A Flea In Her Ear

A Raucous French Farce
by Georges Feydeau

Directed by Aubrey Caldwell
Sandefur Theatre in Guzzetta Hall

Feb. 28 at 8 pm
Mar. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9 at 8 pm
Mar. 3 at 2 pm

$12 General Admission
$10 Seniors, UA Faculty/Staff/Alumni
$6 Students
Ticket Office: 330-972-7885
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An Educational Guide
A Flea in Her Ear
Educational Packet
Created by Alyssa Whiddon and George Moura

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Cast List

Chris Bizub as Victor Emmanuel Chandel/Poshe
Lauren Fowkes as Yvonne Chandel

Travie Williams as Dr. Finache
Dave Crantston as Camille Chandel
Dean Coutris as Romain Tournel

Katie O’Connor as Lucienne Homenides de Histangua
Alex Funk as Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua

A Flea in Her Ear Study Guide
Cast List

Samantha Ost as Antoinette

Chris Simmons as Etienne

Jeremy Winter as Baptistin

Anthony Crislip as Ferralion

Nici Romo as Olympe

Silina Rivera as Eugenie

Charlie Leopold as Rugby
**Plot Synopsis**

It is Paris at the turn of the century, and the lovely Yvonne Chandel, after years of wedded bliss, begins to doubt the fidelity of her husband, Victor Emmanuel, who suddenly has become sexually inactive, or, as Yvonne puts it, “after having been a husband—and what a husband!—suddenly stopped—like that! Between one day and the next.” She does not realize, however, that his behavior is due to a nervous condition, and she begins to suspect that he has a mistress.

Yvonne confides her doubts to her old friend Lucienne, who suggests a little trick to test him. The two women write Victor Emmanuel a letter, in Lucienne’s handwriting, from a fictitious and anonymous admirer, requesting a rendezvous at the Pretty Pussy Inn, an establishment with a dubious reputation, but a large and prominent clientele. It is Yvonne’s intention to confront her husband there, and she and Lucienne leave to do so.

When Victor Emmanuel receives the letter, however, he has no interest in such an affair and believes the invitation from the mysterious woman was meant for his best friend Romain Tournel, a handsome bachelor who, unknown to Victor Emmanuel, has his eye on Yvonne. Tournel, hot blooded and easily excited, quickly exits to make the appointment.

Meanwhile, Camille, the young nephew of Victor Emmanuel, is overjoyed to have a speech impediment corrected by a new silver palate from Dr. Finache. In celebration, he and the household cook, Antoinette, also hurry to the Pretty Pussy Inn, followed by Etienne, the jealous husband of Antoinette. Dr. Finache, also looking for a bit of fun, decides to go to the hotel in search of his own afternoon rendezvous.

To complicate the matter further, Victor Emmanuel, with the intention of sharing his amusement, shows the letter to Lucienne’s husband, Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua, a passionate and violent Spaniard. Don Carlos recognizes Lucienne’s handwriting and assumes that she is trying to start an affair with Victor Emmanuel. He runs off to the hotel vowing to kill her in revenge. Victor Emmanuel, hoping to prevent the threatened murder, hurries off in pursuit.
Feraillon, the proprietor of the Pretty Pussy Inn, runs his business with a military precision, which, alas, is about to be disrupted. Yvonne arrives looking for Victor Emmanuel. Tournel arrives looking for the secret admirer. Finache arrives looking to have some fun. Camille arrives with Antoinette, followed by Etienne, who is looking to warn Lucienne about her husband’s jealous rage. Don Carlos arrives looking for Lucienne and Tournel; and Victor Emmanuel, the most innocent of the entire group, arrives looking to stop Don Carlos. The presence of all the people at the hotel causes further complications and misunderstandings.

Don Carlos, attempting to shoot his wife, violently shoots at anything that moves. Victor Emmanuel sees Yvonne talking with Tournel and believes she is unfaithful. Mistaken for Poche, an alcoholic porter at the hotel, Victor Emmanuel is believed to be insane. And, to escalate the action even further, Camille loses his palate and Tournel tries incessantly to seduce Yvonne.

