A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM

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Dear Friend,

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum is a modern classic of musical theatre, combining the timeless characters of the ancient playwright Plautus with a score by the incomparable Stephen Sondheim. It was the first Broadway show to feature both music and lyrics by Sondheim, as he discusses in this issue of Asides.

This is the first time that the Shakespeare Theatre Company has produced Forum, and I am delighted to introduce our Associate Director Alan Paul, profiled in this publication, in his STC mainstage directing debut. To bring his vision to life, he has collaborated with many of Broadway’s finest designers and artists, some of whom worked on the Bard’s Broadway shows in our 25th Anniversary Season and others who are new to our theatre.

Alan’s passion and enthusiasm will surely be echoed onstage by STC favorite Bruce Dow, Pseudolus, whom you may recognize from his role as Bottom in last season’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Bruce’s unforgettable performances stem from his belief that comedy and tragedy are closely related, which he further discusses in this issue.

For more information about the play and production, I invite you to visit Asides Online at Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org.

Enjoy learning more about this enduring musical comedy classic and its ideal fit for the STC season.

Warm regards,

Michael Kahn
Artistic Director
Shakespeare Theatre Company

SONDHEIM SPEAKS!
Stephen Sondheim on the writing, rewriting and running around of Forum

Stephen Sondheim wrote about Forum in Finishing the Hat (Knopf, 2010). The Shakespeare Theatre Company is reprinting his writings here, in adapted form, with his generous permission.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum was to be the first Broadway show that featured my own music attached to my own lyrics. Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart and I had written it over the course of four years and it had gone through two major producers, two major directors and one major star by the time we were ready to go into rehearsal. I should have been feeling exhilarated at the prospect. Instead, I felt a rapidly burgeoning panic, which I attributed to hysteria from the excitement of finally launching myself as a composer.

I had a terrible time writing the score to Forum. Next to Merrily, it was the hardest score I’ve ever had to write. I had been brought up by Oscar Hammerstein to think of songs as being little scenes or one-act plays which were necessary to telling the story. Forum required exactly the reverse of what Oscar had taught me to do. It was a farce: a play with broadly drawn characters who find themselves in uncomfortable situations which, when seemingly solved, lead to further and more uncomfortable situations. As in every play, the situations arise from character, but the characters in a farce, like those in traditional musical comedy, are one-dimensional, one-adjective, one-noun personalities:
the conniving slave, the lecherous husband, the braggart warrior. It is the clash among these personalities that keeps the plot boiling.

The problem is that one-dimensional characters do not give rise to songs that move like Oscar’s one-act plays, nor do they allow for the subtext and resonance that Arthur Laurents had taught me to appreciate when we wrote West Side Story; they generate songs which, like the characters who sing them, deal with only one idea at a time and play with it. To use a graceful phrase of Burt’s, such songs “savor the moment.” This had been the function of songs in Roman comedy and remained so for the better part of two thousand years afterward. “Savoring the moment” describes most Broadway theater songs prior to Oklahoma!

Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin and their contemporaries wrote lyrics that presented one idea, toyed with rather than developed.

Oscar’s influence on musical theater was not seen by everyone as entirely beneficial. As Larry Gelbart put it in his Introduction to the published libretto of Forum, “Broadway, in its development of musical comedy, had improved the quality of the former at the expense of a good deal of the latter.” The playfulness of musicals had been dampened by Oscar and his imitators and here I was, a convert myself, confronted with a musical that was nothing if not playful.

At the time, I complained incessantly to Burt that although I had loved many of the savor-the-moment songs in the old shows and had written my fair share for Saturday Night, West Side Story and Gypsy, trying to write an entire score of them was cramping my tutored style. I grumbled that Forum would be better off as a play than a musical. Burt replied that if it were just a play, it would be relentlessly and unrelievedly funny and the audience, unable to recover between gasps of laughter, would soon become restless for a breathing space. The few of Plautus’s plays which survive probably didn’t last more than an hour, but even so, they included songs which served as necessary respites from the unremitting farcical push. I had to write one-joke songs, so I picked spots for them where the situations would supply substance: songs like “Impossible” and the drag version of “Lovely,” which were dramatically static but theatrically funny. What I didn’t appreciate properly was the robustness of the book Burt and Larry had written: low farce clothed in elegant language. I was deceived by the details of the dialogue, by aphoristic lines like “I meant yes, it just came out no” or comically poetic phrases like “clump of myrrh,” as in “Hide the girl behind that clump of myrrh.” I appropriated their style without appreciating its substance.

