Class 1: The Comic Vision

A. Species of Comedy

1. Class title 1 (Laughing audience)
2. Section title A (Roman masks)

We all know the Roman masks of Tragedy and Comedy. This course will be all about the right-hand one, **Comedy**. But what *is* comedy? I'm sure we can agree on one of its many definitions: it is an experience in the theater that makes the audience laugh out loud.

3. The above, animated
4. Chaplin in *The Tramp*, 1
5. Chaplin in *The Tramp*, 2

This is one of the first pictures in the Wikipedia article on Comedy. Really? A down-and-out tramp and a waif in rags: surely this is closer to Tragedy? Yet the image comes from **Charlie Chaplin's** 1921 silent movie, *The Tramp.* Chaplin was the iconic comedian of the early days of Hollywood, and the Little Tramp was his signature role. Does the fact that it contains a sad scene or two prevent *The Tramp* from being a comedy? Surely not, any more than a funny Gravedigger prevents *Hamlet* from being a tragedy. This is admittedly an exteme example, but it serves a reminder that there can be more to Comedy than making you laugh. For instace, it can make you nod, shrug, or even sigh. So this class, and the course that follows it, will look at the many different reactions that Comedy can elicit from an audience. This first hour is about the most obvious of these—laughter—and some of the means of evoking it. As most (but not all) of the clips take place by day, I am calling this hour **Days of Laughter**; the second hour, after the break, will be **Nights of Enchantment**.

6. Class title 2 (Days of Laughter)
7. Sutton Foster and Robert Lindsay in *Anything Goes*

In general, I try to avoid duplicating examples between one course and another, but I want to start us off today with something deliberately familiar that we can analyze together, two numbers from shows by **Cole Porter** (1891–1964): the "Friendship" duet from *Anything Goes* (1934) and "Brush up your Shakespeare" from *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948). The situation in *Anything Goes* is that **Reno Sweeney** (**Sutton Foster**) enters into a temporary alliance with minor Chicago gangster **Moonface Martin** (**Robert Lindsay**) to commit a spot of beneficial blackmail; Moonface, who is actually Public Enemy #13, is traveling in the disguise of a harmless parson. Anyway, watch the clip and tell me whay makes it funny.

8. Porter: *Anything Goes,* "Friendship" duet
9. — still from the above (repeat)
10. — the same, with labels

What did you think? Was it funny, and what made it so? Here are my own answers. **TEXT:** Porter was always as clever with words as he was with music; this is one of the better ones, but not the best; more on that in a moment. **SITUATION:** comedy often arises out of situation—more of that in a moment too—but this is not especially the case here; the number was originally written as a duet for Reno and the romantic lead character, so obviously the situation is not an essential factor. **CHARACTER:** not o much here as in other things I am going to show, though the idea of a gangster disguised as a pastor is intrinsically funny. **SCHTICK:** the business of having them quarrel over the ending of the number was added in 1987 when the duet was transferred to these two characters, but I'm sure they added to it… **EXECUTION:** …and of course they do this superbly.

B. Clever Words

11. Section title B (Cole Porter)

So how do the words of "Friendship" actually work? The whole thing is just a collection of vaguely suggestive cliché phrases like "I'm your gal," "Ring my bell," and "Send a wire" introduced by entirely random rhymes such as "If you ever need a pal," "If you're ever down a well," and "If you ever catch on fire." Sheer nonsense. And the nonsense element is increased by made-up words like "blendship" and the do-wop refrains such as "Lahdle-ahdle, dig-dig-dig." In fact, what they argue about is whether they rehearsed an ending with "quack-quack-quack" or "cluck-cluck-cluck." But mostly Cole Porter's words are a lot more meaningful. Here is a verse from another song from *Anything Goes,* "You're the top." It is sung by Porter himself. What do you think of its images?

12. Porter sings a verse from "You're the top"

What did you notice? Everything is clever, for sure, and in 1934 everything would have been contemporary. But a lot of this needs footnotes now: **Arrow shirts** are not so widely advertised, if they exist at all; the **Coolidge dollar** refers to the strength of the economy before the Crash; **Fred Astaire** and **Eugene O'Neill** were movers and shakers in the worlds of Hollywood and Broadway drama respectively; and **Whistler's Mother** and **Camembert** are just what they say they are. Contemporary list songs like this one have the downside that they quickly go out of date. One of Porter's absolute best is the song "Brush up your Shakespeare" sung—totally incongruously—by the two gangsters in *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948). As all the punch-lines are titles of Shakespeare plays, it will never go out of date on that count, but I find it dated in another way; I wonder if you agree? I have played this before, but it is worth watching again. The performers are **James Whitmore** and **Keenan Wynn**.

