Interview between Arnold Wesker and Julia Pascal conducted by Anne Étienne for RADAC, Hove, 16 June 2013.

Anne Etienne.– What prompted you to write the plays? How much of Shakespeare was at the back of your minds?

Arnold Wesker.– Can you actually remember, Julia?

Julia Pascal.– I've always found the play very difficult and I've ignored it. Then I felt I was running away from the problem of being an English Jew. So, by writing it, re-visiting, re-visioning it, I made myself confront it. And it proved a very tough and unpleasant journey, but I felt I had to do it. It was to do with the difficulty of that play always being presented in Britain, and of the concept of Shylock as a major representation of Jewish life. It disturbed me. So I had to do something with it. Which made me want to revisit it but through the eyes of a survivor of the Holocaust. Ruth Posner. She ran from the Warsaw Ghetto as a child. And I have known her for twenty years so her story has a resonance. It is something she carries in her aura. To put this onstage was to make a statement. She plays a character inspired by her own story, and her very Polish presence and accent give a certain stage atmosphere. What also excited me was the juxtaposition of one historical ghetto on another. Therefore Ruth, with her real memories of her childhood in Poland, stands in the Venice Ghetto. There she is confronted by a group of people who are putting on a dress rehearsal of *The Merchant of Venice*. The framework I gave myself therefore was that of play-within-the-play (Ghetto on Ghetto) framed by Shakespeare's actual play to build the story (or should that be "storey"?) one on top of the other to make a new dramatic whole.

A. W.– Quite different from me. I can remember exactly. I had often talked of the idea of writing a play based on the three strands: the pound of flesh, the three caskets and the Lorenzo-Jessica subplot. I had always wanted to direct a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in a way that would present Shylock as a different character, a different personality. And when I said this to an actor friend he

said you're going to have to rewrite a lot of the Shakespeare. And so I thought, why not? And then I saw the Jonathan Miller production, the one in which he tried, by setting the play at the heyday of Victorian capitalism, to show that Shylock was a banker like everybody else.[1] And there came a moment in the play which was a revelation to me. When Portia says, "OK, you can have your pound of flesh but no blood". The Shylock that I knew would have said "thank god, thank god I've been relieved of something I didn't want to do". The challenge for me was to write a play which explored how he was involved in a contract that he didn't want to sign. And so it started, using Shakespeare's names and a few of his original lines, and adding and re-creating characters and ideas. Round about that time I was invited to the University of Boulder, Colorado, to conduct various lectures. One of them was the history of modern British drama and after two weeks I didn't have anything more to say. I told the students: "that's it, that's all I know. But what might interest you is to go along with me on the journey of writing a new play". I divided the Shakespeare play up into sections for them to study. I ended up with a brilliant postgraduate student, Lois Bueler, who gave me my reading list. She gave me a book *The Jews of Venice*, *The Jews of Italy*, *Renaissance Women* – which gave me Portia – and it's based on those books. The major thing that she gave me was information about a law in Venice, which said that you could not have dealings with a Jew without a signed and sealed contract. So my Shylock and my Antonio are friends, and my Shylock gets upset that he's being asked to break a friendship because of a foolish Venetian law. And Antonio reminds him, "You have to, you have to obey this law because if you don't you will set a precedent for the Jewish community. They must respect the necessity of a contract as ordered by the laws of the Government of Venice". He was hung by his own jury and it was going to go ahead. But very quickly, Portia – who goes as Portia, she doesn't pretend she's someone else – says, "you can't draw flesh without blood", and he says "thank god", and he feels he's being relieved of the need to fulfill his bond. But the Doge says, "no, you can't I'm afraid because there's another law of Venice which says that anybody who attempts to take the life of a Venetian is condemned", etc. So that was the framework I had set

out for myself. The other thing is that I wanted, like you, to write real Jews – you didn't recognise a Jew that you know in Shakespeare, I didn't. The Jew of my knowledge was Isaiah Berlin, George Steiner, Lord Robert Gavron, Jonathan Miller: these were the Jews that I knew. And so I created a Shylock who was a mixture of all these people and a bit of myself thrown in to create this new version of the character of Shylock.

A. E.– Would you say that you are in any way censoring Shakespeare?

J. P.– Re-interpreting it is perhaps how I would put it, because how can you censor Shakespeare? It's been staged so many thousands of times.

A. W.– I used the same source material. The first scene establishes a major innovation in that Shylock and Antonio are old friends. It's their friendship that sets the story. Then there are many themes and plots: the relationship between state and individual, between parent and child – that can be found in most of my plays. Shakespeare's Shylock is two-dimensional: he creates the stereotype of the evil, miserly, merciless Jew. Mine is foolish because he's a free spirit and he contradicts the Shakespearean image. He's a businessman but his passion is his book collection and knowledge. He breaks and mocks the laws of Venice.

