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Teacher Resource Guide 2004/2005 Season



A FLEA IN HER EAR

By Georges Feydeau

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The Stanley Theatre

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CHARACTER LIST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

IN THE HOUSE

Camille Chandebise The young nephew and secretary of Victor Emmanuel Chandebise. He has a rare speech impediment that prevents him from pronouncing consonants. He orders a custom-made artificial palate to correct the problem.

Antoinette Plucheux The Chandebise household cook with a cheerful disposition. She is married to Etienne but flirts with Camille.

Etienne Plucheux The haughty butler of the Chandebise household. He is egocentric and domineering, and thinks his wife, Antoinette, is lazy.

Dr. Finache The chief medical officer of the Boston Life Insurance Company. He is also Victor Emmanuel's closest confidante. A Hotel Coq d'Or customer.

Lucienne Homenides de Histangua Raymonde's dearest friend. She is married to Carlos.

Raymonde Chandebise Wife of Victor Emmanuel. Due to her husband's recent lack of romantic interest in her, she begins to doubt his fidelity. With this "flea in her ear," she decides to take matters into her own hands, with Lucienne's help.

Victor Emmanuel Chandebise The devoted husband of Raymonde. The managing director of the Boston Life Insurance Company for Paris, he has business savvy but little sense of humour. His temporary lack of virility leads his wife to suspect him of having an affair.

Romain Tournel A trusted friend and employee of Victor Emmanuel's insurance company. He is infatuated with his employer's wife, who coquettishly encourages but continually rebuffs him.

Carlos Homenides de Histangua Husband of Lucienne and a potential client of the Boston Life Insurance Company. A stereotypically fiery, macho Spaniard, he is very protective of his wife.

IN THE HOTEL

Eugénie A rebellious young maid who is routinely accused of being lazy by her boss, Feraillon.

Augustin Feraillon The proprietor of the Hotel Coq d'Or. A former military man, he runs his hotel with precision and discipline. He is married to Olympe.

Olympe The devoted wife of Feraillon. They met while she was working in a similar hotel, and together they created their own dream hotel.

Baptistin Feraillon's elderly uncle. His job is to serve as a rather unusual decoy to help ensure the privacy of the hotel patrons and confuse any ill-timed police raids.

Herr Schwarz A frustrated and confused hotel guest who speaks only German.

Poche The hotel porter formerly in Feraillon's military regiment. He is Victor Emmanuel's physical double.

SYNOPSIS

Set in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, *A Flea in Her Ear's* main plot revolves around the beautiful Raymonde Chandebise and her husband's sudden lack of romantic interest in her. Not realizing that Victor Emmanuel's lack of virility is due to a nervous condition, Raymonde suspects him of infidelity and seeks the advice of Lucienne, her dearest friend, who suggests a way to entrap him. In Lucienne's handwriting, they pen an ardent letter to Victor Emmanuel from a fictitious mysterious admirer requesting a rendezvous at the Hotel Coq d'Or, an establishment with which they erroneously believe Victor Emmanuel is familiar. Intending to confront him there, Raymonde and Lucienne head for the hotel.

When the faithful Victor Emmanuel reads the anonymous love letter, he believes that the invitation was meant for his best friend, Tournel, a handsome bachelor who, unbeknownst to Victor Emmanuel, lusts after Raymonde. The libidinous Tournel, not one to decline such an offer, quickly exits to make the appointment with the mystery woman.

The amused Victor Emmanuel then shows the letter—which he has kept for posterity—to Lucienne's husband, Carlos Homenides de Histangua, a stereotypically passionate Spaniard. Recognizing Lucienne's handwriting and assuming his wife is trying to start an affair, Carlos storms off to the hotel vowing to kill her. Victor Emmanuel pursues him in an attempt to prevent the murder.

Meanwhile, Camille Chandebise, Victor Emmanuel's young nephew and secretary, has his speech impediment corrected by an artificial palate from Dr. Finache. In a celebratory mood, he and Antoinette, the flirtatious household cook, run off to the Hotel Coq d'Or. They are followed by Etienne, Antoinette's domineering husband. Dr. Finache also decides to head to the hotel for some fun of his own.

