Acting funny

What it takes to do comedy

By Bruce Miller

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I RECENTLY WATCHED four actors from my professional acting class perform scenes from two different comedies. Both scenes contained all the basic elements that you expect in comic work. Despite this, the four students struggled with the material. What I learned from watching those scenes is that actors aren't always aware of the fact that comedy has certain principles that must be observed. Even professional actors often seem ignorant of comedy fundamentals. How often have you seen a prominent performer say on television or in newspaper interviews that he is a dramatic actor and doesn't do comedy? Or *can't* do comedy?

In truth, the principles applied in sound comic acting are mostly the same ones used in drama. The only difference is that in comedy there is an obligation to make the audience find the work funny. Superb actors like Walter Matthau began their film careers as dramatic actors before turning to comedy. In fact, Matthau spent years in Hollywood playing psychotic heavies. His best friend, Jack Lemmon, jumped back and forth effortlessly from comedy to drama throughout his long and distinguished career.

Actors who say they can't do comedy because they are not funny are probably shortchanging themselves. An actor doesn't need to be funny any more than he needs to be sad, or angry, or any other emotional quality while playing a scene. What an actor must do is play actions—actions that are tangible and therefore doable. If an actor plays a set of tangible actions clearly and fully, the audience will get the feeling behind the actions, whether it's drama or comedy. The bottom line is, a good comedic script provides the mechanism for getting the

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Above, Hay Fever*, Woodinville (Washington) High School; at left,* Noises Off*, Cypress Falls High School, Houston, Texas.*

laughs irrespective of how funny an actor thinks he is.

There are, however, certain basic principles that an actor must think about when playing comedy. The first determination is basic: is this play a comedy? And if it is, what makes it funny? The actor's second and equally important task is to figure out the play's comedy style. Styles of comedy include a broad range of categories and sub-categories such as dark comedy, farce, comedy of manners, character comedy, satire, realistic comedy, and slapstick. An actor must have a solid grasp of a play's style in order to succeed.

Other questions that need to be considered are how to:

- Use the play's language.
- Convert the author's wit to the character's wit.
- Recognize and use the conflict as fully as (or more fully) than in a dramatic work and turn that knowledge into strong, playable objectives.
- Listen in the moment, especially to lines that come from a setup in the previous line.
- Physicalize the action in ways that are organic to the scene as well as to the comic obligation.
- Make choices that serve the story and the character without compromising the humor.

Other than some slight variation, there is nothing in the above list that an actor wouldn't be expected to do in any other kind of scene. There is simply a particular focus on the elements that will help bring out what is funny in the work. Now let's take a look at how these same principles apply to the scenes from my acting class.

The two scenes are from *Four Dogs and a Bone* by John Patrick Shanley, and *Private Lives* by Noel Coward. These two plays couldn't be more different in style but, surprisingly, they hold similar pitfalls for the actor who is not accustomed to doing comedy. Again, it's extremely important for you to know the *kind* of comedy you are performing in, and be able to draw from the rules that apply to that particular category. The two scenes I'm going to discuss will provide examples of what I'm talking about.

Playing satire

Before beginning, the two actors working on *Four Dogs and a Bone* explained that they selected their scene because it was about show business, a subject that both could relate to. The scene itself concerns two actresses who are willing to do anything to get ahead in the business, one younger and getting her first big career break, the other a seasoned veteran trying desperately to hang on to a career that is beginning to fade with her youth. Both characters are working together on the same film and see each other as threats to the other's continued success. Each will do whatever she has to in order to succeed. Each will do to the other whatever is necessary to maintain her personal advantage.

To make the scene more interesting, the younger of the two actors played the older established character in the play, and the older actor played the younger, supposedly sweeter, and inexperienced one. The scene as written consists of a series of escalating insults, threats, admissions, and confessions. As the class watched, we heard several funny lines that, as delivered, did not quite have the power to make us laugh, and others that simply fell flat altogether. Most of the class did not seem to recognize the scene as a comedy at all.

When I asked the actors about the kind of script it was, neither of them thought *Four Dogs and a Bone* was a comedy, though both admitted that they thought certain things were funny. However, the pair made no effort to use the humorous dialogue in a way that would do anything but bury the humor. This would be no crime if the actors had other more interesting things to do with

their lines and the scene's unfolding situation. Unfortunately, neither actor seemed to understand what was going on between the characters in the scene. This is not a good formula for success for actors working in any play, and it's particularly dangerous in a comedy. So let's back up a bit and examine how this situation might have occurred, and discuss how applying the principles outlined above might help.

The main problem in this scene as it was presented was the failure of the actors to do two things: one, they did not recognize the *kind* of play they were in, and two, because they didn't understand what the scene was about, they played it incorrectly.

