HOW TO BE FUNNY

Parody, prank, passion and play in the comic techniques of Ridiculusmus Theatre Company

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the essential elements of comic performance using a practice based research project called *How To Be Funny*.

For centuries the greatest philosophers, scientists and psychologists have attempted to define humour. Plato began rather negatively with the Superiority Theory, Kant and others claimed all comedy was incongruity whilst Freud declared relief to be the unifying factor in humour. True to academic bent the different camps and their followers take it in turns to knock each other's theories down finding examples that don't fit (a snake in a fridge is incongruous but not funny for example). I attempted the opposite and sought to find a unifying and universal solution.

The result of the research - a thirty five second practical performative demonstration, involves the deflation of a balloon, a duck caller and a rubber wind bag in the act of sitting down three times. It is at once incongruous, superioritizing and a metaphorical and actual relief in the golden harmonic form of a three line gag and reveals that all comedy is deflation.

The practical work was used to examine the comic elements of the extant methodology of theatre company Ridiculusmus, the principles that underpin it and how these are deployed in the company's comedy in general.

The findings are then extrapolated to universal principles necessary for the pursuit of successful comic performance:

There is functional humour and memorable humour - a successful creator of memorable humour needs to lead a life rich in aspirations that will produce enough deflatory failures to regale and entertain others with. They must be prepared to inflate and deflate themselves over and over again on the sacrificial altar of audience mirth. Nothing is fixed in comedy. Whatever one person finds funny another does not. It is easy to become distracted by fripperies - microphone technique, formula jokes - the pull back and reveal, call back, rhythm, and timing - and by misleadingly close, but distinct areas of study - laughter, tickling and glee. To discover the secret of comedy one needs to find its soul, the essential essence at its core. The aspiring creator of memorable humour needs to realize their unique vision and arrange a soulful communion with their audience that creates a *sensus communis* from which inspiration can be taken.

The thesis, which includes a CD Rom of the performance piece with critical commentary and analysis, reflects the structure and working method behind the performance and is expressed in the form of a long - winded joke that playfully mocks itself whilst divulging useful knowledge in a deductive manner.

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Acknowledgements

Declaration

All the practical results of this PhD are jointly the work of Jonathan Haynes and myself, in collaboration with Miguel Antunes, Richard Talbot, Patrizia Paolini and James King. What remains is my own original research, reflection and fault.

Disclaimer

In the ongoing absence of a gender-neutral third person pronoun I have followed the Japanese convention of randomly referring to men as she, women as he and vice versa. When I use the plural in regard to the actions or thoughts of Ridiculusmus I am wrongly assuming that Jon and I have agreed on such a point of view. Even if we had, it is highly unlikely that he would agree that he had retrospectively, and one wonders how we agree on anything. Therein lies the tension of our double act and although this thesis purports to be about us both, it really is all about my point of view and only half the whole story. Wherever people are slagged off to a litigious degree I have tried to hide their identities and it goes without saying that any likeness to real persons is entirely coincidental.

Backstage

1. Introduction

1.1 Being Funny - The State Of Humour

> When we hear laughter, our attention immediately picks up. We automatically look to the wit, fixing our gaze in an unembarrassed way. He possesses the gift of joy, and we look on in the hope of sharing it[1].

You are funny. Everyone is funny, some choose to use this gift, some haven't the will, and others think it beneath them and choose not to. Some celebrate its use, others merely come across it. Some are completely cut off and unaware of it. All of us can develop it if we choose. Though our sense and mastery of humour is far from extinct, its existence may be threatened by the commercialisation of humour – the shopping mall comedy club, the dirge of the predictable stand-up, the internet joke site, the "How to be funny" book. Just as customer service is now an artificially induced, trained and maintained function in our daily lives whilst the human goodness and sociability that gave birth to it disappears, so humour has in general become mechanized[2]. We have lost our musicality and our humanity and with that we are losing our joy and our practice of humour. People don't tell jokes anymore[3] and soon we will have lost the ability to laugh[4]. The

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[1] Buckley *The Morality Of Laughter* p60

[2] I am not referring to the mechanical humour described by Bergson in *Laughter* – man's functionality in error giving rise to error and therefore laughter, rather the staid, "globalized, normalised, homogenised, vfm-ed tqm-ed, ebitda-d" (Mike Mullett *Ideas Men*) production line style of humour that is prevalent throughout the Western World in the form of ten-a-penny stand ups, formulaic sit coms and Hollywood gaggery.

[3] The joke is, at least in verbal form, an endangered species. They have disappeared from the repertoire of stand ups and the only places you hear of them is on email, in Christmas crackers and bad speeches, or told by primary school kids and building site workers (the latter quoting them from *The Sun*). It is perhaps to do with the emergence of the internet and the mobile phone that the opportunity of surprising people with jokes has been taken away. Everyone has heard everything before on a daily digestible and text-able round. Jokes have been killed off by technology. You can't tell a joke without someone telling you that she got it by email last week or by text yesterday. If you hear a new joke these days you have to run into the street and shout it before someone else puts it up on the web or texts it to everyone they know. Almost as bad is the fact that the art of telling a joke is all but dead too. "Great gag" someone will tell you these days, handing you a phone and inviting you to strain your eyes to read the two inch screen. As you look, you will invariably be told - "Now scroll down". When James King joined us to work on the Belfast shows of *How To Be Funny* he brought a print out of jokes from the Edinburgh Fringe which his son had emailed him from a web site created by a comedy fan who scoured 2004 Edinburgh Fringe comedy shows for punchy jokes to plagiarize. E.g. "The dodo died, Di died, Dodi died, don't you think Dido should be shitting herself?"- From Colin and Fergus at The Pleasance.

"Humour", noted Phillip Adams and Patrice Newell in their introduction to *The Penguin book of Australian jokes* (1994), is a method of ameliorating mortality's bleak implications. Almost without exception they deal in bigotry, sexism, racism, ageism and all other politically incorrect isms… almost every genre is an act of aggression against some form of enemy, be it defiantly targeted or dimly perceived". In an increasingly politically correct society people prefer funny stories and observations; something evident from the proliferation of comedians on non-humour shows – like sports programmes, dancing competitions and game shows; naturally enough as people don't separate humour and seriousness in their lives. But just because the joke is dying it doesn't mean we have lost our sense of humour. If anything we are losing our sense of seriousness, another symptom of our chronic low level anti-intellectualism – if we weren't laughing at everything we'd be crying.

The disappearance of jokes may be explained intellectually as well. There are no jokes. One man's joke may be another man's insult and one may not perceive it. The ethnocentric attitude suggests that jokes are inherently funny however Flugel (1954) questions whether a good joke exists, or that jokes can transcend cultural boundaries: "Nothing

relatively few professional comedians that exist are hailed as "gods"[5]. Society in general clamours for its lost natural humorous state[6] and in an age of extreme litigation the practical joker has become extinct. To have a sense of humour is considered to be the most desirable quality a human can have[7]; a sense that includes generating as well as enjoying humour.

1.2 Who Are Ridiculusmus?

Ridiculusmus is a theatre company based in the United Kingdom. It was formed in 1992 by its two current artistic directors, myself and Jonathan Haynes.[8] The works we have made in the fourteen years of our existence have generally resulted in vocal laughter from our audiences. We have often appeared in festivals of comedy but are never classed as Stand Up comedians and struggle when forced to perform in mainstream comedy venues. We make comic theatre and may be called comic actors and writers rather than comedians or clowns. Our relationship is what has become known as a double act. Our creations are driven by our personalities and the differences and connections between us.

1.3 Are Ridiculusmus Funny?

In so far as being funny is prove-able and measurable, Ridiculusmus are funny[9]. In over three thousand[10] performances we have succeeded in making at least someone laugh. Usually many

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is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone. A joke is incongruous to what? Incongruity denotes a binary relation; nonetheless such a relation by any reasonable definition of stimulus can neither be a stimulus nor a set of stimuli. Clearly then jokes, conventionally defined non-exist... perhaps for the same reason art does not exist – Beauty as with amusement is in the eye of the beholder" (quoted in Chapman and Foot *Humour And Laughter* ps84-85)

[4] Dr Michael Titze: "In the 1950s people used to laugh 18 minutes per day... in 1999 this figure has reduced to 6 minutes per day." Quoted in Kataria: *Laugh For No Reason* p12. At this rate I calculate that by the year 2200 we should be laughing, on average, for no more than 5 seconds per day.

[5] "Stand up comedy is the only truly egalitarian arm of the entertainment business. If you're funny you'll be worshipped as a god, no matter how overweight, ugly, snaggle toothed or freaky you are" Review of Daniel Kitson by Fiona Scott-Norman in *The Age* April 1st 2002

[6] The laughter movement created by Dr Madan Kataria has become a worldwide organisation with the function of manufacturing non-humourous laughter or practising "Hasya Yoga" (laughter yoga). Kataria's book *Laugh For No Reason* explains: "Jokes were banned ...Stale jokes, jokes targeted at a particular community, hurtful jokes and dirty jokes.... (p27) in laughter clubs we do not use humour as a cause, we use laughter as a cause which helps people to do away with their inhibitions and shyness and become more open and start seeing what is funny in life." (p121) Kataria developed a series of exercises to artificially create laughter which in practice often lead to genuine laughter – in chapter 14 of his book he sets out to explain how to achieve this conversion. Unfortunately my copy had several blank pages in this chapter and the gist of his theory of silliness is, alas, missing. Maureen Baas who runs a Kataria affiliated Laughter club in Williamstown, Victoria, Australia and was herself voted "World Laughter Person Of The Year" in 2004 told me (interviewed 21 December 2004) that humour is now considered and described "toxic" by the movement. Baas also commented that a common trait amongst all laughter club leaders including Dr Kataria was that they lacked a sense of humour, though this was off the record. www.laughteryoga.org

[7] See Cann and Calhoun: "Perceived personality associations with differences in sense of humour" *Humor* 14-2(2001) ps117-130

[8] Sometimes known as Jonathan Hough

[9] Such arrogance is offered humbly as an illustration of what Olly Double has called "The confidence trick". Apologies in advance for further slips across the delicate line between necessary confidence and egotistical arrogance.

[10] I just made this figure up. We have performed a lot in the period of our existence and in my MA I included a list of shows, performances and attendance figures from 1992-2002. Probably the viewing figures for the few tiny clips of

people laugh. There are videos and recordings of our performances that record this reaction of mass laughter lodged in libraries[11]. Other than that I have no measurable evidence. Decibel levels divided by audience number, cubic capacity of the rooms we have played in and heart rate measurements are the stuff of scientists not artists. I can't be bothered with them, no comedian could. All that matters to the comedian or comic performer - (Ridiculusmus are a comic theatre company of two comic actors who write comic material) - is whether the bulk of their audience is laughing, getting what they do and expressing that enjoyment and understanding in vocalised audible laughter. If the bulk are not enjoying it their numbers tend to dwindle and the comic will play a smaller venue reflecting their reduced appeal.

1.4 Measuring Success In Comedy

Comic success is not just related to the material and its reception; it is intricately linked with the faith factor. An audience needs to believe that the act they are watching is funny and have faith in its comic potential. This belief can be won in front of an audience without any pre-performance persuasion or as a result of a sustained and expensive marketing campaign[12].

1.5 A Definition Of Humour

In this thesis I am interested directly only in the generation of humour: the intellectual stimuli that achieve a physical response in the form of laughter, and only indirectly interested in the ability to enjoy comedy, whether that be media mediated or not. As however the need to be sensitive to the results of one's humour output is critical to its success - i.e. being aware of material that doesn't

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television that we have appeared on (*Edinburgh Nights, The Edinburgh Review* and *Good Morning Edmonton* - around five minutes in total) out number this tenfold.

[11] The main holding of Ridiculusmus archive material is at The Centre For Performance Research in Aberystwyth, Wales (http://www.thecpr.org.uk/). The University of Kent's Templeman Library has a good collection of work on video and our four academic theses - two MA's and two PhD studies. The British Library have copies of our plays.

[12] I'm thinking here of the relatively unfunny Ross Noble's (See sub footnote (a) below) mass marketing campaigns since 2003 in Edinburgh and Melbourne - his face appearing on billboards, buses and trams - achieving sell out audiences in large venues, not because of his innate hilarity but because of the investment of so many in the belief that he is funny ensuring a positive, if hollow, response at material that is on reflection, terminally dull rather than the articulation of an original vision. Similar examples may be found in earlier waves of comic performers, Olly Double mentions for example the media orchestrated meteoric rise of Newman and Baddiel in the early 1990's. (*Stand Up* p226) These are merely the current big acts.

(a) I am not alone in considering Ross Noble to be unfunny or in my negative judgment of him: "not for the first time with Noble, I found that, however funny and brilliantly extemporised, there's only so much meaningless waffle I can take - and three hours is more than enough. He's not doing anything new with this latest offering, titled *Noodlemeister*. As usual, Noble's set is all digressions and hardly any substance. It's fascinating to see his improv muscles flexing; to watch as a chance heckle or slip of the tongue inflates into a full-blown nonsense fantasy. That's how he ends up playing Gerry Rafferty's Baker Street on a squirrel saxophone. Noble is a flexible physical comedian too, whether impersonating a harnessed bee powering a caravan through the Highlands, or the hapless paddlers in Diana's memorial fountain. His best images are irresistibly silly, or daftly insightful. "How come there's a pearly gate in heaven, but no pearly fence?" But the lack of purchase on the real world is sometimes shocking. Noble is forever signposting his own tastelessness, as poo gag follows knob gag. But he seems blissfully unaware of how crass it is to mock the detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Finally, the essential hollowness of his material, and the sense that Noble could keep generating it at the same pace and comic pitch ad infinitum, become wearing. "With me, it's just constant bollocks," he admits, which can be liberating, but only in small doses." (Brian Logan *The Guardian* 9 September 2004)

work (produce laughter) and improving it or deleting that part that fails[13], reaction is important and referred to, if not analysed. The innocent gleeful laughter of children and tickling are also irrelevant to this discussion and used merely for the sake of entertainment in the practical work and to illustrate mistaken lines of enquiry.

1.6 Specific Research And Universal Principles

Many have written on how to be this, that or the other; and several authors have written specifically on how to be funny. All usually launch into an immediate denial of their ability to make you funny because of the individuality and subjectivity of humour. They then typically fill their pages with their own humour/humor/ous/less anecdotes and biography. Whilst I am making no effort to change this trend by writing only about Ridiculusmus[14] to illustrate the mechanics of our comedy, the practical work does seek to find a universality of principle so that, rather than being solely an examination of how Ridiculusmus are funny, I have embedded pathways to being funny, formulas that might be used, philosophies that explain, and practical work that may provoke or cajole the reader into expressing their own funniness. Some are laid bare in a matter of fact way, others are implied. The fact is that there are a multitude of ways of expressing humour and therefore being humourous, and there are skills that may be acquired and learnt. These skills may be carried out functionally or elevated to the level of art. At whatever level they are practised there will be a subsequent and proportional decline in the enjoyment of comedy by the practitioner. The more one knows about comedy the less one can enjoy it[15]. Whilst most writers on comedy use generalised theory to publicise their own work, I have attempted to do the opposite and use our work as a means to making a general, unifying theory[16].

1.7 Remit Of Thesis

1.7.1 Original Intention

My original intention was to investigate fully our comic techniques. It was an area that I felt had a challenging and interesting potential for study and was beyond the scope of my practise as research MA: *Ridiculusmus: an analysis of current practice*. This used a meta theatrical performance piece *Office* to analyse, investigate and develop the improvisation led methodology that I have developed with Jonathan Haynes as Ridiculusmus Theatre Company from 1992 to the present. As a general study this earlier work was only able to introduce aspects of our work such as our comic technique.

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[13] Dewitte and Verguts *Being Funny: A Selectionist Account Of Humour Production* provided a "data tested" analysis of this point and created the formula pu+/pu denoting the proportion of funny to unfunny material in humour output.
[14] After all this is a peculiar and expensive attempt at promotion as well as a record of research. Academic papers = academic publication = lecturers reading books and putting them on reading lists = students buying books and attending performances en masse.
[15] With understanding, the critical surprise element of comedy is largely removed and you will find that you no longer laugh at comic performances. I have found the same experience with theatre. I don't enjoy theatre, just as I don't enjoy comedy. I pick apart the mechanics of the performance, am completely detached from enjoyment and feel thoroughly depressed at most gigs I have been to since gaining this awareness.
[16] If you are looking for a quick answer to the secret of comedy you need to go immediately to Section 4.3.1. - Already been there? - Go to p 111

1.7.2 Difference Between MA Study And PhD

This current study is different therefore from the MA in that it is specifically about comedy and attempts to broaden out from this company specific study to make universal points about the nature and attainment of funniness. Its methodology, which like the MA is discovered and articulated as part of the project, is also a specific progression from the MA work in that it applies the company's working principles in all aspects of the research, reflection and documentation. Whereas the MA was a relatively well behaved historical analysis, in *How To Be Funny* the research question itself is mocked in a manner that verges on self destruction. This is a bold step forward in attempting to mirror artistic practice in academic study.

1.7.3 "Deep" And "Dark" Play

I suggested in my MA that the cornerstones of our work and therefore our comedy were "Deep Play" and "Dark Play".

The term "Play" is used to refer to that activity partaken by humans and other animals that is pure fun. There is nothing efficient about "Play", it is a loose gleeful spirit that does not pursue any economic or other benefit apart from the pleasure it generates. As Richard Schechner says: "It is hard to pin down or define"[17] but commonly involves the meta-communication that what is happening is inside a "Play-frame"[18], for example, by the giving of a wink or speaking the phrase "I was only playing/joking" after the action has happened.

 "Deep Play" is taken to mean play where the potential risk to one's resources outweighs potential rewards but is pursued for some higher purpose.

"Dark Play" is used as defined by Richard Schechner, where the participants are literally "in the dark" as to where their play is leading and some are even unaware that they are involved in an act of play. The "goals" of the instigators of "Dark Play" are "deceit, disruption, excess and gratification" and there is no wink. Bateson suggests that such play without a frame is characterised by its continual questioning of itself - "Is this play?" [19] "Dark Play" must not to be confused with the ubiquitous term "dark humour" - meaning anything that laughs about morbidity or material that is merely aggressive[20].

These three terms "Play", "Deep Play" and "Dark Play" and their contexts are discussed more fully in the Review Of Literature (Section 2.5)

It seems to me that "Play" is a crucial factor in all theatre, in that it is the quality that makes theatre potentially more exciting than any other art form. Our embodiment of the imagination and the meta-theatrical fun we have teasing the audience's act of faith in accepting our imaginative offerings by acknowledging, highlighting and occasionally disregarding them altogether makes our work a

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[17] *Performance Studies - An Introduction* p79
[18] Bateson *Steps To An Ecology Of Mind* ps 182-183
[19] *Ibid* p182
[20] Like, for example, the Julia Davies penned television series *Nighty Night:* UK, BBC/Baby Cow Productions, Sitcom, colour, 2004.

corruption of play, albeit a playful one. We commit a tricksterish act of semi-blatant cheating that teeters on the edge of destroying the game. The research questions arising here being - is this the only sort of comedy we are capable of? And: Does all our comedy include this technique of framing or framing by apparently rejecting frames?

1.7.4 Revised Intentions And The Perceived Difficulty Of Studying Comedy In Live Performance

These questions then broadened the remit of the research to *practically* investigate a wide panoply of humour and laughter theories from Plato to the present (and place that same practical work within that canon. i.e. Itself within itself) test all these practical articulations of theory, and see if Ridiculusmus could indeed succeed with anything more than meta-comedy in achieving laughter.

This presented a relatively unexplored[21] if eccentric challenge to achieve a funny performance piece that provoked humourous laughter whilst explaining how to be funny and provoke humourous laughter. This is no simple task as pointed out by behavioural neurobiologist and pioneering laughter researcher Robert Provine: "laughter disappears just when he is ready to observe it - especially in the laboratory"[22].

1.8 Sentient Phenomenological Practice, Praxis And Pedagogy

This thesis is a piece of serious academic analysis and a joke. This dichotomy is important and reflects my practice. I have attempted in the writing to walk the line of acceptability and provocation, seriousness and laughter. This is how my humour works and the writing, while inevitably being a deflation from the excitement of the live work[23], attempts to recreate this tension in written form, or more specifically, academically written form. It has two concurrent structures. On the one hand it is a conventional PhD with an introduction, Review Of Literature, Methodology, findings and conclusions, and on the other it is a three part joke with build, pivot and punchline and follow through. It may be read as a parody or be taken seriously. My aim is to merge the two readings into a provocation that entertains and inspires the reader with knowledge from my findings and stimulates a desire to begin their own journey in humour. This duplicity of technique and purpose is a form of play and as such highlights other areas of academic interdisciplinarity. Whereas being funny has little of academic worth written about it - studies of humour tend to concentrate on psychological and philosophical issues rather than practicalities - the topic of play does have a body of established knowledge and I include a review of this material as well as a unique study of shallow comedy guidebooks and performances and writings on Ridiculusmus.

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[21] I am aware of two other practical and performed demonstrations of illustrating how to be funny in live performance in the last 15 years – Paul McDermott's *Comedyoscopy* and Alex Horne's *Making Fish Laugh*. Several contemporary artists offer workshops on related subjects and there is also a video fronted by Rowan Atkinson along with numerous practical guide books on the subject at least five of which have "How To Be Funny" in the title. More on all of these in the Review Of Literature.

[22] Provine *Laughter-A Scientific Investigation* p24

[23] I am first and foremost a performer, not a writer.

Whilst the practical work took the form of a parody of academic conference presentations, this written work mocks the "How to…"movement[24] and academic writing. This gag[25], for example, of using extensive digressions in footnotes that threaten to entirely take over the text, which is inspired[26] by Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*[27], exemplify this approach. As with all comedy material, it is not difficult to demonstrate the lack of uniqueness[28] of this idea. I intend to plunder all manner of sources in this way throughout this essay – reason being everything has

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[24] By "How To" books I mean the proliferation of publications and courses, reflective of our bite size information culture, that profess to enable any amount of skill or knowledge in one simple publication. Some examples of this taken from a cursory glance at a bookshop catalogue in November 2004 are:
How To Be Funny
How To Write Funny
How To Be A Superhero
How To Be Dad
How To Be A Sex Goddess
How To Be A Billionaire
How To Be Like Women Of Influence
How To Be A Jewish Parent
How To Be A No-Limits Person
How To Be A People Magnet
How To Be The Almost Perfect Husband
How To Be Happy
How To Be Happy Though Married
How To Be Like Jesus
How To Be A Winner
How To Be Lost
How To Be Santa Claus
How To Be A Lady
How To Be Your Own Publicist
How To Be A Great Lover
How To Be A Successful Writer
How To Be A Friend
How To Be A Villain
How To Be A Gentleman
How To Be A Jewellery Detective
How To Be Your Dog's Best Friend
How To Be President
How To Be Do Or Have Anything
[25] "gag" is one of many terms used inconsistently throughout this thesis meaning an intentional humourous trigger. Other terms used include – Joke, number, routine, punchline. People who perform "gags" are variously referred to as comics, clowns, stand ups, comedians, jokers and jesters amongst others, as I am not interested in any particular branch of comedy so much as comedy in general these names are used arbitrarily. I have made no attempt to create a glossary of comic terms. These can be found in abundance in the books mentioned in the bibliography.
[26] I intend to credit all sources of inspiration or theft throughout this essay. It is an unwritten rule in contemporary comedy that one does not steal other people's gags. Adam Bloom (a successful contemporary stand up) explains: "And it's understood yeah that you don't steal other comic's jokes yeah? You do not steal anyone else's material!" (The Comedy School, London November 2004). This ethical attitude to the ownership of jokes emerged in the alt-com era of the character comic. (Olly Double covers this thoroughly in *Stand Up On Being A Comedian* ps43, 259-60)
[27] O'Brien's novel was posthumously published in 1967. The anonymous protagonist and first person narrator are obsessed with an invented philosopher cum scientist "De Selby" and information about him and his commentators invade both the main body of the text and footnotes (which peak at 95% page coverage). Ridiculusmus adapted this novel for the stage in 1992 and it remained a stalwart of the company's repertoire until 1997.
[28] see for example Richard Kearney *On Stories* London, Routledge 2002.

been done before – by someone else or by us, and even an attempt at exact re-performance would be flawed and therefore unique.[29]

For the purpose of finding solid reliable proven laugh provoking material I will indulge myself in this practice safe in the knowledge that for an in-house – unpublished and un-publishable[30] text, source acknowledgement is not an issue and I intend to freely lift and push to greater extremes a wide variety of already performed or published material by Ridiculusmus and others.

1.9 Being Funny And Being Serious - Reflection Of Practice In Writing

The translation of practice into writing has been an important consideration. The issue is whether I should present the dissertation humourously, as a literal reflection of the practical work, or, resist such inclinations, and be taken more seriously. The bulk of this thesis is written within performative frames of reference or Batesian "play frames", and at the same time as taking a serious look at the craft of making people laugh or being funny it is also designed to be funny and make people laugh, though in a different way from the live work. The boldness of saying this here at such an early stage is a dangerous tactic, already denying myself, as with the practice, the opportunity for surprise. It is a practical necessity that when trying to be funny you don't say you are trying to be funny. I could say I am going to discuss nuclear physics, crack a joke and get a big reaction as the reader or audience would not be expecting it. But to say outright that I am going to talk about comedy and try to be funny while doing it would seem to be foolhardy in the extreme[31]. This aspiration also increases the likelihood of the work not being taken seriously, a problem not uncommon to writers on humour[32] who have resorted to "academicising" their writing with "unnecessary jargon...as a form of defence"[33].

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[29] An interesting discussion of the ownership of material in relation to clowning is included in Towsen's *Clowns*: "Clowns borrow their ideas from a variety of sources from past comic traditions and from incidents in their lives as circus performers. It would be foolhardy however to state categorically that such and such an entrée was originated by a particular clown in a particular year. Earlier versions are always being uncovered and clowns have never been bashful about claiming authorship of entrees with quite ancient antecedents. The broken mirror, for example, in which one clown accidentally breaks a large mirror and then must enact the role of his partner's reflection, was known to circus audiences in the Pipo-Rhum entrée, and to millions more from the first *Pink Panther* movie (1964) and the Marx brothers film *Duck Soup* (1933). Will and Fred Hanlon were said to have originated it, but according to Lupino Lane this idea was conceived by his grandfather and first performed in 1862. Actually it appears in an anonymous Spanish 17th century play *The Rogues* or *The Rogueries of Pabillos* and probably in even earlier comedies." p244

[30] In a series of meetings with the publishing company Methuen we experienced a rebuffal typical of other media attempting to embrace our work: that whilst being funny in our particular genre (theatre) we would not translate into theirs (books). This comment was also used by Granada television who expressed great interest in a televised version of *The Exhibitionists* and by "two over grown schoolgirls" (Jon's comment) from Channel 4 who came to see *Yes, Yes, Yes* saying it might be good on radio, and by Radio 4 who said we might be good on Radio 3, and from Radio 3 who said we should approach Resonance FM or BBC local radio... and so on.

[31] The Stand Up "lover-thinker-artist-and prophet" Daniel Kitson is an inspirational front runner on such meta-comedic practice, he openly discusses comic technique in his act, mocking, for example, the prevalence of entry-level callback, (the technique of referring back to earlier jokes in the same routine sometimes called throwback) - "because it is only put in by comedians to make us feel clever for remembering. Therefore our applause is really for ourselves, and how masturbatory is that for an audience?" - then proceeds to use a callback himself whilst still eliciting the audience to "laugh to the point of physical pain" (Helen Razer review *The Age* April 2nd 2004) as much as demystifying the comedy, Kitson's technique enhances it and that is what I will aspire to here.

[32] Allport (1960) Carlson (1966) Chapman and Foot (1976), Friedman(1969) p2 of Chapman and Foot, Provine (1998, 2000) Moreall (1983) all discuss this issue.

[33] Chapman and Foot *Ibid* pxii

Not only am I treating the subject with grave seriousness – albeit with an irreverent style that reflects my practise, the very topic of seriousness is crucial to the argument. The work is about being seriously funny. Admittedly an oxymoronic idea but one that is critical to the argument. This means that the "play-frame" around it will not be writ large, the reader will be invited to "get" it rather than being force fed funniness. So that it is more "Batesian" than "Cailloisian". It is also written, I hope, in a language that does not hide behind complexity.

Diagram of "play frames" in use here:

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│                                                                    │
│  Author out of role  - PhD How To Be Funny                         │
│                                                                    │
│   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────────────────────┐  │
│   │ How To Be    │   │ How To Be Funny 1 hour performance with  │  │
│   │ Funny thesis │   │ Torvald Sorenson (played by author) and  │  │
│   │ by author in │   │ guests                                   │  │
│   │ role         │   │                                          │  │
│   │              │   │     ┌─────────────────────────┐          │  │
│   └──────────────┘   │     │ How To Be Funny 30      │          │  │
│                      │     │ second performance      │          │  │
│                      │     │ by Ridiculusmus         │          │  │
│                      │     │ (with author as         │          │  │
│                      │     │ himself)                │          │  │
│                      │     └─────────────────────────┘          │  │
│                      │                                          │  │
│                      └──────────────────────────────────────────┘  │
│                                                                    │
└────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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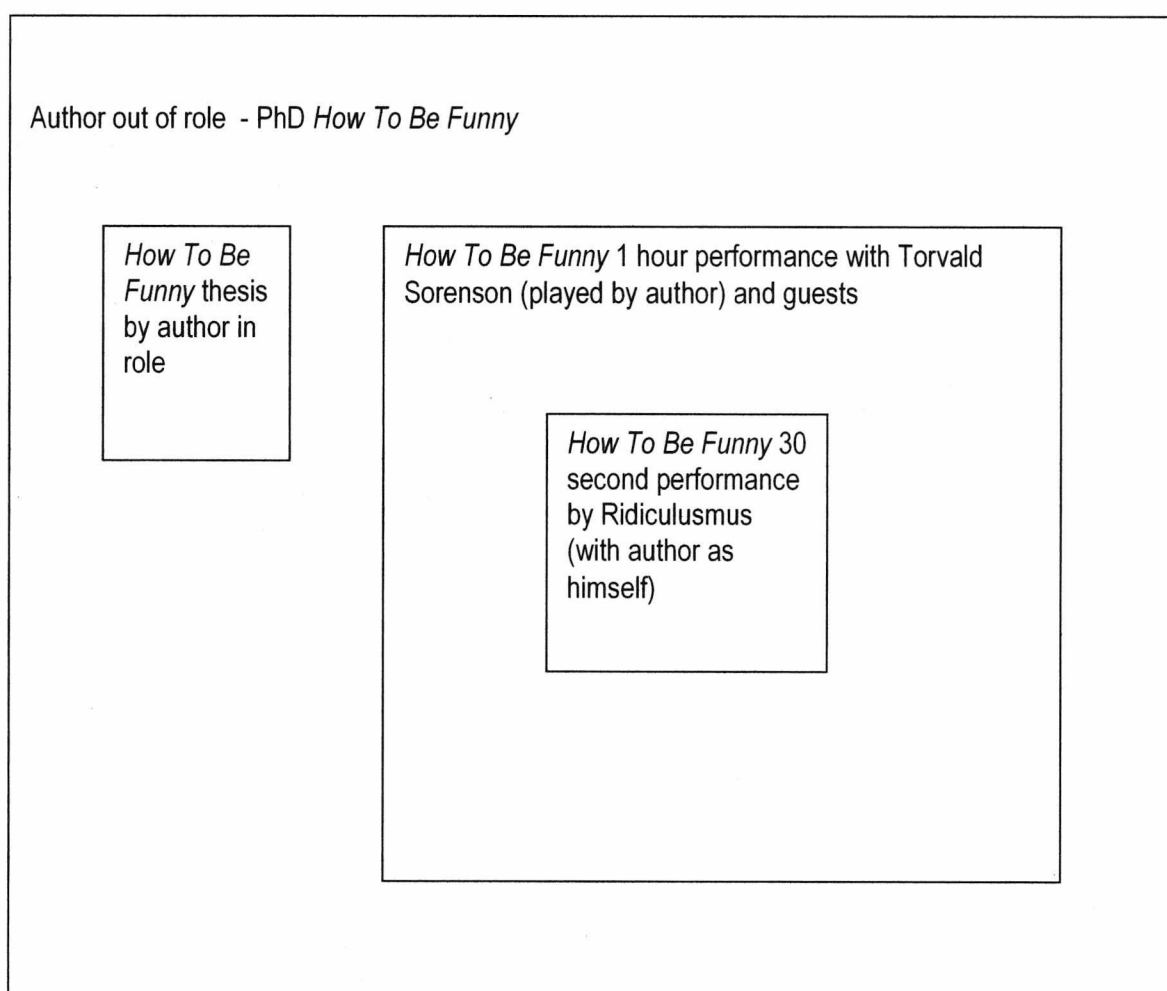
1.10 Digressions

Digressions are incontestably the sunshine- they are the life, the soul of reading - take them out of this book for instance - you might as well take the book along with them[34]

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[34] Laurence Sterne *The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy* p58

My many digressions in the form of extensive footnotes, circular referencing inspired by Borges Library of Babel[35], the use of anecdotes from sport and popular culture, rants about rival acts[36] that are spuriously woven into the text as if of value when they are clearly just personal grudges and jealousies, and the anality of civil service style numbering are meant to reflect the sham meticulousness and discursive dipping and orbiting of the practical work.

