



# THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

**At this year's Toronto** International Film Festival, I had the opportunity to sit down with several key players in the screen adaptation of *The Merchant Of Venice*. The film was written and directed by Michael Radford (*Il Postino*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) and stars Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Joseph Fiennes, and Lynn Collins.

The writer and the actors offered their insights into the transformation of material intended for the stage in the 16th century to a screenplay that speaks to a 21st century audience. The final product was a beautiful and thought-provoking film.

Joseph Fiennes (Bassanio), Lynn Collins (Portia), Zuleikha Robinson (Jessica), and Michael Radford joined me for the interview.

## What did you hope to achieve with this film?

**Radford:** We actually tried to do something here that gripped you viscerally—which proved that you could do that with Shakespeare and not just treat it like a dead text. I tried to do it like Shakespeare would have done it. To get to the public. To engage the public. Because people didn't speak in iambic pentameters in the 16th century either.

So how do you engage the public? You engage them by getting them involved with the characters. By making them laugh. By making them cry. By making them scared. When Shylock approaches Antonio with a knife, I want them to think that he's going to cut his

heart out. That's cinema. Or to understand that Shylock is a victim, but he's also suffering from road rage. He's going way over the top. All of these are things you can totally identify with. Or that his daughter is like the girl from *Bend It Like Beckham*. She's fed up with living with her father who wears a turban all the time. She wants to mix in the modern world. She doesn't want to be a good orthodox Sikh girl who marries some boring old fart, she wants to get out there with these handsome guys. She only realizes at the end what she's done to him.

I also love Portia. She's a girl who marries the first handsome guy who comes along. She has no idea who he is. He's just a fabulous guy. And then the next thing that happens is that she suddenly discovers he's got a past. She's one of the most brilliant creations that Shakespeare

wards and explained to you why the characters were behaving the way that they were. When you have Shylock who says, "Senor Antonio, many a time and oft in the Rialto you have rated me for my monies and my usances." It's the first time that you know that there's an enmity between them.

Well you can't do that in a movie. You have to know that. Right up front. And if you know that, when he says that, you identify with him. He's been spat on. The one reason I did *The Merchant Of Venice* was because that I felt that it had in it this fantastic trial scene it is so cinematic. It really is. It's twenty-five minutes long. I mean, I've never shot a scene in the movies which is twenty-five minutes long. It absolutely grips you. From one side to the other. That's really why.

have amongst you many a purchased slave. What shall I say to you? Marry them to your heirs? Let them lie in beds as soft as yours? And you shall say, No, we own these slaves." He's actually making a speech for liberty. It's extraordinary. How can a guy who's anti-Semitic write that? If you want to see anti-Semitic, read Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew Of Malta*.

I think that Shakespeare was such a great writer and such a great humanist. He understood human psychology so well. It's kind of irrelevant to me. The anti-Semitism in it. It's human. It's two cultures colliding. There's a guy who's suffering from road rage. There's a man who is hiding his homosexuality by being particularly religious. How many people do we know like that?

*"I think that if you set it in the period, you understand that this is a play about anti-Semitism, but it's not an anti-Semitic play. How can it be anti-Semitic when you have a speech like, "I am a Jew. If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"*

—Michael Radford

ever made. She grows in wisdom from being this girl to being this fantastic woman.

**Why did you choose *The Merchant Of Venice*? And why did you bring it to the screen?**

**Radford:** It's never been done for the cinema before. I've always been a bit leery of Shakespeare on film. It is a sort of a genre. And most of the Shakespeare movies I have ever seen haven't really worked for me. Not because sometimes they're not beautiful. Orson Welles' *Othello* is a very beautiful film. But you don't get interested in *Othello*. You simply don't. You just watch it and think, "Well, that's kind of interesting." But, *Othello* doesn't move you.

I felt that I would like to try and make a Shakespeare movie that actually gripped people. Shakespeare wrote for a popular audience. There's absolutely no reason why a popular audience, if approached in the right way, shouldn't grasp this. It's just a problem of a slightly archaic language. We decided to attack it in a very naturalistic way and tried to speak it a little slower. And cut a lot of the text without cutting the major stuff. I cut two hours out of the play. The thing is that nobody knows that.

I made the prologue so that people can identify with the characters and know where they're coming from. Shakespeare didn't do that. What he did was he entered in the action of the play and then people came on after-

**How much did you fret over adapting the play for today's audience in terms of anti-Semitism? It's certainly a hot-button issue today.**

**Radford:** I didn't fret at all, actually. Because when I read the play, I didn't think it was anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitism, you have to understand, is something that was really born, anti-Semitism as we know it now, with the pogroms in Russia and the Nazi concentration camps. That's where the real venal anti-Semitism was born.