To begin with, a familiarity with Shanley's work would probably have told the actors that he likes to write plays about subcultures in our society. The offbeat characters he creates to represent those subcultures produce both empathy and laughter in the audience because these characters are often funny and touching as well as different than the audience who pays to watch them. In addition, the characters in a Shanley play are usually lacking something that they want very badly and this generates the conflict in the play and in the characters.

Four Dogs and a Bone appears to be a character comedy at first glance. Actually, Shanley has written a very funny satire. The playwright's creation of two stereotypical Hollywood characters—the young starlet and the aging beauty—and their rivalry is an over-the-top satirical take on a conflict that has been played out in countless plays, movies, and novels.

Both women absolutely want to succeed in show business, and more specifically, in the picture they are currently making. They see each other as dangerous rivals, and because the older actress is more threatened, she takes the lead to destroy the other. The younger actress, though set up as "nicer," refuses to be cowed by the other and is left no choice but to engage in battle. The two women verbally use every device they can think of to ruin one another—including theirages, their talent, and their power and relative position with and over powerful men. In their verbal battle during the scene, there are victories, defeats, and discoveries aplenty. Because each woman is going all out, the scene is absolutely life and death, and hilarious too.


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The actors playing the scene did not consider the satirical world of the play—the exaggerated and cutthroat land of Hollywood where success is everything. If they had, it might have reinforced the conflict, the basic engine of drama whether it's comedy or tragedy. In comedy the higher the stakes for the character, the funnier the situation. The actress playing the younger character saw herself as nice, and therefore chose not to engage in battle during the scene. Her choice removed the conflict and the potential for hilarious nastiness and social commentary. Further, because of this miscue, the actors failed to use the dialogue as a weapon, therefore dulling the power of the language and, in turn, keeping the scene from being funny.

In addition, the actors did not block the *Four Dogs* scene to their advantage. It was set in one of those trailers used during the filming of a movie. That kind of space is narrow and limited, an arrangement that would confine the conflict. But, as the scene was presented, the actors did a lot of aimless wandering across the stage. If they had taken the scene's setting into consideration, the characters would have been forced into a face-to-face situation during most of the scene—essentially about asserting and holding on to power. But, because they failed to use space in this manner, their wandering physically kept them from *listening* to each other and from building on one another's previous adversarial comments.

Here's why the blocking and, in turn, listening is so important in playing comedy: comic dialogue often operates in what I call the ladder pattern. One character says something, is countered by the other, who in turn is countered again. One build-up follows another until someone delivers the verbal knockout punch. A wisecrack to hurt, a powerful retort, a topping of the topper, and so on. Whenever the clincher line is delivered, there is a win and a loss that causes a transitional moment. During that moment, each character is given the comedic opportunity to take stock of where she is, react, and find a new strategy for continuing the war—exactly what needed to happen and didn't in the scene we've been discussing.

In summary then, the actors in the *Four Dogs* scene failed to recognize the

kind of play they were in and the style it required. This set up a chain reaction of bad choices that led away from producing successful comedy. The actors had not considered the play's inherent conflict, nor had they used the dialogue to obtain their objectives. Since they were not playing the conflict of the scene actively, there was no strong need to listen to each other and build on what was being said moment to moment. As a result, they did not use their blocking and physical action effectively, and made choices that countered what was innately funny about the situation and their characters.

On the positive side, promptly after we discussed the scene, the *Four Dogs* actors bravely agreed to rework it in front of the class. This time they applied the principles of comedy included in our bulleted list and the scene became extremely funny without losing any of what the actors had hoped would be there.

A comedy of manners

The actors working on *Private Lives* also outlined why they had chosen their scene and what they were hoping to get out of it. They explained that they had picked the scene because they had never done Coward and were interested in tackling this kind of material. The style frightened them a bit, they said, but the challenge also drew them to it. They explained that the British idioms and the accents were a problem, but they had been trying to work around their discomfort and deal with the language during their rehearsals. One of the pair contradicted this, however, by saying he had tried to ignore the Britishness as much as possible in order to get comfortable with the scene. When the cutting was presented, the accents seemed more implied than actually there and faded in and out as the scene progressed. This proved to be a minor distraction for those of us watching. Far more distracting was the fact that we could tell that the scene was supposed to be funny and was not. Although there were many funny or witty lines delivered, rather than making us laugh, those lines quietly traveled from our ears to our brains as a little voice inside us said, "Yes, a funny line indeed," but failed to produce anything physical or emotional in us. The scene had very little arc or throughline as well, and though it wasn't very long, it seemed like it was.

