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Screens in Shakespeare: Hollywood comes to Ephesus. Trevor Nunn's *The Comedy of Errors* (RSC, 1976)

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Résumé

Dans sa mise en scène demeurée légendaire de *The Comedy of Errors* (RSC 1976), Trevor Nunn convoque le cinéma hollywoodien du film muet aux classiques des années 50 (comédie musicale, film noir, *screwball comedy*) et aux blockbusters des années 70. L'intermodalité permet un réencodage de la grammaire d'origine de la pièce dans des codes qui fassent sens pour le spectateur d'aujourd'hui. Les enjeux dramatiques sont chacun retraduits dans un genre cinématographique aux enjeux voisins, qui a pour fonction de les refamiliariser pour les rendre à nouveau décodables. Au-delà, Nunn s'essaie à un jeu postmoderne qui annonce les *mega musicals* à venir, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Cats*, et *Les Misérables*.

Mots-Clés

Texte intégral

The Comedy of Errors was performed – and possibly *first* performed – on Innocents' Night, 28 December 1594, during the annual festivities at Gray's Inn, one of the four major law schools in London, renowned for its entertainments and its overall contribution to the development of early modern drama. Audiences there were composed of the sons of influential families, and on some particular nights of guests from the court of Elizabeth I. The conditions of this rowdy night, which came down to us as "The Night of Errors" are recorded in the *Gesta Grayorum*, an account of the 1594-95 festivities. [1]

In 1756, *The Comedy of Errors* first came across music in Stephen Storace's adaptation of it as an opera-buffa, *Gli Equivoci*, on a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte. In 1938, it was made into a musical on Broadway, *The Boys from Syracuse*, choreographed by George Balanchine with 1930s-style music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Lorenz Hart, to a libretto by George Abbott (who directed). [2] The show proved extremely popular, and some of its lyrics, "Falling in love with love" and "This can't be love", became standards in the repertoires of Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. *The Boys from Syracuse* was regularly revived on and off Broadway and in the West End as late as 2011, even as adaptations more in tune with the times began to appear, *Oh, Brother* (Donald Driver) in 1981, and *The Bomb-itty of Errors* (Andy Goldberg) in 2001 with rap substituted for Rodgers' lyrics and a live DJ on stage.

In 1940, two years after its Broadway debut, *The Boys from Syracuse* was turned into a musical film by Edward Sutherland, with Allan Jones as the Antipholi and Joe Penner as the Dromios. Critics were visibly underwhelmed:

> [it] relies in the main for its humor upon familiar low comedy mugging and anachronistic gags. Some of them are funny – the first two or three times, anyhow. There are helmeted Greeks smoking cigars, picketing gladiators, a checkered chariot taxicab, an Irish bartender at the Wooden Horse Inn and such inanities. And there is even a chariot chase, according to the old cinematic formula. But a lot of modern slapstick and confusion only goes so far in ancient dress – and, in this case, it isn't far enough. [3]

This is the only screen adaptation in the West, apart from James Abraham's *Big Business*, featuring Lili Tomlin and Bette Midler as the twin siblings (1988), but the play is a favourite with Bollywood (eight screen adaptations to date).

In 1976, Trevor Nunn brought together music and the silver screen on the stage of the Royal Shakespeare Company in spirited production that met with popular and critical acclaim, featuring Judi Dench and Francesca Annis as the sisters, Roger Rees and Mike Gwylim as the Antipholi, and Michael Williams and Nickolas Grace as the Dromios. The production transferred to the Aldwych the following year and was awarded the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Musical while Francesca Annis received a Bafta for her performance as Luciana. Nunn's staging, packed with dancing and singing routines to an effective score by Guy Woolfenden and a Hollywood-style choreography by Gillian Lynne (*Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*), is throughout interspersed with cinematic references (including a scene in a movie theatre).

If Nunn's lyrics are sometimes cued by the same lines as in the 1940 film version, the comparison stops here. Where Sutherland's ancient Greece looked forward to modern times, Nunn's late twentieth century Ephesus looks backward to the 1950s and beyond, and more specifically to the movies of the period. Nunn's postmodern extravaganza spans the entire history of American cinema from the silent movies to then recent blockbusters like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Godfather* (1972). It summons a vast array of references to Hollywood genres – film noir, musical, slapstick reels, including a stampede out of an early western by Henry McRae used as

a counterpoint to an onstage chase. Nunn brings together the codes of drama and those of Hollywood for a sheer romp in which the Hollywood reference serves an immediate generic purpose, while making a statement about late twentieth century aesthetics: intertextuality, pastiche, the synthesis of high and low culture, and the integration of art into commodity production.

The title's "errors" are prompted by the simultaneous presence within the same place of identical twins unbeknown to each other. This typical farce material Shakespeare derived from Plautus's *Menaechmi*, and he upped the ante by adding an extra pair of twins out of *Amphitruo*, Plautus's other twin play. The confusions induced by the resemblance of the first set of twins is increased by the exact resemblance between their servants. The plot seems "a mathematical exhibition of the maximum number of erroneous combinations of people taken in pairs", [4] H. B. Charlton has noted, a challenge even by the standards of farce, a genre requiring clockwork precision.

