

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

presents

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

a Farce

by **William Shakespeare**

Premiere on 23 February, 2012

Preview Performances at reduced prices on 20, 21 and 22 February

Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours

Matinee Performances at 11.00 Hours on Tuesdays and

Fridays beginning 28 February

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Lerchenfeld 14, 22081 Hamburg

U-Bahn Mundsburg

Telephone: 22 77 089

www.englishtheatre.de

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **THE COMEDY OF ERRORS** by William Shakespeare on 23 February, 2012, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 20, 21 and 22 February. Bookings for this farcical comedy have already started. See the cover of this study guide for dates and times of performances. The text of the play may be ordered from Samuel French, 52 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 5JR, England. theatre@samuelfrench-london.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Surprisingly little is recorded in history about the life of William Shakespeare, whose works, along with the Bible, have probably had the most influence on the English language and its literature. We do know that he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford and died there on April 23, 1616. His father was John Shakespeare, a tanner and public official in the small town, who suffered numerous financial reverses throughout his lifetime. It is almost certain that young William, like most boys at that time from the middle-class, attended the local grammar school where pupils received an education grounded in the classics. At eighteen years of age he married Anne Hathaway, and their first child was baptized seven months later. By 1592 he was a professional actor in London and had begun to write plays that were successful enough to provoke the jealousy and admiration of established playwrights. His name appears as one of the owners of the Globe Theatre in 1599, and in 1603 he and his fellow actors received a patent from James I designating them as the King's Men. Although much is unknown and cannot be explained about his life and career, it is generally acknowledged by reputable scholars that the man called William Shakespeare did indeed write, either wholly or in part, the thirty-seven plays which have thrilled audiences for around 400 years.

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS (DIE KOMÖDIE DER IRRUNGEN) is usually considered to be one of Shakespeare's earliest plays. Based on a work by the Roman comic playwright Plautus, it concerns two sets of identical twins that were separated shortly after birth. Years later the twins end up in the same town unaware of the others' existence. What follows is a series of hilarious mistaken identities that wreak havoc not only on the twins themselves but on the citizens of the town as well. The play is a wild theatrical event full of slapstick, beatings, arrests and accusations of infidelity and theft. But, in the end, chaos gives way to love and reconciliation. The play is one of Shakespeare's most farcical comedies. It is also his shortest, making it audience-friendly and a good introduction to his works.

Although essentially a light entertainment, the play touches on the themes of xenophobia, love and marriage, truth versus illusion and the master-slave relationship. It has often been adapted for stage and screen. One of the best known adaptations for the musical theatre is **THE BOYS FROM SYRACUSE** by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.

Summary of
William Shakespeare's
THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

ACT I

The setting is the city of Ephesus where an elderly merchant, Egeon from Syracuse, is sentenced to death for breaking a travel ban between the two Greek cities. He humbly explains to the Duke that he has not come to Ephesus to break the city's laws but to look for his son, Antipholus of Syracuse. The young man left him some time ago in search of his missing mother and twin brother, who were lost at sea in a shipwreck shortly after the twins' birth. The twins were identical, and, at birth, were each provided with servants born at that same time who were also identical twin brothers. The Duke is touched by Egeon's tale of family loss and grants him a way to avoid execution. By the end of the day the old man must raise enough money to pay a fine of one thousand marks. Otherwise the terrible sentence of death will be carried out.

That same day the son that Egeon raised in Syracuse shows up in Ephesus. He is called Antipholus of Syracuse and is accompanied by his servant, Dromio of Syracuse. Both young men are unaware that Egeon is in the city. They are also unaware that their missing twin brothers, Antipholus of Ephesus and his servant Dromio of Ephesus, are residents of the city they are visiting. The two Syracusians are warned by a local merchant of the danger of revealing where they come from due to the travel ban between Syracuse and Ephesus.

Antipholus of Syracuse gives his servant some money and tells him to arrange for a room for them at a local inn. After Dromio of Syracuse leaves, his twin brother, Dromio of Ephesus, appears. He approaches Antipholus of Syracuse, mistaking him for his master, Antipholus of Ephesus. Antipholus of Syracuse is surprised that his servant has returned from the inn so soon. He is also surprised when the servant denies having received money to book a place for them at the inn. Dromio of Ephesus says that he has been sent by his master's wife, Adriana, to fetch his master home for dinner. Thinking the servant is being disobedient and

playing a bad joke on him (for Antipholus of Syracuse has neither a wife nor a house in Ephesus), he beats Dromio of Ephesus, unaware that he is punishing the wrong Dromio. The servant, naturally confused, runs away.

ACT II

In pain from the beating he just received, Dromio of Ephesus returns home. His mistress Adriana and her sister Luciana have been discussing the fickleness of men in matters of love and marriage. When Adriana hears from Dromio about her husband's refusal to come home and his denial that he has a wife, it confirms her suspicions that he is seeing other women. Consumed with jealousy, she angrily orders the servant to return to her husband and force him to come home.

