

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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The Comedy of Errors

by William Shakespeare

The Bell Shakespeare Company
Dunstan Playhouse

It is seven years since Bell Shakespeare last played in Adelaide and they return with a production full of fun and flair. Thought to be Shakespeare's first play, *The Comedy of Errors* borrows freely from *The Menaechmi* by the Roman playwright Plautus, except that, not content with the confusion of one set of twins, Shakespeare goes double or nothing by adding twin servants as well.

Consider the dilemma of Egeon, a merchant from Syracuse who is captured in the enemy city of Ephesus. He is searching for his son, who in turn is looking for a twin brother not seen since they were separated, in a shipwreck, years before. In this carefully calibrated perfect storm the family has been split in two halves - each with one son, one servant, one parent - and, it would seem, one set of names. For reasons I still don't follow, both twins are called Antipholus and both servants Dromio - which guarantees chaos when the Syracusan branch of the family visits Ephesus, unaware that their doppelgangers are resident there.

In director John Bell's fast-paced farce, Ephesus is a Turkish town with (in Jennie Tate's lively design) splodgy whitewashed walls, market stalls and sinister types in Commedia half-masks. The fez is the chapeau of choice, as are turbans like minarets and the sort of harem pants Jeannie would dream of. And, adding to the Maxfield Parrish colour and the catchy Arabic grooves from composer Phillip Johnston, is some real before-your-eyes magic from Ross Skeffington, tying scarves in knots, frisking an audience member's jacket and materialising fluttering doves.

The play opens as the Duke (David Davies) looking more like a South American brigand, demands that the beleaguered Egeon (played with distinction by Robert Alexander) explain himself. It is the longest speech in the play and Alexander navigates it with measured care. But, from then on, the pace is hectic as the interchanging Antipholi and Dromios perplex themselves and everybody else by not recognising each other, or a wife, or

the merchant who sold them a gold chain until, eventually, everything is in a spin of cross-purposes.

There are some excellent performances here. Blazey Best is notable as the bewildered wife Adriana, especially when she despatches a clunky exposition speech with fast forward speed. Anna Volsky transforms from Sister Wendy to Emilia the long lost mother. Sean O'Shea and Christopher Stollery play the Antipholus twins with raffish charm and Paul Eastway as Dromio of Ephesus is a nice foil to Dureen Gilshenan who is outstanding as Dromio One - all swagger and comic business in clown-red cap and stripes. He is hilarious to watch and his nasal delivery, complete with Ron Glumm intonation, only adds more appeal to a portrait of a wily servant.

In this raucous, fart-whistling comedy of misrepresentation and confusion, John Bell returns to the spirit of Nimrod, the Seventies company where he pioneered an Australian style of Shakespeare. And while the final scene is a little short on the kind of restorative ceremony that is a signature of Shakespeare's comedy, in its energy, fluency and timing the Bell Company's *Comedy of Errors* hardly puts a foot wrong.