The presence of identical twins in Ephesus is the outcome of a story of family separation, with a storm at sea, a shipwreck, and endless wandering for the better part of twenty years in search of the lost twin – the staple of romance. This part of the plot is derived from John Gower's *Apollonius of Tyre*, a tale of endless wandering across the Mediterranean, in which the hero loses his pregnant wife in a shipwreck and is eventually reunited with her and their baby daughter after years of tribulations. This, one hears in the opening scene of *The Comedy of Errors*, is the sort of material the past of the play is made of, and now Antipholus of Syracuse roams the Mediterranean with his servant in search of his lost twin. As the play begins, he arrives in Ephesus, as does his old father who, fearing he will lose his second son as he lost the first, has gone in search of him.

The farcical core of *The Comedy of Errors*, the one-day action in Ephesus, is thus embedded in a formulaic romance script in the form of the pathetic narrative of loss opening the play and the tear-jerking family reunion closing it. [5] To farce, a comedic form taut as a spring and devoid of

feelings, is associated its quasi-opposite, romance. One is fun, unsentimental, and pure action, requiring strict unity of time and space; the other is steeped in nostalgia, meandering along with no sense of time, space or an ending. Romance cultivates introspection and emotion; farce banishes feelings in favour of laughter. In one, men and women entertain dreams of ideal love; in the other, wives are shrews whose husbands cheat on them and visit prostitutes. Romance is ethical and pathetic, farce is cynical and amoral, their coexistence likely to derail the play at any moment. To the dramaturgical challenge of steering around two pairs of identical twins Shakespeare sets himself the additional, generic challenge of bringing together two genres that are like oil and water. For an early modern audience, especially the elite audience of Gray's Inn, pleasure would have been derived as much from the conflict of forms as from identity confusion.

The challenge for a modern production is to transpose the grammar of genres into an idiom that makes sense for and is likely to engage twentieth- or twenty-first-century spectators unfamiliar with early modern generic subtleties. Nunn achieved this by transposing the dramatic language of farce and romance into the cinematic language of slapstick reels, musical and screwball comedy, and film noir. [6] Roger Rees refers to his character, Antipholus of Syracuse, as "rather like George Formby in one of those early 1930s films" and as a "little 'Buster Keaton' figure", and describes the famous duologue with his Dromio about the kitchen maid as "reminiscent of Max Miller, perhaps even more like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis". [7]

Nunn makes Ephesus into a 1970s tourist trap, complete with Ouzo wine, and souvenir shops, T-shirts emblazoned Ephesus, Baedecker guidebooks, cameras, and straw hats that are definitely a hint that this is going to be about representation. The place is "lorded over by a comically vast dictator, Brian Coburn, with equally oversized epaulettes". [8] The colonel/duke Solinus merely inspires comic fear, as if the recent collapse in 1975 of the regimes of the Colonels had already made it an unthreatening part of local folklore. It is not just Coburn's oversized epaulettes, as Emerson suggests, but also his sunglasses belonging with the semiotic system of tourism

which dispel the dangerous immediacy of fascism in favour of the mediation of historical re-enactment as a tourist attraction, sanitized and controlled. [9]

Trevor Nunn, The Comedy of Errors (RSC, 1976)
Act I, scene 1. Duke Solinus (Brian Coburn)

Crédits : Philip Casson, *The Comedy of Errors*

Dress ranges anywhere between the 1930s and the 1970s, with now and then a touch of Ancient Greece. The time reference is broad enough to accommodate any of the cinematic genres and characters that are regularly summoned, starting with early twentieth century comedy. Farce is trusted to the figure of the circus clown, complete with a colourful wig, bold colours, suspenders, oversized footwear, pratfalls, knockabout, stunts and cream pie in the face. [10] Nunn actually rehearses the genealogy of the Shakespearean clown – peasant, shepherd, gravedigger, constable, and here, servant threatened with beating – all the way to the circus Auguste then to the *slapstick reels* of the 1910s and 1920s. Ford Sterling, Chester

Conklin, Mack Sennett, and the early Chaplin borrowed all or part of the circus stooge's comic universe.

