



District Merchants

by Aaron Josner



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

BY JOHN HEIMBUCH



IN REPERTORY
NOV. 17 - DEC. 10





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ARTISTIC NOTE

Aaron Posner's *District Merchants: An Uneasy Comedy* (2016) and John Heimbuch's *William Shakespeare's Land of the Dead* (2008) differ in tone and theme, but both are comedies, both draw on Shakespeare, and both make a historical situation feel contemporary. *District Merchants* is based on *The Merchant of Venice*, but the plot is focused around the theme of overcoming prejudice. Living in 1870s Washington, D.C., its characters see themselves and others through preconceptions about gender, race (Black, White, biracial), ethnicity (Jewish, Christian, Irish), and birth (free or enslaved; native or immigrant). Whether they will overcome these prejudices is the play's central question. The Civil War ended slavery, but postwar divisions between geographic, racial, religious, and economic groups became entrenched. From the play's opening lines, those characters are also actors who address us—people living perhaps 150 years after them—to ask whether our society is better than theirs. What would they think of today's growing antisemitism, conflicts about reparations for slavery, distrust of immigrants, disparities of wealth? Do we “look behind,” in the words of Antoine? That is, do we look past what is skin deep? Nessa (female, Black) has an answer: “Love me That . . . is how you heal the world.” Her last three words are a translation of the Hebrew *tikkun olam*, which asserts a duty to mend a broken world. Even though it may make one “uneasy,”

District Merchants is a comedy because it ends with marriages, which are good for the continuation of society. *Land of the Dead*, on the other hand, is a comedy because it's hilarious, largely because it is full of incongruities and unexpected turns of plot arising from the appearance of zombies in 1599 London. Its Shakespeare is a businesslike playwright, actor, and company shareholder struggling with several problems, only one being a series of unfortunate events involving “ferocity and death, though not in that order.” Nearly every central character is surprisingly calm about the attack, as if they all have seen so much tumult in their lifetimes that they can't get worked up by this new source of disorder and death. Life in England was dangerous, which is why Shakespeare's history plays are full of murders, battles, betrayals, and rebellions. Even Francis Bacon, who sees the new catastrophe most clearly, focuses on regaining Queen Elizabeth's favor. Yet we know that this new threat is very bad. We've seen zombie movies, so we know what to expect. They don't. The plays Shakespeare modestly says he writes just for his own time, but one of his best-loved sonnets claims that “Not marble nor the gilded monuments Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” His plays have survived, including the ones he wrote after 1599, so perhaps there is hope for his own survival. Shakespeare lovers will relish the many inside jokes and allusions, but there is no need to have special knowledge to follow the plot, understand the characters, or enjoy the fun. However, some historical background may be useful, so be sure to check the section providing some for each play.

—Susan Petit



ARTISTIC NOTE

District Merchants


In the 1870s America was still recovering from the Civil War, which had ended in 1865. The situation of formerly enslaved Black Americans, now officially deemed citizens, was a central concern. The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, had promised Blacks citizenship and equality before the law, Black representatives were elected to state and national offices, and Black businesses grew. Unfortunately, although Reconstruction was supposed to unify the country and aid newly emancipated citizens in various ways, including by providing reparations (often referred to as “40 acres and a mule”), white Southern landowners became the major beneficiaries of government programs.

The economics of the time were unpredictable, the stock market volatile. The many new immigrants spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and nursed a range of prejudices brought from their countries of origin. It was a time of great opportunities for expansion and material progress but also one of great failures in human relations and social responsibilities. The country needed to find new practices and develop new sensibilities if it was to meet its human obligations, and it did so very imperfectly.

William Shakespeare’s Land of the Dead

By the summer of 1599, Shakespeare’s plays included *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV* (Parts 1 and 2), and *Henry V*, all of which *Land of the Dead* alludes to. There are also references to plays he had not yet written: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a short play almost entirely in prose showing Falstaff in love, is of uncertain date. That summer, Francis Bacon, a courtier as well as writer, philosopher, and wit, was out of favor with Queen Elizabeth; the government position of Robert Cecil, Bacon’s cousin and rival at court, would correspond roughly to that of the prime minister today. People who believe that Shakespeare did not write the plays he is credited with often think that Bacon wrote them, or perhaps the Earl of Oxford. England was in the midst of two wars, one against Spain, which began in 1585 and was threatening to heat up, and one in Ireland, where Catholics were rebelling against Protestant English rule, which had disestablished the Irish Catholic church in favor of the Church of England. Although Catholicism was outlawed, many English subjects were suspected of being Catholic and risked execution for practicing their religion.

