Wieland Schwanebeck

Comedy on Stage and Screen

An Introduction

narr STUDIENBÜCHER

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Wieland Schwanebeck is a researcher in literary/cultural studies. His interests include impostors, twins, James Bond, and comedy.

narr **STUDIENBÜCHER**
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Contents

"If anyone wants to stand up and stretch his legs,
now is the time to do it.
The next item on the programme is a long one."
(Plautus: Prologue to *Pseudolus*)

A: "Who are you, and how did you get in here?"
B: "I'm a locksmith. And I'm a locksmith."
(*Police Squad!*)

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many colleagues and friends with whom I have had the pleasure of collaborating on comedy-related projects and talks over the past few years. The list includes my Ph.D. supervisor, Stefan Horlacher; Nele Sawallisch, with whom I co-organised a DFG-sponsored digital conference on *Funny Women* (2021); and Stefanie Schäfer, with whom I hosted a panel on *Funny Men* at the *Anglistentag* in Leipzig (2019). The book has also profited from many conversations I have had with friends over the years, about the merits of *Love Actually* and a few other things. I am grateful to everyone who has kindly put up with my whims and the occasional vile pun, and I hope they all recognise the extent of their contributions.

My love of comedy affected my teaching far earlier than it did my research, and I am grateful to all the students who have taken part in my classes on British comedy, farce, Shakespearean drama, and cringe humour. Quite a few of them also had to endure a painfully unfunny yet all the more memorable staging of one of the funniest plays of all time, Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*. I remember particularly fondly one seminar in 2020, which coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and which served to remind us that laughter *does* have a cathartic dimension. Speaking of the pandemic: One chapter in this book was written while I was at home with a bout of COVID-19 myself. So whichever chapter in this book you feel is the worst – this is probably the one.

I am very much indebted to Kathrin Heyng (*Narr*) and especially to Laura Park, who patiently read the manuscript and helped me to improve it; she also writes better jokes in her commentaries than a lot of professional playwrights manage in their plays.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my son. Our repeat viewings of silent-film classics did in no small part contribute to keeping us sane throughout the pandemic. I envy his confidence when it comes to ranking funny people.

Primary and secondary sources will be cited using the 'author year' convention, with the exception of a few classic plays, which I cite using act/scene/line numbers. References to television shows come with a short reference to the respective series/episode number. The Works Cited list at the end of this book does not list every play, film, or television show that is mentioned throughout this book, but those that are actually quoted and/or discussed in more detail.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Tragedy tomorrow – Comedy tonight

Stephen Sondheim's stellar musical comedy, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), is set in ancient Rome, and it starts with an introduction sung by the slave Pseudolus. He welcomes the audience with a song that sets the tone for the evening's entertainment and also summarises the genre of the comedy. "Tragedy tomorrow – Comedy tonight" contains the following lines:

Something familiar,
Something peculiar,
Something for everyone,
A comedy tonight!

Nothing with kings,
Nothing with crowns,
Bring on the lovers,
Liars and clowns.

Nothing with gods,
Nothing with fate,
Weighty affairs will just
Have to wait.

Old situations,
New complications,
Nothing portentous or polite,
Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight.

The song lists various distinguishing features of the genre, in a rather understated fashion. If the audience cannot expect anything that is wildly original ("something *familiar*", "*old* situations"), nor anything too substantial ("weighty affairs will just have to wait"), what do they get out of it? Well, for starters, some degree of **relief and a welcome distraction** from life's more pressing questions and from the strain of tragedy, with its "kings", "gods" and "fate". There is always time for that tomorrow, because with comedy, we are firmly in the *here and now*. This book will explore several of Sondheim's claims in more detail. We will explore comedy's complicated relationship with tragedy, some of its most familiar modes and subgenres, and the many ways in which it ditches politeness in favour of the uninhibited and the outrageous, with the aim to be, well, *funny*.

