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Bergson and the Mechanics of the Bedroom Farce

Whereas the earliest farces deal with human appetites on the most basic level, by the mid-nineteenth century these had been sublimated and incorporated into a newly mechanical format. Inaugurated by Eugène Labiche, and perfected by Alfred Hennequin and Georges Feydeau, these masterpieces of clockwork ingenuity would appear to be the inspiration for Henri Bergson's theory of comedy. This article explores the evolution of this style of farce, and demonstrates how Bergson's influential ideas were themselves influenced not only by the popularity of the boulevard theatre, but also by prevailing concepts of clinical psychology and a Symbolist aesthetic. It is further argued, however, that Bergson's reduction of the comic butt to an automaton fails to account for the empathetic element: the heavy quantum of anxiety conveyed from character to spectator.

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FARCE as a genre is located at the polarities of drama. Dryden and most of his contemporaries regarded it as the lowest form of playwriting, whereas, for Edward Gordon Craig, 'Farce is the essential Theatre. Farce refined becomes high comedy; farce brutalized becomes tragedy.'¹ In his view, dramatists fail when they can't face up to farce. It is unclear what he means by 'brutalized', but he was not alone in seeing farce as the flipside of the tragic vision. The Russian poet Maximilian Voloshin compared the *Oresteia* with Georges Feydeau's *La Dame de chez Maxim*; for him, farce had a 'purifying force' (catharsis?) as potent as that in classical tragedy.²

Let us take as a prime example the Parisian hit of 1907, *Anything to Declare?* (*Vous n'avez rien à déclarer?*), by the forgotten team of Hennequin and Veber. It is a masterpiece of French bedroom farce, its premise for once not adultery but impotence. A young playboy on his honeymoon is rendered *hors de combat* by a mental block; his in-laws give him three days to remedy the matter or else . . . annulment! Add to this that the mental block is the recurrent

image of a customs officer who intruded just as the bridegroom was about to consummate the marriage in a railway compartment. Other complications include a rejected suitor intent on thwarting that consummation; and the new husband's decision to visit a courtesan as therapy. Revolving on this unlikely pivot, the play's centripetal forces suck in lost trousers and forged paintings, outrageous disguises and mistaken identities, an irascible camel dealer and a 'sex fiend' on the loose.

When I staged my translation of this play in 2009, it played to standing room only. Audiences of all ages responded with unbridled, unbroken hilarity. Spectators told me that at moments they could not breathe for laughing. I had observed this reaction before, particularly at performances of Feydeau, the acknowledged master of the form. It is the response intended by the playwrights themselves. Over a century earlier, a Parisian critic described the audience at the premiere of a Feydeau play: 'It was exhausted; it was dead with laughing; it couldn't make another peep. Towards the end of the play, the wild laughter that seized and

shook the whole theatre was so thunderous that the actors could no longer be heard – the act ended in pantomime.³

No other form of written comedy has this effect. High comedy relies on an appreciation of social relationships, satire, and badinage that, even if fleetingly, is apprehended by the intellect. Farce attacks viscerally to produce the well-named ‘belly laugh’. The rapidity of the action, the piling of one complication on another, barely registers on the brain before it triggers a laugh, the way it might a sneeze. The audience becomes irresistibly fused together as one giant funny bone, tickled into voicing its surprise and delight.

Feeding Appetites

I intend therefore to enquire into the type known as ‘bedroom farce’, perfected in Paris at the *fin de siècle*, and examine how it achieves its effects. There is no need to go back to Aristophanes or even the medieval *sotie*, except to point out that by the seventeenth century, neoclassical taste, which had a penchant for creating hierarchies of genres, relegated farce to low man on the totem pole.

