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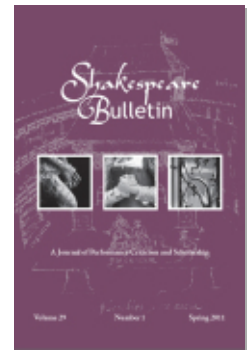
The Comedy of Errors (review)

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refused to favor him with a laugh, indicating their loyalty (perhaps class or region-based) to Dogberry.

Dogberry's direct address to the audience, and his occasional breaking of the fourth wall, combined with other comic moments in the production to emphasize the performativity of Shakespeare's play. This was particularly evident in the gulling scenes. In 2.3, for example, Leonato read haltingly from a stack of note cards in his hand, playing his role increasingly badly, and losing his place in the script when asked about Beatrice's "effects of passion." Claudio (who went to the extremes of love and hatred, passion and violence) overplayed his part, roaring "Ohhhhh sweet Benedick" to such a degree that his fellow actors gave him perturbed looks. Even Don John was occasionally metatheatrical, as at the end of 3.2; he addressed "So will you say when you have seen the sequel" directly to the audience, laughed diabolically, and ushered in the intermission. (It seems emblematic of the production's broad comic tendencies that the villain was played by Rutherford Cravens, a local favorite known particularly for his comedic turns; his Don John alternated with his Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in HSF's repertory season.)

The possible racial/political implications of the production were ultimately swallowed up by the laughter of the audience at the antics of Dogberry, the tricking of Beatrice and Benedick, and the easily-reconciled happy ending. (For a final punch line, when Benedick advised Don Pedro to "get thee a wife," Ursula eagerly raised her hand to volunteer for the job.) Yet it left me with more questions: what if the director had decided to use the Southern setting, Civil War time period, and cross-racial casting to actually make a serious statement? What would this tell us about the play, particularly its violence, misogyny, and racist undertones? Although this production declined to pursue these questions, it nonetheless raised them, unintentionally provoking solemn reflections in the midst of comic summer fun.



The Comedy of Errors

Presented by the **Court Theatre** at the **Abelson Auditorium**, Chicago, Illinois. September 16–October 17, 2010. Adapted and directed by Sean Graney. Scenic design by Tom Burch. Costume design by Jacqueline Firkins. Lighting design by Heather Gilbert. Sound design by Michael Griggs. Production stage management by William Collins. With Kurt Ehrmann (Angelo, Dr. Pinch, Courtesan, Guard), Alex Goodrich (Dromio of Syracuse, Dromio of Ephesus, Abbess), Elizabeth Ledo (Luciana, Luce, Towncrier, Executioner),

Erik Hellman (Antipholus of Syracuse, Antipholus of Ephesus, Egeon), Stacy Stoltz (Adriana, Boatswain, Angry Merchantess), and Steve Wilson (The Duke, Balthazar, a merchant, Jailor).

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Director Sean Graney's work can typically be categorized as either explicitly experimental or engaging with the tradition of adaptation. These aesthetic trajectories merged in the Court Theatre's *The Comedy of Errors*, a meaty 90-minute production focused on skirting buffoonery in order to find translatable humor within William Shakespeare's farcical language. As Graney stated during a post-performance discussion, "I wanted the play to feel funny in new ways," which is an often-difficult task given the play's archaic humor. Indeed, *Errors* has a performance history marked by the inability to reconcile its absurd elements, on which the plot and play depend, with contemporary tastes. Graney addressed this problem by focusing on issues of identity confusion and the farce tradition. The result was a pliant dark comedy anchored by bodily representations of humor and highlighting the problem of Renaissance comedic anachronisms.

The cast comprised six actors playing 21 individual parts: the Antipholus and Dromio twins were double-cast, nearly all of the actors cross-dressed at some point, and each had more than 20 costume changes. The set and costumes were a pastiche of Napoleonic, cartoonish, 1970s-hippy, and contemporary aesthetic stereotypes. It was as if bits and pieces of every staging ever done of *Errors* had been gathered up and cobbled together. In fact all of the play's material aspects were employed to hyper-expose basic stage spectacle tactics. For example, the final set replicated *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In* joke wall from the late 1960s, whose tiers of windows allowed the actors to get all of their characters on stage at once. At times a stray mustache or article of clothing made its way onto the wrong character. These time-capsule-like qualities reflected the explicit billing of the play as an "adaptation," a genre with a historical tradition contingent on experimentation to succeed.

