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### **No Laughing Matter? The Ethics of Racial Humor in *Tres sombreros de copa***

*Miguel Mihura's Tres sombreros de copa* is often celebrated as an irresistibly funny critique of the values of the bourgeoisie in early twentieth-century Spain. Yet the appreciation of some (myself included) is tempered by a discomfort at the handful of references to race and blackness in the play. Drawing on an approach to the ethics of humor that recognizes its *performative aspect*, this article considers several productions of Mihura's comedy from 1983 to 2011, and analyzes the various ways in which they do or do not engage with the potentially "racist" humor of the published text and with the issue of how to perform the character of Buby on stage.

**Keywords:** *Tres sombreros de copa*, ethics of humor, racism, performance, blackface

#### **Introduction**

Miguel Mihura's *Tres sombreros de copa* (1932) is regularly held up as one of the greatest plays in the history of twentieth-century Spanish theater for its critique of bourgeois values (in particular marriage) couched in an experimental humor influenced by the playwright's contact with the Madrid vanguardia, and its bittersweet reflection on life in the theater, presented through the prism of a faux-naivety. In a survey of scholars and practitioners of

Spanish theater carried out by two of the former in the early twenty-first century, some two-thirds of participants listed *Tres sombreros de copa* among their ten favorite Spanish plays of the previous hundred years, making it the third most frequently named title in the survey, behind *Luces de Bohemia* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (Serrano and de Paco 39). For its adroit fusion of comic and serious elements, *Tres sombreros de copa* is also one of the texts on the literature syllabus for the second year of the Bachillerato qualification in Spain, and has been so on previous programs at this stage of secondary education for a number of years.

Despite the critical and general esteem in which this play is held, however, it has never properly crossed over to the English-speaking world in translation. Only one such attempt exists in print (Mihura *Three Top Hats*), its appeal severely diminished by the translator's failure to understand its humor and some horribly clunky dialogue. Yet I believe *Tres sombreros de copa*'s absence from the canon of Spanish plays in translation is less to do with any linguistic difficulties it poses – even Valle-Inclán's ornate, intertextual *Luces de Bohemia* has four published English translations to date<sup>1</sup> – than the ethical dilemma posed by a handful of comments which characters in the play make about the skin color of Buby Barton, leader of the travelling theater troupe to which the female protagonist Paula belongs. These remarks are a stumbling block to any production of *Tres sombreros de copa* in the English-speaking world, whether in the original Spanish or in translation. In Spain, this matter was flagged in 2004 by a concerned father in a letter published in *El País*:

Entre las lecturas que el profesor de literatura ha recomendado a mi hijo este año se encuentra *Tres sombreros de copa*, de Miguel Mihura. El otro día se lo pedí prestado y al leer el primer acto descubrí horrorizado el siguiente fragmento: Dionisio (D): “¿Y hace mucho tiempo que es usted negro?” Buby: “. . . Yo siempre me he visto así... .” D: “¡Vaya por Dios! ¡Cuando viene una

desgracia nunca viene sola! ¿Y de qué se quedó usted así? ¿De alguna caída? .  
 . . ” (Reis Mansada)

Mihura displayed a certain ambivalence as regards this feature of *Tres sombreros de copa*. When approached by Farris Anderson about a possible production in the USA, he refused to acknowledge any offence such lines might cause (Anderson 78). Yet the advertencia he published in the first edition of his play includes the abstruse caveat that “*Tres sombreros de copa es la comedia que los negros no deben ver. Su autor derramó lágrimas muy amargas cuando tuvo que inventar al negro más falso de la Negrería*” (*Tres sombreros de copa* 39).

Mihura’s perplexity at Anderson’s unease and a letter published in response to Reis Mansada’s objection (Pantaleón Iparruguirre)<sup>2</sup> epitomize what is often decried as Spaniards’ obliviousness to the politics of race in a globalized world. This is generally refuted by claims that race dynamics in Spain are different from those in English-speaking countries, and that cries of racism are therefore expressions of over-sensitivity and/or cultural imperialism. Controversies in this respect include the furor caused by an official photograph of the Spanish national basketball team prior to their departure for the Beijing Olympics in summer 2008, the on-line exchanges concerning a piece of commercial graffiti in the Madrid neighborhood of Malasaña in 2015, and the continuing use of blackface make-up by many men playing the character of King Balthazar at celebrations for el Día de los Reyes Magos.<sup>3</sup>

