

Introduction: thinking about comedy

First things

Consider the following series of questions. When you reach for a film in the Comedy section of the local video store, what are the inferred promises which have narrowed your search to this particular category? As you settle in to watch the film, what effect does knowing that it is considered a comedy have on the way you watch it, the way you process information, the way you form expectations about what will happen, and, eventually, how you describe it to other people? Or why, on the other hand, might you have chosen to *avoid* a film which appears in the Comedy section?

In fact, anyone old enough to be reading this book already knows a good deal about comedy. By virtue of being raised somewhere within the force field of Western culture, you have unwittingly acquired a set of guidelines and expectations as to something of the label's connotation in our society and (perhaps more importantly) what it means to you.

This book will attempt to illuminate these things you know without knowing about comedy, and otherwise seek to augment your current level of expertise on the subject. Its overarching project is to assist you in reading comedy from the page – particularly with regard to dramatic texts – more confidently, more knowledgeably, and, should you be so inclined, with a sharper analytical eye. Andy Kempe, who specializes in drama education, offers an interesting comment on reading dramatic texts, by relating it to the way his young daughter might play through a new piece on the guitar (which, apparently, was taking place at the time he wrote the article). She was becoming somewhat adept at playing the actual notes, but, he observes, "The playing has no "feel" to it and she seems to lack an overall concept of where the piece is going or how it hangs together."¹ Part of reading any text involves gleaning its instructions as to *how* to read it, what to expect from it, and something of its 'feel'. Identifying a play, novel, or newspaper article as 'comic' in some way calls for a mental adjustment in our processing of its content (see the box on page 2).

2 *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*

Visual genre cues

An exceedingly unscientific experiment may serve to demonstrate something of the reading process that we take for granted. Turn on your television and mute the sound. With remote control firmly in hand, begin to surf the channels, trying to register something of the show's gist before moving on to the next.

It should be interesting to note the cues that 'tell' you the type of television text you are reading. What visual cues, for example, tell you that you are watching a documentary or news programme? What, in the way the actors relate to one another, identifies it as, say, a soap opera? Even if you recognize the show, try to look beneath your familiarity with it – pinpoint the characteristics which would help you identify it if it was the first time you had seen it.

Eventually, limit your search to comedies. Try to spend a few minutes each on situation comedies or film comedies. What, in the use of the actors' bodies or faces, suggests it is comedy? Does the setting, costumes or colour scheme contribute to your assessment? We sometimes read past the 'intended' signals. We may, for example, recognize an actress primarily known for comedy, and endow the show with comic intent, even if the rest of the evidence does not support that. (You may have to cover the markers on the screen supplied by your cable provider or broadcaster to make a fair test of it.)

As we embark on our exploration it may help to explain a few things about the way this book has been written. One of the initial challenges in entering a discussion on comedy stems from the ungainly sprawl, not only of the topic, but of the term's usage. It is difficult to tighten the reins on the meaning of a word most people have long used in their own, personalized fashion. At the same time, 'comedy' necessarily acquires slightly different critical meanings across adjacent domains like drama, literature, film and television. The word 'humour' also bears a number of different connotations, and is sometimes interchanged with 'comedy'. To forestall confusion about a few central terms we will use throughout the book, let us agree upon the following usages:

'Comedy' is a *genre*, a recognizable type or category of artistic creation with characteristic features. Comedy embraces a range of subgenres, like farce and TV sitcom, and cross-pollinates with other genres to form the likes of tragicomedy.

'Humour' is a *social transaction* between at least two people – and, by extension, between a performer or writer and audience – through which one party intends to evoke amusement or laughter. In many cases, it is a telltale characteristic of 'comedy'. A 'joke', for example, is a formal (or even informal) attempt to initiate humour.

Introduction: thinking about comedy 3

‘Comic’ or ‘the comic’ refers to the features of comedy, often its humorous inclination, and includes any of its qualities or strategies. A ‘bit’, ‘gag’, or ‘routine’ is a theatrical or visual sequence with humorous intent. These can be considered comic elements and may appear in works which would not wholly be considered comedies.

