

REVIEW: 'THE COMEDY OF ERRORS' OFFERS PLENTY OF LAUGHS

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Citing the devastating floods of the last several weeks, Riverside Theatre's Ron Clark stepped out of character at the end of Friday evening's performance of Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors" to ask "Doesn't it feel good to come out and laugh at a wonderful old play like this one?"

Indeed, it does, and the cast of the ninth annual Shakespeare Festival elicits plenty of laughter in a fine production under the direction of Kevin Harris. Due to the flooding, the festival has moved from its outdoor home in Iowa City's lower City Park to Opstad Auditorium at City High School, but regardless of the setting, the troupe turns in a wonderful ensemble performance.

The play opens with Egeon (Clark), a merchant from Syracuse (and father of more noble twins) condemned to death in Ephesus due to a ban on travel between the two cities, setting up the action by recounting the sad back story of a family separated by circumstance.

Despite Clark's moving delivery of his tale, the play's plot is, as might be expected, about as silly as could be: Twin brothers with twin servants who have been separated by shipwreck since shortly after their births and who go by the same names are all in Ephesus at the same time. One pair has lived there for many years; the other has just arrived. Mayhem—romantic, financial, legal—ensues.

Dennis Fox, as Antipholus of Syracuse, and Tim Budd, as Antipholus of Ephesus, are both simply delightful in their roles. Fox perfectly captures his character's wearying incredulity at being recognized by all while he recognizes none. Budd, for his part, is at his best when his character is abjectly raving at the various injustices he faces. Meanwhile, Martin Andrews and Aaron Graham turn in wonderful performances as the two servants Dromio. Equally at ease with the verbal and physical comedy their roles require, the two actors share mannerisms with such success that it is surprisingly easy to confuse them for one another as the play progresses.

As Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, Leigh Williams storms and weeps as her character tries to understand—and control—the bizarre behavior of the man she takes to be her husband. Williams is the most valuable player of this year's edition of the Shakespeare Festival, as she is the emotional heart of "The Winter's Tale" and as well as the overwrought center of the madness in "The Comedy of Errors."

Williams is ably supported by Cristina Panfilio as Adriana's sister Luciana who, while trying to calm her sister and straighten out her supposed brother-in-law, is herself swept up in a romantic twist. Panfilio is called upon to be by turns practical, dreamy, and stern, and she smoothly moves through the transitions.

Wonderful costumes by Colleen Combs McGonegle and an impressive (if slightly inaccurate) clock created by scenic and lighting designer Paul Sannerud support the action effectively, providing visual cues that help the audience navigate the madcap action.

"The Comedy of Errors" is an impressive effort all around and, though "The Winter's Tale" has much to recommend it, the better of this season's two productions.