Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

A Flea in Her Ear
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretive articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Leslie Brott (left) and Kate Fuglei in *A Flea in Her Ear*, 1994.
Contents

Information on the Play

Synopsis 4
Characters 5
About the Playwright 6

Scholarly Articles on the Play

The Function of the Songs in 1776 9
Justice for John Adams 12
Synopsis: *A Flea in Her Ear*

It is Paris at the turn of the century, and the lovely Raymonde Chandebise, after years of wedded bliss, begins to doubt the fidelity of her husband, Victor Emmanuel, who suddenly has become sexually inactive, or, as Raymonde puts it, “after having been a husband--and what a husband!--suddenly stopped--like that! Between one day and the next.” She does not realize, however, that his behavior is due to a nervous condition, and she begins to suspect that he has a mistress.

She confides her doubts to her old friend Lucienne, who suggests a little trick to test him. They write him a letter, in Lucienne’s handwriting, from a fictitious and anonymous admirer, requesting a rendezvous at the Hotel Coq d’Or, an establishment with a dubious reputation, but a large and prominent clientele. It is Raymonde’s intention to confront her husband there, and she and Lucienne leave to do so.

When Victor Emmanuel receives the letter, however, he has no interest in such an affair and believes the invitation from the mysterious woman was meant for his best friend Tournel, a handsome bachelor who, unknown to Victor Emmanuel, has his eye on Raymonde. Tournel, hot-blooded and easily excited, quickly exits to make the appointment.

Meanwhile, Camille, the young nephew of Victor Emmanuel, is overjoyed to have a speech impediment corrected by a new silver palate from Dr. Finache. In celebration, he and the household cook, Antoinette, also hurry to the Hotel Coq d’Or, followed by Etienne, the jealous husband of Antoinette. Dr. Finache, also looking for a bit of fun, decides to go to the hotel in search of his own afternoon rendezvous.

To complicate the matter further, Victor Emmanuel, with the intention of sharing his amusement, shows the letter to Lucienne’s husband, Carlos Homenides de Histangua, a passionate and violent Spaniard. Carlos recognizes Lucienne’s handwriting and assumes that she is trying to start an affair with Victor Emmanuel. He runs off to the hotel vowing to kill her in revenge. Victor Emmanuel, hoping to prevent the threatened murder, hurries off in pursuit.

Feraillon, the proprietor of the Hotel Coq d’Or, runs his business with a military precision, which, alas, is about to be disrupted. Finache arrives looking for fun. Raymonde arrives looking for Victor Emmanuel. Tournel arrives looking for Raymonde. Camille arrives with Antoinette, followed by Etienne, who is looking for them both. Carlos arrives looking for Lucienne; and Victor Emmanuel, the most innocent of the entire group, arrives looking to stop Carlos.

The presence of all the people at the hotel causes further complications and misunderstandings. Carlos, attempting to shoot his wife, violently shoots at anything that moves. Victor Emmanuel sees Raymonde talking with Tournel and believes she is unfaithful. Mistaken for Poche, an alcoholic porter at the hotel, Victor Emmanuel is believed to be insane. And, to escalate the action even further, Camille loses his palate and Tournel tries incessantly to seduce Raymonde.

The confusion persists even after all are reunited again at Victor Emmanuel’s house. However, things begin to clear up when Carlo discovers on Raymonde’s desk a rough copy of the letter written by Lucienne, this one in Raymonde’s handwriting. Next the owner of the hotel comes by to return an article left behind by a member of the household and clears up the confusion between his porter and Victor Emmanuel.

Finally, Raymonde tells Victor Emmanuel the cause of her suspicions, and he assures her that he will put an end to her doubts—tonight.
Victor Emmanuel Chandebise: The managing director of the Boston Life Insurance Company for all of Paris and the provinces, he is a no-nonsense sort of fellow with shrewd business savvy and little sense of humor. In every way he has lived the life of a successful bourgeois gentilhomme. He has a thriving business, a comfortable home, adequate servants, and, most importantly, a beautiful wife who absolutely adores him. At least, she used to adore him, until a dark cloud concerning his bedroom performance, or lack thereof, begins to loom.