Circular footnote on the secret of comedy:

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┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────┐    ┌──────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
│ Begin at /   │    │ Section      │    │ Footnote │    │ Section  │    │ Commentary   │
│ return to:   │──▶ │ 4.3.1        │──▶ │ 210      │──▶ │ 4.4.1 How│──▶ │ on Extract   │
│ Footnote 16  │    │ Extract: The │    │          │    │ To Be    │    │              │
│ page 11 (a)  │    │ Secret Of    │    │          │    │ Funny    │    │              │
│              │    │ Comedy       │    │          │    │          │    │              │
│              │    │ pages 74-76  │    │          │    │          │    │              │
└──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────┘    └──────────┘    └──────────────┘
                                                                               │
┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐                                    ┌──────────────┐
│ 2nd circuit  │    │ End at:      │                                    │ Footnote     │
│ go on        │    │ Ridiculusmus │                                    │ 247          │
│ to: extra    │──▶ │ laughing     │                                    │              │
│ part of      │    │ photo        │                                    │              │
│ Footnote16 on│    │ Page 111     │                                    │              │
│ page 11 (b)  │    │              │                                    │              │
└──────────────┘    └──────────────┘                                    └──────────────┘
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1.11 Deductive Academic-Artistic Practice

Muddles make us see new sorts of things[37].

Bateson's desire for "deductive" learning was an expression of disgust with traditional "inductive" learning.
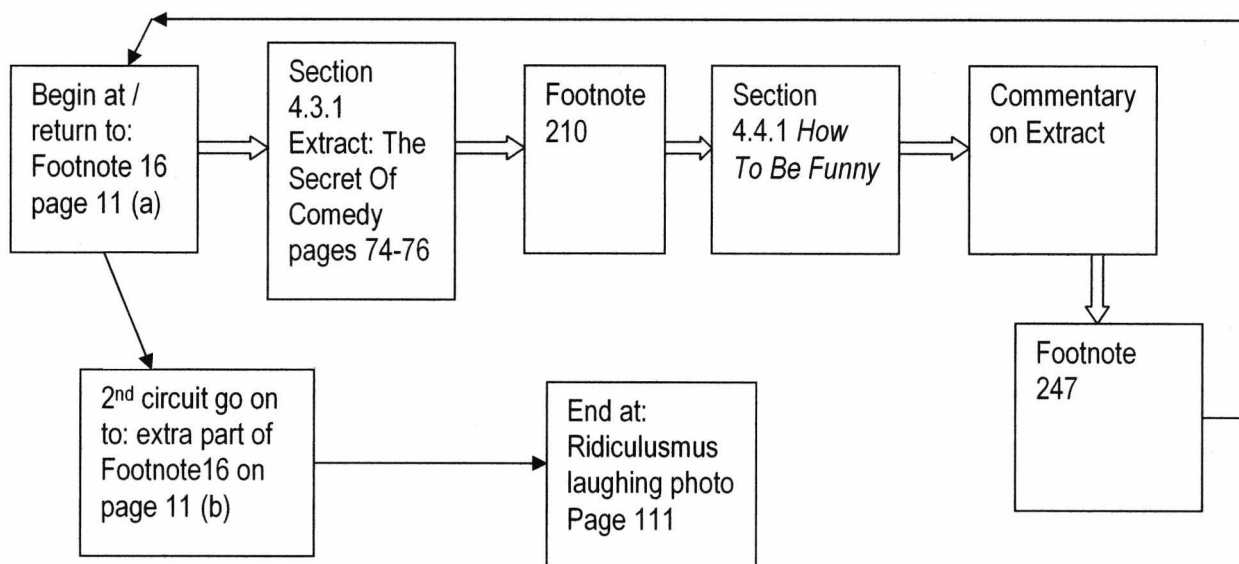
In a strict sense no data are truly raw... everything has been subjected to editing and transformation... the tradition of heuristic concepts being used to reduce the area of research so that after a history of controlled experiment a fundamental "law" may be created results in a

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[35] "Locate book A, consult first book B which indicates A's position; to locate book B, consult first a book C, and so on to infinity ... Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveller were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope." Jorge Luis Borges *Library of Babel* p16

[36] "Since aesthetic judgments cannot be proven, demonstrated, shown or argued (though they can be argued about) efficiently conducted discussions of such judgments are confined to pointing or quoting: I point to what I do or don't like and attempt to influence your opinion" Roger Poole *Towards Deep Subjectivity* p16

[37] Bateson p16

mass of quasi-theoretical speculation and half baked hypotheses... science, philosophy and religion should not be separated[38].

It drove his students mad. The concept is likely to do the same to contemporary students and researchers who have lost faith in the worth and power of imagination and can only comprehend the world in terms of bullet points, executive summaries and information boxes.

My work is that of an artist conducting practice for the purposes of research so that the academy can benefit from real-world knowledge. I see this as an effort Bateson would approve of. It sits perilously on an edge between assertion and analysis. A joke explained is a joke killed and whilst all the answers are here they are purposely embedded so that they function correctly and better illustrate the points despite their deductive nature. The deduction is deliberately made more challenging by the inclusion of red herring passages that echo the dead-end diversions of much humour theory as illustrated in the practice. These include a series of attacks on other practitioners (Ross Noble, Chris Addison etc.) that serve as an illustration of the sort of maniacal ego needed to survive in this business and work as an indirect marketing exercise for our own work, as well as being an essential airing of the truth.

In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too[39].

1.12 The Research Questions

In conclusion, this PhD seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are Ridiculusmus funny / not funny? - is it just by using "Deep" and "Dark" play?
2. Are the principles of their success or failure at funniness universally applicable?
3. What are the universal principles of being funny?

And to do this by:

1. Making a practical articulation of existing humour theory using Ridiculusmus' established practical method that explored the nature of funniness - *How To Be Funny* and condensing it into a simple single statement, action or set of actions that was as concise as possible.
2. Describing this piece of practice in a written version infuse with a similar attitude that reflected the practical work setting seriousness, analysis and conventional form against a cocktail of parody, joking and playfulness.
3. Analysing the results to answer the research questions.

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[38] Bateson *Ibid* (p xxviii)
[39] *Tristram Shandy* p58

Cock Fight

2. Review Of Literature

There are three parts to this review. The first concerns literature on Ridiculusmus and how we achieve our comedy, the second reflects the playful aim of the practical work - *How To Be Funny* and the third looks at the academic context of playfulness as demonstrated in the practice and in the written articulation of the practice. Further literature review is also embedded in the practical work in that the performance itself is a kind of literature review of humour theory. Consequently that vast body of work is left to the mercy of the characters within the "play frame" of the performance and not included here.

As my work is not limited to written research I include also other forms of "literature", recorded media, live performance, and pedagogical sources.

2.1 PART 1 - RIDICULUSMUS

2.1.1 Self Published Comments

Our MA theses made some simple introductory comments within discussions of our attitude, technique and approach but these are amongst wider or different arguments and consequently rather basic[40]. Both Jon and myself have expressed a fear of analysis[41], a fear that is fairly common amongst practitioners, especially comedians.

> "There are few artists more insecure than humorists. They are traditionally suspicious of any attempt to analyze their techniques…It's their serious opinion that the skills, let alone the sense of humor are mystically inherited[42].

This negativity is most likely a form of self protection. The cut throat competitiveness of the business and consequent ego fragility makes comedians reluctant to give away what they think of as their "secrets".

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[40] My thesis: *Ridiculusmus. An analysis of current practice* highlighted comedy as one of the unstated principles behind our work but did not attempt to describe it in detail:

> I don't really agree with our published attitude to comedy anymore. It is a much more intricate combination of factors that make people laugh at our work. We do use reality, but that reality is heightened, exaggerated, escalated and dynamically active, all modifications which aim to provoke laughter in the observer. Re-performance itself can be enough to provoke laughter but communicating the re-performance is heightening, and escalation is development of the material to milk the laughter. What we try to hold on to throughout this growth is a realistic root, the impulses of a believable character. This is the gist of how we have adapted the Poor School approach to comedy - it is a turning up of the volume. An enlargement - gradually increasing size without loss of resolution. The enlargement highlights the banality, ridiculousness of people and situations, and their apparent dysfunctionality - behavioural traits like that of a clown. The attitude with which we increase this heat or size is one of modesty, not expecting laughs but ready to allow them if they come. (p23)

and Jon's *"Behind Current Role, The Person Himself Will Peek Out"* talks of me being addicted to laughter (p19) but little else to do with why or how we are funny.

[41] I declared my fear of death by analysis in "The grove of academe" *Total Theatre* Winter 2002/03. Jon couldn't bear to speak about himself with his own voice in his MA thesis work so wrote in the third person: "Jonathan Haynes' fear is that a far too frightening personal analysis will…ooze all over and ultimately suffocate the fledgling reflective practitioner. Haynes *op cit* p10

[42] Helitzer (p16)

Having already run the gauntlet of self analysis in *Ideas Men* and apparently overcoming this reticence in our MA theses, the prospect of unpicking our comedy to the point of it becoming mechanically re-creatable doesn't deter me from the task. Layers of protective detachment, digression and irony are employed to prevent it from feeling too personal, even if it is.

2.1.2 The Press

Though few reviewers have made an attempt to engage with our material in an analytical way[43], what brief mentions of the nature of our funniness or lack of funniness they have made are of interest. A recurring theme for reviewers is whether or not we are actually comic at all. "There are laughs," says Tim Richards[44], for example, "though I'm not sure you could really define it as comedy".

Generally reviewers seem to understand that we are not pursuing a conventional approach to comedy: "Their desire to explore is stronger than their desire to please - which is an admirable characteristic, though one that's as likely to produce bewilderment as belly-laughs"[45]. This has by no means always been the case, and writers have often assumed that our aim has been to achieve conventional success. The assumption then sets up a slagging on the grounds of our inability to deliver conventional material, and being of interest only to a minority. Fiona Shepherd, for example, said of *The Exhibitionists* "Some people actually seem to find this funny" [46] and Jane Edwardes in *Time Out,* assuming our aesthetic to be akin to hers, moaned "the rest of us need to be convinced that this shambolic aimlessness is deliberate"[47].

To some, our work is "is not so much funny as deeply unsettling"[48] and it often provokes an extremely negative reaction. Richard Cooke, for instance, writing in *The Chaser* explains:

> "No doubt I hated Ideas Men because it was a stinging rebuke to my bourgeois sensibilities…did it elicit more than wry smiles or the occasional forced laugh from its audience? No. Did it make me leave, yes." [49]

How we technically achieve our humour, whether it provokes a positive or negative reaction, is largely untouched. An exception, the reviewer Kate Bassett, claimed to have discovered our "secret":

> Ridiculusmus are madly chaotic but also deft, deadpan clowns. The surreal unpredictability of these guys is a joy, suddenly putting their suits on the wrong way round, lounging with feet up

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[43] The typical approach is to make brief sweeping comments along the following lines:
"Superb comic timing" Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*; "Hilarious" Helen Thomson *The Age;* "hysterically funny from an outsider's point of view, as the audience's full and continuous laughter confirmed." Rebecca Nesvet, *Theatre Wales*; "sublimely amusing" Dominic Cavendish *Daily Telegraph;"* bleakly hilarious" Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*.
[44] *Stage Left* review of *Say Nothing* at Melbourne Comedy Festival 28 March - 21 April 2002.
[45] Mark Fisher *The Independent* 23 August 2003
[46] *The List* 1998
[47] *Time Out* 11-18 January 1995
[48] Ben Eltham *The Courier Mail* 6 May 2004
[49] *The Chaser* Volume 6 no.8 issue 85 April 2004

on the desk but with the back of their heads where their faces should be. They also play unexpected, clever Pirandellian games with reality and role-play, for the pair switch characters at lightning speed, creating dreamlike jump-cuts. Some people might think this slight and silly - there were a few nonplussed faces the night I went. But with others the reaction was extraordinary, with spasmodic howls of laughter flaring up like will o'the-wisps - the woman next to me creased up silently, her head banging against the chair in front. Tops[50].

Whilst her discovery is insightful, it is show specific and does not make any enquiry of our underlying approach or attitude. Something Jackie Fletcher attempted in her review of *Ideas men* for *The British Theatre Guide*:

> Ridiculusmus are brilliant, invigorating and innovative because they ignore entirely any of the rules that were laid down for playwrights centuries ago, and which are still being replicated in MA Playwriting courses up and down the country. As a result their shows are always surprising, refreshing and anarchic. They are, in fact, braver than the bard, because they are well aware that the rule book has contemporary British drama in a straight-jacket, but they choose to swim against the tide. And there is another aspect of their work that is striking. They are in many ways Rabelaisian, medieval in their corporeality, reminiscent of those carnivalesque farceurs, so feared by the authorities, who performed in the days before such severe injunctions were invoked on the British body and acting became something one did from the neck up. It goes beyond spit, sweat and shagging, it goes further than fisticuffs. For example, in Ideas Men there is an incidence of what might be suicide by chocolate éclair, or the self-inflicted injury of stuffing oneself with cream cakes as a form of self-loathing, torture, desperation. It is very, very funny, shocking and, as an actor's sacrifice for his art, almost awe-inspiring[51].

This will to push possibilities to the extreme is noted by Ian Shuttleworth: they - have "long relished taking ideas that were already daft and torquing them into unexpected, hyper-ludicrous configurations"[52].

The idea that our comedy is about the exposure of reality or "truth" has been commented on: "Like all classic comedy there is great pain close beneath the surface..... While we're busy laughing at the absurdities, we're also recognizing the truth beneath the exaggeration and sense that we're giggling on thin ice. Woods and Hough use humor instead of fear and anger"[53].

Our physical appearance has also been noted as a factor in our funniness "Hough is a wispy figure with limp brown hair; Woods taller, broader, beaky of nose and bald as a coot. Even if they were to say nothing, like some street mime act, they'd probably have the audience in stitches"[54].

To sum up: Dead pan, surreal, illogical, extreme risk, exaggeration, truth, great pain, anger and appearance. I like some of these, don't agree with us being surreal[55]. What we do is heightened,

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[50] Review of *Ideas Men* in *The Independent on Sunday* 10 May 2003.
[51] *British Theatre Guide* www.britishtheatreguide.info (20 November 2004)
[52] Review of *Ideas Men* in *Financial Times* 8 October 2003.
[53] "Giggling on thin ice" review of *Ideas Men* by Joseph T.Rozmiarek in *Honolulu advertiser* 21 May 2004.
[54] Dominic Cavendish review of *Ideas Men* in *The Daily Telegraph*.

uncommented upon naturalism and we look like we look. A definition of the term "Naturalism" and further analysis of our version of it may be found in Section 3.1.2 on "Reality" in the Methodology.

2.1.3 Interviews

Occasionally we have given clues to our approach in interviews. I once said: "It's about looking for comedy in reality rather than gags"[56] really quoting Jon but these sound bites have been largely inaccurate. They are intended as promotion led teasers rather than serious evaluation and should be ignored.

2.2 PART 2 HOW TO BE FUNNY

2.2.1 Recorded Media

2.2.1.1 *Rowan Atkinson's Guide To Visual Comedy*[57]

Assuming the role of a sleepy corduroy clad Don, Atkinson introduces a series of practical demonstrations of aspects of visual humour carried out by a young actor character, also played by Atkinson. Atkinson states that visual comedy relies upon "sudden shocks and surprises" and has the actor character fall over while attempting to squash a water melon to achieve a punch sound effect. The fall achieves a louder sudden crack of noise from his head hitting the floor and is more surprising and funny, and so on. Leaving the tokenistic characterisation, poor acting and dated parody aside the viewer is offered a simple set of construction formula for visual/silent or physical humour based on incongruity without any use of language.

2.2.2 Live Performance

2.2.2.1 Alex Horne *Making Fish Laugh*

Horne's show gained him a nomination for Perrier[58] Best Newcomer award at the Edinburgh fringe festival in 2002 and claimed to use the 1976 publication *"It's a funny thing humour"* as its source material. However, the tables and diagrams he used, though seemingly authentic, were untraceable[59]. I'm not sure of the reason for this misinformation, it may have been a cover for his plagiarism from another text or was perhaps indeed his own invention to which he sought to give authenticity. Horne's manner was of post modern nonchalance, the sort of cocky-geeky arrogance

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[55] Surrealism is an important and interesting but largely irrelevant classification when considering the approach from the practice side. To me Surrealism has no logic and we like to have a logic in everything for us to be able to believe in it.

[56] Brian Logan interview in *Time Out* May 16-23 2001.

[57] Actually written and directed by David Hinton "with Rowan Atkinson" Tiger Television/BBC 1992.

[58] The Perrier Award is perhaps the most sought after contemporary comedy award. It began as a best of Edinburgh Fringe Festival selection exported to London but evolved into a stand up/broken comedy only award which tends to take its winners on a fast track to contracts with radio and television companies. Read more about this godforsaken bollocks award at: perriercomedyawards.com. In 2006 it was re-named "if.com*Eddies* award".

[59] The publication is a collection of papers presented at the International Conference on Humour and Laughter held in Cardiff, July 13th-17th, 1976 organized by the Welsh Branch of British Psychological Society and bore no resemblance to Horne's material.

that has swept into the comedy world in the wake of Dave Gorman's success with nerdic obsession as comedy[60].

> "Where most comics leave the stage with the line: "You've been a great audience", Horne can say precisely how great. I'm proud to report that we scored a more than respectable 6.3 out of ten. Horne is joined on stage throughout by Tim, a Statto-like sidekick, who helps conduct this least scientific of experiments to see how we react to such laughter stimuli as the mild discomfort of others, repetition and tickling. These tests are full of off-the-wall invention and form a solid framework on which Horne can hang his eccentricities. His approach to this research is initially tongue-in-cheek earnest, but that facade soon collapses under the weight of the situation's stupidity." [61]

2.2.2.2 Paul McDermott *Comedyoscopy*

Horne's decision to "collapse the façade" and break out of the premise was one taken a lot earlier by Paul McDermott who promised to "dissect and vivisect the secrets of this elusive craft"[62] in his 2002 Melbourne Comedy Festival show *Comedyoscopy*. He was in familiar digressive vein when I saw it - more interested in establishing his sexually potent stage persona and shocking the audience with his wickedly depraved humour e.g. a rendition of The Doug Anthony All-Stars[63] classic "I sucked the cock of little baby Jesus" and forcing the audience to chant "Fuck Off" - rather than actually tackle the question of funniness. In a pre-festival interview he stated that his intention for the show was to destroy comedy[64] but in performance had the audience join in with different types of laughter, gave examples of heckling and ranted about the rather soft targets of impersonators, impressionists and improv artists; people he considered to be representatives of "evil" comedy. What he considered to be good comedy unfortunately fell outside his fifty minute time slot[65].

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[60] Gorman's shows *Are you Dave Gorman?* (2000) and *Dave Gorman's Googlewhack adventure* (2003) were massive popular live successes that transferred into book deals and TV shows. They involve the meticulous execution of a pointless exercise: Finding 100 people with the name Dave Gorman and meeting the host of each of ten "googlewhacked" websites in the space of a year respectively. Similar comedic projects by Tony Hawks - hitching around Ireland with a fridge and beating the Moldovan football team at tennis; and Pete McCarthy's fatalistic endeavour to visit every pub with the name of McCarthy (he died of liver cancer shortly after); were similarly successful at tapping into a nerdic zeitgeist of popular entertainment. See www.davegorman.com , www.tony-hawks.com and www.uktouring.org.uk/petemccarthy for more.

[61] Steve Bennett review on www.chortle.co.uk (1 January 2005).

[62] *Comedyoscopy* publicity material.

[63] Comedy trio that McDermott was a member of 1986 - 1994.

[64] "McDermott has no intention of being sweetness and light in Comedyoscopy. Far from it. His intention with this show is to "tear away the gauze that's been put in front of their eyes so they won't find anything funny anymore and that way can get on with my life"... So in revealing the tricks of the trade and deconstructing the art of comedy, you're trying to wreck it for everybody? "Yeah, I want to wreck it for everybody, then we can all go and do something decent for society, I just want a void, a hollow where comedy used to be," he declares. Does this mean after seeing your show we won't need or want to see any others? "No! I think you'll want to go and see every other show after this one because you'll be so depressed," he chuckles mischievously, 'is that what it's about? Oh my god!' And also you'll want to test your new found knowledge about the structure of a gag and also the heckle lines I intend to give people..." are you going to be evil are you? "But I am. What do you mean 'going to be'? Joanne Brookfield. *Beat Magazine*, Melbourne 3 April 2002

[65] This is a common problem with contemporary fringe and comedy festivals. Michael Billington explains with reference to Edinburgh: "there is a grave danger of the whole Edinburgh International Festival being swamped by the overweening, grotesquely outsized and highly commercialised Fringe...you wouldn't find anyone risking a three-hour

Interestingly McDermott and Horne were paired up by the 2004 Singapore International Comedy Festival for a comedy debate about "what makes us laugh" which promised "No shortage of illustrations, wacky logic and outrageous theories. Audience decides winner"[66]. I wasn't able to find out anymore about this but can guess it would have been digressive and interesting rather than specific, useful or funny.

2.2.3 Guidebooks

On the published guidebook front, a largely American output, there are at least five in print publications with "How to be funny" in their titles and many other similar publications in this obviously lucrative genre.

There is something slightly embarrassing about being seen with such books and it isn't so much to do with the garishly colourful covers as the sad ambition it betrays of the reader. The implication being that If you are reading a glossy colourful book with "How to be funny" written in large friendly letters, you are a dull, colourless and unfunny person. Possibly the most embarrassing is Judy Carter's *The Comedy Bible - From Stand Up To Sit Com, The Comedy Writers Ultimate How To Guide*. It is divided into three parts - "Is there any hope for you?", "Your life is a joke" and "Funny money". Books of this ilk tend to fill large sections with depressingly revelatory teaser sections about how you are going to make money/get rich/be famous/never be out of work etc. "Someone offers you $50,000 a year to write funny ads, it could happen"[67]. I witnessed similar sentiments from Arnold Brown at The London Comedy School[68]: "In two years you could be a millionaire, have your own series on television and be starring in the next Hollywood blockbuster". Tempting stuff for the ragbag of overeducated shelf stackers, life trainers and aspiring open-spotters who were attending.

Perhaps this is the most embarrassing thing. The attraction and selling point used for these products is as a fast track to getting rich and/or famous, or famous and (they think) therefore, rich. Such greed is embarrassing to be associated with.

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straight play in the current Fringe climate. Everything has to be short and fast so that you can rush on to the next event, or so that the venue can maximise its box-office potential. But the basic fact is that the child has outgrown the parent, and the Fringe has turned from a seductive alternative into a cultural behemoth... It is increasingly like shopping in a cultural hypermarket. Everywhere there is an obsession with size and scale. The Fringe office reels off endless statistics, telling you this year there will be 20,342 performances of 1,491 shows by 619 companies in 183 venues...The Fringe used to be a manageable experience that offered genuine artistic pleasure...But now (it)...has turned into a monstrous mixture of trade fair, rat-race, audition centre and showcase for sensation-seekers out to catch the gullible media. Just watch the column-inches piling up for Deep Throat or Lesbian Laundrette. That, you might say, is the nature of the world we live in. But my contention is that, by its pre-emptive timing and unregulated scale, the Fringe is slowly but surely strangling the International Festival. And when the latter is finally driven out of business we might stop and ask ourselves whether it was really worth sacrificing the Janacek String Quartet for Richard Herring Talking Cock." (25 July 2002 *The Guardian*)

[66] www-singapore.com/events/events2.html (2 January 2005)
[67] Carter p30
[68] 28 November 2004

2.2.3.1 Formulae

Comedy guidebooks are very fond of the formula. In *The Comic Toolbox: How to be funny, even if you're not,* for example, John Vorhaus expounds his:

$$Comedy = Truth + Pain$$

formula whilst In *The Complete Idiot's guide to comedy writing*, James Mendrinos shares a universal joke formula:

$$Premise + Point Of View + Twist = Joke$$

Judy Carter's is slightly different:

$$Attitude + Topic + Premise + Act Out + Mix + Act Out$$

Steve Allen[69] meanwhile has seven formulas:

Play On Words
Reverse
Exaggeration
Implication
I'm Not So Dumb
Juggling
Random Rhyme Formulas

But these are really classifications of jokes. He clears up any confusion the reader may have between formulas and joke types by clarifying in an interview section his general statement that:

$$Comedy = Tragedy + Time$$

Melvin Helitzer uses a collection of acronyms - "The THREES" (standing for five[70]) essentials of humour:

Target, Hostility, Realism, Exaggeration and Emotion

and isolates seven major joke formulas "which can be played individually or in chords":

Double Entendres
Reverses
Triples
Incongruity
Stupidity
Paired Phrases
Physical Abuse (Slapstick)

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[69] Creator of *The Tonight Show* and known to UK audiences through frequent re-runs of his spoof interviews with the public e.g. "Would you vote for a known heterosexual?"
[70] This joke is also used by the comedy groups The Four Noels (there are three of them) The Three Canadians (there are four of them) and Los Trios Ringbarkus the 1983 Perrier winners (there are two of them) to name but seven.

Jay Sankey's *Zen And The Art Of Stand Up Comedy* disappointingly[71] also boils it down to a list of four familiar elements:

<div align="center">

Surprise
Credibility
Truth
Exaggeration

</div>

After a while they all start to seem pretty similar, and as mentioned earlier, much page space is devoted to examples of their own uses of these formulas.

2.2.3.2 Character, Practice And Resilience

Eventually all the manuals come back to two unassailable[72] points in the context of their manuals - the need to suit the material to the character and the need to practise:

> Humour doesn't go into character - it comes out of a character. A character needs a trademark...an individual style (sometimes called a hook or shtick). Without a shtick the performer is just a writer of jokes. With it...the performer is the joke.[73]

Helitzer has an acronym for this of course: "MAP - Material - audience - performer" Each must relate to the others with the "common denominator" of character. He suggests twenty types of character and concludes with the "performance secrets": establish a character, let the audience feel superior, make the audience care.

Carter concludes: "I've learned that it's not always the person with the most talent who succeeds - it's the one with the most endurance" and suggests putting yourself in connection with funny people so that their ability will rub off on you - presumably by a combination of mimesis and osmosis[74].

The general drift is that these books are self confessedly useless and you just have to find your own ideas, go out and do it for yourself:

> The first rule is that there are no rules. Take all this stuff with a huge crystalline grain of salt. My tools are my tools, designed for my convenience[75].

There is another synagogue's worth of even less useful guides. Many are aimed at children[76] or the general public[77] and, to preserve what small amount of credibility I may have remaining in this

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[71] Disappointing in that if any of these books were going to raise the level of enquiry you would think this would be the one - it doesn't.

[72] Unassailable in that Judy Carter, for example, requires the reader to fax or email commitment contracts to her at numbers and email addresses that no longer work (p55) and directs you to read no further until you have fulfilled all these tasks in order (p69). The rest make no attempt to monitor reader's progress.

[73] Helitzer p179

[74] Carter p51

[75] Vorhaus pxiv

literature survey, I am not going to discuss them here[78]. My aspiration here is performance mastery and virtuosity, comedy as an art form, and, in the practical work, meta comedy as its vehicle.

2.2.4 Pedagogy[79] Of Funniness

There are practical workshops and courses one can take. The London Comedy School and Jackson's Lane Community Centre[80] teach stand up[81] along the lines of the glossy guidebooks. The Ecole Jaques Lecoq and two of its former teachers, Pierre Byland and Phillippe Gaulier, (who now run their own schools) teach three relevant disciplines "Le Jeu", "Clown" (titled by Byland "Homo Stupidens") and "Bouffons". Derivations of these courses and ideas are taught by former pupils all over the world with varying degrees of development away from their sources[82]. I attended the Gaulier taught courses and backed up the outbursts of its bouffonesque teacher[83] with a reading of Lecoq's *The Moving Body*.

Lecoq discovered that the true nature of clowning was failure[84] and began tuition with an exploration of what makes the individual ridiculous -

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[76] For example: Jovial Bob Stine *How To Be Funny, An Extremely Silly Guidebook* New York, E.P Dutton 1978 and Gyles Brandreth *How To Be Funny* London, Hippo books 1990.

[77] Jon Macks *How To Be Funny* New York, Simon and Schuster 2003.

[78] Some of them are actually a great laugh for what may or mat not be the wrong reasons - Mark Stolzenberg *How To Be Really Funny* New York, Sterling 1988 is laugh out loud bad. Having invested in all this crap for the sake of this research - no library would admit to stocking this pap - I endeavoured to use some of the formulaic systems to recoup my losses, booking the open slots as Judy Carter insisted (Comedy in tatters (the Tattershall castle) London and Sir Laughalot in Epsom) and generating material along the guidelines given. The results are best left buried; suffice to say I'm not earning the millions they said I could.

[79] A wanky academic word for teaching or training.

[80] Also in London.

[81] It was a teacher from one of these courses that rang us up during the period of *The Tomato Club* to say that our invitation to "acts that considered themselves bad enough to appear" was disgraceful. More on *The Tomato club* in *Woods* 2003.

[82] Taking three more successful Gaulier/LeCoq graduates as examples - Mick Barnfarther (Theatre de Complicite ensemble regular) teaches using Gaulier catchphrases and even speaks them in a French accent, Angela de Castro (original Auguste for Slava Polunin's *Snowshow*), a Brazilian Ecole PhilippeGaulier graduate has secured NESTA (National Endowment For Science Technology And The Arts) funding to take her into a deeper investigation of the naivety she discovered at Gaulier and teaches a course "How To Be A Stupid"; and Jos Houben (another Theatre de Complicite collaborator) – has combined the ideas of Lecoq with his Feldenkrais learning and aligned it with elementary humour theory research to create an original "Make Em Laugh" course that concentrates on rhythm, assymetricality and instability.