The confusion persists even after all are reunited again at Victor Emmanuel’s house. However, things begin to clear up Lucienne explains that the letter was written for Yvonne and that it was all a misunderstanding. Next Ferraillon comes by to return an article left behind by a member of the household and clears up the confusion between his porter and Victor Emmanuel. Finally, Yvonne tells Victor Emmanuel the cause of her suspicions, and he assures her that he will put an end to her doubts—tonight.
**Characters**

**Victor Emmanuel Chandel:** The managing director of the Boston Life Insurance Company for all of Paris and the provinces, he is a no-nonsense sort of fellow with shrewd business savvy and little sense of humor. In every way he has lived a successful life. He has a thriving business, a comfortable home, adequate servants, and, most importantly, a beautiful wife who absolutely adores him. At least, she used to adore him, until a dark cloud concerning his bedroom performance, or lack thereof, begins to loom.

**Yvonne Chandel:** The presently unhappy wife of Victor Emmanuel, she is everything a turn-of-the-century bourgeois French wife should be: elegant, charming, beautiful, scheming, jealous, and, at present, extremely insecure. She thinks Victor Emmanuel has, of late, lost all romantic interest in her, and she has come to mistrust his fidelity. Thus, with this “flea in her ear,” she decides to take matters into her own hands.

**Camille Chandel:** The young cousin of Victor Emmanuel. He lives in his uncle’s house and works for him as a secretary of the Boston Life Insurance Company. He has had a difficult time finding employment due to a rare speech impediment that will not allow him to pronounce consonants, only vowels—until Dr. Finache provides him with a silver palate. Still, he is good hearted and industrious; and, although he is certain not irreproachable, he is very adept at projecting an image of innocence and naivety.

**Romain Tournel:** An employee of the Boston Life Insurance Company, he has worked for Victor Emmanuel for some time. Although a trusted friend of the family, he is absolutely dedicated to having an affair with his employer’s wife, an idea which she coquettishly encourages but continually rebuffs. He fancies himself quite the ladies’ man, but obviously wears his brilliantine too thick and his charm too thin.

**Dr. Finache:** The chief medical officer of the Boston Life Insurance Company. He is an old friend of the Chandel family and Victor Emmanuel’s closest confidant. He is also one of the most dedicated rogues and libertines in all of Paris.
**Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua:** The Spanish husband of Lucienne and a potential client of the Boston Life Insurance Company, he gives added meaning to the image of the hot-blooded and jealous Latin lover.

**Lucienne Homenides de Histangua:** The wife of Don Carlos. She is coincidentally the oldest and dearest friend of Yvonne Chandel. With her strong will and fiery temperament, she is a perfect confederate to help Yvonne “trap” Victor Emmanuel.

**Etienne:** The haughty and egocentric butler of the Chandel household and the husband of Antoinette, he is a much better butler than he is husband.

**Antoinette:** The wife of Etienne and cook in the Chandel household, she is pert, saucy, sly, and every ounce a flirt—with everyone but her husband. At the moment the object of her flirtatious attentions is Camille, and she seems determined not to let her marriage to Etienne disrupt her social life.

**Feraillon:** The owner and manager of the Pretty Pussy Inn, he is a former sergeant-major with the 29th Infantry Regiment and believes that his hotel should be run with the same sort of military precision and discipline.

**Olympe:** The devoted and loving wife of Feraillon, she is a former courtesan of no little reputation. It was her reputation and savings that allowed Fermaillon to resign his commission in the army, and together they have created their dream hotel.

**Poche:** A former soldier in Feraillon’s regiment, he is now employed as a porter at the hotel. He is also a persistent drunk, which Feraillon tries to combat with frequent and violent beatings. As circumstances would have it, he is also an exact double of Victor Emmanuel.

**Eugénie:** The young upstairs maid at the hotel.

**Baptistin:** An ancient employee at the hotel, he is a rather unusual decoy to help ensure the privacy of the hotel patrons and confuse any ill-timed police raids.

