

THE COMIC & ITS USES

I hope we shall not invite reproach for singling out the comic actor from among the various types of actor, and for giving him our special attention. There is a philosophy of the tragic and there is a philosophy of laughter; there are thorough theories about the serious genre and the comic genre: for the purposes of this study, therefore, it would seem perfectly admissible to isolate the actor who makes one laugh. But we have not artificially detached the actor for the sake of analytical dissection: if we say that a comedian plays comic parts, we recognise his use of the comic.

We are, however, up against a methodological difficulty, because the concept of use is, at the present time, being contested, and in fact calls for clarification.

As a result of investigation, Jean Duvignaud denounces "the artificial and arbitrary character of this concept of use, which is accentuated above all in France, because of the extreme codification of theatrical customs."¹ If this is so, and if one cannot differentiate the comic without being arbitrary, then our study

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

¹ Cf. *L'Acteur*, p. 252.

is aimless; it would be equally as ill-fitting if we let it be supposed that Jean Duvignaud's general observation excluded any distinction between various major specialties by actors. The difficulty remains nonetheless, not only because by making exception of one category for the comic this confirms the reality of the various uses (albeit reduced in number), but also because there is a variety of comic parts which have definite uses. The traditional classification of first comic parts, second comic parts, character comic parts and so on is now out of date; it was also improper, but it was not unfounded and it cannot be excluded from examination. When, in the Conservatoire, Jouvét severely criticised the act and the means of his pupil by saying to him: "You are ideal for playing old fogeys,"² he was placing him very definitely in a function with clearly defined edges, with the various possibilities and the various limitations.

We readily agree with Jean Duvignaud in condemning the artificiality and arbitrariness of function. Not so long ago it was a prime necessity to react against the sacrosanct routine of a system of labelling in the life of the theatre which had become a nuisance and often harmful. The young man who did not align himself with the norms of classical uses and functions saw his chances greatly diminished when competing for a place in the Conservatoire. More serious still, the rigid nature of this function, the sclerosis which took charge and transformed him into a type hidebound by the fixed assets of tradition, this affected the very foundation of things: it did so by its proposal of characters who had likewise gone through the mill, with the full force of seduction behind it.

In return, we see some risk in accepting the hesitant responses of Conservatoire students collected by Jean Duvignaud as a confirmation of the artificial and arbitrary nature of the concept of use and function. Above all (and with some consistency) the evidence one receives from apprenticed actors betrays the uncertainty of the vocation and the looseness of disposition. This is normal enough at the age of irresoluteness, various aspects of which even conceal deep movements of consciousness.

"To be in search of one's function" is undoubtedly a desire to know, appreciate and measure one's abilities, a thankless task

² Louis Jouvét, *Molière et la comédie classique*, p. 193.

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which, to be conclusive, would demand mastery when one was practising one's scales and when one was not at a stage of self-understanding. This search, however, is more than this: it is the search for one's personality. Think of the discords between the formulated intuitions of being and the expressive rendering of a revolted body! In this case the function is a test of personality. "One must be able to choose one's mask," to quote a Pirandello character.

The classification of actors according to their role aptitude corresponds to the practical demands of the various distributions, and French theatre does not have the advantage of detailed labelling. Although he applies it to the formation of a new actor, Meyerhold draws up a copious table of functions. It is quite true, however, that, in France, such codification has assumed an unrivalled breadth, and it is no less clear that the reason lies, first and foremost, in the success of French classical theatre and in the lengthy extension of post-classical theatre. Characters in the classical tradition enrolled, for various reasons—legacies of farce or *commedia*, condensations of tragedy etc.—in countless contexts, thus making themselves correspond to the weather-vane of situations and of characters involved in the human comedy, which were nonetheless rigorous, conventional, stylised or type-cast. The fortune of certain successive genres, such as melodrama, simply lengthened the list. Highly characterised genres have their functions: this is why the disappearance of genres corresponds to the disappearance of functions. To quote Jouvét's words to his pupil: "There is not a single old fogey left in present day theatre. This character has become half operatic, half Italian comedy..."³ We no longer have the soldier-traitor part and the 'third dagger' part; functions and genres have disappeared arm-in-arm. But let the genre re-appear, and the function will re-emerge as well. The Piccolo Teatro in Milan revives the *commedia dell'arte*, and one re-finds the Arlequins. Because Arlequin is not the Doctor, and because one does not improvise Arlequin for oneself; one might even say that without Arlequin there would be no *commedia*.

It is thus easy to understand that the various theatres, so-called repertory, national, provincial, 'local' Parisian, long

³ Louis Jouvét, *Molière et la comédie classique*, p. 193.

maintained the practice of forming their companies by scrupulously fulfilling the list of functions—this at a time when each theatre had its troupe and was constantly changing programmes. The mania for defining these theatres, and labelling them by classes and subclasses, at the risk of a congestion whose fatal effect would be inaccuracy, still emanates from a desire to analyse and to characterise.

The tables of functions—in no way to be superimposed, and offering clearly interesting nuances—allow useful observations as well as provoking various questions.

The comic—and this is a basic statement—belongs indisputably to a differentiated category of actors, and the variety introduced into this very category draws the attention to the mental or physical (or both at once) adaptation of the actor to corresponding forms of comic expression. The “low comic part”—need one say it—is aligned to the similarly defined genre. Now, this may come about from taste, or from choice obviously, and this orientation is already meaningful, but above all because of the various abilities: the function responds to a capacity in an expressive sphere and for clearly defined characterisations. The flirt is not unsophisticated: likewise, the basic comic part is not low comedy.

Within the series of comic parts one generally finds the First comic part, the Second comic part, the Low comic part, the character comic part, and, without always being in line with the qualification and within the bounds of the group, the buxom wench and the old fogey.⁴ As we have just seen, the distinction between the First and the Low comic parts is blatant. Between the First (e.g. Sganarelle in *Dom Juan*) and the Second (Covielle in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*) the somewhat quantitative difference lies principally in the accentuation of the characterisation and in the intensity of the comic spirit; the former being more suited to major roles, just as, in the dramatic genre, the major first role is that which is a match for large-scale heroes. The two latter—wench and fogey—are separated by their physical appearances. Wench (*rondeur*) is an expressive name; here the voca-

⁴ The list of the troupe of the Rouen theatre for the 1874-75 season mentions: Comic lover. First Major comic. First character comic. First young comic. Young First comic. Strong second comic. Young comic. Old comic. Comic chaperon.