The first principle violated in the mounting of the *Private Lives* scene was the one regarding style. Unlike in the other scene, the actors were well aware that Coward's script was a comedy and therefore, *supposed* to be funny. Still, at times they chose to play against the humor in order to make a "real moment." Choosing to play against a script's genre can be very dangerous, especially if it

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Below, The Real Inspector Hound*, Pleasant Valley (Iowa) High School; at left,* Rumors, *Cactus High School, Glendale, Arizona.*

produces unsuccessful results. Further, the two actors failed to take into account the play's style of comedy—in this case, a comedy of manners, also known as high style comedy.

High style comedies rely principally on wit, as expressed through their ingenious use of language. This type of play pokes fun at society's rules and customs. The pleasure in these plays for an audience comes through the characters' rapier-like wit used to skewer their fellow characters, and as a byproduct, the society in which these characters live.

Coward was one of the wittiest English-speaking playwrights of the twentieth century. He invariably wrote about the society in which he lived—the British middle and upper middle classes of seventy years ago. His society had a set of ethics, rules of conduct, and manners far different than our own. The characters in a Coward play are of that particular world. They live by or violate this set of rules according to their wants and needs and according to the demands of the action of the play. The audience contemporary to that time understood those conventions, as did the actors playing those characters. Today's audience—particularly Americans—are not necessarily aware of all these things. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that the actors playing these roles understand and operate according to them. Otherwise, a contemporary audience will never understand the character or the play that they inhabit, nor will they grasp the script's humor when the rules are purposely adhered to, violated, or poked fun at.

In the *Private Lives* scene, Victor has discovered that Elyot, the former husband of his new bride Amanda, is in a hotel room next to his own honeymoon suite. After the plot has thickened a bit, Victor storms in on Elyot because he fears the other man is attempting to steal his bride. Jealous of the former husband, Victor has decided to fight his rival because he fears that he will lose both Amanda and his manhood if he doesn't.

It sounds like a funny situation, but as the scene was played, the actor playing Victor very quickly dropped the idea of battling for his wife, and settled down instead to a very civilized conversation with Elyot on the subject. The scene turned out to have a lot of telling and very little doing. Before long, the exciting potential set up at the beginning of the scene disappeared.

This is where understanding the world of the play becomes essential. Upper class civilized gentlemen of the 1930s seldom reduced themselves to the level of barroom brawler by settling disputes with their fists. But Victor's extreme duress drives him to consider doing so. Seeing him making such a spectacle of himself would be funny to the audience because the expectations of society are at odds with Victor's personal needs, and because we would soon see that Victor doesn't really want to fight. As the scene progressed, Elyot's calm logic would further confuse Victor and make it difficult for him to maintain the level of hostility necessary to brawl with his rival. We would see Victor struggling to maintain his justified anger, and we would see Elyot see it as well. We would also see Elyot calmly and masterfully outbox Victor—verbally. By manipulating Victor with his use of wit, Elyot would manage to accomplish with his verbal gymnastics what Victor could not with his attempted physical efforts. Watching this happen is hilarious.

The description above is, unfortunately, not what we saw when the actors put up the scene for the first time. By failing to translate the world of the play into their actions, they missed much of the basis for comedy. We did not see the absolute life and death need of Victor to regain his honor through the uncivilized choice of fisticuffs, nor did we see how conflicted this makes him. Instead of challenging Elyot physically, he sat down almost immediately, taking away the threat to the scene. We did not see how the cagey Elyot manipulates himself out of danger, because the actor playing Victor brought no real threat into the scene. A battle of wits was quickly turned into a salon conversation. Neither of the actors used the Coward dialogue—bristling with wit—to fulfill their objectives, and, as a result, blunted the language's power in the scene and its laugh-producing potential.

The inconsistent use of the British accents allowed the audience and the actors themselves to forget the time and place of *Private Lives*, and the social conventions they imply. Further, the characterizations, demonstrated through wit and logic, were flattened because the language was tossed off rather than used actively. Finally, because these cerebral men were not forced into an unnatural macho physicality, the potential for visual humor was blunted as well.

All of these issues were discussed after the scene was presented, and like the actors in *Four Dogs*, the performers playing Elyot and Victor gamely jumped to their feet to make adjustments. Victor's simple act of bringing onto the stage his life and death need to fight immediately turned everything around. The actor playing Victor was hilarious, and his need forced the actor playing Elyot to deal with him as a legitimate problem rather than an easy-to-ignore speck of dust. The newly raised stakes forced all the other elements to be dealt with actively as well, and the actors were far better able to see what the audience sees, thus making each ensuing moment considerably more interesting than it had been in the first presentation of the scene.

