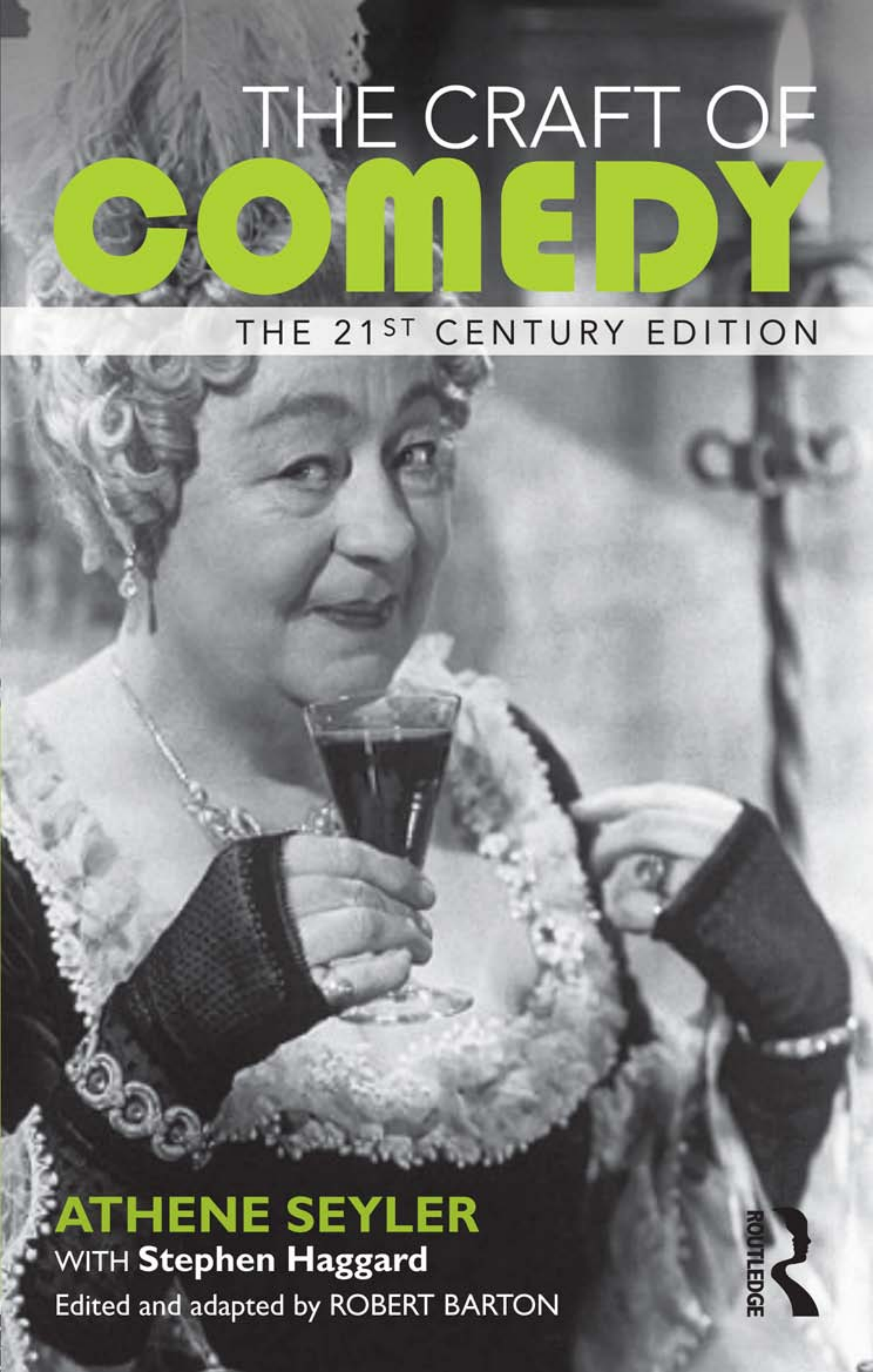
THE CRAFT OF COMEDY

THE 21ST CENTURY EDITION



ATHENE SEYLER

WITH **Stephen Haggard**

Edited and adapted by ROBERT BARTON

ROUTLEDGE

THE CRAFT OF COMEDY

> "a work on the art and craft of comedy as important in its own way as works by Stanislavski and Chekhov"
> —*Oxford Theatre Companion*

In 1939, a young, inexperienced actor wrote to a famous actress of his acquaintance, asking for advice on playing comedy. She responded enthusiastically, and they corresponded variously over the next year. *The Craft of Comedy*, a record of these exchanges, soon emerged as one of the few classic texts in the field of comedy acting.

