

Two guys walk into a bar

Nick Asbury on *The Comedy of Errors*

*There's not a man I meet but doth salute me
As if I were their well-acquainted friend,
And everyone doth call me by my name.*

(Antipholus of Syracuse, IV.3)

It's Saturday night and I'm sitting at the bar of the Dirty Duck in Stratford, waiting to meet someone. A neutron walks in and pulls up a stool next to mine. "How much for a beer?" he asks. The barman replies, "For you, no charge." I smile weakly and look back towards the door. The person I'm waiting for is my namesake, Nick Asbury. I first became aware of him a few years ago, when he emailed me out of the blue, but this is the first time our paths will have physically crossed. He's a respected actor and a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. In fact, I've just been watching him charging around on stage in the Courtyard Theatre, bloodstained and bearded, sword at his side. It should be an interesting night.

The door swings open and a bear walks in. I shuffle along the bar to make room. "Excuse me, barman," says the bear. "I'll have a beer and... .. some peanuts." The barman says, "Hey, why the big pause?" The bear forces a smile – I imagine he gets this all the time and flash him a knowing look. He goes and sits down grumpily on the other side of the bar. The pub is really filling up now, the post-theatre crowd jostling forward, anxious to get served. One of them has a great big slab of asphalt under his arm. I tut loudly and move aside to make room. "Pint of bitter please," he shouts. "And one for the road."

I'm not even entirely sure I'm in the right place. Nick Asbury suggested the Dirty Duck and I know it's definitely supposed to be here, but the sign outside clearly says the Black Swan. I guess it must have changed hands recently. I decide to move away from the bar in search of a quieter spot. Grabbing my pint, I make my way through the crowd, when I practically bump into a guy in a baseball cap and jacket walking the other way. The beard is strangely familiar. "Excuse me... are you Nick Asbury?" The face breaks into a broad grin. "Yes. Hi Nick – good to meet you." I elbow my way back past the road guy and order a drink for my new companion. Then we head for the garden to escape the mayhem. We eventually find a table and a long night's drinking begins.

Why, but there's many a man hath more hair than wit.

(Antipholus of Syracuse, II.2)

I start by asking Nick a bit about himself. It turns out he's not only a very accomplished actor – he also choreographs all the fight scenes. No mean feat given some of the swordplay I'd seen earlier. I ask if he has any other talents. "I eat fire," he replies. At this point, I'm already beginning to feel uneasy. I sense I'm being outshone by my new namesake. I decide to steer the conversation towards music, casually mentioning my talent for playing the piano – not exactly to a virtuoso level, but enough to hold a tune.

It turns out Nick Asbury is an accomplished pianist. He has played professionally in some of London's finer restaurants. He has even played piano on *The Basil Brush Show*. He tells me Basil was great to work with – a true professional. I realise I am losing the battle of the Nick Asburys. The only edge I have becomes apparent when Nick takes his cap off. His hairline may be receding, but I'm a good few inches ahead of him, despite being a couple of years younger. Maybe, somewhere in our distant past, it runs in the family.

I've decided to buy the drinks all evening – it's the least I can do, considering Nick supplied the theatre tickets and is being so generous with his time. I head back to the bar to get another round.

One of these men is genius to the other;

(Duke of Ephesus, V.1)

I buy drinks for a few of Nick's friends as well. Four glistening pints sit on the bar in front of me and I await a fifth. Looking round, I notice a weird-looking bloke at the other end of the bar – it's William Shakespeare. I sidle up to him and ask him about *The Comedy of Errors*.

The way I see it, the play relies on a highly improbable act of naming. Two sets of twins are separated shortly after birth by a shipwreck, each set washed ashore in a different kingdom. By a strange coincidence, both sets are christened with identical names. So you have Antipholus of Syracuse and his servant Dromio, and Antipholus of Ephesus and his servant, Dromio. The action of the play begins years after the shipwreck, when one set of twins arrives in the other's kingdom. Naturally, the first set gets mistaken for the second and all kinds of misunderstandings ensue, until the penny finally drops in Act V and everyone has a good laugh about it.

Had the identical twins had different names, the misunderstanding would never have arisen. The story would never have happened.

Shakespeare appears to be a bit drunk, but accepts the general thrust of my argument. "But to be fair," he says, "it's not actually *that* unlikely. When the twins are split up, the mother ends up with one set and the father with the other. Now, imagine they've agreed in advance on their first-choice names. At this point, both mother and father are assuming the other twins are dead. So you can see how it might happen." This strikes me as a fair point. "Besides," he says. "Look at you. Two Nick Asburys – one a Shakespearean actor, the other writing a chapter about me. Strikes me as far-fetched. Anyway, let me get these." He nods towards the row of beers and offers the barman a credit card. I notice the name on the card is spelt differently to the signature and raise my eyebrows. The barman shakes his head. "I can't serve you, mate – you're bard."

