

## THE PROBLEM OF COMEDY by Robert McKee (from *The Story*)

5 Comedy writers often feel that in their wild world the principles that guide the dramatist don't apply. But whether coolly satiric or madly farcical, comedy is simply another form of storytelling. There are, however, important exceptions that begin in the deep division between the comic and tragic visions of life.

10 The dramatist admires humanity and creates works that say, in essence: Under the worst of circumstances the human spirit is magnificent. Comedy points out that in the best of circumstances human beings find some way to screw up.

15 When we peek behind the grinning mask of comic cynicism, we find a frustrated idealist. The comic sensibility wants the world to be perfect, but when it looks around, it finds greed, corruption, lunacy. The result is an angry and depressed artist. If you doubt that, ask one over for dinner. Every host in Hollywood has made that mistake: "Let's invite some comedy writers to the party! That'll brighten things up." Sure . . . till the paramedics arrive.

20 These angry idealists, however, know that if they lecture the world about what a rotten place it is, no one will listen. But if they trivialize the exalted, pull the trousers down on snobbery, if they expose society for its tyranny, folly, and greed, and get people to laugh, then maybe things will change. Or balance. So God bless comedy writers. What would life be like without them?

25 Comedy is pure: If the audience laughs, it works; if it doesn't laugh, it doesn't work. End of discussion. That's why critics hate comedy; there's nothing to say. If I were to argue that *Citizen Kane* is a bloated exercise in razzle-dazzle spectacle, populated by stereotypical characters, twisted with manipulative storytelling,  
30 stuffed full of self-contradictory Freudian and Pirandellian clichés, made by a heavy-handed showoff out to impress the world, we might bicker forever because the *Citizen Kane* audience is silent. But if I were to say *A Fish Called Wanda* is not funny, you'll pity me and walk away. In comedy laughter settles all arguments.

35 The dramatist is fascinated by the inner life, the passions and sins, madness and dreams of the human heart. But not the comedy writer. He fixes on the social life – the idiocy, arrogance, and brutality in society. The comedy writer singles out a particular institution that he feels has become encrusted with hypocrisy and  
40 folly, then goes on the attack. Often we can spot the social institution under assault by noting the film's title.

45 THE RULING CLASS attacks the rich; so too *Trading Places*. *A Night at The Opera*, *My Man Godfrey*, *M\*A\*S\*H* assaults the military, as do *Private Benjamin* and *Stripes*. Romantic Comedies – *His Girl Friday*, *The Lady Eve*, *When Harry Met Sally* – satirize the institution of courtship. *Network*, *Police Academy*, *Animal House*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Prizzi's Honor*, *The Producers*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Nasty Habits*, and *Camp Nowhere* strike at television, school,

fraternities, rock 'n' roll, the mafia, the theatre, Cold War politics, the Catholic Church, and summer camp, respectively. If a film genre grows thick with self-importance, it too is ripe for mockery: *Airplane*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Naked Gun*. What was known as Comedy of Manners has become the sitcom-a satire of middle-class behaviour.

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When a society cannot ridicule and criticize its institutions, it cannot laugh. The shortest book ever written would be the history of German humour, a culture that has suffered spells of paralyzing fear of authority. Comedy is at heart an angry, antisocial art. To solve the problem of weak comedy, therefore, the writer first asks: What am I angry about? He finds that aspect of society that heats his blood and goes on an assault.

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| farcical      | směšný, trapný      |
| to peek       | nakouknout          |
| grinning      | šklebící se         |
| lunacy        | šílenství           |
| rotten        | shnilý, zkažený     |
| exalted       | vysoce postavený    |
| folly         | pošetilost          |
| razzle-dazzle | humbuk, povyk       |
| populated     | zalidněný           |
| to bicker     | hádat se            |
| to single out | vyčlenit, vybrat si |
| encrusted     | pokrytý             |
| ripe          | zralý               |
| mockery       | výsměch             |