The gathering at the Hotel Coq d'Or causes a huge disruption for Feraillon, the hotel proprietor, and further misunderstandings. Carlos, attempting to kill Lucienne, aims his pistol at anything that moves. Victor Emmanuel sees Raymonde with Tournel and believes they are having an affair. Adding to the commotion, Victor Emmanuel is mistaken for Poche, an alcoholic hotel porter—and his exact physical double—and is believed to have gone insane.

The confusion persists after the main characters assemble at the Chandebise residence. Things begin to clear up only when Carlos discovers a draft of the love letter written in Raymonde's hand. Then the hotel proprietor stops by to return something left behind at the hotel and identifies Poche as his hotel porter. When Raymonde finally tells Victor Emmanuel about the flea in her ear, he promises to "squash that flea, tonight!"

LANGUAGE IN THE PLAY

barmy - eccentric; daft

besotted - muddled or stupefied, as with alcoholic liquor or infatuation

catharsis - a release of emotional tension, such as one after an overwhelming experience, which restores or refreshes the spirit

commissionaire - a uniformed attendant

constitution - the physical makeup of a person

delirium tremens - a violent delirium with tremors that is induced by excessive and prolonged use of alcohol

folly - an act or instance of foolishness

idiosyncratic - structural or behavioural characteristics peculiar to an individual or group

impediment - something that impedes; a hindrance or obstruction

inquisitive - unduly curious and inquiring

inveterate - persisting in an ingrained habit; habitual

neuralgia - severe, sudden convulsion of pain extending along a nerve or group of nerves

palate - the roof of the mouth separating the mouth from the nasal cavity

paramour - a significant other

rheumatic - one affected by inflammation or pain in muscles, joints, or fibrous tissue

uncouth - crude; unrefined

vermouth - a sweet or dry fortified wine flavoured with aromatic herbs and used chiefly in mixed drinks

GENRE: FARCE

Georges Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear* is an example of the classic French farce. A farce is a comic dramatic piece written for the stage or film whose objective is to entertain the audience through unlikely and extravagant situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humour, and a fast-paced plot. Farce also employs broad horseplay and deliberate absurdity or nonsense.

Farces tend to steer clear of a traditional plot, such as two lovers who overcome all obstacles to unite, and instead focus on a transgressive act or a character's attempt to hide something from the other characters—and the unforeseen chain reaction that results. The character who has something to conceal soon passes the point of no return, mistakenly believing that any course of action is preferable to being exposed. Consequently, the protagonist sinks deeper and deeper into trouble. The skeleton in the closet, either real or imagined, may be a secret concerning the immediate present or the long-forgotten past that has just re-emerged and begun to threaten the main character's security or peace of mind. In the late nineteenth century, this secret was usually related to a woman lying about her age or a man fathering an illegitimate child. In the twentieth century, infidelity became a popular theme.

Farces typically move at a frantic pace as they near the climax, where the initial problem is somehow resolved, often in a happy ending. In some cases, poetic justice is not always rendered—that is, the protagonist may get away with what he or she has been trying to hide at all costs, even a criminal act.

Highly tolerant of transgressive behaviour and tending to depict human beings as vain, irrational, and venal, farce is a natural companion of satire. In fact, farce is not merely a genre but a highly flexible dramatic mode that often occurs in combination with other forms, including romantic comedy.

Bedroom Farce

The bedroom farce, perhaps the most popular form of the genre, is a light drama that centres on the sexual pairings and recombinations of characters while they move through improbable plots. Feydeau is probably the most famous playwright of bedroom farces. His collection of coincidences, slamming doors, and ridiculous dialogue delighted Parisian theatre audiences at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond.

EXPLORING THE PLAY

Excerpted from “A Flea in Her Ear: Pure Farce,” by James Mills, *Midsummer Magazine*, 1994

Georges Feydeau (1862–1921) was a farceur par excellence who wrote 39 works spanning a career of 36 years during la belle époque, the period in French history dating from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War I. At a time when the French were faced with the morbid realistic theatre of the naturalists and the idealistic theatre of the symbolists, Feydeau offered a more mundane theatre, which Raymond Rudorff has described as “good-humored libertinism that was the decadence of the moment” (*The Belle Epoque* [New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973], 222). He came to dominate the Theatre of the Boulevard, which demanded a well-made play with violence, shock, and the eternal triangle. His was a bourgeois world of middle-class marriage and the demimonde, or what Leonard Pronko has called “the underside of the belle époque” (*Georges Feydeau* [New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1975], 5).

