



## Seger Note #6 : Some Like It Hot

*Screenplay by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond,  
adapted from the French film Fanfare of Love*

*Directed by Billy Wilder*

*Academy Award nomination, Best Adapted Screenplay*

In lists of the best film comedies, *Some Like It Hot* is often number one. It is a farce, based very loosely on a French movie from 1935 and a German film from 1951, both considered far inferior but containing the basic plot element of two men dressing in drag and joining an all-female band. In the earlier films, the motivation is simply that the men are unemployed, which results in a very episodic storyline. Director Billy Wilder felt a stronger motivation was needed to push the men into this absurd situation. In *Some Like It Hot*, the two men have witnessed the famous 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre, and it's a matter of life and death that they get out of Chicago and hide. In giving the story threat and direction, he raised the stakes and created one of the greatest farces of all time.

The whole purpose of farce is to make us laugh. This is a genre in which everything is designed for entertainment value. Farce isn't meant to deal with the kind of serious subjects we might find in satire or dark comedy, such as *JoJo Rabbit* (the subject of Seger Note #4). Nor does it merely bend reality, simply slanting it toward a smile here and there. It plays with very specific elements, which are the core of farce.

What is farce all about? And why is it so difficult to pull off?

### The Elements of Farce: Mistaken Identity

Almost all farces are based on mistaken identity and disguise. The plot forces characters to move to extremes in hiding their true identity in order to achieve their goal. In doing so, the plot reverses our expectations. Nothing is as it seems. The comedy comes partly from the fact that the audience is in on the joke, and the other characters are not.

In the case of *Some Like It Hot*, we smile at the idea that Jerry becomes Daphne and Joe becomes Josephine. We might also find it amusing that the people playing these roles themselves changed their names when they became actors. Bernie Schwartz changed his name to Tony Curtis. Norma Jean Mortenson changed her name to Marilyn Monroe—and her character in the movie, Sugar Kowalczyk, changed her name to Sugar Cane. And when Joe, as Josephine, puts on a further disguise and becomes the millionaire Junior, or Mr. Shell Oil, he takes on the accent of Cary Grant, whose real name was Archibald Leach.

Josephine, who is Joe in disguise, is Sugar's friend, and Sugar can't wait to tell her that she's met a millionaire. Of course, Joe/Josephine is also the millionaire.

The disguises create an identity which is almost the opposite of who the "real" person seems to be. Joe is a ladies' man. In Act One, we see him seducing a secretary with kisses and sweet nothings. Yet when he becomes Josephine, he is the one who is more contained. He's concerned that they'll be found out. He wants to pull back. When he meets Sugar, he pretends to be totally uninterested and wants her to move because she's blocking his view. When he has his evening on the yacht with Sugar, he tells her that he just doesn't feel anything for women and she will have to convince him. Yet, he falls in love with her and, by the end, they are headed for marriage. He is clearly willing to jump through many hoops to be with her for the long run.

Jerry, at the beginning, is the one who holds back. But as Daphne, he becomes excitable, and spending an evening dancing and being wooed by Owen makes him positively giddy over his engagement and impending marriage. He shakes the maracas and dances around the room in glee.

A staple in mistaken-identity farces and comedies is the idea that some of the new identity rubs off on the character, who becomes a better or at least a more dimensional person, and usually also a more committed person. Embedded in the humor is a theme relating to our ability to transform ourselves and to learn something about ourselves as we change our identity. The audience is engaged by seeing this more fully dimensional character come into his or her own true self.

Sugar blossoms in the course of the story, with a newfound confidence that comes from feeling loved by her friend Josephine and from her relationship with Junior. Joe learns about real love and commitment by becoming Josephine and finding the woman of his dreams. And Jerry/Daphne, who has not been confident around the opposite sex, discovers that, as Daphne, he loves being among all these girls, and glows as he dances the night away with Owen. He too finds love in spite of the “imperfection” celebrated in the famous last line of the movie, when he confesses his true identity as a man. Owen doesn’t care and says, “Well, nobody’s perfect!”

