

Roughing It: The Role of Farce in the Little Rascals Comedies

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Serious consideration of works like the Little Rascals comedies may seem merely an oddity, a critical curiosity piece, but until recently so has any criticism of farce and other low forms of comedy.¹ Theorizing about comedy is as old as Aristotle, but the lower forms of comedy were long considered beneath critical notice. When critics did discuss such comedy, it was often in disparaging if not hostile terms. John Dryden, for instance, complained that “as the Artist is often unsuccessful, while the Mountebank succeeds; so Farces more commonly take the people than comedies.”² Two centuries later, George Bernard Shaw claimed that the public’s interest in farce was akin to its interest in “the public flogging of a criminal,” and that farce appealed to “the deliberate indulgence of that horrible, derisive joy in humiliation and suffering which is the beastliest element in human nature” (Quoted in Davis 22). According to Shaw, “to laugh without sympathy [which farce encourages] is a ruinous abuse of a noble function” (Quoted in Davis 22).

Shaw is right, of course, in pointing up farce’s intimate connection with the darker, anarchic constituents of the human personality. Many critics have noted that farce is in close association with the irrational and that it typically celebrates unreason’s revolt against the strictures of reason. Shaw’s own reasonableness was bound to set him against this. What he neglects to consider is that in farce aggressiveness and festivity go hand in hand. According to Jessica Milner Davis, “at its heart is the eternal comic conflict between the forces of conventional authority and the forces of rebellion” (Davis 24). Davis believes that farce may be

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²Quoted in Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London: Methuen 7 Co. Ltd., 1978) 17.

more prone to aggression than other forms of comedy simply because it depends more directly on the “dramatic enactment of its jokes and humiliations” (Davis 24). Farce is not so much different from other forms of comedy as more primitive in kind. It is important that we remember this primitive connection with more sophisticated forms of comedy. It seems, in fact, that the lower forms of comedy, and in particular farce, lie at the center of the comic experience and underlie the airier, more humanized forms. Maurice Charney argues that “farce may be the purest, quintessential comedy ... with energetic, dream-like characters pursuing their impulses and gratifications with amazing singleness of purpose.”³

Thus, consideration even of unsophisticated works that partake of this quintessence may yield significant insights into the nature of the comic response. The contention of this essay is that the earlier and best of the Little Rascals comedies are animated by the conditions of farce, and that when these conditions are withdrawn or vitiated with elements of more sophisticated comic forms in later productions, the comedy suffers.

I shall be making use of at least two theoretical suppositions about farce. One is that farce, through its mechanical plots and stock situations, illustrates the Bergsonian notion of comedy as “something mechanical encrusted upon the living.”⁴ The other is that farce is governed by unreason, and is therefore characterized in varying degrees by aggression, anarchic subversion, wish-fulfilling spontaneity, and festivity. Underlying this supposition is Freud’s sense of comedy as an unconscious activity venting hostility and circumventing social taboos.⁵ This aspect of farce has a darker side and a lighter side, the first of which has irritated humanist critics like Shaw. Jessica Milner Davis distinguishes the two types of farce as “Humiliation-farces” and “Deception-farces,” depending on the degree to which a victim is openly degraded (Davis 28). Farce, as it functions in the Little Rascals films, is mainly of the Deception type, though at least the suggestion of humiliation is present in any farcical situation.

The most farcical of the Little Rascals films are the early shorts directed by Robert McGowen. These date from the late nineteen twenties and early thirties, and are characterized by their sparing use of scripted dialogue, a corresponding reliance on action shots, sight gags, and background music, and what seem to be

³Maurice Charney, *Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 97.

⁴Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965) 471.

⁵See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960).

loose and spontaneous plots. Indeed, there is a quality of improvisation throughout that quite disappears in the later films directed by Gus Meins and others. The spontaneity and improvisation, however, are actually the result of contrapuntal plotting. In the early films there is usually an official plot that reflects a more or less plausible, adult version of events. But set in play with this official plot is a second plot that reflects—with an anarchic freedom suitable to the childish imagination—the point of view of the children. Often this second plot subverts or functions against the more obvious adult purpose of the story. Interestingly, adults are either banished or made incidental to the children's plots. The wish-fulfilling, unreasoning world of the children is seen in revolt against the strictures and rational expectations of the adult world.

