

Synopsis of *The Comedy of Errors*

Egeon, a merchant from Syracuse, is arrested and condemned to death for illegally entering Ephesus, a rival city. Brought before Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus, Egeon tells the tale of his misfortune. Many years before, Egeon's wife Emilia gave birth to twin sons. At the same time, a lower-class woman gave birth to another pair of twin sons, whom Egeon bought to serve his twins. Sailing home, Egeon's ship encountered a huge storm and wrecked. Egeon's family tied themselves to opposite ends of a mast—Emilia grabbed their youngest twin and one servant boy, while Egeon took care of the eldest twin and the other servant. The mast split in half, and Egeon watched helplessly as his wife and son drifted away. A ship from Corinth rescued Emilia and a ship from Epidaurus rescued Egeon; Egeon's ship was too slow to catch up with the other and the family was separated. Egeon returned to Syracuse and named the surviving boys after their lost brothers: his son, Antipholus, and the servant, Dromio. When Antipholus turned 18, he took Dromio with him on a quest to find his lost brother. After five years, Egeon set out to find the son he had raised, and so his travels brought him to Ephesus. The Duke, moved by Egeon's story, grants him until the end of the day to raise the thousand-mark ransom that will save his life.

Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant Dromio arrive in Ephesus the same day disguised as natives of Epidamnum. Antipholus sends Dromio to the Centaur, a local inn, with their money and luggage. When Dromio reappears, it is not his own servant but his servant's twin—Dromio of Ephesus who serves Antipholus of Ephesus. Dromio of Ephesus scolds Antipholus for being late coming home to his wife for dinner, and Antipholus of Syracuse in turn beats Dromio for denying that he received any money. Dromio runs off and Antipholus sets off in search of his gold.

At the home of Antipholus of Ephesus, Adriana is fuming because her husband is late to dinner. Dromio of Ephesus reports that his master denied having a wife and refused to come home. Infuriated, Adriana sets out to find her husband. Dromio of Syracuse returns to Antipholus of Syracuse when Adriana and her sister Luciana appear. Mistaking him for his brother, they convince Antipholus of Syracuse to come home with them to dine and instruct Dromio of Syracuse to stand guard at the door. When Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus arrive, they find their door locked against them. Enraged, Antipholus of Ephesus decides to give a gold chain that he ordered for Adriana to the Courtesan instead.

Meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse has fallen in love with Luciana, though she protests that he is married to her sister. The kitchen maid, Luce, claims that Dromio of Syracuse is her love. Antipholus and Dromio decide that both women are witches and plan to leave Ephesus. Antipholus sends Dromio to book passage on the next ship. Angelo the goldsmith delivers the gold chain meant for Antipholus of Ephesus to Antipholus of Syracuse. Antipholus of Syracuse tries to pay the goldsmith, but the goldsmith insists he'll collect payment later.



Photo by Joan Marcus.

Floyd King as Dromio and Philip Goodwin as Antipholus in The Shakespeare Theatre's *The Comedy of Errors*, 1993.

Antipholus of Ephesus, still angry at his wife, sends his Dromio to buy a rope's end to beat Adriana. Angelo meets Antipholus of Ephesus in the street and demands payment for the gold chain. Antipholus refuses to pay for a chain he has not received and is arrested. As Antipholus is being led away, Dromio of Syracuse arrives to report that their passage out of Ephesus is booked. Antipholus instructs him to go to Adriana for bail.

As Antipholus of Syracuse walks about town wearing the gold chain, Dromio of Syracuse appears with the bail money. When the Courtesan appears and demands the chain he promised, Antipholus believes she too is a witch and makes a speedy exit. The Courtesan decides to go to Adriana and inform her that her husband is mad.

Dromio of Ephesus returns to his master with the rope's end. Adriana, Luciana, the Courtesan and Dr. Pinch arrive, hoping to cure the men of their madness. Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus are bound and taken away by the doctor. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse appear with their swords drawn to fend off witches. The women run for help, fearing the madmen have escaped. Adriana returns to find Antipholus with his sword drawn. She calls for him to be bound, but he and Dromio seek sanctuary in a nearby priory. The Abbess of the priory refuses to yield them up.

