

Inside & OUT

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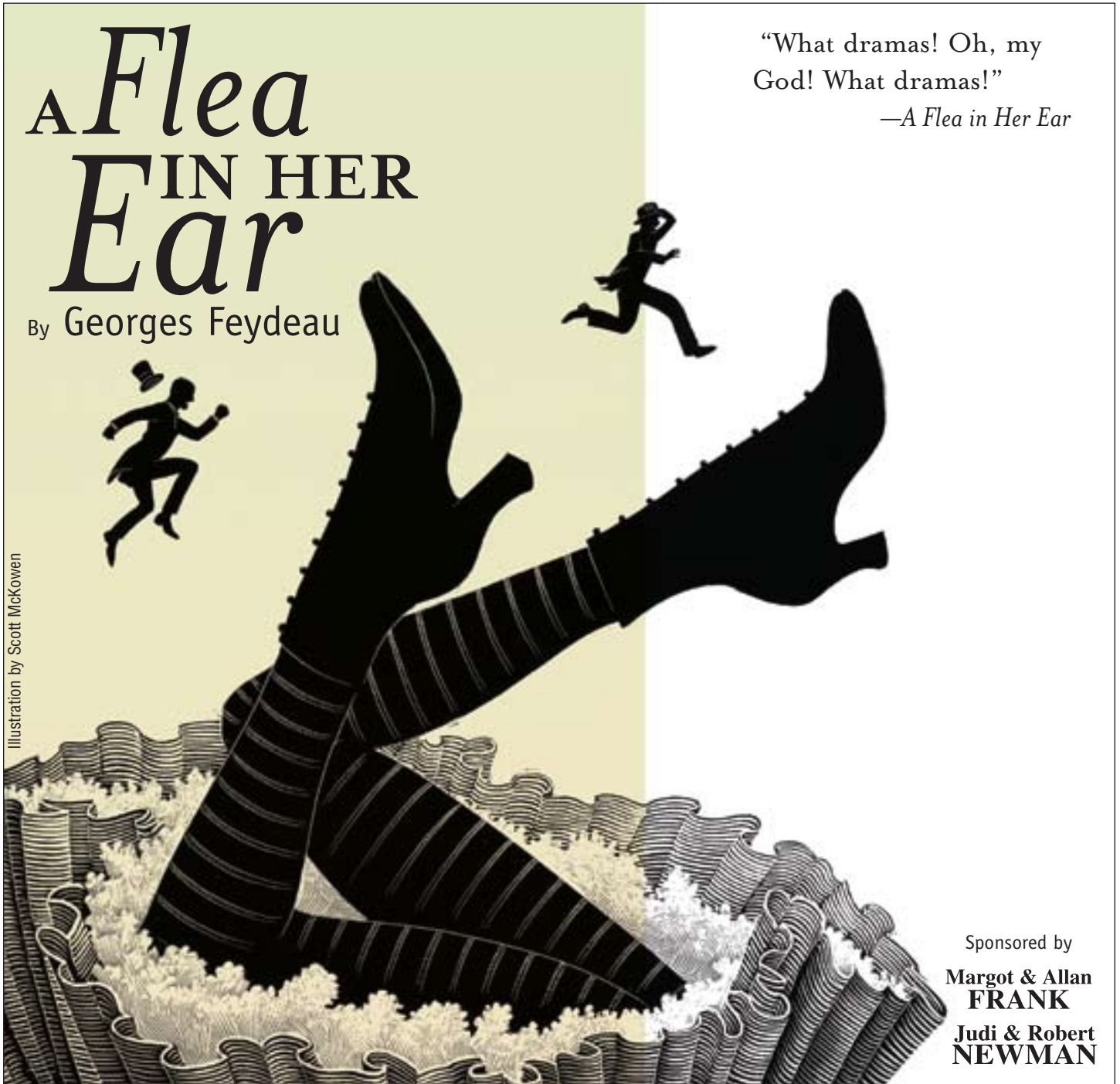
A Flea IN HER Ear

By Georges Feydeau

“What dramas! Oh, my
God! What dramas!”

