SHAW FESTIVAL 20

Charley's Aunt by Brandon Thomas

Directed by Tim Carroll
Designed by Christine Lohre
Lighting Designed by Louise Guinand

The Story

Jack and Charley are students at Oxford University in England.

Jack is in love with Kitty, and Charley is in love with Amy.

There's just one small problem - the girls don't know of the boys' feelings towards them. If Charley and Jack don't tell Amy and Kitty how they feel soon, the college term will end, and they may never see each other again.

The boys concoct a plan – they will invite Amy and Kitty to lunch with Charley's Aunt, Donna Lucia, who is coming to visit from Brazil. The boys will declare their love to the girls, and all will end happily…

BUT…all does NOT go according to plan.

Donna Lucia is delayed. This is a problem – due to the social restrictions of the time, the girls will not be permitted to stay without a chaperone. In a panic, the boys convince a friend from school, Lord Fancourt Babberley (Babbs to his friends) to dress up as Charley's aunt.

As Babbs takes on the role of Donna Lucia, hilarity ensues – will it all work out in the end?

What is Farce?

[video clip: Types of Drama – Farce https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX0LOcjs-hQ]

The play Charley's Aunt is considered a Farce – a sub-type of dramatic comedy in the theatre.

Farces derive their humour from highly exaggerated and improbable situations. In Farce, the plot is not nearly as important as its purpose – to make you laugh!

Farce often employs stereotypes, or simplified examples of character traits. Many of these "character roles" originated in commedia dell'arte theatre. Other theatrical devices of farce include: mistaken identities, character deceptions, wordplay (such as puns or double meetings) and exaggeration.

As John Caird explains in his book Theatre Craft: "A good farce obliges the audience to believe both in the characters and the events to the point where laughter is their only recourse."

Can you think of any other examples of farce in popular culture?

<u>The World of the Play</u>

The play is set in Oxford, England in 1895. Jack and Charley are students at a fictional college at Oxford University. Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world, and teaching at Oxford has existed in various forms since at least 1096!

Set in Victorian Britain, there are many social restrictions and expectations referenced in the play. Most importantly, unmarried females could not be in the presence of young, unmarried males without a suitable chaperone – hence the importance of Charley's aunt!

In the show, much of the comedy is based around the improbable role-play of Babbs as Charley's Aunt. Despite Babbs' unconvincing performance as Donna Lucia – none of the other characters seem to notice that he is a man, disguised as a woman. Babbs taking on the role of Charley's Aunt fits into the farcical nature of the play – we as an audience are "in" on the secret, but the characters in the play tacitly accept Babbs as Donna Lucia. They are willing to overlook the absurdity of the situation in order to get what they want.

Outside of Farce, there is a long history of actors portraying different genders in the theatre – dating all the way back to the ancient Greeks!

Initially, males took on female roles due to social restrictions – sexist ideals and limitations on women's place in society meant that females were not permitted to be actors for much of Western history. Even once they were allowed on stage, female actresses were stigmatized as "low women" or prostitutes.

Cross-dressing a character was sometimes used in the theatre as a dramatic device or for comedic effect. As you watch Charley's Aunt, consider what role Babbs plays in the storyline, and why the playwright chose this device to tell the story. Is this still a valid form of comedy?

In 2020, directors may choose to use non-traditional gender casting to examine a particular social issue or perspective. Actors may make different choices now than an actor playing the same part a century ago. How do you think a story like *Charley's Aunt* speaks differently to a modern-day audience member? Do we see it through a different lens? Why produce a play like this now – what can we learn from it?

The Playright

Walter Brandon Thomas was an English actor, playwright and songwriter. He was born in Liverpool in 1848 to a family with no connections to the theatre. As a young man, Thomas found work in commerce, and then as an occasional journalist, but had ambitions to be an actor.

After a series of minor roles, he developed a reputation as a character actor. He also wrote more than a dozen plays, his most famous being Charley's Aunt, which broke all historic records for plays at the time. Although he never repeated the success of Charley's Aunt, he maintained a career as an actor and dramatist for the rest of his life, acting mostly in comedy, but with occasional appearances in more serious roles, such as Shakespeare.

Thomas died on June 19, 1914, at the age of 65.

The Design

Keeping with the farcical theme of Charley's Aunt, our production is set in "a bubble." Although farce requires actors to be present and naturalistic, the surroundings do not need to be realistic. Our design is based on the idea that it is real people in an unrealistic, comical situation.

The set is light and airy, which allows a sense of both "indoors" and "outdoors." The design was inspired by the archways of Oxford, called "Dreaming Spires."

Our creative team was also inspired by some of the popular culture of Britain at the time – such as the wallpaper designs of William Morris, and the music of Rossini.

The costume design sets the play in the mid-1890s. Clothing was becoming less restrained for women, and the costuming reflects this sense of change.

As you watch our production, look out for ways in which the design helps to support the comedy and pacing of the piece.

We look forward to seeing you soon at the Shaw Festival!

For more educational resources, please visit https://www.shawfest.com/beyond-the-stage/teachers/