About the Author

William C. Morris is in his fortieth year of college and university teaching, twenty-five at Rowan, where he has served as Senate President, professor, dean, Acting Vice-President, stage director, and lighting designer for the Hollybush Opera Theatre.

A certified F.O.O.F. (Friend of Old Films), he sometimes teaches Film History for the Communications Department.

Married to author and lecturer Patricia Morris, he has two sons, one a Ph.D. teaching English at the University of Texas, Arlington, the other an Equity Stage Manager.

Bill will go to the World Series anytime the Cubs play in it. Meanwhile, he works out his frustrations by gardening.
Diary of a Descanting Director

William C. Morris

On November 15, 1991, the Campus Players at Glassboro State began a six-performance run, under my direction, of Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. What follows is a diary of that production, centering on contributions the stage director makes in preparing a play for performance, starting with script selection and continuing through opening night. Along the way, I note six creative phases in the director’s work.

January 12, 1991

Bart says the Production Planning Committee must make final its selections for next season. I’ve decided to do Shakespeare, and now I’ll have to pick a title. (I should do a contemporary play. Our current students think I only know Shakespeare, Lorca, and Pirandello. If I do a second show next season, I must try to bring our students, theatrically speaking, into the last quarter of the twentieth century.) [Note: My second production in 1991–92 was Lanford Wilson’s 1978 play *The Fifth of July*—just under my self-imposed “last quarter” time wire—staged in April 1992.]
January 22, 1991

Nothing in Shakespeare is simple, but there are varying degrees of complexity. As Bob Newhart might say, what's Shakespeare got for two–three couples? Zero. Nada. The trick will be to find a play with mostly young characters, avoiding the plays with many middle-aged ones, (middle age is the student actor's biggest stumbling block) and to find a play that can amuse or enthrall—or both. On this score, at least, Shakespeare is a winner.

It might also be nice if the play were about something that will interest our players and those who come to see them, "a play with resonance and meaning" (to put a pretentious spin on it) for our young actors and for our probable audience (three GSC faculty members who'd rather we did Marlowe, nine GSC students who hope "Shakespeare" is a rap group, and three unsuspecting couples from Washington Township, who heard that the show—whatever it turns out to be—is a musical: "Oh, you're doing Shakespeare? How quaint! I love Kiss Me Kate!"). That Cole Porter, he sure could re-write.

February 8, 1991

Why do we do Shakespeare periodically? Well, first of all, he's there, an Everest among the foothills. But some college theaters never do Shakespeare, thank you very much, and seem none the worse for it. Others seldom miss a season or even schedule festivals of the Bard, which can sometimes become too much of a good thing. Yet we've had some success with Shakespeare in the past, and there is no better way to get actors to work on projecting voices and ideas than to deal, now and again, with the greatest playwright in the language. So, it'll be Shakespeare next year.

It should be a comedy, probably. I don't feel we have the wherewithal right now to try one of the tragedies, and the histories don't possess much relevance for us, I'm afraid (although there are historical and political parallels that could be drawn). So, comedy it will be.
Let's see: in '84 I did *Taming of the Shrew*, in '87 *Twelfth Night*, and in '89 *As You Like It* (*Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* were repeats from earlier years). I've also done *The Tempest*, and Carolyn O. did *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Right now I don't think I have a Portia, much less a Shylock. Nor do I have a Beatrice and Benedick for *Much Ado*. *All's Well That Ends Well*? A possibility, although it's a darker play than I'd like to do. One of my colleagues has warned me off *Love's Labour's Lost*, and I can't seem to warm up to *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. What's left? *The Comedy of Errors*? Maybe.

February 23, 1991

*The Comedy of Errors* may work; it has some definite strengths for us. First, there is no stellar role to cast, no Rosalind, or Viola, or Malvolio, or Petruchio. Second, the cast is manageable, and, third, the physical production can be kept simple. A fourth plus is that there are several roles for women—Adriana, Luciana, the Abbess, the Courtesan, the serving wench—and a couple of others that can be played by women with only a few changes. So far so good.

