

The Many Faces of

Trading Places

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The film Trading Places, directed by John Landis and written by Timothy Harris and Herschel Weingrod, functions interestingly as a comedy. It is a trickster piece which shows elements of farce and character comedy. Further, it is a comedy which often has more than the lightly comedic to say.

Foremost, Trading Places involves a trickster plot, jibing well with Freud's concept of disguise as humor. The first trickster we meet is Billy Ray Valentine. He presents himself as a cripple on a dolly, begging for money out of pity. Two police officers uncover his disguise, but he manages to avoid punishment. When he accidentally knocks Louis Winthorpe III's briefcase down and tries to give it back, however, he is taken for a thief. In jail though, he retains his trickster qualities, recounting for his cellmates his ostensible expertise in karate and the "quart of blood technique," in which "a quart of blood will drop out of the person you're fighting."

Randolph and Mortimer Duke, the wealthy owners of Duke and Duke Commodities Brokers, seize on an opportunity they now have with Valentine. Randolph believes in environment as a basis for human behavior, while Mortimer favors breeding. To decide who is right, Randolph proposes a bet, of their "usual amount," in which they give Valentine a comfortable environment in which to thrive, hoping that his personality and behavior will improve. Likewise, Randolph feels that by taking a proper, well-to-do person like Winthorpe and removing his house, job, fiance, friends, and wealth, they can force him into a life of crime. Mortimer, feeling that neither will change since genetics is the deciding factor, takes the bet. Thus, a trickster plot begins, with Valentine and Winthorpe as the unsuspecting victims, living out the whims of the Dukes and donning disguises they don't even know they wear.

The Dukes give Billy Ray what used to be Louis' home and job. Billy Ray, though skeptical at first, develops trust for the Dukes. When people as high-class as the Dukes are willing to give him all they have, Billy Ray happily returns the favor. Proving that he is smart in spite of his impoverished upbringing, Billy Ray voices his opinions on buying pork bellies and, much to Mortimer's dismay, is

correct, saving the Dukes thousands of dollars. Louis, on the other hand, is framed by the Dukes for stealing money and possessing drugs. He catapults downward, taking to a life of scavenging and crime. The trick is so complete that his faithful servant Coleman, employed by the Dukes, now refuses to recognize Louis when he visits his old home. Coleman of course lies, saying "there's no Coleman here," but does so only because the Dukes force him into this situation to help execute their trick. Louis attempts to regain his status by framing Valentine, who he thinks is the guilty party, for drug possession. He then pulls a gun and threatens Billy Ray, cinching the bet for Randolph, who has shown that environment indeed overpowers ancestry.

Valentine overhears the Dukes discussing the bet, however. He is a trickster who has been tricked, for a measly one dollar bet. This betrayal can only spell doom for the Dukes. Meeting with Louis, they both realize that the Dukes have been playing another trick, this time on the entire commodities industry. The Dukes have been paying a security agent, Clarence Beeks, to procure a secret orange crop report before its public reading, so that they might get a great head start in trading frozen concentrated orange juice, cornering the market and making millions. Coleman suggests that they beat the Dukes to it, and yet another trick begins.

Billy Ray, Louis, Coleman, and Ophelia, a prostitute Louis met during his poverty, all adopt disguises and board a train in Washington, DC, with Beeks, intending to secretly switch reports. Eventually, they manage to get the report. Disguised as Beeks, Billy Ray gives the Dukes a fake report. At trading day in New York City, the climactic trick scene begins. The Dukes, following their report that the crop will be bad, instruct their trader only to buy orange juice, feeling that the price will shoot through the roof once the report is publicly announced that day. Feeling that the great Dukes' confidence in buying means they know something, other brokers buy as well. Billy Ray and Louis, on the floor with the traders, begin to sell when they feel the Dukes have driven the price high enough. The public announcement brings news of a healthy crop, and the price begins to

plummet. The Dukes panic, owning many shares at a high price. Everyone now wants to sell, and Billy Ray and Louis are happy to buy at the new extremely low price. Confronting the Dukes, they explain that Louis be Billy Ray that they couldn't "get rich and put [the Dukes] in the poorhouse at the same time." Louis lost the bet, and pays Billy Ray one dollar in front of the Dukes.

