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Elizabeth B. Pedersen  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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GOMDS  
– Grumpy Old Men Doing Shakespeare –  
*The Comedy of Errors* as metaphor for life, aging and building community

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By  
Elizabeth Boomie Pedersen  
MFA VCU 2017  
(BA Princeton University 1982)

Director: Aaron D. Anderson  
Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the Department of Theatre,  
Director of Undergraduate Studies,  
Assistant Director of the MFA Program in Movement Pedagogy,  
Affiliate Faculty in the Department of Internal Medicine

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May 2017

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The road to Graduate School would never have been on my map were it not for the support of my partner in life, love and theatre, J. Taylor. Or for that matter, the (unwitting) support of my sons, all of whom but one are gone from home. Thank you all.

Profound gratitude to Carol Pedersen, my mother, who herself went back to school after my brother and I were gone from home, for the inspiration and the support – I look forward to many more years of collaboration – and to my brother Nym for always making sure I don't take myself too seriously.

To Emma Givens, with whom I have had the pleasure to walk, shoulder-to-shoulder, through this process, thank you for the conversations, the propping up from time to time, the long walks by the river and for being my daughter.

To Terry Sumey, whose friendship, generosity and belief in theatre made much of this possible and to Tyra Robinson for being a good friend though it all, thank you.

To Dr. Noreen Barnes who waited until I could actually get here to retire, “words cannot wield the matter” - thank you - how lucky I am!

And finally, thank you, thank you, thank you to my band of Grumpy Old Men without whom there would have been no *Comedy of Errors*, onstage or off. To you gentlemen I owe a huge debt of gratitude and from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Hats off – here's to another one soon!

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## ABSTRACT

GOMDS – GRUMPY OLD MEN DOING SHAKESPEARE – THE COMEDY OF ERRORS AS REHEARSAL FOR LIFE, AGING AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

By Elizabeth Boomie Pedersen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University 2017

Major Director: Aaron D. Anderson, PhD

(Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the Department of Theatre, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Assistant Director of the MFA Program in Movement Pedagogy, Affiliate Faculty in the Department of Internal Medicine)

This thesis explores the process of building community over time, through collaboration, to rehearse and produce a portable production of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, looking at the elements of time, trust and age with an ensemble of ten men, all actors over the age of 55. The building of trust over time was vital to the production process and the actors had the time to embody their roles and the language of the play. We look at the questions “why this play,” “why all men?” “why theatre?” and investigate the physical nature of the play and its violence in the tradition of The Three Stooges or Punch and Judy. We will look at the themes of aging, discrimination and the search for family and identity, all of which have resonance today, through the lens of play.

## INTRODUCTION to a THESIS

“One such characteristic, which I take to be the defining quality of these early comedies, is their playfulness. In them Shakespeare dramatically announces his sense of the way play, in its almost infinite variety, can affect and transform the world; that is, he celebrates his delight in his own creative powers, in the possibilities of drama itself, and in the vital worlds created by the union of such powers with such possibilities.”

J. Dennis Huston, Introduction

We all have reasons for doing theatre. Those reasons are intensely personal. Our taste is subjective, our relationship to theatre is equally subjective; after all, “de gustibus non disputandum est.” There really is no accounting for taste. In order to understand the “why” of my all-male-over-55 version of *The Comedy of Errors*, why this production made sense for me at this moment, I had to examine my own life. In the process, I have had to connect many dots to find the path that has led me here. What follows is part personal narrative, part discussion of a process and finally a possible application to the larger world of what I have discovered in the journey culminating with this project, GOMDS.

When I was very young, I began to study ballet in order to correct an anatomical proclivity that might have led to problems later on. I loved it. I studied in New York City with a teacher from the Ballet Russe, very disciplined, very strict. The study of ballet provided structure and something dependable for me that was perhaps missing in my life. I followed that teacher to the Joffrey Ballet School but as I got older, the very structure that had been so positive and the expectation that grew as I did, backfired. When I was in 10th grade my mother

asked if I wanted to quit ballet. I was on scholarship both at the Joffrey Ballet School where it was expected that I would go on to join the Apprentice company and then go on to be a full-fledged company member. I was also on full scholarship at the all-girls high school I had landed at, after stints in other private and public schools, with the expectation of heading to college upon graduation. Here were two worlds colliding; the pressure was great indeed. I went to ballet class every day after school and when we asked the headmistress if I could get gym credit for the ballet (which would have allowed me to take an earlier class and therefore start my homework earlier so that I could get to bed earlier) the answer was no. If that privilege was given to me, we were told, then it would have to be offered to everyone else. Of course no one else was asking...and so I continued, taking class until 7 or 8, coming home and doing homework, taking 3 classes on Saturdays, doing homework and the summers – 5 days a week of class after class...when my mother's question came, I leapt at the chance to simplify my life. But at what cost? With the discipline gone, I became anorexic. I needed to have control over some part of my life and as all good anorexics do, I did it with diet. Eventually I recovered, (although an eating disorder never really disappears,) but I had by this time thrown my creative impulses wholeheartedly into theatre. I had always done theatre, been around theatre, from kindergarten. My mother was an Equity actress and I remember sitting in an Off Broadway theatre when I was very young, watching a production of *The Dragon* in which she had what I remember to be a major part. She was my mother after all! And yes, I decided I wanted to be an actress when I grew up.

Theatre became part of my life; in college I ran a campus theatre with a friend (who is still a collaborator); I worked at McCarter Theatre as assistant wardrobe mistress; I took every theatre class I could at least twice. I also took every dance and choreography class I could. I



was called into the Dean's office at one point and told in no uncertain terms that I was not allowed to do any more theatre. And when I graduated – finally, after 7 long years of on again/off again commitment to getting my degree (remember the collision of the worlds of academia and the arts) – I was awarded both halves of the Frances LeMoyné Paige Prize for Theatre and Dance. Maybe they were just happy to see me go! Or maybe I had truly excelled in both areas. I had little faith in myself.

After graduation, I went with a college group to the Edinburgh Theatre Festival, taking 5 pieces: I acted in two and directed two. And when I returned from that I went immediately to Yale, where I had been asked to be part of the Summer Cabaret Company. There I worked with designers Derek McLane and Catherine Zuber and actors Rocky Dutton and Christian Clemenson. Playwright Eric Ehn was part of our ensemble. I was in the company of theatre artists who would go on to become well established, even famous, but for whatever reason, I was unable to find my legs. I worked in a French cheese store; I applied to Graduate School at Columbia for Directing and was accepted; I met a man I knew I would marry and indeed found myself turning down Graduate School to marry him. Before I knew what had happened, I found myself married, estranged from my family and in Tokyo.

In Tokyo I found the theatre again. In the ten years we were there on and off, I had 4 children but never stopped my theatre activity for very long, whether we were in the US or Tokyo, dragging my children with me when I could. I was active to the point of distraction, directing, writing, acting, touring. At one point my then husband told me, much like the Dean in college, that I was not allowed to do any more theatre. I didn't listen. I was not the idealized, good wife of Luciana's speech! (II, I, 29)

When I moved to the Charlottesville area from Tokyo, I was again in search of

community. And again, I found that community in the theatre, specifically at Live Arts in Charlottesville. For 5 or 6 years I was active and happy there, even though my life was falling apart; my now ex-husband had kidnapped our two middle sons, taking them back to Tokyo under pretense of a mini-vacation and I fought for 15 months to get them back. During that time I held onto my sanity by relying on the sense of community that I had developed through the theatre. I remember stepping off the stage after the first scene of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, in which I played Nadia Lenin who appears only in the first and last scenes of the play, getting in my car and driving to the courthouse where there was a Tokyo-Charlottesville conference call at 8:30pm our time; when it was over, I drove back to the theatre and stepped back onstage for the final scene. I did all this in costume, a fact that I don't think the judge even noticed. But this experience shows me just how integral theatre was in my life. This was my community. This was where I felt safe, where I felt engaged, where I felt necessary. Where I could live fully.

As the years went by and things changed, Charlottesville changed; Live Arts moved into a new building and the entire “gestalt” was transformed. Gone was the sense of inclusion and real sense of community. Gone was the opportunity to experiment, replaced by programming that included almost exclusively sure-fire audience hits to insure full houses to pay for the enormous overhead of the new building. The sense of team play, of ensemble, or any kind of equality was gone, even architecturally - the ever-increasing paid staff was on the fourth floor while the work done by the many volunteers – indentured servitude - happened on the floors below. Plantation theatre as my mother calls it. But I had lost my community. Tensions between the AD, who was increasingly megalomaniacal and myself led to difficulties in my working there easily any more. Happily and coincidentally, I had been offered the opportunity to take on the Managing Directorship of a small black box theatre in an adjoining county. And

so I went from being a member of a community that I had helped establish, to dealing with the challenge of finding and defining a community in an area in which I was, effectively, an outsider.

Seven years passed; our much-loved but under-funded theatre lost its venue (actually we decided to vacate instead of continuing the dysfunctional landlord/tenant dance) and I found that once again, I was searching for community, looking for the people I could work with collaboratively to create something that had some purpose and meaning in a world that was becoming increasingly difficult to understand. I was becoming bitter and nasty and had all but given up on the possibility of theatre as a transformative experience. So I decided that maybe now was the time to go to Graduate School. After all, three times is the charm and I had tried twice before (not including the NYC effort) to make school possible and had been unable to do so because of life happening. I figured I had nothing to lose. In 2015 I applied for the third time to VCU but discovered that in fact my daughter had also decided to apply to the same program at the same time. This was a major turning point; I decided not to go, to let my daughter have her time. After all, she was young and starting; I was old enough to have already figured it out – at least isn't that what getting older means? But that wasn't the case and when she found out that I too had decided to go, she encouraged me and so we enrolled together. I mention this because of the generational impact of a life in the theatre. My mother was for all intents and purposes my line to the theatre and perhaps I was for my daughter. There is something about being part of three generations of theatre women...

A year and a half ago, in October 2015, I attended a Gero-Stat event in Charlottesville that was a joint presentation by VCU Gerontology and the Jefferson Area Board for Aging. The event was a showing of the film “The Grand Generation” with a panel discussion afterwards

about aging and living and happiness. The film, by Academy Award winner and friend Paul Wagner, depicted in documentary form the lives of six older individuals, a Jewish baker, an Appalachian coal miner, a Chesapeake Bay waterman, a Mississippi Delta embroiderer, an African-American political activist from Washington, DC, an Hispanic farmer from New Mexico, an American melting pot of sorts. All were older – in their eighth decade at least - all were still doing what they did – there was no retirement, no warehousing in a retirement community – they were active and vibrant. The film was inspirational to me. I was at the time dealing with a mother-in-law with dementia and my own fiercely independent mother, whose independence was dependent on me for transportation and sometimes help at home, and company. I knew first-hand the importance of companionship and community as ingredients in a happy and productive life and I was all too aware of my own aging and a real sense of getting older. I looked into the possibility of doing a certificate in the Gerontology Department at VCU to understand better how to be active in the process. I know that there is a direct correlation between theatre and health, community, collaboration and wanted to investigate how that correlation could be understood. The result was this production of *The Comedy of Errors* with a cast of 10 men over 55 years of age. The “over 55” stipulation was in fact an oblique acknowledgement of Plautus: he wrote most of his plays in the last 15 years of his life and he died at 70 (this is a direct quote from the Prologue I wrote for the opening of the show) so he started at 55.

I was very lucky to have Paul Wagner facilitate the talkback after one of our performances at Live Arts and he spoke about the making his film, “The Grand Generation” which he made with a couple of folklorists. Folklorists don't view the older generation as the problem that society might ordain them to be – social, medical and political problems that are a

drain on society. In fact folklorists know that they can find the authentic old ways, the old jokes, the old music, the old stories from these older citizens and so they are revered for their very age and the wisdom and experience they carry. The older generation is the lifeline to the future for the youth, much as my mother had been for me and perhaps as I am for my daughter. How different from our cultural impulse to warehouse and peripheralize our older citizens. I began to look at the options for performance for older actors, which seem to be very few and far between; and I realized, with a jolt, that the same was true for me as well!

Age is a measurable quantity – you are the number of years you have lived and that is measurable. The idea of aging and maturing as a normal and finite event has biblical support: from 1 Corinthians 13:11 “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” But aging and old age are also a social construct, processes seen from a group perspective, labeled and defined in terms of behavior; think of the millennials, the thirty-somethings; the middle aged; the senior citizen; the geriatric. A name and an activity for every stage of life. As usual, Shakespeare said it best, through Jacques, in his play *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,

Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

*(As You Like It, II. vii 139)*

But do we need to forget how to play as we get older? There is a saying posted on the wall at ACAC, (one of the many ubiquitous gyms that are fast becoming a social and cultural tradition, perhaps replacing leisure activities such as theatre-going...) attributed variously to Benjamin Franklin and George Bernard Shaw – “we don't stop playing because we get old, we get old because we stop playing.” Well, I decided that I was going to play again and so I invited some grumpy old men to have a playdate and the rest, as they say, is history.

## Chapter 1

### About *The Comedy of Errors*

*The Comedy of Errors* intends, with one reference after another, to direct us *away* from the farce of a world of men who are foolish in their pursuit of fortune and family when they forget about God and *toward* a sense of comedy such as that conceived by Dante in his own great *comedia* as providential confusion when wandering and bafflement invite man to contemplate wonder and grace – and achieve, through a kind of rebirth, a baptizing or godparenting, a restructuring of experience which takes the form not simply of union and transformation, but of reuniting, of making parts newly conceived into a whole which they had earlier enjoyed.

