

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**TIMELINE**

Initial proposal: May 2016
 Casting & staff: January 2017
 Rehearsals: February-March 2017
 Work in space: April 2-5, 2017
 Performances: April 6-8, 2017

Though Chair of iNtuitons Experimental Theatre—classical, avant-garde, or otherwise unusual—I proposed to direct for Front Row Theatre Co., Penn’s “socially relevant” theatre group, in the hopes of making a very old, very controversial play resonate for students and community members. To that end, I also brought on board an Assistant Director with a very different background from my own to collaborate on the process, from the first cogent vision to the finishing touches. Keep in mind that, throughout this process, I was working with a talented and dedicated team of over 30 people, many of whose contributions directly feature in this document.

[Cast Wordpress](#) | [Facebook event](#)

DIRECTORS’ NOTE

Dear audience,

A year ago, when Jeremy proposed this play to Front Row Theatre Co., he had only a vague sense of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* or how to use ‘intersectionality’ in a sentence. He did not know that issues of artistic representation and the minority-majority status of Penn’s faith communities would take on sharp new valences in the spring of 2017.

It may have been the spring of 1597 when Shakespeare first confronted his audience with the most infamous Jewish villain of the English language: Shylock, the bitter moneylender, the Wandering Jew doomed to repeat the same scraps of sentences. But this play strives for much more, showing us a world where capitalism rubs uncomfortable shoulders with old-money aristocracy. The most beautiful speeches ever written about mercy and justice are delivered to us by the merciless and the unjust.

This production is unfinished. Our troupe of actors, designers, and crew members have collaborated to render this comedy to the best of our ability, but there is much more still left up to you. These eleven individuals will pose questions onstage, and you may leave with partial answers: What disbelief have you suspended upon entering this room? How will you react to what you hear on stage tonight? What parts of you will flinch at the bigotry, and how will you reconcile this with Shakespeare’s artful hand? What is it to be a Jewish student or a student of color on this campus who still (earnestly, naively) believes in an arc that bends toward justice, when in the course of justice some of us may not see salvation?

We know who most of you are, and you probably know who we are, too—after all, this is a student play, not a professional theatre company (no matter how hard we’ve tried to convince Chris and Sonya otherwise). And you also know the world we live in right now, and the unsettling power of freely hateful speech.

Our heartfelt thanks to this cast, Front Row’s board, and the entire crew for indulging us. This is the first time that a TAC-e cast spent their first two weeks of rehearsal role-less, drawing Venn diagrams on day 2 about free expression and intentional safe spaces. And then receiving their roles two weeks later — admittedly, also via diagrams analyzing the class theory behind every character. And then taking on additional lines and singing parts a week before the show. Thank you for trusting our vision, for answering our many questions, and for laughing—always laughing, at jokes from our experiences, from our identities, from our four-hundred-year-old literary heritage that still packs a punch.

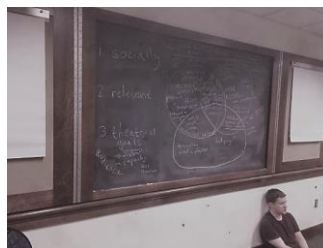
By rough count, this is Jeremy’s 27th theatre show at Penn (and not even his last). This is Meerie’s many-eth theatre show in her life. Jeremy would like to thank Meerie for lending her copy of Peter Brook and pronouncing things in French. Meerie would like to thank Jeremy for cc’ing her on emails relating to this production.

Cheers,
 Jer and Meer

THE PROCESS

AUDITIONS + CASTING

Standard auditions involve reading a side and, if an actor is lucky, reading another side in a callback for a potential role. (Right: Screenshots of audition form and callback plan.) To build the ensemble, we chose to offer an actor a spot in the show, with promise to cast individual parts after 2 weeks of rehearsal.



Discussions: What does it mean to be “socially relevant”? Where are the intersections and divergences of free expression, intentional safe spaces, and hate speech? What are forms of gender- and race-based (or blind) casting, their advantages and disadvantages?

BLOCKING THE PLAY

[illegible]

Several actors were double-cast based on strengths and our always-developing overall vision. The next several weeks we spent blocking the play, learning the text, and collaborating on character development.



Pictures of rehearsal exploring comparison works at the end of Week One (below) and the first Designers' Run of *Merchant* at the end of Week Five



TECH & DESIGNERS

Initial Tech Conceit

This is a travelling troupe, not around the world but at least across state lines. They aim to put on socially relevant productions, usually in a simple but elegant style, and in a variety of locations—that also means either adapting to local customs but maybe also being intentionally vague). Every tangible object (prop, costume) can be used (and was!) in a variety of different Shakespearean or classical plays; if it was not bought or obtained for this production, it is being reused. (This is probably true in the literal sense of the PAC Shop too.) Imagine that we got into town in a few days before performing and were met with a big, empty room and a basic lighting plot (3x3).

