

The Comedy Of Errors

by William Shakespeare

Directed by James Dunn

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PHOTO BY GARY ISAACS

Study Guide

prepared by the Education Department of the Denver Center Theatre Company
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Comedy of Errors: Synopsis

**"Something familiar, Something peculiar,
Something for everyone, A comedy tonight!"**
~ Stephen Sondheim, "Comedy Tonight" from
A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

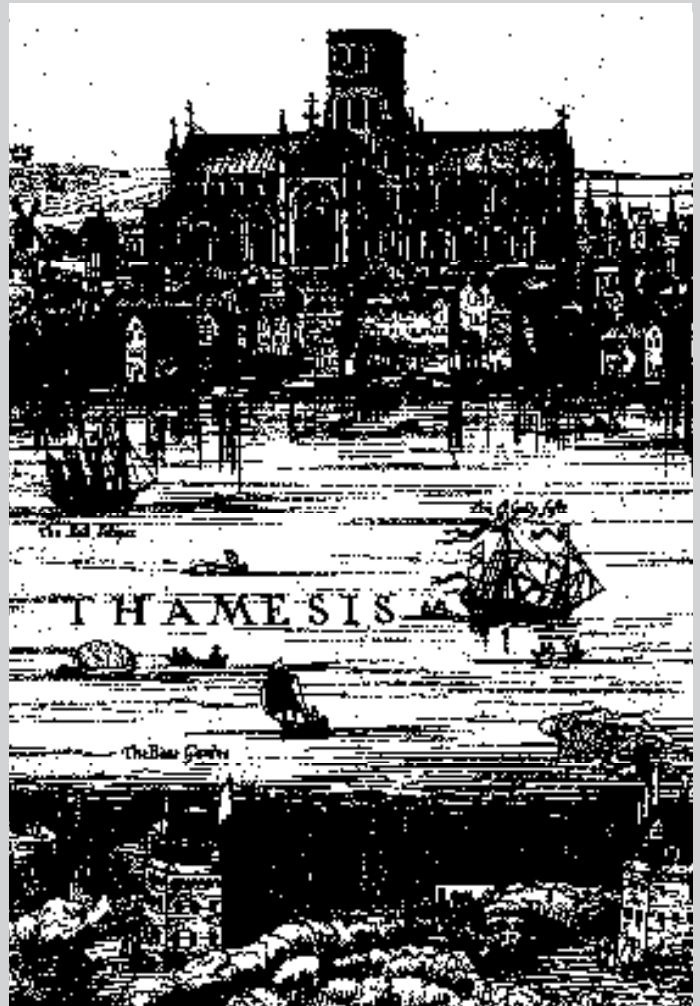
The *Comedy of Errors* is Shakespeare's farcical play based on mistaken identities between two sets of twins. Its humor lies almost wholly in the situations and incidents rather than in the characters. So cleverly are the incidents and persons tangled and untangled, and so rapidly does one surprise follow another that the audience has little time to question the action or raise objections.

The play opens with a penniless Aegeon of Syracuse under arrest and explaining why he is in Ephesus, a city that has a price on the head of all Syracuseans. He explains that several years earlier his pregnant wife accompanied him on a business trip; late at night at an inn, she gave birth to identical twin sons (the Antipholuses). At the same inconvenient hour and in another room of the inn a poor woman, likewise, bore identical twin sons (the Dromios) whom Aegeon purchased to serve as attendants to his own newborn sons. Then Aegeon and family boarded a ship and sailed for home.

The ship was caught in a violent storm and the crew abandoned it and its passengers. Lashing themselves and the children to the mast, Aegeon and his family managed to survive the night, only to be separated after they crashed on a rock the next morning. Two ships sailed to their rescue and in the confusion each set of identical twins was divided. Aegeon and his wife were also separated. Several years later, the Syracuse Antipholus with his companion, the Syracuse Dromio, left home to search for his long-lost twin. His search led him to Ephesus, a city known in Shakespeare's time for "roguery, licentiousness and magical practice—a city in which errors might result because of sorcery and witchcraft."

In the marketplace of Ephesus, Antipholus of Syracuse gives money to his Dromio to take back to the inn for safe-keeping. Walking alone to view the city, Antipholus meets the Ephesus Dromio, whom he assumes to be his own servant. When he questions the Ephesus Dromio about the money, the servant denies knowing anything about it. In turn, Dromio of Ephesus summons the Syracuse Antipholus to dinner, mistaking him for his own master. The confusion begins and each man thinks the other is raving mad or bewitched. One mistake compounds another and when Antipholus of Ephesus arrives at his own house with his servant, they are locked out as impostors.

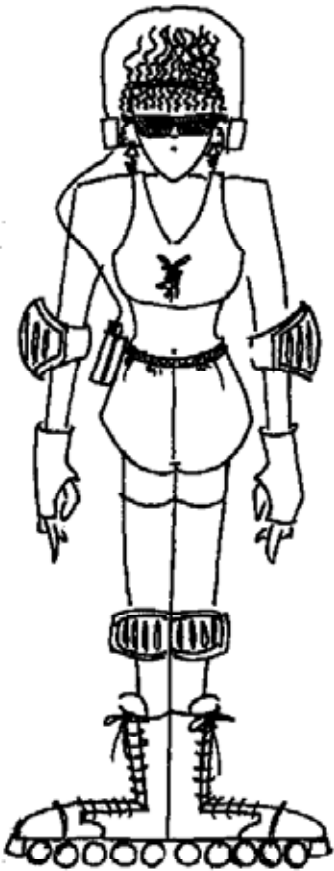
Bungles abound as merchants, goldsmiths, teachers, nuns and courtesans become involved in the eccentric and erratic events. The ribald romp resolves with a family reunited. Anything could and does happen—in this mad, mad, mad, mad world!



