

Lora Looney: I'm sitting with Emilio Williams, comedy playwright from Spain who calls Chicago home. He's a writing fellow at the Art Institute of Chicago where he's pursuing an MFA and where, this fall, he will be an instructor teaching bilingual and bi cultural creativity.

Lora Looney: In 2016, I found his play, Smartphones, in an English translation volume called New Plays From Spain. Then I found his blog online, wrote him to ask how to find a Spanish version of Smartphones for my course, 21st Century Spanish Literature. We read Smartphones and Emilio Skyped in for an hour to teach the group. Emilio so engaged the students that I knew I would invite him to collaborate with my course, Nation and Identity in Spanish Theater, which I am teaching now.

Lora Looney: Welcome to the University of Portland, Emilio.

Emilio Williams: Thank you so much, Doctor Looney. So great to be here. I enjoyed this week so much. Your students are so hilarious, and bright, young people. You know, it gives me hope. It gives me hope in life, it gives me hope in this country.

Lora Looney: The future is bright.

Emilio Williams: Yeah. It is such an incredible generation and these kids are so bright and funny, and you cannot hope for anything more.

Lora Looney: And Nation and Identity students have read two comedies and two tragedies from 1805 to 1933. The first half of the semester is a true literature course. We read, comprehend, analyze and discuss the texts with special attention to gender roles, especially male identity formation in Spanish society. The second half of the semester is a project-based theater laboratory kicked off by your six hour comedy writing workshop.

Lora Looney: Groups of four have been cast into scenes and, with you, students will write a new script by setting the action in contemporary times and by using comedy devices to highlight the gender dynamics, which still have relevance in our present times.

Lora Looney: You've given students their first assignment for the workshop: you've asked them to individually bring a media clip of a moment from comedy that really makes them laugh. And you've told me that you will then adapt the workshop around these student examples of what makes them laugh. I've done the assignment in advance and would like to play a clip from a Hollywood film that I find hilarious.

Lora Looney: In this 1991 road trip movie, Thelma and Louise get a truck driver to pull over after being harassed by him for miles. In setting up the clip, Thelma and Louise pull up next to the truck driver in their convertible, and he continues his rude,

harassing behavior towards them, and they get him to pull over. And they pull over, and that sets up the clip.

Emilio Williams: I love this movie.

Thelma: Where are you going?

Truck Driver: Fresno.

Louise: We've been seeing you all over the place. Why don't you take off those shades? I want to see your eyes.

Truck Driver: Yeah, I've been seeing you too.

Thelma: Yeah. We think you have really bad manners.

Louise: Yeah. Where do you get of behaving like that with women you don't even know, huh?

Thelma: Huh?

Louise: How would you feel if somebody did that to your mother? Or your sister? Or your wife?

Truck Driver: Huh? What are you talking about?

Louise: You know good [inaudible 00:04:09] well what I'm talking about.

Thelma: I mean, really. That business with your tongue, what is that? That is disgusting?

Louise: And oh my god, that other [inaudible 00:04:12] pointing to your lap. I mean, what is that supposed to mean exactly, huh? I mean, does that mean, "Pull over. I want to show you what a big, fat slob I am."?

Thelma: Yeah, or does that mean, "Suck my [inaudible 00:04:25]."?

Truck Driver: You women are crazy.

Louise: You got that right.

Thelma: We think you should apologize.

Truck Driver: I ain't apologizing for [inaudible 00:04:32].

Louise: You say you're sorry.

Truck Driver: [inaudible 00:04:38] that.

Louise: You say you're sorry, or I'm going to make you [inaudible 00:04:50] sorry.

Truck Driver: Oh, Jesus.

Thelma: I bet you even called us beavers on your CB radio, didn't you?

Truck Driver: Yeah. Sure did.

Thelma: I hate that. I hate being called a beaver, don't you?

Louise: You going to apologize or what?

Truck Driver: [inaudible 00:05:02] you.

Truck Driver: Oh God. [inaudible 00:05:15] you.

Louise: I don't think he's going to apologize.

Thelma: No, I don't think so.

Truck Driver: You're going to have to pay for this! I'm going to make you.

Emilio Williams: Wow. It's a movie I love, of course. What a great clip. Yeah. So, what do you think works there?

