

Book review

London, John & Gabriel Sansano (2022). *Acting Funny on the Catalan Stage. El teatre còmic en català (1900-2016)*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

This book provides the first comprehensive overview on comedic Catalan theatre, so influenced by the particularities of time, politics, and regionalities. The introduction provides the reader with an overview of humour studies and the contextuality-dependent relation between comedy and nation, a very relevant aspect of Catalan comedy. The editors also preface the criteria that characterise Catalan comedy, more or less explicitly stated in the chapters. The introduction also provides the reader with the historical development of Catalan theatre from its beginning in the 15th century to the end of the 1990s. The book is divided into three sections: ‘Reception and Influences’, ‘Textual Strategies’ and ‘Acting Humour’, thus providing a cohesive account of the material. The following pages will provide the most relevant aspects of each chapter, as well as their strongest points.

Chapter 1, “Comic and Catalan?: The *Commedia dell’arte* in Catalonia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” by David George, is concerned with questioning the national boundaries of the *commedia*, as it is a “multi-faceted, multi-generic, international phenomenon” (p. 46). Originating in Italy and then moving through France with some adaptations, *commedia* arrived at Barcelona’s emblematic *Paral·lel* theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Given its internationalisation and the characteristics of the *commedia*, George questions the limits between this genre being purely comic, or purely Catalan. To explore this, the author analyses a play by Apelles Mestres, *Blanch sobre Blanch* (1924), and two pieces by Joan Brossa. George is successful in showing the relation between the *commedia* and these plays and in disputing the internationalisation of the genre. Perhaps, this insightful chapter would have been easier to follow had it been divided into separate sections, a feature which is generally lacking in the book, as pointed out above.

In Chapter 2, “Primera història d’Esther i La corta del rey Assuero” [The (first) story of Esther and the court of King Ahasuerus], Maria Moreno i Domenech compares two plays related to what has been coined as *gènere chico*, that is, a performative and lyrical Spanish genre which utilises grotesque elements of real life and “uses slang and popular registers to create a mordant satire” (p. 67). The author questions how audience members can be amused by certain scenes in the Catalan piece *Primera història d’Esther* (Salvador Espriu, 1948, performed in 1957) as it represents problematic aspects of society. After providing some necessary contextual background, Moreno i Domenech compares *Primera història d’Esther* with Spanish play *La corte del rey Assuero*. The author provides a detailed analysis of linguistic, thematical and structural similarities between both pieces, which play with the audience’s knowledge, their expectations of lower and higher classes, accompanied by serious reflections on their conditions.

In Chapter 3, “Dario Fo a Catalunya: el cas de *Mort accidental d’un anarquista*” [Dario Fo in Catalonia: The case of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*], by Enric Gallén, we return to the internationalisation of theatre and its mutability through space and time. Gallén focuses on *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (Dario Fo, 1970), performed professionally for the first time in Catalonia in 1981. There was a political motivation for the performance, as the director and

the company were interested in promoting politically compromised theatre, considering Spain and Catalonia's situation after Franco's death. Gallén focuses his analysis on the critical reception of the play throughout these decades, and he favourably shows the influence of the country's social situation on the play's reviews. The critics' interest shifted from the nature of the play in the 1980s, to the performance of the cast, leaving aside political intentions in the 1990s, to a concern with the social motivations behind the play at the beginning of the 21st century.

In Chapter 4, "Humor absurd: escenes brossianes" [Humour and the absurd: Brossian theatres], Héctor Mellinas deals with the possible categorisation of Joan Brossa's plays as part of the Theatre of the Absurd, an avant-garde phenomenon of 'illogical' performances that emerged in the 20th century in Europe. First, Mellinas well establishes the limits between the theoretical concepts of *comicalness* and *humour*, following Luigi Pirandello (2013). The former establishes an "opposition, a reaction to a grotesque stimulus, incoherent with the horizon of expectations" (p. 102). Humour, on the other hand, depends on a reflection on the part of the audience, which, considering individual stances, "might lead to laughter" (p. 102). The theoretical implications of this division are relevant and well-argued by the author. Mellinas then analyses several Brossa's plays throughout the years, and concludes by stating that, in the playwright's theatre, humour exists as a response to an ideological and civil responsibility rather than to the existentialist motivation that permeated the Theatre of the Absurd.

