

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE COMEDIANS 1967

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### OVERVIEW

After four passengers disembark at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, their lives become intertwined with each other and with the ruthless police state that rules the island nation. Mr Brown has come to sell his hotel and meet up with his old lover, Mrs. Pineda, wife of an ambassador. Major Jones arrives to negotiate a sale of arms to the government. Mr and Mrs Smith are keen to establish a centre that promotes vegetarianism. Jones gets put in prison, the Smiths are horrified by what they see of the dictatorship and leave, while Mr Brown tries to maintain his distance, although not from Mrs Pineda. In the final, exciting third of the story, Brown and Jones go into the hills to support the rebels, but there are mixed results. After suicides and murders, this comedy of fanciful ambitions and doomed love ends on an ambiguous note

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Papa Doc' Duvalier was elected president of Haiti in 1957 and used his private police force, the feared Tonton Macoute, to suppress (and sometimes eliminate) his enemies. Most of the key events in the film, including staging an execution as an entertainment for children and showing a video of the killings in cinemas, are based on historical incidents. Given the anti-government message of the film, the 'Haitian' scenes, which include some wonderful local colour, were shot on location in Dahomey (now part of the Republic of Benin) in West Africa. The film is an adaptation of a novel with the same title by Graham Greene. Despite the all-star cast, and good performances from Alex Guinness and Richard Burton, it is not an entirely successful film, in part because although Greene wrote the screenplay, his humour is difficult to capture on screen. One significant change from Greene's novel is the increased prominence of Mrs Pineda, played by Elizabeth Taylor. A second divergence is the ending, in which Brown accepts the role of the new Jones and leads the rebels, whereas in the book, Brown wanders off across the border to safety in the Dominican Republic.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Jones Major Jones says he is a veteran of the Burma campaign.  
Brown Mr Brown is an Englishman who inherited his mother's hotel and has come back to sell it.  
Mr Smith Mr Smith is an exponent of vegetarianism and an ex-American presidential candidate.  
Mrs Smith Mrs Smith is his loyal wife.  
Mr Pineda Mr Pineda is ambassador of an unnamed South American country.  
Mrs Pineda Mrs Martha Pineda is his wife and also Brown's lover.  
Henri Henri Philipot is a painter and member of the rebel army.  
Magiot Dr Magiot is a supporter of the rebel movement.  
Joseph Joseph is the barman at Brown's hotel and a member of the rebel group.  
Concasseur Captain Concasseur is the police official who harasses Brown and Jones.

### STORY

*Comedians* As the credits roll, we watch a police officer mark an 'X' on the photographs of men's faces pasted on a wall. Cut to a ship in the harbour at Port au Prince, Haiti, where four passengers disembark. Major Jones, a boastful British veteran of the Burma campaign, has a letter of introduction to a high government official. Mr Brown, a gloomy Englishman, has returned to sell his loss-making hotel. Mr and Mrs Smith are cheery Americans who have come to bring vegetarianism to Haiti.

*Jones* Jones is stopped at immigration and questioned by the same police official we saw as the credits rolled. Captain Concasseur, asks to see Jones' letter of introduction from a Colonel Bisch, head of the security police. Unbeknownst to Jones, Bisch has just been removed from his post as a traitor. Jones is then beaten up by the Tonton Macoute, Papa Doc's security police, and locked up in

prison.

*Brown* Brown, on the other hand, is met by a journalist friend. When he sees Jones' hat on the immigration counter, though, he asks about him. 'He's been met,' is the curt and not untruthful answer. Brown tells his friend that he's snared three tourists (the other 'comedians') for his hotel. 'Tourists?' exclaims his friend. 'Not many here now,' he adds as they look around at the beggars and poor on the streets. Brown tells his friend that Mr Smith was a presidential candidate for the Vegetarian Party in 1948 against Truman. He has a letter of introduction to the minister of Social Welfare, Mr Philipot. Hearing that name, the journalist suggests that he look after the Smiths and bring them to Brown's hotel.

*Smiths* Meanwhile, the elderly Smiths are also held up at customs, forced to explain the contents of their dozens of containers, with which they plan to establish their centre for vegetarianism. Their butchered attempts to communicate in French only convince the official that they are bringing in marijuana. Finally, Brown's journalist friend rescues them.

