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The Paradox of Comedy

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The paradox of comedy is that it must attract and repel at the same time, if it is both to hold its audience and to arouse their laughter.[1] The obvious virtue of laughter is that it takes objects that might otherwise engage our emotions and puts them outside the circle of our deepest concerns.[2] If an embattled people can see their enemies as ridiculous, they will find them less terrifying; and those who can laugh at the unfortunate are spared the discomfort of pity. We are the same in relation to ourselves: a peaceful detachment comes with the gift of laughter at ourselves or our own circumstances. Generally, laughter negatives emotion, and comedy serves to ease our lives by detaching us from what would otherwise be painful emotions. That is one side of the paradox.[3]

The other side is that comedy is a kind of theater, and as such it seeks an audience that is not detached, but cares enough to see a play through to the end. Theater engages an audience typically by engaging its members' emotions, so that they are fearful when a lead character is in danger and pleased when the danger is safely behind.[4] The virtue of arousing emotion toward characters and events within theater is that it counters the obvious artifice of staged fiction by helping us take staged action seriously rather than dismissing it as ridiculous.

By "comedy," I mean the genre that has its earliest surviving form in Aristophanes and extends through the work of Plautus to the modern giants

Shakespeare and Molière and more recently to Chekhov and Beckett. This is no simple genre to define, for it aims at a variety of audience responses that range from amusement and good-natured laughter to mockery and outrage. In this paper I must paint with a fairly broad brush, blurring distinctions among types of comedy. Comedy will turn out to be the sort of theater that aims primarily at responses that are antidotes to caring deeply about the people it represents. As Bergson observed, comedy tends to isolate its characters.[5]

This, then, is the paradox of comedy: as theater, it depends on engaging emotions in the audience for what it shows on stage; but, as comedy, it aims at laughter or at a response with a similar effect, disengaging its audience emotionally from what it presents. Yet we find that comedy can make us laugh and still keep our eager attention. How is this possible?

The paradox is pragmatic, not formal; it raises a problem about what effect comedy may have on its audience within the realm of practical theater. We shall see that philosophy does not help; no effort of refinement or argument will resolve the paradox. The only way to deal with it is to embrace it, as practicing actors and writers and directors do, in the delicate art of comedy. This will turn out to be rather like the art of applying oil and vinegar to the same salad: If you try to mix them apart from the salad, they will separate, as each by nature drives out the other. And yet neither can do its job well without the other. A merely oily salad is flat and sticky, like a play that sets out to be a comedy but ends with the audience closely bound to its characters; while a salad with straight vinegar prickles the tongue and defies the second bite, as a play that is too funny soon puts off its audience. Comedy is the most difficult of the theatrical arts, because it must stir up responses that would be incompatible apart from their blending with action by stagecraft.

If the paradox could be resolved by theory, it would be by rejecting the assumptions about comedy with which we began:

(1) Comedy is the sort of theater that aims at laughter (or similar response) directed at what it represents.
(2) Theater aims (among other things) at engaging emotion on behalf of what it represents.
(3) Laughing at P tends to prevent those who laugh from feeling emotions on behalf of P (and similarly for responses other than laughter that are typical to comedy).

It is obvious, I think, that all three of these need to be refined and that none can stand without qualification; it is less obvious, however, that the qualifications that are necessary actually sharpen the paradox, by showing how important it is for comedy to aim at effects that tend to exclude one another.

We shall see, first, that laughter is not the defining aim of comedy. But the sort of comedy that works with little laughter, or with none at all, is even more fiercely opposed to emotion than is farce.

Second, the feelings that theater must engage are not exactly emotions, but differ from emotions in crucial ways. Those feelings turn out, however, to be precisely the element in emotion that drives out laughter.

Third, although laughter is an antidote to emotion, and emotion to laughter, each feeds in a peculiar way on the other. Laughter depends on an undercurrent of emotional engagement (as spices cling to the oil of a salad), and in theater laughter functions (as sometimes in real life) to allow for the release of emotions otherwise too powerful to be admitted. There is, then, no escape from embracing the paradox; comedians must make the difficult best of it.

1. THE AIMS OF COMEDY

Refining our understanding of comedy clears up several problems without resolving the paradox. Most readers will have seen from the beginning that my initial assumption about comedy is at least too simple, if not simply wrong.

