In Brief
An undertaker who has not had any customers in a long time faces a demand for one year's back rent and resorts to murder to drum up business. Vincent Price and Peter Lorre co-star.

“Comedy of errors” has been an idiomatic expression for long enough now that it’s easy to forget that the phrase has a specific origin in the play of that title by William Shakespeare. One person who plainly did not forget was Richard Matheson, for although his punningly entitled The Comedy of Terrors bears no narrative resemblance to any Shakespeare play I've ever heard of, it’s so heavily freighted with Shakespearean references that it seems like scarcely a scene goes by without some manner of riff on the Bard of Avon. The flamboyant, circumlocuting dialogue isn’t blank verse, but often might as well be. The movie ends with a pair of lovers mistakenly believing each other dead a la Romeo and Juliet, and a pile of corpses (some mispresumed, some actual) deep enough to rival Hamlet. One major character is so Shakespeare-happy that he works himself up into a tizzy of air-MacBeth while attempting to read himself to sleep. It should go without saying that to do all that while also sending up every Burke-and-Hare grave-robbing movie from The Body Snatcher to The Flesh and the Fiends entails a great deal of thespian heavy lifting, so it is well that the cast includes not one but two ex-Richard III’s: Basil Rathbone and Vincent Price. It also features Boris Karloff and Peter Lorre—which, together with Matheson behind the typewriter and the A.I.P. production slate before the opening credits, should cue you to expect a spiritual reprise of The Raven as well.

In place of Burke and Hare, The Comedy of Terrors gives us Trumbull and Gillie. Waldo Trumbull (Price) is officially the junior partner in the Hinchley & Trumbull undertaking firm, but since his father-in-law, Amos Hinchley (Karloff), is now both stone deaf and utterly senile, the younger man effectively has the run of the place. Felix Gillie (Lorre, who had plenty of experience poking fun at his horror-star persona by 1963, having begun making movies like The Invisible Agent and You'll Find Out already in the early 40’s) is the convicted bank robber (“I never confessed!” Gillie protests when Trumbull refers to him as a confessed bank robber instead) whom the de facto boss has hired to handle the tasks that Hinchley is no longer capable of performing. That should tell you something about the kind of operation Hinchley & Trumbull is, even if the importance of crooked undertakers in 1960's fright films has somehow escaped your notice. Trumbull is a cheapskate of Cormanian proportions, and his firm has been recycling the same single coffin for thirteen years. (He and Gillie invariably wait to begin the burial proper until all the mourners have dispersed.) He's been scheming for ages to poison Hinchley and help himself to the old man's wealth, and although his wife, Amaryllis (Joyce Jameson, from Tales of Terror and Scorchy), always intervenes to stop him, she suggestively never takes any action that would permanently eliminate the threat to her dad's safety. For that matter, you really have to wonder how secure Amaryllis herself is, given Trumbull's totally undisguised loathing for her, and to suspect that Gillie would be in danger, too, if his employer didn't need an assistant so badly.

Oh—and Waldo's perfect bastardry extends even to stiffing his landlord on the rent. In fact, John Black (Rathbone, of The Black Sleep and The Magic Sword) hasn't seen a farthing from Trumbull in the whole past year. This is a serious strategic miscalculation on the undertaker's part, though, for in addition to owning the antique mansion where Trumbull and his profoundly dysfunctional family live and work, Black is also a skilled and well-connected lawyer. When Black swings by one morning to threaten his delinquent tenant with eviction and legal proceedings if he does not pay up in full within 24 hours, Trumbull finally realizes how precarious his position really is.

This isn't exactly Edinburgh here, and although there's every indication that Hinchley & Trumbull are the only game in town when it comes to burying dead folks, the small local population means that there still isn't a steady demand for their services. Meanwhile, whatever the undertakers are doing with all the money they bring in from systematically chiseling their clients, it plainly hasn't been going into the bank. If Trumbull is to pay off Black within a day's time, he's going to need somebody filthy rich to die right now. Somebody like Mr. Phipps (Buddy Mason), for example. And if Phipps wasn't planning on waking up dead tomorrow, well... I guess
that’s just too bad for him. Bringing the reluctant but easily blackmailed Gillie along with him to pick the locks on the old man’s doors, Trumbull pays a visit to the Phipps place in the middle of the night, and smothers the unfortunate millionaire with his own pillow. Then the two conspirators lie in wait for Mrs. Phipps (Beverly Hills, from Brides of Blood and The Power) to discover the body at the exact moment when they were “fortuitously” passing by in their hearse. But alas for our antiheroes, Mrs. Phipps proves even wiler than them. The widow never shows up for the funeral that afternoon, and by the time Trumbull arrives at her home to square up accounts, she’s stripped the place of everything remotely valuable and skipped off to the Continent!

