



SEATTLE  
SHAKESPEARE

# The Comedy of Errors



By William Shakespeare | Directed by Jane Nichols

**EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE**

# WELCOME

Dear Educators,

Welcome to Seattle Shakespeare Company's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season! This season's theme is "Bloodlines," and we're diving deep into plays about family — both the functional, and the conflicted.

To start off, we're staging this fall's fast-paced version of *The Comedy of Errors*. This play is one of Shakespeare's earliest, and is a light comedy with a dark backdrop. The framing story of this play is of Egeon, who sought his son all the way to Ephesus and is sentenced to death because he is from Syracuse. It is on top of this dreary story that our effervescent comedy of mistaken identity is built.

We will see a more mature version of the unexplained feud between Ephesus and Syracuse later this season, when we produce Shakespeare's beloved tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, with its most famous of family feuds between the Capulets and Montagues. In between these two shows, we will also be producing the stories of a war-weary mother trying to protect her children in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a father who must avenge his destroyed family in *Titus Andronicus*, and a mother who needed to make tough choices to support her daughter in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

Thank you for your continued support of Seattle Shakespeare Company, and we hope you enjoy *The Comedy of Errors*!

Best,  
Michelle Burce  
*Education Director*

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# SYNOPSIS

The Duke of Ephesus has made it punishable by death for merchants from Syracuse to enter the city. Unaware of this, Egeon, a Syracusan trader, has arrived in search of his long lost wife and son. He is arrested and sentenced to be executed.

Egeon tells the Duke how, years ago, he and his wife were traveling by sea with their twin sons (both named Antipholus) and the twin attendants he had gifted to them (both named Dromio). The family was shipwrecked during a storm that separated Egeon from his wife and one of each pair of twins from the other. The Antipholus and Dromio who grew up with Egeon in Syracuse recently set out to find their lost brothers and Egeon has followed them. Moved by this story, the Duke gives Egeon until the end of the day to raise a sum of money ransom his life.



Dromio and Antipholus of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors* (Wooden O), 2011.

Meanwhile, Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse also arrive in Ephesus. Antipholus sends Dromio to deposit some money at a local inn. Almost immediately after, he encounters Dromio of Ephesus and, mistaking him for his own servant, becomes furious when Dromio says he knows nothing about the money and tells Antipholus to go home to dinner where his wife is waiting. Antipholus of Syracuse beats Dromio of Ephesus who flees home.

Adriana, the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, suspects that her husband is unfaithful. Dromio of Syracuse meets Antipholus of Syracuse and denies having said anything about him having a wife. Antipholus begins beating Dromio and is interrupted by Adriana, who rushes to him and begs him not to leave her. Antipholus and Dromio follow Adriana to her house for dinner.

Antipholus of Ephesus returns to Adriana's house but Dromio of Syracuse won't let him come inside. He is about to break down the door, but instead decides to go dine with a courtesan.

Inside, Antipholus of Syracuse begins flirting with Adriana's sister, Luciana — who believe that he is her brother-in-law! Dromio of Syracuse finds out he is apparently married to Nell, a kitchen wench. Confused by what is happening, Antipholus and

Dromio of Syracuse resolve to leave the city as soon as possible and Dromio leaves to make travel arrangements. Antipholus of Syracuse is caught by Angelo, a goldsmith, who insists that Antipholus ordered a gold chain from him. In spite of his protests, Angelo leaves the chain with Antipholus and says he will return later to be paid.

Antipholus of Ephesus sends Dromio of Ephesus to buy a rope so he can retaliate against Adriana for locking him out, but is met by Angelo, who demands payment for the gold chain. Antipholus is arrested and, as he is being led away, Dromio of Syracuse arrives and is dispatched by Antipholus of Ephesus to Adriana's house to arrange for his bail.