**"(Comedy) - proposes the correction of pretentiousness,
of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of
rawness and grossness yet to be found among us.
She is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher."
~ George Meredith. *The Egoist*, (1879) "Prelude."**

Venice West

“Welcome to Venice, California. Recently named one of the ‘funkiest towns in America’.”
Venice Beach WWW Home Page, America-Online

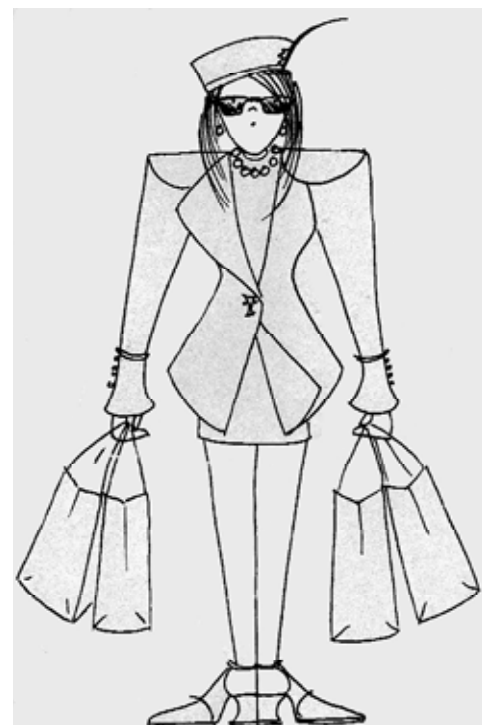
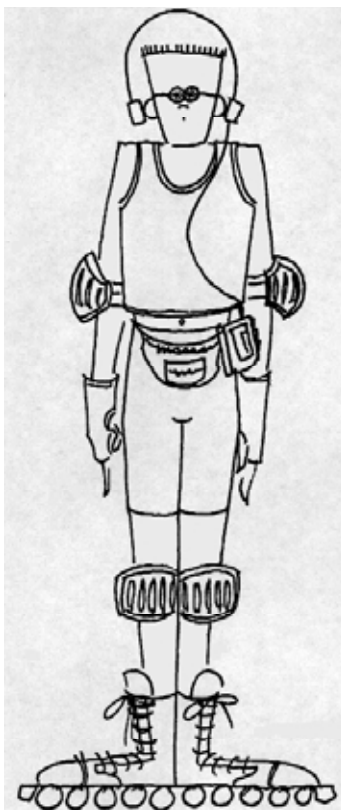


The Denver Center Theatre Company's *The Comedy of Errors* will take place in contemporary Venice Beach, California, which wasn't always called Venice. It was originally named "Rancho la Ballona" by Juan Alvarado, the Mexican Governor in 1839. It wasn't until 1900 that Abbot Kinney founded and named the area known as Venice. Mr. Kinney envisioned Venice as an environment that would foster a cultural renaissance in America, as well as a genteel retreat for aesthetically-minded Los Angeles businessmen. He capitalized on the similarities between the area of Venice, CA and the site of Venice, Italy and commissioned two architects to design a thoroughly equipped city with streets, hotels, residences and 16 miles of canals. Construction was started in October, 1904 and by June, 1905, the canals and lagoon were filled with water. The architectural style was Venetian Renaissance and to complete the effect, Mr. Kinney imported two dozen gondoliers from old Venice, complete with gondolas and repertoires of Italian songs. Despite Mr. Kinney's planning, Venice quickly deteriorated into the Coney Island of the West, attracting the itinerant and indigent, as well as the weird and the "wired." Though recent crackdowns may have chased some of the drug dealers and squatters away, there is still a fundamental tackiness to the Venice ocean front that only bulldozers will destroy completely.

The outward symbol of the boardwalk's economy is the mom-and-pop T-shirt stand; the outward signs of its culture include surfers, street performers, panhandlers, roller bladers, body-builders, esoteric healers, aspiring musicians, badly weathered murals, dirty-mouthed comedians and guitar-playing mystics on skates. It is inhabited by the constant volleyball game and the ever present sun-worshippers who have never heard of sunscreen. The healthy outdoor life co-exists with a kind of energetic gutter craziness that no one seems able to control. It is a Hollywood cartoon, a commedia, a vaudeville, a burlesque existing in real life.

"There's nothing wrong with Southern California that a rise in the ocean level wouldn't cure."
~ Ross MacDonald

Designed by David Kay Mickelsen



A Portrait of the Playwright

Courtesy of The Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger, Washington, DC

If *Entertainment Tonight* or *60 Minutes*, *People* or *Time* magazines had been as much a part of Elizabethan culture as they are of our own, students and admirers of Shakespeare could now reread or view old interviews with the most celebrated playwright in the English language. We would know precisely what he looked like and what he thought. Quite likely, we would know if his marriage was a success, if his children were delinquent, and if he had any skeletons in his family closet.

Of course, in the 16th and early 17th centuries, when William Shakespeare wrote, acted and managed a theatrical company, the members of the entertainment world as we now call it were not the celebrities that they are today. No one hastened to record their thoughts and activities for posterity. It probably never occurred to Shakespeare or his contemporaries that 400 years later millions of people who have read his plays and seen them produced on stage, film and television in virtually every country in the world would be curious about all the details of his life and work. Shelves of books and articles have been created by researchers seeking to satisfy that curiosity. The answers they provide are sketchy, the questions that they raise are fascinating.

Who was William Shakespeare and did he write the plays published in his name? Most of what we know about the man has been gleaned from legal documents, such as the recording of the purchase and sale of land, and from church records of significant familiar events, such as marriages and baptisms. Happily for researchers Shakespeare and his work are also mentioned in the writings of a number of his contemporaries (Ben Jonson, Francis Meres and Robert Greene, among others).

