



# **the Comedy of errors**

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

ADAPTED BY SEAN GRANEY

Directed by Sean Graney

September 16 – October 17, 2010

at Court Theatre



## CHARACTERS

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- **The Duke of Ephesus**
- **Egeon**, father to Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse
- **Emilia**, Egeon's lost wife, now Lady Abbess at Ephesus
- **Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse**, twin brothers, sons of Egeon and Emilia
- **Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse**, twin brothers, servants of Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse
- **Adriana**, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus
- **Luciana**, Adriana's sister
- **Luce**, kitchen maid to Adriana and wife of Dromio of Ephesus
- **Angelo**, a gold merchant
- **Angry Merchantess**, to whom Angelo owes money
- **Doctor Pinch**, a conjurer
- **Balthazar**, a merchant
- **Courtesan**
- **Boatswain**
- **Officer Jailor**
- **Town Crier**
- **Executioner**

## STORY

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The play opens with the Town Crier explaining a new law forbidding Syracusians to enter Ephesus, at which point Egeon, an elderly Syracusan, arrives and is immediately arrested. As he is led to his execution, he tells the Duke of Ephesus that he has come to Syracuse in search of his wife and one of his twin sons, who were separated from him 25 years ago in a shipwreck. The other twin, who grew up with Egeon, is also traveling the world in search of the missing half of their family. (The twins, we learn, are identical, and each has an identical twin slave named Dromio.) The Duke is

so moved by this story that he grants Egeon a day to raise the thousand-mark ransom that would be necessary to save his life.

Meanwhile, unknown to Egeon, his son Antipholus of Syracuse (and Antipholus's slave Dromio) is also visiting Ephesus, where Antipholus's missing twin, known as Antipholus of Ephesus, is a prosperous citizen of the city. Adriana, Antipholus of Ephesus's wife, mistakes Antipholus of Syracuse for her husband and drags him home for dinner, leaving Dromio of Syracuse to stand guard at the door and admit no one. Shortly thereafter, Antipholus of Ephesus (with his slave Dromio of Ephesus) returns home and is refused entry to his own house. Meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse has fallen in love with Luciana, Adriana's sister, who is appalled at the behavior of the man she thinks is her brother-in-law.

The confusion increases when a gold chain ordered by the Ephesian Antipholus is given to Antipholus of Syracuse. Antipholus of Ephesus refuses to pay for the chain (since he never received it) and is arrested for debt. His wife, seeing his strange behavior, decides he has gone mad and orders him bound. Meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse and his slave decide to flee the city, which they believe to be enchanted, as soon as possible, only to be harassed by Adriana and the debt officer. They seek refuge in a nearby abbey.

Adriana begs the Duke to intervene and remove her "husband" from the abbey into her custody. Her real husband, meanwhile, has broken loose and now comes to the Duke and levels charges against his wife. The situation is finally resolved by the Abbess, Emilia, who reveals both sets of twins and explains that she is Egeon's long-lost wife. Antipholus of Ephesus reconciles with Adriana; Egeon is pardoned by the Duke and reunited with his spouse; Antipholus of Syracuse resumes his romantic pursuit of Luciana, and all ends happily.

## ABOUT THE PLAY

*Compiled by Production Dramaturg Will Bishop and Resident Dramaturg Drew Dir*

*The Comedy of Errors* is one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, and is considered by many an apprentice play, an attempt on Shakespeare's part to get used to the idea of playwriting by tackling a less complex play-world. However, while lacking the depth of a *Hamlet*, say, Shakespeare inserts multiple threads and layers into *Comedy* which are entirely lacking in his original Roman sources. This not only made the play more exciting and interesting for Elizabethan audiences, but also reveals his genius in crafting full characters even at this early point.

The Plautus plays Shakespeare uses to inspire *Comedy* are relatively simple farces. Characters are simple types: there is a seductive courtesan, a lecherous husband, a shrewish wife, an accepting servant, etc. These characters' rigid and unflinching natures force them into all types of identity mistakes, or errors. Shakespeare clearly uses this basic format as the start of *Comedy*, where exaggerated characters face error after error.

However, into this mix Shakespeare adds elements of the medieval-Renaissance courtly romance. Romances bring love and Christianity into play. Thus, during the traditional farce, there are two very serious love stories – the relationship between Antipholus of Ephesus and Adriana, and the relationship between Antipholus of Syracuse and Luciana. One of these ends in the traditional romance fashion, with a pending

marriage between S.Antipholus and Luciana. The E.Antipholus and Adriana marriage remains more vague, but is radically transformed from the one-key farce marriage by this romantic influence.

