

The Merchant of Pittsburgh



The Merchant of Pittsburgh: A Comedy

by John Freed

(freed@brandman.edu)

*dedicated to the spirit of August Wilson within us all
and James wherever you are*

Synopsis

“The Merchant of Pittsburgh: A Comedy” is set in an Equity-based theatre in Pittsburgh in the late eighties and concerns a fed-up Jewish board member who takes over as acting artistic director in order to stage a **Shylock-friendly production** of “The Merchant of Venice” while being forced to confront his own set of racial and ethnic prejudices.

This play is a brilliant mash-up of Shakespeare and August Wilson, mixing Shakespeare's exploration of human desires and foibles in “Merchant of Venice” with the complex social narratives of our own times. Think Canada's “Slings and Arrows” meets Chicago's “Clybourne Park.”

Ned Camuso, New School for Social Research critic

Sample scenes from the Dramatists Guild San Francisco Staged Reading:

1. New artistic director, Milt, and aging-ingenue actress, Samantha flirting:

<https://vimeo.com/user8588759/review/121213002/8cbbb427cc> .

2. Homeless father, James, and play director daughter, Cherise, re-uniting: <https://vimeo.com/204712852> .

Cast of Characters

Milt Tannenbaum – [MILT] (in his 40's to early 50's) board member of ETP – the Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh – self-made millionaire.

Samantha Blake – [SAMANTHA] (any age over late 30's) the New York based, aging ingenue, Equity actress and long term companion of the soon to be former artistic director, Perry Thomas.

Jeff Flannery – [JEFF] (comparable age to Milt's character) urban pioneer Victorian house renovator/community developer – former college English instructor– and fellow alumnus of Milt's from Cornell.

C. J. Clayton – [CHERISE] (African-American in her 30's) Carnegie-Mellon trained stage director returning to her Northside neighborhood from the Magic Theatre in San Francisco

James Clayton – [JAMES] (African-American in his 60's) Cherise's homeless father

Leo / Leonora – [LEONORA] Milt's 18 year old son – at first nerdy with glasses and a back pack. He is a bundle of talent – a teenaged Joel Grey – who has to look reasonably attractive when in drag through most of the play. The casting can be gender-neutral.

Andrew Frick-Carnegie, III – [A-III] (in his 70's) father of Andrew IV – still on the board as its former chairman. He and his son are referred to royally as “Andrew, the third” and “Andrew, the fourth.”

Andrew Frick-Carnegie, IV – [A-IV] (any age over 40) important banker and Chairman of the Board of ETP as the play opens.

Kristof Kwintowski – [KRIS] (any age over 40) ETP board secretary and lackey . This actor also plays Lorenzo in Act II.

Geno Mazz – [GENO] – (in his mid-twenties) rugged model handsome – stagehand turned actor cast to play Bassanio in “Merchant of Venice.”

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Clare Everett – [CLARE] (early 20's) Genuine ingenue, African-American actress, cast as Jessica in “Merchant of Venice.”

Barbara Ludwig – [BARBARA] (any age over late 40's) Commune art space owner – neighborhood community advocate – background actress in later scenes or cameo.

ACT I

Scene 1

(eight weeks before opening night)

SETTING: *It is eight weeks before the season's opening night at the Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh in early summer 1989. The corporate appearing Board Room is stage left; the actual ETP Stage Area is stage right, and there is a wall on wheels with a door in it that can divide the set in various proportions throughout the play. There should be impromptu activities going on on both sides of this divider.*

There is a large poster for the upcoming productions – one for “The Merchant of Venice” and the other for “More Joyful Mysteries at St. Casparian's.” On “The Merchant of Venice” poster is added the tag – “Shakespeare's most produced Comedy” On the bottom of both posters is boldly printed “Production Sponsored by Carnegie Bank.”

A modernist sofa large enough to lie down upon is across from the Board Room table and there is a sideboard along the back wall where a Sharper Image type stereo is playing the music that we hear.

Before the lights come up play Ella Fitzgerald's “I Loves You, Porgy” – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niJrTX88Sto>.

When the lights come up Milt is sitting at the head of the table using an 80's electric calculator and taking notes on a yellow legal pad listening to Ella. Geno interrupts with the boxed microwave and expensive looking cappuccino machine are wheeled in on this dolly.

GENO

That's beautiful . . . and sad at the same time

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

MILT

But, see. That's what passion is. . . . And a Jew wrote it. Did you know that?

GENO

Really, I thought it was a colored thing. Where do you want this stuff?

MILT

How should I know? Who ordered it?

GENO

Let's see. "Deliver care of Perry Thomas, Artistic Director, Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh, 1500 East North Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA." That's us.

MILT (*looking over the bill*)

That schmuck. Just leave them on the floor.

Geno unloads the dolly and adroitly wheels it out of the room almost running over Kris Kwintowski who enters.

GENO

Whoa !!!

KRIS

(truly apologetic)

Excuse me.

GENO

You really oughta look where you're going.

KRIS

You're right. I'm sorry. *(very cheery)* Morning, Milt.

MILT

I think it's technically the afternoon, but "Morning, Kris with a K."
(slightly mocking him)

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

KRIS

(sitting down, Milt ignoring him)

I am bearing great tidings of good joy. . .

MILT

And they are . . . ?

KRIS

In one word, “debbiereynolds.”

MILT

That's two words.

KRIS

That's where you're wrong.

*He holds up the bumper sticker
which he reads.*

“Follow me to see DEBBIEREYNOLDS at the Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh.”

MILT

Now that's funny. I didn't realize you had a sense of humor.

KRIS

I don't really.

MILT

If it's not a joke, what the hell is it?

KRIS

Perry sent me word from New York this week that he had spoken with her agent and there is a deal (*pronounced “dill”*) in place for Miss Debbie Reynolds to star in the whole run of “More Joyful Mysteries at St. Casparian's.”

MILT

And what is this “dill” going to cost us.

KRIS

He didn't say.

MILT

Don't you think that that needs to be one of the most important questions?

KRIS

Is money all you think about?

MILT

I'm not talking about money, Kris. I'm talking about value which may or may not have a dollar sign in front of it. The question is, “What does *(holding up the bumper sticker)* “debbiereynolds” add to or detract from the value of our theatre?” And that is . . . ?

KRIS

(at a loss for words)

MILT

Kris, do you think I'm “colorful”?

KRIS

(again undecided about what to say)

MILT

It's not a trick, answer the damn question. . . . Do you think I'm colorful? . . . In a good way.

KRIS

Yes, I do.

MILT

If I'm colorful, then you must be colorless in that not so good way. . . . Don't be offended. Remember Blake, “Opposition is true friendship.” That must make you my truest friend.

KRIS

How can you call this (*holding up the garishly colored bumper sticker*) colorless?

MILT

And speaking of words. Did you know that “null was a four letter “**void**”? (*using a heavy Yiddish accent*).

KRIS

(*showing irritation for the first time*)

I certainly know the words are synonyms for each other. I'm not the dumb mill hunk you imagine.

MILT

I apologize. Edit that last line (*as if speaking to a writer off stage*) Strike out “dumb” and insert “clueless.” Dot, I denken is the right **void**.

KRIS

Tell me how you really felt about last season's “The Joyful Mysteries at St. Casparian's,” Milt.

MILT

I told Perry to his face that I thought the play came across as if Lawrence Welk had written a soap opera. That it was ethnically pandering and fundamentally demeaning to the reputation of this theatre.

KRIS

And I guess he showed you how much he appreciated your learned opinion by scheduling the sequel and getting the iridescent Debbie Reynolds to star in it. And I guess you'll also get to see a lot more of “my Lawrence Welk people” around here this coming year. Oh, and Perry confided that he had tweaked your nose by . . .how did he put it . . . oh, yes by “Shylocking you off at the knees.” And I guess you'll have to grin and bear that too since all the subscription promotions have gone out and the contracts have been signed.

MILT

With two big exceptions.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

*Enter Andrew IV and III dressed like
the bank executives that they are.
Andrew III requires a cane.*

ANDREW, IV

I hate to interrupt you two lovebirds. I'm already running late for my three o'clock with the mayor downtown. How do you say it, Kris, "Don ton" ?

KRIS

That's it, sir.

ANDREW, IV

No, you say it. . . . Dad, let me help you.

*He escorts his rather doddering father to
the chair at the end of the table.*

KRIS

(even more nasal)

"Don Ton."

ANDREW, IV

And don't the blacks over here say "Nor f side" for Northside? Milt, I guess you're pretty safe with "Squirrel Hill." How else could you say that?

MILT

Why do you think that I live in Squirrel Hill? Because that's where "my" people live?

ANDREW, IV

Where do you live, Milt?

MILT

Squirrel Hill.

ANDREW, IV

Enough chit chat. Let's commence. What's on the agenda?

KRIS

(handing out the agenda)

Just two items. The introduction of our newest executive board member and an action item tabled from last meeting – an extension of the artistic director's contract for three more years.

MILT

What happened to the annual financial report?

KRIS

It's . . . it's . . . it's

ANDREW, IV

(completing the sentence)

Not ready.

MILT

I object.

ANDREW, IV

Hold your horses, Milt. I think we should include our newest member in any further discussions. Where is she?

KRIS

You should have passed her in the hall.

ANDREW, IV

(pretending to toss a ball)

Fetch.

There is an uncomfortable silence between Milt and Andrew, IV while Kris is bringing Barbara into the room. Andrew, III is nodding off.

ANDREW, IV

(standing up)

First order of business is to welcome this beautiful lady, “Barbara **Ludevig**.” *(pronouncing her name in an affected accent using German pronunciation.)*

BARBARA

(correcting him shaking his hand)

“Barbara **Ludwig**.”

ANDREW, IV

(singing)

“Ludevig / Ludwig. Let's call the whole thing off.” Mind if I call you Barb?

BARBARA

You can call me “Barbara Ludwig.”

ANDREW, IV

O . . . K . . . Barbara “Ludwig” among her many accomplishments operates her own gallery in an old mattress factory and represents the Greater Northside Arts Council. Let's see if I do better with the rest of the introductions. At the far end of the table is our former chairman, my father, Andrew Frick Carnegie, the third. Dad, Dad, *(Kris shaking him awake)* welcome Barbara Ludwig.

ANDREW, III

. . . Ludwig.

ANDREW, IV

On his right is Kris Kwin . . Kwin .. Kwin . .

KRIS

. . . towksi. Kwintowski.

ANDREW, IV

Just call him Kris with a K. He's the committee's secretary. And to my right is our esteemed treasurer and the heir to the great Tannenbaum Scrap

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Metal fortune. Milton Tannenbaum. Although how your family ever acquired the name of “Christmas Tree,” I can not fathom.

MILT

My father told me it was the punch line to an Ellis Island joke. Which reminds me of a joke that you might like, Andrew.

ANDREW, IV

Shoot.

MILT

Do you know why there are Episcopalians?

ANDREW, IV

No, Milt, why are there Episcopalians?

MILT

(again in his Yiddish accent)

Somebody's got to pay retail.

Barbara spritzes out the water she is drinking.

BARBARA

Oh my, I'm so sorry. . .

ANDREW, IV

Never mind that. *(looking toward Kris)* What's next on the agenda?

KRIS

The information item that Debbie Reynolds is all set to headline “More Joyful Mysteries.”