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bulary stresses the morphological aspect. The fogey, by his bearing, his facial features, his ability to typify the picturesque and the behaviour of people, is linked with the evocation of appearances in roles where the physical representation is of prime importance. The fogey makes himself up, wrinkles and ages himself, gives himself airs. For similar reasons the character comic is expected to portray roles which tend to the type.

This summary is already instructive. In one and the same family of actors we can feel totally different characters and activities and one can note the essential qualification of the outward appearance, or physical portrayal, for certain provocations of the comic.

We are in fact dealing with the comic, not with laughter, which is our second statement. The comic actor is the one who makes people laugh, we do not retract this evidence; but the mission of many actors is to make people laugh, although their functions do not appear in the list for comic parts. Valets, maids and entertainers are beyond classification and this seems surprising at first glance: one only has to think of the outbursts of laughter unleashed and provoked by Toinette or Dorine. This cannot be an oversight: there is not a single person in theatre who does not require Toinette's comic effects to bring the house down. The function entails distinctions: Molière's lady's-maid is not the same as Marivaux; one might even differentiate them by their comic behaviour and the nature of the laughter which results from it. But it goes without saying that they must make the audience laugh. Valet and maid have go-ahead, jovial qualities; their good humour is communicative; their manner of speech leaves aplomb behind and is gay and lively, and their irreverent criticism scratches at poor works. The maid knows how to laugh, knows how to induce audience laughter, as if by contagion; her function requires this technique, this psycho-physiological mechanism of loud release, huge amplification and entertainment. All the talent in the world would not be able to make a true Molière maid of someone who does not know how to laugh.

Perhaps professional practice, which, for utilitarian ends, presides over the catalogue of functions, would come to the support of a characterological observation of major interest? When it is just a question of repertory valets and maids, one

may well wonder if the labelling has simply been imposed by the needs of classical theatre; but when the entertainers are involved, it is clear that one cannot have them excluded, without good reason, from the group of comic parts. The table of functions thus draws our attention to a category of laughter artistes who appear separate from the comic parts because of certain peculiarities of character.

A special mention should be reserved for the compositions. The composition actor, in fact, is often specialised: he plays either comic or dramatic compositions. But one is also frequently quite happy to label him a composition actor, without saying any more about him, thus letting it be implied that he is suited to both sorts of composition equally. This ambiguity is in no way a sign of uncertainty or weakness in the actor; on the contrary, the composition actor, first and foremost, is able to shed his own personality in order to construct and compose the desired personality. To be able to "shed one's skin," to know how to "compose," these are trumpeted qualities for any actor. From this viewpoint, it is hardly surprising that the composition actor has a place apart: he is characterised by his ability to compose; his specialisation in one or other of the genres comes later. It is therefore quite normal that he does not figure in the family of comic parts—even if one should take the view that comic actors are always more or less composition actors.

A classification of those actors who make audiences laugh thus strangely breaks the bounds of the framework reserved expressly for comic parts in the index of functions.

Not infrequently the physical aspect conditions the comic expression. The wench (*rondeur*) is a good example of function predestined by a morphological factor. One is not, by definition, funny or droll because of one's excessive belly, and one can think of wenches whose comic spirit has certainly dimmed. "He acts with his belly," people say harshly when an actor seems hardly to have other assets and other sources of inspiration. (It is not enough to have a good theatrical outward appearance; one must know how to use it—this goes for the wench no less than for the tragic part or the flirt). False padded bellies, indispensable for the silhouette of a character, only create false wenches, most of the time. Padding does not change anything. The true wench also has a round face, round movements; she plays 'roundly;' her

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whole essence is 'round'—it is comic to boot, but need not be. Marked corpulence, in fact, does not determine the comic level; the comic actor can use it in serious drama, and can sometimes use it to advantage in an intensely dramatic plot. But there can be no doubt that comic resources are greatest when the outward appearance is, on its own account, a built-in exaggeration, an asset which can easily provoke laughter if the actor feels like making use of it in all aspects of eccentricity, mockery and caricature.

Many comic parts certainly make the most of the uncommon aspects of the character involved, even the natural misfortunes. If good articulation is an element of correction, for the elocution in the first place, one can think of various stammerers with a certain knack for creating amusing effects from their defect; others exploit unforeseen utterances: a high-pitched voice, or perhaps a sepulchral and desperately husky voice which is out of tune with the physical size or the nervousity of the character. The morphological types of comic actors fill a broad palette with types which are over-fat and over-thin, over-tall and diminutive, prognathous and endowed with noses which recall the descriptive variations of *Cyrano*. One can see, in the *Stage Directory*, a full-page advertisement in which the artiste, with photographic illustrations to back him up, gives himself the title of "the ugliest man in the world." Professional photographs illustrating favourite expressions show definite squints—to order: off stage this actor does not squint. He has developed a muscular defect or faculty for the tricks of the trade which he considers worthwhile. Likewise, the actor with an outsize or over-aquiline nose, the actor with horsey teeth, these do not make people in a drawing-room or people in the street laugh: the use which these actors make of such features is an artistic treatment for the purposes of comedy. Marcel Lévêque had an extraordinary way of turning his head to a given point at which he would reveal a completely unexpected profile; this was done with great skill and confidence, no less so in the appreciation of the effect in terms of astonishment, humility, superiority or whatever else had to be portrayed. Remember how Fernandel gave emphasis to the exaggerated features of his face at the desired moment in a perfect expressive synthesis, a harmony of the whole mimetic expression, voice, gesture and appearance. Yet the same face was capable of trans-

lating the delicacies of feeling and emotion, as this great actor showed us in *Angela*, for example, and other films.

