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The dramatic form that brings you mistaken identities, witty repartee and a lot of slamming doors is “serious” business.

By Nan Christensen

DAVID COOPER



Comedy

It's Good for You

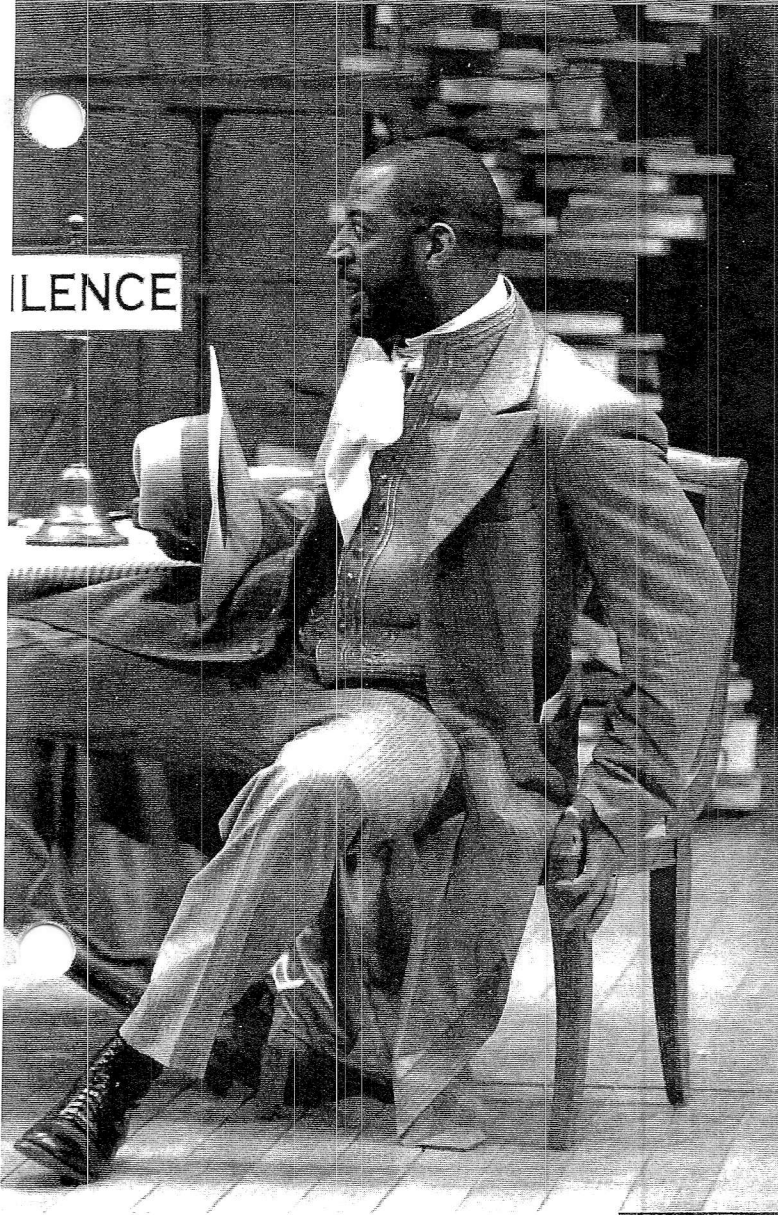
The truth is comedy is inexpensive therapy. Whether you're a chuckler, a guffawer, a mental titterer or a downright belly laugher, it's a strong bet that you leave the theatre after an evening of well-produced dramatic comedy more life-loving than when you arrived.

Popular across social strata since its beginnings, comedy is a small “d” democratic leveler, abandoning the conventions of social, political

and religious hierarchies. No one is immune to its public display of the things most of us would rather keep private. On the flip side, comedy encourages us to *respond* in ways that aren't usually socially acceptable. Comedy bares its human soul and then says, “We're all in this together. Have a laugh. Now let it go.” The release factor alone is powerful medicine.

