

THE CORPOREALITY OF THE COMICAL

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The comical as expressed on stage seems to best suggest to our suspicions – which in this case should look for clues not just around the curtains – its fundamentally physical nature. It is a conspicuous demonstration of corporeality, an inevitable part of the parade of the physical and its both diverse and imperfect bodies. Today, the rejection of God (taken in the broader sense) as a single supreme reason, the adoption and rejection between opinions, their differentiation that is inevitably moving ever closer (how far?) to indifference, or perhaps more precisely, to an indifferent community of differences (again this corporeality of opinions?); finally, the Internet itself, which is probably no longer identified as an evil incarnate even by the most conservative of churches, the cloning of sheep, the discovery of the genome, etc.; this whole **carnavalesque nature** of the late twentieth century discoveries seems to completely sublimate the question of genres and their seriousness, tearfulness, humour or grotesqueness. Everything in life is at the same time very serious and incredibly funny, absolutely real and completely ridiculous. The extreme concern about the body ‘taking precedence of the soul’¹ in today’s world is such an example of a simultaneous seriousness and absurdity because in any case it still (and God

willing) remains mortal, and because not dying is typically a comical feature.

Or, in so far as it is no longer reasonable to speak of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual as separate sectors, then **corporeality** is by no means subordinate today – quite on the contrary. The Western, “Christian” tradition rooted as it is in the experience of the Middle East and Ancient Greece is extraordinarily corporeal as a rule. Somehow it is generally more inclined towards the comic rather than to the heroic and the tragic, despite all its successful attempts in those fields. Christianity’s attempt to overcome the body at all costs only shows the great importance that has always been ascribed to it, and one can hardly question the indisputable, even crushing victory of corporeality in the twentieth century.

Thematically, comedy has always stimulated the fraudulent acquisition of the three well-known goods things of life: money, sex, and power. These are extremely spatial, expanding the physical principle and the bodies – it does not matter what order we would place them in because they stem from one another and the boundaries of their claims to one another remain too indeterminable and disputable. It can be said that every drama, and in general the majority of human desires, aim at the horizon of these goods. Still, we should assume that in the classical comedy they are expressed mainly tangibly and

¹ Bergson, Henri. *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*. Green Integer, 1998.



William Hogarth

William Hogarth *Hogarth Painting the Comic Muse*. Self portrait, 1758.

corporeally, without transcending into other qualities and spaces. Tragic pride is not satisfied with this world, while comic pride still remains in the specific dimensions of the seven deadly sins: greed, lust, wrath, gluttony, envy, sloth – their leader is, of course, pride, represented in Christian tradition as Lucifer. Comic pride makes no claims to tear down the foundations of the world and the power of God; convex and concave, it is too unstable even in its material field where it must periodically slip and fall. In tragedy, Pride is statuary and majestic, and its body is disguised with a cloak. Thus it remains in the mask or the face, in the hands and the voice of the actor, or in the gestures that raise **up** and leave the body. In comedy, Pride descends **down** the body and thus grows petty in the gestures of the Vain character, the Arrogant character, the Braggart, the Miser, etc.

It is trite (but also immutable) that every gesture is spiritualized by ascending and materialized by descending. Theophrastus² describes thirty human types that we nevertheless encounter in neo-Attic comedy, and then later in Terence and Plautus. He does not have an article about the Proud Man, probably because such a character would seem too general to him but he did describe the Petty Pride Man with his “vulgar appetite for distinction.” Bergson also saw **vanity** as comic pride: “Probably there is not a single failing that is more superficial or more deep-rooted.”³ (Why is the superficial also deeper? What is deep can be hidden, it can be noticed or not; in the end it could be a matter of interpretation but the superficial cannot be removed – except together with the body itself. So, it seems that the most superficial is also the deepest.) Vanity physicalizes, materializes pride, imparts to it the appropriate movements and range, which, of course, can only ever be limited (and organified, localized in the respective organs). Its being-in-vain, futility, pettiness, quantitiveness, capacity for infinite division and multiplication is opposite to the compact whole, to the uniformly piercing radiance of the tragic, of Tragic Pride.