Arthur F. Kinney 33

*The Comedy of Errors* is Shakespeare's shortest and perhaps earliest play. According to several sources, *The Comedy of Errors* was written for the celebration of Feast of the Innocents to be performed at Gray's Inn Hall in London, Dec. 28, 1594. The Feast of the Innocents is the Holy Day commemorating the infants massacred during Herod's reign in his attempt to kill the infant Jesus; it is also called Children's Day (Childermas) and is one of the series of feast days called Feast of Fools. How appropriate for *The Comedy of Errors* to be born into the Feast of Fools! This is in fact, the first recorded performance of *The Comedy of Errors*, recorded in the *Gesta Greyorum*; apparently the audience for this performance – mostly law students - was so rowdy that the performance was interrupted when the audience stormed the stage. (22)

There are records showing that Gray's Inn was used as a hostel or “hospitium” for lawyers as early as 1370 and it has continued in that capacity ever since, to present time. Interestingly, the gardens, or walks, of the Inn were designed by Sir Francis Bacon in 1606, who also served as the Inn's Treasurer in 1608. One of the historical facts that appears on the inn's

timeline is the production of *The Comedy of Errors* on Dec. 28, 1594 by the Chamberlain's Men. In true academic fashion, there is some scholarly dispute about the veracity of that date and whether it was actually Shakespeare's troupe, The Chamberlain's Men, that played. The date of the Gray's Inn performance might have been Dec. 27 if they had played in Greenwich (as recorded) in the afternoon or the day before. But there is an account of the performance on Dec. 28, 1594 in *Gesta Grayorum*, the Inn's "pamphlet" that wasn't published for nearly a century after the production mentioned. I include it here by way establishing a firm start to a long production history.

In regard whereof, as also for that the sports intended were especially for the Gracing of the Templarians, it was thought good not to offer anything of Account, saving Dancing and Reveling with Gentlewomen; and after such sports, A Comedy of Errors (like to *Plautus* his *Menaechmus*) was played by the Players. So the night was begun, and continued to its end, in nothing but Confusion and Errors; whereupon, it was ever afterwards called, *The Night of Errors*.

Gesta Grayorum 22

The play is enormously popular and has enjoyed a robust production history, no doubt because of its physicality, its brevity and its accessibility. It was recently done in the US (Jan./Feb. 2017) at Hartford Stage in Connecticut, in a production that included a cast of 22 and then in March 2017 in New York when the Classic Stage Company (the Young Company) mounted a production for young audiences. In England, in August of 2016, as part of Shakespeare400, Antic Disposition theatre company mounted a commemorative production of *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

As stated in the *Gesta Grayorum*, *The Comedy of Errors* borrows from Plautus's play *The Brothers Menechmae* for its plot and twins, and from his *Amphytruo* (or *Amphitryon*, both are correct) for two sets of twins and the master - servant escapades, specifically the shenanigans at the door to the Phoenix in Act IV. In her essay *The Plautine Tradition in Shakespeare* Cornelia



Coulter finds many echoes of the traditional Roman comedy in Shakespeare's plays. She posits that by combining elements of Elizabethan and Plautine humor, Shakespeare created his own comic voice, though she warns against looking for one to one correlation.

The threads are so interwoven that it is practically impossible to separate the two, and in most cases it is useless to attempt to discover direct borrowings. Even general resemblances must be noted with caution; for horseplay and farcical tricks are common to all climes and ages, and it is even possible that, given similar circumstances, the same comic type might arise independently...

Coulter 70

She then goes on to list the similarities in much the same way Arthur F. Kinney finds parallels with the Church and Christian faith in his essay, "Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and the Nature of Kinds."

In his essay, Kinney refers to *The Comedy of Errors* as "a Shakespearean miracle play..." (31) and places the play firmly in the world of the church, of religion and morality. He finds great significance in the fact that the play was produced twice on the Feast of the Innocents, once in 1594 and once in 1604; for Kinney, this reveals "just how bold Shakespeare's brilliant and initial effort in combining Roman farce and Christian belief really was." (32) Kinney likens Egeon to the first innocent, he who shall be killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and goes on to say that Egeon welcomes death from the perspective of faith, not fatigue (35); his essay evaluates the play in the context of the idea of religion and the Tudors. What stays with us today is "this constant return to the basic themes and human fears of estrangement, solitude, and exile – of being alone without any friend, or being (as one character puts it explicitly) partial, fragmentary, incomplete..." (34) This fear of being alone, of not belonging, of not being whole is a very strong undercurrent not only in the play but in the world of the aging baby boomer as well.

According to Kenney, the shift from Plautus's setting of Epidamnum to Ephesus is a shift

from farce to divine comedy (38). Ephesus was a “bad” place biblically, where evil did lurk; the same is true in Shakespeare's Ephesus but the evil is of a more supernatural quality - the witches and Lapland sorcerers that Antipholus of Syracuse brings to our attention every chance he gets. But through the magical working of the comedy, the errors are corrected and the evil is thrown out.

What jumps to mind immediately upon hearing of Ephesus, for anyone raised in the church, is Paul's letter to the Ephesians in which he states the rules for marital bliss:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:22-33

We hear echoes of Paul's letter in Luciana's level-headed rejoinder to her sister's teasing:

Why headstrong liberty is lashed with woe.  
There's nothing situate in Heaven's eye  
But hath his bound in earth, in sea, in sky.  
The beasts, the fishes and the winged fowls  
Are their males' subjects and at their controls.  
Man, more divine, the master of all these  
Lord of the wild world and wide wat'ry seas  
Indues with intellectual sense and souls  
Of more pre-eminence than fish and fowls  
Are masters to their females and their lords.  
Then let your will attend on their accords.

*The Comedy of Errors*, II, i. 15

Of course in Luciana's speech, she makes man master of nature and the universe, not the church, but the sentiment is clear – men rule. (How interesting then to have a man playing a woman.) Luciana's naiveté in the world of male/female relations, her overly simplistic understanding of the attraction between the sexes, is challenged in the later scene with Antipholus of Syracuse when she is presented with physical proof that perhaps St. Paul's view was limited or near-sighted. His attentions unsettle her and she urges him to pretend love for her

sister if he doesn't truly feel it: "Alas poor women, make us but believe/being compact of credit that you love us." (III, ii 21) She clearly is changed by this encounter and grapples with her feelings in the later scene with her sister:

First he denied you had in him no right...( IV, ii. 7)  
Then swore he that he was a stranger here...(9)  
Then pleaded I for you...(11)  
That love I begged of you he begged of me...(12)  
With words that in an honest suit might move.  
First he did praise my beauty then my speech...(14)

And when her sister demands if she "spoke him fair," Luciana deflects the question saying:

Have patience I beseech...(16)  
And then at hearing her sister denigrate her husband:

Who would be jealous then of such a one?  
No evil lost is wailed when it is gone. (23)

Dromio's entrance at this point interrupts the conversation which is finished in the last act with the revelation that in fact it is not Adriana's husband who has wooed her sister but her newly found brother-in-law

And this fair gentlewoman, her sister here,  
Did call me brother...  
What I told you then,  
I hope I shall have leisure to make good;  
If this be not a dream I see and hear. (V, i 374)

In Ephesus the possibility of reuniting is a force perhaps stemming from the idea of "finding" the church again and being new baptized in faith and God. Redemption is possible, as is a happy ending. Of course the path to that happy ending is full of errors – hence the title - as well as contradictions, many having to do with memory, some with time, some more internal to one character or another as in Luciana's conflicting feelings

about love and marital duty or Egeon's desire for death while yearning to live to know of his sons' fates.

Another strong 'current' in the play is that of water, which theme is strengthened by the presence of the ocean – Ephesus is a port city and can be escape, departure and arrival. In Antipholus of Syracuse's words “I to the world am like a drop of water/that in the ocean seeks another drop” (I. ii. 35) Water is escape, destruction, uniting, cleansing and baptizing. The storm of Egeon's voyage is repeated in later plays like *The Tempest* and of course *Twelfth Night* where once again we find twins, separated and seeking to understand where they belong, demonstrating that yes indeed, the best ideas are stolen, for here Shakespeare steals from himself.

I offer these contextualizations of *The Comedy of Errors* by way of contrast to my particular challenge, which was to find a way to make this play live in the present day and be accessible to a contemporary audience, while being possible/attainable for my cast to enact. For we who engaged in this production, the influence of Roman comedy or of church and the religious belief system was never a major consideration. What did resound was Emilia's speech:

Neither. He has taken this place for sanctuary  
And it shall privilege him from your hands  
Till I have brought him to his wits again  
Or lose my labor in essaying it.  
*The Comedy of Errors*, V. i. 94

Suddenly Shakespeare's words had huge significance in the political landscape of today.

Sanctuary states and churches are very much in the news because they are being threatened.

Additionally, the word privilege has had great significance recently as a noun; here Shakespeare uses it as a verb, sounding very much like a modern theorist.

In the early theatrical traditions Commedia del'Arte and its offspring/successor, Punch and Judy for example, there was a great deal of physical violence to demonstrate status and dominion among the men and women, among the servants and the masters. As physical violence becomes intolerable in more “reasonable” modern times, there is a retreat to verbal violence where words become weapons and then the violence is removed from realism and animated, made unreal in the form of cartoons. It is then translated back into verbal violence, as that found in stand-up which is often aggressive and verbally violent in its satire, Lenny Bruce being a good example. Now violence is available in real form, on the television news, on reality television, on live Facebook feeds of suicide and bullying; we have become an audience of voyeurs, able to watch horrible events unfold because we can feel superior or we can feel compassion. This impulse for ambulance chasing is the same that allows us to laugh at the physical beatings of the Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors* – we laugh at the fact that it isn't happening to us. We maintain superiority and hold ourselves at a distance.

There is a visible influence of the Commedia Del Arte in *The Comedy of Errors* in plot and character, although the character types are not firmly delineated – instead the edges begin to blur – the Elizabethan and the Italian melding into a shared form. But we can see vestiges of the original stock characters. It is interesting that the characters all seem to be halves of each other: Antipholus is a kind of Capitan/Vecchi combination, (though perhaps the only “war” either engages in is in the world of business) with Antipholus of Ephesus being the braggart and Antipholus of Syracuse being the Lover – two halves of a whole. The Dromios are truly the Zanni, again two halves of a whole. Pinch could be seen as an aspect of Punchcinello – even the names sound related. And the sisters, too, are almost like two halves of the primo amoroso, revealing belief in the purity of love (as dictated by the church) in one as well as knowledge of

the carnal and profound love of a man for a woman in the other. In the play's resolution, each finds something of the other in her situation. Ironically the real “old man” of the play is an almost tragic character whose quest and only joy is to know his sons are living; with that knowledge, he will die happy and his redemption at the end brings the story full circle. His reunion with Emelia also feels like a completion – back to Antipholus's speech - “I like a drop of water seeking to find his fellow forth – we are all seeking to find our mate/better half/family. And in this production, there was an additional *homage* to Commedia in that the scene changes were our *lazzi*- necessary to change the scene, or provide time for an entrance but a moment unto themselves with the character of Luce and her handmaidens – the unmasked *zagne* - who had their own “show”.

We can see echoes of Punch and Judy in *The Comedy of Errors* in the characters of the Dromios who are the clowns, the Joeys or zanni; in the mistress Pretty Polly (the Courtesan here) who the wife knows about. Our slapstick is descended from the 'batone' Punch carried to fight off his adversaries. Is there a Punch or Pulcinella? Antipholus of Ephesus is sort of a Punch in that he is the one locked out of his house and we laugh at him; he is the one with the mistress that his wife knows about; and he beats his servant mercilessly! There is the Devil's Dam, the Courtesan; there is the Conjuror-like-Priest. But there really is no one-to-one correlation – proving Coulter's point again. Rather it is a spirit that pervades, of play and of eternal life, whether through redemption or imitation. These characters will never die, no matter how hard they are beaten!

What does the comic voice of *The Comedy of Errors* “sound” like in this play? The play is broad farce and relies in large part on the audience knowing more than any of the actors. We become complicit witnesses as we watch events unfold and that brings laughter of recognition

and common understanding. There are verbal highjinks as well as the physical, slapstick funny business; there is the farcical comedy of mistaken identity and finding oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is a kind of comedy of manners in the servant/master relationships and in the reversal of expectations – specifically Luciana's expectations that there is a protocol in man-wife behavior that Antipholus of Syracuse upends. What satire there might be is subtle and perhaps lost to a modern audience not steeped in the church/class hierarchies of the Elizabethan world. *The Comedy of Errors* adheres to the Aristotelian standards of unity of time, unity of space and place and unity of plot; the several sub-plots running parallel to each other, all serve the main plot and are all resolved in the final scene by common agreement. In that sense it is simple, all parts working toward the inevitable happy ending setting the play firmly in the world of comedy. Because it is a comedy, the play ends happily and with multiple marriages, death averted and a promise of change perhaps – the Duke says “Why, here begins his morning story right” as things begin to fall into place and though we have watched the action and know what the story is, there is great catharsis in the collective recognition of “thereupon these errors are arose” and Emilia enjoins the assembled:

Renowned duke, vouchsafe to take the pains  
To go with us into the abbey here  
And hear at large discoursed all our fortunes:  
And all that are assembled in this place,  
That by this sympathized one day's error  
Have suffer'd wrong, go keep us company,  
And we shall make full satisfaction.

V, i. 394

The invitation is to make everything right through the sharing of stories. Perhaps the way to peace and understanding is really through storytelling and listening to the adventures of our fellow companions on the planet, sharing our stories.

