Frederic Wood Theatre

A Flea In Her Ear

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University of British Columbia

Frederic Wood Theatre
presents

A Flea In Her Ear

by
Georges Feydeau

Directed by
Denise Coffey

March 9-19
1988

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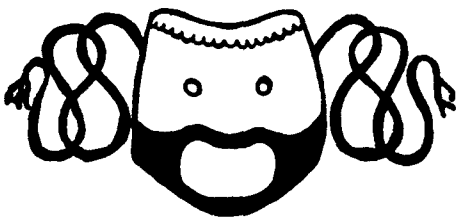
Four Feydeau Anecdotes

Of a fellow-author, notorious alike for his flops, his loathing of his colleagues and his disastrous married life, Feydeau said: 'That fellow's no good for anything except being cuckolded, and even there his wife has to help him out.'

Feydeau was present at a salon where one of the guests was a retired industrialist renowned for his avarice. The talk turned to philanthropy. 'Whenever anyone accosts me in the street and asks me for charity,' said the miser, 'I instantly put my hands in my pocket.'
'Only you don't take it out again', said Feydeau.

One evening Feydeau went to an operetta with a group of friends. The soprano had a pretty voice but couldn't articulate the lyrics. As she sang a moving ballad, of which not a single word was intelligible, Feydeau leaned towards his neighbour and murmured: 'that's one woman I'd happily trust with a secret.'

Feydeau was often late in delivering manuscripts. Once, while he was sitting at Maxim's, a taxi screamed to a halt and a theatre manager leapt out to confront him:
'When do I get the play?'
'Whenever you like', replied Feydeau calmly.
'It's been announced for four years.'
'Be patient, my dear fellow. I'm just finishing the last interval.'



Georges Feydeau
1862-1921

Feydeau on Feydeau

I'm in perfect health. Don't be amazed if I am gloomy. Such is my normal state of mind. I don't in the least resemble my plays, which people are pleased to find diverting. I am a poor judge of these matters. I never laugh in the theatre. I seldom laugh in private life. I am taciturn, somewhat unsociable . . . My plays are entirely improvised; the whole and the parts, the design and the shape all fall into place while I am writing. And I have never made a first draft.

When I begin a play, it's as if I were locking myself up in a dungeon from which I can't escape until I finish it. No, I'm not one of those who give birth with joy. While planning the lunacies that will make the public laugh, I don't enjoy myself; I keep a straight face, and the composure of a chemist dispensing a prescription. I take a gram of complication, a gram of profligacy, and a gram of observation, and I knead these elements together as best I can. And I foresee, almost without fail, the effect they will produce.

Farce And Feydeau

Farce is a theatrical form in which Molière happily rubs shoulders with Ray Cooney, Pinero with Ben Travers, *Box and Cox* with a scenario from *commedia* and Gros-Guillaume of the Hôtel de Bourgogne Company with Brian Rix of the Whitehall Theatre. The appeal of farce is universal, yet it is curiously narrow-minded and almost monomaniac in its exploitation of man's fears and weaknesses. As a form which has entertained audiences for centuries, it has obviously changed and evolved in technique as well as social content.

There are, roughly, two kinds of farce, "optimistic" and "pessimistic". "Optimistic" farce extended from the Romans to the middle of the 19th century. By "optimistic" I mean that despite the buffetings and vicissitudes and consequences of chance, error, misunderstanding, greed and trickery, the view taken of human nature is essentially benevolent, and masters in great difficulties are eventually and deftly extricated by much cleverer servants. Such farces, or farcical sub-plots and situations in plays we would call comedies, are humanistic in intent and nature and operate from the vantage point of an approved system of ethics; they affirm rather than subvert. What I want to call attention to here is "pessimistic" farce, the farce of social and moral anarchy, of a stress on chaos rather than order, on the anti-hero rather than the hero. Both kinds share basic farcical techniques, but they are essentially different in their view of the world and of the status and function of man within it. The latter kind of farce predominates from the middle and late 19th century to the 1960s at least, although farce as a stage form is now more or less in decline.

