First Folio

Teacher Curriculum Guide

The Comedy of Errors

by William Shakespeare

directed by Douglas C. Wager

November 15, 2005 — January 8, 2006
Welcome to the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s production of *The Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare!

Each season, the Shakespeare Theatre Company presents five plays by William Shakespeare and other classic playwrights. The Education Department continues to work to deepen understanding, appreciation and connection to classic theatre in learners of all ages. One approach is the publication of *First Folio: Teacher Curriculum Guides*.

In the 2005-06 season, the Education Department will publish *First Folio: Teacher Curriculum Guides* for our productions of *Othello*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Don Juan*, *The Persians* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. The Guides provide information and activities to help students form a personal connection to the play before attending the production at the Shakespeare Theatre Company. *First Folio* guides are full of material about the playwrights, their world and the plays they penned. Also included are approaches to explore the plays and productions in the classroom before and after the performance. *First Folio* is designed as a resource both for teachers and students.

The Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Education Department provides an array of School, Community, Training and Audience Enrichment programs. A full listing of our programs is available on our website at www.ShakespeareTheatre.org or in our Education Programs Brochure. If you would like more information on how you can participate in other Shakespeare Theatre Company programs, please call the Education Hotline at 202.547.5688.

Enjoy the show!

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The nature of the audience has changed throughout history, evolving from a participatory crowd to a group of people sitting behind an imaginary line, silently observing the performers. The audience is continually growing and changing. There has always been a need for human beings to communicate their wants, needs, perceptions and disagreements to others. This need to communicate is the foundation of art and the foundation of theatre’s relationship to its audience.

In the Beginning
Theatre began as ritual, with tribal dances and festivals celebrating the harvest, marriages, gods, war and basically any other event that warranted a party. People all over the world congregated in villages. It was a participatory kind of theatre, the performers would be joined by the villagers who believed that their lives depended on a successful celebration—the harvest had to be plentiful or the battle victorious, or simply to be in good graces with their god or gods. Sometimes these festivals would last for days and the village proved tireless in their ability to celebrate. Many of these types of festivals survive today in the folk history of areas such as Scandinavia, Asia, Greece and other countries throughout Europe.

It’s Greek to Me
The first recorded plays come from the Greeks (fourth and fifth centuries BCE). Their form of theatre began in much the same way as previous forms did. It stemmed from the celebration of the wine harvest and the gods who brought citizens a fruitful harvest—specifically Dionysus, the god of wine. Spectators had a great deal of respect for their gods, and thousands would flock to the theatre to experience a full day of celebration. The day of drama and song made for a lively crowd. Staff-bearers patrolled the aisles to keep the rowdies under control. While theatre was free, your seat was determined by your station in life. The rich had cushioned seats at the front, while the peasants, artisans and women were forced to take seats at the back. In the later years, after a full day of drink, Greek audiences were not above showing disapproval at a less-than-spectacular performance. Stones were thrown, as well as other sloppy objects, hissing was popular and loud groanings of discontent could usher any actor into early retirement.

The Romans, or the inspiration for Gladiator
The Romans took the idea of “spectator” an inch or so further. Their theatre (first through third centuries BCE) developed in much the same way as the Greeks; with comedy, tragedy and festivals, but unfortunately ended with what the Christians called “morally inappropriate” dancing mimes, violent spectator sports such as gladiator fights, and the public executions for which the Romans were famous. The Romans loved violence, and the audience was a lively crowd. Because theatre was free, it was enjoyed by people of every social class. They were vocal, enjoyed hissing bad actors off the stage, and loved to watch criminals meet large ferocious animals, and soon after, enjoyed watching those same criminals meet their death.

The Far East
In Asia, theatre developed in much the same way it has elsewhere, through agricultural festivals and religious worship. The Chinese and Japanese audiences have always been tireless, mainly because their theatre forms, such as the Japanese “Kabuki” and “Noh” plays and Chinese operas, could last anywhere between a full day, if not three days, beginning between six to nine in the morning! In China, the audience was separated; the higher classes sat closer to the action of the play, and the lower classes, generally a louder, more talkative bunch, would be placed in stalls at the back. The audience expected a superior performance, and if it lacked in any way, the audience could stop the production and insist on a different presentation. In Japan, theatre began with all-day rice festivals and temple plays sponsored by priests. These evolved into “street performances” where the performers led the audience on a trip through the village. In theatre houses, the upper classes sat in constructed boxes, and women in disguise (it was not considered proper for a respectable woman to be seen at the theatre) and lower classes would stand below with the “inspector” standing on a high platform in the middle, keeping a strict eye on everyone.