## Chapter 2 the Process and the Production

Can we mount an authentic performance as Shakespeare would have seen it? No. Authenticity in the performing arts is ultimately impossible. We cannot perform anything, be it dance, music or drama, with any certainty either that we are performing in the right style (we are different people with different attitudes and different sensibilities) or that we will understand, even in approximately the same way as the original spectators.

Peter Hall, Prologue

Sooner or later, everyone is a wounded storyteller. In post-modern times that identity is our promise and responsibility, our calamity and dignity.

Arthur Frank, Preface xiii

I have long had an affinity for Shakespeare because as difficult as his language might be to “crack,” once you get it, it is incredibly immediate and available. So why Shakespeare for this project? Much as the quilter of Paul Wagner's film “The Grand Generation” can understand every age having lived through it, so Shakespeare becomes more comprehensible as one gets older. His plays deal in universal themes that transcend gender, age, class. One need only scratch the surface to see how many variations on Shakespeare there are: all female productions set in prison; all male productions set in prison (the *Julius Caesar* set in a prison in South Africa); young casts, older casts; diverse casts, site specific productions; drunk Shakespeare, church Shakespeare...the list goes on. Shakespeare is everyman's theatre.

We used a text edited by Robert Miola who is also the editor of a collection of essays on *The Comedy of Errors*, which I found after our production was over. I discovered that many of the themes and ideas we had found during our work on the play, had in fact been written on extensively in this collection, including the essays by Arthur Kinney and Cornelia Coulter that I



discussed in Chapter 1. Here was proof of application of thought and theory!

But this endeavor was all about process – the theory was an afterthought. The product or performance was a happy by-product as it were. Of course, in theater the audience is always the missing ingredient and because of the way we staged this, with the audience right there, in the action and being spoken to so directly it was important to have an audience. Every audience is different but every audience is engaged equally. Although this was a process, the product has become an important part of that process. Again my question is what is it that people want from theatre and what is it that theatre is supposed to do? Do people come expecting spectacle? Do they come expecting costumes and props? In the talkback after our final performance at the IX Space many of the comments had to do with how engaged people were with their imaginations, how the words were allowed to create the scenario, how the actions were embedded in the script so that nothing seemed superfluous or added on, which was really wonderful to hear since that was part of the initial impulse. Someone else spoke about how authentic it felt, how much like what Shakespeare's plays must have been like when they were done back in Elizabethan times. Of course how would they know? We weren't there then!

Why was the rehearsal process so long? I realized that time was an important element, not just thematically (!) but also in terms of investment, in terms of commitment. Time is a luxury and I wanted to see what we could get out of being together for such a long period with the focus on the process and not the product. Attrition was interesting: there were clearly some participants who lost interest when it became clear we would be taking our time on this production. But, because of the time we were together, much of the play became embodied physically in the actors so that even when lines went caput, the story was still told clearly. “We were a company before we were a cast.”

Why all men? Shakespeare's King's Men, or The Chamberlain's Men, are Grumpy Old Men here. This was my nod to 'Original Practices', perhaps one of the only original practices we can be sure of, that Shakespeare's players were in fact all men! But I was curious: boys become men – what happens when the men become old(er)? Aging, too, is something that we all experience, no matter how long we live. It is a process that transcends all difference and has the same end - in death. And we all change as we age, whether we perceive it as robbing our beauty, a fact Adriana so eloquently bemoans, or rendering us unrecognizable as Egeon suspects when his son doesn't recognize him. I have also always considered Shakespeare's language to be masculine in its muscular athleticism; it demands from the actor a physical engagement as well as linguistic and intellectual consideration. In this particular play, even the women's roles sounds muscular, more masculine. Adriana stands up for herself and her husband in a forthright way, confronting even the Abbess; her shy and retiring sister surprises us by recommending deceit in maintaining the image of a good marriage which seems at odds with her “pure” aspect, revealing a more complicated, more devious “virgin” and urging Antipholus of Syracuse to behave one way although he might feel another. It is interesting to look at Luciana's monologue that begins “And may it be that you have quite forgot/ a husband's office?” (3,ii.1) Shakespeare wrote this in ABABCDCD rhyme pattern, which I think is part of his (Shakespeare's) effort to make it sound more feminine. In cutting the speech, we had to dispense with the rhyme scheme and go for the meaning and the meaning in such a way that it would be easier for the actor to learn and remember it. (This has been a major challenge with cutting the play – staying true to the text, staying true to the story and the plot, and the recurring themes, images and words, while paying attention to the abilities of the various actors and the limitations of having only ten and having ten that have a limited memory capacity as far as they know. But

what do they know? They know a lot more than they think they do and they have a lot more potential I think, than they thought when they started! So one of the happy by-products of this project is that I think everyone involved in it can feel really positive about what they have achieved because it's way more than they ever expected – for some of them, not all of them.)

The violence in this particular tale is rampant and is also very masculine. In using all men, the violence made more sense or perhaps seemed less dangerous. The violence was also exaggerated by the use of the slapstick, which makes a noise that is violent unto itself. By separating the noise from the action, the violence was shown to be unreal but more violent at the same time; intolerable but funny and so it became a “bit.” Having the same sound for a beating with a handkerchief emphasized that beating is beating, that raising one's hand to another achieves the same result. I decided to use a slapstick so that the beating would be uniform and not dangerous. We watch the masters beat the servants and the servants take the audience into their confidence, confessing their state: “Was there ever any man thus beaten out of season, when in the why and the wherefore is neither rhyme nor reason?” asks Dromio of Syracuse. (2, ii. 47) Later his brother Dromio of Ephesus tells us “I have nothing at his hands but beatings. Etc.” But in rehearsing with the slapstick, we encountered the surprise of violence against Dromios – the sound of the slapstick is not funny but frightening and the beating of the servant even sounds intolerable. We laugh at the beatings, violent as they are, because they are an accepted part of this hierarchical master/servant universe and more importantly, because they are not happening to us. We also laugh because we feel superior, because we know more than the characters before us. We become complicit witnesses as we watch events unfold.

To view *The Comedy of Errors* through the lens of 2017 is to reveal some darker and more sinister overtones in the play. As I have stated earlier, the play took on very pointed

relevance as a reflection of the political state of our country, specifically the growing antipathy to foreigners and intolerance of difference. The condemning to death of anyone found to be in Ephesus illegally, who can't pay his way out, calls to mind the recent travel bans and the edicts about “aliens” and foreigners. When Donald Trump was first announcing his candidacy and bragging about the wall he was going to build – or have built at taxpayer expense - the opening lines of *The Comedy of Errors* took on great significance:

It hath in solemn synods been decreed  
Both by the Syracusians and ourselves,  
To admit no traffic to our adverse towns.  
Nay more: if any born at Ephesus  
Be seen at any Syracusian marts and fairs -  
Again if any Syracusian born  
Come to the bay of Ephesus, he dies. (13)

This was intolerance and punishment for trespassing, for daring to come into a foreign area. Where was the tolerance that was the “American way,” the hope of freedom that was the reason so many came to this country? Using older actors in this piece was a way of looking at the ageism that is also part of the new intolerance. Is there irony in the fact that they were all white men of European descent? Perhaps. But it was also a truthful portrayal of the community in which this production occurred; addressing the segregation in Charlottesville and the lack of diversity is a project for another day.

In the last act, when Emilia says “He took this place for sanctuary and it shall privilege him from your hands” (5,i. 94) how can we not be reminded of the most recent fracas about sanctuary states and then the churches that took on that role?

1.

### **The Casting Process:**

“We were a company before we were a cast.” (Tim R., cast member)

Casting for this production was by invitation. I knew all of the men I asked to participate and had worked with most, if not all. And I was interested in older actors for reasons mentioned elsewhere in this paper. The threshold age of 55 was not random: it was the age that Plautus reinvented himself as a playwright and it was in the last 15 years of his life that he wrote most of his plays. So this ensemble was going to emulate Plautus! (Little did I know that I would have to consider issues such as dental implants and their effect on speech; color blindness as a handicap; hearing loss; and bending. When I asked one of the actors if he thought he could fall to his knees at a certain moment in a scene he replied that though he was sure he could get down to his knees, he wasn't sure how long it would take him to get up. We laughed a lot in rehearsal!)

As I said, there was some attrition but most of my original invitees were committed for the entire time. What a gift! We started with twelve actors and wound up with ten. Doubling was imperative and it could not be random although in a couple of cases, it was based on availability! Adriana was the only character not doubled in terms of speaking roles but the actor was the manipulator of the masks in the opening. All actors were of Ephesus in the opening except for Egeon from Syracuse and all actors had the experience of being from Ephesus in the course of the play, even if just appearing as housemaid!

- Antipholus of Syracuse was also the Prologue. Here was the outsider but also the one who instigates the plot as it emerges in this play.
- Luciana was also the Courtesan. Here was a clear case of the Virgin and the Whore, a yin and yang of characters.

- Emilia was also Balthasar and an Officer. Each character is a voice of reason and calm, or order in the case of the Officer, in the chaos.
- The Duke was also Pinch. Here was the banisher of men's souls by death or exorcism.
- Angelo and one of the Merchants were combined of necessity. The Merchant he took on was one whose only purpose was to be paid so he could leave town on his boat and we let him go, giving some of his lines to the Goldsmith, who needed the money for the job. And then he became the officer who arrested him, which was just our joke. He also became the all-purpose extra hand – by default each time we needed a “you” or “someone” the cast would look at him and he would go. The final punch line was “Behold a man much wronged” and he emerged, wrong place at the wrong time again.
- Egeon (Rick) was loathe to take on another part because of the concern about lines. However he was free from the end of scene 1 until the middle of the last scene and so he became Luce. The man facing execution was the epitome of a gluttonous, carnal life as Luce
- Antipholus of Ephesus was the Merchant who told his brother how to stay alive, again in a doubling that probably was of interest or importance only to those involved with the production. But we appreciated it!

## 2.

### **How the Prologue came to be:**

The prologue had been characteristic of classical drama from the time of Euripides. In Plautine comedy, it took the form of a greeting to the audience, with

a statement of the setting and a summary of the plot, which was delivered sometimes by a special Prologus (Captivi, Casina, Menaechmi), sometimes by a supernatural being (the Lar Familiaris in the Aulularia, Arc turus in the Rudens) or a personified abstraction (Auxilium in the Cistellaria, Luxuria in the Trinummus), sometimes by one of the characters in the play (Mercury in the Amphitruo, Charinus in the Mercator). One Leone de Sommi, an actor manager of 16th Century Italy, gives special commendation to the prologue "in the manner of the ancients," spoken by the poet or his representative, clad in a toga and wearing a crown of laurel.

Coulter 72

My impulse to include a Prologue in the style of Plautus's prologue in his *Brothers Menechmae* came from a desire to acknowledge the origin of the story and the debt to previous storytellers that all storytellers owe. In the case of my Prologue, it is Plautus himself who addresses the audience in an effort to ensure that they are aware of his presence, like a ghost, in the bones of *The Comedy of Errors*. There is much haunting in theatre of one playwright by another, one play by another. Why shouldn't we celebrate that? It made sense to link the play *The Comedy of Errors* contextually to the traditions of the Roman theatre, to ground it as firmly in its ancestry as it is grounded in Ephesus. By imitating the form of the *Menaechmi* and writing a Prologue by way of greeting, setting of context, personal engagement with the audience, it became an homage to Plautus by an actor playing Plautus, who remained onstage in the form of the toga left intentionally hanging onstage when the Prologue exited. Thus the Prologue was a literal expression of the importance of knowing the context and the history that feeds the present moment, in the same way that this whole project strove to investigate and acknowledge the past and experience of an older generation without denigrating and dismissing it.

In staging the Prologue, I was hoping to establish a sense of ensemble both for the actors and the audience. I finally settled on a series of poses reflecting the images of Greek, Roman and Turkish statuary I had looked at in the course of my research. To translate this to the actors,

I looked at Luciana's speech about men's mastery and suggested that there be poses reflecting mastery of the creatures of the air, of the sea and the sky. It was fascinating to see what that meant to each of them and how the poses deepened over time.

And finally, as we rehearsed the entrance of Plautus, it occurred to me that he should bring in some grapes – a nod to Dionysus, why not? – and give them to an audience member. And so we added that in the last days of rehearsal, providing an opportunity for direct connection beyond just words and acknowledging the lineage of the play.

\*\*\*

### **PROLOGUE** with the beginning of a shape (movement)...

*All are in “conversation” stance, staggered not flat. At \* marks in script, change position cleanly and abruptly all together.*

Good evening. Health and happiness...to me! And also to you...since you are here.

Welcome! I bring you Plautus. Really. I am he, Plautus. Well...the full name is actually Titus Maccus Plautus. What a name – have you any idea what it's like being saddled with that name? Flat foot--clown--Plautus. That's what it means. I guess that's what comes of having a sense of humor! \* And flat feet.

So I'm a playwright. Born in 254 BC in Umbria. I am no ordinary playwright; in fact, I am ancient Rome's best-known comic playwright. But I wasn't always a playwright, as far as anyone can tell – there isn't too much left of my history and I certainly don't remember – it was a long time ago. But I wrote most of my many plays in the last 15 years of my life and I died at 70. So I guess what I'm saying is don't let anyone tell you you're too old to start something new! \* You can always reinvent yourself. I did. And I was very successful in my...uh...later years.