Dromio of Syracuse mistakenly delivers the money to Antipholus of Syracuse instead. The courtesan accosts Antipholus of Syracuse, saying the gold chain he is wearing was meant for her. The pair from Syracuse deny this and run. The courtesan decides to tell Adriana that her husband has gone crazy. Dromio of Ephesus returns to Antipholus of Ephesus with the rope. Adriana, Luciana, and the courtesan arrive with Pinch, a conjurer, in an attempt to exorcise Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus, who are taken to Adriana's house in chains. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse arrive armed and everybody runs, convinced they are the other pair out for revenge. Adriana arrives with servants to try and capture the pair from Syracuse, who flee to a priory where they are protected by the Abbess.

The Abbess brings both sets of twins together and everyone begins to understand how things have gotten so confused. The two sets of twins are reunited with each other and with Egeon. The Abbess then reveals herself to be Egeon's long lost wife. The Duke pardons Egeon and everyone leaves the abbey to celebrate the reunion of the family.



Reunited Dromios and Antipholuses in *The Comedy of Errors*, 2007.

## CHARACTERS

**SOLINUS**, Duke of Ephesus

**EGEON**, a merchant of Syracuse

**EMILIA**, Abbess at Ephesus

**ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHEBUS**, twin brother to Antipholus of Syracuse, son to Egeon, husband to Adriana

**ANTIPHOLUS OF SYRACUSE**, twin brother to Antipholus of Ephesus, son of Egeon

**DROMIO OF EPHEBUS** and **DROMIO OF SYRACUSE**, twin brothers, bondmen, each serving his respective Antipholus

**ADRIANA**, sister to Luciana, wife to Antipholus of Ephesus

**LUCIANA**, sister to Adriana

**NELL**, kitchen wench

**LUCE**, maid to Adriana

**BALTHAZAR**, a merchant, friend to Antipholus of Ephesus

**ANGELO**, a goldsmith

**COURTESAN**

**FIRST MERCHANT** – friend to Antipholus of Syracuse

**SECOND MERCHANT** – merchant to whom Angelo is in debt

**DOCTOR PINCH** – a conjuring schoolmaster

**JAILOR, HEADSMAN, OFFICERS**, and other **ATTENDANTS**

## SOURCES

The plot of *The Comedy of Errors*, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, is taken from the play *Menachmi* by Plautus. Widely considered to be Plautus's greatest work. The play is centered on the two twin brothers and the havoc their mirrored looks create.

Because *Menachmi* was so widely known, it is possible Shakespeare read it as a student. William Warner's translation of *Menachmi* was published in 1595 and dedicated to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the theatre company Shakespeare worked with. Regardless, Shakespeare's choice of source material was a smart one as the *Menachmi* story would have been a familiar one in English society.

Shakespeare very much mirrors Plautus's story, with its mistaken identities but does change certain plot details (Shakespeare substitutes a gold chain for a mantle). Shakespeare diverts from Plautus by having two sets of identical twins. This broadens and enriches the comedy, making the story even more absurd. The inclusion of the two Dromios lets Shakespeare start the confusion earlier than Plautus's original.

Shakespeare also expands the women's roles in his play. In Plautus's original, the wife is the only female role and her character is the butt of many of the jokes. Shakespeare expanded the role of Adriana and added Luciana, Emilia, and the Courtesan. While the wife's role does not measure up to Shakespeare's later female characters in terms of character depth, Adriana does help propel the plot forward. Shakespeare switches the gender of the wife's sibling from *Menachmi*, which gives the story a new twist when one of the brothers unknowingly flirts with his "sister-in-law." The last minute reappearance of the twins' mother is also an addition by Shakespeare.

Scholars are divided about the source of subplot of Egeon looking for his sons. It may have been an invention of Shakespeare. He also may have been influenced by the medieval text *Gesta Romanorum*, which had been translated in 1577 by Richard Robinson.

### Sources

Mabillard, Amanda. Shakespeare's Sources Shakespeare Online. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com>

# TWINS

Identical characters (whether twins or doppelgangers) have always been a subject of fascination in literature, theatre, and film. Even in real life, twins have often been subject to curiosity. Writers and artists have used lookalikes as an integral part of plots, equally for tragic or comic effect.

## LITERATURE

### Fred Weasley & George Weasley

Two minor, but well-loved characters in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Actual twins played the brothers in the films.