Act 2, scene 2. Michael Williams (Dromio of Syracuse) and Roger Rees (Antipholus of Syracuse)

Crédits : Philip Casson, *The Comedy of Errors*

The genealogy is made particularly clear in Nunn's treatment of the play's duologues. The double-act routines of Shakespearean comedy first laid the foundations for the comic duos in the style of Laurel and Hardy, and later of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, as suggested by Roger Rees in the interview quoted above. The Shakespearean clown formed a comedy duo with the straight man, the ancestor of the white clown, whose role, then as now, was to ask short, open-ended questions allowing his partner to shine with risqué jokes or absurd puns. In one such burlesque interlude, Dromio of Syracuse, pursued by the kitchen wench who claims him as her own, singles out parts of her fat body for description, in what is a burlesque cross

between a counter-blazon and Sebastian Münster's famous Europa Regina map (59'50" – 1.02' [11]):

> DROMIO: She is spherical, like a globe: I could find out countries in her.
> ANTIPHOLUS: In what part of her body stands Ireland?
> DROMIO: Marry, sir, in her buttocks; I found it out by the bogs.
> ANTIPHOLUS: Where Scotland?
> DROMIO: I found it by the barrenness, hard in the palm of the hand. […]
> ANTIPHOLUS: Where Spain?
> DROMIO: Faith, I saw it not; but I felt it hot in her breath.
> ANTIPHOLUS: Where America, — the Indies?
> DROMIO: O, sir, upon her nose, an o'er embellished with rubies, carbuncles, sapphires, declining their rich aspect to the hot breath of Spain; who sent whole armadoes of carracks to be ballast at her nose.
> ANTIPHOLUS: Where stood Belgia, — the Netherlands?
> DROMIO: O, sir, I did not look so low (III.2.103-124) [12]

Isolating these scenes from the rest of the action through framing, proxemics and pace, Nunn designates them as verbal comic interludes, even as he helps audiences summon a familiar system of references (the Martin/Lewis comedy duo).

The shrewish wife is another character type of farce. In Plautus, she ends up being auctioned off by her husband – should anybody wish to bid for her. But Adriana (Judy Dench) is a Shakespearean type of shrew, of the sort that a director can easily turn into a feminist questioning the rationale of male authority in patriarchy. Adriana is the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, who, she says, turns his gaze elsewhere. She nostalgically wonders about marriage and love and the way they evolve over time, about jealousy, estrangement, and why men, not women, are "masters of their liberty". This is an endless subject of discussion with her bookish, short-sighted sister, who quotes extensively from Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians to make her point, advocating patience and obedience (II.1). The problem is twofold for today's director. The audience can hardly be expected to identify the Pauline intertext, despite the clue provided by the location. The Pauline

doctrine moreover, notwithstanding the ironic distance maintained by Shakespeare, is hardly likely to resonate with female audiences at the end of the 20th century. Nunn therefore chooses to focus on the one grievance in Adriana's list that is most likely to appeal to a modern audience in the mid-1970s, gender equality, in the wake of the second wave of American feminism. Drawing from one of Luciana's sententious lines, "A man is master of his liberty" (II.1.7), he stages a singing and dancing interlude for the sisters which Hollywood-izes the entire sequence, making Adriana into a proto-feminist (17'17" to 21'20"). His choice of a cinematic vehicle for transposing the debate is screwball comedy in which domineering females challenge their partners' masculinity in plot lines involving courtship, marriage, and the battle of the sexes. Over a (very large) drink, Judi Dench questions the Pauline doctrine on the respective rights of husband and wife, or rather the rights of the one and the duties of the other. The reference here is to Hawkes, Cukor, and Capra. Paul's teaching are turned into pillow talk (or talk about the pillow) by a wife whose husband suffers a bout of the seven-year itch, as a result of which she seems to have hit the bottle. But as screwball comedy originates in Shakespeare, the reference equally serves as a tribute to Shakespeare's cinematic heritage. [13]

On the other side of *The Comedy of Errors*' generic map is romance. Unlike farce, an after-the-wedding genre, romance deals with budding love. The Syracusan twin is smitten with love for Luciana on first seeing her. Nunn treats their idyll not along Petrarchan lines as in the play ("Are you a God, would you create me new?" [III.2.39]) along the lines of the 'boy meets girls, boy wins girl' formula Hollywood inherited (yet again) from Shakespeare. With a little help from Gillian Lynne, the choreographer of *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, their one brief scene together – no plot development is possible here as, for all she knows, these are indecent advances by her sister's philandering husband – is expanded to a three-minute dance routine (56'01"- 59'14") intended as a reminiscence or distant pastiche of a Minelli or Donen musical.

Uncertainties about circulating identities are supported by a complex system of financial exchanges in which a gold necklace is ordered by one of the twins as a present for his wife, delivered to the other, the invoice submitted to the wrong twin while the chain ends up around the neck of the local prostitute. Financial exchanges are as disrupted as the system of identities and the marketplace becomes a site of violence, pressure and misappropriation, reworked in the codes of film noir. The creditor, initially a merchant here rewritten as the local pimp (Jacob Witkin), is a mafia type of gangster straight out of *The Untouchables* (or the recently released *Godfather*, 1972), complete with a revolver and a felt hat. The scene where they settle their accounts is filmed in the style of gangster films, summoning the identifying clichés of the genre: whisky, cigarettes, and corrupt police officers.

