ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2018 Production of *The Merchant of Venice*

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Featuring: Lisa Wolpe (Shylock), Josh Innerst (Gratiano), Wayne Carr (Bassanio), Edna Nahshon (Author: "Wrestling with Shylock: Jewish Responses to *The Merchant of Venice*")

cPherson: My name is Kate McPherson and I'm one of the Play Seminar Directors here at the festival, so I'm really used to directing audience traffic and discussions. That's what I do for the seminars, and that's my role again here today. I'm very happy to introduce to you the actors' panel. We have Lisa Wolpe, Josh Innerst, Edna Nahshon and Wayne Carr, and there will be plenty of opportunities for you to ask them questions. I think I'm going to kick it off with just one question that I'd like each of them to answer, and then we'll pitch it out to you. Each of you are playing multiple roles, so when you speak I'll ask you to say what your roles are. Then you can just talk with us a little bit about something that you really brought to

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embodying that particular role because we're really grateful that we have actors here to embody the role. And maybe some great joy you found in that embodiment or some little challenge. And I'll let you pick rather than say, 'What was the hard thing you did?' If there's something you're really loving, you can talk about that as well. So we'll start with Lisa and then go to Wayne.

Wolpe: Thanks for having us. I play Shylock, and when I play Shylock, I don't talk to anybody backstage because I'm not in the same play as anybody else. Everybody else seems to be in some kind of comedy, and I'm having the worst day of my life. So I just withdraw and I do my work inside my mask, and I don't interact with other people. And then tonight I do *Henry VI*, which is fast and, for me it's very light, because I have very little to say and none of it has any depth. I play the Duke of Bedford, who usually appears in the play in a wheelchair, and I asked my director for a *Game of Thrones* wig, which I wear braided down my back. That's what I do, I wear my *Game of Thrones* wig and my cape billows in the wind and I stand in the rain and I say things. And then I run around as a character called Lucy, who is usually also a guy, and I give news under great duress for four and a half minutes. And then I play Joan of Arc's father and I put on the creepy outfit of the old shepherd, and I have a 56-second scene that goes from 'Oh, my long-lost daughter!' to, 'burn her!' Very fast character development. And then I understudy Leslie Brott as Mistress Quickly, which if you haven't seen *Merry Wives,* is a whole other can of fish.

Innerst: I'm Josh, hello. Last night you saw me as Gratiano in *Merchant of Venice.* Tonight you'll see me as Salisbury and Suffolk in *Henry VI* Part One, and in *Merry Wives* you'll see me as Pistol and Robert. I understudy Geoff Kent and Michael Elich in *Henry VI,* so I act Talbot and York in that. I'll talk about Gratiano because you all just saw that. I brought as much of myself to Gratiano as I could because it was important to me that that character does and says the

things that he says from a place of positive choice, because I think he does and says reprehensible things, and it's easy to classify that as a villain, or as a villainous choice. And I thought it was much more interesting if any choice he makes come from a place of love and of positivity, because it's a little more challenging if you see someone that you maybe like, or is funny, doing horrible things. It means you have to reconcile that image as more than a stereotype.

Carr: Hi, my name is Wayne. I play Othello in *Othello*, I play Bassanio in *Merchant*, and I play Alcippe in *The Liar*. And a challenge for me with *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* was that I didn't like the plays.

McPherson: That's a really big challenge.

Carr: Yeah, it's a huge challenge. It's one of the reasons why I decided to take the season. Because I never really liked *Othello*, and I read *Merchant* and I was like, 'What the heck is this? Why are they doing this play?' I had seen it a long time ago, but they had carnival outfits on. It was strange. It was in Milwaukee, and it was insane. I walked away going, 'That was fun. What was that about?' So when I read it, I thought, 'this is a tough play to do', and I was just curious why we were doing it, and that became intriguing to me. So I'm still dealing with that.

McPherson: So let's get the questions and ideas out to the audience and ask some questions of the panel. This is one of our keynote speakers, Edna Nahshon, a noted scholar of Jewish American theatre and theatre history.

Nahshon: There's usually, regardless of the nature of the production, there's a certain erotic tension between Antonio and Bassanio. You can do it in a more conservative way, but the electricity's there in the air. And it's also there with Portia. I mean, she kicks him out of her life, out of both their lives. With the casting the way it is, what's your relationship with Antonio?

McPherson: What is the nature of Bassnanio's relationship with Antonio?

Carr: That's a great question. I would love to throw that back to you, what you think. If it was difficult for you to figure out, that's good. This is what we said in rehearsal. Because people brought that up and our director, Melissa Pfundstein said, 'Yeah, I don't want to play with that.'

Nahshon: But still, what is the relationship?