Before that, it was a biblical thing. The Jews were blamed for the death of Christ. The Franciscans particularly were very anti-Semitic. The Franciscan friar who comes to stir up the mob at the beginning is quoting from St. Paul. And he's actually quoting, believe it or not, from Martin Luther. It's what people felt, deeply and religiously. The Jews at the same time felt something else.

The most important thing was this whole business of usury, actually. Lending money at interest—which we all do now—and which they did then. But, because the Christians weren't allowed to do it, the Jews did it. And then they blamed the Jews for it. But they still needed it economically.

I think that if you set it in the period, you understand that this is a play about anti-Semitism, but it's not an anti-Semitic play. How can it be anti-Semitic when you have a speech like, "I am a Jew. If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" Look at it when he says in the courtroom, "You





**Everyone has his/her own concept of *The Merchant Of Venice*. Did you have to break that down?**

**Radford:** Yeah. We did a lot of rehearsal. I think that's probably what saved this film because we shot it in only seven and a half weeks. We did a lot of rehearsal in New York—for a month—which is unheard of for a movie. It really helped because we just attacked it.

I kept saying to them, "This is what it's about. It's about people. Nobody's good. Nobody's bad. And everybody has to believe in the essential goodness of their own character. The essential humanity of their own character."

**Did you evolve the script with the actors?**

**Radford:** No, I didn't. Of course, being actors, they always want to put stuff back in again. It usually works what I cut out because I did it with a particular thought: "Anything that you can say cinematically, do so." I really cut the dialogue down to a minimum. For instance, this very famous speech by Shylock which says, "How like a fawning publican he looks. I hate him for he is a Christian." You don't need all that stuff. You know he hates Antonio. So if he just says, "How like a fawning publican he looks." You don't need the rest.

Where it's theatrical and where it's explaining things, you take it away because you can deliver it with looks and gestures and stuff. I put a coda at the beginning and a coda at the end of the film to wrap everything up. And that was it. They responded to the text that I had done because it was strong. Dramatically strong.

**How well did each of you know the play before doing the film?**

**Collins:** I was definitely familiar with it because I was so into Shakespeare. I had basically read all of them. But I found that it made me really uncomfortable. I mean, I thought Portia was a great part and she had some of the greatest speeches. But I didn't really like it.

I think it was because of the anti-Semitism in it and knowing the history of how it was used in the Third Reich and in the world in general in Shakespeare's time. It was about anti-Semitism and, I think, pro anti-Semitism. It was difficult for me to be like, "Yes! Let's do this. Let's put this on." Because I think Michael had such vision with making it a slice of history. Which I think is the only way it can be done now.

**Robinson:** I had never read the play in school. I haven't read that many Shakespeare plays. We studied parts of them at school. It took me a little while to like it. Not because of the subject matter. I think it was more the three caskets and how illogical it was. How could anyone come and not figure it out? That was my problem with it, actually. Don't people talk?

**Fiennes:** I had never seen it or read it before. So I had to read it because on the page, I thought, "God, this is quite boring." But actually, he's [Bassanio] fascinating. He's brilliant. You can play him as a fortune seeker and a rogue who actually comes to a realization through the awful circumstances that he puts everyone in.

**Can you talk about the development of your characters?**

**Collins:** We actually worked a lot. We had four weeks of rehearsal before we started shooting. He [Michael] definitely had a very specific vision. I love that in a director; I actually prefer it when they know exactly what they want. As opposed to not sure and then I'm floating around with no idea. I think the main thing for me, that I wanted to make clear, is her development into womanhood. Claiming her power.

She starts off sort of parallel to my life (laughs). She starts off not having choices, being trapped in a way, and ends up claiming herself. She's actually in charge at the end. That was fun. That was really fun mapping that out. And we did, we actually went through in

one part of the rehearsal process, we went through scene by scene.

**Fiennes:** I worked backwards. I thought, okay. This is a great love and it's a love triangle. Portia and Bassanio end up together. I don't think they go off into the sunset. I think they probably have a great argument before anything happens. I think it's an honest love at the end.

So I thought, how is it dishonest? Or how is it without projection. So I go right back and I think that Bassanio is a fortune seeker, a gold digger. He's an egotist. He's the guy who wants the Golden Fleece. He wants to go out there and have adventure, but he also wants it on someone else's dime. He's manipulative; he's charming, you know. He's just a playboy.

