



## **The Art of Comedy**

An Anthology of Plays

Second Edition

Edited by Larry Eilenberg

Included in this preview:

- Copyright Page
- Table of Contents
- Excerpt of Chapter 1

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# Sneak Preview

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# THE ART OF COMEDY

## An Anthology of Plays

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SECOND EDITION

Edited by Larry Eilenberg  
*San Francisco State University*



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# CONTENTS

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1.	<b>Introduction</b>	1
	<i>By Larry Eilenberg</i>	
2.	<b>The Playwrights</b>	5
3.	<b>Lysistrata (411 B.C.E.)</b>	9
	<i>By Aristophanes</i>	
	<i>Translated by Sarah Ruden</i>	
4.	<b>The Menaechmus Twins (date unknown)</b>	85
	<i>By Plautus</i>	
	<i>Translated by Lionel Casson</i>	
5.	<b>The Comedy of Errors (date unknown)</b>	133
	<i>By William Shakespeare</i>	
6.	<b>The Tempest (1611)</b>	183
	<i>By William Shakespeare</i>	
7.	<b>Tartuffe (1664/1667/1669)</b>	245
	<i>By Molière</i>	
	<i>Translated by Richard Wilbur</i>	
8.	<b>The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)</b>	309
	<i>By Oscar Wilde</i>	
9.	<b>Pygmalion (1912)</b>	359
	<i>By George Bernard Shaw</i>	

10. **Los Vendidos (1967)** 433  
*By Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino*
11. **The Clean House (2004)** 443  
*By Sarah Ruhl*
12. **The God of Carnage (2006)** 547  
*By Yasmina Reza*  
*Translated by Christopher Hampton*
13. **Jokes and the Comic (1905)** 591  
*By Sigmund Freud*  
*Translated by James Strachey*
14. **Laughter (1900)** 601  
*By Henri Bergson*  
*Translated by Fred Rothwell*

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# INTRODUCTION

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By Larry Eilenberg

**T**HIS COLLECTION OF comedies has been assembled to serve the students in “The Art of Comedy,” a course I have been teaching at San Francisco State University for over 20 years. It is a class that covers a wide range of contemporary performed comedy, from standup to sitcom, film romance to television satire. But the core material for the course lies in the theater, where the art of comedy began and where it most prominently flourished until the screen-dominated 20th century. This anthology includes some landmark scripts from the history of stage comedy, chosen for their representative qualities, for their influence upon the comic form and for the considerable pleasures they offer the reader.

There is a famous saying usually credited to Robert Frost that goes: “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” For the student of comedy, a variation on this familiar maxim might be: “Comedy is what gets lost in explanation.” It certainly has been my experience that the more you explain a joke, for example, the less funny it becomes. And students have routinely told me that knowing too much about how comedy works can spoil some of its fun. Yet those same students will return to say that their knowledge, finally, made them appreciate good comedy more and tolerate bad comedy less. If that is so, then for the successful course in comedy, we’ll hope that comedy is what gets *found* in explanation.

Experientially, there are two ingredients in a play that signal to us that what we are experiencing is a comedy. One sign, of course, is our laughter. And the other, to put in simplest terms, is a happy ending. The scholarly literature devoted to both of these defining comic characteristics is vast, and is well represented in works explicitly concerned with criticism and theory.

This volume provides only a hint of that literature, with two extracts at the end of the collection from the works of Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. These two writers are among the most prominent theorists of laughter and comedy, and their ideas are foundational to its study. Freud was a psychiatrist, Bergson a philosopher. Current studies of laughter, while still amply provided by psychiatrists and philosophers, are

just as apt to consider the anatomy and physiology of laughter as its psychology, the evolutionary purposes and healing qualities of comedy as much as its aesthetics. That the prestigious Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York has a “Clown Care Unit,” for example, is testimony to the ways in which our contemporary understanding of laughter has gone a long way to substantiate the fact that it may indeed be the proverbial “best medicine.”

The happy endings of comedies are as varied as the kinds of laughter they elicit. The unbridled partying that closes Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, for instance, is in stark tonal and thematic contrast to the family reunion feast that is promised at the end of Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. In Molière’s *Tartuffe*, the jailing of the title character, a religious con man, is announced by the officer of an all-knowing and divinely inspired King, and offers a conclusion that affirms heavenly authority and good order. As such, Molière’s comic universe is nearly the inverse of the one that is ruled by outrageous coincidence in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, yet the satisfactions of their finales are surely equal. Perhaps no comic ending in this collection is more fundamental than that of Sarah Ruhl’s *The Clean House*. In this highly praised contemporary comedy, the character Ana’s dead body is lying on stage at the finish of the next-to-last scene of the play. Then, for the close, she rises, is transformed into Matilde’s mother, and gives birth to the baby Matilde—laughing uproariously at a joke her husband tells her while she is in the midst of childbirth. The sequence serves to remind us of the essentially cyclical and affirmative nature of comedy: that life culminates not in death (the province of tragedy), but in rebirth. Whether that rebirth takes the form of a marriage, or forgiveness, or friendship restored, it can offer us a joy that transcends even the comic gift of laughter.

My teacher Erich Segal, who introduced me to the scholarly study of comedy, wrote evocatively about the origins of the word “comedy,” which was coined by the ancient Greeks. The root is an etymological uncertainty, with three possibilities proposed. One is from *kōma* (“sleep”), the impulse for comedy perhaps coming from dreams, with their topsy-turvy qualities and their many wish-fulfillments. Another possible source, which Aristotle endorsed, is *kōmē* (“country village”), suggesting the birth of comedy from the elemental crudeness and vulgarities of unsophisticated rustics. The prevailing consensus today is that the word *comedy*, in which its first energy was linguistically embodied, came from the Greek *kōmos*, a wild festival, what Segal playfully called “a revel without a cause.” Since the etymological mystery has not been solved, we are left free to entertain the germinal truths in all three proposed roots—that comedy, at its essence, partakes of the dreamlike, the vulgar, and the festive. The plays in this anthology are offered as evidence of all three possibilities.

