

STUDY GUIDE



2015

Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre



The Merchant of Venice

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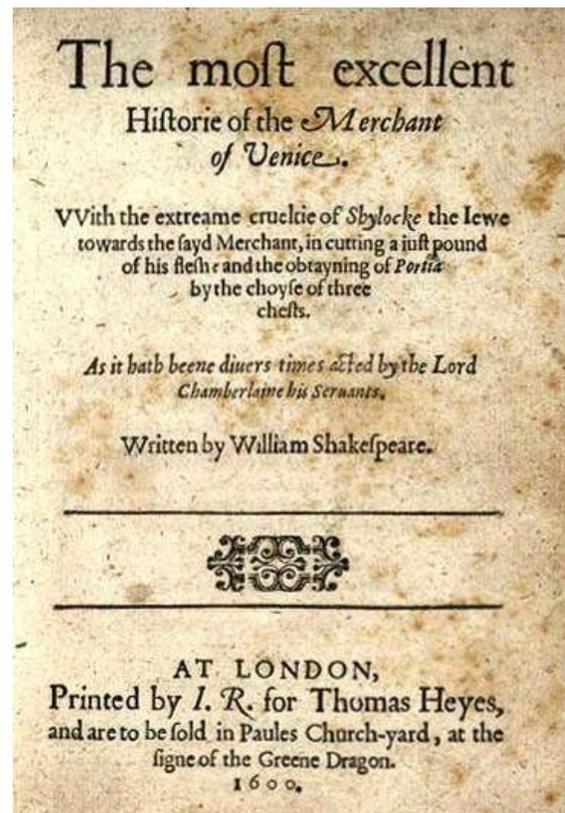
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ABOUT THE PLAY

The Merchant of Venice was likely written between 1596 and 1598. The play was entered into the Stationer's Register (the early modern equivalent of being copyrighted) in 1598, and published in quarto form in 1600. While the play was undoubtedly performed many times before then, our earliest surviving record of a production was in 1605, at the court of James I.

Two events in the years before Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* likely influenced its creation. First, a Portuguese man named Roderigo Lopez, who was a renowned doctor and a Jewish convert to Christianity, was accused of plotting to assassinate Elizabeth I in 1594. News of the alleged plot spread rapidly, which led to an increase in the already rampant anti-Semitism in England. This led to the second event, which was that Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, had a widely popular revival. The titular character of Marlowe's play was a violent caricature named Barabas, and it is believed that both Barabas and Roderigo Lopez influenced the development of Shylock. Other influences that Shakespeare likely looked to in writing *The Merchant of Venice* include Giovanni Fiorentino's prose collection *Il Pecorone*, Masuccio Salernitano's short story collection *Il Novellino*, and a Latin story collection, *Gesta Romanorum*.

Some main concerns to keep in mind while reading or watching the play include the importance of male friendship, gender roles and women's place in society, the conflict between Old Testament understandings of justice and New Testament understandings of mercy, and racism and anti-Semitism.



Title page of the first quarto of
The Merchant of Venice, 1600
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Merchant_venice_tp.jpg

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:

Q & A WITH DIRECTOR, REBEKAH SCALLET

I sat down on an empty stage with Director Rebekah Scallet to discuss *The Merchant of Venice*. Rebekah gave me some insight into her creative process and her upcoming production of the play.

Why did you choose this play?

It's a play that I have been drawn to for a long time, ever since I read it for the first time in college, and then I saw a production of it at the ART Theatre in Boston and they really went for Shylock as a clown -he had a red nose and everything- and they went for all of that humor in it. I just thought, what a crazy, interesting play that contains all of this humor -because all of that stuff worked- but at the same time is so upsetting (particularly because I am Jewish), is so offensive, and hurtful, and so ever since then I've wanted to be able to play with it and see what I can find in it, see what makes it tick.



What inspired you to set your production in the 1930s?

I wanted it to be a period that a contemporary audience would instantly understand. It was important to me to keep it in Italy, too, to make that Venice location very clear, because being on the water, and the ships, and this Jewish history in Venice is all really important to the story. But then I wanted a time period that was understandable and relatable, so I started looking into the pre-World War II period, to see what was happening there for Venice and for Jews. I hit upon the year 1938 because it was the year that Mussolini enacted the first race laws against the Jews, forbidding them to marry non-Jews, forbidding them to hold high positions of office and teach at universities, and things like that. That seemed kind of perfect, this period right before Italy became fully involved with Nazi Germany and started sending Jews to concentration camps, and it's a period where that anti-Semitism is just under the surface and is starting to explode here and there. There's pockets of it coming out, so that really seemed like a good fit to reflect what was happening to Shylock and Jessica in the play.