A Couple of Hundred Years Without Art
Tolerance took a holiday during the period of European history known as the Dark Ages. During this time period culture of all kind went on hiatus—most especially that frivolous, godless display of lewd and licentious behavior known as theatre. Fortunately it
reemerged, with some severe restrictions, during the Middle Ages.

**Pageant Wagons**
Western theatre further developed from the Greek and Roman traditions through the Middle Ages with “Mystery Plays” sponsored by the church. Organized theatre was frowned upon, as it was a place for congregation of the lower classes, encouraging disease and immoral behavior. Church leaders would allow performances of bible scenes, however, for the people who could not read. These productions moved to different locations much like traveling the “stations of the cross.” To spread the good word to the broadest section of the population, these plays left the confines of the church building and began to travel on what were known as “pageant wagons.” These wagons held one entire location, and a series of wagons hooked together permitted a company to tell an entire story just about anywhere. Troupes of actors would roam the countryside setting up make-shift theatres in inns, pubs, public squares—pretty much anywhere they could park.

**Within This Wooden O**
During Shakespeare’s era—the Elizabethan period—theatre companies were awarded status and privilege based on patronage from wealthy landholders or the royal family. With patronage came money so the companies began building theatres. The theatre of Shakespeare’s day was attended by all, was inexpensive, and was known to be an incredibly good time. Surrounding the stage was the lower “pit” where the “groundlings” (or lower classes) congregated and above, octagonally surrounding the pit, were the stalls reserved for the upper classes. If you were stationed in the pit, it was not uncommon to have a goblet of wine dumped on your head—or to be drooled or spat upon by the “more civilized” people above you. Elizabethan audiences did not know what it meant to be quiet for a performance and would talk back to the actors. Thought to be involved in spreading the “black plague,” the good time abruptly ended with the closing of the theatres in 1592.

**Look at me, look at me...**
During the Restoration, theatre became a luxury. For the almost entirely upper class audience, the purpose of going to the theatre was “to see, and to be seen.” The stage was a rectangular area between a long hallway of boxes. The best seats in the house were often right on stage! The house lights were up full so the audience could see each other better, not the action on stage. The theatre of the Restoration consisted mainly of light, fluffy comedies performed in an oratory style—actors posing, wearing BIG costumes and practically screaming over the din of the audience. Theatre companies still existed on the patronage of the very wealthy and often performed plays exclusively in the salons of the rich, famous and powerful. A few hundred years later, opera composer Richard Wagner figured out that to focus the audience’s attention away from themselves and onto the stage, the lights needed to be off—forcing the audience to watch the performance. Since that time the audience has taken its cue that the performance is about to begin from the lights overhead beginning to dim. This small adjustment in lighting effectively erected a permanent barrier between the action onstage and the audience.

**Freud...Tell Me About Your Mother**
While dimming the house lights has drastically changed the overall aesthetic of theatre, another modern movement has had even greater impact on theatre in the 20th century. Psycho-analysis—id, ego, super-ego and subconscious desires—made theatre more introspective in its search for truth. As theatre became more psychological, more a representation of real life, the audience felt as if they were eavesdropping. Twentieth century theatregoers spend a great deal of time and thought pondering the psychological motivations of characters. There is now an imaginary wall, called the “fourth wall,” separating the performers and the audience. It affects how we view the performance and how actors portray characters—we can observe the people onstage as they relate their problems, fears and desires without them noticing us at all.