Carr: As far as I'm concerned the relationship is one of friendship. Bassanio is like a socialite to me, he's like the male Kardashian of the time. He hasn't really done anything to earn his wealth and status; he's just born into it and given some money that he blows away. So they're buddies; they're friends.Because she didn't want to play with anything romantic, or any kind of other relationship, she just didn't want to touch that.

Nahshon: But there's also the age difference.

Carr: There is, yes.

Nahshon: So she [Leslie Brott as Antonio] looks like your aunt, frankly.

McPherson: Or grandmother.

Carr: No! Either way, it's a friendship. Our friendship is one that is close enough that he will lend me 3000 ducats to go on a voyage to win a lady that will help me financially. Again, I am having difficulty with this play ans was hoping you would help me out.

McPherson: Who has another question for the panel? Yes?

Audience Member: So last night when the conversion declaration happened, the entire audience gasped. And I want to know what did that do for you as actors the first time you had that reaction from an auditorium full of people?

Wolpe: Well I was warned by people who have worked here over the years to be prepared to be openly laughed at, that traditionally the Christians would celebrate this and laugh at that moment. Which, because my father's family were rabbis back to the 1600's, is truly offensive. And yet all I can do is bring all the humanity I can to the role, and

fight for my place in humanity in that play, in that scene, in that moment. And inevitably someone will jeer at me, but the people around them feel their discomfort increase as they realize the political complexity of the people that they're sitting amongst. And my hope is that people go home and have conversations. One night I went home, which is one block from the theater, and I'm walking by this 6-year old girl after the show, and she's saying to her parents, 'Well, even if they force him to go to church–' She was trying to work out the political correctness and the moral compass of the group as a whole. And because it's a problem play I don't think you can settle those issues. But as you know, a diverse audience here is rare. Cedar City is not representative of a fully diverse community, but it might be representative of Shakespeare's London. (I don't know, I wasn't there). There certainly were some Jewish people there, and there certainly were some people who were not white people there.

McPherson: And people who were not Protestants also, right? There were Catholics who had been forced to convert.

Wolpe: The forced conversions in the audience were many, and the mistrust of one another, and the subterfuge. I don't know if you guys have seen Bill Cain's Equivocation. It's a great play [about learning to lie] that you might be interested in.

At the time when they're burning the skin off of your feet demanding, 'Come on now, you're a Catholic, right?', or if you were practicing Wicca and they were crushing your bones in a metal cage, you would at some point recant, as you see with Joan of Arc. 'Sure! Whatever you say. Stop burning me.' You know? There's a tension between the truth and social agreement. I'm sure that's true in Utah, where the LGBTQ youth is committing suicide at three times the rate they were before Trump was elected. There's a schism within society, and everybody does not really get along. Everybody's needs are not met, and everybody is not accepted, and people are coat-switching like mad. That's something I worked on with

Jessica, in terms of coat-switching. And the actress is good enough that I play that whole scene with her, and I leave, and I [as Shylock] don't know Jessica's leaving. Even though I know the play by heart, I'm like, 'I did not know you were leaving me today.' Every day I go off stage and I'm like, 'Oh!'

She's cheating, right? She's giving me love, but underneath it's not love. Whatever the resolution is, that's the heartbreak. That people will look in your face and lie to you, on any level. Even if it's Bassanio and his new wife, and she's trying to figure out, 'What is the measure of virtue? What does a ring mean anymore? Why did you come here, what did you want from me, and who is this man?' I talked to Jim Edmondson who played Shylock here 20 years ago and he told me that he literally threw up in that moment on the stage at that point. He told me I could not throw up. And you probably all know that the Nazi's did this play a lot. This play has been used a lot as a propoganda piece on either side of the coin.

McPherson: As other cast members who are not embodying this character who is forcibly converted in the play and as actors what have you heard and how have you reacted to that?

Innerst: Well, we did talk a lot about prepping for this audience experience. But I've done this play before. I did it in Virginia, just outside of D.C., and we got the exact same reactions. We would have applause occasionally. Onstage, I think that is a moment that the whole cast fractures. Because I know Antonio is doing it from a place of mercy, an attempt to save this life in some form. I know you [Shylock] receive it very differently, and it pisses Gratiano off. I [as Gratiano] hate it, because I intend to kill you the moment we leave the stage and this stops that from happening. And I can feel the reactions differently amongst the cast. Sometimes we work so hard in rehearsals to get on the same page, and I love that here we're all on different pages, because the audience is totally on different pages. I've had long conversations with audience members, being stopped just outside the theater for twenty

minutes talking about that specific moment. And so, whether people are celebrating it or mourning it or discussing it, I love that there is a reaction. I would rather have an extreme reaction amongst the audience than no reaction. So I really love that moment because suddenly you have to realize, 'Oh yeah, there's a lot of people in this room.' And you're all on different pages.