The Duke approaches with his prisoner, Egeon. Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus have escaped from Dr. Pinch and are keen to explain their version of the day's events. The Abbess appears, with Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse. For the first time, the two sets of twins are seen side by side. The Abbess recognizes Egeon as her husband, from whom she was separated in the shipwreck many years before.

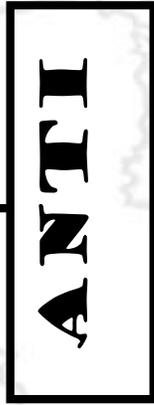
The Duke grants Egeon a full pardon upon hearing the amazing tale. Antipholus of Syracuse is now free to declare his love to Luciana, and all depart to end the happy reunion with a family feast. 

The Comedy of Errors Family Tree

**MARRIED, BUT
TRAGICALLY**



**EGEON & EMILIA
HAD TWIN**



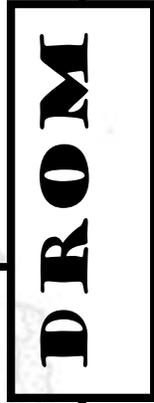
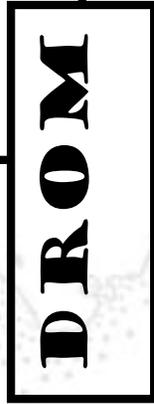
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SIST



**AND THOSE
TWIN SONS
HAD TWIN**



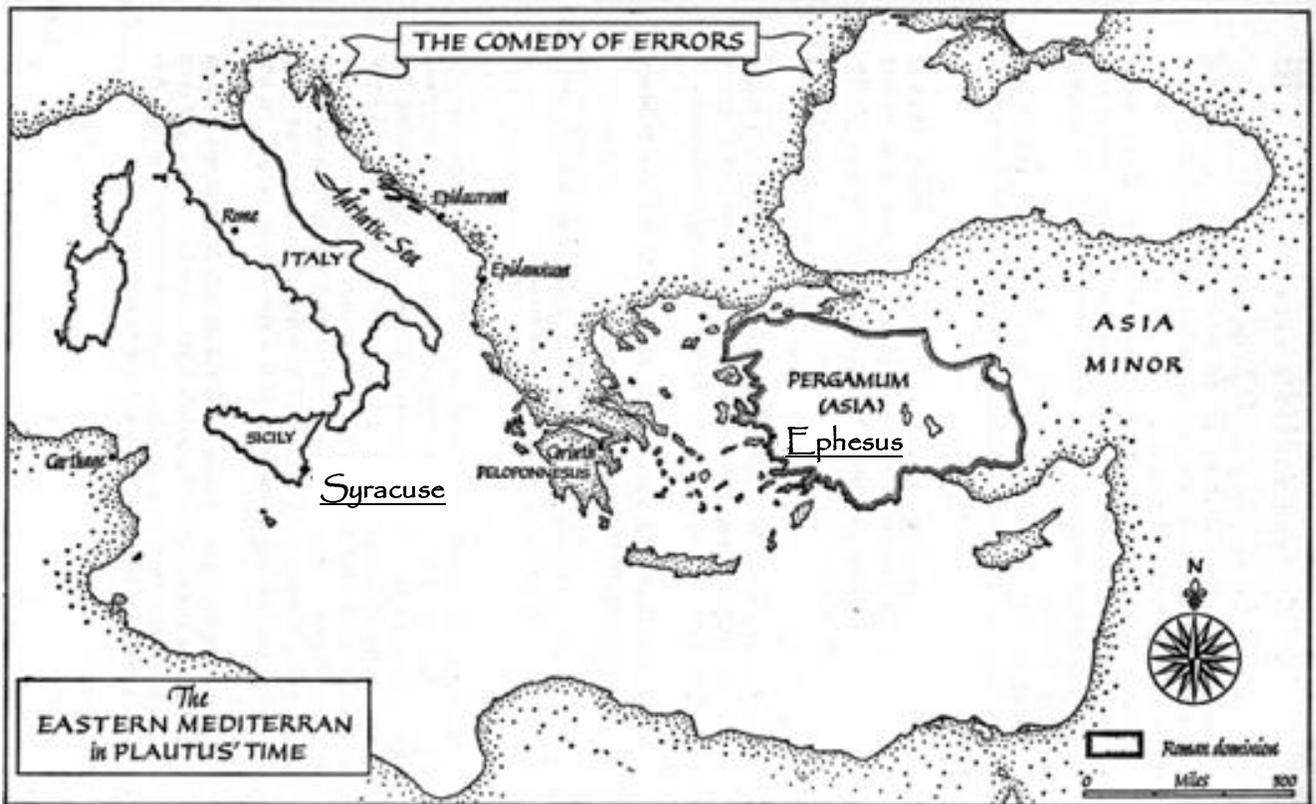
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**EGEON, SADDENED BY THE
SPLIT OF HIS FAMILY,
NAMED THE TWO BOYS HE**

