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New Forms of Comedy

Papers given on the occasion
of the second annual conference
of the
"German Society for Contemporary Theatre and
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Edited for the society
by Bernhard Reitz

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*New Forms of Comedy*
Preface

Before the "German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English" was founded in 1992, it was not at all sure whether this was not too great a risk in view of the large number of similar societies which address almost every aspect of anglophone cultural life. However, a society whose objective was to focus its work solely on contemporary theatre and drama in English did not exist as yet, although many scholars and teachers had been researching this very field.

Luckily our concerns were dispelled when at the founding conference not less than 50 participants declared their wish to become members of the young society. Meanwhile, membership has steadily increased both in our country and abroad.

Our society has been most helpfully encouraged in the pursuit of its academic interests by a variety of institutions, among them the British Council, the Amerika Haus Düsseldorf, and the "Gesellschaft für Kanada-Studien". Their expertise, knowledge and support has been and will continue to be vital in establishing contacts with writers, directors and colleagues from abroad.

Two years after the society's inauguration at Siegen, we introduce our journal CDE in cooperation with a renowned publisher, the "Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier". This publication is intended to serve as a forum for the papers given on the occasion of the annual conferences. A series of monographs dedicated to contemporary theatre and drama in English is in preparation. Both publications are meant to serve as a forum for scholarly discussion. The first volume of CDE is dedicated to "New Forms of Comedy". It mirrors the aims of the society both in the number of plays and playwrights under scrutiny as well as in the variety of the genres which are considered.

Wolfgang Lippke
President
Don't laugh. It's an offence to make people laugh. Jokes carry penalties.¹

Throughout his career, Peter Barnes has been hailed as changing the nature of comedy - even of the theatre itself - with each play being greeted, sometimes with critical bemusement, as yet another new departure into uncharted dramatic territory. To the reviewers of 1968 *The Ruling Class* was 'a revelation' marking "a turning point in the drama of the second half of the twentieth century'. By 1974 Barnes’ comic tone had become easily recognized and was already being given labels like ‘Jacobean’. Yet *The Bewitched* was described as going 'over ground no playwright had trodden before', defying the theatrical standards of the time ‘to imagine how it could ever be staged’. And four years later even an unsympathetic critic of *Laughter!* had to admit that its performance signified ‘a moment of genuine stylistic change: when the dramatic categories crack apart under pressure of new experience.'²

In *Laughter!* the punishments comedy can incur are illustrated by a group of bored German bureaucrats at an office Christmas party in 1942:

Else: The only virgin left in Berlin is the angel on top of the Victory column - Goebbels can’t climb that high.

Gottleb: I sentence you to fifteen years, Fraulein ...

Cranach: Listen, listen, what do you call someone who sticks his finger up the Fuhrer’s arse?

Gottleb: Heroic.

Cranach: No, a brain surgeon!

Gottleb: That’s DEATH.

*Cranach, Else and Stroop collapse in hysterical laughter. But it dies away as they become aware that a suddenly sober Gottleb is staring balefully at the ...*

Gottleb: ... I’ll have you in front of People’s Court Judge Rehse in a day, sentenced and hanging from piano-wire by the end of the week.
And the potential offensiveness of humour is demonstrated by the use of ‘jewish jokes’ to make fun of holocaust victims, deliberately outraging the audience’s moral sensibilities by presenting ‘the farewell appearance of the Boffo Boys of Birkenau’ as ‘the climax of this Extermination Camp Christmas Concert’:

Bieberstein: Bernie Litvinoff just died.
Bimko: Well, if he had a chance to better himself.
Bieberstein: Drunk a whole bottle of varnish. Awful sight, but a beautiful finish ...
They're sending his ashes to his widow. She's going to keep them in an hour-glass.
Bimko: So she's finally getting him to work for a living ... The music has faded out imperceptibly into a hissing sound ... They cough and stagger.
Bieberstein: I could be wrong, but I think this act is dying.
Bimko: The way to beat hydrocyanide gas is by holding your breath for five minutes. It's just a question of mind over matter. They don't mind and we don't matter ... 

These extracts certainly correspond to Barnes’ proclaimed aim of ‘writing against the prevailing modes and pieties’. Although the effect might seem more tendentious in Germany, comparing his intended English audience to Nazis - on the basis that Fascism and the Final Solution are simply the ultimate example of ‘the great conservative tradition ... based on solid middle-class values’ - makes Barnes’ brand of comedy highly politicized. It is also overtly ‘polemical’, both in the way the audience are insulted, and the way he pushes social statements to an extreme (a quality that he sees as inseperable from dramatic experiment). Yet in itself Barnes’ comic material is hardly revolutionary, as he is well aware, having described his plays as ‘at least providing a good home for scores of old jokes that had nowhere to go’. And it could be argued that comedy as such is the most traditional of genres. Indeed to some extent Barnes exemplifies this link with tradition, since a considerable amount of his writing career has been devoted to adaptations of 17th century playwrights (particularly Marston, whose two plays about Antonio exemplify a comparable mix of humour and hysterical violence, Ben Jonson and Molière) as well as fin de siècle writers such as Feydeau and Wedekind.

In light of this traditionalism, ‘New Comedy’ might seem a contradiction in terms; and to evaluate the claims that Barnes’ work is ‘revolutionary’ in nature requires a theoretical framework. To what extent might Barnes’
break with conventions be more apparent than actual: a case of Forward into the Past, as it were? Alternatively, does he reshape established comic forms by filling them with unconventional content? Does his work in fact qualify as a specifically contemporary form of comic drama, as distinct from earlier modes? Or are its disturbing qualities merely symptomatic of the gap between an outdated theatrical style, and late twentieth century consciousness, which would have been the judgement of a theorist such as Peter Szondi.

When writing of the ‘Form-Inhalt Dialektik’ in his classic study of the *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, Szondi argues that in certain social circumstances,

... die inhaltliche Aussage (kann) zur formalen in Widerspruch (geraten). Bewegt sich im Falle der Enstprechung von Form und Inhalt die inhaltliche Thematik gleichsam im Rahmen der formalen Aussage als eine Problematik innerhalb etwas Unproblematischem, so entsteht der Widerspruch, indem die fraglos-feststehende Aussage der Form vom Inhalt her in Frage gestellt wird. Diese innere Antinomie ist es aber, die eine Dichtungsform geschichtlich problematisch werden lässt ...

For Szondi, 20th century consciousness automatically produced this effect in conjunction with standard types of drama that had evolved in previous eras. In his analysis, the characteristic that makes a play ‘modern’ is the degree to which it ‘resolves’ these internal contradictions by creating a new dramatic form: the prime example being Brecht’s theatre, with its ‘estrangement’, montage and anti-illusionism. By contrast, what marks out Barnes’ drama is precisely the exploiting of such oppositions. ‘Inner antimonies’ are the basis of his work; and in Szondi’s terms this would make Barnes ‘historically problematic’. However, Szondi’s focus is on the switch from Naturalism to Epic theatre. His theory completely ignores comedy - perhaps because comedy does not fit its parameters. Incongruity itself is a primary source of humour; and transposing this principle to the form itself - as Barnes does - has quite different implications. The key to Szondi’s definition of out-dated drama is the author’s unawareness. Barnes deliberately sets up a collision of contradictions, which is another way of describing dialectics.

Red nosed clowns jape about the plague and are massacred on stage; historical costume plays unfold into grotesque fantasy; lured in by a title like *Laughter!*, spectators are faced with literal torture. Even the funda-
mental theme of his work, as Barnes outlines it, is an opposition: ‘How can you be truly good when you have responsibility and power? The two are mutually exclusive. (My) plays are dramatic illustrations of this perennial theme.’ The world he presents is manichean, defined in contradictory extremes - God versus Devil - except that here the duality is set in terms of the individual’s potential for goodness, against an evil society where all values have become inverted; and this introduces yet another opposition: inner nature versus external context, personal conscience as opposed to the socio-political conditions that determine how we live.

His typical dramatic structure, too, is overtly dialectical. This is epitomized in Barnes’ shorter pieces, which are designed to be staged as pairs. At first glance, in terms of modern British theatre, such linking of two one-Act plays might appear excessively conventional since this was also the distinguishing hallmark of Terence Rattigan’s drama; and even though Rattigan is currently undergoing a revival in London, after Look Back in Anger in 1956 his work came to symbolize all that was most deadening on the English stage. But a brief comparison will suffice to show that Barnes is using this structure in a radically different way.

For instance, the two halves of Rattigan’s Separate Tables are mirror images. Both take place in the same setting, with each focussing on a different couple among the group of people living in a residential hotel. The situation and characters of the second half are the reverse of the first, with Rattigan’s parallels being carefully and precisely aligned. By comparison, the two parts of a Barnes’ double-bill like Leonardo’s Last Supper and Noonday Demons have practically nothing in common. The first deals with the murder of the artist who personifies the Renaissance, when (having been given up for dead) he revives in a charnel-house; the second with a demonic pair of fourth-century saints competing for holiness in a fight to the death. The link between the two is oblique, consisting only of the connection that is drawn from these quasi-historical scenes to the ethos of contemporary society.

The brief Lecture-Prologue to Leonardo asserts that the Renaissance marked ‘the birth of modern man and the achievements of our age’. The sixteenth-century action then illustrates what this so-called cultural progress actually means: Leonardo admits to having sacrificed social conscience for art, ignoring human needs for aesthetic abstractions - while the triumph of materialism and the profit-motive reduces even Leonardo da Vinci to a commercial commodity, worth more as a corpse (both to the
proto-capitalist renaissance undertakers, and to the modern lecturer) than alive. Leonardo points out that 'S'natural to mistake the living world for Hell, the difference is so slight when men are piked and gutted in either place'; and Noonday Demons goes on to show that in whatever period, 'The story's always the same ... men'll never be governed by reason, virtue or love.' However loathsome the saints' miserable existence, the contemporary world they foresee is a worse 'vision of hell'; and the ending of the play comes right up to date, merging with the present performance taking place. The survivor, who has won immortality, looks on in horror as his own double (another actor dressed in his costume) and his murdered rival take their stage bows, fulfilling the devil's prophecy that 'You'll be resurrected in the second half o' the twentieth century as a stage freak ... just another figment of your author's grotesque imagination.'

The two historically separated parts of Laughter! are directly comparable, though the tone is far sharper and the subject matter more disturbing. Add an S, and the title becomes 'Slaughter': a pun that accurately describes the action. Throughout the first section, a stake is slowly driven up through the body of an almost naked prince impaled on it; a councillor's foot is skewered to the floor; and Ivan, who claims responsibility for 'a computed 222,000' killings, batters his own son to death on stage. All their screams are 'the voice o' the people aching to obey'; and the second section contrasts the way the same principle works in the modern world, with Auschwitz as the prime example, and a bureaucratic Angel of Death to point out the progression from 'personal, arbitrary' massacres to the institutionalized, statistical slaughter of the modern world.

These oppositions are not only dialectical in structure, as well as serving to destabilize an audience's response by switches in tone or context. The binary principle is also intended to carry a subliminal symbolism, representing the essential quality of life. As the Angel of Death states, 'What sets worlds in motion, sends the green shoot thrusting, is the interplay of differences, their attraction and repulsion, sea-tide and heart-beat.' This stands as the antithesis of the various forms of tyranny depicted in the plays, which is seen as a death principle, tyranny's aim being 'to impose uniformity'. In theatrical terms this would correspond with the Aristotelian unities that Barnes' dialectical structure opposes - and indeed each of Barnes' longer works could also be seen as a double play, which aligns them with Barnes' shorter pieces, and implies an equally positive meaning.
All his major plays are divided into two Acts, with the first half being set against the second. Thus Act I of *The Ruling Class* shows us Jack, the 14th Earl of Gurney, in his manifestation as ‘the God of Love’: J.C. Mark 2 with his neo-New Testament gospel for resolving the Western dichotomy between body and soul through glorifying sexuality. Act II inverts this, as he takes up the role of the Old Testament God of Justice, ‘the Great Chastiser’, and reaches his apotheosis as Jack the Ripper. The same pattern recurs in *The Bewitched*, with the first Act dealing with attempts to conceive an heir for the Spanish throne (a farcically distorted and grotesque version of love), and the second Act focussing on death and punishment. This sort of structural opposition is underlined in the title of *Red Noses, Black Death*; and in Barnes’ most recently produced work, *Sunsets and Glories* (1991), the two halves are exactly balanced. The play both begins and ends in the death of a Pope, with each Act having precisely the same number of scenes.

It’s worth noting that in all these plays, Act I could stand as a complete, dramatic whole. The first half of *The Ruling Class* ends with a duel-to-the-death between rival claimants to a mutually exclusive divinity, through which Jack is restored to sanity, along with gaining a new-born son. At the same point in *The Bewitched* we have the climax of a grotesque carnival of torture with an on-stage Autodafé; and the previously impotent king finally achieves a monstrous erection that impales his queen. Similarly the first Act of *Sunsets and Glories* concludes with the willing renunciation of the Papacy by the saint who had reluctantly accepted the throne of St Peter at the beginning. In each case, the following action then reverses the significance of what turns out to be a false resolution, revealing the true reality to be very different than had been depicted in the earlier section. This principle of denying the expectations that have been set up applies to all Barnes’ major plays; and *The Ruling Class* offers the clearest example of how it works.

Jack’s initial state appears to be as mad as his family assumes. They may be corrupt and philistine. But believing himself to be Christ is clearly a delusion; to take a rest by hanging catatonic from a cross on the living room wall by any standards is deranged - though harmless - as is eating the imitation wax grapes off a visiting lady’s hat. His symptoms are accurately described by a German psychiatrist as paranoid-schizophrenic, even though he diagnoses the meglomaniac form of Jack’s dementia as merely an extreme case of the state of mind induced by social hierarchy:
Remember he's suffering from delusions of grandeur. In reality he's an Earl, an English aristocrat, a peer of the realm, a member of the ruling class. Naturally, he's come to believe there's only one person grander than that - the Lord God Almighty Himself.

The point is reinforced by the other outsider, the servant Tucker, who comments that Jack may be 'the same as all the rest, what he doesn't want to be so just isn't so.' But this doesn't imply he's sane, since even Tucker considers him 'a nut-case alright.' In terms of the plot to dispossess Jack and incarcerate him in an asylum as soon as he has produced an heir to inherit, Jack's recognition of who he 'really' is at the end of Act I represents last-minute salvation; and the audience are expected to applaud this in rejecting the outrageous machinations of his family.

However, the whole play revolves around how we define what's 'normal'. In Act II we discover that Jack's 'sanity' simply means adopting the opposite persona to his earlier incarnation. Having fathered a child, he now sees himself as God the Father: Jehova instead of Jesus. Killing replaces love - first a heavily symbolic dove, following the principle that 'it's a sign of normalcy in our circle to slaughter anything that moves', and a poacher (also approved game), then the women who are sexually attracted to him: his sister-in-law, and finally his emblematically named wife, Grace. Yet by the standards of the authoritarian society that Barnes depicts, where repressive puritanism and physical violence are the levers of power, this makes Jack 'one hundred percent normal'. He has not only joined the forces he earlier condemned, but now epitomizes their beliefs, being 'one of 'em, only more so' - and the logical consequence he draws is that

the natural order is still guilt-crime-punishment ... The strong MUST manipulate the weak. That's the first law of the Universe ... love and gentleness ... [is] a foul perversion of life! And must be rooted out. God the Father demands, orders, controls, crushes.  

At the same time, the psychological self-abuse necessary to repress his earlier personality leads to moments of physical and linguistic breakdown, reducing him to violently incoherent sounds: literally a raving maniac. Values that we customarily accept as the 'norm' turn out to be truly insane, along with the hierarchical society that produces them. By contrast, the
ideals of sexual liberation and equality (which we had previously been induced to dismiss as crazy) are revealed as right.

The characters from the ruling class hail Jack's dystopian apotheosis as 'the perfect story-book ending.' But Barnes uses every possible means to ensure that the audience reject what Jack now represents. He betrays his faithful servant, framing Tucker for the murder he himself has committed, and is shown to be dangerously psychotic. In addition, he is portrayed in terms of archetypal villains instantly recognizably to an English (or even German) audience - not only Jack the Ripper, but Shakespeare's Richard III - and the anticipated 'happy ending' turns out to be 'darkness, a single scream of fear and agony.' Thus Barnes not only sets up formal oppositions within the play itself, but also deliberately polarizes the relationship between spectators and the characters. The logic of his dramatic action conflicts with the emotional responses initially evoked in the audience. He works with antipathies.

Before turning to the crucial question of the relationship between performance and public, there's one further aspect of Barnes' structure to take into account. His plays are almost always framed. A prologue sets the context - in Ruling Class and Bewitched the death of a father, in Leonardo and Laughter! a modern figure to outline the general theme, or underline historical connections to the present - and there is also generally a brief coda that serves as an epilogue, which emphasizes or repeats the point of the main action(s). But these epilogues are never separated off, as the Prologues are. The murder of Grace, or the appearance of an even more grotesque freak to succeed Carlos II of Spain, are the logical consequences of what has occurred. Similarly, the song-and-dance act of 'the boffo boys of Birkenau' is a logical extension of the earlier office-party scene, as well as a literal restatement of the Prologue's opening question: 'in the face of Atilla the Hun, Ivan the Terrible, a Passendale or Auschwitz, what good is laughter?!' The pattern is in a sense Hegelian: premise (the prologue) - thesis & antithesis (the double action) - with the final synthesis being left for the audience to supply.

As I've argued elsewhere, despite such statements by his characters as 'Blind chance rules the world!', Barnes is not a quasi-absurdist playwright of despair (which has been suggested by critics such as Ronald Bryden or Martin Esslin). Nor does Barnes mean us to accept the conclusion voiced by some of his characters, that the universe is the creation of a sadistic and malign God. Although in Sunsets and Glories God's massive foot appears
farcically from the flies to squelch a dying Pope, the Angel of Death in *Laughter!* clearly states that God is a product of the human mind. Religion is emphasized as one of the prime elements in the psychology of submission, and the belief in a divine being becomes little more than a way of justifying social hierarchy and man's inhumanity to other men. For example, in *The Ruling Class* the Doctor's evidence for dismissing Jack's delusion about being the God of Love is 'the mountains of gold teeth and hair and the millions boiled down for soap' in the Nazi death camps - which is also the rationale for a 'God of Vengeance' (although the play clearly presents this as an even more insane obsession).  

The outrage expressed in the violent images of Barnes' work is not an existential statement, but social protest. His stated aim is to 'have a direct impact on reality', which implies not only transforming the spectators' political attitudes, but arousing a sufficiently strong rejection of the established system to carry through into action outside the theatre after the end of the performance.

The effect on Barnes' audience is thus more significant than in most earlier comedy; and it's important to estimate the social background of his spectators. Barnes describes his plays as 'an anti-boss drama for the shorn not the shearers'* which might suggest he is writing for the disadvantaged and exploited, or for working-class performance. However, the few representatives of the proletariat who appear in his plays hardly symbolize a hope of social change. Tucker might dream of 'Aristocratic carcasses hung up like kosher beef', but his ideal is to live like the most luxurious of the upper-classes; and the rebellious Spanish peasants are literally portrayed as sheep. At the same time, all his plays require the technical resources and (with the single exception of *Noonday Demons*) the large casts of a major mainstage theatre. As a result, in England productions have generally been limited to the Royal Shakespeare Company at one end of the scale, or the Royal Court at the other: subsidized theatres with a largely middle-class or educated public. This automatically sets up a tension between stage and spectators. Even though not at the top of the power-structure, the audience are certainly neither the surly peasants of *The Bewitched* nor the violent one-time galley-slaves of *Red Noses*. Rather, Barnes' self-selected audience are those who, in his terms, profit from or at least acquiesce in the system: the Royal Court audience might react strongly against being seen in this light, but they are implicitly cast as the capitalistic undertakers of *Leonardo*, the obsequiously respectable ladies organizing the Church fete in *The Rul-
ing Class or the bewitched courtiers pandering to Carlos II. In fact, Barnes is clearly aware of the social composition of his audience. The range of reference in his drama, and even his style of humour, requires intellectual sophistication; and his attack is intended as a means of reeducation, leading to political awakening.

This is already clear in The Ruling Class, where the spectators are repeatedly challenged to intervene in the on-stage action. At the point in the fraudulent marriage arranged for Jack, where members of the congregation are asked to declare if there is 'any just cause why they may not be lawfully joined together ... or hereafter forever hold their peace', the aristocratic manipulators 'stare deliberately at the audience. Silence.' - and Tucker upbraids the spectators as 'jelly-meat whiskers! Stand up on your tea-soaked haunches and stop it. Piddling half-dead helots.' With silk-stockings thrown at them during a strip-tease, they are cast as voyeurs; and later they are treated as murder suspects, when Sir Charles, standing over the victim's corpse, 'turns and explodes indignantly at the audience: All right, who's the impudent clown responsible for this?' On the surface an antagonising display of aristocratic arrogance, this also implicitly reminds them that, having gone along with the action in silence - and considerable enjoyment - they are indeed accomplices in the crime. Barnes, of course, is exploiting the convention that theatre-audiences must listen without interruption during a performance, making this a sign of complicity, while their laughter evoked by all the farcical incidents becomes interpreted as approval of the characters' horrific acts. Comedy is turned into a trap.

In addition to manipulating their responses, Barnes deliberately subverts audience expectations on all possible levels. This applies to the genre in which he chooses to write, as well as the mixture of styles, and the patterns on which individual elements of his work are based.

As for genre, Barnes is clearly categorized as a writer of comedy. His drama - in particular The Ruling Class that established his reputation - has a strong comic emphasis. It contains stock figures of fun, as well as farcical action; and this aspect of his work is reinforced by association with Ben Jonson and Feydeau through his adaptations. A title like Laughter! also has a specific connotation: all of which might well cause an average spectator to anticipate something very different to what Barnes actually writes.

In terms of mixing humour and horror, Barnes is almost unique among British dramatists, although in 1975 Trevor Griffiths also proposed such a model in one of the cabaret turns performed within the (otherwise very
conventional) action of *Comedians*. There is very little anarchic comedy in the English tradition. The comic tone has always been associated with entertainment, generally light, frequently romantic, and traditionally conservative in form as well as political bias. Jokes follow standard formula - a factor Barnes relies on - and farce depends on repetition: the running gag, which is also a favoured technique for Barnes. Although comedy has come under perennial condemnation as an incitement to immorality, its traditional emblem is marriage, signalling the triumph over socially disruptive forces (particularly in Shakespeare, the great exemplary for English audiences). Even satire, from the Restoration to Oscar Wilde or Noel Coward, in attacking moral abuse, false idealism, and above all hypocrisy, affirms the official values of society. As such, at least in England, comedy has the reputation of being unthreatening and cheerfully optimistic. Amusing, possibly uplifting or even insulting, but never seriously discomforting, extremist or revolutionary.  

In such a context, Barnes' stress on death, physical violence and excessive cruelty, his parade of crippled, disfigured or decomposing bodies, the use of the grotesque (which he has compared to Hieronymous Bosch) and his strident political radicalism are all doubly shocking. The same is true of the way Barnes treats the various elements of comedy within his plays, as with the repeated references to a 'happy ending' in *The Ruling Class*, which set the actual worst-case outcome in overt opposition to the conventional conclusion of comedy. This type of incongruity is characteristic. On the performance-level, the insulating separation between audience and stage is broken by direct address. On a conceptual level, historical accuracy is combined with fantastic exaggeration or blatant anachronism. Within the plays appearances contrast with the real circumstances, or words contradict actions - as with the running gag in *The Bewitched* where the expression 'Live and let live' is a signal for the speaker to be stabbed to death. (Incidentally, this particular use of incongruity is itself an old routine, lifted straight out of an early Cary Grant film from the 1930s, *Big Brown Eyes*, in which exactly the same words are also a signal for murder: and this example typifies the way Barnes exploits standard comic formula. Even when these might seem to be inverted, his incongruities as such are frequently cliches.) Barnes subtitled his first major play a 'Baroque Comedy'; but this nod to tradition also carries a double meaning. In English, the word 'baroque' implies something excessive, esthetically extreme, in ornately bad taste; and each of his plays moves further outside the accepted bounds of literary decorum. Per-
haps the clearest, as well as most deliberately shocking example is his treatment of the clown: the quintessential figure of comedy.

Barnes has acknowledged silent-movie comedians such as Buster Keaton or Laurel and Hardy, as well as Sandy Powell and Max Wall from the modern British Music Hall, as his 'mentors'; and the Auschwitz duo of Bimko and Bieberstein are funereal parodies of these popular entertainers. But in his plays such figures usually betray their principles and, instead of being the source of comedy, become targets for the most corrosive of his satire. More than that, Barnes overtly contradicts the popular image. The archetypal clown triumphs under adversity; he epitomizes hope and human resilience. By contrast, in Barnes the clown is always a self-centred cynic, and he always gets slaughtered. In *The Ruling Class* it is Tucker, the anarchist underling who punctures his masters' pretensions - 'spitting in the hot soup, peeing on the Wedgewood dinner plates' - who is arrested as a scapegoat for murder. The dwarf court-jester of *The Bewitched* is tortured on the rack, and reappears as a corpse. The prison camp comedians of *Laughter!* are gassed in the middle of their act, while 'God's zanies' with their red noses and white circus-clown costumes are massacred by the crossbows of the Papal guard.

Beyond its shock-value, this violent treatment of the traditional originator of humour calls comedy itself into question; and this questioning becomes explicit in *Laughter!* As Barnes has said, 'I adore comics and comedians. But I know it's not the answer ... I'll say I loved it, but it didn't help.' The figure of 'The Author', who delivers the Prologue - a variation on one of his early, unperformed plays (*Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie*) where the same character was specifically named 'Peter Barnes' - rather obviously parodies Barnes himself, presented as one of these stand-up comics. The audience are called on to 'root ... out' comedy as 'the enemy': a proposition given literal shape as 'The Author' is pelted with the stock custard pie in the face, harrassed by a revolving trick bow-tie, assaulted by the flower in his buttonhole which squirts water at him in the crudest of practical jokes, and finally humiliated as his trousers fall down (a well-worn piece of slapstick) 'to reveal spangled underpants' (the ultimate in ridicule). The attack by all these outworn elements of the crudest kind of farce is perhaps intended to represent the projected antagonism of those spectators who have come to the performance anticipating the enjoyment of conventional comedy, which they are to be explicitly denied. Or (more directly), it embodies the symbolic revenge of the comic genre itself, reflecting
the Author's dismissal of all the traditional justifications for comedy. The notions of laughter as a moral force, reforming folly and vice through ridicule, as an affirmation of sanity, or a weapon against tyranny, are not just rejected, but denounced as actively damaging. 'Laughter only ... corrupts everything we try to say' - 'An excuse to change nothing, for nothing needs changing when it's all a joke', comedy becomes 'standard equipment for the losing side.'

This, of course, is specifically illustrated by the following double action. The first, Ivan-the-Terrible section is designed to reveal the techniques that produce laughter as empty structures: separating comic form from humorous effect, by setting stock farce in such a horrific context that laughing becomes a totally inappropriate response. Initially the second, Berlin-civil-service section appears to offer light relief, since bureaucracy is a familiar satiric target, as indeed to some extent are the figures of the Nazi leaders; and there is nothing obvious at first to prevent us from responding to it as comic, since the connection with death camps only gradually emerges. Although clearly in the category of Black Comedy, much of the humour is genuinely funny. When we discover the actual function of all the paperwork, and what is being referred to by 'components' (gas-chambers) or 'units' being 'processed' (holocaust victims), then we are forced to re-evaluate our laughter and realize the degree to which a comic treatment has indeed blinded us to social reality or corrupted our moral sense. To ram the point home - and underline the way people repress awareness of the true situation by concentrating on trivial routine: whether comic routines or administrivia - there is a graphic picture of the extermination process at Auschwitz (though in the original Charles Marowitz production, the blue-painted straw dummies of this scene appeared simply fake and diminished the intended shock). The song-and-dance epilogue that follows demonstrates the opening assertion that humour creates victims and prevents them from even protesting effectively. However, it also serves as a test of whether this audience-therapy has been successful: a Final Solution applied to comedy, as it were. Asked if the Royal Court audience laughed at the jokes in Bimko and Bieberstein's 'farewell performance', Barnes replied: 'On the good nights they didn't.'

According to Barnes in an interview during the run of the first production, Laughter! is an experiment in comedy. As in all experiments, you have to take it to an extreme form. I'm asking, 'Is comedy a help? Does it relieve the injustices of the world?' The answer he gave at that time was an
unequivocal No, arguing that even a comic masterpiece such as Gogol's *The Government Inspector* had no effect whatsoever. But his next play, *Red Noses, Black Death*, does suggest that a positive function might exist. Comedy can offer a joyful and affirmative vision of an alternative social order. If this is joined with a revolutionary political stance that calls for seizing power by force, together with a belief in the supreme value of the individual, then the resulting combination might usher in 'a new age, new world, new light, new birth' - at least when society is already destabilized, as it has been in this play by the plague. However, although these three forces, in the shape of the Red Noses, the Black Ravens and the Flagellants, do recognize their common purpose, in terms of the play it is already too late for them. With the ending of the plague, authority is reasserted; and the only effect of subversive comedy is to get the comedians slaughtered, which is perhaps intended to parallel the way Barnes himself has been silenced. (In England, at least, none of his plays after *The Ruling Class* have achieved long runs, and none of them have been revived for a second production, while *Red Noses* took seven years to find a stage.) At any rate, the brief sketch of a socially aware comedy that the Red Noses perform exactly copies the qualities of Barnes' own plays in miniature. He is implicitly presenting his work as the new model, corresponding to the principle of the Red Noses that 'Every jest should be a small revolution ... All forms of rebellion must come together.'

Barnes offers a radical questioning of the nature of comedy, and its function. His work, which he describes as 'on the outer limits of farce where everything is pushed to extremes of pain and cruelty', consciously seeks to redefine comedy and evolve a form appropriate to contemporary realities. 'Balanced on a tightrope between the comic and the tragic' (as Barnes has put it), this kind of drama can hardly be labelled as comedy in any standard sense of the word. Even though Barnes' work goes against Szondi's criteria, it would seem to measure up to his definition for a new, specifically contemporary dramatic form. Indeed it also corresponds to fundamental principles of the most advanced recent literary theory. The binary structure of Barnes' plays, which carries a symbolic anti-authoritarian symbolism in 'the interplay of differences', can be seen as fulfilling Mikhail Bakhtin's principle of 'dialogic' art. In its abusive parody and stress on physicality, breaking taboos about the kind of material that is acceptable on the stage - let alone in comedy - use of grotesque and mixture of aesthetic categories, as well as its dualism, Barnes' work certainly echoes the Bakhtinian ideal
of ‘Carnevalesque’ art. In addition, the structural dialectic of his plays has clear analogies to Derrida’s definition of the political significance in deconstructionism:

We must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a double writing ... that is in and of itself multiple: what I have called, in ‘La double séance’, a double science. On the one hand we must traverse a phase of overturning ... To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy ... That being said - and on the other hand - to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system. By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging writing, we also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept’: a concept that can no longer be included in the previous regime. 23

Of course, aligning Barnes theoretically with Szondi, Bakhtin, or Derrida does not provide answers to some more practical issues. In polarizing the audience, as he does, Barnes effectively undermines his political aims, antagonizing spectators instead of converting them. And one might hesitate to affirm that his work defines what should be the aim of comedy today, since as yet there are no obvious followers of his dramatic line.

So, finally, the evaluation of Barnes’ achievement must remain an open question. However, in this regard, it’s worth remembering that Barnes is by no means a ‘new’ playwright. He is the same generation as Osborne and Arnold Wesker. Arden, Bond and Pinter are his contemporaries; and his first play was written a year before Joe Orton hit the London stage. Yet where all of those - with the exception of Edward Bond - have withdrawn from the theatre or ceased to write, Barnes has stayed at the cutting edge. Where Bond, and even some of the ‘new wave’ of post-1968 playwrights - Brenton, Edgar, Hare - have become an expected commodity, paid-up members of the theatrical establishment, each successive Barnes’ play is still disturbing, still capable of generating outrage: to the extent that major theatres remain reluctant to perform his work. By now the ‘new wave’ themselves have been superseded by a yet younger generation of playwrights. But Barnes has a new major comedy, set in a Renaissance kitchen and once again breaking the limitations of the stage, still waiting to be performed. Despite its innocuous title, Eggs and Bacon, as ever with his work, this play seems too daring to be accepted.
Notes

2 Harold Hobson, Ronald Bryden, Introductions to *The Ruling Class & The Bewitched*, in Barnes *Plays One*, pp. 3-4, 186; and Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 25 January 1978.
3 *Plays One*, pp. 395-396 & 410.
5 *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, Suhrkamp 1966, p. 11.
6 Interview in Programme for *Sunsets and Glories*, West Yorkshire Playhouse, 28 June 1990.
7 *Plays One*, pp. 126, 145, 161.
8 *Plays One*, pp. 350, 356.
9 *Plays One*, pp. 24, 31, 41.
10 *Plays One*, pp. 83, 111.
11 *Plays One*, pp. 112, 119.
12 *Plays One*, pp. 410, 343.
14 Barnes, Introduction to *Plays One*, p. viii.
15 *Plays One*, pp. 107, 56-57, 100.
16 Even Joe Orton’s notoriously savage and irreverent farce, while inverting all moral standards, ultimately validates the ethical values of society. These provide the measure for the depravity of his characters, the bourgeois establishment - and the audience they represent - being condemned for not living by their proclaimed principles.
18 *Plays One*, p. 343.
21 Unpublished typescript, II, iii and Epilogue.
It is getting increasingly difficult to remember the last real British theatre scandal. More than a dozen years ago now Howard Brenton’s *The Romans in Britain* shocked audiences so much that his play was attacked in the House of Commons, with some die-hards clamouring to bring back censorship. Since then, the public debate over the ethics of performance has been much less fun. Nobody, not even Howard Barker, has managed to repeat the *Romans* uproar, and some of Barker’s plays are, if anything, more offensive than Brenton at his best. Peter Kelting comments on this phenomenon, albeit in a wider context:

> The end of the theatre’s capacity for scandal is reached as soon as audiences anticipate the scandal as part of their expectations.¹

Dieter A. Berger goes even further and says about productions of canonized plays:

> By now one is so accustomed to having one’s classics defamiliarized that one is, on the contrary, far more puzzled by a conventional production.²

This is the starting point for my following argument: The really surprising element of much of contemporary drama is the absence of surprises, the fact that many plays are far more conventional than was permissible in the 60s or 70s. I am going to concentrate on two outstandingly successful comedies of the 1980s, Edward Bond’s *Restoration* and Peter Shaffer’s *Lettice and Lovage*. Neither author can be said to have developed new forms of comedy, but both have discovered new uses for the old ones. The returns to established conventions of comedy in these two plays, while superficially similar, have two quite different consequences.³
II

Restoration tells the story of the eighteenth-century country boy, Bob Hedges, who is made the scapegoat for a murder he witnessed. The murderer is his master, Lord Are, who promises to get Bob pardoned. Secretly, however, Are makes sure that Bob ends at the gallows. The play concludes with the triumph of Are, the execution of Bob and the desperate ruminations of Bob’s widow, Rose.