He passes out the bumper stickers then clips one to the “More Joyful Mysteries” poster.

ANDREW, IV

Perry had tipped me off that this was imminent Great news indeed. Back to the agenda.

KRIS

Tabled from last meeting was your motion to extend the contract of our artistic director, Perry Thomas, for three more years with a 20% raise per annum.

MILT

I'm totally opposed and here's why, probably only for Barbara's sake.

ANDREW, IV

Ok, Milt, relieve yourself.

MILT

First. It's clear by Perry's attitude that he considers us Pittsburghers provincial hicks who he can shuck whenever he needs money or employment for his aging, ingenue mistress for an endless array of miscastings. Juliet and Blanche Dubois back to back? And this year Portia then Martha from Virginia Woolf. Really? Meryl Streep couldn't pull that one off?

Then there's the grandstanding with Debbie Reynolds. Here is the greatest illogic of all. If we had standing room only audiences for "The Joyful Mysteries of St. Casparian's" last season without her, where are we going to put the thundering herds that will turn out to see if she's still alive in "More Joyful Mysteries"?

Do the math, deduct from the bottom line the differential between her guess-timated salary of \$80,000 for the run and the \$4,800 we paid last season for the perfectly fine, Equity actress whom she'll replace, and he's dumped a \$75,000 bucket of red ink on our heads. Shall I go on about the microwave and the thousand dollar coffee maker on the floor over there?

ANDREW, IV

I don't think that will be necessary.

BARBARA

Since I'm new here, can I ask a naïve question? Why did ETP hire him in the first place?

ANDREW, IV

Perry simply is the best New York quality director we could get.

MILT

You meant to say that he is the best New York director who couldn't find any work closer to New York than Pittsburgh that we could get.

BARBARA

(laughing)

Touche'

MILT

Andrew, why not save some real money and lure one of those starving directors from Jersey City?

BARBARA

(whispering to Milt)

I know a director originally from the neighborhood who's been making San Francisco theatre headlines for some time now.

She writes something down on the back of her agenda, tears it off and slides it to Milt.

ANDREW, IV

Milt, you're just mad because Perry got your goat about this "More Joyful Mysteries" sequel thing.

MILT

(standing up and taking a magic marker he writes on the poster)

Before the vote I have one thing to add. If Kris with a K can do bumper stickers, I can spruce up posters. It's this wonderful tag line here that I'd like to extend. "Shakespeare's most produced comedy . . . **in Nazi Germany.**"

BARBARA

Please, calm down, everyone. Is the vote about producing that play or renewing the artistic director's contract?

MILT

Let's stop dancing around the rhinoceros in the room. At the rate that Perry is costing us, this theatre will go bankrupt (*referring to his notes and ledger*) on or about March 1st of the coming year.

ANDREW, IV

Milton, how much would it take to insure us another full season beyond that?

MILT

To fully insure it including the Debbie Reynolds "dill" about half a million.

ANDREW, IV

Dad, am I safe in saying that Our Foundation can contribute an extra half million dollars to keep ETP afloat? Provided, of course, that Perry's contract is renewed.

MILT

(taking out his checkbook)

I will see your half million and raise a hundred thousand if it's not renewed.

ANDREW, IV

That's not acceptable to me. We make it three quarters of a million.

Milt writes out a check then slaps it down on the table.

MILT

There is now a million dollars sitting on this table as an unrestricted endowment in my wife's name. She loved this theatre and what it represented. I call for the question to vote up or down on Perry Thomas' contract renewal.

ANDREW, IV

I want everyone to know that if this motion does not pass that I shall resign from the board immediately and remove our bank from this theatre's sponsorship.

BARBARA

I second the call for the question.

KRIS

The call for the question has been moved and seconded. All in favor of renewing Perry Thomas' contract for three years raise your hand.

Kris and Andrew, IV raise their hands immediately.

All opposed to renewing Perry's contract raise your hand.

Milt's hand goes up immediately followed more slowly by Barbara's. Then the half slumped over Andrew III's hand goes up.

MILT

The Nays have it!

ANDREW, IV

Dad, do you know what you just did?

ANDREW, III

A thousand dollars for a coffee maker. That's bullshit.

BLACKOUT

ACT I

Scene 2

(six weeks before opening night)

SETTING Board Room reveal– 80%; ETP Stage Area reveal– 20%. Milt is sitting ripping sheets from a complete Shakespeare and literally cutting and pasting passages from it on to a yellow legal pad. He gets up to pour himself a mug of coffee from the thousand dollar coffee maker. Books are strewn all along the side board and on the top of the Board Room table which is now serving as Milt's desk.

The original Merchant of Venice poster is still on display with the “in Nazi Germany” written on it. However the Debbie Reynolds bumper sticker has been removed from the other one.

On the ETP Stage area Samantha Blake enters without make-up with her luggage and proceeds to “tart” herself up for her first meeting with Milt including stripping to her underwear and swapping her sports bra for a push-up one – back to audience. Geno as stagehand then greets her and while she protects her makeup. She shoos him away then makes her entrance into the Board Room from the Stage area.

SAMANTHA *(seductively)*

Knock, knock. You remember me, don't you, Milt?

MILT

That depends. If it's Juliet, I might have to check your ID. I didn't expect you for two more weeks. How have you been?

SAMANTHA

Now that I am no longer sleeping in a barn in Connecticut I couldn't be finer. I thought I'd come early to relearn Portia's lines – there are a lot of them. I played her once in Central Park with the Public but that was a

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

while ago. Are you going to direct? Oh, by the way there's no need to feel uncomfortable around me because of Perry. Not renewing his contract was the greatest gift you could have given me.

MILT

I was debating between that and the pearl necklace?

SAMANTHA (*thinking for a few seconds*)

That was a joke, wasn't it? You hardly even know me. . . . I jumped on the first plane I could get out of New Haven and here I am. . . bags and baggage. You don't happen to have a spare room where I could crash for a few nights, do you?

MILT

Don't worry. I'll make a few calls this afternoon. But right now, you'll have to excuse me, I'm in the middle of something very important.

SAMANTHA

Maybe I can help.

Samantha holds up Milt's chain of a great variety of paperclips.

Is this a school project for your daughter or something like that?

MILT

No, I'm actually working on redoing "Merchant of Venice." (*showing her the cut and pasted text on his yellow legal pad.*) What you're holding is frame of reference. I read in the paper the other day about this middle school holocaust project in Kentucky or Tennessee or somewhere where they don't have a lot of paperclips that challenged the students to gather six million of them and link them all together in this enormous chain to commemorate the victims. What you are holding is the start of my own contribution which I'm going to send them.

SAMANTHA

Why are they all so different?

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

MILT: *(going one by one)*

Would you like me to introduce you to my whole family? *(taking the chain from her starting with the largest colored one)* Here's my great aunt Sadie, and this . . . *(holding up ten of various colors and sizes paper clips)* the whole Mendlebaum clan. And *(pointing out the last one)* this little one here was 6. He would have been my second cousin. I can't remember his name.

And *(holding up another large silver one)* this one, this one they didn't get – my grandfather Moshe who led us to the promised land of Pittsburgh.

You see what I want to do with our production of Merchant is to show that Shylock and his whole tribe are unique individuals like themselves not some goddamn heap of indistinguishable paperclips chain-ganged together.

Jeff enters from stage left bumblingly carrying VHS camera equipment, tripod and lights.

JEFF

Excuse me, I'm looking for Perry Thomas' office.

MILT

I think it's been moved. . . to somewhere in the middle of the East River. Sorry -- Inside joke. *(getting up to shake his hand.)* I'm Milt Tannenbaum, acting artistic director. And this is Samantha Blake, actress extraordinaire, who unfortunately has to leave to rest from her long trip.

SAMANTHA

It's really less than an hour from New Haven to the Pittsburgh Airport. The longest part was the cab ride into town.

MILT *(ignoring Samantha)*

And you are?

JEFF

I'm Jeff Flannery. I'd scheduled an appointment in June but was told he wouldn't be back from New York until the end of July.

MILT

You look very familiar to me. *(closing his eyes)* That's it . You're the putz who gave me my only C at Cornell.

JEFF

I was a TA at Cornell, but a C doesn't sound like me.

MILT

Now I remember it came down to either writing your literature term paper or studying for my accounting final which I aced I'll have you know.

JEFF

Well since I didn't flunk you, you kinda owe me a favor.

MILT

Before we get to that, what have you been up to?

SAMANTHA *(awkwardly to Milt)*

Should I be going?

MILT

Yes, please.

Samantha returns to the stage area with her bags. She opens up a folding chair and changes back into more comfortable shoes from her high heels and exits.

JEFF *(speaking fairly rapidly)*

Well, Pitt's English Department hired me right out of Cornell, and ten years later they carted me off to an insane asylum when I approached the one thousandth freshman composition student mark.

I can't quite remember but during that time period my wife and I innocently enough purchased a completely dilapidated, three story townhouse built in 1872. Ever see the movie "The Money Pit"?

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Everything that happened to Tom Hanks in that film happened to us except not all at once. So now I've learned to resurrect Victorians for a living. You see a hundred year old house has about as much life left in it as a hundred year old person. Just the other day a cop . . .

MILT (*quickly losing interest*)

And how does your wife feel about this situation?

JEFF

Not really sure. She left almost four years ago.

MILT

I'm pressed for time, so what "favor" can I do for you ?

JEFF

No more than half an hour and I'm out-a-here. (*setting up the video camera and tripod*) Let me outline the project and we can wing it from there.

MILT

Go ahead, but remember that starting from now you need to be "out-a-here" in exactly thirty minutes or less.

JEFF

"Fewer" rather than "less" would be more correct.

MILT

Tick, tock, time's a wasting.

JEFF (*speaking even more rapidly*)

Well the short version is that Warner Cable had to set up a community-based recording studio with a separate public access channel called "Pittsburgh's Arts and Culture." And for that channel's entire existence it has been "off the air" for twenty hours a day. Its four hours of "on air" time is filled with single camera tape recordings of high school football games.

Which then, of course, turns "Pittsburgh's Arts and Culture" into a Polish joke. So I went to the local cable manager with my pitch to produce a

series on the upcoming theatrical productions of the ETP. And bam, I'm here with a loaded camera and booked to produce a half hour show each month. I want to open each episode with an interview with the director. Which wonder of wonders turns out to be you. How much time do I have left?

MILT

Get on with it. What do you want me to do?

JEFF (*straightening Milt's tie*)

Just look up at me rather than the camera and answer my questions. Are you ready? . . . (*in a faux announcer's voice*) I'm here this afternoon with Milt Tannenbaum, the “new” Artistic Director of the Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh to talk about his creative vision for ETP. Milt, where do you see ETP heading in the next few years?

MILT (standing up)

Halt or cut or whatever. Would you turn that thing off ?

JEFF (*sitting*)

Why, what's the matter?

MILT

Instead of cable access, do you want to contribute a little more substantially to Pittsburgh's Art and Culture? If so, I've got a job I need you for. What do you know about Shakespeare?

JEFF

What don't I know about Shakespeare?

MILT

Do you know about how the endings of Shakespeare plays were often radically changed to better fit the times when they were performed?

JEFF

Like Cordelia's being resuscitated and returning Lear back on the throne during the Restoration? Or Garrick's Romeo waking up early to stop Juliet from stabbing herself insuring a happily ever after ending. Or . . .