In the present article, I problematize my (and Anderson’s and Reis Mansada’s) instinctive discomfort at the racial humor surrounding the character of Buby Barton in *Tres sombreros de copa*.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, I draw on critical perspectives on the ethics of humor in order to nuance an understanding of the definitions of humor articulated by Mihura and his fellow humorists of the Madrid vanguardia. I then analyze how the dialogue concerning Buby in *Tres sombreros de copa* has been handled in recent productions of the play. I thus show that

an awareness of the potential racism of the printed text is demonstrated by some of those who have staged *Tres sombreros de copa*, and that some companies are also aware of the problems associated with the physical performance of Buby's blackness. In this way, I do not endeavor to absolve Mihura of accusations of racism, but to argue that there are ways of staging this very funny, touching and insightful comedy that, by exploiting polysemic readings of the "offending" lines, do not perpetuate the insensitivity to the politics of race displayed in the aforementioned controversies.

### **The ethics of humor and *Tres sombreros de copa***

In their reflections on the ethics of humor, both Berys Gaut and Noël Carroll divide existing theories on this matter into three broad camps: moralists, anti-moralists (Gaut)/amoralists (Carroll),<sup>5</sup> and immoralists. Those in the first camp hold that "our sense of humor is fully answerable to ethical considerations" (Gaut 51). Conversely, there are those who argue that humor "is categorically beyond good and evil" (Carroll 87), and "not subject to ethical constraints, for we are just joking" (Gaut 52). Thirdly, immoralists hold that certain jokes are amusing precisely because they are perceived to break taboos (Gaut 55; Carroll 107).

The kind of humor defined under the labels *humor nuevo*, *humorismo* or simply humor by Mihura and others from the 1920s onwards is best described as "(a)moralizing," as it has one foot in each of the first two camps. Such definitions recognize that humor can convey ethical values, but they prescribe a humor that refrains from doing so censoriously. Mihura's most frequently quoted remarks on humor, published in his 1948 *Memorias*, exemplify such a perspective:

El humor es un capricho, un lujo, una pluma de perdiz que se pone uno en el sombrero; un modo de pasar el tiempo. El humor verdadero no se propone

enseñar o corregir, porque no es ésta su misión. Lo único que pretende el humor es que, por un instante, nos salgamos de nosotros mismos, nos marchemos de puntillas unos veinte metros y demos una vuelta a nuestro alrededor contemplándonos por un lado y por otro, por detrás y por delante, como ante los tres espejos de una sastrería . . . . El humor es verle la trampa a todo, darse cuenta de por dónde cojean las cosas; comprender que todo tiene un revés; que todas las cosas pueden ser de otra manera, sin querer por ello que dejen de ser tal como son, porque esto es pecado y pedantería. El humorismo es lo más limpio de intenciones, el juego más inofensivo, lo mejor para pasar las tardes. Es como un sueño inverosímil que al fin se ve realizado. (qtd. in Llera 468)

The same estimation – in fact, the very inspiration for Mihura’s description given the words he employs in the above quote – is found in Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s 1928 essay “Gravedad e importancia del humorismo,” which likewise states that “[n]o se propone el humorismo corregir o enseñar, pues tiene un deje de amargura del que cree que todo es un poco inútil” (Gómez de la Serna 1973, 270). The writings of colleagues Wenceslao Fernández Flórez and Edgar Neville also advocate a gentle humor as opposed to those means of triggering amusement by ridicule or cruelty (see Llera 464-5; Neville 739).

Much of the humor in *Tres sombreros de copa* adopts this “(a)moralizing” approach to the values of the provincial bourgeoisie. For instance, the *Odioso Señor* is not presented as a uniformly bad person: the childlike absurdity of a comment such as “Yo, en la India, tengo cuatrocientos [elefantes]... Por cierto que ahora les he puesto trompa y todo. Me he gastado un dínal...” (*Tres sombreros de copa* 106-7) disarms us in its representation of his materialism rather than spurs us to change the social structures which give rise to such a

mindset. Is it possible to say the same about the humor which involves some reference to Buby's skin color? These are, in addition to those of Dionisio's comments quoted by Reis Mansada above (see Mihura Tres sombreros de copa 69):

DIONISIO. . . . Es que este negro es un idiota...

BUBY. (Amenazador.) ¡Petate!

DIONISIO. No. Perdone usted. Si es que me he equivocado. No es un idiota... Es que, como es negro, pues tiene su geniecillo... Pero el pobre no tiene la culpa... El, ¿qué le va a hacer, si se cayó de una bicicleta?... Peor hubiera sido haberse quedado manquito... Y la señorita ésta se lo ha dicho..., y, ¡bueno!, se ha puesto que ya, ya... (76)

EL ODIOSO SEÑOR. ¿Y es de pasar por tantos túneles de lo que se ha quedado usted así de negro? ¡Ja, ja! (104)

DIONISIO. ¿Está usted llorando?

