

# THE ROAD TO COMEDY IS PAVED WITH DRAMA

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What's the difference between directing, and directing comedy?

Jonathan Lynn tells this story: Two directors at Britain's National Theatre met in a pub. One was rehearsing *Macbeth*, the other a Feydeau farce. Over a drink the *Macbeth* director observed that the two had similar but opposite problems, "You're trying to put the laughs in," he said, "while I've got to keep the laughs out."\*

Laughter defines comedy but it can defile a drama. It's the mark of success in one case, and failure in the other. *Macbeth* can be made ridiculous; *A Flea in Her Ear* can seem tragic. Drama plus laughs equals comedy; comedy minus laughs is dramatic.

Drama and comedy are not different things. They exist on a continuum. The extremes of the spectrum are easy to distinguish. But we live most of our lives in the middle, where a small step in either direction can elicit laughter or trigger tears. Drama is the comedy of our lives played without the laughs.

There's a delicate boundary between drama and comedy that directors must navigate. Drama directors might give the border a wide berth. Comedy directors want to dance over and around it.

When I'm directing a comedy the last thing on my mind is being funny. That's the paradox of my process. I want to be funny but to get there I don't go to funny places...I go to places that are honest, often painful, and, above all, true to reality.

Napoleon Bonaparte, could have directed comedy.

Conquering Prussia in 1807 he found himself in a sticky spot, with the defeated Duchess Louise. In Napoleon's account of the meeting she began in the tragic fashion of an opera diva of the day, crying "Justice! Justice!", begging him not to commit atrocities and show her people compassion. Napoleon was embarrassed by her manner and, as he tells it, "to make her change her style, I requested her to take a seat. This is the best method for cutting short a tragic scene," he explained, "for as soon as you are seated it all becomes comedy."



A simple change in staging made the Duchess' dramatic exhortation ridiculous! By making the Duchess sit, Napoleon created an incongruity between her passion and her posture. This rendered her passion harmless and ineffectual. That disparity, between her words and her position, is what struck him as "comedy".

There is nothing inherently comic in a scene in which the vanquished begs the victor for mercy. Louise's behavior was not in any way foolish or illogical. Quite the contrary, it was sober, purposeful and appropriate to her mission. But Napoleon's vaunted instinct for battlefield advantage served him in the parlor as well. "As soon as you are seated it all becomes comedy." By offering her a chair Bonaparte was following etiquette, which the Duchess felt compelled to follow. But in sitting, the teeth were removed from her argument. Her behavior was socially appropriate but inappropriate to her purpose. This sort of contradiction is

the stuff of comedy. It is the stuff that a director must be sensitive to, and be ready to exploit.\*\*

Directors tackling comedy often make the mistake of asking themselves, "What would be funny?" This question is misguided. It sets the mind off on a desperate search into realms of fantasy, fancy and exaggeration. The error lies in beginning the search for comedy by abandoning reality. The fact is that there is nothing funnier than real life. Life is funny. Truth is funny. Pain is funny. Reality is funny!

Comedy is so deeply rooted in reality that consulting the truth of the thing is the surest way to find or fix the funny.

Jason Reitman, director of *Juno* and *Up in the Air*, offers this advice: "When you're on set don't worry about what's funny...your barometer for what's funny will never be strong, but your barometer for truth is very strong. When you watch something and it feels false, your job as a director is to ask 'why does this feel false?' When you're watching your work and there's something that doesn't work it's not because it's not funny enough, it's just not truthful."

Drama also pursues the truth; so wherein lies the difference?

While asserting that, "comedy has to be based on truth," the great Sid Caesar went on to advise, "You take the truth and put a little curlicue at the end."

Seeking the truth is the business of both drama and comedy directors. The “curlicue” is the business of the comedy director.

When he invited the Duchess to sit, Napoleon put a comic curlicue on the rest of her speech. He rendered it bathetic and absurd.

Francis Ford Coppola did something similar in *Godfather II*:

In a scene in the Tahoe boathouse, Michael accuses his brother Fredo of betrayal. Fredo defends himself, unleashing a torrent of resentment at Michael, which he delivers while reclining on a chaise. Fredo’s aggressive gestures toward Michael are swallowed back into the resilience of the chair’s springy frame. This incongruity renders his rage ineffectual, harmless and risible.

I don’t believe that the staging of Fredo on the chaise came first. I suspect Coppola and his brilliant actors first explored the enmity between the brothers standing face to face, the conventional posture of confrontation. Or perhaps Fredo began the scene seated, and followed a natural impulse to rise in his own defense. They likely explored that staging as well. Then comes the discovery. On the set is a chaise lounge, a reclining chair in which Fredo happens to have landed while awaiting what he expects to be a routine encounter with his brother. Now when Fredo obeys his truthful impulse to rise in defense, the lounge fights back and defeats him.



By adding the realistic but comic obstacle of the chair, Coppola puts a curlicue on a conventional dramatic confrontation scene, making it seem more accidental and therefore more lifelike. He also reinforces a comic motif that has surrounded the character of Fredo from the outset of the

narrative. His anger is ineffectual. He is a tough guy and a weakling. Although there is nothing funny about Fredo's ultimate execution, the air of "comedy" that surrounds him makes his death less than tragic. It comes as an inevitability the audience is ready to accept.

If the addition of the chaise lounge sounds like fine-tuning, it is. Fine-tuning is what directors do when they apply a comic curlicue.

The curlicue is crucial to comedy, but the curlicue comes last. It comes after the truth has been found. The truth is the drama. The comedy director must explore the drama with faith that funny will follow.

So our journey into comedy begins with a search for dramatic truth. The road to comedy is paved with drama. We will take up the director's approach to drama first, before venturing onto the slippery slopes of comedy.

\*Lynn, Jonathan, *Comedy Rules*

\*\* The details of this story were first reported in a memoir published by Bonaparte's *aide de camp*, and its implications noted by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in his 1906 book *On Laughter*.

Aristotle, Kant, Hobbes, Descartes, Freud, Wittgenstein and other philosophers, have tried to explain the peculiarly human phenomena of humor and comedy. Each has offered valuable, if incomplete, insights into the causality of laughter. But none of their work is particularly useful to the *making* of comedy. Except for Bergson.

Bergson explored not just the "whys", but also the "hows" of comedy and I will find it useful to refer to his

work from time to time.