

The CLASSICS OF COMEDY

Life as Laughter

There are several ways to look at life and understand it. Ancient Greeks thought that hardship and suffering could make us better beings. Consequently, they created Tragedy – the dramatic genre – for therapeutic purposes: “Hopefully, you won’t have to confront any major grief or misery in your life. Unfortunately, if you won’t, you lose the opportunity to better yourself. Through our performances we will help you understand the utmost suffering thus giving you a chance to better yourself through empathy”, thought, most likely, the fathers of Tragedy.

Another way to make sense of our existence is through Philosophy. Despite having brilliant minds at it for a long time – from Plato to Kirkegaard, from Kant to Lyotard, from Lao Tzu to Aquinas – we still don’t have a full, satisfying answer. Even worse, we are now confronted with myriads of perspectives, most of them at odds with each other.

For some, Religion seems to be more satisfying and fulfilling. The hope that prayer or meditation, and the belief in a Supreme Being may reveal the Final Answer through an ultimate epiphany is overwhelmingly attractive. However, here too, things don’t seem to work too smoothly. Our world is populated by more than one “Almighty”, each of which is supposedly omnipotent and omnipresent. These “Almighties” spawned various prophets who addressed world through a variety of books, one holier than the other.

It seems that only one person got it right. In his *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams gives us the definitive “Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything” – “42”. Philosophers, scientists, cosmologists, and theologians scratched their heads and found among other things, that: 42 is a meandric number and an *open* meandric number at that; 42 is a Størmer number; 42 is 101010 in binary code; light refracts off water by 42 degrees to create a rainbow; light requires 10^{-42} seconds to cross the diameter of a proton; 42 is the atomic number of *molybdenum* - a mineral that enhances communication between our conscious and subconscious while also mending the inevitable holes or voids in our auras; for the Japanese 42 is a unlucky number because it sounds like the words “unto death”, for Kabbalists 42 is the number with which God creates the Universe, for Christians there are 42 generations in the Genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew’s Gospel, the Beast will hold dominion over the Earth for 42 months (Revelations 13:5), in Talmudic tradition God is assigned “the original Talmudic Forty-Two Lettered Name”, the Gutenberg Bible is also known as the “42-line Bible”, as the book contains 42 lines per page, etc.

Here is the answer given by Douglas Adams, the famous author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide ...*:

The answer to this is very simple. It was a joke. It had to be a number, an ordinary, smallish number, and I chose that one. Binary representations, base thirteen, Tibetan monks, are all complete nonsense. I sat at my desk, stared into the garden and thought '42 will do'. I typed it out. End of story.

(Google Group alt.fan.douglas-adams , Nov 3, 1993)

His answer always triggers at least a large smile if not even a burst of laughter. It is humorous for most people. This is the area where we all seem to come together - a unique feature of humankind – comedy and laughter. Humanity's sense of humour – though slightly different according to cultural areas – is indeed omnipresent and omnipotent. Laughter is highly contagious. Although the mechanisms of this sixth human sense are still a mystery to psychologists and psychiatrists, nobody cares too much about them. Humour is generally regarded as one of our better traits. Humour is not only beneficial for our health but it may also boost our sense of freedom and justice. This is why dictators and fundamentalists hate it and – ironically - are terrified by it.

So who was the first comedian in the world? What was the first ever prank or joke? We will never know. We can, however, look back in time and *watch* what the early films show and tell us about how, why and about what our ancestors used to laugh. Taking a glance to the great first comedians of the silver screen may offer the viewer an unforgettable experience, both surprisingly interesting and refreshingly hilarious. From Sennett to Chaplin, these comedians were astoundingly complete as entertainers. Let's take a look into **Mack Sennett's** bio, for example: actor, director, producer, screenwriter, presenter, composer, and cinematographer. In his first four years of career - between 1909 and 1913 - Sennett appears (mostly as actor, but also as a writer or director) in no less than 380 films! He kept on doing this for the rest of his career and by the end of his semi-retirement (he was 55 years old) he produced more than 1,000 silents and several dozen talkies. He founded Keystone Studios in 1912 – the first fully enclosed film studio and stage in history. No wonder Sennett was called the “King of Comedy”. As a bonus for us, Mack Sennett is Canadian-born (Danville, Québec). Our co-national excelled in slapstick comedies which abound of car chases and cream-pie fights. His fake cow about to be milked and then chased by a bull is a classic and still wildly funny.

Harold Lloyd became famous and is still famously remembered as the “rounded-glasses yuppie” in search for the opportunity of a lifetime, forever ready to risk everything for the ultimate success. Lloyd is the protagonist of some famous stunts. His involvement with risky antics and acrobatics led him to losing his right hand's thumb and index. From then on, Harold Lloyd wore a special prosthetic glove.