I think that the book of Forum is the tightest, most satisfyingly plotted and gracefully written farce I’ve ever encountered (pace lovers of Molière and Feydeau), I don’t think that farces can be transformed into musicals without damage—at least, not good musicals. The tighter the plotting the better the farce, but the better the farce the more the songs interrupt the flow and pace. Farces are express trains; musicals are locals. Savoring moments can be effective while a farce is gathering steam, but deadly once the train gets going. That’s why the songs in Forum are bunched together in the first half of the first act, where there is more exposition than action, and then become scarcer and scarcer until eventually in the last twenty minutes before the Finale there are no songs at all. Those twenty minutes comprise one long frenetic chase in which all the characters are on the run; for one of them to stop even an instant and sing a song would kill the momentum. Farcical musicals such as The Boys from Syracuse and Where’s Charley? have songs sprinkled throughout, but those shows don’t attempt to maintain the tension of a true farce; they pause for diversions. Even though it’s based on Charley’s Aunt, one of the most durable farces in the English language, the intention of Where’s Charley? is to be amiable and jolly, not tense and hysterical and threatening, which is what a serious farce should be. The stakes are lower in shows of that kind, shows that wear the trappings of farce but are actually traditional musical comedies with farcical moments. Farcical operas stand a better chance of maintaining the necessary tightness because the music is continuous, but is Puccini’s Gianni Schicchi one tenth as funny as Forum or any play by Goldoni?

Stephen Sondheim has written award-winning music and lyrics for theatre, film and television. He is also the co-author of the film The Last of Sheila and the play Getting Away with Murder. Sondheim is on the council of the Dramatists Guild of America, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981. He lives in New York City.

“And for good reason, Burt and Larry approached the piece with the utmost seriousness of intention. As Larry wrote in his aforementioned Introduction: “We would preserve the classic unities of time, place and action. We would have no anachronisms or sly references to today. We would use Plautus’ characters, but we would have to invent a plot (the original plots are negligible) to accommodate the characters we wanted to use.”
29 GOING ON 90

Native son and STC Associate Director Alan Paul on growing up in D.C., his theatrical apprenticeship and his love for doing it all

by Drew Lichtenberg

“I’ve always felt as though I were 90 years old,” Alan Paul groans, as we sip coffee near the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s offices on Barracks Row. “I’ve just always felt so old. I’ve always wanted to feel that connection to an older world.” As he prepared to go into rehearsals directing A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, the latest and most ambitious of STC’s forays into Broadway style, musical theatre programming, Paul reflected on his career. He has learned from elder statesmen of the American theatre, traveled around the world, and worked on classics, operas and musicals—all at the tender age of 29.

Paul grew up in the nearby enclave of Potomac, Maryland. His passion for the theatre started at a young age. He started taking voice and piano lessons at the age of 9. “My mom used to take me to every Broadway musical,” he says. “I still have all the tickets, all the programs, all the cast recordings. And by all I mean all.” He has a book sitting at home on his coffee table, filled with letters from actors and stage managers. “I always wanted to know how it worked,” he says, in a half-apologetic shrug that belies the intensity of his ardor for all things theatre.

Like many theatre lovers of a certain age, the 1996 revival of Forum is a pivotal memory. “Nathan Lane said he would not be coming out after the matinee, but he agreed to sign my poster. It’s still hanging on my old bedroom wall.”

