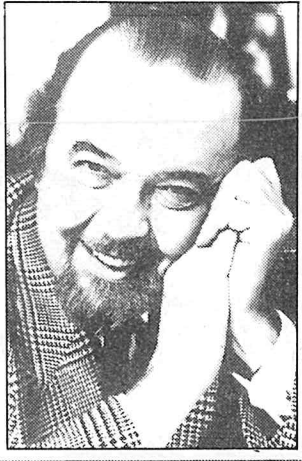


A Letter From London *by Gerard Raymond*



John Haines, Stephen Markeson

Dustin Hoffman as Shylock. Inset: Peter Hall.

One month before Sir Peter Hall's production of *The Merchant of Venice* opened on June 1 at the Phoenix Theatre in the West End, approximately three million dollars worth of tickets were sold. The box office draw was, of course, recent Oscar-winner Dustin Hoffman, who made his West End and Shakespeare debut with this production.

Given Hoffman's high profile, it was no surprise that the London critics concentrated on Hoffman, applauding the fact that his Shylock was not a star performance which threw the rest of the production off kilter, but then complaining that he did not strike a tragic enough figure. For most critics, Hall's production did not seem to make the statements they were accustomed to. Compared with the recent Royal Shakespeare Company production (which featured a bravura, if somewhat overpowering, performance

from Anthony Sher as Shylock), it was more subtle and allowed the text to speak for itself. Bearing the familiar Hallmarks, the production is well cast, clearly spoken, and classically staged.

In an interview with *TheaterWeek* during the week of previews of *The Merchant*, Hall described how he came to direct this play, the second to be produced by his newly formed Peter Hall Company and presented by Triumph Theater productions following the highly successful *Orpheus Descending* last December.

"Dustin approached me last summer and said he would like to try and do a Shakespeare. He asked if I was interested and I said yes. I thought a bit and suggested that Shylock was a great part for him—it's one of Shakespeare's greatest roles, and for someone beginning in Shakespeare the risk is

small because it is only five scenes."

Hall is well known for his insistence on correctly spoken verse, but he says that although Hoffman was a novice, he soon mastered the necessary technique. "We worked on it for a couple of days last autumn when I was in Los Angeles, because I felt that if he wasn't happy to do it in that way, then there was no point in doing it at all. He did it very easily and quickly. He is very musical and has a good sense of rhythm. It was not a problem."

Anti-semitism is one of the charges leveled against the play, but Hall feels that "People don't read the play when they say that. It's not anti-Semitic," he insists, "it's *anti-anti-Semitic*. The Christians are more villainous than the Jews. That's the wonder of the play. It is about intolerance—about racial intolerance. I think the theater has tamed

the play over the centuries and tried to make Shylock either a villain or a figure of fun. But he is neither. He is a man—so he is both. I think it is a contradictory and really complex play in which there are no villains and no heroes. Everybody is treated very critically indeed. And I think the play is the precursor of *Measure for Measure*, and a complex and ironic middle-period piece of Shakespeare's."

While many directors find the return of the rings at the end of the play a somewhat tedious tying up of knots, Hall feels that the last scene "is very dangerous. The characters are walking on very thin ice. The whole play might become a tragedy. I think it is a question of how it is played, and also, of course, how much of it is played. The more you cut it the worse the play becomes. We haven't cut a line."

Something of a purist as far as Shakespeare is concerned, Hall believes firmly in fidelity to the entire text. "We were all brought up to cut the texts. I just don't understand it. It makes me blush when I think, as a young man, how I used to cut Shakespeare. Anything you didn't initially understand you cut. Dreadful—we all did it. Well, I happen to think Shakespeare knew his job better than I do."

Even though the critical reception hasn't been rapturous, there is a distinct possibility that Hall's *The Merchant of Venice* will arrive on Broadway in the New Year, following *Orpheus Descending* which opens in September. If this is so, Hoffman will repeat his role and the rest of the play will probably be cast with Americans. While Hoffman has no discernible American accent in this production, I wondered what Hall thought about Shakespeare spoken in American English.

"I would love to do a Shakespeare play with American actors if I had time to teach them what the rhythm is. I think American speech with its resonant vowels is closer to Elizabethan English than modern English. It could sound very beautiful. But unfortunately most American Shakespeare is an attempt to make it naturalistic—which it isn't. I think it would be a very interesting thing to do, but it would require many weeks of work—much, much more than the normal rehearsal time." □

JOSEPH PAPP PRESENTS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

Cymbeline

directed by
JOANNE AKALAITIS



THE PUBLIC THEATER 425 LAFAYETTE ST. 598-7150

the musical comedy hit!

Nursesense

"HILARIOUS!"
—Liz Smith

4th SMASH YEAR!

Call Hit-Tix: (212) 564-8038 Groups: (212) 889-4300

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS THEATRE 432 W. 42 St. on Theatre Row • 239-4321

Cast Album on DRG Records. Tapes and CD's

CATS™

NOW AND FOREVER

MUSIC BY ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER
BASED ON 'OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS' BY T.S. ELIOT

Call Tele-charge: (212) 239-6200
Open 24 hours a day—7 days a week

WINTER GARDEN THEATRE 50th Street and Broadway