When one examines the comic methods of this kind of farce, one always finds that its technique is not merely structural and mechanistic, but is also a way of expressing a view of the human predicament. At the end of Act I of *A Flea in Her Ear*, Camille tries his best to stop Tournel from going to the Coq d'Or. Tournel cannot understand a word he is saying because Camille has a cleft palate and is entirely incomprehensible unless he puts in his mouth a new silver roof, which is at present soaking in boracic acid on the mantelpiece. By the time Camille reaches it and can speak clearly, Tournel is gone. At moments of dreadful crisis in farce, characters are frequently unable to communicate with each other, either by a device of this kind or by a rapid series of exits and entrances in which they just miss each other, or simply by the opposite, an obsessive desire to prevent communication at all costs. The function of Schwarz in Act II of *A Flea in Her Ear*, at the centre of a maelstrom of confusion and frantic stage action, speaking only German which nobody understands and himself understanding nobody, is another expression of this theme and at the same time a clever variant of a basic farcical technique. Much modern drama — Beckett and Pinter, for example — deals with this theme of the inability or unwillingness to communicate, of the attempts of individuals to hide in their own insecurities. This is a theme of weight and seriousness in both drama and fiction. Farce has extensively treated the same theme, no less serious because it is developed on a comic level.

When Tournel in Act II jumps on the revolving bed to embrace the lovely Raymonde but instead finds himself clasping a querulous Baptistin, we have splendid example of one of a dramatist's, and especially a farceur's, most powerful weapons, the denial of expectation for a character and its simultaneous fulfillment for the audience. It is also a demonstration of one of the most absurdist of dramatic techniques, the frustration of man by machine. Towards the climax of the second act of A Flea in Her Ear, Homenides' deadly marksmanship causes a serious malfunction in the revolving bed mechanism. Until the end of the act both beds, containing a shrieking Camille and a shrieking Baptistin, continue to revolve rapidly before the audience. Here is an excellent demonstration of the Bergsonian view that as man begins to resemble a machine so he becomes less human and increasingly an object of laughter. In this case, and in complete harmony with the extremism of farce, man no longer commands the machine; it commands him — indeed, Camille and Baptistin have become a part of it, subsumed into the machinery as it spins heedlessly out of control. This is a truly farcical position, and it is surely also a philosophical one.

The acceleration of the revolving bed occurs at the end of Act II, when the stage is the scene of the rigidly disciplined chaos so characteristic of Feydeau's dramatic climaxes. Well before this characters have started to run, a certain sign in farce of increasing pace and increasing pressure upon the individual. The Hotel's proprietress, Olympe, is successively pushed, pulled, and knocked about by seven characters who rapidly enter and exit, each finding her in the way. Olympe does not have the slightest idea of what is going on or why they are acting this way; such characters are essential in Feydeau. After this incident the pace grows even faster: distraught men and women, most of them pursued by a raging Homenides with a gun, rush in and out of bedrooms and up and down the staircase. The whole impression is that life is out of control, unmanageable, ungovernable, beyond the power of the individual to determine it or even influence it. The farce author's technique of compressing a great number of exits and entrances into a very short time and directing his actors to run, shout, scream, faint, and fire pistols is thoroughly indicative of this view of the human condition.

It is interesting to observe that since pessimistic farce usually functions by profaning approved moral, sexual, social, and familial codes it flourished only in periods of stability when such codes are the received dogma of the audience. Not surprisingly, then, the golden age of farce has been the mid- and late Victorian

period in England and France of the Second Empire and Third Republic, when one of the dominating obsessions of the elite was the fear of social exposure and the consequent loss of reputation, and when professed public adherence to agreed codes of conduct was very strong. Molière's popularity in the reign of Louis XIV and the rise to fame of Joe Orton in the relatively stable and prosperous England of the 1960s are lesser examples of the same phenomenon. It is difficult to succeed with farce today because there are so few ironclad moral and social taboos to which the majority of an audience subscribes, and because we live in a period of great political instability.

The consequences of the extreme pressure of farce upon the individual are profound. These pressures exert themselves through a skillful combination of comic techniques, but once again it is much more than a matter of technique: The actual sanity and existence of the individual are at stake in a world of accumulating disorder and disaster, a world that goes so far as to refuse to recognise him as a person and denies his identity.

