



BENJAMIN EVETT  
photo: Leslie Hassler

Dear Friends,

I've been to a couple of conferences this summer, the National Performing Arts Conference and the local StageSource Conference, and at both, the central question raised was this: is the theatre relevant to modern American life? Those present argued ferociously that it was, and I agree; but in a landscape of rising costs, falling subscriptions, and a pervading sense among young people that the theatre is for well-heeled older folks, it's easy to understand why the question still gnaws.

As I write this, I'm watching the stock market plummet for the eighth straight day, and as I think about the arts' social relevance, something occurs to me: good times are hard on the arts. When times are good, we feel pretty good about things, and a simple entertainment will do the trick. Of course, we can still yearn for experiences that will pull us out of our reasonable comfort and make us feel really alive, but the urgency is not there—we're working along, and an evening at home watching tv is mostly what we think we need. Hence the arts struggle to show their relevance.

The theatre is about catastrophe—life over the edge—and surprisingly, when our world goes over, too, the urgent need for live theatre returns. When things are at their worst, one of the first things people do is make art. Why?

For the theatre, it all starts with the Story. Telling a story roots us in time, place and, as our real world spins into unknown territory, allows us to get our bearings in a narrative that makes some sense. We can escape from our uncertain world into one ordered by the principles of art. Shakespeare's great tales touch the essentials of human existence, and so we gain perspective. When we see that *The Merchant of Venice* is about risking it all for uncertain but fantastic profit, we can see that what's happening to us now in our lives has happened before, that it is an essential piece of human existence. More important, it reminds us that people are really what it's all about. So many plays are cautionary tales, about what happens if we are not compassionate, open, honest and generous; so to be all these things, especially in dark times, is the ultimate realization of our being. As our world starts to pull apart, vilify, blame and divide, art reminds us that we should strive to do the opposite. So while economic distress threatens us all, the social relevance of art and our essential need for it remain strong.

Our young theatre is beginning its fifth season in this wildly swerving world. Come see our stories. Now is the best time.

—Benjamin Evett, Artistic Director

(Q & A... continued) The play is about people behaving badly—and xenophobia. Shylock and Antonio are in this other world from Belmont, where there's a trivializing of money, because they have no idea what money costs other people. There's an absurdity of plenty in Belmont. It's like a fabulous Connecticut estate that's been in the family so long no one has to think about it. It's a high-society, farcical world—something out of Philip Barry. In Belmont all that glitters is not gold, of course. The play is rife with these wonderful contradictions about how we want true love without money, but it takes money. And there's an anxiety about whether we'll struggle through this time.

ST: Does this anxiety make it all the more easy for them—and for Elizabethan audiences—to loathe the alien moneylender?

MB: I think an English identity was a big question then—as now—and it was easiest to define themselves by what they were not: not Jewish, not Puritan. Shylock has a lot in common with Puritans, who were a great source of anxiety.

ST: Ah, the Puritans. Rich, powerful, feared and loathed. The Puritans were actually the moneylenders in England at the time, weren't they?

MB: The Jews, who had been expelled 300 years early, were slowly being invited back in. I see strong links between Shylock and the Puritans, and Shylock and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*—disliking music and parties. He is not us—he's the other. Why else would everyone but Shylock go off to celebrate in the fifth act. But I don't want to vilify them, either. These aren't terrible people—they're a lot like us. And there's a vicarious thrill in watching people with money behave badly.

(Thanks to interim editor Maureen Dezell)

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# The Serpent's Tongue

A newsletter for Friends of The Actors' Shakespeare Project

## Q & A WITH DIRECTOR MELIA BENSUSSEN

Obie award winning director Melia Bensussen, who chairs the performing arts department at Emerson College, will direct our fifth anniversary season opener, *The Merchant of Venice*, which opens November 6th at Midway Studios. Late last summer, Melia chatted by phone with the Serpents' Tongue about her vision of the play.