Speaking of later years, anyone ever played “old or dead?” It's a game. You name someone and then ask “old or dead?” Let's play that: someone say “Plautus, old or dead?” Go ahead...(ask until someone does this) And the answer is...(all answer:) **DEAD!** That's right, I am no longer living. But what you see before you is not a ghost! I am what you might call, a theatrical device. My words are...living...or they will be as soon as they are spoken. Oh but



that's right, you won't be hearing my words this evening or seeing my play. You will be hearing Shakespeare's words, seeing Shakespeare's play *The Comedy of Errors*. Which, by the way is not an original story - he borrowed liberally from mine to write his! My play *The Brothers Menechmae*? Perhaps you've heard of it? \* That's my play, Shakespeare's source material! But I included only one set of identical twins in my play. *Two* strains credulity but leave it to Shakespeare...and mine was a lot bawdier than his – I had to keep my audience interested so they wouldn't sneak off to the boxing match in the next stall\*, or head for the horse race.\* But I figured out what my audience wanted and I gave it to them! Sex and violence! \*\* Kind of like today's audiences...oh, but not you – you clearly have great taste and discernment! And by the way, I want you to know, I have had a huge influence on the idea of comedy as you know it. My plays have had echoes in Moliere, in Giraudoux... some say certain of my stock characters made it into the Commedia del'Arte, even Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Where do you think Sondheim got his material for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*? Yours truly, thank you very much (\*applause?). ...and then there's *The Boys from Syracuse*, the Rodgers and Hart musical about identical twins? But I don't want to toot my own horn. After all, we're seeing Shakespeare today. Who does Plautus anymore? I just wanted you to know the truth about where all this came from, you with me?

*(Now all leave stylized gesture and stand at ready, still staggered. Egeon will enter and weave among men until Prologue mentions him. As Egeon approaches one, he turns away and crosses his arms. When Prologue mentions him – Oh, there he is – everyone looks at him. When Prologue says “In my story the father died” all look at him, all move forward listening – back up on “it's a little different here.” On “Well, listen to him” all move to places US behind Duke's chair. Gesture together to Duke on kazoo.)*

This story is set, as is mine, in Epidamnus. That's a mouthful. In this story, as in mine, a man from Syracuse has come looking for his long lost identical twin...his father, a merchant named Egeon, also from Syracuse – oh, there he is (*points to Egeon*) - has followed his son for fear of losing him too. In my story,\* the father died because one of his sons was kidnapped and his heart broke – of course you never actually meet him - it's a little different here, you'll see...for instance there are two - sets of twins that is. Well listen to him - (*gesture to Egeon*) - he'll explain. But I'll stick around, in case there are any questions. In fact, I'll insert myself seamlessly into the action. You'll know me by my toga. I'm the only one wearing one!

*\*as he speaks in a confidential tone, all move forward listening – back up on “it’s a little different here” and go back to straight line US.*

*\*At “Well, listen to him” jailer and officer grab Egeon and move to DL corner.*

*\*At kazoo, Duke enter, address Egeon. Mackie take case and have ready for Duke to look into.*

*\*boxing match – unison pugilistic pose...*

*\*horse race – unison leaning forward as if at the races...*

### 3.

#### **The Opening Speech:**

In many ways, Egeon's opening speech seems to be the preparation for a tragedy at the opening of a comedy. He has been condemned to death and is ready to accept his fate. At what point does the audience understand that the play is a comedy beyond being told so by the title? The opening speech brought to mind *The Green Table*, an anti-war ballet by Kurt Jooss, which opened with men in tuxedos, masks and white gloves, doing very stylized movement around a large green table. When listening to the first reading of the opening scene of *The Comedy of Errors* by this company of men, I saw that image in my mind – men making decisions about other men's lives while attired in the formal dress of civilization. It was the presence of masks as distancing and equalizing that came to mind as a tool to start the play but the physical discomfort for the actors was a consideration. Glasses, breathing issues, claustrophobia – these all made mask work difficult to consider. We started with an elaborate dumb show while Egeon was speaking but we discovered that the actor was easily distracted and would get lost if he was aware of movement. After many attempts to find a way to work with fabric, masks and group movement, we came to the simple version. Egeon was a toy merchant who carried masks in his

case. The subsequent staging came out of the actor's needs – if he stood in one place, he could include everyone in the audience and onstage and not lose his lines so easily. The masks however came to be important signs for characters – semiotic totems that signified who would be who later. Was this helpful for the audience? Or just for the cast?

#### 4.

#### **How the set came to be.**

The set design for this production started out as a very simple but theatrical concept. A door that could double as a table at the opening, would become a door for the Phoenix, standing on a weighted hinge so that it could open and close for the various entrances into and out of the Phoenix. And then in Act 4, sc. 3, it would become a door for the abbey. We rehearsed for a long time in the public library, in a large conference room where all we had to use for set were chairs and folding tables. I began to set up three tables as the walls and the door. I knew that the setting would shift (almost to the right, as if on a track) from in front of the Abbey to in front of Antipholus's house, the Phoenix and back again. And so we started using the tables, shifting them, working out the housemaid antics as part of the choreography of the play. When we worked on the knocking scene, the table had been moved to be perpendicular to the walls so that we in the audience could see both sides of the door while the Dromios were hidden from each other, the inside invisible to the outside. Time slipped away as we got closer to performance, as did money. It occurred to me that the walls could be fabric draped clothing racks, easy to move and collapsible for easy transport, which I realized would be up to me. I could fold racks, pile costumes and stack patio furniture all in my car and be assured that everything would arrive on site when needed. And every site we were appearing at would most likely have a folding table.

Ultimately I decided to stand a folding table on end and to drape it in fabric to be the door both of the Phoenix and of the abbey. The actors behaved as if it were a door and the audience never doubted that fact. And the set then faded into the background quite literally while the story came into focus in the foreground.

The lights deserve a mention: because we were going to be in non-traditional spaces, it was clear that we would need something to differentiate the event in terms of lighting. We had very portable, free-standing lights, which could augment the lights available in the room and make it “theatrical” or different from everyday. We used both the stage lights and the room lights – there was light on the audience at all times so that they were included in the action of the play.

## 5.

### **The Time and the Gong:**

“The reality of death is less real than the image of baldness.” (Frank, 45)

The play takes place in one five to eight hour period - “this sympathized one day's error” (5,i. 398) says the Abbess. We based used the evidence presented in the script to figure out what the times actually were so that we could ring the gong appropriately. What follows is by way of explaining the gong, which we used to ground the play in the actual time in which it was happening. The hour of five o'clock becomes very important and is mentioned no less than three times. In Act 1, sc. 2 the Merchant says “Soon, at five o'clock/ Please you, I'll meet with you upon the mart.” (26) Angelo says “He had of me a chain. At five o'clock I shall receive the money for the same.” (4, i. 10) By Act 5, the clock is striking 5 and Angelo says “By this I think the dial points at five” (5, i. 118) upon hearing the clock strike. Working backwards, we may

assume it is sometime in the morning when we meet Egeon and the Duke tells him “Therefore Merchant, I'll limit thee this day/To seek thy health by beneficial help.” (1, i 150) He has one day, not twenty four hours, but, we must assume, fewer than twelve. Antipholus of Syracuse tells Dromio in the next scene “Within this hour it will be dinner time” (1, ii. 11) meaning lunch and Dromio of Ephesus tells his (wrong) master that “The clock hath stricken twelve upon the bell/my mistress made it one upon my cheek.” (45) So it must be between 11 and noon.

Adriana tells us the actual time first - “Sure, Luciana, it is two o'clock.” (2, i. 3) and Antipholus of Ephesus tells Angelo that his wife “is shrewish when (I) keep not hours./Say that I lingered with you at your shop...” (3, i. 2) in order to avoid having to explain why he is late for dinner. In Act 4, sc 2, Dromio says “It was two ere I left him and now the clock strikes one.” (54) - or “on” as it probably is meant to be although Adriana hears one, leading to the protracted joke about time as “a very bankrupt and a thief.” (57) Taking this all into consideration, we rang the first gong was at the end of Egeon's speech, as he leaves with the jailer signaling one o'clock; gong two, two o'clock, happened at the start of Act 2, sc. 1, just before Adriana and Luciana enter. The third gong for three o'clock was Act 4, sc. 2 – Dromio's “Do you not hear it ring?” (51) and the fourth gong for four o'clock, was predicted by Angelo - “I'll meet you at that place some hour hence.” (3, i. 122) Angelo meets Antipholus of Ephesus, or so he thinks, in Act 4, sc. 1, which is at four o'clock (the “hour hence”) or thereabouts; and the fifth gong was, of course, at the top of Act 5, finally five o'clock! The time when money (for Angelo) and death (for Egeon) will coincide.

Time is clearly a major theme. The Duke opens the play with a request of Egeon that he “say in brief the cause/why thou depard'st from thy native home/and for what cause thou cam'st to Ephesus.” (I. i. 28) In his request for “brief” and Egeon's subsequent very lengthy response –

which the Duke does not curtail, instead imploring him “Do not break off so” (96) when Egeon begs “Oh let me say no more.” (94) - the Duke introduces the theme of time as both serious and funny, as well as a relative concept depending on who is using it, which theme is then reiterated relentlessly. Time becomes the butt of a protracted joke in the lengthy exchange between Dromio of Syracuse and Antipholus of Syracuse, about Time and hair, or the lack thereof, with an inevitable “bald conclusion.” For Adriana, time passing robs her of her beauty in a more melancholy spirit as she laments - “Hath homely age th'alluring beauty took/from my poor cheek?” (2, i. 89) resulting in visible aging. The literal passage of time in the play echoes the longer passage of life-time that prompts the events of the play. Time has an increasingly relative perspective and interestingly the math doesn't really add up: Egeon's five years of searching at the top of the play become seven years in Syracuse when he parted from Antipholus (or did Antipholus part from him?) at the end of the play; yet Emilia mentions 33 years of “travail”. In the end it doesn't really matter. Time is relative, as is memory, as is beauty, as is happiness. And there is a real sense of finding happiness in the moment in Emilia's last speech and our knowing that all assembled will gather to tell their stories and celebrate together the resolution of the errors.

There is, of course, also a sense of time being somewhat arbitrary – the Dromios don't know which is elder and so will “draw cuts for the senior” (5, i. 423) - but in the end it is of little consequence; they have been reunited and that's what matters.

Dromio of Syracuse: Not I sir, you are my elder.

Dromio of Ephesus: That's a question. How shall we try it?

Dromio of Syracuse: We'll draw cuts for the senior. Till then, lead thou first.

Dromio of Ephesus: Nay then thus:

We came into the world like brother and brother-in

And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another. (5, i. 421)

Existential and philosophical questions began to arise as we worked on this script: how

long does it take to explain a life, how long does it take to live a life, how long does it take to forget a life? These are all interesting themes in *The Comedy of Errors*, which obviously take on more significance the older one is. But for practical purposes, time was literally a measure and a way to mark the events of the play.

## 6.

### **How the costumes came to be:**

Early in the process, I decided on a basic costume of black pants and a black shirt for all of the actors. Characters would be differentiated by accessories or small costume changes. Having the cast dressed the same for the opening song into the Duke's proclamation framed the play and united the Ephesians against the Syracusan trespasser. Because we had time over the course of our rehearsal process, I was able to see what made sense from a costume perspective and adjust as we went. The question of identity is a dominant theme in this play - one is what one does, but one is also what one is called and I wanted the costumes to help tell that part of the story as best we could with as little as we had. This being, for all intents and purposes a poor theatre production, we relied on costumes we had or could find. I have access to all the Hamner Theater costumes and I used them. I had a number of velvet beret-style hats and brought them into rehearsal to help the actors differentiate their characters during the quick turn arounds. There was something very compelling about the group of men wearing similar hats and suddenly Ephesus had a flavor and style which became the merchant/business class; the Merchants were all dressed in colorful shirts and dark jackets with their black pants. They all wore the berets, including Antipholus of Syracuse, who was able to “pass” following his merchant friend's advice to “...Give out that you are of Epidamnum...” (1, ii. 1) Of course that raises the question of why

everyone not native to the place doesn't have the freedom say that and most importantly why doesn't Egeon say that? Egeon wore a hat more similar to the officers' military style berets, suggesting a different flavor in his native Syracuse; he wore a raincoat – after all he has been traveling – and the actor brought in a pig tie which he wanted to wear, so he did. I think it allowed the actor to allow Egeon to have a sense of play as well. The Duke was in his own cap, which he purchased for the event – he wanted to be the Duke with the Duke cap. On opening night, there was uproarious laughter when he entered and the audience figured out who he was and what his hat meant.

I dressed the ladies in layers; the sisters wore flowing garments that were not necessarily feminine but suggested something other than what we think of as masculine. I was looking to suggest something slightly Turkish in flavor as far as drape goes. Their headdresses were scarves tied to resemble or suggest hair and each had a shawl. I did not ask the men to shave and the grizzled chins of Adriana and Emilia did not detract from their portrayal of women. They were able to find something more essential to the characters than simply the signs we recognize as indicating “female.” The Courtesan needed something easy to throw on over the Luciana costume and the red caftan served both ease of change and color of “sin.” Ironically, twice the actor playing Luciana/Courtesan “forgot” to remove the Courtesan costume and so Luciana the virgin finished the play dressed like her alter-ego, the whore. It was important to me that the women's parts not be caricatured – the essence of the women was what important, what they were saying and I didn't want their costumes to be distracting from that. Emilia wore a real caftan and a nun's headdress, a marriage of cultures and religion which seemed appropriate given that she is in the end, the one that unites them all. Emilia the mother became Emilia the abbess when her children were lost – a mother of sons became a mother of souls, identified by her



“habit.”

