

THE GUILD
Shakespeare



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Shakespeare

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

BY
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

EDITED BY
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Foreword by Kevin Kline

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CONTENTS

Foreword to <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> by Kevin Kline	vii
Editor's Introduction to <i>The Comedy of Errors</i> and <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	xiii
<i>THE COMEDY OF ERRORS</i>	1
<i>MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING</i>	169

FOREWORD

to
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING
by Kevin Kline



George Bernard Shaw once suggested that trying to describe a theatre experience through words is as difficult as trying to describe the experience of a painting through dance.

Bearing that in mind, here are an actor's very subjective recollections of having prepared and performed the role of Benedick, opposite Blythe Danner's Beatrice, during the 1988 season at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park. The New York Shakespeare Festival production was directed by Gerald Freedman and produced by Joseph Papp.

KEVIN KLINE has appeared in a variety of leading roles with the New York Shakespeare Festival and The Acting Company, including Hamlet, Richard III, Henry V, and Benedick. Among his acting awards are two Tonys—Best Supporting Actor in a Musical for *On the Twentieth Century* (1978) and Best Actor in a Musical for *The Pirates of Penzance* (1980), The William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theatre, and an Academy Award for *A Fish Called Wanda*.

vii

THE GUILD SHAKESPEARE

I had always believed *Much Ado About Nothing* to be a nearly indestructible crowd-pleaser, and I had wanted to play Benedick for many years, not so much from having read it in school as from having seen several productions over the past twenty years, both in the U.S. and in Great Britain. Whenever I saw the play, I was struck not only by its unique interplay of comedy and romance but also by the scope of its tone, which fluctuates spasmodically between the very light and the quite dark. The trick to a successful production seemed to be in somehow reconciling these two extremes into one harmonious whole.

Taking our cue from the fact that most of the text is written in conversational prose rather than formal, heightened verse, we did not approach the play reverently in rehearsals. "Screwball comedy" was a phrase which Gerald Freedman borrowed on a few occasions to describe the style of the production, which seemed to me very apt as it conjured images of those romantic, zany '30s movies in which the hero and heroine were strong-willed, high-strung, madly in love with one another, and locked in a battle of complete denial of that love . . . adversaries doomed to end up together.

During rehearsals the actors portraying Don John, Borachio, and Conrade explored the extremes of their characters' darkness—which extremity had the felicitous result of revealing their hidden but seldom-realized comic potential. Don John's paroxysms of jealousy and rage were both believable and laughable. The Act IV, scene 1 denunciation of Hero was played straightforwardly for all its dramatic values (with the possible exception of Benedick's ironical interjection, "This looks not like a nuptial," a

viii

FOREWORD BY KEVIN KLINE

line whose comedic capabilities, however ill-timed or tasteless, I made no attempt to squelch).

In early rehearsals I began by playing Benedick as a loud, loutish, even braggart soldier—a sort of third cousin of *Miles Gloriosus*—with little of the courtier about him. This obvious "type" slowly gained some dimension, I think, as I discovered that beneath his swagger, his posturing and soldierly machismo, there dwelt a rather confused adolescent in search of his identity and wishing desperately to be loved. It was Benedick's search for his identity, in fact, which eventually became for me the explanation or motivation, if you will, for all of his contradictory behavior. He seemed to me to be trying on different masks, or personalities, until he found one that fit.

I began to see that what commonly is referred to as Benedick's wit is in fact a series of buffoonish bids for attention. And whenever his "wit" is directed at Beatrice, it is desperately defensive, and always protesting too much.

"She speaks poniards, and every word stabs," Benedick howls. If we hear his description literally rather than dismiss it as mere irony, we can sense just how much she gets to him and therefore how desperate his defense must be. To me, their verbal swordplay is of the broadsword variety. It has little in common with the witty repartee of such Restoration lovers as Mirabell and Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, where subtlety and obliqueness of phrase are so prized. The world of *Much Ado* is Italian, not English, and our sets, costumes, and music appropriately reflected that passionate Mediterranean spirit.

I saw the central action of Benedick's story to be that of falling in love, and I began to notice in the trajectory of that fall a

ix

progress: from denial to adolescent infatuation through narcissistic love to mature love.

But while there is much potential humor in this evolution alone, the comedy is intensified by the attendant struggle Benedick undergoes as he tries to reconcile his longstanding public image of confirmed misogynous bachelor with his new private posture of romantic lover.

This struggle is compounded by Benedick's categorical refusal to do anything halfway. His unswerving absoluteness may be the character's most endearing quality, as well as his most ridiculous. He is as unequivocal and definitive in the oaths he swears against marriage in Act I as he is in his Act II decision to requite Beatrice's love for him ("I will be horribly in love with her"), and as he is in his ultimate Act V pronouncement that "Man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion." It is, in fact, this "conclusion" that finally frees Benedick from the prison of his consistency. (In Elizabethan usage, "giddy" also meant "changeable.")

I eventually reached a similar conclusion about the play—that it was as mercurial and giddy in tone as is human nature itself. And the key to playing it seemed to be in giving both the light and dark tones their full due, alternately, and also allowing for their simultaneity.