McPherson: That's right. There's 800 people in this theater who each bring something different to the production when they see it, and so they react across the spectrum. Wayne? Thoughts about that?

Carr: That's one of the hardest parts in the play for me, and I have to try my best to stay in the framework of the character that we've created for this play and not burst into tears, because that's what I feel like doing. And Bassanio does have an emotional reaction to that, there is something going on with him during that moment, but Wayne thinks it's the most horrible, nasty thing that I've seen on the stage.

McPherson: I saw both of the first previews of the show, and we had Melinda Pfundstein [the director of *The Merchant of Venice*] at the seminars then to share with audiences her vision and process on the show. And a patron brought up this moment of forced conversion and the fact that many people in the theater that night had laughed. The patron was very upset by it, and I affirmed that. I said, 'Yes, wasn't that cringe worthy?' And Melinda very sharply stopped me and said, 'Wait. People bring different things to the theater, and you don't invalidate what they bring. Even if you are bothered, it doesn't mean that what they did doesn't mean something to them, and people don't always laugh.' And she reminded me that people don't just laugh for one reason. People laugh out of shock; they laugh out of discomfort; they don't necessarily laugh out of amusement. They laugh because it's such a bitter moment. Maybe they laugh because they know that Shylock won't ever actually really convert. That he may say one thing, but that he won't ever abandon his faith underneath. So there is this range of reactions.

Innerst: What's tricky about it is that it's easy to forget that the text is designed to get a specific reaction. The reason this play is complex is because it operates outside of the moral paradigm that we operate in. But within its own moral paradigm and its historical performance context, it is also operating in a progressive moral paradigm. So it's such a complex pot of things. One of the tasks that we didn't talk about in rehearsals that we should have is how we deal with a text that is designed as a comedy when it is also a tragedy. Because we are performing a tragedy which is often working at odds with the text, and it seems in moments like that that the reaction is diverse. Sometimes just letting the actual text and the way the writer designed the text sing, it doesn't quite work with a modern audience, or with modern performances.

McPherson: I brought my students to a production here in 2010 and told them, 'This is called a comedy but don't necessarily expect to laugh. It's a comedy because of the marriage plot, and this was a generic expectation in Shakespeare's time.' And then the production was both laugh-out-loud funny—this was when Tony Amendola played Shylock in 2010—and also incredibly tragic at the same time. And the students came to me, saying, 'You told us it wouldn't be funny and then it was funny.' And I had to say, ' I can't determine that necessarily.' It's a really complex question. It's definitely Shylock's tragedy, there's no question.

Wolpe: Either it is or it isn't. As Edna said [in her keynote], Shylock has 350 lines and Portia has over 500. So it's not that big of a part. Like Gertrude or Ophelia, it's a supporting plot. There are three others: there's Arragon and there's Morocco, and there's the Jew. And we all speak differently and are from somewhere else and get rejected and humiliated and have our lives altered. It's directorial, but also the plan of the playwright to alternate comedy with tragedy on the very same theme, so I have to go out and offer my response to my daughter after Salarino mocks me and calls me a dog and howls at the moon and laughs at me, and after Geoff Kent comes out and does

the funniest Spanish prince he could come up with. But it's the same theme, as in all Shakespeare plays, the same theme over and over, scene by scene, you know. Should Ophelia be buried in sanctified ground is asked by the gravediggers, is repeated by Ophelia, etc. Like, 'where does your soul go?' in Hamlet, this is 'What do you do with the Other? And how is that funny, and how does it get to you?' A lot of it is directorial, or it's in the hands of the actors in terms of 'How deeply are you mocking this? And with what intention are you mocking this?' Because there are other ways to play Arragon; he doesn't have to be a clown.

McPherson: But as audience members we're glad in a production as tragic as this that we do get these moments of lightness, right?

Wolpe: You can be glad if you want to, if you think everything's funny. But at a certain point its hydrofoiling if you think everything is funny, and I don't think it's funny, and we differ it's a problem.

Audience Member: Well there's a huge part of this play that you don't control, and that is the audience. I'm thrilled that I was with an audience that gasped, because I would have been appalled if I was with an audience that clapped at that moment. And I'm taken right back into that moment of thinking 'How can they do this terrible thing?' When they were playing that scene, I was thinking, 'Let me go up and help this person.' As an audience member I wish you had had your own applause. Because I wanted to honor that.

Wolpe: Thank you.

Audience Member: My problem with this play, from the time I first read it as a 19 year old in a college Shakespeare class, has been the hypocrisy of the Christians. This last time that I reviewed it, the word that stuck out for me was 'mercy'. And there is *zero* mercy on the part of the Christians, even though they are preaching it and begging for it. I'm a Christian, so I'm not picking on anyone. But that's the part that makes this play totally disgusting for me, and I keep trying to like

it and I can't. But, I see it again and again and enjoy it and appreciate that, as you've all said, it's an extremely complex play. But the part that, for me, is the final word, is that the Christians are just mean and disgusting. And the conversion scene infuriated me because they are totally merciless. And the corresponding motions–gestures—between Shylock and Jessica in those last moments reinforce the idea that the Christians will never accept you, and you may never accept them. But they're perpetuating the idea of the Other. That will go on, this war isn't over.