How do you think this modernization might affect the audience's perception of the play?

I hope that it allows them to have a sense of the anti-Semitism that's running beneath the surface of this world. Also something that we've discovered in rehearsal is the power of the gang mentality, and how powerful it is that it was this 'everybody is doing it' mentality that really led to people allowing the concentration camps to happen, even though they may have had some personal compunctions about it. I think putting it in that era will help to justify some of the actions of the other characters, and help them understand what they're going through.

People have discussed in the past how the play is in a sort of grey area between comedy and tragedy – are you trying to steer the production towards one or the other?

No, I guess is the answer to that, honestly. I think that it has strong elements of each, and I am interested in playing up both of those elements, and seeing what happens when we really present them side by side and the audience moves between those two extremes. I do think that something in the way this play is written leaves you with this feeling that, even in the comedy, it's not fully happy. It's not a true happy ending, because of the tragedy that has happened underneath. So even while you're laughing, even while you're happy for the characters, there's still that tickling sensation that there's something not quite right, so I'm really interested to see what happens when those two worlds really butt up against each other, and I'm not shying away from either one of them.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, the son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. There is no record of the exact date of Shakespeare's birth, but he was baptized on April 26, leading modern lovers of his work to celebrate his birthday on April 23, the same date as his death.

Like many boys of his social class at the time, young Will probably attended grammar school, where he would have been introduced to Latin literature and many sources that he would later use for the plotlines of his own works. At the age of 18 he married 27-year-old Anne Hathaway. The couple had three children, Susanna, born in 1583 (only six months after her parents were married), and the twins Hamnet and Judith, born in 1585.

Not much is known about the ten years of Shakespeare's life after his marriage or exactly when he moved to London and began writing, but by 1592 contemporary references show that he had several plays on the London stage. An outbreak of the plague temporarily closed the theatres, but when they reopened Shakespeare quickly established himself as an important figure in the London theatre world, making enough money to buy a coat of arms for his father and a home in Stratford for his family. Shakespeare's works were performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who would eventually become the King's Men in 1603, when James I ascended to the throne and became their patron. Shakespeare wrote at least 38 plays over the course of his career, as well as a sequence of 154 sonnets. Sometime around or after 1610, Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he died on April 23, 1616, at the age of 52.



The Chandos Portrait, National Portrait Gallery, London
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chandos_portrait#/media/File:Shakespeare.jpg



Shylock and Jessica, 1876, by Maurycy Gottlieb
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shylock_e_jessica.jpeg)

WHO'S WHO IN THE PLAY

In Belmont

Portia: A rich heiress. Her father's will specifies that Portia must marry whoever solves a puzzle involving three caskets— one gold, one silver, and one lead. Men have travelled from all over the world to try their hand at the game so they might win Portia's hand in marriage.

Nerissa: Portia's lady-in-waiting

Morocco and Aragon: Two princes, suitors of Portia

In Christian Venice

Antonio: The titular merchant of Venice. A wealthy man, he is a dear friend to Bassanio. Antonio hates Shylock for his career and his Jewishness, but is forced to borrow money from him in order to help Bassanio.

Bassanio: A close friend of Antonio's. He fell in love with Portia during a previous visit to Belmont. He seeks to borrow money from Antonio so that he can make the trip to Belmont and attempt to solve the riddle of the caskets.

Lorenzo: A young friend of Antonio and Bassanio. He is in love with Jessica, who is a Jew and Shylock's daughter.

Lancelot Gobbo: A servant, first in Shylock's household and later in Bassanio's. A dear friend of Jessica's.

