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Cal Shakes' 'Comedy of Errors' is Fast-Paced Fun

By Lou Fancher



From left: Nemuna Ceesay as Adriana and Danny Scheie as Dromio in Cal Shakes' *The Comedy of Errors*, directed by Aaron Posner. Photo Kevin Berne

manservants: identical twins Dromio of Syracuse and Ephesus (Danny Scheie, an actor with tremendous comedic instincts and a broad vocabulary of pirouettes). When Antipholus of S arrives in Ephesus with his Dromio, searching for his long-lost brother, mayhem ensues. Ephesians mistake one brother for the other, masters misidentify one servant for the other, and so on. Adrianna (the rock solid Nemuna Ceesay), the wife of Antipholus E, and her sister Luciana (Tristan Cunningham, revealing her circus background and applying it with effortless velocity to Antipholus S), join the brouhaha. The women add love, lust and "you're a louse" declarations to the equation. Soon, everyone knows everyone and no one knows anyone - until the end, when the whole mystery is cleared up and the family is reunited. Even the long-lost mother shows up, emerging as an Abbess (Patty Gallagher, more in a moment, on her).

Leaping and loping nimbly through the Bruns Amphitheater and across set designer Nina Ball's colorful, platform-and-stairway set, the actors are unafraid to plop into an audience member's lap - or pilfer an unprotected bottle of wine. Costume designer Beaver Bauer has a rich eye for texture and does a fine job handling the cut and style of costumes - especially considering the seven-

The synopsis is simple, the laughs are plentiful, the acting spools out joyfully, direction is sturdy, and the choreography is nothing short of magical in California Shakespeare Theater's current production, "Comedy of Errors."

Director Aaron Posner, returning after helming Cal Shakes' "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in 2009, picks up William Shakespeare's 421-year-old play and takes it for a spin. Like bumper cars, it's perfect for summer: fast-paced fun, with "dings" both certain and celebrated. If there's occasionally a bit too much striving for a joke, it can be forgiven. After all, a theater buff craving depth can dig in and appreciate The Bard's deft tilting of a classic story of mistaken identity into something of a pronouncement. Shakespeare, even in this farcical realm, manages to pierce the heart and cause a person to ponder true identity, acceptance, parental love, and more - amid the chuckling.

Although no one dies (rare in a play by Shakespeare), there is a shipwreck and death sentence to start the action. Pronounced upon Egeon (Ron Campbell, playing multiple roles with rubbed-raw clarity), the merchant has violated the trading rules of the city of Ephesus. A Duke (Liam Vincent, who surfaces as a scene-stealing gem throughout the production) hears his plea for mercy and grants him a one-day reprieve.

Why a reprieve? Because Egeon is in Ephesus to search for the sons he lost in the shipwreck: identical twins, Antipholus of Syracuse and Ephesus (Adrian Danzig, convincingly dignified and/or indignant in the "dual" roles).

Of course, the high-class kids have

member cast's need to whip in and out of them at a hellish pace behind the scenes.

One of the best aspects of attending a Cal Shakes performance is that even when ambition exceeds artistry (a rare occurrence, but it happened a few times in a performance on July 6), there is excellence. Gallagher, in multiple roles not typically viewed as leading roles of the play, emerges as a real stunner. She's funny, commanding, astute in playing off fellow actors, spontaneous and genuine.

And Movement Director Erika Chong Shuch deserves her own ovation. There's a tango with a torch press lift (go see it if you're needing a ballet fix during the dance season's slow summer months), Gallagher's hilarious Courtesan solo, an apple/kiwi interaction that if not choreographed by Shuch is surely movement coached, and the cast's vigorous spins and pratfalls. All is deftly handled and delivered with a perfect balance between dexterity and dumb luck. As audience, we're never worried they'll hurt themselves, but afterwards, aching actor's bones must prevail.

"Comedy of Errors" ends July 20, but don't despair if you have to miss it: after Cal Shakes' Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone directs a production of George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" (July 30-Aug. 24), Shuch returns as movement director for "A Midsummer Night's Dream," directed by Shana Cooper (Sept. 3-28).

For information about California Shakespeare Theater, at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda., call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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