George and Fred Fred and George Weasley

### Tom Canty & Prince Edward

In his novel *The Prince and The Pauper* Mark Twain presents a fictional story of a prince who changes places with a commoner who happens to look exactly like him.

## FILM

### Sadie Shelton, Sadie Ratliff, Rose Ratliff, Rose Shelton

In the movie *Big Business*, which is loosely based on *The Comedy of Errors*, two sets of twins create comic havoc in New York City.



Big Business, 1988

### Susan & Sharon

In *The Parent Trap*, two twins conspire to get their estranged parents back together. The story was originally filmed in 1968 with Haley Mills playing both parts and then remade in 1998 with Lindsey Lohan.



The Parent Trap, 1998

## THEATER

### Viola & Sebastian

In *Twelfth Night*, believing her twin Sebastian has drowned, Viola disguises herself as a man to serve the Duke Orsino. Things become complicated when Sebastian arrives and the two twins are mistaken for each other.



Twelfth Night at Seattle Shakespeare Company, 2014

### Victor & Poche

In Georges Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear*, a gentleman and a servant are often mistaken for the other.



A Flea in Her Ear at The Old Vic Theatre, 2010

## MYTHOLOGY

### Apollo & Artemis

Twin brother and sister who were the Ancient Greek deities of the sun and moon respectively.



Apollo and Artemis

### Romulus & Remus

The twins who were nursed by a wolf and went on to found the city that would become Rome. Romulus eventually killed his brother in a feud about where to build the city.



Romulus and Remus

### Yamuna (Yami) & Yama

Yamuna (Yami) and Yama were twin deities of the sacred Yamuna River and Death respectively in the Vedic pantheon of Ancient India.

## STRANGER THAN FICTION

Shakespeare didn't just take inspiration from Plautus's fictional play *Menachmi* about a set of separated identical twins causing confusion and comedy. He made the plot of *The Comedy of Errors* even more far-fetched by adding a second set of identical twins to the mix. As far as plot's go, it's pretty outlandish but . . . sometimes life is stranger than fiction.

In the fall of 2014, in Bogotá, Colombia, two sets of identical twins who had been accidentally mismatched at birth found each other as adults after a friend of one pair stumbled across their doppelganger and the confusion began. Each set of brothers had grown up in separate cities thinking that they were fraternal twins and never suspecting each had an identical sibling living in another town.

Susan Dominus wrote an excellent profile of the twins, their background, and how the whole tale unraveled for the New York Times (link below).

In a comic and additionally unlikely twist, as the twins were learning of each other's existence, and before the media had learned of this bizarre story, Bogotá's Teatro Libre was preparing to stage a production of *La Comedia de las Equivocaciones* (*The Comedy of Errors*) in celebration of Shakespeare's 450<sup>th</sup> birthday! It's unknown whether the twins were aware that a more than 400 years old parallel of their own story was about to be performed in the same city.



Jorge Enrique Bernal Castro and William Cañas Velasco, photo by Stefan Ruiz.



Carlos Alberto Bernal Castro and Wilber Cañas Velasco, photo by Stefan Ruiz.

### Sources

*The Mixed-Up Brothers of Bogotá* by Susan Dominus. [www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/magazine/the-mixed-up-brothers-of-bogota.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/magazine/the-mixed-up-brothers-of-bogota.html?_r=0)

## COMEDIC STYLES

Shakespeare's sense of comedy did not emerge fully formed. *The Comedy of Errors* is unique among Shakespeare's work, in that it shows audiences his first real try at comedy. It contains several characteristics which would be further developed in Shakespeare's future comedies, but also has some that would never occur again.

Shakespeare comedies usually include some combination of the following:

- A greater emphasis on situations than characters
- A struggle of young lovers to overcome a difficulty that is often presented by elders
- Separation and re-unification
- Deception of characters (especially mistaken identity)
- A clever servant
- Disputes between characters, often within a family
- Interesting climax, often with an unexpected twist
- Multiple, intertwining plots
- Use of all styles of comedy (slapstick, puns, dry humour, earthy humour, witty banter, practical)
- Pastoral element (courtly people living an idealized, rural life)
- A happy ending

Looking at *The Comedy of Errors*, one can see Shakespeare playing with the ideas of separation and re-unification, the inclusion of a clever servant (or in the case of the Dromios, two!), disputes, unexpected twists, and a happy ending.

