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Passions for Justice: Fragmentation and Union in Tragedy, Farce, Comedy, and Tragi-Comedy

Daniel Larner

This article examines the tragi-comic mode and some strong contemporary examples of the form, probing in detail the tragi-comic fabric through a look at farce, and searching for those ironic contours which shape our ideas of justice.¹ The most powerful of these ironic contexts emerges as we see that our reforming ideas of justice are at one and the same time crucial, deep-rooted, fundamental, and almost ineluctable on the one hand, and fragmented, perspective-dependent, and hypercontextual on the other. The fundamental dimensions come out in tragic, comic, and farsic forms. The contextual elements are embedded in the content that fills out, and in ironic ways transforms, these ancient structures.

In order to make clear the emergence of such complex and powerful ironies, and the tragi-comic form which lets us see them, we must begin with a review of the workings of the dramatic metaphor.

I. The Metaphor

Metaphor and drama share an essence: transformation. A metaphor carries one world of meaning to another, enlarging what it comes to by what it brings along with it. What is at stake is a meaning, which is transformed to something quite beyond its original state.

Drama is, in its deepest workings, metaphorical. That is, drama takes an action done by characters and transforms it from the mundane to the expectant, the meaningful, carrying it from the realm of its factuality to wider worlds. Seen this way, drama transforms all action to the act of understanding,² of putting some sort of prop under mere fact, of supplying — by some combination of rational, imagistic, associative, and poetic means — context, explanation, cause, meaning, analogy, connection, relation.

The fact of death, transported by metaphor in one ancient vision of the world, is seen not just as the opposite and terminus of life, but also as

order turned to disorder, ambition to destruction, strength and wisdom to weakness and foolishness. And this in turn is transported into (that is, becomes a metaphor for) a world where sudden intrusions of fate — buffeting our wills and testing our wisdom — become the barometers of wisdom. This is the world of tragedy, in which our most luminous visions of right and justice and our most courageous efforts to understand, to preserve, and to improve may be reversed into chaos, destruction, and death. The irony could not be more profound or more total. A world where this can happen is one in which our fates are an agonizing mystery; death is imminent; violence is capricious, maiming, and deadly; striving can be dangerous; pain is permanent; and knowledge, particularly knowledge of justice, is realized and recognized only by watching it shatter at its extreme limits.

Similarly, imagine a domestic world, concerned only with patching up its problems and moving on with life. Surviving — getting the best of the person next to you in a competition for food, money, or a mate — is transported to (becomes a metaphor for) getting ahead in society, wanting to learn from mistakes, to overcome problems, and to promote harmony in the widest possible circle. This, in turn, is transported into (becomes a metaphor for) a world where these are the sole concerns — where peace reigns and lives continually improve, uninterrupted and unaffected by the sober uncertainties and the heavy burdens of the tragic universe. This is the world of comedy, a world in which the practical justice of compromise and settlement is the expected norm and the happy, sensible outcome.

The action of comedy is a moving together, a healing, a joining of the once separated couple who are to create the new generation and to continue the flow of life. The ironies of this world are those of ignorances, stupidities, foibles exposed, dignities deflated, imperfections accepted. The defective and the guilty are not dangerous or deadly, but merely ridiculous. They can recover and learn, and re-integrate into the community. This world is protected from violence and tragedy. Its walls appear to be impermeable. If violence occurs, it is not serious (a slap, a punch, a fall), and the wounds heal. Even bruised egos heal, and the characters learn what they need to learn to change their ways and to get along.

If the comic vision is the building or the repair of justice in a community, affirming domestic custom and the wisdom of social virtue, the

tragic vision affirms only that we can dare to do justice, strive to understand, struggle to choose wisely. This latter vision is achieved, ironically, in an extreme encounter with limits. We learn how large our conviction of justice can be, how heroic our deeds, human understanding, ambition, and striving can be by watching those much larger than ourselves exceed their limits and get crushed.

