



## Comedies for Students

Several years ago, I spent a week a week at Interlochen, the world-renowned arts school in Michigan, as a guest of the Theater Department. As their final show of the year, the theater students were putting on one of my plays, *Midsummer/Jersey*, and we held some seminars and discussions together about the art of theater, with a special emphasis on comic theater. During that week, I wrote them a letter to suggest what plays they should read if they really wanted to understand stage comedy, and here it is.

PS: they were a remarkable group of students and many of them have continued their lives in the theater. My hat is off to all of them for the joy they brought to me, to their teachers, and to each other.

Dear Guys,

(1) You are my favorite cast in anything ever.

(2) As promised, here's a list of my favorite comedies written in English. You should read as many of these as you can. I'm keeping the list short instead of comprehensive because I don't want you to feel overwhelmed. Also, I'm not including much of anything past 1980 or so, because I don't think we can judge anything too recent. This doesn't mean that some wonderful comedies haven't been written since then and that we don't love to go see them. It's just that we can't really tell yet if they have anything of greatness about them.

Also, be aware that not all of these comedies are laugh-out-loud comedies. Some of them might be considered dramas (e.g. *The Winslow Boy* and *The Devil's Disciple*). But at heart they're comedies in the broad sense.

So here's what you should read (or better yet, see if possible):

Pre-20th Century:

Of course, Shakespeare wrote the greatest comedies of all time, and the greatest of these are *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. I also have a personal love for *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

George Farquhar: *The Beaux' Stratagem*. Post-Restoration. Farquhar was about 27 when he wrote it (around 1707, a generation later than the mainstream Restoration playwrights). He died at 29, alas. A great premise and loads of fun.

Hannah Cowley: *The Belles' Stratagem*. Her answer to the Farquhar play, written about 70 years later.

Oliver Goldsmith: *She Stoops to Conquer* – the best constructed, most enduring comedy ever written after the great Shakespeare comedies. You must get to know it.



Richard Brinsley Sheridan: *The Rivals*: One of the greatest comedies ever written. Ingenious. His play *The School for Scandal* is better known and performed more often

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero: *Dandy Dick*. Not well known. The subject matter is a bit dated, but it's brilliant and underrated. Two other very good comedies by Pinero are *Trelawney of the Wells* and *The Magistrate*. (Pinero was the first playwright in British history to be knighted. Sir Henry Irving was the first actor.)

Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Simply great in every way. And a landmark. You must know it.

The 20th Century:

George Bernard Shaw: *Arms and the Man*, *The Devil's Disciple*, and *Pygmalion*. *Pygmalion* is probably the greatest comedy of the 20th century. *Arms and the Man* is a jewel, though it lets us down a little after the brilliant first act. *The Devil's Disciple* is the only play Shaw wrote that is set in America and it's also brilliant. (Note: Shaw, in my view, is the greatest playwright in the English language after Shakespeare. He spans late 19th century into the first third of the 20th. He wrote many other great plays, like *Major Barbara* and *Saint Joan*, but I'm trying to keep the list manageable.)

James Barrie: *Peter Pan*. Captain Hook is one of the great comic characters of all time.

Noël Coward: *Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit* and *Hay Fever*. Noël Coward gets my vote as the greatest person of the theater in the 20th century, and *Blithe Spirit* is the century's best farce. *Present Laughter* has the best lead part in 20th century drama, but the play itself is a let down from a plot standpoint.

Clare Booth Luce: *The Women*. Not only by a woman but with an entirely female cast. Brilliant.

Terrence Rattigan: *The Winslow Boy*, *Harlequinade*.

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart: *You Can't Take It With You*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. (You should also read Moss Hart's autobiography, *Act One*. One of the best theater memoirs of all time.)

Thornton Wilder: *The Matchmaker*.

Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur: *The Front Page*, *Twentieth Century*.

J.B. Priestley: *When We Are Married*.

Joe Orton: *Loot*.

Tom Stoppard: *On the Razzle*, *Arcadia*.



I've probably left something important out by accident, but these will get you started in the right direction. And all of them are simply fun to read. For anybody who wants to move backward into a few other classics of English comedy, you should also read:

George Farquhar: *The Recruiting Officer*

John O'Keefe: *Wild Oats* (hilarious and heartwarming)

Dion Boucicault: *London Assurance*

And for anyone who wants to read a few truly great European comedies, don't miss

Moliere: *Tartuffe*, *The School for Wives*. Almost everything he wrote is a classic, and he was very prolific.

Goldoni: *A Servant of Two Masters*

Labiche: *The Italian Straw Hat*

Feydeau: *The Lady from Maxim's*

Gogol: *The Government Inspector*

Plautus: *The Rope*

Aristophanes: *The Frogs*

Please don't ever hesitate to call me if you have any questions. I'll miss you.

Much love,

Ken