

Comedy Notebook

Fundamentally Comic Things

This section was written without any recent background reading of treatises on comedy, e.g., Henri Bergson's, which I read as an undergraduate, and which struck me as one of the dullest books ever written, or Steve Allen's, which I have never read. I disagree with the theory that we laugh at what we know might happen to us, but which wouldn't be funny if it did. The truth is, we have no idea what the original sources of laughter were in the human race. By all rights, given the world as it is, there is no reason to laugh at anything.

We begin with the question, Are there any immortal comic scenes and situations, things we would describe as "fundamentally comic"? By way of attempting an answer, let us ask what types of comedy seem to become most quickly dated. Certainly one type is political humor. Another is humor based on dialect. But, having said that, we must never forget our enjoyment of Sam Weller's speech in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. Wit and, in particular, word play, seems more long-lived, but so is humor based on purely visual scenes ("sight gags").

It is remarkable that comedy is understandable across cultural boundaries much more readily than is tragedy. We can still be amused at Aristophanes' satires, or Moliere's, but Greek tragedy, and the tragedies of Corneille and Racine are now fit only for the classroom.

The following seem to me fundamentally comic:

- The mixing of contexts, as exemplified by, e.g., Woody Allen's statement, "My mother believed in God and carpeting." (In fact, a case can be made that Allen's formula for comedy is nothing more than the mixing of contexts.)

Or the overly refined person using "as it were", "so to speak", in completely inappropriate circumstances. ("The police found that he had been, as it were, murdered.")

But the mixing of contexts — finding how "unrelated" things might indeed be related — is one of the most important sources of creativity in any field.

- A person of superior character and/or social status having to endure the absurd behavior of others, as when Jack Benny would roll his eyes as someone made a complete fool of themselves.

- The fumbler. There are a number of variations on this:

The perennial, always completely confident, fumbler (Don Quixote, Inspector Clouseau, Claude Erskine-Brown in the *Rumpole of the Bailey* TV series; Mr. Hulot waiting, looking at pictures in the room, straightening each, unaware that the riding crop in his back pocket is causing each to be knocked askew as soon as he straightens it).

The man who takes infinite pains doing something, the audience all the while seeing that it is doomed to failure, or finding out that it has failed for an absurd reason, e.g., Buster Keaton saving in the nick of time his newly built portable house from being hit by a train by moving it off the track, only to find that he has moved it onto another track, down which comes a train that destroys the house. Or the guy who takes infinite pains at something which the audience knows is absolutely useless for his purpose, or in fact impossible (Marcel Marceau leaning on his invisible mantelpiece).

Comic Scenes

Rapid, expert parking of a car by a small woman. Different effects if the car is very big, very small.

Kid about five in a restaurant in Berkeley with his father, who is reading a physics text. Father, every once in a while holding book for kid and saying things like: “See? This is an *AC* motor. And this is the *armature*. Can you say ‘*armature*’?”

Guy trying to eat with chopsticks, getting less and less into mouth each time, chewing more and more, ala Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*.

Woman talking to two people at once, one on phone, the other in the same room, the latter trying to get as much of her attention as possible. The baffling discontinuities in the conversation from point of view of guy on the phone — he thinks she’s talking to him when she is talking to the other, and vice versa.

Someone inept practicing the piano. The halting, the trying again. Going fast through the parts he can play, going painfully slowly through the parts (most of them) that he can’t. Comic effect is gained, as in Bob and Ray’s “Slow Talker” sketch, from our knowing only too well what is coming next, what *should* come next, and listening to his unbearable struggle to make it come next.

Someone running past you down a hill as you make your way up.

Someone frantically, clumsily, going up- and downstairs on stilts. Several people having stilt races on a staircase.

Teenage boys wearing baseball hats with visor to one side or in back, who don’t just drive up and park in a parking lot, say, outside a fast food restaurant, they open the door and roll out and let the truck just bang into the wall or concrete barrier, they don’t give a shit, they’ll get another truck somewhere.

Two grammarians who run off the road in a ravine, or fall down an elevator shaft. One begins calling “Help, help!”. The other begins asking, “Is *Help*, in this context a noun or a verb, do you think? Are you in essence saying, ‘Help is needed here, Bring (or get) help’, or are you saying, ‘Help us.’” The other guy is of course impatient, but the first continues to press him as their situ-

ation goes increasingly precarious.