Raymonde Chandebise: The presently unhappy wife of Victor Emmanuel, she is everything a turn-of-the-century bourgeoisie French wife should be: elegant, charming, beautiful, scheming, jealous, and, at present, extremely insecure. She thinks Victor Emmanuel has, of late, lost all romantic interest in her, and she has come to mistrust his fidelity. Thus, with this “flea in her ear,” she decides to take matters into her own hands.

Camille Chandebise: The young nephew of Victor Emmanuel, he lives in his uncle’s house and works for him as a secretary. He has had a difficult time finding employment due to a rare speech impediment that will not allow him to pronounce consonants, only vowels—until Dr. Finache provides him with a silver palate. Still, he is good hearted and industrious; and, although he is certain not irreproachable, he is very adept at projecting an image of innocence and naivety.

Romain Tournel: An employee of the Boston Life Insurance Company, he has worked for Victor Emmanuel for some time. Although a trusted friend of the family, he is absolutely dedicated to having an affair with his employer’s wife, an idea which she coquettishly encourages but continually rebuffs. He fancies himself quite the ladies’ man, but obviously wears his brilliantine too thick and his charm too thin.

Carlos Homenides de Histangua: The Spanish husband of Lucienne and a potential client of the Boston Life Insurance Company, he gives added meaning to the image of the hot-blooded and jealous Latin lover.

Lucienne Homenides de Histangua: The wife of Carlos, she is coincidentally the oldest and dearest friend of Raymonde Chandebise. With her strong will and fiery temperament, she is a perfect confidante to help Raymonde “trap” Victor Emmanuel.

Dr. Finache: The chief medical officer of the Boston Life Insurance Company, he is an old friend of the Chandebise family and Victor Emmanuel’s closest confidant. He is also one of the most dedicated rogues and libertines in all of Paris.

Etienne Plucheux: The haughty and egocentric butler of the Chandebise household and the husband of Antoinette, he is a much better butler than he is husband.

Antoinette Plucheux: The wife of Etienne and cook in the Chandebise household, she is pert, saucy, sly, and every ounce a coquette—with everyone but her husband. At the moment the object of her flirtatious attentions is Camille, and she seems determined not to let her marriage to Etienne disrupt her social life.

Augustin Feraillon: The owner and manager of the Hotel Coq d’Or, he is a former sergeant-major with the 29th Infantry Regiment and believes that his hotel should be run with the same sort of military precision and discipline.

Olympe: The devoted and loving wife of Feraillon, she is a former courtesan of no little reputation. It was her reputation and savings that allowed Feraillon to resign his commission in the army, and together they have created their dream hotel.
Poche: A former soldier in Feraillon’s regiment, he is now employed as a porter at the hotel. He is also a persistent drunk, which Feraillon tries to combat with frequent and violent beatings. As circumstances would have it, he is also an exact double of Victor Emmanuel.

Eugénie: The young upstairs maid at the hotel.

Baptistin: An ancient employee at the hotel, he is a rather unusual decoy to help ensure the privacy of the hotel patrons and confuse any ill-timed police raids.

Herr Schwarz: Frustrated and confused, he is a guest of the hotel who, unfortunately, does not speak the language.

About the Playwrights

Georges Feydeau

By James Mills

From Insights, 1994

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, France was slowly recovering from its humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870) and from the bitter civil strife caused by the conflict between the national government and certain city governments, in particular the Paris Commune (1871). The abdication of Napoleon III and the end of the Second Empire gave birth to the Third Republic with its accompanying instability and uncertainty. Although the construction of the Sacré Coeur cathedral (1876-1910) on the summit of Montmartre in Paris was designed to restore a sense of pride to the nation, the intervening Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), in which blatant anti-semitism reared its ugly head when a Jewish officer was falsely accused of treason and imprisoned, became a cause célèbre that sharply divided France between conservatives and liberals.

