

Order and Disorder in Farce

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Much writing about humour concentrates upon the “stimulus – response” sequence, in which the humorous material (which may be verbal and/or visual, perhaps even enacted) provokes (or fails to provoke) a reaction expressing appreciation of the humour by the audience. The true nature of this sequence is of course much more complex, as is the range of possible reactions. Both *environment* and *medium of presentation* play an important part, but so do *intentions* and/or *expectations* both on the part of the joker/s and of the audience (which itself operates both collectively and individually). All these aspects will modify the appreciation of the humour, or the lack of it.

Expectations about Humour and Comic Style in Farce

In studying farce, a recognised dramatic comic genre with a long-standing tradition for cheerful, popular amusement, the role of *expectations* in humour comes sharply into focus. Whether the humour stimulus comes from a fair-ground Punch and Judy show, a Mardi Gras parade, a comedy-club or bar, the Viennese Volksoper, watching a cartoon on video or in a particular T.V. time-slot, seeing the letters-page political cartoon in the daily newspaper, from being part of a social exchange initiated by a smile and the words “have you heard the one about ...?”, or from down-loading a web-site collection of jokes on a particular theme, our expectation is not only that a humour response will be appropriate, but that a particular kind of humorous material, presented in a particular way, will be encountered. The predictive power of such framing is self-evident; and it applies for both creators and consumers of humour.

From early in the recorded origins of theatre and theatrical performance (by which I mean both impromptu events and those organized for set times and events), a codified hierarchy of how and when to be funny evolved for performers. Its levels are identified by the different names of types or styles of comedy, which then serve as a key to establish an audience's expectations. Knowing that one is about to encounter a comic opera, or a stand-up comic, or recognising a suspiciously familiar recitation as a parody, or age-old stock characters as those of a bed-room farce, or seeing the square boundary frame and animated figures of a two-dimensional cartoon, all these things serve to signal not only something about what kind of humour to expect but also (roughly) how to react to it. From the "high" comedy of manners (Shakespeare, Molière, Goldoni, Chekhov, Wilde, Shaw, Stoppard and the best of T.V. sitcoms), through tragi-comedy, satire and black comedy, to burlesque, slapstick and "low" farce, the comic label summarises what to expect in terms of characters, plot, style of acting and "tonality" of laughter. The laughter might be warm and sympathetic; it might be tinged with sadness and gravity at underlying wisdom about the sins of the world and the unfairness of the human condition; maybe cheerful and brave, or reckless and defiant; it may be liberating, raucous and indulgent, allowing the comic violation of social taboos and restraints, and the exhausting belly-laugh of repeated comic stimulation. The answer will depend to some extent not just on the nature of the stimuli, but on our expectations and anticipation of what we will see and hear. The "play-frame" for the stimuli includes the fact that we know the name of the comic genre, as well as the time and location of performance¹.

Traditional expectations are looser for some styles of comedy, more precise for others. Often a theatrical piece is artistically a mixed bag, a managed sweep of comic styles ranging from high to low and back again. It might be thought that the "highest" style is the purest, the most difficult to achieve, the most constrained in its artistic formulae and limits; that the "comedy of manners" or romantic comedy deserves its traditional position on the top rung of the ladder by virtue of its elaborate code of construction. However, interestingly, farce at the very bottom rung is probably the most strictly codified in terms of rules of construction

1 William F. Fry emphasizes this concept of the "playframe" surrounding humour and laughing and its importance, drawing on the work of Gregory Bateson and anthropologists in general about observing humorous exchanges; see for example Fry W., 1963, *Sweet Madness*, Palo Alto, Calif., Pacific Books, 123-147 and elsewhere.

and composition, and it is certainly the most demanding to perform (as any experienced actor will testify). Arguably, its mix of dramatic elements (where the drama = character + plot + performance) also provides the most highly comic stimulus – at least as measured in the crude terms of laughter response (which is a product of both volume and duration). It is farce which notoriously exhausts its audience's with physical laughter. What then is farce and how does it operate?

Farce as a Genre and the Origins of the Term

Writing in 1978, after ten years' investigating dozens of European farce-texts ranging from classical antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century, I concluded that farce is characterized by a comic spirit which "delights in taboo-violation, but which avoids implied moral comment or social criticism and which tends to debar empathy for its victims" (Davis 1978:86)². On reflection, I might have added that the more respectable the comic victims are, and the more successfully moral implications are avoided, the funnier the farce will be. Its guiding rule is to tread a fine line between offence and entertainment.

As distinct from high comedy of manners and romantic comedy, farce-plots tend to be short; they are not peopled by complex, sympathetic characters, but by simplified comic types. The humour favours direct, visual and physical jokes over pyrotechnics of verbal wit and declares an open season for aggression, animal high spirits, self-indulgence and rudeness. In contrast to satire and black humour (which can be equally licentious and violent), the humour of farce is essentially conservative: it has little reforming zeal – or even despair – at the ways of the world. It tends to restore conventional authority, or at least to save authority's face, at the end of its comic upheavals.

Farce makes use of techniques such as burlesque (referential mockery of characters and situations known to the audience from outside the farce itself), and slapstick (physical but stylized beatings and the humiliation of agelastic targets); but it does so without seeking to point any particular lesson for its audiences. The fundamental jokes of a farce-plot are probably the inescapable fact that all human dignity is at the mercy of the human body and its appetites and needs; and the acknowledgement that those human bodies themselves are imprisoned by the

2 Davis J. M., 1978, *Farce*, London, Methuen.

space/time continuum. If there is a meta-message or a moral here, it is that we are all leveled down by our common humanity. No airs and pretences allowed.

Exigency of this kind produces elaborate constraints in both the construction and delivery of a good farce; but their mastery has not always been appreciated by critics and theorists. On the other hand popular audiences have returned a "give us more" vote on farce since the dawn of theatrical time. The result is that comic artists with pretensions to status have often reflected this ambivalence in their public attitudes towards their work. Even in fifth century B.C. Athens, Aristophanes busily assured his audience (while serving them plenty of knock-about fun) that his type of theatre was not as "low" as the cheap tricks of the farcical playlets popular in neighbouring Megara. Delivering the Prologue to *The Wasps* for example, Xanthias the slave says:

Don't expect anything profound,
Or any slapstick *à la Megara*.
And we got no slaves to dish out baskets
Of free nuts – or the old ham scene
Of Heracles cheated of his dinner;
.....Our little story
Has meat in it and a meaning not
Too far above your heads, but more
Worth your attention than low comedy (Aristophanes 1970: I,171)³.

