



MERCURY

Teacher's Resource Pack

- Primary Schools

Contents



Page 3: Context & Key Facts

Page 4: Synopsis

Page 6: Interview with the Director

Page 8: Interview with the Designer

Page 10: Interview with the Musical Director

Page 12: Introduction to Characters

Page 14: Meet the cast

Page 15: The Creative team

Page 16: Lesson Plans



Context & Key Facts

- Shakespeare based the play on a work by the Roman playwright Plautus called *The Menaechmi*. Plautus used stock characters such as servants and masters, physical pranks and violence for comedic effect.
- Shakespeare himself was a father of twins – Judith and Hamnet.
- Written around 1593, during an outbreak of Plague - *The Comedy of Errors* is Shakespeare's earliest comedy.
- It is also his shortest play.
- It is thought the play was first performed on 28th December 1594 at Gray's Inn, London. It is recorded that the rowdy and overcrowded audience nearly broke out into a riot during the production.
- When *The Comedy of Errors* was written, Elizabethan England was experiencing an age of maritime exploration.
- The action takes place in Ephesus which today would be located in Turkey but at the time of the play it was a centre of Greek civilisation and commerce. It was also thought to be notorious as a centre of witchcraft. Syracuse is located in Sicily.
- The only play of Shakespeare's with 'Comedy' in the title.
- It begins like a tragedy.
- All the action takes place over a single day.
- It is mostly written in blank verse.



Synopsis

Set in the city of Ephesus, *The Comedy of Errors* concerns the farcical misadventures of two sets of identical twins. Many years earlier, the Syracusan merchant Egeon had twin sons, both named Antipholus. At their birth, he bought another pair of newborn twins, both named Dromio, as their servants.

The Separation

While sailing home to Syracuse, the family are shipwrecked in a violent storm. Egeon manages to save only one of the Antipholus and one of the Dromio babies and takes them home to Syracuse. They have not seen the rest of his family since.

The Quest

Unknown to all of them, the lost Antipholus and Dromio have been living in Ephesus for many years.

Egeon's remaining son, Antipholus of Syracuse, and his servant, Dromio of Syracuse, come to Ephesus, in search of their long-lost twin brothers, unaware that Egeon has also arrived there on the same quest. Unfortunately as Syracuse and Ephesus are at war, Egeon had landed illegally and is arrested and condemned to death unless a ransom is paid by sunset.

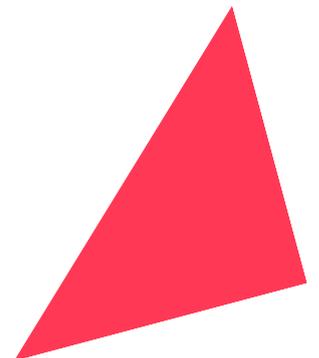


Mistaken Identity

The visitors are confused, angered, or intrigued when local residents seem to know them. They think Ephesus is bewitched! Similarly, Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus run into puzzling reactions from the people they know—who have been dealing, unwittingly, with the Syracusans. Antipholus of Ephesus's wife bars him from his house; he is jailed after a jeweller claims he owes money on a gold chain he never received – a real comedy of errors! All hope of sanity seems lost—until...

Reunion and Reconciliation

...everything builds to a big reunion when the four twins finally come together. All is resolved and in Shakespeare's last twist, an Abbess with knowledge of life beyond the cloistered walls amazes us all.



Interview with the Director



Ryan McBryde

What is it about Comedy of Errors that attracted you to Direct this particular play?

I decided to direct *The Comedy of Errors* during the second lockdown. Its themes of separated families and the madness that ensues seemed more pertinent than ever. Believed to be Shakespeare's earliest comedy, it actually begins with a tragedy and the story has a strong undertow toward restoration, reconciliation, and familial reunion.

Though the prologue promises pathos, with shipwrecks and threats of execution, the rest of the play is pure comedy bordering on farce. The plot is unashamedly fantastical - not one but TWO sets of separated twins unwittingly frequenting the same city at the same time. The humour stems from a multitude of mistaken identities building in helter-skelter momentum toward the final revelation and reunion.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare combines Plautus' *The Two Menaechmuses* and *Amphitryon*, and gives us the wonderful absurdity of two sets of identical twins - double the trouble, you might say. It's also his shortest play by far and one of only two that follows Aristotle's rules of dramatic unity - taking place in one location and in the course of one day. It's this sense of real-time that lends a palpable lunacy to piece.