—*A Flea in Her Ear*

Illustration by Scott McKowen



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InsideOUT

Synopsis

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The “dramas” occur in Paris at the start of the 20th century in the upper middle class home of the middle-aged Chandebises. Raymonde Chandebise doubts the fidelity of her husband, Victor Emmanuel, because he has been sexually inactive with her for more than a month. She is unaware of the causes, such as psychological stress and nervous affliction; her only rationale is that Victor must have a mistress. She confides her concerns to her old friend Lucienne, who suggests that the women test his fidelity by writing Victor a letter from a fictitious, anonymous admirer. The letter suggests a rendez-vous at the Hotel Coq D’Or, an infamous location for conducting illicit affairs. Lucienne will write the letter because Victor Emmanuel would recognize Raymonde’s handwriting. But when he receives the letter, Victor Emmanuel believes it was intended for his best friend, the handsome, debonair bachelor Tournel (who secretly lusts for Raymonde). Therefore, he dispatches Tournel in his place. Victor Emmanuel also shows the letter to Carlos, Lucienne’s husband, a passionate but erratic Spaniard. Carlos recognizes his wife’s writing, assumes she is trying to begin an affair with Victor Emmanuel and rushes off to the hotel to kill her. He is followed by Victor Emmanuel who hopes to prevent the projected murder and smooth all the ruffled feathers.

The presence of the Chandebise entourage including servants and nephew Camille (who has a serious speech impediment) plus the hotel staff and guests are the bases of numerous complications, misunderstandings and mistaken identities. But beneath the humor and zaniness of the situation lies Feydeau’s sometimes kind, sometimes caustic observations of all aspects of French society—and life—in the early, pre-World War I 20th century.

The Playwright

Georges Feydeau was born in 1862 to Lodzea Stewska, a Polish woman, and Ernest Feydeau. Ernest was a stockbroker and novelist whose friends included other French writers such as the poet Charles Baudelaire and the novelist Gustave Flaubert. His best known work was *Fanny* (1858), but he also wrote an archeological study titled *History of Funeral Customs and Graves of Ancient Peoples* (1862). Ernest died in 1873 when his son was eleven; his mother married Henri Gouquier, a drama critic, and the couple promptly sent Georges to a boarding school.

At the Lycée Saint-Louis, Georges wrote skits and sketches to amuse his friends and to avoid doing his homework. In 1883 Feydeau worked as secretary to the Renaissance Theatre and wrote his first successful play, *Tailleur pour dames* (*Ladies' Tailor*) which had a successful run at the same theatre. But seven years passed until he had another hit, *Monsieur Chasse!* (*The Gentleman's in Pursuit*) and *Champignol Malgré Lui* (*Champignol in Spite of Himself*). Thereafter, success followed success and in 1894 three of his farces were running simultaneously in Paris: *Un Fil à la Patte* (*On a String*), *Le Ruban* (*The Ribbon*) and *L'Hôtel du Libre-Échange* (*Hotel Paradiso*).

In 1889 Georges married Marianne Duran, an heiress. But his private life was miserable despite his public successes. Feydeau spent each day writing or directing one of his plays; each evening he attended the theatre and then went to Maxim's where he had a permanently reserved table. He returned home about three or four in the morning and resumed the same routine the next day. Marianne shared none of his interests and eventually asked him to leave. In 1909 he moved to the Hôtel Terminus where he lived until 1919.

Feydeau lived well but gambled incessantly on the stock exchange, a habit that left him perpetually in debt. Instead of making his fortune, his plays continually rescued him from penury. In 1903 he was forced to sell his valuable collection of Impressionist art works just to pay the bills.

In 1916 his health and mind began to deteriorate from the effects of syphilis and in 1919, when he declared he was Napoleon III, friends and family committed him to a sanatorium in Ruel-Malmaison where he died in 1921.

I set about looking for my characters in living reality, determined to preserve their personalities intact. After a comic explosion, I would hurl them into burlesque situations.

