

# illuminations

A Guide to the 2014 Plays





RODNEY GARDINER (DROMIO OF SYRACUSE AND EPHEBUS)

Notes by Otis Ramsey-Zöe  
and Rob Weinert-Kendt

## Who's Who

### Syracusans

#### Egeon

A merchant who arrived in Ephesus after searching for his twin sons.

#### Antipholus of Syracuse

Twin brother of Antipholus of Ephesus and son of Egeon. He has been traveling the world in search of his long-lost brother and mother.

#### Dromio of Syracuse

Twin brother of Dromio of Ephesus and servant of Antipholus of Syracuse.

### Ephesians

#### Duke Solinus

Ruler of Ephesus. He upholds the rule of law while employing compassion in its application.

#### Antipholus of Ephesus

Twin brother of Antipholus of Syracuse. A well-respected member of the community.

#### Dromio of Ephesus

Twin brother of Dromio of Syracuse and servant of Antipholus of Ephesus.

#### Adriana

Wife of Antipholus of Ephesus. Craves equality in her marriage.

*In this production, which is set during the Harlem Renaissance, Ephesus is Harlem and Syracuse is Louisiana.*

# THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

William Shakespeare

Directed by Kent Gash

#### Luciana

Adriana's sister. Has caught the eye of Antipholus of Syracuse.

#### Luce

Adriana's servant.

#### Nell

Antipholus of Ephesus' kitchen maid.

#### Courtesan

Mistress of Antipholus of Ephesus.

#### Emilia

The Abbess of a priory.

#### Balthazar

A merchant.

#### Angelo

A goldsmith and a friend of Antipholus of Ephesus.

#### First Merchant

A friend of Antipholus of Ephesus.

#### Second Merchant

Must get money Angelo owes him.

#### Doctor Pinch

A schoolmaster, doctor and aspiring exorcist.

## The Story

Years ago, the merchant Egeon was sailing with his wife, twin sons and twin servants when a shipwreck divided his family. He, along with one twin son and one servant, was rescued by a passing ship; a separate ship saved his wife and the other twin son and servant. Egeon and his one son and servant settled in Syracuse.

Now an adult, Egeon's son Antipholus of Syracuse (hereafter Antipholus S.) sets out with his servant Dromio of Syracuse (hereafter Dromio S.) to find their lost brothers. When they fail to return, Egeon begins to search for them, his other son and servant and his wife. His search brings him to Ephesus, a town traditionally hostile to Syracuse. Each town has decreed death to any citizen from

## All That Comedy Can Bear

the rival precinct. Egeon is discovered, and Duke Solinus sentences him to death. Egeon accepts his impending death as a means to end his grief and misery. Hearing this, Solinus extends a one-day stay of execution to allow Egeon to raise bail money to save himself.

Antipholus S. and Dromio S. arrive in Ephesus on the same day as Egeon, and the master sends his servant to put away some money for safe-keeping at their inn. Shortly, Dromio of Ephesus (hereafter Dromio E.) runs into the visiting Antipholus. Thinking him his master, he urges him to return home posthaste for dinner. Antipholus S. asks Dromio E. if the money is safe. Confused, he denies knowledge of any money, and gets beaten for his pains.

Waiting, as always, for her husband, Antipholus of Ephesus (hereafter Antipholus E.), Adriana and her sister Luciana discuss the plight of married women. Adriana's servant, Dromio E., interrupts and recounts his strange encounter with the man he thinks is his master. Adriana sets out to fetch her husband and encounters the visiting Antipholus and Dromio and brings them home. When the local Antipholus and Dromio arrive home, they find themselves locked out. Enraged, Antipholus E. goes to a Courtesan and promises her the gold chain he'd intended for his wife.

Antipholus S. courts Luciana, who rejects his advances because she believes he is her sister's husband. Antipholus E. is arrested for refusing to pay for the gold chain that was mistakenly delivered to his twin brother earlier that day. The Courtesan demands Antipholus S. give her the promised chain. Convinced the town is filled with witchcraft (as is Ephesus' reputation), he and Dromio S. try to escape. They find sanctuary in a nearby priory with the Abbess.

Meanwhile, Adriana, Luciana and the Courtesan hire Dr. Pinch to cure Antipholus and Dromio E. of what they perceive as madness, and the doctor takes the pair away. But they escape and meet their household outside the priory. Duke Solinus enters with Egeon on his way to be executed, and the Abbess appears with Antipholus and Dromio S. The family reunion is completed, which includes a revelation that Egeon's wife is the Abbess. Solinus pardons Egeon.—Otis Ramsey-Zöe

Some pedants insist that *The Comedy of Errors*, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays and by line count his shortest, is more accurately titled *The Errors*, after the tradition of dropping the rubric "tragedy" or "comedy" as we do from, say, *The Tragedy of King Lear*. But while no one needs such a category reminder for the tales of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus* or those doomed teens from Verona, to sever "comedy" from "errors" is to separate text from context, sequences from consequences, the punch line from the joke. Such a separation does violence, in fact, to the play's essence. For while it is the sheer volume of scarcely believable mistakes and coincidences that tips it into the comedy column, the play's forward bounce is what keeps these mishaps from inflicting lasting harm and keeps the characters' sins from becoming mortal.

