

Play: The Comedy of Errors (National Theatre, London)

CELEBRITY Shakespeare? This is one comedy I wasn't looking forward to. The idea that Shakespeare needs a celeb endorsement irritates me, it's not my favourite play and it looked like it was going to be another silly modern take on the Bard.

Now I wish I could go into every classroom and get the teacher to sign her class up for the movie, and add a free tub of popcorn too. If *The Comedy of Errors* doesn't make a group of youngsters pause for a moment between texting and Facebook, then nothing will!

Lenny Henry may be the star pulling power here, but director Dominic Cooke has created a dizzying delight, teasing out the humour and then adding enough dollops of slapstick to get your head spinning and, dare I admit it, a tear in the eye when it all ends happily ever after.

The story is so complicated it's best to let it simply flow over you. All you need to know is there are two sets of identical twins – a rich man and his slave, and they end up crossing paths in downtown Ephesus. The slaves are easily identified by their Arsenal T-shirts, while Lenny Henry as Antipholus and Chris Jarman as his double make a remarkably convincing pairing, thanks largely to their similar stature. Why they are all there, and how it happens that their father is on the island, too, with a death sentence over him if he can't find a sponsor, is too convoluted to bother with. Cooke creates a very visual flashback to the storm at sea that starts this adventure, but the speed and wordiness of the Duke's introduction doesn't really reflect the rollicking treat about to unfold.

The grimy cityscape that designer Bunny Christie creates is an integral part of Cooke's vision. Backstreet brawls and sleazy brothels give an atmosphere of menace to these visitors from out of town, in sharp contrast to the glitzy ladies dripping gold and designer labels behind the bars of their upmarket townhouse. A gold necklace and bags of money become the tokens on the merry-go-round that sees masters and servants confuse each other and their wives. It's a very dif-



Bar-room brawls – Lenny Henry (foreground) as Antipholus gets to grips with the locals in a scene from *The Comedy of Errors* PICTURE: JOHAN PERSSON

A Dizzying Delight

Review by *Nushin Elahi*

ferent enchantment to the sprites of Shakespeare's forest plays, but no less entertaining. When Henry's Antipholus has to pinch himself (or punch Dromio) to see if he's

been dreaming, we can laugh at them, knowing this tangled mess will be unravelled before the night is out.

And Cooke keeps the pace fre-

netic, with a broad wink at the audience, while the stranger is seduced by his brother's wife; he is locked out of his home, the gold chain changes owners and money bags are passed around. The chase scene (there is always a chase scene, isn't there?) includes an ambulance that drives on stage simply for effect, and the entire cast running first one way, then another, with the two sets of twins taking turns to lead the scamper. It's total Bedlam – wildly over the top, and fits in beautifully with the tone of the production. Even the abbey, in the final scene, is neatly turned into a health clinic, just like the Priory. Only the most sour-lipped purist could complain.

Apart from the slightly rushed beginning, the prose is superbly delivered while the setting brings it bang up to date. And if the final scene is stretched a little too far with heart-warming emotions, that may just be an exhausted cast

catching their breath.

At least, two of the large group of actors hail from southern Africa. Pamela Nomvete as the lady Abbess has a string of Market Theatre and Pieter Toerien productions to her name, and Lucian Msamati, the visiting slave Dromio, is from Zimbabwe. It's a huge cast, showcasing such an impressive array of black actors it makes one wonder why there aren't more doing Shakespeare. Sadly though, the theatre audience didn't reflect the integrated cast at all. One can only hope that the movie and Lenny Henry's comic charms may spark a new generation of theatregoers who can see how an Elizabethan Englishman could have anything to say about what could be a downtown Jozi.

The Comedy of Errors was filmed live at the National Theatre and will be screened at Cinema Nouveau theatres nationally on 24, 25, 28 and 29 March 2012.