Lora Looney: Well, I think ... I have to admit, you know, the violence, the violence makes me laugh. And I like how the violence, you know, they blow up his truck, and then the next moment is so playful, you know? They're circling in that convertible, and they've got his hat. And, also, I don't like how he's cast, necessarily, I don't like how he's stereotyped in that sort of Southern accent, he's got kind of a hick person- ... a hick identity attached to him. But what makes me laugh really hard is the take charge, you know? The take charge extreme actions on the part of the women.

Emilio Williams: It's amazing how the catharsis works so well here, right? Because the Greeks said catharsis, really, by witnessing in the theater the revenge of the bloody crime, people wouldn't have to do it in real life because they will experience it through the theater. So, I think what works here really well is a revenge fantasy of doing something like this to someone who is that disgusting, right?

Lora Looney: Yeah, the revenge makes me laugh. In fact, I have I to tell you that after that movie came out, my mom got me a tee-shirt that was a gun pointed outwards, a pistol, and it said, "Meet Thelma and Louise." And I wore it proudly.

Emilio Williams: Yeah. It's such an iconic movie. And I think what is really special, right? As well, is that if you think about it, if something horrible would have happened to the trucker, or it's super violent and big but just to the line where you can stay in

comedy, right? So, that's one line, like if the explosion would have killed people, for example, right? It wouldn't be funny. And that's how wonderful that they were able to bring the violence to the point where it was still funny.

Lora Looney: Do you find it cartoonish in that the trucker, you know, he gets away unscathed, right? I mean, he's fine, he walks away. Is that sort of a cartoon technique?

Emilio Williams: It's a bit cartoonish, yeah. And if you think about it, right? This comedy, it's a little bit like Road Runner, you know?

Lora Looney: Yeah, and they're in the desert, in fact.

Emilio Williams: There is violence but then, even if something terrible happens to them, the next scene they are alive and running again, right? So, there is a component of you get away with it because truly there was no permanent damage done to anybody.

Lora Looney: Awesome.

Lora Looney: So, a female lead from Nation and Identity that fascinates students is La Novia from Bodas de Sangre by Garcia Lorca. And, at her wedding reception, she brushes away the groom saying, "Get away." Just after the groom's mother advises her son how to make love to his wife. And this is my translation: "Try to be affectionate with your wife. And if you notice that she's cold, or withdrawn, then give her a hard hug, or a bite, something that causes her a little pain, then a soft kiss."

Lora Looney: Four students have been cast into this scene for adaptation to modern times. Emilio, if I were a writer, where would I go from here to adapt this scene to comedy?

Emilio Williams: I cannot wait to get my teeth into Garcia Lorca because I think the potential for parody in his material is ... in my country, Garcia Lorca is really a walking God, right? And there is such a respect for him. I explained that many of these plays are the equivalent of Tennessee Williams from the American audience, you know? It's such a sacred cow that is very hard to get in there and make comedy with it but I can wait because I feel, at times, with these three rural tragedies that he takes himself too seriously in a way. And then, he's been canonized in such a way, his work, that I think it's now prime for subversion.

Emilio Williams: I'm actually working on a straight, earnest adaptation of The House of Bernarda Alba now because I feel before I work on parodies the American audience has to get more familiar with the material that I'm trying to make fun on.

Emilio Williams: But, okay, so this scene I love, right? Because there is this moment that even in his serious tragedies he has these very tongue in cheek moments about eroticism and I think many people think that he was casting a lot of his

homosexual experiences in characters that were women, for example, and things like that, so there is a lot there, there is a lot of nuance. But this particular one is hilarious because the father is dead and the mother is taking the role of explaining to the son, so it's so interesting, right?

Lora Looney: How to make love?

Emilio Williams: Right. Because if he would be a father to a son, it wouldn't be as funny as having a mother perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes. But, at the same time, it's what is so interesting, it's so hard for me to imagine a rural woman saying something like this to his kid but it's very interesting and visible. So, I think it's prime for comedy.

