

## Comedy is a Serious Business

ROBERT WINTER\*

*In lecture form this paper was illustrated with video clips. These are noted below in boxes in the text.*

The actors' banter in Plautus' time has changed little over the centuries. Asides to the audience continue to be used in Shakespeare. In 1938 Rogers and Hart used the *Comedy of Errors* as a basis for the musical *The Boys from Syracuse*. The asides to the audience as a theme was repeated in the popular Frankie Howard series *Up Pompeii*, UK of the 1970s. In comedy, the continuity of tradition and content is possibly clearer than in any other theatrical form since it can be demonstrated not only in terms of plot and literary influence, but also in theatrical practice. The Oxford dictionary defines comedy as a Stage Play of light, amusing and often satirical character, chiefly representing everyday life, with a happy ending.

A great deal of stress can be laid on 'timing' – the ability to know how long an audience can be kept waiting. Add to this the actors' gift to a 'live audience' which can direct the audience to anticipate the funny side of any given situation with gestures, emphasis on certain words and pacing, and is under the control of the actors. It is here that you have a very important ingredient for success in a stage production.

Film and television have to have different base lines, since the judgement of how funny a scene is or could be is a very subjective matter, primarily because the director and editor essentially control

\* Robert Winter has worked as an editor with Ealing Studios and Yorkshire Television, and has enjoyed an extensive career in film and television. He is a graduate of the University of Sydney. This presentation was given on 29 November 2007.

the pacing of the internal workings of each scene and sequence. In travelling around many theatres in England, from the West End of London through the major theatres in the provinces and in the smaller country theatres as well, and watching the same film at different times of day and night, with film buffs and aficionados at small intimate screenings, I have noticed that the reaction varies widely for some scenes. In others there is a constancy of reaction.

To illustrate this point of constancy, Charlie Chaplin used the banana skin joke, and different variations on the same theme of telegraphing to the audience that he knew the banana skin was on the pavement and carefully walking around it. He would then repeat the action, with the audience expecting him to avoid the banana skin. But he seems not to care, treads on it and goes base over apex. This method of telegraphing the audience in comedy works as well today with contemporary audiences as it did a century ago, though it is a little more sophisticated. The chase sequence is still as funny today as it was in Buster Keaton's time, though today it needs to be a little more inventive. In the Steve McQueen film *Bullitt*, it is a deadly serious chase, with lethal consequences.

In the Ealing comedy *Whisky Galore*, a freighter bound for America with whisky on board runs aground off the Isle of Barra in the Hebrides. The islanders, 'spiritually' dying from the lack of their favourite libation, decide to mount a rescue and cunningly save the cases of amber liquid and hide them wherever they can before the ship sinks. They are aided and abetted by George (Gordon Jackson). Party time is now on and just about everyone joins in, celebrating their new found treasure.

Young George is somewhat daunted in his proposal of marriage to his girl friend Catriona (Gabrielle Blunt) but the local doctor (played by James Robertson Justice) reinforces George's new-found daring by giving him an ample tot of whisky at the local pub to strengthen his courage. George gets high, and proposes to his sweetheart friend in the bar. On returning home, to confront his formidable mother (Jean Cadell), high on 'Dutch Courage', he now becomes a changed man – one with a purpose.

Run. *Whisky Galore*: 3mins 36secs.

The Customs officers seek to nab the villagers with their ill-gotten gains. There was an absence in the original screenplay of humour in the customs officers pursuing the villagers. On the screening of the 'rough cut' viewed by Mick Balcon, a bluff Harry Watt of *Eureka Stockade* fame, elegant Robert Hamer of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, and Supervising Editor Sydney Cole, Balcon charged the other three to come up with something humorous in the absence of the director's input. They devised the following sequence, with the wily villagers coming up with all sorts of devious ways to hide their much needed plunder, as we shall now see.

Run segment. Whisky-hiding sequence: 3mins 50secs.

Of all of the Ealing comedies, I don't think that there has ever been a blacker or more Satanic comedy, or one as much loved, widely known and, one might almost say, revered as *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Eight people disappear in a series of cleverly conceived 'accidents'. Louis Mazzini, tenth in line for the D'Ascoyne Dukedom, decides to take his revenge on the D'Ascoyne family one by one when the family humiliates him on the death of his mother.