This does not sound like much of a comedy, but Bond has always mixed the hilarious with the cruel (to avoid the term ‘tragic’, for which Bond has little use.) Restoration also shares its historical remoteness with most of Bond’s previous plays. The reason he usually gave for setting the action in the past was that he wanted to show social conflicts at a time when they were most obvious - the past became the paradigm of the present. Bond underscored that with anachronisms, stage directions demanding modern costumes, the use of modern diction, and above all with the dramatic format of the epic play in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht: a scenic structure, interrupted by songs, narrative intrusions and frequent changes of setting and context. In Restoration, these elements are still present, but they are counterbalanced, as the title announces, by the format of the restoration comedy.

There is not enough space to demonstrate in detail how carefully Bond copies the conventions established by playwrights from Wycherley to Farquhar. Let me instead, just to convey the flavour of the play, quote the beginning of the play’s first scene:

(London. The Park of Lord ARE’s house. ARE and FRANK. FRANK is in livery.)
ARE: Lean me against that great thing.
FRANK: The oak sir?
ARE: Hold your tongue. No no! D’ye want me to appear drunk? Nonchalant. As if I often spent the day leaning against an oak or supine in the grass.
FRANK: Your lordship comfortable?
ARE: No scab I am not, if that gives ye joy. Hang my scarf over the twig. Delicately! - as if some discriminating wind had cast it there. Stand off. How do I look?
FRANK: Well sir ... how would yer like to look?
ARE: Pox! ye city vermin can’t tell the difference between a haystack and a chimney stack. Wha-ha! I must not laugh, it’ll spoil my pose. Damn! the
sketch shows a flower. 'Tis too late for the shops, I must have one from the ground.

FRANK: What kind sir?

ARE: Rip up that pesky little thing on the path. That'll teach it to grow where gentlemen walk. (FRANK offers the flower.) Smell it! If it smells too reprehensible throw it aside. I hate the gross odours the country gives off. 'Tis always in a sweat! Compare me to the sketch.⁶

Bond here establishes two major oppositions of restoration comedy, that of master vs. servant and that of town vs. country. Frank is only given short questions while Lord Are's speeches are rambling and self-assured. His language, full of orders, curses and witticisms, is that of the protagonists of late 17th century drama, down to vocabulary ('pesky') and elisions (''Tis'). At the same time, Are is introduced as a town dweller who cannot even recognize an oak.

Bond wishes to use these oppositions, which dominate the play, to show the essentially reactionary quality of restoration comedy. Recently he stated:

I wanted to write a play set in restoration themes. These are still received almost totally uncritically in the theatre. The opportunism of the characters is applauded. Humour is taken as a self-consciousness which disarms the wicked and also in a way justifies them in their exploitation of others. So their 'silliness' makes them both socially harmless and entitles them to their positions as exploiters.⁷

To expose that uncritical reception, Bond interrupts the play with songs which owe more to Brecht than to John Gay; they interrupt the flow of the action rather than augment it. The language of these songs is modern and their message as blunt as Are's stratagems are subtle. This is from the first of fifteen such songs:

This is our world and it's staying that way
This time we're gonna say no
Today we'll live till tomorrow
And tell the bastards where to go⁸

A few years ago I pointed out to Edward Bond that this revolutionary stance completely disappears when the hero is killed and his widow has to
face a world without friends. He refused this comment in no uncertain terms and insisted on the play’s hopeful ending. Like his Lear, he said, Rose has accumulated experience, and unlike Lear she even survives to warn future generations.9

I still believe that Restoration is not the politically effective play Bond wants it to be, but my 1993 reasons are slightly more sophisticated than just deploring the absence of a happy ending. In fact I now believe that the choice of raw material, the restoration comedy format, makes any criticism of that material from within impossible. Bond’s usual technique when dealing with conventional forms and themes, a modernization of language and a brutalization of action, is impossible here. Restoration comedies do not just contain, but are actually constituted by a textualization of the world that is witty and ultimately harmless. If you change the characters’ diction or have them commit acts of unmitigated cruelty you remove the very basis of these comedies - the result would look like Joe Orton’s farces. In order to criticize the world-view inherent in restoration comedies, Bond has to leave their literary conventions intact.

As a result, Lord Are has much the best lines of the play. The humbler figures have to quit centre stage as soon as he enters; his total command of language mirrors his total domination of whatever happens around him. He even anticipates events and shares this knowledge with the audience - not in the Brechtian stepping out of his role, but in the traditional aside of comedy:

ARE: Her ladyship is dead.
MOTHER: Dead?
ARE (aside): O the tedium of a tragedy: everything is said twice and then thrice.
MOTHER (flatly): Dead?
ARE (aside): Twice.
MOTHER (flatly): Dead!10

An exchange like that has the audience laugh with the oppressor at the oppressed. Whenever Are enters a conflict he emerges as the winner who carries the sympathy of the audience:

ARE: Fie ma’am! I intend to bequeath posterity the memorial of my life not some snot-nosed brat! If I have a boot or a cape named after me - as I hope to have a hat - I shall be content.
ANN: You monster! You promised me -
ARE: Ma'am a gentleman will promise anything to avoid quarrelling in the church with a parson.\textsuperscript{11}

This contrasts sharply with the crude jokes of his servants.\textsuperscript{12}

Are's pronouncements and actions are entertaining; indeed, they are too entertaining for Bond's didactic aim. While his antagonists frequently interrupt the play for their songs, Are never leaves the conventional frame of comedy. His asides do not turn the audience into spectators and listeners, but into confidantes and accomplices. The conventional Restoration hero, amoral as he is, conspires with an audience who knows and cherishes these conventions and thus undermines the more progressive figures. Christopher Innes has remarked that Bob actually deserves to die because of his stupidity (and this demonstrates the attraction the code of behaviour inherent in restoration comedies has even for critics trying to be impartial),\textsuperscript{13} and David Ian Rabey comments:

\begin{quote}
(T)he hero Bob is so passive a victim whilst his aristocratic enemy Are is so wittily engaging that the play's emotional and theatrical appeal is out of balance (...).\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

\textit{Restoration} was Edward Bond's biggest success in the 80's. Unlike \textit{Summer} (1982), which was more read in German drama departments than seen on the British stage, it even had, after its premiere at the Royal Court, a successful revival with the RSC in 1988; that is good going for a contemporary play. \textit{Restoration} shows that the critical reworking of a literary genre does not automatically lead to a distancing of the audience. There are elements in the play which are designed to enforce that distance (not least the incongruous fragments of pastoral announced in the subtitle), but the restoration material retains enough of its appeal to entertain and, eventually, satisfy.

\section*{III}

Peter Shaffer's \textit{Lettice and Lovage} was even more successful. It ran for years in London and on Broadway, and again the conventionality of the play made it so popular. The play tells the story of two women, Lettice and Lotte, who overcome their differences and join forces against a hostile environment. Lettice is an exuberant and theatrical figure while Lotte is
sober and down-to-earth, and the gradual approximation of those two opposing poles produces much of the fun of the play. It is subtitled *A Comedy in Three Acts*, and unlike, say, Harold Pinter’s *comedies of menace* (this is the critic’s term, not Pinter’s) it is actually a comedy in the narrow sense of the word.

Shaffer uses the conventions of the British boulevard play without changing, augmenting or fracturing them. Most of the action takes place in Lettice’s drawing-room, Shaffer demands a realistic setting, the supporting parts are stereotyped stock figures with names like ‘Surly Man’, and there are numerous effects supporting the convention of the fourth wall. One of the most striking of these conventional elements is Shaffer’s use of a sound effect to indicate time and place: ‘Three o’clock sounds from Big Ben outside.’

This is so corny and time-worn a ploy that an audience who remembers a play like *Equus* (1973) or the Artaud-inspired *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964) and may have come to the theatre expecting something similar will actually be irritated by it. Shaffer paradoxically uses the means of conventional comedy to distance the audience and make them sit up. This is not mere speculation: the reports of the play’s London run emphasize that its conventionality was the really surprising thing about it. C. J. Gianakaris, to take just one example, wrote:

Peter Shaffer caught audiences off guard with *Lettice and Lovage*, his latest stage work. After twenty consecutive years of writing serious drama, suddenly in 1987 he returned to comedy with a brilliantly witty full-length play.

Shaffer’s use of the boulevard comedy format is a striking, practical example of a phenomenon that informs many plays of the 1980s: the habitualized expectation of unconventional ‘shocks’ can only be fulfilled by being denied.

The question remains, however: why does Shaffer do it? *Lettice and Lovage* is not just a practical joke played upon an unsuspecting audience. There is also an ideological dimension to this return to old forms of comedy.

Drama critics and ordinary theatre-goers have long realized that Shaffer’s favourite technique is to contrast two antagonists who have some striking similarities but are emblematic of two incompatible world-views. The ensuing conflict always leads to the physical or mental annihilation of
one agonist, the triumph of one extreme over the other and thus to the fragmentation of the survivor: liquidating one's opposite impoverishes rather than liberates. This pattern had become almost imperative in the 1970s, not just for Shaffer's plays but for many others. You could almost say that a 'well-made play' of the 1970s had to end unhappily. There was certainly not much scope for comedy. *Lettice and Lovage*, on the other hand, dramatizes the synthesis of two seemingly incompatible ways of life in the face of a common counter-world and thus disappoints the audience's expectations on yet another level. Shaffer comments on this:

> When it first appeared there were some critics, both lay and professional, who did not want a happy ending to the play at all. However, I believe most firmly that an unhappy one is actually a betrayal of the genre of comedy. For the life of me, I could not leave Lettice weeping in a basement.  

The genre Shaffer has chosen enforces a happy ending just as Bond's choice of the restoration comedy format enforced the triumph of the aristocratic wit. Shaffer's figures find the solution to their troubles by overcoming their own pessimism and feelings of inadequacy. The motive force of enlightenment sweeps away their obsession with an allegedly better past and makes them stand up to present horrors:

> LOTTE: (...) You're like those women in my office. ('Refined' voice) 'Oh, dear! Oh dear, dear, dear - this horrid, nasty Present!' (Hard) The Past was just as nasty as we are. Just as stupid. Just as greedy and brutal.

LETTICE: No!

LOTTE: Worse. For most people it was far worse.

LETTICE: (Hotly) At least it was beautiful! You said that yourself. 'It gets uglier every minute,' you said.

LOTTE: So it does.

LETTICE: So why shouldn't I hide? It's hideous here. Everywhere ... Hideous and hateful.

LOTTE: Then do something about it! Fight it. Attack it. Show some spunk, for God's sake! Don't just stay cringing in a basement, playing stupid games.

LETTICE: (Desperate) Well, what can I do? What can you do? Or anyone? LOTTE: We are two able, intelligent women.

For the first time, Shaffer dramatizes the reconstruction rather than the fragmentation of the individual, and he does this by reviving the conven-
tions of comedy that had been all but submerged by those of the epic play of the 60s and 70s. Shaffer affirms the possibility of an autonomous existence in an imperfect world. His Lettice, 'a totally self-justified woman' coming to terms with her own and England's past, becomes the very opposite of one of the paradigmatic figures of English drama prior to the 1980s. Davies in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*, according to one critic,

is forced to get rid of his own past as far as he attempts to escape heteronomy and to realize a private freedom beyond society (...). 21

Shaffer's protagonists leave the normative frame of society, too, but they return to it in the end. Yet, far from acquiescing in the status quo, as the old comedy would have had them, they start their own project of change.

IV

Well: two established playwrights, two conventional comedies, two outstanding successes. I think it is significant that Bond and Shaffer of all people, the exponents of the twin influences on modern British drama of Brecht and Artaud, should change their dramatic strategies and reanimate the past. Two years ago Howard Brenton said about the theatre:

> It is an archaic form. Deeply, often hopelessly, recidivistically, archaic. (...) I know of no fundamental innovation that the inventors (sic) of theatre, Aeschylus, Sophocles and above all Euripides, did not use. 22

He goes on to call the theatre 'a load of old tat, bits and pieces, disconnected.' Bond and Shaffer connect them for us, with differing results. In Bond's play the 'heap of broken images' attains more coherence and effectiveness than he himself wanted, in Shaffer's play this coherence is consciously triumphant. Both texts, eventually, show a move away from the 70s view of human beings as either a mere bundle of roles or the agents of revolution. There is something else visible in the complex net of rearranged conventions, and that is the return of the autonomous individual, free in his or her choice of roles, in a society that shows coherence and meaning and hence is potentially acceptable. If Shaffer develops that line of argument he will be attacked as an affirmative reactionary for his change of attitude as
Howard Barker was for his. It has to be pointed out, however, that there are fewer and fewer people around who are prepared to do the attacking.

Notes


3 I am indebted to Loren Reser and Thomas Rommel for comments, proofreading and computer assistance.

4 The most striking example of this technique is The Sea: A Comedy, 1973.


8 Restoration, 1.

9 As early as 1980 he said: "You see, if you do look, I usually leave on the stage a next generation who are not there as an authoritarian cleaning-up-of-the-mess in the sense that a Shakespearean play ends with people coming on to say 'now we go back to normal.' I always leave the situation (grey,) saying, 'Now you can't go back to normal!"' (Quoted in Beverly Matherne und Salvatore Maiorana, "An Interview with Edward Bond", in: Kansas Quarterly 12 (1980), 63-72, 68.)

10 Restoration, 20.

11 Restoration, 8.
12 MOTHER: (...) She the sort a creatureshe looks like?
BOB: Yes if thass cow.' (Restoration, 6.)
13 Cf. Christopher Innes, Modern British Drama, 176.
14 David Ian Rabey, British and Irish Political Drama in the Twentieth Century: 
15 Peter Shaffer, Lettice and Lovage: A Comedy In Three Acts, in: Lettice and 
17 For a metadramatic discussion of that phenomenon cf. Christopher Hampton's 
18 Peter Shaffer, "Preface", in: Lettice and Lovage and Yonadab, vii-ix, ix.
19 Lettice and Lovage, 76.
20 Lettice and Lovage, 30.
21 'In dem Maße wie er der "Fremdbestimmung" zu entgehen und eine "private" 
   Freiheit jenseits der Gesellschaft zu verwirklichen sucht, ist er gezwungen, sich 
   der eigenen Vergangenheit zu entledigen (...).' (Lothar Fietz, "Variationen 
   des Themas vom 'Fragmentarischen Existieren' im zeitgenössischen englischen 
   Drama: Pinter, Bond, Shaffer", in: Anglia 98 (1980), 383-402, 386.)
22 Howard Brenton, "A Load of Old Tat", in: Wolfgang Lippke ed., British Drama 
   in the Eighties and Beyond, Siegen (Universität Gesamthochschule Siegen), 1991, 
   53-63, 54.
The action of Sarah Daniels's *Masterpieces* (1983) begins with three heterosexual couples having dinner together in a restaurant. Very quickly, after a minute or two of dialogue, the couples' conversation turns to joke-telling. Each of the three men, in turn, recounts a joke about rape, jokes that play on the idea that women secretly want it to happen. The stage directions indicate that after each joke the response is the same: 'The men laugh, [one of them] not as heartily as the other two. [One of the women] rather hesitantly joins in. [The second, Yvonne,] doesn't even smile, while [the third] laughs uproariously and rather disconcertingly so'.

After the men finish telling their jokes, the woman who had laughed so extravagantly at them offers a funny story of her own. Its humour is very different from the cheap comedy heard so far, revolving around a mix-up between a vicar and his wife. He has given a talk on sex to some schoolchildren, while his wife thinks he has given a talk on sailing. When the headteacher mentions this wonderful talk to the vicar's wife, the latter expresses her surprise: 'he's only done it twice. The first time he was sick and the second time his hat came off' (p. 168). The stage direction indicates that the men 'laugh [though] they are less inclined to do so' than previously, while Yvonne smiles for the first time.

Finally, into the middle of another conversation, Yvonne interjects her own joke: 'How many men does it take to tile a bathroom?' There is a pause, during which no one speaks, and then the answer: 'Three but you have to slice them thinly' (p. 169). There is no stage direction, no on-stage response to the joke: after an uneasy silence, the conversation simply resumes where it left off.

When I first saw *Masterpieces* at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, the dialectical function of these jokes eventually, rather than immediately, became clear. The Royal Court audience, despite their usually raised consciousnesses and liberal attitudes, joined heartily in the on-stage laughter at the rape jokes, no doubt liberated by the knowledge that the play was, after all, at the Royal Court, the playwright was not only a woman but a feminist, and if the jokes were there it must be all right to laugh at them. Audience participation in the laughter was nevertheless disconcerting, since the on-
stage laughter, as I have indicated, was neither unanimous nor identically motivated. Although I do not remember the general audience response to the vicar joke, I recall my own relief at finally sharing a sense of humour with someone on stage. However, the total silence that greeted Yvonne’s joke about men tiling a bathroom produced a *frisson* that I shall never forget.

The intensity of that silence, which encompassed both characters and audience, produced a palpable tension in the theatre, one that emanated from guilt, resentment, bewilderment, or a combination thereof. In it, you could almost hear the proverbial penny drop: Daniels had explicitly problematized the nature of comedy, not only by dramatizing its different mainsprings but also by implicating the audience in its processes. Those who had laughed at the rape jokes were invited by the play to ask themselves why violence directed at women is perceived as comic, when violence directed at men is perceived as disturbing. In particular, women who had laughed were encouraged to ask themselves why they had been complicit in such humour, and in what way? Did they resemble Rowena who had hesitantly joined in, afraid to be thought a bad sport, a humourless bore? Or did they resemble Jennifer, whose uproarious laugh reflected not her own sense of humour but a denial of her own womanhood?

Daniels’s interrogation of humour at the beginning of *Masterpieces* can serve as a paradigm of one of the ways in which contemporary feminist dramatists handle comedy in their plays. They use comedy to question assumptions about society, gender relations, sexuality, and other matters - a traditional enough function of the genre - but at the same time they question certain underlying assumptions about comedy itself. In this essay, I will explore some of these instances where playwrights interrogate comedy while using it to interrogate contemporary society. My examples will be drawn from *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988) by Timberlake Wertenbaker and from *Ice Cream* (1989) by Caryl Churchill.

Wertenbaker’s *The Love of the Nightingale* is at first glance a strange choice for a discussion of comedy. A retelling of the myth of Philomele and Tereus, the play nevertheless incorporates much humour. It begins with a representation of ‘War’, a fight between two soldiers with swords and shields who at first exchange insults rather than blows:

**FIRST SOLDIER:** You cur!
**SECOND SOLDIER:** You cat’s whisker.
FIRST SOLDIER: You flea's foot.
SECOND SOLDIER: You particle.
(Pause.)

The insults escalate into threats and then violence, culminating in death as the First Soldier kills the Second. The Second Soldier shouts a final insult - 'Murderer!' - but this seemingly unanswerable taunt is answered by another more final - 'Corpse!'  

This stylized depiction of war, with its reduction of the supposed glories of combat to the undignified trading of schoolboy insults, is comic in performance. Heroic pretensions are seemingly debunked, revealing the petty reality behind them. The final taunt of 'Corpse!' is especially funny: not only is it an immature addition of insult to fatal injury, but its simple truth stands in stark, and comic, contrast to the previous exchange of ever-more-elaborate name-calling. Wertenbaker seems to be asking us to laugh at the inanities of war, and we do.

However, as our laughter subsides, the Male Chorus interjects:

MALE CHORUS: We begin here because no life has ever been untouched by war.
MALE CHORUS: Everyone loves to discuss war.
MALE CHORUS: And yet its outcome, death, is shrouded in silence.
MALE CHORUS: Wars make death acceptable. (...) (pp. 1-2)

Audience response is suddenly wrong-footed by this intervention and its change of tone: accepting the playwright's apparent invitation, we have just shared in the experience the Chorus questions, the treatment of war as entertainment. We have accepted the soldier's death, shrouding it not in silence but in laughter, his anonymity preventing empathetic response.

Wertenbaker's comic strategy in this first scene is complex, provoking legitimate responses and insights and then partially undermining them. On a rational level, war is as ridiculous as the behaviour we have just witnessed: it deserves the contempt our laughter has expressed. But the rational level, by itself, is an inadequate basis of judgment: how can we possibly laugh at war's consequences? Wertenbaker's juxtaposition of action and choral comment demands an analytical response to our own laughter: a dissection of what is legitimately comic about war, what inappropriate to laugh at. On a more general level, it asks us to look very carefully at what we find funny and why, warning us to be alert to the nuances of any comedy that follows.
Although Scenes 2 and 3 continue in partially comic mode, I want to turn to Scene 5, the funniest in the play, which is set in ‘The theatre in Athens’ (sd, p. 8) during a performance of the tragedy Hippolytus. Much of the humour here is self-reflexive, turning on the difference between comedy and tragedy. Philomele and her mother arrive late, missing Aphrodite’s opening speech; Philomele is disappointed but her father reassures her: ‘She only told us it was going to end badly, but we already know that. It’s a tragedy’ (p. 9). The Athenian audience is in a position analogous to that of Wertenbaker’s own: we know the outcome of the myth of Philomele and Tereus as well as the Athenian court knows the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Our laughter at their true but simplistic definition of tragedy underlines its inadequacy, forcing us to question its limits, reminding us that our interest lies not in WHAT happens but in HOW it happens.

In similar fashion, the Athenians offer an obvious definition of comedy. Tereus, preferring sport to theatre and ignorant of dramatic conventions, is shocked by Phaedra’s falling in love with ‘Her own stepson! That’s wrong’, he declares. King Pandion’s response is phlegmatic: ‘That’s what makes it a tragedy. When you love the right person it’s a comedy’ (p. 10). Again, the inadequacy of the definition provokes a dialectical response: the audience remembers that even loving the right person in a comedy has its complications; if not, there would be no play. How, then, do comic complications differ from tragic ones: in their very nature or only in their outcome? These definitions and the questions they generate problematize the nature of the play we are watching, as we watch it: how do we reconcile our present laughter with our knowledge of Philomele’s fate? Is this a comedy, a tragedy, or some combination of the two? Will our decision about genre affect our responses - and, remembering the first scene, our feelings about our responses?

The very title connects the play to the web of questions slowly being spun: as Pandion reminds us, love signals romantic comedy, but the love of the title is unlikely to be romantic. Do we, in fact, know what the love of the title refers to? It cannot be Tereus’s lust for his sister-in-law: the nightingale refers to the transformed Philomele. Furthermore, the word ‘of’ is itself ambiguous: the title can mean the love of the nightingale for someone or something, as well as someone’s love for the nightingale itself. And then there is the audience’s own love of the nightingale with its romantic associations.
Our own questions about Wertenbaker's play link into the questions raised by the performance of *Hippolytus*. The play is offered as entertainment, but Pandion is also hoping it will 'help [him] come to a decision' about whether to send Philomele to her sister in Thrace: 'I find plays help me think. You catch a phrase, recognize a character' (p. 9). Tereus, on the other hand, is initially resistant to the play, arguing that it 'condone[s] vice' (p. 10). The present-day audience laughs at his unsophisticated response, his reaction to a contemporary play clashing with our own appraisal of a classic text. But is Tereus's response to *Hippolytus* such an implausible misreading of its import? As we feel some discomfort at the viability of his interpretation, the meaning and function of the Greek classics is interrogated. And if we cannot be sure of the meaning of the Greek text, can we be sure of the meaning of the present one? How are we to interpret what we see? The Queen gives a hint, applicable both to the play and to the play-within-the play, about how to ascertain meaning: 'Listen to the chorus. The playwright always speaks through the chorus' (p. 11).

This self-reflexive message promotes more laughter, but no certain clarity, since the chorus of *Hippolytus* generates different meanings for its contemporary audience. Although the Female Chorus 'beg[s]' the 'love [that turns] us blind with the bitter poison of desire' to 'pass her by', she recognizes her own passivity in the matter (p. 11). Thus, seizing for self-justification on what he perceives to be the play's argument - that destructive passion cannot be resisted - Tereus hatches his plan to violate Philomele. Pandion, on the other hand, lights upon another line spoken by the Chorus: '(...) I rage against the gods who sent you far away, out of your father's lands to meet with such disaster from the sea-god's wave' - and decides that Philomele should not leave Athens (p. 12). He is persuaded by Philomele, however, that she is 'not Hippolytus' and 'Tereus isn't Phaedra'. The correspondence between 'life' and art, between the fictional action and the play-within-the play, is denied at the same time that Wertenbaker's own audience recognizes it.

Our alertness to the possibilities of misapprehension has been generated by the tense balance between our laughter and our foreknowledge of the myth: dramatic genre, theatrical meaning, and audience response have all been problematized by the scene's comedy. Such interrogation is necessary preparation for what I believe is the formally comic conclusion to the play, Scene 21, in which the murdered Itys meets his mother and aunt, now transformed into the swallow and the nightingale of legend. In the preced-
ing scene, the Female Chorus comes as close as possible to explicit state-
ment of the playwright’s meaning:

IRIS: To some questions there are no answers. (...
JUNE: Why do countries make war?
HELEN: Why are races exterminated?
HERO: Why do white people cut off the words of blacks?
( ...)
HELEN: Why are little girls raped and murdered in the car parks of dark cities?
IRIS: What makes the torturer smile?
HERO: We can ask. Words will grope and probably not find. But if you silence
the question.
IRIS: Imprison the mind that asks.
ECHO: Cut out its tongue.
HERO: You will have this.
JUNE: We show you a myth.
HELEN: A child is the future. (pp. 45-46)

What the Chorus then shows us is the death of the child Itys, the death of
the future. They also explain the ‘strange end’ of the myth, the metamor-
phosis of Philomele, Procris, and Tereus into birds (p. 47). As Hero points
out, ‘You might ask, why does the myth end that way?’ (p. 48).

Wertenbaker’s final scene shows the transformation as vital rather than
escapist. Itys asks Philomele whether she ‘like[s] being a nightingale?’ She
replies: ‘not much (...) but we were all so angry the bloodshed would have
gone on forever. So it was better to become a nightingale’ (p. 48). Her
answer, as well as the actual reunion of Itys and his murderers, emphasizes
the positive nature of the move to this new plane: the cycle of violence is
stopped and, contrary to what the Male Chorus told us in the beginning of
the play, death is no longer shrouded in the silence that allows it to happen.
Moreover, the interaction of the characters signals a continuing positive
movement. Itys asks Philomele how being a nightingale compares with her
former self; she answers, ‘I always felt a shadow hanging over me. I asked
too many questions’. Itys retorts: ‘You want me to ask questions’. ‘Yes’, she
concurs (p. 48). The final lines of the play reinforce the point: Itys asks
‘What does wrong mean?’ ‘It is what isn’t right’, his aunt replies. ‘What is
right?’ he persists. In answer, the Nightingale simply sings. The play ends
on Itys's insistent rejoinder: 'Didn’t you want me to ask questions?' (p. 49). The love of the nightingale is perhaps the love of questioning.

As Wertenbaker’s play demonstrates, the asking of questions is awkward, painful, even dangerous, yet essential to growth and movement, to the possibility of transforming an unending cycle of violence and death into life and hope. The play shows this not only through its content but also through its manipulation of the audience to question the import of what they have been watching - a manipulation achieved through its comedy. Being able to read the conclusion as comic depends on the audience’s having been actively involved in the process of questioning throughout the play, learning its value and, indeed, its necessity. Equally importantly, this comic reconciliation depends on a transformative ending rather than on comedy’s traditional movement, from status quo to transformation back to status quo. In other words, Wertenbaker not only questions comic form but overturns it, inscribing the possibility of change in the very breaking of comic convention. Just as Philomele as nightingale steps outside the limits of human form, so Wertenbaker’s play steps outside the limits imposed by genre: there is no closing of the circle but instead an opening out.

Unlike Wertenbaker’s play, Caryl Churchill’s *Icecream* is firmly set in contemporary Britain and the United States. Written in twenty short scenes, the first ten taking place in Britain and the rest in the States, it is both elliptical and dense, with all the rich resonance of a parable. One of its major concerns is the alienation of modern society and the individual’s unfulfillable desire for relationship, with other people, with history, with place. Lance and Vera, American husband and wife, come to England in search of his roots, with an equal interest in tracking down dead greatgrandmothers and living third cousins. The latter are Phil and Jaq, brother and sister, who eventually involve the Americans in disposing of the body of the landlord whom Phil has shot dead. On a visit to the US sometime later, Phil is killed crossing the road and, in a separate incident, Jaq in self-defence kills a would-be rapist.

Such a bare outline of the plot does scant justice to the play and its experimental technique. Its 20 scenes play for a total of just 75 minutes, some of the scenes lasting barely a minute. Much of the important action happens between scenes, leaving the audience to infer it from minimal information contained in the next. However, the audience cannot be sure of the exactness of its knowledge: for instance, we know for certain that Phil has killed his landlord, but we remain unsure of the circumstances, just as
we remain unsure whether Lance's worry that the man was not dead when he was dumped in Epping Forest is justified or the result of a guilty conscience (see Act 1, Scenes 7 and 9).

Nor does my description so far suggest how bleakly funny Icecream is. This serious play about the search for communication and relationship is also a comedy of inarticulacy, non sequitur, and verbal confusion, with meanings variously misunderstood, ambiguous, contradictory, or incapable of expression. For example, in Scene 2, as Lance muses on the difference between English and American history, he asks 'What have we got that's old?' and Vera, misunderstanding, replies, 'Sofa. Freezer'. Later, in Scene 6, Vera tells Phil 'I love you. I just want to say that. I don't mean anything by it' (p. 15). Arguing about the relative imperial culpability of England and America in Scene 5, Vera says

They are both major powers, England has been, America is, and it's hard, there is a responsibility, it's a hard position, you're up there to be knocked down, it's, I do feel sorry for the decision makers. No, they're both terrible countries, I guess. But America did stand for, at one time, when England was, it did stand, my people came, it must have stood for, a long time ago of course. No, they are both... (p. 10; Churchill's ellipsis),

and her speech trails off into silence. Although my examples are drawn from Vera, all the characters exhibit, at times, the same kinds of communication difficulties.

The audience's relationship to this comedy is complex. We laugh from a sense of superiority to the characters' verbal inadequacy: sometimes we understand them better than they do themselves, knowing what they mean even when they cannot express it. Sometimes, however, our laughter is unjustified: we are so confused by Churchill's characteristically over-lapping dialogue that we can no more make sense of what is being said than the characters can. More subtly, however, the very structure of the play implicates us in the process we find funny: the characters try to communicate across an unbridgeable gap of language, and fail. These gaps, in fact, resemble the silences of the play itself, which the audience must try to negotiate. We reconstruct what happens in those silences, so that the narrative makes sense. But each reconstruction is necessarily individual and, for that very reason, limited. We remain locked in our own interpretations of action and meaning, which, as I have indicated above, the play itself
never confirms; in effect, we remain locked out of the play as much as the characters remain locked out of any meaningful relationship.

One need only examine the wildly differing accounts of the play’s reviewers about its import, its failures and successes, to see that the audience’s position is not really different from that of the characters they mock. Critical reception, of course, is never unanimous, but there are often meeting points across a broad spectrum of opinion. In the case of Icecream, however, judgments hardly ever coincide. For instance, Michael Coveney of the Financial Times hailed the play as ‘Stark, fierce, elliptical, gnomic and short’, confirming that ‘not a word is wasted’, while Michael Ratcliffe of The Observer judged the writing ‘surprisingly uneven, even careless at times’; the latter’s judgment is based on his complaint that ‘the quality of clues and data available’ is insufficient to fuel the audience’s imagination, while the former found the play ‘Powerfully coded, but not obscure’.

Similarly, there is no consensus about the implications of Churchill’s treatment of her characters. Ratcliffe complained that ‘the moral critique is far from even-handed: the Americans are merely presented and come close to caricature; the British are explained’. However, Christopher Edwards in The Spectator came to the opposite conclusion from the same evidence: Britain ‘come[s] off worse in this critique of nations. . . . America is dealt out to us largely in caricature. Britain is more starkly exposed’. 7

Churchill’s handling of characterization is in fact more complex than these reviews suggest. There are certainly elements of caricature and stereotype in all the people we see on stage, from the four protagonists to the nine cameo parts shared between two actors. But Churchill is both using and questioning stereotypes, rounding out the characters just enough to prevent the audience from responding to them as such. Jim Hiley’s review of the play in the Listener recognized Churchill’s ‘significant inversion of familiar imagery: violence envelops the British, not the Americans. . . . she subverts every cliché she invokes’. Although he gives no examples, they can be readily supplied. Scene 6 of Act 2 shows Jaq driving with a hitch-hiker and seems to be readying us for something grisly. He warns her to be ‘careful’ about picking up hitchers: ‘A nice girl like you something could happen’ (p. 37). He proceeds to what seems like sexual innuendo: ‘I was wondering if [the word ‘lift’] had some other meaning I didn’t get, some kind of invitation’ (p. 38). The scene ends with his asking her, ‘Do you want to come to my house and have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie with my mother?’ (p. 39). Anyone who has seen Hitchcock’s Psycho may
hear echoes of Norman Bates. But amazingly, Scene 7 opens with ‘JAQ having coffee with the HITCHER and his MOTHER’ (sd, p. 39). Danger only comes a scene later, in the surprising shape of the ‘normal’ and ‘dull’ professor with whom she picnics (p. 44). Churchill’s subversion of stereotype and cliché in the play is at times comic, at times threatening, but the audience has no way of anticipating what it will be.

In short, both the form of Churchill’s play and the nature of its characterization interrogate our laughter, its validity questioned by the doubts surrounding our own understanding and response. Churchill’s invitation to the audience to question its relationship to the play is, however, very different from Wertenbaker’s: the self-reflexive comedy of The Love of the Nightingale actively generates a questioning position, while the elliptical form of Icecream can as easily be answered by alienation as by engagement.