MILT

That's it. What I want you to do is be a script doctor for "Merchant of Venice" so that Shylock gets his happily ever after ending. It's clear to me that Shakespeare's Shylock is far from being a villain.

(looking over his notes) Without Shylock's unexpected loan to his biggest enemy, Antonio, Bassanio would not have been able to finance his gold-digger venture to Belmont. Without that loan, there would be no romantic comedy. I've already started on the revision.

JEFF

Intriguing. What have you got so far?

MILT

As I reread the play I thought what was missing the most were scenes between Shylock and his daughter. Also, I think there's only one reference to his dead wife, Leah, in the whole play. So ... I started writing this little scene that occurs when we first see them. Shylock is showing Jessica her mother's jewelry box and he holds up her necklaces and says, "All of these she would have pawned to spend one more day alive with you." That's where I got stuck.

JEFF

I like it. What's the problem? The scene establishes what a little ungrateful shit Jessica is when she steals her father's money and trades her mother's ring for a monkey.

MILT

The problem is, is it believable?

JEFF

What do you mean?

MILT

Is it believable that with so much wealth Leah wouldn't try for a better bargain – an extra month or a week even?

JEFF

Now do you see why there are almost no accountants who are playwrights?

MILT

How would you do it?

JEFF

Keep your opening line to that scene as you wrote it, then get on with Shakespeare. His Shylock is an extraordinarily complex and articulate character in his own right. Very much less could be said about everyone else except for Portia.

Shakespeare just might have hidden a loophole for Shylock similar to the one that he inserted to save Antonio's ass.

MILT

You're hired. But remember one way or the other you've got to deliver Shylock's happy ending.

JEFF (*very bad Yiddish accent*)

What like in a massage parlor?

MILT

A comedian, you're not. But I've never been more serious in my life. If you're free tomorrow around two, I'd like you to help me interview a director candidate for the show.

JEFF

I hadn't said that I'd do it yet.

MILT

Of course you'll do it. What better do you have to do? Stick your hands in someone else's toilet?

BLACKOUT

ACT I

scene 3

(five weeks and six days before opening night)

SETTING Board Room reveal– 70%; ETP Stage Area reveal– 30%. Milt is already seated at the board room table. Leo enters the ETP Stage Area dressed like a prep school nerd with horn-rimmed glasses carrying a school back pack. Leo takes his tap shoes out and puts them on as well as the Cabaret costume. There is also a bowling shirt with a woman's lace handkerchief in the bag for later in the scene.

GENO

Heh, kid. No one's allowed on the stage.

LEO

I'm here for an audition with Mr. Tanennbaum.

GENO

Ok. then. But don't touch nothing.

Geno exits from the Stage area. Jeff enters on the Board Room side.

JEFF

Good afternoon, Milt.

MILT

So our famous West Coast director, C. J. Clayton, should be arriving any minute. Rather impressive resume. *(sliding it over to Jeff)*.

CHERISE *(looking in from the door)*

Is this the artistic director's office?

MILT (*a little irritated*)

It is, but we're really busy right now. Could you come back later?

CHERISE

Excuse me. I thought my appointment was at two.

MILT

And you are?

CHERISE

C. J. Clayton

MILT

I'm sorry. Barbara didn't mention. . . .

CHERISE

. . . . that I was so tall? . . . so female? or. . . so black?

JEFF (*jumping up*)

Please come in. I'm Jeff Flannery, the playwright. It is so good to meet you. Have a seat. And this, of course, is our artistic director, Milt Tannenbaum.

MILT (*being a little prickly*)

Could you briefly run through your resume for Jeff? He just got here. And how do you like to be addressed?

CHERISE

Cherise is fine. Let's see. (*picking up the resume from the table.*) I got my MFA in theatre at Carnegie-Mellon and then drifted out to the Bay Area a number of years ago and did some acting. But I quickly learned at the Magic that it was a lot easier to get hired as the invisible director than to get cast as some no-name cow girl in a Sam Shepherd play. (*flipping through the other pages*) Fast forward and I'm here sitting around this table with you guys.

MILT

This interview is merely a formality since the only person I have to convince is me. I am going to offer you the job but with a single condition.

CHERISE

And that is . . . ?

MILT

That you cast my eighteen year old son, Leo, in a featured role in the play.

CHERISE

And what kind of stage experience has he had?

MILT

Just high school.

CHERISE

Casting an amateur completely sight unseen in a significant role? I'm not agreeing to that.

MILT

Listen, C. J. or Cherise or whatever you call yourself. About a month ago I paid a million dollars for a ride on this merry-go-round, and if I want it to go backwards, it will go backwards. To demonstrate my good faith I sent you an open ended ticket to Pittsburgh and right now offered you the job virtually sight unseen.

Cherise stands up as if to leave the room. Jeff takes her aside for a moment and whispers something in her ear. She sits back down.

CHERISE

Milt, we are comfortable that we can find room for Leo in the cast, . . . (*Jeff nudges her*) . . . in a featured role, but I will only do this with two conditions of my own.

MILT

I'm listening.

CHERISE

When you hire me as the director of this play that I, along with Jeff, will have complete and final authority to make any and all artistic choices in its production.

MILT

I guess he will be authorized to speak for Shakespeare as well. Jeff knows my mind; I can live with that. But you said there were two conditions.

CHERISE

The other one is that you schedule and promote for next season the world premiere of a new play written by a friend of mine.

MILT

And is that all of the qualifications that he needs, that he is a friend of yours.

CHERISE

Like your son being a son of yours, you mean?

MILT

And does this friend of yours have a name?

CHERISE

August Wilson.

MILT

“Au-Gust” (*German pronunciation.*) He's not German is he?

JEFF

You're kidding, Milt, you've never heard of him? He's great; he's from Pittsburgh, and this would be a world premiere. This is the theatrical version of a hockey hat trick. Make the deal, Milt.

MILT (*addressing Jeff*)

She's a damn tough negotiator, but there you have it – an August for a Leo, and we have a director.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

He shakes Jeff's hand first and then almost as an after-thought Cherise's.

Let's give the kid the good news. What part is he going to play?

CHERISE

That will depend on what he can show us in his audition piece. He does have an audition piece, doesn't he?

MILT

He was up all last night rehearsing.

JEFF

Then bring him on in.

Milt goes to the stage area and brings Leo into the Board Room where Jeff and Cherise are now sitting on the sofa.

CHERISE

Ok, Leo, show us your stuff.

LEO

Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Leo who already has his MC costume and tap shoes on begins to tap dance and sing Willkommen from "Cabaret".

(begins singing)

Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome
Fremde, etranger, stranger
Gluklich zu sehen, je suis enchante,
Happy to see you, bleibe, reste, stay

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome,
Im Cabaret, au Cabaret, to Cabaret

JEFF

That's really, really great, Leo, but "Merchant" isn't much of a musical.
Can you show us some acting?

LEO

Of course.. This is a scene from the middle of "Streetcar."

Leo removes his sparkly shirt revealing the classic Stanley Kowalski tee shirt that he is wearing underneath it. He will use a wide-brimmed straw hat when he is playing Blanche.

(Leo performing both parts)

BLANCHE

Oh Stanley, you're a Capricorn – the goat.

STANLEY

What sign were you born under, Blanche?

BLANCHE

Oh, my birthday's next month, the fifteenth of September;
that's under Virgo.

STANLEY

What's Virgo?

BLANCHE

Virgo is the Virgin.

STANLEY

Hah! Say, do you happen to know somebody named Shaw?

BLANCHE

Why, everybody knows somebody named Shaw!

STANLEY

Well, this somebody named Shaw is under the impression he met you in Laurel, but I figure he must have got you mixed up with some other party because this other party is someone he met at a hotel called the Flamingo.

BLANCHE

I'm afraid he does have me mixed up with this "other party." The Hotel Flamingo is not the sort of establishment I would dare to be seen in!

STANLEY

You know of it?

BLANCHE

Yes, I've seen it and smelled it.

STANLEY

You must've got pretty close if you could smell it.

BLANCHE

The odor of cheap perfume is penetrating.

STANLEY

That stuff you use is expensive?

BLANCHE

Twenty-five dollars an ounce! I'm nearly out. That's just a hint if you want to remember my birthday!

LEO

That's it. *(bows followed by applause from the group.)*

CHERISE

Leo, you are an amazing actor, but don't take this the wrong way. How did you get cast as Stanley?

LEO

Oh, I didn't play Stanley; I was Blanche. You see we're an all-boys boarding school in the middle of the New Hampshire woods.

CHERISE

Milt and Leo, would you give us a moment?

Milt and Leo exit to the Stage area, where Leo changes his tap shoes and Cherise and Jeff glance at the list on the board table and say at the same time.

CHERISE and JEFF

Nerissa.

JEFF

I'll go get them.

They all re-enter from the Stage area.

MILT

What role does Leo have?

CHERISE

Leo is our Nerissa.

MILT

Which one's Nerissa? Is he one of Shylock's tribe or one of Bassanio's blow buddies?

JEFF

“She” is Portia's lady in waiting who ends up marrying one of Bassanio's blow buddies, as you put it, at the end of the play.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

LEO

God, dad, I love it. But no one can tell anyone in the cast that I'm your son or that I'm anyone's "son." We did some Method Acting in school; so I know I've got to get into character as soon as possible and stay there as long as I can. I know just where to go for the most perfect wig. Let me warn you, dad, the next time you see me I will be a blonde. I'll love you forever, for this, Dad. *(hugging him then rushing out)*

*From here on out we will only see
Leo made up, dressed and acting like
a young girl.*

MILT *(lamenting with feeling)*

What have I done?

BLACKOUT

ACT I

Scene 4

(four weeks before opening night)

SETTING: Board Room reveal– 40%; ETP Stage Area reveal– 60%. The lights will go up on the Board Room side revealing a prominently displayed poster for August Wilson's "Jitney" "Premiering Next Season directed by Cherise Clayton" [Note the picture on the poster should be of a brightly colored two door 60's Chevy sedan] and a radically redesigned one for "Merchant of Venice" which now has been re-titled "Shylock's Merchant of Venice." The original "More Joyful Mysteries at St. Casparian's" poster" is between the two. Milt is busy working on his ledger books at the end of the table.

The lights then go up on the ETP Stage side where Cherise is beginning rehearsals with Samantha heavily made-up, Geno and the female costumed Leo as Leonora wearing a blonde wig but not much makeup. There is a large folding table with a number of folding chairs around it as if set up for a table-read. There might be some other actors there as well. On the far end of the table are the gold, silver and lead boxes, the props for the casket scene.

CHERISE

I thought it best to start our rehearsals with the newest members of our troupe and our most seasoned actor, Samantha Blake. By the way I recently learned that she had performed Portia in a production at the Public when Joseph Papp himself was still directing. She will be our guiding star.

SAMANTHA

It really wasn't that long ago. But I'm happy to help out as much as I can.

CHERISE

Samantha, let me introduce your fellow actors. Geno Mazz, *(pronouncing it "maze".)*

GENO

It's actually "Mazz" like "Jazz."

CHERISE

Pardonez moi. He is, of course, our Bassanio. Geno, I don't know much about your stage experience since you were hired by my predecessor. How long have you worked in the theatre?

