Comedies, Romances, and Shakespeare's Heroines: Crash Course Theater #16

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=ZjAqfh9aY9Y
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/ZjAqfh9aY9Y

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and I hope you're wearing your stockings (?~0:07) because today is all about forests, twins, bed tricks, cross-dressing, and a wrestling match. That's right, Shakespearean comedies, because when Shakespeare wasn't killing off all of his characters, he wrote some pretty sparkling humor.

Comedy is maybe the most complicated of all the Shakespearean genres because along with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, it also includes works now referred to as "problem plays" and romances. Today, we'll look at what constitutes a comedy, Shakespeare's kickass heroines, and the unfunny kinds of comedies, with a closer exploration of (?~0:38), no foolin'. Well, some foolin'.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

A Shakesperean comedy is a play that's not based on a recent historical figure and that ends happily. Now, happy is a relative term, even for Shakespeare, but it's a safe bet that if the floor isn't littered with dead bodies, it's probably a comedy, and if it ends with a marriage, it's definitely a comedy. There's more variety in this genre than Shakespeare's others. Comedy spans everything from *The Comedy of Errors*, a straight up (?~1:14) rip-off and a knockabout farce to the bittersweet melancholy of The Winter's Tale. Uncomfortable but nonetheless funny-ish plays like *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice* sit somewhere in between. Comedies like *Midsummer* and *Twelvth Night* usually revolve around themes of separation and reunion, of guise and disguise and mistaken identity. There's often a retreat away from civil society into a forest, a place where some social niceties fall away and more authentic behavior emerges? There are usually songs, though often they're weirdly sad, like, "Come away, come away, death and in sad cypress, let me be laid." LOL. Or not LOL?

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Shakespeare often works with stock characters, who you'll remember from Roman comedy and its inheritors: the Disapproving Dad, the Headstrong Lover, the Wily Servant. But, part of the genius of Shakespeare is that these characters don't feel like stock characters. They feel like real people with real fears and real desires.

In a lot of the plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries we laugh *at* the characters, but in Shakespeare we laugh *with* them. They demand our sympathy. In *Twelfth Night* we laugh at the arrogant servant Malvolio, but when we see Malvolio's hurt, suddenly we don't feel so great about giggling. Shakespeare's comedy always comes with a hefty dose of empathy.

But if the tragedies are about men (and yes, Cleopatra, I am generalizing), the comedies are very much about women. Sometimes they're about women trying to protect themselves. Sometimes they're about women trying to marry the men of their choice. Usually they're about both, and in most of these plays the women have to step away from their ordinary lives in order to succeed. They're gonna run away into the forest. They're gonna put on pants. If they're Rosalind and Imogene, they're gonna run into the forest *in* pants, which is just sensible, really. It's how people *should* be running into the forest if you ask me.

Unlike the heroines of tragedies, who are trapped in terrible circumstances, the heroines of comedy find ways to escape those circumstances. I'm not trying to victim-blame, but if Desdemona or Juliet or Ophelia happened upon a forest and some pants, maybe things could've been different. Perhaps this is a commentary on how limited the opportunities for most women were and how few choices they had when they're at home wearing a corset.

But, it's also important to recognize that if Shakespeare's heroines defy social norms, it's only for a bit. None of them wears pants forever. Their defiance is limited and always...correctable. Nothing they do is ever *that* unladylike, and, at the end of the play, men order them to leave the forest and put their dresses back on so that they can get hitched. Plus, remember that all those spunky heroines were played by boy actors during Shakespeare's time, so the cross dressing is really *double* cross dressing: boys dressed as girls dressed as boys. It is hecking meta.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Shakespeare also emphasizes how great and swoon-y love marriages are at a time when marriage was typically an economic undertaking. And, not only are these love marriages, they are also marriages of equals, or *almost*-equals. The women are almost always a little braver, more clever, and more sensible than the dudes, as per ushe.

For our final thoughts about Shakespeare's women, let's turn to Sir Walter Raleigh: courtier, spy, explorer, and all-around Elizabethan badass who made his own love marriage and went to the Tower for it. Sir Walter wrote of Shakespeare's ladies, "They are almost all practical, impatient of mere words, clearsighted as to ends and means. They do not accept the premises to deny the conclusion, or decorate the inevitable with imaginative lendings."

But okay, consolation prize for the dudes: in the comedies, men tell most of the jokes. How funny are the jokes? It really varies. Some of the funniest jokers are in the tragedies, like Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the grave diggers in *Hamlet*, or Hamlet himself when he's dragging Polonius. And, some of the jokes in the comedies are kind of sad, like the fool Feste's bittersweet cracks in *Twelfth Night*.

While some of Shakespeare's jokes are sophisticated, the most memorable ones are not. *MacBeth* basically invents the knock-knock joke, all of the plays contain puns- some of which are great, and some of which are...tragic, like the way Dogberry mixes up 'suspect' and 'respect,' and Bottom says 'odious' when he means 'odorous.' Why aren't you laughing, Yorick? It tickled *my* funny bone...tragic.

