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Apologia Comœdiae

For almost as long as philosophers have questioned the metaphysics of existence and the morality of social behaviors, they have sought also to answer the cause and function of humor, specifically in the case of performed comedy.¹ With such luminaries as Aristotle, Horace, Kant, Wittgenstein, Bergson, and others involved in the debate, the notion that such an inquiry might be more appropriately located in a journal of epistemology rather than one devoted to performance studies becomes more and more the expectation of those who consider comedy a serious discipline. In fact, few contemporary performance studies scholars approach comedy at all, preferring, it seems, to study the performative aspects of a dental examination or the hidden gender agenda of a nineteenth-century cross-dressing vaudevillian. I would argue that the rigor of philosophy is precisely what comedy theory has always demanded, since any writer might toss off thoughts about comedy and call it a theory; when such a presentation lacks real logic and insight, it serves only to perpetuate the idea

¹ Throughout I will distinguish between the more literary “humor” and the performed “comedy” to keep my argument clear and to restrict my topic to a manageable subject set.

that comedy simply is not worth the time of serious scholars. As Woody Allen so famously put it, “Humorists always sit at the children’s table.”²

Comedy deserves to be respected more for two significant advantages it has: first, it provides great exercise in critical reasoning skills, since comedy works on the reason (as opposed to tragedy, which works on the emotions); second, the best comedy allows a penetrating insight into the society that generated the satire: Thus, my assertion that comedy belongs in a conference devoted to the arts’ role in cultural diplomacy. In a very real way, we do not truly understand a society until we understand what makes them laugh.

Part of my contention is that because the mind processes comedic material, we might refer to the sense of humor as the real “sixth sense.” For this reason, the act of explaining a joke is usually frowned upon and superfluous because the brain has already analyzed the material in the first place. Cognitive scientists have correlated the relationship between IQ and sense of humor. (Thus, if you want people to think you’re smart, you should laugh throughout my presentation).

Because the mind processes comedy, anything that interferes with the reception of the situation and ramifications of the scenario will necessarily decrease the level of perceived humor. For example, we’ve all experienced the case of the joke told about a recent tragedy and the listener doesn’t laugh. The standard response to this is, “Too soon?” because the audience’s emotions

² Woody Allen, *Without Feathers*.

(triggered in a tragedy) block the reason from dealing with the comedy. The significance of this comes mostly in very topical comedy, of course, precisely the domain of satire.

This reliance on the mind of the audience is not a conjecture, but is actually discernable in performance. One prime example I heard recently was from famed director Mike Nichols, who pointed out that “It’s probably why I’m in the theater, because I could hear an audience thinking when I was in front of them,” which fed into his talent to communicate the comedy of his improvisation and his direction.

The importance of the situation should not be discounted. Now, in most parlance, situation comedy or “sit-com” comes with a disparagement not truly earned. All comedy is situational. Even the humblest joke begins with “A guy walks into a bar . . .” to set the stage and provide a context for the coming incongruity or social commentary. Again, the audience’s understanding of the basis and cultural markers is key to the success of comedy; witness an American’s bewilderment at a British joke hinging on toad-in-the-hole or a Glaswegian slang—and these cultures ostensibly share the same language! Imagine how difficult it is to process humor across languages, or even the millennia back to the time of Aristophanes. Comedy does not appreciate the need for footnotes! Comedy therefore usually has a very short shelf-life.

Satire, especially, rewards cultural analysis, since it is based on contemporary problems, and comedy must deal with solvable situations.

Another contrast with the genre of tragedy (besides the emotional/rational distinction) lies in the subject matter at the heart of each: tragedy deals with great mysteries and unassailable facts of life such as death, fate, and the gods. Comedy, on the other hand, deals with social constructs such as politics, courtship, and puberty —things that vary from society to society, and so are ultimately correctible. Comedy that transcends period or country often deal with human foibles, which might easily serve our purposes if we define them as common shortcomings that could be solved, but often are not in the individual or the society. These include greed, vanity, and gender differences. This is precisely the reason that much of Molière seems understandable to modern audiences, since the foundation of the situation (apart from the fashionable details of the day) occupies a recognizable flaw in Orgon or Alceste.