GENO

About three years now at the Equity.

CHERISE

And what roles have you played?

GENO

None yet. However, I helped build every damn set they've had.

CHERISE

Do you know what Perry was thinking when he cast you?

GENO

He said that Samantha had seen my work and had recommended me. And one more thing he said that she had volunteered to take me in hand, I guess, is how he put it.

CHERISE

Samantha, you naughty girl, but we all have experienced that "the punishment for wanting something is to get it." I'm assigning you the task of transforming him from stagehand into lead actor in record time.

SAMANTHA

Aye, aye, captain.

CHERISE

And Leo - Leonora, (is it?) Lancaster is Nerissa, your ever faithful lady in waiting. This will be her professional stage debut as well; so we have a lot of work ahead of us.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Geno, before we start I want to give you a pop quiz to see if you've done your homework. Leonora, will you place those boxes in front of him as ceremoniously as you can?

*Leo as Leonora makes a girlish
show of this proceeding from lead to
silver to gold – the gold one
seemingly the heaviest.*

CHERISE

Do you know why there are boxes sitting in front of you, Bassanio?

GENO

I gotta choose one of 'em.

CHERISE

Good. And what will happen if you pick the wrong one?

GENO

Something very bad.

CHERISE

Actually it's not in this scene but if you choose wrongly you must promise to high heaven to never marry or even court another **woman**. Not really such a horrible fate for a gay man, let's say, now is it? You don't have to answer that, but I think that Shakespeare fully intended that in-joke for his close male friends. And what happens if you pick the right box?

GENO *(thinking for a moment)*

Something really great.

CHERISE

And that would be?

GENO

It's filled with . . . with

LEONORA (*stage whispering to him*)

Portia's picture.

CHERISE

No cheating. Geno, do you even know where Bassanio is when he has to choose the boxes?

GENO

That's easy. Venice.

CHERISE

You haven't read the play yet, have you?

GENO

I thought we were going to do that today.

CHERISE

And so we shall. Let's get to it. Establishing shot – Portia's magic kingdom of Belmont. Imagine Disneyland, Geno, where you, Bassanio, are the biggest hustler in all of Shakespeare. You have even put your best friend's life in mortal danger by getting him to borrow a lot of money from his mortal enemy, Shylock, in order to take this chance at winning Portia's hand in marriage and along with it, of course, her immense fortune. At this point in the play, you are the third suitor to stand the test. Samantha, start with “I pray you.”

PORTIA - [Samantha]

I pray you, tarry: pause a day or two
Before you hazard; for, in choosing wrong,
I lose your company:

BASSANIO - [Geno]

Let me choose
For as I am, I live upon **your** rack.

GENO

Isn't “your rack” kinda rude?

CHERISE

You misread the line. It's "a rack" not "your rack" and it's rack like in medieval torture.

GENO

I have another question? Why all this girly talk? Bassanio's an Italian, right? Why don't he just rip off his shirt and challenge those other guys to a wrestling match or something like that?

Geno takes off his shirt to show his hard body.

LEONORA

Can we try the scene his way?

CHERISE

Geno, keep your shirt on. No, I mean literally put your shirt back on. Continue to read the scene as it is written.

PORTIA - [Samantha]

Upon **the** rack, Bassanio? then confess
What treason there is mingled with your love.

BASSANIO - [Geno]

There may as well be amity ["a-mity"]
Between snow and fire, as treason and my love.
But let me to my fortune

CHERISE

Stop, stop. Geno, you sound like a parrot.

GENO

Excuse me, Cherise, but I got absolutely no idea what he's talking about?

CHERISE

I give up. Keep reading. I guess even a parrot can sound like a sailor with enough practice.

PORTIA - [Samantha]

I am lock'd in one of them:
If you do love me, you will find me out.

Nerissa and the rest, stand all aloof.
Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end.

CHERISE

Leonora, could you improvise the music for now?

NERISSA – [Leonora] *(singing fairly well)*

Tell me where is fancy bred,
In the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?

It is in the eyes engendered,
Where fancy thrives by gazing fed;
Is it gold, silver or is it lead?

BASSANIO - [Geno]

Sooo ah . . . here choose I; Pray joy be the consequence!

*Geno attempts to choose the gold
box, but Nerissa pulls it back and
moves his hand to the lead one.*

GENO

Why isn't she in the gold box? That doesn't make any sense.

CHERISE

Because it isn't the gold one; it's the lead one. Nerissa has already tipped you off in her song that it's the lead one with all the words that rhyme with "lead." – "bred, head, nourished, engendered, fed" and the final word "lead" itself. Let's re-do the scene from the song. Begin.

NERISSA – [Leonora]*(singing)*
Tell me where is fancy bred,
Is it gold, silver or is it lead?

BASSANIO - [Geno]
And here choose I; Pray joy be the consequence!

Geno again attempts to choose the gold box, and Nerissa again pulls it back and moves his hand to the lead one.

CHERISE

On second thought let's keep it exactly the way you two played it. It's much funnier and the perfect character marker for how I have always envisioned Bassanio.

GENO *(looking to Cherise)*

So did I win or not?

CHERISE

I'll tell Jeff to add that line as well. And Portia, like a good game show hostess, tell him what he has won?

PORTIA - [Samantha]

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am: yet, for you
I would be tripled twenty times myself;

A thousand times more fair,
ten thousand times more rich;
only to stand higher in your accounts.

I am an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised;
Happy in this, she is not **yet** so old
But she may learn;
happier than this,
She is not bred so dull

but she can learn;
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours
to be directed,

(kneeling before Bassanio)

As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted:

CHERISE

Hold it. This “I’m just a silly little girl speech” makes me want to puke. She’s obviously talking like an insane woman or someone under a spell. Actually I’d like you to do that whole speech as if you were a little drunk. Out of nervousness you could be drinking from a goblet throughout the scene. Start with “I am an unlesson’d girl.”

PORTIA - [Samantha]

I am an unlesson’d girl, unschool’d, unpractised;

Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours
to be directed,

(kneeling before Bassanio)

CHERISE

Be confused that you find yourself on your knees and with Nerissa's help get back on your feet. Maybe Nerissa could wipe your forehead with a damp cloth or something. Say the next lines as the awakening Portia who will go on to control all the important events throughout the rest of the play.

PORTIA - [Samantha]

But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,

This house, these servants and this same myself
Are yours, my lord: I give them with this ring;

CHERISE

The ring thing is her escape clause in the contract. Play it up on stage.
Continue Bassanio. . . (*uncomfortable pause*) . . . Geno, when I say
Bassanio I mean you.

GENO

Yah, got it.

BASSANIO - [Geno]

Madam, you have bereft me of all words,
But when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence:
O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!

CHERISE

He steps right into it. At the end of the court room scene it is Portia as a
lawyer who will get that ring from off his finger and back onto her own.
And, Geno, in spite of all of your protestations here, you do not die but are
merely permanently neutered. Good start. Geno, read the damn play.

Geno exits.

And you two, let's meet in about a half hour to come up with a ten day
crash acting course for our leading man.

*Leonora follows Geno off stage right.
Samantha gathers her make-up kit and
knocks on the door between the Stage Area
and the Board Room. while Cherise stays in
the Stage Area furiously writing notes.*

ACT I

Scene 5

SETTING Samantha knocks on the door between the Stage Area and Board Room. Milt is working at his desk.

MILT

Come in. Samantha.

SAMANTHA

Milt, would you do me a huge favor?

MILT

Name it.

SAMANTHA

Would you breathe in my ear for a few seconds.

Milt hesitates but responds to Samantha's imploring hand gestures by gently getting up and breathing into her upstage ear but trying to avoid any other bodily contact.

SAMANTHA

We do that on stage all the time to calm each others' nerves.

MILT

What brought that on?

SAMANTHA

We had our first read-through, and I realized what a huge mistake I'd made getting Perry to cast Geno. He just so looked the part. I forgot that he had to speak it as well.

MILT

What do you suggest we do about it?

SAMANTHA

Cherise is making the necessary adjustments. But I need your honest opinion about something else.

MILT

For better or worse that's the only kind of opinion I've ever been capable of giving.

SAMANTHA

Am I beautiful?

MILT

I'm positive that you used to be?

SAMANTHA

That's not exactly the consolation I was looking for.

MILT

Let me turn it around. Do you think I have money and influence?

SAMANTHA

Of course I do.

MILT

And if I didn't but only had this pretty face would you be talking with me right now?

SAMANTHA

I see your point.

MILT

Do you really? You're no longer twenty and drop dead gorgeous; yet I'm spending a lot of time and attention on you. Why do you think that is?

SAMANTHA

Because you're stuck with my contract.

MILT

There's no denying that.(long pause) How are your accommodations?

SAMANTHA

Oh, that's one of the other reasons I stopped by. Can I ask you for another favor?

MILT

It depends on what it is.

SAMANTHA

As you know the building used to be an old elementary school and each unit was once a classroom Mine's the fourth grade. Well, as it turns out all of the windows seem to have been painted shut. You know how hot it's gotten. There's a ceiling fan but that just blows hot air back down on me. The Sears man sold me a little scraper, but didn't tell me how to use it. Could you stop by and free up a few windows for me?

MILT

Didn't anybody ever tell you about Jews and carpenters?

SAMANTHA

I'm not following you.

MILT

No matter. It means I'm not up to the task. Have you approached Geno?

SAMANTHA

Didn't I mention he was a big mistake.

MILT

But seriously other than the stuck windows how are your accommodations?

SAMANTHA

Spending the night in a classroom is kind of spooky and for some reason they left the original chalk board in the room with a full array of colored chalk and old-school erasers. I've drawn caricatures of the whole cast.

MILT

Have you done one of me?

SAMANTHA

Of course, but maybe you won't like it.

MILT

Why is that?

SAMANTHA

You're naked and all blue. Oh, and I also gave you cowbells for earrings.

MILT

I'm almost afraid to ask what that's about.

SAMANTHA

It's a Shiva thing. You're our animating force times two. You really ought to drop by sometime to take a look. . . . *(no reaction from Milt)* There is a down-side to the space.

MILT

Are the toilets too small?

SAMANTHA

That's not a very chivalrous image. They're normal sized and matched with a bidet – which when I checked in had been converted into a fish tank with one rather large, bright orange fish swimming in it

MILT

What did you do?

SAMANTHA

The very next day I walked over to the mall and bought her a companion. Actually right now they're both my only friends in Pittsburgh.

MILT

Did we just get way off track? What's the down side to the unit?

SAMANTHA

It's that persuasive smell of chalk dust that seems to trigger the weirdest dreams.

MILT

You're not about to tell me your dreams, are you?

SAMANTHA

Only if you don't want me to. You know resistance is irresistible to a woman.

MILT

Then I'm absolutely **dying** to hear about your weird dreams.

SAMANTHA

You're the boss. Here goes. So I'd just finished smacking the erasers together for my third grade teacher, Mrs. Stevenson, who was enormously pregnant in the dream like the illustration in "The Little Prince" of the snake right after it swallowed the elephant.

Well as I was going back to my seat, Mrs. Stevenson, lying on her back exactly like that snake grabs my ankle and insists that I perform Juliet's monologue. You know the one that starts with "Tis but thy name that is my enemy" . . . and ends with "Doff thy name which is no part of thee and take all myself."

