

Roundabout Theatre Company

A flea in her EAR



From Page To Stage Production Guide

A flea in her EAR

by *Georges Feydeau*

co-adapted by *Jean-Marie Besset* and *Mark O'Donnell*

directed by *Bill Irwin*

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PRODUCTION GUIDE

written by

Margaret Salvante, *Education Director*

Sarah Moore, *Education Assistant*

Michael Paller, *Consulting Dramaturg*

Elizabeth Ascoli, *Education Intern*

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter.

- F. W. Nietzsche: *The Will to Power*, I, 1896

America's favorite of Feydeau's plays, *A Flea In Her Ear* is a perfect example of French bedroom farce. Set in France at the turn of the century, the story centers around a misunderstanding between Victor Chandebise, a loyal husband and hard working insurance salesman, and his wife Constance, a woman who is in need of a little excitement in her life. Constance's mistaken impression that her husband is having an affair (the flea in her ear) and her ill-fated attempts to catch him, compounded by Chandebise's resemblance to Dodo, a dim-witted valet, soon have the formerly upstanding middle class characters of the play sneaking in and out of the bedrooms of the Hotel Pussycat.

Dealing with the absurd as if it were the most normal of circumstances, the play delights in chases, disappearances, and even the low comedy of kicks in the pants. Through blindness, foolishness, selfishness, avarice, and other human foibles, Feydeau's characters set off the machinery that will trap them. As the events of the play spin increasingly out of control, we are brought face to face with the absurdity of our own predicament and are

reminded that in our struggle to fulfill our hopes, dreams and desires, we must constantly deal with having the rug pulled out from under us by a blind, unfeeling universe.

And yet, the very situations of mistaken identity, infidelity and betrayal, that would be traumatic to us in real life, become, in the hands of Feydeau, hilarious. In the darkness of the theater we are able to applaud and laugh out loud at those words and actions which, in the daylight, we'd insist we find shocking. We snicker at the naughty desires of the characters that set the plot in motion and guffaw as they become more and more frantic and helpless trying to avoid the consequences of their foolish actions. In the chaos that inevitably results we are permitted to release the pressures of our own daily existence with guilt free indulgence in the taboo.

How could one help feeling without an almost unbearable anguish the call which emanates from Feydeau's creatures, a cry of accusation against a universe where man himself, with his wish for reason and happiness, is the most irreparable absurdity?

- Thierry Maulnier, 1951

WHO'S WHO

Victor Chandebise (played by Mark Linn-Baker) the head of the Chandebise household. He is an insurance salesman, who is faithful and in love with his wife, but is afraid he will not be able to perform sexually. Like most people, however, he is flattered with the compliment of being the object of an anonymous woman's affections.

Constance Chandebise (played by Kali Rocha) Victor's wife. She starts the play's mad chain of events because she wrongly suspects that her husband is having an affair. While she likes to have fun and a little spice in her life, she would never consider having intimate relations with anyone besides Victor.

Tournel (played by Bruce MacVittie) Victor's friend. Tournel is a dashing young man who, when apparently seduced by Constance, responds with gusto, and in turn begins to seduce her.

Lucie Histingua de Homenides (played by Angie Phillips) Constance's oldest and best friend. After some persuasion she agrees to assist Constance in a plot to catch Victor in an affair.

Mr. Histingua de Homenides (played by Mark McKinney) Lucie's husband, and a potential client of Victor's. He is a flamboyant and very excitable Latin American. He speaks Spanish almost exclusively, and therefore misunderstands and overreacts when he believes his wife was unfaithful to him: he threatens to kill everyone in sight.



Costume Sketch by Bill Kellard



Costume Sketch by Bill Kellard

Dr. Migraine (played by Richard B. Shull) a doctor who works with and is friendly with Victor and his household. He is quite a playboy, and was the one who introduced everyone to the Hotel Pussycat. He likes to jokes and sarcasm, but he is also clear-headed, and gives advice of all kinds.