The fin de siècle era saw Daudet and the realists and Zola and the naturalists being replaced by the decadent poets Rimbaud and Verlaine and the symbolists, including Mallarmé and Valéry, who revolted against the detailed, scientific approach to literature in favor of the mystical, the subconscious, and the search for absolute truth through symbols of material phenomena. Similarly, the Parnassian poets’ obsession with form and objectivity was giving way to the neoplatonic search for a verity that lay beyond reality (May Daniels, The French Drama of the Unspoken [Edinburgh: University Press, 1953], 17-45).

Meanwhile Edmond Rostand sought to give France a new hero in his Cyrano de Bergerac (1897), and another playwright, Georges Feydeau, endeavored to make France laugh through his vaudevillian farces and, in the process, dominated the genre well into la belle époque of the nascent twentieth century. Yet, as Leonard Pronko has suggested, “lurking beneath the frenetically joyous surface [of Feydeau’s farces] is a vision of the world in explosion,” one which, in fact, anticipated the bloody wars of the twentieth century (Georges Feydeau [New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975], 5).

Born in Paris on December 8, 1862 (some claim 1863), to Ernest Feydeau, a renowned writer and scholar, and Lodzja Zelewska or Slewska, a Polish woman, Feydeau was rumored to really be the son of the duke of Morney or Napoleon III.

The young man was exposed to the theatre in a city which, at the turn of the century, was the intellectual and artistic capital of the western world. He began by writing drawing room monologues; and after his first work, Through the Window (Par la fenêtre, 1882),
written at age twenty, he composed Love and Piano (Amour et piano, 1883) and Gallows-Bird (Gibier de potence, 1883), two single-act plays which received un succès d’estime (praise from critics, but poor sales). His first major theatrical success was a three-act work titled, Ladies’ Dressmaker (Tailleur pour dames, 1886), which he wrote at age twenty-four. This was followed by seven years of failures and only partial successes. Meanwhile, he married the daughter of Carolus-Duran, a well known portrait painter, who was quite rich and who took care of Feydeau’s immediate money problems.

Feydeau stopped writing in 1890 in order to study authors who had succeeded in farce, including Eugène Labiche, Henri Meilhac, and Alfred Hennique. The result was Champignol in Spite of Himself (Champignol malgré lui, 1892) and Monsieur Has Gone Hunting (Monsieur chasse!, 1892), the first of which became a major success at the Nouveautés after having been rejected by the Palais-Royal. His career continued to blossom as he became the most popular playwright of the boulevard theatre and a great success abroad as well. Sometimes his plays were performed in foreign language translation before they were performed in France. While some consider The Lady from Maxim’s (La Dame de chez Maxim, 1899) to be his greatest success, A Flea in Her Ear (La Puce à l’oreille, 1907) went on to become his most popular play in English-speaking countries.

Feydeau had somewhat of an existentialist view of an absurd universe where men and women confront a hostile world in which the innocent suffer with no hope of comic resolution. His work had an undercurrent of pessimism, with many of the characters bringing suffering upon themselves by their affectation, their over-ambition, and their romantic and idealistic notions (Norman R. Shapiro, “Suffering and Punishment in the Theatre of Georges Feydeau” [The Tulane Review, Sept. 1960], 5:126). Shapiro has suggested that, “the playwright, like a master puppeteer, assumes a god-like role, creating around his helpless characters a universe of seeming absurdity in which their efforts to resist their destiny are frantic but fruitless,” and that Feydeau’s theatre is “eminently cruel,” and his characters “are often the victims of relentless whimsy which delights in recreating, in a comical dramatic fiction, the absurdity and inexplicability of real life (117).