A. E.– And do you see your creation as mainly the result of your being a Jewish writer or a direct post-Holocaust response?

J. P.– I think it's both but I'd like to pick up on what Arnold was saying about the sort of Jews we recognise. Because I'm also a theatre director, I knew I wanted to have a Shylock who was a man in his fifties – I was in my fifties when I did it – who was still a sexually active and a sexually attractive man. I was interested in the Jewish man, perhaps more as the post-Holocaust Jewish man, the Israeli, the soldier, the warrior who fights back, who's not the cringing Jew of the traditional version of the Shakespeare Jew, as it was done pre-twentieth-century. For me there was another way. He has a daughter who's going to get married, so he may be 40, he may

be 30. Why is he always presented as a doddery old grey-beard? So I was interested in a muscular, athletic, sexualised Jew, which challenged the preconceptions – and I think audiences had a problem with that but that's what I deliberately wanted to do.[2] What I wanted to put in – which is not in the text – is that atmosphere of Venice that you're talking about: the research, the weight of the Catholic Church – so I have Catholic processions, I have Shylock being converted forcibly at the end. [*To A. W.*] Your Shylock goes to Jerusalem, which is interesting.

A. W.– That's right.

J. P.– He's almost a Zionist, which is quite upsetting for traditional English audiences as well. How does one deal with him at the end? Because in the Shakespeare, it's a bloody end, he's stripped of everything, he's converted, he's completely castrated on every level. It's interesting how both of us took the character and gave him another life, which is not in the Shakespeare play. Maybe that partly explains a Jewish writer's need to give Shylock an afterlife which extends Shakespeare's where Shylock disappears.

A. W.– I wanted to re-invent a poetic work that cannot be seen as anything but anti-semitic whereas Shakespeare's intentions were not. The "defence" of Shylock is disturbing, so I felt I had to address it but shift it, give another context to the lines.

A. E.– One may link that to an act of censorship in that you are euphemising and fleshing up as well, thereby recreating the character?

J. P.– The Inquisition is like the Holocaust. It's never talked about. [*To A. W.*] You talk about it in your play. And it seems to me that your play is quite a lot about England as much as Venice. So there is a form of Holocaust and Inquisition pre-Hitler period that is in the text, that is present in history. One has an obligation as a writer in the twentieth-century. You can't ignore it, you can see the link between the Holocaust and *The Merchant of Venice* and the fact that it was used by Hitler as propaganda – the Nazis loved that play. We can't ignore that. And these caricatures of Jews are in English

literature – they're in Dickens, they're in the Medieval imagery, and it's coming from England. And we, as English Jewish writers, are confronting something which is unpleasant for mainstream society, I would say.

A. W.– The worst one of course is Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. What a horrendous play that is. Maybe Jews have attracted this kind of response because they're anti-authoritarian. Free spirits. Shylock is a free spirit, stuck in a ghetto, hiding his precious books for fear they're confiscated and burnt. But he also has gained an eminent place in Jewish society, and the Jewish community turn to him for help, to flee the Church, to build a synagogue... So he is proud as well as free-spirited, and so easily irritated.

A. E.– Talking about the writing process, can you define it? Was it quick, natural, did the words come freely or did you have to struggle and if so, what against?

A. W.– I know I had to struggle because at a certain point in my diary I wrote, "I can't go on with this, I've just re-read all I have written and it's dreadful". My problem was that what I had written so far I had weighed with far too much history. So I had to bleed. But that was a wonderful moment when I bled the play and suddenly I had a work that was breathing. I had that sort of difficulty. But the research I loved. This student in Boulder – to whom I dedicated the play – she gave me this reading list and I discovered a whole lot of history that I knew nothing about. That wasn't the problem, just hard work.

J. P.– A lot of the research came from being in Venice a few times and visiting many European Catholic countries, and then weighing it against the English experience. Unlike Arnold, I didn't rewrite the play. I have written a few scenes and I have interpreted the play, but 90% of it is Shakespeare and 10% is me. So there's a difference between Arnold's vision and mine. Mine was closer to the original. His is an original piece, mine is as a playwright and a theatre director. So in the playing, it's the fact that Jessica puts on a blonde wig when she becomes a Christian: it's more a comment on late twentieth-century contemporary society, on English Jews wanting to

be more "English" than Jews. The hiding of being a Jew, all that area really interested me. So I'm trying to represent that, which I think is disturbing: that in order to succeed in British society you have to metaphorically put on a blonde wig, you have to lose your Jewishness. And that is what I wanted to raise, and it was a pleasure to write stage directions, to direct. It was a pleasure writing the few scenes I added in between father and daughter, and inventing the Holocaust survivor. Through the creation of Sarah, based on Ruth Posner's life, I wanted to make the past and the present interconnectable, to break down the structure, to make it a very postmodern piece.

A. W.– Don't you think you could have made more of Sarah? Given your framework, she would have been given greater solidity I felt. I wanted to know more of her. Do you plan to rewrite?

