UDK 82.09-211:792.02
792.02:82.09-211
DOI 10.51937/Amfiteater-2024-1/42-75

Abstract

When critics discuss the question of the canonisation of comedy, they usually base their arguments on analyses of successful plays. However, it might be just as productive, and perhaps even more interesting, to examine comedies that failed, especially those written by well-respected authors. The author focuses in this paper on three plays from roughly the same historical period that all experienced a calamitous original performance and either never managed to recover fully from this failure or have since not been treated as comedies.

The three plays that he explores in more detail are Gustave Flaubert's *The Candidate* (*Le Candidat*, 1874), Henry James's *Guy Domville* (1894) and Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (*Чáйка*, 1895). Even though these three plays were written by well-known writers of their own time, who are still considered hugely influential today, the opening-night audiences did not respond to them in the manner that their authors had hoped. This response is particularly surprising since both Flaubert and Chekhov otherwise wrote several very amusing texts. To determine why this happened, the author compares the selected plays to several other works: Carl Sternheim's adaptation of Flaubert's comedy, Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and two of Chekhov's early farces. The results of these comparisons suggest that the plays most likely failed as comedies because of their flawed relationship between reason and unreason, regularly making them too negative to serve as a source of enjoyment.

Keywords: comedy, failure, dialectics, reason and unreason, Flaubert, James, Wilde

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The Anatomy of Failure

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Failure as a Methodological Starting Point

Comedies fail for a variety of reasons. Some of these are entirely trivial. Terence's *The Mother-in-Law* (*Hecyra*), for example, failed once because the audience was distracted by the "talk of a boxing match, and … a tightrope-walker" and then the second time because the performance was interrupted by "a show of gladiators" (62). Georg Büchner's *Leonce and Lena* (*Leonce und Lena*), on the other hand, was rejected because the author missed the submission deadline of a playwriting competition. When he realised the manuscript was returned unopened, he did not try to offer the script to anyone else (Hilton 89). As a result, the play only premièred in 1895, almost sixty years after Büchner's death.

Comedies often fail because they are poorly performed. When actors lack talent and a sense of humour, no amount of playwriting magic can protect them from the audience's disapproval. One such famous instance is the première of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* on 17 January 1775, in which John Lee's stereotypical portrayal of the stage Irishman Sir Lucius O'Trigger was so bad that he was replaced with another actor after the second night (1: 40–41).

Sometimes, comedies are spurned because they are ahead of their time. The main reason why Carlo Goldoni's *The Amiable Old Man* (*Il Vecchio Bizzarro*) was met with "nothing but hisses" (Goldoni, *Memoirs* 308) is that the likeable lover in the play is an elderly man and not a handsome youth. Both Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* (*Ubu Roi*) and John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* caused riots when they were first staged because the spectators found the plays crude and immoral (compare Béhar 73 and Saddlemyer xxi). In all three cases, the audiences' tastes changed subsequently, and the plays not only survived the disastrous opening nights but have, over time, become cornerstones of comic repertoires in their countries.

Most commonly, however, comedies fail because they are badly written; that is, their plots are implausible, their characters formulaic, and their dialogue stilted. Such comedies flop deservedly and irrevocably and are usually erased from the theatre's

collective memory. As appropriate as this fate seems, it unfortunately also means that no one can learn from their mistakes and that future generations of playwrights may end up repeating them. The one exception from this practice is unsuccessful comedies by well-known authors who know how to create psychologically sound characters, structure tight storylines and write elegant lines. These plays are ideally positioned to provide us with an unexpected insight into the inner mechanisms of the genre. They are especially useful in trying to explain what enables a comedy to survive.

Therefore, in this paper, I focus on three plays from roughly the same historical period that all experienced a calamitous original performance and either never managed to recover fully from this failure or, at least since, have not been treated as comedies. Gustave Flaubert's *The Candidate* (*Le Candidat*), Henry James's *Guy Domville* and Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (*Чáйка*) were all staged when their authors were already well respected. However, the opening-night audiences did not respond to their plays in the manner that one might have expected. This response is particularly surprising since both Flaubert and Chekhov otherwise wrote several very amusing texts. To determine why this happened, I compare the selected plays to several other works: Carl Sternheim's adaptation of Flaubert's comedy, Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and two of Chekhov's early farces. The results of these comparisons suggest that the plays most likely failed as comedies because of their flawed relationship between reason and unreason, regularly making them too negative to serve as a source of enjoyment.