**Rugby:** Frustrated and confused, he is a guest of the hotel who, He appears to be always waiting, hoping that a lady will come to visit him but they never do. Desperate for female company he accosts any woman he can get his hands on.
Character Relationships

Chandel Household

Lucienne

Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua

* Believes Lucienne is having an affair with Tournel

Romain Tournel

* Tournel in fact desires

Yvonne

Victor Emmanuel Chandel

* Physician to Emmanuel

Camille

Etienne

Antionette

* Having an affair

Pretty Pussy Inn

Baptistin

* Feraillon’s Uncle

Feraillon

* Employees of the Inn

Poche

Eugenie

Olympe

* Guest of the Inn

Rugby

Married

Married

Married

Cousin

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About the Playwright

Georges Feydeau (1862-1921)

Born and raised in Paris, the playwright Feydeau, whose father was a renowned writer and scholar, was exposed to theatre in the intellectual and artistic capital of the western world at the turn of the century. Also an actor and director, he wrote 39 plays between 1881 and 1916, taking the farce to new heights on the French stage. At age twenty Feydeau completed his first work, called *Through the Window*. Next, he composed *Love and Piano* and *Gallows-Bird*, two single-act plays that received critical praise but whose theatrical runs did poorly.

In 1886, at the age of twenty-four, Feydeau wrote a three-act work entitled *Ladies’ Dressmaker*, his first major theatrical success. This was followed by seven years of failures and only some moderate successes. During that time, he married the daughter of Carolus-Duran, a well-known portrait painter, who took care of Feydeau financially. In 1890, Feydeau stopped writing to study the works of successful authors of farce. He resurfaced two years later, offering the public the plays *Champignol in Spite of Himself* and *Monsieur Has Gone Hunting*. After being rejected by the Palais-Royal Theatre, *Champignol in Spite of Himself* became a major success at the Théâtre des Nouveautés. Feydeau soon became the most popular playwright of the boulevard theatre and a great success abroad. Continuing to write, he published the plays *The Lady from Maxim’s*, in 1899, and *A Flea in Her Ear*, in 1907. The latter has become his most well known play in English-speaking countries. In 1941, Feydeau’s play *Madam’s Late Mother* entered the repertory of the Comédie-Française, the venerable national theatre of France, thus establishing him as a modern “classic.”
The Time of Feydeau

The period from 1890–1914 is now known as La Belle Époque. It was a time of relative peace and stability in Western Europe. The so-called “second industrial revolution” included advances in technology that affected the everyday lives of people all over the advanced countries of Western Europe. Railways began to connect many of the major cities of these rapidly changing countries. Electricity replaced gas as a source of light and heat. Communication became easier with the invention of telephones, telegrams and typewriters.

Paris flourished as the artistic capital of the western world. Cafés and restaurants sprang up all over the city. Artists, musicians, writers and performers were all drawn to this exciting and thriving melting pot of creativity. In previous times, theatre-going and enjoyment of the arts had been geared towards the upper classes, but during this period the middle classes started to attend these activities as well. People who worked hard started to play hard too. “Half a million Parisians attended the theatre at least once a week,” states Felicia Hardison Londré in her book *Words at Play*.

The middle classes in France now owned factories and many became rich. This was a capitalistic society where the old systems of hereditary titles and aristocracy became less important than obvious displays of wealth. Nouveau riche (newly rich) liked to be seen at the most fashionable places, displaying their luxurious clothes and presenting an image of a perfect life. They came to be described as the bourgeoisie.

With so much fun to be had, the bourgeoisie were not immune to the darker sides of life too. Morals declined and marital infidelities became commonplace. Feydeau reflected this in his farces. He had a regular table booked at the exclusive and fashionable restaurant, Maxim’s, where he observed the antics of the other guests for later use in his writing. Something that Feydeau frequently explores in his plays is marriage and infidelity. France was more liberal than England at this time. From 1737 until 1968 all plays intended for the British stage were subject to The Lord Chamberlain’s censorship. All productions had to receive a license for public performance dependent upon the content and morality of the piece. Feydeau was so baudy that when *A Flea in Her Ear* was first brought to England in 1917 the translators had to make extensive changes to the script to make it seem more innocent.
What is Farce?