—Georges Feydeau

The Plays of GEORGES Feydeau

1883	<i>Tailleur Pour Dames (Ladies' Tailor)</i>
1888	<i>Un Bain de Ménage (A Household Bath)</i> <i>Chat En Poche (Pig in a Poke)</i> <i>Les Fiancés de Loche (The Fiances of Loche)</i>
1889	<i>L’Affaire Édouard (The Edward Affair)</i>
1890	<i>Le Mariage de Barillon (Barillon’s Marriage)</i>
1892	<i>Monsieur Chasse! (The Gentleman’s in Pursuit)</i> <i>Champignol Malgré Lui (Champignol in Spite of Himself)</i> <i>Le Système Ribadier (Now You See It)</i>
1894	<i>Un Fil à la Patte (On a String)</i> <i>Le Ruban (The Ribbon)</i>
1896	<i>Le Dindon (Sauce for the Goose)</i> <i>L’Hôtel du Libre-Échange (Hotel Paradiso)</i> <i>Les Pavés de l’Ours (A Little Bit to Fall Back On)</i>
1897	<i>Séance de Nuit (Night Session)</i> <i>Dormez, Je le Veux! (Sleep, I Insist!)</i>
1899	<i>La Dame de Chez Maxim (The Lady from Maxim’s)</i>
1902	<i>La Duchesse des Folies-Bergères (The Duchess from the Folies-Bergères)</i>
1904	<i>La Main Passe (She’s All Yours)</i>
1905	<i>L’Âge d’Or (The Golden Age)</i>
1906	<i>Le Bourgeon (The Bud)</i>
1907	<i>La Puce à l’Oreille (A Flea in Her Ear)</i>
1908	<i>Occupe-toi d’Amélie (Look After Lulu)</i> <i>Feu la Mère de Madame (Madame’s Late Mother)</i>
1909	<i>Le Circuit (The Circuit)</i>
1910	<i>On purge Bébé (Purging Baby)</i>
1911	<i>Cent Millions Qui Tombent (A Hundred Million Falling)</i> <i>Mais Ne Te Proméne Donc Pas Toute Nue! (Don’t Walk Around Naked!)</i> <i>Léonie Est En Avance (Léonie Is Early)</i>
1913	<i>On Va Faire la Cocotte (We’re Going to Play Coquette)</i>
1914	<i>Je Ne Trompe Pas Mon Mari (I Don’t Deceive My Husband)</i>
1916	<i>Hortense a Dit: “Je M’en Fous!” (Hortense said: “I don’t Care!”)</i>

NOTE: *A Flea in Her Ear* could translate into the American colloquialism *A Bee in Her Bonnet* or *A Bug In Her Ear*.

In Feydeau’s original script the hotel was called *Hôtel du Minet Galant* which translates as “Romantic Pussycat.” Subsequent productions have given it the name *Hotel Casablanca* and *Hotel Paramour*, among others.

La BELLE *Époque*

There's no good speech
save in Paris.

—Francois Villon (1431-1465),
Ballade des Femmes de Paris

After more than 80 years of revolutions, violence and political instability, France experienced a period of peace, prosperity and culture between 1890 and 1914 called *La Belle Époque*. This “Beautiful Period” produced the art of the Impressionists, the novels of Marcel Proust, the plays of Georges Feydeau and the World Expositions of 1889 and 1900. These expositions gave Paris the Eiffel Tower, the Pont Alexandre III, the Grand and Petit Palais and the first Metro line. All these achievements reflected the optimism and energy of the period and the industrialization of the Third Republic.

Maxim's, most famous of *La Belle Époque* restaurants, was Feydeau's favorite hangout. It was here that wealthy men spent the wee hours of the evening and here that visiting royalty came to wine and dine and entertain the most expensive courtesans of the day. Indeed, Maxim's stands as a kind of symbol of the fast, gay, easy-going life of the period. There could be found entertainment, sexual titillation, sumptuous food—and forgetfulness of any disagreeable realities of the outside world.