Flaubert's *Le Candidat* and Sternheim's *Der Kandidat*

When *The Candidate* premièred on 11 March 1874, Flaubert was widely considered his generation's most important French novelist (see Lottman 140–41). Though his achievements were never recognised with a seat in the Académie Française, the notoriety of *Madame Bovary* ensured that he was known around Europe. The fact that his best-known novel was almost twenty years old at that time should not be taken as an indication that Flaubert's talent was on the wane. On the contrary, his second realist masterpiece, the autobiographical novel *Sentimental Education* (*L'Éducation sentimentale*), appeared just five years before *The Candidate* and further affirmed his influence in the new literary movement.

The Candidate may have been rushed a bit – Flaubert wrote his comedy in two months – but it was staged at the Théâtre du Vaudeville, a well-regarded house, and produced by the experienced impresario Carvalho, who gained his fame as the manager who staged Alexandre Dumas's *The Lady of the Camellias* (*La Dame aux camélias*). While Flaubert was not a seasoned playwright, the company was aware of his standing as a

literary man and approached his words with care and respect.

And yet, the opening night was an unmitigated disaster. Flaubert himself attributed at least part of the blame for the fiasco to an unsophisticated audience who came to the Théâtre du Vaudeville expecting a light-hearted farce rather than a biting satire. "Besides, it has to be said that the audience was detestable," he complained in a letter to George Sand, "all fops and stockbrokers who had no understanding of what words *mean*" (Flaubert, *Letters* 206). But this may not have been entirely true. In his *Journal*, Flaubert's friend Edmond de Goncourt reports a different atmosphere in the theatre. He suggests that the spectators were, in principle, supportive and were looking forward to hearing Flaubert's fiery rhetoric and uncompromising depiction of contemporary society. When this did not happen, "the disappointment of the audience took its revenge in a sort of bantering whisper, a smiling mockery of the whole sorry business" (Goncourt 135).

The opening-night spectators were not the only ones who could not relate to the selfish characters; the well-disposed critics also struggled with Flaubert's bleak vision of democracy. Émile Zola was just about the only author who appreciated the play. Virtually everyone else dismissed it. Paul de Saint-Victor, for instance, thought it "presented marionettes rather than people"; at the same time, both Auguste Vitu and Sand noted the absence of any sympathetic and relatable characters who would grab the audience's interest (Brown 496–97). Flaubert may have tried to convince himself that the muttering on the first evening was an anomaly, but when he saw that the audience responded in the same manner on the second evening, he was sensible enough to ask that the play be taken off the repertoire (see Lottman 269).

The plot of *The Candidate* revolves around a wealthy provincial banker, Rousselin, who decides to run for a member of parliament. He is mostly interested in the social prestige offered by the position and does not have a clearly defined political agenda. His campaign is further complicated by the fact that the two young men vying for the attention of his daughter Louise belong to opposite sides of the social and political spectrum: one is the middle-class factory manager Murel, and the other is the clueless young aristocrat Onésime. While Lousie prefers the former, by the end of the play, Rousselin forces her to accept the latter to secure the farmers' votes that the Viscount's landlord father can deliver. This does not prevent him, however, from exploiting the services of Murel, who is particularly useful for his connection with the local journalist Julien Duprat. In a very Molièresque ending to the play, Rousselin not only sacrifices his daughter for his political goals but also more or less pushes his wife into an affair with Julien, who, in turn, provides him with positive press coverage. Rousselin wins the elections but is entirely alone at the end of the play.

The Candidate certainly does not lack dramaturgical ambition. Unlike Victorien

Sardou's *Rabagas*, a hugely popular political comedy from the same era that also features a corrupt journalist, Flaubert is not content with staying within the confines of the genre. Instead, he bravely experiments and tries to expand the format. The ending of his play, for instance, is far from happy for anyone, including for Rousselin. The young lovers remain apart, the arranged marriage succeeds, and the husband is cuckolded. In general, the tone of the play is cynical and pessimistic.

