

"A Comedy of Errors" turns in a comedy of pure joy

Theater Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

Purists may demur, but I found the new production of Shakespeare's "A Comedy of Errors" that opened last week at Alabama Shakespeare Festival a terrific show. Visiting director Risa Brainan has moved the play's locale from Asia Minor to Florida, and Charles Caldwell's set for the Festival Theater shows an Art Deco hotel straight out of Miami's South Beach. **Every day is carnival, with snappy music and congo lines.** Brash colors and outrageous costumes by Beth Novac add to the sea shore feel. Shakespeare's lines often sound like conversation, especially glamorous Anne James as a shop-till-you-drop Adriana, admittedly a little shrill.

The plot, an ancient one Shakespeare borrowed from the Romans, has a set of twins, both called Antipholus, who have been separated from their parents. Their servants, the Dromio's, are also twins (no mistaking them in red caps and oversized coats). The plot proceeds by a series of misunderstandings, where one or another of the twins is mistaken for the other. The very satisfactory resolution of the plot is managed by Sonia Lanzener (as the Abbess), who gives us a rare taste of her considerable ability to dominate the scene.

The casting of fine black and minority actors is particularly sensitive, with the father and his two sons — the show's main parts — clearly standing out on the stage. We're a long way from earlier ASF token minority casting with improbable family relationships. Two of the actors are familiar. Montgomerian Wilson Cain III as Egeon and Carl J. Cofield, whose work here we've admired before, as one of the sons. The other, also originally

from Montgomery, is newcomer Eric Ware, who finds unexpected strength in the stock role. **In the final scene he even takes a few, throw-away dance steps, giving us a glimpse of his versatility.** Others in the cast have Japanese and Chinese surnames, an ethnic mix appropriate to polyglut Miami — or even to the original Mediterranean locale.

A lot of the show's energy comes from the inspired clowning of the two Dromio's, James Yaegashi and Chris Mixon, who are not adverse to borrowing from TV or oriental sports. John Woodson, whom I didn't recognize, plays the Duke as a mob boss, with his henchman Devin Haqq. Mendy Garcia, in a too-small maid's dress with red bra and matching bobby socks, was very funny, and another costume that didn't fit the stereotype helped Jeniffer Sheffer Stevens as a courtesan.

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So even if you've seen A Comedy of Errors before, you haven't seen the play like this, complete with echoes of rap and pop culture. The shortest of Shakespeare's plays and one of the earliest, at only about two hours, this production is a fine introduction for children. ASF's repertory season is off to a good start, a classic play updated for the new century.