While Wertenbaker’s play concludes in a different sphere, Churchill’s concludes on the possible brink of one. In the final scene, Jaq is at an American airport, waiting for her flight back to England. She meets a South American woman, who urges her to change her ticket and accompany her back to South America. The play does not clarify whether this will happen, ending only with the woman’s encouragement to investigate the possibility: ‘Go and find out’ (p. 51). Although some critics have seen this as a transformative ending, with the possibility of Jaq’s creating a ‘reciprocal’ and ‘cross-cultural’ relationship,8 this interpretation seems unduly optimistic: the meeting is as casual, as uncontextualized, as the others in the play, and as likely to prove inconsequential for the forging of relationships. However, the unseen outcome for the characters does not ultimately matter: like so much of the rest of the play, it exists only in the shape the individual spectator gives it. What is important is that this ending leaves the audience of Icecream at a point of departure rather than of arrival, at the opening out rather than the closing up of the comic circle. As with Wertenbaker, there is no return to the status quo, although in this play, there is no status quo to return to. Displacement is its hallmark: Americans in Britain, Britons in America and now perhaps in South America. Even the title never comes to rest, the Americans stressing the first syllable of ‘icecream’ and the British the second (p. 9).

The three plays I have examined all problematize comedy in some way. Daniels manipulates and questions audience response through the strategic placement and undermining of sexist jokes. Wertenbaker uses self-reflexive comedy to encourage the questioning response on which her comic conclu-
sion depends; her comedy is accessible and engaging, rooting the audience in a familiar story and linear narrative even as it disrupts that familiarity through laughter. Churchill implicates the audience in their own laughter through her elliptical form, the tight structure jostling with the anarchical content of language, event, and place; her audience are involved in an alienating experience that questions the very nature of their relationship to the play and to comedy. Furthermore, the endings of Wertenbaker's and Churchill's plays refuse to reinscribe a status quo, thus questioning traditional comic structure.\(^9\)

Comedies, as I have said, often ask questions; that is nothing new. But these plays are themselves questions, pushing the audience to imagine what the plays themselves do not show: new ways of being, new ways of relating. It is no accident that such a radical challenge, not only to art but to life, has been mounted by feminist playwrights.

Notes


3 The comedy of Scene 2, which revolves around Philomele's sexual curiosity and Procne's sexual naivety, is important in establishing Philomele as a sexually autonomous subject, another way in which Wertenbaker reworks the classical myth.

4 Furthermore, the court's casual behaviour throughout the performance, chatting as easily as some of us would in front of the television, both comically highlights our own reverent view of the classics and encourages us to appraise the quality of our own attention to Wertenbaker's play.

5 Tereus's temptations and his decision to give in to them are presented subtextually:

PHILOMEL: (...) I want to feel everything there is to feel. Don't you?
TEREUS: No!
KING PANDION: Tereus, what's the matter?
TEREUS: Nothing. The heat. (p. 11)
At the end of the scene, Tereus, who had earlier deferred to Pandion about whether Philomel should journey to Thrace (see pp. 8-9), is decisive about leaving with her 'Tomorrow' (p. 13).


7 Reviews of *Icecream* are reprinted in *London Theatre Record* (9-22 April 1989), pp. 448-53, from which source these quotations have been taken. The reviews originally appeared as follows: *Financial Times* 12/4/89; *Observer* 16/4/89; *Spectator* 22/4/89; *Listener* 20/4/89.


9 Similarly, *Masterpieces* does not return to a status quo: the final scene shows the convicted Rowena talking to a policewoman as she waits to start her prison sentence. However, since Daniels’s play as a whole does not problematize comedy, I have not discussed its ending.

**Bibliography**


Learning by Suffering/Singing: Dennis Potter’s *The Singing Detective* as a Musical Tragicomedy of Disease

In an instructive 1983 essay Pfister & Quadflieg describe a widespread trend towards tragicomedy in modern British drama, a trend which made hospitals apt locations, patients and doctors preferred characters and disease a suitable theme for a darker shade of comedy:

(...) they (the plays) can no longer be comedies of delight, but are darkened by satire, tragicomedy and the grotesque. In this sense, the comedy of disease is the disease of comedy: it is one of the many ways in which modern comedy has lost its ease, but regained cathartic and tonic power.\(^1\)

Ten years on, the grotesque, satiric tragicomedy of disease still seems in good health. The Aristotelian tenet that pain excludes laughter is not valid for this kind of comedy.\(^2\)

The disease of pure comedy seems to have spread and Dennis Potter’s *The Singing Detective*, his most successful and most widely discussed work, will serve to illustrate this point.

‘Dirty Den’s’ interior drama - a Potter profile

Sour. Malicious. Full of Hatred. Venomous. Crude. Spiteful (...) That’s me, apparently. Forget the blue eyes and g-g-golden hair, dear reader. And look at the festering mess deep in the marrow of my stunted bones.\(^3\)

As his ironic self-portrait from 1968 illustrates, Dennis Potter has been the most controversial figure in British television drama for decades, both media darling and target of hateful venom. He is one of the few television writers who earned themselves a position at the TV and film industries’ bargaining tables guaranteeing relative independence. His claim to be admitted to the pantheon of TV and film auteurs seems justified. Potter’s prolific output on my latest count comprises no less than 29 single television plays, 8 mini-series, 6 screenplays, 4 novels and one original play for
the theatre plus two early sixties' essays and a considerable body of TV journalism. In view of the fact that Potter combines news value and mass appeal with considerable formal complexity, surprisingly little has been heard about Potter from scholarly circles, while his profile in the media is overshadowed by the kind of sensationalism that might increase the ratings and his mass impact but certainly obscures an understanding of his plays. Potter is branded 'Dirty Den' or 'Dennis the Menace' by the tabloids but also termed 'probably the most highly regarded playwright working for the medium' by more serious critics. Fellow writer Fay Weldon even considers him 'the best living television playwright in the world'. Potter has been praised by colleagues like David Edgar, Julian Barnes and Hugh White-more and compared to a surprising variety of authors and directors such as Dickens and Sterne, Greenaway, Resnais, Pasolini, Terence Davies and Godard. According to the Observer Potter represents for the BBC 'a mark of its sophistication and civilization'. Unlike many works of his distinguished colleagues, however, Potter's plays have proved tremendously popular with the viewing public in Britain, especially so if the plays feature the Potter's lip-synchronization device that dominates Pennies From Heaven (1978) and The Singing Detective.

Three aspects of Potter's work have figured prominently in the press. First, his disfiguring, psychosomatic skin disease psoriatic arthropathy in combination with various allusions made by Potter himself that he was sexually abused as a child have led critics to read his scripts as thinly veiled autobiographies. Warned against this by Potter, who nevertheless concedes he is toying with the conventions of autobiography, these critics may, indeed, detect an abundance of medical staff and male psychopathologies in his plays. Potter frequently returns to a set of archetypal themes and motifs, some of which can, in fact, be located in his biography.

Second, many critics assume that Potter transmitted to protagonists like Marlow in The Singing Detective not only his disease but also a twisted attitude to sex and women, which is so conspicuous in Potter's male protagonists. Brought up in a secluded Puritan post-war backwater in the Forest of Dean, Potter delves into the depths of the male psyche, earning himself notoriety among conservative moralists as a corruptor of youth and among feminists as a hypocrite pretending to expose male sexist exploitation while actually exploitative exposing women preyed upon by men. To name a few examples of Potter's tug-of-war with TV executives and public pressure groups: In 1976 his Brimstone & Treacle was produced but banned
by BBC Director of Programmes Alasdair Milne because it showed the rape of a crippled young girl by the devil in the disguise of a well-mannered, sensual but sycophantic former classmate; in the case of The Singing Detective, a scene of lovemaking shown from the point of view of a nine-year-old boy was intimidating rather than titillating (and therefore all the more dangerous?). It was unfavourably reviewed by Norman Tebbit, then Chairman of the Conservative Party; and when Potter had actress Gina Bellman cross the television screen scantily clad in lingerie as the fashion model Blackeyes (1989), a feminist critic called him 'crippled inside' and found the series useful only for the purpose of masturbation.

Thirdly, Potter has been a rare exception among television authors in that he champions the aesthetics of non-naturalism and has been called modernist and even postmodernist. Television writers and critics have claimed for years that there exists an inbred alliance of television drama with realist representation, an alliance epitomized in genres such as documentary drama or faction. Arguing from a point of view heavily influenced by Raymond Williams' well-known concept of an audience exposed to a ceaseless flow on our television screens, Potter challenges this assumption:

Most television ends up offering its viewers a means of orientating themselves towards the generally received notions of 'reality'. (...) The best non-naturalist drama, in its very structure disorientates the viewer smack in the middle of the orientation process which television perpetually uses. (...) It shows the frame in the picture when most television uses the picture in the frame. I think it is potentially the more valuable, therefore, of the two approaches.

Potter has developed a range of disorientating devices, notably the incorporation of documentary material, intertextual referencing, the retelling of myths, fairytales and children's books, direct address, the casting of adults in children's roles, the use of flashbacks and metadramatical elements. Moreover, his scripts have increasingly called for an expressionist mise en scène featuring jump-cuts, tilted cameras, circular camera movement, electronic camera devices, obviously stylized studio settings, expressive lighting etc.

The key to Potter's aesthetics is to be found in his firmly modernist aim to open up the world of the human mind to his viewers:
I'm much more concerned with interior drama than with external realities. (...) Certainly one of the strands in TV drama is that of the interiorising process, the concern with people's fantasies and feelings about the shape of their lives, and about themselves.13

Taking The Singing Detective as an example, I will show how Potter blends conventional hospital tragicomedy with his variations on popular music and the musical. He does so in order to translate the interior landscapes he tries to unravel into the language of film. The result is a body of television plays which 'stick in the mind like a chicken bone in the throat'.14

**The Singing Detective as a conventional comedy of disease**

Transmitted in 1986, The Singing Detective features almost all the distinguishing marks Dennis Potter's works have displayed since the early sixties. The multi-layered narrative structure mixing reality, memory and fantasy, is complicated and meant by Potter to 'break up the narrative tyranny'15 of realist television drama. The plot revolves around Philip Marlow, a bedridden patient in a London hospital suffering from psoriatic arthropathy.

Much of the first episode is devoted to depicting and satirizing the harsh reality of a typical British NHS hospital and to highlighting the disfiguring effect of the disease on Marlow's body and the ensuing hopelessness and cynicism in his mind. His thoughts frequently lead the viewer into secondary layers of narrative, a world of memory, where the psychological roots of Marlow's disease are dug up as a firmly Freudian guilt complex. At the age of nine Marlow witnesses his mother's illicit love-making in a forest dell, an event which results in separation from her husband and eventually in her suicide. Moreover, he leaves his excrement on the table of an oppressive school teacher only to blame the deed on a backward classmate, the son of his mother's seducer. This memory world is accompanied by Marlow's fever-induced fantasizing about an alter ego, the 'singing detective' suggested not only by his name but also by his former profession as a writer of detective novels. Not only do Marlow's verbal stylizations derive from the 'repartee' and elaborate similes introduced by Chandler, but the entire concept of a morally impeccable knight in a world of dirty money and treacherous women is taken directly from Chandler's hard-boiled myth and confronted with Marlow's actual guilt complex.
Especially in the exposition of the hospitalized Marlow in the first episode there is ample opportunity for some conventional 'comedy of disease' in the way of satire directed at doctors and nurses, and some tragicomic, grotesque, even anarchic humour arising from the protagonist's pitiful state. The conventional hospital satire can be found in casting nurses as stereotypes of motherly control and doctors as heartless agents of an inhuman and anonymous system. The distinguishing mark of Potter's medical staff is 'linguistic inadequacy', expressed by caretaker talk and the communal pronoun 'we', both epitomized in utterances like 'Rather silly-billy of us, wasn't it?' (8: Nurse White), 'Oh, you naughty boys!' (36: Night Nurse) or 'Tootsie-wootsies' (25, 26: Visiting Doctor). Nurse White insists on patient Ali begging for coffee (7), while the male staff either demonstrate indifference by listening to a walkman (5) and failing to remember Marlow's name (25, 26), or tutelage by tapping his head 'as though Marlow is a child' (26).

Words become almost Pinteresque weapons in asserting professional dominance via intimidatingly enumerated technical terms. Particularly effective in this respect is the scene of the consultant's visit to the dermatology patient. Rather than talking to Marlow about his illness, the doctors exchange cryptic names of medicines in torrents of medical jargon:

**CONSULTANT**: (...) And how are you feeling this morning?

**MARLOW**: Well. I -

**REGISTRAR**: Very inflamed. Extensive lesions.

**HOUSEMAN**: Temperature too high.

**VISITING DOCTOR**: Marked arthrosis. (...) 

**CONSULTANT**: How much movement in the joints?

**MARLOW**: Not v-

**HOUSEMAN** (Instant interruption) Hydrocortisone injections all major joints.  
(...) Prednisone and then Prednisolone in short bursts, orally, then for longer periods. But with Betnovate and then Dermovate topical application under total occlusive dressings. (...) (25)

Although the medical staff are clearly stereotyped to meet the requirements of comedy, the hospital satire has a sure footing in the findings of sociology about medical practice and patients' wishes. Studies suggest that, indeed, doctors tend to ignore and verbally exclude patients from communication, while the patients urgently wish that doctors would refrain from Double Dutch and consider their plights.
Protagonist Philip Marlow is surrounded by flat medical characters to provide cannon-fodder for his cynicism. Marlow's comic devices of defence against this kind of treatment include verbal mimicry, intentional violation of the rules of communication and plain rudeness. He exhibits his anger to a Jimmy Porteresque degree. 'Do you know how many O-levels you have to fail to be a nurse?' (12), Marlow asks his neighbour Ali, and in less eloquent moments he resorts to four-letter insolence, e.g. when he tells the registrar to 'eff-you-see-kay off' (41). Sympathy with the deplorable state of Marlow, the victim, and admiration for his witty ironic stance go hand in hand with laughter on the cost of the insensitive hospital staff. Exaggerated mimicry is to be found in the ironic acceptance of the suggested role model of an imbecile or child, thereby exposing its aims and diminishing its effects: 'my ickle jacket pleeeese. I wants my closey-woseys.' (8) At the other end of the spectrum of possible reactions Marlow deliberately raises the level of style in his answers to the staff in order to reveal the inappropriate tutelage:

MARLOW: (Cutting in) I don't understand because I seem to have regressed into the helpless and pathetic condition of total dependency. Of the kind normally associated with infancy. (27; cf. 38)

Further examples of intentional violation of the laws of communication can be found when Marlow exposes the incorrect use of plural markers on the part of the staff:

REGISTRAR: How are we today?
MARLOW: I'm not very happy. I don't know about him.
REGISTRAR: Sorry?
MARLOW: Or perhaps you mean you? (38)

The psychiatrist is faced with a further instance of deliberately refusing to cooperate, when Marlow disobeys the rules of a Freudian word association therapy:

MARLOW: And I throw up the word I associate with it.
GIBBON: Instantly.
MARLOW: (Rapid fire) Nescafé. (…)
GIBBON: God.
MARLOW: Doctor. (…)
GIBBON: (Suddenly) Guardian.
The passage shows that Marlow extends his aggressive satire beyond the hospital walls to settle a couple of scores with British culture. Another opportunity for verbal venom arises in a voice-over interior monologue passage telling the viewer about Marlow's attempts to evade ejaculation when being greased around his private parts by beautiful Nurse Mills: 20

MARLOW: (Voice over) Think of something boring - For Christ's sake think of something very very boring - Speech a speech by Ted Heath a sentence a long sentence from Bernard Levin a quiz by Christopher Booker a - oh think think think - ! Really boring! A Welsh male-voice choir - Everything in Punch (...) Wage rates in Peru James Burke Finnegans Wake all the bloody Irish the dog in Blue Peter blue Brian Clough and especially James Henry and Clive and Australian barmen ecologists semiologists think think the Guardian Women's Page oh dear Christ yes the Bible and oh God Reader's Digest Special Prize Draw no the Bible think Bible Psalms Song of Solomon thy breasts are like - no, no! - oh! - oooh! - (18; cf., 123)

This humour is neither mere satire on various aspects of contemporary Britain nor solely expressive of Marlow's macho view of the world. It is a classical example of the formula of the comic suggested by Karlheinz Stierle, a Fremdbestimmtheit (heteronomy: 'being-controlled-from-outside'), which has been firmly established as a source of comedy in the hospital by Pfister & Quadflieg. Marlow has ceased to be a self-willed agent and has become an object controlled by the nurse and by a part of his body. Marlow's strategies to evade ejaculation are desperate attempts to regain control. The comic potential is, once again, in the 'traditional comic preoccupation with physical phenomena'. 21 Potter's provocative depiction of Marlow's bodily malaise is reminiscent of Bachtin's re-evaluation of the grotesque body as opposed to the glossed-over version apparent in high culture. 22

The severe condition of Potter's protagonist poses a threat to his identity. He is virtually unable to move, his skin is an appalling sight, we see the other patients gloating furtively at him. In the first episode, frequent close-ups of the lesions enhance the shock effect on the viewer. Initially, the world of Marlow is marked by cruelty and depicted with cruel humour.
When Ali fiddles with his cigarette lighter, Marlow remarks: 'I could see the deadlines (sic!). 'Another Asian Burnt to Death". He continues:

I used to think I wanted the good opinion of honourable men and the ungrudging love of beautiful women. (...) But now I know for sure that all I want is a cigarette. (13)

When the REGISTRAR asks Marlow what he believes in, Potter makes him compile one of his cynical lists:

MARLOW: Malthusianism. (...) Malthus, but mandatorily. Compulsory de­population. By infanticide, genocide, suicide, or whatever other means suggest themselves. Aids, for example. That'll do. Why should queers be so special? (...) I also believe in cholesterol, cigarettes, alcohol, masturbation, carbon monoxide, the Arts Council, nuclear weapons, the Daily Telegraph, and not properly labelling fatal poisons. But most of all, above all else, I believe in the one thing which can come out of people's mouths. Vomit. (40)

This 'modest proposal' accounts for a comedy of utmost despair. Even if this ironic list - funny in its disparate enumeration - suggests that Marlow has lost his belief in the world, he is still capable of rendering his hopelessness by way of irreverent satire. Potter's plays abound in similar examples of existentialist suffering. His religious existentialism hardly ever fails, however, to furnish his protagonists with a means of salvation. In a state of absolute helplessness Marlow seeks relief with his alter ego, the singing detective, and his songs. Both escapist, both commodities in culture industries rather than high art, they, nevertheless, are able to take Marlow back to his youth and thereby out of the hospital.

The musical comedy of lip-synchronization in The Singing Detective: the 'Dry Bones'-sequence

The ability of popular music to give meaning and shape to men's lives is a preoccupation of Dennis Potter. He orchestrates songs as a source of redemption, a Sinnstiftung. Since Moonlight On The Highway (1969) plays such as Angels Are So Few (1970), Only Make Believe (1973), Double Dare (1976) or Cream In My Coffee (1980) have derived their titles from popular songs. In Pennies From Heaven (1978), subtitled 'a play in six parts with
music’, all of the six episodes use popular songs in their titles. Around 20% of each episode is taken up by thirties’ favourites, which Bob Hoskins (as Arthur Parker) and most of the other actors down to the minor characters pretend to sing and dance to. These original music recordings accompanied by self-conscious lip-synchronizing actors take on new meanings in new contexts as interior melodies. Potter himself has described his aims in using these songs:

If you play a song as background music, although you are conscious of it, the tune never comes to the forefront in the way I know it does for some people in real life. (...) it was both alienating and yet the closest I could get to putting the music right smack in the middle (...) these were genuine artefacts from the past that had been cannibalized and transformed into the workings of the head. (...) It’s like an artist with ‘objets trouvés’; (...) You reclaim it in order to remake it. So it takes on the reverberations of all that is around it, and then those lyrics start having added ironies.23

In Pennies From Heaven as well as in The Singing Detective there is the split diegesis of the conventional musical, which, according to Jane Feuer, is technically linked with but ideologically separated from the avantgarde cinema:

In a Godard film, multiple diegesis may call attention to the discrepancy between fiction and reality, or fiction and history. In the Hollywood musical, multiple levels are created so that they may be homogenized in the end through the union of the romantic couple.24

The ‘discrepancy between fiction and reality’ is highlighted by Potter in various ways. An analysis of the ‘Dry Bones’-sequence25 in The Singing Detective exposes both the formal markers of a switch from realistic, spoken diegesis to the sung realm of imagination and fantasy and the overall function of Potter’s musical insertions.

(1) The dialogic voices of the actors are separated from their acquired musical ones not only by decades of technical progress26 but also by the logical impossibility of the audiovisual connection. Potter dramatically foregrounds the inconsistencies in Pennies From Heaven by coupling male characters and female voices and vice versa. In The Singing Detective’s-lip-synching sequences Potter moves likewise past the barriers of the conventional formal devices of verbal comedy illustrated above. It is part of a
general tendency to disrupt the unity between voice and image, to repeat
dialogue patches in different visual contexts, to dislocate sounds and voices
in different diegetic contexts. The ‘Dry Bones’-sequence is introduced by
the doctors’ elliptic suggestions for medication, which are then repeated by
accompanying clicking of fingers before the CONSULTANT bursts into
song:

CONSULTANT: Librium.
REGISTRAR: Valium.
VISITING DOCTOR: Antidepressants.
HOUSEMAN: And a barbiturate. ( ... )
CONSULTANT: Barbiturate!
REGISTRAR: Antidepressants!
VISITING DOCTOR: Valium!
REGISTRAR: And Librium! (29)

The medical staff, who treat their patient Marlow as an object, are sud­
denly - and its suddenness and unexpectedness are vital to the impact of
the device - transformed into agents of Marlow’s fantasy. They are them­
selves turned into objects. 27 The songs are Marlow’s way to reassert his
identity, and the viewer who identifies with the protagonist gratifies this
vicarious release with relieved laughter. The ironic musical metaphor using
the vehicle ‘doctors’ for the tenor ‘God’ is then developed by the ensuing
‘Dry Bones’-song by Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians featuring an
ironic chorus of ‘Now hear the word of the lord!’ finishing on Revivalist
cries:

CONSULTANT: Oooh!
REGISTRAR: Aaaaay-men!
MEDICAL TEAM: Now hear the word of the Lord! (29)

Drawing once more upon stock images of doctors as demi-gods who ruth­
lessly exploit their professional knowledge in order to exert power over
their subjects, Potter comically ascribes to the doctors evangelists’ voices
crying ‘Amen’ and ‘Hallelujah’ in obvious dislocation.

(2) The song lyrics not only offer satiric comment on the medical staff,
but serve to illustrate Potter’s point that there is a religious element of
redemption beneath the surface of bland and easy consumerism:
It's the idea of the world shimmering with another reality (...). They are both ludicrous and banal, reducing everything to the utmost simplification, but also, at the same time, saying 'Yes, there is another order of seeing, there is another way, there is another reality. As soon as we start to sing, dance, remember, things are not as they are. (...) It's a weird thing to do - a non-animal-like thing to do. The angel in us. 28

'Dry Bones' is ideally suited to illustrate the transcendent quality of popular song in that it refers to another pre-text, the biblical resurrection of dry bones (Ezekiel, 37, 1-11). According to Ezekiel, God proved his power to him by connecting the dry bones in a valley and investing them with life: ‘(...) behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.’ (Ezekiel 35,11).29 This is Marlow's situation. The medical team's secular remedies are confronted with a transcendent cure transported by the song. God's promise is, indeed, kept in The Singing Detective, as Marlow's emotional and physical dry bones of the first episode are connected and invested with life at the end of the serial.30

(3) The characters reflect the diegetic split by falling into dance routines and facing the spectator in direct address thereby acknowledging his presence and transcending their roles in the illusionary reality of the story. While the song and dance passage starts out as an escape from real danger, the fantasized performers increasingly take on an aggressive stance, with nurses breaking bones, pushing oxygen masks and hitting vibraphones made of skulls and a threatening approach of the whole group towards Marlow's bed. While the medical ballet dancers perform their routines, the viewer can see other medical staff going about their job, refusing to take any notice of the fantasies occurring around Marlow.

(4) The mise en scène helps create a world separate from the realistic narrative space. Typically Potter creates a realistic world as a frame for his interior characterization. These realist scenes have frequently been turned into classic examples of continuity editing by his directors: immobile cameras at eye level, shot and reverse shot patterns, the 180°-rule etc. The first part of the 'Dry Bones'-sequence observes the established Hollywood code of shots and editing. Protagonist Marlow lying half-naked in a hospital bed with severe psoriatic arthropathy is examined by a coolly disinterested medical team. The hopelessness of his condition and the degradation implied in the situation is evident, when Marlow has his tearful breakdown. All of this is shown in shot/reverse shot-technique using close-ups, half
close-ups or medium shots of the doctors and their patient. The camera position corresponds to the eye-level of the actors, thereby foregrounding Marlow's inferiority. Then, a close-up of Marlow's head inexplicably tilting and bathed in bluish light accompanies the switch to the lip-synched song. At the end of the sequence this pattern is reversed thereby framing the fantasy sequence and suggesting that it emanates from the protagonist's head. The editing rhythm changes radically from an average shot length of 6.07” to 1.89”. Some shots have a length of even less than one second and the entire montage passage figures more cuts (74 in 2'20”) than the dialogic part before (69 in 6’32”).

Conclusion

*The Singing Detective* exhibits the classical feature of *pathei mathos*, ‘learning by suffering’, which has been identified in the modern theatre of Eliot, Osborne, Shaffer and even Stoppard by Manfred Beyer. Lip-synchronized songs facilitate the protagonist’s anagnorisis. Potter both has the cake and eats it. He is critical of the musical (in exposing it as a make-believe world), but at the same time he is complicit with it (in insisting that this belief may serve as a remedy for the diseases of body and soul). Potter himself has called his lip-synchronization device both alienating and integrating, but Colley & Davies have voiced doubts about a Brechtian alienation effect in *Pennies From Heaven*. In *The Singing Detective*, too, Potter seems to make use of the emotional power of the songs in order to implicate the viewer in his story and, in the final analysis, to prove the cathartic power of mass entertainment, which Collins has described as typical of the musical:

(... the presence of the viewer is recognized and utilized by the text to include the viewer in the world of the film. (...) It is essential that the audience feel included within the text because the very nature of the text glorifies entertainment.

In using Al Bowlly and his fellow singers of the dance-band-era as a metaphor for God Potter seeks to bridge the gap between modern anthropocentrism and his existentialist idea of transcendence. Small wonder, then, that Marlow the Sufferer is shot by Marlow the Detective, who walks out triumphantly accompanied by his reconciled wife and by
Vera Lynn’s ‘We’ll Meet Again’. This is the musical’s romantic union, even if Vera Lynn suggests an ironic sub-text. Who will meet again? Marlow and his wife? Marlow and his past? Or Marlow and psoriatic arthropathy?

It has been shown that The Singing Detective, albeit in formal sophistication and self-conscious parenthesis, still offers the same ‘vision of human liberation’ that Feuer has detected in the musical:

Musicals are unparalleled in presenting a vision of human liberation which is profoundly aesthetic. Part of the reason some of us love musicals so passionately is that they give us a glimpse of what it would be like to be free. We desperately need images of liberation in the popular arts. But the musical presents its vision of the unfettered human spirit in a way that forecloses a desire to translate that vision into reality. The Hollywood version of Utopia is entirely solipsistic. In its endless reflexivity the musical can offer only itself, only entertainment as its picture of Utopia.

It follows that the charge of solipsism, which has been levelled at the musical in general and at Pennies from Heaven in particular, must be brought against The Singing Detective, too. In giving the songs a function as part of a memory play and in highlighting their status as artefacts, however, Potter hints at a way in which the musical Utopia could be made relevant.
Notes


3 Dennis Potter, "Exposed by Dennis Potter", *The Sun* (20.5.1968).

4 With some notable German exceptions (seminars by Prof. Stratmann and Prof. Ludwig at Bochum and Tübingen Universities; an M.A.-thesis and a seminar by Claudia Sternberg at Cologne University) and a number of critical essays in Britain.

5 See my forthcoming dissertation for an exhaustive account of the media reactions to Potter.

6 According to the British Audience Research Board, the six-part *The Singing Detective* reached an average of 7.2 million viewers on its first transmission. A further indication of his mass appeal is the writer's fee of 125 000 pounds paid by MGM for the film version of *Pennies From Heaven* - a Hollywood writer's salary second only to Neil Simon's. His more ambitious work, such as *Blackeyes* (1989), was less enthusiastically received if there was no lip-synchronization.


13 Quoted by Philip Purser, "Dennis Potter", in: Brandt, 175.


16 Pfister, Quadflieg (54ff.) find a similar technique in a number of other British comedies of disease.


As a dislocated scholarship boy at Oxford in the early sixties, Potter was part of the wave of *Angry Young Men*. Considering Potter's scathing attacks on advertising in *Follow The Yellow Brick Road* (1972), his heavily advertised and advertising Channel 4-project *Lipstick On Your Collar* (1993) might indicate that his anger has abated.

Note that the only likeable nurse in the play, who is duly admired by Marlow, bears the name of the Mills Bros., who contribute two songs to the lip-synching passages described below.

Pfister, Quadflieg, 50.


As in *Pennies From Heaven* (30s) and *Lipstick On Your Collar* (50s), a recent return of Potter to his technique of lip-synchronization, the 40s' songs parallel the diegetic world as they date from the same period. In *The Singing Detective* it is the world of young Philip Marlow, whose first encounters with this music in London are shown. In this Potter offers a psychological reason for both his musical fantasizing and his wishful-thinking-counterpart, the singing detective.


30 A similar reference occurs in episode five, when Marlow's musical mind transforms the evangelists' hymn 'Be in Time', an eschatological threat ironically sung 'out of time' by the choir, into 'Accentuate the Positive' by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters, a song which uses biblical imagery (Jonah in the Whale, Noah in the Ark) to offer a light-hearted promise of salvation (cf., 161).


32 Cf. Dennis Potter, Potter On Potter, 85.


35 Potter's choice of 'We'll Meet Again' in order to add an ironic touch to his ending may have been suggested by Stanley Kubrick's use of the same song in a similar manner in Dr. Strangelove (1964).

36 Feuer, 84.

37 Protagonist Arthur Parker is frequently longing for 'a world where the songs come true', which is granted to him by Potter in a miraculous double ending. Colley, Davies (74) chide this twofold structure: 'We eat dust and we dream about haute cuisine, but we cannot choose to cook our own meals.'
To discuss the playwright Mustapha Matura in a workshop session entitled ‘English Theatre and Drama outside Europe and the USA’ is totally misleading and ironically appropriate at the same time. It is misleading because Matura’s plays, partly set in the Caribbean, partly in contemporary England, have all been written after the author’s emigration to Britain in 1961 and have been performed to much critical acclaim in London and New York, while they do not seem to figure all too prominently in the repertoire of his home, Trinidad. It may be appropriate, though, because throughout the ’70s and ’80s his work has been situated in the context of London’s black fringe theatre that emerged in the 1960s. The very concept of ‘fringe’, in fact, presupposes a cultural and social mainstream outside of (and in opposition to) which an alternative space, a marginal movement, a counter-culture can define itself and be known. Thus, relegating a Caribbean writer resident in London to the ‘outside’ of our familiar domain may function as a means of exclusion as well as recognize his resistance to established cultural forms. This ambiguity is ultimately due to the fact that the insides of nations, formerly protected by a clear sense of outside Others, have become a site of contention.

This is, at least, what happened with the metropolitan space of Britain in the wake of her imperial break-up. Decades of cultural movement and migration, here as elsewhere, have shattered the national fiction of homogeneous identity in its viability and have led to the ‘essential heterogeneity of being’, as Anna Rutherford has recently described the prevailing situation. And this is what, on a thematic level, the plays of Matura as of other black British dramatists take as their material. The fact that geographically plausible categories like ‘Europe’ and ‘USA’ somehow still imply clear-cut boundaries and therefore fail to make sense of the texture and texts of our post-colonial age, should already remind us of the facile, and indeed ideological, assumptions behind drawing such lines. If ever there was a time when the imperial centre succeeded in keeping outsiders outside, this has become increasingly problematic and, nationalist campaigns notwithstanding, ultimately impossible. Now that Britannia no longer rules the waves we have reason to rethink the topography and
conceptual frame of empire. Post-colonialism may be defined as the condition in which the outside has found its way in.

Thus, the positioning of my Matura-paper within the programme of this conference confronts us with a useful challenge to our cultural maps, and has indeed provided me with the cue to consider the mapping of representational space in some of Matura's dramatic works.

‘Outside’ versus ‘inside’ are categories for the meaningful organization of space. Taking this dichotomy as a starting point for a study of drama seems all the more apt since, in a very real sense, the institution of theatre is usually organized on just this basis. The stage, at least in the conventional form that has been dominant in Western tradition, is defined by separating a site of representation from the spatial totality and juxtaposing it both with the experiential world and with a fictional background space symbolically implied, but not presented in the dramatic action. The latter is normally referred to as the off-stage or backstage area. It is the other place behind (or outside of) the here and now of theatrical simulation. The place on stage, however elaborately or sparsely it may be marked by flats or props, acquires its status and meaning just as much through the communal frame of the spectators as through the absent and uncontrollable space out of their views. The inside of theatre is functionally dependent on the outside.

Let me illustrate this point with two examples from Matura's work. While all of his stage plays seem to be extremely conscious of their locale, often investing it with symbolic meaning, his very first and his most recently published plays provide particularly striking instances for charging the enclosed space of dramatic representation with aesthetic as well as political significance by setting it off against the backstage area. In As Time Goes By (premiered in Edinburgh in 1971) the stage directions suffice to indicate the essentially divided structure of the theatrical space:

The action takes place in two rooms. Front room. Lavishly decorated with religious objects and pictures. Back room. Very shabby kitchen.