‘Laughter’ is a biological *response* to a variety of stimuli including humour. Although laughter may be considered one of the most extravagant physical effects one person can have on another without touching them, it can also be brought about by discomfort and tickling. And though we usually think of laughter as an involuntary reaction, it can be initiated purposefully by the ‘laugher’ (e.g., to curry favour or to demonstrate ridicule).

Let us get started, then, by laying some groundwork.

Play

In Western culture, it is generally unlikely that a stranger would bid you to undress, expecting casual compliance. There is, however, at least one exception to this ‘rule’ of social conduct: if the stranger happens to be a doctor in an examining room, there would be nothing untoward about the request. In a similar way, the nature of your transaction with a professor in class probably differs from the way you would relate to her if you run into one another at the local supermarket. You might even carry out a short conversation unrelated to your studies as you both pick through the selection of ice creams.

Sociologist Erving Goffman uses examples like these to describe the way we reach adulthood armed with a complex system for organizing experience, which he calls ‘framing’. Through it, we categorize our social interactions, thereby interpreting events and referring to unspoken guidelines for behaviour, expectation and response, like the two examples put forward above. (The term, ‘framing’, is notoriously inconsistent in literary studies, but in this book will always align with Goffman’s usage.) Goffman’s concept of ‘framing’, as the way we gauge what kind of behaviour is called for or permitted and what meanings might be intended for a given situation in everyday life, affects our moment-to-moment engagement in the social world. It can also be applied to the way we make sense of plays, films, novels and any other texts, and so provides a doubly apt introduction to the study of comedy.

In Goffman’s system, what we think of as ‘real’ or original experience is mediated by two kinds of ‘primary framework’, classified as physical or

4 *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*

social. We apply a certain kind of attention to activities like crossing a busy street or interviewing for a job, because it matters to our short- and long-term well-being or social standing. This can also be called taking the world ‘seriously’ or operating in ‘serious mode’, because it is somehow connected, even on a mundane level, to our material security.

As you may have realized, we sometimes take time out from serious mode, if only for the length of time it takes to trade wisecracks with a fellow student or co-worker. This amounts to a way of behaving that does *not* take the world or reality at face value, or in some way sidelines the straightforward concerns of serious mode, at least for the moment. Goffman calls this a ‘secondary framework’, and its behaviour is bracketed from the so-called ‘real-world’. In the realm of secondary frameworks, a ‘keying’ of a secondary framework occurs when we agree to suspend the ‘serious’ or primary-framework meanings of a strip of experience – e.g., the playing of a game or a sarcastic exchange like the following: I am walking to class one morning, with the rain lashing down and the wind blowing my umbrella inside out. I pass a drenched commuter, waiting for a bus by the side of the road. We catch each other’s eye, and I summon as cheery a ‘nice day’ as I can muster; he responds with a surprisingly game ‘glorious day!’ In the midst of foul primary-framework conditions – getting to work on time against the fury of the elements – we have, by mutual consent, keyed a brief exchange from a clearly different kind of day for nothing other than shared bemusement at our miserable states.

Similarly, if someone says, ‘I have a joke for you’, they are keying a divergence from ‘serious’ conversation (which you would probably accept with an ‘OK’ or a grin, unless you are in a rush or a particularly bad mood and ‘refuse’ the invitation). Even without prefacing the joke explicitly, if someone asks you, ‘How many English professors does it take to change a light bulb?’, you know a ‘non-serious’ exchange has been keyed because of your sociocultural experience. This kind of implied signalling will have further relevance when we approach humour itself in Chapter 3.

To continue, a ‘construction’ is brought about when one or more participants fabricate a false primary framework for the benefit of another or others – in other words, one party ‘constructs’ a secondary, ‘non-real’ framework, which is meant to be taken by another party as a primary framework. Examples of a construction would include the concoction of a cover story for the purpose of coaxing a friend out of her house so that her surprise birthday party can be readied. An insurance scam or a police sting would also be considered constructions (see the box on page 5).