In A Flea in Her Ear the problem of identity is encountered, typically of Feydeau, in an extreme form. It will be remembered that Poche of the staff of the Coq d'Or is Chandebise's double. Whereas Shakespeare in The Comedy of Errors splits identities between twins of equal rank — two masters and two servants — Feydeau creates an identical pair of opposite social rank: Chandebise the managing director, Poche the drunken hall porter. Chandebise is the head of a prosperous household, catered to by respectful family members and servants; Poche, the lowliest of servants, is regularly beaten by the hotel manager. Feydeau does it this way, of course, to make the experience even more traumatic for Chandebise, to make him feel that his class status, his elevated place in the world as well as his whole personality and identity is slipping away from him in the inexplicable breakdown of hierarchy and the brutality of events. He also does it further to desecrate, as Eric Bentley puts it, household and family gods; Feydeau was aggressively and relentlessly anti-familial at a time when the bourgeois family was the official cornerstone of French society. Chandebise soon runs up against Feraillon, the hotel manager, who assumes he is Poche, insults him, kicks him unmercifully, pulls his hat and jacket from him, forces him into the porter's cap and uniform, and sends him about his duties. Feraillon then re-enters and kicks him off the stage. In contrast to Chandebise, Poche remains calm and stolidly uncomprehending of the bit of bother around him, while the former, by now thoroughly humiliated and terrified, is virtually demented. The techniques of farce have seemingly destroyed him and the world he thought he lived in. It is important that the only people amused and entertained by this spectacle are the audience; nobody in *A Flea in Her Ear* or in *What The Butler Saw* and many other farces, has the slightest sense of humor. What is uproariously funny to the audience is a dreadful nightmare to the characters.

Farce is anything but an escapist art. Rather, the best farce, like Feydeau's or Orton's, takes man into the heart of a malicious, cruel, and absurdist universe which everywhere conspires against him and which he is utterly powerless to direct. In the hands of the masters farce is the bleakest of all dramatic genres, since it offers neither the redemptive power of tragedy nor the love and human sympathy of comedy. Nobody ever sympathised with an Orton character or a Feydeau character. Farce is of course a remarkable paradox. The darkness of its world, the emptiness it sees at the heart of the human condition, are conveyed to its audience by marvelous comic techniques which are not only superbly entertaining and laughter-provoking but are also entirely expressive of the nature of that condition and the content and viewpoint of farce itself.

Michael R.Booth
University of Victoria

Professor Michael R. Booth is Head of the Department of Theatre at the University of Victoria. He is a specialist in Farce and Melodrama, and has written extensively on 19th Century theatre.

A Flea In Her Ear

by
Georges Feydeau

Translated by John Mortimer

Directed by Denise Coffey

Set Design by Robert Gardiner

Costume Design by Mara Gottler

Lighting Design by Robert Hamilton

CAST
(in order of appearance)

Camille Chandebise . . . . . Lawrence Kagan
Antoinette Plucheux . . . . . Kim Godin
Etienne Plucheux. . . . . Jason Smith
Dr. Finache. . . . . Dennis James Kuss
Lucienne Homenides de Histangua . . . . . Laura Di Cicco
Raymonde Chandebise . . . . . Tracy Holmes
Victor Emmanuel Chandebise . . . . . Timothy Hyland
Romain Tournel . . . . . John Murphy
Carlos Homenides de Histangua . . . . . Thomas Conlin Jones
Eugénie . . . . . Debbie Witzel
Augustin Feraillon . . . . . Neil Ingram
Olympe. . . . . Janine Payne
Baptistin . . . . . James Binkley
Herr Schwarz . . . . . Michael Cavers
Poche . . . . . Monty L. Hathidy
Hotel Guests . . . . . Alexandra Apostolidis, Rhiannon A. Charles, Nick Davis, Harley Harris, Thrasso Petras, J. Cricket Price
Le Hot Jazz Petomaniac. . . . . Alan Brodie, Randall Plitt, John Rule, Risha Walden, Dave Weih
Monseiur René Orduré . . . . . Bruce Dow

The action takes place in Paris at the turn of the century.

Act I The drawing-room at the Chandebises' house in the Boulevard Malesherbes, Paris
Act II The Hotel Coq d'Or in Montretout
Act III The Chandebises' drawing-room

There will be two 10 minute intermissions.