McPherson: We have a dichotomous production. There's one show happening on the stage where everyone is dancing and happy that they've got the ladies back and they actually didn't sleep with somebody else. But there's another show off to the side, so can you talk about that mercy aspect a little bit, Wayne? As Bassanio, you're in the court room; what do you want while you're there?

Carr: Well I think it's clear what Bassanio wants. He wants an out for Antonio, and wants their privilege to succeed. I had a conversation with Melinda, talking about mercy. She asked, 'Could it possibly be mercy that Antonio says, "No, I don't need Shylock's money." Is it mercy on Antonio's part that he says, "You should become a Christian." Is that possibly mercy?' Again, I'm still wrestling with the play, but she succeeded in making me try to look as much as I can at other points of view, other possibilities where we can see mercy. Does Portia have any kind of mercy with the whole ring situation, for example?

Audience Member: Exactly. I've seen the line said as, and final insult, Shylock gets to be Christian. This Antonio was relatively gentle in the articulation of that line. I've seen it expressed as a snarl.

McPherson: That's right, that line, 'He presently become a Christian,' is not delivered as a vituperative thing. Now, Gratiano, you're a pretty vituperative character in the play. I can't remember your physical reaction at that moment.

Innerst: Well, it starts earlier. The 'quality of mercy' speech is all bullshit for Gratiano. Because he does not want mercy, he wants fairness, or what he considers fairness or justice. It's funny; I also hated this play before I worked on it. And it is now one of my favorite plays. I *love* this play.

It's our job as artists to be professional empathizers, that's what we do. We put ourselves in world views that are often at odds with our own, and we have to tell that story honestly. It's not my job—it's not our jobs—to try to pass judgement on these characters. Often a director tries to do that job, but it's your job as an audience member, to be the one that makes that decision. And so, for me, even though I can say and do horrible things, and I think what we do to Shylock is horrendous, I feel it's important to put myself in Gratiano's positon. If because of a choice I made my best friend was in the position that Antonio was in—I'm getting emotional about it—then there is *nothing* I wouldn't do to save him. I consider myself a pretty good person, but I guarantee that I would say and do horrible things to protect him.

As an audience member, you should be horrified. But for me as Gratiano, that moment of 'Shylock shall become a Christian' is intricately connected to the fact that 30 seconds before that moment we stopped him in the midst of murdering someone. And so that is an infinitely justifiable action for my character and as Gratiano I am pissed about it because I want to hurt Shylock, and I can't because of that.

As artists, it's our job to see our character's point of view very clearly while also acknowledging that there are going to be many other sides to this. And I think the more that we can embrace those dichotomies and the things that don't quite line up, the more complex your experience is hopefully going to be, so that I can do and say these horrible things while also at the same time being able to fully defend why I'm doing and saying them. Now that being said, if I am ever on the other side of the coin, I guarantee you I'm going to have a very strong opinion about it. But that's one of the things

I love about this play, how it fully embraces our humanity. We do shitty things all the time, and we get away with them, often because of the way we look. And what I love about this play is that there is no truly good person in this play. Everybody does reprehensible things, truly reprehensible things. But the people who get away with it unscathed are the people who look and sound like me. And it's important for our audience members to see that, and I think it's one of the great celebrations that I think that I can celebrate in such a difficult play that people don't often like. Sorry, I've talked a lot.

McPherson: That's all right. Lisa, can you talk about Shylock's encounters and thoughts on mercy—this Shylock's, I mean? You've done other Shylock's, what about this one?

Wolpe: I think mercy comes up in the play a lot as a theme, and I think that's what Shakespeare's looking at. If you look at Shakespeare's later plays, there's evidence of dissuasion and political dissatisfaction and disappointment. 'Dis' is the name of the 9th circle of Hell; it's the name of Satan's chair. So when you're disappointed, you put yourself linguistically in Hell. I think we're all disappointed in justice and fairness. I don't know if I have a lot to say about it.

McPherson: As we were discussing in the play seminar with a larger audience this morning, there's a real tension between Shylock's very inclusive statements such as 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' where he embraces common humanity and his later abandonment of any kind of flexibility.

