

The Humorous Times

Newsletter of the International Society for Humor Studies

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Association News

2016 ISHS Membership and Finances

From Martin Lampert, ISHS Secretary-Treasurer



The International Society for Humor Studies had a good year in 2016 with 269 affiliates, including 257 new and returning members and 12 additional Board Members and Consulting Editors of the journal, *HUMOR*. At the October 31 close of 2016 membership, the Society was again financially sound with \$65,361.99 in unaudited revenue including \$47,255.99 carried over from 2015 and \$18,106.00 from 2016 membership dues and fees. Operating expenses through October included \$192.92 for recognition awards, \$228.00 for online services, and \$14,416.00 for membership subscriptions to *HUMOR: International Journal for Humor Research*. Revenue over expenses by the end of 2016 is estimated to be \$50,525.07.

Between December 1, 2015 and October 31, 2016, Holy Names University received an additional \$1,424.17 for the ISHS Scholarship fund. On October 31, the scholarship fund held \$18,340.36. From this fund, the Society made one \$500.00 and two \$250.00 awards in 2016 to graduate students who attended the 29th ISHS Conference in Dublin, Ireland. As always, I would like to thank the members who made contributions to the ISHS Scholarship Fund, and I would like to encourage others to make donations with their 2017 membership applications.

We look forward to another great year in 2017 with the publication of the 30th volume of *HUMOR* and the Society's 29th international conference to be held at the University of Quebec at Montréal from July 10 to July 14, 2017. You can register and submit paper proposals for the 2017 Conference online at the Conference website, <https://ishs-2017-montreal.uqam.ca>. For Conference information, you can also write to Conference Registration at ishs2017@uqam.ca or to Conference Organizer, Christelle Pare at christelle.pare@brunel.ac.uk. If you would like to host a future ISHS Conference, you can contact me for more information on how to submit a Conference proposal. We are still accepting proposals for our 2019 Conference.

If you would like to join the Society or renew your ISHS membership for 2017, please visit the membership page on the Society's website at www.humorstudies.org. On the membership page, you will find a link that will allow you to renew your membership. On the online application form, you will notice the Society's current fee structure, which allows for membership with either a print or online subscription to the Society's journal, *HUMOR*. For 2017, membership is \$110 with a print subscription and \$69 with an online subscription. Please note that

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Next Issue

The next *The Humorous Times* is due February 2017.

online renewal includes a 3% plus \$1 processing fee. However, regular members who renew before January 31, can still take a \$5 discount on dues, allowing everyone to renew early with an online journal subscription for just \$64 plus processing. If you do not wish to receive the journal, but do wish to be a member to receive our other benefits, you can still join ISHS as an Associate member for just \$30 plus processing.

Finally, thank you for your support of the International Society for Humor Studies. Your participation in ISHS helps to advance the importance of humor research and, as always, is greatly appreciated.

Report on the 2016 International Summer School and Symposium on Humor and Laughter

From Stanca Măda, Răzvan Săftoiu, and Monica Gomoescu, Transilvania University of Brașov

The 16th International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter was held in Brașov, Romania, from July 4-9, 2016 (see: <http://humoursummerschool.org/16/>). The event was jointly organized by Transilvania University of Brașov and the Association of Researchers in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (ARTA) in cooperation with the Advisory Board. Summer school activities were intended to benefit both research students and more experienced researchers considering research in the field of humour and laughter studies.

The program aimed to provide an overview of the interdisciplinary nature of humour research, by considering theory and empirical evidence, addressing special research issues, discussing methodology and evaluation of research findings to date, and also to consider some of the applications of humour and laughter. This year the teaching faculty comprised the following speakers: Professor, Dr. Christie Davies (University of Reading, UK), Dr. Jessica Milner Davis (University of Sydney, Australia), Dr. Graeme Ritchie (University of Aberdeen, UK), Dr. Liisi Laineste (Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia), Dr. Villy Tsakona (Democritus University of Thrace, Greece), Dr. Tristan Miller (Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany), Dr. Hugo Stuer (Senior independent researcher, Belgium), Sonja Heintz and Dandan Pang (University of Zürich, Switzerland), Dr. Adrian Lăcătuș, Dr. Stanca Măda, Dr. Răzvan Săftoiu, and Dr. Raluca Sinu (Transilvania University of Brașov, Romania).

The **lecture sessions** addressed topics from various fields (such as sociology, cultural studies, psychology, linguistics and literature, medical, media and computer sciences):

- An overview of humour research
- The General Theory of Verbal Humor and humour perception
- Logic in jokes
- Incongruity – resolution descriptions of humour
- Why were more and better political jokes told under socialism than in free societies?
- Political jokes: Content, genres, and commentary
- Constructing and testing hypotheses on the basis of international comparisons: The case of the Stupidity Joke
- American jokes about lawyers compared with Romanian and East European jokes about Communist Party leaders: A study of power
- From potential to product: Creating and experiencing humour
- The long tradition of humour therapy and the theory of humours, East and West
- What humour tells about a person
- Measurement of humour
- Constructing humour through corporeality
- Focusing on humour in audiovisual translation
- Online and offline joking cultures
- Language and image in interaction. Notes on visual humour
- Humor and health in the upcoming medical paradigm
- Computer modelling of jokes
- Computational approaches to pun detection and interpretation

Additionally, Liisi Laineste provided a **workshop** on *Humour Research on the Internet*, and Sonja Heintz and Dandan Pang offered a workshop on *FACS – Facial Action Coding System*.