I don't find this particularly funny, but Shakespeare falls about laughing. Literally falls about – rolling across the floor, doubled up. "You love puns, don't you?" I say. But Shakespeare is too creased up to speak. He

crawls away out the front door and into the night. On the other side of the bar, the bear slams down his drink and runs after him.

The barman watches this scene with a seen-it-all-before weariness and then asks me for the money. As he hands me my change, he asks if I'd like a tray. "No thanks," I hear myself say. "I've got enough to carry already."

*I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop,
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.*
(Antipholus of Syracuse, I.2)

Back in the garden, I try explaining my line of work to Nick Asbury. "I basically supply the words for design, branding and advertising projects. It's about coming up with a certain tone of voice that captures a company's personality, and then telling the stories that bring the brand to life. It can be very good fun."

Nick tells me that he occasionally does voiceovers for corporate videos. It's a frustrating business, apparently. Your casting agent immediately shoves you in a pigeon-hole and you only ever get jobs that match those rigid criteria. So if you need an intelligent-sounding, professional, Hereford accent, then Nick Asbury might be your man. But if you need a gruff, Cockney geezer, then you couldn't possibly have the same actor. Of course, the point is that actors like Nick are playing wildly different characters all the time – intoning sonorously on a Shakespearean battlefield one minute and getting arrested on *The Bill* the next. In the world of corporate voiceovers, this argument apparently holds no water.

I tell Nick there are some parallels with the world of corporate writing. There's always the danger of getting typecast. You become the go-to guy for annual reports. Or the guy who does websites for law firms. Or the one with the clever wordplay. The vast majority of writers can do all of these things and more – again, it's part of the job.

We harrumph knowingly and finish our pints. It's time to head back to the bar.

And here we wander in illusions.
(Antipholus of Syracuse, IV.3)

As I make my way back inside, I feel I should prepare my next line of conversation with Nick Asbury. I want to offer him a convincing explanation for why I'm here. It doesn't seem enough that we share the same name. I want to explain that, on some level, the coincidence has a deeper meaning for me – a strange kind of appropriateness. The kind of writing I do relies a lot on verbal coincidences – puns, wordplay, alliteration. You name it, they're all tools of my trade – the pun, especially.

Take many of the classic ideas in advertising, branding and design. 'Your flexible friend': a pun that overlaps a physical characteristic of the product with a benefit of using it. 'Labour isn't working': a pun that helped the Tories back into power. The byte in the Apple logo: a verbal pun expressed visually.

Then you have the brands that deliberately turn away puns at the door. Shell's logo carefully sidesteps more negative suggestions of bombshell or eggshell, instead opting for the natural, seaside variety. Other brands aren't so prudent – like the American automotive company that proudly proclaimed its mission to put 'people before cars'.

I feel this is worth discussing with Nick Asbury. When I first heard about him, I felt as if I'd become part of a human pun. My name, until now, was a sign pointing in one direction. Now it had a double meaning. My professional life is all about playing with language, and now it felt like language was playing with me. I'd come to Stratford as a kind of pilgrimage to the power of the pun.

I ponder all these things as I walk into the bar. The last thing I remember thinking is, "Christ, that hurt."

Hold, sir, for God's sake; now your jest is earnest.

(Dromio of Syracuse, II.2)

Two petty criminals are trying to break into a building when a policeman catches them. One of them has a gun. The policeman orders him to hand it over. The other one says, "Let him have it." The policeman is killed by a single shot.

This is a true story. I'm pondering it on the morning after, as I wander through the crowds of day-trippers along the banks of the Avon. I decide to walk past the pub where we were last night, although my head's far too sore to entertain thoughts of a pint. As I approach the pub, I notice for the first time that the sign outside reads differently depending on the direction you're travelling. From this side, it says 'The Dirty Duck'. From the other, 'The Black Swan'. Hence my confusion the night before. This meeting of two people with one name had taken place in one pub with two names.

I consider this irony as I gaze towards the front door of the pub. It's all coming back to me now. I remember stumbling out through the bar at about one in the morning. The barman had told us it was time to hit the road and the man with the asphalt had taken offence. I remember Nick Asbury and I saying our farewells just there in the doorway, beneath the sign. Nick wished me luck and I said I'd need it. And then we went our separate ways.

I decide I might just manage a drink after all. Making my way to the bar, I'm about to get served when the door opens and in walk a polar bear, a giraffe and a mongoose. The barman looks at them with a heavy sigh and says, "What is this – some kind of joke?" I decide it's best to leave.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Nick Asbury for agreeing to meet up.