ST: You've called *The Merchant of Venice* a romantic comedy, crossed with melodrama. Many people think of this as a difficult, even dangerous, play. How do you plan to address that?

MB: The biggest challenge with this play, as in any play with a significant production history, is to read it as a fresh script. Given the post-Holocaust life of the play, and given people's strong feelings about it, the challenge is to read it anew. What interests me is not the anti-Semitic weight of the play, but that it's a play about money and love, the struggle over money and love and unbridled capitalism. I'm concerned with how not to sentimentalize the play itself, which is edgy and slightly nasty and comedic.

ST: What do you mean by "sentimentalize"?

MB: In our anxiety about the Jew as a villain, we've become comfortable with leaning toward the softness in the play, and we lose the edge—the possibility of a revenge tragedy. Comedies are about obstacles overcome. The obstacle in this play is the Jew and he is overcome. The question is how to show this without increasing the anti-Semitism in the play.

ST: Shylock is demonized because of religion and culture. Do you think he's vilified, too, because of socioeconomic anxieties?

MB: He has been created by the culture he lives in. He has been made a capitalist. And Antonio is caught in a bind because of his behavior. The old world, the feudal world, is slipping away, and they are moving into a more mercantile time. You get a sense of an era passing—an era in which everyone spends money and no one has any sense of consequences. The genuine battle in this play is between Antonio and Shylock. Shylock says, "I hate him for he's a Christian. But more, for that he's changing the rates of usury here in Venice." Antonio says, "I would never take money with interest." Shylock says, "And yet, when you need help, you come to me." ST: This is serious money.

MB: Serious money. A business deal. Shylock loses his best jewels and his daughter, and everyone laughs. He behaves badly. People, when they're screwed, behave badly.

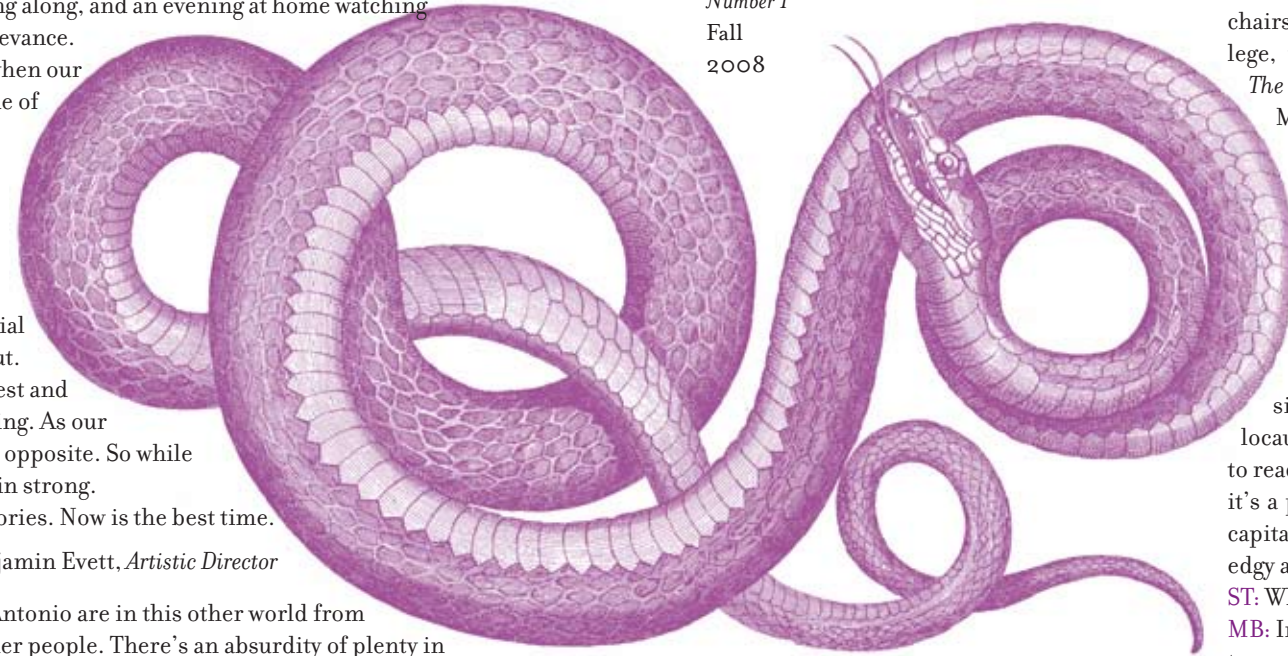
(continued on page 4)

