

STAYING IN OR GETTING OUT. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO CHARACTER IN DANISH AND SWEDISH MULTIPLE VERSION COMEDIES OF THE 1930s

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The multiple version film represents unique material for a comparative aesthetic analysis. This case study is an opportunity to explore different comic character strategies in two multiple version films: *Frk. Møllers Jubilæum* (Miss Møller's Jubilee, 1937, Denmark), and *Julia Jubilerar* (Julia Jubilates, 1938, Sweden).

So as not to mislead my readers, I should start by saying that I shall not be discussing the differences between these films in terms of nationality. Rather, my analysis will be devoted to questions surrounding the comic characters themselves.

Both films were made by Alice O'Fredericks and Lau Lauritzen Jr., the directorial team who in many ways was the personification of modern Danish comedy. The male love interest in the films, Peter/Erik, is in fact played by Lau Lauritzen Jr., who performs similarly in both films. The female love interest (Grete/Gretha), is also very closely matched in terms of character in each version. Finally, the films use the same storyline as well as the same locations.

While there are an abundance of similarities between the films, the title character of Miss Møller/Julia is handled very differently in each film. The Danish film becomes an aggressive, tongue-in-cheek farce as opposed to the Swedish version, which is a much gentler comedy.

Gently Does It

Julia Jubilerar stars Katie Rolfson in the leading role as an old maid accountant, who invites two colleagues on a skiing trip. One is the goofy Mårton, played by popular actor Thor Mondéen. He has repeatedly asked her to marry him over the past twenty years, but received a negative response every time. The other is the parentless Gretha, for whom Julia wants to find a nice young man, so that she won't end up a spinster like herself.

The film's exposition scenes are set up so as to reflect the different sides of Julia. She is shown to be strict, responsible, and unfeminine. Even though the narrative possibilities are slight and only point to a rather crude stereotypical conception of the spinster/accountant, actress Katie Rolfson's performance makes her character believable and at times touching. In clear opposition to her acting style, Mondéen's Mårton is a goofy, one-dimensional stereotype.

When Julia and Mårton discuss Julia's unfulfilled dreams in the beginning of the film, Julia contemplates that she could have married and had a daughter Gretha's age. To this Mårton remarks that he has asked her to marry him many times, but that she has



always refused him. Julia replies that she was young and full of dreams, but that now she is old and it's too late. Mårton comments that it has been good to have remained friends all along, to which Julia retorts: "But it's not enough! Every woman needs a husband and a child." She concludes by proclaiming that they must find a suitable man for Gretha.

Here Rolfson certainly strives for a depth of character as she displays her feelings and the reasons for them. Small things such as her glances and her hesitations, point to a character's inner life and lend conviction to the lines.

Aggressive Characterisation

For the Danish version, Alice O'Fredericks and Lau Lauritzen Jr. cast the reigning queen of the popular revue, Liva Weel, to play Miss Møller. Like her Swedish counterpart, Liva Weel plays a sad woman with no romantic past. In this film, however, the spinster/accountant characterization has been given excessively conceived in order to achieve a comically grotesque quality, rather than to evoke a believable, female stereotype.

The popular entertainer Børge Rosenbaum, who later went on to achieve worldwide fame under the name of Victor Borge, plays her colleague Asmussen.

Weel and Rosenbaum play Miss Møller and Asmussen as pure caricatures, sometimes overplaying the roles to the point of absurdity. They are constantly shown to be incapable of corporeal and vocal control, as is evident in Miss Møller's hysterical giggles, and Asmussen's awkward grunts.

Their acting is underlined by a graphic stylisation of their appearances whereby their stereotypes are virtually drawn on them. Hair, make-up, and costumes give Miss Møller's spinster a look of constant grimness, while Asmussen's goofy and timid bachelor is effectively and relentlessly evoked by a cartoony hairdo and artificially raised eyebrows.

This aggressive characterization may certainly work against any grain of sense and sincerity that might be found in the story, but, as we shall see, it is part of a larger strategy of comic characterization.

In a scene that is parallel to the one with Katie Rolfson discussed earlier, we encounter a shift to a musical number wherein Miss Møller laments her anti-romantic plight. This number is the first of several instances that demonstrates a significant shift in her character's portrayal. As soon as the extra-diegetic music is heard, we witness a change in voice and acting style that signals the film's shift to a poetically stylized version of the old maid. This beautiful, melodramatic song portrays Miss Møller's stereotype with a completely different dramatic resonance of sincerity. In this moment, it is as if light seems to shine on her through a prism that allows us to indulge in another character who is nevertheless the same person.

