

## **Artistic Chair's Message**

The decision to produce *The Merchant of Venice* is not something to be taken lightly. With its deeply anti-Semitic protagonists, Merchant of Venice is often described as an anti-Semitic play. Yet whether or not Shakespeare internalized these attitudes of intolerance, it is impossible to tell.

Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to argue rigorously on both sides of an issue. His plays don't tell us what to think, they force us to grapple with tough issues. He gives us questions, not answers.

But even among those of us who appreciate plays that don't end with the curtain call, plays that keep us up at night and instigate animated debate, this play is almost too much. The decision to produce Merchant of Venice is a dangerous one (this may well be the first professional production of this play in Manitoba), yet the decision to not produce it, if that choice is made out of fear or ignorance, is equally dangerous. A willingness to risk addressing the ugliness of this play's main characters forces us to examine our own psyches, explore our own attitudes.

It is interesting that Shakespeare wrote this play during a time of extreme religious anxiety: failure to display sufficient devotion to the reformed Church of England was cause for suspicion and persecution. Our time is characterized by a religious anxiety of another sort. Sometimes it seems that declaring one's devotion to any religion is cause for suspicion. But what does it cost us to relinquish our cultural and/or spiritual identities?

While I confess to being mildly terrified by the challenge of producing this play, I have infinite faith in the sensitivity and courage of our creative team and the intelligence and good will of you, our audience. Thank you for your willingness to take this risk with us.

*Debbie Patterson*