He has to learn to grow up and has to learn through a horrific event of putting his friend in mortal peril through the whole bond situation. He has to look back. I think he really does. He has to go through the mill and think how can I change my actions? I've got to grow up. I can't do this to people. And to myself. For me, that was a really interesting journey.

**Robinson:** Everyone always feels that Jessica is a very unfinished character. I think Michael really wanted to show her ending. And people are always, like, how could she do that? How could she leave her father and her religion and run off and do that? She's a child and she's infatuated with this young boy. And children do things like that. Run off and get into trouble. It was mostly just trying to find that youthfulness again. Sitting in my own space. And being quiet and feeling that love and trying to remember what it was like.

Jessica's left to her own devices. Always looking out the window. Creating this beautiful world in her head. Which is why she so quickly falls in love with Lorenzo, the first man she meets. He becomes her knight in shining armor and she runs off with him. Only to find out that she has to get to know him. She doesn't understand any of these people. She's stepped into their world.

**How much research did you do?**

***"It's really kind of wonderful, Shakespeare. It's like getting in a Ferrari and just doing the corners at a hundred miles an hour. You dazzle."***

—Joseph Fiennes

**Collins:** I did a ton. I had about a month from knowing I got the part. Actually, that's not true, I started before that. Because they offered me Narissa to keep me in the game. When he did that, I thought, okay, I'll start researching.

I got on the Internet and read so many boring essay books about the Renaissance and women and men in the Renaissance. I think what's interesting about doing the research was the stakes that women lived under at that point. If Portia had been caught, she would have been killed regardless of who she was and how much money she had. Women were killed for it.

**Robinson:** A little bit. I read some books about Venice. I didn't find too much stuff on the Jews in Venice. There was some stuff on the people in Rome, so there was a little bit of a base but not that much.

Jessica's very trapped. Living in a confined space, it doesn't matter how rich you are, you still live in a box with three people. You can't breathe. Which I think is the reason she had to break out. She couldn't breathe. When you're so oppressed, the other side always looks better. People on the other side of the gate seem free.

**As a group of actors, did you sit down with Michael and battle over the screenplay?**

**Fiennes:** We did, definitely. We had a wonderful rehearsal process. Which in film you don't often

get. All of us went to New York and we sat in Al's [Pacino] rehearsal space. We bashed and tore through and fought for things to be cut out or put back in. So it was a real collaboration.

Mike was constantly allowing it in a rehearsal space. He'd say, "Okay let's put it on its feet and see if it works." And if it did, we would think about it. And if it didn't, it would be back out. So it was absolutely a collaboration. As it should be. We rehearsed it almost like a play. We went through while trying to keep it spontaneous for the moment.

Constantly you'd go back and say, "Listen the bit you've cut here, the soliloquy indicates to me that maybe we could put a line back in." Mike's obviously got an amazing visual eye and he's constantly trying to think I've got to keep it for a modern audience. And as actors you're working from just your little bit. So he's got the bigger picture.

**Is there extra pressure when working with Shakespeare?**

**Fiennes:** If anything, certainly a pressure to get to the truth of what Shakespeare was about. A humanist who's writing about human conditions and over and above how I want to execute it. What's he writing about? For what purpose? What's he trying to say? What are the frailties here of the characters? What are the lessons that they are learning? So that an audience can understand those and appreciate and draw their own interpretations.

It's really kind of wonderful, Shakespeare. It's like getting in a Ferrari and just doing the corners at a hundred miles an hour. You dazzle. But are you actually exacting the truth? Are you actually getting over and above your ego and enjoying the language of Shakespeare? What is it that you're trying to say? It's those questions which become more important over the dazzle of iambic and poetry. Which can catch you up.

And I think what we've done brilliantly in the film is to create a world which is set in the right context and period. It allows an audience to draw modern parallels from it without us wagging a finger going it's about X, Y, and Z. I think the poetry and the dazzle and the iambic can be misleading and beguiling. You come away going "What did I just listen to?"

It's all about excavation. Because I think a lot of the iambic is a facility for a bigger, wider space. Shakespeare takes you to a point where the characters are forced to look and confront themselves. And learn by their mistakes. Then, he lets them off the hook. It's an amazing thing to take an audience to that point where the knife is about to go in and everyone's affected by it and then snap! Off the hook and we learn and we move on. ■

Kate is a writer/producer based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. She just finished rewriting a supernatural thriller and currently has three feature films and a television series in development. For the latest news on her career, check out her website: [www.scriptgrrl.com](http://www.scriptgrrl.com).



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