Paul traces his interest in the classics to high school. “I took a class in Shakespeare at the Musical Theatre Center in Rockville, Maryland. I won an award from the Folger for playing the piano on ‘Brush Up Your Shakespeare,’” he says, playing Benedick from Much Ado About Nothing. “I got a Complete Works for that,” he says, beaming with pride. He still has the book at home. “And then I saw Hamlet at the Lansburgh in 2001.” When I mention his love of both Shakespeare and musical theatre, he shrugs. “I should have been a Gemini. I have a very serious classical side, and a side that wants to sing and have fun.”

Paul enrolled at Northwestern University, where he was in the musical theatre program. “Right around the time of Six Degrees of Separation”—his senior-year directing project—“I had an interview with Molly Smith at Arena Stage, and she asked me to be her assistant for Cabaret.” Work at Arena led to an internship after graduation at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and assistant directing gigs with Rebecca Taichman and Moisés Kaufman. At the same time, he was launching a directing career back in Chicago. “I decided to produce a season of classical plays with a friend of mine. We raised $30,000. I directed Richard II and produced his production of La Mandragola by Machiavelli. We did them in repertory, with a six-week run.” He takes a breath. “When that was happening, I met Michael Kahn, and he offered me a fellowship here at STC. I came on in 2007, the year they opened Sidney Harman Hall. I thought I’d be here for a year.”

What changed? “Michael has a way of being very casual about momentous moments in your life. We were having a drink at the Playbill Café, and he asked if I’d like to come on staff as an assistant director. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. For me it meant everything: I was joining the staff of this huge theatre, getting a salary, having security ... At the end of the next season, my predecessor and friend David Muse left to become Artistic Director of The Studio Theatre. Michael decided that he wanted me to move into that job. So here I am, 25 years old and the Associate Director, handed this huge amount of responsibility.” He sighs, thinking about all of the work. He laughs. “I still haven’t taken a break.”

“In retrospect, all of it has been a trial by fire. I’ve been through everything good and everything bad that can happen at a theatre. You know, hiring, firing, casting, budgeting, solving every crisis. Sometimes I’ve made those messes, but I’ve always cleaned them up. It was all building to this,” he gestures, indicating Forum in midair, “and now it’s finally happening. It’s the most exciting opportunity I’ve had.”

When discussing Forum, Paul shows the powerful producer’s mind he has acquired after years spent as Michael Kahn’s right-hand man. The germ for the project originated, he says, with the successful mounting of the Harman’s first musical, Mary Zimmerman’s production of Candide in the 2010-11 Season. Candide led indirectly to “Bard’s Broadway,” two-week mountings of classic-inspired musicals during STC’s 25th Anniversary Season. On Forum, Paul is working with many of the Bard’s Broadway designers, as well as the same casting director. “It was an exciting time for the theatre,” he says. “We discovered that not only could we produce these musicals at a high level, but we could attract big talent.”
When asked what he has learned from years of apprenticeship under Michael Kahn’s leadership, Paul pauses and thinks hard. “I have a huge amount of admiration for Michael, and gratitude for all the opportunities he’s given me. Most importantly, I learned how to orchestrate big plays and musicals from him. It’s an amazing feeling, when you get a large group of people together to create a piece of theatre. The other thing I’ve learned from Michael is how to jump fearlessly between styles and genres. I’ve tried to emulate him in my career, working on everything from musical comedies to minimalist opera to Thornton Wilder … all in the last year.” He smiles again. “When you tackle such varied material, you develop muscles. I feel like I’ve been at the gym for seven years.”

From listening to Paul talk, it is obvious why he feels so old at heart. He dreams of being the kind of director who is increasingly rare in our contemporary theatre world. “My biggest hero is Michael,” he says, “but I also look up to people like Jack O’Brien and Bartlett Sher because they do it all, from classical plays to musical theatre to opera.” Paul is still as in love with the theatre as he was when he was 9 years old. He still writes letters to his heroes, which he saves in a book on his coffee table. In fact, the first thing he did for Forum was to meet with Jerry Zaks, the director of the Broadway revival in 1996. Zaks had acted with Zero Mostel, the original Pseudolus, in Fiddler on the Roof.

