

The Strange Geographies of Ephesus: The Bell Shakespeare Company's *Comedy of Errors*

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The stage world created by John Bell's 2002 production of *Comedy of Errors* captured both the hybridity of the play and the mix of contradictions embodied in the historical and Biblical Ephesus, where the play is set. This essay proposes a reading grounded in cultural geography which allows for a foregrounding of the production's deployment of dreams and magic to generate a theatrical Ephesus which could speak to both Australian and English experiences of modern city life, via colour, movement and rhythm.

Keywords: Bell Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*, dreams, magic, phantasmagoria, cultural geography.

John Bell, founder of the Bell Shakespeare Company, has, as an actor and director, been at the vanguard of 'explor[ing] and establish[ing] a recognisable Australian approach to Shakespeare, an approach which is iconoclastic, energetic, physical, carnivalesque and excessive'.¹ Bell believes that the perception of this combination of features as 'recognizably Australian' Shakespeare may have arisen out of the fact that his early work with the plays in the 1970s was 'different to what was regarded as "English" Shakespeare at the time', that is, '[s]omething reverential, conservative, "Traditional"'; which he admits was 'no doubt a narrow vision of Shakespeare in England' then, and 'certainly would be now' in 2013.² However, a founding principle of the Bell Shakespeare Company is the attempt to create 'a theatre company dedicated to producing the plays of William Shakespeare in a way that was relevant and exciting to Australian audiences'.³ Bell's 2002 production of *The Comedy of Errors* was certainly identified by one reviewer, Chris Boyd, as 'perfect' for Australia, 'for us here and now'.⁴ And yet Boyd thought the production could 'travel well.' Not only was Bell's *Errors* successfully revived two years later in 2004, it also travelled to England in 2006.

The significance of the fact that this *Comedy of Errors* did 'travel well' needs to be noted; it not only travelled, as usual for with Bell Shakespeare productions, around Australia but when, in 2006, it toured to Bath Theatre Royal, as part of the Bath Shakespeare Festival, and later to the Blackpool Grand Theatre, it became the first Australian Shakespeare production to travel to Britain. Many, many Shakespeare productions have travelled from Britain to Australia, but Bell's *Errors* is unique in travelling, and travelling 'well', in the opposite direction. In Bath *Errors* was

seen as 'a really good night out: bawdy, hilarious, dramatic, entertaining and sentimental';⁵ in Blackpool it was hailed as a 'joyous interpretation' and 'that rarest of achievements – a faultless production'.⁶ This confirms the judgment of Chris Boyd reviewing the production in 2002, when he described Bell's *Errors* as 'bloody great theatre', urged his readers not to 'make the mistake of thinking that Shakespeare isn't something you'd choose for a great night out', and exhorted them to '[f]orget the pub, forget the multiplex, forget the x-box. Turn off the TV. [And] [g]et out!'.⁷

Bell believes his *Comedy of Errors* was 'refreshingly brash, unpretentious and heart-warming'.⁸ It was also Australianised; for example, Australian geography replaced European in the dialogue about the globe that is the 'spherical' kitchen wench (3.2). Antipholus of Syracuse asked 'Where's Melbourne?'⁹ to which his Dromio replied 'Her belly button is above her map of Tassie'. Later, when he and his master try to repel the Courtesan (4.3), as part of his frantic incantations, Dromio performed an imitation of a Cockatoo; and when Antipholus of Ephesus is bound (4.4), he ended up wrapped in the rope along the length of his body and 'jumping' along 'like a kangaroo jumping'.¹⁰ These interventions, combined with the actors' use of their own accents, may have made the play feel 'local' by giving it an Australian flavour. The production was also located in the borderland of the new millennium, which saw a renewed intensification of debates about the meaning of Australia, Australianness and, in the wake of the 1999 Republic referendum, a rethinking of relations within the continent and with neighbouring lands. This context makes *Errors* a play of particular relevance to a nation seeking anew to accommodate its diversity and difference, live productively with the ambiguities of western science and indigenous sacred,¹¹ and heal its fractured emotional histories and geographies. For Bell, however, '[t]he serious issue was *personal* [rather than national] identity',¹² and the 2006 programme emphasised deep personal concerns that recur in Shakespeare's later works such as *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, at the end of which 'families are reconciled, past wrongs are forgiven and the twins (or if you like the two halves of a personality) are re-united to make a satisfying whole'.¹³ The Bell Shakespeare website also goes beyond the Australian national context and cites 'Shakespeare's universal insights', which the company aims to use 'to bring inspiration and truth to minds living in an uncertain world'.¹⁴

If certain aspects of Bell's *Errors* made it particular to Australia, the imagined geographies it staged rang true at a transnational level, facilitating the production's transfer to England. This suggests that a more global theoretical lens might be appropriate to considering the production, especially in relation to the production's theatrical creation of Ephesus and notions of the modern global city. My reading of Bell's *Errors* therefore draws on theories current in cultural geography which consider modern cities not merely in terms of their material structures, but also in terms of the phantasmagoric landscapes that constitute many contemporary urban environments and the utopian imperative they promise, but often work against.¹⁵ *Errors* is ideally suited to interrogating the complex relations between time, space and people in the city and Egeon's story, which provides the play's romance framing, speaks of the perils of dislocation. The reprieve granted for him to seek his ransom activates a clock which tells that time is running out; the city's time-pressured

economic milieu is made clear from 1.2 when the First Merchant cannot 'walk with [... Antipholus of Syracuse] about the town' as he has an appointment and has been 'invited to certain merchants / Of whom I hope to make much benefit' (22, 24-25).