J. P. [*Laughs*].– It's very difficult to rewrite once you've had a production. But I could do.

A. W.– I've had this extraordinary experience of proofreading the new volumes published by Oberon. I found myself proofreading *The Friends* and rewriting it.[3] I thought, "this is terrible and I've got to do something about it". So I asked them if they minded whether I literally rewrote it. So *The Friends* is rewritten.

J. P.– Yes, I agree with you, Sarah could have had more.

A. E.– This idea of the framing device, did it come instantly in that it allowed this distance between the text and what you wanted to say, between the past and the present? How did it evolve? What was the idea behind this framing and the creation of Sarah?

J. P.– I had worked with Ruth Posner as an actor for many years and I knew her Ghetto escape story. To me, there was no way I could do the play without her, she became integral to the framing of it. Because if you have a real person, who's also an actor, who carries with her, in her cellular structure, the memory of running away from the Warsaw Ghetto, who is in the play's structure, in the Venice Ghetto, watching a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, you have so much that you can't put on the page but is actually

atmospheric in the production. And I wanted that. Had she not been alive I'm not sure I could have done it. I think what does the living body of a Polish woman who's escaped bring to the vision of that play. I wanted the concentration of that energy in the theatre space.

A. E.– The title of your plays are now about Shylock, not the Merchant any more. Did this choice emerge as a necessity because you are yourselves Jewish, or because of the portrayal that Shakespeare makes of him that prompts this atemporal, stereotypical and monstrous figure of the Jew? Why did you change the title, especially in Arnold's case?

A. W.– I know exactly why. My German translator, a brilliant woman, suggested that I call it *Shylock* and not *The Merchant*. I resisted it, it had to be *The Merchant*. As I went into rehearsal, I realised that Shylock was a much better title. That's what the play was about, it's about Shylock. It's all down to my translator bullying me.

J. P.– The production was called *Merchant of Venice* because I felt there was so much of Shakespeare in it, that it was a director's vision of it. But when it came to the publishing of it, it seemed to be the *Shylock Play*, as a more honest way on the page of dealing with it. But I don't think you can separate the Shakespearean stereotype, archetype, from being a Jew in England. It comes with the territory. As a Jew born in England you have the weight of that stereotype on your shoulders whether you like it or not. It's part of the whole *zeitgeist* of growing up in Britain. So I don't think you can separate the two and I think both of us had to wrestle with this monstrous figure that was given to us.

A. W.– Did you read John Gross' book?[4]

J. P.– Yes. And also Philip Roth wrote a book with a Shylock in it.[5]

A. W.– I read it but I can't remember it.

J. P.– I think all European Jews are saddled with this on their back. It's like a coat on your back and you scratch it and you have to get rid of it somehow.

A. W.– John Gross actually comes out with it and says "there can be no doubt that the play contributed to the Holocaust".

J. P.– That's right.

A. W.– And he presents good arguments.

J. P.– Because there's always the visuals. In the end, no matter what you write or what I write, the image of the Jew with a knife has so much reverberation, so much previous history that there's nothing you can do in words to undo that. Unless you get rid of that scene - but if you get rid of that scene you've lost the play. For me the visual of a Jew with a knife against a Christian breast goes back to the whole Jews killing Jews, this fantasy of regicide if you like.

A. W.– In the production that Trevor Nunn did, which was really plagiarised I thought, he has this moment when Henry Goodman is poised with the knife in front of Antonio and you're supposed to feel that he's having second thoughts.[6] Then, after a long long time, Portia says "Tarry a little". The man's been tarrying for ten minutes. And he feels that he redeems the play in this way. [*They laugh*.]

J. P.– You can't redeem it.

A. E.– Is that what you're trying to do through your writing? You were talking about visuals. Was your work prompted by aesthetic or ideological motives?

J. P.– It's the same, isn't it. For me it's ideological because I'm protesting against the image of Jews in literature.

A. W.– That's right, and creating another image in its stead, saying there's more to it.

J. P.– We, as Jews, are qualified to tell you. There's more than this image which you think is so magnanimous with the speech "Hath not a Jew eyes", etc. You think that is wonderful. I'm telling you it's

nothing, there is much much more, that you do not even dream of. And I think that's what Arnold and I are showing.

A. W.– Do you know Cynthia Ozick? She said all those claims could be made for a monkey. I could not have my Shylock speak this eulogy of pseudo-Jewish virtues. I have Lorenzo speak the lines, and Shylock cannot stand this patronising from someone he loathes. He rebels. He is a threat because he's unpredictable, won't accept charity, won't conform. My Shylock is disturbing because he is irrepressible.

