# Pedagogy, Performativity and 'Never Again': Staging Plays from the Terezín Ghetto

by Lisa Peschel, with Alan Sikes


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# Pedagogy, Performativity and 'Never Again': Staging Plays from the Terezín Ghetto

As collaborators on the project Performing the Jewish Archive we worked with students in the US and in the UK to devise two separate peformances based on a script from the Terezín Ghetto (in German, Theresienstadt) titled *Comedy about a Trap.* By developing with them what we call 'co-textual' scenes, we engaged in a type of performance pedagogy that we hope will achieve lasting transformation: the students created and performed a relationship between the script, their new knowledge of the past and their own views in the present, leading to transformative insights regarding the lives of the prisoners and the need for action today.

Keywords: Holocaust commemoration; Holocaust education; Holocaust theatre; Theresienstadt; Terezín; performance; pedagogy

## Introduction

In their introduction to this special issue, Popescu and Schult emphasise the importance of the pledge 'never again'. While they claim that this pledge has led to the development of a global Holocaust commemoration culture that aims to work toward genocide prevention, they also acknowledge that, in the aftermath of the wars and ethnic cleansings that have occurred since 1945, the phrase sometimes rings hollow. Scholars rightly question whether it has become little more than a politically correct response masking the fact that, far too often, we have been unable, or unwilling, to take effective action against genocide. Considering the recent historical record, what are we to make of the goal of Holocaust commemoration: to transform individuals from passive spectators into socially and morally responsible agents and enactors of 'never again'?

In order to keep working toward 'never again' in the twenty-first century, we take inspiration from a phrase by Samuel Beckett, from his late prose work *Worstward Ho*—a phrase that became a motto of sorts for one of the performances described in this essay: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' Why this motto? It would be naïve not to concede the ongoing failures to avert disaster in Bosnia, in Rwanda, and in other sites

around the globe, but at the same time, the goal of genocide prevention is so important that we must not let ourselves be dissuaded. Although 'never again' remains an unfulfilled pledge, we believe the emotional force behind it can still have the power to motivate. If Holocaust commemoration and education can bring people to understand the urgency of the immediate postwar survivors' oath, then there is still a possibility that their perceptions and behaviours might be changed. We, therefore, keep working toward the goal of transformation, using different approaches, even if some of those attempts will inevitably fail.

This essay describes our most recent collaborative attempt to 'fail better': two performance projects we carried out in the spring and summer of 2016.[1] Both were based on a remarkable script written in the World War II Jewish ghetto at Terezín: a political comedy—or, to be more accurate, a comic work of Communist agit-prop—written by a young Czech Jew named Zdeněk Jelínek. In the first project we worked with students at Louisiana State University (LSU) to stage performances in the US; in the second, students at the University of York in England developed performances for UK audiences.

Our focus, however, was on the performers rather than the spectators. Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued that spectators and actors may be changed by their encounter during a performance event that 'opens up the possibility for all participants to experience a metamorphosis', but that, ultimately, whether that experience 'leads to a reorientation and lasting transformation depends on each individual case'.[2] We acknowledge, and hope, that our spectators may be transformed by their brief encounter with our performance, but we attempt to maximize the potential for lasting transformation by concentrating on our student performers and the effects that a sustained and collaborative interaction may have upon them. More specifically, we apply an approach we call co-textual performance: we treat the script, its history, and its relation to our own present as texts to be interwoven and performed. We work with our students to create scenes that explore all three of these texts, then assemble them into a new creative work that performs the script and its history as well as our relationship to both.

Our performances were developed under the auspices of a £1.8 million, AHRC-funded project called Performing the Jewish Archive (PtJA). Commemoration was an integral part of the project from the beginning, and that included bringing newly rediscovered works of music and theatre back to the stage. In our application we pledged to 'right some historical wrongs—not only by bringing back voices that have been silenced, but by recognizing those who have left

their traces in the archive as the subjects of their own stories, not only as victims'. During the course of the 40-month project we organized five international performance festivals (in the US, the UK, the Czech Republic, Australia and South Africa) and presented dozens of concerts and theatrical productions. These commemorations were performative in J. L. Austin's sense of the word: they changed reality. Every time we announced a performance and named its creator, we changed that person's identity in the historical record from nameless victim to publicly recognised artist.

But there were other dimensions to our work, and one of the most important was pedagogy. Pedagogical practices function differently than the performatives described above. Performatives are illocutionary speech acts that bring into being what they name in the moment of their enunciation; as Austin argues, they rely more on the speaker for their effects. Pedagogy is a different kind of speech act—what Austin calls a perlocutionary act—that depends upon the listeners: are they persuaded, convinced, inspired by the speaker? Our pedagogical goal—the aim of our perlocutionary act—was extremely straightforward and, simultaneously, very difficult to achieve: to use our co-textual methodology to bring students to care enough about the past that they might act for change in the present.

How did this notion of co-textual performance develop? The practice arose quite organically during our first attempt to stage a play from the Terezín ghetto in 2005, with secondary school students in the Czech Republic. During a short but intense development period we combined the materials we had at hand: a script that had come to light during my research, materials regarding the local effects of the Holocaust that the students had already created, and additional scenes that we developed with them based on their personal opinions regarding this history.[3] But the practice did not receive a name until I began working with other colleagues to develop the PtJA project. As we discussed how best to present our research materials—musical scores, songs, plays, cabarets—to the public, we were inspired by the approach of the New Historicists and literary historian Stephen Greenblatt. New Historicists examine canonical works of art alongside lesser-known works and a wide variety of non-literary texts (political pamphlets, diaries, works of visual art, etc.) in order to illuminate the relationship between the work and the life-world from which it sprung.[4] As Greenblatt and Gallagher write, 'In our scholarship the relative positions of text and context often shift, so that what has been the mere background

makes a claim for the attention that has hitherto been given only to the foregrounded and privileged work of art …'.[5]

We diverged, however, from the New Historicists' goals in several key ways. Most importantly, we viewed the relationship between text and context as non-hierarchical from the start. In our performances we integrate scenes from plays written in Terezín with scenes we create about its history. We choose, therefore, to replace the words 'text' and 'context' with the term 'co-text'. We also add a third type of co-text: we ask our students to articulate their own present-day relationship to the script and to the traces of the historical past, and they perform that relationship in scenes that they co-create. Finally, our intentions are quite explicitly pedagogical for spectators and students alike. Instead of building our projects around a canonical text, we ask our audiences to engage with a previously unknown play and a little-known history; through our co-textual scenes we aim to make both intelligible to spectators. But, again, the main focus of our pedagogy is our students, and the co-textual scenes are intended to benefit them even more than the audience. As we guide them through their historical research, discuss the ethics of representing the script and its history in different ways, and shape the material they create into a performance that they then rehearse and stage for the public, we hope to generate a deep engagement that potentially gives students both the intellectual reasons and the emotional impetus to make their own commitment to 'never again.'

