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PRESENT LAUGHTER

Humour at the site of impact
in theatre performance

Ph.D.

2000

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THESIS
5777

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Eric Weitz

SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the implications for the humorous transaction at its immediate site of impact within mimetic theatre performance, as given to the bodied subjects involved. The thesis establishes its theoretical underpinnings in two general areas, seeking to address the event in its 'lived-through' capacity as fluid, unduplicable and denying fair grasp from any single analytic perspective:

- The thesis builds upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's approach to bodied consciousness as the originating perspective for human experience within the fabric of worldly existence. It proceeds to define theatre, humour, and their piggybacking in performance, as transactions in thrall to the intertwining reversibilities which embrace the systems of body/consciousness, subject/world and self/others. Further justifications derive from phenomenological theorists including Mikel Dufrenne, Stanton Garner, Marvin Carlson, Bruce Wilshire and Bert O. States.
- The thesis also constructs a model for the humorous transaction in performance, predicated on Erving Goffman's system of framing as the way humans organise experience; Arthur Koestler's diagram of humour as a 'bisociation' of incongruent frames of reference, for which the precise connection is omitted; and Marco De Marinis' broad conception of genre signals as the way we make sense of the stage world.

The dissertation takes as its objects for study eight specific theatre productions, drawing from Irish, English and American companies from 1995 to 1999, for the demonstration of its broader claims.

The thesis divides into five major sections, beginning with an Introduction. This opening part lays theoretical groundwork for approaches to theatre and humour in their 'lived-through' capacities, justifies a methodological stance, and establishes a model for the humorous event in theatre performance, demonstrating its application and a few of its generic nuances.

The second section focuses on the stage world, viewed as the material interface between practitioner and spectator, and seeks a grasp of the humorous event's theatrical conditioning. It breaks down into chapters on the stage world's definition and phenomenal/semiotic establishment in the opening moments of performance; how a stage world, as it will always be perceived to have some attitude toward humour, can be 'rigged' for it in various registers; play, in childlike and adult tones, and its embodiment of life spirit with reference to the rest of the stage world's mood and raw material; and the implications for humour in the expression of subjective reality.

A third major section takes the practitioner's perspective, relating Merleau-Ponty's notions of *style* and *outlining* to the concerns of stagecraft. Combined then with the humorous model, it applies them to theatre techniques used by playwright, director and actor and suggests loose strategies for cultivation and sharpening of the humorous moment in performance. These instances range from on-the-spot adjustments during a given performance in flight, to the timeless comic patterns of Western theatre. A final chapter treats issues of non-verbal and verbal expression, using Merleau-Ponty's takes on 'gesture' and 'speech' to illuminate humour technique.

The fourth section, from the spectator's point of view, examines the universally human tensions addressed in every bodied response to humour in the theatre: private experience v group consensus, and the psychic seesaw between consciousness and brute being. A short chapter looks at the bodied implications of laughter as an element of the performance transaction, and as a manifestation of upheaval in one's psychic sure-footedness of being-in-the-world.

The concluding section proposes philosophical notions of Truth and Freedom as the psychic engines for stage humour, the basis for laughter's implied benefits for the human species. The concluding chapter takes a final stepping back for reassessment of methodology and findings, and a peek beyond the brackets.

The major findings of the thesis can be summarised as follows:

- The interpersonal transactions of humour and theatre conflate to make a unique spectacle of negotiations between stage and spectator -- this interaction radically modifies the performance fabric, which also discloses complex currents within the audience between each individual and the perceiving body called audience.
- For what has always been considered an intellectual operation, humour works fundamentally on and through the body, most effectively upon material toward which the spectator maintains a strong investment, and so its capabilities plumb deeper into the being than often credited.
- There is a special charge from a joke in lived-through performance, owing to the fact that practitioner and spectator inhabit each other's perceptual field -- both parties to the joke collude in a nod to the world outside the theatre, while at the same time acknowledging that the transaction has been accomplished right here, right now.
- Theatre's unique authorisation scheme commissions a prodigious opening for the audition of experience through a vast range of world styles. Stage humour, besides being sought on its own account for bodied pleasure, is therefore capable of illuminating human experience in ways above, beyond and inaccessible to serious discourse, and at least as valuable to the species.

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Brookfield Public Library

Patrick Sutton, Eilis Mullen, Eithne and Billy Bolger

*To Mom and Dad;
to my other Mom and Dad;
to the Lads;
and above all to Ann*

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PREFACE

Anti-disclaimers

The lifelong student of theatre departing the scene of a play may occasionally be asked by friend or acquaintance what he thought of the performance. If the response requires more than a single-syllable exclamation to express, he is likely to be regarded with an air of pity/disdain, and consoled/chastised for his inability to go to the theatre 'just for fun'. In fact, a practised eye stands to glean deeper enjoyment from any calibre of production. The act of theatre is a wonderfully compressed and sprawling creature, and the interrelation of its parts affords its own gratification in their separation, assembly and the dialectic between the two. The ongoing examination of this favourite thing never becomes boring for the new versions of old ways in which it presents itself, its definitively varying energies, its minutest achievements, partial successes, its unfortunate or infuriating failures. There is always something of interest just the other side of the actual event, inspecting the mesh of its components, mulling its techniques and themes and their significances as sociocultural weather vanes.

In the same spirit, I shall bypass the usual disclaimer prior to studies on humour, in which I would absolve myself in advance for the crass folly of dissecting a thing of ineffable beauty. In both cases I know what I'm doing, I'm doing it anyway, and I *like* doing it. More to the exact centre of my thesis, however, is the conviction that in the hybrid case of humour in theatre, such a holding up for critical study is valuable -- for academic, for practitioner and for anyone else intrigued by taking apart particularly human behaviour to see how it works.

I, for one, have sought to nudge stage and analysis right up against one another to proffer some evidence of their ideal unity. Theory and practice should be seen as a reversible system: One side implies the other, and ignoring one of them doesn't mean it isn't there. Many practitioners dismiss the potential for meaningful analysis with arrogant disdain; many theorists seem to forget that their musings ever pretended to apply to real life. I have tried to demonstrate -- between the lines when not in the words themselves -- the mutual entailing of theory and practice in, for example, the potential benefits to practitioners.

The humorous event in the theatre happens not by accident nor divine intervention. If certain practitioners are more reliable in pulling it off, it is not solely because of some unknowable touch of a thing we call 'talent'. It is at least in part because they have

mastered, consciously or otherwise, a systemic strategy the body ‘knows’ through instinct and experience, akin to riding a bicycle. Neither, as I shall contend, is a humorous moment in the theatre inconsequential or somehow a side effect of what passes between practitioner and spectator in their most earnest engagement -- it is a means by which they most apparently connect in time, space, body, mind and individuality.

Careful inspection from three points of view -- practitioner, spectator and their ‘interface’ in the stage world -- reveals loose but reliable consistencies in humour’s ‘magic’, as well as a multiplex vehicle of expression which cannot be simulated by ‘serious’ means.

Humour

With the things that I am not apologising for out of the way, I can move on to the list of things for which I should at least issue clarification and/or warning, the most obvious being in the way of humour itself. In the absence of a consistent terminology from philosophers to social scientists to theatre theorists, I have adopted the following usages: *Humour* is a tool of social interaction; a *joke* is a formal attempt to initiate humour; a *bit* or *gag* is a theatrical sequence with humorous intent; *comedy* or *comic* refers to a theatrical genre or an instance of humour which evokes that kind of genre; and *laughter* is a biological response to a variety of stimuli including humour.

Although I will propose my own definition for humour in the introductory section (1.4.1), there are three general theories of humour (even though some of them approach it through laughter), all of which play some part in my definition. Rather than fully rehearse them myself, I will offer a concise account of each, and point the interested reader in the direction of the following books: A representative collection of philosophers’ views on humour and laughter can be found in John Morreall’s *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (SUNY, 1987); *Taking Humour Seriously*, by Jerry Palmer (Routledge, 1994) provides a comprehensive and readable survey of humour in society. There are two collections of essays on comedy: *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, edited and with an introduction by Robert Corrigan (Chandler, 1965); and *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. by D.J. Palmer (Macmillan, 1989).

The Superiority Theory is most famously captured by Thomas Hobbes’ sense of ‘sudden glory’ over another person or our former selves. The effect has, at other times, been described as ‘diminishment’ of value or status, ‘debasement’, ‘deflation’ or ‘triumph’. It is also the thrust of Henri Bergson’s thought, in which people become

laughable by exhibiting machinelike (as opposed to fluidly human) behaviour, which Vaclav Havel couches in formalist terms:

‘By defamiliarizing all these “dead” automatisms, by the purposeful ridiculing of everything which seems to be meaningful, by the identification of one’s own inappropriateness, caused by automatism, man is able to defend himself against self-alienation, recapturing always anew his own identity, returning to himself, to his nature and principle’.¹

The Relief Theory, proposed in the 19th century by Herbert Spencer as a release of nervous energy, was reformulated by Sigmund Freud as a sudden ‘economy’ of psychic expenditure. Freud connected humour directly to feeling -- as opposed to jokes with inhibition, and the comic with ideas -- and considered it among the great methods ‘which the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer’.² Daniel Berlyne describes an ‘arousal jag’, whereby arousal escalates past the point of comfort during the build-up of a joke. Its sudden decrease, following the punch line, causes pleasure; the sharper the easement, the more the pleasure.

The Incongruity Theory was cultivated by Schopenhauer, among others, positing the cause of laughter as ‘simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation’. More recently, the theory has undergone a certain refinement with the claim that the incongruity must then be resolved into congruity in some way. Arthur Koestler, whose proposition I extend for my own model of the humorous event, says that a joke builds upon the ‘bisociation’ of two incongruent frames; the listener is invited to make sense of the nonsense in order to ‘get’ the joke. Jerry M. Suls suggests that it is always incongruity which signals the joke, and then ‘one engages in problem-solving to find how the punch line follows from the main body of the joke’.

As I set about deriving my own theory of humour, it will become evident that all three theories play necessary parts in the same transaction, as well as the pre-condition of a ‘play’ frame (alternatively called ‘non-serious’ mode or ‘joking permission’), and an element of suddenness or surprise.

¹ Vaclav Havel (1980), p. 24.

² Sigmund Freud (1927), p. 429.

Some recurring aspects of humour and laughter found in descriptions throughout the literature, all of which I will come to address, include: a sense of rebellion from a minority standpoint; a conservative ridicule of difference from the majority; a momentary unshouldering of reality's mundane or tragic burdens; an expression of ambivalence toward difficult emotion; the strain of opposing forces between individual will and social constraint; humour's shape-shifting abilities and creation of alternate universes; the physical act of submission caused by making someone laugh; and implications of humour and laughter for the human species.

Humour defies standardisation for comparative purposes. Taste in jokes is a quintessentially subjective matter, contingent upon the individual, group and situation. Humour requires a certain insider status in terms of cultural references, communication and perspective in that 'humour is not a property of actions or statements, but a property of the social circumstances in question; that nothing, in short, is naturally funny'.³ People reveal themselves through what tickles their funny bones. And so the samples of jokes put forth in any study show much about the writer's sense of humour, and not necessarily anything about the pinnacles of joking achievement.

One necessary imperfection of inspecting humour (and theatre) is that it is always examination after the fact; 'though it is possible to relish the joke in meditative retrospect by discovering more items in the substructure',⁴ the first flush of humorous enjoyment can never be recovered. Although we may laugh again and again at a favourite joke or theatrical gag, it will ever after be a different kind of laugh -- perhaps an echo of the first, but a more knowing one, a savouring of the humour's prejudice, incongruity or performance.

My approach, in any case, presumes that it is far easier to discern what is *meant* to be humorous through a variety of cues, especially in the stage world which strives to be read with a minimum of accuracy by a maximum of audience. My position in this respect turns predominately analytical: It doesn't matter if the reader finds comparable amusement in my selections, as long as the intention to joke is accepted. In almost every case, the humorous moment on stage has been ripped from performance fabric and crammed into words, so I have occasionally included an impression of audience response as an indication

³ Jerry Palmer (1994), p. 30.

⁴ Walter Nash (1985), p. 32.

of the joke's real-life impact, as well as for observations about the rhythms of humour over a longer stretch of performance.

Phenomenology

As practitioner I have repeatedly been left aghast in my reading chair at the utterly abstract terms in which theatre is rendered by some theorists; as academic I find myself equally appalled at the arrogantly subjective pronouncements through which theatre technique is explained by some directors and actors. To avoid incriminating myself alongside either one of these extremes, it was important for me to find a way of discussing theatre the way it happens, yet which affords access to analytic method.

I will argue (in 1.2.1) that the guiding spirit of the phenomenological approach supplies the most sympathetic grounding for the exploration of humour and theatre performance 'in flight'. Broadly, phenomenology seeks to examine the world as it discloses itself to all of us here on the ground. I have taken my general methodological brief from Herbert Spiegelberg in his mammoth survey on the subject:

'Intuiting, analyzing, and describing particulars in their full concreteness may be considered a common program for all those who think of themselves as members of the Phenomenological Movement.'⁵

'Intentionality' -- the observation that consciousness is always directed *somewhere* -- is a concept central to most phenomenological approaches, and pertains in the cases of theatre and humour to perspectives of both practitioner and spectator. The set, costume, gesture, tone of voice are *intended* by a practitioner relying upon various tracks of *intentional* co-operation by the spectator. The phenomenological gadget called 'bracketing', or the setting aside of certain rudimentary questions, allows me to get on with the work, rather than remaining immobilised by procedural sticking points and legitimate tangents leading outside my present interests.

I have aligned my approach to a large extent with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose focus on the human body-in-the-world as the defining perspective of consciousness, speaks to the very heart of theatre and humour in action. His major work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, establishes a circularity of influence among

⁵ Herbert Spiegelberg (1994), p. 696.

subject, other and world; and his three essays on painting, ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’, and ‘Eye and Mind’, refer his grasp of things to the realm of artistic expression. These general concepts and others will be seen to inform my method and analysis.

Although I have worked primarily through English translations of Merleau-Ponty’s work, I have supplemented my own readings with a range of critical commentary, which serve to clarify points and give broader views upon translation decisions. While grateful to have discovered several articulations which I have pressed into service, I readily acknowledge that these are my own extrapolations. Particularly in the cases of the painting essays, where it might be tempting to railroad Merleau-Ponty’s observations into a broad ‘artistic’ theory, I have vowed to be wary of unfair leaps.

Methodology

Again, one of the reasons I am drawn to phenomenology is the admission from the start of its imperfections. There can be no objective performance because there ‘is no articulation of the world that is free from perspectival conditions, and there is no standpoint that reveals the thing-in-itself.’⁶ Theatre performance never happens exactly the same way twice, nor can even one performance ever be fairly recovered for inspection, no matter how meticulous the transcription. The more words spent on the description of a performance moment, the less true it becomes in comparison to real-life reception. As Merleau-Ponty remarks in reference to painting, it is impossible ‘to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts -- and this whole is not an ideal whole.’⁷ Moreover, a particular detail at the back of the set may not be of immediate interest, yet contribute to an overall perceptual texture which would be slightly different were it otherwise.

I have simply done the best I can at every point along the way, describing important details at the focus of attention as well as a gestalt feeling projected by the

⁶ Linda Singer (1981), p. 243

⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1964a), p. 15. Here I go already, but I think it is fair to relate this comment to the theatre, even if we simply freeze the ‘stage picture’ in silence. It does, however, feel as though it would apply as well to theatre’s more elaborate sensual imprint, which includes space, sound and movement.

wholeness of phenomena in the theatre. I rely often on metaphor to capture the expressive gist of an image or utterance in a quick verbal brushstroke.

Pragmatically, I have tried to view each of the primary productions more than once, and/or gain access to a video recording of performance for detailed note-taking. I supplement these with practitioner interviews and reviews, to arrive at what I judge to be a fair level of generalisation about audience response and consistency of performance over the long run. As I will make clear, however, at the level of production I am studying, performance intentions count on their coherence and are usually successful. My study does not pretend to address the humour's relative success from audience to audience.

Performance constellation is my own phrase, intended to conjure an image of all contributors whose hand is felt at the site of the theatre event in flight: notably, spectator, performer, director, playwright and designers.

Let me emphasise in advance my realisation that the phenomenological approach is not ideal, but one of the reasons I am drawn to it is its accommodation of ambiguity in the absence of an antidote. Inescapably subjective observations and analyses, no matter how diligently self-policed, will always incline toward unfair generalisation. It is, however, the most valid of imperfect approaches I've come across.

Forecast

The general outline of my thesis is rather straightforward, divided into five large sections:

I begin with an introductory section, laying groundwork, establishing parameters and defining terms; justifying my phenomenological stance and applying it to theatre study; and establishing a model for the humorous event in theatre performance, then demonstrating its application and major configurations for comedy.

From there, three major sections approach the humorous event from the positions of stage world, practitioner and spectator, which I believe to be the minimum of blanket perspectives required to treat both theatre and humour credibly. The section on Stage World seeks a grasp of the humorous event's theatrical conditions, viewed as an interface between practical and spectatorial intentionalities. It breaks down into major chapters on the stage world's definition and phenomenal/semiotic establishment in the opening moments of performance; how a stage world, as it will always be perceived to have some attitude toward humour, can be 'rigged' for it in various moods; play, in childlike and

adult registers, and its life spirit, which mingles with other elements to shade the stage world's tone; and the implications for humour in the expression of subjective reality.

The Practical section relates Merleau-Ponty's notions of *style* and *outlining* to the concerns of stagecraft. Combined then with the humorous model, it applies them to theatre techniques used by playwright, director and actor and suggests loose strategies for creation and care of the humorous moment in performance. A final chapter treats issues of non-verbal and verbal expression, using Merleau-Ponty's takes on 'gesture' and 'speech' to illuminate humour technique.

The Spectator section examines the universally human tensions addressed in every bodied response to humour in the theatre: individual v group, and consciousness v body. A short chapter looks at the bodied implications of laughter as an element of the performance transaction; and as a manifestation of upheaval in one's psychic sure-footedness of being-in-the-world.

The Conclusion proposes a few larger implications with reference in separate chapters to the concepts of Truth and Freedom, as 'felt' at the site of the humorous transaction in theatre, and sponsors of laughter's upsurge. The last chapter steps back for reassessment of methodology and findings, and a peek beyond the brackets.

Ground rules

I have tried to maintain a stylistic clarity and consistency throughout the thesis, predicated on the following ground rules:

It will become apparent that the body of work breaks down into major sections, chapters and sub-chapters. All are titled and numbered accordingly, with major section assigned to the first numeral position, chapter to the second numeral position, and sub-chapter to the third. This numbering system allows for more succinct referral from other areas of the thesis, usually noted parenthetically.

Italics in the body of the text are used both for emphasis and to distinguish some of my adopted terms from their conventional usages (e.g., *reversal*). I refrain from italicising a phrase like 'stage world' because, although I do go to some lengths to define it for myself, I have not invented it or adopted it from another 'language game'.

Italics used in parenthesis within a section of dramatic text denote my observations about staging or performance; non-italic notations in parenthesis are the playwright's.

I have maintained British/Irish spellings, punctuation and style, except in the case of quotations for which I have left American spellings intact.

In footnoting I have primarily used the year of publication to refer to the author's source in the bibliography. In several cases, I have used the original, earlier date of publication, so as to give an immediate indication of what 'age' the thought is (e.g., Bergson's essay 'On Laughter', written in 1900, but collected in the 1980 publication by Sypher); and to distinguish among translated works by the same author (e.g., Merleau-Ponty's three painting essays, written at the beginning, middle and end of his career, but collected in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*).

Only one of the primary productions has a published dramatic text which I have used for reference (*The Whiteheaded Boy*); for three others I have acquired unpublished texts (*Kevin's Bed*, *Twenty Grand*, and *Bosoms and Neglect*, the last of which is published, but I was given a copy of the script, updated for rehearsals of the revival); for the rest (*Out of a house, walked a man ...*, *Fool Moon*, *Out the Back Door*, and *70 Hill Lane*) I assembled my own transcriptions of targeted sections, as I have for all non-verbal sequences, or verbal moments which rely for nuance on accompanying gesture and action. I have taken the liberty of *not* footnoting any of these references in the body of the text.

1: INTRODUCTIONS

1.1 GROUNDWORK

1.1.1 First things

Books and articles about humour sometimes introduce themselves with a juxtaposition of the word ‘serious’ in the title (Howard Jacobson’s *Seriously Funny* and Jerry Palmer’s *Taking Humour Seriously*, to name a few at the time of this writing). They serve as playful come-ons to demonstrate joking incongruity and its humbling powers, while setting out to claim humour as a force to be reckoned with in its own right. In the shadows of meaning, however, ‘serious’ still plants its banner of unimpeachable respectability upon the phrase, marginalising even as it pretends to legitimise this laughably other mode of expression.

But humour -- whether seen standing as loyal opposition to the serious, or just scampering along as sidekick -- undeniably carries sensations and meanings all its own, if for no other reason than it *feels* different when it happens. It is not simply serious discourse plus laughter or minus brow-furrowing gravity. Over the course of this exploration, I shall argue that humour and theatre, taken independently as human transactions, have many parallel features, generating *felt* meaning, singularly expressive of human experience. I shall demonstrate, furthermore, that humour and theatre intertwine to exert an eloquent and affective force, revelatory of truths and fancies which connect the individual to the communal in ways that ‘serious’ expression denies. Not just a passing diversion or canny thrust, the humorous event exerts a profound effect upon theatre performance from ground zero outward, with important implications for the theatrical frame and the fullness of the relationship between practitioner and spectator.

My project proposes to examine the humorous transaction in and around its immediate site of impact within mimetic theatre performance. This phrasing intends to exclude valid modes of performance like stand-up comedy and what might be considered ‘performance art’. I am interested primarily in performance which wears its theatrical frame on its sleeve, the better to show us our own world in the guise of another.

1.1.2 ‘Lived-through performance’

I shall consider, as thoroughly as possible, theatre in its ‘lived-through performance’, a phrase inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on situating the human

subject inextricably within the ‘lived’ or ‘lived-through’ world.¹ I take ‘lived-through performance’ to encompass the material event in flight, all that goes on in the ‘room’ where and while theatre performance transpires, with primary focus upon the negotiations between a mutually present stage world (the totality of the expressive object intended by set, lighting, costume, props, actors, language, etc.) and spectator (the perceiving subject). It also tries to remain mindful that the human subject is not simply placed in a world already there, but inextricably *of* a world, ‘caught’ in the same fabric. This implies a ‘circularity’ or mutually influencing effort for practitioner(s) and spectator(s), during the course of performance in flight, which is why I use the term transaction. There is, in fact, a reversibility between the positions, the context for constant ‘conversation’ among the bodied consciousnesses present to the event, carried out on many intertwining levels, and never more explicitly realised than in the humorous moment.

My approach presumes an unfolding performance text in time and space, which ‘exists only in the moment of performance and has no stable meaning or identity outside of the performance process’.² The transaction cannot be fairly grasped from a single prioritised perspective, even after taking the leap of collapsing all particular performances into a single ideal text. As evident in the broad breakdown of my thesis, I consider three simultaneous stances as the minimum for a responsible investigation: practitioner, spectator, and the material interface between them I call ‘stage world’.

I treat humour similarly as a transaction intended by the practitioner, immanent in the stage world, uttered verbally or nonverbally with some degree of performative proficiency, and completed by the spectator in laughter or unvoiced appreciation. Because of a customary accent on the intellectual workings of humour, I will be interested in exploring the nature of certain pockets within the experience of performance, and untangling in particular the ways in which ‘the reverberations of humour are corporeal’.³

¹ M. Merleau-Ponty (1962), e.g., p. 60. The *lebenswelt* is usually translated as ‘life-world’, but I prefer the sense given by Smith’s translation, especially as relates to performance. I shall use the phrase, ‘lived-through performance’.

² Julian Hilton (1993), p. 7.

³ Harry Levin (1987), p. 181.

1.2 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

1.2.1 Arrival

The exceedingly living thing we call theatre performance defies pinning in the air with sufficient rigour for conventional academic probing. A scientific enquiry into the event has trouble finding a valid place to set up its equipment; even if it could, the most painstaking attempt at objective description of the stage world begins halfway down the slippery slope to interpretation. On the other side of the footlights a 'fact-based' approach threatens to become more an exercise in demographics than lived-through experience.

A methodology valid for the co-operations demanded by humour and theatre must attend to the fullness and fluidity of the exchange between practitioner and spectator emphasised by Patrice Pavis: 'No production is ever achieved without the point of view of the potential receiver being taken into account; and every act of reception must acknowledge the production process.'⁴

Somewhere in the supercharged space between object and subject, stage world and spectator, lies the field of phenomenology, a philosophical approach that readily takes on board the insistent ambiguity of life in the everyday world. Although there would seem to be as many strains of phenomenology as theorists applying it to various disciplines, Stanton Garner detects among them all

'a mutually entailing set of aims: to redirect attention from the world as it is conceived by the abstracting, "scientific" gaze (the objective world) to the world as it appears or discloses itself to the perceiving subject (the phenomenal world); to pursue the thing as it is given to consciousness in direct experience; to return perception to the fullness of its encounter with its environment.'⁵

I begin with the phenomenological admission 'that what may be said about the experience cannot replace it',⁶ and acknowledge the further complexities inherent in the multiple perspectives of the performance constellation. This would in any case seem preferable to the lingering academic prejudice which allows the words of a dramatic text to stand as legitimate substitute for performance.

⁴ Patrice Pavis (1993), p. 25-6.

⁵ Stanton B. Garner (1994), p. 2.

⁶ Maurice Natanson (1974), p. 21.

Several of phenomenology's general points of departure, in fact, can be mapped onto the more quicksilver aspects of theatre performance, confounding to other methodologies: intentional co-operations between practitioner and spectator; relationship between material performance and the perceiving, constituting consciousness; bodily presences (and absences), and sensual stimulus -- namely, the 'livedness' of the event in time and space, its immediate effects and demands on participants.

Aware and wary of challenges to the phenomenological stance from deconstructive, Marxist, feminist and other positions,⁷ I nonetheless share an affinity with phenomenology's valiant pledge to look at the world as it is lived, particularly as articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his masterwork, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Richard Kearney isolates the key issue for its claims on validity:

'Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology finds its true vocation in a philosophy of *ambiguity*. Instead of opposing consciousness and world, it reveals their prior overlapping as an indissoluble knot. The "phenomenon" of our embodied consciousness is precisely that "in-between" realm -- l'entredeux -- which pre-exists the division of subject and object'.⁸

This is what I am after: How does humour work on and through the bodies involved, in their separation and linking, during the heat of the theatrical moment?

As seems to be the usual procedure in the phenomenological movement, I have cultivated my own stance with reference to others, particularly Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne, as well as contemporary theatre-related writers Garner, Marvin Carlson, Bruce Wilshire and Bert O. States.

I see, as a most opportune point of entry, Merleau-Ponty's insistence on a 'circular structure' to existence, to which I have already alluded, and succinctly described by Gary Brent Madison:

'I am a subject only by means of the many unbreakable bonds which tie my consciousness and my body together; I am an embodied subject only by being in a direct mutual relation with the world; and I am in the world only through my co-existence with others who, themselves, are also so many beings in the world.'⁹

⁷ See Stanton B. Garner (1994), pp. 18-21, for brief sketches of some of the objections.

⁸ Richard Kearney (1986), p. 75.

⁹ Gary Brent Madison (1981), p. 22.

This reciprocal unity can be seen as fundamental to an understanding of being in the world. It is particularly appropriate to the study of theatre and humour, both of which underscore the interrelations within and among these three systems (body/consciousness, subject/world, self/other), and ever more interestingly so when they work in concert.

It will become evident that my thesis predicates itself upon the bodied consciousness which every one of us is, within this multi-dimensional system of reciprocities. The performing bodies onstage, the perceiving bodies in the audience, reach toward themselves by projecting toward others, they live familiar alternatives to their own experiences courtesy of theatre's hugely expanded fabric of existence. And humour has everything to do with disrupting the routine assurance of these intertwining systems for the amusement, instruction, chastisement, and liberation of the bodied consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty's ontological grasp of the world will be seen to inform this study in its most basic structures and principles. The reciprocal unities of body/consciousness, subject/world and self/other form a 'prime directive' for all sense-making of lived-through experience. The broad, central chapters explore two obvious positions attendant to a single theatre event (practitioner and spectator) plus a third (stage world), which acknowledges a field of 'thereness' shared by perspectival interpretations.

1.2.2 Intentionality

It should be apparent that production elements -- set, lighting, props, the actors themselves -- vary greatly in appearance, import and meaning to each perceiving consciousness in each seat of the house at each performance; as Merleau-Ponty would urge triumphantly, an exhaustive description of a single moment in the lived-through world is impossible. He observed, in fact, in a later work on painting that 'it is impossible ... to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts, and this whole is not an ideal whole'.¹⁰ His observation goes extra-dimensionally for the theatre, which progresses in time, occupies space, and involves a sophisticated interpretive involvement which processes continually from beginning to end. Individual competencies, attention spans and psychic infringements would seem to complicate description further as the spectator's focus may be coaxed but cannot be imposed. Indeed, the theatre's three dimensions -- one of its affective strengths -- undermines the value of any single focal point, as awareness tapers incalculably toward the

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964a), p. 15.

peripheries. But this is the first of several occasions in which I will acknowledge the theoretical worst-case scenario, just to point out that in real life it is not so bad.

Phenomenology seeks its evidence by examining the content of the perceiving consciousness engaged with the lived-through world. Implied by that consciousness is an intentionality, always a consciousness *of* something. In the theatre such a directedness of attention is a guiding consideration -- the intentionalities of practitioner must be intentionally reciprocated by the spectator for communication to take place. This approach to the event will rightly appear to retain a slight stage-facing disposition, as 'in the long run it is reception that determines the coherence and completeness of a theatrical event'.¹¹ Likewise, reception completes and determines the success of a joke.

The material performance, prior to individual concretisations, is no simple, solid, fixed object, but a 'quasi subject'¹²: The stage world is made and performed with a presupposing intentionality, unfolding with corporeal and semiotic vitality. Like any aesthetic creation, it doesn't simply appear or lie there apathetically, but presents itself for apprehension. Like Escher's mutually inscribing hands, stage world and spectator together *intend* construction of the performance through dovetailing efforts.

My approach admits from the start the unwieldiness of the study site, the impossibility of a single consistent, authorised subject or object, the irrepeatability of performance or conditions of perception. The theatrical moment in performance can never be plucked cleanly from the thickness of existence: as it unfolds into being it is already buried beneath the ensuing moment, leaving at best a perceptual echo in the critical consciousness. A psyche reflecting on this moment -- or rushing to scribble it down in the dark -- has already removed itself from the flow of naive perception. An endless string of second looks cannot completely fill in all the details.

Theatre production, however, generally *intends* to reproduce itself within a certain range of parameters, as I will argue further. Despite the 'psychic polyphony', the stage world relies upon a sort of hermeneutic circle of foregrounded and backgrounded phenomena for the construction of stage world and its continuum of moments. It is part of the practitioner's conventional strategy to intend phenomenal emphasis upon important signifiers, through stage picture, repetition, gesture, intonation, costume, action, silence, and even subliminal means.

¹¹ Marco De Marinis (1993), p. 48.

¹² Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 146.

1.2.3 Method

I shall attempt to follow States' general prescription for the phenomenological critic, who 'strives to show how theater becomes theater -- that is, how theater throws up the pretense that it is another kind of reality than the one constituting the ground on which its pretense is based'.¹³ I shall in the process be cultivating a sort of 'phenomenology of humour' for the purpose of marrying the two.

Rather than a specific, consistent series of operations to be performed on any given 'text', my mode of attention proposes that each instance be approached individually, according to the way it presents itself. I will examine aspects of experience 'in the room' that seem to contribute to a moment's makeup and execution, sometimes from different positions. According to Spiegelberg, the phenomenologist 'is fully aware that careful intuiting and faithful description are not to be taken for granted and that they require a considerable degree of aptitude, training, and conscientious self-criticism'.¹⁴ As experienced practitioner (actor and director) and seasoned theatregoer, I claim a sufficient expert competence from these corresponding perspectives; but I have also availed myself of 'outside' material, including interviews, reviews and other commentary.

My method generally involves description of performance in the voice of Model Spectator (which De Marinis bases on Eco's Model Reader), understood 'as a strategy of interpretive co-operation foreseen by, and variously inscribed in, the performance text'.¹⁵ Also situated within the stance is a voice approaching Model Practitioner, assessing strategies and executions, calculated and spontaneous, made onstage by production and practitioner. My aim is to sink further into the experience of the transaction between the two model positions, to apprehend something of the spaces and energies they constitute together. The futility of 'frontal' descriptions, 'the sheer poverty of scientific language in the face of subjective experience',¹⁶ sometimes compels accounts of set, mood, action and reaction unabashedly preinterpreted by me as to a perceived intentional essence. Naturally, I shall remain cautious of overextending my claims to specialised competence. I shall also attempt, as well as I am able, to keep account of my historical-cultural orientation as a white male of middle-class American origins.

¹³ Bert O. States (1992), p. 372.

¹⁴ Herbert Spiegelberg (1994), p. 689.

¹⁵ Marco De Marinis (1993), p. 166.

¹⁶ Bert O. States (1992), p. 378.

By assuming a phenomenological posture, I take as my field of immediate concern just that corridor of cause and effect that can reasonably be said to take place in and around the site of humorous impact during the flow of sensual bombardment and semiotic negotiation. I am tightening the scope of my inquiry by bracketing -- a phenomenologist's term for 'setting aside' -- all that cannot be considered part of the immediate, fleeting transaction within lived-through performance, again by counsel from States: 'It is only the moment of absorption that counts; what conditions the moment and what follows it are somebody else's business.'¹⁷ So, although contemporary modes of criticism rightly question the workings of the humorous moment in sociocultural contexts, I am for now placing them beside, or at least in addition to, the point. If anything, I will expose some of the mechanisms that give humour its powers.

Here, admittedly, is where the phenomenological stance always promises a cleaner view than it can deliver, by its entrapment in just that linguistic system we've so come to distrust in the postmodern age. The stage world by definition keeps one foot in the world outside the theatre; humour counts even more so upon sidestepping the brackets. The attending phenomenologist ultimately takes responsibility for evidence admitted, barred, or perhaps allowed to peek through the door.

Theatre and humour have much to offer up in terms of insight for the diligent prospector, who readily acknowledges that all his tools have been supplied by the historical, sociocultural mining company. One of my main contentions is that the humorous transaction woven into the stage world works more powerfully than we realise through and upon the participating bodies in the theatre. As I will emphasise regularly, there is no joke devoid of ridicule, however soft-edged or invisible. I admit from the start that humour sends its root system deep into our identities as constructed by culture, and so is fertile ground for inspections from the likes of feminist and postcolonial critical positions among others. My descriptions of performance therefore contain embedded within them the culturally endorsed perceptions which are counted upon by the practitioner to elicit a desired response, and certainly open themselves to deconstruction from various points of view.

The necessary evils of bracketing cannot be overemphasised: Every joke *laughs at* something or someone. It must be remembered throughout the reading of this dissertation that humour is well argued to be conservative by nature, especially in commercial theatre,

¹⁷ Bert O. States (1992), p. 370.

which is likely to seek the widest possible consensus in its ‘approved’ ridicule of ‘mainstream’ targets (though it can be applied shrewdly to subversive effect). There are potential power dynamics akin to cultural hazing in a theatre joke made at the expense of someone in the audience who may be, for example, a buxom woman, homosexual or a person with a speech impediment (historically some ‘favourite’ culturally sanctioned joking butts in Western civilisation). It is when a humorous moment seems most innocently fun-loving that it warrants examining for the socially approved prejudices it exploits.

One should also keep in mind that claims of universal humour or an ‘essentially human joke’ that would find even general approval across cultural boundaries take the untenable risk of presuming exhaustive knowledge of codes, experience, and meaning-making in every society on earth. Although I shall have occasion to refer to tried-and-true comic patterns in Western theatre, these comments cannot reasonably be extended beyond that sphere, nor can they be held accountable for the reception habits of any specific individual.

1.2.4 Entering ‘the sensuous’

I will have reason to lay a sturdier foundation for the framing of experience in 1.4.3. For the moment, however, I believe the concept of the ‘theatre frame’ to be easily grasped, if not intuitively familiar, as the convention by which practitioner and spectator implicitly agree that onstage phenomena generate a different kind of reality.

My thesis begins, rather obviously, with the undeniable co-presence in time and space of performer and spectator under willing contract to the theatrical frame. The spectator’s gaze, originating from a specific perceiving body, invades the depth of the stage, just as the stage world in all its livedness (more than the sum of its components) projects its presence upon the perceiving body.

Although factors like sight line to the stage, pre-performance mood and individual sensitivities ensure that no two spectators can even pretend to meet bodies in space, voices, props and scenic elements, in exactly the same way, they represent the nearest thing to a common starting point upon which each spectator proceeds with reception. Dufrenne calls this pregnant presence *le sensible*, or ‘the sensuous’ (as rendered by Edward S. Casey),¹⁸ ‘what the work’s matter becomes when perceived aesthetically’.

¹⁸ Edward S. Casey (1973), p. xxiv.

Theatre-going minds rush stage-world phenomena toward interpretation (it is well argued that there is no ‘before signification’), and experience stands to disperse exponentially in the minds and bodies of so many individuals. But once we admit that a material performance can never be perceived, constituted, felt and judged in exactly the same way by any two spectators (or even the same one twice) we can inch back to the suggestion that individual concretisations are likely to be more alike than different or, specifically, mostly alike at key points of contact (though judgements may differ more dramatically). As Pavis observed above, the skilled practitioner does not send signals in a vacuum any more than the spectator begins reception with a blank slate; signs are assembled for minimum readability *where it matters*.

One of the places this co-operative intending matters most is in the construction of the humorous moment. Genre cues and real-world referents must be sharply readable for the humorous moment to complete itself in the greatest number of spectators. This justifies some presumption of a joke’s constituting threads, despite the impossibility of knowing the natures and hierarchies of deeper resonances within any receiver.

1.3 THEATRE

1.3.1 Watching ourselves live

Merleau-Ponty observes that we meet the world, each other, and experience, first and foremost through the 'lived body' in the 'lived-through world'. In other words, consciousness has no point of entry to its existence other than through the body. Our most abstract thoughts and unfettered fantasies are underwritten by a *bodied* consciousness of the world, which presupposes context, perspective and temporality.

As introduced at the end of 1.2.1, Merleau-Ponty sees an ontological circularity in basic relationships with which philosophers have long been wrestling: consciousness and body, subject and world, and self and other people. For him, each of these dialectical relations constitutes a system in which we can talk about one side and the other as if they were independent elements, but which are irrevocably entwined, mutually influencing, and in turn entwined with and influencing each other in a single fabric of existence. In light of this circularity, we are all, from our individual bodied perspectives in time and space, caught up in the same fabric of existence, and so we all have access to the same 'perceivable' world of brute phenomena.

Because we're all *of* the same world, the perceiving body recognises itself in another person, 'knows' something pre-reflectively of that body's inner currents through the outer traces. When I see a stranger weeping, I do not perform a purely semiotic reading of tears to infer sadness; the body 'knows' itself prior to translation. An irate friend's face and voice, his fist catapulting toward my nose, are not signs of anger I interpret intellectually; for my body they are the anger itself. And because I can never have first-hand access to my whole self -- in the way that I can never capture an unmediated glimpse of the back of my own head -- other people are my best means for gaining a whole-body perception of myself in the process of life.

This, of course, is where theatre comes along. As Bruce Wilshire puts it, we are always too much embedded in our lives amid the flowing morass of everyday existence to acquire certain perspectives, make the keener observations about its hidden vectors. Through the theatrical frame, we have found a way to glimpse ourselves firsthand in the midst of living. Any other human can be taken to provide something of an original account of oneself -- in everyday life we may identify or empathise with another being. But it is not the other's sole purpose or *intentionality* to show us ourselves and our lives; and in any case, the 'return' would be limited due to the impenetrably dense, raw fabric of everyday experience. In contrast, the theatrical frame confers an intentional, structured, slightly

removed authorisation upon its world and inhabitants. They are fashioned purposefully 'for us', allowing us to raise a periscope from the sprawling midst of everyday life, the better to see it somehow organised for grasp of its richer connections.

1.3.2 Aesthetic proximity and feeling

Through the mental shift we call the theatrical frame, the stage world's field of phenomena -- including the human beings we are meant to 'authorise' as stand-ins for ourselves and surrounding others -- throw into being a fictive universe, even while the material ingredients remain irrevocably part of our own. Key to this arrangement is the emergence of coexisting presence and absence: an 'unchallengable presence' of phenomena, yet a physical otherness intended by the stage world/body; and a parallel psychic duality between live actions and the fictional life they are perceived to represent.

The persistence of the theatrical frame is said to endow an aesthetic aloofness or 'psychical distance' from the events onstage, insisting on their otherness to the extent that the spectator is spared emotional (or even physical) intervention that would in 'real life' be expected. This distance allows us to laugh unreservedly at misfortune (even death), regard violence passively, and otherwise maintain a certain detachment toward the stage world. But although the spectator does not engage with the onstage events in the same mode as 'real-life' events, it is inaccurate to say that the stage world is perceived as 'not there'.

In the theatre, we 'comprehend' the raw materials of the stage world with our bodies, even as we consciously award them an 'other' life at the level of representation. A tethering of 'distance' relies upon the all-powerful gravitational pull of the actual. Convention assures us that the actions represented before our eyes are, at some level, not 'really' taking place. The actors are not likely to be in danger of becoming emotionally or physically injured, even as the characters they represent are launched into situations for maximum conflict. But 'what is irreplaceable, the very substance of the work, is the sensuous or perceptible element which is communicated only in its presence'.¹⁹

The two levels are generally taken for granted but, importantly, both exist in some balance *co-presently* within the spectator and can nowhere be completely disentangled from one another. (As Merleau-Ponty would say that a table and its colour cannot be considered as independent parts of the same perception, I would argue that even if an actor drops out of character in the middle of performance to announce a fire backstage,

¹⁹ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 11.

the stage world remains in some degree stuck to him by virtue of costume, makeup, and the bodied qualities he has already contributed.)

The metaphysical distances between ‘self and other’, ‘real and imaginary’, somehow permit a conditional relief -- not too close and not too far -- in relation to the spectator’s psychic involvement, ‘a certain detachment which is lived by the body and its senses’.²⁰ This unique vantage point, afforded by the theatrical frame, appears capable of placing the stage world ‘much nearer to, and much farther away from, the actual’,²¹ each in proper measure for our involvement on one side and protection on the other.

This physical/psycho/social arrangement has come to facilitate a unique position, outlined by Wilshire, from which human beings may present and receive firsthand access to our bodily, emotional presences in the world, an apprehension of the stuff of life distilled and removed from the mesh of everyday existence: ‘[S]ince behavior and identity were laid down bodily, mimetically, and together, their recovery and recognition may very well be achieved only bodily, mimetically, and together -- in the theatre, for example.’²²

Much theorising about ‘distance’ concentrates on the effect of events kept at an intellectual arm’s length, allowing a sort of psychic safety net to be confused with apathy. But disembodied minds do not make and attend theatre, do not laugh and cry, and have no connections to the world without bodily engagement. Although we meet the aesthetic object in theatre through our bodies, Dufrenne recognises that the emotion depicted in the work may differ from the one experienced. He defines the term ‘feeling’ simply as an affective openness, an inner conduit to the stage world. (In this sense, it would dissipate if the aesthetic object treats material *too* distant from our fields of concern.)

As a result, theatre allows us a probing view of our inner workings, which might otherwise be obstructed by defence mechanisms:

‘We experience emotions which seem “objectified” because they are placed in an object outside ourselves, hence removed from a practical response. Because they are pseudo-vicarious emotions (only *seemingly* the emotions of another person) we do not have to acknowledge our ownership of them, but, because we do own them, we permit ourselves to feel them more powerfully.’²³

²⁰ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 359.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964a), p. 164.

²² Bruce Wilshire (1982a), p. 16.

²³ Daphna Ben Chaim (1984), p. 71.

The mirror held to nature is no simple looking glass into which the spectator gazes abstractly, nor is it a window upon an entirely other world made with alien materials -- it is an opening upon the original 'virtual reality' of theatre. Practitioner and spectator bring to it a knowledge and feeling of engagement with life, without which there can be no entrance. The here and now of lived-through performance plays upon the bodily accord between practitioner and spectator, stage world and audience, as external phenomena confer upon the spectator the 'inward tapestries' of living. The transaction of theatre takes place through an actual exchange between bodied consciousnesses, lifted by the theatre frame for the magnification of perception.

Following this explanation, it will make sense that the humorous transaction stages its own particular resonances comparable to and in excess of jokes made in everyday life.

1.4 HUMOUR

1.4.1 Intentional joking

As a next step I shall offer both a wide-angle impression of the humorous moment's sprawl into performance, and an all-purpose model for its appearance surrounding the point of impact. The model builds upon Arthur Koestler's image of 'bisociation' outfitted for performance by Erving Goffman's analysis of 'framing' as the way we organise experience and Marco De Marinis' broad conception of genre signals as the way we make sense of the stage world.

Although artists have long been pleased to wrestle the limits and conditions of performance into confounding positions, I believe the appearance of the humorous event to be significantly consistent, and have concentrated upon its weaving into the fabric of performance text, astride interlocking intentionalities of production and reception.

No two people will always agree on what is humorous, but we can note the conditions generically present when someone does find something funny. Intended humour relies upon prescribed participation from both sides of the 'joke' (a co-operative intentionality similar to the one described above for the theatre transaction): Defined simply, a sudden incongruity is produced and received under condition that it be taken non-seriously; the receiver construes a hidden connection between the incompatible elements, and approves a judgement inferred by the joke. (Unintended humour arises when an observer perceives incongruity unilaterally and/or presumes a non-serious mode of reception.)

More technically, Koestler describes humour as occurring when one 'frame of reference' is suddenly seen to intersect or 'bisociate' another, incompatible frame; the explicit point of contact between the two planes is left unspecified, and so the receiver is drawn to make the connection privately by bridging the gap, or 'getting the joke'.²⁴ The bridging also infers a deflating attitude toward one of the frames. The bisociative surprise at the engineering of 'sense' out of nonsense, appreciation (if not endorsement) of the deflation, and a spark of mastery at having succeeded in bridging the gap, all contribute to the success of the joke as registered in the receiver. (Laughter, although always perceived as an explicit validation of humour, is a notoriously unreliable gauge of its 'competence', owing to the slew of variables attending every circumstance.)

²⁴ Arthur Koestler (1964), pp. 27-97; diagram, p. 85.

My own definition for the basic humorous transaction in everyday life claims these minimum ingredients:

- Two parties mutually accept a non-serious or joking mode, that what follows or what has preceded is not to be taken for the real thing.
- Under these conditions, one party somehow produces an incongruity -- it is usually, but not necessarily, done suddenly.
- Another party construes a hidden connection between those incompatible elements and approves a judgement inferred by the connection.

I shall take for an example the signature joke used by the late Henny Youngman, who perhaps built a reputation on an obvious, mass-approved style of humour: 'Take my wife. Please!' Let us say that the joke is delivered by Mr. Youngman during one of his routines, delivered in performance at a Catskills resort in the late 1950s. (The success of *any* joke incorporates its performance conditions. Even a joke meant to be read by the receiver will need be constructed with reader-reception factors in mind. Youngman was known for a blunt, quick-strike delivery, interspersed by short riffs on his violin.)

Joking permission and co-operation are basically pre-established by the fact that Youngman is a comedian of certain reputation and his audience have no doubt attended the performance for that very reason. The joke begins with a culturally recognised linguistic cue, commonly used to introduce a story by way of illustration. The phrase has become conversational shorthand for: 'Consider my wife, for example ...' It is customary to 'deliver' the phrase as a preface, pausing before the important bit to follow. The next word, however, attaches incongruously. No doubt the comedian shifts to a more entreating tone, but suddenly and unexpectedly the joke is 'over'. Expectations have been denied; the rejoinder and its performance don't 'follow' at first sight. The listener, knowing by joking convention to re-examine the two frames, finds a connection by reinterpreting the first phrase literally. The joke infers an obvious debasing attitude toward the speaker's wife. There is a secondary deflation of the English language or perhaps our vernacular usage of it, in the comic defamiliarisation of a common rhetorical device.

One of the pleasures of humour derives from its superefficiency, the clever metaphoric leap engineered by the joker, and the reward of apperceiving, as it were, the explanation and prejudice. But a joke in four words has taken two paragraphs to describe insufficiently, because there must always be a world of presumed communicational signals, behavioural conventions, culture-specific details and attitudes upon which it hinges.

Although the above joke refers specifically to the speaker's wife, its 'successful' completion in laughter relies on an identification and approval by members of the

audience. Youngman's original audiences in New York's Borscht Belt during the 1950s and '60s would have been more receptive to 'wife jokes' than perhaps a modern-day crowd -- the socially conservative period of U.S. economic growth generated a suburban caricature of the 'hard-working husband' who comes home tired at the end of the day to a 'nagging housewife'. This historical perspective allows a glimpse of humour's potential for cultural hazing noted at the end of 1.2.3. The joke seeks laughter at the expense of wives (probably half the audience) who either bow to the dominant (patriarchal) discourse by absorbing the generic insult and laughing along; or risk being accused that they 'don't have a sense of humour', a 'seriously' manipulative defense for an injurious joke. It is not quite possible to see the gag as an instance of good-natured ribbing between lifelong companions -- the joke would not likely have been reversible to similar effect in that day and age (e.g., 'Take my husband. Please'). In this case one can begin to see the potential for humour as bullying tactic for the buttressing of cultural power positions.

To look at another historical-contextual effect, the utterance would have become more than an isolated joke as it became an expected moment in Youngman's routine. By now the joke could be used to deflate joking itself, as it has become a recognisable caricature of a bygone humour style. It is a different joke at *every* telling, in view of historical moment, place, situation, teller and listener, and other factors. One can never fully 'explain away' a joke as it will keep sliding off into larger, more ineffable circles of experience. I will in a later chapter attempt a closer examination of the technical workings of humour in performance.

1.4.2 Framing

According to Erving Goffman we reach adulthood armed with a complex system for framing experience. Through it we categorise our social interactions, the way we attribute meaning to events, dictating rules and boundaries for behavior, expectation and response (traffic patterns, religious rites, courting rituals, corporate pecking orders, ad infinitum; although an actress onstage at the Abbey Theatre and a busker on Grafton Street engage in public performances, different frames would govern the parameters of response.) Goffman observes that the way we make 'sense of any strip of activity is linked to the frame of experience and that there are weaknesses inherent in this very framing process'.²⁵ These weaknesses provide the opportunities for humour in everyday life by making bisociation possible: The same strip of events can realistically be framed in a

²⁵ Erving Goffman (1974), p. 439.

number of ways, and non-realistically in countless more. This is doubly potent in mimetic performance, where we can witness inappropriate frames of behaviour overlaid mischievously upon situations, with the participants spared the 'real-life' consequences.

In Goffman's system, what we think of as 'real' or original experience is mediated by two kinds of primary framework, classified as physical or social (a medical emergency, a job interview). This is what we usually consider taking the world 'seriously', somehow connected to our survival or material security.

In the realm of secondary frameworks, a 'keying' occurs when two or more participants agree to recontextualise a strip of experience taken from a primary framework (a sarcastic conversation or, of course, the playing of a game). A 'construction' is brought about when one or more participants fabricate a false frame for the benefit of another or others (the engineering of a surprise party, an insurance scam). A strip of experience from a primary framework might involve two men fighting over a piece of bread; a corresponding keying might see the two men practicing together in a martial-arts class; a construction would have the same two men earnestly pretending to fight in a pub, in the hope of getting thrown out to avoid paying their bar bill.

A non-serious frame, proposed and accepted at some point by joker and receiver, is essential for a humorous transaction to take place. A recognised verbal cue like, 'Did you hear the one about ...' or 'How many post-graduate students does it take to screw in a light bulb?' signals that what follows is not to be taken as 'real' or 'serious' or, in Goffman's terms, a 'primary-framework' experience. The cue might also come more subtly in the form of a facial expression or tone of voice. A story which clearly can't be 'true' -- e.g., 'An alligator walks up to the bar and orders a glass of milk ...' -- will most likely key a non-serious frame, especially if it comes from someone known for joking. A 'dry' sense of humour is usually attributed to a person who withholds non-serious cues, and so new acquaintances may mistake his utterances as serious, while friends know to be on the lookout for joking intention. A non-serious frame claimed by one office worker might be refused by another, in which case a strip of seductive behaviour carries only its primary-framework meanings, giving way to charges of sexual harassment.

Goffman awards the theatrical frame its own chapter, describing it as 'something less than a benign construction and something more than a simple keying'.²⁶ The audience know that the events on the stage are not to be taken for real life, that spectators make

²⁶ Erving Goffman (1974), p. 138.

sense of the stage world only with its help, and that they receive a privileged perspective on it. Yet the contract also incurs an expectation that things will be put over on them, especially when humour is involved.

It seems a reasonable extension of Goffman's observations to the vital sub-frame we call genre, especially as considered in its broader sense of incorporating co-textual and contextual traits to establish the rules and horizons of a stage world. 'Keyed' through signals passed on by designers and performers, not to mention publicists and friends, it provides an enabling framework for sense-making:

[T]he identification of genre is a cognitive operation indispensable to the comprehension of a given performance text, or to its full semantic and communicative actualization. Only after having recognized the occurrence in question as theatrical and having assigned it to a given subclass of performance text can the spectator cooperate in the way(s) 'foreseen' by the text, (a) activating pertinent systems of expectation, (b) correctly choosing the possible world of reference, (c) selecting the appropriate (common and intertextual) frames, (d) assuming adequate cognitive dispositions, and (e) making grounded judgments of acceptability and appropriateness.²⁷

These conditions also relate directly to the spectator's co-operation in the rigging and springing of the humorous mechanism. Humour, in fact, can be seen as an adaptable, travelling internal genre, recognised and often sought by the spectator. Placement, guise and tone of humour carry contextual and co-textual signals for the spectator as audience member and individual.

1.4.3 A model for humour in performance

The humorous event in the stage world takes the basic form of a joke told in a parallel universe. In the theatre a cross-hatch of genre frames construct parameters of an alternate universe, highlighting and re-presenting key points of reference to the real world. The humorous mechanism remains bisociative -- the two general frames inherent in mimetic performance, fictional world and real world, alone open vast opportunity for incongruity, and in fact underpin all stage humour. Also, the practitioner's ability to construct and shuffle the stage world's framings without obligation to real-life constriction provides unlimited possibility for bisociation.

²⁷ Marco De Marinis (1993), p. 177-8.

As suggested above, any joke begins well before its telling, at several different points on the continuum of life experience. The joke teller relies upon at least two of these points not generally connected in the receiver's mind, as well as tolerance of the joke's prejudice and, of course, sufficient ability to complete the joke.

In its most comprehensive appearance, then, the humorous moment opens outward and backward from the threshold of performance. The vast, shifting reservoirs of individual experience and cultural competence brought to the event by practitioner and spectator funnel side by side into the start of the material performance, continuing their flow beneath surface levels of production and reception. Humour (like theatre itself) draws for its construction and completion upon areas of overlap between the two reservoirs.

It should be easy to see, then, how the phenomenological chain called theatrical context can be astutely framed for maximum humorous effect. An array of genre cues via design, costume, character, playing style and subject matter are capable of signalling a stage world tolerant of (if not ruled by) a non-serious key. Any shorter strip of stage events will define itself further in terms of a specific distance and angle of observation, as well as any social keyings or constructions borrowed from the real world.

Obviously, the stage world may draw upon a mix of cues: *Waiting for Godot*, in customary performance, invokes a strong joking frame, via music-hall costume and patter, concurrent with an existentially serious frame, through the bleak environment and the characters' metaphysical musings and physical discomforts. A distinctive hybrid results in which one extreme can never completely shake away the other: Joking possibility remains available no matter how dark the moment; despair singses the edges of life-affirming acts.

Despite its reduceable form, the humorous event cannot reasonably be severed from its theatrical moorings. Arguably the Neil Simon one-liner or Oscar Wilde epigram will perform well enough outside its theatrical context, though the full humorous potential is surely cut off at the knees. These witticisms can be lifted out of their stage worlds because the real-life connections are made sturdy enough to stand on their own.

With containing frames drawn in terms of genre, situation and character, it is possible to move closer for a look at the humorous event in its final approach. A *priming sequence* constitutes the start and body of an action that leads directly to a joke. This chain culminates in a *setup*, the final definitive moment of the priming sequence.

A sudden *reversal* or incongruity relative to the setup causes the spectator to look for humorous intent, if genre signals permit. The event's completion relies on the spectator bridging the *gap*, which generally combines observations of the stage world with reference to the extra-theatrical reservoir. The spectator is invited to make the unlikely connection

among frames (there may be more than two) and to approve a debasement inferred by the comparison.

Various generalised angles of bisociation between divergent frames can be seen to encourage certain moods for humour:

The double entendre, a staple of French farce, for example, provides a most literal example of the process. A single word or phrase is discovered to carry meanings from at least two unrelated frames, one of them with sexual connotations. The sexual frame usually applies a 'debasing' reference to a socially proper frame.

The outright clash of (characters representing) social frames has long provided a popular comic format, from the likes of Goldsmith and Shaw to much of the formulaic film and television pouring out of Hollywood. Usually the pretensions of society's higher strata are deflated by the down-to-earth 'sense' either of a lower-class representative or a sceptic among the higher class.

The application of an unorthodox or inappropriate frame to a familiar strip of experience is a favorite strategy of satire, seen in the plays of Aristophanes and Joe Orton, among others. Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* provides a revolving-door riot of framing juxtapositions. The casting alone -- male as female, white as black, doll as human -- undercuts many longstanding images of the British Empire's social hierarchy, even as the 'characters' parrot its conservative tenets.

1.4.4 Humour in action

With Goffman and Koestler in mind, it may be said that all humorous moments are, among other things, jokes about framing. *Fool Moon*, an evening of sketches featuring two American clowns in the so-called New Vaudeville style, makes for a revealing test drive of this humorous model because its extensive use of audience involvement foregrounds the misframing itself in relation to the spectator's identity.

Here also I will set some precedents for my method of phenomenological description. Conscious that to "notate" the performance inevitably means to interpret,²⁸ I have attempted to interpret with judicious aplomb. The non-verbal, improvisational nature of the performance text removes any semblance of fixed elements for points of reference. At the same time a phenomenological approach seeks to intuit, analyse and describe the integration of outer manifestations and inner meanings as intended by practitioner. In other words, 'objective' physical descriptions of mimed nuance are not

²⁸ Patrice Pavis (1982), p. 111.

only impossible but beside the point -- it is the spectator's *reading* of the cocked eyebrow or slumped shoulders in the context of known behaviour that is important. I have transcribed action from performance, pre-translated as to intention and attitude, but often supplying some account of the perceived inner life's external manifestation.

These sequences demonstrate, among other things, the fluidity of performance 'grasped in flight' and the resulting futility of trying too fastidiously to isolate comic components like elements of a chemical compound. The critical observer can nonetheless use any *reversal* as a reasonable toehold, then rewind performance time a single step to identify the *setup*. These two features show themselves fairly readily. The *priming sequence* diffuses under scrutiny, containing many unfixable strands which only become harder to grasp as we move backward from the reversal.

Any facet of the humorous transaction held up to descriptive light must admit to oversimplification, one idealised surface among many in an indefinable hierarchy. The makeup of each laugh by each spectator -- reading of the stage world and bridging of the *gap* -- owes to an unknowable mix of factors residing in the individual identity.²⁹ But successful humour, especially in the theatre, relies on the accurate prediction of an audience's thought processes and attitudes. I believe it justifiable to attempt a loose bundle of insights into the *gap*, without claiming precise knowledge of any actual responses. I will have reason to enhance this justification from positions of practitioner and spectator.

Fool Moon presents a most spectator-friendly stage world by virtue of its minimum requirements for reception competency. Communication is strictly non-verbal, minimising the factor of linguistic competence; the genre contract *obliges* the spectator to take all events non-seriously, assured that no 'messages' lie beneath the surface. Its structure as a series of sketches eliminates the spectator's responsibility for reading and assimilating ongoing contextual details. Even the simple 'real-life' strips of experience forming the basis for each sketch are secondary to the clowning, an easily recognisable form of performance humour for which children gain competency early on.

The show received uniformly favorable reviews and excellent word of mouth during its 1993 and 1995 Broadway runs. It played elsewhere in and outside of the U.S. and returned to Broadway again in 1998. Photographs in the newspapers, posters, displays outside the theatre and on the cover of the program show the two featured performers,

²⁹ Psychoanalytic literary theorist Norman Holland sums up the humorous transaction from a reception perspective: 'In laughing, we suddenly and playfully recreate our identities.' (1982), p. 198.

Bill Irwin and David Shiner in baggy pants, jackets, fools' caps and expressive facial 'masks', all suggestive of clown personas. Irwin in particular has been widely admired by the New York theatre community as a postmodern clown and eccentric dancer.³⁰

All this pre-performance input most likely sends the spectator into the theatre primed in spirit and expectations for 'a good time'. Most spectators seated and chattering away the final few minutes before curtain, already hold in their minds an approximation of the appropriate genre frame for the impending stage world.