II. The Comic Mirror

Within this tragic vision, there is an implied comic mirror, lurking on the other side of the deepest ironies. This comes out most eloquently in farce. Farce approaches tragic vision by being the opposite of realism, eschewing the mere factuality of things and the flat ironies that accompany them. In realism, things are what they are, and only what they are. Whatever implication or meaning we may assign to them has a tendency to collapse, to be patently ironical (it is what it is, but nothing more) in a world of mere factness.³

In farce, however, fact functions in a world wildly distorted, working by a logic which may be clear, but which is wacky and sometimes even impossible. When the coyote misses the roadrunner and falls off a 5,000 foot cliff, we laugh, and he somehow lives to chase again. When Laurel and Hardy's determined politeness and civil good manners turn suddenly to infantile rage, causing them to wreak methodical destruction, piece by piece, on whatever object attaches to the person they are angry at (automobile,⁴ grocery shop,⁵ or house⁶), the destruction is funny. In defense of their dignity and respectability, they tear apart something valuable which belongs to whoever impugns that dignity, like a child tearing apart another child's teddy bear. And the offending party retaliates, creating new destruction and new humiliation. With each round of the battle, the destruction and the fun escalate.

Looked at literally, this is pathological — a totally Hobbesian, anarchic world in which ideas of justice have been reduced to the simplest knee-jerk ethic of revenge. In an ordinary world, Laurel and Hardy, and whoever they are fighting with, would be committing felonies. Looked at metaphorically, the violence is transported to a world in which the threat of violence and destruction is displaced into something far less dangerous and more familiar. It is like our primal response as babies to the game of

peek-a-boo. In the first instant, the emergence of a face from a hidden place is frightening. But an instant later, it is recognized — that's Mommy or Daddy or Uncle Harry! — and the fear is replaced by recognition and vented by laughter. The whole process is so much fun that, as we all know, if the child is young enough it can be repeated almost endlessly. Thus in farce, the metaphor allows us to recognize that this is, after all, only dignity and property that are being destroyed, not lives and civilizations. While the world is being torn apart in small, it is being affirmed in large. We can feel that momentary twinge of horror — he's tearing the walls of that house down! — then laugh and indulge ourselves in the infantile fantasy without ruining the larger world of meaning we think we see and persistently count on being there. And in fact, the ritual of farce is in part a ritual invocation of that larger world, an implicated order of justice and civil society, held in abeyance, banned for the evening by agreement, vital by virtue of its absence. It may be possible to claim that the farce is the sacrifice to the tragedy, as if by performing the farce, by admitting this level of fabulous destruction and disorder, we stave off the necessity of the tragedy. It is as if justice grows through our ritual ability to hold tragedy at this metaphorical arm's length. We come together in the recognition of the larger, more frightening world through the much smaller domestic world of houses, cars, slapsticks, and rolling pins.

Let me offer two illustrations of violent comedy in this mode of ritual farce. The first is from one of Laurel and Hardy's films, *Tit for Tat*,⁷ in which our two heroes are just setting up a new electrical appliance shop and run into trouble with the grocer next door. In a hilarious scene in which Ollie falls off a ladder into a second-story bedroom window, the grocer thinks, erroneously, that Ollie has made advances on his wife. He marches into their store, insults them and breaks something. "Take that." Then, summoning his dignity, he leaves. Laurel and Hardy go to his shop and retaliate, in turn, by breaking something there. Then the war escalates, with the grocer destroying more and more valuable items in the electrical shop and Laurel and Hardy doing the same in the grocery, finally pushing the grocer into a huge basket of eggs and dumping another basketful over his head.