Besides wars and possible religious persecution, Elizabethan Londoners faced plague, which had closed the theatres in 1592-93 and continued to kill Londoners from time to time, though theatres could remain open if there were fewer than 30 or 40 plague deaths a week. On the positive side, the Great Fire of London didn’t happen until 1666, and London Bridge has never fallen down. In 1599 it was the only bridge that crossed the Thames from London to the theatres in Southwark, where the Globe had just opened. — Susan Petit



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS



John Heimbuch is the author of a dozen plays based mainly on the works of other writers. Their titles include *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *A Midwinter Night's Revel*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *Or the White Whale*. He has performed in and directed many plays—notably a one-person rendition of *Beowulf*—and is an independent film producer. In addition to being the artistic director of Walking Shadow Theatre Company in Minneapolis, he also performs with the Minneapolis-St. Paul rock band Bad September, which calls itself a group telling stories against the backdrop of “steampunk alternate history.”



Aaron Posner is a professor in the Department of Performing Arts at American University in Washington, D.C. Like Heimbuch, he has been a resident theatre director and has guest directed in regional theatres around the country. Also like Heimbuch, he is best known for plays which are closely based on other works. Among them are *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Chosen*, adaptations of novels by Chaim Potok. More recently Posner has veered from closely following his sources to letting his imagination be inspired freely by them, notably in *Stupid Fucking Bird*, which is drawn from Chekhov's *The Seagull*, and *No Sisters*, which imagines the lives of the minor characters in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

District Merchants is sponsored by the generous donation of Kimberly Wadycki

William Shakespeare's The Land of the Dead is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals on behalf of Samuel French, Inc.
www.concordtheatricals.com

District Merchants was originally commissioned and produced by Folger Theatre at Folger Shakespeare Library (Janet Alexander Griffin, Artistic Producer), Washington, D.C., 2016 DISTRICT MERCHANTS was developed at The New Harmony Project (Play development team: Michael Garcés, Michele Osherow, Ayanna Thompson, Erin Weaver)

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Pati Bristow

Lance Müller

Set Designer

Louis Stone-Collonge

Lighting Designer

Val Zvinyatskovsky

Sound Designer

Sinjin Jones

SHOW RUNTIMES

District Merchants:

2 hrs. & 15 min. with
15 min. intermission

Land of the Dead:

90 minutes

District Merchants

by Aaron Posner

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S THE LAND OF THE DEAD

by John Heimbuch

CAST

William Shakespeare's The Land of the Dead Cast

JM Appleby... Sir Robert Cecil

Marc Berman... Sir Francis Bacon

William J. Brown III... William Shakespeare

Helena G. Clarkson... Queen Elizabeth

Arturo Dirzo... Richard Burbage

Nique Eagen... Kate Braithwaite

Tom Farley... Dr. John Dee

Annamarie MacLeod... Kemp

Olga Molina... Rice

Adam C. Torrian... John Sinklo/Soldier 1

Kelly Weber Barraza... Soldier 2

District Merchants Cast

JM Appleby... Antoine DuPre

Marc Berman... Shylock

William J. Brown III... Finn

Nique Eagen... Nessa

Annamarie MacLeod... Portia

Michaela Stewart... Jessica

Adam C. Torrian... Lancelot

Reggie Washington... Benjamin

Zombies... **Raymond Alvarez, Syeda Huq,**

Max Mahle, Vic Prosak,

Erika Robertson



CAST



JM Appleby (SIR ROBERT CECIL / ANTOINE DUPRE) is very grateful to be returning to The Pear Theater, having previously performed in *Frankenstein: Unbound* and *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea*. He is beyond excited to get back to work and making magic with other creatives. JM was once a part of the Beach Blanket Babylon cast for over six years. Still craving that energy from the stage life, JM is ready for the fulfillment he receives after every curtain call.



