

## Book review\*

**Gray, Josephine, and Lisa Trahair (eds.) (2022). *Second Nature: Comic Performance and Philosophy*. Rowman & Littlefield.**

We can all be funny at times but unfortunately it is often unintentional as our bodies are essentially unreliable and revealing. This earthly risk is no cause for alarm when taken for comic production and this new book, *Second Nature: Comic Performance and Philosophy*, edited by Josephine Gray and Lisa Trahair, connects bodily betrayal with deep philosophical thought and is a welcome contribution to the field of comedy studies.

The comic character is a necessarily transparent figure, revealing flaws, urges and failings which distance them from audiences and allows us to laugh. Comic characters, possessing a corporeal topology of baser characteristics, are readable in a way that dramatic characters are not. “Second Nature” is a phrase used by Pedagogue and Theatre Director Jacques Lecoq to describe unconscious and conscious human movement that acts as a bodily betrayal of our state of mind revealed through physical gesture. In performance this Second Nature is the revealing physical behaviour exploited by comedians to signal comic intent. This collection of erudite essays examines the Second Nature of comedy performance from its origins in the *komostai* painted on Corinthian vases to the grotesque characterisations of Mike Meyers. Chapter topics range from theatre to literature and screen, creating a comprehensive inter-disciplinary overview.

Co-editor and contributing author Josephine Gray is a Lecoq-trained dramaturgist and co-artistic director of a movement-based theatre group with post-graduate degrees in philosophy and English literature. Lisa Trahair, also co-editor and a contributing author, is senior lecturer at the School of Arts and Media, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and has written about early cinematic slapstick. The editors invited contributions from researcher practitioners or academics to tackle “the elusive substance of comic production” (p. xi) and it is a strength of this collection that its authors bring the authority of creative practice to their study of comic performance.

The first chapter, “Comedy towards an alternative history of mimesis” by Maria J. Ortega Manez reconsiders the philosophical concept of mimesis in relation to comedy. Manez examines what it is about mimetic phenomena that works in the production of comedy while defending its philosophical examination. Setting aside *tragic mimesis* and the preferences for it of philosophers from Tertullian to Camus, Manez focuses on comedy with the lens of Bergson’s (1901) analysis and proposes a revision of the history of mimesis to privilege comedy, arguing that its non-serious definition is in part why it has been marginalised (p. 5). It is a compelling provocation that begs for further scholarship.

The second chapter, “The two laughs of Lecoq: The clown and the *bouffon*” by Caterina Augs, Giovanni Fusetti and Davide Giovanzana, also reconsiders comedy’s lower genre status

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to tragedy but does so through Socratic texts. This chapter also offers an excellent dissertation on the pedagogy and research of Jacques Lecoq. The authors argue that Socrates elevated comedy to the same level as tragedy by describing a necessity for a full comprehension of tragedy to be able to write comedy (p. 18). There is an analysis of Lecoq's two approaches to laughter, tragic laughter and cruel laughter, through an examination of his methodology of acting: the clown and the *bouffon* (p. xiii). This chapter is a great resource for research on the differences between the protagonists of comedy and satire. Clowns are described as relatable, closer to ourselves and a generic comic character as opposed to the *bouffon* who are "figures who communicate truths from another dimension" (p. xiv). The authors demonstrate convincingly a lineage between *bouffon* characters and modern satire, citing their survival in modern media *bouffons* such as Sacha Baron Cohen (p. 31).

The third chapter, Fred Dalmasso's "The masked comic figure in Alain Badiou's philosophy", is a philosophical analysis of comic performance and theatre examining the Structural Marxist playwright's adaptation of Commedia archetypes and the application of his dramatic theory to the comedies of his Ahmed cycle plays (1984-1996). Badiou, a post war but emphatically not postmodern philosopher who has outlived his contemporaries Baudrillard, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Althusser, Derrida and Lyotard, is at first glance a surprising subject for inclusion in this collection but reveals a contemporary application of commedia techniques. Parts of this chapter are a "dense mesh" (p. 52) of analysis of Badiou's theory with close readings of the Ahmed cycle (1984-1996) that will be of interest to readers familiar with Badiou's system and theatrical output. The chapter offers an example of Second Nature amplified by the use of mask in theatrical performance and contends that the mask materialises truth through the "commedia-inspired character of the migrant-worker" to "embody the essence of emancipatory politics" (p. 56) advocating such comedy in Badiou's political theatre as a force for change.

Chapter 4 is a plea for the rediscovery of philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner with the chapter "The body that laughs and cries: Helmuth Plessner's keys to anthropology and theatre" by Xavier Escribano. Plessner has enjoyed renewed interest since the English translation publication of his *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* (2019) and Escribano celebrates the philosopher finally coming out of the shadows of his contemporaries Heidegger and Scheler. The author also raises Plessner's influence on Merleau-Ponty and draws attention their approaches to Second Nature through the centrality of "corporeality and expressive activities in understanding what it is to be human" (p. 64). Of particular note is the way this chapter looks at the control of the comic performer and describes the craft skill of laughing and crying as a form of abandonment to automatism, a deliberate and meaningful loss of bodily control.