This contrast between front and back coincides with the spatial juxtaposition of inside versus outside referred to above. As Matura's description already implies, the ‘lavishly decorated’ front room is a place of representation and display, a space of decoration, decorum and make-believe, self-consciously styled as a stage on which Ram, a West Indian in London, can act out his part as guru and spiritual advisor to the local community of
black immigrants and white hippies. The shabby kitchen, on the other hand, represents the backstage to this theatrical construction: it is the place of poverty and destitution, inhabited by Ram’s wife and child who constantly interfere with his guru-show and each time confront him with the dreary social reality of his own existence. In this sense, the contrast between front and back stage signifies the two sides of Black British Experience framed, as it were, in two styles of theatrical representation. The space of illusion at the front thrives on escapist fantasies which characterize the hippie-movement of the late '60s no less than the expectation of theatre audiences in quest of the exotic. The disillusioned space at the back, on the other hand, could be understood as a reference to the kitchen-sink realism of socially committed drama à la Wesker, representing social reality and human plight, but banned to the backward margins of the stage. It may therefore be justifiable to interpret the spatial organization of Matura’s first play in such a way that the ‘inside vs. outside’-division is employed for an aesthetically as well as politically self-conscious critique of black theatre with regard to its political function.

His most recently published play, *The Coup*, premiered at London’s National Theatre in 1991, is set in Trinidad and takes issue with the neocolonialism of Third World military elites. Framed by an opening and closing scene inside a Cathedral, where a memorial service for the late President is being held, the core of the play is located inside a state prison in which the President is held captive. This on-stage prison space, itself a recurrent site in Matura’s drama, is defined by its strict subordination and juxtaposition to the off-stage space of power and freedom to which the imprisoned hero tries to escape. While all stage action is confined to the enclosed space of the cell, the sphere of action in a political sense is located outside and thus removed from theatrical representation. Again, the spatial organization of the play and its fictional place would seem to provide essential clues for interpretation, because the interaction between outside and inside is directly linked with escape and control.

This relation may be especially relevant in view of the subtitle ‘A play of revolutionary dreams’, which clearly echoes LeRoi Jones’ famous dictum that ‘Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality’. As Jones writes in the same essay, the theatrical realization of such dreams must proceed on a reciprocal relation between the space of drama and the space of society: ‘The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world; (...) we will change the drawing rooms into
Although *The Coup* may well have been shaped by events in the real world - a year before a real coup was staged in Trinidad and the Prime Minister held captive for four days -, one might still wonder about the reciprocal relation. Even if real things are said on the revolutionary stage, how can these affect the world outside? While Matura’s plays are evidently indebted to Black American drama, they would seem to question revolutionary aesthetics and move towards a dialectic relation between outside and inside, which reflects their own political placement.

Before exploring this relationship more closely with regard to *Meetings* and *Nice*, it may be useful to consider some of the sociological as well as aesthetic implications of spatial division in order to establish a frame of reference for what follows. I shall therefore comment briefly on the politics of role playing and on the nature of comic drama in respect to their employment of space.

In the social sciences, theatre has long been used as a descriptive and analytic model for human society at large. Interestingly enough, much of its plausibility in the sociological context derives from the actual as well as fictional on-stage/off-stage separation outlined above. Erving Goffmann’s seminal work on *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) focusses on the juxtaposition of these two domains and explores the different presentational modes and role patterns that individuals employ when acting in front of a social audience or behind their backs. In a recent study entitled *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James D. Scott has applied this analysis to peasant or slave societies and identified resistance strategies which make political use of specifically theatrical spaces such as the back-stage area. He shows how, in a complex interaction of differently encoded scripts, a dominated class may establish its own stage and enact its own social drama, its ‘hidden transcript’ in Scott’s phrase, behind the backs of imperial overseers while continuing to play the accepted roles in front, and for the benefit, of their masters’ gaze. Under the conditions of political coercion, therefore, the space outside the officially defined stage offers a place of retreat, symbolic resistance and, potentially, rebellion.

This sociological analysis may be useful in reminding us of the essentially power-based structure of theatrical representation and its interdependence with the hierarchy of social control. Space is less a naturally given resource than a culturally defined and politically contested element of social life. Hence, its organization and demarcation can never be seen outside the
framework of power. Especially with regard to drama, the formalized space of stage-action, granting privileged visibility to some while denying it to others, bears clearly political implications. Moreover, the spatial separation of actors from audience, which prevails in the established theatre of Europe (the case may be different for the popular market place tradition), has been interpreted as a means of engineering social segregation and constraining popular energy. The Latin American theatre practitioner Augusto Boal traces this back to Greek drama and condemns what he calls Aristotle’s coercive system:

In the beginning the theater was the dithyrambic song: free people singing in the open air. The carnival. The feast. Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators: people who act and people who watch - the party is over! Secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonists from the mass. The coercive indoctrination began!

This polemic is directed against the prescriptive doctrines of drama poetics, such as empathy or the unities of time, place and action, which have been deduced from Aristotle’s theory and which, according to Boal, are subservient to political domination. His argument derives its force and conviction by systematically translating the spatial divisions of formalized drama into social terms. In consequence, alternative forms of drama, like the communal theatre of the oppressed, aim at reclaiming the spatial continuum. In Boal’s phrase, ‘the walls must be torn down.’

With regard to the present subject, however, this view needs qualification. To begin with, the formalized and segregated space of Western drama is by no means the only one available for theatrical practice. Black theatre, in particular, has long been known for its close association with the ritualistic mode of enactment, common in the origins of all drama but largely suppressed, as Boal noted, in the course of Western dramatic history. Alternative and ritualized forms of theatre, whether practised inside or outside Europe and the USA, have often drawn their inspirations from African and Afro-Caribbean forms of communal feasting or carnival which emphasize total design and rely on the ideal of unity rather than on spatial separation and aesthetic distance. As Carlton and Barbara Molette have pointed out, while Eurocentric theatre uses physical distance and the placement of architectural barriers to manipulate a space of illusion, ritual is not
obligated to create a fiction of time and place other than its own. Through the performative force of music and dancing, ritualist theatre creates its own site of communal participation. The setting of ritual, in Soyinka’s vastly encompassing phrase, is no less than cosmic entirety. Without boundaries, barriers or backstage, the traditional theatre of communal religious experience has always transcended what Soyinka describes as our Western habit of compartmentalisation.

The significance of such a generalized characteristic for the works of Matura, however, remains to be explored. Before considering how his plays relate to black theatre in this general sense, it should be noted that even within Western theatrical tradition there seems to be a specific field in which the ritualist origins of drama have not been entirely suppressed by formalisation but continue to subvert aesthetic form and transgress spatial barriers. This field, according to Bernhard Greiner, is the genre of comedy. In his recent study Die Komödie Greiner defines the generic characteristic of comic drama as a continual and unresolvable tension between two opposing principles: poised between carnivalesque feasting with all its orgiastic suspension of barriers and, on the other hand, aesthetic organization with all its formal rules of representation, comedy combines the opposites without letting the one side dominate the other. In the spatial terms of our analysis one might say that comedy as a genre resists the compartmentalisation into outside versus inside, while at the same time allowing for these distinctions to be drawn. The ambivalent character of comedy may ultimately derive from the paradox that it can only transgress those barriers which it has helped to establish. As Greiner summarizes his discussion of Aristophanes’ The Birds, prototypical of the genre as a whole, the space of transgression in which comedy operates is being created by establishing a space of division and segregation.

What does this imply for political comedy, i.e. for a dramatic project that consciously sets out to inscribe its meaning into the social text at large? Matura’s work as a playwright has been described by himself as well as others in terms of consciousness raising and political liberation. As I have pointed out with reference to LeRoi Jones, however, dramatists with a social cause are likely to feel the outside/inside-division especially poignantly, because they must invariably try to transgress the boundaries of the theatre. Not unlike the revolutionary hero of The Coup, whose predicament was outlined above, they may find themselves confined to an institution removed from the arena of actual politics. And even if a com-
edy like *As Time Goes By* reaches out towards representing social reality with a view to getting it transformed, its political imperative is invariably upstaged by the theatrical make-believe of licensed entertainment. How, then, can the space of theatre effectively interact with the social place where it is being performed? And in what way can the outside/inside-division be employed to make theatre instrumental to the cause of political enlightenment and, ultimately, liberation? I will now try to explore these questions with regard to *Meetings* and *Nice*, thereby suggesting a reading of Mustapha Matura which may work towards an academic space beyond the familiar inside/outside compartments.

The play *Meetings*, described by Malcolm Page as a satire turning into tragedy, was first performed in New York in 1981. Set in contemporary Trinidad, the play questions the Americanized life-style of the local urban middle class that emerged in the course of Trinidad's oil boom in the seventies. As a dramatization of the contradictory spatial politics outlined above, however, it goes far beyond the satirical picture of regional business people and may indeed be read as questioning the possibility of representing cultural otherness. The stage shows a kitchen, but a kitchen of a very different kind from the miserable place inhabited by West Indian immigrants in London. It is large and modern and clean, well equipped with labour-saving devices and smart wall units - in fact it has everything a kitchen could possibly have, only one thing is missing. As Hugh, the main protagonist, complains early on, 'look at dis kitchen, it have everything in it exept food, and dat is wat a kitchen is for'. Since Hugh and his wife usually eat out, their fashionable kitchen, like their swimming-pool and Mercedes car, mainly serves to symbolise the status of the affluent, educated manager couple.

The dramatic action is composed of a series of dialogues, all situated in the same place over the time span of roughly a week. As part of their everyday routine, Jean and Hugh meet in the kitchen for a quick coffee and cigarette before going out to work. Each morning they discuss their hectic jobs (Hugh is selling water-pipes to the government, Jean is planning and conducting the local promotion campaign for a new American cigarette) which largely consist of innumerable business meetings. During the course of the first scenes, however, the term 'meetings' acquires a different meaning as soon as Hugh starts telling his wife about his encounter with a mango-seller from the country called Marie. Much to Jean's dismay and disbelief, this old woman, whom he first met in the streets outside his office,
becomes for Hugh the living embodiment of the traditional Trinidad with which he has lost touch as a result of his Western-style education. His acquaintance with Marie is now making up for this loss, reconnecting him with the world of local tradition and opening up a new space of history and creole culture to which he gains entry under Marie’s guidance.

Marie teaches him how to treat his wife’s coughing with natural medicine provided by a local bush; she advises him on professional matters, and her knowledge about people makes him change his mind on a large-scale business transaction. In return, Hugh takes her for a drive through the countryside, where Marie introduces him to the topographical remains of his own history:

HUGH: All along de way she was telling me tings bout who had houses dere in de old days, wat life was like on de old plantations, amazing tings bout de trees. (...) Marie showed me de exact spot where de first rebellion of de slaves took place in Trinidad, de exact spot, her grandmother showed it ter her. De slaves attacked a British post an soldiers, horses, everyting was chopped up, an de slaves went into de hills. She pointed ter de bush tracks where dey went, if yer do’ know where ter look yer car’ see it, but it dere between all de big houses.15

The historical space of Trinidadian slave society and its resistance against European domination is almost invisible and must be traced between the lines of modern developments which have all but suppressed it. The alternative, non-Western places of local tradition are present only for those who know how to find them.

Significantly though, as far as the play itself is concerned, the traditional space that Hugh discovers is absent and invisible for the audience. We are only told about his insights and explorations and, like Jean, never catch a glimpse of what he describes. The stage, for us, remains the sterile and stereotypical domestic scene. The alternative space remains hidden off-stage.

In the following scenes Hugh tries to transform domestic sterility and have Trinidadian culture penetrate the Western kitchen. He employs Marie’s granddaughter Elsa as a cook and asks her to prepare all the old-style creole dishes he used to eat as a child. Food, in fact, provided the first motive for Hugh to articulate his discontent with civilization and seek for the alternative. While he starts looking for a suitable employee, home-made country food becomes an obsession with him. And when he
introduces Elsa to the kitchen equipment and discusses the menu with her, the sheer listing of traditional dishes gains an almost incantatory force:

HUGH: (...) yer see I want ter eat de old food ...
ELSA: Like saltfish bull-gou?
HUGH: Yes, dat is it.
ELSA: An souse an cucumber?
HUGH: Yes, Sunday mornings.
ELSA: An pelau?
HUGH: Yes, on Mondays, wit beef left over from Sunday.
ELSA: An chipp-chipp soup?
HUGH: But you can get chipp-chipp in town?
ELSA: Yes, I know a place in George Street.16

In this way, each dish mentioned is associated with certain days and customs, and each one, in Hugh's memory, conjures up a network of cultural relations underlying the polished surface of his present existence. By meeting Elsa and by eating the food she has prepared, Hugh enters the indigenous space of Trinidadian culture to which Marie first introduced him.

But this development brings him into conflict with his wife. While Hugh becomes suspicious of ruthless economic practices, Jean conducts her cigarette promotion without considering its dangers for the health of country villagers. She strongly disapproves of his new pursuits, declines to try any of Elsa's food (she prefers chicken and chips from the local take-away) and contemnptuously tells him that his craze for the indigenous has turned him into a bushman. Whereas he is increasingly drawn into the off-stage space of Trinidadian culture, she clings to the ways of her modern world represented by the sterile kitchen, where she finally falls victim to her own devices. The play ends with her coughing blood, probably as a result of the new cigarette she has sold to the villagers, some of whom seem to have died from its effects.

Even before this gruesome ending, the play has virtually split along the lines of spatial separation, with the most significant events happening outside the representational space of the stage. The more Hugh gets involved with Trinidadian tradition, the more he is active in the off-stage space behind the wings, so that the absence of significant cultural presentation on stage becomes ever more powerful. This is particularly evident when Hugh tells Elsa and later Jean that Marie has taken him into the hills to join a Shango meeting. The Shango ritual, whose origins lie in West
African Yoruba culture and have been transferred to the places of the Black diaspora, typifies all that has earlier been mentioned about communal rites as a dramatic enactment of social forces, and thus also points to the religious roots of drama. When Hugh finally discovers his personal roots in the ritualized space of traditional Trinidad, he is given a new name, breaks out of his urban life and leaves the Western home for good. At the same time, one must add, he leaves the play we have been watching and whose main protagonist he has been. His new role is situated elsewhere.

For, again, it is crucial to note that the Shango ritual with its elements of genuine black culture are not part of the drama performed on stage, but is merely cited in the dialogue. It is thus employed to refer to an alternative drama which takes place behind our backs and to which we have no access except by narration. Whatever is generally held to be most characteristic of black theatre has been excluded from the inside of Matura’s play and, like the key figure Marie, remains outside the space of representation. The stage never changes from the modern kitchen, stuffed with the gadgets of Western civilization. Yet functionally, all its devices are useless because Elsa, the cook, prefers to bring her own utensils from the off-stage country, from the place, that is, to which Hugh defects once he has found his true role.

In view of the intricate difficulties committed dramatists face when trying to make their work functional for political liberation, it may be justifiable to suggest a metadramatic interpretation of Meetings, proceeding on its dramatic division of space. If Hugh’s gradual awakening to Trinidadian history and culture, as opposed to Jean’s obstinate refusal to accept anything outside the parameters of Western affluence, leads him away from the platform of presentation, while she stays with us, this pattern would seem to imply a radical critique of Western theatre. The play categorically denies any representation of cultural otherness, yet invests it with even greater prominence and potential power by keeping the alternative culture of ritual and rebellion shielded from our views. The barriers between the representational space of the spectacle and the arena of actual participation outside are here reaffirmed, keeping us as spectators confined to the irrelevant scene of domesticity. In the terms of J. D. Scott’s analysis referred to above, one might say the hidden transcript of slave subversion is being performed outside our sphere of control.

The only way in which we ever gain contact with this other world is by means of the meals and dishes which figure so prominently in Hugh’s
cultural revival but which, nevertheless, are highly ambiguous theatrical signs. On the one hand, indigenous food is metonymically related to Trinidadian culture and can therefore be used as signifier for the alternative space outside the sterile kitchen. On the other hand, the food has been purchased to be prepared and consumed inside this very kitchen. Their indigenous nature notwithstanding, the meals are commodities within a Western market economy where they offer variety to consumers who have got tired of chicken and chips. By the same token, Matura’s play itself (and, possibly, black theatre in general), while offering variety to theatre repertoires in London or New York, is also part of a Western entertainment culture where it might serve the expectation of audiences in need of fashionable change. It is therefore significant that Hugh’s cultural and political awakening begins with food prepared in the Western kitchen, but does not stay inside its spatial boundaries.

The fictional kitchen-space, too, is an ambivalent theatrical sign that points two ways. First and foremost, it must certainly be seen as reference to a place represented and precisely located in terms of geography, history and sociology, i.e. the urban home of what the author describes as ‘a heavily American influenced, young prosperous, forward-looking middle class’. Beyond that, however, the stage-kitchen may also be interpreted as a metadramatic reference to the actual place of representation, i.e. the theatre institution which caters for the needs of its patrons but, in this case, ultimately refuses to provide the service required. All significant developments in Meetings take place elsewhere, and the play closes with a disembodied radio voice and its meaningless news. Thus, the space and place of this drama, in both their fictional and their actual sense, not only provide a self-reflexive critique of multicultural entertainment, but also operate as figures of displacement. They direct the audience to the outside of the theatre institution to the sphere of actual political commitment and thereby effectively contribute to transgressing the given categories of control.

I would now like to complement this analysis by discussing an earlier play, Nice, first produced in London in 1973 and located, like several others of Matura’s works, in contemporary Britain. It invites comparison with Meetings on grounds of its spatial confinement and its reliance on telling (the mode of epic narration) rather than showing (the mode of dramatic presentation), which are here taken to their extremes. The play is situated in a prison canteen and consists of a single monologue by one of the inmates, sweeping the place and directly addressing the audience. He tells
us the story of his immigration to England and, like Hugh’s awakening to Trinidad, it is a story of initiation, resulting in a new and fuller understanding of his own role in society. Unlike in *Meetings*, however, we do not witness a gradual development of character, but listen to the ramblings of a narrator who gives an account of what he has gone through, before he finally reveals what insight he has gained from experience. On the basis of the foregoing interpretation, I shall sketch the contents of his monologue and then ask in what ways the theatrical prison space, where it is located, could relate to Matura’s work as an outside dramatist inside Britain.

The protagonist’s career as a West Indian immigrant may roughly be described as starting with assimilation and leading to confrontation - a career referred to in the terms of the title as the development from ‘nice’ to ‘not nice’. Right at the outset he explains his assimilationist philosophy to us as follows:

MAN: Wen a come off de boat de customs man was nice ter me, so i was nice back ter him, but a friend a mine who come ter meet me say, boy yer shouldn’t be nice ter dem, dey do’ like we, but i say nar man it en so, it en so at all, wen people nice ter yer, you must be nice back ter dem. 18

This pattern recurs. Whereas the friend keeps reminding him of his underdog status in English society, the protagonist insists on courtesy and good manners, and he succeeds. Taking mutual friendliness as his maxim, he makes his way into the social space of England, disregarding all warnings from his experienced friend and apparently refuting all preconceptions about English racism or discrimination against immigrants. According to what he tells us, he has progressed from rags to riches, rapidly gained all status symbols of the affluent middle class and made his material as well as social success simply by being nice to everybody.

Or so it seems. In actual fact, we have ample evidence to regard him as an unreliable narrator and be wary of the way in which he relates and interprets his experience. Signals for scepticism are placed early on, for example when he evidently misconstrues his friend’s jealousy for tiredness, 19 or when he cites his ‘nice’-philosophy to legitimize his involvement in poncing and prostitution. Using such signals as clues for our own inferences, the audience might insert a counter-narrative into his success-story, revealing that his wealth and friendliness just form a facade of respectability which barely conceals the exploitation and deceit to which he
owes his status. When he finally realizes that he has himself been deceived (the experienced friend turns out to have exploited the protagonist’s wife as a prostitute) and when he abandons all ‘nicety’ to smash up a pub where black people are refused service, this insight does not come as a surprise to us, because we have long been suspecting that his idealized image of friendly English society was illusionary and naive.

Significantly though, this realization only comes to us through a process of re-interpretation to which we must subject everything we are told. If, as LeRoi Jones declared, Revolutionary Theatre reshapes the stage into a place ‘where real things can be said about a real world’ (cited above), this kind of straightforward link between language and reality is here being undercut. Instead of taking the protagonist’s word for it, we must continuously question the validity of his tale, resorting to our own knowledge about the real world and contrasting it with his improbable luck and success. We never see what happened to him; the social drama of immigrant life in Britain lies outside of, and prior to, the situation presented on stage and is entirely evoked in absentia. But unlike the food in Meetings, in Nice we do not even have signifiers of the other space which might help to transcend the spatial confinement of the stage. Even though our attention is being directed to the world outside, we can only resort to guesswork and our own experience to figure out what exactly happened there.

This process of re-interpretation gains its momentum from the prison-scene as the place of presentation. While the protagonist describes his apparent success, we constantly wonder why and how he has ended up a prisoner. On a thematic level, therefore, the prison-space foreshadowes the ending, indicating his final conflict with the social order and falsifying his ‘nice’-philosophy as a maxim for successful living. Beyond that, however, and on the basis of my analysis of Meetings, it may be possible to suggest a wider interpretation which, again, considers the prison in its metadramatic significance. The spatial enclosure might thus be taken to signify the closed form of drama, prescribed by traditional European aesthetics, with its emphasis on unity of place and time. Such a requirement, radically criticised by politically committed Third World dramatists like Boal (cited above), would seem to find its perfect realisation in the prison-stage, which, almost by definition, presents closed unity and prohibits all transgression. In equating the spatial confinement of theatre with the walls of a prison, this play realigns with institutional boundaries and positively reinforces the division between inside and outside.
Ironically though, this prison space does not only encompass the stage but the auditorium just as well, because the imaginary fourth wall, separating actors and audience in traditional Eurocentric drama, has been obliterated through the protagonist’s direct communication with us. As spectators we find ourselves situated inside the theatre/prison, closed off from the political space of society, denied the illusion of fictional escape and thus thrown back on our own resources to plot the way out. This may indeed work towards enlightenment and, possibly, liberation. In political terms, after all, the prison space is a powerful site of confrontation and violent control which, for precisely this reason, can lead to a realization of the prevailing power structure in society. This is how Jacko, a leading character in Matura’s *Welcome Home Jacko* (1979) recently released from jail, describes this insight:

JACKO: if you tink tings tough outside a prison, it ten time more tough inside, de white screws (...) do’ like yer at all an if yer black den is worse. Dey do’ give yer a chance. Yer have ter ask dem fer everyting, everyting. An de white cons dem come next, dem higher dan yer, dem have tings under control an yer have ter ask dem fer favours too. (...) an den everyting yer do have a rule an regulations ter cover it. So all yer guys tink outside hard eh all yer do’ know how easy it is...take my word fer it, I en going back inside.20

Having been ‘inside’ and having been subjected to complete control through rules and regulations, this ex-prisoner reconceptualizes the space ‘outside’ and perceives the social hierarchy in a different way, opening vistas for its subversion. Even though the political coming-to-consciousness of the prisoner in *Nice* remains doubtful, it may not be irrelevant in this context to think of the careers of prominent Black Power activists like Eldridge Cleaver or Malcolm X who began their radical commitment to political change during a period of imprisonment.21

In this way, the strict enclosure of the prison-stage and the absence of all social presentation in *Nice* may be an inducement for us to rethink society and recast the roles we act outside. Whereas the off-stage space in *Meetings* contained the ritualized slave culture unknown to Western audiences and shielded from their views, the off-stage space in *Nice* must be recognized for our familiar world of contemporary Britain, keeping up its respectable facade of ‘nicety’. Matura’s dramatic monologue, by challenging us to reinterpret his story, incites us to uncover the insidious power structures of control hidden underneath. It does so by reinforcing, rather than eliminat-
ing, aesthetic separations. The walls of the theatre are not torn down, as Boal demanded, but kept up to establish political consciousness in the institutional space so defined. Even the classic unities of place and time may become functional in this way, because they demand the unity of action, traditionally understood as a coherent plot, but now re-interpretable as a concerted effort of both audience and actor.

Let me now try to summarize, as well as conclude, this interpretation of place and space in Matura's drama with reference to an early lecture by Michel Foucault, published posthumously and entitled 'Of Other Spaces', in which the key terms of the foregoing analysis are placed in an interesting interrelationship. Foucault sketches the history of space in Western experience and suggests that is has never been entirely desanctified. Even today, 'our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down'. Among these are the oppositions between private and public space or, in different terms, between inside and outside institutional borders.

Foucault then goes on to outline especially sanctified places which can be found in every society and which he defines as follows:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.

I quote at such length because Foucault subsequently exemplifies this concept of heterotopia by citing, among others, the three sites that delineate the subject of this paper, namely the theatre, the prison and the colony. All these are counter-sites in the ways they relate to the cultural space from which they are separated. The theatre as heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single space 'several sites that are in themselves incompatible'; the prison is a heterotopia of critical deviation 'in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed'; the colony, finally, is a heterotopia of compensation, creating 'another real
space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill con-
structed and jumbled. On the basis of the foregoing discussion, it may be plausible to suggest
in conclusion that Matura's work as a dramatist is situated at the inter-
section of these three counter-sites and, simultaneously, actively involved
in redefining their parameters. Coming from an oversea colony into the
European motherland, Matura has chosen to write and act within the
institution of Eurocentric theatre, yet subverting its spatial and aesthetic
constraints with his imperative for political activism. As part of this project,
the prison-stage figures prominently in his plays because it epitomizes both
social control and the deviant forces of liberation. By superimposing these
counter-spaces, Matura is mapping out a site of cultural counter-move-
ments. In Foucault's terms, his heterotopic drama thus represents the post-
colonial and post-imperial realities of our time; it contests the meticulous
order of imperial boundaries which used to keep outside and inside apart
and protect the one from the other; and it inverts the relations of depend-
ency and display which formerly held between actors and audience. In all
these ways Matura's drama uses symbolic transgression to work towards
social transformation. Thus, the heterotopia of social space in his political
comedies may help to establish the heterogeneity of being in contemporary
society.
Notes and References

1 I would like to thank Susanne Mühleisen, who has been extremely generous in sharing with me her expert knowledge of Trinidadian culture and history and has helped me with this paper is all its stages from planning to revision. Above all, I have greatly benefitted from studying her comprehensive M. A. thesis on *Attitudes towards Language Varieties in Trinidad* (FU Berlin 1993). All remaining shortcomings and errors, however, are entirely my own responsibility.


3 A decision by the organizers, I hasten to add, made for purely pragmatic reasons. Others seem to have had similar difficulties in placing Matura. As Bruce King writes: 'One of the problems with broad comparisons and generalizations is that not all writers fit. (...) What does one do with the West Indian plays, those of Mustapha Matura and Fred D'Aguiar, for example, written and produced in London?' King, Bruce (ed.), *Post-Colonial English Drama. Commonwealth Drama since 1960*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1992, p. 14f.


7 In his incisive study on the reassertion of space into critical theory, Edward Soja writes: 'The generative source for a materialist interpretation of spatiality is the recognition that spatiality is socially produced and, like society itself, exists in both substantial forms (concrete spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an 'embodiment' and medium of social life itself.' Soja, Edward, *Postmodern Geographies*, London: Verso 1989, p. 120.


14 Matura, op. cit., p. 301.

15 Matura, op. cit., p. 314f.
cf.: 'so a went up an ask one a de girls nice fer a dance an she dance wit me an it was a good dance an we had a good time, but me friend pull me aside an say boy, how a go teach yer ter live in dis country wen yer do' listen ter me, (...) so a went back an ask her ter dance an she say yes and we dance again, but a notice me friend wasn't dancing at all, so a say he must be en feel like dancing or maybe he foot hurting him,' Matura, op. cit., p. 69.


Foucault, op. cit., p. 24, emphasis added.

Foucault, op. cit., p. 25, 27.
What is the identity of Canada? The riddle circulates, unanswered, in debates about Canadian culture, resulting in a persistent sense of envy: other countries have clearly defined identities while Canada apparently lacks such a definition. English-speaking Canadians have never felt particularly secure that they collectively have an identity which is distinct from that of either the British or the Americans. The result is an uncertainty of identity which is expressed in English-Canadian culture by irony because the doubleness of irony - saying one thing while meaning another - refuses the idea of a fixed meaning. I want to begin to explore the implications for Canadian culture of reading irony as opening the possibility of identity being understood as a construct, rather than a stable essence. And if identity is understood as a construct, then we can begin to explore the terms of its construction which would allow a re-conceptualization of Canadian culture and the relations of power within it. Clearly, this project is too large for a paper, so I am going to focus on an aspect of the problem: the place in English-Canadian culture of canonical works of art, particularly the plays of Shakespeare, which are invoked ironically in two recent plays, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by Ann-Marie McDonald and *Beuys, Buoys, Boys* by Ken Garnhum. The use of Shakespeare in these two plays implicitly serves to critique the reading practices of those living in a post-colonial country, and how those practices shape a sense of national identity.

The problem of identity has a long history which pre-dates the establishing of the Dominion of Canada in 1867. The British, when they claimed the territories held by France in North America through the Treaty of Paris (1763), assured those living in what is now Quebec of their right to maintain their language and religion. This was not an enlightened policy of tolerance whereby the victor respected the cultural integrity of the vanquished, but a consequence of *realpolitik*: the escalating dissension in the thirteen colonies immediately to the south worried the British who feared that the sympathies of the recently conquered French population would be
with the rebellious colonies. In order to protect its claim to its new territories, the British government thwarted the anticipated alliances through toleration so that French and English cultures co-existed - although not entirely peacefully - in (Lower) Canada.

This model of Canada as two nations is one which informed Canada's sense of identity until relatively recently. There are two aspects of this way of conceiving Canada which are important. First, whatever Canada was or is, the description of the country as two nations denies the culture of the indigenous population. As such, the description is an aspect of the ideologies of European imperialism which alternately dismissed or exoticized the culture of the indigenous people. Secondly, there were waves of immigration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The persistent representation of Canada as bi-cultural erases the contribution of these people. In short, describing Canada as 'two nations' is not neutral, but articulates a politic which rehearses aspects of imperialism by recognizing only the cultural traditions of Western European countries. At the same time, the description of Canada as two nations suggests that there is no single identity to the political state of Canada.

There is another note about the history of Canada which is important to a discussion of post-colonialism. The process of Canada's evolution as a state was slow, beginning in 1867 when the British North America Act created the Dominion of Canada which had control over its domestic affairs. It wasn't until 1931, under the British Statute of Westminster, that Canada (like other Commonwealth countries) was given complete autonomy over its foreign affairs. The consequence of this slow evolution is that Canada never radically severed its ties with Britain - and indeed, even to this day, a thin thread still ties Canada to Britain because the Queen is technically the head of state. This protracted process of Canada gaining control over its own affairs suggests that those in power were largely content to allow the country to maintain its colonial relation with Britain. This point is borne out in terms of Canadian theatre history.

In the nineteenth century, Canadian practitioners worried that the nascent theatrical activity in the country was endangered by the proliferation of low calibre productions of American touring companies seen throughout Canada (Salter 75). In response to this threat, some (like Hector Charlesworth) advocated a national theatre which, following the model of France, would be subsidized by the government. Rather importantly, the debate about a national theatre in Canada occurred at the same time that debates
about the national theatre in Britain were gaining momentum. As Loren Kruger notes, the national theatre in Britain was conceived not simply to celebrate the nation's theatrical heritage, always presented as reaching its zenith with the work of Shakespeare, but, following Matthew Arnold, to educate the populace by initiating it into high culture which was seen as morally improving. A particular aspect of this is the sense that hearing the words of Shakespeare spoken aloud would somehow maintain linguistic purity. Kruger quotes Oliver Lyttelton, 'the National Theatre must set the highest standards for the drama' and he further envisioned that it would 'preserve from pollution the language in which the dramatic works are played ..., would help to keep undefiled the purity of the English language' (128).

This desire to maintain linguistic purity is concomitant with the invocation of Britain's national theatre to buttress the last vestiges of imperialism. One speaker, during the 1913 parliamentary debate, proposed that the National House should be uniquely British, a theatre 'of which the United Kingdom can be proud, that will speak to Canada, South Africa and the Antipodes' (quoted in Kruger 127). As Denis Salter notes sardonically, 'As dutiful members of the Empire, Canadians did in fact listen: whenever they turned their thoughts to the founding of their own national drama and their own national theatre, they repeatedly looked to the British example for ideas, precedent, and practical advice' (78). There is a certain inescapable irony about Canada trying to develop its own national theatre by following the British model which was conceived as perpetuating the glory of the Empire which included Canada as a colony.

This infatuation with British theatre as the model for a national theatre which would be distinctly Canadian is expressed in a range of ways, perhaps most tellingly in the persistent celebration of Shakespeare as the greatest English-language playwright (Salter 80). The issue isn't whether or not Shakespeare's reputation is deserved, but the irony of positioning a playwright, who was represented not simply as a great playwright but as the exemplar of Englishness (Hawkes 31-35), as the model for Canadian writing. What emerges in Canada is a massive inferiority complex given Shakespeare's reputation, what playwright would have the audacity to promote him or herself as his equal? This sense of inferiority, of British theatre setting the standard to which Canadians should aspire, suggests that Canadians had internalized a sense of themselves as colonials and perpetuated their own cultural colonization. The consequence is that in
Canadian theatre, the name 'Shakespeare' is not simply the name of a playwright but, in the context of the historical position of Shakespeare, indicates a set of colonial relations. Nothing marks this colonial anxiety so much as the Stratford Festival which was founded in 1953 to produce the plays of Shakespeare. For a brief time during the 1970s, Stratford identified itself as Canada's National Theatre which serves rather neatly as a mark of the conflicted process of Canada's attempts to find its own sense of a national culture (Filewod 9). Given the fact the country was conceived as two nations which were acknowledged to have apparently irreconcilable cultures, finding as singular national identity for Canada was problem enough; but if a national theatre is to celebrate the cultural achievements of the country, thereby expressing aspects of the nation's identity, how did Canadians ever expect to create a national theatre by constantly rehearsing their colonial status through a deference to British theatrical models?

One of the ways that this apparent contradiction is reconciled is through the inscription of Shakespeare as an Englishman whose genius is such that he is able to transcend the determination of his particular moment in history, speaking across the ages to something which is essentially human in all of us. The obfuscation of the ideology upon which this image of Shakespeare is predicated seems problematic because, as the debates about Britain's national theatre suggest, Shakespeare is integral to notions of 'high' culture which in turn serves to sustain hegemonic privilege. Try as we might to conceive of a Shakespeare who stands outside history, the Shakespeare whom we receive is an effect of history. The project of critiquing the ideological implications of the 'universal' Shakespeare is important to those who have been excluded from power because the socially empowered elite have used Shakespeare, suggesting he is an ally in their cultural project. The claim that Shakespeare is 'our' contemporary cannot be made lightly for who is embraced by the possessive 'our'?

