Fun fact: The Comedy of Errors was one of Shakespeare’s early comedies; its first recorded performance was in December of 1594.

What’s it all about:
William Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors is a comedy that everyone can connect to. It revolves around problems that, in their essence, are common; for the purpose of the play, they’re exaggerated, pushed to extremes for a bigger joke. Director Ken Albers identifies three unifying themes of the comedy:

Confusion:
Like the slogan for Doublemint gum — it’s double the fun! The Comedy of Errors is largely based on a Roman comedy called The Menaechmi (pronounced ma-NECK-mee) by Plautus. In this older play, there was only one set of twins, each named Menaechmus. Shakespeare doubles that, and two sets of twins makes for twice the confusion. Unless you’re an identical twin, you probably haven’t experienced exactly the same problems these characters did. However, everyone can understand the confusion: it’s a case of mistaken identities. You remember going to the movies with your best friend, but your friend doesn’t remember that movie. With whom did you go to the movies? Which one of you is right, and which one is confused?

Reunion:
One of the most compelling themes of The Comedy of Errors is reunion. A man has been separated from his wife for 23 years. A mother has lost her sons, and brothers have been parted from brothers. The final scene of the play is a huge and joyful scene of reuniting this broken family. This is simply a larger scale of the reunions everyone gets to experience, when a friend goes away on a long vacation, when you get to see a relative who lives far away, or even when you go back to school after summer break.

Time:
Time is one of the strongest forces in the play. Antipholus (pronounced an-TIF-o-lus) of Ephesus (pronounced EFF-es-us) is late to lunch; his wife sends his servant for him, who brings home the wrong Antipholus. Angelo, the gold merchant, needs to repay a debt to another merchant right away, so that the merchant can catch the ship that’s leaving at the evening tide. Egeon (pronounced eh-Gee-on) has the most imperative task of all; he has only one day to come up with the money he needs to keep from being put to death. Everyone understands the pressure of a deadline!

Fun fact: The Comedy of Errors is the shortest of Shakespeare’s plays — it’s only 1,800 lines long!
The story actually begins about 23 years before the play starts. While away from home, a Syracusan merchant, named Egeon, and his wife Emilia have twin boys; on the same day, in the same inn, another woman gives birth to twin boys. Since she is too poor to take care of them, Egeon takes the boys to be servants. The family sails for home but they are caught in a storm at sea. Egeon and Emilia fasten themselves and the four infants to a small mast, upon which they ride out the storm. Unfortunately, just as they come within sight of two boats and possible rescue, the mast is broken in two and the family is split apart. Egeon settles in Syracuse, where he raises one of his sons and one of the servant boys, giving them the names of their lost brothers: Antipholus and Dromio (pronounced DRO-mee-yo). When they are eighteen years old, Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse set out to look for their brothers. Egeon also sets out to search for his wife and other son and combs the world looking for them for five years. This is where the play begins: in the marketplace of the city of Ephesus—a city hostile to anyone from the city of Syracuse. Egeon is captured there on his way home and explains his story. Duke Solinus (pronounced so-LIN-us) of Ephesus informs him that he has one day in which to pay one thousand marks or he will be put to death.

Meanwhile, Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse have arrived in Ephesus, but they are unaware that their father is also in the city. On the advice of a friendly merchant they are pretending to be from another city to avoid trouble. Antipholus sends Dromio to take some money and wait for him at the inn where they are staying. Dromio of Ephesus comes into the marketplace and mistakes Antipholus for another man. He takes the money Antipholus sent him and gives it to the man, thinking he is the Antipholus he was sent to find. The man is the Antipholus of Ephesus, and he is furious. This starts a series of complications that involve mistaken identities, mix-up and all sorts of misunderstandings. 

Who’s Who in *The Comedy of Errors*

**Egeon** - A merchant of Syracuse, married to Emilia. Father of both Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus and adopted father to both Dromios.

**Emilia** - Wife of Egeon who is now the Abbess of the priory in Ephesus.

**Solinus** - The Duke of Ephesus

**Antipholus of Syracuse** - One of the twin sons of Egeon and Emilia, parted in infancy from his brother. He falls in love with his sister-in-law, Luciana.