PAULA. No lloro.

DIONISIO. . . . ¿Ha reñido usted con ese negro? ¡Debemos linchar al negro! ¡Nuestra obligación es linchar al negro!

PAULA. Para linchar a un negro es preciso que se reúna mucha gente.

DIONISIO. Yo organizaré una suscripción... (116-7)

Is such dialogue “racist,” as Michael Billig classifies the jokes he finds on the Ku Klux Klan website he consults for his study? The ethics of such humor, I believe, are best explored bearing in mind a number of further points.

First we need to take into account the context in which humor is attempted. Many theorists have noted that members of certain groups often tell jokes that play on the stereotypes with which their own group is associated. Thus it is more appropriate to base any ethical evaluation of humor on who is communicating in this way and in what situation the humor arises. Drawing on the terminology of linguistics to this end, Gaut and Carroll argue it is better to evaluate the ethics of humor “tokens” (Gaut 53-4; Carroll 90), and to see jokes and other types of humor as more abstract entities waiting to be “tokened.” Secondly, as Lockyer and Pickering argue, we need to challenge the notion that humor is “an intrinsically positive dimension of social life” (814), that is, to allow for humor and immorality to co-exist antagonistically. Gaut points out that we may well be able to recognize the aesthetics of humor – the cognitive feat upon which a joke hinges or its concise delivery of information – even as we reject (or are ambivalent about) its ethics on account of the values or norms it expects us to share if we are to be amused by it.<sup>6</sup> Such jokes are thus “flawed” (Gaut 55), but we might still find them funny. Approaching matters from the opposite direction (a refutation of immoralism), Carroll makes a similar argument: “there are more grounds for hypothesizing that at least sometimes the immoral address of an instance of humour will have the affect, for standard audiences, of compromising their enjoyment of the wit” (110).<sup>7</sup> And it is when “humour asks us to entertain that [which] our moral imaginations just resist” (110) that disagreements ensue. Gaut contends that the inverse is also true – that a joke critical of an individual or group can be enjoyed a great deal – so long as the humor is “targeted accurately [and] appropriate to its object” (66). What Gaut flags in the abstract here is more concrete in Pickering and Littlewood’s argument that any ethics of humor must bear in mind whether it targets “those who are in positions of power and authority, or [...] those who are relatively powerless and subordinated” (qtd. in Lockyer and Pickering 813). Finally, if a joke is an abstract entity waiting to be tokened – a matter particularly important for the analysis of



a script written by an identifiable individual (or individuals) – an ethics of humor must also contend with how its author envisaged its tokening. This is not a problem for Billig’s study, since the authors of such jokes self-identify as racist; it is, however, for the dialogue from *Tres sombreros de copa* that concerns me here, any possible racism in which Mihura vehemently denied. Carroll skirts this issue of intention by focusing on the audience’s response (111-12), thus necessitating that offence be made before action can be taken. Gaut attempts a more serious engagement with this question, again by recourse to linguistics: “[t]alk of a joke-type as sexist can be captured by holding that the attitude manifested by the implicit utterer of the joke is sexist, where the implicit utterer is the utterer we would on reasonable epistemic grounds assign to the joke” (59).

One interpretation of the humor involving Buby’s skin color – that implicit in Mihura’s defense – is that such moments hinge on no more than the characters’ assumption that skin color is not an inherited characteristic but a physical attribute which can be acquired. Such humor requires the kind of conceptual jump typical of humor as practiced by Gómez de la Serna and others, rather than the semantic jump required by the plays on words beloved of conventional humor at the time. Another interpretation, however, might point to the fact that such jokes hinge on an understanding of blackness specifically as a negative quality, and that they thus target one of those “relatively powerless and subordinated” groups mentioned by Pickering and Littlewood. Such an understanding is reinforced by a later series of references to Buby’s blackness by Paula:

PAULA. . . . ¡Y es verdad! Estoy ya harta de tolerarte groserías... Eres un negro insoportable, como todos los negros. Y te aborrezco. ¿Me comprendes? Te aborrezco... Y esto se ha acabado... No te puedo ver... No te puedo aguantar...  
BUBY. Yo, en cambio, a ti te adoro, Paula. . . .