Wolpe: I think he takes an oath in that scene with Tubal when he goes, 'My daughter's never coming back. She's gone to Genoa. All of her values have been corrupted. She's not coming back.' And I believe that Leah, his wife, was killed in a pogrom. For Jews, your legacy lives on in the memory of your children. Which means that this is the end of Shylock's legacy, the end of his life. And this thing of stealing babies—whether in refugee camps or as Americans are doing right now by putting brown babies in cages and forgetting them—

when you take someone's child, you really activate their need to do something about it. And that's what I think it is: a pound of flesh for my child.

McPherson: You've taken my heart.

Wolpe: You took my heart; I will take what's nearest to your heart. He believes that this has to stop and he doesn't know what he can do besides create a legal precedent, to notarize that the one who has stolen from him will pay him back. There is no profit in this. He offers friendship and asks the Christians not to wrong him for his love. And on that day they take his daughter, they take his money, they mock him. They roast a pig, they invite him to dinner next to the pig, and he's like, 'I knew this! I had a dream, why did I not listen to my dream? I should not have gone out.' That's why you don't go out! You're not supposed to go out anyway after sunset in the ghetto. And—he got rolled.

McPherson: He takes an incredible risk.

Wolpe: But the thing is—every member of my family put their suitcases down and got on the Death Trains as they were supposed to. Every member of my family died at Auschwitz, except my father, who picked up a gun and joined the Canadians and started killing Nazis. Because he said, 'It has to stop! You're insane, you can't do this.' So there's a point where as a young person, male or female, you get up and you fight back. Because somebody has to say something and so many people are *saying* nothing and *doing* nothing, as though it weren't 2018 and there weren't elections in America. They're not going to the polls. They're saying, 'Well it's the status quo and the overwhelming majority wants this, and I can't stand up, and it's Utah.' But no matter where you are you should stand up and do something. You should say something.

McPherson: So Shylock takes a stand.

Wolpe: Well the actress takes a stand as Shylock in this particular moment, when I'm going to use theatre to say something. Because this may be an old play, but it is also relevant to today.

McPherson: I'm going to call on some people who haven't spoken.

Audience Member: Lisa, the speech during the trial scene when you talk about purchasing a slave I thought was really a centerpiece of this production. And I was wondering if you could talk about how your perspective as Lisa the actor speaks through that speech of Shylock. It felt to me as though you were accusing the audience. You were pointing out at the audience, looking at the audience, as you delivered that speech. But you two [Innerst, Carr] are the onstage audience for that speech, the people who Shylock is really accusing. So I wondered if you two could also speak to your reactions to that speech at that moment.

Wolpe: I took it upon myself to hook Wayne in because they took Kyle away, and Kyle was standing right there and he had been abusing me throughout the show, but I kept looking at him—he's a black actor—and thinking, 'You're next! Dude, look at your skin color, you are next. Stop it. Learn from me. Don't let this happen to your people.' So I had built this complicated thing with Kyle, and then on the last day of rehearsal the director moved him to the other side of the stage.

McPherson: 'Oh no! My target is now gone!'

Wolpe: And suddenly I look over to Bassanio and I think, 'But Wayne [the actor] is black.' And so, even though he's walking in white privilege, and as Josh would say, 'Because we look like this and we sound like this we get away with it,' I look at him and he doesn't look like that.

Carr: I sound like them, though.

Wolpe: You sound exactly like them; it's fantastic. And I just thought, 'I'm going to break your cover, I'm going to code-switch in the middle of this without permission from the director and ask 'Don't you think he's next?' And then let Wayne deal with it.

Carr: I don't deal with it at all. I think with the way Lisa is delivering the line is not a moment of audience-actor

communication, it's a moment of community. It's Shylock saying, 'I am no different from you in this moment.' He's accusing all of us of this stuff, and I just so happen to be a black Venetian. And yes, the word 'slave' brings a certain wave of attention toward me, but I do my best to be still in that moment and allow the rest of the community to think whatever they want to think.

Innerst: Gratiano doesn't have much of a reaction, Josh does though. Those are two of my favorite speeches—the one right before that, and that. Because the rhetoric is so clear and I think Lisa does such a good job that Gratiano goes away for a second and Josh will sit there and take notes.

McPherson: There's a line in the play after Morocco [played by Jamil Zraikat] chooses the wrong casket and leaves, when Portia says, 'I would have all of his complexion choose me so.' Talk about that in rehearsal with the fact that you, as a black man, are playing Portia's suitor.

Carr: Yeah! Isn't that interesting.

McPherson: Isn't it? What do we do with that?

Carr: Sorry guys, I have no answer for that.

Wolpe: But they also have the complexity of the other. Portia might think, 'This man was raised differently. This man might have seven wives. This man lives in Africa; he has a completely different rule about how empowered you're going to be as a woman in his household.' Whereas Bassanio is an elegant person of the same belief system, so they fit well together.

McPherson: And of course Bassanio doesn't hear her say that, he's not there.

Carr: No, no, he definitely doesn't. The word 'complexion' is just interesting. We're not of the same complexion.