Unfortunately, these centuries of critical disdain for the genre of farce have seriously hampered efforts to assess its operations (Bermel 1982:15-16)⁴. No more than fifty years ago, the well-regarded English critic L.J. Potts wrote in his brief volume on comedy that farce is "comedy with the meaning left out; which is as much as to say, with the comedy left out"⁵. But unfunny farce is simply not farce: it has failed to achieve the delicate balancing act which ensures the funniness. There have been however brave exceptions to the desire to ignore farce, and even the British establishment has not always been so stuffy. In 1693, the then Poet Laureate (and dramatist) Nahum Tate, wrote in the Preface to his popular comedy *A Duke and No Duke*, "I know not by what Fate it [farce] happens (in common Notion) to be the most contemptible sort of Drama".

3 Aristophanes, 1970, *Plays*, trans. P. Dickinson, London, Oxford University Press, Vol. 1, 171.

4 Bermel A., 1982, *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen*, N.Y., Simon and Schuster.

5 Potts L., 1949, *Comedy*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1949. A member of Queen's College Cambridge, Potts wrote this popular volume as a literary guide for students, writers and actors of comedy on both sides of the Atlantic. It went into several editions, the latest in 1966.

But he also cautioned "I have not yet seen any definition of Farce, and dare not be the first that ventures to define it". It is true that farce came late to the canon of dramatic terminology, but if Tate had looked across the Channel, he would have found an excellent definition – to my knowledge the first such – penned in 1548 by Thomas Sebillet in his *Art Poétique François*. Farce, he says, is concerned with "*badineries, nigauderies et toutes sotties esmouvantes à ris et plaisir*" ("bantering, tomfoolery and every kind of idiocy that can give rise to laughter and amusement") (Sebillet 1910:165)⁶. The English word in fact derives directly from this French term which itself described a comic genre successfully established in France for over a hundred years when Sebillet wrote.

Fifty years later a French manual on literary practice gave advice about this type of drama called "farce" that still rings true today:

Le sujet [de la farce] doit estre gay et de risée, il n'y a ny scenes ni pauses. Il faut noter qu'il n'y a pas moins de science à scavoir bien faire une farce qu'une egglogue ou moralité. (The subject [of a farce] must be merry and laughable; there are neither scene divisions nor pauses. It should be noted that there is no less science in knowing how to make a good farce than an eclogue [a pastoral] or a morality play) (Delaudun d'Aigaliers 1598: n.p.)⁷.

Ecclesiastical Origins

Like other contemporary critical commentaries, these two definitions focus particularly on the subject materials of farce and on its formal structural elements. The reasons for this lie in the origins of these early French farces as a separate and distinct category among the medieval religious plays of the fifteenth century, evolved at a time when formal drama was emerging from several centuries of increasing elaboration of the Church liturgy. Since the twelfth century, increasing use had been made of vernacular tropes (verbal and musical decorations to the liturgy), especially at the Christmas and Easter celebrations, to convey "human interest". (It should be noted that this was not necessarily *comic* human interest e.g. Mary's lament at the foot of the Cross, or the dialogue of the soldiers on watch outside the Easter Tomb). This process became known as "farcing" (from the Latin verb *farcire*: to stuff), and indeed both the verb and noun forms of "farce" in English and French still bear that somewhat antiquated meaning

6 Ed. F. Gaiffe, 1910, Paris, E. Cornély, my translation.

7 Delaudun d'Aigaliers, P., 1598, *L'Art Poétique François*, Paris, s.v. "Farce", my translation.

(e.g. in English, "force-meat", or stuffing; and *farce* and *farcir* in modern French usage). Thus the little French episodes themselves were called in Latin *farsae* or *farsurae*, and numerous such padded-out epistles, or *épitres farcies*, came to be prescribed for specific feast days.

In twelfth century French ecclesiastical communities, the celebrations for the Christmas feasts were specially elaborate. From the Feast of St. Stephen (first martyr, 26th December) to the culmination of the Christmas festivities on 1st January with the Feast of the Circumcision, each rank of the clergy had its special day of indulgence and each liturgy its *épitre farcie* (e.g. for Feast of the Holy Innocents, 28th December, a Boy Bishop from the choristers might be elected to rule over the festivities and the words of the *Magnificat* were elaborated in view of their special significance)⁸. All of this culminated in the Feast of the Circumcision, the day of the despised sub-deacons (the lowest order of all) who contributed such disruption to established order that by the end of the century, reforming notices were ubiquitous. It should be remembered that the whole of this Christmas period, covering the northern hemisphere winter solstice, corresponded roughly with that from the Roman Saturnalia (17th December) to the Kalends (1st-3rd January), thus giving clear parallels with the institutions of the *Rex Saturnalis* and the temporary exchange of roles between master and man which characterized the Kalends⁹.

At the Cathedral of Beauvais during the height of celebration of this riotous period, the ritual appropriate to the Feast of the Circumcision (an equivocal event in itself) was elaborated in such a way that it became known as the Feast of the Ass. These celebrations featured the beast on which Mary rode (and later Jesus, as well as such other worthies as the Old Testament figure of Balaam). An ass was escorted in procession up the nave by canons bearing wine, while singing the burlesque "Prose of the Ass" (celebrating the paradoxical animal of blessed innocence, divine instrumentality and sexual voracity). The censuring and asperging were done with black puddings and sausages; the celebrant was instructed to bray three times to conclude the Service, with the congregation responding similarly. In his monumental study of the mediaeval stage, E. K. Chambers

8 "Deposuit potentes de sede: et exaltavit humiles" ("He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek"). The quotation is from the psalm called the *Magnificat*, or the song of Mary in response to the Annunciation.

9 For an excellent discussion of this "topsy-turvy" tradition, see Donaldson, I., 1970, *The World Upside-Down*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 15-16.

describes the ruling idea of the feast as "the inversion of status, and the performance, inevitably burlesque, by the inferior clergy of functions properly belonging to their betters" (Chambers 1903: I, 325)¹⁰. But clearly, sexual images and the celebration of folly itself also had a strong part to play and gradually the Feast of the Ass merged into the wider community event of the Feast of Fools.