French vaudevillian farce was a light, amusing, and skillfully constructed comedy quite unlike the American vaudeville, which was more of a variety program (Norman R. Shapiro, *Introduction to Four Farces by Georges Feydeau* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], xiii–xiv). Peter Glenville has observed that Feydeau’s plays are “immaculately constructed” and “are concerned largely with the appetites and follies of the average human being caught in a net devised by his own foolishness” (*Feydeau: Father of Pure Farce* [Theatre Arts: April, 1957], 66). He was not an experimenter or an innovator, but exploited fully the farcical possibilities inherent in the dramatic conventions which he adopted and used with standard plot formulae and patterns (Stuart E. Baker, *Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981], 25). Every word, every motion is important in the Feydelian farce with the typical boudoir comedy functioning as a “rigorously, logically constructed machine” (Shapiro, *Four Farces*, xiii).

After his first real success, a three-act play titled *Ladies’ Dressmaker* (*Tailleur pour dames*, 1886), he had about a dozen failures or only partial successes. In 1890 he retired for two years to study other farceurs who had been successful, including Eugène Labiche, Henri Meilhac, and Alfred Hennequin. In 1892 he found success with *Monsieur Has Gone Hunting* (*Monsieur chasse*) and *Champignol in Spite of Himself* (*Champignol malgré lui*), the latter establishing his position as a great vaudevillist.

As his work evolved it took a binary thrust, with his early plays emphasizing the comedy of action while his later work is more subdued and restrained with realistic decors and characters and plots that are usually plausible. This metamorphosis may be explained in part by difficulties in his private life such as the lengthy separation from his wife, their divorce, his melancholia, and his eventual admission into an institution, where he died insane in 1921. He has in fact been described as a melancholy man of great refinement seated in a lively cafe but quietly listening and observing life about him through half-closed eyes, his ever-present cigar in his hand. To some he seemed cold and aloof, but to others he was gracious, gentle, and natural (Pronko, 10–11). Among his well-known works are *The Lady from Maxim’s* (*La Dame de chez Maxim*), *Hotel Paradiso* (*L’Hôtel du Libre-Echange*), *Keep an Eye on Amelia* (*Occupe-toi d’Amélie*), and *A Flea in Her Ear* (*La Puce à l’oreille*).

On March 2, 1907, Feydeau returned to the “jack-in-the-box constructions of earlier triumphs” with a renewed emphasis on comedy of actions in his celebrated work *A Flea in Her Ear* (Shapiro, *Four Farces*, xxxix). Michael Billington calls the play superb because of its mathematical perfection and flawless economy of plot (*The Listener* [3 March 1966], 315). He further notes that the plot reaches the heights of artifice, but the characters themselves have a basic reality, which is exactly what Feydeau hoped to achieve because he saw his first task to find his characters in reality and to preserve their true nature; then, after a comic exposition, to throw them into burlesque situations.

A Flea in Her Ear is a farce-comedy in three acts that follows the pattern based on deception. It is a comedy of situation involving marriage and deception. Raymonde, for example, feels betrayed when she surreptitiously opens her husband's mail to find a strange pair of suspenders, whereupon she convinces her best friend, Lucienne, to fabricate a letter from a supposed admirer of her husband, Victor Emmanuel, requesting a rendezvous with him at the Hôtel Coq d'Or. Then there is the massive confusion between the identities of Poche and Victor Emmanuel at the hotel, both parts played by the same actor, and the subsequent flood of accusations and charges leveled by the various parties during the hilarious chase scene.

Surprisingly, Raymonde, once convinced (erroneously) of her husband's infidelity, no longer throws herself at Tournel, her would-be lover. In fact, by the end of the second act, she is seeking forgiveness for having merely been in the hotel with another man. Ironically, unlike most of Feydeau's female characters, she insists that she cannot betray her husband because she is too upset.

Instead of dwelling on the mystery of the suspenders, the emphasis is placed on the perplexities of the double identity of Victor Emmanuel and Poche. Meanwhile, the deceived Latin husband, Carlos Homenides de Histangua, hysterically runs in and out of rooms in pursuit of suspected rivals. Then there is Camille Chandebise, Victor Emmanuel's nephew, who adds to the confusion by reserving a room under his family name, causing some of the characters to believe that the room is reserved for Victor Emmanuel. Meanwhile, Camille, who can only experience himself in vowels because of his speech impediment, is misunderstood by almost everyone until he inserts an artificial palate into his mouth, which he promptly loses and does not get back until the end of the play.