The provocative hybridity of *Errors* – evident in its generic complexity which combines elements of romance, farce, comedy and *commedia grave* – is also apparent in the play's complex over-layering of ambiguous geographies. Whilst the Ephesus of *Errors* may well mirror Shakespeare's London: 'a swarming, noisy trade centre, bewildering and hostile to foreigners' where '[e]verything has its price',¹⁶ the specificity of the city's name in this play is significant. It is widely accepted that Shakespeare's translation of the dramatic setting from the Epidamnum of his principal source (Plautus' *Menaechmi*) to Ephesus was influenced by the account of St. Paul's visit to the city and his letter to the Ephesian church. This geographical shift has attracted critical attention since, by opting to set the play in Ephesus, Shakespeare harnesses the ambiguities and dualities with which this city would have resonated for his contemporaries.

The programme for Bell's *Errors* contains features alerting audiences to the importance of the dramatic setting. The mix of miracles and magic, faith and idolatry, and religious worship and commerce bound up in Ephesus is indicated by two extracts from *The Acts of the Apostles*: one recounting the unsuccessful attempts of the Jewish exorcists to cast out evil spirits in the name of Jesus; and the other relating the 'confusion' that filled the city when Demetrius exhorted the Ephesian silversmiths to resist the denigration of their icons as false gods, since this claim was damaging both to the 'profit' made through their trade in silver shrines to Diana and potentially injurious to the reputation of the goddess and her renowned Temple.¹⁷ The ambiguous 'personality' of Ephesus and the Ephesians themselves is also evoked through an extract from Edward Falkener's *Ephesus, and the Temple of Diana* (1862), which points out that although 'its inhabitants were imbued with taste and genius' there was a disjuncture between their 'moral character' and 'their intellectual qualities'. This disjuncture, Falkener suggests, arises out of their conflicted city – which was 'above all other places in the world, noted of old for the study of magic and all secret and hidden arts' – and its geographical location, as, being situated 'on the confines of Greece and Asia', Ephesus 'engrafted the philosophy and mythology of the one and the mystical ceremonies and the belief in magic of the other'.¹⁸

Scholarly considerations of the ambivalences of Ephesus and the doubleness pertaining to the individual sites within the fictive world demonstrate why Shakespeare may have seen it as a perfect setting for his tale of multiple confusions, and analysing specific realisations of these fictive geographies in performance not only further illuminates the play but affords insights into wider spatial issues of importance to the contemporary geographical imagination. Although Bell's programme sought to raise awareness of the distinctly paradoxical character of the historical and Biblical Ephesus, a particularly interesting facet of the company's space in action in performance was the range of responses it prompted which expand the interpretive potential of the production. Jennie Tate's set, when activated by the 'ensemble' of movement, language and music of the embodied text encapsulated precisely the blend of opposing qualities which constitute the hybridity of the play

itself and comprise the ambiguities of its dramatic setting.¹⁹ Furthermore, the gallimaufry of impressions produced by Bell's use of pace, colour, eclecticism and magic, plus the connections critics made with popular culture suggest the ways in which the production set up parallels between the theatrical city of *The Comedy of Errors* and the phantasmagoric environments of modern cities and foregrounded the key themes of dreams and magic.

Bell saw both of Shakespeare's main modifications of his Plautine source – the geographical relocation to Ephesus and the addition of a second set of twins – as working together to 'stress the "magical" aspect of the play'.²⁰ One way in which Bell activated this 'magical aspect' was by punctuating the action with 'Ross Skiffington's sleight-of-hand magic'.²¹ Skiffington, an Australian magician, who was cast as Balthasar and Pinch, 'entertain[ed] the audience before the metaphorical "curtain up"'²² and performed 'all sorts of clever tricks throughout the play'.²³ Skiffington's role as real-life and fictional magician and the tricks he performed in Bell's production not only represented the 'sorcerers' referred to in Shakespeare's text but also became part of the ambivalence that created an atmosphere infused with a sense of fun yet tinged with the sinister. The city 'where the two sets of separated twins come face to face in a series of dislocating encounters that cause chaos and havoc' was a 'creepy' place 'full of sidewalk magicians and strange masked figures' (figure 1).²⁴



Figure 1. Doctor Pinch (right, Ross Skiffington). Image by kind permission of photographer Heidrun Löhr.

