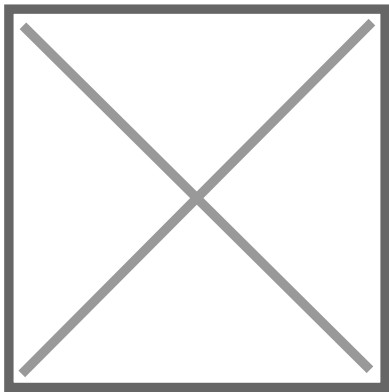




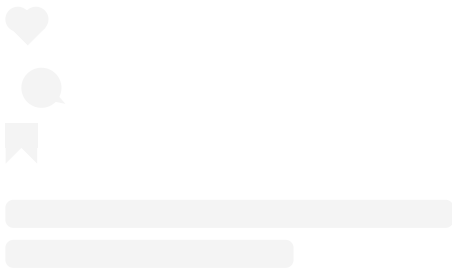
Reshaping Shakespeare for the Better: The World Premiere of “Balthazar” by Debora Threedy

Description

SALT LAKE CITY, UT—I recently had the pleasure of watching the premiere of *Balthazar*, written by **Debora Threedy**, at **Plan-B Theatre Company**. Directed by **Cheryl Ann Cluff**, this captivating play, set just before, during, and after Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, offers a fresh perspective on the classic tale while delving into themes of justice, identity, and the intricacies of the law. *Balthazar*, named after Portia’s alter-ego, is a compelling show that expertly blends the old with the new, offering audiences a fresh perspective on a classic tale. **Threedy**’s adaptation is a testament to the power of storytelling and the enduring relevance of Shakespeare’s works.



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As a reminder, *The Merchant of Venice* revolves around the character of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender whose quest for revenge against Antonio, the titular merchant, drives much of the narrative tension. Shylock’s demand for a pound of Antonio’s flesh as collateral for a loan highlights the themes of justice and mercy, forcing audiences to confront questions of morality and empathy in the face of legalistic rigidity. Yet, it has long been questioned for its critique of prejudice and discrimination, particularly in its portrayal of anti-Semitism. It’s a play that some teachers—and with good reason—refuse to teach.

