

## Programs and Audience Reception of *The Comedy of Errors* — a case study —

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Programs sold at theatre's are both source of information and advertisements. The contents of the program has been steadily growing from mere information of casts and synopsis to short academic information concerning the play written by Shakespearean and other English Literary scholars, writers, novelists, etc. The existence of such contents in the programs may be connected with the fact that Shakespeare has been dropped from A Level exams<sup>i</sup>. This clearly suggests that the number of students who have studied Shakespeare is decreasing, and it will change the pattern or type of audience coming to the theatre in the near future. It means that there is a possibility of audience who has only the basic knowledge about Shakespearean plays.

Enjoying a play does not require any sophisticated technique : yet by understanding the rules of a play the audience will have a better understanding of the performance, or a minimum possibility of misunderstanding the concept or the theme of the play. Shakespeare's play could be considered one of the most performed classical plays in London. Unlike modern plays that shares social morals of the audience, classical play of any period will always carry different moral or rules of society due to its first performance date or publication date. Easiest way to understand such morals or rules of society is to study such rules systematically at school or other academic institutions. Such places provide the basic information about reading or watching any classical play including Shakespeare. Reading Shakespeare was and is still part of the education system. However with recent changes, Shakespeare not being a compulsory subject in A Level means the number of people sharing knowledge or information about Shakespeare clearly decreases : although this suggests that Shakespeare is no longer a shared knowledge therefore directors and actors cannot rely on the basic knowledge shared by the previous generation of audiences. This brought changes in the programs sold at theatres. The inserts of "specially commissioned articles"<sup>ii</sup> by scholars started to appear in the programs.

Short academic articles in the programs will without doubt help the audience to see the most popular or well received interpretation of the play intended by the director of the production.

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<sup>i</sup> *Shakespeare for all ages and stages*, [https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/\\_arc\\_SOP/Page13/DCSF-00470-2008](https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/_arc_SOP/Page13/DCSF-00470-2008), last accessed 27 Oct 2012

<sup>ii</sup> Free cast list of *The Comedy of Errors*

However interpretation of the play may have variations. It may be difficult for the audience to understand or pick up the variations or subtle nuances of each actor, director or production. And leaving everything to the audience's perception may be depending too much on the audience or it could be taken as negligence from the performer's side.

The program of *Comedy of Errors* performed at the Olivier Theatre, from 29th November 2011 to 1st April 2012, includes "Shakespeare & Cities" by Jonathan Bate, Provost of Worcester College, and "The Madding Metropolis" by Adrian Poole, Professor of English Literature at the University of Cambridge. Like other programs sold at London theatres performing classical plays the purpose of them was to sort out the questions and provide the answers to what the audience may feel. Bate's paper dealing with the source and nature of the play of "errors" and "money" and Poole's paper dealing with the anonymity and characteristic of a metropolis in Shakespeare's time.

The credibility and usage of these articles by the audience may be seen through the reviews. It may be nearly impossible to find out about the reaction of every audience. Reviewer's reactions could be found on the website with which they have provided the article. If the reaction of the reviewers have something in common with the program's papers and articles it may be possible to assume that the purpose of the program as navigator and source of information to the audience be proven.

The first article in the program "Shakespeare & Cities" by Jonathan Bate explains the genre, the background, and the modern nature of the classical play. The article starts with the explanation of "the classical devices of comedy : mistaken identities, people getting the wrong end of the stick, clowns getting slapped about the head, politically incorrect jokes about fat people and sexy woman, a vertiginous succession of characters coming in and out of doors." All the characteristics mentioned here are present in *Comedy of Errors*. The confusion caused by the Antipholus twin, and their servant, Dromio twins, to do their business and being mistaken by the people in Ephesus. The confusion is like a ripple in a lake it becomes larger and larger involving many characters none of them realising the possibility of twins and none of the characters actually meeting both Antipholus twins and Dromio twins in the same scene until the end of the play. Compared to reality the setting of the play does not create the chance of the twin characters meeting each other. On the other hand characters other than the twins seems to have more chance of meeting the different pair of twins in a simultaneous sequence allows the comedy to build up, although the audience knows that such chance encounter and possibility of twins not being detected is impossible but they would enjoy the situation as part of a mock-reality created by the playwright or a part of a comic sketch.

Then the article goes on to explain the plot style of comedy and tragedy.

The dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy derive from ancient Greece and

Rome. This title (*Comedy of Errors*), then is a way of saying to the audience : “this play is a comoedia, written according to the classical conventions.” So it is that the drama obeys the ancient rule of the “unities” : unity of action (a single plot line, not a variety of sub-plots), unity of place (the sole location is Ephesus), and unity of time (the action is completed within a single day).