Marc Berman (SIR FRANCIS BACON / SHYLOCK) is honored to join Pear Theatre. Shylock has been a bucket list role, and the dream is real! After being in Sacramento for a decade, Marc moved back to the Bay Area and took the theater world by storm. Performing in over 30 shows in the past decade, the roles have been strewn across the spectrum. Favorites include Napoleon in *Animal Farm* with Role Players Ensemble, Master Ford in *Merry Wives of Windsor* with Curtain Theater, Micky in *Greetings* with Pacifica Spindrift Players, Von Rothbart in *Duck Lake* with Piano Fight, and recently Jack Straw in *Scarecrow For Hire* with Pinole Community Players. Marc owns his own make-up design company (Seduction Make-up). He wishes to thank his consort Lisa, stepson Aidan and son Xander for the constant support.



William J. Brown III (WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE / FINN) is pleased to return to the Pear having last performed there as Jerry in *Betrayal*. More recently he was seen in the Pear Co-productions with Perspective Theatre Company of *Richard II* (York), and *Somewhere* (Corin). He is thrilled that The Pear continues to push the boundaries of South Bay theatre and he is thrilled to be a small part of it. Other roles include: *Hamlet* (Hamlet); *Fighting Mac* (Fighting Mac); *Othello* (Roderigo); *A Message* (John); *Bach at Leipzig* (Steindorf); *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Bottom, Lysander, Demetrius, Starveling); and *On the Waterfront* (Swiftly the Pigeon). It is important that you know...he HATES raspberries with the fire of 1,000 suns.

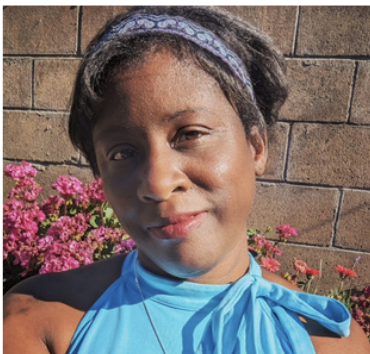
CAST



Helena G. Clarkson (QUEEN ELIZABETH) is thrilled to be elevated to royalty in this production - as the last time she was seen on stage at The Pear (in *Pygmalion*), she was a simple servant. She almost got to perform in *Curious Incident*- but a horrible pandemic hit (luckily it didn't involve zombies)!



Arturo Dirzo (BURBAGE / FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER) is an actor and fight choreographer thrilled to return to the Pear stage. Arturo has appeared in a number of the Bard's works and love-letter shows to the Bard including *The Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *R&J*, *As You Like It* and the Scottish Play. Past favorite shows: *The One Hour Star Wars Show* (Luke Skywalker, Dragon) 3 *Musketeers* (Cardinal's guard, CLTC), *12th Night* (Sir Andrew, SVS) and *The Witches Promise* (Captain of the Guards, Birmingham Rep)



Nique Eagen (KATE / NESSA) is back for more onstage shenanigans with the Pear after being seen last season as "Danielle" in *Dontrell*, *Who Kissed the Sea* and "Justine/Safie" in *Frankenstein: Unbound*. She was also in *Pear Slices*, where her favorite role was "Fannie Lou Hamer". She loves working at the Pear for the awesome friendships and the fabulous show-themed beverages. Nique is a die-hard Steeler fan from Pittsburgh, PA, who majored in Musical Theatre at Point Park University. She has graced the stages of Pittsburgh, New York City, and the Bay Area and her most recent production was City Lights Theatre's world premiere play, *Toxic*. You can follow her on Instagram @nique33. This theatre adventure is dedicated to Charles, Toddles, Ted, and Martin. Bay Area theatre just isn't the same without you.

CAST



Tom Farley (DR. JOHN DEE) is a professional storyteller with Spontaneous Combustion <www.spont.com>, a bookseller with EarthLight, and a teaching artist with Palo Alto Children's Theatre. He is a co-author of "Earthcare for Children", a curriculum for Quaker meetings. Tom received his MA in Theatre from San Francisco State University, thesis project "Improvisation & Quakerism." He worked as an actor, director, and technical director in Marin County before moving to Redwood City. Roles in local theatres include: Marvin (*Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* – Menlo Players Guild), Reginald Tasker (*Bad Seed* – Stage One), Judge Gaffney (*Harvey* – Palo Alto Players), Lord Caversham (*An Ideal Husband* – Pear), Captain Cat and other voices (*Under Milk Wood* – Pear), Dr. Chumley (*Harvey* – San Leandro Players), and over 200 dinner mysteries with Mystery by Design in San Jose and at Angelicas in Redwood City.



