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[1994]

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Department of Communication

presents

ITALIAN STRAW HAT



by Eugene Labiche and Marc-Michel

Directed by Dr. Cary Clasz

Designed by Barry R. Bengtsen

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The Farce

Farce is a form of popular comedy in which human beings confront an intractable and recalcitrant environment. The bumbling human, attempting to wend his way toward happiness, is constantly beset by objects that persist in eluding him, and seem to conspire to thwart, baffle and bombard him. If he wants a creampuff, it is alternately totally unobtainable or dozens of them rain down on his head. Farce is often regarded as a comedy of horseplay and bodily assault, but this is more indicative of burlesque. It is the obstinacy, the perverseness of objects that lies at the heart of a truly memorable farce.

- Doors -

Agitated action is certainly integral to farce. The characters are constantly rushing from one place to another in an effort to obtain some object or elude some pursuer. It is this interminable rushing about that requires every farce to have a number of doors. The French Farce is so closely associated with doors that the Romantic playwright, Alfred De Musset entitled one of his light comedies *A Door Must Be Either Open or Shut* in a clear acknowledgement of the comedic possibilities of human beings and the doors that connect and separate them. The old dilemma of choice among three doors reveals the tempting possibilities and frightening potentialities of the world behind the door.

The French Farce

The farce was especially popular in France in the later Middle Ages. This traditional farce survived well into the seventeenth century when it finally died out with the passing of a trio of exceptional farce players [Gros-Guillame, Turlupin, and Gaultier-Garguille] and the rise of Moliere's comedy. The French Farce became transmuted from its earlier form depicting the grosser faults of mankind to its nineteenth century form centering on the naive, the innocent and the stupid human encountering improbable situations and coming to grips with impossibly contrary objects and environments.

CARY CLASZ

The Current Form of the French Farce

In the year 1851, *An Italian Straw Hat* (*Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie*) burst on the Parisian scene in a stunning success. Its author, Eugene Labiche* (1815-88), raised French farce to a new height with more than 170 light comedies and vaudevilles between 1831-77.

An Italian Straw Hat is his best known work in English translation, beginning with two very free adaptations of the play made by the leading English ``comedian'' of the day, W. S. Gilbert. The first version, *The Wedding Guest* was performed in 1873 and a second version with music, *Haste to the Wedding* in 1892. In 1936 it had a memorable translation as *Horse Eats Hat* for a New York production and appeared as *An Italian Straw Hat* in London in 1945, 1952 and 1957 as well as in New York in 1957.

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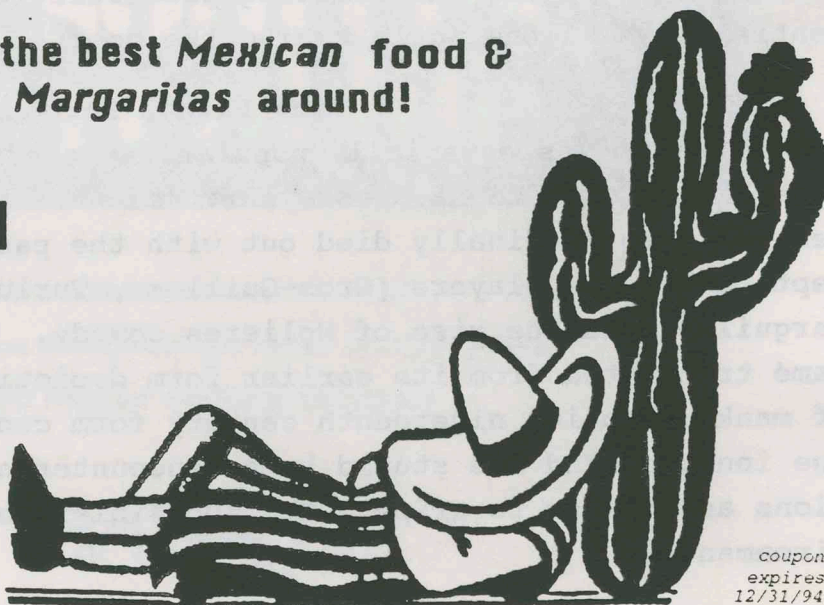
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It is not until the advent of Feydeau (Georges-Léon-Jules-Marie, 1862-1921) that the farcical works of Labiche were matched. Feydeau is the author of more than 60 farces beginning in 1887 and continuing until his death.