He stares at his coffee, thinking. “I’ve always felt a connection to the generations of people that have worked in the theatre.” I ask him why. “I enjoy their stories. Theatre is ephemeral. It only exists in the moment. There’s no record of it, except for those stories.” He sighs, again, old beyond his years. “I’m only 29 but I feel like I’ve seen it all. I’ve always just wanted to be part of that tradition.” He smiles. Curtain.

Drew Lichtenberg is the Literary Associate at STC and production dramaturg for A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. He holds an MFA in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from Yale School of Drama.
TRAGEDY TOMORROW, COMEDY TONIGHT

Bruce Dow reflects on comedy, tragedy and what binds us together
by Hannah Hessel Ratner

The experience of acting is by nature comical: “We dress up. Pretend to be other people. Make ‘real’ the most extreme serious/ludicrous situations.” These truthful words were shared by Bruce Dow, while reflecting on A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Dow, who plays the wily and witty slave Pseudolus, made sure to note the musical’s classical origin in the Roman comedies of Plautus. “All comedy in western theatre—up to today’s modern television situation comedy—all stems from and draws their inspiration and plots from the works of Plautus,” he shared. People keep returning to these farcical plots, according to Dow, because “laughter and the ridiculousness of the human experience have proven the most universal constant in the theatre.”

Dow has had ample opportunity to develop his skills as a comedic actor. He spent many seasons at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, including playing the jester Trinculo in the Christopher Plummer-helmed The Tempest in 2010. He sees those skills as a continuation of his craftsmanship as an actor. The difference between a comedy and tragedy for Dow lies in the structure. In both types of drama the plots unfold in “extreme and ludicrous ways,” ultimately reaching an ending that either elicits tears or leaves the audience roaring with laughter. A tragedy ends with death, comedy with harmony and marriage.

Bruce Dow is the type of actor who holds the masks of comedy and tragedy closely together. “The best comic actors,” according to Dow, “have heartbreak just behind their eyes.” It is accepted that tragic works provide catharsis for the audience, but comedy also provides a communal relief. By laughing together there is an acknowledgment that what happens onstage is ridiculous and mirrors the absurdity of life. During last season’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Dow ran through the house and onto the stage to illustrate his character Bottom’s return from his metamorphosing adventures. Each night of the performance offered a variation on the same—with his reentrance the audience shared a collective breath of relief alongside a roar of laughter. There was both joy and fright in that moment. Above all there was the recognition that the audience and performers were all sharing space.

Dow excels at breaking down the invisible wall between performer and spectator. He believes that “as artists and as audience, we come together in a space to explore the human experience.” Laughter is caused by the recognition of that shared experience. Thinking of his favorite jokes, Dow shared that “comedy occurs when we are given cause to laugh at the King—when the King is reduced to being ‘just like us.’” And of course, there is the universal equalizer: “we are all at our most truthful and vulnerable when a little gas is passed!”

A sense of unity is created in these moments of realization be they philosophical, physiological or scatological. Forum embraces all types of realization, creating a musical that espouses the welcome from Pseudolus in the first song: “Something for everyone—a comedy tonight.”

The production’s director Alan Paul understands Dow’s ability to create community out of strangers: “he is also beloved by everyone on the staff... It was clear that he should do it. The times when the show works best is when the audience falls in love with Pseudolus. They want him so badly to succeed, as the slave who wants to win his freedom, and Bruce is that kind of presence on stage. You can’t help but love him.” STC’s production is Dow’s return to the part of Pseudolus after playing it at the Stratford Festival in 2010. Dow is excited about the opportunity to rediscover the musical and make it “totally fresh.”

Hannah Hessel Ratner, STC’s Audience Enrichment Manager, is in her third season at STC and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from Columbia University.
How to Write a Plautine Comedy in 3 Easy Steps!

1. Start with a “Hero”

- A hopeless and generally penniless young lover (adulescens amator)
- The beautiful courtesan (meretrix)
- Matrona, menopausal battle-ax wife to senex, determined to catch him in the act
- The lecherous old man (senex iratus), who is probably amator’s dad but who wants the girl for himself
- Leno, meretrix’s pimp, who won’t give her up until the lover coughs up the funds

“A actually naming him hero? Bonus points, obviously.