PRODUCTION

Technical Director . . . . . Ian Pratt
Properties . . . . . Sherry Milne
Costume Supervisor . . . . . Chelsea Moore
Set Construction . . . . . Alan Brodie, Roland Dyton, Don Griffiths, John Henrickson, Robert Moser, Robert Walker
Seamstresses . . . . . Jean Driscoll-Bell, Leslie White
First Hands . . . . . Lori Kenny, Geferina Ofreneo
Wigs . . . . . Terry Kuzyk
Head Painter . . . . . Stewart Fairley

Stage Manager . . . . . Elana Honcharuk
Assistant Stage Managers . . . . . Erin Jarvis, Nick von Schulmann
Wardrobe Mistress . . . . . Blanka Jurenka
Scene Design Assistants . . . . . Heather Kent, J. Cricket Price
Costume Design Assistants . . . . . Jill Buckham, Cathy Golf, Heather Kent, Catherine King, Blanka Jurenka
Properties Assistants . . . . . Melody Anderson, Nancy Lyons
Scene Painters . . . . . Kairiin Bright, Elana Honcharuk, Natasha Lyndon, Catherine King, Gary Muir
Make up . . . . . Nick Davis, Cynthia Johnston
Production Intern . . . . . Aileen Wong
Lighting Operator . . . . . Peter Jardine

Assistant Director/Musical Director . . . . . Bruce Dow

Box Office . . . . . Carol Fisher, Timothy Hyland, Linda McRae
House Manager . . . . . Bryson Young
Business Manager . . . . . Marjorie Fordham

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Debra and Kyla Gardiner
Darryll Patterson
Risha Walden
CBC
Rodolfo Bermejo
UBC Gates Hair Fashions

A Note from the Translator

Farce is tragedy played at about a hundred and twenty revolutions a minute. The story of "Othello" and the plot of Feydeau's "Puce a l'Oreille" have a striking similarity. Desdemona's lost handkerchief and Victor Emmanuel Chandebise's missing braces both give rise to similar misunderstandings, undeserved jealousies and accumulating catastrophe. Othello's mistake is the stuff of tragedy. Madame Chandebise's leads to events which move so quickly that we are left helpless with laughter and nobody dies.

What is at stake for the characters in Feydeau's farces in not their lives but their reputations. Feydeau's men are solid, bourgeois, and middle-aged. His women, as he said, "breathe virtue and are forthwith out of breath." Social conventions are essential to farce. No one could write a successful farce about the misadventures of a set of Swedish teenagers in and out of the jacuzzi. The put-upon hero in a Feydeau play finds that the path of true love leads to immediate panic, as when his braces get borrowed and lost. It is the terror of losing their precious reputations which makes Feydeau's characters hide, lie and pretend to be each other. The advent of the permissive society, were it ever to come about, would make the continuance of farce writing impossible.

Happily, the permissive society has not taken over Canada, so no doubt you can recognize the panic of Chandebise, the fury of Raymonde and Camille's innocent search for pleasure. We are all likely to be involved in farce in our lives, what keeps us clear of such events is either lack of daring or astonishing luck.

I translated this play some twenty years ago. Jacques Charon, a wonderful fat, light-footed actor from the Comedie Française taught me about farce when he directed it at the National Theatre in London. I am sure that Denise Coffey and her cast will give you as much pleasure as we all got out of the play then.

The Second Act contains the best prop ever invented by an ingenious playwright. Watch it carefully.

John Mortimer
(London, 1988)

John Mortimer's works include *Clinging to the Wreckage, In Character, Paradise postponed, Rumpole of the Bailey.*

These programme notes were specifically written for the production at the Frederic Wood Theatre.

A Note from the Director

John Mortimer's version of the play is created with the aim of making you in the audience forget that you're listening to a translation and believe that you have a perfect understanding of idiomatic French and the slang of the 'Belle Epoque'. Immersion through laughter. If I were to direct the play in Britain, the accents and attitudes would be local; here in the Théâtre du Freddy du Bois de Boulogne, the voices are Canadian.