Annamarie MacLeod (KEMP/ PORTIA) is happy to be back at the Pear! Ms. MacLeod has performed, among other roles, as *Hamlet* in *Hamlet*, four of the roles in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5 roles in *Richard 2*, Biondello and the Pedant in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Margaret in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Emilia in *Othello*, Desdemona in Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*, Sylvia in *Sylvia*, Heloise in *Abelard & Heloise*, Ruth in *And Baby Makes 7*, Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, and Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*. She has worked locally with Perspective Theatre Company, the San Francisco Shakespeare Festival, the Santa Cruz Shakespeare Festival, Pacific Repertory Theatre, Bus Barn Stage Company, Woman's Will, the New Conservatory Theatre Center, theatre Q, the Ragged Wing Ensemble, and Dragon Productions. She trained in NYC at AMDA and in London at RADA. She also writes and performs solo work.

CAST



Olga Molina (RICE, U/S: QUEEN / U/S: JESSICA & PORTIA) is an actress, improviser and voice-over artist from Barcelona and she's super excited to return to the Pear Theater, where she most recently portrayed Beta in *Frankenstein: Unbound*, and Myhrra and Hunger in *Metamorphoses*. Other of her favorite theatre credits include Indigo at Inferno Theatre's *Quantum Desire*, and the former queen of France, Marie Antoniette, in *The Revolutionists* with Palo Alto Players. In 2019 she produced and hosted the ShortLived Theatre Contest at PianoFight, reaching the finals the previous year as an actress with *Dear Gloria*. She has also performed with Secret Improv Society and has depicted several different characters (Cinderella, a spy Greek Goddess, a Christmas evil rag doll, a nerd gamer, a crazy bohemian slam poet... you name it!) in other shows like Pint Sized Plays, MixTape Show, Holidays With a Twist, Music Scene, and How to Give a Sh*t... Or Not! among others. Before moving to the US in 2017, she studied theatre drama in the Barcelona Theatre School, founded the popular improv company Improtopia, performed in the award-winning French film *Evolution*, and in several theatre plays around Spain.



Michaela Stewart (JESSICA) is so excited to be making her Pear Theater debut! She is currently a member of the Education Workgroup at the San Francisco Shakespeare Festival and a teaching artist with EnActe Arts. She has also worked for many years with Los Altos Stage Company and Los Altos Youth Theatre. Michaela is an award-winning short film director and screenwriter and holds a BFA from Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts and Second City's Harold Ramis Film School. Michaela is also a certification-pending intimacy coordinator with Intimacy Directors and Coordinators.

CAST



Adam C. Torrian (JOHN SINKLO / LANCELOT) is grateful to be making his debut at The Pear! A Modesto native, Adam made his Bay Area debut last year as Henry Bolingbroke in African-American Shakespeare Company's *Richard II* and was most recently seen as Corporal Ellis in *A Soldier's Play* at Altarena Playhouse. Other favorite roles include the title role in *Othello* with Merced Shakespearefest, Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* with Sankofa Theatre Company, Dr. John Prentiss in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* with Gallo Center Repertory Company, and John in *The Whipping Man* with Prospect Theatre Project.



Reggie Washington (BENJAMIN) is a Bay Area transplant, originally from New Jersey and new to acting. He spent the first ten months of 2023 in film. As much as he loved his experience so far behind a camera, he always felt he could never truly call himself an actor until he tried theatre. With extreme excitement and humility, he is happy to have been selected to play the role of Benjamin Bassanio in his first play, *District Merchants*.



