

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Comedy of Errors*, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Lydia  
and Manfred Gorvy Garden Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, July to September  
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Directed by Phillip Breen. With Anthony Bunsee (Egeon), Guy Lewis (Antipholus of Syracuse), Jonathan Broadbent (Dromio of Syracuse), Rowan Polonski (Antipholus of Ephesus), Greg Haiste (Dromio of Ephesus), Hedydd Dylan (Adriana), Avita Jay (Luciana), Sarah Seggari (Luce), Zoe Lambert (Aemilia), Nicholas Prasad (Solinus), Riad Richie (First Merchant), William Grint (Second Merchant), Dyfrig Morris (Bodyguard), Angelo (Baker Musaka), Patrick Osborne (Balthasar), Toyin Adeyun-Alase (Courtesan), and Alfred Clay (Doctor Pinch).

Although I have seen *The Comedy of Errors* many times before, this charming, thoughtful production showed me things I did not know about the play and reminded me how profoundly moving it can be. The programme note observes that the theme of reunion is particularly appropriate for the RSC's first live staging since the COVID-19 pandemic separated families and friends and made us all keep two metres away from each other, and the production heightens our awareness of what it means to live socially by introducing onstage audiences for two crucial scenes. When her husband does not come home Adriana, accompanied by Luciana, goes to look for him, and finds Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse in a restaurant where Antipholus has just ordered a meal, and where diners at adjacent tables are already eating. The appalled fascination of those other diners creates comedy, but also induces an acute awareness that the characters are not only suffering private traumas but have public positions to keep up (a waiter with a toupée also offers a splendid visual context for all the jokes about baldness and enables a pun on 'to pay'). The sense of social pressure returns when Antipholus of Ephesus's 'business in the town' is inventively staged as a civic ceremony in which he needs to cut a giant ribbon,

with cameraman and journalists who are there to cover the opening but are soon diverted by the juicy scandal of his apparent unpaid debt to a goldsmith. The ribbon and the huge scissors provided to cut it also speak to the play's repeated references to tying people up, whether to restrain them or to bind them to something safe, and this motif is suggestively emphasised when the binding of Antipholus and Dromio is accompanied by the same sound of wind and waves as formed the backdrop to Egeon's opening narration.

There are other creative touches too. The real-life pregnancy of Hedydd Dylan's Adriana not only gives point to the closing scene's reference to 'such nativity' but becomes a prompt for the presence of gift bags such as might be brought to a baby shower; this underscores the production's emphasis on Ephesus as a market and a centre of commodity culture, which is stressed in other scenes where characters carry shopping bags branded with real brand names (including the RSC) and when the word 'Capitalism' is sung – the only actual word (as opposed to syllable/pure sound) sung during the whole production by the four onstage singers, who were highly mobile and involved in action and yet also remote from it in something of the manner of a Greek chorus. The presence of the singers formed part of a complex pattern of use of microphones and megaphones; all the cast were mic'd, which is unusual for the RSC but necessary to counter noise seeping through from the street and the river, but there were points at which some characters spoke directly into an onstage microphone, perhaps in a desperate attempt to make their particular version of reality sound the loudest. In a further addition to this pattern, William Grint's Second Merchant, a bling-bedecked gangster in a fur coat, is Deaf, so his terrifying henchman translates everything he says, deploying a heavy Eastern European accent which chimes with the multiculturalism of this Ephesus and also allows for the usual comic discrepancy between length of original utterance and length of translation. Finally, this is a world in which visual as well as aural elements are unstable, because the cube design on the floor and walls oscillated between appearing flat and three-dimensional.

After sixteen months with no live theatre at all, almost any production would have been welcome, but one of this calibre is particularly welcome. I cried when I took my seat for the sheer pleasure of being in a theatre again, and I cried at the end because the production reminded me of what is missed when you cannot go out.