This is clearly evident in the early film, *Railroadin'*, produced in 1929. The official plot centers around a cautionary story told the children by a father who works for the railroad and is afraid that they could be hurt playing on the engines. He describes what might happen if a crazy man started a train while the children were playing on it. The "crazy man," whose appearance is gratuitous and soon forgotten, may be seen as a latter day version of the Vice figure used to set the farcical plot in motion. The main body of the film, which depicts the father's story, is actually a wild and wish-fulfilling fantasy. Under the guise of the cautionary tale format, the children are shown indulging their fantasy of operating the train free of adult supervision. The farcical law of the reversal of hierarchies applies here. The children, normally under the control of adults and forbidden access to such symbols of adult control as the train engine, take over control of the train and drive far out of the station. The train is a symbol of freedom offering them the possibility of escape to far-off places like New York and Chicago. Furthermore, the power of the engine suggests the adult world of responsibility and reason, which the fantasy subverts. The dangers inherent in such subversion, which form the substance of the adult cautionary plot, are rendered innocuous by the farcical presentation. For instance, one of the children gets his foot caught in a rail-split, and is forced repeatedly to lie down as the train moves back and forth over him. In the tradition of farce, the scene is at once threatening and painless. As the train roars through the countryside (the children all the while running about the engine delightedly afraid), it smashes through a vegetable wagon and is littered with its contents. The children comment—surely subversive of the "moral" content of the story—that they would like to hit an ice cream wagon next. On another occasion they call out: "Hey Joe, get up some speed. You're going too slow." This dialogue is almost smothered in cacophonous background noises, including much tooting of the train whistle. Finally, after a number of comic "near misses," the train is

stopped as it is about to have a head on collision with another train, though not before the camera has played eagerly and anarchicly with the possibility of the disaster. In effect, we witness the reasonable adult world turned upside down and threatened before the fantasy is brought harmlessly to an end. And the children enact their dangerous fantasy without punishment. They are offered a reward by the conductor of the other train for having tried to stop the train started by the madman. The cautionary frame story ends with the children swearing they will never go near trains again, but they have had their adventure, and the film blurs the line between fantasy and reality (subtly suggested by an egg falling in both fantasy and reality on the head of one of the children).

A more typical form of the contrapuntal plot occurs in the film *A Lad An' A Lamp*, directed by McGowen in 1932. The story's premise is laid with unself-conscious ease. Over a shot of the book, a voice is heard reading the beginning of the story of Aladdin. The shot fades to the group of children eagerly rubbing various lamps they have collected. There are a number of farcical visual scenes. One boy is shown lugging an expensive pottery lamp which soon falls and is smashed to bits. He comments: "How far is it to Mexico?" Spanky is heard wishing that the little black boy, Cotten, would turn into a monkey, to which the latter's brother responds: "Be careful what you wishin' for."

Here begin a series of coincidences that will separate the children's plot from the adult plot that has governed so far. As usual with McGowen's shorts, the verbal effects are sparing, and the comic images are captured on camera. We see from a high camera vantage point that on the other side of a fence some workers are preparing to set off dynamite. The dynamite explodes just as the children are rubbing an old oil lamp of the "Alladin" type. This coincidence of the adult plot, however, sets off the counter-plot, for the children now assume and act on the assumption that they have discovered a magic lamp. The next scene shows them feverishly at work rubbing and wishing for various things. A second coincidence occurs when a kindly grocer overhears Stymie wishing for a watermelon and rolls one of his melons toward the children, who exclaim: "Hot dog! This is the lamp!" A third coincidence is now prepared. The scene cuts to a local vaudeville show, where a disgruntled magician is finishing his tired act. "People don't believe in magicians anymore— outside of kids," he complains to a fellow performer off stage. Outside the theater, the children are preparing to eat their watermelon when they are interrupted by a bully who demands that they give it to him. They respond by rubbing the lamp and calling: "Appear, genie!" It so happens that the magician overhears them from a window, and decides, in his present mood, to do them the service of playing the genie and frightening off the bully. He advises them to rub

their lamp if they have any wishes. Thoroughly convinced of the lamp's power, they are now prepared to accept a fourth coincidence. Spanky again wishes that Cotten were a monkey, and at the very moment he does so, a monkey escaped from the theater throws a smoke bomb that frightens Cotten away, and appears in his place. The children are now faced with the problem of what to do with "Cotten." When one suggests that they sell Cotten to the circus, the monkey runs away, and they chase after him.

