Humour in the Playback Theatre

By Margarete Meixner

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Humor is the button which prevents that our top blows up.

(Joachim Ringlnatz)

Humor was during my whole life a help in giving me a bit of simplicity, closeness but also a bit of distance. I like it a lot when humor take place in the playback theatre. Many times I miss this part when I go to see a play. That is the reason why I started to investigate about humor and include it in this piece of work. What is humour? What is it’s effect?

In our SOG Playback THEATRE group we laugh a lot during our meetings and even during the performance together with our audience. There is one performance I remember during which we did not laugh a lot. Why not? What are the preconditions for humour? Humour can, as well, hurt somebody’s feelings and can be disrespectful towards others. Under what conditions? Humour in the Playback Theatre has not to end up in a superficial, comedy like play. How can we prevent that? This I like to find out.

1. What is Humour?

People from totally different branches of art and science are preoccupied with the what humour is and the meaning of laughter is. “Humour is not a mood but a philosophy of life”, said Ludwig
Wittgenstein. Authentic laughing is a characteristic of spiritual health, a characteristic of feeling well and comfortable to be as you are and who you are. But Humor tends to include a kind of defiance power as well. “The power in general all of them, fears nothing more than laught, a smile and mockery. They are symbols of critic attitude, fantasy, intelligence and the opposite of fanaticism. I didn’t participate in a theatre to act out hamlet but with the belief of being a clown or a buffon.” (Dario Fo when he received the Nobel Prize award for Literature in 1997 at Stockholm)

Michael Ende refers to that statement: “Humour can never be fanatic nor dogmatic. It is always human and friendly. It is the philosophy of life that gives one the possibility to confess ones inadequacy without bitterness. As well as to respond others inadequacy just with a smile. Humour is not indentc with wisdom but still they are close relatives.” (Michael Ende: Words like Dreams, Freiburg: 1991)

2. Effect of real humour

The scientific researcher on the field of humor Alfred Kirchmayer states the following effects of humour: (Vgl. Vortrag):

- **Humor produces closeness.** Laughing together connects and builds up a closer and stronger solidarity, as well as building up trust.

- **Humor produces distance.** If one can laugh about a negative experience it is possible to win a certain emotional and intellectual distance to block oneself, to be dogged and to be fixated.

- **Humor extends the perception.** The cognitive and emotional range can grow and expand. Because of this option which was neither recognized before nor taken into account one is able to make out new aspects about conflicts and to realize them.

- **Humor has a playful and creative effect** as the opposite of exhaustion and burnout. It supports the way of thoughts about problems, brings new aspects, resolution possibilities and hypothesis during the analysis of it.
Humor creates new perspectives. It can find funny sides inside tragic moments. Surprising objections help to defeat blocking and stucking ways of thinking.

Humor dissolves tensions. Its effect is in general to create social, emotional, intellectual and physical relaxation accompanied by a smile or laughter. In situations characterized by conflicts humour is able to loosen a blockade, to reduce tension and create the possibility stay to the matter of fact during a discussion. Furthermore it supports childlike love of life.

An erotic culture of self-development and of living together is characterized by a humorous philosophy of life and not accompanied by a total seriousness. It has to do with the connection and the working together of pleasure, love and reason promoting the creative and free development of ones personal and human needs, abilities and relations. The opposite is a neurotic culture characterized by its life like fears, scruple, forces and seriousness. Each ideological and fundamental difficulty and freezing produces a lack of humour. (www.alfred-kirchmayr.at)

Specialists on that field agree that the function of humour is a contribution to relaxation. Henri Bergson for example states that laughing can also mean punishment and correction but that it holds normally a very useful function because of its relaxing and kindly attitude towards something. The task of laughing is certainly to remove tendencies which separate people and to flexibly narrow headed ones. (Vgl. Bergson: Laughing. In an Essay about the meaning of Comedy [1900], Zürich: 1972) Helmuth Plessner believes that humor, jokes and comedy are pour outs of life due to the mental power which protects someone from concrete inhibitions or scruples and has a freeing effect. (Vgl. Plessner: Laughting and Crying. An Investigation about the Border of Human´s Behaviour (1941), Bern: 1950)

Plessner tries to understand and explain the requirements or preconditions for laughing. Occasions for laugh attack us, but to restrain the laughter we sometimes need to keep our selves under control. When we laugh a loss of our self-control takes place as well as a “disorganization of the relationship between humans and the physical existence” which is not wanted but still understood as a meaningful reaction. (Vgl. ebd, 86f)
Humor is a social and cultural phenomenon. People laugh increasingly in groups. (Vgl. Meyer 2000) What a group believes to be funny and laughs about, undergoes a “constant change throughout history, because of the changes of norms among society” (Plessner 1961).