Liva Weel's character could have never spoken convincingly of lost opportunities as can Katie Rolfson's one, in part because the melancholy of her statements would have simply been lost when played out in caricature. However, the lyricism found in the musical mode allows Weel to reveal the sadder side of her stereotypical portrayal *without* any dependence on realism. In one song, her character symbolically uses the stages of a flower's existence whereby death becomes a surprisingly strong theme: the flower, like herself, was a bud that grew and finally withered. In the second verse, she reminisces about Asmussen's clumsy proposals and how she let him down. The chorus goes: "It's hopeless to wish for past to come back, 'cause we're not young any more. Even though you didn't win my heart, you'll always have me as a friend."

Here, Liva Weel is allowed to use her fictional character to showcase her signature talents as an actual performer. It may be argued that Weel's acknowledgement of the audience during both of her numbers in the film support a non-fictive star performance, although such an acknowledgement is surely a commonplace in comedies.

As soon as the song is over, she falls promptly back into her caricatured performance, which marks a shift in characterization.

Character as Locus for Performance and Spectacle

In the film, Miss Møller and Asmussen are depicted in several grotesque situations. Filmed in fast motion, the actors perform acrobatic stunts with the aid of body doubles, which provides a playfully wild and poetic dis-unity to the characters' dimen-

sion of talent. More precisely, for Miss Møller and Asmussen, *character* serves as a locus for performance and spectacle. In this sense, a unified psychology or identity is secondary.

In the musical skating scene, for example, Weel seems to strive for a continuity between acting and performance. As we see in her close-ups, Weel expertly integrates her giggles and involuntary movements into her singing, making her performance compatible with her caricature. But again the film chooses to challenge her character's unity. In the long shots, we remark what is clearly a body double for a whole new Miss Møller, who is capable of performing artistic figure skating that is perfect to a fault. As we also find in Asmussen's character, there is a discrepancy between his *out of control* caricaturization and a *controlled* body double who elegantly masters the clumsy art of *not* being able to skate.

In this scene Miss Møller's and Asmussen's identities are shells for the performance of stunts. On this comic scale, characterization disappears. This also holds true in the skiing scene that culminates with a shot of a stunt version of Miss Møller whose head is buried in the snow, her legs protruding.

The situation is very different in the Swedish version. In the skating scene stunt doubles are also (presumably) used, but it is striking how invisibly the film transitions between actor and stunt double. The flawless cuts create the illusion that Julia and Mårton are expert skaters which, if performative unity is the goal, makes for a much more satisfying performance.

In terms of aggressive characterization, Thor Mondéen's Mårton in the Swedish version is very much on par with Møller and Asmussen. However, his character has nowhere near the performative diversity of his Danish counterparts.

Both films open with Asmussen/Mårton trying out pianos in the company store-room.

Mondéen uses his clumsy charm, which corresponds with his stereotype, as he pounds away on two pianos. Børge Rosenbaum, for whom the number was designed, delivers a performance of musical precision as he takes on six grand pianos with two deft hands and an office chair. Whereas Mondéen, in the Swedish version, never strays far from character, there is a whole different sense of performance and spectacle in Rosenbaum's playing, thus a greater clash between the expert performer and the nitwit caricature of Asmussen.

Baroque vs. Discrete

In the pivotal roles of the Danish film, we have two comic characters whose extremely different stylistic and performative upstrategies make the characters at times grotesques, at times musically melodramatic. Sometimes the actors' signature talents shine through the fictive characterization. At other times, the antics of anonymous body doubles invade the characters.

Frøken Møller's Jubilæum is a baroque film which pushes its fiction to the limits by constantly revealing the very signs of fiction and genre.

The actors in *Julia Jubilerar* do not change nearly as much as their Danish counterparts. In fact, it seems that they do not stray once they are placed within certain lim-

its of characterization. *Julia Jubilerar* thus becomes a comedy that is closer to a unified norm in which characterization is redundant, whether or not the caricature, albeit stereotyped, has any depth.

The point of this case study has been to explore different approaches to the comic character and to explain the difference these approaches create in two parallel films.