*Mrs Pineda* Brown gets out of a taxi a particular spot where he used to meet his mistress, Mrs Pineda, wife of a south American ambassador. He walks to their old meeting place—and there she is again, waiting in her car. 'My god!' she cries. 'It's you.' They renew their love affair. She says that her husband suspects nothing; he says that he must sell his hotel to get the money he will need to follow her to her husband's next posting.

*Suicide* Brown arrives at his hotel, a grand colonial building, which is now deserted and dark. His bartender, Joseph, show him the body of Philipot, the minister from whom the Smiths had a letter of introduction. It lies at the bottom of the empty swimming pool. Joseph explains that Philipot came to the hotel to hide from the dreaded Tonton Macoute. A car pulled up, he hid in the garden and then, realising he was trapped, killed himself.

*Magiot* Dr Magiot, a local doctor, arrives and explains to Brown that Philipot had been drinking when he called the President 'a little country witchdoctor.' He then urges Brown to dispose of the body quickly because the Tonton Macoutes might wonder why he chose his hotel to hide in.

*Smiths* When the Smiths arrive, they are shown to the Barrymore Suite ('Did he really stay here?' they ask. 'Before my time,' Brown says, 'but I can show you his liquor bills.') They admire the view from their balcony and order some hot water for their Bevril, a special health tonic. In the morning, Mr Smith learns that Jones has been detained and that Philipot 'has passed on.'

*Ministerial meeting* While Jones and Brown wait for their appointment with Philipot's replacement, they are told that American guns have been found with rebels in the mountains. Brown also runs into Mr Pineda, the ambassador, who invites him to a small party at his residence. Granted an audience with the minister, Smith make a pitch for his vegetarian campaign, based on lowering acidity in the diet. The minister asks about acidity, and Smith proclaims, 'if we can eliminate acidity in the body, we can eliminate passion.' The minister is dubious but impressed by large investment that Smith intends to make.

*Prison visit* As the meeting breaks up, Brown mentions the arrested Mr Jones. The minister hides behind bureaucracy and says he's powerless to help them, but Smith insists and Brown offers a bribe. Brown and Smith visit Jones in his prison cell, where the prisoner writes another letter of introduction addressed to the President himself. Despite the spartan conditions, Jones remains cheerful.

*Duvalierville* Escorted by the minister, Brown and Smith visit a construction site for the new city of Duvalierville, the President's pet project, where Smiths' vegetarian centre might be built. Smith expands on his ambitious plans, which include a restaurant, a cinema and even a theatre in the round.

*Funeral* When the hearse carrying Mr Philipot is prevented from entering the cemetery, his widow, screams abuse at the Tonton Macoutes. She is supported by Mrs Smith, but Brown and Mr Smith advise caution. As they wait, a car arrives, men jump out and smash the windows of the hearse, prise out the coffin and put it in the back of their car. Mrs Smith tries to intervene but is pushed aside. Mr Smith wants to fight back, but Brown restrains him.

*Pineda's party* Brown and Dr Magiot are the only guests at Ambassador Pineda's party. Most

people are staying indoors because of the outbreak of violence in the city. Pineda's residence is surrounded by Tonton Macoutes, he says, 'for my protection.' Henri Philipot, nephew of the dead man, arrives with a painting he's done for Mrs Pineda. Standing apart, Magiot and Henri speak in whispers about the rebels in the north, their low numbers and their lack of training.

*Love letter* Mrs Pineda takes Brown upstairs to meet her child, who is sick in bed. Tucking him in, she finds a love letter that the boy has taken from her desk. 'For the American stamps,' he says. It is Brown's letter, which he then takes from her before they enjoy a brief but passionate roll on a bed. After Brown has left, Mr and Mrs Pineda talk about their situation. When she says that she 'can't go on like this much longer,' he wilfully misunderstands her to be referring to the heat of Haiti and the unsettled life of an ambassador.

*VIP Jones* On his way home, Brown stops off at a bar-cum-brothel, where he is summoned by Captain Concasseur, who says he is guarding a foreigner. Jones emerges from the back rooms and greets Brown with enthusiasm. Jones explains that he is getting VIP treatment, and Brown wonders why. The next scene shows Jones in consultation with the military, promising to sell them new guns stored in a warehouse in Miami.

*Cockfight* Henri meets Brown and asks him to go to Jones on his behalf and request that he help him and the rebels with his military experience. Brown says that Jones has already been signed up by the government and that, anyway, the rebels have no hope. Henri shows him a cock that has only one eye yet won a big cockfight when blessed by the Voodoo god of war. He invites Brown to witness a ceremony where he will sacrifice the cock to that god.