[83] In class, Gaulier goes into role as a provocative and belligerent bouffon character shouting "Boring" or "Get off" at students when they "fail".

[84] "I suggested that the students arrange themselves in a circle...and make us laugh... one after another they tried. The result was catastrophic. When they realised what a failure it was, they stopped improvising and went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. It was at that point, when they saw their weaknesses, that everyone burst out laughing at the person underneath, stripped bare for all of us to see." (Lecoq *Moving body* p143) Lecoq was not the first to value failure. Samuel Beckett, who wrote in 1949 that Bram Van Velde is "the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world... I know that all that is required now, in order to bring this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation." For Beckett, Bram van Velde embodies the spirit expressed at the end of Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, when tired of waiting, one of

Research on one's own clown [85] begins by looking for one's ridiculous side. The more (the actor) is himself, the more his weakness is shown up, the funnier he will be... he must avoid playing a role..give free rein to the innocence inside[86].

- whilst being wary of letting his students get too deeply involved with these aspects of themselves for their psychological well being. The reluctance to become "Stanislavskian" is emphasised by Phillippe Gaulier:

> "Its necessary to use a fundamental trick of theatre - the one most venerated by actor and audience alike, because without it no game would exist: artifice. Artifice is the deceitful and artful vehicle that disguises so well the truth that everyone believes. In theatre, artifice is truer than the real. We believe the artifice because this, as opposed to real personal misery, doesn't destroy any part of the pleasure we have to imagine the show that takes place before our eyes. On the contrary, it stimulates this pleasure, leading it to unimaginable delights. Theatre is the very real pleasure of artifice."[87]

Whilst the impulse of the clown is to naively engage with everything, the Bouffon's is the more naughty and provocative "to mock"[88]. Both are filled with "Le Jeu"[89], a readiness to play with joy for the benefit of the audience. This movement away from the banality of generalised realism towards an emphasis on playfulness as the critical element in the development of the humorist seems to me to be a refreshing area for the student of funniness[90].

2.3 PART 3 PLAY LITERATURE

There are five key texts that chart the concept of play into "Deep Play" as defined in the introduction earlier. In historical order they are: Jeremy Bentham's *Theory Of Legislation* (1780), Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), Roger Caillois' *Man, Play And Games* (1958), Gregory Bateson's *Steps To An Ecology Of Mind* (1972) and Clifford Geertz's hilarious "Notes on the Balinese cock fight" which is included in his 1973 *Interpretation Of Cultures.* Richard Schechner has grouped and classified the above texts into a simple "dipping and circulating" bullet point style information led book: *Performance Studies An Introduction* (2002) and added the definition of "Dark Play" (also defined on page 15 above)

Beckett's tramps asserts, "I can't go on," but, having no alternatives, concludes immediately, "I'll go on." Beckett *Bram Van Velde* p3

[85] Gaulier defines "one's own clown" as "a unique idiotic character". www.ecolephilippegaulier.com/frames.html (2 January 2005)

[86] *The Moving Body* p145-146

[87] www.ecolephilippegaulier.com/frames.html (2 January 2005)

[88] Lecoq p105

[89] "Le Jeu - game and play - is the source of everything: of the pleasure and desire to be an actor. Playing in the theatre is the same as playing at running, jumping, fighting as people and animals do : playing cowboys, Indians, soldiers, doctors and with dolls." www.ecolephilippegaulier.com/frames.html (2 January 2005)

[90] I did however have a 13 day disagreement with Gaulier over the degree of naivety he believed necessary for a clown. My feeling at the time was that a clown could be sophisticated, complex and "adult" yet still be stupid and funny.

2.3.1 Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) *Theory Of Legislation* (1780)

Bentham's invention of the concept of "Deep Play" appears as a mere footnote to a chapter on "Pathological propositions upon which the good of equality is founded" a paragraph about the loss of wealth relating to the loss of happiness.

> It is to this head that the evils of deep play ought to be referred. Though the chances, so far as relates to money, are equal, in regard to pleasure they are always unfavourable. I have a thousand pounds. The stake is five hundred. If I lose, my fortune is diminished one half; if I gain, it is increased only by a third. Suppose the stake to be a thousand pounds. If I gain my happiness is not doubled with my fortune; if I lose, my happiness is destroyed, I am reduced to indigence[91].

Geertz has saved me the bother of interpreting it:

> By it ("Deep Play") he (Bentham) means play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all[92].

2.3.2 Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) *Homo Ludens* 1938

Huizinga established a definition of play:

> It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space in a visible order. According to rules freely accepted and outside of the necessity for material utility. The play mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exultation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow[93].

According to Huizinga in order "Really to play, a man must play like a child"[94] he believes that losing "eternal child like innocence"[95] has resulted in "virtue...going out of the game[96] as playing becomes increasingly "conscious of its own grace"[97].

He argues that "Civilization arises and unfolds in play"[98] and gives examples of play in ancient civilization's law, war, sacred ritual:

> The spirit of playful competition is older than culture itself and pervades all life. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play,

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[91] *Theory Of Legislation* p106 (Indigence means extreme poverty)
[92] Geertz p432
[93] *Homo Ludens* p132
[94] *Ibid* p199
[95] *Ibid* p202
[96] *Ibid* p199
[97] *Ibid* p202
[98] *Ibid* Foreword

wisdom and philosophy...the rules of war, the conventions of noble living were (all) built up on play patterns. We have to conclude, therefore that civilization is...played. It doesn't *come from* play...it arises *in* and *as* play and never leaves it[99].

He bewails the denigration of play in "modern social life" into "something that yields the illusion of play .. but is puerilism"[100]. A form of shallow play that he holds responsible and symptomatic of "the world wide bastardization of culture"[101]. One might create a contemporary list, Huizinga was writing over 50 years ago and the trend is snowballing. Huizinga says that this "puerilism" is "false play.. (that makes it) increasingly difficult to tell where play ends and non play begins[102] (A note that echoes my point about joking and seriousness from the introduction[103]) and repeatedly re-iterates that "play is serious"[104] or indeed "of a higher order than seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness"[105].

More and more doubts arise as to whether our occupations are pursued in play or in earnest, and with the doubts come the uneasy feeling of hypocrisy as though the only thing we can be certain of is make-believe[106].

Whilst Huzinga's snobbishness about play may be off putting (Schechner likens his "pure" play to "the disinterested play of gentleman amateurs"[107] he has described qualities and distinctions that remain relevant in the understanding of "Deep" and "Dark" play.

Huizinga talks of the need for "difficulty" and "High stakes" when playing to give rise to greater "tension" which will "raise the tone (and) intensity of life" making it more "beautiful"[108]. To "live in beauty" he says, is "an imperishable need of man" and "there is no satisfying this need, save in play"[109]. He distinguishes between spoil-sports who destroy play by "robbing it of illusion" which "reveals and threatens it fragile state" and cheats who corrupt outcomes of games whilst still playing concluding that society is more tolerant of cheats than spoil sports"[110]

In hypothesising that Ridiculusmus use "Deep" and "Dark" play as "cornerstones" of our comedy and that we are "tricksters" I am aligning us with Huizinga's cheats. We play the game but apparently not by the rules.

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[99] Huizinga p173
[100] *Ibid* p205
[101] *Ibid* p205
[102] *Ibid* p206
[103] Footnote 3 to Section 1.1 Being Funny.
[104] *Ibid* p20
[105] *Ibid* p45
[106] *Ibid* p191
[107] Schechner *Performance Studies: An Introduction* p85
[108] Huizinga p48
[109] *Ibid* p63
[110] *Ibid* p11

2.3.3 Roger Caillois (1913-1978) *Man, Play And Games* 1958

Caillois' 1958 work was a response to Huizinga work that he considered to be "too broad and too narrow"[111] and attempted to bring Huizinga's definitions up to date by including new categories of games that Huizinga had not. He defined play simply as "an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, shill and often of money"[112] and produced a table of types of play under his four areas - Agon (competitive play), Ilea (chance), Ilinx (thrill of speed) and Mimicry (imitation) and set them against a sliding scale of Paidia (uncontrolled tumult) and Ludus (formalised structure). I have added a few modern references for ease of understanding:

	Agon (competition)	Alea (Chance)	Mimicry (simulation)	Ilinx (vertigo)
Paidia Tumult, Agitation, Laughter	Racing, wrestling (not regulated)	Counting out rhymes. Heads or tails	Children's initiations, games of illusion	Children whirling, Waltzing, Swings and roundabouts, Horseback riding
Kite flying Solitaire Patience Crossword puzzles **Ludus**	Boxing, billiards, chess, fencing, contest sports in general	Betting, Roulette, The lottery	Theatre, Spectacles in general	Skiing, Tightrope walking Climbing Bungee jumping Parachuting

Caillois also distinguishes between cheats and spoil sports (he calls them nihilists):

> If the cheat violates the rules (of the game) he at least pretends to respect them. He takes advantage of the other player's loyalty to the rules.. his dishonesty does not ruin the game. The game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional...who refuses to play because the game is meaningless. His arguments are irrefutable[113].

and devotes a whole chapter to the "Corruption of Games":

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[111] Caillois *Man, Play And Games* p4
[112] *Ibid* ps 5-6
[113] *Ibid* p7

There are specific perversions to each category of games where pleasure becomes obsession, escape becomes obligation, a pastime, a passion, compulsion and source of anxiety..(in them) the principle of play has become corrupted[114].

Another table helps illustrate:

AGON	Cultural forms (at margin of social order)	Institutional forms (integrated into social life)	Corruption
Competition	Sports	Economic competition, Examinations	Violence, will to power, Trickery
Alea (chance)	Lotteries, casinos Hippodromes	Stock market speculation	Superstition, Astrology
Mimicry (simulation)	Carnival, theatre Cinema, hero-worship	Uniforms, ceremonial etiquette	Alienation Split personality
Ilinx (vertigo)	Mountain climbing, skiing Tightrope walking, speed	Professions requiring control of vertigo - window cleaner Rigger, painter	Alcoholism and drugs

Caillois is less ambitious than Huizinga and states "trying to define a culture by deriving it from games alone would be a rash and probably fallacious undertaking"[115]. He prefers to muse on sociological clues arising from games and does so making unintentionally humorous and offensive generalizations as he does so. Caillois, like Huizinga, imagines:

> a golden age where people play by the rules....a Utopia where violent irruptive ecstasy is rare and strictly governed. There is little dependency on chance or fate because people live rationally[116].

2.3.4 Gregory Bateson (1904-1980)*Steps To An Ecology Of Mind* 1972

Bateson's "Steps", which include a series of metalogues[117] between a father and daughter, demonstrate his belief in the benefit of deductive learning - "an explorer can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored"[118] so that we have to work to gain knowledge and so gain a sense of ownership of our discovery whilst actually remaining in a sort of heavy mist of confusing but trendy interdisciplinary bumph or "soft science"[119].

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[114] *Ibid* ps 44-45
[115] *Ibid* p66
[116] This is Schechner's summing up from *Ibid* p85.
[117] Bateson defines a metalogue as "a conversation about some problematic subject". (p1)
[118] Bateson *Steps To An Ecology Of Mind* pxxiv
[119] Ibid pxxv

My deduction from the metalogue "About Games And Being Serious" is that in an interesting game the rules are discovered as part of the game:

> F: The point is that the purpose of these conversations is to discover the rules. Its like life.... The rules are always changing and always undiscoverable

> D: I don't call that a game daddy

> F: Perhaps not. I would call it a game, or at any rate "play"[120]

And from "A Theory Of Play And Fantasy"[121] that subtle "meta communicative frames"[122] are necessary when playing to communicate without heavy handedness a moment of play is occurring and should be enjoyed as such.

I believe and agree wholeheartedly with both these points which makes me suspicious that the effect of Bateson's inductive learning leads to the development and confirmation of one's own theories rather than those of the writer which as an artist is stimulating and satisfying and as an academic practise based researcher guilt inducing.

Bateson (or I) seem to suggest that a game does not lead to new knowledge whereas play does. Cheating is a part of play and by cheating, a new rule or understanding is developed.

A good example of cheating in action is the "Hand of God" goal scored by Diego Maradona in the Football World Cup quarter final for Argentina against England in Mexico in 1986: At first it appeared that the player had scored legally with his head, the England goalkeeper - Peter Shilton protested but the referee - without the benefit of television replay allowed the goal to stand. Maradona later described his strike as "Partly Maradona, partly the hand of God" and despite England fans still chanting "Same Old Argies, always cheating" to the tune of the alien spaceship in the film *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*[123] whenever England play Argentina, Maradona's act was accepted as part of football history. This was made more palatable by a miraculous second goal he scored shortly afterwards in the same match that was undisputedly legal and involved him waltzing around half the England team as if they didn't exist and the fact that he led them to victory in the competition that year. Maradona was a cheat but a brilliant playful one and that was acceptable. This indulgence however was strained in recent times when Maradona claimed on his television show *La Noche del Diez* that he assured his teammates who were "timid...as if they were saying: 'We've robbed them'" that : "he who robs a thief gets a 100-year pardon." The player was apparently referring to the Falklands War, fought unsuccessfully by Argentina against the UK to take control of the islands it claimed as its own[124]. I see this recent comment of his as a brilliant deepening of the game playing as much as a PR stunt to boost his TV ratings. England fans however are more likely to resort to relishing images of Maradona's fall from grace into serious drug use and obesity for solace. The "game" around this moment has made it legendary.

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[120] *Ibid* ps 19-20
[121] *Ibid* ps 177-193
[122] *Ibid* p428
[123] Written and directed by Steven Spielberg 1977.
[124] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4176258.stm 23 August 2005

2.3.5 Clifford Geertz (1926 -) "Deep Play: Notes On The Balinese Cockfight" 1973

Appearing as almost an appendix to his book *The Interpretation Of Cultures* Geertz's essay is perhaps the most useful to this study of all the literature of play. It is a hilarious account of the culture of cock fighting in Bali which uses detailed anecdote to produce precise theory, definitions, and concepts.

> The deep psychological identification of Balinese men with their cocks is unmistakable. The double entendre here is deliberate. It works in exactly the same way in Balinese as it does in English, even to producing the same tired jokes, strained puns, and uninventive obscenities. ....cocks are viewed as detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own... the fact that they are masculine symbols par excellence is about as indubitable, and to the Balinese about as evident, as the fact that water runs downhill[125].

Hilarity aside the thrust of Geertz's definition is vigorously put. I am not going to pretend to have anything enlightening to say about Geertz. His work is self explanatory and merits lengthy quotation:

> The Balinese attempt to create an interesting, if you will, "deep," match by making the center bet as large as possible so that the cocks matched will be as equal and as fine as possible, and the outcome, thus, as unpredictable as possible. .. The question why such matches are interesting - indeed, for the Balinese, exquisitely absorbing - takes us out of the realm of formal concerns into more broadly sociological and social-psychological ones, and to a less purely economic idea of what "depth" in gaming amounts to ... It is because money does, in this hardly unmaterialistic society, matter and matter very much that the more of it one risks the more of a lot of other things, such as one's pride, one's poise, one's dispassion, one's masculinity, one also risks, again only momentarily but again very publicly as well. In deep cockfights an owner and his collaborators...put their money where their status is.

> It is in large part because the marginal disutility of loss is so great at the higher levels of betting that to engage in such betting is to lay one's public self, allusively and metaphorically, through the medium of one's cock, on the line. And though to a Benthamite this might seem merely to increase the irrationality of the enterprise that much further, to the Balinese what it mainly increases is the meaningfulness of it all. What is really going on in a match is something rather closer to an *affaire d'honneur*.

> Psychologically an Aesopian representation of the ideal/demonic, rather narcissistic, male self, sociologically it is an equally Aesopian representation of the complex fields of tension set up by the controlled, muted, ceremonial, but for all that deeply felt, interaction of those selves in the context of everyday life. The

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[125] Geertz p417

> cocks may be surrogates for their owners' personalities, animal mirrors of psychic form, but the cockfight is - or more exactly, deliberately is made to be - a simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of crosscutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups -- villages, kin groups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, "castes" - in which its devotees live. And as prestige, the necessity to affirm it, defend it, celebrate it, justify it, and just plain bask in it (but not given the strongly ascriptive character of Balinese stratification, to seek it), is perhaps the central driving force in the society, so also - ambulant penises, blood sacrifices, and monetary exchanges aside - is it of the cockfight. This apparent amusement and seeming sport is, to take another phrase from Erving Goffman, "a status bloodbath."[126]

Geertz portrays the cock fights as the most intense theatrical experience:

> The mob scene quality, the sense that sheer chaos is about to break loose, with all these waving, shouting, pushing, clambering men is quite strong, an effect which is only heightened by the intense stillness that falls when the battle begins[127].

But ultimately it changes nothing, after the fight all is forgotten, the fight "lives only in its own present"[128] and for the Balinese marks either "full" or "empty" times[129]:

> It is not a reinforcement of status discriminations, it is a meta-social commentary upon the whole matter of sorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks...its function is interpretive, a story they tell themselves, about themselves[130].

2.3.6 Richard Schechner (1934 -) "Dark Play" (2002)

Richard Schechner created a new theoretical term "Dark Play" in his 2002 publication *Performance Studies: An Introduction*:

> Playing in the dark means that some of the players don't know that they are playing… it is connected to Maya-Lila and the feeling of being caught in the toils of fate or chance. It involves fantasy, risk, luck, daring, invention and deception...it may be entirely private... or erupt suddenly... it subverts order, dissolves frames and breaks its own rules - so much so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed. "Dark Play"'s goals are deceit, disruption, excess and gratification… and the non-knowing players are essential to the playing[131].

Compared to Geertz's seven year stay in a rural Balinese village Schechner's research method of asking students on his courses at the University Of New York to relay tales of "Dark Play" from their lives is rather lazy and shallow.

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[126] *Ibid* p436
[127] *Ibid* p429
[128] *Ibid* p445
[129] *Ibid* p448
[130] *Ibid* p448
[131] Schechner *Performance Studies: An Introduction* ps106-107

It reminds me of an exercise at The Poor School to tell the story of "the worst thing that ever happened to you". This was an exercise as part of acting study to demonstrate how reality is a lot more heightened than we imagine when dramatically interesting; and resulted in a series of attempts to outdo fellow students efforts with more and more tragedy and affliction. Inevitably reality was exaggerated and sold as the truth. Indeed with each telling the group would crank up the stakes so that illness would be outdone by death, death by painful death and so on, refraining narrowly from the soap operaesque abyss of murder and bodies in the garden. Comics like Jane Godley have turned this into their "shtick"[132]

> ..a personal history that would outdo anyone: Hard working but alcoholic father, feckless and debt prone mother, regularly abused and raped by uncle most of childhood, left school early, married into a gangster family, husband prone to depression and bouts of physical violence, one brother HIV positive heroin addict, mother murdered by violent boyfriend, arrested and imprisoned with husband after a police raid on their house finding explosives and firearms[133].

Schechner's deduction is that the attraction of "Dark Play" is the exploration and exploding of the limits of power and authority. The players are excitingly liberated from mundane reality and gain "power over themselves"[134] admitting that "some moments only become play in the re-telling"[135]. His concept seems to have little to differentiate it from "deep play" other than there is a degree of cheating and deception involved that makes it less predictable but not necessarily more exciting. For example, applying this to the betting scenario, in "Deep Play" I could stake a ridiculously large amount of money, and therefore status, on a 50-50 bet on cocks from which I know there would be one of two outcomes - I win or I lose; whereas in "Dark Play" I wouldn't know any of the possible outcomes so am likely to play less deeply as it is less interesting - I could win, I could lose, the others might not want to play, the others might not understand and the match would be uneven etc...Schechner's "Dark Play" can be used to describe Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre, where members of the public are unwittingly involved in improvisations and pranks where the victim is unaware of another's deception.

2.3.7 Others

Other books have spun off from these texts - Nachmanovitch's meditation on improvisation *Free play* - includes further anthropological examples of "Deep Play" or "Potlatch" as he calls it which similarly illustrate daring exchanges and destruction of goods to maintain or extend status.

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[132] "Shtick" is used here to mean a characteristic attribute of the act.
[133] *The Observer* 12 June 2005 Interview with Stephanie Merritt
[134] *Ibid* p107
[135] *Ibid* p107

Hand of God

3. Methodology

3.1 ARSEFLOP Re-Evaluated

The performance element of this project was intended to be made, and actually began with, improvisation led devising techniques guided by the ARSEFLOP principles that I have developed with Jonathan Haynes over the lifetime of Ridiculusmus[136].These are, in essence, an articulation and expansion of fairly common improvisation principles: Attitude; Reality; Sensitivity; Edge; Open (Your Heart); Play. In my MA thesis, *Ridiculusmus: An Analysis Of Current Practice*, I included a re-evaluation and expansion of the ARSEFLOP principles and shall not duplicate that research and analysis here. This does however present the reader with an apparently awkward absence of information on the Ridiculusmus method and whilst I would encourage the reading of the earlier work, the current writing does stand alone and prior knowledge of the group's system is not necessary. In the period of time between MA and PhD nothing changed about our approach. The Ridiculusmus working method is a skeleton upon which each project fleshes out its character and whilst that skeleton renews, matures and alters, the shape remains identifiable as the joint creation of Jon and myself. Where relevant below I have discussed the alterations and modifications associated with this project.

3.1.1 Attitude

> Comedy is simply a point of view…standing outside a character or situation and pointing out one's delight in certain aspects of it[137].

Comedy is utterly reliant on confidence. You need to feel funny to find it, confident that others will find you funny in order to perform it and faith to carry it through in difficult circumstances. Comedians would appear to need to be arrogant or thick skinned to have such extreme "fuck-you" faith in themselves but I think that this strength doesn't need to be foregrounded. Indeed an equally successful strategy is to express the insecurity one feels and acknowledge the irrelevance of one's ideas and the deluded boldness in believing that one is worth listening to or watching. This takes real strength of character to share and is a perfect foil for the necessary arrogance and ego to get up in front of an audience in the first place. The low status alluded to is a deliberate tactic in order to endear an audience. Our characters are commonly low status, dysfunctional and backward. In writing a reflection of this performance technique I include phrases such as "I am not a writer", that "this thesis is a joke" and unpublishable. The aim is the same, to disarm an audience's reluctance to enjoy high status arrogance by playing low status insecurity. There are successful high status comedians but they generally find a way of deflating themselves.

3.1.2 Reality

In Germany the study of laughter as a branch of philosophy is called "*Lebensphilosophie*"[138] or the philosophy of life. Comedy is life. But it is not as simple as that.

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[136] Ridiculusmus began in 1992 shortly after graduating from The Poor School's two year acting course, and ARSEFLOP was first defined in 1999.
[137] Athene Seyler *The Craft Of Comedy* p9
[138] See: buecherei.philo.at/leben.htm

The wit spontaneously creates humour whilst the comedian collects it and re-performs it. We always prize the wit's intelligence and value the unrehearsed sally over the remembered joke. The professional comic successfully conceals this divide. I want to re-dispel a myth about Stand Up comedy[139]. Stand Up comedy is an act, it is not reality; it is a performance by a person of themselves as a Stand Up comedian. It is not them talking, it is scripted and then brilliantly acted to give the impression the person is coming up with those ideas and quips, in the moment, so as to win laughs for their apparently instantaneous wit. No comic, including the supposedly great improvisers - Eddie Izzard, Ross Noble, Al Murray, actually improvises 100%. Their success is a marketing one - in that the public have been successfully convinced that their heroes are making it up as they go along. A term sometimes called "sans script ". Even what seems to be ad-libbed in response to some oddity of the occasion is actually scripted, memorised and then used at an appropriate time by comedians. Fans savouring the pros' "quick" turn of phrase are really admiring their memory and their ability to transfuse old material into a new situation. Most of their performances are recorded, re-written, and rehearsed. This myth is reinforced by the setting of a comedy club where:

> A Stand Up comedy performance involves direct communication with an audience. Performing rather than acting... the audience are spoken to, conferred with and confided in, and more importantly their responses are acknowledged. A temporary fourth wall may be erected, but they constantly return to directly addressing the audience by briefly sharing the implications of what's being said, with passing comments, rhetorical questions and facial muggings. Stand Up comedy therefore has two agendas – performing prepared material plus all the business of delivering it to this audience on this particular occasion[140].

Our work is a modification of this scenario. We have developed a particularly slow style of making characters and material which begins with true-life observations. At The Poor School, working with pre-scripted plays, we were encouraged to get a play "off the page"[141] - that is, making it sound as natural speech sounds. This is a much harder task when speaking another writer's words. One's own writing - especially if made in improvisation, where it is instantly "live", is a lot easier to give a naturalistic rhythm and delivery. Jon and I are meticulous at typing up every stutter, pause and repetition of improvisatory dialogue and then learning it in all its natural messiness for re-performance. It may well include comments to an imagined audience, meta-commentary on the staging of the piece and its success or failure. In *Yes, Yes, Yes* we start with a visual pun of smashing an ice block that emerges from a cardboard box I have been hidden in with it while the audience come in. My first line is: "There that's broken the ice" to which I add the meta comment: "I know, it's terrible, twenty minutes in a box for that!" All originally improvised, then scripted, re-learned and re-performed, as if for the first time; in other words, what is commonly known as "naturalistic acting" albeit of the most unnatural actions.

In the making of television series *The Office* co-writer Stephen Merchant recalls:

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[139] Tony Allen in *Attitude* covers this clearly: "Myth has it that the art of the comedian is a natural gift, despite the fact that deconstruction reveals it to be honed, heightened and carefully selected re-runs of normal speech and behaviour." p27
[140] Tony Allen *Attitude* p28
[141] Not to be confused with being "off book" which means knowing your lines.

We just knew we had to get the best naturalistic actors ever, we were thinking we should get people who aren't actors - We'll get real people to do it! But the thing is real people can't do it. In fact most actors can't do it. The most flattering thing for us is when people think it's improvised."[142]

3.1.2.1 "Naturalistic" acting

I use the term "Naturalistic acting" to refer to a kind of heightened "reality" that is edited and then refined into entertainment. It is life without the boring bits.

3.1.2.1.1 Stanislavski

When we think of what naturalism has come to mean the name Stanislavski is usually featured. Stanislavski was not a naturalist - if we take that to mean unadorned reality or the factual recreation of actual circumstances of human life. He developed the use of "emotion memory" whereby a real event in one's life similar to that of the play is remembered and used as a foundation for the performance. For example, if I had to act the grieving of my mother's death and my mother hadn't died, I would have to think of some other death that would help me trigger the feeling - a favourite dog or cat perhaps. It is a theatre myth that this was taken further by Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan at their "Method" school in New York where famous graduates like Marlon Brando would recreate the feeling they were required to perform for example by getting beaten up and shot if they needed to act being beaten up and shot. Stanislavski's system of acting is illustrated on page 42.

Terms like "stage charm", "super objective" and "feeling of truth" used in his "System" hardly point to "factual" behaviour; in fact nothing could seem further away from it. So much for Stanislavski.

3.1.2.1.2 Mamet

"Stanislavski is nonsense, it is a cult" says David Mamet who has another take on stage naturalism:

> The actor's challenge is not to recapitulate, to pretend to the difficulties of the written character (there is nothing less interesting in the world than an actor on the stage involved in his or her own emotions); it is to open the mouth, stand straight and say the words bravely, adding nothing, denying nothing and without the intent to manipulate anyone, himself, his fellows or the audience... The audience will accept anything they are not given a reason to disbelieve[143].

As combined authors and actors of our work with Ridiculusmus it isn't possible for Jon or I to make such a clear delineation as Mamet's provocation demands. And Mamet's statement is very much a provocation, written apparently after witnessing a badly acted version of one of his plays it pleads for a blankness or automatism in its performers though at the same time as requiring the audience to make an immense imaginative leap.

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[142] *Sunshine On Putty* ps404-405
[143] David Mamet *True And False* ps 10-11, 22 and 114

Stanislavski's "System"

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │   Proposed super objective  │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │   Common theatrical state   │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
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Internal theatrical state
Imagination
Units and objectives
Attention and objects
Action
Feeling of truth, belief
Internal tempo - rhythm
Emotion memory
Communion
Adaptation
Logic and coherence
Internal characterisation
Internal stage charm
Ethics and discipline
Control and finish

Through line of action

Perspective of role

External theatrical state
Relaxation
External tempo rhythm
Voice
Speech
Vocal technique
Language and its laws
Movement
Dance
Fencing
Physical expressiveness

Physical characterisation

Experience

Feeling

Will

Intellect
Representation
Judgement

Through the conscious to the unconscious

From *Building A Character*[144]

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[144] Quoted in *Stanislavski, An Introduction* by Jean Benedetti p61

We certainly use this willingness in the audience to make bold imaginative leaps ourselves but if we take these two versions of what has come to be regarded as naturalism as the rules, we are deceitful rule breakers or cheats. We understand both these varieties of rules, we are capable of them and use them but we also rip them apart in our desire to reach the edge of possibility. Section 4.2.1.4 on Characters gives examples of our disruptive, playful approach.

3.1.2.2 Comic "Naturalism"

For comedy purposes this "reality" is framed inside what Fry has called a "play frame" and Louter "tensiveness". It is fiction infused with reality. We fail often in the journey to this creation, sometimes publicly in "Scratch" performances and sometimes privately to invited guests, but ultimately our work is 100% scripted. The failures are welcome signposts along the journey to a script. To an audience however, it will always seem 100% improvised, assuming it is performed well. This puts us on a par with the immediacy of stand-up, but unlike Stand Up in that we don't want the audience to think that it really is us in front of them. We want them to believe that it is somebody else. A Stand Up wants the audience to believe it is them in front of the audience. In fact, it is only a version of their self that they are prepared to open up in front of an audience[145]. We use parts of reality to enhance our work and give it a naturalistic edge but do not attempt to pass it off as reality. It is the character's reality, not ours. It is a "reality" we enhance by having a "real" base character from which we may leap into obvious artifice or refer to our "real" selves in order to enhance its "real-ness"[146].

The motivation for performance is the same as Stand Up: to capture an immediacy in performance and reaction. It intensifies the reception of the work. The difference is in the level of egotism and the "play frames" erected when creating a role. This effort distinguishes us from most contemporary comic theatre practice which, more often than not, does not even attempt to enter this reality game and seeks laughter from artificiality. We seek a level of intensity[147] that is not possible in obvious artifice.

Jon seems to agree with the Erving Goffmann school[148] and calls this infusing of fiction with reality "merging"[149]. He claims that I "arrange the exposure of my character"[150] but ultimately seems

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[145] A thing that Tony Allen calls a "strategic identity crisis" which he argues is triggered by the "beast of a live audience... without the theatrical convention of a fourth wall is a pretty scary situation and ...triggers a strategic identity crisis'" (pxv) and is needed " in order to survive – various sides of our personality come to our assistance, how these are assembled, how we learn to switch seamlessly from one to another, and how we laugh at ourselves and the world around us, is the stuff of discovering our own range of attitude." *Attitude p35*

[146] E.g. In *Ideas Men* my character Mike Mullett pretends to be the secretary Sue and the boss, John Mclaughlin. These acts are badly executed so as to make Mike seem real. The worse they are, the more real he appears to be. The same technique has been used in practically all our other shows. See also Footnote 177 Section 3.2.1 on *Broken*.

