



A FLEA IN HER EAR

BY GEORGES FEYDEAU
TRANSLATION BY JOHN MORTIMER

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK
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Di Botcher
OLYMPE



Jonathan Cake
ROMAIN TOURNEL



Oliver Cotton
DR FINACHE



Lisa Dillon
RAYMONDE
CHANDEBISE



Freddie Fox
CAMILLE CHANDEBISE



Fiona Glascott
LUCIENNE HOMENIDES
DE HISTANGUA



Tom Hollander
VICTOR EMMANUEL
CHANDEBISE / POCHE



Lloyd Hutchinson
AUGUSTIN FERRAILLON



Tim McMullan
ETIENNE PLUCHEUX



John Marquez
CARLOS HOMENIDES
DE HISTANGUA



William Maxwell
BAPTISTIN



Rebecca Night
EUGENIE



Maggie Service
ANTOINETTE
PLUCHEUX



Walter van Dyk
HERR SCHWARZ

DIRECTOR **RICHARD EYRE**
SET DESIGNER **ROB HOWELL**
COSTUME DESIGNER **SUE BLANE**
LIGHTING **MARK HENDERSON**
SOUND **GREGORY CLARKE**

GEORGES FEYDEAU

LIFE & CAREER

(Dates plays were written are shown in brackets)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1862 – Born Georges Léon Jules Marie Feydeau on 8 December in Paris.</p> <p>1869 – Writes his first play.</p> <p>1872–78 – Attends the Lycée Saint-Louis.</p> <p>1879–86 – Performs plays and monologues in amateur concert parties and theatre clubs. Writes his own monologues and one-act comedies. During military service in 1884 he writes his first full length play <i>Tailleur pour dames</i>. Works as an assistant theatre manager and writes a newspaper column about the stage.</p> <p>1886 – On 17 December, <i>Tailleur pour dames</i> (<i>A Gown for His Mistress/Fitting for Ladies</i>) begins a successful run of 79 performances at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. During the next 30 years Feydeau writes approximately 60 works for the stage, including one-act plays, monologues, ballets, comic operas, as well as over a dozen full-length plays.</p> <p>1888 – <i>Chat en poche</i> (<i>Pig in a Poke</i>) is produced.</p> <p>1889 – Marries Marianne Carolus-Duran.</p> <p>1892 – <i>Monsieur Chasse!</i> (<i>The Game Hunter/The Master is Hunting!/The One That Got Away</i>) runs for 114 performances. <i>Champignol malgré lui</i> (<i>A Close Shave</i>) runs for 467 performances. <i>Le Système Ribadier</i> (<i>Where There's a Will</i>) co-written with Maurice Hennequin runs for 78 performances.</p> <p>1894 – <i>Un fil à la patte</i> (<i>Cat Among the Pigeons</i>) runs for 129 performances. <i>L'Hôtel du libre échange</i> (<i>Hotel Paradiso/Hotel Casablanca/Heart's Desire Hotel/A Little Hotel on the Side</i>) co-written with Maurice Desvallières runs for 371 performances.</p> | <p>1896 – <i>Le Dindon</i> (<i>An Absolute Turkey/Sauce for the Goose/Paying the Piper</i>) runs for 275 performances.</p> <p>1899 – <i>La dame de chez Maxim</i> (<i>The Lady from Maxim's</i>) runs for 524 performances allowing Feydeau to spend two years painting.</p> <p>1901 – Feydeau, in financial difficulties, sells most of his art collection.</p> <p>1902 – <i>La duchesse des Folies-Bergère</i> (<i>The Duchess of the Folies-Bergère</i>) runs for 82 performances.</p> <p>1904 – <i>La main passe</i> (<i>She's All Yours/Winner Takes All</i>) runs for 211 performances.</p> <p>1906 – <i>Le Bourgeon</i> (<i>The Bud</i>) runs for 92 performances.</p> <p>1907 – <i>La puce à l'oreille</i> (<i>A Flea in Her Ear</i>) runs for 86 performances but closes after the death of one of the cast.</p> <p>1908 – <i>Occupe-toi d'Amélie</i> (<i>Keep an Eye on Amélie</i>) runs for 288 performances.</p> <p>1909 – Feydeau leaves his wife and moves into the Hôtel Terminus near Saint Lazare station.</p> <p>1914 – <i>Je ne trompe pas mon mari</i> (<i>I Don't Cheat on my Husband</i>) runs for 200 performances.</p> <p>1916 – Feydeau divorced by his wife.</p> <p>1919 – Suffering from syphilis, Feydeau enters a sanatorium.</p> <p>1921 – He dies on 5 June.</p> |
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Please note that this timeline contains selected Feydeau plays and their corresponding English translations.

A FLEA IN HER EAR SYNOPSIS

Act I

The play opens in the grand drawing room of the Chandebises' household in Paris. Victor Emmanuel Chandebise and his wife, Raymonde, are close friends with Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua and his wife, Lucienne. Dr Finache has carried out a medical examination of Homenides, for insurance purposes. He has come to give the results to Chandebise who happens to be out. Etienne, the butler, keeps Finache company while he waits and almost catches his wife, Antoinette, kissing Camille Chandebise (Victor Emmanuel's nephew). Camille baffles Lucienne with his speech impediment; the result of a cleft palate.

Raymonde confides in her friend, Lucienne, that she thinks her husband has been having an affair at the seedy Hotel Coq d'Or. She had been considering starting one herself with her husband's friend, Romain Tournel, but is mortified that Chandebise may have been having one already. The ladies concoct a plan to trap Chandebise. They write him a love letter from an imaginary admirer asking him to meet her at The Hotel Coq d'Or. They will be there waiting instead and if he arrives they will have caught him in the act. Lucienne writes the letter in case Chandebise recognises his wife, Raymonde's handwriting.

In a private conversation, Dr Finache and Camille confess to each other that they are both regulars at The Hotel Coq d'Or and Finache presents Camille with a silver mouth palate that he can insert to make him speak properly.

The letter from the ladies arrives for Chandebise. Unbeknownst to the ladies, the gentlemen decide that it must be a case of mistaken identity and cannot be for Chandebise but must be for the handsome Romain Tournel instead. The letter is very effective; the men think the imaginary admirer is head-over-heels in love so the lusty Tournel agrees to go to the hotel to meet her.