In mediaeval England, the milder indulgences of the Feast of the Boy Bishop were more common, although the Feast of Fools was not unknown. But in France, the activities of the licensed fools, or *sots*, were so popular with the laity as well as with the junior clergy, that when the religious feast was formally proscribed in 1438, the townsfolk took it over, forming their own secular societies of fools to perpetuate the annual temporary reign of folly. These were the *compagnies des fous*, or *sociétés joyeuses*.

As elsewhere in Christian Europe, the organization of communal dramatic performances was by then located outside the Church. In Italy and Spain it was in the hands of charitable associations, in England those of trade-guilds, and in France, dedicated *confréries* (fraternities) named for a particular saint or religious concept. This French method of organization seems to have led to some division of acting skills, or formal specialization, in performing religious drama and comedy (e.g. the understanding that existed in Paris between the *Confrérie de la Passion*, which was granted a legal monopoly in 1402 to perform religious drams within the city, and the powerful Parisian branch of the *Basoches*, the guild of law-clerks, called *Les Enfants sans souci*, whose members performed in costume as *sots*). This collaboration was significant and unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, so far as is known: from it much flowed.

Accompanying the division of labour came an important differentiation in dramatic structure. Texts of the early fifteenth century reveal that any religious play such as a *mystère* ("sacred mystery"), or a *vie de saint* ("life of a saint"), both celebratory and instructive in purpose and narrative, might well include a separate comic episode, explicitly intended as comic relief – a *farce* in fact. In one MS (dated 1420 and quite possibly forming part of the repertoire of the *Confrérie de la Passion*), a series of miracles performed by Saint Geneviève carries a forthright textual heading before introducing some separate comic play-lets:

10 Chambers E. K., 1903, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 Vols, London, Oxford U.P.

Miracles des plusiers malades

En farses pour estre mains fades.

(More miracles of [healing] the sick

Done with farces to be less dull.) (Jubinal 1837: 281)¹¹.

This evidence of stylistic separation and specialization is born out by the record that at Dijon in 1447, a *Mystère de St Eloi* gave rise to a law suit. The court records affirm that “*pardedans ledit mystère y avoit certaine farce meslée par manière de faire reveiller au rire les gens*” (“in the middle of the said mystery there was a certain farce, put in so that it would excite the people to laughter”) (Petit de Julleville 1886: 330)¹². In this case however the comic balance of farce had tipped towards dangerous social criticism: the complaint before the court was that the audience had been excited to laughter against the King and the Dauphin by political references in the so-called *farce*.

Farce Versus Satire

Very early on in France therefore, a taste for rational categorization joined with a strong legal system to produce a formal differentiation in secular theatre, first between the serious and the comic, and then between what we would now call farce and satire. These classifications set the pattern for the following centuries and go far towards explaining why it is the French term which in English names the precise comic genre we now recognize as farce. Even the *compagnies des fous*, dedicated to celebrating the spirit and letter of the licensed Feast of the Fools, seem to have made a clear distinction between two kinds of performance, the *sottie*, and the *farce*. The *sottie* was performed by their actors dressed as *sots* in what is quite recognizable as the costume of the “licensed fool” or clown – particoloured hose and tunic with cap and bells. The *sotties* turned upon the theme of unmasking public and private figures to reveal the *sot/fool* behind. Not surprisingly, such biting allegorical satire constantly risked provoking official reaction, punishment and even imprisonment of the actors, and eventually, in the mid-sixteenth century, all formal fool societies were suppressed.

On the other hand, the *farce* proper (correctly identified by Sebillet and others as an independent, short, fast-paced play designed purely to get people laughing)

11 Jubinal A., ed., 1837, *Mystères Inédits du 15e Siècle*, Paris, Techener, my translation. The MS is numbered 1131 in the Bibliothèque Ste Geneviève collection.

12 Petit de Julleville, 1886, *Répertoire du Théâtre Comique en France au Moyen-âge*, Paris, Cerf.

embodied a more tolerant attitude towards the stupidity of human nature and organizations. Probably the best-known text of this period is *Maitre Pierre Pathe- lin* (c. 1480, and almost certainly a Basoche farce, given its focus upon legal quibbling)¹³. It exemplifies the common pattern (although in an abnormally extended form, being one of the more elaborate farces of this period): a short uproarious plot presenting a comically balanced struggle for power between two opposing forces – husband and wife, or parent and child, master and thief, or judge and cheeky lawyer – whose characterizations are convincingly realistic and down-to-earth, but whose sufferings do not make large calls upon our sympathies nor invoke the censor in us. The actors of the farces did not dress as sots, but as the recognizably real (if caricatured) people of contemporary town and villages society.

When the *sociétés joyeuses* passed into demise, these farce playlets retained their popularity, judging by the large number of them printed throughout the sixteenth century. In 1545, members of a travelling troupe of actors are recorded as signing a legal agreement which bound them to play “*moralitéz, farces et autres jeux roumains et françois*” (“moralities, farces and other Latin and French plays”) (Cohen 1926: 204)¹⁴. This clearly shows that farce as a distinct genre formed part of a new professional livelihood, that which in time provided the training ground for Molière and his colleagues.

Molière’s debt to this native farce tradition has been proudly acknowledged ever since Gustave Lanson’s classic 1901 essay in the *Révue de Paris*, “*Molière et la Farce*” (Lanson 1901).¹⁵ Dissenting from the then traditional opinion that the artist’s achievement was cheapened by the influences he absorbed from both the French and the later Italian farce (the *commedia dell’arte*), Lanson argued: “These are his masters, these are his origins. And he is great enough not to blush at them. He is the best *farceur*, and for this reason he is the best creator of comedy” (trans. Cohen 1963: 154)¹⁶. The great Russian director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, took exactly the same view a little later, seeing in the essential theatricality

13 See Bowen B., 1964, *Les Caractéristiques Essentielles de la Farce Française et leur Survivance dans les Années 1550-1620*, Urbana, Ill., Illinois U.P.; and for the text itself, Bowen B., ed., 1967, *Four Farces*, Oxford, Blackwell.

14 Cohen G., 1926, *Histoire de la Mise en Scène dans le Théâtre Religieux Français du Moyen-âge*, 2nd ed., Paris, Champion, my translation.