An example of this is the exchange between Beatrice and Benedick in Act IV, Scene 1, after the denunciation of Hero. Early in the run, we played this scene, regrettably, only for comedy. But as our performances matured, this encounter became not only a comic scene but also a dramatic love scene: the audi-

ence continued to laugh at Beatrice and Benedick but also began to get a sense of their genuinely caring for one another.

During the Central Park engagement rain interrupted several performances, but the audience refused to leave. They steadfastly waited out the weather, demanding a resolution to the play—a tribute to the power of Shakespeare's storytelling.

And whenever the play was allowed to reach its conclusion, and Beatrice and Benedick finally kissed, the audience cheered, for they fully apprehended the extent of the journey these characters had traveled. And in the meantime, Beatrice and Benedick had found not only one another but themselves as well.

Editor's Introduction to
THE COMEDY OF ERRORS
 and
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING



The Comedy of Errors is widely regarded as the most derivative, the least imaginative, of Shakespeare's works. So overtly does it adhere to the conventions of Roman drama (particularly the character types and plot devices of Titus Maccius Plautus, ca. 254–184 B.C.) that commentators sometimes apologize for it as an apprentice piece, an exercise in imitation by a novice who needed to demonstrate his mastery of a recognized Latin exemplar before he could proceed to the dazzling experiments in dramatic form that would mark his subsequent development as an artist.

There is probably something to be said for this view, especially if we think of *The Comedy of Errors* as one of the earliest, if not the very first, of Shakespeare's plays. What we should bear in mind, however, is that although the comedy may in fact have been produced at the beginning of the dramatist's career—in the initial months of 1589, say, or even in late 1588—there is no compelling evidence for so early a date. Indeed, recent studies

have led some scholars to hypothesize a period of composition much closer to the time of the play's first recorded performance, before a cultivated private audience at the Gray's Inn Christmas revels of 1594.

A careful examination of its dramaturgical techniques will show that *The Comedy of Errors* is considerably more sophisticated than a superficial appraisal of its structure would seem to indicate. This does not necessarily point to a later date, of course, but it clearly accords with one. And it suggests that we might be more attentive to this brief work's virtues if we were to consider it, not as an artistic confirmation rite, but as a deceptively subtle adaptation of Plautus by a playwright who may well have come to the task with proven credentials.

Like *The Menaechmi*, the Plautine model it chiefly resembles, *The Comedy of Errors* revolves around the misunderstandings that issue from mistaken identity. In this case the confusions that propel the action are the consequence of not one but two sets of twins, who have been sundered since infancy and who have no way of knowing that their counterparts are even alive, let alone traversing the same streets in the play's bustling Mediterranean marketplace. As dramatic providence would have it, after more than two decades of separation the sibling pairs remain indistinguishable not only in name, appearance, and manner, but even in the apparel they happen to have donned for what will turn out to be the day of their lives. In a way that parallels the *Amphitruo*, another Plautine antecedent for Shakespeare's comedy, this situation precipitates a multiple identity crisis, a set of trying circumstances in which the Antipholus and Dromio who make their home in Ephesus suddenly realize to their dismay that they have

been supplanted in their own community—indeed barred from their very doors—by a brace of impostors they later learn to be the unwitting boys from Syracuse.

But Plautus was not the dramatist's only source for *The Comedy of Errors*, and by drawing on the very different tonalities of a late Greek romance about Apollonius of Tyre Shakespeare folded the play's comic artifice into an enveloping narrative about the most heart-wrenching of Fortune's vicissitudes. Through a sequence of reversals, revelations, and restorations that are frequently so far-fetched as to challenge the audience to dismiss the action as an "improbable Fiction" (*Twelfth Night*, III.iv.139), Shakespeare transmutes the comedy's incidents into what appear at times to be intimations of allegory. The result is a complex work that commences as knockabout farce but concludes with a miraculous "Nativity" that expels all "Grief" (V.i.404) and delivers us to an atmosphere suffused in wonder.

An old man who is all too willing to surrender his hapless hopes to the "rig'rous Statutes" that condemn him at the beginning of the play discovers in the last act that his "Woes end likewise with the ev'ning Sun" (I.i.9, 27). An Abbess who has been cloistered for nearly a quarter of a century is reunited with a husband whose "home Return" (I.i.59) occurs at a point where neither of them could have dreamt of such a blessed event. A brother who "to the World" is like "a Drop of Water / That in the Ocean seeks another Drop" finds not one "Drop" but two: the "Fellow" for whom he went in quest when he left his secure niche on the east coast of Sicily, and the bride in whom, without being conscious of it, he was seeking to "lose" and thereby gain his deepest "self" (I.ii.35-40, III.ii.47-52) through matrimony.

"Not Mad but Mated" (III.ii.54)—that turns out to be the key to this "sympathized One Day's Error" (V.i.395). And what the play implies is that those who are "obedient to the Stream" (I.i.85) will eventually arrive on shore for the kind of "Gossip's Feast" (V.i.403) that symbolizes both personal regeneration and a restored social order in which those who entered "the World like Broth'r and Broth'r" will now "go Hand in Hand" again, "not one before another" (V.i.421-22).