Sudden presences followed by equally sudden absences are characteristic of the phantasmagoria of the modern city, where '[t]hings (of all kinds) pass through the lives of city dwellers'²⁵ and the 'tricks' played by the city's ever-changing, mobile urbanscape were suggested by Tate's 'smart and appealing design [... which was] a riot of colour and interest in the setting of an oriental bazaar where characters appear

and disappear amid the clutter and coffee-making steam'.²⁶ For Emma Nelms, Tate's 'oriental' stage world with its 'colourful and attractive' mix of 'Harry Potter chic' and 'classic Hollywood Middle-East' worked in conjunction with the masks and costumes and Ross Skiffington's magic to accentuate the play's concern with 'sorcery, deception, insanity and bewitchment': providing an appropriate milieu for characters who doubt, and are challenged about, their own sanity, and also provoking questions about 'the nature of what we regard as mysterious, exotic and magical – revealing it to be delusion, illusion and confusion on both sides'.²⁷

Bell's production, then, expressed the sense of the magical in *Errors* by exploiting the talents of a trained magician within the mysterious stage world facilitated by Tate's eclectic design. The company's success in combining the magical and the dream-like elements of the play and its theatrical city are suggested by Boyd's comment that the production 'seemed to float an inch or two above the stage like an intoxicating fog'.²⁸ The idea of dreaming is important in Shakespeare's text: when Antipholus of Syracuse finds himself the subject of Adriana's mistaken, amorous address, he asks 'What, was I married to her in a dream?' (2.2.91); Egeon, on encountering Emilia for the first time after their long and grievous separation, prefixes his proclamation of recognition with 'If I dream not' (5.1.233); and Antipholus of Ephesus promises to 'make good' his declarations of love to Luciana 'If this be not a dream I see and hear' (5.1.377). These references to dreaming serve both to indicate a confusion about reality and to express the deepest desires that the characters have for their waking lives: the end of searching; the family re-united; a brother made whole by restoration to his twin and finding romantic his soul mate.

The dreamers of these poignant dreams moved within an exuberant world and Australian and English reviews of Bell's production were fairly unanimous in feting it as both 'fun' and 'funny'; indeed, Peter Morrison declared it to be 'probably the best night's care free fun in Sydney theatre' at the time;²⁹ and for Lyn Gardner the 'enormous sense of fun' was among the elements that 'seduc[ed]' the audience in the Bath revival.³⁰ However, as Bell recognised, 'for all its sense of fun, *The Comedy of Errors* does convey something of the fear of loss of identity, of being dumped in a totally alien environment where you know no one but everyone seems to know you'.³¹ If this is true for the Syracusan visitors, this unsettling symptom of displacement operates in a sort of reverse mode for Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus, as they are in a decidedly familiar place, but excluded by their familiars from the sites they know most intimately, and either have their actions denied or have actions attributed to them which they have not carried out. Both of these mis-recognition scenarios are the stuff of dreams and nightmares and can be part of the phantasmagoric experience of life in the modern city: a place which 'provides the archetypal scene for uncanny experiences' and where 'desires and fears [are] made concrete'.³²

Bell's *Errors* was 'lively'³³ and the storytelling 'zip[ped] along at breakneck', indeed, 'sizzling' speed.³⁴ For Gardner, the decision to make a 'headlong rush' to play the action within an uninterrupted 100-minute space of time 'ensure[d] that Shakespeare's lightest confection d[idn't] sink under the weight of too much comic over-egging'³⁵ and the 'riotous pace'³⁶ generated an energy that aptly corresponded with the farcical elements of the play and the production's 'delight in slapstick'.³⁷ The

'lickety-split tempo' at which the production 'barrel[led] along',³⁸ suited the dramatic structure and articulated the key theme of time – particularly time running out. It also worked to create a space infused with the force and relentless succession of fast moving sequences of action typical of the modern city life.

Bell's programme feature on the reputation of Ephesus may have orientated audiences towards an appreciation of the evocative force that this city would have had for the Elizabethans and triggered thoughts about the tensions arising out of religious and mythological dualities, superstitions, exorcisms and sorcerers. However, the production offered its audiences a spatialisation of Ephesus full of the paradoxes embodied in contemporary cities as hubs where conflicting interests converge in a mix of excitement and fear; aspirations and disappointments; and luxury and poverty. Such urban ambivalences were present in Bell's 'rattlingly rude yet romantic' treatment of the play,³⁹ which realised what Vanessa McCausland saw as 'the potential for hideous, gorgeous excess in Shakespeare's first comedy'.⁴⁰ McCausland's oxymoronic juxtaposition of adjectives recalls G. R. Elliot's dual conception of 'the sense of dreamlike transformation' that 'overcome[s]' both Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse in Ephesus; but which is 'romantic in the master and grotesque in the man'. Elliot's analysis of the play led him to contend that the 'weirdness' of *The Comedy of Errors* is so keenly developed because Shakespeare had truly apprehended the way that twins can unsettle the idea of human individuality; a phenomenon he referred to with the seemingly contradictory phrase the 'comic horror'.⁴¹