Goffman's 'keyings' and 'constructions'

A strip of experience from a primary framework might involve two men fighting over a piece of bread; a corresponding 'keying' might see the two men practising together in a martial-arts class; a 'construction' could have the same two men earnestly pretending to fight with each other in a pub, in the hope of getting thrown out to avoid paying their bar bill. Games and sports fall within non-serious or play frames – they amount to secondary-framework enactments of hand-to-hand or army-to-army combat, with rules that stand in for the actualities of physical conflict. You and I may play in a game of football as *if* our lives depended on the outcome, but they don't, in 'reality', and that is the understanding upon which we play. For professional football players, however, their performances may have primary-framework implications for livelihood and physical health, but the game itself remains in a secondary framework.

Goffman awards the 'theatrical frame' its own chapter, describing it as 'something less than a benign construction and something more than a simple keying'.² It might be said that any artistic creation invokes some version of this framing balance, in that the readers cooperate in giving it life, yet it maintains interest by continually withholding something of its making.

The realm of secondary frameworks includes a mode of human activity sometimes called 'play', which goes by a number of other names, including 'non-serious mode'. A play frame relieves an event of serious, primary-framework import and meaning. It is usually assumed that all parties to the play frame participate with full knowledge (while a practical joke would be another example of a construction).

Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott ascribes to play a universal importance in helping children negotiate a healthy bridge between 'inner psychic reality' and the 'external world', which clearly (and perhaps disturbingly) maintains its own agenda in the face of any given wish by the individual. Later in life, accessibility to this highly personal middle ground may turn into what we call creativity: 'It is assumed that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from that strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged.'³

When children play, they do not shift physically to another universe, nor do they lose touch with their actual surroundings. They merely accept (or 'make believe') that, for example, the chair is a throne or a car or a mountaintop, and that they are kings or queens or parents or superheroes (see the box on page 6). It should be apparent that this is exactly what we

6 *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*

do in the theatre, and that the spectator is no less involved in the playing just because the involvement appears more passive than the practitioner's. Bruce Wilshire claims that the collective pretending we do in the theatre is not far removed from that which takes place on the fields of childhood: 'Together the audience and the actors engage in incarnated imaginative variation of the meaning of human being and doing.'⁴ The play frame operates similarly in film, television and literature. We usually know when to take the images on the screen or the words on the page to represent some 'other' world fashioned by human hands, and we are asked to invest in it as in some way 'real' – although the likes of *Jackass*, Michael Moore and Ali G may have muddled the waters in that regard.

Some views on play

Margaret Lowenfeld (1935) Writing about the importance of play in child development, Lowenfeld observes that 'play has an outer and inner aspect: an outer aspect, which is the form which appears to the playfellow or adult observer, and an inner or psychological aspect, which is the meaning that the type of play has to the child'.⁵

She sets forth four main purposes:

- (a) It serves as the child's means for making contact with his environment. . .
- (b) It makes the bridge between the child's consciousness and his emotional experience. . .
- (c) It represents to the child the externalized expression of his emotional life. . . and
- (d) It serves for the child as relaxation and amusement, as enjoyment and as rest. . .

Johan Huizinga (1938) In his well-known study of play, called *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga describes play as 'a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own'.⁶ Furthermore, 'it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites', and 'adorns life, amplifies it':⁷

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.⁸

Introduction: thinking about comedy 7

Jean-Paul Sartre (1943) Sartre seems to be saying that we come *too much* to terms with the exterior world at the expense of our humanity: 'Seriousness involves taking the world as one's starting point and attributing more reality to the world than to oneself; or reality to oneself only to the extent one belongs to the world . . . It is obvious that the serious man at bottom is hiding from himself the consciousness of his freedom . . . Man is serious when he takes himself for an object . . . What indeed is play if not an activity of which man is the first origin, for which man himself sets the rules, and which has no consequences except according to the rules he has set? . . . The act is not its own goal for itself; neither does its explicit end represent its goal and its profound meaning; but the function of the act is to make manifest and to present to *itself* the absolute freedom which is the very being of the person.'⁹

M. J. Ellis (1973) Ellis outlines fifteen recognized theories of play, including the release of surplus energy and its function as rehearsal for real life. It is not necessary for my purposes to address them all. But Ellis notes at the very start of his study that 'ideologically a human is most human, as defined by our culture, when at play'.¹⁰

Michael J. Apter (1982) Apter divides subjective activity into 'telic' and 'paratelic' states. The 'telic' state is defined as an orientation by a person toward some essential goal. The goal is real, the course planned, and the pleasure lies in the future, pending the achievement of the goal. In the 'paratelic' state the subject is oriented toward some aspect of behaviour or sensation. It is present-driven, spontaneous and pleasurable in itself.