As a form of theater, comedy aims beyond laughter—frequently at affirming a sense of community and sometimes even at presenting the possibility of redemption. Not all comic theater leads to laughter. Productions of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* or Beckett's *Endgame* may be faithful to those plays without arousing a single titter, and yet they belong to comedy. The isolation of the characters from one another, their preference for gesture over action, and their rather machine-like limitations (what Bergson calls *l'automatisme*) all place these works in the center of comedy as defined by Bergson.[6] Debates as to whether Chekhov's plays are comic or melancholic are beside the point: his plays themselves are evidence that comedy can be melancholic. Whether the mood of a scene is light or heavy, Chekhovian theater is always critical of society in a way that is distinctively comic. Critical theater such as Brecht's is also descended from the comic tradition. In *Mother Courage,* although we are supposed to find Courage's actions painfully and laughably absurd—when she tries to save her children by making money her first priority, at their expense—she cannot be a figure of fun, and we are never tempted to laugh at the ineffectual gabblings of her tongueless daughter. The response Brecht wants from his audience is not empathy for either character, however, but a sense of outrage that empathy would undermine.[7] There is comedy, then, without laughter.

On the other side, types of theater we do not consider comedy also provoke laughter. We may laugh at the porter in *Macbeth,* or at Hedda's husband in *Hedda Gabler,* or at the choices of Mother Courage in Brecht's play; yet, none of these plays is a comedy. Tragic or epic theater may have scenes that make us laugh, and it may be all the more tragic because of these

comedic elements. There is a broader paradox of laughter in theater, not merely in comedy, and whatever solution we find for comedy should help with that. But comedy is the harder case (for reasons we shall see in a moment), and so that is the place to begin.

Outside comedy, the paradox is dull because tragedies with humorous elements usually separate what is laughable from what is emotionally engaging. Consider the famous case of *Macbeth.* The laughter we are allowed at the porter's scene may help us bear the horrors that surround it, through relief or by easing us into a measure of detachment, but a production has probably miscarried if it lets us laugh at Lady Macbeth's attempts to wash her hands. The boundary is clearly drawn; the porter is only a servant, and this is his only scene; he is unimportant because he is not engaged in any serious way with any of the other characters. They do not care about him, and he does not care much about them. By contrast, Lady Macbeth dominates the play because she cares about a great many things; in particular, she is ambitious for her husband. Generally, we care about, and are therefore emotionally engaged with, characters who themselves have cares that we recognize; and the surest way to draw an audience into caring about what happens to stage people is to show them caring about each other. But theater tends to isolate a character who is to be the butt of ridicule, and we shall see that the isolation of lead comic characters is at the heart of comedy and is therefore the core of its paradox.[8]

Outside comedy, theater can easily work laughter and emotional engagement together because ordinary life does the same: we laugh at some people and care deeply about others. Theater other than comedy simplifies our emotional life by clearly marking the line between the two, setting us up to dismiss some people or events as ridiculous, while making it easier for us to care about others.

Comedy itself sometimes separates what is laughable from what we are supposed to care about, and this may be part of the way it defines community —we, who laugh, versus the outsiders at whom we laugh. This may be the sort of comedy that Plato's spokesman would tolerate in the *Laws,* which would be performed only by foreigners and would ridicule only what was bad (816d). The boundaries such theater draws may be of nationality, of class, of age, of gender, or even of education; a light moment may come to a serious play from an odd foreigner, a bumbling servant, a small child, or an absent-minded professor, while we continue to revel in empathy for the main characters. Laughter at outsiders I shall call the laughter of exclusion. Comedy that provokes such laughter is morally and politically objectionable; to go beyond it, and to achieve a comedy that is morally acceptable, comedians must overcome the paradox of comedy and arouse laughter without detachment.

In the comic theater of exclusion, our empathy is withdrawn from the

comic characters and spread among ourselves as an audience, not as shared feelings toward the characters—they are being pushed outside the circle of those toward whom we have feelings—but simply as a kind of self-congratulation, a shared "feeling good" about ourselves. Such feelings will not sustain a play of any length or complexity, and so we find the comedy of exclusion mainly in short cruel jokes about outsiders. (How many of *them* does it take to screw in a light bulb?) Fortunately for the moral health of theater, sustainable comedy usually makes fun of insiders as well, exhibits a higher degree of complexity, and (as we shall see in a later section) promotes a measure of empathy even with its outsider characters.

The Old Comedy of Plato's youth, for example, ridiculed community leaders and, in many cases, the community itself. Aristophanes' *Clouds* may unite its audience in ridiculing the new learning as represented by Socrates' school—and thus marking that school outside of the community—but it ridicules as well the traditional learning that is the school's alternative. In other ways, too, members of Aristophanes' audience were frequently led to laugh at themselves, their leaders, and their way of meeting a crisis. Aside from the religious significance of such self-ridicule, the laughter it generated probably helped the Athenians face the enormous dangers with which they lived.[9]

Comedy can let us laugh at things we care about, and do so while we are caring deeply about those things. That is one root of the paradox, and we cannot cut it off simply by taking a more sophisticated view of the comic genre, or of the wider place of laughter in theater.