# merchant conversations

with moderator Stephen Greenblatt

Tuesday, November 18th, 7:00pm, Midway Studios,  
15 Channel Center Street, Fort Point Channel, Boston

Join us for a riveting evening exploring the provocative and resonant themes of *The Merchant of Venice* today, with scenes from the play and thoughts from the cast and director Melia Bensussen



## FINDING SPACE IS NO EASY TASK

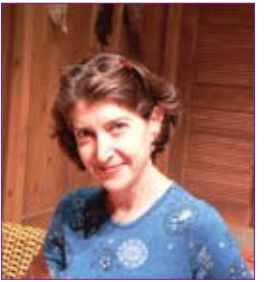
In most theaters, if a director wants to set a play in a ballroom, a set designer designs a set that looks like a ballroom on a stage. At Actors' Shakespeare Project, we start looking for a ballroom somewhere in Boston or Cambridge that will welcome our production.

As ASP's manager of artistic operations and company stage manager, I play a unique role in choosing and using the nontraditional venues in which we perform. I take part in the artistic conversations in which we explore what kind of space we want and which neighborhoods we hope to work with. I help find the spaces we use. As stage manager, I work in each space, experience its quirks and gifts, and help make it work for each audience and production.



Titus Andronicus. photo: Kippy Goldfarb

Some of our plays are tightly connected to the places in which they're performed. We staged our first production, *Richard III*, in Boston's Old South Meeting House, which artistic director Benjamin Evett saw as a perfect setting for a play about a people's rebellion against a corrupt king. Performed on a set that consisted only of rugs, some chairs, and a couple of cots, the play helped fulfill our new (continued on page 2)



MELIA BENSUSSEN courtesy of Baltimore Centerstage

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"GO, presently inquire,  
and so will I,  
where  
money is"

# The Merchant of Venice

NOVEMBER 6 – DECEMBER 7  
MIDWAY STUDIOS

15 Channel Center Street,  
Fort Point Channel, Boston

Obie Award winner Melia Bensussen directs Shakespeare's uncomfortable comedy. In *The Merchant of Venice* a penniless young man wins a rich heiress, using borrowed funds; but the debt must be paid, and justice confronts mercy in a Venetian courtroom. Witty, entertaining and unsettling, don't miss ASP's interpretation of one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays!

**By William Shakespeare**  
**Directed by Melia Bensussen\*\***

Preview Performances: \$20-\$30

Regular Performances: \$25-\$47

Tickets On Sale at  
[www.actorsshakespeareproject.org](http://www.actorsshakespeareproject.org)  
or 866-811-4111

**FREE OPEN REHEARSAL**

**Saturday, October 25th, 1pm, Midway Studios**

Wheelchair accessible,

Transportation: 15 Minute walk from Red Line South Station T-Stop.

Parking: Free on A Street and \$2 pay lot on Iron Street

**Cast:** Sarah Augusta, Marianna Bassham\*,  
Jason Bowen\*, John Greene, Jeremiah Kissel\*,  
Doug Lockwood\*, Sarah Newhouse\*,  
Sean Robert Garahan, Robert Serrell\*,  
Michael Forden Walker\*, Robert Walsh\*

\*member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers in The United States

\*\*Member of the Society of Stage Directors & Choreographers

## ABOUT MIDWAY STUDIOS:

The Fort Point Development Collaborative (FPDC), a joint venture between Fort Point Cultural Coalition and Keen Development Corporation, develops permanent, affordable artist live/work space and cultural resources in Boston's Fort Point neighborhood, home to New England's largest arts



community. The collaborative's first project, Midway Studios, transformed the three former factory buildings at 15 Channel Center Street into a thriving complex that houses 89 live/work studios, a 200-seat black-box theater, a café, offices and retail spaces for non-profit arts organizations and arts-related businesses.

