

2008 Study Guide for *The Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Look up the origins of the word error. What is the original meaning of this word? Considering the definitions of the word error, what do you expect from a play called *The Comedy of Errors*? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.brainyquote.com/words/er/error161402.html>
2. Shakespeare observes the three classical unities in *The Comedy of Errors*. What are the three unities? What are the benefits of confining the play within the three unities? What might be lost through this kind of restriction? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Unities>
3. The 2008 OSF production of *The Comedy of Errors* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's play by director Penny Metropulos with music by Sterling Tinsley. Shakespeare's play is an adaptation of an ancient Roman play by Plautus, *The Menaechmi* or *The Twin Brothers*. Read a synopsis of *The Menaechmi*. Read *The Comedy of Errors* or a synopsis of the play. How are these two plays similar? Different? Why has this story lasted for thousands of years? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.theatredatabase.com/ancient/menaechmi.html>
<http://pages.pomona.edu/~cmc24747/sources/menaechmi.htm>
<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/errors/>
4. What are the elements of Roman comedy? What source material did Plautus adapt for his plays? In what way was music incorporated into Roman comedy? How does Roman comedy rely on stock characters, comic business, physicality and improvisation? How are these elements still used in comedy today, including plays, movies and sitcoms? These and other websites provide information:
<http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/dunkle/comedy/romancom.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_ancient_Rome

5. In 1938 *The Comedy of Errors* was adapted into a musical called *The Boys from Syracuse* by Rodgers and Hart. Read a synopsis of the musical. In what ways is it similar to Shakespeare's play? Plautus' play? In what ways is it different? What might the addition of music add to the story? What about this story lends itself to the addition of music? This and other websites provide information:
http://www.guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows_b/boys_from_syracuse.htm

6. Director Penny Metropulos has set the OSF production of *The Comedy of Errors* in the American Wild West of the late 1800s. What myths, legends and stories are associated with this period in America's history? What character types (or stock characters) associated with this period of history might you expect to see in a comedy set in this time period? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.unpopulartruth.com/2009/04/myths-of-old-west.html>
<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-outlawsandlegends.html>
<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/>

7. Tell the story of the American Wild West from the perspective of the Chinese immigrants. From the perspective of African Americans. Native Americans. Mexicans who became Mexican Americans after the Mexican-American War. What opportunities were available for each group of people? What hardships were faced by each? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/historyarchaeology/Where_East_Met_Wild_West.html
<http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Chinese.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Old_West
<http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4807>
<http://www.asu.edu/lib/archives/website/index.htm>

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

- <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
- <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>
- <http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>
- <http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>
- <http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to the definitions of the word error. How is this a play about wandering? How is this a play about mistakes?
2. Shakespeare observes the three classical unities in *The Comedy of Errors*. How is each expressed in the play? What positive elements does his adherence to the unities contribute to the play? How does it limit the play's possibilities?
3. Refer to your information about the elements of Roman comedy. What elements of Roman comedy were utilized in the production? How did the play incorporate stock characters, comic business, physicality and improvisation?
4. *The Menaechmi* by Plautus, Shakespeare's source for *The Comedy of Errors*, contains only one set of twins. Shakespeare added a second set of twins. How does this complicate the plot?
5. Compare the OSF adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* to Shakespeare's adaptation. Compare it to Plautus' adaptation, *The Menaechmi*. Compare it to the Rodgers and Hart adaptation, *The Boys from Syracuse*. What elements from each story appear in the OSF adaptation? What elements of the OSF adaptation are new or changed from the previous versions? What did the elements borrowed from each story add to this new version of the story? What did the new or changed elements add? What did the music created for this version add? Write your own adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*. What elements would you keep from each version? What elements would you add or change?
6. Director Penny Metropulos set the 2008 OSF production of *The Comedy of Errors* in the American Wild West. In what ways is this an appropriate setting for this story? How did it influence the themes in the play? What other settings and time periods might appropriate for the telling of this story?

7. Refer to your information about the multicultural nature of the American Wild West. How does the cast of the 2008 OSF production reflect the multiculturalism that was part of the American Wild West? What does the inclusion of Spanish and Mandarin Chinese add to the production?
8. Egeon's encounter with Duke upon arriving in town sets up the possibility that the play could be serious and have a tragic ending. How does this threat of tragedy impact the humor of the play? What other serious situations are contained in the play? Write a version of the play as a serious drama.
9. Read through the play and jot down all the references to trading and money. What do these tell you about the world and the values of the play? How are these embodied in the production? Referring to the text, jot down all the references to madness. What do these tell you about the world and the attitudes of the characters of the play? How are these embodied in the production?
10. Find references in the play to enchantment, magic, the supernatural, witches and sorcerers. What events are blamed on enchantment? How is the characters' willingness to believe in magical explanations responsible for some of the events that happen?
11. One theme in the play is bondage vs. freedom. Find references to being bound in the play. Who is literally bound? Who is bound to serve another? Who is bound by the law? By marriage? By their gender? By their socio-economic status? Who achieves freedom by the end of the play?
12. Another theme in the play is identity. Whose identity is questioned? Whose identity is mistaken? Who doubts their own identity? How are identities restored at the end of the play?
13. Describe the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse. Describe the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus. How are the two servant-master relationships similar? How are they different? What do these relationships reveal about the individuals?

14. Referring to the text, jot down your impressions of Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus. Write down quotations that reveal something about each of them. What are the differences in life circumstances of each? What are the differences in the emotional life of each? On whom does each depend? What do the brothers have in common? How does the production emphasize the sameness and differences? Do the same exercise for the Dromio brothers.
15. Make a list of the traits or characteristics of clowns or fools in literature, television and film. Which apply to the Dromios? Which do not apply?
16. Each of the women in the play has a unique role within a society that offers few choices for women. What role does Adriana have? Luciana? Emma (or Aemilia)? Nell?
17. What are Luciana's views on marriage? To what extent are they influenced by her lack of experience? What are Adriana's views on marriage? To what extent are they influenced by her experience of being married to Antipholus of Ephesus? To what extent do you agree and disagree with each? What are Emma's (or Emilia's) views on marriage? What experiences have influenced Emma's views on marriage?
18. Tell the story of *The Comedy of Errors* from the point of view of Adriana, Luciana, Nell, each of the Dromios, each of the Antipholus, Jose Luis, Duke, Egeon, Emma, Colonel and Li Wei.
19. Luciana accuses her sister of jealousy. If you are also seeing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and/or *Othello*, compare the jealousy of characters in those plays to Adriana's. What are the similarities between these jealous characters? What are the differences?

Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department created the "2008 Study Guide for *The Comedy of Errors*." These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

© Oregon Shakespeare Festival. No part of the "2008 Study Guide for *The Comedy of Errors*" may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, for professional or commercial purposes without permission in writing from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department.