The Shakespearean text was intentionally made secondary to the stage action. Basic stage conventions like quick costume changes exposed staging logistics to the point where the exaggeration rather than the language became the central focus. When Dromio of Syracuse was mistaken for the guard of the home of Antipholus of Ephesus, he stood on the balcony, looking down on Antipholus of Ephesus and refusing him entrance. When Antipholus summoned Dromio of Ephesus to help, the Dromio on the balcony disappeared, only to reemerge from the entranceway beneath



Photo by Michael Brosilow; Erik Hellman (Antipholus of Syracuse) and Alex Goodrich (Dromio of Ephesus) in a moment of confused identities.

outfitted in an entirely new costume representing his twin. Both Dromios were engaged in the dialogue but never with each other, a trick that tested how far the audience's comprehension could be pushed.

Errors put heavy stock in participation: the actors worked hard to cajole audience members into cheering or hooting their approval of and during the stage action. The *Wife-as-Globe* scene was re-crafted as *commedia dell'arte*. For Chicago, with its rich tradition of improvisational theatres and companies, this was fruitful territory. Instead of simply reciting the list of archaic fat jokes, the Syracusan Antipholus walked into the audience to request suggestions for unlikable countries to use as puns. By reaching out to the room, this moment worked to overturn audience expectations not once, but twice: initially breaking the fiction of the play in order to garner audience participation, but then reverting to the country and joke from the original play text rather than using the suggestions. A significant amount of stage time was invested in undercutting contemporary spectator practices in order to get the audience comfortable with laughing, clapping, and interrupting in the midst of the action rather than simply between acts. So while perhaps this trick of rejecting the solicited participation seems disingenuous, the surprise and absurdity of the rejection—another break in stage conventions and norms—had a comic effect on the audience.

The production toyed with the audience's textual expectations as much as it did their sense of reality. The entire cast was on stage when Antipholus of Ephesus launched into a speech detailing his utter confusion as to how his misfortunes have accumulated. As he mentioned encounters with characters not present on stage, Antipholus expressed shock and disorientation as he looked at the actors who were, at the moment, on stage playing someone else. Laughter broke out when the audience realized what Antipholus was reacting to, as we had been watching the same events unfold. However, in the reality of the play Antipholus had truly gone mad, seeing more than one identity represented by the same body. The scene worked to parallel the spectators' "true" perspective with that of the insane Antipholus—an effective destabilizing move for a genre dependent on the audience's awareness of multiple perspectives.

This production thrived on the Shakespearean plot's many unresolved threads. Kurt Ehrmann's grotesque characterizations of Doctor Pinch and the Courtesan didn't seem to have purpose, which was further magnified by the compounding chaotic misrecognitions. Balthazar was accidentally stabbed so he could interrupt the remaining scenes by morosely walking across the stage with a sword through his middle but still alive. The

unsettling absurdity of the wandering wounded man underscored his impending death while at the same time highlighting it. These stray elements seemed to emphasize the potential unproductivity of farce in an interesting gesture of self-effacement, or perhaps even as a critique of the devolvement of farce genre.

It was the final scene, however, that fully realized Graney's sense of collusion between adaptation and farce. Alone on stage Dromio conducted an imaginary conversation with his brother using an ice cream cone to indicate which twin was speaking. With no joke wall or costume to help, the actor was left to do all the work with his body and voice alone. Antipholus entered the stage to interrupt him, asking whom he was talking to, and then told Dromio that his twin was, in fact, backstage. The fiction of the play was broken for an instant: the only explanation was that Dromio had been talking to himself, but the audience was fully aware that this one actor had been playing both parts, so both twins were in truth on stage. Yet again the play asked its audience to adopt an absurd but true perspective. But the stage went dark before Dromio could respond, as if inviting us to invent our own conclusion and contribute, even if privately, to the history of *Errors* adaptations.



Macbeth

Presented by the **Palm Beach Shakespeare Festival** at the **Seabreeze Amphitheater at Carlin Park**, Jupiter, Florida. July 15–18 and 22–25, 2010. Directed by Kevin Crawford. Set and lighting by Daniel Gordon. Costumes by Penny Williams. Sound design by Chris Bell. With Kevin Crawford (Macbeth), Heidi Harris (Lady Macbeth), Krys Parker (Weird Sister), Trinna Pye (Weird Sister), Greta Von Unruh (Weird Sister), Alan Gerstel (Duncan), Patrick A. Wilkinson (Macduff), Pierre Tannous (Malcolm), André Lancaster (Banquo), Ali Wilson (Donalbain), Dave Pinson (Lennox), Charlie Martin (doctor), Evan Gerstel (Fleance), and others.

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In performance, *Macbeth* is often portrayed as a man torn between two selves, one self a dreamer and one a killer, who is destroyed through the ambitions and apparitions raised by his own imagination. Producer Kermit Christman and director Kevin Crawford's *Macbeth* built on this performance tradition by presenting a *Macbeth* who was not so much torn between two selves as he was a man who grew into his worst half.