Shakespeare also adds Egeon and Emilia, characters who could (and did) walk out of mediaeval romance. Egeon's quest to find his family, and Emilia, an abbess who literally plays *deus ex machina* by letting Christianity save the day, are entirely out of place within farce. The play thus contains a very powerful genre tension, appealing to two immensely popular Elizabethan theater styles simultaneously. The presence of this tension allows Shakespeare to start to explore a more complex world than Plautus's simple farce logic can support. With Egeon comes the Ephesus-Syracuse conflict, which creates a dark, political backdrop to the play's humor. S.Antipholus's presence in turn becomes dangerous – as much as we can laugh at the “jugglers” of Ephesus, we can't forget they pose a real threat to Antipholus. The twin Antipholuses and Dromios also possess a type of intellectual understanding and depth lacking totally in farce. All four twins are seriously concerned and frightened by the sudden loss of their identities – as much as it is a source of humor, it is a source of crisis as well. Even at this early stage, we see Shakespeare pushing basic Plautine construction to its limits, creating not stock characters but full humans who struggle to define their own identities in an inhospitable world.



Erik Hellman as “Antipholus of Syracuse” and Alex Goodrich as “Dromio of Ephesus” in Court Theatre’s production of *The Comedy of Errors*.

### “Deus Ex Machina”

(dey-uhs eks mah-kee-nah):

Latin for “God out of the machine,” a Deus Ex Machina is a plot device in which a seemingly unsolvable problem is abruptly solved with the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new character, ability, or object.



# PLAYGOING IN THE ELIZABETHAN PERIOD

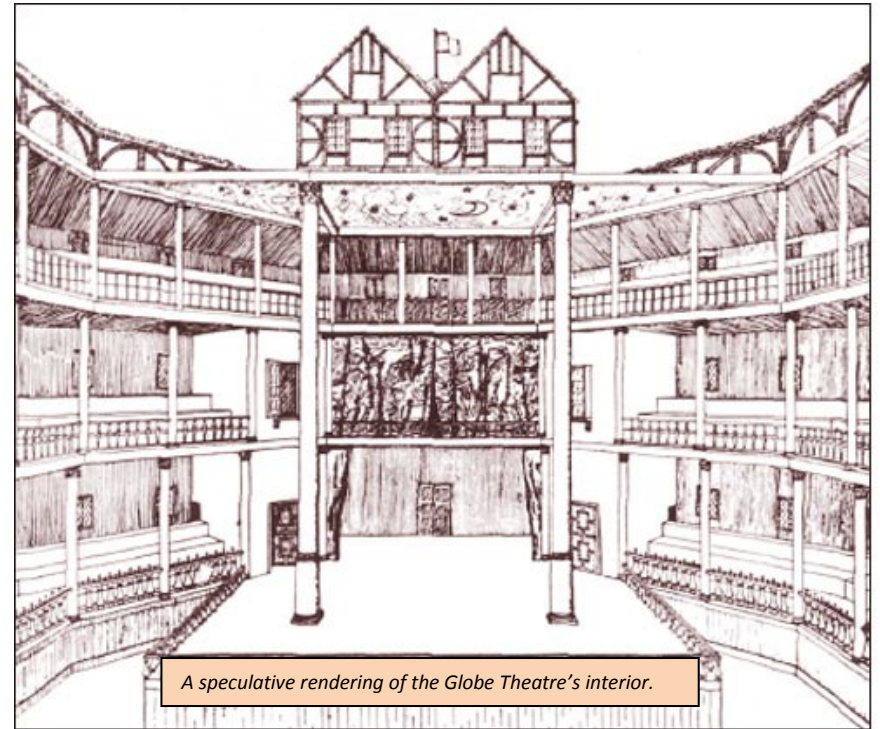
*Compiled by Production Dramaturg Will Bishop and Resident Dramaturg Drew Dir*

In the Elizabethan period, plays served a very different function than they do today. Playgoing was primarily a social experience. Audiences went to plays to interact with each other in a large-scale social setting; the play itself was just part of the whole. Most plays were staged in massive open-air amphitheaters, which allowed them to play out more like sports games than works of art. The audience was equally as visible as the stage, and what happened in the audience was often just as important as what happened onstage.

