THE NATURE OF FARCE: DEFINITION AND DEVICES

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ABSTRACT

THE NATURE OF FARCE:
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By
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The farce as a dramatic genre has been the most overlooked and underestimated of all dramatic types in the theatre. Some form of farce appears in every period of theatre history and it has always been the most popular theatre to audiences. In spite of its longevity and popularity, there exists to the present more confusion and contradiction about the precise nature, characteristics and techniques of farce than of any other genre.

This study seeks to resolve this problem by examining these diverse opinions carefully in an attempt to arrive at a meaningful definition of farce. A significant portion of the study is devoted to an analysis of farce devices.

Because of the dearth of farce texts, an extensive study of theatre literature in the English language provided the resources. The writings of theatre historians, theorists, critics and scholars and production texts from playwriting to acting were scrutinized and the meaningful observations and views correlated and synthesized into definition and devices. Nahum Tate's "preface" to A Duke and No Duke published in 1693 represents the earliest primary source used and the works of Brander Matthews, Leo Hughes and Eric Bentley the major contributions.

Chapter I provides an introduction and background to farce and presents the inherent problems of this study. Chapter II explores the origin, classification and the sources of the comic theatre of farce. Chapter III inspects the anatomy of farce in the following details: how farce and

comedy differ; the hybrid: farce-comedy; the basic requirement for farce: production; the primary elements of situation and plot; the secondary elements of character and dialogue. Chapter IV moves toward the definition of farce after discussing its extrinsic characteristics and purpose. Chapter V examines the farce technique by identifying, defining and illustrating nine basic farce devices: farce dialogue; violent physical action; stage tricks or broad business; exaggerated stage properties; repetition; inversion; concealment; incongruity; and exaggerated characters.

The term "farce" entered the theatrical vocabulary and took its place in dramatic nomenclature only after the Restoration (1660-1700). From the beginning it has held to its fundamental purpose of laughter and entertainment. Slapstick has remained the signature of farce and its aggression and frequent vulgarity have afforded a vicarious release of audience hostilities through laughter. Farce seems to provide a comic catharsis which helps man bear his many problems.

The study revealed that intrinsically the farce concentrates primarily on the elements of situation and plot and on character and dialogue as secondary elements. Most improbable of all farce exaggeration is the sequence and climax of compounding situations where characters make practical rather than ethical or moral decisions. The farce plot, which dominates character, provides a framework for laughable situations, moves rapidly to avoid reflection and is similar to the joke in construction with a late climax and little or no falling action.

Farce characters are exaggerated but recognizable types not fully developed on stage. The dialogue, subordinated to visual action, is capable of wit, humor and broad satire though they occur less frequently than in comedy. Farce usually lacks literary significance for its purpose can only be achieved in production.

W. Stanley Schutz

The following definition of farce evolved from this study: FARCE IS THE POPULAR DRAMA (OR THEATRE) OF LAUGHTER CREATED BY SITUATIONS THAT PROGRESS FROM SIMPLE TO WILDLY COMPLICATED, FROM PROBABLE TO GROSSLY EXAGGERATED AND ARE FILLED WITH LUDICROUS UNEXPECTED INCIDENTS AND RAPID VISUAL ACTION. THE AUDIENCE OBSERVES COMMONPLACE CHARACTER TYPES WITH AN EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT THAT IS DEDICATED TO A COMIC CATHARSIS. FARCE HAS BEEN AND IS CAPABLE OF A BROAD AND BOLD TYPE OF SATIRE.

THE NATURE OF FARCE:

DEFINITION AND DEVICES

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Study of Farce

On the evening of October 16, 1939, The Man Who Came to Dinner opened at the Music Box in New York City to glowing reviews. Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman labeled their hilarious play "a comedy in three acts." The Broadway critics who saw it generally agreed on its merits and predicted future but they also had their differences of opinion as observed in the following excerpted passages:

> . . . It is as gay, giddy, and delectable a comedy as our stage has seen in years. . . . It includes some of the maddest as well as some of the best drawn of Mr. Hart's and Mr. Kaufman's eccentrics. . . .
>
> John Mason Brown in New York Post.

> . . . All this is accomplished on the stage with all the ingenious lunacies the Messrs. Kaufman and Hart are capable of devising, and its farce still remains plausible. It is gross caricature, to be sure, but like all caricatures, it merely emphasizes human absurdity . . . has no plot to speak of . . .
>
> Sidney B. Whipple in New York World Telegram.

> . . . It is . . . a good comedy for any audience. . . . The situation of a flaring egomaniac . . . is a solid foundation for natural comedy.
>
> Burns Mantle in New York Daily News.

> . . . I cannot begin to tell you all that happens. . . . I would not if I could, for this farce and

> surprise is to be cherished. . . . The humor is . . . largely the humor of insult, and a good deal of it is of the knock-down-and-drag-out variety. But satire runs along with buffoonery . . . it is all in good, rough sport.
>
> Richard Lockridge in New York Sun.

> . . . the funniest comedy of this season . . . a fantastic piece of nonsense. . . . The principle intrigue concerns an attempt to forestall his secretary's plan to marry. But that is no more than a clothesline on which this vaudeville is pinned and left hanging in the breeze.
>
> Brooks Atkinson in New York Times.

Burns Mantle had seen the Hartford, Connecticut, preview two weeks earlier but each of these critics was commenting on the same opening night performance of October 16th. Even from such fragmentary excerpts one can sense the enthusiasm that greeted The Man Who Came to Dinner, which was to run nearly two years. But that is where unanimity ends. On closer observation these reviews reveal conflicting views among the critics.

Not only do several critics reveal inconsistencies within their own review but the five critics represented here disagree as to whether the play is a comedy or a farce. In their complete reviews most of them describe the show as farce but only two actually call it farce. The other three willingly accept the author's label of comedy though they elaborate in detail on the many characteristics of the play which are farce. Such confusion seems to be ever present in recorded theatre criticism and it was this in part which prompted the present study.

There are two ways or approaches that can be made in the study of an art. According to Brander Matthews one can either trace the development and growth of the art or inquire

into its processes.[1] The choice of method will usually depend on interest, preference, or background of knowledge. In the study of farce these options were not available.

There exists so much contradiction regarding the purpose, nature, methods and form of farce that one cannot attempt to trace its history or follow its growth as an art until understanding replaces confusion. In other words, a study of the historical development of farce can only come after we have investigated the processes and practices of farce. This study will attempt to focus our view of farce and to gain a clearer understanding of its principles.

The problem persists not so much because of conflicting theories but as a result of scholarly oversight. This oldest of theatrical forms has not been given serious study until recent years. Professor Hurrell observes that farce has been continually taken for granted as ". . . something if not actually beneath criticism, at least beneath the need for critical discussion."[2] This direct or implied low state permeates the bulk of writing on farce and has led knowledgeable scholars to make statements like these: ". . . farce . . . take(s) the cash and let(s) the credit go."[3]; ". . . throughout history it seems that nobody except audiences has had a good word to say for farce."[4] A recent dissertation by George Small alluded to the fact that the historian of drama

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[1]Brander Matthews, A Study of the Drama (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), p. 4.

[2]John Dennis Hurrell, "A Note on Farce", Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLV (December, 1959), p. 426.

[3]Stark Young, The Theatre (New York: Hill & Wang, 1954), p. 44.

[4]Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Fundamentals of Farce", Theatre Arts 40 (July, 1956), p. 92.

(serious plays) relates his material to the thoughts of poets and philosophers while his counterpart in comedy, or comic plays, converses with the butchers and bakers. It appears that the majority of serious critics have ignored farce considering it a mere diversion for the unthinking. Nahum Tate's early hope for more critical discussion on the nature of farce was never realized ". . . because writers of farce did not bother to present a case; they were content to see their plays prosper."[5] To this critical oversight playwright Samuel Spewack caustically concluded that: "Far too many 'important' plays have taken their places in the history of the theatre, rather than in its life."[6]

The term "farce" has been used with a variety of meanings. It will, therefore, be necessary, as part of this study, to explore the origin of the word and survey its theatrical denotations and connotations. "Farce" comes from the French, which derived the term originally from the Latin "farcire", meaning to stuff. Through more recent times it has meant the comic business that an actor employs, a short play of a very light nature, a political pamphlet written in play form, a ludicrous scene found in any play type and one of the dramatic genre. Equally important is the pejorative or depreciatory connotation which is associated with the term "farce." This condition exists today and must be considered as background to this study.

Farce and comedy are sometimes used interchangeably or as synonyms of each other. Occasionally, this appears in the writings of even our most reliable scholars as if avoiding the

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[5]Samuel A. Golden, "An Early Defense of Farce", Studies in Honor of John Wilcox by Members of the English Department of Wayne University, (1958), p. 68.

[6]Samuel Spewack, "Introduction", Great Farces, ed. Robert Saffron (New York: MacMillan Co., 1966), p. 6.

responsibility of defining their terms or accepting as definitive the classic divisions of tragedy and comedy. There is no question that the relationship of farce to comedy or comedy to farce is strong and valid. But the distinction must be clearly made between them if this study is to be objective. In order to achieve this goal, we will observe the major classifications of comedy as they have come down to us in the 1960's.

A study of this type cannot be conducted solely from a theatrical point of view. The dramatist must sense the comic spirit as surely as he knows the craft of theatre. Since laughter is the prime objective of the farce, we will review historically the theories of laughter and comedy in order to better understand the playwright's use of humor. Wolcott Gibbs allowed that: "Humor is probably the one subject in the world on which every man is his own bitter and unyielding expert."[7] But some few men have articulated meaningful theories of why we laugh and it is this background that we shall explore first.

Historically, farce has held to this risible objective though the form and nature have changed with time. Though not an established fact, there is strong speculation that the Megarean or Spartan farce, the phlyakes of Southern Italy, and the Atellan or Oscan farces of Campania all held this objective.[8] The evidence is clear in the farce scenes of Aristophanes and apparently those of other Old Comedy playwrights. The Roman farce with Plautus in the foreground seeks

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[7]Wolcott Gibbs, "What's so funny? Humor on the Stage", New Yorker (December 25, 1943), p. 30.

[8]Allardyce Nicoll supports this view in his brief article, "Farce", in Chamber's Encyclopedia (London: George Newnes Ltd., 1955), Vol. 5, and in Masks Mimes And Miracles (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1963). Further support can also be found in Gilbert Norwood, Greek Comedy (Boston: John W. Luce & Co. Inc., 1932).

no other objective than laughter. Some farcical scenes appear in the medieval mysteries of the French and the English cycle plays of the 15th and 16th century, in a more primitive form again. We see farce in the commedia dell'arte and throughout most of Moliere.

Farce is sometimes considered to be a simplified form of comedy that teaches one lesson: to enjoy life and your part in it. While true, it can also be misleading, as this study will attempt to show. Most of us would probably agree that any source of laughter is precious in a world like ours. John Mason Brown writes that farceurs belong to a race apart where the sky is the limit and no holds are barred. To Brown, the point of farce is to be funny. It makes us ". . . accept the impossible as possible, the deranged as normal and silliness as a happy substitute for sense."[9] Enjoyment and laughter are truly at the heart of farce which often seems, as Bentley puts it, like ". . . joking turned theatrical."[10]

From the beginning farce has always remained closely tied with the theatrical taste and fashions of its day. Hughes and Scouten feel that as a result of this topicality the farce is usually dead when the run is over. Once dead to the theatre, it is dead also to the publisher and as a result a great many plays which have much to reveal concerning theatrical tastes of bygone days have long since vanished.[11]

An example of this can be found in the farces of Avery Hopwood (1882-1928) which earned more money for him than any

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[9]John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things", The Saturday Review of Literature Vol. 34 (March 24, 1951), p. 26.

[10]Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 234.

[11]Leo Hughes and A. H. Scouten, Ten English Farces (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1948), p. vii.

previous playwright in the American theatre. Of Hopwood's thirty plays, fifteen of which ran over one hundred performances on Broadway, only seven were published. Today it is virtually impossible to find a copy of any of his plays except The Bat, a mystery melodrama based on Mary Roberts Rinehart's successful novel. The quality and literary significance of Hopwood's farces may be minimal but his success on the New York stage is unquestioned. He was the first American playwright to have four plays in performance on Broadway at the same time.[12] This record remained unequaled until December 1966 when Barefoot in the Park, The Odd Couple, Sweet Charity and The Star-Spangled Girl made: ". . . Neil Simon the first playwright since Avery Hopwood in 1920 to have four Broadway shows running at the same time."[13]

Simplicity and the dearth of farce texts partially account for the lack of significant criticism and research and yet there exists another basic reason for this oversight. Farce depends upon the doing--the staged farce production is the most important aspect of the genre--more so than any other dramatic type. "They spring to full life only on the stage--when the actors and director know what they are doing."[14] When the run has ended the farce is over and only the laughter continues. To observe and evaluate farce critically means to study it while it lives on stage. Production books and other records are never complete enough to relive accurately the genuine farce. Only since the development of the sound motion picture and television kinescope or video tape have we been able to preserve a stage production for later uses. Perhaps

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[12]The Gold-Diggers, Ladies' Night, Spanish Love and The Bat. The last three opened within a two-week period in August and of the four plays, Spanish Love had the shortest run, 307 performances.

[13]Anonymous, "Simple Simon", Time (December 30, 1966), p. 45.

[14]Spewack, op. cit., p. 7.

this will mean more future study in farce as this recording process becomes more functional and available. But the past productions are gone and we cannot study them with precision. The contribution of the actors and director, which are most meaningful to farce, are lost except to memory and occasional play reviews. We are left only with a script in either its original or revised form. This is an incomplete basis for research in farce.

The earliest sources used in this study were the published works of Nahum Tate (1693), Brander Matthews (1894), G. K. Chesterton (1901) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (1913). Within the past ten years scholarly research and writing on farce have appeared from Richard L. Arnold, Eric Bentley, Samuel Golden, Leo Hughes, John Dennis Hurrell, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Robert C. Stephenson.[15] Two unpublished doctoral dissertations contributed significantly to this study: James T. Nardin, "A Study in Popular American Farce, 1865-1914" (University of Chicago, 1950); LeRoy D. Haberman, "American Farce on Broadway, 1914 to 1950" (Stanford University, 1959).

Professor Hewitt of Indiana University said in 1959 that farce has been out of favor in the theatre for nearly thirty years but that there were signs of its return to fashion. He named two successful plays, The Matchmaker and Hotel Paradiso, and pointed to Bentley's earlier essay on farce as support.[16]

Chesterton at the turn of the century sounded the challenge for both the encouragement of the art and the study of farce in these words: "Some day, perhaps, when the present

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[15]Complete Titles and dates of the writings of these men may be found in the Bibliography.

[16]Bernard Hewitt, "Thornton Wilder Says "Yes"", Tulane Drama Review Vo. 4 (1959), p. 111. Parts of the Bentley essay, "The Psychology of Farce", appeared in The New Republic but the complete article was published as the Introduction to Let's Get a Divorce! and Other Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1958).

narrow phase of aesthetics has ceased to monopolize the name, the glory of a farcical art may become fashionable."[17] Fifty-five years later, critic Krutch gave immediacy to the challenge by saying: "A critical discussion of the meaning and significance of farce as a theatrical mode is urgently called for by the present situation."[18]

This study of the nature and structure of farce represents an attempt to correlate the views and attitudes found in the vast body of theatre literature in the English language. The research, conducted over a six year period, has investigated the major writings in the field in addition to many more obscure works. Only a small portion of this material ultimately contributed to this study. Other approaches might be used but an extensive study of farce criticism seemed to be a logical and necessary first step. It is this writer's hope that the other steps will follow within the reasonable future.

We will further seek to clarify the difference between the genre of the farce and of the comedy and to analyze the various structural ingredients in order to arrive at a definition of farce.

Farce has surely provided moments of brilliance in the theatre but more importantly its universal appeal has made it and generally continues to keep it one of our most popular forms of theatre and mass media entertainment. We have observed this broad appeal in the twentieth century with farce continuing in the theatre as well as moving into the media of motion pictures and television. It has been said that the playwright has two approaches from which he may choose: he may say something in play form or he may give the public what

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[17] G. K. Chesterton, "A Defense of Farce", The Defendent (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1943), p. 95.

[18] Krutch, op. cit., p. 30.

it wants after studying the playgoer's taste. More often than not the writer of farce falls into the latter approach.

Farce has flourished during times of stress and war[19] as audiences prefer to forget their dread and sorrow and enjoy the brief escape afforded them in the theatre. A statistical study[20] of the New York stage revealed a significant decline in serious drama and a strong increase in comedy, farce and melodrama during the pre-war year of 1939. This may take on added significance when we realize, as Professor Gassner has stated, that the theatre both thrives and remains a popular entertainment during difficult times.

> Athens crowned the theatre with glory while fighting for its existence against a host of enemies. Germany advanced stage craft by leaps and bounds at a time when it suffered the miseries of inflation and national humiliation. America, struggling through a decade of economic disaster, likewise affirmed the strength of the human spirit that often proves so painfully blind and bestial under the whiplash of accumulated errors.[21]

Eric Bentley, whose several critical discussions of farce represent the most recent and meaningful contributions to its literature, allows that both melodrama and farce are ". . . arts of escape and what they are running away from is not only social problems but all other forms of moral responsibility."[22] The playwright, aware of his audience and the daily pressures on them, can make a valid contribution to their peace of mind if he has the inventive genius. It has

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[19]A. R. Thompson, The Anatomy of Drama (Berkeley, Calif. University of California Press, 1946), p. 133.

[20]W. M. Little, "A Statistical Survey of the New York Stage, 1930-1940" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Speech, University of Illinois, 1942), p. 52.

[21]John Gassner (ed.), Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1939), p. xii.

[22]Bentley, op. cit., p. 255.

been obvious in both the past and present that the American theatre audience prefers light plays to serious though not necessarily because they are better or more vigorous.[23]

The facts fail to bear out the theory that farce caters to the poorly educated and artistically degenerate public. The Roman farces were performed in Renaissance England by and for the university population. Moliere's courtly audience was certainly not uneducated and the taste for Wilde has never been a vulgar one. There is evidence that Shakespeare's early farce, The Comedy of Errors, was designed for and appreciated by an audience of lawyers.[24] Kaufman and Hart's brilliant farce, You Can't Take it With You, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1939. In fact, the very first Pulitzer Prize awarded in 1918 went to the farce Why Marry? by Jesse Lynch Williams. In the light of these brief illustrations that farce appeals to the enlightened and artistic population we must admit its duality of appeal to both high and low.

Comedians and humorists have unanimously insisted that man has always laughed at essentially the same things or for the same reasons. It is best expressed by William Mathews in 1888 when he speaks of jokes.

> Perhaps if we could trace the entire history of some of the pleasantries and conceits which have provoked our loudest merriment, we should find them stereotyped on the crockery tablets of an Assyrian council, or eternized in the hieroglyphs of an Egyptian record. Who knows but that the very same 'old joes' which tickle the risibles

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[23]Walter P. Eaton writing an "Introduction" to A. E. Thomas' Her Husband's Wife in 1914 said "the public preference for comedy in the theatre is not wholly due to a distaste for high seriousness; in part at least it is due to the fact that the writers of comedy produce, on the whole, better and more vivid plays." p. vi. Though probably true in 1914, we might question this assertion today in the light of Eugene O'Neill and the maturing American theatre which followed him.

[24]Hurrell, loc. cit.

> of the laborer of today may have split the sides of the men who built the Pyramids, or of the workmen at the Tower of Babel?[25]

Though the theories of laughter and comedy may differ somewhat, men of all times may well have laughed at the same things. If we apply this to the subject of our study, we might generalize that the writers, as well as the actors and directors, of farce have used a basic set of farce devices that provoke laughter. This observation is interesting but remains incidental to the present study.

The farce devices are the techniques or tools by which the playwright manipulates his situations, action, characters or dialogue in order to produce laughter. If man remains relatively unchanged, then farce devices should remain constant, though the form, the manner of speech and dress, the characters, the setting and other details of production may change with the times. Or as Spewack puts it: "Social organization has changed considerably over the centuries, but the human animal has not."[26] This study will attempt to identify the basic devices of farce. They are essentially situational devices and can be traced from Aristophanes and Plautus to Hopwood and Kaufman. The nine basic farce devices listed here will be treated in detail later in this study: Farce dialogue; Violent physical action; Stage tricks or broad business; Exaggerated stage properties; Repetition; Inversion; Concealment; Incongruity; and Exaggerated characters. The materials and timely topics surrounding these devices change with the fashions and the times but the basic farce situations or devices may exist from one generation to the next. We can be certain that the perpetrators of the current farce films, What's New Pussycat? and Kiss Me, Stupid owe more to Aristophanes and Plautus than they might imagine.

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[25]Nat Schmulowitz, "A Prolegomenon", The Ancient Greeks & Joe Miller, Albert Rapp (San Francisco 1958), pp. 7-8.

[26]Spewack, op. cit., p. 6.

CHAPTER II

FARCE AS COMIC THEATRE

Origin of theatrical term "farce"

The origin and development of the term "farce" is interesting to us for several reasons. It appears that this type of play existed long before the term "farce" was ever used as its name. Through many periods of theatrical history there have been short dramatizations of ordinary or rustic life, based on compounded situations in which ludicrous characters raced madly about, often in sheer horseplay, for the prime purpose of arousing laughter. This description suggests a kind of play that is literally stuffed with action, situations, comic business and the risible. The description fits the many types of farce that appeared from antiquity to the 17th century: the Megarean and Atellan folk farces; many scenes from Aristophanes; the Plautus plays; scenes and brief plays of farcical nature in the Middle Ages; the commedia dell'arte; the short farces of Hans Sachs; the interludes of John Heywood; the robust scenes from Shakespeare; the works of Jodelet; and ending with Moliere. The Middle French word "farce" or "farcir" which originated from the Latin "farcire" meaning "to stuff", described or typified this type of play most aptly, and so perhaps the nameless thus derived a name.

We can only speculate why these dramatic performances were not uniformly called "farce" or any other common name. While the plays or scenes mentioned above all fit into the description given, they did vary considerably from each other in many details of structure, method and tradition. Some capitalized on informality and others concentrated on improvisation. They also differed in the function to which each

culture would use them. But much of this can also be said of farce in all times.

Certainly the philosophers, critics, poets and historians of antiquity focused the bulk of their attention or at least their extant writing on tragedy and comedy, the more formal and profound of dramatic types. It is possible that many of the critics of Greece were much like their more recent descendants and considered such a frivolous and popular art beneath the need for any critical discussion. At any rate they wrote very little about it. As a result the neoclassic scholars, translators and interpreters of the Renaissance who epitomized the ancient writers appear likewise to have ignored it. Thus we have a nameless art overlooked by early writers who were preoccupied with the formal and logical in life and art. It remained uniformly nameless for almost two thousand years.

Actually ". . . the history of farce in the theatre begins in France during the Middle Ages" though "according to a well-established theory, it may be traced back to the liturgical origins of the drama itself."[1] In France the brief, boisterous, often quite vulgar plays, acted by amateur societies of actors, sometimes bore the title "farce." Bellinger[2] believes there was little or no distinction in kind between the Shrovetide plays, interludes, farces, puppet shows and "feasts" that were presented during the late Middle Ages.

The Fool companies, bands of youths all over Europe, played these gross and nonsensical comedies that were often ribald travesties on the Mass. The best known companies in

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[1]Leo Hughes, "The Early Career of Farce in the Theatrical Vocabulary", The University of Texas Studies in English No. 4026 (July 8, 1940), p. 83.

[2]Martha Fletcher Bellinger, A Short History of the Drama (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927), p. 141.

France were Societe des Sottes, les confreries joyeuses, la Bagoche or les Basochiens (law students in universities under Philippe le Bel) and les Enfants-sans-Souce (the student society of Paris formed under Charles VI).

A later parallel to French farce were the interludes of John Heywood (1497-1565). He invariably called his pieces "interludes" though they bear all the essentials of farce. The influence of French farce on Heywood must have been slight if present at all but Heywood's influence on the English farce that followed is fairly well established.

Though farce had gained a strong foothold somewhat earlier "Edward Ravenscroft is generally credited with beginning the vogue of farce in 1672 with The Citizen turn'd Gentleman."[3] This play apparently won public acclaim as well as the favor of England's Charles II, a devotee of that sort of play. It seems interesting to note, however, that both the man and the play of 1672 are indebted to the master of comic theatre, Moliere. Most of the great works of Moliere appeared in the 1660's and the last of the court plays, The Would-be Gentleman (1670), became the basis for Ravenscroft's The Citizen turn'd Gentleman.[4] Moliere's farcical The Tricks of Scapin (1671) and The Learned Ladies (1672) had immediately preceeded Ravenscroft's play. Early in the following year Moliere died at age fifty-one while playing the hypochondriac, Argan, in the fourth performance of The Imaginary Invalid (1673).

In 1685 Nahum Tate brought out a play named A Duke and No Duke to which was attached a brief page and a half of preface defending farce. But eight years later with the second edition of the play, Tate enlarged this "preface" into a full-blown

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[3]Golden, op. cit., p. 62.

[4]Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.), The Oxford Companion to the Theatre (2d, ed.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 659.

discourse on farce. Golden suggests that the sixteen page "preface" may well be ". . . the most important contribution in the Restoration period to the subject of farce."[5]

Turning back chronologically we find that a singularly significant event in the history of the use of the theatrical term "farce" was the 1661 visit of Chaunouveau and his company to London. A scene in William D'Avenant's (1606-1668) The Play-House to be Lett, supposedly played in 1662, may refer, according to Hughes, to this visit in 1661 and tells of a new dispensation for the English stage and the meaning of farce. In Act I the House-Keeper, the Tire-Woman, and an English Player are approached by a Monsieur who wishes to rent the theatre during the vacation now in progress.

House-K. What would you do in't? we must
like your trade
Before we let our shop, lest we should ride
With John Dory to Paris to seek rent.
Mons. Mi vil make presentation of de farce.
Tire-W. Farces, what be those? New French bobs
for ladies?
Play. Pray, peace! I understand the gentleman.
Your farces are a kind of mongrel play.
But, sir, I believe all French farces are
Prohibited commodities, and will
Not pass current in England.
Mons. Sir, pardon me! de Engelis be more
Fantastique den de Fransh. De farce
Bi also very fantastique and vil passe.
Play. The Monsieur's in the right for we have
found
Our Customers of late exceeding humorous.
Mons. De vise nation bi for tings heroique
And de fantastique, vor de farce!
Tire-W. I like not that these French pardonney
moys
Should make so bold with old England.
House-K. Peace, woman! We'll let the house,
and get money.

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[5]Golden, op. cit., p. 64. Tate's "preface" (1693) represents the earliest source used in this study to determine the nature of farce.

Play. But how will your French farce be understood?
For all our travell'd customers are gone
To take the air with their own wives, beyond
Hide-Park a great way; a homely country mode
of their fore-fathers.
Tire-W. With grief we speak it;
They may be asham'd to leave their poor mistresses
And us behind 'em without customers.
Play. Pray save your tears for our next tragedy.
The Monsieur's all for merry farces, but,
As I said, sir, how shall we understand 'em?
Mons. We have a troop of French Commediens
Dat speak a little very good Engelis.
Tire-W. Bless us! a troop?
Play. Woman, thou art no linguist; they in France
Call a company of players, a troop.
Tire-W. I thought he had ta'em our long Tennis-Court
For a stable.
Play. And you are shelling beans for his horses.[6]

This brief scene makes it clear that "farce was a newcomer to theatre language in 1661 but the term was firmly established by the end of the 17th century.

The nearest suspicion of a theatrical use of farce in pre-Restoration times occurs in the works of Ben Jonson,[7] who speaks with characteristic acerbity of his opponent's using ". . . stale apothegmes . . . to farce their Scenes withall."[8] Hughes believes, however, that this connection with the theatre is an accidental one. The New English Dictionary[9] lists several earlier illustrations as follows: Palsgrave in 1530, "Suche as writte farcis and contrefait the vulgare speche."

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[6]Hughes, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

[7]Introduction to Cynthia's Revels (1600).

[8]Hughes, op. cit., p. 83.

[9]James A. H. Murray (ed.), A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901), IV, p. 71.
The sources cited are Jehan Palsgrave, Lesclarcissement de la langue francoyse 1530 (1852) and Sir David Lyndesay, The testament and complaynt of our soverane lordis papyngo 1530.

and Lyndesay also in 1530, "In ballatts, farses, and in plesand playis." From such brief passages one can only guess at the theatrical tie. Hughes does not mention either source though he credits, in a footnote, the N.E.D. as the basis or beginning of his study.

The Scotch borrowed the term "farce" and used it with some frequency to describe dramatic performances though the term was not used as the French had used it. Anna Jean Mill in Mediaeval Plays in Scotland suggested that "farce" referred to the machine-play rather than to rough, homely comedy. Hughes concluded that: ". . . all this is not to insist that the Scotch had a definite dramatic genre unknown in England of that day, but to suggest that the Scotch were under a greater obligation to the French than the English were--for a term if not a dramatic form."[10]

Krutch states that: ". . . The first recorded use of the word in English occurs a long generation before the birth of Shakespeare."[11] This is verified and pinpointed by Hughes to a performance in 1629 at Blackfryers in London by a French troupe. He adds that this was: ". . . the first use of the word in England to describe a dramatic performance."[12] It would be hard to say if this was actually a farce but there was nothing to prevent them from playing a farce. This 1629 record seems, however, to be unique because neither the word nor the dramatic form stuck.

The term "farce" finally entered the theatrical vocabulary and took its place in dramatic nomenclature only after the Restoration, roughly 1660 to 1700. Hughes tells us that

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[10]Hughes, op. cit., p. 85.

[11]Krutch, op. cit., p. 92.

[12]Hughes, loc. cit.

in none of the English-Latin lexicons of the period before 1660 is farce defined in terms of the theatre.

Toward the end of the century farce in England was not used in a strict or circumscribed sense but often applied to plays of only three-acts. Nicoll claims:

> There was a certain degenerating movement in comedy which started about the year 1675, and the tastes of the audience ever more and more drew the dramatists to introduce weaker and frailer types of humorous drama. The fashion sprang up for three-act plays . . . generally not so witty or so brilliant as the fuller five-act dramas of the more regular authors; but the word farce was applied to them so late in contradistinction to the richer and more extended comedies of the time. Farce, then, came to mean a short humorous play.[13]

The term was used with great abandon to describe a confusing array of things both during and after the Restoration. Throughout that period it was used to label any piece of comic stage action, preferably involving trickery or practical jokes. It was also applied to the type of dramatic production which we now call burlesque or travesty. Political pamphlets filled with satire and written in the form of a play were called farces. By the end of the period any kind of stage performance which did not meet the approval of devotees or supporters of literary drama was labeled farce. These disapproving or scornful attacks used farce as a term of reproach to hurl in the face of the living playwright.[14] Farce was also used to describe the comic business of an actor, the "stuffing" of the stage.

Classifications of comedy

The problem of defining and distinguishing the dramatic genres has persisted since the Renaissance. Samuel Johnson's

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[13]Allardyce Nicoll, The Theatre and Dramatic Theory (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1962), p. 88.

[14]Matthews, op. cit., p. 120.

overused observation that: ". . . comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers . . ."[15] indicates that the greater problem has been in defining comedy.

Since Aristotle, tragedy has born continuous examination and scholarly discussion. His treatment of tragedy in the Poetics remains the basis of modern dramatic theory and criticism. Professor Taylor states that: "The literary world has never recovered from Aristotle's failure to keep his promise to discuss comedy."[16] Whether he failed to keep the promise or whether that portion of his treatise is lost, the absence of his observation or definition has left us floundering with divergent and inconsistent explanations.

The Aristotelian influence is present today in spite of his brief observations made on comedy. Aristotle suggested a didactic purpose for comedy as it showed man worse than himself. By seeing his faults displayed before him, man might learn and correct his faults. From this point on, the theories and definitions have varied.

The problem is compounded in recent times by the fact that: "Up to the close of the nineteenth century, almost all . . . dramatic compositions were classified by their authors in categories."[17] After 1900 the majority of these works were simply labeled "plays" or "dramas", a trend that has continued to the present.

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[15]Samuel Johnson, The Rambler, No. 125. It continues: ". . . for though perhaps they might properly have contented themselves, with declaring it to be" such a dramatic representation of human life as may excite mirth, "they have embarrassed their definition with the means by which the comic writers attain their end, without considering that the various methods of exhilarating their audience, not being limited by nature, cannot be comprised in precept."

[16]Joseph Richard Taylor, The Story of the Drama (Boston: Expression Co., 1930), p. 25.

[17]Nicoll, op. cit., p. 81.

Hughes has argued that the labels of past plays have been inconsistent and frequently inaccurate. While he respects the principle, Hughes refutes the idea held by some and best expressed by W. J. Lawrence in Musical Quarterly:

> Theatrical nomenclature . . . must be taken at its face value. It is not the function of the musico-dramatic historian to throw classifications of old on the Procrustean bed and maim them in accordance with some hard-and-fact principle. Nothing but confusion can ensue from such a course. No matter how unscientific many of them now appear, the labelings given by bygone authors to their works must remain sacrosanct.[18]

Taking exception to this, Hughes denies the fact that bygone authors labeled their works with care using the following arguments. Many plays bear one label on the title page and another in the preface, prologue or dedication. A piece was often labeled comedy on one playbill and farce on another.[19] In addition authors (and their press agents and producers) often mislabeled plays to get them produced and to attract an audience. A New York Times reviewer makes this practice clear in 1916.