It’s kind of amazing that Trumbull didn’t think of his next move years ago. While frantically brainstorming for another rich man who could die unexpectedly in his sleep, Waldo realizes that nobody in town would fit the bill half as well as Black himself. Again the two gravediggers slink out under cover of darkness to make their own luck, but things don’t go nearly so smoothly this time. First, it turns out that Black’s abode is locked up tighter than the Tower of London, with internal bars impervious to Gillie’s lock-picks on every door and window on the ground floor. Then, after Gillie submits to his boss’s demand to climb up onto the roof of the stable and sneak in through an unbarred second-story window, Black proves to be wide awake despite the late hour, animatedly reading aloud the climactic confrontation between MacDuff and the titular usurper king from MacBeth. Obviously a stealthy pillow attack is out of the question. Something finally goes Trumbull’s way when Black gets so caught up in his reading that he climbs out of bed, grabs a rapier from its display hook on the wall, and begins dashing about the house, fencing with imaginary Scotsmen. This nocturnal disportment brings Black into unexpected contact with Gillie, and the shock triggers what looks for all the world like a fatal heart attack. Problem solved, right? Maybe. But the doctor (Douglas Williams) who examines the body the next day is warned by the servants that their master suffered from catalepsy, and considering the obvious kinship between The Comedy of Terrors and A.I.P.’s contemporary cycle of Poe adaptations, I’m thinking that sounds like a “maybe not.”

I call it the Cleese Principle. If you want to make zany comedy work, you have to entrust the clowning to the most dignified person in the room. Even at his broadest, Vincent Price was nothing if not dignified, and Basil Rathbone had even more natural dignity than Price. Lorre and Karloff played in the Never Not Dignified league, too (alright, you got me there— there was The Unholy Night...), so the four of them together have more collective gravitas than the House of Lords at a royal funeral. That’s why The Comedy of Terrors mostly works, even though the jokes, for all Richard Matheson’s commitment to the faux-Shakespeare premise, are generally only marginally more sophisticated (if a great deal blacker) than those in Abbott and Costello Meet El Santo’s Snapping Point. It’s a pleasure to see Price being bitchy enough to win a “Rowr!” from Ernest Thesiger, and Karloff completely owning the part of a doddering old boob. It’s a joy to see the 60-year-old Lorre moaning over Joyce Jameson like a smitten schoolboy in the extended subplot concerning Gillie’s efforts to win the much-abused Amaryllis away from Trumbull. And it’s a straight-up fucking delight to see Rathbone doing solo nuclear-ham Shakespeare in a red velvet dressing gown, with all the regulator rods fully withdrawn. Material that would be toxically unfunny in the hands of, say, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis becomes dependably chucklesome and occasionally hilarious when delivered by this pack of seasoned horror-heavies.

Director Jacques Tourneur deserves a lot of credit for this movie’s successes, too. I’d never seen Tourneur do comedy before, so I had no idea at all what to expect. It turns out that the natural command of visual grammar that served him so well when he was aiming for suspense or nightmarish atmosphere was just as applicable when getting a laugh. For instance, Tourneur frames the shot that introduces Trumbull and Gillie in such a way that just standing Price (six-foot-four, rail-thin, and impeccably foppish) and Lorre (five-foot-five, rotund, and bearing a distinct resemblance to Droopy Dog) next to each other becomes a sight gag. He turns outwardly crude gimmicks like cutting to Amaryllis’s cat (which, incidentally, receives higher billing than Rathbone in the opening credits) for reaction shots into something almost witty. And perhaps most remarkably of all, his sense of timing is such that John Black’s death scenes (he’s cataleptic, remember—he’s allowed more than one) don’t become the slightest bit tiresome, even when they come in flurries. I’d been avoiding The Comedy of Terrors for years out of fear that it would resemble the previous generation of horror comedies, but although there are plenty of superficial similarities, this movie is something else altogether below the surface.

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