But these innovations are not on their own the most important reason for *The Candidate's* failure. Let us not forget that comedy as a theatrical event requires novelty and invention. This means that, in principle, a play that consciously defies what Hans Robert Jauß calls "the horizon of expectations" (*Toward an Aesthetic* 22 ff) should have a greater chance of survival. Yet Flaubert's play failed not only in its original production but also in its 1910 revival, staged by another great director, André Antoine, whose run also lasted just one night (Flaubert 518). Why is this the case? The best answer to this question can be found in a comparison of Flaubert's comedy with its German adaptation, *Der Kandidat*, written in 1914 by Carl Sternheim. Because Sternheim succeeded where Flaubert did not – his adaptation was popular and even today remains on the repertoires of German theatres – an analysis of the differences between the two versions should at least point us to a possible explanation.

Sternheim's adaptation retains the basic dramatic structure of Flaubert's comedy. He moves the storyline into his own time and changes the characters' names, but the sequence of the events remains largely untouched. While only one figure has been cut from Flaubert's *dramatis personae* (the maid Félicité), several of his characters lose their narrative significance in the adaptation. Viscount Onésime's replacement, the comparably pompous Graf Achim Rheydt, for example, barely appears in Sternheim's version and is only peripherally involved in the plot, serving mostly as a paper rival to his bourgeois opponent Grübel (Murel in Flaubert's original). In addition to this, the dialogue in Sternheim's play is substantially faster and more economical. Though *Der Kandidat* faithfully retains virtually all the information from *Le Candidat* – even the jokes are often recycled – Sternheim's dialogue only keeps those lines that advance the action and omits most of those that are used to flesh out the characters' personalities.

Only in the last two acts does Sternheim depart more radically from Flaubert's original. And it is these changes that probably best demonstrate why Flaubert's comedy failed and Sternheim's survived. The first major change is in the Murel-Rousselin (or Grübel-Russek) subplot. In Flaubert's play, Murel, who initially appears to be the shrewdest of the characters, is oblivious to Rousselin's manipulations and believes that the aspiring politician will let him marry his daughter. In Act Four, for example, we can witness the following conversation:

> MUREL. Monsieur Rousselin, it seems to me you might listen to my request!
>
> ROUSSELIN. No! No! Don't worry me now! You would do better to go and look after your workmen. Even in the short time that remains, they might—
>
> MUREL. But I brought Dodart here expressly that he might explain my affairs to you!
>
> ROUSSELIN. Go to your workmen now, I say! We can talk of your affairs later.
>
> MUREL. You consent, then—it is certain?
>
> ROUSSELIN. Yes, but don't lose any more time!
>
> MUREL. [*joyfully*]: Ah! You may count on me! Why, I ought to give them an increase in wages out of my own pocket! [*Exit*]. (Flaubert, 8: 102–103)

Rousselin is very obviously only interested in securing the votes in this scene, and Murel only in securing his permission to marry Louise. When that is given, no matter how casually, Murel is elated and clearly has confidence in Rousselin's promise, even though he had repeatedly seen his prospective father-in-law lie before. Murel believes him and exits happily, never to be seen again on the stage.

Sternheim's Grübel is far less gullible. Though the conversation between him and Russek is quite similar – here, too, the suitor is trying to extract a concession when the father of his beloved is vulnerable – Grübel is more direct than Murel. Here is their exchange:

> GRÜBEL. I've been working behind the scenes for you. Some of what you attributed to Bach today is partially my doing. But let's put that aside. Mr. Russek, in this moment of destiny, when a wisp of rumour can tip the scales and destroy everything, I ask you....
>
> RUSSEK. Don't ask. Everything has long been decided in your favour. Such a dear friend, such a selfless helper! Hurry to the polling station, double, multiply yourself for me! Be like a storm, a turmoil among the undecided! (Sternheim 96)

Grübel's hint is even more open and Russek's acceptance is even less enthusiastic than that in Flaubert, but the outcome of their negotiations is quite different. Later, in an entirely new scene between Grübel and Luise that does not exist in Flaubert's original, Sternheim even gives the couple the opportunity to discuss their impending engagement. "Did he give you his word? Will he keep it?" Luise asks her fiancé, who responds, "I know him better. Don't trust him!" (Sternheim 97). Grübel is no longer uncharacteristically naïve and knows that the assurance he received may be worthless. He remains intelligent and plans for every eventuality.