Emilio Williams: I mean, the idea that ... In comedy, one of the tricks that we're going to be talking about this weekend, it's something that I was doing in my comedy but I didn't know because you guys are the critics and the scholars, and I'm just a writer, right? But I learn from all of you so much about what is that I'm doing, and things that come for me naturally as a practitioner. And this is something that was explained to me by Ruth McGrath, who is a play writer I adore, but she is also a great scholar from the School [inaudible 00:12:11] Institute, and she's playing to me what I was doing in my comedy.

Emilio Williams: And this is something that we're going to talk about tomorrow in the workshop, is understating and overstating. So, one of the things that I'm doing is taking things that are really tremendous and big, and I'm making them small, and nonchalant, and I'm getting the characters to talk about them like they were very daily occurrence. And, on the other hand, I take things that are very small and I overstate them, as they were something very dramatic and a big deal. And then, when you contrast those two, you create a comedic surprise in the approach of the material that you are making a parody of. So, apparently that was something I was doing that I didn't know I was doing, but now I know.

Lora Looney: And we know that this moment, you know, where the Novia pushes away her new husband, it's literally the wedding reception, so she pushes him away because she doesn't want affection from him, and I think that's the moment where everything begins to unravel. So, then the technique could be to make that big moment more trivial? Is that what we're sort of talking about? Like tragic moments more trivial?

Emilio Williams: No. I will make the biting from the mother bigger.

Lora Looney: Oh, gotcha. All right. Okay.

Emilio Williams: I will have the mother recommending the son to practice sadomasochism in his new ... That would be an example. But I don't know, I mean, let's see what the students come up with, it will be a lot of fun.

Emilio Williams: I think what is hilarious about the moment where the wife says ... the newly married bride says, "Stay away from me." Is that she uses the headache excuse.

Lora Looney: She does, yeah.

Emilio Williams: And it's a 1930s play, and it's already such a stereotype, right?

Lora Looney: Right.

Emilio Williams: But I think that could be so funny because the idea in this environment is that they couldn't have sex until they were married, so they were so looking forward to it because, you know, finally becomes for them acceptable to have sex, and all this time you know there's something weird going on when she's not jumping up and down trying to cut the party short to go to bed with him, right? Because that's when you know that something is weird.

Emilio Williams: So, that would be interesting, actually, how can you adapt that to a more contemporary sitcom, everyday occurrence of a wife not wanting to have se- ... And it's a cliché, so ...

Lora Looney: It is.

Emilio Williams: ... actually maybe the interesting thing may be how can we turn it around?

Lora Looney: Right. Well, the students, you know, are thinking they're going to case this scene at prom. Prom night.

Emilio Williams: So, I think the interesting thing would be, for me, what would be very funny in the parody itself, you know, we turn things around, right? And we put black, white, white, black and see what happens, and this would be how about the husband is the one with the headache and she's the one who is really kind of wants to have sex? Because, let's be honest, the rule about not having sex until marriage was really for women because the men were supposed to have that rule with the women they were marrying, but they were not supposed to have that rule because parents ... I mean, the fathers were bringing the boys to brothels.

Lora Looney: That's right.

Emilio Williams: So, I would be interested if she is the one who was looking forward to this night, to finally have sex, and the man would be the one like, "I have a headache."

Lora Looney: Well, since you brought it up, and women are the guardians of honor, right? And also blamed for the downfall of the family's honor because they, in fact, are the individuals who reproduce, right? Who become pregnant, so virginity is prized to maintain lineages, et cetera.

Lora Looney: And so, at the end of the movie ... Movie, excuse me. At the end of the play, and it is a tragedy, she pleads her virginity, right? She just absolutely- ... It's never really clear in the forest if she and her lover actually consummate, they act; students are divided on that. But how about the ending? What do we do with the ending where she's just this bereft, ruined, she's dishonored her family, Leonardo's wife, there's two dead men on the ground, and dishonored his family too? How can we possibly make that a comedy? What would you do with that?

Emilio Williams: Maybe I'll turn the four characters into lesbians and have them have a happy life without men in their lives? I don't know.

Lora Looney: Good.