Two consecutive time-slots for **Meet the Lecturer** sessions, where participants could sign up for a one-to-one discussion with a lecturer of his/her choice, were made available daily.

The **Symposium** section offered the participants the chance to present their (past, ongoing, or future) research and get feedback from the more experienced scholars. The papers comprised the following topics:

- *Paul Scarron's Le Roman Comique and the Tradition of the Picaresque Novel*
Presenter: Elena Ciocoiu (Sorbonne University / National Museum of Art of Romania)
- *Ethnic Categories in Romanian Humorous Discourse*
Presenter: Ioana Ciurezu (Transilvania University of Brașov, Romania)
- *The Performing Arts: The Healing Power of Humorous 'Empowerment' Interventions in Medical/Therapeutic/Rehab Environments*
Presenter: Mariann Martin (USA)
- *Humour Behind Bars*
Presenter: Jeanne Mathieu-Lessard (University of Toronto, Canada)
- *The sequential relation between the laughable and the laughter*
Presenter: Chiara Mazzocconi ("La Sapienza" University of Rome, Italy)
- *The virtue perspective of humour: Validating the BENCOR-Inventory in Mainland China and a first cross-cultural comparison*
Presenter: Dandan Pang and Willibald Ruch (University of Zürich, Switzerland)
- *Small Chuckles Amount to Social Change. Street Culture, Youth, and the Urban Experience of Gender Equality through Humour and Laughter*
Presenter: Raluca Mariana Pinzari (University of Oviedo, Spain)
- *Towards a multimodal analysis of the conventional humoristic structures with sensitive topics in the rural community*
Presenter: Violeta Rus (Transilvania University of Brașov, Romania)

The **social events** were meant to offer the participants the chance to bond and create a better atmosphere in the group. On Monday evening, the welcome cocktail was followed by a special event under the title *Dance is Fun*, in which participants experienced both Romanian and international folk and traditional dances. A guided tour of Brașov followed on Wednesday afternoon, and a festive dinner on Friday evening.

ISS16 was supported by *Transilvania* University of Brașov, ARTA Association, and the International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter. Without their support the Summer School would not have been possible. Also, Mouton de Gruyter sponsored prizes for the best presentation awards, which were won by Dandan Pang, Ioana Ciurezu, and Jeanne Mathieu-Lessard. ARTA Association offered a prize for best presentation made by a Romanian student, which was won by Violeta Rus. As in all previous years, the International Society for Humour Studies (ISHS) endorsed the 2016 Summer School.

Upcoming Events

2017 International Society for Humor Studies Conference

University of Quebec, Montreal, July 10 to 14, 2017



*From Jean-Marie LaFortune, Christelle Paré, and Élias Rizkallah,
2017 ISHS Conference Organizers*

The *Université du Québec à Montréal*, in collaboration with the *Observatoire de l'humour*, is proud to host the 2017 International Society for Humor Studies Conference from July 10 to July 14, 2017 in *La belle province* of Quebec, more precisely in downtown Montréal. Registration for the 2017 Conference is now open online at <https://ishs-2017-montreal.uqam.ca>. Conference registration fees can be paid by credit card through the conference website. Early registration fees of \$250 for ISHS members and \$300 for non-members will be possible through March 1, 2017. We will also offer early

registration fees for student members (\$100) and student non-members (\$125) to enable local and international graduate students to take part in the event. After March 1, the registration fees will be \$300, \$350, \$150 and \$175, respectively. The registration fees will include:

- An Opening cocktail (bites and one drink)
- A Closing banquet (complete buffet and two bottles of wine by table of eight)
- Coffee breaks (coffee, tea, snacks)
- An attendee "survival kit" (program, maps, references for attractions, festivals, etc.)

For additional Conference information, you can visit the conference website at <https://ishs-2017-montreal.uqam.ca> or write to Conference Registration at ishs2017@uqam.ca or to Conference Organizer, Christelle Pare at christelle.pare@brunel.ac.uk.

The summer of 2017 in Montreal will be extremely busy, fun and interesting, as the city will be celebrating its 375th anniversary. We strongly recommend that ISHS visitors and members plan their trip in advance to make sure they obtain the best deals and opportunities. We can't wait to see you in Montreal, the "funniest city on earth" ... according to Just for Laughs!

Twenty-Third AHSN Colloquium

School of Mines, Ballarat Campus, Federation University, Australia, February 1-3, 2017

The 23rd Colloquium of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN) will be held from February 1 to 3, 2017 at the School of Mines, Ballarat campus of the Federation University, Australia. The convener is Dr. Angus McLachlan of the Federation University. The conference theme will be *Humour: Here and There; Then and Now*. For more information, contact Angus McLachlan at a.mclachlan@federation.edu.au or visit the AHSN website at <http://www.sydney.edu.au/humourstudies>.