The American playwright and critic George S. Kaufmann noted that “Satire is what closes on Saturday night,” a nod to the relative lack of pure entertainment inherent in most satire. Still, one of the pre-eminent journalists in America today, NBC’s Brian Williams, called the satirical fake-news program *The Daily Show*, “indispensable” to our society. He explains that “a lot of the work that Jon and his staff do is serious ... They hold people to account, for errors and sloppiness. ... It’s usually delivered with a smile—sometimes not. It’s not who we do it for, it’s not our only check and balance, but it’s healthy—and it helps us that he’s out there.” (NPR All things Considered 10 January 2010).

[DAILY SHOW CLIP]

Not only fake news fulfills the promise of potent satire in our culture today: for more than twenty years TV's *The Simpsons* has provided a clearly satirical take on American family life, political and social norms, and even the situation comedy itself. One of the surest signs that *The Simpsons* has achieved a level of social impact may be found in the fact that I hardly need explain to this audience what or who *The Simpsons* are and represent. [SIMPSONS CLIP] What impact has this show's relentless satire had on American society would be hard to say. One may, however, be sure that the consistently fine writing on the show means that the satirist's keen eye has never blinked from showing American shortcomings through the series. It has been said that "Little good is accomplished without controversy, and no civic evil is ever defeated without publicity;" both *The Simpsons* and *The Daily Show* represent the best satirical light shining on problems today.

In my Fulbright Professorship at the University of Zagreb a few years ago, I taught Croatian students courses focused on "American Comedy as Cultural Mirror," and I used the clips we viewed just now in my canned guest lecture that I delivered all over the country to students and scholars. Additionally, we read plays, viewed films and television programs that presented America in a culturally knowable manner, and of course comedy provided the entrance point for the intercultural study. One of the plays I selected was a 1922 American comedy titled, *Abie's Irish Rose*, about an children of immigrant Jewish and Irish families falling in love. I absolutely had to read this play with my students when I discovered that *Abie's Irish Rose* was the first American comedy

presented on the Zagreb stage in 1928. Knowing the plot as I did, that production made perfect sense, since the major conflict in the play involved the love affair between two young people from different cultures and religions. This isn't a particularly new idea, given *Romeo and Juliet* as a collective cultural artifact, but the relevance to a Croatian audience that might read the story as one akin to, say a Serbian Orthodox boy falling in love with a Croatian Catholic girl seemed apt to me. The fact that romantic comedies (and almost all classical comedies) end in a marriage—or as the Greeks termed it, the *gamos*—underscores the value of comedy as a genre to paint a more optimistic picture of the future society worked out in the course of the play or film. The successful pairing of people who belong together and who together will generate a better next generation is the ultimate social corrective of comedy. Again, with regard to *Abie's Irish Rose*, the resolution at the end represents not only a victory for Abie and Rose as individuals, but also for the needed assimilation of immigrants to the United States in the first several decades of the twentieth century. The play literally argued for the social good of the “melting pot” theory of social harmonization. The 1922 moment represented a need in America that *Abie's Irish Rose* spoke to; a decade or so later, Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It with You* provided an almost opposite argument: instead of assimilation, the later play seemed to argue for individuality, a pendulum swing/correction that too much assimilation seemed (the the playwrights at least) unnecessary in the 1930s. In this way, by studying several comedies from diverse periods, one may chart the social progress and pressing problems addressed in cultural

artifacts. After all, if religious hypocrisy weren't a problem in seventeenth-century France, would Molière have spent ink and stage time on it? Likewise, one might understand the extent to which Athenians (at least a certain section of society) felt that any solution to the war with Sparta was worth considering, even Lysistrata's plan for a sex strike.

Metaphor may be called the basis for all art, from poetry to painting, and the ability of the brain to analyze the parts of the comparison in a rational way points to another level of cultural comic manipulation. It may be argued, naturally, that analysis of some sort is required in most human interactions. What makes the metaphorical and performative form of comedy so important? Again, in relation to the case of *Abie's Irish Rose*, the ability for the society to see the whole in the story of that one couple posits a use of art to generate painlessly the mode of change and correction, since we study a fictional case in a play or movie, and not a case study wrought by social scientists that may be faulted for any manner of methodological shortcomings. Therefore, art provides the "spoonful of sugar" to an audience that may not be inclined to read or engage in political science or social science in a serious way.