**The Terezín ghetto, *Comedy about a Trap,* and our case studies**

The Jewish ghetto at Terezín was established in the Nazi-occupied territory of former Czechoslovakia in November 1941. Its main function was as a transit camp: a place for the Jews of Central Europe to be gathered before being sent on to the death camps and slave labour camps. Because the Nazis focused their efforts on ensuring that that trains came and went as scheduled, they were relatively unconcerned with the prisoners' activities in the ghetto. Shortly after the first transports to Terezín arrived, prisoners began staging 'variety evenings' in their barracks. When it became clear that these performances would not be suppressed, such activities grew and expanded into a startlingly rich cultural life. This aspect of life in the ghetto was eventually exploited by the Nazis when Terezín was given a new role as a 'model ghetto', to be displayed to visitors in an effort to convince the international community that news of concentration camps was just anti-German propaganda. For the most part, however, the cultural

life was organised by the prisoners, for the prisoners. Although self-censorship certainly played a role in the staging of plays in the ghetto, theatrical performances reflected the prisoners' own interests, including their political commitments.[6]

Young author Zdeněk Jelínek was deported to the ghetto from Prague in July 1942, and that his play premiered just four months later, in November 1942. According to survivor František Miška, who performed in the Terezín production of *Comedy about a Trap*, Jelínek was inspired by the satirical play *Fateful Game of Love*, written by Czech authors Karel and Josef Čapek in 1910.[7] The Čapek brothers' script features traditional stock characters from the Italian commedia dell'arte, a type of folk theatre that was experiencing a rebirth at the time. As professor of Slavic literature Harold B. Segel points out, the widespread revival of commedia in the early twentieth century could have been one target of the Čapek's satire.[8] The play's critique, however, cuts much deeper. In brief, the decadent poet Gilles and the aggressive shopkeeper Trivalin compete for the hand of the lovely Isabella, but the scheming Brighella engages in various shady financial dealings to cheat them both and finally takes her for himself. Segel views the play's conclusion as 'a bleak commentary on the impact of capitalism on human relations'.[9]

Jelínek's play also critiques capitalism, but unlike the Čapek brothers' text, *Comedy about a Trap* brims over with youthful optimism and idealism. Jelínek used commedia dell'arte characters and poetic language to deliver an overtly political message: the braggart military officer Capitano and the miser Pantalone (representing fascism and capitalism) capture Harlequin (in this play, a likable, whimsical poet, but also a bourgeois intellectual and individualist) in a trap they set. They then force him to work for them by digging a hole where they assume treasure is buried. Harlequin's friend Columbina (like Harlequin, a 'clever servant' character) and a Communist agitator named Rarach, whose character is inspired not by commedia but by the comic devils of Czech fairy tales, try to convince him that collective action is the only way to get out of the trap.[10] Finally Harlequin agrees. Capitano and Pantalone are defeated, Harlequin is freed, and Harlequin, Columbina and Rarach set off into the world to free others caught in the traps of capitalism and fascism.

This script presented several challenges that we hoped would intrigue our students. First of all, the play is a comedy—perhaps the most controversial mode of Holocaust representation. Secondly, the script represented not just fascism but capitalism as an evil to be defeated. For our

students—most of them children of neo-liberalism—this caused a considerable amount of cognitive dissonance. Finally, the manuscript of *Comedy about a Trap* is incomplete. Five pages of the 24-page text, including the first page, are missing. Although we speculated about what went on during the missing pages, they did not hinder our production due to the nature of co-textual performance: we always divide the play into individual scenes, in order to interweave them with scenes the students develop themselves. Instead, the challenge the students addressed was more fundamental to our co-textual methods: how could they link Jelínek's script with the history of the ghetto and with their own present?

In the following case studies, we examine how each group addressed these three challenges in their own way during the development process and in the final performance. Although both the LSU and the York productions were titled Harlequin in the Ghetto, the two co-textual performances we staged were radically different in the ways the students grappled with the comedy, the ways they related to Jelínek's politics, and the relationship between the script, the history and the present that their co-textual scenes established.

**Holocaust Comedy: The LSU *Harlequin* Production @ rename?**

At LSU we experienced an unaccustomed luxury: a long development process. Alan and his students explored *Comedy about a Trap* for four months; I joined them half-way through the process. They met three hours a week during a 15-week module that Alan designed for spring 2016, dedicated, as his syllabus said, to 'the creation of an original performance piece that details life and art in the World War II Jewish Ghetto Terezín/Theresienstadt'. The students who registered were attracted both by the subject matter and by the opportunity to stage public performances: two at LSU in April, and one at the PtJA performance festival in Madison, Wisconsin, appropriately (if accidentally) scheduled for International Worker's Day on the 1st of May.

Over the course of these four months the students became fascinated by survivor testimony, which enabled them to explore connections between Jelínek's script and the history of Terezín and, to a lesser extent, their own relationship to both. They did not delve very deeply into the political aspects of the script, other than to acknowledge a tension between their admiration for Jelínek's ideals and their ingrained sense of Communism as a system that failed in practice. But by far the greatest tensions arose when they tried to engage with the humour in the play.

The students' anxiety about humour put them in good company. Works that employ comic elements to represent the Holocaust, such as Roberto Benigni's 1997 film *Life is Beautiful*, have spurred impassioned attacks and equally impassioned defences. Scholars in the US have long been aware of certain 'rules' regarding how the Holocaust should be depicted; Terence des Pres, in his landmark 1988 essay, 'Holocaust Laughter?' identified one of those as 'The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even a sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonour its dead'.[11] Other scholars and artists have opposed what Des Pres himself called 'Holocaust etiquette', arguing that Holocaust humour enables new perspectives 'that would otherwise remain unavailable to those so overcome by Holocaust-awe that they have become unreflectively reverent, or else silent'.[12] This struggle sometimes breaks out of the boundaries of academia to play out in very public forums, as was the case in 1999 when *Life is Beautiful* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film. Although this particular debate took place around the time our students

were born, they can hardly help but be affected by a conflict that is still an ongoing aspect of American culture. As a review of the 2017 film *The Last Laugh* reveals, comedians, Holocaust survivors and anti-racism activists are still deeply divided on the question: are the Nazi death camps an appropriate subject for humour, or does comedy inevitably trivialise the Holocaust?[13]

With *Comedy about a Trap*, however, we were dealing with a rare genre: a comedy from the Holocaust, rather than comedy about the Holocaust. Our Terezín author had written a play that potentially 'trivialised' fascism by embodying it as a comic, blustering yet cowardly soldier, and portraying capitalism—which Jelínek considered a similar evil—as a cackling old miser. Alan was initially surprised by the degree of apprehension his students felt about approaching the play, perhaps because he and I had already worked extensively with comedies performed in Terezín.[14] Still, in the syllabus, he had asked the students to 'bear in mind the ethical responsibilities involved in the creation of any live performance, especially one dealing with a topic as monumental as the genocidal murder of more than six million people during the Holocaust of World War II', and the humour in the script clearly raised fraught ethical questions for them. The question of how to handle the comedy became a major topic of interrogation for the project as a whole. What were we to make of a comedy from the Holocaust, and how could we use it as the basis for a performance to be presented to public audiences?