> To this occasion/the best/ "Seven Chances" does not pretend to rise. It is an unusually obvious farce, described on the program, like nearly all our farces, as a comedy. Just why our producers shun the word "farce" is not apparent. They seem to be ashamed of it. They will call a farce a "flirtation in three acts" or a "mad melange in two modes" or a "whimsicality" or even a farce-comedy, but they will not call it a farce. Possibly they regard the word as properly reserved for the ancient

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[18] W. J. Lawrence, "Early Irish Ballad Opera and Comic Opera", Musical Quarterly VIII (1922_, p. 397. Also quoted in Hughes, see footnote 34.

[19] Leo Hughes, A Century of English Farce (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 4-7.

> humors of falling down. But in thus deprecating the word "farce" they succeed only in deprecating the word "comedy."[20]

Secondly, Hughes takes exception to the idea that the labels had a fairly definite meaning to the author's contemporaries. He cites examples of French and English critics, historians, and authors often applying different labels to the same piece.

In addition to the inconsistency of labeling plays which continues today, the question is often raised of the value of labels and classifications. Here again we observe some divergent opinions. O'Hara and Bro feel that: "One could easily spend too much time to too little profit considering the classifications and varieties of dramatic forms."[21] "The only value in the various definitions of comedy is that they are themselves comic."[22] Professor Nicoll indicates that the terms and categories came into being both: ". . . for general purposes and for the specific purposes of critical study."[23] It appears to this writer that the value and necessity of the definitions become more significant than ever in this scientific age where greater precision is a constant demand. In the interest of future scholarship it seems necessary that we avoid the mistakes of the past and define the terms we currently use.

Unfortunately, there is no wholly-satisfactory classification of comedy today. Matthews observed this in 1890 when he said: "There are no hard and fast lines between species and

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[20]Anonymous, "Second Thoughts on First Nights", New York Times (August 13, 1916) Sect. 2, p. 7.

[21]Frank H. O'Hara and Margueritte H. Bro, Invitation to the Theatre (New York: Harper, 1951), p. 58.

[22]Edith Hamilton, "Comedy", Theatre Arts II (July, 1927), p. 503.

[23]Nicoll, op. cit., p. 87.

genre, but insensible gradations from one to the other, with scarcely a missing link anywhere."[24] This may in part explain the tendency to discuss all of comic drama under the term "comedy." This general category often shelters examples from either comedy or farce and is found in the writings of many, including Gassner and Meredith. The latter's famous essay pulls farce under the broad cape of comedy. In a recent Harbrace Sourcebook called Comedy: Plays, Theory and Criticism (1962), editor Felheim places The Misanthrope and The Importance of Being Earnest, to name only two, under the heading of eight comedies. In addition, the editor's brief introduction to each play mingles the terms comedy, farce and satire; and to cap the inconsistencies, he includes a significant criticism of Earnest written by Otto Reinert in which the writer repeatedly calls the play a farce. One must assume in these instances that the distinction is hardly worth making.

Shakespeare, the dramatist supreme, also appears to defy the traditional categories. Perry, in his Masters of Dramatic Comedy and Their Social Themes, excludes the Bard saying: "His work, with its infinite variety and supreme poetry, is, for all its relations to the tradition of comedy, a thing apart."[25] One might well suspect any definition or classification that excludes or fails to encompass the world's greatest dramatist. It was Shakespeare himself who gave us an enjoyable satire on the numerous subdivisions of the drama when he had Polonius, the lord chamberlain in Hamlet, say:

> The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited; Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus

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[24]Brander Matthews, Studies of the Stage (New York: Harper and Bros., 1894), p. 212.

[25]Henry Ten Eyck Perry, Masters of Dramatic Comedy and Their Social Themes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. xv.

> too light. For the law of writ and the liberty, these are the only men.[26]

The classifications of antiquity are fairly common knowledge and raise no serious problem for us. Following the two traditional categories of tragedy and comedy, we find the ancient critics dividing comedy into Old Comedy (486-400 B.C.), Middle Comedy (400-338 B.C.), and New Comedy beginning in 338 B.C. Only the dates vary among the numerous scholars discussing them. This is essentially a chronological classification although there are differences in structure as well. We can add to this another chronological type called Roman Comedy with Plautus, which was quite similar to the New Comedy of Greece. There appears to be little disagreement until more recent dramatic types are identified and categorized.

Though there are at present many differing classifications of comedy with wide categories and divergent terminology, two basic ideas emerge quite clearly. The first is that classifications vary primarily because of different points of departure or views of the writers. The second idea is that the farce or its equivalent appears in virtually all classifications of comic types, regardless of the many other differences that appear.

Let us examine briefly the different viewpoints taken and their corresponding classifications. Dobree in 1924 found it ". . . useful to distinguish three kinds of comedy or at least three elements in comedy:" namely, "critical comedy", "free" comedy, and "great comedy."[27] Critical comedy is classical and from this much of modern comedy is derived. It set

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[26]Act II, Scene II of Hamlet found in Neilson and Hill (ed.) The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1942), p. 1063.

[27]Bonamy Dobree, Restoration Comedy, 1660-1720 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), pp. 9-16.

out to correct manners by laughter and to "cure excess." "Free" comedy produces no superiority nor moral feeling but provides a release. Great comedy is perilously near tragedy and deals with disillusion of mankind and his failure to realize his most passionate desires. This is Dobree's point of departure in the study of Restoration comedy primarily.

In Drama: The Major Genres, the authors call tragedy, tragi-comedy and comedy the major genres and melodrama and farce the minor genres. They draw the distinction in terms of scope. The major genres move people the most deeply and are more important while the minor genres: ". . . do not attempt to say or do as much."[28] One might essentially agree with their classification if they think primarily in classical terms. But if the rustic Megarian and Atellan farces actually preceded the Golden Age of Greek drama and later examples of Roman comedy are accurate, it would appear that the farce was providing its rustic entertainment in one form or another even without a common name. As the earliest form of comic drama and with its worthy objective of laughter, the farce should be considered a major genre.

Taylor provides a list of the minute subdivisions of comedy which dramatic critics have sought to establish:

> . . . pure comedy, heroic-comedy, tragi-comedy, comedy-of-masks, high comedy, comedy of manners, comedy of humors, romantic comedy, farce-comedy, judicial comedy, non-judicial comedy, comedies of situation, romantic comedies, social comedies, satiric comedies, comedies of character, and natural comedy.[29]

Reflected in this conglomeration of types and near types is both repetition and a variety of viewpoints. It merely confuses the issue as Taylor indicates.

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[28]Robert Hogan and Sven Eric Molin, Drama: The Major Genres (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1964), pp. xi-xii.

[29]Taylor, op. cit., p. 28.

Professor Heffner[30] recognizes the types of comedy, ranging from farce to the comedy of manners, but introduces his own two broad categories of comedy which arise from differences in the playwright's vision of his characters and action. These characters are either normal or anormal as they deviate from the norm. A slight deviation results only in laughter as we laugh at ourselves. But a greater deviation results in ridicule as we laugh at others. Heffner classifies Shakespeare in the former and Ben Jonson in the latter categories.

Another classification lists the names of comedy in "descending" order as "joy, divine comedy, humour, irony, satire, sarcasm, wit, and scorn."[31] One might disagree with his order but Feibleman has bravely prepared another point of view.

These grossly divergent points of view represent more or less significant attempts to bring the classifications of comedy into some meaningful focus for discussion. Perhaps they succeed or fail according to the use we can make of them and the clarification they bring to this problem. The more traditional attempts at classification which follow reveal the role of farce more clearly.

From The Law of the Drama (1894) Bruntiere defines the types of drama (by considering the obstacle against which the human will struggles) as tragedy, romantic or social drama, comedy, and farce. Edith Hamilton affirmed this with: "The divisions in the drama are clear cut: there is comedy, which is either comedy of wit or of humor, and there is farce, so-called comedy of situation, which belongs in another category and is comedy only by courtesy."[32] Hewitt, too, accepts the

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[30]Hubert Heffner, The Nature of Drama (Boston: The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1959), pp. 344-45.

[31]James Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy, A Study of its Theory and Practice (New York: Russell and Russell 1962), p. 205.

[32]Hamilton, op. cit., p. 504.

common divisions of comedy and farce elaborating only that ". . . these literary types are differentiated one from the other almost entirely on the basis of the emotions they arouse in an audience."[33]

A somewhat different classification is suggested by Professor Rowe.[34] It includes comedy, satire, and farce with their subdivisions and composite forms such as romantic comedy, high comedy, low comedy, and farce comedy. The farce is defined as a genre apart from comedy by both Nicoll and the Oxford Companion to the Theatre, though their classifications of comedy differ slightly. Professor Nicoll divides comedy into that of "humours", romance, and manners[35] and the Oxford Companion lists five divisions: character, humours, intrigue, (or romantic), manners (or sentimental) and morals.[36]

Koestler agrees with what was once a basic classification, the comedy of situations, of manners and of character.[37] Several more recent authors revive the age old distinction of high and low comedy. The Dramatic Experience suggests satiric comedy, high comedy, romantic comedy and low comedy or farce[38] as its comic divisions while director Sievers uses simply high comedy or comedy of manners and low comedy or farce.[39]

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[33]Bernard Hewitt, Art and Craft of Play Production (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1940), p. 53.

[34]Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, A Theatre in Your Head (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1960), p. 14.

[35]Nicoll. op. cit., pp. 218-19.

[36]Hartnoll, op. cit., p. 144.

[37]Arthur Koestler, Insight and Outlook (New York: MacMillan Co., 1949), p. 102.

[38]Judah Bierman, James Hart and Stanley Johnson, The Dramatic Experience (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958), p. 212.

[39]W. David Sievers, Directing for the Theatre (2d ed.) (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1965), p. 25.

From such a sampling of classifications of comedy one may question any attempts to reach a general conclusion. However, there appears to be sufficient evidence and confirmation to conclude that farce is considered a distinct entity in itself. It has been called the comedy of situation or low comedy but these are merely efforts to be more descriptive and definitive. The farce is recognized by one term or another as one of the dramatic genres or as Matthews puts it: "Farce itself is a perfectly legitimate type."[40] "Surely it deserves to be treated with the respect paid to the other forms of the drama."[41]

Some argue that the farce is less genre than tone or method. Robert Stephenson recently observed that: "Farce is a figure of theatre as metaphor is a figure of speech or antithesis a figure of rhetoric."[42] He may have been influenced by an earlier view that the only difference between tragedy and comedy which has survived throughout the ages:

> . . . is precisely this difference in tone which did not exist originally. . . . Both forms deal with the same problems and situations of human life . . . the difference in tone is often so faint in modern drama that the terms of tragedy and comedy are of dubious value as descriptive of a play.

He concludes that: ". . . one can only be sure that a play is a play."[43]

"Tone" is a most difficult term to deal with in definition as illustrated by another meaning.

> The characters and themes of comedies are similarly distinctive, but there is another characteristic which, linked with plot, makes

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[40]Matthews, A Study of the Drama, p. 221.

[41]Matthews, Studies of the Stage, p. 211.

[42]Robert C. Stephenson, "Farce as Method", Tulane Drama Vol. 5, No. 2 (1961), p. 91.

[43]Donald Clive Stuart, The Development of Dramatic Art (New York: Appleton, 1928), p. 101.

> possible the immediate identifications of a comedy. It is tone--what we feel to be the attitude of the author to his audience.[44]

The idea of tone seems to provide only another posture from which we can view the comic. There might well be still other vantage points which contribute to our problem. However, our focus has centered basically on the question of the farce as a dramatic genre. If our assumption that the farce is a distinct dramatic type is correct, we must then conclude that this will not exclude the mingling of dramatic genres, nor should it. Few plays are completely pure in form. Farce can contribute its form and substance to other dramatic genres.

> More and more in modern drama one form steps into the territory of another. Comedy has mingled with farce and the mixture of the two has mingled with melodrama until some of our popular plays may be termed farce-comedy-melodrama.[45]

To this point we have observed that while "farce", as a theatrical term has existed only since 1670, the comic theatre of farce predates the term by hundreds of years, very likely to the dawn of the Golden Age of Greek drama. The farce has never, in all this time and particularly since 1670, been satisfactorily defined and misunderstanding continues to the present. While the classifications of comic theatre vary as widely as the writers and their points of view, the farce consistently appears as a legitimate genre in itself.

Sources: comic theory

As a form of comic theatre, the farce goes to the same source for its materials as any other comic form. The writer of farce draws from the same theories of comedy as does the writer of comedy. The device of inversion, to be discussed later, may find two characters exchanging identities to

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[44] Bierman et al, loc. cit.

[45] O'Hara and Bro, loc. cit.

confuse their antagonists. A comedy writer may employ this device to expand character or introduce a new dimension of character personality or effect a change in character relationships through the comic medium. The same interchange may be used by the farceur to complicate the situation, compound the confusion and stimulate laughter. They employ a common source for their own purpose and end. The playwright, of comedy or of farce, must be aware of the theories of comedy and be able to effectively use them where the occasion demands. For this reason the brief survey of historical views of laughter and comedy which follows may supplement our understanding of this study.

Arthur Koestler's view of man and laughter seems pertinent and precise:

> One of the synonyms of Home Sapiens is "the laughing animal" . . . to be called "laughing animals" appeals to us in a flattering and evocative way. It seems to lift us to a superior level of luxury creatures in the terrestial zoo precisely because laughter strikes us as an activity detached from any utilitarian purposes, unconnected with the struggle for survival, a kind of biological luxury. We talk of "relieving laughter", and imply by it liberation from the stress and strife of purposeful activity. On the level of biological evolution where laughter arises, an element of frivolity seems to creep into an essentially humourless universe. . . . But if laughter is a luxury, it is a compulsory one, for in its psychological aspect it belongs to the automatic reflex type of action. It is this sharply outlined psychological feature which distinguishes the manigestations of humor from other "luxury" activities of the species such as art and philosophy.[46]

Koestler seems to be implying, in this vivid passage, that laughter is a way of looking at life which in turn makes our existence more bearable. It appears to be the sole property of man and no other animal.

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[46]Koestler, op. cit. p. 3.

Nicoll[47] tells us that comedy does not necessarily depend upon laughter but that laughter is assuredly its most common characteristic. Farce, the freer counterpart of comedy, does depend primarily upon laughter and for this reason we must explore its theories.

The term "comedy" as we use it here refers to its broadest sense, encompassing the genre of farce, the comic and the comedian, and the genre of comedy while also touching on humor. Much of comedy is so closely intertwined that it appears virtually impossible to disentangle, analyze and discuss its theories separately. In addition, the terms "comedy" and "laughter" are frequently used interchangeably. For our purpose here, we have no need to isolate and precisely identify each theory, even if we could. Our concern is merely to sense and observe the theories of comedy and laughter which the writer of farce employs.

Theories of comedy and sources of laughter are many and varied and we must agree with Hewitt[48] that no one theory seems completely satisfactory or all-inclusive. "No theory of comedy yet developed, from Aristotle to Meredith or M. Bergson seems to cover all the ground."[49] Even the more scientific approach of experimental studies has failed to produce any constants.

One such study conducted by F. E. Lange[50] in 1926 timed the laughs of audiences in four performances of the light opera, Iolanthe. One hundred and thirty-seven laughter

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[47]Allardyce Nicoll, The Theory of Drama (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1931), p. 213.

[48]Hewitt, op. cit., p. 60.

[49]Dobree, op. cit., p. 9.

[50]Gardner Murphy, T. M. Newcomb and Lois B. Murphy, Experimental Social Psychology (New York: Harper and Bros., 1937), p. 688.

episodes occurred in each performance and the laughs came in the same places and extended for the same duration of time.

In a similar study reported by Ruth Frank[51] in 1936, audience reaction in four performances of the social comedy First Lady by Kaufman and Dayton revealed only two speeches in the play to which reaction was identical at every performance.

Thomas Andrus, in a master's study done at Louisiana State University in 1945,[52] analyzed the laugh patterns of the melodrama Fashion on successive performances. His conclusion stated that successive audiences do not necessarily laugh at the same thing, or with the same intensity or duration of laughter. The contradictory results of these three studies offer little help in understanding the nature and motivations of laughter.

Historian George Kernodle laments the existing books on comedy which are full of:

> . . . old-fashioned nonsense or half-sense about 'mind dominating emotions', 'detachment', 'objective', 'to the man who thinks rather than feels', 'the observer insulated from sympathy', 'spectator in an unidentifying state of mind'. To the theorists, comedy is simple--you just keep the audience from feeling anything and they are free to laugh.[53]

In The Dark Comedy, J. L. Styan[54] states that the recognized theories of comedy do not help us to understand the characteristic drama of the twentieth century. He adds that a sufficiently all-embracing explanation has come from no theorist and that philosophical and psychological approaches

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[51]Ruth Frank, "Out Front", Theatre Arts Monthly XX (May, 1936), p. 380.

[52]Thomas O. Andrus, "A Study of Laugh Patterns in the Theatre", (unpublished M.A.thesis, Dep't.of Speech, Louisiana State University, 1945).

53George R. Kernodle, "Excruciatingly funny or, the 47 Keys of Comedy", Theatre Arts (December, 1946), p. 719.

[54]J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 42.

have both been wanting. Many other writers add merely that there are countless ways of classifying or analyzing the comic or humorous.

In a nuclear age such as ours, one scientific theory can cancel out another but Playwright Ionesco feels that the truths found in works of art complement one another. He says:

> The great works of art and the great poets seem to find confirmation, completion and corroboration in one another; Aeschylus is not cancelled out by Calderon, or Shakespeare by Chekov, or Kleist by a Hapanese No play.[55]

With this in mind, we will proceed to state the theories briefly and to include other authoritative agreement where it exists.

Carolyn Wells in An Outline of Humor (1923) simplifies the problem by recognizing only two commandments or theories upon which hang "all the law and the prophets of the world of Humor." They are Aristotle and Plato, the chronological beginning of much dramatic theory beyond comedy.

The Disappointment or Frustrated Expectation theory of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) states that laughter arises from the presentation of men as worse than they are in life. What this meant is not certain but it could mean that comedy represents the most foolish of men or men generally as more foolish than they are or appear to be in real life.

Plato (427-347 B.C.) felt that the pleasure we derive in laughing at the comic is an enjoyment of other people's misfortune, due to the feeling of superiority or gratified vanity that we ourselves are not in like plight. This has been called the Derision or Discomfiture theory and was expressed more clearly by Aristotle though it came nearer to impinging on and coinciding with his own Disappointment theory.

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[55]Eugene Ionesco, "Experience of the Theatre", The Content and Craft of Drama, ed. Robert W. Corrigan and James L. Rosenberg (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1964), p. 295.

The Derision theory is often called the Superiority or Degradation theory and the idea is based on a rather indefinite statement of Plato's [56] that pleasure of the ludicrous originates in the sight of someone else's misfortune.

Cicero (106-43 B.C.) subscribed to the Derision theory and in DeOratore, he describes the source of the ridiculous. It originates in certain offensiveness and deformity: ". . . for those sayings are laughed at solely or chiefly which point out and designate something offensive in an inoffensive manner."[57] He goes on to describe the different kinds of the ridiculous and how far ridicule may be carried. According to Grant[58] the "theory of the laughable" was developed more in the writings of Cicero than any other Greek source.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) declared for the Derision theory and his "sudden glory" found in the Treatise on Human Nature (1650) is delightfully expressive.

> The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except that they bring with them any present dishonor.[59]

George Meredith (1828-1909) likewise accepted Derision but modified its harshness.

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[56]Plato, "Philebus", The Works of Plato, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Dial Press, 1936), pp. 47-50.

[57]Cicero, Marcus Tullius, Cicero on Oratory and Orators, trans. or ed. J. S. Watson (London: H. G. Bohn, 1862), p. 289.

[58]Mary A. Grant, The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable (Greek Rhetoricians and Cicero) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, 1924), No. 21, Ch. II.

[59]Thomas Hobbes, Works, ed. Sir William Molesworth (Cambridge: The University Press, 1928), Vol. IV, p. 46.

These two early theories may well be the basis for a broad theory of comedy but there have been other significant views expressed which bear our attention. Among these is the idea of comedy as a corrective agent expressed in the 4th century by Donatus. He believed that man learns what is of use in life and what must be avoided by observing the habits and customs of public and private affairs treated in a comedy.

Philip Sidney (1554-1586) declared that laughter almost always came from things most disproportioned to ourselves and nature. This has been called the Incongruity theory and it has been supported by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and the English drama critic, William Hazlett (1778-1830). Incongruity, or Contrast, as a basis of laughter is probably one of the most widely accepted theories. The clearest statement of it is by Schopenhauer who sees the cause of laughter in every case as:

> . . . simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation and the laughter itself is just the expression of the incongruity.[60]

Comedy served a high purpose to George Meredith who believed that true comedy was the expression of a completely rational view of life. It held up to the "thoughtful laughter" of the reader or spectator all that was out of proportion, affected, pretentious, hypocritical, or pedantic in frail humanity. It exposed self-deception, injustice, false humility and conceit without bitterness. Meredith's An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (1918) has become a classic in the study of comedy as has Laughter (1911) written by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941).

Bergson defines the comic purely in terms of adaptation. We laugh at man's failure to adapt himself to shifting circum-

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[60]Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, trans. R. G. Holdane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd., 1891), I, 76.

stances which allows no sympathy and fellow feeling. Both Meredith and Bergson demand an intellectual attitude on the part of the spectator of comedy and a total absence of emotion. Often a lengthy series of circumstances will pile one upon the other to create a "snowball effect."[61] Blistein illustrates with a series of beatings going from father to son to servant to errand boy and finally the errand boy kicks the dog.

Bergson also finds comedy in automation, the substitution of the artificial for the natural or the mechanization of the living. Laughter is consciously or unconsciously corrective in nature and Bergeson's theory has been traced out along three lines of repetition, inversion and "interference de series."[62] He sees in each a reduction of the living thing to a machinelike inelasticity. This sounds much like the Superiority and Incongruity theories we have mentioned earlier.

Let us consider the subject of laughter by his discovery of similarities between the technique of wit and the technique of the dream. Sigmund Freud (1856-1934) believed that laughter is the result of an unexpected release of psychic energy. One laughs when he is prepared for one thing and then receives another. This is sometimes referred to as the Liberation theory. His "economy of psychic expenditure"[63] emphasizes the expenditure of great energy with a small result and the release of inhibitions, especially erotic ones, which help to explain laughter at the indecent joke. Eric Bentley recognizes this latter quality and capitalizes on the repressed wishes in his "safety

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[61]Henri Bergson, "Laughter", Comedy--Wylie Sypher (ed.) (Garden City, N. J.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1956), p. 113.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Sigmund Freud, Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1916), p. 180.

valve" theory of farce.[64]

The same basic idea is expressed by Bliss in a similar theory that says the secret of laughter is in a "return to nature." Man being only partially civilized: ". . . the human being, from childhood up, must curb, repress, skulk, hide control" and "laughter is the result of suddenly released repression, the physical sign of subconscious satisfaction."[65]

A Play Spirit or Play Instinct theory has been advanced by Max Eastman (1883-), American philosopher and psychologist. This even broader foundation to the comic is based on what he calls the "play instinct" of children. A child laughs at an unexpected accomplishment and also at unexpected disappointment. The sense of humor is a primary instinct and this instinct is to take a shock or disappointment playfully.[66]

This theory was suggested earlier by J. Y. T. Greig and James Sully[67] who felt that a child's laughter merely arises from a feeling of well-being. The idea appears to be somewhat allied to the Liberation theory of Freud.

Albert Rapp (1904-), feels that: "Laughter is born out of hatred and aggressiveness. It is basically and categorically savage."[68] He further states that the first

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[64]Eric Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", Let's Get A Divorce! and Other Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1958), p. xiii-xiv. Bentley is concerned primarily with Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. Jean Riviere (New York: J. Cope and H. Smith, 1930).

[65]Silvia H. Bliss, "The Origin of Laughter", American Journal of Psychology, XXVI (April, 1915), pp. 238-39.

[66]Max Eastman, The Sense of Humor (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), p. 226.

[67]James Sully, An Essay on Laughter (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), p. 149.

[68]Albert Rapp, The Origin of Wit and Humor (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1951), p. 13.

or earliest source of wit and humor was "thrashing laughter", the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel, and that our laughter of ridicule is a direct descendant of thrashing laughter. Cartoonist Al Capp confirms this view in his own philosophy that: "All comedy is based on man's delight in man's inhumanity to man."[69] He adds that the Charlie Chaplin films were extremely funny because all were based on this premise.

Elmer Blistein in Comedy in Action (1964) devotes two chapters, in this small book, to the fact that cruelty and comedy have much in common. To point that out is easy but to explain why they have much in common is not so easy. Blistein suggests that: ". . . we may be laughing in hysterical relief that we are not the victim,"[70] or we may laugh to see pomposity deflated. He then offers: ". . . the theory that we laugh at cruelty if the pain that results from it is limited: it may hurt, but not maim; abuse but not kill."[71] He concludes with the thought that: "We laugh because we know, consciously or unconsciously, that what we are watching is not real."[72] It may be added that these theories may not hold in all instances or examples but they represent considerable insight into laughter.

While these theories of comedy and the cause of laughter may not cover completely the comic field or the risible, they are at least useful in pointing up some of the

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[69]Al Capp, "The Comedy of Charlie Chaplin", Atlantic Monthly 185 (February, 1950), p. 25.

[70]Elmer M. Blistein, Comedy in Action (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1964), p. 60.

[71]Ibid., p. 62.

[72]Ibid., p. 64.

apparent causes of laughter. Laughter may signify one thing or another but must be most carefully prepared. "He who organizes a whole evening of 'merriment' must indeed be an organizer." says Bentley, for:

> Nothing could be more fatal than to stake all on making a good beginning and then let events take their course . . . and it is something every author of a farce must have in mind--or better, in his bones.[73]

Playwright Sidney Kingsley in an interview before the opening of Lunatics and Lovers made this observation: "I've studied all the theories. The nature of laughter is one of the most mysterious subjects in the world. So far as dramatic rules are concerned, anything is right if it works."[74] Or as musical comedy writer Otto Harbach admits:

> After twenty years of writing shows and re-writing them at rehearsals, I still find that the first-night audience upsets all calculations. Laughs I counted on don't materialize and laughs are "discovered" where I hadn't expected any.[75]

It may well be true that the cause of laughter remains half hidden, half revealed but always constant and universal throughout recorded history. Showman-playwright George M. Cohan wrote that we all laugh and cry at the same things and the elemental ideas that "got a rise" out of our ancestors will do the same for us. He uses the clown, through the ages, to illustrate permanence of the same kind of humor.[76] We

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[73]Bentley, op. cit., p. 235.

[74]Murray Schumach, "Explaining a New Type of Farce", New York Times (Dec. 12, 1954), II, p. 5.

[75]Otto Harbach, "Making You Laugh is no Joke", Colliers 78 (October 9, 1926), p. 13.

[76]George M. Cohan and George J. Nathan, "The Mechanics of Emotion", McClure's Magazine Vol. 42 (November, 1913), p. 69.

might then conclude that the generative and creative source, the writer of farce, has used and will continue to use the basic farce devices to provoke laughter.

Some critics would have us believe that laughter is dying or as Taylor smilingly puts it: "We are headed straight for a laughless age . . ." where the ". . . future man will never laugh; at the most, he will smile."[77] He quotes that laughter is the expression of a coarse emotion, which, as culture increases, is refined to the form of a smile. Playwright Abe Burrows has recently observed that: "There is nothing to kid any more. This is the age of consensus, and all the humorists are censoring themselves."[78] A later statement from the same source declares: "A closer examination of current comedy reveals neither a renaissance nor a reformation but the beginnings of what could, unless it is reversed, become the dark ages of American humor."

Al Capp has warned us against the gradual loss of our fifth freedom saying: "Without it, the other four freedoms aren't much fun because the fifth is the freedom to laugh at each other."[79] One cannot arbitrarily dismiss these views but they may well be expressing a needless concern that is voiced in every generation. The human need for laughter seems to stand guard against this pessimistic posture.

In the theatre the many defenders of farce have expressed this value from the theatrical point of view. Matthews has called laughter: ". . . the great antiseptic . . . quick to kill the germs of unwholesome sentimentality by which

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[77]Taylor, op. cit., p. 24

[78]Anonymous, "American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter", Time (March 4, 1966), pp. 46-7.

[79]Al Capp, "It's Hideously True", Life Vol. 32 (March 31, 1952), p. 104.

comedy is often attacked."[80] He adds that laughter clears the air which is a boon in itself and a gift to be thankful for. Bentley calls a good laugh an emotional "work-out", that our psychic violence or animal spirits can be worked off in laughter.[81]

Professor Grotjahn of the American Board of Psychiatry wrote that:

> . . . laughter is taken as a sign of strength, freedom, health, beauty, youth, and happiness. . . . Everything done with laughter helps us to be human. Laughter is a way of human communication which is essentially and exclusively human. . . . He who understands the comic begins to understand humanity and the struggle for freedom and happiness.[82]

It is from this elusive realm that the writer of farce draws his technique. He has learned much from the past and the present. From theory and experience he has observed the laughable and the near-laughable. While most farce writers are aware that their material is funny, the true genius that creates the laughable escapes all but a few.

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[80]Matthews, Studies of the Stage, pp. 213-14.

[81]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 224.

[82]Martin Grotjahn, Beyond Laughter (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1957), pp. ix, 263.

CHAPTER III

"All farces congeal when they are transferred from the stage to a cold description of them."

-Francisque Sarcey

THE ANATOMY OF FARCE

The quotation that heads this page was taken from a review written by Sarcey, one of the perfectionist critics of the French theatre. He was partially into his analysis of La Dame de chez Maxim (1899), written by the master farceur, Georges Feydeau, when he paused to make this observation.

The statement forewarns this writer that the excitement and comic effect of farce theatre may be lost in an objective and responsible analysis. Description can hardly reproduce the vigor of this comic genre. In one sense the wild spirit of farce and the aura of academic precision are so dissimilar that the task seems impossible. But unlike some philosophers and psychologists of laughter, whose writings are tearful and tedious, we will attempt through the body of responsible theatre literature to describe and not destroy the vigorous anatomy of farce.

How farce and comedy differ

The boundary line between the comic genre of farce and comedy is not well defined. It may be compared to the relationship of two people named Smith and Jones. Each man has his own particular personality traits and yet they have many characteristics in common. Despite these differences and similarities they belong to two different and distinct families. To some the distinction between farce and comedy is clear and obvious but to the majority of observers the differences are more complex and the distinction sometimes harder to make.

There are those who, like Downer, believe that: ". . . the distinction may be more dependent upon subjective reactions and the tastes of the times than upon absolute criteria."[1] This position has much validity when we realize that comic drama and the subjects of humor have changed in form and idea with time.

The view of Professor Heffner supports his classification of comedy which we have already mentioned. He sees farce as not:

> . . . a separate form but rather a species of comedy allied to 'pure' comedy. It differs from this type of comedy in that it has relatively little emphasis on satire and hence lacks comedy's significant commentary on man and his social condition.[2]

The last statement seems to be both true and false. Before World War I American farce was generally devoid of satire but by the time of World War II considerable satire was being used in farce. The difference can best be seen in the plays of Avery Hopwood (Gold Diggers, Seven Days, Fair and Warmer, etc.) and those of George S. Kaufman (You Can't Take It With You, The Man Who Came to Dinner, Once in a Lifetime, etc.). The Kaufman wit is well-known for its bold use of satire but Hopwood specialized in wildly complicated situations and had little or no concern for satire. Hopwood's plays were often risque and salacious, or as a reviewer once said: ". . . perceptibly improper but flagrantly entertaining." Farce uses the tool of satire very readily when the writer is imaginative enough to employ it. Rowe acknowledges

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[1]Alan S. Downer, The Art of the Play (New York: Henry Holt Co., 1955), p. 308.

[2]Hubert C. Heffner, Samuel Selden and Hunton D. Sellman, Modern Theatre Practice (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1946), p. 69.

that farce moves easily over into satire:

> It is inevitable for the purpose of farce that the object of ridicule, the butt of the situation, will often represent undesirable human traits. . . . It is a matter of purpose.
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> Satire, like farce, deals in types rather than individual characterization, in farce for the freedom of creation of situation, in satire because it is the folly rather than the individual that is held up to ridicule.[3]

The distinction between farce and comedy is said by some to be merely in emphasis. Comedy places maximum stress on character where farce puts it on incident and compounding situations. As a result the characters are better developed in comedy and the situations in farce.

Part of the confusion is apparent when we find the labels switched so frequently. In one discussion The Importance of Being Earnest may be classified as high comedy and in another farce. Goldsmith called She Stoops to Conquer comedy but some of his critics said that it was farce. Millett and Bentley maintain that the Goldsmith play is so close to this line that it is sometimes labeled comedy, or even farce-comedy, but its predominance of farce made it farce.[4] Matthews placed it closer to farce than comedy, feeling that much of it was fun for its own sake.