## EXPLORING *The Merchant of Venice*

On the SHAKSPER website ([www.shaksper.net](http://www.shaksper.net)), Anthony Burton recently reported a discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* in which "at least one Holocaust survivor and several other younger Jewish attendees ... strongly expressed the view that the play was irredeemably offensive and should simply not be performed."

It is undeniably true that an altogether too familiar kind of mindless anti-Semitism is an important element in the play. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, is reviled by many other Venetian citizens. His daughter elopes with a Christian, to whom she brings some of Shylock's treasure. When his attempt to avenge the insults of a Christian businessman backfires, he is punished with massive fines, and the option of converting to Christianity or being put to death for attempted murder.



SHYLOCK & JESSICA by  
Maurycy Gottlieb

The question of whether he is more sinned against than sinning has dominated most productions of the play in the last half century. But the controversy suggests that *Merchant*, like the issues it confronts, is too subtle and complex to provide any clear-cut answers. James Shapiro, indeed, sees the conflict between Christian and Jew not as an end in itself, but a way for Shakespeare to explore wider questions about the relationships among personal identity, religious identity, nationality, and race.

The title of the play, moreover, puts the focus on the businessman, Antonio, and hence on economics. Europe at the end of the sixteenth century was roiled by the stresses of early capitalism. Farmers were driven from their land to make way for grazing sheep. Small businessmen grew rich, sometimes by lending money at high interest to landed aristocrats. Putting the merchant in Venice invokes the fact that international commerce was bringing English people into increased contact with other cultures.

Furthermore, Antonio borrows money from Shylock to fund a penniless young friend's courtship of a rich young woman—that is, the play is a romance. Much of the action concerns this courtship, and in the last act of the play, Shylock is largely ignored, while three recently married couples sort out the first round of marital conflicts. Those conflicts center on matters not so much of dominance as of fidelity. Yet the fact that the rich young woman can determine the outcome of the ethnic struggle by disguising herself as a man challenges all kinds of gender stereotypes. And that outcome, apparently happy for most of the characters, makes the play a comedy—though like most of Shakespeare's comedies, it confronts deadly serious concerns.

No performance of any rich dramatic text can do full justice to all its themes. This one raises questions of prejudice and reform, of ethnicity and nationality, of gender, of economic power. To let any one issue occlude the others, whatever the social or political motive, impoverishes the total experience of the audience. What Melia Bensussen and the 2008-09 company of the Actors' Shakespeare Project find in *Merchant* may well not be predictable or comfortable. It should, however, be enthralling.

—David Evett



## Rain COULDN'T DAMPEN *Love's Labour's Lost* in Harvard square

Thunderstorm warnings couldn't keep crowds away from ASP's three-day, free outdoor production of *Love's Labour's Lost* in Harvard Square, the weekend of August 1–3. More than 800 people—our largest audience yet—turned out to see our outdoor reprise of this sweet and hilarious dance of courtship, which we originally produced in spring, 2007, in the Basement at The Garage.



*Love's Labour's Lost*: MARIANNA BASSHAM & KHALIL FLEMMING; SARAH NEWHOUSE & JASON BOWEN; MARIANNA BASSHAM, STEVEN BARKHIMER & SARAH NEWHOUSE. photos: Jayson Zeeman

*Love's Labour's Lost* was a highlight of the first Shakespeare in the Square Festival, a collaboration among Harvard Square Business Assoc., ASP, ART and Revels.