J. P.– The Jews are tolerated in England, like a bad smell. I was brought up with that idea, you must have been as well.

A. W.– No, I came from a communist family, where it was accepted that we were all the same. Which we weren't, of course. I actually didn't feel I lived in an anti-semitic country until my first play was done. Then I felt very Jewish. If you've got it, flaunt it. And that's what I did. I think the Royal Court at that time was interested in eccentrics, not eccentrics but writers who were different. I was ethnically different. A bit of something Lindsay Anderson discovered from the Hackney ghetto. When I asked him to read *Chicken Soup with Barley* he replied saying I was a much better writer than John Osborne and Doris Lessing. I don't think he thought *Chicken Soup* would change the image of the Jew.

A. E.– Coming to the central notion of anti-semitism, do you think that it is the primary theme of the play? You explore other subjects in your plays, such as the rise of capitalism, the place of women in society…

A. W.– It's not so much the question of a primary theme. If I was writing about a Jew who was more like Isaiah Berlin and George Steiner and Jonathan Miller, then he had to be interested in ideas. His idea that Abraham invented God to keep the Jews in order because they were a frightful lot is interesting. His relationship with Jessica also. It's to do with ideas rather than central themes.

J. P.– That's a wonderful scene in your play when Shylock explains God was invented by Abraham…

A. W.– I think that is an original idea.

J. P.– It is. Very subversive for Jews. It's blasphemous.

A. W.– I had a cousin who said "you shouldn't be writing plays like that". That's what Jews were invented for, to be blasphemous.

J. P.– The excitement of writing or re-interpreting the play has to do with all those themes: it's got trade, how wealth can come and go, how one can fly high and fall very quickly; it's very modern. The role of women is very important, the role of the ethnic minorities, the business of usury which still goes on, the association of Jews with money, the hatred of money. Arnold, you write about nobility and new money in your play, and it seems to me very modern; a very twentieth-century play in that sense, a very English play. It's about Venice but it's about England as well. It's multi-stranded, and where does the Jew fit in, as this international devil who has contacts all over? Which of course is the role of the Jew in that period. The history is very interesting in that one has the Spanish background but then is thrown out of Spain, then has cousins in other colonies, who can help. The role of the polylingual Jew, mastermind, intellectual, and the fear of it, the anti-intellectualism in it.

A. W.– Has anybody recognised this in your play?

J. P. [*Laughs*].– Nobody has. Nobody knows what my plays are about. To me, it's obvious, but I realise within this context it's not. Do people know the layers you have underneath?

A. W.– No, they don't.

J. P.– They're sort of disturbed by it and therefore they don't like it, or they get it completely, which is rare. But they can't quite see where it's all fitting.

A. W.– And also Israel gets in the way.

J. P.– Israel is a big problem. And that's the problem about being a Jew expressing anything in England today. Because if you're a Jew,

therefore you're an Israeli, therefore you're hateful, but we can't say that, therefore "oh, just go away, leave me alone".

A. E.– But don't you think it would be more difficult for a non-Jewish writer to rewrite the *Merchant*?

J. P.– Yes.

A. E.– That you in fact are allowed to do that?

J. P.– Are we allowed to? I am not sure but I do know we have more sand in the oyster, we have more connections to it, more feeling about it, because of who we are, what we've lived.

A. W.– Do you mind if I correct you. I don't think my play is a rewrite of the Shakespeare play.

A. E.– How would you define your play?

A. W.– It's an original play about a character who is a very important, because malicious, figure in the history of English theatre. I attempt to recreate him. I'd like to think I succeeded.

A. E.– What I like about both your plays is that you created some characters and re-imagined others. The female characters are particularly appealing. You added a sister to Shylock. You made very much of the bond between Shylock and Jessica. Your Portia is very contemporary as well. Could you speak more about the women?

A. W.– I like women more than I like men. I prefer writing about women. But they've been very important in my life, mothers, sisters, aunts cousins, girlfriends. Portia is very different from the Shakespeare. She's not hypocritical, she's not an anti-semite knowingly throwing him to his fall. She is educated and intelligent. She won't suffer a fool for a husband for example. She followed her father's orders to marry whoever chooses the right casket, but she'll lead her own life if Bassanio proves inadequate as a husband.

A. E.– What prompted you to write Rivka for example?

A. W. – That's interesting. It seemed right for Shylock to have a sister because I had a sister. And Rivka, alongside Shylock, is very

much my sister Della alongside me. Rivka appears whenever there's a dilemma. She spells it out when Shylock agonises over it. And so they fight like brothers and sisters.

A. E.– And what about the relationships with the young characters, because they don't act at all in the same way as they do in the Shakespeare play. We see Bassanio being very close to Antonio in the Shakespeare. In your play, they hardly know each other, which prompts the question, "why did Antonio ask the money for a man he had just met and whose character he was unsure about, which in turn led to the fateful contract?". That's one point in the play I'm curious about because I don't understand it.