Seventh Texas Humor Research Conference

Dallas, Texas, USA, March 9-11, 2017

The 7th Texas Humor Research Conference invites submissions for an international multidisciplinary conference at the Dallas Downtown Center of Texas A & M University–Commerce. The conference will include paper sessions, posters, and workshops. Paper proposals can be sent to CHSSA@tamuc.edu. The submission deadline is December 31, 2016 for early submissions and January 31, 2017 for late submissions. For inquiries, contact the Conference Organizers, Christian Hempelmann at c.hempelmann@tamuc.edu or Elisa Gironzetti at elisa.gironzetti@tamuc.edu or visit <http://www.tamuc.edu/humor>.

Forty-Third Annual Meeting of The Association for the Study of Play

The Strong, Rochester, New York, USA, April 5-8, 2017

The 43rd Annual Meeting of The Association for the Study of Play will be held from April 5 to 8, 2017 at *The Strong, The National Museum of Play* in Rochester, New York, USA. The 2017 TASP Conference's theme will be *Playful Communities*. Keynotes will be Bernie De Koven, author of *The Well-Played Game*, and Montana Miller, author of *Playing Dead*. The proposal deadline is November 15, 2016. For information, contact Rick Worch at eworch@bgsu.edu or visit the TASP website at www.taspplay.org/about-us/conference.

Thirtieth Meeting of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor

Orlando, Florida, USA, April 27-30, 2017

The 30th Conference of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor will be held April 27 to 30, 2017 at the Holiday Inn, Orlando-Disney Springs, Florida, USA. The theme of the 30th AATH Conference will be *Humor: The Power of Play and Purpose*. For more information, visit the AATH Conference page at <http://www.aath.org>.

Seventeenth International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA, Romania, July 17-22, 2017

The 17th International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter will be held at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana from July 17 to July 22, 2017. Julia Rayz and Victor Raskin are the local organizers. For information, visit the summer school website at <http://humoursummerschool.org/17/>.



For more ISHS news, conference information, and 2017 membership, visit us on the web at www.humorstudies.org.

Book Reviews

Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation

Reviewed by René T. Proyer, Martin-Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin. (2013). *Play, playfulness, creativity and innovation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 166 pp. ISBN: 9781107015135.

Patrick Bateson (Professor Emeritus of Ethology, University of Cambridge) and Paul Martin (Wolfson College, Cambridge) have written an interesting book on the interplay between play, playfulness, creativity and innovation. It is of particular interest for humor scholars for reasons I will outline below. The book itself is divided into 11 chapters, including an overview of the biology and functions of play, a chapter on dreams, drugs, creativity—and a chapter on humor and playfulness.

A core of the authors' work is the differentiation between "observable play behaviour and an underlying mood state that we refer to as playfulness. 'Playfulness' is a particular positive mood state that may (or may not) be manifested in observable behaviour. Playfulness facilitates and accompanies 'playful play', a subset of broadly defined play, which is distinct from what happens in formal games, theatrical performances and so forth" (p. 2). From a psychological perspective, seeing playfulness as a mood *state* (a positive mood state in particular) rather than a stable personality trait is somewhat challenging since usually the distinction is drawn between play (the actual behavior) and playfulness, the personality trait associated with this particular type of behavior. While authors acknowledge that positive emotions facilitate the emergence of play behavior, seeing playfulness itself as a mood state has consequences for both practical applications and the study of playfulness. This view also challenges past research that located playfulness in broader trait models of personality (such as the big five personality traits). It further raises questions with respect to potential applications, such as limitations of mood induction efforts.

The notion that humans can both think playfully and act playfully (p. 5) and that there is a difference between these types of playful expressions seems important. Also, the notion that playful play (as a positive mood state) is "not always detectable in observable behaviour" (p. 13) is an important point as these less well observable expressions (thoughts and ideas, for instance) are frequently overlooked or less well studied in research on adult play and playfulness. As a distinction between creativity and innovation, the authors suggest: "In human behaviour, creativity refers broadly to generating new ideas, whereas innovation refers to changing the way in which things are done" (p. 3).

Bateson and Martin further argue that "the notion of 'playful play' is our own and is not to be found in the academic literature" (p. 3). It must be noted, however, that Bishop and Chace had already used this term in 1971. They too were interested in studying the potential contributions of play and playfulness to creativity, starting from the assumption that "the motives and processes involved in play [...] are similar to those that have been attributed to the creative process, and thus the child who experiences truly 'playful play' learns cognitive and behavioral processes that enhance his creative potential" (p. 321). Bishop and Chace further argued for studying the "playfulness of play" and mentioned "playful play environments" that may be helpful in facilitating creativity.

The basic mechanism described by Bateson and Martin is that “creativity is about breaking away from established patterns. [...] Play is also about breaking away from established patterns and combining actions or thoughts in new ways. Play is an effective mechanism, therefore, for encouraging creativity and hence facilitating innovation” (p. 45). The authors present a broad variety of examples of play in animals and this reviewer sees these sections as the strongest in the book. They make the important argument that basic mechanisms of play and playfulness are observable in animals, a point that is frequently overlooked in other literature. However, the line of argumentation is less well-developed for play in humans. Studies conducted in the realm of humor research seems to be missing; for example, McGhee’s work on humor-based interventions, his notion of humor being a variant of play, and his emphasis on re-discovering play and playfulness in adult life would have fit well (McGhee 1996). Also, research in psychology on the links between creativity, innovation, and playfulness directly is under-represented.