The reason was obvious: farce was chiefly concerned with those aspects of human nature that keep us earth-bound: our appetites, our five senses, our animal spirits. As it happens, the word ‘farce’ comes from the Latin for ‘stuffing’ and is cognate with that obsolete culinary term ‘forcemeat’. Bernadette Rey-Flaud has pointed out that two Old French etymologies are conflated in the word *farce*: *fars* (modern French, *farce*) means the ‘stuffing’ of a fowl or the ‘padding’ of a doublet; and *fart* (modern French, *fard*) means ‘cosmetics’, ‘make-up’.⁴ Both stuffing and make-up play tricks with reality and confuse the observer. It is appropriate that flesh crammed into flesh should be one term for these comic interludes, and a mask-like face the other. In farce the body is to the fore, mauled, pummelled, camouflaged, forced into cramped spaces or outlandish masquerade, drenched and dirtied, constantly subject to indignities. Certainly the engines that drive the most basic farces are human appetites and desires, lust and gluttony above all. In this it remains close to

its carnival origins: the belly and the genitals govern the motivations of the characters, whose ambitions may not go beyond a nice dish of tripe or a roll in the hay. In its origins, farce is bound to the body. This is drama that smells.

Like the cosmetic mask of make-up concealing actual features, farce is a universe of deceivers and deceived: blind beggars are fooled, and dim-witted husbands perpetually duped by a wily wife and her lover; shopkeepers are cheated by confidence tricksters, while servants avenge humiliation; braggarts terrify one another; ‘know-it-all’s fall for the first loudmouth to come along; and clergy are exposed as hypocrites and sinners. The language itself plays tricks, with manipulations of Latin, local dialects, speech defects, and double entendres, with a special fondness for obscene innuendo. It is often coarse or gross. Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610) opens with the challenge, ‘Thy worst! I fart at thee!’

In medieval farce, persons of low estate get drunk, quarrel, make love. A play often considered a prototype of modern farce, Ruzzante’s *Paduan Pastoral* (c. 1520), starts with a rustic exclaiming:

Bugger these rushes!
Where the fuck are those thrushes
That were here yesterday?
Holy shit . . .⁵

The peasant is cursing not for effect but because he’s starving. Played during famine years, Ruzzante’s comedies feature characters who bemoan, in salty dialect, how hungry they are. It calls to mind the routine of the twentieth-century Italian comedian Dario Fo, impersonating a medieval clown so famished that he devours his own body, the pantomime accompanied by cannibalistic lip-smacking and guttural growls.

After the Puritan ban on theatres, the Restoration re-introduced knockabout comedy into English, adopting the outlandish French term *farce*. In Davenant’s medley of 1662, *The Play House to be Let*, a Frenchman tries to lease a theatre in order to present farces. ‘But, sir,’ says the Player, ‘I believe all French farces are / Prohibited commodities and will / Not pass

current in England.' 'Sir, pardon me!' replies Monsieur. 'De Engelis be more Fantastique den de Fransh. De farce / Bi also very fantastique and vil passe.'⁶ So, as theatre regains a foothold in England, farce is seen as foreign contraband, fantastical in its workings. The wits of the time condemned it as stale, derivative, churlishly defiant of the rules; they were particularly disturbed by the exuberant laughter it excited. Slapstick and horseplay were already being identified as its attributes. The playwright Thomas Shadwell objected to 'putting out of Candles, kicking down of Tables, falling over Joynt-stools, impossible Accidents and unnatural Mistakes (which they most absurdly call Plot)'.⁷ However, his fellow playwright Edward Ravenscroft offered something of an apology by declaring that, in 'a Farce', 'the oddness and extravagancy of the Characters and Subject . . . tho not natural, [are] yet not always against Nature; and tho not true, yet diverting, and foolishly delightful'.⁸ In other words, it's fun, so needs no excuse.

Enter Vaudeville

Farces held the stage across Europe, usually in minor mode as one-act curtain-raisers and afterpieces, throughout the eighteenth century. Although some of its grosser carnal aspects remained, especially in fairground entertainments (in Thomas Guellette's *Le Marchand de merde* the dupe is made to taste excrement), it began to be refined into the *vaudeville*. This short light comedy of everyday life, interspersed with songs set to familiar tunes, may be considered a homely version of the English ballad opera. Rarely more than two acts, it served as filler in a longer bill, meant to put the audience in a good mood. Over time, it was to flower into a form as lush and multilayered as a chrysanthemum.

