A FLEA IN MY EAR

On translating Feydeau into comedy

> There is another class, and with this class we side, who sit down to a work of amusement…. They look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. Thus, though they want novelty, they want nature, too; but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed.
>
> Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

Some months ago, Gary Griffin asked me if I would be interested in doing a new version of Georges Feydeau's *A Flea In Her Ear* for Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Gary and I had happily collaborated on four old musicals – he directing, I adapting – for New York City's Encores! series, and of course *Flea* is one of the very great comedies of all time, a perfect Belle Epoque cog-and-wheel cuckoo clock, the most delicious and delirious of all farces. The title alone had always tickled me, if only because I always heard it as *A Flea In Her Rear*.

"But why that play, why *Flea*?" I asked Gary.

"Because," he said, "I want to understand Feydeau's jokes."

This seemed a humane and philosophical reason. Further research informed me that Feydeau died in 1921 in a mental asylum, claiming to be Napoleon III.

How could I say no?

Comedy being serious business, I pondered method. Feydeau, willfully enough, wrote in French. I had not seriously or even frivolously used my French since visiting a girlfriend in Paris back in what felt like the 16th century. It's true, I had adapted a score of shows since then, but had only worked from English into English. I knew I could translate English into English. What was

I to do with French? And would Gary and I "understand" the jokes if I only boiled them down out of existing and perhaps feeble or abridged or misleading English attempts?

Comedy is nothing if not the chronicle of human folly, so I opted for folly. I decided to work directly from the French.

I do not recommend this course – not because it's unwise but because of the current state of the dollar. A copy of *La puce à l'oreille* (as the obstinate French would have the title) set me back thirty-five bucks from Amazon-dot-Frog. A really inadequate French-English dictionary shorted me another twelve simoleons. What is more, French publishers, in typically perverse Gallic fashion, apparently do not bind their books, they clamp the pages as in a jealous lover's tight, sweaty grip. I expanded my biceps daily trying to force the play open to where I could read the words in the volume's epoxied cleavage. But then again, as the French themselves say: *à chacun son glue*.

My plan was to make my way through the French once or twice, slowly, pencilling in the meaning of unfamiliar words, then to translate the whole thing onto paper. Only then would I consult any English versions, to compare what I had come up with against the work of my fellow Feydeauvians.

With racing heart (not really) I turned to the two-page-long stage direction that sets the opening scene. I marveled. It was so typically French! By this I mean that it was extraordinarily precise and (to me) utterly incomprehensible. As far as I could make out, it described the machine room of a vast ocean liner panelled in "nut" (could that be right?) on a day in June. The word "hinge" seemed to recur in delphic, almost sinister fashion. Yet I knew from having seen the play that the setting was a Parisian parlor. I did recognize the word for "chair." What I had thought was a very large *hors d'oeuvre* turned out to be a sofa. I read on, not laughing

uproariously yet, maybe because I was too busy obscuring the printed text with my pencilled annotations. Feydeau began to merge with Foucault. I wondered if wearing a beret would help.

Stage directions, I soon decided, are not drama, so I sped on to the dialogue – the playwright's bailiwick. With a sigh of relief (not really), I turned to the play's opening line:

CAMILLE: *Allons, voyons!*

Just to fill you in: Camille is a handsome young man with a speech impediment who has just been unexpectedly kissed by a saucy young cook in the parlor of a house owned by a man who thinks himself impotent. (*Now that's what I call comedy*.) I was faced with only one crucial question:

What the foucault does "*Allons, voyons!*" mean?

Literally, of course, "*Allons, voyons!*" means "Let's go, let's see!" Was Camille suggesting that he and the saucy cook go somewhere and look at something? This being a French farce, my imagination ran wild. Words like "zipper" and "corset" sprang to mind. In the end, I did what any self-respecting playwright would do: I asked myself what *I* would say if I were a handsome young Frenchman with a speech impediment who'd just been kissed by an attractive young cook in a short black dress and very high heels while standing in the parlor of a man who thinks himself impotent. I scribbled a stopgap, relieved to have escaped the first line alive, and took the rest of the day off.

As I read deeper into the first act, my heart sank as I discovered more and more instances of "*Allons, voyons!*" peppered through the text. Characters were wont to pop out with this ridiculous and patently meaningless phrase at the drop of a *chapeau*. They also burst out from time to time with cryptic exclamations like "*Ça alors!*" and "*Comment donc!*" From time to time I wondered if they were baffling each other with it as much as they were baffling me.