The closer we come to the heart of comedy, the more disturbing is the paradox. Laughter is healthy, on the whole, but it is not essential to comedy. Comedy is no easy genre to define, and I will make only a gesture at definition in these pages. We have already touched on what I believe is the heart of comedy—the isolation of its main characters. If the characters are detached from one another on stage, then we will be detached from them; and amidst all this detachment the events of comic plays cannot have the significance of events in tragedy—a significance for which we yearn in our own lives. Comedy often ends with a wedding, but no one on stage or in the audience sheds a tear. It is not a real wedding—and this is not because it is a stage wedding (we cry at those in soap operas), but because we know it does not mean anything beyond the promised festive end of the play. If we really cared about the comic lovers, we might shed a tear for their future, but we do not, because we do not see their love for each other as anything but a hypothesis for the plot, and we are not aware that they have a future.

Consider the marriages that are celebrated at the close of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* As a resolution of the night's tensions, these are very satisfying, but the satisfaction is primarily aesthetic, such as is taken in the

resolution of a dissonance in music. Audiences do not really care whether Helena marries Demetrius or Lysander, so long as no one is left out at the end; indeed, they can hardly tell one young man from the other, and, far from sharing in Helena's distress during the night, they find it amusing.

Characters in tragedy (or romance or soap opera, for that matter) do care about one another, and we about them. Their lives have meaning in relation to this caring, and their future is of vital concern. The powerful emotions of tragedy are anchored in the felt attachments of the characters to one another, and this gives significance to the tragic events—a significance felt by characters and audience alike—especially in relation to the moral order that tragedy presupposes. The defining feature of comedy is that is not anchored in any of these ways. Its characters are isolated; if they connect with one another, they do so with as little emotional involvement as possible. Love in comedy is given as a move in a game; it can come in the twinkling of an eye, and it can be retracted as quickly. What happens to such isolated characters, whose passions are so lightly given and removed, does not carry great emotional weight, with the result that comic events lack the significance of the tragic. Comedy takes us where tragedy cannot, to the viewpoint from which human life appears to have no meaning—in other words, to the edge of despair.

Rousseau understood this intuitively when he took Molière's Alceste, the misanthrope of the eponymous play, as the quintessential comic character. Alceste is devoted to isolating himself from others in his comical outrage against hypocrisy, and in his isolation we might easily ridicule him and so reject the virtue for which he stands.[10]

Chekhov also understood the dark heart of comedy. His characters, like the three famously isolated sisters, yearn for a sense that their lives have meaning, but do not themselves set a meaning on anything. Irina is loved, but she does not love, and no one lifts a finger to save her lover from his death. When he is dead, her grief is quiet and apparently not for him at all. In the absence of real attachments among characters, events have no significance. "What difference does it make?" asks the drunken doctor, and no one can answer him. Comedy is built on the suspicion that there is no order in human events and that there is no true love or anger or grief to be found, only the hypocrisy that comedy so ably exposes.[11]

This comic foundation of distance, hypocrisy, and chaos—this world of false meanings—allows for the isolation on which laughter depends, but it is not in itself funny. Trevor Griffiths' play *Comedians* is not a comedy;[12] its subject is stand-up comics, however, and it explores brilliantly the range of materials that are used for humor. It ends after a scene that is at the same time heartbreaking and a comic masterpiece. But it gives the audience nothing to laugh at or with.

If I am right that the isolation of its characters is the dark heart of comedy, the paradox is twice what I set it out to be. If I am not right, it remains true that there is laughterless comedy that is paradoxical in the way I have indicated. Even without reference to laughter, the puzzle remains as to why we are attentive to comedy: Why stay to watch meaningless events unfold? Why care about characters who do not seem to care about one another or themselves? But now we have a new puzzle for comedy of laughter: How could it ever be funny to be given a view from the edge of despair? In actual experience, of course, watching comedy almost never feels like that. The reason it doesn't is that we are rarely given comedy full strength. Comic characters and events are carried in a matrix of meanings and attachments which are not themselves comic, and which allow for the emotional engagement of the audience. We shall see, in the last section of this paper, that comedy is parasitic on the very emotional involvement to which it is antidote, and that the key to comedy lies in a balance of attachment through emotions against detachment through such means as laughter.