Such contradictions are found throughout reviews of Bell's *Errors*. Melissa Blease described the stage world in which the 'complicated tale of mistaken identity' was 'played out' as 'a lush, opulent set that provided as much of a feast for the eyes as the dialogue served up a banquet for the heart and mind';⁴² but this luxuriousness – picked up on by both Australian and English critics – was generally blended with an antonymic word or phrase indicative of the elegance and sleaze that generally coexist in modern cities as well as being suggestive of their dreamlike qualities. For Julie Moffatt, Tate's set, which 'depict[ed] something between Arabian Nights glamour and slightly seedy Turkish bazaar', created a 'weird and delightful world' conducive to Bell's fast-paced presentation of the comedic chaos of *Errors*, but also capable of bringing to light the 'subtle touches of more serious matters such as the effects of war, superstition, separation and reunification of families'.⁴³ The same mixture of stylishness and decay is found in Martin Ball's view that, with its 'riot of colours' and 'obligatory bazaar with lurid signs in Turkish and Arabic', Tate's design 'invoke[d] the dilapidated exoticism of the late Ottoman Empire'.⁴⁴ Reviewing the revival in Bath four years later, Jo Bayne used the term 'a riot of colour' to describe the costumes, adding that they were 'eclectic, part east, part west, part western modern, eastern ancient',⁴⁵ thereby hinting at the merging of cultures, and the blend of modes of thought and being, that constituted the 'weirdness' of this realisation of Ephesus: the dreamlike strangeness of which was also expressed in Robin Duke's designation of Tate's set as 'part bazaar part bizarre'.⁴⁶

This sense of the bizarre is also reflected in connections reviewers made between the stage environment of Bell's *Errors* and the worlds of animation, film and television. Alanna Maclean expressed puzzlement at Patricia Cotter's (Luciana)

costume, which she described as 'a cross between a Chiang Mai market hill tribe vendor and a member of the Mickey Mouse club' (figure 2);⁴⁷ and Vanessa McCausland referred to 'the brilliantly strange costumes [which were ...] somewhere between *The Jetsons* and *I Dream of Jeannie*'.⁴⁸ The different types of television entertainment invoked all have distinct dream elements as they open up 'a space beyond the constraints of ordinary living':⁴⁹ Disney's variety show for children offers a space where kids are the stars and enjoy a time outside of parental control; the fantastic, futuristic family in Hanna-Barbera's cartoon series, *The Jetsons*, live in a city in the sky; and NBC's classic 1960s sitcom, about an astronaut and the beautiful blonde genie he releases from a bottle, evokes the fulfilment of a desire for a sexy partner who can make all your wishes come true.

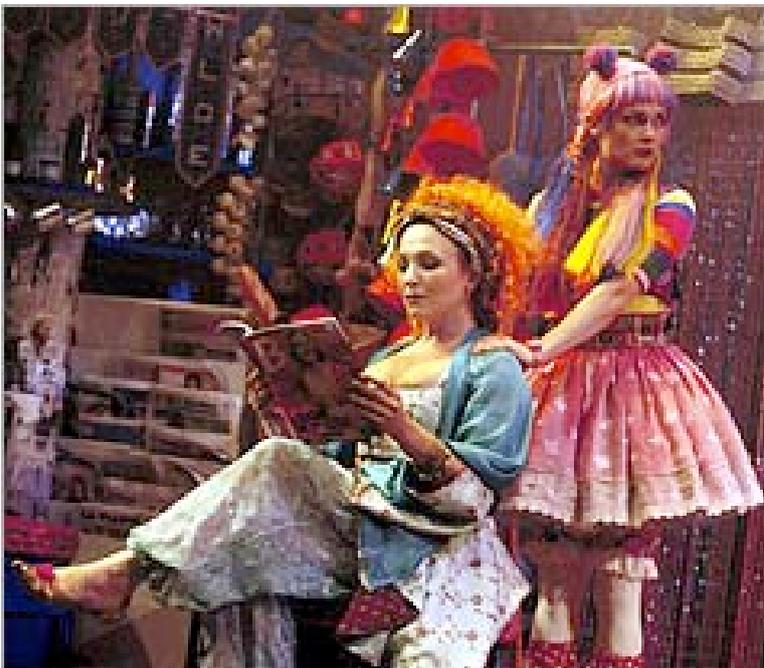


Figure 2. Adriana (seated, Blazey Best) and Luciana (Patricia Cotter). Image by kind permission of photographer Heidrun Löhr.

References to television programmes of disparate styles mingled with the links reviewers made to specific films and with certain genres in American cinema, particularly screwball comedy.⁵⁰ Colin Rose stated that the 'Turkish marketplace' which 'house[d] the action' was 'a location that as [... Tate] imagine[d] it owe[d] more to Technicolour Hollywood fantasy than to anything that may have existed in the Mediterranean' and, for him, the stage world evoked 1940s 'Road to ...' movies with Bob Hope or Bing Crosby, 'or – better yet, given the production's delight in slapstick – the Marx Bros' [*sic*] *A Night in Casablanca*'.⁵¹ Duke also suggested a similar space-time created by a later 1980s Hollywood epic and described the stage environment as an 'Indiana Jones Kasbah where pin striped suits, kiss me quick fezzes, belly dancers and the mysterious Dr Pinch mix and match'.⁵²

These cinematic associations present a combination of different but complementary elements. Firstly, they underline the eclecticism of the production in a

way that is reminiscent of the 'peculiar mix of spaces and times' that contributes to the phantasmagoria of the modern city.⁵³ Secondly, the films mentioned all offer an exotic sort of romanticism and fantasy adventure that is clearly located in the imaginative geographies of their respective celluloid worlds, and which, therefore, require interpreting in terms of the imaginative work their representations can do: as do the strange geographies of Bell's *Errors*.

