

Curt Goetz

How To Die Laughing



L'atelier Spectaculaire

How to die laughing

How To Die Laughing is a play in seven acts.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are left defeated by the circumstances of the mysterious death of Dr Praetorius – a celebrated professor killed in a car crash. The sudden appearance of Mr Shunderson, Praetorius' factotum, only serves to confuse them further. But when Shunderson begins to tell the unbelievable story of his master's demise, the fate of Dr Praetorius gradually unfolds – as the four months before his eventual death are retold in flashback.

However not everything is as straightforward as it sometimes seems: for instance, why was the respected physician hauled in front of a Board of Ethics the day before he died? Could it have something to do with the treatment of his student Maria Violetta? Or does it go further back to the opening of his practice in Peepnest? And why is Shunderson so secretive about his own past?

Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius, Facharzt für Chirurgie und Frauenleiden, Eine Geschichte ohne Politik nach alten aber guten Motiven neuerzählt was written in 1932, at a time when democracy was being challenged by extremists. But while the surface of the play is almost untouched by that turbulence, underneath lies a deep resentment of the unfolding political climate, and the controlling machinations of envy, greed and stupidity.

Curt Goetz, the playwright

Curt Goetz (1888-1960) is a German theatrical institution; as a stage and film actor, a director, and a playwright. As a young man he acted in numerous successful productions, including works by Shaw, Sardou and Shakespeare. Such literature proved an inspiration to Goetz, who began writing original plays which drew on these influences; his own works echo the romanticism of Schiller and Goethe, the expressionism of Wedekind, the constructed wit of Oscar Wilde and the natural drama of Ibsen.

His personality and his works show restraint, refinement, elegance, and a quick wit. A retrospective of his work described his plays as "not sentimental but emotional; not intellectual but intelligent". After his last curtain call, in a speech commemorating his career, Goetz admitted that he had no literary ambitions but rather had written his plays "guided by the compulsion to create laughter". This compulsion proved well placed; no other writer's comedies have been as frequently incorporated into the repertoire of the German theatre in the last seventy years.

Despite being a distant relative of George Bernard Shaw, and the translator of Noel Coward's works into German, Goetz remains an unknown quantity to the English stage. Until now.

Philippe Rixhon, the translator

Philippe Rixhon founded L'atelier Spectaculaire in 2005. He was involved with Brussels' Théâtre d'Art at the age of fourteen; theatre has been his passion ever since.

Before focusing on literary creation and theatre management, Philippe spent more than twenty years managing successful and innovative projects for major companies in ten countries. Some of his works have been financed by the German Government, others by the European Commission, during which time he led prestigious teams, developing groundbreaking systems. He has been vice-president at Zühlke Engineering, the leading Swiss think-tank, and partner at Accenture, the global provider of management consulting and technology services.

Philippe graduated in philosophy and engineering at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve and in management at Boston University. He learnt acting at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts, set design at the Belgian Centre d'Études Théâtrales, and theatre directing at Middlesex University. Philippe is fluent in English, French and German. He publishes and lectures internationally.

Production History

Stage

Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius, Facharzt für Chirurgie und Frauenleiden, Eine Geschichte ohne Politik nach alten aber guten Motiven neuerzählt. Première: December 31st, 1932, State Theatre, Stuttgart. © Dimufidra AG, Stampfenbachstr. 125, CH-8006 Zurich, Switzerland

Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius, Facharzt für Chirurgie und Frauenleiden, Eine Geschichte in sieben Kapiteln, Neufassung. Première: October 31st, 1946, Playhouse, Zurich. © Dimufidra AG, Stampfenbachstrasse 125, CH-8006 Zurich, Switzerland

Film

Frauenarzt Dr. Prätorius. Director: Curt Goetz. Lead roles: Curt Goetz and Valérie von Martens. © 1950 Hans Domnick-Film

People Will Talk. Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Lead roles: Cary Grant and Jeanne Crain. © 1951 Twentieth Century Fox

Dr. med. Hiob Prätorius. Director: Kurt Hoffmann. Lead roles: Heinz Rühmann and Liselotte Pulver. © 1965 Hans Domnick-Film

Characters

Required Cast

5 men, 3 women, 1 child, supernumeraries

Parts

9 men, 6 women, 1 child, supernumeraries, in order of appearance:

Sherlock Holmes

Dr Watson

Jackie Smith

Mrs Smith

Mr Shunderson

Jack

Students

Maria Violetta

Ellen

Dr Job Praetorius

Professor Nack

Professor Spiter

The Nurse

Mrs Higgins

The Head Nurse

The Resident

Vice-Chancellor Baxter

Professors

Dr Job Praetorius

Early fifties. Gynaecologist and University lecturer. Revered medical practitioner and gentleman, his non-conformist attitude and trail-blazing research ensure that he is never far from controversy.