Industrialization brought a revolution that would be long-lasting in its results. Electricity was illuminating the City of Lights; automobiles were seen on the streets, and by 1906 the first motorized buses began to replace the horse-drawn bus. The Metro, which opened in 1900,

shortened the distance between one end of Paris and the other. Men were even learning how to fly, and in 1909 Louis Bleriot made the first crossing of the English Channel by air.

Paris, at the turn of the century, was the intellectual and artistic center of the western world. The Curies isolated radium and used it to discover X-rays. Braque and Picasso were experimenting with Cubism while Matisse and Renoir went wild with colors. The cakewalk found reflection in the music of Claude Debussy, who at the same time, scandalized the public with his “formless” music for the opera, *Pellèas et Mélisande*.

Sarah Bernhardt dominated the dramatic stage and the writings of Colette, André Gide and Guillaume Appollinaire were read by the intellectuals. “It was a day of relaxed morals, huge meals, and a dramatic attitude toward life that saw everything as a spectacle.”¹

But beneath the richness of the arts lay the dishonesty of the government. The Panama Canal scandal, in which unscrupulous politicians stole money from the project, unearthed the corruption in high offices and left many French in doubt about their republic. The Dreyfus affair highlighted the struggle between the military and the intellectuals and exposed a strong vein of French antisemitism. The underbelly of *La Belle Époque* revealed corruption, lawlessness and anarchy that threatened the equilibrium of that beautiful time. In 1914, it exploded with a vengeance with the start of World War I. After the war, with its destruction and disaster, the optimism and self-satisfaction of *La Belle Époque* were no longer possible.

A Brief HISTORY of *Farce*

Farce is an exaggerated form of comedy that takes its impetus from fast action, visual effects and convolutions of plot; the more complicated and illogical the better. Its heroes are clowns or become clowns in the course of the action; it is their foibles and stupidities that are the major source of humor.

Farce is one of the oldest forms of comic drama. It is the predecessor of high comedy, having evolved from the primitive slapstick and folk dramas of the ancient Greeks. As early as the fifth century BCE, farcical plays full of foolishness and bawdy humor were being performed and inspired such writers as Aristophanes (445-385 BCE) who borrowed their jokes, antics and broad hilarious style.

However, the word “farce” derives from the Latin *farcire* meaning “to stuff”—a reference apparently to the padding used to exaggerate the bellies and bosoms of the ancient actors.

The Greek farces influenced the Roman writers of comedy, especially the most prominent, Plautus (c. 251- c. 184 BCE.). But they also found a rich source of inspiration in the peasant farces that were performed in the marketplaces of Southern Italy. These Atellan farces (named for Atella, the town of origin) or *fabulas*, consisted of improvised skits using such stock figures as the drunk, the glutton, the fool or the coward as portrayed by a troupe of actors wearing flamboyant or obscene costumes and masks. The improvisations were strung together by comic plot devices such as mistaken iden-

tity, masquerade, female impersonation and/or intrigue.

Boisterous, farcical comedy was a popular component in the mystery and miracle plays performed in European marketplaces during the Middle Ages. In 16th century Italy the *commedia dell' arte* revived many of the characters, techniques and traditions of the Atellan rustic farce. Traveling troupes spread this revival throughout Europe. In England they influenced

Shakespeare who included elements of *commedia farce* in some of his most serious plays. In France Molière borrowed a great deal from *commedia* and elevated farce to the level of high art.

Farce continued to be popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Farcical sketches often preceded a long tragedy or melodrama as a curtain raiser became part of the vaudeville shows popular in France, England and the United States. At the same time Gogol, W.S. Gilbert, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde were writing the full-length classics of farce. The great French farces were created by Labiche, Courteline and Feydeau.

They kept the inherited stock characters and situations, but their characters took on the manners of the Victorian period. Drawing rooms, salons and hotel bedrooms became the preferred environments. Sex, marriage and money were the motivating factors of the plot and the members of the haute bourgeoisie, the upper middle class—lawyers, physicians, civil servants and others with a certain authority and position in

Comedy is the clash of character.
Eliminate character from comedy
and you get farce.

—William Butler Yeats,
Dramatis Personae.

society to uphold—were the characters doomed to being made ridiculous.

