The Cambridge Introduction to
Comedy

'Laughter', says Eric Weitz, 'may be considered one of the most
extravagant physical effects one person can have on another
without touching them'. Laughter is undeniably connected to the
label of comedy for most people in this day and age. But how do
we identify something which is meant to be comic, what defines
something as 'comedy', and what does this mean for the way we
enter the world of a comic text? Addressing these issues, and
many more, this is a 'how-to' guide to reading comedy from the
pages of a dramatic text, with relevance to anything from novels
and newspaper columns to billboards and emails. The book
enables you to enhance your grasp of the comic through
familiarity with characteristic structures and patterns, referring to
comedy in literature, film and television throughout. Perfect for
drama and literature students, this *Introduction* explores a genre
which affects the everyday lives of us all, and will therefore also
capture the interest of anyone who loves to laugh.

Eric Weitz is Lecturer in Drama Studies at the School of Drama,
Film and Music, Trinity College Dublin.

The Cambridge Introduction to
Comedy

ERIC WEITZ

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

v

vi   *Contents*

Illustrations

Preface

This book is based on the general premise that comedy or the comic requires a vital adjustment to the reading process, through which we elect to take the world playfully. It also advances the idea that knowing something more about the workings of humour, plot and performance can help enhance the mental process of reading comedy. Although I will have cause to discuss some historical contexts and theory along the way, this book is not meant to provide a comprehensive account of either. For those interested in further reading in those areas I have included some suggestions at the end of the book.

One contention of this book is that performance plays an undeniable role in any comic construction – as, arguably, it does in any artistic creation – and such is the case even in a political cartoon, comic novel or email, where the competent performance is crafted for the specific relationship between the author's output on the page and the mind's eye of the reader. A comic text is *intended* toward an audience, consciously fashioned according to the interactive process between a medium's 'writers' and 'readers'. And so, for example, a comic anecdote written to be read in the morning newspaper is likely to be worded at least slightly differently from the same story delivered as part of a late-night television host's opening routine.

Because Western civilization's first formal notions of comedy – indeed, the word itself – derive from ancient Greek drama, the book will retain a primary focus on comedy as it appears in dramatic form. Such an approach also calls attention to the fact that, although a printed dramatic text would appear to be something concrete and unchanging which can be held in the hands and scrutinized long after its original production, it cannot be fully considered without some acknowledgement of the enactment – or at least speaking aloud – for which it is conceived. I have in passing referred to the processing of comedy in other forms, like film, television and literature. I believe that a grasp of comedy and the comic in dramatic texts serves one well for its reading elsewhere, so that the principles found herein can be

ix

adapted almost intuitively to the somewhat different processes of reading novels and watching movies.

An anticipation of performance beneath the lines of a dramatic text allows wide-open spaces for the reader's practical engagement with comedy. It is hoped that the reader of this book (and some friends or classmates) will attempt to read aloud some of the cited scenes and texts. There are a variety of things to be learned from gaining a sense of comic practice 'from the inside', the full value of which can never be explained in the words of a book. I also pose questions for reflection along the way, and there is no better spur to lively discussion than one's favourite comic texts, performances and performers.

The land of comedy will always frustrate efforts at precise and consistent mapping. Its boundaries shift with critical perspective; its territories remain ever subject to analytical dispute. One of the things you find out very soon when surveying analytical views on comedy and humour is that they reveal at least as much about the writer as the topic, and sometimes more. I have tried to strike a balance, in choosing sample texts, between those that are 'recognized' (and therefore easy to find in second-hand bookshops) and those that appeal to me. Neither of these criteria is particularly objective, and could well invite disdain from various critical quarters. In the first instance, I have chosen pieces because they *are* easy to find in libraries and stores; if they lead to discussions about the implications of the terms 'literature' or 'art', or invite enquiries into the Western canon and culture, that's not so bad. In the second instance, I think I have fairly broad-ranging tastes in comedy and humour, although it doesn't matter whether you endorse my choices – our differences of opinion may in some way prove instructive, and you can still apply the principles discussed to your *own* favourites.