On April 26, 1564, the parish register of Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, England, records, the baptism of one William, son of John Shakespeare, a glove maker and tanner of hides, and Mary Arden, the daughter of a well-to-do landowner. Custom holds that the baby was born three days before on April 23, the feast of St. George, England's patron, who according to ancient legend, was a mighty warrior and slayer of dragons. The idea of England's greatest writer and perhaps her most famous historical figure being born on so important a feast has a certain romantic appeal, but alas, no absolute proof of the coincidence exists.

Often with those who admire Shakespeare, the wish, as Wordsworth says, is the father of the thought. No painting or likeness of Shakespeare made during his lifetime exists. However, in 1623, seven years after his death. Gheerart Janssen, a Dutch immigrant, created a bust of Shakespeare for his monument in Trinity Church.

Since the monument was made during his wife's lifetime and with the financial support of many of his friends, the figure was agreeably an acceptable likeness. In the same year, Martin Droeshour created an engraved portrait to appear in an edition of Shakespeare's plays. Although it is doubtful that Droeshour ever saw Shakespeare, he performed his work on a commission from Shakespeare's theatrical friends, so perhaps this is also an acceptable likeness.

As years passed other artists painted the playwright who began mysteriously to appear better looking and more heroic. In the famous Chandos portrait, Shakespeare sports a gold earring and an elegant white linen collar which stands out dramatically against his black tunic. Perhaps the artist felt that a genius of the theatre should look the part.



Whatever he looked like, Shakespeare grew up in the small but thriving market town of Stratford located on the shores of the Avon River. One of eight children, he probably attended the local grammar school, King's, a school of good reputation. Education was a serious business at King's. Pupils spent two four-hour sessions each day studying Latin literature, grammar and learning to do their sums. When well-grounded in Latin, the students moved on to Greek. Because there are no records, we have no way of knowing how many years Shakespeare spent at school. His good friend, the playwright Ben Jonson, says, perhaps in exaggeration, that Shakespeare had "little Latin and less Greek."

Perhaps he was forced to leave school for family reasons. His father, a successful businessman and a prominent participant in community affairs, suffered financial reverses when William was in his teens. Local records indicate that John Shakespeare was unable to pay certain taxes and debts. Although he was forced to sell some of his property, he retained the family residence and his business. In later years William would restore the family to prosperity. But before that occurred, his family obligations expanded rapidly.

Parish records indicate that, at only 18, William married Anne Hathaway, the 26-year-old daughter of a local farmer. In six months the couple became the parents of Susanna. Two years later, a set of twins, Judith and Hamnet, named for family friends, were born. At not quite 21 years of age, Shakespeare had three children and a wife to care for.

How did he manage? No one knows for sure because from the birth of the twins in February 1585 to the first reference of William Shakespeare, actor and playwright, in London in 1592, we have no record of his life. Some scholars speculate that he taught school;

others that he joined a touring company of actors that eventually took him to London. However he got there, by 1592, he had become an important man in London theatre. Records identify him as the “ordinary” or company playwright for the most successful theatre company in the city, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (so called because their patron was the Lord Chamberlain, an important official of the Queen’s household and immediate superior to the Master of the Revels, the person who arranged for and supervised all the entertainments presented at Court).

As the “ordinary” playwright, Shakespeare would have been expected to provide two or more new plays per year to the company and probably to help rewrite other plays which the company wished to perform. During his association with the group, Shakespeare wrote 37 plays and probably collaborated on a number of others. Equally at home writing comedies or tragedies, he created characters so compelling that ambitious actors throughout the ages have wanted to play them. Shakespeare understood actors as few playwrights have. Perhaps because his plays are so brilliant and so popular, we tend to forget that he was also an actor and a manager. Although tradition suggests that Shakespeare played the Ghost in *Hamlet* and perhaps other roles requiring dignity and gravity, we have little definite information about his acting abilities or about the parts he played, but we do know that his name appeared on the list of the company’s principal actors.

The Lord Chamberlain’s Company was owned and run by its shareholders: the company playwright and principal actors. After expenses, such as the purchase of plays from other playwrights and the salaries of the non-shareholders were met, all profits were divided among the shareholders according to the size of their share in the company. Shakespeare held a profitable 10% which, over the years, made him a wealthy man.

During his years in London, Shakespeare continued to regard Stratford-upon-Avon as his home, for there he made investments, purchased property, and probably maintained his wife and children. Although we do not have absolute evidence, Shakespeare probably did not bring his family to London to live. Why he did not has been the subject of much speculation. Many people have hypothesized that Shakespeare and his wife did not get on well. Admittedly, a hurried marriage to a pregnant older woman may not have been an ideal way to start married life. However, if Shakespeare chose to leave his family behind in Stratford-upon-Avon, there are other possible explanations.

London was neither the healthiest place to live nor the best location to raise children. Plague was so rampant in the city during the summer months that theatres were generally closed to prevent the spread of contagion. In addition, the theatre buildings tended to be located in dangerous and infamous neighborhoods where gambling, prostitution and drinking rivaled theatre going as major pastimes.

Further speculation about the state of Shakespeare’s marriage has been fueled by the playwright’s will. He left the bulk of his property to his daughter Susanna, and her husband, a prominent physician. Among his many bequests, only one involved his wife. To Anne he left “the second best bed” and its linen. Was the bequest an insult,

a slight, an indication of no regard? Perhaps not. “The second best bed” may well have had sentimental associations. In addition, it may not have been necessary to state specifically that his wife receive the major portion of his estate. The common legal custom in many English jurisdictions automatically assigned one-third of the husband’s estate to the wife.

