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an absolute turkey

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Georges-Leon-Jules-Marie Feydeau was born in Paris on October 8, 1862 to Ernest Feydeau and the love of his life, Lodzia Zelewska. Feydeau’s father had been hesitant to propose to Lodzia, who was an extraordinarily beautiful and well-known widow with a reputation of seducing high-ranking men, and her acceptance of his proposal and their subsequent marriage came as a surprise to many, including Ernest himself. His wife’s physical attractiveness and the time she spent in the social company of other men (including the Emperor, Napoleon III) became the source of much speculation and gossip. Once Georges was born it was also the reason for malicious rumors to be spread about his paternity. (It is interesting to note that one of the principal characters in An Absolute Turkey is named Ernest.)

The Feydeaus moved in an aristocratic and literary circle. Many have assumed that this milieu, combined with rumors of his mother’s infidelity, shaped Feydeau’s writing and general outlook on life, love and marriage. One of his earliest plot lines involved the triangulation between three lovers, one of whom harbors feelings of true love for the object of desire. This would become a staple of his dramatic work.

By 1880 Feydeau had established himself as an author, with a verse monologue, La petite revoltée (The Rebellious Young Lady). The great success of this piece spurred him to continue writing and a year later his first play, Par la fenêtre (translated in English as Wooed and Viewed) was produced.

In 1883 he was drafted into the army, but he continued to write, producing two more monologues and beginning work on his first full-length play, Tailleur pour dames (A Gown for His Mistress). This last would become a great critical and popular success when it was finally produced in December 1886.

Continued success in his career after Tailleur pour dames eluded Feydeau. In 1890, he took a two year hiatus to write, producing two more monologues and beginning work on his first full-length play, Monsieur chasse (The Happy Hunter). The work appeared on Broadway in A Life In The Theatre, Collected Stories, Accent On Youth, Come Back, Little Sheba, The Lieutenant of Inishmore, and Shining City. He has created music and sound for the original productions of works by David Mamet, Woody Allen, Eric Bogosian, Ethan Cown, and Susan-Lori Parks. Other Off-Broadway and regional works include The Fifth of July (Boyd Street and Williams Town Theatre Festival), The Pastures of Heaven (California Shakespeare Theatre), Gabriel (Atlantic), The Subject Was Roses (Mark Taper Forum), The Undertaker (Roundabout) and The Night Watcher (Primary Stages). Awards: Lortel, Viv, and BACC awards. TV: HBO, The History Channel, Nickelodeon, Discovery, TLC, also Fisher-Price toys. Obadiah is a UR International Theatre Program Master Artist.

Liz Mills (Voice and Acting Coach) is a voice practitioner and theatre director. A long academic career in the Drama Department at the University of Cape Town provided the context for extensive postgraduate research in voice, international publication and the development of her own techniques for working creatively with the voice. She is a recipient of the UCT Distinguished Teacher Award. In 2007 she was invited to take her voice research to the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. The work has also been shared with colleagues in the USA and South Africa. Her directing work includes Shakespeare’s King Lear, Susan-Lori Parks’ In the Blood, Chekhov’s The Seagull and Martin Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life.

Jacqueline O’Donnell (Choreography) Jacqueline O’Donnell graduated from the University of Rochester in 2011 and is currently an Americorps member working at an inner-city elementary school in Rochester. Though her career goals are mostly focused on her lifelong love of dance, she has jumped at the opportunity to choreograph for Todd this semester. Last semester she created the choreography for Nigel Masta’s production of Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale.
Kimberly Glennon (Costume Design) As resident costume designer for the Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), she received a 2003 OBIE Award and an American Theatre Wing Design Award nomination for CTH's production of As You Like It. She received a 2005 AUDELCO Award for Melvin Van Peebles' Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death (Urban Stages), a Howard Hewes Design nomination for Marat/Sade. She also received 7 AUDELCO nominations for various works with CTH. Some additional credits include: Aaron Black's Tis Pity She's a Whore (American Place Theatre); Sixteen Wounded (Cherry Lane); 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, The Puzzle Locker, Accidental Death of a Whore (Lighting Design).