Ann-Marie MacDonald addresses Shakespeare as the site of the intersection of ideologies of universality and patriarchy in Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet). The play deals with a Canadian woman named Constance Ledbelly who is teaching at a well-respected Canadian institution, Queen's University in Kingston Ontario. Constance does not have a regularized teaching position because she has not finished writing her dissertation in which she is arguing that the lost Gustav Manuscript, when decoded, will prove that Othello and Romeo and Juliet are based on two comedies 'that Shakespeare plundered and made over into ersatz tra-
gedies!' (21). Constance's inability to finish her dissertation is largely attributable to her love for Claude Night, a tweedy Brit teaching in Canada. This love is unrequited; but more than that, it is a love which he ruthlessly exploits because he has her ghost-write all of his publications which garner him great acclaim. Near the beginning of the play, he comes to tell her that he has just received news that he has a lecturing job at Oxford. Further adding to his good fortune, he plans to marry Ramona, a beautiful, bright young student. Constance's humiliation at this rejection is intensified when Claude mocks her academic work, claiming that no one takes rumours of the Gustav manuscript seriously and that her 'fascination with mystery borders on the vulgar.' He concludes his dismissal of her with the condescending comment that she has 'such an interesting little mind' (24).

Given that Claude is English and Constance is a Canadian, their relationship can be read as that between a man and a woman which mimics the colonial relation between Britain and Canada. In this context, Constance's response to Claude's dismissal is particularly noteworthy. She decides that her revenge will be an orgy of self-punishment. She plans to resign her job, to return to her apartment where she will 'watch the plants die and to let the cats copulate freely' (26). She continues,

I'll order in groceries. Eventually I'll be evicted. I'll smell really bad and swear at people on the subway. Five years later I run into Professor Night and Ramona: they don't recognize me. I'm selling pencils. They buy one. Suddenly, I drop dead. They discover my true identity. I'm awarded my doctorate posthumously. Professor Night dedicates his complete works to me and lays roses on my grave every day. My stone bears a simple epithet: 'Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown.' ... There's no time to lose! I'll have to start right now if I'm going to sink that low in five years. (grabs phone, dials) Hello, give me the office of the Dean! ... Oh yes, I'll hold. (27)

This moment exemplifies the ironic tone which pervades *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. Constance decides that she will force people to recognize her importance - even if she won't be alive to enjoy the recognition. Her choice of an epithet for her tombstone indicates that she identifies with Hamlet, a male hero, suggesting that she is a colonized reader who erases herself - particularly her gender and sexuality - in her reading of Shakespeare. In a nicely ironic turn of phrase, she tells us that she must begin this process of degeneration with haste because it will take her some time to sink to Hamlet's depths of despair. But this moment of
self-affirmation is immediately undercut by the Dean’s office which puts her on hold: she is too unimportant for the call to be put through.

She doesn’t, in fact, make much headway in her plan for self-abasement but instead is drawn into the world of the ur-texts for *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the two comedies by the unknown author. These texts subvert the conventions of gender in Shakespearean tragedy - or probably more accurately, the way in which we read tragedy. In MacDonald’s play, Desdemona is a warrior after whom Shakespeare models Othello and not the embodiment of feminine goodness and virtue; Juliet is not the preternaturally wise girl who tutors Romeo in true love but a spoiled teenager who is eager to experiment sexually and infatuated with the idea of love. Constance’s entry into the world of these comedies and her interaction with Desdemona and Juliet - both of whom admire her greatly - allow her to discover her own strengths and to gain a sense of independence.

*Goodnight Desdemona* (Good Morning Juliet) is a feminist comedy of liberation which carries a predictable enough moral: a woman, who is colonized in her relationship with a man, finds a sense of her own strength. The specific terms of her discovery are important. Constance’s journey through the worlds of the sources for *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* amounts to a revision which counters the masculine bias of conventional readings. This allows her to recuperate the two heroines from traditions which present them as ‘good’ women who conform to a male fantasy of femininity. If Constance is colonized in terms of her relationship with Claude both by virtue of her nationality and her gender, and if she finds autonomy through re-visionist readings of Shakespeare, it would seem that it is not the works of Shakespeare *per se* which colonize but rather the readings of those works.

MacDonald makes this point clearly in the scene in which Constance comes upon Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo. Picking up on the jocular, adolescent masculinity which characterizes those scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*, MacDonald pushes the tone of Shakespeare’s scene to bring to the fore the homosocial - if not homosexual - undertones of the apparent heterosexuality in the exchanges between the young men. Constance, fearing that she will be discovered, pretends that she is a boy named Constantine. The boys immediately welcome her to their coterie by sharing a series of lewd jokes with her. Says Tybalt, for example, ‘A Bawd! And falling apart ith’t'h’pox! Take care - *She’ll* pay thee, and with a French crown too!’ ‘Ay,’ retorts Mercutio ‘a bald pate, for a little head!’ (54).
While Constance a.k.a. Constantine doesn’t join in, neither does she challenge the sexism of the comments; instead she stands by, nervously biting her thumb-nail. Her silence is taken as acceptance and she is invited to the baths, a ‘new friendship to baptize!’ (54). Finally, Romeo proposes, ‘Greekling, splash with us!’ (54). Constance, of course, can’t take up the offer because her naked body will betray her masquerade, so she begs off the invitation (54). Relieved that she hasn’t been discovered, she says:

Thank God they think that I’m a man. (to God) Thank you. O thank you.

How long can I avoid their locker room? Those guys remind me of the Stratford shows I’ve seen, where each production has a Roman bath: the scene might be a conference of state, but steam will rise and billow from the wings, while full-grown men in Velcro loin-cloths speak, while snapping towels at each other. Why is it that Juliet’s scenes with her Nurse are never in a sauna. Or ‘King Lear’:

imagine Goneril and Regan, steaming as they plot the downfall of their Dad, while tearing hot wax from each other’s legs;

Ophelia, drowning in a whirlpool full of naked women. Portia, pumping iron - (55)

Constance’s critique of Stratford, although perhaps sounding like a parody to those who are unfamiliar with the Festival’s offerings, is understood to refer to Romeo and Juliet directed in 1987 by Robin Philips, the expatriate Englishman who was once the Artistic Director of the Festival. The particular reference is to Phillips’s staging of Act II scene iv when the Nurse brings Romeo the message from Juliet. Phillips set the scene in the baths with Romeo and his coterie cavorting naked in tubs made of corrugated steel. Needless to say, this directorial decision emphasized the erotic dynamic of the play, particularly the homoerotic undercurrents. This element of Phillip’s production was largely unmentioned, as if the audience wanted to believe that this expression of masculinity was not worth comment. MacDonald’s point is that it is difficult to envision a female corollary which would allow women the same sexual license. Conventionally, Shakespeare is read in ways which support social norms of masculinity,
thereby eliding woman, except as the supporting player in dramas focusing on masculine. Simply put, there seems to be very little room for women.

Systemically, this displacement of women is evident in a myriad of ways in Canadian theatre: there are very few women directors in Canada and those who do direct have tended to have their work produced in smaller theatres; there are very few women artistic directors in Canada, and again those who are artistic directors tend to run smaller theatres. There are few non-white women who wield power in Canadian theatre, either as directors or playwrights. For a country which has a large non-Western European population - particularly in urban centres which are also the centres of theatre - there is no sense in which the theatre comes close to accurately reflecting Canada's identity - whatever that may be.

Ken Garnhum's *Beuys, Buoys, Boys* takes up the issues of the relation of a white theatre artist to works of high art from another perspective. His play, a mono-drama, mourns 'the innocent, dead of AIDS' (62). Although one would not necessarily expect that a play which tries to come to terms with death would be funny, Garnhum's account of childhood experiences with death and his meditation on art as helping us cope with loss does produce a gently ironic perspective on death. The title of the play refers to the work of Joseph Beuys, to buoys which he explains are objects 'anchored as . . . aid[s] to navigation' which 'indicate dangers like hidden wrecks or rocky shoals' (82) and to boys, both in the sense of homosexual men and to Garnhum as a child whose early experiences of death have taught Garnhum the man to deal with the spectre of AIDS which so haunts the gay community. 'The older I get,' he explains, 'the more I am clinging to the boy in me' (89).

But like MacDonald, Garnhum's relation to high art, which is largely European, is complex. At one point, he quotes "The sea, with such a storm ... would have buoyed up and quenched the stellèd fires'. That is from *King Lear,' he explains. 'If I were quoting that line in the Maritimes, I would say it somewhat differently: 'The sea, with such a storm ... would have boo-eed up and quenched the stellèd fires.' 'Boo-ee!' On Prince Edward Island you could cause a real panic if you said, 'Oh my, look at that 'boy' floating out there in the harbour' (81). Garnhum's comment alludes to regional differences in Canada which are articulated - quite literally - in voice. And indeed, the pun of the title only works if you are in Ontario because if, for example, you were in Newfoundland, the play's title would be pronounced something like 'Bueys, Boo-ees, Byes.' In an understated way,
what Garnhum is suggesting is that canonical art - like that of Shakespeare - isn’t universal, easily able to cross borders. His point is similar to that of MacDonald’s: we read art, a process which is shaped by the cultural specificity of a particular place at a particular moment. The quotation from King Lear clearly has meaning in Prince Edward Island but because it literally sounds different, its meaning isn’t necessarily that which it would have in Ontario. Whereas the work of Shakespeare once was employed as the basis of a national theatre movement in Canada, here it is used to expose regional difference and hence the impossibility of a national identity which is singular.

One of characteristics of ‘great’ art, of work which comes to be identified as canonical is its capacity to transcend the contingencies of a particular historical moment. Garnhum critiques this valorization of high art through a running gag about Beckett. He describes working at Dominion Playworld in Stoney Creek, Ontario...

... at Christmastime, the year that the Barbie camper came out. We had waiting lists, we had all-female fist-fights, we had attempted bribery, it was a nightmare. I learned my first truly nasty lesson about human nature and consumerism, but I learned something of even more importance - I learned that there is something absolutely irresistible about an accessory for a Barbie doll. This special knowledge stayed with me all these years, resulting in the project which I am about to unveil, a project which I hope will pay for many materials in the years to come ... Barbie’s Beckett.

(Barbie’s Beckett is a Barbie-size stage set on which a Barbie doll performs a series of scenes from Samuel Beckett plays. In this scene, she is discovered lounging under a leafless tree in a comfortable recliner, watching television. She is dressed as Barbie would dress if she were asked to play Vladimir in Waiting for Godot.) (70)

Later, Barbie reappears, still waiting. When she makes her third appearance, her accessories have been changed and she is up to her waist in sand. ‘This,’ explains Garnhum

... must be the first act of Happy Days since Barbie, I mean Winnie, is only buried to her waist. In the second act she is buried to her neck, which is why we have decided that ‘hair’ is so important to Barbie’s Happy Days. In fact, it comes with four wigs - this is the Dolly Parton one, as well as an Ali MacGraw, a Doris Day, and a Kathleen Turner - in other words, one for each actor that Barbie and I would just love to see buried up to her neck in dirt. (78)
The wit of the Barbie's Beckett scheme is the incongruity - to say nothing of fool-hardiness - of trying to market anything relating to Beckett's plays which focus on concerns strikingly removed from commerce. But the apparent naivete of Garnhum's plan implies a critique of how icons of 'high' culture - Shakespeare, Beckett, Beuys - are removed from the realm of the everyday and hence from the material conditions of the world in which their work is produced.

For Garnhum, great art can never be removed from its social context but even as he advocates this position, he suggests that art is universal because it gestures to that which refuses to be articulated, contained, and hence shaped, by language. This is not the same as suggesting that it appeals to something 'essentially human' but suggests that not all human experience yields to language. For Garnhum, art serves as a sort of memorial, frequently in the case of Beckett, Beuys (and we could certainly include Shakespeare) to remind us of what cannot be known: 'Oh - how we long for explanations,' Garnhum laments (89). 'Joseph Beuys believed that his art could be explained, and should be explained, yet he constantly confronted us, his audience, with works of art whose greatest strength is their mystery. This is what we must confront first, before any words, before any intellectualizing' (69). For Garnhum, then, the power of art is its tension to both yield to and refuse meaning; but importantly, as Garnhum's own work suggests, when a work has meaning, it is produced by the audience receiving and reading that work through its own frames of reference. Remember: the title Beuys, Buoys, Boys is a pun in Ontario but not in Newfoundland. In other words, meaning is always local, a point which is reinforced further by the title because the yoking of the work of Joseph Beuys, of maritime buoys and of boys is particular to Garnhum.

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and Beuys, Buoys, Boys serve as allegories of reading. The narrative action of *Goodnight Desdemona* is propelled by Constance's attempt to discover the identity of the author of the Gustav manuscript. Her search for the author concludes with her meeting the Ghost, apparently displaced from *Hamlet* into the world of *Romeo and Juliet*. The Ghost approaches her, 'A man told me he hadn't had a bite in three days, so I bit him. I awoke today and shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got there, I know not. I just flew in from Padua, and zounds, are my arms tired!' (73). Constance finally realizes that she is dealing with 'ghostly fool,' 'a jester from the grave.' 'Could you be ... Yorick?!' she asks (73). 'Na-a-ay. You're it' he assures her (73). 'Don't
speak in riddles, tell me what you mean ... Do you know something of the manuscript?! Do you know who the Author is?' demands Constance (73). Finally, this joking ghost makes her realize that she is the author of the Gustav manuscript. ‘I thought only a Wise Fool could turn tragedy into comedy’ (86).

    Ghost (below) Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
    Constance: Yorick.
    Ghost: Na-a-ay. You’re it.
    Constance: I’m it? ... I’m it. I’m the Fool!
    Ghost: A lass.
    Constance: A lass!
    Ghost: A beardless bard.

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    Constance: That’s me. I’m the Author. (86)

From her reading of Othello and of Romeo and Juliet, Constance generates the imaginary world of the lost texts in which the women are heroines. Through her engagement with this imagined world which is, in fact a projection of her own desires, she gains confidence in herself as an intellectual and as a sexual being, in the process learning that she needn’t be subjugated by Claude Night who made her feel worthless. What is at stake here is the process of identification whereby the reader responds to aspects of the text, not only by entering into the world created of the text, but at the same time by integrating the text as part of his or her experience. The process of reading is complex because it allows us to engage imaginatively with experiences of which we might not otherwise have knowledge. This perspective is certainly the basis of those arguments around the National Theatre which suggests that seeing productions of Shakespeare would be morally elevating for the audience. What this perspective ignores, however, is that reading also involves an appropriation of the text inasmuch as each of the readers responds from the specificity of his or her experience: Constance ‘debases’ the Shakespearean tragedies turning them into comedies which allow her to realize herself as a independent woman. For Constance, reading Shakespeare decolonizes her which, importantly, is a reversal of her earlier reading of Hamlet in which she identified - rather awkwardly - with a male hero. Similarly, Garnhum’s reading of Shakespeare, Beckett and of the sculptures of Joseph Beuys is part of his process of understanding himself as a Canadian artist, as a gay man who
grew in Prince Edward Island and now works in Ontario and who is surrounded by loss as friends die of AIDS. In a sense, the middle term of his title - buoys - not only literally but figuratively mediates the first and the last terms: the works of Joseph Beuys are buoys which help Garnhum to negotiate dangerous waters - the terrible pain of death which boys, like Garnhum, face in the age of AIDS.

In these plays which, on one level, deal with Canadians reading canonical - that is to say, European - art, the consequence is not a sense of yearning to be European. These texts suggest an inversion of nineteenth-century patterns when to be a Canadian was to constantly look elsewhere for a sense of identity. But although the characters in these two plays are not colonized, reading does not help them discover a coherent, singular sense of identity. What is note-worthy is that both Constance in Goodnight Desdemona and the Performer in Beuys adopt personae: there is a clear sense that identity is not an essence but a construct. As such, identity is performed which means it is dynamic, mutable and unstable. This instability is reinforced stylistically in both plays through various comic devices, most notably an ironic tone and a linguistic reliance on puns. There is a political implication to this instability. If identity is performed and hence is an effect of language - and by extension is socially produced - then the logical implication is that the social order within which certain groups are identified as dispossessed and others as empowered is, likewise, a construct. Social change begins simply enough with revisioning. In order to effect change, we must be like Constance Ledbelly and imagine the playful freedom which is suppressed by readings which turn art - or any other social formation - into monolithic monuments demanding reverence to power. But art, Garnhum reminds us, should be a memorial which gestures to what cannot be spoken. The gesture need not be solemn: the doubleness of irony speaks eloquently to the silence in the gap between what is said and what is meant. Laughter, the human voice sounding without words, may be a memorial to human experience which exceeds language.
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From Loman to Lyman: Arthur Miller’s Comedy

I

Willy Loman and Lyman Felt, the protagonist of Arthur Miller’s last-but-one play *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, are characters who are related in more than one way. Both bear a symbolic name. Both are salesmen, although Lyman, more than comfortably installed in the insurance business, is most successful, whereas Loman failed. For both, the travels that come with their profession provide an easy opportunity to transgress the boundaries of marital fidelity. Here again Lyman outreaches Loman. He does not content himself with the occasional fling that Willy gets at Boston in exchange for a few pairs of silk stockings. The well-to-do Lyman Felt is promiscuous on a larger scale. He is a bigamist with both a wife in New York city and one in upstate New York. In New York, his first and legal wife Theodora has born him a daughter. At Elmira he has fathered a son on Leah whom he married on the pretence of being divorced.

As in *Death of a Salesman*, it is chance that reveals the betrayal. Having run his Porsche off the icy road down Mount Morgan while on the way from the one wife to the other, Lyman awakes in hospital to the presence of both his spouses, whom the police have notified. Moreover, for the presentation of this encounter as well as its prehistory, Miller employs the very same dramatic means that he had used in *Death of a Salesman*. Once again the fictitious time present of the play fades into flash-back sequences, dreams, and apparitions of father-figures that illuminate both the past and the hero’s present state of mind.

However, these obvious relationships between both plays have to be balanced against a difference that cannot be overlooked. To Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* revealed the tragedy of ‘the common man’.\(^1\) *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* had its world première at Wyndham’s Theatre in the heart of London’s West End. Miller’s play bears no subtitle that defines the genre. But its critics have asserted that finally the distinguished playwright has tried his hand at comedy. Indeed, those who enjoy wry jokes like ‘Don’t start feeling sorry for yourself; (...) come down off the cross, they need the wood’,\(^2\) as well as the succinct punch-line, will get their money’s worth.
However, even if comedy might be the genre that comes into mind first, there is apparently not enough of it to rank *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* comfortably with either vintage Ayckbourn or a Neil Simon play. While discussing Miller’s text, the critics are markedly ill-at-ease with the comedy-label they have attached to it. For whether the reviews are as supportive as the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Express*, or as overtly deprecating as the *Daily Telegraph*, there can be detected an obvious vexation about the genre-denomination of Miller’s play.³

By taking this vexation as a starting-point, this paper argues that - beyond the affinities mentioned above - *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* relates to central issues which Miller already discussed in *Death of a Salesman*. Once more, Miller explores a crisis of alignment, alienation and identity no less complex than Willy Loman’s. However, for viable reasons, Miller has waived the tragic mode. Reflecting and transmuting the manifest disillusionment about the Reagan era, he does not confront us with another tragedy of the ‘small man’, but with the tragicomedy of the ‘ly-man’, of a liar who for about a decade has sustained his self-deception that one ‘could have it all’. Of the eighties, the time-span which his betrayal roughly encompasses, Lyman Felt is no less indicative than Willy Loman still is of post-war America. But the ethical, societal and psychological dimensions of his case demand a tragicomic rather than a tragic presentation. Lyman Felt is not conceived as a run-of-the-mill bigamist who can be summed up in clichés, and tragicomedy relates both the comic as well as the tragic elements which Miller employs within the structure of his play.

II

Milton Shulman is just one of Miller’s reviewers who have argued that ‘bigamy in theatre is usually a subject for farce’, and, it may be added, this not only because ‘there is something inherently risible in a man who deliberately saddles himself with two or more wives’.⁴ For even if we are made to see the duped women as foolish and as deserving their disappointment - something which Miller explicitly avoids - usually we do not sympathize with the bigamist. His business, after all, is betrayal, and he violates moral standards to which a majority still subscribe. Yet within the structural framework of farce, we are permitted to enjoy the bigamist’s transgressions of the moral order for a while. Traditionally a lower genre, farce is allowed
to cater for related instincts, and sexual infidelity of all kinds remains its time-honoured favourite theme. However, until Orton's amoral black farces redefined the presuppositions of the genre, we could also take it on trust the farce would expose the transgressor as well, and that the moral order would be reaffirmed.

This, one could point out, is just what happens to Lyman Felt. By the end of the play he has lost both the legitimate as well as the illegitimate spouse. The situation of the bed-ridden Lyman, who cannot escape the confrontations with his wives and himself because of an all-encompassing cast, has farcical potential. Miller though has not exploited but counterbalanced this proximity to farce, and the ending is perhaps less stereotypical than it might seem at first glance. But while it remains to be shown that the farcical elements of the play are integrated within its tragicomic structure, at the same time the very nature of Lyman's predicament makes it difficult to accept him outright and unreservedly as the protagonist of a comedy. First of all, established concepts of comedy turn out to be either inappropriate or insufficient when applied to *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*. Romantic comedy in the tradition of Shakespeare cannot supply a frame of reference. Even on the lower level of the boy-meets-girl comedies, love still furthers the development of the characters, and the marriage-bonds still seal more or less explicitly the progress of both the individuals and society. This leaves a bigamist quite obviously out of place. Nor can the structure of the problem comedies, where a tragicomic perspective is present already, accommodate a Lyman Felt. For in Lyman's exposure there is no order restored but a void disclosed.

A bigamist must, of necessity, lie and betray, and therefore he might be supposed to have more in common with Ben Jonson's protagonists. But here too the claim of a conceptual relationship would be a forced one. The amorality as well as the foolishness of Jonson's characters is of such an untempered quality that we do not wince at the mercilessness of their exposure. Lyman and his wives, in contrast, elicit our sympathy, and this to such an extent that Miller has been accused of having written a play that is 'starry-eyed about its hero'.  

Even if there were the space to explore further potential relationships, the attempts to relate Lyman Felt to acknowledged genre concepts such as the comedy of manners or the sentimental comedy would prove to be abortive as well. In view of Lyman's existential predicament, however, one might be tempted to take recourse to Beckett. But here one would have to
concede that the representativeness which Miller has invested Lyman Felt with is of a different quality than the archetypal representativeness we associate with Beckett's protagonists. Finally, on closer inspection, even the apparently inexhaustible and seemingly easily modifiable frame-work of the well-made comedy falls short of accommodating Miller's play. It would well encompass both the obvious jokes which are the standard fare of the West End, and, on a superficial level, the last-act resolution that Miller provides by making both wives leave Lyman. But it falls short of integrating what leads up to this ending, an action which deviates from the causally structured 'crossword puzzle' - as Pinter disparagingly characterized the well-made play.6

Theatre critics are seldom given space to discuss the poetics of drama within their reviews. Therefore, whenever they attach a genre-label to a play, they have to do this on the assumption that there still is a shared understanding of what the label implies. At a time when iron-clad rules of construction have been abandoned for good and when the poetics of drama are taken for a quarry rather than a balanced edifice, this has become increasingly difficult. Insofar, the critics' uneasiness about the appropriate genre denomination of The Ride Down Mount Morgan may not only reflect the quality of the play itself but also the situation of the genre as a whole. The cut-outs that are used by the theatres in advertising make it quite plain that nowadays the genre-denomination of a play is preferably done on the level of the lowest common denominator. 'Funny' and 'optimistic', which more often than not translate as 'superficial', are employed to designate an outright comedy. With plays that are not so out-rightly funny, the adjective 'compassionate' is given preference before 'dark comedy' which, like 'tragicomedy', is obviously considered to be a term that the general public is not so well acquainted with. Plays whose view of life is even darker pass as 'tragic'. It may be added, that apart from 'optimistic', which Miller's play indeed is not, all these qualifiers have been employed by his reviewers.

III

What so far has been described as a dilemma of Miller's reviewers raises a problem for scholars as well. A play that baulks at being filed with an already established genre-model requires a more specific definition. This, however, must of needs relate to common denominators of a genre if it is
to be useful at all. The definitions of comedy are many, and those of tragicomedy are catching up. Most of them are well argued. Still, any selection remains liable to be called arbitrary, and therefore must prove its validity in its application to the text. In the case of The Ride Down Mount Morgan, the following definitions seem pertinent.

‘Comedy as seen from a formal perspective’, claims Grawe,

is the representation of life patterned to demonstrate or to assert a faith in human survival, often including or emphasizing how that survival is possible or under what conditions that survival takes place. 7

Against this may be set John Orr’s definition of tragicomedy. Tragicomedy, he argues,

(...) challenge(s) those cultural conventions of ‘natural’ control so crucial to daily middle-class life, those complex forms of rational control over circumstance made possible by material success, specialised knowledge and cultural capital. (...) It cues us to the necessary but very flawed world of modern Reason, and we already know the pitfalls. We sense, as Freud and the critical theorists have asserted, that rationalities are in part psychic rationalisations, symbolic constructs of the quotidian made possible by the prospect of the material advantage they might bring. And we are clearly uneasy. The tragicomic plays, at times devastatingly, upon this unease. 8

From Orr’s point of view, the unease of Miller’s reviewers might even result from a vexation that reaches beyond the question of the play’s appropriate genre-denomination. Yet before this is pursued, it might be argued that this vexation results from something far more obvious and simple. For what is so disturbing about Lyman Felt is that he is such a nice bigamist. He does not only appeal to our sympathy because his full-body plaster-cast makes him so defenseless. With, quite significantly, the exception of the female critic who wrote for What’s On, 9 the male reviewers have shown a remarkable understanding for Lyman and for the arguments with which he pleads his case. ‘Imagine an economy-size Alan Alda, a blend of handsome exasperation and wisecrack, and you will have a fair model’, writes Sutcliffe of Tom Conti’s performance of Lyman, and Benedict Nightingale concludes ‘that Miller is on Lyman’s side. For him, the creep is almost an Ibsenite hero’. 10
Of course, like all bigamists, Lyman too claims to have made more than one woman happy. But from him it sounds convincing. When, after he has been found out, he pledges his love to each of his spouses, Miller leaves his lines untainted of hypocrisy. Moreover, the reasons he gives to both Theo and Leah are consistent with what he confides to his friend and lawyer Tom. Even if there is a lie and a betrayal at the core of each marriage, Lyman can plead that he did not lie about his feelings, and his ‘I want you both!’ (78) comes from the depth of his heart. The play explicitly states that within each relationship Lyman has been a caring husband, and that he is worshipped by his children. He has provided liberally for both his families, even beyond his demise, and his claim that never in their lives were both his wives as happy as during the nine years of the three-corner-relationship remains unchallenged. The most happy one, naturally, has been Lyman. However, the dream-sequences of the play make it clear that the two marriages still fell a bit short of the ideal he had in mind. Counterbalancing the action in the time present where his wives begin their withdrawal, within the dream-sequences Lyman reveals what he really sought. There, his wives not only pool their cooking for his satisfaction. Leah, the sensualist, has a hand for the more spicy and complicated dishes. Theo, the idealist lady from New England, provides the desserts (44-45). In his dreams, Lyman can command both women into his hospital bed and exult, ‘Oh the double heat of two blessed wives - this is heaven!’ (29).

The marriages of Lyman Felt, however, have to be measured against one more marriage, that of Lyman’s competent nurse Hogan. For her, a good day out is a day she can spend with her husband and her boy, fishing on the ice of a lake. There they while away the time by talking about such things as their new shoes, seconds really, but a good bargain. It is the image of exactly this situation that concludes the play. With, as the stage-directions advise, ‘painful wonder and longing on his face’, Lyman speaks the curtainline, ‘Imagine (...) three of them sitting out there on that lake, talking about their shoes!’; and ‘he begins to weep’ (88).

Comedy, so Grawe has argued, asserts a faith in human survival and, moreover, may include or emphasize how that survival is possible. Quite obviously, survival is a key image in The Ride Down Mount Morgan, as well as, it may be added, its negation – death. More than badly bruised, Lyman survives the accident which launches the play, and though we have reason to conclude that the emotional crash he has to experience thereafter leaves him battered even more, he does survive that too. If, as so far it was done
above, his doings are not judged too harshly, one might still uphold that *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* is a comedy. After all, none of the characters is shown as really hating Lyman for what he has done. When Lyman asks her explicitly, whether she does, Nurse Hogan answers, ‘I don’t know. I got to think about it’ (87), and somehow it seems that all characters still have to. Furthermore, survival implies hope, and hope leaves at least the chance of regeneration. Regeneration is not central to Grawe’s definition, but on the basis of a sympathetic interpretation of Lyman it could be argued that *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* includes its possibility. Within such a reading, the last scene of the play is crucial. On Lyman’s side it would imply the recognition that Nurse Hogan’s unselfish understanding of human relationships can give human relations a quality which he so far had been incapable of imagining. Thus, the breakdown of his marriages and the acknowledgement of the alternative embodied in Nurse Hogan would have to be seen as a cathartic revelation which is expressed in Lyman’s breakdown, but which also includes the possibility of renewal. The physical regeneration which Lyman undergoes in the aptly named Clearhaven Memorial Hospital (3) would thus become symbolic of his spiritual regeneration.

In *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, Miller has mixed the laughter with quite a lot of tears. This should not be held against a dramatist who from his very beginnings and for want of better options had to write for a commercial theatre which took artistic concessions for granted. But any reading of the play that centres around the wisecrack who after all is not so bad that he is beyond redemption, discards the more sinister and more complex aspects of both the play and its central protagonist. They are the societal, the psychological, and the existential. As in all of Miller’s best plays, they are closely intertwined. By taking them into account, the tragicomic dimension of *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* becomes apparent.

Given that the references are so explicit, it remains a riddle why none of Miller’s London reviewers has commented on the relationship between Lyman Felt and the Reagan era. As the flashback scene of Lyman’s proposal to Leah makes clear, Lyman’s decision to commit himself to bigamy coincides with Reagan’s first election. Also, the nine years he manages to get away with it, cover the period of Reagan’s presidency. ‘Listen, up here they’re all saying Reagan’s just about won it’, remarks Leah in an attempt to get away from discussing the abortion she plans, and Lyman welcomes the election of the ‘knuckle head’ as being ‘good for business’ (20). From the hindsight of the nineties, and that includes the perspective of the play,
there remain no doubts whatsoever that Reagan had betrayed the trust he had been invested with. He did in the public sphere what Miller makes Lyman do in the private. Reagan’s presidency encouraged a false belief in wealth and affluence which, as only belatedly dawned on the Americans, was financed with borrowed money that was to be a burden for the rest of their lives. Moreover, the Reaganite philosophy of the individual reduced the American Dream to the hard core of selfishness that was always inherent to it. The Reaganite apotheosis of the individual that can have it all became real in upstarts such as the real-estate-tycoon Donald Trump and the junk-bond inventor Michael Milken, but only up to the point where the one went bankrupt and the other to jail.

Lyman Felt bears a marked resemblance to those who rose under Reagan. While he is still semi-unconscious after his accident, he believes himself to be back in his youth, in the Eisenhower era. But Eisenhower is, as Nurse Hogan remarks, ‘long gone’ (2), and the American Dream that Willy Loman pursued, has been supplanted by Reagan’s reductive version. Miller makes Lyman subscribe to it unreservedly. In line with the prevalent conviction that one had a right to show one’s wealth, Lyman self-gratifyingly clads his wives in expensive furs, and he can inebriate himself with the sight of:

That red river of tail-lights gliding down Park Avenue on a winter’s night - all those silky white thighs crossing inside those heated limousines. (18-19)

On this level it is evident that beyond the additional sexual and emotional gratification she can give, a second wife is also a symbol of status.

Yet what makes Lyman Felt most explicitly a character from the Reagan era, is his wholehearted commitment to selfishness. Selfishness is his ‘truth’, and he defines it thus:

A man can be faithful to himself or to other people - but not to both. At least not happily. We all know this, but it’s immoral to admit it - the first law of life is betrayal; why else did those Rabbis pick Cain and Abel to open the Bible? (49)

Lyman defines Man as ‘all ego’ (49), and the ‘barbed wire conscience’ (16) which Tom credits him with, incapacitates him up to the very end from realizing what he has really done to his families. Selfishness may not be so
nice according to Lyman, but the readiness with which he is willing to concede his, leaves no doubt that to him it is not a vice either.

If looked at as the character who is conditioned by Reaganomics, Lyman Felt tends to forfeit much of the sympathy mentioned above. However, Lyman is just as little a cardboard cliché, of his societal background as Willy Loman is. As is the case with Loman, in Lyman too the societal conditioning of the character is grounded in and expanded through his psychological differentiation. And it is here that both characters become most similar. Both Loman and Lyman are haunted by the fear of alienation. For Loman, the failure to match up to the American success myth implies more than the threat of material failure. The successful pursuit of the American Dream guarantees the inclusion in the American way of life. The losers are denied more than riches. They are denied identity.

About this, The Ride Down Mount Morgan is even more explicit than Death of a Salesman. While Ben is always stern, but never insulting with Willy, within the dream sequences of The Ride Down Mount Morgan Lyman's father leaves no doubt that to him his son is a 'big disappointment' (2). 'You think you gonna be an American?' , he taunts his son, 'You? American? You make me laugh?' (46). However, it is not the successful business man but a much younger Lyman who is addressed thus. In his youth, Lyman had wanted to become a writer, and he claims that 'Jimmy Baldwin liked my stories' (2). The support of Baldwin, who because of his colour and his opinions was an outsider, serves only to underscore the fact that the young Lyman was indeed in danger of forfeiting his alignment with the American Dream.