Creative depictions of places and people in films, literature and theatre go beyond providing a mere setting or backdrop for narratives; they are imaginative geographies that do not just represent 'the world outside', but 'offer different ways of apprehending it and comprehending spaces'.⁵⁴ The theatrical city of Ephesus realised in Bell's production represented such an apprehension of the 'world outside' by encapsulating the contradictory elements of real modern cities with the dreams and magic that circulate within and around their material expressions. The significance of Bell's imaginative geographies is not merely that they effected an off-beat mirroring of contemporary metropolitan milieus, but that, placed in such an environment, the play's narrative demonstrated the potential for life-changing action within the urban environment, thus opening up the utopian possibilities of the city.

The early years of the twenty-first century have seen the 'stirrings of a revival of interest in utopia': precipitated, in part, by a 'rediscovery of the pleasures of fantasies and wish projections'.⁵⁵ Recognising that '[c]ities are imaginary as well as real spaces [...] constituted by dreams and desires, conscious and unconscious longings and fears, along with material developments and practices'⁵⁶ enhances our critical understanding of 'how cities may be thought about, conceived and lived'.⁵⁷ It also allows for a re-conceptualisation of utopia that supersedes the ideologically problematic, traditional ideas structured around 'notions of an ideal state or spatial form for a perfect future', offering rather a utopianism that performs a 'break with the here and now' and so generates 'space for challenging what is, for disrupting dominant assumptions about social and spatial organisation, and for imagining other possibilities and desires'.⁵⁸

The animating potential of such a positive re-definition of utopian urbanism based on the centrality of dreams and desires reflects the 'utopian imperative' that may be seen in Sigmund Freud's and Walter Benjamin's engagement with dreams. Both Freud and Benjamin show an awareness that 'in dreams there is redemption of a kind – for all dreams anticipate awakening'.⁵⁹ The utopian city therefore may be realised not by waking up *from* the nightmare of modernity that has produced a state of cynicism about change, but by 'wak[ing] up *to* the hopes and wishes contained within the phantasmagorias of city life with their emotional dynamism, their dreams and inspirations, their distractions and entertainments, their tears and laughter'.⁶⁰ If, as Benjamin suggested, 'the possibilities of dreams were most vivid at the point of awakening (somewhere between dreaming and waking life)',⁶¹ effecting social change in the material reality of the modern city may come from harnessing the affective energies and possibilities of dreaming.

Conceiving of the ending of *The Comedy of Errors* as a temporary halting of the exciting, yet disturbing and disorientating phantasmagoria of the theatrical city of Ephesus – so aptly realised in the imagined geographies of Bell's urbanscape with its

contradictions, and distortions, its mix of the 'creepy', the 'colourful and attractive', the 'hideous' and the 'gorgeous'⁶² – revitalises perceptions of the play's resolution. In these terms, *Errors* enacts an awakening that empowers its characters to imagine a better future through a change in the present.

Often, the dreams which converge in and which are produced by cities 'point to the wants generated by commodity culture [...] suggest a general condition of unfulfilled desires'.⁶³ Dreams circulate in cities through myriad signs that form part of the phantasmagoric procession of things: they are on display everywhere from billboards to shop windows, from monuments to murals;⁶⁴ and capitalism, the cornerstone of the contemporary city, 'is more than happy to distil your dreams into a commodity and sell it back to you, or to ensure that your unformed wishes coalesce around dreams that it already has commodities for'.⁶⁵ The market economy – much in evidence in Shakespeare's Ephesus – was cleverly condensed in Tate's design into the Turkish-style bazaar selling everything from 'fags and fezzes' to 'gossip magazines',⁶⁶ bags, baguettes, and strings of garlic, and even the odd naked Barbie doll.⁶⁷ And yet, it is not these commodities that Egeon or the visiting twins seek; that Emilia has been longing for; or that Adriana has been musing on. The play articulates dreams that cannot be bought and sold and presents a redemptive awakening that enacts the fulfilment of the desire for the just city.

Benjamin's fear was that 'the swirl and whorl of the phantasmagoria' of the modern city would 'captivate the mind of the modern urban dweller, leaving them [...] Hypnotized. Intoxicated. Stupefied. Dreaming. Sleeping'.⁶⁸ However, Shakespeare's Ephesus breaks through the state of inertia that Benjamin saw as an obstructive effect of the urban phantasmagoria. The final protracted scene of the play which brings all the wanderers together in one place to recount and review their stories in the light of new discoveries stages a revolutionary moment. At the end of *Errors* the phantasmagoria of the city is arrested for sufficient time to allow the characters who have been denied sight of each other, or been mistaken for the someone they are not, to be at last present to each other with results that are both unbelievable and totally natural: as unbelievable as magic and as natural as waking from a dream. In this moment, the possibilities of dreams and magic are activated through the Duke's acquittal of Egeon: an act which has profound implications.

