

## Basic Principles of Comic Relief in Theatre

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**Abstract:** *The means of expression in the art of acting differ from those in other performing arts. I wanted to write this study on comic relief in order to present a different approach to dramatic analysis, a different angle on comic mechanics, a different understanding of the relations between author, director, actor, and spectator. These relations often lack a basic understanding of comic mechanics, an analysis of comic phonetics, a unified perception of the means of expression in comic rhetoric, and the result is, most often, that the last person in the chain (the spectator) is on the losing side. Over time, I have had the occasion to observe work on texts from several perspectives – as an author, as a director, as an actor – and the product analysis that reached me as I also placed myself in the position of a spectator led to certain conclusions. This four-sided perspective has given me the chance to understand, from its very beginnings (the text) how a comic mechanism is born and developed, down to its last phase – perception by the receptor (the public).*

**Keywords:** *Theatre; Acting; Technique; Procedure; Analysis; Phonetics; Mechanism; Burlesque; Grotesque; Absurd; Stage Points;*

### Introduction

Personally, I do not believe that an actor can function without understanding. In fact, in the theory of scenic processuality (*internalising – processing – option – action*), the first phase is subdivided into four subpoints: *I hear – I listen – I learn – I understand*. This last subdivision (understanding) is the object of the study of **comic relief** and I believe it lends itself to much discussion. That is because, depending on how we approach a text, this last sub-step of the first step of processuality can take anything from a few days to several weeks or even months.

Depending on the text, the two means of approach (from outside to within, and from within to outside) can be further divided into four subpoints – from the form to the content, from the character to the content, from the character to the form, or from the structure to the content. Apart from the text's requirements, the director has an important word to say in how the actor approaches a dramatic character. Regardless of the approach, however, regardless of the text, the director, the actor, the elements, the spatiality or the conjuncture, I do not believe anything is done without understanding.

The entire dramatic analysis of a text relies on an in-depth knowledge of how an actor (a living organism) can function in relation to a text (a non-living organism), by creating a carefully traced route depending on segments, accumulations, plot twists and situations, by forming

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connections between characters, by associating the actor and the character – until possibilities are identified for the last phase of acting authorship: committing.

## 1. Comicality and humour

Usually is defined as an aesthetic category including in its spheres motives and situations which elicit laughter. Appearing (mostly) in human social spheres, comicality is (with some reserve) a classical aesthetic category. If we take “beauty” to be another aesthetic category (according to the philosophical conversations between Socrates and Phidias), we realise that the part of comicality is not necessarily to be beautiful, but rather covers a wider area – from art to society and even crossing the human boundaries and entering the animal kingdom.

Comicality essentially results from conflict, in all its facets, in a different rapport between appearance and essence or between form and content. Of course, it can be manifested in various forms through comic mechanics (from procedures to mechanisms), and the sphere of contradiction can be extended all the way to the contradiction between the goal and the means. However, all these contradictions find their common denominator in the type of the conflict: critical attitude.

This attitude comes, to some extent, from an (apparent) superiority complex, from an point of view that seeks to “make right” certain faults of mankind – mainly matters of ethics of morale, “all too human” faults – which are not so intense as to qualify as passions or (even more) as drama or tragedy. In other words, the result of said faults does not cause a change in destiny – as it happens, for example, in Greek tragedy.

By way of consequence, the sphere of comicality is mostly limited to human beings, to “matters of mankind”, finding its inspiration in the shortcomings of the human condition – whether they are singular or belong to a whole society – and resulting in a mechanic congestion – laughter. Even if (both theoretically and practically) we move on from matters of character to physical particularities, a comical mechanism (albeit immoral or bothersome), such as imitation, can elicit laughter. In specialised terminology, we say that imitation follows the path of caricature-based comicality – a deformation (moral or physical) which the interpreter exaggerates.

Moving on from the social to the artistic, we see very little change in the essence: we still need a minimum of two interpreters for a comical situation (author and victim), excluding the case in which the particularity of singularity by rapport to the object becomes comical by lending human qualities to the object (the type of reply or non-reply which the object provides, through the change in rapport). Singular comicality is essentially still a two-party procedure (again, author and victim), in which the rapport is reversed during the comical act – namely, the author becomes a victim through the non-action or reaction of the object (e.g. a door is slammed and swings back, hitting the author).

