

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.