MILT

Was this a long dream or a short one?

SAMANTHA

Oh, oh. I forgot to mention Jimmy, who always sat in front of me in every class because we sat alphabetical; he was also in the dream. He's the one who punched me in the stomach when he was a patrol boy.

MILT

Was that part of the dream?

SAMANTHA

No, that actually happened. What happened in the dream was that when I was done with my recitation and returned to my seat, I was hit with this strong urine smell and pee was dripping down from the seat in front of me. When I tapped Jimmy on the shoulder and asked what was going on, he smiled and said that he had peed himself rather than interrupt my beautiful performance.

MILT

Oddly that's also one of my biggest fears as we bring in an older and older audience. That the plays will be so entrancing that those old guys will forget themselves.

SAMANTHA

And I would accept it as a great tribute.

MILT

That's why you're the artist and I'm the management. You see this is why I hate listening to other people's dreams. No matter how irrelevant or ridiculous it is, I can't resist asking the next question, Why do you think you had this dream?

SAMANTHA

Perry called me from New Haven last night and asked me to marry him and play Susanna in a new adaptation of "The Marriage of Figaro" that he is going to direct at Yale Rep. I'm not sure in which order he presented the proposals. Should I do it, Milt?

MILT

Have you ever been married before?

SAMANTHA

Not as such. Most actors, married or not, engage in an activity best described as Theatre Polygamy. Does that count? You were married, right, Milt. How did that work out for you? Was marriage a new experience or more like the end of experience?

MILT

Let me put it to you this way, I was never bored a day in my life with my wife, Rachel. But our friends were sure that we would eventually tear each other to shreds.

But if they had observed more carefully, we completed each others' sentences and nobody or nothing ever came between us. I guess if I had to describe our marriage in a metaphor it was a professional wrestling match where both contestants delight in being in on the joke.

SAMANTHA

What happened?

MILT

Almost six years ago, she was visiting Israel with her sister and both of them were blown up on a bus in the middle of Tel Aviv. All they recovered was this little ring that I had given her at summer camp when we were sixteen.

He holds up his left hand. The ring is on his left little finger. He is not wearing a wedding ring.

SAMANTHA

That breaks my heart. . . . So, should I marry Perry or no? I don't want to be the fish left behind in a Pittsburgh bidet.

MILT

Maybe what you really should do is take those fish out of your bidet and release them. *(another long pause)*.

SAMANTHA

Did you ever kiss an actress?

MILT

Other than a hooker, no.

SAMANTHA

That is what you think of us, isn't it?

MILT

A joke.

SAMANTHA

A really bad one. I mean like an actor kissing an actress in character. Would you like me to demonstrate? How would you like to kiss Marilyn Monroe in "The Seven Year Itch"?

She unbuttons the top button of her blouse and starts an improv as Marilyn Monroe.

MILT

I'm not comfortable doing this.

SAMANTHA

I'm goofing with you, but so you won't get the wrong idea maybe we should start at the other end of the spectrum. How about kissing the witch from my summer stock production of "Into the Woods"?

Samantha digs through her make-up case finding and starting to put on her witch's prosthetic nose.

This is what I should be playing now, isn't it? Not the fairy-tale princess version of Portia, but the unattractive heiress. Incredibly intelligent but desperately teetering over the abyss of spinsterhood.

Leonora knocks on the door between the Stage Area and the Board Room.

MILT (relieved)

Come in.

LEONORA

Don't let me interrupt, but I needed to remind Samantha that we're scheduled to meet with Cherise to come up with a plan to save us from Geno.

SAMANTHA

Let me get my things. Milt, I still am very interested in hearing your advice.

She gathers her make-up case and gives Milt a hug who has backed up all the way to the edge of the Board Room table.

LEONORA *(whispering to Samantha)*

Advice about what?

SAMANTHA

How to rescue fish from a bidet.

Samantha and Leonora exit to the Stage Area to join Cherise.

BLACKOUT

Intermission

ACT II

Scene 1

(three weeks before opening night)

SETTING As the lights go up on the Board Room of the Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh, there is a large poster for the upcoming premiere production of August Wilson's "Jitney" and a "Giant Eagle" grocery shopping cart filled with a random array of cast-off toys topped by a large white micro-wave oven.

There is a pile of rags on the couch. Unseen under that pile is James asleep.

Milt enters the room and is bewildered by all of the junk in his office. He starts to pull off the pile of rags and jumps back when they move and he discovers James' bare feet and then the rest of him asleep on the sofa. James wakes up.

MILT

Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?

JAMES

They call me "Clean up." I clean up the streets and I clean up for the Lord.

MILT

Do you know where you are?

JAMES

Where the Lord wants me to be.

MILT

And trust me that is not in the Board Room of the Equity Theatre of Pittsburgh.

JAMES

I'd like to sing something for you.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

He gets up and goes right into his song.

Oh, Oh Lord, Lord, Lord my God
I, I, I need to know what to do without you? Oh, Oh Lord, Lord,
Lord my God
I need your word to do it with you.
So please lead me, my Lord, my God.

James goes down on one knee.

Lord, My God, My Father, I need you

MILT

You have a wonderful voice. But before I throw you out, I've got to ask you one question. Don't you feel your lord has betrayed you a little?

JAMES

At one time and another I did. But the fact is it was material things that I thought was so much greater and had so much emphasis. They made me deaf to Him.

But when I was all alone in the dark, I learned that the voice which comes to you right away – that is His voice. And the second voice is Satan's and when Satan comes to you he comes with an idea with a little sugar in it and we fall for it and get in trouble.

But I tell everybody. Don't take my word on it, find out for yourself. And when God enters your spirit, no body and no thing can ever take Him away from you. The Lord freed me from fear. He can heal you too.

MILT

I meant didn't he betray you by making you homeless?

JAMES

No. It was a lesson that I had to learn.

MILT

Do you think that you'll get out of this situation?

JAMES

I know I will. He says to me, James, your mission is not yet done.

MILT

Are you sure that's the Lord speaking?

JAMES

I know that it is.

MILT

Well. . .

JAMES

And I found out that many, many, many times when I have something to do and I go that way (*pointing to the right*) God says, Go the other way. (*pointing to the left.*) And I not knowing why He wants me to go that way.

Right after I start down that other path, this white lady says, Son. And I say, Yes, Ma'am. And she says I need you to clean the yard up and when you're finished here's the key to lock up. And make sure you leave the key in the mailbox. And I never seen her before in my whole life.

Now you can't tell me that ain't the Lord. She says, your payment is in the envelope in the mailbox. And I open the garage and I could a been a thief and took all the valuables that was in there. But she knew. She saw the Lord was in me.

Then I realized that is what we call walking on blind faith. Doing something that you don't know why you are doing it. It took me a long while to learn that, but I'm glad I did. Just like he told me to come this way and sing to you. And I thank you so much

James starts loading his rag covers into the shopping cart.

and have a pleasant day in God's name I pray.

MILT

Hold on there, James. How did you get in here? And where are you going with my microwave?

Jeff makes his entrance carrying a pair of old work boots for James.

JEFF

Milt . . .

JAMES

He let me in.

JEFF

I thought you weren't coming to work until late this afternoon.

MILT

What craziness. So this unholy mess is somehow my fault because I came to work too early.

JEFF

Let me explain. "Clean Up," you sit on the sofa for a minute and try these on.

Jeff hands James the boots which are too large but he puts them on.

MILT

His name's James.

JEFF

So you had a chance to talk to him. What's his story?

MILT

I don't give a shit what his story is. I want to know what you were thinking when you let him in here.

JEFF

Remember last night when that big thunder storm hit around eight, right when I was leaving. When I started to sprint across the park, I got tripped

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

up by his feet sticking out from the bushes. On such a night if he had been a stray dog, I would have taken him in.

MILT

And would you have let a muddy wet dog into my office as well? Are you nuts?

JEFF

I didn't go that far. I let James into the foyer to get him out of the rain. He apparently wandered into your office looking for a soft place to lie down.

MILT (*slapping the side of the microwave*)

And find something to steal.

JEFF

James, what were you going to do with the microwave?

JAMES

Taking the "microway" to the "Light O'Life" Mission as a Christmas present for all the things that they give me. (*pointing to the poster for the play "Jitney"*) That ain't no Jitney car? How you get anyone in the back seat of a car with only two doors? Who this Cherise Clayton? I had a daughter used to be called Cherise Clayton, but I think I be dead to her by now.

JEFF (*to Milt*)

Do you think it's possible?

MILT

The way this day is starting out anything is possible. She's in rehearsals.

JEFF

I'll go get her.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 2

SETTING There is talking before the lights go back up. It is about fifteen minutes after Jeff has returned to the Board Room with Cherise.

JAMES

You can't be my daughter. She only ten years old. What you want from me?

CHERISE

Did you ever think about me when you were gone? I remember every minute of the day you left. I had chocolate milk for lunch at school and spilled some of it on my blouse. The first thing that I heard when I came home was momma crying. I had never heard her cry before or since.

I remember putting on your baseball cleats over my shoes and pulling the laces so tight that one broke. I was so mad at you and stomped up and down our wood floors till momma caught me.

All I had were those dents in that floor to keep you real for me. Did you ever think about me even once when you were gone?

JAMES

You're a grown woman what could I think about a grown woman? My girl's ten, and I been out collecting things for her.

James picks various toys out of his cart.

CHERISE *(to the others)*

What's that around his neck?

JEFF *(reading the tag)*

My name is James Clayton.
If lost, return to the Light O'Life Mission
900 East North Ave
Pittsburgh, PA

CHERISE

Property of Light O'Life Mission please return. My father's wearing a tag that you would put on your dog. . . . Dad what happened to you?

JAMES

The Lord chose me to praise His name.

JEFF

Ask him what he knows about jitneys. The poster somehow jogged something in him that recognized your name?

CHERISE

Dad, Did you ever drive jitney?

JAMES

That was my destruction.

JEFF

James, what happened with the jitneys?

JAMES

See, my friend Willie and me lived in this room on the Hill for more years than I can count. And this room just had the one bed. But that was all right because we both drove Jitney for Mister Darius. Willie and me we'd switch off – I'd drive from noon to midnight and Willie'd drive from midnight to noon; so someone always had the room to himself.

Women, sin and everythin. And Darius had this “understanding” with the police not to mess with us. He sprayed “Darius Transportation Lines” on the trunk and both sides of the cars. He even made his own license plates with the word “Dealer” on them, and we didn't need no insurance or nothing.

The cabbies hated us but what cabbie gonna come for some eighty year old, black lady in the middle of the Hill at any hour of the day or night take her cross town to the super market wait a half hour. Then take her back home. Then carry her groceries up three flights for a few dollars? Sometimes we get a beer or something extra but those Christian ladies

were hard women. I never saw a single Yellow Cab on the Hill all the time I live there. Then something really bad happened.

CHERISE: *(still very angry)*

Worse than walking away and losing your family?

JAMES: *(protesting a bit)*

The Welfare made me do that. Bad I'm talking about was Mrs. Ellington. She always asked for me to drive her and would wait hours if I be busy. Well, she had this old Oldsmobile but she never could drive it herself. She could barely read a label on a can.

Well one day she says to me, James, why don't you take my car for yourself and whenever I need you to drive me somewhere I just call you, you come and get me and don't never charge me nothing. Who wouldn't take that? A free car.

