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***The Comedy of Errors* at The Stratford Festival**

Directed by Keira Loughran
The Studio Theatre, Stratford, Ontario
Performance Date: August 4, 2018

Reviewed by SUSAN ROJAS

Gender-blind casting is more frequent these days, with women earning accolades for their portrayals of Lear and Othello and men cast in traditionally female roles (such as Ophelia in Michelle Terry's recent *Hamlet*). Many of the characters in Keira Loughran's production of *The Comedy of Errors*, however, went further than simple cross-casting: in what seemed an act of resistance to the traditional binary, they were not defined by gender or outward appearance. Loughran's program notes expanded on this, stating her Ephesus was "fiercely committed to inclusion, self-determination, and non-conformity," although her take on Syracuse was not mentioned. Her remarks were accompanied by quotes from artists and authors such as Prince, W. E. B. DuBois, and Jan Morris, suggesting the inspiration for the production stemmed not only from the desire for artistic and personal freedom, but also the breaking of social and cultural stereotypes and a call for acceptance and unity.

Prince's influence on the production was obvious – the production was rhythmic, colorful, and funky. In contrast to the inclusion and fluidity championed in the production's vision, the music used between sets and during scene changes had a structured, electronic beat. In the opening moments, and between some acts, the actors walked, marched, and moved quickly back and forth across the stage to its pulse. The stage was mostly bare, with the odd table or chair brought in as needed. The costumes were colorful, and included cuts reminiscent of Victorian frock coats, 1980s boxy jackets, and skinny jeans or leggings; the style was edgy, modern, and mostly unisex. Some of the actors had bright, electric colors streaked in their hair. Time was fluid, as no specific time period was suggested by either the set or costume design, and the action could have taken place in the past, present, or both.

Egeon (Gordon Patrick White) was the most somberly dressed of all the cast, clad in dusty black and charcoal gray. This not only marked out his anguished state, but highlighted his status as stranger in Ephesus. His reference to "two goodly babes..." helped make clear the production's lack of emphasis on gender, yet he went on to note that the pairs of twins were brothers and sisters. Freedom to be oneself as the rule of the land was suggested through the Duke's (Juan Chioran) long slit skirt, fishnets, thigh boots, and simple ladies' hat. The Duke's poise and serene demeanor contrasted with that of the other characters, suggesting he was the fulcrum for the energetic movement, flow of diverse personalities, vibrant colors, and driving rhythms that swirled in and through the city.

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The Antipholi (Jessica B. Hill and Qasim Khan) were similar enough in build and feature that they could feasibly be twins, but the Dromios (Beryl Bain and Josue Laboucane) required more suspension of disbelief. Despite this, the two sets of twins shared an energy and physicality that served Shakespeare's text well. The dialogue was extremely fast-paced; I often wondered if audience members unfamiliar with the play were able to follow the plot. Physical humor was abundant, with plentiful smacks, blows, and scurrying about. Laboucane's Dromio of Ephesus was a standout in this area, mugging, gesturing, and generally falling about the stage; at one point, he wrestled with a decent-sized stuffed rat. Bain's Dromio of Syracuse lacked the silly slapstick comedy of her twin, but was a good match for her Antipholus (Hill). All in all, however, the pairing of Laboucane and his Antipholus (Khan) was the more effective of the two.

Adriana (Alexandra Lainfiesta) was a Latina spitfire, which was perfect for the character. Her emotions went from zero to sixty in an instant, and when upset, she often rushed about the stage ranting in Spanish. In her confrontations with the Antipholi, especially her husband, it was obvious she felt she was the one in charge; when it came to her husband's perceived disregard, however, she played the wronged, neglected wife. Her sister Luciana (Amelia Sargisson) was her polar opposite, a more sedate blonde in glasses, wearing a ballet-pink dress and flowered Doc Martens. Rod Beattie's Luce was sloppy and over-rouged, but Sébastien Heins's trans Courtesan was statuesque perfection. Tall, blonde, and wearing a micro-mini pannier bustle skirt, fishnets, and sky-high heels, she was both self-confident and gorgeous. This Courtesan was no pushover, either; when restraining the chaotic group of twins in the final act proved too much for the other characters she bound them together with ease, swinging her red fringed evening bag over her shoulder as she swept away. I wondered, however, if there were missed opportunities as far as the female characters. Although I recognize the constraints imposed by the text, other than casting a cross-dressed man as Luce and the Courtesan as trans, aspects of inclusion and non-conformity in the female roles seemed limited to same-sex attraction: Adriana, Luciana, and Hill's Antipholus; Luce and Laboucane's Dromio. The trans Courtesan's dalliance with Khan's Antipholus and other men of the city was the only one of the female-role interactions that had real depth, inviting a complex consideration of acceptance, relationships, and self-expression.

