

# Q GUIDE

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## MOTHER EARTH'S MESSAGE

**Performance artist Deborah Wasserman brings environmental issues to light**

BY TAMMY SCILEPPI

Watching performance artist Deborah Wasserman in action, you'd swear she had multiple personalities.

Last Saturday at Corona Plaza, she channeled her inner nature goddess and became green Mother Earth/Queen of Trash, a long cape of garbage trailing behind her, as curious passers-by watched and wondered. As part of the Rego Park Green Alliance Studio's "Make Queens Clean" Art Intervention 2016, her site-specific, interactive performance, "Dumped: Mother Earth/Queen of Trash" aspires to bring awareness and understanding of the importance of

environmental issues. Wasserman will repeat her performance at Diversity Plaza in Jackson Heights Saturday afternoon.

Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and raised in Israel, Wasserman has worked in a variety of artistic media, and her eclectic approach to art and teaching has been evident in her installations and interventions, paintings, drawings, sound work, sculpture and videos. "When I think of an art project I want to execute, I always try to imagine what material or media will best serve my concept," she said.

In a recent interview, the artist noted that her most inspiring teachers have been female artists who succeeded in carving a niche for their own feminine voice. "I see my artistic path now moving in that direction," she noted.

That artistic path has already taken Wasserman in some rather unusual directions. In 2014, her first RPGA event featured "The Longest Journey Starts with a Single Step," an installation of 140 pairs of girls' shoes.

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Deborah Wasserman in her piece "Dumped: Mother Earth/Queen of Trash," which she will perform Saturday at Diversity Plaza

Photo by Carol Lacks



# Secret Theatre rethinks the Bard's 'Merchant'

## Moving the action to post-WWII Italy sheds new light on Shakespeare's classic play

BY STEVE BARNES

Two of Shakespeare's most famous speeches are at the center of his "The Merchant of Venice." Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" addresses the undercurrent of racism that underlies the crux of the play, while Portia's "the quality of mercy," delivered in the heat of a courtroom battle, stresses the humanity that is needed to make an attempt at overcoming the effects of that racism.

Both speeches are delivered in a particularly affecting manner in the Secret Theatre's production of what is likely the most famous of the Bard's "problem plays," those works that bridge the gap between comedy and drama. The story of a financial exchange that goes incredibly off track, Shakespeare's play supplies both a generous dose of laughter and a troubling, darker side that makes us question the intent and effect of everything we see.

The story of the play centers around a deal

made between Antonio (Michael Vincent Carreira), a nobleman, and Shylock (Richard Mazda), a Jewish moneylender. While arranging for a loan to help his friend Bassanio (Zachary Clark) woo and win Portia (Joy Donze). Antonio agrees to a very strange provision: If he fails to pay back the loan by the assigned date, Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh.

Not surprisingly, that failure takes place, setting in place a chain of escapes, exchanges and disguises that catch almost all the characters up in a complex web of lies and betrayals before eventually reaching an ending that has all the appearances of a happy one, though it leaves a surprisingly bitter aftertaste.

Under the direction of Alberto Bonilla, the Secret Theatre's production brings all of the play's contradictions to life in sharp detail. In a nod to what seems to be the standard methodology of moving the action of Shakespeare's works to

more modern settings, Bonilla has placed the story in post-World War II Italy.

"I wanted to set 'Merchant of Venice' in post-WW II Italy because of the extreme circumstances that Europe was living with," he says.

This move gives the story a surprisingly strong charge, especially in light of the extreme hostility most of the other characters express toward Shylock. Even the marriage of Shylock's daughter, Jessica (Isabella Curti) to a young Christian man takes on an additional weight when reinterpreted through the historical framework that the director employs.

In addition, the conflict between the old and new worlds is brought into the mix. Antonio is an elegant, old-school Italian, while Bassanio and his comrades are young American GIs, who transform the play's traditional setting with their rollicking horseplay and powerful physicality.