In the 20th century farce came to the side of the “little man” embodied best in the art of Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd. He was the best downtrodden person “alone against an unusually unkind world, who survived on his wit and agility like the tricky servants of the *commedia dell’arte*. His outwitting maneuvers were usually physical and though he got knocked down, he picked himself up, dusted himself off and started all over again.”¹ The physical resilience was also shown in the work of the Marx brothers. Their energy was potentially aggressive and destructive as they attacked society’s sacred cows. They expressed anger at what people could not understand, control or do and their insecurities at the difficulty of functioning in a complicated world.

Why has farce persisted for more than 2,000 years? First, farce takes a particular perspective upon certain unchanging qualities in human beings and their relationship with each other and the world around them. The characters are usually pursuing either basic needs or those that society makes desirable: love, sex, food, money, power and glory. They characterize the very human traits of greed, lechery, avarice, arrogance or pomposity. Secondly, farce attacks all pretensions, all masks, and tends to attack in the simplest way, a physical way with a kick in

the pants or a knock on the head. In the world that farce inhabits, people get their just deserts. Finally, farce goes for the belly and the backside; it makes us laugh at the fact that we look funny when we’re at a disadvantage, when we’re caught with our pants down.

God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.

—Corinthians, I: 27

Feydeau's BRAND of *Farce*

Georges Feydeau took farce to new heights. He was influenced by the 19th century comic dramatist, Eugene Labiche, and by Eugene Scribe and his notion of the well-made play. In this kind of play, the plot (usually in three acts) begins with an exposition that gives us some background history of the characters and a secret whose discovery will change all their lives. The act starts at a normal pace but gathers momentum as confusion runs rampant before the first act curtain descends.

The second act revolves around a series of *quid pro quos*: mistakes, ironies, misunderstandings, and Feydeau's favorite device, deception. These always lead to a reverse of the hero's situation, from heights to depths or vice-versa. The third act then explores the way this reversal affects everyone else and restores respectability and order. Feydeau's mastery of the form allowed him to parody both it and its component parts and to deal easily and frankly with subjects that might provoke outrage in a serious drama. For example, impotence motivates the whole plot of *A Flea in her Ear* and is a subsidiary theme of *Sauce for the Goose*. Another serious source of humor were disabilities, especially those affecting speech. For example, in *A Flea in Her Ear*, Camille has a cleft palate and cannot be understood without a special dental device. Feydeau made foreigners, such as Herr Schwarz, a figure of fun with his abuse of the French language. Finally, his fondness for women led Feydeau to focus on the status of women: their equality with men, their "power" in society and especially within marriage.

Indeed, *The Encyclopedia of World Drama* writes that "Feydeau's work can be divided into three groups that reflect the different natures of the heroines he selected.¹⁷" The first group features middle class women who resent any hint of infidelity in their mates or lovers. These

plays include *Hotel Paradiso* (1894) *Sauce for the Goose* (1896), and *A Flea in her Ear* (1907). The second group of plays displays coquettes who are interested in procuring a substantial amount of material goods, usually in the form of jewels. These plays include *The Girl from Maxim's* (1899) and *Look After Lulu* (1908). The plays of the last group focus on a series of shrews linked to weak or stupid men. Some examples are *Purging Baby* (1910) and *Madame's Late Mother* (1908).

Feydeau gave us an accurate appraisal of turn-of-the-century society. "The dread of scandal, rather than concern with moral values as such, is at the heart of even the serious plays written on this theme."² That threat of disgrace could drive a bourgeois household into lunacy. In a world dominated by concern for money and decorum, appearances became more important than reality. And Feydeau, realizing that appearances are easily manipulated and managed, was totally at ease writing about a world that had such a weak notion of what is real. The critic Thierry Maulnier wrote this discourse after witnessing the Comédie-Française performance of *Le Dindon* in 1951: "How could one help feeling without an almost unbearable anguish the call that emanates from Feydeau's creatures, a cry of accusation against a universe where man himself, with his wish for reason and happiness, is the most irreparable absurdity?"³

Activities

1. A malapropism is a confused use of words in which an appropriate word is replaced by one with similar sound but with a ludicrously inappropriate meaning. The term was born out of R.B. Sheridan's 1775 play *The Rivals*, which featured a character named Mrs. Malaprop, who repeatedly misused words. Feydeau gives one of his characters in *A Flea in Her Ear*, Homenides de Histangua, many malapropisms. Locate them in the script and discuss what you think is the appropriate word.

