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 interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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Cover photo: Nell Geisslinger (left) as Gretchen and Grant Goodman as Bernard in Boeing Boeing, 2014.
Boeing Boeing

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Synopsis: Boeing Boeing

American playboy Bernard Lawrence is an architect based in Paris. He lives with his fiancée, TWA airline stewardess Gloria—and Lufthansa stewardess Gretchen—and Alitalia stewardess Gabriella. However, none of the women know about the other two, and this is exactly the way Bernard has designed it. This works just fine as long as their flight schedules only bring them home every three days. Bernard’s live-in maid, Berthe, is key in pulling off this ruse, managing three sets of clothing, photographs, bed linens, and food preferences.

However, this perfect schedule is bound to run into trouble sometime. Things begin to unravel when there is a change to the women’s flight orders, making it increasingly difficult to keep them apart, and eventually bringing all three of them home on the same day. In addition, Bernard’s long-time friend from Wisconsin, Robert Lambert, has arrived in town unexpectedly. He is brought in on the outrageous arrangement and finds himself entangled in trying to help Bernard and Berthe pull it off during the course of a single day.

Will they survive the day? And at what price? It just may be too much for them to handle!

Characters: Boeing Boeing

Bernard: An American playboy living in Paris, Bernard is happily engaged to three different women, none of whom know about the others.

Gloria: An American airline stewardess from New York City, Gloria is engaged to Bernard. She is a go-getter, sexy and works for TWA.

Gabriella: An Italian airline stewardess, Gabriella is also engaged to Bernard. She is passionate and feisty and works for Alitalia.

Gretchen: A German airline stewardess, Gretchen is also engaged to Bernard. She is strong and beautiful and works for Lufthansa.

Berthe: Bernard’s French housekeeper, Berthe is always exhausted and exasperated.

Robert: An old time friend of Bernard’s from Wisconsin, Robert shows up unexpectedly at Bernard’s Paris home.
About the Playwright: Marc Camoletti
By Rachelle Hughes

Marc Camoletti, aka, the master of the theatrical bedroom farce, discovered his comedic niche early in his career. Sex, relationships, and secrets were his playwriting forte and garnered him success on theatre stages and silver screens throughout the world.

Marc Camoletti’s (1923–2003) first ambitions did not begin in the theatre world, although they always leaned toward the artistic. He first dreamed of becoming a painter and even started training. Eventually he discovered that he was far more powerful with the pen than the paint brush when his theatrical career began in 1958 with three of his plays being produced that year in Paris. His first play La Bonne Anna won the hearts of Parisians, and he was quickly embraced by his countrymen. Over his career he became an international phenomenon with forty plays translated into eighteen languages that have been performed in over fifty-five countries. It is estimated that over twenty million have attended live performances of his work over the past fifty-six years. In France his comedic talents were applauded and revered to the extent that he was awarded one of the country’s highest awards—Knight of the Legion of Honor.

Born a French citizen on November 16, 1923 in Geneva, Switzerland, he was born into a creative family of Italian background that was well entrenched in the artistic world. His grandfather, an internationally acclaimed architect, also known as Marc Camoletti, designed and built the landmark Victoria Theatre in Geneva. Camoletti’s great uncle and cousins were also successful architects (https://blog.roundabouttheatre.org/?p=6517). Perhaps, his familiarity with architects prompted him to make one of the main characters of his most successful plays an architect.

His most popular play, Boeing Boeing, opened in Paris in 1960 and ran for nineteen years in the city he called home. The English translation opened just two years later in London and ran for seven years. Just five years after it debuted in Paris, the play was made into a film starring Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis. However, the comedy did not garner as much attention with American audiences, not at first anyway. The initial Broadway production lasted just twenty-three performances in 1965. Yet, Camoletti’s work is currently experiencing an American revival. A contemporary production of the play in 2008 on Broadway earned six Tony Award nominations and two Tony awards. Boeing Boeing is now a staple in regional theatres across the country (https://blog.roundabouttheatre.org/?p=6517).