**Antipholus of Ephesus** - One of the twin sons of Egeon and Emilia, parted in infancy from his brother. Married to Adriana.
of Syracuse for his master, and Antipholus mistakes this Dromio for his servant. This begins a series of mistakes based on confused identities. Adriana (pronounced ay-dree-AH-na), the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, brings Antipholus of Syracuse home for lunch - thinking, of course, that he is her husband - where he begins to fall in love with Luciana (pronounced loo-chee-AN-na), her sister. When Antipholus of Ephesus is denied entrance to his own home by Dromio of Syracuse, he goes to lunch with a courtesan and other friends. The courtesan gives Antipholus of Ephesus a diamond ring in exchange for a gold chain he has ordered from a merchant. The gold merchant gives the chain to Antipholus of Syracuse instead; when the courtesan encounters this Antipholus in the marketplace, she asks for the chain. He refuses, not knowing about the bargain she made with his brother, and she demands the ring back from him—a ring, of course, which he does not have. Finally, everyone believes that Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus have gone completely mad. The two men from Syracuse take refuge in a priory, while a doctor takes away Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus to treat them for madness. They escape from the doctor, and the two sets of twins finally meet each other face to face. At the same time, they are reunited with both their father, whom the Duke pardons, and their mother, who it turns out had become Abbess of the priory in Ephesus. And then, we assume, they live happily ever after.

Who’s Who in The Comedy of Errors Continues

- **Adriana** - Wife of Antipholus of Ephesus and sister to Luciana.
- **Luciana** - Sister to Adriana and loved by Antipholus of Syracuse.
- **Dromio of Syracuse** - One of twin brothers, parted in infancy. Servant to Antipholus of Syracuse.
- **Dromio of Ephesus** - One of twin brothers, parted in infancy. Servant to Antipholus of Ephesus and married to Nell, a kitchen-wench.

Other Characters include:
- Balthasar, a merchant
- Angelo, a goldsmith
- Nell, a maid
- Doctor Pinch
- The Courtesan
- Various Merchants

An Example of Shakespearean staging
Source: The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642
Where we are: The Historical and Theatrical City of Ephesus

In Shakespeare’s time, world travel was new and exciting. It was only a hundred years before *The Comedy of Errors* was written that Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic, discovering the New World. At the same time, new trade routes were being found and employed; in the London marketplace, goods from more exotic locales were beginning to appear. The idea of the world was expanding. Shakespeare was interested in new lands; his plays *The Tempest* and *Twelfth Night* are both set in fictional places but with connections to the world he knew. *The Menaechmi* takes place in the city of Epidamnum; Shakespeare shifts the setting to Ephesus, a city more well known to a London audience both as a port of trade and as a city commonly referenced in the Bible.

According to legend, Ephesus was founded by a race of women warriors called Amazons. It was a port city, a center for trade and a peaceful stronghold during the years of the Roman Empire. The ruins still standing today include those of a huge library, temples, and even a great Roman theater, built into a hillside (see picture above). The Yale Repertory Theatre production of *The Comedy of Errors* is set in a fictional version of this Ephesus. It is centered in a Middle-Eastern style marketplace; merchants of every kind are gathered there to sell food, toys, clothes, or whatever you could wish for. There’s even a musical merchant who accompanies the action of the play with sound effects!
In the Elizabethan theater, women were not allowed to be onstage or involved in the theater in any way. All of the women's roles were played by young men or boys. In 1649 the Puritans came into power in England, displacing the monarchy and banning all forms of theater. The theaters were reopened in 1660 with the restoration of Charles II to the English throne: he had been living in France and brought back new traditions to the English theater. One of these innovations was allowing women on the stage. Almost as soon as women stepped on the stage to take over female roles, they also began playing male roles, usually those of young men or boys. In the opera, these roles were called “pants roles.” For the Yale Repertory Theatre's production of *The Comedy of Errors*, the roles of Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus will be played by women. Director Ken Albers believes that women are generally better comedienne, pointing to actresses like Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett. This casting also offers women the opportunity to play two great comedic Shakespeare roles.