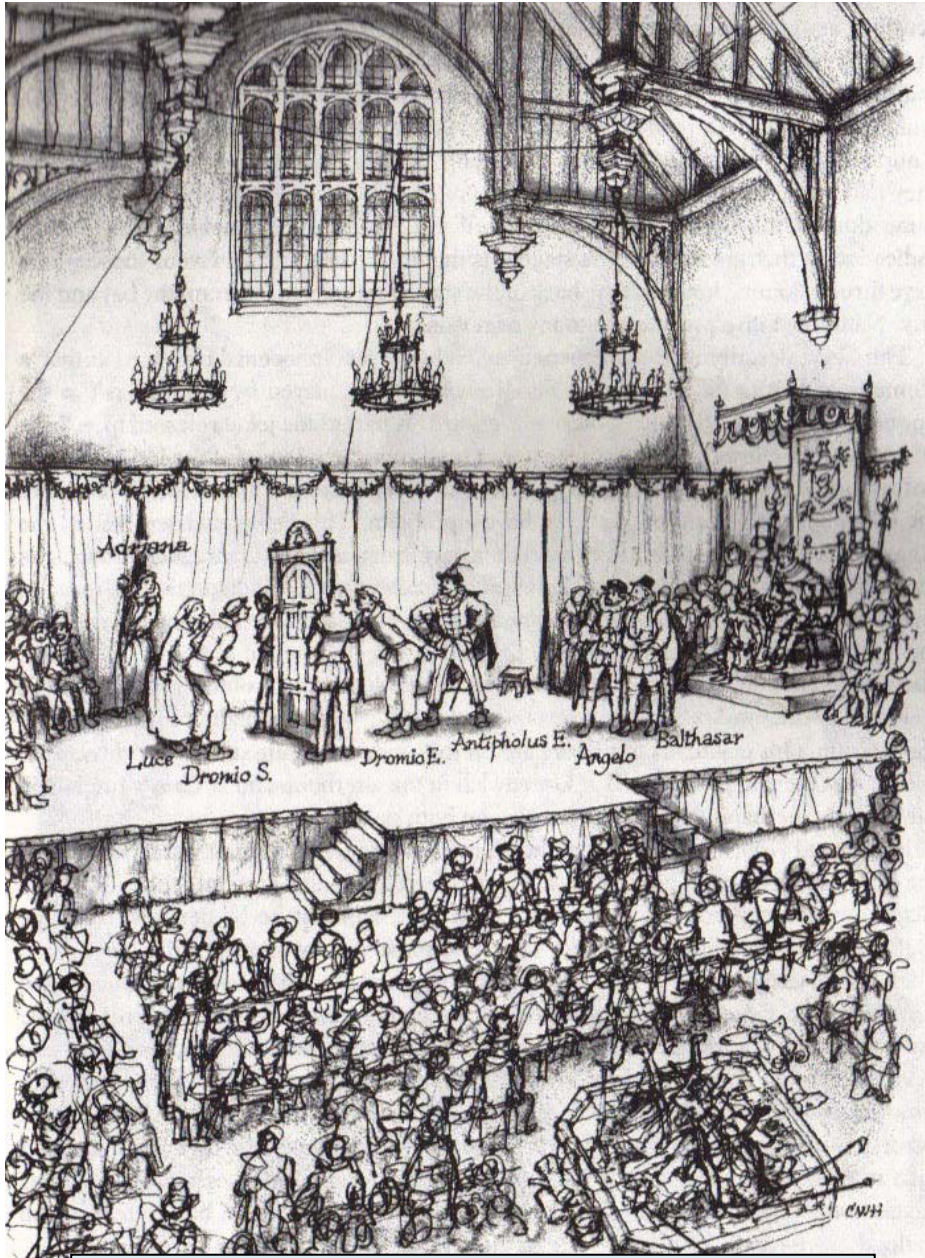
Playgoing was considered a crude, almost sinful entertainment, often likened to going to a whorehouse. Playhouses in London were completely shut down in 1642 for breeding frivolity in a harsh political climate. Full-fledged brawls, either between audience members or the audience and the actors, shut down a number of performances. These events, which we would now call “external” or “incidental” to the play, defined the playgoing experience. The negative connotation of playgoing was rarely due to the plays being presented, but instead by how audience members interacted with each other.

Even when playgoing was not violent or criminal, it was still an audience-centric experience. Audiences would eat, talk, laugh, yell, throw things at the stage, try to converse with actors, and generally ignore every rule of theater decorum we’ve currently established. Going to a play was less about seeing a work of art, and more about having a great time. If the play itself wasn’t amusing, you were free to amuse yourself as you saw fit. Playgoing 400 years ago was in many ways similar to going to a bar with live music today: if you enjoy the performance, then you can watch, but if not, then there is nothing wrong with socializing.