But how do we define 'comedy' in the first place? One of the earliest Western references to comedy appears in the fourth century BCE *Poetics* of Aristotle. His text is almost exclusively devoted to tragedy, but theatre artists and historians have made much of his few comments on the comic form. According to Aristotle, comedy resembles tragedy in that it is a form of imitation, a practice in itself both pleasurable and instructive. But unlike tragedy, which deals with 'higher' sorts of characters, comedy is 'an imitation of characters of a lower type'.[15] Still, despite the ignoble figures in which it traffics, Aristotle stresses that comedy 'does not… involve the full range of villainy, but only the ludicrous, a subdivision of the ugly or base', then adds that 'the ludicrous consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive'.[16]

These remarks from Aristotle helped bring into focus the challenges that we faced with the project. If we were going to perform the comic scenes of *Comedy about a Trap* successfully, how could we persuade the students to perform the villains as ludicrous—having some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive—when they knew full well what kind of destruction the collusion of fascism and capitalism had wrought? Moreover, how were we to make these

comic scenes acceptable to the audience in our adaptation, *Harlequin in the Ghetto*? Mindful of these vexed questions regarding both the production and reception of our performance, we worked with students to create original co-textual scenes that acknowledged the historical villainy behind the ludicrous characters.

Some of their doubts regarding the ethics of using humour in their performance may have stemmed from a perception of comedy as a form of entertainment that offers nothing more than mere amusement. Certainly a crucial function of comedy is to amuse, but that is not its only function; we must not foreclose its ability to prompt engagement, inquiry, and even critique of its source materials and subject matter. After all, Bertolt Brecht, dedicated as he was to a socially and politically committed theatre, exhorted both actors and audiences to 'treat the theatre as a place of entertainment, as is proper in an aesthetic discussion, and try to discover which type of entertainment suits us best'.[17]

For the inmates of Terezín, the entertainment that suited them best, at least in the theatre, was clearly comedy; their goal was apparently to interpret their own experience of Terezín in a psychologically manageable way.[18] But what should the goal of our entertainment be? We wanted the students to draw upon that comic legacy from Terezín, not only in order to keep them engaged by taking some measure of delight in the difficult work that we were tackling, but also to throw the full tragedy of the Holocaust into sharper relief. We hoped that a juxtaposition of the comic and tragic would produce a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or 'making strange' of the students' traditional Holocaust narratives—that it would provoke both critical thinking and accountable action.

Keeping these goals in mind, during the first weeks of the semester Alan decided to begin the process of co-textual creation by introducing them to another comedy from the Holocaust—a cabaret that we had used in an earlier project called *Laugh With Us*.[19] This text, also written and produced by prisoners in the Terezín ghetto, featured numerous sketches in which the inmates themselves joked about conditions in the camp. The students took great interest in the literary and historical information gleaned from the play, and even began to see how and why the Terezín inmates could laugh at their own situation. But when I asked the students to perform short comic scenes from the cabaret, they hesitated to give voice to the jokes themselves, to laugh about experiences not their own.

Significantly, however, after struggling with the discomfort of casting themselves as 'insiders' to the cabaret's humour, the students found it easier to engage with *Comedy about a Trap.* After all, the two texts employ their comedy to quite different ends. The authors of the cabaret invited laughter with their 'inside jokes' about the specific conditions of the Terezín ghetto, in order to cope with their own experience of those conditions; *Comedy about a Trap* used laughter in service of a global political struggle that promised an end to all ghettos, all fascisms, all forms of inequality and oppression. Even more crucially for the LSU students, however, *Comedy about a Trap* made its political points through a form already familiar to them from their theatre history studies: the centuries-old traditional characters of the commedia dell'arte.

Theatrical forms like commedia draw upon what theatre scholar Diana Taylor calls the 'repertoire'—techniques transmitted through practice—as opposed to the 'archive' of written scripts and performance manuals. In their introduction to this special issue, Popescu and Schult invoke Taylor's work on the performative power of the repertoire to transmit memories from the past and thereby transform identities in the present. For Taylor, 'the repertoire, whether in terms of verbal or nonverbal expression, transmits live, embodied actions. As such, traditions are stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods, and transmitted "live" in the here and now to a live audience. Forms handed down from the past are experienced as pre-sent'.[20] In *Comedy about a Trap*, those 'forms handed down from the past' were the comic forms inherited from the commedia dell'arte. My students perceived commedia as a tradition they shared with the prisoners, enabling them to play those roles more readily than the roles in *Laugh with Us*, which they felt asked them to step into the roles of the prisoners themselves and perform an experience that they did not share.

The commedia roles also provided the students with a forum to explore their own comic creativity through an accident of casting: cross-gender role playing. We cast the commedia roles based on the students' ability to develop a specific comic slant on the characters, which we had explored in a few of our workshops. Unexpectedly, this led to almost complete gender role reversal. The male characters of Capitano and Pantalone were played by Caitlin Brimer and Erin Sheets. Rarach, the communist agitator character, is male in Jelínek's script but was played by a woman, Mallory Osigian, in our production. Columbina, the only female character in the play, was played by Alexander Adams, who keenly desired the role due to his own already extensive

experience as a drag performer. Harlequin was the only male character who was played by a male actor, Scott Mitchell. Two actors in particular got tremendous comic mileage from overturning gender expectations: Caitlin from the juxtaposition of her small female body with the blustering, bullying Capitano's hypermasculine posturing, and Alexander from the many double entendres that emerged from playing his character as a man in drag.

[Figure 1 goes around here]

Our careful work on *Comedy about a Trap* and its commedia dell'arte underpinnings put the students more at ease with the notion of comedy from the Holocaust; they better understood how the play used comic themes to critique fascism and class inequities and forecast the eventual defeat of fascism and triumph of the proletariat. But how could we craft our co-textual adaptation, *Harlequin in the Ghetto*, to acknowledge the villainy behind the ludicrous characters while acknowledging the devastation that their real-life counterparts had caused? In this case, the co-texts created by the students offered the solution; their original material detailing the human tragedy of the ghetto placed *Comedy about a Trap* in dialectical relationship with the daily reality of ghetto life.