**What to Look For: Women in Shakespeare**

Scenic designer Evonne Paik (Yale School of Drama, 2005) is excited to be working on Yale Rep's *The Comedy of Errors*; the style and liveliness of the comedy has been an inspiration and a guide for her concept of the theatrical Ephesus. “Whether it comes from 16th-century Italian commedia dell’arte (pronounced com-MAY-dee-ya dell-AR-tay) or from 20th-century American vaudeville, the gleeful effect is the same. In a show where ‘anything goes,’ I wanted to create the atmosphere of a real bustling marketplace in the Mediterranean that was rooted by its architecture, yet felt exotic and different at the same time. I intuitively felt that Morocco would be a great place to look for this type of environment because of the hot climate and a centuries-old culture that revolved around the souk (pronounced SOOK), which is the name for the marketplace. There is such vibrancy and exuberance in the architecture and colors, not to mention the people.”

**Before You See the Play: Questions to Discuss**

**SHAKESPEARE:**
How does a play written more than 400 years ago stay funny for today’s audience? Do you think it should be updated or is there something universal in its humor just as it is?
How is *The Comedy of Errors* like *King Lear* (produced last year by the Yale Repertory Theatre) in its portrayal of family bonds? How is it different?
If you have read other comedies by Shakespeare (like *Twelfth Night* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), what comic plot devices does *The Comedy of Errors* share with these other plays?

**COMEDY:**
What's the difference between a comedy and a tragedy?
How does comedy affect someone watching it? Does it change how you feel or how you see the world?
What kind of effect can it have on society?

**What to Look For: Scenic Design**

“I wanted to create the atmosphere of a real bustling marketplace.”
Evonne Paik
Slapstick: A Tradition of Comedy

About five hundred years ago, an immensely popular form of comic performance arose in Italy called commedia dell’arte (pronounced com-MAY-dee-ya dell-AR-tay). Troupes of actors traveled the country, performing in villages and cities. Instead of staging plays, these troupes used written scenarios that included the basic plot and structure of the performance; into these improvised scenarios the actors would insert rehearsed jokes and pratfalls called lazzi (pronounced LAHT-see). Each actor specialized in a particular type of character that appeared over and over again in different storylines and situations. These were called stock characters, and some examples include Harlequin (pronounced HAR-la-kwin), a tricky servant who was always hungry; Pantalone (pronounced pan-ta-LO-nay), an old miser; and Il Capitano (pronounced EEL ka-pee-TA-no), a braggart warrior who was actually a coward.

It was from this form of theater that the term “slapstick” originated. The real slapstick was a prop that actors would use in the lazzi. It was made from two flat sticks attached at the base; when the character used the slapstick on one another, it made a loud smacking noise without actually hurting. Though that prop eventually disappeared from the stage, its name came to be applied to a particular type of comedy, generally involving absurd situations, physical humor, and ineffectual violence.

That tradition of comedy made its way to England and merged with the British puppet tradition. Pulcinella (pronounced pul-chin-ELL-la), came from the same family of characters as Harlequin; he was generally hunchbacked with a large, hooked nose. In England, this character acquired a wife and became Mr. Punch, and the Punch and Judy show became a hit of the 19th century. Some of the most famous comedians of the 20th century were masters of the slapstick tradition. The Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, and Laurel and Hardy all specialized in crazy physical comedy. Slapstick found new heights in the art of animation; suddenly there was no limit to the situations characters could get into - and more to the point, out of. Wile E. Coyote could fall off a cliff, be smashed by a rock, and exploded by a rocket and still dust himself off to chase after the Roadrunner another day. This same concept is pushed to an extreme and parodied in the favorite cartoon of Bart and Lisa Simpson: The Itchy & Scratchy Show.

Director Ken Albers emphasizes the difference between slapstick and real-life violence. The point of slapstick is to recognize that it’s separate from reality. The characters exist in a world where no one can ever really get hurt; if they could, it would cease to be comedy.