In terms of a general road map for this book, I have begun with an Introduction to the subject, raising more questions than answers about the topic of comedy in general. Chapter 1 addresses the notion of genre in pragmatic terms, and focuses on the way we recognize that a text requires the crucial adjustment toward reading comedy, as well as on what it tells us in the way it signs off. Chapter 2 returns to comedy's foundations in ancient Greece and Rome, suggesting some ways in which its origins have supplied comic patterns still recognizable today. Chapter 3 looks at the mechanics of humour and how they tend to manifest themselves in the words of a dramatic text. In Chapter 4 I offer an introduction to the *commedia dell'arte*, and call attention to the ways it has shaped some of the texts we read today, particularly with regard to comic character and performance templates. Chapter 5 points out how elements of comedy – primarily humour – have

inflected other, more serious stage worlds, especially as any previous dividing line between comedy and tragedy became terminally blurred in the twentieth century. Chapter 6 offers brief discussion first of comedy's relatives, like irony and satire, and then of various theoretical concepts pertaining to the sociopolitical implications of comedy and the comic. Boxes are included throughout the text to provide supplementary food for thought, or to touch upon topics of relevance to the main discussion.

A few housekeeping details, before we begin: I have made my peace with key terms like 'comedy', 'the comic' and 'humour', none of which have standardized, consistent usages in either everyday or analytical terminology, and I have defined them in the Introduction. I use the term 'text' to refer to any artistic object, from novel to film to stage performance. Similarly, we 'read' a text whether it reveals itself through words on a page, images on a screen or actors on a stage. The people who make these texts and those who receive them I call 'writers' and 'readers', even though they may be playwrights, directors and actors in the first instance and spectators in the second. You will notice, however, that I sometimes can't help using compound terms like 'reader/spectator', to make sure that the acts of both reading and watching are held in the mind.

For the sake of tidiness in the supplementary boxes, I have tried to keep citations to a minimum and as unobtrusive as possible. For passages from dramatic texts I have included page numbers in the Notes; they refer to the play's edition in the List of texts. For general quotes the author's name will always be included in the body of the text or in the notes, allowing the reader to find the source in the bibliography; for cases in which I feel obliged to supply a more specific location, I have supplied a page number.

This part of the writing process has come upon me quite abruptly, so I am sure I have forgotten to acknowledge key influences and helpers along the way. By all means let me know who you are and I'll include you next time.

I am grateful to the School of Drama, Film and Music at Trinity College Dublin; to my students, even though they were usually unaware of the things they taught me about comedy; to John McCormick, who supervised the thesis that led to this project; to Dennis Kennedy, who has always had encouraging words; and to Brian Singleton, for his willingness in helping make time in my schedule to work on this book. And, of course, to Ann and Rhona.

I am grateful to the International Society for Humor Studies and its part in my analytical awakening toward the comic, especially by showing it to me through the eyes of other disciplines. International conferences have always challenged my certainty on the subject and sent me away with much to think about. I would also like to thank the Drama League of Ireland, its staff and

xii   *Preface*

students, for realizations I have made about comedy during workshops and for forcing me to articulate the workings of the comic in something approaching plain English. I must give special thanks to Jean Buoy, who presided over my birth as a writer and set me on the high road to literary aspiration.

Other people whose help and generosity have contributed in some way include Liz Sheehy and Kristian and Liv Marken. Geraint Lewis has been particularly cooperative in letting me use his photographs; I am grateful to John Cleese and Andrew Sachs for their permission to use the photograph from *Fawlty Towers.*

I am deeply indebted to Vicki Cooper, Becky Jones and Cambridge University Press, all of whom have been endlessly patient and relentlessly supportive throughout this extended writing process. Becky has been particularly helpful in hauling me across the finishing line.

I thank my Weitz and Sheehy families for continued support and understanding. I owe the greatest debt to my parents and their safe haven, where I have written several of the chapters; to Eamonn and Liam, for their constructive distractions; and, of course, to Ann, whose spirit of play is second to none.