All of this brings us to the realization that there is considerable mixing of elements across the boundary between farce and comedy. Each can contain strong elements of the other, just as tragedy can have some comic or farcical elements intermixed. The types are seldom pure.

The best evidence to support this is the oft-repeated criticism that a comedy has degenerated into farce. Though

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[3]Rowe, op. cit., p. 137.

[4]Millett and Bentley, op. cit., pp. 120-21.

mixing occurs, one can raise a serious question about the desirability of doing it. Tate's brief estimate of Terence and Plautus can answer in part:

> I esteem them both admirable in their own way; that one chose to write pure Comedy in the strictest Notion, and the other liberty of extending Comedy sometimes into Farce; and each got his Point, Terence--of being exact, and Plautus--pleasant.[5]

To those who demand precision in play writing and strict adherence to a play type such mixture of elements would "degenerate" and minimize its quality. It seems strange that we never hear of a melodrama or a farce "degenerating" into comedy or "generating" for that matter, which might be more accurate. It also seems doubtful that the writer would be as concerned about the limitations of his play form as he would be with the idea or situation.

The detractors or less critical observers usually observe that farce is inferior to comedy. Millett and Bentley feel that farce is a less significant dramatic form than comedy because it has a more trivial and temporary appeal than comedy. They see the greatest difference in method where farce is irresponsible and grossly exaggerated, while comedy is keenly observant.[6]

In a universal view, Lea offers this simple and forthright comparison:

> . . . farce is comedy reduced to commercialism. The best farce is what gives the maximum of amusement for the minimum of intellectual effort. The few go to the theatre to consider,

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[5]Nahum Tate, "Preface:, A Duke and No Duke (London: Printed for Henry Bonwicke, 1693), p. 15. There is no pagination in this work but the pages have been numbered from 1-16 for accuracy.

[6]Millett and Bentley, op. cit., pp. 116-17.

> to cry, to conjecture; and the many go to be amused.[7]

This attitude reappears in the opinion of Thompson who calls farce the ordinary condition of comedy. He sees farce as the mediocre work of mediocre playwrights and actors before an audience that easily appreciates.

The blame is sometimes attached to society more than to the playwright. A dissertation on American comedy stated:

> If the society of the day had developed a strict code of manners, the comic writer was able to write a comedy of manners, or High Comedy, but if the society was chaotic and confused, with no established code or class system, the comedy writer tended toward farce, romantic and domestic comedy for his dramatic material.[8]

This cause-to-effect assertion appears on the surface to apply readily today.

In spite of the dispute and discussion of where the line is drawn between farce and comedy, several distinctions are rather commonly accepted. One such distinction maintains that comedy characters and situations are probable while in farce one or the other or both may be preposterously unbelievable. In this view, reality seems to be the test. What the character does and how real the personality of the character is, determine whether the play is comedy or farce. Comedy concerns itself with real people doing real things and both the situations and characters are honest while the play moves to a logical and honest conclusion.

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[7] K. M. Lea, Italian Popular Comedy (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), p. 185.

[8] Delwin Bennett Dusenbury, "A Study of Comedy in the American Theatre Represented in the Productions of Native Comedy in New York City from 1900 to 1920", (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Dept. of Speech, University of Minnesota, 1947), pp. 31-2.

Crafton and Royer advanced a rule-of-thumb definition of farce that has endured for almost forty years. They said that farce: ". . . may have probable people doing improbable things or improbable people doing probable things; but somewhere in the play there is improbability and exaggeration."[9] By exceeding the limits of reality, a comedy can move into farce as the distinction rests with reality. This theory has been widely supported from the Restoration to the present.

Dryden's preface to An Evening's Love (1668) reflects both his scorn for farce and the distinction of reality:

> Comedy consists, though of low persons, yet of natural actions and characters; I mean such humours, adventures, and designs as are to be found and met with in the world. Farce, on the other side, consists of forced humours, and unnatural events. Comedy presents us with the imperfections of human nature; Farce entertains us with what is monstrous and chimerical.[10]

Though Dryden contributed to the list of partially farcical plays he seems to have little use for the exaggerations of farce.

Tate's preface makes the same declaration that: "Comedy may admit of Humour, which is a great Province of Farce; but then it might be such Humour as comes within compass of Nature and Probability: For where it exceeds these Bounds it becomes Farce."[11] This view remains strongly supported in the 20th century though it leaves unanswered questions in its wake.

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[9]Allen Crafton and Jessica Royer, The Process of Play Production (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1928), p. 256.

[10]John Dryden, An Evening's Love or The Mock-Astrologer (In the Savoy. Printed by T. N. for Henry Herringman, and are to be sold at the Anchor in the Lower Walk of the New Exchange, 1671), p. 2. There is no pagination in the preface cited here but the pages have been numbered from 1-10 for accuracy.

[11]Tate, op. cit., p. 14.

If comedy abstains from crude and boisterous jesting and is marked by some subtlety of dialogue and plot as some have said, the distinction then moves to the degree or type of exaggeration employed by the playwright. This becomes the evasive term around which the distinction between farce and comedy must be based. We know from history, and quite recent history, that the improbable or exaggerated idea of one age can become commonplace reality in a later period. The space stories of Hugo Gernsback, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and the comic strip adventures of Nowlan and Calkin's "Buck Rogers 2429 A.D.", started in 1929, and Alex Raymond's "Flash Gordon" have become a reality in the NASA space ventures of the sixties. The improbable happens almost daily.

An endless list of similar examples could be drawn if space permitted. But let it suffice to say that each time a record of one type or another is broken and a new record set the line between the probable and the improbable moves. Each time an incident or the sequence of a series of incidents or events occurs the distinction between real incidents and impossible incidents shifts. In the end we have to conclude that the distinction between farce and comedy based on exaggeration will forever be changing. The province of comedy will be constantly enlarging and the ingenuity of the farce writer will be taxed more heavily. There appears to be no fixed point along the way at which the line might safely and finally be drawn. Or as Tate said of farce: ". . . there are no Rules to be prescribed for that sort of Wit, no Pattern to Copy, 'tis altogether the Creature of Imagination."[12]

Another difference appears to be in the people or the characters of farce and of comedy. The distinction of probable and improbable people has been mentioned and again we must raise the question: what is an improbable person? It appears

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[12] Ibid., p. 16.

that each individual is limited by his own experience. To a young child, at least one and possibly more of his parents' friends and acquaintances would be an improbable person. Nowhere in his limited years of experience, either through books, television, movies, plays or reality, has he observed such a character. To the child he appears ludicrous and improbable but to the parent he is one of a distinct group that may be different but quite probable. The distinction between probable and improbable people will change as we meet and observe more people or as our years of observing people extends itself. We can only conclude then that "probable people doing improbable things or improbable people doing probable things" remains a convenient simplification to describe farce. But because of the changing nature of probability this generalization is not precise enough to become a useful definition.

"The progress . . . from farce toward comedy is marked by the degree of reality which the author has succeeded in giving to his characters."[13] McIntyre's continuum also lacks precision though the idea is useful. Another view states that comedy represents a way of looking at life while farce is not "concerned with truth of life or a view of life."[14] If we are to accept this distinction, we must tie it to the "degree of reality" approach for while the farce may not be following the most real and natural development of events it is still a way of looking at life. The look may be brief and somewhat "cockeyed" but this does not make it unreal. The look does not penetrate beneath the surface to examine the ramifications and motives involved. The look of farce is usually superficial.

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[13]Clara F. McIntyre, "The Word 'University' as applied to Drama", Publication of the Modern Language Association. (September, 1929), p. 928.

[14]Rowe, loc. cit.

Hewitt makes the distinction in minor human calamities:

> In comedy, these calamities arise mainly from the folly, stupidity or vice of human beings; in farce, they arise mainly from the ingenuity of the playwright. Consequently, we find the characters of farce further removed from real life than the characters of comedy.[15]

The outward intrusion of the playwright is also observed in Albright's definition which states that farce: ". . . stresses external incident and unusual situation at the expense of carefully drawn character."[16] The characters of farce tend to lack subtlety and believability as real people. They become instead broad types of character that usually depart from rational human behavior. More frequently they are not full-blown personalities that an audience can identify with readily. Where a character has been fully drawn, such as Sheridan Whiteside in The Man Who Came to Dinner, the playwright has drawn a caricature, in this case an exaggerated likeness to Alexander Wollcott. But the farce character is either an overdrawn caricature or a hastily drawn character--not so normal as you or I.

Brander Matthew's distinction may have been the best. In farce the incidents or situations control the characters whereas in comedy the characters control the incidents.[17] This practical and workable distinction has withstood the test of time. We find it mentioned frequently. Clayton Hamilton took a similar view in which he stressed the farce production as much as the play structure. He said: "A comedy is a humorous play in which the actors dominate the action; a farce

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[15]Hewitt, op. cit., p. 63.

[16]H. D. Albright, Working Up a Part (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), p. 135.

[17]Matthews, A Study of the Drama, p. 121.

. . . the action dominates the actors."[18] In either case the distinction rests with characters that manipulate for themselves or those that are manipulated by the situations or incidents in which they find themselves.

A third major difference between farce and comedy appears in the effect each genre has on an audience. Classical definition tells us little, if anything, about farce but it credits comedy with a didactic purpose. Comedy holds the faults and foibles of man before him in order for him to learn his folly and correct his ways. Many distinctions are made in the belief that comedy is more thoughtful than farce and that farce has nothing that makes inward appeal. Nicoll feels that it is: ". . . some inner quality--the stressing of the spiritual as opposed to the merely physical--that makes . . . comedy out of farce."[19] The two then differ in terms of intellectual comparisons and appeals. Farce is frank to admit this, allowing also that it makes no attempt at such inner appeal in the first place.

In his preface, John Dryden declared that comedy worked on judgment and fancy while farce worked on fancy alone. His scornful attack held that comedy:

> . . . causes laughter in those who can judge of men and manners, by the lively representation of their folly or corruption; the other [farce] produces the same effect in those who can judge of neither, and that only by its extravagance.[20]

This distinction suggests a point at which the two genres can be separated. If farce should attempt to explore

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[18] C. Hamilton, "Melodramas and farces", Forum 41 (January, 1909), p. 25.

[19] Nicoll, The Theory of Drama, p. 89.

[20] Dryden, loc. cit.

the reasoning and deeper motivations of its characters, as does comedy, the audience would be drawn more closely into sympathy or feel a stronger empathy with character. Such involvement would not permit us to laugh at the character as freely as we do in farce. We need to be kept at the surface of character if we are to laugh at him frequently. We need this detachment if we are to feel happily superior. Thompson agrees that farce does not depend for effect on illusion but that comedy does. The law of comedy is realism but in farce the spectator is under no illusion. This detachment is crucial to the movement or rhythm of farce. Krutch observes that: ". . . in high comedy we usually are laughing at ourselves; in farce, at somebody else."[21] In his view we laugh sympathetically at our own mistakes which is the intent of comedy. Swan expressed it well when he said: "Comedy produces pleasant and sympathetic mirth: farce evokes the boisterous guffaw."[22]

"Since farce is merely a more obvious way of inducing laughter than comedy it is only a grosser or broader variant of the comic spirit."[23] Though Gassner's statement is true, the clearest expression of this distinction comes from Highet:

> Comedy always wishes to evoke laughter, or at least a smile of pure enjoyment. Farce does not care what it does provided that everybody collapses into unreasoning merriment. Most of us ignore this side of art; some of us even ignore this side of life; but the fact remains. The ridiculous is built into human existence. Many of our essential activities, some of our deepest emotions and several aspects of our physical appearance, are ludicrous.[24]

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[21]Krutch, op. cit., p. 92.

[22]Taylor, op. cit., p. 538.

[23]John Gassner, Producing the Play (New York: Dryden Press, 1941), p. 50.

[24]Gilbert Highet, The Anatomy of Satire (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 154-55.

We might conclude this discussion with Nicoll's view that farce as distinguished from comedy seeks no literary graces and frankly exploits the realm of the impossible. It does this because it is first and foremost 'theatre' and because there is no other way to provoke continuous laughter. To expect more from farce is to ignore the principles of this art and impose on it a preconceived bias. To measure it by the yardstick of "thoughtful" drama is as meaningless as to ask comedy to meet the criteria of tragedy.

The hybrid: farce-comedy

Some critics have observed that we rarely find pure farce in the modern theatre. They have said that this is true of comedy as well. We frequently read that tragedy in the classical sense is impossible today. If pure forms of the drama do not exist today we might question again the value of classification and the precise definition of genre. Nevertheless, we must define the terms we use as accurately as possible in order to carry on meaningful discussion. The fact that we may define a farce as one thing does not nor should not imply that the playwright starts from that definition to write his play. The creative process usually begins from a different point and we then observe the finished product and identify it. We would hardly expect to find the pure form except in rare instances.

The mixing of genres has occurred and will continue to occur in the theatre. The degree to which this is desirable or undesirable will probably be argued endlessly. The purists will continue to object to the mingling of farce with comedy and the liberals will continue to ask for good drama by whatever mixture the playwright may choose. But there is a group always present that must classify the whole of drama and it is from this view that we get the hybrid called "farce-comedy."

Taylor claims that: "To solve the difficulty of clearly distinguishing farce from comedy certain critics have evolved a third species, a hybrid classification,--:farce-comedy."[25] The attitudes toward this classification are as varied as the ways in which it is described and defined. Professor Rowe accepts it when he agrees that: ". . . farce readily merges with other more complex and, in a sense, higher forms of drama."[26] And this appears to be the prevalent attitude today.

In 1929 Carpenter declared that the tendency to label plays "farce-comedy" was a poor one and that the two genre would mix no more than evening clothes and chewing gum. "Farce extracts from us one attitude; comedy another. When a play attempts to exact both, we are confused and annoyed."[27] This attitude reinforces an earlier observation by Brander Matthews in 1890:

> The bastard hybrid called "farce-comedy", prevalent of late in our theatres--a queer medley of various kinds of entertainment, musical, saltatorial, pantomimic, and even acrobatic--may be often clever but it is rarely either farce or comedy.[28]

Writing at about the same time, W. T. Price described this hybrid as an American product that emerged around 1870. He felt that it was significant that farce-comedy had no honest name. It consisted of a conglomeration:

> . . . of acted anecdotes, odd sayings, burlesqueries and grotesqueries, gathered from all quarters. Those that succeed best have a faint outline of a story. They harbor immature young women in short skirts,

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[25]Taylor, op. cit., p. 31.

[26]Rowe, op. cit., p. 138.

[27]Bruce Carpenter, The Way of the Drama (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1929), p. 116.

[28]Matthews, Studies of the Stage, p. 213.

> abound in song and dance, and could not exist without the special doings of quaint actors. The concoctions of Charles Hoyt have bits of genuine humor; and the class, trivial as it is, opposed to orderly art as it is, must be accepted as indicative of American genius.[29]

In his study of American comedy from 1900 to 1920, Dusenbury observed that the line between farce and comedy was almost negligible throughout the period. He reasoned that both forms gave emphasis to theatricality in acting, and in staging, and that the farces contained as much commentary on the questions of the day as the serious plays.[30]

Interestingly enough the confusion of labels for these plays continued for some time and produced such terms as "farce-comedy", "melo-farce", "mystery farce". In fact, from the period between 1913 and 1950 approximately one in four farces were called "farce-comedy". The term had become well established in the American theatre.

At least part of the basis for Dusenbury's observation seems to be faulty. His distinction between farce and comedy appears to exclude farce from any social commentary and allow comedy the exclusive rights to that function. This seems to be an oversimplified and an inaccurate comparison to make. We shall explore somewhat later the role of satire in farce but let it suffice here to say that farce is capable of satire, usually a very broad and obvious satire. It will not employ the subtle and more pointed satire that is the weapon of comedy. Instead the point may be so blatant and inflated, like a large bladder filled with air, that as the farce pounds away we are struck first with mirth and secondly with its social comment

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[29]W. T. Price, The Technique of the Drama (New York: Brentano's, 1892), p. 197.

[30]Dusenbury, op. cit., p. 75.

which is obvious. The pretensions of the nouveau riche social climber in Moliere's The Would Be Gentleman, the broad mockery of British class society in Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest and the obvious exposure of manufactured entertainment in the Spewacks' Boy Meets Girl are all examples of farces that primarily provoke laughter but also make their comment on society. To call a play, "farce-comedy" because it is farce with a social observation is to misunderstand the nature of farce. All drama makes its comment on life and mankind. The melodrama strums our emotions with thrills and expectations but it also paints a clear silhouette of good and evil in life. The farce must make us laugh while pointing a fat finger at our folly.

The definitions of "farce-comedy" agree to the mixing of farce and comedy but differ frequently with the blend. Some of these definitions are practically meaningless. One such comes from A Dictionary of American English and reads: "A light comedy approaching farce in improbability, absurdity, etc."[31] And another states: "An entertainment mixing the exaggeration of farce with the realism of comedy."[32] Both lack precision to the degree that their intent is ambiguous.

John Dietrich's widely used play direction text defines farce-comedy as: ". . . a low comedy style of writing or playing in which ludicrous situations and exaggerated characters provoke boisterous laughter."[33] The virtue of this statement is the awareness that farce is both "writing" and "playing".

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[31]William A. Craigie and James R. Hulbert (ed), A Dictionary of American English (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), Vol. II, p. 933.

[32]Walter Parker Bowman and Robert Hamilton Ball, Theatre Language (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), p. 131.

[33]John E. Dietrich, Play Direction (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1953), p. 459.

The doing of farce or the playing of the farce play is the fundamental requirement to which we will focus our attention in the next section of this chapter. The weakness in Dietrich's definition appears to be its similarity to pure farce. Ludicrous situation and exaggerated characters provoking boisterous laughter is a fair definition of farce, if not of "farce-comedy".

O'Hara and Bro become more specific when they identify farce-comedy as: ". . . a modern mingling of comedy characters in farce situations."[34] This blend of one part comedy to one part farce makes a strong argument for the hybrid term. This view disagrees with Dietrich's in terms of character. It calls for real and probable people of comedy instead of the exaggerated and improbable characters of farce. Professor Rowe affirms and elaborates this definition of farce-comedy:

> This is a play which plot-wise consists of farcical or ludicrous situations but founded on characterization and truth to life, and which in consequence, may engage the emotions to some degree as well as arouse laughter.[35]

Most modern writers admit that farce and comedy are often mixed but many refuse or are unable to classify the mixture as "farce-comedy". If the descriptions of O'Hara, Bro and Rowe are accurate, we can readily see that "farce-comedy" takes the strengths or primary elements of each genre, the situations of farce and the characters of comedy, and unites them in one play. By using the best of each genre the result should be an improved product. But this genetic theory may break down in this instance where the blend may actually destroy the individual strength of each genre. From the standpoint of comedy, we would think less and laugh more at "farce-comedy". From the view of farce, we would think more and laugh less. The term "farce-comedy" seems to be needless

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[34] O'Hara and Bro, op. cit., p. 194.

[35] Rowe, op. cit., p. 137.

and pointless. In the end we might agree with George Jean Nathan's somewhat facetious but astute observation that a farce-comedy was so named by its author when he realized that it wasn't quite funny enough to be called a farce but was too ridiculous to be classed as a comedy.

Production: the basic requirement for farce

If we have clarified the distinction between farce and comedy and successfully disallowed the hybrid term, "farce-comedy", one condition remains to be discussed before observing the primary elements. That condition may well be considered the basic requirement of farce: the doing or the playing. The farce production is its most significant and crucial necessity. Farce can only be experienced in performance.

In his brief but effective chapter on farce, Hatlen says: "The distinctive essence of farce can be realized only in performance by accomplished comedians before a live audience."[36] The fulfillment of farce can only be realized on stage where the actor and the director make their contribution to the playwright's script. Each has a significant role to play: the actor with his tricks and sense of timing; the director whose interpretation and deft hand gives it movement; and the playwright whose imaginative situations and complications give it form and substance. We cannot underestimate the contribution made to farce by talented directors and skilled actors.

The playwright of farce writes for the stage. He is frank to admit that his play contributes little to literature because his medium is exclusively the stage. He uses his most expedient and effective form of expression--the theatre. He would rather have us see his play than read it. Nardin has said: ". . . it is only in the theatre that the playwright

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[36]Theodore W. Hatlen, Orientation to the Theatre (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 128.

can really convince us that a play is actually a farce" and that: "Closet farce is unthinkable, for the nature of farce demands that no time be given for reflection."[37] To the latter point Hughes and Scouten add: ". . . in fact, closet farce is a contradiction in terms."[38]

The actor contributes heavily to farce as we have already stated. Many farces, especially the one-act farces written as after-pieces, were devised for particular actors to enable them to display their favorite comic skills. The actor-play put its greatest emphasis on the actor's own personality and usually disappeared with his death. But the bulk of farce which we are concerned with here has also depended on skillful acting. The playwright's original sketchy design may be developed and even enhanced by an imaginative comedian. Hatlen observes that: ". . . in characterization especially, farce depends upon the doing."[39] Such roles as Tony Lumpkin in She Stoops to Conquer, Lady Bracknell in The Importance of Being Earnest, and Sganarelle in The Doctor in Spite of Himself afford excellent opportunities for the actor to enhance and enrich the character.

George Lewis suggests in the playing of farce that the actor abandon himself to the situation and allow: ". . . the fun of it to do his work . . ." which is ". . . farce, not comedy."[40] In order for the actor to appropriately free himself, he must of course possess the natural instinct and keen awareness that comes with considerable experience. All farce seems easy and effortless in production and each of us at one time or another has felt as Carpenter that it is unfortunate

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[37]James T. Nardin, "Farce--The Theatre's Challenge", The Theatre Annual (New York: 1956), p. 37.

[38]Hughes and Scouten, loc. cit.

[39]Hatlen, op. cit., p. 136.

[40]George Henry Lewes, On Actors and the Art of Acting (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 68.

that amateurs choose so often to do plays like The Importance of Being Earnest. Without the imagination and precise skill of competent acting the best farce can prove to be a tiring evening in the theatre.

One of the keys to farce production is action and this characteristic alone accounts for its broad popular appeal. Hatlen insists that: "The language barriers are slight because the performer in farce often expresses himself in the universal vocabulary of gesture and action."[41] The action of the plot, together with the acting of the players makes farce visually interesting and exciting to an audience.

Stephenson suggests that the origin of farce initiated and demanded the element of action. "To get at the nature of farce, we go back to beginnings, in either time or structure . . . out-of-door performance calls for exaggerated tones, sweeping gestures, loud singing and furious dancing . . ."[42] That farce has retained this vigorous and robust kind of action to the present suggests that its purpose and method has always been understood by playwrights and actors, if not by critics and historians.

In modern times the advent of silent pictures proved to be an ideal medium for farce. Action was the basic requirement for the film farces created by Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and others. The mechanical ability of film enhanced the opportunity to accelerate human movement and thereby provoke laughter. The action of the slapstick humor and the chase became a trademark of the Keystone Cops, the Marx Brothers and many series of farce films. Regardless of time and form, action has remained at the heart of farce.

O'Hara and Bro insist that the interest in mere action

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[41]Hatlen, op. cit., p. 129.

[42]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 85.

always exceeds the interest in characters. If we subscribe to Heffner's dichotomy of action as "normal or anormal," the farce character deviates from the norm with ludicrous and ridiculous action that is anormal.

The interest in this action appears to be external rather than internal to Krutch. He says that: "We expect visually grotesque situations, and the victim stumbles over a chair instead of over an idea."[43] The chief concern is for outward action rather than inward. Emphasis in farce is on visual action which must be the surest road to laughter. The history of the drama, according to Baker, shows that the public throughout the ages, cultivated as well as uncultivated, has cared more for action first in plays. "Only rarely does even a group of people for a brief time care more for plays of characterization and dialogue than for plays of action."[44] The playwright of farce, aware of this fact, goes directly to his business of conceiving and compiling action for the popular stage.

The action of farce consists primarily of the broad and violent physical variety. Stage farce can hardly achieve the breadth of the farce film mentioned earlier but it proceeds with the same intent. Stephenson believes that the physical buffoonery which is usually accepted as a necessary part of farce is inessential. From his view, that farce is more method than genre, he says: "It helps to look upon violent action as the gesture that accompanies violent speech. Together they implement the item that withstands scrutiny in definitions of the farce; that is, brevity."[45] One cannot question his claim

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[43]Krutch, op. cit., p. 92.

[44]George Pierce Baker, Dramatic Technique (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1919), p. 20.

[45]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 89.

of brevity for the farce of all ages has reflected this. Rapid action with quick complication of situations has proven to be a successful formula for consistent laughter. But gross buffoonery has been a staple of many a long forgotten farce. This type of "fun for its own sake" which has its limits was typical of both French farce and the earliest American adaptations at the turn of the century.

The famous Russian director, Meyerhold, confirmed the fact that physical action and exaggerated character combined with plot situation can only add up to laughter. This emphasis on action and violence is natural for a genre that seeks an obvious appeal. Bentley insists that farce is notorious for its love of violent images for: ". . . without violence, there would be nothing in the world but goodness and literature is not mainly about goodness: it is mainly about badness."[46] At any rate, farce action is broad and vigorous or as Clapp described the "old-fashioned" farces: ". . . strong, sometimes vulgar, often noisy, usually vital fun."[47]

Another significant aspect of the farce production is its vigorous tempo and rapid movement. Both farce and comedy are rapid in movement when compared to tragedy or even to Shakespearean romantic comedy. Both depend on keen timing in production for their effectiveness. But the need is greater in farce for the performer's sense of timing, his skillful use of movement, gesture, and posture and his manner of playing and inventiveness in comedic creativity. He can frequently use his ingenuity in devising comic business. This also applies to the director or producer of farce, who, according to Hewitt:

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[46]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 221.

[47]Henry Austin Clapp, "William Warren, Comedian", The American Theatre As Seen By Its Critics, 1752-1934 Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown (ed) (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1934), p. 82.

". . . will need to use all the materials of production to create an effect of rapid tempo through sharp and marked changes in tempo, volume, and pitch in the acting."[48] Bentley maintains that:

> . . . directors of farce always call for tempo, tempo, tempo . . . it is a question of the speeding up of human behavior so that it becomes less than human.[49]

His view supports the Bergson theory of automation or mechanization of the living but Bentley insists that this rapidity is not a mere technical asset but a psychological necessity of: ". . . making actions seem abstract and automatic when in real life they would be concrete and subject to free will."[50]

To verify this we can examine Kernodle's statement that:

> Played fast enough, any emotional scene will produce laughter. . . . In many farce scenes the comedy is produced simply by playing the emotions for all that can be squeezed out of them, at such a fast speed that they explode into laughter.[51]

He believes that the key of comedy is set by the rhythmic pattern of performance. The speed, the energy, the staccato or legato quality and the subtle but powerful patterns of tension, suspense, repetition, contrast, sequence and interruption make up this pattern. The farce with its non-reflective purpose can only move rapidly or more rapidly.

While much of the gross buffoonery and nonsensical action of the past has literally gone by the boards, the movement and pantomime in farce remain broad and emphatic. Our sophisticated attitude in modern society forbids acceptance or encouragement of this gross physical action. As a result

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[48]Hewitt, op. cit., p. 64.

[49]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 247.

[50]Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", p. xx.

[51]Kernodle, op. cit., p. 720.

we see more spoofing of gross action in order to hide it or make it acceptable. This may not be completely accurate because today we have gone beyond the spoof into the realm of "spoofing the spoof." Almost daily examples of the spoof are available in the theatre, cinema and television. Rowe suggests that both pure farce and melodrama:

> . . . have been taken over from the stage by the motion pictures and television, in part because of the relation between a broad appeal of those forms and functioning of the motion pictures and television as mass media, and in part because of the scope that the screen offers to the basic material of farce and melodrama: vigorous external action.[52]

Today's motion picture and television industries are massive consumers of visual humor.

In production the devices of farce rely heavily on visual humor centering on physical activities. The visual appeals of both farce and melodrama are considerably greater than any other play type, including high comedy. It can be stated of farce alone that the weakness in the play itself has sometimes been overcome by the performer's farcical business. Some weak farces have enjoyed moderate success because of the visual humor contributed by the actor.

Part of Albright's definition states that effects in general are likely to be exaggerated. The physical activities of all the characters become visually exciting and vigorous. It is this observation that brings Sypher to call farce a: ". . . sort of mechanical comedy."[53]

French farce often demanded extravagant pantomime of some kind in spite of its realism. Maxwell tells us: ". . . such comic condiments as a fool's attire, a flowered face,

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[52]Rowe, op. cit., p. 138.

[53]Wylie Sypher, "The Meaning of Comedy", Comedy (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 209.

a buffoon's antics . . ."[54] can be found in the texts. The lazzo of the commedia player before this and the American actor that followed has been broad and physically vigorous. It is this quality in production that is so vital to the success of farce. The farce truly belongs on the stage where imaginative actors can make us laugh primarily through visual humor and action that is rapid and violent in nature.

Unlike any other genre, the farce can only realize total fulfillment in production. With this requirement fully stated, we can begin a detailed analysis of the content of the genre and observe the fundamental ingredients or elements that produce farce.

The primary elements: situation; plot

From the writings of the last two hundred and seventy-three years there appear very few detailed attempts to describe the anatomy of farce. Outside of the several studies mentioned in the introduction, the bulk of writing has either been a broad generalization of the nature of farce or a plea for or defense of farce. A vigorous introspection has been long overdue. This discussion of the primary elements of farce will concentrate on the most basic and fundamental characteristics of the genre as observed by its critics.

"In real life a man may get himself into an occasional comical situation. In farce he simply slides from one impossible situation to another."[55] This observation by O'Hara and Bro captures the most significant characteristic of farce: situation. Because of its basic function in farce we call it a primary element.

Situation is completely and unmistakably the playwright's invention--the generative force or contribution to the farce.

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[54]Ian C. M. Maxwell, French Farces and John Heywood (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946), p. 42.

[55]O'Hara and Bro, op. cit., p. 21.

This is also the distinct mark of farce which separates it from any of the major types of drama. Nicoll observes that:

> It is thus distinct from each /genre/ in this one quality of exaggerated situation, while all differ from it in an insistence upon something larger and broader than mere incident.[56]

Hughes, in his analysis of English farce, describes the farce generally as episodic in structure or: ". . . fitful, full of shifts and surprises."[57] This appears as true of Aristophanic and Old Comedy as of modern farce though the Greek poets must have been observing a somewhat prescribed form. Smith and Rhoads, in their book on farce-comedy, define pure farce as: ". . . a drama depending for amusement upon situation rather than upon character interest . . . upon absurd situations. . . ."[58] They then divide farce-comedy historically into two types: Aristophanic, which is loose and episodic in structure and; Plautian, of the "well-made play" structure but also involving absurd situations. Our point here is not to dispute the use of farce-comedy which we have already done but instead to focus on a particular use of the episodic in farce.

Both Millett and Bentley and Nicoll agree that the individual incidents and the plot are more important in farce than the characters or the implications of the action as a whole. The latter maintains that the dependence of character and dialogue upon situation is the main characteristic of farce. The point has already been made that the situation conceived by the playwright actually dictates or controls the characters. Such reliance on situation or the incidents of farce must validate its role as a primary element. Edith Hamilton states

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[56]Nicoll, The Theory of the Drama, p. 214.

[57]Hughes, A Century of English Farce, p. 21.

[58]Robert Metcalf Smith and Howard Garrett Rhoads, Types of Farce-Comedy (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1928), p. 3.

it simply in these terms:

> The fun of farce is neither of the mind nor of the heart; it is the fun of circumstance. . . . Farce is concerned only with what happens to people; it might be called the comedy of events.[59]

In recent years the farce has often been called the comedy of situation as confirmed by the following examples: the successive situations (plot and story) are of primary importance, Matthews; ". . . it remains a play of situation", Klein[60]; ". . . a play of ludicrous situations", Rowe[61]; and "Farce is usually the comedy of situation", Hatlen.[62] All of this suggests that the playwright exploits a situation or set of situations which are highly atypical.

These situations are unusual and startling and very often stress the external. Hewitt states that they are more unusual and startling than the situations of comedy. While calling the situations unusual and exaggerated, Albright emphasizes the stress on external incident instead of incidents brought about by the will and action of character. Professor Taylor agrees with this essentially because he ascribes to most of the views of Brander Matthews. He does, however, include a statement that is questionable on the surface and unclear in implication. It reads: "Laughable incidents which do not reveal character, incidents which do not further the development of the action are farcical, not comic."[63] This distinction may be accurate, but if it is, the compounding of incidents so that the action arrives at an unexpected conclusion--this rather exclusive talent of the farce writer--is misnamed. To carry it further we might generalize

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[59]Edith Hamilton, op. cit., p. 504.

[60]Ruth Klein, The Art and Technique of Play Directing (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1953), p. 61.

[61]Rowe, op. cit., p. 137.

[62]Hatlen, op. cit., p. 129.