Camille (played by Shaun Powell) Victor Chandebise's nephew and secretary. He is looked upon as the model of good behavior, but has a secret life: he is having an affair with the maid. He has a cleft palate which causes him to have a slight speech impediment—he cannot pronounce consonants.

Ninette (played by Camilia Sanes) the Chandebises' maid. She is married to the valet of the household, but is secretly having an affair with Camille.

Etienne (played by Michael Countryman) the Chandebises' valet. He is Ninette's husband, and he is quite suspicious of her. He has the attitude that all women must be "put in their place."

Batallion (played by James Lally) the owner of the Hotel Pussycat, (a rather questionable establishment), who kindly overlooks the activities of his clients. He is a former soldier, and rather gruff with his maid. He derives peculiar pleasure from beating both his valet and his wife (separately).

See WHO'S WHO on the last page

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Feydeau (1862 - 1921)



The name Feydeau is immediately associated with the boulevard theater of the Belle Époque. and indeed, Feydeau's comedies reflect, better than those of his colleagues, the insouciance, frivolity, gaiety, high living, and optimism typical of this period. Feydeau is immediately acknowledged also as the most accomplished practitioner of the "well-made play." as the technician par excellence whose labyrinthine plots are marvels of clockwork precision. To many, Feydeau is above all the undisputed master of the bedroom farce.

- Manuel A Esteban, *Georges Feydeau*, 1983

Georges Feydeau was born in France on December 8, 1862 to Ernest-Aimé Feydeau and his Polish wife Lodzia Zeleweska. Ernest was an author, poet, and journalist, who was most well-

known for writing a scandalous novel at the time called *Fanny*. (He was on the outskirts of a brilliant group of literary friends, including Gustave Flaubert, Alexandre Dumas and Charles Baudelaire but was hardly as well-respected as his peers.) Georges Feydeau's mother was an extremely beautiful woman who had been seduced by many high powered men. In fact, the real father of Georges Feydeau was rumored to be the Emperor of France, Napoleon III, rather than Ernest Feydeau.

Georges saw his first plays at the age of six or seven, and enjoyed them so much that he immediately followed in his father's footsteps and began writing his own. His father was impressed with Georges' talent and encouraged the boy's writing, even if it meant that Georges never did his homework. Georges used to say that it was his laziness in doing his homework that led him to the theatre.

Feydeau's first theatrical attempts consisted mostly of short scenes and monologues. He eventually graduated to writing full-length plays, and 1886 marked Feydeau's first theatrical success with *Tailleur pour dames* (*A Gown for His Mistress*). While this play raised high hopes for Feydeau's success, his following plays were largely flops, and after a few years of disappointing reviews as well as unsuccessful attempts at acting, Feydeau stopped writing altogether in order to study past farcical and vaudeville writers.

All of Georges Feydeau's plays are farcical in nature, drawing humor from physical activity on stage. Earlier writers of farce and vaudeville include, among other comic masters, Moliere, who lived 200 years earlier. As with his predecessors, in many of Feydeau's plays there are humorous episodes of mistaken identity, and a fast pace which seems to spin out of control. But in fact the play must be very tightly written, and the author is very much in command of what is going on. It is through these farcical situations that Feydeau made a mockery of marriage, parenthood, the military, and other revered social institutions.

Many of Feydeau's characters are drawn from real people he watched at cafes and clubs he frequented. His favorite restaurants were the Napolitain and Maxim's. One was the meeting place for journalists, poets and painters, including the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, while the other was famous for carefree wining, dining and dancing until all hours of the night, and was a symbol of an easy-going attitude at the turn of the century. In large part, it is the fact that Feydeau's characters are realistic and recognizable, with flaws and all, that make his plays so appealing and popular.

