

# Study Guide

SEATTLE

REPERTORY THEATRE

## A Flea in Her Ear

By Georges Feydeau  
Adapted by Frank Galati  
November 29 - December 30, 1989

Directed by Michael Maggio  
Scenic Design by John Lee Beatty  
Costume Design by Kaye Nottbusch  
Lighting Design by Craig Miller  
Sound Design by Michael Holten  
Fight Direction by David Boushey

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## Georges Feydeau's Paris

Between the Universal Fair of 1889 (for which the Eiffel Tower was built) and World War I, Paris experienced its *Belle Epoque* — its "Good Old Days." After many years of political and economic hardship, including a disastrous and humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and the suppression of the radical Paris Commune (in which 30,000 people were killed), France had finally attained a state of relative stability. These were, in one historian's words, the "banquet years."

Paris had become a center for world culture, "a vast theater for herself and the world." The arts, particularly painting, flourished. Impressionist painters like Monet and Cezanne were beginning to achieve recognition. Picasso and Braque would soon lay the ground for Cubism, a highly influential movement in modern art. At the turn of the century, Paris had more than 50 theatres which presented everything from revivals of Romantic and Classical works to popular farce to shockingly naturalistic plays treating forbidden social subjects.

With the turn of the century and the death of England's prudish Queen Victoria in 1901, the 19th-century European era of confident moralism and sexual repression was at an end. In Paris, divorce had recently been legalized, and the city was undergoing a kind of sexual revolution. A scandalous counter-culture had developed around Montmartre establishments like the *Moulin Rouge* and the *Chat Noir*.

This was no ordinary crowd of *déclassé* revellers: it included Gertrude Stein, Oscar Wilde, Pablo Picasso, Sarah Bernhardt and Colette. Free love was in the air and bisexuality was quite in vogue. The popular dances were still polkas and waltzes, but the newest craze was the can-can, which centered on showing off the legs and underclothing of acrobatic and unusually flexible dancers.

On the more respectable right bank of the Seine, the bourgeoisie and *nouveaux riches* strolled the newly rebuilt and widened boulevards, and Georges Feydeau walked among them. The restaurants and cafes (including Feydeau's favorite, Maxim's) where the elite dined, lounged and gossiped, were visited by foreign dignitaries, millionaires, and even royalty. Upon entering these secular sanctuaries, patrons left outside the less attractive underside of this era: growing lawlessness, violence and rumors of war. Maxim's overflowed with the atmosphere that typifies the *Belle Epoque*: joviality, optimism and high living, as well as frivolity and moral laxity.

Maxim's was also Feydeau's chief place of work. At his table, with an open bottle of champagne for appearance's sake (he drank only Perrier water), he would sit for hours listening, watching and making mental notes.

## Chronology

- 1815 Napoleon defeated at Waterloo.
- 1840-1860 Claude Monet, Thomas Edison, G.B. Shaw, Anton Chekhov born.
- 1859 Darwin publishes Theory of Evolution.
- 1862 Georges Feydeau born.
- 1865 U.S. Civil War ends. Abraham Lincoln assassinated.
- 1870-1871 France loses war with Prussia. Paris establishes a communist government which is brutally suppressed. Famine, public executions and widespread arson in Paris. Feydeau sent off to school.
- 1874 First Impressionist exhibition held in Paris.
- 1875 Third French Republic, a conservative government, established.
- 1880 Feydeau's first play (a monologue), *The Rebellious Young Lady*.
- 1884 Feydeau serves in military, writes first hit: *A Gown for His Mistress*.
- 1889 Universal Fair in Paris. Eiffel Tower built. Deeply in debt, Feydeau marries the beautiful and wealthy Marianne Carolus-Duran.
- 1892-1909 Feydeau enjoys a period of great success with plays such as *Hotel Paradiso* and *The Lady from Maxim's*.
- 1895 Divorce legalized in France. First moving pictures shown in theatres.
- 1901 Queen Victoria dies. Picasso moves to Paris. Toulouse-Lautrec dies. Again in debt, Feydeau sells part of his collection of contemporary paintings, including works by Cezanne, Monet and Renoir.
- 1903 Wright brothers' first airplane flight. Feydeau in debt again.
- 1907 Feydeau writes *A Flea in Her Ear*.
- 1909 Feydeau leaves wife, moves to the Hotel Terminus. He begins a series of more serious one-act plays about the hazards of marriage.
- 1914-1918 World War I.
- 1916 Feydeau's last play. He and his wife obtain a divorce.
- 1919 Feydeau committed to a sanatorium, treated for nervous exhaustion.
- 1921 Dies of syphilis.