The chapter “Humour and playfulness” (about 7 pages) will be of greatest interest to readers of this journal. It starts with the assertion that “humorous people often behave playfully and playful people tend to have a good sense of humour. At face value, play and humour are connected” (p. 103). Obviously, the authors use “humour” and “sense of humour” synonymously—and in the conclusion they highlight the similarities between playful play and the generation (!) of humor. Humor scholars would probably wish for a clearer distinction of terms for the different facets of humor at this point. The authors list similarities between humor and playfulness by pointing to Darwin (1877) and Lieberman (1977) (who integrates the “sense of humor” into her model of playfulness along with spontaneity and manifest joy). This section of the chapter ends with the question of what the relationship is between play, playfulness, humor, and creativity.

The other sections in this chapter are: “Jokes,” “What generates humour,” “Humour and laughter,” “Humor as a signal,” “Humour and well-being,” and “Humour and playfulness”. The literature summarized in this chapter will appeal differently to humor scholars. For example, mentioning Wiseman’s search for the world’s most popular joke may be a joke for humor scholars in itself, while referring to Forabosco’s 1992 work on incongruity will sound more familiar. Nevertheless, the selection of the literature reported is somewhat superficial. In particular, the strong reliance on Provine’s (2001) popular book on laughter suggests that the reservations expressed by humor researchers about Provine’s work (Martin 2003; Ruch 2002) have not yet received widespread currency. Those more familiar with humor research will be disappointed with this chapter because it lacks clear distinctions and it does not provide a full overview of the research in the field. Nevertheless, pointing to the interplay of humor and play/playfulness is a strength of this book and may generate further study of this relationship.

This reviewer’s general assessment of the book is positive because it advocates for the importance of play and playfulness in adult life. It is written in a highly accessible and interesting style. The authors have done a great job in summarizing the literature on the biological aspects and roots of play in the animal kingdom, but a stronger emphasis on the literature in humor studies would have been desirable.

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Off the Mic: The World's Best Stand-Up Comedians Get Serious about Comedy

Reviewed by Patrice Oppliger, Boston University

Deborah Frances-White and Marsha Shandur. (2015). *Off the Mic: The World's Best Stand-Up Comedians Get Serious about Comedy*. London: Bloomsbury. 290 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4725-2638-0.

There are numerous stand-up comedy books on the market. Titles promise to teach readers “How to start” in stand-up (MacLean, 2012), “How to do” comedy (Jay, 2013), and “How to be” a professional comedian (Cavalli, 2013). Many books attempt to capture the attention of aspiring comedians using self-ordained titles declaring they are “The Best Book” (DeVoll & Nainan, 2011) and “Ultimate Guide” (Cook, 2015). Authors teach comedy from “Bibles” (Carter, 2001; McKim & Skene 2011) and assure success in “1 Week” (Young, 2014) simply by following “3 Essential Tips” (Hall, 2015) or “20 Steps to Glory” (Larson, 2013).

In *Off the Mic*, Deborah Frances-White and Marsha Shandur present a fresh look at stand-up comedy through thoughtful observations and anecdotes rather than the standard list of often repeated “pearls of wisdom” and formulaic how-to structure found in the previously referenced books. Frances-White contributes introductory essays in each chapter while Shandur’s role is interviewing the comedians. Frances-White does not encourage readers to merely ape successful stand-up comedians, rather she writes in the introduction, “My essays throughout are not about how they do it, but about how you might.” Her advice to newcomers suggests realistic goals such as, “Your aim is not to be [immediately] good at stand-up. Why would you be good at it? It would be weird if you were – you’ve never done it.”

At the beginning of each chapter, Frances-White includes essays recounting her personal experiences of performing improv and stand-up comedy over the past two decades. The majority of the text is made up of interviews with professionals who offer “serious” insights into comedy, as the title promises. The involvement of 46 comedians representing a range of age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and country of origin is quite impressive (e.g., Orny Adams, Hannibal Buress, Margaret Cho, Nat Luurtsema, Jenny Éclair, and Lewis Black). The length of the comedians’ responses vary from three lines to more than 70 lines of text and are clearly denoted with bold typeface text and two-sided, thin gray borders.

Like many of the other books on the market, this one begins with writing exercises. Where Frances-White diverts from authors of strict how-to books that prescribe a strict list of processes to be followed, she encourages readers to do what works for them. In Chapter 1, comedians share where they find their inspiration, ranging from real life experiences, dreams, and childhood obsessions to ideas that simply “popped into their heads.” Many humorous stories come from painful experiences or confessions of comedians’ fears and shortcomings. Nat Luurtsema disclosed how falling in love nearly killed her comedy career because it was harder for her to write jokes when she was happy. Readers are given insight into comedians’ struggles regarding whether or not to use jokes of questionable taste that cross personal moral boundaries simply for the sake of getting laughs.