A guy who tells jokes to his loving new bride, who never gets them, so he carefully explains each one to her. She listens intently, but can't understand the explanations either.

Problems when a woman living in a crooked house attempts to show someone the door: She walking to the door, opening it, walking back, saying, "I would appreciate it if you left. I don't think we have anything more to say to each other." But the door begins to close of itself. She goes back, says something equivalent, door keeps closing as soon as she lets go of it.

Shy guy trying to bring himself to ask about the sexual preference or status of another: "Are you, uh, you know, [contorting of hands in manner of ambitious young graduate students, fingers interlaced, bowing out of hands, then grotesque attempt at entwining fingers, twisting them into proper position so question will be made OK]...uhm [clearing of throat, more twisting]...you know..."

Guy, angry, turning and marching out of a room, kicking a balled up piece of paper on the floor, missing, trying again, missing again, now devoting full energy to having his expression of rage, continuing to miss, things falling down as he causes more and more damage, gets madder and madder.

A guy with big ears in a video store renting a video tape with a dog on the cover that has big ears.

Engineer demonstrating new machine, confidently saying, "And so, when I press this...Oh, yes, forgot to... OK, now when I press this...Ah, completely forgot..." Etc.

A guy telling someone about how a new pair of pants he bought, but which failed to impress: "...my pants let me down (usually, I let my pants down but in this case...)"

Two people who are good at holding their breaths (circus performers or magicians, say), trying to kill each other by strangling. Each keeps thumbs pressed in the other's throat till he is sure he is dead, then let's go. Other holds motionless, eyes-staring, suffocated attitude for a second or two then lunges at the other, buries his thumbs in his throat, and the whole process repeats.

A farewell scene in a 19th century drama. But the carriage doesn't pull away. People keep repeating themselves, waving (but there is no need, because nothing is moving), then gradually run out of things to say. Soon are urging the driver to get on with it. Eventually just walk back up

the steps leaving the travelers-to-be sitting in the carriage.

Mr. Bean composes: He with his busy, fussy, delighted way, writing busily, occasionally hitting one note on piano with extended finger: "Ah, that's perfect!" More busy writing. Then delivering result to orchestra conductor who passes out the parts. Frowning, etc., by orchestra members as they study the parts. Then conductor tapping his baton on podium, raising arms looking around to see if everyone is ready, giving downbeat, and sound that emerges is exactly that of an orchestra warming up prior to a concert. Mr. Bean, sitting in empty seats, beams.

Someone driving someone else crazy by their efforts not to disturb them. Tiptoeing past the door of the room where they are sleeping. The creak of shoe leather or floor board. Second person realizes what's going on, torn between saying stop it and appreciation for the consideration. Minutes go by, second person not sure if first is still there, in midst of gigantic tiptoe pause to ensure silence. Second person driven crazy by not knowing.

A man afraid of large roses. W. C. Fields reaction when, while waiting in the room of a beautiful house, turns and is suddenly confronted by a large rose or several in a vase. Fearful jumping back, hands together. When invited somewhere, always cautiously inquires if there are any roses, ala man afraid of dogs.

Berkeley parent giving instructions to her kid regarding what to say to psychiatrist years hence when kid becomes a patient. Parent giving kid typed affidavits, notes: "Dear Dr. ..., In regard to my son's claim that I ..."

Cartoon Ideas

Mother feeding a child from a bowl on the table of his high-chair, holding a spoonful of oatmeal or whatever, leaning forward lovingly and asking, "Can you say 'autistic'?"

Puns and Word-Play

Landscaping: landscraping

A violent concerto

An inferior decorator

Te Deum: tedium

“She’s my older mother.”

The tooth of the matter is ...

A weekend worrier

Famous woman of the Old Testament: Judith Maccabee

Sports cheer for the excessively refined:
“Go as it were Sharks!”

A book tightled ...

(Reading aloud) “Lungren [a politician] fights back with AIDS.” (Second look) “Oh, ads.”