As identities are switched, stereotypes are played out—and often broken. Sugar is, even in her own eyes, the dumb blonde. She keeps saying she’s not too bright, but we see that’s not true. She makes the connection between Junior collecting shells and being part of Shell Oil. She remembers Josephine and Daphne saying that they went to the Sheboygan Conservatory of Music and uses it to give herself more credibility. She knows about Princeton and Vassar and Bryn Mawr. She knows about debutante balls and cotillions, which is unusual for a showgirl. She feeds back to Junior his own ideas about Freud and the Mayo Brothers, and although she might not know exactly who they are, we see that she is quick-witted.

As the story unwinds, she keeps surprising us. She’s got integrity, as we see when she’s not absolutely sure whether she should take the diamond bracelet. She has charm and vulnerability, she’s fun to be with, and she’s open about her shortcomings. And she’s better at singing than she gives herself credit for, plus she plays the ukulele. Of course, the movie plays on the stereotype of Marilyn Monroe, and she wears some very revealing costumes to show off what she’s best known for. And yet, the more I study Sugar Cane, the more impressed I am by her.

### In Farce, Things Are Not What They Seem

Disguise is not the only element in farce that shows us that things are not what they seem. There is a creative charm in farce that makes us laugh at the unexpected. The coffin in the first sequence is not a coffin but a container for Prohibition booze. The funeral parlor is not a funeral parlor but a speakeasy. The organ is simply a cover to divert attention from the dancing and the big band playing the night away. By the First Turning Point, about 25 minutes into the film, the saxophonist and the bass player are no longer men in a men's band but women in an all-female band.

By the time of the party in Berth 7, the cocktail shaker is a hot water bottle. The whiskey is really vermouth. The ice is an ice block. The "doll" is not a doll at all but is Jerry playing Daphne. The yacht is not really Joe's yacht at all.

### Farce Is Emotional

Farce is more emotional than intellectual. Satire, which also is humorous, is more intellectual, forcing us to think about the situation rather than simply reacting emotionally to it. Movies such as *Dr. Strangelove*, *Being There*, and *JoJo Rabbit* deal with serious subjects. Although we laugh while we are watching, we leave thinking about the consequences of the ideas that the movie explores. Farce is quite different.

Farce requires a certain amount of silliness. Everything is exaggerated, including physical activity. We see pratfalls, people slipping on banana peels, or near misses with a great deal of confusion. Farce depends on physical humor. Many farces use chase scenes which are played as a kind of dumb cop or dumb victim chase.

If there is violence in farce, we are meant to not take it terribly seriously. In *Some Like It Hot*, the camera does not stay on the people being gunned down; it focuses on the reactions and the aftermath as opposed to the actual killing. If people are killed, they fall into a picturesque tableau. This doesn't mean the threat is unreal, but it signals us not to get overly involved. We're not supposed to get too scared—just scared enough to want our main characters to get away safely and, usually, to find love at the end.

### Farce Depends on Reversals

In farce, the characters are generally going in a clear direction, and that direction continually gets reversed because everyone is committed to different goals. Joe and Jerry are determined to save their lives and escape. Their first plan is to go to Urbana, Illinois, but because of a new opportunity they are now going to Florida. They expect to escape by running away in a car and instead they take the train.

These reversals depend on every character having a strong will, a strong motivation, and a firm determination to get what they want. In many films, there is only a goal pulling the character forward, or only a push compelling them to take action. But in farce, the main character or characters frequently have both a push and a pull: a push for them to change direction even as they are still pulled to move in their current direction. Because the situation is so absurd and unique that most of us would never go there, it has to be forced upon them. They have to be so desperate that they are willing to move into the confusion that comes from stepping into this new, absurd, chaotic world. In farce, the characters have to do something outrageous in order to get what they want.

Reversals are played not just with plot and character, but also with other elements, such as props or set pieces or expectations. The bracelet which is meant for Daphne is given to Sugar. The Friends of the Italian Opera is really a cover for mobster activity. Even the speedboat which takes Junior and Sugar to the yacht can only go in reverse. Owen is told that Daphne is really a man, which would ordinarily make someone change their mind, but he loves her, and admits, "Nobody's perfect."

### Using Set Pieces

In most farces, scenes are built into major set pieces which are developed and played out. A set piece is played in one location, and develops and builds toward a conclusion. In *Some Like It Hot*, the speakeasy sequence is a set piece, as is the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, which takes place in the garage. The set piece of the party on the train goes on for about seven minutes, beginning with Sugar and Daphne and then building as other girls are added to the party. They laugh. They tell stories.