We began by linking segments of the play to memoirs or diary entries of the Terezín prisoners, which in turn we often linked to visual art from the ghetto to inspire particular staging moments. For example, student discussion of the trap that ensnares Harlequin prompted the students to read accounts of Jews first entering the trap of Terezín. We then examined paintings and drawings of transports of prisoners arriving in the ghetto, all of them burdened with their baggage and personal belongings. From such images the students created a 'dance sequence' between an arriving inmate and two ghetto attendants, who artfully twirled the new arrival between themselves while confiscating his luggage and picking his pockets. In another instance, remarks in the play about collective action reminded students of testimony on the camaraderie that often developed among Terezín inmates. From there the students turned to an ink drawing of children playing group games in Terezín, then created a sketch in which a simple game of hopscotch serves as a powerful metaphor for ghetto life—even within the tightest support networks, a single misstep could result in permanent removal from the game or, by analogy—transport from Terezín to camps in the East.

While developing these co-textual scenes for our production, we also prompted the students to write original material that reflected their own thoughts about *Comedy about a Trap*

and its history, and we used this for the opening scene of the production. As a sort of preface, the performance began with an 'obstacle course' in which seven of our eight student performers assumed contorted positions and spoke in their own words about *Comedy about a Trap* and its history. Our eighth performer Abby Jones navigated one obstacle after another; she ducked under, jumped over, and even cartwheeled around her fellow actors as they spoke their lines:

> Scott: I think the '*Trap*' play's political content and comedic style pose a unique challenge to our production.
> Caitlin: There are multiple layers here that we must navigate.
> Shelbi: I feel like I can't connect very deeply to *Comedy about a Tra*p. It's not that I don't appreciate and value it. I just don't feel like I really understand it, much as I try.
> Mallory: Talking extensively about how to perform these pieces, as well as simply learning more, has made taking on this material much easier.
> Alexander: I feel much more comfortable with this material that we have now … I think it's due, in part, because it's material that we've had some part in creating.
> Erin: While beautiful, it's still very far away from me. Dramaturgically, historically it's incredible.
> Dexter: It's the historical context that gives it its depth.[21]

This distillation of their own thoughts reveals how important our co-textual approach was to their understanding of both the script and its history: the students spoke about their own struggles to find some level of comfort with the comedy of Jelínek's script, to address their own critical interventions into the material, and above all the need to place *Comedy about a Trap* within its historical context for present-day audiences. Although having the students become 'comfortable with this material' may not always be a goal in Holocaust pedagogy, in this case the students needed to manage their discomfort to engage with the script at all—and they did so, as Alexander pointed out, by becoming co-creators of the performance.

When Abby reached the end of the obstacle course, she acknowledged the need to incorporate the history of Terezín into our *Harlequin* production: 'And so … we'll present it WITH its historical context. Lights down … cue testimony.'[22] Abby, in fact, was one of three students—along with Dexter Ellis and Shelbi Young—who controlled the ebb-and-flow of the unfolding *Harlequin* performance. As our designated 'Messengers' they were tasked with interrupting scenes from *Comedy about a Trap* to introduce scenes created by the students. In this way the Messengers provided both the historical context for *Comedy about a Trap* and the structural framework for the Harlequin production. For example, the testimony that Abby cued right after the 'lights down' prepared the audience for the notion of laughter in the ghetto. The voiceover

began with Alexander Adams identifying the survivor, Pavel Stránský, then quoting his testimony:

> I think to live you must have an ideal – a hope. You must eat, you must drink, you must love … and you must laugh as well. When one is young, one doesn't think about death. I'm ninety. I am thinking about dying. But I know that it is normal. It is the end of life, but until then … you must not only eat and drink but also do something, to have an inner life as well.[23]

The performance then segued into the original *Comedy about a Trap script*. The lights came up suddenly on our own Rarach, Mallory Osigian, and she addressed a prologue to the audience as indicated. Because the first page of the script is missing, however, she began in mid-sentence at the beginning of the second page: '... and some of you may have to have everything justified down to the last detail. Some of you may be progressive; some of you may be reactionary to the core.'[24] At the end of her prologue Shelbi, as a Messenger, interrupted her:

> Shelbi: *(enters)* Wait! They *(gestures to audience)* don't even know who you are.
> Rarach: Well what am I supposed to say? The first page of the script is lost. Half of my prologue is missing.
> Shelbi: Allow me. *(Speaks to audience)* This is Rarach // a character in the play …
> Rarach: *(interrupting)* And who might you be?
> Shelbi: *(ignoring her*) This is Rarach, one of the characters in the play *Comedy about a Trap*.
> Dexter: *(enters)* It was written in a World War II Jewish ghetto called Terezín or in German Theresienstadt, located about 40 miles NW of Prague…

Shelbi, Dexter and Abby continued, delivering, in essence, a five-minute primer for the audience on the history of the Terezín ghetto, the centrality of comedy in its cultural life, the commedia dell'arte inspiration for the original script, and the communist ideology that it championed.

After this initial interruption, the performers returned to *Comedy about a Trap*, but the Messengers returned periodically as well, invoking survivor testimony to forge thematic links between moments from *Comedy about a Trap* and life in the Terezín ghetto. For example, in an early scene from *Comedy about a Trap*, Harlequin waxes lyrical about the chaos of the world, a giant mess that leaves its poor inhabitants staggering through fog. To his reflection on the vicissitudes of life and fate, Columbina replies in a brief poetic passage 'There are those whom we meet again and again / And those who never return'.[25] This line served as a cue for the Messengers to introduce a segment about the regular transports out of Terezín to 'the East'—transports that often divided friends and family from one another, leaving them with little more than hope for a reunion sometime in the uncertain future.

Later in *Comedy about a Trap*, Harlequin at last comes to class consciousness and Columbina convinces Rarach to help Harlequin escape from his trap. But Columbina also uses her feminine wiles to lure Pantalone and Capitano into a trap of their own. Both characters had professed love for Columbina, but Capitano regards her as a trophy, and Pantalone views her as a business associate. When Pantalone 'pops the question' he asks Columbina not to become his wife, but his secretary. 'I'm hopelessly invested in you', Pantalone cries.[26] Our script then juxtaposed these examples of exploitive relationships with the sustaining power of true love in the ghetto. The Messengers entered, focusing again on the testimony of Pavel Stránský, who arrived in Terezín with his fiancée, married her after their liberation, and lived happily with his wife into old age.

In the next scene—the climax of *Comedy about a Trap*—Rarach, Columbina and Harlequin capture Pantalone and Capitano. The three of them then sing a victory song in which they envision 'a world without Pantalones and their Capitanos / A world sounding like a marching song'.[27] Thus the play closes on a requisite comic theme: the villainy of Pantalone and Capitano—within the world of the play, never very painful in the first place—is neutralized, and the sunny world of socialism is forecast as a promise for the future.