Wolpe: Bassanio has a beautiful speech about the leaden casket, about what's valuable. I know that's written down, but if you imagine saying that spontaneously out of your heart and mind, what an interesting, complex person, you know? Who can weigh this against that and make an elegant

argument and still be handsome, and move well, and have a history with her father and be a part of her world. Whereas Morocco's just coming in on a dare to get something, like a prize.

When I directed this show I had a black Portia and a white Portia alternating in the role. Within the black community there's plenty of classist, 'I want this shade of skin' or 'I don't want that' or 'This is what I want for myself' or 'Here's how much money I have and here's how I think it's going to go.' So I thought that was just as interesting as the rich white girl who is just stupid. Portia's just completely unexposed to anything. But then how does she completely reinterpret the law on a dime? One of the cool things about Tarah Flanagan, who plays Portia, is that she's very, very smart.

McPherson: I wish she were here with us because I would want to speak with her about her complete surrender of all her assets to Bassanio at the time he makes the right casket choice. And this is not what we expect from Portia in some ways, and then is not what we see when she goes to court either. There are fundamental tensions there.

Innerst: She makes interesting choices. She seizes agency when she says, 'I give them.' The meter extends 'I give them,' and she has intentionally stressed '*I give them*.' I'm putting words in Tarah's mouth. but I can hear Portia saying, 'Just so you know, this isn't just dad.'

McPherson: Other questions? Yes, sir.

Audience Member: In that courtroom scene, I'm fascinated by a box in a box. It's three-walled enviroment inside a 3-walled construct, an image of the social construct within a walled environment, and within that there's a moment when Portia as the litigator says, 'that would be oppressive, don't do that.' And logically the response is, why not? The law would allow it. I'm an academic and I hear that all the time, 'We can't do that, we'd set a precedent.' Well why not set a great precedent? So I would love to hear your thoughts on that moment, because that's the pivot; that's the missed opportunity for everyone really.

Wolpe: It was never their intention to create fairness. Any of those wealthy Christian people could have bailed Antonio out before the bond date. Just in terms of mercy, none of the wealthy people around him lend him the money. None of them! I don't know why nobody notices that. They didn't care yesterday. Not enough to loan $3,000 to their friend to save his life. Suddenly Portia's money's on the table and they would be blowing her money to save him. But none of tgave a darn, and they all laughed when the Jew's money and his daughter were abducted.

In the trial scene itself, the Duke says that he can cancel the trial and send them all home. And now you say, 'Oh just do a little wrong to make a bigger right. Just stop this devil.' This is not about fairness. When Portia takes up the idea of the 'letter of the law,' she doesn't have to take it as far as she does. She doesn't have to take all his money and threaten his life. That's her own invention. She begins having never seen the bond before, and begins by saying 'Oh, but there's no blood!" And then they find the statute. But pushing it to that level of alienation is just the kind of injustice we see in our newspapers today. And if the Duke doesn't have a sense of justice, fairness, and the law—which we see in the play the Duke doesn't—then this is Christian oppression, this is not love. This is not Christian love.

That's the first thing Shylock says. 'I'd like to make friends with you and have your love.' 'Love' and 'mercy' are big ideas which are being questioned in the play. And I'm sure they're huge in the Christian community as it actually exists, but in the top 1% that are gathering wealth and just took millions of dollars from Shylock—and are satisfied with themselves for doing it—that's power over, not power from within. And you could talk about how Jesus is a merciful god and the God of the Old Testament is a vengeance god. But it's not God in the room; these are human beings taking each other's stuff and hitting each other over the head like vandals.

McPherson: Right. Thoughts on precedent?

Carr and ***Innerst:*** No.

McPherson: Well I know that it was definitely one of the director's big goals in the play to show the best and the worst in each person in the show. And there are many opportunities for that. You have a question?

Audience Member: Yes. The term 'justice' has been coming up a lot, and precedence is a huge part of that. But I'm curious. Justice seems completely arbitrary in these plays, serving only as an ideological method to support a particular community. So I'm wondering how, according to yourselves and maybe also according to your characters, would you each define justice?

Wolpe: Four-year-old brown boy defending himself in the dock in court? What is justice? Its people who have power writing history and other people getting plowed under. If you don't have a political voice, you don't get justice. That's why so many people are running for office. Because people were complacent and they weren't actually working to create a democracy in this country. But now people are stepping up and saying, 'Wait, no let me participate.' It's not justice if you sit back and say nothing. Because the loudest people, as we see when we talking about the audience reaction, are not always the soul of the community. They just are bold about being louder, and that can be taking too much space, or a limited perspective. What do you guys think about it?

McPherson: Josh? You said Gratiano comes on wanting something. He wants fairness, he wants justice.