A. W.– First of all, Shylock and Antonio are friends, so Shylock disregards the contempt he feels towards Bassanio. Also, it would be to his friend that Antonio would turn naturally. And I know Gentile-Jewish relationship, with friends who had great influence on me, which is based on experience. I made Bassanio his godson, and that draws a sense of obligation.

J. P.– Antonio, Arnold's character, is so morally driven that even if he hated him, he would feel obliged to help his godson. It's very clear that there's a moral obligation from you to the child and his parents in the Christian world. That was my reading.

A. W.– Thanks, that's exactly what I meant.

A. E.– And what about the relationship between Shylock and his Jessica?

J. P.– I was aware of Shylock as a widower. And I thought a Jewish man wouldn't be alone. Your Rivka seems to me quite right. There would always be some woman… A Jewish man would be married off or someone would be there to look after him. For me I wanted the father-daughter bond to be very strong, show that he would do anything for her. I have him sewing her coat. I thought of Jewish tailors of course. So there was an intimate bonding.

A. W.– But wasn't that to carry jewels?

J. P.– It happens later, but I wanted the act of him doing something for her that was quite personal. I like the idea of the male tailor. Sewing in English life is women's work. The male tailor is quite a Jewish image.

A. W.– That's rather brave of you. You kind of have to know about Jewish men and women. And throw that into an English audience.

J. P.– And that goes back to your question of what WE bring to *The Merchant*. Our knowledge, a live knowledge of Jewish life in Britain, that comes with your breath, and therefore is in our writing, my writing, my productions. I was interested in Portia. I think Arnold's women are feminists and strong women. I think mine are too. But Portia has an unpleasant feminism. In the first scene I have her with a lover under her skirt, rather than this chaste maiden being caught. She is sexually free. Venice in that period was full of brothels. Also rich women presumably had lovers. If they were careful and didn't get pregnant, it was OK. It was not discussed but it was there. Rich women had power but, until they were married, they couldn't exercise it. But Portia was unpleasant as she is as anti-semitic as her society. That interested me. So you create a woman who seems attractive and sexually free and intelligent and learned, but she's an anti-Semite. Then you've got Jessica, the Jewish woman who is in love with Gentile society. And I have only had relationships with men who are not Jewish in my life. So to deal with the ambiguity of being attracted to Gentile society seemed to me important. Jessica IS governed by lust not by intelligence on any level, the lust for Gentile society. Which as an English Jew you've got to understand. To fit in, you've got to marry Gentile society, unless you're going to be an orthodox Jew. For me, it had those levels as well. Dampening down your Jewishness in order to survive seems to me to be part of English Jewish life. Whereas I'm not sure it would be true if we were in New York. That's what I was playing with if you like.

A. E.– With Portia and Jessica you have two facets of womanhood attached to the same man. There's this powerful moment at the end when Shylock shows his affection, his respect and admiration for Portia in front of his poor Jessica who just runs away. It was a heart-

breaking moment, knowing that he's left for Jerusalem in the next scene.

A. W.– It's not meant to be a romantic scene. Both women have attached themselves to men who are not worthy of them. They are very modern women because they will act on their mistakes. Jessica does very quickly. She's very intelligent Jessica, but she rebels against Shylock because of what he expects of her. And so she falls in love with Lorenzo, who stands as the young generation of thinkers. When she realises he's a religious fanatic, that Shylock was right in despising him, she runs away again.

J. P.– I have a vested history in this. My father said, "Better to marry a Jew who beats you than a Gentile who is good to you." Within Shakespeare's play, within Arnold's play, there's something very interesting in the Jewish father who disowns his daughter. This is in Jewish life, unless it's educated and liberal. But certainly it's in the background. I know that to marry out is the most terrible sin. And you're betraying the ones who died in the Holocaust if you take it to the modern day. And I didn't have children, so I haven't been a good Jewish girl.

A. E.– Both your plays, each in their own way, are quite didactic. They lay things out for the audience. What is your experience of audience participation, audience response, and is it the same as for your other plays or is there something clearly different about this one?

J. P.– How do you know who's going to come? You do not know your audiences. There is no such thing as "The Audience". They're individuals with different expectations. Perhaps it's different for you, because you wrote an original play and I was rewriting parts of Shakespeare. I felt I was touching the Holy Bible and it was somewhat sinful. But your play was original text.

A. W.– I suppose I wanted people to come away with a different idea about Shylock. And in the process of coming away an audience would encounter all sorts of interesting ideas. For their own sake. The teacher in me wanted to have good pupils.