Boeing Boeing may be the play that cemented Camoletti’s playwriting success, but he followed up this play with a steady stream of other plays with similar themes. Sémiramis in 1963, Secretissimo in 1965, La Bonne Adresse in 1966, and L’Amour propre in 1968. Don’t Dress For Dinner, first produced in Paris, later became London’s longest running comedy ever. It is still a favorite with regional theatres (http://www.samuelfrench.com/author/1064/marc-camoletti).

Theatre was Camoletti’s lifelong passion, and his theatrical endeavors extended beyond just playwriting. In 1972, Camoletti and his wife, Germaine, took over management of Théâtre Michel, on Paris’ Rue des Mathurins. Théâtre Michel became a venue for Camoletti’s plays as well as his work as a director. He often produced and directed his own
work starting with his play Duos sur canape in 1974. Théâtre Michel continued to be Camoletti’s home base as he continued to write, produce, and direct at the Théâtre Michel during the 1980s and 1990s.

Camoletti passed away on July 18, 2003 at age 78 and was buried in the Montmartre cemetery next to his wife who passed away in 1994. Their theatrical legacy at Théâtre Michel was continued by their son Jean Cristophe and his wife, Arianne, who managed the theatre until 2008. (http://thebarksdalebuzz.blogspot.com/2011/09/world-famous-playwright-youve-never.html).Springs. As partner Alan Jay Lerner once said, “There will never be another Fred Loewe.”

Coffee, Tea, or Me?
By Elaine Pilkington Pearce

From Roman comedy through Shakespeare and Molière and on to the twenty-first century, comedy has a happy ending. Requisite to this happy ending is the union of the young lovers. Boeing Boeing is a comedy with a twist. It begins at the end. Bernard not only gets the girl, he gets three of them. Looking closely at Boeing Boeing, we find that it is a refashioning of Plautus, one of the most notable playwrights of Roman comedy. Plautus’s plays had a predictable cast of characters, confusions and deceptions, and the happy ending in which young love triumphs. Marc Camoletti does a remix of the intrigues usually found in Plautus by concentrating on the love story, times three.

Bernard is a combination character, playing the young lover and knave, with a hint of the senex to come. For Bernard the course of true love is running very smoothly indeed. With mathematical precision—“everything designed, organized, regulated and working to the precise second. . . . So precise as to almost be poetic”—he has coordinated his love life with three beautiful “tried and tested” stewardesses, “handpicked through the employment procedures of the different airline companies. In every respect! Physical, moral, intellectual. So, all the work’s done for [him]” (Marc Camoletti, Boeing Boeing, translated by Beverly Cross and Francis Evans [New York: Samuel French, 2012], 19, 18). He has imposed a defined structure on the usual chaos of romance. Their flight schedules always have two of them out of town when one is in Paris.

This arrangement seems immoral to his old friend Robert, who “assumes that the norms of society ought to be respected” (“The Comic View: An Introduction,” in Eight Great Comedies, eds. Sylvan Barnett, Morton, Berman, and William Burto [New York: New American Library, 1958], 9). However, Bernard explains, “They all think they’re the only one. They don’t think it’s immoral, so why should I?” (Camoletti 17). Besides, he is not taking advantage of any of them because he adores each of them, spoiling them equally. “I love them so much that if one asks me for something—a tiny present say—well, I go out and buy three tiny presents! I can’t bear to spoil one without spoiling the other two!” (Camoletti 22). With such a perfect plan, who could help but be smug? In Plautus, such cleverness is usually reserved for the tricky servant or knave, but Bernard plays the part well. In comedy it is not uncommon for “individuals [to] set themselves up as exceptional. . . . The mistakes of the comic figure arouse our critical laughter—we observe him and his foibles with an intelligent awareness of their shortcomings” (“The Comic View: An Introduction” 9).

