

Shakespeare & Co., Lenox, MA

The Comedy of Errors, by William Shakespeare. Directed by Kate Kohler Amory. .
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Live on my confusion.”

This is my favorite Shakespeare comedy; it always has been. I suspect it always will be and no matter how many times I’ve seen it, I always crave one more. For this outing in their outdoor arena theater, The Arthur S. Waldstein, they have chosen a wild, athletic, Vaudeville-style romp. This was an excellent choice for the visual humor along with verbal wit hides the play’s principal plot flaw: mistaken identity. Antipholus of Syracuse is roaming the known world seeking his twin brother accompanied by his indentured servant and friend Dromio of Syracuse. They have come to Ephesus, where Syracusans are executed for existing, and they are immediately assailed as friends, husbands and lovers. For some unexplainable reason this confuses them rather than signaling that their twins must exist in this town. Thank you, Plautus.



The company of The Comedy of Errors; Photo: Nile Scott Studios.

Egeon, a merchant of Syracuse, has come to Ephesus, seeking his searching son and slave and has been arrested for his presence in town. Given twenty-four hours to produce his ransom, he is condemned to death, a public execution, at that time. He sets out on his search which ultimately has him begging the audience for financial help. In a weird comment on the mindset of twins, separated at birth, both pair of men are dressed alike which only adds to the confusion of identities. Adapted many times into operas, plays and musical comedies, this aspect of the show never alters. The dunnest of these versions, Rodgers and Hart’s “The Boys From Syracuse” even verbally gives credit to Shakespeare for one short line used in the opening number of the musical.

In its writing style the women speak in rhymed couplets while the men do not. You can, therefore, always tell if a character is male or female. The two principal women in this show are Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, played with urgent style by Madeline Rose Maggio and her sister, Luciana, played sweetly by Emma Geer. Luciana suffers from identity recognition hysteria when Antipholus of Syracuse, adroitly played by L. James, falls in love with her. Luciana assumes he is her brother-in-law and panics, nearly freaks out, in fact. Both women deliver fine portraits of their silly characters, even when put into potentially recognizable domination roles.



Madeleine Rose Maggio, Emma Geer
Photo: Nile Scott Studios.

As the plot thickens with missing money, stolen jewelry, sexual adventures, hanks of rope, romantic appeals and government intervention, this production grows funnier and funnier. Director Kate Kohler Amory has pushed acrobatics out of her main players and her more incidental players as well. People bounce on and off the stages, never lose their hats and garner even more laughter than Shakespeare and Plautus ever intended. I have to admit that the carrying-ons of this company consistently are funny, especially when one Dromio repeats an earlier physical escapade performed by his unseen twin. Instinct, apparently, will out.