PAULA. ¿Y qué? ¿Tú crees que yo puedo enamorarme de ti? ¿Es que tú crees que yo puedo enamorarme de un negro? . . . He sido novia tuya por lástima... Porque te veía triste y aburrido... Porque eras negro... Porque cantabas esas tristes canciones de la plantación... . . . Pero nunca te he querido, ni nunca te podré querer... Debes comprenderlo... ¡Quererte a ti! Para eso querría a este caballero, que es más guapo... A este caballero, que es una persona educada... A este caballero, que es blanco...

BUBY. (Con odio.) ¡Paula!...

PAULA. (A Dionisio.) ¿Verdad, usted, que de un negro no se puede enamorar nadie?

DIONISIO. Si es honrado y trabajador... (Tres sombreros de copa 73-4)

Such comments by Paula sit uncomfortably with other aspects of her personality which elicit our sympathy for her as the female protagonist of *Tres sombreros de copa*, such as her orphan status, the fact she is forced to prostitute herself, and the childlike joy she displays at the possibility of escape from the itinerant life she leads. Other dialogue perpetuates the stereotypical association of blackness with a lack of self-control and of the power of reason: in addition to Dionisio's allusion to Buby's "geniecillo" above, the character Fanny explains to Buby that "los negros quieren de una manera muy pasional..." (78-9). Dionisio's reference to lynching, while an exaggerated reaction to Paula's sadness, is a tactless reminder of a practice that, in the USA, particularly affected people of African origin.

### **The performance of *Tres sombreros de copa***

Another means by which to examine the ethics of the racial humor in *Tres sombreros de copa* is to look at the "tokening" of such dialogue in performances of the play. The performative

aspect of stage comedy is crucial for a fuller understanding of what concerns us here. This is not only the case as regards individual jokes, for which “[i]t is what the performer does with them that causes or fails to cause comic amusement” (Carroll 90). It is also necessary to look at how each joke features in the production as a whole:

A performer can build up a pattern of manifested attitude by stringing jokes together, and so can transform our understanding of the attitudes manifested by the individual jokes. The attitudes thus manifested may owe more to features of the performance than to the nature of the individual jokes. (Gaut 53)

I now proceed to such an analysis of several stagings of *Tres sombreros de copa* between 1983 and 2011, recordings of which I have been able to consult. I include here an examination of how each engages with the problematic practice of blackface. These recordings of live productions also allow one to examine the audience’s reaction to such humor.<sup>8</sup> From an ethical perspective, the racial humor is best examined here as a feature that develops over the course of each production, and in which the physical performance of Buby’s blackness is crucial.

In all productions (as in the printed text), the audiences first learn that Buby is black when he walks onstage following a long argument with Paula from behind a locked door. The earliest production consulted (by the Centro Dramático Nacional) is the only one in which Buby is played by a black actor: H. Alito Rodgers Jr is a bilingual (English/Spanish) actor who studied theater in Boston and New York before commencing a career in Spain in the early 1980s. In the recording, Rodgers Jr’s entrance provokes a huge laugh from the audience, most likely an expression of surprise at seeing a black actor on stage at this time.<sup>9</sup>

This is followed almost immediately by a comically exaggerated double-take by Dionisio (Manuel Galiana) on seeing Buby. The protagonist's astonishment at seeing a black man soon turns to fear, again presented in a comically exaggerated manner by means of Galiana's facial expression, body language and intonation. Afterwards, Dionisio's fear becomes an uncomfortable embarrassment as Paula (Verónica Forqué) and Buby while away time by singing "When the Saints Go Marching In," a song which fleshes out Buby's character by hinting at origins in the Deep South.<sup>10</sup> Because Dionisio is acutely embarrassed at this point, his subsequent question "¿Y hace mucho tiempo que es usted negro?" provokes gales of laughter not at Buby, but at Dionisio's inappropriate breaking of a taboo in his unintentionally insulting small-talk. Likewise, his following remark that "Cuando viene una desgracia nunca viene sola" comes across as a clumsy attempt to comfort Buby about his skin color. We might therefore categorize this scene in the CDN production as an example of cringe comedy, a little-studied genre in which Jason Middleton sees Vivian Sobchack's "documentary consciousness" at work: "a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the unreal into the space of the real" and which "depend[s] always on the viewer's existential knowledge of and social investment in the context of a lifeworld that exceeds and frames the text" (qtd. in Middleton 140 and 141). On hearing Dionisio's remark, therefore, the audience laughs in the knowledge that it is completely inappropriate in the "lifeworld that exceeds and frames the text." Since cringe comedy exposes the ego of the speaker (and his/her distorted understanding of that "lifeworld"), Dionisio is thus cast in a negative light and the audience laughs at him. A similar approach is displayed in this production as regards the next joke made at the expense of Buby's skin color in the published text. Dionisio's claim that Buby is easily angered and his reference back to the bicycle accident which he believes left Buby black are cut, and the dialogue that follows amended in order to trigger another cringe on the part of the audience:

DIONISIO. . . . [To Fanny] Es que este negro es un idiota. [To Buby] ¡No! Perdone usted. Si es que me he equivocado. [To Fanny] No es un idiota, no. Es que como es negro y la señorita ésta se lo ha dicho, pues se ha puesto que ya, ya.<sup>11</sup>

It is crucial in this respect that Galiana delivers Dionisio's apology here directly to Rodgers Jr/Buby – and not to Fanny, to whom he is providing the explanation (as might be assumed on reading the text) – for it makes explicit Dionisio's realization of the offence he has thoughtlessly caused.

This cringe comedy approach to other references to Buby's blackness throughout the text is untenable, however. The production therefore deals with them differently. First, Paula's initial insults to Buby ("Eres un negro insoportable, como todos los negros") are spoken breathlessly while he chases her around the room and Dionisio loudly tries to keep the peace; Forqué's words here can barely be made out over the din. When Forqué delivers the subsequent dialogue about why she cannot love Buby, a degree of sympathy for him is elicited by his reaction to such wounding words: he suddenly contorts when Paula ends her question "¿Es que tú crees que yo puedo enamorarme de un negro?" and begins to sing to himself the spiritual "Go Down Moses."<sup>12</sup> Rogers Jr's singing here comes close to drowning out the rest of Forqué's speech. The impression in this scene is that such words are unequivocally cruel and thus need to be concealed in order to minimize any possibility that the audience might look on Paula negatively. Secondly, El Odioso Señor's question whether Buby turned black from having travelled through so many tunnels is performed in a way which does not provoke the nervous laughter of cringe comedy, but in order to elicit our censure of his racism as yet another of his negative qualities: after the question, El Odioso

Señor (José Bódalo) laughs loudly at his own “joke” with the self-assurance of someone who knows he is “el hombre más rico de toda la provincial” (Tres sombreros de copa 103). The audience’s scorn for this character here does not necessitate laughter, however. In recognition of the ambivalence of any laughter at this moment – that it would likely be interpreted as laughter directed at Buby and as validation of El Odioso Señor’s attitude – Rodgers Jr breaks the fourth wall at this moment and delivers Buby’s subsequent demand for “¡Silencio!” downstage to the audience itself, from whom some laughter can be heard.<sup>13</sup>

The final two references to Buby’s blackness – the stereotype of the sexualized black person and the mention of lynching – are retained in this production. The former passes without remark, perhaps because the stereotype is so firmly rooted in the western mindset. The latter is delivered by a patently drunk Dionisio. This moment might be interpreted in the same way as El Odioso Señor’s “joke,” that is, as an example of a racist attitude – here let slip as a result of Dionisio’s inebriation – to be rejected by the audience. However, this sits uneasily alongside the production’s use of the same character’s inappropriate comments about race earlier as a means by which to generate cringe comedy. The laughter that accompanies Dionisio’s call to lynch Buby at this moment of the recording is therefore insensitive at best.

The critical distancing from the remarks made by Dionisio, Paula, Fanny and El Odioso Señor in the 1983 production of *Tres sombreros de copa* by the CDN is hinted at in other productions. Nevertheless, this is impeded to a significant extent by the fact that Buby is played by a white actor. (As argued above, Buby’s physical appearance when he first walks on-stage is crucial in how the dialogue can be interpreted.) In one such production (2011, *La Farándula de 1905*), Santos R. Hernández plays Buby in full blackface.<sup>14</sup> He also wears white gloves and adopts a gruff voice when speaking. *La Farándula de 1905*’s decision to use blackface continues the practice of performing Buby in this way that stretches back to the