Its therapeutic value notwithstanding, comedy suffers an inferiority complex when up against its more respectable sibling, tragedy. Case in point: a mere 16 percent of the Best Picture Oscars and 15 percent of Pulitzer Prizes have been awarded to comedies.

OSF actor-director Kenneth Albers waves the underdog flag: “For some unknown reason, comedy as a dramatic form has always seemed like the rebellious neighborhood child— attractive but too unkempt to be clean, tolerated but too



Julia (Miriam A. Laube) resorts to “womanly” tactics to keep her man (Derrick Lee Weeden) in *The Philanderer*.

tragedy is a celebration of man’s capacity to aspire and suffer, comedy celebrates his capacity to endure.”

That capacity to endure usually boils down to a happy ending—as critical to comedy as an unhappy ending is to tragedy. The family separated for decades is reunited (*The Comedy of Errors*); the twins lost at sea and feared dead find one another again (*Twelfth Night*); the bride brutally denounced by her fiancé on their wedding day reconciles and weds him (*Much Ado about Nothing*). Comedy is that protected arena where absurdity, violence and all manner of manipulation can play (read that *play*) out without negative consequence, or at least, lasting consequence. Marilyn French, in *Shakespeare’s Division of Experience* writes that one of the defining characteristics of tragedy is, as Lady Macbeth says, “What’s done cannot be undone.” In comedy, the opposite is true—actions can be undone, words can be unsaid. For an audience to enjoy an experience that blows open the bounds of reason, justice and, in many instances, good taste, they must believe that their comic heroes and heroines—indestructible, forgiving and forever optimistic—ultimately will prevail.

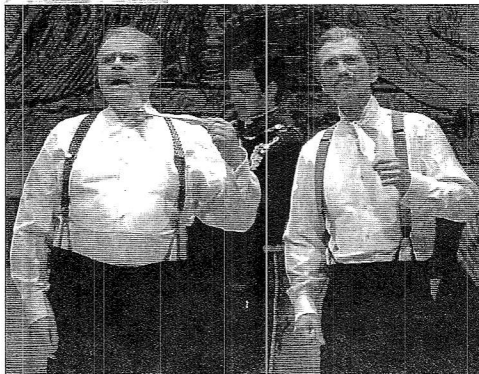
It takes one to know one

Cicero said that comedy is “an imitation of life, a mirror of customs, and an image of truth.” It’s comedy’s element of harmlessness that creates a safe place for us to reflect on our own less-than-perfect nature. As the pompous banker (who has just finished patronizing his chauffeur) loses his trousers in the limo door, the comic spirit allows us to let down our guard and in our heart of hearts, confess that it takes one to know one. Comedy is a party, and we are all invited to take some pleasure in the strange human gyrations that challenge how we think we conduct ourselves in civilized society.

At the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, comedy is an integral part of a balanced 11-play season.

You need a good belly laugh *and* a good cry every day, according to the Irish grandmother of literary director and dramaturg Lue Douthit. “Even the ancient Greeks knew about this kind of balance,” says Douthit. “At the Great Dionysian Festival in Athens, in which three playwrights were pitted against one another, each had to include a satyr play [a bawdy farce] along

The Philanderer: Cuthbertson (James Edmondson) is reunited with his less free-thinking old friend Colonel Craven (Mark Murphey). John Tufts is the pageboy.



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undisciplined to be understood, clever but too unpredictable to be trusted, liked but too dangerous to be loved, recognized but too frivolous to be respected.”

The capacity to endure

What is it about the comic spirit that makes this bad boy of the theatre so appealing? One way of looking at it comes from Robert W. Corrigan in his book *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (1965): “The constant in comedy is the comic view of life...the sense that no matter how many times man is knocked down, he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep on going. Thus, while

Comedy Is Hard

Michael Hume's teenage children have long outgrown cartoons, but you still might catch the OSF veteran actor in front of the likes of Bugs Bunny. Hume is hardly apologetic: He owns his own copy of the Looney Tunes Golden Collection and views it as a Rosetta Stone that unlocks secrets of comedic code. No joke.



