

## Book review

**Wilkie, Ian Angus (2016) *Performing in Comedy: A Student's Guide*, London: Routledge.**

Books about acting can turn out to be both instructive and frustrating endeavours, filled with inspiring advice but lacking in the actual stuff of studio teaching, with the vital interpersonal, embodied exchange missing between teacher and student. Books about *comic* acting in effect double down on a claim to guide practical learning from a literary remove, as the contract between performer and spectator are beholden to a heightened sense of on-the-spot give and take. Ian Wilkie, in *Performing Comedy: A Student's Guide*, engages laudably and thoroughly within the confines of his teaching medium by marshalling a wide range of material for a multi-lateral game plan—input is culled from practitioners, theorists, and instructors as well as his own formidable experience. To begin, Wilkie situates his approach at a useful nexus between acting practice writ large in western performance and the putative subset of an approach to acting comic text. He therefore acknowledges the theoretical pillars of so-called ‘serious acting’ while signposting a set of lanes relevant to comic performance, elucidating upon how analysing, rehearsing, and performing comedy calls for customised modifications in approach and technique, and an informed ability to read the scripting of dramatic text through the eyes of a comically inclined specialist.

The book, divided into several operational perspectives, proceeds from the principle that comic performance by generic definition presumes the intention of some kind of laughter provocation. Wilkie refers astutely and persistently to the transactional nature of theatrical performance in general and so-called comic performance more specifically, with their mutually entailing sets of expectations. He acknowledges, for example, the “three-way process” or “trialogue” (p. 23) of acting from text, which acknowledges the interaction at the site of performance amongst the actor, audience and playwright. The book offers a treasure chest of practical exercises, some geared towards the enrichment of the actor’s instrument and general improvisational technique, others to the various demands of the comedic project (and it might be noted that differing degrees of skill or experience on the part of the instructor would be required for maximum clarity and benefit). Supplementary materials are proffered, from sample texts for experimentation to considered evidence regarding the value of historical research. With a primary focus on live interaction, Wilkie also addresses mediatised configurations that deny body-to-body interaction between performer and spectator (e.g., film and television), offering a full chapter on similarities as well as the adjustments they invite.

One element of Wilkie’s approach is especially gratifying for the pedagogically diligent acting instructor: from the start he encourages the cultivation of “a reflective practitioner” (p. 2) through a creative cycle that seeks to impart a culture of “doing, reviewing, redoing and re-reviewing throughout the performance process” (p. 3)—where many a comic practitioner discussing their work will default to a primacy of inspiration, instinct, or “you just know” and other evidence of magical thinking. It is in fact refreshing to see advice from a comic practitioner akin to the following, recognising that it may not always be easy to put studio discoveries into words on the page of a journal:

This should not deter you from attempting to evaluate the processes, causes and effects that you will encounter when making comic performance. Unhelpfully, both comedy and performing are sometimes presumed to operate through entirely subconscious or intuitive processes and there exists a belief among some actors that conscious analysis of the execution of practice is somehow dangerous (p. 68).

Wilkie draws upon a wide range of sources to support his guidance, and herein may lie an unproblematised fault line in the approach: in attempting a practice-facing manual with a concomitant theoretical root system, there is sometimes insufficient attempt to differentiate one discursive context from another, particularly between the languages of practitioner and academic. There is, for example, revealing analysis of Tommy Cooper's hat routine. The discussion, however, includes quoted fragments from uncontextualised sources, such as "visual signifiers" (p. 45), a specialist language that may need more patient explanation prior to being useful for some students. Interviews with respected and experienced comic practitioners generate quotes which suggest general guidelines or point to moments of practical insight while not always illuminating an instructive mechanism for the studio or rehearsal room. It may be interesting to read what the likes of Beryl Reid had to say about acting comedy, but it is far less clear as to what practicable instruction can be taken from ruminations that "the audience must feel affection for the person who is aiming to make them laugh" (p. 28), given that an audience cannot be presumed a knowable, concrete entity, and is every night a different mix of individuals with so many reservoirs of experience, feeling, thought, disposition and, indeed, chemistry.

There emerges occasionally a prescriptive or absolutist premise that there is a "most authentically truthful interpretation of the text" (p. 7) to be excavated, without acknowledging variables in all aspects of context and the impacts of individual comic contributions by the performer, let alone vagaries of time, place, and culture. If audience "laughter must be gained *appropriately*, otherwise the overall effect becomes diluted and cheapened" (p. 38, emphasis in original), what are the criteria for appropriateness in general terms? Writing to the student performer, Wilkie looks to distinguish between performative embellishments that serve a notion of "comic truth" to which all should aspire and the worst excesses of pantomimic begging for laughs, although the boundaries between them are not always clear in teachable terms.

In any case, there are nuggets throughout worth affixing to a student refrigerator, such as the author's urging to find one's own rhythm within the words foreseen by a writer (p. 49), or John Wright's counsel that "the strongest comedy comes from the greatest seriousness" (p. 53). Amidst the commentary from practitioners past and present, one truly illuminating passage lies in Donald Sinden's detailed reflection upon his portrayal of Malvolio from an RSC production in 1969, in which he articulates the character's second-by-second inner monologue customised for comic effect, which includes passing technical instruction to the performer (p. 70). There is emphasis throughout on the dovetailing importance of playful thinking, reflection and analysis, of calibrating the instrument for sensitivity and focus in performance, of endless practice and exploration in the studio. Wilkie gathers together all the threads in the concluding chapter, culminating in an extremely useful list of "ingredients of comic performance" (p. 191), which embody the book's strength as a sturdy and well-packed toolkit for the care and cultivation of an embodied comic sensibility.

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