In 1884, the *doyen* of French dramatic critics, Francisque Sarcey, published an essay in which he noted that plays that endure are seldom engendered by manifestos.⁹ Revolutions in art, he asserted, are not set in motion by ideologues and theorists, but occur almost accidentally by the creativity of exceptional talents. To prove his point, he listed the three

plays that he believed to be critical turning points in nineteenth-century drama.

Given the date of his article, as well as modern prejudices for social reform, one might suppose the list would include Friedrich Hebbel's ground-breaking tragedy of middle-class life, *Maria Magdalena*; or Henrik Ibsen's updating of Greek fatalism, *Ghosts*; or perhaps a mythopoeic music-drama by Wagner. Not at all. Sarcey was a Frenchman of the Third Republic, and when he says art and culture, he means French art and culture. Paris is the umbilicus of civilization, and outside that anti-clerical *ecclesia*, there is no salvation.

Consequently, Sarcey's three seminal plays are: *La dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils; Jacques Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers*; and *Le chapeau de paille d'Italie* by Eugène Labiche and Marc-Michel. In Sarcey's view, Dumas's drama of a self-sacrificing courtesan (known in America as *Camille*) initiated the critique of modern life on stage, while Offenbach's *opéra bouffe* mocked the gods of Olympus with such effervescent music and saucy satire that any lingering vestiges of neoclassicism were swept off the stage. Our concern here is with *The Italian Straw Hat* (1851), classified by its authors as a *vaudeville*. Sarcey extolled it not only because it extended the one-act form into a full-length comedy, but also because it introduced a new style of mechanistic, plot-driven farce.

Jeune as plot summaries are, allow me to sketch out the intrigue of this piece. A young man of fashion is about to wed the daughter of a suburban market-gardener. While he is awaiting the arrival of the wedding party, an officer bursts into his apartment with a young woman in tow. It turns out that while the officer was courting the lady, a married woman, in the Bois de Boulogne, our hero's horse ate her straw hat. The officer intends to set up camp in the apartment and slowly demolish its contents until the bridegroom finds a replacement for the hat, thereby enabling the lady to return to her husband after her illicit dalliance. At this point, the wedding party arrives, with the father-in-law-to-be totting a large potted plant as a gift.

The rest of the play interweaves the ceremonials of the wedding day with the hunt for

the elusive *chapeau*. It constitutes a comic variant on the Way of the Cross, each scene a new Station excruciating to the protagonist. Wherever he goes, he is dogged by a host of guests, not to mention the potted plant, and must concoct reasons why a milliner's shop, a nobleman's drawing room, and a private apartment (which turns out to be the home of the hatless lady's husband) are all relevant to the festivities. The bridegroom is about to undergo his Calvary at a police station when a happy ending is literally pulled out of a hat – one of the gifts schlepped through Paris all day long turns out to be the spitting image of the fatal headgear.

Although Labiche, an expert observer of bourgeois hypocrisy, wrote scores of successful plays, *The Italian Straw Hat* is the most frequently revived. W. S. Gilbert adapted it for the Victorian stage as *Haste to the Wedding*; René Clair filmed it, updated to the 1890s, as a vibrant silent comedy; Orson Welles Americanized it for the Federal Theatre Project as *Horse Eats Hat*. Its ingenious structure may be pictured as a caduceus, the snake-entwined staff that is an attribute of Hermes, god of speed and deceit. The rigid staff represents the basic action, in this case the undeviating progress of the wedding party through church ceremony, civil ceremony, banquet, ball, and *vin d'honneur*. The curlicued serpent stands for the series of convolutions the hero has to go through to achieve ends unknown to the other characters. Like a parallel line, it runs alongside the central action, but, unlike parallel lines, it twists and turns until the two finally meet to provide a 'denouement', which literally means an unknitting of the intricacies. The potted plant, carried, through thick and thin, by the father-in-law, serves as a fixed point around which all the turbulence swirls.

The late-nineteenth-century elaboration of farce, exemplified by Feydeau, indulges in a luxury of preparations, weaving a web of causes and effects in which the characters are trapped. The initial trigger, a misapprehension or untoward encounter, sets off a series of cascading rebounds, far-fetched reversals, and absurd situations. In this microcosm of bourgeois life, everything obeys the insane logic of an implacable fate. The mechanical

devices used to intensify this effect, especially doors opening and closing, imply an automatism in the characters as well. In this saturated atmosphere, objects seem to be maliciously animated while the characters who wheel about and rebound, are reified. The rapid tempo and recurrent gimmicks of the Feydeaulian farce demonstrate the truth of this premise. The characters are swept away by an accelerated movement, constantly shuttling from anxiety to relief, and vice versa, seized by a feverish urgency which prevents them and the spectator any time for reflection.