Don Carlos Homenides enters and Chandebise shows his friend the love letter. Homenides recognises his wife's handwriting at once and is convinced that Lucienne wrote it to Chandebise, who denies this and explains that Tournel is meeting her at The Hotel Coq d'Or; Homenides vows to go there and kill him. Chandebise tells Camille that if he sees Tournel he is to warn him that his life is at risk. Tournel returns to the house but cannot understand what Camille is trying to say. Camille is desperate that Tournel should understand him so inserts the silver palate that Dr. Finache gave him before chasing after Tournel.

Act II

The Hotel Coq d'Or is run by ex-army colonel, Feraillon and his wife Olympe as a haven for those who want privacy for their liaisons.

A room is visible with a bed beside a wall. Feraillon is proud of this 'camouflage system' at the hotel; the wall revolves revealing another bed which Feraillon's old, rheumatic Uncle Baptistin, is employed to lie in - at the press of a button, guests can revolve the wall so the beds switch. Feraillon also employs a hotel porter, Poche, an old army subordinate, who was a destitute alcoholic and Eugenie, the maid. Dr Finache arrives; a regular on friendly terms with the staff. Another guest we meet is Herr Schwarz, an amorous Prussian.

Raymonde arrives and is shown to her room where she waits to see if her husband has taken the bait but is shocked to see Tournel enter. Tournel, convinced that Raymonde wrote to him and loves him, tries to seduce her. Mortified, Raymonde confesses her scheme to reveal Chandebise's indiscretions which Tournel denies. Raymonde contemplates an affair but shrinks from Tournel, and presses the revolving wall button and Baptistin appears. Tournel searches for Raymonde and they return to the room where Baptistin remains so they press the button to remove him, which reveals Poche instead. Poche looks identical to Victor Emmanuel (Raymonde's husband) which causes great upset to Raymonde and Tournel who continually beg his forgiveness despite Poche, Baptistin and Feraillon explaining that he is Poche, the servant.

Camille and Antoinette appear and, also mistaking Poche for Chandebise, flee fearing discovery. Herr Schwarz emerges and knocks Camille's palate out, restoring his speech impediment. Spotting Etienne (Antoinette's husband) arriving, Camille flees. Etienne seeks Lucienne so he can warn her that her husband is intent on murder but accidentally goes to Herr Schwarz's room where Antoinette is with Herr Schwartz. Etienne assumes she is having an affair and, in a fury, departs.

Before going, he sees Poche and mistakes him for his master, Chandebise. Poche thinks they are crazy calling him 'Sir' and 'Victor Emmanuel'.

Lucienne arrives seeking Raymonde and sees Chandebise (who has also just arrived). He declares he knows she loves him because her husband Homenides identified her handwriting on the letter. Realising the significance of her husband seeing the letter Lucienne prepares to leave with Chandebise.

A murderous Homenides arrives to kill his wife and Tournel. Feraillon, seeing Chandebise and assuming that he's Poche, orders him to remove his jacket and put on Poche's uniform. Chandebise is bullied into doing so and exits. Poche then returns seeking his uniform but in its absence dresses in Chandebise's hat and jacket.

Raymonde and Tournel see Chandebise (as Poche) and ask him to call them a cab. Chandebise demands they explain their presence together which confuses them as they think they have explained their innocence already (which they have but to Poche). Feraillon appears and further abuses Chandebise believing him to be Poche. Lucienne and Camille enter trying to flee Homenides; they become separated and Poche (who Lucienne thinks is Chandebise) rescues Lucienne. Chaos ensues as everyone enters and chase around the hotel.

Act III

Tournel, Raymonde and Lucienne return from the hotel having been chased by Homenides brandishing his pistol. They decide that Chandebise's seemingly schizophrenic behaviour means he has gone mad.

Poche arrives at the house wanting to see Chandebise but everyone at the house think that he actually is Chandebise. Etienne sends for Dr. Finache. Raymonde and Tournel persist in explaining to Poche that they are not having an affair, believing him to be Chandebise. Raymonde goes to kiss him and smells alcohol on his breath. Finache arrives and they conclude that Chandebise has become an alcoholic and is suffering hallucinations. They send Poche to bed to 'recover'.

Chandebise - still dressed in Poche's uniform, returns to the house. Camille sees Poche then immediately sees Chandebise and believes that he is hallucinating too. Chandebise is furious to see Tournel at his house as he is still convinced that he is having an affair with his wife. Finache tries to treat a bewildered Chandebise which infuriates him further.

Feraillon comes to the house and chases Chandebise, believing him to be Poche. Homenides arrives with two pistols and challenges Chandebise to a duel. Chandebise flees in fear to his bedroom where he sees Poche asleep; recognising the likeness to himself he is convinced that his house is haunted and runs away. Poche is woken by Homenides, who thinks he has tracked Chandebise down and continues to challenge him to a duel. Poche escapes through an open window.

The others enter and Lucienne finally explains to Homenides that she wrote the letter to Chandebise as a favour to her friend, Raymonde; he is placated by her explanation. After much confusion, all is made clear. Everybody realises that the physical similarity between Poche and Chandebise has been the main cause of the madness. Raymonde explains to Chandebise that she suspected he was having an affair which is why she sent the letter. Eventually, all is forgiven restoring the status quo.

A FLEA IN HER EAR CHARACTERS

Victor Emmanuel Chandebise

Victor Emmanuel Chandebise is the director of The Boston Life Insurance Company in Paris. He is an upstanding citizen who visits the theatre and is a faithful husband. He has married the 'extremely attractive' Raymonde. His wife is 'everything' to him. Chandebise is a successful man, who works hard. He owns a large house and has the means to employ a household of staff.

Generous and loyal; he has kindly employed his nephew, Camille Chandebise, who suffers from a speech impediment and also his friend Romain Tournel. He is innocent to the seedier side of Paris in the early 1900s, for example, he doesn't know of the Hotel Coq d'Or when it is first mentioned and wonders if it is 'one of those hotels?' Aware that he's not the most attractive man, he decides the letter he receives must be for his friend Tournel 'it wasn't me she fancied. It was you'; thus proving his modesty. By the end of the play he feels he that he has been on a 'joy-ride' and is quite content for life to return to normal.

Raymonde Chandebise

Raymonde is the wife of Victor Emmanuel Chandebise. She is young, attractive, imaginative and frivolous; her scheme causes immense difficulty for all involved. Raymonde is extremely fickle; one moment she invites Tournel to have an affair with her then she changes her mind once she decides that her husband is already having one 'Not now, thank you very much. Not when he's unfaithful.' She is self-centred and selfish yet is not intentionally malicious. She doesn't intend to harm others but simply doesn't think about them having grown accustomed to getting her own way.

