

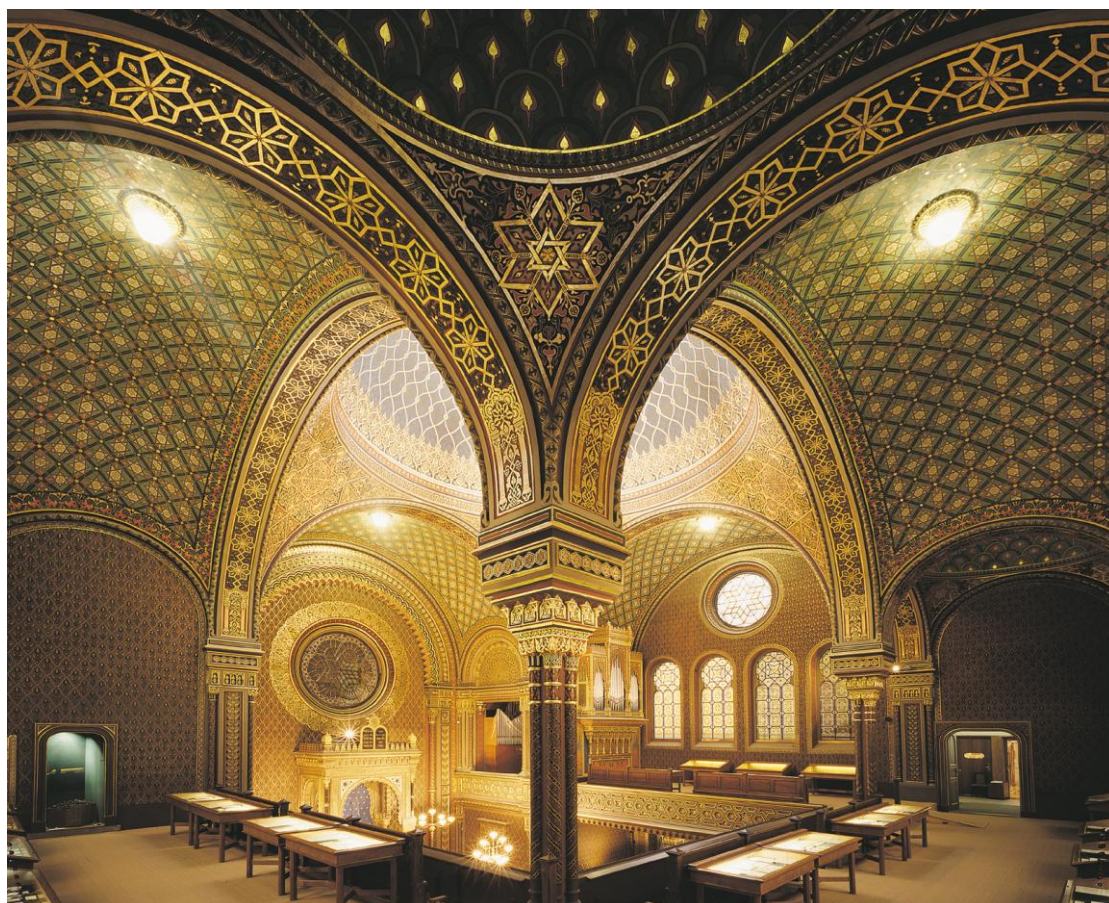
# Shylock's Ghosts: The Afterlife of Shakespeare's Jew

Jewish Museum in Prague – Spanish Synagogue  
Věžeňská 1, Prague 1

July 18, 2011 at 9:00 PM

Director: David Peimer  
Actor: Robert Gordon

*Organized by the Jewish Museum in Prague on the occasion of the 9th World Shakespeare Congress, with a kind support of Ms. Mary Ann Cloyd of Los Angeles, California.*



*The Merchant of Venice* as a text exists today in the shadow of the Holocaust. Moving from medieval to modern anti-Semitism, the performance will deconstruct Shakespeare's play in a range of different cultural contexts.

In Shakespeare's England the play would have been viewed within the perspective of a long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism (anti-Judaism) typified by the later views of Martin Luther:

First ... set fire to their synagogues or schools... This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians. But if we now ... were to protect and shield such a house for Jews, existing right before our very nose, in which they lie about, blaspheme, curse, vilify, and defame Christ and us ... it would be the same as if we were doing all this and even worse... Second, I advise that their houses be razed and destroyed ... Third, all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. (Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their Lies*, 1543).