Whatever his feelings about his wife, when Shakespeare retired, he returned to Stratford-Upon-Avon to live out his life. He and his wife took up residence in an impressive home where he was widely regarded as one of the leading citizens of the town. Although his son died at the age of 12, his daughters survived to marry and reside nearby. Unfortunately, Shakespeare had only a few years to enjoy his retirement, for on the 23rd of April 1616, his putative [commonly accepted] 52nd birthday, he died. Although we do not know the precise cause of this death, an unconfirmed report some years later by a Stratford clergyman suggests that Shakespeare and two writer friends had a “merry meeting” where they celebrated a bit too freely, for Shakespeare caught a fever and subsequently died.

Shakespeare was reported by friends to have been a man of good humor and pleasant disposition, so perhaps people like to think of him bidding farewell to life after a pleasant evening. However he died, Shakespeare is buried in the Trinity Church under an inscription whose authorship and content have caused considerable debate:

**Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here!
Bless’d be the man that spares these stones,
And curs’d be he that moves my bones.**

The Author of these lines is unknown, but they certainly lack the ring of Shakespeare’s verse. Whether deterred by the threat or by legal problems, no one has disturbed his final resting place. Seven years after his death a monument was placed in the Church honoring his memory, but the most important monument to his work was the *First Folio*, a collection of his plays published by his friends and fellow shareholders, Heminges and Condell.

No question was raised about the authenticity of Shakespeare’s authorship of these plays for over 150 years after the publication of the *First Folio*. Since then a number of people have argued strongly that a man of such limited education and personal experience could not possibly have written such masterpieces. As alternative authors they have suggested Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, and even Queen Elizabeth I. The theory for their authorship assumes that people of distinguished social position would be ashamed to be identified as playwrights in a period of history when plays were not considered literature and when commercial playwrights were low on the social scale.

Although there are many gaps in the information which we have about Shakespeare’s life, serious scholars have no doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon was indeed the author of the plays in the *First Folio*. Genius knows no social class or educational level. As Ben Jonson said of his friend, “He was not of an age, but for all time.”

Commentary

“This is a tilted world but must retain the sense of humanity in order to follow the story and allow for interest in the characters. The people need to still remain people, albeit easily recognizable types. There must be a basis of humanity in the production.” ~ DCTC Production Note.

The *Comedy of Errors* is one of Shakespeare's early works, and lacks many of the features we associate with his masterpieces. There is no brilliant dialogue, no very impressive characters, and its plot line is difficult to take seriously. In short, it most nearly resembles a farce, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “a dramatic work which has for its sole object to excite laughter.” The play is both short and funny, but Shakespeare does show his genius in his concern with what it is to be human and his depiction of the human condition.

For example, the plight of Aegeon is truly pitiable; his family has been separated and while in search of his lost wife and son, he has been arrested and must raise money for his release. Though in this production he resorts to chicanery and disguise, he is still a picture of human frailty. He might be compared to Corporal Max Klinger of “MASH” who resorts to women's wear, voodoo and letters of family misfortunes in order to return home to his loved ones in Toledo. In the chaos of war, Max represents a rationality of purpose, just as Aegeon's purpose is noble. In any case, the subplot of Aegeon is an early example of an important aspect of Shakespeare's art—“the formulation of more than one point of view, generating different and potentially conflicting responses from the audience.”²

Adriana is one of the earliest of Shakespeare's attractive heroines, but he developed her from a stereotype of the contentious, jealous shrew and she conforms to this image. But she is raised from a type to a real human being through her wit and her loyalty and love for her difficult husband. The playwright could thus present the reality of Elizabethan women whose personal strengths enabled them to survive the general subservience of

their gender. Adriana's modern counterparts might be the long-suffering, but sharp-witted wives of such sitcoms as “Dave's World” or “Home Improvement.” They are hardly subservient, but smart and feminine.

The matter of social identity was of concern to Shakespeare and he touched upon it in this early work. Antipholus of Syracuse is concerned for his lost selfhood when he regrets the loss of his family in a soliloquy lamenting his lack of contentment. Also, it is evident that the distress experienced by the four misidentified twins is caused by the loss of their sense of identity. As the people in their world fail to recognize them, they experience an uncomfortable uncertainty as to who they are. A modern comparison could be made to Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito, the unlikely twins of the movie *Twins*, who are searching for their family and who they really are.

The transforming power of love was always an important theme for Shakespeare; in several later plays, it is a major concern. In this play, it is almost overwhelmed by the farce, but we see it roughly sketched out in the marriage of Adriana and Antipholus of Ephesus and in the wooing of Luciana by Antipholus of Syracuse. And, of course, in the end, love triumphs in the familial reunion. It has the sentiment of “The Waltons” and “Father Knows Best” but with Shakespearean skill.

**“The duke, my husband, and my children both,
And you the calendars of their nativity,
Go to a gossip's feast, and joy with me;
After so long grief, such felicity.”**

~ Abbess, “The Comedy of Errors, Act II, Scene 4, p 76.

To Adapt or Not to Adapt?

~ Excerpts from the “Offbeat Bard” by Stephen Peithman, August, 1996

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The ‘offbeat’ to some (directors) meant unusual costuming or settings, while to others it meant rewriting or cutting the originals to meet the needs of their players and audiences. Still others adopted policies aimed at trying to get back to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Elizabethan stage.

The question of whether to perform Shakespeare's plays in their entirety or in edited versions seemed a question of degree.

The Shenandoah Shakespeare Express is a Virginia based touring

company that keeps cuts to a minimum. —Co-founder Ralph Cohen says, “We have found Shakespeare's plays can be performed in two hours through brisk pacing, no intermission and a continuous flow of dramatic action.”—Cincinnati's Fahrenheit Theatre Company takes the same approach, according to Artistic Director Jason Minadakin. “There are no lines or characters cut. It's just blindingly fast.”