Guy receives a phone call early in the morning, is asked the time, replies “Ten after sex.”
(from anecdote told by a friend)

Hopeless incompetence in trying to repeat an old saying: “Out of the crud grows the pie-shaped flower with little things on it — what do you call those?”

Guy in crowded airport to another guy: “Would you watch my things?” First guy says, “Sure!”, then, when the first guy is out of sight, gets a baggage cart, loads the things onto it, and, staring intently at them, pushes the cart out the door.

Don’t harangue
An orang-
utan

“It’s in *offal* shape.

We are not out of the woulds yet!

The feral government.

Caught between Iraq and a hard place

What do the trees say in Spring? “How *releaved* we are!”

“At what period in your laugh did you ...”

Playing ketchup ball

Conversation re a wedding:

“And what does the groom do?”

“He’s a groom.”

“I see. Well, appropriate occupation!”

A venereal sin

What would it be like if two persons, one of whom tended to leave sentences unfinished, the other of whom was always completing other people’s sentences, had a fight? “You’re nothing but a —” “No good bum?” “Yes. And also —” “A lazy lout?” “Yes. And I’ve grown sick and tired —” “Of putting up with me?” “Yes, and as far as —” “You’re concerned?” “I’m concerned you can just —” “Pack up and leave?” “Go.”

Variations on: “I’ll say just one word: plastics.” in the film, *The Graduate*: “I’ll say just one word: Beethoven’s Late Quartets as played by the ...”

Title, “Post-Impressionism” appearing on the screen, followed by impressionistic painting of fence posts at the edge of a field.

Various visual puns on “preying on”, e.g., “hawks prey on rodents”, picture of hawk with claws folded on back of crouching rodent, little kid perhaps wondering why the hawk would do such a thing, wondering why the hawk spends so much time flying above the meadow looking for a mouse he can do that to.

Dialogue Fragments

“...laughing on the outside, crying on the ... whatchamacall...”

“Inside?”

“Well, I suppose. I was thinking of the kitchen table.”

“The early bird catches the...whatchamacall...”

“Worm?”

“That too.”

“I find myself full of angst.”

“You seem quite nervous, too.”

“Bon whatchacall...”

“Jour?”

“You got it.”

“Well, I’ve always said, a rolling stone gathers no whatchamacall.”

“Moss.”

“That too.”

“...and your son had a baby!”

“His wife did.”

“Oh, she too? Not twins, I hope.”

Line to use, *sotto-voce*, in an argument with someone whose girlfriend is named Robin:

“...(well, at least I don’t have a girlfriend who is named after a bird...)”

“Opera? I like it fine, except for the singing.”

Judge or prosecuting attorney: “And why didn’t you consummate your marriage?”

Defendant (after long pause, obviously embarrassed): “I forgot.”

Variation on “I have a gub”

This is a variation on the famous scene in the Woody Allen film, *Take the Money and Run*.

Bank Teller [reading note handed to him by customer/bank-robber]: “You have a... gub?”

Bank robber [nervously, looking from side to side]: “No, that’s an *n*. I have a *gun*.”

Teller: "I see. Just one? Or... are you a collector?"

Robber: "No, just one. I have it with me. Right here." [Pointing to revolver which is partially covered by jacket]

Teller: "I see. Then the rest of your collection is at home."

Robber: "No, I don't have a collection. Just one gun. Here." [pointing]

Teller: "Is there some particular reason why you're telling me this? Or is it a purchase you have just made?"

Robber: "No, it's not a recent purchase. I've had it for a long time. And now I have it here. With me. In this bank."

Teller: "Well, I can understand your fear of violence in today's day and age, but I don't think you have to worry inside this bank. As you can see, we have several security officers on duty." [Calling out] "Bill? Bill? Could you come over here?" [Bill comes over.] "Could you explain to this young man that he has nothing to worry about in this bank, that you and Bob are here to see that no harm comes to anyone?"

Bill: "Sure. What's your name, sir?"

Robber: "I can't give you my name."

Bill: "I understand. Some people don't like to tell anything about themselves. Anyway, see this?" [Pointing to gun in his holster.] "I assure you, if anyone tries anything in this bank, they're going to be in for trouble. Don't worry about a thing. We're here to protect you. In fact, what Bob and I will do is, we will stand right here while you complete your business with the bank, and then we'll walk you to the door and to your car. Don't you worry about a thing..."

