



**BARD'S GRISLY DEAL:** (left to right) Al Pacino as Shylock & Byron Jennings as Antonio in excellent revival of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo: Joan Marcus

### *Theater Review*

**Al Pacino's performance makes**

***Merchant of Venice* accessible**

*The Merchant of Venice*  
Written by William Shakespeare  
Directed by Daniel Sullivan  
Through January 9, 2011  
Broadhurst Theatre  
235 West 44th Street  
(212-239-6200), [www.MerchantOnBroadway.com](http://www.MerchantOnBroadway.com)

By David NouNou

Anyone who ever had a fear of reading or comprehending Shakespeare in school or throughout life had better rush to the Broadhurst Theatre and feast their eyes on this brilliant revival presented by The Public Theater, starring Al Pacino. Never has Shakespeare been more accessible, understandable, and satisfying than this version of *The Merchant of Venice*. The language is still Elizabethan, but with the modern touches under Daniel Sullivan's expert direction, set design by Mark Wendland, and costume design by Jeff Goldstein, all the stuffiness associated with it has been taken out and doused with fresh, brutal energy. I can't say I enjoyed last year's version of *Hamlet* with Jude Law, or 2008's *Macbeth* with Patrick Stewart, even though they were both done in modern dress; they still possessed all the Shakespearean trappings that one fears.

Set in Venice in times when Christians did not believe in charging interest on loans and only Jews were in the money-lending business, Antonio, a Venetian merchant (Byron Jennings) with his resources tapped, is approached by Bassanio, a lord and friend (David Harbour), to borrow money in order to pursue his lady love Portia, an heiress (Lily Rabe). Not to let his friend down, Antonio allows Bassanio to use his name as credit. In order to secure this loan, he must go to the Jewish moneylender, Shylock (Al Pacino), to obtain the 3,000 ducats for a period of three months. The bond created is that, if Antonio fails to repay in three months, the penalty is that Shylock would obtain a pound of Antonio's flesh. And this is just the start of Shakespeare's immortal classic.

In 1990, a version was presented with Dustin Hoffman as Shylock. It was Shakespeare, unexciting and safe. I had the good fortune as a teenager of seeing Mr. Pacino in his Broadway debut and Tony Award-winning role as a drug addict in 1969 in *Does a Tiger Wear a Necktie?* The play was good, but Mr. Pacino was sensational, and his star was on the rise. He was the new Brando: raw, exciting, stark, and fearless. Safe does not exist in Mr. Pacino's vocabulary. His Shylock is a dark, vengeful stereotypical Jewish moneylender of the times, and he wants his revenge. He demands his pound of flesh. He portrays him as ruthless and unsympathetic and asks for no pity. As written, and a product of Shakespeare's time, the Jew was a lowly cur who deserved no respect and no sympathy, and Shakespeare strips him of all his dignity and, in the end, leaves him with nothing. However, from the moment Mr. Pacino enters to his final exit, we are riveted to his Shylock. In not playing him safe and sympathetic, our heart goes to this Shylock, for ultimately he is the injured party and the victim here

As Portia, Lily Rabe finally comes to full fruition as an actress. Her Portia is fresh, intelligent and beguiling. She is both commanding and vulnerable and a constant delight. Byron Jennings as

Antonio can always be relied on to deliver a good performance; however, David Harbour's Bassanio needed some reigning in. He is too contemporary to be part of this company. In the middle of the show as one of Portia's suitors, the Prince of Arragon, Charles Kimbrough (who played Jim Dial on TV's "Murphy Brown") delivers a beautiful nugget of a performance. A scene-stealing moment if ever there was one.

Upon seeing this version of *The Merchant of Venice*, don't feel bad if you find yourself rooting for Shylock. Due to Al Pacino's galvanizing performance, just this once you hope that he ends up being victorious. By not demanding our pity, he is the hero and not the villain.

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## Broadway Listings

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**FIRST-RATE 'MERCHANT': Al Pacino is sensational as Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice.'** Photo: Joan Marcus



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associated with it has been taken out and doused with fresh, brutal energy. Upon seeing this version of *The Merchant of Venice*, do not feel bad if you find yourself rooting for Shylock. Due to Al Pacino's galvanizing performance, just this once you hope that he ends up being victorious. By not demanding our pity and standing by his principle and demanding his pound of flesh, this Shylock is not the villain but the hero.

**BROADHURST THEATRE, 235 West 44th Street, (212-239-6200).**

**[www.MerchantOnBroadway.com](http://www.MerchantOnBroadway.com)**

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