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## **The Ambivalence of the Racist Insult in the Crisis of Acceptance and Understanding: Facing the Other through the Slur in Benali's *Yasser* (2001) and Chalmers' *Two Merchants* (2011)**

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Politically, *The Merchant of Venice* has been claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians as a narrative supporting their respective causes. Dana Lori Chalmers, *Two Merchants* (2011)

### **Introduction**

It is a well-known fact that *The Merchant of Venice* makes the spectator, the director, and the actor cringe. It is not officially labelled a tragedy, but it is generally agreed among academics that it is not a traditional comedy either. This play is therefore a source of confusion, malaise, uncertainty, and it makes us fear judgement and misunderstanding. What is truly at stake in the play is the status given to the racist insults—their creation, reception, scope, and dramatic function. The complexity of racist insults is influential in the elusive characterization of the play. It seems relevant to explore the complex pragmatics of racist insults and to point out the fact that neither Manichean sectarianism nor prejudiced bigotry rise from the text. The ambiguity of racist insults is what drew the attention of Abd-el-Kader Benali<sup>1</sup> and Dana Lori Chalmers.<sup>2</sup> Benali's work, *Yasser*, is a rewriting of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. This two-act play was written in 2001 in Dutch and then published for the 2008 Edinburg Festival Fringe<sup>3</sup>. Benali's cultural appropriation echoes Chalmers' *Two Merchants* subtitled "an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*". In this play, Chalmers used the lines from Shakespeare's play and cut some passages to shorten the performance. She decided to have two performances of the play in a row for each show with one difference between them—the

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<sup>1</sup> He is a Moroccan-Dutch playwright and writer who published two novels *Waiting by the Sea* (1996) and *The Long-awaited* (2002) dealing with the issue of identity, in particular with the status of the immigrant. He was the recipient of the Lubberhuizen Prize in 1996 and the Libris Literature Prize in 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The adaptation *Two Merchants* was a doctoral research project, "The Play's the Thing", that Dana Lori Chalmers carried out for her PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies, "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? : Daring Entertainment to Challenge Ideologies of the Arab-Israeli Conflict", University of British Columbia, 2014, under the supervision of Professor Stephen Heatley (2014).

<sup>3</sup> It was directed by Teuniek van der Sluijs and produced with the Studio Dubbleagent theatre company. The role of Yasser Mansour was performed by William al-Gardi. The first performance of the play took place in 2008 at the Assembly Rooms, for the Edinburg Festival Fringe. The play was also produced in Chopin Theatre, Chicago (USA) and Arcola Theatre, London (UK), respectively in 2008 and 2009.



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majority community would turn into the minority community. Antonio's community was made of Jewish Israelis for an hour and turned into Muslim Palestinians during the last hour of the performance. Whether an adaptation or a cultural appropriation, these works throw a new light on Shakespeare's play and invite the spectators to question their own biases about the controversial issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In both works, scenes of racist insults turn out to be ambivalent—they do not merely express violence or hostility, but they paradoxically become a bonding trigger between antagonistic characters. This paper aims at showing that the staging of racist insults in Benali's *Yasser* (2001) and Chalmers' *Two Merchants* (2011) evoke Derrida's theory of "hostpality".<sup>4</sup> Significantly, racial slurs do not only display hostility, but they also create the possibility of empathy for the two rival communities of the plays—they turn out to be unexpected ethical acts as they are staged in both productions. We will first discuss the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the wall of non-communication as the context of two contemporary appropriations/adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. Then we will move on to examine the issue of casting politics and the status given to racist insults in *Yasser*, emphasizing the shift from showing their insulting effect to revealing their ethical potential. Eventually, we will analyse the discrepancy between insults and the setting made visible on stage in *Two Merchants*, studying the aesthetics of a scenography in anamorphosis to show how "hostpality" emerges.