2. Create an Obstacle or 4 (or 5)

- The overblown soldier (miles gloriosus) whose lust almost equals his self-adoration

3. What to Do?!

- Rat out dad to matrona and let her deal with his nasty habits.
- Invent a terminal illness, ideally exotic, that requires isolation.
- Pretend your house is haunted by ancient spirits. Then hide inside.
- Discover that you actually have a long-lost twin. Reunite.
- Disguise yourself as a general, a shaman, a slave—whatever seems most appropriate at the moment.

Possible Solutions . . .

- Dress a man as a concubine and sub out for meretrix. They’ll never notice.
- Pretend your house is haunted by ancient spirits. Then hide inside.
- Explain that you have a long-lost twin. Whenever something goes wrong, it’s definitely his (or her) fault, not yours.
- Discover that you actually have a long-lost twin. Reunite.
- Disguise yourself as a general, a shaman, a slave—whatever seems most appropriate at the moment.

The Clever Servant (servus callidus), master puppeteer, promises to help his master win her heart and/or buy her from her pimp.

The End

Live happily ever after, thanks to the clever slave!
The play title *Mostellaria* is likely to mean nothing to anyone but classical scholars, while *Miles Gloriosus* and *Pseudolus* will ring a bell with contemporary theatregoers not as titles but as character names from the 51-year-old musical theatre classic *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. But it is in those three simply titled comedies by the Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus (254-184 B.C.) that *Forum* had its collegiate pre-origins in the years before World War II. Playwright Burt Shevelove recalled in a program note for a *Forum* revival:

> I was a first-year student in the Department of Drama at Yale University. Richard O’Connell (later to become the authorized translator of Lorca’s plays) was directing Plautus’ *Mostellaria* as his master’s thesis. He had conceived it as a Broadway musical comedy, and I wrote the lyrics for the production. I remember one of the songs was called “A Couple of Greeks on a Roman Holiday.” It was that kind of show.

Shevelove’s memory is sound: The year was 1938, and the work’s full title was “Plautus Potpourri: A Roman Holiday, Adapted from Plautus’ *Mostellaria* (The Haunted House).” Setting Plautus to music became something of a pet notion of Shevelove’s: In 1942, as a resident director at Yale, he wrote the book and lyrics for *When In Rome*, adapted from the Plautus plays *Miles Gloriosus*, about a swaggering Greek soldier, and *Pseudolus*, about a conniving slave.

The idea didn’t resurface until the late 1950s, when Shevelove, as he recalled it, was part of a late-night bull session among fellow playwrights and TV writers in which the topic of “the lack of low comedy on Broadway” came up, and he began to wax nostalgic about his New Haven experiments. Plautus’ early comedies, he felt, could provide a template for all that was missing from the Broadway musical at the time—a form which was then defined by comparatively sophisticated shows like *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady*. As Larry Gelbart, who would join Shevelove as co-writer on the musical that would soon bear the working title of *A Roman Comedy*, put it, Broadway’s development of “the musical comedy...had improved
the quality of the former at the expense of a good deal of the latter...The Rodgeres and Harts and Hammersteins, the Lerners and Loewes, brilliant men of music and artists of great refinement, had created a vulgarity vacuum, a space we were happy, even anxious to fill.”

Among those similarly anxious to join Shevelove was a young songwriter, Stephen Sondheim, who by that point had already penned the lyrics for West Side Story (another exemplar of the era’s weighty musicals) and tried his hand at television writing, but was itching to for a chance to premiere both his music and lyrics on Broadway. Sondheim saw great farcical potential in the Plautus plays Shevelove showed him. Gelbart, too, devoured Plautus’ comedies, and later raved:

What a treat he was to research! How incredibly Plautus’ aged, ageless writings based on men’s gift for silliness, for pomposity and hypocrisy, have survived; how well it all stood up, the comedy that would serve as fodder not only for the theater, but for future stand-up comedians as well. Digging about as archaeologists might have, what unbelievable treasures we found in his plays, a catacomb filled with nothing but funnybones...I believe it is safe to say that there is not a joke form, comic character, or farcical situation that exists today that does not find its origin in Plautus’ work.