Richard Schechner (1993) Schechner sees 'playing' as a vital aspect of culture and performance. He says, 'playing is a mood, an attitude, a force',¹¹ and goes on to suggest the use of the term 'play net' as a more accurate metaphor than 'frame'. He bemoans the fact that the 'multiple realities' of play are always given lesser consideration than serious mode: 'In the West, play is a rotten category, an activity tainted by unreality, inauthenticity, duplicity, make believe, looseness, fooling around, and inconsequentiality. Play's reputation has been a little uplifted by being associated with ritual and game theory. The defense department takes play seriously when it stages war games and simulations.'¹² Schechner concludes, 'The questions we need to ask are: how, when, and why is playing invited and sustained? How, when, and why is playing denied or repressed? Is playing categorically antistructural – that is, does it always take the opposite position or role to whatever is happening at the time it erupts or is invited? Is playing autonomous – that is, will it "just happen" if nothing else blocks, cancels, or represses it?'¹³ Although these comments come from his book, *The Future of Ritual*, there is a wide-ranging chapter on Play in his 2002 book, *Performance Studies: An introduction*.

What is comedy?

Thinking back to the series of questions with which the chapter began, it may be instructive to reflect upon some works which in your view typify comedy. Try to isolate those you believe deserve placement at the centre of the

8 *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*

classification, then think about *why*. Compare your choices and their justifications with those of other people. For the purposes of this mental exercise, it is important to think in terms of a ‘definitive’ or even ‘perfect’ example of comedy rather than your favourite play, film or novel. (After that, go ahead and think about what characterizes forms of ‘the comic’ most pleasing to you.)

It should not spoil the exercise to suggest in advance that comedy is, at the very least, an unwieldy creature of radically changeable appearance – you would, I suspect, have trouble narrowing your list down to a single entry which presents ‘the essence’ of comedy, if forced to choose from drama, film, television and literature. It cannot be bad (or unenjoyable) to apply conscientious thought to such a question at the start of our exploration. But, as Alexander Leggatt suggests, we might well be looking at the question the wrong way round: ‘There is no such thing as comedy, an abstract trans-historical form; there are only comedies. But they accumulate to create a body of case law, a set of expectations within which writers and audiences operate.’¹⁴ Leggatt’s formulation is astute and timely for the practical purposes of this book: we should resist the temptation to become caught up in analytical generalizing for its own sake. It is, rather, worth remembering that we each cultivate our own body of evidence for the framing of genre one text at a time, beginning in the mists of childhood and thereafter redefining our sense of genre with each new text we meet.

Let us reiterate, then, that by early adulthood most people have acquired a considerable range of experience in identifying certain texts as ‘comedy’ before, during and after they read them (whether from the armchair or spectator’s seat). It is surely something most of us do without reflection. And so, if pressed, one might encounter some difficulty in compiling a precise description applicable to *all* texts we intuitively classify as comedy. The works of Aristophanes differ from the plays of Molière, which differ from the television series *The Office*, though it is likely that most people would consider all of them comedies. If we then throw our enquiry open to the performance of a stand-up comic, a novel by Jane Austen, the film, *Bringing Up Baby* (1939), a newspaper column by Dave Barry, and the animated television series, *The Simpsons* (1989–), is there any hope of finding some meaningful, all-embracing characterization?

Something to make us laugh?

The most obvious response to the above paragraph is that all of the texts appear intended to make us laugh or at least amuse us. (They may not all be

Introduction: thinking about comedy 9

successful at it, but we usually know when something or someone *means* to be funny). Most of us, at first glance, would consider humorous intent an expected feature of comedy – an identifiable joking attempt within a text’s introductory moments would generally guide us toward a comic genre framing, depending on surrounding elements. For those who like to make lists, humorous intent would appear as the most prominent of comedy’s ‘family traits’.

