

RETAGGING SHYLOCK: A HISTORY

The role of Shylock has long appealed to actors from various backgrounds, especially those who exist in their daily lives on the margins. Shylock is nothing if not an outsider trying to make space for his own existence within a society not made for him. He contains multitudes—he is a widower, a father, a businessman, a devout Jew, and, perhaps most importantly, he is smarter than most of the other characters around him. Is he a villain? Or is he a victim? Is he an anti-hero? Or is he just caught in the cultural crossfire and taking advantage of an opportunity to seek revenge?

Representations of Shylock have ranged the full gamut

of expression since the play's inception—comic clown, hateful heretic, sympathetic survivor, and multi-dimensional avatar. So much of what we make of Shylock in production is based on the performer inhabiting the character and their visual relationships with the rest of the ensemble. The part is as enigmatic as Hamlet, as strong as Othello, and as broken as Prince Hal. Shylock is unlocked in his performance; he can make you cry amused tears of laughter, icy tears of sadness, or the white-hot tears of rage. It's no wonder that so many actors have been drawn to the role for centuries.

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1858—IRA ALDRIDGE

Ira Aldridge left pre-Civil War America to find fame on the European stage. He made his London debut as Othello, but he was also drawn to white characters such as Shylock and Lear, which he played on tour.



2007—GRAHAM GREENE

A First Nations actor born on Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario, and a featured actor in many films, Graham Greene played Shylock at the Stratford Festival in Canada in 2007.



1905—JACOB ADLER

Jacob Adler was one of the great actors of the Yiddish theatre in late 19th and early 20th century America. He was also the father of Stella Adler, the famed acting teacher. Adler appeared as Shylock in the first decade of the 20th century, speaking Yiddish in an otherwise all-English production.



2007—ICHIKAWA ENNOSUKE

Ichikawa Ennosuke took on the role of Shylock in an all-male production directed by Japan's foremost director of Shakespeare, Yukio Ninagawa.

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2008—REMESH PANICKER

Remesh Panicker, known mostly for his voice acting career as “The Big Brown Voice,” was Singapore Repertory Theatre’s first Associate Artistic Director. Lovingly nicknamed Singapore’s James Earl Jones, Remesh garnered critical acclaim for his portrayal of Shylock for SRT’s Shakespeare in the Park series.



2011—MADAME HAI-LING WANG

Madame Hai-ling Wang, the diva of Chinese opera, portrayed Shylock in *Bond*, an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* produced and performed by the Taiwan BangZi Opera Company. She is known for her unaffected approaches to characters that draw upon their needs and nature.



2015—MAKRAM KHOURY

Makram Khoury was born in Jerusalem, to a Christian family, and spent his childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. The first non-Jew to win the prestigious Israel Prize for acting, Khoury played Shylock in a production for the Royal Shakespeare Company.



2019—SEANA MCKENNA

Seana McKenna is known colloquially as Canada’s Meryl Streep. Seana has played over 20 of Shakespeare’s heroines over her four-decade career. She took a turn in the role of Shylock for Calgary’s The Shakespeare Company just before the pandemic shutdown.