A COMPANION TO FILM COMEDY

Edited by Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf

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Comic Introduction

“Make 'em Laugh, make 'em Laugh!”

Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf

Make 'em laugh

Make 'em laugh

Don't you know everyone wants to laugh?

Donald O'Connor as Cosmo in Singin' In The Rain *(1952)*

We need laughter more than we need a sheriff.

Larry Gelbart, Laughing Matters

Our goal is simple: we hope that our readers' enjoyment of worldwide comedy will be enriched by insights offered in these essays. Comedy is important, as Preston Sturges reminds us in the conclusion to *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), when Sullivan gives up his desire to make the serious Depression drama *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and is ready to return to Hollywood and once more make comedies: “… there's a lot to be said for making people laugh…did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much…but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan…”

Given the universality of film comedy, and its importance as a genre to the development of the motion pictures and as a reflection of social, political, and cultural trends, it was a natural subject for our anthology. It has been argued that all genres can be conceived in terms of dialectic between

cultural and counter-cultural drives where, in the end, the cultural drives must triumph. But between the inevitable “fade in” and “fade out,” screen comedy has been free to work its complex and often subversive purpose, revealing and commenting on the preoccupations, prejudices, and dreams of the societies that produce it.

Our collection celebrates both the variety and complexity of international film comedy from the “silent” days to the present. We are well aware that it is by no means comprehensive. There are huge gaps; we do not cover queer comedy, for example. But the genre is so vast, drawing on human behavior in its many and manifold forms, that our selection of essays can only touch on some areas, while ignoring others. Since Gerald Mast's second edition of *The Comic Mind* (1979) went out of print with his lively and provocative “opening up” of cinematic comedy's diverse nature and characteristics, there has been no complete history of comic film, and again, this *Companion* does not provide that. Like Geoff King's *Film Comedy* (2002), ours is only a selective analysis of the genre, but it does ask us to take it seriously. Comic films raise questions that have no easy answers and explore social and personal problems that have no easy resolution. In short, they expose folly and present no cure, for folly is an incurable human disease for which, as Beckett wrote in *Waiting for Godot*, there is “nothing to be done.”

There are other useful anthologies, such as Andrew Horton's *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (1991), Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins' *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (1995), and Frank Krutnik's *Hollywood Comedians* (2003), but our collection embraces not just American cinema, including Native American and African American, but also the comic films of Europe including Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, the Middle East, and Korea. Hopefully, this anthology will begin to map out some of the myriad ways in

which comic films have helped to reflect and influence history, culture, politics, and social institutions globally.

There are many fine studies on specific film comedy topics including Neale and Krutnik (1990), Jenkins (1992), Harvey (1998), Dale (2000), on slapstick in American movies, and Glitre (2006), to mention just a few, along with recent studies by some of our contributors: Claire Mortimer's *Romantic Comedy* (2010), Tom Paulus and Rob King's *Slapstick Comedy* (2011), and Leger Grindon's *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (2011). These works will be cited throughout this volume and referenced in the authors' lists of suggestions for further reading.

As an overview of the significance of this wonderfully complex topic and of some of the myriad ways of approaching it, we want to lay out six of what could easily be dozens of observations on comedy in general that go beyond film, television, theater, books, or the Internet. Some of these were initially discussed in Horton (2000: 1–16).

1. *Comedy is a way of looking at the universe, more than merely a genre of literature, drama, film or television*. Scientists and psychologists all agree that each of us tends to have or to lack a “comic” view of life, which is in part genetically determined. Furthermore, studies have shown that laughter can often be a healing factor in life as Norman Cousins **(**1979: 43) found in helping to cure his cancer through watching Marx Brothers' films and other comedies. “I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain free sleep.” Those who laugh more live longer. As Allen Klein (1989: xx) notes, “humor helps us cope because it instantly removes us from pain.”

2. *Comedy is a form of "play" that embraces fantasy and festivity*. As part of the larger category of "play," comedy shares what Huizinga (1950) and others have pointed out is a form of activity in which individuals (*Homo ludens*) do not feel threatened because all forms of play have their boundaries that must be followed while in the "game." The festive and fantasy level of comedy as celebrated in communities around the world also points to the spirit of *carnival* during which participants have "fun" and do not feel threatened as they act out fantasies. As Mikhail Bahktin (1968: 7) has written about carnival, it "is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people." In this carnivalesque spirit, we can better understand the Greek origin of the word "comedy" as *komos*, which meant a drunken chorus in the Dionysian spirit, singing, drinking and calling out insults while dressed in costumes that Aristophanes' comedies suggest could be frogs, birds, angry women, and more. There is also the Latin origin, in Comus, the playful and lecherous god of springtime revelry, emphasizing that there is in comedy the essential idea of "rebirth" and "renewal."