Chapter 2 covers comic material, or as Frances-White puts it, how “an idea become[s] a joke.” She notes that in the beginning, young comedians are often too quick to abandon ideas and too slow to say no to extraneous or unfunny material. Performers are encouraged to listen to recordings of their sets and use audience feedback to revise material. Included in the chapter are descriptions of comedians’ idiosyncratic creative processes, such as where they write and how they write (e.g., even the type of pen and size of the notepaper they use). What I found to be the most interesting part of the chapter, if not the entire book, was the inclusion of how comics utilize (or avoid) new forms of comedy delivery such as blogging, podcasting, and posting on Twitter.

The development of a comic’s stage presence or persona is addressed in Chapter 3. Frances-White reports that comedians often identify an authentic part of themselves and play it up, much like a caricaturist exaggerates a dominant physical feature in comic drawings. She addresses the conundrum with which young comedians often grapple: the risk of being called an imitator if they are too much like everyone else and the converse risk of alienating the audience by being too different. A major strength of the chapter is an in-depth analysis of whether performers find a comic identity or does it find them? The chapter covers details from the appropriate level of vocal energy to where one stands in relation to the microphone. Chapter

4, “Structuring Your Set,” includes discussions of framing, rhetorical, or bridging devices. Interviewees debate a range of topics such as how to best memorize a set and whether to tell the best joke first or save it for last. Frances-White cleverly sums up the theme of the chapter with the declaration, “Comedians bring a lot of preparation to making this look effortless.”

Part Two of the book centers on the performance. Chapter 5 “Getting Started” is aptly subtitled “Learning to die before learning to fly.” I enjoyed the honesty of successful comedians who described how past failures became part of their journey. Developing one’s comedy is the focus of Chapter 6. Frances-White explains how professionals move from “just doing comedy” to “doing comedy well.” Comedian interviews contain guidance on how to handle criticism and unsolicited feedback. Frances-White shares the difficulties of the profession and advises performers to quit comedy unless they simply “can’t not do it.”

Part Three addresses mastering more than the basics, such as establishing one’s presence on stage and recovering from the unexpected. In Chapter 7, the discussion of “owning the room” circles back to previous advice regarding adopting a persona, establishing status, and dealing with hecklers. Comedians disclose details of how they command a room by moving around the stage and actually leaning forward to engage the audience. Humorous stories are included about how performers deal with texting and drunk audience members. Difficult scenarios like these disrupt what Frances-White refers to as “best-laid plans” in Chapter 8. Professionals share their strategies for instilling fear in the audience, delivering rehearsed comebacks when confronted with hecklers, or, as Lewis Black advises, letting disruptive audience members talk until they hang themselves. The final section on lifestyle focuses on professional comedians’ stress and the loneliness of being on the road.

Off the Mic’s biggest strength is that it addresses comedy at a deeper level than the average “how to write a joke” manual. The advantage of combining the proficiency of a professional interviewer and the experience of a seasoned comedian is apparent throughout the book. Frances-White credits her co-author Shandur’s skills as an interviewer for extracting information from individuals of which they themselves might not be conscious. The comedians come across as sincere in that their responses are free of the superficial clichés and canned answers likely given for a publicity or entertainment piece.

Perhaps my greatest disappointment in the book was that Frances-White did not contribute more to the discussion. While her chapter introductions were very insightful, more consistency in the quantity and quality of segues between interviews and extended commentaries at the end of the chapters would have been helpful. Each chapter concluded not with a summary comparing and contrasting content of the interviews but with a separate, extended conversation with a comedian, in most cases having little to do with the topic at hand (e.g., a 22-page exchange between Phill Jupitus and Eddie Izzard). One topic that could have greatly benefited from extended input was the struggles of female comedians. Chapter 3 concluded with very moving interviews with Sara Pascoe and Jenny Eclair who discuss the challenges and double standards they have experienced as women. Without a more sophisticated analysis, the issue is presented as a problem for individual female comedians rather than as systemic gender discrimination.

Overall, *Off the Mic* is a good read for those who enjoy comedy, whether or not they have any intention of performing. At times I forgot I was reading as a reviewer, getting lost in the rich and humorous storytelling. The anecdotes are amusing and the lessons of perseverance, following one’s passion, dealing with failure and criticism can be applied to other facets of life. Although not written for humor scholars (per the absence of citations or footnotes), the interviews offer valuable insights into the creation of humor.

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Why Stand-Up Matters

Reviewed by Christopher Molineux, Brunel University

Sophie Quirk. (2015). *Why Stand-up Matters. How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*. London: Bloomsbury. 246 pp. ISBN: 9781472578952.

Stand-up comedy is a 95-5 business: 5% of the people earn 95% of the money. The general public is aware of the image of the impoverished up-and-coming comedian alongside the contrasting image of comedians such as Peter Kay, Louis CK and Michael McIntyre merrily sifting their way through their millions made through mirth, but in the world of stand-up comedy money is not the only measure. There is a great striving among many comedians to somehow be meaningful in order to avoid the corrosive fate of simply being considered a joke. In some cases they reveal this by clambering up to some self-defined moral high ground and convincing themselves that their failure to raise laughs is merely a sign of their great profundity. In a more limited and cherished number of cases though, there are comedians who have a genuine desire to effect some type of social or political change and possess the comedic ability to convey their ideas in an engaging and powerful manner. In her 200 or so well organised pages Sophie Quirk gives a detailed tour of this particular section of the world of stand-up comedy and applies a very able analysis to numerous aspects of the comedy of influence.