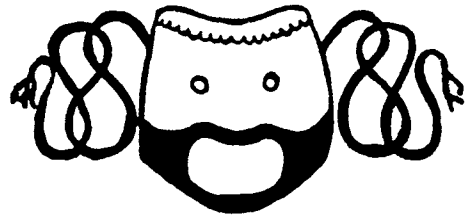
Denise Coffey

The Director: Denise Coffey

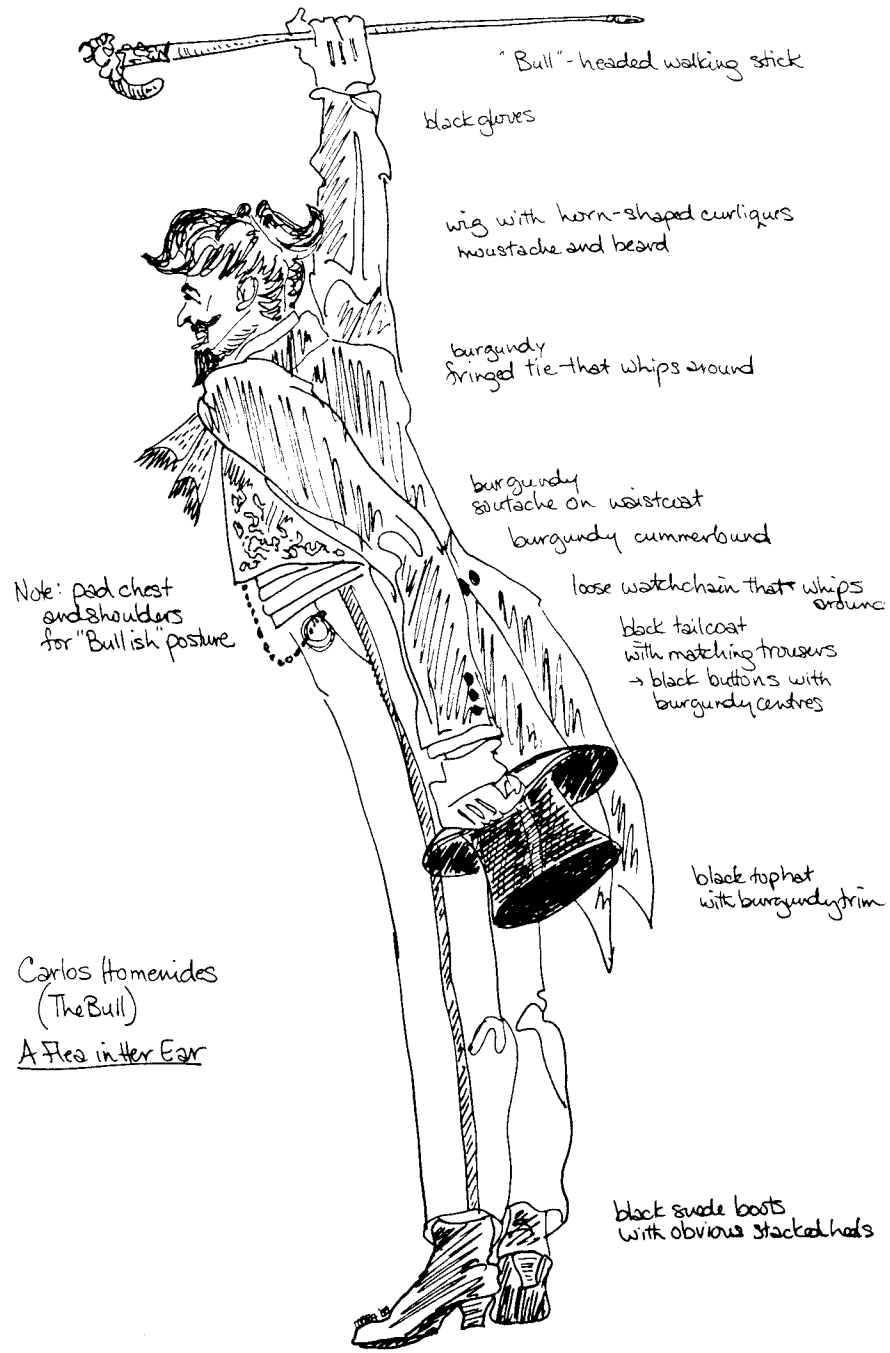
Denise Coffey is well known in the U.K. as performer in television and radio, as actress in films (*Far from the Madding Crowd; Another Time, Another Place)*, as director, stage actress, and writer at the *Young Vic* in London for thirteen years. She translated and co-adapted Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, titled *A Wee Touch of Class*, the highly acclaimed success of the Edinburgh Festival 1985/6.