Thus, comic movement is intermittent, stumbling, or suddenly accelerating, or unnecessarily slowing down its rhythm, in short: suffering from overconsumption of energy. Comic communication is abundantly saturated with failures along the communication lines, and the comic posture is limited in its organicity, it is limitedly organic; on the whole it is organified, to use a slip of the tongue, such dyslexia – incidentally,

² Theophrastus. *The Characters*. Translated by J. M. Edmonds. Loeb Classical Library, 1929.

³ Bergson, Henri. *Ibid.*

one of the endless media in the panoply of the comedy. Organics is either slowed down, or accelerated, or both at the same time – as in acceleration, for instance. It is organic. On its part, tragedy has never dealt with what is organic, with the natural – the latter is a whim that emerged in the late eighteenth century and came more prominently in power in the late 19th – early 20th c., being periodically rejected and reinstated thereafter. But the return to the natural, to something akin to primitive syncretism and to the corresponding denial of art, was the goal of even some of the avant-garde performances of the recently elapsed century. The tragic is the deliberately artificial, the technical, the manufactured – and only within this scope can it truly be expressed. To be actually uttered **deeply and superficially**; so to say, it is planar. (The natural claims transparency: from the surface to the depths or vice versa.) On the other hand, the comic is organified – that is, it is also not natural, it is artificial, but it expresses its quality in a different way. Rather, it artfully damages and repairs the artificial, plays with it but does the same with the organic as well. The comical organifies, always shows unexpectedly disproportionate organs, unlimitedly limits the organs; organifying is associated with both baring and concealment. And there is nothing more pathetic when it plays with the artificial without artfulness, without the unexpectedness of play – which is a must so it can happen. The notion that comedy genres are some sort of “(more) popular” art, that their ideology is spontaneously and ubiquitously critical, simultaneously protective and anarchist (since, as a whole, they seem to intuitively strive to contain fashion, norms and customs, so to speak, **as a bundle**), should in no way limit a comedian’s impulse

for artfulness, for improving his/her means of organifying. Unfortunately, it is precisely the comedy genres that are a particularly fertile ground for stage clichés. Our Bulgarian theatrical experience in the field of comedy abounds in examples of this, starting with the golden age of the Satire Theatre in Sofia itself to today’s theatre and television productions.

Obviously, the Balkans themselves as a contact zone of various cultures (while, for example, Rabelais and Gogol’s comedy as I understand it, at least according to Bakhtin – which incidentally always somewhat means ‘as I would like to understand it’ – is a ‘zone of contact’ between worlds that cannot be rationally reconciled) – are overpopulated with all sorts of contrasts, surprises, generous opportunities for disguise and, accordingly, for comic unmasking. On the Balkans even the heroic is always considerably funny. This is the case of Krali Marko himself, the hero of the epic songs, with his grotesque upswings and crashes – the ‘tavern hero’ as Pencho Slaveykov⁴ called him – and there is simply no way to compare him to Roland or Siegfried. In fact, Bay Ganyo⁵ would be impossible without Krali Marko. All of this

⁴ Pencho Slaveykov (1866–1912) was a noted Bulgarian poet, philosopher and publicist.

⁵ Bay Ganyo is the main character of a series of satirical feuilletons written by Aleko Konstantinov in 1895. One of the most famous literary characters in Bulgaria, he was designed as an incarnation of all perceived national flaws (such as greed, lack of manners, dishonor, unscrupulousness, arrogance, ignorance, all on a petty scale) and consistently used that way since. Krali Marko is a mythical hero with supernatural strength in Bulgarian (more generally Eastern South Slavic) folklore, envisioned as a savior and protector of Bulgarians against their Ottoman masters. (Translator’s note.)