In addition to the tricks, there are corollary aspects of farce, for one person's trick is another person's farce. For Louis, everything goes wrong in the first half of the film. He loses everything. The Dukes even charge him, falsely of course, with embezzlement. As Freud would interpret, he begins a transformation to the ridiculous. When he attempts to withdraw money from his bank, a security guard throws him onto the street. Point-of-view cinematography informs this moment. Louis is shot from a high angle, making him appear small, while Ophelia is shot from below, resulting in an emphasizing of her height. The prostitute is now greater than the rich businessman. Proper Louis begins to dress terribly, scrounge for food, get drunk, and he can think of nothing other than vicious revenge. In desperation, he sells his extremely expensive watch to a pawnbroker for just \$50, and ends up purchasing a gun. The pathetic Santa Claus costume he wears to go frame Valentine emphasizes the sad transformation. When the framing attempt fails, Louis hits his lowest moment. Going home, a dog urinates on his foot. Echoing this, a hard rain begins on him. He raises his gun to commit suicide, but it won't fire. He tosses it away, only to have it fire upon hitting the ground. Indeed, everything has gone wrong, and Louis' life is now a farce.

The next person whose life becomes farce is Clarence Beeks. Beeks, who succeeded in helping the Dukes switch the places of Billy Ray and Louis, now appears successful in stealing the crop report. When Beeks discovers the heroes' attempts to thwart him on the train, he brings them into a cargo car at gunpoint. In the car is a live gorilla, and on the train is a group of people throwing a costume party for New Years Eve. When a man in a gorilla suit enters the cargo car with them, Beeks knocks him out. The real gorilla, offended by this, knocks Beeks out. When all seemed

hopeless for Louis and his cohorts, fate smiled upon them. They dress Beeks in the partier's gorilla suit, and in an inspired moment, place the costumed Beeks in the real gorilla's cage. Beeks' life will never be the same after spending time with the real gorilla. The man in the gorilla suit, the clowns, and other members of the costume party help lend a circus-like atmosphere to the train, appropriate for the farcical situation Beeks gets in.

Naturally, the Dukes also become farcical characters. Their trick against Billy Ray and Louis succeeds, but presses their victims toward revenge. Billy Ray and Louis do this by thwarting the Dukes' other trick, the orange juice scam, getting double revenge against the Dukes and Beeks. In the end, the Dukes lose their fortune, their seats at the exchange, and all their assets, leaving them with absolutely nothing and no hope of recovery. All has gone as wrong as possible in their now farcical lives.

Trading Places also functions as a character comedy, in that it presents several one-dimensional characters, none of whom are admirable in their own right, but alters a few characters, proving them to have learned valuable things about life. The question of heredity versus of environment, the very basis for the plot, itself seeks to understand human nature. Thus, it is understandable that such a story should explore this, commenting on different character types.

Billy Ray is presented as poor, Black, conman. This plays on common stereotypes. Indeed, it is stereotyping which leads to his arrest during the briefcase incident, since he was in fact only trying to give Louis' case back. When first brought into his new home, he sings in the bathtub. Randolph claims that Blacks are "a very musical people." Though not an unfavorable comment, it is a stereotype nevertheless, and helps perpetuate the sense of Billy Ray being one, unchanging type of person. However, he takes to his new environment and immediately displays positive characteristics.

His first instinct is to go out and buy champagne for his friends, inviting them to a party at his home, showing him to be selfless. However, he respects his new home, and complains about the partiers making stains on his Persian rug. He further scolds them upon seeing several drink glasses sitting around, asking "Haven't you ever heard of coasters?" Paralleling Louis, he makes his own transformation. Humor comes from the unexpected concern he has over etiquette, but since he gains positive qualities, Billy Ray's change isn't as "ridiculous" as Louis'. At the end of the party, he says, "Goodnight, Coleman. Thanks, man." Coleman's response is "Goodnight, sir." Though seemingly meaningless, this exchange is actually quite telling. He expresses sincere thanks to his servant, who he can't really view as beneath him. Coleman likewise calls him "sir" not just out of habit or procedure, but out of respect for someone who shows true worth in his concern and sincerity in his thanks.

