

## FORWORD

*The Fox on the Fairway* is a farce, and it was written in homage to the great English farce tradition that began in the 1880s and flowered in the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

A farce, essentially, is a broad comedy where the emphasis is more on the story and the plotting than on the emotional journey of the characters. It typically has a broad, physical, knockabout quality and is filled with recognizable characters who find themselves in precarious situations. Great farces are minutely plotted, and part of the joy we take from a great farce comes from the beauty of the play's architecture. When a complex story ticks along without missing a beat, then fits together perfectly at the end like a Chinese puzzle box, we leave the theater feeling exhilarated. The experience might be described as catharsis through laughter.

Farce on stage begins with Plautus in the 3rd century B.C. Twenty of his plays survive, and Shakespeare used several of them as sources of plot and character in the most overtly farcical of his own plays, including *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Farce recurs again and again in the history of British stage drama, from Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* in the 17th century to David Garrick's one-act curtain-raisers in the 18th. In fact, virtually all of the comic masterpieces written at the end of the 18th century, including *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith and *The School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, have strong farcical elements throughout.

The particular tradition that I'm honoring in *Fox* is a kind of comedy that first appeared in 1885-1887 in a number of tremendously successful comedies by Sir Arthur Wing Pinero (the first playwright in history to be knighted). These include *The Magistrate*, *The School Mistress*, and *Dandy Dick*. They are all set in upper-middle-class England amid clerics and judges, teachers and students, youngsters and oldsters, where youth ultimately fools old age and gets

what it wants. Close on the heels of these plays, in 1892, appeared what is probably the most successful farce of all time, *Charley's Aunt* by Brandon Thomas. It is the zany story of an Oxford student who dresses up as his friend's aunt in order to help the cause of true love and thwart the older generation.

Beginning in 1922 the playwright Ben Travers wrote over a dozen comedies known as the Aldwych Farces (because most of them were first produced at the Aldwych Theatre in London), including *A Cuckoo in the Nest*, *Rookery Nook*, *Plunder* and *Thark*. These featured the same group of actors from play to play, involved amorous uncles, forbidding mothers, opinionated servants and innocent ingénues, and became tremendously popular with the English public. The Travers tradition was then carried on, and indeed enriched, by many of England's finest dramatists, such as J.B. Priestley (in *When We Are Married*), Terence Rattigan (in *When the Sun Shines*) and Noel Coward (in *Blithe Spirit* and *Look After Lulu*). Along the way there were some outstanding one-offs, like *Tons of Money* by Evans and Valentine, and *See How They Run* by Philip King. (P.G. Wodehouse wrote the greatest farces of all time in this tradition, and he did it for over 75 years during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. In Wodehouse's case, however, they are in the form of novels and short stories.)

What the plays in this tradition have in common is not only their wildly funny stories and characters, but a firm sense of their own innocence. Their authors were very aware of the sex-fueled, often bitter French farces by Georges Feydeau written in the decades around 1900; but that is not exactly what they wanted to emulate. They wanted Feydeau's extravagant plots, colorful characters and breathless climaxes without the adultery and the pessimism. Thus emerged the singular tradition of British farce.

In *The Fox on the Fairway* I've tried to touch base with some of the specific characteristics of this genre in order to sustain what I consider to be an important yet endangered tradition. For example, many of the above-mentioned classics had sporting themes, probably because professional sports have a jaunty yet competitive edge that can bring out the best (and worst) in all of us. Some of the farces in this tradition revolve around bets; many of them concern marriages on the brink of disaster; some involve authority figures brought down to earth; and all of them concern young love fighting for survival.

It is important to put this genre into its own context. If it is judged – wrongly – in comparison to emotional comedies (say *Twelfth Night* or *Private Lives*) or intellectual comedies (say *Volpone* or *Major Barbara*), critics who don't understand the genre will find it wanting in emotion and intellect. If it is judged in comparison to the edgy farces of Joe Orton and Alan Bennett (say *Loot* or *Habeas Corpus*), it will not be found savage enough. The joy of the farces by Travers and Priestley, Pinero and Thomas, is in their plotting, wordplay, rhythm and exuberance. They all have a breezy quality that is intentional. For me, these plays reach a genuine depth of artistic merit, but it is the kind of depth we associate with great technique – in painting, for example, with composition, brushwork, and the choice of subject matter. If a critic finds *Charley's Aunt* too “frivolous,” then he has not entered the theater with the right critical tools.

Finally, I've written this play not only as an homage to the earlier tradition, but also as a reminder of the values that the tradition embodies, things like innocence, humor, good sportsmanship and honor. My hope is that it is still possible to come together in a darkened theater and embrace these values with a sense of joy. If so, there may be hope for us yet.

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