Emilio Williams: How can you subvert such a situation, right? But I think the fact that it's a tragedy is very funny. So, in these conversations these days, it's been so wonderful to be here, and I've learned so much from you and your students, it's so interesting, right? That from the academic point of view, particularly when you're looking at historical text, we have very clear definitions of what is a comedy and what is a tragedy. And you're very curious about this idea of how do you make a tragedy comic, right? But, for me, that's the most natural thing; that's where my comedic instinct is because, for me, there is nothing more hilarious than these big tragedies, they're so over the top. And I think about people like Mel Brookes, you know, making a parody of Frankenstein, which is, in theory, the least funny thing that you can imagine other than ...

Emilio Williams: So, I think tragedies, and reinventing tragedies from the canon in a comic way gives us the opportunity to be very silly without necessarily being stupid, which is the trick, right? So, it's being silly for the sake of being silly becomes stupid, but if you use the opportunity to try to shed light into the contradictions of the canon, or the unfairness of the things that they were bringing to this place, or the absurdity of the situation, some gender roles, expectations about gender, particularly I think it can be pretty funny.

Emilio Williams: And I think, you know, as you know, I've been working a lot on how to reinvent this canonical texts.

Lora Looney: Yeah. I want to talk about ... Exactly. You've taken us there and I want to talk about your adaptations of King Lear, Hamlet and Medea.

Emilio Williams: Yeah. So, the first one was the one for King Lear. And how this came about is my dearest muse, and one of my best friends, the actress, [inaudible 00:18:46]. She was on Broadway, on the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, and she was an original cast member of The Laramie Project. And, actually, she's on ... she can be seen in House of Cards as the national security advisor, she's an incredible actress. Her family's originally from Spain, and she was actually born

in Medea, but grew up in the States. And she was representing the evil sister, Goneril, in King Lear in a production and I went to see here.

Emilio Williams: And Goneril, for those who may not know the character, is one of the most evil of all the evil characters ever invented, it's just wonderful. And her being the wonderful actress that she is, she was creating excuses for Goneril because one of the things actors do when they are trying to do these characters is trying to find the truth in them. And it was so funny that she was trying to find excuses for Goneril that I created a monologue for her that, actually, she did in Spain, called Maldita Cordelia, in Spanish, or Damn Cordelia, where she blames everything that happens to the family to the pure, you know, the youngest sister who is the one that represents perfection, and beauty, and kindness in the play, right? And that was the idea.

Emilio Williams: And then, from there, I said, "Well, I think this gives me an excuse to reinvent some of these texts. What can I do?" And I was thinking, "What would be the most difficult character for an actress to defend?" And it had to be Medea, right? So, it's the tragic character of Medea is the woman who kills his two dogs in revenge to her husband infidelity, and there couldn't be anything more serious under [inaudible 00:20:36]. And then, I created this one woman show that has 12 roles where the actress represents Medea, the actress is representing Medea, represents herself, and then represents four or five characters from the original play, and [inaudible 00:20:51]. And then, there is ... something that you will love about this play is that it has a round table discussion of three feminists giving their ideas on Medea. One is a German feminist, another one is an Argentine psychoanalyst explaining the influences of ... Look, you're laughing. [inaudible 00:21:09].

Lora Looney: See, this is the one script I have not read.

Emilio Williams: Yeah, the Lacanian influences of Lacan. And then, the other one is a historian from Oxford giving her opinion on this terrible play that we're watching. So, it gave me also the excuse to talk about academia, and spoof all of you doctors and ...

Lora Looney: Oh yeah, exactly.

Emilio Williams: ... serious scholars with ... In a way, you know, everything I do, I think, in comedy has ended up being a tribute and a parody, in a way. So, I hope I'm not putting down this text, I think I'm making fun of them but also with a lot of love and respect, and King Lear is my favorite play, and I would say Medea is my favorite tragedy, no doubt. So, there is a lot of also love on my [crosstalk 00:21:54].

Lora Looney: Well, let's also talk about your one act play, Hamlet, My Nephew, which makes me laugh out loud every time I read it. In spot on, vernacular English, King Claudius introduces himself as if he were at an AA meeting. Then he tells us why

his nephew, Hamlet, is an [inaudible 00:22:15] because of how he treats Ophelia. And I would say what you do really well is you transport these characters into new contexts; it's a displacement that works very well. And then, you interweave Shakespeare's world with all these references from today's society, like AA, and you just produce astonishing new ways to think about the original tragedy, Hamlet. Would you talk about that project a little bit?

