacle that would not antagonize a country that prides itself on being a racial melting pot. To meet the challenge, Limite: 151 gave the play three distinctive voices—the outsider, the clowns, and the carnival lovers—through which it established a three-tier cultural context, reflected in three different styles of acting and dialects.

Edney Giovenazzi, one of Brazil's most acclaimed actors, was given the task of negotiating the difficult matter of anti-Semitism to create a Brazilian Shylock for the first time. Giovenazzi brought much experience and talent to his interpretation, and he was undoubtedly the highlight of the production. His theater credits include leading roles in such plays as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Cherry Orchard*, Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, and many Brazilian plays. He has also performed in over thirty-five *telenovelas*, the popular prime-time soaps on Brazilian television. This distinguished actor played the part with subtlety and dignity, never allowing his character to deteriorate into caricature or to dominate the play.

To give his character life, Giovenazzi drew on his vast experience as a performer of classical plays; he also reached into Brazil's European roots, finding a model for

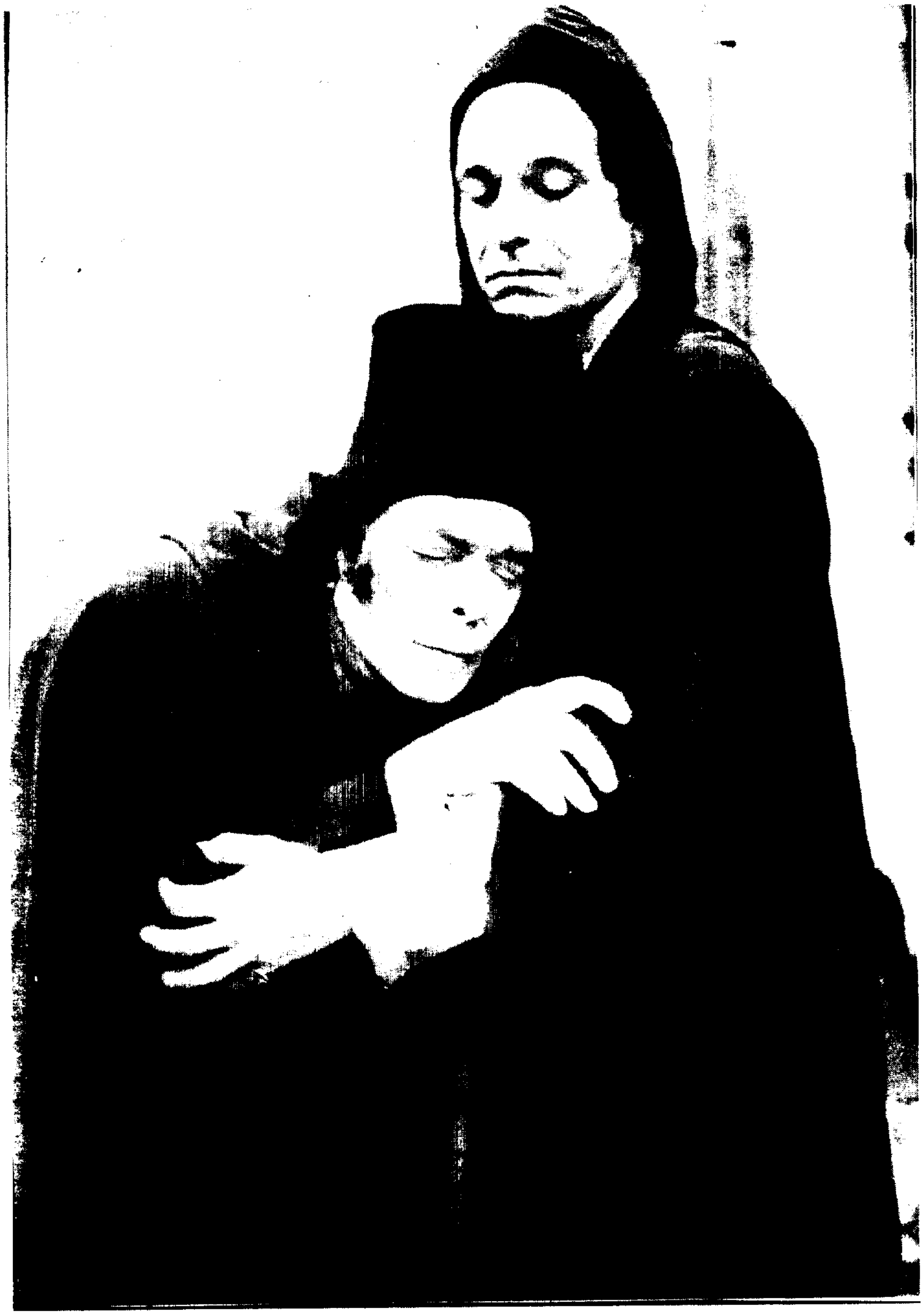

Fig. 1: Edney Giovenazzi as Shylock (right) and Heleno Prestes as Tubal in Limite: 151's 1993 production of *The Merchant of Venice.*

Shylock in Renaissance Peninsular Jews. His brown, grey, and black costume, in contrast to the colorful costumes of Venice and Belmont, set him apart as thoughtful, deliberate, and melancholy. Equally distinctive was Shylock's foreign accent, which came across crisp and clear through Giovenazzi's perfect diction and intonation, conveying subtle nuances of emotional expression. Seemingly unable to articulate the abundant and difficult Portuguese nasal sounds, Shylock situated himself at the interstices of cultures and left the haunting impression that key words such as "*coração*" (heart) had been hollowed out.

Giovenazzi's stage presence gave his Shylock emotional depth and complexity that contrasted with the shallowness of the other characters. Most memorable was Act 3, scene 1, when, in talking to Tubal (Fig. 1), Shylock shifted from tears at the news of his daughter's escape to joy at the news of Antonio's misfortunes. Both vulnerable and powerful at this moment, Shylock let his humanity find expression in his deep friendship for Tubal, in his suffering for the loss of Jessica, and in his desire for revenge on Antonio.