In review, the *Private Lives* scene demonstrated the following principles of acting comedy. Actors need to:

- Adhere to the rules governing the world of the play.
- Find and play the conflict fully.
- Use the play's language in a way that supports the objectives being played.
- Find physical choices that are funny and serve the objectives of the characters.
- Support the actions of the scene without compromising what is inherently funny in it.

Other styles

We've looked closely at two particular kinds of comedy, satire and high style; there are several more. Each of those, besides generally adhering to the principles already mentioned, require consideration of their own individual characteristics, as demonstrated in *Private Lives*.

There are the contemporary realistic comedies of the mature Neil Simon, for instance. Or the character comedies of such authors as Beth Henley and Wendy

Wasserstein. Or the hilarious dark comedies that are brimming with social commentary by playwrights such as Christopher Durang and Nicky Silver. And then there are the farces, perfected a century ago by the great French playwright Georges Feydeau, whose tradition is carried along by such contemporary British playwrights as Michael Frayn and Alan Ayckbourn and by Americans like Paul Rudnick.

A good example of character comedy is Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*. The action centers on three quirky sisters from a small town in Mississippi who are reunited because the youngest, sweetest, and dimmest of the three has inexplicably shot her husband in the stomach with the intent to kill him. This unlikely setup for comedy is funny because the characters are. Yet what makes the characters humorous is not necessarily a quick wit, a pratfall, or a situation so extreme that it drives its characters out of their normal behavior. Rather, it is the slow unfolding of who each character is, how each relates to the other characters, and how each deals in her unique fashion with the vagaries that life has brought her. The truthful yet surprising reactions to the world that each displays are what makes the audience laugh.

In such a play, the actors must make believable and realistic choices for their characters just as they would in a drama, but they must also possess an awareness of what is funny about their characters and make sure that each moment, filled with discovery and new information, is fully realized. The physical characterizations of the offbeat characters in a play such as *Crimes of the Heart* must also be thought about and constructed carefully to maximize the humor generated by each character in the play.

A play by Neil Simon operates much like Henley's comedy. However, the characters found in a realistic Simon script are aware of their senses of humor and their wit, and like the characters found in a comedy of manners, use their wit to get what they need. But unlike the characters in a comedy of manners, the characters in Simon's plays are, for the most part, multi-dimensional, and it is their complexity and truthfulness that draws us, more than any plot devices or attempted social commentary. The comedy, therefore, is generated from who the characters are and what they need rather than any sudden twist or turn of the plot. But clearly, even though character-centered, a Simon play is filled with funny dialogue and capped with punchlines that must be respected by properly setting them up and effectively using the text. This requires more than a come-what-may attitude to the mechanics of the word play. The actors must have a full understanding of the dialogue and the way it is structured if they are to get the comic results expected.

The dark comedies of Christopher Durang or Nicky Silver are a hybrid that combines elements of various comic styles. In a Durang play we find the biting social satire of a comedy of manners and the conscious and active use of wit by characters to get what they need, similar to the behavior in a Simon play. But the world in which Durang characters live is invariably a bit twisted and askew from that of most people. As a result, the characters have also been shaped into satirical extremes of the people who populate our society. Their wants and needs have been malformed in accordance with the logic they have learned from their twisted world. Yet, for them, it is a real world.

Playing this out-of-kilter world in an exaggerated fashion is an understandable but ineffective acting choice to make, however. What makes a Durang play work effectively is an absolute commitment to the reality of that world without any commenting by the actors to show how ridiculous they, as actors, think it is. The script itself provides all the craziness needed. When the actors keep it real by truthfully adhering to the life and death needs of their characters, the comedic potential and the satirical underpinning are most successfully realized.

And finally, a word or two about farce, a category of comedy whose definition goes a long way toward telling actors how it should be played. Farce can be described as a comic play in which the laughs are produced through the broad, ridiculous, life-and-death choices of its characters. The comedy is physical and mostly produced as a result of the plot rather than character or witty dialogue. Characters in a farce find themselves in what they consider life and death situations and are willing to do anything and everything to extricate themselves. Obviously in this kind of comedy the actor must be willing to make the most extreme choices, because the character he or she is playing would. In fact, in a farce, extreme is the operative word. Plays such as *Noises Off* or Marx Brothers films like *The Cocoanuts* or *A Day at the Races* are fine examples of what it takes to make a farce work. Only when the actors commit to the extremes provided by the play—physically and emotionally—do the mechanics of a farce fall into place and start humming.

In summary, comedy is a specialized brand of acting, but it is not out of the reach of actors who are willing to do the work required to make it successful. Knowing the world of the play and making the choices necessary for converting that understanding into actions that will make the audience laugh is not so much a matter of talent as it is applying the fundamental principles needed to produce those laughs. Research into the world of the play and a grasp of the rules governing its style will go a long way to getting the results desired.

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