Peter Glenville argues that Feydeau’s plays concentrate on the appetites and follies of the average human being caught in a net devised by his or her own foolishness, that virtue does not triumph, and that the dramatist “is not interested in what people should be, or even, on occasion, aspire to be, but rather with what they almost inevitably, and amusingly, are” (“Feydeau; Father of Pure Farce,” [Theatre Arts, April 1957], 66,86). He also points out that every detail is logical and plausible and engineered by the characters themselves. Richard Hayes contends that “the world of Feydeau is alien to the ethical, romantic [spectator] . . . for it is a world indifferent to sentiment or morality or psychological nuance” (“The Mathematics of Farce,” [Commonweal, May, 10, 1957], 154).

While Feydeau’s basic premise may be founded in reality, the characters and plot are quickly pushed into the realm of the irrational. He was not an experimenter or an innovator, but an exploiter of the farcical possibilities inherent in the dramatic conventions that he adopted (Stuart Baker, (Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981], 108, 25). His characters are ordinary people who are aggressive and, at times, cruel. While his plays are known for their nonsense, fantasy, and bedroom farce, they are also known for their sense of madness and their geometric precision (9). His is a popular theatre that may not always appeal to cultured audiences.

In 1909, Feydeau left his wife, Marianne, to spend the next ten years in the Hôtel Terminus, where he surrounded himself with his paintings, his books, and some 250 per-
fumes. His later works were better, and often emphasized domestic themes. He divorced his wife in 1916 after an unhappy marriage that is perhaps reflected in his last five short plays (1908-1916) where the wife is a vixen of the sort who persecutes her husband almost to the point of madness (Pronko, 10).

As his work evolved, he continued to adhere strictly to an immaculate construction and geometry and a preoccupation with mechanical form and verbal wit and titillation, a combination that Hayes calls the “mathematics of theater” (154). He likewise moved toward more verisimilitude and a more intense and almost savage comic vision (Baker, 27-28).

Sadness dominated Feydeau’s life. He wanted solitude, but needed company. He also owed millions of francs. His final full-length play, I Don’t Cheat on My Husband (Je ne trompe pas mon mari, 1914), was done in collaboration with René Peter, while another play had to be finished by Yves Mirande, and yet another had its first act written by Sacha Guitry. Feydeau suffered from melancholia and moved to a sanatorium in 1919 to be treated, but remained only partially lucid, dying insane in 1921.

In 1941, his play, Madam’s Late Mother (Feu la mère de madame), entered the repertory of the Comédie-Française, soon to be followed by some of his other plays, thus establishing him as a modern “classic.”

Some have seen in Feydeau a precursor of Dadaism, surrealism, and the absurd. Perhaps Shapiro best sums up his contributions when he speaks of the grandeur that is to be found in Feydeau’s compositions in spite of their levity and seeming triviality, and in his ultimate canonical designation of the dramatist as “the Bach of his genre” (“Forms of Shock Treatment for a World Out of Plumb,” [Times Literary Supplement, June 18, 1971], 689).
A Flea in Her Ear:  
Pure Farce  
By James Mills  
From Midsummer Magazine, 1994  

Georges Feydeau (1862–1921) was a farceur par excellence who wrote thirty-nine works spanning a career of thirty-six years during la belle époque, the period in French history dating from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War I. At a time when the French were faced with the morbid realistic theatre of the naturalists and the idealistic theatre of the symbolists, Feydeau offered a more mundane theatre, which Raymond Rudorff has described as “good-humored libertinism that was the decadence of the moment” (The Belle Epoque [New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973], 222). He came to dominate the Theatre of the Boulevard, which demanded a well-made play with violence, shock, and the eternal triangle. His was a bourgeois world of middle-class marriage and the demimonde, or what Leonard Pronko has called “the underside of the belle époque” (Georges Feydeau [New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1975], 5).

