

The Comedy of Errors, directed by Sean McGrath, August 2016.

Reviewed by Andrew Muir.



The Comedy Of Errors, directed by Sean McGrath and played in Trinity College Gardens in August, this year, was an absolute riot. So much so, that it will probably surprise many of those who roared with laughter throughout those performances, that many people have started to write about the play in a serious vein. Dr Emma Smith, for example, tells us that:

This play employs a lexicon of magic and the supernatural is striking more mentions of witches and witchcraft than in Macbeth for instance more mentions of conjuring in magic than in A Midsummer Night's Dream, more references to Satan and the devil than in any other Shakespeare play.ⁱ

Others have stressed the moments of existential crisis such as the time when one of Dromios finds himself in a state of bewilderment so extreme that he questions his own existence. It is also undeniable that there are darker sides portrayed amidst the fun, as jealousy and violence play such a prominent part in the farcical proceedings.

Lucianna's: *Self-harming jealousy! fie, beat it hence!* Strikes home as highly necessary advice as the ghosts of Leontes and Othello threaten to overwhelm our ebullient fun.

While, less cerebrally, but no less tellingly, a huge amount of violence is inflicted on the Dromios. It may well be very funny to witness, but it is no joke for them, as the following quotes from Dromio of Ephesus so eloquently attest:

I am an ass, indeed; you may prove it by my long ears. I have served him from the hour of my nativity to this instant, and have nothing at his hands for my service but blows. 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; driven out of doors with it when I go from home; welcomed home with it when I return; nay, I bear it on my shoulders, as a beggar wont her brat; and, I think when he hath lamed me, I shall beg with it from door to door.

And

*Am I so round with you as you with me,
That like a football you do spurn me thus?
You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither:
If I last in this service, you must case me in leather.*

You get the impression that perhaps we are supposed to have some pause for reflection even as the

hilarity unfolds.

Yet, for all that I have just written, there was no real thought of these points, aside from the very occasional awakening of something more serious, as I laughed myself silly watching the manic antics of the wonderful cast.

I want to begin my praise of that cast by concentrating on the two Dromios as I thought they were simply brilliant. Lindsay Huebner (Syracuse) and Evangeline Beaven (Ephesus), take a bow. You must have been absolutely exhausted as not only did you put in a tremendous amount of running but you were usually yelling at the tops of your voices as you sped about the wide expanses of the College Garden.

Most of the rest of the cast ran a lot, too, I should add here. I mention in my [book on the Festival](#) that a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had more running about in it than an episode of *Doctor Who*. Well, this one had more running about in it than ten episodes of *Doctor Who*. Or, at least, that is how it felt.

I apologise to the actors but I think of the Dromios as one person and so please take all praise here, that should perhaps be individually broken down, as joint praise. It is a compliment in any case, and to all four of the twins, as the whole idea is that you are to be totally confused with your opposite.

The Dromios, from the very beginning of the play, had the audience captivated. An early report, delivered by Dromio while standing on a bench and repeating and recounting what had happened while using his hands as though they were glove puppets, was outstanding theatre.

I mentioned above that the beatings the Dromios receive can bring a darker shade to the play. However, there was a clever touch here in having the Dromios fight back quite a few times. I liked that because, funny though it was, the slapstick humour of seeing two servants being beaten by their masters can become off-puttingly excessive.

The delivery of some of the Dromios' lines was fantastic as well. Ephesus' lines quoted above would stand as fine examples, as would Syracuse's emphases here :

Marry, sir, besides myself, I am due to a woman; and Oh, sir, I did not look so low.

There was also an excellent use of the Dromio characters to announce the closing of the first half and the opening of the second. That was very neatly performed and effective.

You have probably concluded already that this review is going to be one of sustained praise. Your conclusion would be correct and the praise is very well deserved as the production garnered highly positive reviews all round and evoked tremendous audience reaction.



Lucianna and Adrianna were perfect. Emma Longthorne brought a subtlety and depth to Adrianna that I had not realised the character possessed. While Rachel Oliver's depiction of Lucianna being torn between her sibling duty to her sister, whom she genuinely seems to love, and her lust for a man she thinks is her sister's husband was unforgettable. Their dialogues were excellent and the way Emma

delivered the word 'servitude' in the line: *This servitude makes you to keep unwed* was worth going to the play all on its own. Emma also got a round of applause at one point for spitting out a most spectacular rant. Lucianna, meanwhile, had her own hilarious moments and a very funny speech in the second half that had everyone laughing themselves silly. Adrianna had another magnificent rant near the end of the play. It was a play of many a good rant, that is for sure.

The play opened with Scott Loader as the Duke and he had a very clear voice and was very authoritative (this is also true at end of the play). He knows that he has to stick to the law, even though he wanted to help the hapless-seeming Aegeon, who was brilliantly played by Ian Recordon. This play has a very long opening speech of exposition and so Ian had to tell the back-story and it this went on for quite a long time during which he had to hold the audience's attention. This posed no difficulty for me because I could listen to Ian talking all night and luckily for me, he had two other parts in this play so I got to hear him a lot.

Then there was Adam Elms with his beard, already striking at the start of the summer and by now a large mass that looked like it was about to take on a life of its own. Adam was funny as Angelo but downright hilarious as the lascivious courtesan – which just has to have been the most hirsute courtesan there has ever been - whose interaction with a male member of the audience was one of the highlights of all eight plays at this year's Festival. This ended with a piece of bawdy innuendo and was another part of the play that drew forth its very own unprompted acclaim from the audience.

You could not help but feel sorry for the two Antipholuses, played by Tim Atkinson and Stephen Horncastle, as they ran about and were chased to distraction by coincidences and by just missing people by a minute. As the misunderstandings proliferated and the mayhem ensued Tim and Stephen were central to the audience's pleasure in all the enfolding turmoil.

The play unfolds at an extraordinary speed and I am not at all sure where the cast get the energy from to keep this up night after night, as they never allowed the pace drop at all. I mentioned rants, well, Stephen Horncastle got a quite spectacular rant in the second part of the play which went down very well. I also shouldn't forget the tremendous comic turns of the Abbess, Susanna Gordon, who was very, very funny in that role and a wonderful Dr Pinch (Scott Loader, again.) The eccentric Dr Pinch's attempts to exorcise the supposed satanic possession of Antipholus were just magnificent. There was so much going on at that point, actually, that it was really hard to watch everything. However, you just could not take your eyes off Dr Pinch for a minute and you just had to try and be aware of all the other action that was going on simultaneously. Somehow you managed it, though I was quite breathless by the end of that scene so goodness only knows how breathless the actors must have been.



There is a tendency to sneer at farces and to think that they are unworthy of your time or contemplation. You would almost think that laughter is unimportant. It is not, quite the opposite, in fact. This production had the entire audience in gales of laughter each night I saw it and that is a rare and precious gift that should be treasured, not sneered at.

Thanks to all the cast for their tremendous work and to director Sean McGrath because to manage all of this so seamlessly with so many confusions, coincidences and misunderstandings and so much running about, the planning and rehearsals must have been spot on - bravo!

So good was the production that I went back to see it on two more occasions before the run came to an end. *In the bleak midwinter to come, frosty winds may moan*, but my summer memories of *The Comedy of Errors* will keep my heart warm.

Andrew Muir

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ⁱ <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/comedy-errors>