In the case of a human duo (always author and victim), the author is the person “initiating” the deed, “pulling a trick” to put it informally, while he victim has to (in the same specialised register) “put up with it”, experiencing the action initiated by the author. In real life, many such events become humorous thanks to involuntary comicality. In art, humour results from intentional comicality – which is the particularity of the professional.

The basic comical mechanism (singular or two-party) can be accomplished, whether intentionally or not, in a mechanism involving three characters (or three persons, in a social

situation). Apart from the author and the victim, it takes a third party – the recipient (the one for whom the author’s action is intended) – which often changes roles (to the delight of the audience, whether a paying audience or simply social witnesses) from witnessing to being an accomplice. In an elaborate comical situation, without this latter party (the recipient), humour may have a lighter effect, as the recipient often takes the place of the audience, as a “representative” to whom the humour of the two (author and victim) is addressed.

Paradoxically, though they say “comedy is harder than tragedy”, in society (and this has nothing to do with the current context, but rather applies, to some degree, since ancient Greece), laughter or comedy are considered light subjects. Perhaps it is because of philosophical perceptions, as philosophy only finds essence in human drama or tragedy, or perhaps it is because of a desire to relax (as early as ancient times, working people needed a way to relax, as only philosophers could afford the luxury of “thinking” without “working”), or perhaps it is because of the grandiosity of tragedy, which concerns the universe, while comedy concerns details, or perhaps yet it is a sum of the above, but laughter is not valued at its true worth.

The human does not become aware of him/her self, but only in the relations with the others, thus “we” comes before “me”<sup>2</sup>.

When we speak of the scene, to a film set or to any condition of intentional comicality, we are not referring to poor spirits, jokes in poor taste or hostile intentions from the emitter – which lead the text or the interpretation in the direction of the type of humour we call easy. We are talking about a quality text which aims to generate conversation or questions on delicate or serious subjects, by using humour as a vehicle to enter the mind of the spectator.

What we should consider, particularly when we speak of intentional comicality, is one of the human necessities, namely intermittence – humans cannot be subjected to either continuous comedy or continuous drama, which makes the value of intentional comicality dependent on a mechanic of delivery, on “dosage”, on the ratio of the things we have discussed above – appearance and essence, form and essence. Naturally, the text (in the case of intentional comicality) is what shapes and sustains the comical situation – in other words, the substance or essence of the matter being discussed – but it is the form in which it reaches the audience, in case of comicality, which causes the major switch from comic to humorous.

*Humour* as a word comes, etymologically, from *humeur* – a bodily secretion. As these secretions were held to change a person’s disposition, gradually the meaning moved from the physiological sense to the psychological one. Humour is based on a mixed feeling, often containing contradicting elements – pain and pleasure, enthusiasm followed by total depression. In other words, humour is based on composite feelings, which blend together seriousness and jocularly, sadness and merriness, sympathy and antipathy<sup>3</sup>.

The mechanism of humour is based on a simulation, as the comical form masks a sad essence. A French proverb says “I put on a merry face so I don’t burst out crying”. In humour, jokes are meant to hide a desperate situation, to avoid falling prey to total dejection. As a total, mixed feeling, humour is also realistic, being the closest to common, ordinary life. If life is a mixed-up affair, neither as tragic nor as comical as it seems, but rather a blend, then humour,

<sup>2</sup> Roger Garaudy. 1969. *The XX-th century Marxism*. București: Political Publishing, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Vasile Morar. 2008. *Aesthetics, Texts and Interpretations*. București: Editura Universității, p.135.

which contains these elements, stands the best chance to come as close as possible to the reality of life.

One interpretation of Vasile Morar's text *Aesthetics. Interpretations and Texts* makes me think of a theological contradiction deriving from Leibniz' thesis (all is well in the best of all possible worlds): the hypothesis of evil which can only be discussed in a religious context, because in any other it becomes mere chance. The mix discussed by Morar causes humour to move away from the "sensational", from the "key element" of dramatic writing (ordinary people put in extraordinary situations) and to become distant from any framing into a dramatic category – a position with which I personally do not agree.

In comicality, realism comes precisely from the human aspect (which is, by definition, realistic): earlier I have tried to illustrate the mechanism of singularity through the door example in which the comical phenomenon is connected to the object, where humour is derived from the author's action on the object (to continue the door example, humour comes from the human in relation with the door) or to the spectator, who thus becomes the recipient of the humour derived from the comical situation.