Aaron Black (Lighting Design), University of Rochester, Hamlet, Peer Gynt; To Pay She's a Whore, The Puzzle Locker, Accidental Death of an Anarchist (Lighting Design); New York: Three Sisters, Supreme Tartuffe (Audelco Award Nomination) Black Nativity (Audelco Nom.), King Lear (Audelco Award Nom.), Waiting For Godot, Fun-nyhouse Of A Negro (Lucille Lortel Award, Helen Hayes Award Nomination, Audelco Nomina- tion), Trojan Women, Mother Courage And Her Children, Dream On Monkey Mountain (Audelco Award), Hecuba, The World Premiere Of Almost Blue. No Common Thread, Open Field, Pink Crooked, Soar Like An Eagle, Alarm Will Sound at Carnegie Hall. Regional: American Repertory Theatre (IRNE Nomination), Two River Theatre Company, Repertory Theater of St. Louis, Opera: Portland Opera, Royal Opera House, New York City Opera, Bard Summerscape, Glimmerglass Opera, Montreal Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Minnesota Opera, Spoleto Festival USA, Opera Bilbao. Pittsburgh Opera, Opera Omaha, Boston Lyric Opera, Opera Boston. Production Designer/Art Director: MTV Video Music Awards, From The Top on PBS, The New York City 9/11 Commemorations for the May- or's Office of New York City, VH-1 Storytellers, WNBC, Today Show, MSNBC, Fuse, MTV, VH1, NBC, CMT. Education: Certificate from the Pacific Conservatory for the Performing Arts in California. Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Conservatory for Performing Arts at Webster University in Saint Louis and a Master of Fine Arts from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Aaron is a UR International Theatre Program Associate Artist.

great praise, and Champignol malgré lui (Champignol in Spite of Himself). On submitting the latter to the directors of the Palais-Royal, he was urged to burn it. By chance, a friend who needed to prevent his theatre from closing decided to produce the discarded work. In a time when a major hit by French theatre standards would run for more than 100 performances, Champignol would go on to run for more than 1,000.

These two hits firmly established Feydeau as the King of French Farce. From 1892 to 1916, he quickly produced a number of works, now considered masterpieces of the genre. These include Le dindon (An Absolute Turkey, usually translated in English as Sauce for the Goose) and La puce a l’oreille (A Flea in Her Ear).

Feydeau's personal life was as complicated as his plots. He met his wife, Marianne Carolus-Duran, the daughter of a famous French portrait painter, in 1889. The two were married later that year. Though his marriage may have been a happy one to begin with, the decade following the couple’s nuptials would provide great material and inspiration for his writing. Feydeau moved out of his home in 1909 for many of the same reasons his male characters leave their spouses. There were, however, other contribut- ing factors including a general boredom and apathy with life. This is most poignantly displayed by the follow- ing anecdote: once while Feydeau was out walking with a male friend, the latter noticed a woman he con- sidered to be one of the most beautiful he had ever seen. He urged Feydeau to turn and experience her beauty for himself. Instead, Feydeau merely replied, “Describe her to me.”

His continued estrangement from his wife caused the marriage to end in divorce. Feydeau moved into a Paris hotel, the Hotel Terminus (in An Absolute Turkey, the hotel is called the Hotel Ulti- mus) where he could pursue other passions, such as gambling and enjoying the Parisian nightlife from his reserved table at the restaurant, Maxim’s. In 1919, a mental illness brought on by syphilis took him to a new permanent address: a sanitarium.

Feydeau died on June 5, 1921. He is buried in Montmartre Cemetery in Paris.
British barrister, playwright and author John Mortimer, in his program note for a 1966 production of Feydeau’s *La puce à l’oreille* (A Flea in Her Ear) stated that the world of farce needed to be “necessarily square, solid, respectable and totally sure of itself: only so it can be exploded.”

The word ‘farce’ comes originally from the Latin *farsa* which then became the French *farce* or *farcie*, meaning ‘stuffing,’ or ‘padding.’ This literal translation best describes the nature of the first farces in the late middle ages. They provided comic relief during serious, dramatic works known as Morality Plays, in which characters had to fight against the forces of evil in an attempt to live a moral and virtuous life. A brief interlude of comic immorality was the perfect break for audiences.