In this way one can establish a whole gamut of ways in which the outward appearance is put to use, from peculiarity to defectiveness and unfeigned misfortunes—obesity, dwarfs, even the malformed, the display of which, by the way, poses a separate problem, as a corollary. In any event, the importance of the outward appearance is considerable for the comic actor; in the case of highly original artistes one is frequently struck by the fact that it is vital to ask oneself about the reality of a morpho-psychology which is peculiar to the function.

For Max Eastman the answer leaves one in no doubt: “those people always have a hitch somewhere.” His observations are plentiful, and all the more important because they deal with great stage artistes and screen actors known to him, and genuinely approached by him. Charles Butterworth’s comic style is created by his ‘physical handicap.’ Ed Wynn is a man whose gift consists in exploiting his defectiveness; he is clumsy, he licks, his voice is weak, he is incapable of singing in tune and “yet he insists on appearing in public....” Examples such as these surely back up our own. But Max Eastman applies a general extension to his observation: “These remarks might seem to be specially applicable to certain actors, but you will see that they do, in fact, apply to all intrinsically comic people, though in a way which may not always be evident.”⁵

In support of his affirmation and leaving aside actors such as W. C. Fields whose ‘hitch’ is so blatant it needs no mention, Max Eastman takes the example of an actor or artiste who, on the first encounter, shows nothing unusual in his personal appearance and behaviour: “... the same thing, though less visible, is true of Groucho Marx. In his make-up he is a good-looking, expressively featured man, with an exquisite profile—a man who, in serious drama, might well play the part of Heinrich Heine. But when he gets up or moves, he is bent at the waist in the most uncomfortable manner conceivable, as if he were put together with a pair of hinges. What is more, when he speaks his eyes tend to drop to the corners of their sockets like those of a doll when it is laid flat, and this seems completely

⁵ Max Eastman, *Plaisir du rire*, p. 52.

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accidental in the middle of some mundane conversation. These features are comic even when they are not meant to be. From the point of view of the normal human mechanism these are without doubt defects.”⁶ He goes on to specify this line of thought beyond all shadow of doubt; in the presence of any “intrinsically comic” actor: “I would say, quite simply, that a comic person is, in some way, outside the norm...”⁷ This person makes one want to laugh without knowing why.

Max Eastman does, however, admit an exception in his gallery of famous comic actors. It is a considerable exception: he is Charlie Chaplin. “Charlie Chaplin is not an intrinsically comic person. On the contrary, when you meet him he gives the impression that, though he may be small and thin, almost a man in miniature, he has a kind of perfection—an elegance, a balance and an agility both physically and in his elocution—which one feels absolutely no desire to improve... In addition, Charlie Chaplin is an extremely serious individual, so serious that he will overwhelm you with some interminable discourse—or bore you to death with a lecture—if you get him on one of his pet subjects... Far from being a funny man, he is a man with a humourous imagination... perhaps the most original we have seen since Mark Twain: he is also a consummate actor. He can imagine any conceivable funny character and then play him; the little tramp whom he managed to identify himself with in the mind of the public is only one of a thousand parts which he has at his fingertips, if he had sufficient boldness to give voice to them. But as a person he is impressive rather than droll; and this reality isolates him, and makes the words “comic actor” seem somewhat inadequate to describe him. He is a poet of humour.

“So in the Chaplin comedies, more than any other, we laugh at the representation and not the reality of a comic person.”⁸

Once again Charlie Chaplin enjoys the privilege of being put to one side, unclassified. Cinema writers and sociologists open a special shelf for the Chaplin case and its mythology; the psychologist of laughter does the same. The rare personality and the

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 52.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 52.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 53.

good fortune of an exceptionally deserving creation oblige, of course, the study and consideration of every detail; but do the uncommon qualities inevitably screen a mystery of creation which cannot be reduced to others, and can one not, on the contrary, draw from this a profitable instruction for everyone to know?

No matter what one thinks, Max Eastman's analysis is of great interest. For our purposes its primary merit lies in its illustration, so strikingly presented, of the distinction to be made between actor and comedian. This does not emerge here from the terms used; it is a matter of vocabulary. Actor and comedian are taken for each other—the common practice when there is no question of psychological or characterological differentiation. But the highly detailed observation is clear. It shows us an actor whose outward appearance and normal behaviour do not point to his function and use, but to a consummate art, capable of playing “any conceivable” character, of identifying with the thousand roles carried within him (the remark is excellent because it is true that, while of necessity considered in the light of Charlie-the-type, Chaplin nonetheless shows as an author and as an actor his capacity for escape in other films—*Public Opinion*, *Mr. Verdoux*...). Here the perfect definition of comedian is opposed to that of actor. Louis Jouvet set great store by this distinction, and we have applied it ourselves, because we are persuaded that it corresponds to two characterological types in relation to two original creative processes. The actor, with his very marked physical and instinctive characteristics, deforms the character in relation with his own personality; the comedian, on the other hand, obliterates himself in his character by means of a suppler and broader mime. Each time he is the character, while the actor is himself in the character each time. Through the spectrum of intrigues and characters, W. C. Fields is always W. C. Fields, but it is paradoxical that, despite the strait-jacket of the conventional type and the breadth of this mythical significance, Chaplin's heart beats too differently to list in the various suggestions of individual persons, for which reason he is so often moving and pathetic.

Max Eastman's remark is therefore most instructive: the burst of laughter unleashed all round the world by Charlie is equal in power, in comic power and in volume, to that of other great stars, and the artiste is a comedian who is clearly featured in

opposition to the actor. But the exception made in the case of Charlie's celebrated creator, himself not "intrinsically comic" introduces a serious reduction of force in the general nature of the observation. Certainly, the examples quoted by Max Eastman belong to the same category of actors, but is it not possible that there are others who are psychologically related to Charlie Chaplin? It should be noted that names such as W. C. Fields, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers (like Charlie Chaplin incidentally) ... come from the music-hall, and perhaps the development of the genre and the disappearance of the music-halls, which were previously plentiful, can explain the fading-out of that family of comic actors who were like a fiery constellation at a certain point in the history of the cinema.

There are different ways of explaining the appearance of intrinsically comic features in the autonomous life of the artiste, which are not necessarily unsuspected and uncontrollable imperatives of nature.

