

The Distinction Between Theatrical Comedy, Obscene Comedy, and Lumpenistic Comedy: An Analysis of the Aesthetic, Social, and Ethical Functions of Laughter in Performance

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received August 05, 2026

Accepted September 06, 2026

Published online September 30, 2026

ABSTRACT

Comedy, as one of the most fundamental theatrical genres, has always played a role far beyond mere entertainment, serving as a tool for social critique, behavioral correction, and the enhancement of collective consciousness. However, in the contemporary cultural landscape —particularly in Iran and within the digital sphere—the proliferation of superficial forms of humor, such as obscene comedy and lumpenistic comedy, has undermined the conceptual boundaries of authentic theatrical comedy. Employing an analytical-descriptive method and drawing upon theoretical sources in the fields of aesthetics, sociology of art, and theater studies, the present research seeks to identify the substantive differences among these three genres and to examine their socio-ethical harms. The findings indicate that authentic theatrical comedy transforms laughter into a conscious and critical act, whereas obscene and lumpenistic comedies reduce it to an instinctive, consumable response devoid of social depth.

Keywords:

Theatrical Comedy,
Obscene Comedy,
Lumpenistic Comedy,
Laughter,
Social Critique,
Aesthetics of Humor.

Cite this article: Alamdar, S. M., & Bagheri Lori, M. (2026). The Distinction Between Theatrical Comedy, Obscene Comedy, and Lumpenistic Comedy: An Analysis of the Aesthetic, Social, and Ethical Functions of Laughter in Performance. *International Journal of Applied Arts Studies*, 11(3), 127-133.



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Publisher: Islamic Azad University, Yazd Branch.

Introduction

Comedy is one of the oldest forms of theatrical expression, rooted in collective rituals and ceremonies, and gradually evolved into a powerful medium for representing individual and social contradictions. In the classical tradition—from the comedies of Aristophanes to the works of Molière and Dario Fo—comedy has served not merely as a means of generating amusement, but also as an instrument for exposing anomalies, critiquing power, and interrogating social structures.

Throughout the history of theater, comedy has consistently occupied a position beyond that of an entertaining tool, functioning as a mode of critical engagement with social and human realities. Within the theatrical tradition, laughter is not a random reaction but rather the product of a conscious process in the representation of social incongruities and contradictions. However, in the contemporary cultural context, the proliferation of superficial forms of humor has blurred the boundaries between intellectually engaged theatrical comedy and forms of comedy grounded in vulgarity or lumpenism. This research seeks, through a theoretical reexamination of the concept of laughter, to reveal the fundamental distinctions among these genres.

In recent decades—particularly with the expansion of digital media and social networks in Iran—superficial and commercial forms of humor have become widespread, blurring the boundary between authentic theatrical comedy and its vulgar counterparts. Obscene comedy and lumpenistic comedy, which often appear in the form of short clips, television programs, or commercial stand-up performances, have emptied laughter of its critical function.

Theatrical Comedy and Conscious Laughter

In theatrical comedy, laughter arises from the audience's perception of incongruities and contradictions inherent in human relationships and social structures. This type of comedy, through the employment of dramatic narrative, purposeful character development, and symbolic language, invites the audience to intellectual engagement. Within this framework, laughter is not the endpoint of the theatrical experience but rather the beginning of a process of reflection and critique. For this reason, it assumes a corrective and cultural function.

Theatrical Comedy and the Critical Function of Laughter

In authentic theatrical comedy, laughter is a product of cognition, distancing, and awareness. Henri Bergson regards laughter as a social reaction that leads to the correction of mechanical deviations from human norms. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his concept of the "carnavalesque," emphasizes the liberating and critical dimension of laughter.

The main characteristics of theatrical comedy include:

- A coherent and multi-layered dramatic narrative;
- The creation of multi-dimensional characters that represent social types—such as those in the works of Dario Fo, who challenge political power;
- The employment of subtle wit and innuendo rather than direct jokes;
- Inviting the audience to reconsider social reality.

For instance, in the plays of Aristophanes (such as *Lysistrata*), laughter engages in the critique of war and power structures through critical exaggeration, prompting the audience to reflect. Consequently, in theatrical comedy, laughter is not an end in itself but rather a means for awareness and correction.

Obscene Comedy and the Reduction of Laughter to Instinctual Stimulation

Obscene comedy is primarily based on sexual jokes, vulgar language, and superficial taboo-breaking. Laughter in this genre results from the immediate stimulation of the senses and instincts, rather than from an understanding of dramatic or social situations. The absence of coherent narrative and profound character development transforms this type of comedy into a consumable and ephemeral phenomenon.

From an aesthetic perspective, obscene comedy lacks layers of meaning, and from a social perspective, it not only fails to serve a corrective function but also, through the repetition of gender-based and physical stereotypes, contributes to the deterioration of cultural taste and the normalization of vulgarity. A notable example is certain commercial Hollywood comedies (such as the *American Pie* film series) or viral clips on Iranian social networks, which employ sexual jokes without any critical context.

