The Comedy of Errors , National Theatre

Screened at Cornerhouse, Manchester
Reviewed by Anne Ryan March 2012

In these harsh times, it's good to see the National Theatre so popular, with international screenings of audience friendly plays and performances like this, including the likes of Lenny Henry. Following the success of James Cordon in One Man, Two Guvnors , once more we see a comedian and TV star on stage, beamed to a screen at the Cornerhouse.

Lenny Henry has immersed himself in Shakespeare in recent years, beginning with a literature degree with the Open University. He has been appearing frequently in radio dramas and enjoyed great success as Othello. The role of Antipholus of Syracuse is not as demanding as that great tragic role, but his talents as a comic are brilliantly used in the drama.

As often with Shakespeare's comedies the story is slight and involves a great suspension of

audience disbelief. The plot concerns two sets of identical twins, separated as infants by a shipwreck. So when Antipholus arrives in Ephesus as part of his long search for his twin brother, he is, of course, immediately mistaken for someone else – the twin, with hilarious results! The drama that follows is somewhat crude with lots of scenes of mistaken identity – as the Antipholus twins are mirrored in their incompetent servants, the identical Dromio brothers. The action is vigorous and farcical and the chaos takes the audience along for a frantic ride.

Dominic Cooke’s fast moving modern-dress production is set in a mythical Romanian city of crumbling buildings. This recession-ravaged setting is populated by lippy prostitutes, mad shrinks, sinister heavies and a wandering street band who sing British pop hits in their native language.

In his lead role Lenny Henry brings a comedian's ease and familiarity with comic business that has become traditional and his double-takes are worth the price of admission alone. He also shows a tremendous stage presence and while not copying James Cordon's ad-libbing he does interact wonderfully with the audience. His look of stunned confusion, rage and wonder as he finally realises that he has found his family, show a true actor's range and it is deeply moving when the twins are finally re-united.

Chris Jarman plays the Ephesus twin – and for once in this role he does bear a more plausible resemblance to Lenny Henry. He is an interesting and effective actor, but of course cannot compete with the star's comedic skills. The primary twins are supported by Lucian Msamati and Daniel Poyser as the Dromios, who are equally funny, particularly in Msamati's speech about the attractions of a kitchen maid who pursues him.

As Antipholus of Ephesus twin's wife (see how confusing it gets) Claudie Blackley is delightful, especially when she unknowingly treats her brother-in-law to supper and bed, much to Lenny Henry's amazement and delight. She plays the role like an escapee from The Only Way is Essex. The production entertains through comedy, but also captures the poetry and deeper emotion of this farcical play.

The casting of TV stars and the production of such a crowd-friendly play might call into the question the purpose of the National Theatre. Should it be aiming for a mass market or giving artists the opportunity to experiment? At a time when West End theatres concentrate on musicals, the works of great dramatists are dependent upon the subsidised sector. The Royal Opera House, which receives an even greater per seat subsidy, has recently been heavily criticised for its challenging production of Dvorak's Rusakla which was greeted with boos and cat-calls.

In Manchester we have seen the Green Room close - a venue for avant-garde dance and theatrical productions. So is the future one of populist productions appealing to mass audiences and business sponsorship? I do not know the answer, but these are obviously challenging economic times for the arts, perhaps the only thing we can do as audiences is vote with our feet and support the arts while we still can (editor's note - listen again to the Salon discussion on Valuing the Arts
). In a particularly poor week for mainstream cinema releases, the Cornerhouse shows yet again the need for an alternative to the mainstream commercial.

Some may criticise this Comedy of Errors as a populist production, but Shakespeare cannot always be for purists, some of the audience will be seeing this play for the first time and many will have been attracted by the star casting, ***but it works***. As we read that business sponsorship of the arts is falling further and the whole of the public sector faces cuts, this may be the future of the subsidised theatre – fewer experimental and niche productions and more targeted to a mass audience. And with this screening innovation, the audience is now worldwide.