But in the end, the real



Richard Mazda (foreground) plays Shylock in the Secret Theatre's "The Merchant of Venice"  
Photo by Reiko Yanagi

test of contemporary remainings of the Bard lies in how they walk the fine line between the poetry of the language and the complexity of the plot. In this regard, the production succeeds with flying colors. The attempt to deliver the lines with strict Elizabethan pronunciation is done away with, and the relaxed speaking voices of the actors respect the rhythm and beauty of the text while also providing the audience with a clear, involving story line.

In a cast that is uniformly appealing, several actors stand out. Mazda gives us a surprisingly restrained Shylock, his focused, subtle intensity giving his speeches maximum emotional effect. Carrera delineates a multi-layered, involving Antonio, capturing his basic goodness while never losing sight of an essential priggishness within the character. And as Portia, Donze (along with her partner-in-crime Nerissa, admirably played by Grace

Merriman) deftly alternates between bawdy humor and emotional power.

As far as costumes and sets go, both make strong contributions. Sandy Yalkin's set combines elements of classical Italian architecture (balconies, bridges over rivers) with the look of rubble-strewn postwar streets, while Anna Winter's costumes make the distinctions between characters clear.

For those not familiar with Shakespeare's work, this engaging production would be a great place to start, while for those with a longtime affinity for his plays, it has more than enough original and provocative insights to make it worthwhile.

"The Merchant of Venice" runs through Sept. 18 at the Secret Theatre, 44-02 23rd St., Long Island City. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, with a 3 p.m. matinee on Sundays. Tickets are \$18 in advance, \$20 at the door. Go to [secrettheatre.com](http://secrettheatre.com) for more information.

## NATURE

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She said they accepted her proposal to display all of her two daughters' shoes (which she had collected since they were born) and invited the public to interact with her installation and join her journey as a mother who watches her children grow.

Another of her works illustrated the ties between domestic duties and artistic expression. Entitled "Washing my Dirty Laundry in the Basement, in high heel shoes, as I got rained out," it unfolded last year in her basement laundry room, where she acknowledged and embraced (if only for a time) her homemaker tendencies. It's an interesting, slice-of-life, female-centric vignette.

"We want to have all the roles and do them all perfectly at once: To be fantastic mothers, have fulfilling careers, be politically involved and fight for change, raise wonder kids, run the marathon, look good and fit



Multimedia artist, teacher and feminist Deborah Wasserman in her Woodside studio.  
Photo courtesy John P. Creveling

into size 4 jeans..." Wasserman explained. "I'm very familiar with this type of drive to move forward and do things, to leave an impact on this world...but at times I wonder, from a more spiritual point of view, why we are so motivated to keep proving ourselves."

Wasserman's art is just one part of the wide range of events

taking place at RPGA Studio's Queens Art Intervention Day this Saturday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at Diversity Plaza, 37th Road between 73rd and 74th streets in Jackson Heights

In addition to Wasserman's "Dumped," the day will include something being referred to as a "vote your butt installation." The butts in question,

however, are cigarette butts: "People will discuss one new innovative design created by RPGA Studio to stop people from littering on the streets," said RPGA Founder and Executive Director Yvonne Shortt. "Cigarette butts are litter and we want people to use their butts to vote. Plus, we will be giving away free portable ashtrays that can be carried in your pocket or pocketbook."

There will also be a 110-second-long virtual reality installation that shows people where garbage goes and asks them to make one change to reduce their litter. Another featured piece will be a trash can with an innovative hoop that lights up when garbage goes in. "We will also be giving out gifts for people who get their garbage in the hoop," Shortt noted.

Other works will include Nizeki Hiromi's "GumHearts," in which T-shirts will be turned into reusable bags with the help of the community and the "Road to Realization," an installation that shows two roads—one lit



A trash can with a light-up rim encourages people to put their garbage in it.  
Courtesy RPGA Studio

tered with garbage, the other beautiful. "We then invite the public to discuss ways to make the community cleaner," according to Shortt.

When Wasserman isn't performing or creating multimedia artwork, she teaches after-school art classes to local kids, ages 4½ to 11, at her Art for a Start program ([www.artforastartnyc.com](http://www.artforastartnyc.com)).

On the weekends, she preps students for specialized art schools at her Woodside studio.