15 Lanson G., 1901, “Molière et la Farce”, *Révue de Paris*, Vol. III (May 1910), 129-153.

16 Trans. by Cohen, R., 1963, *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. VIII, 154.

of farce the life-springs of the professional theatre from which, even in modern times, it can seek to regenerate itself:

The idea of the actor's art, based on a worship of mode, gesture and movement, is indissolubly linked with the idea of the farce. The farce is eternal. If its principles are for a time expelled from the world of the theatre, we nevertheless know that they are firmly engraved in the lines of the manuscripts left by the theatre's greatest writers. (Corrigan 1963: 205-6)¹⁷.

Farce and its Comic Style and Structure

With this twentieth century rehabilitation, farce could at last be examined as itself, not just as a sub-set of higher comedy, giving attention to the psychological bases of its popularity, and to the internal structures by which it achieves its comic effects. That there are psychological forces at work was first noted by theatre critic Eric Bentley, in an important essay entitled "The Psychology of Farce" which he wrote to preface a selection of nineteenth and early twentieth century French farces by masters of the genre including Courteline, Labiche and Feydeau (Bentley 1958: vii-viii)¹⁸ These were the same farces which, in first production on the Paris stage in the 1890's, inspired the philosopher and scientist Henri Bergson to speculate about the mechanical patterns of the comic plots and characters that produced such gales of laughter and he published his conclusions in *Le Rire* (Bergson 1910).¹⁹ Both Bentley's and Bergson's analyses are fundamental to an understanding of the constraints which paradoxically ensure the generation of unrestrained laughter in farce.

For Bentley, farce is "practical joking turned theatrical" (Bentley 1964: 234)²⁰ and he elaborates the extraordinary violence and mayhem that characterizes the genre. It is not just a matter of custard pies in the face nor even a barrel of night-soil broken over the clown's head. (This memorable scene concludes one popular eighteenth century fair-ground *parade*, or street-theatre performance, called *Le Marchard de Merde*²¹. It features the then popular figure of Gilles the bone-

17 "Meyerhold on Farce" is translated and reprinted in Corrigan R., ed., 1963, *Theater in the 20th Century*, N.Y., Grove Press, 205-206.

18 Bentley E., 1958, "The Psychology of Farce" in Bentley, E. ed., 1958, "*Let's Get a Divorce!*" and *Other Plays*, N.Y., Hill & Wang, vii-xx. Parts of the essay had previously appeared in *The New Republic* magazine.

19 Bergson H., 1910, *Le Rire; Essai sur la Signification du Comique*, Paris, Felix Alcan.

20 Bentley E., 1964, *The Life of the Drama*, N.Y., Atheneum.

21 Anon, 1761, *Théâtre des Boulevards, ou Recueil des Parades*, Paris, Mahon, Vol. I, 238-260.

headed clown, who has been fooled into attempting to make his commercial way in shit-selling to people who might need it. He fails - miserably.) Farce plots celebrate the fact that people actually enjoy the thrill and the shock of escaping "the rules" of polite civilization. As Bentley puts 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, and one of the chief uses to which he puts his intelligence, such as it is, is to think aggression when he is not committing it".(Bentley 1958: xix) And woman too of course, if theatre, film and TV audiences can be trusted.

The parallels with dream violence and its customary taboo-violations are striking. Bentley points to many apparent structural similarities (sequences of actions, such as chases; "routines" of dressing, packing; stereotypical characterization of threatening bullies, the dependent child, the "stud-muffin" who isn't, and so on; and even the style of performance - large gesticulation emphasized by distortions of time and space). But dreams are (frequently) unpleasant: in pleasurable farce, says Bentley, "one is permitted the outrage, but is spared the consequences".(Bentley 1958: xiii)

It might be thought from Bentley's critique that farce is all fantasy in which "anything goes". My own analysis shows that the more extreme the outrage and the more directly it is expressed, the more carefully constrained the dramatic techniques will be (for example, in Noel Coward's very restrained English comedy *Fumed Oak*²², the technical acting and production challenges are very great indeed in delivering the famous "slap" to the cheek of the upper-class mother-in-law, which must seem to knock her out cold, without alarming the audience). Violence is omni-present in farce, but often it is more sound and fury, than actual; more symbolic gesture than potent action; often deflected to unwitting third parties rather than to the true psychological object of resentment; frequently minimized in its consequences; justified with rationalisations; and mocked with parallel sub-plots and repetitions²³. The targets of aggression and violence are presented as largely responsible for inviting their own fate (as being misfits, killjoys, selfish, mean, hypocritical, exploitative and/or just plain stupid enough

22 *Fumed Oak* was first performed at the Phoenix Theatre, London, in 1936. For the text, see Coward N., 1934-1958, *Play Parade*, 5 vols, London, Heinemann; *Fumed Oak* appears in Vol. IV (1954), 133-159.

23 Oddly enough, unless there is a high seriousness of purpose, mimicry in and of itself is belittling or ridiculing; this holds true even for mimicry of the mimic - mimicry squared as it were.

to fall for being fooled). They are iconic figures, representative of general groups (such as parents, members of the opposite sex, country yokels lacking civilized manners, unsympathetic guardians, rival lovers of both sexes, self-invited visitors, over-educated, boring pedants and professionals, masters and bosses, or just plain annoying wimps). They receive their punishment on behalf of a much wider set of offences than those they present personally. And always they lack self-consciousness, being totally unaware of their own limitations. Over their fluid humanity is plastered the restrictive plating of self-absorption. Communication with them only takes place on their own terms and warnings go unheeded.

Type Characters or “Masks”

These are “types”. Bergson described the type as a dramatic character who lacks flexibility and is dominated by a rigid mental set (Bergson 1910: 96); and it is this inelasticity which prevents type-characters from adapting properly to changes in their surrounding circumstances. Doomed to repetitiveness both in behavior and in mental processes, they display exactly that aspect of “*du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant*” (“something mechanical stuck over the living”) which for Bergson defines the comic instance (Bergson 1910: 39). More significantly for the crucial difference between violence as fun, and violence becoming serious (for mental rigidity can and does have tragic consequences if the characters possess self-awareness), types are capable mimicking themselves by *being repeated*, as well as of repeating themselves. This important observation of Bergson’s helps explain why like and unlike (or inverted) pairs and triangles of characters are so typical of broad comedy: Abbott and Costello, the Three Stooges, the Seinfeld trio, Box and Cox (from a famous late nineteenth century London farce), the lost twins of Plautus’ *Menaechmi*, Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* and Goldoni’s *Servant of Two Masters*, the clever servant paired with the stupid servant, Tweedledum and Tweedledee²⁴ The artificiality signals both a distancing of the characters from the audience, and a lessening of their humanity: they lack the flexibility, the self-consciousness and the individuality of life.