## Feydeau's Life

Tall, blond, with aristocratic features, Georges Feydeau was very much a man of his time. Always stylishly dressed, Feydeau was incomparably graceful and dignified. Nonetheless, his friend, Louis Verneuil, described him as "a bit cold perhaps, and distant." Though he spoke little, preferring to listen, he was known for his caustic wit. At rehearsals, he could be positively vicious. Once, while Feydeau was directing a rehearsal, a young actor dared to interrupt him with a loud "I have an idea." Feydeau paused, fixed the young man with a carnivorous smile, and said, "How bored it must be all alone."

Feydeau, too, spent a great deal of time bored and alone. He was subject to frequent bouts of depression. "Don't be surprised if I am sad," he told an interviewer. "Such is, in fact, my usual disposition. I do not resemble at all my plays which everyone considers so cheering. I am a bad judge when it comes to such things. I never laugh in the theater. I rarely laugh in private life. I am taciturn, a little unsociable.

"The authors you call comic are always sad: they think 'sad' first," said Feydeau, and one needs only to scratch the surface of many of his plays to discover despair, cynicism, even cruelty. Feydeau realized that comedy is serious business: "To make a good farce," he wrote, "you take the most tragic situation possible, a situation fit to make a mortician shudder, and you try to bring out its burlesque side. There is no human drama which does not offer at least several comic aspects."

Unfortunately, Feydeau's experience of folly and pain was not limited to detached observation of his compatriots. To a great extent, he lived what he wrote. And the more successful he became, the more difficult and unhappy was his home life. His marriage, by all accounts, began happily and remained so for at least 10 years. But Feydeau's increasingly dissi-

pated lifestyle worried and angered his wife. Every night he would conclude his observations at Maxim's and walk home slowly, often indirectly, arriving home at two or three in the morning. He gambled and lost a considerable amount. One night, in 1909, their quarrels had become so unbearable that Feydeau did not return home. He packed little more than a few essentials and moved to the Hotel Terminus. He remained there for the next 10 years. As if trying to insulate himself, Feydeau packed the small suite with paraphernalia. His rooms were so cluttered with books, trinkets, even a suit of armor, that one observer claims Feydeau was forced to write standing up. Yet Feydeau was so afraid of loneliness that he further prolonged his nocturnal meanderings. His son-in-law tells the story that he once found Feydeau sitting at a kiosk, selling newspapers. Feydeau explained that, as was his custom, he had stopped to speak to the newspaper seller, and she had complained of the cold. He eagerly volunteered to take her place while she went to have a bowl of soup. When she returned, the three of them stood on the street corner talking until well past dawn.

As long as Feydeau had material to write and rehearsals to attend, he was able to keep a tenuous foothold on sanity. But once the well ran dry and he stopped writing, his mental condition deteriorated. Insomnia and a serious case of syphilis worsened his condition so badly that finally his children felt bound to have him institutionalized. Feydeau, the genius who had created such laughable madness, became a victim of madness himself. He, who had always been the model of decorum, spent his final days alternately convinced that he was a bird, a calf and Napoleon III. As Bentley observes, "The era of modern farce ended with his death in 1921." Meanwhile, France had seen the *Belle Epoque* change to the murderous strife of the Great War. The Good Old Days were over.