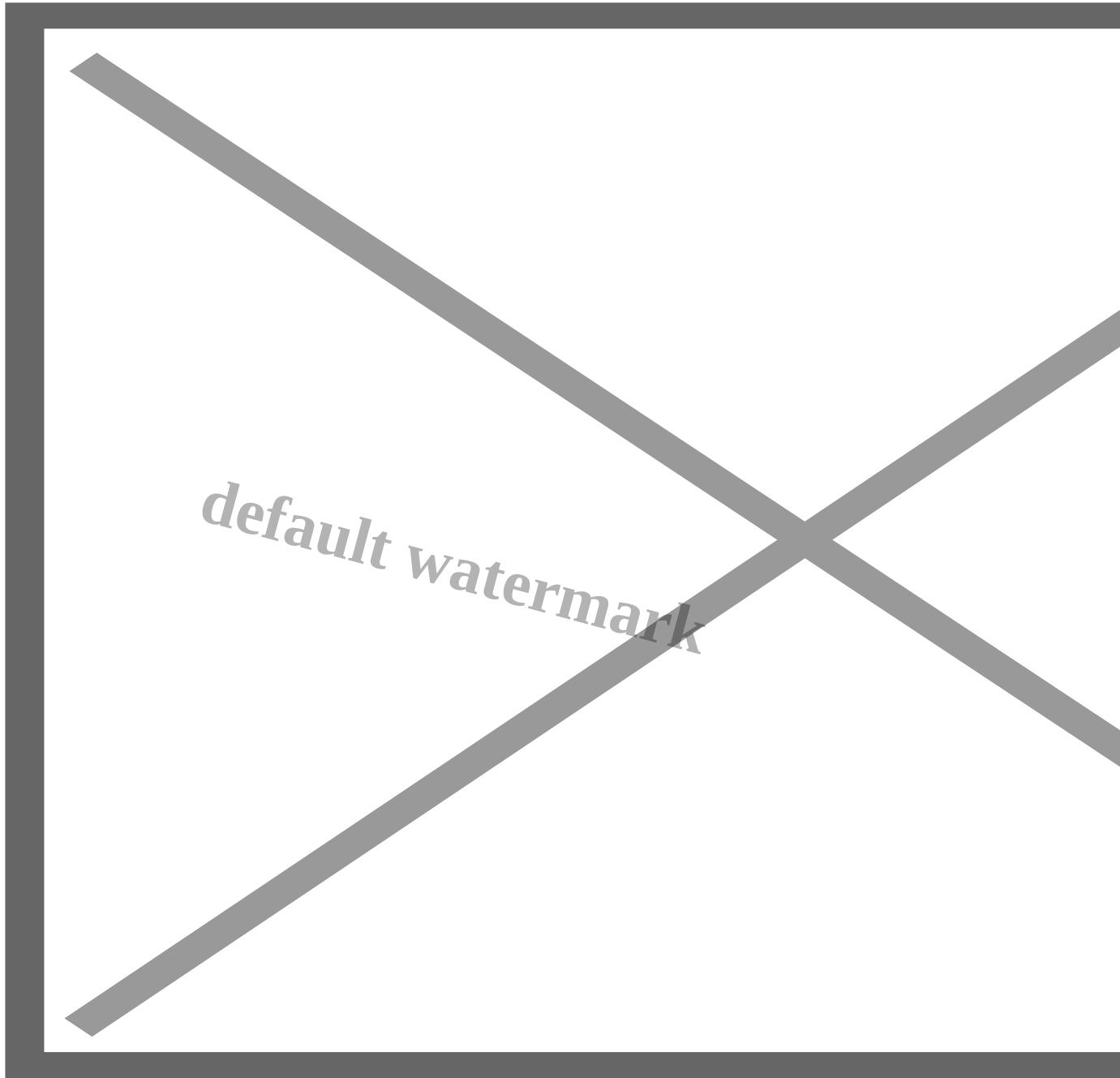


Photo by Sarah Meservy

As a published Shakespeare scholar and college English and writing instructor, I would gladly include Threedy's adaptation in my own coursework, and I do not think it will be long before others will, too. Before premiering at **Plan-B Theatre Company**, *Balthazar* was previously chosen for **The Utah Shakespeare Company's Words Cubed**: a week-long, intense development and performance process for the 2022 season. With all this in mind, I was genuinely impressed with how Threedy approached this problematic play.

Threedy's expertise shines through in her exploration of the legal aspects of the story, adding depth and complexity to the adaptation.
â??Rhetorical Review

As a retired law professor, Threedy's expertise shines through in her exploration of the legal aspects of the story, adding depth and complexity to the adaptation. Her ability to seamlessly blend Shakespearean storytelling with modern discourse is commendable, making *Balthazar* a compelling addition to the theatrical landscape of Shakespeare. [In an article published by Slug Mag, Threedy says, "I sometimes refer to this play as my love letter to law, but it's kind of a conflicted love letter because I have some ambivalent feelings about the law" \(Written by Aspen English\).](#) Threedy excels in humanizing new perspectives and doing so appropriately (within the context of the play). In other words, every element felt believable; I cannot stress how incredibly difficult that is to accomplish when updating a sexist or racist play (or both). Indeed, I feel *The Merchant of Venice* was a play Threedy was born to rewrite.

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Balthazar centers around Portia's journey into the world of law (portrayed by **Lily Hye Soo Dixon**). The story takes place just after Portia's father has died, leaving her with a large dowry but no way of claiming it unless a man marries her. Unfortunately for Portia, her father made very peculiar stipulations for claiming the dowry and Portia including a betrothal riddle for the man who is lucky enough to win her. Instead of waiting for a man to rescue her, Portia takes matters into her own hands and decides that she will learn the law. However, she is only allowed to learn the law by dressing as a man. **Dixon**, who plays Portia, is charismatic and energetic, capturing the audience's empathy and admiration as she grapples with legal puzzles that outwit her cousin.