These spasmodic reflexions are leading us towards more important statements. The comic actor, he whose creations are real and stamped with the original seal of a personality, composes his character; he exercises his character through all his creations. He has chosen his mask, like one of the heroes in *Les Géants de la Montagne*, magnificently expressing, in his familiar ambiguity, the Pirandellian dialectic of man and actor, person and character. Such a choice translates and engages the personality. The mask is more than a neutral accessory of the scenic set; it reveals and it hides. Beneath his character, the actor reveals and conceals himself.

It is precisely in the face in which one knows the extreme wealth of expression that the shrewd eye seeks to uncover the whole semiology of the character, normal and abnormal, and including the subtlest expressive nuances which convey the real personality. The face = eyes and lips, and the look in the eyes; the face = what emanates from it too: voice, breath—*anima*, soul. One can decipher a face because the moulding process of life has inlaid it with its signs. But, in the words of Rilke: "There are a lot of people, but there are many more faces, because everyone has several." What is the true face of the actor?

In his memoirs, Albert Fratellini says: "I am not at ease with my everyday face, because my real character is the one you

may have seen in the ring. When I get down to creating a mask for myself, all I do is emphasise my real features—which are dominated by good humour, jollity, even lechery.”⁹

This disclosure by the famous clown bears witness to an escape from social censure: beneath his make-up, he dares to display his jollity and lechery in the outburst of good humour—all those things which he considers and constrains in everyday life. He finds full and authentic self-knowledge beneath the mask which he has made himself for the ring; and one can make a parallel conclusion that he is not at ease with his usual face because he has likewise moulded it for the requirements of his social conduct. The human comedy is thus made of a perpetual play of faces; at this juncture we cannot avoid quoting Gaston Bachelard: “... a human face is a mosaic made up of a desire to dissemble and a fatality of natural expression.”¹⁰ One can understand why Goethe could say that a man was responsible for his face once he was past forty. The choice of a mask is a serious matter. The remark assumes full volume when the person concerned is an actor who is professionally practising a game of masks: masks for the various types embodied, a mask of his own character, a mask for himself. The “dialectic of dissimulation and sincerity” for the comedian is an exercise which is further enlarged by the demands of the trade. A perilous activity in which supreme skill can emerge—“I am beautiful when I want to be,” said Eleonora Duse, and in effect one can think of actresses whose unfortunate, even ugly and disagreeable features can vanish on stage and become a face of extraordinary charm—whereby the routine mechanism can turn a pale personality into someone faceless who “looks like an actor,” as one comedian said to describe himself for the people coming to meet him at the station.

Has the comic actor tried to dissemble this uncommon and comical feature which makes him conspicuous, or else has he yielded to the fatality of natural expression? This deep-seated dialectic is obviously variable depending on the individual, who, incidentally, does not analyse himself in these moments when he feels the will to appear in some deliberate guise or, on the

⁹ Albert Fratellini, *Nous les Fratellini*, p. 114.

¹⁰ Cf. Roland Kuhn, *Phénoménologie du masque à travers le test de Rorschach*. Foreword by Gaston Bachelard, p. 12.

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contrary, when he tries to obliterate or forget the image offered. The personality is affirmed by this conduct, and it is quite likely that the intrinsically gifted comic actor demonstrates the dominant trait or traits of his character, by doing which he gives himself some satisfaction, he justifies, affirms and maybe reassures himself, just as, equally, it is quite conceivable that he attenuates, and rubs out, as far as possible, anything which falls outside the common denominator of expressive anonymity. Even those natural inconveniences which cannot be dissembled yield to these adjustments. There are buxom wenches who seem to ask the town to forgive them for being buxom; others carry theirs off with assurance and satisfaction, one might even call it provocatively. Facial expressions, which reflect the personality, are even more susceptible to such treatment.

An over-aquiline or over-snub nose, or a squint are not intrinsically comical and can even embarrass the onlooker; to be comic with such features one has to know how to make use of them. When one sees the virtuosités of those with such physical flaws, one may mistrust the inevitability of their occurrence when they are not required.

These restrictions on the general extension of the observation in no way reduce its weight and interest: a category of comic actors, with powerful originality and inspiration, those for example to whom Max Eastman pays especial homage, let themselves down in day-to-day life in a comic way, by the fact that there is "no hitch." The declaration enlightens us about the permanence of the playful impulses of these actors, about their social behaviour and about the relationships of their comic and true personalities. It does not enable us to conclude that the masters of laughter all belong in this category, even if they express themselves in this hypertrophied vein of the comic.

Our remarks are backed up by the actors of the *commedia dell'arte*. The *commedia* makes one laugh. Anyone who saw *Arlecchino, servo di due padroni* at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, to the accompaniment of hysterical enthusiasm from a public carried away by the feats of burlesque, the follies, the perplexities, the frolics and roguery of this extraordinary Arlequin, anyone who was there can have no doubt of this. Dressed in his traditional costume, however, Arlequin acts beneath the mask of leather. He is not asked to show his various facial oddities by

his make-up; his attitudes and highly characteristic movements are type-cast; at any given moment he seems to illustrate one of those conventional attitudes or gestures laid down by the iconography of the *Commedia*. When he has put away costume, stick and mask, is there anything unexpected and droll about him? One should recall the astonishment, the genuine amazement felt by the students who met Arlequin at the Sorbonne wearing a jacket and talking about his art in very simple terms: a man like any other man. It would not have taken much to have persuaded these girls to call him insignificant or banal, so hard did they find it to imagine the miracle of transformation by which this modest, moderate artiste could introduce them to this crazy universe and make them laugh as he did. One has the same surprise with Charlie Chaplin when he has left his famous hat, stick and shoes in his dressing-room.