Prior to performance, a plush, red, act curtain masks the proscenium; there is no preset soundtrack. Tossing the rule book out the window in its first instant, the production pulls conventional performance fabric from under the spectator's feet in a double shuffle of the theatrical frame. Shiner appears through a curtain at the front of the auditorium before the lights go down and the curtain rises, outside the performer's domain -- and in the midst of the spectator's -- in time and space. Easily identified by costume and performative 'ostentation', he wanders into full view, approximating the sort of distracted applauding of a latecomer who realises the show has begun. He stops and waves a theatre ticket for several seconds, energetically casting his gaze over all parts of the auditorium. The spectator has by now registered the misdirection, bestowed the anticipated theatrical and genre frames upon the event, and the show is on.

The first *priming sequence*, then, begins at some indeterminate point in the real-life strip of experience that transpires in the audience prior to 'curtain'. The *setup*, in this case, is the instant before the entrance, a point at which most spectators appear to be in their seats, attentions migrating toward the stage and oncoming performance.

With Shiner's appearance, twin breaks of the performance and audience frames register at some level as *reversals*, and the simultaneous breaches of convention are automatically read as non-threatening within the anticipated clowning genre. The spectator's instant recognition of the usually sturdy codes being violated bridges the *gap*. There may also be some magnanimous appreciation of having been duped in the derailment of ingrained expectations.

It is the moment in the performance that all spectators are least likely to attend at the same time, as it may take several seconds for everyone to fix upon the action. A swell of audience response suggests that many have assessed the ramifications of the frame breaks and a reconfiguration of the auditorium that marks the audience fair game for the stage world. It may be that a certain amount of this initial laughter derives simply from

³⁰ For example, Nancy Vreeland Dalva (1989).

Ubersfeld's 'pleasure of the spectator' ('There's a clown in the house!'), or an uneasy titter of anxiety. Indeed the identity of the audience, especially of those spectators nearest the front, has already been set adrift between frames, a recognition which may be grasped intuitively better than consciously beneath the laughter.

The following several seconds of performance contain a 'keying' of Shiner's physical vocabulary in that the mime provides 'a key to the reading of the whole sequence' by establishing 'the distance separating normal gesture (ours, the one we normally experience) from the gestural mode in which what follows must be "read"'.³¹ Although the term 'keying' has thus been defined by Pavis in a different context, it can be seen to carry on from Goffman's sense in that it installs a secondary frame by agreement between participants, and specifies some of the rules in force.

Shiner, with an air of urgency, looks back and forth between his ticket and the surrounding rows of seats, displaying the parameters of his clown physicality and underlining its non-verbal code. At the same time he establishes an immediate social context, real-world caricature and objective, giving the spectator several guard rails for making sense and forming expectations. His actions and attitude encourage construction as something like 'clown-world version of a snooty, late-arriving theatregoer searching for his seat'. Aside from these introductory functions, the segment constitutes a *priming sequence* for the next major action. The *setup* comes as Shiner stops a short way up the right center aisle and, with a jolt of excitement, indicates one of the centre rows as containing his seat.

The moment occupies a good five to ten seconds in actual time -- Shiner maintains the 'Eureka' energy level, pointing to his ticket and then the row letter on the aisle chair -- giving all spectators ample time to register and anticipate. The spectators may visualise any number of resolutions, and are still unlikely to be prepared for the imminent *reversal*, an extravagant violation of audience frame embarked upon by the performer.

Shiner climbs horizontally from one end of the row to the other, making sure that no theatregoer escapes some degree of comic molestation. I will return to this small slice of performance in a later chapter (3.2.2). Suffice it to say that the extended gag makes a clowning spectacle of a latecomer trying to locate and occupy his seat -- Shiner gropes, steps and tangles himself across spectators, executing mini-gags toward some of them according to their appearances.

³¹ Patrice Pavis (1982), p. 55.

Seated theatregoers generally are required by physical laws and some degree of social courtesy to shift in their seats or stand to let a latecomer pass. Presented with Shiner's manner of crossing the row, the spectator refers to a mental file containing acceptable behaviour (and, perhaps, annoying social stereotypes) to bridge the *gap*. (What is here considered as a general *reversal*, obviously contains a string of smaller ones to be addressed later.)

Preparing to launch a journey across another row, Shiner suddenly identifies his seat on the aisle by slapping his ticket and whistling sharply while pointing to the seat's occupant. The previous trans-row traverse becomes the *priming sequence* for a new *reversal*, set up by the performer's highlighted 'preparation' to tackle the next row. This type of *reversal* foregrounds the sudden economising of psychic energy which Freud connects with laughter: As the spectators build anxiety by projecting and preparing for further upheaval among them, Shiner undercuts expectations and releases accumulated tension by suddenly ending the search.

The man shows no intention of giving up his seat and Shiner waves down an usher from the back of the house. She examines the ticket, points him toward one of the upper side boxes with a single, strong gesture, then strides back up the aisle.

This 'official' validation of Shiner's defeat provides a *reversal* that draws a peak audience laugh. This humorous moment, primed by the entire preceding sequence and set up by the usher's arrival, offers a momentary end to the conflict, neither outright success nor failure, but an unexpected deferral of resolution.

1.4.5 Duelling frames

Humour in this initial sketch exploits two different framings of the spectator's presence described by Goffman. The *theatregoer* comes from the realm of primary frameworks, having real-life 'untheatrical activity to sustain', like purchasing tickets, parking the car, settling into a seat. The *onlooker*, a party to the theatrical frame, 'collaborates in the unreality onstage', contributing to its construction and customarily remaining outside it. The difference can be seen in the quality of laughter demonstrated by the onlooker reacting to a character's pratfall, as opposed to that of the theatregoer responding to an actor's miscue.³²

Theatregoer and onlooker usually appear interchangeable, primarily due to an out-of-frame status presumed by both. There is, of course, precedence for the onlooker to

³² Erving Goffman (1974), p. 130, and Susanne K. Langer (1953), p. 341.

be drafted as a temporary cast member during performance, but convention dictates that there can be no real threat to dignity or physical safety.

The performance chain described above, however, drives a wedge between primary and theatrical frames by dismantling the position of onlooker, who is forced to do much more than collaborate in the (un)reality of the stage world. Spectators not involved directly in the action retain onlooker status intact, but the laughter surely owes in part to identification with the fellow patron's plight. Theatregoers take for granted an automatic cut-off valve built into the theatre frame, presuming, as Walter Kerr points out, that management couldn't take to 'risking law suits by thrashing the daylight out of genuine customers'.³³ That is, however, pretty much what Shiner does.

Each increasing transgression acts as a *reversal*; framings of theatregoer and onlooker (corresponding to Shiner's framings as performer and character) bisociate at the site of action. For this reason, the audience laughter at some of the more outrageous acts takes on a gasping quality, often containing veritable shrieks of disbelief. This response results from an ongoing bridging the *gap* between what is actually happening and a way of behaving in public which is virtually unheard of under almost any other circumstances.

Although framing organises the inner meanings we attach to physical actions, their exterior manifestations become inextricably bound to them. Visual incongruity must then be considered as an ever-contributing element to the humour in Shiner's audience foray. His costume and physical dialect are thrown into relief by spectators' costumes and responses, articulating the frame clash in visual or exterior terms. In keeping with Merleau-Ponty's holistic approach to perception, the performer presents a hybrid actuality, never wholly fiction nor reality, but a viscous mixture of both. But here the 'thingness' of the performer, clearly a denizen of the stage world in spectacle and movement, is placed literally upon the 'thingness' of the spectators' bodies, visually rooted in the real world, marking the clash of incompatible frames.

Sometimes an audience member will inadvertently execute a *reversal* by being manipulated into a position above and beyond the range of usual spectator physicality. But for the most part the spectators take no initiative; there is not much they can do during Shiner's cross-row antics, aside from assuming the almost mandatory role of 'good sport'. Their uniform deferral of attention primes expectations for *reversal* when someone does, occasionally, 'fight back'. The audience register and perhaps appreciate the focal

³³ Quoted in Erving Goffman (1974), p. 420.

spectator's engagement with the stage world, his or her daring 'to play'. This supplies Shiner with a ready-made *setup* and permission to execute a topping *reversal*.

In such cases, the performance fabric bears an inordinate amount of pressure. The audience are inclined to trust Shiner's ability to maintain the stage world's integrity, but the involved spectator does not enjoy the same 'participation status',³⁴ despite obvious provocation. A spectator stepping so whole-heartedly inside the play frame radically inflates the threat of performance breakdown and loss of face to either participant. Shiner may manage a *reversal* by shoving the man who was laughing at him, not, the audience would assume, within the array of possible responses. The act simultaneously serves as *setup* in light of the spectator's subsequent and unexpected retaliation. Although the audience applaud the spectator's gamely ventured *reversal*, they recognise him as a wild card within the stage world, further nudging the theatrical and social frames out on a limb. Shiner's firm 'buttoning' of the incident -- a final push after a 'dumbfounded' hesitation -- garners a heightened audience response, a huge part of which embodies relief at the closing of an unusually wide 'arousal jag' between discomfort and easement. For the moment, at least, framing has snapped back into some degree of comfortable alignment.

1.4.6 Comic and aesthetic proximities

To return to the subtle adjustment of psychic perspective through framing, a certain 'distance' has likewise been associated with the conditions for humorous exchange. Joking in real life requires a less formally invoked non-serious mode than theatre, temporarily sneaking a strip of events in a primary framework from under the glare of survival-based pursuits. As in the theatrical frame, 'distance' should not be taken to infer a disengagement or aloofness from emotional involvement, but a more psychically tolerant access. (As I will have cause to emphasise further on, we don't laugh at things we don't care about.) This subtle re-organisation of experience affords a double consciousness much like the theatrical frame: The joking material obviously resides in the real world *and* it is not to be taken on real terms.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the presumption of an either/or occupation in the perceiving subject's mind persists as an objectivist prejudice. His observation of optical illusions is similar to that of hallucinations: 'One both *is* deceived by the experiences and one is *not* deceived'.³⁵ This I believe can serve as a phenomenological description of Goffman's 'keying' as well as the theatrical and joking frames.

³⁴ Erving Goffman (1974), p. 224.

³⁵ Michael Hammond, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat (1991), p. 203.

By way of illustration, David Shiner's attacks on the audience in *Fool Moon* evoke peak laughter because (enough) spectators have awarded his 'actual' aggressive behaviour a reassignment of social meaning, despite the fact that real theatregoers have been showered with real popcorn. To fine tune even further, it is not quite the mental constructs of 'real' and 'not real' invoked co-presently by the play frame. Actions are taken as 'not real', *but also* 'not not real' in the theatre, and 'not serious' *and* 'not not serious' in joking, which captures more accurately the psychic subtlety of the willed ambiguity.³⁶

Again, the so-called sense of distance is characteristic of the psycho-emotional balancing act fostered by the mutual insistence of a primary frame -- which roots the joking material in the real world -- and the secondary frame -- which throws up a sort of winking shield against its full import. Shiner's attacks emphasise, as well, that in the theatre things 'really' happen *and* we may afford them non-threatening meanings.

In theatre performance, the interplay of aesthetic and comic proximities harbours a double-helix variety of spins for any stage world. The phenomenal worlds blueprinted by Feydeau and Chekhov, for instance, are likely to strike different inward comic chords for mining similar emotional material related to sexual longing, marriage and middle-class morality -- they both depict fate's perfect orchestrations of happenstance. Feydeau bypasses emotion for lust; the stage world is usually endowed with a voluptuous vitality, which rises to a peak at the end of each act. Laughter at the world can be unrestrained because of the obvious parody of reality. Chekhovian style tries to pitch itself closer to the world we know; it takes its feeling more seriously, as the characters descend through circumstance toward points of no return. As a result, its laughter is far more likely to tug on the heartstrings. One can begin to see how a desired psychic proximity is calculated by poisoning the stage world through language, visual and physical palette, and in fact the nature of its humour.

The notion of these interdependent proximities is worth considering alongside Freud's essay on 'Humour' (1927), in which he contends that the process follows one of two models:

'It may take place in regard to a single person, who himself adopts the humorous attitude, while a second person plays the part of the spectator who derives enjoyment from it; or it may take place between two persons,

³⁶ Richard Schechner (1985), p. 110. These usages adapted from the 'not me ... not not me' psychology attributed to play.

of whom one takes no part at all in the humorous process, but is made the object of humorous contemplation by the other.³⁷

In the first model, all the ramifications of the moment are acknowledged between the two people involved in the transaction; not so in the second, in which the initiator and spectator find amusement at the expense of the 'object of humorous contemplation', or 'butt' of the joke. The first model suggests collusion between joke teller and listener; the second infers some sort of exclusion. This can be seen, slightly differently, to describe the difference between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at'.

Practitioners have calibrated the models in various ways, contributing to a range of subtleties in the relationships between stage world, individual characters and spectator. These anglings surely contribute to the individuating entry of the joke's raw material into the perceiving body. The first model generally induces a feeling of involvement or equal footing between the joking entity -- whether a character or the whole stage world -- and spectator ('laughing with'); the second ('laughing at'), tends to urge a more observational, judgemental slant.

Traditional comic style most often parallels the second model. A character may have 'awareness' of making a joke at another's expense or at the expense of society, culture or human nature. But comic convention usually dictates that the joke's butt exhibit insufficient or stylised awareness of the humorous moment. (For example, the 'double take', one version of which has the actor look in the direction of some unlikely sight, turn front, suddenly register the vision as if to say, 'Could I have just seen that?', then jerk his head to look again, finally 'seeing' it). In a Restoration comedy the audience may be invited directly by a character's aside to laugh at the expense of the cuckold. In the Feydeau farce, alluded to above, two characters in full panic will be conscious of teetering along the verge of disaster, but they are in no position to partake of amusement.

Sometimes the playwright initiates the process entirely over the heads of the characters. The stage inhabitants behave without any awareness that a potentially humorous act has taken place, examples of which might include a scene from *Juno and the Paycock*. The likes of Captain Boyle and Joxer Daly may well enjoy laughter between themselves, with the spectator having occasion to share in the amusement. But there are moments, pertaining particularly to Boyle's work ethic, at which the characters as

³⁷ Sigmund Freud (1927), p. 427. It should be noted that I take humour in a wider sense than he does, but I believe the model to shed light on all joking situations.

conventionally played -- in whatever degree of broadness or realism -- are likely to remain innocent of the playwright's ironic commentary.³⁸

There is even a sharper bite in the usual styles of playwrights like Caryl Churchill or Joe Orton, in which conversations framed seriously register as baldly cynical or hypocritical to the outside eye. It is only through perceptions held by the spectator outside the stage frame that the characters become 'objects of humorous contemplation', and, again, they do not acknowledge their comic value.

Freud's first model applied to theatre would require that all or most of a humorous moment's ramifications be acknowledged within the stage world; the audience are not as likely to be asked to make comic judgements from outside the theatre frame. Examples would have been seen in the Abbey productions of Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993) and *Give Me Your Answer Do!*, (1997) in which sarcasm, sexual innuendo and silliness were for the most part registered onstage within the script and naturalistic acting style, with apparently little excess meaning unacknowledged by at least one character. The Chekhovian world mentioned above may well use both models: Characters attempt jokes within the stage world, and are registered as such by present company; at other times they behave in earnest, unaware of the ironies perceivable from outside the theatre frame.

1.4.7 The Freudian model, feeling and laughter

I am not, of course, claiming that playwrights and directors set out consciously to base production concepts on Freudian models. But a couple of sample cases should demonstrate the affective possibilities resulting from manipulations of the performance fabric with reference to these configurations.

In Synge's *Well of the Saints*, produced by the Abbey in 1994, the spectator was encouraged from the start to adopt a role in the second model, recognising irony in an elderly blind couple bantering about their good looks. Interestingly, the situation is constructed by the playwright so that Martin and Mary's lack of awareness is not so much stylistic as practical, giving townsfolk within the stage world a certain ironic perspective, which fits concentrically inside the audience's. The Douls' blindness within the represented world courts feelings of sympathy or tenderness from the spectator, yet the co-present knowledge of the fiction offers sufficient room for humorous engagement.

³⁸ In this section I am taking liberties in generalizing about 'usual' performance styles for the sake of illustration; obviously, any given production may do what it pleases. I am not in any case presuming a transcending intention inscribed in the words, but making observations from productions I have seen and my own practitioner's readings.

Upon gaining his sight in a gathering of the townsfolk, Martin vainly searches the faces of the young women for the one that must belong to his Mary. He can be pardoned with a laugh shared by townsfolk and spectators for any mixture of swagger and hope with which he is mistaken about the young Molly Byrne. Here the stage world registers the moment with a level of awareness not substantially different from the spectator.

But Martin then addresses another girl, who responds on a less gracious note, that ‘a seeing woman, I’m thinking, would never wed the like of you’. She turns away, flouncing her revulsion for the townsfolk, who (as instructed by the playwright) laugh again. Their laughter seems to collaborate the taunting attitude taken by the girl.

The mood change in at least one audience was palpable in their refusal to endorse the harshness of the stage world’s joking prejudice, emphasised by the crowd’s reaction. Freud’s second model is completed entirely within the stage world, producing an opposite effect upon the outside observer. An abrupt overbalance of empathy for the ridiculed Martin seems to flood away the joking frame for the spectator, perhaps a sudden collapse of distance in switching alignment from the onstage crowd of laughers to the poor old blind man at the butt of the joke.

The opening moments of *Out of a house, walked a man ...* are worth study upon several points in relation to humour, one being their play upon the first Freudian model.

As produced in 1994 by Théâtre de Complicité at the Lyttelton Theatre, the production attempted to capture theatrically the works of Daniil Kharmis (1905-42), a Russian writer ahead of what might now be called the postmodern tradition.

Although Complicité has acquired a reputation for its depiction of darkly comic worlds based in a highly imaginative, physical theatre, the audience would be at a loss to construct an accurate genre frame at the start -- it does not present itself obviously as a universe friendly to humour, by virtue of a darkly looming stage space (which I will describe in further detail in 2.2.3) A man at a desk, dressed in a dark suit and hat, sits motionless with head bowed for several seconds, then raises his head. A second man, dressed the same, walks to the front of the stage and stands arrested at alert yet neutral attention, looking out toward the audience.

After several minutes of polite, expectant and eventually unsettling silence, someone in the audience laughs. The second man responds immediately, searching the audience with eager eyes for the laugher. This instigates -- perhaps with the man’s thin suggestion of a clownlike physical vocabulary -- further laughter, the sources of which the man attempts to pinpoint with a bright-eyed air of triumph. Discomfort or uncertainty, even impatience, may well contribute to the first laugh; there are surely sociological

observations to be made about patterns of laughter and social dynamics. Some sort of affective build-up would be likely, particularly as the audience realise their behaviour has been located inside the theatrical frame.

The configuration initially recalls the first Freudian model -- before words are spoken, the audience presume they are 'laughing with' the performer, perhaps at some little game he is playing. After several more minutes, during which the only sound is the ebb and flow of audience laughter, the man seated at the desk turns to address the audience in a level tone: 'I am testing my theory of humour. If you want the auditorium to laugh, come out on to the stage and stand there in silence until someone bursts out laughing'.

Suddenly the production has whipped aside an imaginary curtain in a very literal *reversal*. Contrary to its original assumption, the clownlike performance is not the object of humorous contemplation -- it is the audience themselves, who discover they have unwittingly performed their scripted role.

The spectator has been revealed not only as butt of a well-played gag, but as the aesthetic object in all its actuality. Any ridicule remains soft-edged in the tone of the playing, a shared joke on the production/reception relationship, blurring the positions within the Freudian model. The gambit recalls the Bakhtinian essence of carnival laughter, which 'does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators',³⁹ drawing a tangible magic circle around the event and all its participants.

These two examples show how the spectator's positioning in the humorous model -- one factor among many -- can be manipulated theatrically to provocative effect, prior to service in larger production strategies. The above performance strips are based on simple jokes, yet they offer an inkling of how a sequence, couched within the theatrical frame, might expand the playing field dramatically to inform humour's precise imprint.

1.4.8 Plan of attack

With parameters, orientations and models in hand, I stand prepared to examine several aspects of the humorous transaction in lived-through theatre performance, and to look closer at some of its deeper implications for the immediate participants.

To isolate any aspect of the event is to disfigure its appearance, as well as to de-emphasise the subterranean system of interdependences that generate the whole. Obviously the spectator does not register the empiric breakdown of each laugh, just as a

³⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), p. 7.

staged moment may strike each perceiving subject in differing constitution and still cause group laughter. Every area necessarily leaks into the others.

But because the whole of the event can never be apprehended in a single analytic glance, particularly in a way that is meaningful for each and every attendant to the scene, my only recourse is to propose a range of areas that seem likely to take part in some degree, without claiming complete or exhaustive description applicable to any lived-through moment or any specific participant.

I have adopted a three-pronged approach for clearer management of these closer examinations, based, as foreshadowed in 1.2.1, on Merleau-Ponty's views of being with reference to human subject, human other, and a phenomenal landscape which they both inhabit, have sensual access to, and modify for each other.

Here in section I, the *priming sequence - setup - reversal - gap* model for the humorous event has been established and demonstrated for future use, with a few auxiliary points made about broader modulations of feeling toward joking material. The remaining major sections attend to:

II) characteristics of the stage world as material interface between practitioner's and spectator's intentionalities -- it will show how its specific makings and subject matter 'enable' a particular style, weight and personality of humour;

III) factors pertaining to the practitioner's bodied utterances -- ways in which the humorous model points the way to the care and feeding of rehearsal and performance, and illumination of a few historic patterns in Western comic performance;

IV) elements of the spectator's bodied response, with close attention to the main tensions at work in every humorous transaction -- the individual's bodied knowledge as measured against the group's communal perceptions and the psychic seesaw of the bodied consciousness -- plus a brief discussion about the bodied implications of laughter for the species; and.

V) some concluding ideas about Truth and Freedom, philosophical names for the larger forces I take to animate the workings of the humorous transaction in performance.

A few words may be in order concerning the sampling of performance texts chosen for this study. It will be obvious that I would not have been able to map out my array of selections in advance, as the final collection of productions had debut dates from 1994 to 1998. Although one of my earliest intentions was to examine the live event of professional-calibre productions which fall somewhere under the heading of 'mainstream', only intuitively did I have an idea of the range of factors which would serve my purpose. It was a matter of hoping an appropriate production would come to my attention, fill a

suitable gap in my collection, *and* afford reasonable access for my methodology. Furthermore, I had hoped that a total of less than 10 productions could corral among them the range of desired features.

This assortment of factors included:

- Productions that would be readily identifiable as ‘comic’ (e.g., *The Whiteheaded Boy* and *Fool Moon*) as well as those which would blur generic lines (*Out of a house, walked a man ...* and *Twenty Grand*). This thematic axis was also desirable for demonstration that some humour would not necessarily be recognised or received as such, because of its serious ballast for the perceiving subject.
- Productions which relied in varying degrees on verbal utterance (from the non-verbal *Fool Moon*, to semi-verbal *Out of a house*, to conventionally verbal *Kevin’s Bed*). This axis was intended to demonstrate the nature of humour performed without words, *and* bring to attention the fact that the completion of a verbal joke on the stage remains contingent upon its bodied performance (e.g., intonation, gesture, rhythm, genre cues, bodied responses of other characters).
- Productions that portrayed the world ‘realistically’, which is to say with a fourth-wall, face-value depiction (e.g. the kitchen setting in *Kevin’s Bed* and the penthouse lounge in *Twenty Grand* root their worlds in a recognisable place with no gaps to be filled by imagination) and a psychological continuity within characters (the actor and actress are to be taken as the characters themselves in non-fantastic, worldly situations); *and* productions which make the world non-realistically through theatrically licensed representation (the sort of ‘story theatre’ technique used in *70 Hill Lane*, with actors and sellotape constructing then changing referents before our eyes; metaphysical forces expressed by the ensemble in *Out of a house*; the use of two actors to perform a single subjective identity in both these productions).
- An attempt was made also to adopt a fairly spread English-speaking cultural base for the study, with at least two productions each originating in Ireland, England and the United States.

In every instance, I saw the production before confirming its suitability for my project. I chose the first two productions, *Fool Moon* and *Out of a house*, primarily because I was an established fan of Bill Irwin on the one hand and Théâtre de Complicité on the other, and knew that they would provide something worth examining with reference to humour. Barabbas’ *Out the Back Door* was included even before *The Whiteheaded Boy* appeared on the scene, as I anticipated the value of a ‘children’s’ piece in connection to ‘play’ and humour.

At this point in time my selections needed to become more purposeful. I attended *The Whiteheaded Boy* as a naive observer, but almost immediately recognised that it filled several requirements for my work, not the least of which was its embodiment of a conventional literary text in a way which confounded the prioritisation of words on a page. *Twenty Grand* was chosen for the sheer uncertainty that any given spectator would capitulate to its humorous intent, as well as its theatrical reframing of inherited genre. *Kevin's Bed* was approached as a popular representative of 'establishment' comedy. *70 Hill Lane* and *Bosoms and Neglect*, the last two productions to be selected, came along at just the right times -- for both productions, audience response was in some way divided, which fit well into a spectator-oriented chapter on humour in performance.

It may be difficult to discern whether the gamut of productions fit perfectly into a multi-headed project that was there from the start, or whether that is merely the appearance given by a string of productions which forged the thesis, each in its own way, as they came on board.

2: STAGE WORLD

2.1 GROUNDWORK

2.1.1 A bodied context

The 'world' of a theatrical event, its phenomenal and fictional elements interlaced to produce meaning and feeling, emerges during performance as a complex being which harbours from the very start the mechanisms and possibilities for its humour. Perhaps more than we realise, the process inside the theatre draws upon the experience of life on the outside, beginning with our inextricable situating as 'of-the-world' -- in other words, our relationship with environment.

Plays without actors are hard to come by, or at least plays without 'stand-ins' for the perceiving subject (in the case of puppets, robots or Beckettian mouths). But attention to the spectator's need for identification should not be allowed to obscure the theatrical vitality of surrounding environment.

Wilshire's approach to theatre as a means for 'watching ourselves live' implies a worldly context for that life, a world with whose fabric the body knits and within which it acts and responds. Merleau-Ponty describes the relationship as literally organic: 'Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system'.¹

The mind's attempt to picture a person completely severed from environment cannot succeed -- the imagining body will take as 'background' whatever it can and construe some affective import upon it. Conversely, an imagined landscape devoid of people still infers a perceiving body in the perspective from which it is envisioned and the feeling it evokes. It is impossible to imagine body without world or world without body, as 'neither has existence and meaning without the other'.² A sort of aesthetic corollary emerges for the onstage body and the stage world, because we 'know' ourselves only as of-the-world. It becomes, however, an understatement several times over, given the overdetermining powers of the theatrical frame.

The stage world can be seen as a supersaturated aesthetic object intended by a collection of stimuli from the 'real world' and through which phenomena and fictions

¹ M. Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 203.

² Gary Brent Madison (1981), p. 30.

continually cross-pollinate feeling and meaning. From the black-box void to a realistic environment crammed with minutiae to abstract and expressionistic stage designs, practitioner and spectator collude in the construction of an absent universe, with reference to the immediate presences of set, lighting, costumes, props, words, voices, movement, even the size and shape of auditorium and playing space.

The process of this collective generation occurs in all aesthetic transactions, according to Dufrenne, through a complex link between perception -- 'to render oneself present to something through the body'³ -- and imagination -- which 'somehow creates the liaison between mind and body'⁴ to conjure an absent world. The interaction can be seen straightforwardly in the strategies of the mime, who does not engage in a mere transmission of signs, but carves life from the material of an invisible environment -- a gust of wind, a pane of glass, a slobbering dog. The fictional world's contours and characteristics are defined by the performer's physicality, recognised through the spectator's bodied experience, and escorted by the imagination into presence.

What may sometimes be overlooked is the fact that these objects, environments and actions do not materialise in the mind antiseptically, but with some 'bodied' meaning which necessarily infuses attitude or feeling toward them. A mime expressing life in an invisible world cannot help but shade that behaviour with affective colour. 'Pantomime', Marcel Marceau has said, 'is the art of expressing feelings by attitudes and not a means of expressing words through gestures'.⁵ This elemental, affective dimension of signification unfurls to the stage world at large and the aesthetic object in general:

'In the theater, for example, the first scenes directly instill in us a certain emotion which orients our entire comprehension. It is not sufficient that a problem be posed or an intrigue outlined, for it is also necessary that there be communicated to us a certain world-quality within which the problem or intrigue takes on meaning.'⁶

Dufrenne writes here from the position of artistic production, but neither can the spectator help but confer a 'world-quality' upon the unfolding stage world. This is because in the everyday world we cannot meet any person, environment or situation without feeling something about it. In fact, there can be no 'objective' or 'neutral' awareness of

³ M. Merleau-Ponty (1964a), p. 42.

⁴ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 345.

⁵ Quoted from Marcel Marceau in John H. Townsen (1976), p. 343.

⁶ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 188.

material reality, a registering of something ‘just as it is’, cleansed entirely of contributions by the observer.⁷ Even less so toward a stage world, which consciously (and unconsciously) assembles and pitches itself, not only for clearer decoding and reference, but for an inner inclination.

Although they may be taken to refer to the same species of cultural space, the realistic living room sets assembled for plays by Feydeau, Ibsen, O’Casey and Shepard will not only ‘feel’ like pieces of different worlds, but encourage different interpretive stances and speculations. Similarly, a kitchen might be indicated by a meticulously appointed set with working sink, appliances, furniture, cupboards and windows; by only a table and chairs and a flat with a door; or by an area of the stage with several wooden boxes. These physicalisations, along with dialogue and behaviour, may construct for the spectator the same represented space; but to the extent that the theatrical witness, from a seat in the auditorium, invades the hereness and thereeness of the stage world in an original sense, these three kitchens vibrate differently for the perceiving/interpreting consciousness.

A stage world expands upon this principle to incorporate factors like how things happen, how time passes, how space appears, how people move and talk and, of course, how they make jokes (consciously and unconsciously); these multiplex resonances meet the spectator as a psychic brew of present phenomena, absent signifieds, meanings and feelings. To be sure, a stage world withholds its final first-hand impressions until the end of the performance, and will continue to coalesce and re-form ever after. It must, however, begin making itself knowable from the start, with particular reference to the terms upon which it proposes its fiction.

2.1.2 Divining the tilt of the world

The theatrical frame, then, is a hyperefficient psychic scaffold, supporting receptive activity on at least the following, mutually involving levels: 1) a field of brute presences; 2) an array of phenomena, ripe with intending signs and symbols; 3) a gateway to feeling through ‘sensuous’ presence; 4) a collection of genre cues to facilitate processing and incite expectation.

For my purposes, the stage world is the material interface between the producing and perceiving intentionalities at the site of lived-through performance. It is modelled after Merleau-Ponty’s ‘perceivable’ world, a theoretical bridge which seeks to deny overprivileging of either subjectivist or objectivist views in questioning, for example,

⁷ Marco De Marinis (1993), p. 9, citing Luis Prieto, *Pertinence et pratique: Essai de semiologie*, p. 126.

whether two people can experience a specific tree in comparable ways. Performance phenomena exist in the same fabric with spectators -- there may be discrepancy about meanings and/or practical or interpretive skills, but far less so on whether, for example, that is an actor wearing a green hat and reciting the Lord's Prayer.

Certainly, the communication of a single stage world may vary according to competences (and compensations made) throughout the performance constellation. But given the recognised degree of proficiency on the parts of the companies featured in my work, I believe the leap to a valid ideal keeps the risks of divergence to an acceptable threshold. As I will argue further, established practitioners acquire a minimum competency in 'saying what they mean' in readable fashion. Nonetheless, I have noted apparent miscalculations, and accounted for ranges of actual reception.

The stage world, in my terms, is relatively indisputable in its 'brute presence' and ideal in its intendedness -- the practitioner intends a model reception through the specific features of the stage world. It combines semiotic implications with genre cues to 'disclose' to the spectator a 'different kind of *here*'⁸, in excess of the raw materials present onstage.

As might be expected, the stage world cannot be underestimated for -- indeed, cannot be disengaged from -- its involvement in the humorous event. We live in a universe potentially humorous at every turn, to the extent that we may choose to see (or be unable to resist seeing) any given strip of experience in a joking light. The stage world, however, is 'a universe *rigged* for humour' in that the materials and manner of its installation intend to lead us into a specifically tuned relationship with the performance. This world contributes an enabling context within which a strip of experience embeds itself -- the stage is literally set for humour before it takes part at any specific site.

The appearance and guise of humour within theatrical brackets provides a source of reference as to the angle at which the stage world reflects our own. Humour may be seen always to spring at some consistent trajectory from the serious stuffings of a stage world -- it projects an actual 'personality' through its mix of joking materials, thematic strategies, genre framings, comic techniques and performance styles. To the extent that any production impresses patterns of feeling upon the spectator, so will its humour (or lack thereof) exhibit some sort of influence upon the perceiving body and consciousness. One of the things I propose in the following section is that some stage worlds tool their humour for deeper imprint by fastening it to the theatrical assumptions of the actual event.

⁸ Bert O. States (1985), p. 4.

2.2 A UNIVERSE RIGGED FOR HUMOUR

2.2.1 Surface joking

With the above definition in mind, the stage world as ‘aesthetic object’ begins to take shape for the spectator at the instant of first contact.⁹ As noted earlier, there will no doubt have been a host of hermeneutic influences before the theatregoer sets foot in the theatre. Advance dispositions will have some effect upon reception in areas like genre decoding, plot expectations and critical opinion.

But regardless of the near impossibility of a clean receptive slate, the clock begins ticking in earnest once the spectator and stage world come face to face (or, more properly, body to body). For most contemporary productions the theatregoer (who has arrived before the show starts) turns spectator upon entering the auditorium and encountering a stage ‘pre-set’ for action, sometimes accompanied by music or other input. Even productions using an act curtain to withhold this first encounter until the last minute will often open upon a stage devoid of actors, if only for seconds.

A set without actors is nonetheless ‘performing’ from the instant the spectator lays eyes on it. Already delineating itself phenomenally, significantly and generically, ‘the stage picture leads us by the senses into its world’.¹⁰ It anticipates its action and imparts that anticipation to the spectator; it shows us something about how it will make itself and how it will represent, introducing us to its particular feeling of ‘worldness’. Beginning to sketch itself as the spectator first regards the stage, its world then gathers detail with heightened intensity as actors occupy the environment.

The theatrical frame does not by definition incur joking obligation or permission. Each performance fabric must establish and maintain its own credentials, and begins to offer them up through clues supplied by the set. If we care to notice upon entering a theatre, the awaiting set should already be showing us something of what we can (or should not) expect from it as a ‘world for humour’ in, for example, the social and historic

⁹ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. lii. Put simply, but helpfully for phenomenological considerations, Dufrenne considers the raw materials of an object a ‘work of art’ until they are perceived with aesthetic intent, at which point they become the ‘aesthetic object’.

¹⁰ Bert O. States (1985), p. 51.

implications of a represented environment; its style of depiction and view of reality; and the mood of its colour or shading.

The impending stage world established for Declan Hughes' *Twenty Grand*, as produced in 1998 at the Peacock theatre, Dublin, presents a sleek modern-day club lounge for pre-set introduction to the incoming spectator. With deco-style bar and mirrors, reddish leather furnishings and picture window looking from high above Dublin's city centre, there are thus far no theatrical short cuts taken, no betrayals of a gap between phenomena and a face-value style of representation. A piece of the world caught 'candidly' fills the proscenium, and all set elements seem to stand for themselves. The space clearly marks a certain societal milieu, insinuating an inchoate genre frame from attitudes and anticipations -- cultural and theatrical -- on the part of the spectator.

This is an introduction to what I consider a surface or 'realistic' style of theatrical depiction by virtue of a certain one-to-one correspondence between phenomenal presences and fictional counterparts. The onstage chairs are 'playing themselves' as are all furniture pieces, decorations, props and costumes. In such a style the actors and actresses *are* their human characters in movement, speech and psycho-emotional continuity, within a minimum sphere of worldly possibility. Indeed, the bodies in this theatrical world will appear to suffer the real-life injuries of punishment beating, knifing and shooting.

This is to point out that I do not necessarily consider the events or the manner in which they take place to be a 'realistic' or perhaps 'actual' depiction of the world outside the theatre. *Twenty Grand*, in fact, borrows its frame of reference from existing 'low-life' crime genres in literature and film, and the humour, such that it is, attempts to siphon joking permission through those generic prisms. Clearly the average theatregoers owe most, if not all, of their knowledge of 'underworld' activity from just these fictional appropriations, which may come to pass for the 'real thing' in their minds, but allow the stereotyping and distancing for its particular brand of unfeeling humour to take place.

At the start of *Twenty Grand* a recording of Frank Sinatra singing, 'I'm Gonna Live Till I Die', in a jazzy, brazen, 1950s style, fills the auditorium. The lights come up to reveal a man in his 40s, nicely dressed, smoking and looking out the window as he paces back and forth. Shortly a young man enters through a door, house left. The first man, seemingly involved in the music, signals for the newcomer to stay quiet a moment. No words have yet been spoken, but we are likely to recognise a range of potential framing refined further through environment and situational behaviour. The first man, in his respectable, authoritative bearing, seems to occupy some position of authority in relation to the newcomer, who is dressed more casually. He takes stock of the room and checks his watch while respectfully awaiting permission to speak.

When the older man, whom we will meet as Hackett, finally switches off the music via remote control, the younger man, Dalton, broaches the silence: ‘You wanted to see me.’

Hackett, responds firmly, yet evenly: ‘Seventeen minutes ago.’

The scene continues and the men talk, maintaining a rhythmic momentum in the dialogue. While not rushed, there are no pauses for thought, little movement in the first several exchanges. The style is tautly realistic, yet pared to the bone.

DALTON: I got held up.

HACKETT: Excuse me?

DALTON: I got held up.

HACKETT: At gun point?

DALTON: Wha’?

HACKETT: You got held up. Is that it?

DALTON: Yeah. Wha’?

HACKETT: Because if it was Bozo Kearns, say, I could cook the Sunday fuckin’ roast while Bozo was guidin’ me through the maze of lost keys and flat batteries and incompetent subordinates that caused him, unaccountably, to be so tardy; even if all it was is he’s come to between the blotchy white thighs of some robber’s dog welfare queen, he’s nursin’ a brain haemorrhage hangover and he’s hopin’ ‘cause we’re in a club I can’t smell the clouds of pure alcohol waftin’ from the folds of his brightly coloured, incriminatin’ly stained synthetic leisure wear; even if, that is, he has no fucking excuse whatever except him bein’ a stupid messy cunt, he will nonetheless extend to me the courtesy of fabricatin’ a raft of thoroughly implausible *bollocks* in an effort to allay my quite understandable irritation. And I owe Bozo a favour. Bozo and me go *back*. Do you see what I’m sayin’, son?

By now, in the above sequence, the genre frame has been substantially clarified. Liam Carney, as Hackett, wears an expensive suit with a hanky in the breast pocket, keeps cool control of his body while his voice exudes command. The character appears to have a strong sense of irony, rarely giving away thought or feeling with his inscrutable expression. Environment, dress, interaction, language, and a certain behavioural style, particularly on Carney’s part, coat the stage world in a recognisable brand of literate, thuggish pseudo-realism. Interestingly, it is not likely to be the stuff of the average theatregoer’s everyday world, but familiar all the same. It behaves along the lines of a gangsterish genre of fiction and cinema, violent and glib, identified originally with writers like Raymond Chandler and given a 1990s tongue-in-cheek cynicism by filmmaker Quentin Tarrantino. Here it is retooled for northside Dublin through cultural signifiers and regional dialect. Notice, again, that identification with these genre relatives encourages a receptive

stance which counts for its ‘humour of violence’ on these inherited framings overshadowing the serious real-life strips of experience.

A subsequent discussion of Dalton’s ‘cut’ from ‘the credit card thing’ further confirm the underworld milieu suggested in the speech. This strain of fictional world comes ready made for dry, cynical humour, predicated as it is upon a presumed clash of frames: a morally corrupt and deadly character base given a facility for detached philosophising and verbal articulation.

Hackett hangs out an individually inscribed genre shingle with his lengthy speech, the rhythms of its mock poetic imagery syncopated with the gutter euphemisms one might expect from society’s underside. The long speech thrives on a string of linguistic *reversals* from deft description to blunt profanity. But it also lays open a *gap* to be bridged between Hackett’s nimble samples of extravagant excuse-making and an archetypal social situation or personality, perhaps well familiar to the spectator. A generic ‘hook’ for humour comes from an identification with common patterns of social experience, ironically removed to an extreme milieu -- here it is a synchronic bisociation of the criminal world with our own day-to-day lives.

A second primary source of humour in this opening scene and throughout the play comes from Hackett’s relationship with his son Dean, who is in his early 20s. Both men are unflinchingly violent, but Dean’s feral taste for brutality, as played by Karl Shiels with an empty-headed readiness, provides easy *reversals* for Hackett’s *setups*. Dean’s depiction, in fact, stretches the stage world toward a broader, more traditionally comic framing. His flashy jacket and tie, caged energy and vacuousness fit within the genre, while pulling it and Hackett into a more farcically based shrewd-guy/fall-guy duo that sends up the father-son relationship.

Shortly after Dean’s entrance, manhandling a suspected traitor, he becomes confused over Dalton’s first name and keeps interrupting the interrogation. His father finally attends to him, in a sense dropping out of ‘professional’ mode into ‘paternal’ mode, the sudden switch itself a stylistic cue for humour:

HACKETT: Dean, d’you remember the rule?

DEAN: Yes Da.

HACKETT: What was the rule?

DEAN: If you’re a thick cunt, shut up.

HACKETT: And what are ya, son?

DEAN: I’m a thick cunt, Da.

HACKETT: Thank you, son.

This short exchange is played quickly and clearly, like a regular father-son drill, for which the son has already realised his misstep, and demonstrates he 'knows better' in his dutiful, slightly frustrated responses. The tone, of course, is more appropriate for dealing with a child of four or five -- the politeness of the phrasing and delivery is made even more incongruous by the cruel crudeness of the catechism.

A minute later, Hackett describes to a suspected traitor the instrument designed for gouging out the eyeballs of gangland turncoats:

HACKETT First, this ingenious custom-made tool. Call it an eye-hook. See, it's an ordinary hunting knife, but with an inch at the point angled 90 degrees against the blade. What you do is, slip the tip into the side of the eye, fold the handle back until the hook sits snug in the socket, just behind the eyeball ... it's a bit like shuckin' an oyster ... tug firmly and Pop! Repeat on the other side and Here Comes the Night ... da da-da *daa* da ... Dean devised this little instrument, didn't ya Dino?

DEAN Yes Da.

Hackett's speech bisociates the frame of gangland torture with that of a glib lecturer or a television advertisement for some amazing new kitchen gadget. Dean, rather than launching into his own explanation, again assumes the frame of schoolboy proudly having his science project touted by Dad. Contrapuntal to the potential for witty badinage, humour loves to cut through verbal veneer.

Hackett maintains what seems like a horribly condescending attitude by a father toward his son, exaggerated to such a degree and under such unlikely circumstances so as (hopefully) to wedge the spectator's psychic distance wide enough for humour. The playwright takes advantage of the pattern by reversing it for one of the few instances of potential humour late in the play.

The plot has been driven by a missing £20,000, which no one will admit to having taken. Considerable violence, vividly portrayed or described, has already resulted from various efforts to recover it. With two bodies already lying about the stage and another imminent, Dean suddenly admits to having taken the money:

DEAN: I was gettin' a bit pissed off everyone goin' on how fuckin' smart Tommy [Dalton] was, with his credit card this an' his computer that. Thought to meself, Dean's not as thick as everyone thinks. Dean can do somethin' smart too.

HACKETT: So what did you do, Dean?

DEAN: I kidnapped the assistant manager's mother, told him I'd rape her if he didn't give me twenty grand. He got it out of some fuckin' pension fund or somethin'.

Didn't think it'd cause all this bother but, eh, 'fraid to say anythin' case ... well, just in case, you know? I still have it all but.

The turn of events presents an amusing *reversal* in itself, as Dean seems the one person least equipped intellectually to carry through such a deception. His tale about the 'assistant manager's mother' is a ludicrously unworthy explanation, delivered sheepishly by the actor. There is a beat of silence as the audience wonders what unspeakable response or paternal chastisement Hackett will come up with. He then begins to applaud, and says with disbelieving pride: 'Ah, Dean, Dino, De-an-issimo, good man. First time I've felt you're your father's son.'

This moment, which comes at a time when the spectator is probably grateful for any spark of lightness, *reverses* the running gag of the relationship. The *gap* to be bridged contains residues of all the father's comically harsh reprimands thus far. It also offers cynical irony in the variety of reprehensible 'lessons' Dean seems to have learned in finally gaining his dad's approval.

The stage world for *Twenty Grand* is disclosed in its virtual entirety within the first minutes of performance. The spectator is encouraged to register a lack of guile in the signifying strategies of a stage world which conspicuously shies from declaring itself as theatrically constructed. There are no changes in modes of representation along the way; any humorous *reversals* remain fully accountable within the established ground rules. Its comedy is both acquired from the genre and 'spun off' from it. Its humorous mainsprings -- Hackett's self-styled gangsterese, Dean's goggle-eyed pugnacity, and their ability to clash humorously as father and son -- are in place.

This type of exterior correspondence between phenomena and fictional world, a basic psycho-social believability in the characters and their embodiment, and the realistic accommodation of violence and its ramifications, set predictable conditions and parameters for potential humour. Many spectators are not able to find amusement in these goings-on, especially during the last deadly section. Here is where fiction and film literally get away with murder in a joking vein -- violence sits less comfortably in the theatre, with its firsthand proximity to the perceiving body, especially in a fourth-wall, 'realistic' style.

The humour of the *Twenty Grand* stage world is surely more hard-bitten than many, but follows a paradigm for what I consider 'realistic' stage worlds, in which humour for the most part concerns itself with the recognition of life and its external manifestations. Underlying any individual joke, a broader *gap* to be bridged often refers

the spectator's attention to the cushioning space between a stage world pitched to afford some degree of aloofness and the range of 'real' experience in the lived-through world.

2.2.2 Humour among frames

Some stage worlds not only admit to their theatrical contrivance, but mine the humorous capacities of the constructive elements themselves in their presumption of what I consider a 'non-realistic' latitude between signifiers and signifieds. The 1997 Barabbas production of *The Whiteheaded Boy* is unusually direct about the establishment of a stage world that includes a joking relationship with the audience, beginning in advance of the performance proper. The play, by Lennox Robinson, was written in 1916 and is described as 'a light-hearted comedy about the small-town social pretensions and self-deceptions which beset the Geoghegan family'¹¹ in provincial Ireland.

As performed in a black-box space (the project@the mint in Dublin) of about 120 seats on risers, theatregoers enter upon a set already inhabited by the performers. The set itself features a blown-up, turn-of-the-century trompe d'oeil image as backdrop, looking down what appears to be the main street of a small town, storefronts lining both sides. The backdrop proffers context upon life-size set pieces, which carry through the photographic cutout effect upon a round table and three chairs, stage centre; a fireplace, angled downstage house left; and a small table downstage house right -- whatever sits upon the table is hidden by a large cloth.

The three performers, Mikel Murfi, Veronica Coburn and Raymond Keane (who work together regularly under the company name of Barabbas), are dressed plainly but uniformly in dark trousers, long-sleeve jerseys and charcoal waistcoats. Few people who come to see the show will be unaware of Barabbas' reputation for physically adept humor and outright clown performance. The performers wait informally for 'curtain' time as 'themselves': talking to one another, smiling and laughing, acknowledging and even greeting the theatregoers filing in, one of them acting as a sort of host and carrying on brief chats with those he knows. The performers share with the audience the pre-performance bonhomie which might in other cases be going on without them.

The production, in effect, attempts to put a convivial arm around the spectator's shoulder from first contact. Ordinarily the set seen prior to performance represents a piece of a world of which certain conclusions might be drawn, but whose otherness cannot yet fully be known. In this case the barrier between the theatre's 'here' and the stage world's

¹¹ David Nowlan (1997). It has also been denoted 'a traditional drama epitomising the Irish struggle for independence': Sophie Gorman (1997).

‘there’ is bridged in advance, a degree of potential strangeness defused. Although the set design emphasises its representationality, the stage world has introduced itself as dispensing with customary theatrical ceremony. Humour not only seeks consensus but loves a lack of pretence -- in light of the tone set by the actors, it would be surprising if the production did *not* have joking on its mind.

At some signal, the performers migrate toward the small, house-right table, behind which they stand politely until the audience become silent. Coburn, standing between the two men, announces in an even, narratorial tone, ‘The Whiteheaded Boy. A well-made play by Lennox Robinson’.¹² A short blackout follows and when the lights come up the actors are still in their previous positions, shoulder to shoulder; the cloth has been removed to reveal a model of a theatre set with scale footlights, miniature furniture and wall hangings. There is something quietly magical about the sight/feeling: The three performers stand behind the model, their faces perched just above it, inviting the spectator through beaming expression to inhabit this actual yet small-scale piece of a home.

Coburn begins to describe the set, a portion of which, it becomes obvious, is represented upon the stage at the foot of the street shown on the backdrop. It should at some point register to spectators who don’t already know, that the three actors are by turn giving voice to the playwright’s expository stage directions. Unlike most play scripts, they are written in an ostentatiously subjective register more suitable to a novel or storyteller, as if spoken by a character who oversees the play and gives clucking commentary to character and action. Christopher Murray describes it thus:

‘A curious, informed, yet ill-educated person (who uses quaint turns of phrase and even dialect at times) takes the spectator into his confidence and comments on the setting, the characters, and the action in such a way as to provide a filter for the comedy.’¹³

Indeed, the artistic choice does not ring forced. For example, following the first purely descriptive sentence of an opening page and a half of stage directions, comes:

¹² All subsequent citations of spoken text and stage directions are from the published text of *The Whiteheaded Boy*, in *Selected Plays of Lennox Robinson* (1982).

¹³ Christopher Murray (1982), p. 14. In his *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*, Murray writes: ‘The stage directions in the published text seem to derive from a traditional story-teller, an acute observer but an invented persona not to be identified with Robinson himself’, p. 116.

‘William Geoghegan (God rest his soul) was a very genteel man, and when the wife brought him the house and the bit of land instead of getting a tenant for it like a sensible man (and the whole village knew Clancy, the vet, was mad to take it), nothing would do him but live in it himself and walk down to his business every day like a millionaire. ’Tis too high notions poor William always had ...’

Keane supplies the parenthetic, ‘God rest his soul’. Murfi takes over the phrase which follows the above passage, ‘and his sister Ellen, worse again than himself, craning after anything new she’d be like a cow through a fence ...’ At the naming of Ellen, Coburn assumes the character: She turns sideways and puts on a pair of spectacles, resting them low on her nose, puts her fists on her hips, thrusts out her belly to suggest girth, and turns down the corners of her mouth. She emits a laboured exhalation and thrusts her tongue around her lips.

This introduces the evening’s convention of sudden transformation into, out of, and between characters -- each performer plays at least three -- through broad, thumbnail physical signatures. Coburn then moves onto the set and Keane picks up the narrator’s voice to introduce George, played by Murfi. A few lines later Coburn returns to narrator; she describes Mrs. Geoghegan and the role is taken by Keane, thereby opening the convention to include characters of one sex played by someone of the other.

Moments later, Coburn is introduced as the elderly servant, Hannah. The actress throws her body into a state of hunched decrepitude requiring the aide of a walker, and croaks a death-rattling ‘Aaaah’. She then hauls herself in three hard-fought ‘strides’ toward centre stage for the first actual line of the play, ‘Will I bring in the ham, ma’am?’, delivered in an ancient, rasping voice.

The surrounding stage world bases itself in the general vicinity of our own: The performers do not pretend to be anyone more than themselves taking on fictional roles, as established by continuity with their pre-performance conduct. Sometimes a performer will act surprised that it is his or her ‘turn’ to fulfill a function. At other times they will transform with Pavlovian abruptness upon the utterance of a character’s name, appearing to bypass completely the performer’s thought processes. These effects do not necessarily preclude the fact of the production’s ‘rehearsedness’.

For the most part, the stage world has established its ground rules as the dialogue begins. The evolving fiction, its host and inhabitants expressed with a sense of winking affection by people made of the same stuff as the theatregoers, appears pitched in a tone that justifies those features of the literary text prone to strike modern theatregoers as antiquated or clichéd. As one critic observed, ‘the whole theatrical confection remains

tongue-in-cheek faithful to Mr. Robinson's original intention, and most of it is much funnier than any 80-year-old light comedy has any right to be'.¹⁴

The production has by now customised the stage world for four general paradigms of humour in excess of what may be construed as the literary text's joking intentions: 1) stage directions; 2) quick changes of character; 3) casting and gender, age and behaviour; and 4) intrusion of another 'world' frame.

1) An early stage direction reads, 'You're admiring the furniture?' Murfi's chatty reading of the line seems to ignore the fact that he is pointing to the furniture on the model set -- or does it? His tone can be imbued with several possible attitudes by the spectator, but three obvious *gaps* hang in the air ripe for bridging: perhaps most obviously, the asking of such a question in reference to the doll-size furnishings; the knowledge that the line, as stage direction, is absurdly garrulous for a piece of literary text the spectator is rarely intended to see, and in any case was intended for reference to life-size furniture; and the performer's perceived critique, through the line's ever so parodic delivery, of a recognisable strain of sociocultural behaviour.

2) By the end of the opening stage directions Coburn has 'taken on' two roles. Prior to the introduction of Hannah mentioned above, she assumes the character of Kate, the eldest daughter. Kate, described by Robinson as 'plain', quietly hard-working, and ill-treated by romance, is drawn with a wistful, open face; standing with hand to upturned chin, she casts her gaze toward some distant vista, and heaves a meaningful sigh. Having posed for a few seconds, she turns dramatically upstage, setting an identifiable quality for the character.

Following her first line of the script as Hannah, Mrs. Geoghegan has a line, then Coburn turns suddenly into Kate to answer her. These transformations of character place two characters side by side in one body, sometimes amusingly different in appearance and/or energy. The sudden changes, of course, set up eventualities for one performer singlehandedly to conduct a scene between two people -- a feat which each of the three undertakes at least once. The execution of these duologues to maximum humorous effect will be addressed more fully in the practical section (3.2.2).

3) The character of Mrs. Geoghegan, the widowed nurturer of the family, is described in the stage directions as 'a hearty woman yet', 'not more than sixty-five years of age', having 'such a pleasant way with her', and 'not what I'd call a clever woman'. Keane inhabits the role by softening his mien, bringing his elbows close to his body, while

¹⁴ David Nowlan (1997), *The Irish Times*.

allowing his hands to float generally upward, one to his collar, the other, bent at the wrist, palm up and fingers gently curled. His head sits slightly back of his shoulders. His facial features knit toward his forehead in a mask of practised concern, a quality carried through in his pinched voice.

The character's 'womanly' and 'maternal' behaviour, though not ridiculed in Keane's portrayal, clearly emanates from the body of a man. There is no change of costume or make-up -- whatever skill is brought to bear in playing the character, the brute presence of the actor's body, previously ascertained as male, remains undeniable. Given the comic framing of the performance, this has the effect of offering up for humorous defamiliarisation moments when we perceive Mrs. Geoghegan at her most 'maternal'.

When midway through the first act, Mrs. Geoghegan is accused by Aunt Ellen of favouring her son Denis (the title character) over her other children, she responds:

And why shouldn't I make differences? Is there anyone living who'd stand up on that floor and say that Denis isn't smarter and cleverer than his two brothers -- or his sisters, either -- or the whole menagerie of the Geoghegans lumped together? From the day he was born I knew he was different. Oh, Ellen, it will break my heart if George turns against him now!

Keane (as Mrs. Geoghegan) delivers the speech sitting at the table: stoically defensive, clenched fist to mouth as if holding a hanky to stop the tears, using voice and fist to emphasise heartfelt conviction on individual words (e.g., 'From the *day he was born*'). Deftly observed character and performing body can never be disengaged from one another, while at the same time the rift between them stretches wide, instigating a sort of psychic optical illusion between phenomenal and semiotic worlds. It must be said that because aspects of Keane's characterisation read as so well observed, the discrepancy tends toward narrowing, oddly invoking Bergson's comic 'mental see-saw' effect.¹⁵ At the same time, the actor's gestural palette inserts enough of a wedge between character and behaviour so as to underscore the disappearing line between melodrama and comedy for a contemporary audience.

A few lines later, when 'Mrs. Geoghegan' utters the phrase, 'women like me', with confidential conviction (still talking to Aunt Ellen, played by Coburn), the *gap* of the gender incongruity is flooded with explicit irony.

¹⁵ Henri Bergson (1900), p. 123. 'A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.'

The characterisation amuses because it is so organically drawn, in no way a camp caricature in walk or speech. When, in the first act, Mrs. Geoghegan defends her preferential treatment of her son Denis (the title character), the social stereotype is defamiliarised *because* it is so earnestly rendered.

4) As noted above, the stage world is outlined rather straightforwardly in terms of three performers from our own reality, acting and narrating a play they have either rehearsed or collaborate on intuitively. But the entrance of Louis Lovett, who plays Denis, asks for the first time that the spectator buy into a theatrical illusion -- not an intrusion from the *real* world, but from the *fictional* world.

Upon the usual introduction -- Coburn as narrator says, 'Ah! Here's Denis in the other door. Isn't he lovely? You'd know he was from Dublin by his clothes and his smartness. He's just turned twenty-two' -- Murfi has already assumed the role, 'epitomising' in the production's caricatured style an urbane and confident young fellow, cigar in one hand and brandy snifter in the other. But Lovett arrives on the stage, apparently 'the character himself', embodied in a more old-fashioned theatrical style, with heavily blushed cheeks and bright blond hair, fully costumed in cream suit, scarf and checked vest. His appearance, with an acting style somehow lower-keyed than the others, marks him as made from 'other material' than the rest of the people in the stage world.

Lovett is put forth as a (rather Pirandellian) pure inhabitant of the fictional world, and the other three performers behave as if he is an 'unexpected' addition to their storytelling. They go through phases of surprise, confusion, amusement and reluctance before deciding to interact with him. He effectively introduces his own incongruous level of reality to the stage world, supplying textbook conditions for humorous cross-framing.

The difference is immediately mined to comic effect by Keane. Denis/Lovett says, 'Hullo, mother'; Keane suddenly 'decides' to continue the play and snaps into Mrs. Geoghegan's character. He catapults onto Lovett's hip, arms around his neck and both legs airborne in double arabesque, for his, 'Denis! My darling boy!' The stage world accommodates such an overtly physical gag, which strikes by surprise because the stylistic detachment from real-life representation tolerates extravagance without prescribing it.

In *The Whiteheaded Boy*, an added theatrical frame places the performer as a comic prism between character and spectator (evocative of Brechtian technique), encouraging laughter *with* the 'production' and *at* the fictional world, its real-life referents and the original dramatic vehicle. These general types of joking have all been pre-installed for the stage world, as configured primarily in the foundational *priming sequence* before 'curtain' and during the opening moments of performance in flight.

2.2.3 Preparations for darker humour

Not all stage worlds, of course, request such unambiguous joking specifications. Particularly those wishing to admit darker colours tactfully measure out serious and non-serious cues side by side. As described briefly in 1.4.7, Théâtre de Complicité look the audience straight in the eye for an introductory joking sequence in *Out of a house, walked a man* ... But in this case the theatrical frame remains relatively formal, actors do not admit to identities outside the stage world. Arriving theatregoers have already been greeted by an imposing environment; at first sight, the unpopulated set couches the coming vision of life in an image of sombre and overwhelming space.

I have focused my argument thus far on the stage world's function as an environment supercharged with significance, primarily for its relationship to the authorised subject. But Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, explores in terms similar to Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne connections of human subject to environment which would seem to suggest a direct engagement by the spectator prior to the actor's presence.¹⁶

For the perceiving subject, space is no mere matter of physical boundary, nor does it exist devoid of an affective charge for the inner body. As explained by Bachelard, open plains and deep forests give rise to profound feelings; shelter has become as the womb rediscovered against the elements of nature. The enclosed spaces of our lives gather around them meanings for the body in excess of their practical purposes. To be sure, the theatregoer responds to space in a studio theatre, music hall, spectacle venue, or open-air theatre in different ways, not entirely assignable to cultural or economic insinuation.

There is, it seems, more than an element of acquired symbolism to our feelings about generic aspects of space and its enclosure (e.g., routine descent toward the cellar or climbing to the attic). But if it is more symbol than instinct that has come to cause the response, it is a symbol whose accompanying feelings of routine have become so engraved in the body's experience as to merge the strong emotional echoes with the space's essential features.

