

John London and Gabriel Sansano (eds), *Acting Funny on the Catalan Stage: El teatre comic en català (1900–2016)*

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The three principal theories of humour constitute the point of departure for this volume, a first concentrated attempt to analyse Catalan theatre through a comic lens, with essays presented in both English and Catalan. As for the theories themselves —namely, the Superiority Theory, encapsulated by Hobbes as the “sudden glory” of laughter provoked by “the apprehension of some deformed thing in another,” whereby, in a theatrical metaphor, those who laugh “suddenly applaud themselves”; the Relief or Release Theory, according to which laughter, in Freud’s terms, serves to lift an “inhibition”; and the Incongruity Theory, whereby laughter arises when we perceive something absurd and, as Kant has it, undergo an expectation suddenly reduced to nothing— none of them, whether considered in isolation or concatenated, appears fully apt to define national and linguistic contexts, questions which are, rather, crosswise addressed in the scope of this study.

Although the volume’s temporal framework concludes in 2016 —being published in 2022— its grounding in the concepts of Comedy and Nation in relation to Catalan theatre has, nearly a decade later, acquired renewed and contentious significance. Following the critical juncture of the Catalan *Procés* —organized by the Catalan Government on October 1, 2017, and oriented toward claims of self-determination and secession from Spain, which only concluded in 2022— the question posed by London and Sansano is remarkably insightful: how can one possibly discuss the identity of a nation without political independence, particularly in relation to a genre in which every sentiment can invert itself, as shown by the three main theories of humour that consistently trace the shifting of emotions from one extreme to another? The argument is articulated through the criteria of comic form, performative innovation, and socio-political function, which recur throughout all chapters of the book. With regard to collective Catalan identity, it should be noted that successful parody flatters its audience, requires identification with the parodist, and provides at least the illusion of revealing the truth —a paradox that has persisted for miscellaneous audiences throughout Catalan history and which is mirrored in its dramatization and staging.

By organising the book into three parts, different aspects of the function of humour on stage can be analysed. The first part, “Reception and Influences” provides a view of how Catalan theatre has assessed, adapted, and performed pre-existing texts or techniques, both Catalan and non-Catalan. The second part of the book, “Textual Strategies” focuses on the comic techniques of plays written directly in Catalan, rather

than the influences on them or the way productions may have interpreted them. The third part, “Acting Humour,” places the emphasis firmly on the performers who create comedy on stage. The chapters covertly exploit the ambiguity of the English title of the book, absent from the Catalan: acting funny is behaving strangely as well as (and with the purpose of) provoking laughter.

The opening section of the study, then, is structured around four chapters: “Comic and Catalan?: The *Commedia dell’Arte* in Catalonia in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries” by David George; “*The (First) Story of Esther* and *The Court of King Ahasuerus*” by Maria Moreno i Domènech; “Dario Fo in Catalonia: The Case of *Accidental Deth of an Anarchist*” by Enric Gallen; and “Humour and the Absurd: Brossian Theatres” by Hector Mellinas, the last three of which are written in Catalan. Three chapters, all written in English, then form the structural basis of the study’s middle section: “Beyond Carpanta: Humour in the Plays of Josep Escobar” by Rhiannon McClade; “Comedy in French Catalonia: Adventures in Mockery and Self-Mockery” by John London; and “Strategies for Comedy in Plays by Contemporary Catalan Woman” by Isabel Marcillas-Piquer. The study’s final section comprises four chapters, two in Catalan and two in English: “Joaquin Montero i Delgado: Passages an Intersections” by Núria Santamaria; “Power, Politics, and Comic Theatre: Political Satire as Dissidence in *La torna* and *Ubú president* by Els Joglars” by Simon Breden; “The Pedagogical Influence of Jackes Lecoq on the Contemporary Catalan Stage: The Acting Dramaturgy of Sergi López and Toni Albà” by Martí B. Fons Sastre; and, to put the finishing touch to the book, “Xavi Castillo and Pot de Plom: Between Transgression and Political Satire (1985–2015)” by Gabriel Sansano, a chapter that closes the circle, as the book’s cover features the actor Xavi Castillo with one of his archetypal plungers—a photograph copyrighted in 2016 by his own company, Pot de Plom.

As is distilled throughout the volume, comedy, understood as a theatrical event intended for an audience that must comprehend it, identify with it, laugh at it, and applaud it, does not depend solely on the text but also, inevitably, on gesture.

Given the situation of the Catalan language’s perpetual vulnerability and its constant struggle not to be overwhelmed by Castilian—to the point of surrender and extinction— or by French in Northern Catalonia, as is the case in the works examined by John London in his analysis of the history of Catalan theatre, it is the combination of what is termed “dramatic literature” in convergence with the idiosyncrasy of artistic stage personalities that has shaped the originality of a body of authors, directors, and actors.

Taken as a whole, this study reveals how, within a Catalan-speaking geolinguistic sphere—which extends beyond Catalonia, for the first time within a single project, to embrace País Valencià and various towns in Roussillon, France— there unfolds, in a

rigorous yet engaging and attractive panorama, a selection of comic theatrical productions from the history of Catalan theatre which need not be confined within political borders.

Through this selection of retrospective stagings, the political evolution of a culture is traced, and from it emerges its thought. One observes both the adoption of canonical theatrical conventions and the constraints of what is politically correct, followed, as a natural consequence—given the censorship to which this culture and its thought have been subjected—by their brave transgression. Indeed, intermittently yet persistently, within the theoretical framework of the study, censorship has shaped both of the converging strands on which comedy rests: dramatic literature and stage dramaturgy, built from the silent, visual remnants of gesture, action, and the charisma of its creators. Therefore, this convergence—indispensable in all theatrical cultures when raising a text to the stage with the aim of emancipating it from the page and turning it into a successful performance, both at the box office and in critical reception—has, in the case of Catalan comic theatre, arisen in some instances from iconic masterworks of world theatre, but more often from the self-made artistry of its creators. This has endowed *Acting Funny on the Catalan Stage* with a richness and an idiosyncrasy that become manifest in each and every case addressed in this book.

In this regard, on behalf of Catalan theatre, we extend our gratitude to the editors, John London and Gabriel Sansano, together with all the contributors to the volume, for having brought to light and affirmed the value of Catalonia's contribution to European culture.

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