A. E.– In terms of actual audience response, how were they received?

J. P.– There was one production at the Arcola, a three to four-week run.[7] Some critics got it and a lot were totally mystified because they didn't understand the references, they didn't really know what the play was doing. They didn't understand why Jessica wanted to put on a blonde wig, because they didn't know about Jews trying to fit in English society. The ignorance on Jews in British life is manifest. It always shocks me that people know almost nothing about Jewish life whereas, we, as Jews, we learn everything about Christian life. They didn't know what the references were, the attack on the Catholic Church which is in the production with the procession; they didn't understand about the Inquisition. It didn't mean anything to them when Shylock gets converted at the end. Some people had never seen the Shakespeare so they thought that's what happened in the Shakespeare. You have a huge diversity of reactions depending where people are coming from. People who knew about the Holocaust understood the framework clearly, that it was a vision of the Shakespeare through the eyes of a Holocaust survivor's experience with someone on stage who had gone through the Holocaust. They got it. But they might not have got the other elements which are the critique of the Inquisition, the weight of the Catholic Church at that time. And those who didn't know Shakespeare didn't know that what you were doing was different.

A. W.– I never thought about that, that someone wouldn't know the Shakespeare. I imagined it would get such rave reviews that it would go on and on and on and the word would spread as to what the meaning was.

A. E.– In your case, there was more than one production and there was a very traumatic American production.[8] What was the reception of the premiere in Stockholm for instance?[9]

A. W.– I was told that it was received as the best play in the last ten years. It did make an impact. I saw the Danish production and that was honourable. I can't remember the others. David Suchet played Shylock in Birmingham. Again, it was honourably received. It wasn't

the sensational "how dare he?" that I thought might happen. But that's what I'm looking for: "how dare he?", and crowds outside the theatre booing as I come out of the theatre.

A. E.– Do you think you have written a polemical play?

A. W.– Yes.

J. P.– It's challenging, provocative, it's the two fingers to the English vision of so-called tolerance of Jews.

A. W.– Yes, Shylock's last send up, using the only Shakespeare lines in the play, gives the lines to Lorenzo.

J. P.– Yes, that's fantastic, that's amazing. The anti-semitic lines.

A. E.– Do you attach the controversial dimension of your polemical play to the English context? Could it be taken as polemical in other parts of Europe?

J. P.– I think it would because Shakespeare has been translated and Shylock is a universal figure, the Jew who is avaricious, money-lending, obsessed with money, cold, heartless, filthy, stinking, serving the basest parts of society – that's the stereotype. It's international. When you present it in England, obviously…

A. E.– There's a lack of understanding that shouldn't be there. Both your plays have distinctive forms. How important do you consider – and I know Arnold will say that the material dictates the form – form as opposed to text, words, themes, ideas. Did you have an idea of the form you wanted your plays to take before embarking on the writing? With Julia, it is particularly striking because the form effects a distance with the Shakespeare text, a distance that is forced on the audience as well.

J. P.– In the old Arcola we did it with two sides of the audience as the Ghetto. The water was the floor, the stage area, between. I didn't really know before I got into the space that it would work well on two sides. The length of the canals interested me in Venice and the feeling of that. Obviously if you had a lot of money you would do it with water. But we staged it with planks going over

water, and the idea of water rising, the geography of the city was important to me, the fluidity of life, how things can change on a knife edge. The non-naturalistic way of it. When I saw *Shylock* in Birmingham, it was the books, the weight of the books, which I thought was an integral part of the text. But they're two very different pieces. Mine was written and imagined in such a way that it was fluid and adventurously imagined, not in a traditional proscenium arch. *Shylock* was made for a more formal structure. And the revolution was in the writing and the ideas rather than the design of it. Correct me if I'm wrong.

A. W.– I did have some ideas about the form but Jocelyn Herbert, the designer, didn't follow me. I know that I wanted the first scene to be in dark colours, shadowy, because it was the Jewish Ghetto. And then the next scene was to be Belmont, absolutely sun-lit, strikingly light and then back again to the Ghetto. That's what I wanted to be the basis of the form of the play. But Jocelyn Herbert had other ideas and she was at the time closer to John Dexter [*the director*] than I was. She was a great designer so the sets were beautiful, but it didn't make the impact that I wanted made going from light to dark.

J. P.– I think you're right because of the crushing oppressive nature of the Ghetto even when you go to Venice today and the amount of people jammed in. And you talk about this in your play. It's very important to show that. These so-called wealthy Jews were actually living like sardines, in unpleasant ways, and if they smelt it was because there was no air.

A.E.– This mise-en-abyme that you create, what was the central idea behind it? To me what's important is that it's not so much a play in performance, but a play in rehearsal. There's this free – because the director of the play is away – almost festive atmosphere around a central dark atemporal contract. You said you were influenced by the fact that you were working with a company, so were there various influences while writing it that impacted on the shape of the play?

J. P.– The idea of the director being held up by the rising water and therefore the dress rehearsal happening without her, and the fact that the director is a woman, it's a reference partly to myself and other women directors – still a rarity in British theatre. But yes, here there is still the idea of Shylock as a fixed figure… Maybe Shylock is not a fixed figure, maybe Jews can reinterpret Shylock. Maybe Shakespeare was a rehearsal for us, we can take this stereotype and turn it on its head and challenge it. So the idea of rehearsal is the outer level of this inner kernel of the idea "what is a Jew?" Who is Shylock? Is he a vibrant, sexy, intellectual, friend of a gentile, generous human being whose life is broken by the State? Or is he this blood-thirsty, knife-carrying Jew?