Regardless of what Shakespeare's own intentions may have been, the play has been made use of by anti-Semites throughout its history. The end of the title in the 1619 edition "With the Extreme Cruelty of Shylock the Jew..." describes how Shylock was viewed by the English public in the 1590s.

The Nazis used Shylock for their propaganda. Shortly after the 'Kristallnacht' pogrom in 1938, *The Merchant of Venice* was broadcast for propagandistic ends over the German airwaves. Productions of the play followed in Lübeck (1938), Berlin (1940), and elsewhere within Nazi-occupied territory.

Was there any form of filth or crime... without at least one Jew involved in it. If you cut even cautiously into such a sore, you find like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden - a Jew." (Hitler)

The Jew ... is an exploiter: the Jews are a people of robbers. He has never founded any civilization, though he has destroyed civilizations by the hundred... everything he has stolen. "(Hitler - speech in Munich, July 1922)

The depiction of Jews in the literature of English-speaking countries ... bears a strong imprint of Shylock. Much of English literature up until the 20th century depicts the Jew as "a monied, cruel, lecherous, avaricious outsider tolerated only because of his golden hoard". Such anti-Semitic notions are a grotesque distortion of the historical facts. During Shakespeare's day, money lending was a very common occupation among Jews. This was due to Christians staying out of the profession due to their belief at that time that usury is a sin and the fact that it was one of the few professions available to Jews in medieval Europe, who were prohibited by law from most professions.

The performance by Robert Gordon, directed by David Peimer, deploys a number of contrasting interpretations of Shakespeare's play in the context of the history of European anti-Semitism to explore the various possible meanings it may have today.

**David Peimer** is a Professor of Theatre at University College, Falmouth, UK and at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and directs theatre for the Nobel Prize winner Pinter Centre in London. He has won many awards (including the Soros Open Society Award, Goethe Inst Award, South African National Playwriting and others), directed many plays in 3 continents, and given numerous papers around the world. He has also been Professor of Theatre at New York University (Prague campus). Born in South Africa, Peimer graduated from Columbia University on a Fulbright Scholarship. He has worked as a director and playwright in South Africa, Prague, New York, the UK, Germany and directed over 25 plays of which 7 were his own. His most recent book of plays *Armed Response; Plays from South Africa* was published in 2009. Peimer has directed 3 plays in English in Divadlo Na Zabradi (Prague, CZ), working with a multi-national ensemble of actors. He was also the only artist from Africa invited to stage work at the Prague Quadrennial in 2003. For this, he worked with performers from many countries and created a major installation in the Prague.

**Robert Gordon** is Professor of Drama at Goldsmiths University of London where he is the Director of the Pinter Centre for Performance and Creative Writing. He has worked in the UK, South Africa, Italy, the USA and Ireland as an actor, playwright and director. His play about the impact of apartheid on South African women, *Red Earth*, and *Waterloo Road*, his play about Lilian Baylis, were presented at the Young Vic. He acted in *A Chekhov Quartet* which toured the UK before being performed in Moscow and Yalta in 1990. In the USA he has acted Pinter's *Monologue* and directed *The Lover* and *Ashes to Ashes*. He was co-director of Moveable Feast Company in Dublin for whom he directed the theatre pieces, *Beds*, *La Corbiere*, *Le Crapaud* and the trilogy *Jersey Lilies* by Irish poet Anne Hartigan in Dublin and the USA. In London, he has directed rarely performed Restoration plays such as Wycherley's *Love in the Wood* and *The Plain Dealer*, and Etherge's *Love in a Tub*. His production of a site-specific version of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* played in over twenty outdoor locations in Rapallo in 2002 and he directed his own adaptation of Baricco's *Novecento* for the Teatro della Clarissa and Teatro Portofino. In the USA, Robert has taught performance theory and practice at Duke University, Colby College, State University of New York, in London at Royal Holloway, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Actors' Centre, BADA, the Drama Studio, and the Acting Company as well as at Witwatersrand University, Durban University of Technology, Natal Playhouse in South Africa.