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Religion at Stratford

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The Merchant of Venice, runs until November 3, 2001

Inherit the Wind, until November 3

The Trials of Ezra Pound, closed August 17

The Sound of Music, until November 11

Religion proves to be as thought-provoking, inspirational and potentially offensive as ever this year at the Stratford Festival, North America's largest summer theatre. Located in the town of Stratford, in southwestern Ontario, the 14-production playbill includes four shows where religious themes either whisper or roar.

Anti-Semitism haunts the background of The Sound of Music, Rodgers and Hammerstein's enormously popular story of the musical Von Trapp family's escape from Nazi-occupied Austria. It is also contained in Timothy Findley's new play, The Trials of Ezra Pound, the story of the great American poet whose anti-Semitic broadcasts from Italy during World War II tarnished his artistic reputation and led to his indictment in the U.S. on charges of treason.

However, religion is front and center – and on trial – in Inherit the Wind by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee and Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Lawrence and Lee's play is a dramatization of the Scopes "monkey" trial of 1925, in which Dayton, Tenn. schoolteacher John Scopes was arrested for teaching his high-school students about Darwin's theory of evolution. Mr. Scopes' actions contravened a Tennessee state law that made it illegal to teach "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."

Scopes was defended by the distinguished attorney Clarence Darrow and the prosecution's team included orator and former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. The Stratford production features towering performances by James Blendick, as the Bryan character called Matthew Harrison Brady, and William Hutt, playing Henry Drummond, the Darrow character.

They square off in a sweltering county courthouse, Brady defending "the living truth of the Scriptures," Drummond supporting "the right to think." This production, directed by Stratford artistic director Richard Monette, leans a little heavily on the image of Christian fundamentalists as narrow-minded bumpkins, having groups of Brady's church-going followers burst into hymns at nearly every scene change. The play characterizes the local minister, Rev. Jeremiah Brown, as a cruel, hellfire preacher whose daughter, in a plot turn that is a bit too pat, is in love with the schoolteacher on trial.

But the questions it raises are relevant to any age. Is Brady a sad relic or an eloquent champion of faith? Is Drummond a cynical destroyer or a symbol of intellectual freedom? Do we have to check our brains at the door when we go to church? How much censorship are we willing to live with in society? Does freedom sometimes make us uncomfortable?

Freedom is certainly a theme in The Merchant of Venice, one of those great works of literature that is perennially banned due to its offensiveness. It is most certainly offensive. One cringes to think of a Jewish member of the audience, especially a young person, hearing Shylock, the moneylender, called "the dog Jew" and seeing him agree, under duress, to convert to Christianity at the end of the famous trial scene. Paul Soles,

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as Shylock, unfortunately underplays the role, so he seems less a vengeful victim of bigotry than a nice old guy having bad stuff done to him.

Christians in the audience may squirm with discomfort, also. Shakespeare, that equal-opportunity offender, makes us all take a hard look at anti-Semitism. "Hath not a Jew eyes?" cries Shylock. But his plea to be accepted as part of humanity ends with a warning shaped by years of injustice: "The villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction." It is impossible to hear Shylock's words today without thinking of the Holocaust and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and how Christian and Jewish attitudes have shaped those events.

The cumulative effect of the dramas at Stratford show that at its worst, religion is a constricting, oppressive force that inflicts as much evil as good. But they also show that at its best, religion liberates man to consider the great questions of existence, in short, to think.

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