Theater today is very different. Audiences come to see a specific show, and give it their undivided attention. Generally, audience participation outside the guidelines of the specific production is frowned upon. However, theater today plays a very different social role than theater in the seventeenth century. At the time, theater was the only form of public entertainment. It had a massive popularity, both among the educated who loved hearing great poetry read out loud and the uneducated who could only experience great writing through theater. The playgoing experience was, as a result, conditioned by the same strict social rules that governed daily life. The class-based stratification which drove every interaction was as much in place at the open-air playhouse; the more you paid for tickets, the “better” seats you got, creating a physical stratification within the audience.



*A speculative rendering of the Globe Theatre's interior.*



An artist's speculative rendering of the first performance of *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn, 1594. C. Walter Hodges, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*.

## THE FOURTH WALL

- ✧ The fourth wall is the imaginary "wall" at the front of the stage in a traditional three-walled box set in a proscenium theatre, through which the audience sees the action in the world of the play.
- ✧ The idea of the fourth wall was made explicit by Denis Diderot and spread in nineteenth-century theatre with the advent of theatrical realism, which extended the idea to the imaginary boundary between any fictional work and its audience.
- ✧ The presence of the fourth wall is an established convention of modern realistic theatre, which has led some artists to draw direct attention to it for dramatic or comedic effect when this boundary is "broken", for example by an actor onstage speaking to the audience directly.
- ✧ The acceptance of the transparency of the fourth wall is part of the suspension of disbelief between a fictional work and an audience, allowing them to enjoy the fiction as if they were observing real events.
- ✧ Postmodern art forms frequently either do away with it entirely, or make use of various framing devices to manipulate it in order to emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects of the production.



**Xenophobia** is an irrational, deep-rooted fear of or antipathy towards foreigners. It comes from the Greek words ξένος (xenos), meaning "stranger," "foreigner" and φόβος (phobos), meaning "fear."

Xenophobia can manifest itself in many ways involving the relations and perceptions of an ingroup towards an outgroup, including a fear of losing identity, suspicion of its activities, aggression, and desire to eliminate its presence to secure a presumed purity.

The *Dictionary of Psychology* defines it as "a fear of strangers". It can mean a fear of or aversion to not only persons from other countries, but other cultures, subcultures and subsets of belief systems; in short, anyone who meets any list of criteria about their origin, religion, personal beliefs, habits, language, orientations, or any other criteria.



Kurt Ehrmann as "Dr. Pinch", Elizabeth Ledo as "Luciana", Stacy Stoltz as "Adriana", Erik Hellman as "Antipholus of Ephesus", and Steve Wilson as "Officer Jailor" in Court Theatre's production of *The Comedy of Errors*

While some will state that the "target" group is a set of persons not accepted by society, in reality only the phobic person needs to believe that the target group is not (or should not be) accepted by society. While the phobic person is aware of the aversion (even hatred) of the target group, he/she may not identify it or accept it as a fear.

Xenophobia has two main objects:

The first is a population group present within a society that is not considered part of that society.

The second form of xenophobia is primarily cultural, and the objects of the phobia are cultural elements which are considered alien.

# a brief history of the comedy of errors

Information compiled by Production Dramaturg Will Bishop and Resident Dramaturg Drew Dir

There are only two recorded performances of *The Comedy of Errors* that occurred in Shakespeare's lifetime—once in 1594 for a rowdy crowd of Gray's Inn law students, again in 1604 at the court of James I—though there were probably more.

For the next two hundred years, the play received little attention.

In 1780, W.W. Woods presented his version called *The Twins, or Which is Which?* in Edinburgh; the author claimed to have “endeavored to use the pruning-knife only to make the shoots of genius spring forth more vigorously.” In 1819, Frederic Reynolds composed an opera of the play, adding lyrics from other Shakespearean songs into the libretto; it ran twenty-seven times in one season.

Despite these exceptions, the play continued to receive few productions, compared to other Shakespeare comedies, by companies like the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (later renamed the Royal Shakespeare Company).

Ten years later, the play was included in the Shakespeare tercentenary celebration of 1864 with two Irish brothers, Charles and Henry Webb, as the two Dromios. Other notable productions in this period included a 1905 London production by Sir Frank Benson's company (featuring Benson in the role of Antipholus) and Sir Philip Ben Greet's 1915 production.

It was not until Samuel Phelps revived the play in 1855 using Shakespeare's more or less original text that *The Comedy of Errors* received a complete, unadulterated production.