But the kicker is that every time Laurel and Hardy decide to retaliate for the grocer's latest raid and leave their shop to invade his, an anonymous man in a double-breasted suit and fedora enters their shop and

steals something from it. Each time, when Laurel and Hardy return to their own shop, they encounter him leaving, appliances in hand. Unfailingly, he greets them politely, and they, always the perfect gentlemen, unfailingly return the greeting, never taking notice of the fact that, right in front of them, he is carrying merchandise out of their store. Finally, the man returns with a large truck and completely empties the store! While the form of this sequence is the old reliable running gag, the metaphorical effect is horrifying. It is as if the universe had it in for our heroes. Just when they are down and under attack, everything is taken from them. This universe is like Lear's, arbitrarily cruel, cruelly impersonal, void of any hint of justice. But why is this funny rather than devastating? I suspect it is for the same reason that in cartoons, when a character is ironed flat by a steam roller, he always re-inflates to chase again. In this farcical world, no loss is permanent. Healing is magical, and our dignified gents will be back again soon to do battle with the next assault on their pretentious dignities. This strange anarchy is frightening, but only in the same way peek-a-boo is frightening. For a moment, deep down, it might look like tragedy, but we quickly recognize our old friend, farce. The sacrifice is offered, made, and accepted.

In the second illustration, the violence is not literal, but implied. In *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin plays both Hynkel, the ranting Hitler parody, and the tramp — this time a Jewish barber — who, when he gets his chance to speak about fighting for democracy, starts modestly, but gets swept away by his enthusiasm and also ends up in a rant. As Michael Wood points out, “Ranting is ranting... An idea going in one direction meets another idea, and Chaplin plays both ideas, [making] the meeting ground... his [own] face.”⁸

We laugh, but it hurts to recognize how close we all are to ranting like that. Then it hurts to remember who Hynkel really stands for, and the torture and genocide of the Nazi era, just as it hurts to think about the feelings of the poor sap who had that basket of eggs dumped on him, or his house torn down, board by board — but we're still laughing.⁹ Laughing at destruction is the sacrifice to the god of Fear. Wood observes that “Chaplin's movies, and indeed his life, remind us of all the tramps and others who *don't* make it to Easy Street, who get to dress up only as themselves, and whose roles do become destinies, because the play they are in is endless and all there is.”¹⁰ Thus the metaphor of farce reminds us

of the real circumstance it distorts. When we agree to watch, we have sealed the bargain with the sacrificial victim. When we laugh, the sacrifice has been accepted. This may be why the experience of watching movie cartoons — which are basic Punch and Judy, ritual beating farce in the ancient Roman mode — is so important to children. Cartoons help support us through that horrifying first apprehension that we are vulnerable and mortal, making it easier to live with fear, to believe that justice is possible, to laugh hard, and to face the mysteries and the terrors of growing up and growing older.

III. The Ritual Dance of Offer and Sacrifice

In David Mamet's *Oleanna*, we can see tragedy and comedy doing this same intimate, mirrored dance of offer and sacrifice.¹¹ What is at stake is nothing less than our apprehension of right and justice. Mamet's play is particularly interesting in this context because it begins as a relentlessly domestic problem. There is a dispute between a teacher and a student, and an effort is made to heal it. But the teacher, John, is often condescending and obtuse. For a teacher he is a remarkably poor listener — arrogant and self-absorbed. The student, Carol, is confined by a kind of learning disability (or arrested developmental stage) that allows her to understand only formulaic, true-or-false answers to questions and explicit instructions about what to do next. The result is that when she asks her very literal questions, John's misplaced attempts to reason with her turn from dialogues to lectures, ever more one-sided, more convoluted, and more impossible to understand. She becomes more confused and desperate since she understands nothing of his meanderings, asides, footnotes, allusions, illucidations, and explanations. He launches into one line after another of critical exposition, term definition, issue discussion, and even anecdote about his own life, past and present, hoping these personal gestures will reduce the tension and will help his student learn. He vainly believes, in the name of patient pedagogy and reason, that this will produce mutual understanding and solve the problem. But he is listening only to himself.

As we watch, we are probably frustrated by their inability to get together, by their stubbornness and the rather sad incapacities which dig them ever deeper into a morass of conflict. This is a good setting for a

comic turn — a revelation that helps each of them to see the other, to relax and laugh a bit, to recognize their limitations and foibles, and to start learning from the other. The comic transformation would be toward a student rewarded for her persistence and determination, and a professor satisfied that he has found a way to overcome obstacles and teach successfully. Each would find tolerance for the other's eccentricities, and the happy couple would then achieve their comic union, not in sex in this case, but in the good feeling and the anticipation of future fruitfulness that crowns any successful relationship. Justice would be done for both of them in its most merciful form.