The biggest challenge was the twins. When we had initially discussed the cast all wearing black pants and shirts in the opening and then adding costume pieces, I had imagined the Dromios in loose pants that could be worn at the knee. I settled on chef's pants with stripes, which I had two pair of, so the Dromios had matching pants, tee shirts and red suspenders, of course and they shared socks so that each had one of each pair, worn to mirror each other. There was a question of a jacket of some sort – I had only one that seemed in keeping with these two and so we hit upon the idea of sharing the jacket since they were never onstage at the same time until the end. The job then was to figure out where one was exiting and where the jacket hand-off could be. The same was true for the Antipholi – there was only one frock coat. They each had a blue button down shirt with a purple paisley cravat and they shared the coat, handing it off when one was exiting until the last scene of the play when it made sense that the Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus would not necessarily have their jackets having been tied up and left in the dank, dark room. This coat share was apparently not noticed by most audiences, which fact I discovered in the talkbacks.

The Officers wore masks because they needed to be different from their other characters and because there is something anonymous and the same about “the law” or the arresting officer. They too had beret-style hats but they were actual military hats, separating the officers from the merchant class.

Because the play adheres to the Aristotelian unity of time, there was no need for costume changes.

The housemaids deserve a mention here. Because there was a need for some scene changing, I decided to let Luce be the one to effect whatever was needed. But it quickly became

evident that there was a need for more than one pair of hands and so I decided that Luce would always be the scene changer but would have at least two helpers. They could rotate according to who was available but the costumes, the aprons and caps, would be shared - what made the housemaids the housemaids were the aprons and the mobcaps. The mobcaps were built for the production so that the housemaids had a clear identity that was immediately visible. As the cast became freer with the production, they brought their own spins to the maids, how they danced, how they interacted and that changed a little bit each performance, always in the moment. Unfortunately Antipholus of Ephesus, who was to be the maid at the top of the show, “forgot” twice and so for two performances we were down a maid in the first scene change which no one noticed except me, who had intentionally chosen to have three maids unless it was the single Luce. The decision to make the Abbess, Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio of Syracuse the messenger in the final scene was as much for fun as for anything else. They were all “hiding” in the abbey and were available and so they became the staff at the Phoenix.

## 7.

### **How the music came to be:**

One day as I was driving to Richmond on my daily commute, *Funiculli, Funiculla* popped into my head and knew that somehow we needed to incorporate it into the show. It was a good, hearty Italian folk song that embodied the spirit of what I thought might be the feeling among this group of men. I also thought it not inappropriate that the original had been about the funicular car in the Alps but had been appropriated to be about the joy of music and song. At rehearsal when I asked if anyone knew it and they started singing together, I was immediately struck by the power of the voices and the fact that so many of them seemed liberated by the song.

At one point in the early rehearsals our stage manager/prompt mentioned that he had attended a wedding and the favors included tiny harmonicas. There happened to be a great many of them left over, did I want them? Yes, of course I did! And so we incorporated the tiny harmonicas into the opening and here was an action that epitomized the whole spirit of serious play – grown men with miniature musical instruments, seriously blowing them in unison to begin their play with a song about joy.

Scene change music was another consideration. I had already decided that any scene changes would be done by the “housemaids”, who could be any number of the cast at different points. I looked at the map and saw that Syracuse on the coast of Sicily to Corinth in Greece to Ephesus in Turkey is actually a fairly straight line across the Mediterranean. How interesting it would be to have the music follow that line as well, from Italy to Turkey. And so I found Italian popular music based on folk songs and all manner of modern Turkish songs and began to play them at rehearsal. We settled on a song that everyone responded to during our rehearsal process for our scene change music and all of the housemaids found the beat as they were moving the wall or the table; the rest was used for house music, to flavor the atmosphere.

8.

### **STAGING – the knocking scene**

The knocking at the door scene in Act 3, sc. 1 – the first knock-knock joke? - was problematic because none of the actors used the knocks for comic potential. After several free-for-all rehearsals, when some knocked sometimes and some never knocked, I realized I would have to script the knocks like dialogue. The following is how I did that and once the knocks were incorporated like lines, the scene began to work. When the actors deviated from the

rehearsed (scripted) knocking, the scene wasn't nearly as funny. And of course, the other major challenge was to get the actors to really knock, not indicate knocking! Why is doing something for real so much harder than pretending to do it?

DROMIO OF EPHESUS Maud, Bridget, Marian, (*knock, knock, knock*)  
Cicely, Gillian, Ginn! (*knock, knock, knock*)

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE Mome, malt-horse, capon, (*knock, knock, knock*)  
coxcomb, idiot, patch (*knock, knock, knock*)  
Either get thee from the door, or sit down at the hatch.  
Dost thou conjure for wenches, that thou call'st for such store,  
When one is one too many? Go, get thee from the door.  
(*knock, knock, knock*)

DROMIO OF EPHESUS What patch is made our porter? My master stays in the street.  
(*knock, knock, knock*)

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE Let him walk from whence he came, lest he catch cold on's feet.  
(*knock, knock, knock*)

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHESUS Who talks within there? ho, open the door! (*knock, knock, knock*)

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE Right, sir; I'll tell you when, an you tell me wherefore.  
(*knock, knock, knock*)

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHESUS Wherefore? for my dinner: I have not dined to-day.

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE Nor to-day here you must not; come again when you may.  
(*knock, knock, knock*)

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHESUS What art thou that keepest me out from the house I owe?  
(*knock, knock, knock*)

DROMIO OF SYRACUSE The porter for this time, sir, and my name is Dromio.

DROMIO OF EPHESUS O villain! Thou hast stolen both mine office and my name.  
The one ne'er got me credit, the other mickle blame. If thou hadst  
been Dromio today in my place, Thou wouldst have changed thy  
face for a name or thy name for an ass.

LUCE What a coil is there, Dromio? who are those at the gate?

DROMIO OF EPHESUS Let my master in, Luce. (*knock, knock, knock*)

LUCE Faith, no; he comes too late. (*knock, knock, knock*)

DROMIO OF EPHESUS O Lord, I must laugh!



## PROGRAM and PROGRAM NOTE

GOMDS\* in conjunction with The Hamner Theater presents William Shakespeare's



in a version adapted and directed by Boomie Pedersen

\*Grumpy Old Men Doing Shakespeare in partial fulfillment of BP's thesis requirement  
performances followed by facilitated conversation about health, community, aging and the arts...

### CAST

**Chris Baumer** (Prologue, Antipholus of Syracuse, Messenger)

**Mackie Boblette** (Adriana)

**Roman Cybak** (Angelo, Officer)

**Jim Horstkotte** (Dromio of Ephesus)

**Tom Howard** (Dromio of Syracuse, Messenger)

**Tim McNamara** (Balthazar, Officer, Emilia, Messenger)

**Joe Monaghan** (Duke, Pinch, Merchant)

**Tim Read** (Merchant, Antipholus of Ephesus)

**Rick Steeves** (Egeon, Luce)

**Kurt Vogelsang** (Luciana, Courtesan)

unsung hero, stand-in and prompt – **Tim White**

mobcaps, safety pins, all things technical and transport – **J. Taylor**

### Special Thanks to:

Patricia Gulino and Unity of Charlottesville

Jennifer Ayers and the Senior Center

Bree Luck, Tracie Steger and Live Arts

Paul Wagner, Larry Goldstein, Bob Rannigan

Sharon Tolczyk and Crozet Arts

Admission is free but donations to the Hamner Theatre are welcome . The Hamner Theatre is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. All contributions are tax-deductible and will support more work in our communities and will help offset the cost of the space that welcomes the work.

## Director's Note

This project has been in the works since May of 2016. We gathered informally once or twice a month to read, play, explore various casting choices – some self-selected, some not. We did some mask work and a lot of laughing, lost a few actors, found a few more and eventually settled on this merrie band of ten men, gamely taking on the seventeen or so characters in the play. This production is all about the process and we are delighted to have you here to share the work with us, to experience **Comedy of Errors** where it is at this moment; the production will continue to grow as it changes venues and audiences.

Shakespeare had his Chamberlain's Men, then his King's Men; now we have Grumpy Old Men, a name offered with greatest affection – these men are neither grumpy nor old. But they are, as are we all, aging and that offers challenges and rewards in the undertaking of a project like this. This process has been a discovery and an exploration of some of these challenges. This performance is a celebration of some of the successes.

We will happily answer any questions you might have in the conversation after the performance – why all men, why **Comedy of Errors**, what were the particular challenges you faced, how did you manage to learn all those lines etc. But here a couple of questions I would like to ask of you:

- What brought you here?
- What were your expectations and was the experience what you expected?  
If not, how was it different?
- What will you take away from this event?

Above all, **THANK YOU FOR COMING**, for without an audience, we would have no one to witness our work!

### Chapter 3 GOMDS JOURNAL

I am in the present and only the present matters to me.

Arianne Mnouchkine

We do not necessarily improve with age: for better or worse we become more like ourselves.

Peter Hall

Here is an informal journal of this project and notes of the process and discoveries made therein. The Project: an investigation into Aging (Ageism), Memory, Community and Shakespeare in which a group of older male actors takes on Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and begins a 9 month process of rehearsal and “gestation.” Over the 9 months, we had somewhere in the vicinity of 60 three hour rehearsals, a total of nearly 200 rehearsal hours, far more than an average production. I took on the roles of director, producer, dramaturg, designer of all elements, chief cook and bottle washer, marketer...this is why having a production team is so imperative!

Goals:

- to discover optimum ways of learning lines;
- to do thorough text analysis and editing together;
- to build a strong ensemble;
- to perform for various under-served audience groups;
- to provide an opportunity for older actors to take on challenging parts regardless of age.

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May 15, 2016:

Hello Gentlemen -

I am writing to ask whether you all might be interested in joining me in a project



that has piqued my interest - I want to do an all male version of Comedy of Errors with "mature" actors...no millennials needed...this could be part of the Shakespeare Initiative or part of my thesis (which I will need to do next year!) or it could be just for fun or all three. Looking at late summer/early fall performance dates, possibly touring some "facilities" (breweries? nursing homes? cideries?) At this point it is in the investigative stages so an initial reading is in order - please let me know if you might be interested in even just that? It would be a start...

Thanks!  
Boomie

This is the initial email I sent to the actors I thought might be interested in this project.

Since I have worked in the Charlottesville theatre community for twenty two years, I know a fair number of actors and have worked with many. I went through my mental rolodex and chose actors I thought would understand the project, who might have the freedom to do it. I include some of the emails to the GOMDS where they seem relevant. Some of the crucial phrases in the emails that informed our project are "investigative stages", "chance to taste multiple roles," "we are making our own rules," "why theatre?" and of course Peter Hall's quote. Start with the text.

\*\*\*

### **The Beginning – Spring/Summer 2016, May – August.**

Meeting #1: Thursday May 26 at 4262 Garth Rd.

Present: John Holdren, Chris Baumer, Kurt Vogelsang; Jim Horstkotte; Rick Steeves; Roman Cybak; Tim Read; Brian Dowd

Tim McNamara was away and Kevin O'Donnell had another engagement. Bill Smith is very unavailable but will stay on the list...

We ate (oven roasted chicken thighs with brown rice blend, arugula salad, pineapple upside down cake) and talked about my thoughts for the project as they unfold – they are still unfolding - and read through Act 4 sc. 1 sitting around the table. Mentioned Arianne Mnouchkine and her ensemble, the play on the dining table, the importance of sharing art and food in community.

\*\*\*

Meeting #2: Mon., June 6 at 7pm at Crozet Arts

Present: John Holdren; Chris Baumer; Jim Horstkotte; Rick Steeves; Roman Cybak; Tim Read; Tim McNamara

Brian Dowd overslept and forgot to call; Bill Smith is still away; Kevin O'Donnell made no effort to respond; Kurt Vogelsang was with clients far north so couldn't make it

We talked at length about what peoples' experience is, what they are after, why theater.

We spoke about the importance of “the instrument” and keeping it finely honed; we spoke about memorizing techniques and tactics. Everyone had a chance to speak – Jim Horstkotte was most voluble; Chris Baumer was very reticent. Learned a lot about everyone. We had snacks – grapes, cookies, cheese and crackers and coffee.

We finished reading the play – everyone stood to read and moved when/where they felt like it. Tim McNamara and Rick Steeves are a touching Emilia and Egeon – two white bearded men, epitomizing age and dedication, love.

Tim Read thinks that acting is putting on a funny voice – he had a different accent for each character he read. Had to ask him to drop the British because no one else was in that world. Talked a little about time and being willing to take time without worrying about the end product. All seemed willing to work that way. Roman reads very intelligently and with care. He suggested that we ask Mackie Boblette to join the project.

\*\*\*

Meeting #3 – tentatively set for Monday, June 27 at 7 at Crozet Arts

present were John Holdren, Chris Baumer, Tim Read, Tim McNamara, Mackie Boblette – first time – Roman Cybak, Kurt Vogelsang, Jim Horstkotte and me.

Rick Steeves was with his Grandkids; Brian Dowd was unavailable; no word from Kevin. I will stop notifying Kevin and Brian in September.