### **1. The Israeli-Palestinian Crisis and the Wall of Non-communication as the Context of Two Contemporary Appropriations of *The Merchant of Venice***

Often introduced as one of the most controversial issues of contemporary current events, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict relies on a crisis of non-acceptance and mis-understanding. In 1947, Zionist leaders decided to proceed with the project of creation of Israel with the support of the British government which obtained authorization from the covenant of the League of Nations to administer a mandate over Palestine in 1920. At the end of the British mandate, a war started between Zionists and the indigenous population who refused to accept colonization of their lands. The Arab population lost the war and were denied the right to self-determination and self-government for they were expelled from their homes and became refugees. This event,

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) 45.



seen as the war of independence for Israel, became known as the Palestinian Al-Nakba (the catastrophe) and started the fight for the right to return, known as the Al-Awda. The issue at stake in this conflict is that Israel regards this right to return, for the displaced populations, as a negation of its very legitimacy. The colonization of Palestine turned the indigenous population into strangers forcing them to leave their lands. The displacement of Arab populations and the creation of illegal settlements in the Gaza strip and the West Bank contributed to alienate the Palestinian nation for decades. Moreover, the state of Israel also decided to discriminate against people of Arab descent by depriving them of their mobility rights through the establishment of an official apartheid.

Shakespeare's play is not based on Manichean characterization and the racist insults used from beginning to end do not target exclusively Jewish characters. Both Antonio and Shylock insult each other and both resort to the devil trope to attack the other. In the same scene, Antonio insults Shylock by turning him into the devil when the latter attempts to convert him to his reading of the Bible: "The *devil* can cite Scripture for his purpose." (I, iii, 94; emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Ironically, Shylock rejects Antonio's invitation to have dinner in his home by describing such a place as Hell: "[...] the habitation in which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the *devil* into." (I, iii, 354; emphasis added). As they both use racist insults, Christians and Jews appear as similar figures—so similar that Portia cannot tell one from the other: "Which is the merchant here, and which is the Jew?" (IV, i, 170). The play does not introduce Christians and Jews as mortal enemies involved in a clash of civilizations, but it points out the extent to which their identities are blurred and connected. Thus, the play emphasizes the complex relationship between two communities as a clash of centrifugal and centripetal forces. Shylock and Antonio's link is characterised by hospitality and hostility. There are attempts to reach out to the other, as with Antonio inviting Shylock to break bread with him in his own house as well as attempts to hurt the other's feelings, as does Antonio humiliating Shylock with words of abuse. Shakespeare's play relies on dialectics of hostility and hospitality, which is the very foundation of the complex relationship of Jews and Christians—introduced as interdependent communities throughout the play.

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<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* John Drakakis, ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2006). All quotations from the play follow this edition. Act, scene and line numbers are in parentheses in the text.



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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the result of the failure of international diplomacy and the symptom of a peace process in a dead-end. In this context of political immobility, Benali and Chalmers decided to commit themselves to set peace in motion through their adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. As committed directors, they acknowledged the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “a limit situation” that Jean-Paul Sartre defines as a universal and extreme situation posing an ethical dilemma. Interestingly, both adaptations seem to be in keeping with what Sartre had in mind when he wrote his essay “For a Theatre of Situations” in 1947.<sup>6</sup> He argued for a theatre focusing on situations and story-telling rather than on characters themselves. Indeed, Benali and Chalmers were interested in the paradoxical situations that the plot put the characters in, rather than in the characters themselves—they were fascinated by the interactions between characters and the choices they made in an ethical predicament or a “limit situation” to use Sartre’s terminology.

They both chose to tackle the issues of the play differently in the appropriation process.<sup>7</sup> First, Benali’s work involved an actual rewriting of the play which led him to change the text and only include a few lines from Shakespeare’s play. We could argue that Benali managed to produce a “revision” of Shakespeare’s play as Adrienne Rich put it: “Revision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction [...]”.<sup>8</sup> Benali is looking at Shakespeare’s play through the eyes of the eponymous character of his play who turns out to be a contemporary Palestinian actor. This “revision” or rewriting is meant to have a dialogic relationship with Shakespeare’s play for they enlighten each other. However, Chalmers’ innovation was not about the text itself that she merely cut without making

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<sup>6</sup> “[I]f it’s true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what we have to show in the theatre are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be. The character comes later, after the curtain has fallen [...]. The situation is an appeal: it surrounds us, offering us solutions which it’s up to us to choose. And in order for the decision to be deeply human, in order for it to bring the whole man into play, we have to stage limit situations, that is, situations which present alternatives one of which leads to death. [...] [In theatre] all the spectators are united, situations must be found which are so general that they are common to all. Immerse men in these universal and extreme situations which leave them only a couple of ways out, arrange things so that in choosing the way out they choose themselves, and you’ve won—the play is good. It is through particular situations that each age grasps the human situation and the enigmas human freedom must confront.” (Jean-Paul Sartre, “For a Theatre of Situations,” trans. Richard McLeary, *Modern Theories of Drama*, ed. George W. Brandt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 43.