But pride filled me up and I wanted people to know it was mine and wouldn't let Darius spray it with his signs. The Lord punished me for that.

JEFF

How so?

JAMES

I'll tell you. Darius' cousin comes up to my car right around midnight and tells me Mrs. Ellington just call from Allegheny Hospital to come get her quick. So I get there fast as I can and this cop car with his lights flashing and siren roaring pulls in right behind me.

These two cops pull me out the car and put handcuffs on me. I tell them to go find Mrs. Ellington and she explain all about it. They shove me in the back and take a long time before bringing this black woman with them to take a look at me. She crying and everything. She just shakes her head and points to the car. The cops tell me Mrs. Ellington, she dead and her daughter tells them her momma's car stole and I must be the one what took it. My lawyer tells me five years is better than fifteen, and I go to jail. There's nothing much to tell you about that because it's just like living in a closet.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

This public defender, white lady name of Shelley, eventually get me out, but Darius and half the Hill be gone by then. And I got nowhere. But the Lord led me to the light of his mission and they feed me and give me a place to sleep most every night when it's not too crowded with folks worse off than me. . . .I'm so tired. Can I rest here some more before I go?

JEFF *(to Cherise)*

I'm renovating an empty apartment near here and have an old futon in my garage that I can put him in. How does that sound for right now?

CHERISE

Very generous. Let's get his stuff out of Milt's way. *(to Milt)* I'm so sorry that this got dumped on you.

MILT

Minor inconvenience.

JEFF

Milt, can I drop the microwave off at the mission?

MILT

With my blessings if that counts for anything over there?

CHERISE

Come on, Dad, we're going somewhere where you can rest.

JAMES

I knew to trust the Lord when He told me last night to give up my bed and come out into the storm. And all of you have a pleasant day in Christ's name I pray.

Milt, Jeff and Cherise help James gather his things and all exit together. Cherise holding her father's arm more out of affection than need for support,

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 3

(two weeks before opening night)

SETTING Board Room reveal– 30%; ETP Stage Area reveal– 70%. As the scene opens on the stage area Leonora is playing the Hatvikvah very softly on an upright rehearsal piano.

Begin piano playing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3kceNNeo2c>

She is dressed in a medium length mini-skirt and stylish boots. She is heavily made-up. Her purse and a paperback copy of “As You Like it” are on the top of the piano. Samantha enters carrying her makeup kit, purse and similar copy of “As You Like It.” all of which she puts down on the folding table along with a boy's cap and bright ribbon for Leonora as Rosalind to wear. [NOTE: Leonora will perform the first part from “As You Like It” with the cap on, and the second part with the ribbon tied on over the cap with a large bow at the neck.]

SAMANTHA *(touching Leonora's shoulder)*

That's awfully somber. Why are you down, little sister, your acting is first rate?

LEONORA

How do you know if you're pretty enough?

SAMANTHA

Pretty enough for what?

LEONORA

For someone to fall in love with you.

SAMANTHA

And that someone might be?

LEONORA

Geno.

SAMANTHA

Aren't you two going out already?

LEONORA

We have fun together, but we're so mismatched. He's Adonis, and I'm a scared deer.

SAMANTHA

I sincerely doubt that Geno could even spell Adonis.

LEONORA

That may be, but when Geno comes really close, I start to tremble and my voice quakes.

SAMANTHA

You can't control how you **feel**; you can control what you **do**. It's more than OK to feel afraid, since there's really not much anyone of us can do to prevent that, but you don't have to act afraid.

In my experience men want women who appear to know exactly what they want. As long, of course, as the man is made to believe that what that woman wants, most in all the world, is him.

LEONORA

And how do I do that?

SAMANTHA

Watch any Marilyn Monroe movie. She never misses a beat. Or better yet be very attentive to our acting lesson today. (*removing a mirror from her make-up kit*) First, however, you've got to look in the mirror.

LEONORA

What's wrong with me?

SAMANTHA *(in a heavy Southern accent)*

Goodness, gracious, sakes alive, darlin', Who ever taught you how to put on makeup? We don't actually **want** to look like drag queens, do we? Although there's certainly nothing wrong with drag queens. *(dropping the accent)* Pretty young things like you need to **reveal** not **conceal**. Didn't your mother tell you that?

LEONORA

My mother died when I was 12.

SAMANTHA

I'm so sorry.

She gives Leonora makeup removing wipes and a small towel from her case and shows Leonora how to use them.

Hideous off; beautiful emerges from within. For the lips let's go with – dusty rose.

Samantha takes out this color lipstick from her makeup kit and applies it first heavily to her own lips then kisses it on to Leonora's. She smooths it out by licking her own little finger and rubbing across Leonora's lips while delivering the next lines.

Beware the movies; they eat their young. Stay on the stage if you want a career with legs, and by the way you've got great legs.

Before Geno gets here, let me shorten that skirt some more to spotlight your chief asset. All you have to do is roll up the top. *(starting to roll up the top of Leonora's skirt.)*

LEONORA *(alarmed stops her hands)*

Don't.

SAMANTHA

Aren't we the modest one.

To distract her Leonora hands Samantha a small box that is on the piano.

LEONORA

Oh, I almost forgot. I brought you a gift that you can give to Milt the next time you see him.

SAMANTHA *(opening the box and holding it up)*

What is it?

The Mezuzah should be a non-traditional one reflecting the early nineties and Leo's taste.

LEONORA

It's a mezuzah.

SAMANTHA

That doesn't help me much. What's a mezuz**la**.

LEONORA

Mezuz-**a** not **la**. It contains a hand-written, Hebrew scroll that you hang next to an entry door. If you touch it, Jews believe that it brings God's blessings to everyone within. Trust me. He'll love it. And this theatre needs it.

SAMANTHA

Thank you so much. I'll wrap it fancy.

Geno enters wearing a tool belt with his copy of "As You Like It" tucked into the waist band and hammer hanging.

GENO

Sorry I'm late. The crew needed a hand with the tower.

SAMANTHA

Recess is over, kiddies. The purpose of lesson number four is to exercise your facilities as actors to pretend. And this scene from "As You Like it" is Shakespeare's master class.

Geno, you play a lover again although this one is significantly different from Bassanio because Orlando actually is in love with Rosalind not her fortune.

Another layer of pretending in this scene is that you have to convince us that you're in love with a character who to you appears to be a young man who's pretending to be your Rosalind. And of course in Shakespeare's time that actress would have actually been played by a boy actor, performing as a girl, dressed as a boy pretending she is the girl being courted by you. Did you get that?

GENO

Kind of. But it sounds so gay.

SAMANTHA

And so it is. But we've all been **pretending** for more than 400 years that it's not. Remember, Geno, you're the desperate lover in this scene. Rosalind starts here in the guise of a boy. I'll read her friend Celia's part.

Samantha hands Leonora the boy's cap to put on.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

There is a man haunts the forest, that
abuses our young plants with carving 'Rosalind' on
their barks; deifying the name of
Rosalind: if I could meet that fancy-monger I would
give him such good counsel.

ORLANDO - [Geno]

I am he that is so love-shaked, young sir. I pray you tell me your remedy.

SAMANTHA

Geno, you must be rougher in your manner with her because you believe that you're speaking with a young man named Ganymede (another insider gay joke by the way) and Leonora you need to act much more boy-like. Let's skip to the second passage on page 58 with those notes in mind when the boy-actor Rosalind is playing herself as a girl and Orlando shows up late for their date.

Samantha hands Leonora the ribbon to tie over the cap ending with a large bow at the neck. Geno acts with real sincerity now.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Why, how now, Orlando! where have you been all this while? You a lover! Never come in my sight more.

ORLANDO - [Geno]

My fair Rosalind, I come within an hour of my promise.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Break an hour's promise in love!
It may be said of him that Cupid
has merely winged his shoulder and missed his heart.

ORLANDO - [Geno]

Pardon me, dear Rosalind.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Nay, if you be so tardy, come no more in my sight: I would prefer to be wooed by a snail.

ORLANDO - [Geno]

A snail?

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Ay, a snail; for though he comes slowly, he carries his house on his head; a better offering I think, than you make a woman.

But Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday mood and like enough to consent. What would you say to me if I were Rosalind herself?

ORLANDO - [Geno]

Love me, Rosalind.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Come, sister, you shall be the priest and marry us. Give me your hand, Orlando. What do you say, sister?

ORLANDO - [Geno]

Pray thee, marry us.

CELIA – [Samantha] (*aside to Rosalind*)

Do you think this is wise? I cannot say the words.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

You must begin, 'Will you, Orlando--'

CELIA - [Samantha]

Go to. Will you, Orlando, have to wife this Rosalind?

ORLANDO - [Geno]

I will.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Ay, but when?

ORLANDO - [Geno]

Why now; as fast as she can marry us.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Then you must say 'I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.'

ORLANDO - [Geno]

I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

And I do take thee, Orlando, for my husband:
Now tell me how long you would have her
after you have possessed her in marriage.

ORLANDO - [Geno]

For ever and a day.

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

Say 'a day,' without the 'ever.' No, no, Orlando;
men are April when they woo, December when they wed:
maids are May when they are maids, but the sky
changes when they are wives.

I will be more jealous
of thee than a Barbary cock-pigeon over his hen,
more clamorous than a parrot against the rain, more
new-fangled than an ape, more giddy in my desires
than a monkey: I will weep for nothing, and I will do that
when you are disposed to be merry;

I will laugh like a hyena,
and that when you are inclined to sleep.

ORLANDO - [Geno]

But will my Rosalind do so?

ROSALIND - [Leonora]

By my life, she will do exactly as I do.

SAMANTHA

Let's stop there. And you Leonora do exactly what Rosalind has done. I
have some wrapping paper to buy.

GENO

Leonora, can I speak to you for a minute?

LEONORA (*desperately*)

Samantha, can I come with you?

SAMANTHA

I have to freshen up first. I'll stop by for you when I'm ready.

*She gathers her things including
Rosalind's props, her makeup kit and
the mezuzah and exits.*

GENO

Why have you been avoiding me ever since I asked you to come over for Sunday dinner? I promise you'll love it. I've got this one uncle who shows up every week in a different clown costume. The littlest cousins have to guess who he really is. It's so funny because even when the kids get older they still want to play the game. Even me. Last week I guessed Willie Stargell.

I want everyone to meet you. You know I'm crazy about you. And I know you're crazy about me. Don't worry. I'll stay close and translate. Some of the aunts still think they're in Sicily. Under no circumstances let them get close enough to grab your ears.

*He goes up to her and gently holds
her ears then yanks on them from
side by side.*

But much, much harder. Is it love? Is it anger? Is it love? Is it anger?

LEONORA

You can let go now.

GENO

You are crazy about me, right?

LEONORA

Read my lips. I am **crazy** about you. Why is it so important that I come to dinner?

GENO

I want my mother to like you as much as I do.

LEONORA

If she really knew me, I sincerely believe that would **not** be the case.

GENO

Give her a chance. There's no one on this planet who wants me to be happier than her. And you make me happier than I have ever been. So she's gotta love you. Please come just this once.

LEONORA

Ok, Ok, just this once.

GENO

Fair warning when her lasagna hits your mouth you won't be able to live without it. Oh, and one more thing. You might feel some awkwardness at first.