Feydeau, fade in. Three acts, three days and half a bottle of Advil later, I had "read" *A Flea In Her Rear*. Pardon me. *Ear*. The task had gotten easier (maybe it was the beret) and I had actually laughed here and there (in *French*! how different I sounded!) though I still couldn't explain all those hinges. I now knew, in a detail I'd never foreseen, what a French speech impediment sounds like. (Actually, it sounds a lot like Finnish.) One crucial passage also cleared up for me a philosophical-slash-philological question that had plagued me since early infancy: namely, what does a language sound like to those who are speaking it? In this case, what do the French sound like to each other? Do they *actually* sound like Pepe LePew, or only seem to? Do they really murmur and shrug and thrust out their lower lips, or is that our collective imagination? Was Maurice Chevalier a cruel anomaly?

Here's the crucial passage in question, in which Tournel, a would-be gigolo, at last has secured the desired Raymonde in his arms:

> TOURNEL (*embracing and kissing her greedily)*: Oh, Raymonde, my Raymonde! Don't you see? *Hong, hong!* Don't you see you had no reason to suspect your husband? *Hong, hong!* Don't you see that it's your *duty* to deceive him? *Hong, hong!*

Now what the *enfer* are all those vaguely Asian-looking "*hongs*"? In vain did I thumb my dictionary for guidance. No matter how many times I looked it up, "*hong*" was not there. Nor could I wish the word away: the passage was too well-*hong*. I briefly wondered if "*hong*" was a rare past tense of "hinge," a word that admittedly does not exist in French but which seemed central to the action. Those "*hongs*" did remind me of something I had found ecstatically funny when I was ten years old: a passage from Robert Benchley in which he instructs Americans on the correct pronunciation of French:

FRENCH VOWEL	CORRECT PRONUNCIATION
A	ong
E	ong
I	ong
O	ong
U	ong

In the end, Benchley turned out to be my clue. For I realized that "*hong*" was a French transliteration of the French sound that a French lover makes when ardently embracing the object of his (French) lust. "*Mon Dieu*!" I cried (not really), "so the French actually *do* sound like Maurice Chevalier when they're among themselves!" The proof was in the *poudang*. Now all I had to do was translate "*hong*" into correct English.

Very simple: "*hngh*," of course. The pricier French dictionaries probably even include that.

Having "read" the play a couple of times, I then sat down (not that I'd been standing all this time) to translate it onto the page. This took some two or three weeks, and produced yet another extraordinary result.

In English, the play was 193 pages long.

I had on my hands the fattest flea in entomological history. I had an impulse to wrap it up in brown paper and hide it. I would wake in the middle of the night thinking the whole affair had all been a nightmare, only to wander into my writing room and find the gargantuan typescript visibly sagging the center of my desk. Not that I was worried about performance length. I was worried that I would bankrupt Chicago Shakespeare with copying costs. In fact, the heft of the script was in line with other plays of the period: when audiences went to see Shaw or Ibsen or Pirandello, they wanted three hours, their money's worth, 14 people onstage, and a full night out on the town, not an 87-minute one-act with two characters, one emotion, some profanity and a

chair, all for a hundred bucks plus a piratical "restoration fee," which is our own squalid age's standard. Besides, I could always trim the damn thing later on.

Having extruded my 193 pages, I compared half a dozen English translations with my own. I discovered three things: first, all the other versions were shorter (but only by virtue of being cut, often drastically); second, I'd gotten pretty close in my own translation if I did say so *moi-même*; third, I needed a martini. Bombay gin, olives, stirred (of course), not too dry.

But what had I discovered about Feydeau's jokes by delving into the French?

"Ah, *mon ami*," as Hercule Poirot is always rather irritatingly saying, "ziss (i.e., "this") is the heart of *la question* (of the question)!"

What I had discovered is that *there are no jokes* in *A Flea In Her Ear* – or very few, as we would count them. (Maybe I should say: very few as I translated them.) For *Flea* is not one of our synthetic, digital-age pieces full of bing-bang-boom setups and payoffs, where smartass wisecracks and zippy ripostes clang one upon the other like rusty tire irons tossed onto a pile. No, the comedic secret of *A Flea In Her Ear* is that it actually is *about* something.