Don Carlos Homenides De Histangua

Testosterone fuelled, strong and manly. The Spanish aristocrat is married to Raymonde's old friend Lucienne. Dr Finache examines Homenides de Histangua and remarks upon his 'constitution', he is clearly a fine figure of a man. He possesses a powerful presence and commands attention. Homenides is a demanding man with a fiery temper which bubbles to the surface quickly and without much provocation. He proudly carries a pistol as a 'deterrent' to his wife should he ever 'catch her with another man'. Full of murderous intent on seeing his wife's handwriting in the letter to Chandebise he terrorises the visitors at the hotel 'I want to kill them!' His fiery temper is easily abated however when his wife explains her part in the scheme, it seems that he truly loves her.

Lucienne Homenides De Histangua

Lucienne is an old friend of Raymonde's from their days at a convent school. Lucienne then married the Spaniard Don Carlos Homenides De Histangua. She seems a little sharper than Raymonde. She is witty and switched on, 'you've got no proof' she warns Raymonde when she is accusing Chandebise of having an affair. She is aware of her husband's temper and is terrified when she realises he wants to kill her for writing the letter 'my husband's breathing down my neck. With a revolver!' She appears a little baffled by her husband's character 'What an impossible creature!'

Romain Tournel

Tournel is a dashing attractive man who 'women have committed suicide for'. His best friend is Chandebise who also employs him at The Boston Insurance Company in Paris. Tournel enjoys the existence of a bachelor; he sees many women and admits to knowing the Hotel Coq d'Or from previous experience. Not the most moral of men, he has few qualms about embarking on an affair with Raymonde. He is arrogant and knows the effect he has on women. Tournel is totally self-obsessed 'Do you think I will be made a fool of, in front of myself!'

Camille Chandebise

The young nephew of Victor Emmanuel Chandebise. Camille has a cleft palate and suffers from a speech impediment. He has difficulty pronouncing consonants so his speech is almost impossible to understand. Chandebise has taken pity on him and employed him as his secretary so that he has an occupation. He leads a double life, at home he is seen as innocent and sweet 'the virginal young Camille' but he and Dr Finache compare notes on The Hotel Coq d'Or where they are both regulars. Camille has been having an affair with the cook, Antoinette.

Dr Finache

Dr Finache is Chief Medical Officer of The Boston Life Insurance Company in Paris. He carries out insurance medicals for the company. He regularly frequents the The Hotel Coq d'Or 'it's where I go for my little adventures'; he enjoys the ladies and admits to Camille that he would 'never go anywhere else'. A respectable doctor by day he ventures into the darker realms of the city at night- the staff at the hotel know him well.

Etienne Plucheaux

Etienne is the butler at the Chandebises' house. He likes the sound of his own voice and is rather self-important. He tends to irritate the guests and is not very polite 'Madame ...whatever your name is'. He is frequently out-witted by his wife, the cook, Antoinette.



Antoinette Plucheaux

Wife of Etienne, she is the cook at the Chandebises' house. She has been having an affair with Camille Chandebise but is a calculating woman who tells lies, backed up with alibis, which mean her husband never quite captures her 'in the act.'

Augustin Feraillon

The militant hotelier of The Hotel Coq d'Or. He was once a colonel in the army and likes to run the hotel with 'discipline'. Augustin ironically values 'respectability' and the hotel's 'reputation', although he practically runs a brothel. He likes to treat all the guests with the utmost discretion. He is married to Olympe Feraillon who also works at the hotel.

Olympe Feraillon

The wife of Augustin Feraillon, she runs also runs The Hotel Coq d'Or. She has a colourful past. Before marrying Augustin, Olympe was known as 'The Copper-Bottomed Contessa', she was the mistress of a duke and appeared naked at a freemason's dinner. She became famous for this event. Now she is the gracious hostess of the hotel.

Poche

The hotel porter at The Hotel Coq d'Or. Once served under Feraillon in the army but was discharged for drunkenness. Feraillon gave him a job at the hotel because he finds him easy to control – he beats him and makes him work in return for his keep. He is uneducated, working class and a simple soul. He fears Feraillon who beats him. He likes routine but drinks whenever he has the chance. Poche bears an uncanny resemblance to Victor Emmanuel Chandebise.

Baptistin

An old, rheumatic uncle of Augustin Feraillon. Feraillon employs him to act as a decoy at the hotel, should a suspecting spouse arrive to search for their unfaithful husband or wife.

Eugenie

Chambermaid at The Hotel Coq d'Or. A simple girl who follows orders.