Staging the production outdoors, in the pedestrian-heavy

Winthrop Park, proved to be an easier transition than we thought. Benjamin Evett, who directed five of the six original cast members—Marianna Bassham, Jason Bowen, Khalil Fleming, Sarah Newhouse & Michael Forden Walker—and Steven Barkhimer in the outdoor production, says he found it “easier, funnier and more moving than before.”



Like many of ASP's intimate, indoor performances in small venues around Greater Boston, *Love's Labour's Lost* seemed to please Shakespeare scholars and first-time theatergoers alike. Evidently, the spirit of our original production, which the Boston Globe's Louise Kennedy called “big-hearted, brimming with wit, and tinged with the quiet but sure knowledge that laughter doesn't last forever,” permeated the open air.

—Jayson Zeeman



(Finding Space...cont.)

company's promise to create intimate, relevant theater with a focus on voice and text.

In 2007, director David Gammons scouted with us for months to find a venue that fit his *Titus Andronicus*. Ultimately, we found our perfect match in the Basement at the Garage in Harvard Square: a windowless underground room with concrete walls, and large cement pillars holding up eight-foot-high ceilings. David used the columns as a tool to evoke the primitive, brutal world of the play.

ASP hasn't yet established hard, fast rules for finding each space. Typically, we ask our directors to describe the world in which they want to set their plays. Then we start to search.

My favorite part of working with an itinerant theater company is the challenges it brings. Yes, it is hard. For each play and in every space, we have to build new risers and create new seating charts. We might have to turn a busy hallway into our back stage.

Some actors are thrown at first, when no one seems to know where their props table might be. But working without a huge set behind them or lights flashing above allows artists to share an intimacy with the audience that is seldom possible in most theaters. The actors, along with ASP's designers and directors, use each space to create beautiful worlds that would not have existed in a traditional theater setting.

One of the most striking examples was *Macbeth*, which we performed at the BU College of Fine Arts, in a room with next to no power supply. Our lighting designer, Jeff Adelberg, bought a slew of normal, household table lamps. Actors carried lamps with them, lighting the set and creating sometimes startling effects. As Lady Macbeth moved about the stage reading her husband's triumphant letter, a household servant followed, holding a lamp to illuminate the letter, attempting to scrutinize every word and move.

The same space was home to our production of *King Lear*. What stands out to me about that play was how, yet again, we used “obstructive” pillars. Pillars have posed problems in at least four of our shows. (And believe me, our audiences remember them long after the show has closed.) But the actors in *King Lear* used the poles to hide from a furious father, to eavesdrop, and to add tension to their scenes.

When we moved our production of *Lear* to an unobstructed New York venue, we sorely missed those pillars. They had become another character in our play—and proof that ASP can make its home almost anywhere.

—Adele Nadine Traub



PAULA PLUM in *Macbeth*. photo: Stratton McCrady



The set of *Henry V*. photo: Skip Curtiss

## “I’LL TAKE MY CHANCE” (one actors' journey with ASP)

When Emanuel Silva boarded a plane to Boston in 2006 to escape gang violence in his native Cape Verde, he could hardly have imagined he'd be packing up again two years later, headed to Manhattanville College in Purchase, NY, to study acting. Emanuel, who's 17, left Boston in late August with a newfound love of Shakespeare and ASP's professional production of *King John* under his belt.

Born and raised in Palmarejo, Cape Verde, Emanuel spent four years living in the United States as a child. His parents sent him to Boston at 15, when he was violently assaulted, his life threatened by gang members in his home town.

Emanuel moved in with siblings in Uphams Corner, Dorchester, just one block from the Strand Theater, home to the city of Boston's after school youth theater program. Having developed a taste for acting during his first two years of high school, he joined ASP company member Doug Lockwood's contemporary scene study class in summer, 2006. That fall, as Emanuel was entering his junior year at Excel Public High School, the Strand Youth Theatre Project recruited him for its first Shakespeare class.