Why do you think Shakespearian Comedy resonates well with audiences still to this to this day?

Shakespeare is a master of the human spirit. On a superficial level this is simply the bard's shortest and funniest play but at its heart is the search for family and the fundamental need to be reunited with lost loved ones. Antipholus of Syracuse leaves his home to travel across Europe in attempt to track down his long lost brother and mother. He feels alone in the world without them, half-finished. He yearns for the wholeness, completeness, that only a reunion with his family can satisfy. Adriana too longs for a reunion with her disloyal husband, and her sister, Luciana is frightened of relationships but is desperate to fall in love. *The Comedy of Errors* resonates with a modern audience because deep down it is a story of the search for the whole, that in searching for your other, you come closer to finding yourself, and in doing so, lose yourself to something greater.



You have chosen to set this particular production in the 1920's. Why do you think this era is particularly fun?

Finding a backdrop for the play was tricky. It starts with an execution, refers to a recent war and in the conflict between the sisters, Adriana and Luciana, debates the roles of women in society. Taking influence from *The Great Gatsby* and *Grand Budapest Hotel*, I've transposed the action to Hotel Ephesus - a glitzy, luxurious beacon of extravagance, opulence and pure hedonism in somewhere in central Europe. The 1920's were a decadent decade of feathers, flapper dancers and flamboyance - a time of release and relief following a devastating pandemic and the Great War.

It was a time of great social and cultural upheaval: jazz and swing, socialism and feminism; rapid shifts in art, literature, music and fashion. The magic of film and the glory of Hollywood had been introduced to the world, it was the age of the automobile and the airplane, and the relaxing of once dark and repressive social mores, in a spirited and hopeful post-war period of progress.

The threat of execution in this version of the story comes from the town's military leader, the Duke, who hints at the rise of fascism to come. The war they refer to becomes World War I and Adriana and Luciana's debates are now reframed against the backdrop of women's suffrage and the Representation of the People Act 1918. Adriana represents the pleasure-seeking, taboo-breaking, trouser wearing feminist of the 1920s, whilst Luciana still clings to the ideas of duty, obedience and a woman's place being in the home.

What do you think the musical element is going to add to the show?

The glorious golden age was nothing without its extraordinary music. We're using contemporary pop-songs rearranged through a vintage filter to sound like 1920s classics. This soundscape will give us a flavor of the period but will also highlight some of the themes in the play. For instance, madness is a major theme and so songs like *Crazy* by Gnarls Barkley and *Queen's I'm Going Slightly Mad* have found their way into the story. Adriana thinks her husband is leaving her so she sing's *Don't Speak*, a song about the end of relationship.



James Button

Can you tell us a bit about you and how you got into theatre design?

I think I've always been involved in theatre in some way, I started off acting and then when I was around 10 I suddenly had a moment when I was doing a community play, I was watching the scenery come in and I remember thinking I'd rather do that than standing here on stage. I then joined the National Youth Theatre in London and spent my summers working alongside designers, making costumes in the wardrobe department, and from working so closely with them, I knew that that was what I wanted to do. To me it seemed like a job that wasn't really a job, as it'd actually be really fun to do. Once I was old enough I went to study at Wimbledon School of Art and spent three years there and afterwards I assisted designers for quite a long time. I do think I was incredibly lucky as I was introduced to theatre by my parents, we always went to see it and were around it, so it's always been part of my life in some way or another, and so I was quite easily able to realise that theatre was a place where I felt really comfortable and enjoyed being in.

What is the concept behind your design for *The Comedy of Errors* and what inspired you during the process?