The subject of the potential effects of stand-up on people's thoughts and behaviour is a very broad one encapsulating numerous sociological, performative, psychological and historical elements, but Quirk has managed to shrink things down to a manageable size by limiting her analysis almost entirely to British performers from the last 20 years, her strongest emphasis being on a small number of political and issue-oriented comedians such as Stewart Lee and Mark Thomas. While the platform may lack a degree of breadth, her analysis certainly shows commendable depth, and she confidently cites many of the standard suspects in the discipline of comedy studies, Morreall and Bergson to name but two, as well as adding numerous interviews, performances and internet related material which all combine to make the work feel balanced and well researched. Her style is predominantly academic but still reads fairly smoothly, and she includes many passages where comedy material is examined and quoted, so helping to infuse extra levity into the proceedings. The book covers everything from the micro-manipulation that goes on in performance to the manipulative aspects of the stand-up environment(s), and it also investigates specific documented examples of influence that have occurred. The material weaves its way through issues such as race, gender, politics and political correctness and also gives an analytical nod to the more innocent comedy stylings of folk such as Eddie Izzard.

Any readers of the book who are not familiar with British stand-up in the last 20 years will have to do a fair amount of YouTube referencing in order to get a real feel for the comedians who are cited. Indeed I would recommend the same strategy for *any* reader, in order that they acquire a better grasp of the subject and getting a few laughs along the way never hurts either. *Why Stand-Up Matters* is an excellent book in particular for anyone seeking to gain a deeper understanding of stand-up comedy's potential to effect a change in people's attitudes and behaviour. Its conclusions are not beyond question or criticism, but unassailable conclusions are about as rare as dry oceans. I would have liked to have gleaned some information on topics like the changing historical attitudes towards comedy's influence on social and political events, the role of influence in personal, non-political domains, plus some comparisons between different nations and cultures, but at such points I suppose I am not really complaining, but simply suggesting the idea of a sequel. Why not?It worked pretty well for Rowling.

Humor, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria

Reviewed by Edward Freeman, Paris, France

Ebenezer Obadare. (2016). *Humor, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria.* (Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora v.69) Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, Suffolk: University of Rochester Press and Boydell & Brewer. 188 pp. ISBN: 9781580465519.

This is a very ambitious book of a primarily sociological nature and a challenge for readers not trained in that discipline, witness the very first sentences of the Introduction: “This book is intended as a critical meditation on the subject of civil society. It is not a description of contemporary civil society or the civil landscape in Nigeria. It is an attempt to think with [sic] the subject, that is, civil society.” Fortunately Professor Obadare’s purpose is announced (slightly) less hermetically at the bottom of the same page: “...the two illustrative chapters in the book – on humor and silence, respectively – are most fruitfully approached in a heuristic spirit, meaning as examples tendered not with any hope of analytic finality but as a way of suggesting and opening up new discursive vistas. I hold up and analyze humor and silence respectively as two instances (others exist) of informal strategies of resistance outside rigid associational formats.” Put simply (and there is great need for that in his book), the author is discussing two options for ordinary Nigerian citizens, many of whom are immensely poor and deprived. How should they respond, if at all, to the corrupt, cynical and incompetent tyrants who rule them, usually as a result of a succession of military putsches?

The first of the proposed alternatives, survival by recourse to humor, is pinpointed at the outset of the Chapter “The Uses of Levity” when Obadare borrows the following quotation from Mark C. Taylor’s *Field Notes from Elsewhere, Reflections on Dying and Living*: “The greatest levity is found in moments of the most profound gravity.... When life’s darkest moments cast a shadow over all that had seemed important, the faithful response is to burst into uncontrollable laughter.” The author demonstrates that humor in all its forms, ranging from traditional masquerades and dancing to satirical cartoons and stand-up comedy, has always had a big audience in Africa, and not just in Nigeria (take for example Zimbabwe, where anti-Mugabe jokes are criminalized).

In fact politicians themselves, even while ripping off their fellow citizens, pocketing the country’s oil revenues and sending in their riot police against protesters, are expected to be funny, jokiness and jocularity being prerequisites for high office (together with physical bulk: no-one votes for a skinny person, I might add). This creates amazing paradoxes. Obadare observes that General Idiagbon was severely criticized for his generally unsmiling demeanour, and gives him no credit whatsoever for telling the absolute truth about the country’s parlous economic situation: “When pressed by journalists as to the defiant severity of his countenance, Idiagbon famously [sic] replied that the precarious situation of the Nigerian state hardly called for laughter.” So one wonders how on earth Winston Churchill got away with his epic call for blood, sweat and tears without at the same time making a few jokes about Hitler’s moustache and Goering’s belly being full of sauerkraut (and did Goebbels have one, two or ‘no ++++s at all?’).