Act III, scene 2. Mike Gwylim (Antipholus of Ephesus), Paul Brooke (Angelo), Richard T. Griffiths (Officer)

Crédits : Philip Casson, *The Comedy of Errors*

As the play moves to its climax, bringing confusion to a head in act IV, so Nunn moves on to displace any firm, clear system of encoding the audience might identify, with a view to disrupting their field of references. He moves on toward sequences disrupting whatever frame of representation the audience might have evolved in the course of the performance, two extensive and seemingly *extempore* interludes with hardly any – or a very flimsy – textual basis in the play. Each is specific and entirely singular.

The first is Antipholus's exorcism. For rational Ephesians, the erratic behaviour, which the audience knows results from a series of quid pro quo confusions, can only be ascribed to madness and/or demonic possession. On the word "mad" (IV.4.39), the local Antipholus is duly delivered into the hands of one Dr Pinch, "a conjurer" (41), for a four-line exorcism session (48-51) which obviously gives the director free rein to experiment with whatever stage business he can think of. The reference to conjurors, witchcraft and demonic possession would have been familiar to an early modern audience within the framework of witch hunting, anti catholic propaganda and within years of Harsnett's *Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures* (1603). But how is this to be conveyed to a modern audience? Nunn predictably draws on Friedkin's then recently released *Exorcist* (1973). But as the point is now to mix references, the exorcist is no priest but a quack doctor out of a Wild West film of the fifties.

While his brother is being exorcised, the other twin attempts to take a French leave, a purely technical development signalled by a rhyming couplet at the tail end of act IV: "I will not stay tonight for all the town; / Therefore away, to get our stuff on board" (IV.4.150-151). Nunn uses it as an opportunity for a long sequence – the longest in the play – in which the cinematic reference literally takes centre stage. The action is now located in a cinema showing *A Call to Arms*, the second part of Henry McRae's *The Indians are Coming* (1930), with an additional touch out of *Some like it Hot* as Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, now in flowing dresses and broad brimmed hats, are sitting in the audience waiting for an opportunity to make an escape.

Henry McRae "The Indians are coming"

Crédits : Philip Casson, *The Comedy of Errors*

Michael Williams (Dromio of Syracuse) and Roger Rees (Antipholus of Syracuse)

Crédits : Philip Casson, *The Comedy of Errors*

A mad chase ensues before and behind the screen when they are found out, in which the stage actors are silhouetted against the movie screen, an image fully emblematic of Nunn's enterprise: not just how to mix farce and romance, but the larger challenge of mixing media across time. Film and play actions are made to collapse, horses on the screen running one way and stage protagonists in front of it running the other.

If Nunn's directorial choices prove useful in translating a local, early modern generic code into a twentieth-century idiom, they also serve on a larger scale to interrogate the way the distinctive codes of postmodernism – aesthetic populism, the effacement of the frontiers between high and low culture to name but a few – are likely to accommodate enshrined texts, and how these in turn can help us grapple with late twentieth-century aesthetics. The forms co-existing in *The Comedy of Errors* prove a uniquely

fit material to sustain this questioning, as they happen to encapsulate some of these issues, notably time, identity and the market.

Fredric Jameson has identified the postmodernist moment as a "mutation […] in the object world" turned into "a set of texts or simulacra". [14] The unifying concept that best defines the phenomenon, he argues, is depthlessness, the prevalence of the surface as image and simulacrum, exemplified by the role of photography in contemporary art. Depthlessness has seen the development of a new culture of images (the characteristic form of art of our postmodernist era is film as opposed to theatre or the novel), and the repudiation of previous depth models (essence/appearance; latent/manifest…), notably, for what is of concern here, categories relying on notions of time and inwardness like history and the subject. Postmodernism, Jameson observes, spells "the death of the subject" envisaged as ego and individual, entailing what he calls the "waning of affect" replaced by "intensities […], free floating and impersonal", [15] while the other great depth model, history – duration, memory, temporality – has become increasingly unavailable and "we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic". [16] The double demise of history and of the subject, he argues, has contributed to a growing sense of heterogeneity in the field of forms, the latter by spelling the end of what used to be called personal "style", the former by weakening historicity. Postmodernist culture as a result rehearses dead styles, "voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture", [17] while the sense of the past has itself become "a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum". [18] "[O]ur daily life, our psychic experiences, cultural languages", he concludes, "are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time". [19]

Jameson's description proves invaluable to explore the dialogue of forms in *The Comedy of Errors*, and beyond it the larger rationale of Nunn's aesthetic choices. Farce and romance rehearse the selfsame shift from depth to surface Jameson describes. Romance as represented by the Syracusians is steeped in the depth models of history and the subject: time, growth, memory, and personal suffering. Antipholus has spent his adult life

trying to erase the wounds of time inflicted by the loss of a family scattered in a storm at sea, and failing to do so, lost himself in melancholy, the humour of Saturn/Chronos. Time for the Syracusians, father, mother, son and slave, is the fabric of life and loss: Dromio is the living "almanac of [his master's] true date" (I.2.41), while "time's deformed hand / Ha[s] written strange defeatures" in Egeon's face, the reason why (or so he thinks) his surviving son fails to recognize him after seven years (V.1.299-300). [20] Likewise, the thirty-three year period separating the storm from Æmilia's happy reunion with her sons is described in terms of pregnancy, the paradigm of flesh-as-time:

> Thirty-three years have I but gone in travail
> Of you, my sons, and till this present hour
> My heavy burden ne'er delivered. […]
> After so long grief, such Nativity. (V.1.400-406)

By contrast, on arriving in Ephesus Antipholus of Syracuse leaves the world of romance/history for the depthless world of farce. There is neither history nor individual subjects in Ephesus, only mechanical types (the shrewish wife, the courtesan, the cook, the quack doctor…) inhabiting the one-dimensional present required by the genre. Unity of time shrinks the action to a single day, the interval, punctuated by the regular, mechanical chiming of clocks and bells, between late morning and five o'clock, Egeon's sentence and the time of execution. [21] There is no horizon beyond this, no such thing as the depth of history. Antipholus of Ephesus has no memories of a previous life in Syracuse. He lives on the surface of the moment with no sense of the past: "I never saw my father in my life" (V.1.319). The dwindling of time as a depth model places a premium on space. In sharp contrast to the vast, but indeterminate expanses of romance, sea, forest, or the desert, Ephesus is a compact, but sharply delineated urban décor in which protagonists are seen to scuttle to and fro between the three places competing for their, and our, attention, the Phoenix, the Centaur and the Porpentine.

The asymmetry between experiences of time and space Georg Lukács has identified as an effect of capitalism. For workers in early capitalism, Lukács writes – and the same goes for consumers in late capitalism, Jameson argues – time loses its flexibility and hardens into space, achieving the reification of human activity in the process:

> […] time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified, mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short it becomes space. [22]

Lukács's diagnosis applies to Ephesus, a materialist place inhabited by merchants and craftsmen engaged in commodity production and financial exchanges, where everyone is identified by their trade (goldsmith, merchant, courtesan), and seems to yearn only for things money can buy (a chain, a ring) and for the money to buy them. [23] Social relations are absorbed by the networks of exchange, what Curtis Perry terms "the commercialization of social bonds", their depth altogether cancelled. Antipholus of Ephesus' invitations and business lunches play no small part in Adriana's sense of alienation. [24] Nor was the process of commodification alien to the early moderns:

> [A]ll the world choppeth and changeth, runneth & raueth after Marts, Markets and Merchandising, so that all thinges come into Commerce, and passe into traffique (in a maner) in all times, and in all places: not onely that, which nature bringeth forth, as the fruits of the earth, the beasts and liuing creatures, with their spoiles, skinnes and cases, the mettals, minerals, and such like things, but further also, this man maketh merchandise of the workes of his owne handes, this man of another mans labour, one selleth words, another maketh t[r]affike of the skins & bloud of other men, yea there are some found so subtill and cunning merchants, that they perswade and induce men to suffer themselues to bee bought and sold. [25]

In *The Comedy of Errors*, the chain of economic obligations (buying, selling, borrowing) is both figured and comically perturbed by the erratic circulation of the gold chain purchased by one of the twins, but delivered to the other and then charged to the first, who is subsequently arrested for non-payment and bailed by his wife. Ephesians have accordingly become a function of the market. They are defined by their possessions and their creditworthiness. Their identities are produced in and by the marketplace. [26] In the general commodification of people and social relations, the possessing 'subject' almost naturally ends up being 'possessed', as Antipholus discovers to his shock and dismay, a twist Marx and Lukács would have appreciated. And when the worst comes to the worst, the victimized Dromio, already an object beaten up and kicked about, is metaphorically monetized by virtue of a pun on *mark*, the currency and the corporeal sign of beating. [27] To Antipholus who demands in what safe place he has bestowed the thousand gold marks entrusted to him, Dromio replies:

> I have some marks of yours upon my pate,
> Some of my mistress's marks upon my shoulders,
> But not a thousand marks between you both.
> If I should pay your worship those again,
> Perchance you will not bear them patiently. (I.2.82-86)

This view of identity confirms Jameson's diagnosis of the correlation between the extinction of depth and the disclosure of the underlying materiality of things. [28]

No place is symbolically fitter for such a disclosure than Ephesus, the cradle of Christianity that was simultaneously the trading hub of Roman Asia. [29] It is the dual nature of the place that leaves Shakespeare free to decide which, of the spiritual or the material, has the last word in *The Comedy of Errors*. The structure – a farcical core framed by romance – makes his choice clear. In act V, as the local Duke is left nonplussed by the ambient chaos, it belongs to Æmilia, the mother turned abbess, to sort out the play's errors along the lines of romance. *The Comedy of Errors* is not merely a play about

genre, as Van Elk suggested, [30] even though experimenting with genres is so much part of Shakespeare's art. It is a play about how Shakespeare uses genres to make a statement about his own context, namely here by engaging proto capitalism. The return to romance in the final moments – the reunion of the scattered family restores enduring interpersonal exchanges, while the cancellation of Egeon's ransom repudiates the mechanisms of human commodification – expresses the nostalgia for a social order "in the process of being […] destroyed by nascent capitalism, yet still for the moment coexisting side by side with [it]". [31]