This rosy ending, however, proved particularly vexing to the students, especially since the actual triumph of socialism in postwar Czechoslovakia confounded the happy future predicted by the play. And so just before the final lines of *Comedy about a Trap* the Messengers introduced a final intervention, this time in the form of a short documentary video created by students Lindsey Potter and Sarah Saurage and managed by Kendall Krebsbach, with audio support from Alexander Adams. The video, projected on a screen at the rear of the stage, offered Rarach a glimpse of the socialist future: the 1948 coup that brought the Czechoslovak Communist Party to power; the abuses of the Stalinist era, including overtly anti-Semitic political trials; the reforms of the Prague Spring crushed by Soviet forces; and the Velvet Revolution of 1989—an uprising Rarach first mistook for the final triumph of a genuine communism, rather than the overthrow of a corrupt socialist regime.

But despite this grim warning about the future of socialism, we scripted our Rarach to remain committed to his political struggles; the disasters of the Cold War era did not obviate the value of the socialist tradition to spur political thought and practice in the present moment. 'We cannot abandon these ideals', Rarach exclaimed to the assembled students.[28] For a moment the

Messengers, in spite of their efforts to impress upon Rarach the failure of communist ideology, supported her fight while acknowledging its uncertain outcome by invoking the words of playwright Samuel Beckett: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'.[29] With this, three of the students stepped out of their roles and addressed the audience as themselves, in a brief co-textual scene that articulated their own relationship to the script and Jelínek's politics:

> Shelbi: Presenting this play in place of the prisoners has been difficult. Yet I think we all come from a different place of respect and understanding that we did not have at the beginning of this process.
> Alexander: I still think we cannot fully understand the political com-mitment that is associated with this play and its audience. The best we can do is relate it to situa-tion that we see now and recognize, such as in our political and international environment right now.
> Scott: I'm not sure that we can fully comprehend the kind of political passion and conviction that the prisoners had because the dynamics of our political climate are different and the stakes are lower.[30]

But Rarach refused to accept this, declaring 'But the stakes aren't lower. I still have work to do … and we're still going to finish this play'.[31] She then ushered Alexander and Scott, the students playing Harlequin and Columbina, back into position. With their final lines, they vow to spread word of the revolution abroad, while also attending to the future of their assembled Terezín audience:

> Rarach: Dear friends, it's time for me to bid you farewell…. Did you think that I would stay and live in the past? / There are still so many places suffering in helplessness!
> Columbina: Let's go and wake them with our boundless laughter, / Chase away the clouds forged by heavy silence / To set life on fire and run!
> Rarach: To the South!
> Harlequin: Me to the East!
> Columbina: And what will happen to those who remain here? / Where will they go and which way?
> Harlequin: May they not stay here for long,
> Columbina: May they go where they want.
> All: May they all go HOME![32]

This passage, taken directly from Jelínek's script, ends with a heartfelt and optimistic address to its original Terezín audience. Thus the play concluded on the requisite comic theme of villainy painlessly vanquished – but in this moment, the implied villains shift from the comic characters of Capitano and Pantalone to the prisoners' Nazi overlords in Terezín. This expression of hope and faith in their own survival took on incredible poignancy in performance, for just a few pages

earlier the students had performed survivor testimony about mass transports from the ghetto in the autumn of 1944 that sent two-thirds of the prisoners to Auschwitz and the vast majority to their deaths.

So did our co-textual approach enable us to present the comedy of the play in ways that both students and spectators might regard as transformational? That is, by acknowledging the history of the ghetto with our co-textual scenes, would the comic moments from *Comedy about a Trap* come across not as trivialisations but as crucial counterpoints to the many tragedies of the ghetto itself? Feedback from a post-show audience talkback at LSU suggests that it did. An audience member asked what the students knew about the Holocaust before they started and 'what they steeped themselves in, because they really seemed to understand it.' After the students enthusiastically described the process of researching and developing the script, she responded, 'I really like the way you presented it…. I'm Jewish, I think most of you aren't, but I think most of you got it, I think it's so important that the next generation gets what happened.'[33] Perhaps we had changed her thinking regarding the ways that a new generation can come to an understanding of the events of the Holocaust.

But how did the students describe their own transformation? Stránský's testimony, and the testimony of others who had laughed and loved in the ghetto, had made a deep impression on them. After our final performance at the PtJA 'Out of the Shadows' festival at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Margaret Miller told the audience about her attitude when studying the Holocaust in school:

> I didn't really see them as human beings, I just saw them as Holocaust victims. And I feel like, through reading all these testimonies and going through all these diaries and receiving all this information, I think something that really struck me is … the perseverance of the human spirit that I didn't associate with the Holocaust before, that they were able to experience, even within this horrible situation … the whole spectrum of the human condition. They were still feeling, they were still falling in love…. [34]

Rather than trivializing the Holocaust, it appears that the humour in the script, when juxtaposed with the historical information and personal stories delivered through the co-textual scenes, actually functioned in a transformational way. The students, through their own experience of comic joy in the performance, gained an understanding of the prisoners as subjects, as active agents, who experienced the whole range of human emotions in the ghetto. But how might this serve the pledge 'never again'? Although we did not spend time during our research and

development process studying other genocides, we hope that this is a connection the students will make on their own: that the people being persecuted under oppressive regimes today are just as much subjects, just as much people with names and lives as the Terezín prisoners to whom they became attached, and just as worthy of our active engagement.

**Trivializing the present? *Harlequin* in York**

The PtJA project, with its US and UK festivals scheduled practically back to back, provided Alan and myself with a remarkable opportunity to run our co-textual experiment again with my students at the University of York. What kind of performance could we create with the same script from Terezín and the same methodology, but with a different group of students from a different cultural background? How would they take on the challenges presented by the comedy and by Jelínek's politics? And what kind of relationship would they establish between the script, the history and the present?

Due to the festival schedule we faced an extremely compressed rehearsal period: three weeks to create and rehearse the play.[35] Fortunately my students, who had all taken this on as an extracurricular activity, were scheduled to be with us for several hours a day, and we had already engaged in some preliminary exercises with them. Back in February, before I left for LSU, PhD candidate and assistant director Mark France and I had run a day-long workshop to audition our cast. We spent the day reading through *Comedy about a Trap* and speculating about the gaps in the script, discussing capitalism and communism, and doing improvisational exercises based on survivor testimony, images and music from the ghetto, etc. We then selected those who most enthusiastically embraced this style of work, including several international students.[36] To make the most of our short rehearsal period they agreed to engage with the reading that we would send them before hand, which included my chapter on the history of the ghetto and its cultural life, some samples of survivor testimony, and the *Communist Manifesto.*

Why the *Communist Manifesto*? There were two things I wanted to do differently with this group. One was to engage much more directly with Jelínek's politics. At LSU, the students had used his political themes as triggers to perform scenes about their historical research; for

example, when the script portrayed capitalism as a trap, they segued into a co-textual scene about the nature of the ghetto itself as a trap. I wanted us to listen much more closely to what Jelínek himself was saying and, in effect, to treat him as a fellow pedagogue, for his play has a clear didactic aim: to teach his audience to embrace collective action and communism and reject not only fascism but exploitive capitalism. My real goal, however, was not to turn them into card-carrying Communists, but simply to get them to engage deeply and sincerely with *otherness.* In these increasingly isolationist and xenophobic times, any sustained and open-minded engagement with opinions different from our own has the potential to move us further down the road from mere tolerance to mutual understanding and respect. How might our students be transformed by learning not only *about* Zdeněk Jelínek but *from* him?