So what makes Nigerians laugh to palliate their miserable condition? The section starts not too well, perhaps, with a long list of a President’s wife’s blundering attempts to address the people in English. Some readers might question the tastefulness or otherwise of mocking Dame Patience Jonathan (wife of President Goodluck Jonathan) in this way: after all, English is not her native language (I’m just glad the mocker was not a Brit). Our response might be similarly ambivalent to the section “State of a Thousand Laughs” where the author makes it clear that in Nigeria there has been an “explosion in the number of stand-up comics” and in the humor industry generally, and then provides a long series of the jokes of such as Ali Baba, Basket Mouth, Klint da Drunk and many others. Some of these are very funny, even witty; some, it must be admitted, are highly sexist; some are non-specific to Nigerian dictators or even African politics at all and could be heard in any English public bar or American Donald-Trump-all-boys-together-in-the-locker-room setting, and might thus offend some readers of *The Humorous Times*. So nothing new there then. Eat your heart out, Bakhtin theorists; and Bergson’s eyes would certainly be watering. (Both are referred to in the immense and impressive bibliography, but only briefly in the text.)

“Siddon look” is the mysterious title of the chapter concerning the alternative resistance strategy, namely silence. Obadare explains that the term is a corruption of ‘sit down and look’ in Nigerian Pidgin English and “is intended to convey a subject’s deliberate physical and moral distancing from (but not

necessarily apathy toward) something, someone else, or a social scenario... Tanda look, that is, ‘stand and look’, connotes a similar spatial and moral distantiation” (p.132). Sitting and standing are all very well, but it would be interesting to know whether there is a pidgin version of ‘take-one-look-then-run-like-hell’, an amply understandable response for many oppressed ordinary Nigerians unwilling to share the fate of one Musibau Olatunji in 1996. He was not spatially distanced enough from riot police while taking part in a pro-democracy rally and was blinded in both eyes when they opened fire.

Before him, hundreds had been far unluckier, losing their lives in the protests against the Babangida régime around 1993, or being forced into exile, most notably of course Wole Soyinka, Nigeria’s Nobel Prize laureate. This chapter is in fact a detailed (and as such, valuable) political history of this strife-torn period, and it is only at the end of it that the author remembers he is meant to be persuading us that contemptuous silence, whether sitting or standing, can be an effective form of resistance to tyranny. Meanwhile he is sufficiently lucid (and impressively authoritative on all the associated scholarship) to voice doubts against his own case. This reviewer, present in Nigeria during the Biafran War, an infinitely worse period in the country’s recent history, shares those doubts and can commend the author for his honesty in admitting to them.

Molière et le Théâtre Arabe: Réception Molièresque et Identités Nationales Arabes

Reviewed by Edward Still, St Catherine’s College, Oxford University

Angela Daiana Langone (2016). *Molière et le théâtre arabe: Réception molièresque et identités nationales arabes*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. 332 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-044234-2.

Among the myriad legacies of the work of “le monstre sacré de la comédie” (p.27), its contribution to the development of Arab national theatres is an aspect upon which relatively few have had the pleasure of alighting. Langone addresses this deficit, building upon previous more wide-reaching scholarship conducted on Arab theatre by critics such as Hamadi Ben Halima, Monica Ruocco and Nada Tomiche, by focusing specifically on the impact of Molière’s work on Mediterranean Arab milieux. Langone’s central contention is that, contrary to the assessment of Mieke Kolk that a “Molièrization” of Arab theatre can be equated with “the de-politization of the theatrical discourse” (p.11), the work of the French playwright served and continues to serve dramaturges in the Machrek and the Maghreb with material ripe with political potential. Accordingly, she divides her study into four parts, each focusing on a play that can be interpreted as a marker of one of the four stages in Clifford Geertz’s theory of nationalist development as outlined in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Thus the reader is introduced in succession to Marun Naqqas’ *al-Bahil* [The Miser], Ya’qub Sannu’s *Mulyir Misr wa-ma yuqashih* [Molière of Egypt and what he endures], Noureddine Kasabaoui’s *al-Marisal* [The Marshal], and Taïeb Saddiki’s *Molière ou « Pour l’amour de l’humanité »* [Molière or “For the love of Humanity”]. Langone presents a clearly structured, scientific approach to the texts which permits an easy digestion of the points that she wishes to make. For example, in her introduction she lists the formal aspects for comparison that she will be approaching and dutifully fulfills each self-imposed requirement as the study progresses. At the same time she provides ample context to the works and the authors that she investigates, supplying autobiographical and historical material whose more discursive nature contrasts pleasantly with her rigorous analyses. Moreover, Langone encourages her reader to form a personal engagement with her corpus and opens her study to a wider readership by including translated versions in her appendices, a valuable undertaking given that the first three texts were previously available only in their respective Arabics.

Returning to the study’s Geertzian framework, Langone’s first chapter, (listed as chapter 2, after the introduction), deals with Naqqas’ reworking of Molière’s *L’Avare*, elucidating the challenges presented by his attempt to introduce a foreign art form into the Lebanese cultural sphere, whilst illuminating those aspects of the play that support a link with a nationalist “prise de conscience”. Langone explains that 19th century Arab nationalism, here analogised with the work of a Christian playwright, depended more on a shared linguistic heritage than on any religious association and she demonstrates how Naqqas’ play not only enacts a socio-linguistic renaissance, bringing classical Arabic to life on the stage, but also deploys language to humorously subvert colonial hierarchies by undermining the capacity of its Ottoman figures to speak good Fusha.

