



The Merchant of Venice

Director: Michael Radford
Genre: Drama, Comedy
Runtime: 138 minutes
Year: 2004
Cast: Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Joseph Fiennes, Lynn Collins, Zuleikha Robinson, Kris Marshall, Charlie Cox, Heather Goldenhersch

Plot Outline

The plot of 'The Merchant of Venice' should be familiar to you, since many of you had to (or should have) read it in the very first semester of the very first year. Of course, for some this has been a long time and some haven't read it, so here's a brief plot outline to refresh your memory.

In Venice, young Bassanio needs a loan of 3,000 ducats so he can properly woo a wealthy heiress of Venice named Portia. To get the necessary funds, Bassanio approaches his friend Antonio, a merchant. Antonio's money, unfortunately, is invested in merchant ships that are presently at sea; however, to help Bassanio, Antonio arranges for a short-term loan of the money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Shylock has a deep-seated hatred for Antonio because of the insulting treatment that Antonio has shown him in the past. Under pressure, Shylock strikes a frightening bargain in wicked humour: the 3,000 ducats must be repaid in three months, or Shylock will exact a pound of flesh from Antonio. The merchant agrees to this, confident in the return of his ships before the appointed date of repayment...

Review

Michael Radford has made his Shakespeare debut with this film. For his debut film he instantly chose the most complicated of all Shakespeare plays: 'The Merchant of Venice'. This was a great challenge for him; it's the most frequently adapted play for the stage, but no one has ever dared to adapt it for the big screen. The main reason for the directors was that the play was simply too complex and only fit for the theatre as it contains not one, but two entirely different story lines. Nevertheless, Radford managed to attract some great Hollywood actors and together they made a brilliant film.

Al Pacino plays the role of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender and one of Shakespeare's most tragic heroes. Pacino does a great job in bringing him to life: he is theatrical, but not too much; it doesn't become a parody. His Shylock is heinous, but at the same time sympathetic, especially near the climax. Jeremy Irons plays Antonio. He is less capable in showing the complexity of his role. His Antonio remains superficial for most of the time and that's a shame. Next to him is Joseph Fiennes, who has become a real expert on costume dramas. He partook in, among others, film hits such as "Elizabeth" and "Shakespeare in Love". He hits the spot perfectly as the young, amorous Bassanio. The only hitch is the total lack of chemistry between him and Portia - nonetheless a beautiful role from the promising Lynn Collins).

Zuleikha Robinson as Jessica also makes a notable appearance. This young British actress has only contributed to a small number of films, but no doubt we will see more of her in the future. Kris Marshall, known for his role in "Love Actually", is not strikingly present in a negative or a positive sense as Gratiano, though he occasionally makes the viewer smile.

Radford, who also rewrote the script for the film, has left out many of the original play's expressive monologues and dialogues. No wonder; in making films, less is more. There's a lot more to say for subtle language than for redundant words. One should be extremely cautious, however, in choosing what to keep and what to cross out. Radford did a good job in capturing the essence of the original play, and the tale is well preserved.

Of course, the attentive student shall miss some events, but Radford's "The Merchant of Venice" gets away with that perfectly. All in all, this film will become one of the classics from Shakespeare film adaptations.

Original Dutch review (for movie2movie.nl) and English translation by Tessa Obbens



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