LEONORA

Why is that?

GENO

I don't think there's been a blonde person in the house, ever.

LEONORA

I could wear a dark wig if that would make you feel more comfortable?

GENO

Could you? That would be perfect. And I could teach you a little Italian.

LEONORA

It's a deal. *(in a bad Italian accent)* One tima because I lova you and I weara the wiga for mamma.

GENO

Can I ask you a very personal question?

LEONORA

As long as I reserve the right not to answer it, ask away.

GENO

Since we love each other so much, why won't you have sex with me? Is it because you're a virgin?

LEONORA

First swing, you hit it right out of the park. I stand before you an untapped keg. *(doing a complete rotation)* Is that a problem?

GENO

On the contrary. I totally respect a girl who's saving herself for marriage. Although I admit I never met one before. I guess I ought to tell you the real reason why I want you to come to dinner.

LEONORA *(turning her ear flaps toward him)*

I'm still all ears.

GENO

Right before dessert in front of my whole family. . . I'm going to get down on one knee and ask you to marry me.

LEONORA *(horrified)*

Oh, My God!

SAMANTHA *(from off stage)*

Leonora, I'm ready?

Leonora sprints off stage in a panic.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

GENO (*yelling after her*)

Does that mean you're not coming over?

BLACKOUT

ACT II

scene 4

(three days before opening night)

SETTING Board Room reveal– 30%; ETP Stage Area reveal– 70%. Lights go up where Cherise and Jeff are sitting down stage on folding chairs on the ETP Stage Area side. Actors are milling around up stage.

CHERISE

There are mice in the apartment.

JEFF

And voila I discover once again that no good deed goes unpunished.

CHERISE

Don't get me wrong. I'm more than grateful for what you've done for my father. I simply want you to remove the mice. Wouldn't you do that for any other tenant? Do take care not to hurt them. I know Sears carries a whole line of humane certified, catch and release traps. Oh and one more thing, the hot water isn't hot enough.

JEFF

I really hope Milt goes along with us, otherwise we're pretty much screwed.

They are interrupted by Milt wheeling his very expensive, carry-on luggage having come straight from the airport.

CHERISE

How was TCG at Boston?

MILT *(ignoring her speaking to Jeff)*

How is he?

JEFF

Myron is going to be fine. He just sounds a lot like Jimmy Stewart right now.

MILT

What happened?

JEFF

He had a very minor stroke while playing tennis.

MILT

What's a seventy year old man doing playing tennis?

JEFF

Trying to live to be seventy-one, maybe.

MILT

“A very minor stroke” Was that a diagnosis or a comment on his backhand? *(finally addressing Cherise)* Who's going to replace him?

CHERISE

That's what we wanted to talk to you about?

MILT

Why now? You asked me to butt out some time ago, and I butted out. What do you want from me at this late date?

JEFF

Play Shylock.

MILT

What?

CHERISE

It's three days before opening night. You know where we're going with the play. Who better than you? Myron will probably be ready to go on next week; so we've just got to get through this weekend.

MILT

I'm no actor.

JEFF

But you're a damn good reader. All you have to do is appear on stage in Shylock's costume and read the lines in as close to character as you can imagine. Throw in the Yiddish for good measure. Give it the old college try.

MILT

All right. All right. I surrender. What do I need to do?

CHERISE

Jeff made a copy of the script with your part and entrances and exits marked which you can take on stage with you, and I asked Samantha to read with you the first big divergence from the original. Sam, can you come over here?

Samantha is wearing very little make-up and the prosthetic nose.

SAMANTHA

Milt, you look a little pale. Welcome to my world.

Samantha comes close to Milt and breathes into his ear for a few seconds.

By the way, how do you like the nose? Cherise thinks it's genius. She gave me the Mary Wollstonecraft seal of approval. Where should we begin?

CHERISE

Start with "then must the Jew be merciful."

PORTIA - [Samantha]

Then must the Jew be merciful.

SAMANTHA

(pointing out where Milt is to begin)

You're right here.

SHYLOCK - [Milt]

On what compulsion must I? tell me that.

PORTIA - [Samantha]

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath:
It blesseth him that gives and him that receives.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
It is an attribute to God himself.

Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea.

SHYLOCK - [Milt]

But who shall then purge the bile from my spleen that this
man has infused in me?

PORTIA - [Samantha]

Through your deed of mercy you shall purge it yourself and
gain the higher ground and be superior to his power
forever.

SHYLOCK - [Milt]

Antonio, *(pausing for a moment)* I shall release you from
your bond and will not drain from you the life-blood that
you sought from me and my kind.

MILT

(astonished)

And that's it? Shylock forgives him and the debt.

JEFF

I believe that's the path to a more compassionate justice that Shakespeare was offering all along. Why else write such a powerfully persuasive speech from Portia right at this decision point?

Portia touches everyone's heart in the audience with that speech. Why not Shylock's too if he is as human as they?

MILT

So Shylock finesses the Christians, by out christianing them. And thus am I revenged? I think I am. *(more enthusiastic)* Then where does the plot go?

JEFF

It flows very logically because Portia, to reward Shylock for his generosity in saving Bassanio's patron's life, offers to bring him to Belmont with her to reconcile with his bad-ass daughter, Jessica. Whom he also forgives and even gives his blessing for her to marry Lorenzo under the proviso that Lorenzo has to first convert to Judaism. I worked in a joke about adult circumcision and the play ends with their Jewish wedding officiated by Portia disguised as a rabbi.

MILT

A woman rabbi, I'm not so comfortable. But I can live with it. It's only a play after all.

Samantha joins the other actors.

CHERISE

Thank you so much, Sam. The other scene that I'd like you to start on is the one that Jeff had to write completely from scratch – Shylock's reconciliation with Jessica in Belmont. Clare, could you come here.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

*The young, African-American actress
playing Jessica comes over to join them.*

MILT

Wait! This is my daughter? I have to draw the line here. Half of Squirrel Hill will be in the audience on Friday night. Kissing Antonio's ass, that they're used to seeing everyday, but this is going to make many of them very upset. If you can't fix it, I will have to cancel the show.

CHERISE

What exactly do you mean by "this"?

MILT

Don't you realize what you are saying about Shylock's wife if he has a colored daughter?

CHERISE

Did you really just say "colored" to our faces? You patronizing bastard.

MILT

You know what I meant – African-American. I didn't mean to be offensive.

CHERISE

If that's the case, you do have your head completely up your ass. Clare and I are deeply and personally offended. And you are offensive.

MILT

You can't talk to me that way.

CHERISE

Funny, I just did. And the play will stay exactly the way Jeff has written it and I have cast it.

*Cherise starts collecting her things
and directs Clare to do likewise.*

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

MILT

It's on you then. Jeff, inform the rest of the cast and crew that they can all go home. The show has just been canceled. *(heading to his office.*
Phone calls I've got to make.

JEFF

Time out. Don't anyone take another step.

They wait a beat then ignore him.

Not another step.

*Cherise and Clare exit stage right meeting
Leonora on her way in and taking her with
them. Milt continues into his office leaving
Jeff alone on the stage.*

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 5 – Still three days before opening night

Back in his office Milt is standing dialing the phone as Jeff enters.

JEFF

Put down the phone, Milton, and sit.

MILT

I'm not your goddamn student any more, Jeff.

JEFF

Theoretically you are. You never completed that last assignment.

MILT

I guess you weren't listening. Your advisory services are no longer required. Now get out of here.

Leonora enters, takes off her wig and speaks in her Leo voice.

LEO

Dad, why are you being such an ass?

MILT

You're too young to understand.

LEO

I'm old enough to understand perfectly well. And if you go through with this cancellation, you are no father of mine.

MILT

Calm down. I'll make sure you get cast in the next show.

LEO

Do you really think that that's what's upsetting me? What Cherise told me has made me doubt everything I thought I knew about you.

MILT

What don't you know about me?

LEO

One question. Am I loved by you only because I am your dutiful son, Leo, and when the Leonora within me emerges will she be cast away like what you are doing to Clare?

MILT

You are my child. I will always love you whether you're my son or daughter or someone in between.

LEO

That's not good enough. For me to believe it, you've got to begin tearing down those other walls that separate us from other people.

JEFF

And isn't it a great way to demonstrate this by putting on stage a Shylock who is genuinely brokenhearted and driven a little insane by the double loss of his wife and daughter, who is able to overcome those obstacles and recover the daughter at least and make his world whole again on his own terms.

MILT

More accurately on your and Portia's merciful terms.

JEFF

You gave me the pen, my friend.

MILT

Ok, you two guilted me enough. The show is officially un-canceled

JEFF

There are some more people who need to concur. Leo, do you know where Cherise and Clare are?

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

LEO

I asked them to wait in the lobby.

JEFF *(to Leo)*

Bring them back to the stage, will you?

Leo exits.

(to Milt) We have a little charade to play so follow my lead . . . Oh and you'll have to endure another one of my lectures. The last one, I promise.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 6 – Still three days before opening night

Leonora brings in Cherise and Clare; Jeff brings in Milt.

JEFF

This is my cue to quote my favorite Pogo line, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” I want you all to face me, close your eyes and slowly take five deep breaths. Inhale . . . Exhale. Inhale (*longer pause*) Exhale. Inhale (*still longer pause*) exhale.

While he is pacing their breathing, he arranges four folding chairs in a row on the stage.

Now sit.

Milt sits first. Cherise skips the chair next to him and sits on the third chair. She directs Clare to the fourth chair. Jeff moves Clare next to Milt.

JEFF

For this performance I need assigned seating. Milt and Cherise, are you crazy? Like it or not, you are both on the same side here against the race-haters whether they're Nazis or slave owners. And if you yourselves divide humanity along racial or ethnic lines, you become them.

All praise due to Shakespeare, but I did not work on and Cherise certainly did not cast the kind of play whose very existence any racist, or sexist for that matter, would tolerate. You see, Milt, in the theatre we are free to create the kind of worlds we want to live in.

Case in point. How better to show what we are about than have a Shylock forgive and accept his prodigal and, in this case, black daughter back into his family? Into his family, Milt, not the maid's quarters. If we can't respect each other without distinctions after all we've been through, how can we expect any one else to respect us? (*short silent pause*)

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

CHERISE

If Malcolm X could get past his anger, insults and prejudices, so can I.
What about you, Milt?

MILT

It's too late to cancel the show anyway, we'd lose a fortune. See,
sometimes it's good to have an accountant in the mix. . . . And, Jeff, I
know, I know, I know you're right. Cherise, I sincerely apologize for what
I just so stupidly said. And Clare, I'll need all the help that I can get, please
don't trip me on stage.

CLARE

I can't promise you that.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 7

(two days before opening night)

SETTING Board Room reveal– 60%; ETP Stage Area reveal– 40%. The lights go up on the Board Room side of the set where James and Andrew III are quietly seated close to each other on the sofa. Andrew is in a vintage, pin striped banker's three piece suit.

*James is wearing a similar three piece suit from the Thrift Shop, but it is apparent that he is not wearing socks. There is a cane on Andrew's side of the sofa. **NOTE:** The mezuzah is now hanging on an angle to the right of the door that leads to the Stage Area*

Meanwhile actors will be arriving on the ETP Stage side of the set for the dress/tech rehearsal that will start right after this scene is finished.