*Ritual* Brown watches (what is said to be a genuine version) of a Voodoo ceremony in the countryside, with fierce drumming and intense dancing. Henri is smeared with the blood of the cock and is blessed by the god of war.

*Mrs Smith* At his hotel, Brown is awakened by Tonton Macoutes and Captain Concasseur, who wants to know about Henri and Joseph, who was also at the ceremony the night before. That morning a police station was attacked and a policeman killed. The captain orders his thugs to beat up Brown, but Mrs Smith, in her nightcap, intervenes. Her forthright words startle the captain and he leaves.

*Firing squad* Mr and Mrs Brown go out for a stroll in the town one evening and chance upon a procession of schoolchildren, all dressed in white. She thinks it must be a Catholic Saints Day and follows. What they see is a firing squad who shoot three men tied to stakes. The American couple fly out of Haiti the next day.

*Fugitive* Jones shows up at the hotel and begs for help from Brown. It turns out that his partner in Miami welched on the plan to sell guns to the government and the Tonton Macoutes are after him. Disguised as a local woman, Jones is taken to Ambassador Pineda's house. Captain Concasseur summons Brown to his office and offers him a hefty sum for persuading the ambassador to leave the country and to give up Jones.

*Jones enlisted* Back in his hotel, Magiot explains to Brown that he needs help. Henri is in the mountains, but his rebels are untrained and he might do something foolish. Magiot asks Brown to influence Jones to go to the mountains and give them training. Brown scoffs at the idea, pointing out the Jones is safe and sound in the embassy, but Magiot goes there and appeals to the Major's sense of adventure and his immense egotism. Flattered, Jones agrees to help.

*Magiot murdered* Magiot is operating in the hospital, when Tonton Macoutes enter and slit his throat with his surgeon's knife.

*Escape and confession* Eluding the Tonton Macoutes by using a decoy car, Brown drives Jones toward a rendezvous point with Henri. When the car breaks down, they continue on foot, though Jones struggles with his bad feet. They settle down for the night in a cemetery, where Jones confesses that he never got to Burma and never was a soldier; instead, he ran a cinema for the troops in Assam.

*Jones killed* Captain Concasseur appears and shoots Jones as he tries to escape. Brown is taken to the captain's jeep, but the captain and his associate are shot by Henri and his men. Henri looks at Jones' body and says that the morale of his men is high since they are expecting a British officer with experience fighting in Burma. 'It was true, wasn't it [about Jones]?' he asks Brown, who says it was.

*The new Major Jones* Henri points out that Brown cannot escape and convinces him to become the Major Jones his men are waiting for. Henri leads him to the rebel hideout, where a dozen men in rags and machetes stand to attention. He climbs up on an oil drum and addresses his 'troops' in English, which they do not understand. 'Tomorrow we attack the Tonton Macoutes. I'm a hotel-owner,' he says, 'and I don't know how to fight. You are the rabble of the slums, with brains.' They applaud.

*Departure and uncertainty* In the final scene, Mr and Mrs Pineda are seen off at the airport by the journalist, who tells them that a police station was attacked yesterday in the hills. Two rebels were killed: Joseph, the barman at the hotel, and an unknown man. Mrs Pineda fears that it might be Brown.

## THEMES

*Pretence* The main theme of this dark comedy is the prevalence of pretence. All the main characters, with the possible exception of the Smiths, are forced or choose to adopt a role, to perform and to deceive. The consummate performer is Major Jones, the self-proclaimed war hero of Burma, who was not a major, who was not called Jones and who never set foot in Burma. He was in nearby Assam, where he ran a mobile cinema for the troops and was then put in charge of entertainment. Jones certainly entertains his fellow ship passengers with jokes and anecdotes, and later in the story goes in disguise as a cleaning lady. For his part, Mr Brown prides himself on not supporting political causes, but he turns out to be a very dedicated participant in the plan to get Jones into the mountains. And, then, when Jones is shot, he himself assumes the role of Jones and makes a speech to his ragged followers, which is the example par excellence of how pretence can be parody. Brown is also, of course, a participant, along with Mrs Pineda, in the love affair hidden from her husband. Mr Pineda, the ambassador, pretends not to know when it is obvious that he does. 'We shouldn't be ashamed of being comedians,' he says at a party. 'There are times when we all play parts. Even in a good marriage. Isn't that so?' Those last words are addressed to his wife, around whom he has placed his long arm. Then there is Henri, the painter who is really a rebel, and Magiot, the doctor who is a sympathiser. As for the government and their ruthless secret police, they, too, play roles. Wearing dark sunglasses and hats, they are straight out of central casting. Indeed, the whole Duvalier dictatorship is built on façade, as illustrated by Duvalierville, the new city on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. When Smith is shown this special presidential project, it is a shamble of crumbling walls and half-built staircases. Pretence, the playing of a part, is the default position for the main characters in this film.