> "What normally happens [in comedy] is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will." (Frye 1990, 163)

To come to terms with our comic present, we have to acknowledge our comic ancestors. In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Sondheim recycles many tropes

and characters that had been around since the ancients but which still work very well in contemporary musical comedies or sitcoms. This underlines that comedy has, in many ways, remained **remarkably stable** over the centuries. We will have to look into those well-rehearsed patterns, those old situations that comedy forever recycles and updates, not to mention the beloved roster of familiar character types, those "lovers, liars, and clowns", that continue to make us laugh.

One of those patterns that many people will know about is the **rule-of-three**, which is often taken as gospel in comedy. One of the most popular joke templates ("A rabbi, a priest, and an imam walk into a bar …") consists of an idea presented (#1), a pattern established (#2) and then immediately subverted to create the punchline (#3). I will honour the rule-of-three throughout this book by including little boxes here and there that offer you three select quotes or examples of a particular phenomenon. We may as well start with three brief definitions of comedy from different authorities in the field:

THREE SHORT DEFINITIONS OF COMEDY

- "a movement towards harmony, reconciliation, happiness" (Nelson 1990, 2)
- "a *genre*, a recognizable type or category of artistic creation with characteristic features" (Weitz 2009, 2)
- "comedy can mean many things, but essentially it means to put your shoes on the wrong feet" (Bevis 2013, 1)

These brief definitions highlight different aspects of comedy, but they all boil down to *structural* arguments. They envision comedy on the basis of patterns with recurring features: a degree of confusion, the struggle to resolve this confusion, and a happy outcome. This indicates the topsy-turvy pattern of carnival that we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, and those familiar plot patterns that hinge on "a nightmarish tangle" of confusion (Booker 2004, 150). Some of the most widespread **comic master-plots** are summarised in the following table. Not all of them are unique to the genre of comedy, but their usage in comedy differs from their usage within other genre traditions (e.g. the comic revenge story goes for a different outcome than the rape-revenge story in horror).

PLOT TYPE	WHAT IS IT ABOUT?	AS SEEN IN
David vs. Goliath	A likeable underdog challenges an overwhelming adversary and wins the day, by resorting to wit rather than strength.	*Lysistrata* (411 B.C.) *Easy Street* (1917)
fish out of water	The hero is stranded in an unfamiliar environment, learns to adjust, and conquers their new surroundings.	*I Know Where I'm Going* (1945) *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984)

PLOT TYPE	WHAT IS IT ABOUT?	AS SEEN IN
marriage plot	A story of romance, where foes turn into lovers. Alternatively, a married couple breaks up and makes up again.	*Much Ado about Nothing* (1599) anything from the 1990s starring Meg Ryan
mistaken identity	The hero must don a masquerade and lead a schizophrenic existence, until everything can be cleared up and the charade is over.	*As You Like It* (1599) *Some Like It Hot* (1959)
quest	The hero goes on a journey to obtain a goal or to reach a destination, overcoming various obstacles along the way.	*The Twelve Chairs* (1970) *Back to the Future* (1985)
rags to riches	An 'ugly duckling' is made over into the 'belle of the ball' to climb the social ladder. But it's all about inner values, you know.	*Pygmalion* (1913) *Pretty Woman* (1990)
revenge	Some petty rivalry erupts into an open conflict, with every party intent on settling the score. The foes may or may not make up.	*Big Business* (1929) *Grumpy Old Men* (1993)
Scrooge plot	A misanthrope becomes a better person. The audience will secretly resent this, as misanthropy is more fun to watch.	*Groundhog Day* (1993) *As Good as It Gets* (1997)

It does not hurt to be familiar with some of these patterns, but the plot is by no means all there is to comedy. None of the short definitions presented above stress the **importance of laughter**, even though most people would instinctively identify laughter as an indispensable feature of comedy. A definition that tries to bring both aspects together must inevitably conflate the aesthetic level with the dimension of affect (see Neale/Krutnik 1990, 17), but this is necessary to properly identify what makes comedy special. This means that what we call comedy may refer to at least three different things:

1. a *genre* that encompasses subgenres like farce or the romantic comedy ("I watched a great comedy at the theatre last night.");
2. an umbrella term for different comic *modes* like slapstick or parody ("The performers really knew how to do comedy!");
3. and also a general term for comic *effects* that make us laugh ("You should have seen how he bumped his head, it was comedy gold!").