Balkan comic predisposition and, in general, the easy happening of the comedy here foster a certain type of laziness in terms of the process of its creation. The 'naturalness' of the comic predisposition of Balkan life is in conflict with the inevitable artificiality of the stage, or more precisely, with the need of artful play. In this sense, it is as if our comical in the theatres finds itself into Krali Marko's situation who often underestimates his own situation: at times he loses to child heroes, at others he wins battles that seem more difficult with unexpected ease. In this sense, the **heroic** is also a significant feature of our (Bulgarian or Balkan) sense of making or understanding comedy; the heroic as indiscipline, messiness and crudity, as an intense display of spontaneity and 'naturalness'. Finally, we would say that this **vitality**, which is a matter of particular pride in the Balkan people, often is but reluctance to achieve a more artful play with the artificial. However, the same vitality constantly stimulates the production of comic gestures even in an otherwise more serious and dramatic environment. In this sense today's Bulgarian theatre seems to have a slightly higher than necessary degree of dalliance, which, moreover, can very easily be explained by the postmodern situation of art, which often appears at the right time and place just as some sort of an alibi for the offender of the serious or his/her lawyer.

The comical entirely and more than anything else in the world inhabits the realm of the corporeal, of the quantitative, of relativity. It ridicules quality and its possibilities, as well as the assumption that quantity can become quality. Hence, theorizing on the comic has more pitfalls than anything else. Comic principles or means

such as disguise and unmasking, misunderstandings, over-consumption of energy, and communication failures, etc., are in fact constantly playing and disguising. But the seemingly endless field of the comical is nevertheless finite, not only because one cannot find its centre (and of course, it is impossible to find a centre not only for the comic as a phenomenon but for almost everything else), which is on account of language, and more precisely, the language that is finite in principle as Derrida would say. The possibility, and even the obligation, for its methods to constantly play and disguise **ultimately** leads to the reflections on the comic also inevitably becoming comic – something noticed as early as by Jean-Paul Richter and later reaffirmed by Benedetto Croce.⁶ And thus they have to be interrupted at a certain point because they can go so deep into the play that they become ridiculous, fall and sin, be led by the nose, similarly to some comic characters.

As early as from the eighteenth century on the methods of comedy noticeably settled in drama and on stage, even where the tragic effect is primarily sought, which in turn leads to the much darker hues getting well-established in comedy itself, and in most cases, it is deprived of the bursting vitality and merriment it used to have in its classical period. As if comedy has reduced the over-consumption of external energy but not the communication failures; their virus infected even the drama and the stage as a whole. In general, a convergence of types and genres has happened but still in the direction of comedy. As early as in the nineteenth century,

⁶ Croce, Benedetto. *Esthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*. Routledge, 1994.

Kierkegaard noticed that “the whole age is working more toward the comic.”⁷ This is even more obvious today – as mentioned above, is there anything more comical (and, on the one hand, somewhat sad, while on the other, too serene and optimistic) than cloning Dolly the sheep, than her **repetition**? Or than the possibility, if not of immortality, then at least of a pointlessly long life? But since this hypothesis has already emerged, is it not funny that the length of life should be regulated in some ways by the society, that longevity should be handed out and taken away – something which until now a vague enough subject such as history has claimed to carry out? It is clear, however, that in its long historical rivalry with the tragic, the comic still emerged as the winner – and yet, probably because it won a Pyrrhic victory.

In any case, the comic is expressed in two directions on stage: through **movement** and through **speech**. Historically, movement in theatre, with sporadic exceptions in the 20th century, has been subordinated (and underestimated in comparison) to speech. Thus, theatre has always lived rather in the field of literature; it was another kind of writing and reading texts. (Let us recall that in the 1960s the entire theatrical tradition before that point was labelled ‘literary’). Until very recently, speech was considered the main carrier and exponent of stage messages; it intellectualized and sensitized theatre. That is why movement-based humor was defined as a lower expression of the comic than

