

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



Rodney Gardiner (Dromio of Louisiana and Harlem)

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Why set *The Comedy of Errors* in Harlem? Shakespeare's comedy is more than a knockabout farce of mistaken identities and desire deferred launched when twins arrive from Louisiana (Syracuse) in the city of Harlem (Ephesus). Bravura comic high jinks have made *The Comedy of Errors* an audience favorite. But this is also the story of a family whose members are presumed to be lost at sea because of a shipwreck. The heart and soul of the play may be found in the unlikely and delightful unification of this family after decades of loss and separation.

One of the tragedies of slavery was the destruction of black families; couples were sold to different masters, children sold away from their parents. After Reconstruction, during the Great Black Migration, roughly six million African Americans traveled north to pursue prosperity and freedom. Many gravitated to Harlem, New York, and although race prejudice persisted, a new way of life emerged.

From 1919 to the late 1930s, Harlem exploded in a Renaissance of music by Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Eubie Blake, film by director Oscar Micheaux and literature by Zora Neale Hurston and Harlem's poet laureate Langston Hughes, among many others.

Their work irrevocably changed American culture and literature.

In black communities, there's a long tradition of greeting and acknowledgment. Today's "Wassup?" and "Hey brotha/sista!" goes back to post-Reconstruction and the Great Migration. We recognize and (re)discover our cousins, aunties, parents and siblings in the streets after a history of separation. On the streets of our communities, it can feel like an endless family reunion. During the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, it often was.

What joy might result when Shakespeare's comedy of mistaken identity, longing and family reunion unfolds in this world?

—KENT GASH

ISLAND (excerpt)

Dream within a dream,
Our dream deferred.
Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard?

—Langston Hughes

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