Just like Ben, Lyman's father is a more-than-life-size character who embodies the pressures of conformity on the individual. Lyman Felt too has succumbed to these pressures. By turning to the insurance business, he has traded the development of his individuality for the promise of an unalienated identity. Both the societal and the psychological motivations that are given for his development are in line with that particular blend of psychological realism which has determined Miller's character-construction since Willy Loman. There is, however, a distinct difference in the approach. Because Willy Loman fails to realize the American Dream, he is also denied a look behind the veil of its promises. The successful Lyman is permitted that knowledge, and instead of the fulfilled identity he discovers an existential and spiritual void. 'The soul was once immortal', he concludes, 'now we've got an insurance policy' (30). To Lyman, it is ridiculous
that 'serious people still go around looking for the moral purpose of the universe' (51), and he voices his disillusionment in the concluding image of Act One:

We're all in a cave . . . where we entered to make love or money or fame. It's dark in here, as dark as sleep, and each one moves blindly, searching for another; to touch, hoping to touch and afraid; and hoping, and afraid. (34)

Desolation and alienation are the rewards that Lyman Felt has reaped from his pursuit of the American Dream. Because of the void that he has discovered, death cannot any longer be, as it still was in Death of a Salesman, a final gesture of alignment and a sacrifice. In The Ride Down Mount Morgan, death constitutes the ultimate threat, and death constantly haunts Lyman who is afraid of the dark, afraid of being alone, and who fears to 'vanish without a trace' (34).

In the disclosure of the existential and spiritual void behind the glamorous facade of the American way of life, Miller has taken the argument beyond Death of a Salesman. The no-nonsense materialism that is at the core of the Reaganite understanding of the individual has eased this disclosure. Within the context of the Eisenhower era, Willy Loman still could persuade himself that the alignment with the American Dream implied an alignment with progress and with the process of history. In The Ride Down Mount Morgan, this alignment is stripped of all idealism and reduced to nothing beyond an all-encompassing pledge to self-interest.

The psychological as well as the existential dimension of The Ride Down Mount Morgan enhance the doubts that Miller conceived his play as a comedy. However, it cannot be directly inferred that it is a tragicomedy. Neither the societal, the psychological or the existential in The Ride Down Mount Morgan are tragicomic per se. But they contribute to the tragicomedy quite essentially, because they constitute the frame of reference within which Lyman Felt's actions and rationalisations have to be seen. 'Rationalities are in part psychic rationalisations, symbolic constructs of the quotidian made possible by the prospect of the material advantage they might bring', was Orr's argument. It can be shown that psychic rationalisations are the basis of both Lyman's marriages as well as his life.

The common denominator of all of Lyman's actions and arguments becomes apparent in his ceaseless efforts to reconcile the contradictory. The more Lyman is convinced that the first law of life is betrayal, the more he
insists on his love of truth. He does not believe in a moral purpose behind the universe, but he insists that a bigamist marriage is more moral than an illegitimate relationship. According to him, self-interest is the prime motive behind each and everyone, but it is Lyman who glorifies love. Life discloses a void, but if so, then one must try even harder to get at least as much fun as possible out of it. And if death poses an ultimate threat to life, life can be asserted, if only in sexuality. In his contradictions, Lyman verges on the ridiculous. For while he takes his own infidelity for granted, he is also subject to extreme jealousy. It was jealousy that got him on the icy Mount Morgan in the first place, the fear that Leah, whose phone was engaged for more than an hour, might be involved with someone else.

These contradictions are underscored by the structure of the play. The action within the time present progresses but slowly, and Miller does not enhance the tension about the probable decisions of Lyman’s spouses. But the essentially more static than dynamic confrontations within the time present are constantly broken up by the flash-back scenes and the dream-sequences. It is there that Lyman discloses his contradictory character, and it is there that he is most puzzling because he can identify so unreservedly with whatever attitude he adopts. Although Miller does not leave us with an incomplete picture of his protagonist, he does not present us either with a causally structured argument that centres around either the progress or decline of the hero. Lyman gains in complexity as the contradictions that determine him are disclosed. But as he cannot reconcile these contradictions, it also becomes clear that Lyman is denied development. Thus, his confinement within his cast is but an outer image of the stasis he embodies.

In The Ride Down Mount Morgan, this stasis relates to the spiritual and moral void that Lyman discloses. Lyman acknowledges no moral order as a basis of judgement, and thus he fails to understand what guilt means. Guilt had been a major motive in Miller’s earlier plays. But in The Ride Down Mount Morgan, guilt has given way to a self-propelling process of rationalisations. It is through these that Lyman attempts to retain control of his life and to hold himself together. But we witness his failure in reconciling the contradictions that his life consist of, and in his vain efforts we recognize his tragicomic stance. ‘Tragicomic heroes (...) are willing players in a game they do not always control or understand’, writes Orr, ‘but are also astute inventors of their own moves and rituals’.11 Lyman Felt too is an astute inventor whose rationalisations, at least to him, fully justify his moves. Yet we come to see him as well as the player in a game he does not understand. First of
all, throughout all arguments within the play, he is incapable of understanding either his wives, his daughter, or Tom. This casts further doubt at the assumption that his reaction to Nurse Hogan’s marriage really implies an act of cognition. His ‘painful wonder’ may not transcend in comprehension. More crucial is that the growing insight into the shallowness of Lyman’s rationalisations also uncovers his incapability of understanding himself. By relinquishing his career as a writer for that of the insurance salesman, Lyman had forsaken his chance for individuality. Within the play he acts like a man who, unaware that he has bartered his soul, strives to get his shadow back, and this restricted understanding adds the farcical to the tragicomedy of his efforts.

Archetypal tragicomic heroes such as Wladimir and Estragon have not failed to elicit our sympathy. Abstracted from the quotidian, as they are, and untainted by guilt, they even appeal to our compassion. It is different with Lyman Felt. The tragicomedy of his vain rationalisations not only undermines the comedy-structure that was supposed above. Because Miller has grounded Lyman Felt so concisely in the societal and existential, his tragicomedy also discloses what in T. S. Eliot’s terms is a ‘hollow man’ of a rather doubtful stature. In The Ride Down Mount Morgan, the tragedy of a man who fails to disentangle himself from the wasteland of his ego, is developed out of the comedy of the bigamist caught in the act. What results from this match may be best described as tragicomedy. But the themes and genre-conventions which Miller connects within this frame of reference are complex enough to account for the vexation of his reviewers.
Notes

3 The reviews are reprinted in Theatre Record, 23 October - 4 November 1991, 1347-1351.
4 Theatre Record, 1348. References to farce are found also in the Daily Express, the Independent, the Sunday Times, and the Sunday Telegraph. Cf. Theatre Record, 1347, 1349-1350.
5 Thomas Sutcliffe in the Independent; Theatre Record, 1349.
6 Cf. Pinter, Harold, "Writing for the theatre", in: Pinter, Harold, Plays: One, London: Methuen, 1976, 12.
9 Cf. Theatre Record, 1348.
10 Theatre Record, 1349 and 1348.
11 Orr, loc. cit.
Barbara Garson, playwright, author and journalist, who was born in 1941, now lives in Manhattan. She earned a Bachelor's Degree specializing in Classical History at the University of Berkeley, California. There she also worked as editor of the *Free Speech Movement Newsletter* (1964-1965). Out of this radical student movement grew the political satire *MacBird!*, first published in 1966. Alluding to the Shakespearean tragedy *Macbeth*, this play - showing John F. Kennedy as the murdered King and Lyndon B. Johnson as the new monarch - gained some notoriety in the United States. In 1968, a German version of the play was performed in Stuttgart. A heated debate arose as to whether the performance should be canceled because of its 'Verfassungswidrigkeit' (i. e. unconstitutional character); some observers regarded the play as an insult of the President of a befriended nation. Peter Brook, however, called it the 'most powerful piece of pro-American theatre in a long time'. Garson, who could be called a political activist, wrote some more plays and non-fiction books after her first scandalous hit. Her plays are always committed to social causes, such as bad working conditions or the problems that tenants of apartment houses have to face when the buildings are sold (e.g. *Going Co-op*, 1972). Most of her plays are comedies or musicals, among them also plays for children. She wrote over 150 articles, stories and reviews, which appeared in *Harpers, The New York Times, Newsweek, The Village Gate*, to name but a few. In the course of her career as a writer and journalist she received several grants, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, an OBIE, and the 'Art Fund', a fellowship for comedy writing.

I had a chance to meet with her in July 1992. On this occasion she gave me a copy of *Security*, her latest play. She had just attended its premiere at the University of Pittsburgh, at a summer theater festival where plays are performed in a workshop-like atmosphere, mostly with the co-operation of the playwrights.

At present she is working on a new play, which will also be in the vein of a black comedy, namely about a 'die-in', that is a form of sit-in demonstration conducted by older people in the lobby of the health insurance office.
Security has been performed on stage but is not yet published. It was first presented at the Carnegie Mellon Drama Showcase of New Plays, which took place from July 3 to August 2, 1992. The Producer’s statement gives an interesting insight into the precarious situation of contemporary drama in the United States and explains the objective of a nonprofit institution such as the Carnegie Mellon Drama Showcase:

The changing climate of the American professional theatre, the heightened financial risks, crippling production costs, censorship, the fear of failure, together with the sheer frustration of searching out playwrights with a voice that needs to be heard, combine to make the presentation of new works extremely difficult. We believe this is where institutions like Carnegie Mellon can fill a significant void. The traditional role of the theatre conservatory as a place where nurturing, guidance, cajoling and sustenance are the very raison d’etre can be precisely the oasis needed by the playwright.

Although the entire cast includes about three dozen characters - some of them carrying proper names like Ellen, Estelle, etc., others carrying generic names like Sr. Efficiency Man, or Window Patient - all of them can be played by four men, four women, one child, or even fewer if actors are allowed to switch roles and transform themselves on stage. Settings should not be elaborate but merely suggested through lights, attitude changes, and occasional props, according to the stage direction. With a spare use of props, extensive use of lights and character transformations on stage, Garson borrows expressionistic stage conventions.

Ellen, the protagonist, has the double function of (a) character participating in the action of the play, and (b) stage manager or narrator communicating with the audience. Nothing innovative about the form of the play; it bears striking similarities with Tennessee Williams’ ‘memory play’ Glass Menagerie.

The frame story consists of the following situation: The action takes place in a U.S. city at the present time. Ellen, single, divorced, with one child, is seated in a jail cell reading a letter she just finished writing. The letter is addressed to her 8-year-old daughter Daisy, and tells Ellen’s career as a criminal, which starts when she quits her job at a Social Security Center because the job is anything but humane. The frame story, which reflects the working conditions in a contemporary underpaid clerical job and therefore expresses general truth for a large portion (especially lower middle class and female) of the audience, is interrupted by flashbacks.
in which scenes and characters that are important for her personal development drift out of the darkness. Ellen accepts an 'Ugly Old Man's' offer to marry him. He knows he is going to die soon and he would like her to live off of his pension as his beneficiary.

At the point where Ellen decides to specialize in the conquest of single or widowed old men, the play becomes grim and quite black in humor. The play does not cease being a comedy, though, for the macabre is always linked to the ludicrous or the trivial. Garson has a fine ear for hackneyed conversation and incites our laughter by exposing the rigid and stereotypical nature of our speech even in the most romantic or solemn moments of love and death:

Ray - Oh Ellen.
Ellen - Oh Ray.
Ray - Oh, Ellen, my dream has come true.
(Stage direction:) Ray expires with a smile on his face (...) Ellen gently pulls the sheet over his head.

Garson cleverly exposes the shortcomings of the American welfare system, including the de-personalized, often inhumane medical system. In one of the central monologues, which forms the legal backdrop of the play, the audience is informed that

If a woman has more than one husband - in a row that is - if she applies for a new Social Security Number each time she starts to collect, there's no way they could tell that she's a multiple widow. And these pensions would have been buried with those men. So you're not taking anything from anyone. You're recycling.

The laws of black comedy allow the protagonist to produce corpses almost at breakneck speed, sometimes even bordering on slapstick humor, in the tradition of Kesselring's *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

The first of the two acts proceeds at a fast pace. The deaths that follow each other could be performed by letting each body pile up on stage while Ellen goes on to the next scene.

Act II depicts Ellen's marriage with Orson, for whom she feels real affection and understanding, and her sensational conviction for murder. Although in this case Ellen is not the catalyst for her husband's death, her own lawyer advises her to plead guilty in Orson's case in exchange for six years of prison. Thanks to the intervention of a lenient judge, who set
his heart on spending his last years touring the world together with the accused, Ellen is not sentenced. *Three Penny Opera* comes to mind. The tabloid headlines switch from 'Pension Playmate on Trial' to 'Black Widow Freed'. This scene brilliantly portrays the absurdity of the American legal system and exposes the ruthlessness of sensational journalism.

The action of the play cannot exactly be described as realistic, nor is it altogether bizarre or absurd. The situation of the heroine is representative. Finding herself as a single parent who desperately tries to live a middle-class life and to give her child a good education, is in no way exceptional. Ellen’s behavior in this situation is, however, extreme (This point will be discussed below). She wants the security that allows her to be a good mother. But no matter how likeable she appears to be, she is a murderer. Ellen’s friend, Mrs. Bello, who is equally checkmated by the social system, serves as a foil. She does not become a murderer; instead, she follows the rules and tries harder each time she suffers a setback.4

In Ellen Garson created a protagonist who is extreme in her behavior; yet, as far as her social status is concerned she is the average American woman of the 1990s and could be seen as the female counterpart for Miller's Loman - 'Low-Woman', so to speak - with the exception that she is more successful in her defiance of the failure of the American Dream than Miller’s tragic hero in *Death of a Salesman*.

American society has changed since the suicide of Willy Loman. We see a female protagonist as the head of a family. She does not kill herself but she kills husbands, on a more abstract level the makers of the social and political system, in order to survive.

In the 1980s, the decade preceding this play, the administration of Ronald Reagan appointed the first woman justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, named two women to the cabinet, and claimed to be more committed to women’s rights than any previous administration. Nevertheless the Reagan administration adopted positions that were anathema to feminists (e. g. opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, withdrawal of federal funding for abortions for poor women, hostility to affirmative action programs designed to assure the hiring of more women and blacks.)

True, the role of women as far as employment and marital status are concerned has considerably changed since the 1940s.5
- By 1970 more than 50% of women with children 6 to 17 years old were in the work force.
- By 1980 more than 50% of those with children under 6 were also employed.
- By 1980 more than two out of five marriages were expected to end in divorce.
- The number of individuals living alone in single households soared from 11% in 1964 to 23% in 1980.
- By 1980 the number of children per family had sunk below 1.6, the reproduction level required for zero population growth.

Social scientists noted a direct correlation between the increase in the divorce rate and the number of women entering the labor force. Although women experienced an employment boom in the late 1960s and 70s, the work they entered in most cases offered no possibility for economic advancement and upward mobility. In many cases women took up jobs in order to help the family, which has always been a traditional female role. For the most part they clustered in sex-segregated jobs such as clerical or sales work. They were kept underpaid, denied promotion opportunities and treated for the most part as 'marginal'. Personal services and clerical work were defined almost exclusively as 'women's jobs'; such occupations, however, suffered the most dramatic decline in real earnings during the inflation of the 1970s. 'We may be approaching a situation like that in some industrializing third world countries,' an economist commented on that subject, 'there has been a big increase in jobs for women (...) but the jobs don’t lead anywhere, they don't lift women out of poverty.'

Ironically, women often sink beneath the poverty line instead of securing the liberation so much talked about in the media. Due to the massive increase in female-headed households from the 1960s through the 1980s the term 'feminization of poverty' was coined.

Ellen finds herself in the exact same situation: divorced, leading a single-household with one child to support, working in a 'sweatshop' without making enough money to pay for her apartment and a decent school. If we recall Garson's background as a leader of the Free Speech Movement during the 1960s and her characterization of herself as a 'radical' rather than a liberal it is no wonder that Ellen rebels against the unfair social situation in her own way. Her indifference toward governmental controls and taking the law in her own hands makes her a
prototype of the American individualist, a stereotype that goes back to America’s pioneer days of the last century. To some extent, Ellen resembles last century’s pioneers fighting back a geographical frontier. In Ellen’s case the frontier of the 1990s has become a social one, and her fight is for a fair and humane society.

The beginning of student protest on the campus of Berkeley represented America’s claim to providing the most advanced higher education to the broadest segments of youth; the riots of Blacks in America’s leading cities, the involvement in a disastrous and unending war and the wide-spreading Watergate scandal resulted in the withdrawal of faith in America’s central purposes and underlying virtue by a large part of its younger generation. In the 1970s American society fell into two parts; those who were basically conservative about the political system and who did not want to see any change; and those (among whom I would count Barbara Garson) who saw the society, culture and polity almost as disaster areas and who wanted change. The election of Reagan sent a shock through this part of the liberal intelligentsia that was shaped in the 1960s and 70s.

What kind of play did Garson, former member of the New Left, create? The basic disagreement between Plato and Aristotle was whether the theatre has importance as an instrument of moral and political action, or whether it is an imaginative experience with no apparent usefulness beyond the purgation, ‘catharsis’, of its audiences.

Aristotelian theatre is an end in itself, complete and self-contained. Platonic theatre is a means toward a future goal, not to be achieved until the audience, excited by the spectacle, leaves the theatre to resolve these tensions through some form of active intervention.

While both elements, the aesthetic and the politically committed, can be found in Security, I would say that Garson’s interest here is rather political than aesthetic. She may be a good playwright but whatever she writes is more or less with the conscious goal of making propaganda. Thus I would describe her more as a social philosopher than as a poet. She calls herself a ‘genuine black humorist.’

What is her message then? In my opinion the evaluation of Garson’s political plays is ambivalent. Garson offers no political solutions to the problems presented. For, if we were to take the play literally, America would abound in multiple widows, and all the men over 60 would be swept off its surface.
Depending on the personal taste of the spectator or reader, one could consider *Security* as a very cynical 'screw-ball'comedy offering many opportunities for good laughs, or as a bitter attack on the American so-called Welfare System.

Maybe it is possible to see *Security* as a metaphor: a young woman is eliminating the old or sick. Does this not sound like the 'logical' conclusion of the American idolization of beauty and youth? Ellen's motivating force could be, 'let's benefit from the old and ugly in the only way they can be helpful'.

Is it possible to consider this a metaphor for frustration or even nihilism in the present American generation? According to Brustein this kind of metaphorical art is missing from minor contemporary drama, whereas all great modern drama has been metaphorical, from Ibsen's metaphor of ghosts as a symbol of a rotting bourgeois social inheritance to Beckett's metaphor of two tramps lost in an empty space decorated with a single tree.¹

If Garson's comedy fulfills Brustein's demand for metaphor as the most prominent feature of a good play, it would be fair to call *Security* one of the great modern plays.

Notes

6 See Chafe, 336-337.
7 See Chafe, 336.
11 See Brustein, 289.
Christiane Bimberg

The Serious Business of Comedy: Return to a Complex Genre in Woody Allen's A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy

Quite extraordinarily, with this 1982 Orion Pictures Production, Woody Allen leads us into an idyllic countryside at the turn of the century. The film director who became famous for presenting his film visions of New York City life, unique pictures of Manhattan especially, chose to retire to a pastoral background for his free and witty adaptation of one of Shakespeare's masterworks.

Analogously to its dramatic model (if the Elizabethan play served as such at all), Allen's script sends a small party of well-to-do townspeople who feel well at home in New York or Chicago, on Wallstreet, Coney Island or at a university, to the woods surrounding a lovely country home. Imitating Shakespearean symbolism, he exposes the six people to the sensual temptations, sexual confusions and psychological struggles for which the wood so effectively becomes a lyric and dramatic image. Actually, Woody Allen has never been enthusiastic about films set in rural surroundings.

When his family moved to a new home at 1216 East Twelfth Street in 1944, he hated the way to school leading through such an area. Whereas other kids were obliged by their parents to play in the open air he enjoyed the fascination of cinema visits far away from the realities of life. Another terrible move of the family to Port Chester, approximately twenty-five miles from Manhattan, brought about his full recognition of the fact that he was "two with nature."1

For reasons of verisimilitude Allen always preferred real rooms and localities to constructed sets.2 It seems as if Mia Farrow's countryhouse in Connecticut became the ideal location for A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy, though Allen personally never enjoyed his visits there. The same place would later be suggested for the Turgenev and Chekhov-like atmosphere of the picture September. The plan had to be abandoned, however, because the picture had to be shot in winter. As Allen found that the bare trees and the cold created an atmosphere that he hadn't intended, the picture was shot in the studio.3
In *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* the trees, bushes, fields and walks, the lake and the swing contribute to produce lovely summer effects of leisure-time, relaxation, tension and even danger. Yet Allen's preference of authentic locations did not go so far as to allow his life to be endangered - for the scene in which he (playing Andrew) and Mia (playing Ariel) fall from a winged bicycle into a lake he did not permit his body to be touched by real water. He was splashed with mineral water instead.4

Fashionable details like buttoned boots, women's long dresses, light summer suits for the men with matching sun hats, elegant sports suits for various leisure-time activities, but also a car suggest (apart from the contents of discussions, references to scientific achievements etc.) the turn of the century/beginning of the twentieth century as the time-frame for the picture.

Shakespeare-like Allen offers an intricately woven net of a comic plot. By scene five (my classification) all the main characters are introduced in their mutual relationships of marriage, friendship, engagement and acquaintance. Adrian has invited her cousin Leopold with his bride Ariel to her and Andrew's country home. Leopold's marriage is in two days. Further guests are Andrew's best friend Maxwell and his newly-acquired girl friend Dulcy. The partnerships of the three couples are put to trial by a reunion of Andrew with his former girl friend Ariel. In the course of the action the relative order of the outset is gradually destroyed. A recoupling of partners occurs. At the end a new order emerges from which two people are left excluded: dead Leopold and single Dulcy.

Characterizing each of the dramatis personae in physical, mental, moral, social and (the men) in scholarly-scientific terms with the help of verbal and non-verbal means including self-revelation, Allen presents six clearly determined persons who symbolically and allegorically represent different attitudes towards love, sex, marriage life in general on the verge of modernism. Each acts as a sort of counterpart in the comic scheme of the play/picture, including the male-female issue of rôle behavior.

*Leopold* for instance (Jose Ferrer) is a mysterious, contradictory character who surprises us several times though Allen develops his actions quite consistently. He is an elderly renowned university professor, a philosopher. Highly aware of his reputation and position in the academic world he has decided to give up his private liberty at last and marry the adored ideal of a woman, Ariel. He is an expert on Renaissance culture (a fact that Ariel slightly mocks at), revelling in poetry, a lover of spiritual songs and amateur
singer himself (Schubert). He considers himself a civilised person - in other words, an aesthete. Referring to specimen of German culture, mocking clichés of German character and stressing spirituality, Allen simultaneously gives Leopold an air of silliness, aloofness, profundity and dignified narrow-mindedness. In the comedy Leopold even cites the German text of a Schubert song. It was Woody Allen's first nurse, Mrs. Wolf, by the way, who talked German with the boy. Perhaps this helped him to give Leopold this distinctive trait of character.5

An imperturbable fighter against metaphysics, Leopold doesn’t believe in magic or supernatural phenomena of any kind and remains untouched by the spell of the wood that he can’t find magical at all. Yet he presents contradictory traits of character, too, in that he has no sense at all for the invisible subtleties of life though his professional field is the humanities. At the outset Leopold seems to be an incarnation of the pure spirit, giving the impression of being highly if not unbearably intellectual, untouched and untroubled by the more trivial pursuits and circumstances of life, its practical, biological or sensual aspects, though philosophically he holds an empirical view, denying invisible truths. While the other men together with Dulcy enjoy robust leisure time activities such as archery, he retreats to the noble game of chess. Though firmly intent upon marriage for solid reasons, he is actually frightened by the prospect of it. During most of the film he tries (perhaps unconsciously) to bring the relationship with his bride (whom he met - and this is significant - in front of one of the less famous madonnas in the basilica of St Peter's in Rome) down - or rather up - onto a platonic level. He praises her piano accompaniment of Schubert’s spiritual songs for instance and stresses the high-spirited, unromantic, noble level of their mutual intellectual heritage, qualities like understanding, tolerance and the ability for mental dispute. Symptomatically enough, Allen makes Leopold suggest a sort of ‘grand tour’ to Italy for their honeymoon with the not unimportant side-effect of giving lectures on Renaissance culture and putting Tintoretto in the right light for his admirers again.

After having rented a flat for himself and his future wife near the university, Leopold looks forward to introducing Ariel to his neighbours, mentioning how nice it is going to be to be engaged in interesting arguments with the professors and their wives. Marriage to Leopold obviously is a matter of timely convenience and of representing his social and academic standing.
Having consciously decided to marry, Leopold thinks equally pedantically of quite officially finishing his bachelor time with Dulcy. Formally he asks her to do him the honor of sleeping with him on the eve of his marriage. Covered by the elegance of formal speech and the surroundings of teaching Dulcy the rules of chess, he nevertheless shows signs of anxiety and inhibition.

This scene starts a whole series of events leading from the willingness to betray (even if this is not admitted) to jealousy against Ariel, murderous lust, sexual violence and finally death. Dulcy wakes the beast in Leopold, who until then had tried to subdue his erotic phantasies.

Andrew's later appeal to Leopold as 'the man of spirit, the pacifist,' becomes ineffectual. Leopold attempts to murder him, wounds Maxwell instead, takes Dulcy (though with her consent) violently and dies of a heart failure during this adventure. Ironically enough he ends as a pure spirit and has to admit that Andrew is right in believing that there are more things on earth than are to be seen. He performs the most extreme development of character in the comedy, a circle movement that includes an inversion and stops with a return to the beginning. Most certainly unintended by Allen, Leopold bears a close resemblance to the figure of a betrayed husband in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590/96) who out of jealousy throws himself off the rocks and becomes a pure spirit.

Shakespeare-like, Allen manages to invest the outward form of comedy with multifarious fundamental subjects and issues that he discusses with the help of characterization, dialogue, action, verbal and non-verbal irony as well as literary and philosophical allusions and references. He seems to employ the Elizabethan concept of the Great Chain of Being (interpreting the interrelationship between man and universe, microcosm and macrocosm); he discusses circles of greater and smaller subjects that are linked with one another.

The film's main subject could be analysed as the position of modern mankind in relation to both the micro- and macrocosm. More specifically it is the dichotomy between reason and emotion, between knowledge, education, intellect on the one hand and feelings, instincts, physical needs on the other. This consequently leads to a related issue - the question of fate, chance, coincidence, the effect of superior will, or man's ability to determine his own course in life.

Allen explores these fundamental issues of man's existence that have concerned authors, listeners and readers since ancient times, on different
levels of more particular issues, relating them to peculiar problems that beset his characters on the verge of modernism. Therewith he creates an exigency, a jungle of conflicting mental, physical, moral and social terms.

The broadest level is that of the philosophical-scientific discussion to which mainly the male characters contribute, addressing such questions as the recognition and explanation of the world (relationship man - universe)

As did John Dryden, the Restoration writer, learned in ancient philosophy and rhetoric, in his famous Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668) when he discussed the merits of ancient and modern drama and left the answer open to his readers by choosing the form of a dialogue of four speakers with differing attitudes on the subject, Allen has three scientist/scholars discuss the issue. The end of the film has Leopold converted to the insight that there are more things in the world than just the visible ones and that Shakespeare’s ghosts are much more real than some people are. It is a victory of metaphysics after all.

Allen commenced his philosophical interests in the middle of the 1950s. The autodidactic process and search for a philosophical model that is able to explain a metaphysical order as well as for a proof of God and his interest in problems relating to the dilemma of man’s existence still keeps on going.

The level next to the philosophical issue is that of the historical development and cultural progress of humankind (man in history, evolution).

Questions about the use of education, the value of rational abilities and the application of superior intellect present themselves. Cultural progress and the direction of historical development are drawn into doubt. The neanderthal is aroused in Leopold, and also for the other characters knowledge, education, reason etc. seem to be no help in disentangling from self-caused troubles. The animal world supplants the human one and triumphs over it.

This is also shown on a third level coping with issues of moral dilemmas and social obligations, in short, the sex-love-marriage issue. The question of a connection and interdependence is evoked by the women first (especially Adrian), extending to nearly all the characters of the comedy later on. The bed, particularly the marriage bed, becomes a Damocles sword for most of them. The institution of marriage is put to trial, functioning as a cage, an escape and refuge, a convenient excuse as well as a place of fulfillment. Each couple in the picture conducts a different movement, e.g. Adrian and Andrew from marriage to sex to the erotic. Ariel and Maxwell are linked
with one another from the beginning by a mutual recognition and liking of their odours. ‘In the animal world we should be married,’ Maxwell explains, and it is indeed the animal world that again triumphs at the end as Leopold’s beast-like behavior, Andrew’s and Adrian’s sexual exercises and Maxwell’s and Ariel’s union (apart from rational considerations) indicate.

A further level of issues would be the rôle behavior of the male and female characters. Sexual liberation begins to dawn for Allen’s women here. Dulcy, Ariel and Adrian represent three different variations of ‘the modern woman’ according to their liberation from/adherence to the conventional norms of female behavior.

Adrian’s question ‘Don’t I have to love the man I sleep with?’ raises a fundamental issue not invalid or out-of-date even today and which confuses the male world, too. Premarital virginity (never a self-imposed norm for men) loses its overall importance in Allen’s comedy thanks also to the modern possibilities of contraceptives.

A final level of issues would be the correlation body-mind-soul. Self-determination over one’s own body requires knowledge and courage from the women. For Adrian the sexual mechanism about which Dulcy knows so much is a little frightening at first, before she is encouraged to practise in order to enjoy sex with her husband. She calls the talk about it ‘clinic’.

The magic spell of a necessary interdependence between sex, love and marriage has to be broken before the woman is allowed to enter the modern age of self-determination over her body, which does not only include the knowledge about the use of contraceptives but also about whom to make love to.

Apart from techniques of plot and characterization Allen makes his picture a firework of various comic devices.

The verbal means include infinite well-working jokes, gags, examples of dry humor and understatement, witty forms of dialogue and repartee (to employ a term of Restoration comedy), suggestive remarks, slapstick, irony, witticism that makes use of antitheses and logical contradictions. He is superior in the more intellectual forms of comedy, in sophisticated comedy, and has always professed not to be afraid of practising forms of humor that are aloof though he never thought the label ‘intellectual comedian’ suitable for himself. 8

The visual means of the picture, so exuberantly employed, create a delightful picture of leisurely and prosperously spent days and nights in the country at the turn of the century. Yet the scenes of picnic, badminton and
archery, the talks among women on the swing, the chasing of butterflies, walks through the woods, dinner in the open air etc., clichés of nature, the life of plants and animals, the play of light and darkness, clouds, the moon etc. do not just reveal a voluptuous revelling in lyric, dramatic and ironic passages.

The outward romantic effect, supported by effects of magic and mysticism, contrasts in a well-balanced manner with the tension underlying the relaxed superficial atmosphere. Allen has been interested in magic, games of deception and illusion since his childhood. In high school he conned lots of children with card games and other tricks and intended to become a card-shark. He even performed magic tricks with a friend with improvised gags and practised sleights-of-hand. This explains perhaps the use of magic effects in many of his pictures.10

The movie’s auditive means include the voices of the actors, sounds and noises and last but not least the music of the picture. They all contribute to the peculiar romantic-dramatic-ironic character of the film. The symphony No. 3 (Scottish) in A Minor (Moll), the Violin Concerto in E Minor Opus 64, the Piano Concerto No. 2 in D Minor Opus 46 and A Midsummer Night’s Dream by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy are effectfully wrought into the web of the film, transporting the general atmosphere of summer sensuousness in lyric scenes, tension and growing danger in dramatic scenes,11 as well as irony in the quick, short sequences showing the readiness of the characters for betrayal, lies and untruthfulness.12

Along with starting magic, Allen took up an even more intensive interest in music at the age of thirteen. Not only did he soon become an expert in traditional jazz but he also played various instruments himself. It was particularly the clarinet and New Orleans jazz that became his true love and he even played soprano-saxophone in a trio in a club. Gradually, along with his growing professional experience, Allen learned to see the importance of the optimal use of music to support the message of pictures.13 Today he is firmly convinced that story, script, score and his performances belong to the strong points in every aspect of his films. Music has gradually become an integral part of his work as a film director. His biographer Eric Lax is convinced that one might even recognize a Woody Allen picture from the score alone because his use of tunes from 1900 to 1950 is so pronounced. A big album collection and the ASCAP title book enable him to make his optimal choices.14
The visual and auditive means of Allen’s *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, along with gestures, mimicry, movements, body language, and last but not least the cutting, combine to produce the overall complex effect of well-balanced irony.

A clue to understanding the peculiar development that Allen’s humor and comedy has taken over the decades is to trace it back, following the phases of his career. During the production of his first pictures he was always eager to work as screen comedian and to appear in those films that offered him an opportunity to show this side of his personality.

Developing along with his films, he detached himself from the exclusive character of a comedian later on. Also, when he started producing pictures, he was interested in those kinds of films that he liked when he was younger - purely funny comedies and romantic, elegant, more sophisticated comedies. Only some years later did his reactions to foreign films, to European productions become more dominant in his work.

His entire work shows how much can be done once comedy and humor are taken more seriously. *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy* is not only a new form of comedy in the new quality of humor and comedy it introduces to Allen’s career and productions, or strictly a new form in the context of a revolutionization in the field of comedy that began in the fifties.

Most of all it is new in that comedy here comes into its own again, as a further variation and development of the ancient genre, reviving the complex possibilities of the genre in regard to plot, character, subject, aims, means and effects.

Though the title is ‘sex comedy’ (and sex is an essential ingredient in it) Allen’s film has affinities to society comedies, the witty spirited forms that Oscar Wilde was master of, as well as to the comedy of manners.

The literary and theatrical references to many genres are overwhelming indeed.

The most obvious one is to Shakespeare, though in detail it is to be doubted that Allen made it a conscious application. Amusing affinities with Shakespeare are to be found in the references to the title and the symbolism of the wood; the comic pattern (the order-disorder-pattern in the plot); the genre issue (mixture of comic with tragic aspects); the aim of comedy (laughter about uncontrollable passions and weaknesses of man, self-criticism); the issues (love, marriage, social harmony / discord for instance); the characterization (parallels, contrasts, exaggeration, transformation, use of foils, elucidation of contrasting/extreme qualities of man that
could be described by oxymorons such as Leopold the beastly spirit or educated neanderthal, Andrew the dreaming pragmatic, Adrian the innocent deceiver, etc.); the means of imitation, parody, mockery, deception and comic relief; bawdry; the employment of magical/supernatural devices and last but not least the universal issues of semblance and reality or of the complexity of man's world and life as an eternal struggle.