Robert, the innocent abroad, is another matter. At first he seems the fool, the country
bumpkin from Wisconsin where things are a lot different, a lot quieter. Initially he plays our part (the part of the audience) on-stage, reacting as we might react, asking the questions that we might ask. This allows Bernard to stay in character. Because of his conversation with Robert, he does not need to step outside himself to deliver a belated prologue, the conventional exposition usually found at the beginning of a Plautine play. Eventually, Robert becomes not just an admiring spectator but an active character in the comedy as Bernard’s paradise begins to unravel when flights are rerouted and schedules are changed. As houseguest, Robert is sucked into the comings and goings, trying to divert one stewardess while another takes off.

This constant coming and going has plagued Berthe, Bernard’s faithful servant, from the beginning of the play. While Bernard has his timetables and notebooks to keep his schedules, Berthe must rely on him for information. She is the one who changes the pictures in the apartment, moves clothing in and out of “Monsieur and his wives’ bedroom” (Camoletti 33), and alters the menu depending upon which girl is in town. On the day the action takes place that would be the American for breakfast, the Italian for lunch and the German for dinner. Berthe is like “the impudent, the indispensable, the endlessly resourceful, the badgered . . . Plautine slave” (E. F. Watling, Introduction, Plautus The Rope and Other Plays [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1964], 9). She is quite right to tell Robert that “without me, I don’t know what would happen to Monsieur Bernard—with all his complications” (Camoletti 23).

Inevitably, comedy turns to “bedroom” farce. (Perhaps “bedroom door” farce might be a better term.) As in all good farce, the love story is temporarily abandoned while the characters deal with the complications. “If one tells the story of a farce, one may well start talking of young lovers, but if instead of telling the story, one looks at what has remained in one’s memory from a farce, one will not find young lovers but two other characters, the knave and the fool” (Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama [New York: Atheneum, 1967], 248). Much of the humor comes from the fact that Robert abandons his role as fool to play the knave, tricking one of Bernard’s fiancées to kiss him and encouraging the advances of another fiancée. His initial disapproval of Bernard’s lifestyle turns to admiration, acceptance, and finally a desire to imitate Bernard as he toys with the idea of acquiring a Paris flat and furnishing it with three stewardesses of his own: a former Rio De Janeiro samba queen, a Japanese girl, and a Swedish beauty.

Bernard’s character, on the other hand, shifts from knave to fool. His reliance on set timetables ignores important variables such as the unpredictable nature of human beings and the weather. Bernard has mentally scripted what he would do in the unlikely event that two of his fiancées happen to be in Paris on the same night. He tells Robert, “[If] one girl landed when another who was supposed to be taking off didn’t take off, well I’d stay with the one who wasn’t taking off and spend the night in Saint German-en-Laye or somewhere like that” (22), failing to consider that the girl in question might have other plans. Convinced of his own cleverness, Bernard is positively obtuse when Robert’s covert comments suggest that certain arrivals and departures are out of whack. While Robert is wildly trying to improvise, Bernard remains oblivious, unable to shift from his geometrically precise plan to a scenario that deals with the practical realities of the present moment.

Bernard and Robert are in danger of failing as an improvisational team. “One of the most important of the rules that make improv possible . . . is the idea of agreement, the notion that a very simple way to create a story—or humor—is to have characters accept everything that happens to them” (Malcolm Gladwell, Blink: The Power of Thinking with-
out Thinking [New York: Little Brown and Company, 2005], 114). Bernard's slowness to accept the reality of his situation creates even more humor, humor that is further heightened by adding Berthe, the third member of this improvisational troupe. A day with timetables and schedules, comings and goings, is difficult enough for Berthe, but having one girl in the bedroom, another in the bathroom, and a third at the front door is impossible. Berthe, Bernard, and Robert reach their breaking point. Before long the situational conflicts in the play shift to physical combat with Bernard and Robert rolling on the floor while the audience is rolling in the aisles with laughter.

Ultimately, the play has a happy ending. Confusions are resolved, and deceptions are forgiven. Each Jack ends the play with one Jill and “nought shall go ill.” Societal norms and morality have bounced back. Boeing Boeing.