

APPENDIX B COMEDY

What a person finds funny is of course a very personal thing, but there are some principles of comedy that I think you will find useful. These principles apply to the four ways that a movie or show can be funny: the situation, the lines, the characters, and/or the physical business may be funny.

ALWAYS PLAY COMEDY FOR REAL

Comedy, like drama, is best achieved when actors concern themselves with moment-by-moment reality rather than the effect. If the situation is funny, playing it straight, connecting with it as simply and honestly as possible, makes it funnier. Under the best humor is often real pain. The problems of Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason on "The Honeymooners") were always desperately serious.

If the lines are funny, they come out funnier when the intention is more important than the lines. If the actor's subtext is "look how funny this line is," the fun is gone.

Sometimes after a bit of physical business gets a laugh, the actor is tempted to milk it to get the laugh next time, to do the business *for its own sake*. This means it is no longer coming out of the situation. It has become schtick. It now takes the audience out of the story, and is, finally, not as funny. If, in rehearsal, a funny bit comes out of a character using toilet paper to blow her nose, when the actor has to repeat the

activity for the camera, she has to be sure that the reason she is using the toilet paper is *to blow her nose*, not to make the audience laugh.

Many actors train in “comedy improv” classes or “sketch comedy” classes, where they develop a number of “characters” that they can “do” in many different imaginary situations. Actors who “do characters” should never *play character*. What makes the good character actors good is that they can create the physical and behavioral adjustments of a wacky character, and still put their attention on playing the reality.

It can happen that a director has to step in to let an actor know he has crossed the line into shtick. Paul Newman recalled getting this direction from Martin Scorsese during rehearsal for “The Color of Money”: “Don’t try to be funny.”

LISTENING

When actors listen, they are getting out of the way of the lines. Then, if the lines are funny, the audience can hear them and get the joke. Comedy works best when there is ensemble playing. The actors play off each other — a ping-pong effect. I think it is no accident that in the better written comedies, there is more listening. First of all, superior actors are drawn to superior writing. And second, the actors trust the writing and know that if they play off each other and don’t push, they will get their laughs.

James Burrows said in a Los Angeles Times interview of his years of directing the television show “Taxi” that his role was “more of a wrangler than anything else. There were a lot of egos on that show. I was really a wrangler to get the ensemble nature. That was my job — check your ego at the door.” What this means is that he got the actors to listen to each other. I believe that his ability to get actors to behave as an ensemble, to listen, to give the scene to each other instead of trying to prove how funny they are, is central to his phenomenal success in directing television comedy.

SENSORY LIFE

Physical comedy needs to be rooted sensorially, not indicated. This means that the actor doesn't demonstrate his wide-eyed wonder; he creates an image that really affects him, or he surrenders to the physical sensations in his eyes; perhaps both.

FREEDOM, RISK, AND IMAGINATIVE PLAY

True comic invention is a risky business, requiring headlong, uncensored access to the subconscious — with a light touch. Clowning is in my opinion a very noble profession. Great comedic actors expose the most chaotic reaches of their imaginations and in some small way make the world safe for the rest of us. The comedic actor must not be watching himself, or paying attention to the effect he is having on the audience. Watching to make sure the right effect is created is the director's job. The comedic director must be a safety net for the actors, able to tell whether the work is good and give them permission to risk, to fail, to commit.

It can also help if the director knows a few comic techniques.

SETTING UP GAGS

Every joke must be set up. A "straight line" sets up the situation; the punch line or "payoff" delivers the twist. In vaudeville the roles of "straight man" and "funny man" were very clearly defined. When George Burns first teamed up with Gracie Allen, he thought of himself as the funny man and gave her the straight lines; soon he noticed that she was getting more laughs than he, so they switched roles and, with his simple questions ("What did you do today, Gracie?") he became the best known "straight man" in the business. Dan Ackroyd, in a *Daily Variety* interview for the issue commemorating George Burns's hundredth birthday, described himself as the "straight man" to John Belushi and Bill Murray on the early days of "Saturday Night Live." The character played by Jessica Lange was the "straight man" of the movie "Tootsie." Playing "straight" does not make an actor

subsidiary to the “funny” actors, or mean that he never gets laughs. The early years of “Seinfeld” positioned Jerry as the “straight” center of the show, as was Mary Tyler Moore of her show; the zanier “second banana” characters bounced the gags off the more “normal” lead characters. Sometimes a single character performs both duties: paying off one gag and setting up the next one with the same line.

Some jokes are wordless. For example, a scene in “Ace Ventura: Pet Detective” depicts Ace’s clandestine search for medical records in a dark storeroom. This gag is set up in two stages. Stage one of the setup (the serious situation) is that we know Ace needs to be very, very quiet. In stage two, the camera watches his stealthy entrance into the storeroom from low inside the room — behind a length of bubble wrap piled on the floor. The loud popping that issues from his accidental step on the bubble wrap is the punch line — the first punch line, that is. The popping becomes the setup for the next gag: Ace, alerted to danger, struggles to keep his feet in the air to prevent further popping. Gravity, of course, defeats him, and more and more popping ensues. This is an elaborate gag that continues to “pay off” until the last bubble is popped. But even a “cheaper” gag such as a character unexpectedly banging his head on a rafter needs to be set up by establishing his reason to leave the room.

TIMING

Timing simply means knowing how long to wait before delivering a line. Sometimes it is funnier to pause; sometimes it is funnier not to pause. Timing involves a relationship to the audience, and good instincts for timing are rarely perfected without exposure to live audiences, either through theater training or through experience in a live comedy troupe or as a stand-up comedian.

LOUDER, FASTER, FUNNIER

Comedy needs comic energy. This doesn’t mean every line must be shouted, but often comedy depends on the actors “topping” each

other. On the other hand, sometimes the punch line is delivered with a sudden drop in energy — the actor “comes in under.”

GIVING THE AUDIENCE PERMISSION TO LAUGH

This is a subtle, mysterious thing that comic actors have to feel in their bones. It has something to do with timing, comic energy, and risk, and it means that the actors *let the audience in*, allowing them to laugh. It's a very fine line, because the actor has to let the audience in without playing the effect.

OPPOSITES

Surprise and juxtaposition are the heart and soul of comedy. Playing an intention that is opposite to the apparent meaning of a line is a common comic technique.

COMIC ADJUSTMENTS

If a character is carrying on about losing his pack of chewing gum *as if* he has lost an envelope containing a thousand dollars, the inappropriate adjustment might be funny.

ACTION VERBS

Playing a simple verb (intention) full out for as long as it will hold and making crisp, full transitions can aid in setting up or delivering gags.

RISING OR FALLING INFLECTIONS

This technique is better phrased as an adjustment. Using the rising inflection technique, for instance, means that every line is spoken *as if* it is a question.

It's hard for actors to deeply trust a comedy director unless she knows how to give actors feedback and advice on matters of comedy technique: for example, whether it is likely that there will be a bigger laugh if the actor holds a microsecond longer before giving the punch line; when it might be better to come in "under" instead of topping; when a rising inflection might just polish a gag. You also need a good imagination to see opposites and think up comic adjustments.

But the techniques and gadgetry of comedy should always be in service of the central situation of the *story*. The comedic director's primary tasks are to put the story ahead of the cheap trick, to turn the actors into an ensemble that keeps hitting the ball back to each other, and to maintain a light touch and a free atmosphere where imaginative play is respected. And finally...

EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING

The director is the guardian of the integrity of a film or television show. I recommend that as you develop your aesthetic judgment, you look always for the humor in a dramatic script, and the pain that is underneath comedy.