Gratiano, Salanio, Salarino – Friends of Antonio and Bassanio

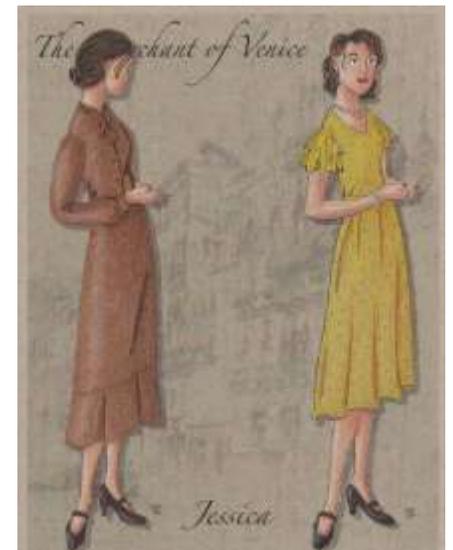
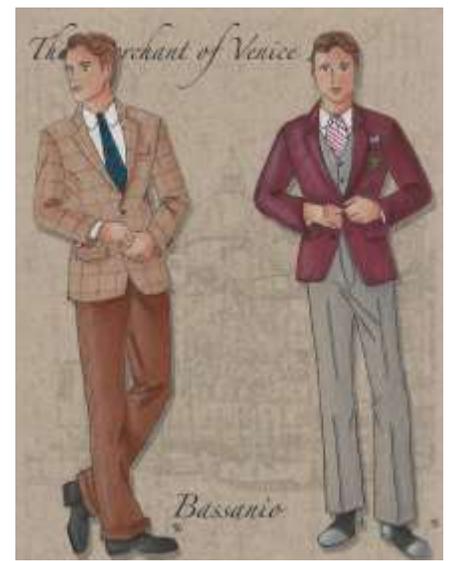
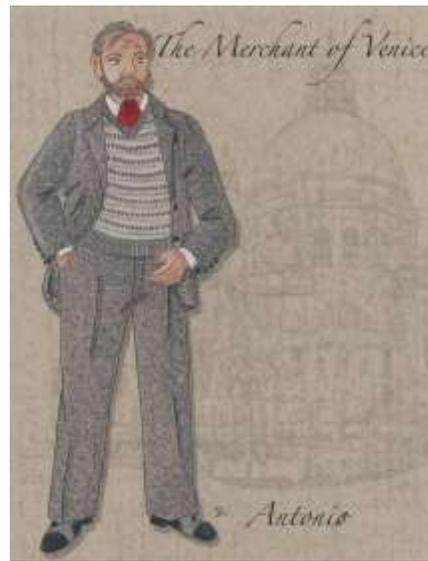
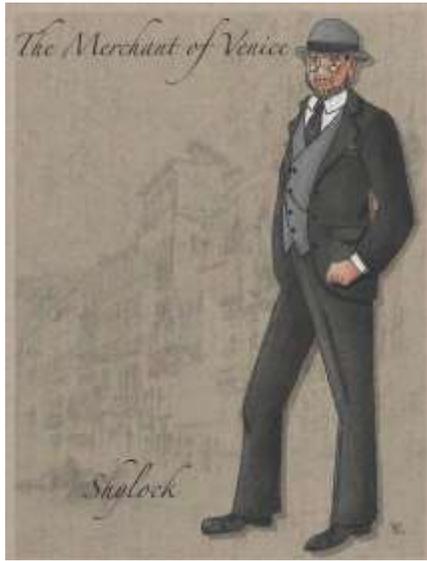
In Jewish Venice

Shylock: A Jewish moneylender, Jessica's father. He hates Antonio for his Christianity and the way Antonio treats him.

Jessica: Shylock's daughter. She is close friends with Lancelot, and in love with the Christian Lorenzo.

Tubal: A businessman, and Shylock's friend.

CREATING THE LOOK



SETTING THE SCENE

“We wanted to approach the design for Fiddler and Merchant as a true “Festival” style season, meaning that both shows would share the same footprint and we would try to shape each space uniquely within that space. Both shows are served very well by the “in-the-round” configuration as each is heavily focused on the theme of community. Merchant of Venice, is deeply rooted in an Italian society with thousands of years of tradition the not only dictate the customs of marriage and love but also the inclusion or exclusion of citizens within that community. By placing the audience all around the action we not only allow them to examine the constructs established by the society but also implicate them in the actions of that community.”

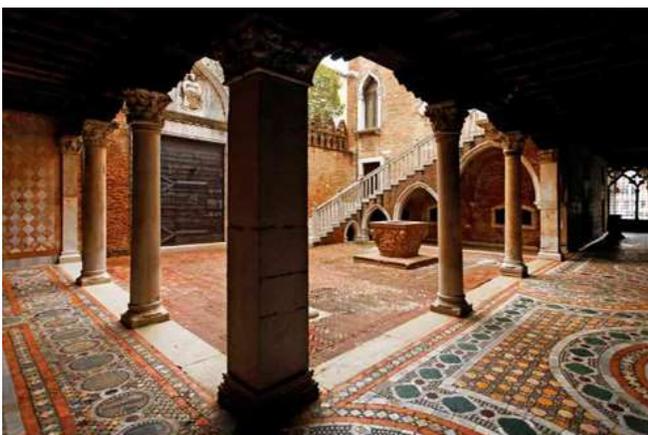
Jeff Kmiec, Scenic Designer



Del Gurana Meeting Room, photo © Aman Canal Grande Hotel, Venice, Amanresorts.