The grounding of the metaphor can make or break the power of the satire (or any comedy for that matter). Once again, a cultural literacy improves the communication of the satire. A great example of this literacy may be found in the realm of parody. My rule of thumb with parody is, "If the more you know, the funnier it is," then it's a parody. A great recent example of this kind of

comedy may be found in 1983's *This Is Spinal Tap*, where heavy metal music is held up for loving ridicule by a team of musician-comedians. Not only are inane lyrics held up for ridicule, but the lifestyle and trappings of the rock tour are as well. To cite one example, when lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel uses a whole violin to stroke his guitar during a solo, savvy audience members recognize a direct intersection with Jimmy Page in the film *The Song Remains the Same*, where the Led Zeppelin guitarist uses a violin bow to stroke his instrument. [SPINAL TAP CLIP]

The legendary American comedy writer Larry Gelbart, responsible for television's *M*A*S*H* among other fine works, penned a 1989 political satire called *Mastergate: A Play on Words*. The title mischevously puns on a similar sounding sexual word, since the play deals with, in its own words, "debilitating governmental self-abuse."

When asked in an interview about politicians' double talk that is satirized in his play, Gelbart quipped, "I'd settle for double talk. I think we're up to quadruple talk now."³ Thus Gelbart took to task the politicians' penchant for obfuscation. In another interview at the time of *Mastergate's* Broadway opening, Gelbart connected the role of language further to his anger:

I know that I can't get the response I want in an audience unless it's very, very clear. I know that if I want to get a laugh, I have to be

³ Larry Gelbart, *CBS News Nightwatch*, interview by Jacqueline Adams, CBS, 14 Nov. 1989.

precise in what I'm saying. I would expect that same sort of attention to be paid to matters equally as important as laughter, such as life and death, when it comes to the men and women who control our destinies.⁴

In an interview with Dick Cavett in 1989, the talk show host asked Gelbart whether he had ever read George Orwell's essay, "Politics and the English Language" (1946), in preparation for his work on *Mastergate*. Gelbart responded that, no, he hadn't read it—astonishing in light of the many parallels to be found between Gelbart's play and Orwell's essay.⁵

Orwell begins "Politics and the English Language" by stating that, although English is in a state of decline, "the process is reversible." The decline, he feels, intensifies over time, as effect becomes cause, reinforcing badly used language: "It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."⁶ *Mastergate* is rife with examples of badly used language so

⁴ Larry Gelbart, *Spotlight*, television interview by Edwin Wilson, The Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1 Nov. 1989.

⁵ *The Dick Cavett Show*, CNBC, 8 Nov. 1989.

⁶ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 1. Gelbart echoed these sentiments with regard to the lowest common denominator requirement of TV in a *Newsweek* article in 1983: "We don't use language to the extent we should, and television has made it even worse. It's forever showing us the shortcut in

skillfully rendered in Gelbart's dialogue that some critics have commented on the documentary quality of the production.⁷ Brustein acknowledged during rehearsals that Gelbart was having "a hard time trying to invent things that haven't already been articulated in congressional hearings."⁸

Orwell lists several faults of usage that mar language's ability to communicate clearly and thoughtfully. He first addresses the subject of dying metaphors, phrases that lack so much of their original vividness that they are in danger of actually portraying a meaning opposite to the one intended. To cite an example from *Mastergate*, as Maj. Manley Battle testifies:

BATTLE. Self-interest begins at home, sir. The US Air Force has thousands of personnel in Ambigua, learning the ABC's of our IBM's, manning our most highly secret missile silos positioned here—[Pointing at map] and here—which place us logistically just a nuclear hop, skip and jump away from one of a thousand Communist countries.⁹

communication. So language, a very powerful tool, has been blunted" (Gelbart "TV, Movie Bosses" 54).

⁷ Kroll and Watt, among others.

⁸ Mark Caro, "Comedy of the Covert," *The Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 17 1989., 32.

⁹ Larry Gelbart, "Mastergate: A Play on Words" in *Mastergate and Power Failure: Two Political Satires for the Stage* (New York: Applause, 1994), 66. All of the quotations illustrating Orwell's points will be taken from this play.