Since the audience recognizes that the people on stage are safe, we are free to laugh and enjoy the characters’ predicaments. Real violence has real consequences, often terrible ones, and should not be confused with the harmless hits of slapstick.
Shakespeare’s Theater: A Tale of Two Companies

In Elizabethan London, there were many choices for entertainment, but when it came to theater, there were only two major companies: the Lord Admiral’s men and the Lord Chamberlain’s men. The companies took their names from their noble patrons, members of the aristocracy who sponsored them with financial investments and court backing. When Shakespeare first arrived in London, he spent some time writing and acting for the Lord Admiral’s men before he permanently joined the Lord Chamberlain’s men.

Each company had its own star actors, permanent theaters, and playwrights. Richard Burbage was the lead actor of the Lord Chamberlain’s men and performed in Shakespeare’s plays, taking such roles as Othello, Hamlet, and King Lear. Burbage and Shakespeare were both shareholders in the Lord Chamberlain’s men; they had invested money in the company and in return received a share of the profits. The Globe was the main theatrical home of Shakespeare’s company. The best playwright attached to the rival Lord Admiral’s men was Christopher Marlowe. His plays include Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta, and Tamburlaine. The lead actor in the Lord Admiral’s company, Edward Alleyn, was also the son-in-law of the manager of the company, Philip Henslowe. The theaters of Henslowe’s company were called the Rose and the Fortune.

What is Farce?

Over the years, the term “farce” has often come to be used as an insult, implying something meaningless and fluffy. In the theater, however, a farce is simply a type of play. According to Jessica Milner Davis’s book Farce, a farce is a specific form of comedy which is “broad, physical, visual...whose effects are pre-eminently theatrical and intended solely to entertain.” The Comedy of Errors is just such a play. Director Ken Albers separates farce from other types of theater in this way: in tragedy, characters make a passionate commitment to what is universal (like honor or patriotism); in comedy, characters make a passionate commitment to what is personal; in farce, characters make a passionate commitment to what is trivial, something “of little worth or importance.” What are the trivial things that characters are committed to in The Comedy of Errors? Adriana’s desire to have her husband home for lunch is one example, and it is this trivial desire that sets in motion all of the mistaken identities in the plot. Material items are also the objects of this commitment to the trivial, as in the case of the gold chain and the diamond ring. Can you find others? You may see physical commitment to trivial things as well, like two people tugging on a carpet they both want.
**The Comedy of Errors Through the Ages**

**Ancient Rome:** Plautus, who wrote the earliest dramatic version of the story of *The Comedy of Errors*, lived from 254 to 184 BCE. Ancient Roman theaters, much like the one whose ruins still stand in Ephesus (see page 4), were open, outdoor structures. The stage was backed by a building called the scaena (pronounced SKAY-nah), which contained a main set of doors and one on either side. Rather than creating different scenery for each play, the theater was equipped with triangular prisms called periaktoi (pronounced pair-ee-AK-toy). Each side of this device would be painted to represent different scenes: the palaces and noble settings appropriate for tragedies; the private houses and shops suitable for comedies; and the mountains, trees, and rustic dwelling places for satyric (pronounced sa-TEER-ic) plays. The periaktoi could be rotated to reveal the proper setting for a performance.

**Elizabethan London:** *The Comedy of Errors* was first performed for the Christmas celebrations at Gray’s Inn in 1594. The audience that night was made up of lawyers, judges, and other educated men. Some scholars believe that this audience would have been familiar with the recently rediscovered writings of an ancient Roman architect named Vitruvius (pronounced vih-TROO-vee-us), who had described in detail the design of a Roman theater. The play then would originally have been staged in an arcade style setting, with each doorway representing a different house or shop. This was often the staging style used for other plays produced at Gray’s Inn.

**Shakespeare Revised:** In the years after Shakespeare died, and most particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, playwrights and theater companies felt that Shakespeare’s plays needed to be revised and updated to make them interesting for contemporary audiences. A two-act version of *The Comedy of Errors* called *See if You Like It*, or *‘Tis All a Mistake* appeared on the London stage in 1734 and was apparently very popular. In 1779 Thomas Hull adapted *The Comedy of Errors* for production at Covent Garden, a popular theater in London. He cut it radically, despite its already short length, and also added to the wooing scene between Antipholus of Syracuse and Luciana in order to expand the love story of the play and make it seem less frivolous and farcical.