My other goal was to focus more upon the present, forging clearer relationships between the script, the history of Terezín, and the student's own lives. Alan and I are both committed to a particular kind of pedagogical transformation: the creation of a relationship with the past that encourages students to make a difference in the present. But what should the nature of that relationship be? As Simon et al. write in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*,

> A politics of relationality is additionally needed, implicating us in an examination of how it is each of us listens, learns, and responds to those whose identities, bodies, and memories have been fundamentally impacted by such violences – impacts that cannot ever be reduced to versions of our own troubles and traumas.[37]

Obviously it is desirable to create a relationship rather than a reduction, but here is my concern: in our efforts to prevent students from over-identifying with and thus trivializing the past, we may inadvertently devalue their present. That is, if today's 'troubles and traumas' are so trivial – if, as our students at LSU put it, 'the stakes are lower' – why should they act? I hoped to engage our York students not only with the traumatic past but with a present in which there are choices to be made that lead us toward or away from future genocides, and to inspire them with the belief that action in the present is not only possible but necessary.

At our first meeting with the cast, we laid out our plan to spend the entire first week doing research and development work: to study, to discuss, to improvise text and images that we would turn into co-textual scenes. One thing we discovered immediately was this: the York students did not share the LSU students' anxiety about comedy. Had they become accustomed to

the idea already at our February workshop? Or had it actually never been an issue – was their acceptance due to a fundamentally different attitude toward the Holocaust on the part of our English and international students? I believe the students' attitude was due simply to the fact that there is less public discourse overall about the Holocaust in their countries, and therefore less opportunity for students to be influenced by perceived 'rules'. Perhaps because national commemoration activities were adopted significantly later in the UK than in the US, discourse about the Holocaust has simply not had as much time to become embedded in UK culture.[38] Regardless of the reasons, however, it was simply a given circumstance of our project that we would not need to spend as much time helping them engage with the comedy..

Another development that day took us both by surprise. While engaging with Jelínek's political beliefs through the *Communist Manifesto,* the students initially expressed reactions similar to those of the US students: although they did express admiration for its ideals, they saw it primarily as a failed system. But when we asked them to engage with those ideals by staging communist rallies based on the *Manifesto*, they were simply unable to put themselves in the place of young, idealistic Communists. Instead they parodied Marxism's political aims, or created comic scenes with idealistic yet superficial slogans. In one improvisation they tried to 'sell' communism through that most capitalist of media: the infomercial.

When we asked them why they could not take the exercise seriously, an issue came to light that would become central to our performance: our students stated quite bluntly that they do not believe in collective action. Mark pointed out that his generation, born in the 1970s, were activists, pushing back against the perceived inactivity and isolationism of the British government. The students responded that they were pushing back against over-intervention: for example, what they see as the unjustified aggression of their own government in the invasion of Iraq. They also discussed their personal experience of the futility of collective action: the failure of mass protests against proposed tuition fee increases in 2010 (the increases went into effect in the autumn of 2012). They laughed as they showed us the video of Nick Clegg's televised apology for breaking the Liberal Democrats' campaign promise to oppose the increase—or rather, the version of that apology that apparently every member of their generation knows: the auto-tuned musical parody, which now has over 3.5 million views on YouTube.[39] Alan and I were left wondering: in three weeks, would the students reach the point where they could understand and perhaps even perform Jelínek's ideals, even if they did not share them?

After four full days of research and development, which also included intense discussion of the history of the Holocaust from each student's national point of view, hours of improvisation and image development work based on survivor testimony, and lively debate about the recent scandal regarding alleged anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, Alan and I gathered together all the material we had generated and, with the help of a few students who were available over the weekend, organised the script.[40] We structured our performance, as we did at LSU, using *Comedy about a Trap* as its spine. Rather than creating a fairly simple dialectical movement between the script and the history of the ghetto, however, we integrated two sets of co-textual scenes. One set of scenes provided straightforward historical information about major events in the history of the ghetto, especially the arrival and departure of transports, as a kind of timeline to orient the audience. In the other set of co-textual scenes—the ones I will discuss below—we explored three themes that we had distilled from our students' work: collective action, labour, and having a voice.

The play began with a condensed version of Rarach's prologue from the original script, then the students, speaking as themselves, laid out the stakes of our endeavour:

> Rarach: … we simply call upon Archimedes, who asked only for a firm place to stand in order to move the world. We are more humble; we want to move only you.
> All (*to audience*): And we want to move only YOU.
> […]
> Amilee: Zdeněk Jelínek, the author of this play, wanted to move his fellow prisoners in the Terezín ghetto to accept the principles of Marxism ...
> Estela: ... and to prepare for the postwar triumph of Communism…
> Audun: … and to encourage the type of collective action it would take to establish a more just world.
> Ruby: We feel a bit more ambiguous about collective action.
> Adam: But we'd like to see if Jelínek's play can still move you.
> Roberta: Because this play has moved us to ask, about Jelínek's time and our own:
> Amilee: what might collective action mean?
> Estela: what's the status of labour?
> Kayleigh: what does it mean to have a voice?[41]

As Roberta pointed out, the play would explore 'Jelínek's time and our own'. We had created two co-textual scenes for each theme: one from the prisoners' past, and one about the students' present. But even the scenes about the past were different in nature from those the LSU students had created. Since the York students were not as anxious about the comic elements in Jelínek's

script, they did not need to counterbalance them with tragedy. Instead, they sometimes used the co-textual scenes about the past to explore unexpectedly positive testimony about the ghetto. For example, Ruby introduced the scene about the status of labour in Jelínek's time by describing his dream of 'a world of human work, yet still a holiday'.[42] Audun then quoted testimony by a young survivor who had experienced non-alienated labour in the ghetto itself, after an illness left him unable to do his previous job:

> Audun: … I couldn't work as a plumber anymore, so I was sent to work in the library for youth, which was a very beautiful activity. We had a few books there which we lent out, but mainly we gave lectures. Education was officially forbidden, but those lectures actually served as a substitute for school.