Emilio Williams: Well, of course, another great play, right? That I love. But Claudius is such a disgusting character that the idea to get into his vanity and his mind was so much fun to see other side in the play from his perspective, for me. And, yeah, so it goes in the same kind of, like, these are the three plays that I don't like. I'm also finishing a commission for [inaudible 00:23:09] for Electra, another big tragedy, but that one has more earnest and real moments mixed with moments of craziness as well, and interrupted. But, yeah, so I think probably this will end a cycle until I get my hands on Garcia Lorca.

Lora Looney: But my lifelong challenge is teaching Don Juan Tenorio from 1844. So, this is a play that's technically a comedy, but the Don Juan figure is such a repulsive womanizer that we want to punish him, just like the truck driver in Thelma and Louise. So, it's called a comedy, right? Don Juan Tenorio, because technically it has a happy ending. So, what do you think about this definition of comedy?

Emilio Williams: That comedy is when it has a happy ending?

Lora Looney: Yes.

Emilio Williams: I don't know.

Lora Looney: That's an academic definition that we feed to our students, right?

Emilio Williams: Right. So, I'm thinking some of my favorite comedies don't necessarily have a happy ending, in a way. I'm thinking of Annie Hall, for example, that's a comedy that I love. Yeah, I think it's more in the 20th century as we go people are playing against the expectations of the [inaudible 00:24:24], right? And that's very interesting as well.

Emilio Williams: In [inaudible 00:24:26], my play, there's two couples, it's a romantic comedy, and one of the couples end up together and the other couple break up, but it was a happy ending for the woman because she needed to get out of that relationship. And that was very important for me that, at the end, the character of Mark was happy, and seen as happy not being with the romantic lead, ended up together. So, there is times, you know, that not being together is the happy ending for certain types of relationships, and I thought that was an important way to revisit romantic comedy, for example.

Lora Looney: And so, do you see opportunities to upend Don Juan?

Emilio Williams: Wow. So many. And it's been done, in a way, because if we think about a Spanish comic classic, like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, I think Ivan is Don Juan, right? So, we have been revisiting the idea of this super macho Latino figure a little bit like *Thelma and Louise*, like not getting away with felony anymore, right? So, it's been, maybe not directly. And I know, I remember 1990, '91, a movie called *Don Juan* [Spanish 00:25:37], it was a Spanish, very funny comedy where Don Juan comes back every year and he becomes an actor in the play, and it was very, very interesting play.

Lora Looney: I'd like to ask you one more question that's directly related to the course I'm teaching. In *Nation and Identity*, we examine the social-political upheaval in 19th century Spain, a time when the struggle for individual rights is constantly defeated by conservative backlashes. And these conservative backlashes, I believe, are exerting discourses to shape gender roles, you know? So, what can comedy do in that environment?

Emilio Williams: Well, obviously, it's not doing enough. But I think, you know, the fear, right? Is when you look back at history at these plays, and you think, "Spain has come along so much." Is that in Spain, and in the US, and in the West, we've become so self-congratulatory ... sorry, help me with this word.

Lora Looney: Congratulatory.

Emilio Williams: There we go, thank you. This is why I always have a doctor next to me, modern languages to help me with my bad English. But the thing is that we pat our backs a lot about our progress and, as we are noticing right now, the progress is not at the root of the issues, right? So, in just these last few years, I mean, we're facing racism in this country, and what it is, and what has happened with the police violence, and the Me Too movement is bringing to the forefront that things were not perfect, and are not perfect in our work environment, and in our private lives.

Emilio Williams: So, I think that we need this comedy, and we need to revisit the canon as a way to play against the role that the canonical plays had in perpetuating some of these themes, and subvert them for our own pleasure, in terms of the comedy, but our own, I would say, political criticism.

Lora Looney: And our own catharsis, right?

Emilio Williams: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And, at the same time, recover what is good in the canon as well because so many of these plays, again, have so many incredible themes, and the language, that there is so much there. I mean, I don't believe in just deleting all these things. As a matter of fact, it worries me that there is a tendency now to, in academia, not to deal with complicated or problematic material because I think that's not helping either. I think what we need to do is actually not delete it, quite the contrary. I think this is what we need to study. I

want to study it with a new perspective, and argue with it and against it, and among ourselves, and discover the layers of perversion in some ...