Yes! We met for our first “real” rehearsal – script analysis. We attacked the first long speech in Act 1, scene 1, interpreting it line by line, reading it all together. In the end we all

understood what was going on. Tim Read wants to open everything up – he is a lawyer – and has some interesting insights. I feel like I talk too much, trying to find my way I suppose...I brought hats and talked again about casting, about theater, about the situation in C'ville. Also about how to create ensemble – I asked them all about their varying experiences with ensemble work. Mackie has had some real ensemble experience but long ago. I mentioned the possibility of rep work, of adding women. I also talked about theater games and exercises as a way of helping build trust and ensemble feeling. When it became clear Mackie didn't know everyone's name we did the purple square name game, then with names and states...they were so good at it! We laughed and had fun, even Chris B who hates theater games. Before we left, I encouraged them each to choose a monologue or bit of speech that was appealing to them, to “memorize” it if possible or at least to become very familiar with it. The plan is to work the scenes around those pieces, to see what kinds of characterizations they can create...and if memorization is too difficult, we'll see that too.

Next meeting is scheduled for Monday, July 18 at 7pm at Crozet Arts.

\*\*\*

Email re meeting #3

Hello All -

Many thanks for your time and presence on Monday. I am writing to confirm our next meeting on Monday, June 27 at 7pm at Crozet Arts. We will focus on a couple of scenes (TBD) and mix up the actors so that you all have a chance to taste multiple roles. The goal for this is to allow you all to have some say in which characters you take on. We can have multiple casts - we are making our own rules!

Something from Peter Hall to think about:

"The word is the beginning and out of it comes the physical life of the character, the action and the atmosphere."

I am looking forward to all that!

Thanks,  
Boomie

\*\*\*

Monday, July 18 – 6pm - Crozet Arts

Present at this meeting:

Chris B., Roman C., Tim M., Rick Steeves, Tim R., Kurt.

Had an email from John H. in the meanwhile – he has lost his job and is now at age 61 dealing with many of the issues that prompted this project, in looking for a new job. How is he perceived in the job market? As experienced or too old to garner the wage he deserves...the door is open for him to come back although he has stated he doesn't feel like doing a comedy right now. (Of course comedy is so much harder to do than the more serious thematic material – under all the laughter is something of substance, something really vulnerable.)

Saw Cristan Keighley – or rather saw Rebecca who asked if I would include Cristan in this, which I did and have not even heard from him other than to run into him and have him say “I will respond” but I am not holding my breath. Talked with Kevin several times – he is so evasive, not in a calculated way but because his focus is on all sorts of other things...maybe he will come next time....

I brought in the half-masks. We started with some warm-ups – plateau exercise and flocking. Wish I had more space to do the flocking. Would like to do it for a good 20 minutes to see what happens but these guys need more space.

After we did that and I talked a bit about ensemble building, we looked at several scenes with the half-masks. They all found them liberating and fun. Maybe we will use them... Scheduled next meeting for Mon., Aug. 22. I tried to have an extra meeting Aug. 11 but in the end, even I was unavailable. In the meanwhile I called Michael Volpendesta to tell him about the project; he called back to say yes, he was interested and then did a total about-face to say he wasn't able...is it him? Life? His wife? His mother dying in Chicago?

\*\*\*

Mon., Aug. 22 – 6pm - Crozet Arts - .

Present: Chris B., Kurt, Tim M., Tim R., Roman, Jim H., Rick (late as usual!) and Brian Dowd!

No John, no Mackie -he was afraid he was getting sick – no Kevin who called from Leesburg where he was painting commercial buildings for his little brother trying to earn money; no Michael Volpendesta who is too overwhelmed by life for this right now. Roman and Tim mentioned Tim White (from Locally Sourced) and Ron Berubi...will follow up.

We started with a circle – name game touch/speak...the longer we play, the harder it gets...then we went right into larval mask work – I feel like I'm stabbing in the dark...might use these masks as part of opening like *The Green Table* – men in masks making decisions.

Then hot seated each one – questions and non-verbal responses. They enjoyed playing and feeling free.

We read the opening of Plautus's *The Menaechmus Twins* – Prologue and Act 1 - bawdy and funny – can we merge the two somehow? Brian read *Sponge at Blackfriars* and may still have the script...Tim R. has never done Shakespeare before! Then we read the last act of *Comedy of Errors* and talked about who wants to play what. Tim M. is a wonderful Emilia. Kurt is interested in Luciana. Chris B. likes the Courtesan – I would cast several courtesans – and the rest are easy with whatever. One of the Grumpies thinks doing Shakespeare means funny voices and awkward or “artificial” movement.

Here is a tentative cast list:

Rick S. - Egeon and ?  
Chris B. - A of E (the one who doesn't encounter Courtesan), Courtesan and  
Tim M. - Emilia and  
Brian D. - A of S?  
Jim H – D of E?  
Roman – Duke and Merchant?  
Mackie – Pinch and  
Tim R. - Angelo and  
Kurt - Luciana and  
Kevin – D of S?  
Luce, jailers, merchant (TBD)

The original Plautus has clowns, lazzis and other comic conventions...want to mix the two together somehow...masks or clown noses? Maybe noses...for part of it. The introduction can be a melange and then we go into the Shakespeare...thinking of writing a Prologue...

\*\*\*

### **The Middle – Fall, 2016 – Sept. - Nov. - Rehearsals start in earnest**

Saturday, Sept. 16, 2016 – at Chris's house

Present: Chris (at his house), Tim Mc., Tim White, Kurt, Joe, Mackie, Rick, Jim.

Our cast now includes Rick S, Chris B., Tim Mc., Tim Read, Tim White (who would rather not do a part but is happy to do stage management), Kurt, Mackie, Roman, Jim H., Joe M, (maybe Brian D., maybe Kevin?) Jim H wants to read an Antipholus; I need to be careful with the Dromios. Maybe Brian and Mackie?

Could do:

A of S – Chris B.  
D of S – Brian  
A of E – Jim H.  
D of E – Mackie B  
Duke – Joe  
Egeon – Rick S.  
Adriana – Tim Read (?)  
Luciana – Kurt  
Balthazar – Roman? Joe?  
Angelo – Roman? Joe?  
Courtesan – Kevin(?)  
Luce – Tim M.  
Pinch – Rick S.  
Emilia – Tim M.  
Merchant – Roman  
Jailers -

We read the Prologue and first Act of the original Plautus in two different versions – they were very language heavy – almost Dr. Seussian in the rhythm and rhyme. The prologue was the

writer speaking to the audience, telling the story – comparable to Egeon's opening speech; the opening monologue by Sponge or “Table Duster” served to contextualize the place and to introduce the liaison with the audience (Dromios and A of S). The entire first scene is spent denigrating women, specifically the wife – in one, Menaechmus is wearing the dress he is stealing from his wife to give to his lover. The scene is all about justifying the infidelity. Reflected in the Courtesan in *Comedy*.

We read through Act 3, up to the Luciana, A of S scene. Next step is to cut, to hone in on who wants to do which part. We will meet – some of us – on Oct. 1 to see *Comedy* at UVA – apparently it has been set in a drug dealer's world...? We will adjoin to the Monaghans' after, to talk about it. Maybe Jim can read A of E – could do Act 3, sc. 1 with all who come...need to set up next full meeting – Fri. evening maybe?

\*\*\*

Tim R. organized tickets to go see the UVA production of *Comedy*. We will go to the matinee on Sat., Oct. 1 and then go to Joe's to have our own talkback. There will be six of us. The rest are going at another time.

Ran into Doug Grissom at the gym, the Professor of playwriting at UVA. Asked if we'd seen the UVA production of *The Comedy of Errors* and said it was the worst thing he'd ever seen. Had no idea why Colleen had hounded Betsy to direct – had to ask 3 times. Betsy would do it only on condition that it was a co-directing deal. JP was the other half...missed the mark completely. What was with everyone putting on clown noses as they left the stage at the end of the play?

In the interim since seeing the UVA *Comedy*, we have met a handful of times. We have gone through the whole play again, broken it down. Now we begin to rehearse in earnest. But I

have lost a couple of actors now...Brian has Kelly to cart around and is not available. And Sean forgot to check the performance dates before saying yes. So there we have it.

When did Tom H. join? End of Nov. when Sean M. bowed out due to lack of reading schedule! Put Tom right into Dromio of Syracuse part – he called it a “gift.” Probably just as well Sean bowed out - he is an actor who strikes me as needing to have things spelled out more definitively (his way!) and might not take to this exploratory process...

I have not been good about keeping up with rehearsal journal entries. Juggling school, life, this project, *Mother Courage* and all the driving...

\*\*\*

### **The End (is in sight) – Winter, 2016 – Dec. - Feb.**

We met today, Sat., Dec. 10 at 11 – worked with Rick for an hour and then the rest came. We worked the opening and then we worked Adriana and Luciana. I have decided that Egeon is a toy merchant. As he has traveled for the 5 years, visiting countries where he clearly doesn't speak the language, he has become adept at using his toys to tell the story of what he is doing. (We will try demonstrating the speech with Playmobile – Chris has all of his kids' – pirates etc. It may be too small but what an interesting metaphor – men playing with Playmobile while deciding the fate of another. For the Duke's cabinet, the appeal of the toy and the playing allows them to step out of their uptight, suited, prone-to-violence, black-and-white-laws selves and find the joy of play again. Little boys and their ships.

At the end of rehearsal, one of the actors approached me and asked if “now was a good time to give me some notes.” I had such a hard time figuring out what he meant – as far as I know I am directing this and so if anyone gives notes, it would be me...but then I realized he is not trained, not an actor – he is a lawyer and a minister, so clearly right about everything. And a



straight, white male. (Later, in retrospect, I wondered if the fact that I was the only woman gave him more permission to approach me like that, not maliciously, but because it is such an ingrained part of our culture.) At the time though, it occurred to me, giving him the benefit of the doubt, that perhaps he didn't know that notes are not given by actors; that saying "I had a thought" or "I was wondering" or "something occurred to me that I wanted to share with you" would be the thing to do...as it turned out, because he had come late to rehearsal, he had no idea what we were engaged in as far as the movement went and was off the mark completely. Oh well.

\*\*\*

Confirmed today that we will do a thrust presentation. A hollow core door, a couple of sawhorses, a stand. Door is table, is door to the Phoenix and is the Abbey door just by shifting orientation. Also need the garden table and chairs for the ladies. Fruit bowl. Luciana is a snacker, wants to eat...Adriana is a firebrand, a pistol. Luciana is calm and placating and terrified.

\*\*\*

We meet next on Sat., Dec. 17. We will look at the door scene and the Exorcism. Both full cast scenes.

If not everyone is listed in the script for the door scene, I will add them in! Also need a Courtesan...maybe Leo Arico would do that for me...just that scene...but I think he's in *Peter and the Starcatcher*...need to find one more actor...maybe two...or cut something...

Door scene is becoming clearer – cannot let down on vocal energy or pace it builds and builds.

Chris will do Prologue – tried to model it after the Prologue in Plautus.

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Ordered masks.

Decided no playmobile. Too small – would work for film, not for stage. We need something large enough for the audience to be able to see it. Do we just use the actors then?

They sent wrong masks – the full face with no mouths. All the others are really too small for the men's faces. Can we use them anyway? Maybe on dowels...? They've sent on the eye masks I ordered.

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It is the New Year, 2017! Here is the rehearsal schedule that I aimed for and I believe we mostly achieved, with specifics. Time needs efficient management going forward – serious business!

#### **REHEARSAL/PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE – COMEDY**

**Sat., Jan. 7** – 10 – 1 – Library - All called - transitions

**Sun., Jan. 8** - 1 - 4, Crozet Arts: Roman, Tom H., Jim H., Tim M., Kurt if he can

**Mon., Jan. 9** - 5:30 -8:30 - Library - Chris B., Tom H., Tim R., Jim H.

**Tues., Jan. 10** - 6 - 8:30 - Library - All Called (no Rick Steeves) - Acts 2 and 3. Act 3 folks not in Act 2 (Tim R., Tim M., Roman) come at 7 if you like.

**Thurs., Jan. 12** - available if anyone wants to do line work...or not...

**Sat., Jan. 14** - 11 - 3 - Library - All Called (no Rick Steeves) - Acts 4 and 5

**Mon., Jan. 16** - 6 - 9ish - Crozet Arts - All Called (All present?!?!?) - Limp Thru whole play!!!

T - F - TBD

**Sat., Jan. 21** - 11 - 3 - Library - work all scenes without the Boys from Ephesus

**Sun., Jan. 22** - 1 - 4 - Crozet Arts - All Called - Limp Thru again, sans Tom Howard. (Maybe off book for a scene or two? Just a suggestion...)

**Mon., Jan. 23** - TBD

T - F TBD

**Sat., Jan. 28** - 11 - 3 - Library - All Called - Run Thru

**Sun., Jan. 29** - 1 - 4 - Crozet Arts - All Called - Run Thru

**Mon., Jan. 30** - 5:30 - 8:30 - Library - scenes TBD

**Weds., Feb. 1** - 5:30 - 8:30 - Library - scenes TBD

**Sat., Feb. 4** - Crozet Arts - 2 - 5 - TBD

(Crozet Arts Midwinter Frolic - 8pm - Act 2, sc. 2 "teaser" - Antipholus of S., Dromio of S., Luciana)

**Sun., Feb. 5** - 1 - 4 - Crozet - Run Thru – no Jim

**Mon., Feb. 6** - 5:30 - 8:30 – run thru

T - F – TBD

add **Weds., Feb. 8** and **Thurs., Feb. 9**

**Sat., Feb. 11** - 11 - 3 - Crozet

**Sun., Feb. 12** - 1 - 4 - Crozet

M - Th - TBD, possible rehearsals at Live Arts

**Fri., Feb 17** - 7pm - Performance Unity Church

**Sat., Feb. 18** - 7pm - Performance Unity Church

**Sun., Feb. 19** - 2pm - Performance Senior Center

**Weds., Feb. 22** - 7:30pm - Performance Live Arts, Reh. A

**Thurs., Feb. 23** - 7:30pm - Performance Live Arts, Reh. A

**Sat., Feb. 25** - 11 (?) stage in Newdick Theatre at Shafer Street Playhouse, VCU 3pm -

Performance, Newdick Theatre, VCU; 7pm - Performance, Newdick Theatre, VCU (possibility of one performance Sat. at 7:30 and one on Sun. at 3 if we prefer 2 days - our choice...)