[63]Taylor, op. cit., p. 29.

that the plot in farce is the plot of comedy and that only the side-tracks or diversions and the lazzo or stage business of the actor can be farcical. Such oversimplification is inaccurate. Farce instances and situations do further the action. The point at which the farce ends is usually more improbable than that of comedy but even more improbable is the particular sequence of situations and actions that brought us to that solution. Hurrell accurately sums up the action of any successful farce in one sentence: "A situation or a relationship gets out of hand and somehow, inefficiently perhaps but eventually successfully, it is put right."[64] It is true that in comedy the characters, the instruments of plot, would bring about a more natural sequence of situations approximating what we would do in reality. But the province of farce is circumstance and improbability and this can be as much a stimulus to plot as character.

The farce situations usually depend upon visual humor where man is shown as the victim of his biological nature, not only sex, but any drive, appetite or situation in which he loses his bearing or the control of himself and his circumstances. Our interest is on the surface of character and what he appears to be. It then seems natural that the body with its overt desires and functions would be a basic source for farce situations and business. These physical activities often involve a complicated series of misunderstandings.

The action that derives from situation usually involves a simple meaning, at least on the surface. This alone can be laughable but Koestler observes that in his discussion of the comic of situations, Bergson came nearest to the essence of the comic itself: "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events

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[64]Hurrell, op. cit., p. 428.

and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time."[65] The laughter at the appearance can be compounded by the laughter at what may be happening within the character. We laugh uproariously at Jack and Algy's confrontation in The Importance of Being Earnest but also in expectancy of how each will squirm out of his own dilemma.

Farce situation unmistakably bears the marks of improbability as verified and illustrated by the following writers and their individual choice of terms: exaggerated incidents and ridiculous events, Millett and Bentley; "highly improbable and atypical" situation, Hatlen; "gross exaggeration of incidents", Gassner; "most exaggerated and impossible" situation, Nicoll; patently absurd or the serious treated lightly, Nardin.

Agreement is strong with Matthew's view that the situation and the plot are the controlling factors in farce. Edith Hamilton simplified the idea observing that farce is concerned only with what happens to people. But Professor Nicoll laments what he calls an: ". . . undue insistence upon incident . . ." in farce which exists nonetheless. He would have farce, and melodrama as well, aspire to: ". . . a penetrating and illuminating power of characterization, or at least by an insistence upon something deeper and more profound than mere outward events."[66]

Without claiming profundity in any sense, Hurrell suggests that farce does make its comment on the human situation. He argues that tragedy deals with moral choices and comedy with the laws, written or unwritten, that govern man and his community:

> Farce ignores both the moral and the social laws, not because it denies their existence, but because it sees an alternative to this constant reference

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[65]Bergson, op. cit., p. 123.

[66]Nicoll, The Theory of the Drama, p. 88.

> to laws, moral or social, an alternative followed by the majority of mankind.[67]

The key to this view is ingenuity and the farce reflects a kind of assertion that man possesses the continual capacity for setting his house in order through the ingenious use of his capacity to make practical, rather than ethical decisions. It raises the question of how man can contrive escape or concealment, after being caught in a predicament, so that the world can continue smoothly and safely as it did before human weakness asserted itself. Hurrell would argue with the lamenters that:

> Farce recognizes that there are alternatives to the solutions provided by tragedy and comedy, and that it is these alternatives that shape the majority of our decisions.[68]

This attitude does not preclude the improbability of situations for we sometimes find ourselves in such unavoidable circumstances or improbable situations. Fortunately, we seldom find ourselves in such a complex set of improbabilities as the characters in a farce.

Much of farce is built on an absurd situation from which seemingly endless complications grow. It has been suggested that the audience suspends its normal and rational faculties and enjoys the many complications simply because they know that the result will not be disastrous. Eric Bentley offers a "safety valve" theory[69] of farce which supports this assertion. He feels that farce lets us enjoy unmentionable wishes and adventures without suffering. Our repressed desires can be vicariously fulfilled as we are permitted the outrage but spared the consequences. Our everyday frustrations are somewhat relieved, much like the "sudden relieving hiss of steam through

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[67] Hurrell, loc. cit.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", pp. xiii-xiv.

a safety valve," as we enjoy and laugh at the violence on stage without incurring the responsibilities or suffering the guilt. He further states that in the application of this formula which is called "bedroom farce":

> We savor the adventure of adultery, ingeniously exaggerated in the highest degree, and all without taking the responsibility or suffering the guilt. Our wives may be with us leading the laughter.[70]

We can and ought to laugh at man, the victim of his biological nature--his drives and his appetite.

Koestler believes that cuckoldry, the situation of a man whose wife is unfaithful, is no longer comic:

> The classic triangle has migrated from the vaudeville stage to the waiting room of the psychoanalyst . . . hence the modern comedy has increasingly to rely for its effects on a change from caricature to witticism, from the comic of situations to brilliant dialogue. . . . The general increase in education and sophistication furthers the tendency towards the dry, allusive wisecrack and the apparent nonsense joke.[71]

This may explain the lessening of interest in farce in this country. It would clearly explain the nearly complete absence of "bedroom farce" from our stage today.

In summarizing the primary element of situation in farce we can make several meaningful statements about its nature and its requirements:

1. Situation dominates farce. Like comedy in general, farce is dependent on complication though these situations and incidents play a primary role in farce and secondary role in comedy.

2. The sequence of compounding situations in farce is more improbable than any single situation alone. Andrews elaborates that: ". . . its situations must be always more

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[70]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 229.

[71]Koestler, op. cit., pp. 103-04.

and more excruciatingly funny up to a grand climax of mirth, and thence quickly to a still laughable solution."[72]

3. The situations in farce are improbable and exaggerated. They lack subtlety and usually depend upon the coarsest and rudest of improbable incongruities. The humor is often visual and comes from the physical characteristics of the situation itself.

4. The compounding of situations occurs as a result of practical decisions quickly made. The fact that they are often wrong decisions adds to the fun and makes no further comment on the human condition than that man can usually make the best of bad situations. Such decisions in comedy and tragedy are usually ethical or moral decisions respectively, according to Hurrell.

5. Coincidence is accepted in farce. It differs from the other genre in that its use is accepted and as Bentley put it: ". . . chance ceases to seem chance, and mischief has method in its madness."[73]

6. Inventing the farce plot requires great ingenuity and imagination in manipulation of situations and compounding the dilemma. In addition it calls for a shrewd sense of the theatre and an awareness of comic theory.

The playing or production of farce rests in the hands of actors and directors. Situation remains completely the responsibility of the playwright. Both are equally important to farce for without excellence in either the spirit of farce is dead. This seems to be a distinctive condition of farce alone among the dramatic genre.

If situation is the essence of farce then it must follow that the plot and its development would be all-important to the structure of the play. The two are interrelated in many ways

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[72]Charlton Andrews, The Technique of Play Writing (Springfield, Mass.: The Home Correspondence School, 1915), p. 187.

[73]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 245.

as the plot provides the skeletal outline of story onto which each situation is attached. The situation and the plot are interdependent on each other for a weakness in one reduces the effectiveness of the other. For this reason we propose that the second of the primary elements of farce is plot.

The plot of farce is highly developed and manipulated by the playwright to achieve its purpose of laughter. Clayton Hamilton has called farce the most irresponsible (no subservience to plausibility) of all the types of drama where the plot exists solely for its own sake. He further states that the playwright has only two requirements:

> First, he must be funny, and second, he must persuade his audience to accept his situations for the moment at least while they are being enacted.[74]

Both are formidable tasks. The first tends to defy prescription and evolves out of comic genius. The latter, while born of the same genius, must certainly develop from experience. Through the experience of trial and error he learns how much of coincidence an audience will accept.

The farce plot is usually fast-moving and more or less arbitrarily contrived or built of a series of contrivances. As we have already observed, the reason for the rapid plot is to prevent reflection on how or why a situation or event took place. Having contrived the sequence of events that involve the characters, the playwright does not want and, indeed, must prevent the audience from considering such motivation, at least beneath the surface. Inner motivation is not important and may be a hindrance to the observer.

Sypher speaks generally of comedy but primarily of farce when he says that in such a comic vehicle: ". . . fate takes the guise of happy or unhappy chance . . ."[75] which

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[74]Clayton Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 25-6.

[75]Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy". Comedy (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 209.

makes a neat arrangement of improbable possibilities. He calls the plot an 'artificial framework' which we assume must equate in meaning with 'contrived' plot. The distinction is one of plot evolved through the force of characters in the play as against the plot, 'artificial' and 'contrived', of the farce writer.

The plot of farce is much more complex than that of comedy and is usually filled with a greater variety of incidents. Throughout the literature on farce this characteristic appears repeatedly from Matthews to Hewitt, which gives us further reason for considering plot a primary element.

With such an emphasis it only stands to reason that character becomes subservient to plot and is relegated to secondary importance. Millett and Bentley support the Matthews' view that in farce the plot dominates character. Thompson, however, takes exception to this opinion and cites The Man Who Came to Dinner as an example. He argues that if Matthews means "controls" or "determines the nature or outcome of", then Sheridan Whiteside in that play refutes the idea because he is the source of what plot there is.[76] While this is true, in part, one has to look carefully at the situation. The basic premise or original situation is not controlled, nor determined by Whiteside. The broken leg that put him in a wheel chair at the Stanley home in Mesalia, Ohio, is a contrived situation imposed by the playwright or "fate in the guise of unhappy chance." Much of what he does thereafter is partially or totally dependent on this situation over which he presumably has little control. What he does is less like a famous drama critic and lecturer and more like the caricature of the same--highly improbable. To relegate the Stanleys to the upstairs and only the use of the back entrance, intimidating and ordering all the occupants of the house about, addressing Mahatma Ghandi as Boo Boo and the editor of Atlantic

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[76]Thompson, op. cit., p. 260.

Monthly as Stinkie, inviting the prisoners from the Crockfield Home for Paroled Convicts to visit, bringing a lawsuit against the Stanleys are only the initial set of improbabilities in this play. The character of Whiteside is ingenious but the clever manipulation by Hart and Kaufman is even more ingenious. Whiteside is hardly making ethical decisions but is most certainly making practical ones, at least from his point of view. The true farce lies in this complex set of improbabilities as it does in the original situation. In this sense the plot seems to dominate character, even that of Sherican Whiteside.

Taylor also supports the view that plot dominates character and applies the test to the "comic" film where the important element is: ". . . not the living persons but the inanimate objects,--the custard pies, the wobbly auto, the revolving doors, the sheeted ghost."[77] He insists that one leaves remembering only that a pie was thrown and forgetting who threw it or why it was thrown. What happened is more significant than the persons involved and their motivation.

The script of farce is sometimes regarded as the scenario for action. Such a statement implies a lack of vital and comic dialogue which is inaccurate. The fact does remain that dialogue, to be discussed later, is a secondary element while the plot is basic.

The motivation behind plot structure is difficult to identify. Perhaps it is the challenge of comic invention that drives a playwright to write farce. Avery Hopwood once wrote that it was easy to make people cry but difficult to make them laugh:

> I do not write more serious plays, for one thing, because it is too easy. . . . It is more of an adventure to set before the popular taste a play in the comedy vein. And since the audience has to be more responsive, mentally, would it be conceited

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[77]Taylor, loc. cit.

> of me to suggest, that the playwright has to be more active, intellectually, when he contrives a comedy, than when he labors in the less arduous field of the "serious drama."[78]

Or perhaps it is a more elusive spirit expressed by Bentley: "The passion that spins the farcical plot is that younger brother of wickedness, the spirit of mischief."[79]

The main interest in what happens or in the action of farce depends completely on the ingenuity of the writer in inventing complications, turns and counterturns. Downer calls it: ". . . a kind of structural prestidigitation." There appears to be no formula or pattern for farce in the texts on playwriting and it may be considered rightly a mental slight of hand. Andrews states merely that the humor must arise chiefly from the complications of plot and warns that disaster is imminent whenever the fun lags. Even more slight is Grebanier's contribution that the plot is loosely put together: ". . . to keep things moving, as diverting or thrilling situation follows diverting or thrilling situation."[80] The prevailing characteristic has long been the extravagant development of plot and buffoonery according to Nicoll and others but how this is done remains somewhat obscured.

Professor Hatlen contributes a meaningful analogy of the farce plot with an aircraft:

> The structure of farce is a framework for vigorous, rapid, and exaggerated action in which the characters move, rather than think, and where evoking laughter justifies nearly any means. Once the engine has been cranked up and set in motion, the speed is accelerated, and by unexpected blowouts, backfirings and explosions, the mechanism careens crazily through space, gathering

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[78]Avery Hopwood, "Why I don't Write More Serious Plays", Theatre Magazine (April, 1924), p. 10.

[79]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 248.

[80]Bernard Grebanier, Playwriting (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961), p. 291.

> momentum until it finally lurches to an awkward but happy landing in a cloud of steam with all of the parts still spinning; and while there has been a whirlwind of activity, the machine has not really moved an inch in any direction.[81]

As a result of this piling up of events it is not the least surprising that the story cannot be taken seriously. Anyone who has seen a farce can tell you that whether it was Plautus' Menaechmi, Moliere's The Doctor in Spite of Himself or Kaufman and Hart's You Can't Take it With You. The playwright frequently has no message as such but instead wishes only to make a comment or brief observation, for his aim is chiefly to divert audience attention and entertainment. Most frequently the logical development of plot is obscured or subordinated to the ludicrous situations that keep reappearing. In terms of depth, the farce confines itself to the superficialities of life as it cannot dig deeper into human conduct and still maintain its purpose. The Nardin study stated this as an essential part of pure farce:

> The plot may be of various kinds so long as it is established that the central situation is not in any way related to the world of serious values or emotions; in other words, the author must establish for his story an irrational, amoral world, where nothing causes pain and where love does not have significance.[82]

In order to remain at this level, the farce plot must move rapidly and thereby prevent reflection on what has happened. The minute that the plot slows down we sink beneath this superficial level much as the water skiier whose tow boat reduces its speed.

Another characteristic of the farce plot then is speed. Many farces are one long pretext for flight and pursuit such

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[81]Hatlen, loc. cit.

[82]James T. Nardin, "A Study in Popular American Farce, 1865-1914", (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Chicago, 1950), p. 13.

as The Italian Straw Hat, Charley's Aunt and Getting Gertie's Garter and their plots, according to Bentley,[83] have much in common with "the chase", which was the mark of the Keystone Cops.

In a structural analysis of modern farce, Albert Nadeau illustrated this well when he charted the plot lines and major crisis or climax of five farces and three serious plays. His conclusions follow: "In farce sensational elements serve to set the chain of incidents underway posthaste," or: ". . . we have a certain and immediate initiation of plot." Various and complex plot meshing provide for scattered plot crises throughout the play from start to finish. There is also a "very late crisis in the dominant plot" with relatively short falling action. He concluded that:

> If, in pure farce, there is no audience attachment to the character, it seems only logical that a farce should end abruptly after the crisis, since the plot is finished at that point for all practical purposes.[84]

All of the farces under study reached their dominant crisis no more than six pages from the end. Of the serious plays A Doll's House reached this point with seven pages remaining, The Cherry Orchard with fourteen and The Weavers with twenty-six pages left to play.

Lea claims that farce plotting generally breaks down at the denouement where the knots are "cut and not untied." The claim appears to be as true of the majority of modern farces as with the improvised commedia dell'arte which she calls farce.[85]

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[83]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 248.

[84]Albert H. Nadeau, "A Structural Analysis of Five Modern Farces According to the Principles of Kenneth Thorpe Rowe", (unpublished Master's thesis, Catholic University, 1950), pp. 46-52.

[85]Lea, op. cit., p. 196.

Instead of cleverly and swiftly untangling the web that he has spun, the less imaginative playwright resorts to something external to solve his dilemma, a type of "deus ex machina." A magician arrives with magic water that revives the dead, cures the lunatic or acts as a love potion. It may well be, at this point of resolution, that we can distinguish good farce from poor.

As early as the seventeenth century, Tate acknowledged that: "Farce may admit of most admirable Plot, as well as subsist sometimes without it." We read that much of the early American farce was extremely slight in plot, the plays of Charles Hoyt and George Ade for example. At about the same time the nineteenth century masters of the French farce were using incredibly complex and elaborate plots. Bentley described them as: ". . . the kind of farce which is said to be 'all plot' is often much more than ingenious, it is maniacal."[86]

The solution of the farce story represents a crucial problem for the playwright but some feel that an even more critical problem is the original premise. We have said earlier that this original situation must be acceptable to an audience. It must be improbable but not impossible. It must give promise of mirth and create enough anticipation in the audience to insure its acceptance. It must allow for sufficient complications to sustain the fun and provide for comic surprises. MacMillan believes that: ". . . its excellence is to be sought in the originality of the conception and in the skill displayed in the execution of the joke."[87] Most of the farces that fail on the stage, warns Haberman, fail because they lack a good farce premise.[88] A special blend of probability--improbability,

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[86]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 247.

[87]Dougald MacMillan, "Farce", Dictionary of World Literature. ed. Joseph T. Shipley, (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 235.

[88]LeRoy Day Haberman, "American Farce on Broadway, 1914 to 1950", (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Speech-Theatre, Stanford University, 1959), p. 17.

of reality and unreality, of characters probable and improbable is required to open a farce--enough magic to lift us out of the world of reality and place us happily in the irrational and amoral world of farce. We have made this transposition readily because we came to the theatre primarily to be diverted and entertained. We might also have come for an escape from the shocking realization of daily life. And though we came for fun, we may find some implicit criticisms of society and its mores. The comment may be too broad to resemble the satire of comedy but it may provide a message of momentary cheer. The use of satire will be treated later but let us coc-clude here that satire in farce appears as a by-product and not the essential reason for its existence.

In summary we can observe that the plot of farce is closely interrelated with situation. Together they become the two primary elements that distinguish farce from the other comic genre. The basic characteristics of farce plot can be summarized in the following statements:

1. The farce plot provides a framework for situations that are laughable. Its ingenuity often lies in the complex compounding of improbabilities though it can succeed on a slight and simple structure equally well.

2. The plot of farce dominates character as it carries both its characters and the audience out of the world of reality and serious emotions and values into an irrational and amoral world of fun.

3. Both the original premise or situation and the climax of the play are crucial points in its structure demanding deftness and considerable imagination from the playwright.

4. The farce plot must move rapidly to prevent reflection by character and sudience on the things that have transpired. This calls for a continually accelerating series of situations that gradually build to a climax.

5. The climax of a farce plot occurs very late in the play because there is no real need for falling action. It is

closely analogous to the joke; nothing is necessary after the "punch line."

6. The farce plot is capable of satire though its use is of secondary importance. Its primary function is entertainment.

We can return to an earlier statement by Bentley that plotting a whole evening of merriment is no easy task and follows no prescribed pattern. It requires an understanding of these characteristics but even more the talent to make a joke theatrical.

The secondary elements: character; dialogue

The elements of character and dialogue are considered secondary because they are dependent upon situation. They are, of course, vital ingredients of any type of drama and essentially so of farce. But so much of the shaping and limitations of both character and dialogue is determined by the primary elements in farce that they stand subordinate.

From the body of literature on farce there appears more disagreement in the area of the secondary elements than anywhere else. This may stand to reason as the shadings are less distinct than the more obvious elements of situation and plot. We see, as an example, that the characters are real persons or mere types and that they are stupid and foolish or ingenious. These disputes carry over into dialogue as well as other elements of farce. For the most part they depend upon (1) the writer's purpose, whether he be analyzing, defending or persuading, (2) the writer's point of view or his side in the dispute, or (3) the writer's set of illustrations, the plays he cites as examples. The latter condition can be manipulated to form logical support for almost any opinion. It is probably as true of all play types as of farce that the elements and characteristics change from author to author as well as from play to play by a single author. As a result it becomes as

difficult to describe accurately the characteristics of a genre as it is to define the genre. Lawrence observed that:

> It is impossible to frame a definition of any particular dramatic genre which would be thoroughly descriptive of the salient qualities of every example of that genre.[89]

This does not prevent us from examining the views and arguments advanced and from making meaningful observations from a detached and objective view, which is our goal.

"Farce is the ideal way of merely stating character."[90] This statement appears, on the surface, to be suspect as over-simplification. In reality it attempts to place character in accurate perspective with the other elements and also to describe the average farce character. As we look at the great range of characters found in much of farce, Stephenson's statement stands as a succinct appraisal. It makes even more sense when we realize the function of plot in the farce. From the first situation on, the plot becomes the thin ice over which the numerous complications and coincidences slide on their way to the climax. Time alone in the theatre will not permit the detailed development of character unless it happens to be a major character around which the plot turns. Even then, by the nature of the speed of plot, we cannot penetrate beneath the surface motivations of the character. As a result we must accept the sudden recognition of this person as a general type, familiar to us and probably known quite well in our world of acquaintances. It should then be obvious that time will not permit more than the instant recognition of character--the mere stating of character in farce.

Instantly recognized characters need not become mere objects. Drama critic W. P. Eaton observed in 1910 that"

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[89]Lawrence, loc. cit.

[90]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 91.

> A farce will be successful, then, quite as much according as its characters are human and interesting as its action is rapid and surprising. A farce without character is seldom enduring.[91]

Eaton failed to support this statement but used it instead as one of his arguments against London Times critic Walkley, who claimed the farce was gone, or rapidly going, because it outraged the modern sense of the realities of life. Eaton's view then is that they must be real life and blood persons with many, if not more, of the same problems that face ordinary people in life. They cannot survive as mere cardboard figures or chessmen in the story of farce.

It is this less-than-well-developed character, this stated character, of farce that leads most writers to charge that farce is inferior to comedy. McIntyre speaks for many in observing farce as inferior because character interest is reduced to a minimum. This seems to be the very heart of the argument or prejudice against farce. We will return to this problem later but let it stand at this point as a truism. In terms of character interest and development by the criteria (literary merit) most frequently applied, the farce is inferior to all other genres. It has little interest in strengthening character development. As a result we find farce characters are usually not well developed characterizations but instead are character types that can be manipulated as the writer wills.

O'Hara and Bro have stated the reason for this as well as anyone. They insist that we, the audience, are interested only in what the characters do in the developing situations. They further state that the people are not really characters but types and that we know the type so well that the author need not individualize them for us. Matthews put it somewhat differently when he said that they existed solely for the sake of the story. From this view, the story is not created by characters

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[91]Walter Prichard Eaton, "The Return of Farce:, American Magazine (December, 1910), p. 267.

moved by their own volition as in tragedy and comedy. The characters are only what the plot allows them or forces them to be. They are dominated almost completely by plot.

It is understandable then that the characters of farce are generally simple and less real than human beings. They are of a simplicity, says Rowe, that leads very naturally to farcical action and buffoonery and even their physical appearance is laughable. They get absorbed in themselves and are sublimely unaware of their own deficiencies. They are very likely to be conceited and as the butt of jokes they are not embarrassed. We laugh freely at them without any malice or contempt and we often cherish them for the fun they afford us. They are sufficiently "whacky" to come off as caricatures instead of characters. Bentley claimed that the farce writer required the: ". . . gift of some lunatics (such as paranoiacs) to build a large, intricate, and self-consistent structure of improbabilities." He described the characters as:

> . . . monuments to stupidity, disturbing yet, surely, deliberate reminders that God lavished stupidity on the human race with a recklessly prodigal hand. They put us in mind of our own stupidities. They even teach us (if we are not too stupid) what stupidity is . . . farce characters pass beyond stupidity into craziness.[92]

While Bentley gets carried away with his description and overstates, for example, the nature of the average farce character he strongly affirms the realm in which this character operates. The farce character is not maneuvering in a world of thoughtful decisions but rather in a world of action. We are not observing him thinking as we do but instead acting as he must, and this may be similar to some of our own foolish actions. It must be this attitude that brings Hurrell to declare that: "The common denominator of farce characters is ingenuity. . . ."[93] The farce characters, and this could only be a small portion of them, are resourceful and inventive in making

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[92]Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", p. xix.

[93]Hurrell, loc. cit.

practical decisions but these decisions usually produce only immediate and not long-term results. They solve the current problem often with no thought for the long-range effect. In this sense the farce characters become caricatures but they come suspiciously close to real human nature. The distinction may be luck or chance that separates our own actions (decisions and results) from those of the characters in farce. We may just be luckier, or unlucky from another view, than the farce characters. The hand of Providence may be kind to us where the playwright's hand can be ruthless and cunning.

We have mentioned earlier the view of Professor Heffner that comic characters are either normal or anormal and that they become ludicrous as they depart from the norm. His two broad categories in comedy are to excite laughter at ourselves or to ridicule as we laugh at others. Within this framework the laughter at farce characters (and Heffner doesn't recognize farce as a separate genre but rather a type of comedy) would occur primarily in ridicule as they deviate considerably from the norm. This distinction draws a fine line between that which results in laughter though ridicule is present and that which stresses ridicule but has laughter. When you add to this view that in the former, we are essentially laughing at ourselves and in the latter, at others, he has almost disallowed the distinction to be made. The two become so entwined that such tints or shadings of identity are impossible to make as they rely on individual attitudes within the audience. Can we not within the same moment at the theatre each be laughing with a different reason?

Another contribution of the farce characters is that of subject. Dickinson declared that: "The subjects /of farce/ are derived from the stupidities, crafts, and petty villainies of character."[94] There is at least an implication

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[94]Thomas H. Dickinson, An Outline of Contemporary Drama (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1927), p. 20.

in this statement that the kinds of people or characters of farce are low or considered "low life." We will also find this distinction drawn by others later in this discussion. Hughes readily admits that there have been frequent attempts to tie up farce characters and "low life" but he argues that this principle has never been well established. "There are numerous characters from the lower classes in plays not labeled as farces and not a few members of the gentry, particularly of the rural gentry, in farces."[95]

The characters of farce are less real and more conventionalized than those of comedy and are not carefully drawn. As a general rule, this observation by Hewitt and others is true and we find numerous illustrations of it in Jonson, Wilde and Goldsmith. But modern American farce began to depart somewhat from this, particularly in the works of Kaufman and his collaborators. Sheridan Whiteside, Dulcines, and Laura Partridge are only three examples of well-drawn central characters around which these plays are built. Each is an easily recognized type, however, and they are loveable in their way but somewhat lacking in common sense. Kaufman's characters on the whole are types and his successful business man, the beautiful, brainless girl, the rich and socially prominent young man, the unusual servant are all excellent foils for the laughably silly central figure. There appears to be a slight trend among the farces of the forties and fifties to paint the central character more carefully and more vividly: take Elwood P. Dowd in Harvey and Abby and Martha Brewster in Arsenic and Old Lace, for example. Generally speaking though, the vast majority of farce characters are types, less real and more conventionalized than the people of comedy.

Millett and Bentley feel that there is very little character at all and that the people are caricatures, kept

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[95]Hughes, op. cit., p. 11.

simple so they won't interfere with the improbabilities of the plot.[96] This is a valid reason in farce where the attention is focused primarily on what is happening. Sypher and Krutch call them puppets that are moved from the outside as the events or circumstances require, but this is borrowed from Matthews who proposed the following test:

> . . . if the characters fade into nothingness, when we seek to separate them from the events in which they took part, and if their movements have been so illogical and so completely controlled by another will than their own, that we are ever left in wonder as to what they will do next, then the play in which they are puppets is farce or melodrama.[97]

As a generalization this rule-of-thumb has justly stood the test of time. At best it is helpful in making quick distinctions in genre. But at the same time, it appears to have weaknesses when observed more closely. It seems to make more of a distinction among play types than among characters and this may have been Matthew's intent. We would expect nothing of character in farce if the events or situations were removed because without the events we would have no farce. This "comedy of events" is dominated by situation and plot and the interest must be sustained on what happens to the people or characters. Character, as has been stated, is a secondary element but not a needless element. This test seems no more accurate than a comparable condition applied to comedy: if the events or situations fade into nothing when separated from the characters . . . then comedy. Both situation and characters are indispensable to comedy and to farce. Each pursues its own purpose with a different blend of these elements but neither comedy nor farce can function without characters and

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[96]Milley and Bentley, op. cit., p. 122.

[97]Matthews, A Study of the Drama, pp. 121-22.

situations. Matthew's test seems more useful in determining genre than in illuminating and distinguishing the characters of farce.

Since character is subordinate to both situation and the purpose of laughter, the farce characters must be typed rather than individualized and developed to leave room for plot manipulation that achieves its laughable purpose. Throughout theatre literature the type character of farce has been described and identified in different ways.

Krutch called them puppets but elaborated further that: ". . . the chief personages in farce usually are--or are put in a situation where they seem to be--clowns. And a clown is a butt, or victim."[98] His behavior would very frequently be exaggerated and highly physical. The farcical characters of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew and The Merry Wives of Windsor are typical of this and are nearly always of the rough-and-tumble type. These characters, according to Nicoll, are deliberately sacrificed to situation.

Haberman has called them stereotypes, who are not people as much as they are personifications of human traits. Heffner, Selden and Sellman describe them as a static type peculiar to comedy that do not develop and change with the action. Hatlen confirms this view that they are usually simple stock characters, often from ordinary life. They also tend to lack subtlety and plausibility, according to Albright, though there are examples to the contrary. Pinero may have been the best exception as he strove to make even his farce characters and circumstances plausible. He believed that life was an organic whole whose parts were dependent upon and strictly related to one another.

Speaking primarily of early American farce, Nardin saw

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[98]Krutch, loc. cit.

farce characters devoid of common sense and veering toward the insane, without causing dismay in the audience over their apparent lack of reason. This meant the playwright:

> . . . may either rely on stylized caricatures or may sketch them roughly to show that they are light-hearted people, incapable of rational behavior or of deep emotion, and unconcerned over, and even unaware of that deficiency.[99]

In a word, the characters are not sensible.

Eric Bentley has shown the relationship of farce characters to human beings in this manner:

> The farceur does not show a man as a little lower than the angels but as hardly higher than the apes. . . . If farce shows man to be deficient in intellect, it does not show him deficient in strength or reluctant to use it. Man, says farce, may or may not be one of the more intelligent animals, he is certainly an animal, and not one of the least violent either.[100]

Through most of these descriptions we can draw the widely accepted generalization that the people of farce have exaggerated character traits. One could hardly argue with Millett, Bentley, Gassner and others on that point. But there is an exception to be taken when this simplified generalization is critically observed. This is the first: because of the nature of farce plotting and its rapid pace we cannot observe, nor do we want to, the complete picture of character. We must observe only those traits of character that will be affected in the story. The left-over traits may be interesting for a discussion of the character, but are useless in this particular sequence of events, the play. As a result we get, in the farce character, only part of his personality exposed in the play, very often the more obvious or obnoxious characteristics at

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[99]Nardin, loc. cit.

[100]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 250.

that. Secondly, we are observing this character as he makes numerous decisions throughout the play. The fact that most of his decisions are wrongly made may be an exaggeration from reality but a necessity to plot. The right decisions would fail to provoke laughter and so we get an exaggeration not so much of character traits as poor choices, bad luck or wrong decisions. So while we see this character type, not fully drawn but lightly sketched, making one mistake after another, we might well conclude that we were watching grossly exaggerated character traits.

Farce characters have been categorized by Hatlen into two main types: the crafty manipulators who keep the action moving, and the awkward, unlearned or unsuspecting characters who are the targets of laughter. The manipulators are made up of tricky servants or parasites who live by their wits while rustics, foreigners, foolish old men, hypocrites and poseurs of all kinds constitute the latter group. Bentley identifies these two groups as "the knaves and the fools" allowing that while the fools are more numerous, the knaves are more influential. He further equates the knave in farce to the villain in melodrama. These two broad character types have not come about arbitrarily but evolved through theatre history as we will see somewhat later. The distinction is useful in generalizing the nature of farce types.

The names given these farce characters have often been laughable or at least indicated the nonsense of the play itself. Names like Benjamin Blowhard, Sir Fitful Gust, Adolphys Fitztopper, and Tompkins Tipthorpe sound funny if nothing else. In some instances the names were actually puns, such as Phil Graves, Rashleigh Gay, Welland Strong, I. McCorker, Vesta Bule and Nora Marks.

In summary, the characters of farce have been the most violently active human beings that were ever imagined. For the most part they have moved in a vigorous and active physical

world. And they in their plight have provoked our loudest subconscious reaction--laughter.

The characters of farce have remained essentially as they have always been. While Haberman and others feel that the characters are unchanged, from the earliest days, O'Hara and Bro suggest that the tendency today is to demand more character motivation even in farce. They feel that present audiences demand more plausibility of character than did the audiences of the past. Part of this is the result of greater sophistication and the inquiring spirit of our nuclear age. As a result we see among writers like O'Hara, Bro and Rowe the strongest support for "farce comedy." According to their view this greater character motivation and development brings farce into closer relationship with comedy which accents character, and so they settle for the middle point. As stated earlier this writer feels both the position and the term "farce-comedy" are needless and pointless. To stake a middle ground is suffocating to both farce and comedy as it permits them to exist only in their pure form. Any mixture of farce into comedy or vice versa would have to become "farce comedy" and this would represent the bulk of all comic drama. Better we should label a play comedy or farce because it possesses a preponderance of the primary elements and characteristics of one genre. A farce with stronger character motivation can still remain a farce even though its author paints character more deliberately than others have. The same could be said of all the elements such as dialogue or the use of satire. If we must have something called "farce comedy", let it be that precise mid-point where the elements are equal, where character and situation play comparable roles, where all other characteristics are equally those of farce and of comedy. And let the defenders of such a genre tell us when we have such a blend.