<sup>7</sup> According to Huang and Rivlin’s definition of “appropriation” as “an ethical stance”: “[...] appropriation carries strong overtones of agency, potentially, for the appropriator, it can convey political, cultural, and in our contention, ethical advocacy”, Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 10.

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” *College English*, 34.1 (1972): 18.



any other changes to the lines. She put the emphasis on the creation of a symbolic scenography setting the scene in Jerusalem. She provided the spectators with a new interpretation of the play thanks to the change of setting. However, she chose to add a subtitle to her play to emphasize the dialogical relationship with Shakespeare's play pointing out it was "an adaptation from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*".

## **2. The Issue of Casting Politics and the Status Given to Racist Insults in *Yasser*: From Showing Their Insulting Effect to Revealing Their Ethical Potential**

In the opening sequence of the play,<sup>9</sup> Benali draws the spectator's attention to a significant scene in which Yasser reports a case of racial profiling at the airport. Through the character of Yasser, the audience is shown the power of the abusing gaze as well as the insulting effect felt by the abused. He tells the story of how custom officers treated him as he arrived in an Israeli airport to play Shylock in a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. His face was scrutinized by the custom officers who took a long time to stare at him and even glare at him. They were looking for a sign of physical resemblance with an Islamic extremist. They were trying to find a specific phenotype to confirm the identification of Yasser as a terrorist. After this examination, the custom officers decided that Yasser fit racist stereotypes, and so they put him in temporary detention as he was identified as a potential threat. Their anatomizing gaze had the effect of cutting Yasser's face to pieces and of dissecting him only to focus on his nose—thus stigmatized through their own act of looking. Yasser was exposed to their abusing gaze and detained without probable cause. This racist gaze is a symbolic racist insult showing how the abuser produces the insult. As Yasser stood on the stage to tell his story to the spectators, he turned his head to show his side profile to the audience. In the background, we could see a framed picture of Yasser Arafat hanging on the wall behind Yasser. As the custom officers were scrutinizing Yasser's face, they took some pictures zooming in on Yasser's nose. Interestingly, the *modus operandi* of the abusing gaze is shown on stage through their taking pictures of Yasser's nose. Benali put his spectators to the test by putting them in the custom officers' shoes. Indeed, spectators can see the side profile of Yasser and, just behind him in the background, the

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed review of the play, see Jessica Apolloni, "Shylock Meets Palestine: Rethinking Shakespeare in Abdelkader Benali's *Yasser*," *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 31.2 (2013): 213-32.



framed picture of Arafat. It is then up to each spectator to adopt or not the abusing gaze of the custom officers.

Yasser is an actor and he was chosen to play Shylock—this opens the question of casting politics. Does the actor have to be or to become Shylock? He tells the audience that he needs to put on a prosthetic nose to become Shylock and that without it he will not be able to do so. However, he informs the audience that his nose was stolen as he was at the airport. The issue at stake now is to see how he can play Shylock without the prosthetic nose. This prop is an artificial device used to augment Yasser's own nose to make it look like a "Jewish" nose. This prop aims at creating a disability or an impairment to make Yasser look disfigured enough to fit the racist stereotypes stigmatizing Jews as having protruding noses. This issue of the prosthetic nose raises the question of whether to embody racist insults or not. The actor can either use props and costumes to make the racist insult a true statement or to emphasize the delusive character of the insult by creating a discrepancy between the racist insult itself and the actor's body on stage. Using a protruding nose gives implicit legitimacy to the racist insult by materializing it into the prop. This urge to get as close as possible to reality is reminiscent of naturalism: the prop would have been used as an index, *i.e.* a performance sign expected to point to the fact that the actor wearing it was Shylock the Jew. Nevertheless, this fails for the nose gets stolen. Therefore, it is not present on stage, but it is not completely absent either. It is worth noticing the spectrality of this item haunting the stage as Shylock appears. By being a striking prop, the nose could be seen as a visual, non-verbal racist insult because it shows a causal link between racist insults and the abused—one causing the other. The non-presence of the prosthetic nose on Yasser's face appears as a symbol of the abusing gaze only perceiving unreal racist fantasies and not reality itself.