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Room Service actors David Kelly, Christopher DuVal and Eileen DeSandre work hard for the fun.

Sir Laurence Olivier is reputed to have admitted that no one would know if he was only at 70 percent as Hamlet, but if he wasn't at more than 100 percent in a Feydeau farce, *everyone* would know immediately. It may seem effortless from the 10th row in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, but OSF actors have few illusions about the challenges inherent in a comic role.

Comedy is grueling work that takes precision, a steel concentration and an instinct for timing. Ask anyone in OSF's production of the farce *Room Service*. Hume (who plays Faker Englund) says the cast is a "team machine" of real workhorses—actors who summon all their skill, art and energy to connect with honest human communication, actors who are keen on eliciting more than mere laughter from an audience.

David Kelly (Gordon Miller) had forgotten about the demanding pace that makes farce work. "The play needs to be out-of-our-minds fast," the actor says. Breathlessly. Kelly, who seems to have a love-hate relationship with laughter, has learned that each audience and each performance is different. "If the laughs don't seem to be as loud as the night before, we can't be stuck on that: We have to go on and play our game and not be driven by our panic to make a quiet audience noisy."

Eileen DeSandre (cast as the Russian actor/hotel worker Sasha) moves her finger in an arc in the air and stops on an imaginary point. "It's just after the crest of the laugh," she says as she describes the exact moment to begin her next line. DeSandre knows, however, that reading audience response in "real time" is beyond technical—it's an art form. Christopher DuVal (Leo Davis) agrees. He looks for the balance between precision and spontaneity to make each performance moment truthful, authentic to the situation and appear as if it's happening for the first time.

Catherine Lynn Davis, who will play the Princess of France in *Love's Labor's Lost* during OSF's 2005 outdoor season, believes that at its core, comedy is not different from any other type of acting. According to Davis, comedy requires "the same emotions and depth that drama does. The great clowns—Jackie Gleason, Tom Hanks, Jack Lemmon, Art Carney—have offered up fabulous tragic performances. There is pain at deep levels in comedy.

"The key to a great comic performance," says Davis, "is the absolute belief in everything you do—that all the totally silly and utterly goofy things you are doing are essential to the character's survival." —NC

with the three tragedies. Comedy is external, intellectual and social, whereas tragedy is internal, emotional and individual. As human beings, we are neither exclusively one nor the other."

OSF is blessed with a robust cadre of comic talent. "Our comedic strength is deep and wide," says associate artistic director Penny Metropulos. The level of skill needed to play a Shakespeare tragedy, she notes, is the same level of skill needed for comedy; otherwise comedy runs the risk of being banal, stupid. At the Festival for more than a decade, Metropulos understands how OSF's repertory company helps make our comedy so strong. "Everybody knows everybody. Consequently, there is knowledge of what the other actors' rhythms are. It's like jazz musicians who can riff off of each other."

The comedies of 2005

Since its beginnings in ancient Greek theatre, comedy types—comedy of manners, intrigue, character, ideas, humors; problem comedy, situation comedy, romantic comedy; satire, mime, farce, vaudeville, burlesque and, yes, even the hybrid tragicomedy—have proliferated like rabbits, offspring of offspring. In 2005, OSF's comedy offering spans five centuries—from the late 16th century romantic comedies of William Shakespeare (*Love's Labor's Lost* and *Twelfth Night*) to Hannah Cowley's witty 1780 comedy of manners (*The Belle's Stratagem*) to the social exposé of George Bernard Shaw's 19th century comedy of ideas (*The Philanderer*) to a classic 20th century American farce (*Room Service*).

It's the extraordinary use of language that Kenneth Albers, who will direct *Love's Labor's Lost* on the outdoor stage this summer, loves about this Elizabethan comedy. Says Albers, "The romantic wordplay of the lovers is set against the silly pomposity of Don Armado, which is set against the academic Latin of Holofernes and Nathaniel, all of which is skewered by Moth. *Love's Labor's Lost* is, in the words of George Bernard Shaw, a 'carnival of words.'"