FEYDEAU'S FARCE

Farce is a theatrical style that has been around since Greek and Roman times. Farce takes tact and social graces and thrives on misrepresenting them; it reduces the pillars of society to ruin. Feydeau utilized the form of farce to highlight the important elements of the story. His stagecraft is a type of broad comedy that draws its humor from physical activity. Farces are high-strung, catastrophic stories that involve inexplicable coincidences, errors of identity, furtive secrets and a climactic chase. Thematically, farces tap into marriage, the army, law and politicians in order to poke fun at their authoritative and traditional foundations and make the audience laugh. All of this is shrewdly calculated to raise the audience's laughter and give them temporary escape into irrational and fantastic behavior.

There is more to farce, however, than laughs. Farce is also the most energetically violent, aggressive form of drama — far more so than tragedy or melodrama. Violence is one of farce's principal ingredients, seething below the surface, suddenly erupting above it like a volcano through the most placid ice pond, scattering helpless skaters in all directions. This violence, we must admit, also has its appealing side. In his book on humor, Freud tells us that laughing at certain jokes is a catharsis, a liberation of secret, pent-up desires. "Wit," he wrote, "permits us to make our enemy ridiculous through that which we could not utter loudly or consciously on account of existing hindrances; in other words, *wit affords us the means of surmounting restrictions and of opening up other inaccessible pleasure sources.* [italics his]." The release of this pressure is laughter, but the material is always disguised in some degree, hidden from the person telling the joke and to the one hearing it. "Strictly speaking," Freud continues, "we do not know what we are laughing about."

In addition to its laughter and violence, farce has a third salient ingredient: energy. The characters in a Feydeau farce pursue the satiation of their appetites with a single-mindedness that, in its power and fury, seems to have been derived directly from nature.

Therefore, on one level in *A Flea in Her Ear*, we are laughing at the absurd situations its respectable middle-class people get themselves into. On another level, we are laughing at the penalty-free destruction of all those family values we supposedly hold so dear. Why *shouldn't* we be able to have an affair with the next attractive man or woman who enters the room? Why *shouldn't* we be able to sneak away to the Hotel Pussycat and indulge our desires? Why *shouldn't* we be able to keep our sex lives to ourselves, instead of sharing them with our oh-so-intrusive spouse? Perhaps one of the reasons we turn down the lights in theatres is to disguise the fact that we are enjoying ourselves so much.



PRINCIPAL WORKS

<i>Tailleur pour dames (Fitting for Ladies)</i>	1886
<i>L'Affair Edouard (The Case Edouard)</i>	1889
<i>Monsieur chasse (The Happy Hunter)</i>	1892
<i>Un fil à la patte (Not by Bed Alone)</i>	1894
<i>Le Dindon (The Dunce)</i>	1896
<i>La Dame de chez Maxim (The Lady From Maxim's)</i>	1899
<i>La Duchesse des Folies-Bergere (The Duchess of the Folies-Bergere)</i>	1902
<i>La Main-passe (The Main Road)</i>	1906
<i>La puce a l'oreille (A Flea in Her Ear)</i>	1907
<i>Occupe-toi d'Amelie (Keep and Eye on Amelie)</i>	1908
<i>On purge bebe (Going to Pot)</i>	1910
<i>"Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!" (Don't Walk Around Stark Naked!)</i>	1911
<i>Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!" (Hortense Has Said: "I Don't Give a Damn!")</i>	1916

FEYDEAU'S FRANCE

Georges Feydeau wrote the majority of his plays between 1880 and 1914, a stretch of history that is typically broken down into two separate and distinct historical periods. The period between 1880-1899 is known as the *fin de siècle*—meaning the end of the century—and 1900-1914 is now known as the *belle époque*—which loosely translated means “the beautiful time.”

