ABSTRACT: Frequent revivals of comedy of manners plays across a variety of periods attest to their enduring popularity with the modern American audience. The genre adheres to mannerly conventions intrinsic to their original time unfamiliar to the general population. David Hirst identifies three necessary ingredients of a true comedy of manners: characters use manners employed in a social context, their main concerns are sex and money, and they control their emotions using wit and disguise. Modern audiences respond to the third ingredient because they recognize the dichotomy between what a character really thinks and feels and the forced composure due to societal requirements. Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* include genre defining illustrations of this dichotomy.

The comedy of manners is a theatrical genre that deals specifically with stylistic and mannerly conventions of certain time periods, whether it is the British Restoration focusing on courtiers in late-seventeenth-century, Oscar Wilde satirizing narrow-minded upper-class Victorians in the late-nineteenth century, or Noel Coward’s socialites in the 1920s. In his article, “A Show About Nothing,” David P. Pierson writes, “As a dramatic genre, the comedy of manners is intimately related to the social conditions of the time” (51). The manners these plays ridicule are basically archaic and distinctly British. They are not the manners of American society today, yet these comedies are frequently revived and presented to American audiences. Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* was successfully produced on Broadway in 2002, receiving Tony Awards for revival, actor Lindsay Duncan’s performance, and set designer Tim Hatley’s sets. Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is recently enjoyed a successful run at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, according to opening night reviewer Jay Gabler the audience “laughed pretty much from the first moment to the last.” In the same review Gabler cites a recent production of the same play by another theater company in Minneapolis and an upcoming production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by yet another theater company. The enduring popularity of the genre of comedy of manners cannot be denied, but what is it about these British plays from long ago that resonates with American audiences today?

In their book *Acting with Style*, John Harrop and Sabin R. Epstein delve into two styles of comedy: comedy of manners, or high comedy, and farce, or low comedy. According to Harrop and Epstein the two styles are on opposite ends of the spectrum, farce relying on “dynamic physicality” and comedy of manners a “strong definition of social types” (87). “As its name suggests, comedy of manners is concerned with the social manners and attitudes of groups or classes of people who define themselves as superior, or at least different, by the following of very particular life styles based upon strict codes of behavior and taste” (Harrop 90). The characters in this genre are entirely aware that they are living within a highly mannered society with strict social norms that must be followed. “Possibly the most difficult problem today for the actor approaching comedy of manners is the presumption of artificiality that has grown up around it” (Harrop 96). For the characters in these plays, there is an innate serious, a realistic need for the stylish conventions of the time. “Actors tend to make judgments from their everyday circumstances and condemn the plays for lack of truth and reality because they demand behavior different from the actors’ own” (Harrop 96). Comedy of manners demands complete commitment on the actors’ part, if the actor does not take the characters’ manners seriously the action becomes frivolous. Oscar Wilde subtitled his *The Importance of Being Earnest*, “A
Trivial Comedy for Serious People” and indeed the characters in the play are deadly serious people, serious about trivial manners such as style of dress, behavior and witticisms.

Literary critic David Hirst defines three necessary ingredients of a true comedy of manners: characters use manners employed in a social context, their main concerns are sex and money, and they control their emotions using wit and disguise (1).

Not surprisingly, the manners are the first necessary ingredient in a comedy of manners, according to Hirst, “The subject of comedy of manners is the way people behave, the manners they employ in a social context” (1). The characters are required to interact within the context of these socially-accepted manners. “These rules are society’s unwritten laws regulating behaviour, the dictates of propriety which, though they may differ in detail from age to age and class to class, are always basic to the conduct of the characters in the comedy of manners” (Hirst 3). The presence of strict rules regarding socially-accepted manners is intrinsic to the genre. While most American audiences are familiar with the manners of “middle-class civility” demanded on a modern-day television show such “Seinfeld,” it is unrealistic to expect that every theatergoer who attends a production of The Importance of Being Earnest or Private Lives has an in-depth understanding of the socially acceptable rules of 1895 or 1920s British upper-class society (Pierson 49). Every era from Restoration to present day encompasses its own individual set of rules, and the study and specific presentation of such rules must be the work of the actor and director. It is imperative that the audience feel the presence of such rules and gain a sense of the mannerly society the characters inhabit.

In addition to adhering to strict manners, Hirst points out that in a true comedy of manners the characters are preoccupied with “sex and money (and thus the interrelated topics of marriage, adultery and divorce)” (1). Though the subject matter is acted out with all the societal mannerly requirements, the characters needs are physical, greedy and unrefined. David P. Pierson states, “One of the underlying assumptions of these dramas is that people primarily act out of self-interest and as such, they have few commitments to anybody or anything but themselves. The primary function of this self-interest is the pursuit of intellectual and sensual pleasures, along with the more direct concerns of acquiring and maintaining material goods and services” (52). Underneath their mannerly surface, each character is angling toward their own self-serving innermost desires.