Billy Ray goes on to display even greater changes for the better. When Coleman drives him past a cab, Billy Ray sees Louis inside. Billy Ray exclaims, "He looks just like the motherfu- I mean, he looks just like the gentleman that had me busted." The self-correction shows his developing concern for propriety. When Mortimer later drops his money clip, Billy Ray's face first indicates that he's happy to find such a treasure. However, he quickly changes his mind, running down several flights of stairs to catch up to Dukes. He returns the clip, extremely proud of himself, claiming, "It's all there. Count it." That Randolph finds it unnecessary to count makes Billy Ray happier, expressing a mutual trust, and Billy Ray must be seen as worthy for returning a favor to those who've helped him so much.

The wealthy people in the story stand in stark contrast to Billy Ray. Louis is presented as a spoiled caricature, with Coleman serving him breakfast in bed and helping him dress for work. Just as the audience must be getting sick of the royal treatment Louis receives, the scene shifts to the even more extreme Dukes. As they leave their home, a dozen servants greet them, extending to ridiculous

proportions the single servant of Louis'. All are presented as stereotypical snobs, especially at their seemingly favorite hangout, the Heritage Club, whose ironic motto is "With Liberty and Justice For All - Members Only."

Louis' friends and fiancée are just as pretentious and stereotypical as he and the Dukes. When Louis is framed, they all abandon him with great speed. His fiancée Penelope, on meeting him at the jail, says "You look awful," showing her to be concerned mainly with appearances. Though she's worried about the fact that he's been fighting, evident from his beaten face, she says this in the same breath with which she tells him he smells. Clearly, her priorities are misplaced. She leaves him, and along with their friends, denies any friendship with Louis, leaving him alone in his fight to regain respect.

Mortimer and Randolph, however, display the least worth as stereotypical rich people. Their great wealth allows them to act on whims, and the entire identity-switch trick is cruel to all concerned. That they can thrust a hardworking, honest man like Louis onto the street is reprehensible. Further, they intended to stick Billy Ray back in the ghetto once the bet was over. When the reverse trick is pulled on them, Randolph drops to the floor. Mortimer expresses his true worries, saying "Fuck him." He is more concerned with their lost fortune than his ill brother. Indeed, such people deserve the come-uppance they receive, and should stand as negative examples for the audience.

Probably the most consistent display of good character is Coleman. He too is a stereotype, a British servant. (Indeed, accents help define characters, relating to the commedia dell'arte accents. The British servant parallels the servant from Bergamo, and individual accents are given to Billy Ray, Louis and his friends, and the Dukes.) However, he helps expose and break the other stereotypes around him. When Louis and Penelope offer him their dessert, he throws it out in the kitchen, showing rich peoples' fare to be beneath him, a servant. He subtly positions himself above the

wealthy, implying that there's more to human character than what's on the surface, i.e., classy food. He then receives a call from one of the Duke's, who asks him to participate in the trick against Louis. After hanging up the phone, he states, "What a scumbag." He obeys, since he is in the Dukes' employ, but doesn't truly want to deny Louis as he soon will. Indeed, when he threatens to call the police on Louis, a quick, subtle facial gesture from Coleman informs the audience that he isn't enjoying the trick, and that he feels badly about his actions. Later, Coleman sneaks a drink at Billy Ray's party, showing that he can let his guard down a little with Billy Ray, who he can ironically relate to better than he did to Louis. The honesty and lack of pretense in Billy Ray is therefore to be admired.

When Coleman later suggests that Billy Ray and Louis beat the Dukes at their own game, he helps bring together the two victims of the trick. This is especially meaningful for Louis, who, though having learned a lot in his poverty, retained aspects of his one-dimensionality in his prejudice against Blacks. With Coleman as a common bond, Louis and Billy Ray look past race, joining together outside the bounds of stereotype to defeat the villains. In the end, it is clear that the Dukes, who don't really care about other people, using them to exploit their own whims, are the kind of characters the audience is meant to hate. Alternately, Louis and Billy Ray, who have learned to join together against such people are to be admired, as is Coleman, the servant who transcended his servitude to help defeat the Dukes and earn status in his own right.