Chapter 5, "Beyond Carpanta: Humour in the plays of Josep Escobar", by Rhiannon McGlade, inaugurates the section on 'Textual Strategies'. In it, the author presents an analysis of psychological and linguistic humour in the plays of Catalan cartoonist Josep Escobar Saliente. Besides his remarkable status as an artist of political satire, Escobar also delved into theatre later in his life. McGlade briefly introduces the reader to Escobar, pinpointing his most relevant accomplishments, and then moves to an overview of her approach to humour. McGlade continues with the analysis of *Assaig general* (1957), performed in Catalan under "the protective umbrella of the Catholic Church" (p. 118), a detail which gives the reader an important contextualisation cue for the status of Catalan at the time. McGlade provides a clear, step-by-step analysis of the humorous mechanisms of the play, linking them to Escobar's cartooning, helping the reader understand the relevance of the artist's work. The author also comprehensively examines another play next, *A dos quarts de set, repte!* (1960), and the piece *L'altra cara de la lluna* (1965) in the same fashion. By studying these three plays and drawing parallelisms between them and Escobar's cartooning, McGlade shows this artists' creativity and his ability to transmute from one medium to another.

Chapter 6, "Comedy in French Catalonia: Adventures of mockery and self-mockery", by John London, begins with a necessary historical overview of French Catalonia, an understudied Catalan-speaking region. London situates the period of analyses in the 1970s, as the comedies written then were part of a "new cultural awareness" (p. 150). However, they were neglected in the biggest spheres of theatre due to a power imbalance between peninsular Catalan and the French region. First, London uses two short plays by Jaume Llong, *Un conseller municipal, content i enganyat* (1971) and *En Gregori fa el partatge* (1973), to show the close relation between the creation of jokes and Catalan. Then, the author moves on to another playwright, Pere Guisset, and his play *Allà dalt* (1974), utilising Catalan identity and language in comedic theatre differently. Guisset's *Hem de casar en Baptista* (1974), analysed later in the chapter, employs intergenerational difference of language and cultural aspects to create humour. Lastly, London also puts forward the play *El vi de l'Anton* (1977), by Josep Tolzà, which uses verbal and physical humour to show a politically compromised reality. By analysing these plays so thoroughly, London places French Catalonia on the map of Catalan humour studies and shows an underlying "bilingual knowledge" (p. 158) in their creation of humour.

In Chapter 7, “Strategies for comedy in plays by contemporary Catalan women”, Isabel Marcillas-Piquer analyses the comical devices employed in several plays by five contemporary, Catalan women, Ruth Vilar, Cristina Clemente, Gemma Rodríguez, Beth Escudé and Mercè Sarrias. This is an outstanding topic in the book in and of itself, as the other chapters only study male Catalan-speaking comedians. Marcillas-Piquer begins by didactically delimiting her theoretical approach, to then move on to the analysis, in which she finds common points between the playwrights, such as the absurdity in their representation of everyday life events (*L’espedaçament*, Vilar; *Vombodí vs. Praga*, Clemente; *Quebec-Barcelona*, Sarrias) and the denunciation of serious social issues through black humour (*35.4 Estem quedant fatal*, Rodríguez) or irony (*Aurora de Gollada*, Escudé). These pieces show the creativity of these Catalan women playwrights in capturing relevant social issues through the lens of comedy and allowing the middle-class audience to become aware of them via a humorous lens.

In Chapter 8, “Joaquim Montero i Delgado, transits i cruïlles” [Joaquim Montero i Delgado: Passages and intersections], which starts the section on ‘Acting Humour’, Núria Santamaria examines the figure of Joaquim Montero i Delgado, a Valencian actor, playwright, and director, amongst others. In here, Santamaria takes the reader on a journey through Montero i Delgado’s presence in the social sphere and his public persona, to then analyse several comedic mechanisms in his plays. The first part of the chapter is nicely accompanied by pictures, postcards, and magazine excerpts which give the reader an idea of the creation of his public image. Santamaria’s rich, insightful grasp of the correlation between Montero i Delgado and his role in the Catalan scene provides the reader with sufficient knowledge on the figure. The deeper analyses into the humorous techniques occupy the last pages of the chapter and they are, at times, diluted within the social comparison between old and new Catalan theatre. The linguistic analysis that the author puts forward right at the end – in Santamaria’s words, “the most fruitful source of evidence” (p. 221) – promises interesting developments elsewhere beyond this chapter.