The Geography of

the Comedy



A map of the area where *The Comedy of Errors* takes place, courtesy of Isaac Asimov's *Guide to Shakespeare*.

Syracuse

Syracuse, the home of Egeon and Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, is located on the modern-day island of Sicily. The city was founded in 734 BCE by Greek settlers from Corinth. Cicero, a famous orator and statesman in ancient Rome, described Syracuse as the greatest and most beautiful Greek city.

Ephesus

Ephesus, located on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), is where the play takes place. It was also home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. The temple was constructed of marble and contained 127 sixty-foot high columns and four bronze statues of Amazons.

There is no historical evidence of a feud between Syracuse and Ephesus. In fact, in the original play by Plautus on which Shakespeare based his work, the two rival cities are Syracuse and Epidamnum. Shakespeare may have chosen to use Ephesus instead because it was more familiar to Elizabethan audiences as a major center of Christianity. When St. Paul arrived in the city to preach Christianity in the first century CE, he met with great resistance from the Ephesians who worshipped Diana. In Roman mythology, Diana was the chaste goddess of the hunt and the moon. Shakespeare may have used his audiences' familiarity with the story—and the association of the city with a virgin goddess—to make Emilia's miraculous appearance as a nun from the abbey all the more amazing and resonant. 

WHEN IN ROME... (I mean London)

SHAKESPEARE'S ROMAN INFLUENCE



Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Grammar school in Stratford, England, where Shakespeare probably studied Plautus and other Roman playwrights.

Scholars speculate that before moving to London, Shakespeare attended and then taught grammar school in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon. One of the cornerstones of an Elizabethan education was a strong foundation in Latin, the language of ancient Rome. Shakespeare probably learned and taught from texts written in Latin, including poetry, oratory and plays. It is no surprise, then, that the content and structure of one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *The Comedy of Errors*, is based heavily on the form of ancient Roman comedy. Shakespeare borrowed much of his plot from the famous playwright Plautus, whose plays were produced between 205-184 BCE and are the earliest works of Latin literature that survive today.

Plautus, in turn, borrowed the plots and structure of his plays from ancient Greek comedies, adhering to the unities of time, place and action set forth by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Shakespeare, taking his

cue from Plautus, also adheres to Aristotle's unities. (Shakespeare will do this only one other time in his whole career, in one of his very last plays, *The Tempest*.) Plautus used stock characters (such as servants and masters,) physical pranks and violence for comedic effect. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare also includes classical stock characters, slapstick humor and violence—for example, the Dromios are servants who are beaten throughout the play for comedic value. Structurally, Plautine comedies often start with a formal prologue, set apart from the first act, which provides background information. Shakespeare used a similar opening device. His prologue is much more integrated with the play as a whole. *The Comedy of Errors* opens with a long speech in which Egeon, relating his woeful tale, provides the audience with the necessary background to the play. The old man's story then frames the play; Egeon's pardon and the family reunited give *The Comedy of Errors* a happy ending.

Scholars agree that Shakespeare borrowed plot points directly from Plautus' play, *The Menaechmi*. Like *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Menaechmi* includes a set of twins, separated at birth and reunited as adults in a foreign land after many hilarious instances of mistaken identity. Shakespeare, not to be outdone by the Latin master, adds a second set of twins to the mix. Doubling the twins redoubles the errors of master to servant, stranger to citizen, and husband to wife, creating an action-packed comedy for his demanding Elizabethan audience.