Lumpenistic Comedy and the Reproduction of Social Vulgarity

Lumpenistic comedy, through the exaggerated representation of lumpen behaviors, language, and culture—such as verbal aggression, rudeness, and marginal conduct—normalizes these patterns without establishing any critical distance. Characters are often stereotypical and one-dimensional, and laughter substitutes for analysis and critique. Rather than exposing the anomalies of lower social strata, this genre reproduces them as appealing models.

Contemporary examples in Iran include certain television comedy programs or Instagram clips that, by relying on lumpen accents and behaviors, generate superficial laughter without prompting the audience to reflect on the social roots of this phenomenon. From an ethical standpoint, this type of comedy disregards the responsibility of art toward society.

Theoretical Framework

According to Henri Bergson, laughter is a social act that acquires meaning only when it leads to the correction of a kind of "mechanical inelasticity" in human behavior (Bergson, 1911).

Within this framework, authentic theatrical comedy, through the employment of conscious and distancing laughter, renders the audience alert to individual and social anomalies, and thus possesses a critical and corrective function. Laughter in this type of comedy is not an instinctive reaction but rather the product of a process of cognition and social judgment.

In contrast, obscene comedy can be regarded as a genre in which laughter deviates from the corrective logic proposed by Bergson. In this type of comedy, laughter relies primarily on the direct stimulation of instincts and momentary shocks, lacking that rational distance which Bergson considers the essential condition for social laughter (Bergson, 1911). Consequently, from an aesthetic standpoint, obscene comedy is reduced to a consumable and ephemeral reaction, losing its capacity to generate meaning and sustain critique.

Lumpenistic comedy can be analyzed with reference to the concept of the "carnavalesque" in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory. Bakhtin regards carnival as a space in which the official order is temporarily inverted and the critique of power becomes possible; however, this inversion possesses critical value only when it leads to awareness and liberation (Bakhtin, 1984). In lumpenistic comedy, this inversion occurs without critical distance and, rather than exposing anomalies, results in their normalization and reproduction. Thus, laughter in this type of comedy is not liberating but rather reinforces the status quo.

Complementing this analysis, Dario Fo regards laughter as a tool for political denunciation and resistance to domination, emphasizing the critical capacity of comedy in confronting power structures (Fo, 1991). From this perspective, authentic theatrical comedy, by adopting a conscious stance, stands against vulgarity and domination, whereas obscene and lumpenistic comedies, due to their lack of a clear critical position, effectively contribute to the reproduction of the same structures. Additionally, Terry Eagleton warns that humor lacking critical awareness can assume an ideological function and become an instrument for neutralizing social dissent (Eagleton, 2003).

Comparative Analysis

A comparative examination of the various forms of comedy reveals that the distinction between theatrical comedy and its vulgar counterparts is both structural and functional in nature. Theatrical comedy, by transforming laughter into a cultural and conscious act, enables social critique and reexamination, whereas obscene and lumpenistic comedies tend to diminish the critical capacity of laughter. Elucidating this distinction can play an effective role in advancing theater education, the criticism of dramatic works, and cultural policymaking.

A comparison of the three genres reveals that the primary distinction lies in their engagement with laughter, the audience, and social responsibility:

Figure 2. Comparison of the three genres.

Genre	Type of Laughter	Function
Authentic Theatrical Comedy	Conscious, critical, corrective	Positive social and ethical function
Obscene Comedy	Instinctual, consumable, ephemeral	Aesthetically neutral to destructive function
Lumpenistic Comedy	Normalizing, anomaly-reproducing	Socially destructive function

These distinctions are defensible on the basis of three theoretical criteria:

First, the **aesthetic criterion**, which refers to the degree of dramatic depth and critical distanciation within the work;

Second, the **social criterion**, which determines the relationship of laughter to either the critique or the reinforcement of the existing order;

And third, the **ethical criterion**, which indicates the extent to which laughter summons the audience toward awareness, reflection, and social responsibility, or merely confines itself to the stimulation of instincts.

Conclusion

A comparative examination of the various forms of comedy reveals that the distinction between theatrical comedy and its vulgar counterparts is both structural and functional in nature. Theatrical comedy, by transforming laughter into a cultural and conscious act, enables social critique and reexamination, whereas obscene and lumpenistic comedies tend to diminish the critical capacity of laughter. Elucidating this distinction can play an effective role in advancing theater education, the criticism of dramatic works, and cultural policymaking.

In recent decades—particularly with the expansion of digital media and social networks in Iran—superficial and commercial forms of humor have become widespread, blurring the boundary between authentic theatrical comedy and its vulgar counterparts. Obscene comedy and lumpenistic comedy, which often appear in the form of short clips, television programs, or commercial stand-up performances, have emptied laughter of its critical function.

Authentic theatrical comedy, unlike obscene and lumpenistic comedies, transforms laughter into a cultural, conscious, and responsible act. Recognizing this distinction is essential in the contemporary cultural context of Iran, where digital media rapidly disseminate superficial humor. Producers, directors, and theater artists should move toward intellectually engaged and critical comedy in order to preserve the historical role of this genre in strengthening social awareness and elevating theatrical culture. Adherence to these principles can contribute to the enrichment of public taste and the prevention of cultural vulgarity.

Author Contributions

The authors have conceptualized the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Ethical considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and misconduct.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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