Shakespeare's move from one generic universe to another within his own cultural and economic context is the perfect vehicle to interrogate the shift in late capitalism from previous cultural depth models (essence, subjectivity, spirituality, history) to postmodernist depthlessness (citations, commodity production, mass culture), and to interrogate Shakespeare's place in it as the iconic figure of the 'dead classics', an interrogation in which the use of film and filmic references on a stage plays a central role. 'Frozen time' and the repudiation of duration in Ephesus translates as an emphasis on the synchronic at the expense of the diachronic, as exemplified by Nunn's choice of costumes and – crucially – of filmic references. Costumes range anywhere between the seventies (tourists in shorts and bright flowery shirts), the late forties (women sporting frocks and victory rolls), and the thirties (the pimp's pin-striped suit), going as far back as the late nineteenth century (Pinch's outfit), and Ancient Greece (Adriana's chiton). Filmic references are likewise a random collage encapsulating within the two-hour traffic of the stage the whole history of western cinema from Henry McRae to Stanley Donen and beyond, the mere "cannibalization" of the past without the retrospective dimension that imparts a sense of cultural genealogy, Jameson's "vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum". [32] Whatever pertains to the past – even the recent past – can only be approached by way of connotation, not representation. Nunn's Ephesus is about *pastness* as distinct from 'the past', as completely devoid of historicity as it is replete with stereotypes. [33] It is also about Greekness, conveyed by connotation,

much as, for Barthes, Marlon Brando's fringe conveyed Roman-ness in Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar.* [34] Connotation, however, is not limited to bringing in an Orthodox pope or *evzones* in white stockings, garters, red shoes and black pompons. It is conveyed by way of movie intertextuality, with a sirtaki dance routine (49'15" – 52'06") straight out of Cacoyannis's *Zorba* (1964) – sirtaki being, significantly, not a pre-existing cultural artefact but a dance created for the film, with a view to imparting it with the required sense of Greekness. We are left with surfaces, a phenomenon that could not be more adequately transmitted than through, literally, *film*.

The sirtaki routine. Nickolas Grace (Dromio of Ephesus), Norman Tyrrell (Balthasar), Paul Whitworth (Waiter)

Crédits : Philip Casson, *The Comedy of Errors*

Nunn's production of *The Comedy of Errors* as a hybrid of film and drama was revived off Broadway by the Acting Company under the direction of John Rando in 2001. Judging from Wilborn Hampton's review for *The New York Times*, its original cultural heterogeneity was retained ("a grab bag of cultural clichés from the 1960's and 70's") while fresh film intertextuality was added: "There is a running gag with a cat from an old James Bond movie; some business with a whip and gun is borrowed from Raiders of the Lost Ark, and there is a long chase scene that Mack Sennett would have

loved". [35] Nunn's production had become a text in its own right, a post-modernist object. When it was later released on video to make it available to larger audiences, the journey from stage to video – echoing Nunn's mix of film and drama – seemed yet another stop on its progress through the media, video being after film the latest vehicle of cultural-as-commercial hegemony. [36]

This brings us to the question of Nunn's rationale in offering a postmodernist fantasy of/about *The Comedy of Errors*. This is no idle questioning, in view of the object of Nunn's experiment ("Shakespeare" as a cultural icon), the place (the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon) and the man (the then Artistic Director of the RSC, who has by now done all thirty-seven plays of Shakespeare's canon). It appears that the necessity to implement market-friendly policies in order to attract younger audiences in the mid-70s became an opportunity for a statement on the effacement of the frontier between high-culture and mass/commercial culture, and on the possibility to postmodernise the 'classics'. Shakespeare amply demonstrates how he is capable of being used in new ways, yet the question remains of what Nunn's final conclusions are. He juxtaposes film and drama the way Shakespeare created the conditions of a dialogue between farce and romance and the estranged twins representing them. But where Shakespeare's structure clearly gives romance the final say, what are we to conclude – if anything – of Nunn's finale, the song cued by Dromio's final couplet "We came into the world like brother and brother, |An d now let's go hand in hand, not one before another", in which the whole company eventually joined? Is it a return to true emotional depth – there is a cut to a lady wiping a tear in the audience – or is this mere schmalz? For Perry, giving the final celebration of kinship to "the play's least sentimental major characters" is an indication that Shakespeare may not have intended his audiences to "take it seriously". [37] For Keith Parsons, on the contrary, "[a] wave of happiness engulfed the curtain calls and swept over the front of the stage as the actors moved into the audience to shake hands with as many people as possible". [38] Is the audience experiencing the emotion of romance or an instance of postmodern

"euploria"? [39] And what are we to conclude from the inclusion of a film within the play? Is this meant as food for multimodal thought or as pure playfulness? Does it reflect the action – a chase – or reflect *upon* it? And when a stage player is eventually seen to crash through the screen, is it pastiche or an aesthetic statement on the relationship between forms? Similarly, when the play was filmed in a television studio for its release on video, did Nunn retain the fiction of a filmed performance with a montage of the audience arriving and taking their seats in order to play on the cultural capital of "Shakespeare" or to further blur media boundaries?