In the meantime, Antipholus of Syracuse has gone to the inn himself where he is told that his servant was there and arranged for their accommodation. Antipholus is perplexed. Why did Dromio claim that he had not done this? A few moments later Antipholus of Syracuse runs into his real servant, Dromio of Syracuse, and asks him if he is now over his ridiculous mood. The servant, of course, cannot understand what his master is talking about. When Dromio of Syracuse denies making a joke earlier about his master having a wife, Antipholus of Syracuse beats him for lying.

They suddenly see two women, Adriana and her sister Luciana, waving at them. Mistaking Antipholus of Syracuse for her husband, Adriana approaches him. She begs him not to leave her for another woman but to come home to dinner and fulfil his proper duties as a husband. Luciana, thinking Antipholus of Syracuse is her brother-in-law, shames him for treating her sister so badly. Unable to make sense of the women's weird remarks, the Syracusians believe they must be dreaming or are under the spell of witchcraft, a thing the city of Ephesus is famous for. Nevertheless, they allow themselves to be taken away by the attractive women to Adriana's house for dinner.

ACT III

While Adriana is dining with her husband's twin brother, her real husband, Antipholus of Ephesus, arranges with the goldsmith Angelo

to have a gold chain made for her. Now Antipholus wants to return home and have dinner. He invites Angelo and a merchant friend, Balthasar, to dine with him. Outside his house he encounters his servant, Dromio of Ephesus, who is still under the false impression that it was his master who beat him earlier. When they try to enter the house, they find the door locked. Antipholus of Ephesus pounds on the door, demanding entry. None of the servants inside will open the door. They think their master is already in the house dining with Adriana. Even she assumes that the man outside is a scoundrel pretending to be her husband. Antipholus of Ephesus is so enraged at being refused entry to his own house that he orders Dromio of Ephesus to fetch a crowbar to break down the door. His friend Balthasar persuades him not to make a scene unworthy of his position and reputation in the town. So Antipholus of Ephesus decides, instead, to dine with a local courtesan and give her, not his spiteful wife, the gold chain. He asks the goldsmith to deliver the chain to the prostitute's address as soon as it is ready.

Meanwhile, inside the house, his twin brother, Antipholus of Syracuse, has fallen for Adriana's sister, Luciana. When they are alone, he flirts with her. Although flattered by his attentions, Luciana is shocked by the moral conduct of the man she believes to be her brother-in-law. She scolds him for flirting with her behind his wife's back, then exits to consult with Adriana on the matter. Dromio of Syracuse tells his master that one of the servants in the house (a fat, ugly kitchen maid called Nell) thinks she is his wife and has been trying to have sex with him. He compares various parts of her body to different countries of the world. As both Syracusians now have women who insist they are their wives, they decide to leave the town right away. Dromio of Syracuse is sent to the harbour to arrange for their departure by ship.

Outside, while waiting for his servant to return from the harbour, Antipholus of Syracuse is approached by the goldsmith Angelo, who has mistaken the Syracusian for his twin brother. Angelo forces the young man to accept the gold chain that he claims he ordered from him. Then the goldsmith leaves, saying that he will return to him later for the payment. Now in possession of a valuable chain he never ordered, Antipholus of Syracuse is convinced that everyone in the town is either bewitched

or crazy. More than ever, he is eager to flee from Ephesus.

ACT IV

In the meantime, Antipholus of Ephesus has completed his visit to the courtesan. On his way home he encounters his servant, Dromio of Ephesus, and sends him off to buy a rope so he can beat his wife and servants for locking him out of his house. He is then accosted by the goldsmith Angelo, who demands to be paid for the chain. Since Antipholus of Ephesus never received the chain, he naturally refuses to pay for it. Whereupon the goldsmith has him arrested by an officer for not paying his debt. The wrongly accused Antipholus of Ephesus is furious. As he is being taken away to jail, Dromio of Syracuse returns from the harbour and, mistaking Antipholus of Ephesus for his master, informs him that their passage by ship has been booked. As he never asked his servant to arrange a booking, but to buy a rope, Antipholus of Ephesus is thoroughly confused. Nevertheless, he instructs Dromio of Syracuse to hurry to Adriana and get from her enough money to bail him out of jail.....

At Adriana's house, Luciana tells her sister of her husband's improper advances toward her earlier. Although angry over her husband's infidelity, Adriana still seems to love him. The sisters are interrupted by Dromio of Syracuse. After he reveals to Adriana that her husband has been arrested, she quickly gives the servant the necessary bail money and he runs off to deliver it.

However, instead of delivering the money to Antipholus of Ephesus, the servant runs into his own master, Antipholus of Syracuse, and gives him the money. Antipholus of Syracuse has no idea why his servant has so much money. As they try to sort it out, they are approached by the courtesan who has spied the gold chain that Antipholus of Syracuse is wearing. She claims that he visited her earlier and promised her the chain in exchange for a ring that she gave him. Having never seen the woman before, Antipholus of Syracuse denies this. She seductively tries to take him to her place to discuss the matter. Believing her to be a witch, the Syracusians flee. The prostitute resolves to tell Adriana that her husband is insane.