Early farces were filled with characters that mirrored the audience: with jobs, seductions and problems familiar to people of the age. This allowed audiences to identify and connect with what they were watching.

In stylistic terms, farce derived from the Italian Comedia dell’Arte. Commedia—a durable comic performance tradition—relied on stock characters. These include Zanni, the knavish quick-witted servant that evolved into Arlecchino (also known as Harlequin and Pierrot the Clown); his gullible and lustful master, Pantalone (the master-servant relationship was a central one and always included conflict of some kind); Il Dottore, the all-knowing doctor who didn’t have the faintest clue about anything; and the militaristic braggart and coward, Il Capitano.

The character typologies of Commedia were adapted over the years to various European cultures and traditions. They were updated and transformed to mimic the issues and the social mores of the times. Throughout, they retained a breadth of physicality, gesture and intention that is characteristic of the genre. Farce is essentially a comedy born out of situational complications. Characters that are broadly drawn—bold enough to be recognizable, but distinct enough to not exist solely as caricature—find themselves in compromising and complex situations from which they must escape if the social and moral order of their world is to be maintained. The driving force of a farce is almost always the need to satiate an appetite (sexual or otherwise). It is the hungers of man—and it is almost always men and their appetites and failings—that provide the central focus of most farces. The result is a kind of comedy that is intensely physical in nature and less cerebral or verbal than many other comic genres. It is one in which the complexity of the plot and the frenetic nature of the action trumps subtlety of characterization or thematic profundity.

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**So, do you start with the simple question: “what sounds like this?”**

Yes. For example, what sounds like a shower? Where, in my experiences outside of a bathroom, have I heard something like this sound? Breakfast. Pouring Rice Krispies. Ok. So, let’s experiment with different types of grains. Rice Krispies are delicate. Maybe something harder will produce a louder sound. We tried pouring pasta in a pan, and found that was too quiet. Then we tried Basmati rice. We needed the “shower” to run for an extended time. Rather than be limited by how much rice could be poured out of one box, we found that by constantly rubbing the grains over and around each other in a plastic bowl we could produce a louder, continuous, and more shower-like sound.

**How has this experience enriched your appreciation of sound design?**

For me, this whole experience has been recalling, re-thinking and re-listening to everyday auditory experiences. It’s been about wholly cherishing and thinking about the workings and beauty of a single sense. I think it’s comparable to how a painter cherishes and thinks about sight. A painter has to look closely at an object and see how the colors are working. He can’t punch a hole through the canvas to create depth. A painter has to use shading and color variation to evoke the sight of depth on a two dimensional canvas. The artist cooperates with his/her constraints. Foley artists do that too. Foley artists can’t catch wind in a jar and bring it into the studio. They have to listen intently to the world around them for similarities and produce sounds with objects sometimes far removed from the actual materials.

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**an interview with props assistant, lydia jimenez**
Boulevard comedy or French farce is an approach to the genre that is uniquely Continental in character. Distinctly middle class in its concerns, it provides a window into a world where a rigorous and constrained public morality comes into conflict with the private, leisure-time proclivities of the late 19th century middle class male. In a society where the appearance of propriety was more important than the actual practice of it, the French farce gently satirizes the hypocrisies and peccadilloes of the age without actually criticizing them in any substantive way. The protean morality of late 19th/early 20th century French café society — something that is also depicted with great vibrancy by the visual artists of the day (Degas, Courbet, Renoir, Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, to name but a few) — shines brightly in these comedies, yet their end result is always a reaffirmation of the sanctity of urban middle class values.

The English developed no real comparable tradition, and their great comedies of the era are intensely verbal and witty in their execution (Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is perhaps the epitome and the high water mark of English comedy of the time; America produced no similar tradition either, and concerned itself with melodrama instead.) Farce continued throughout the twentieth century (and continues today) to have a vibrant and active life. The ’60s, ’70s and early ’80s saw British farce theatrically triumphant in the work Joe Orton, Alan Ayckbourn, and Michael Frayn (*Noises Off*) and on British TV in *Fawlty Towers* (amongst others). Americans seem to have preferred their farce on the big screen more than in the theatre with movies like *American Pie* and the work of Adam Sandler, Ben Stiller, Jim Carrey, Owen Wilson, and the Farrelly brothers being standard bearers of the genre.