While *The Menaechmi* is the most frequently cited classical source for *The Comedy of Errors*, Plautus' *Amphytrion* is just as relevant an influence. Shakespeare's treatment of identity and its fragility are derived from this latter work. In the *Amphytrion*, the Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury take the shape of a man named Amphitruo and his servant Sosia. In the central scene, the true Amphitruo returns from battle and finds himself locked out of his house, while his Jupiter look-a-like takes his place in his wife's bedroom. Shakespeare includes this scene in his own comedy, but with a slight twist. Antipholus of Ephesus is barred from his home while Antipholus of Syracuse, mistaken for his brother, enjoys an incredible dinner prepared by his brother's wife.

The Comedy of Errors and its Roman precursors, to varying degrees, deal with the issues of identity,

violence and servitude. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare begins to examine themes that will reappear in later plays. Twins separated by shipwreck will recur in the comedy *Twelfth Night*, which also contains scenes of mistaken identity. The questioning of identity will be the focus of several other comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. In *The Comedy of Errors*, both the Syracusan and Ephesian twins question reality and presume to have gone mad at different points in the play. Insanity is a major theme in Shakespeare's mature works such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Shakespeare will return to the theme of families separated by tragedy and then reunited in his later romances, particularly *Pericles*, which also contains a joyous family reunion scene that takes place in Ephesus.

Early in his writing, Shakespeare relied heavily on traditional forms of drama while exploring his ability to push beyond their limitations. Within the formal structure of a Roman comedy, Shakespeare reveals his ability to push storytelling beyond traditional norms. As several disparate characters and pursuits tumble into chaos, the playwright keeps the story on course towards a satisfying conclusion through heightened language and an emotional depth not usually seen in comedies of his time. Although it may have begun as a schoolmaster's Latin lesson, *The Comedy of Errors* is certainly the work of an apprentice who will later become a master. 

Aristotle's Unities

Almost two thousand years before Shakespeare began writing, Aristotle outlined the ideal components of a play (as he saw them) in his essay *Poetics*. According to Aristotle a good play should include these three unities:

- **Unity of Time**

The entire action of the play should take no more than 24 hours, i.e. the play should take place in one day.

- **Unity of Place**

The entire action of the play should be in one location.

- **Unity of Action**

Every incident in the play should contribute to the main plot and there should be no irrelevant information or action.



Photo by David Cooper

Christopher DuVal as Dromio (on table), with Catherine Coulson and Jamie Peck in the 2004 Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *Comedy of Errors*.



Photo by Joan Marcus.

The cast of The Shakespeare Theatre's 1992-1993 production of William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare experimented with different types of comedy, making his audience laugh in different ways. Some types of comedy, often called "high comedy," appeal to our more intellectual sense of humor. Other types of comedy rely mostly on silly physical gags, sometimes called "low comedy."

High comedy has also been called "pure comedy" and often appealed to the more well-educated members of the audience. One type of high comedy is verbal wit, or wordplay. Characters often outsmart each other with words rather than with physical tricks or traps. Shakespeare used puns and played with the multiple meanings of words to fashion jokes. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the Antipholus and Dromio brothers have several skirmishes of verbal wit. The Dromios will often reply to a question or command from their master with a pun, picking up on a different meaning of a word to create a joke. Their masters will respond in kind, creating a quick exchange of wordplay. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse also have an extended series of jokes about Nell, the kitchen maid who claims Dromio as her love. Comparing her large person to a globe, they make

jokes about where different countries would be found on her body. The pair is able to make cracks both about the kitchen maid and the other European countries which would have been familiar to Shakespeare's audience.

Another type of high comedy is satire. Satire is a mix of comedy and criticism, also known as "biting humor" or the "criticism of life." Satire is used as a way of making fun of people and their style of living and often has an underlying political message. Playwrights who are writing a satire will often take a stereotype that applies to a group of people and make it even bigger and more extreme than before. For example, it is a stereotype that all rich people wear fancy clothes. Therefore, the characters in a satire may wear clothing that is exceptionally colorful and ornate in order to show off this stereotype.