As we know, of course, things turn out very differently. Carol's disconnected, factoidal memory of the transactions of the first act is apparently laid out for her by her "group" into a picture of a different kind. Each of John's utterances will be decontextualized and reassembled, then hurled back at him as accusations. Harassment and assault appear as the perfect postmodern deconstruction: unpredictable, dangerous, in arbitrary context, and the result of conflicting social ideologies and forces. As Carol, now empowered, now in the driver's seat, presses her charges, one after the other, John makes an effort to explain to her, to admit his condescensions and other minor failings, to philosophically sympathize with her position about what she is supposed to be learning. He only gradually sees that she is instituting not one, but a whole series of prosecutions against him, first to the full extent of university regulations, then to the full extent of the law. As John's situation, both in the university and beyond, grows more desperate, he becomes more and more like the demon she believes she is prosecuting. Finally, in the end, accused of rape, he knocks her down, stopping just short of smashing her with a chair, screaming that he wouldn't touch her sexually with a ten foot pole. He has almost become the monster she already sees him as being.

What has happened in this play? The action of the play, as in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, feels like a tidal wave coming to destroy a person, a family. We see it coming. It comes on relentlessly. It arrives and crashes down. It destroys. It is over. The storms in the sea off the Aran Isles — random events of nature — impersonally kill off one fisherman after another, leaving their families devastated and destitute. In feeling, this resembles the natural storm which catches Lear naked on the heath and the human one which later kills Cordelia. This latter is the

“Great thing of us forgot!” by Albany, who, if he had remembered earlier that Edmund’s forces had captured Lear and Cordelia, might have saved her. But in tragedy the winds will blow until they are exhausted, and some of us will have to pick up the pieces when it is over and begin again. Inside the comic mirror of *Oleanna*, an amusing vision of two absurdly limited and flawed people, a tragic wind blows. Like Gloucester’s blinding in the wake of his misapprehension of the characters of his own sons, injury comes suddenly and with striking cruelty. What’s left is really painful and hard to bear.

It seems to me, then, that *Oleanna* is not about whether it is Carol or John who is right or wrong. It is about the horror of what viciousness, stupidity, and blindness wreak when we mistake them for justice, wisdom, and vision. Carol does destroy John’s career, and probably his family life. But his deafness and arrogance, his pompous self-obsession and obtuseness as a teacher are also damaging. The deepest irony in the vision the play presents is that the context is typically comic. These are manners, styles, and social institutions which are being examined. They signal the domestic comedy of manners to the audience in an instant. They carry with them a sense that though fashions may change and conflicts arise, we can correct our worst faults, change, and solve the crisis created by our own foolishness. Here we have two narrow creatures whose knee-jerk reactions and drastic limitations, given their chosen roles in life, are quite ridiculous. John is almost a clown, a pretentious pedant-expert, much like Oliver Hardy. Carol is the waif, the nincompoop, the blunderer, all concentration and concern — not dissimilar to Stan Laurel. Like all good comic characters, they take themselves seriously. But what is at stake is not, for instance, pride in the face of a petty insult, as in Laurel and Hardy, but something larger: learning, the truth, the obligation of the teacher, the striving of the learner to understand a difficult and frightening world. Try as we might, we are not quite permitted to laugh. The form of the comic world is there, but it has taken a sour turn. While Laurel and Hardy can destroy a whole car or house without significant consequences, here the consequences, in the second act, come thick and fast.

Perhaps one reason why the play has provoked so much controversy and outrage is not just that it seems to some critics to be a rigged case, but that Mamet will not let us have our comedy, will not let us see these people as clowns whose actions may teach us a little something but, after all,

do not mean much. Mamet has offered the sacrifice, but it is not acceptable. He has shown us a domestic world which — as if we did not know it — is unsafe and unjust.