3. *Comedy and tragedy are near cousins whose paths often cross*. Plato's *Symposium* ends as Socrates and Aristophanes agree that comic and dramatic moments often come very close to each other in life. This observation helps us better appreciate so many comedies including Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) in which George Bailey (James Stewart) wishes to commit suicide on Christmas Eve but is saved by Clarence (Henry Travers), a gentle angel sent from Above, who not only saves George, but his family, the town, and the Spirit of Christmas in a festive "happy ending." But comedies differ from tragedies in their

emphasis on the social rather than on the individual. Indeed, as Kathleen Rowe (1995: 45) has rightly observed, “comedy often mocks the masculinity that tragedy ennobles.” In a similar vein, we can observe that comedies are seldom simply “comedies,” but are often a mixture of genres, moods, and implications. Many would call George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) a western comedy but others would label it a western with comic moments, while it can also be called a “buddy film,” and even a “loosely biographical” film as William Goldman's script is based on real outlaws.

4. *Comedy implies a special relationship with and to its audience*. Whether directly or indirectly, comedy through the ages has delighted in breaking down the “fourth wall” so that the actors can see and communicate with the audience, thus acknowledging the sense of “play” or gamesmanship that comedy creates. In many of Aristophanes' comedies, characters talk to and even walk into the audience to make a point. Similarly, when a comedian such as Woody Allen faces the camera and thus “us,” the audience, in *Annie Hall* (1977), he is directly involving us in the laughter that is generated. This was a common technique in even early “silent” comedies, where Roscoe Arbuckle, for example, gestures to the camera (and thereby us) to look away as he is undressing in films such as *The Knockout* (1913) or *Little Band of Gold* (1915). Drama and tragedy, on the other hand, depend on being complete narratives that do not acknowledge the presence of an audience.

5. *In the world of the truly comic, nothing is sacred and nothing human is rejected*. Comic filmmakers, like comic writers and performers throughout history, have had to deal with censorship in many cultures for political, social and religious reasons, yet within the spirit of carnival and the truly comic, everything and everyone is potentially

“on camera” for laughs, be it satire, parody, or an open celebration of sex and life itself. Certainly this celebration of “nothing is forbidden” from laughter helps us appreciate and enjoy films such as Luis Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty* (1974) and Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1979), which take on religion with much outright humor, or *Sweet Movie* (1974), directed by Dušan Makavejev of the former Yugoslavia, which looks comically at sexuality and the horrors of real warfare as we witness cross-cutting between an orgy of group sex in a vat of sugar and documentary footage of digging up the bodies of hundreds of Polish officers murdered by the Russians in World War II.

6. *Comedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself*. No study is needed to underline that people in every nation enjoy laughing and that, even if festival awards such as Oscars tend to go to “serious” and/or “art” films, the box office in each country reflects the popularity of comedy. And sometimes the awards and popularity do cross paths. Danis Tanovic's dark comedy about the Bosnian War, *No Man's Land* (2001), for example, won the Best Foreign Film Oscar in 2001. It begins with one soldier asking another, “Do you know the difference between a pessimist and an optimist?” The soldier answers, “A pessimist says things are as bad as they can be and the optimist says they can always be worse,” and throughout the film, everything does get worse. The point is that in many ways one can learn as much or more about the Bosnian crisis in this comedy made by a young Bosnian who had been through the war himself as through a traditional TV documentary.

Comedy is obviously a slippery genre, as is the language used in describing it. “Comedy” and “humor” are often seen as interchangeable, although etymologically the words have

quite different meanings, with “comedy” coming from the Dionysian *komos*, as described above, while “humor” has its origin in the ancient idea that the body is made up of four “humors”—black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood—which control a person's temperament. Categories or types of comedy overlap. Romantic comedies can contain slapstick elements and they often deal with gender, for example. Because of this element of pastiche or mélange, readers may wonder why some of the chapters in this volume fall under one heading and not another. Some headings are clear. We begin at the beginning, with “Comedy Before Sound,” and the development of the slapstick tradition as it carried into the sound era in the American slapstick short. We end with “Animation,” another obviously distinct category, and one that is perhaps growing in significance in our digital age. In between, there is a certain amount of fluidity, although the titles of the chapters identify the focus.