Several devices are used to give texture to the plot. The musical score is often composed of parodies of classical music, including themes from Mozart and many other great composers. When the Dukes leave their grand country home at the beginning, we hear a quote from "Pomp and Circumstance," surely a joke aimed at the pompous airs of the Dukes. This device helps makes the wealthy seem cultured, but shows them to be unauthentic and pretentious. The pieces aren't the real compositions, only parodic imitations. This pokes fun at the artificiality of the wealthy lifestyle, and

one can't help but wonder whether, upon hearing such pieces, they'd really know the difference between the parodies and the real thing. A nice contrast appears when, on Billy Ray's first day of work, we hear a beefed up orchestral version of "Yankee Doodle," bringing the common man into the world of the upper class.

Obscenity is another device which sheds light on the characters. Eddie Murphy is famous for gratuitous obscenity in his film work, but his use of it in Trading Places seems justified in that it provides for contrast between his lower class character and the prim and proper upper class. Louis attempts to be funny with a weak pun, saying that those who didn't play the pork belly market correctly have gone "belly up." Billy Ray, however, can get a laugh by throwing a vulgarity into his speech for no real reason. But unlike ancient Greek comedy, where vulgarity was thrown in simply for the sake of humor, the contrast here is of greater importance, evident by Billy Ray's self-correction regarding Louis in the cab. Language is something which separates the classes, and Billy Ray's rejection of lower class vulgarity helps us see him in a better light than we might have at the beginning of the film. Likewise, since we never hear Louis swear, it is a relief to hear him say "Let's kick some ass" while on his way to the big trading day at the end. It is a sign that he has loosened up and has become less of the propriety-obsessed snob he had been.

One final element which plays a key role in structuring the plot is the concept of reversal and duality. The very title itself resonates in reference to commodities trading and to the main thrust of the plot, the identity trade between Billy Ray and Louis. The trade itself is, of course, an extreme form of reversal, Billy Ray moving up in the world as a direct result of Louis moving down. At the end of the first trick, the Dukes decide they don't want Louis back, and since Billy Ray is destined once again for the ghetto, both find themselves on the bottom of the socioeconomic pole. They are now poised for their own trick, in which they will rise at the expense of the Dukes. Indeed, the bigger they come the harder they fall, and as the great Dukes fall flat, the success of Louis and Billy Ray is

just as great in comparison. In itself, this is a reversal. That it directly echoes the first trick yields an additional sense of duality. The new one dollar bet between Louis and Billy emphasizes this mirror effect.

Another reversal can be found in the fate of Clarence Beeks. Just as Billy Ray and Louis were "screwed over" by the Dukes as the result of a scientific experiment (regarding heredity versus the environment), Beeks is "screwed" by Billy Ray and Louis. His plan is thwarted, and his implied relationship with the real gorilla adds a literalness to his being "screwed." In the end, the cage is shown being hoisted onto a ship bound for Africa for "a big scientific experiment," creating a further duality with the initial fates of Billy Ray and Louis in the Dukes' experiment.

The debate over the purpose of comedy is especially pertinent to Trading Places. In this case, comedy seems to function for both pleasure and usefulness. On one hand, the film is funny to watch. However, one can certainly dig deeper and find useful lessons. This is evident from the earlier discussion of character comedy. We learn not to be exploitative and careless like the Dukes. But unlike many character comedies, where we learn simply what not to be, Trading Places gives us positive models as well. Both Billy Ray and Louis begin at one extreme, move to the other, and end up somewhere in the middle, proving Aristotle's theory of means and extremes to be worthwhile. Billy Ray, the poor, untrusting conman, becomes rich and develops total trust of the Dukes, but their trick wakes him up to the truth. He cons them back, regaining his street smarts while retaining his newfound culture. Louis provides an equally good example of discovering a mean. A cocky aristocrat, his poverty itself teaches him lessons about values and who he can really trust. Indeed, his sad state, evident from his beating in the jail and his pathetic drunkenness on the bus home from framing Billy Ray, is really nothing to laugh at. He is forced into a terrible life, and his transformation to the "ridiculous" is so extreme that the audience should realize that Trading Places isn't meant just to entertain. In the end, coming back halfway he is able to conquer prejudice and work with Billy Ray

for their own mutual benefit. He regains his fortune and can live well, but is now a better human being as a result of the poverty he'd gone through.