So our director, Ryan, decided to set it in the 1920's, 1923 to be exact and we realised there were so many parallels to now and then which were interesting to explore. They'd just got past the Spanish Flu pandemic, and obviously we've just had that with the Covid pandemic, they'd also just come out of World War I and although that isn't the same for us, there is very much still conflict going on in the world. Location wise, we decided to set it in a hotel, allowing us a parallel with the original setting which was a market place. So the lobby of the hotel could become this central hub of the community and the other locations within would also work narratively for the story. What's really interesting about this production is that it is marking 50 years of the Mercury Theatre, so we wanted to encapsulate a celebratory theme and being in a grand location like a hotel allows you to achieve that and meant we started looking at the design elements of films like *The Great Gatsby*, also *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Particularly the block colouring that is used gives it a really beautiful aesthetic so we wanted to incorporate that throughout.

Research wise, with the period of the 1920's, there's an awful lot out there to draw influences from. The art deco style and a real sense of opulence, because it's that period of time where people were really celebrating being free again, which we're all feeling now. We've gone from being locked into our homes to being able to see people and enjoy our time again, so that seems to be a great parallel to play with. The whole look itself is such a celebration and with the theatre's 50th anniversary, it seemed like such a great chance to produce something really splendid on stage, something really beautiful, but of course there were just so many influences to look at. So the final stage of the process was very tricky and was about fine tuning it, being really specific and simplistic in our choices, because ultimately the focus needs to be on the story we are telling.



This play includes a lot of slapstick and visual comedy, how does this affect your process?

It really does affect it a lot! Shakespeare has written in a lot of slapstick, but also by choosing to set it in the 1920's there are so many silent movies with iconic people like Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin and so on, that we can really draw from.

The main thing for me is making sure you are creating a space that allows these ridiculous moments to take place. There's an amazing chase sequence in act 2 and for that to be visually funny you need as many entrances/exits as possible – with lots being concealed so there's an element of surprise too. So all of these moments are in my mind as I build the world of the show.

I also really associate slapstick with Monty Python as I grew up watching that style of comedy and so I really like using objects for a different purpose than they were originally intended that really adds to the silliness. There's also a scene where some of the characters are having a meal which could become almost like a slosh scene in a pantomime – obviously there's a fine line between the two, but we can bring the total joy of that to this piece. Essentially with this kind of show the props become very important and so they are needed in the room from day one, which the brilliant stage management team here have done, as a lot of these moments will come from the actors playing and inventing in rehearsals. You really have to submerge yourself in the research of the world of slapstick to create the tools for the rehearsal room, which is so important. We can all imagine – it would be funny if you did this – but really you need to see it in the moment with the story to determine whether it actually works. Overall, it's providing the ingredients that facilitate play that will then translate into some really ridiculous moments on stage.

What advice would you give an aspiring theatre designer?

I think what really helped me understand my craft was assisting designers and working in other departments (prop design, costume, set) as this really helped me to understand how things are constructed so that when I began designing I could be really articulate and clear about what it was I wanted. It really allows you to become a good collaborator, as the process doesn't stop when you've built a model or complete a costume drawing, a huge amount of the process is working alongside the brilliant people in the workshop, wardrobe and stage management departments to work out how it is possible to turn your designs into a reality. The collaboration of all of these departments is what really brings a design to life and isn't something you can learn theoretically when you're studying, so learning the collaborative process means you can take a design so much further – but also learn how to bring it in on budget. So I'd definitely recommend volunteering for somewhere like the National Youth Theatre to submerge yourself in other departments and assisting, it just really gave me the confidence and the practice before launching my career.



Interview with the Musical Director

Jessica Dives

How did you become a musical director? Were you interested in music at school?

I didn't come the expected way! I went to University - Royal Holloway, University of London - and studied Drama. Whilst I was there, I spent a lot of time with the Musical Theatre Society directing concerts, creating shows and generally making shows happen. I then went to study Acting at Central School of Speech and Drama. When I made Acting my job, I quickly started work on shows that either had a lot of music and singing in them, or needed me to play an instrument. I don't work in Musical Theatre, but so much theatre now has music and actors who play instruments in them. I learnt the Piano growing up, and never really got on with it. I also had a very keen interest in Folk Music. I spent some time writing my own music, and gigging with my guitar whilst at University. I then went on to sing and play in bands, alongside being an actor. On my first job out of Drama school someone said 'can you play these instruments, as well as act in them?' I finally found a love of playing the piano... when it wasn't for passing an exam, but for actually making music with others.