How Henri Bergson's (1901) concepts of rigidity and inelasticity were explored through the use of humorous devices by Karl Valentin and Bertold Brecht is analysed by contributor Meg Mumford in her chapter "Valentin, Brecht and comic inelasticity: Ridiculing rigidity as an impediment to social change." The author interprets records of historical performances and films of Valentin and Brecht's work through Bergson's understandings of what constitutes the comic character. Mumford's description of comic inelasticity offers researchers a clear articulation of comic character subjectivity, the way they "automatically get(s) in (their) own way without troubling (themselves)" and how "such individuals fail to adapt to new social surroundings due to absentmindedness or an inability to modify habits" (p. 101). This Bergsonian interpretation of the comic character turns on the comic character's insulation from dramatic events and how they are propelled through a series of failures towards a happy ending. The other comic principle employed by Brecht is comic incongruity, used by him as "a vehicle well-suited to shocking spectators out of their usual modes of viewing the world and for alerting them to the need and

capacity for change” (p. 104). Mumford convincingly presents Brecht’s comic turns as a correction to Bergson’s theory by framing it as the comic character’s vulnerability to the “machinery of society” which moves it in a “deadly direction” (p. 105).

The medium of Puppet and Object Theatre is examined in Chapter 6, Carolyn Shapiro’s “Happiness, dead and alive: Object Theatre as philosophy of the encounter”. This chapter focuses on “Happy Endings” by Harry Holtzman for Label Brut, a French Theatre company, and “Happy Days” by Samuel Beckett. Object Theatre is the theatre of movement using live human performers with puppetry and objects. The author includes Beckett’s play, arguing that the notion of happiness in object theatre and clowning does not necessarily mean good fortune (p. 113). Beckett’s characters are objects, his script “equally devoted to the italicised stage directions as it is to delivering dialogue” as subject to an “exterior directorial force that acts upon” them (p. 116). Second Nature here is examined through the lens of Lecoq’s understanding of the involuntary gestural language of the clown that gets a laugh, a punch line that “physicalises the impact of the unexpected” and is usefully likened to the forehead-slapping “D’OH!” of Homer Simpson (p. 117).

Chapter 7 “Living in the doll house: Cavell, comedy and *The Ladies Man*” by Lisa Trahair responds to earlier critical writing on screen comedy by Stanley Cavell and Steve Seidman around a discussion of Jerry Lewis’s 1961 film “The Ladies Man”. Trahair provides an updated perspective on the screen comedy genres of romantic comedy, remarriage comedies and comedian comedy and the way they overlap and share generic tendencies. Criticism like this is long overdue and will be of great value to researchers responding to contemporary screen comedy. Trahair makes an insightful claim that masculinity has been overlooked as *the* social problem as the central concern of comedian comedy (p. 147) and will provide an anchor to new critical writing on contemporary male comedian stars.

The Cuckold as comic object throughout the history of poetry and the philosophy of impotence is presented as a kind of Second Nature in Chapter 8 “Trouble in paradise? Impotence and comedy” by Lisabeth During. In addition to an explication of philosophical arguments about sexual failure from Augustine to Aquinas, During presents impotence as an enduring subject for comedy, and in particular, farce. Examining Lawrence Stern’s 1759 novel “Tristram Shandy” as “impotence comedy”, During draws a line to the screen protagonists of Ernst Lubitsch sharing the erotic uncertainty of the “distracted modern heroes of Thomas Mann, James Joyce and Alberto Moravia” (p. 179). Comedy lowers the stakes, especially in situations of adulterous high jinks, and the author’s conclusion is that comedy teaches us to forgive human frailty and malfunction and that such flaws can even be loved (p. 186).

In Chapter 9, “Only what is born lives Kafka L.O.L.” by Jean-Michel Rabate, first-hand accounts of Kafka’s own laugh precede an analysis of an early tragicomic novella “Descriptions of a Struggle”. The chapter also reviews an anthology of short stories, “Comical Kafka”. The author details various critical positions on Kafka and extends his analysis to Kafka’s sense of underlying horror, describing a neutral voice for which “it is almost impossible to isolate funny moments” (p. 200). The chapter’s focus on laughter is aligned thematically with the bodily betrayal of Second Nature, but it is the dark sense of humour in Kafka’s writing that the author argues convincingly is a laughter that dissolves shame and offers a kind of liberty.

The final contribution by Josephine Gray “The grotesque: Comic performance and the paradox of acting,” explicates Diderot’s philosophical analysis, “The Paradox of Acting”, about the act of performance. In this examination of mask work as a theatrical tool Gray effectively describes how the mask creates distance between the actor and the character they are playing. She traces the roots of the word grotesque to its early origin in Ancient Greek drama and includes comedy that signifies both an otherness and a sense of the otherworldly (p. 210). The transformational movement of the grotesque is presented as an analogue for the process of an

actor's performance and draws a connection between comedy and the grotesque reaching as far back as the deformed bodies of the *komostai* figures painted on Corinthian vases (p. 214).

This volume would be improved by at least one chapter focused on more recent screen comedy performance as it is rare to find writing of this quality about popular material. This is a minor criticism prompted by the excellent 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema criticism already within its pages. The book's strength is its long historical reach from the theatre of Ancient Greece to Kafka, Brecht and Jerry Lewis which offers a wealth of material for new comedy studies and performance studies scholarship. These investigations of Second Nature expose the transformational power of the body necessary to comic performance and highlights its triumph over the human reality of frailty and decay. Distortion, whether accidental or deliberate, is hilarious when nobody suffers but when they do, we are too busy laughing to mind.

**Marty Murphy**

Australian Film, Television and Radio School  
[marty.murphy@aftrs.edu.au](mailto:marty.murphy@aftrs.edu.au)

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