

# [Some aspect of theater essay](https://assignbuster.com/some-aspect-of-theater-essay/)

Several forms of entertainment take place in a theatre, the art of theater is considered as one of the oldest type of entertainment. The art concerns with live performances of actors on a platform or stage done in front of an audience. Coined from the Greek theaomai, which means “ to see”, a great deal of theater focuses on seeing (Guthrie and Chaillet, 2002. p. 521). In theatre, there are who genres or category: tragedy and comedy (Wilson and Goldfarb, 1999, p.

135). Comedy is defined as a “ humorous drama” wherein all elements- characters, events and action are intended to generate laughter from the audience (p. 42). Comedy is a term which literally means “ song of revelry” (Pickering, 1988, p. 63). It is often said that people who create comedies are not serious about important events; they may very well be serious individuals.

For example, some of the best comic dramatists from different periods- Aristophanes, Moliere and George Bernard Shaw have shown passion towards the affair of humanity but have taken the comedic route to see the world in a different side (p. 142). To laugh is a human reaction that is often viewed as mysterious. There has never been a definite explanation as to how and why laughter takes place.

All we know is that laughter is a unique human thing. There are three basic characteristics of comedy: 1. Suspension of natural laws 2. Contrast between individuals and the social order 3. The comic premise (Wilson and Goldfarb, 1999, pp.

142-144) A unique feature of comedy is that the natural laws of logic do not apply to it. For instance, when a man carrying a big box gets in the way of a dog walker with about 4 dogs on leashes, the focus is not on the safety of the man or if he can get out of the entanglement; in comedy, the focal point is that of the man getting tripped over the leashes and perhaps falls flat into the ground. In a sense, there is a temporary suspension of the human’s belief in injury. In burlesque, a form of theatrical comedy which will be discussed in latter part, a character may get slapped on the backside and the audience laugh because they know that only his pride is hurt. At one point in the history of theatrical comedy, two sticks were fastened and used to create the sound of hitting so that when a scene entails a hitting scene, the sticks would be slapped together. This was known as slapstick and today the term has stuck to refer to wild, “ knockabout” comedy (p.

143). An example of theatrical comedy which highlights the suspension of natural laws is Steve Martin’s play Picasso at the Lapin Agile which finds Picasso, Albert Einstein and Elvis Presley at a Parisian cafe, something which in real life will never happen (p. 143). American playwright Arthur Kopit also contributed several plays that exemplified the suspension of natural laws. For one, he was able to make people think of murder as comedy.

In his play Arsenic and Lace, the severe topic of murder was not given serious thoughts, thereby allowing the audience to focus on the comedic aspect (p. 143). Comedy is written when the belief about society and the events of the play feature a distinct difference. This is what the second characteristic of comedy or the contrast between individual and the social order is about (Wilson and Goldfarb, 1999, p. 143-144).

For example, hypocrisy and extravagance are laughed at when viewed against a setting of normalcy (p. 144). This is in stark contrast to the usual setting of dramatic play, especially tragedies. One theatrical play that features this characteristic is Moliere’s Tartuffe, whose main character is a swindler who acts as if virtuous and even dons a clerical outfit (p. 44).

What makes this more comical is that the main character resides in a thoughtless man named Orgon who think Tartuffe is wise (p. 144). What Tartuffe really wants is to take Orgon’s wife and his wealth. The play ends with Tartuffe’s two-facedness and Orgon’s unwariness out in the open (p. 144).

Moliere mocked the individual and his abuse of marriage and religion rather than marriage and religion combined. In modern theatrical comedies, the assumption has gone the other way around, meaning the world is that of illogical and that normal people are put up in a abnormal setting (p. 44). This is commonly found in tragicomedies and theater of the absurd (p. 144). The last characteristic of comedy is that of having a comic premise.

Combining the natural suspension of law and the contrast between the individual and the social order will lead to the comic premise. Defined as an “ idea or concept which turns the accepted notion of things upside down”, a comic premise serves as the catalyst of the play, its characters, situations, and the comic dialogues (Wilson and Goldfarb, 1999, p. 144). Aristophanes is often described as the master of creating comic premise.

In The Clouds, the Greek satirist dramatist imagines Socrates as a man who can only reflect when seated on a basked that is suspended in the air (p. 144). The three characteristics of comedy- suspension of natural law, contrast between the individual and the social order, and the comic premise lead to the embellishment of other comedic facet: comic situations, verbal humor, and characterization (p. 144). There are various forms of comedy in theater, depending on the intent of the dramatist and the techniques used.

These include farce, burlesque, domestic comedy, comedy of manners, and comedy of ideas (Wilson and Goldfarb, 1999, pp. 145-146). Farce features exaggeration in language, plot and characters (p. 145). The intention of farce is simply to provide laughs and entertainment. It pokes fun at everything and thrives on a “ pratfalls and horseplay” (p.