This explains to the audience the very classical and stylistic form of the play *Comedy of Errors*. Thus letting the audience know that it is different from modern day comedy and also by adding the information of the play being one of the earliest comedy of Shakespeare : it further emphasises the plot following the classical style of comedy and also that this was one of the few plays that Shakespeare has written according to its rule, especially of the rule of unities. Then the nature and the acceptance of the play during the time of Shakespeare are explained : The form of comedy being well known among the “educated members” and thus being mentioned as “like to Plautus his *Menaechmus*” and the difference in audience reaction is explained. “To the classically trained, a work was good not because it was original but because it resembled an admired classical exemplar, which in the case of comedy meant the comedy by Plautus about “The Menaechmus Twins””. This is also a necessary information for modern audience who considers the originality being the most important characteristic to further understand the background surrounding the creative mode during Shakespeare’s era. *The Comedy of Errors* was a play fitted into the classical style but it was also fitted into the trend in Shakespeare’s time as Thomas Heywood, Shakespeare’s contemporary, has written in *Apology for Actors* (1612) that “Comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace ; tragedies begin in calm, and end in tempest.” As the synopsis of the *The Comedy of Errors* suggest it “begins with the threatened execution, as this one does, you can have little doubt that there will be a happy reversal and a quasi-magical escape from catastrophe before the evening is over” which fits into the trend.

*The Comedy of Errors* is one of few plays that Shakespeare followed the trend of “city-comedy”, a trend already created by Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton. However Shakespeare in some respect did not follow all the trends in the play written among his contemporaries. Most of Shakespeare’s comedies involve a pastoral world in one way or another. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As you Like It* takes place in a wood or a forest, *Love’s Labour Lost* takes place in a royal hunting park, although *Twelfth Night* does not actually takes place in a forest or woods but most of its settings are in a large mansion with gardens. *Comedy of Errors* is an exception in that sense that although it does not take place in actual London but Ephesus: although the actual atmosphere have the feel of “modern London”. They resemble “a London street, a London marketplace” with a touch of the Mediterranean atmosphere to emphasise the setting of Ephesus. The play being one of the few that takes place in the city does not mean that Shakespeare was not good at creating plays based in the city. It could be

considered that he preferred writing plays from his origin, the pastoral world of Stratford-upon-Avon, and that image of world he created was shared by audiences. Shakespeare created his career as a playwright in the London theatre world therefore it is quite clear that he was well accustomed to the urban world of London “peopled by the knaves, bawds, businessmen, parasites, courtesans, lecherous old men and amorous young men” so it was by choice that he chose his setting in the pastoral world, and not by lack of talent as the play *Comedy of Errors* can be of such proof.

Lastly Bate points out the similarity of the play’s setting with the modern world :

Its starting point is a restriction on free trade with a financial or legal penalty attached: we learn that due to a law forbidding the presence of Syracusan merchants in Ephesus, the old Syracusan trader Egeon faces execution when he is discovered in the city. He can only escape by paying a fine of a thousand marks. The implicit critique of trade protectionism is in its way an anticipation of that fundamental driver of modernity and globalization, the triumph of free trade.

This lets the audience know that the plot of *Comedy of Errors* is in many ways both classic and modern. Classic that it is written by Shakespeare, the Canon of English Literature, and the play itself is written more than 400 years ago. Modern in its sense that the problems mentioned in the play are the same problems that people are still struggling with. And especially in this the problem is an economical problem : for example until until recently Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* was one of the plays that were seldom performed due to the fact that it was rather difficult to find a common ground with modern society. However in 2012 Nicholas Hytner’s new production of *Timon of Athens* at London’s National Theatre received an enormously positive review with its setting being moved to London under the financial crisis. In *The Guardian*<sup>iii</sup> the production is described as follows :

Hytner has staged *Timon* not just as an episode in the financial crisis : this is a meltdown of the British establishment played out in full view of the Occupy camp ; *Timon*’s women strut and preen in couture that Kate and Pippa might wear ; his protégé, Ventidius, comes out with the same posh rubbish you might hear from gilded youth in Chelsea ; *Timon* himself is the liberal aesthete-millionaire, dispensing patronage to the arts and short shrift to his accountants. Until things fall apart.