A few years on, and having learnt a few more instruments along the way, a Director asked if I would also be able to MD a show whilst also being in it. I thought it sounded like a good challenge, so I said yes. Fast forward to now, I have a career as both an Actor and MD!

What does having music in this Shakespeare play add to the show?

Many of Shakespeare's plays had music written in to them and would often finish with a full company jig. So really, it's not too radical to do with a Shakespeare text.

We have chosen to set this production in the 1920s, and such a key feature of the 1920s is the party music, Charleston dancing and the blues. The music is iconic from the era, so it is an essential part of any show that takes on the era of the 1920s. The music in our show is modern songs with a 1920s twist. Putting modern songs in a Shakespeare play is an excellent way of making a show accessible for all ears. Some of the songs help add to the comedy, they help add to the farce and surreal elements of the comedy, they sometimes help us tell parts of the story that we wouldn't usually see in the play, that aren't written in the text. The music often taps into what state a character is in, or comments on things that are happening. It also helps us focus on the themes present in the play.



What instruments make up the band? Why did you choose these particular instruments?

When researching the play and the music of the era - the 1920s- I went back to the iconic bands and musicians and entertainers around that time - Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Nat Gonella, Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker etc and found that there were often many of the same instruments. Choosing instruments for a show is an essential part of creating the right sound for the setting. When we think of the 1920s we think of Trumpets, Clarinet, Double bass... so these were a must. The 1920s were heavily influenced by a style of piano playing called Rag Time so this meant our Piano became really useful. And of course, the drums too! That gives us the trumpet, Saxophone, Clarinet, Piano, Double Bass and Drums.

We also have some other instruments in the show - The Guitar, The Ukulele, The Accordion... all of these can be found in different styles of music from the time, and using different instruments is a great way of shaking up the texture of sound within the show.

You have chosen more contemporary modern Pop songs but have given them a 1920s twist. How have you been able to do this?

Just like anything, there are trends and fashions in music. For example a lot of songs in one era might use similar drum rhythms, or they might have similar tunes, sounds to their harmonies, similar sounds to their guitars etc, so that is a great starting point. One of those things that makes something immediately sound older is a swing rhythm, or the Charleston rhythm.

First things first - irrelevant of the style you might want to turn a pop song into, if it is for a show, you need to know what purpose it serves in the show. Is it there to share a characters deepest, saddest feelings? Is it there to represent new and exciting love? Is it simply a big party number? This immediately gives me an idea as to whether it needs to be up tempo, does it need to feel like a ballad, does it need to be good for dancing and so on.

What has been your favourite part of working on this production?

The people! It has been such a wonderful set of actors and creatives. And I love working on Shakespeare plays. They can feel so difficult or out of touch when you read them, but when you stand them up, and hear lots of different people reading the characters, you realise how clever his work really is. I have worked on various other productions of Comedy of Errors, and I still think it's so funny. He obviously knew what he was doing!

It will also never *not* be a wonderful thing hearing other musicians play your music. I have been sitting at home with it all in my head for weeks, and so to hear it out loud with other people playing it and bringing their own flare to it, is one of the best bits of my job. So that's a few favourite things really!



Introduction to the Characters

Duke Solinus:

He is ruler of Ephesus and must enforce its laws. When Egeon arrives illegally from Syracuse at the start of the play, the Duke condemns him to death. However, when he hears Egeon's story, he is moved to pity and grants him a stay of execution. "I am not partial to infringe our laws."

Egeon, an unlucky merchant of Syracuse:

A shipwreck split up his family in the distant past and he is travelling to find them. Egeon's deepest despair at the loss of his family, and possibly his own life, reverses itself in the last moments of the play. "Hopeless and helpless doth Egeon wend."

Antipholus of Ephesus:

The first "lost" son of Egeon; this Antipholus witnesses his sense of identity dissolve around him when, unbeknownst to him, his twin brother arrives in Ephesus. Even his wife seems part of a conspiracy to drive him mad. "This day great Duke she shut the doors upon me."

Antipholus of Syracuse:

The second twin, the "lost" son; he arrives in Ephesus in his quest to recover his scattered family only to find himself spellbound, as he sees it, in a city of witchcraft and trickery.

