THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
Rain or Shine Theatre Co.
The Dovecote, Naunton
Sunday 31st August 2014

In the sun-kissed rural splendour of The Dovecote, Naunton, Rain or Shine's summer 2014 tour ended in style beside the gently-flowing River Windrush with a hugely entertaining production of Shakespeare's spicy tale of money-lending, match-making and Moors.

Still remarkably topical, the prickly business of taking out and fully repaying a loan retains an unsettling hold over audiences, who, along with countless academics, continue to debate the degree of anti-Semitism, or the absence of it, in the Bard's Venetian vagary. Controversial, therefore, but nonetheless captivating, and this afternoon's presentation was indeed absorbing. The eight-strong cast, draped in consistently exquisite costumes, maintained a steady pace throughout a production in which moods polarised in a way I have rarely seen in live theatre, ranging from grim solemnity and quiet reflection to high comedy and even Whitehall farce.

Here was another engaging lesson in multiple role-playing, strong characterisation and clear diction. Particularly impressive was Michael Skellern as the frequently emotional Bassanio, while Claire Tucker bubbled as the exuberant Portia, but enjoyed her finest moments as the learned judge in the powerful courtroom scene. Jayne Lloyd turned the incidental role of her maidservant Nerissa into a three-course meal, but the stable anchor this time round was Rob Keeves whose assured performance of Antonio combined dignity, determination and panic in equal measure. Perfectly complementing Anthony Young's outrageous Prince of Morocco, his brief turn as the ever-so-slightly camp Prince of Aragon was an unmitigated delight. Eliciting sympathy for the otherwise despised Shylock takes considerable skill, and director James Reynard rose impressively to the challenge, reducing the audience to a reverent silence during his impassioned *"If you prick us, do we not bleed?"* plea.

A performance in which all did glister, and 'twas indeed gold. Beshrew me!

Simon Lewis