Interestingly, the famous speech "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.51–64) was moved from Act 3 to the trial scene in Act 4.[1] When Antonio demanded that Shylock become a Christian and Portia asked point blank, "Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?" Shylock responded with the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech from Act 3. As placed in Act 3, the speech addresses Salerio and Solanio; in Act 4 it addresses the entire Venetian court. The Brazilian Shylock was empowered at a moment when the text leaves him powerless. The effect was electrifying and the audience cheered. As the Christians proceeded with the forced conversion, the audience gasped in horror. Portia insisted, "Art thou contented, Jew?" and Shylock replied, "I become contented" ("*Fico contente*")—a translation that ironically twists Shylock's "I am content" to suggest not a state but a process. When the Christians brought him new robes stamped with a large golden cross, Shylock asked permission to leave. He exited holding his hand over his mouth as if on the verge of vomiting. When I asked Giovenazzi why the speech had been moved to Act 4, he explained that at a moment when the world is seeing a resurgence of ethnic violence, the Brazilian producers did not want to fuel anti-Semitism. Indeed, this production never dehumanized Shylock, but it showed him trapped by resentment and the desire to seek vengeance for wrongs he had suffered. Despite his alien garb, voice, and values, this Shylock grabbed and held the audience's attention and sympathy.

Like anti-Semitism, racism can be a troubling element in *The Merchant of Venice*, especially in a country like Brazil, which takes prides in being a diverse society, tolerant of religious, cultural, and ethnic difference. A melting pot in ways the United States has never been, Brazil tolerates, for example, interracial marriage. Afro-Brazilian religions coexist with Roman Catholicism; the followers of one religion do not hesitate to claim full membership in another. This granted, however, anyone familiar with Brazil will observe that the country is not free of racism and that Brazilians seem obsessed with whiteness, although "white" is a relative term in Brazil and encompasses a large spectrum of skin color.

Limite: 151, perhaps trying to reflect Brazil's sense of national identity, handled the racial issues in a way as interesting and imaginative as that in which it handled the anti-Semitism. This approach was used, in my view, not for the sake of political correctness but to accommodate Brazilian sensibilities about racial matters. All of Portia's foreign suitors were played by the same actor, Flávio Antônio. No distinction was made among Morocco, Arragon, and the other suitors: all of them seemed unacceptable because of personal eccentricities rather than ethnic or racial difference. In 1.2, as Nerissa named the various suitors and Portia described them, Flávio Antônio, from a raised platform placed upstage, mimed each suitor's eccentricity—from the Neapolitan prince's obsession with his horse to the young German's exces sive drinking. Arragon, too, behaved in a most outlandish manner. Speaking with a strong Spanish accent, he strutted around Portia, sometimes clowning, sometimes angry, always extremely full of himself.