**A Musical Comedy:** Many of Shakespeare’s comedies include music; *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* all use songs. In 1938 Richard Rodgers and George Abbott adapted *The Comedy of Errors* into a Broadway musical titled *The Boys from Syracuse*. While the musical only contains a few lines from Shakespeare’s text, its immense success boosted the popularity of the play. *The Boys from Syracuse* was made into a film in 1940 and a TV movie in 1986. It was even revived on Broadway just last year!
What to Look For: Costume Design

One of the most important considerations in producing *The Comedy of Errors* is the costuming of the two sets of twins. The fun lies in the audience’s being able to tell them apart when none of the characters on stage can do it. This creates a unique challenge for a costume designer: how do you create markedly different costumes that still look almost identical? Designer Alixandra Englund (Yale School of Drama, 2005) came up with a fun and clever solution for the Yale Rep’s production (the sketches in this guide show designs currently in progress). Pay close attention to the details of Antipholus of Syracuse’s costume and compare it to his brother’s. Notice that one Antipholus has a long vest and the other a shorter one; also, one Antipholus has a shirt with full sleeves while the other wears a shirt with tight sleeves. A similar device is used to distinguish the two Dromios. One Dromio’s vest has horizontal stripes and the other’s has vertical. Can you spot other ways to tell them apart?

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Class Activity: Setting the Scene

1. Divide the class up into small groups. Read out loud the exchange between Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse in Act III, scene 2 (lines 71 through 160). This scene, in which Dromio compares the kitchen maid Nell to different countries, climates, and parts of the globe, is a brief but illustrative example of the verbal comedy in *The Comedy of Errors* and contains both general jokes and ones that make reference to current events in Shakespeare’s time. Go over any footnotes with the class that explain specific Elizabethan references.

2. Discuss the jokes Shakespeare uses to describe Nell. Which jokes make the most sense to a modern audience? Which jokes are confusing? For example, in line 131 Antipholus of Syracuse asks Dromio, “Where America, the Indies?” Dromio responds, “O, sire, upon her nose, all o’er-embellished with rubies, carbuncles, sapphires,” etc. Dromio is both mocking Nell for boils and pimples on her nose and making a joke about the rumored wealth of the newly discovered America and the Indies. Does this sort of joke still work today?
For the audience, it’s all fun and games as Antipholus of Syracuse is mistaken for his twin brother and the Dromios return to the wrong master time after time. But for the characters in this comedy of confusion, there is a fear that something darker is at work. Antipholus of Syracuse talks about Ephesus being a city of sorcerers. He wonders if he falls in love with Luciana because of a spell, and the baffling behavior of the citizens makes him more ready to believe in their witchcraft. Antipholus of Ephesus, on the other hand, thinks that everyone around him has been bewitched, while everyone else is sure that he’s the one who is possessed or mad.

For the Elizabethan audience, witchcraft was a very real force in the world. They had a highly developed idea of order in the universe; everything around them, from the weather to the human body was governed by the planets. Every planet and part of the heavens had both physical and personality traits attributed to them, which were in turn attributed to those days of the week, locations, and bodily functions that were under the influence of those planets. Witches were believed to be able to affect this order, throwing it out of alignment. They were blamed for causing illnesses, droughts, even death. They were thought to be frightening forces of disorder.

In the Yale Rep’s production of *The Comedy of Errors*, the focus is not on the dark side of these forces but rather on their disruption of order. The order of the world is so confused that the twins are no longer sure even of their own identities. Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse especially suffer from this. They are adrift in a city they don’t know but where everyone else magically seems to know them. Even more, during the course of the play, they lose track of the one person in the city they are closest to: each other. When the end of the play comes, these bewitched, befuddled twins are able not only to reunite with each other but with themselves. The forces of witchcraft and disorder are dispelled by the magic of reunion.