premiere of *Tres sombreros de copa* in 1952, directed by Gustavo Pérez Puig, in which Buby was played by Javier Domínguez.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, when Hernánz enters the stage, one can hear a number of light gasps. While these maybe expressions of a surprise similar to the laughter which greets Rodgers Jr's appearance on stage in the CDN production, they could also be the result of astonishment at the use of this theatrical convention in the twenty-first century. When examining the use of blackface in Spain, one needs to take into account the differences in the history of this practice in Spain and elsewhere. While there are abundant examples of the use of make-up to perform blackness in the history of the Spanish stage, from the character of the negro in Golden Age theater (*Fra Molinero* 25), through the handful of nineteenth-century plays featuring African characters (*Vidal Tibbits* 2-3) and the various productions of Shakespeare's *Othello*, to plays from the mid-twentieth century such as Enrique Jardiel Poncela's *El amor solo dura 2.000 metros* (1941) and Alfonso Sastre's *Mulato* (1963), blackface never existed as a genre of performance there in the same way that it existed in the USA (Lott) or Cuba (Lane).<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, we can see in recent stage productions in Spain a recognition of the ontological and ethical minefield that is the performance of racial otherness, however groundless claims to the existence of race as a differentiator of humans are. The CDN production of *Tres sombreros de copa* in 1983 is a case in point, as is the staging of Santiago Rusinyol's 1901 play *Llibertat!* by the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya in 2013, in which the older Jaumet was played by Óscar Kapoya. Numerous other instances can be found in productions of foreign plays, such as Emilio Buale's performance as Henry Brown in David Mamet's *Race* (translated as *Razas*) at the Matadero de Madrid in 2010-2011, and the all-black cast of Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* (translated as *Los negros*) at the Teatros del Canal, Madrid in 2011. *Tres sombreros de copa* (bar the CDN production) is the exception to this rule, perhaps precisely because of the ethical questions explored in this article.<sup>17</sup>

A certain caution as regards the use of blackface in *Tres sombreros de copa* is evident in the productions by Teatro Gátaro and Teatres de la Generalitat, in which dark make-up does not entirely cover the face and neck of actors Lluís Cortès and Pep Sellés respectively, thus revealing their true skin color.<sup>18</sup> In the former production, moreover, the slurred and gruff voice with which Cortès speaks (with a constantly puckered mouth) and his frequent cackling – features which suggest Buby is dimwitted – are dropped when Buby is left alone with Paula during that party. The audience thus becomes aware that Buby performs the negative stereotype of the uncivilized black man as a tactic by which to deceive rich provincial theater-goers who expect him to conform to such a stereotype.

However, I would argue that the mere use of blackface in these productions – more so if done thoughtlessly, less so when done with caution – compromises any intention which might exist to perform those scenes in which Buby's skin color is mentioned in a way that challenges racism and/or discourages the audience from seeing the character as an object of ridicule. Such an intention beyond the avoidance of complete blackface is difficult to observe in these productions. The portrayal of Dionisio as a blank canvas – Manuel Veiga for Teatro Gátaro, Sergio Caballero for Teatres de la Generalitat, and Alberto Amarilla Iglesias for *La Farándula de 1905* all employ a vacant expression and wooden body language in their performances – means that his questions to Buby on making his acquaintance do not strike us as an egotistical fool's cringeworthy attempt to make small-talk, as in the CDN production, and instead generate uncertainty and ambivalence as to whether he is being knowingly racist or not. The use of blackface (rather than a black actor) encumbers what Middleton sees as one of the essential criteria for cringe comedy: "its realist depiction of the quotidian quality of its diegesis" (142). Likewise, Dionisio's loud calls for a lynching (addressed directly to the audience in the Teatres de la Generalitat production) are delivered impassively. Neither do



these productions endeavor to present those comments by Paula (Savina Figueras Jansana, Inés Díaz and Henar Montealegre respectively) to Buby as anything other than horribly cruel.

The most interesting approach to the question that concerns us in this article – and to *Tres sombreros de copa* as a whole – was adopted by the company *Fuegos Fátuos* in 2008.<sup>19</sup> More so than in the CDN production, Dionisio is here depicted by J. David Fernández as a self-satisfied fool (who, moreover, wears a facha-style moustache). In this production, Buby is played by the white actor César Maroto without any make-up. Yet the character is still black, as is made clear when, on Buby's entrance, Dionisio turns to the audience and says in a startled tone “¡Un negro!”. Uncomfortable at the aggressive scrutiny to which Buby then subjects him as Paula's new acquaintance, Dionisio asks his questions about Buby's skin color in a friendly tone, in an attempt to make light of the situation. Buby plays along with Dionisio's jocular remarks as – the production soon makes abundantly clear – he and Paula see Dionisio as a potential victim for one of their scams. During their argument prior to the moment when Paula insults Buby by reference to his blackness, the two of them peer a number of times over at Dionisio to make sure he believes the pretense. After this, Buby signals to Paula to move over to behind the chair in which Dionisio sits, and Paula's body language reveals she is reciting lines she has learnt.<sup>20</sup> It is then that they reach the moment of the original text when Paula first alludes to Buby's blackness. However, her lines here are trimmed of all but one reference of this kind:

PAULA: Es verdad. Estoy ya harta de tolerarte groserías. Eres insoportable. No te puedo ver. No te puedo aguantar. Yo nunca me casaría con un negro.