Shakespeare's less mannered but hugely popular comedy *Twelfth Night* (Peter Amster, director) has its own hefty serving of comic characters. Olivia's fool, Feste, offers his witty commentary on events. On the more bawdy side, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew present a coarser comedy. They hurl a slew of colorful insults, mostly at the puritanical and self-righteous steward, Malvolio, to be played by Albers in OSF's 2005 production.

Heavily influenced by Shakespeare, Hannah Cowley modeled her heroine Letitia Hardy in *The Belle's Stratagem* on Shakespeare's spirited Rosalind, whose clever maneuver out of

a desperate situation drives the plot. Like Shakespeare, Cowley had a wealth of comedic tools to craft her scripts: deception, manipulation, wordplay, repartee, stock characters with roots in *commedia dell'arte*, physical humor, a hectic pace. Oddly enough, *The Belle's Stratagem's* "madcap pace" reminds dramaturg Melinda Finberg of the HBO comedy *Sex and the City*: "Everyone is overextended and trying to keep up with all their social and business commitments. They are always catching each other on the fly on the way to some other engagement."

According to Finberg, Cowley's effervescent style of comedy was written as entertainment; social commentary was the byproduct. "The comedy exaggerates social conventions and absurdities, but its ideas are handled lightly," she says. Ultimately, Finberg suggests that Cowley's special touch rests in her ability to "bring the audience in as a participant in the comedy, complicit with the plot machinations and characters' secrets. We are in on the joke and have a stake in the payoff, which helps carry the festive spirit through to the play's celebratory resolution."

To the contrary

Penny Metropulos laughs out loud when asked about comedy as it relates to Shaw's *The Philanderer*, which she directs in the Angus Bowmer Theatre. In the play, Shaw has used his verbal dexterity and keen sense of the ridiculous in a place "where emotion meets reason," she says. And in that space "there is every possibility for comedy—and poignancy." As Metropulos sees it, Shaw has based his play on the reported last words of the most serious of playwrights, Henrik Ibsen—"to the contrary." As soon as something is said and it seems that it is right, the contrary makes an appearance.

As a response to societal upheaval in the face of the Industrial Revolution and the absurdity of a world war to come, whackiness "was already in the air at the turn of the century," says Metropulos, "and Shaw—even in his little Edwardian, Victorian box—was breathing it and doing very peculiar things."

Speaking of outright whacky, enter the world of *Room Service* and American Depression-era inventiveness and tenacity. When the show's composer Todd Barton first looked at the cast list for the play, he said, "It's already funny." (See sidebar, p. 6, for more on *Room Service* actors.) Visiting director J.R. Sullivan sees the play, written by John Murray and Allen Boretz, as a "machine built of human energy, fueled by an audience poised to laugh and be uplifted. In this play everyone—even the villain—gets what he wants," promises Sullivan.

"We know that this play is a farce because it fulfills the minimal criterion: There are four doors on the set," quips the play's dramaturg, Lue Douthit, who categorizes *Room Service* as a "frantic" comedy. In his introduction to the anthology

Frantic Comedy: 8 Plays of Knockabout Fun, editor Tony Tanner claims that fear of discovery is what sustains frantic comedy. "This fear sets in motion a series of 'frantic' defensive actions," he writes, "which in turn produce endless circumlocutions of action and reaction, usually on the part of characters who have no idea what the hero or heroine is hoping to achieve, since so many lies are told and since so often people are pretending to be persons they are not...."

It makes one wonder what drives playwrights like Murray and Boretz to go to such lengths of absurdity. Albert Bermel (*Farce*, 1982) hypothesizes that writing farce "may require a rare blend of arrested development and wide-open arteries from the soul." Bermel may be on to something. In our time of war and fear—and, paradoxically, possibility—a solid dose of comedy's optimism and good old-fashioned play may be the therapy we need to unplug our defenses and pretenses and connect to our fellow beings with open hearts. ●