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[1] All quotations from the play follow the Pelican edition, ed. Alfred Harbage (1959; rpt. New York, 1978).

Morocco did not apologize for his complexion as he does in the text: "Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun, / To whom I am neighbor and near bred" (2.1.1–3). When he said "Let's see once more this saying graved in gold" (2.7.36), which the translator Bárbara Heliodora rendered as "*Ouçamos novamente a voz do ouro*" ("Let's listen again to the voice of gold"), and chose the wrong casket, Portia did not dismiss him with the racist comment: "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.77). The production erased Morocco's racial difference, underscoring instead his idiosyncrasies. He pranced around in turban and white Arabic robes—all quite appropriate, except that he also wore red Turkish shoes, which made him look ridiculous. In addition, he had the uncontrollable laugh of a lunatic. Even Lorenzo, following the producers' desire to rid the play of racism, did not accuse Launcelot of being responsible for "the getting up of the Negro's belly" (3.5.34–35). According to Giovenazzi, Limite: 151 downplayed racism because, considering the large black population of Brazil, "*ficaria gratuito e agressivo*" ("it would have been gratuitous and aggressive").[2] By underscoring the eccentricities of the suitors, the Brazilian production revealed a conflict between personal traits and cultural, racial, or religious difference; it subtly suggested that Venetian society, under the guise of mocking individual difference, hid intense racial and religious prejudice.

The Italian characters, like the Brazilian audience, set themselves apart as lovers of carnival. Carnivalesque elements countered the seriousness of the play's theme and suggested Venice's famous carnival celebrations, second perhaps only to Rio's. Colorful Renaissance banners flanked the stage. Antonio, despite his melancholy mood, appeared in a red costume. Clowns tumbled on the stage before the appearance of Salerio and Solanio in 2.8. Jessica's escape with Lorenzo occurred amid a raucous, delightful masquerade, reminiscent of Rio's carnival *blocos de rua* (groups of neighborhood musicians, samba dancers, and other revelers). Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo engaged in horseplay. Launcelot Gobbo and old Gobbo brought the whole audience to uproarious laughter and applause. Gratiano became an amusing parody of himself, with his smart-aleck comments and blatant Latin machismo. Portia, Nerissa, Bassanio, and Gratiano enjoyed themselves enormously in the last scene. The disguised Portia and Nerissa were both elated by their ability to deceive their husbands and became even more so when they finally revealed that they had the rings. Nerissa gently beat Gratiano when he teased her "*e mulher vira homem?*" ("woman changes into man?"). When Antonio got word that he hadn't lost everything after all, his "*É incrível*" ("it is incredible") brought down the house. This carnivalesque spirit governed many of the scenes in Venice and Belmont.

The outsider, the clowns, and the carnival lovers created different cultural contexts and reflected varied styles of acting. Giovenazzi, performing in a classical style, represented an alien world made familiar in its human dimensions and vibrant in its appeal to the audience. The suitors emerged as clowns, caricatures, or eccentrics, amusing but remote: neither Portia nor the audience could take them seriously. To underscore class difference, Morocco and the European suitors often reverted to the Northeastern Brazilian dialect characteristic of manual laborers and servants. The Italians, however, clearly came from the *telenovelas*, usually the mirror of Brazilian upper-class life. The flippant, shallow, and formulaic acting style of the *telenovelas*, accentuated further by the actors' disparate levels of experience and ability, contrasted sharply with Giovenazzi's more formal style.

The *telenovela* influence could be clearly detected in all the Italian characters, most noticeably in Portia, played by Gláucia Rodrigues, and in Nerissa, played by Andréa

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[2] Edney Giovenazzi, letter to author, 8 July 1993.