In this performance, the racial slur appears as an unexpected bonding trigger pointing out the blurred in-between of the "hostpality" of the childhood memory scene. In the first part of the play, Yasser is both abuser and abused. His not being able to play Shylock without the nose leads him to start an introspection—thus moving on from focusing on Shylock to focus on himself. He remembers a childhood memory and starts picturing it. As a child, he used to indulge in role-playing and impersonation to entertain his friends. He loved playing Yasser Arafat but one day he dared impersonating Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. Because of this, the Israeli police arrested him. His mother bailed him out and was horrified, not because her

child was taken by the police but because on the same day, Israeli soldiers killed her husband and Yasser's father. She was angry at her son for playing a Jew and saw that as a betrayal. His mother was traumatized, and her pain led her to see all Israeli soldiers as the enemy. Contrary to his mother, Yasser remembers what his father taught him about drama:

Those are actors, says my father. They can play anyone. Be anyone. Say anything and get away with it. They even get paid too. When I was your age, I wanted to be an actor. So that by putting on a mask, I could cross all borders. I would learn a new tongue and outlaw kings and presidents. I could meditate between war and peace. Between the living and the dead. I would teach humanity what respect is.<sup>10</sup>

Yasser confesses that he forgot about this lesson and he becomes aware that he does not need the racist prop to play Shylock. When thinking about what happened to him at the airport, Yasser immediately bonds with Shylock and understanding that sharing a traumatic experience of a similar abusing gaze brings them together: “The Arab understands Shylock better than anyone!”<sup>11</sup> At this stage, Yasser takes the hanger with Shylock's costume on it—he is ready to perform, feeling closer to Shylock than he ever did. This scene shows that the abuser needs to look far from himself as Yasser does when, as an actor, he is entrusted with the task of playing Shylock on stage. This leads him to go back to himself and have a closer look. It is precisely this back and forth movement between the self and the other that enables Yasser to change perspectives and break free from the mechanics of the racist insult. As Yasser performs as Shylock, he crosses racist borders bonding with Shylock through the insult. Sharing the same traumatic experience of the abusing gaze leads Yasser to feel closer to Shylock—a solidarity ironically produced by racist insults.

### **3. Showing the Gap Between Words of Abuse and their Staging in *Two Merchants* to Show “Hospitality”**

When characters resort to racist insults, the situation does not involve merely one abuser and one abused. Instead, it involves two groups of people that are connected either to the abuser or to the abused. What is at stake is more than the two individuals facing one another—the scene of racist insult in *Two Merchants* turns the abuser and the abused into representatives of their

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<sup>10</sup> Abd-el-Kader Benali, *Yasser. A Monologue*, trans. Terry Ezra (Amsterdam: Stichting Studio Dubbleagent, 2008) 39.