4. Humor in the Playback Theatre

Jo Salas wrote in “What is `good` Playback Theatre?” (J. Fox/H. Dauber 1999, page 34): „Such a wrong practice consists in directing a performance in a comical and entertaining way in which the director has no disposal of sociometric abilities and sympathetic communication and as a result even the actors show insufficient respect towards the story.

…… the deeper meaning of a story is ignored or lost, dynamism and theme of the event stay undeveloped and the audience is only entertained without acknowledging the plays real theme“ Empathy and respect to what the narrator speaks are in the centre, humor in performance in only ONE aspect and cannot be only an superficial end in itself. If there are three main points in a play to
be represented it is recommendable that point number four shows an easier and humorous part. This balance is taken into account and achieved naturally or intuitively by experienced Playback actors.

4.1. Humour during the training

For the last 6 years we have been acting in the SOG. THEATER with enthusiasm. This group consists of seven women and six men. The training takes place once a month, half a day and our average of performed plays is two per month. The training follows a strict ritual. After a pre-preparation of ca. 30 minutes the motivation stage. This means that the narrator- and interviewer are sitting on stage on a chair and will have to do a warming up activity. The topic: How are you here today? What is in your mind, what do you feel inside your belly? Person A has the job to make a solo to a central statement; person B performs afterwards acting out the opposite. Each of them moves from their chair to the next chair. This way each of the actors will have to perform each character. To finalize the director asks questions about the theme the actors had been talking about. Many times the actors reflect on what they had freely acted out, about things that were not planned: Great and worst moments in our life (highs and lows), work experience or boarder experiences. This is the respective main theme of the following hours. All of the group’s members have their own job as adviser, therapist, actor, decorator of shops, mother, students, railway conductor or theatre - educationist. The aim of that stage is an inner arrival, a telling and listening of whatever is present and supporting the main theme. Mostly after that stage the actors are able to feel again comfortable and confident. This time is used to tell, to ask, to act out and to laugh together to lower the affective filter. This forms an excellent basis for a successful training. “The frank invitation to tell and narrate convey a liberating feeling and validy.” (J. Fox 1996)

Martina a member of the group referred when she was asked about the topic humour spontaneous to her story. She arrived after an exhausting day at work as an advisor for women and told something from one of her clients whom she is not able to get closer to. This woman always arrives with her handkerchief which she uses all the time to wipe her nose or clean her eyes. And she also brings an attaché case with all her personal papers. Martina selected a person to represent the attaché case and another one to represent the handkerchief, one to act out her client and a last
one to act out her own role. She had to give each person a sentence and an adjective. The actors had the task to perform the whole scene using only the given sentence. Martina was laughing out during the dramatization loud. Why? „The acting out of that scene was not devaluating the woman. It took off my tension and gave me more ease. After this I was able to cope better with that woman.“

Exkurs: The intensity of the body-language helps to bring experience closer. It gives inner strength mostly not shown oral but being still perceptible. Repetitions correspond to the fact that one’s dogma or doctrine is repeating constantly inside our minds. We tend to repeat and reaffirm our conduct as well. „Conscious and reinforced repetition is able to change the character of experience and get strength out of it. It creates on one hand a closeness and at the same time on the other hand a distance.” (D. Gilmore, 2007, S. 145).

4.2. Humor during the performance

“The more serious one is, the more able to laugh with all the soul.”
(Schopenhauer)

Creating a mood of confidence

How to create the correct conditions for a performance? How can conditions be created and with it „all its magic be benefited from, and the participants led through an adventure?” (J. Fox, 1996, Seite 141). How to create conditions, to make the frozen movable, to be open and feel the mutual goodwill and to let humour take place? This is a challenge which one has to face during each performance again and again.

David Gilmore (2007) says that atmosphere and mood is created by the connection of many elements:
- the number of people,
- the manner of movement (for example if busy or calm),
- the kind of thoughts and feelings in the atmosphere (for example if it is critical or benevolent)
- the relation among people (if close or distant and if they touch each other),
- the way the group of people esteem each other.
- The circumstance, what happens at the moment or if something (pleasant or unpleasant) has happened.

In this enumeration there are some elements missing:
- The importance of the space. Is it cheerful? Is it friendly and suiting the occasion? Not too big or too small? How is its stimulation? How does it smell? Is it’s temperature warm or cold or just perfect? How is the closeness- and distance- proportion between stage and auditorium?
- Are we in contact with each other? With others of the team?