The farce opens with meaningless syllables uttered by Camille, "Hare foo. Please be careful!" (John Mortimer, trans. [New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1968], 1). While the mumbled speech may anticipate the complete breakdown in communication that is to follow, the intent of his words similarly seems to allude to the possibility of difficulties ahead. This is immediately followed by the comforting admonition of Antoinette, the maid, "Calm down. The family's out" (1), which is designed to lull both Camille and the spectator into a false sense of security, when, in reality, the nightmare is just about to begin.

The play is a well-constructed, geometrical triumph with a number of secrets hidden from most of the characters until the conclusion, but shared with the audience. Victor Emmanuel's lack of passion, for example, remains unexplained until the end, as well as the identity of the author of the anonymous letter. And, of course, the confusion involving the identities of Victor Emmanuel and Poche and Victor Emmanuel and Camille remains until the final scene.

A Flea in Her Ear is the most performed of Feydeau's works in the United States and Canada. Its continued success serves as a reminder that vaudeville still holds its appeal more than a century after its inception.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Georges Feydeau (1862–1921)

Born and raised in Paris, the playwright Feydeau, whose father was a renowned writer and scholar, was exposed to theatre in the intellectual and artistic capital of the western world at the turn of the century. Also an actor and director, he wrote 39 plays between 1881 and 1916, taking the farce to new heights on the French stage.

At age twenty Feydeau completed his first work, called *Through the Window*. Next, he composed *Love and Piano* and *Gallows-Bird*, two single-act plays that received critical praise but whose theatrical runs did poorly. In 1886, at the age of twenty-four, Feydeau wrote a three-act work entitled *Ladies' Dressmaker*, his first major theatrical success. This was followed by seven years of failures and only some moderate successes. During that time, he married the daughter of Carolus-Duran, a well-known portrait painter, who took care of Feydeau financially.

In 1890, Feydeau stopped writing to study the works of successful authors of farce. He resurfaced two years later, offering the public the plays *Champignol in Spite of Himself* and *Monsieur Has Gone Hunting*. After being rejected by the Palais-Royal Theatre, *Champignol in Spite of Himself* became a major success at the Théâtre des Nouveautés. Feydeau soon became the most popular playwright of the boulevard theatre and a great success abroad. Continuing to write, he published the plays *The Lady from Maxim's*, in 1899, and *A Flea in Her Ear*, in 1907. The latter has become his most well-known play in English-speaking countries.

In 1941, Feydeau's play *Madam's Late Mother* entered the repertory of the Comédie-Française, the venerable national theatre of France, thus establishing him as a modern "classic."

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please impart some general theatre etiquette to students. They should keep in mind that this is not a movie theatre and different audience etiquette applies to a live theatre environment.

- The use of cameras or any type of recording equipment (including cellular phones) is strictly prohibited.
- It is important to turn off wristwatch alarms, cellular phones, and beepers for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher and we will alert you if a call comes through.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre or lobby.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- We request that you refrain from eating or unwrapping candy in the theatre, as it is a distraction for others.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- Seating at The Stanley Theatre and Granville Island Stage is assigned. Please sit in your assigned seat and respect the fact that other seats have been reserved for other patrons.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance, you will not be seated again until the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance. Even whispers carry!
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. We will be happy to address concerns on your behalf.

FURTHER RESOURCES

General Theatre Texts

- Bond, Daniel. *Stage Management*. New York, NY: A & C Black; Theatre Arts Books/Routledge, 1991.
- Cole, Toby & Helen Krich Chinoy. *Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theatre*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.
- Covey, Liz & Rosemary Ingham. *The Costume Designer's Handbook: A Complete Guide for Amateur and Professional Costume Designers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.
- Dukore, Bernard F. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.
- Parker, W. Oren & R. Craig Wolf. *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990.

Web Resources*

- <http://www.elcaminohigh.com>
- <http://www.ibdb.com/person.asp?ID=5878>
- <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=fr&u=http://www.comedie-francaise.fr/biographies/feydeau.htm>
- <http://www.worldhistory.com/wiki/G/Georges-Feydeau.htm>
- <http://www.bard.org/Education/Other/other.html>
- http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Bedroom_farce
- <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Farce>
- http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Georges_Feydeau
- <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Farce#France>

*Web links were active when preparing this guide.