In the next scene, Sternheim repeats Flaubert's most cringeworthy dialogue, in which the father begs his daughter to sacrifice herself for his political success and marry the ridiculous Graf Achim. Just like in the French version, in the German, too, Luise eventually agrees. But there is a catch: unlike Flaubert, Sternheim allows the lovers to elope rather than condemning the obedient daughter to a loveless marriage with a brainless snob. This not only restores some of the more traditional comic feel to the

play but also helps Grübel retain his dramatic integrity.

By empowering Grübel, Sternheim accomplishes an important task: he creates a rational character whose main purpose is to take on the straight role in the double act that is the foundation of all comic dramaturgy. Early critics complained about the lack of sympathetic characters in Flaubert; what they were missing were consistently intelligent characters who would serve as a counterpoint to the general irrationality of the world that he depicts in his play. In other words, Flaubert's *The Candidate* failed because it is missing the interplay of reason and unreason. His entire comedy is delivered in the same pitch, one outrageous comment following another, without a moment of respite for logic. It should not surprise us then that the audience was so soon tired of it. Inasmuch as it is true, as Aristotle already observed, that comedy imitates people who are worse than us (13), it also needs people who are better than us. To enjoy aesthetic representations of stupidity, we also need to admire the intellectual skill that exposes it. And if this aspect of comic dialectic is missing, we are left unfulfilled.

James's Final Attempt

Flaubert and James knew each other and met several times when James visited Paris (Kaplan 166 ff). Just like Flaubert, James was respected, rather than loved, at the time his *Guy Domville* premièred. Despite this, the actor-manager George Alexander's faith in James's literary abilities was such that he commissioned the play as the opener of the newly renovated St. James's Theatre.

Guy Domville is set in the 1780s, and no expense was spared in the production to ensure the historical accuracy of the costumes and the setting. A friendly group of James's supporters attended the opening night on 5 January 1895. He himself was too nervous and went to see instead the hugely popular production of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* that was playing a few streets away and had opened two days earlier. The first act of James's play was received politely, but, by the second, the audience became noticeably restless. By the end of the evening, the spectators were yelling offensive comments during some of the more heartfelt speeches, and when James was invited in front of the curtain to be acknowledged as was the practice in the Victorian era, he was ruthlessly jeered and booed (Edel 98). Leon Edel speculates in his notes that James may have been collateral damage of a theatre claque that disliked Alexander and suggests that they showed up at the opening primarily to punish the star and not the playwright (103), but James was profoundly hurt and permanently gave up on his dream of becoming a successful playwright.

The audience's behaviour that evening was scandalous enough that most reviewers mentioned it in their reports. As supportive as such influential critics as George

Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, William Archer and Arnold Bennett were of James (see Edel 87-89), their apologies for the play's failings could not change the fate of the production. On subsequent evenings, the audience's reception was much more polite, but by that point, the damage was done. While the play managed to complete its four-week run before it was taken off the repertoire, it was never revived again.

Guy Domville is not labelled as a "comedy" but simply as a "play", but then so was its contemporary competitor, Wilde's *An Ideal Husband.* The very first lines of the text indicate that James, too, is attempting to write a drawing-room play full of clever banter and sparkling wit. The hero of the play, Guy Domville, is a member of an old English Catholic family. He is about to enter the seminary when he is told by the conniving Lord Devenish that, due to an unexpected death, the young prospective priest has just become the head of the Domville family and is expected to marry a distant relative, Mary Brasier (who happens to be Lord Devenish's illegitimate daughter). At first, Guy does his best to continue the family line. He adjusts to the secular life and even half-heartedly starts to court the reluctant Mary. Yet when he meets her true love, Navy Lieutenant George Round, Guy's better nature prevails. He ends up helping the couple elope and then returns home. Lord Devenish, whose main objective has been all along to correct his youthful indiscretion and marry Mrs. Domville, Mary's widowed mother, does not give up. He is still hoping that Guy will end up getting married and is encouraging his affection for Mrs. Peverel. But once Guy figures out that he is once again just a pawn in Lord Devenish's plans, he renounces love and family, entrusts Mrs. Peverel into the hands of his good but dull friend Frank Humber, and leaves for the seminary, this time for good.