While characters may not be changing radically there may well be a character dimension, in terms of motivation, added

to modern farce as expressed in Hewitt's description of Thornton Wilder's farce, The Matchmaker. The characters are not in revolt against our culture and our values but are in conflict with the drive toward self-preservation, security and peace and against the ideas and attitudes which discourage marriage:

> Wilder has used the form and method of farce to celebrate . . . the radical, the pioneering, the exploring, the creative spirit in man. . . . The Matchmaker is gay; it is exhilarating. It is not a tranquilizer but a tonic.[101]

The characters in this farce are often sensible and at times exercise their own free will. Even wealthy old Horace Vandergelder chooses to be "taken" in marriage in order to find some adventure in life. Yet in the final analysis these characters are dominated by restrictive situations that control their lives. The play has extraordinary action, a kind of light-hearted rebellion, and high spirits. It is a farce.

As we look back over the history of farce we find that the stock, type characters have changed very little. From the earliest rustic farces of Megara, Atella, and the phlyax, theatre scholars and historians have generally supported the view that there were four type characters. Bentley identifies three of these as different kinds of fools: The Blockhead, The Braggart, and the Silly Old Man. The fourth type was the Trickster, or the knave.[102] Freedley and Reeves identify a fifth type of character called "Cicirrus" which was possibly a bird or animal-like mime. The evidence to support this comes chiefly from vase paintings which show the masks that were worn by these actors. The four human-like characters were called "Bucco," the fool, "Dossenius" or "Mandacus." a witty hunchback

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[101]Hewitt, "Thornton Wilder Says "Yes"", pp. 113-14.

[102]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 249.

with a large wart on his beak-like nose, "Maccus," a stupid, gluttonous, awkward fool, and "Pappus," the good natured but gullible old man.[103]

Down through the years fools of one sort or another have abounded in farce. The dunce or lack-wit has been a characteristic figure as have the shrewish wife and the hen-pecked husband. In describing the characters of French farce Maxwell identifies them as common folk such as small tradesmen, farmers, servants, ministers and parasites. He gives an intimate picture of their common life.

> These people wash up as well as dine, tend babies as well as beget them, scald the milk and fire the oven, weave baskets, buy caldrons, cheapen cloth, know the village beasts by name. They are keenly aware of the difficulty of making both ends meet, and live in a world of domestic tasks and trials.[104]

Eventually in Italian farce the interest in intrigue subordinates character, and according to Lea the servants were the agents of this intrigue.[105]

From its beginnings in the Megarean farces through the

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[103]George Freedley and John A. Reeves, A History of the Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1941), pp. 33-34. This source is one of several significant theatre histories that treat the Atellan farce and its masks with somewhat varied interpretations. The others include: William Beare, The Roman Stage, 2d. ed. (London, 1955); Margarete Bieber, The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre, 2d. ed. (Princeton, 1961); George E. Duckworth, The Nature of Roman Comedy, (Princeton, 1952); and Allardyce Nicoll, Masks Mimes and Miracles:Studies in the Popular Theatre (New York, 1963). In a recent provocative article Professor Trapido, of the University of Hawaii, re-examines the historical evidence, contrasts the interpretations and concludes with this cautious overview: "The wonder may be, not that we can prove so little about the Atellans but that we have enough evidence to guess at so much." Joel Trapido, "The Atellan Plays", Educational Theatre Journal, XVIII (December, 1966), pp. 381-90.

[104]Maxwell, op. cit., p. 36.

[105]Lea, op. cit., p. 174.

medieval French farce of the mid-fifteenth century and into the great periods of French, Italian and English farce between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, the characters of farce are common people immersed in the activities of everyday existence. They are rustics and as such appealed to the popular audience of rustics. Though we see Moliere and others raising the general level of farce characters to those of the court, the farce has remained the drama of ordinary people.

The braggart soldier of Roman comedy and farce and of the commedia dell'arte remains a stock farce character in modern times. He may be Ensign Pulver in the U.S. Navy but his ancient ancestor is the Roman soldier. He thinks the same thoughts, makes the same mistakes and the same ludicrous decisions and may even suffer the same punishment as the braggart soldier. He is basically the same character as his two thousand year predecessor. The deceived husband, the know-it-all, the country clod, the scheming parasite, the fun-loving student and the choleric parent of Greek and Italian farce have become racetrack touts, pompous employers, cowhands, blustering politicians and college freshmen in the farce of today.

The stock characters from previous generations have been borrowed by farce writers of every country, say O'Hara and Bro.[106] To these have been added the heroes of the native folklore of other countries such as the Robin Hood plays in England and the "little man" character in America. The "little Man" has become a stock character in this country as we see the verse writer of Three Men on a Horse, the young husband of Hopwood's Fair and Warmer, or Dagwood Bumstead of the comic strips.

To succinctly summarize the nature of farce characters

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[106] O'Hara and Bro, op. cit., p. 157.

is almost impossible because of their diversity. As we have observed they vary from mere silhouettes to rather detailed personalities. The average farce character does tend to represent a type of person, not fully developed on stage, but instantly recognizable to the audience. As such he remains primarily in that vast majority of recognizable common folk. He is one of that group that we know so well, the "average guy." To use the less common individual would require time in the play to develop his personality, a luxury withheld from the writer of farce.

It is precisely at this point that the farceur meets a paradox unresolved to the present. The low state of farce among the dramatic genres is attributable to the playwright's unwillingness or inability to develop detailed characters. Farce has always been condemned because its characters were common or low life people and it sacrificed character to situation. McIntyre states well the standard by which all of literature including drama has been judged. "After all, has any representation of life which has not given us at least one memorable character been ranked permanently with great literature"?[107] The answer is probably no but it may succeed as great theatre. Why must the drama fulfill the standards of literary excellence? Does great literature necessarily make great theatre? If not, why must theatre make great literature? It seems more reasonable that all drama should be measured by its fulfillment of theatrical standards of excellence. Literature and drama are two art forms and neither should be judged solely by the standards of the other, no more than we would expect ballet to measure up to the standards of opera. The paradox for the farce writer seems to be this: if he stays on the surface of character, thereby slighting its development, in order to see situations develop and surprises unfold, he has

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[107] McIntyre, op. cit., p. 928.

achieved his purpose of laughter; if he develops character more fully and goes beneath the situational surface, he has broken the thread of laughter and failed at farce. Except for the tragedies of Seneca and the works of later enthusiasts of "closet drama," all drama should be evaluated, not by literary standards but by dramatic standards. Thompson's test of a good play may not be adequate but it seems to derive from a more accurate premise: "How dramatic is a play when performed in daylight on a bare stage?"[108] On such a scale, the good farce can excell as the drama of action, as surely as can comedy, tragedy or melodrama.

The dialogue of farce is often considered the loose framework on which all types of verbal wit and humor are hung. It varies among plays from the brilliant strokes of wit in Moliere, Wilde and some of Shaw to the coarsest broad humor of Margaret Mayo, Avery Hopwood and Wilson Collison. Dialogue, like character, takes a secondary role in farce. It can only be what the situation permits it to be. It stands to reason that as the characters of farce are limited by the primary elements, their language will likewise be limited. With emphasis placed on action it is natural that dialogue would occupy a less prominent role. But this dialogue, irresponsible as it may be, is a vital and necessary part of farce.

Stephenson views dialogue as the essential content of farce. He sees action and characters as: ". . . merely devices for getting immediately down to comic speech."[109] This view puts Stephenson alone among the writers on farce but but he is joined by others in agreement that the writing of effective farce dialogue is an exacting and rather rare skill. Verbal wit may be found in farce though it is more frequently

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[108]Thompson, op. cit., p. 102.

[109]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 90.

a part of comedy. The French distinguished and identified three kinds of verbal wit as mots desprit, mots de caractere, and mots de situation. The latter type which points up the humor of the situation would be a prevalent part of the dialogue of farce. Mots d'esprit or witticisms, like Wilde's, which can stand by themselves can also be found in farce but they require the talents of a Wilde or a Kaufman, whose "wisecracks" fall into this type of verbal wit. Moliere seldom uses this form but concentrates heavily on mots de caractere for his comedies and mots de situation for farce. The point we wish to make here is that in the truly great farces both witticisms and wit that stem from situation are so skillfully conceived that they leave the impression that neither action nor characters are as important. In this sense we would agree with Stephenson for it is a rarity when we can laugh equally hard at violent physical action or slapstick and the more subtle but equally brilliant verbal wit. We seldom find it even among the masters of comic drama. It is often at this level of verbal wit that critics argue over The Importance of Being Earnest. In spite of its farce premise, situations and plot which dominate the play, some feel that its witty dialogue, which is very much like high comedy, is too brittle and sparkling for farce and it must therefore be called comedy. But this dialogue, brilliantly witty though it be, occupies a secondary role to the dominant and primary elements of situation and plot and Wilde's play must be recognized as an outstanding example of farce.

George Kaufman, in contrast to Wilde, discovered for himself and used repeatedly: ". . . a method based on the humor that is to be found in accurate reporting of the conversation of commonplace characters."[110] From Dulcy, Merton of the

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[110]Carl Carmer, "George Kaufman, Playmaker to Broadway", Theatre Arts Anthology (1961), p. 160.

Movies, and The Butter and Egg Man to You Can't Take It With You, The Man Who Came to Dinner and The Solid Gold Cadillac we find a great abundance of common folk saying very ordinary things. The warmly personal retort or "wisecrack" that was Kaufman's specialty is used by both the common and the "smart-set" characters. Carmer tells us that Kaufman also used an interpreter-character who pointed out and accentuated the laughable qualities of satire for the audience. Dulcy's brother, William Parker, filled this role in Dulcy, a wise, hard-boiled female extra did it in Merton and a stenographer was the interpreter-character in The Butter and Egg Man:

> Such characterizations, embodying what the members of the audience would like to think their own attitude, give the playwright plenty of opportunity to exercise his talent for dramatic irony, a device not the most to be admired in a dramatist's repertory, but particularly effective with not-too-intellectual audiences.[111]

Kaufman was writing for a different time and audience than Wilde. Where he wished to make his wit more subtle, it was possible still to reach the popular audience with the aid of this interpreter.

The average farce will not measure up, in terms of consistent verbal wit in dialogue, to these two great writers. But it will have its moments of sparkling dialogue. Among its linguistic devices will be puns, repetitions, "tag lines", wisecracks, insults, vulgarisms, cant phrases, deformed language, and current expressions. One will also find in the dialogue of farce the generous sprinkling of jokes, or on its more sophisticated level, epigrams, to get laughs. In terms of the average farce, we must agree with O'Hara and Bro who say that much of the dialogue is side stepping rather than forward moving.[112] These digressions for laughter, while

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[111] Ibid., p. 161.

[112] O'Hara and Bro, op. cit., p. 27.

momentarily enjoyable, account for the inferior quality of the average farce. Writer Samuel Spewack said it best:

> A first-rate writer of farce ruthlessly eliminates any scene, no matter how funny in itself, which does not serve the structure of his play.[113]

This would be equally true of inserted gags or jokes because Spewack writes in objection to the popular myth that a farce consists of "funny lines."

It is probably true that the farce is usually not compatible with a critical ear, for it seeks first to entertain through action and situation. But it must be equally false to assume that farce dialogue cannot appeal to an intellectual frame of reference when handled by the masters of wit. Brilliant dialogue and fascinating characters enhance the farce as well as they do comedy. They must be indispensable to comedy and even though they are secondary elements of farce, they are vital ingredients to good farce.

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[113]Spewack, op. cit., p. 6.

CHAPTER IV

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF FARCE

In 1693 Nahum Tate wrote that he had not yet seen any definition of farce and that he would not dare be the first to venture a definition. The "Preface", in which he expressed this, was, however, a meaningful description of what had been thought about farce for a long time. His intent was to establish farce as something separate from comedy on one aide and burlesque and buffoonery on the other. According to Golden: "It brought together, for the first time, in any orderly and cogent manner, the principles then current upon which farce could find some solid footing."[1] Tate apparently hoped that other writers of farce would refute or confirm his views but they never did. Instead they continued to write popular farce for the theatre, outwardly unconcerned with the principles or definitions.

It was almost two centuries later to the year (1894) that Brander Matthews published Studies of the Stage containing "A Plea for Farce". Matthews, at that time, was professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University, a position he held from 1891 to 1924. This brief but forceful plea was only a preamble to his detailed treatment of farce found in A Study of the Drama. The critical analysis of all forms of drama has made this text useful to theatre scholars from the day it was published in 1910. More important to us is his detailed and critical description of farce, possibly the earliest and most influential discussion in modern times. While Matthews'

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[1]Golden, op. cit., p. 69.

description is exacting, he either refused or avoided the opportunity to define farce.

Two other essays were written at about this same time and contributed to the critical discussion of farce. "A Defense of Farce", written in 1901 by G. K. Chesterton, deplored the attitude which marked farce as debased and trivial and explored the causes. It said a great deal about the nature of farce but made no attempt to define the genre. The second essay, "Farce", is a chapter from the book, On The Theatre, written by the famous Russian director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, in 1913. It was translated by Nora Beeson for the first time in English and published in 1959 in the Tulane Drama Review. Because of its recent translation, this discussion of farce in performance has not significantly influenced the bulk of theatre literature.

Since the establishment of a chair for the Brander Matthews Professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia, two recent occupants have further contributed to the literature of farce. The first and lesser contribution to farce comes from Joseph Wood Krutch, who held the chair from 1943 to 1952. Even though a prolific writer, his short contribution to farce appeared in Theatre Arts in 1956 under the title, "The Fundamentals of Farce." In this effective but far-too-brief description of farce, Krutch in effect repeated the posture of Tate. He made no attempt to define farce but urged that someone ought to do it. His challenge has been accepted by the second occupant.

Eric Bentley, Brander Matthews Professor since 1954, has surpassed the master whose chair he occupies so far as farce is concerned. There is quite naturally some similarity between his essay "The Psychology of Farce", published in 1958, and the chapter entitled "Farce" in his 1964 book, The Life of the Drama. Opinions are almost unanimous that the latter is the only "full-dress attempt" to deal with the subject in any

adequate way today. That explains the reason that much of Bentley appears in this study. And yet critic Bentley has failed, at least to date, to give us a definition of farce.

The concluding objective of this chapter will be the statement of a definition of farce composed by synthesizing the most meaningful elements of the genre. The source of this definition will then be a composite of views, attitudes and critical opinions from Tate in 1693 to the current Bentley. Though the first two hundred years of this time yield little beyond Tate, the last seventy-two years have provided considerable material. It is from these sources that our definition will derive.

The extrinsic characteristics of farce

The preceding chapter attempted to distinguish farce from comedy and explore the anatomy of the genre, farce. The primary elements of situation and plot were investigated in detail as well as the secondary elements of character and dialogue. Together they compose the body of significant characteristics that make up the structure of farce. Their contribution toward a definition will represent the backbone of this statement. But it is not sufficient to define in terms of intrinsic elements alone. In our view this has proved to be the problem with much of farce literature. Many writers have chosen to isolate and observe a segment of farce and then attempt to define it from this restricted basis. In order to avoid this pitfall we will now reach beyond the inner elements of farce, beyond structure, to analyze its outward appearance and its purpose.

Unfortunately many views of farce are influenced either by the writer's personal bias or the long-standing attitude that farce is an inferior dramatic type. This can be observed even among some of our most reputable critics. Whether it occurs subconsciously or through intent, the effect invites

suspicion. If the tenor of this study appears to justify and rationalize farce, that is not its intent. That would hardly serve our purpose. Instead, it is this writer's function to observe the nature of farce as objectively as one would observe melodrama, comedy or tragedy. Each has its purpose and each its form. Each says something different about man and his environment.

Farce, like the other forms of drama, deals with conflict, action, character, situation, plot and involvement. These elements are treated in a uniquely different method and form. We have observed before that initial or basic conflict in farce is an external one, often arbitrarily imposed upon the characters. The action which ensues is generally excessive, violent and predominantly visual in nature. As a result, slapstick has become the signature of farce. Whereas comedy must constantly confine itself to probability, Haberman acknowledges that:

> Farce can go to outrageous lengths to force a laugh through physical contrasts, ludicrous movements, greatly exaggerated or distorted facial and body features, weird costumes and horseplay.[2]

This emphasis on spectacle is further confirmed by Heffner, Selden and Sellman though they feel that within certain restrictions it can also be a part of "pure" comedy.[3]

Colorful stage settings, costumes and make-up are as vital to farce as comedy. But the farce does not demand such spectacle except in occasional plays where the locale is an important aspect of the comic situation such as You Can't Take It With You, My Sister Eileen, etc. What it often requires is a setting with numerous windows and doors leading to closets and other rooms to allow ample patterns for movement and

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[2]Haberman, op. cit., p. 19.

[3]Heffner, et al, op. cit., p. 70.

resources for farce business. With emphasis on the action, the setting for farce must enhance this movement by being functional. As Taylor has suggested, the farce tends to minimize the living person somewhat as it stresses the inanimate objects, the custard pies and wobbly autos on film and the door slamming and collapsible chairs on stage.[4] The farce remains indifferent to spectacle for its focus has always been on action and movement.

The ridiculous or burlesque element is highly important to farce as it contributes to the slapstick technique. Exaggeration of incidents and of character traits have always been a staple of farce. To many the chief element of farce is its exaggeration of possible incongruities. And the key to it all is improbability.

With vigorous action comes an impulse to attack, a kind of hostility and aggression, without which, Bentley believes, farce cannot function. And yet this hostility enjoys itself in the situations and plot of farce as much as in joking. The subjects of farce are certainly closely allied to the subjects of jokes and they both reflect aggression against the moral, ethical or social codes of man. Subjects such as the mother-in-law, the traveling salesman, the farmer's daughter, and "modern" cuckoldry are as common to farce as to the joke. Attacks on religious practices and beliefs, cultural characteristics and attitudes, marital relationships, racial idiosyncrasies, social classes, and many others are evident in both farce and the joke.[5]

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[4]Taylor, op. cit., p. 29.

[5]The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov wrote a number of short farces in the 1880's which he called "jokes". They were apprentice pieces and although minor are not unimportant: Marvin Felheim, Comedy: Plays, Theory and Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), p. 109.

The following one-act farces are all identified by Chekhov as "A Joke in One Act"; The Brute (1888), A Marriage Proposal (1888-1889), A Wedding (1889-1890) and The Celebration (1891):

More meaningful, however, is the concept of aggression which Bentley sees in the majority of farce. He illustrates with this vivid example:

> In one of Noel Coward's /farces/ a man slaps his mother-in-law's face and she falls in a swoon. Farce is the only form of art in which such an incident could normally occur.[6]

If he slapped his mother the scene would be shocking, but the mother-in-law relationship is a subject of joking and therefore funny or laughable.

An audience watching this scene, this aggression, is vicariously experiencing the incident. One may dearly love his own mother-in-law but as a group, mothers-in-law are considered a meddlesome, disgusting but unavoidable legacy to the marriage. The repressed wish to clout one's own mother-in-law finds an outlet as he watches the incident on stage. This healthy release, in joke or in farce, effects "a modest catharsis", according to Bentley. One can laugh and enjoy the satisfaction of seeing a mother-in-law get what she deserves without being taken to court, alienating his wife or being stricken from a will. He is permitted the outrage but spared the consequences. The catharsis or release allows him to work off the frustrations caused by his own mother-in-law or by the group as a whole. It acts as a "safety valve" to those in the audience who have miserable mothers-in-law or who enjoy the mother-in-law joke.

Bentley derives his "safety valve" concept from Freud whose Liberation theory has been stated earlier. He may be placing too much emphasis on aggression when he says:

Anton Chekhov, The Brute and Other Farces. Eric Bentley (ed.) (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958).

[6]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 240.

> It seems to me that if farces are examined they will be found to contain very little 'harmless' joking and very much that is 'tendentious'. Without aggression farce cannot function.[7]

If by "tendentious" he means a "point of view" or "bias", we cannot take exception, for without its satiric slap, the farce seems relegated to playfulness exclusively. But playfulness has also been a function of farce through various periods of theatre history.

The nineteenth century French farce and its ribald and often vulgar treatment of sex in the "bedroom farce" can be compared with the American version of "bedroom farce" popular in the first two decades of the twentieth century, filled with mere playfulness. Dusenbury states that the American playwright was developing a type of farce, reminiscent of the popular English and French marital farces, which was less immoral and more acceptable.[8] The aggression against family piety and propriety which Bentley refers to in building his argument is strong in French farce. But the harmless and ludicrous fun of the American farces of Avery Hopwood and Margaret Mayo might better support the play instinct theory of Max Eastman.

In his book, Enjoyment of Laughter, Eastman takes strong exception to Freud and repeatedly declares that he is wrong in identifying comic pleasure with release from adult inhibitions. His arguments are convincing, but more important here is his view that things can be funny only when we are in fun and that grown-up people retain in varying degrees the aptitude for being playful or in fun.[9] Playfulness, rather

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Dusenbury, op. cit., p. 556.

[9] Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 3.

than aggression, seems more evident in the American farces described by Dusenbury. It started with Twin Beds and Apartment 12-K in 1914. The latter play by Rising:

> . . . adopted 'the-inebriated-man-in-the-wrong-bedroom' idea of Twin Beds, along with the absent husband and the innocent wife, but added the suspicious mother-in-law and a burglar to make the farce more farcical. Fair and Warmer (1915), Parlor, Bedroom and Bath (1917), Up in Mabel's Room (1919), Please Get Married (1919), She Walked in Her Sleep (1919), The Girl in the Limousine (1919), and Nighty Night (1919) are of the bedroom farce genre, with many other productions suggesting the setting but not actually displaying the scene on stage.[10]

Krutch described them as: ". . . usually innocent enough in action but . . . always promising to take a turn into something not quite so innocent."[11] Regardless of the degree of innocence, it seems obvious that the theatre-goer who chose to see any of the plays named here must have gone in the spirit of fun expectant of an evening of playfulness.

The bedroom farce leads us precisely into one of the "characteristic sins" of farce, according to Grebanier.[12] He warns that the writer of farce should not yield to the temptation of steeping the play in vulgarity. The farce of antiquity was crude, gross and apparently licentious in speech as was the commedia which followed. In fact the charges of vulgarity and immorality or unmorality have been leveled at farce of all ages. There have been periodic crusades against "dirty plays", of which farces have been considered the chief offenders.

Such a movement took place in America in the 1920's as a demand for censorship was provoked by suggestive plays,

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[10]Dusenbury, op. cit., p. 101.

[11]Krutch, op. cit., p. 93.

[12]Grebanier, op. cit., p. 291.

particularly farces. Critic John Corbin made the distinction between the French and American morality in 1918 slightly before the crusade got underway:

> Two farces are endeavoring to wag the tail of the dog these days, one in the pure French tradition, (or rather, in the French tradition purified) and the other in our native American style. Has it been sufficiently noted that we have developed a new and indigenous genre in farce? Keep Her Smiling, at the Astor, falls in line with Get-Rich-Quick-Wallingford, Turn to the Right, A Tailor-Made Man and a score of others. Business deals and sudden riches are the point at issue, with at most a background of love or married life. Farces of Gallic origin, like She Walked in Her Sleep, . . . centre as inevitably in marital infidelity, real or suppositious--real in the case of the imported play, suppositious in its American imitation. To consider either style as an exponent of national morals is perhaps to consider it too seriously. Immorality that has become a convention, especially a humorous convention, has lost much of its taint. Yet it is worth pointing out that, as French farce makes a mock of the national instinct for love-making, so our native form of high jinks centres in shady business practice. . . . Are we conventionally immoral in money making as the French are in love?[13]

Nine years later critic George Jean Nathan acknowledged that conventionality as well as the least original and meritorious French farce imports were the reasons for the decline in America of this particular form of stage farce:

> There was a time when the sex didos of the French farce writers seemed very saucy and juicy, but today they have come to take on an air of conventionality, and not only of conventionality but, I dare say, of relative innocence. The so-to-speak more serious drama has gone so far with

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[13]John Corbin, "French and American Morals in Farce", New York Times (Aug. 18, 1918), II, p. 2.

> sex themes that the French farces, even at their naughtiest, begin to seem tame.[14]

The decline of French imports began with World War I but American playwrights and producers were fashioning their own brand of "bedroom farce" and much of it resorted to sensational material. In the post-war prosperity, entertainment was in demand and the bedroom farce enjoyed a renewed spurt of popularity. Farce writers capitalized on risque titles and plots in such plays as Scrambled Wives, Marry the Poor Girl, Rollo's Wild Oats, Getting Gertie's Garter, A Bachelor's Night, Try It With Alice, The Harem, The Blonde Sinner, The Demi-Virgin, and Ladies' Night.

Ladies' Night, written by Hopwood and college professor Charlton Andrews, ran for 375 performances beginning in August of 1920. In defending his play against charges of immorality, Hopwood called the play simply a satire on ridiculous fashions:

> I have simply forced audiences to face ridiculous facts, and, if these facts savor of immodesty, that is the fault of Fashion, and not my fault. . . . This play is neither immoral nor is it unmoral in the present stage of society. . . . In a play like 'Ladies' Night' there is no trace of sexual feeling, because the whole thing is carried out in a comical way. . . . One cannot be amorous, and laugh one's self to death. . . . The drama is a democratic art, and the dramatist is not the monarch, but the servant of the public. The voice of the public should be considered the voice of the gods. My thesis seems to be axiomatic, and unsusceptible of argument. Yet it is continually denied by the Uplifters, who persist in looking down upon the public, and decrying the wisdom of the many.[15]

A year after Hopwood's statement, his co-producer of Ladies' Night, A. H. Woods, was reported to be forsaking

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[14]George Jean Nathan, "The Passing of French Farce", American Mercury 12 (December 1927), p. 506.

[15]Avery Hopwood, "Is the Undraped Drama Unmoral?", Theatre Magazine 33 (January, 1921), p. 6.

the bedroom farce because it would soon lose its popularity if continued indefinitely. He claimed it had nothing to do with being brought before a New York grand jury to defend his production of The Demi-Virgin. This was another Hopwood farce based on a French original, which, though publicly denounced as an immoral play, brought an acquittal for Woods by a jury selected from a panel of three hundred who saw the production and disagreed with the charge. The Demi-Virgin opened on October 18, 1921 at the Times Square Theatre and ran for 268 performances. Woods approved of the bedroom farce:

> . . . on the ground that the public approves of them, pays to see them, and that he himself sees nothing wicked or immoral in them. . . . Those who are afraid of having their sensibilities bruised by my plays need not buy tickets for them. . . . It is argued in defence of "zippy" shows that the public is more or less shrouded in gloom, and the reformers are constantly doing something or other to take the joy out of life. . . . Plagues, Hard times, All sorts of woes. I should be considered a public benefactor when I try, by means of a zippy show, to drag people out of the depths of despond.[16]

Whether the "depth of despond" was as serious as Woods saw it in 1922 is questionable but the gloom of impending financial doom was just a few short years away. The movement for a new morality of the stage was gaining wide acceptance while the theatre in general was prospering.

American theatre was experiencing a transitional development that was eventually to bring it to a momentary peak in 1927. Many varied factors were contributing to this growth and development. The Pulitzer Prize was initiated in 1917 for the best American play. The year 1919 had brought the actors' strike, the termination of which had led to the formation of Actors' Equity Association. At about the same

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[16]Anonymous, "Bedroom Farces Are Passe Declares Their Leading Producer", Current Opinion 73 (September, 1922), p. 364.

time the famed Theatre Guild was forming as an outgrowth of the Washington Square Players. Hopwood's Gold Diggers opened what was to become a run of 720 performances and reportedly net its author an income of $236,000.00.[17] Financial success could be realized in the theatre. Touring shows were in a healthy condition. A record 268 Broadway productions arrived in New York in 1927. "Talkies" were beginning to attract many of the Broadway hopefuls who saw a new field of employment opportunities in sound motion pictures. But the theatre of these lush days was soon to experience a setback with the advent and aftermath of the depression in 1929.

Haberman explains that:

> . . . profanity, near nudity and obscenities became commonplace in serious drama, the farces that employed them lost their erstwhile shock appeal. By 1929, a play that was merely 'naughty' was outmoded and mild. In order to be considered daring, a play had to go to such lengths that it was in danger of being intolerably offensive to playgoers of taste.[18]

What we then can observe is a prospering theatre in a sensational time. Farce, with its basic simplicity of purpose, became an obvious form to express the gay and accelerating times. The apparent simplicity of farce made it attractive to the hack writers and producers seeking quick financial returns in the fast-growing theatre. As a result, many plays were written to exploit the sensational, serious drama as well as farce. In the hands of such writers the farce began to lose favor and to decline in popularity. These farces became the obvious targets of the new morality and the deprecatory attitude toward farce as a genre accelerated.

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[17]Arno L. Bader, "Avery Hopwood, Dramatist", Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review Vol. LXVI, No. 10 (Dec. 5, 1959), p. 68.

[18]Haberman, op. cit., p. 150.

The good and honest farces that were written suffered by association with the "sensational" plays called farce. Both the truly playful atmosphere and the hostility of genuine farce had been misused and abused. Though farce was by no means free of guilt, it unfortunately absorbed the brunt of disparagement for a movement it actively supported, but did not lead. Again, as so often in the past, the farce stood condemned without trial.

One of the prominent roles of farce has been as an afterpiece, in which brevity was a prime requisite. In this role, as in its original sense of "stuffing", the farce functioned as episodic relief or comic filler:

> In England by 1800 it was not uncommon to apply the designation farce to any short piece that was performed after the main play, regardless of its character; and, with the general confusion of dramatic terminology in the 19th century, farce lost its identity and became indistinguishable, except for its brevity, from decadent comedy of manners on one hand and from vaudeville extravaganze, pantomime, and burlesque on the other.[19]

American farce existed primarily as afterpiece until the Civil War (1861-1865) but after the war the farce became a popular full-length entertainment.

Millett and Bentley acknowledge that:

> In the Restoration when the word farce was introduced, it was not used to refer to a special type of comic technique at all, but to the short humorous play which was coming into popularity, a play of three acts instead of the customary five.[20]

Professor Hughes feels this distinction is both "broad and careless." While it is true that most pieces labeled farce ran to less than five acts and most plays in one act only were labeled farce, even this rule had some interesting exceptions.

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[19]MacMillan, loc. cit.

[20]Millett and Bentley, op. cit., p. 121.

He cites several illustrations and concludes that: "In dozens of cases plays in two or three acts were labeled indiscriminately farce or comedy."[21]

As we have stated earlier, Stephenson insists that brevity is the one item that withstands scrutiny in definitions of farce. "Not accidently, as many critics assume, but of their nature, farces are brief." Anecdote, fable, folk tale and the like are suitable materials for farce: ". . . because farce requires short subjects." The devices of farce serve it well because they: ". . . call for short rhythms and brief limits."[22] He concludes that to accomplish its purpose of laughter, the method of farce is critical, a comic shorthand.

Though brevity is a condition of farce, by virtue of its subject matter and its form, it is not an exclusive characteristic nor a distinguishing element. "In spite of what seems a fairly common misapprehension in our day, farce was not distinguished from comedy on the basis of length."[23]

The farce, like the joke, aspires to laughter. Our common experiences tell us that we laugh as hard and more frequently at short jokes than at lengthy ones. We also know that laughter in a group or crowd is infectious and tends to accelerate and intensify itself. But there are limits to this process which exist as much for farce as for the joke. The restriction of brevity imposes itself on the farce which seeks always maximum laughter.

In the light of such historical variations, one can only conclude that brevity is as consistent with farce of all periods as it is with jokes. Certainly the joke and the farce situation seem inconsistent with the five-act length for this must unduly strain the compounding complications and appreciably reduce the impact. In the same sense, the question of one- or

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[21]Hughes, A Century of English Farce, pp. 7-8.

[22]Stephenson, op. cit., pp. 89-90.

[23]Hughes, loc. cit.

three-act seems immaterial. Chekhov's one-act farces required nothing more to make their point. Morton, Gregory, Monkhouse and other writers of one-act farces have found this true as well. Abbott and Holmes required the full three-act time to get their verse writer "kidnapped" and returned safely in Three Men on a Horse. The majority of writers employ the longer form and the determination between one- or three-acts must surely be made by expediency. The historical change in terminology appears to support this conclusion.

Simplicity appears to be another mark of farce. From subject matter to audience appeal the farce has remained free of complication and readily understood. In spite of the complexity of situation and plot, no one can misinterpret or fail to understand the story of the farce. Millett and Bentley identify it as one of the simpler forms of drama because it demands no thought for its appreciation. As a result of this simplicity it has been, together with melodrama, the most popular of dramatic forms. But this popularity and simplicity is misleading to the critic in particular.

Because of its intense speed the audience is kept at the very surface of situation and is prevented from reflecting on incidents past. The resulting degree of illusion is small and the spectator retains a comparatively detached perspective. Thompson makes the distinction between comedy and farce on this point of illusion. He sees comedy depending for effect on illusion because its law is realism. The farce is not concerned with either illusion or reality.[24]

In the broad view everything about farce smacks of simplicity. Its purpose is laughter, its playing is active, it accepts coincidence, its plot structure can be simple, its typical characters are ordinary people, its characters usually

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[24]Thompson, op. cit., p. 218.

say ordinary things in obvious ways, and its greatest appeal is to the popular audience whose intelligence may be said to be quite average. To some, the simplicity of farce marks it as trivial. Mention has already been made that because of its seeming triviality, the farce has been overlooked by scholarly criticism.