[147] It is a quality that, in the anonymous contemporary world, is becoming increasingly sought after. A need reflected in the proliferation of "Reality" television programmes: "The challenge facing the Big Brother contestant is to incorporate an awareness of how everything they do will look onscreen into their behaviour without being seen to do so...if you go too far you might be labeled fake and false. This projection of the self calculated to make people like you, while at the same time not seeming to care too much about what other people think - is the stock in trade of any successful comic.. In this sense the commodification of the self which reality TV entails is also a comedification of the self". *Sunshine On Putty p392, 397*

[148] Goffmann's main work *Presentation Of The Self In Everyday Life* takes a dramaturgical approach to mundane social interaction claiming all to be performative. Jon used a Goffmann quote as the title of his MA: *"Behind Current Role, The Person Himself Will Peek Out" (Goffmann 1974 :293-294).*

confused about his argument as to the extent of pre and post rehearsal manipulation of self inspired material: "A weary sense of futility envelops my attempts to define the elusive self"[151].

This depth of play leads one to sometimes fear the fate of Peter Sellers who was "able to submerge himself so completely in a variety of roles…so that no-one, least of all Sellers himself, seems to have had much idea of what he was really like as a person"[152]. When meeting people for the first time who know us through our work, we are always a disappointment. The opposite seems to be reassuringly true of performers one meets who are colourful and vivacious and endlessly fascinated and fascinating - they are shit on stage.

As long as what you do works on stage, all is well, and this invisibility of the self and one's craft can be empowering, if lonely:

> What people saw when he appeared before them, then, was not really him, but a person he had invented, an artificial creature he could manipulate in order to manipulate others. He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark, solitary place behind the curtain[153].

If you accept that material is biographically inspired and that the end product has no duty to remain true to life, there is no problem. In the current climate of accountability and transparency, it is surely the duty of the artist to fight this mass trend rather than subscribe to it. More on using yourself in performance can be found in "Open Your Heart" Section 3.1.5 below.

3.1.3 Sensitivity

Sensitivity, listening and focus are all straightforward qualities that the good comedian needs to acquire. The difference between theatre, which uses these skills between performers on stage, and comedy, is that, in comedy, the awareness must include the audience. The comedian must allow the reaction of the audience a place in the performance and nurture it and feed off it to maximise laughter response.

3.1.4 Edge - Fear And Danger

Edginess naturally instils a degree of fear in our audience. The relief they feel when a punchline saves them from any real danger is expressed in laughter. As the Berlin cabaret artist, Werner Fink found out after the Second World War, with the removal of genuine "Edge", puerilism creeps in:

> The atmosphere was kindled by the fear of the audience, which erupted in liberating laughter and brought one reprimand after another. After the liberation from Nazi rule… he withdrew from the cabaret scene because it no longer allowed an effective platform for

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[149]Haynes *op cit* p37
[150]Haynes *Ibid* p37
[151]Haynes *Ibid* p63
[152] Peter Evans *The Mask Behind The Mask* p26
[153] Paul Auster: *The Invention Of Solitude*. "Portrait of an invisible man" p16

political satire the dilemma is that nobody takes you seriously any longer. Everyone laughs, even the targets of your satire[154].

A major source of non humourous laughter is fear[155].

3.1.4.1 Anger

To keep working an artist needs to keep angry, and if the anger is ferocious enough there will be fear. In a review of our two-hander production of *The Importance Of Being Earnest* at the Barbican in 2005, Rachel Halliburton described us as "the angriest performers" she knew[156]. Anger is probably the most poorly handled emotion in our society. Some of the common causes of anger include frustration, hurt, annoyance, disappointment, harassment and threats; and the results are more often than not violent, destructive and unhelpful. But anger can be a friend if expressed to useful ends.

3.1.4.2 Angry Corner

An aspect of the creative environment we set up when devising is "The angry corner". This is a place where we put things that make us angry: E.g.: brochures of venues like Aurora Nova[157] and press cuttings of reviews and interviews with groups and people that infuriate us. When our energy drops we retreat to this corner, read something infuriating, and re-energise ourselves to continue working. The inspirational material is particularly effective when directly comparable with our own situation, such as groups funded by the same sources or who are based in the same city, people who are of similar age and background, acts that have been raved about by critics who hate our work and so on[158].

Jon thinks that we "siphon off anger" like Barry Humphreys did about his domineering and embarrassing mother in his Dame Edna Everage performances[159] and rather predictably[160]

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[154] "Oppositional Cabaret" *On Risk* Performance Research 1(2) p 57 Gunther Berghaus
[155] See the diagram in Section 4.3.2.1 for more.
[156] *Time Out* June 15-22 2005
[157] Based annually at St.Stephen's church in Stockbridge for the duration of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and programmed by Wolfgang Hoffman of Fabrik Theatre in Potsdam with logistical support from Komedia Theatre in Brighton, the Aurora Nova presents visual and dance based theatre mostly from Eastern Europe. It is strong on aesthetic and weak on content. Performances are presented in a quasi-religious way befitting of the venue and attract massive popular support from the British visual/physical theatre scene and uniformly unabashed almost hysterical critical acclaim.
[158] At the moment, Will Adamsdale, who developed his Perrier award winning show *Jackson's Way* through the "Scratch" system at BAC (Battersea Arts Centre, London), where our producers and management are based is particularly useful in the angry corner. The "Scratch" system is a ladder of artistic development that invites the muddying opinions of the general public - who are actually all frustrated practitioners themselves - in order to improve the work which is shown at various stages of progress. This creativity by opinion poll approach tends to lead to a homogenisation of work and a transference or theft of good ideas from one "Scratch" project to another; and surely heralds the death of individuality and genuine creativity. It occasionally leads to a high profile mainstream populist success like *Jerry Springer The Opera* - a "Scratch" show that transferred to The National Theatre and West End in 2003.
[159] Haynes *op cit* p49
[160] The cliché that all double acts hate each other off stage - reflecting their on stage combatitiveness is nearly always brought up in interviews, in which we more often than not make up answers like: "it's like a marriage - it's unbearable"

suggests that I turn this anger onto him both inside and outside the act: "DW wants to victimise JH who in turn it appears wants to be victimised… we are each others compliant playthings" [161].

I think the onstage bullying is two way rather than a simple perpetrator and victim arrangement. Jon dishes out as good as he gets onstage though in a passive aggressive way more than in the form of direct action. But it is an agenda he refuses to drop, seeing himself as: "one man totally eclipsed by another"[162] though this may well be part of a "Deep" joke to maintain the tension that keeps our stage dynamic alive, around which, in an anti-Batesian way, no play-frame will be placed. Whatever the anger we exchange it is nothing compared to the anger directed at "society" and its representatives in the room - either us or the audience. This is the real object of the hate.

3.1.5 Open Your Heart

An open-hearted performance is of primary importance in comedy. Despite the fact that it is possible to function without it, or that it is possible to trick an audience to believe that you are being open, performances which are not open hearted remain functional and ordinary. A performer or act can get people laughing but not really be funny, merely functional at producing laughter. This is highly contentious as arguably any act that succeeds in achieving laughter is successful. But there are degrees of success, not just in terms of volume or duration of laughter but in the more important and impossible to measure quality of resonance. By resonance I mean how memorable an act is, or how long the laugh provoking ideas remain in an audience's memory after the event. It is a difficult quality to judge and, as with most matters to do with comedy, one steeped in subjectivity. Ultimately it depends on one's own sense of humour, an area I go into further in Section 5.

For me, humour must be instilled with real emotion to be memorable. To allow emotion into your work you have to open your heart and pour some soul into what you are doing. I will clarify my interpretation of what soul is below but for now use it to mean the inflection of some real and personal experience and feeling into the situation you are communicating[163]. At the same time this must not result in an over indulgence in self glorification[164]. The opening of such an emotional tap

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(*Irish Times* interview 1 August 2001). Aside from the fact that interviews are made up (see Section 2.1.3) I think that, considering the amount of time we spend together, the depths and difficulties we have shared and yet pulled through and the fact that we remain highly functional collaborators, the lazy use of this cliché is disappointing.

[161] Haynes *op cit* ps26/44

[162] Haynes *Ibid* p19. During our 2005 run of *The Importance Of Being Earnest* in London he wrote his own review of the show and published it on our website: "Haynes does this impression of Frazier's brother with a hot poker up his arse as he steps indefinably from one role to another. But they are all just him, this skinny depressed-looking man who whispers most of his lines and seems not to care about the audience. Yet they are a robust double act, if that implies contrast. Haynes's poker-faced, minimal and selfish performance could not find a greater opposite in the more generous, funny and heart-warmingly bumbling performances of David Woods, who seems to inhabit every role he plays." (ridiculusmus.com/reviews/96/jon-haynes-on-reviews-july-2005 18 August 2005)

[163] It is a quality appreciated by Phillippe Gaulier: "I love theatre that gives space to the vibrations of the joy of performance... towards unknowns which the performance will help to uncover. The imagination will give itself up with a joyful heart and lead the actor towards the inaccessible. I love theatre whose origins are found in the realms of pleasure. I love theatre which plays with vibrations, which gives pride of place to the beautiful vibrations of the soul". *Ecole Phillippe Gaulier Newsletter* Fevrier 2001 p2

[164] Honesty is crucial. "All the stuff, I do has an emotional weight, an emotional core that a fair amount on the circuit doesn't really have…. There are moments when Stand Up feels sublime but also moments... when you can't maintain the performer's divine arrogance and doubt sweeps in like a tide... you become aware that every emotional experience you have in your life is basically open to being co-opted by this fucking sort of dancing monkey boy – "Ooh look I've got

and the scoring of "brownie points" for doing so is very much in vogue at the present time. The modality of pathos manipulation has desensitized us to genuine emotion and the impression is comfortably affected. There is a strong contemporary movement for the worst kind of self indulgent boring soul exposure. There are at the present time, for example, oxymoronic web sites that invite you to "share secrets"[165] and an international best selling book called *Dish and Tell: Life, Love, And Secrets*[166] which is a swap shop of self obsession. The revelators try to get some sense of self-esteem from other people by telling the best or most sensational story to elicit forgiveness, or interest. The more a problem is shared, the more it magnifies itself and the more important it seems. A performer may pour out their self by "opening their heart" yet the result may be unattractive and ugly. Their soul is ugly. Perhaps it's best to look at what the soul is in this sense of "opening up" in performance.

The dictionary offers us quite a lot[167] but I am using just two aspects:

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a soul" sort of thing – then you feel like a bit of a fraud. So it is this ongoing thing of wanting to be better but not quite knowing how" Daniel Kitson interviewed by Stephanie Bunbury. *The Age* 4 April 2004

[165] www.postsecret.blogspot.com

[166] *Dish and Tell: Life, Love, And Secrets* by Patricia San Pedro and The Miami Bombshells, Denver. William Morrow & Company, 2005

[167] Some definitions ranging from the religious and esoteric to popular music:

The immaterial part of a person.

The actuating cause of an individual life.

The really real (Merlau-Ponty).

The animating and vital principle in humans, credited with the faculties of thought, action, and emotion and often conceived as an immaterial entity.

A religious term expressing belief in an eternal self.

The spiritual nature of humans, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death, and susceptible to happiness or misery in a future state.

Imagined as a side effect of mental illness (Jonathan Miller).

Ego, Higher Self, Inner Ruler, Christ within, Son of Mind, Solar Angel.

The linking principle between spirit and matter; between God and his form.

Wit (French translation of "esprit", like "spirit").

The true self.

The inner most sacred part of each person.

It evolves in form through millennia and has become both consolation and inspiration (Otto Rank *Psychology And The Soul*).

A spark of God.

The Second octave of being.

The Transpersonal Self.

The Planetary Soul, or Atma.

The all knowing energy seat of all that we are and ever have been.

The original energy signature of an individual energy separate but part of the whole the anima/animus.

The sensitive affections and fantasy, exclusive of the voluntary and rational powers; in distinction from the mind.

The moral and emotional part of man's nature.

The seat of feeling, in distinction from intellect.

The intellect.

A human: "the homes of some nine hundred souls" (Garrison Keillor).

Person, individual, someone, somebody, mortal, human.

The central or integral part; the vital core: "It saddens me that this network... may lose its soul, which is after all the quest for news"(Marvin Kalb).

A person considered as the perfect embodiment of an intangible quality; a personification: I am the very soul of discretion. soul - (the human embodiment of something; "the soul of honor") .

A person's emotional or moral nature: "An actor is... often a soul which wishes to reveal itself to the world but dare not" (Alec Guinness)

A strong, deeply felt emotion conveyed by a speaker, a performer, or an artist. Soulfulness -- (deep feeling or emotion)[168]

Soul, in this dual usage, is the quality in a performance that conveys its moral nature with deeply felt emotion. It is a treasure delicately shared. To do this is to perform at the level we aspire to.

An artist who wants to be attractive and popular then must nurture a beautiful soul. But this is not to be confused with worthiness. One thinks of the worthiness of some acts. Adam Hills is an example of a comedian who, without irony, works with empowering ideas and positive thinking. He adopted an audience heckle "Go you big red fire engine" as a show title and general tag line because of its affirming power. I accidentally kicked off his fake foot[169] in a soccer match in 2004 and he wasn't very affirming then. It's an act; an attitude you can buy into or not. I don't find it particularly funny. Neither do I find sacred clown ministries funny. Evolving from an idea that the Christian church in America had in order to revitalise itself, it involves "nice" clowns who get all their material from the bible and make themselves look stupid because:

Each of us, in our own way, has an exquisite, authentic and very loving statement of self to give in the world. This gift is sacred. This gift is needed now. This gift is ours alone to give! [170]

3.1.6 Play

To define play is at the same time to define reality and culture. Public reality is commonly played, and a playful understanding of reality lies at the heart of happiness. To play is to be in tune with a pre-lapsarian child-like innocence, where things are pursued for pleasure rather than need. But I believe an adult can play as an adult without regression. One doesn't have to be innocent or sweet to be playful, just willing to play.

Humour, meanwhile, needs playfulness for it to work, and the adult joker needs to tap into this genuine adult playfulness and communicate it within a play-frame. Fry expands:

Humor is play. Cues are given that that which is about to unfold, is not real. There is a "play frame" created around the episode. The frame can be indicated by a voice quality, a body movement or posture, a lifted eyebrow - any of the various things that people do to indicate fantasy to one another...Humans have a rich store of non verbal communication devices...it is impossible to outline the complete repertoire; we have not gained that much self awareness yet. These frames are usually established at the beginning of a humorous

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A sense of ethnic pride especially among African Americans, expressed in areas such as language, social customs, religion, and music.
Soul music. soul - (a secular form of gospel that was a major musical genre in the 1960s and 1970s; "soul was politically significant during the Civil Rights Movement").
All from www.dictionary.com (16 April 2005).
[168] Collins English Dictionary (1986) definition.
[169] He wears a prosthetic foot and once made a show all about that.
[170] Sacred clowning ministries © www.joyoflifecentre.com/sacred_clowning.htm (17 April 2005).

episode. A wink, a smile, a gurgle in the voice will set the stage before the joke begins its evolution. There are numerous possibilities[171].

For Immanuel Kant, this play-frame was a state "of mind in which everything is estimated on lines that go quite off the beaten track (a topsy-turvy view of things), and yet on lines that follow certain principles, rational in the case of such a mental temperament"[172]. The "play frame" must not be signalled obviously in order to remain surprising but rather "meta-communicated".

Having established the link between play and humour, I want to rewind a little and re-assess the definitions of "Deep" and "Dark" play that I proposed in the introductions to be cornerstones of our work and to see if they do align with what I mean by "deeper" and "darker" play. In the introduction I said that "Deep Play" was "where risk outweighs rewards" and "Dark Play" was where the goals are deceit, disruption and gratification and that it was carried on without a "play frame". Later though in discussing our performance principles that definition shifts so that "Deep Play" is for us: "where fiction is played close to reality" and that Jon may be playing a "Deep" joke in his self portrayal as "eclipsed" man implying that "Deep" meant a joke without a wink or "play frame" . "Depth" also featured in my definition of "soul" in performance - that "soul" implied deeply felt emotion. But this was one that infused our fictional reality rather than actually being "reality".

For us the difference between "Deep Play" and "Dark Play" is blurry. I defined "Dark Play" as involving exactly this level of deceit - where we attempt to pass off fictional reality as reality within a "play frame" so that for the audience the "play frame" dissolves and their engagement with the action relayed is immediate. But I also regarded it to involve disruption and gratification. Whilst we do use disruption of the rules of convention we are not seeking gratification. What we are doing is to enhance entertainment for an audience, not for ourselves. So on the basis of the initial definition what we do is not pure "Dark Play" though it uses elements of it and these are intertwined so closely with "Deep Play" that the two are inseparable from each other so that a hybrid form is evident.

A contemporary example of pure "Dark Play" is the Indian ashram owner and self proclaimed "God" Sai Baba:

> PUTTAPARTHI, India -- One of the most powerful holy men in India presides over the world's biggest ashram, Prasanthi Nilayam, or Abode of Peace, in a remote town located in a barren corner of Andhra Pradesh, a desperately poor state in a desperately poor country. The town boasts a shiny planetarium, two hospitals that treat patients for free, a college, a music school and immaculate, colorful playgrounds. Luxury apartment buildings are springing up on land that just a few decades ago was covered with ramshackle mud huts. And there's a brand-new airport to serve the wealthier devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, a 75-year-old south Indian man with a big bushy Afro and a warm smile. Somewhere between 10 million and 50 million people worship Sai Baba as God incarnate, and they stream into Puttaparthi from six continents, sleeping in one of the ashram's 10,000 beds or at one of the town's many guesthouses. Meanwhile, the growing number of ex-devotees who decry their former master as a sexual harasser, a fraud and even a pedophile has hardly put a

[171] Fry *op cit* ps138-141

[172] Kant *The Critique Of Judgment* Book II Sub Section 54

dent in his following, though their voices are getting louder. "Sai Baba was my God -- who dares to refuse God? He was free to do whatever he wanted to do with me; he had my trust, my faith, my love and my friendship; he had me in totality." says Iranian-American former follower Said Khorramshahgol. What Sai Baba chose to do with him, Khorramshahgol says, was to repeatedly call him into private interviews and order him to drop his pants and massage his penis[173].

The mix is intended to be a sophisticated adult sensibility, not sleazy or pornographic, but one that requires interpretation, engagement and knowledge to fully appreciate it.

Most comics try to include some kind of "Deep" or "Dark" play in their performances making out, for example, that their witty stories are first hand accounts that personally involved them. It is the degree of deceit that they go to before pulling the punchline plug that determines depth. Andy Kaufmann[174], Sacha Baron Cohen (as "Ali G"[175]) and Chris Morris in his *Brass Eye*[176] television series never seem to pull this plug, though by the nature of the descriptive billing such material gets, a frame is indirectly placed around the work.

When "Deep Play" uses riskier material, so much more is at stake that the players get lost in their play to the extent that they don't know where they are going and perhaps abuse the rules of the game through fear of losing. When this happens "Deep Play" becomes "Dark Play". In attempting to complete this PhD *in* play and *as* play in this way I am putting three years of my life and around £10,000 on the line. Working as I do, in a high risk industry without the security of a regular or guaranteed income this is the merged "Deep" and "Dark" play hybrid epitomised.

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[173] Michelle Goldberg www.salon.com (25 July 2001)
[174]Many of the gags of the late American comedian and TV actor Andy Kauffmann (Latke in *Taxi)* were only shared posthumously in biographies. See for example: Bob Zmuda *Andy Kaufmann Revealed.*
[175] A highly successful TV and film character created by Cohen originally for *The Eleven O'Clock Show.* 1998-99 UK, C4 (TalkBack Productions)
[176] See www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A676424 for background.
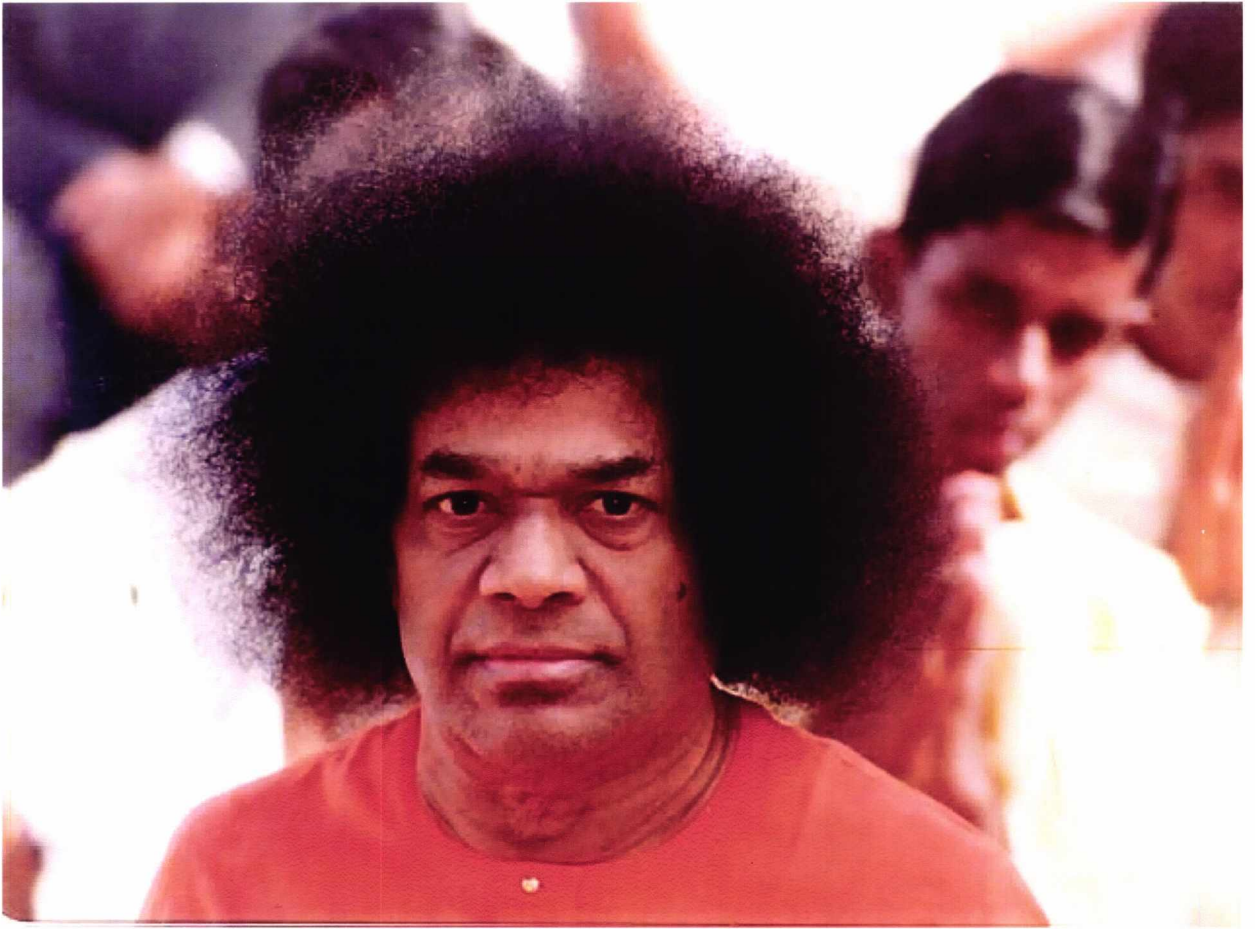
Cock sucker

3.2 Stages Of Work

There are six stages of work in our established method:

1) Idea formation and growth
2) Research - gathering life
3) Freeform - re-presenting life - unthinking
4) Performance development - thinking, condensing and shaping the freeform outcomes
5) Audience exposure and heightening
6) Packaging

This project did not fit neatly into the generic plan but I am going to use it to structure the description of what did happen.

3.2.1 Idea Formation And Growth

The idea for *How To Be Funny* was bred in the research environment and not an artistic one. Our ideas emerge from the circumstances we are in at the time of making, though these usually tend to be moments of real life experience rather than academic enquiry. That is not to say that the academic existence is not part of real life, just quite distinct within it.

An investigation into our style and techniques of comedy was a suggestion for further study in my MA thesis and *How To Be Funny* became a research proposal when we were invited to continue our studies at the University of Kent to PhD level. A " How to " parody or mock lecture/demonstration also followed on naturally from *Ideas Men*[177] in that we had started to dig around in the quagmire of "How to" books as fodder for satirising business creativity and it lent itself to an academic/performative research enquiry. All boded well for a rich joint practical project answering both of our research questions, mine being about our comedy technique and Jon's about his "self" within that area. As time passed, and our research funding applications were rejected, Jon realised that to study himself thoroughly a different sort of research and presentation was necessary. Thankfully he was still able to "act" in my project but this did put me in the peculiar position of having to individually lead and develop what had been, and would continue to be in performance, credited as a joint project.

A major aesthetic influence on me at this time was the programme of work and its critical and popular reaction at the Aurora Nova venue in Edinburgh. We had presented a show at the Edinburgh fringe in 2003 that was deeply written, reflected that complexity and looked beautiful, but was unpopular[178]. I was jealous and angry at the apparent success of the Aurora Nova programme.

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[177] Originally called *Office* and referred to as such in my MA. We changed the name as the hugely successful television series of the same name was being aired at the same time. *Ideas Men* was also a lot more specific to the actual content of the show. It portrayed two "corporate creatives" presenting a "role play seminar" on idea creation.
[178]The show, *Ridiculusmus*, was a "broken" comedy we performed at the Pleasance and later kept developing under the name *Broken*. It included some intimate soul searching and attracted cruel reviews such as this from Dave Johns: At first I thought Live at the Mausoleum was as bad as it gets. Not for everyone? Not for anyone, more like it. Then I saw Ridiculusmus. This was the most boring show I've ever seen. Anarchic? My granny was more anarchic than this. Self-indulgent, pretentious little twits. The black hole of comedy. At least the Mausoleum girls were trying to be funny.

I felt that they tricked audiences into feeling the empty idea-less shows they had witnessed contained something deep and meaningful; seducing them with production values and foreign accents. I was anxious to make a piece that exposed this by doing the same thing without signalling itself as parody.

3.2.2 Research - Gathering Life

In *How To Be Funny* I felt we already had enough material in our pooled memories of similar situations for an hour long show and so we simply shared them anecdotally.

Some of the material unearthed took place within the research period: the Bakhtinian and rather dull conference on "Clowns Fools And Picaros" at Queen's University, Belfast and the PARIP (Practice As Research In Performance) conference in Bristol in 2003 were two major formative influences on the indulgent presentational manner of the final work.

Other conference gatherings, public lectures and influences I drew on included:

1. A Japanese robot demonstration at the British Museum where the idea of using a simultaneous translator came from

2. A research seminar at the University of Kent to mark the launch of the new Aphra Theatre. Sir Iain Mackintosh[179] attacked the theatre's total lack of consideration for the practicalities of performance and destroyed the Head of Department's praise laden "provocation" about how brilliant he thought the new theatre was

3. The Past Masters conference on Tadeusz Kantor at the University of Aberystwyth hosted by the Centre for Performance Research in 2000, where the men in black look we used came from;

4. An aggressive Professor's - "If you haven't read Plato's *Symposium* you shouldn't be here" welcome in my first year at University

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These were like Beckett students who really believed all the crap they read in their modernist courses. My girlfriend says "Would rather have an enema while riding bareback to Timbuktoo on a hedgehog than go through that again".

Not all reaction was as negative. Maddy Costa wrote in *The Guardian:* "Watching Ridiculusmus' sketch show is an unsettling experience. Wearing rumpled suits and slightly pained frowns, the duo - Jon Hough and David Woods - simply stand side by side, swapping, sometimes mid-sentence, between a series of odd characters. We meet Brendan and Pat, scabrous Irishmen with dodgy pasts, Mrs. Mumford, desperately searching for someone to cut her 92-year-old grandmother's toenails, Jackie and Gina, screechy housewives with a penchant for birdseed. These characters are gradually eliminated from the show, until we're left with just Dave and John, versions of the duo's real selves scathingly dismissed as "good-for-nothing wanky artist types", who shrivel before the microphone because they can't stand the sound of their own voices. This is humour for those who like their comedy dark, edgy and strange. A lot of the sketches would have fitted perfectly into Chris Morris's Blue Jam; you gasp more than you laugh. Not that the duo aren't capable of delivering direct laughs: Pat's unexpected John Hurt impression is hilarious, as are the savage parodies of Late Junction and Desert Island Discs. They are glimpses of light in an hour of nightmares." 11 August 2003

[179] Author of *Architecture, Actor, And Audience*, Routledge, 1993 which features regularly on the undergraduate drama reading lists at the University of Kent. He's not a Sir, but I've knighted him to make it seem more significant.

5. Being recommended Erasmus' *In Praise Of Folly* by another Professor after a seminar I gave on "Subversion Through Stupidity" - he didn't know what a three line gag was, had seen plenty of Morecambe and Wise shows which would have included many examples, but had no bridge between practical application and theory

6. Our own post MA research seminar reflection from which Jon's long speech is taken[180]

7. A general feeling that as long as you can drop into your talk the words "epistemology" (epistemological, epistemologies) , "phenomenology" and "performativity" - your findings will be treated as relevant/useful/peer reviewed and so on and, in short, worthy of hosting/hearing/publishing.

In balance, I have read, or been to, many lectures of real interest with actual content and an inspiring speaker, for example – the Reith lectures and John McGrath's series collected in *A Good Night Out* but these are not grist to the humorist's mill. We need weakness, laziness, self indulgence on which to thrive - ambitious failures and irritating examples rather than deserved successes - a collection of follies to mock, or irritations to get angry about.

The three pieces of direct comparison to the mock lecture format discussed in the Review of Literature above also served as pointers as to what to do or not do with this sort of material.

3.2.3 Freeform - Re-Presenting Life – Unthinking

Freeform has been our dominant method of making new material to date. Certainly from 1996-2005 it was the only method we used. Earlier works had involved attempts to write a script and then stand it up and perform it but that had associated problems with the egos of the personnel involved. Once Ridiculusmus settled as a double act the method took off. As a result of the peculiar nature of this production as discussed above in Section 3.2.1 (Idea formation) we bypassed this phase. To be fair we had just finished an exhausting and depressing Edinburgh season[181] and had little enthusiasm for what was a minor gig[182]. It did however become a technique I used within performances and is included in Section 3.2.5 below.

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[180] As far as Jon reveals his sources, he did say it was the transcript of Simon McBurney talking on an arts show on the radio which he recorded and typed up in preparation for the research seminar we had been asked to do at Kent after our MA's. He couldn't face doing it without some material and a character.

[181] It was the *Broken* run as mentioned in Footnote 177 above (Section 3.2.1).

[182] With, however, major funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation for the collaboration with Miguel Antunes, a Portugese clown. We were short of money earlier in the year and spotted a special project fund for collaboration with Portugese artists. At the time the ten grand award seemed like a good idea. We later regretted the burden of having to come up with something with someone who we didn't get on with artistically. He joined a long list of potential collaborators who became intimidated by our lack of care about "fixing" material before performance and became extremely stressed prior to the conference performance.

3.2.4 Performance Development - Thinking, Condensing And Shaping

It would be normal for us that this is the longest and most labour intensive phase of developing a show but here it was completed sitting down around a pile of paper and a pot of tea. We constructed only very short "numbers"[183] that utilised known choreography.

3.2.5 Audience Exposure And Heightening

More than ever the early "work in progress" performances of *How To Be Funny* were high risk ventures that resulted in fairly painful failures. It was not until Ross Festival that we successfully carried off an entertaining evening. Since then the success has continued with varying degrees. Until the Canterbury performances all were billed as works in progress.