Canaletto, Capriccio: a Colonnade opening on to the Courtyard of a Palace, 1765. Oil on canvas, 131 x 93 cm. Accademia, Venice.



<http://explorephototours.com/images/Venice-Photo-Tours-101.jpg>

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SHAKESPEARE'S DAY

There are two important historical locales that we must consider when looking at *The Merchant of Venice*: England, because it provided the cultural context in which Shakespeare wrote, and Venice, as it is the actual setting of the work. The fact that Shakespeare was an Englishman in the Renaissance means that it is unlikely he ever met a Jew; all Jews were officially expelled from England in 1290, and while some likely remained in secret, that secrecy would have kept them out of the reach of a curious playwright. As such, Shakespeare was most likely working from commonly held stereotypes about Jews in his creation of Shylock. These stereotypes were entirely negative and flagrantly anti-Semitic. On the tamer side of the spectrum, it was believed that Jews were inherently greedy (largely due to a false association of Jews with usury- the act of charging interest on loans). On the other end of the spectrum were rumors and lies that painted Jews as truly monstrous, with some Christians even arguing that Jews sacrificed Christian children so that they could use their blood to make bread for Passover (accusations known as blood libel). Jews were seen by the English (and most Christian Europeans) as being different not only on a religious level, but also on a racial level. We can never know for certain whether Shakespeare intended to work for or against these stereotypes, but they undoubtedly influenced his creation of Jewish characters, and would have formed the cultural context in which his original audience understood these characters.



<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-renaissance-venice/>

Venice in the Renaissance was a very different cultural world than that of England. Venice was an independent country, the seat of its own republic for around a thousand years, and the Venetians were proud of that independence. At one point the republic had been a huge maritime power, dominating trade in much

of the Mediterranean, but by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, the republic was on the tail end of 150 years of decline. This decline was brought about by everything from the plague to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, and the expansion of trade and shipbuilding in northern European countries. The fall of Venice's trade monopoly is one possible explanation for why Antonio is so sad in the opening scene of the play.

The situation for Jews in Renaissance Venice was different from the situation in much of Europe. While various Inquisitions across the continent were forcing Jews to choose between emigration and forced conversion, Jews were allowed to stay in Venice, albeit with some strict regulations. Venetian Jews were forced to live on the island of the Ghetto (the first of its kind, and actually the origin of the word 'ghetto'), and every night the doors were locked and the drawbridges raised. They were forced to wear clothing that distinguished them as Jews, could not own property or marry Christians, and were only allowed to be doctors, moneylenders, or vendors of used goods.

While this was obviously far from an ideal situation, it was miles ahead of the way Jews were usually treated. Other cities in what is now northern Italy used Venice as an example of how to positively shape Jewish-Christian relations, and Jews themselves used the city as a model to argue for the expansion of their rights elsewhere. The good treatment of Jews was not the only progressive aspect of Venetian politics, though. The city had explicit laws protecting the rights of foreigners and aliens from exploitation and maltreatment by citizens. These laws were important because, as a center of trade, Venice had to protect foreigners in order to maintain the economy of the republic. Both the positive treatment of Jews and the cities renown for protecting foreigners likely influenced Shakespeare while he was choosing the setting of the play. The myth of Venice as a perfect, progressive state can be seen in the fact that Shakespeare either did not know about the ghetto, or chose to ignore its existence entirely.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ITALY IN THE 1930S

Venice was much like the rest of Italy during the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. Fearing a socialist revolution inspired by the Russians, the Italian government had permitted the existence of a small National Fascist Party. This party attempted a coup in October 1922, and while the coup itself was a failure, the Italian king declared Mussolini Prime Minister. Mussolini slowly banned all other political parties and created a fascist dictatorship, whose end goal was to one day recreate and even surpass the Roman Empire.