Low comedy is far more dependant on action and situation to create comedic moments. The plot lines of low comedies tend to be more silly or trivial than the plot lines of satires. The most popular form of low comedy is known as farce. Farce is very similar to satire, but farce tends to be more crude in its humor.

Farce often includes dirty jokes and characters that get into embarrassing or humiliating situations. However, much like satire, farces contain characters who are exaggerated and over the top. Also, low comedies depend on funny plot devices as opposed to witty words. For example, mistaken identity was a common plot device in low comedy which Shakespeare uses in *The Comedy of Errors*. Other low comedy plot devices include inopportune arrivals, misunderstandings and embarrassing occurrences.

Another important element of low comedy is the use of slapstick or physical comedy. The term slapstick comes from commedia dell'arte, which is an old form of improvised theatre that began in Italy. Characters in commedia plays used to physically beat each other with a paddle-like stick which had another stick attached to it. When an actor would hit another person, one stick would hit the other, making a loud slapping sound. This made it sound like the actor was being hit harder than he actually was. This comedic element is used a great deal in *The Comedy of Errors*. There are several scenes in which the Dromios are beaten by their masters during the course of the play. It is the repetition of the beatings, too, that adds comedy to the situation.

In addition to these categories of high and low comedy, there are certain comedic elements that span the different types of comedy. For example there is incongruity, which is when characters in a play find themselves out of place or in a different physical or social world than the one they are used to. An example of this in *The Comedy of Errors* would be Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse finding themselves in the world of Ephesus, which is both far and different from the world where they grew up. The fact that they are in this new place and in a strange situation is cause for most of the funny things that happen to them throughout the play. Incongruity also involves the element of surprise. The fact that these characters never seem to know what will happen to them next makes the things that do happen to them all the more surprising and fun for an audience to watch.

Perhaps one of the reasons Shakespeare's plays were so popular (and remain popular today) was his ability to combine elements of high and low comedy in a single play. Even though *The Comedy of Errors* could be easily defined as a farce because of its use of mistaken identity and slap-stick physicality, there is a great deal of verbal wit, incongruity and satire contained in the story as well. **S**



Robson & Crane in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, 1879. This comic duo's partnership lasted 12 successful years.

"Methinks you are my glass and not my brother" (Act 5, Scene 1)

Staging *The Comedy of Errors*

The Comedy of Errors is one of Shakespeare's earliest produced plays. The first recorded production in 1594 took place at Gray's Inn in London. The rowdy and overcrowded audience nearly broke out into a riot during the production. They rushed the stage and the play could not be completed. The production history of the play has been wild and varied since that first performance. The zaniness and improbability of two sets of identical twins being mistaken for each other has led many directors to play up the farcical aspect of the play, dismissing any deeper philosophical musings, even to the point of questioning its authorship, adapting it to the point of mutilation, and adding lots of music to delight audiences and distract them from the "ridiculous" story. But even as a young writer, Shakespeare was beginning to deal with the great philosophical questions he would wrestle with throughout his career: What does it mean to be human? Where is the line between appearance and reality? What makes up one's identity?

Antipholus of Syracuse is the character who most embodies this struggle in the play. He arrives in a foreign land in search of his identical twin brother, a part of himself and his family that has been lost for as long as he can remember. Upon arriving in Ephesus, Antipholus is stripped of the identity of his native country—he must disguise himself as someone from Epidamnium, because Ephesus and Syracuse are at war. If he is discovered to be Syracusan, he will be sentenced to death (as we have seen happen to Egeon at the beginning of the play.) Soon thereafter, Antipholus loses everything that establishes his identity: his name and his appearance are somehow already known to all the strangers he encounters. He suddenly is told that he has a wife to whom he must be faithful, even though he finds himself in love with her sister. His servant, Dromio, also finds his identity curiously confused, and himself bound to a kitchen wench. This wench can claim him as her own even down to his birthmarks, those undeniable confirmations of identity: "the mark of my shoulder, the mole in my neck, the great wart on my left arm" (III.ii.145-46). Antipholus and Dromio of



Peter Riopelle (left) as Dromio of Ephesus and Paul Riopelle as Dromio of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*, Utah Shakespearean Festival 2003.

Photo by Karl Hugh.