**Now the Options are Endless**
Today, for the audience, just about anything goes. History has shared with us many types of theatre and we, the spectators, bring our own experiences and histories to the event, causing us to react differently to different productions. Unlike movies or television, the actor-audience relationship is a “live” relationship: each is in the other’s presence, in the same place at the same time. It is the exchange between the two that gives theatre its unique quality. As audience members we have an obligation to be attentive, allowing the performers to fulfill their obligation—to entertain and enlighten us. There is always a dialogue between audience and performer, whether visual or vocal. All individuals participating in the theatrical event, whether as audience or performer, bring to it a personal background and experience that becomes vital to their response to the interaction. In the same way, participants leave the performance enriched both by their own individual experience and that of the larger community to which they belong for a brief moment within the confines of the theatre walls. We must listen to capture and understand what the performers are trying to communicate, and at the same time, they must listen to us.
On William Shakespeare

No man's life has been the subject of more speculation than William Shakespeare's. For all his fame and celebration, Shakespeare's personal history remains a mystery. There are two primary sources for information on the Bard—his works, and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan times. Unfortunately, there are many gaps in this information and much room for conjecture.

We know a man named William Shakespeare was baptized at Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564, and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford on April 25, 1616. Tradition holds that he was born three days earlier, and that he died on his birthday—April 23—but this is perhaps more romantic myth than fact. Young William was born of John Shakespeare, a glover and leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a landed heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children in the Shakespeare household, three of whom died in childhood. We assume that Shakespeare went to grammar school, since his father was first a member of the Stratford Council and later high bailiff (the equivalent of town mayor). A grammar school education would have meant that Shakespeare was exposed to the rudiments of Latin rhetoric, logic and literature.

In 1575, John Shakespeare suddenly disappears from Stratford's political records. Some believe that his removal from office necessitated his son's quitting school and taking a position as a butcher's apprentice. Church records tell us that banns (announcements) were published for the marriage of a William Shakespeare to an Ann Whatley in 1582 (there are no records indicating that this arrangement was solemnized, however). On November 27 of the same year a marriage license was granted to 18-year-old William and 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. A daughter, Susanna, was born to the couple six months later. We know that twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born soon after and that the twins were baptized. We also know that Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11, on August 11, 1596. We don't know how the young Shakespeare came to travel to London or how he first came to the stage. One theory holds that young Will was arrested as a poacher (one who hunts illegally on someone else's property) and escaped to London to avoid prosecution in Stratford. Another holds that he left home to work in the city as a school teacher. Neither is corroborated by contemporary testimony or public record. Whatever the truth may be, it is clear that in the years between 1582 and 1592, William Shakespeare did become involved in the London theatre scene as a principal actor and playwright with one of several repertory companies.

By 1594, Shakespeare was listed as a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the most popular acting companies in London. He was a member of this company for the rest of his career, which lasted until approximately 1611. When James I came to the throne in 1603, he issued a royal license to Shakespeare and his fellow players, inviting them to call themselves the King's Men. In 1608, the King's Men leased the Blackfriar's Theatre in London. This theatre, which had artificial lighting and was probably heated, served as their winter playhouse. The famous Globe Theatre was their summer performance space.

In 1616 Shakespeare's daughter Judith married Thomas Quiney, the son of a neighbor in Stratford. Her father revised his will six weeks later; within a month he had died. The revised version of William Shakespeare's will bequeathed his house and all the goods therein to his daughter Susanna and her husband Dr. John Hall, leaving Judith and Thomas only a small sum of money; his wife, who survived him, received the couple's second best bed.

In the years since Shakespeare's death, he has risen to the position of patron saint of English literature and drama. In the 1800s especially, his plays were so popular that many refused to believe that an actor from Stratford had written them. To this day some believe that Sir Francis Bacon was the real author of the plays; others choose to believe Edward Devere, the Earl of Oxford, was the author. Still others would prefer to believe Walter Raleigh or Christopher Marlowe penned the lines attributed to Shakespeare. While most people are content to believe that genius can spring up in any social class or rural setting, the gap between the known facts and the myths that surround Shakespeare's life leaves ample room for speculation.

The Chandos portrait of Shakespeare, which is the only one known to be produced during his lifetime.

Portrait of Shakespeare engraved by Martin Droeshout, found on the title page of the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works, 1623.
ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

The age of Shakespeare was a great time in English history. During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603), England emerged as the leading naval and commercial power of the Western world, consolidating this position with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Elizabeth I firmly established the Church of England (begun by her father Henry VIII after a dispute with the Pope) during this time. London in the 16th century underwent a dramatic transformation; the population grew 400% between 1500 and 1600, swelling to nearly 200,000 people in the city proper and outlying region by the time an emerging artist from Stratford came to town. A rising merchant middle class was carving out a productive livelihood, and the economy was booming.

