Definition: **comedy** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

One of the two main types of drama. It differs from tragedy in its lightness of style and theme and its tendency to resolve happily. It originated in early Greek fertility rites and, in modern usage, refers not only to a humorous play or film, but also to the growing tradition of stand-up routines. As theatre has developed over the centuries, the once clear division between the two dramatic forms has been blurred, as fusions and a variety of sub-divisions of the two have been developed. See also Aristophanes; Greek drama

Summary Article: **comedy**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

Literary work that aims primarily to provoke laughter. Unlike tragedy, which seeks to engage profound emotions and sympathies, comedy strives to entertain chiefly through criticism and ridicule of man's customs and institutions.

Although usually used in reference to the drama (see drama, Western; Asian drama), in the Middle Ages comedy was associated with vernacular language and a happy ending. Thus, the term was also applied to such non-dramatic works as Dante's religious poem, *The Divine Comedy*.

**Evolution of Comedy**

Dramatic comedy grew out of the boisterous choruses and dialogue of the fertility rites of the feasts of the Greek god Dionysus. What became known to theater historians as Old Comedy in ancient Greece was a series of loosely connected scenes (using a chorus and individual characters) in which a particular situation was thoroughly exploited through farce, fantasy, satire, and parody, the series ending in a lyrical celebration of unity.

Reaching its height in the brilliantly scathing plays of Aristophanes, Old Comedy gradually declined and was replaced by a less vital and imaginative drama. In New Comedy, generally considered to have begun in the mid-4th cent. B.C., the plays were more consciously literary, often romantic in tone, and decidedly less satirical and critical. Menander was the most famous writer of New Comedy.

During the Middle Ages the Church strove to keep the joyous and critical aspects of the drama to a minimum, but comic drama survived in medieval folk plays and festivals, in the Italian commedia dell'arte, in mock liturgical dramas, and in the farcical elements of miracle and morality plays.

With the advent of the Renaissance, a new and vital drama emerged. In England in the 16th cent. the tradition of the interlude, developed by John Heywood and others, blended with that of Latin classic comedy, eventually producing the great Elizabethan comedy, which reached its highest expression in the plays of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Shakespeare, whose comedies ranged from the farcical to the tragicomic, was the master of the romantic comedy, while Jonson, whose drama was strongly influenced by classical tenets, wrote caustic, rich satire.

In 17th-century France, the classical influence was combined with that of the commedia dell'arte in the drama of Molière, one of the greatest comic and satiric writers in the history of the theater. This combination is also present in the plays of the Italian Carlo Goldoni. After a period of suppression
during the Puritan Revolution, the English comic drama reemerged with the witty, frequently licentious, consciously artificial comedy of manners of Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and others. At the close of the 17th cent., however, such stern reaction had set in against the bawdiness and frivolity of the Restoration stage that English comedy descended into what has become known as sentimental comedy. This drama, which sought more to evoke tears than laughter, had its counterpart in France in the comédie larmoyante.

In England during the later 18th cent. a resurgence of the satirical and witty character comedies was found in the plays of Sheridan. After an almost complete lapse in the early to mid-19th cent., good comedy was again brought to the stage in the comedies of manners by Oscar Wilde and in the comedies of ideas by George Bernard Shaw. In the late 1880s the great Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov began writing his subtle and delicate comedies of the dying Russian aristocracy.

Twentieth-Century Comedy

The 20th cent. has witnessed a number of distinct trends in comedy. These include the sophisticated and witty comedy of manners, initiated by Oscar Wilde in the late 19th cent. and carried on by Noel Coward, S. N. Behrman, Philip Barry and others; the romantic comic fantasy of such playwrights as James M. Barrie and Jean Giraudoux; and the native Irish comedy of J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, Sean O'Casey, Brendan Behan, and Brian Friel.

Also important are the musical comedy, which descends from 18th-century ballad operas and the comic operas of W. S. Gilbert and A. S. Sullivan (see musicals) and the slick, satirical, and professional comedy of George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, and Neil Simon. Strongly contrasting with these sunny styles are the nihilistic, highly unconventional comedy, containing both comic and tragic elements, of dramatists of the theater of the absurd such as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett and the so-called black comedy, often concerning topics like racism, sexual perversion, and murder, of playwrights such as Joe Orton, Harold Pinter, and David Mamet.

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