<sup>11</sup> Benali 42





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own communities.<sup>12</sup> Through the insult, each representative attempts to remember his belonging to a specific community. Indeed, racist insults are closely linked to the nationalist tendencies that shape the identity of a specific community. When it comes to racist insults, memory is therefore fundamental, and particularly for the Israeli and Palestinian communities of *Two Merchants*. On stage, the abuser—whether Israeli or Palestinian—remembers a traumatic event that characterizes his community. The Palestinian traumatic memory is staged through a monument that is placed in centre stage. It is a sculpture of a five-feet tall hand that is clenched into a fist. On its bedrock, one can read the statement “We will return”. These words refer to what is known as “Al-Nakhwa”, i.e. to the hope that Palestinian civilians had when they experienced the “Al-Nakhba”, which means “catastrophe” in Palestinian Arabic. To decipher this reference, we have to bear in mind that in 1948, approximately 750,000 Palestinian civilians were displaced against their will which was unethical, illegitimate and unnecessary. In the performance in which the Palestinians have a majority status and the Israelis a minority status, the Palestinians won the war against the Israelis and were able to prevent the colonization and occupation of their lands. The monument placed centre stage commemorates their victory and the traumatic experience of “Al-Nakhba” for their whole community. On the other hand, the Israelis’ traumatic memory is staged through another monument that is also the sculpture of a gigantic hand. However, two things are different: there is a tattooed number on the wrist of the hand and on the bedrock, one can read “Never again”. This monument is a reminder of the “Shoah”, the traumatic historical event that is part and parcel of the Jewish and Israeli community history. Interestingly, having these two monuments centre stage reminding the spectators of the traumatic catastrophe of each community—“Shoah” in Hebrew and “Al-Nakhba” in Palestinian Arabic—becomes highly significant in the scenes of racist insults. These monuments are the visual reminders of the traumatic memory that triggers the urge to resort to racist insults for the characters on stage. Through them, the spectators are shown that Palestinians and Israelis share the same source of resentment—they are both using racist insults

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<sup>12</sup> Norbert Elias insisted on the specificity of racism: “[it] does not need an objective, specific difference to arise insofar as it is able to create one from scratch. [...] The dominant group projects its domination by excluding outsiders from places of political power and decision-making—this reinforces social harmony and contributes in spreading rumours and prejudice which role is first and foremost to enhance the positive image this group has of itself and on the other hand the negative image they have of any outsider.” Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (London: Sage Publications, 1994) 13-15.



as they still feel the pain of the traumatic memory defining their own communities. We could argue that the stage designer was right to set the monuments centre stage to make them the point of origin of the antagonism between the two communities and so the trigger of racist insults.

Through the performances of *Two Merchants*, Palestinian and Israeli characters alternate as the abusers and abused. Both become at some point the recipients of a racist insult, so they share the experience of being left with an open wound—not a physical injury but a psychological one. On stage, the abused even fall prey to anxiety and a form of existential angst. Chalmers managed to stage the feelings of fear that Palestinians and Israelis experience as racist insults target them. Indeed, the characters share the same fear of alienation and dispossession. The racist insult makes the abused afraid of disappearing or ceasing to exist—therefore, the abused are stricken by a fear of dispossession, for instance, a fear of being denied self-determination or self-government, the fear of being forced out of one's homeland, or the fear of being imprisoned and losing freedom. In performance, one of the abused is part of a community that has a minority status. This community loses its connection to its homeland and so to its past, its tradition and cultural identity. Members of the minority community are forced out of their lands and pushed into segregated areas separated by walls from the living space of the majority community. This restricted mobility contributes to instilling fear of complete annihilation in the minority community. The lack of space given to the minority community is therefore evidence that the majority community tries to alienate the others to make them feel like strangers in their own land. Indeed, because of displacement, the minority community becomes a group of refugees—individuals sharing a language, a culture, a memory but with no land. For refugees who lost their connection to their homeland, the fear of alienation is quite real. Such fear triggers what we could see as the survival instinct of the abused who make their best to keep the memory and cultural traditions of the community alive at all costs. In performance, the abused of the minority community perform symbolic acts of resistance to fight this fear of dispossession.

Chalmers decided to create two different versions of *The Merchant of Venice*—with two performances staged one after the other. In Chalmers' adaptation of Shakespeare's play, there is not one merchant but there are two as the title of the adaptation suggests—*Two Merchants*. The emphasis is then immediately laid on the idea of duality that both the actors and the