Other laughter artistes also fall outside Max Eastman's category of the intrinsically comic. They belong to various families. When we were going through the repertoires of functions we came across them, outside the traditional catalogue of comic parts. There are many of them, distributed throughout great Molière drama, vaudeville, street theatre and all the other unclassifiable genres, from musical fantasy to avant-garde theatre. A sweeping statistic would quickly show that in the course of a theatre season, they constitute by their performances the greatest volume of laughs and the greatest volume of mirth. Delicate forms of laughter, the ethereal forms of the poetic theatre, but also huge outbursts from those portrayals which make one laugh until one cries. These actors thus occupy a significant position in comic theatre. Their resources vary, and prior to any thorough reflection and statement of the widespread gamut of the qualities of laughter, one suspects them of having their very own humour; and they know how to be funny, how to provoke and exploit comic effects. It matters little that the theory or catalogue of functions lists them under another heading: they make us laugh, they are comic. Professionally speaking, one would say: "... this whimsical actor is a great comic..." or "... she acts maids and she is frankly comic ..."

Let us take the example of Molière's maid. She is generally pretty, somewhat plump, in fact plump enough to show a certain amount of bosom; she instills a feeling of robust health,

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uncomplicated and simple common sense, and balance; in short she is the opposite of those physical and mental caricatures one finds among previous comic parts. If the whole complex of functions in a troupe is, in the words of Pierre Abraham "above all a cross-section of morphological types,"¹¹ our maid is perfectly defined. In fact these summary suggestions need not point to a routine qualification. It is clear that in the theatre, as elsewhere, there are surprising and magnificent over-compensations. But because the exception proves the rule, one can admit that, in a typified distribution, the bread-board evokes the dry nurse, and that the real nurse has breasts. The function is thus well calculated in its correctly adapted indication of the role. But it is not reduced to a morphological indication. When one says "maid," one thinks of a physical type, of course; and one thinks likewise of the qualities which go with such a type: the capacity to laugh loudly, deeply, vulgarly, communicatively; laughter which will contagiously bring the whole house down; and this personal asset, which, as soon as the appearance on stage has crossed the foot-lights, shows a happy vitality and a mood of laughter. And, of course, comic gifts. Because it is not enough just to speak one's lines intelligently or sensibly—which would make the character into a person of reason (this is one function), at once lustreless and tedious, when this character should be amusing us and making us laugh; the part must be acted, the comic effects must be extracted, by any playful invention deemed necessary; verbal impertinence is amplified by the impertinence of the tone of voice, the voice itself, and the attitude when these need a comic nature.

Theatre exploits comic effects. But laughter in the theatre is not simply born from a feeling of the comic. It is certainly difficult to exit amidst laughter; one cannot measure laughter quantitatively, nor can one separate laughter qualitatively. The actor has released the effect by a word, a gesture, a facial expression, one laughs, but one often laughs because one has been instilled with a mood for laughter. It is not our intention to discuss at this juncture this atmosphere of hilarity which is built up in auditoria, sometimes even before the curtain goes up, because one has come with the built-in idea that one is here to be amused,

¹¹ Cf. *Le Physique au théâtre*.

because one knows in advance that this is to be a light-hearted performance, directed by actors whose funniness one is already acquainted with or one is keen to discover for oneself. This kind of atmosphere warms up with the first lines; it is a veritable cultural cauldron for effects. To be more precise, we are now evoking this act of creating the mood of laughter, which is achieved by the actor himself, by his personal movement or activity, before the actual comic act, or in a state of indifference to it. The actor brings all this on stage with him, and this creates his jolly, smiling audience.

Some performances in which this jovial atmosphere is consistent throughout are permeated above all with good-humoured laughter; the comic effects thrive, helped by the connivance of the act which makes the audience the actor's accomplice, makes the audience be amused, with the actor, by the situations, the words, the slightest jokes which furnish his fantasy world. The genre certainly needs this. This genre is neither paradoxical nor disreputable; its laughter is clearly the sort of which Georges Dumas said: "It translates the pleasure of the comic." One laughs out of happiness and, in Dumas' words: "Heightened good humour and the suppression of constraint are the most ordinary causes of the happy laugh." But here again the genre which cultivates laughter requires actors capable of introducing this "heightened good humour." There are actors endowed with this eminent quality and with the power of making it a communicative force.

Among the comic actor's virtues there is one which finds much mention but little or no insistence because it is ill-defined: it is his "presence." There is no trace of it on the major theatrical manifestoes, which are preoccupied with characterisation, animation, transcendence etc.... and nevertheless theatre people hold it in great esteem. So and so, people say, without knowing how to qualify the person's talent or success, has a presence; he imposes himself on the stage or the screen. Conversely, without presence, the comedian's act, however sensitive and clever, has trouble going beyond the footlights. This quality, made up of many many parts, both physical and moral, is not a mystery: it reflects a personality in which voice, physiognomy, authority and sincerity are in harmony. It is more or less developed in dramatic and comic actor alike. The latter, when he

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has it, and he can hardly be unprovided with it, introduces immediately to the stage the at-oneness with his acting which is consubstantial to him and which demands the audience's smile, and provokes in the audience the humour of the act. Presence in the comic act introduces the happy vitality for which a laugh of pleasure prior to the comic art is sufficient.

To typify the talent of a contemporary artiste, Jean Renoir told us: "... she possessed that extremely rare gift of making every member of the audience believe that she was acting for him." This is the observation of an expert: it expresses an exceptional reality, exceptional for its fullness, because few artistes have the power to establish such a marked and constant connivance with each member of the audience. Theatre goers have, however, been able to see it for themselves, the degree to which depending on the occasion. The ability to cast their spell, which the more bewitching actors possess, has often, and notably in the dramatic repertory, been specified, at the risk of approximative vocabulary, as a "magnetism," producing a "magical charm," an "alienation" ... and one can quote examples of auditoria being totally bewitched to the extent of not noticing the hero's beard peeling off, or the hero mutilating his lines from loss of memory. Jean Renoir's observation involves something quite else: yes, the spectator is in one sense under the spell, but it seems to him above all to be in terms of having a privileged relationship with the actor, who is playing especially for him; it seems that there is a real person-to-person sympathy. This is the highest form of a very great quality: charm.