French vaudevillian farce was a light, amusing, and skillfully constructed comedy quite unlike the American vaudeville, which was more of a variety program (Norman R. Shapiro, Introduction to Four Farces by Georges Feydeau [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], xiii-xiv). Peter Glenville has observed that Feydeau’s plays are “immaculately constructed,” and “are concerned largely with the appetites and follies of the average human being caught in a net devised by his own foolishness” (Feydeau: Father of Pure Farce” Theatre Arts, [April, 1957], 66). He was not an experimenter or an innovator, but exploited fully the farcical possibilities inherent in the dramatic conventions which he adopted and used with standard plot formulae and patterns (Stuart E. Baker, Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981], 25). Every word, every motion is important in the Feydelian farce with the typical boudoir comedy functioning as a “rigorously, logically constructed machine” (Shapiro, Four Farces, xiii).

After his first real success, a three-act play titled Ladies Dressmaker (Tailleur pour dames, 1886), he had about a dozen failures or only partial successes. In 1890 he retired for two years to study other farceurs who had been successful, including Eugène Labiche, Henri Meilhac, and Alfred Hennequin. In 1892 he found success with Monsieur Has Gone Hunting (Monsieur chasse) and Champignol in Spite of Himself (Champignol malgré lui), the latter establishing his position as a great vaudevillist. As his work evolved it took a binary thrust, with his early plays emphasizing the comedy of action while his later work is more subdued and restrained with realistic décors and characters and plots that are usually plausible. This metamorphosis may be explained in part by difficulties in his private life such as the lengthy separation from his wife, their divorce, his melancholia, and his eventual admission into an institution, where he died insane in 1921. He has in fact been described as a melancholy man of great refinement seated in a lively café but quietly listening and observing life about him through half-closed eyes, his ever-present cigar in his hand. To some he seemed cold and aloof, but to others he was gracious, gentle, and natural (Pronko, 10 11). Among his well-known works are The Lady from Maxim’s (La Dame de chez Maxim), Hotel Paradiso (L’Hôtel du Libre-Echange), Keep an Eye on Amelia (Occupe-toi d’Amélie), and A Flea in Her Ear (Une Puce à l’oreille).

On March 2, 1907, Feydeau returned to the “jack-in-the-box constructions of earlier
triumphs” with a renewed emphasis on comedy of actions in his celebrated work, A Flea in Her Ear (Shapiro, Four Farces, xxxix). Michael Billington calls the play superb because of its mathematical perfection and flawless economy of plot (The Listener, [3 March 1966], 315). He further notes that the plot reaches the heights of artifice, but the characters themselves have a basic reality, which is exactly what Feydeau hoped to achieve because he saw his first task to find his characters in reality and to preserve their true nature; then, after a comic exposition, to throw them into burlesque situations (315).

A Flea in Her Ear is a farce-comedy in three acts which follows the pattern based on deception. It is a comedy of situation involving marriage and deception. Raymonde, for example, feels betrayed when she surreptitiously opens her husband’s mail to find a strange pair of suspenders, whereupon she convinces her friend, Lucienne, to fabricate a letter from a supposed admirer of her husband, Victor Emmanuel, requesting a rendezvous with him at the Hôtel Coq d’Or. Then there is the massive confusion between the identities of Poche and Victor Emmanuel at the hotel, both parts played by the same actor, and the subsequent flood of accusations and charges levelled by the various parties during the hilarious chase scene.

Surprisingly, Raymonde, once convinced (erroneously) of her husband’s infidelity, no longer throws herself at Tourner, her would-be lover. In fact, by the end of the second act, she is seeking forgiveness for having merely been in the hotel with another man. Ironically, unlike most of Feydeau’s women, she insists that she cannot betray her husband because she is too upset.

Instead of dwelling on the mystery of the suspenders, the emphasis is placed on the perplexities of the double identity of Victor Emmanuel and Poche. Meanwhile, the deceived Latin husband, Carlos Homenidès de Histangua, hysterically runs in and out of rooms in pursuit of suspected rivals. Then there is Camille Chandebise, Victor Emmanuel’s nephew, who adds to the confusion by reserving a room under his family name, causing some of the characters to believe that the room is reserved for Victor Emmanuel. Meanwhile, Camille, who can only experience himself in vowels because of his speech impediment, is misunderstood by almost everyone until he inserts an artificial palate into his mouth, which he promptly loses and does not get back until the end of the play.