Throughout this book, I shall not pretend that those three phenomena can always be neatly separated from one another – and I will also be looking into those components that many people instinctively acknowledge to be important parts of comedy: comic techniques, motifs, and character types, not to mention a number of ground-breaking comic writers and performers.

Losing the plot

Most comedy introductions are a little plot-heavy for my taste, or let me rephrase this: they *over-emphasise* plot at the expense of gags and comic techniques. Plot is integral to comedy, but I am not entirely sure it is the main reason for people to tune in. Let us start in a different place here, with the strongest currency known in the world of comedy: the gag.

The **gag** is the smallest unit of comedy and, arguably, comedy's main *raison d'être*. Plot theorists will sometimes complain that gags have a tendency to interrupt the narrative flow (see Crafton 2006, 355), and they will characterise them as show-stoppers, similar to the song-and-dance numbers in a musical, or the sex scenes in a porn movie. This approach may be structurally sound but it is perfectly useless at the same time; these sequences are the very *reason* that audiences choose these films. Viewers are unlikely to complain that the gags were not integral to the story, as long as they made them laugh. Gags can range from visual jokes (sight gags, slapstick numbers) to verbal punchlines (one-liners, witticisms, banter); either way, they are "self-sustained routines committed to entertainment, with no obligation to context" (Wasson 2009, 12). This indicates the gag's origins on stage, as part of the clowning tradition in the Italian *commedia dell'arte* of the 16th century: small routines that were used to fill the time between different segments in the programme (see Born 2020, 565–566). Gags may go out of fashion, but there is always a chance that a classic one will come alive again for another generation of spectators. The pratfall will never *not* be funny, no matter if it is performed by circus clowns or the professional stunt performers on *Jackass* (2000–2022).

The gag is so integral to comedy that we cannot simply take it out of the equation to focus on plot patterns or to make an argument on how repressed people are when they tell a smutty joke. The gag is arguably at least as crucial to comedy's popularity as a well-organised plot or the happy ending. Is anyone really *that* much invested in the number of marriages that happen in Shakespeare or in the question of who exactly ends up with the diamonds in *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988)? Of course not. We are mainly there for the laughs, often at our own peril. A doctor in Denmark famously laughed himself to death while watching *A Fish Called Wanda* (see King 2018). Would anyone dare to debate the greatness of Buster Keaton's *The Goat* (1921), one of the funniest films of all time, just because it does not have a proper plot to speak of? In *The Goat*, Buster goes on the run from the police when his photograph accidentally ends up on the 'wanted' poster of an escaped convict, and he woos the daughter of the local chief of police. It is clear that the film simply ties a bunch of inspired set-pieces together, which means that the storyline zigzags from one chase segment to the next. But **who needs a compelling plot** in the presence of all the terrific gags that Keaton performs along the way, including an elevator chase for the ages?

At the same time, the gag does have narrative value, and the plot itself can always be undercut with gags. Many classic episodes of *The Simpsons* (1989–) will veer into a number of different directions throughout the first few minutes to blindside the audience. "Bart the Fink" (S7E15) starts with the Simpsons learning about the death of a relative, whose money they will only inherit if they spend the night in a haunted mansion. So it is a ghost story? Well, no, because the episode simply cuts to the family rising again the next morning, following a good night's sleep in the spooky-looking house (*misdirect #1*). Everyone has thus earned a portion of the inheritance, including the children. So is the episode about irresponsible Bart squandering his money? Again, the answer is no (*misdirect #2*). Bart uses his new chequebook to get an autograph from Krusty the Clown, which inadvertently leads to Krusty's exposure as a tax fraud and thus kick-starts the episode's *actual* plot.