When Adriana and Antipholus present themselves before the Duke, they both appeal for 'justice' (5.1.133, 190, 197). However, their individual desires for vindication in the scenario of marital misdemeanours and anxieties about suspected madness are overtaken by the other personal stories that converge in this moment of waking. The Duke's decision to override the legal requirement of the ransom for Egeon's life does more than allow a condemned man to live; it opens the way for the healing of the enmity between Ephesus and Syracuse. The characters wake up to their dreams fulfilled and The Duke's refusal to accept the 1,000 marks is a ruling of mercy that supersedes both the obduracy of the law, by which he has initially declared himself bound (1.1.26, 98, 143-146), and the monetary economy. This is, indeed, a brave new world.

The glimpse of utopia that *The Comedy of Errors* affords is one which accepts desire – 'the desire for a better way of being and living'⁶⁹ – as central to the

emancipated and emancipatory city. Rather than presenting aspirations towards the creation of a definitive ideal city, the final moments of *The Comedy of Errors* perform an urban utopianism which is 'open, joyful, and about seeking other possibilities within the present'.⁷⁰ One 'vital' feature of cities is that 'they bring together people in such a way that makes a difference to what happens between them'⁷¹ and what happens between people makes a difference to the city. The Duke – the key representative of power in *Errors* – is caught up in the transformed lives of the 'citizens' and this personal 'nativity' produces the possibility of a social and political nativity, made inclusive by the Abbess' invitation:

Renownèd Duke, vouchsafe to take the pains
 To go with us into the abbey here,
 And hear at large discoursèd *all* our fortunes,
 And *all* that are assembled here in this place,
 That by this sympathizèd one day's error
 Have suffered wrong. (5.1.394-399, *my emphasis*)

Through a consideration of the lives of *all* the citizens affected by the recent disruptions, the 'nativity' that revolutionises the world of the play promises at least an attempt at realising the better world of the new urban utopianism.

The kaleidoscopic world of Bell's *Errors*, then, resonated with the ambivalences of both Shakespeare's Ephesus and those of modern global cities; and the interruption in the production's fast-paced, high energy enactment of urban phantasmagoria emphasised the hiatus that occurs in the final act of Shakespeare's play. Thus, the production's imaginative geographies offered a way of apprehending the world beyond the fictive space, which brought *Errors* into dialogue with recent re-theorisations of the utopian vision of the modern city. However, plays can also make a difference to the theatres they temporarily inhabit, as performance and theatre-going are also bound up – along with dreams and magic – in the web of life experiences that are fleeting, yet potentially transformational. In addition to its engagement with the wider spatial issues that occupy theorists of contemporary city life, Bell's *Errors* also reasserted theatre's place as a site to rehearse the politically progressive potential of dreams and magic.

For Christopher Hansford, the magic performed by Ross Skiffington, as a prologue to Bell's *Errors* and a means of linking the action, 'point[ed] the way to the magical nature of life generally'.⁷² There is room for interpreting Hansford's words as suggesting the magical nature of life on several levels: within the world of the play, in the theatre as a space for experiencing the extraordinary, and in the spectators' own life-worlds. Magic is indeed ephemeral and intangible; and, according to Ross Skiffington, the realisation through 'the technical facilities available' of what 'really only happens inside someone else's head'.⁷³ To witness an act of magic, therefore, is to witness a dream embodied. Skiffington accepts that it is 'only the memory of the

effect [of magic] that remains',⁷⁴ but argues that dreams are a necessary part of our waking reality:

We need our myths and fairy tales, our legends and dreaming. They are a wonderful escape from reality. We can take these dreams of the imagination and turn them into a material form through magic, and illusion, and for a short time really believe that they are true. Like a play, a musical or an opera we can be transported into another reality and leave the theatre with a sense of wonder.⁷⁵

If magic, plays, musicals and operas can transport us to other realities – realise for us 'what was originally dreamt about by somebody',⁷⁶ the act of being in the theatre constitutes an acceptance of the invitation to acquiesce to the peculiar (il)logicality of dreams, and the moment of leaving the theatre corresponds to that powerful moment of waking in which the energies of dreaming can be harnessed.