The drawbacks are few, although they are substantial. There is no stellar character to hold interest, no Jacques, no Bottom, no Kate, no Ariel. The play has no great verse, although it has some that is serviceable enough. The story is simple, if not simplistic, but with lots of playable ingredients that work. Despite the drawbacks, I think we can cast this show. Although it calls for two sets of twins, the Antipholuses and the Dromios, makeup and costuming can take care of much of this. *C.O.E.* will give our people the experience we want for them, and the pitfalls for actors are considerably less than in other Shakespeare plays. *The Comedy of Errors* it will be.

March 1, 1991

Well, the Production Planning Committee didn't jump up and down with excitement over my choice of *The Comedy of
Errors, but the group didn't throw rocks either. So I have a play and can put it aside for a while and turn my attention to grading papers for Comp II.

Summer 1991
I've been reading here and there about recent productions of Comedy of Errors. Mike Kelly told me of a British one in which both Antipholuses were played by one man. I'll have to track it down. A couple of seasons ago the flying Karamazovs did a hilarious version that played in Philly and New York and that I later saw on PBS. Very athletic, lots of juggling and magic. We'll need to go for something less ambitious than that, but there are lots of angles. Keep reading—reviews, commentary, criticism—whatever can give you something you can use.

Summer 1991
I must decide on a text for the show. Shakespeare is Shakespeare, right? Wrong. There are numerous editions of The Comedy of Errors, some with changes that interest only the scholar, some with essays and interpretations useful to the actor. I need to find a text that is clear, readable, well glossed, but not painfully so. And one where the price is right so I can have uniform texts for all involved.

Summer 1991
I've looked at the Folger edition, the Signet, the Penguin, the Arden, the Papp, the Yale. I'm very partial to the Arden, but it has more information than the actors need in rehearsal. I'll indicate to the people, once cast, that the Arden is a good source, but I'm going to get multiple copies of the Signet because it's well set up and has useful page-end notes. And it's cheap.

Summer 1991
Random notes on concept or style: For an older play, the director may create a concept that moves beyond the playwright's intention—whatever that may be, or whatever we
think that may be—to give the play new meaning or to disarm the audience, to shake up its preconceptions about the work. Concept is a word often used in connection with new shows that have been given a special lift, a special emphasis, by a director or auteur. (Cf. Bob Fosse's handling of *Pippin*, an integrated-movement musical strongly reflecting Fosse's particular theatrical interests. The success of *Pippin* was thought to rest largely on Fosse's "conception." See also the collaborations of Elia Kazan with Williams or Miller.) But where proven scripts are concerned, the concept need not be as pervasive. It may only mean changing a time period or going for a certain look without substantially altering the original material to fit a director's notion.

Shakespeare gets reconstituted constantly by directors who sometimes want to send out new messages (Orson Welles' celebrated Mercury Theatre *Julius Caesar* done in the '30s in the style of Mussolini's Italy with J.C. as Il Duce), or who sometimes wish to underscore elements in the timeless that may give the play contemporaneity. (*Troilus and Cressida*, placed by Tyrone Guthrie in Edwardian England, opened endless possibilities for "shocks of recognition," e.g., Thersites as a battlefront photographer pimping for the officers, Helen as a slightly plump and rapidly aging bottle redhead, over whom it hardly seemed worth fighting a war.) But sometimes a "concept," however mildly imposed, can have disastrous results (Orlando with a Southern drawl, languishing under magnolia trees in the opening scene of an ante-bellum production of *As You Like It* at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis). Or sometimes the concept grows out of a desire to vivify that simply is not understood by the audience. In 1964 I directed *Romeo and Juliet* at Loyola U. in Chicago, and I was strongly influenced by the look of the then new film version of Giuseppe De Lampedusa's *The Leopard*: 19th century Italy, warring states, family quarrels. Perfect parallels! But then came the costume ball I staged with Napoleon and Josephine, Marie Antoinette, the Medicis, Michaelangelo, and, finally, Juliet in a hoop skirt. Both she and I nearly got
booed off the stage. In my mind, I equated certain things in *Romeo and Juliet* with what I’d seen in *The Leopard*, but not many in the audience understood me—my fault, not theirs.