During Shakespeare’s lifetime, England also experienced a tremendous cultural revival. This so-called English Renaissance found expression in architecture, music, literature and drama. Shakespeare both drew inspiration from and enhanced high and popular culture of the English Renaissance. Popular entertainment during the 16th century tended to be boisterous and often violent. Many men, women and children attended public executions of criminals that took place on a regular basis, and persons of all social classes and genders attended theatre performances. The trade of book-making flourished during the period as public education fueled the appetite for great works in print.

During the years 1590-1593, England suffered from an outbreak of terrible proportions; the bubonic plague or “Black Death” claimed so many lives that English society stood on the verge of collapse. Many businesses, including theatres, closed, in part to keep people from spreading the disease and in part because of the labor shortage that resulted from such widespread illness and death. Once the epidemic subsided, the theatres re-opened and quickly regained their former popularity.

This explosion of commerce and culture lasted throughout Elizabeth’s reign and into that of her successor, James I. James’ rule brought many changes to English life; the two most pivotal were a bankrupt economy and an intense dissatisfaction from a minority religious group—the Puritans. In September 1642, the Puritan Parliament issued an edict that forbade all stage plays and closed the theatres; an act that effectively brought to a close the Elizabethan Renaissance. Theatres rapidly fell into disrepair and neglect until the Restoration in 1660.

In writing his plays and sonnets, William Shakespeare drew ideas from many different sources. His keen eye for detail and his sharp understanding of human nature enabled him to create some of the most enduring works of drama and poetry ever produced. But his work also provides an insightful commentary on 16th-century English values, life, history and thought.
William Shakespeare, in terms of both his life and body of work, is the most written-about author in the history of Western civilization. His canon includes 38 plays, 154 sonnets and two epic narrative poems. During his lifetime, many of his plays were published in what are known as Quarto editions, frequently without receiving the playwright’s permission. The Quartos are mostly flawed versions containing added material or missing entire passages from the original works. The first collected edition of Shakespeare’s works is called the First Folio and was published after the playwright’s death in 1623 by two members of his acting company, John Heminges and Henry Condell. Since then the works of Shakespeare have been studied, analyzed, translated and enjoyed the world over as some of the finest masterpieces of the English language.

Establishing the chronology of Shakespeare’s plays is a frustrating and difficult task. It is impossible to know in what order the plays were written because there is no record of the first production date of any of his works. However, scholars have decided upon a specific play chronology based on the following sources of information: 1) several historical events and allusions to those events in the plays; 2) the records of performances of the plays, taken from such places as the diaries of other Shakespeare contemporaries; 3) the publication dates of sources; and 4) the dates that the plays appear in print (remembering that a play was produced immediately after it was written in the Elizabethan age, but may not have been published for years following the first production). Despite the fact that we have an accepted play chronology, we must keep in mind that the dating is conjectural, and there are many who disagree with the order of plays listed on the next page.

Drawing distinctions between Shakespeare’s plays and categorizing his works has been a focus of scholars for hundreds of years, and the criteria used to differentiate the plays into types or genres has changed over time.

The distinction between tragedy and comedy became particularly important during Shakespeare’s life. During that time writers of tragedy conformed to Aristotle’s definition, relating the tale of a great man or woman brought down through hubris or fate. Comedy in this time, much like in our own, descended from the Roman ‘New Comedy’ of Plautus and Terence, which kept away from politics and focused on love, domestic troubles and family affairs.

In the First Folio, some of Shakespeare’s plays are divided by their theatrical genre—either Tragedies or Comedies—however, some of the tragedies’ protagonists or heroes, like Romeo, Timon or Macbeth, do not easily accommodate Aristotle’s definition.