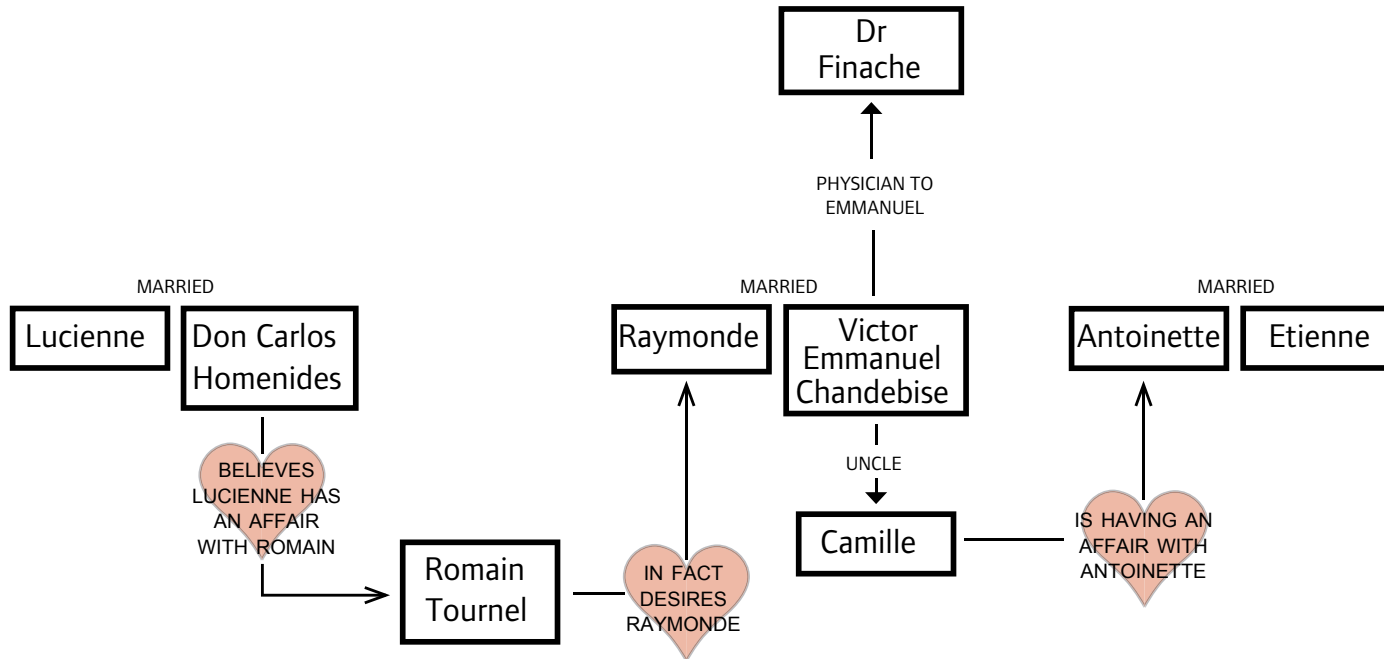
Herr Schwarz

A sex-crazed Prussian gentleman nicknamed 'Herr Shutyourhole' by Poche. He is a regular at The Hotel Coq d'Or. Nobody understands him as he speaks only German but he insists on talking anyway. He appears to be always waiting, hoping that a lady will come to visit him but they never do. Desperate for female company he accosts any woman he can get his hands on.

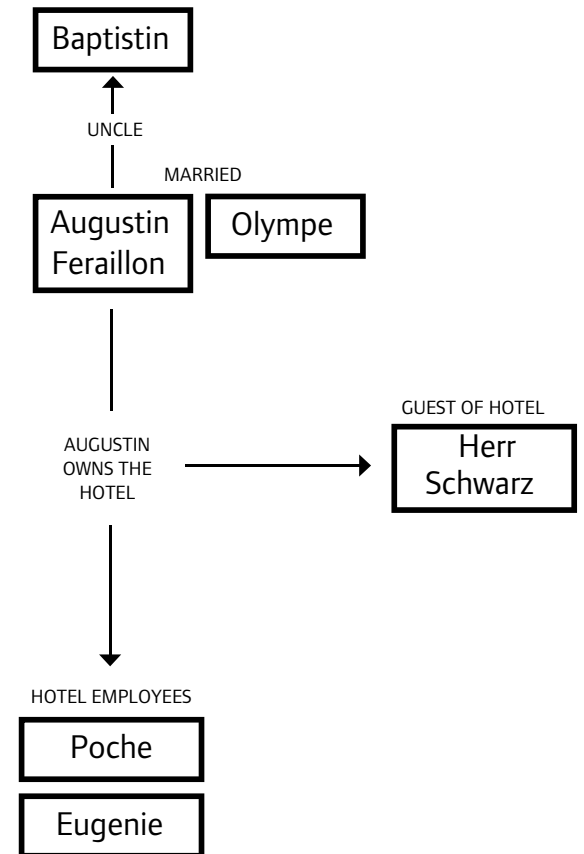
A FLEA IN HER EAR

MAIN CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS

Chandebise Residence



Hotel Coq d'Or



A FLEA IN HER EAR MAJOR THEMES & INTERESTS

Appearances

Appearances can be deceiving. Typical of a farce, one of the main causes of the action is a case of mistaken identity. Much of the confusion that occurs could be avoided if only the characters would realise that they have confused Chandebise and Poche. This serves a comic purpose but Feydeau is also making a more profound comment on civilisation. In the 19th Century what you wore spoke volumes about who you were, how much money you had, what class of society you came from and how much value you therefore deserved. Less overtly obvious today, we do still however judge people on their appearance. The characters in the play rely so heavily on appearances that Raymonde does not realise she is talking to the hotel porter, not her own husband, simply because they look the same. Feydeau seems to be commenting on how easily persuaded we are by appearances, so much so that a servant can become a gentleman merely by changing his jacket.

Marriage

In the 19th Century marriage was still respected as a crucial institution, the only way a man and woman could lead an honest, pious life together. Children produced outside marriage were still branded bastards; marriage was the only respectable way to procreate and live with a member of the opposite sex. Feydeau was unusual because he didn't depict marriage as an infallible union; all the marriages in the play have faults. Feraillon, defending the reputation of his hotel by saying 'only married couples come here' confirms the link between marriage and respectability. Lack of communication is a distinct problem within the marriages of the play, as Dr Finache advises Chandebise once he has described his impotence 'You should have told your wife all you told me...she'd have had a good laugh, and you'd have enjoyed the joke together'. Feydeau was an observer of the liberal, fun loving culture of Paris in the 19th Century. He witnessed the hedonistic behaviour going on around him, to present it on stage to the very people on whom it was based was both daring and shocking and all the more funny because it was so close to the truth.

Infidelity and Sex

The play opens with Antoinette trying to kiss Camille. Etienne is then seen explaining to Dr Finache that Antoinette has 'got some strange idea about me and the housemaid'; immediately infidelity is established as a major theme in the play. Raymonde believes Victor Emmanuel is unfaithful whilst also confessing that she has 'even thought about taking a lover'. Tournel does not seem to mind that Raymonde is married to his friend and employer and pursues her regardless. The Hotel Coq d'Or's main purpose is to provide a place of 'tact and discretion' for those who are unfaithful. Throughout the play characters are themselves committing adultery, thinking their partner is committing adultery or being accused of committing it.

Sex is alluded to frequently in the text. Feydeau uses innuendo to insinuate sexual references and even acknowledges that he is doing it through Feraillon saying 'I'm not making any innuendoes'. Dr Finache alludes to Homenides' sexual prowess 'What a constitution! What stamina!' and the whole description of Chandebise's impotence is realised through metaphor and innuendo. Feydeau makes it overtly clear that he is making these risqué sexual references but the innuendoes serve the comic purpose far better than saying them outright.