### Threat of death

Still, the first thing one notices about the play is that it begins and ends on the very brink of mortality. The Syracusan Egeon will die unless he can raise a ransom by sundown, and the action climaxes with his dramatic, last-minute rescue from execution. While it's easy to trace Shakespeare's sources for the play—a pair of mistaken-identity comedies by Roman playwright Plautus—the addition of a literal "deadline" is an invention typical of the young playwright's dramatic sense. From the outset, Shakespeare guessed that even the frothiest farce purrs along better with a frosty nip at its heels.

Shakespeare's other innovation is also the play's boldest gambit: doubling the number of separated twins for maximum comic confusion, so that waiting on two estranged young masters named Antipholus are two oblivious servants named Dromio. Not only had none of Shakespeare's antecedents tried this, it is hard to find a twin-based mistaken-identity tale since, from Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask* to David Cronenberg's film *Dead Ringers*, that has dared to "supersize" its fantastical premise in this way.

This ambitious mistaken-identity pile-up functions as the sort of all-or-nothing gamble that both raises the comic stakes and piques our curiosity as to how it can possibly be pulled off, like an ice skater adding another triple axel in midair. And it constitutes the playwright's

## ARGUING MARRIAGE

Elizabethans generally adhered to views of Christian marriage as dictated by faith and articulated in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which states that wives must be subject to their husbands, who in turn shall be "head of the wife." As such, in Renaissance England, a woman's body and possessions became her husband's property, which allowed him to beat her for disobedience. Accordingly, Antipholus E. sends his Dromio to buy a rope for such purpose.

Adriana and Luciana dispute the nature of marriage and role of wives. Their dialogue reflects tension between romantic love, social obligation and expectations of married women. Luciana represents the status quo, urging her sister to observe patience and accede to dominance. Adriana argues that Luciana's position stems from naïveté and says experience will alter her thinking.

In contrast, Adriana questions why men should have greater freedom than women. Her revolutionary stance against social, political and economic orders seem rooted in a rejection of the powerlessness created by those very systems.

—ORZ

# THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

## STOCK CHARACTERS

The figures in *The Comedy of Errors* derive from stock characters that originated in Roman comedies and found their greatest expression in Italian commedia dell'arte. Based on fixed social types, many evolved into the favorite characters of European drama in the 17th and 18th centuries. Here are some of the most popular:

**Pantalone** is a lecherous, miserly old Venetian merchant. He is most often portrayed as rich and retired. Sometimes he is poor, sometimes a father, other times a bachelor. (Egeon)

**Arlecchino**, or **Harlequin**, was the most popular of the comic servants. He is at once witty, insolent, mocking, inept, clownish and emphatically ribald. (The Dromios)

The **Inamorato** and **Inamorata** went by many names and had no recognizable traits other than being in love. Typically, they are rational beings under ordinary circumstances; however, being in love thrusts them into states of absurdity marked by jealousy, fickleness, vanity, selfishness, self-obsession and

winking bargain with the audience: Suspend your disbelief, and I'll keep all the plates spinning. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it in *Literary Remains*: "A comedy would scarcely allow even the two Antipholuses . . . but farce dares add the two Dromios. . . . In a word, farces commence in a postulate, which must be granted."

Even so, *The Comedy of Errors*' "postulate" is by design not an easy one to swallow, and our indulgence is required not only when the farce commences but throughout. For starters: Even allowing for the twins' physical resemblance, what exactly are the odds that they would be wearing the same clothes? Productions of *The Comedy of Errors* most often surmount this obstacle with the tenuous suggestion that Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, meaning to hide their city of origin from hostile authorities, have donned the prevailing fashion of their adopted town, the better to blend in. This leaves us to assume, however, that the sartorial options for men and their servants in Ephesus are as circumscribed as a private school dress code.

And given that Antipholus of Syracuse is ostensibly on a quest to find a long-lost twin brother, why does it never occur to him that the confusion about his identity might be related to this self-same missing sibling? Compare his dim bewilderment to the response of Viola, another disguised twin separated from her counterpart by a shipwreck, in *Twelfth Night*. After just a few exchanges with a passionate pirate who swears he knows her as a young man named Sebastian, she guesses at the truth—that her long-lost twin brother survived the wreck and is at large: "Prove true, imagination; O prove true, That I, dear brother, be now ta'en for you!"