speech-based humour. Playing with movement was considered a clear sign of some older and “underdeveloped” comedy forms, such as farce. Where movement was able to refute, or rather to impede speech, one could see a breakthrough of the low comedy repressed and aggressive because of a purely intellectual deficiency. On the other hand, pantomime is writing through body movements easily deciphered in terms of their meaning; therefore, it can also be defined as ‘literary.’ But if we try to set aside the Aristotelian and Classicist theorizing about art and its clichés, we should rehabilitate movement at least on par with speech. (Even for Brecht, for understandable reasons, it is more important than movement.) Or more precisely, we must intellectualize it to the level of speech. Because regardless of whether we do this in theory, today it is already a fact in practice. We need only mention how dance theatre, or other theatrical forms emphasizing movement are entering the realm of dramatic theatre not only more and more aggressively but also with a superior intellectuality. This historical misunderstanding between movement and speech in theatre is based (generally speaking) on the realistic understanding (and respectively, practice) of European theatre. In life, it is completely natural for speech to be the more intellectual and supreme expresser of the human than movement. In its modest realism this fact has obviously strongly influenced the realistic normativism of traditional European literary and theatrical theory, the thinking based on direct analogies. Here, however, there is a fundamental error, because in general, art tends to use metaphors more or less, and therefore movement can immediately be put into the place of speech and vice versa.

⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. From: <http://sqapo.com/Complete-Text-Kierkegaard-EitherOr.htm>, last accessed on 16.07.2021.

After all, we are dealing with fictions and transfers of properties, not with criminal investigations of what constitutes a blow and what – a verbal insult... Also, the blow itself can often be witty and inventive, while wit and verbal jokes can be very hurtful. The seemingly easy task of judging the ‘farce-ness’ of one’s verbal or motional act in comedy is also highly problematic. If farce (in the most general contemporary sense) can be defined as a realm of a ruder and more primitive humour, one that is aggressive and with no moral messages, the question still arises as to where exactly the boundary of rudeness is beyond which we pass into it. Because elements of rudeness can be found in the most sophisticated comedy texts. In general, we know how the understanding of rudeness developed in the Middle Ages and later in the Modern Age. Rudeness is a matter of etiquette and upbringing, which are historically, culturally and civilizationally charged; in general, it is corporeal and does not fully overlap with ethics. The Japanese’s declarations of love (in Kabuki or in classic Japanese cinema vegetating on the Simpa acting technique, etc.) seem to us infinitely aggressive, even funny, but the Japanese consider them to be the only possible chivalrous behaviour towards women. From the 17th century until very recently, the indecent expressions in literature and theatre (one of the forms of rudeness) have always fallen under the double-edged knife of censorship and self-censorship, which have reduced them merely to a lesser obscenity. Lesser, but lesser than what and to what extent? And it is not difficult to guess the real expressions hidden behind what is said and shown, the actual obscene phrases shyly peering from behind their replacements. In today’s free

expression – in the meaning and forms of both speech and movement; of the body in general – classic comedy can now only be played as contemporary one. Otherwise, the rudeness of the 17th and the 18th centuries unwittingly turns into freedom, and freedom into rigidity, and thus, rudeness.

Today, speech can no longer formulate truths but can only be expressed in an adequate way in relation to movement and the state of contemporary vocabulary. Actually, movement itself does the same. So to speak, the movement of speech becomes more important than its purpose; the very physical movement does not seek to serve truths, either. (Because the discipline and the form of movement can never last long enough nowadays.) Indeed, **rhythm** becomes meaning. This interchangeability and, in fact, disguise of the two main stage carriers of the form – movement and speech – is in itself a comic state. As movement becomes more and more verbal, and speech becomes more and more mobile, it would be justified for us to think that in the beginning there was not so much the Word, as the Gospel of John says, not the Deed, the Action, i.e. mostly the movement as per Goethe’s *Faust* – but the rhythm, because all bodily signals such as sound, gesture and movement become communication precisely through their repeatability. In order to be recognized, they must be repeated at intervals determined by the impact of the environment on the person and by the degree of his/her interest in asking a question or giving an answer, or a communication in general. Thus, the return of rhythm in theatre as the main carrier of meaning is not and has never been something new; it has always been the very breath (and spirit) of theatre, but today, with the free-

dom and also the extremity, the limitation of movement, obviously rhythm is the one whose authority remains, in a manner of speaking, unshakable.