Bergson Analyzes Farce

This style of farce, in which a concatenation of misunderstandings or cross-purposes sets off a logical and inexorable series of *quid pro quos*, became so standard by the end of the nineteenth century that it clearly coloured Henri Bergson's theory of comedy. At first sight, the juxtaposition of Bergson and farce may seem paradoxical. For all the popularity of his philosophy in his own time, he is now remembered chiefly for the concept of the *élan vital*, the 'vital spark', which Shaw renamed the Life Force: that mysterious impulse that drives evolution and creation (and, for Shaw, social progress). Bergson is also cited for his ideas about duration and temporality, non-linear time, and the stream of consciousness that influenced his cousin-in-law, Marcel Proust.

In 1901, Bergson published an essay with the somewhat misleading title *Le Rire* – misleading because his subject is not laughter but that which provokes laughter.¹⁰ In his view, comedy developed to assist survival; without it, life would be too unbearable. To promote the adhesion of society, comedy aims its shafts at the misfits, outsiders, losers, those who fail to conform to the necessary norms. It is corrective and normative in purpose. So far, so commonplace, as theories of comedy go. Bergson's originality is to suggest that, to remove any moral qualms we might have and to render those butts appropriate targets for our ridicule, they are turned into inflexible mechanisms. He phrases his ideas as axioms: 'The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact

proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine . . . We laugh every time a person gives us an impression of being a thing.' The comic is 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living'.

To demonstrate the mechanical nature of comedy, Bergson offers a straightforward example: a man runs down a street and suddenly stumbles and falls, and the bystanders laugh. They would not laugh, he asserts, if the man had decided to sit down on the ground, but, because his fall is involuntary, it prompts their mirth. His lack of elasticity, his rigidity of momentum turn him into a thing, and so we laugh.

This insistence on the physicality of the characters, their psychologies reduced to fundamentals, makes Bergson's comic vision very close to traditional farce. At the time he wrote, the age-old comic typology of the monomaniac who behaves not by reflection but by reflexes – the miser, the lecher, the misanthrope – seemed to be endorsed by French behavioural scientists. For clinical psychologists of the Third Republic, an hysteric (almost invariably cast as a woman) not only reacts mechanically to given stimuli, but acts out her hysteria by particular physical manifestations, which can be codified. At the Salpêtrière hospital, Dr Charcot gave weekly demonstrations to the public of just such reactions. According to Théodule-Armand Ribot, in his *Psychologie des sentiments*, a suggestible subject posed in a certain posture will eventually fall into the state of mind associated with that posture. Slumped in a chair, head bowed, a patient will eventually feel dejected. Stanislavsky, when conceiving of his system of physical action, was inspired by this concept.

Bergson, however, drew his examples not from the consulting room but from the toy shop. As the 'Jack-in-the-box', a character reverts to the obsessive phrase or gesture. Molière was a master of this device. Orgon's repeated '*Pauvre homme*' in *Tartuffe*, or Harpagon's '*Ma caisse*' in *L'Avare*, or '*Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?*' in *Les fourberies de Scapin* were tried-and-true laugh-getters. In *Anything to Declare?* the hero automatically loses his erection when he hears a customs officer (or even an ersatz one) utter that

phrase. Foreseeing the repetition, the audience is gratified by its own perspicacity and responds as automatically.