*Dictatorship* Set against this story of human duplicity, is the very real tragedy of the Duvalier dictatorship. While Jones (played by Alec Guinness) provides comedy, the people of Haiti are being subjected to violence and deprivation. The very first shot shows a police station wall where the photograph of a man has an X drawn across it—the next victim of the Tonton Macoutes. Throughout the story, the police act with impunity, killing, maiming and terrorising the local population. We are introduced to this fear by the suicide of Dr Philipot and then witness it when the Tonton Macoutes smash the windows of the hearse carrying his body. In another example, Mrs Smith innocently asks Joseph about his bad leg and is told that he wouldn't cooperate with the police. 'But that's shocking!' Mrs Smith exclaims. 'Did you report it?' Joseph smiles ruefully and says, 'To whom?' 'Is there no law and order?' Mrs Smith wants to know. 'Oh, yes,' says Joseph. 'Tonton make law. Tonton make order.' Government ministers and officials speak with tight smiles, knowing that they are accountable to no one. A vivid illustration of the mentality of the dictatorship occurs when Smith and Brown are driven out of town to see the construction site of Duvalierville. Smith wants to know where the people are, and the minister explains. 'The local inhabitants were ignorant peasant and we sent them back to the hills.' He goes on to exclaim that the crumbling buildings are a monument to elegant living and to 'our President's beneficence.' At that moment, a maimed beggar crawls up to the car and stretches out his empty hand. The minister pushes him away with a thrust of his own hand. The man drags himself back to a shelter made of palm fronds. Perhaps the most damning comment is made by Brown when he confronts Captain Concasseur about one of his murderous acts. 'I had my orders,' the captain explains, and Brown replies, 'We hang people in Europe for obeying orders. A place called Nuremberg.'

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## **Brown**

Character Mr Brown (played by Richard Burton) is a brooding presence in the film, a dark and unhappy man, stewing in his failed business and personal affairs. He is weary, mocking and sometimes angry, though he has passionate moments with his lover, Mrs Pineda. He tries to keep aloof from the political situation swirling around him, but it draws him in.

### Illustrative moments

*Cynic* Like many Greene heroes, Mr Brown is cynical about causes, campaigns and heroic figures. He doesn't believe in Marx or god or any government. His caustic comments pepper the film, belittling anyone or any idea that crosses his path. He reserves special venom for the Haitian dictatorship and its lackeys. A fine example of his sarcasm occurs when he and Mr Smith are escorted by a minister to a possible site for Smith's vegetarian centre. When Smith comments that the site is fine but that something will have to be done about the approach road, which is full of potholes, the minister explains that they've had a bad rainy season. 'Isn't that so, Mr Brown?' he asks, angling for support. But Brown comments acidly, 'Mr Smith, this is the finest road in Haiti.'

*Frustrated* Brown is a man of many frustrations. A good example is the scene, in which he takes Mrs Pineda (played by Elizabeth Taylor) into a guest room and tries to make love to her. She is hesitant, pointing out that her son is next door and her husband downstairs. Brown sneers at the mention of her son and suggests that she give him a box of puzzles. He then asks how many 'adventures' she's had. He talks about the future, when she'll be middle aged and he'll be too old. Brown knows that she can't tell her husband about him and that he has to remain the shadows. He can see no life ahead for them, only snatched moments in the back of cars or back rooms. Insanely jealous, he speaks of her husband, the father of her child, as a beast, who ravaged her in the bed. When she doesn't respond to his sexual advances, he draws back and says she is just like a prostitute. She suggests that he should go to the local brothel, like he used to. Frustrated, jealous and angry, he says, 'All right, Mrs Ambassador, I will' and storms out of the room.