Today, the rhythm of the stage unites the tragic, the dramatic and the comic view of the world and life. And yet the comic prevails in it. In contemporary stage expression, if it is not elementarily conventional and commercial, oddities and non-repetitions must inevitably lurk. They are the ones that should hamper the smooth rhythm of gestures foretold, to cut into them. The strangeness of the gesture (movement, speech) seems to take on the character of Kierkegaard's 'isolated person, who "becomes comic by wanting to assert his accidentality over against the necessity of the process"⁸. **The ironic** – which is rather comic but also a tragic device, and it is not a coincidence that it brings together the two extreme genres in drama being present in both – today it is an inevitable and constant companion of the suggestions and the reception of so-called post-modern art. Actually, more and more often we find irony too tiresome and insipid, inserted into the work or the performance somehow out of obligation. The issue of the **deformities** of the body (both the character's and actor's) or the plot is in the same situation. Indeed, today we are unable to surprise anyone by unfolding any external theatrical means, by the bodily presence of theatre, and it seems it can no longer be (although who can actually say?) metaphysical.

Baudelaire distinguishes between two types of comic: 'significant comic' – an expression of man's superiority over man and belonging to the realm of morals; and 'absolute comic' (which he also calls gro-

⁸ Ibid.

tesque) – expressing man's superiority over nature, which he sees in the works of Rabelais and E. T. Hoffman.⁹ Gogol differentiates between three types of laughter: 1. light, 2. spiteful and irritable, 3. the kind that 'oars from man's bright nature'¹⁰. Apparently, the first two types inhabit Baudelaire's 'significant comic', and the third, the 'absolute comic'. This latter kind is clearly based on a transcendent position, and like Kierkegaard's humour, it is a means of attaining God. According to Bakhtin, this "radiant" and "exalted" laughter – causing one to laugh "like the gods" – is incompatible with the satirist's laughter and shapes the major elements in Gogol's work; but he considered it necessary to justify his laughter within the limitations imposed by the human morality of the time¹¹.

This big and hugely resounding laughter is generally absent in Bulgarian comedy, and we could probably find the 'absolutely comic' only in Yordan Radichkov's texts, and at times, but far from absolutely, in Stanislav Stratiev's works. As for our stage productions, the 'significant comic' reigns not only in its ordinary, but quite often in its completely elementarized expression. The fact that television dictates the mass fashion in building and maintaining comedy culture in Bulgaria – with television programs such as *Hashove*,

⁹ Baudelaire, Charles. *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 152.

¹⁰ Gogol, N. V. *Gogol: Plays and Selected Writings*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1994, p. 184.

¹¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and Gogol: The Art of Discourse and the Popular Culture of Laughter*, trans. by Patricia Sollner. – *Mississippi Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Essays Literary Criticism (Winter/Spring, 1983), p. 44.

Kanaletto, *NLO*¹² and half a dozen more, even stiffer in their ordinariness – undoubtedly restrains the possible flight of the ‘absolute’ on stage as well. (In any case, the mass media call the shots – whether through the masses, with their mass taste, or the media itself. Some of these programs readily credit themselves with a sort of socio-political heroism; they are something akin to Krali Marko of the [post-Socialist] transition age – this was the case with *Hashove*, for example; while others, such as *NLO*, gravitate mainly towards the image of the already liquor-soaked, tavern-dwelling character.)

In fact, in this case the term ‘absolute’ is used partially and extremely; it is clear that the absolute is unattainable. Yet the possibility of attaining God today is clearly not to be found in science or philosophy; increasingly, it is fading out in religion, too.

For its part, art remains ambiguously attuned to this possibility: it must attack those values which are seen and adduced as absolute, but also to see/adduce them. Thus, in itself, it is rather comical and disguised on an ad hoc basis. However, **laughter**, to a much higher extent than tears (let us say that in melodrama, among others, they are deceitful), is an appropriate means of attaining God – perhaps even the only one left today. Laughter is the sound of Truth itself¹³, and the higher and farther it goes, the longer it lasts, the more it elevates God and actually reaches Him.

Published in Homo Ludens 2001/No. 2–3.

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¹² Popular Bulgarian TV sketch and variety shows in the 1990s and early 2000s. (Translator’s note.)

¹³ Paying Umberto Eco and his novel *The Name of the Rose* their dues.