In Chapter 9, “Power, politics, and comic theatre: Political satire as dissidence in *La torna* and *Ubú president* by Els Jogals”, Simon Breden analyses two key plays by theatre company *Els Joglars*, *La torna* and *Ubú president*, in terms of their creation of incendiary humour. The author traces their comedic inspirations to mime, such as Marceau and Decroux, the ideological compromise of Brecht, and even the aesthetic approach of Lecoq and *Commedia dell’arte*, thus showing the ever-present connections between all these types of comedy. Breden argues that Albert Boadella, one of the founding and most prolific members, “develop[s] his own theatrical identity” (p. 228), which makes the analyses in the chapter more interesting given their novelty. The author demonstrates that *Els Joglars* employ shared knowledge between actors and audience regarding public figures to provoke laughter, which is their most effective tool in this incendiary humour. The comedy in *La torna* implies a cathartic realisation on the part of the audience of their role in society and the extent to which we are compliant in injustice, while the humour in *Ubú president* relies more on language, while preserving the slapstick perspective that characterised the company.

In Chapter 10, “La influència de la pedagogia de Jacques Lecoq dins l’escena còmica catalana contemporània: la dramaturgia de l’actor de Sergi López i Toni Albà” [The pedagogical influence of Jacques Lecoq on the contemporary Catalan stage: The acting dramaturgy of Sergi López and Toni Albà], Martí B. Fons Sastre successfully compares the pieces of *Brams o La kumèdia dels horrors* (Sergi López and Toni Albà, 1986) with the later monologues written and performed by these authors, *L’ombra* (López, 1994) and *Non solum* (López and Picó, 2005). The chapter is clearly organised in sections, providing the reader with enough information to understand the point in question. Fons Sastre argues that the techniques employed by the playwrights stem from their learnings under the wing of dramatist Jacques Lecoq. The author

offers a sufficient outline of the theatrical philosophy of Lecoq, moved by a common poetic background and mime. Fons Sastre shows these correlations not only in the dramaturgy and comedic aspect of the plays, but also in the interaction between actor and audience, loneliness on stage, the absurdity of the play, and the employment of the figure of the clown.

The final chapter of the book, “Xavi Castillo i Pot de Plom: entre la transgressió i la sàtira política” [Xavi Castillo and Pot de Plom: Between transgression and political satire (1985–2015)], undertakes an overview of the figure of Xavi Castillo and his comedy theatre company *Pot de Plom* (1985-2015). Gabriel Sansano offers a solid introduction to the figure of Castillo and his collaborators, as well as to the evolution of the company, making sure to always link them to the reality of the Valencian society of the time. The relation between a political compromise and Castillo’s comedy is key, as his creations engaged in constant criticism of the conservative *status quo*, to the point where he was banned from public performances under the right-wing government. Sansano argues that the jocularly of Castillo stems from previously mentioned concepts such as *Commedia dell’arte*, the clown, pantomime, scatological and irreverent language, and a social connection with his audience, who share his interest and criticism for their shared social reality. All in all, Sansano successfully demonstrates the roots of Castillo’s performances in Valencian traditions of humour, while recognising the comedian’s ability to create comedy and linking these more recent creations to the beginning of the book.

Overall, the book offers a cohesive overview of the roots of Catalan comic theatre in its many forms. This cohesiveness comes from the common themes found between some chapters, such as *Commedia dell’arte* (Chapters 1 and 10), the absurd (Chapters 4 and 10), a socially compromised theatre (Chapters 2, 3, 6 or 7) and the relation between the audience and the success of the play (Chapters 2, 6 and 10). These theoretical, rhetorical, and analytical parallelisms assist the reader in seeing the connections between the chapters, which at times are unbalanced in the organisation, length, and the amount of detail of their humorous analysis. Despite a couple of negative aspects, the book is overall successful in its attempt to explore in detail the comedic theatre in Catalan from the 1900 to more recent times. Besides, it is a necessary reading piece for anyone interested in the evolution of this art form, the correlation of language and comedy on the stage, and the creative tools of playwrights and performers for the Catalan language.

Natàlia Server Benetó
The Ohio State University, USA
serverbeneto.1@osu.edu

References

Pirandello, L. (2013). *L’humorisme*. Adesiara.