The full function of this quality emerges in pieces which are gay and fantastic: the dramatic or tragic actor may have it. This advice of having recourse to charm came from Sarah Bernhardt: a tragic heroine in tears must still be smiling. The actor exercises his charm by a harmony of gesture, ease of breathing and vocal utterance, and the triumph, always flexible and supple, of the extenuating violences of pathetic action. Should the dramatic art thus benefit from this by the mediation of the actor—because the aesthetic of the art is not the aesthetic of the drama—the genre itself is unaware of this, even if it does not exclude it. Whereas charm, calm and smiles, is directly at the service of the play.

The theatre world readily embraces the idea obligingly in an

indefinable blurred manner; the radiant quality of the comic actor who has charm is veiled in mystery for the person who tries to find secret powers and forces in the irrational. One can easily recognise it and allow it its predominant place in the talent of an actor. Of course he does not avoid the analysis which recognises in him all the characteristics of "elegance" as applied by philosophers and aestheticians.¹² There is no confusion here with beauty, and the annals of the theatre are bursting with evidence of surprising transformations enacted on stage by charm: banal faces, wan or tired, light up with youth and allure and take on a beautiful appearance. Beauty is static, charm—or elegance—means inspiration and smiles, alertness, resolute efforts, like acting onself. "Elegance is movement, and movement is freedom," writes Raymond Bayer.¹³

These are important qualities because of the movement of sympathy which they engender in the audience, and for which one can resume point by point the analyses made by Bergson on the feeling of elegance. With great subtlety the author of *Les données immédiates de la conscience* shows how ease of movement suggests the following: all movement is prepared in the spirit of ease which pre-moulds the next attitudes. Thus, the support of the backing rhythm being an aid, the attitude which will be taken appears to obey us, and in no way to be imposed upon us. The feeling of elegance is therefore imbued with a physical sympathy which, subtly and by affinity, suggests a moral sympathy. "... the truth is that we think we can unravel in anything that is conspicuously elegant not only the lightness which is a sign of mobility, but also the indication of possible movement towards ourselves, a virtual or even budding sympathy."¹⁴ Such is the quality of charm which, in effect, gives the spectator the feeling of being in sympathy with the actor, to the point of making him feel, in a vague complex of impressions, as we have seen previously, that the actor is acting with and for him. This elegance is certainly a personal quality in an actor, and, as Schiller observes, it is here that the seduction lies; it is not a quality of the character: it belongs to the actor—mobility, ease

¹² Cf. André Villiers, *La Psychologie du comédien*, pp. 115-118.

¹³ *L'Esthétique de la grâce* vol. I, p. 33.

¹⁴ Cf. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, p. 10.

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and sympathy are his own properties. What a hasty look might easily take to be a secondary and superficial aspect of the talent in fact masks real merits and is evidence of a personality. In the good old days when Maurice Chevalier was filling the stage with his gusto, people said, quite plainly: he has charm and he is sympathetic. Not long after his appearance on stage, the whole auditorium was a-smile.

The entertainer and actor, whose charm is working, puts the auditorium in a mood for immediate laughter; he introduces smiles and gaiety into the theatre before he has resorted to any comic devices, and, in this state of sympathy and resonance with him, the spectator easily enters the act and shares the happy exuberance.

Eros is scantily veiled behind the play of charm and beauty which is continually used by comedy. Dussane has subtly remarked that the public is always a little in love with the flirt. An ambiguous act this, evidently intended for the character to be seduced in the play; for him she is beautiful and provocative; but the spectator does not admit the plausibility of the act unless she is beautiful and provocative for him too. The most established art cannot escape from this requirement. One may say that all is innocence in this action on the public when one knows that the actress has been chosen because she is beautiful, because she knows she is beautiful, and because she contrives to put her beauty and all the refinement of her seduction to the best advantage. There is, here, a sympathetic exchange between spectator and actress: the whole artistic sublimation, the inaccessibility of the actress behind her fourth wall, the separation of the two levels of fiction in which the actress moves and the spectators' everyday life, these factors in no way detract from the reality of the impression lived. The eroticism of the act is constant with the performance of the comedy; toned down, ethereal, honest—a delicateness which puts on a front of being unaware of itself in the highest forms of art; on other occasions there is real sexual provocation, more or less casual, which is saved by tact and talent—our statements draw the line at properly becoming works, and do not intend to take into account the vulgar qualities of perverted theatre. An eroticism of laughter responds indisputably to this eroticism of the act. One should number the secret callings of Eros among the general excitement

of pleasure which is expressed by happy outbursts of laughter.

Let us consider eroticism of the act by itself, independently of the intentions of the play. It goes without saying that the gallant intrigue and jocular or improper jokes are like a highly flexible spring-board for this act; they are not just pretexts, because the work demands interpretation in this sense. The games and laughter of love, and its complications, occupy such a large part of comedy that there are splendid occasions for the actor or actress to use his or her physical glamour in the art of seduction. But prior to the requirements of the intrigue and the situations, the actor, by his presence, looks and charm—in short any quality which arouses a sally of sympathy in the audience—exercises, in the course of this act, this eroticism which evokes smiles and laughter.

Célimène and Madame de Léry come on stage swathed in their flirtish radiance and the audience laughs; and the audience laughs at the first expression which suggests discreet intentions, at the first inflexion with just a dash of malice in it, in which one would be hard put to it to find any mechanism of comic effect.

These precious qualities are therefore made available to the theatre of laughter by the various artistes. They are truly theatrical qualities, because beauty does not necessarily go beyond the footlights. It is not always radiant, it is easily lustreless; like, as sometimes happens, the beauty of those honoured prizes which hardly attracts a second glance when it circulates through some ordinary worldly crowd, its hygienic stature in strict accordance with the standards of juries. It is necessary to know how to use beauty, just as the comic actor must know how to use his ugliness. Need one mention that such knowledge alone is not sufficient, that other qualities are needed to instill life into a character. In the annals of the Conservatoire one would find first prizes for drama which were, in truth, beauty prizes, and only lived up to the promise they offered in a mediocre way. But a mistake lies here. The error can be explained: in the first place, the artiste is not without other qualities, even if modest, and the character who is cleverly staged “sticks” to the person so well, adjusts so well to the exploitation of its beauty, that the necessary characterisation appears sufficient and self-propelled, and the spectator is won over first and foremost and unknown to him by the eroticism of the act.