24 Bergson 1910:167-169. K. M. Lea also comments on the strange validity of the stage rule that to do or say the same thing three times in succession is innately funny, a fact well and truly exploited by the actors of the *commedia dell'arte* (Lea, K. 1962, *Italian Popular Comedy*, Vol.1, 194-195).

However types must not be unbelievable nor totally unsympathetic. If audiences felt no interest whatsoever in the chattering puppets on stage, the joke would fail utterly. Farce succeeds because every character is rooted in human reality and convinces the audience that their way of thinking and doing is believable – excepting only that it is isolated from other characteristics of a fully-rounded human being, and pushed to extremes. Writing about the full-length farces of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, so popular on the London stage of the 1880's, J.R. Taylor comments that even the frenzies of Pinero's solid, respectable Victorian figures are believable:

Once these characters exist, they are made to act according entirely to the dictates of their own natures, the only improbability permitted being that they do it with greater abandon and lack of self-consciousness than most people in real life do most of the time. They accept, that is, for the duration of the play, the logic of extreme solutions, and, having decided to act, never do things by half-measures. Hence the extraordinary situations into which they manoeuvre themselves. (Taylor 1967: 55)²⁵.

And extraordinary they are: in *The Magistrate* (1885), it takes three acts for the audience to follow how Mr. Posket, presiding genius of the Mulberry St. Court, but firmly under his second wife's thumb, comes to sentence that lady to seven days in jail when she appears in the dock of his own court-room. Recoiling in shock at his own behaviour, Posket is reassured by one of his Associates: "O come now, sir, what is seven days! Why, many a married gentleman in your position, sir, would have been glad to have made it fourteen" (Act III, Sc. II)²⁶.

To act such characters is well known to be a highly demanding professional task. The emotional and physical skills of the actor are at a premium, and woe betide those on stage who join the audience in laughter, losing their essential gravity. No matter how comic the events to the audience, for those on stage they are real and earnest. Timing is crucial for the correct reception of a custard pie or a knock-out slap to the cheek (as in *Fumed Oak*), let alone for the precise (and substantial) machinery of revolving-door bedroom farces like those of George Feydeau. The acting must keep the audience in constant motion between anticipation of predictable action-and-reaction on the part of the characters on stage, and delightful surprise at some unexpected development that reveals a more complete symmetry of events. Taken together, predictability and surprise add up to

25 Taylor J., 1967, *The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play*, N. Y., Hill & Wang.

26 A convenient edition is Booth, M. ed., 1974, "*The Magistrate*" and other Nineteenth Century Plays, London, Oxford U.P., 369-370.

the pattern of incongruity so often identified as fundamental to all humour²⁷. And this is certainly an essential ingredient in farce structure.

Farce-Plots: a Typology

In terms of plot, the comic conflicts are usually marshalled into a limited number of recognizable shapes. Three highly significant principles of construction were identified by Bergson in his study of the French stage at the time of Feydeau, Courteline and Labiche: *repetition* (of scenes, events, problems, phrases, and characters); *inversion* (which can be repetition with a twist or contrast, a reversal or an opposition); and the “*interference of series*” (Bergson 1910: 91, 95, 98ff). This last is a term drawn from optics, which Bergson used for the misunderstandings and “crossed-wires” which are such a feature of comic dialogue and comic plotting. In it, two independent on-stage experiences intersect so that the resulting single event is interpreted in different ways by either side while the audience uses its privileged position to see both sides and to enjoy the hilarity of detached superiority.

Applied to the life and concerns of type-characters, these principles dictate both the overall shape of farce-plots and that of the internal minor episodes. As Kathleen Lea remarked in her classic study of the *commedia dell'arte*, plots need not be over-elaborate: the most fundamental may be a single *burla*, or practical joke, or a string of them connected by the thread of the same type-characters and their motivations. Thus a clown may merely say to the other, “Let’s do the old man”, or, “Let’s do him again”, and the farce will move forward (Lea 1962: I, 188).

With such basic, unidirectional plots, there is a strong element of *Schadenfreude* (or pleasure in the pain of others), but it is balanced for the audience by the appealing vivacity of the pranksters and by the inability of their targets to justify their conventionally bestowed power and authority. These are what I call “humiliation farces” (Davis 1978: 28-32), structures and pleasures which hark back to the inverted rule of the Feast of Fools. Their simple catch-cry, “*deposuit potentes de sede*”, serves to justify a world of rebellion and indulgence. Normally

27 This dissection of incongruity is not customarily made. The usual approach to incongruity sees it as essentially a single-step process of perception or understanding on the part of an audience in experiencing humour. This simplification limits many theories which seek to explain the nature of humour by concentrating upon incongruity as its principal element.

they are short; the longest I discovered was Garrick's *Miss in her Teens* (first played at Covent Garden in 1747, but still popular 50 years later)²⁸. It ekes out the theme by supplying a repeating series of useless lovers to be humiliated by the desirable Miss Bidley, culminating in a crusty old aristocrat, who is revealed too late to prevent disaster to be the father of her *preferred* suitor, the handsome young "Captain Rhodophil". Eventually, Sir Simon the father hands the girl over to his son, declaring her to be "too much" for him. Ah, the Realpolitik of farce: indeed she is, and in more ways than one.

Symmetrical patterns created by the exchange or reversal of comic roles between the joker and his/her butt are actually more common than humiliation- or deception-farces. Thus, a rebellious or mischievous practical joke produces a counter-attack, so that the rebels are either check-mated, or suffer humiliation in their turn. These I label "reversal-farces" (Davis 1978: 43-49). One group features variations on the theme of "the robber robbed", a term made famous by the Shrovetide playlets (*Fastnachtspielen*) of Hans Sachs²⁹, written and performed in sixteenth century Germany when the festivities inherited from the Feast of Fools still held sway on that one night of the year. It is a pattern which successfully allows for the restoration of challenged authority to conclude the farce, even if it is clear that this is only a temporary halt to hostilities.

