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Classic Shakespeare with a modern twist

Summary:

(October 21, 2005)-The theater discipline at the University of Minnesota, Morris will provide a new take on classic Shakespeare with the first production of the 2005-2006 season, "The Merchant of Venice." Set in the cutthroat world of 1980s Wall Street where insider trading reigns and "greed is good," this dark and bawdy comedy runs November 2-5 at 7:30 p.m. with an additional Saturday matinee on November 5 at 2 p.m.

Antonio, a merchant who has invested all his capital in risky trading ventures, allows his friend Bassanio to take out a loan on his credit from Shylock, the moneylender, to help fund Bassanio's pursuit of the beautiful Portia, an heiress of Belmont. If the bond is not returned in full, the payment Shylock will receive is one pound of Antonio's flesh.

Directing the production is Assistant Professor of Theater Ray Schultz, who lived in New York City and worked on Wall Street during the 1980s. Describing the connections between "The Merchant of Venice" and 1980s Wall Street, Schultz explains, "All the characters strike me as opportunists of some sort, especially when it comes to issues of money. Shakespeare's Venice and the New York of junk bonds and insider trading days seemed very analogous to me." Schultz is excited to direct the play because, "this concept is something that has been percolating in my head for a long time, so it's been fun to finally get a chance to make this idea a reality in the theater."

Visiting Professor of Theater Adam Parboosingh is responsible for evoking the audio and visual world of 1980s Wall Street. Parboosingh, who is designing sets, lights, sound, and costumes, is assisted by students Sara Herman, Alex Clark, and Lydea Aurentz. The set design combines aspects of modern Manhattan with "a classical feel of Venice" by placing "three classical entrances as elevators amongst marble columns and Italian architecture." The fashion statements of the 1980s were quite memorable and UMM's production will showcase these infamous fashions in all their splendor.

"All I can really say is 'big hair' and 'big shoulder pads'," says Parboosingh. "With their bright neon colors, leg warmers, and big sweaters, women's fashions dominated over the men's. Looking at girl bands, such as the Go-Go's and Bananarama, and pop icons like Cindi Lauper and Madonna were a great help to focus in on specifics for this era."

"The Merchant of Venice" features Nick Lostetter (Buffalo) as the title character Antonio. Bassanio is played by James Parker (Louisville, Kent.), with Chelsea-Wren Hanvy (Sauk Centre) as Nerissa, Alex Carlson (Cottage Grove) as Gratiano, Erin Denman (Minneapolis) as Jessica, Alex Bertolas (Virginia) as Lorenza, Peter Ray (Barrett) as Salarino, Ben Palm (Plymouth) as Solanio, and Philip Burgraff (Fairmont) as Lancelot. Rounding out the ensemble are Eric Aufderhar (North Branch), Brad Coulombe (Waseca), Katrina Heimark (Aitkin), Justin Kemppainen (Spicer), Dein Lawrence (Bemidji), Scott Shaffer (Saint Louis Park), and Katie Sundquist (New Hope).

Playing the roles of Portia and Shylock for their senior projects are Lisa Burton (Rochester) and Todd Janssen (Hampton, Iowa). Senior Jenn Vareberg (Frazee) serves as Stage Manager and is assisted by Amanda Ochsner (West St.

Paul) and Susan Seim (Maple Grove).

As an added bonus, UMM Chancellor Sam Schuman, a noted Shakespearean scholar, will give a pre-show talk about some of the controversial aspects of the play on Friday, Nov. 4, from 6:30 to 7:15 p.m. in the Proscenium Theatre. This discussion will focus on the nature of Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most infamous characters, and is free to the public. Schuman plans to explore the conflicting views scholars hold towards the character. Is Shylock a portrait of anti-Semitism or is Shakespeare defending his humanity? Is there any value to producing this controversial drama in contemporary America?

"The Merchant of Venice" runs Wednesday through Saturday, Nov. 2-5, at 7:30 p.m. with an additional Saturday matinee on November 5 at 2 p.m. All performances are in the Proscenium Theatre, Humanities Fine Arts at UMM. Tickets are \$7 for general admission and \$5 for students and senior citizens group discounts are available for groups of 10 or more. Free, convenient parking is available evenings and weekends in all UMM lots. For more information and ticket reservations, please contact the box office at (320) 589-6249.

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