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The Comedy of Errors



The magic of slapstick was once the sail that launched the popularity of film comedy from Chaplin to the Marx brothers. Now movie magic slapstick can be seen alongside Dromio as he is beaten down by master Antipholus twice, as puppets are raised to play the twins of aforementioned Antipholus and Dromio, and as the omnipresent "chain" is given "spotlight" treatment in this particularly slapstick treatment of "The Comedy of Errors" at A Noise Within.

Old Egeon (Michael Stone Forrest) of Syracuse used to have twins who are taken care of by twin slaves. When he is condemned to death at Ephesus, he tells Duke Solinus (William Dennis Hunt) how he and his wife had been separated during a voyage home long ago, and how he was left with one son and slave, and his wife was left with the other twin son and twin slave. Syracusians are barred from visiting Ephesus by law, but Solinus gives Egeon one day to come up with the money he needs to ensure his release. However, Egeon feels like he has just "procrastinate his lifeless end."

Antipholus (Bruce Turk) of Syracuse is introduced calling himself "I to the world am like a drop of water, that in the ocean seeks another drop" in finding his mother and brother, "in quest of them, unhappy, lose myself." He runs into Dromio (Jerry Kernion) of Ephesus, who searches for him to come home. Antipholus of Syracuse asks for his money back from Dromio of Ephesus, who is utterly confused but wants to convince him to return to the Phoenix, but Antipholus returns to the ship Centaur and blames sorcery for his misfortunes.

The wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, Adriana (Abby Craden), ruminates on her husband, who is "master of his liberty, but time is their master." In a spot-lighted soliloquy, Dromio of Ephesus ("round like a football") relates how everything he says is turned into "my gold" by his master. The humor is highlighted by director Michael Michetti's brilliant strategy of employing piano, sound effects, and lighting to put the humorous parts of the play into a showcase of slapstick. The effect is made to look like an early sound movie that captures every character tripping over another with a loud sound effect. We can even see the piano next to the stage, operating the silent-movie-style sounds.

Meanwhile, Adriana bemoans her husband's promise of a chain and cries "since that my beauty cannot please his eye, I'll weep what's left away, and weeping die." Her suspicions appear to be confirmed when the wrong Antipholus appears with the wrong Dromio, speaking of time being bald, and the world having bald followers, and tells him "I do digest the poison of thy flesh." Adriana gets the stranger to enter for dinner and puts Dromio, who proclaims himself a grass-loving ass, to attend to the gate. Meanwhile, Antipholus of Ephesus is kept out of his own home while hanging out with Angelo (P. J. Ochlan) and Balthasar (Paul D. Masterson), who cautions against "foul intrusion." Antipholus follows his advice and goes to a well-discoursed Courtesan (Lauren Robyn) instead.

Adriana's sister Luciana (Annie Abrams) is getting Antipholus of Syracuse's attention, raising moral concerns. She tells him to "muffle your false love with some show of blindness" and to make women believe that he loves them so that "the sweet breath of flattery conquers strife." Turk's Antipholus ("are

you a god? would you create me new?") has a certain rapport that makes this the most romantic moment in the play. Abrams and Turk give each other distance, and no comedy interrupts this moment when he asks "transform me, then, and to your powers I'll yield," and declares her to be "mine eye's clear eye." Meanwhile, a relationship of a different sort exists between Dromio of Syracuse and his new-found beastly "wife" Nell (Gibby Brand), one deemed "if she lives till doomsday, she'll burn week longer than the whole world." Every statement of Dromio's is accompanied by beat of a drum, and the jokes are all the more funny by Kernion's telling of them in mock rage, such as describing her sweat as "Noah's flood could not do it." A particularly funny moment occurs when Kernion measures out the distance himself with his arms: "she is spherical, like a globe: I could find out countries in her," with Ireland found in her buttocks by the bogs, and France in her forehead making war against her hair (though Netherlands was too low to look).

After sending Dromio of Ephesus off for a rope (money in his hat), Antipholus of Ephesus is accosted by Angelo regarding the gold chain which Angelo thought he had given Antipholus. The result is that Antipholus is arrested in the spotlight, while Dromio of Syracuse tells him of a ship of Epidamnum that's about to sail, making him even more culpable. Meanwhile, Luciana tells Adriana that her husband tempted her love by praising her beauty and her speech. Adriana calls him "stimatical in making, worse in mind," and notes that "my tongue, though not my heart, shall have his will," and "my heart prays for him, though my tongue do curse." Antipholus of Syracuse wonders if there are "Lapland sorcerers" here, while the Courtesan wants from him her ring back (or forty ducats).

Kernion's Dromio is perfectly dressed for the part, both for Harold Lloyd-like slapstick and for Shakespearean humor. Most poignant is his speech about how he served Ephesus since nativity: "when I am cold he heats me with beating, when I am warm he cools me with beating; I am waked with it when I sleep, raised with it when I sit... when he hath lamed me, I shall beg with it from door to door." Kernion prostrates himself when he needs to, and makes a spectacle whenever he can, often taking over the scene over Antipholus. Bound by Dr. Pinch, Antipholus of Ephesus lashes out his rope on Dromio, causing the most laughs at a Shakespeare play I've heard in a while, for Kernion cries constantly "ouch" while Turk give out mock punishment in the background, and the lashing doesn't stop.

After the pair from Syracuse escape the crowd into the abbey, the abbess refuses entry, and get an additional bit of magic from this production. Masterson switches between Balthasar and the Merchant in his role, and the change requires but merely seconds. The *deus ex machine* proposed by the abbess is simple enough: puppets representing the pair from Syracuse are held side by side with the pair from Ephesus, and their voices are given mutely by one of the suppliants. The solution is a marvel, as every lift of the puppet's arms is celebrated by riotous laughter. Indeed they are true friends, "hand in hand, not one before another."

Michetti's production is full of laughter created by Shakespeare, but linked to our modern lives by the use of movie-like slapstick magic with a bit of burlesque, and every one of those timeless pauses are cause of endless laughter.

"The Comedy of Errors" is performed at A Noise Within (<http://www.anoisewithin.org/>) in Glendale, California, until 14th of May, 2011.