Cats and Dogs Among Themselves

Scrawny dog tells rest of the gang how lonely he is.

Tall, happy dog: "Hey: get yourself a human! They're great!"

Song:

Get a human
It's so much better
Than being alone
With only a bone.
Get a human
They're not bad
They like to talk
And take you for a walk
Get a human...

Another, hesitantly: "Well... if you get a good one."

Tall: "Mine's a good one. Feeds me every day. Pets me. I got a nice dry place to sleep. What more do you want?"

Scrawny: "I've heard too many stories. Beatings, kicked out into the cold..."

Tall: "Well, sure, if you get a bad one. You just got to know what to look for."

Scrawny: "Like what?"

Tall: "Like, do they reach down and want to pet you. Do they scratch the back of your head?"

Do they scruffle your ears. Oh, I love that.”

Scrawny: “Well, you just can’t walk up to one in the street.”

Tall: “Sure you can. Just walk up, and then sort of pad along next to them, and look up at them with doggy eyes. That’s what God gave them to you for. Always go for the women first. They’re softer.”

Scrawny: “I don’t know. I think I’d rather be miserable.”

Tall: “Yeah, sleeping under porches, being yelled at all the time, watching out for the dog catcher. Not me. Get a human, that’s what I say.” [Looking at cat cleaning her paw] “Right, Princess?”

[Cat nods as she goes on cleaning herself.] “See, what’d I tell you? And there ain’t no one as finicky as the Princess here.”

Princess: “I’m not finicky. I just know what I like.”

Tall [to Princess]: “What you like is a house on a hill and a rich mistress who’ll feed you [names most expensive cat food] and hold you and pet you all day. What a life. You ought to do something. Do you ever go out and get a bird anymore? Chase a mouse? You’re going to seed from too much luxury, young lady.”

Princess: “Hunting is so vulgar. I was born to be pampered. I can’t help it.”

Tall: “You got to stay strong, like me.” [Flexing muscles] “Twice around the block every day, top speed. Run with the old man when he goes jogging. Chase a cat now and then. Whoops, sorry.”

[Princess looks at him with bored supercilious expression.]

Tall: “I mean, Christ, we’re only animals. We may live in houses and everything, but we’ve got to remember who we are. We were meant to live in the wild, don’t forget. This is just — a passing interlude.”

Princess: “Not for me. Ms. You-know-who says she wants me forever.”

Tall: “She’s a lonely, rich old lady. They’ll say anything to someone who looks like they can stand their company.” [Pause] “So, Scrawny, are you going to get a human or what?”

Scrawny: “I’ll think about it.”

Tall: “Of course you have to train ‘em. Don’t get the stick too fast when they throw it. Make them work. Remember that your goal is to make them like you, so that they’ll treat you right and keep feeding you. Jump up once in a while on your hind legs, dance around, let the women ooh and ahh, but don’t make a habit of it. Anyway, don’t think about it. Do it. Here, you want me to go with you?”

Scrawny: “Later.”

Tall: “Not later. Now. Hey: look at that old guy over there. Come on.”

Scrawny: “No...”

Tall: “Come on. Watch this.” [Runs across the street, tail wagging, rubs nose against pants of man, who shouts at him to get away. Tall comes loping back across the street.] “Well, sometimes it doesn’t work.” [Beautiful young woman comes into sight. High heels. Brisk walk.] “There! Go on!”

Scrawny [bored]: “I’m too tired.”

Tall: “Come on. Watch this.” [Galumphs across street, tail wagging, gives her a friendly bark, she reaches down, pats his head. He tries to lick her hand.]

Woman: “Oh, you sweet thing. But I’m late. Oh, what a nice dog you are. Do you have a home?” [Patting away. Tall looks across the street at Scrawny, trying to get him to come over. Woman gives him a few more pats and ruffles his hears, then walks on. He comes loping back.]

Tall: “Wow, what perfume. Dyn-o-mite! You shoulda grabbed her. Wow. You know what I heard?”

Scrawny, still bored: “No, what.”

Tall: “I can’t tell you out loud.” [Goes over and whispers in his ear.]

