

“Comedy Tonight”—Or Is It?

Laura Dullum

Writer’s comment: This essay actually began the moment I first saw the COM161B: Comedy reading list. Aristophanes, yes, Moliere, yes, *Godot*—What? *Waiting For Godot*? In a comedy course? The last time I read *Godot*, I hadn’t seen a single smile in the entire class. Even Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* includes comic relief, but *Godot* was unrelenting, unadulterated utter tragedy. And yet, thanks to Dr. Bulman, *Godot* had us all laughing out loud. So exactly what was *Godot*—and where was the difference between comedy and tragedy? Perhaps our course theme song, Stephen Sondheim’s “Comedy Tonight,” sums it up best: “Nothing with gods, nothing with Fate/ Weighty affairs will just have to weight/ Frenzy and frolic/ Nothing symbolic/ Goodness and Badness/ Man in his Madness/ Something aesthetic /Something frenetic/ Nothing portentous or polite... Tragedy tomorrow, Comedy tonight!”

—*Laura Dullum*

Instructor’s comment: In my upper-division Comedy course (Comparative Literature 161B), I assign ten plays, a spectrum of comic drama from the Ancient world to the present, in addition to a variety of readings in comic theory. In her dazzling essay, which draws together text and theory in a manner that shows mastery of both, Laura Dullum argues that certain plays, like Chekov’s *Uncle Vanya*, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* elude rigid classification as either tragedy or comedy. With wit, humor and an encyclopedic grasp of the material presented in the course, Laura reveals to us the the very nature of the comic.

—*Patricia Bulman, Comparative Literature*

IN TWO DIFFERENT APARTMENTS, Jane and John each open their newspaper and see the same ad: **Theater Festival Triple Feature**—Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Another theater offers Aristophanes instead, and a third is presenting Euripides. John likes comedy and Jane prefers tragedy. Now consider carefully: Who goes to what play? The obvious answer is Jane attends Euripides and John attends Aristophanes.

Because when it comes to categorizing *Vanya*, *Godot*, and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*, the answers aren’t obvious at all: Are these three plays comedies or tragedies or neither? According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “Comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life” (Bulman, *Quotes*). At the time, neither realism nor existentialism existed, and the ancient Greeks believed an author could write comedy or tragedy, but not both—and definitely not the two of them mingled together in the same play, as in modern works.

The 18th century scholar Horace Walpole remarked, “Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel” (Bulman, *Quotes*). In his 1900 essay on *Laughter*, Henri Bergson similarly noted how “The comic appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion” (Bulman, *Quotes*). In the 1989 film *Crimes & Misdemeanors*, Woody Allen observed, “Comedy is tragedy plus time” (Bulman, *Quotes*). This is because comedy requires distance or, in Bergson’s words, an “anesthesia of the heart” (*Laughter*). But perhaps the best explanation comes from comic Mel Brooks, who defined tragedy and comedy thus: “Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if you walk into an open sewer and die” (Friend 84).

This definition, in itself comic, exemplifies all the theories of comedy. First, a lack of empathy is necessary; we cannot identify the victim with ourselves. Instead, we feel securely superior because the victim brought it upon himself by being so dense as to ignore the construction workers, orange cones, warning signs, and open manhole. It also contains incongruity: A fatal fall is presented as less severe than a minor scrape and the sacredness of death is combined with the sewer’s vulgarity. And, of course, there is the physical humor of pratfalls and potty talk. Equally important is the release-relief theory, which views humor as “a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of [including insecurity] and the corpse” (Friend 80). By joking about death, we come to terms with our mortality. As humorist

Del Close said, “There is very little difference between the realization ‘aha, we’re going to die,’ and our laughter, which is ‘ha-ha’” (Friend 84).

Tom Stoppard explores this in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*, where the title characters repeatedly debate the nature of death. In one scene, Rosencrantz wonders when “it first occurred to you that you don’t go on forever. It must have been shattering, stamped into one’s memory. And yet, I can’t remember it.... We must have been born with an intuition of mortality” (72). Tellingly, Rosencrantz sandwiches his speculation in between two deliberate, desperate jokes*—here the character does openly what the playwright does, intentionally and implicitly, throughout the play.

Stoppard, Beckett, and Chekhov all use humor to examine and expose our own insecurities over death, but also about life itself. This raises the key question: When a play handles a serious issue in a humorous way, does that make it a tragedy or a comedy? For example, during *Waiting For Godot*, Estragon takes off his belt to hang himself—and his pants fall down (60). Oedipus or Othello’s pants never fall down, nor do they fart like Pozzo or pick their nose like Alfred (*R&G* 89, *Godot* 52, *R&G* 76). This incident changes Estragon’s situation from high tragedy into low comedy. Samuel Beckett, who deliberately subtitled his *Waiting For Godot* a tragicomedy, said, “All my plays should be played light and fast. I don’t want to dwell upon their seriousness... My plays shouldn’t be ponderous” (Bulman, lecture). Thus, during the Broadway revival of *Waiting For Godot*, Steve Martin played the role of Vladimir and Robin Williams acted Estragon (Bulman, lecture).