Farce is a style of comedy that has its roots as far back as Greek and Roman Theatre. It had its real heyday in the 19th and early 20th Century, however, particularly in France. A comedy can be defined as a farce by the following characteristics:

1. An improbable, unlikely plot featuring extreme and heightened situations.
2. Characters in disguise and cases of mistaken identity.
3. Respectable, dignified characters. This makes it much funnier when undignified things happen to them.
4. Word play; flirtatious language, sexual innuendo, double entendres (double meanings).
5. Physical, stylized performances of exaggerated characters; stereotypes of their class and sex.
6. The lives of the characters are less important than the plot. These stylized performances mean that the characters are more representative of a type of person than an individual. This generalisation makes the characters better able to reflect large groups of society.
7. A plot consisting of sexual misadventure, deception, characters deflecting blame, comic despair and a sense that everything is about to go very badly wrong. Spontaneous action that builds to a final crescendo, often ending in a chase scene.

**Bedroom Farce**

The bedroom farce, perhaps the most popular form of the genre, is a light drama that centres on the sexual pairings and recombinations of characters while they move through improbable plots. Feydeau is probably the most famous playwright of bedroom farces. His collection of coincidences, slamming doors, and ridiculous dialogue delighted Parisian theatre audiences at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond.
Language in the Play

Barmy - eccentric; daft
Besotted - muddled or stupefied, as with alcoholic liquor or infatuation
Catharsis - a release of emotional tension, such as one after an overwhelming experience, which restores or refreshes the spirit
Porter - a uniformed attendant
Constitution - the physical makeup of a person
Delirium Tremens - violent tremors that is induced by excessive and prolonged use of alcohol
Folly - an act or instance of foolishness
Idiosyncratic - structural or behavioral characteristics peculiar to an individual or group
Impediment - a hindrance or obstruction
Inquisitive - unduly curious and inquiring
Inveterate - persisting in an ingrained habit; habitual
Palate - the roof of the mouth separating the mouth from the nasal cavity
Paramour - a lover
Rheumatism - a disease of the joints causing stiffness and pain
Uncouth - crude; unrefined
Vermouth - a sweet or dry fortified wine flavoured with aromatic herbs and used chiefly in mixed drinks
Themes in A Flea in Her Ear

Appearances

Appearances can be deceiving. Typical of a farce, one of the main causes of the action is a case of mistaken identity. Much of the confusion that occurs could be avoided if only the characters would realize that they have confused Chandel and Poche. This serves a comic purpose but Feydeau is also making a more profound comment on civilization. In the 19th Century what you wore spoke volumes about who you were, how much money you had, what class of society you came from and how much value you therefore deserved. Less overtly obvious today, we still however judge on their appearance. The characters in the play rely so heavily on appearances that Yvonne does not realize she is talking to the hotel porter, not her own husband, simply because they look the same. Feydeau seems to be commenting on how easily persuaded we are by appearances, so much so that a servant can become a gentleman merely by changing his jacket.

Marriage

In the 19th Century marriage was still respected as a crucial institution, the only way a man and woman could lead an honest, pious life together. Children produced outside marriage were still branded bastards; marriage was the only respectable way to procreate and live with a member of the opposite sex. Feydeau was unusual because he didn't depict marriage as an infallible union; all the marriages in the play have faults. Feraillon, defending the reputation of his hotel by saying “only married couples come here” confirms the link between marriage and respectability. Lack of communication is a distinct problem within the marriages of the play, as Dr Finache advises Chandel once he has described his impotence “You should have told your wife all you told me...she'd have had a good laugh, and you'd have enjoyed the joke together.” Feydeau was an observer of the liberal, fun-loving culture of Paris in the 19th Century. He witnessed the hedonistic behavior going on around him, and to present it on stage to the very people on whom it was based was both daring and shocking, and all the more funny because it was so close to the truth.
Infidelity and Relations