Beginning with French audiences laughing at the Lumière Brothers' *The Gardener and the Little Scamp* (1895), cinema has created comedies that have made the world laugh. In France, George Méliès was making trick films and Max Linder became the first internationally known comic film star at the turn of the century, while in the United States, the Biograph Company was soon turning out one-reel comedy shorts. Although D.W. Griffith is sometimes said to the “the father of film,” at least in the United States, it might well be argued that it was in the area of comedy that film experienced its most spectacular growth and popularity worldwide, as Frank Scheide's chapter covering key performers in Europe and America during the so-called “silent era” from 1895 to 1929 clearly suggests. Like other chapters in this volume, Scheide talks about the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and he emphasizes some of the early comic films before the heyday of Max Sennett and the Keystone Kops, with sections on Max Linder, Bert Williams,

Flora Finch, John Bunny, and Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew; he ends with Charlie Chaplin. Kristen Anderson Wagner also discusses Finch and Drew, but her chapter, “Pie Queens and Virtuous Vamps,” is a more complete look at many of the largely neglected women comics who were so popular in those early years.

Donald Crafton and Tom Gunning have identified the “pie” along with the “chase,” the gags that disrupt the narrative, as defining elements of early slapstick. Rob King, writing on early sound shorts, such as those produced by Hal Roach and Educational Pictures, looks at the waning “pie tradition” as sound begins to dominate. He traces the distinction between speech and noise in these films—speech aligned with sophistication and culture, noise with the “lower” aspects of life and suggestively argues that “the history of film comedy might finally be said to have ‘begun again’ with sound…sundering once again standards of ‘low’ versus ‘sophisticated’ comedy that it was the legacy of the silent era to have mediated and reconciled.”

Representing the kind of comedy defined by Steve Seidman (1981) as “comedian comedy,” four essays discuss comedy in the era of sound with the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati, Woody Allen, and Mel Brooks, although Jacques Tati, of course, does not rely on dialogue, as the others do, but is a master of sound (noise). Kevin Sweeney identifies the pattern of repetition in his gags—gags that help us to see the comic in the mundane. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, Frank Krutnik puts the Marx Brothers in the anarchistic tradition of carnival, quite different from Tati, and explores a critique of hegemonic orthodoxy that bubbles beneath their fun. Seeing Woody Allen as a modern incarnation of Charlie Chaplin, not in his style of comedy but in the fact that he writes, directs, and stars in his films, David Shumway examines two fairly distinct Allen personae: “the Nebbish,” more characteristic of his earlier films, and the “Artist,”

predominating in his later, more realistic comedies. With Mel Brooks, Henry Jenkins uses J. Hoberman's concept of “vulgar modernism,” a style of comedy he sees emerging after World War II across a range of media, to look at how Brooks plays different media against each other for comic effect. He centers his discussion around a close analysis of *Silent Movie* (1976).

Romantic comedy, as opposed to comedian comedy, obviously involves comic pairs and it tends to be narrative oriented rather than episodic. Celestino Deleyto's essay deals with this sometimes uneasy balance between comic moments and narrative in three films, *The Smiling Lieutenant* (Lubitsch 1931), *The Palm Beach Story* (Sturges 1942), *Man's Favorite Sport* (Hawks 1964), his remake of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), and *Green Card* (Peter Weir 1990), noting changes in the genre as it developed through evolving social, cultural, and political climates, and how the comic moments he analyzes are also narrative in nature and contribute to the overall structure of the films. Romantic comedies are founded on what may be an irrational belief in the ability of human beings to transform a drab reality into a “utopian scenario.” Drawing on this idea, Leger Grindon takes this genre from the twentieth century into the twenty-first with two films from 2004: *Before Sunset* (Richard Linklater) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry). Celestino Deleyto has called *Before Sunset* a romantic comedy “on the margins” (Deleyto 2009: 157–74), but Grindon explores them specifically as comedies of infidelity, portraying doubts about romance without abandoning completely something of the utopian vision seen in their predecessors.

The chapters by Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Lucy Fischer both look at variations of romantic comedy from a male perspective. Jeffers McDonald identifies what she calls the “Homme-com Cycle,” comedies that center on the