Certainly, *The Comedy of Errors*, as a play experimenting with genres, was first-class material for a director who has declared, "I've never had any feeling of disconnection between the classical theater, or the contemporary theater, or musical theater, or the thing that we call opera. I've never wanted to categorize them, or to feel that they should be done by different people, different specialists". [40] Its mix of movies, song and dance, its eventual move from the RST to the Aldwych and, courtesy of John Rando, Broadway, somehow anticipated the mega-musicals Nunn embarked on some four years later, often with the same team – John Napier, Gillian Lynne, Roger Rees. Where *The Comedy of Errors* had blurred the frontier with the movies, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980), *Cats* (1981), *Les Misérables* (1985) now blurred the boundaries between the stage, poetry, and the novel, while increasingly espousing the "cultural logic of late capitalism", and not merely because *Nicholas Nickleby* had been started as a desperate bid to revive the flailing finances of the RSC. As Michael Billington noted at the turn of the century, "It seems to me no accident that the Thatcherite 80s were characterized by the rise and rise of the musical: a form that, with a few exceptions, appeals to our desire to escape and that actively celebrates capitalism. This was the decade of *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*; and, if anyone objects that the last-named stimulates revolutionary fervour, I'd say that it actually makes poverty picturesque". [41] *The Comedy of Errors* certainly heralded Nunn's later work, not least by making the financial world of Ephesus a hilarious merry-go-round.

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Notes

[1] *Gesta Grayorum* (London, 1688). On the December 1594 performance, see Margaret Knapp and Michael Kobialka, "Shakespeare and the Prince of

Purpoole: The 1594 Production of *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn Hall",
Theatre History Studies, 4 (1984), p. 71-81.

[2] About the same time, Theodor Komisarjevsky directed a version of the
play to music by Handel (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1938).

[3] Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times*, 1 August 1940.

[4] H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Comedy*, London, Methuen, 1932, p. 66.

[5] There is systematic interweaving of the generic modes in the play
(Adriana's nostalgic reminiscing of love and Luciana's wooing belong to
romance, Egeon is a father in search of his son, a romance topos, as well as
a merchant, an occupation typical of farce). But their criss-crossing is
beyond the scope of this article. On the overlapping of forms, see in
particular Kent Cartwright, "Surprising the Audience in *The Comedy of
Errors*", in Evelyn Gajowski (ed.), *Re-Visions of Shakespeare: Essays in
Honor of Robert Ornstein*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2004,
p. 215-230; also Martine Van Elk, "'This sympathized one day error': Genre,
Representation, and Subjectivity in *The Comedy of Errors*", *Shakespeare
Quarterly*, 60.1 (2009), p. 47-72.

[6] For John R. Ford, it is Nunn's hybrid of drama and musical which
translates Shakespeare's generic mix: "By creating a kind of hybrid, grafting
musical numbers and dance to the play's choreography of farce […] it
rediscovered the oppositional balance between the play's bustling farcical
language and movement and its more reflective and romantic narrative
frame", "'Methinks you are my glass': Looking for *The Comedy of Errors* in
Performance", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 24.1 (2006), p. 19.

[7] Roger Rees, "*The Comedy of Errors*: Reflections of an Actor", in Robert
Miola (ed.), *The Comedy of Errors*, *Critical Essays*, London, Routledge, 2001,
p. 501, p. 505, and p. 506; first published in Roger Sales (ed.), *Shakespeare
in Perspective*, London, BBC, 1982-85, vol. 2, p. 224-231.

[8] Sally Emerson, "Trevor Nunn's Musical Production, 1976", in *The Comedy of Errors, Critical Essays, op. cit.*, p. 498, originally published in *Plays and Players*, 24 (Dec. 1976), p. 37.

[9] In Amir Nizar Zuabi's production (RSC, 2012), the immediate context, in particular regarding refugees illegally entering Greece, retained its sinister immediacy. "Coming from where I come, the whole thing of being illegal somewhere has a very strong echo. From my point of view, Shakespeare is a Palestinian. […] That sense of making the comedy real – they are running for their lives, not running to be funny – makes a lot of sense. From the moment you read it this way, all the mistaken identities stop being just fun. There is deep anxiety under everything. This is what I want to investigate […] A Palestinian with a completely different bag of heritage […] can pick up *The Comedy of Errors* and completely identify with it in his understanding and perception", *The Guardian*, 11 June 2012.

[10] Adrian Noble made Ephesus a circus clown world with red noses (Stratford, 1983).

[11] *The Comedy of Errors*, directed by Trevor Nunn, DVD, Granada Ventures, 2012.