Similarly, *Uncle Vanya* is included in an anthology of *Eight Great Comedies*, and Anton Chekhov himself “called his principal plays comedies. He battled with directors, with critics, with audiences to stage them, to discuss them, to see them as comedies. No one would listen to him, as he often and bitterly complained” (Kerr 234). Chekhov fought constantly with Konstantin Stanislavski, the influential Russian director who invented the psychological realism acting method and wanted to stage *Uncle Vanya* as a tragedy (Bulman, lecture).

Observes one critic, “Anyone who prefers not to see what is comic—which is to say, limited—in the behavior of Chekhov’s characters can easily give all of his attention to the unhappy eventualities of the play and none of it to the self-delusion that has brought such things about” (Kerr 234). Terrible though the situation might be, the audience is amused because the characters clearly, and comically, brought it upon themselves.

As Dr. Astrov remarks in *Uncle Vanya*, “I used to think that every fool was out of his senses, but now I see that lack of sense is a man’s ordinary state” (Barnet). This comment echoes “What fools these mortals be,” the definition of comedy offered by Shakespeare’s famous character Puck. Chekhov’s characters in *Uncle Vanya*, though far less frenetic, prove just as deluded as those in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In one scene, Uncle Vanya tells Yelena, “You’re my happiness, my life, my youth” (13). Rather than being impressed with him, Yelena simply scolds, “Ivan Petrovich, you’re smart, you’re well-educated... Instead of always complaining, why don’t you help?” (18). This *senex amator*, an old man in love with a young, beautiful woman who rejects him) comes straight out of ancient Roman farce and sixteenth-century Italian pantomime. Yelena’s marriage with her husband, the pedantic professor, is similarly a stock comic plot.

However, Uncle Vanya’s own relationship with the professor proves even funnier. Bemoans Vanya, “That ridiculous professor riddled with gout was my ideal... We hardly ate, we watched every kopek. We sent him thousands of rubles.... I lived through him. Every word he spoke and wrote seemed like genius. And now, his life’s work—what does it amount to? Nothing... I’ve been cheated” (19). Actually, as the audience sees full well, Vanya cheated himself; he, no one else, made that fateful, foolish decision. Had Vanya acted differently, he could be happily married to Yelena right now, or so Vanya flatters himself (19). Though Vanya makes Yelena his new idol after rejecting the professor, she ignores him just as much as the professor always did. Unwilling to take a chance himself, Vanya tells Yelena, “You have a siren’s blood in your veins, so be a siren. For once in your life let yourself go. Fall head over heels with some spirit of the deep, dive in, headfirst. Leave the Herr Professor and the rest of us wide-eyed on the shore, amazed and awed” (28). Instead of living vicariously through the professor’s intellect, Vanya now lives vicariously through Yelena’s beauty, as does Dr. Astrov.

Dr. Astrov is a nature-loving idealist worn down by harsh reality and constant, futile efforts to improve the lives of the peasantry. “As for my private life, there is none,” but that is the doctor’s own fault, because “I don’t expect one” (22). Astrov ignores Sonya, the professor’s compassionate but plain daughter, and instead attempts adultery with Yelena, the professor’s beautiful wife. As Sonya herself asks the alcoholic Astrov, “You say instead of creating more, people are always destroying. So why do you destroy yourself?” (23). When he learns of Sonya’s

love for him, rather than responding, Astrov decides to do “Nothing, probably. I’ll make her understand that I can’t love her, that I have my own worries” (23). Astrov’s own apathy compounds, even creates, his problems.

The same situation occurs throughout Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon debate hanging themselves (twice), abandoning their vigil (constantly), and even whether to get up after they have fallen down. However, they do nothing, making the audience ask along with Estragon, “Then why don’t we? What are we waiting for?” (54). The reply, which Vladimir offers to Estragon’s every proposal of action, is “We’re waiting for Godot.” However, Godot is never seen or even identified; he is not a person, he is an excuse. When Estragon asks why Lucky doesn’t set down the luggage, Pozzo replies, “Why doesn’t he make himself comfortable? Let’s try and get this clear. Has he not the right to? Certainly he has. It follows that he doesn’t want to” (21).