The combination of Hirst’s first two ingredients creates a dichotomy within each character: the self-serving character seeking the primal needs of sex and money who is also concerned with manners, politeness and style. It is from this dichotomy that his third ingredient derives. As Hirst states, “the style is distinguished by the refinement of raw emotional expression and action in the subtlety of wit and intrigue” (1). In a comedy of manners, characters pursue their individual desires underneath a mannerly guise created with witticism and disguise. The need to “keep up appearances” is continually reinforced as an obstacle to the characters true desires (Hirst 2). Emotional outbursts or expressions of one’s true wants must be hidden under wit or through disguise in order to maintain the necessary manners.

The hilarity in comedy of manners comes when all three of Hirst’s ingredients are present: the characters’ strict decorum and observation of society’s rules does not allow them to express their true feelings. Donald Bruce explains in his book Topics of Restoration Comedy, “The forms of a polite society frequently constrain its members to act a part: to disguise impulse in reason, to mask passion and appetite with decorum. The personal reality is often at a remove from the social appearance” (89). The result is that many characters in these dramas say one
thing and mean another. The stronger the character’s true feelings, the more at odds they are with the manners they are displaying, the funnier the situation becomes to the audience. A modern audience does not need to know the specifics of a given society’s manners to know that the manners are keeping a character from expressing his or her true feelings, the audience just needs to know what the character’s true feelings are and realize that due to societal norms he or she is forced to suppress them.

Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* provides a layered example of this dichotomy in the characters of Amanda and Elyot, characters that struggle to mask their passionate feelings for each other. In his review, Steve Vineberg wrote, “The two are furious, because, as quick-witted as they are, they are powerless to exert the slightest control over their emotions. They are unable to deny the passion inadequately buried in their bitterness toward each other.” Not only are Amanda and Elyot struggling to hide strong feelings for each other underneath their mannerly guise, they are angry with themselves for having the feelings in the first place. When upon their surprise meeting in the first scene, Amanda quips, “Extraordinary how potent cheap music is,” she is attempting to exert control over the passionate emotions the “cheap music” is reawakening by disguising them in wit (Coward). The line is flippant and witty, but the real humor comes from the “maintaining of a precise balance between a brittle tenuous surface and a depth of emotion” (Hirst 62). Audiences respond to the humor when the emotions are high and the effect of the music on Amanda is “extraordinary” and she undercuts those feelings by calling the music “cheap.” In a comedy of manners, the characters “are playing a game, perhaps, but in deadly earnest and for the highest of stakes; and, moreover, they must stick to the rules” (Hirst 3). The high stakes are those self-serving innermost desires which must be strong enough that the manners are an obstacle in the way of their goals. Amanda and Elyot’s constant witty banter is their way of sticking to the societal rules that keep them from expressing their true and “deadly earnest” feelings.

Nowhere is earnestness more apparent than in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one of five plays Hirst references as achieving “the full potential of the dramatic genre” of comedy of manners (116). The frequent revivals of this gem attest to its enduring comedic value. The tea party scene between Gwendolen and Cecily illustrates the highest stake for the two characters. Each believes the other to have stolen her fiancé, Ernest, a conflict with each character’s self-serving primal need for sex and marriage. The comedy, easily recognized by the modern audience, is seeing these meticulously dressed, culturally refined characters go through the motions and strict manners of a Victorian tea party while inwardly wanting to tear each other’s eyes out. Gwendolen’s line “[With elaborate politeness] Thank you. [Aside] Detestable girl! But I require tea!” illustrates the comedy of manners dichotomy perfectly (Wilde 38). She adheres to the necessary social conduct of thanking Cecily for the offer of tea, but also demonstrates the innate necessity of adhering to the socially dictated norms when she insists in her aside that tea is something she “require(s).” The fact that she despises Cecily cannot be separated from the fact that she must disguise her feelings within her strict manners.

Situations where social decorum forces one to hide one’s true feelings are readily identifiable to an American audience as we are familiar with our own society’s written and unwritten social rules. The more regimented and involved the manners of a society and the higher the emotional stakes of the characters, the funnier the comedy of manners. The modern British and American versions of the television show “The Office” parody office etiquette. Characters in these documentary-style sitcoms have the opportunity to express their own asides
to the camera, telling the audience what they really think in the same way characters do in period dramas. We laugh at these contemporary programs for the same reasons we laugh at the antiquated plays, the adherence to social norms becomes ridiculous as the characters are desperately attempting to achieve their own aims while maintaining their necessary manners.

Works Cited