Sometimes even a well meant “concept” changes the original so much that it’s barely recognizable. *My Romeo and Juliet* was still about star-crossed lovers, who die in the end (there were 17th-century versions in which they didn’t), but other “new” productions of Shakespeare have retained little but the name. About twenty years ago, the N.Y. Shakespeare Festival did an entertaining and successful version of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* that really should have been called *The Kids from Italy*. I guess, rather simplistically, my own feeling is that if you don’t trust the play on its own terms, don’t do it. Shakespeare himself rewrote earlier works, or at least borrowed freely. But he was a genius, so what the hell. Having said that—

I don’t have a new concept for *The Comedy of Errors*—it’s still going to be about identical twins, separated as infants, who wind up, as young men, in the same port in Asia Minor, with all the expected mistaken identity confusions and consequences—but I want to change the time period to something more visually accessible.

Justification? In Shakespeare’s time, most of his plays were simply done in Elizabethan dress. No need, then, to do *Comedy* “authentically.” I think I can find a time period that will not appreciably alter the feel of *The Comedy of Errors*, yet will not use chitons, mantles, and garlanded waistbands.

I’m thinking of Post-World War II in the Greek Islands. Movie equivalents: *Never on Sunday, Boy on a Dolphin*. The hookers and the gangsters in the former seem right to me, while the peasants, the natives in the latter also seem right. Closer to production, I’ll discuss this with our designers and get a reaction.

*Mid-September, 1991*

I’ve thoroughly discussed my change of time period with the set designer, the costumer, and the lighting designer.
Before auditions, Phil G. and Joan S. are going to show me some things that spin off the "Greek Islands: Late '40s" notion. I suppose you could call this "End of Phase One of the Director's Creative Process: Choosing an Environment for the Show." (If I were both playwright and director, this would be Phase Two.)

Joan showed Never on Sunday to the costume class, but the images proved too specific, not light enough for the comedy we're doing. I guess I remembered that film imperfectly. I've shown Joan some stills from Boy on a Dolphin. That seems more like it, especially some of the fishermen and merchants depicted there.

Of course, the earthy spear chucker in Dolphin was played by Sophia Loren. Ah, well, you can't have everything.

October 4, 1991

The first play of the CP season, Whose Life Is It Anyway? is about ready to open. Time to set up auditions for The Comedy of Errors. I'll make available to auditioners some notes on the characters as I see them and then have actors prepare comic monologues.

At minimum, I think I need the following:

The Antipholuses should be tall, strong, dark. They should be intimidating to the Dromios, and sufficiently interesting as lovers to attract the attention of the women. Antipholus of Syracuse can have a little larceny in his soul. The Dromios should be small, quick, and capable of broad comic playing. Much physicality required. Since I'm going to have the Duke played as an island kingpin, the Greek equivalent of an Italian Don, he needs to be tall and tough looking. I'm going to give him a girlfriend, a gum-chewing, nail-filing, "dame" (no lines). Egeus and the Abbess are the only characters that need to be middle-aged, thank heavens. Size and look for them can go in several directions. I'm going to make the Abbess someone who operates a haven for travelers, where you can get a libation and perhaps have your palm read and your brow soothed. She won't operate a bawdy
house, though. Adriana needs to be aggressive—but young, attractive, and charming. Luciana must be lighter, bright, and very winning. The doctor will be the head of a cult that exorcises "witches" (I'm going to play up the sorcery angles in the original), and there'll be some opportunities for magic displays (little ones).

Sounds as if all I've been saying about "concept" has been thrown out here. Well, not really. I expect to make few changes in the script itself. We're still doing Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors and not The Saps from Syracuse.