3.2.5.1 Performances Of *How To Be Funny*

With the show settled into the status of "David's personal whimsy"[184] the only chance to move it along creatively was to keep performing it to the public, that way the actors could be more easily persuaded into rehearsing and developing the piece - with an audience present "you go up a notch"[185].

The trouble with having showings of unfinished material is that the work has to tighten up very quickly and massive new areas are not uncovered. Only minor improvements and adjustments are possible. For example, the only change to the script of the other characters arising from a residency prior to the Belfast shows was when James King added after "Let's help the stage hand off", this line: "and can someone take the piss", to which Jon added: "or has it already been taken?" Brilliant, if minimal. Often, when ideas come up they arise from the practicalities of the situation – James watched the Ross video and saw the need to clear the stage of the piss jug and his additional text arose from that. I reassured myself that improvements would naturally arise, however gradually, and that eventually it would be as rich as our other work – despite its predisposition to negativity and cynicism coming as it did from a rather negative impulse (the Aurora Nova season).

What makes our use of this phase and our process in general unique is the absence of formal feedback either directly from the public or mediated by a director. We rely on our own intuition as to whether something works or not. We used video recordings to help jog our memories with this project more than others which was critical in this case due to the unbalanced creative drive and less collaborative status of the piece and as a source of footage for documentation. Normally at this stage performances would not be recorded, merely pondered on in every waking hour then discussed prior to the next performance and revised in front of an audience.

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[183] "number" is used here to mean a comedy routine.
[184] Jon's description of the project at a company planning meeting known as "a Mildred" (after the vegetarian café in Soho where the inaugural one was held) in 2004.
[185] Ronnie Corbett in *Comedy Greats: Ronnie Corbett* UK, 2002, ITV/Granada

With each performance we ask ourselves - is our practice any good? - does it make people laugh? Is it funny? Is it interesting? Is it filled with soul without being self indulgent? Does it educate? Does it entertain? - And ultimately, do I enjoy doing it?

In the Ross and Belfast performances I was determined to develop the text by "riffing" freely during the introductory and linking sections as the Professor Sorenson character. The exercise was possible if I put myself in a mood of supreme confidence bordering on arrogance and a calmness that if things failed it really didn't matter. The reverse logic of comic performance is such that the readier you are to fail the more likely you will succeed.

Date	Event	Venue	Number of Performances	Cast
September 2003	Clowns, Fools and Picaros Conference	Queens University, Belfast	1	DW, JH, MA
January 2004	Club Duckie (reduced 15 minute form)	Royal Vauxhall tavern, London	1	DW, JH, RT
January 2004	London International Mime Festival	ICA, London	1	DW, JH, RT
August 2004	Ross International Arts Festival	Phoenix theatre, Ross on Wye	1	DW, JH, PP
October 2004	Belfast Festival at Queens	Old Museum Arts Centre	3	DW, JH, JK
May 2005	PhD examination showing	University of Kent in Canterbury	1	DW, JH, JK, PP
October 2005	Autumn Season Tour	Leeds Met Studio	1	DW, JH, JK, PP
April 2006	Melbourne International Comedy Festival	Melbourne Town Hall and The Malthouse Theatre	2	DW, JH, AB

Key:

DW - David Woods
JH - Jonathan Haynes
MA - Miguel Antunes
RT - Richard Talbot
JK - James King
PP - Patrizia Paolini
AB - Adam Broinowski
Ross - a small market town on the England/Wales border
ICA - Institute Of Contemporary Arts, London

3.2.6 Packaging

I shall discuss here the approach of three of the venues that *How To Be Funny* played at that show a significant range of tone.

3.2.6.1 Clowns, Fools And Picaros Conference, Belfast

Alongside academic conferences – or sold as such – the show has limited appeal. Here's how Queen's University, Belfast sold their International Clown Conference: "Clowns Fools and Picaros":

> About the conference
>
> The School of Languages, Literatures and Arts at The Queen's University of Belfast is organising an international conference on clowns to be held from 4-6 September 2003. The conference will be multidisciplinary in scope and aims to bring together academics, theorists and practitioners. It is anticipated that a selection of proceedings will be published[186].

Barely thirty people registered, all of whom were presenters of papers, and very few of these were practitioners. It wasn't surprising that no members of the public or even students bothered to come considering the conference menu:

> German Theatrical Clowns, The Clown and Suffering, Günter Grass Panel, Clowning and the Body Politic, Plenary Session 1, Clowning beyond Bakhtin 1, Fools 1, The Clown in Action 1, Clowning beyond Bakhtin 2, Fools 2, The Clown in Action 2, Dialogicity and the Clown, Fools 3, The Clown in Action 3, Plenary Session 2, Clowns in Film 1, The Picaresque in World Literature 1, Clowns in Film 2, The Picaresque in World Literature 2[187]

Our first version of *How To Be Funny* was offered under the "Clown in Action 2" heading. It was only as a consequence of this stage - specifically David Grant's introduction and after comments about our performance - that the idea of academics presenting a piece of contextualised practice came up. The experience begged parody. It was unpleasant, infuriating and on reflection, hilarious. We had the urgent need to escape as soon as we had performed our offering, so didn't receive any feedback. This rather unpleasant sensation, leading to the desire to escape unseen from the venue and city[188], is one we have experienced on many occasions during the development of shows. *All About H.Hatterr*, the show that became *Yes, Yes, Yes*, was in this state for three years and on at least one occasion I had to be coaxed out of a dark corner while still covered in talcum powder and wearing my leopard skin leotard ten minutes after we had finished.

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[186] Publicity email from Dr. David Robb on the "Clowns, Fools And Picaros" Conference, Belfast 2003.
[187] "Clowns, Fools And Picaros" Conference brochure, Queen's University, Belfast 2003
[188] We were on the fast ferry out of Belfast to Stranraer within an hour.

3.2.6.2 London International Mime Festival

The Mime Festival always attracts a crowd and our 2004 scratch at the ICA was no exception. A packed house of the keen, the converted and the jealous assembled for a performance whose blurb should have covered any variety of unhappiness:

> Ridiculusmus takes time out to present some new ideas at the ICA, scratching under the title *How To Be Funny*. Runs approx 40 minutes without interval[189].

It clearly indicated the "work in progress" nature of the piece and was priced to reflect this[190]. The evening seemed to be a great success though a couple of walk outs were noticed and a fairly severe complaint was received claiming the piece to be: "unimaginative, lazy and boring"[191].

3.2.6.3 Belfast Festival

The presenters felt it necessary to spoil the joke and gave away the central conceit of the show, presumably considering it too edgy for a litigious audience to take:

> Expect academic theories, mime artists and a "high coupe of humour" as Ridiculusmus create a parody of the human desire to define what makes us laugh[192].

Such customer led arts presentation is a sadly prevalent contemporary trend[193].

3.2.6.4 The Ideal Blurb

The blurb should be a part of the trick and something along the lines of:

> An exploration of the nature of humour by the award winning comedy duo, Ridiculusmus. Ridiculusmus' poetic and touching exposition of the major theories of comedy is a moving observation on the human condition as well as an opportunity to learn "the secret" of

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[189] www.mimefest.co.uk/2004/rid2004.html (23 March 2005)

[190] £5/£4 - most shows in the festival cost upwards of £12.

[191] "Subject: How to be funny Date: Mon, 19 Jan 2004 From: "Sean Harris" <sean.harris@alphabet-ic.com>To: <ridiculusmus@yourimagination.org>Cc: <tickets@ica.org.uk> To whom it may concern,
I have never been as under whelmed as I was this evening by your show at the ICA. The only bright point being that I had a magazine to read in my pocket. Your performance was unimaginative, lazy, and boring. It left me feeling flat and uninspired at its finish. The only rational explanation for such a poorly thought through event might be that you have begun to believe those who tell you your work is of merit - find some new acolytes. It would be less galling if the performance were free; sadly this was not the case. You will find my bank details at the end of this email; a refund for 2 tickets (£10) would be appreciated, to demonstrate at least some sort of integrity. Yours sincerely, Sean Harris 07050 3830209 Bank: Smile Account Name: JW Harris account # 26276520."
Negative comments always dominate and I think those that choose to underwhelm themselves with them must know this - a fit of determination to pass their misery onto others.

[192] Belfast Festival brochure 2004 p9

[193] We had to fight at length with The Barbican to retain the title "*The Importance Of Being Earnest*" for our two-hander version of the Oscar Wilde play in 2005 as they felt it would give rise to complaints. The marketing department suggested "*The Ridiculusmus Importance Of Being Earnest*". We held out and won and had no complaints though they made out this was thanks to a warning notice on all publicity "Warning: You will have never seen an Importance like this before" that they insisted on having.

comedy. Seen at the Singapore Comedy Festival, Aspen's HBO Comedy Festival, Montreal's Just For Laughs, Melbourne Comedy Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe where it was nominated for the Perrier Award *How To Be Funny* comes to Runcorn for a one-off special appearance.

This remarkable event is presented with an introduction by Professor Torvald Sorenson of the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Kent (KIASH) and a reading from *Taking Laughter Seriously* by Professor Avrom Norvershterm, a fascinating insider's account of his work with this "closed" group.

"A proficiency of delivery which puts them well ahead of the pack. A complete joy to watch, planting the sort of silly images that bump around in your head forever." The Guardian

Suitable for people aged 16 plus who are advised to bring a pen.
Performance runs approx. 35 seconds without interval.

A version like this would be more appropriate. Instilled with attitude, naughtiness and deceit, in line with the game of the show, but honest, in that it is obviously a joke and could be proven as such should litigation ensue. Combining sales pitch with modesty is as delicate here as in the material for performance and at once needs to enthuse and entice audiences, pre-disposing them to faith in our funniness.
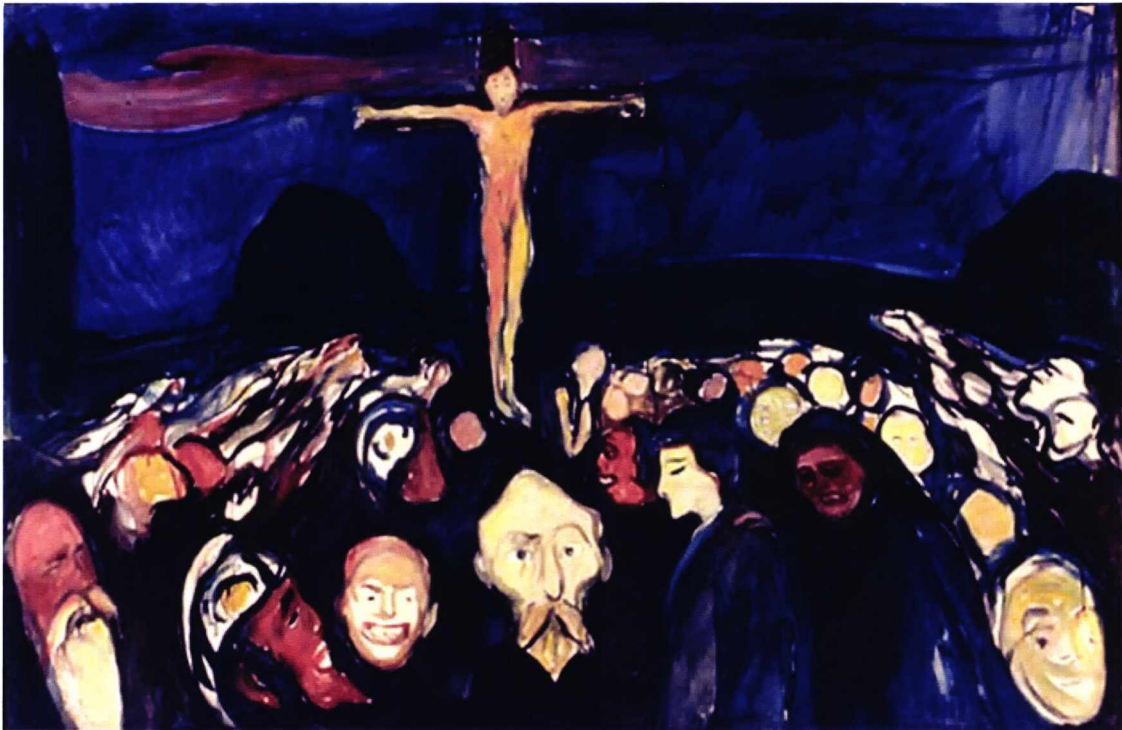
Men laugh at Jesus in Munch's *Golgotha*

4 The Practice

4.1 Introduction

This section is on CD Rom (lodged inside the back cover). It includes a video record of the performance part of *How To Be Funny* made up of extracts of the performances at Ross on Wye, Belfast and Canterbury that best illustrate[194] the research and are edited together into a complete version of the performance. There are several inconsistencies as a result:-

1. Jon's character was called Torvald Sorenson until the Canterbury shows but his character was obviously English - inspired by Simon McBurney (in fact an impression of him[195]). We renamed him with a randomly selected academic Jewish name taken haphazardly from a Google search -Avrom Norvershterm. My character - who was vaguely Scandinavian - inspired by Richard Talbot's Frederick character[196] and Lars Von Trier and Jorgen Leth's pretentious film *The Five Obstructions*[197] became Torvald Sorenson. The move was a bad one - Avrom Norvershterm was such an impossible mouthful and I still associated Jon's character with Torvald, having edited hours of video footage with him under that name, so in the performance I mistakenly called him Torvald and fluffed the new name when I did remember who he was supposed to be.

2. At the Ross show we had Patrizia translating but didn't have James signing and at the Belfast shows we had James signing but no translation. In Canterbury we had both.

The explanatory sections attempt to analyse the material, where analysis is justified, and explain how it answers the research questions. They record the origin and growth of the ideas[198], and

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[194] In practise the version where the audience laughed the loudest at the appropriate moment.

[195] See Footnote 179 to Section 3.2.4 on page 54.

[196] Richard Talbot was a collaborator on the ICA version of the show. He has vast experience of "Deep Play" in his performance career to date as part of a mock-tribute act to the late and faded Danish pop stars, Nina and Frederik, famous throughout the world for easy listening hits: *Listen to the Ocean* and *Little Donkey* and in the guise of "The Singing Nun" who was banned from The Royal Mile at the 2005 Edinburgh fringe "after staging a roof top protest against the costs of performing at the fringe. The 'nun' climbed onto the roof of the lower stage on the Royal Mile and dropped a banner with the words "I want my money back" written on it. She was told to come down by fringe stewards but insisted on staying on the roof to sing Kumbaya for the large crowd of fringe visitors. It took four police officers to remove the nun from the roof. She was then ushered into the narrow Jackson's Close off the Royal Mile, where she was interviewed by the police and told to stop talking in a 'silly voice'. The police said that they did not find the stunt funny, and that the nun was a danger to the public, although the nun pointed out that the crowds had asked her to stay on the roof and had laughed a lot at the protest. 'The festival provides jobs and employment for many non-artists, but the cost of bringing a production to the festival is exorbitant, and a lot of up-and-coming artists are paying to be here. The festival feels more like a marketing event than an arts event, to me' said the nun 'so you have to do bigger and bigger stunts to get noticed'. Last night she was threatening to kill herself if she did not get the attention she needed. www.ninaandfrederick.co.uk (21 August 2005)

[197] *Fem benspænd, De* Zentropa Real ApS films, 2003

[198] Susan Melrose's keynote address on performance virtuosity highlights this as an area of concern in PARIP circles: "Many of us in the university are skilled in and teach the (democratic and inclusive) arts of expert spectating, rather than those specific to a performance production in terms recognised by and funded within the wider arts communities. Many of us, under the heading of interdisciplinarity, have been encouraged to overlook that (or those instances of) disciplinary mastery, upon which a future in the performance professions may well depend. Many of us, in my experience, find that the discourses we have available, and teach, enable us to find any work at all, once displayed, to be 'of interest'; whereas few of us are able - or willing - to provide a discursive model whose application will permit us to determine whether or not work is either 'good', or 'of professional standard'.

compare them, where appropriate, with other performance examples both within and outside the Ridiculusmus canon.

What follows is a paper copy of the script of the show[199] with the relevant commentary following each section that it relates to. This is in case of problems with the CD[200] or to cater for readers who prefer paper to screen.

4.2 The Build

4.2.1 "Two Biscuits Each" - Extract 1

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Audience arriving - general theatre build up before the
lights go down-only here they don't go down
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PREAMBLE - four characters present Professor Torvald Sorenson (David), Professor Avrom Norvershterm (Jon, seated), Alessandra Giagheddu (Patrizia Paolini floating around Torvald), and an unnamed sign interpreter (James King) seated in signer's position down stage right. They all wear the garb of the conference academic - black suits, shirts and polo necks and wear conference name badges.

They greet the public as they enter as if delegates participating in a conference - everything is a bit messy, so the impression is that the conference is nearly over-the delegates are rather exhausted, or bored, bits of handouts and timetables are strewn around, as are coats and bags where people have reserved their seats. Three video cameras are documenting the session.

The conference is called "Tonight Matthew I'm playing the epistemologist" and this session is supposed to be a performance by Ridiculusmus of "How To Be Funny" to be

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Alongside these critical observations, I wanted, in addition, to suggest that many of us concerned with expert, arts-disciplinary practice as research might benefit from observations and the terminology emerging from what has been called "practice theory" - despite the evidence that few "practice theoreticians" seem to have concerned themselves with professional art-making practices. I wanted to propose that we adopt from "practice theory" the notion that in some instances at least, performance-making processes could be identified in terms of epistemics, which is concerned with the construction of formal models of perceptual and other processes - such as we can identify in the workshop and rehearsal activities of each of the 'signature' practitioners I have named above - through which knowledge and understanding are achieved and communicated." *Virtuosity And Performance Mastery Symposium* held on 31 May 2003 at Middlesex University www.mdx.ac.uk/www/epai/virtuosity/introd.html (25 April 2005)

[199] I have only sampled Patrizia's translations as I'm not an Italian speaker and I've marked all the laughs with asterisks. Stage direction and descriptions are in italics, spoken text in Courier New font.

[200] E.g. the sound is terrible in general and abysmal in some of the footage. The small production budget alas did not stretch to professional quality sound and clip on mics and consequently you will often hear the filmed audience laughing at a line that you didn't hear which is extremely frustrating.

*introduced by Torvald Sorenson and preceded by a paper from
Professor Norvershterm.*

*A variety of little things happen as the public enter -
Torvald gets a call on his mobile and speaks to someone on
it in Danish. Alessandra chats with Italian delegates in
Italian, coffees are grabbed and balanced, dumped, drunk
and spilt and biscuits dunked.*

*Other recently seen shows are discussed with the audience -
"were they any good?", "how much did they cost?" etc - all
useful fodder for dropping in later*

*As the start nears Torvald checks with the technician that
the cameras are all rolling.*

James signs*

D: So yah

P: *Translation   Si**

D: My name is Torvald Sorenson, I am the convenor of
tonight and am here to say briefly just welcome. Welcome to
tonight*

P: *Translation Bienvenutti tutti… dilettante*

D: and this performance of *How To Be Funny* by Ridiculusmus

Translation

D: …there is no need to introduce the work of the group,
only to say briefly welcome to the Aphra Theatre in the
Drama Department of the University of Kent and the last in
this series of three performances, a mini festival of the
research work of the performance group Ridiculusmus within
this semester's broader international, interdisciplinary
cross fertilised mongrel bastard of a programme "Tonight
Matthew, I'm playing the epistemologist."*

P:(*struggles*)Err* Bienvenutti….. ….

D: The group which is in its 22nd year now*, it was 21 last
year and came of age as it were, reached a plateau, became
an adult.

P: *translates…including* el bambino croscuto

D: And welcome also to the Kent Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities - KIASH*

P: Bienvenuti KIASH*

D: KIASH is a research institute within the University of Kent at Canterbury that organises and coordinates a programme of research activity in all fields of the humanities and cognate areas of the social sciences. We're very grateful for that and ongoing financing.*

P: token TRANSLATION ending non importanti*

D: And welcome also to our international visitors from the Universita di Bologna - Departtimento Teattro E Media (*pronounce maydia*),
P: Universita di Bologna - Departtimento Teattro e Media
D: and La Sapiensa di Roma
P: La Sapiensa di Roma
D: and their translator - Allessandra Giaggheddu
P: … questo sono io Allessandra Giaggheddu
D: and welcome to this performative practical evening which is as you know a scratch evening *

P: translates pause to indicate impossibility of task then translates including the English word "scratch"*

D: and I think before we see this work by Ridiculusmus we wanted to unpack some of those terms: Perhaps first we can cover the topic of mime. I will concentrate mostly on the personage of the Arlecchino. A tradition that has been going on for several hundred years. We will cover that in four minutes. And I am very happy to say we will see today in the work of Ridiculusmus. Questions, answers in person if you like after the performance not necessarily with the performers, as you know they are a closed group, and they don't like to talk too much with people from the public.*

P: *(doesn't bother translating) Si*

D: What is comedy? What is comic theatre? and for example scratch.

Translation during which a mobile goes off and then people in the box start talking

D: I would just ask my esteemed colleagues in the box to stop talking now as Avrom Norvershterm has already been talking for seven hours today. And if you could turn off your mobile phones because I just heard someone receiving a text. Just turn the fucking thing off.* While we are sorting out the talky people and the mobiles perhaps I could just make a quick practical note the people who have been on their feet a long time didn't get a chance to pick up a coffee at the front desk can do so afterwards, just show your conference pack in the discussion time (or Festival Brochure in your case Mr Beardy man*).

P translates including mention of caffe latte biscotini*, cappuccino* Signor Barboroso**

D: and two biscuits each*.

Translation

D: and we are going to listen to Avrom on the topic of comedy and physical theatre, visual theatre - what is it? Why we are always every year asking the same question* - what is funny?

Translation

D: We are privileged then to have with us Professor Avrom Norvershterm here from the institute of fine art, performance art design - FEEPAD* based in the Ramsgate branch of the University of Kent* in Canterbury where Professor Norvershterm was able to get private insight into the working of Ridiculusmus

TRANSLATION

D: and the big secret of the group - how to be funny*. Following on from his publication laughter -Taking Laughter Seriously* 1984. (*Holds up copy of the John Moreall book of the same name*)

TRANSLATION

D: We feel this performance this gathering this event of performers, students practitioners, the general public

marks the turning of a new chapter tonight in the relation of a method which has broken so many boundaries, so many people's hearts and even a few virginities *

TRANSLATION

and this has now become part of the module on physical theatre *

TRANSLATION

which my esteemed colleague has begun at Brunel University*

TRANSLATION

There will be a chance to discuss placing yourselfs* in that institution afterwards. Perhaps we should now tackle the subject what is scratch? which is basically the idea that the artists are very kindly sharing the work at a fragile stage maybe after only ten minutes of activity, so we won't have any complaining like I paid ten pounds for Amy Winehouse* ticket (*other topical act that has played recently and seen by a member of the audience at the same venue or festival*) and eight pounds on this piece of …(*pause to suggest the word "shit" will be said - classic music hall innuendo style*) scratch.

TRANSLATION

And I will assure you will appreciate that they would like some kind of comment, Perhaps if you want to write an email or so forth but of the constructive kind.*

TRANSLATION

D: Yah and if you could restrain yourself to one line each*

TRANSLATION

End Of Extract

4.2.1.1 Subverting Expectation - Incongruity

The audience arrive expecting to find out how to be funny by watching the theatre company Ridiculusmus perform their show of the same name. Instead they are the butt of an hour long single joke. They are met by a group of academics who appear to be in the middle of a

performance conference and are "cast" as delegates at the conference. The Ridiculusmus show *How To Be Funny* is part of this conference. This immediately establishes a "play-frame" in which the audience can relax in the knowledge that it is intended to be fun and that they have the permission to laugh.

The academics delay the presentation of the Ridiculusmus performance with their own theories, analyses, practical work demonstrations and housekeeping paraphernalia. We discovered by the second performance of *How To Be Funny,* at the ICA in London, that a twenty minute delay was possible. The majority of the audience were entertained and engaged. They followed and understood the humour and laughed out loud and uninhibitedly at the punch line. At subsequent performances we extended this section to around fifty five minutes. I refer to it as "the build".

The incongruity of this situation is immediately within the scope of the most popular of theories about humour, the Incongruity Theory. Developed by Kant, Schopenhauer and Koestler amongst many others, it suggests that humour arises when logic and familiarity are replaced by things that don't normally go together. We expect one outcome and another happens. The initial anticipation takes the form of logical thought intertwined with emotion and is influenced by our past experiences and our thought processes. When the joke goes in an unexpected direction, our thoughts and emotions suddenly have to switch gears. We now have new emotions, suggesting a different line of thought. In other words, we experience two sets of incompatible thoughts and emotions simultaneously. We experience this incongruity between the different parts of the joke as humorous.

4.2.1.2 Simultaneous Translation And Signing

The initial shock and surprise of having so many people on stage[201] and the ridiculousness of the translation, the immediacy and familiarity of similar situations, and pushing credibility to the edge with the simultaneous signing sets up a laugh ripe situation. It is a ridiculous foundation for the fun that follows. The tone of seriousness amidst the chaos is immediately established. Patrizia's performance includes pauses when presented with impossible blocks of text to translate, relish on phrases like "Bambino croscuto" and types of coffee or any talk of food, over acting in a Mediterranean passionate way and the insertion of English words instead of Italian ones where translation is not possible; all these details enhance the meticulous approach to fun with believability. James' ridiculous deadpan signing takes it further again, though in what is perhaps a more edgy way, as it is "non-pc" to mock any sort of disability. The irony is that James is so locked into his role that even in life he claims that his signing is genuine and understandable to other signers based as it is on letters and improvisation - a fine example of "Deep" playing.

4.2.1.3 The Audience And The Environment

> Successful comedy cannot be done in a vacuum. It is difficult to do comedy in a half empty or indifferent house. A small audience is likely to be an unresponsive audience [202].

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[201] Generally performances as part of post graduate PAR are high in concept and low in personnel.

[202] Provine *Ibid* p139 Provine lists in an appendix to *Laughter-A Scientific Explanation* 10 tips for increasing laughter:
1. Find a friend or personable stranger.
2. The more the merrier.

Laughter is a communal experience not an individual one. Laugh tracks on radio and television shows are designed to make you feel part of a crowd. The first challenge with live performance is to get a crowd and a room that the crowd you can get will fill.

Alex Horne's show *Making Fish Laugh* pointed out and demonstrated charmingly how a lubricated and intoxicated audience in a warm room was more conducive to laughter than a cold, sober one. I believe there are other simple factors that make it easier for an audience to laugh:

> Being in the dark, or in relative darkness to the performance area.

> Having a physical barrier between the performer and audience.
> (The first row of seats are always avoided at comedy gigs except by the bravado filled and drink fuelled hecklers of the "come-and-have-a-go-if-you-think-you're-hard-enough" variety such as populate the "Up The Creek" Comedy Club in Deptford, South East London.)

> Having a comfortable seat.

By prioritising one-off performances of this show, rather than two or three night runs or longer, we have largely succeeded in selling out venues where *How To Be Funny* has been presented. This hasn't always pleased promoters and isn't very economical for us, but is critical for the success of the piece. The feeling being that the show is such a rip off, we need to keep the van running out the back so as to enable a speedy evacuation should it be necessary. In Belfast Festival we performed *How To Be Funny* for three nights in a row back to back with *Ideas Men* and achieved only 40% houses. The humourous atmosphere required to pull off the prank was incredibly difficult to achieve though the pressure was good for the work. Under pressure one has to create and be funny. It is the flop scenario[203] made painfully and excitingly tangible.

4.2.1.4 The Characters

4.2.1.4.1 Developing Familiarity Within A Performance

When a character is unknown an audience can be tricked into feeling familiar, and therefore relaxed and willing to laugh, by the use of catch phrases (a repeated phrase) and call back. These techniques create the impression the performer shares some common ground with the audience. By directly addressing an audience - looking them in the eyes and talking to them - a performer can create a sense of familiarity, even intimacy, very quickly.

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3. Increase interpersonal contact.
4. Create a safe, casual atmosphere.
5. Adopt a laugh-ready attitude.
6. Exploit the contagious laugh effect.
7. Provide humourous materials.
8. Remove social inhibitions.
9. Stage social events.
10. Tickle.

[203] As discussed in Section 2.2.4 Pedagogy Of Funniness.

In the preamble to the Belfast performances I gathered audience names by addressing them as if they were delegates, asking what their name was, and which institution they were from before ticking them off an imaginary list of delegates and their plenary groups. I also took names from the box office booking list and called out for certain people as if on familiar terms from email correspondence prior to the conference.

Stand ups call this "banter". At its most basic level a performer asks an audience member what their name is, where they are from and then "riffs" on that information. These people are considered to be victims as they are generally ridiculed and have an unpleasant experience. The more mature comedian will pick only people that seem to be having a bad time - they will look for miserable or serious faces, people with folded arms, people leaving for the toilet and so on, thus ensuring no positive energy is lost from the room. At a more advanced level it can become a playfully deceitful way of gathering interesting and re-useable material from punters.

We have always sought a playful and positive kind of interactive relationship in our work, inviting audience members to play rather than sacrificing them as fodder for humiliation and a boost for our egos. Whilst playful it is still edgy, in that there is no safety net placed beneath the invitation. The invitation to the audience is to play at our level only; there is no "shallow" option[204]. At times we subvert this and are playfully negative with them, especially when it comes to people who are walking out. I have shouted at walkouts - "Oi" or "any chance of a lift to Peckham?" (as if I wanted to leave too) or simply looked, acknowledged and respected their decision. In *Yes, Yes, Yes,* which provoked regular audience walk outs; I would say "good that's got rid of them" to the remaining audience after someone had left, encouraging an atmosphere of playful liberating naughtiness rather than ego and superiority. I have never been a subscriber to the negativity of the Superiority Theory of comedy. This theory - that we laugh at jokes that focus on someone else's mistakes, stupidity or misfortune and feel superior to them - is the oldest of all the theories on humour and sets a precedent for the devaluation of humour as an intellectual topic. If superiority is used, it should be given to the audience voluntarily at the performer's expense.

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[204] Word and Action are an example of a theatre company that use shallow interaction with an audience: "I have seen two W and A performances, one at the Round Festival The David Hall, South Petherton 1996 and another in Nuns Island Arts Centre in Galway 1996. To briefly expand on it - they call the style "Instant Theatre" and perform it in the round - their idea of this being a square seating arrangement with two equal rows of chairs on each side so that everyone is an equal distance from the performing area - in practise the second row has a poor view of the stage and have to bob their heads around between those in the front row to see and cannot access the stage as easily, I recommend it as a good place to hide should you find yourself in the unfortunate position of attending a Word And Action performance. A facilitator/conductor/wizard person asks the audience for suggestions not unlike a *Whose Line Is It Anyway* type show and then puts all of them together to describe a situation e.g.:" Jimmy's arsehole at the Ice cream parlour in Outer Mongolia - a star in the nether galaxy". The facilitator then asks someone to be Jimmy, another to be Jimmy's arsehole, two people to be the ice cream parlour, a few more to be the nether region of ..." (Word and Action Instant theatre at the 1996 Round festival) Woods *Ibid* p101

"Watching Word and Action's "entertainments" is akin to the worst kind of public humiliation, one where by enforced, dis-empowering participation in the naturally disheveled unedited "artistic" collaboration we grimace into a feel good plasticity that ensures a regular non return of participants to their ever dwindling work" Letter from Ridiculusmus to the editor of the Word and Action newsletter: *The Round* Autumn1996.