Self-obsession/ Narcissism

If only the characters were less concerned with their own circumstances, they would be far better equipped to find out what is actually going on. Raymonde and Tournel particularly are both utterly self-obsessed; Raymonde has such double standards that even when talking about Chandebise having an affair she admits that she 'may want to deceive him but for him to deceive me! No! It's going too far!' Raymonde's hypocrisy is borne of her sense of self-importance. Tournel is embarrassed of being 'made a fool of in front of [him]self!' They are both so intent on talking themselves out of trouble with Chandebise that they entirely dominate their first encounter with Poche and barely ask him any questions; they just keep talking and therefore don't notice that he simply resembles Chandebise. Homenides is similarly narcissistic; once he decides that Lucienne is having an affair, he charges around hell-bent on destruction, brandishing his weapons. He doesn't stop to question the situation but simply wants vengeance. They are all blind to any simple resolution because they are too self-absorbed. It isn't difficult to imagine these characters existing in the Paris that Feydeau inhabited which valued fun, pleasure and liberation of the self.

Timing

Timing is crucial to the success of this play. Feydeau knew this which is why the play is accompanied by detailed stage directions. The many entrances and exits are all vitally important and specifically placed. They punctuate the rhythm of the play and help to translate the quick energy of the action and the sense of confusion. There is so much going on all at once that the audience feel the same sense of bewilderment as the characters. Much of the plot hinges on people just missing each other, prolonging the anticipation of a resolution. In Act I Chandeise just misses Tournel; the audience see Chandeise leave to warn Tournel that Homenides wants to kill him, and once he's left, immediately Tournel enters again. To make matters worse, Camille doesn't remember his metal mouth roof until Tournel has already left once more so is unable to speak clearly enough to warn him of the danger.

Class

The play mocks the world of the 'chattering classes'. Even the name of Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua is so over the top that it seems ridiculous; Etienne mocks it by saying 'whatever your name is'. The play suggests that morals in these circles are loose and that infidelity is rife. It 'sends up' men like Tournel as good looking, a bit stupid and spending all their time chasing ladies. It makes the ladies, Lucienne and Raymonde, appear selfish and silly. Men like Chandeise come across as naïve. When the action moves to The Hotel Coq d'Or, the alleged 'working class' are better behaved; Feraillon and Olympe being happily married and faithful. Through the confusion with Chandeise and Poche it seems Feydeau is commenting that, for all their airs and etiquette, all that really separates the upper and the lower classes is their clothes.



A FLEA IN HER EAR FARCE & ITS ORIGINS

What is farce?

Farce is a style of comedy that has its roots as far back as Greek and Roman Theatre. It had its real heyday in the 19th and early 20th Century, however, particularly in France. A comedy can be defined as a farce by the following characteristics:

- An improbable, unlikely plot featuring extreme and heightened situations.
- Characters in disguise and cases of mistaken identity.
- Respectable, dignified characters. This makes it much funnier when undignified things happen to them.
- Word play; flirtatious language, sexual innuendo, double entendres (double meanings).
- Physical, stylized performances of exaggerated characters; stereotypes of their class and sex.
- The lives of the characters are less important than the plot. These stylized performances mean that the characters are more representative of a type of person than an individual. This generalisation makes the characters better able to reflect large groups of society.
- A plot consisting of sexual misadventure, deception, characters deflecting blame, comic despair and a sense that everything is about to go very badly wrong. Spontaneous action that builds to a final crescendo, often ending in a chase scene.

When? Historical Context

The period from 1890–1914 is now known as La Belle Époque. It was a time of relative peace and stability in Western Europe. The so called ‘second industrial revolution’ included advances in technology that affected the everyday lives of people all over the advanced countries of Western Europe. Railways began to connect many of the major cities of these rapidly changing countries. Electricity was better understood meaning that people could have basic electric heating and light in their homes instead of only gas. Communicating became easier with the invention of telephones, telegrams and typewriters.

Paris flourished as the artistic capital of the western world. The fashion industry started to behave more as it does today, designers began changing their collections with the seasons. Cafés and restaurants sprang up all over the city. Artists, musicians, writers and performers were all drawn to this exciting and thriving melting pot of creativity.

In previous times, theatre-going and enjoyment of the arts had been geared towards the upper classes but now the middle classes particularly started to enjoy these activities as well. People who worked hard started to play hard too. ‘Half a million Parisians attended the theatre at least once a week’ states Felicia Hardison Londré in her book *Words at Play*.

The middle classes in France were now making more money; they owned factories and could pay the working classes very little money thereby making themselves an awful lot. This was a capitalist society where the old systems of hereditary titles and aristocracy became less important than obvious displays of wealth. These people liked to be seen at the most fashionable places, displaying their luxurious clothes and presenting an image of a perfect life and they came to be described as the bourgeoisie.

With so much fun to be had the bourgeoisie were not immune to the darker sides of life too. Morals slipped somewhat and infidelities were rife. Feydeau reflects this in his farces of the time. He had a regular table booked at the exclusive and fashionable restaurant, Maxim’s, where he observed the antics of the other guests for later use in his writing. Something that Feydeau frequently explores in his plays is marriage and infidelity.

France was more liberal than England at this time. From 1737 until 1968 all plays intended for the British stage were subject to The Lord Chamberlain’s censorship. All productions had to receive a license for public performance dependent upon the content and morality of the piece. Feydeau was too raunchy for the British stage so when *A Flea in Her Ear* was first brought to England in 1917 the translators had to make extensive changes to the script to make it seem more innocent.



Who? Main contributors

The most well-known French writers of farce are Labiche (1862–1921) and Feydeau (1862–1921). Labiche's plays reflected the daily life of the French bourgeoisie in their pursuit of pleasure, money and marriage. Feydeau's plays took a more cynical view of the bourgeoisie, they are more critical of society, raunchier and openly suggestive about the sex lives of the 'well to do'. Labiche is heralded mainly for the volume of plays that he wrote – an estimated 174 – while Feydeau is credited for his ability to visualise the physical action on stage and his skill at almost conducting the audience's laughter with the precision of an engineer.



What is the relevance of farce today?

Thus far Farce in theatre has been less prevalent in the 21st century. The difficulty in writing a farce for the contemporary stage may lie in the fact that society has far fewer taboos today than it did in the 19th Century. One of the main functions of farce was to overturn, and therefore question, widely accepted values and for that reason it flourished in a community supposedly dominated by moral code and conduct. The questioning of class and morality which was so shocking then is far less relevant today when class boundaries are much more loosely defined and institutions like marriage less widely adhered to or necessary.