2. EMOTION IN THEATER—OR RATHER DIRECTED FEELING

So far I have allowed the second element in the paradox to stand unchallenged, supposing that audiences in tragedy or soap opera are genuinely engaged though their emotions with the characters. But this cannot be right. What we experience in theater is like emotion, but it is detached in a way that emotion itself is not.[13] It is what I shall call *directed feeling*. Since laughter also involves detachment, we might hope that this would resolve the paradox—that although laughter defuses emotion, it is not inimical to the weaker feelings we find in ourselves as we watch a play. The hope is false. To see why it is false, we will have to look more closely at our experience of theater and its relation to emotion.

If our feelings in theater are not emotions, then we do not care in the full sense about the characters in the plays we see. By "caring" I mean pinning yourself on another person in such a way that you either feel part of what they feel or you experience other feelings on their behalf. Real caring involves sharing not just feelings, but a whole range of emotions, and the very best caring of all goes beyond emotion sharing to an understanding of the other person in her particular situation, which may produce emotions very different from those of that person.[14]

If we are adults who know we are watching a play, we do not let our feelings toward the characters incline us to action; but inclination to action is an essential part of most of the relevant emotions—anger, fear, pity, etc.[15]

Anger in the fullest sense involves the inclination to hurt, fear the inclination to flee or to protect, pity the inclination to comfort. But we are not normally so angry at the villain that we really feel like shooting her from the balcony, or so fearful for the hero that we warn him audibly to run away. We are detached enough to enjoy these feelings without having to resist the inclination to act; had we felt the associated emotions, however, we would have been in double pain, since the emotions themselves are painful, and we would have felt in addition the pain of being unable to act upon them, jammed as we are, weaponless, in the seats of the theater.

Consider make-believe games that are analogous to theater. When a parent in a swimming pool pretends to be a shark, the child swims away, pretends to be frightened—and laughs. If the child were genuinely frightened of the parent, he would not be able to laugh, and vice versa. So, in order not to frighten him, the parent must learn how to play this game in a way that can make the child laugh; and the game would end in tears for another child who does not laugh on the same cues. Make-believe depends on the sort of detachment in which laughter is at least possible, and of which laughter is one of the possible causes. Make-believe requires a detachment mechanism such as laughter, and we shall see that the same is true of theater.

Theater, like make-believe, depends on emotion-like responses that are not genuine emotions. Genuine fear is painful and makes you feel like running away, but no producer of plays wants his audience to feel like running away or to complain afterward of a painful experience. Unlike make-believe, however, theater does not typically make you pretend to experience an emotion. It really does feel like fear, the pressure that rises in your chest while you watch the predator dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* leaping after the children in the camp kitchen. But it isn't fear, because if it were fear that the audience felt in such intensity (and it is intense), it would not leave them in their seats. Again, if it were true fear, it would be painful; but it is not fear, because children pay to see the scene again and again. This—like the game of make-believe—goes only for the intended audience. I, unlike my children, did want to leave during that scene, and I did not want to see it again. The film's detachment mechanisms did not work as well for me as they did for my children, with the result that what I felt was a great deal more like fear than the producers of the film intended. I was like the child who did not understand the game of sharks and burst into tears.

I shall say that an emotion is a feeling that inclines the person it affects toward at least one specific action—that is to say, it makes the affected person feel like doing something. Shame may make you feel like vanishing from the spot; disgust, like being sick; regret, like reliving and repairing your life; grief, like weeping. You do not need to be capable of the action in question, but if you feel the emotion, you must feel like taking the appropriate action,

and this must be fairly specific: fear of that lion makes me feel like running away from *that* lion (even when I am trapped); regret for not having said farewell makes me wish I could relive *that* episode in my life (even though I know time is irreversible); and so on. This is what I call the action requirement for emotion.

This requirement is more strict than is found in many definitions of emotion, but we shall see that what it excludes has no relevance to the issue we are concerned with in theater—the binding of an audience's attention to a play through their feelings. Nameless fears, for example, and vague senses of regret, may be strong feelings, but they do not make us feel like doing anything in particular, and so they are not emotions under my definition. Their very vagueness disqualifies them for the role of holding an audience to the specific events and characters of *this* play. There is, of course, a range of feelings related to the name of any emotion. "Anger," for example, may be used for anything from a bad mood (which may have no object and is associated with no particular inclination toward action) to the sort of anger that does involve an inclination to act. Any stage in this continuum could be called "emotion"; I restrict emotion in these pages to feelings that include inclinations to act because caring about persons in the full normal sense does involve inclinations to act. If you do not feel like saving your child when he is in danger, your claim to care about him is suspect (as Solomon assumed on a famous occasion).

