

Theater review: 'Comedy of Errors'

Posted by [dwelker](#) January 24, 2009 08:20AM



Drew Foster/Bag&BaggageMaggie Chapin as Dromio and Nik Hoback as Antipholus in "The Comedy of Errors"

The attempt to make Shakespeare seem relevant is famously fraught with unfortunate outcomes (see: "Richard III" in full Nazi regalia), but the adaptation of "The Comedy of Errors" in the playful style of an animated cartoon, now playing at [Bag&Baggage Productions](#) in Hillsboro, works.

In addition to providing a solution to a problem of staging the play for modern audiences, it works because it features a cast of what must be the hardest working actors this side of Helvetia, making this an excellent, sweet, and irreverent way to get your fix of the bard this season.

"The Comedy of Errors"

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday, through Feb. 8

Where: [Venetian Theatre](#), 253 E. Main St., Hillsboro

Tickets: \$18-\$22, 503-693-3953 or [online](#)

Web site: [bagnbaggage.org](#)

It is necessary to keep in mind that "[The Comedy of Errors](#)" is no "[Hamlet](#)." It is one of Shakespeare's earliest works and it actually *is* cartoonish. Much depends on silly lines and puns, long expositions, and ridiculous coincidence. The plot could hardly be called delicately wrought: Two sets of twins, one of masters and one of slaves, are separated at birth. Many years later, all four of them wind up in the same town, where the confusion wrought by nobody being able to figure out who's who leads to beatings, arrest, spousal alienation, exorcism, and near-madness.

Director and adaptor Scott Palmer has accomplished the cartoon transformation using movement and pacing. Rather than standing around declaiming in the usual Shakespeare-play fashion that these characters are kinetic creatures, they skip, twirl, pose, and mug, either alone or in well-choreographed groups, and all at top speed.

The action takes place in front of projected animation backdrops created by Fred Gardner, an Emmy-winning animator who has worked on shows including ["Tiny Toon Adventures"](#) for Warner Bros. He gives us scenes straight out of Saturday morning Toonland (think Bugs Bunny, doc), such as gas-lit cobblestone streets lined by rows of higgledy-piggeldy buildings.

To reinforce that just-drawn look, designer Lacey Cassidy uses colorful wigs and costumes that seem freshly watercolored -- there are even visible brush marks on a couple of the jackets. And these characters can act. Maggie Chapin plays Dromio of Syracuse, one of the slave twins, as a cheeky but endearing wag. Nikolas Hoback brings just the right amount of confused anxiety to Antipholus of Syracuse, one of the master twins, and Gary Strong as Aegeon has some knock-out line delivery (of some knock-out lines) near the end of the play.

Because of the elegance of Shakespeare's later plays, it is easy to forget their context in a faraway culture much more primitive than ours. In his time, for example, blood sports like bear baiting were enormously popular. In this play, there are several instances of masters beating their slaves -- for laughs. One slave says of his master, "When I am cold, he heats me with beating; when I am warm, he cools me with beating."

Setting this play in the cartoon world solves this problem. It lets us know that different rules apply. In the land of cartoons, a character can be hit by a falling safe, lie on the street for a couple of seconds with birds tweeting in a circle around his head and X's where his eyes should be, then get up, dust himself off and go on his way. Staging the play as animation gives contemporary audiences a ready-made way of bridging a temporal divide and enjoying this satisfying, whimsical play.

Categories: [Performance Top Stories](#), [Theater Reviews](#)

Comments

Footer