## **Jones**

Character Major Jones is a cheerful person, full of tall tales of his military exploits in the jungles of Burma. He imagines that his fantasies will bring him success but they only bring tragedy. His vainglory is both ludicrous and touching.

### Illustrative moments

*Jaunty* Major Jones is a jaunty chap, full of good cheer and matey jokes. We first meet him with Brown and the ship's captain when the boat has reached Port-au-Prince. He accepts the captain's offer of a drink but adds, 'Must be nippy, though. Some of the top brass are waiting to meet me on shore.' The captain returns an identity bracelet, which bears the inscription: Major HR Jones, 5 Corps. 'It was with me in Burma,' he says, 'in '42 and '43. The bad years.' Jones then swallows his drink and says, with a wink, 'Well, must be off. Remember: if you can't be good, be careful.' What a jolly fellow, we think, as he skips out of the room. It is a memorable performance by Jones, for later we learn that he is lying.

*Fantastist* Later, we see how fanciful Major Jones can be. The rebels want him to lead them, but he is hiding from the Tonton Macoutes in the Pineda's residence. Dr Magiot and Brown join him in drinking and playing cards. Slyly they appeal to his sense of himself as a great military man by talking about the desperate situation in the city. 'I feel terrible just sitting round drinking whisky,' Jones admits. 'But one ex-officer can't do much,' Brown prods. 'Well if I had fifty trained men, I'd take over the country,' Jones says with a broad smile. Magiot says he could arrange for Jones to escape from the embassy and go to the hills, where the rebels are waiting for someone with his know-how. Mrs Pineda says, 'That's crazy. He'd be shot when he set one foot outside the house.' Mr Pineda nods and says, 'There are 5,000 Tonton Macoutes.' Now, Jones' face lights up. '5,000, eh? Well, think of it. Yours truly. Riding into Port-au-Prince. Seizing the palace. A provisional government. Recognition from abroad. Then, job done, I'd slip quietly away. Like Lawrence of Arabia. Scarlet Pimpernel stuff.' His face wears an expression of maniacal triumph. Mrs Pineda again tries to pour cold water on the fanciful idea, but Jones won't be deterred. He is no longer just the pretend Major Jones, a failure and a fugitive. He is a great hero, a famous patriot. His Walter Mitty complex is in full

**flow.**

*Smith*

Character Mr Smith is a kindly older American politician who is an evangelist for vegetarianism. He is passionate about his cause but is deflected from implementing his plans when he confronts the terror of the Tonton Macoutes in Haiti. Although his ambitions outstrip reality, he displays moral courage at key points.

Illustrative moments

*Backbone* Although Mr Smith is a pacifist, dedicated to reducing acidity in the body and therefore violence in society, he has backbone. Of course, he was 'a presidential candidate', so we assume he has a modicum of grit. This aspect of his nature is displayed during a conversation with a minister. He has come to lay out his plans for the vegetarian centre and also to raise the issue of Jones, who is in prison. After the minister offers to take Smith to see a possible site for his centre, Smith mentions Jones and demands to see him. 'Be reasonable, Mr Smith, the minister says. 'A prison is not a guest house. You cannot simply walk in and out. Some prisoners misbehave and the guards have to defend themselves.' Smith is incensed and shouts, 'Against unarmed prisoners?' Brown then greases the minister's palm with US dollars, but the official still prevaricates. 'I will do what I can, but it may take time,' he says with his fake smile. Hearing this, Smith rises and says firmly, 'I will undertake no trip with you until I have seen and spoken to Mr Jones.' His refusal to be fobbed off and the determined look on his face persuades the minister to allow the prison visit. Mr Smith is at times whacky in his beliefs, but when it comes to helping his friends, he is nothing but solid.

*Ambitious* If Mr Smith has a flaw, it is the unbridled ambition of his plans. He has come to the island to open a centre for vegetarianism, the same cause for which he campaigned for the US presidency in 1948, and lost. It is, of course, a crackpot idea, but Smith is committed to realising it in grand fashion. On the drive to a possible site for his centre, he expands upon his plans to the minister. 'No centre has ever been built before on this scale. There'll be a restaurant, with a first-class chef. Then a library, a lecture hall, a cinema and even a theatre in the round for vegetarian drama.' The minister doesn't reply, so Smith continues. 'I want the President and his ministers to attend the gala opening and take the first vegetarian meal as an example to his people.' It is an expansive vision, but then again, Mr Smith is an American.



(Brown and Mrs Pineda)