Feydeau in 1904, three years before writing *A Flea in Her Ear*.

## Farce

In daily life, the word farce is used to describe something absurd, ridiculous, or even fraudulent. As a theatrical term, farce is more difficult to define exactly. The label is applied to many different kinds of plays from many different centuries and cultures, from the ancient Greeks' to our own. In the broadest sense (according to *Webster's*), a farce is an exaggerated comedy based on highly unlikely situations. Usually written for the commercial stage and designed to attract a large audience (and a nice profit), it is by definition a popular genre.

Farce has generally been suspect among the intellectual community. Many critics see it as a form of "low" comedy, one that relies on its gimmickry and implausibility without performing any substantial function (except entertainment). In a sense, they are right: a play like *A Flea in Her Ear* was written primarily to amuse. How interesting, then, that this light comedy should have as its most important ingredients:

impotence, adultery, prostitution, alcoholism, sadomasochism and madness.

At first glance, it would seem that a "light" treatment of such subjects would be profoundly unsatisfying. The world of Feydeau's farce is, as a rule, unjust; a character will act despicably and be rewarded for his bad behavior, while an innocent person will be subjected to untold suffering. Violence runs rampant, though no one is ever seriously hurt. Mores, particularly sexual ones, are only adopted for show. Why wasn't Feydeau's respectable audience offended?

Critic Eric Bentley argues that farce actually reassures the middle class in times of social ferment. With all the changes going on, farce allows them to experience vicariously their darkest desires in a non-threatening atmosphere and come away with the social order unscathed. It is, therefore, a cathartic experience; "In farce," writes Bentley, "one is permitted the outrage but spared the consequences."

Feydeau's farce affirms the political order as well. Though the lower

class is often treated worse than animals by their employers, they do not stand out as sympathetic characters. Servants are generally indolent, alcoholic, oversexed and/or idiotic schemers. Everyone is cut down to size. And if anyone has stepped out of place, he or she will be neatly restored by the end. No wonder, then, that his work should be so popular, so profoundly reassuring to the bourgeoisie, a class that was deeply disturbed by the growing anarchist and communist movements.

Well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of farce as a medium, Feydeau was a serious student of his craft. When he felt dissatisfied with his technique, he quite self-consciously studied the works of the writers of the previous generation, in particular, Scribe (pronounced: "SCREEB") and Sardou, the French masters of the "well-made" play. Scribe, in particular, had succeeded in outlining a kind of science of playwriting; he detailed a formula for how a three-act play should proceed: what should happen in each act, when to spring the surprises, how long to keep the audience in suspense, and so on.

The well-made play enjoyed a long period of influence and popularity, but critics like George Bernard Shaw and the emerging naturalist movement found the genre appallingly limited and deadly dull. They argued that human nature is unpredictable and does not run according to formula.

Feydeau, by contrast, had no problem with the formula — the formula was his bread and butter. He was merely concerned with keeping it from going stale: "I noticed that popular comedies were invariably built on obsolete plots," he wrote, "with conventional, ridiculous, false characters, puppets. I thought that all of us, in our life, find ourselves in 'vaudevillesque' situations without, for that, losing our interesting personality. That was all I needed. I started to search for my characters in real life, living, and keeping their own personality. I tried, after a comical exposition, to throw them

into ludicrous situations."

To this knack for observation, Feydeau brought an unusual facility for quick characterization and exposition — for immediately giving the audience what they needed to know about the people and their situation. In cinematic terms, Feydeau cut right to the chase: "When writing a play," he said, "I seek among my characters the ones who should not run into each other. And they are precisely the ones I bring into a confrontation as soon as possible."

Action is the substance of farce, and time is of the essence. As he improved his technique, Feydeau increased the speed and complexity of his plots. At its best, his dialogue is geared to advance the dramatic action; it is never just amusing for its own sake. Frequently, his characters must race the clock. Physical action, especially the constant running in and out of doors, becomes increasingly important in Feydeau's work. One of Feydeau's early plays has 108 arrivals and departures; one of his more mature works has 279.

