

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS
Rain or Shine Theatre Company
Tuckwell Amphitheatre, Cheltenham
23rd July 2013

There was something ominous about the champagne cork, which rocketed onto the stage during the opening fanfare to this Ephesian escapade. It heralded an evening of high jinks, with several larger than life characters embroiled in the kind of whacky storyline that predated the Whitehall farces by nearly four centuries. Indeed, could this have been Shakespeare's own Globe farce? Forsooth, the Immortal Bard packed enough scope for implausibility into the shortest, and daftest, play he ever wrote, and, under his inspired direction, James Reynard's versatile troupers brought it all hilariously to life: a fluffy parrot, bawdy sea shanties, stray hats, the Great Up Hatherley Joke, and an amusing Long John Silver impersonation with every leg still in place.

Hotfoot from the Everyman Studio, Rain or Shine were back in their element in the great outdoors, well met by fairylight in the sylvan charm of the Tuckwell Amphitheatre, and making full and judicious use of this enchanting auditorium.

The plot is very complicated and silly, and largely reliant on that now rather hackneyed device - mistaken identity. Two sets of twins and their parents, driven apart by a shipwreck 25 years previously, remain hopeful of a family reunion in Ephesus, that icon of 16th century respectability and moral fortitude (not). Risking his life to find his lost sons is Syracusan merchant Egeon, who has no idea that his former wife Emilia isn't a million miles away, either.

If the first act wasn't zany enough, the second careered along wildly with all the stability of a frail ketch on the high seas, building through any number of improbable situations to its crazy climax, typified by Jayne Lloyd's mutation from an inviting courtesan to a virginal abbess. Featuring a highly suspect game of statues, Gunfight at the Ephesus Corral, Adriana's impassioned plea to Duke Solinus delivered at twice the speed of sound, and a hornpipe hoedown to finish, it all resembled an edition of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* I'm not sure that shackle chain was meant to break in two, but it generated further gales of laughter (and not all of them from the audience) and seemed strangely in keeping with the unrelenting lunacy that drove this Mediterranean mischief. At its heart, however, lay a masterclass in clear diction, brilliant timing and faultless performances, especially from the wonderfully goofy Dromios. Thank goodness for differently striped breeches; even I had a hard time distinguishing one twin from the other throughout this swashbuckling spectacle. Another Rain or Shine winner – and no mistake.

Simon Lewis