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<sup>iii</sup> Mason, Paul, *The Guardian*, 20 Jul 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/jul/20/timon-of-athens-paul-mason>, last accessed 27 Oct 2012

This image crossover with the “Occupy camp” that emerged in both Wall Street and the City immediately reaches into the audience’s heart. Such image frequently broadcasted on TV news or seen from photographs in the newspapers the idea of the play seemed to be more familiar than the audience actually think. This in a way takes away the inhibition or an emotional barrier that the play was written 400 years ago and gives the audience of watching a TV drama based on a modern day problem. With such feeling their acceptance of the play will change. Audience knows the play is 400 years old and knows that the moral standard was different from modern society yet the reaction they have towards a distant time period or an idea that they cannot understand is something that they cannot control : Yet similar economic problems that people actually know and feel every day takes away such distances, like *Timon of Athens* using the “Occupy camp”, and concentrates on the core content of the play. In Bate’s article it is mentioned as :

Throughout the play, we see that money makes the city go around. On arrival in Ephesus, the first thing that Antipholus of Syracuse has to do is sort out his currency : he sends his slave Dromio to deposit some money at the inn called The Cantaur.

Anyone who has travelled abroad to a country with different currency knows that the first thing they have to do is to exchange their money into local currency, something that has not changed for centuries. And money is a factor that people in any time period may find similarities with their own lives.

Money gets you into trouble — though it can get you out of it — with the law, with your partner and with your family. Money for fines, money for bail, money for goods, money for sex, money exchanged by mistake, money bringing bad fortune and good: that is the story of *The Comedy of Errors*, that is Shakespeare’s take on life in the city.

The similarity with modern economy and city life as mentioned above is sure to take away the differences that the audience may feel with *The Comedy of Errors*. And such explanation let the audience understand why they were able not to feel the barrier or a difference in moral standard that they were expected to encounter.

The next article by Adrian Poole starts his discussion of the “Metropolis” where Jonathan Bate’s article ended “that is Shakespeare’s take on life in the city”. London in Shakespeare’s time started to become the modern city “where clocks and watches become essential aids to staying afloat : keeping the promises, for love and for money, to be at particular points at precise

instants.” Another factor of the “Metropolis” is described as

The city is the place in which the exceptional gets intensified and exaggerated — habits, styles, experiences — a place of maximum stimulation, a place where you can go collectively crazy, at carnival time for example. Or spill over the top, into violent insurrection.

This suggests the excess of comedy within the play that may seem exaggerated yet with the hint of reality. The misconception of the twin and the subsequent confusion caused by the people, including the twin themselves, who do not know the existence or do not consider the possibility of the man or the slave in front of them may be a twin or a doppelganger of the person he or she knows. With the exaggeration and the problem starting to grow out of hand also may be the characteristic of a metropolis where everything is with full of stimulant.

No wonder the city inspires such fears and desires. They are often embodied in festivals where normality is turned upside down, in the ancient Roman rites of Saturnalia and Bacchanalia, and before them, in Athens, of the Dionysia. One of the greatest of Greek tragedies explores the double aspect of such Dionysial or Bacchic release. Euripides shows us Dionysus himself descending on the city of Thebes to punish it for refusing to honour him. The migrant god from the magical East is returning home with blessings and bane, the power of fertility but also of a violence that will tear the family and the city apart.

This characteristic of the city seemed to infuse the madness of the play caused by the twin who does not know the existence of the other. This madness is increased with the confusion of the twins. Plot of Comedy of Errors, the twin who does not know the existence of the other, is stated as a typical plot using the twins from the time of ancient Greece and Rome to the present day movies :

It was also the golden age of ‘the double’, as in Dostoevsky’s great tale of that name (it’s sub-title is ‘A Poem of St. Petersburg’), in Poe’s ‘William Wilson’, in Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*, though it is as old as ancient Greece and Rome, and still a potent modern myth, as movies such as John Frankenheimer’s *Seconds* or David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* attest.

This suggestion shows that the popular tale of the twin confusion is usually set in a metropolis where the residents itself does not know who their neighbours are truly the man they claim to be they

are or they themselves are not originally from the city : they may have come to to escape the life of village or small town where everyone somehow know each other. Like Antipholus of Syracuse who is a total stranger in Ephesus he does not expect to be recognised in this city yet he is somehow recognised as someone. This feeling of his identity being threatened or a feeling of himself falling into madness is paralleled by the confusion and the excitement in a metropolis. It suggests the possible grim ending to the play is shared by the short story of Nathaniel Hawthorne :

Hawthorne draws a magnificently grim conclusion about the perils we run, in a world where 'individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole'. By stepping aside for a moment, a man runs the risk of losing his place forever, and finding himself, like Wakefield, 'the Outcast of the Universe'.