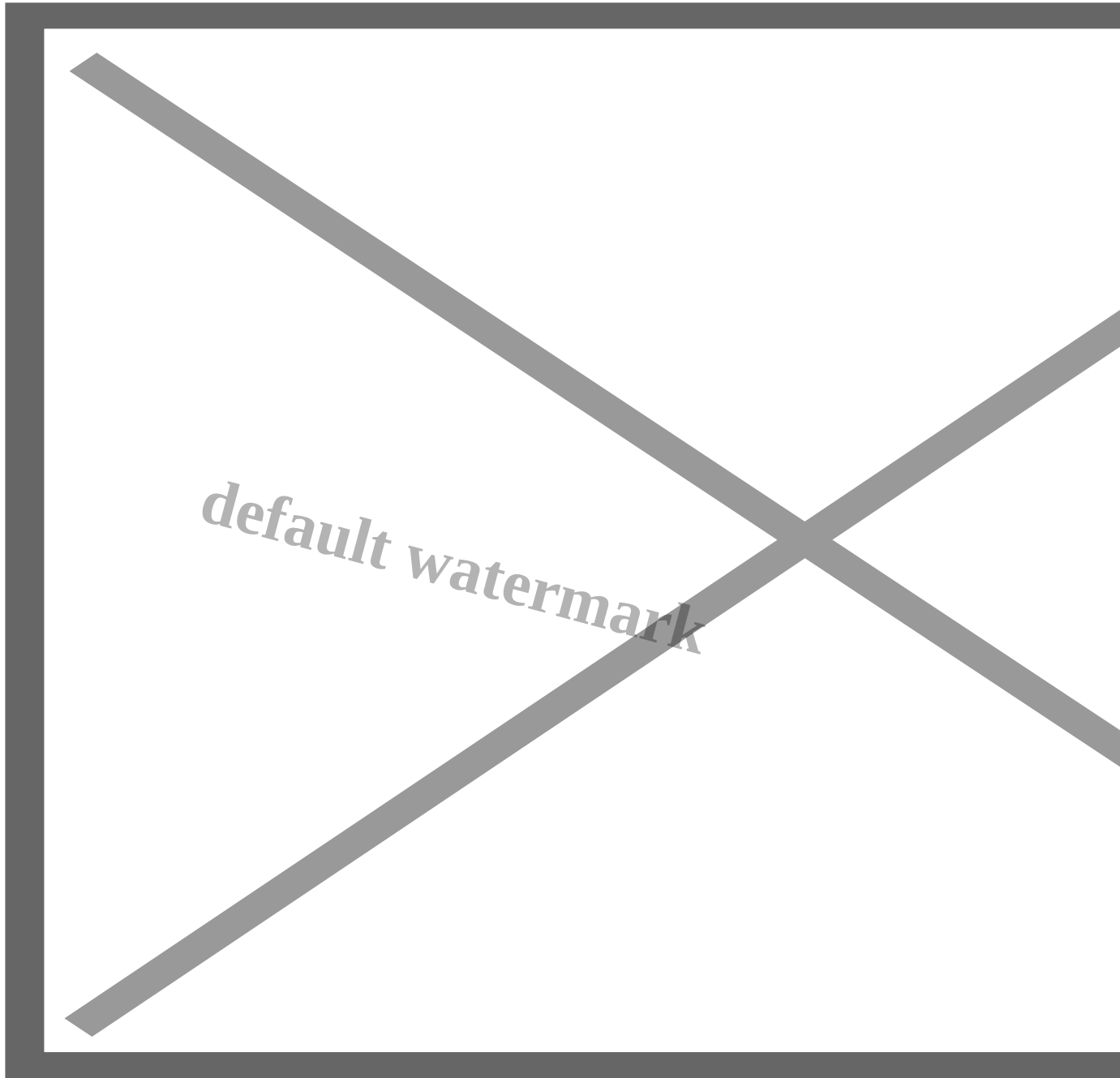


Photo by Sharah Meservy

Jason Bowcutt gives a very compelling performance as Portia’s cousin and legal advisor, Bellario. Bowcutt’s Bellario acts as her friend and guardian (now that Portia’s father has passed). Bowcutt does a superb job delicately balancing the relationship of (almost) father and friend to Portia. However, Portia sometimes pushes him to his edge, and he must put Portia in her place and teach her lessons, as painful as that is for both of them. Bellario’s parently love for Portia shines through his wise counsel and passionate debates. Bowcutt’s portrayal adds depth and nuance to the character, making him both relatable and lovable.

If I were to offer a critique, it would be that I wish the scenes, including Bassanio, were not skipped. It felt like a letdown after spending so much time setting up Portia’s fate not to be able to see

Bassanio solving the riddle that wins her hand in marriage.



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Director **Cheryl Ann Cluff**'s adept handling of the material is evident throughout the production. The pace and energy of the show are consistently engaging, with well-timed moments of pause and reflection interspersed with lively dialogue and debate.

The elegant set design by **Janice Chan**, accompanied by a lovely pre-show soundtrack, sets the stage for an immersive theatrical experience. I would have enjoyed more music throughout the show. **Aaron Asano Swenson**'s detailed Graphic Design and rich Costume Design enhance the production's visual appeal, with cleverly designed changes adding to the overall sense of magic and spectacle. Props Designer **Arika Schockmel** collected an impressive array of vintage items that brought Cluff's

vision to life. The lighting design by **Marley Keith** was simple and effective. **David Knoell** built the beautiful set as the Scenic Builder and kept a quick pace as the Stage Manager. Intimacy Director **Liz Whittaker** works with actors not only for romantic scenes but for any scenes in which actors might need help navigating physicality that might produce difficult emotions—her job is to advocate for actors’ needs.