Bryce Hallett's remark that '[t]he lively pace, improvisational skills of the cast and the pitch of the very fine performances' kept at bay 'such bald questions as "how can they be so dumb?"'⁷⁷ was echoed by Martin Ball's observation that the strong flow of humour produced by the 'evenness of rhythm and style' meant that audiences 'd[idn't] stop to question why, for example, the two sets of twins should be wearing the same clothes'⁷⁸ Both reviewers suggest that, for Australian audiences at least, Bell's 'entertaining production', which worked 'wonders in conjuring the play's magical qualities'⁷⁹ generated a space where they were permitted the empowering and pleasurable freedom of refraining from asking logical questions; a place where they could witness a materialisation of the dream that 'a drop of water / That in the ocean seeks another drop' (1.2.35-36) can actually find it, even – perhaps especially – amidst the storm of brash and comic mayhem that Bell's *Errors* constituted. Going from this material and metaphorical place with a 'sense of wonder' can set up the platform from which new questions – logical and illogical – may be asked.

For the British, the imaginary geographies of Australia are shot through with eternal blue skies and sunny days; certainly Hansford, writing for the *Bath Chronicle*, thought that Bell's *Comedy of Errors* brought 'more than a touch of Australian sunshine to rain-swept Bath'.⁸⁰ But perhaps this 'sunshine' came also from the momentary re-energisation of the utopian imperative, glimpsed in the sudden halting of the phantasmagoria of city life, which promises a better future in Ephesus, and which, for a while at least, opened up a new perspective on what *could* happen in those same 'rain-swept' streets.

NOTES

¹ Adrian Kiernander, 'John Bell and a Post-colonial Shakespeare, 1963-2000', in John Golder, and Richard Madelaine (eds.), *O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2001), pp. 236-255, p. 240.

² John Bell, personal email communication, 31 July 2013.

³ Bell Shakespeare Company website, <<http://www.bellshakespeare.com.au/about/vision>>, accessed 7 August 2013.

⁴ Chris Boyd, 'Finally a Comedy Without Errors', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Herald Sun* 27 August 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20867/full.html>>, accessed 22 June 2013.

⁵ Melissa Blease, 'Review: Bath Shakespeare Festival 2006', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Venue Magazine* 17 – 26 March 2006.

⁶ Robin Duke, 'No Errors in Bard's Faultless Comedy', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, Unsourced clipping, Blackpool Grand Theatre archive.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Personal email communication.

⁹ All references are to *The Comedy of Errors* ed. Stanley Wells, New Penguin Shakespeare (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1972).

¹⁰ All these interventions are detailed in the 2002 prompt book.

¹¹ J. M. Powell, 'Revisiting the Australian Experience: Transmillennial Conjurings', *Geographical Review* Vol. 90, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1-17, pp. 5-6.

¹² Personal email communication, emphasis in original.

¹³ Production programme 2006 p. 2.

¹⁴ Bell Shakespeare Company website, <<http://www.bellshakespeare.com.au/about/history>>, accessed 7 August 2013.

¹⁵ My thinking on the production is informed particularly by Steve Pile, *Real Cities* (London: Sage, 2005); David Pinder, 'In Defence of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities after the "End of Utopia"', *Geografiska Annaler*, Series B, Human Geography, Vol. 84, 3-4, Special Issue: The Dialects of Utopia and Dystopia (2002), pp. 229-241; Zack Furness, 'Utopia and the City: An Interview with David Pinder', *Bad Subjects*, 78, Hope, <<http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2007/78/pinder.html>>, accessed 29 July 2013; Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁶ Clare Asquith, *Shadowplay: the Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), p. 57.

¹⁷ *The Acts of the Apostles* 19.16-20; 24-28, qtd. with some ellipses in the 2002 production programme p. 11 and in a reduced version in the 2006 production programme p. 3.

¹⁸ Edward Falkener, *Ephesus, and the Temple of Diana* (London: Day and Son, 1862), <books.google.com/books?id=4oEBAAAAQAAJ>, Full View, accessed 25 July 2013, pp. 135, 139,

qtd. in production programme 2002, p. 10; production programme 2006, p. 3.

¹⁹ My conceptualisation of theatrical space is informed by Michel de Certeau's idea that 'A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it'. See *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles; London: 1988), p. 117.

²⁰ Production programme 2002, p. 10.

²¹ Bryce Hallett, 'A Polished Production, Yet a Comedy of Errors', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 September 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20865/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013.

²² Peter Morrison, 'Bell's Faultless Fun Show', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Australian Jewish News* Friday 4 October 2002 <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20859/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013.

²³ Martin Ball, 'Bell pulls farce one, doubles the mirth', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *The Australian* 23 August 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20868/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013.

²⁴ Lyn Gardner, 'The Comedy of Errors', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *The Guardian* Friday 10 March 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/mar/10/theatre1>>, accessed 12 October 2012.

²⁵ Pile, *Real Cities*, p. 165.

²⁶ Hallett, 'A Polished Production'.

²⁷ Emma Nelms, 'Turkish Delight: *The Comedy of Errors*', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *M/C Reviews*, 29 August 2004, <<http://reviews.mediaculture.org.au/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=998>>, accessed 12 October 2012.

²⁸ Boyd, 'Finally a Comedy Without Errors'.

²⁹ Morrison, 'Bell's Faultless Fun Show'.

³⁰ Gardner, 'The Comedy of Errors'.

³¹ Production programme 2006, p. 2.

³² Pile, *Real Cities*, pp. 40, 26.