The headmaster of the gernetriccenter Vienna Liesing invited in March 2009 around 40 employees of different working branches and different origins. A cheerful room with a lightly lifted stage. The topic of that evening was “the coming and leaving”, stories around the theme of being strange and unknown. The headmaster greeted everybody and then he left me in charge of the whole evening. This is always a special and important moment. Will it work to get in contact with the group?

Normally we have very good experiences with the pre-preparation-stage of the audience (as it happened too this evening). After welcoming everybody and a short explanation about what we do and who we are, we did a special greeting-ritual. Working with sociometric- exercises I asked questions about the audience composition: “Who in this room works in the branch of nursing? Please stand up and I invite the other members to greet them all to clap their hands.” This way we all greeted the different job-branches. I had totally forgotten the branch of therapists but I was reminded in a friendly way by a woman sitting in the audience. Laughing I introduced the missing job. The first contact between me and the audience had succeeded. To make the cultural richness visible, I invited everybody to say „Good Evening“ in their mother tongue. We could hear the same greeting in seven different languages. A young man coming from India was reinforced by his working pears up to the point when he finally said „Good Evening“ using his mother tongue. I
always tried to repeat the greeting as good as possible and the audience thanked by clapping their hands. The actors stood during that stage inside the room and clapped with the audience. Now it was time to come on stage and to start each one with a personal statement about the topic being unknown, strange or even foreign and to start the narration and the play.

**The development of the story**

Approximately at the middle of the evening Mary from Ghana told a story when she moved to Austria. At the Customs office, the officer opened all her bags and searched inside them very carefully but, in a very disturbing way. She was even badly treated. She had brought Maniok and Sweetpotatoes from Ghana. She had to explain and tell the customs officers what each of these strange things were. But she was not able to talk as much German as she would have needed to do this accurately. This was a very bad and stressing situation for her. After some time she realized that these people were looking for drugs. We took her story and acted it out. Sebastian was one of the customs officers who had to search in Mary’s luggage for drugs. Julia acted Mary the narrator. Ivanka started to accompany everything with music, the stage was prepared to look a bit like a Customs officer at an airport and the actors took their place on stage. The customs officer started to talk in an unfriendly and disrespectful way in German to Mary and rummaged in her things. She acted irritated and intimidated. “Yes it was just like that”, said the narrator after the scene was acted out. “I had to laugh, even if the situation wasn’t funny at all”. The audience joined the laughter.

4.3. When there is nothing to be laugh at .......

Same topic but at another place one week later. We acted for the first time in a center of Jewish migrants in Vienna. Because of safety-reasons we were all checked at the entry and even had to show our id cards. A narrow passage led to the room where we had to perform. Even if the audience had shown enthusiasm during the whole performance, we all felt something depressed and sad during the whole Playback Theatre presentation. “I was afraid to say something wrong or to act inadequately. I felt deeply inhibited and self-conscious during my acting.” said Thom the musician during the afterwards-reflection. Sebastian another actor said: “There is a border of
horror, the human contempt, the awful, there humor can’t take place there, it is inadequate. Some destinies are totally depressing and sad that they shocked and affected me that I was totally unable to bring a smile on my face. When people are completely turned over by other people there humor can’t take place.” I was afraid not to be sufficient or to leave people unsatisfied. Sabine: “We are no Jews. Can we share, imagine or experience their feelings? Can we put ourselves in their shoes?

We all felt a deep sense of strangeness. During the reflection that evening we discovered that we were not informed and had not prepared ourselves enough to face the reality of those people. We had no reference on the topics of Jews and their persecution. Because of these conditions we were not able to find a connection with the audience out of our own fears to do or say something wrong.

5. Conclusion

We do not need to be afraid when there are stories to act which are tragic, we can have a deep confidence that towards the end of the acting there will be joy and a deep laugh. Playback Actors can feel this intuitively. New and inexperienced Playback Theatre groups try to find laugh as fast as possible but do not pay the needed attention to the real story, they stay at the surface of the tale. This way stories from the audience are abused to built up the ego of the actors. Deep humor and laugh have changing effects, how we could understand in the theoretic Exkurs. The reference to topics, to people, to experience, that is certainly what had happened to Martina or to Mary. The play was able to show new ways of experience and to take strength out of it. It creates closeness as well as distance to what one of us had lived. Hard or even negative experiences can be worked about and relieved. Sometimes it is possible to relax and laugh about what first hurt or irritated us. Parallels between play and reality, between stage and life give us the possibility to discover the playful part of life. Humor in the Playback Theatre can only be led in a bigger sense, supported from respect and understanding. And this is an act of high art.

We need a place where we feel comfortable, if not we will lose the laugh.
(D. Gilmore, The clown in us)
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