Certainly, Antipholus and Dromio have the comparative disadvantage of bearing the same names as their twins, so that everyone they meet not only seems to know them by appearance but to call them accurately by name.

How convenient it is for the story's purposes that neither of the paired twins happen to wander into each other's sight until the denouement. And the one time they come dangerously close to contact—when Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus arrive at their house while their Syracusan doubles are being entertained inside—the confusion is maintained by the simple refusal

of Adriana and her servants to look outside at the men claiming to belong there.

How exactly does Shakespeare get away with all these feints, suspensions and reversals of plain common sense? By turning the very quadrupling of mistaken identities, which generates the play's most glaring challenges, to his advantage. In giving each Antipholus his own clever, garrulous servant Dromio, Shakespeare is not only able to multiply the plot's misunderstandings but to milk every drop of humorous commentary from them.

The presence of a comic foil, in turn, lends the cock-ups and confusions another explanation, apart from the suspicion of sorcery: the notion that they're a put-on or a practical joke. This possibility, and the comic dander it raises in those who imagine they're the brunt of pranks, provides the play's near-primal wellspring of crowd-pleasing fun: slapstick violence, the undeniable backbeat of physical comedy from Aristophanes' Philocleon to Homer Simpson mock-strangling Bart. Consider that even before any of the mistaking has begun, Antipholus describes Dromio as "a trusty villain . . . that very oft / When I am dull with care and melancholy / Lightens my humor with his merry jests."

And when, a few lines later, the wrong Dromio approaches and summons Antipholus home to a wife he doesn't know—and what's worse, claims not to have the money Antipholus just entrusted to the first Dromio—Antipholus first takes this talk to be "jest" and "foolishness." His ire stirred, Antipholus delivers the first of many angry blows that one master or another will inflict on the wrong servant throughout the remaining action.

### More than funny stuff

The play's comic beatings are not merely diversions, but that's one way they function—by keeping those spinning plates aloft on gales of sheer reactive laughter. They also become a physical demonstration of the play's escalating stakes: When Antipholus of Ephesus is clapped into custody as a madman on the reports of his wife, he breaks free and tortures his would-be exorcist, the conjurer Dr. Pinch.

This offstage horror appropriately comes near the play's climax, which is fraught with all the violence a comedy can bear: Egeon's execution is imminent, the Syracusans have fully armed

themselves against any oncoming attackers, and a desperate chase has led everyone to a mysteriously significant priory.

This being Shakespeare, there is plenty of deft, even dizzying verbal sparring alongside the physical kind, but it's not hard to notice that this light comedy's pace has been quickened, and its laughter sharpened, by the shadow of the gallows and the tick of the clock. A mere recital of errors, or a friction-free comedy romp, couldn't possibly offer the same satisfaction.

—Rob Weinert-Kendt

## From Ephesus to Harlem

Kent Gash's production of *The Comedy of Errors* places the play in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, a vibrant explosion of arts and literature by African Americans living in Harlem in the early part of the 20th century. This setting breathes new resonances into the issues represented in Shakespeare's play. The efforts of the Syracusans to reunite with family members separated during a journey across the sea take on nuanced significance in this context, since African-American cultural memory engages with two major odysseys—the Middle Passage (1501–1866) and the Great Migration (1910–1970)—that evoke such occurrences.

Similarly, there is an increased poignancy in the lack of family knowledge by the Ephesian Antipholus and Dromio; splitting up families and stripping away self-knowledge were hallmarks of slavery. To remedy the absences in their lives, the Syracusans set out to find their missing relations. Likewise, African Americans traveling north as part of the Great Migration sought to reclaim what they had lost—primarily freedom and opportunity. While the confluence of African-American progress and creative expression fomented the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration produced the metropolitan dynamism that undergirded it.

After the end of the Civil War, African Americans in the South fled farms and plantations in search of a better life in northern industrial cities. They were driven by the lure of millions of new manufacturing jobs for unskilled workers in the Northeast and Midwest. After



*The Comedy of Errors* (2008): Tasso Feldman (left) and John Tufts played the twin Dromios.

World War I, some returning African-American soldiers resettled in cities in the North, West and Midwest, hoping to find more tolerant communities than those in the South.

Dating back to slavery times, many Southern African Americans saw the North as the land of freedom. Its nickname, "The Promised Land," aligned with the view of the exodus in biblical terms as a fulfillment of God's promise to deliver Jewish people out of bondage in Egypt. The Great Migration included both the dream of the promised land and the failure of that dream.

In his autobiography *Black Boy*, author Richard Wright, the grandson of slaves and the son of Mississippi sharecroppers, conveys the sense of hope associated with the North. "The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt or seen; it had no relation to what actually existed. Yet by imagining a place where everything is possible, it kept hope alive inside of me."