I also exclude such immediate responses to stimuli as the startle response or the chill up the spine—or, for that matter, laughter. A loud noise makes me jump in my seat, but it does not arouse an emotion because the loud noise does not make me *feel* like jumping in my seat. It simply makes me jump, whether I feel like doing that or not. In the same way, a good joke makes me laugh, whether I feel like laughing or not. We can, of course, laugh deliberately, and so we can feel like laughing, and that feeling, unlike laughter, would satisfy this condition on emotions. I would say it is the feeling of being amused.

The action requirement leads to two other requirements, that of ownership and that of intentionality. Ownership is required because actions must have agents; that is why there must be a specific someone who has an emotion, and an emotion cannot waft about among a crowd like a mood that may be no one's in particular.

Intentionality is required because actions must have defining contexts, which in turn define emotions. If I fear for my child's life when she is confronted by a dog, I feel like rescuing *this* child from *that* dog. If I merely felt like covering my eyes, that would be a different fear, because it is related to a different action. In this case, my fear has two objects: the dog, at whom my fear is directed, and the child, on whose behalf I feel the fear. It would

be a different fear for a different child; and it would be a different fear if I feared for myself, that I would lose the child. (No temporal reference is required; all emotions are feelings like taking action now, whether or not that is possible; if I felt like rescuing my child later—after a good lunch and a fortifying nap—that feeling would hardly be an emotion, although it might be a reasoned response to an emotion.)

On this account, you should be able to specify at least four things for any standard occurrence of emotion:

1.	Who feels it?	Ownership
2.	Feels like doing what?	Action
3.	At what or at whom?	First intentionality
4.	On who's behalf?	Second intentionality

In many cases, intentionality will be more complicated, as contexts demand more and more references to people and events or possible events.[16]

Now we can return to the theater and ask how close my feelings there come to emotions. Suppose I feel as if I am afraid that Macbeth will be persuaded by his wife into committing a horrible crime. Ownership and intentionality are satisfied, but the action requirement is not. Of course, there is nothing anyone can do to help Macbeth, as he is alone with his wife; but that is not the problem. I often feel like doing things no one can do. The problem is that there is nothing I feel like doing to help Macbeth. If I felt like bursting in upon the Macbeths with an improving moral lecture, I would be missing the point of the play, which wants me simply to watch in fascination as the scene unfolds. This is because the play is a *play* and not because it is fiction; my response would be the same if it were an accurate staging of a historical event. Either way, the play would be ruined for me as an audience member if this scene made me feel like doing anything other than observing it attentively. And so the scene must be presented in such a way that I am detached from it in the relevant way.

Although I am not moved by an emotion in the full sense, I am genuinely moved by this scene in which Lady Macbeth shames her husband into becoming a murderer, and the feelings to which I am moved feel very much like fear and horror. I have argued elsewhere that the emotion-like feelings aroused in theater are related mimetically to the associated emotions. The scene has an effect on me that is very similar to the effect that fear would have, but it is not the same effect as the effect of fear, because it is missing the action component (and it may be missing other components as well). My feeling toward Lady Macbeth is a *directed* feeling—directed because it is my feeling, and it is directed at her. It is precisely because it is directed that it binds me to the scene; it could not do so if it were a nameless fear or a vague dread.

Visitors from another culture might respond differently. Not recognizing the cues that allow for my detachment, they might spoil the play for us

all by attempting to change the course of events. For them the play's detachment mechanisms would have failed, and they would have experienced genuine emotions. I, on the other hand, have been protected from emotion by a number of cues that allow me to be confident that I am not about to witness an actual murder.

The detachment mechanisms that allow me to have directed feelings but not emotions toward Lady Macbeth belong to the general family of devices in which Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekten* are the most powerful members.[17] I suggested at the beginning of this section that the detachment mechanisms of theater are related to laughter in that, like laughter, they defeat emotion. Brecht may have wanted his v-effects to defeat directed feelings as well, but there can be no doubt that they do not do so in his most famous plays. *Mother Courage* has been a success because the title character's consuming care for her children arouses strong feelings in an audience, in spite of Brecht's efforts, through revisions, to forestall empathy.