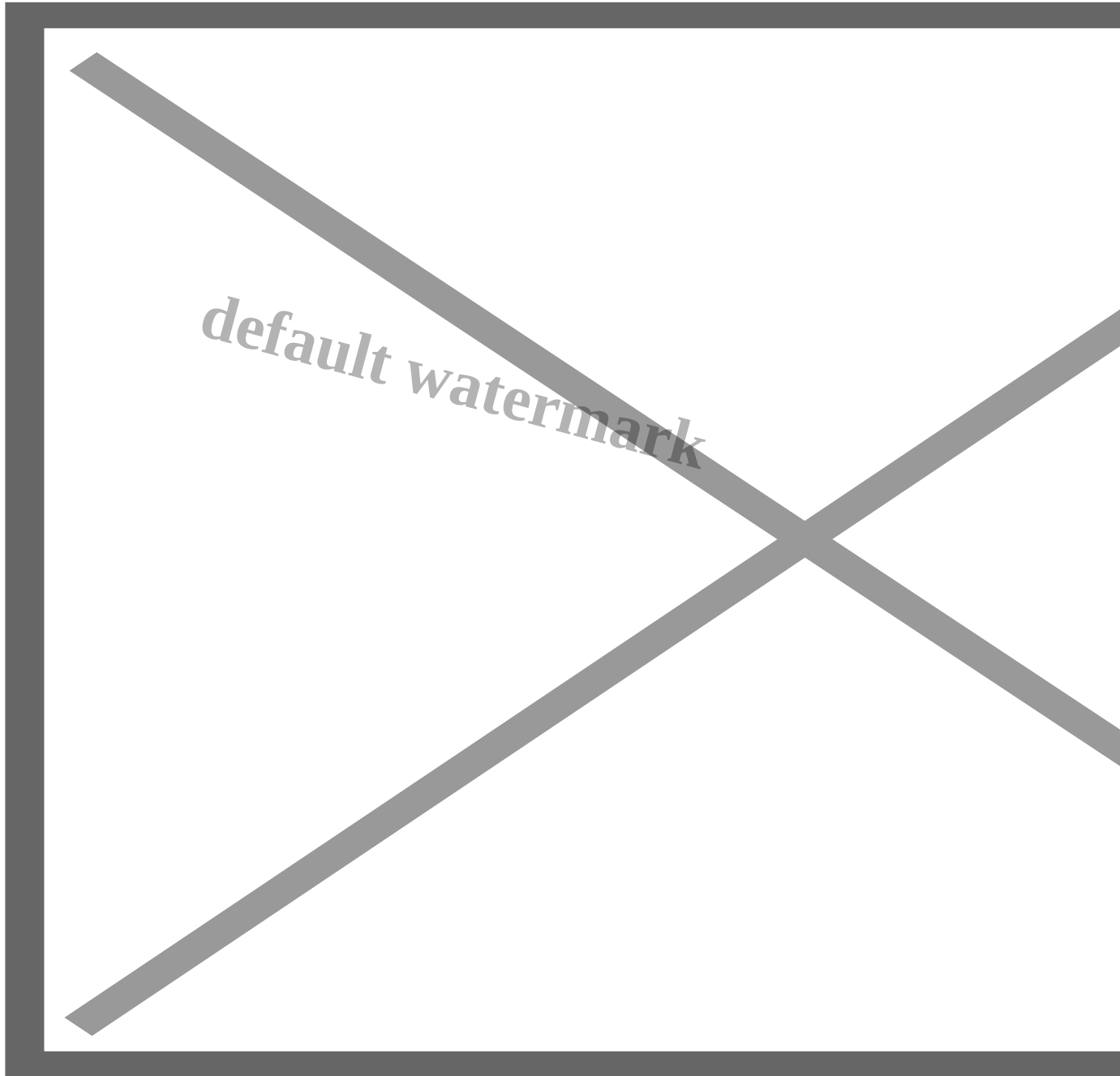


Photo by Sarah Meservy

In conclusion, *Balthazar* is an intriguing retelling of a classic canon that expertly blends the old with the new, offering audiences a fresh perspective on a classic tale. Because of nuanced writing, thoughtful direction, and richly layered themes, *Balthazar* is a testament to the enduring relevance and power of Shakespeare’s works. As it embarks on its journey with Plan-B Theatre Company, it’s clear that

Balthazar is poised to make a lasting impact on audiences far and wide.

Digital Playbill Accessed [Here](#)

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FEBRUARY 15-MARCH 3, 2024, IN THE STUDIO THEATRE

**THURSDAYS @ 8 PM, FRIDAYS @ 8 PM, SATURDAYS @ 4 PM
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Portia is a noblewoman from 16th-century Venice. She wants to be a lawyer, but that profession is reserved for men. Her lawyer cousin Bellario won't teach her. Her husband, Bassanio, is in serious legal trouble and he's in love with his best friend, Antonio. Things are not going well. What's a girl to do?

1. Create an alter ego (enter Balthazar).
2. Trick Bellario.
3. Represent Antonio (and Bassanio) in court.

This riff on Shakespeare's *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* is a life-and-death journey through the law, love, and gender identity.

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CAST & CREATIVE

Playwright: [Debora Threedy](#)

Actors: Jason Bowcutt & Lily Hye Soo Dixon

Director & Sound Designer: Cheryl Ann Cluff

Intimacy Director: Liz Whittaker
Lighting Designer: Marley Keith
Props Designer: Arika Schockmel
Show Art & Costume Designer: Aaron Asano Swenson
Scenic Designer: Janice Chan
Stage Manager & Scenic Builder: David Knoell

â??When we are both accoutered like young men,
Iâ??ll prove the prettier of the two.â?•

â?? William Shakespeareâ??s THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act III, Scene iv

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Date

2026/10/15

Date Created

2024/02/15

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