In another scene about the past, on the topic of collective action in the ghetto, Estela and Audun quoted testimony by survivors who recalled their political activities:

> Estela: In Terezín there were communist cells for three people, one was the leader. The cells met and discussed political economy, Marxism ...
> Audun: Under the influence of my girlfriend, later my wife, who was at that time a committed 17 year old Marxist, I got into the movement. It was organized in cells of three …. I believed in that movement, that society was capable of establishing some kind of more just order on earth ....

With these scenes, the students performed their own act of pedagogy: they introduced spectators to the surprising spaces of agency that the prisoners were able to carve out for themselves even in the ghetto. These scenes also served as a performative act of commemoration: by speaking this testimony to an audience, the students publicly restored the prisoners' identities as non-alienated labourers and full political subjects, even in the ghetto.

The scenes that I suspect left the most lasting impression on the students, however, were the three co-textual scenes about their own present. For example, the scene about 'having a voice' was based upon the articles students read about the Labour Party's anti-Semitism scandal. In the scene, Kayleigh acted as host of a talk show where our English students represented a range of viewpoints, from the Jewish Socialist Group's argument that this was simply a plot to divide the left, to accusations that Labour was creating a climate of fear for today's British Jews. She then invited the international students, as members of the 'studio audience', to provide 'a view from the outside'—that is, from Italy, Norway and Mexico respectively. Excerpts reveal

clear condemnation of anti-Semitism but, again, ambiguous feelings about taking action, collective or otherwise:

> Roberta: Being a foreigner, all I know about your politics are the contrasting voices that the media present. How reliable are they? I don't know, but what I do know is that someone has said something anti-semitic, and this is politically unacceptable.
> Audun: This scandal is bad and frankly, from my point of view, seems a bit ridiculous, but by not being from this country and not being able to vote or properly be a part of UK politics, I can't help but just think, 'shape up, Britain'. But at the same time I know that I have somewhere stable to return to. I am just left with the thought, what can I do?
> Estela: To me this is just noise. I understand why it's important to pay attention to it, and to do something about it. But English politics don't matter much to me. […] All I can say is STOP! Stop repeating the same "blame the Jews" discourse. Stop comparing other politicians to Hitler; they are not him. I'm not saying they are doing good things but we should judge them by who they are now. We should always remember what happened in the Holocaust and make sure it never happens again.[43]

A tension emerges in this scene between the conviction that '[w]e should …make sure it never happens again' and the question all three seem to ask—'what can I do?' This tension continued to develop throughout the script: would it resolve itself, or would it remain a fundamental aspect of the project?

Another scene from the present engaged explicitly with the theme of collective action. Ruby, who had participated as a 16-year-old in the demonstrations against UK tuition increases, delivered an impassioned monologue about the euphoria of chanting 'no ifs, no buts, no education cuts!' along with thousands of other protesters in Manchester, and her faith, at the time, that the government would listen. As the other students continued to chant, she said, 'At the time I naively thought that we would make a change. We would force the government to change their actions, take back what they had done'.[44] Hope, however, turned to utter disillusionment when David Cameron explained that, in spite of his commitment to higher education, it was tuition, rather than government spending, that would be increased. With what seemed like six years of pent-up rage, Ruby was finally able to reply, at least symbolically, to Audun's smug delivery of Cameron's speech: 'Of course you can say that …someone who was brought up in money. Has always had money, knows its security. Your education was never questioned. Never compromised…'.[45] The scene continued with Kayleigh's portrayal of Nick Clegg's incredibly awkward televised apology, and ended with its parody: a rousing chorus of the 'I'm sorry' song.

At an intellectual level I found this scene disappointing. I could not help wanting to urge them to try again—that one defeat, even though resounding, should not mean the end of

collective action for Ruby and her generation. At an emotional level, however, this was the moment when I most clearly understood the frustration behind their passivity. I had asked them to engage with otherness; now it was my turn to engage with an opinion differ from my own—and this scene made me do that, unexpectedly but sincerely. Watching it in performance, however, the aspect I focused on was their ability to feel passionately, even six years later, about a political cause. What would it take to harness that passion to action in the present?

The present-day scene that gave me the most hope for the future was about the value of labour. This scene was inspired by a role-playing exercise Alan led: the students played the parts of the farmer, the baker and the capitalist, and experienced the process by which capitalism leads to alienated labour. During our post-exercise discussion, Amilee questioned her manager's decisions at the restaurant where she worked: why, on nights when they were very busy and clearly making money, were they told that the company could not afford to bring in a few more staff? Her frustrations at work, when combined with the communist infomercial she and Estela had created earlier in the week, evolved into a riotously funny scene in which she appeared as a guest on a Jeremy Kyle-inspired talk show, appealing for help with her feelings of exploitation. Estela, as the host, then welcomed another guest, Karl Marx (played by Kayleigh wearing a false beard), who was there to promote his new work, the *Communist Manifesto.* Marx and Estela encouraged Amilee to join the Communist Party and engage in collective action against her employer, but at the critical moment she made a decision more suited to her generation:

> Estela: And here again, audience, you have come on a very special day. Because today, free for the asking, anyone who wants them will receive tickets to the best party in town: the Communist Party!
> (*She waves the tickets to cheers and applause*.)
> Amilee: Wait, please wait! (*Interrupts the applause*.) I'm still not sure how all of this rhetoric helps me as an individual. I don't want to jump from the frying pan into the fire!
> Kayleigh (*as Marx*): But we want everyone to jump into the fire! Of course, it's a leap of faith. But collective action today guarantees free development for every individual in the future. Once we eliminate the means for the few to earn profit from the work of the many, everybody wins!
> Estela: So Amilee, what are you going to do?
> *(Everyone watches in suspense. The host holds out the tickets. Amilee thinks, then…)*
> Amilee (*triumphantly*): I'm going to quit my job![46]

[Figure 2 goes around here.]

Why do I find this scene so hopeful? Previously the students had parodied the Communist Manifesto, David Cameron and Nick Clegg; now they were parodying themselves. Unlike the helplessness of 'what can I do?' in the face of alleged Labour anti-Semitism, or the disillusionment behind their biting mockery of Clegg's broken campaign promise, this moment struck me as a humorous, very self-aware acknowledgement that perhaps their instinctive, individualistic reaction was not the most desirable one—an acknowledgement that could create a space for change. And we saw evidence of real change in this scene as well. Unlike the Communist rallies the students had improvised in early May, in which they simply mouthed slogans that clearly meant nothing to them, Kayleigh's portrayal of Marx rang with conviction: she knew what she was parodying. Jelínek's pedagogical aims had at least partially hit their mark. Amilee had come to a type of 'class consciousness' about her own job, and Kayleigh, even if she might not agree with the principles of Marxism, had engaged with them enough to understand them.