They drink. And we wonder how long it will be before Sue, the one in charge, gets wind of what's going on and puts a stop to the party or finds out about the booze and punishes all involved. But instead, all the girls pull off a good party without being found out.

The love scene on the yacht between Junior and Sugar is a set piece which builds through eating, drinking champagne, lots of kissing, and the end of a perfect evening. In the set piece of the chase around the hotel in Act Three, the mobsters try to capture Joe and Jerry when they finally realize they are not the girls they seem to be. These set pieces allow the film to develop relationships while keeping humor going.

### Keeping Up the Pressure

Desperation pushes the story, so everything needs to happen quickly: characters need to decide quickly, they need to act quickly, and there is a sense of the importance of the present moment. It's not easy to get away from the situation once you're in it. The pressure is intensified by the use of limited locations.

Limited locations force connections and create a sense of urgency which has to resolve itself. Whether the groom has to get to the church on time in order to keep the bride from marrying the wrong person, or whether the characters have to escape danger or they will shortly be killed, tight quarters add to the threat. This doesn't always mean only one location, but farce is not epic.

Most farcical plays take place in one or two rooms. Most of *Some Like It Hot* takes place at a Florida resort hotel. There is the beach. There is the yacht just off the shore. There are the ballrooms and the bedrooms and the reception area. But the characters don't go into town and they don't move from state to state (except, of course, when they take the train from Chicago to Florida, which itself is a constricted space). When the mobsters come to the hotel, suddenly the protagonists and the antagonists are occupying the same space: the same elevators, the same ballroom, the same hotel hallways and reception area. Naturally, they are going to cross paths and intersect, and that's where the fun is—in the intersection.

### Farce Depends on Speed and Timing

In comedy, and particularly in farce, timing is everything. Most farces are fast-paced because we know there will be an Imminent Reveal and because there is time pressure. Just as most farces take place in limited locations, they also take place in a condensed time frame, usually in a few days or a week or two. This squeezes everybody into the same place and forces development and revelations to happen. In *Some Like It Hot*, Act One seems to take place over a period of less than twenty-four hours, and the period spent at the hotel is probably less than a week (a band is usually booked for a short period of time).

“Keeping it moving” is extremely important, and there is a great deal of movement in farce. People stride and run down hotel hallways. People go up and down stairs. Sugar shimmies as she plays the ukulele and turns toward her fellow musicians for emphasis. People dance. Daphne shakes the maracas.

Everything is fast-paced, which generates lots of possibilities for near misses. These are accidents of timing, just as coincidences are. People just happen to be in the same place at the same time in a way that is unpredictable and often absurd. The chances of things happening this way in real life are probably almost zero, and yet farce allows any number of coincidences to happen, and to happen at the same time. This collision of elements forces comedy, and also forces the plot to move quickly to some kind of resolution.

In *Some Like It Hot*, Joe and Jerry just make it to the train—of course. Later, it's clear that Joe (who until a moment before had been disguised as the millionaire) had just enough time to put on his Josephine wig and make it into a very bubbly bubble bath before the door opens and it's Sugar, talking about the wonderful millionaire she's just met. We feel, “Whew, that was a close one!”

Doors opening and closing at exactly the right or wrong moment are a staple of farce. A door might get slammed in somebody's face. Somebody leaves a room through one door and, just as it closes, another door opens; if the timing had been different by a split second, something comically awful would (or would not) have happened.

Perhaps you've been in a farcical situation where you just missed an opportunity or where, if somebody had opened the door at that exact moment, it would have been curtains for somebody or another. Many years ago I was at a reception in Los Angeles and the person I was talking to was looking over my shoulder. I turned around to see what she was looking at just as the door closed. My friend turned back to me and said, "That was Robert Redford going out the door!" Although some might call this near miss a true tragedy, it's more apt to be an element of farce. The stakes aren't high, and you can't help but smile.

In farce, a chase imparts energy and rhythm and usually humor. These are not the serious chases we see in westerns, where the good guy is chased on horseback by the bad guy or vice versa, or the chases we see in mobster movies which are life-and-death situations. Often, they are no more than chases from room to room or chases around the bed. Though *Some Like It Hot* starts with what seems to be a serious chase situation—mobsters being pursued by the police with guns a-blazing—and for a few moments we might not be sure we're watching a comedy, our expectations are soon reversed. It isn't a matter of who is in the coffin, but what is in the coffin. The stakes drop: instead of life and death, the question is simply whether the booze will be delivered to the speakeasy without the police knowing. It looks as if this is a near miss. The cops almost got these guys, but not quite—as they slip into what seems to be a funeral home, with a sober service and organ music. Yet once again our expectation is reversed: the cops do get into the speakeasy and start to arrest people, but they miss Joe and Jerry.