The use of “hop, skip and jump” with regard to a nuclear missile trajectory is frightening in real life, the subject of satire in comedy. The passage above contains other obvious faults, such as the exaggerated and/or vague use of “thousand” in the figures presented, but Orwell’s essay next censures the use of operators or verbal false limbs. These fall into two categories; first, the addition of unnecessary words to verb phrases:

HUNTER. I’m most curious now as to the substance of what was actually said, that in preliminary testimony you’ve stated you recall remembering, Mr. Lamb. (40)

“Politicians always find an extra syllable or two,” Gelbart explained to the ART’s dramaturg, Arthur Holmberg. Orwell’s second subset of false limbs includes the overuse of suffixes arbitrarily or spontaneously added to words, as when one puts

“-ize” at the end of a word to form a verb in hopes of sounding profound. One of the early monologues from the play provides the finest example:

BOWMAN. Let me emphaticize one thing at the outset. This is not a trial. We are not looking for hides to skin, nor goats to scape. (13)

Next on Orwell’s list is *pretentious diction*, wherein he pays particular attention to bad writers, “especially scientific, political and sociological” ones, who use Latin and Greek roots to “give an air of culture and elegance.”

Mastergate's most pretentious speaker in this area, Sen. Oral Proctor, provides the following illustration:

PROCTOR. Mr. Butler, please elucidate us in your inferral regarding Mr. Slaughter's involvement, if you will. (27)

Furthermore, this speech provides an example of Orwell's related observation that "it is often easier to make up words of this kind than to think up the English words that will cover one's meaning"—as "inferral" readily shows.

Orwell's final category, *meaningless words*, applies not to words that lack any meaning, but to words whose meanings are so many and so abused as to render the various denotations contradictory and thus meaningless. The essayist offers words associated with art criticism—"romantic, plastic . . . sentimental . . . natural"—and political words—"democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic . . ."—as examples of words that "not only do not point to any discoverable objects, but are hardly ever expected to by the reader." The playwright offers many examples of these words throughout *Mastergate*, as for example:

BATTLE. San Elvador lies just right of center here in Central America. It has a democratic form of government that has been run by its Army for the past forty years. Passionately anti-communist, with a vigorous opposition press, a strong, vocal church and free elections that are promised regularly. (65)

Apart from these specific categories, Orwell makes many other important points about words and their relationship to political health: “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.” Regarding *lost metaphors*, and the related *euphemism*, once again, he sees the value to politicians who do not want to fill the audience or reader with ideas: “Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things [like the destruction of whole villages] without calling up mental pictures of them.” Based on a reading of *Mastergate*, and his other political works, Gelbart would agree wholeheartedly with the essay’s assessments, especially Orwell’s contention that “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

Another technique that Gelbart has used throughout his career—as in *Movie Movie*’s stilted dialogue or Buddy Fidler’s non-sequiturs—appears in *Mastergate* in many forms. The non-sequitur and the tautology are related in a perverse sort of way, and this relationship provides characters with humorous, empty, but altogether realistic-sounding lines. For example, when confronted by a news reporter about his major role in the illegal activities, Secretary of State Bishop declares

BISHOP. That is a gross exaggeration. My involvement was strictly limited to the extent of my participation. (50)

or in this breathtaking “opening statement” monologue spoken by a mid-level IRS official:

LAMB. Yes, sir. Thank you. [Reads from a prepared text] I wish, first of all, to extend my extreme gratitude to the Committee for the privilege of being subpoenaed, so that I might clarify the version I have given of the events under investigation. I secondly thank the Committee for granting me limited immunity, in that it gives me leeway to tell everything I know without having to tell *everything* I know. It has been most difficult remaining silent during all I've said up to now, but in lieu of the fact that certain prior actions by others, which could conceivably include myself, have been labeled as possible criminal behavior in high places, I have felt it my duty to remain steadfastly evasive and selectively honest so as to protect the national interest and, above all, to protect the President's security. Looking back in hindsight, there are many things I would have done differently in the past, but that I did whatever I have been told it's possible for me to say I did because I felt I was doing my best acting in the interests of our government. I also ask the Committee to remember that, ethics and morality aside, I felt I had a higher obligation to do as I was ordered to. I'm aware that that's not an alibi, but I know you'll agree that it *is* an excuse.' Thank you, Mr. Chairman. (31)