Syracuse begin their adventure in mild confusion, wondering if they are asleep or awake. As the errors continue, they become more frantic in their loss of identity. In a panic, Dromio asks his master, "Do you know me, sir? Am I Dromio? Am I your man? Am I myself?" (III.ii.73) while the more metaphysical Antipholus wonders, "Am I in earth, in heaven or in hell? / Sleeping or waking? Mad or well advised?" (III.ii.215-16). The prospect of losing their identity is so fearsome that two finally conclude that Ephesus is peopled solely by sorcerers and witches and they must immediately flee. The confusion only ends when the two sets of identical twins meet a living, breathing mirror of themselves; as Dromio of Ephesus tells his twin, "Methinks you are my glass and not my brother" (V.i.419).

Shakespeare's characters, even though they are ridiculous, have to struggle with larger issues of identity. What makes up a person's identity? What are the implications of suddenly finding a human being exactly like oneself? Having grown up so far apart, do the sets of twins have different personalities, or do they share an unspoken connection?

Directors of the play have dealt with (or ignored) these issues in different ways. After the initial ill-fated performance at Gray's Inn in 1594, *The Comedy of Errors* was revived ten years later at Whitehall palace and then disappeared from the stage for over a hundred years. In the mid-18th century, many adaptations loosely based on Shakespeare's play were

staged in London. These adaptations included the 1716 farce *Every Body Mistaken*, the 1734 Drury Lane production *See if You Like It, or 'Tis All a Mistake* and Thomas Hull's 1790 adaptation at Covent Garden which significantly expanded the wooing scenes to make the play more romantic. In fact, many theatre-makers around that time thought they could do a better job with the play than Shakespeare. W. Woods created a two-act adaptation of the play called *The Twins, or Which is Which?*, performed at the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh and published in 1780, which shortened Shakespeare's five-act version considerably, so that the audience, according to Woods, had "less time to reflect on the improbability of the events."

Perhaps the most absurd of these adaptations was produced by Frederick Reynolds in 1819. Reynolds created a musical extravaganza from the play, cutting the text severely but adding additional material from Shakespeare's other works. According to the title page, the script included, "Songs, Duets, Glees, and Choruses, Selected entirely from the Plays, Poems and Sonnets of Shakespeare." Reynolds added a hunting scene to Act 3 and a drinking party to Act 4, as well as including songs from *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Antony & Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*. The play also included some text from rival playwright and poet Christopher Marlowe, and concluded with a medley of songs from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Critics at the time loved the production, and thought the addition of music from throughout Shakespeare's canon was just the thing to improve the silly play.

In 1855, Samuel Phelps produced *The Comedy of Errors* at Sadler's Wells. Phelps restored much of Shakespeare's text to the original, as he did with so many of Shakespeare's plays that had been heavily adapted throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. This was perhaps the first non-adapted version of the play produced since Shakespeare's lifetime.

In the 20th century, directors began looking at *The Comedy of Errors* in a new light. In 1938, the Russian director Theodor Komisarjevsky produced the play in Stratford. His set was stylized and he crammed every single building mentioned in the text onto the stage, creating a non-realistic crowded urban scene. Another notable element of his production was a giant clock on the back wall which would chime the hour. The hands would whirl around to show the passage of time, highlighting how critical time is to the play—since Egeon has until 5:00 to find the bail money or he will be executed. Emphasizing this serious life-or-death element of the story gave an urgency to the play not seen in the merely farcical productions. *The Comedy of Errors* continued to be adapted, though—in 1938 it became a Broadway hit musical, adapted by Rogers & Hart as *The Boys from Syracuse*.

In 1962, Clifford Williams directed a production at the RSC which was critically acclaimed for the sad,



Thomas Hull, one of the many 18th century adapters of *The Comedy of Errors*.

moving performance of Egeon as well as for the deeper interpretation of Antipholus of Syracuse, showing flashes of fear and bewilderment as he wanders through a strange city without his identity. The second half of the 20th century has brought many varied productions of *The Comedy of Errors*, which has been redeemed by directors and scholars alike as being a farcical play with some serious themes. In 1987, the Flying Karamazov Brothers created a romp of an adaptation of the play which was literally a circus—including jugglers, fire-breathers, belly-dancers and other vaudeville and circus acts.