So while they may be unfairly maligned as extraneous material that disrupts the story's momentum, **gags can accomplish different things**. They may serve as a means of characterisation, or they may embellish the film's main themes. Both are true of the comic universe of Jacques Tati (1907–1982), whose carefully observed, largely silent comedies contain gentle caricatures of modern civilisation. The humour is often based in the characters and their various eccentricities. Tati's films consist of little comic vignettes that suggest a story with remarkable narrative economy, even though they do not exactly advance a plot. Just think of the hilarious blink-and-you'll-miss-it sight gag that occurs in the dining-room scene in *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (*Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, 1953): The head waiter, seen in the foreground, cuts the meat as the dinner guests enter the frame from the right; he subtly adjusts the size of his cuts depending on the size of the person who enters the room.

Fig. 1.1: The sight gag as character work (*Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, 1953).

Before we start …

You will quickly realise that this book does not follow a strict chronology, or only to a point. We will start with the origins of comedy in the ancient period (Chapter 2), then work our way towards the present day via stop-overs in the world of Shakespeare (Chapter 4), the Restoration (Chapter 6), or existentialism (Chapter 8). At the same time, I will be cutting **back and forth between different periods** to explain that our idea of comedy is still very much informed by historic precedents. Inevitably, this approach must bring together some strange bed-fellows, including Aristophanes and the Looney

Tunes (Chapter 2), Aphra Behn and Eddie Murphy (Chapter 6), *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Naked Gun* (Chapter 12). Rest assured that this is all in your own interest, and in a way, it liberates you from the need of having to read this book cover-to-cover. Feel free to use the table of contents or the index to trace specific phenomena like the fool or visual humour, to find out what else they are related to.

This also means that I do not always introduce **comic terms and concepts** in the context of where they pop up for the first time in history. The fact that I am discussing the pun in the chapter on 19th- and 20th-century nonsense, for example, does not mean that puns did not exist prior to this period; it simply means that they are particularly integral to it. I will offer as many examples and visual aids as possible, to illustrate gags and comic techniques. You will quickly realise that I am playing favourites. My examples do not constitute a canon of any sorts, they simply reflect personal tastes. The selection brings together many acknowledged classics that have endured for one simple reason: they are hilarious. To paraphrase a line from Groucho Marx (1890–1977): These are my examples, and if you do not like them, I have others.

Besides *not* formulating a canon, this book will also *not* offer apodictic rules on what makes 'good' comedy, nor will it try to explain *why* something is funny. We should not forget that comedy has always known how to poke fun at narrow-minded attempts to delineate the field and to define funniness. **Rule-books** written by comedians themselves should be taken with a grain of salt; when great comic minds formulate their personal lists of dos and don'ts, tongues tend to be firmly in cheek. Billy Wilder (1906–2002) believed in ten iron rules as a screenwriter and director, the first nine of which are, "thou shalt not bore" (qtd. in Karasek 1992, 147). David Zucker (1947–), the director of the first two *Naked Gun* movies, formulates 15 rules of comedy, the last of which simply says, "no rules" (see Wahl 2017).

Besides comic modes and techniques, this book will also look into various **theoretical approaches** to comedy and laughter, as well as a number of **critical debates** that have popped up over the years. The list includes cringe humour (Chapter 13) and the recent debate about funny women (Chapter 14). I should point out, though, that I resent the underlying implication in such discussions: that an academic degree is required to 'properly' appreciate comedy. It is, after all, "something for everyone", to use Sondheim's words. Moreover, comedy does not need to be validated by critical discussion as though it only deserves to be taken seriously when it is more than 'just' comedy. Highbrow critics tend to feel embarrassed when their gut reaction is ahead of their intellect, so they are more likely to laugh at a witty remark once they have received clearance from their super-ego. I cherish a line from Stephen Fry (1957–), who once reviewed a book on the history of British satirical magazine *Private Eye.* In response to the author's claim that the readers appreciate how *Private Eye* "strays over the border of what is permissible and tasteful", Fry has one thing to say: "Drivel. They read it for one reason and one reason only: because it is funny. When it stops being funny they will stop reading it." (Fry 2004, 133)

THREE THOROUGH TAKES ON THE DEEPER MEANING OF COMEDY

Lewis Carroll, when asked by children about the meaning of his poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876): "I'm very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense." (qtd. in Ede 1987, 48)

