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Le théâtre anglophone contemporain et les nouveaux enjeux du rire/Rethinking Laughter in Contemporary Anglophone Theatre

Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès, Toulouse, 12-13 October 2017

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- 1 What exactly makes spectators of contemporary theatre and performance laugh? Which (political) issues can be turned into joking matter and when does it become inappropriate to do so? Where does that thin line dividing the comic from the tragic or even from horror lie? These are just some of the questions which the scholars meeting in Toulouse for “Rethinking Laughter in Contemporary Anglophone Theatre” confronted. The two-day conference was hosted by the Anglophone Cultures Research Group (CAS) of the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès in collaboration with the Théâtre du Grand Rond and organized by **Emeline Jouve** and **Sophie Maruéjols-Koch**. Together, the presenters offered a broad overview of the work on offer on the modern Irish, American and British stages ranging from well-established, canonical authors such as Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams to relative newcomers like Robert Askins. Textual approaches went hand in hand with papers devoted to productions from both sides of the Atlantic.

Thursday 12 October

- 2 **Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch** welcomed the participants and opened the conference by contemplating the elusive nature of laughter, which several philosophers and writers have tried yet ultimately failed to capture. The two papers of the subsequent first panel were connected through their political subject matter. **Johan Callens** (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium) discussed *The Town Hall Affair*, a 2016 production by the New York avant-garde theatre collective The Wooster Group, in his paper titled “‘If you wish me to act the clown’: Revisiting a ‘Dialogue on Women’s Lib.’” Based on *Town Bloody Hall*, a 1979 documentary which itself depicted an explosive encounter between macho-icon Norman Mailer and several second-wave feminists at Town Hall in Manhattan in 1971, the production would at first sight not seem to leave much room for laughter. Feminism is overall not known for its good cheer and the meeting in question took a vituperative turn. However, as Callens pointed out, feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Judith Butler have written about laughter as a means of subversion. In her most famous text, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous talked about an orgiastic laughter capable of causing physical discomfort and allowing for the crossing of boundaries. Butler had recourse to parody as a means to subvert the gender acts we are all bound to repeat. In the Wooster Group’s production, comic energy swirled around the antics of *Village Voice* critic Jill Johnston and Mailer’s clownish behavior. Laughter as a means to evade oppressive norms also played an important part in “Stand-up Gays et Lesbiens: Le Rire queer comme performance esthétique-politique” by **Xavier Lemoine** (Université Paris Est Marne-La-Vallée). He explored the elements which can provoke laughter in queer stand-up performances ranging from the comic to the provocative and the strange. Queer stand-up routines seek to destabilize the established order and allow its performers to quit being, in Lemoine’s words, “the butt of the joke” (pun intended). As such, these performances constitute a means of empowerment. Lemoine demonstrated this with a video clip that showed a stand-up routine by Lea DeLaria recounting how she came out to her mother and father. While the parents’ refusal to acknowledge their daughter’s lesbianism may seem to render the event tragic at first sight, DeLaria turns it into an occasion of merriment by blaming their apparent forgetfulness on their Italian-American heritage and its special Catholic ability of instantly ceasing to remember unpleasant facts. Asked by one of the audience members how exactly he defined queer laughter, Lemoine replied that maybe its very nature lay in its elusiveness. Like laughter, queerness is characterized by ambivalence and instability.
- 3 In her keynote speech “‘In the Heart of Each Joke Hides a Little Holocaust’ (George Tabori): Wit on the British Contemporary Stage,” **Elisabeth Angel-Perez** (Université Paris Sorbonne) subsequently took us across the Atlantic, yet we stayed in the realm of the political to some extent. She looked into wit’s tragic potential, its connections to horror – “laughter,” after all, turns into “slaughter” by adding a single letter – and the increasing move away from the visual towards the aural found in British productions today. The overtly political surfaced through case studies of playwrights such as Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill and Martin Crimp, yet Angel-Perez equally devoted attention to minimalists like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Since she has translated plays by several of these writers into French, the issue of humor and its translatability became part of the discussion following her talk.

- 4 This question also played a role in the next paper, “*Hand to God: The Irreverent Laughter of Robert Askins: ‘Laugh, motherfuckers, that shit’s funny’*” by **Marianne Dugeon** (Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier 3) in that the American productions of the play she discussed were very successful, whereas its French and British equivalents failed to find favor with their audiences. Dugeon considered the mix of genres Askins brought together – *Hand to God* as an “in yer face black comedy” amongst others – and its blend of the comic with the horrific. Askins’s out of the ordinary puppet play dares its audiences to laugh at things which are not usually deemed funny, as Dugeon demonstrated by citing a hilarious rape scene involving a teenager. Teenage protagonists are what the two papers in the panel shared. **Claire Hélié** (Université de Lille SHS) linked laughter to youth culture in her contribution “Laughing Out Young: Humor in Evan Placey’s Plays for Teenagers.” Even though the plays written by this Canadian-British playwright deal with serious matters like sexting, statutory rape and closeted gayness, laughter can be found both on stage and off. Whereas Lemoine’s earlier paper raised the issue of “queer laughter,” Hélié reflected on the possibilities of a young as well as gendered laughter.
- 5 The final panel opened with a return to politics and the UK with the presentation “Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (2000): The Nervous Laughter of Horror” by **June Pham** (Université Paris Sorbonne). Pham argued that Churchill makes use of grotesque elements depending on a delicate balance between horror and laughter as well as burlesque traditions. The aim is to deny the spectator the experience of catharsis so as to arouse his/her political consciousness. The day closed with a presentation by **Sigrid and Alexandre Bordier**, two mysterious and seemingly incompetent scholars from the Université de Lausanne who studied the work of the Toulouse-based theatre company **Le Bestiaire à Pampilles**. Since the presenters failed to set up their PowerPoint and had ended up splashing water all over their notes, they were left with no choice but to act out some of the exercises their subjects used to prep for comic routines. Presenters and subject turned, of course, out to be one and the same and this particular comic routine aimed to make its academic audience laugh at its own flaws. The presentation was, after all, tellingly titled “Rire de soi.”