The first and last acts of *Flea* take place in the ultra-bourgeois living room of one Victor-Emmanuel Chandebise, the stodgy director of an insurance company. The middle act, by contrast, takes place at The Frisky Puss Hotel, a gaudy, louche establishment where, as the manager says, "all the guests are married, but not to each other." Through a series of misunderstandings, all of the characters in all 47 subplots find themselves in the Frisky Puss, swept up in a maelstrom of ridiculously concatenating events and encounters which make perfect sense to us because we have the larger view, but no sense at all to the increasingly frenzied participants of the plot. The staid world meets the un-stayed, the buttoned-up the literally unbuttoned. Everybody at the start of the play thinks he or she has a grip on reality; in the middle

act, everybody loses his or her grip and is set adrift. Chandebise, a man who sells life insurance -- i.e., security -- discovers the rabid insecurity of Life Itself. What you have, in other words, is an almost Dantesque descent from middle-class order into (apparently) senseless, classless sexual chaos.

Now that's what I call comedy.

In one sense, *Flea* (written in 1907) is like some contemporaneous gloss on Freud, a theatrical diagram of the ego (Chandebise's proper parlor) suppressing the untamed id (the Frisky Puss). But the comedy of it all *hinges* (that word again) on a vision of life, and comes from a world view as powerful and persuasive and ironclad as Beckett's. For everything in Feydeauland is entirely logical to us while to the characters everything is absurd. They skate on the mad, slippery surface while we see to the perfectly rational inner workings clicking away underneath. This play is, in other words, a metaphysics, a statement about the world, an angle on epistemology, a cosmic machine that some comedic Immanuel Kant might've come up with (and remember that Chandebise's middle name is "Emmanuel," which is French for "Immanuel"). It's our distance from the action, our perspective, that lets us find the growing insanity funny. We are like scientists watching rats in a a cage who can't figure out why food keeps pouring down the chute, when they're the ones causing the food to pour by constantly pushing a button marked "Stop."

There is a passage in Hume's *Natural History of Religion* that makes me think of Feydeau:

> We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent these ills, with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes*, then,

> become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence.

There is also a passage in Camus's *L'étranger* that's of interest in this regard. The scene is the courtroom where Meursault is on trial for the murder of an Arab on a beach.

> Raymond [a witness for Meursault] told the courtroom that my presence on the beach was the result of chance. The prosecutor asked him how then the letter that was the start of the whole drama had managed to be written by me. Raymond said it was chance. The prosecutor retorted that chance had a lot of unfortunate events on its conscience in this story. He wanted to know if it was by chance that I had not intervened when Raymond slapped his mistress, by chance that I had served as witness at the police station, by chance again that my deposition had been revealed to be pure connivance…

This could be the tirade of any jealous husband or wife in any final-act climax of a Feydeau farce. The prosecuting spouse in question simply doesn't have the whole story and can't see that in fact nothing happened by chance.

Feydeau is sort of the reverse of Ionesco. One could almost write a reverse-Ionesco, a sort of "Feydesco" play by taking one of the great Rumanian absurdist's pieces and pulling back the curtain, so to speak: showing how every apparent absurdity actually has its basis in some simple, logical turn of event in the backstory. In *Flea,* for example, Chandebise can't understand how his jacket found its way home from the hotel. We know it's because the hotel bellboy brought the jacket. In an Ionesco play, Chandebise's jacket would simply find its way home without a reason, as if it had legs. To be caught in an absurd world is one thing; to be caught in an absurd world *which has a ruthless but unperceivable logic* is worse – and for my taste, profounder, funnier, and deliciously unsettling. No wonder the poor bastard went mad. Or maybe Feydeau actually *was* Napoleon III, and we're just missing all the relevant facts…

There was one line in the play that dogged me to the end, absolutely defying sense or translation. Feydeau clearly meant the line to be funny, because it came as the climax of a

gorgeous two-page build, the rhythms quickening and tightening, all the emotions rising to the bursting point. The cork in the shaken champagne bottle, that line was clearly meant to go *pop*. When I checked the other English versions of *Flea* I found that *nobody had translated that line*. So I did what any self-respecting playwright would do: I carried the script across the hall to a guy who actually *is* French, born in France, accent and all, and asked him what the line meant.

He couldn't make any sense of the line either. In other words, the French not only *do* talk like Maurice Chevalier, but they really *are* baffling each other with their French all the time!

Ça alors!

So I had reached a lot of enlightenment but was stuck with a crackling laugh line and no idea what it meant. In the end, I did what any self-respecting playwright would do.

I did what Feydeau would have done.

I made something up.

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