One of the last, most successful farces written was *Noises Off* by Michael Frayn in 1982 but since then it is not a genre often attempted by modern playwrights. That said, elements appear in many television comedies and that is perhaps the genre that has absorbed farce most welcomingly. The relationship between farce and the camera can be seen as early as the 1920s, with Charlie Chaplin using elements, but continues through to *Fawlty Towers* in the 1970s, *Blackadder* in the 1980s right up to today with comedies like *Friends*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Peep Show*.

INTRODUCTION BY RICHARD EYRE

I was lucky to be a friend of John Mortimer and if I have a regret about doing his version of *A Flea in Her Ear*, it's only that John can't be here to see it. He died in January 2009. I was asked by his family to give the address at his funeral. This is part of what I said:

'You could say John was larger than life; you could also say that life was smaller than John. His legacy will be some hugely entertaining plays and novels, some dazzling epigrams and, in Rumpole, a character who can stand beside those of Shakespeare and Dickens. Above all, though, what will survive of John will be the affection of hundreds who are grateful for having had the luck to spend time with a man who was touched by greatness – who was humane, generous, liberal, loving, charming, funny, flirtatious, seductive, sexy, raffish, kind, sometimes bashful, never boastful, often vulnerable and full of self-doubt, fastidious, proud, just, indignant on behalf of victims and passionate on the part of the dispossessed, extravagant, wise, decent, tolerant – and unique. He multiplied the gaiety of nations.'

A NOTE FROM JOHN MORTIMER

The world of farce is necessarily square, solid, respectable and totally sure of itself: only so can it be exploded. There is nothing comical about a trembling masochist being kicked on the behind, or a sprightly and permissive collection of Swedish teenagers being caught in the wrong bedrooms. These events must occur only to the most dignified and moral persons. It is impossible to be funny about funny people. Feydeau's characters are triumphantly serious.

They are also mature, and almost completely satisfied. They have settled, on the whole gratefully, for security, marriage with the Director of the Insurance Company, a few nights out at the theatre, and a few safely uncompromising glances at the husband's best friend. It's all sound, predictable, and a little dull. The husbands are not quite in their first youth, in bed they have become indolent or worse. Their healthy, grown-up, but still somehow schoolgirlish wives 'breathe virtue' – as Feydeau said – 'and are forthwith out of breath'. They very much regret that it's hard to take a lover without deceiving your husband. And the husbands still envy their bachelor friends (for whom, it appears, ladies rapturously poison themselves) and still cast a wary but interested eye towards the sleazy hotels they pass on their way home from the office. Feydeau's plays, like all great drama, start at the moment when these small longings become alarming reality.

For then, of course, the world of common sense whirls and dips like a drunkard's bedroom. The first small domestic misunderstanding, the gentlest of white lies, brings down a series of disasters as inevitable and appalling as a speeded-up Greek tragedy. By then the husbands and wives and mistresses and lovers have become so inextricably confused that it's hard to tell if you're being faithful or not, and there's no time to jump into the vaguely longed-for bed as everyone's running far too fast.

Through all this, the characters must retain their common sense, like a hat desperately held on in a high wind. Kicked, unexpectedly embraced, shot at, taken for mad, they continue to behave quite rationally – conduct which of course greatly increases the lunacy of the entire situation.

Feydeau wrote thirty-nine plays, apparently out of extreme indolence. When he was a child his father found him writing and told his governess that he need do no lessons as he'd written a play that morning. From then on Feydeau wrote to avoid sums. He was so lazy that when a friend said to him: 'Turn round. The prettiest woman I've ever seen has just come into the room', he answered, without moving: 'Describe her to me.' He sat in a café in the Rue Vivienne and made wild and ill-calculated investments on the Stock Exchange. Thus he had the great traditional stimulants to the industry of an artist: laziness and debt. A friend described him as elegant, gentle and charming, a poet who knew 'the wealth of fantasy, as well as disenchantment, that hovers in the smoke rings of a cigar'. It's hard not to see in Feydeau one of his own characters, sensible and detached, choosing a quiet life; but unceremoniously booted into a world of frenetic creation that became, at the drop of a coincidence, gloriously out of control.

This note first appeared in the National Theatre's programme for *A Flea in Her Ear* in 1966.

IN CONVERSATION WITH TOM HOLLANDER

At the time of this interview Tom had injured his arm and was unable to perform.

Did you know much about farce as a genre before you started to work on the play?

No, except everybody said how seriously you had to take it- I'd heard that many times, without realising quite what that meant physically. I always thought that it was about taking the characters seriously but it also turns out that you have to take it very seriously from an athletic point of view.

Watching you run around on stage is quite something, you must be exhausted and much fitter than you were before you started.

I was until this accident, yes. Now I'm concerned that my fitness is dropping while I'm convalescing so it's going to be a bit of a shock when I hit the stage again.

The two parts you play are physically very different. Did you go through any specific processes to accentuate these differences?

Well, they became physically different just by thinking of them as two different characters.

So I'm thinking of one as them as a bit uptight while the other one is more relaxed, one is educated and one is not educated, one is impotent, the other is priapic (relating to male sexuality & sexual activity), one is a bit slovenly and the other a bit of a 'poseur' so I just went through opposites like that and physically that had a natural consequence. Chandebise is a bit anal and uptight while Poche is more relaxed and a drunkard of course! There's the whole section in Act 3 where he's drunk so that clearly has implications for one's physicality. What's also interesting, beyond making the differences clear, is the similarities. So the miracle is that they are almost genetically the same, nearly twins, but have gone down totally different paths but then in what respect are they similar physically? The fact that they're similar is also part of the pleasure of it. Once the audience believes that they're two different people they then enjoy how similar they actually are to each other. If only they knew each other...the audience even start to think that they might meet and you sort of want Feydeau to be able to pull that off, he can't obviously but the closest he can get to it is having Chandebise rush into the bedroom and come out of it again saying 'I've just seen myself lying on my bed' and that gets a roar of laughter. At the end he says 'Poche, Poche, nothing but Poche! I'm sorry he left in such a hurry, I'd like to have seen him close to, my second self' and that sort of releases something in the audience as well- a feeling of relief that I've said that, that line is there for them really.

As you have so many entrances and exits, have you had any moments where you've come on as the wrong character or not known where you're meant to be?