The play opens with Antoinette trying to kiss Camille. Etienne is then seen explaining to Dr. Finache that Antoinette has “got some strange idea about me and the housemaid”; immediately infidelity is established as a major theme in the play. Yvonne believes Victor Emmanuel is unfaithful whilst also confessing that she has “even thought about taking a lover”. Tournel does not seem to mind that Yvonne is married to his friend and employer and pursues her regardless. The Pretty Pussy Inn’s main purpose is to provide a place of “tact and discretion” for those who are unfaithful. Throughout the play characters are themselves commit adultery, think their partner is committing adultery or are being accused of committing it. Feydeau uses innuendo to insinuate sexual references and even acknowledges that he is doing it through Feraillon saying “I’m not making any innuendoes”. Dr Finache alludes to Homenides’ sexual prowess “What a constitution! What stamina!” and the whole description of Chandel’s impotence is presented through metaphor and innuendo. Feydeau makes it clear that he is making these risqué sexual references but the innuendoes serve the comic purpose far better than saying them outright.

Self-obsession/ Narcissism

If only the characters were less concerned with their own circumstances, they would be far better equipped to find out what is actually going on. Yvonne and Tournel particularly are both utterly self-obsessed; Yvonne has such double standards that even when talking about Chandel having an affair she admits that she “may want to deceive him but for him to deceive me! No! It’s going too far!” Yvonne’s hypocrisy is borne of her sense of self-importance. Tournel is embarrassed at being “made a fool of in front of himself!” They are both so intent on talking themselves out of trouble with Chandel that they entirely dominate their first encounter with Poche and barely ask him any questions; they just keep talking and therefore don’t notice that he simply resembles Chandebise. Homenides is similarly narcissistic; once he decides that Lucienne is having an affair, he charges around hell-bent on destruction, brandishing his weapons. He doesn’t stop to question the situation but simply wants vengeance. They are all blind to any simple resolution because they are too self-absorbed. It isn’t difficult to imagine these characters existing in the Paris that Feydeau inhabited which valued fun, pleasure and liberation of the self.
Timing

Timing is crucial to the success of this play. Feydeau knew this which is why the play is accompanied by detailed stage directions. The many entrances and exits are all vitally important and specifically placed. They punctuate the rhythm of the play and help to translate the quick energy of the action and the sense of confusion. There is so much going on all at once that the audience feel the same sense of bewilderment as the characters. Much of the plot hinges on people just missing each other, prolonging the anticipation of a resolution. In Act I, Chandel just misses Tournel; the audience see Chandel leave to warn Tournel that Homenides wants to kill him, and once he’s left, immediately Tournel enters again. To make matters worse, Camille doesn’t remember his metal mouth roof until Tournel has already left once more so is unable to speak clearly enough to warn him of the danger.

Class

The play mocks the world of the ‘chattering classes’. Even the name of Don Carlos Homenides de Histangua is so over-the-top that it seems ridiculous. Etienne mocks it by saying “whatever your name is.” The play suggests that morals in these circles are loose and that infidelity is rife. It “sends up” men like Tournel as good looking, a bit stupid and spending all their time chasing ladies. It makes the ladies, Lucienne and Yvonne, appear selfish and silly. Men like Chandel come across as naïve. When the action moves to The Pretty Pussy Inn, the alleged “working class” are better behaved; Feraillon and Olympe being happily married and faithful. Through the confusion with Chandel and Poche it seems Feydeau is commenting that, for all their airs and etiquette, all that really separates the upper and the lower classes is their clothes.
1. If you were to direct *A Flea In Her Ear*, where and when would you place it? Explain your choice. How much of the humor in the play relies on the setting or location?

2. One of the comic devices used in *A Flea in Her Ear* is mistaking one character for another. Can you name other plays, stories, movies or TV shows that rely on mistaken identity? Is the situation always funny?

3. *A Flea in Her Ear* explores some issues are basically dark: infidelity, adultery, alcoholism, distrust, violence and prejudice; how do you feel about the treatment of these issues with humor? What purpose does the humor serve? How would this play work as a drama?

4. Have you ever been in a situation where it seemed that someone was lying to you but in the end you found out they were not- it was just the circumstance that made you think that? What did you do about it? How did you feel when you found out that you were wrong?

5. Costumes play a very important role in theatre. Think of the first moment each character walked onstage and what they were wearing. What did the costume tell you about the character?