*Weds., March 2 - Sun., March 5 - SETC - no performances*

**Weds., March 8** - pick up/review rehearsal

**Fri., March 10** - 7:30pm - Performance at IX

**Sat., March 11** - 7:30pm - Performance at IX

**Sun., March 12** - celebratory dinner? (I may have rehearsal - so TBD...)

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Sat., Jan. 7 – Library – 10 – 1 – snow makes library open at 11.

All present; Rick left early

We talked thru transitions – who enters from where and exits where – and then walked through the same up to Act 5 and worked what we could of Act 5 without Rick.

\*\*\*

Sun., Jan. 8 – Crozet Arts – Present: Tim M., Roman, Tom and Jim; no G&D guys, no Tim R.

Worked Angelo, Balthazar, Dromios. Started with physicalization for Dromios – they have such distinct and settled postures. How to get them to find something more neutral so they can take on a character. Had them follow each other and watch for something “noticeable” about gait or posture. Then had them exaggerate it and continue the walking; then reversed who was following whom. Hard to do much without more. Find myself worrying too much about calling actors and not using them a lot...but some parts are not big or not big in certain scenes or more about listening...hard to get them to understand that. Time is such a commodity – can't waste it!

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Mon., Jan. 9 - Library – Antipholi and Dromios and Kurt showed up - did some physical work – clown exercise – did the following closely behind someone and finding an aspect of their movement to exaggerate – none of these guys can do that. Or if they start, they can't sustain it. It is hard for them to notice things – they see what they think is there.

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Tues., Jan. 10 – Library - all but Rick and Joe – Worked Acts 2 and 3

Hard for them to maintain, from one rehearsal to the next, some basics of working in thrust. Hard for them not to constantly look at each other when speaking...hard for them to understand walking and talking at the same time...just hard. Hats help.

\*\*\*

Sat., Jan. 14 – Library 11 – 3 – trying to run whole thing. Limp thru. A gentleman (B. Catron, PhD, writer and editor) joined us. He saw the notice about the Senior Center performance – wanted to participate. I invited him to join us, to watch rehearsal. He wound up reading in for the few missing. Serendipitous!

\*\*\*

Mon., Jan. 16 – Crozet Arts – 6 – 9 – Limp Thru. (Though Bayard said he would come back, he did not...is he okay? Email if you don't hear from him...)

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***Notes to Self - Production issues - costuming:***

\*Can't find music or costumes yet. Not sure what the “milieu” of the play is yet. Italy, seaside, bursting into song at the drop of a hat – bright shirts.

\*Jean Louis Barrault in his flowing white pants and top – could have all men in flowing pants – zoot suit trousers? Suspenders?

\*Or Jacques Copeau in his stripes – white socks and pumps, hat...

\*How do we convey twin-ness?

\*Can we do it with clothing alone? A wig maybe?

\*All have mini harmonicas, eye masks...

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Thursday, Jan. 19 – Present – Kurt, Mackie, Roman, Tim M., Tim R., Joe, Jim

Heard from Bayard: he fell and hurt something pretty badly – hip? Knee? Anyway, he is out of commission for a while and will join us when he can, if he can. He was very interested and enthusiastic. Seems like he appreciated the community...

Just worked 4/1 with Merchant, A of E, Angelo and Officer then Adriana and Luciana scenes and with Dromio of Ephesus. Had conversation after with Kurt and Mackie – Kurt's fear of not remembering is causing him to not remember. He knows there is a history of Alzheimer's in his family – father, uncle, etc – so he's afraid the changes he is experiencing are pointing to that. He doesn't know whether he has anything wrong – won't see the doctor - but his worry is

affecting his behavior. Self-fulfilling possibility.

\*\*\*

Sat., Jan. 21 – worked opening – all but Tim R and Jim there. Did it as we went – will work so much better – Funiculi, Funicula into Prologue, into scene 1. Using masks on sticks as totems.

\*\*\*

Sunday Jan. 22 – we will work opening again and move into Act 4 and Act 5.

What a bunch of divas! Did not get as far as I had hoped. Didn't know till late that Roman wasn't coming. Went over the song, prologue and opening monologue but not enough. Right now it feels like everyone is in his own play – no one is doing enough listening so that lines are happening because in a vacuum. The sense of conversation is missing, as is the sense of events being actions and reactions...Kurt was a mess again. I feel so bad for him. Have to run to Improv now. Would rather not!

Love working with the masks like puppets – trying to get the men into their bodies enough to animate the masks is tough. They need to love their masks and endow them with character and life.

Tomorrow I will work with A of S, D of S; add D of E at 6 and if Kurt is up for it, lines at 7:30 with him, then Tim R. Ending at 8:30.

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Mon., Jan. 23 - Worked the physical bits – hard to get Tom to look away from Chris...little by little he is getting it. Have told the Dromios repeatedly that they need to talk to the audience. They are the clowns, the liaison with the audience. The more they are available, the better.

Kurt worked hard but the more he works, the further away it gets. Talked for a while about why...suggested that he leave Kurt at the door and just let Luciana in...he's so in his head,

about how he thinks it should sound.

Met with Tim R. to go over his parts. Finally had a breakthrough today – understood iambic pentameter – didn't before now! Saw how it could help with learning lines, telling the story. Went through Act 4 up to Act 5. He understood “operative words” and need to NOT punch pronouns unless that was where the stress fell. He is starting to lose his funny voices although he is still using one for the Merchant – I am letting him because it is such a brief appearance...what did Dustin Hoffman say - “You can't improvise this shit!” (Peter Hall)

Jim did well – nearly there with his lines and he is embracing the “trippingly off the tongue” notion...need to tell them all that “There's so much going on in a line of Shakespeare, that if the actor colors the voice too much, the audience loses too many other colors.”

\*\*\*

Chris will be gone Sat. and Sun. - told me today. Won't be able to run the show so we will work bits...the opening, scenes we can run. Lines, lines, lines...

\*\*\*

Sat., Jan. 28 – Library - worked on opening song and prologue with gesture – a sort of contemporary chorus, singing chorus as well as gestural. They mostly got it. They have been so patient with all the changes to the Prologue – I hope they understand that I am tailoring it to their abilities and attempting to streamline the thing...

Then we went to Act 5 with everyone. Roman has become the default “extra man.” We are making it a bit – whenever the Duke says “Go, one of you” or calls for someone, it is Roman. At which point everyone else on stage looks at Roman until he “gets it” and exits. Why is it so hard for them to remember to look at him for the joke to work? Timing! Comedy!

\*\*\*

Sun., Jan. 29 – Library - we continued with Act 5, starting with end of 4.

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Mon., Jan. 30 – Library - we started with Chris, Tom, Tim the Messenger. Simplified it. No circling, instead one-upping...when the rest of the cast arrived, we started at the end of 4 into 5 and then went to the start. The mask/movement bit does NOT work. Not enough time to do what I see. Not enough ability to sustain gesture. Except for Mackie. Will simplify it as well. Fabric on “walls” which will be turned around to set garden scene at Phoenix and back again for abbey if I can make the clothing rack idea work. Need the door – do I use a screen? Can J make something portable and workable? Need block for Abbess as well.

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Weds., Feb. 1 - we will start at 5:30 with Luciana, Antipholus, Dromio – 3/2 which we are doing at CA on Sat. Need costumes for them as well – will set Sat.

Thinking white pants and blazers (?) for Antipholi; chef's stripes for Dromios; caftan, shawls and fans for Luciana and Adriana. Or all black pants or black and white...

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Performance at Crozet Arts Midwinter Frolic. Just doing Act 3, sc2 – Antipholus and Adriana followed by Dromio and Antipholus geography lesson.

If they can do it there, they can do it anywhere!

Set up lights and bench as they will be in our performances – doubled for the dance as well.

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Rehearsals at library and at LA – running. Slow. “Pick up the pace” is hard to enforce when the lines aren't solid. Pausing to remember is different from pausing to think!



Kurt had a hissy fit. “The Courtesan is interfering with what I want to do with the other role.” Just say the words Kurt! The words do the work and what you are doing is stopping the story! He wants to quit – I don't have anyone else. We will cut more of the speech – what is the crucial part of it?

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Thinking of using the table for the door anyway. There will always be one at each venue we get to. Except maybe IX...need to check. I could fashion a cover out of fabric...will have to ponder this.

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### **SHOWTIME! And some notes on the performances.**

We have completed our first three performances. Thank God for Tim the Prompt. And how seamless he makes the offering a line. We had an interesting conversation about use of prompts in the UK and the eschewing of them here in the US. In the UK apparently Stage Right and Stage Left are more usually Off Prompt and Prompt – if an actor needs a prompt, he moves to the left and gets it. I remember seeing a production by the English Shakespeare Co. at the Tokyo Globe of one of the history plays and at the start of the second act, the actor doing his monologue backed upstage and leaned to the left. Then he returned to his downstage position and continued – clearly he had received a prompt! How reassuring for the audience to know he could get back on track and wasn't stranded onstage with a blank space in his memory. Why are we so insistent on not acknowledging our “human-ness” here in the US? We demand perfection, which gets in the way of truth and being in the moment. We are none of us perfect!!!

Audiences have been good – opening was terrific and surprising for the cast. The second night was a second night – lower energy, too hot onstage, smaller audience...Bit and Macy were

there and made the talkback a love-fest which I was really uncomfortable with but it did bring up an issue about the “who” – I asked all of these men personally to do this project and if they did not have some sense of me before they accepted, it might have been a different project. This process was different from the start in that they didn't have to audition; rather we came together and agreed to find out organically who would play which part. As Tim R. said, we were a company before we were a cast. And that builds trust and ensemble from the ground up.

Their good spirit and joy is infectious – the audience can feel that. The audience is also far more forgiving – why? Because of the name of the company “Grumpy Old Men?” Because they are older actors and so there is a lesser expectation? Or because the whole event is irreverent, so the audience feels more ownership, that their participation is equally important – they can't sit back and judge...

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**Performance weekend #1, 3 shows:**

Opening at Unity was the biggest crowd and they fed the show – their enthusiasm was infectious. Second night not quite as full and very much more quiet – cast didn't seem to be too affected by it. Talkback with Kate was far more open and relaxed.

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Senior Center was very full as well. There was a gentleman in a wheelchair who slipped down in his seat during the performance so that at the end, we had to hoist him back up to a sitting position. Thank goodness Mackie has experience with how to pull on what so that there is no injury. We wound up pulling him up by his waistband. How amazing that he came. One of the audience was a woman whose son had won a Tony Award for producing. She was thrilled with the piece, saying – of course – that it was as good as anything she'd seen on Broadway or

Off-Broadway – we were of course way off-Broadway!

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**Performance Weekend #2, 4 shows:**

Live Arts: Weds. - Paul Wagner, small space, line snafus; Thurs., - Larry Goldstein, laughter and snafus still...Tim remarked that the space held the production better than at Unity where it was sprawling. Adriana and Luciana missed an entrance because they were in the hall talking about what lines they had screwed up...small space but easier to get lost!

Richmond – no Aaron – real life has interrupted and needs attention! Video a performance, he says...but that won't show one of the most important parts of this event, the presence of the audience...did this performance on the stage – only performance where we had stage lights – no glaring lights in anyone's eyes this time! Loved putting the audience onstage with the show – real engagement. Paolo and Luca came – Paolo spoke of the “joy of play” he saw and felt; that that was what theatre really was at its heart. Luca speaks little English but was able to follow the story because of the physicality. Two shows in the same afternoon – what was that like in terms of stamina? In terms of focus? They made it, they didn't seem tired. They kept it together because they had to!

\*\*\*

Week and a half break between penultimate and final performances – what did that do? Was it hard to retain the play, the words?

**Performance weekend #3, 2 shows:**

Last rehearsal, Weds., March 8 – pick-up at the library – in the familiar space, it was nearly word perfect. Performance the next evening in a new space was a mess – lines lost, moments of “where am I?” but nonetheless, the story was told, the audience seemed pleased and

glad to have been there. There was a sense of everyone – audience and cast – working to tell the story, with the audience willing to fill in the holes where the actors inadvertently left them.

The new space, the IX – biggest audience yet – at least 50! And very varied. Many friends of mine or folks I knew – really nice and warm. But the screw-ups were incredible. Roman went up on most lines in merchant scene – he’s never done that before! But that is just part of the process – get it together and carry on. Rabbit was facilitator for this performance – wanted his voice because he does so much work with men, with fathers and sons...Mrs. Gooch – Tim R.'s friend – 94 years young – most eloquent, most lovely. Said she had lived her whole life in Charlottesville and was proud of that and this production made her proud all over again. So nice.

Second performance in the IX space – final performance – was lovely. Roman decided to do his Godfather impersonation as Angelo but did it in only one scene! Unexpected and very funny for all the wrong reasons. We videoed for Aaron (and for me to have an archive) with two cameras from different angles. I want to edit them together and make one full video, maybe with some footage of interviews with the cast members – will they remember the experience now?