A. E.– Or is it Sarah?

J. P.– Yes, or is it a woman who's escaped from the Ghetto? But what is her link to that? Was Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* a rehearsal for the Holocaust? Did the creation of the Shylock figure lead to the gas chambers? All those questions are inherent in the idea of a rehearsal of this most potent of plays and the images of Jewery in Europe.

A. W.– There's obviously quite a bit that I missed reading your play. I remember thinking I would get a lot more if I saw it.

J. P.– Yes, because I'm a director and I write as a director. I know how to make those levels, and that atmosphere and those questions arise in the air, through action, through presentation. When I direct other people's plays those two are working together for me. I can't separate them.

A. E.– *Shylock* is built more traditionally, in two acts with scenes. At the same time, even when reading, you feel the urgency of the action inscribed within the structure. Was that your instructing the director that, though the play looks traditional and narrative, its urgency is at the structural basis of it?

A. W.– Yes. Don't forget also that I was brought up on the cinema. Never went to the theatre, except when I was an amateur actor. We couldn't afford the theatre, but we could afford the Odeon cinema

which was in Brick Lane, at the top of the street where I lived. I think a lot of critics and directors forget the existence of cinema in the way we write. When talking about my generation bringing for the first time working-class characters onto the stage, it's crazy. There was the whole of the Dead End Kids, there was Sean O'Casey. It was just a big gap that critics left out. But I was much more influenced by the cinema than by theatre. And I'm sure that shows in places in *Shylock*, through quick-cuts.

A. E.– The distance that you've created, differently, with the original script – with the addition of characters, opposed perspectives, fleshing out, metatheatrical device – did that prove a natural creative space or one that was difficult to negotiate? How daunting was the Shakespearean ghost in a way?

A. W.– I distanced myself by writing a new text. I knew that I wasn't going to rewrite Shakespeare or even write in the style of, as if I could. So, writing from the beginning, I freed myself. One of the people I mentioned when I was talking about the kind of Jew I knew was George Steiner and Lord Gavron. Bob Gavron who is a friend, owns the Folio Society and Carcanet Books. He made a lot of money as a printer. He printed the *Guinness Book of Records* and *Vogue* and all those magazines and he made a lot of money. And found time to read. I sent him everything I'd written. He read novels, he read theatre, the opera (he became a Governor of the Royal Opera House). Someone like him was always at the back of my mind, and how he might talk. Plus my own inimitable way of writing dialogue. *[All laugh.]*

J. P.– I think you wrote a more intellectual Shylock, especially with the history of books and his love of learning. Mine was not, mine was the merchant, mercantile because I knew less of that intellectual world growing up. My grandfather was in textile and he was in the import-export business in a basement in Manchester, in a room half this size. And he became very rich and then very poor very quickly. So I knew about the little trader and I became interested in those people who live on their wits through money. He's more Shakespearean than original, my Shylock; but he grows from

Shakespeare's because of the visual presentation of him as a loving father or in the scene when he's walking down the street and he's spat on, he fights back. The extension for me was taking the merchant Jew forward into the fighting Jew. He is close to the modern soldier, the new Jew, the post-Holocaust Jew. Mine was a different Shylock; yours is much more the Isaiah Berlin, well-rounded English man of letters. They're two different visions.

A. E.– Were you aware of other writers' work around *Shylock*?

J. P.– Philip Roth and John Gross, yes. But it's more to do with the weight of the figure, like Fagin that's everywhere, the caricatures of Jews, the common vision of Shylock. I'm often asked where I'm from for example. If I say Manchester, which is where I was born, they're disappointed. I look foreign and it's not what they want to hear. They mean you are not English, what are you? But I'm hesitant about saying I'm a Jew because I don't know who I'm going to meet and what their reaction is going to be. Or I say my grandparents are Romanian, but not Romanian Jews. So I censor myself. In America I wouldn't do that.

A. W.– I don't have a memory of censoring myself.

J. P.– I write about it but I don't say it because it could be dangerous. There's a weariness about it for me. I don't flaunt it except in public debates like here.

A. E.– Is there still anything unspeakable or unshowable?

J. P.– Israel is an unspeakable territory in British life. It's a very dangerous territory. I tend to shut up and listen unless I'm with people who have a very wide understanding of geography and history.

A. W.– I remember during one of these very early morning radio shows one of the participants was an Irish singer. We were all standing around waiting to go on and the problem of Israel and the Middle East came up and she said almost *à propos of nothing*, "what about the poor Palestinians?"; and you never know where that's

coming from or when. And I've worked out of course *l'esprit d'escalier*.