Can we say, therefore, that the students were somehow transformed by their experience of this project? The tension that runs throughout the play—between the perceived need for action and the unwillingness to act, at least collectively—was never fully resolved. Ironically, even in the final moments of the play, the students placed the ultimate responsibility for action upon the spectators:

> Kayleigh: Zdeněk Jelínek had polio as a child.
> Amilee: As his friends recalled, he walked with a limp. He was probably murdered immediately upon arrival at Auschwitz.
> Roberta: That's how the world lost Zdeněk Jelínek.
> Ruby: And between his time and our own, we've lost a lot of the youthful idealism that came so naturally to his generation.
> Audun: But we have his work, we have his voice, and we have his ideal of the collective.
> Estela: What to do with it? We leave that up to you.[47]

The answers they gave to our spectators during post-show talk-backs after our public performances, however, tell a somewhat different story. For example, one audience member alluded to the upcoming vote on Brexit then asked, 'Do you feel, after going through this process … do you feel more inclined to participate in the democratic process that could affect your generation far more than some others in the audience?'[48] Several of the students weighed in affirmatively, but it was Kayleigh who confirmed that we had achieved at least one of our goals:

> In my opinion we're so blessed that our politics varies on things like where cuts are made, or where, you know, I don't want to say minor things, but in comparison to 'communism versus fascism' it's so unbelievably minor, and it allows you to sort of take a step back and look at current politics as something that we can work out.[49]

She had clearly not reduced the past to 'versions of our own troubles and traumas', but still took those troubles seriously—as spurs to action. That is, although she acknowledged the enormity of the issues of Jelínek's day, rather than feeling stymied by the triviality of the present in comparison with the past, she found the 'unbelievably minor' issues of their own politics eminently resolvable.

## Conclusion

A few weeks after our performances in York, the UK voted for Brexit; just months later, the US voted for Donald Trump. The forces those choices have unleashed are forces that most of our students object to, but are most assuredly not forces they can take on as individuals. If this project helped our students view the politics of their own day as 'something we can work out' and helped them engage in collective action even as a thought experiment, perhaps they will take the next step on their own: to move that kind of activism from the stage out into the world, and with more persistence than in their previous attempts. Perhaps two of the LSU students, Mallory Osigian and Erin Sheets, best expressed this in the talkback after our performance in Madison:

> Mallory: Rarach sees that the only solution to all of society's problems is communism. […] And so Rarach is completely disillusioned … but she says, well these ideals cannot be abandoned. The ideals are not the problem. So the play actually ends on a fairly optimistic note of, even though it didn't work that time … the ideals of fairness and of equality in society are positive and those are what remain and those are what we still strive for today.
> Erin. I do believe the necessity of that Samuel Beckett quote … okay, yeah, we thought this was going to solve all of our problems and it didn't, but we are going to keep trying …. And putting our perspective on it, coming at this from a place that sometimes seems so far away [from the problems of World War II] but in reality is so close, which is why the stakes aren't lower.
> Lisa. The stakes aren't lower.
> Alan. 'Fail better'. That's the key line in the Samuel Beckett phrase. (*He quotes; the students join in*.) 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' (*The students laugh; Alan continues*.) Which, for a good Marxist, would be a very dialectical way of thinking.
> Lisa: And that might be a good place to end our evening.[50]

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**Figures**

Figure 1. Cross-gender casting of *commedia* characters: Caitlin Brimer as Capitano and Alexander Adams as Columbina. Photo courtesy of Samantha Crownover.

Figure 2. The talk show host (Estela Williams Muyaes) looks on as Amilee Jobin takes advice from Karl Marx (Kayleigh McCallion). Photo by Anna Mwakasege, courtesy of PtJA.

## Notes

[1] Recordings of both performances are available through the following links: https://vimeo.com/172722631 (LSU students in Madison) and https://vimeo.com/180875566 (York – please see note 35 below about our three performances.)
[2] Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 22, 176.
[3] For a description of this project and others based on Terezín see Peschel and Sikes, 'Risking Representation'.
[4] Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, 10, 12.
[5] Ibid., 16.
[6] For more on the conditions of the cultural life see Peschel, *Introduction*.
[7] Miška, *Když se pláč směje*, 38.
[8] Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, 302.
[9] Ibid., 305.
[10] For the history of these 'comic devil' characters see Tyrrell, *Czech Opera,* 148.
[11] Des Pres, 'Holocaust Laughter?' 217.
[12] Ibid., 218; Muller and Freier, 'Humor'.
[13] Needham, 'The Last Laugh review'.
[14] See note 3.
[15] Aristotle, *Poetics,* 14.
[16] Ibid., 14.
[17] Brecht, 'Short Organum', 180.
[18] For an analysis of the humour in the scripts see Peschel, 'Laughter in the Ghetto'.
[19] Prokeš et al., *Laugh with Us.* For details on our work with that script see Peschel & Sikes, *Risking Representation.*
[20] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire,* 24.
[21] Jelínek et al., 'Harlequin in the Ghetto – LSU', 2.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid. From Krevolin & Cohen, *Making Light,* 16.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 8.
[26] Ibid., 25.
[27] Ibid., 29.
[28] Ibid., 31
[29] Ibid. From Beckett, 'Worstward Ho'.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 32.
[33] Post-show talkback, Baton Rouge.
[34] Post-show talkback, Madison.
[35] The rehearsal schedule was even more compressed than this article reveals. We actually produced three separate performances for the PtJA 'Out of the Shadows' festival in York: our co-textual *Harlequin in the Ghetto,* a performance (by the same actors but without co-textual scenes) of *Comedy about a Trap,* and an improvisation on the themes of Jelínek's play by York St John University's Komedie Klub, led by David Richmond. The video from 2nd June, https://vimeo.com/180875566, features *Comedy about a Trap* followed by our *Harlequin*; the video from 3rd June, https://vimeo.com/181015224 features *Comedy about a Trap* followed York St John University's performance.

[36] Our cast comprised Audun Krüger Abrahamsen from Norway, Estela Williams Muyaes from Mexico, Roberta Petraccone from Italy, Amilee Jobin who grew up in both Madagascar and the UK, and Adam Bruce, Kayleigh McCallion and Ruby Sevink-Johnston from England.
[37] Simon, Roger I., 'Introduction', 6.
[38] For example, the US Congress designated an official period of commemoration and education, The Days of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust (DRVH), in 1979, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum was established in 1980. The UK did not engage in a national day of commemoration until after the Stockholm Declaration was signed in 2000, and the building of a Holocaust Memorial funded by the state, announced in 2015, is still in the planning stages.
[39] The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUDjRZ30SNo.
[40] For a brief summary of the Labour Party anti-Semitism scandal in 2016, see Klaff, 'Why all Labour members'.
[41] Jelínek et al., 'Harlequin in the Ghetto – York', 1.
[42] Ibid., 6.
[43] Ibid., 19.
[44] Ibid., 15.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 11.
[47] Ibid., 24.
[48] Post-show talkback, York.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Post-show talkback, Madison.