[12] References are to *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. T. S. Dorsch, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

[13] See Anne-Marie Costantini-Cornède, "'Into hey nonny, nonny': Much Ado About Nothing, Merry-Go-Round Comedy and Swirling Worlds in Kenneth Branagh's and Joss Whedon's Screen Versions", Shakespeare en devenir [En ligne], N°13 - 2018, Shakespeare en devenir, updated 03/12/2019, URL.

[14] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1991, p. 9. See also Jean Baudrillard*, Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, The university of Michigan Press, 1994.

[15] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[16] *Id.*

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[18] *Id.*

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[20] The "Father Time" duologue of II.2 could hardly belong to any but the Syracusans; see also V.1.307-318 for a complete network of time (weather/seasons/frost/night) and flesh images (eyes, ears, veins).

[21] The clock in Ephesus even seems to go backward at some point, cancelling the very notion of time: "Dromio S. – It was two ere I left him, and now the clock strikes one. | Adriana. – The hours come back; that did I never hear" (IV.2.23-54). On reversible time in *The Comedy of Errors*, see Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare's Comic Rites*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 128.

[22] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1968, p. 90.

[23] For developments on the market in *The Comedy of Errors*, see among others, Douglas Lanier, "'Stigmatical in making': The Material Character of *The Comedy of Errors*", *English Literary Renaissance*, 23 (1993), p. 81-112; Shankar Raman, "Marking Time: Memory and Market in *The Comedy of Errors*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 56.2 (2005), p. 176-205; Colette Gordon, "Crediting Errors: Credit, Liquidity, Performance and *The Comedy of Errors*", *Shakespeare*, 6.2 (2010), p. 165-184; Richard Finkelstein, "*The Comedy of Errors* and the Theology of Things", *Studies in English Literature*, 52.2 (2012), p. 325-344.

[24] Curtis Perry, "Commerce, Community, and Nostalgia in *The Comedy of Errors*", in Linda Woodbridge (ed.), *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism*, London, Palgrave, 2003, p. 41. Perry

notes the "careful intertwining of commerce and sociability" (p. 43) at a time when "[t]he expansion of the commodity market in the sixteenth century, coupled with chronic shortage of coin, meant that a great deal of buying and selling at all levels of society involved informal credit. Without banks or credit card companies to mediate this kind of exchange, the default of one household might well have a significant impact upon the fortunes of others. As a result, the early development of commodity culture in England created networks of credit and debt that linked communities together by making the economic success of each household depends on the creditworthiness of others" (p. 40). The "default" of Antipholus embarrasses the goldsmith, who needs the money to pay the merchant.

[25] John Wheeler, *A Treatise of Commerce…,* London, 1601, sigs. A3v-A4r.

[26] Martine Van Elk, "'This sympathized one day error': Genre, Representation, and Subjectivity in *The Comedy of Errors*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 60, 1 (2009), p. 57: "[I]dentity is not a core essence to be uncovered but […] based on access to and exchange of material goods"; see also Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 56-82; Curtis Perry, "Commerce, Community, and Nostalgia in *The Comedy of Errors*", in op. cit, p. 39-51; and Douglas Lanier, "'Stigmatical in the making': The Material Character of *The Comedy of Errors*", in *op. cit.*, p. 299-334.

[27] Shankar Raman, *art. cit.*, p. 194.

[28] Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

[29] Paul, the founder of the Christian Church lived, wrote, and preached there from AD 52-54. His passage in Ephesus and opposition to local merchants are narrated in Acts 19. Paul developed his views on marriage in the Epistles to the Ephesians, which serve as a basis for the discussions on marriage in the play, as seen previously. Tradition has it that Mary retired to Ephesus after the death of Christ and died there. John reportedly wrote the Book of Revelation in Ephesus. The worship of Artemis, for which Ephesus was initially known, was replaced by the worship of Mary especially after

the third ecumenical council held in Ephesus declared Mary *theodokos*, god-bearer, in AD 431.

[30] Martine Van Elk, *art. cit.*, p. 48: "*The Comedy of Errors* is *about* genre as a system of representation, offering a distinct lens on the world".

[31] Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre", *New Literary History*, 7.1 (1975), p. 158.

[32] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, op. cit.*, p. 19.

[33] *Id.*

[34] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, p. 27-30.

[35] Wilborn Hampton, *The New York Times*, 19 May 2001.

[36] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, op. cit.*, p. 69.

[37] Curtis Perry, "Commerce, Community, and Nostalgia in *The Comedy of Errors*", in *op. cit.*, p. 49.

[38] Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason (eds.), *Shakespeare in Performance*, London, Salamander, 1995, p. 54.

[39] For Fredric Jameson, "intensities", negative or positive, are a side effect of the breakdown of temporality: "[t]his present of the world […] signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, the high, the intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity", *Postmodernism, op. cit.*, p. 27.

[40] "Sir Trevor Nunn interview", Academy of Achievement, 26 February 2010. Web. 3 June 2014. URL.

[41] Michael Billington, "The Players", *The Guardian*, 2 July 2002.

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