The homework may have been a laugh, but the gestation of Forum was famously arduous, taking more than four years of writing—not quite non-stop, as the writers took on other assignments in the interim between beginning work in 1957 and the show’s first production in 1962, but rough going nonetheless. One hurdle was the familiar behind-the-scenes heavy lifting of courting producers and directors (Jerome Robbins got cold feet, George Abbott stepped in, Robbins returned to rescue a few ailing numbers, etc.), which in this case had the historically significant effect of essentially creating the musical workshop process; Sondheim thinks Forum may have been the first musical to get regular private read-throughs as its writing developed, rather than being forged in the unforgiving crucible of a rehearsal-and-production schedule.

Adding to the show’s hard sell was its unique conception; if Broadway was low-comedy-deficient, as Forum’s writers had diagnosed, it had accordingly little interest in taking their medicine. Shevelove recalled that, in an era of thematically meaty musicals, “it was difficult to explain to people what the intention of the show was,” and that the notion of a Broadway musical with a single set, let alone a single set of costumes, was considered perverse by the standards of the day.

Perhaps Forum’s biggest challenge, though, was the construction of its farcical plot, looted from elements and archetypes of Plautus and stitched together with original material. Broadly speaking, it concerns the efforts of a scheming slave, Pseudolus, to pair his young master Hero with a courtesan, Philia, who’s already promised to the strapping Roman captain, Miles Gloriosus. Complications entangle Hero’s lecherous father, Senex, also in thrall to Philia, and Senex’s jealous wife, Domina, ever on the alert for her husband’s infidelity, as well as the brothel proprietor Marcus Lycus, a high-strung slave named Hysterium, and a neighboring geezer, Eronnius, on a quest to find his orphaned twins. “You have to work it out almost on graph paper so you know what is going on,” said Shevelove of the script, and Gelbart later wrote:

If one could take Forum apart, unscrew the back of it, so to speak, it would be not unlike looking at the works of a computer or the jumble of different-colored wires telephone repairmen deal in. The play is that dense, that tangled. Add or subtract one character and his or her absence or altered presence affects the behavior of every other character in the piece.

Sondheim has called the result of the librettists’ detailed work the “tightest, most satisfyingly plotted, and gracefully written farce I’ve ever encountered,” and elsewhere has said, “Everybody thinks that it was whipped up over a weekend because it plays so easily. The plotting is intricate, the dialogue is never anachronistic, and there are only two or three jokes—the rest is comic situation. It’s almost like a senior thesis on two thousand years of comedy.”

The composer/lyricist has a much lower opinion of his own contribution, however, feeling that his score and the script don’t match, and pointing out, reasonably, that “farces are express trains; musicals are locals.” Sondheim protests too much, of course; try to imagine Forum without its sprightly score, and you have another fine theatrical curiosity fit to join Plautus on the academic shelf, not on the musical stage, where Forum has deservedly join Plautus on the academic shelf, not on the musical stage, where Forum has deservedly become a beloved staple. Sondheim’s music, after all, is one of those integrally entwined telephone wires in the show’s layout which couldn’t be extracted without damage to the rest of the mechanism. It’s true that if you reverse the thought experiment above and imagine a concert of Forum songs minus the script, Sondheim’s score may seem relatively trifling, particularly compared to the towering achievements ahead of him. But this inextricability is just further tribute to the songs’ seamless integration within the show’s whirring comedy contraption—it is the musical equivalent of that effortlessly achieved seeming effortlessness that Sondheim rightly admires in the show’s book.

Rob Weinert-Kendt is Associate Editor at American Theatre magazine. He has written features and criticism for The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, Variety, Newsday, Village Voice, Time Out NY, The Guardian and The San Francisco Chronicle, among others. He was the founding editor of Back Stage West.