Allen truly learned his lesson from the master, though personally he hated Shakespeare's comedies because - even today - they seem "dumb and bumpkin-oriented and aimed at the groundlings." Allen much more appreciates the power of Shakespeare's serious plays. It is the wonderful language in general that he is impressed by: It is "beautiful and superior to the other writers of his era and to writers since. The speech is so magnificent, so gorgeous, that you're overcome by it. Often you sit through the plays only because the language is so elevated."

Other affinities appear in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* too, though perhaps only at second thought.

The ancient drama and theatre of Greece for instance is alive in some reminiscences. The medieval heritage is revived, too. The characterization of the dramatis personae in Allen's comedy bears resemblance to the allegorical depiction of vices and vertues and their battle in man in the morality plays and other allegorical literature of the middle ages. Reminiscences of the medieval quest appear in the romance-like traits of the comedy and there are also allusions to medieval dream interpretations in the film.

The witty dialogues remind us of the repartee of Restoration comedy. When deeper layers of truth are revealed we feel reminded of the 'nights of truth' inserted by Tennessee Williams in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or *The Glass Menagerie*, by Eugene O'Neill in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, by Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* or Edward F. Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Allen has admitted that he decided in favor of the way into the interior world of man used by his models Ibsen, Strindberg, Bergman and others. As a matter of fact Allen is quite conscious of his European heritage.

Comedy - today an overall term applied to plays, films, soap operas, light entertainment etc. - for him forges a close connection between film and theatre. Allen is aware of what knowledge about dramaturgy in a play can teach him for the peculiarity of the film medium. To produce 'dramatic films' has been his outspoken aim and the film *September* especially shows a very close affinity between film and theatre.
Eric Lax suggests that Allen mainly became a film director to protect his own writing against cinematic distortions. Yet Allen knows and admits that whereas Bergman's roots are in the theatre, his own are in comedy. Though *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* was called an idyl by Lax and classified among the trivialities of Allen's oeuvre, offering an eclectic mixture of subjects and styles, the picture served Allen as a convenient break for a start into another phase of his career.

Though it was not very successful with audiences it was yet another experiment for Allen. Nonetheless it provides a sheer emotional as well as intellectual pleasure for those who are able to see - through its consistently carried out dramaturgy, the complex subject matter, its sureness in comic means and its manifold phantastic effects.

Notes

2 Ibid, p. 315.
3 Ibid, pp. 352, 353.
5 Ibid, p. 15.
6 Ibid, p. 150.
7 Ibid, pp. 150, 151.
8 Ibid, p. 349.
9 For clichés of nature see especially scene seven (my classification) with pictures from life in the countryside, observations from the life of animals etc., which is accompanied by music, and scene fourteen, which is full of humorous and ironic references to the characters' peculiarities and their forming new relationships and also accompanied by music. Here the contrast between outward innocence and background knowledge of the 'omniscient' spectator dominates, creating an atmosphere of presentiment. Allen also employs symbolism: Maxwell the girl-chaser chases butterflies in scene sixteen.
11 See for instance scene forty-four: Leopold hunts Andrew. The scene is accompanied by dramatic music.
12 As for example in scene twenty-two, where the music matches with the general preparations for betrayal by nearly all women and men in the countryhouse.

13 See Lax, op. cit., p. 261.


15 Just to give a few examples: Scene twenty-three: Andrew negotiates with Ariel about her rendezvous with Maxwell. While he is rising on his winged bicycle to speak to her at the first floor bedroom window the music plays. Andrew struggles with the bicycle and fidgets while trying to persuade Ariel that she has to meet Maxwell. His final argument is that Maxwell made several patients pregnant yet never lost one. The scene shows Allen's magnificent feeling for visual, verbal and musical humor. Scene thirty-two: Leopold cannot be stopped to present Schubert songs. Simultaneously Maxwell, who is sitting outside in front of the living room window, tries to persuade Ariel through the open window to give him a final chance on the eve of her marriage. Later Leopold sings spiritual songs by Schubert about heaven and earth and finally the lord's Prayer while Adrian is seducing Andrew on the kitchen table. The music, camera work and situational comedy combine to the effect of irony and humor. Scene fourty: After Ariel has decided in favor of Andrew she walks with him through the nightly wood. The dark wood, their nostalgic memories, the soft music, owl, moon, clouds and their intimate talk create a lovely, romantic scene in contrast with purely humorous or dramatic scenes in the comedy.


18 Ibid.


20 Ibid, pp. 342, 351.

21 Ibid, p. 360.

The New Musical and the Ambiguous Legacy of the Musical Comedy

The following talk has two goals: firstly, it anticipates the planned theme of next year's congress in Halle and works out themes and questions which will be treated in more detail there; secondly, it considers the musical from the viewpoint of this year's theme, which is comic theatre forms. For that reason the latter aspect takes priority, while the former remains more marginal.

The naming of the genre as 'musical' applied today completely as a matter of course - is first of all a reduction to an adjective which has significantly freed itself from precisely characterizing a noun and which could possibly be simply explained as something related to music, if one didn't meanwhile know the exact definition of the term. When the genre was being formed in the USA in the twenties, it called itself, correctly and fully, 'musical comedy', giving itself a historically and systematically precise definition, one which was used from Gershwin's *Lady Be Good* of 1924 to Stephen Schwartz's *Pippin* of 1972 and Coleman's *I Love My Wife* of 1977. The first important musical which called itself simply 'musical' without any addition is associated with such renowned names as Leonard Bernstein, Lillian Hellman, Richard Wilbur, Dorothee Parker and Stephen Sondheim; it carries a title no less famous: *Candide*. In the first version of 1956, though, it had used the genre classification 'A Comic Operetta'. It would be interesting to find out why the traditional term 'musical comedy' was rejected, as well as why the choice did not fall on a term which quite early on had been applied when the new theatre form's close ties with comedy were given up. One spoke neutrally of 'musical play', thereby coining a classification used for the last time in 1973 for Lerner and Loewe's *Gigi*. Since 1975 at the latest all the important works of the genre have been called 'musical', if need be with small modifications such as 'new', 'rock' or 'Broadway musical', although the more precise characterization of the genre became unnecessary with the acceptance of the adjectival term, which hid from view the original connection with comedic theatre forms. With this separation the conditions of the genre 'musical' - which one first automatically associates with the definition - become questionable and one
is likely to presume that this same separation can be directly related to the revaluation of the genre in the last three decades.

Opening a reference book on musicals, one will be informed, with slightly differing emphasis, about the historical antecedents and the various ingredients which went into forming the genre. One assured element is the impetus from the creation of the ‘ballad opera’ in the early eighteenth century, especially Gay’s and Pepusch’s *Beggar’s Opera* of 1728. In opposition to the feudal grand genre of the Italian ‘opera seria’, as characterized by Händel, the new middle-class - almost proletarian - form falls back on folk music, parodying and exaggerating the heroic ideals of Dryden’s era into broad humor, not at all the gallant, brilliant comedy of the contemporary Restoration comedy such as the *Beaux’ Strategem* by Farquhar. The world of Falstaff, relegated, in accordance with the segregation of styles and the ‘Fallhöheprinzip’, to the comic hemisphere of the common people until Lillo and Moore, now pushed its way to the front of the stage and threw down the gauntlet to the feudal opera. If it had not at least latent-ly embodied elements of the class struggle, then Brecht would not have troubled himself with a remake of it as the *Threepenny Opera*, or even partly modelled a new type of socialist epic theatre à la *Mahagonny* on it. The potential of this comic-parodistic variant of opera as revolutionary theatre was recognized and the subversive elements were embedded in the comedy. The Savoy Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan can also be classified as ‘ballad opera’, a comic opera form likewise constantly described as a forerunner of the musical. These operas have unfortunately never established themselves in Central Europe, so that Jacques Offenbach, much weaker in comparison to Gilbert and Sullivan, was always striving to demonstrate that the humbler opera form, the operetta, also contained critical, and thus progressive, potential. For even the operetta is accorded a place in the family tree of the musical.

Ultimately, however, there are the original American models one should consider, which are as little known to the continental European as the Savoy Operas: music hall, vaudeville, revue, burlesque, the black and white minstrel show - forms that would have to be examined in detail if one intended to determine the exact genesis of the genre. Here it is only necessary to keep in mind that all these forms derive from comedy, that the classification as ‘musical comedy’ is accurate and that all the functional characteristics determined by the conditions are proportionately included. The first musicals must have fulfilled the most basic needs for entertain-
ment quite crudely and without finesse, never denying their origin (espe-
cially in America) in the lowest trivial sphere of the American theatre. One
always finds, for example, the reference to *The Black Crook* of 1866,

>a slight undistinguished melodrama that featured more than one hundred ballet
dancers exhibiting limbs in a spectacle that lasted for five and a half hours.²

Because of this the genre remains linked with the pit of the Elizabethan
theatre, standing for bad taste, for the bawdy, the fatuous and everything
that one acknowledges with rough bawling and hooting rather than with a
smile. The musical, at all events, remains rooted in the domain of comedy,
in the historical as well as in the systematic sense, and therefore remains
entertainment which occupies such a lowly level that to this day it is a
*factum non gratum* for critical research.

To free themselves from this stigma was the goal of some of the leading
figures of the musical in the first really successful years of the genre, the
twenties. Ridiculing the genre *in toto* usually stops short of some of the
outstanding works, such as *Show Boat* from 1927 (Kern/Hammerstein) and
*Oklahoma* (Rodgers/Hammerstein) from 1943. Surprisingly, one finds that
each work is accorded the genre classification that turns away from 'musi-
cal comedy'; both works being called 'musical play'. The same thing con-
spicuously occurs in most of the better late musicals such as *Annie Get Your
Gun, Brigadoon, The King and I, My Fair Lady* (1956), *The Sound of Music,
Camelot* (1960) or *Fiddler on the Roof*; while all the most important ex-
amples of the genre, beginning with *West Side Story* (1957) and *Cabaret*
(1966), have, to this day, simply been termed 'musical'. One might suppose
that the coupling of the genre to the comic genera is thought of as an
impediment holding it back and that any revaluation depends on the choice
of serious subjects. The light and usually shallow entertainment is supposed
to be transformed into weightier matter, the untroubled pleasure principle
is expected, at least within limits, to come into contact with the reality
principle.

Use of the term 'musical comedy' was usually in reality a reference to
'musical farce'. Not the sublime comedy of Shakespeare or Mozart was
meant but cheap farce which served as primitive amusement for the lowest
strata of society. No wonder then that those seeking more seriousness and
weight for the genre should focus on a model which in the field of tragedy,
stood for the extreme attitude - the Victorian melodrama. This genre is
usually seen as starting with Rousseau's *Pygmalion*, where *mélodrame* in its original sense meant a combination of spoken dialogue with background music, as in the dungeon scene from Fidelio. This sensationalistic tragic-vulgar form, marked by extreme conflicts and pompous black and white situations and imbued with a large amount of wet-eyed sentimentality, is a product of the nineteenth century, arising out of the self-pity of the little man. In its origin in the eighteenth century it was actually the domestic tragedy, an alternative to the heroic tragedy but also to the comic rogue opera, remaining formally in the sphere of the *genus humile*, the comedy, and only by occupying the *genus sublime*, the tragedy, conquering the bastion of the nobility, although in a vulgarized form which did not exactly increase the reputation of the theatre. One notices from the term 'musical comedy' and avoidance of it by the ambitious works of the genre that the revaluation consisted in moving away from farce and towards *melodrama*. For that reason one should re-designate 'musical comedy' as 'musical tragedy', or instead, keeping in mind the trivial genera as precursors, rename 'musical farce' as 'musical melodrama'. 'Musical play' would be consistent with the dilemma of having to designate a genre as comic which at heart was anything but humorous. This term was unconsciously revealed by Kislan in his short characterization of *The Black Crook*, which spoke, as quoted before, of an 'elaborately staged melodrama', so that the unbelievable effect of this concoction was probably due in large part to its melodramatic character.

If one examines the important works of the genre, one surprisingly realizes that, in *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma* from the beginnings, and especially in the works of the heyday in the seventies and of the current period, the genre has only acquired weight and meaning since the plots have followed the patterns and traditions of melodrama rather than those of comedy. This applies to the first milestone of a musical that became a classic, *West Side Story* (and looking back at the model for it, one ascertains that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is more of a melodrama than a tragedy). And in *Cabaret*, which melodramatically presents historical events in key sections, one thinks especially of the Miskeit-complex, Fräulein Schneider and the Jewish fruit-seller. This also applies to *Chorus Line*, with its sentimental flashbacks, where two different gay fortunes are developed, as well as the bittersweet romance between - shall we say, tongue in cheek - Michael Douglas and his chorus girl. Even in the major Rice/Webber works such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* the plot is melodramatic in central
areas and therefore carries weight. With the later products of the Lloyd Webber factory, such as Phantom of the Opera or the melodrama par excellence Aspects of Love, the relationship to the 'vulgar-tragic' (more appropriate than melodramatic) becomes obvious. The former affiliation to musical comedy is completely broken. Applied to the last two pieces mentioned, but also to other later ones such as Les Misérables or Miss Saigon, the term 'musical comedy' seems more of a mockery; they could not be more remote from the original sense of the term. And the trend shows no sign of having reached an extreme of the worst melodramatic striving for effect, as the very embarrassing Marlene Dietrich musical Sag mir, wo die Blumen sind/Tell Me Where the Flowers Are demonstrated in Berlin a few months ago: The designation 'musical comedy' would in this case be plain sacrilege. Comedy occurs only unintentionally, and it must be seen as a blessing that the term for the genre has freed itself from every limitation - including that of good taste - and that it presages nothing more than a stage work with music.

I have spoken elsewhere, in reference to Evita, of scholarly research's fear of contact with the musical, of its entertainment aspects and the key position that it could - and should - occupy in the world of new arts. And I have illustrated how an area-studies approach can be applied to an important musical in order to determine its value, and finally pointed out that in the musical a serious democratic aesthetic could acquire its most effective organon, moulding it into a genre offering quality entertainment and accessible to all social strata. A genre that has a plebeian tradition in Europe on the one hand and the fundamental democratic robustness and integrative heterogeneity of the American models on the other hand, especially since jazz and rock as Afro-American elements have won the musical and choreographical dominance away from the traditional middle class, at the same time penetrating the international youth disco culture. The question arises, nevertheless, of whether in the newest works the increase in quality due to the emphasis on the melodramatic has reached a limit which endangers the revaluation of the form and may cause it to degenerate into an aesthetic anathema once again. In the conclusion of his concise treatment of the melodrama James L. Smith supposed, in view of the noisy but ineffectual protest theatre in the Western cities on one side and - as in rebellious 1973 he was easily ready to believe - the completely different readiness in the communist world, in East Berlin, Moscow and Peking on
the other side, that proletarian melodrama was the dominant form, above all in the East.

It is, in fact, difficult to resist the view that melodrama reaches now a wider audience than any in its history. And this, as it should be, for there is no other form of theatre which speaks so simply and directly to the people as a whole. 

In the post-1968 era even a British scholar was disposed to designate an authority such as 'the people as a whole' as a jury of reception, and to determine from quantitative popularity aesthetic relevance, maybe even quality. To speak directly and simply to the public - or to speak directly to the simple public - must be the goal of a stage work which feels itself dutybound to a democratic aesthetic. In the new musicals of more consequence from *West Side Story* to *Evita*, but also in one as early as *Show Boat*, the melodrama features without a doubt as the central characteristic. However, even Smith's quantitative argument, expressed in view of communist dictatorships, as well as the wretchedness of the newest hit musicals, such as *Aspects, Les Misérables* and *Where the Flowers Are*, make it clear that with the dominance of the melodramatic and its exclusiveness the dark side - or the hangover - of the nineteenth century has found its way into modern entertainment theatre. Not by coincidence did Stephen Sondheim take up one of the most famous Victorian melodramas in his 'musical-thriller' *Sweeney Todd*, turning it into a musical theatre work that would make Brecht and Weill proud. Nevertheless, in one decisive aspect *Sweeney* is something more than melodrama; with this peculiar characteristic one can gauge the outlines of the new musical, which does not descend into the crude melodrama that appears more and more even in the music of the pure melodramatists of our time. Contemporary music is defined on the level of a few privileged listeners by Webern, Berg and Weill, and on the level of mass culture and subculture by rock and pop. The dreary American film and piano bar music in Frank Sinatra style, as heard in Rodgers and Jerry Herman, in its triteness an inseparable part of American society, constitutes another important musical aspect grudgingly absorbed into the musical. This style contributes nothing towards the rejuvenation and the revaluation of the genre in the sense of a democratic aesthetic. The early Sondheim took up this insipid music, but in his latest musicals (if these can still be called musicals), such as *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Sweeney*
Todd - highly original masterworks both in text and in music - he follows the musical language of Weill and of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

In comparison, Lloyd Webber, incredibly talented and versed in every style, has reverted ever since *Phantom* to the Italian Verismo and displays more and more pompously his personal preference for Puccini. Puccini is a shameless melo-dramatist, purest nineteenth century and probably the epitome of a concept of opera that was pronounced dead in the twentieth century and inspired Boulez's polemic concept of blowing up opera houses. To exploit this completely outmoded music for the contemporary musical is ruinous. *Aspects* is an utterly reactionary Puccini opera for our time, which quickly died on Broadway and, thank God, is now finally closing in London. The concoction is now supposed to grace the provinces, where old-fashioned Englishness is no doubt expected to assure it of an appreciative reception. From the musical language one can easily surmise about the quality of the plot and the state of the soul of the implied listener. A musical language which does not evince any awareness of new concert or opera music, whether that of Britten or of Glass or of the diverse varieties of rock and pop music, but which instead is stuck somewhere around 1900 must raise suspicion.

With regard to the plot and its form one is reminded once more of how the musical came to be, when it still called itself 'musical comedy' and belonged to the comic genera. If one looks at the theatre in the larger perspective, it is comedy, following George Steiner's pronouncement of the *Death of Tragedy* (1961), which remains as the leading genre, taking over the tragic plots of earlier, less 'transcendently homeless' (Lukács) times. Tom Stoppard provides a good example of how one can integrate philosophically ambitious material, political agit-prop and human tragedy in comic, even farcical forms. The lachrymose melodrama *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* deals with the deplorable fate of dissidents in Soviet psychiatric clinics. This deeply tragic plot is not only presented as a farce but in the use of a grand symphony orchestra recalls the original *mélodrame*, and maybe even the nascent musical, although no-one sings except for the young Sasha. The link with the comic prepares the melodrama in such a way that the tragic conflicts are made enjoyable for modern sensibility, in this manner having long-term enlightening effects. The melodramatic element guarantees earnestness: in order not to degrade into cheap sentimentality, a form of presentation is necessary which ensures distance; at the same time it makes possible high-spirited enjoyment in
place of the dubious enjoyment of the tragic, uplifting one above the serious subject and leaving one not lulled and heated up, depressed and furious but instead critically enlightened, and encouraging a level-headed attitude, even deliberate action. It submits to the catharsis of comedy and not to that of tragedy or its vulgar sister, the melodrama. If one locates the historical birthplace of comedy in the spirit of music (Die Geburt der Komödie aus dem Geiste der Musik), this can only be done profitably at the end of the Enlightenment, which surveyed the mental distance in transcendental philosophy and propagated uncommitted delight, the serene enjoyment of the art work as an aesthetic act of reception. The epochal position of Mozart is based not least on the fact that he shunned the opera seria and remained close to comedy in his great works. From him there is no Orpheus, no Fidelio, no Freischütz and no Wozzeck. Probably the most painful romantic tragedy in opera is the helpless fury of the couple in Così fan tutte, who, though imprisoned in their own inadequacy, must continue to act cheerfully, even though they are boiling over with rage: ‘Ah, bevessero del tossico’ (‘Oh hopefully the wine is indeed poisoned’). In Don Giovanni, which does of course have tragic characteristics (for that reason the romantics cut out the moral coda of the high-spirited but nonetheless comic second finale), the basic discourse remains tied to comedy. Dramma giocoso is what Mozart called the hybrid, which recommends itself as a name for the genre of the musical, because it is now no longer possible to name it ‘musical comedy’. Where is the indication, though, that the important melodramatic musicals are the equivalent of dramma giocoso, where do they reflect the structures of the leading contemporary dramatists, in which comedy plays a leading role and the transcendental act of reception clears the stage of dull, primitive emotion?

West Side Story achieves distance through energetic ballet numbers (an important additional element which here is not yet brought into play, but which can nevertheless be included, in the wider sense, under comedy), through the dancing-class scenes and through the adolescents’ parody of the hackneyed socialworker’s phrases of a failed environment, thereby providing the general alibi for the juvenile delinquents. In Cabaret the comic, distancing classic figure of the fool, in the shape of the master of ceremonies [MC], dominates (‘Willkommen, bienvenu, welcome’); the main character, Sally, is melodramatic, but, even without Liza Minelli, lightened through self-irony and hilarious humour. Once again the ballet choreography provides comic distance. The great Rice/Webber works
Joseph, Jesus Christ and Evita all function according to the same principle. All three plots, including that of Joseph, are melodramatic. In all three the stage manager achieves creative comic distance. In Joseph it is the Evangelist, in Jesus Christ it is the Judas character with the furious ballet vortex at his return, just before the melodramatic finale, who has the last word. In Evita Che Guevara is the master of ceremonies, unfolding the broadsheet and introducing the epochal ballet with Fuller's choreography, in which the caricature of military and bourgeois in their entanglement is subjected to the spirit of comedy. Finally, the magnificent libretto by Tim Rice sets nuances at the verbal level which one finds again only in Gilbert and occasionally in Coward. These texts, themselves worthy of analysis, occur again in Chess, an intelligent work - cursed with bad luck - with music by ABBA, for Lloyd Webber was no longer available and was producing musicals which - with the possible exception of Cats - do not hold a candle to Chess. Though Starlight Express is at most childish comedy, speaks the musical language of the disco and reveals an MTV Videoclip mentality and modern acrobatic choreography, it is head and shoulder above the danceless Puccini samplers in pure melodramatic style Phantom and Aspects of Love.

If one continues to group the musical with comic forms, in spite of its basically melodramatic character, one does so out of the awareness that after the death of tragedy one cannot celebrate instead the resurrection of melodrama. Lionel Abel defined the new theatre from a position identical to Steiner's as 'metatheater', drawing attention to the implicit self-reflection of the genre. If this transcendentualism also applies to the musical (and that must be the case if it is to become the democratic stage form of the future), then its intrinsic melodramatic tendency could be counterbalanced and brought into a delicate equilibrium by the alienating means of comedy, in addition to other distancing effects such as choreography, projections or multimedia (accomplished in Evita, for example, with integrated documentary film material).

In the beginning Wagner's idea of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' had a revolutionary component. The same applies to the 'ballad opera' and its descendants down to the esoteric and elitist proletarian opera of Henze and Bond, We Come to the River. What Hermann Hettner predicted in the middle of the last century for the musical comedy of his time could apply to the synthetic art form of the musical:
Das musikalische Drama wird sicher künftighin eine sehr hervorragende Stellung einnehmen. Die Komödie zeigt dies am deutlichsten. Je mehr die Komödie Darstellung und Genuss eines schönen und heiteren Menschentums, d.h. je mehr sie freier Humor wird, um so unabweislicher muß sie, ihrer innersten Natur nach, zu ihrer vollen Wirkung das musikalische Element in sich aufnehmen. Denn nur die Musik umfaßt und durchdringt in elementarem Walten die ganze Menschen­natur und löst uns ganz in Gefühl und Genuss auf.  

The musical drama will certainly occupy a significant position in the future, comedy being the clearest evidence of this. The more comedy becomes a representation and an enjoyment of a fair and serene humanity, that is, the more it becomes free humour, the more urgently must it take up as fully as possible the musical element, in keeping with its innermost nature. For only music embraces and pervades with elemental power the whole of human nature, dissolving us in emotion and pleasure.

This late romantic hedonistic concept, 'dissolving us in emotion and enjoyment', could be broadened in the contemporary musical so that the melodramatic foundation tempers the hedonism of the entertainment genre, while the pleasure principle is enhanced by brushing with the reality principle in the process creating a new musical, which can claim a position that even a serious scholar could no longer dismiss as irrelevant. And even if these utopian assumptions are only accepted as a heuristic fiction, one can decide with a clear conscience - in the birthplace of the father of the opera seria Georg Friedrich Händel - to devote a few days to this genre of the future and to ask whether the new musical, vulgar and tragic as it has become, should actually continue to be essentially 'musical comedy'.

Notes

sqq. Swain quotes Leonard Bernstein: ‘Street brawls, double death ... it’s all much less important than the bigger idea of making a musical that tells a tragic story in musical-comedy terms ... Can it succeed?’ (p. 205).


Robert Ashley’s Comic Opera for Television

Prior to 1970 - that is, to the year in which video technology first began to be inexpensive and portable enough for independent artists to buy it and use it in their work - there had already been a ‘tradition’ in the United States that held that experimental theater, experimental music, and experimental film should be integrated or united into single, ‘multi-media’ presentations (That ‘tradition’ begins with the ONCE group, which staged such events in the late 1950’s in Ann Arbor, Michigan; John Cage and others, who staged ‘happenings’ in the early 1960s in New York City: Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters, who staged acid tests in 1964 and ’65 in San Francisco, and Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable which formed in 1965 and toured the country in 1966). But the availability and introduction of video and television allowed the experimenters to unite theater, music, and film in a way that was more comprehensive, or, shall we say, less reliant upon collage and juxtaposition, and more like a narrative.

At least three people pioneered the new ‘music theater experiments for video’ in the 1970s: Robert Wilson, Philip Glass, and Robert Ashley. All based in and, to an extent, associated with New York City at this time, these artists did not form a school or launch a movement, but they collaborated on projects together (Wilson and Glass collaborating on Einstein on the Beach among other works) and they centered projects around each other (Ashley producing Music with Roots in the Aether, a series of video portraits of Glass, Terry Riley, Pauline Oliveros, among others, in 1976). The three pioneers I mentioned have continued to be active since the 1970s, and have collaborated with and focused upon the younger artists who they have inspired, including Laurie Anderson, Steve Reich, David Byrne, and John Adams - all of whom are based in and, again, associated with the city of New York.

I should like to focus on the work of Robert Ashley, the least known of the three pioneers of the 1970s, which is unfortunate, because he was a founding member of the ONCE group, and so has produced experimental music theater on both sides of the 1970-videotape dividing line.

Ashley was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1930. He studied music theory at the University of Michigan and piano and composition at the
Manhattan School of Music. In the mid-1950s, he returned to Ann Arbor and studied and worked at the University of Michigan’s Speech Research Laboratories for several years. His primary interests were psychoacoustics and cultural speech patterns, and these subjects came to dominate his work. The ONCE group began touring the United States on a regular basis. Ashley's contributions consisted of musical compositions (both ‘traditionally instrumental’ and ‘electronic’), collaborations on music-theater pieces (several in which dancers trigger sound-producing devices), solo performances, and films and videotapes.

With the dissolution of the ONCE group in 1969, Ashley relocated to Oakland, California, where he became the Director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College. He organized a superb music and media arts facility at Mills, and became interested in the new technologies of videotape and videotape editing. The results of Ashley’s research into experimental music-television came in 1978, when New York’s The Kitchen commissioned Perfect Lives, an opera for television in seven half-hour episodes. To complete it, Ashley moved to New York in the early 1980s; Perfect Lives was finished in 1983, and stands as Ashley’s central work, the culmination of more than a decade of study and work. Since 1983, Ashley has been at work at completing the trilogy of ‘television operas’ in which Perfect Lives is the second one. The first is Atalanta: Acts of God, produced between 1983 and 1987, and the third is Now Eleanor’s Idea, currently in progress and growing rapidly: it has split into four sub-operas (Improvement, Foreign Experiences, Now Eleanor’s Idea, and The Immortality Songs), with the last of the four comprised of 49 subsections. All told, when the trilogy is finished, there will be 40 half-hour episodes, or a total of 20 hours of material.

In a series of interviews, Ashley has spoken of his development over the course of the last 40 years.

I was very interested in European serialism - Webern, Berg, Schoenberg. I guess I was doing the same thing Europeans my age were doing - Stockhausen, Boulez, Berio, Maderna.

In 1991, Ashley proclaimed,

Of course I'm (still) a serialist! What else could I do? And while my ambitions were not very different from theirs, I failed to realize how great our cultural
differences were...One of those differences concerned heritage, the heritage of opera, let's say...As far as I understand it, in the tradition of opera, there were once many givens, many cultural things that everybody understood. Because we didn't inherit that tradition, Americans haven't come to opera through an evolution...I don't believe this recent fashion of American composers trying to imitate stage opera from Europe means anything. It's not going to go anywhere...It'd be delightful if the Metropolitan Opera asked me to do an opera. I'd do it, but I wouldn't deceive myself for one minute that I was doing a piece that had any meaning compared to Verdi. That guy went to the opera every night of his life. If you're going to play baseball, you have to play baseball. You can't go to the opera 10 times and then write an opera...

Another of Ashley's differences from his European contemporaries concerned more practical matters.

I started out composing in a typical way, imagining that somebody would want to play the music, and quickly found that I wasn't getting performances...They wouldn't play it, they couldn't play it, had bad attitudes - everything! (And so) I just naturally went into vocal music because I had a vocal band, I had people at my disposal who would actually play the music. Throughout my thirties, which were coincident with the 60's, I wrote pieces for voices, in many cases for people who never had my ambition to sing but would do what you wanted them to. And so, of course, I got interested in speech, and I've been interested in it ever since.

Like William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson and William S. Burroughs, Ashley is interested in what he calls 'a way of singing that comes from American English'. He speaks of his fascination with the idea that there's an American style of vocal writing that will, by definition lead to some form of narrative.

In particular, Ashley is interested in the narratives that can come from the vocal writing styles of the American Midwest, by which Ashley means the Corn Belt (the huge expanse of plains that extends west from Illinois and the Mississippi River, to Wyoming and Colorado), and not the industrialized midwestern states of Michigan, Ohio and Indiana (or whatever).
Ashley has stated that,

I realized in the middle 70s that what I considered to be singing and the appropriate use of English in music was very, very difficult to produce on an opera stage without an enormous budget for sophisticated amplification...Since I had no dream of that kind of support for my music, I felt it was - I don't know how to say it - wrong of me to keep dreaming of big concert stage productions. I mean, it's hard enough to understand Madonna, and she's got a lot of help. I despaired that I would ever hear those words with the correct sound...(Furthermore, those words) and those dialogues change locations every few minutes, which is as obviously easy to do on television or the movies as it is difficult to do on stage. In our experience of opera of the European tradition, there are typically four locations...If you had four locations in a movie, no matter how expensive, you'd be considered very avant-garde. Spielberg changes location every fifteen seconds...And so I decided, impractical as it was, that I would try to get my music married to television. It would be enough (of an impracticality) to marry it to audio recordings, but since it had dramatic form, and in many cases required some sort of presence, I decided on television, as opposed to movies, for technical reasons, and as opposed to the stage, again for technical reasons.

In 1993, this co-mingling of serialist vocal music, the American Midwest, and television, may strike one as unsurprising, especially if one has seen and got used to the American TV programs *Married with Children* and *The Simpsons*, both of which are set in Illinois and are filled with distinctive vocal writing styles and narratives. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, Ashley's synthesis was quite unique; he struggled to have the work completed, and then struggled to have it broadcast on television, which it has been no more than a half a dozen times in the United States. In Europe - thanks to the Belgian TV channel RTBF - it has been seen more frequently.

The videotape of the opera (that is, the text of the opera) has recorded a wide variety of inputs. It has recorded the live recitation of Ashley himself and David Van Tiegham and Jill Kroesen, who act as a kind of chorus; these recitations were conducted on a specially designed stage (it was filled with TV sets implanted in architectural settings) and in a specifically designed room (it was acoustically perfect); furthermore, the recitatives were recorded in ways suitable to each of the speakers' voices and to the way they sounded in that room. The videotape has also recorded the live piano playing of Robert Sheff. Since the television sets on the stage
sometimes show live video-footage of Ashley as he is reading and Sheff as he is playing piano, the final version or the final product has also recorded live video as well as live action.

The videotape of the opera has also recorded a whole array of pre-recorded musical sounds (produced by pianos, organs, drums, percussion, synthesizers, and human voices) and pre-recorded videotapes (mostly of Kroesen and Tiegham, playing the characters Isolde and 'D', the Captain of the Football team). And so Peter Gordon, the recorder and live-mixer of the musical sounds, and John Sanborn, the recorder and editor of the video-images, are as much creators of *Perfect Lives* as Ashley and Sheff are: it is and, indeed, practically speaking, has to be a collaboration. To finish off the final product, Ashley, Sanborn and Sanborn's assistant Kit Fitzgerald added special computer-generated video images and video effects of as great a range as they were able. And so the *Perfect Lives* are lived, if that is the right word, in three different orders of time: in real time (live action); in virtual time (recorded action); and in simulated time (created action).

Though the look, sound, and feel of *Perfect Lives* is very loose, every single level of action - be it verbal, vocal, musical, or visual - is strictly organized by what Ashley calls 'templates'. Each of the seven templates in *Perfect Lives* derives from the physio-acoustic qualities and patterns of a certain person (actually Ashley himself) reading a certain series of words in American, Midwestern American, English, and each template determines the melodic and harmonic patterns of the live piano playing, and the rhythms and tempos of both the live music and the pre-recorded music, as well as the shot-rhythms, rotations, and angles of all the video-cameras and special effects. Each template, that is, each of the seven 'songs', is also assigned a name, a hypothetical location, a slogan or phrase, an hour of the day, and a shape.

And so there is:

I. The Park (Privacy Rules). 11 a.m. Low horizon cut.
II. The Supermarket (Famous People). 3 p.m. Lines converging in the distance.
III. The Bank (Victimless Crime). 1 p.m. Grids.
IV. The Bar (Differences). 11 p.m. Vertical lines.
V. The Living Room. (The Solutions). 9 p.m. Equal vertical fields.
VI. The Church (After the Fact). 5 p.m. A window.
VII. The Backyard (T'Be Continued). 7 p.m. A doorway.
Each ‘song’ also has a motto, an interpretation of that motto, and a dedication. These are too lengthy to list; nevertheless, each ‘song’ proclaims,

These are songs about the Corn Belt, and some of the people in it - or on it.