Just like in Flaubert's *The Candidate*, in James's *Guy Domville* the main structural weakness of the play that prevents it from succeeding as a comedy is the inertness of its dynamic. In other words, all the characters behave in a very similar manner. Unlike in Flaubert's comedy, they may not be worse than us in terms of their morality – if anything, they are all so nice as to verge on bland – but they are once again all comparably irrational. Guy may well be a man of integrity, but he is at the same time unnecessarily impulsive and changes his mind without much thought of what his actions will do to the others. Lord Devenish, at first, seems quite cool and calculating but seriously misjudges the situation twice: even the most hopeful of spectators surely know in advance that his meddling after the elopement will not achieve anything. Even less reasonable is Mrs. Peverel. Though she admits her feelings for Guy to his friend Frank, she ends unhappy because she cannot force herself to open her heart to Guy himself. Lieutenant Round's scheme is thoroughly harebrained; poor Mary lacks the imagination needed to avoid the unwanted marriage, while Frank simply drones on. We are missing in the play's comic dialectic the rational counterpoint to the unreason dominating the actions of practically all the characters.

James understood something was wrong with his play and immediately tried to rewrite it. The most substantial change he made before *Guy Domville* resumed its run was the removal of much of the drinking scene in the second part of Act Two, during which Lieutenant Round is trying to get Guy drunk and disclose his true intentions. James deleted about seven pages of the text, but the changes did not significantly affect the play's reception. Though most critics singled out that particular passage as one of the main weaknesses of the plot, just making Guy's behaviour less inconsistent was not enough to convince the actors to trust the play again. Unlike the relatively minor tweaks that turned Sheridan's *The Rivals* into a major hit and unlike Sternheim's changes and additions that revived Flaubert's *The Candidate*, James's dramaturgical changes did not have the desired effect. Why not? Because the inexperienced James did not have as sound dramatic instincts as the skilful Sternheim or because the dynamic of his play is beyond dramaturgical redemption?

I suggest here another possibility. The main reason why no one has managed to rewrite *Guy Domville* in more than a century since its unsuccessful première is that such an "adaptation" already exists. In fact, it existed before *Guy Domville* itself was even written. I am thinking here of Wilde's 1893 play, *A Woman of No Importance*.

James's relationship with Wilde was peculiar. On the one hand, he disliked the man passionately (see James, *Letters* 2: 372), and on the other, he was, as his attendance at a performance of *An Ideal Husband* demonstrates, inexorably drawn to Wilde's comedies. In many ways, then, James's plays, and *Guy Domville*, in particular, can be seen as a direct response to Wilde's brand of comic playwriting or even as an attempt to improve Wilde's formula. The obvious parallels between *A Woman of No Importance* and *Guy Domville* are hard to miss. Both plays are situated in the countryside and populated by upper-middle class and aristocratic characters. They both deal with similar issues – the questions of family identity and the role that illegitimate children play in respectable society – and resolve them in a similarly melodramatic fashion. Even the crucial prop in both plays – the gloves – is identical. There are more characters in Wilde's play than in James's, but the central figures all seem to be related. Lord Devenish and Lord Illingworth are both clever and morally questionable. Mrs. Arbuthnot is more stubborn than Mrs. Domville, but they both raised illegitimate children. Finally, the two young men, Gerald and Guy, are similarly Puritanical in their outlook on life.

However, the dynamic of the relationships between these characters is fundamentally different in the two plays. While in *Guy Domville*, the audience is often frustrated with the sympathetic characters' inability to behave rationally and make the right choices, in *A Woman of No Importance*, even the most questionable acts by morally suspect characters are presented as perfectly reasonable. We can see this very clearly in the

two scenes where the parents of the two illegitimate children discuss their future. In *Guy Domville*, Lord Devenish and Mrs. Domville are very quick to give up on Mary after they have learned that she has fled with Lieutenant Round. "Let them go!" Lord Devenish says. When Mrs. Domville asks in horror, "Go and be married?" he responds without much subtlety, "Go and be damned. We still have Guy! He's as much of a Domville as ever! He can still have heirs" (James, *Guy Domville* 179). He does have a plan, but his reaction is impetuous and lacks an intellectually convincing motivation.