Eric Bentley tells us that the great drama critic Sarcey and playwright Labiche both justified farce on grounds of its triviality. Sarcey found the serious plays about adultery unsavory and felt that the playwrights should get instead a little fun out of the subject. While watching a good farce we often experience the feeling that the playwright had fun in writing it and the actors are in like manner enjoying it. It seems so easy and simple to do.

In The Life of the Drama, Bentley expresses this paradox of simplicity most graphically. He says that farce may seem simple in that it goes right "at" things. It is absolutely direct and presents an unmeditated vision. Farce may also:

> . . . seem simple in its acceptance of everyday appearances and of everyday interpretations of these experiences because it can use the ordinary unenlarged environment and ordinary down-at-heel-men of the street. The trouble is that farce is simple in both these ways at once, thereby failing to be simple at all. Farce brings together the direct and wild fantasies and the everyday and drab realities. The interplay between the two is the very essence of this art--the farcical dialectic.[25]

After six years of research into the nature and method of farce, this writer can readily verify the Bentley view. At the surface the farce bears every mark of simplicity. If one does not believe this after seeing or reading a farce, he has only to turn to the majority of critics and scholars for confirmation. But investigation and observation into the very nature of farce beneath this surface image reveals a

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[25]Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 241.

series of complex and often subtle relationships and techniques that tend to defy recognition.

Farce is truly the drama of beguilement. The farce on stage has deceived both audiences and its many critics for years. The audience invites and accepts farce for the laughter that it provokes. They eagerly accept its coincidences and improbabilities. But the critic faces a dilemma. If he assumes the audience role, his critical effectiveness is diminished. To stand apart from the audience, where he must, the critic cannot enter the experience. Either posture must be uncomfortable and the critic often writes of the surface impression and laments the obvious simplicity. Within this apparent simplicity lies the universal power of farce: the universality of appeal to high and low, to the intelligent and the simple; the universality of purpose--to laugh and enjoy life. "Farce is as universal and perennial as the need for laughter."[26] To this we can only add the climactic and colorful statement by Meyerhold:

> The farce is eternal. If its principles are for a time expelled from the walls of the theatre, we nevertheless know that they are firmly engraved in the lines of the manuscripts left by the theatre's greatest writers.[27]

The attitude that farce is inferior and lacks significance because of simplicity presents an interesting phenomenon. It stems more often from the critics and dramatic theorists than from anywhere else in the theatre. Exacting directors admit that staging a farce requires skill and knowledge. Some will say that it is more difficult and demanding than directing comedy or serious plays. Serious actors quickly confirm the difficulty of farce. Some readily acknowledge

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[26]Lea, op. cit., p. 185.

[27]Vsevolod Meyerhold, "Farce", trans. Nora Beeson, Tulane Drama Review (September 1959), p. 148.

that farcical acting is a sensitive technique not found in many performers. Many playwrights have attempted and abandoned farce because of its highly specialized demands and allusive nature. The simple farce puts great demands on its practitioners who seldom speak in its defense. As a result the deprecatory attitude perpetuates itself.

The purpose of farce

The farce beguiles the unconcerned and the unaware with its simple and light-hearted fun. Yet through careful analysis we are not deceived by this drama of beguilement. On occasion we see farce at its spectacular best and yet we know it need not rely on spectacle. We see farce that is playful and foolish, and yet we know it to be hostile and aggressive. We see farce at times immoral and licentious and yet we know it to be as moral as society. We see farce brief because of its subject matter and form and yet we know it can be fully protracted with numerous intricate complications. We see farce as simple and yet complex.

Farce may also beguile us in its purpose or its purposelessness. From one view we might assume that farce lacks any serious purpose. Hughes may be speaking for all farce writers and yet may be oversimplifying when he makes the following observation:

> In the face of so nearly uniform an opposition /during the period from 1650 to 1750/ the writer of mere farce could hardly expect to be given serious consideration, and he did not ask for it. His tone . . . is frankly apologetic: "What I offer here," he says in effect, "is trash, concocted in haste for the purpose of mere light entertainment for those who have no objection to such frivolity. No one should make the error of taking it so seriously as to examine it critically.[28]

This statement is as generally true of the English playwright from the Restoration to the mid-18th century as

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[28]Hughes, op. cit., p. 278.

it was in America during the first three decades of the 20th century. It is not surprising that we find the purpose of farce described in many sources as it is in the following statements: "immediate entertainment is the sole aim", Millett and Bentley; "the purpose of farce is to entertain", Hatlen. This fact alone makes farce appear purposeless to some while others see a positive purpose. Eaton's attitude may console the former group. "It is no reflection on our taste if we enjoy the frank fun and honest nonsense of clean and witty farce."[29] The latter would praise this purpose and propose that this, in itself, is a serious purpose.

Two prominent American playwrights have supported the view that farce has a serious and meaningful purpose. The great farces survive because they are intelligent, writes Samuel Spewack, and to make people think without pain is a formidable task.[30] Thornton Wilder concurs with Spewack in saying: "Since farce is an intellectual exercise, the only ornament it welcomes is the additional intellectual pleasure of lines of social comment and generalization." Wilder goes on to give support to the serious purpose of farce:

> Farce would seem to be intended for child-like minds still touched with grossness; but the history of the theatre shows us that the opposite is true. Farce has always flourished in ages of refinement and great cultural activity.[31]

Once again we see the duality of farce. This drama of beguilement can be purposeful while appearing to lack purpose beyond entertainment. But is this actually the case? One might suspect the opinions of the men who wrote Boy Meets Girl and The Merchant of Yonkers, later successfully re-written as

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[29]Eaton, op. cit., p. 273.

[30]Spewack, op. cit., p. 7.

[31]Thornton Wilder, "Noting the Nature of Farce", New York Times (Jan. 8, 1939), Sect. 9, p. 1.

The Matchmaker, as being overstated and biased. They are claiming that farce makes people think and that social comment and generalization can be a part of farce. We have mentioned before that farce is capable of satire and we now see confirmation for this view.

Though the term "satire" tends to have varied meanings at different times in history, we can establish our definition somewhat firmly through the contributions of Frye, Garnett, Robson and others.[32] Satire blends or brings together for observation a critical attitude toward society with humor and wit. Its aim is to amuse the observer with that which is ridiculous or unseemly and its limits range from fantasy to absurdity. The object of ridicule or attack may be ideas, conventions or people and they are frequently observed from more than one viewpoint. When people provide the object of ridicule the focus is often on the group but, whether together or individually, character tends to become caricature. Though satire encompasses both invective and irony, it tends to be more effectively satiric when minimizing the abusiveness of invective and the gloom and sullenness of irony.

Tate's preface contains the earliest statement that farce could use satire, if we interpret accurately his usage. He wrote: ". . . Farce is not inconsistent with good Sence, because 'tis capable of Satyr, which is Sence with a Vengeance."[33] This was written in 1693, a time in which the words

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[32]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957; Richard Garnett in Encyclopaedia Britannica. 11th ed., Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1911; William W. Robson in Cassell's Encyclopaedia of World Literature. S. A. Steinberg ed. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1954; William F. Thall, Addison Hibbard and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature. New York: Odyssey Press, 1960.

[33]Tate, op. cit., p. 14.

"satire" and "satyr" were often confused and interchanged.[34] Other than the interchanging of words, The Oxford Companion to the Theatre tells us that there is no connection between satyric drama and satire or any form of Greek comedy. Tate's references prior to this statement are to similarities in the plays of Aristophanes and the plays of Shadwell, Beaumont and Fletcher. In addition, Tate has defined his term as "Sence with a Vengeance" which seems close to "invective," a common term in definitions of satire. From this point of view, it seems clear that Tate and others he spoke for recognized that farce was capable of satire. We ought also to underscore Tate's terms "'tis capable" and note the option. Farce can function with or without satire and thus it is given secondary importance.

There have been few to follow Tate in this view. Thompson allows satire in farce when it is the mere ridicule of an individual. Otherwise it belongs to the comedy of idea because it involves comparison of the ideal in life with actuality. Professor Rowe, quoted earlier, acknowledges that farce moves easily into satire. Bentley's aggression or hostility can readily be manifested as attacks on persons, ideas, or institutions of various forms. The overwhelming majority of writers elect either to ignore discussing the role of satire in farce or support the distinction between comedy and farce that allows comedy the sole property of satire.

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[34]"The words satire and satyr were probably at one time pronounced alike, as the derivatives satiric and satyric are still; and the common use of y and i as interchangeable symbols in the 16th and 17th c. still further contributed to the confusion." N.E.D. VIII, p. 119. Under the figurative definition of satire: "a thing, fact, or circumstance that has the effect of making some person or thing ridiculous," N.E.D. illustrates with a spelling like Tate's in exactly the same year:" 1693, Norris Pract. Dics. (1698) IV, ii Religion has no advantage from the Commendations of those whose Lives are a constant Satyr upon it."

Highet makes some meaningful distinctions in satire for us. He finds that in nearly every satire there are some elements of farce and that comedy and farce are kind compared to satire and their purpose is good:

> The writer of comedy or farce . . . likes people not in spite of their peculiarities, but because of them. He could not endure the notion that all the oddities might disappear and leave the world to routine and to him. . . . The purpose of comedy and farce is to cause painless undestructive laughter at human weaknesses and incongruities. The purpose of satire is through laughter and invective, to cure folly and to punish evil; but if it does not achieve this purpose, it is content to jear at folly and to expose evil to bitter contempt.[35]

Highet uses a human analogy to distinguish the point of view of comedy and farce. Comedy shows the amused friend who loves his friends' absurdities and farce reveals the servant who likes his master but cannot keep from befooling and mimicking him. Highet's thesis seems to assert that farce makes use of satire primarily to poke fun or ridicule with no conscious intent to correct. This may be in Bentley's thinking when he calls farce the art of escape, running from social problems as well as all other forms of moral responsibility. From this vantage point the farce writer cannot realistically hope to correct but can make us obviously aware of some folly.

Nardin observed no satire in American farce from 1865 to 1914. By his definition farces were plays: ". . . from which rationality and normality have disappeared."[36] We have no reason to question his confusion because most of the plays in this period are unavailable and this view is confirmed by others.

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[35]Highet, op. cit., pp. 155-56.

[36]Nardin, op. cit., p. 6.

In his study of American farces from 1914 to 1950, Haberman implied a similar conclusion:

> It can by outlandish exaggeration and overstatement focus attention upon a person, system or institution, but, unlike satire, its edge is blunted by its unreal portrayal of characters and incidents.[37]

We can and ought to raise several serious questions to this view. Haberman's picture of farce characters seems somewhat stark. The people of farce may be instantly recognizable types that are not fully developed or revealed but they are not unreal. They are flesh and blood people caught in a set of circumstances that are improbable. Neither farce nor satire are as concerned for the individual as they are for the folly. It seems also that exaggeration and overstatement are the tools of both satire and farce. They may be functioning in farce strictly in a mimicking and fun-making manner and in satire that cannot achieve its corrective purpose and so must jeer and make fun as well.

One could also charge Haberman with the obvious oversight of Kaufman except that this is the period of the "farce-comedy." By refusing to question this "genre", we must assume the writer's acceptance of it. From such a view the caustic satire of Kaufman's farces would relegate them to "farce-comedy" and not farce. It is true that most Kaufman plays have elements of both farce and comedy. Carmer wrote that:

> No living American is more adept than he at spanking the silly vagaries of his contemporaries. Scholars may feel that his rod of correction is too much of a slapstick to allow of his endeavors being dignified by the term, comedy of manners, but their purpose is very evidently the same that Congreve claimed.[38]

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[37]Haberman, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

[38]Carmer, op. cit., p. 168.

The terms comedy of manners, drawing-room comedy, artificial comedy, and high comedy have all been used somewhat interchangeably and generally denote the type of comedy that focused on the correction of social absurdities. Nicoll has called it "Congreve comedy" after the master of the form that originated in France with Moliere and was prevalent during the 17th and 18th centuries. At its best it was delicate and quite disarming but at its worst equivocal and indecent. It was always witty and usually elaborated on seeming trivia. Its sharp point of satire was frequently thrust among high society, the sophisticate and aristocrat. While Kaufman was often nipping at the socially prominent, he was also working over the average man, the average business, the average organization, and the average politician. His sweep was broad enough to cover large corporations in The Solid Gold Cadillac (1953), or the movie industry in Merton of the Movies (1922). But he offered few, if any, solutions to these social ills. In this sense many of Kaufman's plays are much closer to farce than to comedy, even though the dialogue is witty. But let us return to satire for the moment.

It appears that satire itself has been changing. Worchester generalizes this evolution in his preface when he writes:

> I have attempted to show that the vast laux satura or hotch potch of satiric literature is susceptible of classification and that a natural evolution has occurred, whereby complex and subtle forms have arisen out of simple and primitive ones.[39]

Criticism of our increasingly more complex society may be more opportune but at the same time has become more difficult. With a more complex society and equally complex problems, we

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[39]David Worchester, The Art of Satire (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), p. v. This is the second printing of this book, originally published in 1940 by President and Fellows of Harvard College.

must agree with Duff that the answers or solutions today are more obscured and complex:

> Contemporary satire, largely represented by novels and plays rather than by poetry, exhibit one striking difference from the satire of the ancients. There is less confidence on the part of the modern satirist that he himself stands on sure ground in his social criticism. . . . This loss of sureness seems to characterize the present-day attitude in contrast with that of even a few generations ago . . . and it serves to explain why many novels and plays now appear, after a series of negations, to end on a merely interrogative note. . . . The ancient satirist had a less complex world to survey, so that it is easier under his criticisms to grasp his positive beliefs and to understand his outlook.[40]

This brings us to the point that has been overlooked since Tate. Farce can and frequently does use satire but as a by-product and of secondary importance. We find it in the plays of Aristophanes, Plautus, Moliere and Kaufman though their basic or primary purpose seems to be entertainment. In the hands of masterful writers the inclusion of effective satire becomes an accessory to the fact of fun. It is not introduced as Klein has stated, as an attempt to reform farce through the use of satire. It must be from just such a bias that the bulk of theatre literature has overlooked the role of satire in farce. It is this writer's feeling that we have seen in America from World War I to the present the inclusion in farce of a broad and most blatant satire. This has not been the pointed satire that would correct or punish our follies but the rollicking, fun-making satire that points up and accentuates the folly itself. While it has caused us to hold our sides in laughter, it might also have made us think. We obviously had fun and we must have seen the obvious point.

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[40] J. Wright Duff, Roman Satire: Its Outlook on Social Life (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1936), pp. 10-11.

We will now move from a major omission to unanimous agreement in theatre literature. The fundamental purpose of farce is to arouse or produce laughter. To a man, all will agree that this is the very heart of farce.

Because of this unanimity it would serve no purpose here to identify the many sources. It may suffice to say that from Brander Matthews' 1894 essay to Leo Hughes, in a letter to this writer dated February 6, 1966, this basic purpose has been repeatedly verified. For over seventy years laughter has been recognized as the paramount purpose of farce. With the principle clearly in mind, we need look only at the variety of terms and colorful descriptions to realize the significance of this purpose: the sole or the highest aim; to excite, arouse, or produce laughter; designed for laughter; fun for its own sake; laughter for the sake of laughter; riotious, continuous and unrestrained laughter; constant series of laughs--continually in a roar of merriment and; hilarity, continued and increasing.

This vigorous laughter affords man a healthy release. It serves much the same function in the theatre as does joking in everyday conversations. Rowe sees this as a laudable purpose in itself, for laughter within proper bounds is a healthy release to natural human responses. In yet more forceful terms Matthews has called it:

> . . . the hearty laughter which has cleared the air, and which is a boon in itself and a gift to be thankful for. . . . But laughter is a gift for which mankind is rarely as grateful as it ought to be. We are eager to find distraction from worry and surcease of sorrow if only for a moment, and we are ready to pay the humorist the wages he asks.[41]

This may be the stimulus from which Bentley conceived his "healthy release" which he calls "a modest catharsis"

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[41]Matthews, Studies of the Stage, p. 214.

because it predates the earlier Freud by twenty-two years. In The Life of the Drama, Bentley makes the following observation:

> Gilbert Murray has suggested that the idea of catharsis is easier to apply to comedy than to tragedy--easier in the sense that we agree to it more easily. There is already a consensus of opinion that some of our psychic violence--what our grandfathers called excess animal spirits--can be worked off in laughter. It is generally agreed that a good laugh does us good, that it does us good as a sort of emotional "work-out".[42]

The prolific American farce writer Avery Hopwood, whose "bedroom farces" and other farces earned him many fortunes over, expressed his view quite freely:

> I remember, at college, /University of Michigan/ we heard much of "the tragic katharsis" of Aristotle. This was his teaching, that from the witnessing of a great tragedy, an audience derived a kind of "purification" or "katharsis". But, in my opinion, there is a comic, as well as a tragic, katharsis. And the majority of people, I feel reasonably certain, derive more benefit from a good comedy than from an equally good tragedy.[43]

Though he died in 1928, Hopwood reflects what is probably true today. His experiences and familiarity with American theatre and the theatre abroad just after the turn of the century give some validity to his observations. The idea of a comic catharsis has been inferred or expressed by other writers as well. One of these was the French playwright Anouilh who said, "everything is ugly, everything is sad, and afterwards we know it. But the soul must be purged by laughter." In his La Petite Moliere, Anouilh is implying a comic catharsis as the only virile attitude to take in

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[42] Bentley, op. cit., p. 224.

[43] Hopwood, "Why I Don't Write More Serious Plays", p. 10.

the face of the human condition--to laugh at it.

Playwright Maurice Valency, professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, alludes to a catharsis in Greek or classic comedy:

> The classic forms; essentially objective, invite an almost cruel degree of hostility on the part of the audience with regard to the clownish characters on the stage. They were meant, most likely, to effect a purgation of emotion through laughter, and to leave the audience in that stoical state of mind--apatheia--which the Greeks considered appropriate to the ideal citizen.[44]

Professor Louis Kronenberger also implies a comic catharsis as he observes comedy as criticism:

> If through laughing at others we purge ourselves of certain spiteful and ungenerous instincts--as through tragedy we achieve a higher and more publicized catharsis--that is not quite the whole of it. Comedy need not be hostile to idealism; it need only show how far human beings fall short of the ideal.[45]

The most recent and complete view of a comic catharsis is presented in Comedy in Action by Elmer Blistein. The passage reads as follows:

> I suggest that if there is a physiological theory of tragedy, and Aristotle's Poetics with its emphasis on catharsis is at least one such theory, then it is equally possible to have a physiological theory of comedy. This theory would also emphasize catharsis, but not catharsis of the emotions of pity and terror. The emotions that we seek to purge in comedy are those of scorn and mockery . . . /of/ the comic antagonist, the comic villain. Strangely enough, the tragic hero and the comic villain have some things in common. Both are over-reachers; both suffer from hubris; both try to

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[44]Maurice Valency, "The Comic Spirit on the American Stage", Theatre Arts (September, 1958), p. 22.

[45]Louis Kronenberger, The Thread of Laughter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 5.

> possess more power than is rightfully theirs. The tragic hero is destroyed by the operation of nemesis; the comic villain is frustrated through the mockery of our laughter. The audience of a comedy does not ask that the villain be destroyed; it merely asks that he be foiled.[46]

Many sources and considerable detail have been included here to substantiate the idea that laughter provides a healthy release for man. Such a release tends to purge the emotions of worry, of scorn and mockery, of our spiteful and ungenerous instincts and to momentarily end our sorrow and restore the balance to our psychological and physiological being. We feel strongly that there is a comic catharsis, modified somewhat from the tragic catharsis. Since Aristotle's complete observations on comedy are not available, we can only speculate that he wrote it first. At any rate, it seems to invite the detailed scrutiny of further research.

A comic catharsis, if there can be such, would be applicable to both comedy and farce for both hold the purpose of laughter. The focus of such purgation would vary with comedy and farce as well as interrelate. It would interrelate in the sense that our emotional and our intellectual functions are inescapably entwined. It would interrelate because comedy and farce are both capable of thought and foolishness. It would vary essentially because comedy is primarily intellectual and farce is basically emotional. In this view the purgation through comic catharsis would help us solve our problems in comedy and help us bear our problems in farce. Both would benefit the man who laughs.

Though the farce may lack a serious purpose, it must be evident by now that its true purpose is laughter. If this cannot claim to be a serious goal it must certainly

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[46]Blistein, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

be evident that it is a worthy one. The drama of beguilement continues to be simple and yet complex. It will probably always seem foolish but quite worthwhile. So long as there is laughter in the theatre, the farce will continue to seek more and greater sources of laughter while appearing only to enjoy them.

Toward a definition of farce

The difficulty in attempting a definition of farce is the frequent contradictory points of view expressed in the literature. This has been particularly evident in this study which seeks definition by deduction. Such arguments began with the initial question of whether farce can be defined. Tate responded negatively and Matthews positively. Tate said there were no rules to be prescribed, no pattern to copy and that farce was altogether the creation of imagination. He then retired from commenting on farce hopeful that someone would prove him wrong.

It took two hundred years and Brander Matthews to dispute Tate's assertion. Matthews insisted that farce was an art with laws of its own which he later elaborated. His writing was a pioneering venture to describe the farce but it fell short of definition, perhaps wisely.

Generally speaking, farce has meant what it does now though this has remained a superficial understanding of the genre. There has never been, nor is there today, a consistent use of the term. There have been few earnest attempts at definition and even fewer detailed studies of farce. It is not merely oversight that has created this situation but an attitude of avoidance. Having seen no definition, Nahum Tate declined to be the first to venture a definition. Even today Professor Gassner expresses a common attitude: "I am not at all sure that an absolute definition can be arrived at."[47]

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[47]Quoted from a letter to this writer dated Jan. 9, 1966.

Another problem that obstructs definition is the misinformation and vagueness so prevalent today. Specialized reference books such as drama dictionaries and handbooks frequently appear with oversimplified and meaningless definitions and descriptions that distort and mislead. Several examples are included here to illustrate the problem.

Sobel's The Theatre Handbook, which has provided assistance to the theatre student since 1950, defines farce as follows:

> A comedy designed only for entertainment and laughter. There is no serious or sincere attempt to depict character nor is there genuine concern with probabilities or realities. A farce does not intend to be convincing--only amusing.[48]

Sobel defers for his authority to Dryden whose indifference to and prejudice against farce we have already discussed. The only credit we can extend Sobel is that he chose a different and more detailed Dryden source than did Samuel Johnson. The definition in Johnson's Dictionary reads as follows: "A dramatick representation written without regularity."[49]

Wilfred Granville's A Dictionary of Theatrical Terms published in 1952 recognizes the nature of the farce interlude but defines the farce in these meaningless terms: "Short for farcical comedy, which is played at a quicker tempo and on broader lines than pure comedy."[50]

Theatre Language by Bowman and Ball comes slightly closer to the farce but persists in ambiguity: "A broadly humorous dramatic composition, or a portion of one, which is based on improbable situations and is unsubtle in

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[48]Bernard Sobel, The Theatre Handbook (New York: Crown, 1950), p. 337.

[49]Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language 11th ed. (London: Printed for J. Johnson, etc., 1799).

[50]Wilfred Granville, A Dictionary of Theatrical Terms (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1952), p. 73.

idea or characterization."[51]

The effects of such reference sources on the general reader are several and are undesirable. Such vagueness cannot possibly assist to a better understanding of farce. The numerous omissions only compound the inaccuracy of what ought to be reliable sources. The indifference or prejudice reflected in such definitions can only confirm the long-standing but erroneous belief that farce is inferior drama. Such bias is inexcusable in sources designed to assist the reader and the theatre student.

Certain developments in the 20th century have further complicated the problem of defining farce in modern American drama. Haberman's study identified and elaborated this problem most effectively.

First, there was the stigma of farce which was felt by many playwrights. As a result they intentionally mislabeled their plays usually billing them as comedies. A second development was the growing practice of employing press agents to handle advertising matter for theatre producers. These publicists frequently eschewed precise terminology in favor of catch-all terms or intentional distortions. It should be understood that these men, while well qualified in promotion and persuasion, were generally unschooled in theatre history and a knowledge of the dramatic forms.

A third development could be charged against many of the popular playwrights. Haberman claims that these men, unfamiliar with the history or characteristics of the genre, unintentionally mixed forms and thus watered down the definition. To the dramatic purist this would represent a capital offense, but the creation of a fine dramatic work seems far more desirable than the preservation of a definition.

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[51]Walter Parker Bowman and Robert Hamilton Ball, Theatre Language (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), p. 131.

The fourth development has been mentioned earlier in this study. Critics were often guilty of confusing comedy and farce and of interchanging the terms when discussing the plays they were reviewing. Whether the reason was indifference, ignorance, prejudice or vengeance, the confusing effect was the same. These are a few of the reasons that explain our lack of a clear definition of farce.

Our purpose now is to compose a concise and meaningful definition of farce. Throughout the preceding portion of this study we have attempted to analyze and describe the true nature of farce. Where disagreement has occurred we have attempted to make objective choices and to verify our position. It seems logical at this point to bring together the several aspects of the nature of farce in order to deduce an accurate definition. Central to this definition will be the primary elements of situation and plot and the primary purpose which is laughter.

Farce, in essence, is the drama of cumulative and improbably compounded situations. From the initial situation on, the plot, as it develops, becomes filled or "stuffed" with incidents and complications--a piling up of coincidences. In good farce these situations become incredibly complex and imaginative.

The plot is constructed much like the anecdote or the joke. It is filled with broad and exaggerated humor, a kind of joking turned theatrical. It is concluded with the climax or the "punch-line."

The rising action becomes a complicated structure of absurdities that are accumulated for laughs. The direction must always be upward as the rapid sequence of scenes bring a constant series of laughs. Here again plotting is crucial as the juxtaposition of one scene with the next must produce "a continual roar of merriment," as Nicoll described it. To achieve this requires an ingenious and complex set of inter-

relationships designed to advance the action and produce laughter. Krutch insists that nobody gets out of one scrape before he gets into another. We might add that the audience is hardly finished with one laugh before they are given another.

In terms of complication, the obstacles that present themselves throughout the farce are usually commonplace or of a low order. Low, in this sense, refers to the comic effect as measured by Thompson's comic scale of wit and it includes: (1) the shock of surprise of indecency; (2) the physical action or upsets; (3) the plotting or comic effects that arise from the plot and; (4) wit or the verbal comic effects. These are listed in ascending order and in increasing subtlety and constitute the areas in which farce is found.

Farce begins by accepting the ordinary and everyday. Bentley says: ". . . while it begins by accepting the bland, placid, imposing facade of life, [it] proceeds to become farcical by knocking the facade down."[52] In The Law of the Drama (1894), Brunetiere defined farce by considering the obstacles against which the will struggles. "Locate the obstacle in the irony of fortune, or in the ridiculous aspect of prejudice, or in the disproportion between the means and the end."

Climax then, whether major or minor, brings resolution by chance and not by human will or choice. Because farce characters cannot or do not bring about the result, Clayton Hamilton and others have called farce the most irresponsible of all types of drama, avoiding social and moral responsibilities. Since the will of character does not determine the resolution, Hurrell's view that these characters ingeniously adapt and adjust to resolution and other crises seems valid and descriptive. In farce, as in life, man is being tested and he usually demonstrates his ability to set his house

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[52]Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", p. xv.

straight after adversity. Carmer's description of Kaufman farces seems applicable to farces in general:

> The unpleasant complications which confront the character as a result of his stupidity are completely overcome at the end of the play with a magnificent stroke of luck, frequently occasioned by this very thick-headedness.[53]

Luck, chance, circumstance but not human will or choice determine the resolution of farce.

With more attention focused on situation and less on characters, the farce has greater audience detachment with little concern for illusion. Interest centers in intrigue rather than in character. This emotional detachment predominates over audience identification. Nadeau has claimed that farce is pure to the degree that it is void of emotional audience involvement.

The situations in farce are filled with ludicrous, unexpected incidents and usually move quickly from a probable opening situation to a series of completely improbable situations. These situations are usually exaggerated to the extent that they are absurd, unusual and highly improbable and coincidence is readily accepted. Nardin suggested an alternative or the "height of absurdity" when a serious situation is treated lightly.

O'Hara and Bro use "impossible" as an adjective describing the type of situation which may occur but this is incorrect. As Hurrell points out, the impossible suggests fantasy and that is rarely the province of farce.

The complications, either major or minor, and the catastrophe stress external incident. The climax is unexpected or consists of a number of unexpected happenings or surprises. To shock by use of the unexpected has long been a staple of farce.

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[53]Carmer, op. cit., p. 160.

Situations can be both logical and illogical. They frequently begin logically and then develop quite illogically, or after accepting certain initial illogical improbabilities they then proceed in a life-like and logical manner. Wilder claims farce is based on logic and objectivity which is half true. The author may ask the audience to concede two or three wild initial improbabilities but thereafter he must proceed with rigorous consequence. From a slightly different view Hurrell observes that the improbability may exist in the fact that situations are carried to their logical conclusions.

Rapid and vigorous physical action abound in the farce situation. This action is often achieved through a comparatively crude technique of exaggeration and slapstick performance. The common-type characters of farce often appear automated or machine-like. Matthews likened them to puppets on strings.

The purpose of farce is to evoke laughter, which provides the stimulus for a comic catharsis. The laughter that provides this healthy release tends to purge our emotions of worry, scorn and spiteful instincts and at least momentarily terminate our sorrow. With our hostilities vicariously vented, our mental and emotional beings are returned to a balance.

The truly distinguished farce may contain excellent wit but relies primarily upon situation. The conversations of many average farces are often senseless but humorous.

Farce is capable of satire, usually of a broad and boisterous nature. While satire may provide the machine for plot, its role is subordinate to laughter. With laughter its foremost objective, the farce continues to be quite naturally the popular theatre. Its appeal is massive because its law is amusement before instruction. Its obvious simplicity can charm with unpretentiousness. It requires little subtlety or intelligence to perceive and goes about

its mischief with child-like abandon.

Farce usually lacks literary significance for its purpose can only be achieved on stage. Of all the dramatic genres, the farce is the most theatrical.

The above summary has been developed out of the total analysis that preceded it. Contributing to this were the numerous descriptions and definitions from the past and the present. It represents this writer's efforts to analyze and correlate these expressions. The detailed descriptions of some sixty writers have been coordinated with the observations and ideas of numerous other theatre practitioners, scholars, critics, and historians to evolve this work.

The definition of farce which follows represents a composite of critical opinion. It reflects the most meaningful and convincing observations that are available. Needless to say, the vast majority of theatre literature available today contributes little or nothing to the discussion of farce. The need for a definition that is both understandable and accurate has long been overdue. The major focus of this study can be terminated in these three sentences.

FARCE IS THE POPULAR DRAMA (OR THEATRE) OF LAUGHTER CREATED BY SITUATIONS THAT PROGRESS FROM SIMPLE TO WILDLY COMPLICATED, FROM PROBABLE TO GROSSLY EXAGGERATED AND ARE FILLED WITH LUDICROUS UNEXPECTED INCIDENTS AND RAPID VISUAL ACTION. THE AUDIENCE OBSERVES COMMONPLACE CHARACTER TYPES WITH AN EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT THAT IS DEDICATED TO A COMIC CATHARSIS. FARCE HAS BEEN AND IS CAPABLE OF A BROAD AND BOLD TYPE OF SATIRE.

The detailed qualifications necessary in most definitions have all preceded this point. If there is merit in this definition it belongs to those whose convictions and serious thoughts have gone into this work. It is the hope of this writer that the definition offered here may assist others in serious research of the neglected farce.

CHAPTER V

THE FARCE TECHNIQUE: BASIC DEVICES

In defining farce we have established the limits of the term under study. We have described the genre by its properties and the farce play by its attributes. We have placed the farce into a class where it belongs and enumerated the marks of traits which distinguish it from other members of the comic theatre. And yet no matter how simple, positive, hard and fast this definition may be, we must admit with Josiah Royce that it cannot tell the whole truth about a concept.

If we know more precisely what farce is, should we not seek out the methods used by the farceur to achieve his goal? The question posed a necessary and logical next step in this study: to focus our attention on the farce technique.

With production as the basic requirement for farce, the contributions of the producer and the performer are as significant as that of the playwright. The play script requires the complementary techniques of skilled performers and directors in order to realize the complete farce which demands production in the theatre before an audience to reach full expression.

Hatlen has suggested that the theories and devices of farce are the same as those of comedy except on a more elementary level.[1] This is admittedly true because the writer of comedy seeks comic ideas, characters, situations and dialogue as a method through which he can make human observations and comment upon them. His humor and comic devices are more subtle, restrained and probable for he is bound more closely to reality.

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[1]Hatlen, op. cit., p. 130.

His comic techniques are tempered by the seriousness of the folly he exposes and the precision of his corrective point.