George Seaton, when asked about the underlying agenda of the hit comedies he wrote throughout the 1930s and 1940s: "This whole business of social significance is nonsense." (qtd. in Adamson, 1973, 210)

Mel Brooks, when asked about the point of the farting scene in *Blazing Saddles*: "The farts were the point of the farting scene." (qtd. in Smurthwaite/Gelder 1982, 32)

I am all too aware that probing jokes in too much detail may kill them, and thanks to a 1991 episode of the *Tiny Toon Adventures* (S2E9), we know what happens to jokes that have been killed. They are buried at the joke cemetery, where they wait to be resurrected. I hope that I will not become guilty of too many such crimes against comedy throughout these pages. When I cite examples, it is not my aim to take all the fun out of them, but to highlight the comic traditions they are embedded in and to explain different comic techniques and concepts.

Other than that, all you need to know 'going in' is that unlike comedy, which habitually thinks *outside* the box, I have done my best to put as many phenomena *inside* the box when writing this book. You will find various types of **info-boxes** scattered throughout these pages, whenever an additional quote or a quick explanation of a particular phenomenon or theoretical debate is required. Some of them are dedicated to the three major theories of laughter, the superiority theory (Chapter 2), the incongruity theory (Chapter 8), and the release theory (Chapter 11). It is worth stressing, though, that the three of them should not be considered mutually exclusive; they simply meet different needs. Take the iconic scene from *Fawlty Towers* (1975–1979) in which a desperate Basil Fawlty beats up his broken-down car with a tree branch. Clearly, the comic effect of this scene cannot be explained solely through *one* of the three theories. The scene is full of *incongruity* (modern man being stripped off all his dignity; the inappropriateness of the response), but it also establishes a position of *superiority* (we laugh *at* Basil Fawlty and his continued misfortune), and it allows the viewer to release psychological tension by proxy, via Fawlty's ham-fisted attempt to let off steam.

Such mixed emotions can be attributed to most comic set-pieces, and this is as true of the contemporary sitcom as it is of the ancient world, which is where we will start our journey through the world of comedy.

- The genre of comedy has been around for a long time, and has remained remarkably stable.
- There are numerous well-known comic master-plots, but plot may have been overemphasised in theoretical discussions of comedy.
- The gag is at least as integral to the nature of comedy.
- Not all definitions of comedy highlight the importance of laughter.
- There are three major theories of what makes people laugh: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the release theory.

FURTHER READING:

Bevis, Matthew (2013). *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: OUP.

Romanska, Magda/Alan Ackerman (eds., 2017). *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory & Criticism.* London: Bloomsbury.

Weitz, Eric (2009). *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy.* Cambridge: CUP.

Chapter 2

Our comic forefathers

Let there be laughter

Though it is hard to pinpoint the origins of comedy, scholars agree on a **formative myth** of sorts. The theatrical experience itself is said to have started with dithyrambs, the choric songs performed during the annual festivities in Ancient Greece (see Baumbach/Nünning 2012, 22–23). They were part of elaborate processions involving music and dance, in honour of Dionysus, the god associated with wine, fertility, masquerade, and various forms of ecstasy (from Greek *ek-stasis*: to be outside yourself). The chorus performances gradually evolved into a more elaborate form consisting of a back-and-forth between a soloist and the chorus, and later several soloists who adapted roles to act out a story. This later manifested itself into the well-known pattern of Greek tragedy, which is interspersed with chorus parts, and which became the central focus of the Dionysia. Plays were performed over the course of three days as part of a competition, with a winner chosen at the end.