Scrawny: “Get outta here.”

Tall: “Seriously. This boxer told me. Said it was great. Different, but still great.”

Etc.

Explaining the Meaning of Dirt to an Animal

Interview with, say, an otter.

Int: So, let’s see, you’re an otter?

O: Yes, [gives Latin name of species].

Int: And, so, you spend a lot of time in the water and along creek beds sliding down things, mud slides, and so forth.

O: Yes, that is more or less correct.

Int: OK, well, what I’d like to do is try to explain to you the meaning of something which you probably don’t think about alot. I’m talking about dirt.

O: Dirt?

Int: Well, yes, like mud is a form of dirt. And the creek bank, where it’s not covered by grass and rushes, is dirt. Usually wet dirt. In fact mud, I would suspect. But then, when you’re farther away from the water — that brown stuff under your feet. That’s dirt.

O: Yes, all right.

Int: Now the thing is, to us humans, dirt is, well, dirty. It’s something we want to be clean of. It’s something we sweep out of our houses.

O: Why?

Int: Well, it’s not clean.

O: What’s clean?

Int: Well, it’s like water. Water is clean, usually. And air, at least where you live. That’s clean. And leaves. And flowers. And rocks in the water, usually. See what I mean?

O: I don’t actually see how the things you have named are different from dirt.

Int: Yes, I see. OK: when you get mud on your paws, don’t you try to get it off?

O: It usually just comes off when we go into the water, for example.

Int: But if it didn’t. Wouldn’t you try to brush it off?

O: I suppose.

Int: Aha! That’s because you sense that it’s dirty. You want to be rid of it.

O: No, I just want it not to get in between my claws. Just like grass, or flowers, or...

Int: Yes, I see what you mean. In other words, you have nothing *against* dirt. You don’t consider it any different than anything else.

O: No. What do you mean different?

Int: Well, dirty. Dirty.

O: Well, if dirt is dirty, then a leaf is leafy, and water is watery, and a nice young [prey] is [name]y. Seems rather obvious.

Int: Yes, I see what you mean. Look, have you ever... No. I have to go think. I’ll be back.

Toasts

Speaker: "I'd like to propose a toast to one of the great discoveries of the nineteenth century. Let's raise our glasses to — *Maxwell's equations!*"

Crowd: "Hear, hear!", "Maxwell's equations", "Yeah, Maxwell", etc.

Speaker: "And now, I'd like to propose a toast to something that only recently has been discovered, but which has been there all along, bringing us health along with pleasure, making our lives better even though we didn't know it. Let's raise our glasses to — *phenolic anti-oxidants*, found in red wine, and helping to prevent, I say *prevent*, the oxidation of the good cholesterol which flows in all our veins.

Crowd: "Yeah!", "Hear, hear!" "Phenolic anti-oxidants." "Good cholesterol!"

Etc. for other non-human things: Velcro, toilet paper, gravity, the Swiss Army knife, healthy-teeth...

Lines for Epic Poems

"When, as, after flushing a big load,
The little pieces come back up the hole,
Causing us to flush again,
And when, as, ...
So, on that exorbitant day, ...

Lyrics for Songs Yet to be Written

"Relatively Little"

"Relatively little
Relatively little
This is all I ever hope to see
Relatively little
Relatively little
That will have to be enough for me
I'll never obtain
what I'm hoping for
I'll have to abstain
From wanting more
Than
Relatively little
Relatively little..."

"Black Clothes"

“Black clothes
Black clothes
The dirt doesn’t show
When you’re wearing
Black clothes
No one will know
That your clothes have spots
That they’ll need lots
Of soap
To cope
With all the dirt that’s on them
When you’re wearing
Black clothes”

A Realistic Christmas Song

“Down comes the rain
The house is cold
My girlfriend doesn’t like me
I am growing old
The roof is leaking again
I can’t afford to fix it
I’ll put a bucket under
...”

“Out of work for months
No one wants to hire me
Then whatever I do
They soon want to fire me
Growing old
growing ugly
Am going through my savings
...”

“Having to buy presents
The shopping, the crush,
Trying to guess what will make someone happy
Who I don’t like very much
...”

