

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

By Shakespeare

“The Comedy of Errors” may have been one of Shakespeare’s early plays, but the story was already about 2,000 years old. The Greek playwright, Menander, first used the device of identical twins being mistaken for each other in 345 B.C. The Roman author, Titus Maccius Plautus, copied Menander’s original 100 years later and it was from Plautus’ “The Twin Menaechmi” that Shakespeare lifted the plot.

But Shakespeare doubles the fun by doubling the twins. It’s not what you’d call a believable premise, but then you aren’t expected to believe in farces; just laugh at them.

Here’s the set-up. A Syracusan merchant named Aegeon and his wife, Emelia, become the parents of twins while he is in Epidamnum on business. Shortly after, a penniless woman of the town is also delivered of twins and they are purchased by Aegeon to be raised as servants for his children.

While the children are still quite young, Aegeon and his family decide to sail back to Syracuse. When they are out at sea, a violent storm builds up and the vessel begins to founder. The sailors desert the boat, leaving the family to their fate.

Aegeon ties his wife, one of their twins, and one of the servant twins to one end of a small mast. He then attaches himself and the remaining two children to the other end. They remain afloat as the ship sinks, but a massive wave drives the spar into a rock, breaking the mast in two, separating husband and wife and the youngsters with them.

A ship bound for Corinth picks up Emelia and the children with her. Later, Aegeon and the others are also rescued, but by a ship headed for Epidarus. In the first scene of Shakespeare’s comedy, this is the sad story the now-aged Aegeon tells - at great length - to Solinus, Duke of Ephesus.

It seems that Aegeon, and the two youngsters saved with him, have lived for some time in Syracuse. The boys adopted the same names as their missing twins: Antipholus and Dromio. When Antipholus reached manhood, he decided to leave to search for his missing brother, taking his servant, Dromio, with him. Aegeon waited for quite a while for word from his son, but no messages came. Fearful that something has befallen his remaining child, he set out to look for him.

Aegeon’s search brought him to Ephesus, which turned out to be a bad decision. Syracuse and Ephesus are deadly enemies. Any citizen of Syracuse caught in Ephesus must either pay a ransom of a thousand marks or forfeit his life. Aegeon has no money, so he is condemned to die at sundown.

Aegeon explains all this to Duke Solinus who is moved by the sad story and wishes he could pardon the sorrowful old father. But the law is the law: if he can't come up with the ransom, he must die. While Aegeon's story is truly poignant, it is also the mainspring of the play's comic action, tightly wound in the first scene to uncoil to mounting laughter until it reaches a most satisfying resolution in the last.

At this point it's worth noting something special about Shakespeare the dramatist. Even though he's setting up a farcical situation, the roles of both Aegeon and the Duke of Ephesus are drawn in rich, human terms. There is nothing of slapstick humor here, but characters that are fully developed and wholly credible.

This is also true of the rest of the characters in the play. However frustrated, puzzled, and apoplectic they become, they are not stick figures, but roundly-conceived human beings.

The fun begins slowly: in the next scene, where we meet Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse. By coincidence, they have also just arrived in Ephesus, ignorant of Aegeon's presence and his predicament. Antipholus receives a sum of money, which, we might note, is the exact amount it would take to ransom Aegeon, from a merchant and sends Dromio to put it under lock and key at the tavern where they are lodged.

In short order, Dromio returns, but with a strange message. He urges his master to come home to dinner: his wife and the whole household are waiting for him. Well, as you can guess, this is the other Dromio, now living in Ephesus with the other Antipholus, who is established as a prominent citizen of the town. Antipholus laughs at what he thinks is a joke. But when Dromio persists in this mad tale, Antipholus gives him a beating and sends him packing.

You can tell where this is heading. One Dromio or the other will meet one Antipholus or the other throughout the play, alternately confounding and enraging their masters.

It turns out that Antipholus of Ephesus is married and lives there with his wife, Adrianna, and her sister, Luciana. This particular afternoon, he has been delayed by business associates and has lost track of the time. When the Ephesus Dromio returns to tell Adrianna that her husband refuses to come home - denying that he even has a wife - Adrianna and Luciana go searching for him.