Comedy is said to have evolved in reaction to the very high-minded official proceedings: as a way of **mocking the sombre rites**, led by drunken revellers who resorted to obscene chants in light-hearted protest against three days of standardised protocol. The term 'comedy' is derived from *kōmos* ('to revel') and *aoidos* ('the singer'). While the mocking of officialdom may be seen as an outright provocation, it did not completely contradict the festive spirit. The Dionysus festivities celebrated fertility and were thus very much a phallic ritual, invested in the idea of renewal: "the expulsion of death, the induction of life" (Cornford 1914, 53). This foundation myth sits well with anthropological accounts of laughter and comedy that we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, as this is, in essence, the carnivalesque pattern: a folkloristic and down-to-earth reaction to ritualised officialdom. The story also attributes a parasitical nature to comedy that is most evident in parody (see Chapter 12), in that comedy is seen as a mere negation of something serious, like tragedy. The genre has had difficulties shaking off this reputation as a secondary phenomenon, and is often not taken seriously in its own right.

Like tragedy, the comic ritual took several decades to become manifest in a distinct generic pattern, and another few decades until it became part of the annual proceedings. Eventually, the drama competition was no longer limited to tragedies, satyr plays, and burlesques. When comedy was accepted as part of the competition, it quickly became an audience favourite. **Aristophanes** (c. 446–386 B.C.) would reference the ritualised occasion in his plays, and he was not above using bawdy material to win over the audience.

Today, the ancient world's most influential manifestations of comedy are known as Old and New Comedy. The former belongs to the Greek tradition and is more or less synonymous with Aristophanes, while the latter is dominated by the theatre of ancient Rome.

THREE MAJOR EVOLUTIONARY STEPS IN THE HISTORY OF COMEDY (BOOKER 2004)

Old Comedy establishes a rough plot pattern of equilibrium – complication – resolution.

New Comedy favours the love story, with the most popular template revolving around lovers who must overcome resistance to their union and clear up some confusion.

Later, *William Shakespeare* builds on the ancient templates to arrive at more complex plots and variations, including unrequited love or love triangles.

Old Comedy

What we call **Old Comedy** is more or less synonymous with the plays of Aristophanes, who wrote eleven of the twelve surviving comedies from ancient Greece. He contributed regularly to the annual drama competition, a fact that can also be inferred from his play-texts. His signature wit betrays a competitive mind that did not shy away from denigrating his rivals. In his plays, Aristophanes accuses his colleagues of stealing from him, he pokes fun at them, and goes so far as to conclude Act One of *The Clouds* (423 B.C.) with some gentle threats to the jury should they not give him the first prize. His put-downs are not limited to his fellow authors, though. *The Clouds* is a satire on contemporary philosophers, most of whom Aristophanes mocks as bullshit artists who have no idea what is going on in the real world.

To make sense of Old Comedy's distinct brand of humour, it is quite important to consider the historical context. Imagine these plays performed during the annual festivities, in front of about 10,000 men as part of an **arena spectacle**. Such a setting will not encourage an author to go for subtle wit and a 'less is more' approach. Quite the contrary, Aristophanes often opts for crude and very blunt solutions to please an audience consisting of inebriated festivalgoers and tourists. The setting resembles that of modern-day poetry slams or hip-hop battles, where it is often the unabashed loud-mouth who is most likely to leave an impression with the audience, particularly if the performer is willing to chew the scenery and to interact with the viewers.

CHORUS.

My Comedy's a modest girl: she doesn't play the fool
By bringing on a great thick floppy red-tipped leather tool
To give the kids a laugh, or making fun of men who're bald [...].
No torches, shouts, or violence, or other weak distraction:
She comes before you trusting in her words and in her action.
And I am not a long-haired fop, nor yet a smooth-faced cheat
Who pretends that something's new when it is really a repeat.

(Aristophanes: *The Clouds*, 1.537–546)

Accordingly, the humour is far from subtle. Old Comedy does not shy away from grotesque, **larger-than-life effects** in all departments. Close-fitting body suits are as common as leather phalluses and lewd punchlines. The fun is not in looking for elaborate plots or endlessly inventive story ideas. It is a far more monological form of comedy with only a few soloists in the main roles, and the setup is similarly sparse. A few doors will be enough to suggest the scenery and to allow for exits and entrances. The plot is merely an excuse for the author to include as many jokes and inventive put-downs as possible.