Though he claimed himself to be lethargic and frequently procrastinated almost to the point of no return, when he did write, it was with tremendous speed and uncanny accuracy. As he said, "My plays are entirely improvised; the whole and the details, the context and the form, everything falls into place as I write. And I have never prepared an outline for any of them." In his prime, Feydeau had as many as three farces running in major theatres at one time. His plays were translated into other languages and performed all over the world, often before he was able to premiere them in Paris.

## Plot Synopsis

### Act One

Deboshe, an insurance executive, has been suffering from a bout of impotence. His wife, Yvonne, dismayed at his sexual inactivity, is beginning to suspect that he has a mistress. She confides in her old friend, Lucille, who suggests that they test his fidelity. They decide to write him a letter from a fictitious anonymous admirer, requesting a rendezvous with him at a sleazy hotel. Since Yvonne is afraid her husband will recognize her handwriting, she asks Lucille to write the letter. When Deboshe receives the letter, he believes that it was actually intended for his best friend, Blase, a handsome bachelor who is constantly in his company. He sends Blase off to the rendezvous in his place.

Later, Deboshe casually shows the letter to Lucille's husband, Histangua, a passionate and violent Spaniard. Histangua recognizes Lucille's handwriting and assumes that she is trying to start an affair with Deboshe. Deboshe defends himself by saying it is Blase who is going to the assignation. Vowing revenge, Histangua runs off to the hotel with the frightened and horrified Deboshe in pursuit. Deboshe's nephew, Claude, tries to warn Blase not to go to the hotel. Unfortunately, Claude was born with a cleft palate, an affliction that makes him unable to enunciate his consonants. He has a silver palate which allows him to speak clearly, but, as luck would have it, he is not wearing the device; Blase cannot understand him.

### Act Two

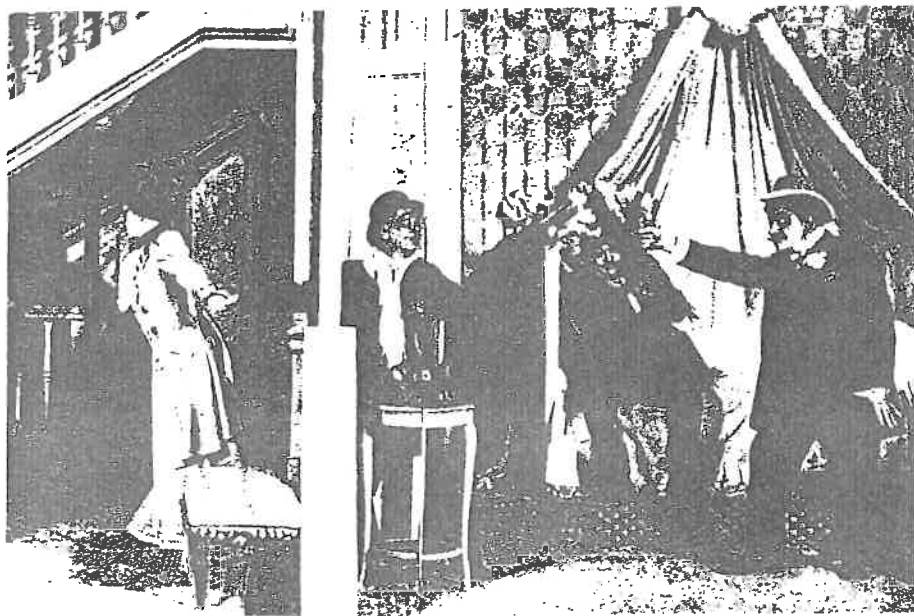
The layout of the hotel — all doors, corridors and beds — can only make the situation worse. One room even has a bed on a revolving platform: push a button and the bed will change places with the one in the next room. The hotel is staffed by a number of shady characters, including the proprietor Martinet (a sadistic former soldier), a drugged

and drunken porter, Goshe (who looks *exactly* like Deboshe), and some ladies of doubtful repute. The staggered arrivals of all the people from act one (at exactly the wrong moments) cause innumerable complications and misunderstandings. Histangua attempts to shoot his wife. Claude loses his silver palate in a brawl. Deboshe sees Yvonne with Blase and believes she is unfaithful. Mistaken for Goshe, Deboshe is believed to be insane. The doors open and slam, and the beds revolve.