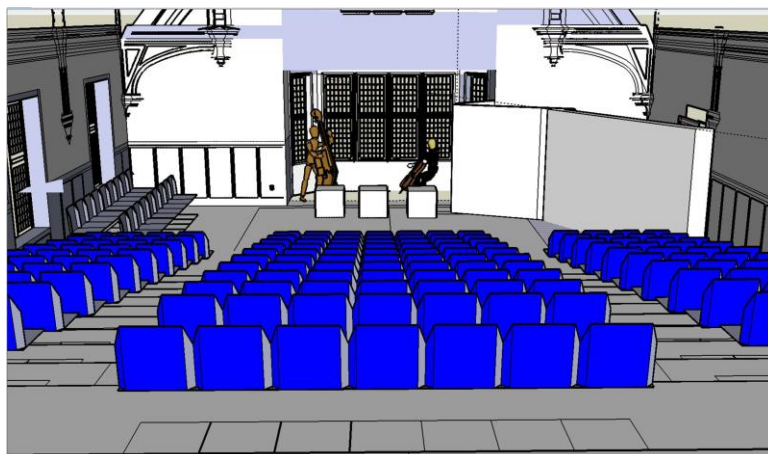
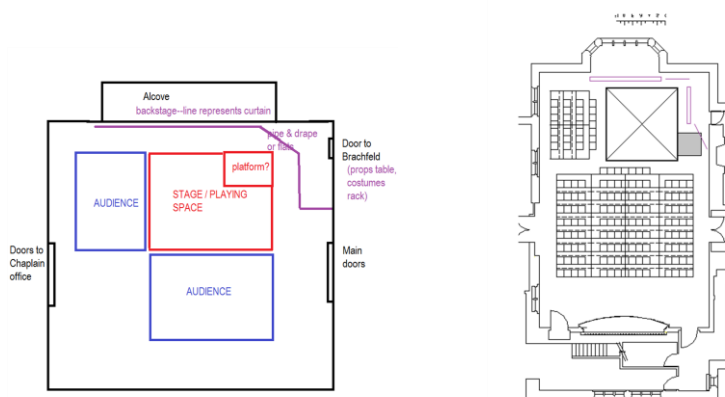
Lights: Basic lighting plot (for diamond) plus some side lighting tools: floods/footlights/trees.

Sound: 1-2 live musicians, Veronica, Josh, Jillian. In order of preference: Upright bass, cello, percussion, clarinet, tenor sax. Syncopated rhythms. Playing at beginning, to introduce Belmont (distinct from Venice), something comical for Princes of Morocco and Arragon, maybe court scene, and in last scene. We'll need microphones for instruments, but since we're already sharing with Atma, that should be doable.

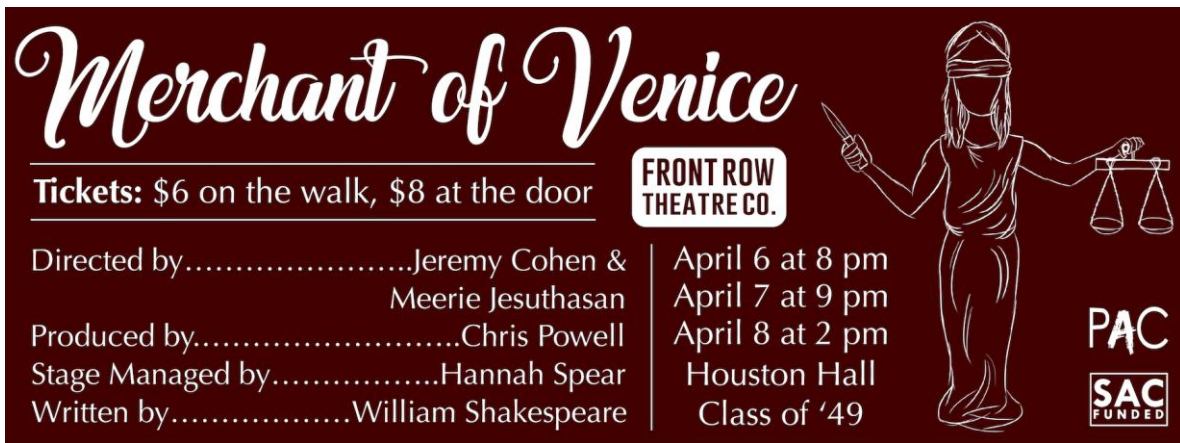
Props: Minimalist, with a lot of reuse. Should come out of a big travelling suitcase with flight/train/bus decals. Even if the audience never sees the suitcase, we should feel that it's there.

Costumes: Everyone has a basic layer, and then each person adds 1-3 items (shirt, sweater, hat, shoes) to "take on" a character. This enables the crazy number of roles that e.g. Katie, Josh, Jillian play (which are all thematically connected). When Raina and Veronica go into disguise, they should be adding Judge and Clerk features *on top of* (partially obscuring) their Portia and Nerissa costumes. No need to explicitly signify gender for Francesca, Katie, or Jillian; only for Raina and Veronica's disguises.

Graphic: Court sketches. Long, fancy title. Content disclaimer / gussied-up trigger warning: "This show contains material that is sexist, racist, anti-Semitic." Longer note in program to this effect, maybe also pre- and post-show surveys, plus significant dramaturgical material.



Top, from left: My ideation for stage location + set design, in abstract and per building dimensions; set designer Adrienne's freely drawn sketch. Bottom: Adrienne's to-scale SketchUp model, with stand-ins for live musicians, viewed from back of audience.

GRAPHICS + ADVERTISING

These two images—one for social media advertising (Facebook cover photo, above) and the other for printing on physical posters and programs—are the work of our talented and flexible Graphics Designer, Alex.

We were playing with two different and possibly competing priorities: At one point, this play is being driven by ideas of justice, mercy, blindness, blood; on the other, the production is about an ensemble of 11 actors coming together to put on a tight, cohesive, well-crafted performance.



PHOTOCALL: FINISHED PRODUCT

Note: Photos were taken on Tuesday, April 4, by Louis, not me (I appear in some of them) and are largely unedited. Some finishing touches were still missing, and there were a few notable absences—cellist, bassist, audience—but I hope you enjoy nevertheless!