This unique comedian combined like nobody else hilarity with thrill. Undoubtedly, his most famous stunt is the one in which he hangs desperately by his hands of a skyscraper large clock, 'miles away' above the street level. The 75 minutes long silent is called *Safety Last!* and the afore-mentioned sequence is one of the icons of film history. The method used to film this scene was the subject of extended coverage by the press of the time and made the first page of countless newspapers.

Buster Keaton was another incredibly inventive comedian of the silent era. Between 1920 and 1929 Keaton worked relentlessly as an actor, director and writer and gave birth to some of the most famous comic scenes of all time. Roger Ebert considers him "the greatest actor-director in the history of the movies". In 1925 Keaton directed, produced and acted in *The General*, a comedy set during the American Civil War and inspired by the Great Locomotive Chase of 1862 - a fierce race between a train captured by Union volunteers and a successive series of Confederate locomotives. Orson Welles said that Keaton's *The General* is "the greatest comedy ever made, the greatest Civil War film ever made, and perhaps the greatest film ever made". British Film Institute's *Sight and Sound Magazine* listed the film at #15 best movie ever made. What makes Keaton's humour unparalleled is his catastrophic interaction with mechanical contraptions in particular and with the surrounding world in general. Furthermore, Buster Keaton confronts all his hardships, misfortunes and his own unseemly clumsiness with an unforgettable immobile face. Just as the round glasses were Harold Lloyd's signature, so was the lack of expression on Keaton's wooden face, no matter in which direction was he blown by the events. His nickname - "The Great Stone Face" - spelled respect and reverence and became immortal.

Perhaps one of the most interesting comic acts was that created by the famous duo **Laurel and Hardy**. From the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s the large Ollie and the thin Laurel were the delight of the public and triggered storms of laughter throughout the world. Their performances were based by the stark contrast between their personas. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy had the genius to exploit their physical disparity to the limit and build on it. Consequently, they created two contrasting characters representing a dysfunctional pair of friends who were trying obstinately to work out their differences that pestered relentlessly their unlikely association. Ollie (Oliver Hardy) was extra-large, pompous, patronizing, and embarrassing with his stubbornness to save up appearances. He is 'the boss' of the pair. Stan (Stan Laurel) is extra-thin, super-sensitive, hilariously clumsy, and childlike – his noisy sobs are unmatched by anything in the comedic field. He is 'the follower'. In spite of his allegedly subdued role, Laurel often rebels against his 'leader' and gives him well-deserved lessons. The couple dynamic is so natural, so perfect, and so compulsively funny that it is impossible to find an equivalent in the world of film. These actors were so wildly talented that they were able to build up on a simple joke until they

reached the ultimate 'meltdown' with catastrophic results. Their dialogues are funny even today. One of their best-remembered dialogue routines was the "Tell me that again" routine. Laurel would tell Hardy a genuinely smart idea he had come up with, and Hardy would reply, "Tell me that again." Laurel would attempt to repeat the idea, but jumble it into utter nonsense. Hardy, who had difficulty understanding Laurel's idea when expressed clearly, would understand perfectly when hearing the jumbled version. The couple was so ingenious and worked together so perfectly that they were capable of making their audiences crack in laughter just by hysterically laughing for minutes in a row in front of a camera or at each other.

Finally, a very interesting and too often unjustly forgotten comedian is the British **Norman Wisdom**. Although knighted by the end of his career, Norman – his screen name – seems to have faded out from the public attention. Nevertheless, during the 1950s and 1960s, this actor delighted audiences everywhere with his awkward, shy, sloppy, and sometimes obnoxious character. He represented the eternal underdog who, despite all adversities – some of them natural, some other brought upon himself by his own mischiefs – , prevails and 'gets the girl' in the end. Strangely enough, this eclectic mixture of personae resulted into a very lovable and endearing character. Short, with a rather rough face, always slipping or tripping, dressed up in a shrunken suit and oversized cap, Sir Norman Wisdom's antics are still capable to make us burst into laughter while tenderly sighing: "Awww!" Charlie Chaplin called Sir Norman his favourite clown and, between 1955 and 1966, his humble character – Norman Pitkin - beat Sean Connery's *James Bond* to become Britain's biggest box office attraction. According to the BBC, Sir Norman achieved worldwide notoriety from Hong-Kong to South Africa, from Albania to the US (in *The Ed Sullivan's Show*). His humour and his gullible innocence will always give the audiences a breath of fresh, uncontaminated air. Through the absurdity of some of his acts, Sir Norman Wisdom may now be regarded as a surprising precursor of several Monty Python's routines.

The best way to pay homage to this great and now almost forgotten comedian is in his own words:

"My comedy is for children from three to 93. You do need a slightly childish sense of humour and if you haven't got that, it's very sad."

(Quoted by Andrew Walker in *Sir Norman: Nobody's Fool*. BBC, June 6, 2000)

It is what pure comedy always asks us to do – reach back to our childhood's innocence. In the words of the famous British play writer Tom Stoppard (*Shakespeare in Love, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Brazil, Arcadia*, etc.): "If you carry your childhood with you, you never become older".

Dr. Phil M. Ovie