Moving to an Egyptian locale, chapter three highlights how Ya'qub Sannu's play represents a clear rejection both of British influence in the country and of its support by local political power. *Mulyir Misr wa-ma yuqasih* borrows from its hypotext, Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, by representing the staging of a play within the diegesis, thus alluding to the need for nationalist organisation. It also borrows from Molière's personal and combative approach by satirically featuring contemporary figures opposed to the establishment and expansion of Arab theatre, such as Sannu's bête noire, Draneht Pacha, an impresario heavily invested in the success of European theatre in Egypt. Here Langone also touches on a repeated point of interest in her work, namely the fraught question of women's participation. Sannu is cited as the first Arab to employ the term "la 'iba" [actrice], because he was the first to introduce women to the stage, teaching Jewish and Christian Arab women to read, write, and perform in his plays.

The analyses of Noureddine Kasabaoui's *al-Marisal* focus on a more conciliatory, didactic potential in Molière's work as his 1967 adaptation of *Le Maréchal* seeks to contribute to the symbolic settlement of the post-colonial Tunisian nation state. Interesting here is how Langone dissects Kasabaoui's use of the different dialects of Arabic present in contemporary Tunisia, her attention to linguistic detail being notable throughout the book. For Langone, this usage allows Kasabaoui to better represent the linguistic plurality of the country, to perform important social commentary, and to produce humour, as stereotypes are manipulated and played with.

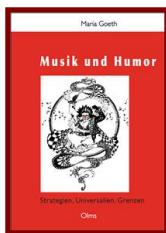
Finally, in her work on the Moroccan playwright Taïeb Saddiki and his play *Molière ou « Pour l'amour de l'humanité »*, Langone demonstrates how, through a combination of both Moliéresque humanism and anti-clerical humour with traditional autochthonous theatrical forms and practices, Saddiki created a new play which, following Geertz's fourth stage, seeks to ameliorate and normalise interior and foreign relations. The chapter mindfully addresses the play's poignant dedication to the Algerian dramaturge Abdelkader Alloula, assassinated in an act of terror during Algeria's "black decade" of the 1990s, and its attempt to oppose the forces of monoculturalism and extremism.

Langone's study is admirably accessible and lucid, impressive in its depth of research, and engaging in her palpable commitment to a belief in the transformative nature of theatre, and it is certainly a shame for Anglophone readers that her text is currently only available in French. A revised edition might, however, seek to enrich its analyses of Molière's influence on Arab nationalism and theatre by problematising its own Geertzian framework, as the clearly delineated stages of nationalism do not always appear to tally precisely with the nature of the plays dealt with. Perhaps an expansion on the work of Alloula would also be valuable in order to complement her writing on Saddiki and complete her analyses of the theatre of the francophone Maghreb. These suggestions notwithstanding, her book makes an important contribution to the study of literary and theatrical form in the Arab world, along with their political implications, whilst it will also be intriguing for the non-specialist in postcolonialism, in particular for admirers of Molière's theatre.

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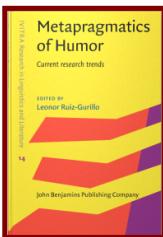
Recent Publications



Musik und Humor

Maria Goeth (2016). *Musik und Humor*. Hildesheim, Germany: Olms. 360 pp. ISBN: 978-3-487-15426-8

From the Publisher: Over the centuries composers have used a wide variety of original strategies in the attempt to make players and audiences laugh. The author maps out a profound system of the possibilities of musical humour, which range from modified single notes to large-scale parodic works. Based on a specially devised theory of appropriateness, the book immerses us in the historical discourse surrounding the feasibility and perceived value of musical humour, outlines the issues of reception and illustrates the general problems of researching humour. The focus of the study is the first comprehensive taxonomy of strategies for creating humour within music – with many musical examples from a range of periods, styles and genres.



Metapragmatics of Humor

Leonor Ruiz-Gurillo, Editor (2016). *Metapragmatics of Humor*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins. 301 pp. ISBN 978-9-027-26637-8

From the Publisher: *Metapragmatics of Humor: Current research trends* contributes to a new area in the pragmatics of humor: its conception as a metapragmatic ability. The book collects thirteen chapters organized into three parts: Revisions and applications of General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) in a metapragmatic context; Metapragmatic awareness of humor across textual modes; and metapragmatic practices within the acquisition of humor. Thus, this book provides an up-to-date panorama of this field, where metapragmatic abilities are described in adults as well as in children, on humorous and non-humorous genres—jokes, cartoons, humorous monologues, parodies, conversation, Twitter—and using several approaches, such as GTVH, multimodality, conversational analysis, eye-tracking methodology, etc.

Recent Articles in Humor Studies

The Humorous Times announces recent articles from *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* and by researchers who publish elsewhere within humor studies. The following list, compiled by the ISHS Executive Secretary, includes humor studies articles published since September 2016. If you have a recent publication, let us know. We will include it in a future newsletter.

- Al-Momani, K., Muhammad A. Badarneh, M. A., & Migdadi, F. (2016). A semiotic analysis of political cartoons in Jordan in light of the Arab Spring. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 29(4), 507-538. doi: 10.1515/humor-2016-005.
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