Typically, Old Comedy involves one character who is presented with a problem, and who must come up with ideas to solve it. Elder Olson calls Aristophanes's plays "cartoons in dramatic action" (1968, 69), and he has a point. The dramatic arc favours stubborn linearity – there is one objective that must be achieved, and each scene sees another little scheme tested and abandoned. We can draw a line from Aristophanes's method to Wile E. Coyote's failed attempts to catch the Roadrunner in the classic *Looney Tunes* shorts. The audience is not invested in the dramatic goal, as it is all too clear that Wile E. Coyote will once again go over the cliff. What they are interested in is the sequence of events that will lead to this inevitable outcome. To mistake this for a proper dramatic arc, you would have to be pretty unfamiliar with the laws of story-telling, like *ALF*, former resident of the planet Melmac, who gets cartoons mixed up with soap operas: "On Friday, the coyote fell off of an 80-foot cliff. I better see if he survived." (*ALF* S2E16) Instead of wondering about the outcome, the audience are free to enjoy the exact *how* of the failure, the pratfalls and detonations. Some critics dismiss Aristophanes because he simply wrote *ahead*, without worrying too much about how the jokes would eventually hang together, but you might as well criticise **Stan Laurel** (1890–1965) and **Oliver Hardy** (1892–1957) for never allowing their characters to evolve as human beings.

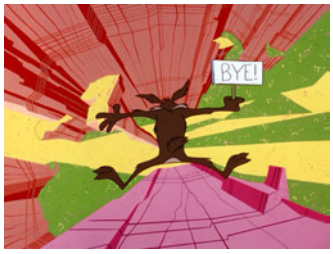

Fig. 2.1: The coyote loses yet another battle with gravity (*Chariots of Fur*, 1994).

What remains impressively modern about Aristophanes's plays is their diverse repertoire of comic routines and the cheekiness of his jokes. The plays are full of satirical interludes and songs, they provide room for slapstick clowning and ***parabasis***: little digressions akin to stand-up routines, where the character pauses the plot to deliver lengthy asides to the audience, to act as a surrogate for the playwright to insult the competition, or to have a go at contemporary politicians. These bits will seem inevitably dated to modern spectators, so that the actors will update these references with more topical material in modern productions. But this does not mean that the texts themselves are out of date. The comedies of Aristophanes are rather timeless and as likely to please (or offend) audiences today as they were more than two millennia ago.

Old Comedy is unabashedly scatological and bawdy, as **references to bodily functions** abound. A discussion about wind and weather in *The Clouds* will inevitably give way to fart jokes. Conservative audiences who frown upon raunchy comedies for revelling too much in bodily fluids conveniently forget that this kind of material was part of comedy from the very beginning. Not just as a celebration of fertility and the life-cycle, but also as an important reminder that tragedy's high-minded soliloquising and spiritual torture are not all there is to the human condition. The tragic actor sets his sight on the heavens and the afterlife, but the comedian always remains down-to-earth. Gravity will remind him of the earth's powerful pull (particularly during the inevitable fall), and there are other ways of making sure the character remains grounded: insults, shame, and humiliation. Comedy revolves around that which is unfairly labelled as 'lowly', and it would be short-sighted to dismiss this historical nexus as a mere product of 'bad taste'.

Bawdy humour is the overall term for risqué material involving sexual innuendo and the realm of genitalia. Bawdy humour can be traced back to the very beginnings of comedy. In his seminal work on *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914), Francis Macdonald Cornford explains that the presence of the phallus on stage served as "a negative charm against evil spirits" as much as "a positive agent of fertilisation" (1914, 49–50). Obscenities and sexual rhetoric are direct descendants of Old Comedy's phallic tropes, which must be seen in the context of this ritualistic background. Our discussion of romantic comedy (see Chapter 4) will explain how comedy is still very much invested in this celebration of life-force and procreation. Henri Bergson traces this idea in his evolutionary idea of the *élan vital*, the 'vital impetus' (see Bergson 1907/2014).

Comedy was always a manifestation of a festive spirit that allowed for a temporary inversion of social order – a pattern that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5. This involves the 'safety valve' argument of carnival, according to which the rigid hierarchies of our everyday lives need to be loosened from time to time so that people