Meanwhile, Dromio of Ephesus returns to Antipholus of Ephesus (still being held in

custody by the officer) and gives him the rope he was sent to buy. No longer interested in having the rope, Antipholus is furious. Unaware that it was the other Dromio that he dispatched to get the money that would free him, he grabs the rope and beats the servant with it. The officer tries to restrain him but he continues beating the servant like a madman. This violence is witnessed by Adriana, who has entered with Luciana, the courtesan and Doctor Pinch. When Antipholus of Ephesus sees Adriana, he turns his anger on her. In a fit of rage, he accuses her of refusing to give him bail money and locking him out of his own house. Adriana and the others all agree that her husband must be insane, just as the prostitute has claimed. She gives the officer money for her husband's freedom and instructs Dr. Pinch to bind him and his servant, and take them to her house. After they are taken away, Adriana and the others are startled to see Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio of Syracuse enter. The Syracusians, convinced that the town is enchanted and full of witches, have appeared with their swords drawn to protect themselves. Assuming that her husband and his servant have broken free and now intend to do them harm, Adriana and the others run away.

ACT V

As the Syracusians prepare to leave the town, Angelo the goldsmith and the merchant Balthasar enter. Angelo notices that Antipholus of Syracuse is wearing the chain he made and demands payment for it. The Syracusian again refuses to pay for something he never ordered. Just as they are about to get into a fight over the matter, Adriana returns with the others. She asks the officer to arrest the Syracusians. They flee into an abbey for refuge. Shortly thereafter the

Abbess comes out of the abbey and demands to be told what is going on. She listens to Adriana's list of grievances against her husband, but refuses to turn the young man over to her as it would violate the rule of religious sanctuary. Before returning to the abbey, the Abbess advises Adriana to become the kind of loving wife that a husband would not want to flee from.

The Duke and Egeon enter, on their way to Egeon's execution. (Egeon has not been able to raise the thousand marks that would spare his life.) Adriana begs the Duke to force the Abbess to release the man she believes to be her husband. In the meantime, Adriana's real husband and servant have broken free from their bonds. The Ephesians now suddenly appear. Antipholus of Ephesus asks the Duke for justice against Adriana, whom he believes is the cause of all of his suffering that day. When Egeon sees Antipholus of Ephesus, he believes he has found his son from Syracuse, who will surely be able to pay the thousand marks to save his life. But both Antipholus of Ephesus and his servant Dromio of Ephesus deny having ever seen the old man before.

The Abbess, wishing to speak to the Duke, comes out of the abbey with Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio of Syracuse. Finally, everyone sees the two sets of identical twins together, and all of the confusion of the day is gradually clarified. Antipholus of Syracuse greets his father Egeon, who is pardoned by the Duke. The Abbess, whose name we now learn is Emilia, recognizes Egeon as her long-lost husband and the two Antipholuses as her sons. Antipholus of Ephesus and his wife Adriana are reconciled. Antipholus of Syracuse continues his flirtation with Luciana. The play ends with the two Dromios embracing as all celebrate their new-found happiness.

Multiple Choice Exercise

1. Egeon is sentenced to death for (a. murdering someone, b. spying, c. breaking a travel ban).
2. Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus are (a. identical twin brothers, b. cousins, c. father and son).
3. The Dromio twins are their (a. servants, b. friends, c. acquaintances).
4. When her husband does not come home, Adriana suspects that he is (a. drinking with buddies, b. seeing other women, c. gambling).
5. Antipholus of Ephesus has (a. a gold chain, b. earrings, c. a bracelet) made for his wife.
6. His twin brother, Antipholus of Syracuse, flirts with (a. Adriana, b. Adriana's sister, Luciana, c. a prostitute).
7. Dromio of Syracuse announces that a servant called Nell thinks she is his (a. sister, b. wife, c. mother).
8. Antipholus of Ephesus has dinner with a courtesan because (a. he was locked out of his house, b. he prefers her cooking, c. she invited him).
9. Antipholus of Ephesus is arrested for refusing to pay for a (a. chain, b. rope, c. crowbar).
10. Antipholus of Syracuse concludes that the town of Ephesus is (a. a safe place for visitors, b. ideal for financial investment, c. full of witchcraft and crazy people).
11. The Abbess turns out to be Egeon's (a. niece, b. sister, c. long lost wife and mother of his sons).

Answer Key:

1. c, 2. a, 3. a, 4. b, 5. a, 6. b, 7. b, 8. a, 9. a, 10. c, 11. c

Interpretative Exercise

1. Describe your favourite example of mistaken identity in the play and say why it is funny.
2. Write a short account of the strange things that happen to either Antipholus of Syracuse or his brother, Antipholus of Ephesus, in the space of just one day.