Directors have also begun to play with doubling the roles of the twins. In Ian Judge's 1990 RSC production, he cast the same actor as both Antipholus brothers and another actor as both Dromios. The 1984 BBC Television production did the same, casting Michael Kitchen as the Antipholus brothers and The Who's Roger Daltrey as the Dromios. The doubling of these roles creates some staging problems, particularly in the reunion scene. Directors on stage have found creative solutions for this, including body doubles. On film the problem can be solved with editing. In terms of the identities of the Antipholus and Dromio brothers, this casting choice makes a strong statement about the play. Some critics have complained that casting the same actor in both roles does not show enough of a difference between the two characters' personalities. However, casting two different actors as the twins creates its own problems. How does a director make an audience believe two different actors are identical, even though they are just dressed alike? Directors continue to find varied solutions to the problems of identity presented in *The Comedy of Errors* as it continues to be produced across the globe. 

Classroom Connections

Before the performance...



Servants & Bondsmen—Status in *The Comedy of Errors*

Status plays an important role in *Comedy of Errors*. As servants, the Dromio brothers have lower status than the two Antipholus brothers, their masters. Because he is a ruler, the Duke of Ephesus has the highest status in the play. Explore status by having students walk around the room as if they were Dromio. When they encounter another student, the two play “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” The winner then becomes Antipholus, the loser remains Dromio. As more students become Antipholus, they may find other students who are of the same status and play “Rock, Paper, Scissors” with them. The winners become Dukes and the losers return to Dromios. Students may only play with others of the same status. The winner always increases in status; the loser decreases. At each stage, encourage students to explore how they show lower and higher status with their bodies as they interact with the other students in the room. How is an encounter with someone of equal status different than with those whose status is higher or lower? How does it feel to be Dromio? Antipholus? The Duke?



Mistaken Identity

Loss of identity and mistaken identity are essential issues in *The Comedy of Errors*. What are the components of our identities? Ask students to define who they are by creating an “I am From” poem. Ask students to answer on a piece of paper:

- Where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- What is a typical meal you remember from your childhood?
- What is one of your parent’s famous sayings?
- What did you do on Sundays when you were a kid?
- Who is the person that was most helpful to you as you grew up?

Other questions about memories or personal information can be added. Ask students to compose statements that begin with “I am from...” using what they have written and adding anything else they want. They should be encouraged to play with rhythm and flow. Students can then get in small groups and perform each other’s poems. Ask students what they learned about identity. Ask students to discuss or journal about what would happen if the memories and information that create “who we are” were suddenly erased?



Abuse & Violence in the Play

In *The Comedy of Errors* Shakespeare uses violence, especially between masters and servants, for comedic effect. Similar to the tradition of “slap stick” in commedia dell’arte, characters are violent with each other to emphasize their class differences and to get the audience to laugh. Have students find examples of violence throughout the play, especially between Antipholus and Dromio. How does Shakespeare use the violence to create comedy? Discuss how a director might create this violence on stage. Prepare to look for it while watching the play, and discuss what works or doesn’t work after seeing the performance.



Twins in Shakespeare & Popular Culture

The mistaken identity of twins is a comedic device that has been used for centuries. Shakespeare uses the device several times in his own work. Where can we find this device still used today in popular culture? From *Sister, Sister* to *The Parent Trap* to Mary Kate and Ashley, the confusions of identical twins can always be used for a laugh. What is the value of returning to a classic device in writing? Do students think that the use of twins in *The Comedy of Errors* is an example of Shakespeare working cleverly within a classic construct, or does the improbability of the situation with two sets of twins make it too ridiculous to be believed? What are some other common comedic situations that Shakespeare uses in the play?



Verbal Comedy

The Antipholus and Dromio brothers continually try to out-do each other with their verbal wordplay. Re-read Act 2 Scene 2 lines 1-120 and Act 3 Scene 2 lines 75-180. What is the nature of Antipholus and Dromio’s verbal sparring? What kinds of verbal comedy are popular today? Ask students to write a scene in which two friends try to top each other with the cleverest joke. What kinds of things were funny in Elizabethan times that may need to be re-contextualized today?

