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Eric Weitz. (2016). *Theatre & Laughter*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. viii, 97 pp. ISBN 9781137356086.

Reviewed by Bryan Radley, University of York

Theatre & Laughter is a distinguished entry in Palgrave's interdisciplinary series of short "Theatre & ..." paperbacks. From the outset, Eric Weitz's lucid account of the mirth generated by performance does an excellent job of conveying the effervescence of comic theatricality. He never allows the reader to lose sight of the fact that the humour of live theatre is always rooted in the occasion of a specific performance and the physical bodies that are present – that ineffable collective encounter between actors and audience. In other words, Weitz gives both bodies and minds their due. There is as much emphasis on miming and slapstick as there is on defamiliarizing laughter and wordplay, while Erin Hurley's approach to theatre as "feeling-labour" is a key methodological touchstone: "Comic performance undoubtedly is a prime example of the theatre maker's design on our bodied apparatus" (p.36).

The detailed analysis of James Corden's performance as the overweight servant in the first UK and Broadway runs of *One Man, Two Guvnors* exemplifies this approach. Weitz's subtle take on Richard Bean's 2011 adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* focuses on a joke where laughter is produced by the unexpected prospect of the triumph of Francis's appetite for food over his carnal desire for his fellow retainer Dolly. In answer to her question, "Does he prefer eating or making love?", Francis pauses for a long time before turning to the audience to deliver the explosively incongruous punch line: "It's a tough one, that, isn't it?". As Weitz aptly notes, "In this case, the usual reduction of a subject to base, physical desire is itself brought low by the dark-horse consideration of that other possibility

we might suspect Francis/Corden to favour” (pp.46-7). He goes on to excavate the debt owed by the comic framing of Goldoni’s mid-18th-century prototype to the *commedia dell’arte*’s “twin engines of laughter provocation in performance”, namely the central interplay of “virtuosity and spontaneity”. Weitz shines a light on “genre-defining dramaturgical parts like word play, doubling and mistaken identity, increasingly audacious scheming, and slapstick”, along with *lazzi*-like “well-rehearsed set pieces” and “personalised versions of stock characters or *masks*”, which appear in “born-again strains of *commedia*” that have emerged in the modern and contemporary periods (pp.36-7).

As you would expect from the author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (2009), Weitz introduces the main branches of humour theory efficiently and stitches together concepts from humour studies, neuroscience, and theatre studies almost seamlessly. The book also successfully counterbalances the progressive possibilities of humour as play and laughter as “event” (in a Žižekian sense) – what Weitz calls the “Laughter for Change camp” (p.82) – against pessimistic biopolitical interpretations of “laughter as crowd control” (p.68): “one of the shrewdest technologies of power ever harnessed [...] through laughter we make sure that no one strays too far from approved thought and comportment” (p.71).

Weitz’s choice of texts is laudably eclectic, inclusive, and international. Luigi Pirandello and Wole Soyinka rub shoulders with contemporary practitioners such as Panti Bliss and Sarah Ruhl. Weitz thus casts his net far wider than you would expect from the rubric suggested by the book’s title. Discussions of comic performance in more obviously theatrical forms such as a Feydeau farce, Christmas panto, or Richard Pryor stand-up routine sit next to comic case studies from film, television, and social media. Different Anglo-

American tv genres are especially prominent: sketch show monologues from *Victoria Wood as Seen on TV*; Nelson Muntz's characteristically derisive laugh in *The Simpsons*; *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia's* transgressive sitcom humour; Tina Fey's devastating caricature of Sarah Palin on *SNL*; John Oliver's topical political satire. None of these vignettes of analysis is done badly – quite the opposite, in fact. Weitz skilfully captures the way *Breaking Bad* oscillates between “straight-ahead slapstick” and the gruesome, morbid clowning of Walt and Jesse's “double act”, for example (p.43). However, these multi-generic ingredients and the highly elastic definition of ‘Theatre’ are not given any rationale until the penultimate section (p.83). There may be a question too about an implicit generic hierarchy in the idea of theatre's “performative offshoots” meriting inclusion.

Weitz has edited two essay collections on humour in an Irish performance context. Thus, the book also contains many illuminating examples of comedy taken from the Irish theatrical canon, from Lady Augusta Gregory's 1904 farce *Spreading the News* to ANU Productions' site-specific *Vardo* in 2014. He pays productive attention to Samuel Beckett's “laughology” – in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*, for example – before producing a terrific close reading of the “theatrical display” of laughter's “boisterous, restorative ... capacity to save us from the terrifying prospect of facing life's serial adversities alone” in Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (p.55; Murphy translates the titular setting as “the place without laughter”).¹ Similarly, there is an attentive discussion of comedy's role in a key dramatic reversal in Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians*, which is set in a Derry graveyard and responds to the Bloody Sunday shootings. Weitz pinpoints the “emotionally brutal

¹ Tom Murphy, *Bailegangaire*, in *Murphy Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1993), p.92.

effect” that is achieved through the conjunction of a pair of lewd jokes with “a cruel non-joke” about a daughter’s terminal illness (pp.32-4).

The small size of this lightweight volume makes it approachable, highly portable, and straightforward bedside reading. The book is also easy to navigate. Thanks to a handy tripartite index of subjects, people, and texts, alongside the 22 functional sub-headings, it is a cinch to find any given topic. It also rewards those who want to know more by providing a full list of works cited and several useful recommendations on generic, philosophical, and scientific approaches to comedy and humour. The presentation of the text is not without blemish, however. The year in which Bloody Sunday took place is mistakenly given as 1971, for example, and there are several typos, including a full line of text where the words are merged (p.33; p.76).

Such minor quibbles aside, this is an important and entertaining contribution to the study of theatrical humour. *Theatre & Laughter* combines erudition with readability; it will be a valuable text for students, scholars, and the general reader alike.