### Act Three

Battered and baffled, the characters find their way back to Deboshe's house. The true origin of the letter is revealed when Histangua discovers on Yvonne's desk a rough draft of the letter written by Lucille. When Martinet comes to return Claude's silver palate, he clears up the confusion between Goshe and Deboshe. Finally, Yvonne tells Deboshe the cause of her suspicions, and he promises to do what he can.

A scene from Act II of the original 1907 production at the Théâtre des Nouveautés.



## Adapting Feydeau's Farce

The *Belle Epoque* was a time very like the mid-1960s, notes director Michael Maggio. "The period between the death of John F. Kennedy and the real troubles of the Vietnam war and the peace movement, this was a period of changing mores, but it retained a certain innocence," says Maggio. "That's what we wanted to capture." For the original production (at Chicago's Goodman Theatre) of this new adaptation of *A Flea in Her Ear*, Maggio and playwright Frank Galati moved the action of the play to 1968 Paris.

Interestingly, it was in 1966 that *Flea* first became popular with English-speaking audiences: Great Britain's National Theatre presented *Flea* in a translation by British author John Mortimer, and, that same year, director Jacques Charon of the *Comedie Francaise* and British playwright Noel Coward collaborated on a film version starring Rex Harrison. But those productions were set in the time Feydeau intended. Galati's script is, as far as Maggio knows, the first attempt to update the play's action.

Galati faced the dual challenge of transposing the play to another language and a later era. To begin with, he says, "It's a little bit

difficult to try to capture the class structure that is built into the play." Especially demanding was the task of clearly distinguishing the idiom of the porter, Goshe, from the executive, Deboshe. Further, moral standards changed considerably from 1907 to 1968. Scandal was not what it used to be. "I tried to create characters," says Galati, "whose appetites and passions would compromise them in a more modern world than the world of Feydeau."

While Galati (who does not speak French) wanted to remain faithful to the mechanics of the original (he based his adaptation on a literal translation by Abbott Chrisman), he also wanted to have some fun with it, and his version plays with language in some ways that Feydeau's did not. Galati's word-play includes changing all the characters' names into puns on French words. For example, Deboshe's name (originally Chan-debise) sounds like "debauch," while his alter ego's name, Goshe (nee Poshe), is a play on "gauche." The original *Hotel du Minet Galant* — literally, Hotel of the Courteous Kitten — has been renamed the Hotel Pussy à Go-Go. Galati also allowed himself bawdy puns on 1960s slang and changed a few of the play's circumstances to better fit the period. The character of an oversexed Englishman, for instance, has become an Indian, opening up possibilities for references to sitars, hookahs and gurus.

Nonetheless, Galati maintains that he did not make any substantial changes in Feydeau's work. "There are occasional idioms which you might associate with the '60s," he says, "but they came up only when they came up in the play. I didn't do anything to the play." Further, Galati steered clear of topical references. "I didn't want to insert anything that wasn't in the play," he says. "The play is in such a hurry to get its mechanism going and completed that there's hardly a breath for political or social satire. It's breakneck fast, and it needs to be. If the audience had too much time to think, they wouldn't like it."

## Design Choices

Set designer John Lee Beatty drew his inspiration from 1960s movies and from the era's trends in art, architecture and commercial design.