Plays are also categorized in the First Folio as Histories, done so because these works chronicled the lives of English Kings. These plays tended toward tragedy (Richard II or Richard III, for instance) or comedy (the Falstaff subplots of both parts of Henry IV and the Pistol-Fluellen encounters of Henry V). Through the effort to categorize Shakespeare’s plays in publication, we can see that his writing style mingled the antagonistic visions of comedy and tragedy in ways that still seem novel and startling. The recognition of this has led scholars since the publication of the First Folio to add additional genres—problem plays, romances, tragicomedies—to help classify the works of Shakespeare. Still other scholars have augmented these genres by grouping the plays chronologically, separating by time periods.

The first period, pre-1594 including Richard III and The Comedy of Errors, has its roots in Roman and medieval drama—the construction of the plays, while good, is obvious and shows the author’s hand more so than his later works. The second period, 1594-1600 including Henry V and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, shows more growth in style and a less-labored construction. The histories of this period are considered Shakespeare’s best, portraying the lives of royalty in human terms. He also begins the interweaving of genres that would become one of his stylistic signatures. His comedies mature in this period, developing deeper characterization and subjects than previously seen in his work.
The third period, 1600-1608 including Macbeth and King Lear, includes the great tragedies—the principal works that would earn Shakespeare his fame in later centuries. The comedies of this period show Shakespeare at a literary crossroads—they are often darker and without the clear comic resolution of previous comedies—hence the term “problem plays” to describe them. The fourth period, post-1608 including The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest, encompasses what have been referred to as the romances or tragicomedies. Shakespeare at the end of his career seemed preoccupied with themes of redemption. The writing is more serious yet more lyrical, and the plays show Shakespeare at his most symbolic. Scholars argue whether this period owes more to Shakespeare’s maturity as a playwright or merely signifies a changing trend in Elizabethan theatre.

It is important for scholars, teachers and students to keep in mind that these “genre” classifications were not determined by Shakespeare during the writing of each play but imposed after his death to help readers better understand his work.

*The Two Noble Kinsmen* is listed although a few scholars do not believe it is an original Shakespeare work. The majority of the play was probably written by John Fletcher, Shakespeare’s close friend who succeeded him as foremost dramatist for the King’s Men.
During the Elizabethan period, “English” was a relatively young language (only about 160 years old) combining Latin, French and Anglo-Saxon. There was no dictionary or standardized literacy education. People in Shakespeare's London spoke much more than they read, causing the rules of grammar and spelling to be quite fluid. Writers created new words daily and poets expressed themselves in a new form of writing known as blank verse, first appearing in 1557 in Certain Bokes of Virgiles Aenis by the Earl of Surrey:

They whistled all, with fixed face attest
When Prince Aeneas from the royal seat
Thus gan to speak, O Queene, it is thy will,
I should renew a woe can not be told:

(Book II, 1-4)

That the verse was “blank” simply meant that the poetry did not rhyme, allowing rhyme-less poets such as Virgil and Ovid to be translated and Elizabethan playwrights to emulate the natural rhythms of English speech within iambic pentameter.

A typical line of verse from this time contains five units of meter or feet. Each foot contains two syllables. When the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed (dee DUM), it is an iamb (iambic meaning push, persistency or determination). The prefix penta means five, as in the five-sided shape—a pentagon. Iambic pentameter is therefore one line of poetry consisting of five forward-moving feet.

It was this new tradition of blank verse in iambic pentameter that Shakespeare inherited as he embarked on his career as playwright and poet. Similar to the human heartbeat, a horse gallop or the beat of a piece of music, iambic pentameter drives and supports Shakespeare’s verse, moving the language along in a forward flow that emulates the natural speech and rhythms of life. Here is a standard line of verse in iambic pentameter from Romeo and Juliet.

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

(Book II.1.2)

If we were to say the rhythm and not the words, it would sound like this:

dee DUM  dee DUM  dee DUM  dee DUM  dee DUM

When we scan a piece of text (marking it with a ‘/’ for the unstressed and ‘/’ for stressed), we simply tap out the rhythm of the line, based on dee DUM dee DUM dee DUM dee DUM dee DUM, to see if the line is structured in iambic pentameter:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

(Book II.1.2)

Embracing the rules of this new verse, Shakespeare’s early writing operated almost entirely within strict iambic pentameter.