The 'sonority of being'¹⁷, which Bachelard attributes to the poetic image, stems from a personal involvement in these spaces we experience and therefore can (or cannot) feel directly. It can be argued that stage pictures are poetic images cobbled together with brute presences instead of words. Space in the theatre is available to us first-hand in all its dimension and at least some of its ambience, as are all the phenomena in its grasp.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard (1969), p. xxii. For example, he suggests the principle of reversibility in his comment, 'It is as though the poet's being were our being'.

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard (1969), p. xvi.

Regardless of semiotic intent, ‘things are *present* to us in perception, and there is no screen between them and us. We are both of the same race’.¹⁸ The theatrical ‘image’ -- that which fills and inhabits our field of perception -- thrives on its three dimensions apprehended at once, and so it fosters multiple or contradictory presences capable of affective nuance and inexhaustible by semiotic interpretation alone.

For Bachelard the image of the play’s title, *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, would already have sent preliminary ripples through the spectator: no particular house and no particular man, the two rhythmically balanced, unhurried phrases describing an image of departure from shelter, led by the ellipsis toward a generic unknown.

The formidable proscenium space at the Lyttelton Theatre presents to the arriving theatregoer a multi-story backdrop: the murky, shadowy facade shows columns and rows of black rectangles, suggesting windows of some huge institutional exterior; it is textured, seemingly made from a huge number of square leaves, some of which peel slightly away at the corners. The stage is empty save for a desk and chair toward the front, and a freestanding door unit near centre. The spectator cannot exclude any of the four main elements from the field of vision: backdrop, desk and chair, door unit, and surrounding space.

It may not be advisable to propose too specific a response to this awaiting world. But the darkness and roughness of the backdrop might be said to endow the expanse of stage space with a metaphysical colour. At the same time, the furniture and door unit -- designed to intimate ‘deskness’ and ‘doorness’ in a broad, plain sense -- project some essence of an ‘inside’ against a brooding universe. If Bachelard is right, any notion of ‘house’ instills primal feelings of enclosure, protection and warmth: ‘It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life’.¹⁹ In this case, the macrocosmic inference is well drawn. The absence of visible partition, however, might restrain the inclination toward comfort: The walls, though willingly thrown up by the perceiving imagination, are simply not there -- without insulation, the space’s threat imposes itself through the rest of the image. This explanation may already be too confident in its specificity; but the spectator’s experience of the stage space must certainly vibrate as dark and cavernous, overwhelming the human scale of its few ‘civilised’ objects.

This is not an obvious joking environment, to say the least; nor are any further clues given as the space is soon occupied by the man at the desk in profile and then by the second man who enters through the door frame, both wearing dark suits. The sequence

¹⁸ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), pp. 336-7.

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard (1969), p. 7.

toys generally with the audience's 'horizon of expectations' in the crucial opening moments of performance. Within an otherwise imposing visual image, both actors remain stock still, bringing the flow of signs to a virtual standstill at a time when the spectator desperately seeks clues as to 'How should I take this world?' and 'What is going on?', let alone 'Do I have permission to take this unorthodox introduction humorously?' To add to the devilishness, *Complicité* is as well known for its serious work as its comic capacities; its stylistic technique is infused with a spirit of the 'new clown' movement, for which 'it is the individual poetic object that counts, and that does not necessarily need to be funny'.²⁰ The 'cultured' theatregoer likely to be attending the performance, would be reluctant to laugh in the 'wrong' place.

The initial 'I am testing my theory of humour' sequence, in which the second man stares at the audience until someone laughs and then marks with his gaze the origins of successive laughter, assigns a distinctive joking personality to the stage world, given a sardonic undertow by the looming environment. The opening joke's particular nature plays upon the singular, unrepeatable experience of each audience, initiating, as the director Simon McBurney has said, a 'sense of common understanding which exists in that room for the evening'.²¹ It gives permission, perhaps even pre-emptive instruction, to apply non-serious consideration to future events, so that bleak and violent images to come acquire a darkly grinning cast.

As a sort of coda to the sequence, which had ended with the first man describing what the second man had just proved -- 'If you want the auditorium to laugh, come out on to the stage and stand there in silence until someone bursts out laughing' -- the first man moves centre stage and the second man stands in back and to the side of him. Together they say, 'After this you may proceed to your programme of humour and, rest assured, success is guaranteed'. This theatrical device proposes the two men as part of the same psyche, or at least that the second man exhibits an aspect of the first. The second actor launches into an animated 'dance', back and forth across the stage, all limbs, and angles and body shapes, a sort of music-hall puppet set free.

The sequence shows, as demonstrated above in *The Whiteheaded Boy*, how a stage world establishes stylistic and thematic features which provide an enabling framework for the ensuing dynamic of humour. In this case the comic backbone will include a mischievous linguistic intelligence; the dual signifiers -- earthbound and

²⁰ W. Kenneth Little (1986), p. 55.

²¹ Simon McBurney (1994), p. 15. McBurney was speaking in general of a desired effect of 'complicity' he seeks to establish with an audience.

exuberant -- of the production's central figure, Russian writer Daniil Kharms, portrayed by separate actors; and a clownlike physical dialect meant literally to embody the life spirit.

Complicité grounds its work in collaborative devising, physical invention and proficiency, and so the stage world will continue to evolve through expressionistic images enacted by the ensemble. Scenes are likely to swirl one into another through suggestive set pieces, props or physicalised moods, sometimes underscored by music. Death and deprivation will be shown to the spectator as constant presences in Kharms' life. But these opening moments establish a vision of life that includes laughter in the embrace of the ominous space. The stage world comes to integrate the spiritual opposition between the life-affirming impulse of the 'laughter' sequence and the surrounding forces of Stalinist tyranny, producing a sort of absurdist cosmos which appears indifferent at best and malevolent at worst.

I have named the character played by the first actor, Stage Kharms, who represents a 'real-world' incarnation of the protagonist/narrator; I refer to the other character as Clown Kharms, embodying the man's spiritual buoyancy. One reviewer described the two actors, Jozef Houben and Toby Sedgwick, as 'looking like a pair of sensitive intellectual clowns in half-mast trousers, outsize shoes, droopy jackets and wing-collars'²². Stage Kharms is played by Houben, a lanky actor with a natural style of movement and articulation. Clown Kharms, entirely an invention of the Complicité production, is played by Sedgwick, a more compact and wiry actor. The following set piece, which appears later in the first act, demonstrates in microcosm how the stage world in the opening moments establishes a triggering device for a key strain of its eventual humour, also serving as a template for its evolving 'felt life'.

Stage Kharms' small flat is represented by an unwallled area at the centre of the stage, inhabited by a few pieces of utilitarian furniture in close proximity. He has been portrayed so far as a writer close to starvation and under faceless external threat from 'the authorities'; here he is caught in mortal battle between sleep and poetic inspiration, with Clown Kharms at hand for spiritual uplift. Finally, from the folds of slumber, Stage Kharms conceives the germ of a story about 'a miracle worker who is living in our time and who doesn't work any miracles ... and eventually dies, without having done a single miracle in the whole of his life'. The two alter-egos gambol about jubilantly, as Stage Kharms revels aloud at his incipient triumph: 'Now then, now then, to work! Away with any kind of sleep and laziness! I shall write for eighteen hours straight off!'

²² Paul Taylor (1994).

He then proceeds to enact a babbling inner monologue, a wheel-spinning frenzy that seeks out any conceivable task to forestall the paralysing responsibility of putting pen to paper. He spends several moments pacing, flopping into a chair, springing up again, lighting a pipe, looking out the window; and all the while Clown Kharms shadows and parallels him, offering a nimble accompaniment of psychic cheerleading.

Finally, with Clown Kharms at his shoulder, Stage Kharms sits at the desk and squeezes the first line into being, word by word: 'The miracle worker was a tall man'. Clown Kharms approves this disappointing start with as much heartiness as he can muster. Stage Kharms remains poised over the page, while Clown Kharms tries bodily to buttress creative momentum. Using all the body English at his command to inspire a second sentence, every one of his muscles urges upward, his hand uncurling as if to wrest the words, 'And then ...' After a few moments, teetering on the edge of hope, Stage Kharms gives up -- 'Nothing more can I write', he says -- and Clown Kharms slumps in psychic defeat.

A painstaking chronicle of each successive humorous moment in the sequence -- many of which can be surmised from the highlight transcription above -- would take several pages, better filled with some wider observations. The sequence shows the two Kharmses angled cleverly at different points of engagement to the same task or 'plot line'. While Stage Kharms undertakes to shift his own palpable writer's block and accomplish something tangible, Clown Kharms takes aim directly upon his alter-ego's leaden spirit. In this scene the journey is made more interesting, not to mention entertaining, by charting two courses that continually join, parallel and veer apart right up to the final standstill.

The separate performative energies alone prove highly comic in different ways: Stage Kharms' movement is fitful. His manic ballet of procrastination places frame after frame, one activity then another, each humorously contradictory and fully invested. Clown Kharms, who has a more fluid style of movement, exudes festivity even when standing still; he marshals all his forces in one Sisyphean effort to pry open the paralysing grip on Stage Kharms' creativity.

It may be argued that Stage Kharms alone could render the character with dramatic justice. The use of Clown Kharms, however, provides a legitimate and theatrical extrapolation of the 'original' literary texts from which the piece was devised, with its linguistic pratfalls and parodic reception gags. It also introduces a lively and comforting mode of performance humour into a fictional universe that inclines toward bitter irony.

Clown figures exact an interesting flavour of authorisation from the spectator: As privileged agents of the unfranchised they allow an everyman's identification with uphill struggle. At the same time they encourage in the laughter an assertion of Hobbesian

superiority -- despite unswerving determination and fantastic invention, clowns always fail. In fact, the clown arrives inscribed for reception with a general metaphysical brief: 'Everything he does goes wrong, but he persists, as if the repetition denoted constant success'.²³ Clown Kharms' involvement in this context may supply surreptitiously a naive, irrepressible and doomed shading for feelings and expectations.

Complicité's ability to extend the reach of theatre representation produces a strangely ambivalent fabric of feeling in this 'non-realistic' stage world. No small part of the effect derives from familiar humour strategies -- the clown, for example -- giving a comically 'comfortable' shading to the expression of psychic disjunction and metaphysical menace, as will be seen further in the next sub-chapter.

2.2.4 Joking and representation

Stage and Clown Kharms compose a unified version of the historic Kharms as his own straight man, a sort of bipolar vaudeville act which personifies Enid Welsford's notion that 'the clown depends, not upon the external conflicts of hostile groups, but upon a certain inner contradiction in the soul of every man'.²⁴ My suggestion, of course, is that the two presences stand in co-presently for the single perceiving subject. They set up within the spectator a complex resonance in a serio-comic key, struck from opposing feelings about failure and success, inertia and action, triviality and creativity.

To be sure, the stage world has by this point coalesced further in consequential ways. It transmits a feeling of itself linguistically and theatrically through a series of mini-texts 'written aloud' by Stage Kharms from his desk area. One of them goes as follows:

'A certain old woman, out of excessive curiosity, fell out of a window, plummeted to the ground, and was smashed to pieces. Another old woman leaned out the window and began looking at the remains of the first one, but she also, out of excessive curiosity, fell out of the window, plummeted to the ground and was smashed to pieces. Then a third old woman plummeted from the window, then a fourth, then a fifth. By the time the sixth old woman tumbled out of the window, I got bored with them.'

Short, uttered pieces like this one carry the makings of what we call 'character' via language, style of humour and conveyance -- it is likely that we form attitudes toward the

²³ Wolfgang Iser, (1987), p. 56.

²⁴ Enid Welsford (1935), p. 318.

stage world and its inhabitants by our alignment with its joking matter and disposition. The story begins in a sort of gossipy register before taking a sudden dive into cartoon violence. (The old woman seems to change from human being to flower pot by the end of the first sentence.) The narrator defies comic convention by declining to make the third old woman into a punchline. Macabre farce turns banal by the sixth old woman, whereupon the emotionless narrator walks away from the burgeoning pile beneath the window, depriving us of any conclusion.

The 'story' is delivered face front by the actor, in a tone neither monotonous nor dramatically invested; it is simply as if he is reading aloud from his mind for the spectator's delectation. Whatever original intention as an anti-Stalinist joke about the commonplace fates of those afflicted with 'excessive curiosity', would be obscured during spontaneous reception for most contemporary theatregoers. Its more immediate effect confers upon the speaker -- and the stage world at large -- a muted cynicism toward literary/dramatic form coupled with a blackly comic aloofness toward violence and death. It contributes to a growing sense of the consciousness at the centre of the play, the cast of its mind and soul. And here, with a sense of glib detachment, is the first time death is actually named.

Following previous intimations of starvation and police-state horrors, the stage world slides toward the weirdly serious with the start of the play's centrepiece, based on Kharms' longest piece of fiction, 'The Old Woman'. Out on the street, Stage Kharms asks a stooped old woman lugging a large clock, 'What time is it?' She turns the clock toward him -- it has no hands. She tells him, 'It's quarter to three', and a clock strikes somewhere.

Stage and Clown Kharms leave the mildly disconcerting event behind, until the Old Woman later appears at the door of the flat. The woman falls asleep in a chair and Stage Kharms, lying on the floor, drifts off, too. He awakens to find her unmoved. When he nudges her she slumps lifelessly, her dentures lurching half out of her open mouth. He realises aloud with laughable gratuitousness: 'The old woman has died'. Interestingly enough, the dead woman -- at once inconvenient and irrepressible -- hereafter becomes a prime motivator of humour in the play. For example, Stage and Clown Kharms later return to the flat and the body is nowhere to be seen. They clown co-operatively, physicalising an exchange of hopeful relief that all was a dream. Suddenly the corpse collapses to the floor from behind a closet.

Obviously, this would not be a candidate for a humorous moment in many a stage world this side of Ionesco and Orton. But the framing has been subtly cultivated, primarily through recitation or enactment of Kharms' devilishly wry pieces, combined with the conventional permissions of the clowning performance idiom. The corpse's precisely unfortuitous appearance likely triggers some recognition of farcical genre. The dead Old

Woman has more extravagantly comical moments to come, which I will discuss in connection with play. But upon her ‘death’ the stage world is, for all intents and purposes, fully formed. And with the arrival centre stage of death, the phenomenal and represented worlds take diverging roads, together embodying a comically diabolical universe.

The stage world has by now shown several faces, which, of course, can be played off one another in rapid frame changes to produce diachronic incongruity for comic effect: Stage Kharms dreads returning to his flat, where the Old Woman presumably lies dead and waiting. He vacillates between fear and fortitude outside the door, egged on by the rest of the ensemble (as a sort of phantasmagoric conscience) to take revenge upon the corpse with a croquet mallet. Clown Kharms offers a hopeful, ‘Maybe she’s disappeared’. Momentarily heartened, Stage Kharms opens the door to face a manifestation of his most paranoid fears: the garish illumination of a wedge of grotesque-looking bodies charging from the back of the stage, led by the Old Woman wielding an axe. He slams the door and plasters his back against it in a freeze of full-body, open-mouth horror.

Stage Kharms remains paralysed in this sculpted scream for several moments, through a short scene with his washerwoman neighbour. Played with a working-class Scottish burr and a torn sense of ‘don’t-want-to-get-involved’ curiosity, she accepts his petrified head shakes as natural enough responses to questions, and then calmly pronounces him a madman while walking away. After several more minutes locked in horror, Stage Kharms is echoed in advance by the ensemble, supplying the thought growing within his mind: ‘I can’t go on standing here like this’.

Noted briefly in reference to *The Whiteheaded Boy* in terms of switches from performer-to-character and character-to-character (and previously alluded to in David Shiner’s strategies for *Fool Moon*), the stage world of *Out of a house, walked a man ...* has been constructed to afford a capricious mobility. The sudden changes of frame, with Stage Kharms ricocheting between opposite attitudes toward the waiting corpse, compose a comic mini-odyssey of torment, until the croquet mallet is suggested, itself a quirky choice as far as lethal instruments go. Clown Kharms provides a first rhythmic plateau in the sequence with his concise burst of hollow optimism.

We perhaps expect that Stage Kharms, at last emboldened enough to open the door, will be slapped down by the fates. But the grossly exaggerated realisation of his worst-case imaginings switches frames again. His horrified freeze becomes more comic the longer it lingers, the scene with the neighbour enters the bizarrely farcical. The last piece of the sequence, bolstered by the force of the ensemble, makes an absurdist

defamiliarisation of an everyday phrase. The series of *reversals* has been made possible by earlier, more studied admissions to the stage world of style, mood and subject matter.

The sequence as the gathering sum of its turns and impressions yields a psychic imprint, prepared by practitioner and lived through by spectator, for which all steps are indispensable and no description can substitute for experience: It has been suggested from the start of performance that the enveloping stage world in fact emanates from the enacted writings of the historic Kharms. Stage Kharms then embodies a uniquely double-sided consciousness as creator of a universe and its chosen victim for metaphysical reversals and absences, nonsense and terrors. His is a universe, in short, not with a vacuum at its heart, but a Machiavellian sense of humour. This sequence, in fact, shows in compressed form the cumulative import of a stage world's humorous features, and their inseparable contribution to its overall personality of meaning and feeling.

2.2.5 The stage world's sense of humour

To revise: Humour is immanent in the wholeness of the stage world, its material presence, fictional absence and the spaces between. The astute practitioner knows that the theatregoer turns spectator well before the lights go down, and that the opening moments of lived-through performance acquire heightened import as *priming sequence* for the developing stage world and its humorous strategies. The beginning of a play overflows with information and signals, or at least it is taken so by the spectator. A sense of the stage world as all too familiar or overly opaque informs the critical attitude and no doubt affects reception energy; a stage world perceived as intriguingly concocted adds a certain vitality to the transactions between practitioner, spectator and material. A stage world promising humour encourages just that much more in the way of astute attention from a spectator who does not want to miss the jokes.

There may well be some indistinct cutoff point by which time the stage world must have offered the keys to its personality in order to take best advantage of the spectator's horizon of expectations. This world picture will contain the primary components of its joking apparatus: Although integral parts of a stage world 'joined in progress' at the start of the play, specific joking premises must introduce themselves through some combination of '*preexisting codes* (which can be divided into *general* or *particular codes*) and *distinctive codes* that are created anew with each performance and thus recognisable only by *abduction*'.²⁵ Assessment of the stage phenomena and then further reconciling of

²⁵ Marco De Marinis (1993), p. 4.

casting, costume, style of movement and facial expression, verbal and linguistic cues, and subject matter most likely expose the world's major contours within a figurative 'first four seconds' of performance in flight.

Twenty Grand makes use of general fourth-wall coding to establish a style of realistic representation, plus particular codings of characterisation and linguistic style which encourage the spectator to allow for stage humour. The fictional world asks us to meet and judge it on the same terms we meet and judge the everyday world -- except we are allowed 'unacknowledged' presence to it (even though it faces front and waits for us to finish laughing). This silent-observer status allows us to laugh at a world that looks a whole lot like our own, while pretending to be remarkably other.

In *The Whiteheaded Boy* the production maintains the general code that the performance proper begins after a brief blackout, but it breaks from the general code that keeps actors out of view until seen 'in character'. It aligns itself with some of the particular codes of comedy, for example, in the inflated style of characterisation and accommodation of audience laughter. Its distinctive codes involve the speaking of literary stage directions and the three performers 'putting on' their roles as needed.

This is not to say that a play must make a joke in its first five minutes in order to make another one later on. Studiously serious worlds can harbour comedy, but only particular kinds; certain comic worlds will not tolerate humour of other strains. At the very least the spectator will have constructed a genre frame early on, admitting and barring various shades of response to the same strip of action. *Out of a house, walked a man ...* establishes early on the distinctive coding of the central character's clown aspect, the convention of his enacted creations, and the ensemble's ability to represent moods and abstract influences within a physical/vocal vernacular. While its ground rules do not lead us to expect such a development, the Old Woman's vigorous life after death has shrewdly been promoted well in advance.

The Whiteheaded Boy and *Out of a house, walked a man ...* demonstrate the increased potential of distinctly theatrical humour, which sinks its comic roots beneath the surface of the represented world, into the phenomenal foundations. They may amuse in their overt dalliance behind the facade of representation, but these worlds clearly breed metaphysical implications for the invisible forces beyond the grasp of our sensual equipment. Laughter, in these cases, provides more than surface tremors at the expense of recognisable referents; it shakes the deeper structures of our engagement with the stage world, and by inference our own. Humorous laughter, as will be discussed in 4.4, always signals a disruption in our bodied knowledge of the world -- 'non-realistic' stage worlds gain leverage by positioning themselves literally behind the scenes of 'reality'.

2.3 PLAY

2.3.1 Inside and out

This chapter sets out to explain and explore a beloved mode of human behaviour and a defining condition for both theatre and humour: making believe. The play frame, as it were, goes by a number of other names including non-serious mode and ‘keying’ which, as earlier described in Goffman’s terms, is the way that humans agree to put inverted commas around a strip of experience taken from real life.²⁶ In this widest of senses it psychically relieves an event of serious, primary-framework meanings or survival-based implications. Its invocation for theatrical and humorous transactions generally requires acceptance by both parties. A failure or refusal ‘to play’ on one side or the other dissolves performance, constructs one where none is intended (or perhaps propels it toward the avant-garde). One approaches the realm of Schechner’s ‘dark play’²⁷ -- more like a frame ‘fabricated’ by one party without the other’s awareness -- in performance modes which, for some reason or another, seek to blur the boundaries between life and art. A unilateral play frame in relation to joking can lead to embarrassment, insult or just plain confusion, although some comedians have been pleased to teeter their audience on the edge of uncertainty.

Margaret Lowenfeld’s characterisation of childhood play, published in 1935, bears a distinct whiff of the phenomenological. She anticipates a model to be met in the next chapter concerning the construction of social reality, in that ‘play has an outer and inner aspect: an outer aspect, which is the form which appears to the playfellow or adult observer, and an inner or psychological aspect, which is the meaning that the type of play has to the child’.²⁸

Although Lowenfeld’s observations remain studiously confined to the importance of play in childhood, the four main purposes ultimately set forth might cover the bases for play in adulthood undertaken through theatre:

²⁶ M.J. Ellis (1973). Ellis outlines 15 recognized theories of play, including the release of surplus energy and its function as rehearsal for real life. It is not necessary for my purposes to address them all. But Ellis notes at the very start of his study that ‘ideologically a human is most human, as defined by our culture, when at play.’

²⁷ Richard Schechner (1993), pp. 36-9.

²⁸ Margaret Lowenfeld (1935), p. 230.

- a) 'It serves as the child's means for making contact with his environment ...',
- b) 'It makes the bridge between the child's consciousness and his emotional experience ...',
- c) 'It represents to the child the externalised expression of his emotional life ...', and
- d) 'It serves the child as relaxation and amusement, as enjoyment and rest ...'.²⁹

We must, in any case, be wary of how distinctly we cordon off playful activity from the phenomenal world. Play is always hosted by an outer world in which bodies remain answerable to physical realities: An injury sustained in a football match does not vanish at the final whistle. Nor can play turn on and off a separate phenomenal universe in the theatre. As observed in an earlier chapter, the 'keying' of a strip of activity remains physically and psychically co-present with the primary-framework actuality of the event -- e.g., we grant ourselves present to the court at Elsinore in some vague past moment, while agreeing to ignore (but never forgetting) our 'actual' presence at a particular theatre at which specific theatrical materials convey a world for *Hamlet*.

Roger Caillois, perhaps in his zeal to admire the intensity of the actor's concentration, misapprehends the psychic refinement: 'He puts on make-up and costume, plays and recites. But when the curtain falls, and the lights go on, he returns to reality. The separation of the two universes remains absolute.'³⁰ This observation oversimplifies in its either/or rigidity. If true, this would preclude the actor's attention to blocking, volume and enunciation, allowances for audience response and adjustments for spontaneous mishaps -- in fact, all the elements that must persist to make the performance 'presentable'. 'Playing is a mood, an attitude, a force', says Schechner who goes on to suggest use of the term 'play net' as a more accurate metaphor than 'frame'.³¹

If we can mark off a field for play in time and space without ever escaping the earthbound embrace of the material world and its natural laws, neither can the mind cast off entirely the building blocks and structures of its familiar reality. Even at its most imaginative, playful behaviour is limited to references, materials and experience from the real world, though often assembled in unlikely, unfamiliar or fantastic formations. Huizinga recognises:

²⁹ Margaret Lowenfeld (1935), p. 232.

³⁰ Roger Caillois (1962), p. 45.

³¹ Richard Schechner (1993), p. 41.

‘The child is *making an image* of something different, something more beautiful or more sublime, or more dangerous than what he usually *is*. One is a Prince, or one is Daddy or a wicked witch or a tiger. The child is quite literally “beside himself” with delight, transported beyond himself to such an extent that he almost believes he actually is such a thing, without, however, wholly losing consciousness of “ordinary reality”. His representation is not so much a sham-reality as a realization in appearance: “imagination” in the original sense of the word.’³²

Along these lines, psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott ascribed to play a universal importance in helping children negotiate a healthy bridge between ‘inner psychic reality’ and an ‘external world’ that clearly (and perhaps disturbingly) maintains an autonomous agenda in the face of any given wish by the individual.³³ Later in life, accessibility to this highly personal middle ground may turn into what we call creativity:

‘It is assumed that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged.’³⁴

And so one of the things we do in the theatre is a playing together in this childlike fashion, a sort of communally constructed attempt to address the aforementioned strain. It should be remembered that the spectator is no less involved in the playing just because the involvement appears more passive than the practitioner’s. There can be no fictional otherness unless the witness ‘plays’ along as guided. What practitioner and spectator do in the theatre is not far removed from the collective pretending which takes place on the fields of childhood: ‘Together the audience and the actors engage in incarnated imaginative variation on the meaning of human being and doing’.³⁵

The concept of conflict, generally considered a defining feature of drama, is an embodiment of the fact that one person’s inner reality frequently collides with the exterior reality generated by the environment, by another, or by others’ inner realities. In broad terms, tragedy might be seen as a genre which depicts the failure of successful

³² Johan Huizinga (1955), pp. 13-14.

³³ D.W. Winnicott (1971), p. 51. ‘The area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world.’

³⁴ D.W. Winnicott (1971), p. 13.

³⁵ Bruce Wilshire (1982a), p. 24.

reconciliation, often ending in the literal annihilation of the protagonist's inner reality by exterior forces; comedy could then be posed as the successful transition, perhaps even a momentary command of external reality. Paradigmatic variations bred by 20th-century culture could include absurdist drama, which pits an authorised inner reality against the exterior reality of a universe which is opaque, chaotic, uncaring or malicious.

The theatrical frame, then, transforms stage into playground, upon which we as practitioners and spectators spar intellectually and emotionally on behalf of a widespread inner reality, against the dominions of external reality.

2.3.2 Child's play

Barabbas literally came to play in a 1997 devised production titled *Out the Back Door* -- the 50-minute piece aimed to embody the energies and imaginings of the 7- to 12-year-old target audience.

Describing their approach in retrospect, the company would seem to have hit intuitively upon the basic components of early creative energy:

‘Rather than just commenting on a child’s imagination, part of the notion was that for a child the world is, if you like, some parts imagination, some parts reality. And what was interesting was to create that onstage.’³⁶

In real life, a child might wish an object to hand. The exterior world does not readily accommodate the desires of inner reality, so she might act ‘as if’ it were there, either substituting another object or conjuring it from thin air. This ‘subjunctive mood’ as Turner calls it, is key to the performance contract between practitioner and spectator; Stanislavsky, too, invokes the ‘magic if’ as a tool for the actor to find a character’s psychological truth.³⁷ In the theatre, the imagined world receives metaphysical support from technical production, conventions, and the spectator’s co-operative imagining.

In *Out the Back Door*, Barabbas set out to theatricalise the ‘intermediate area of experience’ described by Winnicott: ‘The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects.’³⁸ At one point the character played by Raymond Keane has somehow gotten himself marooned at the top of a pole, about 10 feet off the ground. Having hoisted up a

³⁶ Veronica Coburn (1997).

³⁷ Victor Turner (1988), p. 169; Constantin Stanislavski (1936), p. 46 and after.

³⁸ D.W. Winnicott (1971), p. 47.

small brown bag, previously displayed as empty by Veronica Coburn, he reveals it to be suddenly full of (very real) chips. Deciding they need seasoning, he holds the bag out in front of him, and twin streams of (also real) salt and vinegar drop from the skies. The moment is accomplished theatrically by Keane 'losing balance' long enough to mask with his body a quick switch of bags, the full one hidden behind a box near the top of the pole; containers of salt and vinegar have been hung in the fly space and aimed to release upon a specific spot in the air, which the actor anticipates with the bag.

This theatrical moment dramatises just that step in development that Winnicott's 'transitional' or middle ground attempts to reconcile at an earlier stage: When the baby is hungry does it find the mother's breast there or *create* it? With the help of the dual presences invoked by the theatrical frame, the event embodies the ambiguity expressed in Winnicott's phrasing. In the fictional world Keane's character has willed the food into existence; outside the theatrical frame Keane has clearly contrived and executed the materialisation. Both 'realities' insist upon co-presence in the perceiving psyche, effectively constituting a third, gestalt 'reality'.

As mildly humorous event, few audience members are too young to register the bisociation between the willed materialisation in the represented frame and the chances of the event occurring in the frame called 'real life'. The *gap* bridged invites appreciation of the two frames reconciled via the 'magic' of theatre, and perhaps a soft-edged sense of triumph by the stage world over exterior reality.

2.3.3 Adult's play

The humorous transactions between stage world and spectator in *Out the Back Door* all bear a similarly beneficent wash. There hangs in the air a constant *readiness* to laugh and there is laughter along the way, as recognition or rediscovery of the familiar are key sources of the pleasure derived from jokes. But this stage world, primed for joking by virtue of its quintessentially non-serious mode, declines debasement of its referents and thereby retains an innocent or childlike quality.

The differences in humorous texture between Barabbas productions of *Out the Back Door* and *The Whiteheaded Boy* suggest that amusement or laughter accompanied by some clearly articulated prejudice increases the psychic burst, and endows the felt performance with what may be perceived as a more adult edge.

The stage world for *The Whiteheaded Boy*, as described previously, builds itself upon an openly playful approach to characterisation. The performers make a stylistic point of 'putting on' their various roles. Although crisply staged and well-rehearsed, the performers allow us to see the fun-loving fraction of their own psyches that spill over the

sides of fictional character. There are, however, instants at which the production turns extravagantly playful -- perhaps playfully playful -- even by its own standards.

Mikel Murfi endows his characterisation of Baby, the youngest girl of the Geoghegans, with the semblance of a cartoon duck, back acutely swayed, body lurching forward awkwardly, knock knees, hands and feet splayed, tongue lodged forward to puff up the cheeks, eyes wide and clueless -- she is an unrestrained caricature of the 'great lump of a girl', described in the stage directions: 'She's thirty if she's a day, but she doesn't look it -- 'tis the way she dresses, I suppose. She's a great idea of herself entirely, it's as much as her mother can do to hold her in'.

She has originally been described as 'a great one for music', and opens Act III singing. The piano, like the other set pieces, is clearly not the real thing, though shaped like it, a photographic keyboard pasted where the real ones would be. As Baby, Murfi launches into 'playing' with an over-the-top abandon to a sound cue of someone banging on the keys. He flails at the 'keyboard', occasionally adding a flourish by reaching one hand over the other; this is by way of accompaniment as he drones some semblance of 'Because God Made you Mine' (the religious song called for in the script) loudly on a single, excruciating note, out of tempo. The opening lines of the scene go as follows:

KATE That's lovely, Baby. You've a great turn for music.

BABY I have, then. I love them passionate songs. There's some like comics, but give me a song with passion in it. It goes through me like. I suppose I'm queer.

KATE Why wouldn't you like them? Myself, I could never tell one tune from another, but I'd listen to you all day.

The production, which for the most part remains faithful to the fictional reality in its heavily stylised way, in this case 'plays' with its own premise. The characters render the above lines as if they truly mean them. The contrast between their conversation and Baby's musicality is, of course, seen as highly comic, but occurs as a result of the production's broadly mischievous liberties taken in the space between fictional strip and phenomenal depiction.

Elsewhere, Peter Geoghegan, played by Keane, is introduced by the narrating voice as 'nothing much one way or the other'. When first seen he is carrying too many suitcases; he seems to look up at the world sideways from a perpetually stooped position, constantly nodding in servile fashion, a simple grin etched into his face and voice. From this base behavioural posture, maintained during the first act, it is not much of a stretch for the actor to descend to all fours at the beginning of Act II. He exudes a kind of slobbering canine energy toward George, who comically validates the 'transformation' by

feeding him a biscuit. Then, in an effort to get him off the couch so she can sit down, Aunt Ellen takes a biscuit from her handbag, puts it in front of his nose, then tosses it to the ground. Peter duly ‘chases’ it, allowing Ellen to sit in the vacated spot; soon she is absently scratching Peter’s head. Again, the production’s self-established rules are stretched a noticeable step beyond a certain faithfulness to human ‘reality’, given even the cartoonish style of characterisation.

Both sequences can be described as instances of the production *playing with* an already playful stage world because the phenomenal depiction diverges facetiously from its established mode of representing ‘reality’. It is one way in which the production occasionally ‘pushes the envelope’ in an effort to supply the unexpected incongruities required to maintain a humorous momentum. As in the ‘chips’ episode from *Out the Back Door*, the practitioner has effected a pointed manipulation of the stage world in which the spectator bridges a three-way *gap* among the fiction, its phenomenal rendering, and experience of life in the real world.

In the ‘adult’ stage world, however, the event receives an added comic kick by punctuating a debasing attitude within the playful departure. Murfi’s and Keane’s respective characterisations of Baby and Peter isolate and burlesque sufficiently recognisable personality traits from sociocultural experience. The moments described above extend the incongruity another decimal point, as it were, by stepping wholeheartedly toward the ridiculous. As exaggerations of caricatures, a new level of incongruity appears: Baby’s rapturously tone-deaf monotone and a keyboard technique something like a child splashing in water, stem from and surpass the signature depiction, as does Peter’s descent into the personification of subservience and its carrying through by the other characters. Alongside the spectacle and silliness, approval is begged for the high mockery of personality traits encountered in real life, even though -- or possibly because -- they are hyperbolised beyond a range in which they could be taken to point a finger at any real person.

A definitive difference between what I am depicting as cases of childlike and adult stage worlds corresponds to Freud’s distinction between ‘innocent’ and ‘tendentious’ jokes. For Freud, an innocent joke’s *sole* aim is to evoke pleasure in its hearers. The tendentious joke is made with the added intention of satisfying an unconscious urge, deemed unacceptable for social or cultural reasons. The ‘chips’ episode is most likely appreciated simply for its making and the manner of its making; the Baby and Peter interludes harbour an added antagonism, even though the real-life targets are sufficiently ambiguous to allow the illusion that there is no real butt to the joke. We are laughing very

much *at* the characters as they connect to our real-life experience of people. Freud takes the tempting step further:

‘A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible. Since the technique of both can be the same, a suspicion may be aroused in us that tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access.’³⁹

Those sources are likely the proscribed urges, the sudden satisfaction of which give the adult/tendentious joke an added force via a compact explosion of relief.

In *Out the Back Door*, Barabbas play ‘innocently’, withholding adult judgements; even during the stage world’s most extravagantly playful moments, laughter rolls forth with a benign smoothness. But their production of *The Whiteheaded Boy*, despite its good nature, plays very much on an array of sociocultural prejudices -- toward small-town life, family dynamics, theatrical style and Robinson’s original text -- and the prevailing tone of performance humour revels in those tendentious peaks.

2.3.4 Life force

The notion of play seems often to be associated with a liberation of human instinct or pure expression of individual nature. Where Winnicott attempts to maintain a social scientist’s even-handed perspective toward interior and exterior worlds, Sartre’s existential view of play slants unabashedly toward the side of inner reality. He seems to be saying that we come *too much* to terms with the exterior world at the expense of our humanity: ‘Seriousness involves taking the world as one’s starting point and attributing more reality to the world than to oneself, or [attributing] reality to oneself only to the extent one belongs to the world’.⁴⁰ For Sartre, the way out of existential inertia lies in the will to command Winnicott’s ‘transitional’ middle ground:

‘What indeed is play if not an activity of which man is the first origin, for which man himself sets the rules, and which has no consequences except according to the rules he has set? As soon as a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom, whatever may be his anguish, then his activity is play. ... [T]he function of the act is to make

³⁹ Sigmund Freud (1905), p. 139-40.

⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre (1965), p. 110.

manifest and to present to *itself* the absolute freedom which is the very being of the person'.⁴¹

Gadamer supplies play with similarly liberating properties, while allowing for seriousness as a complementary mode that keeps the spirit from floating off into some wild blue yonder of irrelevance: 'Play and seriousness, the exuberance and superabundance of life, on the one hand, and the tense power of vital energy on the other, are profoundly interwoven'.⁴²

These formulations imply an affective buoyancy of human spirit or 'life feeling' for play, loosening the earthbound grip of brute existence upon the body. I would suggest that play takes more than an organisational role in theatrical and humorous transactions. In supplying a 'reality apart', it furnishes festive escape *and* palpable entry into 'impossible' realms of existence. The mind may imagine unlikely experiences through reference to the body's knowledge, but it is the play spirit that books passage, underwriting a power over reality sensed in every humorous transaction. (See further development along these lines in the 5.2 chapter on Freedom.)

It would seem likely that death in its finality and certainty represents some ultimate, intimidating embodiment of reality. And so it is interesting to observe how we 'play' with it in our stage worlds. People carry with them a foreknowledge of death, which unfailingly affects the way we live, says philosopher Susanne K. Langer in *Feeling and Form*. And 'since the instinctive struggle to go on living is bound to meet defeat in the end, they look for *as much life as possible* between birth and death'.⁴³ This drive is captured ideally in dramatic form, Langer says, to the extent that the 'human life-feeling is the essence of comedy'.⁴⁴ Without ever using the word 'play' Langer talks in terms of a 'pure sense of life' evocative of Sartre and Gadamer. All theatrical forms partake of a basic play mode, in that practitioner and spectator agree to 'make believe' that actual actions animate a fictional reality.

Humour in performance squares the existing play frame, and so, in a sense, heightens the feeling of life. When a stage world gravitates toward matters of death and violence, humour's felt 'lifeliness' stands to exert an ambivalently ironic effect. In the face of death rendered with a surface resemblance to the 'realistic' -- everyday causes and

⁴¹ Jean-Paul Sartre (1965), p. 311.

⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986), p. 130.

⁴³ Susanne K. Langer (1953), p. 333.

⁴⁴ Susanne K. Langer (1953), p. 331.

effects; blood, pain and fear -- the spectator may well have trouble maintaining a psychic distance, increasing a need for relief.

As described earlier (2.2.1) the world of *Twenty Grand* is drawn phenomenally in a way intended to suggest a face-value correspondence between signifier and real-life referent -- what we see on the stage *could* be happening someplace exactly as embodied. Even though it is a sphere of experience foreign to the common theatregoer, the behaviour and consequences are intended with a high degree of external accuracy. The stage world accepts the rules under which death and violence are generally considered to operate. Indeed, by toying with its usual serious framing it flaunts a breed of person who trafficks coolly with fatal consequence.

Violence in the production is realistically rendered but clearly 'staged', and humour gains a foothold (if it does) because of that co-present knowledge. Even so, humour all but disappears toward the end of *Twenty Grand* as the 'dead bodies' accumulate onstage. It sardonically proposes entry at one point by overstating the abject denial of feeling at work in the fiction, bisociated with another of the fatherly lessons which has signalled humour throughout.

Ken, one of the gang members, already sprawls dead in an armchair. Rooney, the accused traitor, had earlier sustained an offstage beating that left him lame -- he sits strapped to another chair and barely alive, having been stabbed several times by Dalton. Hackett, holding a gun, appears on the verge of executing Dalton when he suddenly becomes distracted by Rooney's moans. Hackett says, 'Get rid of that noise, will ya, Dean?'

Dean eagerly picks up the baseball bat, and Hackett intervenes: 'No, no, no. Not the fuckin' baseball bat. What are we, animals? Get Ken's gun.' Dean takes the gun from Ken's jacket, cocks it and shoots Rooney in the chest. The event is accomplished theatrically using a blank in the gun to make the noise; the actor playing Rooney jerks his chair over backward, illustrating the force of the shot. Hackett intervenes again, with a paternal tone of impatience and instruction: 'Ah, in the *head*, son. Plug him in the head.' Whereupon he dispassionately aims and shoots with a routine efficiency his body seems to know by heart.

The sequence acquires a laughable brutality because of the unruffled facility with which Hackett turns from one task to the next, once again interrupting 'serious business' for another quick opportunity to impress upon his son the tricks of the trade. His mildly disgusted, 'What are we animals?' suggests some sliding scale of ethical decency in cold-blooded murder, a juxtaposition which would impress most observers as ludicrous. The quick pacing of the scene and the sudden punctuations of the gunshots subtly

contribute to humour in a sequence which in real life would be horrifying. But the father-son interludes have the habit of cueing a frame change, offering a second, deflating perspective which may relieve the spectator (especially) in the face of excessive cruelty.

Freud assigns humour (as distinguished from jokes and wit) the explicit task of protecting the emotions: 'the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering'.⁴⁵ By way of example, he cites the story about a 'rogue' being led out to execution on a Monday morning and remarking, 'Well, this week's beginning nicely'. One can broadly suppose the incongruously chipper pronouncement as denying mortality the weight of its imminence -- the condemned man's life force rallies feeling, mind and body to an act of psychic defiance, even in the shadow of the gallows.

The feeling of the above scene in *Twenty Grand* truly exemplifies a Freudian 'gallows humour', even though the spectator's demise may not be quite imminent. The realistic stage world by definition depicts death as the ultimate and unfathomable consequence of life; and it can be hard to watch our mortality underscored with such a brutal disregard. If the stage world can be said to imply assertion of the life spirit, it is because it also finds a way to ridicule death's power, saying, 'For this moment here in the theatre, let's not take death *too* seriously -- what the hell, let's make it even more horrifying'. The practitioner is the Freudian rogue himself, as is the spectator who approves by laughing.

2.3.5 Playing with death

In *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, the same psychic dread is addressed, but with a theatrical twist that opens the door wider for humour. The representation techniques for the stage world allow the production to 'play' with death in ways that reconstruct its outward manifestations, consequences and very feeling.

During the Old Woman's first appearances, the actress Kathryn Hunter presents a trudging, world-weary figure. Upon the Old Woman's death, recounted previously in 2.2.5, hers becomes the most life-affirming body in the stage world. At first the Old Woman's lifeless form represents a mere farcical obstacle, recalling other inconvenient corpses in theatre history, from Ionesco's *Amédée* and Orton's *Loot*. But in ensuing sequences, the Old Woman's body surpasses the status of absurdist prop.

Out in the world, Stage Kharms has met a young woman in the bread line, and after a short conversation she appears interested in returning to his flat. The following

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud (1927), p. 433.

stretch of the play assumes a brooding, expressionistic quality, reflected in a plodding, discordant soprano aria sung by the young woman. The mood, as a product of all stage elements, slides toward the disturbingly serious.

Stage Kharms, in a portion of the stage removed from his flat, suddenly remembers aloud that he cannot take the young woman to his home: 'In my room on the floor there is a dead old woman'. This comment opens the mood toward comedy with a dry *reversal*, the realisation performed as if the state of affairs might easily slip one's mind. Then on cue the Old Woman rises from the floor and observes with a knowing shrug, 'She'd have to be a pretty remarkable young woman'. The *reversal* provides welcome relief, as the dead woman unexpectedly reveals herself not only capable of movement, speech and omnipotent observation, but possessing a spunk she lacked in life.

Eventually Stage Kharms receives the assistance of a neighbour in trying to dispose of the Old Woman's remains. The set piece is more complex, the progression more finely calibrated, than the following summary can pinpoint, but it will serve to sketch a theatrical image for discussion. The sequence, which takes place in Kharms's flat, begins with the neighbour (played by Marcello Magni) poised over the corpse and contemplating a simple, unsavoury task: How to stuff the sprawling corpse into a suitcase for discreet disposal. He folds one of the Old Woman's arms in toward her body and rigor mortis causes a leg to fly askew. He reins in the leg and the other arm pops up. As the neighbour tries to attain leverage by standing up, the corpse becomes more actively inert, acquiring properties akin to flypaper. The job of getting the dead woman under some sort of control gradually transforms from an awkward wrestling match with a willful, oversized doll into an athletic pas de deux -- from tango to cancan -- for man and corpse. Just as the Old Woman's spirit appears hopelessly unconfined, she collapses neatly into the suitcase of her own accord.

The established stage world retains a somewhat 'real-life' seriousness about death, though previous indications of the dead woman's irrepressibility have delivered it free of downright morbidity. The Old Woman appears lifelessly disarranged at the start of the sequence; the initial suggestion of cramming the body into a suitcase establishes a mildly blood-curdling mood, *reversed* when the first unco-operative limb shoots up in the air. Generic framing switches suddenly to farcical or comic mime, in any case *something* other than deadly serious.

The gag wedges open the oft-concealed gap between (live) actress and (dead) character: Although the two entities mingle in the perceiving consciousness, the spectator remains aware that the fiction-based corpse receives its unlikely behaviour from Kathryn Hunter's bodied presence. She gradually forces the gap wider in a series of wryly

incongruous ways. At first passively defiant, the corpse acquires downright vivacity, until finally *choosing* to tumble neatly into the suitcase, properly dead once more.

The actress plays at the playing like someone who, during a game or competition, cheats blatantly for the sake of amusement. She continues to cheat more and more audaciously, as if to entertain the other players by mocking the 'rules of the game', in this case what we see as the indisputable laws of nature. More than the biological condition of death, it is our perceptions, imaginings and dreads -- our inner responses toward death -- with which the production toys.

The sequence plays upon a disparity that turns on its head Koestler's rejection of one of Bergson's central formulations. Koestler says: 'If "we laugh each time a person gives us the impression of being a thing" there would be nothing more funny than a corpse'.⁴⁶ Koestler is too dismissively confident for the endless subtleties of comic framing. In this case, a corpse is funny as a *thing* giving the impression of being a *person*, or possessing qualities and energies not generally associated with human carcasses.

A dead body onstage is never the thing itself (one hopes), but an actor (or dummy or the like) acting death with due respect to its lifelessness. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the playful possibilities generated by a calculated opening between the phenomenal and fictional enrich the possibilities for a *gap* to be bridged. Here, incongruity concentrates upon the fiction (human remains) and its bodied presence (increasingly lively woman); the *gap* is seeded by an eminently playful collusion between actress and spectator, communally fantasising a body's zest after death, as opposed to the proverbial final rest. In effect the character/actress body produces a new and other image of human existence: The presumably empty husk is grinning victor amid darkness and dread, also and always nimble trickster of the living. This entity, 'fabricated actually' through the superimposition of phenomenal and semiotic frames, belies largely held perceptions about the experience of death. It parodies our theatrical conventions for performing death as well as our profoundest fears: that, contrary to organised religion's assurances, *inner* deadness matches its *outer* appearance.

2.3.6 Serious pull upon play

It is certainly possible for a stage world to exude a life-affirming sense of play with a minimum of serious 'strings attached' -- avoidance of death or violence in its

⁴⁶ Henri Bergson (1900), p. 97; Arthur Koestler (1964), p. 47.

construction would go a long way in that direction. (I suspect it is impossible, however, to escape completely the gravity of life's earthbound limitations by virtue of theatre's bodied palette, along with the conventional need of formidable obstacles for conflict.)

The opening instant of Barabbas' *Out the Back Door* finds the three company members centre stage in freeze, faces and bodies alive. Over the next several minutes, they run across and around the stage, downstage centre and back, sometimes singly, sometimes in tandem, occasionally leaping onto one of two side towers, peering around, then returning to action. The sequence goes on for a good five minutes through several ebbs and flows. One and then another actor 'tires' and sprawls on the ground, then revives and continues running; occasionally they veer in unison, spreading arms like birds or airplanes. Throughout this opening section, the performers attempt to embody the energy and patterns of play as a deluge of youthful energy, a free exercise of the body toward no 'serious' purpose.

Real bodies on a stage cannot help but betray their boundaries and limits, and the sequence makes a point of showing the fatigue (delicious though it may be) brought on by all-out play. Nonetheless, this introductory section shows no real threat anywhere in the stage world -- it amounts to a spectacle of pure playful exuberance, the unadulterated life spirit. At some opposite end of the spectrum lies the psychically loaded domain from which joking in *Out of a house, walked a man ...* emanates, following upon the point made earlier about emotional ballast enhancing the comic punch.

'Behind dark curtains, snow seems to be whiter',⁴⁷ observes Bachelard, admiring the power of contradiction to invigorate poetic image. His example might also refer to the affective implications of such humorous events as described in the last sub-chapter. Indeed, the prejudice involving one's own death, presumably being universal and deeply felt, provides a stark catch-22: Death can be rendered impotent through play, its severity deflated by humour -- but not without conjuring the threat of its presence. The Old Woman's humorously death-defying behaviour stands to embody 'lifeliness' in higher definition precisely *because* of the tension generated by death's formal admission to the stage world.

In earlier reference to *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, I discussed Clown Kharms' contribution to the embodiment of the psyche's tensions between the will to create and existential torpor (rather appropriate in light of Sartre's attitude toward play). His physical vitality and clowning style strive in opposition to Stage Kharms' entropic

⁴⁷ Gaston Bachelard (1969), p. 39.

momentum. Langer calls the clown figure ‘the personified *élan vital*’⁴⁸ and Clown Kharms exerts the other substantial life force in the stage world (in addition to the Old Woman’s corpse) as well as its other primary source of humour.

Comic contrast, then, works from opposite directions through the stage world’s two eminently playful forces. Stage Kharms, the authorised mortal, acts as foil to corpse from one side and clown from the other, making him the hapless, mortally vulnerable ball in a comic tennis match.

If playful behaviour tends to vitalise feelings of unfettered life spirit, then taking head on and momentarily mastering death, its invincible opposite number, puts upon the stage an expression/impression of the human endgame replayed to victory. This is the stuff of a child’s playground grown to maturity: Features of external reality, which press upon the adult psyche with troubling force, are embodied more favourably by strokes of collective gamesmanship.

I am suggesting that this particular treatment of this particular subject matter produces an imprint of extraordinary resonance: Play serves not only as condition but animating force for the above sequence, simultaneously acknowledging and taming its target as can only the bodied, unfolding theatrical image and its humorous fashioning.

⁴⁸ Susanne K. Langer (1953), p. 342.

2.4 SUBJECTIVE REALITIES

2.4.1 Real and 'real' as tested by humour

Rotated to a slightly different angle, the relationship between external and internal experience discussed in the preceding chapter translates into issues of objective 'realities' and subjective perceptions. It may be said that, unlike one in the real world, an object on the stage harbours an identifiable inner component in that it carries through an intendedness for the meaning of the stage world. It is for such a reason I have argued that, particularly when dealing with skilled practitioners, it may for certain kinds of points be fair to privilege the apparently intended meaning over its external rendering.

The greater burden in writing about the theatre stems from its split-level realities, at least one additional (fictional) reality as well as the gestalt reality bred by tenaciously entwining frames. (Many of my phrasings have intimated a vague indecision about what can be taken without inverted commas as 'real' or 'really happening'.) This primarily organisational aspect can be prised open by returning to a moment from *Fool Moon*. The segment bases much of its humour on ambiguous stress fractures in the structures of social propriety.

I described in an earlier chapter (1.4.4) the introductory segment of this 'new vaudeville' piece, in which David Shiner assumes the role of an arrogant latecomer. The piece takes place in the first several rows of the audience and the two side boxes, as he searches for his seat. In non-verbal, clownlike fashion he engages in more and more comically invasive engagement with the actual theatregoers. Along the way he acquires a huffy attitude toward the audience, whom he 'takes' to be laughing at his misfortune.

Having already shoved one man and whacked another with his hat, Shiner moves along the front row, dumping popcorn on one spectator, spraying others with soft drink, ransacking the pockets of several coats, commandeering wallets and distributing the money to other theatregoers. Although Shiner has described in interview his continual re-adjustment to what a given audience will tolerate, the sequence is predicated upon an overwhelming trust that the theatregoers (those involved and those observing) supply their own inverted commas around these antisocial actions, *which are never taken for 'the real thing' even though they are actually happening*.

The sequence and its presumed durability for a large number of audiences shows something of the reinforced strength of a theatrical frame overlaid by successful humour. These strips of otherwise socially unacceptable behaviour are tolerated because, although the exterior *results* are the same as if they were carried out 'seriously', the victim and

audience agree that the *meanings* are different. The admission of a dual composition to social reality again demonstrates the validity of considering internal and external implications, here rehearsed under a phenomenological rubric by social philosopher Finn Collin: ‘Action is not just behaviour, mere bodily motion, but also has an “inside” comprising the agents’ concomitant mental processes’.⁴⁹

Social belief in the properties of the theatrical frame in this case relies heavily on the persistence of primary-framework convictions -- Shiner is clearly a performer of some skill and repute, engaged in a performance, carrying out aggressive actions for the purpose of the audience’s entertainment. Under such conditions, the actions are admissible as ‘not serious’ or, as we often translate, ‘not real’. Yet the tone of audience response (which includes disbelieving shrieks) suggests that the two realities cannot be disentangled -- and it is precisely the composite reality, ‘fictional intentions’ resulting in ‘real consequences’, which furnishes such a potent *gap* to be bridged. Maximum effect occurs closest to the border at which any given theatregoer might feel that Shiner has overstepped the limits of artistic licence.

The framing trick executed in the above sequence may be seen as an expressly theatrical proof of the inner component’s importance in our construction of social reality. It also attests to the operation of humour as a reliable barometer of consensus -- here, for example, as to the qualifications of ‘real’ behaviour -- in a roomful of subjective perceptions and interpretations: Without laughter, which is the group expression of joking consensus, the sequence unravels. Shiner, in fact, continually adjusts the degree of his extravagances on the spot, according to the response each audience registers (see 3.2.3). Taking complementary steps further, theatre and humour emerge as uniquely human tools for the care and feeding of shared experience in a world of subjects.

2.4.2 Shared subjective experience

Most people would accept that we all occupy a same material world of geographical contours, physical objects, and other living entities some of which are also human. The phenomenologist might continue that, while remaining a thing-in-itself, the material world diverges upon contact into as many individual experiences of it as Alfred Schutz’s guiding notion of ‘biographical situation’ might suggest: ‘Thus, the individual as an actor in the social world defines the reality he encounters’.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Finn Collin (1997), p. 103.

⁵⁰ ‘Biographical situation’ appears to include all the construction materials of individuality, from historical location and cultural inscription to genetic dispositions and

Merleau-Ponty claims that human beings are generally more alike than different, that a person unfailingly ‘knows’ another person as of the same species and world, and therefore of comparable inner experience as visible through its external traces. Nonetheless, we clearly cannot conclude that everyone perceives and processes the world identically. With as many constituting agents of the world as subjects in it, how can we know to what extent any person’s experience compares to another’s?

The contention that ‘individuality and sociality are implicated in each other’⁵¹ may well be the supporting sociological principle of humour. It is exactly the patterns of *shared subjective experience* which find expression through humorous discourse. Today’s stand-up comedy often eschews classic punch-line humour in favour of a more narrative style, merely requisitioning approval of ‘collectively held’ subjective observations about everyday life experience.

By recalling that all experience comprises an exterior, observable (and in some way quantifiable) aspect, and at the same time an interior counterpart whereby ‘we only seem to know one particular thing, namely our own life’,⁵² we gain entry to the underlying project of the theatre, providing key points of reference with which the individual may triangulate perceptions of experience.

Wilhelm Dilthey’s approach to human studies builds upon an acknowledgment of each subject’s inner world and a process of ‘understanding’, whereby the individual, assisted by Others in gaining ‘knowledge of life’, is given the wherewithal to make sense of experience. The ‘watching ourselves live’ we undertake by going to the theatre would seem a likely strategy toward that end. Dilthey refers to the arts and to the theatre in particular as part of a vital system of interactions which lead to his version of ‘understanding’. (Although unspecified, I assume he is talking about Shakespeare’s Richard III in the following passage):

‘The curtain goes up and Richard appears. A flexible mind, following his words, facial expressions and movements, can now experience something which lies outside any possibility in its real life.’⁵³

form and content of parental guidance. Maurice Natanson (1971), p. xxvii-xxviii: “‘The world becomes transposed into “my” world in accordance with the relevant elements of my biographical situation’.

⁵¹ Laurie Spurling (1977), p. 86.

⁵² Wilhelm Dilthey (1976), p. 186.

⁵³ Wilhelm Dilthey (1976), p.227.

The inference is that the theatregoer wields an existing knowledge of external and internal concurrence to extrapolate an understanding of some new subjective state or action. Inversely, it may be used to pinpoint, reconcile, re-order or otherwise call attention to indescribable patterns of experiencing.

In more extraordinary ways than Dilthey supposed, theatre's conjuring trick of exceedingly meaningful absence/presence has the capacity to embody experience in ways that may appear non-objective or 'unreal' but *feel* like accurate representations of 'what life is sometimes like' or 'what life might be like'. And as I have demonstrated, the fissures between phenomenal and semiotic presences become virtual breeding grounds for comic incongruities. Again, these disparities often refer us to gaps between exterior and interior, objective and subjective, or culturally constructed and individually experienced 'realities'.

2.4.3 The feel of subjective experience

Serious mode, in a way, is one of the ways we show our respect for the single, authorised reality pre-supposed by mainstream social discourse. An 'objective' reality, able to be observed and analysed from some neutral position, may be a cunning ruse by society or a needed anchor for the individual. But measures of time and distance, for example, have little to do with the way a human actually meets the world, and our individual orientations to everyday life are unlikely to maintain a fluid notion of abstracted 'objective' reality. In subjective experience time flies or drags, even though we know that minutes do not vary in length; on different days the same raw events may seem dark and hostile or bright and encouraging, depending on our internal climates. In actual human experience, there is no such thing as the nonpartisan disposition toward objects presumed by 'objective' reality. Similarly, although the notion of Truth has come to connote the objectively authentic, such granite-written claims are highly problematic in the world of human experience -- which is all anyone can speak from. This point should go without saying more than it does in everyday usage. Suffice it to say that truth is considered in this dissertation *only* in the context of a subjective orientation from person to person. It is a consensus on the personalised feel of the 'real' or 'true' that humour often seeks. The examples which finish out this chapter show how variously the principle can be exploited.

To recall a point made earlier, the specific phenomenal rendering of a fictional world cannot be swallowed whole by signification. A bedroom represented differently for three productions of the same play -- a platform box in an otherwise empty arena space; a modestly decorated unit set with four-poster, door and window; actor and actress standing upright against a back scrim, holding a blanket up to their chins as if the spectator looks down upon the bed from above -- could easily be 'apperceived' by the spectator as the

same location in each case. It would, however, *feel* differently from one representation to the next. The body, which is incapable of perceiving in 'neutral', engulfs the physical stage world. It feels the space and phenomena -- its contained shapes, textures and colours, the arrangement of its bodies, the chemical response to the actuality of a performer -- even while suffusing the perception with imaginary features gleaned through signification.

Toward the end of *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, Stage Kharms asks a man to loan him thirty roubles. The exchange is made via simple theatrical legerdemain: The actors stand a substantial distance apart, yet carry out the transaction as though the money realistically changes hands. The paper bills seen in one actor's hand disappear, then reappear in the other actor's hand. Obviously the moment is carried out with the help of a magician's palming technique. A flash of stage humour may be claimed in the production's playful 'invention of unexpected signs'.⁵⁴ The point in bringing it up here, however, lies in the prospect that the spectator will 'feel' the space between the two actors even while interpreting it out of existence -- which generates a hybrid subjective experiencing of the event suspended somewhere in between.

This principle should extend to the fullness of the stage world's material evolution. Despite inclinations by the spectator to 'apperceive' the stage world into objective terms, the theatregoer 'feels' its actual playing in time, space, action and framing. The double exposure of phenomena and referents, genre framing and structural energy can be felt as incarnating a mode of subjective experience. A universe inspired by Feydeau in all its snowballing misadventure or by Ionesco in its ludicrous banality, is not built upon ground of the totally unfamiliar. The bodied consciousness knows that's how life feels sometimes.

In a sequence referred to earlier from *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, Stage Kharms weathers a mercilessly comic gauntlet of paranoia, nightmare, farce and surreality in the wake of the Old Woman's death (2.2.4): the stark swings between dread and confidence before he opens the door to his flat; the sudden confrontation of a ghoulishly hyperbolic image, the Old Woman with axe raised high and backed by an army of avenging corpses; his slamming the door upon the vision and remaining literally frozen in horror through a scene with a neighbour, who barely notices his psychic distress; several more minutes of petrified hysteria before his body's protestation grows through the ensemble into full voice, echoed aloud by himself.

Unlike classic farce, which fixates upon conspiracies of the external world, this performance strip expresses involvement of the internal track. The stage world manifests

⁵⁴ Anne Ubersfeld (1982), p. 133.

various 'beings of feeling', which may arise during a chunk of subjective experience, and distorts them to fantastic degrees. These successive framings are timed and styled with a humorous savvy toward *reversal* -- a signifier, suddenly revealed, reads too perfectly inopportune to take seriously.