Though similar, the phenomena of comicality and humour have distinct characteristics and are, in a way, derivatives – humour derives from comicality, but is not a subpoint of it. The receiver does not laugh at comicality, at the singular person slamming a door (to continue with our example), but rather at the action derived from the author's (namely, the reaction of the door, which the spectator thus endows with a human quality – reactivity).

The same thing can be applied in the opposite direction, particularly in involuntary humour – for which we can give another example, where the lack of means causes a comical person to no longer generate humour. If a wedding guest does something that elicits laughter, as soon as they feel they are being watched and start "acting", but lacking the means necessary to turn comicality into humour, the involuntary humour will become intentional non-humour. At this point, no one laughs, it all becomes predictable and boring – we can examine the acting or the means of intentional expression. And when the author does not have a good command of them, involuntary comicality cannot become intentional humour.

In other words, comicality can be manifested in two ways – one involuntary, the other intentional. The first is unintentional (an accidental form of a comical situation), the second is constructed consciously by an author (playwright/director/actor). In the first case, that of involuntary comicality, the author (the person generating the accident, in the case of singularity, or the person who experiences it – and here I return to the transfer between author and victim) is not aware of the comicality they produce. Comicality, however, can turn into humour only in the presence of a receiver, who observes it (but does not address it).

When we speak of intentional comicality (in singularity), the author (who also undergoes the author-victim transfer) must have an obligatory characteristic: naivety. Most often, this is a mark of direction which the actor assumes. Through a conscious process, naivety causes laughter through its apparent unintentional form, which is in fact voluntary. Usually, in playwriting, this type of personality is used for characters who are children or adults with delayed development – as both categories can, in reality, generate involuntary comicality – but in playwriting mechanics both typologies actually generate intentional humour.

## 2. Comical situation, comical mechanism, comical structure

In voluntary humour, **the comical situation** is a situation which is well defined from the dramaturgical point of view, using procedures or mechanisms, with characters who have clear goals (whether declared or not) and who do not stray from the rule of the conflict.

Of course, in parallel, we can talk about the development of the comical situation through methods linked strictly to the Art of Acting – the comicality of gestures, movements, forms and nuances.

To the actor, comicality can become a performance, involving visible verbal and motive actions and needing scenic processuality in its final, rapid stage (in which processing, option and action are subordinate to speed, excepting situations in which the dramatic comical mechanism must be observed, and processuality must be subordinate to the mechanism).

The comical mechanism is, in fact, an action-reaction at the author-receiver level. In comedy, in general, the level of a performance cannot drop below the level of the text. In other words, if the dramatic comical mechanism is good, the show cannot be below its level. Even if we have to do with cheap comedy, if the actor's and director's authorship is below expectations, there may still be delightful moments generated by the text itself, which observes the comical mechanisms from a dramatic point of view (one example of a simple dramatic comical mechanism: line-reply-joke-counterjoke-beat-punchline). If, however, we have to do with Hamlet, there is a risk – a high risk, in fact – of the level of the performance to be abysmal, precisely because of the lack of the comical mechanism, as drama falls more in the realm of creative authorship.

Unfortunately, insufficient knowledge of the comical situation or of the comical mechanisms, or their faulty interpretation, causes many written texts not to come to fruition in a successful show, but rather in a tepid one.

It is the comical mechanism which, also paradoxically, develops the actor's desire to resolve and perfect a role, even after the première. The understanding and in-depth exploration of the comical mechanism determines an actor to develop and do detail work on reaction times (both theirs and their partner's), on beats in the text, on scenic processuality.

On another hand, the comical mechanism, as a structure, can also limit individual authorship, which can only be exercised within the implicit limits of the mechanism (I avoid using the word "creation", preferring "authorship". From my point of view, man cannot be a creator, but only imitate divine creation). Of course, actors generally attempt all sorts of subterfuges, sometimes meant to improve the mechanism, at other times intended to draw the public's attention on the actors, to the detriment of the performance. In a pre-established text mechanism like line-reply-beat-joke, if during the beat (obviously determined by the charge – and, at times, by the public's reaction) the actor fails to follow the mechanism and tries to improve on it through looks, gestures, signs a.s.o., this (the mechanism) will no longer have the intended effect. If the actor's authorship is, in itself, merely negative addition to the mechanism, then it is gratuitous, useless and unwanted. If the actor's authorship is meant to support the beat (implicitly, we are referring to the same example), entirely supported by the lines, in accordance with the situation, and not getting in the way of their partner, then the action will, I believe, be embraced by both the director and the acting partner, and the comical mechanism will be dissimulated; it is, indeed, most desirable for the mechanism, structure, trajectories and concept not to be seen by the public. They should be sensed and accepted, not pointed to.