Il Duce: Prime Minister Benito Mussolini
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_Fascism#/media/File:Benito_Mussolini_Roman_Salute.jpg

Under pressure from Hitler, Mussolini published his *Manifesto on Race* on July 4th, 1938, the year in which our production is set. The race laws laid out in the *Manifesto* stripped Jews of their Italian citizenship, banned Jews from most kinds of employment (particularly those related to the government), banned Jews from owning land or business over a certain value, and banned marriage between Jews and non-Jews. There was intense opposition to the race laws throughout the country; they were denounced by the Pope, and some strongly resistant areas had to be militarily occupied in order for the laws to be enforced. The Italian public's refusal to comply with the race laws even inspired resistance in other occupied countries.

There were some ways in which Venice was different from the rest of Italy during this period. The first historic meeting between Hitler and Mussolini was staged in Venice in 1934. The dictators were met with crowds of cheering fascists, and Venice actually lacked the anti-fascist resistance that was present in most cities. The city itself was spared during much of the war; both sides independently decided that the city was too great of a historical and artistic treasure to risk damaging it, and the city even had to deal with issues of overcrowding once people from neighboring areas realized that it was a safe haven. Like Jews in the rest of Italy, the Venetian Jews were limited by Mussolini's race laws, and faced a terrifying fate once the Germans took full control over the northern half of the country and began deporting Jews to concentration camps in 1943. Different sources report different numbers, but 205-246 Venetian Jews were deported to concentration camps, and of those that were deported, only 8-15 returned. Before the war, it is estimated that around 2,000 Jews lived in Venice; the post-war population was reduced to somewhere between 1,050 and 1,500 people.

GENDER MATTERS

Male Friendship in the Renaissance

It was widely believed during the Renaissance that male friendship was the purest form of relationship possible on Earth. This view stemmed from a culture of misogyny, which held that women and men were not equals and therefore, could not form the true bond of an equal relationship. This view also had roots in Neoplatonic ideals, which held that a pure relationship could not be physical, because physical relationships clouded one's view of what really mattered- the spirit of the person. Male friendship was idealized because it was supposed to lack the lust that was present in male-female relationships. Friendship was also considered better because it was a choice: men chose their friends (unlike marriages, which were mainly financial transactions planned by both families), and could choose to leave their friends at will (also unlike marriage). This free will and lack of coercion meant that truly close male friendships were seen as requiring more dedication than a marriage. This kind of close male friendship is exemplified in *The Merchant of Venice* by Antonio and Bassanio: Antonio is willing to risk his wealth and even his life to help Bassanio, and wants nothing in return but Bassanio's love.

Women's Place in the Renaissance

During the Renaissance, women were seen as the property of men; first they belonged to their fathers, and then to their husbands. Sermons from the time period argued that the husband should be the head of the wife in the same way that Christ was the head of the church. While both men and women were expected to marry who their parents chose for them, men were afforded much more leniency, whereas women (as property of their fathers) had no choice but to obey. Women were expected to be completely chaste before marriage and entirely faithful to their husbands after marriage.

Women were banned by sumptuary laws from wearing any kind of masculine clothing. Contemporary understandings of biology taught that physical sex was not as different between men and women as we view it to be today, and so strictly gendered clothing was used to enforce and strengthen gender differences. A woman in masculine clothing was seen as incredibly subversive, and there are recorded cases of women in London serving time in jail or being forced into shameful, public acts of penance, for wearing pants. Both the marital expectations of women and the legal enforcement of gendered clothing are relevant in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is hard to know exactly how Shakespeare intended the women in the play to be received: Portia and Nerissa are uniquely independent, Jessica elopes and marries a Christian against her father's will, and all three named female characters in the play spend time in disguise as men.

BEFORE THE PLAY

B D J N R E I X A P J T R D P E L W H S
G L U V L D T V L K U J X N R Z B L Z E
O B D C G J D V E B S R J R A W O W J J
U J G R A G B D A N T O N I O X D U Z M
K E E J S T Q S M S I C A R W O R H R Z
B R M A O Q S F B X C C P J T L B L J E
C Y E O K A U L J K E L E S A F Y V Y N
T W N T N A H C R E M W Q E K R Y Y Z O
A N T I S E M I T I S M U P B S O R S G
I I O G H P Y D S N V S E H R X U K V D
K Y T M Y L W L P K Z Q I I L Q T E L I
B H L R L L O R E N Z O H C L H W F U I
H B A Y O E T Z W N C W I A A H L K L I
R W I B C P B X X Q D T B H W F Y W V V
U O R H K R E V E N G E B J M V Q D U L
R U X Y T F E U B R V T R W I A G L N X
L R P K C O U M M W J G S T M Y W T E B
F V U Q M F D H R R D I N J S E T R V T
H O C N Q W F J W D X C L L E X O T N F
R G S W G B Q G W G K B F A V A Z C Y A

ANTISEMITISM
ANTONIO
BASSANIO
BELMONT
DUCATS
JESSICA
JEWS
JUDGEMENT
JUSTICE
LAW
LORENZO
MERCHANT
MERCY
MONEYLENDER
PORTIA
RACISM
REVENGE
RIALTO
SHYLOCK
VENICE

AFTER THE PLAY

First, some fun review!