The officers in blue, not buff (Mamie Zwettler and Andrea Rankin), were reminiscent of Dogberry and the Keystone Cops, often apprehending themselves rather than their quarry. Dr. Pinch (doubled by Rod Beattie) was no lean-faced villain, but looked rather like a chartreuse Willy Wonka; he more successfully exorcized himself than the Antipholi, much to the delight of the audience. Although understandable in terms of the plot, Pinch's references to demonic possession, as well as the Syracusans' concerns about cozenage and deception, seemed out of place in light of the production's stated commitment to acceptance. Is it demonic possession to not act or dress in a manner determined by others' ideas of gender and sexuality? Is it really cozenage for a person to live in a way that feels most natural and comfortable to them? Is it more deceptive to choose one's own form of outward expression or to bow to what is expected?

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Another sequence that appeared at odds with the production's commitment to inclusion was Dromio of Syracuse's "she is a globe" description of Luce. Although the scene was pulled off well by Bain and Hill, the body-shaming was out of place with the ideas of acceptance set forth by the quotes in the program and Loughran's vision of fluidity and freedom for the inhabitants of her Ephesus. Perhaps it was assumed that the gag would be expected, and that since the barbs were spoken by women (and directed at a man dressed as a woman), no harm would be done. Perhaps, too, the Syracusans' mocking of the kitchen servant was intended to emphasize their status as outsiders and suggest discomfort with the Ephesians' disregard for traditional gender markers. If so, the point should have been made more clearly, as the lines seemed uncomfortably out of step.

Fluidity in the production was not confined to gender and time. The same gates and balcony that served as the Duke's terrace became Antipholus and Adriana's home, then the Courtesan's inn, and finally Amelia's abbey. Not only a concession to the small performance space, this shared use also gestured to inclusion and equality. When the gates and balcony became the abbey, a neon-blue cross was lit above them, and Amelia appeared dressed in flowing robes of navy and muted blue. Blue was apparently the color of authority in this world, from the muted tones of royal blue worn by the Duke to the bright baby blue worn by the deputies. Color, it seems, was an important aspect of the production, marking out the administrative levels of Ephesus, the pairs of twins in their matching outfits, and the sisters Adriana and Luciana's complementary shades of peach and pink. These points of unity in what was a rapidly moving production helped the mind form associations and served as subliminal mnemonic devices.

In Shakespeare's text, the *Comedy of Errors* characters do not reveal much interiority. Other than the emotion surrounding Egeon's story of loss and his shared joy with Amelia at their reunion, there is not much insight as to the characters' thoughts, desires, or motivation. In light of this, the bright color and rapid movement of this production served the text well, as its effect was one of outward appearance with little thought as to inward concern. Unfortunately, Loughran's attempt to unite this with messages of acceptance, inclusion, and the condemnation of judging based on outward appearance was not completely successful. There was plenty of laughter from the audience, but much of it was at the expense of characters being hit, bound, chased, or similarly antagonized, which did not mesh with the concept of respecting a person in their entirety. In fact, the strongest message regarding acceptance, and the most affecting, was the last line. "And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another" said Dromio of Ephesus to his twin as they joined hands and walked off the stage side by side. Two individuals: separate, yet one. This, it seems, was the message the production was searching for. It is a shame it came in the final moment.

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Susan Rojas received her MA in English from Florida Gulf Coast University, and she is currently an independent scholar. Her research focuses on the representation of existential boundaries in early modern drama.