I shall restrict myself to the text or texts that are recited in Perfect Lives, because these texts are the literal source of everything else in the opera. Ashley has some interesting things to say about his texts. Perfect Lives

‘is just little stories about people, those people being Isolde and her brother ‘D’, who want to commit the perfect crime by robbing a bank and then returning the money without getting caught; Ed and Gwyn, friends of ‘D’, who plan to drive to Indiana and elope; and ‘R’, a singer, and Buddy the World’s Greatest Piano player, that is, stand-ins for Ashley and Sheff respectively.

Given who these people are, or are supposed to be, these stories are both ordinary and fantastic, everyday and spectacular. But what makes Perfect Lives special, Ashley says, is that, in it,

the anecdotes have dissolved. The anecdotes have lost their form, and Perfect Lives mainly consists of sayings - recounted things. I started working with the idea of recounted things; things that people had said to me and ideas that I’d gotten from other people. It’s literally full of those...In the Midwest, where Perfect Lives exists (as they say), I’m pretty sure it’s very much like that. Everything is recounted. Everyone has forgotten what their origins are and everything is all secondhand. It’s very strange. It’s so banal and it’s so true that America is so huge, but when you live on the East Coast, there’s still a connection to roots. Everybody’s got roots and some cultural ideas. When you get to the Midwest, those roots become hard to put your finger on. Nobody is really anything except what they’ve been told.

I’m not sure I believe this is an exact or even accurate transcription of Ashley’s words, or - even if they are - that I believe these claims about the rootlessness of the Midwest. It would appear that it is the Midwesterners who relocate to the East or West Coasts who are rootless or second hand or derived, not the Midwesterners who actually live in or on the Corn Belt. But Ashley’s point about the reliance upon proverbial expressions and sayings in the Midwest is welltaken and of interest. The tremendous popularity of Garrison Keillor’s monologues would appear to attest to this.
But unlike Keillor's texts, Ashley's are open to the most unlikely, and, yet, strangely appropriate intersections. ('Intersection', says one of Ashley's characters in *Perfect Lives*, 'I drew intersections'). I would like to draw your attention to two types of intersections drawn by the opera.

The first intersection is with drama. Ashley's text is interspersed with stage and camera directions, such as

In this scene there are two shots; the camera is obsessed with what it sees; and the camera is circling - not circling her - but circling.

Here Ashley has done nothing new: there are all sorts of precedents for revealing or allowing the details of the mechanics used to produce the spectacle into the spectacle: in the theater, one thinks of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and Antonin Artaud's concept of the theater of cruelty; in literature, one thinks of James Joyce and John Dos Passos; and in film, of Sergei Digilev (maker of *The Man With the Movie Camera*) and Jean-Luc Godard. But rather than insisting that the mechanics are as real and are as important as the events that they make visible (that is, the plot), Ashley completely removes the events, the plot. It exists, but it is never visible on stage. There are, strictly speaking, no actors in this opera: there are nothing but narrators, and representers. Nothing happens, but a lot is said to have happened; in saying so, something has happened. Rather than suppressing the narrator in favor of collage-juxtaposition or self-reflexivity (art-about-itself), Ashley has put the narrator and all of his or her tools on stage, *including* juxtaposition and self-reflexivity.

The second intersection is with the occult and non-western religions. Ashley's text, in addition to being filled with proverbial sayings and cliché expressions, is also filled with references to and paraphrases from Francis Yates's study of *Giordano Bruno & the Hermetic Tradition*, and from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. The ideas of the heretical late 16th century Italian occultist in particular the idea of the universe's structure is mirrored in all the structures of its parts, even the smallest of them struck Ashley as remarkably similar to the theory and practice of the template. In an iconic twist that must not have escaped Ashely's notice, Giordano Bruno ('Whoever he was; 'I think they burned him') was burned the very year, 1600, that is cited as the beginning of real opera, in Italy and elsewhere.

The overall template of *Perfect Lives*, or rather, the overall template that is *Perfect Lives* has been derived from the seven-part elegy that Tibetan
monks shout into the ears of dead people before they are buried; the monks' idea is that hearing is the last sense to die, but must be shouted to, to be stimulated or 'accessed'; the ceremony consists of seven parts because the deceased faces a 49-day-long passage, through the seven-chambered house known as the Bardo, at the end of which lies reincarnation. The last words of the opera are spoken - or, rather, are said to have been spoken - by Isolde, and they are,

I'm not the same person I used to be.

But in the same way that the voice says 'who ever he was (who cares)', Ashley is not interested in assigning or proving a 'templated' resemblance between the Bardo and the Corn Belt. Ashley has said - or is said to have said, by a newspaper writer - that

the Bardo is like Dante('s Inferno): down, down, down. I modeled Perfect Lives on Midwestern evangelism, which goes up. In Pentecostal evangelism, especially in the Midwest, you start in the most banal place. The preacher says, 'You don't really have to be here, except that you're in deep trouble, and I'm going to lead you.' And it gets more and more intense until you get to the penultimate place, then he lets you down and you go out. Ok: now of those seven 'songs', how did I come to narrow it down to a single one, to IV. The Bar (Differences) in particular? I picked this one for three reasons:

1) it is the 'song' that tells the story of the elopement and marriage of Gwyn and Ed, and not VI. The Church, as one might expect, if one had not read the song's slogan, 'After the Fact'. I am interested in the subject of their marriage because both the concept and the act of marriage are nearly inseparable from drama and the theater, whether it is 'traditional' theater or experimental theater. Marriage frequently serves as an apparently satisfactory displacement, if not an actual resolution, of such problems as family-feuds, international wars, property or inheritance disputes, and the like. This is the case in opera and operatic adaptations as well as in the theater. We 'perform' all three: a Justice of the Peace 'performs' a wedding ceremony; actors 'perform' roles or parts; and singers and musicians 'perform' scores or musical parts. The question that Perfect Lives raises is, if the performance of a wedding ceremony is binding (certainly for the bride and groom, if not also for the congregation), are the performances of an opera somehow binding as well? binding for those upon whom the performances are performed (that is, the characters)?

2) It is the 'song' that speaks of 'Snowdrift', a peripheral but nevertheless important character. First let us read the part of the opera's plot-summary that con-
cerns Part IV: Somewhere in Indiana, with the money hidden in the car (unknown to Gwyn, of course: ‘Gwyn’s not guilty’) and certain of their success, Ed and Gwyn and Dwayne and ‘D’ have found a justice of the peace who will perform the ceremony (‘I handle speedtraps, elopements, true signatures and the like’), and who recognizes in Gwyn something so urgent (‘and why is the Bride-to-be so, uhn, what is the word?’), something so dramatic - (‘She is a (p’)monkey, Sir’) - that he is transported to somewhere in the past, to another ceremony, to another Bride-to-be (‘Lucille, who speaks in tongues’), to a confusion of time and place where other (famous) marriages are enacted: ‘Snowdrift’, abandoned at the altar; and so forth. And while we pause to eat the wedding cake, his humble situation (‘right off my bedroom is my office’) is transformed before our eyes, as it were, into the Church (‘the church of the great light’). And we are satisfied.

There’s a lot in this summary that we will follow up on: the robbery and the money; the famous marriages of Snowdrift and Lucille and Gwyn; and the wedding cake. For the moment, let’s interrogate the significance of Snowdrift being abandoned at the altar by her Groom-to-be. Who is she? Who was her beloved who changed his mind? This is the dedication to IV. The Bar (Differences):

This song is dedicated to Snowdrift. She was a friend of mine, whose name, apology, among other things of importance, and apology, I have forgotten. If you hear this and recognize yourself, please call me, collect: it’s urgent. These are songs about the Corn Belt, and some of the people in it, or on it.

It seems clear that ‘R’, the singer, or even Ashley himself, was the one who forgot to come to the Church that day. And Snowdrift? This is from the ‘song’ itself:

Now in the case of Snowdrift it was different. She was a pal of Gwyn’s and we called her that because in winter in your car at night it was easy to get in her (joke). I saw her years after standing on the church steps in her bridal gown. I was only driving by (so much for winter) and I knew without knowing anything that some awful thing was happening. It’s true: he just did not appear: a Knight disgraced, banished forever from the table. I dedicate this one to you, Snowdrift, long live the avant, avant, woe! woe! long live the avant, avant, avant-garde!

Snowdrift - the avant-garde (the concept of it-what it has become) - flirted with, made love to, engaged - and ultimately rejected, by Ashley, in favor of a marriage with television.
Why wouldn't Snowdrift make a good wife? *Perfect Lives* doesn't say anything more about her. Well, then, why does television make a good wife? About this, *Perfect Lives* does comment, but it is Lucille - the one who speaks in tongues - who says (or is said by 'R' to have said) that she is enamored of the television passing on the movie of passing it on: that's a joke.

Ashley's explanation is more helpful:

I just think it's inevitable that something besides conventional popular music will be on television.

3) The last reason I selected *IV. The Bar (Differences)* was that it contained the only portion of videotape that I think is even close to as interesting as the words, voices, and music. To make this plain, I don't like the pre-recorded video images (the ones of Isolde and 'D'), nor do I like the special effects and shapes. They strike me as both gimmicky (reliant on novelty rather than substance) and cheesy (cheap-looking, and this despite the fact that the computer-generated images were very expensive in the early 1980s).

Throughout the opera, there is a consistent and clearly deliberate effort not to show more than just a handful of pictures that might relate directly to the characters, their stories, and their sayings. But just a handful isn't enough with a text this rich in imagery, and so the effect falls flat. In being inconsistent about applying the template to the content of the video images (most times producing totally abstract shapes and colors, other times producing specific images of Illinois) - in trying to have it both ways - Ashley and Sanborn have produced something that only ten years after its release looks dated, precisely because of the tremendous advances in computer-generated video images. (The music, on the other hand, remains fresh and rich.)

The portion of the videotape that I think is interesting shows Ashley reciting in a single shot, which gradually pulls back as he reads.
OK: let's talk about the wedding cake. First, let's talk about the image of Gwyn and Ed reproduced in miniature at the top of it. It is a common enough practice, doing this, as well as having the Bride and Groom cutting the cake at the same time and eating of the first slice together (the Groom usually feeding the Bride). These seem to be as much part of the marriage ceremony as both Bride and Groom saying 'I do'. The Bride and Groom and the whole congregation don't just 'eat' the cake: they are 'fed' from the cake, they are nourished. But it is not a common practice to question the symbolism of a congregation being nourished from the bodies (reproduced in miniature, but still there) of the Bride and Groom.

This sequence of *The Bar*, as it moves from the marriage of Gwyn and Ed to the marriage of Lucille, does or reports upon two contradictory things at once: first, it reports on the literalization of the Bride and Groom reproduced in miniature:

The cake is lifted from the table and Lucille is placed upon the table and the cake fits her from the chest to the hips.

Certainly Lucille is wearing the cake when the congregation eats and is fed from the cake; perhaps the congregation eats and is fed upon Lucille herself, and that this is why her mother appears, proud and fussy, and removes the table from the congregation.

The second thing this sequence reports is that the cake - this bringing-to-life of the couple in miniature, or this bringing-to-cakeness-of-Lucille - was made by God. The Cake becomes literal, and still it is symbolic: the Cake made flesh; the flesh made Cake; Jesus's flesh and blood as wedding cake, instead of communion wafers and wine....

We seem to have got nowhere, but we haven't, because the divine perfection of the Cake traces out a similar template to the divine perfection of the Crime committed by Isolde and 'D'. As the plot summary of the opera says, this

'perfect crime' is a metaphor for something philosophical: in this case, to remove a sizable amount of money from the bank for one day (and one day only) and let the 'whole world know it was missing.
What is philosophical or perfect about this crime is not the elaborate use by which Isolde and ‘D’ reveal to the world that the robbery has taken place:

(Buddy’s) dogs create a ruckus (‘like a noise from Hades’) that gives Isolde the excuse to get a bucket of water from next door to throw at the dogs and miss and soak the Bank Manager, who goes into the safe for a change of clothes, only to discover that The Bank ‘has no money in the Bank.’

What is ‘philosophical’, or at least mysterious, is how they put the stolen money back in to the Bank (it is never explained); why they want to return the money? Apparently, what’s perfect about this perfect crime is that it doesn’t pay; even though it has do with money, it has nothing to do with money.

The same mysterious series of events that puts the stolen money back into the Bank without being detected, also brings the newlyweds Gwyn and Ed back to Galesburg, Illinois, from Indiana: like the money in the Bank, Gwyn and Ed are back where they belong. They have stolen away, or been stolen away, and are now returned. The perfect crime seems to offer a commentary upon the perfect couple, Gwyn and Ed, and marriage as the perfect way to end a piece of musical theater. By returning to Galesburg, Gwyn and Ed have nullified whatever value the elopement might have had: instead of having no one know they are married, everyone is now going to know. And yet, somehow, it is going to pay off, it is going to create something where there was nothing, while the perfect crime created nothing where there was something. Because what the marriage ceremony - what the performance of the marriage ceremony - seems to do is to produce a unity of husband and wife that exceeds the man and woman as separate people considered together. In other words, husband and wife, one plus one, doesn’t so much equal two, as it equals one (a single household) or three (the two people plus the entity constituted by their union: their legal estate) or both one and three. There is a ‘profit’ even though, strictly speaking, the wedding ceremony does not work or was not produced to be sold for a profit. The perfection of all marriages is that they pay, even though they have to do with love and not money.

But if there is a perfect template shared by Crime and Marriage, more disturbing questions arise: is not there something romantic about crime, something rapture-producing about tales of the carrying away of money?
and is there not something criminal about the way all marriages produce an instant profit, something usurious about it? Should not divine pardon or divine grace cover not only the Perfect Marriage but the Perfect Crime as well? Phrased another way: Is there not a philosophical dimension to the Perfect Marriage as well as to the Perfect Crime?

I don’t know if Ashley knows the answers to these questions; I know that I don’t. But I do know that they are the right questions, certainly to ask with regards to this opera, if not to ask with regards to everything and anything as well.
Peter Griffith

Aspects of Contemporary Theatre-in-Education

Speaker: Peter Griffith, BA (Hons), LGSM, director White Horse Theatre

1. Introduction

Anyone who regularly attends conferences such as this must have noticed that if a talk has a title beginning 'Aspects of Contemporary ... ', it means that at the time when the publicity went to press, the speaker didn’t know what he or she was going to say. I freely admit that this is so in my case: but when the title ‘Aspects of Contemporary Theatre-in-Education’ was suggested to me last January, I was delighted. Having been a practitioner of T.i.E. for some 20 years, it has been fascinating having this opportunity to think through what I do and why I do it.

And an additional bonus: little did I realise six months ago that the fact that this talk is being given in the month of June 1993 would take on a specific significance. This month could be a turning-point in the history of T.i.E. in Great Britain - why, you will discover in the final minute of my speech.

I have been asked to speak for 12 to 15 minutes, which I propose to divide as follows:

- 2 or 3 minutes theory: what is T.i.E.? why is it valuable?
- 5 or 6 minutes putting contemporary T.i.E. into a historical perspective.

2 or 3 minutes giving an example of T.i.E. - and I make no apology for the fact that the company I will describe is the company I know best: the company that I founded fifteen years ago and have been running ever since.

- 1 or 2 minutes the topical conclusion, as promised.
- 1 or 2 minutes waffle, more or less as I have been doing up to now - this is the packaging and marketing of the ideas which I want to convey to you, so that you, the audience...

- can follow the thread of what I am saying
- pay attention in the hope that I will do something dramatic or make some comment that brings a smile to your lips.
To this waffle belongs also the occasional quotation from someone famous - a technique I've picked up from the many academics present at this conference, to give an impression of learnedness to what I am saying. - e.g.

Theatre is the one performing art that can be practised at the highest level of skill and intensity naked of technology, its only instrument being - ourselves
(Howard Brenton, Author's Note in ‘Plays for the Poor Theatre’)

2. What is T.i.E.?

Defining terms:

Drama implies no audience, no performance, the participants involved in role-play as an end in itself. Drama as a classroom subject involves relaxation and concentration exercises, mime, improvisation, devising and/or writing of plays, techniques of acting and presentation. The educational aims include development of self-confidence, self-awareness, social skills, and creative cooperation - pure education in the literal sense of the word.

Theatre implies performance - presentation of dramatic material (whether scripted or improvised) before a public. The performers may be professional, amateur, or pupils, and the venue may be anything from a vast theatre to a classroom.

Theatre-in-Education ('T.i.E.' ) is a specific term which has come to imply a company of professional actors or actor/teachers performing in a school, usually with a large element of audience participation (the amount of audience participation can vary - at the least it can be a few specific responses elicited from the audience during a play that is performed fully by the actors; at the most it can be a complete play devised and performed by pupils in collaboration with professional actors, in the performance of which the pupils are the principal performers.) The subject-matter of T.i.E. performances can involve any aspect of the school syllabus or any social theme.

The School Play is a tradition in British schools, in which every school at least once a year puts on a theatrical production performed by pupils. This tradition is less evident in German schools; but it is clear from this conference that there are nevertheless many schools where a 'Theater AG' exists, and there are some very fine student theatre groups in the universities. In modern education in Britain the concept of 'the school play' has
been developed - no longer is it an activity devoted to the elevation of the school's prestige and involving only an elite of the school's best actors; instead it is the archetype of project-based education and team-teaching - an inter-curricular event involving all levels of the school and all subject-fields in a creative cooperation. This concept of school-theatre is expounded in my own book *The School Play* (Batsford Educational 1981) - from which modesty prevents me from quoting at the moment.

3. **What are the Educational benefits of T.i.E.?**

   a) using the visual/aural/emotional impact of theatre to make points that pupils will remember - about anything. Traditional teaching (a single teacher in front of a class of pupils) generally involves only the logical/analytical side of the pupils' brains - the left brain-hemisphere. Theatre involves both sides of the brain (the right hemisphere being the emotional-instinctive side) simultaneously. It is therefore inevitable that, whatever subject you wish to teach the pupils, they will absorb and remember more of it if the teaching is done by theatre.

   b) improving the social awareness and social skills of the pupils by involving them in cooperation in role-play. ('Drama is pure education')

   c) introducing children to theatre as an art-form - an art-form which they can not only enjoy as spectators, but also through which they can actively express themselves.

   d) giving the pupils the experience of professional performance. A generation of pupils accustomed to video and the occasional amateur theatre production needs to be made aware of the experience of live professionally-produced theatre, which is based on the building up of an atmosphere through the creative emotional concentration of cast and audience together.

   e) improving the pupils' morale by presenting in the school something that they cannot help enjoying.

   f) working against the traditional insularity of school by bringing in people from outside - helping pupils to see school as an element in the wider community.

   g) broadening the possibilities of school by doing things with pupils that a teacher cannot do - because the T.i.E. team:
- consists of more than one person
- has a professional training in theatre as well as in education
- has a different relationship with the pupils, unclouded by traditional models of teacher/pupil relations.

4. Historical Perspective


Here follows a brief and extremely subjective account of the history of T.I.E., involving the history of my own career which began at more or less the same time. I graduated from university at the beginning of the 1970's, and worked at first as a teacher of drama. I was part of the first wave of teachers trained in the light of those late-60's ideas which crystallised in what is now known as 'the '68 movement' (or, more dramatically still, 'revolution'). I was a typical trendy young drama teacher bringing a new influence into schools - bringing creativity, art, culture into the lives of pupils for, so we thought, the first time.

I had my shoulder-length hair and my beard (compulsory in those days for trendy young male drama-teachers) and I joined battle, in common with my whole generation, against the traditional order. I and my male drama-teacher friends were the first to dare to teach without wearing a tie - while at the same time my female drama-colleagues were breaking new ground by entering the classroom wearing trousers. These outward symbols were part of our conscious attempt to erode the old established status of The Teacher, and to redefine the role. We were part of a whole new educational philosophy - encouraging our pupils towards self-expression, self-awareness, critical thought - Education in its literal sense. We were part of a reaction amongst our whole generation - a feeling that the previous generation had got it wrong - that the established teaching system was destructive in that it tried to work through external discipline rather than to encourage self-discipline, and so spoiled the natural creativity and curiosity of children. (The spirit of the age - and particularly of my generation of teachers - is splendidly summed up in the opening section of Keith Johnstone's book 'Impro', which I can heartily recommend to anyone interested in teaching Drama as a subject. Keith Johnstone, who was a key figure in the early days of the Royal Court, and is acknowledged as an influence by no less than Max Stafford-Clark, began his career as a teacher, and his
account of this experience reminds me uncannily of my own teaching days.)

In all new movements there is a danger of overstatement, and with hindsight I have to admit that we did not always manage to avoid this trap. We trendy teachers rejected the traditional teacher/pupil roles (an army officer instructing lower-class recruits) only to adopt instead a teacher-role that was at times equally problematic - something like a self-appointed guru gathering disciples to change the basis of society, ushering into an unsuspecting school a new age of social equality, mass culture, internationalism and love-and-peace. But it was an inspiring time, and I like to think that in our small way we have left a little of our mark on society.

For convenience in this talk I will call the movement I have just described The New Education: and in the forefront of this new movement in education came two specific concepts: Drama-in-Education and Theatre-in-Education.

The New Education is only one of the ‘parents’ of T.i.E.. At the same time came a new movement in professional theatre: the ideas of Grotowski, Brook, etc. were developed and became well-known. These ideas can be briefly summed up as two new principles:

First, the set of notions associated with the term Poor Theatre - rejection of scenery, costumes, in some cases even the stage, and most of all rejection of the cast/audience barrier. All these rejected elements characterize theatre as an elite activity; Poor Theatre sees theatre as something that can be done anywhere, without any financial outlay, and appealing to every level of society. As Howard Brenton so succinctly expressed it in the quotation I read out earlier, Theatre consists purely of actors in interaction with their public.

Secondly, a feeling among actors and artists in general that education matters, and it is important and valid for artists of all sorts to work in and for schools.

The combination of these two principles in Theatre plus The New Education led to the rise of Drama as school subject, and to the blossoming of T.i.E.

(In Britain we were fortunate that there was a parallel feeling among Labour politicians and educationalists that this work was good and worthy of support.)

During this time I gave up teaching and founded my own T.i.E. company. I had become increasingly aware that the school system still inevitably
propagated the old teacher-role that I so despised, and that I could achieve more as an actor coming into a school and saying ‘Look and experience!’ than I could as a teacher standing in front of my class and saying ‘Theatre is good’. All my friends thought I was mad to give up a steady career in order to take on the precarious life of an itinerant actor: but it is a move I have never regretted. Thus at the height of the T.i.E. movement, I was part of that movement. Sadly, within a couple of years things started to change.

*The Fall of T.i.E.* (ca. 1980 - 1995)

The *end of the 70’s* in Britain brought the new government, the rise of *The New Right*, a new way of thinking. The 80’s and early 90’s have seen the closing down of many T.i.E. companies, the reduction in size and potential of those companies that are still surviving, and the suppression of Drama as a major subject in schools.

I have just described to you how I experienced the Spirit of the 60’s and 70’s. The spirit of the 80’s was very different. I suppose it can be summed up in three precepts:

a) anything that doesn’t make a profit is not valid

b) encouraging pupils to be creative and to think for themselves is dangerous (it can lead to student unrest, anarchy, lack of discipline, trade unions, and all things most abhorred by right-thinking people)

c) actors and drama teachers and ‘new educationalists’ are probably Labour supporters who will encourage kids to vote against the government.

It is clear that T.i.E. and educational drama offend against the principles of the modern Conservative Party for all three of these reasons. It is therefore hardly surprising that the present British government seems to have decided to eradicate these offensive arts from the education-system.

It is tempting to fling all the blame at Mrs Thatcher and her cronies: but sadly, even though the majority of the population have never supported the conservative governments of the past twelve years, there remains a sizeable body of public opinion in favour of some of their notions. There has developed a general feeling that the ideas of the Left and of the 60’s and 70’s are wishy-washy, unpractical, unpatriotic, undisciplined, and unsuccessful.

And unfortunately T.i.E. and drama-in-education are associated with the ‘rejected’ ideas of the 60’s and 70’s - a set of ideas which are now seen by the public as outmoded, and by the British Conservative Party as Socialist. This is sad, because T.i.E. and Drama are to my mind valuable, indeed vital, elements of our education system at its best.
This change of general opinion has had the following results:

a) national Curriculum without Drama

(The government in its wisdom has decided to impose a national curriculum, in order to be able to maintain a tighter control on what children are taught. Unfortunately this national curriculum does not include the subject of Drama.)

Leading to: lack of qualified Drama teachers in schools - drama, if it exists at all, is now often taken for a couple of hours a week by an English teacher who isn't really interested - even where there is a drama teacher, the subject is only offered as a choice against other subjects.

b) schools have to manage their own budgets

(A logical extension of the idea that only that which makes a profit is valid)

Leading to: cutting drama teachers,
- cutting extra-curricular visits to theatres,
- cutting visits from T.i.E. companies to schools - T.i.E. visits, instead of being a natural and important part of the school system, are competing in the head-teacher's list of priorities with painting the school toilets or buying books.

c) shift in ideology at Arts Council:

(Being based in Germany I am out of touch with this: I am indebted to Nick Banwell, director of Pitprop and T.i.E. representative on the board of the ITC, for this and other up-to-date information about what is going on in Britain at the moment)

the old notion (traditional Arts-Council policy since '65) is that T.i.E. is theatre as a way of learning about life - the ideal educational method, with intercurricular application - theatre can be used in schools as a vehicle for teaching pupils about the history of mining or the danger of AIDS or whatever the schools wish to be taught.

the new notion is that T.i.E. is a way of learning about theatre - a vehicle for performance of set texts, and only to be used in situations measurable in terms of the national curriculum.

Leading to: loss of the Arts Council lobby arguing for support for T.i.E. in its wider sense.

d) shutting off of public funding for T.i.E. - from regional arts associations and from local education authorities - in the words of Nick Banwell: 'The Education System is being systematically underfunded; the Arts are being systematically cut back. T.i.E. is thus losing both its sources of subsidy.'
(Traditionally T.i.E. has received its funding jointly from the regional arts associations and from the local educational authorities. Both of these sources have suffered massive cutbacks to the money they receive from the government, which is their job to distribute.)

Leading to: T.i.E. companies have to make compromises in order to survive.

For example:

a) loss of ensemble-companies - many of the best T.i.E. companies used to have full-time ensembles: this gave many advantages in terms of the expertise that the companies built up over a long period. Most of these ensembles are now lost - instead, T.i.E. companies just consist of an administrator and an artistic director who hire actors - as few as they can manage with - for each production.

b) the quality of much T.i.E. work has changed: companies now have to deal with quantity, not quality - i.e. where traditionally T.i.E. companies did much of their best work in the form of in-depth participatory theatre projects with single classes or with small groups of pupils, now it is necessary for financial reasons to pack an entire school, or a complete year, into the audience. This means that T.i.E. now has to be more performance, less participation.

c) in particular, in-depth work with special-needs pupils is no longer possible, since it cannot be funded by the pupils involved, and LEA funding is no longer available.

d) companies are now expected by the government to survive on box-office income - and moreover, their ability to do this is seen as a criterion for judging the company's worth. BUT anyone who thinks about it knows that in the world of theatre developing a show that everyone wants to book doesn't necessarily lead to the best-quality theatre.

As a result of all these cuts, new sources of support for T.i.E. companies are necessary:

- some survive by attaching themselves to rep companies (e.g. Belgrade in Coventry, Roundabout in Nottingham).
- some survive by concentrating on work with specific-needs pupils: the deaf (Show of Hands), the disabled (Chickenshed), Asians (Neti Neti - who have now lost their grant.
- some survive by attracting grants from industry by doing science/technology shows (Molecule, Kinetic).
- some survive by getting grants from Health Education programmes to do work on AIDS.
- some, unfortunately, survive by paying actors low wages and using the fact that, with the present high unemployment among actors, inexperienced actors will do anything to get a bit of experience to put on their c/v's - this is unfortunate as it sometimes leads to a lowering of standards which gives the whole of T.i.E. a bad name. (I could mention four well-known examples of this practice.)
- finally, some survive by working in other European countries where the conditions seem to be better - of these, White Horse Theatre must be one of the largest and most successful.

5. White Horse Theatre

White Horse Theatre has adapted T.i.E. to German needs. The company was established in 1978, first visited Germany in 1980, and has been based in Germany since 1985. In German schools English is a compulsory subject, English-lessons are often dry and very hard work for the pupils, and so theatre gives a boost to the pupils’ motivation. Pupils discover for the first time that they can laugh in English. White Horse Theatre’s productions give pupils a confidence-boost through their discovery that they can follow an hour-long story in English and understand the plot. How we do this creates the tenuous link between this talk and the theme of this conference - ‘New Forms of Comedy’. Of which more in a minute.

Having begun as one small touring company, White Horse Theatre has expanded to five groups, each performing on average twice-daily. Six German administrators maintain contact with English-teachers and arrange the bookings. Recently a fruitful collaboration with the Cornelsen-Verlag (they publish some of our plays and help us with publicity) has been beneficial hopefully to both organisations. In the current school-year some 200,000 pupils have attended our performances.

The company offers plays for Unterstufe (written in the present tense, with very limited vocabulary - using only the grammar and vocabulary covered in the first year of the Cornelsen Realschule English course) and for Mittelsstufe (with vocabulary and grammar suited to the 8th-10th year). We have ten plays for these levels, specially written for the company, of
which nine were written by me. And for Oberstufe/University students we offer literature - Shakespeare, Shaw, Shaffer, Pinter, Ayckbourn, etc.

The main teaching requirement is linguistic. But there is an opportunity for further educational content in the plays’ plots. In those plays that I have written a large element of entertainment is of course essential, so that the pupils will enjoy the experience of seeing the plays (the themes are appropriate to the age-groups concerned - TV, pop music, boy-meets-girl, etc.) but each play also has an educational element in its theme (anti-racist, being critical of the media, sexuality, etc.).

So what are the New Forms of Comedy which we employ? Really, nothing that is in itself very new. If anything is new about the forms I use in my plays, it is the mixing up of Old Forms of Comedy for educational application. The following forms can be identified:

a) music - all our plays involve some music, and two are Musicals. Nothing new here - music has been used in theatre, especially in comedy, for centuries.

b) acrobatics, dance, mime - all traditional dramatic methods.

c) slapstick - particularly effective in our type of theatre because it is essentially non-verbal.

d) whole-audience participation - e.g. the audience provides the count-down and the rocket-engine noise for the take-off of a space-mission, or a body is found on stage and the entire audience is suspected of the murder - this a standard technique of childrens’ theatre, particularly clearly to be seen in the traditional Christmas-pantomimes all over Britain.

e) individual audience participation - e.g. a pupil is brought on stage to dance with the actor playing the pop-idol; a Hollywood talent-scout auditions audience-members for a film-role; a pupil is given a policeman’s helmet and asked to see that the criminal doesn’t escape; a super-heroine is looking for a boyfriend and tries chatting up audience-members; etc. etc.. This is really a technique borrowed from clowning or street-theatre: it is of course particularly effective in a school, where the pupils are all known to each other and so they are delighted to see their friends caught up in the play’s action.

f) rehearsed teacher-participation - e.g. the actors are searching for a terrorist or a thief, and it turns out to be the teacher; during a hospital-scene on stage a teacher in the audience collapses and has to be rushed onto the stage for an emergency ‘operation’; a vampire hypnotises a female teacher and bites her neck. This sort of situation is naturally certain to ‘bring the
house down’ in a school performance. Is the idea new? Surely the idea of making a fool of an authority-figure derives from the old English ‘Lord of Misrule’ festivities in the Middle Ages.

g) wetting the audience - e.g. an actress cleans her windows using an imaginary window but a real water-spray so that the audience is sprinkled; an actor with a watering-can looks amongst the audience for plants in need of watering; a surgeon in a spoof-hospital-scene extracts a red water-balloon from his patient and flings it out into the audience; a space-monster ‘spits’ water from a concealed water-pistol. This is a simple and harmless technique which works admirably provided that the actors get the timing right - and it derives directly from traditional circus clowning.

So to summarise: the plays that I write for English-learning pupils between the ages of 10 and 16 involve a number of forms of comedy, all of them in themselves ‘old’. But perhaps the very eclecticism - the combining of many forms of comedy - actually constitutes a ‘new form of comedy’?

I am available to answer further questions about the work of White Horse Theatre - or about any aspect of T.i.E. or drama in school - for the remainder of this conference.

6. The Present: the Campaign

And now a brief and, as promised, surprisingly topical conclusion to my talk. As I have mentioned, the situation for T.i.E. in the UK is at the moment dire. And now the cuts to T.i.E. (caused by cuts in funding to Education and to the Arts) are being seen as the beginning of further even worse cuts which are likely to hit schools and all aspects of the arts in the coming decade.

Therefore, throughout this month (June 1993) a national campaign is being mounted by all British T.i.E. companies with the backing of Equity, the Independant Theatre Council, the Theatre Managements Association, the National Campaign for the Arts, and the National Union of Teachers. The campaign also has major support from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre.

All the Arts are fighting for their survival - the Arts Council as a whole has suffered a £5 million cut this year. The repertory theatres are decimated, and even The National Theatre has lost 10% of its grant. Small-scale touring theatre companies and T.i.E. companies need relatively little money
in comparison with the RSC, the Royal Opera, etc: but they are inevitably
in the first wave of cuts. For those that are interested I have here a list of
cuts to subsidies to T.i.E. companies this year - that is this year alone,
disregarding the huge cuts of the past five years. This list was faxed to me
by the ITC last week, and the total cuts come to one million pounds. Beside
each company on the list you can read the effect that the cut has had on the
company: as you can see, some have already been closed down (at least
one, the Essex Theatre Van, is working without pay), and many more are
likely to be closed by the end of this year.

The campaign to save T.i.E. involves one month of action - starting with
a rally at the National Theatre in which the speakers include Richard Eyre
and Juliet Stevenson, continuing with all regional repertory theatres ex­
hibiting T.i.E. work while the NUT organises petitions, and concluding one
month later at the Barbican.

The campaign has two simple demands: the reinstatement of £1 million
lost this year, and a strategy for development for T.i.E. in the future.

To conclude: as I see it, we face a government that is suspicious of the
Arts because they are suspected to be left-biased, and that is suspicious of
modern educational ideas because they are modern and educational. I
maintain, in common with most teachers and most artists, that T.i.E. is a
valuable, indeed vital, tool for use in our school system. How can we
convince the politicians - and the electorate?

My colleagues all over England are doing their best - now! And I here in
Germany am doing my best too. If anyone here today has got any influence
with the British government, now is the time to use it!

Sources

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