Not as such. This is very, very fast. In most plays you have time to think about what's going to happen next, in this you don't have so much time so generally I find when I come off stage I sort of walk off into the blackness, a bit like stepping off a ledge into an infinite space of nothingness. I'm mostly thinking about what's just happened so I often don't know what the next entrance is and I have to try very hard to keep myself moving as I know I'm going to have to come on again and need to prepare myself. Now we're used to it I know what's going to happen but it took me ages. In rehearsal, previews and the first production week I regularly came off and just blanked, I had no idea what was happening next but now the dressers effectively point me in the right direction!



When you first saw the script did it worry you how quickly you would have to go from one character to the other?

It wasn't that clear on the page, it was only once we started doing it that it became clear how quick it was and then when you run it you realise how exhausting it is.

The timing and the pace are so crucial to making the play funny, how did you work on that in rehearsal? Was it frustrating having to go over things hundreds of times to get them just right?

To be honest, it's evolving all the time so we got some things right and we didn't get other things right and some things are probably better now. Rehearsals were really about defining a style and a pace.

I probably took up twice as much of the director's time than anyone else because I was playing two parts but obviously, for the central device of the show to work; those two parts had to be clearly delineated.

Feydeau's farcical characters are well known for having a little more depth than other farcical characters. Have you found that to be true?

They are terribly well conceived archetypal characters so it's just a question of identifying what sort of archetype he's allowing you to play and playing it in your own way. Those characters are pretty efficiently drawn, there's clearly no poetry there and there's not much reflective stuff but, that said, there are moments. Feraillon gets to be wistful about his military past, Etienne and Antoinette's relationship is quite deeply defined as a married couple. John Marquez's performance is brilliant and his Homenides is a completely rounded character, you know who he is. There's pride and vulnerability there. It's not just two dimensional farce. If they were in a different play, on a normal day in their lives, not one where they all went mad and got a flea in their ear, they could probably end up in a Chekov play- if they were slowed down and made to be a bit more reflective! It's the same sort of period.

I read somewhere that you were in a play with Nick Clegg at university, have you any plans to collaborate with him on further acting projects in the future?

No! He is, however, coming to see the show!

IN CONVERSATION WITH FREDDIE FOX



It's not been a bad year for you considering you only just graduated; you've done lots of exciting things already. Was it at all intimidating for you when you started rehearsals?

I knew that Richard had wanted to do the play for years and years and had it in the pipeline so I had always thought that it would be wonderful to be part of but I'd never dreamed it would be my first theatre job, I thought it might be something I could do further down the line. So when I got it I thought 'Woah!' I read the script and just thought 'this is so funny'. My agent described it as 'gold plated theatre' – Tom Hollander, Richard Eyre, John Mortimer. John was my godfather and did the best ever translation plus I get to play a guy with a cleft palate!

It's quite challenging though for a first big role, it's not the easy option!

It was a bit daunting. I thought how am I going to make this funny? I also knew that Edward Hardwicke, when he did it in 1966, had been hysterically funny and I heard that he'd been offered about two TV series and a comedy show off the back of it so it was a bit intimidating but then when you've got Richard there being so calm and directing you all that goes out of the window.

I suppose he's helped and you're helped by Feydeau's stage directions? They're all so carefully crafted that a director has to listen to them really doesn't he?

Yes I think so. I mean Feydeau has written it like a mathematical puzzle, like a calculus paper and the formulas have to be obeyed or the comedy doesn't work.

In rehearsal did you have to go over things again and again to perfect the timing? It must have become slightly laborious?

Well yes but then you can go over things again and again in rehearsals but when you get on stage things change. In the second show we did I whacked Tom (Hollander) with a door, blood spurted all over the stage! It was a combination of me opening the door very quickly and the fact that we hadn't rehearsed a new move and as soon as you don't rehearse something in a play of this pace things go wrong, so that attention to detail is necessary.

Where did you start with the speech impediment caused by the cleft palate? Did you go and listen to people speak who had cleft palates? Did you have a vocal coach?

It started with me speaking to a few people, one of whom was a teacher of mine at Guildhall. He had played Camille himself a long time ago so I asked him if he could remember how the cleft palate affected his speech. His interpretation wasn't one that I thought was very medically accurate. You could get away with overblown mistruths back when he did it but nowadays it would have to be a lot more politically and factually correct.

I ... phoned a doctor contact of mine who put me in touch with a wonderful woman at Great Ormond Street Hospital called Debbie Sell. She specialises in cleft palate surgery. I said that I didn't want to be taking the mickey out of Camille, he's just a guy with a speech impediment and while that makes it very funny in the context of the play, he wouldn't find it funny; it's just the way he speaks. They showed me some amazing material of young people going through speech therapy before an operation on their cleft palate. So that's how I started, I listened to a lot of kids in that situation and then I just practised and practised.

What is so remarkable is that you still make yourself understandable.

There are moments when other characters repeat my lines so obviously the audience pick those up but then you do still have to be intelligible; people have to understand why you're not being understood. So I start the show making the impediment more realistic and profound and then once that impression is created I ease it slightly to make it a bit more understandable.

Camille leads a bit of a double existence, how did you deal with the two sides of his character?

I was really confused when I got the script at first. I was thinking 'how is this guy virginal yet naughty?' 'What is he meant to be more of?' I then made the decision that he was very sexual, almost more sexually charged than anyone else in the play but that he has to hide it away from everyone, introduces a new dimension to his character.

It must be quite poignant for you that John Mortimer was your godfather and now you're doing this play, he presumably would have been very proud of you.

Yes, I feel like there must be a bit of fate involved there. I think perhaps it's meant to be.

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN MARQUEZ

You speak Spanish in the play and your name is Marquez, are you Spanish?

No, well my dad is Spanish but I don't actually speak Spanish. My mum was English so all five of us kids just spoke English but we obviously heard Spanish a lot so that's why I can do the accent. When I found out I had this part I also wanted to portray the high range that my Dad uses when he speaks, even when he speaks English, unfortunately it sounds very funny in English and we all used to laugh at him when we were kids! So I got the humour from there really.

So because your dad is Spanish, did he have any influence on how you portrayed Homenides?

Yeah, massively. Not necessarily physically but vocally. Also the whole thing of getting extremely emotional and dramatic over tiny things I've taken from my dad because he would get very upset very easily.

Physically, your interpretation occasionally made me think of Tango and Flamenco; have you had any dance training, did you use dance as an influence?