Lora Looney: And, in fact, a new idea that you've given me today is that Garcia Lorca both innovates and stereotypes, and that's something to talk about.

Lora Looney: So, Emilio, do you write what makes you laugh?

Emilio Williams: Wow. What a difficult question that is. So, I'm definitely inspired with what makes me laugh, right? Some of the things that make me laugh are quite inappropriate for me to find them funny. For example, I'm obsessed with this story about the woman who found a finger in her chili - look your laughing - at Wendy's, and almost ruined Wendy's, and she found a finger. I'm obsessed with that story, right/ And I want to write a documentary parody one day about that story. So, you know, something ...

Lora Looney: The grotesque.

Emilio Williams: Right. You never know what makes you laugh, that's why it's so important for me to ask the students and figure out what makes them laugh, right?

Emilio Williams: But, you know, one of the things is that we don't know what we're doing when we're writing. And I know this is kind of creepy for whoever is not a writer, but sometimes we just go into a mode where all these characters are talking to us, and you're moving, and the situation. And it's not as cerebral as people think, the process. I don't find the comedy on it until I find the actors doing their first reading and you get the first dramatized reading, and you have an audience. I think the comedy is in the audience more than in the ... or necessarily on the plot, because if you think about it too, another misperception about comedy is that, actually, what is happening to the characters is very dramatic and serious, otherwise it's not funny. The characters are not in on the comedy of what is happening. And, actually, the more they suffer, the funnier it is.

Lora Looney: Right. That's perfect, yes.

Emilio Williams: In a way, right? So, that's why necessarily my process is not necessarily a funny process where I'm there sitting laughing at my script because at the moment I'm not conscious of it.

Lora Looney: I'm so glad you're telling us that and, you know, I've heard you tell students twice in two different teaching experiences that you don't necessarily know what you're writing when you're writing it, and you find out later. Maybe you [crosstalk 00:31:13]

Emilio Williams: And that's why we get academics, and critics ...

Lora Looney: Yeah, there you go.

Emilio Williams: ... and the audience.

Lora Looney: But also, very interestingly, yesterday you were teaching a class, it was a fine arts class, but your topic was: what is creativity? And I heard you tell the students that this is ... well, you presented a book called Grit, on sort of the process of work and how hard work is, but basically you ended the session by telling them, "You have to work your ass off. This is what creativity is." And so, when I ask that question, "Do you write what makes you laugh?" I think I get it now, that no, this is work, you're working your ass off.

Emilio Williams: Yeah. I think this is a big misconception, and you are an expert on the romantic period, right? So, this is such a romantic notion of, "The artist gets inspired." Right? And the lighting, and then they do this masterpiece, and that's absolutely absurd. If you study the biographies and the ways of any master, or any artist that you admire, what you're going to find in common is how hard they work, and how much they work, overcome the setbacks that they had in their careers and their personal lives, and how difficult it is. And I think that's one of the big misconceptions that people ... and I even had it when I was younger, that I thought I wasn't writing just because I wasn't inspired. No, you need to sit down every day, you need to show up, and you need to treat your desk and your piece of writing like an office.

Emilio Williams: And you need to show up every day, and you have to have a lot of discipline, and this is why I discuss with them ideas on how to build discipline to show up every day, because if you don't show up every day you're never going to get the good page, right? And you're going to have to throw away a lot of pages that don't go anywhere along the way.

Emilio Williams: The wonderful novelist, Carmen Martin Gaité, when I was very young, said something to me that really ... because she was a really hard worker, she said, "Writers write with their ass." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" It's like, "Yeah, by sitting down their ass on the chair and getting the work done."

Lora Looney: I call it chaining myself to the desk.

Emilio Williams: Yeah. And without that, there is nothing worth discussing is going to come out, that doesn't happen.

Lora Looney: Thank you, Emilio.

Emilio Williams: Thank you so much, Lora. It's been wonderful to be here.

Lora Looney: I look forward to our comedy writing workshop with students, and future collaborations in teaching comedy. And thank you so much for your visit to the University of Portland, and I wish you luck in the upcoming stage performances of your work around the world.

Emilio Williams: Thank you.