In contrast to this, in the comparable conversation in *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde manages to make Lord Illingworth's similarly callous proposal almost sensible. "According to our ridiculous English laws," he says to his one-time mistress and mother of his son, Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I can't legitimise Gerald. But I can leave him my property. Illingworth is entailed, of course, but it is a tedious barrack of a place. He can have Ashby, which is much prettier, Harborough, which has the best shooting in the north of England, and the house in St. James Square. What more can a gentleman require in this world?" (Wilde 8: 178). Lord Illingworth is essentially commodifying his responsibilities here, yet the intellectual plausibility of his suggestion is somehow far less jarring than Lord Devenish's stratagem. And certainly, far more amusing.

James may have objected to Wilde's excessive use of epigrams as a means of ensuring an effective comic dialectic (*Letters* 3: 514). However, if someone ever wants to have another go at *Guy Domville* and rewrite it, this hypothetical adaptation will likely end up far closer to a pastiche of Wilde's comedies than James would have liked. Refocusing James's jokes will inevitably lead back to the source texts from which he was trying to distance himself. And the best way of ensuring that the reimagined *Guy Domville* works better than the originals will be to borrow shamelessly from them.

Chekhov's Miscalculation

The world première of Chekhov's *The Seagull* took place in St. Petersburg's Alexandrinsky Theatre on 17 October (O.S.) 1896. Chekhov was concerned about the quality of the production team before the play opened, worrying about the actors' inability to deal with the new kind of text (compare *Letters* 263). Once the curtain rose, his worst fears were realised. The audience was unfriendly from the very beginning. The spectators laughed at Nina's symbolist monologue and booed the performers. In Chekhov's view, the only actor in the cast who could handle his unique brand of dialogue, the delicate Vera Komissarzhevskaya, was so affected by the audience's disapproval that she lost her voice and could barely continue with her lines. Chekhov was thoroughly traumatised by this experience; he hid backstage for the final two acts and vowed never to write for the stage again. Just like in James's case, the continuation of the St. Petersburg run

of *The Seagull* was received more generously, but the production was still taken off the repertoire after only four days (see Callow 259).

The failure of *The Seagull* differs in two significant respects from the fiascos that *The Candidate* and *Guy Domville* experienced. First, unlike these two plays, which have been more or less forgotten since their disastrous opening nights, *The Seagull* bounced back from its failure spectacularly and is now a mainstay of most repertoires. The reason for this is, of course, the Moscow Art Theatre's 1898 production under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky, which included, in addition to Stanislavsky himself in the role of Trigorin, Chekhov's later wife Olga Knipper as Arkadina, and the very young Vsevolod Meyerhold as the avant-garde playwright Konstantin Treplev.

The second unique characteristic of *The Seagull's* initial failure is that Chekhov, unlike Flaubert and James, had written successful comedies before *The Seagull*. Both *The Bear* (*Медведь*), originally performed in Moscow in 1888, and *The Proposal* (*Предложение*), which was first staged in St. Petersburg two years later, were popular with the audiences and encountered none of the problems that characterised the early reception of both *Ivanov* (*Иванов*) and *The Seagull*. Chekhov himself may have dismissed his one-act farces as insignificant and called them "stupid" (quoted in Callow *43*). Yet, it is precisely his inability to frame the "stupidity" properly that may have doomed *The Seagull* as a comedy. Let me explain why.