Will Kerner, John Conover, Virginia Dougherty, Mac Wood, Megan and Barbara, Xenia and Alexey...really nice audience. Like home. Speaks to the power of community – how long does it take to make a community!

Jim H. suggested we remount this this summer and tour the wineries...would love to take it somewhere...or do a different play! *Romeo and Juliet?* *Love's Labour's Lost?* *Merry Wives?*

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Performing in different spaces allows for different audience expectations. I want to do a survey but fear no one would fill it out – question of time again! So I included the questions in

the program note:

1. What brought you here?
2. What were your expectations?
3. Was the experience what you expected?
4. If not, how was it different?
5. What will you take away from this event?

Our first facilitator tried to ask these questions verbatim and the conversation was quelled before it began. She is a theatre-trained minister, pastor of Unity, author of a book about the end of life. But the conversation wanted to be freer and more spontaneous.

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Performing at the Senior Center already presupposes a certain audience. Performing at Unity, Live Arts and IX will probably attract a more similar potential audience, more friends and other theatre folk. Performing onstage at Newdick promises yet different expectations and audience – more trained theatre people who will bring with them their “rules and regulations” for performance and acting. What will this production say to them? But surprisingly few VCU students came – another ill of our culture – time is so valuable, it isn't given to others – where is the interest in what your fellow practitioners are doing? Navel gazing theatre has no future. It is the future of phone relations...looking right into the palm of the hand to see what's on the screen instead of into someone's face and eyes to see what's there.

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#### **Some salient points from the talkbacks:**

Each audience was invited to stay to have a conversation about the piece, about their experience, and to offer any insights or comments that may have arisen. I was able to record most, although a couple are too garbled (or I forgot to push record!) There were many of the same sentiments expressed. There is much more feedback from the talkbacks, but to adequately

reflect what was said requires more time and equipment than I have at my disposal at present. It is a project for tomorrow, as is the editing together of the videos of the final performance, which though it does not convey the life of the event, shows the measurable moments. I would like to compile a more thorough record of this project in the future.

Facilitators for the talkbacks were Patricia Gulino and Kate Adamson, both ordained ministers, at Unity; I did the one at the Senior Center (I had thought to ask Bayard, our PhD write/editor drop-in but he never came back); Paul Wagner and Larry Goldstein at Live Arts; Emma Givens at Newdick; Bob Rannigan for the first performance at IX. I wanted Carol Pedersen (my mother) to facilitate the last performance – she has a wealth of knowledge about Shakespeare, Shakespeare festivals and theatre in general (she has an MPhil in Shakespeare studies from Columbia University) and she too knows all of the cast well having worked with most of them herself. But she went to *Peter and the Starcatcher* instead, a production on which she had been acting coach, demonstrating again, loyalty to the project she is working on! So I did the final talkback and felt honored to do so.

Our audiences were almost exclusively white, which is a reflection of the community in Charlottesville that attends and participates regularly in theatrical enterprise, unless it is a production that requires African-American actors which in turn requires active outreach to find and convince people of color that the project is worth doing. Our audiences were also largely middle aged and older. (I had hoped for both more intergenerational audiences and more diverse audiences, to have the possibility of different perspectives.) One of the things all audiences were surprised by was the physicality of the actors in the play – there was far more “athleticism” for want of a better word than expected from a cast of this age. The truth is that the more that was expected of them, the more they could do. They pushed themselves at a certain point, as they

gained the confidence by doing.

Another quality of performance that was commented on in nearly every talkback was the joy evident in the work these men were doing. That joy was a result of working together to tell the story, of “playing” on a team of players that understood each other well and knew where there were challenges and could assist in alleviating them, in the sheer fun of playing characters so outside themselves, whether women, or servants, or exorcists, officers, a Duke, a man condemned to death. The presence of the imagination and the strength that came of believing in imaginary circumstances was joyful and compelling.

And all audiences agreed that the story was told clearly and compellingly, even when there were line screw-ups. Rick Steeves, the actor who played Egeon is an accomplished citizen of the world and the one actor I cast before we started – he *had* to play Egeon. In addition to an MFA in creative writing, he is an RN and has a PhD in Nursing. At UVA he teaches the Death and Dying class to the freshman nursing students and has from time to time brought me in to speak about death onstage. In our penultimate performance at the IX Space in Charlottesville, in his last speech, Rick the actor, lost Egeon's words. I watched him struggle to allow the right words to bubble up, but what came out was “I'm too old for this.” It was a moment of laughter and recognition, truth and untruth, for in his next breath he found the words and finished the speech. The story prevailed, in life and art! Rick has described aging memory like this: as you go through life, you create memories and have experiences and they settle as you go on, with new memories and experiences coming to rest on top of them. As you get older and try to remember things, the things you want to remember have to bubble up from below the things that have more recently settled and sometimes you can't tell what will come out. Clearly what bubbled up for Rick at that moment was the futility of fighting to find the right words amidst the

flotsam and jetsam of the other information that was more readily available. The “I’m too old for this” was a true statement in the moment for both Rick and Egeon but then passed as he was able to find the words and continue.

In the same way that 18 year old children are deemed adults by our social system, so perfectly vibrant people called senior citizens seem to be sentenced to a life of not living while they wait for the end of life. Old age should not be a death sentence - death is an inevitable part of life and if we are lucky, we have the privilege of aging. The term senior citizen seems to sentence people of a certain age to a certain way of living rather than allowing them to continue to live as they see fit and feel fit and are fit to do.

One point that was made in a talkback has haunted me and it has to do with our assumptions about what we see as a direct correlation to our cultural and social selves. The lesson learned has to do with the absolute power of symbols. The rope's end we used was actually a piece of hemp rope that I liked better than the white nylon rehearsal rope we were using, but the rope was in the form of a noose that I intended to take out. I forgot. At one of the Richmond performances, an audience member remarked that the noose had triggered certain associations which were not at all part of the world of the play but which were very real nonetheless because of her racial and cultural identity and what a noose was immediately associated with, in other words, lynching. We removed the noose from the rope immediately. I realized that because I had intended to remove it, I didn't really see the noose any more but more importantly the noose had no real significance for me. White privilege? Probably. To be honest, there were several white audience members who were equally distracted by the noose as well, seeing significance and meaning where none was intended. The moral is: never overlook the power of symbols!!!



## Chapter 4 In Conclusion...

“It's a lot harder than it seems; to make it believable.” R. Cybak, actor, GOMDS

There have been many studies done on the health benefits of the arts in aging; on the value of community and specifically arts communities in aging; on the health benefits of theatre games and the challenge of memorization as good exercise for brain elasticity and power. Now we prolong life for a seemingly indefinite period, bodies surviving long past minds in some cases. And what happens to the people who are living, warehoused, shut off from company, from stimulating activities, from fun? We know that community can counter the fear and anxiety that comes with being alone. And that creative activity keeps the brain sharp and the body healthy.

The work of Anne Basting came to my attention in my research into “Senior Theater” (which is something else again, a different approach to theater for older actors...another paper, another day!) Dr. Basting, MA in Theatre and PhD in Theatre Arts, is an artist and educator who works to embed the arts in long-term care, particularly for people suffering from cognitive disabilities like dementia. In addition to writing many plays and giving lectures and keynotes around the country on various aspects of the application of the arts to aging, she developed a piece over the course of a year, based on the myth of Penelope, called *Finding Penelope*, in a long term care facility in her native Wisconsin, creating a multi-generational, site-specific production. It was a site specific piece that used the residents, the nursing home, the actors and the myth of Penelope to tell the story of the people who were actually there. “If the gods will grant us a happier old age, we will be free from our trials at last.” is the closing line of a brief

film clip of the project that used the Odyssey, the Greek language, students, artists and residents to create a site specific quest. This work interests me greatly.

She has also developed the TimeSlips(C) Creative StoryTelling Project, to promote “creative engagement” between generations. It is a way of telling a story communally in such a way that anyone who is challenged by memory issues doesn't need to experience anxiety because he or she cannot remember. The stories that are told are told about things that are right there in the present moment, whether it's a picture or an object or someone's shoe. The stories are created in the moment and are completely spontaneous. She views aging not as the time of tragedy and loss that we have come to see it as; rather as a time of richness and growth. She won a MacArthur Award for her work in 2016.

There is also the Messenger Theatre Company who collaborated with an organization called SPARC\* in NYC, to do a *Romeo and Juliet* at a Senior Center, using the residents as the cast. Empowerment is a strong impulse for theater-making and theater can empower those who feel disenfranchised, like the older (elderly); like people without families who need to stay connected; like men who have lost their “club/team/family. The use of myth and classical texts like Shakespeare point to the universality of experience and the relevance of storytelling as one gets older. *Romeo and Juliet* is not just the purview of the young – anyone who has loved and lost can relate to the thematic and emotional elements of the story.

One of the things “the grumpy old men” talked about was how they felt they were all on a team, how they felt that they were all working toward something together, for something that was really good and valuable. The benefit of feeling part of a team cannot be measured. Too often in old age people are isolated, put in nursing homes, visited only periodically or infrequently. There is no sustained and continuous social life beyond that of the staff and the

sitting room where they might gather to sit and pass the time. That was one of the great things about this project, the social aspect of it. That we got together regularly, that we could talk about challenges and successes, how we were feeling, in life as well as on the project and then we all got to work on something together. The kind of support and camaraderie we experienced made all of us feel better, stronger, happier, more engaged, more able. Certainly I felt that way and I know the men did as well.

The study “Still Kicking”, specifically about older theatre artists, conducted by the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University's Teacher's College with the support of the Departments of Cultural Affairs of both LA and NYC states:

No one has tackled the unique and urgent needs of artists as they grow old. While foundations and other funders have long directed their largesse to emerging and even mid-career artists, notably few have concerned themselves with the artist as s/he matures into old age— artistically, emotionally, financially and chronologically. Special attention to aging artists is important for material support and policy-making and is made more urgent in a time of scarce resources when the baby boomer generation is about to enter the ranks of the retired.

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The study then goes on to present an exhaustive record of the value of lives led by the artists in the study, with statistics and numbers all leading to the conclusion, from the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society. “Policies and Politics for an Aging America” that:

In today’s and tomorrow’s America older people have a wide array of capacities that are often underused. We must find ways to use the abilities of older people. Moving forward we will have to create new institutions or revise our thinking about the limits and ranges we’ve set for work, education, housing, civic engagement, and other domains. Including the arts.

MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society. “Policies and Politics for an Aging America,” 25

There is an entire industry built around “senior theatre” which basically consists of short

plays written for older actors who have memory issues. I have read a number of them - they seem largely hackneyed and uninteresting, superficial and jokey. An exception to this could be the work done Stagebridge Senior Theatre in Oakland, CA. It was founded in 1979 by Stuart Kendall, making it perhaps the oldest of the 700 plus senior theatres in the country. (Perry) At Stagebridge, older citizens are encouraged to reinvent themselves and take risks; there are ongoing classes and performances. In the article by Matt Perry, *Positive Aging: All the World's a Stage* (from California Health Report), the playwright Anthony Clarvoe is quoted as saying of the writers he tutors at Stagebridge "They have remarkably little fear about talking about the whole range of human experience. They are very vital, Very energetic. Remarkably dedicated. And constantly looking to improve." Anne Basting's TimeSlips(c) program is also used at Stagebridge, where the many programs are designed to stimulate, not numb. In the same article, a participant in the Stagebridge programs says "When we perform, something happens with the young people in the audience. They stop looking at us as old people and start looking at us as performers." Still later in the article Stagebridge founder Stuart Kendall says "What the arts do is give people a reason to get up in the morning."

There are so many wonderful plays that could be done by older actors, specifically because they have the experience to bring a greater truth to their characters and have no fear, or not as much. Shakespeare is certainly in that category. I would like to work on an older actor version of Chekov's *The Three Sisters* in the translation by Sarah Ruhl. It is true that the play opens on Irina's name day and she claims to be what, only 20? Well, we could handle that...the hopes and dreams, the frustrations, the losses, the yearning – those feelings never really leave us no matter how old we get. Why should they be the exclusive territory of the very young? Just because one gets older doesn't mean one stops having wants, desires, frustrations. If anything,

those feelings get more pointed because as we get older we realize that we have less time than we thought we did. I suppose one of the biggest take-aways from this project is to treasure the moments of connection. Treasure the moments of reaching an audience, the moments of reaching one individual in the audience, because, at the end of the day, the human connection is what makes life worth living.

*\*SPARC is a collaboration among the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department for the Aging and the City's five local arts councils. This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the Department For the Aging.*

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- <https://vimeo.com/21164186> (from the Penelope Project website)

## VITA

Boomie Pedersen was born March 4, 1957 in New York City and was a career track, scholarship ballet student with the Joffrey Ballet before deciding to give up the ballet and go to college. She graduated from Princeton University in 1979/82 with a BA in English and Theatre, winning the Frances LeMoyné Paige Prize for both Theatre and Dance. She has lived in NYC, Tokyo, Los Angeles and resides at present in the Charlottesville, VA area. She has worked extensively as actor, director, teacher, writer, producer and choreographer in all those places. She is Artistic Director of the Hamner Theater and the Virginia Playwrights Initiative as well as the Hamner Shakespeare Tour. She has run the Hamner Improv Troupe since 2009 and is involved in Momentum Playback Charlottesville. Boomie's greatest achievement is her six children and she is very grateful for their patience as she has worked toward her MFA, after all this time. But as shown in the writing above, she is hoping to figure out what she can be when she grows up, now that her babies are all out on their own!