The most influential production of the twentieth century, however, may have been Theodore Komisarjevsky's 1938 production of *Comedy of Errors* at Stratford. Dressing the actors in a “gloriously undisciplined conglomeration of styles,” including a flock of pink bowler hats for the officers, Komisarjevsky's production emphasized the playfulness of Shakespeare's farce, even when the fun came at the expense of the text.

In 1938, Rogers and Hammerstein adapted the play into the musical *The Boys from Syracuse*, filmed two years later as a Hollywood feature film.

In 1983 Robert Woodruff collaborated with the Flying Karamazov Brothers and Avner the Eccentric to stage a visually outrageous version of *Comedy of Errors* adorned with virtuoso juggling and circus tricks. Woodruff's production, which premiered at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, boldly warped and even rewrote much of Shakespeare's text to support the antics of the performers; beloved by audiences, it divided critics and Shakespeare scholars for years.

The most recent production in Chicago was Chicago Shakespeare Theater's version, directed by Barbara Gaines, which embedded the play within a play about a movie studio filming their own version of *Comedy of Errors*.

More recently, a touring production titled *The Bombitty of Errors*, touted as an “ad-rap-tation” of *Comedy of Errors*, features four actors in a hip-hop retelling of Shakespeare's play.



# ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

*Written by Becca Manery in 1992, revised for 2010*

SHAKESPEARE COMPOSED *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS* EARLY IN HIS career, in 1593 or 1594; though whether it was his fourth, third, second, or even first play is much in dispute. It was probably written around the same time as two other early comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Because of its early date in the canon, *The Comedy of Errors* is often viewed as an apprentice play, a work derivative in form, on which the young Shakespeare cut his teeth; this characterization, though, is also much disputed.

Notoriously little is known of Shakespeare's life. He was born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1564, one of the eight children of John and Mary Shakespeare. His father was a glover who became an alderman and later Chief Alderman of the town. Shakespeare probably attended the King's New School in Stratford, but he had no university education. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway; their first child, Susanna, was born six months later. The couple also had twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. Hamnet, the only son, died when he was eleven.

Nothing is known of Shakespeare's life from the mid 1580s until 1592, when Robert Greene's reference to the "upstart crow" who fancies himself "the only Shakes-scene in the country" places him in London with a burgeoning reputation as a playwright. During the plague years of 1592 and 1593, when the theaters were closed, Shakespeare wrote two long poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both dedicated to the young Earl of Southampton. His 154 sonnets probably date from this time as well. In 1594, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of London's leading companies, re-named the King's Men after James I became their patron. His role as principal playwright and shareholder in the Globe Theatre made Shakespeare sufficiently wealthy to purchase considerable property in Stratford, where his wife and children lived, and sufficiently respectable to secure a coat of arms in his father's name.

Shakespeare's early success was built on comedies, an occasional tragedy, including the popular *Romeo and Juliet*, and history plays. By 1599, Shakespeare had turned to darker and more troubling material. *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure* were written between 1599 and 1604. The latter three were often labeled problem plays by twentieth century critics because of their admixture of comic and tragic elements. Less than a year elapsed between *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*, which initiated the period of Shakespeare's great tragedies. *King Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* followed in quick succession. Toward the end of his career, Shakespeare focused on romantic comedies, including *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. His last plays, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, were collaborations with John Fletcher.

After the Globe Theatre burned down in 1613, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, dying there on April 23, 1616. His work remained uncollected until John Heminges and Henry Condell, two actors of his company, published the First Folio of his plays in 1623.

## DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Court Theatre's production of *The Comedy of Errors* mixes Shakespearean text with modern English. In your opinion, what might this imply?
- Sean Graney, who directed last year's production of Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, adapted and directed this production of *The Comedy of Errors*. What elements of farce are present in the show? What does "farce" mean to the characters in this production? Are there elements of realism mixed in? If so, what are they?
- One of the themes of *The Comedy of Errors* is xenophobia, or the fear of the "other". How does this play out in the production? How does it relate to -- and drive -- the action of the play?
- Emilia, the Abbess, serves as a "Deus Ex Machina" at the end of the play. What are some other examples of "Deus Ex Machina" in plays, TV shows, and movies?
- Money and debt play a large role in this play. Is the play making social commentary? Why or why not?
- Throughout *The Comedy of Errors*, characters' identities are mistaken and misidentified. How do the characters' definitions of themselves differ from how they are perceived? What might this mean about the nature of identity?
- What does this play say about love and marriage? Does it seem to view it favorably? Why or why not?
- What does this play say about gender and the role it plays in identity?