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This anthology, with its intention to serve as a companion “reader” to a course on comedy, does not provide the usual critical introductions to each of the collected plays. The particular approaches to these comedies that a class may wish to take are left to the instructor’s judgment and presentation. Brief biographies of the playwrights follow this Introduction. More detailed biographical information on the playwrights and backgrounds to the plays, needless to say, are readily and voluminously available through the resources of any Internet search engine.



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# THE PLAYWRIGHTS

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## **Aristophanes**

Aristophanes (c. 448–c. 380 B.C.E.) was a writer of Greek Old and Middle Comedy. Author of approximately forty plays, his eleven surviving works are the oldest complete comedies extant. Aristophanes was an outspoken critic of the lengthy Peloponnesian War and a satirist of his contemporary Athens. Biographical information is scant, though there is a famous portrayal of the playwright in Plato's *Symposium*.

## **Plautus (Titus Maccius Plautus)**

Plautus (c. 254–c. 184 B.C.E.) was the most popular of Roman comic playwrights. His works, twenty of which survive, are musical, farcical, and filled with wordplay. Often imitated in his own time, Plautus' comedies have been adapted throughout theatrical history. Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and Rodgers and Hart's *The Boys from Syracuse* were both drawn from *The Menaechmus Twins*, and the highly successful musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was adapted from the Plautus comedies *Pseudolus* and *Miles Gloriosus*.

## William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is widely considered to be the greatest playwright in history. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, the son of a prosperous glover, Shakespeare made his way to London by the early 1590s, where he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a leading theatrical company. Shakespeare wrote tragedies, histories, romances, and comedies, and his plays in each category are among the most famous ever written. His works have been voluminously studied, and the titles, from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to *Richard III* and *The Tempest*, are at the very center of the canon of world literature and drama. Shakespeare was also an actor and manager in his company, later renamed the King's Men. He retired to Stratford in 1613 and died three years later.

## Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin)

Molière (1622–1673) wrote the best known of French comedies and founded the theatrical company that became France's national theatre. Son of a prosperous upholsterer well connected to the French royal court, Molière was well educated and intended for court life. Instead, he changed his name, began his career as an actor, was imprisoned for debt, and then spent a decade touring the provinces. Molière turned to playwriting in the early 1650s, received a royal invitation to perform in Paris in 1658, and settled there to share a theatre with an Italian *commedia dell'arte* company. Molière's great comedies of the 1660s and 1670s included *The Misanthrope*, *The Miser*, and *The Learned Ladies*. The most controversial of his comedies was *Tartuffe*, which the playwright had to rewrite twice before it was allowed onstage. He died shortly after a performance as the title character in his last play *The Imaginary Invalid*.

## Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was a celebrated wit and aesthete of the late nineteenth century, author of social comedies such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, as well as the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's reputation today rests principally on the continuing popularity of his subversive farce *The Importance of Being Earnest* and on his tragic prosecution and imprisonment for homosexual practices.

## George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was a novelist and critic into his forties, when he began writing plays. During the next fifty years of his long life, Shaw became the most illustrious writer of comedy in the English language, winner of both the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Academy Award (for the screenplay of *Pygmalion*). Shaw was an ardent socialist, evolutionist, and vegetarian, and his plays and prefaces are full of politics and opinions. Among his best-known works are *Candida*, *Major Barbara*, *Man and Superman*, *Saint Joan*, and *Heartbreak House*. His hugely popular *Pygmalion* was adapted into the frequently revived musical *My Fair Lady*.

## Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino

Luis Valdez (b. 1940) is the founding playwright of Chicano theatre in America, son of migrant farmworkers in California, and a graduate of San Jose State University. Briefly a member of the agitprop San Francisco Mime Troupe, Valdez formed El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworkers' Theatre) in 1965 to help unionize grape pickers and to support their strike. Valdez wrote short comic sketches for this purpose, called *actos*, among the most enduring of which were *Los Vendidos* ("The Sellouts") and *Las dos caras del patroncito* ("The Two Faces of the Boss"). Valdez wrote the hit play *Zoot Suit*, which was made into a film, and he directed the popular movie *La Bamba*. Luis Valdez has held several academic appointments in the University of California and California State University systems. El Teatro Campesino continues to produce bilingual theatre at its company home in San Juan Bautista.

## Sarah Ruhl

Sarah Ruhl (b. 1974) is a poet and playwright, born and raised in Illinois and educated at Brown University, where she studied with Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Paula Vogel. Sarah Ruhl was awarded the MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship, has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and has received wide recognition and international production for her increasingly varied body of work. Sometimes characterized as a contemporary "surrealist," she is perhaps better understood as a tragicomedian. Her best known plays are *The Clean House* and her recent success *In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)*, which premiered at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre before moving to Broadway.

## **Yasmina Reza**

Yasmina Reza (b. 1959) is a French actor, playwright, novelist, and screenwriter of Hungarian-Iranian-Jewish background. Her stage comedies, especially *Art* and *The God of Carnage*, have had extraordinary international success and won the major theatre awards of France, Britain, and the United States. Yasmina Reza's screen adaptation of *The God of Carnage*, called *Carnage*, was directed by Roman Polanski, featured Jodie Foster, Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz, and Jon C. Reilly in the leading roles, and was released in 2011.

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