The two Dromios:

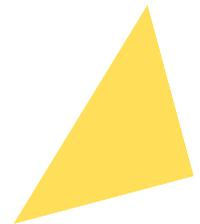
Exact lookalikes and slaves to the respective twin Antipholuses; the Dromios parallel exactly their masters' dilemmas and take regular beatings. Dromio of Ephesus: "Methinks you are my glass and not my brother." Dromio of Syracuse: "We'll draw cuts for the senior: till then lead thou first."

Adriana:

The attractive, rich wife of Antipholus of Ephesus; she mistakenly welcomes his twin brother as her husband, much to her husband's dismay and the visitor's amazement. "I see two husbands, or mine eyes deceive me."

Emilia:

The long-lost wife of Egeon; she has become an Abbess at Ephesus. She offers refuge to her Syracusan son without knowing who he is, then at the end of the play, she invites the entire cast of characters to feast and discuss the day's events. "Most mighty Duke, behold a man much wrong'd."





Angelo:

An Ephesian goldsmith; he is drawn into the complications when he delivers a gold chain – ordered by one of the twins – to the other twin, and when he tries to collect payment from the wrong one. “Arrest him officer I would not spare my brother in this case.”

Dr Pinch:

A quack employed by Adriana to ‘cure’ Antipholus of Ephesus. He visits him in jail and suggests he and his servant be bound and laid in some dark room to exorcise the "fiend" within them.

Luciana:

Adriana's unmarried sister. She tries her best to calm Adriana at points of stress in the plot, but she too gets caught up in the enveloping madness. Shakespeare neatly pairs her off with Antipholus of Syracuse at the end of the play. “Why call you me love? Call my sister so.

Balthazar:

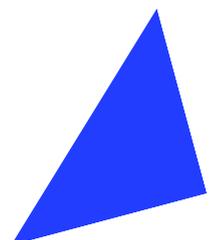
A merchant of Ephesus and a friend of the local Antipholus.

The Officer:

A debt recovery officer, who can be hired to arrest defaulters.

Nell:

is a maid at Antipholus of Ephesus’s. She has little patience with loud ruffians at the gate, whom she consigns to the stocks.



Meet the Cast



Rosalind Ford

Adriana/Balthazar



Nichole Bird

Dromio of Ephesus



Michael Lambourne

Egeon/Angelo/Dr Pinch



Mike Slader

Antipholus of Ephesus



Jessica Dives

Emilia/Nell/Musical Director



Danielle Bird

Dromio of Syracuse



Lucy Keirl

Luciana/Nestor/Officer



Daniel Burke

Antipholus of Syracuse



Aaliyah Zhané

Duke Solinus/Calypso



Meet the creative team

Director - Ryan McBryde
Assistant Director - Michael Cottrell
Designer - James Button
Lighting Designer - Ben Cracknell
Sound Designer - Ella Wahlström
Musical Director - Jessica Dives
Movement Director - Michela Meazza
Fight Director - Haruka Kuroda
Casting Director - Marc Frankum
DSM (On The Book) - Emilie Leger
Production Photographer - Pamela Raith



KS2 Activities



**Lesson #1:
Exploring the 'Comedy' in
The Comedy of Errors**

Objective:

- Explore the different types of Comedy within a Shakespeare play setting
- Reflect on and evaluate their own work and that of others
- Develop a range of theatrical skills and apply them to create performances

In *The Comedy of Errors* Shakespeare experimented with various types of comedy, enabling him to make his audience laugh in different ways. These include

- Verbal wit
- Satire
- Farce
- Physical comedy and slapstick

This last type of comedy, appearing throughout the play, was heavily influenced by a genre originating in Italy, and popular throughout Europe from the 16th to the 18th century – *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Commedia dell'Arte

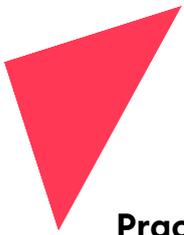
Elements of *Commedia* have made their way into almost every theatrical form from the writings of Shakespeare (most notably *The Comedy of Errors*), to opera, puppet theatre (*Punch and Judy*) and pantomime, to the work of the Marx Brothers and Rowan Atkinson. Players made their performances accessible to all social classes, removing language as a barrier through the use of skilful mime techniques, universally understandable 'stock' characters, traditional gags and pranks ('lazzis'), easily identifiable costumes and masks, broad physical comedy and improvised dialogue that was tailored to each audience.