Bergson's second plaything is the 'Dancing-jack', whereby a character believes he is acting on his own volition but is actually manipulated by another. Since this is a standard ploy in comedy from the clever slave in Plautus to the clever slave in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, we have to expand Bergson's formulation to fit bedroom farce more exactly. The intricacies of a farcical plot of the Feydeau school turn the characters into Gloucester's 'flies to wanton boys'; their plans, if not their lives, are destroyed by forces beyond their control or their ken. In Feydeau's *L'Hôtel du Libre-Échange* the protagonist's plan to seduce a friend's wife at a shady house of assignation is doomed to be thwarted because he has no idea that, that same night, the hotel will be occupied, for various reasons, by the woman's husband, by a friend from the provinces whose five daughters will pretend to be ghosts, and by his nephew who has been inveigled there by an amorous housemaid. Nor does he know that the bellboy is a voyeur who bores holes in the walls, or that a disgruntled guest has alerted the police to raid the joint. Throughout the second act, our hero has to jump through a series of hoops presented by fate, chance, or coincidence. As the Yiddish proverb has it, *Mensh trakht un Gott lakht*, a catchier version of 'Man proposes and God disposes'.

In this respect, *Othello* is a good example of a Dancing-jack plot turned to tragic ends. An outsider – a smooth-talking Moorish *converso* – is manipulated by a tricky underling into thinking he is a cuckold by such trivial tokens as a handkerchief. In *commedia dell'arte*, his wife would give him a good drubbing or actually take a lover; in Shakespeare, the stakes are higher and matters take a bloodier turn. Anywhere along the line, however, as in farce, any straightforward explanation could dispel the *malentendu* and bring about a happy ending.

Bergson's third device is the 'Snow-ball', a succession of occurrences or episodes that accumulate without let or hindrance. Cause-and-effect creates the spring action of farce: one heedless or mistaken act sets in motion a

whole train of reactions that in turn detonate fresh complications. It is a snowball, rather than a domino effect, because of the cumulative nature of its progress. The effect of each individual action or decision takes on new significance in contact with the next. Feydeau explained that he would devise a situation in which two persons must under no circumstances meet and would then bring them together, sparking a fresh set of cross-purposes. The classic farces are Rube Goldberg (or, in England, W. Heath Robinson) contraptions that put people rather than objects (or, as Bergson would have it, people *as* objects) into action to get from point A to point Z by any number of curlicues, zigzags, and devious bypaths. 'By indirections [to] find directions out', to quote Polonius, another purblind fool who misreads the evidence.

For the snowball to agglomerate successfully, an accelerated tempo is needed. This velocity makes farce rhythm distinct from that of drama. Dramatic plots deal in 'situations'; the characters are 'situated' in a given circumstance unfolding in real time. Farce propels its characters into 'motion', rapid and spontaneous incitement, rather than 'emotion'. Allowing no time for contemplation, the reflex action of the characters provokes an equivalent visceral reaction in the audience. Without questioning the credibility or consequences of what it sees, it laughs. If the kinetic principle of Labiche's *Italian Straw Hat* is forward propulsion, then that of the school of Feydeau is both centrifugal and centripetal. In the early acts, the characters are thrust from various positions in different directions, and then, in the later acts, brought together for the desired collisions and climaxes.

Again, what Bergson claims to be the essence of comedy is more precisely the essence of farce or, if you prefer, low comedy. Comedy of manners, romantic comedy, comedy of characters, poetic comedy, comedy of ideas . . . Although they may partake of the mechanical, they are all more reliant on emotional manipulation and intellectual cut-and-thrust than on physical rough-and-tumble. However, Bergson's approach may be too reductive even for farce.

Let us offer some variations on a basic Bergsonian scenario. A fat man leaves his house on

a winter's day. Boys pelt him with snowballs, causing him to slip on a patch of ice. He falls on his bottom, his top hat flies in the air; but he immediately rebounds, catches the hat in mid-flight, and angrily chases the boys. A number of factors may strike us as funny: the deflation of dignity (codified by paunch and top hat), the triumph of mischief, the surprising agility in the victim, but particularly the lack of consequence in the fall, the speed of recovery. It all takes a few seconds. The fat man's resilience gives us licence to laugh.

What if, after falling, the fat man struggled to regain his balance and recover his hat? It is brand new and he seems dismayed by its damaged state. He limps away, cursing, as the urchins continued to pelt him with snowballs. Suddenly he is not merely a rebounding cipher, but a human being whose recognizable physical and psychological traits are capable of nuance. As he takes on the attributes of a protagonist, the boys assume the role of antagonists: their target may now be viewed as a victim of persecution. This takes a minute to unfold. Comedy is beginning to shade into drama.