Some might argue—and Gelbart clearly does in Mastergate—that lawyers devise such language in order to detract from the understanding of the text and therefore the accountability of their clients. Orwell observed that “A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself.” Jack Kroll, in his review of the play for *Newsweek* magazine, succinctly condenses the parallel examples above to a simple, “If George Orwell had been a gag writer, he could have written *Mastergate*.”¹⁰

The political side of *Mastergate* cannot be ignored, coming as it did on the heels of the Iran-Contra investigations. In a *Newsweek* interview from 1983, Gelbart summarized his feelings about why politicians have earned a special place in the tradition of satire:

Comedians sense when a politician is ripe. Some little act betrays pomposity, stupidity or arrogance, and it's time to go after them. It's the idealist in you saying to the politician: 'I wish you were better. I wish you were Abraham Lincoln. And if you are going to be

¹⁰ Jack Kroll, “One Step Beyond Satire,” *Newsweek*, 31 Oct. 1989. Reprinted in *New York Critics 1989*, 197.

such a fool, I'm going to have to show you how disappointed I am in you.¹¹

Gelbart admitted the source of his frustration reached back into the '50s, when the Army-McCarthy hearings took place as the earliest televised national scandal.¹² For the first time, citizens were able to hear what politicians sounded like in the moment, without scripts or speeches. As comedian-author Steve Allen described an example of language dysfunction from that hearing,

Senator McCarthy stalked out of a congressional committee room in a rage, to be met by a bevy of reporters who asked him to comment upon a shocking allegation that had just been made. 'Why, it's the most unheard-of thing I've ever heard of,' McCarthy exploded.¹³

Gelbart himself recalls a particular comment that Sen. Strom Thurmond made to prospective Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, "I just have one

¹¹ Larry Gelbart, interview, "Conversation with Larry Gelbart: TV, Movie Bosses Wouldn't Know Humor 'If It Bit Them,'" *Newsweek*, 28 Feb. 1983, 54.

¹² The McCarthy-era hearings and blacklisting also provided a social sidebar to Neil Simon's *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1991).

¹³ Steve Allen, *Funny People*, qtd. in *The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes* (New York: Little Brown, 1985), 376.

question here that I would like to prepare.”¹⁴ Gelbart moved the language only a bit farther afield in *Mastergate*, with cognates such as

PROCTOR. I just have one or two questions which I don't quite understand.¹⁵

Often in his career, Gelbart has termed theatre, “the only safe place for writers.”¹⁶ The ability to fine tune the material up to and beyond opening night, with protection for the script from meddling hands, allows a playwright a very large comfort zone in stage work. The playwright also receives immediate feedback from a live audience, almost a necessity with comedy, where changing a syllable can mean the difference in getting a laugh. As David Ogden Stiers observed about Gelbart's dialogue, “If you miss an ‘and’ or a ‘but’ or a ‘which’ or a ‘who’ it throws it off just a little bit. Then pretty soon it wobbles like a top. and you get all off and you have to start all over again.”¹⁷

Gelbart wanted two things out of *Mastergate*: to tell America, “I heard this and watched this along with you and those of you who were really angered by this, you're not alone”¹⁸ and for the audience to “walk out of the theater . . .

¹⁴ Stone 15.

¹⁵ Gelbart *Mastergate* 25.

¹⁶ Stephen Rebello, “Commedia Del Larry,” *LA Monthly*, March 1991, 102.

¹⁷ Granger 19. Stiers appeared in a featured role in *Oh, God!* (1975), and also played Maj. Charles Emerson Winchester on the post-Gelbart *M*A*S*H* series (1976-1983).

¹⁸ Caro.

a little less susceptible to political snow jobs and a little more sensitized to gibberish.”¹⁹ He eschews the label “satire” for *Mastergate*, explaining bluntly, “The real hearings were satire. This is ridicule.”²⁰ Most critics did label it satire, however, and reminded their readers of George S. Kaufman’s legendary quip that “Satire is what closes on Saturday night.”

¹⁹ Simi Horwitz, “Mastergate Potshots: Gelbart and Engler Take Aim at Congressional Hearings,” *TheaterWeek*, 16-22 Oct., 1989, 18.

²⁰ Kroll.