Cavalcanti, who spoke with a distinctive Rio de Janeiro accent. Portia was played as a rich Brazilian aristocrat and Nerissa as her "*aia*," or lady-in-waiting and confidante. With upper-class assurance and arrogance, Portia seemed in control from the start. The lighting accentuated her aura of control: the scenes in Belmont were brightly illuminated, whereas in Venice the lights were dimmed. She was not in the least intimidated when Morocco offered to "make incision" for her love or when Arragon displayed his outlandish arrogance. In 3.2 she and Bassanio appeared alone together onstage. Under bright lights he approached her from behind and kissed her long dark hair (no golden fleece here). When he tried to embrace her and kiss her on the lips, she slapped his face and immediately called for music. The mystique of the lottery vanished in the presence of Portia's powerful personality and Nerissa's unwavering support. In the courtroom Portia seemed in absolute control—cold, detached, apparently impartial. In a sober but firm tone, she expeditiously judged and closed the case. One could not detect the slightest sense of glee in her victory. Similarly, Jessica was played as a sympathetic character, whose sole motivation for betraying her father was her love for Lorenzo. Lorenzo, played by Rafael Camargo, a young actor of extraordinary talent and promise, ably negotiated Jessica's ethnic and religious difference with humor and joy, never taking himself too seriously.

Although no topic is off-limits for the *telenovelas*, the production felt coy in its attempt to suggest a homosexual dimension in Antonio and Bassanio's friendship. Antonio, played as a gray-haired, bearded man, did not manifest the conflicting elements of his character—contempt for Shylock, generosity toward his friends, and possible homosexual desire for Bassanio (although the age difference implied that he might be buying Bassanio's favors). Since his character was not sufficiently developed, the audience, especially those unfamiliar with the text, had to be puzzled by the last scene in the play. When all had exited, Antonio stayed behind, not knowing what to do. Bassanio returned briefly, exchanged a knowing, perhaps amorous glance with Antonio, and just as quickly exited, leaving Antonio alone. Obviously, not all of the play's issues had been resolved.

Part of the success of this production came from Bárbara Heliodora's superb translation of the text. Like the Schlegel-Tieck German Shakespeare, her translations are making literary history, recreating the rhythm, poetry, and flavor of Shakespeare's language while retaining a degree of archaism without becoming wooden and artificial. As translator, critic, and producer, Bárbara Heliodora has been at the forefront of Brazil's appropriation of Shakespeare. In an interview with the Brazilian weekly news magazine *Veja*, she pointed out that theater professionals have had to wage an uphill battle in bringing Shakespeare to Brazil: "Brazil does not have a great theatrical tradition. We did not have a Shakespeare, as did the English, or a Corneille, Racine and Molière, as did the French. We had only one classical author, Gil Vicente. Furthermore, every time the theater tried to get on its feet, censorship or lack of money caught up with it."[3] Her reference is to a period of censorship imposed by the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to the mid-1980s and to the economic problems that followed the period of military government.

Naturally, no single individual or production can account for Brazil's current fascination with Shakespeare. The recent flurry of productions must be placed in a larger historical context. Even in the nineteenth century, the Brazilian Emperor Dom Pedro II, on his 1876 state visit to the United States to open the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, managed to see two Shakespeare plays—the New York City Booth Theater's production of *Henry V* with George Rignold in the title role and, in San Francisco, a matinée performance of *King Lear* with John McCullough as Lear.[4]

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[3] Bárbara Heliodora, "Falta Paixão," interview by Alfredo Ribeiro, *Veja* (12 May 1993): 7–9 (translation mine).

[4] *The New York Times*, 16 April 1876: "The Emperor from the start was evidently interested in the play, and paid close attention to its progress. He seemed especially pleased with the efforts of Mr. George Rignold, and manifested his commendation of that gentleman's acting by judicious and well-timed applause." During the

Since the 1950s there have been sporadic performances of Shakespeare in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In the past decade, however, Brazil has pooled its resources, talent, idealism, and vision to turn Shakespeare into a national icon of its own. As Giovenazzi explains, "we are a Third World country, but our dreams are of the First World."[5]

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intermission, Rignold was introduced to the Emperor, and after the performance, Dom Pedro went backstage to inspect the stage machinery. See also George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York, 1938), 10: 121–22 and 392–93; *The New York Herald*, 29 April 1876 (the San Francisco production).

[5] Edney Giovenazzi, interviewed by the author, Teatro Dulcina, Brasilia, 15 May 1993.