145). An example of a farce is A Flea in Her Ear, created by nineteenth-century French playwright George Feydeau (p. 145). Meanwhile, burlesque features not only physical comedy and exaggerations but a little bit of crudity (p. 45). Traditionally, burlesque served as a preposterous adaptation of dramatic plays.

An example is the previously discussed Tartuffe which religious hypocrisy. There is also what is termed as domestic comedy, which in essence, portrays common situations found in families or he neighbourhood and then creates humorous scenes around it (p. 146). Neil Simon is fond of creating such plays. Comedy of manners is another form of comedy which uses a lot of sharp dialogues and verbal wit (p.

146). It is the opposite of a farce which relies on physical comedy and horseplay. From seventeenth up to eighteenth century, majority of English theatrical comedies features comedy of manners courtesy of playwrights like William Wycherley, William Congreve and Oliver Goldsmith (P. 146). Oscar Wilde is also another writer that utilized comedy of manners.

Lastly, comedy of ideas pertains to comedic plays that employ comic technique in discussing serious topics (p. 146). British playwright George Bernard Shaw was fond of creating plays that suggests comedy of ideas. Theatrical comedy is said to have been originated around 480 B. C.

by Epicharmus of Syracuse (Pickering, 1978, p. 3). The basic elements of comedy were said to have been developed from the phallic choruses and processions that occurred during the planting and harvest rituals and Dionysus’s festivals (p. 63). During these festivals, the people, especially the drunkards, make fun of these phallic choruses and revelled in the “ sexual frankness” and other characters who were either “ absurd or offensive” (p. 63).

At that time, these plays were called Old Comedy and consisted of scenes that were loose, farce, satirical and parodied (The Columbia Electronic Encylopedia, 2007). Furthermore, the plots of Old Comedy were derived from existing matters in Greece (p. 63). One vital characteristics of Old Comedy is a plot that had a happy idea (p. 63).

The happy idea is a product of the main character’s imagination and the comedy comes from the character’s attempt to create place that happy idea into reality (p. 63). This is also the concept of Aristophanes’ The Birds, which looks at two men who believe that a Utopia may be achieved in a bird land. Eventually, Old Comedy declined and with the death of Alexander the Great and the collapse of this empire, a new form of comedy took place- aptly called New Comedy. It was the result of the transition from Old Comedy to Middle Comedy (Pickering, 1978, p. 63).

Created to amuse the “ educated leisure-class audience”, New Comedy soon became the principal dramatic kind. It tackled truthful subjects of the Greeks, like the lives of the slaves, the courtesan, adventurer, and the poor (p. 63). The plot of New Comedy was usually involved two lovers who had a setback and always featured a happy ending (p.

63). It is interesting to note that this type of setting is still prevalent today. Ironically, it the Romans who made Greek New Comedy reached its zenith. Plautus and Terence were considered as two of the best Roman comic writers in their time (Pickering, 1978, p. 63). Plautus penned variations of Greek New Comedies while Terence stuck to the Greek originals.

Furthermore, it was Plautus who added farce, song and dance, and dramatic irony in theatrical comedy (p. 63). Terence, on the other hand, was responsible for the inclusion of elements like double plots and amalgamation of character and plot (p. 63). During Medieval times, theatrical comedy leaned towards the farce (p.

3). It was probably the result of two unlikely sources: folk ritual and the church (p. 64). Folk ritual such as the adventures of Robin Hood or St. George had a distinct characteristic: that of showing them pandering around the crowd (p.

64). This brought out farcical themes. Additionally, the church became an unlikely source of farce during medieval times. Ridiculing the church and it traditions bore the fruit of medieval plays. An example is The Second Shepherd’s Play which focuses on a sheep thief and his wife (p. 64).

The dawn of the Renaissance saw a return of the classic Roman comedy. It was also the time where interlude, created by John Heywood, merged with Latin classic comedy, the result of which is what we now call Elizabethan comedy (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2007). William Shakespeare was one of the best proponents of Elizabeth Comedy, dealing with romantic comedy, farce and tragicomedy (2007). Ben Johnson was another expert on Elizabethan comedy, dishing out satirical plays (2007).

He was responsible for creating humor characters (p. 66). Working on the concept that the human body has four humor behaviors- blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, a man whose humors are not balance will result in peculiar action (p. 66).

This according to Johnson will generate an amusing situation. Tragicomedy, as mentioned earlier, is also another form saw its heyday in Renaissance England. Simply put, tragicomedies combine tragedies and comedies. Shakespeare was fond of tragicomedies. His play Lear is an example of a tragicomedy.