One more turn of the screw: as the fat man lies inert, a small trickle of blood darkens the ice beneath his skull and pools around the battered hat. A woman appears on the stairs and screams at the sight. Some small children appear behind her skirts. Now our fat man has a backstory, a private life; we imagine the misfortunes that may befall his family. Even if he survives, it will be in a much-reduced state. The pointlessness of the accident bespeaks the cruelty of fate. Drama has morphed, not into tragedy – since there is no volition involved – but into calamity. The awareness of consequences has aborted laughter.

This example would seem to prove Bergson's point: if we are to laugh uproariously, our feelings must be anaesthetized. To achieve that, the characters of farce must be puppets and its structure must be built with strict causality. If farce's underlying motor is human passions, its outward expression is cerebral. As Thornton Wilder pointed out, 'the pleasures of farce, like those of the detective story, are those of development, pattern, and logic'.¹¹ A 'pure' farce, he asserts, would be

all pattern and would have to avoid exposition of character. Fortunately, he goes on, 'there has never been a pure farce'. Such a work would be too unbearably cruel. Character creeps in, as does social commentary, as does satire, but only in such proportion as to mollify the unforgiving objectivity of the form.

Beyond Mechanics

At the same time that Bergson was propounding his thesis, experiments in Symbolist drama were recasting humanity as puppets in the hands of fate. Human beings, bounded by their mortality, were seen as passive instruments manipulated by a higher power. The idea runs through Maeterlinck and culminates in Gordon Craig's *Übermarionette*. In Russia, the poet Fyodor Sologub introduced a 'Theatre of a Single Will' in which this principle would be incarnated: the playwright was to read the script while mute actors mimed his words.¹² Meyerhold made some directorial moves towards this, which proved counter to the taste of both performers and audiences.

However, the characters in farce are not such blank dolls as these humourless concepts prescribe. Farce differs from burlesque because it must be rooted in a world recognizable and identifiable by the audience. By insisting that in comedy the physical becomes the mechanical, Bergson's model actually filters out those raw human elements that were originally farce's driving force – the appetites, desire, irrational thinking of the characters. He sterilizes farce. The American critic Walter Prichard Eaton in 1910 insisted that 'good farce, like any other good drama, must have certain qualities of sympathy and truth'. However much the action may elude their control, the propulsion of a successful farce has to originate in the passions and personalities of the characters. 'The audience would find it amusing to see a man slip on a banana peel, but not to see a doll slip. So the personages of a successful farce must elicit our interest and win a certain degree of conviction.'¹³

To inveigle us in, the characters in farce must be more than Bergson's automata, at least at first. They need to have individual

personalities, fantasies and unsatisfied desires, often of a latent eroticism. Feydeau pointed out this underlying realism: 'I set about looking for my characters in living reality, determined to preserve their personalities intact. After a comic explosion, I would hurl them into burlesque situations.'¹⁴ Only as he improvises his scenario and its accelerating action do they become cogs in the machine:

I do not analyze my heroes, I watch them act, I hear them speak; they become objectified in a way, they are for me concrete beings; their image is fixed in my memory, and not only their silhouette, but the memory of the moment they came on stage and the door they entered through. I own my play, the way a chess player his game-board; I have presented to my mind the successful positions the pawns (my characters) occupy.¹⁵

In Feydeau's system, the persons from 'living reality' lose their humanity and take on elements of Bergsonian automatism only when thrust into the concatenation of circumstances he devises.

In early silent-film comedy, the structural principle is the gag,¹⁶ which is not reliant on character: the shorts of Mack Sennett's Keystone Studios are essentially collections of gags, played by spring-heeled clowns who exist only for the sake of the joke. Bergson's 'Snow-ball' is standardized as the chase, aided by camera speeds and trick photography. Black-and-white imagery, and dialogue only on intertitles, serve to distance us from reality. However, as the buffoons develop personalities, the stories become more complex, elements of empathy appear, and we wind up with the masterpieces of Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, and their fellows. The trolley race through New York that forms the climax of Lloyd's *Speedy* (1928) is fuelled by strong affective motivation as well as by the demands of the plot. We want Lloyd to win because he has engaged our sympathies.