The farce opens with meaningless syllables uttered by Camille, “Hare foo. Please be careful!” (John Mortimer, trans. [New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1968], 1). While the mumbled speech may anticipate the complete breakdown in communication that is to follow, the intent of his words similarly seems to allude to the possibility of difficulties ahead. This is immediately followed by the comforting admonition of Antoinette, the maid, “Calm down. The family’s out” (1), which is designed to lull both Camille and the spectator into a false sense of security, when, in reality, the nightmare is just about to begin. The play ends with Victor Emmanuel, the principal victim, with a painful look, saying: “Yes. That is—well, at least I’ll try!” (87), perhaps hinting that trying is the best that one can do to survive in an absurd world.

A Flea in Her Ear is Feydeau’s most complete picture of love. The actual production can be difficult not only because of the large cast and the complicated action, but because of the numerous extravagant incidents involving the world of the cuckold. The French farce, after all, was not for a family audience. Feydeau’s portrayal of love includes conjugal love; adultery; the homosexual proclivities of Doctor Pinache; the sadistic penchant of Ferraillon, the hotel-keeper; and the masochism of his wife, Olympe. Then there is Poche who derives
a certain masochistic pleasure from being kicked by Ferraillon (Pronko, 73). It is a world of bourgeois marriage with its infidelities and revolving bed. It is a world that borders on the edge of madness (“Forms of Shock Treatment for a World out of Plumb,” Times Literary Supplement [18 June 1971], 690).

The play is well-constructed and a geometrical triumph with a number of secrets hidden from most of the characters until the conclusion, but shared with the audience. Victor Emmanuel’s lack of passion, for example, remains unexplained until the end, as well as the identity of the author of the anonymous letter. And, of course, the confusion involving the identities of Victor Emmanuel and Poche and Victor Emmanuel and Camille remains until the final scene.

The characters are ordinary people who are at times deliberately cruel. Hervé Lauwick has noted that Feydeau’s work consists of “décors psychologiques” that are imbued with a certain “fatalité” (D’Alphonse Allais à Sacha Guitry [Paris: Librairie Plon, 1963], 81). A Flea in Her Ear reveals a certain disillusionment and reflects a somewhat negative look at life as mirrored in the irresponsibility that pervades the bourgeois world.

This realism is underscored by Tourneur’s lustful desires, Camille’s physical impairment and the cruel jokes that life plays on him, and pervading deceit, cruelty, manipulation, and infidelity. The characters move toward insanity as the plot reveals itself, particularly during the absurd nightmare found in the latter part of act 2. Furthermore, there is attempted rape, a major lack of communication, and the suffering of Victor Emmanuel for reasons which he cannot comprehend. Henri Bidou has correctly described Feydelian trauma as “violence mécanisée” (in Lauwick, 83).

A Flea in Her Ear is the most performed of Feydeau’s works in the United States and Canada. Its continued success serves as a reminder that vaudeville still holds its appeal more than a century after its inception. For this we are much indebted to Georges Feydeau.
There is a striking similarity between Desdemona’s missing handkerchief in Othello and Victor Emmanuel Chandebise’s recovered suspenders in Feydeau’s A Flea in Her Ear. They both give rise to misunderstandings, jealousies, and catastrophe. Othello’s mistake leads to tragedy, while Madame Chandebise’s leads to a series of unfortunate but hilarious coincidences—and nobody dies.

It is precisely the discovery of her husband’s suspenders that puts “an enormous flea in her ear” (like a bug in her ear, or maybe, in this case, a bee in her bonnet, in English) and sets the wheels in motion toward the play’s abundant farcical complications. Monsieur Chandebise has been a loving husband, but of late has been unable to fulfill his conjugal duties. The more he worries, the worse the condition gets. Raymonde, his wife, suspects that since her husband has heretofore been a “raging torrent,” the current “drought” must be due to his infidelity. She moves from suspicion to certainty when she mistakenly opens a package addressed to Chandebise. It comes from the sleazy Hôtel Coq d’Or located in the Montre-Tout (“Reveal-All”) district and contains her husband’s suspenders. What she doesn’t know is that following Dr. Finache’s advice, and in an attempt to find a cure for his affliction, Chandebise has changed the style of his suspenders and has given his old ones to his nephew, Camille, who left them at the hotel during a recent tryst with the married Antoinette.