The sequence can be seen to show how a stage world which appears 'non-realistic' may yet be far from alien to everyday experience. It forges in theatrical terms one profile of human experience as lived through abject subjectivity. In this case, the individual's ability to frame experience comfortably is short-circuited by psycho-emotional overload, as the stage world inflates to cartoonish extremes the paranoid fodder of self-torment. Its humour recognises the potential weight of psychic distress and at the same time commissions a laugh at the perception of cosmic bullying. Such an insightfully theatricalised 'being of feeling' takes ironic advantage of disparities between real life as we routinely objectify it and real life as we actually experience it.

2.4.4 Comparative realities

The stage world's alternate universe always presents itself as ripe for ironic allusion to our own. Realistic or naturalistic stage worlds insist upon being taken as objective depictions of social action which show the physical, external aspects of intersubjectivity just as they appear in everyday life. Humour within a realistic stage world says, among other things, 'Here is a way in which this world is like yours, its people like the ones around you'. It serves as a genre cue aside from a joking invitation. The surface patterns of human behaviour can also be held up for wry juxtaposition with what the spectator recognises from subjective experience as the likely inner operations.

The opening sequence in *Twenty Grand* (treated in 2.2.1), though from a slightly other world, bases itself upon a strip of everyday experience generic to contemporary urban life: someone who is late for an appointment. Most people will have been on one and probably both sides of the depicted exchange. The catch-all, exquisitely vague excuse, 'I got held up', with its variety of possible 'real' meanings, is very often allowed to slide by unchallenged. Here it is questioned and defamiliarised ('At gun point?') through a potentially 'real' exchange, for which the rather ordinary play on words receives a comic boost from the gap between subjective identification and crime-world jargon.

But as stage worlds move away from external realism they stand to comment in other ways upon subjective experience in the everyday world. An altogether alternative physical reality underwrites the series of sketches which constitute the whole performance of *Fool Moon*. David Shiner and Bill Irwin establish from the start a surreal body dialect, defining a physical world answerable to new and unpredictable natural laws: Their bodies

appear to be made of something more plasticine than skin and bones; various parts are sometimes aloof, sometimes overly connected to subjective life; and they are ever at the mercy of mischievous metaphysical whims. In Irwin's first appearance, his body is continually 'sucked' back between the folds of the act curtain 'against his wishes'. At the end of the opening 'latecomer sketch', both performers, each holding onto the other for dear life, tumble with slow, cataclysmic precision from a balcony box.

This strain of non-verbal humour often lines the *gap* to be bridged with an underlying deflation of the consistent physical reality we take to be self-evident. The performers' world does not act or react like it's 'supposed to'. Shiner and Irwin, in their 'waiting for the train' sketch, parody the wrestling egos of two commuters. Their stage world relegates the pragmatic body to a back seat in the conflict between the inner energies of humans and the everyday world.

Both performers enter in oversized business suits and contrasting demeanors: Shiner displays a loose, hangdog disaffection pulling upon face and body; Irwin's eyes, nose and mouth shrink toward the centre of his face in a pained ball of tension, his shoulders likewise drawn up around his ears. The performers stand side by side, peering off stage left, both checking their watches, Irwin underlining his impatience, Shiner his imperturbability. Their fictional characters read instantly as epitomes of two types of businessman living in suburbia. Like characterisations by Barabbas in *The Whiteheaded Boy*, the joking images simultaneously provide *setup* and *reversal* and can be grasped and 'gotten' at once. They refer to cultural 'originals' through costume and situational suggestion, and draw upon an ever-ready *priming sequence*, supported by genre guidelines that encourage the spectator to be on the lookout for such referents.

The two 'commuters' eventually face one another and engage in pantomimed conversation. Irwin, who appears to be pressing a strong opinion about something, authoritatively taps Shiner's chest with his finger. Irwin's neck lengthens and his head cranes over Shiner's as he makes his point with increasing force; Shiner, humbled in response, has shrivelled in stature. Through performative skill, the two men seem literally to change sizes, one growing while the other shrinks. The effect is then reversed as Shiner takes the initiative, returning both men to their original physical forms. Seemingly 'stuck' in his shrunken body, Irwin pulls out a handkerchief and blows his nose, which somehow restores him to proper stature. Other parts of the sequence will be discussed later in relation to performance technique, but these first few moments escort the spectator into a sub-stage world in force for the duration of the sketch.

The performers' physicality manipulated incongruously beyond its normal range and the contrasting images side by side spearhead the joking. But the richer substance of

the *gap* to be bridged has to do with the embodiment in ‘unrealistic’ fashion of a different vantage point upon intersubjective truth: The body, no longer stable casing for a wildly fluid inner life, becomes a helplessly expressive conduit for the conflict between internal and external forces. Again, the physical surface of objective reality provides an all-purpose butt for this type of comic defamiliarisation. We may laugh at the amusing vision of two clowning bodies, but it is the simultaneous recognition of subjective experience physicalised playfully which fills the *gap* and makes the joke in its fullest sense.

2.4.5 Bodied metaphor

We are perhaps prone to privilege external facts as our bodies’ outer surfaces broker contact with the material world we share with other subjects. But humour, capable of its most varied and sophisticated expression within a theatrical frame, provides an important mechanism for the recovery of truths from the internal track.

Metaphor invokes reference to a frame inappropriate to ‘objective’ description in order to augment a particular strain of accuracy about something. The phrase, ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’, bisociates human fate with an image of attack by a barrage of pointed, airborne missiles. It emphasises a subjective impression of the beleaguered individual and it has acquired its cultural sticking power by describing a pattern of inner life which people continue to recognise more readily than scientific description.

When David Shiner admonishes a theatregoer, his finger wags out of control setting off a chain reaction of limb reflexes which can be ended only by taking a prop gun out of his pocket and shooting his foot. Through the enacted metaphor we call theatre, the rebellious body parts have taken on a life of Other, detached from the body and known laws of biology. It cannot be the incongruity alone of disobedient limbs which gives the bit its comic currency. The gag starts with a ‘genuine’ gesture and there will be a strategic point when the finger’s ‘behaviour’ begins to look silly, but still could be realistic. People are likely to have had a limb separate itself from body unity, for example, through nervous energy, ‘falling asleep’ or spasm, and pass through some bizarre realm of response. Despite its eventual course, the sequence could not gain admission to the stage world without some initial connection to the ‘truth’ of common experience.

Shiner finally resorts to logic from an unexpectedly violent frame to quiet the offending extremity -- and just happens to have the gun in his pocket for such an emergency. The *gap* to be bridged most likely includes recognition of the exceedingly severe punishment and the real-world implications of shooting oneself in the foot (another common metaphor), the serendipitous appearance of a real-life prop in a mime world, *along with* identification with the event’s nub of experience. Clearly, the situation in

clown-body metaphysics, as opposed to realistic treatment, opens the way for striking, otherwise unavailable, flashes of humour: The genre frame guarantees a joking mood and an impishly non-realistic stage world.

The joking material, however, remains inescapably mindful of the real -- in this case, the capacity for all-consuming frustration with the body's quirks -- only here it cartoons the track of 'inner reality'. The expanded representational palette sponsors an effect which is truly defamiliarising in the sudden, almost shocking validation of feeling toward that which we knew so routinely.

Phenomenologically speaking, particularly as summarised by Spiegelberg on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the 'life-world' refers to the world as people experience it with their external *and* internal selves. For whatever reasons, we have come to privilege an objective notion of the world to the extent that this prejudice becomes invisible:

'It should also be realized that the life-world is by no means immediately accessible as such to the average person in the "natural attitude," especially insofar as he has come under the spell of the scientific interpretation of the world. As Husserl sees it, a peculiar kind of first reduction, a suspension of science, is indispensable in order to get sight of the life-world and of its structures'.⁵⁵

It may be that theatre and humour provide avenues of recovering the life-world by helping to perform that 'first reduction' in ways suggested by this chapter.

A stage world reveals not so much an alternative universe as an alternative gateway to the one we inhabit, its humour a measure of truth tuned to a different frequency. Our reservoirs of knowledge and feeling echo persistently against the unfolding stage world. If, as Wilshire says, 'theatre is a mode of discovery that explores the threads of what is implicit and buried in the world, and pulls them into a compressed and acknowledgeable pattern before us',⁵⁶ a stage world's humour attempts to arrange those threads for the reconstituting of subjective experience (the only one we can know) in ways more 'true' to the individual than 'real' to the scientist. Dulled and bored by the 'abject conformism' for which Baudrillard damns the flat nakedness of external reality, perhaps we find a voluptuous flash of excitement in the subjective realities disclosed by this sudden striptease called humour.

⁵⁵ Herbert Spiegelberg (1994), p. 145

⁵⁶ Bruce Wilshire (1982a), p. xiv.

3: PRACTICAL JOKING

3.1 GROUNDWORK

3.1.1 Form joking

Having looked from overhead at the humorous event as it situates itself in material theatre performance, I shall now move ‘inside’ the production of the stage world, as it were. In this section I will be interested primarily in picking through various aspects of the practitioner’s technique for glimpses of humour astutely cultivated. To what extent *is* it possible to generalise about the effective tooling of a humorous moment in performance? Can one winnow out some theoretical rules of thumb for what many would claim is a strictly instinctual endeavour? I will address these questions both through head-on observations of performance technique and with the tangential relevance of comic structural strategies that seem historically consistent to Western reception patterns.

Although this is the longest of the dissertation’s sections, its broader schemes follow my usual plot of grounding in theory and terms, presenting a picture from the long view, zooming in for specific treatments, then following up related points as seem fit or otherwise intriguing. I begin in 3.1 with a short revision of the humorous model from the joke maker’s position, then define two terms (*style* and *outline*) intended to help make sense of practical technique. In 3.2, I look directly at the pragmatics of generating humour in theatre performance, discussing first the practitioner’s obligation to make humour of a piece with its stage world fabric. Getting down to particulars, I develop several points based on the humorous model and centred around the paramount import of effective framing. I then include a few sub-chapters of related interest to the crafting of humour in performance. Chapter 3.3 looks at strategies for the creation of humour, first in non-verbal and then verbal delivery. It concludes with two further points about the wielding of humour with reference to the wholeness of the stage world.

One most certainly can construct and refine a joke ‘by the numbers’.¹ There are plenty of recognisable joking forms, including the ‘light bulb’ model, to follow on my example in cuing from 1.4.2. The uttered question, ‘How many _____ does it take to

¹ In *The Language of Humour* (1985), Walter Nash diagrams jokes and comic literary passages throughout the book, examining various elements of composition, their placement and selection.

put in a light bulb?’ instantly proposes a joking frame and throws up a sort of prefab structure for people anywhere near the mainstream of present-day English-speaking culture. As proposed earlier, the joke maker fills in the blank with a socially recognised group, say ‘post-graduates’. (Note that this stereotypable segment of the population provides a rather ‘safe’ target for ridicule, being relatively innocuous as far as cultural minorities go. It is also a group to which I obviously belong -- I am deflating my own position, almost always an offence-proof joking posture.)

Next, the joke maker singles out a widely perceived characteristic of the group -- in this case, perhaps a predilection for obsessive intellectualisation or stratified, gratuitous arguing -- and figures out a response which points to a concealed connection and infers prejudice in a *gap* to be bridged. One possible punch line, which I have just made up, would finish the joke as follows: ‘How many post-graduates does it take to put in a light bulb?’ ‘Well, how are you defining light bulb?’ The phrasing could be tinkered with -- ‘Well, how do you define light bulb?’ or ‘Well, what do you mean by light bulb?’ would be slightly more efficient and baldly ludicrous; the first version copies a more likely ‘post-graduate’ linguistic pattern -- and the punch line could be greatly enhanced if ‘performed’ with a suitable air of pomposity-in-training. Another possible punch line might simply string together a nonsensical series of hot-button academic terms ending somehow with the words ‘light bulb’, and delivered similarly.

The point is that a strategy emerges for building a joke from the ground up without divine inspiration -- just a familiarity with sociocultural caricatures, a knowledge of current joking forms, and a grasp of the humorous model. Situation comedies and late-night talk-show host monologues, having to crank out so much humour on a regular basis, are rife with this type of workmanlike joke. The astute observer will note that they routinely insert the same prejudice into a variety of familiar formulations. (Yes, it *would* be possible for a computer to make up a joke as much of mainstream television humour bears a distinct stamp of the mechanical.)

Still, an excellent joke has a singular, unpredictable form and logic, as if dropped from the sky. There is a knack for processing the world (to be justified in 3.1.3) that renders the above floor plan somewhat beside the point. Practitioners producing the level of work examined in this study are among those who see and feel the world in such a way that its humorous, infra-red connections present themselves at an instinctual level.

3.1.2 *Style*

As promised in the Preface, I tread warily upon ground in Merleau-Ponty's three essays on painting,² for which Paul Cézanne provides a recurrent focus. In no way can I contend his comments on painting be extrapolated straightforwardly to theatre -- such a simplistic operation would betray a misapprehension of Merleau-Ponty's ontological foundations. As forms of expression, painting and theatre bear utterly different, untranslatable relationships to the artist. Someone who 'thinks in painting' and someone who 'thinks in theatre' conduct the world through entirely different 'body languages' -- to reclaim a phrase -- not just different dialects of the same language we call 'artistic expression'. Their superficial distinctions in time and spatial dimensions proceed from our inscribed preoccupation with scientific constructs in the first place, and make their correlations appear simpler than they are. But if, as Merleau-Ponty says, 'painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility',³ I would suggest, in a similar sense relative to the perceiving body, that theatre celebrates the mysteries of kinetic presence.

I have, after diligent scrutiny, come across what I believe to be kindred principles at work if one accepts the notion that the two art forms, in their fashions, pry loose for our perception truths about experience normally submerged in the free-flowing morass of everyday life. Both Merleau-Ponty and Wilshire talk about their respective topics in words which could easily apply to the other's. Couldn't painting be said, in Wilshire's words, to allow 'us not only to see and to grasp an appearance of what something is when the actual thing is not present, but to see it *better*'⁴? And couldn't theatre's project be compared to Cézanne's wanting no less than 'to portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make *visible* how the world *touches* us'⁵? In any case, two notions developed by Merleau-Ponty in his essays on aesthetics set one to thinking about practical theatre technique: They stem from the terms 'style' and 'line'.

It becomes clear after several interviews with various theatre practitioners, that even the most willing volunteer can put words to artistic instinct and experience up to a point, and that the nub of creation dangles out of rational reach. But if there is a retreat from articulation of the humorous moment's internal emergence, it should not be assumed

² 'Cézanne's Doubt' (1945), 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' (1952), and 'Eye and Mind' (1960). Page references pertain to translations in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (1993).

³ Merleau-Ponty (1960), p. 127.

⁴ Bruce Wilshire (1982), p. 32.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 70.

to infer some magical 'Eureka!' discovery in every instance, an immediate, indescribable and inarguable feeling of artistic success. A pattern emerges, in these higher levels of proficiency, of the theatre practitioner who reflects and tinkers every step of the way, referring constantly to a principle which may seem obvious to the point of invisibility: the joker's inseparable reciprocal status as producer and receiver of the joke. To a notable degree, practitioners weigh in with similar versions of a creative gauge, which trusts implicitly the position of self-as-potential-audience. Gerry Stembridge, director of Barabbas' *The Whiteheaded Boy*, acknowledges that various comic moments will come under scrutiny by the company during the course of rehearsal, and that the final verdict rests with him: 'If I think it's funny I always think there's a fair chance other people will think it's funny'.⁶

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Merleau-Ponty's ontological circularity finds its way into the relationship between artist-in-the-world and work of art. In his middle essay, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', Merleau-Ponty raises the issue of 'style', having laid the groundwork earlier in his writing. The following mention in the *Phenomenology of Perception* sounds a lot like Schutz's 'biographical situation' (encountered in 2.4.2), which informs our every action: "I am a psychological and historical structure and have received with existence a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in relation to this structure".⁷ In 'Cézanne's Doubt', Merleau-Ponty moves toward 'a theory of artistic creation as the fusion of self and world, not imitation of the world as object by painter as subject, nor a subjective projection of the world by the artist's imagination'.⁸

'Style' marries the notions of biographical situation and an ontological circularity to address the way 'perception already stylizes'⁹ for the expressing subject responding to the world; 'style' is the way one sees the world. Although derived through his consideration of the artist, 'style' seems intended for far more sweeping implications: 'The art to which Merleau-Ponty refers here extends beyond the realm of painting and toward a human orientation toward expressively appropriating the world.'¹⁰

These few steps lead me to suspect that among all the possible angles and shadings of this 'certain vision of the world', a humour-ready *style* emerges. To oversimplify, some

⁶ Gerry Stembridge (1998). All subsequent quotes by him are taken from this interview.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 455.

⁸ Galen A. Johnson (1993), p. 13.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1952), p. 91.

¹⁰ Linda Singer (1981), p. 239.

people's perceptive apparatus present the world to them in ways which enable literally a 'sense of humour'. There are, of course, different strains and tones of humour, but generally such a *style* might be fed by: a predilection for appropriating the world playfully; a facility for quirky associations and sideways leaps of logic; an acuity for observing and distilling human behaviour from inside and out; a sensitivity and agility connected with framing; and certainly a physical instrument well attuned with any of these connections ...

Such an incidence of innate perception might explain why those with a comic knack are at such a loss to fill in the most telling gaps of how they come to be funny. It is simply the artist's 'very way of inhabiting and taking up the world',¹¹ a way of seeing and feeling which, as manifest in the individual, becomes manifest in the work. Woody Allen disregards in strikingly phenomenological terms the possibility of one day waking up to find himself no longer funny: 'That thought would never occur to me -- it's an odd thought and not realistic. Because funny and me are not separate. We're one'.¹²

Experienced performers, directors and playwrights will have cultivated their *styles*, reinforcing, extending and refining in their expressing bodies a circuitry for humour production, the precise fittings of which I shall attempt to appraise. This section is not intended as a step-by-step primer of the *Comic Performance for Dummies* ilk, but an articulation and perhaps deeper illumination of what experienced practitioners literally know in their bones.

3.1.3 *Outlining*

I will now proceed to adopt the term, *outlining*, as the variegated means by which the community of practitioners wielding influence at the site of performance intend coherence of the stage world individually and together.

In his essays on painting, Merleau-Ponty refers to the artist's use of line to mark the outer contours of objects in space and the meeting of one texture with another, even though 'there are no lines visible in themselves'¹³ for the subject perceiving the same object(s) in the real world. In painting an apple, for example, the outline 'makes an object of the shape, whereas the contour is rather the ideal limit toward which the sides of the apple recede in depth'¹⁴. The line as outline has become a conventional technique for

¹¹ Gary Brent Madison (1981), p. 87.

¹² Woody Allen (1995), p. 208.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1960), p. 143.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), p. 65.

transposing the apple from perceivable space to the flatness of the canvas, a way of 'lifting' the apple to meet reception.

I contend that what we call practical theatrical technique involves a similar *outlining* of behaviour, word, action, image and other phenomena, the better to pry it from that free-flowing morass of the lived-through world and position it with a particular boldness, softness, tone or pitch. I am talking about the actor's gesture or vocal delivery, the director's pacing or visual image, the playwright's phrasing or plot point, all of which intend to tailor performance in its 'objecthood'. The actress *outlines* her voice through volume and articulation, possibly through dialect or register -- it is the way a practitioner seeks to etch signs as cogent and readable.

The idea of *outlining* may be applied to the stage world as a whole, as well as its individual elements. At any given performance moment the totality of its contributing phenomena may be said to intend or *outline* a felt meaning for perception. Merleau-Ponty traces the evolution of the line into modern art, the 'freeing of the line' which renders visible hidden or indirect networks that do not 'reach the eye head on'. In a theatrical sense a company like Théâtre de Complicité has discovered ways to *outline* or 'render present' experience beyond the externally realistic, through ensemble images and vocal invention. Symbolist and surreal theatre have long sought to *outline* ephemeral, pre-intellectual or abstract life material in ways that reach beyond surface representation.

As we will see in the following chapters, *outlining* plays a vital role in practical humour technique, which is highly dependent on crystalline frame renderings and crisp *reversals*.

It cannot be emphasised too often, but this is as good a time as any for a reminder: I am setting aside consideration of the sociopolitical services for which theatre humour may be conscripted, although inferences shall continue to emerge from between the lines. I shall in section 4 mark some of the key tensions within the receiving body which can be manipulated to powerful effect, and in section 5 throw some light beyond the brackets to highlight the impossibility of categorically 'innocent' humour.

3.2 HUMOUR TECHNIQUE

3.2.1 Cohesion of humour and stage world

Humour does not occur in a vacuum; it cannot meet the receiving body devoid of connections to both real and imagined worlds -- humour *is* those connections. The humorous moment needs an identifiable context, a sturdy 'before' from which to diverge unexpectedly. In the theatre, the *priming sequence* for every humorous moment is inextricably bound up in the fiction, rendering, and framing of stage world. At the phenomenal, lived-through level, the stage world flows forth in performance through signs generated *purposefully* and *unwittingly* by performer, director, playwright and designer.

An incalculable variety of stage worlds make themselves available to the imaginative practitioner, capable of unfamiliar features and comic surprises. But a stage world, as mingled co-presence of phenomenal and semiotic stuff, yet owes key allegiances to the deeper structures of the everyday one we inhabit. We 'know' the world in certain ways. We may be willing to buy into the wildest differences between the world onstage and the one outside the theatre, but the perceiving subject is likely to demand certain coherences of 'worldness'.

With the convergence at the site of performance of so many artistic sensibilities, a stage world sculpts itself with a conglomerate *style* of its own. Although inconsistencies and divergences may be intended as natural or emblematic to a vision of life, every unfolding moment proposes itself to the perceiving body as *of* the fabric of the stage world -- a proposal which may, given the various artistries, competences and limitations at work, be rejected (or, more likely, accepted by some spectators and not by others).

In fact, a particular comic incongruity that strikes actor or director in the piecemeal work of rehearsal, may flounder in the fuller, fluid context of production. Practitioners widely and informally use the phrase, 'Does it work?' or 'It works', in reference to the success or suitability of a performance choice, and a joking choice in particular. Generally, 'It works' has become shorthand for, 'It works *as outlined for potential performance in the context of surrounding elements*'. This principle is acknowledged by Stembridge, who emphasises that no individual 'bit' can reasonably be judged apart from the whole within which it is embedded: 'When you run a sequence of the play which includes that thing you're wondering about, that's when you find out if it works. You run 15, 20 minutes of a play, often just to look at one little bit of it. But that's what'll show you if it works or not.'

More to the point, humour strategies and techniques cannot be clinically prescribed out of context; each moment -- humorous or not -- remains responsible to all that precedes and surrounds. The task can be tricky: Incongruity at the heart of every humorous event *intends* to call attention to itself as incompatible in some way, to upend the stage world without fracturing its integrity. The caveats are clear: A *reversal* must contrast with *something*, though not *anything* (the *setup*); that something must itself be an integral piece of a strip (*priming sequence*); that strip must inhere with the fabric of life as rendered (stage world); and it must retain key bonds to referential experience (real world).

In an unusually broad example, David Shiner and Bill Irwin report that *Fool Moon* contained verbal exchanges between them until the first preview in New York. In a pre-Broadway incarnation of the piece, performed at Lincoln Center, Irwin would appear onstage or in the balcony and open a dialogue with Shiner's 'latecomer' about invading the audience. Irwin recalls: 'I started throwing people's purses, saying, "This is great, I see why you like this; uh oh, don't go too far"'. It was an interesting turnaround'.¹⁵ They tried to keep some version of the dialogue in the Broadway production, so as not to incur the limiting label of 'mime show', and wrote several possible openings, though there was no talking anywhere else in the show. Irwin says they threw out the idea the night before first preview: 'There were good jokes in there; we got good laughs, but it wasn't from the same cloth'.

Similar decisions were made in connection with the 'train' sketch prior to the 1995 revival. After it had been up and running successfully during the first Broadway run, Shiner and Irwin toyed with the idea of including references to cellular phones and fax machines, and considered building a prop which was a hybrid of the two devices. Ultimately they cut the prop but experimented in previews, miming the phone/fax and producing the sound effects vocally. Irwin says they ultimately decided that the sound effects were intrusive: 'It felt like we changed stylistic course halfway through and we threw it out, throwing out big laughs'. As Pavis might diagnose in both these cases, with the introduction of verbal utterance or vocalisation into a mode of expression based in mime, 'the universe of gesture is then contaminated by meaning of a different sort. No exchange, other than a distancing one, can be established between the body and the shock of the sound it utters'.¹⁶

¹⁵ Bill Irwin (1996). All subsequent quotes by him are taken from this interview.

¹⁶ Patrice Pavis (1982), p. 55.

The same principle pertains on a smaller, more individualised scale to specific choices of style and content made all along the route of the creative processes which lead to performance text. Gerry Stembridge and the company of *The Whiteheaded Boy*, for example, laboured over the appropriateness of the more extravagant sequences involving Baby and Peter, discussed in 2.3.3 in relation to 'play' (see 3.2.8, below). Although in this case Stembridge made a directorial choice in advance, the decision will sometimes be left -- or suddenly present itself -- for consideration during initial performances in front of the 'fresh' eyes of an audience.

It may already be apparent that this brief discussion of coherence can actually be seen as a practical slant on material covered in 2.2, concerning the establishment of comic possibility in a stage world's foundations. In any case, I shall now move right to the site of the humorous event for a closer look at 'how it's done'.

3.2.2 The importance of clean framing

The humorous model provides surprisingly reliable signposts for tuning a process which would seem to despise organisation. Spontaneous contribution to performance in flight concentrates within the first three steps of the model: *priming sequence* culminating in *setup* and *reversal*. Although the *reversal* (or punch line) appears most prominently in a performed sequence, an attention to delineation for all three elements enhances humour's sleight-of-frame action. To put it generally, the *priming sequence* wants to be framed as clearly as possible in anticipation of the divergent frame to come with the *reversal*. Along those lines, the effective *setup* will foster a 'clean' switch of frames. Again, these are not intended as explicit, foolproof instructions -- they may suggest a variety of adjustments, depending on things like character, stage world, focal point and joke.

It is not my suggestion that any of the practitioners are aware of a humorous model, but it is interesting to see how their instincts and experience reconcile with its principles. The model may in fact reside beneath the practitioner's consciousness, like the acquired instincts for riding a bicycle, so that cases which would seem to defy one of the model's dictates can be seen to obey its broader brief. It might, in fact, serve as a handy reminder for the able practitioner who loses perspective in the heat of rehearsal.

The theatre practitioner who intends a humorous moment may not be able (or even eager) to ensure that every spectator approves the prejudice of a given joke. It should be relatively safe to say, though, that someone who intends a comic moment would want it to be 'read' sufficiently well to be 'gotten' by everyone in the theatre. Much of successful

humour technique can be traced to effective framing -- in fact, *outlining* the frame -- either for the better reading of signs or the finer, comically desirable tuning of stage world.

These sub-strategies are easy to appreciate in radical frame switches by a single actor. Keeping in mind that sudden incongruity is a linchpin of humour, Barabbas' pretext for *The Whiteheaded Boy*, having three performers play all the roles, enables many opportunities for instantaneous changes into, out of, and between characters (mentioned earlier in 2.2.2).

Mikel Murfi portrays Jane, one of the Geoghegan girls, among his array of characters. 'She' is introduced in the first few moments of the play by Raymond Keane in the narratorial voice of the stage directions: 'This tall girl coming in is Jane. She has a year or two less than Kate. A nice quiet girl.' Mikel was last marked as Baby, an extravagant, rather involving caricature of a young woman given the semblance of an awkward cartoon duck (described in more detail in 2.3.3). Following Raymond's cue, there is a momentary stop in the action. Mikel looks at Raymond and then 'remembers' that Jane is 'his' character. He changes suddenly into a willowy female with a glowing smile and thrusts his face into a suddenly produced bouquet of flowers. He delivers Jane's first line, the actual words not being as important as the light, breathy voice and the attitude of demure adoration toward her fiancé, Donough (played by Veronica Coburn).

Murfi indulges in a sort of stage-world trick, which allows the spectator the momentary illusion of being present to a blip of live performance. Most theatregoers will recognise an amusing, if well-rehearsed, transition. Murfi effectively passes from one character framing to another. In a way, he allows the spectator to catch his 'real-live actor' body poking its head through the Baby caricature, comically validating what the theatregoer has begun to realise as the potential confusion of each performer taking on so many roles. Technically he uses the moment to gather full attention upon himself. Spectators would not have known who was to take on the next role, and might have missed the front end of the transition -- the device increases the chances that focus will be properly directed for witness of the deft switch in contrasting characters.

The pretence that Murfi has forgotten his cue and must 'catch up' with the performance, justifies the actor hurtling himself into the role of Jane. The depiction, of course, filters through Murfi's notably ungirlish body type and his performative *style* of goofy intensity. He snaps into character with a force that accentuates the contrast all the more -- in effect, he arrests a barrelling momentum, 'stopping on a dime' in his embodiment of a sweet young woman smelling flowers, itself the physicalised lampoon of an Edwardian femininity. The virtuosity of the performer *and* his *outlined* inclusion of the

audience in the stage world cultivate a doubly ingenuous relationship between performer and spectator.

Murfi executes a virtual ping-pong match of contrasting frames a bit later in the first act. He has already initialed the role of George, the self-appointed bulwark of the Geoghegan clan, with a forward-leaning, stalwart stride. He is apoplectically serious, with a brow-furrowed face, muscle-bound voice, and an obsessive behavioural tic of smoothing his hair, particularly when agitated. The particular inclusion of the George character in the exchange is comically fortuitous. He is drawn with an overbearing seriousness and complete lack of self-awareness, prime qualifications for a joking butt. Murfi makes him into an overtaxed pressure cooker, shaking, sputtering, cheeks puffing and reddening in response to a fate which perpetually refuses to bend to his will.

At one point, George sits at the table, nearly doubled over in consternation about a telegram concerning Denis' latest shame inferred upon the family. Jane has previously been placed as standing next to him, profile away. The exchange goes as follows:

JANE: What is it, George?

GEORGE: 'Geoghegan's Hope also ran.' That's either a race horse, or it's Denis himself.

JANE: I don't understand you.

GEORGE: He's either broken his word to me and is betting on horses again, or else ... he's failed again.

JANE: His examination, you mean?

GEORGE: I do.

JANE: God help us!

Visually, this short scene places Murfi's cartoon embodiments side by side and back again as he bounces up and down, back and forth between characters, the contrasts amplified in the corresponding vocal timbres. Filling out the effect is the volley between comically contrasting inner lives, George seized by self-righteous passion counterpointed against Jane's perplexed naiveté.

Although energetically invested physically and emotionally, Murfi has honed the characters and rehearsed the sequence to the point that each switch is remarkably 'clean', in the sense that he strikes the signature embodiment with virtual precision every time. There is no doubt an element of these characteristics being 'in his body', a part of his inhering *style*. But in their fullness, there is also a minimum of brush strokes, an underlining of a single concept unmuddied by excess detail or secondary qualities.

Underpinning the comic principle from a performance standpoint is Murfi's bodied co-presence with the characters. The switches happen as quickly as humanly possible, but the transition can never entirely disappear -- he approaches something of a machinelike efficiency, which becomes phenomenal spectacle in its own right. The smooth surety of accomplishment, sudden clarity of one character then the other, generate a rhythm -- George's bodied thickness and psychic turbulence > fiction in abeyance, Murfi as actor fleetingly present during the whiz of transition > Jane's bodied lightness and psychic innocence -- which is reversed and replayed several times. The transitional instant can never be eliminated, which reminds us of Mikel's inescapable personhood.

In effect, the sequence defamiliarises domestic argument; the opposing energies are more keenly distanced from one another than they would be in real life *because* they clearly originate from the same body, yet are caught in this spectacle of silliness.

To step back and restate some of the general lessons to be taken from these passages, the humour quotient stands to increase 1) from care toward the broadest frames of phenomenon and fiction, clarity of signifying conventions and *stylistic* palettes in terms of what may be tolerated as comic incongruence; 2) from a honing of each frame -- *priming* and *reversing* -- with attention to physical, vocal, emotional, culturally loaded, and other contrasts between one another; 3) from a subtle *underlining* of the *setup*; and 4) from a clean transfer from *setup* to *reversal*, with full and immediate investment in the bisociating frame.

The above 'lessons' can be seen as potential guidelines for cultivation of humorous moments in the advance construction of the stage world, i.e., rehearsal. But the improvised nature of David Shiner's 'latecomer' sequence in *Fool Moon* (addressed earlier in 1.4.4 and 1.4.5) makes it possible to glean related advice for spontaneous humour. To a greater extent than usual, this non-verbal, unrehearsed mode of performance remains unscripted and unpredictable moment by moment. Hanging loosely upon a general plot strategy, it relies almost entirely on the performer's improvisatory skills and instincts -- which are, nonetheless, based on effective exploitation of the humorous model.

Shiner's embarkation across the row of seats and their inhabitants effectively serves as an introductory *priming sequence*, amusing in itself for its physical and social incongruence: surreal body splashing about among real ones *plus* audience invasion by an unthinkable class of boor. He climbs from one end of the row to the other, often losing all contact with the ground. More specifically, Shiner first establishes a 'norm' of audience invasion, steadily maneuvering across patrons, hooking arms and legs around this person and that as if scaling a horizontal rock face. His steady progress involves gaining

purposefully awkward and contorting hand holds while highlighting his clownlike performance status -- at one point he might be draped across three spectators. It very obviously clashes with the audience frame, roles which they, of course, fill perfectly.

Shiner's continuation toward the opposite aisle then serves as a renewable *priming sequence*, sprouting *setups* and *reversals* along the way. He slaps an unco-operative man on the shoulder; he 'inadvertently' puts his hand over someone's face and grasps another man's hair, gradually registering distaste as he interrupts the climb to extract an imaginary louse and flick it over his shoulder; he discovers that his hand has become prisoner to one woman's long hair; he notices he has mussed another woman's coif and tries to set it right 'before anyone notices'. He finally backs out the other side of the row. During this time Shiner maintains an ideal joking momentum, pulling the spectator along at a calculated pace without allowing energy to flag or expectations to rush ahead.

This strategy of establishment before divergence might be seen as common joking wisdom: a frame must be installed and expectations aroused before real ambush can occur. Really just a specific form of *priming sequence/setup/reversal*, the technique appears frequently in jokes which use a series of three as framework. A joke may begin, 'An Irishman, an Italian and a post-graduate went fishing', and we know from the start that the first two will set a sort of pattern to be skewered by the third. Another joke may proceed: 'A post-graduate goes to the neighbourhood brothel, whereupon he's told to come back tomorrow. He comes back the next day and is again told to come back tomorrow. The third day ...' We can be reasonably sure that the joke will arrive momentarily; clearly, two entries are the fewest needed to set a *priming sequence* pattern for *reversal*.

Recall the mini-text from *Out of a house, walked a man ...* in 2.2.4, which begins, 'A certain old woman, out of excessive curiosity, fell out of a window, plummeted to the ground, and was smashed to pieces', and ends when the narrator gives up around the sixth old woman. The piece pointedly subverts our engrained expectations by persisting past the third old woman, and then failing to deliver any satisfactory conclusion. This humorous event obeys the spirit of the model by appearing to defy its letter, using our knowledge of comic form 'against us', as it were, in a strategy of *reversal* through *anti-reversal*.

To return to *Fool Moon's* 'latecomer' sequence, first described in 1.4.4, Shiner finally attempts to claim a seat after climbing across spectators from aisle to aisle. As might be expected, the real-life occupant refuses to move; the usher, waved into service by Shiner, examines his ticket and authoritatively points him toward the side box. This interim resolution reliably gains a peak audience laugh at the 'latecomer's' expense. Shiner registers the setback and his identification as joking butt with hands on hips, as if

aggrieved to find everyone 'against him'. At this point, his attitude takes on a more antagonistic edge. Before leaving, he points to the theatregoer who has 'taken his seat' and viciously gestures that he wants to cut the man's throat. As he makes his way toward the exit he mimes booting a man who is laughing. He pushes another man, who, laughing, pushes him back, earning a large audience response. 'Stunned', Shiner pushes him again. A man in the next aisle actually starts to grapple with the performer; Shiner whacks him with his hat; the man relents; then Shiner halts his exit to return and whack him once again for good measure, indicating 'and *that's* for laughing at me', before disappearing through the curtain.

Interspersed with short onstage interludes by Irwin, there are three more 'chapters' to Shiner's 'latecomer' quest: First, he plays a scene in the house-left side box, wherein he bullies a real-life ticketholder out of her/his seat before being directed to the house-right box by the usher. Then he passes by the front row of the auditorium, visiting indignities upon the patrons and generally continuing his reign of 'revenge' (as described in 2.4.1). Finally, he shows up in the house-right side box, where he tries again to unseat one of the patrons -- he may literally wrestle someone out of their seat and to the floor. He is eventually joined by Irwin, who winds up pulling both of them over the railing.

From these sequences, a variety of further observations can be made in reference to the performer's spontaneous techniques for maximising the potency of each step in the cycle of *priming sequence*, *setup* and *reversal*. Again, it should be noted the extent to which these strategies attend to the care and maintenance of framing:

1) *Clarity of attack*. Shiner often ensures the efficiency of a *reversal* by pausing to designate the site -- in most of these cases, the victim -- of an impending attack. He adopts an active suspension of motion, as if measuring his next target or marshalling his forces. The *setup* hangs in the air, allowing all observers to 'catch up' and register an impending act, unsure of what form it will take or whether he will actually go through with it. The *reversal* then arrives cleanly and suddenly, disparate signifiers side by side in time. (In my terms, the oft-admired instinct for 'comic timing' refers to the ability to measure a punch line indirectly; it is, more to the point, a knack for tailoring a *setup*, which often refers to this precise judgement of duration.)

2) *Increased field of frames*. Shiner expands his potential for bisociation through a cross-hatch of code-related *reversals*. For example, audience laughter is usually considered an 'out-of-frame' activity, disattended by stage-world character if not real-life

actor.¹⁷ Shiner the actor is keenly aware of audience laughter, every step of the way; his character, however, is shrewdly selective. He may ignore it for several minutes, then single out a spectator for ‘punishment’, imitating his laughter as a sort of bobbing jack-in-the-box head, with flapping tongue and wide-eyed, vacuous gaze.

3) *Framing maintenance*. What seems to make any act short of causing real injury available to Shiner is the systematic stretching and maintenance of the non-serious shield. He continually tests the limits of the onlooker frame through more and more daring transgressions, building from simple if dramatic intrusion on personal space to outright physical attack. It is interesting to note, from his side of the event, that he is constantly evaluating the level and mood of response coming from the audience:

‘One night I remember taking an old lady out of her seat and throwing her against the wall and punching her in the stomach, and I knew it was one of those nights, I could be Harpo and go bonkers ... She was sitting up in the box and tears of laughter were streaming down her face. So you know, in that kind of improv it’s really all a feeling of where the audience is. I’ll only go as far as they give me permission to go. Some nights they don’t give you any permission. You just hold back.’¹⁸

Shiner spaces the acts strategically across time, each incrementally more extravagant than the previous, so that each becomes a reversal of expectations -- because each one seems to reach the acceptable limit -- then joins the *priming sequence* for a later *setup* and *reversal*. The boundaries of the stage world are repeatedly tested and nudged outward.

Also, Shiner ensures that his joking relationship with the audience remains unimpeachable through subtle but constant attention. His actions receive a certain privilege under the clowning genre by definition; his physical *style* retains a cartoonish quality, divorced from the range of contemporary vernacular movement, and it implies ‘these are not the actions of a real person’. He supplies regular emphasis of his status in the nature of clowning ‘asides’. He will occasionally imitate spectators in clown dialect before attacking them, for example, caricaturing someone who doesn’t seem to be paying enough attention. And he will periodically adopt a socially inferior position, e.g., the woman whose coif he has mussed, which he submissively tries to set aright.

¹⁷ Erving Goffman (1974), p. 220-23.

¹⁸ David Shiner (1996). All subsequent quotes by him are taken from this interview.

Indeed, more than one reviewer felt the theatrical frame shudder in the wake of the performer's more extreme liberties taken, 'those dangerous Shiner-esque moments that walk the line between serious insult and serious fun'.¹⁹

4) *Ability to surprise*. Comic momentum cannot be maintained without the practitioner's continued ability to surprise. A spectator is capable of learning the stage world well enough to see what's coming, thereby reducing the arousal jag.

Here the performer shows an uncanny intuition for maintaining the surprise element, not only through increasingly daring frame breaks, but by a continual shuffling of frames. The described strip of experience plays a sort of shell game with orientation, using Shiner's ability to inhabit a cascade of incompatible frames in rapid succession -- rude latecomer, put-upon victim, unassuming theatregoer, master contortionist.

During his climb across the row, Shiner tosses in the occasional rogue frame. His gesture of 'finding a louse' in someone's hair opens a *gap* whose completion assigns a vaguely undesirable character to the targeted spectator. By flicking the imaginary insect over his shoulder, he produces a new *gap* on the back of the last one, redirecting spectators to consider socially acceptable disposal practices of unwanted parasites. This type of invention supplies a capacity to step sideways from frames immediately at hand, keeping ahead of the spectator by occasionally darting away from the familiar field of play.

Along these lines, one of the sketches from *Fool Moon*, in which Shiner drafts a female theatregoer for an extended 'date' routine, offers a sort of object lesson in framing. In it he exploits the contrast between competent *outlining* and non-performative behaviour as a basic theme for humour. Shiner, whose early career experience included audience-participation routines while busking in assorted European cities, has acquired an amazingly reliable facility for choosing ideal spectators to bring onstage, neither shy enough to kill the action nor so extroverted as to hijack the scene. It is an openness he can glean from their eyes, he says, 'a quality of innocence, a quality of naivety, something that tells me they're not going to try to prove themselves, they'll just be themselves'. Like all the participants I have seen Shiner draft from the audience, the woman is likely to be mildly self-conscious but an excellent sport, no doubt conscious that 'the deep obligation of temporary performers ... is not to be correct but to take in good humor the response their lapse calls forth.'²⁰

¹⁹ Linda Winer (1993).

²⁰ Erving Goffman (1974), p. 373.

The 'date' sketch banks entirely on the selection from the audience of a personable non-performer. Optimum humour counts on her inability to negotiate several frames at once and the 'actress' frame in particular, employing a slightly different strain of the opening 'latecomer' sequence's frame shuffle.

To establish the new sub-stage world, Shiner appears onstage carrying two bentwood chairs, wearing a bow tie and carrying a large flower. He places the chairs side by side, opens an imaginary car door and sits in the chair on the audience's right (this is the U.S.). The five-piece, onstage string band supplies jaunty underscoring as Shiner goes for a 'spin'; bouncing to the beat, 'steering' and 'shifting', his mime and the music placing him behind the wheel of an old-fashioned jalopy. He stops, mimes opening the car door and stepping out, descends the stairs to the audience and knocks on an imaginary door to the sound effect of the drummer's woodblock. Shiner affects an ingenuous, lovesick persona through facial expression and body attitude, no doubt a sign handed down to our receptors through ages of clowning, music hall and silent screen comedians: his eyes flutter heavenward, hands clasped over the heart with a full-body sigh.

The general stage world and its codes remain in force from previous segments. The immediate scene and mood have been set, Shiner's character refashioned as generally more benevolent than his 'latecomer'. He chooses a young woman from the audience and cavalierly escorts her onstage to the 'car'. The sketch follows the basic plotline of 'going for a spin' and on to a restaurant. It changes gears when Irwin joins the fray as an oily waiter with designs on Shiner's date.

The sketch will succeed to the extent that the woman falls into a series of well-laid traps. Shiner, as 'man on a date', escorts the woman to the passenger side of the 'car'. He indicates that she should have a seat; the woman takes him at his 'word' and tries to sit down, whereupon Shiner stomps his frustration and facially implores the audience for sympathy as he pulls the woman back so he can first 'open the door'. If she begins to protest vocally, Shiner goes comically ballistic, putting his hand over her mouth and then using his hands to imitate her yapping. After a marked display of impatience as 'frustrated scene partner', he will suddenly decide to resume the scene, switching into frame as 'breathless swain' holding the car door for his date.

As previously noted in reference to Mikel Murfi's technique, the performer adroitly constructs successive frames for psycho-physical contrast. Shiner replaces the exasperated face and body of a faux outer frame with the fully performed, flowing romanticism of his cartoon character on a date. He therefore seems to jump from primary to secondary framing, also switching 'horizontally' from one mode of behaviour to

another: a 'negative' attitude (annoyance) suddenly unplugged in favour of a 'positive' one (gallantry).

Amid a strategy similar to the 'latecomer' sketch in laying out a variety of frames for shuffling, Shiner repeatedly places the woman in positions of having to inhabit the roles of 'actress' and 'woman on a date', for which she is not equipped and not expected to be equipped. He continually insists, through comic prodding, that the woman attain, or at least attempt, a certain level of involvement -- this first part of the sketch counts on her reticence to join, her artlessness when she does, and even her occasional success, all of which are comically framed by Shiner.

In a sort of negative image of Shiner's earlier infringement on the audience space, the woman's unskilled performance behaviour intrudes upon the onstage frame and its performative polish. Visually, the woman persists throughout as a foreign agent on the stage. Her bodied location in the 'real world' adheres to her -- even when she does try to 'play the game' -- through her dress and absences of physical control and stage presence, as well as the audience's persistent awareness of her 'volunteer' status. She appears in marked contrast to all those qualities embodied by Shiner, plus his ability to hop nimbly among larger frames of 'man on a date', 'clown/actor' and real-life performer. In effect he is using humour in the Bergsonian sense as social corrective, gently ridiculing her non-conformance with the codes of his slippery stage world.

Many *reversals* are executed unwittingly by the woman and highlighted by Shiner, as, for example, her above-mentioned failure to wait until the 'door is open' before 'stepping into the car'. These moments hint at the comic gold mine of bridgeable *gaps* seeded by the sketch's structure and execution: The spectator likely bridges the real-life consequences pertaining to the strip in the primary framework, e.g., the woman stepping through the car door. At the same time, Shiner maintains the contrast between his fantasy personality within the 'date' and the more cynical demeanor when he steps outside the scene, which effectively mocks the inner stage world's romance. There may also reside a blurry tit-for-tat element to their relationship: Shiner's pointed impatience in correcting the woman probably contrasts with our sense of fairness in light of her unenviable position.

An interesting feature, courtesy of the primary-secondary framework clash, is that Shiner seems naively to persist in an 'aside' relationship with the audience despite the woman's clear lack of co-operation in a formal fiction frame. Shiner's asides, of course, would normally be disattended by an actress. Comic reactions for the audience's benefit, as well, are generally considered to take place on an out-of-frame track of behaviour, disattended by others in the stage world. In this case, though, the woman cannot or will not let go of her onlooker status -- she watches and laughs, thereby assembling a surreal

identity which flutteringly combines watcher and watched. The indelibility of the woman's real-life status, in fact, attends every humorous moment: She feels no obligation to foreswear her spectator's right to laugh at the performers and maintains certain prerogatives (she resists voluntarily, even within the fictional framework, kissing her 'date' good night).

Occasionally the woman bursts into laughter after her own error or unacceptable effort. Goffman calls this 'flooding out', the individual's sudden failure to construct any role at all for herself, usually in recognition of feeling caught out of frame or falling short of an attempted frame participation. This sort of response represents, of course, a highly undesirable admission from someone claiming the actress frame, and its appearance in the stage world likely draws laughter at the rare surrender of social pretence. (I have, however, seen professional actors *allow* themselves to 'break up' at the same point in performance every night, as it so seems to ingratiate them to the spectators, who think they have witnessed a unique and vulnerable moment.)

Shiner, as in the 'latecomer' sketch', takes legitimate risks with 'arousal' levels in the audience, showing the peak comic rewards available. As shown in 1.4.5, the formidable demand on an audience member to keep the performance fabric intact and fluid raises the stakes by courting spectator discomfort. Successful negotiation inflates the laugh with an unusually high expulsion of relief -- and possibly a triumphant burst at the real-life participant's momentary mastery of the stage world.

With the woman sitting next to him in the 'car', Shiner sets off as he has demonstrated earlier, bouncing along jauntily to the music of the onstage band. The woman becomes a blatantly still figure within the stage world. After several seconds of 'driving', Shiner 'notices' her lack of involvement. He indicates for her to watch him, and demonstrates the bouncing body and joyfully floppy face she should assume. She laughs, no doubt out of discomfort and the mental image of looking like him, and when Shiner and the band set off once again, she makes a half-hearted attempt. Shiner waves away the scene again, conveying a sort of pedantic sense of, 'Sorry, that's not good enough; you have to do it like this', whereupon he demonstrates again. Shiner in fact finds the next few attempts unacceptable, raising anxiety levels throughout the house until he relents.

When they reach the destination, however, the woman remembers to 'close the door' after stepping out of the car.²¹ This obvious and successful attempt at participation

²¹ If not at this precise point, it usually happens somewhere along the way that the participant will 'get it right' without prompting.

in the stage world turns her entire incompetent 'performance' so far into a *priming sequence, reversed* upon as she not only accepts the actress frame, but fills it relatively well. Shiner, highlighting her effort, turns to the audience, raises his eyebrows and mouths 'Bravo'. Then, with an inner eye peeled for yet another frame change, he turns his endorsement into *setup*: He then mimes lifting the door off the ground and replacing it, leaving the spectator to recognise that she had slammed it too hard. This last action by Shiner acts as a comic 'button', an informal term used to refer to a peak humorous moment which lends a feeling of definitive conclusion to a longer sequence.

For all appearances of seat-of-the-pants unpredictability, Shiner keeps relatively firm control of these audience-participation sketches. With an overriding structure and a supply of reliable sub-frames, performances may not vary as widely as one might suppose:

'You create a structure and within that structure you can play and bounce off the four walls; but you've got to have those four walls or it becomes too chaotic. So fix a structure and you bring the audience member into that structure and their reactions and spontaneity within that structure is more than enough to create humor.'

Clearly then (and although he might never articulate it as such), Shiner has conceived a stage world inordinately fertile for frame changes in several 'directions' at any given time. As bodied performer, he undertakes a tightrope juggling act, orchestrating three performances -- his own, the onstage spectator's, and the audience's at large -- through his spontaneous selection and execution of framings.

3.2.3 Frame overlays

Frame juxtaposition need not happen sequentially. In fact, a stock method for enabling humorous incongruity involves the imposition of norms from one frame upon another. Such an overlay allows a comically inappropriate response in an obliquely related situation. Mundane reaction to serious threat remains a favourite humour tool for action films and television sitcoms, along the lines of Freud's condemned rogue being led out to execution on a Monday morning and remarking, 'Well, this week's beginning nicely' (also mentioned in 2.3.4). Such a strategy is used in the grimly cynical world of *Twenty Grand*, when Hackett and Dean appear to take time out from a gangland execution for a harmless little father-and-son chat (see 2.2.1). A reverse mismatch is also routinely employed: imposing an urgently serious frame upon an everyday task. Comedy and farce often show pursuit of an ordinary goal with laughably extraordinary fervour.

A sequence from *Out of a house, walked a man ...* offers material for inspection in the form of a short piece written by Kharms in dramatic form and titled, 'Disarmed, or Unfortunate in Love: A Tragic Vaudeville in One Act'. A man chases a woman through an upstage door, clearly pressing suit for sexual congress -- the sub-stage world opens upon a scenario from reality *outlined* with a broad physicality and melodramatic ardency. The man's urgency builds as he gropes for the woman; their verbal wrestling is confined to short pleas -- he cries, 'Let me!', she responds, 'Go away!' -- as she tries to keep him at arm's length. 'Just one thrust!' he pleads, apparently at his very limit. With the two arrested in the vicinity of centre stage and angled front, the man fumbles in his trousers to produce his penis -- which, to his astonishment, has gone missing. The woman looks on, amazed and confused, as the man continues to scour his pants for the missing object. Mystification, horror, frustration and embarrassment pour over one another as he extends the search farther afield, down his trouser legs and finally beneath the woman's shoe. 'It's a damn funny thing', says the man, as he slinks in disgrace to the back of the stage and the woman bursts into tears.

Melodrama's superemotive body has become a provisional cue for comedy in the late 20th century, tipped further in this performance fabric by the *commedia*-inflected physicality. Such a scene might still be intended as a serious inner strip, but the repeating pleas and protestations cast a mechanical veneer over the exchange, which turns passion ludicrous. The spectators are invited to find sardonic amusement in the gap between real-life knowledge of lustful compulsion and the baroquely overheated resolve they see embodied before them.

The man's 'Just one thrust!' acts as a *setup* -- the action in effect freezes for him to begin his 'search'. The actor *outlines* a man in advanced arousal unzipping his fly and reaching for his member, feeling around disconcertedly, then craning downward to inspect, before looking up, astounded. At the instant of initial 'discovery' that the penis isn't there, *the genre frame slides into a new sub-stage world even though the narrative orientation remains the same*. The spectator retains co-presently that the man is trying to locate his penis while the actor *outlines* the procedure and mien of a man searching for an object which might inadvertently have fallen through a hole in his pocket, say a watch or currency note ('Now, where the heck could that thing have gotten to?') The actor, *outlines* phases of feeling toward his objective -- mystification, horror, frustration, embarrassment -- which, applied by the spectator to the narrative situation of 'missing penis' bring about an inspired incongruity.

The actor stretches the limits of the new genre frame by degrees, able to coax a series of *reversals*, first 'searching' in the immediate area of the object's usual location,

then down his leg and finally under the woman's foot. The actress co-operates by enjoining the transition in her own way from potboiler to absurdist universe -- she drops her defences to observe the spectacle, herself surprised and disconcerted by the strange development. Again, the social actions from one frame overlaid by behavioural qualities from another trap a humorous *gap* between them.

Frame overlaying is a time-honoured technique for generating satiric humour. At their most effective, they can count on 'genre histories' or cultural matrices brought to the event by the spectator to flood the joking material with a fully formed -- and slyly incongruent -- pattern of response which includes revealing attitude and feeling. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), for example, invokes the form of Italian opera, replete with heroic characters, high-blown emotions and ridiculous plot turns, for his attack on the civilised hypocrisies of the ruling classes. By filling his stage world with the ruthless criminal class, characters who were at the time of its writing thinly veiled stand-ins for well-known politicians and popular figures, Gay availed of a double deflation. Highwaymen and prostitutes are seen to comport themselves with impeccably 'operatic' manners as they justify the most cynically self-serving behaviour (-- even the modern-day spectator cannot avoid collapsing the gap between economic classes). The mass theatregoers' own predilections for escapist fluff are ridiculed by inverting the conventional world of opera and supplying a meta-theatrical *deus ex machina* which sweeps moral closure under the rug in favour of a crowd-pleasing happy ending.

3.2.4 Joking momentum

Having looked at the actual mechanisms of humorous performance, a few things may be said about its cumulative rhythms in flight. The comic performer is charged with the accommodation and control of audience laughter during the course of performance in flight, 'because the play moves on without the breathing spell we usually give our own thought and feeling after a joke. The action carries over from one laugh to another, sometimes fairly far spaced; people are laughing *at the play*, not at a string of jokes'.²² There are various bits of received wisdom for the performer wishing to keep the performance fabric taut without losing the next line in laughter. One such piece advises the performer to wait until the the laugh has crested and begins to dissipate before proceeding with the following line or action. Sometimes a performer will try to jump in before a laugh

²² Susanne K. Langer (1952), p. 347.

gathers steam, so as to conserve momentum or prevent the audience from 'tiring themselves out' in a longer sequence.

The above comment by Susanne K. Langer also hints at the stage world's larger cohering shapes. The accomplished practitioner -- performer, playwright and director -- is likely to carry an inner gauge for momentum, the ebb and flow of energy fusion between audience and unfolding stage world. Each performance, ever a singular event fed by the coming together of performers and theatregoers at a specific time and place, materialises its own flight profile in relation to the energies circulating between stage and auditorium. Ideally, spontaneous adjustments made for performance's larger chunks can serve individual humorous moments: calculated lulls and quickenings, 'staying ahead' of the spectators or allowing them breathing space, and controlling levels of audience comfort and involvement can greatly affect the spectator's experience.

Most scripted stage worlds allow a narrow band for maneuvering, largely restricted to regulations of energy and pacing, and perhaps the odd unrehearsed embellishment. (Actors in long-running shows are well known for indulgent 'improvements' added after the director leaves, especially in comedies for which the audience may act as unintentional goad.)

Shiner's audience-participation routines, however, provide cases of extreme latitude for the performer to judge and inform the performance relationship 'on the spot'. In the 'latecomer sketch', for example, Shiner has the unusual double condition of point-blank access to audience response and improvisatory control over 'plot developments'. His moment-to-moment choices rest to a large extent upon audience input as evaluated by his seasoned inner sensor, as Shiner must attend 'on the fly' to matters usually pre-judged by playwright, director and actor prior to performance:

'You have to know when to stop, when to go again. I listen a lot to the reaction and I play with what I'm hearing. If it's dipping down I do something to pull it back up again, because I like to keep a nice high tension. So if I feel like it's not getting big enough laughs, I'll do something bigger -- throw a coat or get more angry with somebody, make it more bombastic, more arrogant, more out of control. It depends on how the audience is.'

In *The Whiteheaded Boy*, an increasing pace is contributed unwittingly by Lennox Robinson to the George/Jane exchange examined in 3.2.2. George has two relatively long lines in response to Jane's shorter ones. But the short lines, conventionally suggestive of

an increased urgency, and the exclamatory rejoinder at the end of the sequence, allow for a microcosmic snowballing effect when played by the same actor:

JANE: His examination, you mean?

GEORGE: I do.

JANE: God help us!

Murfi finishes the mini-sequence at his most 'manic', a kinetic echo of which is given room by the production to vibrate in the air for a moment, in the aftermath of Jane's final remark. This is an obvious and distinctive feature of live performance. Stage world and spectator inhabit the same dynamic field -- such a burst of psycho-physical action surely makes a resounding splash in the felt fabric of experience.

Humour often benefits from an increasing momentum, which raises arousal levels and rhythmically enhances a sudden *reversal*. It has an intriguingly ambiguous effect: Though deriving, generally, from a gathering urgency or emotion, it is manifested in the 'anti-human' impression of runaway mechanisation.

Over the larger shapes of performance time, however, a measured quickening and relaxing of rhythm is likely to keep the spectator on a taut -- but not tiring -- line. Playwright Bernard Farrell has shown consistent proficiency in the technique of comic writing -- he has a knack for supplying humorous possibility in plot and character. His plays observe Dublin's middle class and do well at the box offices of the mainstream Gate and Abbey theatres. Farrell's worlds are comfortably 'realistic', and would be perceived as non-tendentious in comedy and themes. Their humour relies on socio-cultural references, uncontroversial biases (which is not to say the biases are harmless or uniformly held) and classic situational ironies. Generally, some emotional issue of contemporary bourgeois experience lies at the crux of the play.

Farrell talks about a particular overall rhythm for a play, which he both 'writes in' and expects to be reinforced by the director. His 1998 play, *Kevin's Bed*, takes place entirely in the kitchen of a house in Dublin, during anniversary parties 'today' and 25 years ago. The kitchen serves as a sort of behind-the-scenes gathering place, while the party itself goes on elsewhere in the house. Kevin is 22 years old in the first act and suddenly back from the Irish College of Rome, having reneged on an earlier decision to enter the priesthood. Many private and semi-private conversations take place among the seven characters, with the playwright controlling entrances and exits so that the kitchen population shrinks and swells over the course of the act along with various urgencies and relaxations. The facts emerge that Kevin's Italian-speaking guest, Maria, is not a nun

come to counsel him about returning to the priesthood, but a young woman with whom he is in love and who now carries his child. Although Kevin's character is defined by a lack of drive or decisiveness, other characters are 'built' for intensity, like Betty, engaged to Kevin's brother John, but seemingly more drawn to Kevin; and the Italian woman herself, who bristles increasingly at being forced by Kevin to deceive his family.

The first act reaches a penultimate peak in a scene between Kevin, Betty and Maria. Betty has just entered the kitchen to discover Kevin and Maria in an intimate embrace. She erupts passionately and perhaps drunkenly, feeling betrayed at having confessed her feelings to Kevin earlier, and now seeing the falsity of Maria's 'cover story'. Maria is obviously fed up with the pretence, and eager to defend her romantic claim. Kevin gamely tries to match both their energies in trying to defuse argument. In the general blocking for the Abbey performance, the three actors formed a flat triangle opened toward the front of the stage: Maria (played by Carmen Hanlon) stood house right, Betty (Catherine Walsh) house left, and Kevin (David Parnell) able to shuttle between them. Important to the comedy is the fact that Maria speaks Italian and Betty speaks English -- neither woman understands the other, and Kevin understands both.

Betty has been trying to assert her 'right' to Kevin's affections by invoking memory of an interlude from years earlier. With a determination made comic by inebriated logic, she insists on convincing Maria that Kevin is gay, here in the climax of the scene:

KEVIN: Betty, you are drunk ...²³

BETTY: (Hard and clear. *To Kevin*) ... because if you want my opinion, I'll tell you what you are: you are a homosexual -- it's all so obvious, Kevin -- that's why you loved Rome, loved being with all those men ...