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When the art of the comedian demands such efforts and such application to bring the character to life, to build up the character, and to live him by an osmosis of intimate feelings canvassed from the depths of the consciousness, it may possibly seem strange to give pre-eminence to those qualities which are often thought to be luxuries, trimmings appended to the solid foundations of talent. Presence, knowing how to be beautiful, charm, extensive good humouredness, all this, one would say, cannot be the essence of the actor; and one would quite readily concede that this is not the be-all and end-all, and that no real creation can be satisfied with just these things. Nevertheless, these are dominant qualities, almost exclusive qualities, in very great artistes and the paradox is only an apparent one, because a major part of these qualities have issued from the instinctive reserves of the actor. They affirm an actor's personality. Their pre-eminence in the ration of natural gifts may make other profound propensities pale, although it is quite rare that the two do not go together, even that they presuppose each other to some degree. "Knowing how to be beautiful," for example, requires the ostentation of the basic spectacular complex in the actor and the equally characteristic will to act on someone else, to pressurise the audience.

Quite naturally, these qualities are used to the full in non-serious performances in which laughter, nourished and puffed up by comic effects, is already the happy, good-humoured laughter of pleasure.

If it is of use to draw attention to this erotic quality of laughter, which is a real one in the heightened performance of drama, stripped of all underlying motivation, it is superfluous to dwell on the cases when it is used to the full. More exactly, the eroticism of the performance is exercised in the perfect knowledge of the laughter which goes with it. The play thus plays on the two planes of eroticism and laughter. Here again we are excluding any allusion to outright sexual provocations, because these descend into a deliberately pornographic genre, or a genre which, according to the dramaturgies which load them with profound meanings, is a little too lofty; most of the time these appeals to sexuality tend not to provoke laughter. Whereas an ample literature for theatre which is frankly libertine or pleasantly daring, from the operetta to satirical comedy, resorts to subtle

variations of eroticism in an entertaining climate of amusement and laughter. Each genre naturally has its appropriate actors. It is not just a matter of skill, or technique adapted to the fashion of the day, which can teach one to hitch up one's skirt a little higher than was becoming at the time of the French Cancan, or the manner of "lifting" the nude into bed or into the bath, according to the conventions of the contemporary cinema. Everything is trying to find direction (even the strip-tease); the actor still needs some artistic aptitude. The author's libertinism is spiritual: the actor's performance should be too, and if the expected effect—theatrically speaking—is laughter, then it is as well if the actor is totally and bodily spiritual, all the way ... to his fingernails, in his gestures, his attitudes and his sexual advances—all must make one laugh.

Transvestite performances, those perplexing confusions between boys dressed up as girls and vice versa which occur in the greatest dramas of Shakespeare and Goldoni and so on, who derive powerful comic effects from them, rely on sexual ambiguity. The words are funny, the situation comic, but it is up to the actor to render this ambiguity. It is a well known fact that the art of the transvestite is not an easy one. If the boy dressed up in female trappings is hampered by presenting a caricature, what he evokes is quite simply no more than comic pleasantry; if what he evokes is too polished, this can be suspect and embarrassing. If in this respect the girl suggests something approaching perfect virility, there is no ambiguity left. It is true that sometimes costume substitution only induces misunderstandings and artificial discoveries in complicated intrigues which have no merit other than their complexity; but the art is often more subtle than this, and weaves strongly sexual feelings into the ambiguity. The script and the situation are conceived for sometimes truly comic effects, and often in order to provoke the laughter of pleasure and gaiety by means of the spectators' reaction to the tease of such ambiguity. To be comic, and to provoke laughter means playing this ambiguity, as far as the actor is concerned. To say that it is a matter of tactfulness, of decency bordering on indecency, would be tantamount to reducing the result to a superficial level, and would not be a description of the way in which the actor handles this art, the way in which he makes the physical suggestiveness of ambiguity

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respond to intimately felt and ambiguous feelings. This is a true art, and it admits refined treatment. In order to express the perplexity of her feelings in an intricate play of transvestism, the heroine of *Arlecchino, servo di due padroni* (put on by the Piccolo Teatro in Milan) uttered successive strings of "ohs" (like rosaries) picking off scales of rising pearls—a delightful invention, with an exquisite musical quality. A most subtle art, in which the emotional flutter of the girl was forcefully expressed in its exact degree of meaning by an expressive delivery which completely charmed both ear and mind. One laughed at this performance as one would at the most established of comic effects. The register of different laughter at a performance of the *commedia* is extremely varied, but in the fine example quoted above one can easily recognise a veiled flavour of eroticism emerging through a flood of good humour and amusement. The classic theories behind the mechanisms which provoke laughter will explain the reasons and the causes of the effect, but seen from the viewpoint of the actor's fabrication, one finds that laughter responds, in the circumstances, to the expression of a perplexed, ambiguous feeling, felt by the actor, manifested physically in an artistic transcription, and intended to cause laughter.

By way of concluding this close survey of the particular traits and means of comic actors who make us laugh, we would say, in the first place, that all of them, no matter what their function and genre, possess the basic qualities of an actor. The comic actor—and it is worth noting this fact—illustrates the striking components of the characterological estate: the desire for metamorphosis, driving exuberance, a permanently playful spirit, and a spectacular complex.

These actors with their common propensities do not, however, all have the same comic personality. The basic qualities are clearly evident in the comic actor. But the talent of a comic actor cannot be reduced to his variable use of the differing instinctive assets. In his final interpretation other elements intervene, at times not without contradictions: sensitivity, intelligence, culture, moral consciousness, the general orientation of the artistic consciousness... and the actor is sometimes more an actor than a comedian, and sometimes less.

Our second statement is this: actors who make us laugh can be divided into two large classes.

Those properly so called comic actors demonstrate a great spirit of invention—both buffoonery and caricature.

The others, with contagious euphoria, engender the laughter of good humour and amusement.

The distinction here is a real one. Whereas the first group is principally based on pleasantry, deformation and excess in an act which is constantly deprecative, the second group has an agreeable outward appearance which goes unopposed, its trump cards are charm and (as for the maid) the good balance of glowing good health.