The second plot is now off and running too (with a medley of background music to spur it), and the scene is set for a number of farcical sight gags, as when the monkey frightens off a hamburger stand operator and his girl-friend and proceeds to serve Spanky and demolish the stand. Again, the second plot allows a takeover of the precincts of the adult world, in which comic chaos reigns. Eventually, the monkey drinks a bottle of liquor, and escapes "drunk" into town. Pratfalls are taken, a quantity of plate-glass is broken, and the police (of a decidedly "Keystone" variety) get involved and threaten to shoot the monkey. The children desperately plead for the life of "Cotten" until the grocer finally steps in to resolve the misunderstanding. Cotten and Spanky reappear, grown fat from having gorged themselves at the food stand. As in *Railroadin'*, the double plot in *A Lad An' A Lamp* functions to overturn the usual strictures of society and allow unlicensed gratification of fantasy desires. Adults, such as the food stand operator and the police (who have a number of vases broken over their heads), are subjected to comic humiliation. But in the tradition of farce, festivity pardons the sins of humiliation and the circumvention of taboos. Indeed, a number of taboo situations and racial jokes, which touch on deep social anxieties, are allowed free play with a remarkable festive innocence.

The comic liberation of taboo subjects, one of the central features of farce, characterizes many of the comedies directed by McGowen. In *Bear Huntin'*, for instance, the children set out to go camping and bear hunting and happen upon the hideout of two gangsters. The gangsters discover them as they happily set up outdoor housekeeping in a parody of adult society. (The children's home-made machines parody the technology of adults.) To frighten them away, one of the men dresses as a gorilla and menaces the children. They have come armed with bows and arrows and a bear-trap, however, and soon turn the tables on him. Once again, the comedy hinges on a double plot: the adult plot of children accidentally straying into danger, and the children's plot of hunting bears. The children are allowed the anarchic delight of attacking and tormenting an adult, which, like riding a runaway train, is not normally acceptable behavior. Among other things, they shoot arrows at a human being. But the counterplot of hunting a bear, a

mechanism of their innocence, justifies their tasting such forbidden fruit. The fact that the men are gangsters reinforces this, but is not the main justification from the children's point of view; the two plots in this story never coalesce, and the children never discover that they have not been hunting a bear. As in all farce, the humiliation is really self-justifying. The danger and the blows are comic, but the anarchic sting is real.

Comic trespassing on the domain of adults is also the theme of *Forgotten Babies*, another McGowen feature. In this story, the children, rather improbably, are given responsibility for taking care of baby brothers and sisters on Saturdays. The opening shot, a scene that would surely chill the heart of any mother in a different context, shows the older children holding fishing rods with various pacifiers dangling from the lines over the heads of the babies. One particularly active baby is actually caught on his brother's line. As the older children would rather be swimming on their day off, they come up with a plan to leave the babies in Spanky's care. Spanky, little more than a baby himself, resists the plan but is blackmailed into accepting. The film shifts now to a house with no adults, another symbol of the children taking over the adult world in a comic reversal of hierarchies. Here Spanky attempts to control the babies. In an extended shot that is something of a *tour de force*, Spanky entertains the babies with an improvised story about Tarzan. The scene is a delightful parody of the adult world, with Spanky as a youthful paterfamilias in his living room holding the other babies, for the moment, spellbound. Soon, however, they begin to get out of control and crawl all over the house breaking dishes, turning on faucets, spilling flour in the kitchen, toppling expensive lamps—in short, all the things children are punished for, or things they contemplate in fantasy but never act out for fear of punishment. A primal comic anarchy is allowed to reign in the sanctum of the adult world, the house. Much of the comic energy derives from Spanky's frantic efforts, in his unwanted role as a parody adult, to impose order on the chaotic situation, an order he eventually achieves through such unusual expedients as gluing a baby to the floor. Contrapuntal plotting does not figure as prominently here as in other McGowen features, but there is a slight adult plot that helps to wrap up the story. One of the babies takes the phone off the hook next to a radio he has turned on. The operator overhears a murder story being threatened on the radio and calls the police, who respond, in their usual Keystone fashion, to the scene, just as the other children return. Together they find Spanky in triumphant quiet, having locked up or fastened down all the babies. Order has returned even before the intrusion of adults.

The early Little Rascals comedies are all characterized by a certain rough-

ness of style which accompanies and indeed makes possible their spontaneous exuberance. Roughness is a mark of low comedy's innocent freedom of expression. Like all forms of innocence, and perhaps paradoxically, such roughness is a delicate commodity. Many of the "peasant poets" of the nineteenth century who were taken up by the literati ruined themselves trying to become more "literary," and similarly, the Little Rascals comedies, as they became more sophisticated in the mid 'thirties, lost much of their comic edge, the primitive, farcical bite that animated the early features. For one thing, under the direction of Gus Meins and others, the Our Gang comedies, as they were now called, became heavily scripted, and the child actors, forced to recite lines at each other, lost much of their endearing spontaneity. (One might note that the anarchic freedom implied by "Little Rascals" is safely socialized by the title "Our Gang," suggesting the kind of group activity favored in the America of the New Deal.) The scripted plots, too, became basically homophonic, with a single point of view of essentially adult character. Of course, the later plots have greater unity and make use of sophisticated literary devices like dramatic irony, but the unity is often stiff and the irony forced and unchildlike. Interestingly, many of the later stories separate themselves from raw farcical comedy altogether and make use of the revue formula. In these, the rather thin plot is simply a device to showcase the talents of performing children.

