

Looking Funny

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

THERE WAS A TIME when I was a student of Stella Adler that I wanted to play a funny role. I can't recall the character, perhaps something out of Neil Simon, and Stella said I couldn't play comedy because I didn't look funny. Taking her at her word, I let go of the idea though I wasn't sure I agreed with her. Thinking back now, I can say that in a sense she was right and in another sense she wasn't.

Certainly the names that come to mind, iconic names of the stage and screen, when considering women and comedy, are names of women who somehow look funny even when glamorously turned out. There is Mae West, Margaret Dumont, Carol Burnett, Jean Stapleton, Lily Tomlin, Bette Midler—all who can make us grin just by standing there. But there's another sort of actress who can elicit laughter in spite of being unfunny looking, though this sort must do something besides stand there. Even with a pretty face, Lucille Ball was so manic in behavior that she looked funny. Stella Adler herself, who was by any account beautiful, actually reminded me, in her moments of being scattered, of "I Love Lucy," and, in her moments of being imperious, of Margaret Thatcher. Both aspects were funny (though the Thatcher would have been unintentionally so). We can see Stella's actorly funniness in two of her three movie roles preserved on video: a gussied-up gun moll in "Shadow of the Thin Man" and a Hungarian landlady in "My Girl Tisa." The ultimate in the beautiful woman who's also funny may have been Katherine Hepburn, succeeded by Diane Keaton in a later day. I regard Meryl Streep as gorgeous and funny. So I can't honestly credit Stella's rubric, though I can guess what she meant was that an actor has to take on the look of funny to be funny and that may be so. While Kate Hepburn plays the sophisticated, intelligent, savvy woman of the world, what's funny is that when she enters the domestic arena, like when she enters a kitchen to cook, she portrays the look of inept. Diane Keaton finds herself in complicated psycho-social-sexual situations and exudes the look of "la-di-da." So maybe funny does look funny.

I was gratified this fall to find beautiful women doing viable comedy on stage, even if the plays were

not so engaging. The roles they were given to play were stock characters—the bombshell or showgirl type. The difficulty for the actor of course in any conventional role is to transcend the cliché, most especially if the cliché is nailed in, as it was in Ken Ludwig's "Shakespeare in Hollywood," directed by Jiri Ziska at the Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia. In his tribute to Hollywood screwball comedy, Ludwig fit the bombshell type into the guise of a dumb-blonde ex-chorus-girl named Lydia Lansing (Polly Lee), mistress to 1930s Hollywood producer Jack Warner. Another blonde turned up in Christopher Durang's musical "Adrift in Macao," which received its world premiere from the Philadelphia Theatre Company. Here she was a would-be nightclub singer called Lureena (Rachel de Benedet), coming on as a femme fatale, sexily seductive in a slinky dress. Her redheaded alter ego Corinna (Michele Ragusa) was a washed-up nightclub singer strung-out on cocaine. Both women looked fabulous and were funnier than the script. Intended as an affectionate take on 1940's-50's film noir, Durang's "Macao" didn't manage to strike an agreeable balance between fondness and parody.

Whereas "Adrift in Macao" was program-noted as "Chris Durang in a good mood," I prefer the Chris Durang of his latest non-musical "Miss Witherspoon," which if, sorry to say, is Chris Durang in a not good mood, the result is happy for us. Set in the "recent past and foreseeable future" on "earth and not earth" the play deals in reincarnation, specifically what happens if a person has recognized that life is suffering, has had enough of life, is recently deceased, and is now resisting reincarnation—is definitively not wanting to go back—but nevertheless gets reincarnated, and then commits suicide in order to escape life once more, and of course gets reincarnated again, and so on through various embodiments, including that of a dog and a neglected baby born to redneck addicts, and each time finds a way again to commit suicide. The production, which received its world-premiere at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton directed by Emily Mann, before being moved to the Playwrights Horizons in New York, is laugh-aloud amusing because of the writing of Christopher Durang, and especially the acting of Kristine Nielsen as Miss Witherspoon who looks, moves, sounds, speaks, and plays funny.

I admire serious actors who let themselves or their

characters be laughed at. This level of generosity was apparent in high degree in the Opera Company of Philadelphia's November production of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville." The luscious-voiced cast of almost all Italian singers sported together without a trace of "I'm a star," or in the case of the barber Figaro (Roberto de Candia), "I'm the star." When Count Almaviva (Antonino Siragusa) was pretending to be Rosina's music master in order to gain access to her room, he sang the role with a speech impediment. Everyone took turns helping each other make fools of them-selves. Most delightfully, director Alessandra Panzavolta had inserted little dance steps to punctuate highpoints within the story. These were dance steps executed by each character at one time or another, or by couples or trios of characters, dance steps so diminutive, inadvertent, and unexpected that they just seemed to pop up out of the floor under people's feet, and were hysterical.