However, *The Comedy of Errors* lacks much of the dazzling word play which surfaces in his later comedies like *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado About Nothing*. It is probably the most slapstick-filled and physically comedic of Shakespeare's plays. It is also one in which Shakespeare leans heavily on characters being insulted as a basis for comedy. His later plays have more mature humor, and show the consequences of characters' actions. His later comedies may end happily for most characters, but they are messy happy endings. *The Comedy of Errors* ties everything up neatly for all parties involved. Shakespeare even throws in the long-lost wife, who happens to be the Abbess who hides the twins. Though it is one of his earliest, "first-draft" comedies, it certainly has provided much enjoyment for audiences centuries later.

### Sources

Denton, Jaques Snider. *The System of Shakespeare's Dramas*. St. Louis: G. T. Jones and Company, 1877. Shakespeare Online. 20 Aug. 2009. < <http://www.shakespeareonline.com/plays/elementsofcomedy.html> >.

# PLACING THE PRODUCTION

Director Jane Nichols has placed *The Comedy of Errors* in 1960's Greece, echoing its original classical setting in an updated time period. In this production, the main focus is on seeing the play as a race against time. This play takes place over the course of a single day, and time is running out for Egeon, who needs to find bail money or be executed at sunset. To emphasize this focus on time, the main set piece is a large clock with a swinging pendulum. The clock runs both forward and backward through the course of the play, but is ever-present. The lighting design will also lead us through the course of the day, from morning until sunset.

The blue and white colors of the set will locate us firmly in Greece, and the recognizable music will also contribute to this feeling. For those who have seen the movie *Zorba the Greek*, the music will be somewhat familiar. Fashion will also set us in the 1960's time period in Greece. The fashion at that time was very stylish, with an island coastal spin. The Antipholus characters will both be wearing summer suits with neckerchiefs, while the Dromios will be in shorts with knit shirts and tall socks. Color accents on the neckerchiefs and socks will help the audience to identify the twins from Syracuse versus the twins from Ephesus.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, the people get confused and mis-matched throughout the show, having dinner with the wrong husband, sending the wrong Dromio on an errand, and selling jewelry to the wrong Antipholus. The set will also reflect this by having doors that flip back and forth onstage, always mis-matched until the very end of the show when they finally match to create the priory, where all of the confusion is finally resolved.



**MAGICIAN & ASSISTANT**



**COURTESAN**

# PLACING THE PRODUCTION



**ANTIPHOLUS**



**DROMIOS**



**DR. PINCH**



**ADRIANA**



**NELL**

# VOCABULARY: *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*

**Anatomy:** skeleton, skin and bones

**Anon:** soon, shortly

**Baggage:** (insult) good-for-nothing woman, harlot

**Bark:** ship, vessel

**Bespoke:** asked for, ordered, requested

**Capon:** (insult) chicken, fool, dolt

**Choleric:** angry, raging

**Coxcomb:** a fool's head

**Dissemble:** disguise, deceive

**Face me down:** confront with impudence, persist in contradicting

**Fain:** gladly, willingly

**Forebearance:** patience, restraint, moderation

**Forswore:** deny, refuse to admit

**Hapless:** unfortunate, unlucky

**Horn-mad:** furious, enraged

**Importune:** urge, press

**Juggler:** sorcerer, conjurer, magician

**Knave:** servant, lackey

**Malt-horse:** (insult) heavy brewer's horse, drudge, idiot

**Mome:** (insult) blockhead, fool, dolt

**Mountebank:** (insult) charlatan, itinerant quack

**Patch:** (insult) fool, clown, rogue, knave

**Pate:** head, skull

**Pray / Prithee:** please, may I ask

**Privy:** secret, personal, private

## ACTIVITY: SHAKESPEAREAN INSULTS

### OBJECTIVE:

To get students speaking and understanding Shakespeare.

**TIME:** 5–10 minutes

### STUDENT SKILLS:

- Choosing words and phrases for effect.
- Determining the meaning of unknown words.

