

The Comedy of Errors

By William Shakespeare

Produced by The Shakespeare Theatre: Washington, D.C.

Directed by Douglas C. Wager

2005-2006 Season

Program Note

An Existential Joyride

It is far too easy to categorize *The Comedy of Errors* as merely a knockabout farce. Undoubtedly it is a funny play—perhaps the most joyful romp in the entire Shakespearean canon. Mistaken identities, misunderstandings, broad physical humor, sight gags and silly wordplay make the drama a hilarious adventure. Yet the frivolity of the enterprise is buttressed by a looming darkness. In fact, the dramatic effectiveness of the comedy is dependent upon the severity of impending consequences. Basic human fears frame the play: the losses of family, identity, individuality and love. Without these shadows hanging over the enterprise, the play disintegrates into an over-long skit amounting to very little. *The Comedy of Errors*, however, avoids this trap and emerges as a complex examination of the human condition. Shakespeare's response to the fragility of existence is a sidesplitting belly laugh that also manages to be life-affirming and spiritually rewarding.

The first recorded performance of *The Comedy of Errors* was for a group of lawyers as part of the Gray's Inn Christmas revels on December 28, 1594. A number of critics date the play's origin at least a year or two earlier. In either case, the work is one of Shakespeare's first forays into the comedic form. Obviously indebted to the works of the Roman playwright Plautus (most notably his *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*), Shakespeare conflates and adapts

his classical sources to create a new kind of drama. *The Comedy of Errors* is one of the rare works in the Shakespearean canon that abides by the traditional unities, taking place during a single day in a single location (*The Tempest* is another). The use of classical dramatic structure creates a level of tension and acceleration that is usually lacking in the epic form more typically employed by the Bard. The clock is literally ticking, and, as the day comes to a close, the mounting comedic complications create a Gordian knot that seems impossible to unravel. The result is a giddy thrill ride that retains the farcical silliness of Plautus but is imbued with Christian iconography and an Elizabethan worldview.

The play begins with the announcement of a death sentence that remains in force until practically the final moment of the piece. Even more disconcerting, the person decreed to die—Egeon—is a kindly old man whose character is beyond reproach. Tragedy permeates the scene, and the situation is exactly as Egeon describes it, “hopeless and helpless.” A land that would punish an honorable, elderly man searching for a missing son is a place turned upside down. And suddenly, without warning, the world of the play is transformed into a carnival arcade lined with distorting mirrors. Two sets of brothers—one of masters and one of servants—proceed to misidentify what they see and misunderstand what they hear as the four of them collide wildly into each other. Tragedy is swiftly and jarringly transformed into farce.

Farce is a type of comedy that by definition challenges credulity. It is a transgressive form of entertainment marked by exaggeration, absurdity, broad physical humor, scatological references, puns and sexual innuendo. It

makes fun of sacred cows such as governmental and religious institutions but in such an outrageous manner that it is not perceived as a threat. The English farcical tradition can be traced to the first Corpus Christi plays, in which interludes were employed between episodes for comedic relief. In the 15th-century *Wakefield Cycle*, and specifically *The Second Shepherds' Pageant*, the form reaches a zenith with the farcical elements being incorporated into the main body of the piece. In 1566 the schoolmaster of Eton, Nicholas Udall, composed *Ralph Roister Doister*, combining the pastoral comedy of *The Second Shepherds' Pageant* with the Plautine model. Shakespeare probably viewed both of these works in his youth, and their influence pervades his comedies.

Once farcical elements are introduced in the second scene of *The Comedy of Errors*, the comedic momentum builds quickly as the situation grows ever more absurd. By the fifth act, the play has spun out of control, with one brother imprisoned, a marriage on the brink of ruin, reputations in tatters, and the old man Egeon ever closer to execution. The comedic complications have grown to outrageous proportions, and there seems no possible way the situation can be satisfactorily resolved.

Reconciliation and redemption, however, are achieved at the moment of greatest despair: a life is spared, a family reunited, a marriage saved, a marriage restored, reputations reinstated and future romantic possibilities created. A happy ending indeed, for everyone is actually better off at the end of the play than they were at the beginning. The comedic chaos has caused the truth of self and society to merge. Ironically, the institutions and values that are lampooned in the play turn out to be the vehicles of deliverance and

restoration. Of course, we knew all along that everything would somehow turn out fine. But the joy of the ride—the joyride of the experience—comes from the convoluted nature of the complications and the appearance of impending doom. Shakespeare has created a roller coaster ride—the twists and turns are scary and the illusion of terror is reinforced, but in the end we arrive safely at the disembarking point. But unlike a thrill ride at an amusement park, we have been collectively placed in a space where we are able to consider the very essence of our humanity. In a comedic context, the play poses fundamental existential questions. What constitutes our individual identity? How do we become fully integrated personalities? And most significantly, what are we in search of on our journey through life? These are rather complicated issues for a mere frolic. But of course, *The Comedy of Errors* is much more than a romp; it is a great work of art.