She has worked in Paris (at the studios in Joinville) in the film *Start the Revolution Without Me* and co-translated the hit-farce *Le Pere Noel est une Ordure*, created by the famous Paris Group "Les Bronzés".

Over the last six years she has been an Associate Director of the Shaw Festival, and there has directed plays by Shaw and Coward. She has worked at ATP in Calgary as director for *The Beggar's Opry* and *When that I was...* by John Mortimer. Presently she is commissioned by ATP to write the libretto for the chamber opera C.3.3., with music by Alan Rae. Before returning to the U.K. in May, she will direct *Major Barbara* for the New American Shaw Festival in Milwaukee. In the U.K. she will begin work on the production of a play hidden for centuries, believed to be written by William Shakespeare and William Rowley. Her first novel is with a publisher in London, and her latest screenplay is under discussion in Los Angeles.



Clympe Feraillon
(The Swine)
A Flea in Her Ear
"dyed blonde" wig
à la Gibson girl
jewelled
dangling earrings
rosy cheeks and lips
accent little dark eyes
Note: Padding on Bust
and Bottom to
give a porcine look
darker pink-purple la
on bodice and sleeves
→ applique on breasts
smoke grey velvet
for cuffs, waistband
and all ribbons
used on dress
overskirt with drape
in pink-grey moiré
understirt in same moiré
with edging of pleats
→ ribbon (grey velvet) trim
pink hose
silver-grey shoes
Note: garter worn


"Bull"-headed walking stick
black gloves
wig with horn-shaped curliqurs
moustache and beard
burgundy
fringed tie that whips around
burgundy
soutache on waistcoat
burgundy cummerbund
loose watchchain that whips
around
Note: pad chest
and shoulders
for "Bullish" posture
black tailcoat
with matching trousers
→ black buttons with
burgundy centres
black tophat
with burgundy trim
Carlos Homenides
(The Bull)
A Flea in Her Ear
black suede boots
with obvious stacked heels

On Rendering "A Flea in Her Ear"

The idea of using animal allusions in *A Flea in Her Ear* came quite naturally for me from within the play's own skeletal structure. The major internal clue centred on the reason why many of the Hotel Coq d'Or clients were foreigners: they had come to see an exhibit of the French expressionistic painters in the Paris Salon of 1905. The sensation which this exhibit caused led one critic to term the artists "fauves", or wild beasts. And it is precisely this menagerie environment that I wished to suggest in rendering the costumes: the veneer of a sophisticated French society acting as a thin fabric, barely covering the more bestial man. (It is interesting to note that Freud's psychoanalytic theories were being formulated at this same time.)

Because the principal thrust behind this farce had to come from the actions within the play and not from the look of the play, the animal allusions were sublimated. What one sees at first glance looking at *A Flea In Her Ear* is a 1905 fashion silhouette; what is evident on closer examination are the hints of the animalistic extensions of each character: Carlos Homenides storms through life as well as hotels like a raging bull; the snaky Dr. Finache insinuates himself easily into many situations; Romain Tournel struts like a colourful, boasting rooster guarding his henyard; Antoinette demonstrates the same frenetic energy as a spoiled poodle; and Lucienne Homenides wafts in and out of the scenes like a delicate dove. The rest of the characters I will leave, however, for the audience to decipher . . .

Mara Gottler

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Performing on the stage of the Frederic Wood Theatre is of immense value to our BFA students, for here they can gain a practical knowledge of their developing acting skills which can be applied to a career in the theatre. As our audience, you play an essential part in the training and education of our students for which we thank you, and trust that we will continue to entertain you sufficiently that you will return again and again.

For further information please contact the Department's Main Office in the Frederic Wood Theatre.

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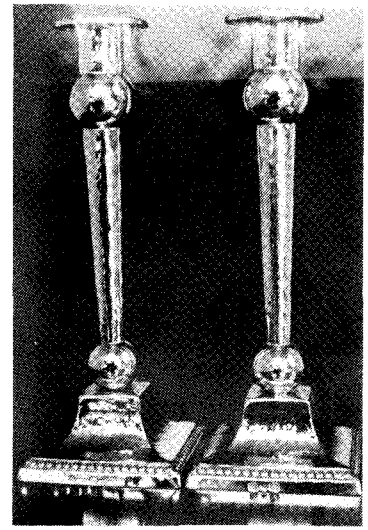

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