A. E.– That would be the last taboo?

J. P.– I wrote *Crossing Jerusalem*, which was set in Jerusalem during the 2002 Intifada, because I realised no British writer had really written about Israel. And I did it at the Tricycle [*in 2003*] and no-one really knew what to make of it. They all thought it was going to take sides, and then I showed them some complexity. The more you know the less you know. It's a many layered cake. It's the simple platitudes I can't stand. You have to understand geopolitics.

A. E.– You have rewritten and changed the perspectives on the character of Shylock, but the moment in the trial when the bond has to be effected, can you tell us about your understanding of the bond and the moment when blood does not have to be drawn, when the pound of flesh does not have to be claimed?

A. W.– Mine had got into a gallop. It couldn't be anything else than the way I had written it. I had set it up in such a way that it was the only ending possible.

A. E.– And it's thanks to Portia, but in a different way than in Shakespeare's and Julia's plays, where Portia, transvestite, is given the authoritative voice.

J. P.– She is very dubious because she is supposedly an impartial lawyer and that speech about the quality of mercy is not strained. I was brought up with thinking that it is a marvellous speech of Shakespeare poetry and knowledge of human beings. But in fact it's fraudulent. She's representing the interests of her future husband, so she is not a pure lawyer, she's a completely faulted character. I was interested in her being a sympathetic feminist character, who then you start to hate. I like shifting the audience's perspective on characters. I had sleepless nights over that scene because you can't avoid it. It's textually how Shakespeare wrote it in mine, but not in terms of the direction: Sarah is watching it, and Jessica is watching it and the crowd are very anti-semitic in it, so you are pulled, you are disturbed by it…

A. E.– You're manipulated.

J. P.– Yes. And I don't think you can escape it. Arnold didn't rewrite the scene, because it's not Shakespeare's language, it's Arnold's language. It has much more compassion towards Shylock. Mine still has the Shakespeare hatred of Shylock in that moment. But I hope that because of the weight of the whole, and that you see how he's punished and forced to become a Christian in a very brutal way, that it's seen in a slightly different light.

A. W.– I seem to remember thinking that it was very Chekhovian, the way I'd done it. Everyone had chosen the wrong something. Portia realises she's chosen the wrong man, Jessica realises she's chosen the wrong lover, Antonio and Shylock realise they've chosen the wrong contract. In fact I wrote them all in separate corners of the stage, as they're rejected by the strength of the story into the wrong position.

A. E.– You had this vision already of how it would live on the stage?

A. W.– Yes, in corners.

A. E.– Do you have a question for each other?

J. P.– If you were to write it today, would it change?

A. W.– That's interesting because I wrote an adaptation and I made changes for the radio, which I rather liked and kept it for a stage production.[10]

A. E.– It's almost impossible for an academic to keep abreast of his work because he keeps amending it.

J. P.– Like Brecht.

A. W.– I suppose I would have liked more help, maybe more stage directions. But I reached a stage when I felt the fewer stage directions the better. My stage directions became more and more sparse. Then I read a Poliakoff script and he writes in all the

thoughts of the actors in his play. I thought, yes I can understand that, because you want to tell the actors exactly what to be thinking.

A. E.– And you directed the play, Julia. Would you let it in the hands of other directors?

J. P.– Yes, of course. I would hope so.

A. E.– Would you like to direct your *Shylock*?

A. W.– I couldn't now but I would like to. I directed a studio production at the Riverside, ten days, ten performances. And I raised £35,000 for that. That's why I was named as a fund-raiser. I sold space in the programme. I'd like to be even ten years younger and I'd direct it.

A. E.– Is it the play that is closest to your heart?

A. W.– Yes. The others are closest to my heart for different reasons but I would like to see *Shylock* done before I die. They'd better hurry.

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[1] Miller directed Laurence Olivier as Shylock in a controversial National Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1970.

[2] In Pascal's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock was played by Paul Herzberg.

[3] *The Friends* was first produced at the Roundhouse in 1970, directed by Arnold Wesker.

[4] John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1994.

[5] Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: a Confession*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1993.

[6] Trevor Nunn directed the production at the National Theatre in 1999.

[7] Pascal's production of *The Merchant of Venice* opened at the Arcola on 11 September 2007 and ran until 13 October.

[8] *Shylock* first ran in its English version opening on 29 September 1977 at the Kennedy Centre, Washington before its Broadway run at the Plymouth Theatre on 16 November. See Arnold Wesker, *The Birth of Shylock and the Death of Zero Mostel*, Quartet Books, London, 1997.

[9] *The Merchant* premiered at the Royal Dramaten Theater, Stockholm, on 8 October 1976, directed by Staphan Roos. The UK premiere of *Shylock*, directed by Peter Farago, took place at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on 12 October 1978.

[10] First London airing as dramatised reading running for eight performances from 16 to 22 October 1989 at Riverside Studios with Israeli actor Oded Teomi as Shylock. Directed by the author.