'Merchant' merits pound of praise

By BOB DARDEN
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A. Bryan Humphrey's twisted, tormented Shylock dominates the Baylor Theater production of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," despite the presence of the best cast of the season. Humphrey's characterization galvanized the action opening night and made the near sell-out crowd almost forget the play's three-hour-plus running time.

Of course, Shylock's dominance is written into the play, but Humphrey makes the tortured, sinister moneylender come alive with a modicum of dignity and sympathy. He is oily and slavish in the opening scenes, darkly resolute to the point of obsession in the final scenes and never less than compelling.

It's to the credit of such fine actors as Terence Zeeman, David Merbeth, Renee Cox, Matt Lagan, Randal Wilson — and director Pat Cook — that the towering character of Shylock doesn't completely overwhelm the play.

The action revolves around the rich heiress Portia (Miss Cox), her ardent suitor Bassanio (Merbeth), Bassanio's long-suffering friend and confidant Antonio (Zeeman) and Shylock. Bassanio wishes to borrow money from Antonio to woo Portia in a distant city. When Antonio can't come up with the money, he borrows it from the Jewish moneylender Shylock. But Antonio — indeed, all of his race — has mercilessly abused the Jew in the past. Shylock agrees to lend the money, but with a pound of Antonio's flesh as credit.

There are, to be sure, myriad subplots as well. Shylock's daughter Jessica (Luann Purcell) hates her father and plots to run away with Lorenzo (J. Scott Evans) — taking much of his fortune with her. Portia is constantly pursued by other suitors from all over the world. To win her hand and fortune, they must answer the riddle of the three caskets in a number of comic interludes.

But the fascination for today's audiences lies mainly in Shakespeare's ambivalent treatment of Shylock. Miss Cook has thoughtfully included a couple of essays in the program detailing the treatment of Jews (literary and otherwise) in Shakespeare's day. It doesn't make his treatment of Jews any less odious, but it helps to see the characterization in a different context.

And Shakespeare, as always, is able to transcend the prejudice of his age in transforming a comic monster into a living, breathing man with Shylock's powerful speech: "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

The frequent (probably too frequent for most modern tastes) comic passages from the groundlings are in capable hands as well in this "Merchant." Worth special mention are Thom Gilbert's buffoon Launcelot Gobbo, Lonnie Johnson's comic, barbarian Prince of Morocco, and Burton Curtis' pompous fop of a suitor, the Prince of Arragon. Matt Lagan's loquacious Gratiano is also fun.

A few tickets remain for the Baylor Theater production of "The Merchant of Venice." Performances are to continue Thursday and Friday nights at 7:30 p.m. and at 1:30 p.m. Saturday at the Mabee Theater. Call 755-1861 for information.