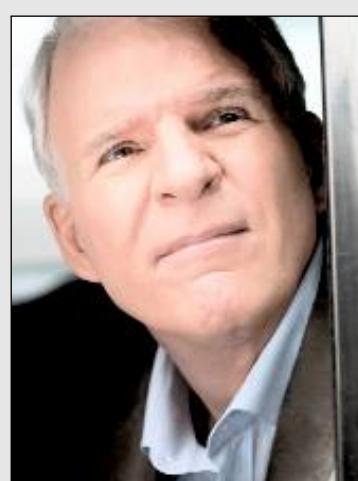
films also. opening

THE BIG YEAR

Take three gifted comic actors, put them in a situation ripe with hilarious potential with the guy who directed *The Devil Wears Prada* and you get – baited and switched, at least in the case of *The Big Year*.

It's not that there's anything particularly wrong with David Frankel's adaptation of Mark Obmascik's book about competitive birding. In fact, there's a lot that's right with it, starting with the cast: Jack Black plays Brad Harris, a 30ish underachiever living with his parents in Baltimore; Steve Martin is Stu Preissler, a wealthy tycoon who uses bird-watching as a way to escape the torpor of retirement; and Owen Wilson plays Kenny Bostick, whose most recent Big Year – when birders try to see as many rare species as they can – racked up a record 732 sightings.

When Brad and Stu make a run at



Steve Martin in *The Big Year*.

Kenny's record, the game of *The Big Year* is afoot, taking the three as far afield as the Aleutian Islands, the Florida Everglades and points in between. Granted, Frankel has stinted on nothing, taking his cast to real-life locations, once in a while giving the audience a glimpse of their beautiful, flighty quarry.

But somehow, the comic chem-

istry never seems to ignite in *The Big Year*, which burbles along at the clunky pace of a low-stakes chase; issues of male ego, competitiveness and compensation are briefly addressed but never truly engaged, and too often, the three actors look and feel as if they're in three different movies. *The Big Year* has heart and sweetness to spare – but as any birder will tell you, focus and energy count, too. – Ann Hornaday, Washington Post

CONTRABAND

Contraband is like an *Ocean's Eleven* movie, minus the glamour. Taut and suspenseful for the most part, the thriller substitutes a wily, working-class Mark Wahlberg (as smuggler Chris Farraday) for George Clooney's urbane con artist, Danny Ocean, and replaces the globe-trotting milieu of casinos and museums with a gritty, claustrophobic freight ship.

Watching it leaves you feeling less buzzed than jittery and slightly nauseated. If the *Ocean's* movies were martinis, *Contraband* is a thermos full of coffee.

In context, that's kind of a compli-

ment. *Contraband* is a remake of the Icelandic film *Reykjavik-Rotterdam*. Directed by actor-director Baltasar Kormakur – who played the lead in the 2008 original – it has a gloomy, propulsive, working-class energy that feels slightly more European than Hollywood-y.

If anything, it might be too exhausting. The plot also leaves a lot of dead bodies in its wake. *Contraband* is considerably more violent, and even more testosterone-centric, than any of the *Ocean's* movies, with the added distastefulness that almost all of the victims are anonymous Latino gangsters – collateral damage when things begin to go south during the ship's nail-biting stopover in Panama.

That said, *Contraband* delivers certain rewards, both expected and unexpected. There's an especially clever plot twist involving a stolen Jackson Pollock painting that, in the course of things, gets repeatedly mis-taken for trash.

As Chris himself says about his crew, "It's no 'A-Team', but it's the best we can do." As it turns out, the boys get the job done. – Michael O'Sullivan, Washington Post

Managing to make classic 19th century adventure yarns feel as wondrous and exotic as a Hallmark Channel special, *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* sincerely tries to pay homage to the likes of Jules Verne and Robert Louis Stevenson but is too contaminated by today's tame sensibilities.

The sequel to 2008's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* suffers, first, from an exposition that is clodish even by the standards of multiplex kid stuff. Cramming a tangled mess of motivations into a few minutes, it barely attempts to make us believe that Hank (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) would take his hateful stepson, Sean (Josh Hutcherson), on a spur-of-the-moment trip to the South Pacific just because a mysterious radio transmission has hinted that Verne's "Mysterious Island" actually exists.

The movie's flexibility with its own rules would be less noticeable if it were busy thrilling us. But the action here consists exclusively of barely reheated sequences from better films, and the dialogue's allusions to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* serve only to remind us of what we're missing. – John DeFore, Washington Post