The same apathy permeates the rest of the characters, not only in *Godot* but also in *Uncle Vanya* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Modern comedies often revolve around the humor that results from the antics of someone who has given up his own ability of active agency, yet the surrender of free will is in itself a tragedy. Observes scholar T.G.A. Nelson, “Part of what makes Stoppard’s play comic rather than tragic is, no doubt, the high incidence of wit and jesting. But the participants’ refusal to struggle, their resigned certainty of their own impotence and unimportance, their spineless acceptance of annihilation by forces greater than themselves, contributes just as strongly to the comic effect” (*Comedy*, Ch12). Substitute ‘oppression’ for ‘annihilation,’ and Nelson’s observation applies equally well to Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* and Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*.

Uncle Vanya confronts the professor, saying, “This estate never could have been bought at all if I hadn’t given up my inheritance in favor of my sister, [and] then it took me ten years of working like an ox to pay off the debt.... You’ve ruined my life. I haven’t lived. My best years were wasted, destroyed—by you” (35). The professor emerges as Vanya’s Godot, an easy excuse for one’s own inaction. Vanya himself gave up his money and his time; no one robbed him. Eventually, Vanya realizes this, exclaiming, “I’ve wasted my life! I’m intelligent, talented, daring—I could have been Dostoyevsky!” (37). But, one wonders, why didn’t he then? The obvious answer, and part of the remark’s humor, is that Uncle Vanya simply lacks the necessary talent. Vanya himself fears this, so rather than try and fail, he never attempts anything at all.

Chekhov's choice of Dostoyevsky, rather than using anyone else, is thematically telling because Chekhov, Beckett, and Stoppard all openly cite the literature which influenced their own work.* In his "Grand Inquisitor," Dostoyevsky declares, "[M]an is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature was born. Freedom, free thought and science, will lead them into such straits... that [people] will crawl fawning to our feet and whine: 'save us from ourselves!' they will submit to us gladly and cheerfully and we will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure at present in making a free decision for themselves."

This situation, treated as a tragedy by Dostoyevsky, becomes comedy in the hands of Chekhov, Beckett, and Stoppard. Beckett, an incredibly well educated person who uses many literary references, was especially impressed by Dostoyevsky's novels (Bulman). In a Dostoyevsky-influenced conversation from *Godot*, Estragon wonders "Where do we come in?" and Vladimir replies "On our hands and knees" (13). When Estragon next asks whether "we've lost our rights," Vladimir "distinctly" retorts, "We got rid of them" (13.)

References to Dostoyevsky abound in this scene and throughout the play. Neither the audience, nor the pair themselves, ever understands precisely who Godot is or why they are waiting for him. Exclaims Vladimir later on, "It's Godot! At last! We're saved!" (47). But it proves to be a false alarm. Godot has still not shown by the play's end, when Estragon asks, "And if he comes?" (60). What then? Vladimir's reply, like his earlier statement, uses the same wording as Dostoyevsky does: "We'll be saved" (60). But from what? Not a single threat ever appears on-stage, and if one did, they are free to flee. That freedom, their own inability to take individual action, is what truly terrifies them. When Vladimir suggests they play at being Lucky and Pozzo, he chooses not the role of master but the role of slave. He too wants to be 'lucky.' Vladimir's greatest fantasy is that someone else will make all the decisions for him, removing him from responsibility.

Similarly, Tom Stoppard builds his play around the lines that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say when they are first introduced in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Both your majesties / Might, by the sovereign power you have of us, / Put your dread pleasures more into command / Than to entreaty" and "But we both obey, / And here give up ourselves in the full bent / To lay our service freely at your feet, / To be commanded" (36). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern surrender their freedom,

trusting “There’s a logic at work—it’s all done for you, don’t worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again, even without the innocence, a child—it’s like being given a prize” (40).

Rosencrantz later faces the footlights, saying, “I feel like a spectator—an appalling business. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute” (41). Replies Guildenstern, also eyeing the audience, “What a fine persecution—to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened” (41). Their exchange aptly captures the audience’s own experience while watching existential comedy. Tellingly, the characters in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern, Godot*, and *Uncle Vanya* feel the same way, because they are as much spectators as the audience is. The three plays’ characters have literally become on-lookers in their own lives, rather than active participants in the on-stage activity. Or rather, the inactivity; the three modern plays have none of the frenetic farce found in ancient comedies such as *Lysistrata* and *The Braggart Warrior*.