Meanwhile, the Ephesus Antipholus is arranging to buy a gold chain for his wife. He then invites some friends to join him at home for supper. But Adrianna has found the other Antipholus and persuaded him and his servant to come home for dinner. The two are thoroughly puzzled, but obey.

When the Ephesus Antipholus finally arrives at his home, he is denied entrance. The servants tell him - through a closed door - that Antipholus is already

dining with his wife and cannot be disturbed. Furious, Antipholus decides to take his friends with him to dine with a courtesan and leaves.

The Ephesus Antipholus and Dromio make two important discoveries during dinner: while not particularly liking the woman who says she is his wife, Antipholus is strongly drawn to her sister, Luciana, and tells her so. She is scandalized. Dromio finds out that he is engaged to the kitchen wench who is, as he puts it, "spherical, like a globe." The two of them cannot understand what's going on.

Antipholus of Syracuse becomes convinced that:

.the town is full of cozenage,
As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,
Soul-killing witches that deform the body,
Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,
And many suchlike libertines of sin.

They decide to leave town as fast as they can and Antiphilous sends Dromio to arrange for passage. At this point, the complications start to pile up. A merchant delivers the gold chain to the wrong Antipholus, refusing to take payment until later. When he finally asks for payment, it's from the wrong Antipholus, who demands to see the chain before parting with his money. The goldsmith threatens arrest. Adrianna sends for a Doctor Pinch to lock up her husband until he is cured of his madness. Almost every time either Dromio is sent on an errand, he returns to the wrong master.

The confusion compounds as the action - and the two sets of twins - become more and more frantic. The four of them can't understand how their normal world has gone so crazily off the rails. But the audience can, knowing full well which Antipholus is which, and delighting in the carefully-crafted mistakes all the characters make. Since the action in a farce depends in large measure on being surprised by each new complication, we'll just leave the story here so your enjoyment of the play is not compromised by knowing all the details. However, be assured that it all ends in a half-expected, but still rather surprising and satisfying conclusion.

"The Comedy of Errors" is perhaps the most classically constructed of Shakespeare's plays, scrupulously observing the Aristotelian unities of time and place. The action occurs during a single day. It may well have staged before the traditional three doors of Greek comedy: one for Antipholus' Ephesus home, the Phoenix; one for the Porcupine, where Antipholus takes his friends to dine; and one we don't pay much attention to until the very end: the priory, which divulges the play's resolution.

Clearly, "The Comedy of Errors" requires the classic "suspension of disbelief" in order to enjoy the play fully. It defies logic to think, not only that each set of twins is truly identical, but that they just happen to be wearing exactly the same clothes. Shakespeare's comedies often depend on improbably impenetrable

disguises, but having these four so easily confused requires that reason be checked at the door. I cannot think of a production which featured real twins, and make-up and costuming can do only so much, so the audience simply must buy into the premise.

For all its frantic humor, the play contains serious elements, in particular Aegeon's sorrow, both in the opening and final scenes. The love which develops between Antipholus of Syracuse and Luciana is treated with warmth and sincerity.

We may have reliable a date for this play: in an account from the late 16th century. On the third day of Christmas, Childermas, December 28th, in 1594, it was reported that the annual Christmas revels by the law students at Gray's Inn got completely out of hand. "After dancing and reveling with gentlewomen, a comedy of errors (like to Plautus his Menaechmi) was played by the players. So that the night was begun, and continued to the end, in nothing but confusion and errors; whereupon it was ever afterwards called 'The Night of Errors.'"

Clearly, the law clerks had a rousing good time. And that's what a farce should provide. Shakespeare was a poet and dramatist of genius, but in this early work, he is more the ingenious craftsman, setting up a clockwork plot which plays out like the very best TV sitcom or Hollywood comedy.

Shakespeare, in his greatest works, plumbs the depths of human nature and challenges our thoughts and feelings as no other playwright in history. But he also knows how to make us laugh. In proof of that, "The Comedy of Errors" is Exhibit A.