13. Porter: *Kiss Me, Kate* movie, "Brush up your Shakespeare"

Do you see how that was dated? The references may be timeless, but most of the lines imply a male domination of women—just think of "kick her right in the *Coriolanus*"—entirely non-PC. There are several other Porter songs—very clever in their time—that have had to be adjusted in revivals.

14. Tom Lehrer

I'll be doing a whole class on comic songs written for performance on their own, rather than in musical plays, and one of the featured artists with surely be **Tom Lehrer** (1928–). Many of his songs are edgy too, but here is one that is totally PC-proof: simply a listing of the chemical elements sung to the tune of the Major-General's song from *The Pirates of Penzance* by Gilbert and Sullivan. This clip is from a live performance in Copenhagen; it does not give the text of the words, but you will get the feel anyhow!

15. Tom Lehrer: *The Elements*

C. Clever Music

16. Section title C (Lerner and Loewe)

Music can be clever too. Sometimes the comedy comes from the incongruity between the dramatic situation and the musical style in which the composer sets it. A prime example comes from *My Fair Lady* (1956) the most famous work of the two men shown here, **Alan Jay Lerner** (1918–86) and **Frederick Loewe** (1901–88). The *Ascot Gavotte* uses stately quasi-eighteenth-century dance music and almost static poses to accompany a text about a normally exciting event, a horse race. But for the British upper class, opening day at Ascot is a prime event on the social calendar, to parade in ones finest clothes while maintaining perfect *sang-froid*. We will watch it in the 1964 film by **George Cukor**; the costumes are by the Queen's *couturier,* **Cecil Beaton**.

17. Loewe: *My Fair Lady,* Ascot Gavotte
18. Stubby Kaye, Danny Drayton, and Johnny Silver in *Guys and Dolls* (movie 1955)

An even more academic musical form is the fugue, in which three or more voices intlace with each other acording to precise rules. So it is a joke when **Frank Loesser** (1910–69) opens *Guys and Dolls* (1950) with a piece he called **Fugue for Tinhorns**, in which three two-bit gamblers (hence the "tinhorns") sing about their choices for some upcoming race.

19. Loesser: *Guys and Dolls,* Fugue for Tinhorns
20. Juan Diego Florez and Pietro Spagnoli as Count Almaviva and Figaro

The joke here is that the music is far faster and more complex than the dramatic situation warrants and the joke in the Ascot Gavotte is that is it much slower. As it happens, there is at least one case in opera where the two jokes accur back to back. This is in the first big finale of *The Barber of Seville* (1816) by **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792–1868). I'll tell you more about the story in a moment, but suffice it to say that

the hero **Count Almaviva** has caught a sight of the heroine **Rosina** from a distance and declared his love for her in a serenade. Now he enlists the help of the barber **Figaro** to get him inside the house where she is kept under lock and key by her guardian **Doctor Bartolo**. Figaro suggests that he pretend to be a drunken soldier billeted on the household, but things get out of hand and the police are called. When the Sergeant asks for an explanation, all speak almost at once in the fugue from hell, and when he arbitrarily arrests the Soldier and the Count reveals his identity, everybody else on stage is struck dumb and the tempo becomes an *adagio.* I'll play just the first three verses of it, but it goes on for a while.

21. Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, entrance of the Sergeant

D. Situation Comedy

22. Section title D (Rossini)

Rossini is the master of comedy of situation; I'll have a whole class on his final comic opera, *Le Comte Ory*, two weeks from today. And *The Barber of Seville* is just one farcical set-up after another, so let me give you one further example.

23. Set-up for the *Barbiere* quintet.

I made this slide before I knew I was going to include the clip you have just seen, so forgive me if I repeat myself a bit. **Rosina** is kept a virtual prisoner by her guardian **Dr. Bartolo**, who hopes to marry her for her wealth. Her only confidant is **Figaro**, Seville's most successful barber and accomplished go-between. Meanwhile the hero, **Count Almaviva**, has already serenaded her disguised as a student, then with Figaro's help he pretended to be a soldier billeted on the house. That failed, so he tries again as the music teacher "**Don Alonso**," a harmless cleric who says he is substituting for her regular music teacher **Don Basilio**, another cleric. All seems to be working fine, and under cover of a music lesson, Almaviva has got her to agree to elope with him that evening; Figaro manages to obtain the necessary key. But now Basilio arrives unexpectedly. For one reason or another, everybody needs to get rid of him. We'll hear first some recitative with the harpsichord—the operatic equivalent of dialogue. The orchestra comes in with Basilio, and the music at first follows the natural give-and-take of the dramatic action.

24. Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, "Buona sera" excerpt

Then Rossini pulls it all together with the musical device of introducing a catchy tune and repeating it again and again, as Basilio says he is going but takes a long time doing so—only to come back once more at the end.

25. Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Act II quintet
26. Class title 3 (still from the Madrid production)

E. Nights of Enchantment

27. Section title E (animated transition)

That Rossini scene took place in the evening, which is the perfect transition into our second hour, which is a collection of scenes that take place at night. After my anatomy of laughter and its mechanics, I am going to be more organic, and choose works that between them take us into the realms of **romance**, **fantasy**, and even a surprising shot or two of **truth**.

28. DVD covers of the four operas shown

I would have liked to have given you a mixture of opera, operetta, and Broadway in this section, but I am stymied by lack of good videos of the appropriate sections—especially **Sondheim's *A Little Night Music***, which is virtually the definition of "nights of enchantment." But no, I have had to stick to the four operas shown here; I will take them in the order left to right; their actual chronological order is represented by the vertical arrangement. Beside all containing elements of enchantment, and all involving weddings, the excerpts I have chosen all include one final scene: the ending of an act in the Janacek, the endings of the operas in the Mozart, Britten, and Verdi. As a director, I have always found that the way a piece ends is the key to my interpretation of the entire thing.

29. MOZART TITLE

Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais (1732–99), who wrote the play on which *The Barber of Seville* is based, followed it up with *The Marriage of Figaro* as a sequel. Both contained numerous farcical situations. But while Rossini in 1816 was only interested in laughter, **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91), who wrote his *Figaro* in 1786, before Rossini was even born, saw its darker human potential.

30. Main characters in *The Marriage of Figaro*

This slide should explain it all. **Count Almaviva** has married Rosina, who is now the **Countess** (top right). **Figaro** has become his valet, and is to be married to the Countess' maid, **Susanna**. But the Count lusts after her and intends to have her on her wedding night, before Figaro does. [These are different perfomers in the same production by **David McVicar**, so ignore the change in hair color!] The Countess enlists Susanna in a plot to bring her husband back to her side: she will set up a clandestine assignation with the Count that night in the garden, which will in fact be kept by the Countess in Susanna's clothes—so that the Count commits adultery with his own wife! The trouble is that Figaro is not in on the plan, and thinks that Susanna really intends to meet his rival. She knows he is jealous and decides to punish him for it, as we hear in the following recitative. But then she starts her aria, "Deh vieni, non tardar" (oh come without delay), and something changes. I would like us to discuss it after you have heard it.

31. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, "Deh vieni, non tardar"

32. *Figaro* DVD cover

What did you think? What qualities did this have that most of the clips in the first hour did not? Is this still comedy? Yes, the situation is very much a comic one, but Mozart finds a beauty in it and I would say a human feeling. Susanna is very much acting up in the recitative to needle Figaro, who she knows is eavesdropping. But when she comes to sing the aria, especially its final section, the man she is surely looking forward to sleeping with is the one she truly loves, her husband.

33. The Act IV set

It is notoriously difficult to find an appropriate setting for Act IV of the *Marriage of Figaro*, which takes place outdoors after three other acts indoors. Sir David McVicar doesn't even try, but brings some tree trunks branches into the interiors he had used all along, relying on lighting and music to do the trick. And I think they do. Mozart's finale is a masterpiece that turns on a dime between comedy, beauty, and truth. Beauty, as Figaro sings of the magic of the night. Comedy as he makes love to the woman he believes is the Countess, in order to revenge himself on Susanna. Farce, as he realizes that this really *is* Susanna, and turns the seduction up a notch. Comedy still, as the Count comes in, meaning to denounce his wife, onlt to pull a whole series of other lovers out of the undergrowth. Then a total shift of mood as the Countess herself appears, and the Count can do nothing but apologize. I shall stop briefly at this point to make one further observation.

34. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, Act IV finale, penultimate section

Everybody comments on the beauty and simplicity of the Countess's line and the Count's apology, whose mood continues into the ensemble that follows. But not everyone notices the extraordinary four measures played by the lower strings after that. Technically, it is just Mozart changing back to the original key. But from the point of view of the characters, I have always thought them thinking: "*We have been through such a lot; do we really want to risk it all again*?" And the answer, of course, is yes. Calling for the party to continue with champagne and fireworks, all celebrate then run offstage.

35. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, closing ensemble

36. JANACEK TITLE

At the end of the course, I will feature three pieces where the comedy consists of make-believe: **Sondheim's** *Into the Woods*, plus **Lloyd Webber's** *CATS* and **Ravel's** *L'enfant et les sortilèges,* both of which involve animals who talk. Which is a cue for my next very brief clip, from *The Cunning Little Vixen,* written in 1923 by **Leos Janacek** (1854–1928). It was based on a comic strip in a local newspaper that dealt equally with the people in the village and the animals in the forest that surround it. Despite its singing animals, it is hardly sentimental at all; indeed the leading character is killed at the end. The scene I am going to play is another marriage. The **Vixen** emerges from her den with the **Fox**, her lover, and tells him she is pregnant. So they have to make this legal straight away. All the animals celebrate, but there is something about their celebration we don't even get in Mozart. How would you describe it?

37. Janacek: *The Cunning Little Vixen*, Act II finale

38. BRITTEN TITLE

There are no talking animals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the operatic version of the play by **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) written by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76) in 1960. But its fairy world is at least as important as the human one; Britten gives it a special color by using high percussion instruments, children's voices, a coloratura soprano as Tytania, and a countertenor as Oberon: we will hear them all in a moment. But first I want to introduce one other quality of Comedy that I haven't mentioned before: **Parody**. As you know, the play ends with the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, and the implied wedding of the other two couples. And as after-dinner entertainment, the chamberlain has engaged a group of amateur performers to put on the *Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe.* It is comically bad, but its failings give the composer much opportunity to parody operatic styles. After going through Handel and Verdi and even atonal opera, Britten finally zeroes in on the Victorian sentimental ballad for the death of Thisbe. Here is is in an updated production from the Royal Swedish Opera.

39. Britten: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the death of Thisbe
40. Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Glyndebourne

While Britten uses mostly romantic music for the human characters, his historical awareness also shows in his treatment of the Fairies, whose musical style contains echoes of Elizabethan dances and the lute songs of Shakespeare's day. I would not call it parody so much as homage; you are not supposed to laugh, but to feel you have entered a magic world. The production I am going to show, by **Sir Peter Hall** at Glyndebourne in 1881, dresses Oberon, Tytania, and Puck in Elizabethan ruffs with enormous wigs. This photo, I think, comes from a later revival, but I am glad to show it as most of the color is washed out in the old video. Anyway, here is the ending of the show, as Oberon and Tytania go through the house blessing the three couples. Note the mesmerizing effect of the "Scotch snap" rhythm, and the scintillating color of all those high voices. The soloists are **Ileana Cotrubas** and **James Bowman**.

41. Britten: *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* finale

42. VERDI TITLE

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) came out of retirement in his later years to write two operas based on Shakespeare, both with texts by **Arrigo Boito** (1842–1918)—who, like Stephen Sondheim, began as a librettists but went on to be a composer. *Otello* (1886) is a tragedy and doesn't concern us, but *Falstaff* (1893), the composer's swansong and only mature comedy, very much does. I will play two excerpts, both from the final scene, which takes place in Windsor Forest. There are fairies here too, but not supernatural beings. The inhabitants of Windsor have dressed up in all sorts of guises as a kind of midsummer carnival, and the juvenile lead **Nannetta**, in her role as Queen of the Fairies, has gathered a lot of the local children as sprites and elves. Here is her aria, "Sul fil d'un soffio etesio" (on a thread of sheerest gossamer), in which she sends them all off to gather flowers that she will use to make magic

potions. The singer is **Barbara Hendricks**, and I am showing it simply to show that Comedy can also embrace Enchantment and Romance, and the music that results can be so darned beautiful.

43. Verdi: *Falstaff,* Nannetta's aria
44. Two productions of *Falstaff*

That of course was a traditional production (with the same designer, incidentally, as did my first *Barber of Seville*). The one seen now at the Royal Opera House, and also at the Met, is an update by **Robert Carsen**, who moves it all into Britain between the Wars. Sir John Falstaff is a clubman, and the final scene turns into a splendid dining room, like the old Simpsons in the Strand. This also fits my theme of marriages, since in the end Nannetta ends up marrying her young boyfriend and not the elderly miser her father had picked out for her.

45. Score page with the *Falstaff* Fugue

And what music did Verdi choose for the final three minutes of his final opera? **A fugue**. Not the three voices of Loesser's Tinhorns or the relatively simple overlaps in Rossini's *Barber,* but the fugue to end all fugues, a gigantic affair of over a dozen separate lines. I am playing this in the Met Opera version, since Carsen's idea of having the characters all walk forward along a table as they enter exactly follows the structure of the music. The words are a variant on Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage"—life is one giant comedy in which we're all players, we all get played. So Verdi uses this most complex of musical forms to create a sense of teeming multiplicity, but bringing it all together into a whole.

46. Verdi: *Falstaff,* Fugue
47. Class title 4 ("It's a Comic World")