A collaboration between the Strand theater and ASP's budding education program, the class ran simultaneously with ASP's fall 2006 production of *Hamlet* at the Strand. Doug Lockwood and ASP company members and guest artists Jason Bowen, Johnny Lee Davenport and Marya Lowry met regularly with students, and worked with Emanuel on a monologue spoken by Hamlet's father's ghost.

“I was afraid of Shakespeare,” Emanuel recalls. “Getting comfortable with the language. Speaking it, reading it.” Nevertheless, his harrowing, otherworldly delivery sent chills up the spines of his classmates and teachers.

But in November, Emanuel and two other students were held up at knifepoint one block away from the Strand, while they were walking home from class. Fearful for his son's safety, Emanuel's father forbade him to attend future classes. Shakespeare was a luxury, he said. Emanuel had to be home before dark.

Then in December, the day before an end-of-semester showcase,



BILL BARCLAY & EMANUEL SILVA in *King John*, photo: Stratton McCrady

of performing Shakespeare: simplicity. “I try not to force anything—just let it flow,” Emanuel says.

Last spring, ASP artistic director Benjamin Evett cast Emanuel in *King John*, a pivotal experience in the promising young performer's career. “I'm usually hard on myself,” Emanuel says. Performing in *King John*, though, “I felt satisfied. Good.”

“Shakespeare is a challenging way of expressing sincere emotions,” as Emanuel sees it, “Shakespeare's text contains deep sentiments from a poet's imagination.”

Emanuel is indeed taking his chance. “Without acting, I would feel incomplete,” he says. “Acting gives me purpose in life. When I am acting, I feel like I belong.”

He plans to study more Shakespeare.

“Shakespeare allows me to explore and interpret a character, and allows me to draw a line connecting the past to the present,” Emanuel explains. “A lot of what happened in Shakespeare's time happens today, but in different ways. The rivalry in *Romeo and Juliet* could be gangs now.”

—Magda Spasiano

Magda Spasiano works for DOT Art in Dorchester and most recently was the lead teacher for ASP's Shakespeare On the Out program for girls.

## Education Notes

By Lori Taylor, Director of Education

ASP Education Director Lori Taylor and company members Jennie Israel, Michael Forden Walker and Jason Bowen recently wrapped up a series of Shakespeare workshops at a Framingham girls' detention facility. Lori & Jennie led text-based activities, theater games. Michael and Jason performed scenes from *Love's Labour's Lost* and led a Q&A with the girls. “Even though we never showed it, thanks so much for coming and believing in us and getting our minds to go elsewhere,” one girl said. “We loved having you here.”

Seasonal company member Sarah Hickler led ASP's week-long institute for high school teachers at Salem State College this summer. Jennie Israel, Paula Plum and Lori Shaller rounded out a week of instruction and exploration of “Being Shylock.” David Evett, *Merchant of Venice* Director Melia Bensussen and ASP company members Michael Forden Walker and Jason Bowen contributed their time and talent.

## News on the Rialto

**Marya Lowry** was Anna Deavere Smith's personal vocal coach this fall while Smith was at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, where her *Let Me Down Easy* ran through Oct. 11. Marya is also teaching a two-day intensive workshop in the Teachers As Scholars program, a professional development collaboration that pairs college and university professors with K-12 teachers.

**John Kuntz** plays multiple characters in Anne Washburn's new play *The Communist Dracula Pageant* at

the ART in October and November, then moves across the river to perform multiple roles in The Lyric Stage Company of Boston's production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep* in December.

**Doug Lockwood** directed Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* at Boston Conservatory's Zack Box Theatre in early September.

**Bobbie Steinbach** kicked off the fall-winter season in Stephen Sondheim's legendary *Follies* at the Lyric Stage

Company, directed by Spiro Veloudos. In November, she'll direct *Our Town* at Boston Conservatory, where the show runs at the Zack Box Theatre Nov. 13-16. Bobbie starts rehearsals in December for *The Corn is Green* with Kate Burton, at the Huntington Theatre Company.

**Bill Barclay** did sound design and composition for *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Goatwoman of Corvis County* at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox during the summer.