

Romantic Comedies Through the Ages (History and Commentary)

Why do audiences love a good romantic comedy? Are we all just hopeless romantics at heart? We just want to see the underdog guy get the girl and live happily ever after? It's hard to say exactly why, but romantic comedies have had a long history of entertaining audiences. Whether in the theatres, opera houses, cinemas or just on your couch, audiences have had a history of laughing (and perhaps crying a bit too!) along with trials and tribulations of people falling in love.

Consider the idea of romantic comedies on the Elizabethan stage. While the words "romantic" and "comedy" may not have been put together in Shakespeare's days, all of his comedies are defined by the prevalent theme of love. Mistaken identities, twists and turns abound in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *As You Like It* (just to name a few). Often the humor also focuses on a battle of wits between the sexes (*Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example). While the humor may not be seen throughout the entirety of the story (I don't think anyone laughs when Hero is condemned to death by her father in *Much Ado About Nothing*), the main lovers work their way through the complications to find their way to each other in the end.

The musical stage has also been keen on the idea of romantic comedy over the years. Italian comic opera – opera buffa – tended to be light and romantic in themes. *Il Barbiere di Seville* was pure comedy. *Le Nozze di Figaro* was comic but added in dramatic elements. And *L'elisir d'amore* was perhaps among the most romantic of the comic operas. Operettas then became very popular in America at the end of the 19th century. Storylines were typically light, humorous and also satirical. They generally contained larger than life romances with a happy ending. Gilbert and Sullivan solidified the art form for English-speaking audiences. *H.M.S Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Patience* and *Ruddigore* (among others) featured story lines of damsels in distress, mistaken identities and happy marriages, leaving audiences simultaneously laughing and rooting the characters on.

With the rise of Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, audiences were presented with far more options when it came to their choice in romantic comedy fare. There was a distinct modernity to the style of romantic comedy seen in the movies of this era – full of wit, sophistication and strong female characters. There was also a subset of romantic comedies that fell into the "screwball comedy" genre, which was more of a parody than the typical romantic comedy set up.

It Happened One Night, featured Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert and involved a plot about an heiress on the run and a man who turns out to be a reporter in need of a good story (mistaken identity!). *Adam's Rib* featured Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn as married lawyers who come to oppose each other in court (battle of the sexes!). The Tracy/Hepburn duo appeared in four other romantic comedies together: *Woman of the Year*, *State of the Union*, *Pat and Mike* and *Desk Set*. These

films tended to focus on Hepburn playing a professional role and her refusal to be subordinate to her male counterpart.

The 1950s saw almost a complete reversal in the type of witty banter and non-damsel-in-distress characters seen in the previous era. Doris Day and Rock Hudson starred in movies such as *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*.

With a few exceptions, the romantic comedy nearly disappeared in the early 1960s. 1967 introduced audiences to Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate* – a new spin on the romantic comedy where the obstacle is the heroine's mother.

The romantic comedy landscape changed again in 1977 with *Annie Hall*. Woody Allen's story presented a whole new concept on the idea of relationships and marriage – a deviation from the convention of “all comedies end with a wedding.”

As film conventions grew and characters became increasingly complex, film audiences were introduced to *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *High Fidelity* and *Husbands and Wives*. The female counterpart of the romantic couple took the spotlight in films such as *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Moonstruck*.

The 1990s and 2000s introduced film audiences to more realistic characters in more unconventional pairings. *My Best Friend's Wedding* features Julia Roberts in a role where she (spoiler alert) doesn't end up with the guy. *In and Out* explored gay relationships in a small town. *Bridget Jones's Diary* featured an anti-heroine “singleton” in the role of Bridget Jones. And *Love Actually* shows many different aspects of love – from brand new love to unrequited love to a married man who is exploring “love” with someone other than his wife.

So where does contemporary theatre fit into this scope of romantic comedies? After all, many of the most popular romantic comedy movies are based off of plays (*The Philadelphia Story*, *The Shop Around the Corner* and subsequently *You've Got Mail*, *10 Things I Hate About You* is a modern *Taming of the Shrew*, *Pretty Woman* is new take on *Pygmalion*just to name a few).

Even with so many favorite films based in theatrical roots, very few *new* romantic comedies are being written and performed on Broadway and in regional theatres across the country. (And the few that come to mind for you are probably musicals!) With audiences flocking to movie theatres to see the latest romantic comedy, it is surprising that there aren't more new scripts for the stage that would fall into this category. Are these stories too formulaic and escapist for theatregoers? Did the “chick flick” give the genre a bad name?

Outside Mullingar is a bit of an outsider when it comes to the genre currently seen on stage. With two star-crossed lovers, family feuds and multi-layered characters, the story has the makings of a modern day rom-com. Watching two living, breathing people fall in love on stage might even transcend what we experience while

watching it on film. Perhaps today's playwrights should take note of Shanley's success with this Valentine on stage? Or perhaps we will soon see Hollywood's take on this romantic tale, too?