DIONISIO: ¡Hombre! Si es honrado y trabajador...

This single reference and Paula's allusions to Dionisio's whiteness on pretending to reject Buby are clearly shown to form part of a ruse by which Paula ingratiate herself with the wealthy visitors of the hotels at which Buby's troupe stays. What is more, it is suggested that this entire scene in which Paula and Buby burst into Dionisio's hotel room is no more than a dream, from which it might be surmised that the threatening Buby is a figment of Dionisio's prejudiced imagination.<sup>21</sup> Given that Fanny's reference to the stereotype of the sexual black person, El Odioso Señor's "joke" at Buby's expense, and Dionisio's call to lynch Buby are likewise pruned from the script of this production, the only remaining reference to blackness – in Dionisio's explanation to Fanny – is reworked as part of Dionisio's hysterical ramblings to Fanny (again in a dream) as he struggles to come to terms with what he just experienced.

### **Conclusion**

By focusing on the staging of a comedy, then, we can reach a better understanding of the role of performance in debates surrounding the ethics of humor in the play under examination.

Each in their own way, the productions of *Tres sombreros de copa* (except that of *La Farándula de 1905*) demonstrate an awareness that it might offend racial sensibilities and a desire to perform the play in a way that does not do so. While in the case of some of the dialogue, this is only possible by cutting – Dionisio's uncalled for lynching of Buby – other dialogue can be modified. By means of the latter strategy, there is scope in the play for a performance of the character of Dionisio which prompts a more critical attitude in the audience towards him while retaining the comic potential of his lines, rewired to provoke the audience to laugh at him – his discomfort or his outdated views – rather than at Buby.

Similarly, what might at first glance be perceived as Paula's unflattering view of black people can be presented from a different perspective from that which might be assumed according to "reasonable epistemic grounds."

Such an approach to the text is more likely to facilitate the casting of a black actor in the role of Buby as routine, rather than as the one-off event that the CDN production in 1983 has come to be. Companies and directors seem loath to accept that such dialogue and/or the use of blackface do have the power to offend. This might be seen to echo what was noted by one academic when it came to light that recently-appointed Madrid city councilor Guillermo Zapata had tweeted jokes about the Holocaust and para-alpine skier Irene Villa in 2011: “Es una cuestión cultural. . . . Hay chistes que se hacen en España que serían inaceptables en otros entornos. Aquí decimos ‘paga, no seas judío’ o ‘esto lo saben hasta los chinos.’ Lo dicen profesores sin darse cuenta de que hay chinos en su clase” (Enrique Dans, in Gómez 20). Yet an opinion piece and users’ comments below the line in British newspaper the Guardian about the use of brownface in popular UK comedy series *Come Fly with Me* (Ravichandran) and the debate surrounding African Studies scholar Rachel Dolezal – to name but two – suggest that this is not a matter exclusive to Spain. These are all issues which must be flagged and discussed in the classroom if *Tres sombreros de copa* is to remain on university and school curricula, as I feel the play merits, and in rehearsal.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.outofthewings.org/db/play/luces-de-bohemia/translations>.

<sup>2</sup> In his defense of *Tres sombreros de copa*, the writer of this letter does himself no favors by mistakenly claiming that the playwright visited the USA around the time of writing his play, and that he was therefore critiquing the racism he had observed on the other side of the Atlantic: Mihura never travelled to the USA with his humorist friends such as Edgar Neville and José López Rubio on account of a leg ailment (see Moreiro 162, n. 3).

<sup>3</sup> For more on these controversies, see the article by Sid Lowe, and the websites <http://www.somosmalasana.com/es-este-graffiti-racista/> (I have Helen Finnegan to thank for bringing

the second matter to my attention) and <http://black-face.com/blackface-world.htm>. I do not include here what is undoubtedly the greatest controversy related to this issue in the UK press – footballer Luis Suárez’s racist abuse of Patrice Evra on 15 October 2011, the fine and 8-match ban he was handed by the English Football Association, and Liverpool FC’s solidarity with him immediately after Evra made his accusations – because Suárez is Uruguayan. That does not mean, however, that there are numerous points of contact between this and those cases in Spain.

<sup>4</sup> Here I take “race” to be an epistemological framework which premises its understanding of human diversity upon the assumption that humans can be categorized into discrete groups according to skin color and its supposed correlates of bone structure and hair. The adjective associated with this framework is “racial,” “racist” referring to actual discriminatory behavior seemingly according to (but in reality giving rise to) such a framework and the hierarchies of classification consequent to it.