A second group however tends to a more balanced outcome. Focusing more narrowly upon repeated oscillations between the quarrelling or counter-plotting parties, rather than upon the broad sweep of a single overall reversal, they can be conveniently categorised as "quarrel-farces" (Davis 1978: 50-60). Their underlying structural device was identified by Barbara Bowen in her study of French mediaeval farce and termed "le balancier" (the pendulum). She suggests that the satisfaction for its audience do not come so much from an innate sense of justice (as in the robber robbed), but "from a profound and unconscious desire to see two elements oscillate and return to equilibrium. To begin with, the first element gains ascendancy – and it is irrelevant whether this is just or not – and then the second" (Bowen 1964: 37-38)³⁰.

28 Reproduced in Bevis, R., ed., 1970, *Eighteenth Century Drama: Afterpieces*, London, Oxford U.P., 77-108.

29 See for example, his *Merry Tales and Three Shrovetide Plays* in Leighton W., trans., 1910, London, Nutt.

30 Bowen 1964: 37-38, my translation.

Such an oscillation may be verbal, physical or metaphorical in nature; or all three together, as in the inspired marital quarrel-farces of both Chekhov³¹ and Feydeau (who intended to publish his suite of one-acters under the title, *Du Mariage au Divorce*)³². Probably the most famous is not sex-war based however, but male-to-male turf warfare between two lodgers, Mr Box and Mr Cox, who are tricked into sharing the same room in the eponymous early Victorian farce by John Madison Morton (first performed at the Lyceum in 1847)³³.

A temporary truce is enough to conclude a quarrel-farce (it is all the funnier if the type- characters are threatening to start off again as the curtain falls). But some plot-structures overlay the basic oscillations with a larger, circular movement. The effect of this is to emphasise the common status of all characters as victims, whether they realise it or not. Bowen remarked the frequent role in farce of certain talismanic physical objects, which almost come to possess a life of their own, so strong is their hold over the characters. One thinks immediately of the missing removable palate in Feydeau's *La Puce à l'Oreille* (*A Flea in the Ear*, 1907)³⁴, which magically converts the young secretary's cleft-palate speech to fluent Parisian French and which insists on disappearing and reappearing like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. Labiche's famous vaudeville³⁵ *Le Chapeau de Paille d'Italie* (*The Italian Straw Hat*, first performed in 1851)³⁶ has a plot which is simply a chase across Paris to find a certain talisman (a missing hat, or its replacement). The hunt is up when the hat is discovered in his own apartment and the circular chase concludes.

Closer to today, the London comedy popular from its first performance at the Strand Theatre in 1971, *No Sex Please – We're British* (by Marriott and Foot)³⁷

31 E.g. *The Bear*, *The Proposal*, *The Anniversary*, etc in Chekhov, A., 1965, *Ten Early Plays*, trans. Alex Szogyi, N.Y., Bantam Books.

32 According to Marcel Achard, in his *Introduction to Feydeau*, G., 1948, *Théâtre Complet*, Paris, Eds du Bèlier, Vol. 1, xii. See also Shapiro, N., trans., 1970, *Four Farces by Georges Feydeau*, Chicago, Chicago U.P., in his Editor's *Introduction*, pp. xl-xli.

33 In Booth, M., ed., 1974, *"The Magistrate" and Other Nineteenth Century Plays*, London, Oxford U.P., 175-198.

34 For a discussion of the role of objects and accessories in Feydeau generally see Gidel, H., 1979, *Le Théâtre de Georges Feydeau*, Paris, Klincksieck, 79-82.

35 A specialist French term for an entertaining, skilfully constructed comedy with farcical effects, not the American variety programs also called vaudevilles, as Norman Shapiro reminds us in his *Introduction to Feydeau's plays* (Shapiro 1970: xiii-xiv).

36 In Labiche, E., 1960, *Théâtre*, ed. G. Sigaux, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, Vol. II, 227-308.

37 Marriott A. and Foot A., 1973, *No Sex, Please – We're British*, London, Samuel French.

is similarly dominated by a flood of objects; in this case they are unwanted sex-aids, mistakenly posted in anonymous plain wrappers to an embarrassed couple of very respectable newly-weds. Repeated deliveries from the "Scandinavian Import Company" (please note this is the 1960's) culminate in the arrival of two live call-girls, who mistakenly present their eager offerings to the couple's boss and mother-in-law, both of whom "just happen" to be visiting for complex reasons.

Here the plot's circular movement utilises a device identified and named by Bergson as "*la boule de neige*" (the snowball) (Bergson 1910: 81-84). This is a rolling ball of co-incidence and misunderstandings which, from small beginnings, grows in size and speed to envelope every bystander in its final explosion and disintegration. It is a levelling device, true to the spirit of folly, which reveals to the audience (if not to the characters on stage) that all are equally culpability. In *No Sex*, predictably, the mother-in-law turns out to be an old girl-friend of her son's boss, and the boss in his turn is recognised by one of the call-girls as a former client, with resulting red faces which allow the young couple to conceal their own small degrees of guilt.

At its most mechanistic, the snowball can be as predictable as declared by George Bernard Shaw (who despised farce for its lack of social conscience):

I first learnt the weariness of it from *Pink Dominos*³⁸, although that play had an excellent third act; and I have been wearied in the same way by every new version. For we have had it again and again under various titles. Act I, John Smith's home; Act II, the rowdy restaurant or casino at which John Smith, in the course of his clandestine spree, meets all the members of his household, including the school boy and the parlourmaid; Act III, his house the next morning, with the inevitable aftermath of the complications of the night before; who that has any theatrical experience does not know it all by heart? (Shaw 1934: II, 120)³⁹.

At its best, however, the device can achieve extraordinary brilliance and polish in the hands of masters such as Pinero, Wilde, Labiche, Courteline and Feydeau, or today's Stoppard and Ben Elton. Then the snowball machine creates a kind of "closed *mental* system, a world of its own lit by its own lurid and unnatural sun", as Bentley puts it. "Danger", he says, "is omnipresent. One touch, we feel, and we shall be sent spinning in space" (Bentley 1958: xx). And paradoxically this effect is best achieved in a highly naturalistic setting.

38 An rather tame adaptation by English actor-manager Charles Wyndham of *Les Dominos Roses* by Hennequin and Delacour, a popular hit at the racy Palais Royal Theatre in Paris in the 1870's.