Unlike *Guy Domville*, *The Seagull* is subtitled as a comedy but has rarely been treated as one. Instead, the melancholy atmosphere in the second part of the play and the suicide at the very end are usually seen as thoroughly dramatic and even tragic. Chekhov's label, in turn, is often either dismissed entirely or considered slightly whimsical (compare Gottlieb 232). Yet, Chekhov clearly indicated that he had set out to write a humorous play. In particular, he saw *The Seagull*'s many convoluted love relationships as an element of romantic comedy (Chekhov, *Letters* 261). Most characters in the play seem to be in love with a person who loves someone else. The brooding Konstantin is in love with the aspiring, though not necessarily talented, actress Nina. She, in turn, falls for the popular author Trigorin, who is otherwise Konstantin's mother's lover. Arkadina herself is loved platonically by the still dashing Dorn, while Masha, the estate manager's daughter, pines after Konstantin but marries instead the smitten schoolteacher Medvedenko. In a radical departure from the traditional romantic comedy model, not one of these relationships ends happily. Masha hates her husband, Nina gets pregnant with Trigorin but loses her baby as Trigorin returns to Arkadina, and Konstantin shoots himself after Nina rejects him once again.

In short, most characters in *The Seagull* behave foolishly and should, consequently, be a perfect target for ridicule. But we feel pity for them instead. The main reason for this is, as in Flaubert's and James's plays, the absence of a proper way to foreground their

stupidity or irrationality. Compare, for instance, how differently Chekhov approaches a very similar theme in a successful versus an unsuccessful comedy. In both cases, the examples are from the very beginning of the play. *The Bear* starts with a conversation between the recently widowed Popova and her servant Luka, who is trying to convince her to get on with her life:

> LUKA. It's just not right, missus. You're letting yourself fall to pieces. Cook and the maid have gone berry picking, every living thing is out enjoying the sunshine, even your cat, now, he's out there trying to catch himself a bird, and here you sit, shut up in the house all day long, like some kind of nun. That's no fun. You listen to what I'm saying, now! It's been a whole year since you left the house!
>
> POPOVA. I shall never leave this house. Why should I? My life is over. He's dead and buried, and so am I, buried here within these four walls. We're both dead.
>
> LUKA. I never heard the like! Your husband's dead. Well, God rest him, he's not coming back. You mourned him good and proper; now it's time to move on. You can't sit here wearing black and crying for the rest of your life. I lost my old woman, too, a while back, I cried for a month, and that was that. No need to sit around for years singing hymns; she wasn't worth it. [*Sighs*] (…). (Chekhov, *Plays* 21)

As we learn later in the play, Popova's mourning is excessive. Her late husband treated her badly, meaning her behaviour can be seen as exaggerated without a good reason. And there is only a short step from stupidity to ridiculousness, from being inflexible to being unreasonable to the extent where others can observe this as well (and laugh at it).

The Seagull also starts with a character in mourning. This time, the overly melancholic character is Masha, accompanied on her walk by her ever-so-keen suitor Medvedenko. Here is the passage:

> MEDVEDENKO. Why do you always wear black?
>
> MASHA. Because I'm in mourning for my life. I'm not happy.
>
> MEDVEDENKO. Why not? [*Perplexed*] I don't understand why not. You're in good health; your father is ... well, he's not rich, but he's pretty well off. I'm in a lot worse shape than you. I make twenty-three roubles a month, that's before payroll deductions, and I'm not in mourning. [*Sits*]
>
> MASHA. It has nothing to do with money. You can be poor and still be happy.
>
> MEDVEDENKO. Well, maybe in theory, but it doesn't work out that way. There's me, my mother, my two sisters, and my little brother. I'm the wage earner, and all I get is those twenty-three roubles. How am I supposed to buy a drink? Or sugar for tea? Or cigarettes, even? I can't do it. (Chekhov, *Plays* 111)

Even more than Popova's, Masha's dejection seems disproportionate. Though Konstantin is indeed not returning her affection, dealing with rejection is not the same

as experiencing loss. As real as her depression is, Medvedenko's inept attempts to alleviate it make it even more trivial. Rather than comic, Masha is pathetic (compare Jauß, *Aesthetic Experience* 123–34).

The most significant difference between these two situations, and probably also the main reason why Popova is funny while Masha is not, is that in *The Bear*, Luka foregrounds Popova's irrationality, while in *The Seagull*, Medvedenko only serves to exacerbate Masha's. Though both characters seem to have the same objective – to convince the two women that they should snap out of their stupor – only Luka's strategy is rational and selfless. Medvedenko, on the other hand, registers what Masha says but then immediately switches back to himself. In other words, the dialectic between reason and unreason is fully formed in *The Bear*, but in *The Seagull*, it only flickers temporarily. To sustain the comic for more than a few fleeting moments, both aspects of this intellectual tension must be maintained, and this does not happen too often in *The Seagull*.