No, not really. I mean I had a bit of dance training at Drama College but I've always been quite physical and able to move well. I've messed around with Flamenco in a comedy way before. The heels and the costume for this part give you that attitude anyway. Homenides is an aristocrat too which helps to give him that confident posture.

Did you find the detailed stage directions a hindrance at any stage? They are very specific; did you ever feel trapped by them?

At times I might have thought that I wanted to try something from a different position but then Richard Eyre was always very good. I'd either say something or I'd just try it and if he didn't say anything against it then I'd just keep doing it.

What's it like working with him?

It's been fantastic. To be honest, I'd never met him before and I was very scared just of the name but it's kind of like being directed by your favourite uncle. He's a really lovely man, he gives you a lot of confidence to develop what you want to develop but he will direct you when he needs to. He's very gentle but very, very astute.

Is this also your first time at The Old Vic?

It is, yes and I love it.

IT'S RAINING IN REHEARSALS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR PSYCHE STOTT DIPS INTO HER REHEARSAL DIARY TO REVEAL SOME OF THE SURPRISES THAT ARISE WHEN A COMPANY TACKLES FEYDEAU.

Our Assistant Stage Manager Oli rushes for a bucket. Jen the Deputy Stage Manager grabs some tissues. Richard Eyre, meanwhile, continues to discuss with Oliver Cotton, who plays Dr Finache, the details of his state of undress. 'Shoes on or off?' as he is pulled down the stairs by the maid Eugénie to attend to Olympe, a character experiencing the 'screaming tiffaffs'. During this action, the rehearsal photographer takes the opportunity to step in for some close-ups. The wet floor is a potential hazard because one of the puddles is forming on the spot where the actors enter the scene.

This chance moment in rehearsals mirrors exactly, for a couple of minutes, the tempo of the play; many things happening to many people all at once with the underlying potential of a mini-disaster connecting everyone. In Feydeau's play, every single element has been considered and crafted, nothing is left to chance; it is masterfully structured.

Following the first read through at the beginning of the week, Richard explains to the company that this will be a difficult play to rehearse because it goes at such a pace. But before we can do this in earnest, we have to slow it down and work out each moment. As we start to explore the action and the thoughts behind each line, reaction-by-reaction, we discover he's right!

Plotting the precise timing of the action starts to make some moments feel untruthful for the actors so we read the scene without the movement to remind them of the tempo they are aiming for. Some reactions only make sense when the scene is played at speed. The scene is then run again and the problems disappear.

Richard observes: 'It's a painful paradox that it happens quickly but you have to rehearse it slowly to begin with. It's not unlike the musical score of a great composer. Every pause, inflection and the tempo is intricate.'

The cast explores a particular moment: 'Is our reaction a result of what Feraillon is doing to Chandebise or a result of what he is saying? Are we disgusted?' Richard: 'No, horrified.'

We try this moment again and the musicality of the text is transformed from a descending series of 'Ahs' to ascending 'Ahs', as if going up a musical scale, increasing the intensity along the way. By doing so, it instantly becomes more truthful and funnier.

A few days later, we are in the middle of rehearsing a scene where Chandebise (played by Tom Hollander) receives an anonymous love letter... to the great disbelief of Dr Finache and Tournel (played by Jonathan Cake).

Tournel: You!

Finache: You, Chandebise!

Chandebise: Me! Chandebise! She couldn't take her eyes off me...

Tournel: (taking the letter and moving RC) 'You were in a box with your wife and another man...'

Chandebise: 'Another man.' That's you, Tournel.

(Taking the letter) 'Another man' 'X'.



The audience at this point are one step ahead of the characters. They have witnessed the writing of the letter in an earlier scene, so they know who it is from, what it says, and that it is drenched in perfume. We are working from page 19 of the script and discover the following on the next page:

Tournel: Oh, my dear fellows...

Chandebise and Finache (together): What?

Tournel: What does she mix her tears with to make them smell so overpowering?

Actor Jonathan Cake asks why he, as Tournel, hasn't smelt the perfume before? It's a good question and we pause to find an answer. The stage directions clearly say Tournel takes the letter from Chandebise, so why doesn't he smell it?

We try a couple of versions of the scene exploring what happens if Tournel doesn't take the letter but looks at it over the shoulder of Chandebise. This doesn't really work.

Is the letter a magnet for attention?

We try once more, this time with all three characters reacting as if gobsmacked by the letter. Richard then suggests that perhaps Tournel and Finache don't actually take it too seriously until the mention of 'The Hotel Coq d'Or', an establishment they are both familiar with. This makes sense of their relationship with Chandebise and of the stage direction where Tournel takes the letter. But we are still confused as to why Tournel doesn't smell the perfume straight away.

Richard looks to Feydeau's original text for clues. We discover Feydeau has in fact written a stage direction explaining that Tournel leans on the table and Chandebise wafts the letter under his nose at this very moment. Et voilà!

This is not the first time Feydeau has helped us make sense of the action.

To follow or not to follow... the stage directions.

In Act III Tom Hollander, who plays the characters of Chandebise and Poche, has only three lines (25 seconds at the last count) to exit down stage left as Poche, change costume and re-appear up stage centre as Chandebise. How is this humanly possible?

What if the trousers are neutral and it is just the top that is changed?

Richard: 'It needs to be a complete change of costume for it to be convincing.'

There don't seem to be any indications in the stage directions of John Mortimer's translation, so Richard refers back to Feydeau's French text again. He discovers a detailed and infinite breakdown of exactly how this can be achieved, right down to where the dresser should be waiting. It's quite brilliant but I shan't spoil the surprise.

Richard explains that when typically rehearsing a play, it isn't necessary to pay such great attention to stage directions – after all, Mortimer's are very close to Feydeau's most of the time. But on this occasion, Feydeau's are like the Holy Grail.

We're finding out that it is impossible to learn the dialogue of this piece until you have mapped out the action. Everything is associated with a physical action or reaction. Richard points out that it is not dissimilar to learning choreography; every movement fits to the music. In our case the music is the text, punctuated by doors slamming and pauses that become like a bars rest.

'Ah!' Door slams. 'What!...' or is it, 'Ah!' 'What!' Door slams?

The timing of the opening and closing of the doors is crucial. Richard compares it to 'percussion with a symbol crash at the wrong time.'

The text implies the door slam comes after the 'Ah!' – so we have a go....

All: Ah!

SLAM

SLAM

SLAM

SLAM

All: What!

The whole room bursts into laughter... and Feydeau's genius surprises us once more.