³³ Hallett, 'A Polished Production'; Julie Moffatt, 'Errors Abound in Vintage Bell', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Manly Daily*, 4 October 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20860/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013; Helen Thomson, 'Bard's Bawdy Tale of Twins Has More Twists than DNA', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *The Age* 27 August 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20866/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013.

³⁴ Christopher Hansford, 'Australian Shakespeare is Pure Magic', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Bath Chronicle*, 8 March 2006; Alan King, 'Experience the Bard at breakneck speed', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Bristol Evening Post* 9 March 2006.

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- ³⁵ Gardner, 'The Comedy of Errors'.
- ³⁶ Blease, 'Review: Bath Shakespeare Festival 2006'.
- ³⁷ Colin Rose, 'Sibling Revelry', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Sun Herald*, 22 September 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20863/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Alanna Maclean, 'Magical Show Not to Be Missed', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Canberra Times* 1 August 2002.
- ⁴⁰ Vanessa McCausland, 'The Comedy of Errors', *Drum Media* 24 September 2002, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/artifact/20862/full.html>>, accessed 27 July 2013.
- ⁴¹ G. R. Elliott, 'Weirdness in *The Comedy of Errors*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 9 (1939), pp. 96-106, Rpt. in Robert S. Miola, *The Comedy of Errors: Critical Essays* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 57-69, pp. 65, 58. The extract from Elliot's essay in which he comments on this 'comic horror' produced by the 'complete identity' of twins is included in the 2002 production programme, p. 15.
- ⁴² Blease, 'Review: Bath Shakespeare Festival 2006'.
- ⁴³ Moffatt, 'Errors Abound in Vintage Bell'.
- ⁴⁴ Ball. 'Bell pulls farce one'.
- ⁴⁵ Jo Bayne, 'Masks, Magic and Mayhem Characterise this Australian Company's Debut Contribution to an English Celebration of the Bard', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald* 9 March 2006.
- ⁴⁶ Duke, 'No Errors in Bard's Faultless Comedy'.
- ⁴⁷ Maclean, 'Magical Show Not to Be Missed'.
- ⁴⁸ McCausland, 'The Comedy of Errors'.
- ⁴⁹ Pile, *Real Cities*, p. 33.
- ⁵⁰ Rose, 'Sibling Revelry'.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Duke, 'No Errors in Bard's Faultless Comedy'. The 'kiss-me-quick' phrase is an allusion to Blackpool's fame as a somewhat cheesy tourist destination where part of the fun for some visitors is to flaunt this invitation on their headgear.
- ⁵³ Pile, *Real Cities*, p. 3.
- ⁵⁴ Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 99. Although originally connected with Orientalism and colonialism, the term imaginative geographies has gained significance beyond the analysis of East-West relations, and has become a tool for producing a more intense scrutiny of the ways in which all 'representations of space, place and landscape [. . .] structure people's understandings of the world, and in turn help to shape their actions' (F. Driver, 'Imaginative Geographies', in Paul Cloke, Philip Crang, and Mark Goodwin (eds), *Introducing Human Geographies* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1999, second edition 2005, pp. 144-155).

⁵⁵ David Pinder, 'In Defence of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities after the "End of Utopia"', *Geografiska Annaler*, Series B, Human Geography, Vol. 84, 3-4, Special Issue: The Dialects of Utopia and Dystopia (2002), pp. 229-241, p. 229.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁵⁹ Pile, *Real Cities*, p. 166, see also pp. 55-58.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180, original emphasis.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Pile, p. 175.

⁶² Gardner, 'The Comedy of Errors'; Nelms, 'Turkish Delight'; McCausland, 'The Comedy of Errors'.

⁶³ Pile p. 167.

⁶⁴ See Pile pp. 26-58.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ Robert Gore-Langton, 'The Comedy of Errors', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *Independent* 14 March 2006; Serena Davies, 'A Riotous Madcap Comedy', rev. of *The Comedy of Errors* directed by John Bell, *The Telegraph*, 10 March 2006, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3650835/A-riotous-madcap-Comedy.html>>, accessed 12 October 2012.

⁶⁷ Production photos; prompt book, which details that Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse shake a cross made of breadsticks and a naked Barbie doll as a charm to try and drive away the Courtesan in 4.3.

⁶⁸ See Pile, p. 165.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238. Pinder, 'In Defence of Utopian Urbanism', p. 238.

⁷⁰ Zack Furness, 'Utopia and the City: An Interview with David Pinder', *Bad Subjects*, 78, Hope, <<http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2007/78/pinder.html>>, accessed 29 July 2013. N. Pag.

⁷¹ Pile, *Real Cities*, p. 1.

⁷² Hansford, 'Australian Shakespeare is Pure Magic'.

⁷³ Ross Skiffington, production programme 2002, p. 11; 2006, p. 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Hallett, 'A Polished Production'.

⁷⁸ Ball, 'Bell pulls farce one'.

⁷⁹ Hallett, 'A Polished Production'.

⁸⁰ Hansford, 'Australian Shakespeare is Pure Magic'.