However, there is an argument for adaptations. Cathy A. Brookshire, artistic director of Shakespeare Live! and PAVAN, a touring com-

pany in Virginia, has done a 30-minute version of *Macbeth* and a one hour *Romeo and Juliet*. —Poetic license was at its greatest at the Royal Fairy Tale Theatre of Clay, New York. “We attempt to bring Shakespeare to life by use of modern characterization and silly reference,” explains company founder Chrissy Clancy. She points to the use of the (rewritten) theme song from “Gilligan’s Island” in her production of *The Tempest*. “After all it was a shipwreck.”

Artistic director Dale Lyles of the Newnan, Georgia Community Theatre Company set the coast of Illyria in *Twelfth Night* as a summer resort. “Everyone was in Ocean Pacific pattern shorts and shirts, made of muslin and hand-painted with dye. —Later Malvolio wore hightop sneakers laced all the way up to his yellow knee socks, yellow shorts, yellow tank top, and a yellow clipboard. Audiences howled.” —For *The Comedy of Errors*, Lyles says, “The set was post-modern ultramarine blue, with a single chrome yellow trench running down the center. —Don’t ask me why. The entire cast wore gray sweat suits and each wore a different color makeup on faces and hands; the twins had identical colors, of course, —which made the confusion about identities even more credible.”

On the other hand, a number of companies eschew anything but the basics. “Our emphasis is on the actor, not on sets or costumes,” says Cathy A. Brookshire of Shakespeare Live! —We perform in 17th century English. The actors never leave the performance area, and we double and treble roles, with actors changing character right in front of the audience, an Elizabethan technique.” —In the spirit of the Elizabethan stage, Shenandoah Shakespeare Express lights the house as well as the stage. “An Elizabethan actor could see his audience,” explains Ralph Cohen. “When actors see an audience, they can engage with an audience. Furthermore, in a universally lit venue, a spectator cannot avoid seeing other spectators in addition to the performance. The dual awareness makes for drama that plays to both fictional and real spaces. Leaving an audience in the dark can literally obscure this dynamic.”

There is debate, too, about the true, original style of Shakespeare. “What most people today call ‘Shakespearean,’ the doublet-and-hose look, actually is a vague version of Renaissance,” says David Hammond, associate producing director of Chapel Hill, North Carolina’s PlayMakers Repertory Company. “And that look is actually a century or two before Shakespeare. —And the Bard’s characters didn’t speak “Elizabethan.” Instead they spoke iambic pentameter, a highly theatricalized language which no people anywhere ever spoke in the street. —Trying to recreate an ‘original’ look is difficult, because the plays were all shot through with anachronisms. Take *Hamlet*, for instance, the play was written in the late 16th or early 17th century and tells a story set in the 12th or 13th century, with people shooting off guns and cannons they couldn’t have had, drinking English wassail in Denmark and quoting the *Bible* and using the crucifix to ward off spirits in an uncivilized country that had not yet accepted Christianity. Yet the people were civilized enough to send their sons to school in Germany and on holiday to France.”

Hammond continues: “You try to find a look, a setting that works; a look that helps the play speak to its audience. —When some critics say you can’t shift Shakespeare to other locales and times, they are forgetting that is exactly what Shakespeare himself did.”

The Shakespearean Audience

“Fit audience find, though few.”
~ John Milton: *Paradise Lost*. VII-31

Audiences of Shakespeare’s day were both more primitive and more cultivated than they are today. They liked cruelty and bloodshed; one of the most popular sports of the time was bullbaiting, in which the spectators watched a tied bull fight bulldogs. Equally popular was bearbaiting, in which dogs fought with a bear, or men stood about and whipped a chained blind bear while he tried to attack them. These same persons also flocked to the public executions of traitors at Tower Hill in London or common criminals at Tyburn. Thus, they were not shocked when Gloucester’s eyes were put out in *King Lear* or Titus’ hand was cut off in *Titus Andronicus*.

Yet these same Elizabethans who loved blood sport also had a taste for music and poetry that has seldom been equaled. Their enthusiasm for poetry is shown in the amount of verse published and in the number of plays written. Barbershops entertained waiting customers with lutes (guitar-like instruments) on which the customers themselves joined in harmony. Entertainment after dinner was usually singing; songbooks were passed around and each person was supposed to be able to sight read his part and join in the singing. A person who could not sing or read music was thought to be poorly educated. Most of Shakespeare’s plays included music or instructions for it. The only exception is *The Comedy of Errors*.

The audiences at London’s Globe Theatre were usually boisterous before the performance. Men and women were brought informally together, so there was much socializing, flirting and even dancing. Pickpockets mingled with the peddlers and peasants, and occasionally, the hoi-polloi. There were riots, but only when the galleries of the Bear Garden collapsed on January 13, 1583 and when the Globe burned to the ground in 1613. Sometimes the gallants (gentlemen) mixed it up with the servants, but the groundlings (the lower class audience who stood on the dirt floor) policed themselves and demanded the culprits be ousted.

If Shakespeare’s audience was noisy before the play, silence prevailed when it began. The only complaints that occurred about disturbing sounds during performances refer to nutcracking; a habit akin to modern day coughing, whispering and paper rustling. Shakespeare’s audience gathered to enjoy an experience dearly bought with time and money. They wore their finest clothes and the criminal or quarrelsome were not tolerated!

However, if the play failed to please, it was O.K. to boo. No worse affliction could befall a playwright—then or now.