<sup>5</sup> Despite this difference in nomenclature, there are a number of parallels between Carroll’s analysis of the ethics of humor and the writings of Gaut. This is not acknowledged in Carroll’s text itself – in which he chooses not to include any bibliographical references – although Gaut’s publications are listed in his bibliography (Carroll 121).

<sup>6</sup> This position Gaut terms “ethicism” (55).

<sup>7</sup> Carroll labels this position “moderate comic moralism” (110). Carroll is rather unfair in his critique of ethicism, which he claims “requires as a criterion of appropriateness for an amused response that the humour not be morally defective” (104; emphasis added). Ethicism for Carroll appears to be what Gaut labels “strong” (55) moralism: Carroll’s subsequent claim that “[a]s we have seen, it is possible to find something comically amusing while simultaneously acknowledging that it traffics in moral improprieties” (104) echoes Gaut’s remark that “humor might still be present to some extent, perhaps because great ingenuity is displayed in the joke, involving clever puns and sophisticated subversion of normal expectations” (55).

<sup>8</sup> I am aware of the problems inherent in interpreting laughter, as Carroll notes as regards what he labels “attitude endorsement theory” (92-102, especially 96). My interpretations below, therefore, can only ever be tentative.

<sup>9</sup> For more on black actors in Spain, see my article (Green).

<sup>10</sup> Mihura's stage directions indicate nothing more specific than "una canción americana" (Tres sombreros de copa 68) at this point of the play.

<sup>11</sup> This and subsequent transcriptions are made directly from the recordings of productions.

<sup>12</sup> Rodgers Jr repeatedly sings the line "Way down, Moses." This is slightly different from the lyrics of the spiritual (the refrain of which is "Go down, Moses / Way down in Egypt's land"), although it is sung to the same melody.

<sup>13</sup> Despite Buby's demand, a little (although noticeably less) laughter continues after this point in the recording.

<sup>14</sup> A photo on the company's Facebook page shows Hernánz as Buby in a curly wig, although this was not worn at the performance that was recorded.

<sup>15</sup> See the photograph of the production in Peláez (139). Later examples include Pérez Puig's revivals of the play at the Teatro Español, Madrid in 1992 and at the Teatro Príncipe, Madrid in 2005, where Buby was played by Nicolás Romero and Carlos Urrutia respectively, and the made-for-TV version (Fernando Delgado, 1978) in which the character was performed by Antonio Iranzo.

<sup>16</sup> I have not been able to locate any evidence that the teatro bufo (as the blackface genre came to be called in Cuba) reached the eastern shores of the Atlantic in the same way that the minstrel show did in the UK.

<sup>17</sup> While the character of Othello has yet to be played by a black actor on the Spanish stage, photographic documentation of recent productions show that this character is now usually (though not always) performed without recourse to blackface, sometimes in order to comment upon Spain's fractious relationship with north Africa.

<sup>18</sup> While Pep Sellés wears white gloves, he also wears a short-sleeved top, thus exposing the unpainted skin of his lower arms.

<sup>19</sup> The company's approach to the play as a whole includes the cast of five taking on a number of roles, the pruning of much of the dialogue, changes to the order of scenes, making the character of Don Sacramento (Dionisio's future father-in-law) a woman, and incorporating the character of Margarita (Dionisio's wife-to-be) in two scenes, including a new scene at the very end of the play in which the audience witness Dionisio's and Margarita's wedding and see photographs of their

subsequent marriage (all to the soundtrack of “Suspiros de España,” a pasodoble closely associated with the cultural values of Francoism).

<sup>20</sup> In the printed text (and in the other productions), the audience does not become aware of this pretence until much later on, shortly before Buby introduces Paula to El Odioso Señor.

<sup>21</sup> The scene is bookmarked by Dionisio dozing in a rocking chair, the stage lit by no more than a spot on him in the chair. The difference in the sound made by the telephone in this scene and in the subsequent scene also indicates that the entire storyline involving Paula is a dream. Buby’s costume of a black wig, gloves and bow tie, and a white suit (with black buttons and trim) is an exact copy in negative of the costume Maroto wears as butler to Doña Sacramento and Margarita, and thus could be seen as a memory of Dionisio’s visit to his future wife that resurfaces in his sleep.

<sup>22</sup> Recordings held at the Centro de Documentación Teatral, Madrid.

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2007. Centre d'Arts Escèniques, Terrasa. Dir. Víctor Álvaro. Teatro Gátaro. Date of recording: 22 March 2007.
2008. Teatre Talia, Valencia. Dir. Antonio Diaz Zamora. Teatres de la Generalitat. Date of recording: not available.
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