KEVIN: Betty, if you don't shut up ...

BETTY: No I will not shut up. (Shouts at Maria) Did you hear that? Homosexual. Only like men. Not women ...

MARIA: (Puzzled) Cosa sta dicendo quella?

KEVIN: Betty, you get out of here now ...

BETTY: (To Maria) He will never do anything with you. Homosexual. Him.

KEVIN: Stop it, Betty.

MARIA: (Realises. Shouts) Cosa? No no, non e' assolutamente vero. Non e omosessuale! No!

BETTY: Ah, she understands.

KEVIN: I'm not taking anymore of this.

MARIA: No-no-no-no ...

²³ Bernard Farrell (1998a). All subsequent citations from the dramatic text are taken from this rehearsal script.

BETTY: Yes-yes-yes-yes ...
 KEVIN: ... shut up ...
 MARIA: (Shouts at Betty) Non e' vero perche' aspettiamo un bambino.
 BETTY: (Not understanding) You're wasting your time. Go back to Italy ...
 MARIA: (*Gestures with both hands to outline a large 'bump' in her belly*) No, no
 io e Kevin avremo un bambino. Sono incinta. (*A pause, then finally in English*) Pregnant!
 KEVIN: Shut up, Maria ...
 MARIA: (*Clearly indicating herself, then Kevin, then cradling motion*) ... Madre
 ... Padre ... bambino. Tutti noi. Una famiglia. Un bambino.
 (*The kitchen door has opened in time for Maria's last line so that Dan and John
 hear the 'announcement'.*)

The alternation of short lines is usually taken by practitioners for the verbal traces of urgency, the precise nature of which may be construed either psychologically from the 'realistic' text or enforced technically in absurdist stage worlds. In this case the playwright has 'planted' a three-way clash of inner lives strategically designed for emotional conflict, escalating energy and increasing tempo.

Already licenced as a realistic comic stage world, each of the characters, for their serious intentions behind the fourth wall, leak humorous construction: Betty's loopy, defensive fixation upon a construction of Kevin's sexuality which quite obviously isn't true, and Maria's dudgeon in a foreign tongue, further frustrating communication, are interposed by Kevin's impotent efforts to squelch the argument and keep his secret. Walsh, as Betty, speaks louder and louder, as if sheer volume will assist with simultaneous translation; Hanlon, as Maria, then matches her out of frustration and feistiness; again, Parnell, as Kevin, is drawn into the energy vortex in pace and volume.

The scene is outfitted and placed artfully, with the pivotal revelation 'dropped' at the height of excitement in a comically oblique fashion. Although Maria speaks Italian, most English-speaking spectators will get the idea 'before Betty does', from the word 'bambino' if not before. The comic pinnacle comes with Maria's universally recognisable miming of her condition. The bottom, in effect, drops out of the scene, emphasised by the stunned presences of Dan and John. After a momentary standstill as the information settles in, Betty renews her attack on Kevin.

Farrell acknowledges a pragmatic method to his manipulation of peaks, valleys and gradations thereof:

'Clearly if you're going to send the audience out to have their drink at the interval, you better make sure they all come back in again. So you sort of build a play on the Richter scale of 1 to 10. If it starts at 1 and goes up to 2 and comes back to 1, then goes to 5 and goes back to 3, then goes

up to 7 and goes back to 4, as you come near the end of the act, it should be up to 10, and then come back to about 5 or 6, and then let them out.’²⁴

Farrell’s assessment intuitively distills the larger effects of joking momentum, especially as relates to audience stimulation and expectation. What remains invisible, in this comment, is his ability to control those peaks and valleys through the characters’ psycho-social ‘loading’ informed by humour techniques, as demonstrated in the above sequence: an ability to regulate the placement and urgency of entrances and exits, the emotional ballast and escalation of scenes, and their ironic composition in particular.

Here Farrell enables an ideal situation for humour through the premise of combatants speaking different languages. This allows the non-verbal punch line when Maria mimes her pregnant condition and sets up a situation in which the spectator ‘gets’ the idea before Betty -- and private completion, bridging the *gap*, provides the *éclat* for humour technique. For those who are interested in peeking past the brackets, this sequence leaks something about the power lines of the audience’s approved biases in its use of a non-English speaker, a drunken woman, and homosexuality as its three main contacts for ridicule.

3.2.5 Internal ironies and invisible setups

Another way in which the playwright may pre-tune a stage world for humour comes in its subtle preparation by planting situation or information in advance.

I have underscored throughout the inherent reliances of theatre and humour upon the spectator’s co-present measuring of life outside the theatre to the phenomenal/semiotic stage world. Dramatic events of any kind are open to this individualised comparison within each perceiving body.

What interests me at present, however, arises from the privileged position of the spectator in relation to various types of stage world. In a widely used model, the inhabitants of the stage world operate without vital knowledge as to the true nature of the situation, the spectator given omniscience, so as to observe the ironic unfurling of events. An obvious example would be Oedipus’ naive complicity in fulfilling the tragic prophesy. No character knows as much as the spectator. The other model allows at least one of the characters, either through observance or commission, to have vital knowledge. What happens to *Othello* if the spectator is excluded from Iago’s plotting?

²⁴ Bernard Farrell (1998b). All subsequent quotes by him are taken from this interview.

It has been argued that one of theatre's strengths resides in the manipulation of privileged information fed to the audience and affecting meaning in the stage world. Frank O'Connor wrote of the skilled playwright: 'He knows by instinct that drama begins at the precise moment when he allows the audience to share in a knowledge which he withholds from one or more of the characters'.²⁵ It might be said that playwrights like Pinter and Beckett are pleased to revoke that privilege or even, in a sense, to 'underprivilege' the spectator, keeping the stage world aloof from an all-knowing grasp.

Satire and black comedy often operate upon cynically ironic comparisons to 'real life' nowhere admitted within the stage world of the play. There is, I believe, a danger where humorous intent is not signalled effectively: If the spectator does not come to the piece ready to supply a tone of ridicule, the satiric strip risks being taken to support the stance ostensibly being criticised. (Films of the mid-1990s like *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction* claimed to satirise the exploitation of violence in American culture through exaggeration. Without including emphatic signs of ridicule or suggestions of internal critique against these 'screen worlds' the films could be seen merely to be trading on the appeal of over-the-top violence.) Similarly black comedy, according to Walter Kerr, 'is a tricky, troubled, daredevil business, an attempt to paint a shadow on absolute night by depending upon the audience to bring a kind of cat's-vision with it; it is comedy showing no mercy, while begging it'.²⁶ In these cases the decision to take the stage world with tongue in cheek rests almost entirely on the spectator.

Operating with an awareness of that ever-present gap between life as rendered in the theatre and life as we know it, the practitioner may exploit our willingness to infer psychological continuity and social implication by planting characteristics or conditions which give rise to ironic recognitions. And so, where the *gap* to be bridged mines an irony which straddles the divide between real and stage world, the *setup* step of the humorous model will seem to be missing. In fact, the cleverness of the strategy derives from the placement of the *setup* elsewhere in the performance fabric.

An example of such a construction appears in Act III of *The Whiteheaded Boy*. Denis, the title character, has by now caused his family and Duffy, his future father-in-law, no small distress by first deciding to flee to Canada on his own, then revising his plans to include Delia, his fiancée. Duffy, a crusty old fellow and crafty small-town businessman, has managed to extort several hundred pounds from various family members who hope to

²⁵ Frank O'Connor (1947), p. 14.

²⁶ Walter Kerr (1985), p 319.

avoid the scandal of a court suit over Denis' broken marriage agreement with his daughter. Denis shows up in the third act dressed in work clothes, far 'beneath' his previous dandified image, having suddenly married Delia; the couple have decided to stay in town and 'make it' on their own. This turnabout upsets everyone else on the stage for one reason or another. As Denis describes having just signed on for a job on the street-paving crew, the whole development sticks in Duffy's craw as it renders his moral injury groundless and pointedly torpedoes his white-collar pretensions.

Amid the generally comic upheaval experienced by George, Aunt Ellen and Mrs. Geoghegan, Duffy (played by Raymond Keane) responds with incredulous disgust:

DUFFY: You'll be working on the street?

DENIS: Yes, on the street. I hope in a day or two we'll have worked up as far as the Post Office, Mr. Duffy.

DUFFY: Oh, my God!

Nothing in the scene suggests the potential for a specifically humorous moment. The spectators, however, receive a residual laugh by retaining the knowledge, 'set up' elsewhere in the play, that Duffy runs the post office. Duffy suddenly becomes a quintessentially comic foil, especially as played by Keane as granitelike and chronically humourless: His arms remain permanently folded with hands thrust into his armpits, trunk arched slightly forward, eyes steeled, lips pursed, and raspy voice.

Robinson prepared the payoff so unobtrusively that Gerry Stembridge, the director, confesses being surprised by the laugh in performance, having overlooked its potential in rehearsal. The fact that the humour didn't become apparent until the presence of an audience points to the likelihood that the laugh emerges at least as much from the spectator's contribution to the character's inner life as from Keane's playing of the scene.

The irony of a situation can open a delicious *gap* to be bridged under an entire scene. Such arrangements are the particular domain of mistaken-identity stage worlds, in which characters' behaviours become increasingly baffling to one another and only the spectator knows why. The playwright builds coincidences and misunderstandings into a cunning house of cards, designed to demean and confuse the fictional participants with the spectator at a safe distance for amusement. O'Connor continues in the passage quoted a few pages back:

'Where he does play upon the curiosity of the audience is never on the point of who or what a character really is, but the point at which the

revelation is to be made, and what effect it will have on the other characters; and it is always the sign of a great dramatic craftsman that he never for an instant forgets that he and the audience are linked by that knowledge; that every few minutes he sends them a wink or a nod, and that he drives each dramatic point home in such a way that it echoes back from them as from a vast sounding board. That is the secret of humour in the theatre.'

This stock comic device can be found in many a stage world. Bernard Farrell has constructed several such sequences in *Kevin's Bed*, one of which follows Kevin's admission to his father, Dan, that the Italian visitor is not a nun, but -- quite the reverse -- a romantic interest. Eamon Morrissey, as Dan, has played the scene at the end of his tether, gradually dragging the truth from his son with rising anger. Kevin assures him that John, his brother, is the only other person who knows the real story: 'It's all only so's not to upset ma. That's why we're doing all this, da, that's all we're thinking of.' Dan responds, 'Are you? Well you have a funny way of going about it!'

This last exchange drives his barely controlled fury to a peak emotional pitch, a ghost of which is allowed to linger for a second before the door opens and John, played by Sean Rocks, enters carrying dirty glasses and 'in great form'. He seems innocently intent on embellishing the pretence which Dan has just exploded:

JOHN: Great gas in there now -- you should go in, da -- Sister Maria is going down a bomb.

KEVIN: John ...

JOHN: Mrs. Boylan just asked her again if she'd have a go at Panis Angelicus, but instead she gave us three verses of 'Volare' and she was terrific.

KEVIN: John ...

DAN: Bit unusual to see nuns singing pop songs, isn't it?

JOHN: Oh no, da, that's the way nuns are today -- ever since the Pope decreed all the changes for the Second Vatican Council.

DAN: Is that so? And did the Pope also 'decree' that sons could tell barefaced lies to their father, treat him like a gobshite, a half-wit, a bloody thick -- has the Pope also 'decree'd' all that for the Second Vatican Council?

Farrell has built a general *priming sequence* and all-purpose *setup* into the short scene: the information and tenor of the prior scene, especially the emotional tableau the instant before John's entry. From first sight, John's jovial spirit obviously clashes with the son-in-serious-trouble frame upon which he intrudes (and to which he, of course, remains totally oblivious). The spectator may even sense what's coming. On the wings of a good mood, John dives head first into the worst subject possible. 'Sister Maria is going down a

bomb' imparts a second, ironically obverse meaning from the one intended by the character, and the spectator is likely to read those sarcastic implications into the faces and bodies of Morrissey (Dan) and Parnell (Kevin).

'The comedy of the moment is that John's making a fool of himself', Farrell notes. 'And part of the essence of comedy is that the audience is actually laughing because they're safe in their seat, they're not up there.' The observation, though nothing new in humour theory, is worth reconsidering for a moment from the perspective of theatre as 'watching ourselves live': What is the difference in nuance between internal positions of laughing at someone else and laughing at yourself 'up there'?

Between impotent attempts by Kevin to save him, John blithely forges ahead, his second speech suddenly reading as comically succinct confirmation of Maria's 'real' identity. Dan then lends him a hand in digging the hole deeper, by asking a leading question in faux innocence; John obliges by jumping into the trap, eagerly concocting the justification. Dan suddenly reverses the flow with an anticipated eruption. The angry outburst retains a comic key, given his character as *outlined* and the vernacular demolition of pretence which humour so loves.

Lastly, Farrell has availed himself of a foolproof aid for breeding comic irony: time. With the two acts occurring twenty-five years apart, he has opened the possibility for many an ironic *gap* in terms of the way people change (or don't change), predictions they make and other 'jokes' of fate. In Act I, Pauline, a friend of the anniversary couple, lost her first husband and is now keeping company with Cyril, of whom she says wistfully, 'oh, that's just companionship, Doris -- no one could ever take the place of Tim'. The sentiment, apparently earnest as played by Marion O'Dwyer, is reinforced many times during the act, although the spectator, with Dan's encouragement, supplies a sexual robustness beneath her demure disclaimers. In Act II, twenty-five years later, having now lost Cyril, Pauline is on to Reggie, of whom she says, 'it's only for companionship, because nobody could ever take the place of poor Cyril', with the same true-blue regret. Sexual inference will usually court humorous perception; and there are observations about the core unchangeability of our human natures, confirmed comically in the identical phrasing and heartfelt delivery of the claims 25 years apart. Pauline, in O'Dwyer's enactment, remains unconscious of the irony; a lack of self-awareness aims the humour over her head, carrying a classic, cautionary admonition for the perceiving subject.

3.2.6 A note about comic tuning

I shall take this opportunity to include a sort of side suggestion in the service of keeping in view the potential variations of the written word, which, from a theatrical point of view, remains a mere unit of possibility until uttered in performance. From phenomenal contextualising to embodiment of character by a specific human being to the gestured nuance and vocal intonation of a single line, meaning is infinitely variable -- so, of course, is precise genre framing and mood.

The previous scene affords discussion, from the perspective of humour technique, as to how comic performance may be tuned. The demarcation or *outlining* of reality shows the practitioners' fingerprints in obvious ways if it is going for a maximum of potential laughter, and the stage world's *style* of depiction will have long since been established. For comic effect, the original collision of frames (Kevin and Dan v John) should be clearly *outlined*. Actors playing Kevin and Dan would want to leave room for ambiguity in the registering of John's unknowing blunders -- the spectator will do much of the work in constructing their inner states -- so as not to be perceived as tipping him off by their behaviour. John might impress a sense of being so increasingly pleased with his part in the cover-up that he purposefully steps farther out on the limb. Actors may be tempted to go too far toward surface indication of inner life. Making *sure* the spectator reads John's blunder in Dan's and Kevin's behaviour might obliterate the surface tension of a realistically oriented stage world.

A production inclined to downplay comedy, for whatever reason, would engage within a more serious outlining from the start. As mentioned earlier, much comic genre likes its outlines sharp and bold. In this particular scene it might de-emphasise the contrast of opposing moods, containing them in a narrower, more 'natural' band. Outlines are rendered faintly in 'realistic' worlds, an attempt to simulate a perception of untampered everyday life. Outside comic convention, which allows a degree of disattention from John as to the reactions of Dan and Kevin, adjustments would need be made by all three actors. This paragraph, however, involves a hypothetical leap against the grain, as a certain humour is 'written into' the scene: The playwright has built it a little too well in its splendid coincidence, larger stretch of believable situation, and language of characters.

Farrell notes one instance from *Kevin's Bed*, in which an inadvertently comic line was cut to preserve the scene's gravity. Much of the comic irony, during the course of the play, hinges on Kevin's disclosure of various secrets which soon wind up as common knowledge within the stage world. In the second act, the tenor of the world has indeed become more weighty -- Kevin is told by his father that his mother has a terminal illness and just four months to live; we learn that John, a former schoolteacher, has exiled himself

to England following allegations that he abused his students. (It is never made clear what the charges were and whether he was in fact guilty). John has returned for the anniversary party, but retreats to the kitchen in advance of leaving because one of the guests insists on asking him discomfiting questions related to the incident. Kevin finally parts with the news: 'Ma is dying, John -- she only has four months to live'. Farrell says:

'There was a line in the play, that Kevin said, "But we're just going to keep this among ourselves". And the audience always laughed there, because they sort of recognised that this was Kevin's philosophy of life. And that line brought laughter from the audience at a moment where it killed that line of John being exposed, so I took the line out. It was laughter in the wrong place. So it's no easy task to get an audience to laugh, but there are times when you have to make sure that they're not laughing.'

No doubt the spectator was eager for comic release, in the way that Declan Hughes and director Conall Morrison allowed toward the end of *Twenty Grand* (addressed in 2.3.4). The father-son 'routines' established in the first scene and interspersed throughout -- Hackett's savvy v Dean's thickness; the 'parent instructing a young child' frame laid over their criminal, brutal affairs -- signal a brief respite from exceedingly harsh reality. Amid the violence in the final scene, joking permission is grabbed by some spectators, unaccepted by others, and fingered ambivalently by many.

3.2.7 Jester and authoritarian

Back to the business of humour technique: No playwright begins from scratch, least of all the comic playwright. Particularly with regard to theatrical humour, stock structures can be seen in the skeleton of every stage world. They amount to shorthand for genre identification, as well as reliable laugh producers. One of the oldest tools inherited by the comic playwright is the comic pairing.

I have discussed the humour possibilities and recurrent appearance of the comic duo in reference to Hackett/Dean, the father and son in *Twenty Grand* (2.2.1), and Stage Kharms/Clown Kharms in *Out of a house, walked a man ...* (2.2.3 and 2.2.4). Needless to say, the comedy team has long represented a staple of performance on the stage and in television and film. Clearly, the comic duo affords presentation of incongruity in toto, visually and psychically. Selective oppositions will be embodied by the 'partners' -- they may even constitute a sight gag in mere appearance. One will sometimes fill the role of 'straight man', the other acts as comic foil.

Kevin's Bed does not utilise a comic duo, per se. But Dan and Doris, the couple whose anniversary is celebrated in each act, supply two related elements often found in formal comedy: a jester and rigid figure (also termed, *ieron* and *alazon*, as discussed in 4.2.5). The nature and function of the pairing evokes a strategy reminiscent of a traditional European circus' entree clown act, which has long been comprised of a 'whiteface' and his 'auguste' partners:

'It is only through their relationships that their comic characters make sense. An entree could not be performed on the merits of just one clown or the other working alone in the ring. For example, the authoritarian whiteface, who simply wants his plan to be accomplished properly, defines the bad manners, incompetence, and lowly status of his auguste partners, who never seem to be able to provide their elegant friend with the necessary help.'²⁷

In terms of comic strategy, *Kevin's Bed* might be seen to place Doris as the whiteface, surrounded by the augustes of Dan and Kevin. The entree's socio-comic agenda seeks 'to reveal the chaotic characteristics of culture that are veiled by our habits of thought and action',²⁸ and so Dan acts as primary challenger to Doris' central pillar of rectitude. (He is finally revealed as the cleverest person on the stage, planting a calculated and ultimately harmless mistruth which produces a fairly happy resolution.)

The playwright endows Dan with a position found in comedy since the slaves of Aristophanes, the plain-speaking representative from the underclasses who punctures 'civilised' pretensions. Eamon Morrissey, who was uniformly lauded by critics, *outlines* the character as an irascible working-class guy, a postman by trade, trying his best to grapple with life in the middle class.

Dan is also given a set of character features ripe for comic invention in text and performance. He has arthritic knees, arthritis being a common enough ailment in the late 20th century, yet not too serious to joke about. Dan has already called attention to them by the time Kevin confides to John that 'da says he gets pains in his legs every time he looks at me'. Several minutes later, John is talking to Dan and Doris:

DORIS: John has news for us, Dan.

²⁷ W. Kenneth Little (1986), p. 52-3.

²⁸ W. Kenneth Little (1986), p. 53.

DAN: What? (*It occurs to him that John is announcing his engagement; looks at his son and starts toward him, delighted*) Ah son, I couldn't be happier for yourself and Betty.

JOHN: No da, it's not about me or about Betty.

DORIS: It's about Kevin.

Morrissey's leg buckles slightly and he grabs for his knee as he says, 'Oh Christ -- what's that yahoo done now?' The playwright here has given the actor a potent opening for an unvoiced gag -- in Morrissey's performance, we are to read Dan's knee-jerk response to Kevin's name as occurring subconsciously. Note that in terms of frame change, it sets up Morrissey for maximum *reversal* by affording a greater contrast with the joyful response he has just given mistakenly. And again, the joke is that bit more delightful for the spectator who makes the unspoken connection between Kevin's earlier comment and Dan's leg buckling.

By the second act Dan has new plastic knees. When he's asked about how they're working out he responds, 'Oh grand, only they're now talking about giving me new hips as well. If this keeps up, they'll have me walking around like Pinocchio'. (As might be expected, a plain-spoken deflation of a now commonplace scientific achievement.)

Morrissey's Dan also has a rather adorable pride in his poetry-reciting abilities. His command performance of 'The One-Eyed Yellow Idol to the North of Katmandu' provides various amusements throughout the play. Dan undergoes two humorous *reversals* in rapid succession toward the middle of the first act, which offer a wide-range look into his character. Obviously he has long been called 'the postman' by his mother-in-law, who now lives upstairs and shouts down to the kitchen via the dumb waiter, upstage, house right on the set:

GRANNY: (*Out of sight, from above*) Oh it's the postman, is it?

DAN: (*Roaring up to her at the opening*) Yes it is the bloody postman -- and go on, do all you like, roar down that your daughter was too good for me with her upbringing and her education -- but we're still together, still married, living here, despite all your sneering about me and my ...

Dan hears the kitchen door open and, at the same volume and intensity, switches to: '... One-Eyed Yellow Idol to the North of Katmandu, there's a little marble cross ...' As he turns around, he sees that it was Kevin who entered the room, and he drops the facade: 'Oh it's you -- the bloody Phantom of the Opera'.

The sequence shows him defending his lower-class origins at the top of his voice, and caught but not thrown by the intruder. The two 'texts' sit incongruously in the same

emotional/vocal register. The sudden drop of energy into grumbling father completes the second frame switch.

Doris assumes the position of rigid or authoritarian figure found in most comedies. Although drawn by Farrell and played by Barbara Brennan as a likable enough woman, she is the character to whom all others defer. She is established early on as a defender of moral order, Brennan pursing her lips stonily at the report that her unmarried granddaughter is visibly pregnant and not at all concerned about the father's location. As often is the case with rigid figures, she has strong religious connections -- it is for such a reason that Kevin has chosen to pass off Maria as a nun. The first act reaches its climax as Doris learns the truth and responds with wounded severity. In the second act, she is thought to be terminally ill, which makes her a serious character indeed. If comic structure is based on avoidance, Doris, as the rigid figure, provides the focus for that avoidance.

Where Dan as jester makes many of his jokes 'consciously', Doris as authority figure gives rise to humour beyond the character's awareness. Their comic positions can be caught in microcosm in a short exchange during the second act. Doris is put on the telephone to Maria's mother who speaks a little English. In performance, Brennan warms to the task eagerly, raising her voice and adopting an Italian cadence: 'Hello? Yes, me good too. How you? You good like me am good, yes? Me say gracias for lovely wine'.

Morrissey's Dan intervenes at her side as private coach, both conscious of the joke but wishing to help: 'Doris, speak properly or she'll think she's talking to Tarzan'. Again, humour gravitates toward the human target lacking self-awareness; the jester frequently acts as conscious agent of the unmasking, even though comic style traditionally disallows full recognition by the joking butt.

3.2.8 Practical adjustments in the *gap* to be bridged

The crafting of humour, like the making of theatre, is by no means a science. It may involve painstaking calculation on the part of writer and/or performer, but is subject to individual verification by each theatregoer. A joke is by definition an exercise in shrewd elision, and so the precise amount of information to be omitted can be a matter of some debate. The goal generally is to provide the richest *gap* to be bridged via the sparest joking 'surface', a tightrope walk between giving away too much and too little. Part of the pleasure of a joke comes from the listener's spark of accomplishment, which may be lessened by making the leap too easy and, on the other hand, forestalled by making it too hard. A playwright (or actor or director) might try to refine a humorous moment in

rehearsal or previews, by rephrasing a line or adding a gesture to edge the spectator the needed step closer to 'getting' the joke, or hold off giving it away too soon.

The opening 'I am testing my theory of humour' sequence in *Out of a house, walked a man* ... (1.4.7 and 2.2.4) may well set a record for the minimum output in actual *priming sequence* and *setup*. It's first joke is predicated on the performer giving away nothing verbally and little gesturally until the *reversal* of the first line. As dissected in the earlier chapters, once Stage Kharms says, 'I am testing my theory of humour', a huge, culturally pregnant *gap* floods into place, built upon the audience's completion of their prescribed role with spectacularly little assistance from the performers.

Theatre's fully embodied humour incorporates gesture into vocal utterance to the extent that the strategically placed raising of an eyebrow or turn of the head can 'make' a joke. Veronica Coburn elicits a huge laugh from a minor irony in Act II of *The Whiteheaded Boy*. Coburn's characterisation of Aunt Ellen, described in 2.2.2, constructs her as a bespectacled dowager, who long ago made the decision to bypass the traditional route of romance and family in favour of a life in business. Duffy has vowed to gain monetary satisfaction from the 'breach of promise' between Denis and his daughter, with the Geoghegan family paying. The Geoghegans are in a collective tither. Duffy has just knocked at the door, and the blustery George is wracking his brain for a way to save money *and* face. George (played by Mikel Murfi), is suddenly struck by a vague remembrance, which he puts delicately but urgently to Aunt Ellen:

GEORGE: I'm wondering, Aunt, if you spoke to Duffy yourself tonight? You used to be good friends long ago, I've heard it said. I ... I ...

AUNT ELLEN: To be sure I'll speak to him; a woman can often come around a man.

The sexual innuendo, as written, may or may not be exploited for irony in a given production of the play. But the character patois of this production's stage world uses broad strokes; Coburn has given Aunt Ellen an ambling metabolism and dour expression. As Murfi finishes the line, 'I've heard it said', she has assumed a faraway, determined look; slowly she takes a small jar from her purse, puts two dabs on each side of her neck, and begins to arrange herself provocatively on the couch. Coburn's execution of the sequence is measured and simple, with a seeming absence of peripheral movement; she evokes with efficiency and precision what we would have considered an incongruous meeting of lust and guile in the body of a woman older, heavier and more severe than the actress herself. The gag unfolds almost in slow motion, spectators allowed to pick up on it

in their own time. Coburn's actual utterance of the line can be 'underplayed' and still earn a topping laugh. Here, the actress has left the bulk of the joke work to be completed in the spectator, *oulining* just enough to instigate the comic connections.

In *Kevin's Bed*, Farrell furnishes a reliable laugh by virtue of the fact that the *priming sequence* has been fed bit by bit to the audience all along. By the end of the second act, it has been well established that Maria continually bestows the fruits of the family vineyard upon Dan, and that, unknown to her, he can't stand the stuff ('three months later your stomach is still reminding you'). Maria, who becomes a sort of ogre in the second act, is under the impression that Doris has four months to live, and is being uncharacteristically kind to her and her husband. She says, 'You do not worry -- you will have enough to think about, poor darling', kissing Dan on the forehead. 'And here, some more of papa's wine for you', she adds, pouring him a glass with an air of proud good will. Dan's only words as written are, 'Thanks, Maria', which Morrissey delivers with eyes full front in a subtly loaded deadpan that allows the spectator to construe all the long-suffering distaste packed by the parade of earlier references.

In the first act, Dan grills Kevin about his relationship with Maria. Kevin's cover story about her being a nun is rapidly losing credence:

DAN: Dressed in civvies, singing and gallaring, yapping at the top of her voice -- what convent would stick that? If you told me she was really a chimpanzee, you'd have a better chance of me believing it. So out with it -- plain talking now, Kevin, between the two of us -- what is she?

KEVIN: All ... right, da -- she ... she's not really a nu ... nu ... nun. Supposing I just said she was a postulant.

DAN: A prostitute?

The joke obviously rests on the incongruity between like-sounding signifiers, along with the underlying inference about Maria built on a rude confusion of *prostitute* ('a woman or girl who engages in sexual activity for payment') for *postulant* ('a candidate, esp. for admission into a religious order'). John Farrell, speaking on a panel discussion of the play, clearly felt that Dan's line 'overprimed' the joke, that the *setup* was ideally placed just by the actor's expressive response:

'... there's one perfect moment where Kevin ... turns to his father ... and describes the young Italian woman as being a postulant. And Morrissey did a wonderful take; the whole audience knew exactly what the old man

thought -- “a prostitute” -- we got the joke. Yet Farrell still forces Morrissey to look back at David [Parnell] and say, “a prostitute”, and it’s that kind of just a little too much that bangs it over the head ...²⁹

Perhaps (Bernard) Farrell is guilty of *outlining* the *reversal* too heavily, not having foreseen the effect of the actor’s take. In production the line may well seem gratuitous, overloading the tease by which every joke leads the spectator to the brink of the *gap*, and not an inch further, for the maximum pleasure of discovery. The matter will of course be one of individual reception -- any given theatregoer may need or prefer the extra nudge of the vocalised line to complete the *reversal*.

These examples have attempted to clarify the desire for an ideal efficiency in generating the *gap* of a stage gag. But it is possible to detect instances of qualitative absence in the *gap* itself, either a lack in the engineering by playwright or the performer’s attempt to seek more of an audience response than the joking material ‘merits’. This point reveals as much about humour reception as its production.

Performance *style* by nature lends its own *outlining* to an intended joke, through a confluence of practitioners’ cues. It is, interestingly, sometimes easier to see the ‘Here’s a joke!’ *outline* than the joke-in-itself. A performer’s delivery, a playwright’s linguistic *setup*, a director’s pacing -- any and all of these factors may point toward an intended *reversal*. Spectators become schooled in the conventions surrounding a sequence of performed humour, so that elements like vocal, physical and facial nuances, and joking rhythms may well provoke a show of amusement, regardless of the actual joking material. (The canned laughter added to many a television comedy is designed to coax a response from the home spectator by artificially embellishing one of the surrounding indicators of successful humour.)

In the scene from *Kevin’s Bed* presented in 3.2.7, Dan’s line, ‘Oh it’s you -- the bloody Phantom of the Opera’, comes off as generalised or hazy, even upon closer inspection of the script -- the debasing intention is clear, but not the comic connections to the character and situation. It probably receives its good-size laugh by sole virtue of it’s placement and execution. Spectators are quite likely to laugh at Morrissey’s performative *outlining*, his radical change of vocal/emotional register; with his likable character and comic savvy, they are liable to laugh at his slightest perceived cueing. They also have

²⁹ John Farrell, guest speaker on panel discussion of *Kevin’s Bed*, RTE Radio 1 Arts Show, 30 April 1998.

reason to *expect* a crowning criticism of Kevin to complete the sequence -- the placement of the line in a calculated succession of *reversals*, likely puts the spectator 'in a state of pleasurable instability that welcomes, craves, indeed *courts* the impact of another joke'.³⁰

Comedians and actors develop punch-line vocal patterns, so that their voices or faces may be telling us to laugh, regardless of the words. Spectators sometimes respond to the joking *cue* rather than the joking *material*. The effect is recognised by Gerry Stembridge, who says that he sometimes feels like he is 'cheating' by inducing audience laughter so easily:

'There are certain kinds of gags, that it's like pressing a button and they'll laugh. There is a certain kind of laughter in the theatre which is because the audience *want* to laugh or people *have* to laugh. It's like someone's put up a sign, and they go, "Oh, it's funny".'

A 'cheap' gag, another one of those informal but widely used phrases, generally refers to one conceived or executed gratuitously, in a way which reliably draws laughter without really being 'earned'. Overblown characters and responses, sudden changes in energy, silly faces or voices -- these strategies may appear as shortcuts in courting audience response to the exclusion of the stage world's continuity, as they have come to act as signs for humour.

Stembridge mentions the Baby and Peter instances discussed as play within an already playful stage world in 2.3.3 as subjects for debate along these lines: 'I remember Veronica particularly had a problem with "Peter the dog". She just worried that it was too much, that it meant the character of Peter couldn't survive that particular thing. That was my call because I just liked it; I thought it was funny'. Stembridge had comparable reservations about Baby's over-the-top piano playing. He ultimately kept both 'extravagances', in part because of their respective positions in the overall rhythm of the piece: Peter's 'dog bit' begins Act II and Baby's 'piano bit' opens Act III. Stembridge reasoned that, as comic secondary characters who seemed intended to 'goose' the beginning of each act, they could bear the stretching: 'When you look at the range of some characters, even within the general physical range the actors have established, some characters have to be taken better care of and some characters still have the possibility of being let loose'.

³⁰ Walter Nash (1985), p. 13.

A culturally 'hot' word, phrase or reference brings about a frame clash between theatrical and everyday worlds, which causes a *reversal* insofar as the spectator is surprised to discover such an emblem of social currency among the fictional otherness.

'Political or topical allusions in a play amuse us because they are *used*, not because they refer to something intrinsically very comical. This device of playing with things from actual life is so sure to bring laughs that the average comic writer and improvising comedian overdoes it to the point of artistic ruin ...'³¹

An example of this type of humour in the stage world can be seen in Dan's 'Manchester United' joke in *Kevin's Bed*, or Hackett's 'Bray' joke, described in 3.3.4.

3.2.9 In the presence of humour

I shall end the chapter with a remark about the nature of the humorous transaction in its lived-through capacity. In any joking exchange conditions and agents of material production insinuate themselves into the shadows of the *gap* to be bridged: A joke is told by the life of the party, who uncharacteristically has to go back at one point and insert an important piece of information; a deft witticism emerges spontaneously from a member of the group not known for such interjections; a politician reads a prepared comment about the economic climate, then improvises a winking reference to the storm outside.

Speaker, place, situation, outside circumstances and other knowledge build their own expectations for humour in the individual listener. The theatrical frame invoked under 'professional' conditions is likely to incur a maximum obligation for joking proficiency.

A spectator usually knows when some moment of the stage world has been intended humorously, as formal cues (and sometimes informal betrayals) accompany every joke. No small amount of the comic potential in any stage world is shouldered by the performer on the spot. As the only practitioner to make a bodied appearance, the performer 'makes humour' or fails to at each specific instance, regardless of the best efforts of director, writer and designer. A muffed line, jumped cue or unfortunate misstep stands to unravel the most ingeniously contrived gag, despite hours of rehearsal. Something of the stage world's collective risk as carried primarily by the performer must lurk in the mind of any spectator past a certain age. Such a ritual gamble upon human capabilities has always been one of the theatre's unique titillations -- and its reward. Part

³¹ Susanne K. Langer (1953), p. 347.

of any laughing response acknowledges that the stage world, in some way, has signalled its intentions and then somehow met the challenge.³²

Stage worlds that produce some sort of virtuoso display sprinkle many of their *gaps* to be bridged with the pleasure of the spectator's awe. These moments might be exemplified by the rapid switches between characters in duologues performed by Murfi, Coburn and Keane in *The Whiteheaded Boy*, the physical transformations by Shiner and Irwin in the 'train' sketch from *Fool Moon*, and the 'death' duet danced by Kathryn Walker and Marcello Magni in *Out of a house, walked a man ...* Even in *Kevin's Bed*, the comic bodying and skilled *outlining* of an Eamon Morrissey cannot be ignored.

The adept execution of humour always calls attention to the spontaneous abilities of the performer behind the stage world, over and above its 'history' from conception through rehearsal and all previous performances. The command of voice and body, invention of the inspired gag and its execution 'without a net', the performance traces of training and rehearsal, all stand upon the actor's real-life abilities beyond the theatrical frame. States coins the phrase, 'self-expressive mode', to refer to this performing subtext of, 'See what I can do'.³³ Used mainly to refer to extra-fictional displays of proficiency or charisma, there might be said to lurk a layer of 'self-expressive mode' in *every* execution of humour. The spectators respond to the performer's real-life artistry and success in fulfilling what we know to be at least one of the real-life intentions: causing laughter.

There is, it seems, a special charge from *both* sides of a good joke in lived-through performance. (Ask the comic actress who has just brought the house down with a perfectly placed punch line.) And it owes to the fact that practitioner and spectator inhabit each other's perceptual field, and have enjoyed, through the call-and-response of humour, a sort of mutualising 'pleasure of transaction'.

³² Mikel Murfi says, 'For us as performers, when you do something that's supposed to be funny and they laugh, they're basically saying, "Well done"' (1998).

³³ Bert O. States (1985), p. 161.

3.3 VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL EXPRESSION

3.3.1 Speech and gesture

This chapter will look at practical issues of stage humour from the perspective of the performing body as featured in the comic event (in support of and in the absence of linguistic accompaniment), and then the performing word, as it were, in terms of verbally based joking patterns. There are, as usual, a few things to establish in advance.

Given longstanding academic approaches to the dramatic text, which even today retain a certain pre-emptive authority, visitors from Mars and schoolchildren might acquire the impression that the act of theatre equates to the private digestion and analysis of words on a page. Arguments notwithstanding about the extent to which written text furnishes the essential tissue of any potential performance, we still incline toward privileging the playwright's words in excess of their contribution to the lived-through stage world. For dramatic texts written prior to rehearsal and performance, we should admit the erection of at least *some* 'structural features' in advance of performance.³⁴ But with the help of Merleau-Ponty and company, it may be possible to move constructively beyond what seems like mere academic prejudice, the inclination to grab on for dear life to the only piece of performance fabric that looks like a fixed object. What must be kept in mind for the theatrical project is that its written word presumes utterance not in the inner voice of the reading subject, but through vocalisation and bodied gesture by the *speaking subject*.

I treat gesture as a bodied response, which can be seen to provide direct access to another individual's emotional state. One does not 'read' the flushed tautness of an angry face or the furrow of a worried brow as *signs* for anger and worry; one *understands* these gestures of the human body from the inside. A suppressed emotion is not a trace of inner life barely shielded by the outer crust of bodied behaviour; gesture is the total mix of those torn psychic forces as lived by the body, and so potentially readable from the outside.

Dufrenne might continue,

'as long as gestures do not claim to make any objective statement, they constitute a spontaneous and immediately comprehensible language. This type of comprehension, however, is limited to what is commonly called feeling, that is, to a certain way of being in the world, of instituting a

³⁴ Jiri Veltrusky (1941), p. 94. Veltrusky claims 'the text exists with *all* its structural features before the other components of the theatrical structure are created' (my emphasis); I can't go that far.

particular relationship with it, of discovering its character, and of living certain experiences in its terms'.³⁵

For Merleau-Ponty the spoken word has meaning, and you can be sure that he refers to a direct hook-up with the body. It is not our deceptively nimble translation of an arbitrary sound scrap, but a pre-reflective knowing tied to a three-way circuit with gesture and feeling. Merleau-Ponty's claim actually implies an unexpected directness for verbal utterance: 'The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its'.³⁶ In a single vocalised package, the word bears sound, meaning, personal and cultural association; it exacts a specific facial mask and carries its full thought and feeling through the speaking body. (This is not to say that it has fully knowable or stable meaning, or identical meanings for two perceiving consciousnesses.)

I believe a comic moment from *Kevin's Bed* serves to illustrate. John (again, as played by Sean Rocks) reaches the limits of his patience trying to get his brother to part with a straight answer as to the actual identity of the Italian visitor, who certainly isn't acting like a nun (see 3.2.4 for a refresher plot summary). Kevin attempts to dodge the question with a sort of conversational hide-and-seek. Finally, approaching peak outburst, John asks, 'What the hell *is* she, Kevin?' 'Who?' asks Kevin (David Parnell) with as much innocence as he can muster. 'Sister shaggin' Maria!' John responds in foot-stomping frustration.

An analytic breakdown of the humorous event would point to the irruption of a venerated framing by vernacular profanity. But the Abbey theatregoer need not take time to reflect on meanings and references. They are delivered directly by the three uttered words. The phrase, 'Sister Maria', carries its framing and feeling along with it, as does the supposedly inappropriate 'shaggin', so that the three words cause not a mere intellectual incongruity but a minor affective whiplash. The *reversal* can be felt without cognitive examination because the three words deliver their felt meanings to the body firsthand. 'Sister Maria', as an utterance which carries full and immediate meaning, has been used in the stage world several times already with appropriate vocal gesture. It is literally split asunder and transported to a generally inappropriate emotional pitch by the intruding euphemism. The *gap* to be bridged might be meticulously supposed in retrospect -- adding considerations of relationship and situation -- but is all but beside the point. This is a gag that strikes pre-emptively because the words 'mean' fully and suddenly for the perceiving

³⁵ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 130.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 183.

body. (There is, on the other hand, a kind of humorous moment which operates on a time lag; the spectator is encouraged to rewind the joke's transcript mentally for location of the incongruity.)

With affective moorings confirmed, we can go back to ascertain speech as the particular domain of thought, and the very means by which the notion of 'truth' becomes possible. As the subject attempts to structure experience of the world, 'originary speech' or 'authentic speech' is considered an 'expressive operation by which a meaning emerges for the first time'.³⁷ 'Secondary speech' refers to everyday usage, 'the repetition of already expressed ideas', which comprises much of what we 'think' from moment to moment. As explained by Monika Langer: 'Authentic speech *is* the presence of thought in the world -- not its garment, but its body'.³⁸ This type of speech, an outward intending of thought, is seen by Merleau-Ponty and his interpreters as a special case of the body's expressive function. Accordingly,

'all words which have become mere signs for a univocal thought have been able to do so only because they have first of all functioned as originating words, and we can still remember with what richness they appeared to be endowed, and how they were like a landscape new to us, while we were engaged in "acquiring" them'.³⁹

There is more than a hint of the 'defamiliarisation' process to this explanation, and Dufrenne formulates the logical generalisation with expected emphasis on the phenomenological transaction between lived bodies: 'Authentic art is an originary speech which, instead of bringing forth conceptual meaning, simultaneously awakens a feeling and conjures up a presence.'⁴⁰

Once again, the sense of a thrill at discovery might legitimately expand to include the 'originating speech' of a humorous moment, which suddenly crystallises a truth previously unarticulated, but *felt with the mind*. As presaged by the above example, I will now highlight various generic humour techniques, non-verbal and verbal, and submit ways in which they intend toward the body as well as the mind of the spectator.

³⁷ Gary Brent Madison (1981), p. 110.

³⁸ Monika M. Langer (1989), p. 59.

³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 401.

⁴⁰ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 135.

3.3.2 Non-verbal speech

Another of those informal theatrical wisdoms suggests that if you can capture the essence of a play in a sentence or two, there's no reason to bother with the play -- that the 'meaning' lies somewhere in the wholeness of elements irreducible to words. It might be said more formally that there is a kind of authentic speech produced by the stage world, a 'coming-to-itself' of thought which seeks its expression between the lines of experience. In the way that Merleau-Ponty would characterise the writer's quest as a 'meaning-to-be-said', the various contributors to stage world conspire a direct 'meaning-to-be-embodied'. Although it may be presumed that language underpins the thought which generates a stage world, the authenticity of its speech necessarily overreaches its verbal signifiers in performance as, 'Expression and comprehension are achieved through the body first and foremost; any intellectual clarification comes later'.⁴¹

The key difference between gesture in everyday life and gesture in the stage world is that the latter's paramount project overinforms any isolated incarnation of emotion and meaning. A gesture on the stage springs from the designs of an 'intention to signify', precisely the motivation for speech. Therefore, even stage worlds that eschew verbal utterance engage in the same artistic type of intending as those which do not.

In other words, although we consider it non-verbal performance because the stage world does not produce verbal phenomena, an ongoing interpretive monologue transpires inside each individual spectator, *and is intended by the performance*. A non-verbal stage world played before audiences who speak different languages stands the possibility of successfully crossing linguistic boundaries; gestures may enter pre-translated into the preferred language of each perceiving body. Then again they may not. Here is a good place to emphasise that, because 'neither thought nor emotion is divorceable from the body', and bodies are inscribed differently from culture to culture, gestures have meanings which are liable to differ across some boundaries.⁴²

Bill Irwin recalls that *Fool Moon* stints in Germany and Austria did not simulate the unqualified successes of the American runs in New York and Los Angeles. In reference to the 'waiting for the train' sketch, he says, 'People laughed but it just didn't -- along with everything else in the show -- it just didn't feel like it was as strong'. He notes the obvious cultural gap in reference to the prototypical 'commuters', so recognisable to

⁴¹ Monika M. Langer (1989), p. 61.

⁴² Monika M. Langer (1989), p. 62. Langer, Madison and Merleau-Ponty all invoke the example of the kiss being by no means a universal gesture of affection.

big-city American audiences. But he observes further that, from one culture to the next, even 'body language has dialect to it'.

To digress one more step, however, Irwin demonstrates a clown routine for which he says he has received admiration as far as Australia and Indonesia: He blithely begins running around in a circle, trips at a certain point, and falls down; he gets up, dusts himself off, sets off again around the same imaginary circle and trips and falls in the same place; the third time around, he slows upon approach to the tripping point and, *outlining* his incipient cleverness, steps over it; then triumphantly launching back into his run, he trips and falls once again.

It may be argued, in this case, that the routine's setting, structure and gesture steer as clear as humanly possible of specific cultural markers, and that it expresses some wry truth about the human condition, the struggle between inner life and external existence. There is, of course, no way to ascertain its status as universally 'authentic speech' -- tripping, for example, may carry different cultural loading from one place to the next.

The short piece nonetheless exacts an inner monologue of thought, not in the manner of sign translation so much as gestural sense-making. The attitude of the 'character', the implications of falling, the narrative progression and evolving context, recognition of triumphant competence (*setup*) and its sudden undoing (*reversal*). These elements are not brute or raw phenomena; they involve the perception and amassing of meaning. The easily accessible nature of this mimed gag notwithstanding, the routine clearly has thought behind it and therefore demands a speech-like engagement by the spectator to follow the story and 'get' the joke. We have, in a sense, come around to the back door to admit a certain linguistic privilege, which is amended though not disengaged by non-verbal performance.

Language, Merleau-Ponty emphasises, is our element 'as water is the element of fishes'. And so in our embodiments of the world, verbal communication is prone to be conspicuous by its complete absence from a stage world. But jokes transmitted by strictly gestural means eliminate words and sound, tone and inflection from performance fabric, elements capable of dominating reception. The perceiving body, deprived of verbal utterance, may focus upon gesture to defamiliarising effect.

3.3.3 Variations of non-verbal humour

Because speech so informs our interaction with the world and each other, a stage world's studious avoidance of the spoken word winks at us from somewhere within every *gap* to be bridged. To recall the moment from *Kevin's Bed* in which Doris mentions Kevin's name to Dan and he 'subconsciously' grabs for his knee (3.2.7), I would submit

that the absence of a vocally articulated *reversal* adds a spark of self-congratulation to the spectator's discovery and completion of the joke. It is as if we derive complicitous pleasure from completing a satisfying transaction behind the back of our dominant mode of discourse. The joke performs its authentic speaking in the silent inner voices of stage world and spectator, and the *gap* contains at least in part the recognition how private monologues can be seen to coincide through the outer surfaces of gesture.

Ubersfeld claims that 'the act of filling the gap' between phenomenal sign and fictional reality is the source of one of theatre's distinct rewards: 'Theatrical pleasure, properly speaking, is the pleasure of the sign; it is the most semiotic of all pleasures'.⁴³ This comment is obviously reminiscent of Koestler's pleasure of the joke in bridging the *gap* between incongruous frames. The similarity speaks to the natures of both theatre and humour to thrive on and reward the spectator's implicitly foreseen co-operation.

First described in 2.4.3, toward the end of *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, Stage Kharms asks a neighbour to loan him thirty roubles. The man agrees and the exchange is made via theatrical sleight-of-hand as they stand about ten feet apart: The paper bills seem to disappear from one actor's hand and reappear in the other actor's hand, the financial transaction taking place 'realistically' in the fiction, but not in the phenomenal present.

This stage world can be seen to body forth defamiliarisation of a truly mundane social transaction -- as a sort of cubist riff on objective experience, separating and flattening the image of giving and taking; or as a visually literal presentation of post-industrial alienation, making real an absence of physical connection between humans engaged in a simple act of business. But the swell of audience amusement is more likely to stem from the stage world's 'playful invention of unexpected signs',⁴⁴ not only the spectator's spontaneous reading of a 'distinctive' code, but recognition that it has been rendered without explanation as 'speaking' in the spectator's private thought process.

Gestural responses to the natural world and social situations are customary domains for non-verbal humour. Because gesture cannot amend or pursue its own meaning in the way speech can, non-verbal joking is in effect 'limited' to the physical, emotional and thought-related aspects of gestures and their connections. Non-verbal stage worlds involve situations which are either inherently non-verbal (a mime engaged in a solo activity; two people robbing a house with the occupants asleep upstairs) or in which the characters 'speak' to one another in the context of the stage world, but utterances remain

⁴³ Anne Ubersfeld (1982), p. 129.

⁴⁴ Anne Ubersfeld (1982), p. 133.

gestural or mouthed. In the first case the absence of verbiage is justified realistically, in the second case it is established stylistically.

The 'waiting for the train' sketch from *Fool Moon* (partially examined in 2.4.4) encompasses a good range of these non-verbal humour variations. To refresh, Shiner and Irwin hang a series of clowning bits upon a loose plot, in this case two obsessively competitive businessmen passing time on a commuter platform. The sequence is clearly marked off into sub-stories, each of which establishes a short-range plot and comes to some sort of resolution, giving way to a short performative 'breath' before the next one.

The actors delineate basic characters of contrasting temperament, Shiner drawn and languid, Irwin tense and tight. The sub-routines based on one-upmanship are epitomised by the final bit. Having challenged one another to displays of physical strength, Shiner dares Irwin to punch him in the stomach. Irwin resists at first -- initial reluctance is a common strategy for stretching anticipation and underlining *setup* -- but eventually relents, *outlining* a punch and stomping the floor to make a sharp sound of 'impact'. Shiner reciprocally 'outlines' receipt of the punch with a quick jarring of the body and a facial freeze intended as a mask of disguised pain. Shiner punches Irwin similarly. They give each other manly salutes through their desperately fixed faces, turn to the audience and dissolve into agonising puddles on the ground. To the sound effect of an extended whistle they each wave feebly, indicating that they are missing the train after all.

The joking here does not target just any two strangers who take to punching one another. The performers' styles automatically underline their 'characters' as cultural buffoons. The final double defeat is the generically predetermined failure of the clown plus a last laugh at the macho or obsessively competitive businessman.

But at the level of non-verbal performance, the actor negotiates the extremely subtle *outlining* of a bodied consciousness' attempt *to deny the entwining of gesture and feeling by order of thought*. Irwin and Shiner manage phenomenologically correct physicalisations -- remember, gesture is not a veneer of emotion; it *is* the emotion -- by *outlining* each feature of the complex body state. Tendrils of 'pain' escape through cracks in the confident exteriors as ego-driven intellect stands guard, this state embodied by a perceptible knot in the brow or a precarious determination in the eyes and movement. The non-verbal form dispenses with the words exchanged -- they are unimportant distractions to 'what is going on' physically, emotionally and intellectually between the two men. The *gap* to be bridged is in our bodied knowledge that such a separation of gestural threads is impossible, not to mention foolish in the service of such gratuitous posturing. (No doubt a playwright like Harold Pinter has written a scene akin to this one, in which the posturing is bodied in language.)

The sequence takes a final *reversal* when the two men face front, no longer able to maintain their stalwart facades. The performers' effective 'melting' into submission shows thought all but squeezed from the equation -- Look into their eyes! -- as biological reality is lifted to a surreal and emotionally telling frame.

At one point earlier in the sequence, Irwin 'complains' of neck pain, and Shiner volunteers to straighten him out. Shiner takes hold of Irwin's head and gives it two 'warm-up' twists. He then lifts the head from between Irwin's shoulders to full neck extension, the distance maximised by Irwin's turtlelike compression to begin with. His head appearing to perch inhumanly high upon his neck, Irwin's face grows a look of stunned but pleasant discovery. This piece demonstrates an emotional, even spiritual liberation through physical 'manipulation', visibly surprising and confounding to the thought process.

Akin to the painter, the performer has adopted a dialect capable in various ways of *outlining* borders which aren't there in real life. Even though the perceiving body cannot help but make use of thought (the inside edge of speech), the absence of verbal stimulus allows perhaps a fairer hearing for gesture and its components. Both sequences enact non-verbal deconstructions of bodied experience in the world. If they succeed as humour it is because they stimulate authentic speech within the spectator in a way that appears objectively (up there onstage) as incongruity and subjectively (here inside) like truth, the search for which is 'a never-ending quest whose origin lies in speech itself'.⁴⁵

The technical accomplishments of non-verbal performance, done right there in front of our eyes, pervade the *gaps* of its humour. As mentioned at the end of 3.2.9, there is a 'self-expressive' mode of the performing body, which foregrounds its on-the-spot abilities, talents and accomplishments over and above any co-present fiction. The inherent risk of humour, realised intuitively by most spectators, accords a measure of appreciation for every stage joke successfully conceived and executed within the unforgiving fabric of lived-through performance.

In the 'waiting for the train' sketch, the various tit-for-tat bits are occasionally set off by actions executed in unison. Shiner enters the scene first, joined by Irwin; they acknowledge one another and check their watches, movements coordinated at about three-quarter speed. Later, they 'smoke cigarettes', again in a legato tandem mime: Facing front, inhalation makes their bodies expand and heighten as they turn and crane their heads

⁴⁵ Monika M. Langer (1989), p. 63.

toward house right, looking for the train; exhalation shrinks and shrivels them as they return front, drop their cigarettes with airs of dissatisfaction and grind out the butts with their feet. These bits can be intellectualised as demonstrating the enervating effects and loss of individuality of the suburban treadmill. They amuse, however, through a sort of ensemble 'self-expressive mode', which emphasises skill and precision not only as individuals but as partners.

The performers have already presented themselves as supremely skilled physical comedians; here they function as twin aspects of a single bodied image in the unison pieces, as well as one bit in which they become entangled in each other's jacket: They have taken their jackets off, the better to engage in a one-upmanship of physical prowess. Irwin, who has been holding the jackets, gives one back to Shiner, and it turns out to be the wrong one. Each one offers a sleeve of the jacket he is holding, which the other puts his arm into, their bodies awkwardly pretzeled and partly jacketed. They stop for a moment to highlight the predicament, then with a flurry of flailing arms they suddenly face front, fully and correctly jacketed. The bit takes a generic clowning structure, seen also in the sequence built on trying to stuff the Old Woman's corpse into the suitcase (2.3.5). A physical task is proposed, which should appear to the spectator as difficult (if not hopeless) and somehow unlikely or off-kilter. A series of alternate strategies and *reversals* may occur along the way and just at the point of maximum improbability the problem suddenly resolves.

This model of clown or mime routine appears to confront the rigorous grip of physical reality, snatching human victory from the jaws of existential defeat. The ultimate resolution often appears incredibly lucky or easy, after all. The spectator harbours more than an inkling, however, as to the levels of skill, imagination and painstaking rehearsal required to make it so, as if to acknowledge, 'It's amazing what bodies can do when they put their minds to it!' Pointedly verbal joking is a whole other language, so to speak, and can be divided for the purpose of this study into short and long forms.

3.3.4 Verbal joking techniques -- short forms

'The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its.'⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty's claim would seem self-evident, given that the spoken word requires a body for delivery, and that even the most concerted efforts to nullify its gesture (up to and including Beckett) cannot succeed entirely. To be sure, 'the

⁴⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 183.

grittiness of the voice -- Barthes's *grain de la voix* -- speaks of a reality other than that of the sign and representation. It speaks of the reality of the actor and of the relationship of the actor to his or her own body'.⁴⁷ Even in the complete or partial absence of a visible speaking subject, the actuality of voice supplies body for the perceiver; radio drama, for example, counts on its listeners to 'concretise' its world through verbal gesture alone.

Speech, however, facilitates a radical expansion of expression by being able to 'talk about' a universe of things and even itself. Words do 'perform' in the way demonstrated briefly above (3.3.1), but not independently or in substantial excess of the delivery system. Their bodied, situational utterance and work upon the perceiving body remain inseparable considerations for the theatre practitioner, to the extent that a term like 'verbal gesture' might offer the accurate nuance of mutual entailment.

Words have meaning for my body. Although the notion of neutral utterance defies real possibility, some jokes are indeed made in the writing (if not undermined by the delivery), the result of a specific assembly of words in advance of verbal gesture. In looking at a few variations on dramatic verbal joking, I should like to keep in mind to what extent the frame *reversals* rely upon words and phrases as sensual missiles exerting pre-reflective influences upon the body.

The guiding tenet for the one-line joke is efficiency. The *setup* is either couched within the punch line itself, or it is fully primed by the end of the line before: 'The quickfire gag, the punch-line, the dry aphorism, are irresistible because they compress so powerfully, imply so much in a little compass -- a phrase, or even a single word'.⁴⁸ Walter Nash's allusion to explosive energy is apt: A verbal joke's sudden, strategically placed incongruity within the tightest possible package means to upend the receiver's world through a well-laid booby trap made from words.

A playwright, of course, might make use of familiar joking models within the context of a stage world. In *Twenty Grand*, Declan Hughes spins a variation of what Nash demonstrates in the 'Coventry' joke, some sort of witty debasement of a well-known provincial area. The spectator may recognise the joke type better than the butt, and will still be able to get its point: 'It shows that we are not required to have the *specific* experience to which the witticism refers, but only to grasp a category, to recognise the *kind* of image that is raised'.⁴⁹ The exchange goes like this:

⁴⁷ Helga Finter (1997), p. 22.

⁴⁸ Walter Nash (1985), p. 13.

⁴⁹ Walter Nash (1985), p. 13-4.

HACKETT: ... Ah, it's all fucked up out there anyway.

DALTON: In Bray? Yeah.

HACKETT: Why is that, d'you think?

DALTON: That they're all fucked up out in Bray?

HACKETT: Yeah.

DALTON: I don't know.

HACKETT: Suppose it's on account of spending all day out in fucking Bray.

It is not necessary to share Hackett's feeling toward Bray in order to respond to this gag. The use of familiar form and the evocation of a local reference relates to the humour shortcuts referred to in 3.2.8. The feeling of this joking pattern is most likely ingrained in the spectator, who may even laugh at the joke and 'get' it on separate internal tracks of recognition (or laugh without even knowing why Bray should be an object of derision). It is an example of a joking formula wedged into what is meant to be taken as real-life communication in the stage world.

There are other, however, more general principles for the playwright's planting of humour in verbal gesture. Early in *Kevin's Bed*, John reproves Kevin about the upsetting effects of his behaviour on the rest of the family. The short passage played in performance as follows:

JOHN: So you disappear for four weeks in Europe and suddenly turn up here yesterday for their anniversary?

KEVIN: I had to turn up for their anniversary.

JOHN: I know -- and it's great you did -- but they have telephones in Italy, haven't they? You could have warned them!

KEVIN: I needed time to think.

JOHN: And then you're surprised ma starts bawling her eyes out and granny starts throwing her false teeth at the neighbours?

As acted by Sean Rocks (as John) and David Parnell (as Kevin), the scene is played in a lighter shade of serious. The description of granny reliably gains a laugh from the audience. In an earlier version of the script, however, it read, '... ma starts bawling her eyes out and granny starts flinging her food across the bedroom up there'. Bernard Farrell had decided the original image of granny was too feasible and therefore too harsh for the tone he sought. He wanted to show that granny was 'a handful', but he also wanted a touch of humour in advance of a more serious, expositional sequence to follow. The exaggeration, Farrell says, 'needed to be there -- to show what granny was really like, to

make that more graphic, and also to make it so bizarre that the audience would react, would relieve themselves through laughter’.

One can see that, in the earlier construction, the two reports in John’s last sentence are linguistically too much of a piece with the rest of the sequence. Phrasings like ‘bawling her eyes out’ and ‘flinging her food’ conjure lighter affective embodiments than some of the alternatives. But the change of granny’s description turns the first half of John’s sentence into a *setup* (following several lines of *priming sequence*), placed directly beside an image extravagantly ludicrous. Again, the phrases as linguistic signifiers make tangibly different impressions in the perceiving body. ‘Overstatement and understatement are major principles of comic staging’,⁵⁰ not only because of the gaps they open between the feel of the fiction and the feel of the real, but because of the sudden upheaval they cause in a stream of secondary speech.

In the second act, Pauline, now 65 years old and with two beloved husbands behind her, describes her latest relationship, attempting to make it sound more platonic than romantic. Her latest beau is Reggie, a Northerner from Lurgan who is divorced:

DORIS: Divorced?

PAULINE: ... and I didn’t like to hear that either -- but it’s only for companionship, because nobody could ever take the place of poor Cyril.

DORIS: ... of course not ...