In writing farce the playwright seeks first to provoke laughter through the broadest situational intrigues and developments he can imagine. He finds few restrictions because his purpose is fundamentally to make us laugh. The full spectrum of comic theory is at his disposal and every comic convention of the past awaits him. The farce writer is limited only by his own experiences, imagination and ingenuity.

The word "device" appears frequently throughout theatre literature with some few varied meanings. Ironically, throughout this vast source of material the term is never defined, apparently because of its somewhat obvious meaning. "Device" implies an ingenuity or cleverness of invention and, as it is used here, the "farce device" or "device of farce" means the contrivance, the gadget, the tool, the trick or the technique described in the script or observed on the stage to evoke laughter. The actor, the director and the playwright contribute within the bounds of their immediate responsibilities.

We will assume that, for this study at least, a farce device is a method or technique used originally by the playwright to achieve his purpose of laughter. The device naturally arises first out of the playwright's work but both the director and the actor can contribute original devices of their own to supplement those found in the script. The director's and the actor's methods or techniques of arousing laughter can also be identified as farce devices but where these are not critically and adequately observed, recorded or described, there is little that can be concluded.

When we isolate or identify something as a farce device we must bear several things in mind. First, the device is being used primarily for farce purposes and thus we label it a farce device. It is obviously true that a farce device will be found both in farce and in farcical scenes in all other

forms of theatre. We find farcical scenes abounding in serious drama either for comic relief or extending character dimension or for various other reasons. Their inclusion need not alter the identification of dramatic type nor does it necessarily reduce the effectiveness and purpose of the play itself. A farce device then may be found in any type of drama but would naturally appear with greater frequency and variety within farce itself. Conversely, the play that employs a majority of farce devices should be called a farce.

Secondly, a farce device may be characterized not only by purpose but by mode of perception. A device may direct itself to aural perception, visual perception or both. With so much of farce exploiting the physical aspects of man and its strong reliance on visual humor, it is not surprising that eight of the nine devices involve visual perception. Because of these different stimuli we initiate the organization of farce devices in two broad areas that may operate independently or dependently and simultaneously: aural devices and visual devices.

Aural devices provide an auditory stimulus primarily through dialogue and sounds. They generate almost exclusively from the playwright and act upon the intellect, consciously or subconsciously. Because the farce dialogue is the most abundant in numbers and involves the greatest complexities, it will be treated first.

Visual devices originate basically in actions and appearances which create a visual stimulus. The devices of violent physical action, stage tricks or business, and exaggerated stage properties can function independently and appear primarily as visual devices. The remaining devices most commonly operate as both aural and visual devices of farce.

Though this organization may seem loosely contrived, its value may lie in its simplicity.

The devices used in this study represent an attempt to

place the many various techniques into some common structure and simplified order from which they can be viewed more meaningfully. As such it represents a beginning to the ordering of farce devices. It does not claim to be all-inclusive and definitive nor are the devices mutually exclusive. There has been no attempt to force any stated technique into one or another of the categories.

The nine basic farce devices presented here provide a set of fundamental techniques or methods of farce. They were inspired by and originated with Professor Leo Hughes' devices found in A Century of English Farce.[2] Other basic devices were added which expanded and elaborated on the original devices to make them more universally applicable. A compilation of implicit and explicit views and descriptions developed from a broad cross-section of comic theatre. Examples and illustrations were also compiled in an effort to identify, define and organize the basic devices proposed herein. We will now proceed to the techniques of farce and observe the basic farce devices.

1. Farce dialogue

George Pierce Baker defined the chief purpose of dialogue in a brief phrase: ". . . to convey necessary information clearly."[3] Good dialogue is kindled by feeling and made

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[2]Hughes' second chapter, "Structure and Devices" (pp. 21-59), contains a detailed discussion of five devices and their variations: (1) Concealment--disguise, (2) Repetition, (3) Violent physical action, (4) Extravagant stage properties, (5) Exaggerated or overdrawn characters. Hughes acknowledges first the episodic nature of farce with no unity except of purpose, which is laughter. Episodes are linked together primarily by common characters. The structure of the farce consists of the framework and the details: the framework composed of a chase containing the many intrigues; and the details consisting of the farce devices, "the real stuff of farce."

[3]Baker, op. cit., p. 309.

alive by the emotion of the speaker. Clarity, compression and naturalness are the usual technical qualities of dialogue according to John Howard Lawson. He adds:

> Speech is a kind of action, a compression and extension of action. . . . Dialogue enables the playwright to extend the action over the wide range of events which constitutes the play's framework.[4]

This identifies the chief functions of most dialogue as seen by two great teachers of playwriting. It may also help us to understand the difference between structural dialogue and farce dialogue. The former conveys needed information and extends the action of the play. The latter provokes laughter and may be defined as the speech utterance which contains humor in the form of jokes, puns, wisecracks, sounds and many other forms for the primary purpose of provoking laughter.

Since dialogue of one sort or another is found from beginning to end in a play, it should not be surprising that the frequency of the farce dialogue device will be greater than any other single farce device. In several representative modern farces the percentage of farce dialogue devices found averaged over sixty percent of the total of all devices.[5] In other words, approximately two-thirds of the devices identified in these plays involved farce dialogue. While this was not a precisely controlled scientific survey, it did modestly support the preponderant use of this device.

One statement must be added here about the performer of farce which has relevance to both writer and performer. The

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[4]John Howard Lawson, Theory and Technique of Playwriting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 288.

[5]The analysis involved the identification of each instance in which one of the nine basic farce devices appeared in the following plays: Cradle Snatchers, Stepping Sisters, Boy Meets Girl, Three Men on a Horse, Turn to the Right, The Man Who Came to Dinner, The Bat, Fair and Warmer, The Gold Diggers, and The Demi-Virgin.

utterance of the comic line must be as exacting as the content of that line. The actor's ability to deliver the comic line, his sense of pace and timing, is crucial to the intended purpose.

The accompanying physical movement or business of the actor contributes further to the effect. From another aspect the director's plan and execution of these factors relate significantly to the end result. An actor's relative position on stage and his physical appearance and posture, also a part of the director's responsibility, must and does determine when a given comic line will provoke the response of laughter. In this sense, the author's script containing numerous farce dialogue devices relies heavily upon the director and the actor to fulfil its purpose.

We must also be aware that in the invention of his play the playwright does not concern himself to any degree with one or all of the farce devices. His imagination may conjure up the incident or scene he wishes to portray with or without a specific awareness or conscious intent to use certain farce devices. As a result we find farce dialogue co-existing with other devices.

Sheridan Whiteside's insulting remarks to his nurse, Miss Preen, in The Man Who Came to Dinner may illustrate this best. The use of farce dialogue of the wisecrack variety is numerous within the first scene:

> "Great dribbling cow!" (Offstage to Preen)
> "Doesn't that bird-brain of yours ever function?" (Offstage)
> "You move like a brokendown truck horse!" (Offstage)
> "Will you take your clammy hands off my chair? You have the touch of a sex-starved cobra!" (Offstage)
> "Go in and read the life of Florence Nightingale and learn how unfit you are for your chosen profession."
> "What do you want now, Miss Bed Pan?"
> "My Great-aunt Jennifer ate a whole box of candy every day of her life. She lived to be a hundred and two, and when she had been dead three days she looked better than you do now."

Even in such a minimal relationship as that of Whiteside and his nurse, the compounding of devices can clearly be seen. In addition to the farce dialogue device so evident, we can see the device of repetition as Preen is repeatedly insulted. The above quoted lines are spread over thirteen pages in the acting text. Incongruity is evident as the famous critic belittles a lowly nurse, as he returns insult for kindness, and as the varied descriptions do not fit the neatly uniformed Miss Preen. The fact that she takes his insults so seriously and frustratingly redoubles her effort touches on the exaggeration of character device as well. Most of these lines, actions and reactions occur simultaneously and we, therefore, cannot be certain of what really triggers the laugh. One thing is certain and it is that laughter results from these lines in this brilliant farce.

The variety of sub-divisions that fall under the broad heading of farce dialogue devices may be independently augmented by each individual who reads it. It will also be noted that many of the sub-types are capable of added variations. With this in mind we will proceed to describe, without concern for order, the varied examples and illustrations of farce dialogue devices.

(1) Simple types of wit including the pun.

Example: "He took fourteen hundred dollars from Sam Goldwyn at cribbage last night, and Sam said, "Banjo, I will never play garbage with you again.""

The Man Who Came to Dinner

(2) The use of extravagant and affected language.

Example: "There, my beloved--repose your agitated anatomy!"

The Double-Bedded Room

(3) Repetition through interlinked dialogue.

Example: "Emily: But who are you, sir? and what do you want?
Fanny: Yes, sir, what do you want, sir? and who are you?"

Grimshaw, Bagshaw and Bradshaw

(4) Verbal slip of the tongue.

Example: "It's too much--it's much too much!--a tet-a-tet with a one-horse woman, in a fly--I mean with a fly with a one-horse woman!--No, that's not it.--With a woman, in a one-horse fly!"

Lend Me Five Shillings

(5) The interjection of a casual or incidental remark into a conversation.

Example: "I'll tell the man where to drive to, my dear. Mind how you get in; you're holding the child upside down! Mind you tell old Burley how distressed I am I can't come. Good-bye."

If I Had a Thousand a Year

(6) Incongruity of or the building up for an unexpected punch line.

Example: "Now the very great majority of people I'm ashamed to say, would instantly have picked that pocket-book up--which is exactly what I did."

Who Stole the Pocket-Book

(7) The use of the trivial.

Example: In discussing the merits of a suitor whose name is Tompkins (spelled with a p) Tipthorpe (with an e) the conversation ends with--"Ah, I see; that accounts for it; but, I say, what with an admiral for an uncle, and a p to his Tompkins, to say nothing of an e to his Tipthorpe, I'm only afraid he'll consider himself a cut above the daughter of a nurseryman."

Catch a Weazel

(8) Repeating cant phrases.

Example: "Divorces are made in Heaven--," ". . . in married life three is company and two is none," and "The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact."

The Importance of Being Earnest.

(9) Verbal duels.

Example: "Wagtail: "Kindness", and "attention!" Oh, yes--of course. (humming) Ri-tum-tiddy iddy-ri-tum!"

Bobtail: What do you mean by "Ri-tum-tiddy iddy?" I insist on your explaining your "Ri-tum-tiddy iddy!" What do you mean?"

My Precious Betsy

(10) Extended verbal duels.

Example: Almost all of John Morton's Box and Cox except for scenes with Mrs. Bouncer

(11) Contrasts between what is said and the real intent.

Example: "Go before I do you a serious mischief" and "I shall do you a frightful injury."

Box and Cox

(12) Excessive verbosity when bluntness or action would be more normal.

Example: "Halloa-Halloa! young woman, when you're quite done joggling the table, perhaps you'll leave off; indeed, when I tell you I am trying to marry (in his writing of a novel) the youthful Frederick to the Lady Clementina, the necessity for your leaving off joggling the table must, I am sure, be evident enough."

Master Jones's Birthday

(13) Elaborate puns and lengthy dialogues which set up simultaneous and separate meanings for the participants.

Example: (a reference to stock markets creates this misunderstanding--):

"Chaffington: I mean things are not brisk, for instance, mines are down.

Green: Of course they are; a very longway down, some of 'em.

Chaffington: Canals are stationary; Gas, by no means, brilliant.

Green: Ours is shocking bad up here!"

If I Had a Thousand a Year

(14) Name-forgetting and mispronunciation repeatedly. Example: Lt. O'Scupper repeatedly forgets Felix Fluffey's name in Morton's Love in the Tropics and throughout the play calls him Duffey, Guffey, Muffey, Snuffey, and Puffey. Often dialogue is interrupted to correct the error.

(15) Use of the aside. Audience directly given the real thoughts of the participant and a knowing wink or rib poking gesture frequently accompanies the speech.

Many of the previous illustrations are the contribution of Richard Arnold[6] in his study of the farces of John Maddison Morton. Lea[7] suggests the following devices common to commedia dell'arte and the English stage:

(16) Direct address to the audience (Different from the condition and presentation of the aside).

(17) Use of a dialect.

(18) Use of parody and mistaken word. Latter sometimes occurs as a malapropism.

The manner of delivery and method of utterance remains crucial to all of these devices and it will be particularly important for the remaining devices which follow.

(19) Rapid alternations of questions and answers.

(20) Abusive and insulting expressions. The preceding lines from The Man Who Came to Dinner exemplify this.

(21) Imitating or mocking the speech of another.

(22) Use of vulgarisms or swearing.

(23) Use of epigram or aphorism.

Example: "It is an embarrassing thing to break a bust in the house of comparative strangers."

Pinero's The Schoolmistress.

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[6]Richard L. Arnold, "A Study of Comic Techniques in the Farces of John Maddison Morton", Western Speech Journal, Vol. XXIX (Winter, 1965), pp. 22-27.

[7]Lea, op. cit., p. 405.

(24) Use of wisecrack. Usually a phrase or a sentence of which brevity is the soul and body.
Example: Seeing the laundry room filled with mountains of soapsuds in Mister Roberts, Ensign Pulver exclaims, "It's a Winter Wonderland!"

In some instances the device relies more on the utterance and accompanying sounds than upon the strict dialogue that is spoken.

(25) Funny sounds of certain words like "Oshkosh" and "Gorgonzola."

(26) Build speech to a breathless state, gasp for air, and then speak the last word or the gag or punch line.

(27) After completing a speech, gasp and laugh or produce a throaty laugh. The effect of this can be to start or "kick" a laugh in the audience.

(28) Mocking the laugh of another, ending with a grunt, groan or cry.

(29) Grunts, groans, hissings and belchings given before, during or after a speech.

Beyond the sounds that emanate from the actor are the sounds of music and a variety of special effects used to provoke laughter. "Sound effects . . . have almost the same characteristic factors as human speech, being restricted only partially by the nature of the actual sound they imitate."[8] Albright's view seems to support the inclusion of sound effects under this aural device. It may not be an example of farce dialogue but it hardly appears significant enough for a device or category of its own. We include it here because of its auditory stimulus in the following forms.

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[8]H. D. Albright, William P. Halstead and Lee Mitchell. Principles of Theatre Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1955), p. 397.

(30) Musical comment to a scene, an action or dialogue. An example of this can be found in Three Men on a Horse, where such orchestra selections as "My Little Gray Home in the West", "Happy Days Are Here Again", "Some One of These Days", "All Alone", "It's the Talk of the Town" and "Horses" are played before and between scenes to make their comic point.

(31) Musical background such as "Hearts and Flowers" or "Home, Sweet Home" played to a sad scene for comic effects.

(32) Comic sound effects like the explosion of fireworks in You Can't Take It With You, the blasting underfoot in My Sister Eileen, or the numerous doorslams in The Servant of Two Masters. There are numerous effects that might be listed here but a few of the more common would be sounds of automobile crashes, glass breaking, tires or brakes squeeling, toilet flushing, birdcalls and door chimes.

Many other sub-types could be listed under the farce dialogue device and the preceding list represents only a broad sample of some of the most characteristic or typical ones found in farce. Even though these examples are perceived through our auditory senses and can be considered strictly aural devices, they are and should be most often found intertwined with other farce devices. One can surely see by virtue of its breadth and variety why the farce dialogue device is the first and possibly most important of all farce devices.

2. Violent physical action

This basic farce device employs all types and degrees of gross physical action, usually in the spirit of playfulness or suggesting pain or discomfort, for the prime purpose of arousing laughter. Found in the playwright's stage directions and dialogue, it depends finally on the director and actor in performance for precise execution.

With its major focus on action and movement the farce has consistently specialized in visual humor. In fact, the art

of slapstick has virtually become the signature of farce. The term "slapstick" incorporates both the devices of violent physical action and stage tricks or broad acting business for it means a fast, boisterous and zany physical activity combined with horseplay.

The sense of this action is well expressed by Lea in describing the pace of commedia dell'arte playing: ". . . comedy broke into a trot which quickened every now and then into a galloping farce."[9] Perhaps an even more vivid description is suggested by Hatlen: "In the journalistic fare of the theatre, farce is the comic strip of the Zam-Bang-Powie school."[10]

Violent physical action has always been a staple of farce on stage and it was to become equally important to the movie industry near the turn of the century. Stuart describes a thirty-second movie made in 1895 by the Lumiere brothers showing the watering of a lawn, a child stepping on the hose, the gardener looking into the hose nozzle, the child stepping off and the gardener getting wet. "That burst of water signaled the marriage of the infant motion-picture industry to the ancient art of slapstick." Thus the screen farce was born which ultimately gave us Mack Sennett and the Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, and W. C. Fields.

> In the new medium, it was possible to capture a considerable breadth of comic action in any locale, to focus attention on the smallest significant detail, and to combine the resultant pieces of film in whatever lengths and whatever sequences might be necessary to create the maximum comic effect. The result was a comedy form that has extracted more laughter from

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[9]Lea, op. cit., p. 179.

[10]Hatlen, op. cit., p. 128.

more people than any other amusement ever devised with the possible exception of tickling.[11]

Farce action in film was characterized by Mack Sennett as "controlled pandemonium", a phrase that aptly describes the farce action on stage. Charles Hoyt, whose farces, with or without music, broadly satirized contemporary events, held much the same view as Sennett. His comic formula required as many doors as a stage set could support and the thrusting of comic-strip characters in and out at maximum speed. Alan Downer credits the American farces of the 1930's with fantastically fast action, considerable door banging, exits through windows, and hiding in closets and under beds, only slightly more excessive than those of the Restoration.[12]

Supporting the farce device of violent physical action are two comic theories. They were jointly identified by the master of the device, Charlie Chaplin: ". . . playful pain-as you say-that is what humor is. The minute a thing is overtragic it is funny."[13] Certainly this device requires a playful attitude which Eastman emphasized in his analysis of laughter. The act of violence cannot cause suffering in either the performer or the spectator. Either result would destroy the atmosphere of play and laughter. In addition to playful attitude, the fear of cruelty or brutality can be as potent in evoking laughter as the fact. Blistein quotes Buster Keaton as saying, "The best way to get a laugh is to create a genuine thrill and then relieve the tension with comedy."[14] The comic

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[11]Walker Stuart, "A Slapstick Renaissance", The Reporter (Nov. 5, 1964), p. 40.

[12]Alan S. Downer, Fifty Years of American Drama, 1900-1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 130.

[13]Eastman, op. cit., p. 331.

[14]Blistein, op. cit., p. 60.

chase illustrates this best, especially when the crack-up at the end is avoided. The chase is one example but anything suggesting pain or discomfort that is done "in fun" can provoke laughter and some illustrations follow.

Dougald MacMillan states in the Dictionary of World Literature that: ". . . of the physical action three types have been developed, farcically denominated suicidal, fatricidal, homicidal."[15] In the suicidal type, the actor is the victim of his own practical joke. A confederate or "stooge" receives the custard pie in the face in the fatricidal type of farce action. This assistant often appears in the audience as an innocent and unsuspecting spectator. The third or homicidal type directly involves the audience, according to MacMillan, as when Olsen and Johnson would invite three men and three women onstage and offer prizes in a race for the women to remove the men's undershirts. These distinctions of types seem useless for any purpose other than the application of terms that describe. The homicidal type, as MacMillan describes it, does not affect the farce drama but appears to describe the farce action found in variety shows, extravaganza and audience participation programs of various types.

The following examples of the violent physical action device in farce only serve to illustrate some variations to be found within its limitations.

(1) The chase. The speeding up of human behavior so it seems less human and more automated is a well known device which brought fame and fortune to screen favorites like Sennett, Chaplin, Fields and many others. Bentley has called it the pride and glory of the Keystone Cops and cited the plots of An Italian Straw Hat and Charlie's Aunt each as one long pretext for flight and pursuit.

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[15]MacMillan, op. cit., p. 236.

Leo Hughes described the chase as the ideal thread which held together the various episodes within the farce. He saw it also as the motivation for introducing the devices of concealment, repetition, and violent physical action that are so basic to farce:

> The chase has the advantage of providing suspense without at the same time distracting our attention too much from the discrete episodes. At the same time it allows the dramatist to maintain a pace too fast for the leisurely examination which the wildest flights of fancy do not readily survive.[16]

Though the pursuit and evasion of the chase was not widely used in Restoration farce, it saw its fullest development in the film farce which has given way today to the animated cartoon on screen and television. Animated or human, the chase characteristically finds the knees and feet high in much effort with the feet literally spinning before starting and many missed turns in the course of pursuit. Probably the earliest extant chase in dramatic literature is the brilliant one found in Aristophanes' The Birds.

(2) Headlong flights. Apart from the chase, this type of action frequently involves comical movements in which the actor moves across or about the stage in wide sweeps or s-curves at high speeds taking long strides. This was the chief trick of George M. Cohan. With the head held high and holding a side or profile pose while moving, the actor steps high and leads with his elbow extended.

(3) Comic fights and duels. One of the most familiar examples of this device is the farcical duel between Viola and Sir Andrew Aguecheek in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. In another illustration Arnold describes a different type of ludicrous struggle in Morton's A Most Unwarrantable Intrusion:

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[16]Hughes, op. cit., p. 25.

> Snoozle follows the Intruder around the room putting back in order the elegant furnishings that the Intruder is upsetting. When the Intruder begins to pry into a drawer of a large round table, Snoozle removes the drawer from his reach by turning the revolving table a half turn. The Intruder continues to annoy his host by dropping muffins in the fish bowl on the other half of the table. This forces Snoozle to revolve the table top another half turn which again returns the drawer to the Intruder's side of the table. When the precocious Intruder grabs for the drawer handle again, Snoozle violently pulls the table away which completely removes the drawer from the table and causes a mass of letters, papers, and other contents to fall out.[17]

This type of action needs little more elaboration because of the variety of familiar illustrations that exist throughout dramatic literature. Again, the suggestion of pain and violence done "in fun" provides the humor in this device.

(4) Comic beatings, spankings and other violence. The kick which flattens a stooping man, the blow which levels another character and similar acts are also numerous in farces of all ages. Perhaps the classic illustration of this device appears in Aristophanes' The Frogs when the god, Dionysus, and his servant Xanthias have exchanged identities on their way to Hades and must absorb a series of beatings to prove their identities. They exclaim, cry out and shout verse to avoid complaining from the beating they receive. In The Tricks of Scapin, Moliere devised a scene where the servant hides his master, Geronte, in a sack and then proceeds to beat him pretending to be an imaginary enemy. The humor appears to be multiplied in such scenes when the beating falls on the master rather than the servant.

(5) Comic tumbles and pratfalls. The fall, or near fall, of a fat man caused by a rug, step, bar of soap, or

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[17]Arnold, op. cit., p. 24.

banana peel has consistently provoked laughter. The comic possibilities are considerably enhanced when the recipient, from pompous politician to sanctimonious puritan, deserves chastisement for his antisocial behavior.

(6) Pie in the face. This age-old device and its many variations have been a stock-in-trade item of farce. The current practitioner is Soupy Sales whose antics and pie-smeared face appear regularly on television. Hughes declares that:

> While it may not be necessary to go the whole way with the Hobbesian view /Derision theory/ that laughter is essentially scornful and triumphant, it must be admitted that there is a disposition to find enjoyment in the physical discomfort of the buffoon who has a pie thrown in his face or is knocked sprawling or is covered with soot.[18]

Variations of this device include the mock-shaving trick in which a painful shave is administered to the victim while stealing his money. In some instances the shave is concluded by powdering the face with soot, flour or snuff. In other variations the victim has water--or more offensive liquids-- thrown on him or he is dunked in a well.

(7) The practical joke. This device can and usually does involve physical action that is violent. Blistein calls it a form of: ". . . cruelty that frequently causes laughter."[19] While our present sophistication causes us to insist that we frown, not laugh, at practical jokes, the overwhelming majority of us will laugh when we see one. The practical joke, literary or non-literary, deals with physical and emotional pain and has been a staple from Aristophanes' The Clouds through Shakespeare's Love's Labors Lost to Sam and

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[18]Hughes, op. cit., p. 50.

[19]Blistein, op. cit., p. 59.

Bella Spewack's Kiss Me, Kate! Blistein sees them differing only in degree and not in kind. In such instances the pain is not permanent and the hurt is in fun with the pompous deflated, the rascal rewarded and the only serious damage inflicted on pride.

Many types of violent physical action have occurred as a result of accidental or unexpected incidents which happened during a performance. Such incidents or actions have frequently remained in the performance when they produced more laughter than the planned action. The actor accidentally falling into the orchestra pit or a piece of scenery or stage prop toppling on some one's head has produced such lively response that it became a permanent incident in the farce production.

The variety of violent physical action devices have only been sampled here but this device remains the most significant visual technique of the farce and depends almost exclusively for effectiveness on the director and his actors.

3. Stage tricks or broad business: the lazzi

This basic farce device is probably the oldest of all the devices and is a principle contribution of the actor. It can be defined as the actor's stage business or "by-play", both planned and improvised, which may contribute to the action of the farce episode or exist independent of that action, but which constantly seeks to provoke laughter.

The term lazzo (most familiar form of word is plural--lazzi), from the Italian commedia dell'arte, is helpful in describing the device. Professor Hughes actually calls these acting details or pieces of stage business, lazzi and credits it as "the real stuff of farce."[20]

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[20] Ibid., p. 24.

Professor Nicoll devotes several pages to the discussion and illustration of lazzi. Though the derivation of the term is not clear, Nicoll insists that there existed both verbal lazzi and action lazzi, the latter usually rough and tumble. "The lazzi were simply scenes of action independent of the episodes outlined in the scenario."[21] They usually varied in type and degree from a scene in which two guards allow a prisoner, on his way to prison, to tie his shoelace and he grabs their legs, throws them over and escapes, to another scene involving the famous clown, Harlequin:

> . . . Harlequin interrupts the scene /Scapin, a servant explaining to Flaminia, the mistress, a plan to prevent Harlequin from leaving/ with different lazzi; sometimes he pretends that his hat is full of cherries, which he feigns to eat and the stones of which he pretends to pitch at Scapin's face; sometimes he makes show of catching a fly, of clipping off its wings in a comic manner, and of eating it; and so on.[22]

By our standards today, such crude bits of business may seem absurd. They seem to have been present since the folk farces of antiquity and have developed by borrowing from many other devices. Stephenson called it: ". . . the reductio ad absurdum within the simple propositions of behavior."[23]

Hughes sensed this interrelationship so strongly that he refused to recognize stage tricks as a device. Instead he placed the devices of concealment and disguise, repetition, violent physical action, exaggerated stage properties and exaggerated or overdrawn character as the details which constituted the pieces of stage business or lazzi. Within

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[21]Allardyce Nicoll, Masks Mimes and Miracles (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1963), p. 219.

[22]Ibid., p. 220.

[23]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 90.

the limitations of his study this must be a tenable position but when we look beyond England and the Restoration to mid-eighteenth century there appears to be sufficient support to identify stage tricks and broad business as a farce device.

Typical of this device is the following list of "things that men laugh at" compiled in 1913 by George M. Cohan and George J. Nathan. They prefaced the list with a statement that these were found in cheap farce and slapstick plays as well as "legitimate drama."

1. Giving a man a resounding whack on the back under the guise of friendship. The laugh in this instance may be "built up" steadily in a climactic way by repeating the blow three times at intervals of several minutes.
2. A man gives a woman a whack on the back, believing in an absent-minded moment that the woman to whom he is talking is a man.
3. One character steps on the sore foot of another character, causing the latter to jump with pain.
4. The spectacle of a man laden with many large bundles.
5. A man or a woman starts to lean his or her elbow on a table or arm of a chair, the elbow slipping off abruptly and suddenly precipitating him or her forward.
6. One character imitating the walk of another character, who is walking in front of him and cannot see him.
7. A man consuming a drink of considerable size at one quick gulp.
8. A character who, on entering an "interior" or room scene, stumbles over a rug. If the character in point be of the "dignified" sort, the power of this laugh-provoker is doubled.
9. Intoxication in almost any form.
10. Two men in heated conversation. One starts to leave. Suddenly as if fearing the other will kick him while his back is turned, this man bends his body inward (as if he actually had

been kicked) and sidles off.

11. A man who, in trying to light his cigar or cigarette, strikes match after match in an attempt to keep one lighted. If the man throws each useless match vigorously to the floor with a muttered note of vexation the laugh will increase.
12. The use of a swear-word.
13. A man proclaims his defiance of his wife while the latter is presumably out of hearing. As the man is speaking, his wife's voice is heard calling him. Meekly he turns and goes to her. This device has many changes, such as employer and enployee. All are equally effective.
14. A pair of lovers who try several times to kiss and each time are interrupted by the entrance of someone or by the ringing of the doorbell or telephone-bell or something of the sort.
15. A bashful man and a not bashful woman are seated on a bench or divan. As the woman gradually edges up to the man, the man just as gradually edges away from her.[24]

Cohan and Nathan called these the "bag of tricks" or "tools of emotion" which an actor could employ. In addition to laughter, they listed some proven methods of producing thrills and a comparable list for producing tears. Their whole approach hinged on the idea that theatrical emotions were largely mechanical and that certain external stimuli make us think but after repetition we react to them as reflex actions, from the spinal cord rather than the brain.

Ruth Klein, in a directing text published in 1953, recognized that there were many "standardized devices or tricks of farce" and identified a few of the frequently used tricks as follows:

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[24]Cohan and Nathan, op. cit., pp. 75-76.

Gulp to show embarrassment.

Signaling to one person behind another's back and changing the signal when caught.

Two or more people sitting down, or getting up, crossing legs, folding arms in unison. Any action in unison can be made farcical.

Passing unwanted things, even people, from one to another.

Doing things in series--one at a time, two at a time, and so forth.

Pacing--alone or in pairs--in parallel or opposite directions.

Following close behind another who is pacing.

Stopping short in front of person following.

Bumping or tripping one another.

Imitating another's action with same intensity or with greater exaggeration or with timid restraint.

Almost sitting on the hat.

Two stooping to pick up something at same time with an Alphonse and Gaston sequence.

Handing person who is tearing things up, something of his own to tear up.

The guilty person discovering the feet of the one who has caught him and then letting his eyes go all the way up.[25]

In order to provide a better cross-section of illustrations the following examples of stage tricks and business have been gathered from widely varied sources:

Bend a servant or companion over and use his back as a writing surface.

After shaking hands, he shakes his hand clean.

Swing a sword, stick or bat back over the head and someone following takes it. Victim looks about, up sleeve or under coat for the lost object.

A frightened man runs and jumps into the arms of another man or sometimes a woman.

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[25]Ruth Klein, The Art and Technique of Play Directing (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1953), p. 62.

Biting the finger pointed at you.

Man tip-toeing after a woman.

Men bowing till one slaps the other and exits.

Kissing a lady's hand after which fingers walk up her arm. The kiss may follow.

Lighting a match on a baldhead.

Walking between two intended assailants with sticks or clubs and they brain each other.

Preparing to kiss a lady, he closes his eyes, the lady slips out and he moves in on nothing.

Further examples can be found in farces as well as in mime, burlesque, pantomime, variety acts and vaudeville routines. The device of stage tricks and broad business is found as frequently out of farce as in. Variations of this device have been borrowed and invented by actors throughout time.

4. Exaggerated stage properties

The third of the solely visual farce devices is the use of exaggerated stage properties. This device involves the use of any stage property including costume that appears ridiculous, exaggerated or incongruous or the animation of inanimate objects for the sake of laughter. Such properties appear less frequently than most of the other farce devices but its employment has persisted.

Kernodle declares that different ages have preferred different means for setting the comic key and the ancient playwrights often set their key with exaggerated properties.[26] Aristophanes devised animal and bird choruses of many types with exaggerated masks and later, Plautus still used masks with big noses, exaggerated eyebrows and flabby and shredded ears.

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[26]Kernodle, op. cit., p. 721.

Harlequin's batte or slapstick in the commedia dell'-arte passed through many hands on its way to becoming the cane of W. C. Fields and Charlie Chaplin. Numerous other properties including chamberpots and clysterpipes were a common part of continental farce. The blunderbuss and the pistol found frequent use in the Restoration farce where they appeared as absurd weapons to induce fright and the resulting horseplay. Hughes describes the surgeon's tools used in Ravenscroft's The Anatomist as the most ridiculous and frightening assortment of surgical instruments that could be obtained. The use of water or a seltzer bottle as a weapon has long been a basic gag in American farce and burlesque, since Winchell Smith's The Fortune Hunter in 1909.

Hughes states that:

> . . . though the meager pictorial record and scanty stage directions leave us few specific details to judge from, we may assume that no opportunity to draw laughter was wasted when a little judiciousness in choosing a prop would turn the trick.[27]

He further states that more elaborate stage props, suggesting the machine play and anticipating the pantomime, were borrowed from the continental drama. "Plays of Faustus and Emperor of the Moon type make full use of dishes which fly out of the hands, of tables which rise up to the ceiling, of statues which speak."[28]

Stage clothing or costume, which seems more a stage property than a disguise when used to provoke laughter, has contributed in diverse ways to preposterous situations, actions and characterizations. Morton often dressed his low comic types in bright colored trousers or jackets as did the earlier commedia. A gentleman might mistakenly put on the wrong hat,

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[27]Hughes, op. cit., p. 47.

[28]Ibid., p. 49.

one too small so that it perched impertinently on top of the head and another too large covering the ears and eyes. The hat gag has been used with as many variations as there are actors, for it appears true somehow that there has always been a hat available to make any face appear comical.

