

*It's a kooky, crazy world where
light is dark and dark is light!*

Black Comedy

by Peter Shaffer

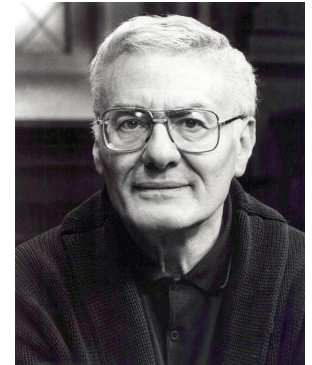
– A Playgoer's Companion –

“Very occasionally, a single gimmick is enough to make a play's reputation, and Peter Shaffer certainly hit on one when . . . he conceived the idea for *Black Comedy*.” – Ben Brantley, *New York Times*

“One tends to associate the playwright Peter Shaffer with epic theater and lofty themes. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* was about the conquest of Peru, *Equus* probed the morality and psychology of passion, and the nature and divinity of genius inspired *Amadeus*. But Mr. Shaffer has also had his forays into farce.” Alvin Klein, *New York Times*

About Peter Shaffer

English dramatist Peter Shaffer, born May 15th 1926, lived in Liverpool, England with his mother, father, and twin brother Anthony. After graduating from school, he went to Trinity College to study history. He had many jobs, such as his coal mining job during World War II, before discovering his love for theatre.



After the success of his first play (*The Salt Land*), he continued writing and had great success with his play *Five Finger Exercise*, which won the Evening Standard Drama award in 1958. He also won the New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best Foreign Play when *Five Finger Exercise* did extremely well in New York in 1959.

Shaffer's abstract writing combines a wide variety of themes. He subsumes philosophical undertones in his dramas and satirical plots in many of his comedies. His play *Equus* won him the Tony Award for best play in 1975, as well as another New York Drama Critics Circle award. It ran for over 1000 performances and was revived in 2005 and again in 2007. He also wrote *Amadeus* in 1979, and that won him the 1981 Tony for best play and the film adaptation won eight Academy Awards, two of which went to him for screenwriting.

In 1992, he received the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in American Theatre. He then became the Visiting Professor of Contemporary Drama at Cambridge University in 1994. And in 2001, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth. – *adapted from Wikipedia.*

“ When I was brooding on this and thinking I wish I'd never agreed to do it, someone from National Theater rang me up and said: “ We've announced your new play and we've got a terrific response at the box office. You must be pleased.” I looked down at my desk at what I had been advertised and what the public was apparently responding to so nicely and it was just two pieces of paper, one covered with tomato soup and the other which I had just torn up” – Peter Shaffer

"*Black Comedy* shines...an outrageous cake of kookiness"

—Peter Birnie, *The Vancouver Sun*

About *Black Comedy*

Since its New York debut in 1967, with a cast that included Michael Crawford, Lynn Redgrave and Geraldine Page, *Black Comedy* has had a healthy life in American community and university theaters, and one can see why. It is, for its first half-hour, almost foolproof comically. It not only offers a novel occasion for the eternal gymnastics of elemental farce: people falling down stairs, bumping into doors and furniture and mistakenly groping each other. It also, in showing twittish characters trying to maintain their customary social rituals in a world deprived of visual cues, coaxes the latent absurdity out of those rituals, and even the process of mixing a cocktail courts burlesque disaster.

The play focuses on Brindsley Miller, an opportunistic young sculptor who is facing one of the most important evenings of his life, the night in which he is to meet both the tyrannical father of his debutante fiancée and a millionaire patron of the arts capable of making his career. Just before his guests arrive, a fuse blows, plunging his South Kensington apartment into darkness. What follows is a series of mishaps and embarrassments as people fall down stairs, constantly bump into doors and furniture, and mistakenly grope each other. The play's humor hinges on a highly theatrical concept: when the lights are on in Brindsley's flat at the beginning of the piece, the actors are in total darkness; when the lights go out, the stage is then lit, allowing the audience to watch the cast stumble about and fumble as they try to complete the simplest of tasks.

After 14 previews, the original Broadway production, produced by Alexander H. Cohen and directed by John Dexter, opened on February 12, 1967 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, where it ran for 337 performances.

"The play is built around farcical archetypes perfumed with a quintessentially 60's scent of sexual license. The essential fun is created by the scenic idea The laughter at *Black Comedy* claims a certain purity because we hardly realize why we are laughing." – Harold Clurman, *The Nation*

A Chinese Connection

In *Laughter in the Dark*, Edith Oliver writes that *Black Comedy*, which was first produced at The Roundabout Theatre in 1967, takes its cue from Chinese classic theatre. She quotes Shaffer, from a note which appeared in the original program for the production: "In one of the most celebrated scenes in the repertory of Chinese classical theatre, two swordsmen fight a duel in a completely darkened room. The scene is performed with the stage fully lit."

Oliver goes on: "That this production, the apotheosis of the sight gag, affords more than pratfalls and slapstick and other appurtenances of farces is the result of the funny characters, as drawn by Mr. Shaffer. . . . It occurred to me, sitting on the sidelines in Row F, that *Black Comedy* rates at least two visits, the first to concentrate on the actors who are speaking and falling around, the second to watch those who are listening; they are just as eloquent. Farce it may be, but 'Restoration Comedy' was the first thing that came to mind."

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