PAULINE: ... and I know Lurgan is a bit of a distance -- but the way we work it is: this fortnight Reggie comes down to me and the next fortnight I go up to him.

DAN: Home and away, Pauline, just like Manchester United.

The spectator has already had the exchange placed in ironic perspective. (As shown in 3.2.5, Pauline echoes her widowed devotion to ‘poor Cyril’ with the exact words she had earlier employed in claiming devotion to the memory of ‘poor Tim’.) Pauline’s explanatory line provides the *setup* for Dan to slice through Pauline’s pretence, transposing her latest so-called ‘innocent’ relationship to the level ground and physical contact of the football pitch.

As Farrell remarks, the only decision to be made was the order of phrases in the punch line, to leave it as it stands or reverse it to, ‘Just like Manchester United, Pauline, home and away’. The joke works better the way it stands in the script, as the first phrase redirects the frame orientation through a recognisable sports allusion. The ultimate incongruity is thereby maximised by the explicit comparison of Pauline to a popular

⁵⁰ Walter Nash (1985), p.169-70.

football team. If the linguistic phrases are transposed, it moves from specific to general, and the effect should incline toward the anticlimactic. 'Manchester United' is the clearer incongruous image, but cannot crystallise the logic of the frame translation on its own. In this case the spectator's body requires transport by linguistic means to a tangentially logical sphere of experience before the final joking destination.

Another familiar comic strategy precipitated verbally lies in 'defective exchange' contrived by the playwright. This works by way of a humorous misdirection brought on by some violation of Grice's maxims for 'ordinary' conversation (what amounts to a bunch of guidelines whereby speakers tacitly agree to use language fairly): 'the obligation to give adequate and accurate information, not to be prolix, not to get into conversational deadlocks, not to be snagged on *non-sequiturs*, to pay attention to what is said, to try to make relevant assertions and responses'.⁵¹

In a continuation of the scene between Doris, Dan and John discussed in 3.2.7, Dan is giving vent to impatience with Kevin. John and Doris, in Kevin's defence, are trying to tell Dan about the surprise arrival of the visitor from Rome, whom they both believe to be a nun:

DORIS: He's done nothing ...

JOHN: It's not bad news, da.

DAN: Everything about that fellow is bad news ...

DORIS: ... Dan ...

DAN: (mimicking) 'I want to be a Christian Brother, I don't want to be a Christian Brother; I want to be a priest, I don't want to be a priest ...'

JOHN: No da, this news is different.

DORIS: This is news about a nun.

DAN: Jaysas, don't tell me he now wants to be a nun!

This is a sort of playwright's *outlining* of defective exchanges, which reveals the inadvertent mischief caused by our bodies' sophisticated communicative procedures. One can trace the progress of the conversational misdirection and its comic consequences, each conversant incurring a minor infraction of the Gricean rules. The confusion is made more plausible in performance by the urgency with which the sequence is played. Inferred by the mistake, and adding a kick to a merely silly incongruity, is Dan's apparent questioning of Kevin's manhood to which allusion has already been made. The model for this type of gag

⁵¹ As summarized by Walter Nash (1985), p. 116.

follows a mid-range sleight-of-frame strategy (see 2.2.2 and 3.2.2) in which the stage world props up a specific affective framing for optimum ambush by another.

Grice's maxims, which do their best to corral the potential problems of language as effective communication, provide a rather concise list of pressure points for a systematic approach to humour manufacture. The petty betrayals and deceits of language constitute one of the pet projects of absurdist theatre. The brief narrative by Stage Kharms in *Out of a house, walked a man ...* about the old women falling out of the window (see 2.2.4) may be derived from a literary text, but takes on the obligations of stage utterances when spoken. Several Kharmsian micro-texts, delivered in performance from a downstage position and with a minimum of emotional *outlining* by actor Jozef Houben, break communicative courtesies about pointless conversation:

STAGE KHARMS: On one occasion a man went off to work and on the way he met another man who, having bought a loaf of Polish bread, was wending his way home. And that's just about all there is to it.

If the guidelines for dramatic speech can be said to involve some sort of variation on person-to-person exchanges, this little piece fashions *priming sequence* and *setup* in the first line, and *reversal* in the second. The obligation of communicative 'fairness' in launching into a story are denied: There is no conventional 'point' to it.

A short conversation between Stage Kharms and his neighbour resembles the form of a 'contractual failure' Nash calls 'the runaround'⁵²:

MAR'IA: Some auld man was asking for ye!

STAGE KHARMS: What old man?

MAR'IA: I don't know.

STAGE KHARMS: When was that?

MAR'IA: Don't know that, either.

STAGE KHARMS: Did you talk to the old man?

MAR'IA: I did.

STAGE KHARMS: So, how come you don't know when it was?

MAR'IA: Twa oors ago. [sic]

STAGE KHARMS: And what did this old man look like?

MAR'IA: Don't know that either.

⁵² Walter Nash (1985), p. 117.

Again, what threatens to fall by the wayside in a discussion of humour and language, is the full implication for the perceiving subject in the theatre despite concentration upon linguistic traces. Situated within the affective spin of any specific genre frame, this exchange as a series of verbal gestures imparts psycho-emotional meaning for the bodied observer. If not for the words, there would be no interlude between these two people; but given the words exchanged there comes a repeated dead-ending of the gestural intention to correspond. Here is quintessentially absurdist humour, which recalls the patter of music hall and vaudeville routines in its surrealistic pointlessness. Language is *outlined* in such a way as to unmask itself to the body. It imparts the *feeling* that a person remains essentially isolated despite the use of words, those alleged conduits of higher-level expression between human subjects.

3.3.5 Verbal joking techniques -- longer forms

Rather than the explosive upheaval intended by the 'compressed' joking model, the longer, 'expansive' form, lays down a foundational framing through verbal allusion, which likely supplies a general tone of amusement perhaps swelling at certain 'charged' elements.⁵³ Clearly the effects upon and meanings for the perceiving body differ in quality, as far as 'authentic' or 'originary' speech is concerned -- longer forms trade the sudden attack of insight for a more gradual burrowing toward truth.

Out of a house, walked a man ... and *Twenty Grand* offer examples of verbal joking in longer form, which bypasses the single punch line for a humour of language in wider view. Although not necessarily a defining feature of the strategy, both of the following pieces draw direct attention to the body's involvement in language by invoking reference to our physical objecthood. Neither of the monologues, though potentially troubling in content, is performed in such a way as to emphasise its ghoulishness. Still, the phonic imprints, their received and personal connotations, the stage worlds from which they emerge, court a response from the perceiving body through words which do not require an act of reflection to work their effects.

More importantly for consideration of long-form verbal joking, each speech feeds upon association to a recognisable style or literary genre, itself likely to install in the spectator a pre-reflective framing for reception. There is what Nash refers to as a 'root joke' to the humour behind Hackett's patois in *Twenty Grand* (described in 2.2.1). He is a linguistic cousin to the American philosopher thugs written by Quentin Tarrantino,

⁵³ The terms in inverted commas are borrowed from Walter Nash (1985), generally treated in the first two chapters of his book.

themselves Hollywood descendants of Damon Runyon's and Raymond Chandler's different flavours of underworld denizen.

Very early in the play, Hackett describes a fellow criminal's encounter with a red-hot stove, 'the story how he lost half his face'. The unfortunate man is referred to as Bozo Kearns -- Bozo was the name of an American television clown and now slang for 'a stupid or insignificant person' -- so any serious frame has already been knocked askew. Hackett has recounted how Bozo came home late one night, utterly exhausted, but with the intention of making himself a plate of genuine chips. Further wearied by the peeling and chopping, he pulled a chair up to the stove to rest his head. He had mistakenly switched on, not the heating area under his chips, but the one under his face:

HACKETT: His face is on the hot side. 'Course he wakes up immediately, but you see, on account of Mrs Bozo constantly cookin' spice burgers and batter burgers and whatever-the-shite burgers and never cleanin' up after, Bozo's chosen super-charged heat area is mingin' with grease and gristle and muck of all sorts. Which have now attached themselves to Bozo's face. Meaning Bozo's left cheek is stuck fast to a red hot surface. Well he has to get it off the heat, and he's shriekin' like a hen night when the stripper comes on, but his face won't budge. Finally, he gives it one last almighty wrench. And his head comes up. But the left half of his face, temple to jaw, remains behind.

The story, I believe it fair to say, is disgusting. But it is told by Carney in a histrionic, northside-Dublin dialect as if it were more an amazing curiosity, and supported by an arrangement of words that suggests a relish in the speaking. The language here is not erudite, and it is peppered with street-level crudities. But the speech means to be 'originary', the thought process more sophisticated than your average ruffian, which emerges in word selection ('attached themselves'), rhythm ('grease and gristle and muck of all sorts'), figures of speech ('like a hen night when the stripper comes on') and a measured formal shape.

This cool and eager attention to detail works upon the perceiving body in ironic opposition to the excruciating occurrence being described, a potentially comic eloquence and baseness interwoven. The words provide the outside edge of which the spectator lives the inside -- though not quite: 'the act of speaking is, not the immediate presence of the subject to things, but a new way of making them present while keeping them at a distance'.⁵⁴ Spectators who cannot maintain their psychic distances will not find much amusement in this story. But coming early in the stage world, before violence presents

⁵⁴ Gary Brent Madison (1981), p. 120.

itself as immediate, distance is easier to maintain. It may also be perversely entertaining to watch Hackett revel in the telling to the obvious discomfort of Dalton, his onstage listener, who very obviously cannot maintain his own psychic distance.

In *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, the Old Woman, herself deceased in the context of the stage world, assumes the linguistic style of an adventuress-turned-lecturer to warn against underestimating the mobility of dead people:

OLD WOMAN: They need to be watched and watched. Ask any mortuary watchman. What do you think he is put there for? Only for one thing: to keep watch, so that the dead don't crawl all over the place. There can even occur what are, in a certain sense, amusing incidents. One deceased crawled out of the mortuary while the attendant, on management's orders, was taking his bath, crawled into the disinfection room and ate up a heap of bed linen. The disinfectors dished out a damned good thrashing to the deceased in question but, as for the ruined linen, they had to settle up for that out of their own pockets. And another deceased crawled as far as the maternity ward and so frightened the inmates that one child-bearer produced a premature foetus on the spot, while the deceased pounced smartly on the fruits of the miscarriage and began to devour it, champing away vigorously. And when a brave nurse struck the deceased on the back with a stool, he bit the said nurse on the leg and she soon died from infection by corpse poisoning.'

Again the body may understandably have trouble keeping a joking distance from this visceral attack, a disorienting back-and-forth between laughable and revolting imagery. Kathryn Hunter's delivery, like Carney's previously, sidesteps the 'real-life' weighting of her commentary, by transposing it to speech keys reserved for 'amusing' or 'informative' anecdotes. Phrases like 'ate up a heap of bed linen', 'the deceased pounced smartly' and 'corpse poisoning' dislodge the utterance into quirkily inappropriate linguistic stylings, conjuring the heroic anecdote, soapbox homily and medical diagnosis, for example. Neither the subject matter nor its various linguistic framings can be disengaged from one another in the perceiving body, which produces a bizarre seesawing between feeling-of-referent and feeling-of-verbal-style. The preceding linguistic displays are by no means freely humorous, hitting the body 'where it lives'. They are more likely to impart some unsettling composite of darkness and light, revealing all the more vividly language's ability to dictate feeling toward brute experience, instead of the reverse.

3.3.6 Humour and character

The first of two side issues related to practical contributions of the uttering body and performing word refers to the mere appearance of humour -- something we harbour a host of responses to and feelings about in real life -- in the stage world.

'Character' is a construct of the theatrical frame, the taking of fictional signs and indicators upon the phenomenal body. An actor's rehearsal of a written text attends to none other than the discovery of a specific, repeatable bodying for the 'character's' words. Because 'the understanding of gestures does not in fact require any introspection',⁵⁵ it is possible to follow a play in a foreign language and, at the very least, to form judgements about the characters.

A character's sense of humour will be a highly visible trait, as will a performer's proficiency in playing such roles. Humour within the brackets of the stage world becomes the actual stuff of character construction, likely to inform the spectator's degree of identification: one's basic 'humour' (toward the Jonsonian sense as a dominant element of personality); the kinds of jokes one might make in certain situations, in terms of taste and point of view; one's facility for joking; whether one is inclined to laugh at oneself. As discussed earlier (3.2.9), humour relies unequivocally upon its performance at the site of reception. The humorous speech may borrow the wit of the playwright, but it claims its full effect only as verbal gesture produced by the performing body.

A paper given at the 1976 Conference of Humour and Laughter was titled, 'If Hamlet Had Had a Sense of Humour', and argues tongue-in-cheekily that the Dane, like many a tragic hero, may boast a 'trenchant wit' but 'lacks a grasp of himself as a mortal fool'. The lecturer forewarns his audience by inference: 'Hamlet's predicament is real, but he compounds it by his inability to perceive it in broad enough perspective'.⁵⁶ True enough, the lecturer ignores the vast amending potential of the performing body. The paper in effect presumes a fixed character of Hamlet as fool, in part by enumerating the series of heavy misfortunes he endures without (in the theatre of Mr. Mindess' mind) cracking a self-deprecating smile. But the point may be taken as a two-fold reminder about character and humour: 1) even a 'character' from a highly familiar literary text faces rebirth in the body of each new actor, and 2) a character's perceived sense of humour informs our opinions about them and their situations.

Although the *gap* to be bridged remains the spectator's domain, the practitioner is well able to alter its 'packing' by making, negating, shading or altering a joke through

⁵⁵ Monika M. Langer (1989), p. 60.

⁵⁶ Harvey Mindess (1977), p. 5.

performance, which in turn constructs an underlying ‘humour’ for the character. Hamlet’s first scripted line comes in the second scene of Shakespeare’s text. Claudius addresses him as ‘my cousin Hamlet, and my son’; the prince responds, ‘A little more than kin, and less than kind.’ The line on the page suggests a play on words -- but with what shade of joking intention, if any, will it be delivered and received? It follows in some way as a response to Claudius’ specific verbal gesticulation, immediately constructing a palpable relationship *beneath* the words. The bodied characters conduct a ‘pre-reflective dialogue’ which, despite Shakespeare’s linguistic accomplishments (or perhaps even because of them), supercedes the words. The verbal play emerges in the author’s *style*, as filtered through some sense of character; the humour generated at the site of performance by verbal gesture conflates words, intentions, feeling, thought and the actor’s own bodied *style*, which *may* produce amusement but *will* produce meaning for the spectator. (Actors described as ‘stiff’ or ‘wooden’ are being accused of insufficient bodily involvement. ‘Indication’ describes excessive loading or heavy-handed *outlining* of intended meaning through the body, incommensurate with the style of the stage world.)

Even the stage world that works against psychological continuity refers back to ways we ‘understand’ gesture in experience of the everyday world, and to potentially humorous ends. Stage Kharms’ full-body petrification throughout a neighbourly interlude (2.2.4) causes a two-pronged frame disparity. He has just been exposed to a nightmarish presence, against which he has slammed the door and plastered himself in frozen hysteria. The actor *outlines* the body as grotesquely aroused yet stock still. It is a gestural state we the spectators ‘understand’ as impossible and here exaggerated to parodic effect. At the same time he is placed in space beside the meddling neighbour, an equally comic contrast *outlined* in a working-class woman whose caricatured embodiment is based on an ‘unrefined’, unchecked exterior wholly fluid in its body/emotion/thought unity. Extreme framing contrasts in *style* and character read in several impossible directions at once, to *outline* a mundane, tormenting and comically angular vision of life.

3.3.7 Serious disappearances

Finally, I shall remark upon a symbolic use of language in strangely similar ways as seen in two of the Irish plays. This side trip is apparently made possible by a fluke of my play selection. But it offers clearer-than-usual evidence of a single comic thread’s impact on the mood of a stage world -- in these cases the playwright pointedly tautens the thread, leaving a starkly changed tone.

Speech is more than a way in which two subjects attempt to impart the content of their inner lives to one another, it is a way of living our bodies in the world. Emanating

from the bodied consciousness caught in the intertwining of existence, this infers a two-way entailment for body and world, mediated by speech. A change of language, even a change in vernacular, implies an adjustment in orientation for expressing the world, a different *frame of speech*.

The character of Hackett in *Twenty Grand* distinguishes himself through an expansive linguistic blend of florid description and obscenity-spattered, street constructions, delivered with a top-dog insouciance (in Liam Carney's performance also described in 2.2.1). A young man named Tommy Dalton (played by Anthony Brophy) works as a runner for Hackett's criminal empire and dates the man's daughter. In the first scene of the play, Dalton's verbal style contrasts greatly from Hackett's. He appears a modest man of few words with no interest in inventive expression. Hackett, contemplating an early retirement, has offered to pass on his 'business' to Dalton. 'Wha'?' Dalton asks, slightly confused and with an *outlined* North Dublin underarticulation.

Hackett responds: 'Excuse me, not "wha", Tommy, sound like the bright kid y'are, not some smack-toothed mange-head. "*Wha*'?" The way you speak, the manner in which you express yourself, is absolutely fucking paramount, d'y'understand me?' 'Yes, Mr. Hackett', says Dalton. The aspiration to eloquence infiltrated by its crass corruption is characteristic of Hackett's cynical, faux-literate humour; as played by Carney, he seems to know exactly what he's doing, letting himself in on his own mischief. Dalton's response is typically respectful, minimal and serious.

Humour claims power, if just for an instant, but here at the top of the deadly heap it is the privilege and curse of joking for a consensus of one (and those in the audience who can manage the psychic distance). At the end of the play Dalton un.masks himself as a linguistic chameleon, capable of having suppressed his savvy frame of speech while orchestrating a consummate and deadly double-cross. He emphasises the appropriation of Hackett's verbal style in his last few speeches: 'You're not the man at the top anymore. You're the man in the doorway a cup in his hand, drool comin' out of his mouth'. The irony drips blood, now; this theatrical playing with loaded guns may or may not be humour any longer. But the blackest of amusements appears intended by Declan Hughes' writing and Brophy's steely self-satisfaction at a besting of the best.

A motivating character for humour in the first act of *Kevin's Bed* turns nearly villainous in the second act, distinguished most obviously in the stage world by her appropriation of the English language. Maria provides the impetus for 'avoidance', in Act I, a defining situation for comic plotting. The young Kevin's paramour, she has chased him impulsively to the anniversary party in Dublin. Already having dropped pretensions to the

priesthood, Kevin tries to avoid upsetting his mother further by explaining away Maria's visit: She is a nun come to counsel him on remaining in Rome. The first meeting between girlfriend and mother is loaded with the spectator's knowledge that Doris gleefully believes Maria to be a religious emissary from Rome. The pretence is kept up more easily because Maria speaks only Italian and so all translation must go through Kevin.

Maria enters the kitchen, which Doris, Dan, Pauline, Betty and Kevin already occupy. Maria excuses her intrusion in Italian, and Barbara Brennan's Doris tries to ease over any discomfort by earnestly adopting a pseudo-Italian speech pattern (earlier referred to also in 3.2.7): 'Yes, Sister, come-a in please, there-a is something you-a want, yes?' Dan follows on with a remark intended by Eamon Morrissey's delivery to expose an ironic edge to the audience: 'Jesus, Doris, I didn't know you could speak Italian'. It is the first in a running set of joking exchanges about ethnocentrism as manifested naively through language.

But Maria, played by Carmen Hanlon, is no longer the source of *any* humour in Act II, set 25 years later. She has been stubbornly enjoying her bath, despite knowledge that Kevin's parents have arrived. When she does enter the kitchen, this time she stalks her own territory and rules it unapologetically with a sharp tongue: 'Kevin! Why is everybody in here -- this is the kitchen!' Maria now speaks English all too well and seems to disperse anything approaching a play frame by her mere presence. The character might have retained a humorous potential by, for example, making the change 'too well'. But her *outlining* in speech and body declares her seriousness rather viciously at one point: 'And Kevin, I do not like you and I do not love you and when we marry it was the greatest mistake because maybe you should be a priest or something else because you are a bad husband and a bad father and a bad friend and a bad lover ...'

In both cases, language as conduit for thought emphasises its more thorough-going connections to the body and its involvement in the world. Humour *about* the implications of differing linguistic matrices logically disappears when the 'outsider' learns to speak the same language, inferring a sea change in the subject's being. A sudden competence in the language of power (whether 'literate gangsterese' or 'Anglo-Irish English') re-forms the whole feel of the character at a notable remove from a sympathy earlier enjoyed. More reliably, though, in both these cases the whole feeling of the stage world alters with the character's linguistic relocation. The playwrights effect a palpable weighting of the tone through a constraint, if not dismissal, of the major humour locus. In a way the stage world says, 'I'm not kidding any longer', and it seems to get down to the more serious business on its agenda.

As demonstrated in the preceding section, verbal humour makes jokes about anything we can put into words. But it is always also joking about the investments we make in language, individually and socially; about the exposition of its hidden biases and its inability to 'mean' consistently and purposefully; and about the relationship between the spoken word and its bodied intention.

And in the broader view of practical technique which guides this section, it supports with graphic contrast the contention that humour is far more than something one adds to a stage world to make it enjoyable -- it constitutes meaning itself.

4: THE BODY OF THE BEHOLDER

4.1 GROUNDWORK

4.1.1 Reorientation

This section adopts a somewhat more straightforward game plan than the previous one. After the usual preparations, it examines two major conflicts for bodied subjects in the world, with primary attention to humour found in specific stage worlds which appear to feature those tensions. Along related lines, the section concludes with a brief consideration of the bodied implications for laughter.

The intractability of claiming an empiric stage world and performance notwithstanding, things fall even farther apart as we swing focus around to the side of the spectator in action. It has been my premise that at the higher levels of competency, the material consistency of each performance can be said to conform within a certain band of production intentions. It has further been argued that the community of practitioners attempt to *outline* these intentions clearly *where it matters*, especially when courting a degree of commercial success, like the productions in this study. (It may sometimes be the intention to frustrate or defamiliarise conventional reception techniques, or to encourage some meanings to 'float'.) To be sure, practitioners at all levels may miscalculate with reference to their Model Spectator; or, to regard it a different way, their Model Spectator's capabilities and/or tastes may not bear close enough resemblance to the profile of attending theatregoers. In this postmodern age, a practitioner might intend to 'mean' something about the instabilities of meaning itself.

In looking over the audience's shoulder, however, we find ourselves robbed of such relative intentional certainty. Through cultural conditioning, theatregoers are obliged generally only to pay the price of a ticket -- which may somehow affect the spirit in which they co-operate with the stage world -- and to conduct themselves within a range of socially acceptable theatregoing behaviour.

To be sure, specific theatres attract a broadly definable range of theatregoer, and court them through their artistic programming. In Dublin, a tourist would be more likely to see a play at the upscale, well-marketed Gate Theatre than the smaller, rather eccentric Crypt. Aside from hermeneutic dispositions, it may also be argued that Merleau-Ponty's circular relationship among body, mind and emotions implies a narrowing of possible responses for the spectator: The body's external containment within certain parameters of audience physicality and comportment (different from, say, a spectator at a football match)

theoretically informs and further standardises the field of possible internal responses. Still, the variety of biographical situations and intentions leave a huge amount of room for individualised reception at any given theatre on any given night.

In short, the theatregoer's mandates for the role of 'audience member' do not infer a similar level of intentional prescription to the practitioner's project in performance. This, in fact, crystallises a generic challenge for the practitioner, seen in microcosm through intended humour: to induce within a desired range the *unobliged* -- and potentially radically differing -- individual response.

As I emphasised in connection with the practitioner's intention in 3.2.7, the humorous transaction (and, for that matter, the theatrical one, mentioned in 1.2.2) is no such thing until completed in the spectator. And regardless of signals emanating from the stage, no spectator can be forced to receive and react 'properly', even on the basic level of serious or non-serious processing. The theatre traffics in the ironic as a matter of course with reference to the spectator's unavoidable comparison of the stage world to real life, and there can be no guarantee that even the most able practitioner can place and pitch a specific referent in any given perceiving subject.

4.1.2 Reinforcing brackets

This short revision has come by way of reaffirming that my interest lies in the nature of a lived-through transaction between practitioner and spectator. A look back at various reader-response theories from the 1960s and '70s confirms the suspicion that, while bringing about an important focus upon the reader's contribution to the text, they seem to overprivilege the receiver with a stable and antiseptic authority, easily susceptible to post-structuralist, cultural and political attack, among others. But as defended by Susan Bennett, 'without the existing corpus of reader-response theory, it is unlikely that there would be the current concern of drama theorists for the role of the audience'.¹

While Holland's 'identity' theory and Fish's 'interpretive communities' suggest relevant considerations for theatre reception, Wolfgang Iser restores the mutually active dynamic between literary text and reader, whose 'convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual'.² This assessment rings true for the lived-through transactions of theatre and humour, despite vital differences between the armchair reader and theatre spectator: The string of words and punctuation on page after

¹ Susan Bennett (1997), p. 34.

² Wolfgang Iser (1974), p. 50. Although important aspects of Iser's phenomenological approach to the reading process cannot apply to theatrical reception, this one can.

page provides a single linear input as opposed to theatre's 'density of signs', which Barthes describes³ (and the density of phenomena he ignores). Iser's 'active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection' for the reader expands, in theatre, to include a formidable 'present' of directly accessible sensory stimuli.

For any given humorous moment, someone may laugh or bristle against laughter or laugh privately at friends in the cast or even seek to disrupt performance through laughter, and all these reactions owe to exceedingly private contributions to joking material and performance. These are reasons beyond the scope of the practitioner's artistic intentions, usually unshared by other spectators, although possibly having an effect on audience dynamics. I consider these types of phenomena worthy of examination by other disciplines.

If 'in laughing, we suddenly and playfully recreate our identities',⁴ it can never be surprising that rogue responses arise in the theatre, where perception is primed for hidden meaning. Conversely, you can lead an audience to humour, but you can't make them laugh, as any given biographical situation projects its own unforeseen associations upon phenomena. But once again, I have gone too far in acknowledging a theoretically chaotic indeterminacy only to step back toward the claim that my approach is reasonable enough, given the ability demonstrated by the practitioners in my study to produce the minimum transcending experience to which theatre and humour aspire.

The relationship between producer and receiver must be seen as asymmetrical, though interlocking, in the sense that the spectator does not intend sign production as actively as the practitioner. It has been argued that pre-production and rehearsal are the processes through which a practitioner cultivates a system of phenomenal signs, and that this Model Performance is targeted every time.⁵ (To be sure, the quality of performance can be influenced by audience response, but the performers are still trying to put on some version of their Model Performance.) The practitioner's overdetermining intentionality contributes toward a minimum stability over successive performances of a production.

Although the individual spectator actively engages with the event more than we credit -- in terms of sensory reconnaissance, interpretive processing, emotional authorisation and response -- this contained activity cannot be said to mirror the

³ Roland Barthes (1963), pp. 261-2.

⁴ Norman Holland (1982), p. 198.

⁵ As hinted earlier, David Shiner's audience-involving improvisations in *Fool Moon* may be said reliably to 'hit the same notes', despite an entirely new 'cast' of theatregoers for each performance.

aggressive outpouring that comes from the stage, nor is it externally detailed (with the notable exception of laughter). I can, however, propose that the *individual* in the theatre seat is at the same time part of an *audience*, which, in Herbert Blau's words, 'is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire'.⁶ As a 'consciousness constructed' by the onset of lived-through performance, the audience must also be said to constitute a many-headed perceiving body. In this respect it becomes something of an Ideal Spectator in its own right, about which some receptive activity may be observed and intuited.

This thesis will continually seek to avoid psychological, sociological and cultural pretensions, which I still deem beside my point of entry. Indeed, I do not consider the living threads of theatrical reception in flight sufficiently recoverable by traditional forms of data gathering, either by inspecting external traces (a camera trained on the audience) or internal recollections by specific spectators (in the form of 'exit polls'). My method remains phenomenological in its attempt to excavate gists of bodied response from living experiences through educated observation. From this stage-facing perspective I hope to analyse what I take as prototypical humorous reactions in the perceiving body.

Finally, I recognise the limiting factors and inscribed prejudices of Fish's 'interpretative communities', and realise that specific joking references and conventions may not outlive the localised, historical conditions of performance. All of these productions are now in the past, as are their particular spectatorships. Although my observations of specific theatrical moments cannot count on reaching beyond their cultural-historic sites of production, I would contend that the analyses remain generically sound as samples for the foreseeable future -- theatre and humour are entrenched mechanisms unlikely to change radically all of a sudden, even though the sociocultural fabric of Western civilisation does.

The primary thrusts of my study for this spectator-oriented section provide the titles for the following three chapters, and concern what I determine to be the main areas of interest for general consideration of the bodied spectator at the site of humorous impact in theatrical performance. By way of theatre's social, bodied and mutually present nature for producer and receiver, I propose in the next two chapters the poles of two psychic issues which sponsor all humorous moments in the performance transaction: the tensions within the living subject between individuality and group; and the correlation of thought

⁶ Herbert Blau (1990), p. 25.

and feeling. These fields of play may not be at the forefront of the joking material, but always anchor delineation of the *gap to be bridged*. The third chapter considers laughter briefly as outer confirmation of the relationship between practitioner and spectator, and, more deeply as the result of an inner upset to bodied knowledge.

4.2 INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP

4.2.1 The defining question

As alluded to above, one of the paradoxes that helps to confound analysis of the spectator's position comes from the lack of a precise answer to the question: Where does the individual's unique perceiving status pass over into Blau's construct of audience as 'a viewing subject, the determining principle of performance'?⁷

From our phenomenological view, of course, they can't and shouldn't be separated -- an observation about one anticipates an observation about the other, as they are co-present and intertwined. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology rises above blinkered subjectivity by denying just that perceptual autonomy that reader-response criticism seems to infer. We comprise and have living experience of the same phenomenal field as one another in the audience, and we inhabit that field in similarly human ways.

A theatre audience does not contain a collection of hermetically boxed consciousnesses, each one undergoing a flow of private perception related to private experience, and which may, only by chance, overlap. There is, by virtue of our bodied beings, a 'primordial knowledge of all things'. This is an overarching principle which anticipates the experience of an audience in the theatre -- 'to see how the public tends to embody the universality which is already found in the solitary witness.'⁸

On, then, to the heart of this chapter: The psychic tension between individual engagement with the perceptual field we call life and confirmation of our shared experience is a defining force for humour and part of every joke in the theatre. Theatre assembles *a body of bodies* for the audition of some perspective on our being-in-the-world: 'In the case of theatre it is primarily what we mean to ourselves that is revealed, and this is that we are temporal and self-constructing beings who are irreducibly individual and irreducibly communal'.⁹ Humour takes the second half of the preceding statement as its founding condition; particularly in the theatre, it inclines toward pinpointing consensus about the perceptual field each of us calls 'my life'.

⁷ Herbert Blau (1990), p. 42.

⁸ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 64.

⁹ Bruce Wilshire (1982a), p. 57.

4.2.2 Authorisation of parallel identity

The spectator lives a complex angle of identification with any stage world, based on responses to its content and *style*. This disposition will betray itself most apparently in reactions to humour, which attempts to confirm a momentary overlap of identities between stage world and spectator, individual and audience.

The quest for humorous consensus operates quite candidly when the stage world dispenses with fictional pretence, nominating a single performing subject for our direct identification. This is demonstrated readily in the relationship between stand-up comic and audience: Although rehearsed and performative, the stand-up routine amounts to a bodied campaign of comic defamiliarisations about some sub-stream of life experience. Although stand-up comics modify their personas, cultivate styles and tailor routines for specific audiences, the total reservoir of joking material is and can be none other than contemporary subjective experience. The fantastic story and historic anecdote still rely on the recognisable 'here, now and always' as unspoken contribution from the spectator.

Receptive disposition toward direct-address performance joking hinges upon the spectator's identification with the sphere of material, prejudicial stance and the performing subject itself. If deprived of the psychic buffer afforded by fictional 'character', a performer is in effect asking for the spectator's body-to-body authorisation on similar terms to an encounter in 'real life'. Contemporary stand-up convention often dispenses with formal jokes in favour of extended personal anecdotes and ruminations, seeking consensus on individual experience ('Did you ever notice ...?') For better or worse, such a relatively unmediated grip on the performer's phenomenal being -- appearance, personality, dress, speaking dialect, etc. -- will likely sway the spectator in terms of openness to authorisation and, by extension, joking permission.

A performance piece titled *70 Hill Lane* -- produced and toured by the London-based Improbable Theatre company, 1997-98 -- intends such an ingenuous relationship, seeking to confirm a universality through the eccentrically individual. It is essentially a 90-minute rumination on the childhood home of Phelim McDermott, inspired by his recollections of ghostly occurrences, but roaming to present-day experience as well as factual, anecdotal and metaphysical side trips. The production visited Britain and the U.S., but as performed at the Samuel Beckett Centre in Dublin (October 1998), the audience enters at the front of the performing area, which stands empty save for a platform about 15 feet wide, 10 feet deep and perhaps 8 inches high. A tall table at its centre is washed in blue light. Musician Ben Park mans a control centre of instruments and sound equipment to the left of the platform. McDermott, who wrote the script, 'performs' himself as narrator and focal character, talking to the spectators and sometimes demanding

they talk back. Two other actors, Guy Dartnell and Steve Tiplady, supply supporting characterisations and other services: Extensive and inventive use of sellotape literally *outlines* the spaces of his boyhood house and invokes the spectator's imagination in constructing an array of passing representations.

A silent opening sequence (described in 4.3.1) ends with McDermott crouched in front of the platform, telling a sort of fairy tale about a stillborn child magically resuscitated by the moon; the other two actors, positioned to the rear, supply images of the night-time sky (clouds billowing upward to reveal a crescent moon) using crumpled newspaper and a torch.

The effect of the story settles for a moment, then the lights come up more fully, and McDermott pointedly surveys the audience. He says, 'Hello', as many times and with as much body English as it takes to coax something like a genuine group 'Hello' in return. McDermott 'plays' with the audience here, in ways that may vary from performance to performance, helping latecomers find their seated friends, asking them if they'd like to be filled in on what they've missed. (Sometimes they quickly replay the first 10 minutes.) Asking, 'Do you want to know what happened?', he will again require an actual 'Yes' from at least one spectator in order to proceed. One night, in trying to convince the audience that he really is courting vocalised responses, he says, 'Just trying to establish this is not the telly'. Audience laughter usually follows these defamiliarisations of theatrical illusion, as spectators get used to the idea of an explicitly dialogic relationship with the stage world.

McDermott as fellow human, his body, his biographical situation, his real-life way of being in the world, provide the stuff and slant of the stage world -- he wrote the script, as well, based on his own history and perceptions. He could easily be telling a story at a party, leading us through it as himself using a casually performative voice -- any blatant theatricality comes from imaginative methods of representation. Our 'chemical' and sociocultural responses to the progressive disclosing of McDermott's individuality in this performance will greatly inform our disposition toward the stage world and its humour, our willingness to construct our own identities parallel at various points to his. Our willingness to authorise his otherness as our own -- what all stage worlds rely on in some way -- depends very much on how we feel about him. This reaction is likely to refer to his *style*, his bodied way of being the biographical situation, some of whose details we receive during the course of the performance.

McDermott grew up in Manchester, England, now lives in London. My own response to his performance presence produced the following impressions and reactions:

early 30s; mop of curly, dark hair; intelligent, anxious, vulnerable face; wiry body, sometimes quirkily disjointed in movement; reedy voice. Separate reviewers considered him 'puckish' or comparable to Woody Allen, presumably in reference to his sleight, non-leading man appearance, his intellectualised sensitivity, and occasional flare-ups of neurotic angst, particularly toward women. A modest sampling of newspaper reviews and comments solicited from a cross-section of theatregoing friends reveals an unsurprising pattern of responses consistently guided by personal reaction to the actor/writer, especially in reference to the show's humour. I make this observation, without veering to pursue it further, by way of pointing out that any individual humorous moment may be prompted favourably or otherwise by the spectator's magnetic reaction to an actual bodied subject.

This circuit is variously affected by States' three phenomenal modes of the actor's presence, one of which, the 'self-expressive mode', I have already touched upon (in 3.2.12 and 3.3.3). In their pure forms, 'self-expressive mode' calls attention to the virtuosity of the actor as performer; 'collaborative mode' highlights the interaction between actor and spectator; and 'representational mode' foregrounds the actor as signifier or 'character'.¹⁰ Clearly the modes can be seen to overlap in, for example an actress' bravura performance in a classical role which involves a series of asides to the audience. In 'self-expressive mode' the spectator responds to what the actress *does*, in 'representative mode' to what she *represents* (although in either case, the spectator's response may be coloured by attributes of the character in the first case and of the real-life actress in the second).

'Collaborative mode', by calling attention to the explicit link-up of actor and spectator, makes the relationship the most vulnerable to interpersonal response. Surely a 'character' may confide in the audience, maintaining something of a fictional shield between actor and our bodied disposition toward him. In a case like *70 Hill Lane*, McDermott has put himself forward without any such buffer, pressing an unadulterated 'collaborative mode' to a greater extent than Barabbas in *The Whiteheaded Boy*. He asks the audience to take him literally at face value, reminding them throughout the performance through asides and direct questions, inviting a response to himself as a real-life person. The stage world of *70 Hill Lane*, then, as funnelled so predominately through the *style* of a single, minimally fictional subject in 'collaborative mode', affords a singularly uncluttered look at the mechanism of individual authorisation which every humorous moment aspires to set in motion.

¹⁰ These modes are addressed in States' *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985), pp. 157-206 and (1983), pp. 22-42.

4.2.3 Widespread individual experience

If the spectator awards McDermott some degree of authorisation, several of the show's moments solicit recognition of engrained wrinkles from contemporary, roughly middle-class life. The stage world's time frame basically bounces back and forth between 'then' (the house in which McDermott grew up on 70 Hill Lane) and 'now' (his Brixton flat). The sequences in the flat do not contribute to the main 'plot', such that it is, so much as put forth for widespread validation some quirks of his private, everyday experience.

Our introduction to the Brixton flat comes early in the show. 'There are two sofas in my flat', McDermott explains, his demeanor now taking on a chatty efficiency. Tiplady places a set of tandem wooden folding chairs on the platform and perpendicular to the audience. 'This is the first one', McDermott continues, standing by the chairs. 'It's a kind of puffed up, bloated sofa. It's covered in a drape with fish on it'. Dartnell has placed another set of chairs several feet away, facing the audience. 'Over here, is a very different sofa', McDermott says, moving to describe it. 'This is a kind of 1950s Jetson-style sofa'. He adds, 'It's got arms like wings', raising his hands slightly from his sides, palms down, to give an aerodynamic impression. Here he 'breaks' from descriptive mood to talk more candidly, an aside *within* the existing 'collaborative mode' of address: 'It's extremely uncomfortable. If you have friends around and you want to use this sofa, it's actually quite difficult to have a conversation'. By way of demonstration, he sits on one of the chairs and allows his torso and head to 'fall' way back, arms pinned to his sides, face and eyes showing mild distress, as if trapped. After a few seconds, he 'escapes' from this position to standing. 'I don't like that sofa', he says, accusing the piece of furniture with a dramatic, arm-length pointing gesture. 'It's got lots of things on it -- my bag emptied out', he says as he then mimes shaking the contents of his shoulder bag onto the couch. 'I can do that 'cause I don't use this sofa', he confides once again.

There is nothing particularly witty about this sequence; its *gaps to be bridged* require little work on the part of the receiver other than comparison to one's own domestic behavioural patterns and (the production presumes) recognition thereof. In treating the minutiae of everyday private life, it hopes to impart to the spectator a surprise feeling of 'That *is* how it is' or in phenomenological language, 'I didn't realise that *other* bodied subjects engage privately with the world in ways so like mine'. This reaction might be augmented by the individual spectator's further sense of unity with Blau's body of 'audience' -- sudden discovery and verification of identical worlds with all the other laughing subjects in the audience.

McDermott applies for approval from three main approaches to defamiliarisation, all exemplified in reference to the second sofa: a) cultural/verbal cross-reference; b) comic physical *outlining*; and c) anthropomorphising of objects.

a) The phrase, a '1950s Jetson-style sofa', evokes both a culturally and historically specific style of furniture design -- an 'efficient', minimalist use of artificial fabric stretched across a single-rod base structure, shaped curvilinearly to give an impression of 'space-age' trajectories. Alas, as anyone who has had first-hand contact with the model knows, it gives precious little ergonomic support. The reference also deflates by association with a 1960s television cartoon series which, itself, poked fun at futuristic projections of everyday life. The joke obviously works best for the spectator who carries personal experience with the referents (the sofa and TV show), and, of course, comparable feelings about them. Some familiarity is required to receive the joke's full value, though people may have derived knowledge from the commercial recycling we call 'nostalgia'.

b) It so happens that McDermott offers inclusion on the joke in his physical demonstration which 'reads' as humour, and draws on nothing more than bodied knowledge of 'civilised' conversation, discomfort and comic performance cues. As recorded above, he 'interrupts' his eager-host persona to confide in the audience that the sofa is 'extremely uncomfortable', and upon which it is 'actually quite difficult to have a conversation'. His subsequent physical *outlining*, recognisably comic in style, fills in the gap left by this curious claim: McDermott sits on one of the chairs and his upper body topples backward like a falling tree, indicating the inability of the sofa to support the human body's conversational sitting posture. His accompanying facial mask suggests someone troubled by being rendered bodily ineffectual in a nearly supine position. The whole image obviously (and humorously) suggests the impossibility of maintaining any degree of acceptable social interaction, through pointed exaggeration. The sudden, purely phenomenal transformation from standing fluidity to reclining, petrified grotesquerie can also be taken as a sign for humour, the form of a joke regardless of its substance.

c) McDermott 'breaks free' from the clutches of his sofa to a standing position and points back accusingly to the piece of furniture. He delivers the line, 'I don't like that sofa', as a melodramatic pronouncement. This rendering suggests an emotional outlay toward an inanimate object, which simultaneously seems too much feeling to spend on a mere sofa. But it also may be secretly accurate in the way we can anthropomorphise 'things' we engage with routinely to the extent that we award them motivations (inner lives) and respond to them with tones of emotion usually reserved for humans.

As if to increase the insult, McDermott adds, 'It's got lots of things on it -- my bag emptied out', during which he mimes shaking the endless contents of a shoulder bag all

over the sofa. He turns back to us: 'I can do that, 'cause I don't use this sofa'. The tone of this utterance invokes a blithely cruel framing from a lovers' quarrel, as if to stand upon his indifference toward hurting the sofa's feelings. This comic coda calls attention to the curious space(s) found in probably all but the most fastidiously kept domiciles, which become disarranged holding areas for anything the occupant doesn't feel like putting away or finding a permanent home for.

Ideally, the preceding sequence submits that anyone who has used one of these sofas will -- whether having thought at the time, or discovered suddenly in retrospect -- recognise and approve this particular disparagement of an era's architectural style over practical considerations. It may also propose a more general comment on cultural fads as far as furniture design and television programming go. In this case, though, the defamiliarisation reaches for direct body authorisation, presenting the clear *outline* of an uncomfortable or ungainly physical position we may have taken ourselves. It asks not only, 'Has this ever happened to you?' but, 'How could someone have considered this a viable product design, and what could have possessed people to purchase such a thing in large enough numbers to make it culturally recognisable?'

Importantly, these are not simply detached recognitions of shared experience, or even lampoons of popular culture from a specific era. There is a joking butt constructed by every joke, and given such one-to-one identification with the performer's confessional stance, it is at least in part ourselves who stand in the line of ridicule.

The 'bits' of the preceding sequence surely have varying individual impacts on given spectators of given audiences. The individual/group dynamic, however, operates in the body of the active spectator in response to every stage joke, identifiable as such, whether or not the humour connects. Spectators recognise *and feel* themselves part of the same perceptual field as everyone else in the theatre.

Merleau-Ponty uses an outing with his friend Paul in the midst of a natural landscape to argue that as bodied presences occupying the same perceptual field, they can indeed point to mutually experienced phenomena like hills and trees and even each other. They can compare experiences of the landscape even while they become an influencing part of it for each other. In the case of theatre performance, the 'landscape' is exceptionally alive with intended meaning. As an actual participant in the sphere of the perceptual field called the audience, my interaction with the stage world affects the experience of my co-spectator(s) as surely as 'my gestures invade Paul's world and guide

his gaze' when I point to a faraway hilltop in the landscape.¹¹ Laughter makes for a particularly potent manner of 'pointing' to perceptions in the 'landscape', sending out reciprocal vectors of influence from the individual to stage and audience.

I shall pull up short of the behavioural complexities of audience size, makeup, and the thousand other factors which inform audience dynamics in a given time and space. But it should be evident that the perceiving subject in the theatre feels itself as individual and audience simultaneously, and that the psychic yearnings inherent in these identities are set to vibrating by the stage world, particularly during moments marked for humorous intent. Influences upon perception include a knowledge in the body that 'laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers'.¹²

The humorous event in the theatre aims at the body of individuals (audience) through the individual body (perceiving subject), nominating a defamiliarisation and judgement of subjective experience as legitimate for collective acknowledgement. To the extent that any given stage joke succeeds in any given spectator, it reifies the dual being of self and transcendence within a single body, confirmation that, as Merleau-Ponty contends, 'Both universality and the world lie at the core of individuality and the subject'.¹³ And if Blau is astute in his comment that theatre 'brings us together *as alienated*',¹⁴ humorous confirmation that one's bodied isolation allies with others' stands to exact a relief more primal than the Freudian psychic economies -- it includes perhaps a momentary feeling of symbiosis with the pack.

4.2.4 Expanding the net for authorisation

Three sequences in *70 Hill Lane* show how the embrace of audience authorisation stands to broaden through the expansion of formal humorous technique: a) a relatively simple recognition of private behaviour; b) extension into psychic fulfillment; c) and full-fledged flight into comic fantasy.

In one sequence, McDermott enacts returning to his messy flat after an exhausting day. He conveys the sense of inner struggle between a self-imposed duty to clean up and an immediate need for sleep. McDermott reminds himself aloud, 'You're supposed to be doing some work', as he mimes wearily picking things off the floor. Suddenly he stops, turns to the audience and says, 'Maybe -- I could go to bed now -- get up early in the

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 405.

¹² Henri Bergson (1900), p. 64.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 406.

¹⁴ Herbert Blau (1990), p. 124.

morning -- and do some work *then*'. A joking cue is not clearly *outlined*, though the utterance does seem ever-so-slightly framed by the neatness of its deadpan. The spectator may recognise a self-deception willingly seized time and again by the tired psyche. The *outlining* appears even to intend a slightly sarcastic judgement upon this transparent rationalisation. The defamiliarisation is not big and broad; *setup* and *reversal* are subtly contained in the rendering of a personal moment the spectator may authorise as 'all too true'. This strategy invests entirely in the delineation of an ostensibly human behavioural twitch, without the aid of explicit comic form -- only those willing to claim the pattern as their own and criticise it will find this amusing.

A few moments later, McDermott demonstrates his changing of an overhead light bulb, and his subsequent battle to rehang the paper lampshade. He enacts standing on the coffee table, arms reaching up to try to maneuver the wire cross-piece into position and balance the lantern. He goes on for nearly a minute in this mimed activity -- quite a stretch in performance time -- adding the occasional vocal imprecation, 'Get on', changing the position of his hands for a better angle. But for someone who has been through this subtle torture, the sense of endlessness is recognisable from the outside and laughably ridiculous. It is easy to discern from some of the more vocalised responses in any given audience, who personally has done battle (or witnessed a battle) with one of the things. Eventually becoming frustrated, McDermott stops the action with an anguished growl. He then mimes tearing the lampshade into smaller and smaller bits, each motion accompanied by a vocalised, 'rip', which further expresses his taking a mad satisfaction in the annihilation.

The first part of the sequence derives a series of '*anti-reversals*' as the action stretches longer and longer without resolution, the plodding of time marked by the actor's periodic change of positions. *Bridging the gap* would involve the perceiving subject's authorisation that this is no exaggeration and that, yes, it is quite a ludicrous undertaking.

But the anguished growl, part of a real-life frustrated reaction, becomes *setup* for *reversal* into the more fanciful frame of 'executing' the lantern. Surely the spectator who has so far authorised this subjective experience and judgement, may derive a bonus release from the emotional identification with this tempting but economically unsound resolution. The formal frame switch, however, throws open a wider expanse for entry by the spectator who thus far has *not* identified fully with this particular domestic travail. The moment clearly marks its humorous intent as the rush of violent energy contrasts comically with the foregoing controlled attempt at problem-solving. Suddenly the sequence is *also* an audition of wish fulfillment about the release of bottled-up frustration. Without having to approve observations on the specific act of hanging a paper lampshade, the spectator

may respond to the more open invitation to ratify some part of a general attitude toward home-dwelling experience: saintly patience in the face of stupidly designed domestic products; dutifully civilised behaviour as opposed to instinctive response; the presumed thingly innocence v the true dastardly motives of inanimate household objects; the tightrope between sanity and madness routinely shaken by mundane contemporary existence; the ever-present play between theatrical signifier, signified and real-life referent. This suggests a tendency toward expansion of audience consensus through the use of formal humour technique, taken to a more audacious level in the following example.

The broadest use of theatrical humour to defamiliarise subjective experience takes place when McDermott shares with the audience some of the recollections and insecurities of his teenage years. It is a sequence obviously tagged with humorous intent, and apparently one of the more popular set pieces in the show.

McDermott, having led us through a tour of his house on 70 Hill Lane, introduces the family sitting room. The folding chairs are set toward either side of the platform. Dartnell sits on one, a newspaper held in reading position to hide his face; he portrays McDermott's father, home from his white-collar job at day's end. Tiplady sits on the other with legs crossed, left hand in lap, right-hand fingers gathered to a point and lightly touching his other palm; he is McDermott's mother, a schoolteacher marking papers. Mom and Dad are apparently in their own worlds. McDermott recalls missing a feeling of togetherness and, more specifically, his father's lack of communication.

Regarding the other two 'characters' from a point standing between them, McDermott confides anxiously, 'I know they don't say anything about it but -- they're worried about me'. He then cocks his head and postulates, 'Maybe when I'm not here, they say what they really feel'. The piano begins a tender introductory underscoring, and Dad (Dartnell) puts down his newspaper. He stands and gazes into the distance, taking on an expansiveness in body and voice which relates tentatively to the musical accompaniment: 'Darling. It's so wonderful to be alone together'. Mom (Tiplady) has put down her schoolwork, and faces out, saying, 'At last'.

'Come, let us dance', Dad continues; he extends his hand in musically melodramatic style. He twirls Mom into dance position, both facing the audience, while McDermott interposes, 'God, he's never danced in his life'. Mom and Dad proceed to declare their mutual love in operetta-like recitative. Dartnell and Tiplady have established through narration and *outline*, cultural characters recognisable enough for the spectator to read broad incongruity upon this switch to the high emotional disclosure of operetta. The actors' phenomenal presences -- performative and committed, yet not pretending to be

accomplished musicians -- further deflate the genre's stylistic weight, Dartnell because his body is large and not quite graceful, Tiplady's because of the cross-gender casting.

Finally, Dad confesses with a declarative spread of the arms, 'There's only one thing that stands in the way of my complete happiness ...'; Mom interjects a half-sung, 'Oh, no ...', assuming a classic heroine's gesture of stoic foreboding, with the back of her hand covering her mouth and the other palm extended toward the point of threat as if to stave off the imminent bombshell; McDermott attends the scene with great curiosity, about to discover some secret cache of information buried back in his teenage years.

Dad moves more toward song, speaking some of the words, but holding others (mostly the first and last words of phrases) on definite melodic pitches: 'I'm worried about the boy. So worried about the boy. He's so weird. He spends too much time alone in his room. He'll never make a computer engineer like I am. He's not interested in manly things: football, cricket, rugby, mathematics, backpacking'. This list is sung, and begins a duet section, in which Mom and Dad overlap or continue under one another's lines, in exchanges like: Mom -- 'He's just artistic'; Dad -- 'He's such a woman in his ways.'

While Mom lamely defends her son's interests in drawing and theatre, Dad builds the section emotionally and musically to, 'I know the people that I meet, what they are thinking', and on into full-throated song: 'That -- he's -- a -- poofter. ... That he's a poofter. ... That he's a willy woofter'. This section is counterpointed by Mom's distressed, 'ohs' and 'no no no no no', swelling in the pauses; McDermott runs between them, powerless to edit this retrospective nightmare. The sequence ends in generic musical-finale fashion, Mom and Dad standing with hands out, their voices joining harmonically to hold the final note on, 'But he's my son'. After they finish (and the applause dies down), McDermott admits, 'They never said these things. They probably never even thought them. It's just that, well, that's what it felt like back then at 70 Hill Lane'.

The humorous devices and effects should not need point-by-point unravelling. The production has entertainingly superimposed at least five divergent frames -- the fictional parents, stereotyped as stolid and middle-class; suggestion of their unexpectedly impassioned inner lives; the highly dramatic emotional articulation of musical theatre or operetta; the real-life actors who do not reconcile with any of the other three; McDermott himself, reacting to these revelations -- all well executed for comic effect. Identifiable *setups* and *reversals* occur: For example, Dad's 'There's only one thing that stands in the way of my complete happiness', begins one *setup*. 'I'm worried about the boy' provides the *reversal*, not for being unexpected, but because it fulfills McDermott's paranoid expectations with devilish perfection.

This being the most formally and extravagantly humorous of the three examples, it cannot be surprising that it claims a peak comic response: The joking intent is overdetermined and escalated several times. The performances are at once competent and silly. The uncommunicativeness of men and the intimate lives of long-married mothers and fathers provide strong stereotypical referents and nearly sure-fire points for the spectator's individual contact. Beneath it all, the surpassing seriousness of the musical genre and its stylistic indulgences supply a safe and potent canvas for humorous deflation.

All of these factors throw the net ever wider, so the spectator can easily find room within the joking embrace without wholly buying into the explicit identification of wondering whether your parents question(ed) your sexuality in moments of privacy. The perceiving subject may well be amused primarily by the humorous technique, but the psychic material of a joke can never be completely isolated from its form. At its broadest reach, this humorous sequence taps into a communal ocean of lived and remembered emotional insecurity, to which almost anyone should be able to gain entrance. Anxiety about the secret thoughts of loved ones is confronted, blown to the ridiculous proportions they may acquire in the individual imagination, and in one final wiping of the slate, assigned to the realm of probable overreaction. Once again, the debasement is, among other targets, self-directed -- and because of the roomful of laughers, it is at once an acknowledgement by 'me' and 'all of us' who authorise the joke.

Humorous technique appears capable of bringing about an increased subjective admission to the individual experience enacted onstage, because its recognised forms *in themselves* place familiar, comfortable invitations within the spectator. More importantly, though, theatrical humour's capacity for multiple framings expands the playing field by adding more spheres of experience for authorisation. This action seems somehow to trigger a broadening of perspective for the perceiving subject, from narrow specificities which may keep them aloof, to more widespread experiences which address universal issues of individual personhood in a world of Others.

And as I have more than implied throughout the chapter, one of the sweeping psychic strokes completed by every (reasonably) successful humorous transaction in the theatre is the explicit confirmation of the transcendental in the individual. This ability to claim knowledge of another's world, which philosophers have long been known to question, is as plain and verifiable as the roar of an audience laughing as one.

4.2.5 Comic constants

Tangential to these lines, it is tempting to note that the human being has evolved at a rate that would seem to deny wholesale changes over the past few thousand years.

Merleau-Ponty's claim that, 'the behaviour of another, and even his words, are not that other,'¹⁵ suggests the possibility of essentially human joking material. If all bodied subjects 'understand' each other's engagement with the same phenomenal world, it should not be surprising to find performative patterns delightful to the spectator across space and time. States, for example, notes that the psychic pattern of reversal/recognition 'runs so deeply in human experience in the world', that it can be seen in the structure of classical tragedy as well as the common joke.¹⁶

Everyone on earth engages with the world through a prototypical biological body, which would argue *for* some kind of universal joking material. But one set of cultural inscriptions have the capacity to deny joking permission toward any act or object which might seem entirely innocent to another. This may or may not be a case in which theory presents in abstraction extremes far in excess of the way life is lived. Rather than traipse across the anthropologist's field, however, I limit the following proposal to Western theatre tradition in noting an apparent constant in theatrical humour, which appears to extend our human connections in diachronic and synchronic directions.

It is some matter of interest that stock comic archetypes described by Aristotle and employed by Aristophanes over 2,400 years ago can still be seen to inform characterisation here at the end of the 20th century. The *eiron*, who ironically 'dissembles his real qualities and abilities', and the *alazon*, who 'loudly lays claim to qualities and abilities not rightly his',¹⁷ remain key agents for humour in popular Western drama.

In the first act of *Kevin's Bed*, the characters of Dan and Doris bear strong natural resemblance to the stock types of *eiron* and *alazon* respectively. Described from a practical orientation in 3.2.7 as jester and authoritarian, Dan is a working-class postman who married 'upward' and has never been allowed to forget it by his mother-in-law; Doris is the self-proclaimed moral and intellectual centre of the family. The sequence described at the end of 3.2.7, achieves a peak *reversal* with Dan's comment, 'Doris, speak properly or she'll think she's talking to Tarzan'.

In this stage world, Doris holds down the structural position of Frye's 'blocking' character, motivating much of the comically evasive action. The situation and likely response is described almost perfectly in Frye's comment:

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 354.

¹⁶ Bert O. States (1994), pp. 53-4.

¹⁷ Kenneth McLeish (1980), p.53.

‘The multitudes of comic scenes in which one character complacently soliloquizes while another makes sarcastic asides to the audience show the contest of *eiron* and *alazon* in its purest form, and show too that the audience is sympathetic to the *eiron* side.’¹⁸

Remnants of the *alazon* can be detected in the characters of George, from *The Whiteheaded Boy*, and David Shiner’s persona as both ‘the latecomer’ and ‘the commuter’ in *Fool Moon*. The *eiron* archetype is evoked by Clown Kharms in *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, and, in a way, the theatregoers drafted by Shiner to participate onstage. It may be part of Shiner’s spontaneous insight into human character (solely by exterior inspection!), that he is usually able to choose people more likely to dissemble or deprecate their theatrical ‘talents’ than those more confident.

Because most characters are denied full consciousness of the audience, they carry out deeds and spout self-assessments unaware of the accountability brought to bear by the theatre spectator. The spectator’s privileged eye on the stage world affords a vantage point for the detection of gaps between attitude and deed -- a perspective unavailable in the close quarters of real-life experience with such unaware ‘characters’. The evergreen currency of these comic types reveals a constancy in cultural inscription, if not something more deeply embedded in the organism’s survival instincts, according to Frye: ‘Comedy is designed not to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge’.¹⁹

I have chosen to mention these comic archetypes in the context of a human ‘nature’, which may have generated an essential form for joking material. Our bodied experience with each other over thousands of years still recognises these generic ways of behaving in certain situations, although in everyday life we are not likely to be fixed in one archetype or the other to the extent of a fictional character: These comic figures serve as warning (*alazon*) and model (*eiron*) for social behaviour, although it is not clear in what balance the mandate might arise out of cultural or biological desirability. Insofar as these classic types build upon a defamiliarising depiction of disparity between thought and action, they point the way to the next chapter, which examines the operation of humour with reference to the psychic wrestling match between body and consciousness.

¹⁸ Northrop Frye (1957), p. 172.

¹⁹ Northrop Frye (1949), p. 76.

4.3 BODY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

4.3.1 The 'knowing body'

Another major issue for the body of the perceiving subject, rehearsed in some way with every humorous response, occurs along the presumed fault line between mind and body. In fact, the image of a 'fault line' is useful but misleading by about half: Mind and body should not be thought of as separate, grinding tectonic plates, but viscous yet potent psychic elements entwined with one another. Their shifting engagement, however, perpetuates a primal, subterranean instability, whose consideration is essential to the spectator's reception of theatre in general and humour in particular (as it sometimes brings about the seismic disturbance called laughter).

It is not merely the case that the body is aware of the world only through consciousness, and that consciousness is present to the world only through body. The circular structure of being (cited in 1.1.2) justifies phrases like 'knowing body'²⁰ or 'bodied knowledge' to convey the sense of their mutual entailment producing something more than the seesawing sum of the two components. As bodied consciousnesses we can never perceive ourselves as wholly subject (consciousness) or object (body), but always that something more than both we call human. It is ultimately the psychic wobble caused by perceived imbalance between consciousness and body, which is handled by theatrical humour to larger and lesser extents.

The opening sequence of *70 Hill Lane* highlights just that basic ambiguity, by causing the spectator suddenly to identify subjective life (what Merleau-Ponty calls a *for-itself*) in what had previously been confirmed as a recognisably lifeless object (an *in-itself*) from the everyday world. It seems further to crystallise the interpenetrating fluidity of body and consciousness.

The lights come up on McDermott standing behind the table (described in 4.2.2), perusing a broadsheet newspaper spread upon it, and casually turning a page or two. His hands are placed in a not uncommon reading position, the tips of all 10 fingers poised at the bottom corners of the newspaper, as he peers at an article toward the top of the page. Imperceptibly, his fingers begin to push forward and centre so that as the bottom portion of the paper wrinkles together, surface tension forces the upper half to rise. The

²⁰ Gary Brent Madison (1981), p. 24.

newspaper now fans outward and upward from his hands on the table. Through pressure exerted by his fingers, McDermott steers his creation to 'face' right and then left.