Laughter is a detachment device, as we have seen in the case of make-believe, but it defeats any sort of directed feeling. If I had laughed at Lady Macbeth, the more I laughed, the less I would have been able to direct feelings toward her. In the game of shark I described above, the child is laughing so hard that he does not feel anything that feels like fear of his parent. He is excited, and he is having fun, but fear is not exciting or fun, and in any case such a sense of fun and excitement is without direction and is not what keeps the child engaged in *this* game. Of course he wants the fun to continue, but what binds him to *this* game in particular is the love between parent and child that frames the entire episode. He feels nothing within the frame that is toward the shark; he feels a great deal outside the frame, toward his parent. Laughter defeats emotion because it defeats the very directedness of emotion, its intentionality. But, as we have seen, intentionality of feeling is what is most important in theater.[18]

The second element of the paradox is wrong as stated: theater does not depend on emotion; but what theater does depend on is the precise component of emotion that is attacked by laughter. Refining the second element has only sharpened the paradox. In what follows, however, I will not need the fine distinction between directed feeling and emotion and will revert, for simplicity's sake, to the familiar idiom in which we label our responses in theater as emotions.

3. MIXING OIL AND VINEGAR, LAUGHTER AND EMOTION

The third element of the paradox was that laughter and emotional engagement are mutually defeating: we cannot laugh at what we care about most deeply, and we cannot care deeply about the things at which we laugh. This

is true but misleading. Laughter and emotion may be mutually antagonistic, but they also feed each other. This, then, is the final shape of the paradox of comedy, that it calls for antithetical kinds of response from its audience, but that neither can be had in the absence of the other.

The very same emotion that laughter displaces has prepared the ground for that laughter. Although laughter at P leads to detachment from P, we would not laugh at P if we were entirely detached from it at the outset. That explains why laughter is self-limiting. We find old jokes stale, and butts of ridicule boring after time, not just because they are familiar, but because we have laughed them out of the arena in which they might have been important enough to laugh at. For the same reason, a joke can be too funny for laughter—too ridiculous to be interesting. Comics and comic writers must learn to control their material so as not to weaken their hold on the audience.

Playwright Moss Hart tells of a comedy which contained a scene that caused his audience to lose interest. It was, he finally realized, too funny for its place in the play.[19] Audiences have only so much laughter in them, and they must have a rest from time to time. But exhaustion alone does not explain the problem of the too-funny scene: we lose interest if the laughter is too intense to allow us to go on caring about the action of the play. In the end, no one cares what happens to people who are utterly ridiculous, or to people who are found in totally ludicrous surroundings (as was the problem with Hart's bad scene). That is why comic acting demands a higher level of control and is harder for amateurs than is dramatic acting. You can overplay tragedy for a sympathetic audience; but it is well known that if you overplay farce you will ruin it for any audience. Good comics seem to know intuitively that laughter can be an antidote to interest on the part of their audience, and so they arouse it with care. Part of the care is to see that people are laughing *with* them, rather than *at* them.

We commonly make a distinction between laughing at people and laughing with them. Laughing *at* them puts them outside the pale of concern, while laughing *with* them is compatible with a high degree of empathy. By "laughing with P" I think we mean laughing not at P, but at P's predicament, and in such a way that P could join in the laughter without the pain of attacking herself. Such laughter is a kindness if it draws people into laughing at their predicament, and so into taking it more lightly. Laughter *with* P leads to detachment from P's predicament, not to detachment from P himself, and in this way it is beneficial to P.

Overlooking this sort of laughter can give comedy a bad name. Rousseau would banish comedy from an ideal polity because he thinks of comedy solely in terms of laughter *at* rather than laughter *with,* and because he finds that successful comedy must make virtue laughable. The result is that he holds comedy as such to be morally objectionable.[20] As we saw earlier, com-

edy is morally obnoxious insofar as it supports community by exclusion—by uniting an audience in laughter at those it designates as outsiders. But Rousseau misunderstands his own examples: comedy such as Molière's can defeat the laughter of exclusion and ultimately draws outsiders back into its circle.[21] In comedy we sometimes find ourselves laughing *with* characters, because we are laughing *at* the common human predicament. If so, we seem to have a practical way to resolve the paradox: use laughter to banish care in comedy, but use it to banish the common care of human life, not the care an audience has for this or that particular character. Such comedy may detach an audience from concerns that are common to characters and audience, rather than from the people its characters represent. If laughter is an antidote to emotion, then laughing at common predicaments should allow us to care less about them; and, indeed, we find that this is true.

My distinction between laughter-at and laughter-with does not resolve the paradox, however. The at/with distinction is no more helpful than the observation we made early on that the same play can ridicule some characters while honoring others. True, the distinction shows how we can be attached to characters while dismissing their predicaments as laughable; but to be attentive in theater, we must care about precisely those predicaments. If laughter in theater allowed us total detachment from the events it depicts, we would perhaps have entered a state of enlightenment (such as is the goal of certain religious practices), but we would no longer be an audience at all, since we would have withdrawn our attention from the action of the play. Even if we did pay attention to the events of the play while in a state of enlightened detachment, we would not care enough about them to laugh. Why should we need the relief of laughter when we are already relieved of caring? Comedy, therefore, must embrace its whole paradox and make us care about, and laugh about, the same events, or the same characters.