This essay is excerpted from the full essay commissioned by STC. Read about the contextual material for all STC mainstage shows in the 2013-2014 Season! Download the Guide to the Season Plays e-book for the Kindle or Nook. Visit ShakespeareTheatre.org/Guide.
THE SCIENCE OF COMEDY

It’s more human than you think.
by Garrett Anderson

Analyzing humor can kill it dead. Jokes are exposed to their bare bones, comic timing is monitored like a heartbeat and there may or may not be an appendix in there somewhere. In Laughter, his book of essays on humor, Henri Bergson says that there is no comedy outside of what is exclusively human. Any analysis of comedy is an analysis of the human condition itself. It is the manipulation of the human, however, that brings forth laughter. Let’s see how dissecting comedy can bring it to life.

To Bend Not Break
The banana peel slip is one of the oldest tricks in the book. This joke is only considered funny, however, until the person that falls is actually hurt. According to Bergson, laughter has no greater enemy than emotion. The second the audience feels any sympathy or pain for the character who has fallen, the joke is no longer funny. Comedian W.C. Fields explains, “If one comedian hits another over the head with a crowbar, the crowbar should bend, not break. In legitimate drama, the hero breaks his sword, and it is dramatic. In comedy, the sword bends, and stays bent.” The dehumanization of the characters’ physical bodies gives the audience enough distance to laugh. The opposite is also funny when animals or robots are given human qualities.

Repetition
Another form of dehumanization—and thus, distancing of emotions—is when humans act in mechanical ways. Plainly, repetition is funny. As Carol Burnett says, “Comedy is tragedy plus time.” A change in that repetition is even funnier. Wile E. Coyote’s third fall is intensified if he’s already fallen twice before. This is where stand-up comedians’ and sitcom writers’ “rule of three” comes from.

Manipulation of Scale
Sometimes pain can be funny if it’s not on a human scale. Mel Brooks says, “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when I fall into an open sewer and die.” Brooks’ explanation is the perfect example of finding humor through a manipulation of scale. The more exaggerated the comic object is, the less sympathy it evokes. This is why exaggerated physical features are funny as well, such as the over the top faces of Lucille Ball in zany situations from I Love Lucy.

The Irrational
It’s funny because it’s true! Exaggerated or distanced objects may be comical, but there is also humor in the exaggeratedly human. Sigmund Freud described humor as a cathartic expression of repressed ideas. Certain jokes are funny because they provide an outlet for repressed urges and desires. The anarchic screaming of Lewis Black, the nonsensical wordplay of the Marx Brothers and the neurotic humor of Woody Allen all stem from Freud’s theory of the repressed unconscious. Another way suppressed emotions are worked out through comedy is through impersonation, such as imitations of your angry boss or family member.

The Comic Life-Force
All forms of comedy come down to a celebration of life. At the end of all of the comedies by Shakespeare or Plautus, characters end up married and society returns to a state of happiness and comfort. Falstaff at home in the tavern embodies the comic spirit. Pseudolus makes us laugh because he is constantly trying to find his own happiness and freedom. Bottom returns to his fully-human form. The dissection of comedy is an unveiling of life, not death.

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CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS
Join the FREE exchange of ideas! STC’s Creative Conversations provide our audience with the chance to connect deeply with the work on our stages. No matter your interest, we have a discussion for you.

PAGE AND STAGE
Sunday, December 1, 5–6 p.m.
Sidney Harman Hall
Explore the production with the artistic team and local scholars.

BOOKENDS
Wednesday, December 4
5:30 p.m. and post-show
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall
Immerse yourself in the world of the play with pre- and post-show discussions.

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT
Saturday, December 14, 5–6 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall
Discuss the production from multiple perspectives.

FREE POST-PERFORMANCE CAST DISCUSSION
Wednesday, December 18, post-show
Sidney Harman Hall
Extend your theatre experience with a post-show discussion with the acting company.

FREE TWITTER NIGHT
Thursday, December 19
Sidney Harman Hall
Use hashtag #STCnight to join the online conversation from the theatre lobby or from home. Performance tickets available for purchase.

For more information, visit ShakespeareTheatre.org/Education.