It might be pointed out, however, that this has not always been the case. In some eras, for example, laughter has been considered morally unseemly, while some theorists have claimed that comedy’s sole obligation is to instruct.¹⁵ Although this is no longer the presiding view, it should also be apparent that humour alone does not automatically mark a text as comedy. Recent critics have warned against the superficial definition of comedy as something that makes us laugh. L. J. Potts says, ‘I cannot help thinking that to identify comedy with laughter is to begin at the wrong end,’ and then goes on to explain, ‘The truth is that just as the emotions evoked by tragedy are too complex to be called merely sad, so comedy is too complex to be merely funny’.¹⁶ Surely there *is* something more, both at the heart of comedy and in its surface behaviours.

Susanne K. Langer also contends that, although humour has a habit of appearing in comedy, and may even provide its dominant tone, it ‘is not the essence of comedy’.¹⁷ Langer establishes ‘foreknowledge of death’ as that which distinguishes humans from other animals; their attitudes toward that knowledge inform any drives toward self-realization, and, ‘since the instinctive struggle to go on living is bound to meet defeat in the end, they look for as much life as possible between birth and death’.¹⁸ Langer finds this drive manifest in drama’s ‘comic rhythm’, and characterizes the essence of comedy as the ‘human life-feeling’, a sense of vitality or ‘felt life’, which lifts us past the awareness of our mortality.

This impression of spirited escape from the harsher realities of corporeal existence recalls the sense of play, discussed above, with which we humans sidestep the serious implications of life on earth, and which I take to underpin the generative feeling of all we take as comedy. This is not to paint comedy as uniformly or even basically escapist, but to characterize the psychic freedom with which it approaches the world, unconstrained by the limits of ‘serious’ discourse. Humour remains a favourite characteristic of comedy because it embodies the infinite number of playful alternatives to any serious thought or strip of action (snippet of human activity). It is a certain sense of ‘taking the world playfully’ that generates comedy’s affinity for humour, and, I believe, allows us a viable thread through the texts

10 *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*

submitted at the end of the previous section, which are widely varied in feeling and form. Humour itself does not exhaust the effect of comedy's impulse to play with the world, yet its intention to amuse is fairly emblematic of that animating force.

Happy endings

Every text comes to an end at some point, and we take as extremely meaningful the intellectual and emotional imprints with which it leaves us. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, writing about literature in general, note that 'a particularly helpful way of reflecting on the overall force of a literary text is to analyze the nature and impact of its ending'.¹⁹ The last image before blackout in a theatre performance, like the last words of a novel, comprises our final first-hand contact with the world of the text. From a reader's perspective, it is arguable that we cannot know entirely 'what to make' of a text until it is over, that is, until we have its full picture. This is not to suggest that a text ceases to work on us once we part company with it, just that it puts vital finishing touches on its vision of life in the express way that it 'signs off'.

Comedy, of course, has a reputation for ending 'happily' or 'in marriage', sometimes through sudden and unlikely reversals of fortune (which we may come to expect precisely because we 'know' comedy). This sense of comedy's natural shape may survive as a structural echo of the festive upsurge with which Ancient Greek comedy ended. In his well-known work, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914), Francis Cornford posits that standard elements of Aristophanes' comedies follow directly from earlier ritual patterns. He identifies one element as the 'sacred marriage', an ultimate pairing off at the end of any given play. Such an ending may appear tenuously justified to the contemporary sensibility, but, according to Cornford, needed no further substantiation in its historical context, as it remained an insistent remnant from formal comedy's roots in the folk culture's rites of fertility.

Comic resolution is sometimes seen symbolically as an act of rebirth, renewal or reaffirmation. Northrop Frye associates comedy, as one of his four generic literary plots (*mythoi*), with the season of spring. He sees comedy's universal movement as the hero's challenge to existing society in pursuit of the heroine; ultimately they are united, amid a widely inclusive 'new' society. We might collectively be excused for favouring happy endings, even while most of us see through them, as acknowledged by Frye: 'Happy endings do not impress us as true, but as desirable, and they are brought