And this is what comedy actually does. In watching Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus,* for example, we would have the traditional disregard for the young lovers, who have little time on stage and are not developed as characters. What binds us to the play is the slave Palaestrio, who *does* care about the young lovers, and whose machinations form the substance of the plot. An ancient audience watching a slave giving instructions to his social betters would feel a delightfully amused outrage at this comic reversal; but along with this comic response they would surely feel some empathy for Palaestrio. Audience members would want him to succeed, and if they wanted the young lovers to unglue their lips so that the pair will not be caught, they would want this for Palaestrio's sake, not for the lovers'. Palaestrio is set off as a comic character because of the reversal of power, but he is not isolated, and he is not the butt of laughter. That is why it is he who keeps an audience in its seats and binds the play together—comic and engaging at the same time.

Not every play called a comedy works this way, however. Oberon and Puck provide a binding and controlling element in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* similar to that of Palaestrio. Puck especially captivates us through most of the play; for all his playfulness, however, he is not comic in the traditional sense, but a visitor to comedy from another literary world, the transforming world of masque. Generally, Shakespeare's most successful comedies push beyond the limits of comedy. In *Much Ado About Nothing,* we have the standard comic lovers, Hero and Claudio, whose instant and unconvincing passion means little to the audience. This couple's story is blended with that of Beatrice and Benedick, who grow away from comedy as the play progresses. When Benedick says, "How doth the lady?" of the fainting Hero in IV.1—the only man who bothers to ask—Beatrice knows she has found a man capable of caring about a woman; and this is the true turning point of the play, not the artfully staged scenes of eavesdropping. After Beatrice and Benedick discover their love (latent, most likely, in their first exchange of insults), their story is not comedy at all, but high romance of the sort that came to animate the modern novel; yet it is this discovery that draws an audience to the play.

Molière's plays, however, are uncompromisingly comic. His master stroke in the *Misanthrope* is to let us see on stage the hypocrites who mock Alceste, in such a way that our laughter at him is moderated by our reaction against the laughers on stage. We cannot side with them, and so we side with the hero, ridiculous as he is, and with the more likable characters (such as Philinte), who themselves like Alceste. He is human, after all, and ironically not exempt from the hypocrisy he detests. We do care, in the end, for this comic hero, because the playwright does not allow him the complete isolation he seeks: even he stoops to hypocrisy in order to protect the feelings of others, and even he is pitied in the last couplet.

Consider the most extreme play of detachment in the western repertoire —Camus's *Caligula.* Here, the young emperor (plainly modeled on Molière's Alceste) sets about more directly than Alceste did to separate himself from all hypocrisy and from every false claim to significance. But, like Alceste, Caligula fails to isolate himself. He cannot lose the sympathy of his audience or of his friends because neither we nor they can side with the hypocrite patricians who first exploit and then oppose him, and his own earnest yearning for honesty is itself a kind of care that makes them and us care about him. So Scipio the poet still loves him and is loved by him, and Cherea, who leads the mob that kills him, is still in some sense his friend. Still, bloody as the play is, it is comic through and through—in its lineage from Molière, in its theme of isolation, and in its brilliant blending of detachment and empathy around the passionate tyrant who gives the play its name.

This blending of elements is only half the story. The other half, which

I have space to review in only the briefest terms, is this: Laughter and emotion must be able to work together because of their mutual dependence at a deep level of cause and effect. Whether the comic is comic by being laughable or simply by being detached, we will not care to laugh at it, or to react in any way to its detachment, unless we care about it in the first place. Emotion comes before laughter, and if laughter kills emotion entirely, it kills itself. Sustainable comedy retains the emotional engagement of its audience from start to finish because emotion is the ground for laughter.

On the other hand, laughter is the ground for emotion in the world of comedy. We have heard that comic elements in tragedy help distance us psychologically from tragic events and thereby allow us to react to what would otherwise make us shut down our emotions altogether in horror. This is not universal in tragedy, and certainly tragedy can have its effect without borrowing any tricks from comedy. But the eye of comedy is fixed on a more unsettling landscape than that of tragedy. Like Camus's emperor, comedy brooks no hypocrisies and no unfounded claims to significance in human matters. It looks at the howling desert and laughs; it is able to look because it laughs; and because it is able to look, it is able to respond to what it sees. If we could not laugh, we could not dare to look at the raw naked soul of Alceste; but if we could not look at him, we could not care about him, and if we could not care about him, we could not care about ourselves. Letting us look at Alceste, laugh at him, understand him and ourselves—this was a task for a master craftsman of the theater.