This major new edition takes a brilliant book and makes it better. Editor Robert Barton has devised extensive supplementary material, including:

- an introduction to the correspondents, the culture of the time, and the evolution of their book;
- summaries, definitions, and exercises and practice scenes for readers wishing to explore Athene Seyler's invaluable advice;
- photographs, additional essays by Seyler, and a guide to easily accessed video clips of her performing.

Seyler's lucid guidance, and Barton's scrupulous editorship, ensure this legendary work's rightful status is restored: as one of the great practical guides to the craft of comedy, and an essential resource for actors and students of acting.

Robert Barton is the author of the books *Acting: Onstage and Off* (now in its 6th edition), *Voice: Onstage and Off*, with Rocco Dal Vera, *Theatre in Your Life* and *Life Themes*, with Annie McGregor, and *Style for Actors* (all in recent revised editions). His most recent text is *Acting Reframes: Using NLP to Make Better Decisions in and out of the Theatre*. His regular column "Many Right Ways" is published in *The Voice and Speech Review*.

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The 21st century edition

Athene Seyler
with
Stephen Haggard

Edited and adapted by
Robert Barton

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INTRODUCTION

The Craft of Comedy is a classic, practical, much admired (and by many beloved) guide to comic acting. The *Oxford Theatre Companion* describes it as “a work on the art and craft of comedy as important in its own way as works by Stanislavski and Chekhov.” While records from the early part of the past century are not entirely reliable and the terms edition and printing are often interchanged, the book has now been published in at least four editions, twenty printings and five languages, since its initial release in 1943. Simon Callow has summarized the abiding regard with which it is held: “It’s one of the first books I ever read about acting and remains one of the best. An absolute miracle of insight and witty writing.”

In 1939, a young, relatively inexperienced actor wrote to a famous successful actress of his acquaintance for advice on playing comedy. She responded enthusiastically. They had seven additional exchanges of letters, and then he wrote to her one last time, all within just under one year. Sadly, his death in World War Two preceded the actual publication of those letters and prevented his own career application of her words of wisdom. However, countless others benefited. This handful of letters proved so full of wise insights and useful tips that the book is regarded to this day as a major source on comic performance.

The Craft of Comedy has a wide range of enthusiastic supporters from scholars to undergraduates, from professional actors and directors to academics. It is on the shelves of many theatre practitioners, but its last publication was in 1990 and it is now largely unknown to Generations X and Y.

This new edition keeps the wonderful letters intact, adding summary material, term definitions and suggested exercises for readers wishing to immediately apply the invaluable advice. It offers considerable supplementary introductory material regarding the lives of the correspondents, the culture of the time and the evolution of the book. It provides illustrations of both writers in and out of performance. Appendices include additional essays by Seyler, an introduction to video clips of her performances, plays referenced for practice and an annotated bibliography of texts on comic acting published more recently. The adaptation aims to introduce a new generation to the contents, while providing structure that will allow readers to more easily scan and search the material, pull out salient points and apply the techniques discussed by Seyler.

The book has always been innovative in eschewing elaborate theory in favor of pragmatic advice and in the format of letters exchanged instead of a single authorial voice. It was not formatted for classroom use, but rather for the individual reader. It has provided a challenge for some readers to excerpt and apply ideas and to instructors attempting to use it as a textbook. It is hoped this edition will aid these processes, for both the solo reader and for collective classroom contexts. The additions for this edition provide the kind of structure that would allow it to now be used as the primary text in an acting comedy class or as a supplementary text, employed for a unit on comedy in a more general acting class.

But the reader addressed is still the individual actor who might open up a copy and decide to explore. If you are fortunate enough to be supported by classmates, castmates, teachers, directors or coaches, relish the feedback. But if you are flying solo, you can. Most of us who discovered this text between 1943 and now, did just that.