2. Read the section *A Brief History of Farce* in the study guide. To become better acquainted with this style of theatre, read the following plays: *The Miser* by Moliere and *Noises Off* by Michael Frayn. Compare and contrast the work in the following categories:

- Source of main conflict (Does it involve a clash of ideas or events?)
 - Use of language (What language tools are used to provide comedy – put downs, verbal blunders, etc.)
 - Characterization (Are characters simply good and bad types or are they more complex?)
- Resolution (Is the conclusion complete and satisfying or open-ended?)

Format your findings in a chart and create a third column for *A Flea in Her Ear*. Save your chart for use after the performance.

After you see The Denver Center Theatre Company's production of *A Flea in Her Ear*, complete the final column of your chart. Discuss the differences and similarities that you found among these three versions of farce.

3. In his essay, "Farce," critic Eric Bentley

writes, "farce is...notorious for its love of violent images."

- Considering DCTC's production of *A Flea in Her Ear*, how would you respond to this statement?
- How many violent situations can you recall from the play?
- Was the violence verbal, physical or both?
- Try to remember how those scenes affected you.
- Did you feel that the characters involved were actually threatened, or was there misfortune humorous?
- What do you think the writer might have been trying to convey through this use of violence?

4. Although the artists of the Belle Epoque period were from many different countries and expressed their ideas in many different ways, they were all seeking a common means of reacting to their modern society. In many ways, they were trying to create an international style that was uniquely modern.

- Is there a particular movement today, in either the visual or performing arts, that projects an international identity?
- Do our arts in the United States have a national style that is distinct from other countries?
- Discuss these ideas in small groups.

Share your initial reactions to the questions with one another, then assign each member of your group a different art form to research for current trends.

- After you have completed your research, meet again to see how, or if, your opinions have changed.

5. Feydeau was obsessed with details and insisted that his plays be rehearsed for at least three

Continued on next page

months in order to guarantee that every scene ran perfectly. At DCTC, our actors have usually only four weeks of rehearsal, and yet they have to contend with many of the same problems faced by Feydeau's original casts. The plot and subplots of the play are very complex, the pacing extremely fast and the personal stakes for each character are quite high. While the performance that you will see is fluid and hopefully very funny, it requires a tremendous amount of time and effort. To give you a sense of just how intense the rehearsal for even a short scene may be, find an acting partner and someone who is willing to direct you in the scene below. This is the scene in which Homenides discovers what he believes to be his wife's, unfaithfulness. After you have rehearsed, present your work for the class. Then discuss what you felt were the greatest challenges of the scene.

of truth! Caramba!

CHANCEBISE: Whats the matter?

HOMENIDES: Her handwriting! (He produces his revolver.)

CHANDEBISE: What?

HOMENIDES: (Seizing Chandebise and bending him over the table): Thief! Snake! Reptile!

CHANDEBISE: There – there, old fellow.

HOMENIDES: My faithful bulldog! Here, boy, here!

CHANDEBISE: He's got a dog with him?

HOMENIDES: There you are!

CHANDEBISE: Steady now....

HOMENIDES: My wife thends you letters!

CHANDEBISE (escaping and running around the table): Certainly not!

Anyway how do you know it's her?

These days all women write alike....

HOMENIDES: I know it!

CHANDEBISE: Anyway, I'm not going to see her. It's Tournel.

HOMENIDES: The man who wath here! Good! I shall kill him!

CHANEBISE: I'll stop him going. It'll be all right....

HOMENIDES: (Stopping him): I wish it conthummated. Then I have my proof – and I will kill beautifully!

CHANDEBISE: What?

HOMENIDES: Caramba! The moment

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