June 1, 2017

To the Muddy Flower Theatre Troupe:

I want to thank you for an entertaining, enlightening, and moving evening of theatre. I had a wonderful time and very much enjoyed your performance. As a theatre practitioner, it is sometimes hard for me to become immersed in a performance. I find myself critiquing and/or drawn out by something that distracts me from the storytelling. In your case, however, I just went for the ride and was able to easily enter the world you created.

Dr. Shailor asked me to take some notes and give him some feedback. When I saw him yesterday we discussed my writing this to you as a troupe, so here you are. Some of this is for him, but most of it is for you. I will apologize for my lack of specificity, but I was unwilling to stop and write much as I was too engaged in your performances!

As our group was waiting to enter the prison, we encountered a DOC employee who came up to Dr. Shailor and shook his hand. She congratulated him and said that she had never seen a Shakespeare play before. She talked about how moving it was (she saw the afternoon performance), and her eyes filled up with tears as she said that. What a wonderful testimony for your impact on your audience!

The introduction of the play was great. “We know who we are, but not what we may be” was a wonderful way to invite us into the particular conditions of doing theatre in the prison. Having seen many productions there over the years, this reminded me – before you even started the performance – of the power of Shakespeare, and theatre to create change and to transform lives. As most of your audience was made up of inmates, inviting them to sit back and enjoy without worrying about understanding each word, seemed to allow many to relax and open up to the experience they were about to enter.

I loved the opening scene as a way to set up the ideas of the play through music, dance, and the physicalization of oppression. I found it powerful and it made me even more excited for the words that were to come. In a similar way, the ending of the play (I’ll get to that later) was a great way to close the story, leaving us to think about and question the actions of all of the characters. The beginning and ending were strong bookends to the storytelling and a nice directing choice! As a director myself, I strongly believe that the various *ways* that a story is told is as important as the story itself in terms of our ability to understand, to be moved, and to learn from what we see. Anything that helps us to enter into the ideas and the emotions of the playwright and the characters is great. This was a creative way to do that. Kudos to Dr. Shailor!

I know how restricted you are in terms of the design elements you can use. Personally, I am not bothered my that, and often find it a stronger way to get us to focus on the acting and the text. I did think that the costumes, while simple, were effective and the limited scenery and props worked fine. I loved the musical choices and the performance of those choices. I believe it was Dale who played the guitar and managed the ‘music’. Great job there. I loved the guitar playing and thought it a nice way to help us through the transitions between scenes. I also loved the singing. *Adon Olam* is a song that I know from my youth and I found that very moving and a good choice. It was a nice choice to have Shylock and Jessica sing it together. I wonder if you all looked at the English translation of the words in that song? I assume that it was chosen as a popular song that talks of the G-d as a refuge, among other things.

I know that some of you have been in the troupe for awhile and have acted in other Shakespeare plays at RCI. I also imagine that some of you have had some experience acting at some other point in your life. Still, many of you are new at this and are learning the ‘craft’ of acting and how challenging it can be. There was clearly variation in experience and ability in the production, but from my perspective it made no difference. Each of you seemed fully committed to what you were doing. You were focused, pursued your objective, worked to physicalize your character, and seemed to understand everything you were saying. More importantly, I saw a real confidence in all of you. You were prepared and knew what you needed/wanted to do. There was no hesitation. You put on the cloak of your characters and you wore it through the entire play. You listened to one another and your reacted. It was great ensemble work.

I have seen many men play women’s roles at RCI, but I have to say that this year I was particularly impressed. Patrick Allen, Keith Love, and Michael Shortt – you all did a terrific job at committing to the choices you made, keeping it simple and not showing any discomfort. I was particularly fond of Patrick’s physicalization of Nerissa and her hand movements. I found myself watching you and enjoying your clear choices. None of you overdid it, but made it clear that you were taking these women seriously and not creating caracatures.

All of your performances were strong, but I do want to particularly commend Eugene Thomas for his portrayal of Shylock, and Michael Shortt for his portrayal of Portia. Both of you had detailed, nuanced performances that really brought the characters to life. Eugene, I will be thinking of your Shylock for a long, long time!!!

I am the audience member from Parkside who mentioned the ending of the play. I want to clarify for you what I said so you understand my perspective. I’m not sure that I was as clear as I meant to be. A year ago, I did discuss this choice of play with Dr. Shailor. I wasn’t suggesting that he not go forward with it, but rather was talking about it as a play that I have struggled with my entire adult life and one that I could not see myself directing. I find it tremendously problematic because of the anti-semitism in the play. Yes, Shakespeare tempers it with those powerful lines from Shylock, “…If you prick us do we not bleed…”, but he ends the play with the happy reconciliation of lovers and friends and there is no justice for Shylock. I agree that he is a complex character and one that we don’t like much of the time, BUT there are reasons for his behavior and choices that are powerful ones, even though we can certainly say that he takes them too far. (This is something that you clearly understand as you all discussed it at the talk-back.) To have the play end with Shylock being converted to Christianity is a hard pill to swallow without any commentary on it to help us to think about it. I have seen the production several times where audiences thrill at Shylock ‘getting his own’ and laugh at some of the things that make me highly uncomfortable. I am particularly uncomfortable with this because I am Jewish, but we could take any under-represented group that is discriminated against and make the same statement. I don’t take issue with the play talking about this issue, but is it the lack of resolution and/or commentary on it that makes me so uncomfortable. I hope that makes some sense. BUT, the ending that Dr. Shailor created allowed us to leave the theatre recognizing both types of endings – the joy for the couples and their friends, and the injustice for Shylock. That certainly made me think differently about how one can stage this play and challenge audiences to really look at that. I can now think of a *Merchant of Venice* that allows for a deep reflection on injustice, oppression, and the motivations for hatred and revenge. As everyone said at your very thoughtful talk-back, this play really is timely right now. If we can think of *Merchant* as a reflection of the serious issues of hatred, religious intolerance, and the growing fear of ‘the other’ in our world… well that would make this a play I would want to do.

Every time I come to RCI to see The Muddy Flower Troupe, I am eager to come back. Your performance reminded me of how much I have learned from coming to see your plays over the years and, occasionally, having the opportunity to work with the troupe. I hope I will have that opportunity again. You have much to teach me!

Thanks again for a wonderful evening. I keep thinking about the play and your performances. That’s what theatre is meant to do!

I look forward to *Cymbeline*!

Best,

Lisa Kornetsky

Professor, Theatre Arts

UW-Parkside