

Wonderful performances in 'The Merchant of Venice'

Schoolcraft College presents "The Merchant of Venice," 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Nov. 12-13 in the Liberal Arts Theatre on campus. 18500 Haggerty, between Six and Seven Mile roads, Livonia. Tickets \$5, call (734) 462-4699.

BY BOB WEIBEL
SPECIAL WRITER

If you have shied away from Shakespeare, because it's "too hard to understand" you may want to reconsider, and attend Schoolcraft College's production of "The Merchant of Venice." The play is easy to follow and the

principal players turn in wonderful performances. Professor James Hartman has edited the play slightly to update archaic words from Shakespearean times to make it more palatable.

For example, "in sooth" becomes in truth. And "rate of usance" becomes rate of interest.

The central conflict involves a young man borrowing money from a friend to finance a romance with a wealthy young lady. To test the values of her suitors, she promises her dead father to marry the man who makes the correct choice

between gold, silver and lead chests. Lots of comedic possibilities there — and no doubt 400 years ago Elizabethan audiences found it very funny. There is a dark side to the play, however.

Much of the world was virulently anti-Semitic in Shakespeare's time. Who better to be a villain than Shylock — the Jew — who lends money to Christians. Today, the derisive language directed at him is a bit disconcerting, similar to the way modern popular culture treated American Indians not so many years ago. Ray Van Hoek (Shylock) creates a marvelously sym-

pathetic character. His "revenge" speech in which he explains why he insists on his "pound of flesh" in lieu of repayment of his loan is spellbinding. If only the actor entering at the end would delay a beat, however, allowing us to digest the moment.

Despite his wonderful character, Van Hoek tends to hold one stage position too long. Both he and Jerri Doll (Portia) deliver Shakespeare's lines in such a natural manner that one is seldom aware that they are speaking in verse. Not any easy task as many of the less experienced actors can attest.

Doll, as Portia, lights up the stage with energy and style as a young woman hoping the man of her dreams selects the correct chest. It is a stunning performance. Brian Taylor gives his usual solid performance as Bassanio, her love interest. John Rowland (Antonio) looks the part of a successful merchant, but needs to add more spice to the delivery of his lines and variety to his movement. Colleen Greenwell is very good as Portia's friend, Nerissa. Diane Aretz is most effective as Shylock's daughter, Jessica, who runs off with his money and marries a

Christian. Others appearing include Jason Kirby, Benjamin Karl, Nick Ward, David Omsby, Lisa Brawley, David Janvey, Ryan-Iver Klann, Jeremy Hargis, Tom Rowland, John Abair, Brendan Smith, Charles LaCroix, Antonio Musso and Tom Noe.

The setting, lights, sound and costumes are well done, though there are an interesting variety of footwear for a period piece.

Bob Weibel is a Westland resident who writes about theater for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

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varying movements of a blind character and the thugs, who tend to move erratically. It's a thug thing.

As you might imagine, a play with a blind lead character puts a premium on lighting to draw the audience in to the unfamiliar circumstances of having to rely on its instincts. Cost members were supported throughout this production by lighting techniques that enhanced their scenes. No simple task, given the importance that the many different degrees of light had to the plot. John Deierlein, who also did scenic design for the season opening production of "The Music Man," deserves applause in this area.

"Wait until Dark" is a dialogue-intensive play which taxes its performers and the director to sustain suspense. There were occasional lapses in the exchanges between characters and glitches in sound and special effects that prompted audience members to settle a bit deeper in their seats.

Director Jim Stillman is an unabashed fan of Knott's mysteries, including the classic "Dial M for Murder," which Avon presented two years ago. Here, he presents the story in an easy-to-follow manner, and although the production is not exactly a nail-biter, he does establish a distinct identity for each character. This is most evident with the con-

men, portrayed by Michael Jeffries, Mike Fraley and Anthony Sherman.

Musicals and comedies will always have an advantage in being consistent crowd-pleasers. An audience that believes community theater should also attempt to stretch itself by presenting more challenging productions will appreciate this one.

John O'Donnell is a Troy resident who writes about community theater for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

STAY TUNED

For three decades, Bobby Lewis and his Crackerjack Band have been rocking around Detroit. The classic rock band will grab audiences attention at Livonia's Winter Wonderland Parade Saturday, Nov. 20 while performing at Wonderland Mall.

Sure it isn't the old "Your Mustache" lounge in Dearborn, where Lewis played with his band Sticks and Stones for 13 years, but audiences are sure to love that blend of rock, jazz and bluegrass.

It's a mystery to me. One Livonia reader wrote with a question. What has happened to

KISS FM? One night she turned on the radio to find it changed to a rock format? Anyone with information may e-mail scaslone1@aol.com.

While Delilah may be missing from the airwaves, director Kevin Smith ("Clerks," "Chasing Amy") is in plain sight with

his latest film "Dogma." While the movie may be shrouded in controversy for its take on religion, Alanis Morissette's latest single "Still" should tide eager fans over before she completes another album. Look for Morissette's cameo as God in "Dogma," opening tomorrow.

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Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2:00 p.m.
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Sunday, Dec. 5, 2:00 p.m.
Sunday, Dec. 5, 6:30 p.m.
Thursday, Dec. 9, 8:00 p.m.
Friday, Dec. 10, 8:00 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 11, 2:00 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 11, 6:30 p.m.
Sunday, Dec. 12, 2:00 p.m.
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and all performances December 16-26