“All theories of what a good play is, or how a good play should be written are futile. A good play is a play which when acted upon the boards makes an audience interested and pleased. A play that fails on this is a bad play.”
~ Maurice Baring, 1874-1945. *Have You Anything to Declare?*

Understanding Shakespeare's Plays

The craft of the playwright

Courtesy of The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, DC

Were Shakespeare to wake today and find himself in an English class, he would be perplexed and probably highly frustrated by the carefully and clearly defined rules of modern grammar and amazed by the size of modern dictionaries and the frequency of their use, for he had lived in a time of much greater freedom in the use of language. The first dictionary of the English language did not appear until 1604, only 12 years before Shakespeare's death and many years after he had become a famous playwright. Of course grammar existed, but its rules were much more flexible than they are today. Despite these differences, Shakespeare's goal like any other writer's was always to convey ideas and emotions as effectively and as clearly as possible.

When potential theatregoers of today fret that they may not understand a Shakespearean play, they are responding to changes in the use and meaning of language. Change need not be such a frightening process if we realize that we cope with linguistic changes every day of our life. We have only to listen to the lyrics of current popular music and those of five and ten years ago to see how much slang and colloquial (informal) English change. Of course many changes have taken place since the days of English Renaissance theatre, but the core of the language is the same. By learning to recognize a few techniques which characterize Shakespeare's writing style, potential audience members can increase both their understanding and their enjoyment.

First of all, one must learn to listen for the general meaning of the words. Often when we hear or read a work which we do not immediately understand, we stop and attempt to puzzle out its meaning. Although this technique is feasible for a reader, it is disruptive for a listener. When we shut down our listening while we think about a single word, we miss much additional spoken material which would probably clarify the meaning of the unknown word and would certainly convey additional, necessary information about the characters and events of the play. In addition, other clues to the meaning of the dialogue come from the movement and facial expressions of the actors, so understanding is contingent on more than the comprehension of single words and phrases.

The study of rhetoric ("the art of using words effectively... especially, the art of persuading"³) was a common component of all formal education in Shakespeare's lifetime. Consequently, people tended to know and appreciate the importance and the beauty of language. Shakespeare was a master rhetorician, a wordsmith. If no word existed to express the sound or the idea he sought, he simply made one up. For compassion or sympathy, he had Lady Macbeth demand: "...Come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here." The image produced by his original word "unsex" conveyed his precise

meaning with startling impact.

As Shakespeare was concerned with both striking and precise imagery, he was also concerned with sound, with the music of words ("When to the session of sweet silent thought/I summon up remembrance of things past"). Words not only carry their own sound effects, they also communicate signals about the performance to the actors. The playwright's selection of words determines the speed with which they can be said. For example, Macbeth's famous speech, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow..." can not be spoken rapidly. The words force the actor to speak slowly, thoughtfully, a pace that is particularly appropriate to this moment of Macbeth's greatest despair. His wife has just died. He has sacrificed honor, decency and happiness to gain power and now that power is rapidly melting away.

Sometimes Shakespeare's hints to the actors take even more specific form. His dialogue often indicates an action or reaction on the character's part. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, for example, the Countess of Rossillion tells Helena, a young girl who lives in her household, that she would like to be a mother to her. The Countess' lines indicate Helena's physical response: "When I said 'a mother', / Methought you saw a serpent. What's in 'mother', /That you start at it."

As Shakespeare's lines provide clues for performance to the actors, they also provide clues for the imagination of the audience. Recognizing the physical limitation of staging, the playwright depended upon the audience to "piece out our imperfections with your thought." In this quote from the prologue to *Henry V* the character acknowledges to the audience the limitations of staging, but asks that they conjure up with their imaginations the two great armies and the battlefields which will be dramatized in the play.

Just as audiences are intimidated by Shakespeare's somewhat unfamiliar language, they are frightened by the thought of seeing a play which is also poetry, assuming that poetry is by definition strange and difficult to fathom. Actually Shakespeare's plays are a subtle mixture of prose and poetry. One scholar has estimated that the average play (they vary widely) is comprised of roughly 75% poetry and 25% prose.

Of that 75%, all but about ten percent is blank verse, the poetry form which most closely resembles the natural human speech pattern. Although blank verse—unrhymed lines of five iambic feet, with iambic designating an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable—is a structured form of composition, the audience is rarely conscious of the structure. Only a small per-

centage of the dialogue in plays calls attention in any self-conscious way (such as the use of end rhyme) to its poetic form.

The switches among blank verse, rhymed verse, and prose are important signals about the nature of the speakers and about the events which are taking place. In general, characters of lower socio-economic status, such as servants, soldiers, and country folk, speak prose, while members of the aristocracy express themselves in poetry. However, these distinctions are not universal. In moments of great stress characters may switch from one form to the other to signal their emotional upheaval.

The mood of one play may be more suitable for poetry and another for prose. Shakespeare's tragedies are written largely in poetry; the comedies make much greater use of prose than the plays of serious content. The prevailing principle with Shakespeare's writing is that communication of the idea or the emotion is more important than the form in which it is expressed. You can always recognize an amateur Shakespearean actor by his concentration on the mechanics of the poetry rather than the content.

If the intricacies of language constitute a small but surmountable barrier between actors and audience, other aspects of Shakespeare's dramatic technique remove barriers. Despite their size, Elizabethan theatres were remarkably intimate because their thrust stages jutted out into an audience which enclosed the actors on three sides. The audience's sense of involvement with events on stage was heightened by the use of the *soliloquy* (the character speaks his thoughts directly to the audience) and the *aside* (in conversation with others, the character expresses thoughts and reactions aloud to the audience which are accepted as being unheard by the other characters). This sharing of thoughts and information invites us to be a part of the theatrical event in a very overt way. Shakespeare was accustomed to an active, volatile audience and he capitalized on their existence to put his play across. He would be amazed and disturbed to think that audiences often view the prospect of attending his plays as some highly formal occasion.

been filled to capacity on holidays when shops were closed and

The Wild And Wonderful World of Shakespeare's Theatre

Courtesy of the Shakespeare Theatre at The Folger, Washington, DC

On the south bank of the Thames River in the city of London, a construction crew is at work building the new Globe Theatre on the same spot where the original was torn down in 1642. The reconstruction project is not as simple as it may sound, for no one knows just what the first Globe really looked like. Just as much information about Shakespeare's life has been lost, so too the plans for the theatre in which his plays enjoyed their earliest success no longer exist. Nevertheless, we can and do make educated guesses about the nature of this most famous of all theatre facilities.

