



# Birth of Shylock & the Death of Zero Mostel

*Arnold Wesker*

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## **Birth of Shylock & the Death of Zero Mostel** Arnold Wesker

Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*-the epitome of money-grabbing avarice and cruelty-is, Arnold Wesker believes, "a libel on the Jews" and a reflection of Elizabethan racism. Wesker, one of Britain's most revered playwrights, decided to create a counter portrait to the Bard's offensive character by writing his own play, *Shylock*, in which the Jew is compassionate, intelligent, and deeply moral. John Dexter, the world-renowned director, arranged to have it open on Broadway in 1977 with Zero Mostel in the lead. The play promised to be a great box-office draw, with high advance bookings, thanks to Mostel. But after the first preview in Philadelphia, Mostel fell ill and died within days. The play opened on Broadway with Mostel's understudy, but its momentum had been fatally damaged and it spiraled into disaster. In this extraordinary book, Wesker records how the people involved-including many of New York's cultural elite-interacted in the making, and unmaking, of an extraordinary theatrical event.

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