Such articulations of the tension between hope and despair pervade the art, literature and music of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes' famed 1951 poem "Harlem" expresses these themes as the tension between the dream and its deferral or between aspiration and limitation. The poem asks, "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? [ . . . ] Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?"

According to scholar and writer Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History 1513–2008*, between 1910 and 1930, the black population in Central Harlem

excessive passion. (Luciana and Antipholus of Syracuse)

**Columbina** is servant to the Inamorata and the beloved of Harlequin. She is self-sufficient and possesses a keen and active wit. (Luce and Nell)

**Dottore** (the doctor) presents himself as a learned man who specializes in everything. At his core, he is pompous and fraudulent. According to Pierre Louis Duchartre in *The Italian Comedy*, "There is no record in history of any case that Dottore has ever cured." (Doctor Pinch)

**La Ruffiana** is often represented as an older woman who is either a current or former prostitute, a mother or a village gossip. On occasion, she has been called a witch. (Courtesan)  
—ORZ

# THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

## DOUBLE TROUBLE

William Shakespeare's own twins, Hamnet and Judith, may be why he included twins as major plot elements in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. Or it might be because twins are as reliable a plot-propelling pair as star-crossed lovers or mortal enemies. Here are some highlights of the form.

- *Menaechmi* by Plautus. This tale of identical twin brothers sowing mass confusion is assumed to be based on a Greek predecessor.
- *The Venetian Twins* by Carlo Goldoni (1747). Brothers separated at birth, one stupid and one smart, converge on Verona.
- *The Man in the Iron Mask* by Alexandre Dumas (1850). Based on the legend that the unlovable Louis XIV had a banished—and nicer—twin brother locked away in the Bastille.
- *Twins* (1988). This comedy cast Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito as grown men who can't believe they're long-separated twins.
- *Dead Ringers* (1998). Director David Cronenberg's creepy thriller about twin gynecologists who use their resemblance to seduce women in tandem.

—RWK

skyrocketed from 17,995 to 147,141. Among the city's newcomers were black artists who produced the social, intellectual, and artistic landscape of the Harlem Renaissance. Jazz musicians came from New Orleans, blues players from the Delta. Writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets and scholars all made their way to Harlem; among them were Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, Romare Bearden, James Weldon Johnson, Marcus Garvey and Paul Robeson.

Alain Locke, Howard University professor of philosophy and “dean” of the Renaissance itself, contextualized the era in his seminal 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*. The Harlem Renaissance period is known as the New Negro Movement. In his foreword to the anthology, Locke identifies some of the characteristics of the Renaissance: “Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. . . . We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression. There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart.”

### Creating positive images

The original architects of the Harlem Renaissance, including Locke and others, envisioned a movement that would counter negative images of black inferiority with more “truthful” representations and evidence of serious black cultural accomplishment. For W. E. B. Du Bois, a leader in social justice and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), African-American artistic achievements would impact social conditions. In his 1926 essay “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois argues, “until the art of black folk compels recognition, they will not be rated as human.”

Altogether, the Harlem Renaissance evolved through three stages. The first phase, ending in 1923 with the publication of Jean Toomer's novel *Cane*, was deeply influenced by white artists and writers—bohemians and Revolutionaries—fascinated with the life of black people. The second phase, from early 1924 to mid-1926, was presided over by the civil rights establishment of the National Urban League and the NAACP, a period of interracial collaborations between charitable white businesspeople and the African-American

elite, called the Talented Tenth. Prominent artists of this period include writer Zora Neale Hurston, poet Langston Hughes, poet Countee Cullen and sculptor Augusta Savage.

African-American artists dominated the last phase, from mid-1926 through the Harlem Riot of March 1935. This final stage was marked by rebellion against the civil rights establishment and white sponsors by many of the very artists these sponsors had promoted.

In “The Negro Artists and the Racial Mountain,” published in *The Nation* in June 1926, Langston Hughes encouraged black artists to free themselves from the artificial standards set by whites and civil rights leaders. Hughes spoke against the prevailing trend “to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” Instead, he called for black artists to honor the complexities of black life in their work “without fear or shame.”

Hughes' skepticism of the idea that recognition in art would lead to social change and his advocacy of freedom of expression illustrate growing tensions concerning the movement's ideas and expectations. While a number of factors account for the end of the Renaissance, the Harlem Riot—a bloody confrontation over the alleged beating of a 16-year-old black youth—marked a clear shift in priorities for civil rights leaders from the arts to social and economic problems. Despite its abrupt close, the Harlem Renaissance had a lasting impact at reframing expectations of African-American achievement in the arts.—Otis Ramsey-Zoë

## Further Reading

- Alain Locke. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. This 1926 anthology offers a resonant portrait of African-American art during the Harlem Renaissance.
- Robert S. Miola. *The Comedy of Errors: Critical Essays*. The usual grab bag of academic theory and close reading, literary and performance history and criticism.