Kelly Weber Barraza (SOLDIER 2). You might be more familiar with Kelly's voice than her stage presence at The Pear as you may have occasionally heard such commanding lines from the stage manager's booth like, "Please keep off the stage!", or "Do NOT touch the props!" Kelly was last seen performing on the Pear stage as the sparring partner in *Collective Rage*. She was also "Kelley" the stage manager in *A Millionth Production of a Christmas Carol* (so meta). Prior to the Pear, you may have been lucky enough to catch her doing such rousing performances in *The Ugly Duckling* and *Stone Soup* at her elementary school, or as "Iago" in *Othello* for her Junior year English class assignment....but this is highly unlikely. Kelly gives her love to her incredibly supportive husband, Michael, and their fur babies: Kiyap, Sopaipilla, Houdini, and Baxter.

PRODUCTION TEAM

Sinjin Jones (Director) is a storytelling artist and the Executive Artistic Director of The Pear Theatre. A director and writer, he always feels lucky when he is able to be on stage! Favorite roles include Benjamin in *District Merchants* by Aaron Posner, Daniel Stubbs in *Fairfield* by Eric Coble, and his run as another Benjamin in *Eight Nights* by Jennifer Maisel at The Pear.

Kelly Weber Barraza (Stage & Production Manager) is ecstatic to be in her 10th season here at The Pear Theatre. Some of her favorite Pear productions are *Noises Off*, *Taking Steps*, *Eight Nights*, *August: Osage County*, and *What You Will* to name a few. Other favorite productions: *Bright Star* (PAP), *Yellow Face* (LASC), *The Bridges of Madison County* (SBMT), and working with the "Misfit of Magic", Ed Alonzo. Kelly gives her love to her incredibly supportive husband, Michael, and their fur babies: Kiyap, Sopaipilla, Houdini, and Baxter.

Louis Stone-Collonge (Set Designer and Technical Director) In sixth grade (1979) Louis began working with his father building sets at local theater companies, Montalvo Players and Theater West. Louis founded The Audacity Performing Arts Project, Inc. in 2012 and currently serves as Development Director. He has served as Technical Director for Saint Andrew's Episcopal School, Notre Dame High School (San Jose), Silicon Valley Shakespeare. Louis holds a BA in Religious Studies from SJSU. He also collects D&D books, is obsessed with all things MCU/Star Wars and loves to spend time with Michelle, Caitlin, Baloo and Bagheera.

Pati Bristow (Costume Designer, *William Shakespeare's The Land of the Dead*) is delighted to return to The Pear. She most recently designed costumes for *Pear Slices 2023* and *Frankie & Johnny in the Claire de Lune* at The Pear in Winter 2022. This is her 6th season with the company. Thank you to all our Pear friends for supporting live theatre.

PRODUCTION TEAM

Val Zvinyatskovsky (Lighting Designer) is thrilled to be returning to The Pear after music directing *Falsettos!* He is a Bay Area-based designer, music & vocal director, director, stage manager, and actor. Recent credits: Direction - *Follies*, *Falsettos* (Upstage Theater); Music Direction - *Sweeney Todd*, *Next To Normal* (SCP), *Tick, Tick... BOOM!* (Upstage); Lighting - *Matilda* (PYT), *TTB!* (Upstage). He also teaches middle school drama/directing at GHJDS. Val channels his creativity to bring people together and change how they see the world, through art. He'd like to thank Ruiran and Quentin for keeping him sane and Sinjin for all of the snacks. www.valzvi.com

Lance Müller (Costume Designer, *District Merchants*) is from sunny Los Angeles where he got his start in live theatre. Lance chose to finish his studies at San Francisco State University, where he designed the costumes for *Rent* the Musical. Lance has also been an assistant for productions such as *Doubt: A Parable* and *The Who's Tommy*. Lance's passion for stage costuming has only been fueled by the dedicated theatre makers that surround him.

Bora "Max" Koknar (Assistant Stage Manager) has built a 19-year portfolio spanning over 300 innovative experiences that have riveted over half a million spectators worldwide. Recognized by outlets including The NY Times, SF Chronicle, and the American Theatre Magazine for their innovation and creativity, Max's projects have reached global audiences and clients, including through collaborations with industry giants such as Meta, Google, and Apple. His writing has been produced with organizations including San Jose Repertory Theatre, San Jose Taiko, The Dragon Theatre, Tabard Theatre, and the Pear. His most recent full-length work, *The Super Secret Society: a Playable Play* was the first professional production in the United States to be co-written with an AI Large Language Model.

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John & Trish Files
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