4.2.1.4.2 Charm

The loveability or likeability of a character requires charm. A contemporary trend whose origin may be traced to Phillippe Gaulier's teaching is to blatantly stare at the audience whilst smiling, in order to charm them. Gaulier orders his students to "look at mum and dad" every seven and a half seconds. The look he requires is one seeking approval and the permission to stay up late. More often than not his students will resort to faking pleasure as convincingly as they possibly can so that he allows them to remain on stage. This success then gives them real pleasure that they can tap into to stay longer. "Fake it til' you make it" is a catchphrase of the Laughter clubs, mentioned in Footnote 16 to Section 1.3, and could adequately describe this. A modification of the charming smile look is the conspiratorial smile - a twisted smile plus raised eyebrows. It is also a Gaulier derivation, from his teachings on complicity - an audience and performer should be complicit in the act of performance creation - the one requiring the other's acceptance of the imaginative leap required.

In *Yes, Yes, Yes*, the only show where we used this technique, I found that "the look" works best when broken down into a sequence as follows: look seriously without smiling to see if the "parent" is watching; when the "parent" looks and eye contact is made, smile; turn away shyly and get back on with what you hoped they were watching. Consciously recreated by adult performers to an audience of strangers in a performance situation the technique can fall horribly flat[205]. It is a high risk strategy. The performer's spirit needs to be exactly right - anything less than genuine effervescent glee is depressingly obvious to an audience. When it's not right, the efforts to endear an audience appears desperate and gives a clear, if subconscious, signal that the performer, in their appeal for approval, lacks confidence. Confidence, as we have seen elsewhere, allows an audience to relax and therefore laugh.

My feeling is that the paying audience has made an investment in the show's success simply by buying a ticket and performers need not concern themselves with crude endearment. The public want their investment to pay off and will willingly enter into the imaginative world of the artist. How long their indulgence lasts will then depend on the quality of the piece. Generally you can get away with anything for the first ten to twenty minutes.

4.2.1.4.3 Risk

A comic who plays safe tends to perform further away from reality so as to be clear that what is being performed is intended to be funny. We prefer to remain close to reality so that the material has the potential to offend as well as entertain and so that it is exciting as well as funny. Arguably this excitement is a necessary state for our humour to work as it is not so much about structured

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[205] "Charm has its place in the theatre, but there are a number of young companies around at present - working particularly in the visual and physical theatre fields - who seem to feel charm harnessed to comedy is enough. It seldom is" Tell Tale Hearts' *Donkey Haughty* at BAC, London *The Guardian* 25 November 2002 "I do, however, get tired of companies - and Cartoon de Salvo is not alone - who seem to think that, when creativity fails them, they will be able to get by on a conspiratorial smile to the audience. In theatre, as in life, charm has its limitations." Cartoon de Salvo's *Ladies and Gentlemen, Where Am I?* BAC *The Guardian* 21 February 2003 Both reviews by Lyn Gardner.

jokes as situations and tension. In this way it is like *The Office*[206] - painfully accurate and often only laughable on a second viewing. The believability stakes are high. Our base character creations are bold. I am not Danish, my accent is bad, but consistent, my wig is awful, yet worn with conviction. It is the conviction in believing in these appendages that is funny.

It is obvious that what we are doing is play, though we refuse to admit as much, and in this refusal the game becomes deeper and more interesting. We incorporate elements of "play" and "Deep Play" into reality, "torquing" it to the extreme "crest of edginess". The level of conviction is idiotic, like clowns but without the comfort of breakouts at seven and a half second intervals.

4.2.1.5 Repeats And Callback

Normally a Stand Up will milk the punch line of a joke, adding perhaps three or four extra comments post punch line to extract repeat laughter from the gag – for those who liked it, those who didn't get it and to flesh out their performance with what they perceive to be good stuff when they get a decent reaction. Blake Edwards, director of *The Pink Panther* movies called it "topping the topper" but it is now commonly referred to as "callback". Callback is a "cheap way of creating the illusion of structure"[207]. It is extremely common in hour long Stand Up shows and involves the comic referring back to an earlier joke in the same show. It is frequently used in this way to extend the reaction to material post punchline but is most noticeably used late on in a routine – usually the very last joke [208] - so as to give the impression that the material has some meaning and relevance and is all carefully planned. It's interesting in the Stand Up context in that it playfully reveals the scripted nature of the material when the desired illusion is of absolute spontaneity[209].

In theatre, callbacks are seen more as aspiration towards literariness, poetry and musicality. We have used it in *Ideas Men* where the first line: "Do you wanna go for your lunch now or do you wanna go later?" is repeated five minutes from the end.

Any technique can be deployed with an elementary level of craft; it takes more work to deploy it with artistry and in *How To Be Funny* the callback technique is casually drawn on in more the former than the latter way. Information from the pre-amble banter is quickly and casually drawn on to demonstrate the effect. In the Ross Festival performance the gleaned information about an expensive and disappointing Amy Winehouse concert earlier in the same festival and the "beardy man" 's well thumbed festival brochure got a large reaction just because they were obviously spontaneous and mentioned earlier the same evening in the preamble banter. These, along with more conventional jokes and punchlines[210] are needed in order to keep up the audience laugh rate.

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[206] By Stephen Merchant and Ricky Gervais starring Ricky Gervais (BBC 2002) "The funniest, most brilliantly observed situation comedies ever to appear on our television screens" *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* 22 December 2002 Rebecca Tyrrel.

[207] Daniel Kitson performance at Lower Town Hall Melbourne April 2004.

[208] Fiona O'Loughlin, Wil Anderson, Jack Dee all do it / did it; too many to mention do.

[209] Sankey explains: "people don't really think of stand ups as actors….. the belief in the extemporaneous sharing...is one of stand up's most powerful myths… in reality Stand Up comics are nothing more than actors, playing the part of Stand Up comics." (p53)

[210] In this section some conventional humourous things are: that sex has become part of the module on physical theatre; the idea that you are only allowed two biscuits in tea breaks at conferences; Scratch is a pile of rapidly rustled up crap, and comments on it aren't really welcome, despite the invitation to give feedback; the alliterative and tautologistic phrase: "people from the public".

To find enough to keep up a satisfactory rhythm is the challenge in making a piece. It is something a performer senses instinctively, aspiring for an atmosphere that is buoyant but not overwhelming.

4.2.2 "Two Penguins Sitting In A Bath" - Extract 2

D: Perhaps now Avrom I think they are warm* to the unpacking of Ridiculusmus so I would like to welcome to the floor. Professor Avrom Norvershterm of the FEEPAD INSTIUTE IN RAMSGATE IN KENT

J: Thanks, erm thanks Torvald

D: *(interrupting)* There's won't be signing simultaneous and there is no need to translate this – as there is a full copy of the paper in the conference pack

Translation

J: I'd like to begin by trying to think about finding ways of addressing what is, I think, the first impulse – which is to look at, if I might presume to be so bold, the question. And erm what is this question?* Hegel, of course, and others –Du Pont, Avrillard, Runnicles, Long, Kosser, Thorpe, J.C.R.Richards and, to a lesser extent, the all-embracing panoplies of Bannerman, Schmidt, Adolf Bane, Obcarskas, Clarke, Beth Masters, Dogend* and –from a kind of Fitzrovian perspective*- Kitty Juniper Daley –erm well, and others- have made err questionable leaps towards what I can only call 'plugging the gap in knowledge'. But this, it seems to me, begs the question: where is that orifice?*

Now, I'm not going to tear into the work *(laugh)* – what work? *- but I do want, I think, to question this first impulse- and to begin by trying to talk about new meanings of performative, and a kind of different notion of perfo**ming** – why can't I just talk straight is, of course, yet another question * – but before we get round to that I'd like to propose, I'd like to consider the dialogue-the engaging dialogue- we are having with ourselves. You know, this whole question of historicity, permicity, specificity, intercity* and performativity – brings us inexorably to a different notion: what is learned and what is unknown. And although it could be said that these intercultures occur at a micro-level, what we have to invent new questions – or, at least, new imperatives. Which brings me back to my

earlier point – is it interesting? And ultimately I have come to the conclusion that in my own way I can be funny too.* For example:* Two penguins were sitting in a bath, and one said to the other 'Pass me the soap' and the other one said 'No soap, radio'*. That joke was first told to me in…er,(cough) 1967*, and I didn't know why it was funny then* and the only reason I say it now is because apparently, Ridiculusmus, when they were asked how to be funny, would have a whole set of answers which were entirely irrelevant to what was being asked. So I just thought that, you know, probably the best answer to this question of how to be funny, would be to do as they do – throw the I Ching, er, and find whatever piece of paper or whatever thing occurred in the disgusting recesses of their minds, and see what came up. And that's just what came up *and I suppose you'll have to forgive me for it or as the I Ching says "No blame", when you do something which is slightly wicked.* I don't know –you know- er, political – golly *– you know, how can you say that anybody who throws the I Ching to be funny – is really political? I remember seeing Ridiculusmus in 1984 I think it was, when they gave a performance at the Almeida, when the Almeida was still a (cough) revolutionary place –it was once–* and my brother reminded me of this– we saw Ridiculusmus afterwards, um, and I said "They don't look like radicals. They look like clowns." Something beatific and innocent about their approach, so how could they possibly be political?

And I just want to leave you with this from Freud in Jokes and the Unconscious. He distinguishes between joking on the one hand and the comic on the other and this distinction rests in part on their semiotic status and in part on their ensuing structures of address and in another part on the different psychic levels they tend to predominantly involve, now made, constructed or produced and exists only in utterance. Its immediate existence is language and signs. The comic in contrast is witnessed, discovered, observed and can exist beyond the realms of formal utterances and situations encountered in everyday life, now jokes tripartite structure..the joker, the addressee and a perceiver or a butt in this case you* (pages 71-72) and that, believe it or not, is the end of the paper*

D: Thanks for that Avrom. *Applause**

End Of Extract

4.2.2.1 How Far Believability Can Go

Jon's speech illustrates very well how far believability can be pushed. His character spouts "wisdom" that ties himself and its audience in knots, saying a lot but saying nothing, he extends name dropping and academic acknowledgement to a ridiculous length and speaks with deliberate guile to conceal his lack of content. The material as mentioned before is apparently copied from and inspired by Simon McBurney on a BBC Radio 4 style arts discussion programme and it uses a "Deep" play technique, also used earlier in the "two biscuits" section in referring to our real selves whilst playing a fictional self. This plunges the game into a level of conviction that insists on the audience making a major imaginative shift. As discussed earlier in Section 3.1.2.1 Reality.

4.2.2.2 Understatement As Surprise

I should just draw attention to an example of Jon's mastery of the technique of understatement in making comedy:

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this whole question of historicity, permicity, specificity,
intercity* and performativity
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The patently ridiculous insertion of "Intercity" (a type of train) amidst the pseudo academic words that end "city" is disguised by subtly changing speed and volume. The real academic words are slightly louder and slower than the joke word which is slipped in almost unnoticed so that despite the banality or childishness of the joke it succeeds in provoking laughter. By not signalling a joke is coming it makes it more surprising and therefore funnier. A further example of this is offered in the "jokes" section where a joke ("two pints of lager in the library") as bad as the two examined and demonstrated ("Frogs legs" and "lettuce in") succeeds by the mere fact of being unannounced.

4.3 The 5 Diversions

Academics typically waste time in digressions and parodying this trait here was a useful device to be clear that common areas of digression that have nothing to do with the core essence of funniness. Rather they are attractive but diverting problems when tackling the question of being funny.

The digressions used for illustration in this case are the non-humourous laughter sources - contagious laughter, glee and tickling, sentimentality, the philosophies of humour, structured "street" jokes, taboo, scatology, surrealism and aggression.

4.3.1 "The Secret Of Comedy" - Extract 3

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D: This conference was emerging from an idea to invigorate
the processes of practise as research, comic processes to
invigorate those and in the course of its organization we
with our faithful students both here and at FEEPAD we
created what we might call a series of responses to the
unfolding journey and we thought we might show that now
before we see the work of the masters Ridiculusmus?
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TRANSLATION

(To the others mumbling) The "Secret Of Comedy" thing?
(some mumbling amongst the academics) So we show a
provocation just a sharing of something before we see the
guys..? called "The Secret Of Comedy"

TRANSLATION

which I should mention briefly with the Gulbenkian
foundation was made in collaboration with the writer in
residence Dr Phillip Roberts, himself a practitioner and
academic based at the University of Wales in Llangollen*.
So we show the piece?

*TRANSLATION while they fart around looking for the "Secret
Of Comedy" envelope. They can't find it so Jon makes one. D
clears some clutter.*

*The three take their chairs to the front of the stage and
stand ready.*

*Three arrangements of chairs are offered*** without
anything more than a communal look*** at the audience*

*On the 4th arrangement once the heads have turned to face
the audience Adaggio for strings plays**

*Another three arrangements followed by spinning with the
chairs back to seated behind table, during the fairly
dangerous spinning there is a chair collision* (music then
cross fades to a similarly sentimental Michael Nyman track
from the film The Hours.*

*J produces envelope with "The Secret Of Comedy") Written on
it. P and D clamber for it poetically always just
missing***, then struggling with each other* until finally
D produces a toy fishing rod* and casts for it, Jon
attaches the bulldog clip on the end of its line to the
envelope and D reels it in*. He opens it[211], laughs in slow
motion* to the music then so much so that he bangs his head
on table.**

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[211] The contents of the envelope are not revealed. If you wish to find the "answer" to the secret of comedy you should
go to Section 4.4.1.

Music immediately stops and J and M laugh at him Contagious laughter begins** All sorts of laughter demonstrated naturalistically for as long as possible – including snorting, gagging, whooping, giggling, bellowing and hiccups – until they are worn out and need to pee – D puts water jug from table on the floor in front of P, P does a reasonable length piss then passes on to J who can't go *– D does a mammoth one then a wet fart with his last effort, lets out a sigh and (puts the water jug now full of frothy yellow piss back on the table)

D: *(to the others)* I'm not sure how that one ends. *(to public)* We're not sure how that one ends

TRANSLATION

What we saw there an exploration of floating or contagious laughter and something of the physicality of the writer's provocations.

TRANSLATION

The piece began as an exploration one lunchtime and will culminate in a series of performances in Easter 2012.* The Trinity term.*

TRANSLATION

End Of Extract

4.3.1.1 The Excuses For The Diversions

Academics regularly indulge themselves in the exposure of sub standard artistic works that would not survive in the open market place to a wider audience at conferences. Adrian Heathfield[212], for example, regularly "performs" lectures. I once saw him give a "performance paper" which involved sitting smugly with his back to the delegates taking his hat on and off and dropping Robert Wilson references. It was supposed to be about the Polish director Tadeusz Kantor. Another academic at the same conference showed a video of a painfully poor "Kantor inspired" autobiographical piece about coming out as a lesbian. The only Kantor connection was some artfully chosen wooden props that seemed totally inappropriate to her story.

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[212] Dr Adrian Heathfield is a Principal Research Fellow (Performance & Live Art) at Nottingham Trent University. "His work questions the ethics of the encounter between the spectator and the artwork, elaborating its significance through and into debates on the status of sensory experience within cultural knowledge, the politics of commemoration and shifts in the perception and presentation of mortality. He is working on a project called limbo, a new international cultural organisation of numerous artists and thinkers concerned with the research, curation and creation of liminal art works, thought projects and cultural affects." Reminiscent of Jon's "Two penguins" speech.
(www.ntu.ac.uk/research/schoolofartanddesign/academic%20profiles/5037.html 18 August 2005)

This sort of hijacking of events is not limited to the academic world. At a Gardzienice[213] gathering in Derry in 1996, a community worker called Roy Arbuckle took the chance to croon his way through a half hour singer-songwriter routine before they came on including worthy duets with a Loyalist ex-paramilitary Sam Starrett, about the Dunblane massacre: "Men And Their Guns", and his "popular" hit: "Davy Crockett Comes From Donemana". These are just examples from the world I've inhabited; "door-stepping"[214] goes on everywhere.

It is the structure of classic clowning to announce a bold intention then digress, divert and only at the very end of the activity perform the intention brilliantly and quickly.[215] Contemporary street performers use it all the time. For it to work, the victim of the delay - one half of the double act, the audience, or in solo shows - the performer's disciplined self as opposed to the digressive self; must be a compliant play thing who is happy, or at least willing, to be in the "play-frame".

The chair arranging came straight out of our angry corner. We copied a "scratch" that Jon had seen at BAC which the supportive cliquey audience thought fantastic. Cartoon de Salvo were also involved and made angry corner with some banal cardboard box based brainlessness. Jon has been interested in the use of sentimental music for ages - especially how by playing a classical "weepy", things suddenly take on significance and resonance. We used it in *Broken* and again here. The "Secret Of Comedy" section is Pina Bausch meets Aurora Nova - beautiful music, movement and lighting with hollow silliness.

The spinning movement with the chairs was simply as a result of enjoying the vast depth of the theatre at the ICA - it came up spontaneously as a reaction to the architecture - as they would say in "Viewpoints"[216] work. Spatial awareness work was a staple at The Poor School. I'm not sure whether the teachers got it from Laban, Alexander technique or Litz Pisk[217], but we used to walk around filling the space quite a lot. It's a skill you never forget.

4.3.1.2 The Envelope - The Daunting Prospect Of All The Theories Encapsulated

The Sorenson character calls it "a general provocation" - and it is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task ahead. The idea that some sort of "secret" to being funny could be contained in a small envelope on a slip of paper is ridiculous. It is very easy to disprove all the major theories of humour - Steve Allen does it, Olly Double does it:

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[213] A Polish theatre company. See www.gardzienice.art.pl/ for more.

[214] I use "door stepping" to mean an "unwanted visitor" (as in people who put their foot on your doorstep and stop you closing the door to get rid of them).

[215] Small versions of this can be seen in *How To Be Funny* when I interrupt Avrom's paper just after introducing him to say that "there won't be a translation" and in the jokes section during Jon's joke performance I give an example of a joke that does not cognitively process correctly and in the tickling section to acknowledge some extra collaborators.

[216] "Viewpoints" is a technique of improvisation that grew out of the postmodern dance world. It was first articulated by choreographer Mary Overlie, then by the directors Anne Bogart and Tina Landau in *The Viewpoints Book* (2006). "Viewpoints" are a set of names given to principles of movement.

[217] Author of *The Actor And His Body* London, Harrap 1975.

"One of the fundamental rules of scientific investigations is that experiments should be carried out under controlled conditions without extraneous variables, but extraneous variables are the very stuff of what makes people laugh." [218]

To get to the heart of funniness requires an act of faith, an opening of the door into the joys of the unknown, a willingness to dive into the chaos of thought and action[219]. The grabbing for the envelope supposedly represents this.

4.3.1.3 Contagious Laughter - Corpsing

This was one of the original pieces of material for the Belfast conference show that was developed with Miguel Antunes and probably arose from an old idea we used in *Broken*. In that show we had a small pedal bin and a recording of manic laughter which Jon would trigger open and cue after some of our more mechanical jokes. This live version of aggressive artificial laughter is fun to do because it begins as quite appealing and endearing and becomes rather horrible. Initially it seduces the audience, proving the point about the contagiousness of laughter and then repulses them by its excessiveness and exclusion. The point that this divide is crossed is different for everyone and helps us sense an audience's tone - where their edge is - so that we can perform the show appropriately.

This study is not about laughter. Laughter is merely one of the five illustrative digressions from the real task of this thesis, to nurtures the ability to be funny. Laughter is not the same as humour; it is the physiological response to humour. Robert Provine suggests that we can learn most about comedy by understanding laughter[220] and has stated that humans have a "neurological auditory feature detector" that responds to laughter by triggering other neural circuits in the brain, which, in turn, generates more laughter. This explains why laughter is contagious, a fact he illustrates with the remarkable story of the Tanzanian schoolgirls who endured a two and a half year epidemic of laughter in the 1960s[221].

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[218] Double *Stand Up - On Being A Comedian* ps 246-7

[219] This mode must be backed up by a meticulous approach to development through recording, analysing, adapting and re-performing material.

[220] "Philosophy is to science what alcohol is to sex: It may stir the imagination, fire the passions, but the actual implementation may be flawed, and the end result may come up short" p11 "Most laughter research neglects laughter and its occurrence in everyday life... *Laughter, A Scientific Investigation* Provine ps19-20

[221] In Tanzania in 1962 at a missionary boarding school for girls aged 12 - 18 years at Katasha village, 25 miles south of Bukoba near Lake Victoria, three girls started laughing on January 30th and spread it to 95 of the 159 students forcing the school to close on March 18th. It reopened on May 21st but closed again when 57 pupils were stricken. Individual laugh attacks lasted from a few minutes to a few hours and recurred up to 4 times. In a few cases the symptoms persisted for 16 days. There were no fatalities or permanent after effects, but teachers reported students being unable to attend lessons for several weeks after an episode. No teachers were afflicted.
Once the school closed, the laughter spread to Nshamba village where some of the girls lived affecting mostly young adults and school children. Another outbreak occurred at Ramashenye girls' middle school and Kanyangereka village both near the homes of other Kashasha students. Before finally abating in June 1964 there was a plague of laughter that spread like a prairie fire and temporarily closed 14 schools and afflicted 1,000 people in tribes bordering Lake Victoria in Tanzania and Uganda. Quarantine was the only means of containment. A psychogenic, hysterical origin was established after excluding alternatives such as toxic reaction and encephalitis.
(Provine *Laughter* p131 - his source is Rankin, A.M and Phillip,P.J (1963) "An Epidemic Of Laughing In The Bukoba District Of Tanganyika." *The Central Africa Journal Of Medicine* 9, 167-170 so sounds authentic)

Comics use forms of contagious laughing to induce their audience to laughter and/or extend laughter once they have achieved it. They do exactly what Hamlet asked clowns not to do:

> And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them… for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some barren spectators to laugh too[222].

Not a new thing then by any means and one used extensively by contemporary comedians like Ross Noble, who comes on laughing, Chris Addison who always laughs at is own jokes[223] and Billy Connolly who sounds like he's laughing all the time. Provine calls this last technique "Laughspeak":

> Especially notable in talk show hosts, public relations professionals and others who attempt to defuse a delicate inquiry by posing it in a laughing voice. It is also common when there is a power imbalance between the conversants, as when a person is trying to ingratiate themselves to another…the power dynamics of laughter and laughspeak are obvious and quite entertaining once you develop an ear for them; they are also penetrating and uncensored because of the unconscious nature of most laugh production and the limited awareness most people have of their own laughter[224].

Corpsing is an accidental outburst of natural laughter during performance[225]. It is an enlarged version of performing with pleasure. It shows the performer to be out of control and needs to be disguised and channelled. It's a delicate state to be in – if you let yourself go and burst out laughing

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[222] Hamlet's advice to the players. Shakespeare *Hamlet* Act 3 Scene 2

[223] An extremely irritating technique this one and again it's not just me who thinks so: "An enthusiastic capacity crowd created the perfect atmosphere for this year's final. But the billed compere, Boothby Graffoe, was replaced by Chris Addison - a vastly inferior substitute, in my view. Addison has a lot of mildly-amusing material, but also a most irritating stage manner. He is one of those pedestrian "Where are you from?" comperes, who swears too much and laughs at his own gags. (The Daily Telegraph Open Mic Award Final 1999, Edinburgh www.wilco.dircon.co.uk/reviews5.htm 14 December 2004)

What is impressive about Addison's acted recreation of laughter, which goes something like this: *He laughs then gathers himself and says:* "I've got to the point in my career where I make material for my own entertainment" is that he can repeat it exactly time after time. I witnessed the: *Laugh* - "I've come to the point in my career" combination on twelve separate occasions in the space of a week at the 2004 Comedy Festival in Melbourne. The unfortunate occasions were: *The Comedy Festival Opening Gala*, his own Stand Up show – 6 shows plus, *The Great Debate*, the TV version of *The Gala*, the Festival Comedy Club Friday and Saturday, in conversation with Will Anderson on *Triple J Breakfast Show*, on *Rove Live* … and these are just the times I was unfortunate to witness – there may have been many more. – Why you may wonder was I such an enthusiastic follower of such an abysmal apology for an entertainer – we had the bad fortune to be sharing a dressing room with him and would hear his set as we packed up each day. Acting laughter is not easy to pull off. Coach: I'm going to have to pull you off at half time

Player: Can't I just have an orange like everyone else? There was a scripted corpse in *Ideas Men* which I had to make into a fake laugh, deliberately machine gunning it out because recreating a real one became impossible. I find it is easier to fart on cue than to laugh (with the help of mung bean sprouts). So it is certainly not an easy task to master (perhaps that is why Addison indulged himself with it so often) but worth using if it comes up naturally and milking on special occasions, as long as its accompanied by careful ego management and awareness of previous use – i.e. don't do it if you're ever on telly because millions will see it and then not believe you when they see you live.

[224] Provine p50

[225] Tony Allen uses "corpsing" to describe a deliberate laugh by the performer rather than an accidental one: "The Now requires mastery of two basic clown techniques – Mugging and mimicry and corpsing (used to build expectation - "I'm just laughing thinking about this story I'm going to tell you") - or to mark time as the audience laughter fades – it's a deceit that should be used sparingly." (*Attitude* p29) I am going to stay with the more common usage of corpsing as an accidental outburst of laughter.

the public will cease to find it funny – as we found out doing *The Exhibitionists* in Plymouth during a poorly attended matinee - and yet they will find it endlessly hilarious when you struggle to keep it in. The audience enjoy and laugh at the pain of the performer. This is the Superiority or Aggression Theory at work but with the victim being the jokers themselves, a reverse form of *Schadenfreude* as seen in Section 4.2.1.4.1 above. More on which below. I like these occasional slip ups and milk them to heighten the atmosphere whenever they come up. Some of our most memorable gigs have included corpsing. There are tasteful examples of genuine corpsing in the CD Rom of the performance of *How To Be Funny*. On my ad-libbed line about the mobile phone "turn the fucking thing off" where infected by the audience's reaction, I laughed but managed to absorb it into my speech; and if you look carefully at James's face occasionally his lips curl into a smile but he controls the urge to laugh by making out that he is exercising his face .

Fry usefully groups all of these forms of laughter in performance together under the name "Intercurrent laughter" differentiating it from "terminal laughter", which is from the audience and follows a punchline. He warns of its overuse:

> If the intercurrent laugh becomes too boisterous or the joker is carried away in laughter by the as yet unrevealed humour, the joke is spoiled and the audience gets little humour from the episode [226].

Such techniques, together with some of the efforts at endearment mentioned above - the complicit smile in particular, may be seen as versions of "the wink" or "play-frame". They communicate that it is okay to laugh, this is play.

4.3.1.4 *Schadenfreude* And Reverse *Schadenfreude*

Schadenfreude is commonly known as the unique German word to describe the enjoyment we feel at the suffering of others. The comedian may garner many laughs by reversing this phenomena and willingly putting herself in the position of an inferior who may be laughed at, as well as with. There are some examples of this in *How To Be Funny* - loss of control of our bowels, the tickling, the embarrassing "Heaven" dance routine and involuntarily, my inability to perform properly as a result of corpsing. To some, even the act of going on stage in front of an audience is a form of suffering and to do this willingly is a sure fire way of putting an audience into a state of readiness to laugh. Audiences go into a state of indulgent joy at the willing suffering of the clown but also mutually suffer by spectating voluntary pain. John Portmann has pointed out that this is a bonding experience: "of all the ties that bind, there can be few greater than sharing sorrow"[227]. As we have seen already the foundation of comedy is common ground[228] and this communion of mutual and voluntary suffering shares the end goal of entertainment which in turn makes the "sorrow" a joyful and pleasant one.

At the heart of *Schadenfreude* lies a celebration that another person may have to re-evaluate his or her self worth and the principles by which she lives. This means that we are unlikely to feel *Schadenfreude* toward people with little or no self esteem. In a performance context where the

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[226] Fry *The Anatomy Of Humor* p146
[227] Portmann *When Bad Things Happen To Other People* p47
[228] Section 4.2.4.1 on character.

comic is willingly suffering and the audience are sharing the pain and laughing at it, the performer's esteem must be strong and playfully great. This explains the prevalence of cocksure comics. It is an obvious solution to act egotistically on stage so that the personal failures that are the subject of the comedy work at a schadenfreudian level. It is the daring comedian that dares to play a low status character. They must find other, more subtle strategies and more surprising deflations. Lee Evans, for example, used to start his act with the very low status approach that his character was too nervous to speak into the microphone. He then acted as if he was a balloon being let go and the escaping air caused him to shrink in size. From a crumpled position on the floor he would pretend to pump himself up to standing, only to deflate again and again.

Schadenfreude is a function of both pleasure and suffering and can be seen therefore as an articulation of the Superiority Theory.

> Whether the body be affected apart from the soul or the soul apart from the body, or both of them together, we constantly come upon the mixture of pleasure with pain [229].

4.3.1.5 Scatology

Scatology is a large and popular part of superioritizing humour but also illustrates the Relief Theory. Scatology is commonly known as "toilet humour", and strictly speaking should be about excrement and excretory functions only. In practise its remit is a lot broader and may include anything unpleasant and bodily. The urination sequence at the end of the "Secret of Comedy" section of *How To Be Funny* represents this area of humour. Logically our idea was that we would laugh ourselves to the point that we lost control of our bowels. We try to work to extremes and this seemed to be the furthest we could take the idea in this context.

The Relief Theory was developed by Sigmund Freud[230] from earlier "hydraulic" theories[231] about jokes and laughter in which joking was seen as the release of psychic energy. Freud claimed, joking (like dreaming) serves as a safety valve for forbidden feelings and thoughts, and when we express what is usually inhibited, the energy of repression is released in laughter. Talking about personal ablutions is generally considered to be forbidden in public or at least anti-social and unnecessary. Even in our *Dish And Tell* times the phrase "too much information" and an accompanying grimace are commonplace when things get a bit too personal. Hence, in contemporary performance, a level of acceptable grossness has to be found. For example, in this extract urinating out of sight but showing the result (a jar of frothy yellow liquid) was judged to be appropriate.

[229] *The Collected Dialogues Of Plato* ed Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns Princeton University Press 1980 p1132
[230] *Jokes To Make You Unconscious* (1905)
[231] From the likes of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) - a radical classical liberalist and lung expert who coined the phrase "Survival of the fittest".

4.3.2 Jokes - Extract 4

D: So now from a general taste of the subject, a general provocation if you like to we are going to go for a direct action now in the form of a joke and look at the subject of joking. In this case you have the jokes?

J: well I've only got two jokes

D- so Professor Norvershterm - I drew it up here for ease of reference (*refers to vast diagram*) is the emetteur E the encoder of humour and we've made the decision to encode humour for obvious reasons not so much today for ...the maintenance of a group solidarity, the attack on a superior authority, the need for approval which is obviously not applicable to us* anyway or the removal of attention from some other situation possibly the (*insert name of shit / expensive recent act mentioned earlier - callback - Amy Winehouse*)* experience it's more to illustrate the point which of course makes the battle a lot harder.

..So having decided to encode this humour, we will see in this specific social situation, the verbal output in this case, of a humourous message. I would ask you to concentrate especially on the fluency of the semantic content and the cognitive content, for example the time span involved.*

TRANSLATION

Jon: Err, as I said I've only got two jokes. I looked on err. www.jokes.com but they are mostly American

D: Which would obviously cause problems with cognitive content* and the cognitive process "cp squared"* and cause an error in the process*, for example the Australian joke: Which route are you going to take? Oh I thought I'd take the wife)*

J: One. Knock, Knock

(*pause*)

D: Yeah* thanks for that as the receiver, or the decoders. We beg you to participate in an interactive way with the professor's provocation. Maybe you can start again now that they are alive* and aware as to what is happening here

J: "Knock, Knock"

Audience: "Who's there?"