However this grim ending is avoided in the play by the revelation of the twin to each other and the suggestion of marriage of Antipholus of Syracuse to Luciana, the sister of Adriana the wife to Antipholus of Ephesus. This fits into the statement that "Hardy described the 'precision' exacted by the metropolis as 'fiendish' — enough to drive a man mad with need for the love that might keep him sane.". And Hardy was mentioned in the article as "better known for writing about the country than the city but he [Thomas Hardy] spent half his life in London and knew all about its maddening effects."

Both articles by Jonathan Bate and Adrian Poole strengthen the understanding of the play by explaining the points that are important in understanding the play and to also show that the story line and setting of the play is fairly common or often used. This commonness of the plot or the setting takes away the mental barrier that may be felt by the audience who is expecting to see something that they may not understand because the play they are watching is classic. However with these articles the commonness or similarity with the contemporary movies surely takes away such barrier and let the audience see and share the problem and its solution that is performed.

The mentioning of the barrier felt to the contemporary audience is clearly stated in some of the reviews. In *Time Out London's* review it is stated that "Cooke's setting exposes the play's politics, placing it in the context of globalisation gone mad. But the extra grit weighs down the hectic action nearly as much as the poorly choreographed crowd chase including a real ambulance.<sup>iv</sup>" The mentioning of "placing the context of globalisation gone mad" may be something familiar for the audience since it is often mentioned that globalisation has become both a beneficial outcome and a problem. In *Mail Online* the review states the familiar aspects

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<sup>iv</sup> McGinn, Caroline, *Time Out London*, Dec 5 2011, <http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/event/238510/the-comedy-of-errors>, last accessed 27 Oct 2012

in the play.

Cooke's ingenious use of the tale brings it into the modern day, with the two Dromios wearing identical Arsenal FC shirts.

We have an ambulance drive on stage at one point, a Keystone Cops-style chase (it just about works) and a scene with billiard tables.<sup>v</sup>

Although money is not mentioned as a familiar object as in Bate's article other familiar objects such as "Arsenal FC shirts", "ambulance", "Cops-style chase" and "billiard tables" are mentioned which in the performance gives the image of contemporary urban life. This also means that the barrier that may be felt by the audience can be taken away with such objects. *Financial Times's* Ian Shuttleworth states the life in metropolis as did Poole in the program's article :

Royal Court artistic director Dominic Cooke's first production at the National gives a real sense that this [*Comedy of Errors*] is a city comedy of the kind more associated with the likes of Ben Jonson than Shakespeare. The two Antipholi and their servants the Dromios get so repeatedly mistaken for each other because they are all part of the urban bustle of Ephesus. This city can throw up in supporting roles a quack doctor, an increasingly hysterical goldsmith and, novelly, a band who punctuate the proceedings by singing in an indecipherable language (possibly Romanian?)<sup>vi</sup>

the review suggests the mistaken identity is part of the urban life and its bustle. This may also mean that with the existence of the metropolis this comedy is possible to exist. And interesting enough the mistake in the program is also mentioned

Witness the National Theatre, whose programme for this tale of the two separated-in-infancy sets of twins crossing and recrossing each other's paths accidentally lists the character of Adriana as being married to the wrong Antipholus. Luckily, the NT spotted the mistake in time to print an erratum slip;<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>v</sup> Letts, Quentin, *Mail Online*, 14 Dec 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-2067914/The-Comedy-Errors-Review-A-Comedy-errors-sublime-King-Henry.html>, last accessed 27 Oct 2012

<sup>vi</sup> Shuttleworth, Ian, *The Financial Times*, Nov 30 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/3dd627ea-1b3b-11e1-8b11-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2DQcDW9EB>, last accessed 27 Oct 2012

<sup>vii</sup> Shuttleworth, Ian, *The Financial Times*, Nov 30 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/3dd627ea-1b3b-11e1-8b11-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2DQcDW9EB>, last accessed 27 Oct 2012

It may be too much to ask yet it is possible that the reviewer mentioning the urban life may be due to the fact that the article of the program was read and it has influence the content of the review. However review by Michael Billington in *The Guardian* does not have any aspects mentioned in the program in the article although he states “What Cooke offers thereafter is an extended urban nightmare ;<sup>viii</sup>” it is quite different from what Poole was stating in his article.

Several reviews mentioning the content of the “specially commissioned” article suggest that the content is read and the reviewers use such content to shows that the play is not misunderstood or misinterpreted, although some review does not refer to some aspect of the article may be similar to the fact that not all audience by the program. Yet however minimum the mention in the review is it is possible to conclude that articles in the program are used and this mean that an ordinary audience is sure to read the article either before or after the performance and understand the play with minimum amount of misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

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<sup>viii</sup> Billington, Michael, *The Guardian*, 30 Nov 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/nov/30/comedy-of-errors-theatre-review>, last accessed 27 Oct 2012