

## Book review

**Weitz, Eric (2016) *Theatre and Laughter*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Education.**

Professor Eric Weitz's small though major book on theatre, as part of the Palgrave Macmillan paperback series of short books, is designed to foreground the interdisciplinarity of theatre and performance, and to redress the complexity of the philosophy and the specific theories informing this academic field, while, at the same time, constituting a challenging contribution to the literature of humour. The author is an erudite scholar (author of, among other things, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* 2009), a long-standing theatre practitioner, and an avid theatregoer too, and his tiny volume compresses various perspectives on theatre (anthropological, psychological, linguistic, sociological). Drawing on different drama and performance texts, Weitz's interesting study on the mirth achieved in performance situations praises the capacity of theatre and laughter "to blow open the doors of possibility" (p. 71) and thus to change the situation. This particular approach reflects Weitz's political idea of theatre and laughter as showcases for framing contentious personal and social issues. Here Weitz understandably draws from Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque theory, a theoretical background which, in my view, would have benefited the reader if spelt out. The main points of the Russian philosopher's approach to carnival as counter culture, namely reversal of hierarchies, eccentric behaviour (otherwise, humour and chaos), non-linearity of narrative (disjointed narration), as well as delight in freedom, equality, and abundance imbue Weitz's case studies. These range from Aristophanes, medieval farce, and the comedy of manners to internet humour, TV shows, and stand-up comedy. Besides, a curious literary scholar would perhaps enjoy a comparative look at the author's examples of contemporary live shows and their effect on audiences on the one hand and Bakhtin's discussion of the reversal of hierarchies on the other.

More importantly, Professor Weitz's appealing contribution in terms of theory is a combined approach to theatre and laughter via educational psychology and play theory (Sutton-Smith 1997), anthropology (Douglas 1968), and phenomenology (Wilshire 1982) distilled in the assumption that theatre and laughter are interrelated with possibility and the potential of human imagination. This assumption is adroitly matched with Žižek's (2014) concept of *event* (p. 72). The Slovenian philosopher approaches the notion of *event* as something extraordinary taking place which, within a certain field of phenomena, dramatically changes the situation and is stronger than its own cause. An *event* is a sort of 'miracle', an encounter that changes the rules in somebody's life or within a domain, be it literary, political or other. Particularly, Weitz's "Laughter for Change camp" (p. 82) – discussed in the chapter pertinently entitled "Changing the situation", preceding the conclusion of the book – is an illustration of Žižekian counter-hegemonic theory transferred to comedy in that it entails "an alteration in our conception of the Real, rather than a change in reality itself" (pp. 82-83). Comedian's jokes open up the space, redraft our perception of being, and breach both physical and mental boundaries, argues Weitz (p. 83). Apparently, they counterbalance "commercially produced laughter" (p. 68) in populist theatrical forms reflecting power relations (see the chapter "Laughter as crowd control").

The book is meant as an “introduction to laughter in theatre and performance” (from the blurb) and it is within this context that it strongly favours the interaction between performers and audiences. This translates into an emphasis on the sociological concept of Hurley’s (2010: 9) *feeling labour* as a methodological tool in viewing comic performance. Weitz’s interdisciplinary jargon, along with his scholarly and practical experience, manage to keep the reader alert. Argumentation is dense and so is the variety of aspects introduced. The book is divided into twenty-two short chapters of two to four pages each, most of them bearing suggestive and figurative titles (e.g. “Play’s the thing”, “Killing the frog”, “Laughter in the frame”), and examining topics as varied as embodiment, miming, slapstick, laughter, and wordplay. For all these reasons, I would suggest that the readers of this fine little book be cautious with the series editors’ comment in the preface; that is, *Theatre and Laughter* “should all be readable in one sitting by anyone with a curiosity about the subject”. There are many courses of thinking and various contemporary drama and performance examples mentioned – sometimes particularly situated within the YouTube culture and the Irish live performance scene – which the reader should grasp. Nonetheless, Weitz’s rhetoric strongly pronounces the importance of the context in laughter and theatre, as well as the ethics of joking.

As already mentioned, the scope of the book is the analysis of theatre and laughter co-considered as fields of human play and social activity. With the technological advances defining the age of the social media, it is intriguing that Professor Weitz’s discussion of the physicality of theatre and laughter is illuminated by an elaborate analysis of dramatic texts written by the giants of modern theatre (such as Samuel Beckett and Luigi Pirandello) and classical farce (for instance, Molière and Georges Feydeau). It is also true that, at least dramaturgically, Weitz is interested in paying tribute to the genre of *commedia dell’arte* and its prototypical method of laughter provocation in performance (“virtuosity and spontaneity”, p. 37), adopted by other theatrical genres in modern and contemporary times. The author also pays “close attention to the conception and embodiment of these activities” (p. 3), bringing in examples from quite different performance genres and international contexts, such as internet humorous programmes, American TV sketch shows and sitcom humour, stand-up comedy routines, topical political satire, and drag queen shows in Ireland. In his analysis of all these distinct genres, the author manages to foreground a variety of comedic tropes and humorous mechanisms (be it wordplay or satire, slapstick, or clowning). This is certainly a rewarding journey for the reader. Nevertheless, while savouring these paradigms, I wonder whether they fit within the limits of theatre or performance. Maybe a theoretical disambiguation of the terms *theatre* and *performance* would be in order here.

The book can prove a valuable portable guide for students of theatre and performance, scholars, and the nonprofessional alike. It provides useful recommendations for “Further Reading” with notable suggestions for introductions to the philosophy of humour, scientific approaches to humour, and the genre of comedy. Its bibliography includes, to name a few, entries on ancient Greek philosophers on laughter and comedy, historical approaches to laughter and modern theories of laughter, verbal theories of humour, comedy, performance, humour and Shakespeare’s theatre, modern British and Irish comedy and performance. One could perhaps excuse my fussiness in mentioning that Žižek’s volume is not cited in the bibliography list. This blunder notwithstanding, the reader of this volume will find it easy to navigate through the concise index of “People”, “Concepts and Subjects”, and “Texts” (plays, films, television shows, etc.).

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