Throughout *The Comedy of Errors*, insults are thrown around, especially heaped on the heads of the Dromios. In fact, what is thought to be the longest insult in all of Shakespeare's plays can be found in *The Comedy of Errors*. Antipholus of Ephesus describes the man sent to "cure" him of his madness, and insults him along the way.

### Antipholus of Ephesus

Along with them  
They brought one Pinch, a hungry lean-faced villain,  
A mere anatomy, a mountebank,  
A threadbare juggler and a fortune-teller,  
A needy, hollow-eyed, sharp-looking wretch,  
A dead-looking man...

In this activity, students will practice speaking Shakespeare by addressing each other with short Shakespearean insults of their own creation. This will help students to approach Shakespeare as something that is fun and understandable.

Help students reason out what each of the insults mean. For example, what might it mean if I called someone "unmuzzled"? What about "eye-offending"?

### INSTRUCTIONS

Have students pair up and look through the list of insults. They should work together to decide what they might mean, and choose their favorite way to address each other. Then go around the room and hear everyone's lines. Students should stand up to address each other, and use their biggest, broadest acting voices!

(See worksheet on next page.)

# WORKSHEET: SHAKESPEAREAN INSULTS

## Opening phrases

Halt! Thou . . .

Never did I see a more . . .

What, ho . . .

### Column A

artless

beslubbering

errant

impertinent

mangled

puny

bootless

blunt

crooked

dissembling

unmuzzled

greasy

saucy

bawdy

vacant

peevish

impish

### Column B

pox-marked

fool-born

malt-horse

rump-fed

base-court

dog-hearted

fat-kidneyed

fly-bitten

idle-headed

lean-faced

rough-hewn

eye-offending

dim-witted

onion-eyed

rug-headed

empty-hearted

mad-brained

### Column C

mounteback

villain

baggage

knave

coxcomb

juggler

harpy

lout

capon

dogfish

maypole

patch

pirate

minus

egg-shell

buzzard

ruffian

## PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Before watching the show, have students reflect on the following questions, either in a large group, small group, or individually in a journal.

How might you react if someone you thought you'd never see again suddenly came back into your life? Would it be easy to resume your friendship?

How would you react if someone you knew very well suddenly started acting different? What if they could not remember who you were?

What is more important in determining what we are like — genetics or environment? Do you think that twins separated at birth will be more like each other, or more like people who were raised with them? In what ways?

In *The Comedy of Errors*, there is a rule in the city that anyone from Syracuse who comes to Ephesus must die. Can you think of historical or modern examples of two groups of people who hate each other so much that they would punish someone just because of their group identity?

## POST-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Here are some questions to discuss with students after the play. Answers may vary and students are encouraged to come up with their own interpretations of the play. There are many correct answers, as long as they are backed up by events from the play.

This is one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies, yet it is bookended by tragic events. Aegeon is sentenced to death, and Antipholus of Ephesus is arrested. How does this tragedy frame the comedic elements of the play?

What do you think has changed between Antipholus of Ephesus and his wife Adriana by the end of the play? Have they learned something new about each other? About themselves?

What do you think is the relationship between the Antipholus masters and their Dromio attendants? The Dromios seems much abused, but they also seem to have a camaraderie with their masters. What role do the Dromios play?

Different characters in the play hold diverse views of marriage. What are they? How does Dromio of Syracuse react when he meets "his" wife? What about Antipholus of Syracuse?

How does the status of the Dromios and the Antipholi add to the comedy of the play? When does a Dromio play low status to his master? When does he seem to have a higher status?

How is *The Comedy of Errors* different from Shakespeare's later comedies, like *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado about Nothing*?

# SEATTLE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

## Mission Statement

With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

## ABOUT US

Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region's year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company's growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

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## EDUCATION PROGRAMS

### In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

- In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.
- Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.
- Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activities, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

### Touring Productions

- Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.
- Schools have the opportunity to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

### Camps and Classes

- Our summer "Camp Bill" series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.
- In our Fall and Spring after-school "Short Shakes" programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.
- Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.