Eaton described farce as a play in which 'possible people do impossible things', a definition useful in distinguishing it from a clown act or a Punch-and-Judy show. The more extravagant the characters' behaviour, the more plausible their motivation must be. Stanislavsky once described a French farce

he had seen in his youth, in which the hero, at one desperate point, removed his trousers and beat his mother-in-law over the head with them. For all the outrageousness of the moment, it was totally convincing because everything up to that point made it the only possible thing to do.

This is why the usual milieu of a classic French farce is a bourgeois household, whose husbands pursue such ordinary professions as insurance agent or architect, and whose wives are respectable ladies of good society. Even when the scene shifts to a courtesan's intimate circle, it is made to seem perfectly middle-class (as in Feydeau's *Occupe-toi d'Amélie*). Once normality is established, the playwright is free to introduce exotica – a South American general, a dancer from the Moulin Rouge, an Algerian camel dealer – to jump-start improbable encounters. Feydeau is fond of disrupting the norm with a Bergsonian mechanical – a lawyer who stutters whenever it rains, a clerk with a cleft palate who can speak distinctly only when he inserts a silver roof to his mouth, a gentleman who starts barking at moments of excitement. Or else he will set the stage with an apparatus that makes the characters react involuntarily – an 'ecstatic chair' that renders comatose anyone who sits in it, or a revolving bed, or a set of call-buttons hidden under a mattress.

This is endemic to the nature of farce: systematic, self-enclosed, self-sufficient, mathematically exact, superficially logical – so that we effortlessly accept its credibility. The organic inevitability of this world allows no resistance. Each absurdity entails the next, and no reversal occurs to challenge its likelihood. Rational explanations become alienated, even if the solution to a dilemma is only an inch away; the action conspires to sidetrack the characters and lead them on a merry chase away from the sensible solution. This serves to explain the proliferation of concealments: hiding in closets or under beds, cross-dressing and other disguises, falsehoods ranging from the purest white to a spectrum of grisaille, elaborate subterfuges to camouflage simple facts. In this vortex of accelerating confusion, their normal responses are inadequate, their human complexity dissolves before the

need to respond, and only then does the Bergsonian mechanism kick in. Dialogue is reduced to 'Huh?', 'What?', 'My husband!', 'My wife!', 'What a night!' – not so much human utterance as the involuntary voicing of cosmic bewilderment.

The indecency of farce derives from its inversion of the certainties of everyday life. Marital relations, bad matches, shrewd dealings, class resentment – all the familiar aspects of reality are shown in a distorting mirror. Its characters must have a profession, a family, a name, and a concern about money; but, as with any carnival construct, this world is turned upside-down for a limited time. Farce is the revenge of the instincts and impulses over ethical precepts, so there is rarely a hint of scruples or remorse. Farce refuses to point a moral or teach a lesson (to paraphrase Dr Johnson), except that it is fair game to trick a trickster. It exemplifies Johann Huizinga's point that play is an activity with no *raison d'être*, 'and no profit can be gained by it'.¹⁷ Action is spontaneous, taking advantage of whatever is at hand. In this respect, farce acts as a social safety-valve or (see below) 'a rebound from agony'.

The revival of *fin de siècle* farce after the Second World War may have its origins in this. In the rubble left by cataclysm and Holocaust, the clockwork ordering of chaos by Hennequin, Feydeau, and company made sense to the existentialists and the absurdist. It took a while for the fad to cross the Channel, but by the 1960s farce was the order of the day on the London stage. Often qualified as 'black humour', works by Pinter, Orton, Shaffer, Simpson, Stoppard, and Frayn refashioned many of the devices of farce to their own ends. The most extreme case is that of Peter Barnes, who in his two-part play *Laughter!* (1978) tried to test the limits of farce. The first part, which plays the savagery of Ivan the Terrible as slapstick, evokes only a shrug; the milieu is too distant and too exotic to engage our emotions. The second part is more controversial: it sets up a traditional sex farce in the office of a factory that produces gas for a Nazi extermination camp. The epilogue shows two old Jews succumbing to the gas while swapping hoary jokes like a vaudeville double act.