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spectators experience. The same actors play the same roles in the two performances but the context changes. In one version of the adaptation, the community that enjoys the majority status is Israeli and Jewish while the other community, made up of Palestinian Muslims, has the minority status. In the second version of the adaptation, the community with the majority status is Palestinian and Muslim while the Jewish and Israeli community becomes the minority one. The actors switch from Israeli Jewish identity to Palestinian Muslim identity—thus duality is experienced by the actors as well as the spectators. By departing from Shakespeare's play, Chalmers leads her spectators into the midst of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Chalmers has developed a theory about the role of drama in the context of political issues—she coins it “Ideologically Challenging Entertainment” or “ICE”. Precisely, it is a kind of performance that questions binary thinking, bigotry, and Manicheanism such as the pattern of “us versus them” that is recurrent in ideologies associated with radicalization, violent conflicts, and terrorism. The point of ICE is to help the audience to challenge their biased opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to shift from prejudice to a rational approach emphasizing parallelism, symmetry, and comparison. Interestingly, with the ICE, *Two Merchants*, Chalmers threw a new light on Shakespeare's play by showing that *The Merchant of Venice* is not a play about anti-Semitism but a play about the complex relationship of two communities attacking themselves but also needing themselves—a paradox that becomes obvious in the scenes of racist insults.

A parallel can be drawn between Antonin Artaud's “Theatre of Cruelty” and Chalmers' theory of ICE. In both these theories, the director attempts to put forward symbolic gestures or inarticulate screams to stage the extremes of human nature. Both Artaud and Chalmers intend to give a certain responsibility to spectators to make them face reality as it is. Theatre is then introduced as a therapy against forms of radicalization such as racist insults. As Artaud put it himself: “[Theatre must] reveal a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized”.<sup>13</sup> Chalmers shares such conception of drama insofar as she values the necessity to make the spectator aware of the violence and the futility of fundamentalism through performance. Eventually both Artaud and Chalmers developed a symbolic scenography to appeal to the spectator's inner voice and not to

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<sup>13</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richard (New-York: Grove Press, 1958) 30.



the voice conditioned by society that exists in every individual. The spectator may reach a state of real consciousness by breaking down the influence of social norms and ideologies. The audience is expected to break free from ideology by putting an end to the duality of the bicameral mind.

## Conclusion

Chalmers' cultural appropriation *Yasser* and Benali's adaptation *Two Merchants* help us to change our perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on Shakespeare's play itself. They analyse the dialectic of alterity and identity through the prism of racist insults. These are not introduced as the symptoms of an unethical relationship between abuser and abused—on the contrary, they are evidence of an unexpected ethical bond between abuser and abused. Insults are defined by their context—even racist insults are closely linked to the context in which they emerge. They may be the sign of a wall preventing communication between two individuals or two groups of people or they may be a bridge facilitating understanding and leading to acceptance. This very ambivalence is obvious in Shakespeare's play as well as in Chalmers and Benali's works. The racial slur is first introduced as a harmful, unethical act meant to humiliate the abused to the point of losing their face. However, on stage, they become more than signs of hostility—they become a bonding trigger making abuser and abused face each other in the ethical experience of empathy. There is a switch from the unethical, insulting effect to the ethical, bonding effect of racist insults. Paradoxically, racial slurs become ethical triggers leading antagonists to what Emmanuel Lévinas called “the epiphany of the face”.<sup>14</sup> In Chalmers' and Benali's works, insults enable antagonists to transcend hostility and accept the other in an act of hospitality and empathy—in an “ethical relation” that Lévinas defines as the “face-to-face”.<sup>15</sup> Through the performances of *Yasser* and *Two Merchants*, the creative crew made up of directors, scenographers, and stage designers worked together to create a specific setting in which racist insults would mean something different from one might expect. The scenography created for both performances becomes a space in which racist insults do not draw people apart but precisely draw them closer. Chalmers and Benali's work is an act of political

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991) 199.

<sup>15</sup> Lévinas 202.



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resistance against sectarian ideologies—they “write back” against dominant discourse about *The Merchant of Venice* and about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Yasser* and *Two Merchants* emphasise the dialectic between past and present, self and other, abuser and abused, Shakespeare’s play and its adaptations—thus pointing to a back-and-forth motion capable of bringing down dogmatic ideologies. What is at stake here is to show the paradox between impervious political borders and the permeable ontological borders between the native and the stranger, the self and the other, the abuser and the abused.

We can only deplore the fact that President Donald Trump had not had the opportunity to attend these productions before officially recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Those two productions could have taught him that building walls will not help solve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and that it is never too late to build bridges to make peace—even with racist insults.

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