39 Shaw G.B., 1932-1948, *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, 3 Vols, London, Constable.

Farce and Violence

Possibly the most violent farce I have encountered is Georges Courteline's *Les Boulingrin* (*The Boulingrin Family*, 1898).⁴⁰ Here Monsieur des Rillettes ("Mr Mince-meat"), a parasitical visitor who ingratiates himself into being invited to dinner, drops into the middle of a vicious domestic squabble. The audience witnesses his increasing discomfiture, as an assiduous host and hostess press their competing attentions upon him. Politely springing to the lady's defence when her husband criticizes her arrangements for his comfort, des Rillettes becomes himself the target of escalating violence. He suffers direct (unintentional of course) physical harm from blows, kicks, hair-pullings, with his chair snatched from beneath him to accommodate a better one. Badly corked wine is forced between his reluctant teeth in an effort to demonstrate the incompetence of one spouse; undrinkable soup – "genuine ratsbane" – is pressed upon him by the other; he is splashed with food and wine, and seized as a shield when Monsieur threatens Madame with a revolver. The lights are shot out, blows and insults are traded in the darkness; he is wounded in the calf, and falls heavily to the floor while a crescendo of noise and destruction ensues: plates, windows, the clock and all are smashed, and finally the house is set on fire. In the growing red light and to the realistic sound of the fire-engine's galloping horses, the guest is drenched with a bucket of water as the maid attempts to douse the blaze. As the curtain falls Monsieur Boulingrin appears silhouetted in the door-way, reminding his guest: "But you mustn't go, M. des Rillettes! You're going to drink a glass of champagne with us!"⁴¹

Reflections on Violence in Farce

The pace and fury of the action, the perfect parallelism in construction of both verbal and physical countervailing acts of aggression, all signal the circular workings of the snowball-machine in which the victims are trapped. It is uproariously funny, neither bitter nor censorious about the folly it portrays. Reflecting on why this is so, on why *laughter* is released rather than sympathy, there are seven-

40 Translated by Bentley as *These Cornfields!* in Bentley, 1958: 192-206.

41 Courteline G., 1938, *Théâtre*, Paris, Flammarion, Vol. II, 49, my translation. *Les Boulingrin* (literally, *The Bowling-Greens*) was first performed at the Grand Guignol Theatre, Paris, in 1898.

ral lines of enquiry I would like to suggest. The first is the distancing effect, or the encouragement to detachment, which I believe is produced by the closed system of which Bergson and Bentley speak. Perhaps this produces a kind of comic alienation (a parallel to the famous Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*) which reinforces for the audience their position of superior perspective for all that is happening on stage. The same effect is graphically illustrated by the ubiquitous contemporary TV show, *Funniest Home Videos*, which features only too realistic and believable humans from whom the viewer feels almost complete detachment. Not only are the stars of these video clips strangers who have chosen to submit disaster-shots of themselves and their families or friends, but the clips show them succumbing to entirely predictable lines of force or co-incidence – at least with the hindsight offered after the event. Further, the disasters which ought on any moral considerations to enlist our sympathies are greatly removed from us in time and space, once by being captured on video and twice by being re-broadcast on television. The result may be that we focus entirely on the mechanics, and not on the human (and sometimes animal) sufferers⁴².

Social Learning Theory and the Enjoyment of Farce

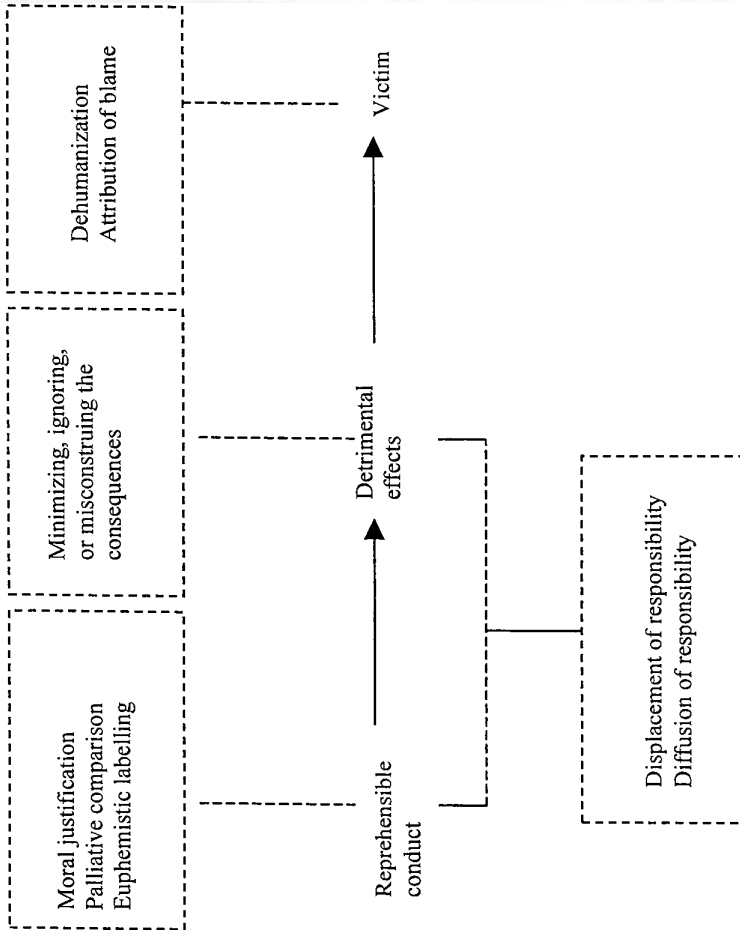
Secondly, there is the question of the general disengagement of internal control in laughing at the misfortunes of others. In applying his theory of social learning (Bandura 1977)⁴³ to the vexed question of why “decent moral people perform culpable acts” (i.e. acts which they themselves disapprove of), the psychologist Albert Bandura has suggested that this paradox is made possible by processes which disengage evaluative self-reaction from such conduct (Bandura 1979: 351-2)⁴⁴. Psychologically speaking, this is certainly a preferable explanation to either, failure of proper moral development or, the existence in all indivi-

42 It may be a specifically culture-bound reaction, but I have often had classes of Australian students remark that they are more inclined NOT to laugh if the victims are domestic animals, rather than people.