The Relativity Song

“Everything is relative, nothing’s absolute,
If someone tells you otherwise,
Just give them the boot.
If someone talks of Either/Or

Get up and show them to the door;
But if they talk of Yes but No,
Tell them “That’s the way to go!”
If you’re feeling hot
In Hell you would be cold;
And if you’re feeling cold
On Mars you would be hot.
Everything’s more what it’s not
Than what you think it is.
There is one thing only that’s
Impossible to refute:
Everything is relative, nothing’s absolute”

Lines for Songs on a Realistic Children’s TV Program

“It’s mine, it’s mine, and you can’t have it...”

“I’m better than you, so there, so there...”

“My father can beat up your father,
And besides, he’s richer.”

Comic Names (For Use By Novelists)

Motormouth Transalpina (Italian woman who is non-stop talker)
Warr’n Rector (guy in charge of eminent domain demolitions)
Omigod Feldstein (nervous Jewish girl)
Winton Loser (upper-class ne’er-do-well)

Imperfectly Remembered Poems

“Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with deer.”

For Stand-up Comics

Routine: Comic coming out and raising one sole, remarking he thinks he stepped on something, then proceeding with routine, but periodically throughout using this as a digression, perhaps commenting on what it might be, rubbing the sole on the floor, perhaps taking shoe off, peering intently at sole, picking at it, indicating a smell, putting shoe back on, etc.

Character: one who is terrible at telling stories, jokes [make his ineptitude convincing]

Ethnic Humor

Anti-black guy who constantly praises Asians. Discussing any social problem, he is sure to insert, “Now your Asians, they know how to handle that”, and frequent parenthetical remarks (“Of course, you’ll never find your Asians doing that.”) Talking about his good neighbors, “Of course, they’re Asian, you know. Oh, yes...” Watching them walk down the street, “See? Discrete, modest. Know their place. But work hard. Damn those yellow devils work their asses off. It’s what’s got them where they are today. Yessir.”

Southern accents, e.g., “So, before you knew it, they’d gone and built a fahr.”

Two people, both non-Persian, talking about Persians in another part of room or restaurant.

“What were they doing?”

“Oh, dancing around the fire, whatever they do.”

The manner of speech of a man who has learned Italian almost entirely from operas.

Additional Notes

There are all kinds of reasons to tour a region: wine tours, architectural tours, garden tours... But why not bathroom tours? There could be sophisticated reviews ala hotel reviews in pamphlets, books, devoted to the subject: “The men’s room at Howard Johnson’s in Norbertsville is not to be missed!” etc. (See also the Peter Greenaway film, *26 Toilets*.)

Winner, Worst Bad Breath at the Choral Society Concert for the second year running.

Conversation between horse and cat regarding what they think about their guts being used for violin strings. They don’t understand the music, but it sounds kind of nice sometimes. They don’t like to think of the relatives who sacrificed their lives, however.

People say “This is my cat”, “This is my dog ” but never “This is my caterpillar”. Yet caterpillars are furry, too.

“Look out [yawn], there’s a spider coming.”

A watch that does everything but keep time.

Comedy Notebook

Sing Dixieland songs in Yiddish, e.g., “Up a Lazy River”.

Concerto for Rifle and Orchestra

T-shirt:

Picture of Milky Way, possibly with “You Are Here” as in existing T-shirt

On top, “The Milky Way — Our Home [If no You are here]”

Underneath, “Love It or Leave It”

T-shirt for college students: big letters, perhaps in Roman typeface:

“Fuck Relevance
I’d Rather Study Something Important”

Life is hard. Then someone comes along and says, “Life is hard.” Then you die.

In a morgue: all the attendants take giant, grotesque, tiptoe steps in moving about. Being quiet for the dead.

Conversation between neighbors on the subject of lawns. First neighbor’s is in bad shape, all brown. She says how she envies the lawn of the other neighbor. He: “Well, the grass is always greener...”

Customer at cloakroom counter in expensive restaurant: “Have you got a place for my golf swing?”

Man: “I’m here to give a talk. What is the name of this place?”

Woman behind desk: “The Center for Continuing Education.”

Man keeps trying to repeat it back to her by way of confirming he’s got it right, can’t.

Soon to come: Olympic bee-keeping.