Something profound, after all, has been lost — not only some faith in what it might mean to be student and teacher, to be learner and scholar, but faith in the comic rite, in the coming together of the loose and ragged ends of imperfect individual transactions into the justice of Walzer's "thick relationships," the working, acceptable weave of the social fabric. But I predict that as the social fashions change, and the pressure of the issues raised is eased, this play will seem dryer and funnier. Age will make its characters more and more ridiculous, and the play will be more fun.

IV. Joining the Dance

As we look down at comic characters and ridicule them from a distance, laughing at them for what they have to learn (we are much wiser than they are!), part of us cannot forget that they are our sacrifices to the household gods, to the gods of survival and security.¹² In the Dionysian mood, without the death of tragic characters, we could not live. And without the humiliations comic characters endure, we could not be assured and confident of our competence and acceptability. The first corollary of the thesis advanced earlier, that farce is itself a sacrifice to tragedy, is that we make the sacrifice so that comedy can live.

When they are successful, our comedians on the stand-up stage are said to "knock 'em dead." In the tradition of stand-up, the "them" is us, in the audience, laughing at ourselves, at our humorlessness and overseriousness, at our pretensions, violent customs, and deadly ignorance. Thus the stage-edge has nearly disappeared, or works, by mutual agreement, in both directions at once. On the stand-up stage, the threat of comic disgrace disappears when its exemplar, the comedian, takes his bow and exits. On the comic stage, however, the threat is on-going. We need the protection of the comic god to be sure that matters domestic stay that way. The sudden onslaught of disease, war, natural disaster; the depredations of power-seekers; the corruption of justice; the hypocritical, murky swamps of political maneuverings; the welling horror of fear, anger, and violence felt by one individual or one group toward another — all these

can rip apart our domestic tranquility not only with a brutal suddenness, but with an equally brutal arbitrariness. If the good King Lear is right about the indifference of the gods, only comedy can save us — and only then for a while. The sacrifice must be continual, and it must be effective. We must find a way to laugh, for the comic laugh is the expiration of the breath that builds societies. Without that, we spend our time in caves, shrinking in fear.

In the hands of Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter, or the early Tom Stoppard of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or *Enter a Free Man*, or the David Mamet of *Oleanna*, we find the everyday domestic world of comedy, but without its customary wall of protection, its castle-keep separating it from the ultimate truths and ironies, chaos and destruction of tragedy. Here in the world of tragi-comedy the walls leak, and seeping into the very warp and woof of that social fabric which is supposed to protect us — into the minor details of everyday reality, which, if they go wrong, we should be able to fix like the plumbing — are the seeds of disaster, of humiliation, destruction, and chaos. This is particularly clear in plays like *Oleanna*, *The Widow's Blind Date* by Israel Horowitz, *The Visit* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Joe Egg* by Peter Nichols, or *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner.

As the butts of the comedy we take the boot-heel of tragedy in the neck, as Bertolt Brecht might have stated it. As Pogo said, with an apologetic little grin, "We have met the enemy and he is us." If Pogo, the embodiment of gentle social optimism, Walt Kelly's animal sacrifice to the gods of civility in politics (a possum in a world of raccoons), sees the irony, maybe we can see it. As Al Capp's Li'l Abner put it, "Any fool can see that... *Ah* see it!"

If we are doomed as a species, it may be because we have built self-collapsing gods of this kind, and we will continue to chase them round and round, up the tails of our own pretensions. If we are not doomed, it may be that in laughter we will find the courage to rebuild that stage-edge. By taking advantage of the inherently metaphorical structure of drama, by carrying a new set of meanings from the individual to the society, from the gods to humankind, and back again, we can restoke the metaphor of the drama from the thickly ironical world of justice. In turn, we can reinvigorate our structures of justice from our largest sense of the meaning of human action in our expectations of dramatic action. In rec-

ognizing the tragedy and reconstructing the farce, we can reinform a comedy for our time.