We base our conceptions on a number of historical documents. Perhaps the best known of these are an early 17th century engraving of the city of London by a Dutch engraver, Jan Visscher, and the building contract for the Fortune Theatre, a major competitor of the Globe. Some features of the Fortune were supposedly patterned after the Globe, but in one major respect they differed. The Globe was round or octagonal in shape, and the Fortune, square.

Although we lack the exact dimensions of the Globe, we estimate that it could hold roughly 2,000-2,500 people, a large theatre indeed even in the 1980s, but distinctly so in a city whose population is estimated to have ranged between 150,000 and 200,000 in Shakespeare's day. Although the theatre would probably only have

people off work, much of the audience would still have been in remarkably close proximity both to the actors and to one another. First, the Thrust stage which was approximately 40 feet wide and 25 feet deep, reached well out into the audience. Second, most of the audience paid one penny, the least expensive entrance fee, which entitled them only to standing room in the pit, the area around the stage apron. "The groundlings," as the pit audience members were known, had to look up at the performance. For additional pennies, one could obtain seats in the three galleries built around the outside walls.

The stage was partially covered by a roofed structure called the huts. Actors dressed behind the stage in an area called the tiring house. There may have been an inner room or space at the back of the stage or perhaps only a curtain covering an opening, but there was at least one balcony level above the stage which was used in scenes such as the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Theatres like the Globe (large, open air theatres, with low admission charges) were called public theatres to contrast them with so-called private theatres (smaller, indoor, candlelit theatres with higher admission fees). In addition to the Globe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men) owned the private theatre, the Blackfriars. Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed in both playhouses.

weapon fired on stage caught the thatched roof of the theatre and the theatre burned to the ground. But the Globe was a profitable business, so it was rebuilt within the year. Although the Globe survived this crisis, neither it nor the many other public and private theatres could survive political upheaval which was approaching.

For years the Puritans had bitterly opposed theatre. Their opposition was grounded in their religious belief that the creation of characters and their impersonation were a form of deceit. Moreover, they believed that watching behavior on stage would lead people to copy it in their private lives. The arguments which they used against theatre were similar to arguments which are now lodged against rock music, television and film.

As Puritanism spread, particularly among the newly emerging middle class, the Puritans rose to important positions in local government. In fact, even during Shakespeare's years in London, the Puritans controlled the government of the city. Because of their strong opposition to theatre, the Globe and most other theatres were built across the Thames River outside the legal confines of the city. The Puritans opposition to things theatrical was abetted by the low repute in which actors were commonly held. Throughout the 16th century, regulations were promulgated to prevent theatrical performances. In a statute of 1572, actors were classed with vagabonds, thieves and ruffians. To gain legal access to any community, they were required to carry a writ signed by two magistrates. A few years later, the requirements were stiffened. In addition to the two magistrates, a member of the nobility, a patron, must also vouch for the performer.

Of course, local authorities had some grounds for their reservation. Up until 1576, plays and entertainments were generally staged on portable stages, usually set up in the yard of local inns. The architecture of the inns made them an ideal performing place. Two

wings extended out from the central segment of the inn forming a partially enclosed courtyard where guests could tie up their horses. Players would set up portable stages along one wall of the inn and the audience could gather 'round in the yard or those guests staying at the inn could look down on the action from the galleries.

The inns were a gathering place for travelers and locals interested in a drink and company. Naturally, the mix of alcohol, crowds and entertainment proved volatile. The presence of crowds drew petty criminals and prostitutes looking for opportunities for profit. They usually found them. All of these circumstances added to the headaches of authorities attempting to maintain law and order. Even though the actors might not be taking part in rowdy or criminal behavior, many people identified them as the proximate cause of the trouble.

Of course, the problem was exacerbated by frequent outbreaks of the plague which spread rapidly in congested areas. Given all these factors, the Puritans could find nothing about the theatre to recommend it. Had political conditions remained static, perhaps the uneasy coexistence of theatre (protected by the patronage of the aristocracy) and Puritanism would have continued. But theatre was not to enjoy that good fortune.

Shakespeare retired during the reign of James I, a strong-minded monarch who did not take kindly to Puritans or anyone else infringing on his authority. When he was succeeded by his son, Charles I, who was determinedly opposed to Puritanism and to encroachments of his prerogatives, England was on its way toward a civil war. Once the Puritans were victorious, they acted decisively against their old enemies. In 1642 all theatres were closed; many, including the Globe, were torn down. Not until the return of the monarch in 1660 would theatre again be legitimized.

Notes

1. Clark and Wright, p. 88
2. Boyce, p. 124

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Activity Package

ELEMENTARY

Twins:

Define: fraternal twins, identical twins.

Look up: famous people who have/had a twin. Do you know that John Elway has a twin sister?

Imagine you have a secret twin: If you had a twin you never met, draw a picture of what you think that twin would be like, where would you think the twin would live, how would that twin be like you and how different, what would that twin like, what would that twin dislike. If you had one hour to talk to your twin, what would you think important for that twin to know, i.e., friends, family, activities, likes, dislikes.

SECONDARY

Name some modern problems that are touched upon in this play.