In the early era of movie making, after the introduction of sound, microphones were extremely limited in what they could do. Warner Brothers’ *The Jazz Singer* had opened the door to sound (and in so doing also to audience expectations of audio realism) and other studios raced to catch up and to compete. Jack Foley, an employee of Universal Studios who had radio experience was brought in to work on providing sound for the musical *Show Boat*. Since microphones could only handle dialogue, the rest of the ambient aural universe had to be added (and thus created) on a separate audio track in the studio. Recording equipment was also very large and so designers couldn’t just go out into the field and record. Foley developed effects to make realistic sounds on film possible, and a whole department and related art now bear his name. Another master of the art was Jimmy MacDonald, the lead Foley designer for Disney, who headed a team of sound technicians and designers in the 1930’s. They built hundreds of props to create sounds for Disney cartoons. These were often simply constructed machines of levers, pulleys and wheels. The coffee can/string apparatus used in our production of *An Absolute Turkey* was inspired by a device built by Jimmy MacDonald and his team who used a similar apparatus to create creaky noises for early Disney animation.

**a brief history of foley**

Where do you start when thinking about how to create a sound from everyday objects?

It’s difficult to figure out where to start. There are endless possibilities. You start with nothing as there are endless materials in the world and endless ways to manipulate them. When trying to simulate these sounds, it’s tempting to begin with the actual materials. But that’s not always practical. We couldn’t nail a toilet to the foley table, and spraying water from a shower hose would have been messy.

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La Belle Époque, in English often called The Gilded Age, refers to a period (approximately 1890 to 1914) in the social history of Paris where it became an artistic mecca and a central locus of world culture. This was a time in European history when industry and technology made significant advances. These developments, which affected every area of life including entertainment, would drastically change the lives of many, some for the better and some for the worse.

Advancements were made in all aspects of modern life, from medicine to communications. With the inventions of the telegraph, telephone and railways, goods became more easily available and more diverse. Similarly, people became increasingly mobile, connected and informed. Concurrent with this was both massive urbanization and the rise of the middle and upper middle classes, or the “bourgeoisie.” For the first time, disposable income and leisure time became available to those outside of the landed gentry. People in the professions (doctors, lawyers, etc.) and the newly wealthy industrialists and businessmen (and their families) made up the bulk of this urban class. It was a class that demanded diversion in equal amounts to social stability. In Paris, venues like the cabaret Le Chat Noir and the dance halls of Le Moulin Rouge catered to these desires.

Disposable wealth also provoked a desire for novelty and innovation. Perhaps this is what allowed Paris to become the centre of artistic life, as well as a major financial and mercantile capital. It was as a cultural capital that Paris set the tone and the pace of world art, fashion, music, and literature. Feydeau emerges from this world and from the leisure classes to whom his work is addressed. He exploits the tension between bourgeois respectability (the desire for those with new money to be viewed and accepted as upstanding citizens and moral exemplars) and pretension (the often shallow veneer of respectability assumed by this class), and the insecurities and uncertainties of a world undergoing extreme change. He contrasts the carnal nature of desire against the gilded social surfaces of the day. "It is not a theatre of mockery, but rather of gentle satire. While his work tips its elegant hat at conflicts and disparities of gender (the jilted wives), entitlement, class (the servants, chambermaids and bellhops who also populate the play) it seeks not to offend, but to gently poke fun at its audience — an audience that wanted to be charmed and amused rather than shaken and held up to too much scrutiny or to account.

That being said, the very presence of the tensions of class and gender in his work points both to Feydeau’s ambition as a playwright and to the simmering resentments and disparities present in the society of his day. It was these tensions, amongst others, that would lead, with such ferocity, to the outbreak of World War I. That war put a swift end to the belle époque and to the kind of theatre that Feydeau and his peers had created with such lightness, gaiety, and frivolity.

Feydeau’s work is thus both a portrait of a very particular age and a vision of a universal one, working brilliantly on the stage and continued to amuse and even, at times, to shock. The masterful structure and plotting of Feydeau’s plays and his finely drawn characters — a lady of the night, a retired army officer, two police inspectors — are all essentials that characterized the development of the modern Western world.