As Tolstoy once complained to Chekhov, “Where is one to go with your heroes? From the sofa where they are lying to the closet and back again” (Barnet). The first thing the title character of *Uncle Vanya* says is “Now Sonya works alone, and all I do is sleep, drink and eat” (6). Dr. Astrov similarly observes of Yelena, “There’s no doubt she’s beautiful, but what does she do all day? Eat, sleep, go for walks, charm us, and that’s all... Being aimless is not good” (22). When Yelena complains, “I’m dying of boredom, I don’t know what to do with myself,” Sonya replies, “You could help with the estate, or teach, or visit the sick” (27). Retorts Yelena, “I don’t know how to do that, and it doesn’t interest me. People in novels always teach and take care of the peasants. But you can’t just jump into it” (27). Similarly, Rosencrantz wonders “Shouldn’t we be doing something — constructive?” without ever actually accomplishing anything (41).

Waiting For Godot’s opening line, “Nothing to be done,” is repeated throughout the play. Similarly, Lucky’s Act 1 monologue overflows with “abandoned,” “unfinished” “labors lost.” However, other options exist; the pair does not live in a vacuum. They once stood on “top of the Eiffel Tower,” Estragon wanted to “go [to the Dead Sea] for our honeymoon,” they recall picking grapes in the Macon country near the Rhone River, and propose “wander[ing] in the Pyrenees” mountains of Spain (7, 8, 35 & 40, 52). However, no matter how often they prepare to leave, the pair eventually decides, “Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer” (12). Similarly, Yelena debates whether to “for once in your life let

yourself go [and] fly like a bird far from here, free" at last (29). After all, "Why not? ... Because I'm frightened, I'm timid, and I'd have too many regrets" (29). So Yelena does nothing.

None of the characters do. Uncle Vanya's only decisive actions are to shoot the professor (whom he misses) and to steal the doctor's morphine (which he returns unused). At the play's end, Vanya negates his rebellion by reassuring the professor that everything will continue "the same as before" (44). And it does. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern similarly sacrifice their options of independent action. When Rosencrantz considers revolt, it is by "remain[ing] silent till we're green in the face" (71). This deliberate authorial reverse of the usual expression "talk till you're blue in the face" emphasizes how everything Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do is the exact opposite of taking action.

In Shakespeare's original *Hamlet*, they die as either "Traitors hoist[ed] by their own petard? Or victims of the gods? We shall never know!" (82). In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accidentally open Hamlet's death warrant, but reseal it because "we are little men, we don't know the ins and the outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings" (110). This is not treachery; this is apathy. Their decision is simply not to decide. Hamlet's friendship for them and his murder of Polonius are equally ignored; they neither rescue a dear comrade nor execute a homicidal maniac.

Even more ironically, after Hamlet switches the letters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inadvertently open—and actually ignore—their own death warrant. In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are "outside the action (admittedly)" by authorial design, and Shakespeare's plot "events play themselves out to aesthetic, moral, and logical conclusion" (112 & 79). As for "Who decides?," Shakespeare does, not them, because "it is *written*" already, and the pair never has a chance (80). But in Stoppard's adaptation, they have several choices—and plenty of money. With at least ninety gold coins of their own, plus the king's payment, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could easily destroy their death warrant and start a new life in England. After all, King Claudius never ordered their execution, the letter is a forgery seen only by their own eyes, and they know "no one is going to come on and drag us off" (125). Instead, they just give up because, as Rosencrantz says seconds before vanishing, "All right, then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved" (125). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Vladimir and Estragon, Uncle Vanya and Yelena, make only one decision of their own

accord: to give up all their decisions, and their lives, into the hands of “divine apathia, divine athambia, [and] divine aphasia” (*Godot*, 28). Therein lies the characters’ personal tragedy and the plays’ hilarious comedy.

Therein also lies the chief difference between traditional and modern comedy.

In earlier plays, underdogs achieve their goals against impossible odds, and the comedy comes from how they foil their oppressive opponents (Frye). Where Roman comedies abound with wily slaves who earn their freedom, modern comedies instead contain free people who surrender their independence to abstract, invisible, and impersonal forces. The relief-release theory might explain this change: If humor acts as “a defense against the pure emotion of fear,” then perhaps the loss of our individual freedom to abstract, omnipotent entities is a fear especially prominent in, and a product of, modern society (*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*, 17).

P.S.: Jane and John, the two total strangers from our introductory example, found themselves seated next to each other during the Theater Festival’s Triple Feature of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*, and Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. John came to see a comedy; Jane bought tickets to a tragedy. Both thoroughly enjoyed all three plays—and each other’s company. They are now happily married with four children: sons Godot & Guildenstern and daughters Vanya & Rose (full name Rosencrantz). As Lord Bryon said, all comedies end in marriage, and...

Tragedy Tomorrow, Comedy Tonight!

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- *Comedy* by T.G.A. Nelson, extract from Ch12, “Absurd & Existential Comedy”
- *Eight Great Comedies* by Barnet, Berman, & Burto, editors

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