Innerst: I think in Gratiano's viewpoint, justice is vengeance.

McPherson: He's very obstreperous.

Innerst: Yes, and also there's a large element to this story that I think is in the forefront of the text that this production doesn't deal with, and that is debt. Because it is hard as a modern audience in recent history, that is, within the last hundred years, to look at this play and see anything other than the race issues and the justice issues, but Shakespeare

is writing a play about debt. And it's one element that we don't get to explore—the social element—the cast system of Venice, and how does this group of people work. We don't actually know that people like Bassanio and Gratiano have just frivolously piddled away their inheritances. We just know that we're soldiers and we're students; that's the only thing the text really says about us. But the thing we know about soldiers and students is that society doesn't give a shit about their money. In fact, they're often poor.

McPherson: Some things never change.

Innerst: Right. My character does rotate around the idea that he is poor, in debt and that when I have no power in life the moment I have some outlet for that anger and frustration, it's going to go from 0 to 100 like [snaps] that.' And so that's why for me his idea of justice is entirely vengeance and kill, kill, kill, because it's coming from a place of complete powerlessness. That is Josh bringing something to the play, not the director and I don't think our production tells that story at all. But it's a way that helps me get from point A to point B, that there's an element of debt and of poverty that we don't get to explore, but is actually in the forefront of the text.

McPherson: And it would have been a very raw topic to the Elizabethan audiences of the show because the consequences of debt were, in fact, that you could be jailed. And people died in jail from disesase, from neglect, so it was a very imminent threat to life.

Wolpe: Well and Shakespeare's father was a usurer and Shakespeare was in court all the time over petty money issues. If you're interested in Mary Sidney, who was one of the authorship contenders, when her husband died—and this relates to a woman playing the man—everybody tried to take her stuff the minute her husband was dead. So just as a woman inside of a male who is also being otherized, I get that. It's very hard for me to make a living the way Josh does. I don't get as many auditions as Josh does. He must record

three auditions a week; everybody wants Josh. A 60-year-old woman? Not so much. Do we have the same training? Yes. Does the world want to see us? No. So I'm only entering into a male text because it gives me a range of thought and feeling and emotionality that the female roles won't give me. And if I want the exercise of sociopolitical expression—you want to talk about the 'haves' and the 'have nots'—that's the only thing I want to say about gender flipping the production. Inside Shylock you have a subversive, Jewish lesbian who's saying, 'I saw your world; I saw how you treated me. I can apply that to any other person because I have empathy, and I am an actor. And I can put this in there.' As Josh said, I'm a professional empathizer. Is Shylock a great Jew? No, he's a failed human being. But I can at least celebrate what he's going for.

Audience Member: One thing that was really apparent for me in this production was 'love' and 'loss'. For me, it became very clear—and I think this was your intention—that Shylock didn't decide on murder and vengeance until his daughter was abducted, and that the most violence came from the Christians when the man that they loved, Antonio, was suddenly at risk. And for Portia—and I can't ask the actress if this was her intention—part of her viciousness seemed to come from the pain being caused to the man she loved through Shylock's attempted murder of Antonio. Can you speak to how you tried to incorporate, or how love may have infused your performance of this problematic and tragic—or weirdly vicious—play?

McPherson: Let's start with Wayne.

Carr: Love definitely plays a part of it. I think that's one of the things that has actually been massaging me through this process a little bit. Because I realize that Bassanio has a love, Antonio has a love, everybody loves somebody or something. And sometimes that love makes us do things; as you [Innerst] said about the love you have for your friend—you would do anything, horrible things to protect your

friend. And I think that that's something that really resonates with me in this play and in life. I realize, speaking of justice, the love people have for their culture, their way of life; those friends who I have who are from the south love their culture, and when I have discussions with them about certain things, about statutes or whatever, those things may have a history , they mean something to them. Those people love them and they don't understand why I just don't get it or why it pisses me off. But being the person that I am, the artist that I am, I notice that and I go, 'Oh, they love their culture; there's an attachment there that I just don't get and I don't understand.' And that's where the difficulty comes for me, and why I grapple with this play in a positive way right now, because I realize that love is something that everybody is using as their ammunition to do whatever it is that they're doing.

McPherson: [To Josh Innerst] The question of love?

Innerst: One of the things that I think makes the play interesting is that within its historical context, Shakespeare has written others as more magnified and more minimally human than any of his competitors did. And I think that's one of the reasons we have Shakespeare festivals and not Johnson Festivals.

In his text there is an element of how we ostracize and treat others that this production has brought to the forefront of the text. One of the consistent conversations we had in rehearsals was how easy it is to extend love to ourselves, and how hard it is and how much we fail to extend it to the Other. It's easy for Gratiano to be *so* devoted to Bassanio, and by proxy to Antonio. And because of that choice it's easy to fail to extend love to anybody else.