Much like Feydeau's farces, real life in turn-of-the-century France had a sense of things spinning out of control. Socially and economically, France was in the midst of an upheaval. The upper class elites were being violently thrown from their comfortable place in society by a rising working class and a strong socialist movement. The differences between social orders were rapidly diminishing as literacy and education became more widespread. Cities were growing to accommodate the increasing size of the strong working class, and with the growth came an increase in crime and theft. France even saw signs of anarchy with waves of bomb attacks on the homes of police magistrates and intellectual centers.

The period also saw a great many technological and scientific advances, which affected areas such as transportation, communication and medicine. The public saw the advent of such current necessities as telephones, telegraphs, typewriters, bicycles, automobiles, buses and electric lamps, as well as medical advances such as the use of x-rays and the utilization of vitamins. It is notable that these advances benefited the majority of the French and European population. Buses, for example, meant that there was an inexpensive way to transport a large number of people. It also meant that some classes traveled together, which broke down class distinctions even further.

Aside from the major social and political upheavals of the time, the early 1900s had one significant difference and improvement from the two preceding decades: an economic recovery. Between 1900 and 1914 there was simply more money around than there had been before. It was this feeling of relative economic stability, coupled with the continuous social, political and cultural changes, that accounted for the *belle époque*, or the feeling that things were good, exciting and carefree. Paris became the center of a cultural and intellectual explosion. Painters such as Seurat, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cézanne, Degas and Picasso were presenting increasingly different and less-traditional works. Theatre and other forms of entertainment had a larger audience than they had ever had. Both the wealthy and the working classes increasingly went to the theatre, dance halls and even night clubs with women singing in provocative costumes. It was a time of experimentation, a time where the pervasive feeling was that “anything goes.”



A scene from 1895 France by Toulouse-Lautrec

WHO'S WHO Continued:

Ginnette (played by Virginia Smith) the maid at the Hotel Pussycat. She is not happy working for the impatient Batallion, and does not overlook nor fails to judge the questionable activities of the hotel's clientele.

Olympia (played by Alice Playten) Batallion's wife. A former beauty, she is now 57 years old, wears tight clothing, and too much make-up and jewelry.

Rugby (played by Wally Dunn) an impatient Englishman who has a room at the Hotel Pussycat. He nervously expects a guest who never shows up.

Dodo (played by Mark Linn-Baker) the valet for the hotel. He is drunk most of the time, and not too bright. He used to work for Batallion in the army, and is so used to his boss's abuse that he now enjoys being kicked around. He happens to look exactly like Victor Chandebise.

Baptistin (played by George Hall) Batallion's father, whose job at the Hotel is to act as though he is a sick old man. This way he will be a decoy for the guests in case any of them get caught by their spouses.



Dodo

ACTIVITIES:

BEFORE THE PLAY: Think about the most absurd or ridiculous situation you have ever been in. What caused the situation to occur, was it something you did or was it due to circumstances beyond your control? Did the situation seem funny when it was happening or did it only become humorous after the fact? Have you ever been in a situation where someone has said "We'll laugh about this later"?

AS YOU WATCH: Pay close attention to the action as it unfolds. Are you able to keep track of where each character is and what he or she is up to? Are you able to anticipate what is going to happen next? How do the costumes, lighting, scenery and sound contribute to the humor?

AFTER THE PLAY: Think of two or three movies or television shows that you have seen recently that you considered comedies. How were they similar to *A Flea in Her Ear*? How are they different? What situations occur that would seem tragic or shocking if handled differently? Think of an absurd situation from your own life. How can your story be retold to make it funny? What characters, circumstances and exaggerations can you add to turn your story into a farce?

WEBSITE:

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>

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WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The upper lobby of the Roundabout Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you. Student discounts are available to those who show a student ID card. Roundabout's lobby is also an art gallery, so you might want to have a look at the paintings we have on display. Also, take the time to review the display about the show.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in *From Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

*Thank You For Your Cooperation
And Enjoy The Show!*

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Roundabout Theatre Company
1530 Broadway, New York, NY 10036 (212) 719-9393 • Fax (212) 869-8817