The baggy pants and oversized shoes of Charlie Chaplin have been used by generations of comedians as a typical example of the exaggerated prop. Red flannel underwear, mentioned by Krutch as being so successful in Reunion in Vienna, typifies another use of this device. Costume accessories such as garters, girdles, bloomers and suspenders have been used with similar results.

Charlie's Aunt, one of the classic modern farces, demonstrates further uses of the exaggerated stage property device in the wearing of female attire. While this suggests disguise, the sight of Lord Fancourt Babberley, a college boy dressed up as a Victorian aunt from Brazil, aiding his friends Jack and Charley with their romantic pursuits, seems more ludicrous than deceptive.

Chairs that collapse and other pieces of furniture constructed to shatter or give way when used have long been sources of great amusement. Though the use of exaggerated stage properties may admit to a certain weakness on the part of the playwright, such extrinsic devices must be justified when we recognize that his purpose is to entertain by whatever means he finds appropriate. Certainly this device remains an effective means to the end of laughter.

5. Repetition

The device of repetition provokes laughter by repeating a word, a sentence, an idea, a situation or event, an action or reaction, a character or characters, or a manner of speaking in excess of what we could reasonably expect. The effect of such "coincidences" produces laughter when they exceed the

limitations of probability. It is deliberately planned and calculated by playwrights and spontaneously improvised by performers. It can be the mere repetition of a gesture, a movement or an action which has earned a laugh. Hughes says that:

> . . . by some principle which may roughly approximate a law of human reaction the response grows in intensity with each successive repetition. Since the result can only be gauged approximately, however, the number of times that a repetition will be greeted with the desired response must be left to the farceur's skill and judgment.[29]

One of the strongest and most useful of the farce devices, repetition, can be found as both an aural and visual device, at one or the same time. Henri Bergson saw it as the favorite method of classic comedy and one of three significant processes or comic elements in situations and in words:

> It consists in so arranging events that a scene is reproduced either between the same character under fresh circumstances or between fresh characters under the same circumstances. Thus we have, repeated by lackeys in less dignified language, a scene already played by their masters. Now, imagine ideas expressed in suitable style and thus placed in the setting of their natural environment. If you think of some arrangement whereby they are transferred to fresh surroundings, while maintaining their mutual relations, or, in other words, if you can induce them to express themselves in an altogether different style and to transpose themselves into another key,--you will have language itself playing a comedy--language itself made comic.[30]

Bergson illustrates frequently from Moliere and particularly from The School for Wives which does nothing more than repeat a single incident three times: Horace tells Arnolphe that he intends to deceive Agnes' guardian, who turns out to

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[29] Ibid., p. 33.

[30] Bergson, op. cit., pp. 139-40.

be Arnolphe himself; Arnolphe believes he has counteracted the move; and Agnes contrives that Horace gets all the benefit of Arnolphe's precautionary measures. The same symmetrical repetition appears in George Dandin: Dandin learns that his wife is unfaithful; and summons the assistance of his in-laws; but Dandin himself must apologize in the end.

Lea declares that the device of repetition was the most interesting contribution made by the commedia dell'arte to the art of farce construction. She says that when something happens three times in succession we laugh whether it be a joke or not. Her footnoted illustration is taken from Li due simili and offers the simplest example:

> When Aurelia and Flaminia are tired of arguing in the street, Flaminia gives Aurelia a blow and goes into the house, leaving Aurelia's blow to fall on Pantalone, who comes up the street at that moment; Aurelia disappears and Pantalone hits Coviello, Coviello's blow falls on Lelio, Lelio's on Franceschina, and Franceschina's on Zanni, who is the last arrival.[31]

She concludes by admitting that the professional comedians of the commedia did not concern themselves with the reason for the laughter but made use of the fact. The idea reappears in many sources but is candidly expressed by Klein: ". . . the big laugh comes on the third time."[32]

Apart from the series of repetitious events, Kernodle illustrated the powerful technique of repetition when he observes that:

> In broad farce a key of robust laughter is constantly set by pairs or groups of characters moving in unison, moving toward or away from each other, crossing a leg, raising a hand or starting to speak in unison. A whole sequence of action is repeated to great comic effect when the 'worm turns'

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[31]Lea, op. cit., p. 195.

[32]Klein, loc. cit.

> and one character gives back the treatment he has received. Even more complex sequences have been used in plays and vaudeville skits in which, a third, fourth or even fifth person gets the same kind of deal.[33]

Stephenson supports repetitions in speech, action, and scene as one of the essential means of farce. He calls it "staccato successions" and lists among possible variations those of gesture, movement, business, action, episodes or scenes, and of speech types in duplicate examples.[34] Two actors may do the same thing simultaneously or in succession. Normally, the movements are not exactly alike as one may be an unsuccessful copy of another or one may gesture with the right hand and the other with the left. The master may kick a stone after which a servant kicks it and injures his toe.

Repetition is used to effect the characters in a plot. Character repetition can be observed with the twins of Plautus' Menaechmi and Shakespeare's double repetition of two sets of twins in The Comedy of Errors. Through disguise identical appearances are sometimes developed, as in John Lacy's Old Troop, or Monsieur Raggou (1665). Hughes provides this illustration of repetition of disguise:

> The cheese is confiscated, sold, reconfiscated, resold. Flea-Flint disguises as Raggou and, much to everyone's confusion, we have two Raggous, or would have if Raggou had not disguised as Flea-Flint so that the latter is multiplied. Finally, with one more common variation of the device, Raggou buys the puppet show and manages to keep his own identity concealed; Flea-Flint buys it from him, expecting to be equally successful, but in his case the outcome is quite different.[35]

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[33]Kernodle, op. cit., p. 721.

[34]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 89.

[35]Hughes, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

One of the most significant variations in repetition is the "Snow-ball" device of Bergson's. He defines it as:

> . . . an effect which grows by arithmetical progression, so that the cause, insignificant at the outset, culminates by a necessary evolution in a result as important as it is unexpected . . . for instance . . . a caller rushing violently into a drawing-room; and he knocks against a lady, who upsets her cup of tea over an old gentleman, who slips against a glass window which falls in the street on to the head of a constable, who sets the whole police force agog, etc.[36]

Blistein illustrates the "Snow-ball" effect with a repetition of comic beatings that finds each one in the series funnier than the last:

> The father beats the son, the son beats the servant, the servant beats the scullery or errand boy, and the boy, finding no human being below him in the order of things, promptly kicks the dog.[37]

Variations of this are also found in Steele's The Conscious Lovers (1722) and Sheridan's The Rivals (1775) to name two of many comedies and farces using it.

6. Inversion

Inversion is another visual-aural device which we define as the reversal of position, order, or relationship in characters, attitudes, actions, or speech for the prime purpose of effecting laughter. Bergson defined it simply in this statement: "Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene."[38] Its application has been broad and, according to Bergson, could include everything that comes

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[36]Bergson, op. cit., p. 113.

[37]Blistein, op. cit., p. 45.

[38]Bergson, op. cit., p. 121.

under the heading of "topsyturvydom."

Stephenson identifies inversion with the phrase, "antitheses (of types, accents, dialects, behaviors)."[39] As one of the "essential means of farce", his antitheses, or opposites, encompass the speech, actions, and characters of farce.

Historian Kernodle makes the point that playwrights have often found the key to laughter in sharp contrasts and reversals. Aristophanes gave us Socrates up in a basket thinking, Euripides composing verse on top of a ladder, the dictator competing with the baloney-seller, and the general in The Acharnians floundering in the ditch. Plautus frequently used rhythmic patterns of repetition and reversals.

Inversion appears most frequently as a plot mechanism in both comedy and farce. It is, therefore, the device of the playwright or the generative force. The examples are numerous but let us observe several which illustrate its flexibility.

We find inversion when female characters assume dominant roles as in Lysistrata, The Warrior's Husband and The Queen's Husband. A classic example of reversal is found in the medieval farce, Master Pierre Patelin, when the lawyer is caught in a net of his own weaving. In Happiest Days of Your Life a girls' school finds itself billeted in a boys' school to the horror of all concerned. Barrie's comedy, The Admirable Crichton, reveals a butler who assumes control of a household when the family is marooned on an island, but upon being rescued and returned home resumes his former servile role. The tables are turned in It Pays to Advertise and a lesson is learned after intending to teach the lesson. The meek verse writer in Three Men on a Horse finally takes command

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[39]Stephenson, op. cit., p. 89.

of the situation. Again we see the turnabout of a down-trodden character who ultimately dominates in The Solid Gold Cadillac and Born Yesterday. A Texas Steer takes a man out of his element to see how he'll act in another, from western ranch to eastern congress.

Stephenson comments briefly on the diverse use of inversion. "Turning the tables, a favorite device with farce writers, may seem to be a characteristic pattern, but it, too, is appropriated ready-made and unaltered from anecdote and folk tale."[40]

Inversion in situation or in words is less interesting to Bergson than repetition perhaps because it is easier to apply. The minute something is spoken, the professional wit looks for a meaning that can be made by reversing it:

> One of the characters in a comedy of Labiche shouts out to his neighbour on the floor above, who is in the habit of dirtying his balcony, "What do you mean by emptying your pipe on to my terrace." The neighbour retorts, "What do you mean by putting your terrace under my pipe?" There is no necessity to dwell upon this kind of wit, instances of which could easily be multiplied.[41]

Inversion has served all of literature as a type of plot complication. As a farce device its use has been particularly effective when the reversal comes as a surprise and when the new order offers laughable relationships and consequences.

7. Concealment

The device of concealment involves the evasion of detection by others, or the hiding of an object, person or information in order to provoke laughter. Equally important

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[40] Ibid., p. 87.

[41] Bergson, op. cit., p. 138.

to this purpose is the kind of concealment and the place of concealment. This visual-aural device can range from extremely simple to complexly improbable and contributes to the intrigue of farce where its method is as important as its occurrence.

Professor Hughes uses the traditional term "disguise" to identify this device though he expresses dissatisfaction with it:

> What I have termed the disguise motif is so varied and complex that it proves difficult to fit under so specific a heading. It may range from the mere attempt to evade detection by assuming another--or another's--appearance. . . to a point at which all pretense of verisimilitude is abandoned and the clown poses as a tree or a statue or other non-human object.[42]

Other terms have been used which are not synonymous with "concealment" but describe a type of concealment--words like "confusion", "mistaken identity", and "deceptions". Lea expresses the vast proliferation of disguises in this passage:

> The device of disguise is at least as old as the Graeco-Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence: with the dramatists of the Renaissance it became almost an obsession. . . . Given the lead in fiction and printed drama, the situations of the girl-page, the young lover as a servant, a physician or a woman, the old lover as a tradesman, the servant as his master, as a stranger or a necromancer, were multiplied and modified ad nauseam.[43]

Because the term "disguise" and "mistaken identity" seem more descriptive and specific, we have chosen to use the more general term "concealment" which more fully embraces the span of this device. The range of disguises or concealments that Hughes suggests make meaningful illustrations of the diversity within the device.

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[42]Hughes, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

[43]Lea, op. cit., pp. 408-09.

Concealment at its simplest level, the mere evading of detection, functions as a plot technique to any literary form. When viewed solely from this role, its significance to farce seems secondary. But when concealment serves both to advance intrigue and provoke laughter it fulfills most completely the function of a farce device.

The farce playwright has used concealment at least since Aristophanes had Dionysus and his servant Xanthias switch identities in The Frogs in order to provide the means for complicated misunderstandings. Concealment in the hands of playwrights of all periods appears chiefly to aid the plot complications but the farceur has turned it also to the end of laughter. It has a long and illustrious history and is herewith discussed in this dual sense which is the province of comic theatre.

The Menaechmi of Plautus has been mentioned before with its reunion of long lost twins. Shakespeare further complicated the idea in The Comedy of Errors by adding a set of twin-servants and multiplying the opportunities:

> Disguise, long associated with the merrymaking of a Saturnalia, Twelfth Night or Hallowe'en festival, has been a stock-in-trade in theatrical history for comic effect. Whether it is Ed Wynn or Charlie's Aunt, you constantly see the character through the disguise.[44]

Aristophanes used disguise in The Wasps as Philocleon attempts to escape from his house by a series of ridiculous and hilarious efforts, the most improbable being his disguise as smoke coming out of the chimney.

Lea explains the development of this device in 16th and 17th century Italian comedy as follows:

> Offshoots of the drama of disguise are the devices of substitution and concealment by which the lovers borrow each other's clothes, and so,

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[44]Kernodle, op. cit., p. 720.

> unwittingly sort themselves into the appropriate couples or manage to evade their parents by being carried from house to house in coffins or chests or washing-baskets. These more farcical effects, together with the sensational scenes of supposed death and feigned or temporary insanity, are particularly common in the commedia dell'arte, but they occur also in fiction and academic comedy.[45]

The boy-bride or girl-page redisguised as a girl were common to the English and Italian popular stage and spying disguises adopted by a husband, a father or a duke were particularly prevalent in England, according to Lea. Certain of these plays were commissioned and written to exploit the talents of a particular actor. The "breeches" parts in English comedy are another but somewhat different illustration of young women disguised as men.

Moliere's The Tricks of Scapin, mentioned earlier, presents the rogue who hides his master, Geronte, from an imaginary danger and then beats him, pretending to be his enemy. Here, as with most of the farcical uses of concealment, the characters on stage conceal only from other characters but the audience detects the act and is in on the trick which compounds the fun.

In Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer, Tony Lumpkin deliberately causes mistaken identity by telling Marlow and Hastings that his home is an inn. The two visitors then treat their host as the landlord and his daughter as a maid.

In discussing American farce of the mid-1930's, Alan Downer insists that concealment or hiding in closets and under beds was more prevalent than it was during the Restoration period. Most typical of these plays were a group called the "Abbott comedies", so named for the playwright-producer-director George Abbott who made them succeed in New York and

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[45]Lea, op. cit., p. 409.

on tour. The plays included Three Men on a Horse, Boy Meets Girl, Room Service, Brother Rat and What a Life. In addition to concealment, these farces played on stage with vigorous and rapid action and went to extreme lengths to escape consequences of all types.

The range of ludicrous concealments appears limitless. The age-old trick of a clown dressing in women's attire or a college boy dressing as Charley's Aunt is as typically farce as the clown who appears as a corpse, a devil, an ape or a bear. Another type extends further into improbability when a clown poses as a non-human object. He might pose as a figure in a painting or tapestry before him or behind him. Hughes allows that transformations by magic whether real or mock represent still another type of disguise:

> Since the ostensible object of disguise is almost always to prevent detection, this device suggests a related one: the liberal use in any age of certain traditional places of concealment. Continental drama seems to have favored the sack. . . . English farceurs relied chiefly, however, on more traditional properties as places of concealment: chests, hampers, wash-baskets, and barrels. So many examples of the use of all these occur that it is hardly necessary to offer specific illustration. Much the same thing may be said of the numerous uses of rugs, of wells and cisterns, or of chimneys for concealment. . . . One final word on concealment. No other device has been quite so fully and universally used for laughs as darkness.[46]

Concealment in farce employs the dual function of plot intrigue and laughter.

8. Incongruity

The farce device of incongruity presents an idea, action, speech or character that involves a contradiction.

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[46]Hughes, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

Things or people apparently unrelated and in conflict with one another are placed together in space or time in such a way as to imply or state a connection between them and thus produce laughter. Professor Nicoll writes in The Theory of Drama that incongruity is undoubtedly the greatest source of laughter, and that:

> It is the incongruity between two ideas that presents to us the twin qualities of wit and humor. . . . Mere eccentricity is not comic unless it be opposed to or contrasted with something that is normal. No comedy can be a true comedy unless there is presented alongside of the humorous situation, words, or character something that is more or less ordinary.[47]

Wallace Gray identified three types of incongruities as: rational and meaningful; irrational and meaningless /but not purposeless/; and irrational and apparently meaningless.[48] The first type occurs when we laugh because it is unexpected but yet we understand the rationality underlying the event. The third type exists to make a point and can be found in much of the dialogue of Ionesco's The Bald Soprano.

The second type of irrational and meaningless but purposeful incongruity:

> . . . is most frequently encountered in a farce in the form of slapstick and has no purpose other that to entertain. . . . This type of incongruity is pure fun and occurs in a situation or context in which we have been encouraged to accept the incongruity, as in a child's game of marbles, 'for fun, not for keeps'.[49]

A lovely girl appears on the screen and as she smiles beautifully a custard pie hits her in the face. Gray further

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[47] Nicoll, The Theory of Drama, p. 196.

[48] Wallace Gray, "The Uses of Incongruity", Educational Theatre Journal Vol. XV, No. 4 (December, 1963), p. 343.

[49] Ibid., p. 344.

illustrated with the mime character in a commedia dell'arte play who starts to sit on a chair when someone pulls the chair out from under him. Instead of falling the mime sits comfortably as though in an imaginary chair.[50]

Stephenson provides the term "incongruous juxtapositions"[51] which seem not to alter but to add description to the term. Relationships between elements must certainly point to the heart of the incongruity. The device constitutes another of the visual-aural devices used in varied ways.

In farce we frequently find a character condemning a certain undesirable line of conduct and only moments later proceeding to do it himself. Such incongruity seems more subtle than instances in which a character appears with a hatchet or an arrow sticking in his head or someone cracks a walnut on the head of a friend only to have a bump appear.

The Matchmaker abounds in foolish fun with chairs pulled out at the wrong time, people entering swinging doors at the same time, maids skipping to answer doors and Mrs. Levi sprawled on the floor in all her finery. Many of these illustrations incorporate incongruity and violent physical action as well as other farce devices.

Krutch illustrates physical incongruity by the infant Cleopatra pushing her brother off the throne or the prim secretary in Candida getting tipsy. Jack Worthing putting on mourning for the death of the non-existent brother in Earnest might be called an example of visual incongruity. Not only are the lines funny but the hat with a black band adds to the total incongruity. The fun in such actions, ideas, witty lines and characters lies in the contradictions represented to the audience.

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Stephenson, op. cit., p. 89.

9. Exaggerated Characters

The condition of farce which demands rapid pace and quick recognition, requires stock or standard characters. These characters appear to be types of individuals that an audience can identify early and recognize easily. They may range from mere silhouettes to detailed and complete personalities but they usually display exaggerated character traits.

Seldom do we find these characters fully developed but they frequently display certain of the idiocyncracies of ordinary people carried to exaggeration. Such traits are made readily observable and predictable as playwright and performer combine their talents to give the farce character life. Farce is always acted and as Professor Corrigan declares: "No other form of drama makes such great demands on the actor."[52]

The device of exaggerated character is defined as characters that are self-absorbed, sublimely unaware of their own deficiencies, sometimes conceited but generally with exaggerated or anormal behavior that makes us laugh. We will use the term "stock types" which refers to both traits of personality or stereotype and of standard and established characterizations.

We can trace the ascendancy of the stock characters of antiquity down to the present-day descendant. Such genealogical lines of development from primitive times would tend to focus on a character change from its original form. With historical data so meager, this approach seems hardly feasible. Our concern ought to be for the similarities that exist between farce characters today and their ancestors. If we make this distinction clear we can observe the consistency of characterizations among the farceurs, writers and performers, of all ages.

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[52]Robert W. Corrigan (ed) Roman Drama (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), p. 14.

The ancient stock types mentioned earlier reveal, so far as meager evidence will allow, a rustic simplicity of characters, all masked: Maccus, the stupid, gluttonous, awkward fool; Bucco, the fool; Pappus, the good-natured but gullible old man; and Dossemius or Mandacus, the witty hunchback with wart on nose. Bentley identifies essentially these same four characters as three fools--the Blockhead, the Braggart, and the Silly Old Man--and the Trickster or knave. What we have are four stock "type" characters that are exaggerated and comical on stage but they do not descend to the present in these forms. They are molded and recast by each generation and the character that emerges today is not a replica but a comic "character" that has evolved out of the ancient mold. He bears many of the same marks as his ancestor but he is now a twentieth century version of the Silly Old Man. It may be somewhat less than accurate to call him a character type but in reality he is the Old Man type in modern dress and manner.

The device of exaggerated characters was a favorite of Plautus according to Casson. In Casina he gave us the lecherous old codger, Lysidamus, who appears to descend from the Silly Old Man. His scheming servant in Pseudolus reflects back to the Trickster or knave of an earlier day, as the title indicates. The braggart soldier, Pyrgopolinices, of Miles Gloriosus is often considered to be the original Braggart himself. Slightly later Terence presented Thraso, the rich, pompous and conceited soldier, so vigorously used and abused in The Eunuch.

Out of the medieval period came Mak, the rogue and well-known sheep stealer, in The Second Shepard's Play. The unknown playwright of this fifteenth century manuscript probably had no knowledge of the Trickster type that Mak resembled. Also from an unknown playwright came The Wakefield Noah which combined the sermons from God with the farce of Noah and his shrewish wife. Invited by Noah to enter the ark and abandon

her gossip, Noah's wife breaks out in a fit of violent scolding. She appears to be one of the earliest chattering and shrewish wives to take the stage.

Nicholas Udall, in the sixteenth century, offered another braggart in the title role of Ralph Roister Doister. This pompous and gullible braggart, who assumed himself irresistable to the ladies, represented a much-purified adaptation of the braggart soldier of Plautus.

A German version of the trickster appears in The Wandering Scholar From Paradise by Hans Sachs. The sixteenth century writer sketches a witty, unscrupulous student who wheedles money and goods from an old woman and the horse from under her husband.

Volpone, the fox, presents the best developed trickster of this period. Jonson's delightful character is unique on several counts: instead of the servile class, the fox is a Venetian magnifico and master himself; instead of being humiliated in defeat he proves to be a good sport when defeated. These are but a few of the traits of Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor. This jovial, rotund rogue, friend of Prince Hal's in Henry IV, is gulled, beaten and dumped into the Thames from a laundry basket. Like Volpone before him, the conniving Falstaff takes defeat well in stride. Shakespeare's complete treatment of this character qualifies Falstaff as a character of comedy but his gross action and vigorous antics seem to make him strongly farcical.

Moliere's tricky Tartuffe and the old fool, Orgon, are cleverly combined in one of the best comic pieces of the seventeenth century. Tartuffe attempts to steal the old man's money and wife and Orgon, the credulous, wealthy fool, vigorously defends the intruder beyond all reason.

From The Doctor in Spite of Himself and The Affected Young Ladies, Moliere contributes other types in the faggot-gatherer Sganarelle, who would be master and erstwhile doctor

of his house, and Jodelet, the valet who passes himself off as a man of quality. "Sganarelle or Jodelet . . . may represent jealousy or avarice or boastfulness."[53] While these characters manifest personal qualities, they also bear resemblances to an earlier fool and tricky servant.

Wilde's Lady Bracknell appears to have nothing in common with the earlier shrewish wife of Noah but the society dowager magnifies the domineering manner and shameless mercenary interests of her earlier sister. She seems utterly inhuman and very amusing.

Many of John Morton's farce characters are of the conventional stock type. He used the foolish old man or old woman with excessive complacency and affectation, many variations of the overly self-satisfied and smug type, the coarse talking, blundering, whiskey-drinking, cocky Irishman and a most interesting group of middle class journeymen and clerks, most with an exaggerated code of Victorian morality and decorum. According to Arnold there is a strong reliance upon extravagant ideas, behavior, and decorum by Morton.

The exaggerated characters of American farce reflect individual traits as well as obvious similarities to basic stock types. The short but numerous Mulligan Guard farces of Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart developed a drama: ". . . out of the lower life of the larger Eastern cities . . . significant because of the fidelity with which the types of character are portrayed."[54] Quinn later continues with this description of the character types of Harrigan's creation:

> They were almost perfect pictures of the guerillas of life, hanging on the skirts of the other races and in their reckless gayety,

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[53]Hughes, op. cit., p. 32.

[54]Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama From the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1936), p. 82.

> improvidence, impudence and superstition, adding almost unlimited possibilities to the human comedy.[55]

Harrigan played the Irishman Dan Mulligan and Hart played his wife Cordelia until 1885 when they dissolved their partnership.

Charles Hoyt, whose farces with music or without, broadly satirized contemporary events, developed caricatures or comic strip characters with some reality. They were types, nonetheless, as were the characters of George Ade and George M. Cohan. Ade's The College Widow offered a group of highly exaggerated characters and Cohan's Hit the Trail Holliday presented a character based on the career of Billy Sunday, a bartender who leads the prohibition crusade. Such characters, fully-developed or fragmentary, contributed a unique but definite American "type" to the list of standard farce characters.

The little man-hero of American comic drama developed as a distinctive native type at the hands of numerous playwrights. He often appeared stupid but always managed to succeed because of the peculiar world around him. George Kaufman used him as a loveable main character. George Abbott made him a shade smaller but still a hero. This development has led Professor Gassner to credit the "loveable nitwit" as the basic ingredient of American low comedy.[56]

The farce characters in any age cannot be observed through major characters and types alone. Numerous lesser or minor characters have added fantastic dimensions to this device. They have touched many qualities, including the sensational, cruel, reckless, gross, crude, passionate, intense, grotesque and rowdy. They have impressed us as improbable while seeming

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[55] Ibid., p. 87.

[56] Gassner, Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre, p. xvii.

to be quite real. They have served as the puppets which the imaginative, comic minds of playwrights have maneuvered for the sake of laughter. The farce device of exaggerated characters will continue to appear dissimilar to life while drawing heavily on man's incredible antics.

These then are the basic devices that have emerged out of the comic theatre of farce. Their origins are obscured in time and yet their presence seems to be evident since antiquity. It must certainly be evident at this point that the presence of a farce device can more readily be noted than the resulting laughter can be explained. Perhaps without rationalizing, we may confess to a greater interest and concern in the former than the latter. We, like farce, are more concerned in the doing than the reason. In one sense, our dilemma might have been best expressed in the words of the English drama critic, J. F. Grein, when he described an "Abbott comedy":

> The actors work with a will and like Trojans; they rush about the stage as if panic had stricken them; they blurt out their wild bits of dialogue as if under pneumatic pressure; they shout, gesticulate, play tricks, gambol with the irresponsible abandon of an amiable lunatic asylum let loose, they give us no time to think; to analyze or to criticize; somehow they laugh and will make us respond--and the result is that people on the stage and people in the house let themselves gayly go, both parties really full well aware that they are "dashed" if they know what it is all about.[57]

A dearth of farce texts has compounded the difficulty of locating a representative sample from all periods. As a result the evidence and illustrations that have been used were randomly selected from an unrepresentative sampling of farces. If all the desired farce texts had been available,

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[57]Montrose Jonas Moses (ed), Representative American Dramas (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1941), p. 331.

the weakness of analyzing and judging farce from the play script would nevertheless remain. In spite of this the study has been profitable in focusing on farcical similarities through the literature. With little else to research Professor Hughes' statement reinforces our view:

> Inadequate as the mere text of farce is, however, we may, with the assistance of the fuller and more useful commentary of contemporary theatre-goers, learn enough of the structure and devices of farce to observe the persistence of elements common in all ages.[58]

This has remained the ultimate purpose of the present study from definition to device. A closer scrutiny of farce has long been overdue. To the degree that playwrights, scholars, and historians have been objective and precise, this study may validly be called the nature of farce.

From definition to device the correlation appears strong. All farce devices address themselves to the fundamental purpose of laughter and a comic catharsis. In definition farce is the popular drama or theatre of laughter in which an audience, emotionally detached, can experience the comic catharsis.

Farce concentrates its major focus on situations that progress from simple to wildly complicated filled with ludicrous unexpected incidents. The farce devices of inversion and concealment offer useful techniques to execute this function. The situations further develop from the probable to the grossly exaggerated through the use of repetition, exaggerated properties and exaggerated characters. The devices of violent physical action and stage tricks or broad business create the rapid visual action found in the definition of farce.

To the definitional commonplace or ordinary character types, the farce devices of exaggerated type characters, incongruity and farce dialogue contribute a variety of means.

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[58]Hughes, op. cit., p. 59.

These same devices offer the necessary tools to the playwright who employs bold satire in his work. Again by definition the genre of farce is capable of a broad and bold type of satire that may frequently be too obvious to be pungent.

The history of farce must certainly reveal the duality of the genre in yet another way. The farcical purpose and its techniques have consistently augmented the works of other forms, dramatic and non-dramatic. At the same time it has perpetuated its own legitimate genre of drama. There is no reason to believe that this dual function will or should ever cease. Man's need for laughter can only increase as the problems and complexities of the world accelerate. The farcical spirit in all its forms stands ready to meet that need.

As this study began, a defense of farce seemed a biased research approach but our conclusion now justifies a vigorous defense of this much maligned genre. The simplicity of purpose and elementary form of farce theatre now prove more involved and complex with its duality of form and technique. The history of farce has yet to be written. Other superficial fragments of this history point more strongly than ever to the need for greater understanding of farce. When this history is recorded it will incorporate several views.

The farce is eternal. From ancient Atellan plays before the golden years of Greek drama the farce form and substance first appears in recorded history. Its purpose and basic devices remain unchanged as does its popularity throughout recorded time. There need be no attempt to elevate, to upgrade or inflate the value of the theatre of laughter. The audience and the genre seek a common goal of entertainment through laughter.

Lea describes the relationship of the commedia dell'-arte to farce in the following thoughts that prophetically

illustrate the role of farce in the theatre:

> Farce it is and to farce it must return. We hunt out its development astride the horse of a merry-go-round that is predestined to a circular career. The drama is not advanced, but it has had a glorious penny-worth on the way round.[59]

This study concludes itself most effectively in the definition of farce and its nine basic farce devices already stated. They represent the culmination of a study into the nature of farce. And yet there remain some explanations and observations that ought briefly and finally to be made and are herewith included.

The bibliography that follows identifies the sources used but much of this textual material contributes quite minimally to the research. A smaller proportion of these sources provides invaluable assistance. The entire bibliography made some contribution to this study and yet it represents a fraction of theatre literature explored in the process.

It should be stated here that the great majority of theatre literature omits or avoids any meaningful discussion of farce. It contributes little or nothing that might clarify either the characteristics, the definition or the techniques of farce. From the few that attempt some critical insight, much is superficial and inaccurate. Frequently the writers defer to one or several of the primary sources used in this study. All of this points further toward the need for continued research in this area.

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[59]Lea, op. cit., p. 196.

It seems reasonable that a detailed investigation into the true origin of the theatrical term "farce" and how that term became the nomenclature for the genre of farce would contribute immensely to our understanding. Such a study would contribute significantly to our fragmented history of farce and could develop into a study of its own which collects the scraps of information from many sources into a meaningful history of farce.

It is the hope of this writer that the definition of farce arrived at in this study would be tested. Perhaps the most obvious test would come through a detailed analysis of the plays themselves, which raises the problem of availability. This in itself offers another project in terms of information retrieval. Because many farces were never published but were often copyrighted to protect the writer and producer during the run of the play, a systematic search and identification ought to be made of Library of Congress manuscripts. In addition to this, a systematic search through collections and library holdings across the nation might culminate itself in a union catalogue of farces in United States libraries. With the plays thus located the opportunity to use them for analysis would invite attention.

The concept of comic catharsis needs extended research, either refuting the idea or supporting the concept as does this study. A thorough analysis of the reviews and criticisms of the productions of significant and representative farces might provide greater insight into both comic catharsis and the nature of farce.

Another meaningful project would be an expanded assortment of farce devices to provide a convenient catalogue or handbook for actors, directors and playwrights interested in farce. These are a few of the related studies that must be done in the area. Quite obviously much of this will require that farce texts be available for research.

Though the definition and devices arrived at earlier conclude themselves quite naturally, several significant observations must here be summarized.

Farce is the only dramatic genre that is completely and irrevocably theatre, for it can fulfill its purpose only in production. It has been and continues to be the comic drama of situation, relying most heavily on the improbable compounding of events or situations in a surprising and exaggerated sequence. It is currently seen more on television than in the theatre as we find almost daily examples of the "situation comedy" on every broadcasting network. The medium differs but the characteristics and techniques are usually farce.

Contrary to prevailing opinion, the farce is not plotless but is filled with an abundance of rapidly changing improbable situations. Ludicrous and exaggerated characters while appearing as cardboard stereotypes are very real and ordinary people. The dialogue of farce is capable of both wit and satire in spite of general opinion to the contrary. Great wit has always been the product of the few masters of comic theatre and it has appeared infrequently in any period. When satire is present in farce it is a broad and obvious type, more a by-product and certainly of secondary importance to farce.

The basic purpose of farce is and always will be to arouse laughter by every means possible. Its future seems secure because of the need in man for laughter and the need in the theatre for a type of comic drama that provides entertainment first and is directed to all men.

The farce with its vigorous and gross exaggeration speaks to young and old, to simple and sophisticate. Susanne Langer speaks of all comic theatre in the following observations that direct themselves particularly to farce:

> Humor has its place in all the arts, but in comic drama it has its home. Comedy may be frivolous, farcical, ribald, ludicrous to any

> degree, and still be true art. Laughter springs from its very structure.[60]

The art and craft of the farceur is focused most directly toward laughter. The nature and technique of the farce survives and endures because of our need for unrestrained laughter in the theatre.

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[60]Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 338.

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