October 8, 1991

Auditions proved a disaster. I like the people who tried out, but I'm not sure I like them in this play. And there aren't enough of them. We are critically short of men, and, although I can do some double-casting, that can only go so far. Yes, there are Shakespeare companies that use eight actors, six actors, to do all the roles in Antony and Cleopatra and both parts of Henry the Fourth—on the same day—and never bat an eye, but come on, give me a break. In my potential cast I have two actors who've each done one Shakespeare production. That's it.

Among other credits my actors possess are Grease, The Odd Couple, Pullman Car Hiawatha, and King Arthur and the Magic Sword. And that's the serious stuff. The only two actors who look remotely alike for the Dromios are two big men (220 and 240 respectively), talented and full of life, but not exactly what I had in mind. If my original idea is to hold, I need Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley as the Antipholuses. With Steve and John as the Dromios, nothing less than 6'6" is going to make it. I have a good prospect for the Duke, and an impressive, imposing lady for the Abbess. There are several possibilities for the two ingénues, but it will depend on whom I can cast as Antipholus. I don't have a Doctor, but I think I can double-cast the Duke here since he otherwise appears only at the beginning and end of the play.

The Antipholuses are the key, really. I am more than will-
ing to work with inexperienced actors; I joke some about it, but that, after all, is what I'm here to do. Still, I don't like to saddle an actor with something that is simply over his head. I have one strong choice for Antipholus (probably Antipholus of Syracuse, the more worldly of the two brothers), but I don't have anyone of similar experience for the other brother. But what if, as in that British production Mike told me about, my actor could play both brothers? How might that work? They are not on stage together until the final scene. Prior to that, is there anything impossible for one actor to accomplish (quick changes, re-entrances, et al.)? I'll have to consider it. That still leaves me with an Antipholus four inches shorter and 60 pounds lighter than his slave, but that's another matter. (What, me worry?)

October 9, 1991

So, that's it. Bill W. will play both Antipholuses. I'll have a silent stand-in for him dressed the same, and I'll try to fool the audience into believing there are two people. I'll worry about the last scene when I come to it. John and Steve, my big guys, will play the Dromios. I'll make something out of the fact that they are bigger than their masters: the Dromios will appear to be afraid of them, but clearly they won't be physically intimidated. They will suffer the beatings their masters give them because, in the long run, each Dromio will see it's better to be servant to a bright, resourceful boss, even if he beats you a little, than to have to try to make it alone. Problem not completely solved, but at least manageable.

As to the problem of not having enough men—the goldsmith, Angelo, will become Angela. (I remember this friend of Aunt Tess's who used to show up on occasion at family gatherings. Always nicely dressed, she carried a very large purse from which she extracted numerous pieces of jewelry, offering them for sale. When I was fifteen, I imagined the stuff was hot. She would also appraise jewelry, screwing in her jeweler's eye and carefully scrutinizing each piece before
naming a price. This fascinating person is my image for Angela, the goldsmith.) Similarly, since I have more women than men, a couple of messengers will be played by women, as will all the doctor’s helpers.

October 10, 1991

The director and creativity, once again. Directing, if it’s an art at all, is an interpretive one. The director, after all, hasn’t written the play (although I have a successful playwright friend who always directs the first production of each of his new plays), unless he or she rewrites it, and doesn’t usually design the scenery, costumes, or the lighting. So just what does the director do? And is what the director does creative?

Phase one was “Creating an Environment for the Play.” Creative Phase Two? Casting. The director creates an ensemble, putting together a group of actors who will interpret what the playwright has written. But the very act of choosing actors for parts involves creating something from nothing. With knowledge of the play’s requirements, infused with his or her own insights, the director puts together a cast that will of necessity be different from any other cast assembled, or contemplated, for a production of the same play. Solid casting can bring out the meaning in the script, or perhaps create new meanings; poor casting may make the interpretation falter, leaving the finished product hanging.