One of the more charming of these later features is *Beginner's Luck*, directed by Gus Meins in 1935. It begins with Spanky reading poetry to an audience of adults including his mother and grandmother. (The reader should note the increasing use and importance of adults in the later stories.) We notice quickly that Meins has picked up some sophisticated devices from romantic comedy. Spanky's "stage" mother is portrayed as a stock type of what Northrup Frye has called *alazons*, or blocking characters, while his grandmother is clearly of the "helping" *eiron* type.⁶ The mother wants to force Spanky to become a stage actor ("What do Clark Gable or Barrymore have that Spanky hasn't?"), while the grandmother would as soon let the boy have a normal childhood. The grandmother can laugh at Spanky's reluctance to perform, while the mother, obsessed with her own ambition for him, does not "see what's so funny." The story hinges on Spanky's friends arranging to ruin his performance at a variety show and so free him from the drudgery of learning lines and acting. As one of his friends notes, "All actors are sissies." This line, coming from the mouth of a child actor, is typical of the inside theatrical jokes that permeate the later films, and it should be pointed out that it represents an essentially adult form of humor. In fact, the main action of

⁶Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 172.

Beginner's Luck is a stage revue highlighted by early bit appearances of such child performers as Alfalfa, Darla, and the Cabin Kids who were to become the prominent actors in many later productions of Hal Roach. The plot turns now on a fairly sophisticated and ironic reversal caused by Spanky's discovery of a love interest. He becomes attracted to Daisy Dimple, a young dancer "*par excellence*" who is desperate to win the contest in order to purchase a dress, but who fails through stage fright (suggested with sophisticated closeups of the faces in the audience). Spanky promises to win the dress for her, but he now faces the problem of whether his mother, who does not know of the earlier plan, can convince his friends, who are similarly ignorant of his change of heart, to let him perform without interruption. The expected misunderstanding takes place, followed by another ironic reversal: because the friends go through with their attack and disturb Spanky's planned reading from *Julius Caesar*, he succeeds as a *comic* act, and wins the prize money, love, and freedom. With the help of his grandmother, his mother is humiliatingly undressed before the audience and learns her lesson too. Aside from some farcical moments when the children tease the bald piano player, however, *Beginner's Luck* dispenses with the resources of farce in favor of elements drawn from "higher" romantic comedy. We see this in the emphasis on dialogue in place of sight gags and pratfalls, and in the dependence on a sentimental love interest to turn the story to a festive conclusion. If the children were older, one might almost speak of the promise of "fertility," along with the establishment of a "new society" at the end. In other words, we have left behind the unreasoning, farcical world of the childish imagination for the essentially adult, sneakily reasonable world of *As You Like It*, as interpreted, perhaps, by Northrup Frye. And in spite of the relative success of *Beginner's Luck*, one feels that the child actors are not quite comfortable with the new conditions.

In the features of the later 'thirties, the balance of high and low comedy in *Beginner's Luck* was less frequently struck, while the anarchic spontaneity of the early features was lost. The plots became increasingly stilted and the acting was often inexplicably bad. *The Big Premiere*, produced by MGM, and directed by Edward Cahn with a screenplay by Hal Law and Robert McGowen, is typical of the later revue-style features. It opens with big band music played over a stylized cityscape image. The scene cuts to the outside of a Hollywood movie theater where a premiere is about to take place. An adult announcer introduces the "stars" while the gang waits in awe outside the ropes. When they create a disturbance, they are sent away by a guard. Darla exclaims that she is disappointed at missing the premiere, and Spanky, by this time grown older and rather more corpulent, suggests that they have their own "big premiere" with the help of Waldo and his

movie camera. They proceed to enact a parody of the adult premiere, complete with cement for their footprints, introducing each other to an audience of children with great ceremony. Somehow, they have a movie projector in their clubhouse, on which they show a home movie they have made. The farce is limited to the little black boy Buckwheat getting his feet stuck in the cement, and a number of camera jokes. The image on the screen is frequently shown on its side or upside down. The children do voice-overs from off-stage which rarely coincide with the image on the screen. When Darla announces from the side of the stage, "Here comes my hero, isn't he handsome," a goat walks into the screen image in place of Alfalfa, and the children (if not the movie audience) laugh. Eventually, the film runs out in the middle of Alfalfa's song. The children complain, and Alfalfa steps in and offers to sing the rest of the song in person. While he is singing, a hen nesting on a rafter above him, accidentally kicks an egg into his mouth. He swallows it and continues his performance, but we begin to hear chicken sounds coming from his stomach. At last an animated chick flies out of his mouth during one of his long-held high notes.