Thus unaware of her husband’s innocence, Raymonde and her childhood friend, Lucienne, conceive a plan to catch him en flagrant délit. In so doing, her behavior resembles that of most of Feydeau’s female characters. They are usually more assertive, self-confident, and clever than the men. While she happens to be wrong about Chandebise’s infidelity, she does have the courage to try to expose him and satisfy her feelings of vengeance.

Perhaps most women in French bourgeois society would not have reacted so boldly. After all, during the period of this play, la belle époque, French women were still reeling under the vestiges of the Napoleonic era when women were second class citizens—politically, socially, and economically. Divorce had only recently become an option for women. In addition, the creation of a baccalauréat for women (similar to a high school diploma) wasn’t instituted until 1919, and women wouldn’t legally spend their own earned money until 1907, the year this play was written. Raymonde could have easily chosen to be a dutiful, bourgeois housewife and swallow her pride, but this Feydeau character is cut from a different cloth.

We learn, for example, that before her husband’s bout of impotence, she had entertained the idea of taking a lover because her marriage was so problem free and uneventful as to be boring. Here she takes a cue from a popular nineteenth century French novelist, Stendhal, for whom boredom is the only unredeemable sin. Nevertheless, this propensity she has toward taking a lover is only reinforced at the Hôtel Minet-Galant when she discovers from her lover-in-waiting, Tournel, that her husband is, in fact, innocent. She advocates a double standard usually attributed to men. She can understand and rationalize her cheating on her husband, but would not stand for it if the reverse were true! Her reason for even considering taking a lover is as curious as it is illogical. According to her explanation to Lucienne in Act
1, her life with Chandebise has been a perpetual bliss, an “endless love,” a “constant spring.” But the lack of any “clouds” or obstacles made it all so monotonous that she seriously considered turning to Tournal, a notorious womanizer and her husband’s best friend. But as soon as she gets the “flea in her ear” about Chandebise’s unfaithfulness, her fantasies about extra-marital dalliances shut down.

Equally odd is her behavior at the Minet-Galant. The happier she becomes about learning of Chandebise’s innocence, the more she kisses Tournal and allows him to kiss her. Moral protocol is turned upside down; and, yet, as Tournal maneuvers her closer to the bed, she reacts:

“RAYMONDE: Are you mad? What do you take me for?
“TOURNEL: But I clearly understood that you agreed . . .
“RAYMONDE: To be your mistress, yes! But not to go to bed with you! Do you think I’m a prostitute?” (Trans. by John Mortimer [London: Samuel French, 1960], 39).

Raymonde’s idea of a lover is a naive one. She seems to believe that a lover would be satisfied with the gift of her mind and heart. But Tournal’s behavior at the hotel should easily disabuse her of such notions. He aims at other parts of her anatomy.

One might be inclined to concur with Chandebise that this woman is a “remarkable creature.” On the other hand, she may simply be as fickle as most men and as changeable as most women.

Finally, it should be pointed out that this three-act play by Feydeau is above all a masterfully written farce. Once the action gets moving, there is little time for the audience to reflect on cause and effect, personalities and philosophies. There are no fewer than 274 comings and goings on stage! This production can aptly be called “the theatre of a hundred doors.” Feydeau has acquired the equilibrium of a tight-rope walker to balance the myriad aspects of his tightly wrought imbroglios. The pace, particularly in Act 2, is simply breathtaking. Spectators are subjected to viewing so much chaos, so much movement, so many complications, so many breakneck chases, so many gasping and panting characters, that at the end they are left breathless and physically exhausted themselves—certainly a great tribute to Feydeau’s genius.