Classroom Connections

...After the performance

Adapting Shakespeare

Plays by Shakespeare are often adapted into movies, new plays or even musicals for the stage. The musical *West Side Story* is based on *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, and the movie *O* is based on *Othello*. Having seen the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of *The Comedy of Errors*, how could you imagine it being adapted into a new play, musical or movie? What would you change about the setting or characters to make it more enjoyable for a contemporary audience?

Separation & Reconciliation

Separation is a theme of both Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies. In tragedies, however, these separations remain permanent, while in comedies the separated characters are "happily" reunited. *The Comedy of Errors* ends happily, but the last scene comes very close to being a tragedy. Discuss what would have happened if Egeon had not seen his son right before his execution. If the errors of the day were never explained, would Antipholus of Ephesus have ever forgiven Adriana for locking him out? Would Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse have returned home only to find Egeon had disappeared? In what other ways could this story have ended up as the "Tragedy of Errors?"

Casting *The Comedy of Errors*

Divide students into 6-8 groups and assign each group a character in the play. Ask each group to write a description of their character. Discuss the quality and functions of each role: leading man, best friend, etc. Ask the students to make the decisions of a casting director for a new big-budget Hollywood remake of *The Comedy of Errors*. Casting only living actors, who would play the lead roles? Are the casting choices justified, logical, funny or wacky? What attributes does each actor share with the role? How would students handle casting the twins? Ask students to prepare a character collage from magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and write a short explanation.

Ending Without Words

Antipholus of Syracuse has been searching for his twin brother for years, yet when they are finally reunited at the end of the play, almost no words are exchanged between them. Since there are no words, it is necessary that their feelings be conveyed non-verbally in the performance of the play. Split students into several groups that are big enough to perform a piece of the final scene. Give each student playing one of the Antipholus brothers an emotion to demonstrate, such as overjoyed, disappointed, distraught, hysterical or angry. Have each group perform their scene. How do the different emotions change the meaning in each scene? Does it make the ending more complete, or does it still seem unfinished between the brothers?

After the Celebrations

At the end of this crazy comedy, the Antipholus and Dromio brothers are reunited with each other and with their mother and father, Emilia and Egeon. The last time we see them, they exit the stage to feast and celebrate. What do you think happens to this family after the play is over? Ask students to write a scene, several days, weeks or even years down the road, about the group adjusting to family life. What issues might come up between family members who have grown up apart? Do you think that they share an unspoken connection, or will there be tensions between them? Where will the family live, in Ephesus, Syracuse, or in a different city altogether? Ask students to create answers to some of the questions that remain unanswered by the "neatly" tied bow at the end of the comedy.

The Comedy of Errors

Resource List

Books or Essays on *The Comedy of Errors*

- Brooks, Harold. *Themes and Structure in The Comedy of Errors*. Prentice Hall, 1965.
- Charney, Maurice. *Shakespearean Comedy*. New York Literary Forum, 1980.
- Huston, J. Dennis. *Shakespeare's Comedies of Play*. Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Kinney, Arthur F. *A Modern Perspective on The Comedy of Errors*. Washington Square Press, 1996.
- Muir, Kenneth, ed. *Shakespeare: The Comedies*. Prentice Hall, 1965.
- Whitworth, Charles. Introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Books on Shakespeare and Teaching Shakespeare

- Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*. Doubleday, 1978.
- Epstein, Norrie. *The Friendly Shakespeare*. Penguin Books, 1993.
- Gibson, Janet and Rex Gibson. *Discovering Shakespeare's Language*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Gibson, Rex. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000.
- Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*. Theatre Communications Group, 1992.
- Pritchard, R. E. *Shakespeare's England*. Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999.
- Papp, Joseph and Elizabeth Kirkland. *Shakespeare Alive*. Bantam Books, 1988.
- Reynolds, P. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Websites

- daphne.palomar.edu/shakespeare—*Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet*.
- www.bardweb.net—*The Shakespeare Resource Center*.
- www.sgc.umd.edu—*Shakespeare's Globe Center USA*.
- hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/Svtour.html—*Shakespeare: A Virtual Field Trip*.
- renaissance.dm.net/compendium/home.html—*Life in Elizabethan England*.
- www.shakespeare.org.uk—*Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*