I do not know theoretically how oil and vinegar can be made to cooperate in every kind of salad, but I know they must be made to do so, and I can toss a salad. Likewise, I cannot offer a theory to explain fully how the art of comedy can sustain emotion and laughter at the same objects in the same play. Philosophical clarity will not by itself resolve the paradox of comedy. The better we understand theater and audience response, the more difficult comedy appears to be. That is the right answer: as writers, actors, and directors know, comedy is hard.

NOTES

1. This essay is part of a larger work in progress on emotion in theater, parts of which occur in publications cited below.
2. A now famous example is described by Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (New York: Norton, 1970).
3. Bergson famously defended the complementary position that emotion negatives laughter: "Indifference is its natural environment; laughter has no greater enemy than emotion," *Le Rire; essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1913), 4. An English translation of *Le Rire* is *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,* trans. Cloudseley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1913). For a similar contemporary

view, see John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1983), 101–13, and his "Humor and Emotion," *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor,* ed. John Morreall (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 212–24. For Ronald de Sousa's critical discussion of positions of this kind (in which he introduces a kind of humor he believes is not opposed to emotion), see his *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 275–99.

4. Paul Woodruff, "Understanding Theater," in *Philosophy and Art,* Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 23, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press), 11–30.
5. *Le Rire,* 142–49. Writing before Beckett, and soon after Chekhov, Bergson may be pardoned for tying this principle to laughter, not having noticed that even laughterless comedy tends to isolate its characters from one another and from their audience. For a more detailed account of comedy, see Section 1 below.
6. *Le Rire,* esp. 142–49.
7. On Brechtian empathy, see my "Engaging Emotion in Theater: A Brechtian Model in Theater History," *Monist* issue entitled "Aesthetics and the Histories of the Arts," 71 (1988): 235–57.
8. Isolation in prose fiction works differently from isolation on stage, and the difference is especially marked in interior styles, such as James Joyce uses in *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man:* we are drawn to Dedalus when he is isolated as the butt of laughter from his older schoolmates, and our sympathy for him grows.
9. This seems especially likely of the plays of 411 B.C., *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae,* produced in a year of special dangers to Athens.
10. Rousseau, *Letter to M. D'Alembert On the Theater,* trans. Allan Bloom in *Politics and the Arts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1960), 34–47.
11. For a more traditional approach to comedy, see Northrop Frye's discussion in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 163–86. His account treats the varieties of comedy as phases in the development of redemptive social structures and explains elegantly the sorts of plot and character each phase employs. My account (unlike his) is confined to the theatrical tradition and aims at explaining only the varieties of audience response. Some sorts of comedy fit my account better than others. Part of the cost of my account, for example, is that it makes little of Shakespearean comedy deviant in the direction of romance (Beatrice and Benedick) or of masque (Puck and Ariel). Frye's view accommodates the same differences within a single framework.
12. Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (New York: Grove Press, 1976).
13. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 240–89; see also his "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978). The account I give below is neutral with regard to the theory he proposes.
14. For an analysis of the range of possibilities here, see my "Engaging Emotion in Theater."
15. We may nevertheless feel genuine action-related emotion toward the play itself or to some element within it: anger at obscenity in the play may make us leave the theater, while an appropriate resolution to the plot may give us a deep satisfaction that keeps us in our seats. (I am indebted for this point to a discussion with Richard Sorabji.) Such emotions are distinct from those directed toward characters or actions represented in the play.
16. I have given a more detailed version of this account in "Trying to Care About Hamlet and Hecuba: From Mimesis to Emotion in Theater," forthcoming in *Ratio,* ed. Tobin Siebers *(New Approaches to Narrative).*
17. See John Willett, trans., *Brecht on Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), esp. 101–2.
18. The varieties of empathy are distinguished by their intentionality, as I argue in "Engaging Emotion in Theater."
19. Moss Hart, *Act One: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1959), 385–402.

20. "And since the very pleasure of the comic is founded on a vice of the human heart, it is a consequence of this principle that the more the comedy is amusing and perfect, the more its effect is disastrous for morals" (*Letter to M. D'Alembert,* 34). See also de Sousa, *Rationality of Emotion,* 277, 289; and Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* 167–68.
21. Paul Woodruff, "Rousseau, Molière, and the Ethics of Laughter," *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1977): 325–36. See also Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism:* "The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated" (165).