In the professional theatre, any vision the director has of a character can usually be satisfied. You want a young woman, 5’8”, auburn hair to her waist, who can sing, and dance en pointe? Put out a call, and tomorrow fifty such will show up at your door. In the college or community theatre, it’s not that easy; compromise is the name of the game. I’ve compromised some, but I think I’ve been able to put together a cast for Comedy that can satisfy the play’s demands and that challenges me without crippling me. I’m prepared to move into rehearsals.
October 10, 1991 (Late)

Having analyzed the language and ideas of the play, I'm on to Creative Phase Three: Pre-Planning the Action. This phase will go on for many days, in fact until the last dress rehearsal. The director creates the stage picture, *i.e.*, what it is the audience sees at any given moment. Each grouping of actors is a composition, not unlike a painter's exercise in group portraiture. The composition requires unity, harmony, balance, proportion, focus, and rhythm. Color is important, light and shadow. The theatrical designers contribute here, but the director usually approves things, has the last word. But the stage picture, unlike that of the painter, is always moving, always changing. The director facilitates changes in the picture by moving (blocking) the actors into new relationships. Theoretically, whenever the composition is frozen, it should reflect what's happening in the play at that moment. Not just pretty pictures, then, but meaningful ones. Controlling all of this is the director's job, a significant aspect of his or her creative contribution. The job is a bit different from that of the film director, who may compose a shot, but who also may cut and edit for effect. The stage director manipulates within the "frame" only.

Also starting now, and also ongoing, is Creative Phase Four: Temporality. The director governs the speed at which lines are delivered, the flow of stage movement and pantomime, the number and length of pauses. If you like a play because it was "well paced," credit the director. If you find that the play "dragged," was slow, the director is probably the culprit. Of course, actors contribute to the temporal aspects of the production by the ways in which they play lines and execute actions. But the speed with which actors do things must constantly be monitored, governed, by an alert director. "Pick up your cues," shouts the harried *régisseur*, who sees the show's tempo lagging, and who chooses the first remedy: keep the dialogue moving. There may be subtler approaches, graver problems, but, at minimum, picking up cues is a must.
But sometimes a director doesn’t want a cue picked up. You want a pause to allow the mood to change; you want the audience to experience something different. (Find the word *pause* in a Pinter script and look to see what’s significant in that silent moment.) Even though Shakespeare doesn’t call for it, I see the need for a pause for a kiss during the dialogue when Antipholus of Syracuse first meets Luciana. There’s a moment that simply seems right. In general, Shakespeare doesn’t tell you about things like this, nor about how fast or slow to read the verse. He doesn’t tell you where to pause for contemplation, for a kiss, or for much of anything else. Stage directions in Shakespeare are usually limited to things like “enter,” “exit” (or the all-purpose “exeunt”), “beats him,” “dies.” When you get something like “They heave Antony aloft to Cleopatra,” scholars write books about it.

In Shakespeare, the lines tell us what the action needs to be; careful reading of the text supplies the answers to most questions. Still, there’s room for interpretation. At one point in *Comedy*, Dromio of Ephesus describes to Adriana the beating Antipholus has just given him. We’ve had a chance to see this happening in the previous scene. Can Dromio’s words to Adriana, taken literally, guide us in the playing of the prior scene? Or do we assume that with Adriana, Dromio embroiders for effect? The latter probably makes Dromio funnier, and so that is the thrust we’ll take. Exactly what the beating should look like, then, is up to the director. Once having decided, I’ll turn the details of it over to our local fight master, Charlie C.

*October 12–18, 1991*

We’re blocking the show, working on making the narrative clear, developing the characters, getting the language to be precise. Soon actors will be off book, and we’ll work on prop handling, comic timing, comic business. Some big things left to do: finding a way to make workable the opening scene between Egeus and the Duke, developing a series of cross-
overs to set the life of the seaport, working the final sequence, where both Antipholuses are seen at the same time and where both speak.

October 20, 1991

The opening scene isn’t going to make it as it now stands (or sits). Egeus is saddled with a long series of speeches telling how he and his wife and the twins boarded a ship, how a storm came up, how the ship was broken in two, and how he went one way with one kid and an infant slave while Emilia (the Abbess) went another way with the other two children. Our Egeus is trying hard, but it’s wearying stuff. I’ve decided that we’ll cut this to its essentials and then have a pantomime upstage, with Egeus narrating, showing Emilia and Egeus (stand-ins for both) each with two “babies” (dolls wrapped up) and lots of Sturm und Drang (taped effects and music). I think this is the only way to play it: get it over with and on to the comedy.