The irony is that several characters in *The Seagull* could have successfully complemented the buffoons and killjoys, such as Masha, Medvedenko or Shamrayev, or tempered the fools, such as Arkadina and Trigorin. For instance, Chekhov's alter-ego, the cynical country doctor Dorn, is quite convincing as a *raisonneur*, and there is a certain wisdom in Arkadina's constantly laughing brother Sorin as well. However, neither is placed in the right double act to fulfil this function. If Dorn had spent more time with Konstantin, the young man might not have killed himself. Likewise, if Trigorin had spoken more to Sorin than to Nina, he might not have found the opportunity to seduce her. Christopher Durang attempts something along these lines in his 2012 comedy *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*. In this play, too, a middle-aged actress returns to her ancestral home and upsets everyone's daily routines. But because all the stooges have their foils in Durang's parody, the unfaithful younger lover in his text is unceremoniously dumped, and everyone survives.

Without any comparable dramaturgical interventions, in *The Seagull*, reason and unreason orbit in parallel comic trajectories that rarely intersect. It almost seems as if, after seeing how smoothly his one-act farces ran, Chekhov decided he wanted a new challenge and reshuffled all the natural comic combinations in *The Seagull*. Based on what happens in *Uncle Vanya* (*Дядя Ваня*) and *The Cherry Orchard* (*Вишнёвый сад*), his other full-length plays that are identified as comedies, it seems that he recognised *The Seagull* may have gone too far in its comic experimentation. Lopakhin and Varya from *The Cherry Orchard* are not quite Lomov and Natalya from *The Proposal*, and it is hard to draw a direct parallel between Popova's refusal to shoot and Uncle Vanya's missed shots. However, the interaction between reason and unreason is certainly more conventional in his two late comedies. Comic characters in these plays are still contradictory, unpredictable and uncertain, but their irrationality is almost always

displayed in conjunction with reason. In other words, there is a method to their madness. Chekhov's comedy is often very subtle and rarely simple, but his characters' insight is just as important as their triviality.

Provisional Conclusions

Three failures are, of course, too small a sample to articulate any decisive observations. I can, however, offer some provisional conclusions. We can argue, for example, that the success of a comedy does not depend exclusively on accurate and plausible exposure of human foibles and weaknesses as has been the view of traditional comic theory (compare Dryden 10:203). All three plays examined in this paper demonstrate quite convincingly that no matter how perceptive and psychologically nuanced a depiction of individual or collective irrationality may be, the audience still expects the authors to balance it with reason. If the spectators want to feel truly superior to the characters, they should not only be convinced that they are smarter than the stupid ones but also that they are as clever as the most intelligent among them. In other words, comedy is not just a representation of the world as unreasonable but also a genre that recognises the crucial role that reason plays in our lives.

We can also suggest that a comedy can survive a failure in two ways: by adjusting the values within its internal dynamic – this is what Sternheim did to Flaubert's *The Candidate* – or by pivoting permanently to a different horizon of expectations, as it seems to have happened with Chekhov's *The Seagull*. If neither can be done – the obvious example here is James's *Guy Domville* – the play will likely be forgotten or, in case its author is very influential, be relegated to a historical footnote. If a comedy is ahead of its time, these three options become immaterial: such a comedy simply starts its reception cycle once the audience is ready for it.

What about the possibility that, in the future, audiences will also start to laugh at comedies without a balanced dynamic? In more than two thousand years since Aristophanes' *The Acharnians* (*Ἀχαρνεῖς*), this has not happened yet. Successful comedies have been delivering a vigorous dialectic of reason and unreason for centuries. But a categorical answer to this question is, alas, impossible.

And one final warning: the suggestion that these three comedies by three major realist authors were unsuccessful because they lack a proper dramaturgical dialectic cannot explain every comic debacle. It is far more likely that problematic epistemology only becomes an issue when a play is otherwise dramatically ambitious and has literary merit. As I mentioned at the very beginning, there are many ways in which a comedy can fail.

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