Just a few examples of the influences Beatty lists are: monochromatic color schemes (the hotel setting echoes one scene in the film *Dr. Zhivago* in which absolutely everything is red), extremely strong colors, shapes from the mobiles of Alexander Calder and the paintings of Piet Mondrian, and architectural features of the Seattle Center (built for the 1962 World's Fair) — including the arches from the Pacific Science Center.

This is Beatty's fifth production of *Flea*. The setting is a modified version of his original plan for the Chicago production. For The Rep's stage, which has different spatial and budgetary parameters, Beatty found himself rethinking the design. According to Beatty, any design for the show has to begin with the doors: their placement, which way they hinge, and which one is going to be most important to the action. Each time he has designed the show, he has found ways to improve the set's physical fitness for comedy.

Another of the play's demands is a striking visual contrast between its two settings. As Frank Galati points out, *Flea*'s locations are a metaphor for "the two halves of the human personality: one is professional and official and public and somewhat artificial; the other one is venal and carnal and low and full of appetite."

For the Deboshe's home, Beatty has concocted a stylish white-and-black drawing room reminiscent of the popular 1960s TV show *The Avengers*, and for the Hotel Pussy à Go-Go, a lurid scarlet palace (during the Chicago production, Beatty nicknamed it the *Jetsons* brothel) complete with mirrored walls and a revolving circular bed.

Designers for a modern production of *Flea* must also find ways to distinguish one class or type of person from another, culture from

counter-culture. Kaye Nottbusch's costume designs for the bourgeois characters recall the relatively conservative early '60s style (the way the Beatles dress on covers of their early albums), while her costumes for the hotel characters are more psychedelic late-'60s pop (the style of the Beatles' outfits on the cover of "Sgt. Pepper").

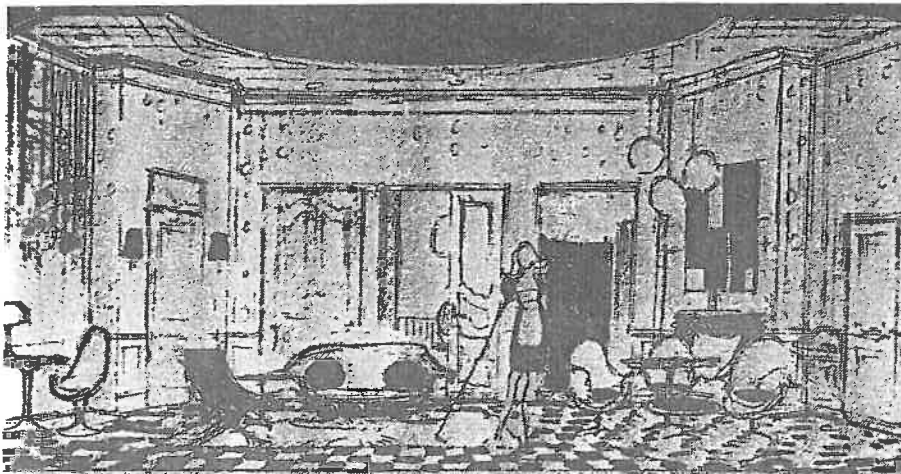
## Directing the Show

Like the show's designers, Director Michael Maggio has had to find stylistic equivalents to transpose 1907 farce to the 1960s. To bone up on both farce style and '60s sensibility, Maggio says he watched a lot of movies, particularly those of Blake Edwards, whose 1964 comedies *The Pink Panther* and *A Shot in the Dark* introduced Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau. (Maggio pays homage to the Edwards-Sellers style by using Henry Mancini's sound track for *A Shot in the Dark* as incidental music.) Though Maggio observes that "*Flea* would have been a great vehicle for Peter Sellers," he notes that there is an important difference between Feydeau's comedy and Edwards' in that *Flea* is so tightly constructed: "The machinery's wound tighter."