While the play is commonly referred to as a tragedy, it must be remembered that the character was chastised for his stupidity. Another example of tragicomedy is Sir John Falstaff’s Henry IV (Parts I and II) (p. 67). It was also the time when the Italians created the commedia dell’arte or improvisational theater (p. 65). Borne out of the streets, commedia dell’arte featured short skits but became hugely popular in Europe that commedia troupes found themselves playing in noble courts and palaces (p.

65). Commedia dell’arte hinted of New Comedy with characters reminiscent of Arlecchino and Pulcinella (p. 65). Meanwhile, Renaissance France did not follow their English counterparts with tragicomedy. What Moliere did was combine comedia del’arte with satire (2007).

Additionally, Moliere employed comedy of manners in his plays. The English comedy of manners stemmed out from exposure to French drama courts (Pickering, 1978, p. 68). The court audience was banned from having contact with the real world so they resorted to fabricating their own world (p. 68). This repression phase, which occurred in the Puritan Revolution, resulted in plays that dealt with clever barbs yet impious comedy of manners (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2007).

The Restoration comedy of manners accentuated the relationships of people in placed in a refined society with plenty of money, no work and large periods of time devoted to social games (p. 68). However, the presence of such plays brought forth a harsh reaction that a new type of comedy emerged- sentimental comedy. Sentimental comedy was different for it focused on providing tears rather than laughter. More so, the plot usually involved characters with middle-class upbringing who are righteous and “ self-sacrificing” as well (p. 69).

In France, this type of comedy had its equivalent, called comedie larmoyante (2007). The foray of sentiment-filled comedies resulted in most theatrical comedies going underground. It was only in the nineteenth centuries that comedies resurface (p. 71). However, some plays on comedy of manners emerged in the last part of the eighteenth century- She Stoops to Conquer in 1773, The Rivals in 1775 and The School of Scandal in 177 (pp. 70-71).

While most English theatrical comedies focused on more dramas rather than inducing laugher, Irish writers tried to sway it around. At the end of the nineteenth century, Irish-born playwrights Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw revived theatrical comedies (Pickering, 1978, p. 71). Wilde was responsible for bracing the comedy of manners forms (p. 71). One of his more famous works, The Importance of Being Earnest, has been constantly put up on stage and was even put into a musical (p.

71). Meanwhile, Shaw, inspired by Ibsen and Chekhov, worked on developing comedy of ideas (p. 71). Shaw created works dealing with the serious subjects like prostitution, religion, health, landlord and even manufacturers (p.

1). He focused on ideas rather than providing physical action and to his credit; he was able to put up one-acts and full-length plays with critical success. In his fifty-eight years of writing, he was able to produce a massive fifty-three plays (p. 71). The turn of the century was a period of revival. Burlesque and vaudeville revived theatrical comedy.

Flourishing in the United States at the end of 19th century, the term vaudeville is rooted from the French valley called vau de Vire where a style of amusing song was developed (Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia, 2008). Later on, the term became voix de ville which means “ street voices” and the songs were then used in drama (2008). Vaudeville usually features songs, comedy, acrobats, and even animal acts (Kamien, 1998, p. 372). By 1905, vaudeville was the most popular form of American entertainment (2008). Approximately two million people attended vaudeville theaters in the US by 1928 (2008).

The Palace Theater in New York City led the vaudeville performances in the country, with singers Nora Bayes and Eva Tanguay and comedians Eddie Cantor and W. C. Fields headlining nightly shows (2008). There was also the revue, a variety show that did not have any definite plot, satirical and featured chorus girls and comedians (p.

372). It also saw the rise of philosophical comedy as led by Luigi Pirandello and Noel Coward (Pickering, 1978, p. 72). Eugene O’ Neill, a dramatic writer, inked the sentimental comedy Ah Wilderness (p.

72). At the end of the World War II, a new comic genre rose. This was called black comedy. At times, it was even called as sick comedy (Pickering, 1978, p. 73). It was not really a new form of comedy as King Lear has the same elements.

The twentieth century has ushered in new trends in theatrical comedy. Aside from the smart comedy of manners as started by Oscar Wilde in the 19th century, there are also romantic comic fantasies such as the works of James M. Barrie and Jean Giraudoux, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, Sean O’ Casey and Brian Friel (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2007).

Likewise, there is what is called musical comedy, which traces its roots from 18th century ballad operas (2007). Furthermore, there is the Theater of the Absurd, named for the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco (Pickering, 1978, p. 5). The term was coined by Martin Esslin (p. 75). The twentieth century also brought in one of America’s most important contribution to popular culture- musical comedy.

This type of theater incorporates acting, singing and dancing (Kamien, 1998, p. 371). Majority of these musical are played in Broadway in New York, thus the tern Broadway musical. Theatrical comedy has come a long way from the Old Comedies in Greece to what the audience is enjoying now. While it has taken many forms and styles, the objective is still the same: to provide entertainment and laughs.