Eventually I did play comedy at the Adler Studio but only after graduating and no longer being Stella's student. What transpired, was that seven classmates who had studied with Stella for two years formed a group theatre after completing our course of training. Stella found directors for us and I had a chance at comic roles. In Sean O'Casey's "Bedtime Story," I was given to play Miss Mossie, an old biddy Irish landlady that warranted dressing up in a schmatta costume with a shawl and headgear. To disguise my voice, I invented a laugh for Miss Mossie that was sounded entirely on the inhalation, but the laugh seemed so hilarious to me that I was in danger of losing Miss Mossie at every use. I also had a run as Mrs. Lee in Murray Schisgal's "The Chinese," under the direction of the late Larry Blyden, who died in a car crash way too young. We were directed to play straight and with such earnestness that it became even harder than as Miss Mossie not to break up on stage, given the Chinese accents and Chinese dialogue. The plot is that a perfectly all-American looking boy named Chester, living in Brooklyn with his thoroughly Chinese laundry-proprietor mother and father, begins to question his parentage just as he's eager to bring home his newly found Jewish girlfriend Gladys to meet the folks. My character Mrs. Lee embarks on an explanation of Chester's origins, beginning with her

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BY ELIZABETH DIXON

IN THE MAKING OF ALL GOD'S BEAUTIFUL CREATIONS, or the most beautiful paradises on earth, to me there is nothing more beautiful than the human being at the very peak of his or her potential development, mental, emotional, spiritual, moral, social, physical and vocal grandeur. There is also nothing greater on this earth in our potential than the free right to reign over and achieve this development and growth for each and every one of us. That is what the American Constitution is supposed to be all about.

Did you know that actors and actresses often believe that what they do requires a mystical, special unusual gift called talent? Well, that is not completely true. All of the rest of us harbor many of those same special gifts that make a really fine performer in the acting art. Or else, there would not be any audiences. If we did not have the same feelings and emotional responses, the same sympathy with the downtrodden and the helpless, same hope and belief in the goodness of life, we could not know or appreciate what a really great acting artist is all about. If we could not see that humor very often has its base in the very heart of deep tragedy, if we did not have faith that beyond laughter and tears there is—quiet peace, we would not be willing to be audiences.

Many human beings, I have found, are always arranging to cheat themselves of opportunity and capability by insisting on believing in those mystical, magical words such as genius, talent, mental prowess or intellectual capacity which is beyond and above the scope of everyday human beings. That is what keeps the self-limitators from obtaining their full potential. Except for the emotional and mental blocks we set up in our own way—the universe is willing, even anxious to give us all we desire.

The truth is, that while you cannot change your speaking equipment, you can change how you use it. We all come into this world with pretty much the same basic

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design for respiratory/phonatory systems (air/ sound) and articulation action.

But from those first phonemes or vocal sounds we make as a baby, we all operate the vocal equipment in our own personal way. We begin to develop and use an "habitual muscle set." An habitual muscle set is created by conditioned use of the vocal muscular system in what becomes a learned or set pattern. The respiratory system settles into a patterned muscle set also. In each person—every pattern and individual personality is always a little different.

It is also wise to read and understand the philosophy and psychology (Psychoses and Neuroses of Speech) as you undertake the deep study of muscle training and ear imagery, breath control or accent removal—and then the process which makes all of these adjustments into a new habit. Create a new habitual muscle set, much more efficient than the old one. Then we must take this new muscle set and carry it on into an habitual way of speaking in conversation and otherwise—for ever after.

That accomplished, you must also have the respect for your vocal instrument to maintain its efficiency with at least a minimal set of consistent exercises. This is one of the important bits of information for this new century.

Singing teachers have known it for eons. The student or the accomplished professional of singing must do his or her do-re-mi vocalese before they can sing the song or give the concert. Why should the speaking voice be any different than the singing voice? Maintenance for muscles in speech is every bit as important as the accepted jogging, gyms, sports, walking, hiking and other physical exercise activities for those muscles that adorn the surface of the body—if not more so. you will never do it unless you make all of the various technicalities of speech your own:

1. The basic skills of voice for your sound.
2. The basic articulation skills for your accent and clarity.
3. The technical muscular delivery skills for automatic control.
4. The coloring, imagery, stress and even the projection of your soul into your utterances.

Build yourself, particularly your speaking instrument, so that your life experience and your intelligence come through your sound (if you have a good sound and can be heard). Let your personality and character shine through

your delivery skills (if your delivery skills are adequately trained and polished). In fact, none of the foregoing vocal accomplishments can ever happen if you do not have a free and responsive speaking voice. ♦2001

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own and her husband's births in Macao (site of Christopher Durang's musical!), and she winds up clarifying nothing, as in the following: **Mrs. Lee.** On both sides of the family, on your father's side and mine, there has been intermarriage. I myself can count two Great Uncles and a Great Grandparent who are European, while your father's father came from . . . (She turns to Mr. Lee, in Chinese.) Nay lo tai po hai been do lay ge? (Where did your father come from, dear?) **Mr. Lee.** Montgomery, Alabama.

It was at the conclusion of this scene, on gleaning the expression of unremitting confusion and horrific frustration in the face of my son Chester (Rick Hendrie) and the expression of wry inscrutability in the face of my husband Mr. Lee (Dan Merchant) that I invariably had to turn upstage and begin ironing clothes so as to collect my wits and hold my breath. Such is the challenge of comedy, or it was my challenge in comedy: not so much to look funny on stage but to refrain from laughing at what looks funny on stage.

Maybe it was because Stella Adler understood and appreciated the underlying melancholy of life that she told me I couldn't play comedy. She was fonder of drama and was herself talented at experiencing sadness. All she had to do was say, "The baby," and she could cry. But of course she had a rich, mainly ironic, sense of humor, which must have served her well in playing the Jewish mothers, Bessie Berger and Clara Gordon, in the Odets plays back in the 1930's Group Theatre. In any event, there emerges from this discussion a reasonable way for an actor to be, and it's not unlike the very modern, the very existential Miss Witherspoon: funny in a pool of sadness. ♦2006

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