



Raucous The Comedy of Errors Rocks Shakespeare Orange County Amphitheatre

by Jim Volz. Written on 2011-08-21. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: The Comedy of Errors (2011, Shakespeare Orange County, USA).

IT'S A MAD MARDI GRAS PARTY WITH BOISTEROUS BOUTS OF MISTAKEN IDENTITIES IN GARDEN Grove, California as director Alyssa Bradac has crafted a clever, fast-paced *The Comedy of Errors* that prompted audience members to shout and clap starting with the opening scene. Shakespeare's genius take-off on Plautus' *The Menaechmi* (or The Twin Brothers) includes another set of twins (conveniently lower class so that they can be cast as servants to the more well-healed twin brothers) and the play's simplicity is a nice break from the Bard's more complex comedies (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Pericles*, *Love's Labour's Lost* or even *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

It's a pleasantly breezy night in Orange County with a pandemonium of bright green wild parrots threatening to drown out the pre-show Shakespeare lecture and zany pre-show entertainment in the park just outside the theatre that plays host to picnickers, wine connoisseurs and Frisbee throwing theatre patrons checking out this much heralded production. Out strolls the woeful Egeon (skillfully crafted by Gil Gonzalez) who regales all who will listen with the sunken ship tale of lost sons and separated brothers while bringing both the empathetic Duke of Ephesus (riotously rendered by Brian Clark) and the audience into the heart of the play.

What follows is Alyssa Bradac's directing triumph as she crafts a comedy as strong as any this reviewer has seen in this summer's travels up and down the California and Oregon coast to some of America's best Shakespeare Festivals. True of all of Shakespeare's classics, The Comedy of Errors lives or dies on the evenness and cleverness of the casting from top to bottom. Director Bradac discovers, coaches and showcases a wealth of talented non-Equity actors with coast-to-coast training and credits and anchors them with two veteran Equity actors (Gil Gonzalez and Evelyn Carol Case) in the older roles of Egeon (father to the Antipholi) and Aemilia, Abbess and Mother to the Antipholi).

Two real acting finds are both University of California, Irvine MFA acting students—Amber Starr Friendly as Adriana (wife to Antipholus) and Anika Habermas-Scher as Dromio of Syracuse. Ms. Friendly is a passionate, always in-the-moment, striking (literally and figuratively) Adriana who drives the topsy-turvy action forward while providing important clarity to each scene. Ms. Habermas-Scher is hilarious in her reactions and physically skilled in her commedia-esque actions and helps bridge the otherwise easily confusing transitions from scene-to-scene and Antipholus-to-Antipholus.

As twin brothers, Shaun Anthony and Jeremy Schaeg are marvelous straight men to the Dromio's silliness and endure the constant mistaken identity confusions with wives, courtesans, and bill collectors with panache. Joshua Snyder as Dromio of Ephesus has a nice sense of exaggerated comic timing and a slick handle on the physical humor required for the much-maligned servant. Stephanie Robinson (Luciana), Nicole Javier (Angela, the Goldsmith), Michael Drace Fountain (Balthazar), Malia Wright (Courtesan), Garrett Schweighauser (Merchant), Jessy Bremner (Luce), Chelsea Pearson (Sailor/Nun) and Paige Fodor (Officer/Jailor) all have their comic moments in the brisk action of the play.

Katie Wilson's costume design adds a much-needed explosion of color and texture to Michael D. Fountain's well-designed, multi-functional set and William Georges does an excellent job of lighting the tumbling, pratfalling and brawling actors even when their adventures take them down into the massive pit and up into the audience. Kyle M. Wilson's property work is nicely handled and the original music by William and Jennifer Georges helped set moods and establish a through-line in regards to the director's zany concept for this early, sometimes raw Shakespearean comedy. Stage Manager Kayla Hansen & crew deserve kudos for an impeccably called closing night performance that stood up to invading airplanes, the aforementioned wacky parrots, and the intermittent chorus of car alarms that are just part of the expected California charm during a night alfresco with the Bard.

Jim Volz is an international arts consultant, author, producer, and professor based in Orange County at California State University, Fullerton. He served as a longtime critic/arts columnist for New York's Back Stage and founding editor of the Shakespeare Theatre Association's international magazine, Quarto. He has produced over 100 professional productions, consulted for over 100 arts institutions and published more than 100 articles on management, arts criticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in American Theatre, Oxford University Press's Theatre Research International, Hollywood's Drama-Logue and myriad other articles for national and international publications. He is a Ph.D. graduate from the University of Colorado, Boulder. jvolz@fullerton.edu