When I staged this epilogue as part of a 'Holocaust cabaret', the audience laughed loudly at the bad puns and ancient wheezes punctuated with coughs induced by Zyklon-B – gags accented by gagging.

BIEBERSTEIN: Bernie Litvinoff just died.

BIMKO: Well, if he had a chance to better himself.

BIEBERSTEIN: Drank a whole bottle of varnish.

Awful sight, but a beautiful finish. . . .

BIMKO: According to the latest statistics, one man dies in the camp every time I breathe.

BIEBERSTEIN: Have you tried toothpaste?¹⁸

In the question-and-answer session that followed, when it was learned that the sketch was not a product of the camps themselves but devised decades later by a gentle British playwright, some spectators waxed indignant. 'What right has an outsider to exploit the Shoah for his bad jokes?' Farce was deplored as not only incompatible, but insulting. It was an early example of the current debates over cultural expropriation.

To this objection, one might assert, with G. K. Chesterton, that farce 'is the form most truly worthy of moral reverence and artistic ambition'.¹⁹ What is the proper artistic response to overwhelming atrocity? When the mind is paralyzed in contemplating these horrors, our reflexes kick in. And the laughter at farce is a knee-jerk reaction to similar knee-jerk reactions on the part of the characters as they confront the accelerating accumulation of extreme situations. The camp inmates are trying to preserve their individual natures while devoured by a system that turns them into statistics. At the onset the heroes of farce are recognizable fellow creatures who engage our sympathies; only when tossed about by a force of circumstance that prevents deliberation or free will do they become Bergsonian cogs in the machine, like Chaplin on the assembly line in *Modern Times*. It may be interpreted as an up-to-date equivalent of Greek tragic destiny.

The dramatic critic Gilbert W. Gabriel once wrote that 'Farce is only a rebound from agony. Know what a nation's farces are, and you know its innermost worry.'²⁰ So we can play the parlour game and generalize that French farce is about sex, English farce is

about social status, American farce is about money and celebrity. There may, however, be one overriding emotion that drives most farces, whatever their cultural specificity. This is 'anxiety': anxiety to conceal one's deepest desire or nastiest behaviour, to succeed at an onerous task, to live up to the expectations of others, to meet an obstinate challenge. As Paul Hervieu put it, 'What is tragedy? It is a play all of whose springs are tightened to inspire anxiety, serious thinking, commiseration. True, it is no longer superbly clad, but contemporary, rational, prosaic, no longer bloody, but minus the scaffold.'²¹ Our beleaguered bridegroom of *The Italian Straw Hat* is anxious to find a substitute *chapeau* while keeping the actual situation hidden from his guests. Most of Feydeau's husbands are anxious to keep their attempts at adultery unknown to their wives, while the wives are anxious to catch their husbands *in flagrante delicto* or take a tit-for-tat revenge. The hapless newly-wed of *Anything to Declare?* is anxious to meet the urgent deadline set by his in-laws, which anxiety is redoubled because he is constantly frustrated, and this generates even greater anxiety. Intensifying anxiety ratchets up the intensity of the action.

The emotions tragedy means to inspire are, in the modern age, to be found in farce. With this difference: in classical tragedy we may know better than the characters what brought them to their sorry ends, but, as fellow creatures, we share their ignorance of the gods' interventions in our own lives. We cannot scan the bigger picture. So watching others succumb to their ignorance shakes us. At farce, however, we laugh like Olympians, because we persuade ourselves that we would never be as foolish or blind or mistaken as its characters are. Their panic strikes us as out of proportion to the contingency of its causes. We do not fear losing our libidos at the glimpse of a customs officer, or confronting our identical twin in the shape of an alcoholic janitor, or being abandoned in our underwear on the landing of a strange apartment house. This is the stuff of nightmares, the surrealistic guises assumed by our real-life anxieties. Even more than tragedy, farce moves us to a catharsis, through laughter: the (temporary)

purging of those anxieties. Its happy ending, by unravelling the tangled knot of confusions, gives us the specious reassurance that, unlike these poor boobs, we can, ultimately, make sense of our world.

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