Although his work was not highly regarded in his own day, Feydeau's reputation has grown with passing years as many of his best works have been produced by the Comédie-Française and translated and widely done in the English-speaking world. Especially since 1945, popular English adaptations of his works include *Hotel Paradiso*, *Look After Lulu*, *A Flea in Her Ear* and *Cat Among The Pigeons*.

CARY CLASZ

Production Notes

Italian Straw Hat was an immediate success at its Paris premiere in 1851 and may be said to have been a success ever since. In modern times, a great French revival was staged by the highly respected and innovative director Gaston Baty at the Comédie Française in 1938. It was revived by the same director nine years later.

An interesting sidelight of cultural history reveals that Franklin D. Roosevelt played Vezinet (Uncle Bopaddy) in the first W. S. Gilbert version, *The Wedding Guest*, while a student at Groton.

CARY CLASZ

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You
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Trust**



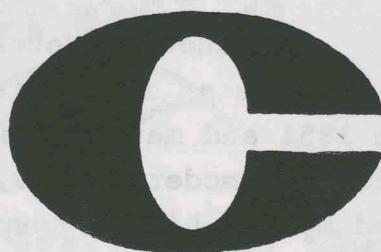
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More Notes on The Play

Strangely enough no English text of the play itself has ever been widely available. A translation by Clair Vincent Chesley appeared in the periodical Poet Lore in 1917. In 1926 an adaptation by Paul Tulane and Agnes Hamilton James was performed by the American Laboratory Theatre but no script at all seems to have survived from this production. In 1936 an adaptation by Orson Welles and Edwin Denby was produced by the Federal Theatre Project. The 1936 text survives in a single MS copy at the New York Public Library.

In 1955 Lynn and Theodore Hoffman produced an English reading version for The Modern Theatre series. They included, of course, the songs, staying close to the French text in order not to change the character and texture of Labiche's method. They recommend the Andre Cadou score, which is made up to a fair extent of French tunes of the mid-nineteenth century.

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Cast of Characters

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NONANCOURT, a horticulturist

BEAUPERTHUIS

VÉZINET, who is deaf

TARDIVEAU, a bookkeeper

BOBIN, nephew Of **NONANCOURT**

ÉMILE TAVERNIER, a lieutenant

FÉLIX, servant Of **FADINARD**

ACHILLE DE ROSALBA,
a young dandy

Aaron Phillips

David Gilham

Don Bonjour

Ken King

Jas Abramowitz

Brian Walrod

Jon Matson

Steve McGill

Ariel Guierrez

HÉLENE, daughter Of **NONANCOURT**

ANAIS, wife Of **BEAUPERTHUIS**

BARONESS DE CHAMPIGNY

CLARA, a milliner

VIRGINIE, chambermaid

Of **BEAUPERTHUIS**

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ACT ONE -

The home of FADINARD, about eleven in the morning

ACT TWO -

A millinery establishment, a little later.

ACT THREE -

An elegant parlor in the home of the Baroness De Chamaginy, in the afternoon.

**There will be an Intermission
Between Act Three and Act Four**

ACT FOUR -

A bedroom in the house of Beauperthuis, later that evening.

ACT FIVE -

A square. Streets right and left. Downstage left, FADINARD'S house; downstage right, a post of the National Guard with a sentry box. It is later that night.

The Original Text In French

Interestingly enough, the best edition of the play in French seems to be an American textbook, edited by Alexander Y. Kroff and Karl G. Bottke for Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952. Much of the interesting odds and ends reported in these notes are taken from that edition's introduction.