And, you know what else Shakespeare loved? Dirty jokes. *The Comedy of Errors* has a fart joke, and many of his plays are lousy with bits about naughty bits. Shakespeare pretty much invents the Your Mom joke when a wronged son says to Aaron the Moor, "Thou hast undone our mother," and Aaron says, "Villain, I have done thy mother." Daaang. Insert super hot fire here.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

But, just because a play has jokes doesn't make it a comedy. That Your Mom joke is from *Titus Andronicus* which is *not* a knee-slapper. And, the flip is also true. Just because a play is a comedy doesn't mean it's full of jokes. Shakespeare's comedies also include plays we now call the "problem plays" and the "romances."

There isn't universal agreement on which plays belong in which category, but let's start with "problem play," a term invented in the late nineteenth century and inspired by the works of Henrik Ibsen. Problem plays take on a social problem and are sorta stuck between comedy and tragedy. Plays like *Measure for Measure, All's Well that Ends Well, and The Merchant of Venice* are problem

plays. They have happy endings, at least on paper, and often end with a marriage, just like a classic comedy. But, the resolutions aren't satisfying and the conclusions can feel sour- like how *Measure for Measure* ends with a marriage proposal...that goes unanswered.

The romances also mix tragedy and comedy, but the melding of genres is softer. The approach to time and space is looser. The plays usually begin as tragedies- along the lines of *Othello* or *King Lear*- but they don't end that way. In tragedies people act hastily, thoughtlessly, selfishly. In the romances people exercise patience and forgiveness, so the conclusions are happier. In *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, what's lost returns. What's broken is mended...mostly.

In the problem plays the happy endings feel wrong. In the romances they feel right. The endings are unlikely, sure, but they're also deeply satisfying. Characters have changed and matured in a way that they just aren't able to in the tragedies, but there's a greater sense of weight and of disaster narrowly averted than in the comedies.

To explore the romances, let's look at one of the wilder ones, *Cymbeline.* First produced in 1611, *Cymbeline* concludes with one of the all-time great recognition scenes.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Help us out Thought Bubble. Cymbeline is King of ancient Britain; his two sons were stolen a long time ago and his only daughter Imogen has just eloped with Posthumus, which is not good because Posthumus is of a lower social status. Also he's named Posthumus. Posthumus is banished to Italy and the Queen plots to have Imogen married to her blockhead son Cloten. She also tries to murder Imogen just to cover all the baddie bases. While Posthumus is in Italy he meets this guy Iachimo and he makes a bet that Iachimo can't seduce Imogen which is not what you do if you love and trust your wife. Iachimo fails but he hides out in her room and does enough spying and stealing to make it seem like he succeeds. Posthumus (again not the greatest) now plans to kill Imogen but a servant warns Imogen and because she's brave she escapes dressed as a boy named Fidele. Cloten finds out where Imogen is going; he figures he'll head there, rape Imogen and then marry her because Cloten is even worse than Posthumus somehow. Cloten puts on Posthumus's clothes and heads off but then gets his head off, literally, by a mountain man that he insults, and this is where it starts to get complicated. Turns out that the mountain man, Polidor, is actually Imogen's long-lost brother, Guiderius. He and Codwall, actually (?~9:08) and also another long-lost brother have already, by chance, taken in a disguised Imogen who has accidentally taken a sleeping potion. Imogen wakes up, sees what looks like a dead Posthumus, and flips out. She then somehow joins the invading Roman army as a pageboy. Why not? Meanwhile, the Roman hordes have invaded and Cymbeline is about to execute Posthumus and Fideli, but then Posthumus reveals himself and Imogen reveals herself and the kidnapper reveals himself and the long-lost sons discover their real parentage and Cymbeline agrees to pay tribute to Rome. Also, the queen is dead! The end. Thank you, Thought Bubble.

Okay, so that recognition scene is a little extra but in Cymbeline, you can see how beautifully Shakespeare combines tragedy and comedy. We have the jealousy plot borrowed from Othello, the cross-dressing borrowed from comedies, and enough time and care to make sure that everything works out all right in the end. Even for the Romans.

===== (10:00) to (11:22) =====

And we have a woman who is way more ingenious than her husband. Girl, you can do a lot better. At least get you a man who looks at you the way Paris looks at Juliet when he doesn't think Romeo is looking at him.

It's time to say goodbye to Shakespeare and continue on to Jacobean drama and Caroline court masks. By way of farewell, I'm gonna leave you with Ben Johnson's words on Shakespeare.

"I loved the man. He was honest and of an open and free nature. Had an excellent, fancy, brave notions and gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped, but there was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned."

So pardon gentles all and until next time, curtain.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows like The Art Assignment and Eons and It's Okay to be Smart. Crash Course Theater is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe. Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support of our Patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love through a monthly donation and help keep Crash Course free for everyone, forever. Thanks for watching.