The physical appearance of the former frequently presents uncommon or unfortunate facial or bodily peculiarities, which, by themselves, have the effect of devaluation. Helped by the morphological aspect, their procedure is aimed at depreciation. But this is not an unavoidable consequence. The comic actor who outrageously imposes his features by make-up in order to appear funny degrades his own face in which one would ordinarily find nothing disagreeable; just as the actor in the *Commedia*, with a handsome bearing, slips into the mould of the monstrously exaggerated type and screens his face behind masks whose comic magnification is ugliness. The fatality of the genre to which the actor dedicates himself does not demand the fatality of an unfortunate natural expression; the fatality of an unfortunate (or bad-tempered) natural expression is not always so domineering that the actor has to yield, by necessity, to the fatality of a genre.

A patent example of systematic devaluation is shown us by those comic actors who, in order to be comic, misrepresent the qualities to which they are suited in serious or tragic genres. Robert Murzeau's whole career was in "comedy," and yet he won the first prize for tragic interpretation at the Paris Conservatoire. Again, throughout his life Armand Bernard marched his dismal character with immeasurable solemnity into the most inappropriate situations, making auditoria reverberate with irresistible laughter: he too won the prize for tragedy. In such cases, and to comic ends, the artiste uses qualities of which he is fully aware by deforming them and swerving them from their purpose; and he uses them for serious genres in which he had possibly considered having a part. This technique of

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comic effect by degrading the tragic and the serious is a constant one. Saturnin Fabre, Louis de Funès ... think how many have exploited it, and how many still practise it. Besides, it imposes itself by itself in numerous cases. But one still has to be master of it. In order to ridicule authority by its own bombast and its inadequacy to the situation on stage—things that will provoke laughter—one must be capable of this authority in a considerable number of such cases. Brutal decisions wrongly taken, deep thoughtfulness with a hollow ring to it, ill-designed impatience in men of action—unspeakably funny in the hands of Louis de Funès—such things can be used in the serious genre by a comic actor who effectively has the expressive qualities of resoluteness, and quick, active intelligence. If it so happens that authority is only apparent—a mere sedate voice issuing from a large dummy which can be deflated by a pin-prick—this particular voice and physique are still necessary to express it. It is the comic actor's task to know how to use it, firstly, and to mean it.

Here, then, we have two broad classes of actors whose respective originality can be grasped on a universal level; nevertheless, they come from the same family.

They all make us laugh. Their qualities are not identical, they do not use the same procedure, the laughter resulting is not the same type: one can therefore legitimately make a distinction between them by the clearly determined complexes of their characters. But one should not forget the relativity of such a dichotomy. Over and above typological and characterological determinations, they are in fact separated by their mental attitude. The choice of mask, which is neither completely free nor completely obligatory. In this way one can understand these exceptions, these interchanges from one category to the other, by a decision which seems to contradict the apparent gifts and the genre adopted; or in other terms, which are equally significant, these contaminations in variable relationships of the characters proper to each category.

In fact, the blatant differences do not allow us to forget the common reserve of qualities. In the first place, the playful attitude and the mood of laughter. By surrendering to an inner need, the comic actor delightedly achieves his plunge into the world of the non-serious in which any extravagance and any irreverence is permissible, in which he is liberated by the cheerful

expansiveness of the gratuitous act. It is this act which generates laughter, by its exuberance, its distension of happy vitality, and the pleasure felt by its excitement. In this the mood of the act and the mood of laughter are closely linked and related: but they are not to be confused, for the difference emerges depending on the case in point by the characterised predominance of the one over the other.

This is the strange compound which, in the theatrical act, leads to the final result of laughter. The dominant virtues to which one cleaves to begin with in order to qualify them are not reserved for a function or a talent: the whimsical part is not the only one to have the privilege of charm; the comic actor with his burlesque ammunition is not the only one to use deprecative effects. The maid who stands up for common sense, the valet who unveils the follies and pettiness of his master, these do not practise any monstrous devaluation, grotesque and caricatured, but they are eminently irreverent. Certainly, they scratch while the others overpower; but their lack of respect is continual, whether they are denouncing, be it rightly or wrongly, for our benefit the weaknesses of their masters, the defects of the milieu or the uncertain features of morality or institutions. Of course they interpret text and situations in the sense desired by the author, but their inventions—vocal, gestural ... playful—are constant, and they always have this underlying roguishness, this impertinence and this skill which tumbles respectability and which strips hallowed virtue to its bare essential. If for them this irreverence is not excessive enough to give it the aspect of comic buffoonery, it is often inspired by a similar spirit.

The common denominator for all these, be they comic or whimsical, be they in farce, comedy, or cabaret revue, lies in this refusal of the serious either in or through the act, in this stage-set refuge of the non-serious in which taboos fade away and every conceivable impertinence is given sway. The lack of respect of the act in all its aspects is a liberating force. It extends from the unrestrained and irreverent rejection of minor oppressions and petty censorships to caustic attacks and punishing stigmatisation. The division between restraint and aggression is obviously a wide one, as wide as that between simple cheerful expansiveness and the cruelty of comic effect; but at every level

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of the outlet of the act one finds this de-oppressive aspect.

The observation about the same embracing family of comics constantly dodges the reality of common features with opposed differences. An original instinctive reserve variously used...: the observation is banal, and deceptive as soon as shifting particular features are added as exceptions to the stereotypes of the different actors. The fact is that the play of masks, applicable to the comic actor as much as to other actors, is a play of people. The art of the comic actor is deeply rooted in the depths of the personality. From the anaesthetic root to the flourish of this art, what a host of ways are offered to the pith of the comic and laughter, what a host of restraints, but what a host of options too, what a host of decisions, what a host of variety of psychological behaviour. One cannot define the comic personality corseted in a rigid system of typological, characterological or aesthetic references; one can define *one or more* comic personalities. This is not to say that they are independent of the original ground, and undetermined; it is because they are the consequence of a structure of truly autonomous consciousness. The comic actor is not imprisoned within the general frameworks we have mentioned: he creates freedoms and restraints in order to mark the position of his choice.