- <http://www.rudolphacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Merchant-of-Venice-Crossword-Puzzle.pdf>
- <http://www.funtrivia.com/playquiz/quiz134339f63070.html>

Questions to consider:

- 1- The Merchant of Venice is often described as being in a grey area between tragedy and comedy, in spite of the fact that it is classified as a comedy in the First Folio. Does the final act of the play succeed in restoring comedy to the play? Does the bond plotline undermine the romantic comedy plotline?
- 2- Some scholars have described Shylock as a caricature of Jewish stereotypes, instead of a psychologically realistic character. Other scholars argue that Shylock is so compelling that he overshadows the other characters in the play. Would you agree or disagree with either of these statements? How much of Shylock's identity is shaped by his Jewishness? How much is shaped by his profession as a moneylender?
- 3- What does the closeness of Antonio and Bassanio's friendship reveal about each of their characters? Can you see any imbalance in their relationship, or are they equally matched?
- 4- There is no implication in the play that Portia is legally bound to her father's casket game- on the contrary, her decision to follow her father's wishes is a choice that she frets over. How does her moral (although not necessarily legal) duty to her dead father reflect women's roles from the time period? Is Portia solely following her father's will because she feels obligated, or does she benefit in some way from the situation? How is Portia's relative independence different from what was expected of women in Shakespeare's day?
- 5- How does the legal status of aliens in Venice during the Renaissance differ from what is seen in the courtroom scene in the play? What dramatic and thematic purposes might these differences serve?

ATTENDING A PLAY

Part of the beauty of attending a live production is sharing the experience with those around you, and being part of a group that gets to witness a unique artistic work (because no two productions of the same play are ever the same). As such, there are some basic rules of etiquette that should be kept in mind, so that you and everyone else in the audience around you can have the best theatre experience possible.

- 1- **Please, turn off your cellphone.** The last thing you want is for your ringing phone to distract the audience, or even the actors themselves. And you may think that you can get away with texting as long as your phone is on silent, but in the darkened theatre your bright cellphone screen will shine like a beacon, distracting those around you and showing a lack of respect for the amount of work that has gone into the production.
- 2- **Please, don't eat during the show.** Have dinner before you leave for the theatre. It's highly unlikely that you'll be able to eat even a small snack without disturbing those around you. There will be an intermission, during which you may eat without fear, but snacking should be avoided during the show itself. If you need cough drops, bring them already unwrapped, to avoid disturbing others with the loud crinkling of a wrapper. And speaking of cough drops...
- 3- **Please, cover your mouth if you have to cough or sneeze.** It is notoriously easy to spread germs in a crowd, and nobody wants to catch what you have. Bring a handkerchief or tissues. No one can blame you for being sick, but they will if you inconsiderately spread germs in a crowd.
- 4- **Please, don't talk during the show.** Audible reactions to what happens on stage are okay, as are brief whispers to your neighbor, but avoid carrying on conversations. You can discuss the play during the intermission or after the show, but don't give commentary during the show, and don't ask your friend to explain something you missed. By the time they explain what happened or what was said, you and everyone else around you will have already missed something else because of the conversation.
- 5- **Please, don't fall asleep.** As previously mentioned, a lot of work goes into putting on any production, and sleeping during a show is disrespectful. Plus, your snoring will distract others. If you're tired and think you might fall asleep, save yourself the ticket money and don't go! Your bed is undoubtedly much more comfortable than the theatre seats.
- 6- **Please, don't feel like you have to dress up!** There is no dress code for going to the theatre. Wear something that you will be comfortable sitting in for several hours. Theatres tend to be a little on the cold side, so bring a light jacket that you can put on if you need it.
- 7- **Please, respect other people's personal space.** Seats may be a little close for comfort, but that doesn't mean there's nothing you can do to make sure you aren't bothering those around you. Don't lean into your neighbors, or stretch your legs out so that others have to fight for leg room.

Etiquette rules modified from New York Show Tickets
(<http://www.nytix.com/Links/Broadway/Articles/etiquette.html>)

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