Because it is now more than seventy years since the letters were exchanged, it is essential to establish historical context for the work and to ascertain what has changed between then and now.

Cultural contexts

The exchange of letters constituting *The Craft of Comedy* took place just prior to the outbreak of World War Two, an event often identified as the end of humanity's collective innocence. Atrocities inflicted and horrors experienced eventually impacted theatre along with the other arts.

Haggard seems to foresee this in *I'll Go to Bed at Noon: A Soldier's Letter to His Sons* (originally published in The Atlantic Monthly 1940). He had sent his wife and son to New York for their own safety after he enlisted:

> My Dear Sons,
>
> You are both too young, thank God, to realize quite what it can have meant to me and to your mother to part as we have parted today. Britain is at war, of course, and life is full of partings just now. You and your mother are going to America to escape the possibility of a wretched fate. You are not going, as people of the last century went, with ambition and high hopes; you are not even going as the Mayflower pilgrims went, because they found the way of life in their own country insupportable. If that were the reason for your flight, there would be no great tragedy in it. There would be wretchedness, danger, hunger perhaps, the panic and despair which fill all refugees who are uprooted from the country and the people they have loved for generations.
>
> But you are fleeing because there is a chance – and on this twenty-fourth day of June 1940, a good chance – that all the wisdom, all the kindness, the education, the comradeship, the visionary development of the last fifty years, shall have proved of no avail in the battle against evil which is now raging.

When the letter was published in book form a few years later by Faber and Faber, the boys' godfather Christopher Hassell wrote in the introduction that it had been a period where "we were bankrupt in time . . . desperately building dykes against oblivion" and that "the sort of people we had been died almost overnight."

When Seyler writes that comedy should be free of malice and anger, she is referencing the body of work encompassing years prior to the war and its impact. This does not mean that the letters cannot be useful in any comic context, because comedy is comedy, but that the reader will find there are a number of forms of comedy as yet unknown to the correspondents. The writers do not address a more pervasive spectrum of what eventually came to be accepted as comedic, when theatre of the absurd and other darker perspectives emerged. And as more time now elapses between the origins of classical comedy (plays referenced in the exchange are for the most part written before 1895), the basic need and ultimate value of these tips for playing it will be even greater. Now it can also be more of a challenge to guide students who embrace the postmodern perspective as ordinary life, responding to experiences with an ironic, self referential edge, and being accustomed to comics who, according to media columnist Kevin McConough, "seem compelled to exude rage, blowtorch profanity and overall 'edge'" into dramatic contexts where none of these exist.

While all of us directing classical plays have had to devote considerable rehearsal time to guiding actors in the handling of corsets, capes, trains, fans, snuff and other unfamiliar clothing and props (see Appendix B, Seyler's essay "Fans, trains and stays") that task has become even more daunting. A colleague of mine recently mounted a contemporary play where characters were gathered for a formal dinner party. She found herself with male actors who had to learn to wear hard soled leather shoes and suit coats, because they did not own and had not experienced such garments, and some women cast members who needed to learn to move in long dresses and heels, which they had only worn to the prom, if then. So whenever a period costume is going to constrain and dominate a character's movement, it will now be foreign territory to many actors, who will have no frame of reference on which to build. If you do not know conventions and constraints of formal wear in your own time, where do you start to find connections in rehearsal to constraints of the past? This simply means that the lessons will be more vital and the amount of rehearsal time required for mastery more extensive as time goes on.

In our age of full disclosure, where nothing seems to remain secret or off limits, and the boundaries on what may be considered appropriate are constantly stretched, it can be puzzling to find that classical comedy often centers on debates over what is appropriate behavior and what constitutes good manners. Decorum is simply assumed by all to be important even if characters disagree on exactly what it is. Seyler and Haggard also lived and wrote in a time when a sense of propriety dominated. For example, President Roosevelt was never photographed or filmed in a way that revealed he was restricted to a wheel chair, because that was universally regarded as disrespectful. There were also narrow standards of tolerated behavior. Film stars were actually censored by congress for making unconventional decisions in their romantic entanglements. The failure to accurately report the conditions of Haggards' death and the failure of Seyler to be titled as most felt she deserved due to her living conditions (see their bios for further details) are all but unthinkable now and stand as vivid examples of what a different world it was then.