- 1 This paper is the fourth in a series of essays. The first essay examined justice as an essential ingredient in the metaphors of drama. See Daniel Lerner, "Justice in Drama: Historical Ties and 'Thick' Relationship," *Legal Studies Forum* XXII: 1, 2, & 3 (1998), pp. 3-19. The second essay took a closer look at justice in relation to content and the structure of drama, specifically the tragedy. See Daniel Lerner, "Teaching Justice: The Idea of Justice in the Structure of Drama," *Legal Studies Forum* XXIII: 1& 2 (1999), pp. 201-210. The third essay expanded this consideration to comedy. See Daniel Lerner, "Justice and Drama: Conflict and Advocacy," *Legal Studies Forum* XXIII: 4 (1999), pp. 417-429.
- 2 In this context, the English word "understanding," seldom examined, becomes an eloquent expression of what it means to comprehend an object metaphorically — to see what metaphorical systems support its meaning.
- 3 The essentials of this view of realism can be found in Northrop Frye's account of the dramatic forms in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
- 4 *Two Tars*, 1928.
- 5 *Tit for Tat*, 1935.
- 6 *Big Business*, 1929.
- 7 Produced by Hal Roach, directed by Charles Rogers, 1935.
- 8 See Michael Wood, "Perseverance to the Point of Madness," *New York Review of Books* XLIV: 12 (July 17, 1997), p. 10.
- 9 *Big Business*, *supra* note 8.
- 10 See Wood, *supra* note 10.
- 11 It is important to note at this point that contemporary literary theory makes it difficult to discuss this dance. Brian Richardson ("Beyond Poststructuralism: Theory of Character, the Personae of Modern Drama, and the Antinomies of Critical Theory," *Modern Drama* XL:1 [Spring 1997], pp. 86-99) argues that contemporary poststructural literary theory, since it denies representation, cannot give a full account of character in modern drama. "... the presentation of character in modern drama remains not only undertheorized but in principle incomprehensible as long as reigning theoretical constraints are observed" *Id.*, at 87. The same might be said for action, plot, and theme (what Aristototele called "thought"), since each, in the poststructuralist mode, is deconstructed to the fragments of hegemonic, or subversive, ideologies or to other fragments of ideas seen to be more crucial than action or character or comedy or tragedy — like gender, race, body, performativity, and power. Sandra Tomc points out ("David Mamet's *Oleanna* and the Way of the Flesh," *Essays in Theatre* 15:2 [May 1997], pp. 163-175) that numerous critics have

asked whether Mamet has ruined the play by using the first act to tell us what he thinks is “the truth” about who John and Carol are and what happened between them, loading the case for John and against Carol. This assumes, of course, that what is at stake in the play is summed up in the question of what sexual harassment is, whether it really happened in this case, and by extension, whether it happens at all. Could the play be as much about the failure of certain ideas about teaching and knowledge, about study and learning, as it is about sexual harassment and the anti-intellectual deprecations of political correctness? Could it be about a connection between the two sets of ideas, each illuminating the other? In the deconstructionist, post-structural critical stance, these questions cannot be framed, let alone answered. Could it be about what happens when two people trap themselves in conflicting, stereotypical roles which flow from the institutions and the social structures in which they live? One could argue that such a description is useful for understanding hundreds of plays across centuries and cultures. Richardson argues that we need the capacities of poststructuralist analysis, but that it should be combined with elements of humanist and formalist criticism to derive a cogent analysis of the shifting, and sometimes contradictory, representations of character in contemporary drama. In pursuing this analysis, I have used largely the humanist and the formalist modes, preferring those traditions which see works of art as real entities, and forms as wholes, with power to make meaning out of their parts.

- 12 See Mark Pizzato, “Theaters of Sacrifice: Greek, Aztec, and Postmodern,” in Bettina E. Schmidt and Mark Münzel, eds., *Ethnologie und Inszenierung: Ansätze zur Theaterethnologie* (Marburg: Förderverein Völkerkunde, 1998), pp. 137-167.