What is still obviously a newspaper appears to have acquired *behaviour*, perhaps something about its top edge inclining to the side like the torso of a shy or curious person. In the spectator, the mind and body have suddenly caught a glimpse of their gestalt nature: An inanimate and unhuman-looking object becomes a 'body' by exhibiting traces of 'consciousness' -- but it is precisely through this object's exterior 'conduct' that the spectator *recognises* inner consciousness. Insofar as this moment works as humour (and it seems to, by and large), it is a joke about the sudden identification of inner life flipping our perception of brute object to fellow subject. Alongside a 'pleasure of the sign' sown through the practitioner's cleverness, there lies a subtle puncturing of human superiority over solid objects. Body-object and mind-subject are separated out to suggest the ambiguity inherent in their concurrence.

The indivisibility of body and consciousness becomes joking material for a longer sequence in which McDermott dissects his private behaviour during domestic routine. Unlike the first of the three sequences described above (see 4.2.4), in which McDermott 'plays himself', this one literally splits McDermott's subjectivity into body and consciousness, self and other.

McDermott has just finished describing his flat to the audience, when Tiplady is seen facing upstage at the front left of the platform. Tiplady mimes unlocking a door, as McDermott 'notices himself' entering the flat (this is also punctuated by a single rising note on the stringed bass). McDermott, at right on the platform, conspiratorially turns to the audience to explain, 'That's me coming in'. From here in, Tiplady represents a fictional McDermott's body, the real McDermott speaks for his extra-corporeal consciousness.

'I've been rehearsing for the show', McDermott confides, as Tiplady enters the living-room area (described in 4.2.3) with a flagging, end-of-the-day energy. He surveys the room, and McDermott's disheartened real-life voice seems to bring about the bodied change of carriage: 'Oh, God, it's a mess in here'. A convention is by now established, whereby Tiplady proceeds about his business, oblivious to McDermott's physical presence, but somehow exteriorising the consciousness being verbalised by McDermott.

Sometimes McDermott's 'stream of consciousness' registers Tiplady's perception; sometimes it attempts to exert analytical or ethical influence; and occasionally it comments aside to the audience. In at least one case he attempts humour via a clash of all three frames. Tiplady finds a computer disk in the (imaginary) morass of objects on the sofa, while McDermott supplies inner monologue: 'What's that? Oh, it's the disk, I mustn't lose

that, it's got the script in it'. Tiplady 'flops' onto the other sofa; he mimes picking up the television remote control and giving himself over to mindless channel-surfing.

As the 'body' tosses the disk onto the coffee table, the 'consciousness' says, 'I know -- I'll put that on there. That won't get lost'. Tiplady is staring vacantly at the television as he 'tosses the disk'; even as McDermott speaks the preceding thought process he brings his hands to the side of his head, looking on with a self-loathing dread. Tiplady's embodiment *outlines* an insufficient attention to a casually important action, and McDermott projects that lazy rationalisation in words and voice while with his own body indicating premonition of the disk's certain loss.

It may be noted that McDermott the performer cannot succeed in keeping voice and body on separate emotional tracks, as it were, and that toward the end of the line his physicalised trepidation bleeds into his vocal delivery. This may also be read as McDermott's persona in the here and now (with the audience) betraying judgement over his ineffectual inner force, there and then (by himself in the flat).

To typify the slightly different strategies in a sequence too long to detail:

- *Body reflects consciousness* -- McDermott's narration and Tiplady's action appear generally in tune with one another, nominating a private moment for communal authorisation. We see Tiplady (body) registering an awareness supplied by McDermott (thought), such as looking in the mirror and 'thinking': 'Phelim, you must do something about your hair -- it's ridiculous'. Tiplady underplays the exteriorisation, to expose a dryly comic disparity between psychic energy and physical embodiment.
- *Body disregards consciousness* -- Tiplady enacts the physical demands of being-in-the-world as outweighing the obligations of consciousness, voiced by McDermott. Tiplady is folded sideways onto the 'sofa' in a practiced position of telly-viewing comfort, obviously too weary to be interested in any activity short of full-scale relaxation; McDermott standing beside him, leans in with hands clasped, wooing and pleading: 'I must do some work. I promised Lee I would do some work on the script. I *will* do some work. I *will* do some work, honestly I will'. Only when the consciousness gets around to suggesting a drink, does the body register the thought with a sudden interest. The bit exhibits the body as having a mind of its own, and implies with a wink that the body's brute 'actuality' awards it pre-emptive pride of place in the psychic hierarchy.
- *Consciousness leads body* -- Cognitive power (McDermott) finally proves itself to be of some use for the gratification of physical needs (Tiplady). The bipartite onstage character 'decides' to go out for something to eat. McDermott, taking on the spirit of urgency, says: 'Where's your cash card? You had it earlier? Where is it? Come on. In

your bag?’ Tiplady has mimed rummaging through the pile on the sofa. He stands and faces out, hand poised to mouth in an attitude of puzzlement. McDermott forges ahead: ‘Pockets? Pockets?’ Tiplady pats his back pocket, ‘feels’ the card and ‘pulls’ it out. There is a return to tandem reciprocation with McDermott’s, ‘Ah, hah. Things are going well this evening’, underlined by Tiplady’s expression of satisfaction.

Tiplady ‘portrays’ the body, so to speak, with a mentally dulled *outlining* in face and bearing, as if the physical shell is low on batteries or perhaps inefficiently connected to its consciousness. Such a framing enables a comically optimum contrast of frames with McDermott’s energetic but fretful playing of inner life. The slight inflation toward either pole of being aligns with humorous technique, helping to manifest an ambiguity inherent in our moment-to-moment existence -- the clear separation allows body to belie consciousness and consciousness to become frustrated with the body’s inefficiency. In other words, the sequence achieves its humorous potency through a co-presence in the spectator of a) suspicion that the alienation between body and consciousness can at least sometimes be seen as applicable, b) a bodied knowledge that such a clear disentanglement is impossible, and c) the sly inference that the consciousness, what we presume as the seat of our humanity, is forever fighting an uphill battle against the body’s earthly limitations, but that d) consciousness can indeed be a sort of prig.

An attempt to deconstruct the elements of subjectivity may also be recalled from the fictional Daniil Kharms, split into Stage and Clown personas (and examined as such in 2.2.3 and 2.2.4). Though similar to the present ‘relationship’, Clown Kharms represents a more spiritual aspect of being and Stage Kharms interacts with his alter-ego.

The nature of this split brings to mind a reliable teaming of types for comedy, used at least in part for dramatic texts like *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. To take a further historical step back, there is something basic to this mind/body relationship even in classic comedy teams like Abbott and Costello -- one ‘character’ is considered the ‘brains’ of the duo, the other the instinctual ‘body’.

4.3.2 Emotion

Emotion is a formidable aspect of human being, and particularly central to the workings of theatre and humour. In the theatre, where we ‘watch ourselves live’, emotional involvement between stage world and spectator provides a defining point of focus for theory, from Aristotelean catharsis to Brechtian alienation. And once again, despite the insinuations of familiar (and not wholly inaccurate) terms like comic ‘distance’,

an optimum joking response draws its power from an emotional relationship with the joking material.

Merleau-Ponty doesn't seem to spend much time on the workings of emotion, and the omission strikes one as odd with reference to what most of us would consider a defining element of our lived-through humanity. He makes the passing comment that 'emotion is not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude'.²¹

In reaction to this statement, a few things seem obvious even to casual inspection:

1) His itemisation of emotions -- anger, shame, hate, and love -- reads much like a short list of Platonic ideals. No two instances of anger can be said to be purely and solely that; they cannot arise from exactly the same mix of outer influences and inner forces, nor will their bodied manifestations look precisely the same, whether in different people or the same person on different occasions. Anger must be anger *at* someone or something, suffusing body and consciousness with reference to the specific moment in time and place. A noun like 'shame' may etch for the perceiving body the generalised gist of a range of bodied states, momentarily or over a period, but emotions are much more complex and individualised in the lived-through world.

2) Although Merleau-Ponty mentions some of the more dramatic ones, the emotional life does not disappear between instances of anger, shame, hate, and love; in fact these four may be present in degrees all at the same time. The subject *always* manifests an emotional life (even though 'emotion' or 'emotional' have in mundane conversation become common coinage for the most phenomenally evident manifestations). The vacationer lounging peacefully under the setting sun on a Caribbean beach bears an emotional state just as surely as the rush-hour commuter inching through downtown traffic. There is no moment when body and consciousness can be considered devoid of a mutually affecting emotional state.

3) It is perhaps understandable that emotion is overlooked, apparently contained somehow within the body/mind gestalt. But emotion does not align wholly in the domain of either body or consciousness, yet it is always evident in both, appearing to subtend their relationship. If *body* gives us our physical presence to the world and *mind* provides us with an ongoing articulation of that presence, *emotion* manifests a function of their entwined engagement with the external world to the extent that we take it to be at the root of all 'humanness'. In the theatre, the perceiving subject's emotional response bathes bare

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964), p. 53.

act or idea in personal meaning; in the *gap to be bridged* of a joke, an emotional carriage toward at least one of the frames lays the explosive charge for approval.

Emotion is a direct function of the subject's intending toward the world, as body and mind remain ever in thrall to one another. Because the bodied/conscious state is always under the influence of the lived-through world, temporality becomes a key factor in its description. Reaction (past) and anticipation (future) refer to intentional projections by the bodied consciousness -- they suffuse the subject with an attitude or feeling toward brute phenomena with reference to their perceived impact upon its needs and desires. Emotion, then, may be seen as a sort of protective lubricant for the psyche, a fluid bearing of the body/mind continuum as it relates to temporal existence in the lived-through world. It is a function of our engagement with the world and each other, and even with ourselves, past, present and future.

When McDermott, 'embarrassed' by the enactment of his private behaviour in the previous sequence, slaps his hands to his cheeks in an angst-ridden cry of, 'Why am I like this?', he points to a feeling of self-directed frustration which we all may have had at some time. Here in the stage world a divorce is made explicit between consciousness and bodied engagement through the dyeing of each aspect in emphatic 'character' colour. It defamiliarises a plausible psychic moment, because the perceiving body and mind recognise the truth of such experience, the impossibility of such a clean psychic split *and* its ridiculous portrayal.

But this moment also lifts to our attention the element of emotion. Humour, in its thrilling efficiency, phrases in an unspoken instant the paradox we know to be true if we hold it up to internal examination: Not only is consciousness capable of regarding its own body as another's (and vice versa), but it can acquire a highly critical emotional stance toward that self/other. The question is posed almost secretly via theatrical invention. How can a misalliance of aspects unfailingly united in the same subjective package occur in a way as to rival our antagonism toward entirely other people? How is an integrated psyche *able* to cause itself such distressing emotion? Being theatrically able to separate the inseparable, the moment articulates with pre-verbal pith one of those paradoxes, to which the likely response is a wry shrug of the shoulders at the opposing truths our bodies know to lie at the heart of human nature.

As constant psychic flow, emotion cannot be claimed to disappear in the act of theatre spectating anymore than it can be expected to coincide exactly with the emotions portrayed in the stage world. Even setting aside non-performance contributions to the

spectator's emotional state -- a headache, a later engagement, a longstanding or instant dislike for the leading actor -- the theatrical frame sponsors a special 'like-my-life-but-not-my-life' stance toward the stage world, which is potentially protective and facilitating, and which is often referred to as 'distance' (see 1.3.2).

The term 'distance' is usually taken to refer to a detachment from emotion, particularly necessary for successful joking. It should be reiterated, however, that it is never the absence of emotion that is wanted, but sometimes a *tethered receding* and at the most a *redirection* from the likely stance within serious engagement (addressed in 1.4.6). What is required is not necessarily a stepping back so much as a *leaning sideways*, momentarily out of the reach of serious mode's high beams. Emotional attachment to the real-life material of the joke remains essential to its success, insofar as it exists co-presently with a temporary bracketing of first-hand implications. This, in the most troubling topics, amounts to a daring psychic trick, as it is the spectator's steadfast knowledge of the serious implications that makes the joke.

Difficult joking material would obviously involve striking at the perceiving subject's most deeply felt vulnerabilities, namely the stability and survival of its own body and mind, which are the precise guardianship of the emotions. Violence and disease, madness and torment mount direct threats to the human fortress, and therefore divine some of the most fertile ground for humour. Freud, it may be recalled (from 2.3.4), expressed admiration for humour as protector of emotion through a momentary parry of a situation's psychic weight.²²

In some treatments of this potentially threatening material, a feeling of distance may well be approximated. Broadly *outlined* comic style and an obviously playful universe expand the perceptual distance between 'real world' and its fictional depiction. Slapstick is a mode of performance humour which denies or distorts the real-life implications of violence, featuring motivation, effervescence and resiliency, and, importantly, the absence of biologically accurate consequences. It is easier for the perceiving subject to stand aloof from the real world when the spirit of playfulness remains wild and beneficent.

The punching sequence between Shiner and Irwin in *Fool Moon's* commuter routine (3.3.3) isolates and inflates the bodied reaction to an extent that the perceiving subject knows to be laughable. The performers employ a clowning vernacular to disfigure physical response in time and space, project their 'thoughts' to the spectator, and highlight

²² Sigmund Freud (1927), p. 428. 'There is no doubt that the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest'.

emotional life, which in fact carries the point of the routine. The real-life strip of experience, if expressed in another genre, could be unpleasant -- here it is ridiculous and bloodless, so concentration focuses wide of realistic consequences to the sociocultural comment on overblown egos trapped in gratuitous competition.

As shown in the 'missing penis' sequence from *Out of a house, walked a man ...* (described in 3.2.3), bold framing may place pointedly discomfiting material well beyond serious threat. Identification with a man who not only fails to 'get it up', but loses the thing entirely would be the stuff of many a male spectator's worst dreams, and not easy joking material given the influence of the sexual drive on the psyche. But the performance's mock-tragic, *commedia* style and increasing absurdity indulges the body's nightmare to such extremes that most male identities should be able to 'take the joke', and may be the better for it. (Comparisons of a man's and woman's response to this particular sequence could generate a whole chapter for a theatre-minded psychoanalyst.)²³

It would seem that what the body 'can know' and what the mind 'can think' do not always reconcile, and such is the chink in our psychic armour which gives leverage to humorous possibility. Broad *outlining* thickens the strands of physical engagement in the world to an extent the perceiving subject knows impossible; it thereby affords easy, sidelong grasp for 'laughing at' the primordial workings of body, mind or emotions. In the preceding sequences from *Fool Moon* and *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, the issues of physical violence and death are all but relieved of psychic threat through dominantly festive framing: This is violence and death in the key of life.

If, however, the stage world conjures our being closer to the way we know it in reference to these bodily threatening issues, humour's life force strikes from a darker background. An ambiguous *outlining* of joking material challenges the survival instinct head on by keeping the strands closer to real-life alignment for the serious business of

²³ It is a detour more properly taken in a thesis by some breed of social scientist, but sex historically makes for sure-fire joking material. If humour exploits the transcendent in the individual, and benefits from a strong psychic disposition toward the object of the joke, then sex is truly one of our commonest denominators as bodied subjects. As it happens, Merleau-Ponty uses 'the body in its sexual being' to demonstrate the dialectical gestalt at the crux of being-in-the-world: 'The intensity of sexual pleasure would not be sufficient to explain the place occupied by sexuality in human life or, for example, the phenomenon of eroticism, if sexual experience were not, as it were, an opportunity, vouchsafed to all and always available, of acquainting oneself with the human lot in its most general aspects of autonomy and dependence'. -- Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 167.

existence. A style invoking 'realistic' reference to survival might render any given spectator unable to *refocus* or *lean aside* due to an emotional binding of body and mind to the specific experience depicted onstage -- moments of humorous impact might demand more of a relaxed grip on psychic authorisation than the person can manage. (This could, of course, happen to any given spectator in reference to any given humorous moment, regardless of the joking material and its treatment. A person who has just lost a loved one may not be able to laugh at death in any guise.) For those who do engage favourably with this sort of humour, it emphasises Langer's momentary triumph of the life force over our indelible foreknowledge of death (described in 2.3.4), as well as Freud's psychic economy mentioned above.

4.3.3 Joking face to face with the body

John Guare's *Bosoms and Neglect* affords a telling glimpse of the torque between biological self (body), conscious self (mind), and the psychic tides that possess them (emotion). It also facilitates demonstration of the way humour is capable of relieving us, in the way Freud diagnosed, of our persistence of humanity. A human being is never purely brute thing or bare consciousness, and humour affords a momentary loosening of the 'serious', survivalist grip they maintain on one another. The adjustment infers an alternate bearing for emotion, which is not quite the 'detachment' or 'distance' often claimed. It might be considered a stretching to accommodate co-present, ambivalent perspectives, and can be studied best in a stage world for which body and mind come under harsh and realistic threat.

In the Signature Theatre Company's 1998 New York production of the 1979 play, the stage world is couched design-wise in subtly skewed angles and ripe, pastel colours. To the spectator's left is a bay window, forced out of perspective; a plush sofa at centre-right and a black mahogany desk to its upstage right add to the impression of the well-appointed Manhattan apartment to be identified in the dialogue. The imitation hardwood floor slants slightly toward the downstage corner near the window. Stacks of books can be seen on the desk and on the floor near the sofa and window. A sheer white drape hangs across the back; shortly after the play begins, it is whisked away to reveal five wall units of full bookshelves which pick up the off-kilter feeling of the foreground set.

To a dreamily inspecific sound cue of piano cacophony, tinged with urban street noise, the lights come up on Scooper (David Aaron Baker) lying in some sort of discomfort on the sofa; Deirdre (Katie Finneran) sits cross-legged upon the window seat. After a fitful few exchanges between them -- Deirdre is urging Scooper to try to talk about something, though the naive spectator could not identify more than a

psycho-physical agony on his part -- Henny (Mary Louise Wilson), Scooper's 83-year-old blind mother, comes through the curtain to the spectator's downstage left. She is spewing vaguely coherent song lyrics, stepping side to side like an agitated bird.

The spectator is hurled into the midst of a high-pitched, ambiguous genre frame, but one aspect of the stage world appears obvious: Real-life gravity of pain and fear are present and in force. Scooper's line, 'I found a doctor who makes house calls', serves as a bridge between the 'present' we first entered upon and a second 'present' pried open by Henny's arrival. Scooper relates alternately to Deirdre and Henny, but the two women don't appear to be part of the same present tense: Scooper is both reliving an incident with his mother and describing it to Deirdre. The pace has a frantic urgency, the pauses and overlaps of naturalistic conversation sliced away, as are any transitional lags between time frames.

Wilson as Henny, wears a flowered nightgown and pink slippers, a wiry agitation possesses her body; she conveys sightlessness through 'two huge blank eyes brimming with need',²⁴ aimed just above the audience, but constantly adjusting toward the source of her sons's voice. Baker as Scooper, is a nice-looking man in his late 30s, given a sort of intellectual guise by eyeglasses, soft green suit and tie. He shows an anxious concern for his mother, his feet and attention fitfully stepping forward and back. Finneran, also in her 30s, fulfills the script's call for her as 'beautiful', dressed in white blouse and cream skirt, long blond hair piled in a bun. The main interaction between Scooper and Henny, being conveyed to Deirdre in retrospect, involves a medical emergency suspected by Scooper and denied by Henny.

Scooper proffers a jar with one hand, apparently trying to coax Henny into producing a urine sample for the doctor's inspection. Though standing in one spot, she uses any means possible to block him out. He says, 'Don't go screaming and crying and shaking so hard. He can't get a look at you if you're screaming and crying and shaking so hard. I told him it burns when you pee. I told him it's probably cystitis. Don't close your ears and hum' (which she is doing all the while).

Finally, Henny blurts, 'My bladder fell out', and Scooper, keeping pace, directs his next line to Deirdre:

'This magic doctor says, "What does this mean, her bladder fell out?" I said, "That's what she says, her bladder fell out".'

Henny immediately repeats the admission to Scooper: 'My bladder fell out'.

²⁴ Well captured by Michael Feingold (1998).

Despite and because of the intensity of the scene about an elderly woman's discovery of long-neglected breast cancer, the frame feeling makes room for humour. Agitation is *outlined* at such a pitch that blurs the parameters of realistic behaviour and comic mania. The pace is heightened and the conversational agility appears too nimble to be taken as 'seriously' real. Such mundanely antagonistic conversations between these cultural stereotypes -- read as 'New York City mothers and sons' -- very often signal humorous intent by definition.

The sudden utterance, 'My bladder fell out', sounds laughable in its vernacular phrasing of a biologically unlikely event, especially coming from the lips of a childlike elderly woman. Heightened repetition acts as a signal for humour, capable of pre-empting otherwise serious material (Bergson's 'machine' dictum embodied in linguistic patterns). The successive readings of the four 'bladder' lines bounce among different framings: Henny's pathetic confession is undercut by Scooper's removal of the event to he-said/I-said narration, which is in turn juxtaposed by Henny's urgent self-echo. The sequence clearly projects a serious episode upon the perceiving subject, but the phenomenal rendering evokes comic form in its four quick repetitions. Wilson vocalises Henny's crusty aggressiveness with a Queens (a borough of New York) accent, which automatically supplies a nasal blare. Her defensive ripostes mix a bluntness with innocence (and both attributable to octogenarians and infants), packing the kind of plain-speaking wallop that humour adores.

Henny finally accepts the jar from Scooper and, feeling its size, fires off a defensive accusation: 'You'd have to be a contortionist to fit on this. What's wrong with you?' This moment takes the form of a 'time out' from the surrounding urgency; a home medical routine, usually executed in private, clashes with bodied sense-making to produce a foolishly bizarre mental image. We may be laughing at Henny's naiveté, but the joke also offers a provisional critique of the procedure's demeaning implications, especially for an old and frightened woman. Such momentary diversion from the main sense of threat keeps joking permission within reach for more ominous material.

A few minutes later, the spectator is still not clear on the specifics of the 'real' problem Henny is describing -- if there is one. Scooper has discovered a carton of tampons. Henny, still raving, says, 'It bleeds and bleeds and I put Kotex over it and stand in front of the window all night in the dark looking up waving a statue of Saint Jude over it so it'll dry by the morning. ...' In performance, the words pile out of the actress' mouth as steadily and tautly as her breath will allow. The conversation flails toward communication, with Henny always choosing to stop short of meaningful disclosure:

HENNY It started that day.

SCOOPER What started that day?

HENNY The skin broke that day.

SCOOPER Skin where?

HENNY It's not important.

SCOOPER What skin broke?

HENNY I can deal with this. My Kotex and Saint Jude and I are very happy. I don't have to pee. If I can just work it so I don't have to pee, I'm all right.

What appears on the page like a verbal chase scene, careening between farce and tragedy, shows us in lived-through performance a mind/body subject aware of its own creeping destruction. High emotions manifest a turbulent whirlpool of bodied and cognitive behaviour, as in the above fragment: Henny sidles to the edge of serious revelation concerning her condition, then leaps sideways. Her bodied state remains bound to crisis -- she is trying to 'make sense'. But the incongruous alignment of 'Kotex', 'Saint Jude' and 'I' is likely to burst upon the spectator as bizarrely comic, thrown by the phrase, 'are very happy', into an unexpected human-relationship framing. Her leap to 'I don't have to pee' and the ensuing unrealisable proposition continues the vein of frantic, grotesque unintelligibility.

This moment does *not* relieve the gravity of the situation for the authorised subject, with Henny emulating Freud's criminal by adopting a sunny aplomb on the way to the gallows. It is not reframed as a kind of 'time out' from seriousness in the manner of the above 'contortionist' line, or for the mini-sequence in *Twenty Grand*, when Hackett and his son stop in the midst of a blood bath for a stylistic aside to discuss the lad's professional progress (see 2.2.1). In the above sequence from *Bosoms and Neglect*, the potentially humorous utterances emerge as direct manifestations of the situation's heightening severity, so that Henny's fear and past pain plus the seriousness of her condition remain 'face to face' with the perceiving body in the audience.

It should be obvious that no two laughs can be precisely the same, owing to the internal potion of time, place, mood, material, form, execution, even the laughing subject's progress through life experience. Notice here, though, the likely difference in the quality of laughter in such life-and-death stage worlds. One can intuit a defiant, relief-oriented laughter at the 'time-out' model, an eruption of the audience as body. For 'face-to-face' joking, no escape is sanctioned -- the laughter may yearn for defiance and relief but stops irresolutely short under the harsh gaze of mortality; audience laughter may be more ragged as it is less sure of itself in each individual bodied consciousness.

Truly, we may fail to laugh at jokes that strike ‘too close to home’ at some point in our lives, unable to maintain a playful framework around sensitive emotional material. But Frijda rephrases humour’s bisociation as key to a certain kind of emotional coping: ‘Serious events are divested of part of their seriousness by discerning features that include them in a different context. ... They do not deny, avoid, or diminish personal involvement, but give it a double implication, by discerning both implications in the events.’²⁵ If the preceding sequence ‘works’ upon the spectator, it probably does so because the performance constellation has adjusted the style of the stage world a couple of shades wide of realistic ‘true north’. This, of course, opens a portal to joking perspective upon material that has trouble shedding its psychic weight.

Several lines later, the above stage world exerts powerful effect by, in effect, executing a ‘serious’ mood flip or *anti-reversal* -- the sudden, unexpected repeal of joking perspective. The sequence’s seriousness has been tempered through a flow of threatening material regulated by a style skewed by humour-friendly characterisation and pacing. The following is a continuation from the last line cited above:

SCOOPER (to Deirdre) The doorbell rang. (*quickly, to Henny, change of tone*)
He’s here. The doctor is here.

HENNY Send him away.

SCOOPER We’ll hold you down and strip you and find this incident.

HENNY It feels better. Go away.

SCOOPER What skin broke?

HENNY (*agitation level climbs too high and she relents*) Oh God. Here.

With the last word, Henny, facing upstage, pulls aside the lapels of her robe. Scooper is literally knocked back a step by shock and horror. The revelation is perhaps made more severe in the spectator’s imagination by Henny’s following speeches, which begin, ‘It doesn’t look so bad. Does it?’ She proceeds in a vein of runaway chatter that might previously have provoked laughter, but now garishly *outlines* that human coping device of trying to suppress fear through forced bonhomie. The panicked build-up and sudden halt parallel the rhythm of a comic *setup* and *reversal*. Surely the sudden exposure of her breasts by an elder mother to her adult son will stop people short. But Baker’s/Scooper’s jaw-dropping reaction suddenly yanks the palette of representation toward the starkly real, and any alternative humorous view is stylistically revoked. One of

²⁵ Nico Frijda (1986), p. 437.

the most bodily powerful effects humour has at its disposal is its sudden evacuation, imparting a psychic whiplash which the abrupt absence of laughter in the auditorium corroborated in performance.

Humour, most notably in such sequences as the preceding, may provide some of the most convincing proof -- philosophically if not scientifically -- that one is likely to find in favour of Merleau-Ponty's circularity of structure for the body. The spectator perceives a schism between body and consciousness at odds with its bodied knowledge; with emotion tricked out of position humour is enabled. But a sudden change of house rules allows emotion to reassert its usual grip -- body and consciousness snap back toward alignment for sudden immersion in real-life consequences.

4.3.4 Mind games

Elsewhere in *Bosoms and Neglect*, it is consciousness which might be seen under attack. The stage world is driven by a tragicomic engagement with psycho-emotional instability in the urban upwardly mobile, played out in the first act between Scooper and Deirdre. The two characters have just met in a bookstore on a blistering summer morning. They find themselves drawn together not only sexually, but through the deeper bond of sharing the same psychiatrist. Both characters appear to be fighting battles below the surface of respectable exteriors -- he's a computer analyst, she's a book buyer. Baker gives Scooper a jittery, sweaty furtiveness and an almost adolescent sincerity in his voice. Finneran's statuesque Deirdre speaks in creamy tones, but quirky tremors in her sleek surface suggest that she lives under constant threat of an inner unravelling.

Deirdre and Scooper frequently compare their respective neuroses, as if each is testing with a wary combination of hope and dread which of them is the bigger psychological mess. In an early stretch of conversation, Scooper says he is in analysis, and Deirdre, with a snobbish relief, says, 'I couldn't talk to you if you were just in therapy'. (This reframing of psychotherapy to an elitist pecking order most likely is willingly accepted for joking intent by a New York audience.)

Later, the subject comes up again, in reference to the frequency of their psychoanalytic sessions:

SCOOPER How many days a week?

DEIRDRE Five.

SCOOPER How many years?

DEIRDRE Eight.

SCOOPER (*with deep understanding and a bit of awe*) You must be very sick.

DEIRDRE (*pride and reciprocal interest, a shakiness beneath*) How long for you?

SCOOPER Six.

DEIRDRE How many days a week?

SCOOPER The three I see you.

DEIRDRE Oh, therapy. You're only in therapy.

SCOOPER I'm in analysis.

DEIRDRE (*virtual eruption of arrogant ridicule, a giddiness still underlying*)

Three days a week? Gerber's Baby Food analysis. On the other hand, we have me! Five days a week! Depths of my psyche! Sonar waves into my soul! Psychic barium cocktails.

The above sequence picks up in the midst of a rapid-exchange section, performed with an increasing competitive intensity primed for humour. In the last speech, Deirdre flattens her opponent with the barrage of hit-and-run, hyperbolic images, which mark a rhythmic peak and plateau for release of audience laughter.

Scooper then regroups and reassesses, as a light begins to dawn:

SCOOPER Wait. You go early in the morning.

DEIRDRE Gallop straight from my dreams to the couch.

SCOOPER Oh, I know what you're in.

DEIRDRE Doctor can't wait to start off his day with a high.

SCOOPER You're in supportive analysis.

DEIRDRE Deep classical.

SCOOPER You're one of those sad neurotics who have to go first thing in the morning just to get enough courage --

DEIRDRE What Beethoven is to the sonata, I am to the couch!

SCOOPER -- just to get through the day.

The scene, in writing and performance, bisociates the seriousness of mental fragility with a frame in which a famous fictional detective might finally piece together the dark secret which flushes a confession from the master criminal. Finneran's performance cross-frames triumphalist pride with an incipient psychic crumbling; Baker acts the revelation as both vindicating and horrifying, with dashes of admiration and relief. The preceding sequence, which has more twists and turns than I need bother articulate, should give some impression of the stage world's humour toward consciousness. Although the joking intent would not be difficult to perceive for most Western audiences, maximum appreciation of this material calls for more than passing awareness of a stereotypically neurotic yuppie New Yorker.

As this section of my study focuses on the perceiving subject in the theatre, the critical response from New York reviewers marks out a fair and informative range of reception with reference to a Model Spectator's reading and authorisation of the stage

world. Reviews appear to have been predominately favourable, if sometimes barely tipped toward the positive. The production was uniformly preferred to the two previous New York incarnations, in 1979 and 1986. Overall assessment varied from ‘a small masterpiece of modern tragicomedy’ in the *Village Voice*, to a qualifiedly ‘entertaining’ evening in the *New York Times*. Most reviewers gave a slight edge either to Baker’s or Finneran’s performance, though all lauded Wilson’s and director Nicholas Martin’s work. Guare was awarded a respectful minimum to enthusiastic maximum of credit for his script. Notably, the overall reaction to play and production often was guided by the reviewer’s specific response to the plot line between the two younger characters.

Again, my intention, here, is not to conduct a gratuitous survey of press reviews. I have in this particular case, tried to call attention to an interesting pattern of perceptions outside my own. The responses are remarkably unanimous in their ecstatic admiration for Wilson’s performance. As I have demonstrated above and will return to below, hers is a trunkline of the play which, through some marriage of writing and performance, simultaneously touches and tickles to the painful core of the perceiving body. Several critics felt that the production didn’t quite ‘come alive’ until the second act, which is primarily an extended scene between Scooper and Henny in the hospital. As one reviewer wrote, it is only then that writing and performance ‘suddenly coalesce into a shattering image of human suffering and isolation, and the play etches itself woundingly, and lastingly, on the heart as well as the funny bone’.²⁶

As I’ve already noted, most disagreement crops up in opinions toward the psycho-emotional conflict between Deirdre and Scooper. The more accusatory voices seem to have perceived the stage world as two acts which may skirt the same territory but do not fuse satisfactorily. It is recognised, with various degrees of approval, that ‘Guare is walking a fine line between humor of mental breakdown -- the kind of zany quality that we mean by a word like “madcap” -- and the torment that lies inside it’.²⁷ This comment by Fintan O’Toole may provide a clue, if nothing more conclusive to the divergence.

The first-act humour ridicules the late-20th-century Manhattan subculture of psychoanalytic dependency (along with pop-intellectual literature). Such humour is levelled at obsession with self and psychoanalytic therapy as a sort of white-collar badge of heroic ordeal for people who have no worries of physical or economic survival. It can, in fact, be identified as a comic style in its own right. Within the writing can be identified rapid jerks toward incongruity and exaggeration which seem a little too contrived to be

²⁶ Charles Isherwood (1998).

²⁷ Fintan O’Toole (1998).

transcriptions of life. The acting might be seen to simulate a caricatured instability in movement or vocal quality, producing now-familiar signals for comic intent, as seen, for example, in the films of Woody Allen. This is not necessarily undesirable, as all performances were commended to some extent. But such readings of the younger characters are less likely to foster authorisation for the perceiving subject-at-large. In this case, I would describe it as distance either from believability or interest, and apparently a distance too far for some of the critical consciousnesses to bridge.

Not so in response to Henny, whose comic turmoil appears anchored somewhere deeper in her humanity than the younger characters'. Her mind and emotions are under constant assault from within and without; but her body, old, blind and cancerous, and at the same time feisty and resilient proposes an extraordinary subject for the spectator's audition. Henny/Wilson *outlines* something of the needy and valiant at the unprotectable core of human being. Humour is a key note in her character because of generic qualifications for comedy she carries (see 4.3.7). Henny/Wilson's specific psychic gumbo, juggled ambiguously between the real and theatrical, defies the holistic alignment for which it desperately yearns. Schisms among body, consciousness and emotion are *outlined* in such a way that allows them to read as playfully incongruous to the perceiving body and at the same time unsettlingly 'knowable'. I would suggest that if she touches a wider audience it is because she is built to exert a broader pull upon bodied understanding than what appears to be the more limited appeal of 'shrink humour' enacted by the other two. Henny/Wilson constitutes a remarkable aesthetic object for further discussion about humour aimed point blank at the bodied consciousness.

4.3.5 Perverse reversals

Some of the largest comic responses come out of moments in which Henny lashes out from a palpable anguish, far from the stuff of festive humour. The second act shows Scooper and Henny in her hospital room. She's under assessment for the festering cancer revealed in the prologue; he was stabbed in a violent episode at the end of Act I, but Henny doesn't know he is a patient rather than a devoted visitor. They are locked in Oedipal combat, during which he grills his mother about her previous 15 years of suicide attempts. It gradually appears that he is steering her toward finishing the job once and for all, a way of freeing both of them from their earthly torments.

The scene turns quietly tender, with Scooper perched on the edge of Henny's bed, his head curled down conspiratorially toward hers. He urges her attention to the sleeping pills in the table drawer, and a tenuous peace starts to take hold of her face as she seems to resign and galvanise herself to the task.

The softness of the interlude does not rule out a bittersweet gallows humour at this ostensible goodbye scene. Scooper looks around the room, then surreptitiously hands Henny the vial of pills:

SCOOPER Ma?

HENNY Are these the pills?

SCOOPER I loved you.

HENNY Is this our scene?

SCOOPER We'll give each other a hold. (*He begins to take her in his arms.*)

HENNY Don't do that. It hurts.

The fourth line in the above is a reference to Scooper's earlier disclosure of the 'death-bed' declaration of love to his father. The quality of humour remains gently disposed toward Henny's anti-emotional version of vulnerability. Likewise, the sixth line is delivered as a quiet but firm motherly chastisement. It overlays the extreme seriousness of the woman's bodily discomfort with an everyday behavioural pattern.

Scooper comforts and reassures his mother over the ensuing exchanges. 'Still. Quiet', he coos. '350-2219', Henny says, as if to impart some final wisdom. 'That's the butcher. He delivers. If you ever want anything delivered'. '350-2219', Scooper repeats, with respectful understanding. The two characters now treat one another with far more warmth and equanimity than they have previously. The implications of their play spirit within the dire fictional circumstances makes their interaction uncharacteristically endearing, as if a hard-won move toward familial redemption. In its diversion to a mundane pragmatism in one's last mortal words (everyone *knows* how hard it can be to find a good butcher who delivers), is this a real-life strip of events or comic 'deformation'? The ambiguity makes for a sweetly 'affective' humour.

It is hard to replicate in words the full path and sense of a 'winding down' through the many moments of performance. The farewell scene appears to be coming to an end with the following stretch of dialogue -- Scooper kneels by the bed, his face almost next to Henny's, which is face up on the pillow:

SCOOPER I loved you.

HENNY I loved your father.

SCOOPER Thank you. That's important to know.

HENNY I love you.

SCOOPER Goodbye.

HENNY You sure you'll light a lot of candles for me?

SCOOPER (*tender and reassuring*) They'll see the glow in Helena, Montana.

HENNY (*a bittersweet recollection*) When I was a little girl, I dreamed of being a great actress and I would change my name to Helena Montana.

SCOOPER Your own name is all right.

HENNY Goodbye.

SCOOPER Goodbye.

A poignant frame is strongly in force, inclusive of the aforementioned wry humour, as the pace relaxes. If the scene continues in its present framing, Henny now will swallow a fistful of pills, wash them down with the a glass of water and be on her way to wherever. What happens, however, is that Henny suddenly sits bolt upright, flinging the pills across the room and bleating, 'You rotten little shit! Do you think they're going to let me bring killer pills in here? These are for my gas. You'd have done it? You'd have let me die?'

Scooper is hurled to the floor at the foot of the bed by the shock wave from her explosion. He blurts back, 'Take these pills!' Henny yells for the nurse. (Baker as) Scooper steps to the (imaginary) door to assure the (unseen) people in the hall that the patient was merely dreaming. He returns to Henny, his face screwed into a mask of passionate frustration, and pronounces, 'I want you dead!' (Wilson as) Henny returns to a more matter-of-fact vocal tone, grumbling to no one in particular, 'God help me if I get gas in this hospital', and tosses away the empty vial.

The sudden U-turn taken by the performance fabric cannot be sufficiently recovered, nor can all the levels of humorous *gap*-bridging even be approached through methodical unravelling -- the moment is too climactic, too overdetermined, and too knotted up with highly personal dispositions toward death, family and identity. There are issues of suicide, euthanasia and, I suppose, murder; of bodily mortality in general; of final farewells (whether you're the one living or dying); and of the inferences for cataclysmic hostility beneath the touching goodbyes -- these would be broad categories for survival-oriented identification by body, mind and emotion in the perceiving subject. Humour strategies bent on pulling the psyche away from seriousness would be comprised of the usual: sudden radical frame switches in subject matter, performative style, emotional mood; undercutting of serious concerns, especially through blunt linguistic style and bodily functions seen as ludicrous, like 'gas'; ordinary behavioural patterns imposed upon extraordinary events, and vice versa; shrewd orchestration of a situation we think will lead to death, and the increasing need for relief in the perceiving subject.

There is, in any case, an undeniable peak response from the audience in the wake of Henny's outburst. The sequence amounts to an expertly played, somewhat dirty trick on the perceiving subject, who is led down a garden path of sentimental framing, the more effectively to be tripped up by its sudden obliteration. We are asked to 'feel' for both

mother and child in an archetypal episode of the life cycle -- Scooper seeks some last-minute measure of redemption for a lifetime of emotional torture, and Henny appears to be going along quietly. The early joking adds to a storybook grace for the scene, all of which is booted out the window as Henny claims what can easily be reframed as the ultimate, heartless betrayal by her own flesh and blood. Scooper, for his part, reverses upon the expected repentance by declaring with comparably inappropriate directness, 'I want you dead!'

Compare the tones of humour before and after Henny's outburst (the prime *reversal*). The playwright has set up a situation in which the sentimental favourite, emotional reparation, is rejected in favour of life-affirming dysfunction shouted from the rooftops. This involves an inspired mingling of serious material and humorous technique: The switch is not a merely technical sleight-of-frame manoeuvre to keep the spectator off balance (as in *Fool Moon*, 3.2.2). It *counts* on the underlying world's integrity so that the hostile behaviour points back to its presence beneath the touching farewells.

Generically (and therefore culturally), this turn of events is grossly improper. It is an unmasking from a comic situation in a different play, but which 'shouldn't' happen between a blind, cancer-ridden mother and her only son. Yet there may be the unacknowledged, dirty little secret about human nature elbowing the perceiving subject from the *gap* to be bridged. Writer and performance may have succeeded in manufacturing a skirmish between the body's contradictory inscriptions, showing something of the way in which a strip of experience cannot be disengaged from its theatrical positioning. The perceiving body is seduced toward laughter, which feels vaguely 'inappropriate', and possibly that bit more delightful for it. Blau advises: 'About any audience one must ask not only what they are likely to see and respond to but what they are likely to overlook and resist'.²⁸ This brand of comic attack underscores both of those impulses simultaneously in a single perceptual 'beat'.

The sequence was remarked upon by more than one reviewer, to the effect that, 'it's a sick little moment that couldn't be more hilarious.'²⁹ Cresting audience laughter usually attests to an astute orchestration of performance rhythm and escalation toward relief. But as I mentioned earlier (2.3.3), it often points to some unusually strong psychic investment in the joking material, especially when it reflects proscribed or otherwise daring ground for playful treatment. Humour cannot succeed *entirely* through generic chicanery. Regardless of sudden remorse once the psychic triumvirate close ranks,

²⁸ Herbert Blau (1990), p. 203.

²⁹ Sam Whitehead (1998).

laughter acknowledges some fissure of approval for a debasement or devaluation. Therein lies a hint of humour's greatest potency, perhaps capable of telling the perceiving subject something it never knew about its own thoughts and feelings.

4.3.6 Stretching the psychic fabric

Within the sequence described above, comes a painful moment, one of the closest in the play to humour that couldn't possibly be funny. Scooper is confronting Henny with the gritty facts of her medical condition, following her emergency admittance to hospital. This is visibly troubling territory for her, but she suddenly seems resigned to receiving the information. Scooper sits on the edge of the bed, speaking in a gentle but unflinching tone:

SCOOPER In spite of everything, you were in remarkable health. He said the cancer --
 HENNY I hate that word. (*speaking half to herself, she closes her eyes*)
 SCOOPER -- could take ten years till it got you.
 HENNY Ten years? (*still quietly, as if to confirm she heard correctly*)
 SCOOPER Ten years.
 HENNY (*her eyes pop wide open, her voice resounding with something akin to belligerent disbelief*) Ten years! You gotta be joking: ten more years of this?

In performance, any audience laughter has an anguished quality. It is another one of those moments which seems to evoke an impossible co-presence of desolation and mirth. The enacted behaviour is genuine. We are suddenly given a heart-rending glimpse into a bodied, psychic pain that makes life an unbearable burden. But the utterance is just that bit from another, more ordinary frame. Henny reacts to news which might initially be seen as a lengthy reprieve in a register more suited to haranguing the checkout clerk at the supermarket over the exorbitant price of tomatoes. Such a pugnacious utterance in the service of self-depleting sorrow wrenches the perceiving body in opposite directions, though it elicits no small amount of laughter.

There are many reasons people laugh at presumably unsuitable joking material. The spectator may unilaterally apply a joking frame before feeling the graver implications (if, for example, it has lingered in the perceiving consciousness from a previous sequence). And, of course, as shown in 4.3.2, comic performance vocabulary can conduct the most serious material to a safe context for amusement.

In the above scene, though, the practitioner achieves something remarkable for the perceiving body by inveigling the spectator to laugh at authenticated human suffering. The effect recalls aspects of Luigi Pirandello's prescription for humour and Mikhail Bakhtin's

laughter at the grotesque. ‘Comedy’, claims Pirandello, is taken up by ‘*perception of the opposite*’. In his famous example, we catch a glimpse of the young girl that the old woman so desperately has tried to become by ‘dolling herself up’, and we laugh at the ridiculous gap between the images. It is, however, the ‘*feeling of the opposite*’, an empathy derived from emotional reflection upon what *causes* the poor woman to behave so, which constitutes the more desirable achievement of ‘humour’. Genuine humour, Pirandello says, makes one feel as though suspended between forces: ‘I feel like laughing, and I do laugh, but my laughter is troubled and obstructed by something that stems from the representation itself.’³⁰

Bakhtin in turn calls upon the image of the ‘laughing hags’ (old women, again!), senile and pregnant, to express a defining ambivalence in the grotesque. It simultaneously celebrates and ridicules the bodied presences of all subjective consciousness: ‘The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life’.³¹ There may be an interesting monograph to be written, pursuing Merleau-Ponty’s ‘reversible’ relationship between body and world alongside Bakhtin’s ‘grotesque body’, with its stress on the apertures and convexities that open it to the outside world, that is ‘the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it’.³² I have concluded, however, that the detour would not pertain directly enough to my trunk arguments for present exploration.

Laughing and crying are often portrayed as adjoining responses, rather than polarised behaviours. During the second act of *Bosoms and Neglect*, Scooper is shown to be no match for Henny in the emotional grappling between mother and son. Her quirky world view and acid tongue parry his every thrust at sensible communication. Scooper reveals that the man he has been observed visiting regularly is not a lover, but his psychiatrist. Henny reacts with shamed revulsion, and Scooper can’t believe his ears:

SCOOPER You’d rather I were homosexual than had to go to a doctor?

HENNY There’s nothing sick in being homosexual.

SCOOPER But going to a psychiatrist?

HENNY That’s sick. (*at which Scooper bursts into laughter*) I love to hear you laugh. When you laugh, the world’s back in place. Laughter! That’s the best medicine! Laughter! Doctors know that’ll put them out of business. Laugh, Scooper.

³⁰ Luigi Pirandello (1960), p. 117-18.

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), p. 62.

³² Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), p. 26.

Beneath Henny's speech, however, Scooper's laughter has dissolved into tears, his face buried in his hands out of resigned misery. The laughter and its disappearance are loaded in terms of character, relationship and the irony of Henny's paean to its psychoanalytic benefits. A passing of 'laughter into tears' represents a standard comic bit. The moment coheres only because the perceiving body 'understands' humour's precarious balance in certain situations, with the possibility that defamiliarising incongruity recedes to leave only the pathetic undertow of feeling.

It may misshape Pirandello's and Bakhtin's concepts to force too close a connection with each other and my argument. I do, however, sense a related salute to the doubled perspective humour constructs through bisociation, and its potentially conflicting connections to the bodied subject. Much humour affords a momentary escape, then returns us to everyday alignment within the serious world. But once in a great while, perhaps tricked for an instant into looking askance upon material the bodied subject holds too dear, humour may stretch the psychic fabric in some new way, so as to leave it irrevocably altered from its previous state. As Pirandello, Bakhtin and Guare may have intuited, this lifts it from status as a tool for relief, distraction or correction. Humour may sometimes work more profoundly upon human being to expand its psychic wherewithal.

4.3.7 The trickster

Before moving on, I shall say a few insufficient words about the trickster figure -- insufficient because they propose another potential transcendence for theatrical humour, while merely kicking the door open upon a room worthy of its own full-length study. Preliminary inspection intimates that an archetypal trickster does indeed transcend cultural barriers, situating itself at the confluence of tensions between self/other and mind/body.

Anthropologist Mahadev L. Apte has traced the trickster across cultures in North America, Oceania, South Asia, and Africa. Although loathe to force a connection between folkloric figures in prose narratives and theatrical performance, I can't help but notice in the trickster -- sometimes called 'fool', 'clown' or 'buffoon' -- a tension between bodied spirit and social constraint, which we have seen lie at the constant heart of humour. Apte describes tricksters as driven entirely by the body's self-gratification to the abject disregard of Other and social unit at large. They appear to possess qualities applicable to *both* hero and buffoon:

'Most tricksters are pranksters and are primarily egotistical. They are powerful, clever, selfish, cruel, deceitful, cunning, and sly. They are also

boastful, foolish, lazy, and ineffective. They have no control over their basal desires and seek instant gratification. They are infantile, inordinate, lack restraint, and ignore social responsibilities. Tricksters are prone to blunder and have no ability to distinguish between good and evil, between themselves and others, and between objects and organisms.³³

Jung goes so far as to base the dichotomous impulses on spiritual terms, characterising the trickster as 'subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being'.³⁴ It should seem obvious to the most reluctant armchair psychologist that this archetypal creature embodies juxtapositions drawing upon psychic elements considered alternately desirable, unavoidable, vicariously fulfilling and socially destructive.

In theatrical terms, David Shiner's 'latecomer' persona in *Fool Moon* (described in 1.4.4) can be seen to instigate conflicting humour responses evocative of the trickster's ambivalent appeal. It can be characterised as self-centred, spiteful and rigid yet resourceful, daring and chameleonlike.

Shiner's body is entirely real, of course, in its phenomenal actuality. At the same time it resists and exaggerates conventional interaction with the world; his body is the same as the spectator's, yet disruptive toward the 'known' rules of engagement. Shiner's sleight-of-frame technique for juggling frames to comic effect (discussed in 3.2.3) amounts to a trickster-like strategy for destabilising the spectator's disposition as it relates to the individual v the social group. The audience laugh *at* his obnoxious and failed attempts to procure a seat, but *with* his nerve in showering a taunting patron with popcorn. Both of these 'roles' in one character construct a remarkable subject for the spectator's authorisation, affording near-simultaneous ridicule of blatantly antisocial behaviour and endorsement for the flouting of social taboo.

Henny, in *Bosoms and Neglect*, represents a remarkable embodiment of the trickster figure in body and spirit. Wilson's performance embraces a vulnerable tenacity in voice and movement. The 'character' is brittle and capricious, feeble and indestructible, needy and rebellious. In theatre performance, this unstable melange of features translates into a sure-fire mix of comic qualifications: Elderly characters often have a crusty candour to them; so do blind ones, who are generally assumed to have clearer 'vision' than the seeing-unimpaired. These perceived 'strikes' against Henny's mortality should make spontaneous upsurges of spirit feel all the more triumphant to the perceiving subject.

³³ Mahadev L. Apte (1985), p. 227.

³⁴ C.G. Jung (1954), p. 143.

She is evasive one minute and guileless the next, always comically embellished by her anti-intellectual regional dialect and blaring tone.

But Henny/Wilson adds up to more than a clever comic creation, the tricksterish presence of the wild card in the stage world's deck. She is very much a product of her bodied state, driven by quintessentially irreconcilable human needs, in turn admirable and intolerable and both at the same time. Henny appears impervious to the slings and arrows of infirmity and dysfunction. Do we feel sorry or envious or proud, and what are the implications for the perceiving individual/human?

Henny's droll inscrutability as trickster is captured in a definitive image at the end of the play, during a monologue delivered from her hospital bed. Henny thinks Scooper is listening from a nearby chair, and that she is finally unburdening herself of the story that will mend their emotional bridges once and for all -- as it happens, he has left the room, and so there is no one to hear but the audience.

The monologue describes a romantic disappointment from long ago. As a poor Irish Catholic girl from Manhattan, the young Henny had been deemed unsuitable by the Quaker mother of her beloved Don, forcing them on to separate life paths. Years later, married out of desperation, but finally with a baby son, she made the three-hour train journey from New York to Boston to confront her former beau and show him what he had passed up. She contrived to be waiting outside his office at lunchtime, with child in tow:

'I wanted it to seem like I had just bumped into him, act casual, show him how great my life was, show off my beautiful child that was not his. And I saw him and I loved him so much. And after we said hellos and fancy meeting you and acted surprised, I picked you up to show him what he missed and instead I hit him with you. Because he wasn't your father. Because he hadn't trusted me. Because I hadn't meant enough to him. I kept hitting him with you, pushing your face into his, till I realized your nose was bleeding.' (*monologue continues for several more minutes*)

In performance the feeling is one of intimate denouement, a momentous postscript to two hours of overwrought conflict. Stage light has narrowed for this closing speech, which Wilson delivers as a long-awaited confession, picking through and savouring details while re-arguing her case nearly 40 years later. Leading up to the climax cited above, she seems transfixed by her own semi-tragic fate. By the time she reaches, 'I kept hitting him with you', her face is still, her voice quivering under the emotional weight as tears glisten on the rims of her eyes. The image has, in fact, been planted much earlier in the play, in a

dream that Scooper is trying to decipher with Deirdre's help. He sees himself as a little boy, all dressed up and in a strange city. He is facing a strange man:

SCOOPER And my mother who is all dolled up --

DEIRDRE A new beginning?

SCOOPER Picks me up and begins hitting this man with me.

DEIRDRE Using you as a weapon?

SCOOPER And she's screaming, 'You neglected me! You neglected me!'

Taken as a neurotic man's dream, this first time around, it creates an amusingly odd image the spectator can cross-reference with pat Freudian avenues of interpretation. But explained in somehow believable and heart-rending fashion as the stage world's final revelation, it strikes a variety of overlapping chords that might include the following and more: the risibility of the vision; a sort of exaggerated brutality in using one's child as a club for the release of adult anger; the painful mythologising of an unhappy psyche; the pathetic impotence of a life-defining act; recognition of a cleverly played trick on reception in the 'real' explanation of the previously 'surreal'; the acknowledged artifice that nearly all darker stage worlds count on for humour.

Henny's disclosure, 'I picked you up to show him what he missed and instead I hit him with you', does bring chuckles in its sudden skid toward the inappropriate -- relief may be welcome here. But I would not dare try to generalise this audience reaction. The moment has a texture worthy of the trickster's deepest burrowing into the archetypal psyche, with its leering refusal of simple jesting ratification; its cross-hatched overdetermination by warring impulses in the human body; and the bodied construct itself in Henny/Wilson, deteriorating and stilled, yet alive and kicking from its deepest recesses.

A character, like a stage world, is never complete until the sum of its utterances have washed over the perceiving consciousness by the end of the play. As I have said, the embodied character of Henny/Wilson exerts a wild, subversive presence throughout the stage world, by nature unsettling and questioning the spectator's angle of authorisation toward ambiguous material. Her crowning, crystallising utterance described above, caps a theatrical incarnation of the trickster figure as goad to the argument within each bodied subject between irrational body and counterweighted consciousness, between uncurbed biological instinct and normalising cultural inscription.

4.4 LAUGHTER

4.4.1 Laughter, theatre and body

The transactional natures of theatre and humour are never more evident than when they join forces. Stage humour solicits an 'honest' reaction from the spectator, which is no different from its first-order response to a joke in real life -- the bodied report of amusement called laughter. Every humorous moment, however well conceived and rehearsed, has to be executed in the real world of performance every time. Laughter then becomes an on-the-spot monitoring device from both sides of the transaction, confirming in every instance the anthropological assertion: 'Laughter is a unique bodily eruption which is always taken to be a communication'.³⁵

The prospect of humorous content, feeding the spectator's 'horizon of expectations', encourages a certain quality of attention, promising an immediate 'return' for the sufficiently competent observer. Humour's successes and failures can be detected all too easily by most spectators, and contribute directly to that same quality of attention. Conversely, the practitioner (actor, director, writer) looks to audience response, most readily available through laughter, to evaluate more than just the success of an effort at humour -- it provides interpersonal data on the audience's level of involvement, information processing, and approval of practical competencies.

Laughter knits to the 'flesh' of performance. Humorous moments in the cinema transpire regardless of audience reaction. But laughter in the theatre provides phenomenal emphasis of the spectator's penetration into the stage world, influencing the actors' pacing and volume, even their moods. Successful humour verifies continuing permission for the essential exchange between performer and spectator: 'His enactment authorizes our laughter, and our laughter authorises his enactment.'³⁶ A steady, spontaneous laughter means performance and audience are in some way on the same wavelength. No play feels longer than a comedy that isn't working from one side, the other, or (God forbid!) both.

These and other observations can be made in a pragmatic glance at laughter as exterior manifestation of bodied behaviour. But if we apply Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that inner life and its outer traces constitute two sides of the same skin, laughter points to some impressive goings-on 'below the surface'.

³⁵ Mary Douglas (1975), p. 86.

³⁶ Bruce Wilshire (1982), p. 22.

To refresh the memory, Merleau-Ponty sees an ontological circularity, a 'reversibility' in basic relationships with which philosophers have long been wrestling: consciousness and body, subject and world, and self and other people. For him, each of these dialectical relations constitutes a system in which language allows us to talk about one side and the other as if they were independent elements, but which are irrevocably entwined, mutually influencing, and in turn entwined with and influencing each other in a single fabric of existence. This 'flesh', as Merleau-Ponty came to call it, is 'the concrete coincidence of immanence and transcendence in the phenomenon of the lived body'.³⁷ Every subject, being *of* this 'flesh', 'knows' in its body the intertwining of all people, things and the world.

The three basic dualities of existence -- mind/body, self/other and subject/world -- may well represent essentially human psychic tensions, as they have long provided fodder not only for philosophers but for comic performers. The stage world presents a vision of life for the spectator's affective perusal, its phenomenal and semiotic materials interlacing to generate a hybrid world apart -- but never *too* far apart -- from the perceiving consciousness. Because its own bodied knowledge sponsors the act of theatre spectating, this implied reference to the three systems can be found lurking somewhere beneath every humorous transaction within the stage world.

Humour can always be seen to concoct an unspoken rupture in the psychic continuum of body, consciousness, other and world. Stage humour produces in the spectator dual perceptions of experience -- 'coherently deformed' for the theatre and at the same time based unavoidably on ours -- and the gap between them is ever part of the joke: It is always at some level based on the embodiment of an incompatible experience with reference to the spectator's bodied knowledge of being in the world.

I have studied several stage worlds for which the way the world is made and the way experience is represented are foregrounded. Body/consciousness, self/other and subject/world quite obviously underpin the schisms which produce amusement in *The Whiteheaded Boy* (e.g. three *styles* of being), *Fool Moon* (the surrealistic body), *70 Hill Lane* ('story theatre' enactment techniques) and *Out of a house walked a man ...* (splitting a character's identity between actor and clown). But even such 'realistically' rendered stage worlds as *Kevin's Bed*, *Twenty Grand* and *Bosoms and Neglect*, jostle our bodied knowledge in their humour-friendly timings, inappropriate behavioural frames, comic *outlining*, and other practitioner's fingerprints on the fictional 'flesh'. And this is merely

³⁷ M.C. Dillon (1997), p. 146.

the humour commissioned by theatrical contract, prior to consideration of joking planted by the playwright in the manner of comically beneficial plotting, topical gags and one-liners that burst fully formed from the mouths of characters. A comic 'take' -- the performative *outlining* of a look or gesture so as stylistically to emphasise an incongruity -- defamiliarises by exaggeration the real-life response (reconfiguring the 'known' intertwining of body and consciousness), the real-life human interaction (reconfiguring self/other), and the real-life unfolding in time or space (reconfiguring subject/world).

In fact, the mechanism of humour is based on our transcending bodied awareness of the ambiguous nature of being. This is often at odds with perspectives associated with the serious mode, which sees the psyche mobilised for survival or goal-oriented action. Each psyche grows a world view that serves its engagement with everyday life. It presupposes a certain 'real' alignment for the master system embracing body and consciousness, self and other, subject and world. Humour technique seeks to demobilise the psyche, to loosen the bindings of its universe, so that these dialectical relationships can be set playfully adrift. Laughter in the theatre, then, is always an internal pratfall over something kicked away in the perceiving subject's psychic grasp of being in the world.

4.4.2 Laughter's calling

What must be kept in sight when surmising about the inner experience of laughter, may be the one aspect most readily comparable from one subject to the next, and easiest to neglect: It feels good. Most of us like to do it, and most of us also like to see others do it (as long as it's not at our expense). Whatever parts relief or joy or superiority or any other possible components of any given instance of laughter, Jonathan Miller, among others, has supposed in it an 'evolutionary pay-off' for the species, comparable to the way sexual pleasure ensures continued procreation:

When we are in the domain of humorous discourse -- i.e., those cognitive situations which actually bring about laughter -- we almost always encounter rehearsals, playings with and redesignings of the concepts by which we conduct ourselves during periods of seriousness.³⁸

Along these lines, laughter can be seen to encourage the audition of psychic flexibility through bodily reward which, in effect, aims toward keeping humans

³⁸ Jonathan Miller (1988), p. 11.

adaptable. This perspective has been ventured by playwrights like Sean O'Casey, who wrote, in an essay titled, 'The Power of Laughter':

Man is always hopeful of, always pushing towards, better things; and to bring this about a change must be made in the actual way of life; so laughter is brought in to mock at things as they are so that they may topple down, and make room for better things to come.³⁹

In this way, the laughter response is seen as incentive for the resistance of 'anti-human', automatonistic lethargy and brittleness. The effect called laughter simulates a sort of bodied earthquake, brought about by humour's successful attempt literally to topple our petrified psychic patterns and appeal to a subjective conviction.