By setting *The Comedy of Errors* in Ephesus, Shakespeare reminds his audience not only of the sorcery originally associated with this ancient city (a connection familiar to Elizabethans from the nineteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles) but also of the major themes in the Apostle Paul's epistle to the seaport's newly converted citizens. Of these themes, one, the Christian concept of marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33), is the basis for Luciana's counsel to the shrewish Adriana in II.i.15-25 and the Abbess' even more telling admonition to Antipholus' wife in V.i.68-86. The other, the Pauline distinction between "the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts," and "the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:17-32), is intimately related to the comedy's emphasis on deliverance from bondage—its focus on the renewed spirit that prompts men and women to perceive themselves as "members one of another."

What Shakespeare does, in effect, is to baptize Plautine farce in Pauline theology. And what results from the "Sea-change" is a New Comedy that is "Rich and Strange" (*The Tempest*, I.ii) in many of the ways that we have now come to identify with the playwright's late Romances.

But if *The Comedy of Errors* ends with "Strange Events" (*As You Like It*, V.iv.135), the same can be said of the other comedy in this volume. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, the "Wonder" (V.iv.70) that draws the action to a happy resolution is all the more striking because of the familiar, realistic world it intrudes upon and implicitly rebukes.

Unlike *The Comedy of Errors*, which is almost entirely in verse (even the Dromios resort to rhymed doggerel on most of the occasions when they deviate from the iambic pentameter that dominates the dialogue), *Much Ado About Nothing* is almost entirely in prose. Only rarely does its discourse partake of the heightening of meter, and when it does the characters so defined come across as comparatively "artificial": mannered, reserved, formal, or otherwise constrained by society's norms. The personalities who interest us the most virtually never speak verse; the two significant exceptions occur in the first part of IV.i, before Benedick and Beatrice are left alone on the stage and revert back to their normal prose dialogue, and in V.iv, where the decorum befitting a wedding imposes a dignified bearing on them as well as everyone else. Meanwhile, of the two characters who impress us as most subject to their socially conditioned roles, Claudio and Hero, one or the other participates in every scene that includes blank verse.

"Nothing" is a word of potent ambiguity in Shakespeare (the playwright would later explore its potential most profoundly in the "Nothing will come of Nothing" that constitutes the essence of *King Lear*), and in *Much Ado About Nothing* its implications include the possibilities inherent in the Elizabethan homonym "Noting." Through the machinations of the surly Don John, who

twice tricks Claudio into "noting" things that undermine his faith in others, an innocent maiden is rejected at the altar by a young lord who believes his honor to have been scorned. Fortunately, Don John's accomplices have themselves been "noted" by the most ineffectual Watch that ever patrolled a city; and despite the incompetence of their asinine Constable, these faithful but doltish servants of the Duke succeed in bringing the malefactors to justice. In the meantime, the Friar who was officiating at the wedding has "noted" in the spurned bride a behavior that persuades him of her honesty, and he sets in motion a process that will lead to reconciliation through ritual reenactments of both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

The "notings" that have always given the most pleasure to audiences, however, are the ones we see engineered by the friends of Benedick and Beatrice. Despite the "Merry War" (I.i.63) with which they try to mask their interest in each other, these two wit-crackers convince others that they belong together. And in a pair of scenes that have never failed to set theatres aroar with laughter, the most stubborn of love-heretics succumb to an "inraged Affection" (II.iii.110) that neither can quite admit to the other in a fashion that would permit them to "woo peaceably" (V.ii.77-78). Eventually Benedick concedes that "the World must be peopled" (II.iii.257-58); and by the end of the play Beatrice yields "upon great Persuasion" (V.iv.95). But it is anything but clear that they do so much as exchange a kiss before the dance that lightens their hearts and ours at the conclusion of their final "Skirmish of Wit."

When Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*, probably in 1598 or early 1599, he could have drawn from a number of

antecedents for the story of Hero and Claudio, among them passages from Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) that had been translated into English by Sir John Harington and adapted by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* (1590). But he probably drew principally upon a story in the *Nouvelle* of Matteo Bandello (1554), either in the original Italian or in a French version included in François de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1569). For the sparring of Benedick and Beatrice he may have derived some inspiration from a passage in Baldasare Castiglione's *The Courtier* (probably in Sir Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation from the Italian). But he could also have gone back to Petruchio's wooing of the fiery Katherina in his own *Taming of the Shrew* (1593-94). For Dogberry and the Watch, the playwright almost certainly profited from his own observations. According to one of Shakespeare's early biographers, the poet modeled his inimitable Constable on an actual officer who lived in nearby Buckinghamshire.

The most authoritative text for *Much Ado About Nothing* is the Quarto published in 1600, an edition that appears to have been based directly or indirectly on the author's manuscript. The 1623 First Folio includes a slightly edited version of the Quarto text. The only early text for *The Comedy of Errors* is the one to be found in the 1623 Folio. It too appears to derive from the author's playscript, possibly by way of a copy by the scribe Ralph Crane.