Prose in Shakespeare’s work is not in iambic pentameter and relies more heavily on other literary devices for its speed and rhythm. These devices include: antithesis (setting opposite words against each other), lists (series of actions or descriptive words that build to a climax) and puns (the use or misuse of a word to mean another word). Shakespeare used prose to express conversation between the lower classes, like the Mechanicals in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, or familiar or intimate scenes, as with Henry and Katherine at the end of Henry V. He also utilized prose to express madness or vulgarity, as in the nunnerly scene of Hamlet. The exact meaning of a shift from verse to prose is not constant, but it always signals a change in the situation, characters or tone of a scene. Only Much Ado About Nothing and The Merry Wives of Windsor rely almost entirely on prose.

In the following passage from The Merry Wives of Windsor, note antithesis in Ford’s comparison of himself with Page and of other men’s possessions with Mistress Ford, see the list of things Ford would rather trust others with than his “wife with herself” and observe the pun on “effect”:

Ford
Page is an ass, a secure ass; he will trust his wife, he will not be jealous. I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, an Irishman with my aqua vitæ bottle, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself. Then she plots, then she ruminates, then she devises; and what they think in their hearts they may effect, they will break their hearts but they will effect. God be praised for my jealous!

(Book III.3.300-314)
As his writing skill level increased, Shakespeare gradually employed alliteration (the repetition of a vowel or consonant in two or more words in a phrase), assonance (resembling vowel sounds in a line) and onomatopoeia (words with sounds imitating their meaning) to create deeply poetic, vibrant images on stage for the characters and his audience. Examples of these three literary devices are found in the following four lines:

**Chorus**
From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch.

(Henry V, IV.4-7)

The hard "C" is repeated in the first line (alliteration), the "O" is heard in "through", "foul" and "womb" (assonance) and the word "whispers" in the last line imitates the sound whispers produce (onomatopoeia).

By the time Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, he sometimes allowed a character's thoughts to overflow their usual pentameter lines with an extra beat, often ending with a soft or feminine ending. He also utilized more and more enjambed or run-on lines, allowing thoughts to continue from line to line, rather than finishing a thought per line. He grew to express the inner life of his characters and the size of their thoughts within the structure and the scansion of the text. In this famous passage from Hamlet, notice the overflow in the first line of Hamlet's huge thought beyond the regular pentameter, forming a feminine ending:

```
\ / \ / \ / \ / \ / \ /
To be, or not to be: that is the question:
```(III.1.55)

With this overflow, Shakespeare expresses the enormity of Hamlet's thought, his situation and the uneasy exploration of this argument. (It is important to remember, however, scanning is subjective and must be decided by the individual actor or reader.)

This line might also be scanned:

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\ / \ / \ / \ / \ / \ /
To be, or not to be: that is the question:
```(III.1.55)

This creates a trochee, or an iamb of reversed stress—DEE dum.

Eventually, in Othello, King Lear and Macbeth, Shakespeare became a master of building, breaking and reinventing rhythms and language to create an entire tone or world for a play. Continuously experimenting and exploring the combination of form, meaning and language, he used short and shared lines between characters more and more, as in Macbeth, allowing the speed and rhythm of characters' thoughts to meet and collide.

Lady Macbeth I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.
Did not you speak?

Macbeth When?

Lady Macbeth Now.

Macbeth As I descended?

(II.ii.15-19)

By the time Shakespeare gives his final farewell in The Tempest, believed by many to be his last play, his verse is so varied and specific to character and situation that it is extremely difficult to scan. Shakespeare broke, rebuilt and reinvented the verse form so many times that he plays the equivalent of jazz in the rhythms of Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale and The Tempest. At the end of The Tempest, in Prospero's powerfully simple epilogue, Shakespeare brings his work full circle by returning to the simplicity of regular verse. Having created almost 1,700 words, timeless characters and the greatest poetry in the history of the English language, Shakespeare "buries his art" and returns to the form with which he began.
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<td>1540 Michelangelo finishes painting <em>The Last Judgment</em>.</td>
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<td>1570 John Shakespeare first applies for a family coat of arms. His application is denied.</td>
<td>1562 A series of civil wars between Catholics and Protestants, known as the Wars of Religion, begin in France.</td>
<td>1543 Copernicus' heliocentric theory, claiming the sun is the center of the universe, is first published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1583 Shakespeare’s daughter Susanna born.</td>
<td>1568 A revolt of the Spanish-ruled Netherlands against Philip II, King of Spain, begins the Eighty Years War.</td>
<td>1565 Arthur Golding translates Ovid’s <em>Metamorphoses</em>. The text later influenced Shakespeare’s work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1585 Shakespeare’s twins Judith and Hamnet born.</td>
<td>1587 Shakespeare goes to London to pursue life in the theatre.</td>
<td>1567 Richard Burbage, a tragedian who portrayed many of Shakespeare’s characters, born.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1594 Shakespeare becomes a founding member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.</td>
<td>1596 Hamnet Shakespeare dies at age 11.</td>
<td>1576 The first permanent theatre in England, The Theatre, is built.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1597 Shakespeare purchases New Place in Stratford.</td>
<td>1599 Shakespeare’s family is granted a coat of arms.</td>
<td>1577 Raphael Holinshed publishes <em>The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland</em>, which becomes Shakespeare’s primary source for the history plays.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1601 Shakespeare’s father dies.</td>
<td>1603 The Lord Chamberlain’s Men are renamed the King’s Men. They perform at the Court of King James I more than any other company.</td>
<td>1580 Thomas Middleton, a playwright who collaboratively wrote many plays, born.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1603 The Lord Chamberlain’s Men are renamed the King’s Men. They perform at the Court of King James I more than any other company.</td>
<td>1608 The King’s Men begin playing at the Blackfriars Theatre, a prominent indoor theatre.</td>
<td>1588 Marlowe’s play <em>Dr. Faustus</em> first produced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1598 Philip II of Spain dies. The French Protestants are permitted to freely practice their religion by the Edict of Nantes.</td>
<td>1609 Shakespeare’s <em>Sonnets</em> published.</td>
<td>1590 Marlowe’s play <em>The Jew of Malta</em> first produced; it influenced Shakespeare’s <em>The Merchant of Venice</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1601 The Earl of Essex attempts to rebel against Queen Elizabeth, fails and is executed.</td>
<td>1610 In March, Shakespeare, apparently ill, revises his will. On April 23rd he dies and is buried at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford.</td>
<td>1592 Thomas Kyd’s <em>The Spanish Tragedy</em> first produced. It influenced Shakespeare’s <em>Hamlet</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1603 Sir Walter Raleigh is arrested, tried and imprisoned for disobeying the Queen by secretly marrying one of her maids of honor. Queen Elizabeth dies. King James VI of Scotland, son of Mary Queen of Scots, becomes King James I of England. The plague once again ravages London.</td>
<td>1564 Ben Jonson’s play <em>Volpone</em> is written.</td>
<td>1597 The Theatre permanently closes due to the expiration of its lease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1604 England establishes a peace treaty with Spain.</td>
<td>1607 Jamestown, one of the first English colonies in the Americas, is founded.</td>
<td>1599 The Globe Theatre is built on Bankside from the timbers of The Theatre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1610 King Henry IV of France is murdered. He is succeeded by his son, Louis XIII.</td>
<td>1618 The Protestant German princes and their foreign supporters begin their struggle against the Holy Roman Empire. This marks the start of the Thirty Years War.</td>
<td>1603 The “Scientific Revolution” begins with Johann Kepler’s recordings of planetary movements and Galileo Galilei’s perfection of the telescope.</td>
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| 1623 Shakespeare’s *First Folio* published. | 1611 The King James Bible first published. | 1616 Ben Jonson’s *Workes* published in folio. |
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.

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

And those twin sons had twin

Egeon, saddened by the split of his family, named the two boys he
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.
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’ *Amphytryon* is just as relevant an influence. Shakespeare’s treatment of identity and its fragility are derived from this latter work. In the *Amphytryon*, 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.

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**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.
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.
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 slapstick physicality, there is a great deal of verbal wit, incongruity and satire contained in the story as well.

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 inopportunity 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.

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Robson & Crane in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, 1879. This comic duo’s partnership lasted 12 successful years.
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 Epidamnum, 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 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?” (II.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, 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...**

### 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?

### 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?
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?

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?

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?”

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.

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.
**Books or Essays on *The Comedy of Errors***


**Books on Shakespeare and Teaching Shakespeare**


**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*