Lazzis

A *lazzi* is any bit of physical stage business - polished jokes, gags, feats of acrobatics, displays of skill, from a simple action or word through to a whole scene, devised and rehearsed beforehand and inserted into an improvised or scripted performance. Most *lazzis* have been passed down to us via pantomime, circus, music hall and silent film.

Slapstick

Characters in *Commedia* used to physically beat each other with a paddle-like stick which had another stick attached to it – when an actor hit another character, one stick hit the other making a loud slapping sound. This made it sound like the actor was being hit harder than he was. This comedic element is used a great deal in *The Comedy of Errors*. There are several scenes in which the *Dromios* are beaten by their masters during the course of the play.



**Lesson #1:
Exploring the
'Comedy' in
The Comedy of
Errors**

Practical exercises to explore the above:

KS2

Knee-Boxing – Pairs

Stand facing your partner, knees bent, hands on knees. Each partner tries to slap the other's inside knee as they take their hand off to 'attack'. Score points for each slap.

KS2

Boxing Match

In pairs (perhaps as 'master' and 'servant') each couple has a boxing match but there are two simple rules – all movement is in slow motion, and there is no physical contact. Players however behave as if there were physical contact. So punches that are thrown are reacted to as if they hit. Players should not attempt to win but concentrate on developing a fluid exchange of punches between them – a lazzi!

Try combining these exercises with excerpts from the text where 'beatings' occur – notably Act II Sc (ii) and Act IV Sc (iv). Rehearse the beatings in slow motion without actually touching each other, then act out sections of the scene quickly, adding words from the scene to accompany the 'blows'.



Curriculum Links: English Literature & Drama

Time: 40 minutes

Resources: Open space

Primary: KS2



Lesson #2: Exploring the themes in Comedy of Errors

Objective:

- Explore performance texts, understanding their social, cultural and historical context including the theatrical conventions of the period in which they were created
- Develop a range of theatrical skills and apply them to create performances

There are a number of themes within the play which provide rich sources for further exploration. Here are just a few with some suggested practical exercises.

Master and Servant

See-sawing status roles are a key feature in *The Comedy of Errors*. The theme also has strong links with the *Commedia Dell'Arte* tradition.

Practical Exercise:

Work in PAIRS – A and B. A is the servant, B the master. B orders their servant to do a job for them – ‘clean my boots!’ But before A has time to start that job, B must issue another order – ‘Answer the door!’ Before the servant can get to the door there must be another command – ‘fetch me a rope!’ And so on. (Contrary to expectation, players find it hard to be the master because of constantly having to invent tasks – 30 seconds of this exercise is probably long enough!) A and B swap roles.

Extension: Pairs – one player has to give instructions to the other through physical directions, eye contact and gestures only. Switch roles.

Twins

Shakespeare’s fascination with twins probably comes from the fact he was father to twins himself. In the *Comedy of Errors* he doubles the amount of twins there were in his source material.

Exercise: Mirroring

Work in PAIRS – A and B. Player A will be the mirror and B the actor. Pairs stand facing one another. Ask students to make eye contact. As Player B begins moving, A is to mirror B’s actions exactly. Both players should maintain eye contact, with Player A seeing B’s movement through his/her peripheral vision. Encourage slow and sustained movements to begin with and/or simple actions like brushing teeth or playing a sport in slow motion. After a set time, ask students to switch leaders. Eventually, pairs can be encouraged to switch back and forth between leaders on their own or to try and work together where neither person is leading.

Possible Variations/Applications:

- Have students explore feeling vocabulary (sad, excited) through their movements.
- Magnifying Mirrors Work in pairs. The leader tries to keep his movements "small," but the "mirror" makes all the movements "bigger." This is lots of fun, and calls for imagination, because it is not always obvious how to make a movement "bigger."
- Shrinking Mirrors Like "Magnifying Mirrors," but in reverse.

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS



Subject to availability when booking Comedy or Errors, we are offering a free, one hour Comedy of Errors workshop to schools that book 30+ tickets to see the show. Workshops can take place at the school or at the theatre.

We hope to see you there!