The first to go is the gallivanting Scone D'Ascoyne – drowned when his punt goes over a weir during an amorous interlude. The second is Henry D'Ascoyne, whose photographic studios go up in flames; the third, the Rev. Lord Henry, is poisoned, and the Lady Agatha is shot down in a balloon. General Lord Rufus is blown up, and Admiral Horatio D'Ascoyne obligingly plunges to his own death in a naval accident. The next in this catalogue of murders is Lord Ascoyne D'Ascoyne, the banker of the family, who conveniently dies after a heart attack. The last but not least remaining member of the family is the Duke himself, who whilst out shooting is lured into a 'mantrap' by the scheming Louis Mazzini (played by Dennis Price), thus ensuring Mazzini's 'right' to the Dukedom.

For his directorial debut, Robert Hamer brought the film in under schedule and under budget – a coup of the first magnitude. Hamer’s stylish direction of the sustained dialogue scenes, and with very little shooting of inter-cutting close-ups, had been honed through his years as an editor. The lighting cameraman on the film, Dougie Slocombe, (whose constant peering through the camera lenses caused the eventual loss of his right eye) explains how Alec Guinness came to give his startling and brilliant performance, playing all eight roles of the D’Ascoyne family. Together, Hamer and Guinness produced a sensational accomplishment of directing and acting, giving a polish, rhythm and refinement to each scene, and requiring of all the actors poise, an impeccable delivery of their lines, and a bitter-sweet taste to the whole film. This is the serious business of black comedy.

Run segment: 5 mins

In the theatre it has been standard practice over the years to have a stand-up comedian to ‘warm up’ the house to help the audience anticipate the excellence of the entertainment to come, or to introduce a more established comedian, thus setting the tone for the rest of the show. This aid carried across into the early TV studio shows. If the audience was uncertain when to laugh, cue cards were shown to them to indicate that a situation or joke was funny. Further visual cues were presented suggesting that the act was very good by the ‘applause’ card and was difficult to resist.

In the mid 1950s, television series could not employ these visual card cues on filmed TV shows. One of the earliest of filmed television shows in the UK, *Dick and the Duchess* – a series on which I was the sound editor for CBS in New York – prompted much discussion of the two pilot shows with the writers Harvey Bullock and Ray Allen (flown in from Hollywood) to determine what was humorous in both their dialogue and the situations that they hoped would be the hilarious elements for the next 24 shows.

In the series, an amorous American high-powered Insurance executive marries the daughter of an English Earl. As an illustration

of the humour she explains to him that whilst we have ironmongers in England we do not have woodmongers. I found myself engaged in much discussion with the writers of the first two episodes, together with Sheldon Reynolds the American director, of what was or was not funny to a British audience, as well as the important criteria for an American audience for whom it was principally made.

The rationale behind our thinking, remembering these were the pioneering days of television, was that if you suggested a situation or a line of dialogue was funny with a laugh, by auto-suggestion people would hear others laughing and would not want to miss out on the humour. With a lounge-room audience there is a certain collectiveness in others laughing in the room and, even if you don't think a scene is amusing, it is difficult not to enjoy the situation the way the others do. (Obviously we do not all enjoy the same sense of humour which is probably why the TV series *Are You Being Served*, with Molly Sugden and John Inman, worked in the UK, but when the two key artists and the writers were brought to Australia and tried to repeat the English success, it just didn't work and the series was withdrawn.)

Taped audience laughter was imported from New York and I managed to synthesise some 30 odd different kinds of laughter, starting from a 'titter' through to a guffaw, gently building perhaps to something uproarious, and declining, or not really getting underway at all. If you can visualise that this had to be intuitively decided, physically laid in by hand at high speed, with the music and effects added, and sent to the USA within the space of three days, you can readily appreciate that not every situation was worth a laugh, but this was a new experience at that time. The series was sold to Z.D.F. in Munich, the second largest TV network in Germany where I spent some five months working with translators so that most of what was considered funny in the English language – aided and abetted by the addition of 'canned' laughter – could be sustained in other dubbed languages. The series was an immense success internationally.