I have tons of notes about how individuals are approaching their work, how they are meshing in this production. I have notes on my frustrations with actors, my frustrations with myself. I don’t think I’ll commit to paper my specific criticism of individuals. Much of it is temporary, anyway, and the rest will keep.

October 30, 1991

Halloween tomorrow, Mischief Night tonight. I’m beginning to block a pantomime sequence that will precede scene one and several other crossover scenes that will involve nearly all the cast as merchants, townspeople, sailors, courtesans. We’ll have fish merchants, wine sellers, bakers, shoppers, pickpockets, and pickups. This will allow for some needed transitions, and the variety of occupations and types will add visual interest. The prop people don’t like me.

My charts for the crossovers are done in several colors and look like diagrams for some very complicated plays from scrimmage: “OK, Lucy, you and Anti cover the Wig mer-
chant while the Abbess here tries the Colossus of Rhodes play right up the middle.” This kind of stuff reduces the director’s role to that of traffic controller (or traffic cop), but it all contributes, one hopes, to the audience’s enjoyment of the finished production. I’ve decided that in the opening sequence I’ll introduce the Dromios and, stealing a Marx Bros. bit from Animal Crackers, I’ll have them do a mirror-image panto, with each man thinking he sees his own reflection in a shop window. Or did he really see someone who looked like him? My Dromios work so well together that I think I can get value and fun out of this.

October 31-November 10, 1991
Things are moving very rapidly now. Rehearsals for integration. Putting all elements together: This is Creative Phase Five. I’ve got set pieces to deal with, levels, ramps. Soon there’ll be costumes, music, makeup, some trick props (two short soliloquies by A. of S. will be “illuminated” by conjurers, mountebanks, card sharks, et al.). There are lighting cues to worry about. The actors are getting ready; they’ll lose time as we adjust the physical production. I’m checking pace, mood, business. My stage manager records every change so that by opening night I can put it all in her capable hands; she’ll call the shots during performances.

November 11, 1991
Some worries still about the final “revelation.” I think that up until the final scene, Bill will either fool the audience into thinking he’s two different people, or will win admiration from people for how well he plays two different characters. Because I have his exact double make a couple of silent appearances at moments when Bill can’t possibly be in two places at once, we have a nice conceit going. However, there’s that last scene. I’m having the double and Bill mimic each other; they even say a line or two together. The double is blocked sometimes in three-quarter upstage to minimize the time the audience gets to contemplate him. But he does
have a couple of lines here, and, while the double does them well enough, we run the risk of blowing the illusion. Overall, things are carried off fairly well, and this is a presentational comedy, after all. (Excuses, rationalizations.)

**November 15, 1991**

If the show's been put together well, the director on opening night is superfluous. We opened *The Comedy of Errors*, and I'm pleased with what the actors have done. The show moves, it's frequently funny, and Shakespeare is done no disservice. Bill W., the young women, the Dromios, and many of the others are to be commended. I can't really decide about my own work. The elements are there, and I know I gave the production my time and best energy. Others will have to judge how well we've succeeded.

**November 23, 1991**

Turkey time next week. This is not a reference to *The Comedy of Errors*, which played to enthusiastic audiences, and about which I got very nice comments from my colleagues. If there's a Creative Phase Six to directing, it comes when the director rethinks all that's been done and decides how it could have been done differently. As I watched one of the last performances of *Comedy of Errors*, I suddenly knew what I should have done in the final scene. I should not have let Antipholus of Syracuse speak at all. Each time he needed to speak, Bill should have jumped in as though reading his twin's mind. Of course, the audience would assume, then, that Bill had played both roles, but there would be those moments earlier when he appeared to be in two places at once. Questions, lingering doubts: all I could really ask for. Now, next time....