J: "Lettuce"

Audience: "Lettuce who?"

(If it goes wrong e.g. if someone shouts out "Lettuce what?" - after a concerned pause: D: Yeah can you try to concentrate, maybe just for 5 minutes *, I know it's difficult*)

J: "Let us in and I'll tell you"

Pause

D: Okay good.* Perhaps we can refer to the diagram *-we follow the flow horizontally. What we see here is the perception of the incongruity, the comprehension of the incongruity, the relief at the understanding and in this case a non appreciation of e's humour*, leading to silence, the end response of silence or social laughter, in other words fake laughter, or verbal derogation, which might take the form of "you're just not funny guys", or "Fuck off, wanker*". The emetteur takes the strategy to engage with that situation before it feeds back and make further decisions to encode humour - for example -

J: The second joke?

D: With the heckle

J: With the heckle? What is the second joke?

D: *(from auditorium)* "Bollocks"

J: Oh yes, I know where you are… - "sorry you order food over there mate"

D says incomprehensible phrase

J: *(miming)* "sorry we can't send back your paintings"

Dead pause

D: Perhaps we can try another one?*

J: If someone can shout out "wanker" at me

Audience member: "wanker!"

J: "Cunt! * See we have a dialogue*." Oh there's another joke.

D: I think we've … we've err done enough

J: But I've done all this research

D: Well, I've spent two years getting this together

J: I've spent six years. I met Ridiculusmus in eighty four, not ninety nine.

D mumbles something inaudible insistent aggravated instructions to Jon

J: These guys have slept at my house

D: (*forcefully*) Yeah if you just do the joke and we show the non appreciation

J: "Waiter, waiter, have you got frog's legs?" "Yes sir" "Then hop over there and get me a cheese sandwich*"

*Pause for flop **

D Okay; so if we imagine then the laugh was on the incongruity and not on the derogatory pause.* Just so we can illustrate this other side of the diagram imagining that we appreciated the humour, the incongruity. We had a positive evaluation of E, giving him faith in his decision to encode humour, so the cycle enlarges, more and more humourous laughter, which can take the form of "Ha ha", smiling, bowel release*, as illustrated previously. I just want to distinguish that with the non-humourous laughter which can result from humourous laughter which we also saw earlier and from tickling, glee and *Schadenfreude*. Which can sometimes come direct from a hotline as it were from the visual slapstick, or by chance as distinct from the direct decision to encode humour, the chance can sometimes lead into *Schadenfreude*, non humourous laughter or into the decision to take over that situation and use it for the audience and resulting in humourous laughter. So we have

Freud, (*slaps "Freud" on diagram with papers*) we have Freud
(*slaps second mention of "Freud" on diagram*) and we have
Schadenfreude (*slaps "Schadenfreude" on diagram*).* So I
think that's covered jokes. * Except perhaps to say: I went
to the library earlier and I asked if I could have two
pints of lager and packet of crisps. And the librarian said
to me (*sotto voce*): "I'm sorry sir but you're in a
library." I said "Oh Yes (*sotto voce*) I'll have two pints
of lager and a packet of crisps".*

End Of Extract

4.3.2.1 A Dynamic Model Of Humour Diagram

I found several diagrams[232] while reading around the humour canon on joke situations. They were immensely complicated and similar to an inspiring photograph in Paul McGhee's book *Humour, Its Origin And Development* in which a teacher wearing a Groucho Marx mask stands in front of a very complicated scientific diagram. It served the purpose of digressing from the point very well.

By the time of the Belfast performances I had revised and expanded the diagram in line with my attempt to create an all embracing theory. Initially the diagram did not attempt to represent humour in general but just jokes in particular so this expansion marked some progress in the quest for new knowledge.

The illustration became large and beautifully complicated and I felt merited a wall size version to be chalked up as the backdrop to the entire show. I had thought about unveiling the diagram just before this part of the show but it was so beautiful that I decided to leave it in view throughout. This gave the impression that the joke situation diagram refers holistically to the entire performance, which, in a way, it does. The banality of the jokes used to illustrate it enhanced the incongruity of the diagram's complexity, relieved the tension of the pressure on the show to provide an answer to the research question and made us look inferior to our own complexity of knowledge, thus encapsulating all the humour theories microcosmically.

I asked Jon to think of a couple of jokes which the diagram could explain. He brought the Tommy Cooper vintage - "frog's legs" one which had been one of his family favourites and I got some more off the website www.jokes.com from which the "lettuce in" "knock, knock" joke and the "two pints of lager" in the library joke came from.

4.3.2.2 Joke Structure And Performance

Hockett (1960) developed a convincing structural analysis of jokes showing that they must consist of a "build up" which is the main body of the joke, a 'pivot'- a word or phrase around which a joke's potential for double meaning revolves, and a "punch" which completes it.

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[232] The diagrams I adapted are from Smadja,1993 and Chapman and Foot, 1976 ps140-141.

Hockett suggested that only a skeleton of a joke and its punchline needs to be memorized by the performer. Norrick (2001) expands on this pointing out that joke tellers use hesitation, formulaicity and repetition to bridge pauses and gain planning time while they adapt their telling to their audience in a dynamic way.[233]

> Joke tellers build up to punchlines with various lexical and syntactic strategies including the basic joke text, teller strategies, standard joke prefaces, formulas and pattern, the style of delivery and audience response, hesitation, formulaicity and repetition help them gain time to plan but also create a rhythm which lulls their listeners into a semantic trap[234].

Whilst we sought to demonstrate these factors, we also wanted to draw attention to them and retain a level of success at provoking a laugh response. This was possible by using deprecation and surprise. The difference between this and conventional technique may be illustrated as follows - where the initial joke is shrunk into a larger joke situation:

Initial joke:

Build up	Pivot	Punchline	No laughter

Deprecation of initial joke:

Build up (We have a joke and its going to be good)	Pivot (Original joke: Build up - Pivot - Punchline)	Punchline (Deprecation - its actually very bad)	Laughter

The post punchline comments during the joke demonstration, our attitude of willingness to fail and the disguised formula joke at the end of the section (the "two pints of lager" in the library joke) succeeded in achieving this. The confidence required to embrace and champion failure gives the audience faith in our funniness, or at least allows them to relax into a laugh ready state knowing that they won't have a personality confidence breakdown on their hands. We state bluntly that we don't care about approval: "which is obviously not applicable to us". This attitude is present throughout the show in the desultory production values - mumbling things like "shall we do this bit now?" knocking up a missing prop quickly and badly and getting the order wrong. It is present in our entire oeuvre.

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[233] See also Section 3.1.2 for more on this.
[234] Neal R. Norrick "On The Conversational Performance Of Narrative Jokes: Toward An Account Of Timing" *Humor* 14-3 (2001), 255-274 NY2001

4.3.3 Tickling And Glee - Extract 5

D: We go to another form of direct action which is the tickle

J: Shall we get on with the tickle?

TRANSLATION

D: And we look at how this intimacy can reflect the self and the tactile communication

P translates Communicazione tactile

They mutter

D: *(seated and ready to start but can't resist saying more bull)* I should also say thanks to the group of students of Dr. David Grant who worked on this originally with us at the Queen's university in Belfast

TICKLING (tickling, surprise, stupidity)

All three arms up

D tickles Patrizia she laughs. Patrizia tickles Jon - no laughs, P tickles D - he laughs, they put their arms back up. J tickles himself (no laugh)*

All 3 Arms up again DJ Sammy "Heaven" plays

Choreographed dance to Heaven

Twiddling fingers to opening
James signs the lyrics which are typically banal rave song style - "Baby you're all that I need, as I lie here in your arms, finding it hard to believe I'm in heaven."

1 Vertical arms slowly side to side left-right-middle*
2 Vertical arm crossing*
3 Shoulders side to side over 8 x 2* then 4 x 2 then double time until drum roll
4 Egyptian hands side to side x 8 *
5 Diagonal -sides - down (arms outstretched)
6 Head moves - Right side, Left side, Right tilt, Left tilt, down, up, chin out chin back x 2 *
7 Wobble to standing

8 J free style D and P hands on hips elbows alternately to
centre* continue bending forward, back, forward, back
9 hip thrusts with hand/arm pull*
10 All three sit down
11 Spin around badly on chairs*
12 D and P jumping up together */ J syncopated

D's pens jump out of his pocket and he signals cut throat.
Music stops.

D: I am losing my pens here* and also we are trying to
recreate a classic Ridiculusmus performance which was last
seen in 1996 and I think we don't have the right attitude

J: No

D: It's a work the group have long since left behind them
and working from video and only the brief times we have
together and obviously things have not clicked.

TRANSLATION

D: Maybe we try the other one, the Gay Clown Porno

Herb Alpert track plays. They mime as follows:

D, P and J mobile position 1:
D gives P a blow job, P hands on D's head/shoulders. J
thrusts into P from behind all standing
Mobile Position 2 P gives D blow job – D pulling P into him
then puts one foot up on chair and hand behind head. J
licking P's bum and wanking vigorously
Position 3 all wanking to front
Position 4 chain bang. D at back hand on back of head. J at
front wanking himself
Position 5 chain bang D at front sucking thumb.

It breaks down and D signals cut as before

D: *(signalling cut)* Our apologies for that.* What is there
to say about that only – the solo tickle is even emptier
than solo sex – much better therefore to resort to
choreographic element, albeit a tokenistic one leading to
the feeling of the sudden increase in skill, the glee.
Which is another major contributory factor to the laugh in
the audience which you can all try at home.

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I invite you all to put on your home exercises videos*,
your lycra outfits*, do your "Bodypump" moves *and create
some material that way* sharing it with the public for
direct results*.
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We see there, the public humiliation of the "Pop Idol"
variety and the comedy resulting. The love of the public in
the failure, the flop and the willingness on the part of
the clown, the joker, to give themselves over to that
situation, and that is what we have to do to achieve to
this level of humour. This is the sacrifice of the clown -
to lay yourself on the altar of the audience mirth. *
```

End Of Extract

4.3.3.1 Non Humourous Laughter

Tickling is a recurring non starter in humour investigation. It is the crudest form of non humourous laughter, leads nowhere, and is often misplaced and disturbing. It is then, worth a quick dismissal unless you are deliberately recreating dead end research for the purpose of entertainment and researching that process, as I am here. Hence to our misguided academic characters it is an important area to cover.

Shylock's rhetorical question: "If you tickle us do we not laugh?"[235] barely scratches the surface of what goes on in the tickling process. As Adam Phillips has pointed out, it is a complex visceral web of desire, pain and pleasure and nothing to do with intellectual stimuli:

> What is more ordinary in a child's life than...his desire to be tickled?... (to) tickle speaks of the precarious, and so of the erotic...The quality of the experience is a unique representation of the over-displacement of desire and at its most unsettling, a paradigm of a perverse contract...a delightful game, the impossibility of satisfaction and of reunion...a continual re-enactment of the irresistible attraction and repulsion of the object, in which the final satisfaction is frustration[236].

An especially busy area of humour research about tickling that does nothing to help us understand how to be funny is self tickling. The fact that you can't tickle yourself, even in the same area and the same way someone else tickles you into hysteria, is a matter of some obsession to scientists[237]. Their problem being that the information sent to your spinal cord and brain should be

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[235] William Shakespeare *Merchant of Venice* III.i.49–61

[236] *On Kissing Tickling And Being Bored* by Adam Phillips. ps 1-3

[237] Dr Blagrove of the University of Wales in Swansea, for example, constructed a tickling machine to investigate the nature of rapid eye movement (REM), sleep and dreaming. And found that volunteers experienced self-tickling as though it were done by someone else..." if you are woken from REM sleep and tickle yourself it feels as intense as if you are being tickled by someone else." Whilst researchers at the Institute of Neurology in London constructed a palm tickler and found that "People with schizophrenia can successfully tickle themselves because they produce hallucinations (and) think that what they see is real, coming from outside themselves, not actually produced by them." (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/3599129.stm 10 December 2004)

exactly the same. But for tickling to work the brain needs tension and surprise, something that's obviously missing when you tickle yourself. How the brain uses this information about tension and surprise is still a mystery.

Seen as a form of desirable playful aggression, laughter fits the Superiority Theory (the ticklee is the victim of the tickler), the Incongruity Theory (successful tickling must be a surprise) and the Relief Theory (we want to be tickled because we like touch and intimacy, so it's a relief when it happens). Such a simple physical illustration of the major theories of humour suggested that a universal demonstration of what it is to be funny was achievable and it was this area of the research that led directly to the solution of the third research question (how to be funny) in Section 4.4.1.

4.3.3.2 Sudden Glory

Hobbes's reflections on comedy are most commonly associated with the Superiority Theory. Another important area of humour that he covers - that of surprising and pleasing acts - often slips by unnoticed in exegesis[238].

> **Sudden glory**, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and **is caused** either **by some sudden act of their own**, **that pleases them**; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they applaud themselves[239].

The Brighton promoter David Lavender once said that we "don't have any skills". Yet our skill is the invisibility of our skill. Acts like this "Heaven" dance routine that follows the tickling demonstration are the sort of thing that would demonstrate to people like Lavender what he would consider to be "skill". We perform a piece of apparently skilful choreography and people laugh, not just because the moves are silly and suggestive of pop dance routines that they recognise, but because they are "pleased" by the sudden shift in performance mode - from desultory disorganised mumbling to tightly worked out and organised movement. It is a sort of marvel articulated in laughter. I have always found bits of humourless skill in comedy routines rather irritating. The most common example is the comedy song which merely shows off an ability at structuring rhyming lyrics with (usually known and popular) music. "Heaven" is tacky, populist and easy, yet instantly satisfying for an audience. We used moves from naff dance routines, Poor School movement exercises and some plyometrics and filled in boring bits with freestyle gay clubbing style dance moves by Jon. It's irritating that this all works. I hate it, but mixing high and low culture is a rich vein to mine for comedy.

4.3.3.3 Taboo

The "Gay Clown Porno" is another demonstration of the Relief Theory, portraying forbidden thoughts in a literally relieving way. It is also incongruous and superioritizing as we perform an unexpected act of self humiliation, yet one that provokes laughter as we perform with demonstrated pleasure and fun. The idea was a recreation of a video shown by a cabaret MC in Philadelphia where we performed in 2000. He claimed to be in the business of making "gay clown pornos" and

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[238] A fancy word for critical analysis - I use it here to divert attention from the dullness of the point I am making.
[239] Leviathan Part 1 ch.6 in *English Works* vol. 3 ed Molesworth

showed a brief but rather disturbing extract during a very unsuccessful cabaret night in which we featured.

The text I speak after the routine about self sacrifice arose in Belfast from my conscious efforts to develop the text through free style improvisation. As with all devised text, you can never be sure whether the idea came spontaneously in the moment or from some earlier private or public musing. It is an idea or principle that I believe and conveys the need for utter devotion to the task of being funny.

4.3.4 "The Pan Germanic Laughter Competition" - Extract 6

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D: - Finally we try what Ken Dodd once said* If it's below
the trousers it's really not comedy*
```

*Translation**

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D: the result then to resort to surrealism shown now in
this piece where we play the Pan Germanic laughter
competition illustrating that perhaps in our case at least
it is better to do nothing.
```

TRANSLATION AND CONFAB

```
D: The Pan Germanic laughter competition
```

*J fires a gun and a rubber chicken stuffed with feathers
falls onto the stage****

*Whenever someone in the audience laughs they judge it
"Fake" *," Totally fake*" or "Falso"*(Patrizia) "all
fakes"*, "cough"* or sign language version (James) this
goes on for several minutes.*
*J fires gun again indicating the end and a dummy technician
falls from the rig. *** She is dragged off.***