While Seyler's observations cover a wide range of comedic forms, the examples she most frequently references herein are from the plays of the Restoration. Unfortunately, many readers today, particularly in the US, will be unfamiliar or only vaguely aware of Restoration comedy. These plays, written between 1664 and 1700, reflect the "restored" British monarchy with Charles II returning from exile to the throne. Between the execution of his father Charles I in 1649 and this event, Puritanism of a most repressive and violent nature dominated England, with theatre itself even being outlawed in 1652. Politics replaced art. Essentially fun was outlawed during this interlude and then much sought after once it was over. The resulting plays focus on the antics of an aristocracy determined to make up for lost time in terms of decadent self-indulgence. Characters are often free of any moral code whatsoever, feeling an obligation to satisfy all appetites. Essentially anything goes provided it is done with well spoken panache.

Restoration plays were always performed far more frequently in the UK than the US, are decreasingly done in either, and are widely regarded as the most difficult comedies to pull off successfully. If staged authentically in period, they require actors to achieve total command of accoutrements, which may include elaborate wigs, headdresses or hats, an abundance of lace and ribbons, fans, walking sticks, handkerchiefs and snuff. More importantly they require vocal precision in delivering lines. As Haggard says, actors must be able "to speak those long, artificial sentences with that mixture of precision and nonchalance which they require." Most importantly they require the capacity to make these characters, who might be regarded as deplorable, adorable, or at their very least tolerable. The correspondents chose Restoration comedy to round out their letters, simply because it did and still does present the greatest challenges.

The term "Restoration" is also sometimes used outside the period itself to refer to any style of comedy influenced by the plays of that time or to a particular style choice. In the eighteenth-century Georgian plays, while more wholesome characters may be at the center of the story, some genuine Restoration characters still emerge. Oscar Wilde's late 1900s' characters are in many ways Restoration with an absurd overlay of Victorian propriety. Noel Coward's characters in the 1920s have practically returned to original narcissism. Many regard Captain Hook as a displaced Restoration villain. Some believe that Black Adder, no matter what period he is in, remains Restoration in nature. Many examples of arch, witty, removed Restoration characters exist outside the confines of their origins.

Recently comedy has been exposed to science. We now know, for example, that there are fifteen facial muscles involved in laughter and that an animal story will get the biggest laugh if that animal is a duck. Seyler's contention that laughter actually heals has been verified by solid scientific research. It would be interesting to subject all her ideas to scientific testing. She simply observes as a veteran drawing from her own singular experience. However, in the absence of empirical verification, we readers largely agree that those observations are spot on.

Athene Seyler

(May 31, 1889 – September 12, 1990)

> "My work was my holiday to me, I enjoyed it so much.
> I had a smashing time."

This sense of relish and sheer joy of performance seems to have consistently characterized Seyler's work over an incredible 60-year career of nearly 200 roles, approximately 80 on film and 115 in the theatre. This averages out to three to four roles per year and there were no years in this astonishingly productive career in which she did not perform.

The youngest, by ten years, of seven children, she and all her siblings were given Greek names by their Hellenophile father. She was educated at Coombe Hill, a progressive co-educational school where the emphasis lay on tutorials rather than textbooks.

Family friend and neighbor, the legendary actor Sir Henry Irving encouraged Seyler to become an actor, perhaps after observing her in an early performance as a child, dancing a hornpipe and reducing the audience to helpless laughter when she acknowledged that her "draws fell down." With his support, she applied for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Though she auditioned as Rosalind from *As You Like It* and gained a scholarship, her debut at the academy was as Charles the Wrestler in that play. She graduated as the gold medalist with top honors in 1908, despite being told by the pioneering female director and faculty member Lena Ashwell that she would never make an actress because of the way ("with poached-egg eyes and wizened quality") she looked.

Her first professional stage appearance was in 1909 at the Kingsway theatre portraying Pamela Grey in the play *The Truants*. It was Ashwell, with an apparent change of mind, who cast her in this role. Between her debut and the end of the First World War, Seyler appeared in almost thirty productions, in London and on tour, but it was not until 1920 at the Lyric, Hammersmith, that she began to attract considerable attention, first as Rosalind (at last and long identified as her favorite role).