43 Bandura A., 1977, *Social Learning Theory*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall. Social learning theory proposes essentially that behaviour is learned through the observing others, as well as through the direct experience of rewards and punishments.

44 Bandura A., 1979, “Psychological Mechanisms of Aggression”, in M. van. Cranbach et al., eds., 1979, *Human Ethology: Claims and Limits of a New Discipline*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 351-2. See also Bandura A., B. Underwood and M. Fromson, 1975, “Disinhibition of Aggression through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims”, *Journal of Research in Personality*, Vol. IX, 253-269.

dual cases of mental defence mechanisms. Bandura identified a number of operant conditions which serve to disengage behaviour from self-evaluative consequences at different points in the behavioural process (see below for a summary; Bandura 1979: 352). It is interesting to note a number of similarities and parallels between these conditions and the mechanisms of farce and comedy that I have been examining.



In the case of *Les Boulingrin*, it could be argued that our enjoyment of the mayhem on stage is, in Bandura's terms, "reprehensible conduct", seeking pleasure in the misfortunes of others. Also that doing so is fundamentally immoral, given the deleterious effects (destruction of property, the deterioration in family relations and, importantly, the physical harm and humiliation to a guest and, to a les-

ser extent, to the hosts). Focussing simply in this way upon the sufferings of the main victims, it is clear that most of Bandura's conditions do apply to any reaction which allows us to find the events on stage laughable. I shall discuss each condition in turn.

(a) Moral Justification

We have strong moral justification for taking pleasure in seeing des Rillettes suffer: he has richly deserved his come-uppance by overweening self-confidence, selfishness and a patronising attitude to his hosts (including taking liberties with the maid). The play-text clearly shows him inviting himself to dinner, knowing next to nothing of his hosts, and offering little in return; he has no real concerns of friendship, only a shallow *politesse* and an intention to extract as much free hospitality as possible. Somehow it is particularly satisfying that each of his self-indulgent expectations is matched with a precise reversal (he gets a quarrel instead of harmony, discomfort instead of comfort, scandalous abuse instead of polite conversation, dregs and leavings instead of fine cuisine, and a raging inferno instead of a cosy hearth. Finally, he meets his match in a pert and punitive maid-servant, instead of finding her a compliant sex-object).

(b) Minimise and Ignore the Consequences; (c) Dehumanization of the Victim

In addition, we know for a fact that the consequences of the mayhem are minimal for the characters on stage – they are actors and the action is only pretence. In terms of the psychological consistency of the characterization, we also know that these one-dimensional types have suffered little and learned little: there will be no changes to their motivation and behaviour. This truth is only reinforced by the host's last manic invitation, "Don't go away!" as des Rillettes struggles to get out of the house of doom. In summary, these comic types brought to life by gifted actors are not fully rounded individuals aware of their own motivation and capable of questioning their own behavior. They amount in Bandura's schema to "dehumanized victims" who are responsible for their own fate; any damage to them, their egos or their property can be safely ignored.

(d) Displacement and Diffusion of Responsibility; Palliative Comparison.

It curiously strengthens the kinds of moral justification outlined above to know that the "deleterious effects" are all inflicted on des Rillettes either by accident or by deflection from their true target – even the maid's final bucket of water. (Or is it an accident? the ambiguity is pleasing.) Thus the action possesses the distinct advantage that its mechanics definitely displace responsibility for disastrous events to co-incidence and incongruous mischance.

I have already pointed out the limitations of damage inflicted on the chief victim, but in the case of the two spouses, there is no evidence apart from noisy complaints that either of their persons suffers physical harm. Cries of help there are aplenty, but perhaps they are only what a psychiatrist would call a token "cry for help". In addition, a delightful diffusion of responsibility exists in which each member of the audience at a performance of the farce can compare their own merriment with several hundred others laughing equally as hard. Moreover, all can displace responsibility for the existence of the farce itself onto the author, the cast and the theatrical enterprise which chose to rehearse it and to sell tickets to the night's show. As for palliative comparison, is it not better to laugh like this at a theatrical image of someone else's marital wars engulfing a complete stranger, rather than to allow the stress of one's own family relations to provoke similar catastrophic behavior in one's own home?

Concluding Reflections

It is of course the complex mechanical rules of presentation upon which farce plots and characters are built which invoke the same conditions which Bandura outlined in a far more general scheme. While I do not wish to make too much of the parallels, the release of laughter must certainly be facilitated by the mechanisms of his "disengagement practices". Fortunately, there is no evidence of real moral harm from hearty laughter at what G. B. Shaw called turning "human beings on to the stage as rats are turned into a pit, that they may be worried for the entertainment of the spectators" (Shaw 1934: II, 118-9). Indeed his indignation remains isolated in the canon of critical comment. Finally however, the question of audience expectations must return to the forefront of consideration: are not the reactions I have just described above exactly what we expect of a farce, exactly what the audience was anticipating and what the actors and management under-

took to provide in offering a farce in production? We all expect that somehow, in ways which we still do not fully understand, the constraints under which farce operates will trick our internal controls into allowing us to enjoy the unspeakable truths of this fantastic but realistic “slice of life” on the stage, and less consciously perhaps the truths about ourselves into the bargain. Surely this is the secret of what Meyerhold correctly saw as “the eternal life of farce” in the theatre.

Porządek i nieporządek w farsie

Oczekiwania widzów, ich cechy osobowościowe i czynniki środowiskowe pełnią ważną, lecz słabo zbadaną rolę w postrzeganiu bodźca humorystycznego i reagowaniu na niego. Tradycja teatralna wykształciła hierarchię typów i stylów komediowych o określonych sygnałach strukturalnych, które pozwalają przewidzieć pewne istotne aspekty tego, czego z dużym prawdopodobieństwem widzowie doznają.

Wśród bogactwa gatunków od satyry i burleski po romantyczną komedię i *slapstick* farsa uważana jest za formę najniższą. Jest ona gatunkiem z długą tradycją, o najszywniej wyznaczonych cechach i o najściślej określonych regułach komediowych. Niewerbalne żarty czynią z niej gatunek “fizyczny”, szeroko akceptowany jako najmniej agresywny i najbardziej “nieszkodliwy” rodzaj komedii. Ścisłość reguł farsy jest bezpośrednio związana z jej charakterem – przestrzeganie reguł pozwala farsie na częste ich łamanie, wywołujące śmiech widowni.