Another Theme to Think About:

**Magic and Identity in *The Comedy of Errors***

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**Class Activities Continued**

3. Come up with new jokes that fit into the frameworks of Shakespeare’s text. Is there a different joke for the name Nell that you can come up with? Which countries would you pick to refer to? How would you compare their climate, society, or politics to the body of a person? Don't worry about using Elizabethan language, but try your best to make your new jokes get the same amount of information across as the original scene did. In other words, your audience should have a fairly good idea of what Nell looks like and how she treated Dromio of Syracuse.

4. Using the jokes you have written in step #3, perform your revised versions of this scene. Which do your classmates find more effective: the original or the revised version?
For the Yale Repertory Theatre’s production of *The Comedy of Errors*, director Ken Albers decided to nearly double the cast size by adding merchants of everything from toys to fish, carpets to fezzes, to fill the marketplace of Ephesus with life and color. A special addition to this group is the musical merchant, who will inhabit a shop overlooking the bazaar and accompany the action with sound effects and musical punctuation. This sort of accompaniment is not a new invention. Music accompanied the plays of ancient Greece and was also an important part of Japanese theater. In Noh drama, which is a particular type of performance that became popular in Japan in the 14th century, there would be a small group of musicians (usually three or four) who were called koken (pronounced *KO-ken*). They sat on stage and accompanied the action with improvised music on drums and flutes.

Another avenue of sound accompaniment was the creation of sound effects. Elizabethan actors, for example, rolled cannonballs backstage to create thunder. This art reached a new level of realism with the invention of the radio in 1874. While actors performed their roles live on the air in radio dramas or serials, the sound effects had to be created live as well. Crashes, footsteps, door slams, and squeaking staircases all had to be made with everyday materials in the recording studio. The sound artists who did this work were called Foley artists, after Jack Foley. Foley was credited with inventing the art through his work in the film industry. Even today Foley artists work to create the little sounds – gravel crunching underfoot or the rustle of a rider mounting a horse – that microphones often miss when movie scenes are filmed.

The role of the musical merchant is a combination of these two traditions, and this role will be taken by musician Rich Dart. During the weeks of rehearsal, he will work to come up with sounds that not only enhance the sounds of the stage, but also respond to the action or comment on it. His music shop above the marketplace will hold normal instruments, like a slide whistle, gong, triangle, xylophone, and drums. It will also have found and made instruments – things constructed from everyday materials like pipes and wood, trash can lids and plastic buckets – to create new and exciting effects.
How To Learn More

TheatreHistory.com has a great biography of Plautus, the Roman playwright, at [www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/plautus001.html](http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/plautus001.html). A 1595 translation of *The Menæchmi* is available in the appendix to the Oxford edition of *Comedy of Errors*.

The Shakespearean Stage 1574 ~ 1642 is an excellent book on the Elizabethan theater; it is filled with great information on the companies, actors, stages, and playwrights. On the internet, [www.shakespeare-online.com](http://www.shakespeare-online.com) is a fantastic resource, including information on Shakespeare’s life, a glossary of Elizabethan words, and essays on all of the plays. The Shakespeare Resource Center ([www.bardweb.net](http://www.bardweb.net)) also includes up-to-date links to reviews and articles on Shakespeare in the media.

For more information on the Yale Repertory Theatre, check out our website: [www.yalerep.org](http://www.yalerep.org). More dramaturgical notes and information will be available on the *The Comedy of Errors* page, [www.yalerep.org/morecomedy.html](http://www.yalerep.org/morecomedy.html). The website for the Yale School of Drama is [www.yale.edu/drama](http://www.yale.edu/drama).

Yale Repertory Theatre is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant. The NEA offers an interesting website featuring information on Shakespeare productions around the country. Check out their website at [www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org](http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org).

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After-words:

What do you think?

What are the differences between Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus? What are the similarities?

How did the production track the passage of time and keep you aware of Egeon’s plight?

How does Shakespeare give the play a satisfying ending? Was that effectively realized by the Yale Rep production?

Source: [www.wathena406.k12.us](http://www.wathena406.k12.us)

YALE REPERTORY THEATRE

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