Ex: homelesses, identity crisis, unfair and discriminating laws

Character Analysis:

I. Stock characters in Shakespeare's plays:

The young lovers

Jesters etc.

The shrew or nagging wife

Witty servants who know more than their masters

The melancholic character

The philanderer

The shipwrecked either physically or emotionally

In general, the characters of *The Comedy of Errors* are stock types and one can therefore say very little about their character development within the play. Identify the different stock types in *The Comedy of Errors*. Find their counterparts in sitcoms and movies today.

Would the same character types apply now? What stock types can you think of that do not appear in the plays? For example: computer nerd, the athletic female, the female executive, the house husband. Or did they exist in another guise (i.e. defined differently but the same inherent character)?

II. This play depends largely upon the structure of its action for its comic effect. How is it constructed?

1. What dramatic devices are used: shipwreck, identical twins, anything else?

III. What are the different attitudes towards marriage found in this play?

Positive:

Negative:

Does our culture look at the male and female roles differently now? How?

Exercise: What really defines what **you** feel about yourself? Use different colored pencils or crayons to write, draw, list, or apply things that appeal to you, textures that look and feel good, music that speaks to you, art, literature that expands the way you think, sports that energize you, activities that interest you. What grabs you enough that you might forego comfort in order to view it, hear it or participate in it? What challenges you? What engages your attention?

Work on this during a quiet time, because it requires time to think and listen to yourself and explore what you are.

Words, words, WORDS:

Material Courtesy of *Yo Words*. Washington: One Reel, 1994.

"Poetry, like bread, is for everyone."

~ Roque Dalton, Salvadoran poet.

"Form: a shape in which to pour your soul."

~ Judith Roche, Seattle poet.

Knowing how to play with poetic form gives you a structure, bones on which to hang your poem, like the rhythm and rhyme of a song.

"Poetry is the story of the psyche."

~ Sharon Doubiago, West Coast poet.

Psyche: a person's innermost creative spirit or soul.

1. **The Haiku:** You probably know the 5-7-5 syllable haiku form. Haiku records the essence of a moment in which nature becomes a metaphor for how the poet feels. Example.

**The piano man
is stingy at 3 am
his songs drop like plum.**

**To write a blues song
is to regiment riots
and pluck gems from graves.
Etheridge Knight, poet.**

A variety of poetry can pour into the haiku form: a mood, a person or an action.

a. Write three haiku. Try either the 5-7-5 syllable model or just three short lines. Try to get the feeling of the haiku (the essence of a moment).

"Poetry is knowledge, is salvation, power, abandonment.

An operation capable of changing the world,

poetic activity is revolutionary by nature,

a spiritual exercise, it is a means of interior liberation."

2. **The Tanka (Japanese for short poem):** A tanka works like a haiku, only with two lines added. Tanka are usually moody poems employing strong images, metaphor and personification. Modern writers often disregard the strict syllable count and just write five short lines. Example.

Memory

**They say memory
reflects one's necessities
in a shallow pool.**

**I think back on my childhood
and the surface is trembling.**

~ Islands, Robin Skelton, Canadian poet.

Useful elements:

Abandonment: a giving up to unrestrained exuberance.

Liberation: achievement of freedom.

Personification: giving human characteristics to non-human things, i.e. "The alarm screamed."

a. Now, you try the tanka form.

3. **The Sonnet:** A sonnet is a 14-line poem. The first ones we know about got started around the year 1200, supposedly by a poet called Giacomo de Lentino. The word sonnet comes from the Italian word *sonnetto*, which means a little sound or song. The sonnet does a lot in 14 short lines. It sets up a situation or a new thought that needs to be finished by the time you get to the end. Sonnets usually consist of two parts: the first eight lines, called an octave, and the second six lines, called a sestet. The octave can be divided into two four-line stanzas and the sestet can be divided into one four-line stanza and two lines to finish it up. These last two lines often are used to make the selling point or grand conclusion at the end.

It's true that sonnets can be written about almost any topic but take a guess what it usually is. If you guessed love and what to do about it, you got it.

In 1609 Thomas Thorpe, a London publisher, brought out a small volume described on the title page as *Shakespeare's Sonnets. Never before Imprinted.* There is no evidence that Shakespeare himself had anything to do with the publication of these poems; the number of misprints and the illogical punctuation indicate that the author did not see the book through the press.

Since the late 18th century, Shakespeare's sonnets have excited the interest of scholars and fascinated readers of poetry.

Sonnet 29

by William Shakespeare

**When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,**

**Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.**

a. Write your own sonnet, here are a few things for you to keep in mind:

- use the first eight lines (octave) to present the situation/world/love you want to write about;
- use the sestet (the next six lines) to tell how you feel about the subject and end with a grand slam conclusion

Variations:

Take the last couplet (two lines) or a line of any sonnet and use it as your first line.

Write a comic love sonnet.

Write a genuine love sonnet.

Write a love sonnet to and about yourself - how wonderful you are.

4. **Free-form poetry:** Most of poetry in our time is written free-form, or in free verse. At the beginning of the last century poets began breaking all the rules. They got rid of rhyme and they made up new rhythms. Most contemporary poetry is written in free verse, 'vers libre' [French]. The point is to make it a poem, not prose, without using rules. Poets are outlaws by nature and love to break rules. It may not rhyme but it still needs to sing. Use sounds that go together. Think about line breaks. Write on any subject. Go for the heart of the subject.

Part of Poem for "Magic" by Earvin "Magic" Johnson Donnell Reid and Richard Franklin

**take it to the hoop, "magic" johnson
take the ball dazzling down the open lane
herk & jerk & raise your six feet nine inch
frame into air sweating screams of your neon name
"magic" johnson, nicknamed "windex" way back
in high school.**