According to Maggio, the imagery

of machinery is important in understanding farce's effect on the audience. Trapped in the gears and wires of intricate plots like Feydeau's, characters are subjected to ritualized acts of violence that would seriously injure real human beings. One character is taken for the next — they are as replaceable and interchangeable as mass-produced dolls. As the characters are dehumanized, their situation is, says Maggio, "viscerally funny but also frightening." As the audience is given the chance to experience and "laugh at the forces that dehumanize them," Maggio believes, "there's a subconscious release. It creates a comic catharsis."

Frank Galati also affirms the healing, purgative powers of farce: —"*Flea* is about identity," he says. "It's about characters who are disjointed — split in two — by their own appetites and needs. We all do that, so when we see it on stage, maybe we heal a little bit. We become a little more integrated, because we see the disintegration of personality and the reintegration of the personality at the end, and the victory over lust and folly. And that's after all what most of life is — either victory or defeat over our needs and appetites and disabilities. I think we go to the theatre in order to reaffirm that we all are on the same stage."



John Lee Beatty's set design for the Seattle Rep production, Acts I and III.

## Suggested Pre-Play Activities

1. What is the importance of comedy in our lives?
2. What television show or movie do you find particularly funny? Identify a scene. What is it that you find funny about that scene? Is it the situation, a character's reaction to the situation, or the characters themselves that make it funny?
3. Discuss the differences between laughing at someone, laughing with someone, and laughing because what someone does reminds us of something in ourselves?
4. The Seattle Repertory Theatre's production of *A Flea in Her Ear* is set in the 1960s. The '60s represent different things to different people. When you think of the 1960s, what images come to mind? What type of clothes? What music? What attitudes? How do these reflect the social and political climate of the times?

## Suggested Post-Play Activities

### FOR DEBATE

Divide the class into teams for debate: one to defend the statement, one to refute it.

1. Treating someone with a disability in a comic situation is OK.
2. *A Flea in Her Ear* was written only to amuse and was not meant to be a social commentary.
3. Martinet's violence toward his servant Goshe is justified.

### FOR DISCUSSION OR ESSAY

1. In SRT's production of *A Flea in Her Ear*, what aspects of the '60s do you think the director and the designers were trying to portray? How does their illustration of the '60s compare with your images of that time?

2. Place *A Flea in Her Ear* in the late 1980s. What changes might occur in the script if you were adapting it? What issues in our lives today might affect the telling of this story?

3. 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 of the play relies on the setting or location?

4. SRT's production of *A Flea in Her Ear* is from an adaptation by Frank Galati. He took the story from 1907 to the 1960s. In doing so it was necessary to bring in "lingo" of the '60s. Pick a short scene from *A Flea in Her Ear* and rewrite it using lingo from 1989.

5. 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 television programs that also rely on mistaken identity? Is the situation always funny?

6. Yvonne deceives the husband she loves in order to find the truth about his alleged deception. Why does Feydeau use the theme of deception? What is he trying to say about human nature?

7. *Flea* explores some issues that 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?

8. 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 circumstances that made you think that? What did you do about it? How did you feel when you found out that you were wrong?

9. Each character in *Flea* has at least one exaggerated characteristic, i.e. Claude's speech impediment and Martinet's sadism. How does

focusing on and exaggerating a single characteristic help in creating a comic situation?

10. Writing farce can be a technical challenge since so much of what happens relies on mistaken identity, miscommunication or characters making stupid mistakes. Pick out points in the story where one character making a different choice could have changed the play.

11. What if you were to have a set of twins to play Deboshe and Goshe. What would happen in the script if they were allowed to meet in the end? Write that scene.

12. 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?

13. List each character's reaction to Claude's speech impediment. Which characters responded similarly to him? Why do you suppose that is?

14. Feydeau spent many hours gathering material for his plays by watching people at Maxim's, a famous Paris cafe. He chose to look for his characters in real life and then place them in ludicrous situations. Find a place to sit and watch people: in the hall at school, on a street corner, on a bus. Take notes on people that you see. What is interesting about them? What makes them unique?