```
D: And the winner is... (Hands Jon envelope)
```

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J: (pause for fake tension) It's a draw
```

```
D: Which is a disappointing finish reflective of my own
personal feeling of comedy that it is ultimately deflatory
and depressing* and that is my theory of comedy.[240]
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End Of Extract

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[240] Since the period of research I have removed this line and found the overall reception of the work is greatly improved. The phrase strikes a note of ennui and such a state is not conducive to laughter.

4.3.4.1 Ken Dodd And Dada

Ken Dodd (1927 -) is a traditional, jokes based, comedian whose anachronistic marathon performances are his shtick. He is however relatively scholastic for a working comic and a well publicised thinking-practitioner. Yet despite his credibility, dropping his name throws up images of feather dusters and cheesy songs rather than intellectual analysis and this resonance taps the high-low culture tensiveness discussed in Section 4.3.3.2 above. Whereas on stage Ken Dodd merely wants to make people laugh and has no "attitude", Dada is pure attitude. As far as I know "Doddy" hasn't published anything on Dada, which was the source inspiration for the Pan Germanic laughter competition, though he did once declare that "Surrealism isn't funny"[241].

Dada was a precursor to Surrealism and has more purpose than its legacy suggests. Whereas Dada has logic and structure, both of which are necessary in comedy - diversions from the rational provoke laughter, (which is why we don't laugh when dreaming because dreaming is not in the rational realm) - Surrealism has none. Hence my disagreement and anger at reviews that label us as such.

The routine came from a neo-Dadaist act we made up in 1998. At that time we were desperately scraping around for a project that we could get funding for. We had no money and no original ideas. We suggested a re-visitation of the Dada movement to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland as audiences had often said we were like Dada and proposed testing out this comparison by remaking original Dada acts and creating new ones inspired by them. This took the creative pressure off us whilst appearing to be a worthy and fundable activity. The entire project was carried out in Dadaist spirit. A representative of the Arts Council was told to "piss off", a pretentious German performer was humiliated[242], a sham tour that attracted an audience of less than ten people was undertaken and finally a video of an entirely different work was submitted to the Arts Council assessor as evidence of the performances. The laughter competition was the most successful, and possibly only successful, output of the project and was used as a cabaret act for publicity purposes whenever they arose[243].

The attitude of the Dadaists that we tried to emulate is best expressed by Tristran Tzara:

> **Everyone dances to his own personal boomboom.** …Everything is incoherent. There is no logic… The acts of life have no beginning or end. Everything happens in a completely idiotic way. That is why everything is alike. Simplicity is called Dada… The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of an art, but of a disgust. Disgust with the magnificence of philosophers…disgust with the pretensions of these artists-God's-representatives-on-earth, disgust with passion and with real pathological wickedness where it was not worth the bother; disgust with a false form of domination and restriction…disgust with all the

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[241] I got this out of *The Daily Mail*, along with the quote used in the text of the show, in a doctor's waiting room and in my haste at ripping it out while no-one was looking I didn't get the date. It was sometime in 2003.

[242]We walked out whilst he recited Kurt Schwitters' 30 minute sound poem *Ursonate*. We actually had to leave in order to perform *The Exhibitionists* at the Ormeau Baths Art Gallery which we had double booked by mistake.

[243] For example the piece has been performed at the launch of The Assembly Rooms Edinburgh fringe programme in 2000 when *Yes, Yes, Yes* was on there, at The Bongo Club in Edinburgh, at the Kerry Arts Festival "Comedy Night" in Tralee and at "The Two Packets Of Quips" club at the University of Kent amongst others.

catalogued categories, with the false prophets who are nothing but a front for the interests of money, pride, disease, disgust with the lieutenants of a mercantile art made to order according to a few infantile laws, disgust with the divorce of good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly...Disgust finally with the Jesuitical dialectic which can explain everything and fill people's minds with oblique and obtuse ideas without any physiological basis or ethnic roots, all this by means of blinding artifice and ignoble charlatans promises. As Dada marches it continuously destroys...From all these disgusts, may I add, it draws no conclusion, no pride, no benefit. It has even stopped combating anything, in the realization that it's no use, that all this doesn't matter. What interests a Dadaist is his own mode of life. But here we approach the great secret. Dada is a state of mind. That is why it transforms itself according to races and events. Dada applies itself to everything, and yet it is nothing, it is the point where the yes and the no and all the opposites meet, not solemnly... but very simply at street corners, like dogs and grasshoppers. Like everything in life, Dada is useless. Dada is without pretension, as life should be[244].

I extended the act to include two "drop gags". On the gunshots that start and end the competition a feather stuffed rubber chicken and a human dummy fall from the roof as if shot dead by the bullets from the gun. It is a classic gag that works with unfailing reliability.

4.3.4.2 The Incongruity And Assault Of Nothingness

The non-content of the laughter competition may be seen as an articulation of Jon's principle of not needing to do anything to be funny. I believe that whilst this is true to a point, you need to put a "play frame" around it for it to work which the start and finish gun and announcement of the winner do. It is also an attack on the source of anger in this case - though an indirect one, targeted as it is at the audience who have been cast as Aurora-Nova-going-laugh-secret-analysts. *How To Be Funny* mocks the quest for a "secret" of comedy. We challenge the "cast" audience with the supposed object of their quest - laughter, ridiculing the idea that it is quantifiable in a parody of an attempt to quantify it. The audience are repeatedly called "fakes". It is an aggressive and challenging stance that fuses the laughter of embarrassment with relief and incongruity. It forces the audience to contemplate its expectations and, as with sense of humour, expectations are individually unique and unquantifiable. Here again is a microcosmic version of the whole thesis in one short section. We might call this recurrent encapsulation "iconic coding"[245] and note that it is typical of our work to have every moment reflective of the whole.

4.4 The Punchline - All The Theories All Together

Raskin (1985) managed to subsume all the theories of comedy, building on Koestler's Bisociation ideas (1964) and synthesise the apparently disparate approaches of Bergson (1900), Freud (1905), Fry (1963), Bateson (1953) and others by treating jokes as a clash of semantic scripts. But with language comes misunderstanding and to create a universal theory of comedy one needs to be understood, and jokes, as we have seen, are only small parts of humour output.

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[244] Tristan Tzara From "Dada Manifesto" [1918] and "Lecture on Dada" [1922] in *Dada Painters and Poets,* edited and translated by Robert Motherwell, New York, pp. 78- 9, 81, 246-51; ⓒ 1989) Harvard University Press.
[245] Bateson *op cit* p132

I attempted to articulate a universality of funniness that was understood and funny in its own right and escalate the ridiculousness of this pursuit into a conceit that encapsulates this show, the company name[246], its attitude and philosophy and the discoveries of this thesis.

4.4.1 Ridiculusmus *How To Be Funny* - Extract 7 And Comment

So now we ought to, we really ought to see Ridiculusmus'
work, *How To Be Funny* maybe we can clear this area Lets
help the stage hand off

Desultory fuss over setting the scene for Ridiculusmus

Jon: Can someone take the piss? Or has it already been
taken?

D: Let's see if the guys are ready. *(goes off and talks to
imaginary members of Ridiculusmus, then re-enters)* They're
ready.

D: So please welcome onto the stage of The Aphra Theatre in
Canterbury the group Ridiculusmus

Applause black out

*Peculiar music plays. Lights flash on the three chairs.
After a minute it goes dark very briefly, then a bright but
tightly focussed lighting state comes on. In the gap
Ridiculusmus have appeared as if from nowhere. It is
obvious that it is the same three actors but they are
without wigs and paraphernalia and look deadly serious. The
music fades. They are dressed all in black with tights over
their heads and the remains of exploded balloons sellotaped
to their noses.*

Patrizia (P) sits down and lets out a balloon fart or
whoopee cushion as she sits. Jon (J) sits and a plastic
duck caller sounds as he does. David (D) sits and a loud
balloon explosion goes off.
Blackout. Other strange music plays. Lights flash again and
Ridiculusmus have disappeared. Blackout. Music stops.

*Applause initiated by the academics who appear from the
back of the auditorium.*

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[246] See my *MA: Ridiculusmus, An Analysis Of Current Practice* for more on this (p8) (the name is from the Horace epistle: "Parturient montes nascetur ridiculus mus" meaning literally "Mountains heave in childbirth and a ridiculous mouse is born" and suggesting a lot of fuss precedes an apparently trivial outcome).
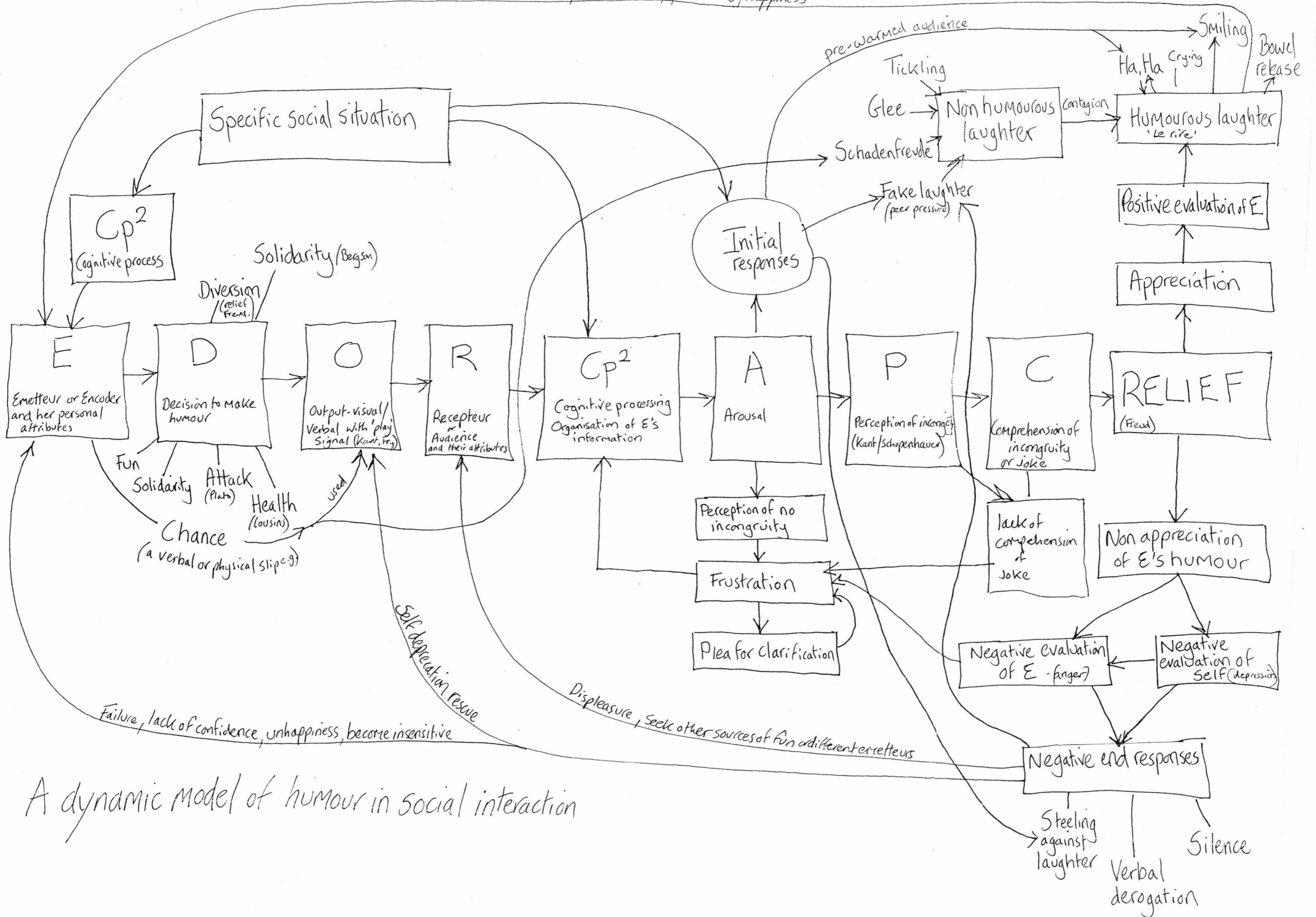
A dynamic model of humour in social interaction

End Of Extract

To add this ridiculous amount of production values to such a miniscule creation was a dig at the Aurora Nova aesthetic but also a practical necessity in order to facilitate the academics disappearing from the auditorium and changing into "Ridiculusmus".

The Ridiculusmus performance is both a miniature three line gag in itself and the punchline of the overall three line gag of the show and of this thesis, so in keeping with that sentiment I will keep this analysis punchy in the short sense of the word.

Comedy is deflation. A voluntary deflation by the joker in order to provoke laugher, either of themselves, their status or of some aspect of the universe they live in and its status. We used three cliché joke shop methods of deflation - a "whoopee" cushion, a duck caller and a balloon. They deflate in decreasing lengths of time as we sit on them slowly[247] and with three very different sounds - a fart, a quack and a bang. The devices are hidden so that when they sound there is an element of surprise, they are incongruous, make us look stupid and therefore inferior; and are literally and metaphorically a relief. To break wind, sit down and let the air out of a balloon is a physical relief, to puncture pomposity is an emotional relief and to come to the answer of a tortuous research question is a spiritual relief. Comedy, therefore, is a fart.

This solution may not be appreciated[248]. It is unlikely that this is because of misunderstanding[249] as its audience and readership are likely to be articulate and intelligent thinkers. This thesis is

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[247] I want to relegate the notion of timing as the secret of comedy to a footnote. Timing is about sensitivity and listening, qualities discussed in the methodology earlier. Put most simply it is about being heard, speaking loudly and clearly or being seen amidst coughs, traffic noises, cappuccino machines, mobile phones, people walking in late, people walking out, heckles and dropped beer glasses for example. It also about allowing the audience to laugh by leaving an appropriate pause after a punchline. The resumption of the performance is just as important as Provine states: "if the comic rushes to his next joke…he not only discourages, and crowds out, but neurologically inhibits audience laughter (laftus interruptus). In show biz jargon - you don't want to step on your punchline (p39). This pause can seem incredibly long at times and is influenced by the confidence of the performer - the more confident, the longer the pause and the more likely laughter will come to fill it. The Pan Germanic laughter competition is an extreme example of this allowing a massive pause to facilitate laughter. Though here, it as much nervous laughter as a reaction to the intellectual stimulus of the material, which in this case is actually the play-framing of the nothingness rather than the nothingness itself. Comedians search for the perfect pause for each occasion listening carefully to the strength of the audience reaction and guessing the moment just before it subsides so that a continual wave of material, listening and laughing drives the show along. In the long term, timing is also a question of originality and suitability at the present moment as much as sensitivity during performance. Neil A. Norrick's article: "On the conversational performance of narrative jokes" mentions: a fundamental if often neglected part of timing is that a comic must have fresh material … in fact a joke heard before is not a joke any more – it's a failure – a failed joke. Non-professional humour performances are usually preceded by a clarification –"have you heard the one about"… the cow who had an abortion – decaffeinated yeah …Information theory confirms this devaluation of jokes - the more they are heard as with any phrase - the less they are worth. Davis and Olsen define information as: "Information is data that has been processed into a form that is meaningful to the recipient and is of real or perceived value in current or prospective actions or decisions" www.cis.njit.edu/~bieber/CIS677F99/synthesis/info-theory-f99/define.html. (13 February 2005) We like to stay ahead of our audience by continually surprising them. Joking partially concurs with the communication theory idea that their value declines with each repetition. Some jokes however have an ability to remain funny by passing into familiarity. Despite being known their funniness increases with repetition. This does not include material that is too painful to laugh at the first time or too complex but that which attains a public sentimentality that demands re-runs or repeats for comfort rather than stimulation.

[248] Disappointed readers should go to Footnote 16 on page 11.

written in an accessible style and the performance piece is incredibly simple and recognisable. Non-appreciation is a question of taste. No-one has the same sense of humour as another person; it is a unique assemblage of situation, mood and experience.

> The meaning attributed to what goes on in the significant space before our eyes - the ethical space - will vary according to our moral presuppositions, the partial visions we receive, the position we occupy in the perspectival world[250].

Humour is utterly reliant on subjective complicity, it cannot be objective, it relies on irrationality and the surprise of the instant. It is not the stuff of objective rationality. The job of the comic is to create enough common ground to achieve a humourous response in the bulk of their audience. If she can stimulate a crowd so that they are alert enough to recognise incongruities, provoke them so that they are relieved when difficult topics are played on and secure an acceptance to play by communicating and inviting them into a "play-frame" then they are likely to succeed. There will always be individuals who fall outside this net[251] as Kenneth Slessor put it: "You find this ugly, I find this lovely".[252]

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[249] For example my dislike of Ross Noble may be because he refers frequently to daytime television programmes and computer games and "fantasy" games (board games generally played by nerdy adults with wizard and gnome characters), none of which play a part in my life and of which I have no understanding. When interacting with people who do know them I found that their inability to concentrate on our conversation and their obvious preference to be sitting in front of a machine playing some solitary violent game rather than having an actual lived experience, deeply irritating. Hence my dislike is compounded.

[250] Roger Poole *Towards Deep Subjectivity* p6

[251] "Experts say that several obvious differences in people affect what they find humorous. The most significant seems to be age. **Infants and children** are constantly discovering the world around them. A lot of what goes on seems ridiculous and surprising, which strikes them as funny. What's funny to a toddler consists of short and simple concepts, like an elephant joke. Along with the ridiculous and the surprising, children -- much to their parents' dismay -- also appreciate jokes where cruelty is present (it boosts their self-assertiveness) and what we refer to as "toilet humour." To children, a preoccupation with bodily functions is simply another way of exploring their fascinating new environment. The **pre-teen and teenage** years are, almost universally, awkward and tense. Lots of adolescents and teens laugh at jokes that focus on sex, food, authority figures and -- in typical rebellious style -- any subject that adults consider off-limits. It is an insecure time of life and young people often use humour as a tool to protect themselves or to feel superior. As we mature, both our physical bodies and mental outlooks grow and change. Since there is a certain amount of intelligence involved in "getting" a joke, our senses of humour becomes more developed as we learn more. By the time we're grown, we have experienced much of life, including tragedy and success. In keeping with these experiences, our senses of humour are more mature. We laugh at other people and ourselves in shared common predicaments and embarrassments. (I want to add in here a news story about the manslaughter of a teenager in Newcastle. "A teenager told a court yesterday how a boy of 15 screamed in terror as he burned alive in a skip. Michael Temperley, 15 had climbed into the rubbish container at a retail park in Gateshead to retrieve his bike after it was thrown in by friends. The door was shut behind him and secured with a chain before another youth pushed burning paper through a gap **'as a joke'**" *Metro* March 17th 2004.) The **adult** sense of humour is usually characterized as more subtle, more tolerant and less judgmental about the differences in people. The things we find funny as a result of our age or developmental stage seem to be related to the stressors we experience during this time. Basically, we laugh at the issues that stress us out. Another factor that affects what we find funny is the **culture** or **community** from which we come. Have you ever laughed at a joke and realized that if you were from anywhere else in the world, it just wouldn't be funny? It's a fact of life that culture and community provide lots of fodder for jokes. There are economic, political and social issues that are easy to laugh about, but only the people living in that culture may understand it. When people say "That's not funny," "It is offensive" or "What's the point?" she must either have some attachment and protective affection for the idea or person being put down in the joke or have no attachment whatsoever." (people.howstuffworks.com/laughter5.htm 12 June 2005.

[252] Kenneth Slessor "William Street" in *A Portrait Of Sydney* 1950.

4.5 Follow Through

The round of applause we give the performance by "Ridiculusmus" in the role of the academic characters completes the circular structure of the show and should continue or even clarify the punchline for the audience. This allows them to continue their laughter. I call this follow through. It is a common and rather lazy technique that can multiply the length of the material tenfold.

4.5.1 "Any Questions?" - Extract 8 And Comment

D: I don't know what to say - so good. perhaps we can take a break now, or we can take some questions then answers perhaps, any difficulties with the £7 ticket ? General festival observations. (*Picks up part of exploded balloon*) The fragments regenerating themselves into future shows, today's bottom is tomorrow's nose.

J: Thoughts

D: It is a weekday night, and perhaps a late night. Any burning issues to be addressed, we can do that now.

TRANSLATION and SIGNING resume

They make a genuine attempt to get a question from the audience - may have to wait for this

D: Yes?

Pretending audience member asked something

J: Shall I read my response
D: yeah perhaps we can just share our thoughts on the trio, their three line gag

They talk lots of crap

Jon: just open it up and ask if there any questions about the terminology. Practise which forms… a discursive practice is a shared language… for example that of theatre luvvies, Stand Up comics, later on for example I will be focussing in my own work.. as well of those of say Alan Bennett….

P translates

D puts arse on the table – Patrizia puts a red nose between D's bum cheeks and draws on a face so that it looks like a big clown face

End Of Extract

Just when the audience think the last layer of deceit has been pulled away, we soldier on asking for questions, building a "talking through our arses" allusion and resolutely refusing to end the game. I had wanted the other two to put their bare arses on the table as well, but they refused. The bibliography of this essay attempts a written version of "Follow Through". Our depth asserted, we need an exit strategy and cross fade from this sustained believability with a musical track to a black out. It is the only way we can get off[253].

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[253] It actually wasn't - there are many possible ways to finish and this ending was very recently changed to an exit for coffee and the promise of further discussion outside. This was more successful and skill invisible and completed the blurring of edges that the interactive beginning began.

5. Discourse and findings

5.1 Taste, Subjectivity And Aesthetics - The *Sensus Communis*

As early as 1709 Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury wrote a treatise called "*Sensus Communis*: An essay on the freedom of wit and humour[254] which introduced an idea that Kant and others have held out for - that it is possible to apply objectivity to taste in humour. Such a stand leads to the sort of nasal laugh one hears at a performance of a Shakespeare play or other similarly dead examples of humour where audience members laugh from the head and express air through their nose to indicate their appreciation of the wit they have been informed that it contains.

Critchley[255] has more recently coined a phrase to articulate the opposite - "*Dissensus communis*" that everyone is laughing at themselves rather than collectively at some other.

> In humour I find myself ridiculous and I acknowledge this humour is self-mocking ridicule...such humour is not depressing but gives a sense of emancipation, consolation and child-like elevation[256].

Yet, a comedian can achieve general laughter in an audience. This can't just be a coincidence of the members of the audience laughing at themselves, there is far too much orchestration. An audience of individuals laughing at themselves would create such a random cacophony of noise that a performance would be impossible to conduct.

My belief is that we create common ground by migrating individual responses to a common one, shaped in reaction to the comedian's emblematic representational sacrifice. Which points to the need for comic material to be loose enough to be read individually by its audience. Didacticism and dogma in comedy cannot work only "deductive suggestivism" can.

5.2 Characters - Recognition And "Otherness"

Our comedy is character driven. In Ridiculusmus shows we usually create a base character that is not ourselves. This is our level of protection against inhibition and egotism. It is not an avoidance of performing reality. The base characters we create must in general be at once familiar, attractive and playfully "other". In Stand Up comedy this apparently real self is an acted version of the performer and whatever the style of its believability it needs to be utterly absorbing so that an audience laughs *with* and not *at* you. For both types of creation the priority is to be "in the moment". As Maria Aitken drives home in *Acting in High comedy:* "There is only one moment, and the moment is now." This is Stand Up and clowning in essence. Tony Allen calls this quality "the now". The circus clown Grock wrote that he wanted "to show the audience his stupidity...that of the naive fool who is discovering the ways of the world for the first time"[257]. It is essential for us, as it is for a stand up, to appear to be an sympathetic person thinking and speaking in the present.

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[254] *Characteristics Of Men, Manners ,Opinions, Times* Vols 1-2 New York, Bobb-Merrill, 1964
[255] *On Humour* London, Routledge 2002
[256] *Ibid* ps 94-95
[257] Towsen p233

People laugh because they love someone or because they recognise and feel joy when they see something or someone they know. The characters who meet them have to be believable, in a state of confident fun, loveable and recognisable. It is fair to say that not everyone who sees *How To Be Funny* will have previously experienced a long winded Scandinavian academic waffler clad from head to toe in serious black, yet most will have heard or seen an arts discussion programme, or at least been bored by formal speeches somewhere or other. The degree of proximity to the source material will affect the degree of reaction to this recreation. An audience may feel offended, if they behave similarly, or feel superior if it is similar but outrageous and stupid compared to them.

Dialect helps. By definition it is something other than the norm for most of the audience and therefore says: "this is play, we can laugh". It can be pleasant, musical and laughter inducing but it is the fact that it is "other" that gives the audience the important play signal.

> The comedian behaves like a visitor from another planet vainly trying to disappear into practices that we take for granted and failing calamitously in the process[258].

5.3 Fear And Anger

Fear plays a large part in Ridiculusmus' comedy. We channel real anger and act angry in our performances and this instils fear in our audience which results in relief in the form of laughter when a deflatory punchline arrives. The things that make me angry change over time and vary in their level of ferocity[259]. Often the audience are cast as representatives of the offending issue which heightens their involvement, fear and consequent relief. The Pan Germanic Laughter competition is an example of this in *How To Be Funny*.

5.4 The Double Act

> They're a classic double act in the Laurel and Hardy mode; one's an asshole and the other's retarded"[260].

If *How To Be Funny* tells us anything more about the current state of the Ridiculusmus relationship it is that it is in an unbalanced but healthily diverse phase. We acknowledged this state in the

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[258] Critchley *Ibid* p88

[259] Specifically at the time of writing I am angry about the way the dishwasher never gets the plates clean, having to be on tour for twelve weeks, packing and unpacking, my dad's ill health, brother's ill health, the crumples in my blue jumper, the UN's inactivity during the genocides in Rwanda and Zaire (just because I'm reading about it and saw the film *Hotel Rwanda* the other night), people getting angry and righteous like this, the climate that makes me angry about that, apathy in general, the bastard who nicked my computer, the bureaucracy involved in getting the insurance to get a replacement, having to borrow other people's to get this written or wait for the shared use machines on campus, having a dishwasher but not a computer, queuing, "Why don't people have to wait for things in Wales?" "Because they only have 24 letters in the alphabet and no Q's." being mentally invaded by shallow gags and jokes (see also Footnote 222), the way your neighbour will stab you in the back, the obsession with ownership, getting to Bolton, the rail network, privatisation, greed, apathy again, particularly apathy that directly affects me, because when someone is apathetic they are withdrawing from life as part of a community and just being selfish - its blinkered, fatally conservative, reductive and seductive and if they could see the effect they wouldn't, though some would - and that is even more infuriating. As the world gets bigger, in terms of awareness/globalisation/knowledge and technology so the inhabitants retreat for security into themselves. In this way bits of material crawl out.

[260] John Kricfalusi on *Ren and Stimpy* quoted in *Sunshine on Putty*. p308

performance by including an in-role argument about our respective authority in discussing Ridiculusmus: "D: I've spent seven years on this…J: These guys have slept in my house."[261] This is the only exposure of our "soul" in the performance. It is a small, character disguised glimpse of the "great pain"[262] of "real and personal experience"[263] beneath the surface mentioned in the Review Of Literature. At a general level our difference and differences are hardly anything new. The situation has always been like this, it comes up in every play we do. Here is a typical output featuring this dynamic from *Ideas Men* where I play Mike and Jon is Liam:

> Mike: And er, you know, brainstorming and everything….. traditional brainstorming techniques, well the way I see it …the way we've been progressing is it's about us, it's about you and me and the big question, the magic question: What IF? And if that remains in the equation mean ultimately, no matter how many ideas we come up with we need to get back to the point where we started so we can review the situation and keep ourselves open to new influences - like Leggo or the sleep pods- I mean I serve up my share of flops like anyone. We don't need the sleep pods when we can lie on the floor on duvet days, and some people, not naming names, (*shouted off*)Geoff and Katie, abused that facility in an undesirable manner. You can kybosh my ideas if you want to that's fine. I understand that, that is all part of the process. But the government is now saying that everybody's creative, everybody's creative, everybody's got that special spark, from the pre-school child to the old age pensioner, everybody's got that magic quality - but it's not exactly rocket science to see that that is a conspiracy cos you tell that to those guys stuffing shelves in Tesco of a Saturday afternoon to top up their pathetic pensions or frying burgers down in Macdonalds for two pound an hour and they're gonna come back to their shitty little shift based jobs the following week feeling slightly better about themselves cos they've been told that they're creative...you can read all about it in them glossy £21.99 books "Down Size Your Way Home To Purley Of A Friday Afternoon." "Balls Out - Middle Management Is For Salad Munchers"… Even Lego are doing it, lets build things lets build ideas out of plastic bricks and transform them miraculously …into money cos- that's what it's all about here Liam that's the core value. That is the strategy. We have to come up with the ideas to create the cash for other people, we

[261] From Extract 4 in Section 4 above.
[262] Section 2.1.2
[263] Section 3.1.5

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are hacking away at the coalface of creativity day in
day out to order in order to come up with the cash for
them people-aren't we Liam?

Liam: Sorry - Mike…I've got to just say something. I
haven't been listening to you for the last five
minutes. I've been thinking about other things. I
wanna be honest about that

Mike: That's fine, Liam

Liam: 'Cos I mean I know what you say generally
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This extract demonstrates us as the verbal equivalent of the classic clown double act:

> The clown is not only silly; he is also stupid… whatever the task a tremendous amount of misguided energy will be exerted with little result. The clown's ability to evoke feelings of superiority in the spectator plays a hidden role in all clowning. But this stupid buffoon is just one half of an ancient comic formula. Traditionally two zanies, the first a scheming rogue and the second his less clever butt, a stooge "he who gets slapped." [264]

It was a problem Morecambe and Wise[265] had, Eric would be busy pouring out his soul to the point of getting his heart attack while Ernie, his straight foil, apparently did relatively little and was totally underrated for it by the public. Yet Wise was critical to the success of the act as Jon is to ours. You can't rant and rave in isolation and get laughs, you need the punctuation or punchlines. The laugh that comes at the end of the *Ideas Men* extract above is on Jon's line. Which makes me his feed, expending everything in the build up to his deflatory release and cue for the laughter. Or to put it another way, in this example, Jon is my punchline.

In *How To Be Funny* I attempted to experiment with this, putting Jon centre stage with a joke spot, but again this evolved into an elaborate set up, framing and after comment by me - a massive explanation of comedy theory illustrated by Jon's two line joke, though the punchline in this case was the deprecatory comment by me after his joke. The busy, generally positive, and the still, generally negative, roles remain firmly entrenched. Our attempt to take a break from this role status rut by staging a two-hander version of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance Of Being Earnest* fell the same way[266]. With the analysis and awareness of our practise based research has come the feeling of entrenchment. Our pain at this entrenchment makes it funnier. The question for our

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[264] Towsen p206

[265] Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise first joined forces in 1941 and rapidly became one of Britain's best-loved comedy acts. Initially appearing in music hall they peaked with a series of TV shows over twenty years which achieved audiences of over twenty million viewers in the UK. Everybody remembers Eric as one of the greatest comics that this country has produced, while Ernie's role is often overlooked ... and sometimes dismissed. Whilst this is understandable it is also rather unfair. From the beginning of the act in 1941, Eric and Ernie had always shared the jokes. In his book, *Behind The Sunshine*, Gary Morecambe gives an example of Eric suggesting that it would be funnier if Ernie carried a gag. p125

[266] See Footnote 161 on page 46 above.

longer term survival is whether we are prepared to keep enduring it for the sake of comedic success or jump out of the box before we are buried in it.

5.5 Jon's Approach

Jon's approach to being funny[267] - that he is not trying to be funny, just accurately portraying life - is his "funniness" at the same time as being a denial of it. This stealthy and ego-invisible approach to pursuing laughter is a brilliantly successful if not crucial technique and one tied up with our attitude principle. The "I don't care if you don't laugh" "confidence trick" is a perfect foundation for achieving comedic success. To act deadpan is a major and dominant version of conveying this attitude. The approach has many prominent contemporary users[268], and whilst Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin are thought of as the pioneers of the demeanour it was actually pioneered by the clown double act Footit and Chocolat in the early twentieth century[269]:

> Chocolat is the hapless Negro scapegoat who obeys without complaining, acts impassive leaving the spectator vague as to whether he is an absolute fool or an unfortunate individual who knows everything but says nothing because it would not do any good[270].

Jon is a master of it. He has an ability to conjure an almost contour less face in fulfilling his side of the double act pain bargain and effortlessly balances anything uninhibitedly positive with a physiognomically expressed blanket of depressive pessimistic nihilism.

5.6 My Sense Of Humour

To articulate what constitutes my half of the bargain - the "uninhibitedly positive" is to attempt to describe my sense of humour. Clive James once said that comedy is "common sense dancing".[271] I like dancing and I think I have good common sense. I believe everything is connected which makes me more a Leibnizian[272] than a nihilist. In my view comedy is possible because everybody is ultimately the same and can recognize themselves in everything. It is the job of the comic to highlight or draw attention to this - to find a heart note. Also everyone is different (it's amazing but nothing special) and therefore incongruous, and therefore funny. As life is infinitely complex and infinitely variable so then too is its range of possible expressions. This organic sense of life and its corporeality sets us apart from the inorganic and is the essence of comedy. It is the fecundity of humanity given form.

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[267] On our website and in interviews Jon claims that he is to not be trying to be funny and doesn't want to be. He wants to be realistic - he added this quotation to our web site - "There is no need for comedy life's oddities when shown realistically are comedy enough" (www.ridiculusmus.com 10 December 2001).

[268] For example: Jack Dee, Jimmy Carr and Otis Lee Crenshaw/Rich Hall

[269] George Footit (1864-1921) and Chocolat (Raphael Padilla – a Cuban)(d 1917) worked at the Hippodrome du Champ De Mars (1894-98) and the Nouveau Cirque.

[270] Franc Nohain: *Memoires De Footit Et Chocolat* p103

[271] *The Age* Humour Special 6th August 2005

[272] Leibniz combined the Scala Naturae with his plenum (continuous) view of nature, and called the result the Law of Continuity. He believed that it was not possible to put organisms into discrete categories, stating "*Natura non facit saltus*" (Nature does nothing in leaps).

The more a comedian knows or is interested and engaged in, the more she will be able to make connections between things[273]. After each deflation there must be re-inflation and as long as this essential ability to breathe again remains, comedy can continue to be made. An inspiration toward this level was Alexander Von Humboldt who was arguably "the last man who knew everything":

> Traveller, explorer and mountaineer no less than scientist, he combined the ideals of Enlightenment and Romanticism: a genius in thought and deed, as remarkable for his sensibility as his universality. Not only did he invent or re-invent several new branches of earth and life science (including human and plant geography, climatology and vulcanology, hydrology and geomagnetism) and greatly augment most others, he also transformed the historiography and philosophy of science. We owe to him such familiar notions as the iso thermal lines on weather maps, seismic waves, magnetic storms, reverse polarity, the Jurassic era. He investigated the igneous formation of rocks, the decrease in the earth's magnetism towards the Equator, and the formation of galaxies. Long before they could be realized, he conceived of a Panama Canal, a United Nations, academic "think tanks" and a "universal library", a scientific database, not unlike the internet. When Humboldt was born in 1769, Linnaeus and Lavoisier were revolutionizing botany, while Rousseau and Kant did the same for politics and metaphysics. Natural and human sciences were still comparable enterprises, conducted by individuals as citizens of an informal republic of letters, and a true philosopher was expected to be familiar with the whole spectrum. By the time Humboldt died, aged almost ninety in 1859, the specialization of knowledge meant that no one savant could expect to master the whole of either corpus, and institutional bifurcation meant that scientists could scarcely even converse with non-scientists. Humboldt alone had kept abreast of everything. The most cosmopolitan figure of his time, he conversed and corresponded with equal ease in French, English, Spanish and Italian; if he needed a language, he learnt it. He was in constant dialogue with countless correspondents; he wrote some 35,000 letters, sometimes spending a tenth of his income on the post, and received at least 100,000, though at the end of his life he felt obliged to place a newspaper advertisement begging importunate admirers to leave him in peace[274].

It is my taste to desire and aspire to a soul communion in comedy, by expressing my soul I invite a soulful or deep response which will resonate beyond the laughter of the moment into a memorable affected and empowered future. If that meeting succeeds in creating common ground, and it is surprising, provocative and naughty, it is likely that it will be marked by plentiful laughter.

I am not looking for a worthy soul when I want to laugh. I want something that is realistic, but not pessimistic, playfully wrong, not poisoned and provocative but not offensive. Soulful artists, particularly in comedy, often convey extremely negative world views. I believe Jon and I balance each other out in this sense or rather battle for the audience's inclination. Generally speaking, he is

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[273] It is also possible that this would make her happier which might be a bad thing: Bertrand Russell: "The man who enjoys watching football is superior to the man who does not. The man who enjoys reading is still more superior to the man who does not, since opportunities for reading are more frequent than opportunities for watching football. The more things a man is interested in, the more opportunities of happiness he has" (*The Conquest Of Happiness* p123-4). I think, however, that considering the propensity to failure of most football teams and the overwhelmingly impossible abundance of books it is more likely to make one angry, and therefore inspired to make comedy, than happy.
[274] Daniel Johnson on Humboldt's *Kosmos* in *The Times Literary Supplement* July 22nd 2005

negative, I am positive. But microcosmically we keep changing. We offer shifting, liminal states that we always attempt to express soulfully.[275]

The aim of an aspiring comedian needs be to develop a *funny* soul. A *beautifully* funny soul that is good or bad, positive or negative, but always energised by this good/ bad tensiveness. It is a rare quality and not always associated with success. Three contemporaries who I consider to have soul whilst being funny and interesting are: Daniel Kitson[276], Johnny Vegas[277] and Rumpelstiltskin[278]. Their levels of success are remarkably different. Kitson won the Perrier award only to turn his back on all things commercial, drop his agent and attempt to whittle his audience down to a bare minimum - "12 or so, let's call them disciples"[279]. Vegas seems to be always on the brink of disaster despite relative commercial success and Rumpelstitskin is disaster in human form[280].

Truth and openness are evidently dangerous fruit. They excite fictions and give them a frisson of reality[281]. This can intensify in "Deep Play", when a fiction is played excitingly close to the reality of the situation. So much so that an outsider would be unable to tell what is real and what is not. The performer, meanwhile, must never forget, or else, risk losing their mind or will to live.

For me there is only one muse; the comic muse. Comedy is the abundance of life. A comic vision is vitally important in life. This is a deeply sensed attitude to one's existence, which absolutely forbids taking ourselves too solemnly. It has to do with real seriousness which holds that we are made good/ valuable and graceful and no matter what befalls us we remain intrinsically valuable. At its

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[275] See Section 4.2.1.4.3 on Risk for an example of the level of conviction I mean by this.

[276] www.danielkitson.com

[277] www.johnnyvegas.co.uk

[278] He is currently employed by Cirque du Soleil in their Las Vegas operation. www.rumpel.com.au

[279] Kitson circa 2004

[280] "Those who know me are by now aware of the deep existential crisis occasioned by last week's viewing of *Fool exposure*", the 'show' by the outlandishly garbed jester Rumpel. Where once I was a reckless reviewer, perversely drawn to acts of the so-bad-it's-good, laugh-at-not-with genre, *Fool Exposure* did in fact expose to me the dark tragedy of such a position, the foul arrogance that dwells therein. I knew of Rumpel, I'd heard various reports that suggested he was a comic genius, a madman, an infuriating bore, an example of outsider art, a skilled throwback to a lost art form or an eccentric weirdo. I wanted to see for myself, and was utterly affected by what I saw. Rumpel's show is pure chaos incarnate, and mainly consists of the fool pulling toys from his suitcase and showing them to us, or rambling (sometimes incoherently) about his "foolosophy", or putting springs onto his feet and falling over. It's initially stupid, but becomes hypnotically engaging, as you come to realise that what you're viewing is not an act but the outpouring of a genuinely different soul. There's an innocence to his clowning that is impossible in most performers, and it's equally honest and completely mystifying. I don't mean to oversell the show: a lot of people would be enraged by the total lack of sense, point or even jokes. But as Rumpel points out, he's trying to make us realise that humour is more than gags and certainly, watching him skip rope while riding a unicycle is pretty impressive. But it's not a ride that everyone would appreciate; it's not even an act really, just a window into another universe where Rumpel seems to live." John Bailey *Beat magazine* Tree number 30

[281] I mentioned earlier the success of the contemporary nerd humour of Dave Gorman and for him this use of reality is how his work became popular: "These true stories got more laughs than the jokes I'd written and, perhaps stranger still, every time I took a joke out of the show, somehow the rest of it seemed to get funnier. (Trust me, what jokes there were, weren't *that* bad). It seemed that every joke made the true bits seem less true because they told the audience that I was prepared to lie to them... without them the truth felt more true and the audience laughed longer and harder. And the more evidence I added for the truth, the funnier it got too. A journalist dubbed what I was doing a *Documentary comedy* and I guess it's hard to argue as not only is it a true story... but I present the evidence. The tag has stuck and now it seems that *Documentary comedy* is regarded as a genre all of its own. Odd really because people have been telling true stories on stage for years." www.davegorman.com (29 July 2005)

deepest level the sense of the comic rebuts those who would leave man all alone in the universe, unloved, unjustified, disconnected and despairing. Within the armoury of this comic vision are stored the weapons of insouciance, hope and laughter. It goes without saying that mortal man is prone to failure, right left and centre; but only failure of a kind. She is ultimately indestructible precisely because of his vulnerability - personal value endures, come what may. But it is the comic vision alone that, in acknowledging vulnerability, offers a centre of gravity outside us which in turn guarantees our personal survival. This is the light end of my sense of humour; the dark side is my anger.

5.7 The Necessary Difference

It is a brilliant deep game that we play as Ridiculusmus. It is cheating and playing. The perfect foil to the laughter inflator is the laughter deflator who also creates humourous material but apparently doesn't want people to laugh at it. Outsiders can comically miss the joke[282]. We necessarily bring out the best and worst in each other and forge material from it and ultimately do try to be funny and we allow the play technique from our making process to invade performances so that there is always the possibility that the game will continue towards an unknown outcome. We continue to make material that provokes a humourous response and measure our success in audible laughter. Our disagreement is our comedy. Why we go on with the pain of this arrangement when, in theory, it is possible to coldly create laughs through a straight recreation of scientifically proven humour:

Performance + Joke = Laughter

is because:

"Deep" Performance + "Dark" Joke = Deep, Disturbing And Memorable Laughter

and ultimately, we all want to be remembered.

5.8 The Oppression Of Play

Since time immemorial the authorities of any given situation have tried to delineate play from life so as to control it. From medieval days of carnival and mis-rule to contemporary structured compulsory fun in the corporate workplace formal attempts have been made to keep it on a leash. This next paragraph is evidence of the control placed on me by my examiners and institution to regulate this piece of work. As I stated in the introduction the aim of my writing was to reflect my practice which avoids didacticism and encourages the use of deductive interpretation to animate and inspire its audience, this alas is not acceptable to the busy academic in the over formalised, bureaucratized and bullet pointed world of accountable contemporary learning in the UK. In embedding my key ideas (for example in footnotes) to mine away in the hungry mind is to capture my performance attitude in printed word. This next paragraph is a reductive deflation and an unwilling sacrifice. Willing converts may close the book now with my best regards.

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[282] A designer we once worked with found our polarity "intriguing" and whereas I was of the "Yes, let's try that" Jon was of the "I don't know" variety and she said "a really nice totalitarian director would be nice" as we weren't "doing her head much good".

5.9 Key Findings

There is functional comedy and memorable comedy.
(Section 3.1.5)

Memorable comedy affects its audience and is remembered by them. For me memorability is determined by the amount of real personal feeling or soul involved in the work and that the revealed soul is a funny one to me - in that the style and content surprises and stimulates me and makes me laugh. I particularly like comedy that aspires to achieve things and inevitably fails. This willingness is energetic and irrepressible in acts I enjoy and I hope to find a way of channelling into my work.
(Sections 3.1.5; 4.2.1.4.3; 5.4; 5.6)

I seek to achieve this by "playing in the dark" at a "Deep" level when making new material and applying this, invisibly in performances of finished work so that the finished work appears to be "Deep" and "Dark" play. When I achieve this level I am able to speak from my soul and "liberate the will and desire"[283] so that situations that I portray or similar situations that my audience can relate the provocation to in their own lives, can be changed. Our work doesn't seem to be framed, it is subtly communicated that what we do is a form of play but this along with any skill we might use is used as invisibly as possible.
(Sections: 3.1.6; 4.2.1.1; 4.2.1.2; 4.2.1.4.3; 5.7)

These are my specific findings on Ridiculusmus with the disclaimer that it is only my half of the story as mentioned in the opening pages.

The general results of this thesis are:

> It is possible to unify all major comedy theory in the statement that all comedy is deflation and show this in a simple set of actions.
> (Sections 4.3.2.1; 4.3.3.1; 4.3.4.2; 4.4.1)

> It is also possible to illustrate in diagram form the complete world of humour generation and its reception.
> (Section 4.3.2.1 with diagram page 84)

The universal applications from this thesis are that one can be funny by:

1. Willingly sacrificing oneself - in terms of status, dignity and respect for the sake of the entertainment of others - a form of reverse *Schadenfreude.*
   (Sections 4.2.1.4.1; 4.3.1.3; 4.3.1.4; 4.3.1.5; 4.3.2.2; 4.2.2.2; Extract - 4.3.3)

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[283] Spoken by the Eddie Waters character in Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* who goes on to say that this is what he considers to be a "true joke" Faber, London 1976 p20.

2. Being believably relevant and sharing common ground to and with one's audience. (Sections 4.2.1.4.1; 4.2.1.5; 4.2.2.1; 4.2.2.2; 4.3.3.2; 5.1; 5.2; 5.3; Footnote 246)

3. Using skill without showing off. (Sections 4.2.2.2 and 4.3.3.2, footnote 207)

4. Leading a full life - rich in possibility and aspiration, willing to fail over and over again, free of snobbishness about status, high and low culture, failure and success, totally devoted to the goal of being funny. Channel this vitality into remaining upbeat and perform with playful pleasure even when the material or character requires sullen or negative performance so that these tones which are not laughter inducing are within a "play frame" which is.
    (Footnote 198; Sections 3.1.5; 4.2.1.4.2; 4.3.1.2; 4.3.3.2 ; 4.3.3.3; 5.6)

5. Being relevant so that the timing of a performance of particular material is of common interest and relevance with and to one's audience .
    (Footnote 246; Sections: 3.1.2; 4.3.2.2)

6. Speaking from the heart/soul (or whatever term needed to help tap into your passionately held beliefs whatever they are).
    (Sections 4.2.1.4.1; 4.3.1.3; 4.3.1.4; 4.3.1.5; 4.3.2.2; 4.2.2.2; Extract: 4.3.2)

7. Creating a conducive atmosphere for comedy: safe, populous and comfortable.
    (Section: 4.2.1.3)

Plug pulled

5. Guide To The Footnotes

There are 280 footnotes. To make it easier to navigate them the following alphabetically indexed guide is offered. It has two headings: Ridiculusmus and General. Page referencing and other functional footnotes are omitted.

Ridiculusmus:

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General:

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