The problems with this feature are typical of the problems of the later comedies. *The Big Premiere* rehearses a number of previously successful formulas, but they do not occur with comic inevitability or anything approaching the spontaneity of the early films. McGowen as co-writer is not up to McGowen as director. For one thing, written dialogue was never the strong point of the early films, which relied heavily on visual effects, background music, and improvisation—children horsing around like children. The reciting children of the later films do not act like normal kids; the inside jokes and interests of the "Hollywood brat" have taken over. Adult intention and control is everywhere at hand.

Even when McGowen tries to revive a form of the double plot, as in *Bubbling Troubles*, directed by Cahn in 1939, the film sinks under the weight of its script and the attendant lack of spontaneity. This film compares interestingly with *A Lad An' A Lamp* in its imagery and some of its situations. The plot hinges on a misunderstanding involving dynamite, there is a monkey, and there is the comic situation of a child growing suddenly fat (with an inflating device). But the similarities end there. The story begins with Alfalfa in the role of melancholy lover. He sits at the dinner table uninterested in his food, envisioning Darla's face in his bowl of soup (the superimposition of her face is another of the fairly sophisticated techniques we find in these later films). Alfalfa's father gives him "Settles-itt Powders," for his "ailment," and Alfalfa goes to join his fellows at play. It seems that Darla is smitten with Butch, who claims that he can make dynamite in his "chemistry lab." The gang follows her to Butch's house to see him prove it. Alfalfa, as ever jealous

of Butch, arrives in time to see Butch making “dynamite” with what he sees are really Settles-itt Powders. Calling Butch’s bluff to impress Darla, he offers to drink the “dynamite,” without realizing that Settles-itt Powders must be mixed together before being drunk. As soon as Alfalfa drinks the contents of a second glass of powders, he begins to expand. At this moment there is a coincidence meant to set off a second plot. Butch’s father has been repairing a truck in the driveway and is attempting to start it. Just as Alfalfa throws a glass of the “dynamite” in disgust near the truck, the truck backfires, and the gang now believes that it was dynamite Alfalfa swallowed, and that he is liable to blow up at any moment. With pillows attached to his feet, he is led to a “safe” place in the woods. Along the way, the monkey, in a gratuitous appearance, attacks Alfalfa and frightens the children for the obvious reasons. It so happens that a workman has just planted real dynamite under the tree stump in the woods where they stop. While the gang goes for the fire department, the workman discovers Alfalfa, sends him away, and proceeds to blow up the stump. The Gang hears this, and believing Alfalfa to have been killed, proceeds weeping to Alfalfa’s house to “tell his folks he won’t be home for dinner.” Alfalfa is already there, however, and has been given bicarbonate of soda for his problem. When he sees his friends, he falls on his stomach, and burps a hurricane-like wind that knocks the front wall out of his house.

Compared with such miserable later efforts as *Clown Princes*, *Don’t Lie*, or *Farm Hands*, *Bubbling Troubles* makes some attempt to recapture the farcical energy of earlier films, but its effects are artificial and strained next to a film like *A Lad An’ A Lamp*. The romantic love interest (a non-farcical import) is dropped as soon as the dynamite coincidence occurs. The motif of growing fat, used with a delicate touch in the earlier film, is over-played here (the giant and destructive burp with which the film ends is too heavy-handed to be accepted comfortably in a story adopting so many conventions of romantic comedy). And the stilted script overwhelms any attempt at spontaneity in the work. The false-mourning scene is as bad as the one in *Romeo and Juliet*, and less excusable in terms of its historical context. The film fairly lumbers to its conclusion, and marks the decadence of what one might call the Little Rascals genre.

The early Little Rascals comedies remain delightful in spite of and perhaps because of their relative crudity. They accommodate comfortably the traditions of low comedy, of raw farce, both in terms of mechanical plot function and anarchic energy. This is the mainspring of their comic effect, and it remains valid even in times grown sceptical of higher, smoother, more reasonable comic art.

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Figure 1: An early grouping of “Rascals”