Maria Violetta

Early twenties. Medical student. Italian. Passionate but emotionally fragile young woman. Both smart and beautiful, she is not prepared to sit idle in a male-dominated environment.

Shunderson

Mid to late sixties. Strangely over-sized and under-explained lump of a man. Praetorius' factotum. His subservience to his master and his self-imposed silence only fuel the mystery of his shadowy past.

Professor Nack

Early to mid fifties. University Professor. Close friend to Praetorius. Good humoured, loyal and reliable, possessor of a quick temper and a faster word.

Professor Spiter

Early sixties. University Professor. Small but fierce academic, with a propensity towards propriety and officiousness.

Sherlock Holmes

Early fifties. Detective. Self-congratulatory master of mystery and intrigue. Well-mannered, well-spoken and well-dressed. His deductive powers are only bested by his own rhetoric.

Dr Watson

Early fifties. Doctor. Long suffering partner of Holmes. Always a step behind the action, in spite of his intelligence and medical prowess.

Vice Chancellor Baxter

Mid sixties. Respected vice chancellor of the College of Medicine. Uncomplicated arbiter of the medical code of ethics.

Jackie Smith

5 year old patient of Praetorius.

Mrs Smith

Early thirties. Sherlock Holmes' housekeeper.

Jack

Early twenties. Medical student.

Ellen

Early twenties. Medical student.

Mrs Higgins

75 year old patient of Praetorius.

Synopsis

Act 1

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are left defeated by the circumstances of the mysterious death of Dr Praetorius – a celebrated professor killed in a car crash. The sudden appearance of Mr Shunderson, Praetorius' factotum, only serves to confuse them further. Shunderson begins to tell the unbelievable story of his master's demise.

Act 2

The gynaecologist Praetorius accidentally intrudes upon Professor Spiter's anatomy class and is coaxed into an impromptu lecture. But instead of addressing matters of the body, he cannot help but cast aspersions on the prevalence of stupidity within society, and question the presence of women in medicine.

Act 3

Maria Violetta, one of Professor Spiter's students, is examined by Praetorius and is traumatised by his diagnosis; she is pregnant. Maria Violetta considers an abortion – as the baby's father has been killed in a recent plane crash. When Praetorius suggests he is against such a decision, Maria Violetta leaves and attempts to kill herself. Praetorius manages to save her and, faced with the threat of repeated suicide attempts, is left with the dilemma of whether or not to administer the abortion.

Act 4

Praetorius visits the ward in his clinic. His female patients are not afraid to make outrageous demands of his bedside manner; an elderly lady cannot overcome her ridiculous hypochondria, while a young girl just wants Dr Praetorius to sit with her on her bed. When he visits Maria Violetta, he tells her that his initial diagnosis was incorrect. She is not, and never was, pregnant.

Act 5

Two months later. Praetorius is notified by his friend, Professor Nack, that recent gossip has culminated in him being called before the Board of Ethics. Professor Spiter, the instigator of the investigation, turns up to officially inform Praetorius of the hearing. Maria Violetta, now Praetorius' wife, tells Praetorius that she is pregnant. Praetorius already knows; she has been since she first visited him.

Act 6

In front of the Board of Ethics, Praetorius defends himself against allegations concerning his medical background, his practices, and his relationship with his factotum, the shadowy Shunderson. The complicated history of Shunderson is told first-hand, as he explains the unlikely sequence of events – including imprisonment, murder and an unsuccessful execution – that have lead him to the present day. As judgment beckons, Maria Violetta interrupts the meeting to fetch her husband and take him to the opera. It is on their way there that they have the fatal car accident.

Act 7

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are flummoxed by the case, and Shunderson reserves the truth for the audience: *Doctor Praetorius said: "Why, darling, can't I find the germ of human stupidity?" And she said, powdering her dainty little nose: "Because, darling, you're probably too stupid for that." I presume, Ladies and Gentlemen, that you feel that this isn't particularly funny. The fact that we're too stupid to recognize our own stupidity is perhaps more tragic. But the doctor laughed [and drove his car into a tree]. In order to die as a martyr to his own philosophy, like every prophet? I don't think so, Ladies and Gentlemen. Despite being inwardly very conservative, I believe he laughed quite simply because he found it funny. And what more can we wish for a laughing man than a happy end!*

Review

"Sassy, timeless social commentary, in a league with Oscar Wilde. Rixhon's translation, the first in English, is delightfully playful, with brilliant repartee that artfully conveys Goetz's sophisticated explorations of the human psyche".

Eric Liebtrau, Associate Editor, Kirkus Special Reports, Broadway, March 2006

Contact

L'atelier Spectaculaire Ltd
28 Winchester Avenue
London NW6 7TU
United Kingdom
Email: prixhon@latelierspectaculaire.com

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