In terms of weight, both the mechanism and the structure can be utterly annihilated by the actor. As previously stated, they can be annihilated in a negative sense, when the quest for playful acting entirely oversteps conceptual borders and unfortunately, as it can happen with any mechanism, one beat more or less can cause it to malfunction, nullifying the expected effect – but they can also be annihilated positively, when they are completely dissimulated by subtle authorship and a sustained, motivated trajectory.

There is, however, a particular class of actors who have the comical mechanism in their blood – in which cases, it can only be a little refined or developed, but the one who undertakes this road as an exegete should expect to find a double-edged sword in it. The instinct remains brilliant through its very definition, but interfering with it can make it banal. But actors can also have that instinctive genius for the mechanism which lends itself to carrying a particular piece or fragment to its absolute worth, to a maximum height of interpretation.

Paradoxically enough, in the **structure-authorship-mechanism** triangle, the actor (i.e. authorship) has the least important word to say. Of course, on the wide spectrum of comical authorship we encounter fair actors who follow the structure and implicitly bring out the mechanism, which can only lead to a good performance. But the obverse is never far. There are actors who have a genius for comicality, in which structure and mechanism begin to fade before divine inspiration which, through its mere existence, manages to bring a good show to magnificence.

Comical structure refers to the structure and dialogue of the text in question. It can have typologies and manners, it can be ascending, descending, interrupted, false-start, farcical, boulevard, vaudeville; its structure can be classical, contemporary, classical four-cornered, or even no-rules. But the structure of the text is what determines one author (the director) to push another author (the actor) into a certain key, which can itself be burlesque, absurd, psychological realism or akin to caricature.

But here is where the paradox comes in. We often speak of the freedom of authors and the freedom of the actors, but we must not forget that, whatever it is the actor did, they did it within certain limits and structures of the text and of the director's perspective and vision (let it be noted that we are talking about comedy, actors who know what they are doing, and directors who know how to lead; I mention this because generally authorship, art and truths stated about theatrical or film perceptions leave room for diverse interpretations); as such, the actor can move at ease within the role, but only in keeping with these limits (as a well-known Romanian joke puts it, “we laugh, we joke around, but we stay on the premises”).

It is also structure that generates clarity, on the one hand, and limitations, on the other. When the structure of the dramatic text is recognisable, it provides the actor with that inner peace given by the knowledge of its contours. On the one hand, the limitations generated by structure are not always pleasant. Through their very nature, of course, they limit the trajectory and the authorship in how a role is presented to the public. But from the director's point of view, they can be useful, particularly for actors inclined to “games”.

### 3. Conclusions

Due to their nearness to the human sphere, comicality and humour function by certain rules and, like any rules in art, these must comply with their respective branch of art (playwriting, directing, acting). In order for it to have the intended effect, the real feeling of the

involuntary situation, a comical situation should comply with the mechanisms of dramaturgy, directing, and acting, and should do so exactly, with no selfishness, narcissism, or desire to make a demonstration.

As a part of comedy, comicality and humour have a rather mathematical functioning method, a musicality defined by the text and delimited by the director's vision. But one aspect which I believe should be taken into account (though it applies just as well to the tragical register) is inspiration. Unlike drama or tragedy, comicality and humour have a much more varied range, a far broader spectrum of register categories. From procedures, modalities, mechanisms and structures, comicality and humour move on and develop into nuances, situations, appearances and effects, never leaving out the essential element of any work of theatre and film: the spectator.

What I do believe is that the working method in the art of acting comedy requires a rigour which drama does not impose, a certain ear for music which tragedy can dispense with, reaching a level of performance that few actors can rise up to. Naturally, neither drama nor tragedy are easily accessible themselves, but they (from my point of view) need a different type of depth, another approach, another human structure, one far more oriented towards the inside, far less histrionic, far more inclined towards discoveries. To draw a profane parallel, a comedy author is like a soldier – in the best sense of the word and of the comparison: they must have rigour, mental hygiene, a clockwork rhythm and execution, always falling in step, never straying from the established course just for the pleasure of the audience.

#### 4. References

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