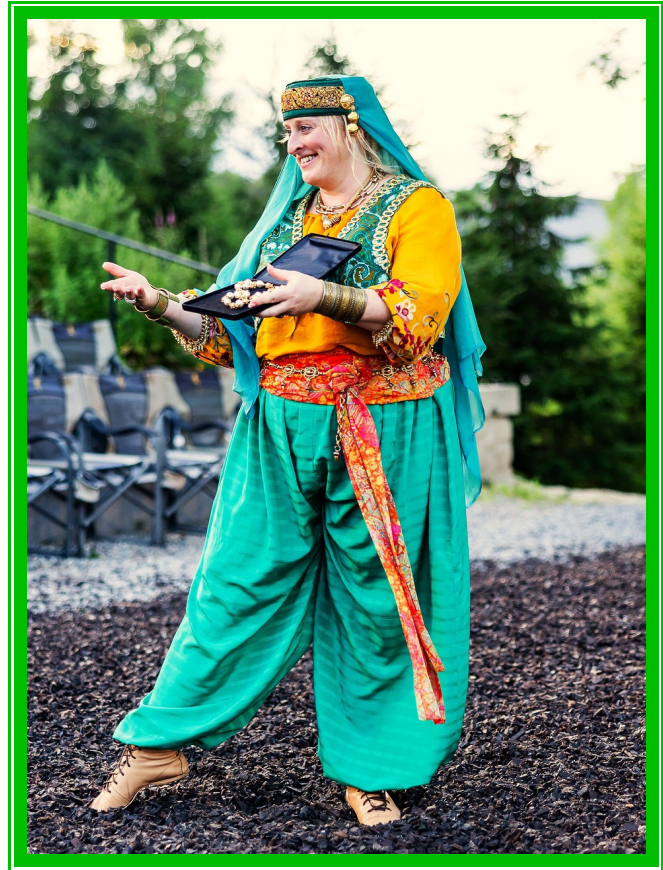
About half of the amusing charm of the piece is due to the wonderful costumes designed by Govane Lohbauer. She has splashed the stage with color and pattern, giving each actor a look and feel of their own character. The Dromios and the Antipholi (that's two Antipholuses) are bright and dynamic befitting their roles as staged by Amory. Luciana, a virgin, is in delicate pink while her married sister, presumably physically loved by her husband, is dressed in hot pink. The courtesan, beautifully bumped and grounded by Ashley McCauley Moore, is appropriately exotic and Rory Hannond's goldsmith, Angelo, is unisexually gowned in green and gold. As always Hammond delivers her role perfectly. As much as anything in this presentation, Lohbauer delivers a show of her own.

Scenically the show has a definite reverberation plucked from reality. The scenic design by Theron Winewinger shows us a circus stage atmosphere in front of which the highly active and intensely acrobatic work of the cast seems very appropriate.. The Vaudeville concept takes on a broader feel in this setting, One can imagine a troupe of roving players setting up their set in town in order to play out this tale for an eager local audience. We are transported to Will Shakespeare's time in his early days as a trouper in order to find how this early play of his might have been seen by his early audiences. I liked this concept very much.

In addition to Rory Hammond, company regular David Gow appears as Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus. His is very god in the rgabjkess role. Naire Poole plays The Abbess, a role that assumes major importance in the last act (there five acts but only one intermission). Poole doubles as the policeman and defines the role well..

In a pivotal, audience-appealing role, Dennis Trainor, Jr. plays the Syracusan merchant, father of the twin Antipholi (they have the same name, by the way, because each having been saved from drowning by only one parent, neither of whom knew which son they had saved, chose that name for their “survivor”). He handles the opening monologue beautifully and sets the story in motion just as Egeon should do.

In any Shakespeare comedy there is always one sober, sane and responsible character and this play has Egeon, but Amory gives Trainor his comic moments too



Rory Hammond; Photo: Nile Scott Studios



Dennis Trainor, Jr.; Photo: Niles Scott Studios

The play, of course, rests on the four men playintg the two pairs of twins..This edition has an exquisite quartet in those roles. L. James as the hero Antipholus brings both humor and dignity to his playing. As phycal in his role as any of the foursome, he manages his twin senses of confusion and conviction extremely well. As his somewhat more villainous counterpart Antipholus, Sharmarke Yusuf gives a more dramatic performance as the confused and hurt cheating husband who steals jewelry and lies about his life to his wife. Yusaf does a fine job, and I like him very much when he and L. James stood and measured one another’s height.



Javier David, Sharmarke Yusuf, L. James, Evan Stevens;
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

The two Dromios are played by two young actors I could watch all day and night. Not only are they able to play the comic lines very well they excel in the physical comedy of their roles as well. They leap, they tumble, they somersault and seemingly fly ar rimes. The two of them alone make up half the show. They are Javier David (Syracuse) and Evan Stevens (Epgesus). These two men are worth the price of the play and I'd pay a second time to watch their work.

What a good show this is for Shakespeare & Co. It's just as good for the audience.

+ 07/20/2024 +

The Comedy of Errors plays in the Arthur S. Waldstein Amphitheatre at Shakespeare & Co., 70 Walker Street, Lenox, MA through August 18. For information and tickets go to Shakespeare.org or call 413-637-1199.