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A Tribute to Robert W. Gobetz

by Harold W. Loy, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus

When I first came to PSU (then Kansas State Teachers College) in 1953 as a member of the Department of Education, my assignment was Supervisor of Speech-Drama Activities in the College High Laboratory School where the Kelce School of Business now resides. For purposes of interscholastic competition, College High was a member of the Old Mineral Belt League. As participants in each annual Mineral Belt League Speech and Drama Festival, my students and I soon faced a chief rival for top ratings in one-act plays and individual drama events. That rival was tiny West Mineral High School. It was then that I became acquainted with their talented, young coach by the name of Robert W. Gobetz.

For the next several years, before Bob moved on to other positions, we enjoyed a brisk professional rivalry, but always enduring friendship. When I learned that Bob was a graduate product of the Northwestern University School of Drama, as had been my college drama mentor, I recognized why our directing philosophy and style were so very similar – procedures in handling auditions, prepared director's prompt books, pre-planned blocking and movement patterns, body positions, projection, diction and so on. All these elements were reflected in Bob's well-paced productions, complemented by strong, dynamic characterizations. I continued to admire and respect his directing skills.

When Bob moved on to other teaching positions, I kept abreast of his good work at Miami High, NEO of Miami, Joplin High, and eventually at Northeastern State College at Tahlequah. In 1967 shortly after I became Chairperson of the Department of Speech and Theatre, we had a drama vacancy and Bob was hired. In his 23 years of service in the department, he directed more than 50 productions, touching the lives of scores of talented students as well as the hearts of thousands of appreciative audience members.

He loved the challenge of developing "raw talent" by recruiting students who had no prior acting experience. "I've got a lot of green wood in this show," he would say, half lamenting, half boasting. Yet, certain devoted experienced actors auditioned only for "Mr. G's" shows.

Bob tended to give preference to plays dealing with the lives and conflicts of the common man. But whether it was a drama by William Inge or a selection from The Texas Trio, his shows always bore the Gobetz trademark of sensitive pacing, balanced stage pictures, and dynamic, believable characterizations. One could not avoid sensing the strong hand of "the director" in every production. His disciplined approach to directing carried over into his classroom. His expectations for students to follow a prescribed "method" for preparing speeches in the basic course were no less adamant than the required memorization of the phonetic alphabet in the Diction course.

Bob was a stocky, raw-boned, friendly fellow with a heart bigger than his frame. The son of Yugoslavia immigrants, he grew up on a farm near West Mineral where his father worked in the coal mines. That environment no doubt contributed to his love of

people, his appreciation for the working class, and his warm sense of humor. He took pride in his Slavic heritage and retained fluency in his native language.

When I reflect on my forty years' acquaintance with Bob Gobetz, the man -- a panorama of memories flood my mind: convention trips; judging trips; cast parties; Ella's baked beans; a friendly game of poker; an early mess of lettuce from his fertile garden; a day at an auction to buy play props; a Christmas eve gift of his own handmade potica; or one of his many backyard sales. Ah, yes, backyard sales! In recent years he would vow, "This is my last yard sale. I'm getting rid of this junk for the last time!" But the next auction would find Bob crowded in near the auctioneer bidding on tools and other miscellany, as usual.

Health complications increasingly bore down on his body until he found it necessary to retire in 1990. His health steadily declined until his recent death on August 26, 1994, when we all lost a valued colleague and loyal friend.

Life lingered long enough for Bob to fulfill years of longing to have a grandchild. Son Rob and his wife Robin fulfilled that wish with a precious little boy in time for Bob to hold the baby in his arms several times during his waning weeks of life.

Bob may have had his last yard sale, but I prefer to think that he has just begun another great production. Break-a-Leg, Bob!

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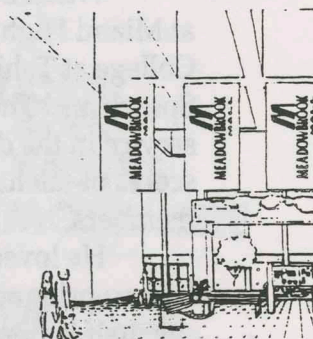


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