Wolpe: I did a talk a group of maybe 35 very smart Jewish people who come here every year and they asked me to be on their Actor Panel. Their request was, 'Couldn't you be warmer to Jessica? Where's the man who loves his family. We love each other,' and I thought, 'You didn't write the play. This wasn't written by Jewish people; this is not how Jewish

families behave.' If you study the play, the writer didn't know anything about Jewish people.

McPherson: And likely never would have met any. There were very few.

Wolpe: I can't buy that. People keep saying, 'Well there were no Jews so he didn't know.' I don't think it's true. There were 40 Jewish musicians in the balcony of the Globe Theatre, there was a Jewish doctor attending the queen. But you all can argue amongst yourselves. However, I do think the writer got it wrong in terms of specific things about Jewish culture. It's kind of like trying to say to Othello, 'How exactly did your wife sleep with him 1,000 times when they were on different ships and he just got here yesterday. Are you crazy?' That's the problem, it's a not well-written play either, *Othello*. You know, that's not how people act.

McPherson: Consistency was not necessarily Shakespeare's objective all of the time.

Wolpe: And I don't know if he—or she or whoever wrote the plays—wrote them in ten days or actually thought about these through-lines, do you know? It's dramatic, it creates contrast. But Wayne would've seen the end coming; Othello doesn't. Shakespeare basically rewrote *The Jew of Malta* with a little bit more humanization, but because he didn't do a post-Holocaust, politically correct production, and he was in 1620, he hit a bunch of stuff that hits us in an unevolved way.

That's what we keep doing. What are the roots of Puritanical culture; what was this country built on? How do we keep those ideas running, and how are they incarcerating so many black people and no white people? Where is the money? Follow the money, and how is this stuff getting perpetuated?

I didn't know my Jewish family until about ten years ago. I did an internet search—-before 23andMe—and I discovered them. Then I got a call from a rabbi saying, 'The first Wolpe family reunion will be at the Holocaust Museum in D.C. in two weeks and you'd better be there.' So I went

there and the patriarch told me, 'Never forget!' and I was like, 'Oh my God, this amount of anger. I don't know if I want to take it on.' And then I found all of my relatives and what happened to them and I started going into it. And I thought, 'Well of course we're angry, but where is this heading? As a person who wants to be a love bomb, where is it heading that I'm going to shake my fist in the air and go, 'Never forget!' Who am I yelling at? Current Berliners? Who am I yelling at? Those people are in Argentina and they're 97.'

This wants to evolve into a conversation about next-level empathy and how we feel about our communities. How do we engage in meaningful discussion about problematic things without retreating into our bubble and saying, 'I can only understand it from my point of view.'? For me, as an international person, it's great to perform in Utah where it's a predominantly white, predominantly Christian, predominantly Mormon audience because I would never see that in my travels. I saw an all-white *Othello* in Prague last year and I'm still reeling from the misogyny, from the racism. Having said that, there weren't any black people in Prague. I counted eight black people in seven months there last year. They just don't go to Prague. And that's a place where if your political or religious ideas are different from the established power structure, they literally throw you out the window. All the tourists sites are like, 'Oh this a defenestration—' 'What's defenestration?' It's when they throw you out the window because your religion is different on that day, it's not in vogue. There's all these spots on the sidewalk where people's brains were smashed into pumpkins because Protestantism was out that week and we were into the Alchemists. And I respond, 'Whoa! You just throw people out the window.' The violence in all of our societies is huge, and still present.

McPherson: I would say the Festival's choice to stage these plays this season is creating this incredible dialogue that is really helping people get to these difficult conversations and start to listen.

Wolpe: I don't know. I just saw *Big River*, and I'll try to see *The Foreigner* today. But if you don't have a point of view on these plays it's really important to begin a discussion, because they're deep. Deep American cesspools of accepted hatred. Love means opening your heart to all people, and I'm trying to open my mind and heart in a new place.

McPherson: That's a challenge. Let's get one more question at the back.

Audience Member: I think one of the things Lisa said about gender was very important because last time I watched this production, I really noticed that Shylock's usury is the same as what women do in marriage. Because society doesn't wish people to respond to women's actions as free choice. And so Shylock became a usurer, and the women get married, but society also despises Shylock as a loan shark and women as gold-diggers. Actually what's most striking about this play is that in this play, the gold-diggers are all men. But if a man wants to seek financial security by marrying a rich women, no one despises them. They are not gold-diggers.

McPherson: Because they're marrying up.

Carr: Absolutely. [Laughter]

Wolpe: And then there's capitalism, there's what Antonio is doing. There are all different kinds of usury in the play. One is condemned and the others are not, but you're right and thank you for your smart comment.

McPherson: That's great. Well I believe we are at time, so thank you very much and please thank our actors. [Applause]