Run. *Dick & the Duchess*: 3mins 55secs

In *Dad's Army*, stepping forward in TV years but backwards historically speaking to the last war, when London was mercilessly bombed for some 72 continuous nights, with the war going very badly and people at the end of their tether, the BBC decided in 1968 to get David Croft and Jimmy Perry together to write a TV series based on their first hand experiences of the last war. Many of the situations were written with a high degree of poetic licence, and scenes played very much 'tongue in cheek'.

Captain Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe), The Swallow Bank Manager, is needled by his chief clerk, Sergeant Wilson (John Le Mesurier), Private Pike (Ian Lavender) and Private Walker (James Beck) as only they can do. Pike is the somewhat naïve and simple clerk whose mother 'looks after' Wilson and Mainwaring suspects that the two of them are having an affair.

These episodes expose the demarcation of the social classes at the beginning of 1939 and the snobbishness existing between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. It was particularly prevalent in the armed forces, as Joan Littlewood was to exploit in *Oh What a Lovely War*. Our series attracts laughter and its humour as much from the absurdity of so many of its visual situations as it does from the silly conversations between Captain Mainwaring and his unwieldy and misunderstood bunch of Home Guard recruits.

In many of the episodes Private Walker exploits to the full his scheming and tricky relations with Mainwaring in trying, as a black market spiv, to flog to anyone that'll listen, and con them into buying, something that has fortuitously fallen 'off the back of a lorry'. Many of you will probably know the rest of the characters and their weaknesses so I hope you enjoy this small excerpt which underscores some of the idiosyncrasies of the English. In this clip, Arthur Lowe becomes apoplectic when he discovers that Wilson has been made the Bank Manager of the Westgate Branch without him knowing, whilst Pike seems to be very well informed in the matter.

Run. *Dad's Army* Wilson – Manager Episode: 7mins 30secs

The British empathy with comedy stems essentially from the inherent ability to make fun of ourselves under the most appalling conditions and circumstances; to tilt at some of our 'quaint' customs; perhaps to joust with bureaucracy; or upset people with authority, or with a curious anti feminist approach, as in the *Vicar of Dibley*. The key elements in writing for this comedy series lay in the juxtaposition of what is a serious appointment of a new vicar in a small village community and a bunch of eccentric half wits on the village council surprised at the outset by the fact that the vicar (played by Dawn French) turns out to be a woman, much to the surprise of Letitia who, on the burial of the previous Vicar, offers Dawn French a ham and lemon curd sandwich, and says that our dearly departed will have carnations and a pineapple on the coffin as something different in the floral arrangements .

The most significant thing about this comedy lies in the casting of the characters which brings about the contrast of human emotional elements and the timing of their reactions to each other. This is due partly to direction and partly to the intuitive ability of the artists spontaneously to get into the characters and give each part a depth of consistency in every episode, often providing instantaneous laughter as situations threatened to get out of hand upon the set during filming. If it seems hilarious on the set, it does not always translate in the cold light of day and sometimes needs reworking.

Run. *The Vicar of Dibley*: 4mins 20secs

My last contribution is what must be essentially one of the finest of British Comedies and one of the most sophisticated series ever produced by the BBC. It delves with great accuracy into Parliamentary bungling, with flawless performances by the wily, perfidious Sir Humphrey Appleby (the cabinet secretary played by Nigel Hawthorn), who does his utmost to keep the Prime Minister Jim Hacker (played by Paul Eddington) in check and as far as humanly possible in total ignorance of all his bureaucratic machinations not only with the cabinet, but also with other very senior ministers, and

an eager press thrown in for good measure. Sometimes the Prime Minister manages to outwit Sir Humphrey while Derek Fowlds, playing the part of the secretary, tries to be faithful and give his two cents worth to them both, often putting his foot in it with great awkwardness. He just can't win.

Run. *Yes Prime Minister*: 5mins 45secs

This salute to British comedy brings my presentation to a close.