Andrew III looks over at James slightly alarmed.

ANDREW, III

Do I know you?

JAMES

Sure do. We're old friends.

James comforts him by putting his hand on his leg. Andrew puts his arm on James's arm.

ANDREW, III

Have you ever heard of Goldfish?

JAMES

What like in an aquarium or something like that?

ANDREW, III

No, like in a bag.

*He reaches in his inside jacket
pocket for a snack sized bag of
Goldfish and starts eating them.*

I'll sell you some for a hundred dollars.

*He reaches in his other pocket and
brings out another bag.*

JAMES

I ain't got no hundred dollars.

ANDREW, III *(as if figuring out a puzzle)*

That doesn't seem right. . . . you know . . . I'll tell you what I am going to do. . . I'm going to lend you that hundred dollars *(taking out from his breast pocket wallet a hundred dollar bill)* and you can buy this . . . and pay me back whenever you get the money.

*Andrew hands James the hundred
dollar bill who in turn hands it back
to him and is handed the bag of
Goldfish crackers.*

JAMES *(opening his bag)*

These sure are good.

They sit for a minute in silence.

ANDREW, III

Do you want to know what I love most about you?

JAMES

No, what?

ANDREW, III

Watching you walk.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

*James gets up and walks fancily
around the room ending in soft shoe
dance steps.*

JAMES

For you.

ANDREW, III

You are magnificent. What I wouldn't give to do that right now. (*banging the floor with his cane.*) . . . You know since we're such old friends maybe we should form a partnership.

JAMES

What you mean?

ANDREW, III

You be my legs and help me get to and get away from my car, and I'll have my driver take you wherever you want to go, whenever you want to go there.

JAMES

I won't need no license, will I?

ANDREW, III

I'm sure you won't. I've never had one.

JAMES

What if I want to go to somewhere like Jerusalem?

ANDREW, III

He'll have to take you there. A contract is a contract. Let's shake on it. (*shaking hands*)

JAMES

Well let's get going to the Giant Eagle. I need me some socks.

*James helps Andrew, III exit on his
arm leaving the cane behind.*

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 8

(one day before opening night)

SETTING: The ETP Stage side is set up for tech/dress rehearsal with actors in costume and props for the Jessica and Lorenzo moonlit garden scene and the choosing the casket scene with Nerissa and Bassanio.

The three boxes – gold, silver and lead – are now prominently arranged on a sideboard covered with a tapestry-like cloth.

As the lights come up, Jessica and Lorenzo are off to one side miming the rehearsal of their lines. Cherise with her clipboard and Jeff are seated stage front discussing blocking concerns. Nerissa and Bassanio are standing on opposite sides of the table. Nerissa/Leonora is trying very hard not to make eye contact, and Bassanio/Geno is trying to engage her attention.

GENO *(wolf whistle)*

Heh, beautiful! Remember me?

Leonora looks in the opposite direction while Geno cups his hands to make a megaphone and speaks with a mock echoing effect.

I'm m m way way way over here here.

CHERISE *(stepping forward)*

OK, you guys, stop horsing around; you're up first. Stan, *(speaking to the unseen sound director)* run through some options. Let's see where the shadows fall. One thing.

She moves the two actors to switch sides.

That makes more sense, doesn't it, Jeff?

JEFF

Yep.

CHERISE

Leonora, why don't you sing while Stan is fiddling with the lights?

GENO

What do you want me to do?

CHERISE

Just stand there and try not to scratch yourself.

GENO

These tights itch.

CHERISE

They wouldn't if you wore underpants.

GENO

Note taken.

CHERISE

Leonora, you can start singing now.

LEONORA (*beginning to sing*)

Tell me where is fancy bred,
In the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?

It is in the eyes engendered,
Where fancy thrives by gazing fed;
Is it gold, silver or is it lead?

GENO: *(talking over her singing)*

I'm sorry I scared you with the proposal thing. I can't stop thinking about you. You got such great legs.

LEONORA *(ignoring him continuing to sing)*

GENO

Just tell me what I did wrong and I won't do it. You said you're crazy about me one minute and when I re. .cipro. .cate (that's the right word, right?) you run away like a . . . like a . . mouse.

LEONORA: *(interrupting her singing)*

So you think I'm a mouse?

GENO

OK more like a deer or a beaver maybe.

LEONORA

(ignoring the comment resumes singing)

GENO

Do you know what I wish?

LEONORA *(interrupting her singing)*

That the Pirates win the World Series?

GENO

Sure that too. Guess what else.

LEONORA: *(genuinely irritated now)*

Stop being so tedious just tell me.

GENO *(pointing to the three boxes)*

You know this box thing with the picture in it of the girl I'm supposed to marry.

He opens the gold box to show her.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

There's nothing in it. Jeez, the prop lady screwed up.

LEONORA (*opening the lead box, taking out Portia's picture*)
Lead, lead, lead.

GENO

Yah, that one. What I wish is that this was not pretend and that your picture was in that box and you **had to** marry me because that was the deal.

He reaches for the picture. Leonora comes closer to hand it to him and he puts his right hand around her waist, embraces and kisses her. Leonora resists for a few seconds, breaks away and then returns to kiss him back.

LEONORA (*stepping back*)

We can't go any further down this path without my telling you the truth about myself.

GENO (*impetuously*)

You're dying of an incurable disease; you're an illegal alien; you've got crabs; I know you got pregnant from a toilet seat once. Am I getting warm?

LEONORA

No actually a much greater impediment.

GENO

I don't care what it is. Right here, right now I vow, before you say another word, that I will marry you whatever it is and will love you forever . . .
(*brief silence because there is no response*) . . . plus one day.

LEONORA: (*breathing deeply to gain courage*)

Geno, my love, the big secret is . . . (*starting to lift up the front of her skirt but then thinking better of it*) The big secret is . . . that I am Jewish.

GENO (*horrified*)

Oh my, God. That would kill my mother.

He runs off the stage.

CHERISE

That's it for you kids.

Leonora walks off in the opposite direction from Geno.

Stan, open with the soft spot on Lorenzo then as Jessica speaks expand it to include her. Start the violin . . . (*violin begins*) play more softly as if coming from inside the house. Lorenzo, begin.

LORENZO - [Kwin]

The moon shines bright.
In such a night as this,
The sweet wind did gently kiss the trees.

In such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls
And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressida lay that night.

JESSICA - [Clare]

In such a night
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself
And ran dismay'd away.

LORENZO - [Kwin]

In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew
And with an unthrifty love did run away from Venice
As far as Belmont.

JESSICA - [Clare]

In such a night

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith
And ne'er a true one.

LORENZO - [Kwin]

In such a night
Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
Slander her love, and he forgave it her.

JESSICA - [Clare]

I would out-night you, but we must go in
to ready the house for Portia's return

CHERISE

At this point I think you two should kiss.

LORENZO – [Kwin] With pleasure. *(They kiss.)*

Sweet soul let's in.
And yet no matter: why should we go in?
We should bring the music forth out into the air.

CHERISE

Very good. Let the music play on for a bit, and then let's break. *(music plays on)* That's it. *(to the lighting director)* I prefer a darker blue tint for moonlight. *(to Jeff)* How do you think it's going?

JEFF

Right on course it seems to me, but what do I know and I'm worried about Milt.

Milt is in his Shylock costume in the background with Samantha dressed as Portia, the male lawyer, running trial scene lines.

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

CHERISE

He'll handle it. Jeff, . . . have you ever kissed a black woman?

JEFF

No, but I've always wanted to . . . aw oh . . . that did not come out right. And what about you?

CHERISE

Yes, . . . I have kissed a black woman. But a white man never.

JEFF

Let's start this conversation over. *(bowing slightly as if asking for a dance)*
May I have the honor of this first . . .

She assertively kisses him.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 9

(Opening night)

SETTING On the Board Room side of the stage James and Andrew III are sitting next to each other on the sofa. Cherise and Jeff are sitting at the board room table. On the ETP Stage side the play is in progress in a sort of dumb show with the Jewish wedding canopy being set up. Jessica takes off the necklace that she is wearing and hands it to Shylock. Shylock will hug her. Shylock then helps Lorenzo put on the kittel (special white men's wedding garment) Then hands Lorenzo the badeken – (the bride's veil) and shows him how to place it over Jessica's head.

Portia enters with Bassanio; Antonio (Andrew IV) is trailing them. She is dressed rather plainly and is wearing her prosthetic nose.

PORTIA - [Samantha]

It is dawn and our nuptials, Sweet Bassanio, are prefigured by this love between Jessica and her Lorenzo.
I shall fetch the rabbi and all shall be well.
Father Shylock, the scene is left to your direction.

(Shylock [Milt] starts by handing Antonio [Andrew IV] a yarmulke which he does not put on. Then Shylock hands out to the rest of the men yarmulkes who all put them on. Portia returns dressed like a rabbi.)

SHYLOCK - [Milt]

So let's make a new beginning.

(Under the canopy, Shylock starts Jessica off as she walks around Lorenzo three times. Then Portia hands

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Lorenzo the ring that she has taken from her own hand which Lorenzo will put on Jessica's index finger of her right hand.)

LORENZO - [Kris]

Behold you are betrothed unto me with this ring according to the law of Moses.

PORTIA - [Samantha]

And these are the Blessings that this wedding brings to us.

God, gladden the hearts of these beloved friends, as you made the first man and woman rejoice in the garden of Eden long ago. Blessed are You, God, who causes the groom and bride to rejoice.

Blessed are You, God, who lights the world with happiness and contentment, love and companionship, peace and friendship, bridegroom and bride. Let the mountains dance! Let the gates ring with the sounds of joy, the song of merriment and delight.

(Shylock turns the couple to face the audience and places the linen wrapped glass that Nerissa hands him on the stage floor. Lorenzo stomps on it.)

PORTIA - [Samantha]

Mazel Tov! Strike up the band!

Begin the Klezmer band wedding dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQdN12bRRO0>

The fiddler and Klezmer clarinet player lead everyone in a choreographed wedding dance that flows into curtain calls with rhythmic clapping from the audience. Milt at first stands out of the way but is brought forward by

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

Leo to stand next to Samantha then goes back to bring Geno forward to stand next to Samantha.

SAMANTHA *(aside to Milt before Leo returns)*
Well, Milt, what's next?

MILT
So, have you ever played a Polish nun before?

Leo brings Geno up to stand next to Samantha and makes a formal introduction.

LEO
Samantha and Geno, I'd like to introduce you to my father, Milt Tannenbaum.

MILT
And let me introduce you to this very fine actress, my son, Leo.

(Leo takes off his wig.)

SAMANTHA and GENO: *(Obviously shocked)*
Son???

BLACKOUT

Lights back up

(The entire cast lines up for their final real bows. Cherise, Jeff, James and Andrew III on the Board Room side step forward and bow. They then exit stage left arm in arm, two by two – James and Andrew III followed by Cherise and Jeff.

Then on the ETP Stage side Lorenzo (Andrew IV) and Jessica (Clare) step forward, bow and exit stage right

The Merchant of Pittsburgh

followed by followed by Shylock (Milt) and Portia (Samantha) followed finally by Bassanio (Geno) and Nerissa (Leo – Leonora). Before they exit, Geno turns to Leo, takes the wig that Leo is holding and puts it on his own head.)

Final Curtain