However temporary the transformation that laughter in the theatre embodies, it does loosen our psychic grip on the limits of bodied knowledge -- it supplants certainty in favour of possibility, whose reward for the species was suggested in the previous paragraphs. It is an irrevocable glimpse of something previously unthinkable, which once 'gotten', can't be erased. Such is the gist of my argument touched upon at the end of 4.3.6, and to which I shall return in the Conclusion: The humorous transaction, whatever else it entails, is a method by which the bodied subject lives freedoms and feels truths differently and sometimes anathema to the 'real life' of serious discourse. It will be suggested that wills to Truth and Freedom are drives whose gratifications supply the humorous transaction with its pleasurable upsurge and implied benefit for the species.

³⁹ Sean O'Casey (1987), p. 202.

5: OVERVIEWS

5.1 TRUTH

5.1.1 Truth and Freedom

In stepping back for a final, encompassing view, two philosophical concepts appear to loom behind the nature and purpose of the humorous transaction at the site of lived-through performance: Truth and Freedom. These two time-honoured topics have made their presences felt from between the lines all along, and were in fact introduced under assumed names with reference to stage-world construction in the chapters on ‘Subjective realities’ (2.4) and ‘Play’ (2.3). Truth and Freedom are properly covered here in retrospect, as I believe the breadth of their implications as I shall define them buttress the overarching claims of this thesis. It is right that these major motifs should begin to attain articulation in the preceding section on the spectator, for, in fact, the humorous transaction always aims toward its reception, no matter how much subtle ‘conversation’ goes on between teller and listener during its unfolding.

The trunk lines of my project relate to the contention that the humorous event in the theatre amounts to a routinely extraordinary activity. A remarkable outlay of skill and insight in the material event calls attention to a superabundance of subterranean activity on both sides of the transaction. Humour is not something added on to the stage world to make it more appealing, but, as spotlighted in 3.3.7, it inscribes its fabric as part of the weave. In the last chapter I demonstrated humour’s ability to expand our psychic spaces, to afford us passage to otherwise difficult territories; its capacity to articulate collective subjective experience, a task for which serious discourse is ill-equipped; and its way of keeping the bodied consciousness ‘human’ according to the nature of its fluid fullness, of protecting the species against the hardening, enervating demands of survival.

What might be considered bodied ‘feelings’ of truth and freedom are tied up in all these features I take to attend the humorous event, over and above its specific performance at any given time and place. They are the secret psychic ingredients which incite the spirit from every single *gap* to be bridged. In these next two chapters I shall pick over several performance moments which have been studied for other reasons and pose one or two other sequences, all of which testify most intelligibly to the involvement of truth and freedom as twin generators for humour.

5.1.2 Truth, metaphor and theatre

If one of the reasons we go to the theatre is to 'watch ourselves live', we must do so because we expect to gain some benefit from the viewing. It would seem likely that it has to do with various possibilities for enactment which can be connected to the concept of valuable perceptions about life, or as Blau articulates, 'the mysterious relation between *seeing* and *understanding* which is the seeming substance of Western metaphysics.'¹ The desired operation, then, should be something akin to Heidegger's explanation of truth as the 'unconcealment' of being. Life on the ground is too relentlessly involving, too engulfing for us to observe with all-seeing insight, even to 'phrase' some of its connections, questions and patterns of feeling. We go to the theatre to stand slightly to the side of 'real life', which can be re-assembled, re-presented and expressed for astute unconcealment in a variety of ways.

The bodied consciousness in the theatre can perceive a fictional universe only with reference to its own. The purest 'entertainment' shows us things about the world we already know and love. Even the strangest stage world assembles itself from materials we know well in our everyday existence, and still implies various causes and effects (or their lack) for generic modes of engagement with the world. Seemingly outlandish fantasies and science fictions nonetheless refer us back to our knowledge of the world, other people and ourselves. Through an unavoidable reliance on genre and convention, no matter how outlandish the fictional universe, these worlds still choose from among a customary array of 'messages' about human qualities, external forces, metaphysical patterns built into timeworn structures (e.g., the inevitability that 'hubris' leads to tragic comeuppance).

We do not generally go to the theatre to see something we anticipate as irrelevant to our lives -- and if we do take a chance and find ourselves pleasantly surprised, it is most likely because the stage world has succeeded in revealing something of the familiar through the alien. The Western theatregoer has certainly come to expect some sort of insight about how we *do* live or how we *should* live, some unconcealment about what it is to be human in general and this human in particular. Conventional dramatic structure takes as one of its dominant actions a movement toward unconcealment at the centre of the stage world, usually in the form of truths about characters as disclosed to themselves or others, or in a newly comprehensible way to the audience.

¹ Herbert Blau (1990), p. 41.

Toward the end of his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the intertwining of all worldly things caught in the 'flesh'² of existence -- this is how we 'know' in our bodies something of the experiences of other people. But he could well be standing on the threshold of his own, undiscovered essay on theatre when he seems to be talking about an inability to outreach one's own experience with one's own vision, and so 'to bring a vision that is not our own into account'² -- in other words, to expand or enrich one's knowledge of the world by perceiving through the body of another. This is what theatre makes possible on a high-level basis. We have developed a fecund, endlessly capable sociocultural transaction which assembles the visible world in such a way as to enable plumbing the 'inexhaustible depth' beneath the actual surfaces of being. The aim, of course, is truth, or more properly for the case of theatre, 'bodied truth', the experience of 'bodied knowledge' perceived. This manner of unconcealment offers physical surfaces to the world but points to links beneath or between, all those vectors of meaning that radiate outward invisibly from the workings of the bodied consciousness in the world.

Here up front is the time to reiterate caveats for any discussions about truth. The concept, as long wielded by religion, science and culture-at-large, has inferred an authority both outside the individual and constantly valid. Although routinely taken that way in common usage, it is a highly problematic notion and is never the meaning taken by this thesis. We humans can only know the world through our bodied situations in it, which is to say our subjective orientations -- these will necessarily align or differ according to a multitude of factors specific to biographical situation. For me, any responsible discussion of truth keeps these issues in mind -- especially with reference to theatre and humour, which are entirely occupied with *human* being. I may proceed to sling the word around as freely as anyone else, but it will always go without saying that even a truth validated by everyone in a particular audience is still not an 'objective' or 'universal' truth.

What might be said is that an aesthetic (and later humorous) approach to truth *intends* to open beyond personal discovery, a private epiphany arising from an intuitive leap or an act of creative thinking. It emphasises the simultaneous acknowledgement outside and inside the perceiving subject by virtue of contact with an astutely crafted artistic expression, and suggests a sweeping validity for communal apprehension. James Edie argues, after Aristotle, that an elevation of life to the 'poetic realm' admits to higher degrees of truth when compared to the ordinariness of daily life:

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968), p. 143.

‘we all have the realization, when we have discovered a great work of fiction or theater, that it is precisely because of its distinctness from our own mundane existence that it is sometimes *more true* than the real world of our own experience. It is *more true* because it can give us at a glance, so to speak, an essential insight into some aspect of human experience which we, ourselves, will never experience, never *could* experience, except in imagination’.³

Edie’s usage of the verb ‘experience’ unnecessarily narrows away some of the perceptual abilities of the theatrical frame I have claimed. Although we are not placed inside the fiction, our unmediated contact with the stage world allows some version of a first-hand audition of the events. Through the agencies of direct perception and imagination *and* the safety granted by the theatrical frame, the perceiving consciousness is able to give fuller attendance to matters of self-revelation. We certainly *do* have these experiences, else they wouldn’t constitute truths for us; we never could experience them in quite the way depicted, not because of their adjournment to the realms of gods and royalty, but because ‘mundane existence’ has been manipulated to magnify certain of its tissues, often in such terms so as to supersaturate its semiotic fabric. The feeling of ‘more true’ comes from this combination of the theatrical frame’s special conduct to the site of lived events and their artful tailoring from psychically influential materials.

These truths are approached through a strategy akin to metaphor, which basically recontextualises a concept so as to shed illumination from an oblique angle. Metaphor (as mentioned in 2.4.5) is capable of being ‘more true’ in selective ways, even though it cannot be precisely true in all ways (that is, never ‘seriously’ true). By forcing attention to a framing of a different stripe, metaphor stands to transpose an insight that unconceals some subtlety of attitude or apprehension which could not come about by ‘factual’ description. More importantly, the comparison usually specialises in conferring a ‘human’ or bodied meaning upon the original.

Every stage world nominates itself as a metaphoric ‘vision of life’, carefully chiselled from fact and fiction to conduct the perceiving consciousness toward particular strains of truth. It is itself comprised of metaphoric building blocks which contribute to the larger accentuation of experience (grounded in chapter 2.1). While imparting a baseline feeling of life upon the perceiving subject, they prime specific attempts at unconcealment.

³ James N. Edie (1982) , p. 341.

In *70 Hill Lane* the use of sellotape to *outline* aspects of the stage world opens various avenues for unconcealment during the course of the evening (see 4.2.2 for first treatment of the production). Most of the play's action takes place on a low platform. McDermott and his two assistants, each armed with a roll of tape, manipulate the sellotape inventively and efficiently to delineate the physical -- and sometimes the metaphysical -- world. They stretch strips around the tops of four corner poles to suggest walls or stair banisters; crumpled balls of tape turn variously into a doorknob, McDermott's sick granny drinking tea in her hospital bed, and the poltergeist he thought to have inhabited his childhood home. It often takes a minute or two to accomplish these constructions, during which time all that can be heard is the scritch of unwinding tape. The supernatural gloss of the stage world's tone and the glittering translucence of the material coincide fortuitously at various points, especially the most 'magical' transformations. At the same time, the sellotape's sheer ordinariness as a household staple and the drudgery it sometimes takes to 'build' the environment pulls feeling in the opposite direction.

The sellotape makes for a multi-headed metaphoric device in its phenomenal presence, its variety of uses and the way the actors handle it to 'make' the world. In an anecdote about McDermott's beloved granny and her last days in hospital, she is embodied as a puppetlike tape sculpture, given frail life by the two assistants in the ways they manipulate her body and limbs. Two strips of tape stretch upward from her 'arms' as 'intravenous drips' and attach to other strips marking the 'wall'. When McDermott announces soberly that she died a few days later, he snips the 'intravenous' strips with a small pocket scissors. The sad ceremonial air his body conveys; the simple, almost inconsequential act of cutting; the way the strips of tape flutter to the ground; this phenomenal unfolding unconceals a delicate and ephemeral human feeling in a rite of personal loss, and it is potentialised courtesy of the specific metaphoric strategy.

More photographically rendered stage worlds are nonetheless perceived as metaphors for the real world. Although they intend to look just like the 'real world', they are still 'coherently deformed' so as to emphasise precise features of their surfaces and invisible currents for calculated guidance toward unconcealment -- with playwright, designers, actors and director all contributing to the calibration. Metaphoric value may well be firmly *outlined*. In two well-known hypothetical stage worlds, realistically justified wall portraits of the late General Gabler and the absent Mr. Wingfield serve as imposing metaphors for the persistent presence of the past, the 'characters' capable of steering our lives long after they've left them. These examples from *Hedda Gabler* and *The Glass Menagerie* also harbour vastly different breeds of truth for their respective stage worlds.

But character and relationship can also be said to act metaphorically, in that they direct the perception toward a model related to the 'real thing' while framed fictionally so as to emphasise specific qualities for unconcealment. *Bosoms and Neglect* tenders Deirdre and Scooper in tandem as, among other things, a metaphor for potentially romantic relationships. Their specific delineations within the forced perspective of a contemporary stage world provide imaginary terms which are *laterally* but not *literally* applicable to any given 'real-life' counterparts. Whatever else is included in the *outlining* of their characters, Deirdre/Finneran's and Scooper/Baker's approaches to one another embody the mating dance of adults subtextually negotiating toward sexual connection through body English and the subtle guiding of conversation.

This metaphoric interaction reaches a climax, as it were, while they kneel together on Deirdre's roll-out bed. They are in the advanced stages of physical arousal, yet talk with religious fervour about their favourite novelists. Deirdre, who deals professionally in first-edition books, has offered up an uncut Byron on the altar of their consummation, a rather thinly veiled metaphor in reference to the cutting of its virginal pages. Scooper wields the knife with which he slits the leaves, Deirdre guiding his hand from over his shoulder. In unison they emit a series of wimpered 'ohs', rising in pitch and intensity, as he nudges the knife up the page. There is a breathless sense of sacrament directed toward the value of the book mixed with the final inching toward erotic fulfillment. They then tumble into one another's arms, back onto the bed and into stage darkness.

The seductive undercurrent from real life helps drive the plot. But it also proposes a handful of dovetailing truths made more visible from within the metaphoric relationship. Neither Deirdre nor Scooper is 'me', the spectator, in detail, but they might better unconceal something about 'me' because of transparencies enabled by their specific *outlinings*. The allusion may throw off an unforeseen glint of insight as a result of this somewhat alien framing.

Once again, the metaphor is cashed during the above 'climactic' scene by cross-determining its sexual nature with a bisociating religious reverence of literature. The sexual parallel to shared bibliophilia is blatant, but does not present itself as especially humorous in performance -- sexual enactment sometimes involves the perceiving psyche too directly, and the sexual frame is more often the debasing than debased; also, the building momentum of the scene discourages interruption. There may be a quieter kind of unconcealment derived from this triple framing overlay, which accentuates the aura of a treasured experience between the two people rather than its animalistic intimations.

To reassess, no small part of the unconcealment value derives from the delicate concoction brought about through the cross-framing of usually unrelated modes of feeling.

The compositely affective inferences are precisely what distinguish metaphoric insight from scientific or 'serious'. Such decidedly 'human' unconcealments lie at the heart of artistic nature and purpose, according to Dufrenne:

'That which art says is not the reality of the real but a meaning of the real which art expresses. This meaning is true because it is the affective dimension through which the real may appear and not the reality of the real which a physical formula could capture.'⁴

5.1.3 Humour: the feeling of truth

In the 'climactic' *Bosoms and Neglect* scene described above, audible responses can be heard from some theatregoers -- what might be described as chuckles, snickers, titters, or other ambiguous, vocalised expressions of appreciation which are difficult to pin down. There is, of course, no way to discern a clear-cut line between metaphoric and joking laughters, but the generally self-conscious quality of these responses would recommend it toward the former.

A joke, which is built like a metaphor, also works from the feeling of truth derived from a misdirection, and unconceals through unspoken references to bodied knowledge. Humour adopts a different field of play, and a more specific, sophisticated form designed to facilitate snap *reversal*, rather than simple recognition of a clever comparison. Joking bisociations are 'wilder' or more playful than metaphors. And by emphasising the element of judgement, joking also carries more dynamic implications for interpersonal agendas.

Comic unconcealment benefits from a crystalline glimpse of life transposed or set apart from its usual moorings. It suddenly overlays experiences of the world which are spheres, moods and rhetorical registers apart. If the joke is good, these salient strips overlay one another, carrying along their human contexts; it feels like truth has been felt anew because something fresh in this hybrid perception makes 'sense' to the bodied knowledge from an undiscovered angle in a 'Eureka!' flash of unconcealment. And if the bisociation draws unabashedly on psychically involving materials or prejudices, the humorous jolt carries more emotional voltage. As discussed in the 'Individual and Group' chapter (4.2), a personal unconcealment discovered to have universal validity -- endorsed by its appearance on stage and through the laughter of others -- seems to augment the feeling of truth by opening it outward. Remember, however, that *particularly* in the

⁴ Mikel Dufrenne (1973), p. 516.

presence of humour, a feeling of truth cannot be stripped of subjective orientation, no matter how absolutely 'right' it resonates within any given practitioner or spectator.

All humorous moments, then, seek a validation of *truth as unconcealment of shared subjective experience between perceiving consciousnesses*. This can happen in everyday life between two friends, when one of them makes a spontaneous joke only they can appreciate. A close-knit group of people (e.g., long-time co-workers or classmates) will share their own exclusive but highly charged field of experience. The reservoir for jokable reference narrows as the prospective audience widens in demographic scope, and so for most theatre the truths have to become more inclusive, more couched in cultural patois.

Such is a pitfall of rehearsing comedy. As a collective of practitioners working closely and intensely, the laughter of peers does not always foretell the laughter of a paying stranger. Bill Irwin observes: 'One of the basic [comic] crafts is realising in an innate way what the point of view of the audience is going to be like, realising the difference between a rehearsal laugh and what an audience will laugh at'.⁵

It should be emphasised that recognisable referents and cueing structures may signal a joke, but strong subjective 'histories' or attitudes load the humorous rush. Private jokes between people can be highly charged because of their shared yet deeply personal reservoirs, and the depths to which they are likely to know each other's flashpoints of psychic investment. For a couple or a very small group, highly specific prejudices about personalised material can be given free release. The theatre practitioner, in effect, tries to construct a 'private' joke for the widest number of people.

The closest things to 'private jokes' to be found in most mainstream productions would be localised one-liners in the more realistic stage worlds, for example the 'Bray' joke from *Twenty Grand* and the 'Manchester United' joke from *Kevin's Bed* (originally treated in 3.3.4). Both rely for full comic value on judgemental 'truths' unconcealed through familiarity with some larger but culturally limited aura of meaning, as does the narrator's 'voice' in *The Whiteheaded Boy*, which defamiliarises a quintessentially Irish 'character' in its syntactical pattern (e.g., 'Tis too high notions poor William always had ...') and is performed in a caricatured *outlining*, directly recognisable for Irish audiences. None of these jokes is impenetrable to, say an American tourist, for various reasons, but the full layering of 'intended' truth will be unavailable.

⁵ Bill Irwin (1996).

Distinctly ‘bodied truths’ -- gag sequences which unconceal patterns in the workings of the human body or its engagement with the world -- clearly have an inside track for the widespread imprint of something like, ‘That joke expresses what I know and feel about experience’. In a provisional way, I have in early chapters referred to truths perceived in physical embodiments by David Shiner in his general clown persona from *Fool Moon*, and Kathryn Hunter as the Old Woman in *Out of a house, walked a man ...*

A rather easygoing truth is plumbed when Shiner wags his finger in castigation at a real-life theatregoer, and the finger proceeds to ‘get away from him’ (2.4.5). The unruliness spreads to other parts of his body, and the experience of truth throws its net open to anyone who has been on the receiving end of that sort of parentlike chastisement. Shiner’s officious *outlining* primes the gag for maximum effect if the perceiving subject not only ‘knows’ the bodied personality, but ‘feels’ vindication in the ridiculous punishment meted at the expense of a generic authority figure. The notion of a voluntary action running away with itself to pass uncontrollably through the body’s parts will, of course, disrupt *and* tickle the bodied consciousness’ sense of psychic wholeness.

The sequence in which the limbs of the Old Woman’s corpse actively refuse to be stuffed into the suitcase (discussed in 2.3.5), proposes truths about inanimate objects handled by humans under pressure, with a complicating nuance. The psychically loaded ‘thingness’ of the object -- a dead Old Woman played by a very live actress -- spices considerably an otherwise basic joke about our frustration with metaphysical mischief, but the behaviour of a corpse like a stiff-jointed puppet reduces the weight of the death issue. One might recognise the experience that inanimate objects sometimes *do* appear to defy laws of physics and the human will, and at the most inopportune times. Lifted skillfully for playful scrutiny by a legibly comic *outlining*, some ineffable truth poises itself for impact by the cross-pollination of the ordinary and the grave, by way of a classic humour performance *style*. (At this point the sequence has yet to swing the balance to prioritise the corpse’s ‘liveliness’, as when it dances.)

Among the most accessible -- and pleasing to the spectator -- are truths validated through the here-and-now of the theatrical event. When at the start of *70 Hill Lane* McDermott says something like, ‘Just trying to establish this is not the telly’ (4.2.2), the truth of the statement appears at first glance to be merely obvious. But it aims more incisively at the audience’s habitual non-involvement with an event right there in front of them -- by inference a mode of disengagement trained into our bodies by television *and* most theatre. Whether or not one blames the television, the intended unconcealment has

something to do with the fact that contemporary theatre routinely and rather glaringly disattends one of its most formidable conditions: that it *is* an on-the-spot transaction between real people.

Quite adventurous is the opening ‘laughter’ sequence in *Out of a house, walked a man ...* (described in 1.4.7), which effectively proves in advance the stage world’s first spoken lines: ‘I am testing my theory of humour. If you want the auditorium to laugh, come out on to the stage and stand there in silence until someone bursts out laughing’.

Again, the audience has done its part in fulfilling the prophesy, testing the truth of a statement which undoubtedly preceded them, and in which the stage world has put great faith. The laughter before the line steadfastly resists unravelling: The ploy comes at the very start of the performance, before the spectator knows how the stage world is meant to be ‘taken’ -- laughs erupt one or two at a time from various individuals, they swell by chain reaction, diminish and take on various amorphous patterns over several minutes. Such may be the nature of the unconcealment endeavoured by this ploy: Yes, it did happen, and yes, it might have been foreseen. But it is intuitively ‘known’ by the perceiving body that the clinically phrased ‘theory’ is predicated on a capricious notion of cause and effect. The intuitive truth uncovered by this dialogue between stage world and audience is that laughter can be predictable against the odds and still wholly unknowable.

In a way these two most recent examples offer curious lessons. They remark upon ‘apparent’ truths, expressly voiced from the stage world, clearly meant and generally taken as *reversals* in their defamiliarisations of theatre’s immediate presences. They do *not*, in their obviousness, utter the fullest substance of the unconcealments, but direct the psychic eye deeper into the transactional patterns beneath the actual exchange.

Rather than attempt an exhaustive catalogue of humour tactics, I would like to intimate in a few ways, the extent to which ‘obvious’ joking truths often betray deeper channels of unconcealment. As I have noted throughout and from a variety of perspectives, the humorous transaction can never be disengaged from its ‘setting’ in the stage world without obscuring some vital insights into its operation. Apropos of the present discussion, a) a common comic vessel, b) a popular performance style, and c) an overbearing non-humorous mood, all reveal the richer textures of felt truth modulated through its bodied conditions:

a) In *Kevin’s Bed* the character of Dan establishes himself as a classic comic truth-telling figure. One sequence has already been discussed (3.2.9, 4.2.5), in which he admonishes his wife for her loudly pidgin effort to speak Italian over the telephone.

The surface truth emerges from straightforward joking form within the fictional world, and simultaneously conjures forth parallel situations in real-life experience (always the main reason we laugh in the theatre). But Dan's plain-speaking rejection of pretence unconceals something about the 'character' of truth, its simplicity and modesty and, well, its specialised appropriation by humour. The 'dissembling' *eirōn* as unmasker, being a common denizen of comedy, says something more sweeping about the cultural *style* so enamoured of it. This joking character type is always a crowd pleaser (Henny, as well, in *Bosoms and Neglect*), moreso than someone who tells the truth straightforwardly (like Denis in *The Whiteheaded Boy*). Not only is a character associated with cleverly forthright truth-telling felt communally as desirable, it appears to be downright seductive, which leads toward discussion of the politics of laughter to be acknowledged in 5.3.2.

b) Are Barabbas' characterisations in *The Whiteheaded Boy* in any sense 'truer' than a realistic portrait because they make us laugh? Not in full detail, of course, but as the highlighted unconcealment by metaphor drawn in a popular performative dialect. Their selectively embellished, exterior manifestations of inner engagements with the world, remind us of bodied behaviour we've seen and the broad strokes of personalities that go with it. But they would not hit the mark without somehow reflecting light upon our own engagements with the world.

When Veronica as Aunt Ellen raises her eyebrow in a bodied flicker of seductive resolve (3.2.8), the rusted sexual response of a middle-age spinster is conduit for a truth which always must refer back to the perceiving subject's own experience -- one's romantic feeling and intention, one's veritable sexual being -- or else, quite simply, there is no joke. Similarly Mikel's rendering of George (3.2.2) is not only (or even primarily) an acute apprehension of cultural stereotype, but a back-handed paean to the serious mode, which we know in our bodies. Raymond's performance of Mrs. Geoghegan tearfully defending her favourite son (2.2.2) throws signal streaks of behaviour, recognisable inside and out, into relief against a bodied context which is visibly inhospitable. The success of all these characterisations comes from an instinct not only for skilled cultural caricature but for etching it organically in familiar worldly contexts.

c) Hackett and Dean, father-and-son characters in *Twenty Grand*, comprise the only substantial sources of humour in their stage world, 'dad' for his coolly thuggish literacy and 'son' for his exuberant thickness. The world they inhabit is pessimistically feral, grounded in an inner-city network of drugs, crime and murder. Most theatregoers would know these 'mean streets' primarily through gritty accounts in the press, and courtesy of various representations in film and television. Its metaphoric value would employ the milieu's exotic seediness to call attention to an extreme survivalist streak in

human being. It is quite a grim vision, depicting the prospects of life with no room for compassion, no favours without strings, no trust in any human being, and the necessity at all costs of maintaining an impenetrable shell around the inner self. From out of this world in which murder and torture become the daily chores, the father-son metaphor works not only as darkly comic relief, but as strategic connector to the easily familiar.

Several times (as described in 2.2.1) a strip of casually vicious action is interrupted for a 'private' father-and-son moment. In the midst of a climactic bloodbath, Dean suddenly admits to stealing the £20,000, which has been a driving mystery of the plot. As enacted by Karl Shiels (as Dean) and Liam Carney (Hackett), the scene jumps framing to a little boy's confession of resentment over the attention his father has been giving other kids. Of course in this case, the bare-bones details involve kidnapping, extortion and threatened rape -- but the explanation is given a 'Gee, Dad' interpersonal framing. Hackett's considered response inverts most expectations, *outlining* an expansive paternal pride in his son's initiative. Joking intent is clear, even if the perceiving consciousness cannot purchase the playful intrusion upon cruelty.

In a world whose trappings are so different from ours, we still perceive people who are more like us than not. The bodied spectator who responds to the humorous intent is likely to enter upon an illumination of truth through what it 'knows' about father-son or parent-child patterns. The innocence of the exchange, which might be read as sweet under other conditions, is jarringly inappropriate to the stage world's encasing harshness. This describes the technique of the humour (*always* a metaphorically justified clash of frames), but also the compelling breadth for unconcealment in the perceiving consciousness: a rather bold statement of feeling about human interaction composed of grossly incompatible co-framings, which may yet contain a valid internal logic through their binding together. Rather than an insulated gag on transactional analysis, the sequence throws its illumination over the darker ground of the despicable in human nature. Not surprisingly, implications leak also in the other direction, supplying a sort of cautionary edge to the idyllic innocence of family bonding. And although it takes a bunch of sentences to unravel these threads, they all swirl together in a single wash of truth.

To be sure, some of the most powerful of humorous unconcealments can be the most troubling, precisely *because* they resist being approached seriously. As suggested previously, humour is capable of expanding tolerance of the perceiving consciousness by setting off its charges in psychic areas which do not generally share borders. In *Bosoms and Neglect*, Henny's suicide *reversal* (4.3.5) and her disbelieving, 'Ten more years of this?' (4.3.6), use humour technique, mother-son dysfunction, deeply serious material

about mortality, and other ingredients to unconceal feelings about life's most indelible patterns. These regions of truth are extremely difficult for serious discourse to handle -- humour wedges open an avenue for 'psychic discussion' from a completely unlikely direction, giving many a perceiving subject the license to trespass upon forbidden territory with a new angle of understanding and a measure of relief. John Guare himself has remarked about the possibilities of theatre's true nature, as 'a place of darkness where the bright truth is told',⁶ and surely humour is one of the sharpest tools.

One of my main contentions is that humour will always offer truths in textures which differ from serious discourse, and therefore unconcealments of the same lived patterns are effectively different truths. In one of his essays on painting, Merleau-Ponty infers that the work of art seeks 'a new system of equivalences' in the perceived world, 'and it is in the name of a *truer* relation between things that their ordinary ties are broken'.⁷ This is what humour does in radical fashion, and what stage humour can do with spectacular finesse: It outfits new systems of equivalence, and breaks the ordinary worldly ties so that truer relations can be explored.

Once again, we can't be blamed for thinking that some truths are distinctly our own, our subjective experiences of the world having been calibrated independently through as many bodied perspectives. Such, perhaps, is part of the spark when we perceive an accurate and oddly unexpected formulation of our own grasp on the experience of living pinned to the air before our eyes (and therefore pressed to the body).

The preceding ruminations on truth in specific performance instances have obviously been my own. As usual they are subject to modification with reference to the reception and experience of any other spectator. Suffice it to say that the bodied approval disgorged by humorous laughter amounts to a recognition of experiences otherwise incomparable but somehow utterly 'right'. This 'feeling of truth' plays a part in every humorous transaction, and gains substance for the perceiving consciousness through theatrical embodiment.

Perhaps things do feel 'truer' when they come suddenly from around the bend to reconcile with our bodied knowledge in a way we have never been able to consider 'seriously'. As I have claimed several times by now, humorous discourse allows us to confirm 'knowledge' of some experiences in ways which could not otherwise be approached; and the theatrical frame sponsors the radical expansion of all possible playing

⁶ John Guare (1996), p. xii.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1952), p. 93.

fields for unconcealment. The plethora of potential truths beyond the reach of serious mode will be the subject of the next chapter.

5.2 FREEDOM

5.2.1 Obstacles and possibilities

We each have a bodied sense of possibility emanating in all directions from our beings, acts that we consider impossible, unlikely, probable, feasible or certain, sometimes depending on various conditions. I can imagine myself downstairs in front of the television, on a Parisian street, in an African jungle, on the top of Mount Everest, inside a Martian crater, at the Mad Hatter's dinner table, long ago in my grandmother's kitchen, running the Dublin Marathon, at my 4-year-old son's future wedding, in the body of an ostrich ... Some of these consciously diverse images would be easier than others to realise, some I could better place myself to fulfill if I put my mind to it, some are unlikely under any circumstances, and others very obviously in excess of my bodied abilities.

As a human being, I find myself in a certain worldly situation with which I engage according to needs and desires. Some of the world is very solidly there, in terms of things like geographical features, brute phenomena, natural forces and other people. There are grids of social facts and meanings, as well, which cross-reference my experience with the physical world. These external conditions precede my bodied presence, and in fact give it structure by the influences and limits they impose.

I also assign my own significance to worldly phenomena, according to my individual bodied situation and *style*. The sheer rock face of a mountainside and the role of Hamlet would present themselves as obstacles in ways that are particular for me, yet general for anyone who would face them. They exert demands which are actual *and* which have distinct implications for my bodied capacities. What we perceive as obstacles derive their meanings, not through external imposition, but from our individually bodied situations in the world.

Such is the basis for Merleau-Ponty's discussion of freedom, the conditions of bodied existence which provide the loose structures for our engagement with the world:

'What then is freedom? To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways *at once*. I am never a thing and never a bare consciousness.'⁸

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 453.

It is yet again, the ontological principle of states co-existing or dovetailing in the bodied subject which enables one of the more invigorating features of the theatre transaction. An event which cannot ignore its moorings in physical laws and human bodies is able through its fictions and phenomenal renderings to reconstitute all manner of worldly obstacles -- that is, it can allow us access to the impossible.

5.2.2 Co-operative freedom

We cannot live all possible lives in one. Choices once made modify irrevocably our biographical situations -- we can redirect our lives radically, but cannot undo what we have lived. We are also defined to some extent by being born into a certain historical era, in a certain culture, of specific racial, biographical, biological and economic features. Again, we have the ability to change our sex or economic class, but we cannot shake away those previous influences upon our ever-evolving beings.

I have returned regularly to the idea of theatre as a means for 'watching ourselves live', and will now flip that notion to recall its certain double-sidedness. The 'other person' and especially the authorised subject onstage will always serve as stand-in for the spectator. It would be foolish to ignore, however, that we are not by any means all the same person, with the same rootings in the world and the same experiences, differing only or primarily in, say, our physical features. Undoubtedly we each meet life from a specific perspective, gather different encounters to our being and through them acquire different understandings, which in turn motivate different consequential turnings.

We go to the theatre also to 'watch others live', to audition various ways of engaging with the world, to 'try on' another's skin and circumstances. As might be expected, the co-presence of self and other in the authorised onstage subject superimposes separate angles of perception upon one another. Like the human being's binocular vision, in which two eyes working in concert produce a three-dimensional perspective, the authorised subject operates as a sort of psychic hologram in which we 'watch ourselves live as another'.

Described in terms of metaphoric construction in the last chapter, this ambiguity between the known and the possible provides overlapping frames for the mining of new viewpoints upon experience. The theatrical frame allows safe conduct to dangerous and faraway places, and to metaphysical spaces which do not physically exist: *Twenty Grand* extends a sardonic and dangerous world for our psychic sampling; *The Whiteheaded Boy* escorts us personally to another time and place; *Out of a house, walked a man ...* makes tangible a leering foreboding of life on a tightrope above the cosmic void.

Theatre obviously allows entry into worlds whose trappings appear wildly different from our own, worlds which deny our expectations of experience. In the theatre, as Wilshire propounds: 'We beings -- we actual beings -- discover our power over possibility. Together the audience and the actors engage in incarnated imaginative variation on the meaning of human being and doing'.⁹

The 'power over possibility' inheres in the actual making of stage worlds like Barabbas' *The Whiteheaded Boy* and Phelim McDermott's *70 Hill Lane*. Both establish theatrical scaffolding in which part of the 'adventure' promised is the rendering of the world's fullness via modest means and prodigious imagination. These types of visions dabble in the impossible in a way that can be casually liberating for the perceiving consciousness, the basis for a co-operative freedom between practitioner and spectator.

The theatre practitioner has licence and means to 'rephrase' the very natures of real-life obstacles. Certainly the parameters of the impossible are temporarily relocated during *Out the Back Door*, Barabbas' children's piece, in which a bag of chips suddenly appears and salt and vinegar pour neatly from the sky just for the wishing (2.3.2). In *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, the Old Woman behaves more exuberantly in death than in life (2.3.5). That the spectator goes along with the idea of a corpse behaving *at all*, attests to the collaborative abilities of practitioner and spectator, 'living' what is normally considered the domain of the impossible. In both cases, theatrical conjuring from frames wished by consciousness but repudiated by bodied conditioning supplies comic incongruity. Such 'magic' always courts a humourlike reaction to the 'pleasure of the sign' (3.3.3) -- it marks an appreciation of theatrical invention and acts like the bridging of a *gap*, with the 'real world' ribbed for being tricked into 'meaning' against its natural laws.

Supernatural events are given substance in *70 Hill Lane*, as McDermott and company give presence to the poltergeist's antics; more metaphysical mischief among frames in *The Whiteheaded Boy* culminates in the act of Louis Lovett as Denis, ultimately being inducted into the bodied status occupied by the other three performers, in effect shrugging off his 'fictionality' to become a 'real' actor -- or is it the other way around?

These stage worlds harbour bodied meanings for which there is not even any language in the world of realistic world structure. Complicité's *Out of a house, walked a man ...* establishes a sophisticated and supple framework for representation. As previously described, Daniil Kharms, the central character, is played by one actor, though his spiritual

⁹ Bruce Wilshire (1982), p. 24.

alter-ego is embodied by another performer with a decidedly clownlike flavour (2.2.4). Accurate presentation of surface reality is nowhere the project of the company, and neither is narrative clarity. Expressions of subjective experience are sometimes embodied by the ensemble (e.g., the ‘feeling’ of nightmare), and *commedia*-inspired performance techniques merge with totalitarian threat.

The central character of *Out of a house, walked a man ...*, whom I have called Stage Kharms, reaches the closing moments of a previously bleak and macabre stage world, still in possession of the suitcase established to have contained the remains of the Old Woman. He ‘boards a train’ out of the city to dispose of the incriminating evidence, and sits helplessly, suffering dire intestinal trauma, as the Old Woman appears and maternally strokes his brow. She then trudges off into the stage darkness, carrying the suitcase which contains her own body.

The precise meanings, impressions and truths for any given spectator are unsurmisable and too ephemeral to approach with words (which is part of the point). But the feeling alone is quite revelatory, especially as Stage Kharms steps off the train and, transfixed by a caterpillar, kneels to coax it onto his finger (this accomplished through mime), with Clown Kharms standing loyally at his shoulder.

Such are the fields of freedom granted by the theatrical frame, up to and including a wholesale realignment of worldly obstacles to allow the unfurling of unique psychic spaces. The transaction grants just that parallel overlapping of the collective and subjective for communal production of fabulous events. Humour acts similarly as a vehicle for freedom in offering a teasing taste of the impossible, which feels exceedingly and excitingly true.

5.2.3 Humour: the feeling of freedom

All humorous transactions fasten themselves upon our perceptions of worldly obstacles and possibilities and then spring preposterously askew. Incongruity, a characteristic of humour and its prime indicator, amounts to the recognition that there are ‘real’ obstacles blocking the way to ‘taking something seriously’. When, in *Kevin’s Bed*, the character of Dan caps a flurry of conversational crossfire about his son with, ‘Jaysus, don’t tell me he now wants to be a nun!’ we know of at least one obstacle which would belie serious intent: Sons can’t be nuns. As it happens, however, Dan’s intent beneath the paradox *is* serious -- he is ridiculing not only Kevin’s indecisiveness, but his manhood. Humour, here, reveals the ‘serious’ through the ‘impossible’, with more nuance than otherwise afforded. The utterance is, of course, embedded in a fuller sequence (3.3.4),

which enriches the imprint dramatically in various ways and with reference to the real world, not to mention the bodied spark of comic fusion.

Every joke commands a flirtation with the impossible or unlikely or unacceptable, given one's construction of the world according to a grasp of its physical and social obstacles. Every joke also comments on that 'real' world in its components and its feelings toward them. Such an utterance always works upon the world as given to bodied consciousness, and spurred by a 'feeling of freedom' which commissions the joke. Humour, then, might be said to amount to a peak engagement with the world, a spirited defiance of obstacle, which takes on all that incarnate existence allows *and more*.

The double play mode invoked by the humorous transaction in the theatre supplies doubly pointed conditions for experiments in freedom-loving unconcealment. Toward the start of *70 Hill Lane*, McDermott introduces his childhood home, whose address serves as the show's title. Standing at the front of the platform, he tells the audience that his house was built rather quirkily so that its architectural front was at the 'back', contrary to all the other houses on the street. 'That is, if this was Hill Lane', he says, indicating with his hand a swath of space in front of him and across the front of the stage, 'then the house faced the other way. Like this'. McDermott turns his back to the audience. His two assistants, Dartnell and Tiplady, mark the placements and facings of several other houses on the street by stepping into line with him and facing front. Having 'marked' the position of one house, for example, each assistant will step sideways to announce the location of another.

The sequence comes to a pause with Tiplady, McDermott and Dartnell standing in line, the outer two (assistants) facing the audience, the middle one (McDermott) facing away. McDermott then turns to face the audience, presumably to continue the narrative, and the other two in unison turn upstage. The audience 'gets' that just by the three actors changing directions they have created the reverse perspective -- without leaving our seats, we have instantaneously been transported to the other side of the house. Although it is registered by spectator as a trick of theatre signification well played, the 'impossible' implications for an audience's movement in space and the simplicity of the actions which bring them about surely contribute to the amusement, duly registered by laughter.

In Act III of *The Whiteheaded Boy*, Duffy (played by Raymond Keane) and Aunt Ellen (Veronica Coburn) are left onstage, a widower and dowager upon the brink of a long-delayed romantic connection. Aunt Ellen sits downstage and right of the prop piano, faced offstage and attention fixed on a copy of *Vogue* magazine. Duffy stands stiffly, several good strides away, left hand behind his back and the right one clenched close to his mouth, apparently unable to break the ice. They are alone only in the fictional sense, as

Mikel Murfi has just completed two lines as narrator, in which capacity he prepares to observe the ensuing scene, from slightly upstage of them.

The space separating Aunt Ellen and Duffy will be easily recognised as one of those insurmountable chasms felt between two people, neither of which knows quite how to take the first step in bridging a monumental issue. The anticipation planted in the audience is embodied by Mikel. After several noticeable seconds of silence, during which time we expect some dialogue about Duffy's previous marriage proposal, Mikel *outlines* his growing impatience, as he looks back and forth between the characters. Finally, with a silent acknowledgement of exasperation to the audience, Mikel proceeds to lift Duffy/Raymond in his frozen gesture and transport him right next to Aunt Ellen/Veronica. He then manually pushes Raymond's trunk over slightly so Duffy's head will be close to Aunt Ellen's, thereby jump-starting the scene.

The moment receives a huge laugh from the audience because it compares the moving of mountains to a recognisable interpersonal pattern and then removes the obstacle. This piece of stage humour has several strands, but one of them has to do with just that simple directness with which the problem is overcome, unconcealing the fact that the obstacle is entirely a non-physical fabrication of human workings. One can see how the mutually involving feelings of freedom and truth, so apparent in this sequence, would necessarily underpin every humorous transaction, their capabilities expanding exponentially for theatrical embodiment.

In realms of humour, the impossible and true are more closely related than the body 'thinks' in its default, 'real-life' gearing. The sudden disruption of psychic security in laughter (4.4.1), betrays the depths of the persistent wrestling match between the bodied consciousness 'I can' and 'I cannot', which pre-defines all our worldly obstacles.¹⁰ No one argues with the importance of serious mode to our physical and psychic well-being. But that untethering mind set called non-serious or play mode is one of the things that rescues us from 'sub-human' stagnation, entrapped by our perceived obstacles.

If humour as we know it *is* a universal mode of human behaviour, it would attest to a kind of primal psychic profile, which encourages the imaginable in the face of the 'known'. Play mode, the defining psychic disposition for humour and theatre, is not only a respite from the serious, it stands literally to 'open us up', or at least to re-examine the validity of our habitually perceived obstacles. In Victor Turner's words, 'although

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 137. 'Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can.'

“spinning loose” as it were, the wheel of play reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality’.¹¹ This train of thought ties in with suppositions that one of humour’s functions is to keep the species flexible and therefore adaptable, as gleaned from child psychologist Margaret Lowenfeld’s observations on childhood (see also 2.3.1): ‘To be able to enjoy the irrational, instead of being irritated by it, is a passport to life.’¹²

5.2.4 Humour and madness

It has already been noted that a character’s or an action’s encrustment in serious mode makes for an ideal joking butt (3.2.7, 4.2.5, and in passing), due to a lack of psychic or bodied elasticity in dealing with the world. So also at the other end of the spectrum: Madness has become associated with the laughable, a bodied state which usually infers too *little* regard for the conventional matrix of worldly obstacles.¹³

In the context of the present discussion humour about madness is very often seen as both a function of social marginalisation and implicit critique of ‘conventional’ sanity, its supposed opposite. Madmen, like fools, are presumed to tell the truth, sometimes harsh truths, licensed by the discounted status with which society is pleased to overlook any real threat to authority. This may have to do with the fact that, in the joke and the theatre world, madness is ‘made’ with signs. Characters may be *outlined* as ‘sane’ or ‘insane’ for the perception of the spectator -- someone who seems ‘sane’ to us and is dismissed by society; or someone who seems ‘insane’ to us, and undercuts the dominant discourse with inadvertent insight. Either way, the fact that they appear as instruments for humour ensures that they will somehow ‘make sense from nonsense’.

A definitively sane man is momentarily declared mad in *The Whiteheaded Boy*, for phrasing the prudently human in irreconcilable social terms. In Act II, Denis has argued that he cannot marry Delia, his fiancée, while his prospects for work remain so uncertain. George, his older brother, has been threatened with a hefty lawsuit by the young woman’s calculating father, should the marriage fail to come off. The inquisition has reached a pitch

¹¹ Victor Turner (1988), p. 168.

¹² Margaret Lowenfeld (1935), p. 185.

¹³ The conditions under which insanity is invoked by society, officially or otherwise, have, of course, been seen as problematic from various critical perspectives. Humour’s reliance on the unspoken of cultural inscription as well as the split validation of individual and group, recommend it as an auspicious body of evidence for historic study. The bodied and linguistic enactments of madness in a comic vein, its socio-semiotic conventions through cultures and ages, invite similar exploration.

of thinly concealed desperation for George, played with volcanic severity by Mikel Murfi (see 3.2.2 for fuller characterisation). Rather disingenuously, he demands of his brother: ‘Do you mean to tell me you don’t want to marry Delia? You don’t care about her?’ Denis, as played by Louis Lovett, sums up his position with a considered, rational and realistic attitude: ‘I do care about her. That’s why I won’t marry her’. George/Mikel erupts: ‘That’s crazy talk!’ Not only does Denis’ statement appear admirably sensible, it contrasts comically with George’s explosion, which paints him as by far the less rational -- his implied definition of madness is actually rather cynical. Clearly, in this case, the ‘crazy talk’ has the sanest substance.

In *Bosoms and Neglect*, the character of Henny is *outlined* as indelibly unstable, an elderly blind woman with a festering cancer and a history of suicide attempts (see 4.3.3 for fuller characterisation). Her son Scooper, among many such declarations, assigns her to ‘the Loony Hall of Fame’. Henny’s fitful bodied state, her clarion voice and unpredictable mood, as rendered by Mary Louise Wilson, virtually ‘read’ as madwoman. When, at the start of the play, she announces, ‘My bladder fell out’, it sounds bizarrely impossible (also described more fully in 4.3.3), yet turns out to be ‘true’ enough. A few lines later, feeling the jar she’s been handed for collection of a urine sample, she snaps: ‘You’d have to be a contortionist to fit on this’. This time, in a reverse effect, she has uttered a truth which suggests a human illogic to this routinely acceptable practice.

During the second act, Henny delivers a slew of socially rooted truths in a mad rant from the hospital bed, as she recovers from breast surgery:

SCOOPER My father. Was he lonely?

HENNY Why would he be lonely?

SCOOPER You never asked him?

HENNY I’m supposed to wake him up in the middle of the night and say to my husband I’m lucky to get, “Are you lonely?” He’d thwack me in the head. A man is never lonely. A man on his deathbed can pick up the phone and get a date. A woman’s different. I had buck teeth. They should’ve straightened my teeth while I was under the knife. They should’ve left my bosoms alone broken my legs and reset them straight. I had grey hair when I was twenty-seven. Too honest to dye it. I made myself attractive telling jokes and acting the life of the party. Slaving in the kitchen. I was always afraid your father would leave. I was glad when he died. The worries were over. He couldn’t leave me.

There is a batty logic to these ruminations, supported in performance by a furtive pursuit of sense-making by a troubled, defiant woman. Wherever possible Henny turns the usual or expected phrasing on its head, where it reads as madness but still looks like truth, and perhaps one less acknowledged by social wisdom.

Madness, as noted above, has become a semiotic vehicle for unapproved truths, derived from a bodied consciousness deemed *too free* for society's own good. It is one of our culture's more recognisable tropes for thought and behaviour somehow improper for the group. In present terms it implies a psychic defect due to a 'faulty' grasp of worldly obstacles -- through stage humour, however, an unorthodox reconfiguring of worldly obstacles subverts the approved discourse, exposing *its* faulty grasp of things, and often giving way to liberating insights. Stage worlds like *Fool Moon*, *The Whiteheaded Boy* and *Bosoms and Neglect* have been described by critics in terms of madness, and such coinings are trumpeted by promotional materials. Obviously, the ability to 'let go' momentarily of bodied and social tyrannies are deemed appealing to audiences as well as sociologists: 'In the most potent forms of humour people are what is called in Jewish humour *Luftmenschen* -- freely floating, fantastic, utopian, irresponsible, crazy, yet very human'.¹⁴

¹⁴ Anton C. Zijderfeld (1983), p. 40.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS

5.3.1 Overcoming lingering doubts

Before concluding I should like to revise some fundamental misgivings about methodology, which, instead of gradually fading, have only reinforced themselves. Return to my notes on a certain performance moment, study of a script or video, attempts to recall and describe my feelings toward the theatre event's hereness -- each of these retrospective ploys at recovering a performance in flight (let alone all the ones I didn't see) have only reminded me that any such method must finally bow to fluid, unrepeatable performance as woefully out of stable reach. Despite best intentions and constant revisions, my descriptions of the theatre transaction disfigure the experience any way you look at it: in its multiplicity of incarnations from night to night; in its essential ambiguity from any perspective in the theatre during even a single performance; in my inescapably subjective filter; and with whatever literary skills I attempt to manipulate bodied processes into readable form after the fact. Although I have claimed to argue away these and other reservations, they still stalk the integrity of an expedition which presumes to seek concrete and universal revelations about the ineffability of lived-through experience.

My consolation is that I have not come across nor can I conceive of any more accurate approach this side of an annotated virtual reality. More words, more time, more notes, more performances -- none of these 'improvements' could take me closer to something which fiercely refuses to become a fixed object from a single, all-knowing perspective even once, let alone through the life of a production. I have submitted my work to the most rigorous self-scrutiny, and am satisfied that I have come as close as constructively appropriate given my specific subject and aims. Ultimately I can only hope to have captured a gist of experience in my description -- recognisable to someone who has seen the production, and evocative to someone who hasn't -- from which broader observations follow fairly.

I have taken to heart the phenomenological premise that the universal resides in the individual and theorised authoritatively about meanings, perceptions and the internal processes of joking. I have felt the creaking of the limb beneath my feet as I lean out ever further to clinch an insight. Again, the tenor of my defense lies in the 'well close enough to be of value'. What good is academic exploration of the utterly human if not to posit grand implications? In so doing, I grasp for the kernel of validity rather than the full-blown fact. I remain confident in my ability to apperceive the workings of theatre practice and reception to an extent that I can stand by the broad legitimacy of my findings for their general

insights for all perceiving subjects, if not any given one. And for all my anti-scientific fretting, I believe I can claim that my model for the humorous moment in performance qualifies as a verifiable/falsifiable theory for the performing arts at large.

5.3.2 Beyond the brackets

One of my main contentions is that the humorous transaction woven into the stage world works more powerfully than we realise through and upon the participating bodies in the theatre. I have referred to my use of a phenomenologist's tool called 'bracketing', which means setting certain issues aside for the sake of getting on with the task at hand. At this point, I would like to emphasise the extent to which sociopolitical and ideological issues will always outstrip any attempt to get around them, with reference to the humorous transaction in performance. They are, after all, something of the currency with which the transaction is conducted.

As I have said, there is no joke devoid of ridicule, however soft-edged or invisible. Neither can it be pretended that the very act of signification in the theatre, particularly at a mainstream level, does not take for granted cultural biases inferred by words, gestures, conventions, costumes, casting, even the venue itself. As Blau would remind us, 'there are no innocent things, nor innocent views of things, least of all in the theater'.¹⁵ A stage world constitutes a highly calculated and intentionalised utterance.

Although it may strike one as surprisingly sinister, Blau's contention is no exaggeration. In the language of pragmatics, 'theatrical performance brings into play complex strategies of manipulation and seduction, which have always been recognized'.¹⁶ The intentions of humour must surely be considered in light of this statement. Laughter is typified by a psycho-physical feature found also in weeping and vomiting called 'surrender'.¹⁷ Clearly issues of power and its wielding must be seen to be negotiated in every humorous transaction.

I have admitted from the start that humour in the theatre sends its root system deep into our identities as constructed by culture, and so is fertile ground for inspections from feminist, Marxist and postcolonial critical approaches among others. My descriptions of performance, as I remarked at the outset, have embedded within them the culturally endorsed perceptions and interpretations counted upon by the practitioner, and open

¹⁵ Herbert Blau (1990), pp. 322-3.

¹⁶ De Marinis (1993), p. 145.

¹⁷ Nico H. Frijda (1986), p. 437.

themselves to deconstruction on at least the same terms as the performance texts themselves, not to mention the blind taken-for-granted of my own biographical situation.

It should be evident that a stage world promising laughter might well be a ruling factor for someone making decisions about a night at the theatre. The 'next step', however, must be to remember that all laughter is at someone's or something's expense. Farcical form, usually defined upon its paramount intent to evoke laughter, or 'family entertainment', which usually infers widely inoffensive or non-tendentious humour, still nominates a 'butt' for each and every joke. In these cases, the biases are more or less 'invisible' as tacitly accepted by the dominant discourse (like 'wife' humour in 1950s American culture, to recall the dissection of the Henny Youngman joke in 1.4.1).

Fool Moon was enormously successful in attracting mainstream audiences able to afford the price of Broadway tickets, and in fact emphasised the virtuosity of its comic performances and its 'family' suitability in advertisements. I have described how David Shiner derived comic value from mimicking the onstage volunteer during the 'date routine' (3.2.2). The insult to the individual 'volunteer' is apparent, in these cases; it is almost always taken in 'good humour' by the target, and so deemed fair game for joking permission by the audience. Shiner also makes sure to even the score occasionally by making himself the joking butt -- and sacrificing one's own dignity to laughter buys a fair amount of credit with most audiences. The indignities of this very temporary, very public relationship could trouble any given observer, but rarely seem to.¹⁸

But on a deeper sociocultural level, behaviour I described earlier as 'naive' and 'flowingly romantic' -- for it was intended and succeeded on the basis of just that 'harmless' tone -- can also be inspected for their comic reification of prescribed patterns for male superiority and female submission. In a hugely popular sequence later in the show, several audience members are conscripted by Shiner to enact a silent-movie melodrama. And as one reviewer discerned through the gales of laughter, a 'woman is coached to sashay provocatively across the stage so that a macho suitor can wrestle her to the ground in simulated loveplay'.¹⁹ The comment makes a valid point about the sequence's reinforcement of gender stereotypes, but it all seems like good fun at the time.

There are, in fact, no productions in this study that do not rely for humour on the instant flood of image and bias signalled by stereotype. Because comic theatre

¹⁸ Only Ron Jenkins (1993), expressed reservations about the 'implicit indignities in the relationship'.

¹⁹ Ron Jenkins (1993).

performance relies so consistently on sociocultural shorthand, it always bears wondering what silent assumptions the audience is being asked to endorse. In *Bosoms and Neglect*, one of Henny's best *reversals* emerges when she calls her son 'sick' for going to a psychiatrist -- *not* for suspected homosexuality (more fully described in 4.3.6). The spectator may be forgiven for presuming a homophobic disposition on her part, because it has been encouraged through her *outlining* as an 'unenlightened' elderly woman with working-class roots.

Again, humour that seems purely entertaining, probably adopts a conservative orientation, ridiculing marginal or pre-approved positions. But if, as Bergson concludes, 'Laughter is, above all, a corrective', it can be aimed in the other direction -- and such would be the strategies of so-called minority stand-up comics. A truly subversive humour, which by definition jeers at the status quo, risks succeeding only within its own already sympathetic audience, depending on the solidity of the ideological supports it attacks.

The slyly subversive playwright learns how to defamiliarise comically, so that the 'surrender' of laughter occurs in the spectator prior to the utterance's full impact. A few examples were given in 4.3.2 to 4.3.6, to show how inscribed comic patterns can be wielded to inspire laughter against the grain of individual -- and to some extent sociocultural -- disposition. Playwrights like Caryl Churchill, Joe Orton and Dario Fo have employed conservatively oriented comic techniques to subversive effect. Each, for example, has refitted farcical form, which usually promises a 'satisfying' restoration of the social order, to undermine the ideological security of a 'happy ending'.

If the theatre event can never 'begin from scratch' and there is no such thing as neutral perception, what becomes interesting is no longer whether sociocultural inscription is there (because it always is) but what part it plays: What are the 'feelings of truth' begging verification -- and how do they betray a particular ideological interest? Practitioner and spectator *must* approach each other as generic entities in order to 'gear into' the machinery of theatre and humour. That is why the subtleties of their interaction as individuals and as social units open themselves to the gamut of modern critical perspectives as well as inspection by the social sciences.

In this study I have tried to launch a basic excavation of how humour in the theatre does what it does, and to sketch the formidable convergence of energies for those present to the event. Situating my approach in the lived body has sought to concentrate on the nature of the event's ignition rather than the fallout, another of those analytical tricks which seeks insight by presuming a division that isn't actually there. Rather than ignoring

the implications, I am taking them for granted, and it will have been apparent that these issues routinely slip through the brackets on their own.

5.3.3 In retrospect

Each chapter sought to argue widespread validity stemming from the study of particular production sequences. Although I do not think it necessary to revise them sub-chapter by sub-chapter, some of their themes might be worth recalling in summation:

- A model for the humorous transaction in performance may be adopted, which follows the form of *priming sequence - setup - reversal - gap* to be bridged. The model provides an accurate tool for the identification, examination and improvement of any intended joking utterance.
- Although a stage world (the material interface between production and reception) does not finish coalescing until the ‘curtain comes down’, genre cues and conventions within an introductory phase of actual performance enable all ensuing humour, and in fact endow it with a personality all its own.
- The humorous model can be applied by the practitioner in rehearsal and performance for the conception and tweaking of comic effects. This ranges from on-the-spot adjustments during a given performance in flight, to the timeless comic patterns of Western theatre.
- The main tensions at work within the spectator during a humorous transaction are the individual’s bodied knowledge as measured against the group’s communal perceptions, and the psychic seesaw between consciousness and brute being.
- An enhanced sense of truth exacted by the metaphoric engine of theatrical joking, and a psychic freedom from the everyday alignment of worldly obstacles, can be seen as bodied feelings behind every humorous moment in the stage world.

A master project of this thesis involves a desire to champion a couple of quintessentially human institutions, which seem to attend contemporary civilisation from a sort of second-class status. Theatre pales in its cultural presence next to film, television, video and computer entertainments, in some measure through its own fault, but as well due to economic and social trends in technological society. And humour is patronised for its crowd-pleasing tendencies, or brushed aside as ultimately unworthy of serious comment. In the final analysis, I hope to have framed several points in support of both:

- The interpersonal transactions of humour and theatre conflate to make a unique spectacle of negotiations between stage and spectator -- this interaction radically modifies the performance fabric, which also discloses complex currents within the audience between each individual and the perceiving body called audience.
- For what has always been considered an intellectual operation, humour works fundamentally on and through the body, most effectively upon material toward which the perceiving consciousness maintains a strong investment, and so its capabilities plumb deeper into the being than often credited.
- There is a special charge from a joke in lived-through performance, owing to the fact that practitioner and spectator inhabit each other's perceptual field -- both parties to the joke collude in a nod to the world outside the theatre, while at the same time acknowledging that the transaction has been accomplished right here, right now.
- Theatre's unique authorisation scheme commissions a prodigious opening for the audition of experience through a vast range of world *styles*, exponentially augmenting humour's natural capabilities.
- The humorous transaction in lived-through theatre performance is capable of illuminating human experience in ways above, beyond and inaccessible to serious discourse, and at least as valuable to the species.

Pursuant to this last item, I have inferred all along that it is possible to take life seriously -- that is, grab it with both hands, as it were -- and yet refuse 'serious' strategies an exclusively privileged influence on the psyche's engagement with the world. There is in fact a clear advantage to humorous discourse, especially given the immense sweep, specificity and infinite texture demonstrated here in the theatrical frame. At the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty seems to issue, if not a call for more respect toward humorous discourse in the theatre, at least his own warning against narrowing the field of vision to the ordinary evaluations of worldly obstacles:

'Taken concretely, freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer -- even the prehuman and prehistoric freedom with which we began -- and it shrinks without ever disappearing altogether in direct proportion to the lessening of the tolerance allowed by the bodily and institutional data of our lives.'²⁰

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 454.

I return once again to the definitive natures of theatre and humour and the eclat of their confluence. As I have argued, at such a site the boundaries of the possible can be extended in endless redirection and variation for any single 'real-life' strip of experience, their unconcealments capable of infinitely more shadings beside and beyond the reach of the serious. At such instants, the singular and collective separate in order to overlap, confirming with pleasure a glimmer of sense for the bodied consciousness amid its ceaseless immersion in the fabric of experience.

If laughter and humour do indeed benefit the species by encouraging a strategy of adaptability, the process would seem directly sponsored by the concerted feelings of freedom and truth as denied, even suppressed by 'serious' discourse: With a bodied thrill the thinkable expands beyond the known, to find there something unexpectedly verifiable. And so humorous discourse is not a mere alternative to the serious posture, but its symbiotic complement, even for lofty purposes of survival. If, as Merleau-Ponty submits, we are our individual freedoms to the extent that we engage with the world, freedom can be seen as a sort of lived creativity -- and the humorous transaction in the stage world amounts not only to an individual upsurge of blind-siding truth, but nothing less than a communal exercise in freedom.

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(4.4.2), (4.2.3), (4.2.4), (4.3.1), (4.3.2), (4.4.1), (5.1.2), (5.1.3), (5.2.2), (5.2.3)

Twenty Grand, by Declan Hughes, National Theatre Society, Dublin, 1998
(2.2.1), (2.2.5), (2.3.4), (2.4.4), (3.2.3), (3.2.6), (3.2.7), (3.3.4), (3.3.5), (3.3.7),
(4.3.3), (4.4.1), (5.1.3), (5.2.2)

The Whiteheaded Boy, by Lennox Robinson, Barabbas, Dublin, 1997
(2.2.2), (2.2.4), (2.2.5), (2.3.3), (2.4.4), (3.1.2), (3.2.1), (3.2.2), (3.2.4), (3.2.5),
(3.2.8), (3.2.9), (4.2.5), (4.4.1), (5.1.3), (5.2.2), (5.2.3), (5.2.4)

* A few of the productions were revived one or more times -- the date given indicates the particular incarnation I studied.