There are further near misses as Joe and Jerry evade both the mobsters and the police, who seem to be around every corner. And more, as Joe and Jerry, who are now Josephine and Daphne, walk past the police at the train station. There are also near misses when they are almost found out to be men by the girls in the band. Again and again, they barely miss the moment that would make everything unravel.

Great farces depend on actors with exquisite timing, but it's not just the actors: the director and editor need to know how to keep that rhythm going. As you watch the film, notice the number of shots of the train's wheels turning as it chugs toward its destination. Notice the rhythm that comes from the instruments, such as the close-ups



of the saxophone riff or the rhythm or the bass, which includes a twirl now and then. Some of the laughs come from the intercuts, such as the slower scene of Junior and Sugar on the yacht as she tries to make him feel something for her as a woman, and the faster-paced scenes of Daphne and Owen dancing the tango—obviously having a whale of a time.

Sue directs the band to pick up the pace. A farce is a “happening place”—and we in the audience catch the rhythm and sometimes even physically respond to the rhythms, as we lean forward and guffaw, clap with pleasure, or even tap our foot with the music.

### Balancing Plot and Characters

Although a farce usually does not have a complex theme, it needs well-developed characters and a plot that keeps putting them into situations which reveal more about them. Farce usually depends on multiple plot lines, with a main plot giving direction, while subplots intersect and push at the main plot, complicating it while forcing relationships to unfold.

In *Some Like It Hot*, the mobsters, who are the source of the threat in Act One and Act Three, actually disappear for the whole of Act Two, while the subplots develop relationships and play with the theme of identity. Joe, as Josephine, falls in love with Sugar. Sugar falls in love with Junior. The relationship between Jerry/Daphne and Owen develops, as does the friendship between Sugar and Joe/Josephine. The threat in Act Two has more to do with Joe/Josephine and Jerry/Daphne being found out than whether or not they will survive. At the Second Turning Point, the directional plot returns as the mobsters arrive in Florida for the Italian opera convention, adding energy and threat and momentum to Act Three.

Even though the mobster plot, which is the engine for Act One and Act Three, disappears in Act Two, without that engine and that threat this movie would simply be a story about cross-dressing men in an all-girls band, and as limp and episodic as the films on which it was based.

### Study Questions

1. Google reviews of this film and articles that discuss why it is considered among the top five film comedies.
2. Watch the film and make a note of when you laughed. Also track the tender moments, many of which are carried by Sugar with her sweetness and her vulnerability. Notice how farce allows room for tenderness but is careful always to move back to humor, usually by reversing an expectation at the end of a scene. An example of this is when Daphne gets back from her evening with Owen and plays the maracas. Life is good! Well, except for a few complications . . .
3. List the set pieces and time them. See if you can find a three-act structure in each section such as the yacht scene, the massacre scene, the party on the train scene, the ballroom scene when the mobsters are killed at the hotel. Analyze how each set piece builds, and builds, and builds. You will find tools for analyzing the three-act structure and scene sequences in my books *Making a Good Script Great* and *Advanced Screenwriting*.
4. Look at Act Two to see how conflict is maintained between characters, even though the biggest threat is not present. How many conflict points can you find?
5. Look at scenes which contain a real threat, such as the gunfire and chase scenes, and track the use of humor to lower the stakes. Look also at scenes containing the smaller threat of the characters' disguises being revealed.



**Dr. Linda Seger** has consulted on over 2000 projects, including nearly 100 produced feature films and television shows, since defining the role of script consultant in 1981.



Linda has taught script consultant masterclasses for major film studios and television networks in the US and Europe, and presented screenwriting seminars at film schools and universities in over 30 countries. She is the author of 16 books, ten of them on screenwriting, including the bestselling *Making a Good Script Great*, *Creating Unforgettable Characters*, *Writing Subtext*, and *You Talkin' to Me: How to Write Great Dialogue*. Visit [lindaseger.com](http://lindaseger.com) to subscribe to her newsletter.

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