Friday 13 October

- 6 The second day continued on the subject of the grotesque with the keynote speech “Laughter and Lamentation: The Comic Grotesque in Tennessee Williams’ Late Plays” by **Annette Saddik** (City University of New York, United States). She showed how Williams walked a tightrope between horror and comedy in several of his later texts. Based on early classics such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams is usually thought of as a wordy playwright, yet Saddik emphasizes the primacy of nonverbal elements in the plays making up the second, less successful half of his career. She also stressed the importance of an ironic acting style to the success of their production on stage. *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde*, the play Saddik paid most attention to, once again raises the question of laughter’s (in)appropriate nature. It far transgresses the boundaries of good taste by means of a rape scene involving a person with a disability which was nevertheless considered funny by the audience members of two highly different productions. These were the 2009 production at Boston’s Beau Jest Moving Theater, commissioned by the

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, and the 2016 production “Tennessee Williams 1982” by the Playhouse Creatures Theatre Company. While the former was more horrid than funny, the opposite was true for the latter, making it quite clear how easily Williams’s later plays can move in either direction.

- 7 The first paper of the next panel reaffirmed the connection between the horrible and comedy by focusing on two contemporary British torture plays. In her talk “How can Humour Serve towards the Condemnation of Human Rights Abuses?: Yussef el Guindi’s *Back of the Throat* (2008) and Dennis Kelly’s *Osama the Hero* (2005),” **Clare Finburgh** (Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom) explained how laughter from the audience accompanied even the most grisly scenes during productions of the two plays under discussion, which led her to re-evaluate the notion of superiority humor. The audience, after all, laughed at the torturers rather than at their victims who found themselves in an inferior position, albeit not from a moral point of view. In my own contribution, “‘Spice, Mince, Jolly’: Farcical Politics and the Politics of Farce in Tony Kushner’s *Hydriotaphia*,” I considered a lesser-known play by the American author and why it failed every time it was produced on stage. My answer lay in the text’s generic confusion: Kushner wanted to write an “epic farce” with *Hydriotaphia* yet the demands of Brecht’s epic theatre seem to clash with the needs of farce. Moreover, Kushner muddled the waters even further by combining elements taken from medieval/early modern farce with its contemporary counterpart, making for a rather bewildering viewing experience.
- 8 In her keynote speech “Laughing Matters in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee,” **Linda Ben-Zvi** (Tel Aviv University, Israel) subsequently engaged with another giant of the American stage and adopted a comparative approach. The clownish antics of Beckett’s most famous characters have spawned hilarious productions of plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Yet reducing Beckett’s plays to comedies is to miss the essentially tragic dimension of his humor: Beckett uses laughter as a way to undermine language, to deny its efficacy. His laughter originates in boredom and pain, it is “the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy” (*Watt*). While Albee was brought up in the comic tradition as the adoptive grandson of a man who owned several vaudeville theatres, he never managed to convince people that he was a comic author. Albee liked to consider himself in this way, but many felt that a play like *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, for instance, was overall too savage to be labeled funny.
- 9 Next, we turned to otherworldly and intertextual matters with “Rire, rituel et mythe dans *Summer and Smoke* (1948) de Tennessee Williams” by **Emmanuel Vernadakis** (Université d’Angers). In his paper, Vernadakis first traces the double-layered nature of all Williams’s writing by means of sexual puns and jokes which already demonstrates a debt to Oscar Wilde. The presence of this famed Irish predecessor becomes even stronger in *Summer and Smoke*, a play in which he is explicitly mentioned by one of the characters. Salome, one of Wilde’s most famous protagonists made her name through an act of unveiling. Williams’s play and the short stories he wrote prior to it revolve around a similar act infused with ritual overtones, thanks to the ancient Greek myth of Baubo’s *anasyrma* in the presence of the goddess Demeter and her son Iacchus.
- 10 The day and conference closed with a performance of part of *Fragments*, a bilingual theatre production which the company **OBRA** based on *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* by Roland Barthes. **Oliveiro Papi** and **Mélanie Tanneau** played a couple in love thus making clear that while infatuation is a deadly serious matter to those caught up in it,

it can appear quite funny and even ludicrous to bystanders. Afterwards, director **Kate Hannah Papi** joined us for a discussion about how the company managed to turn Barthes's philosophical text into stage material and tease out the humor.

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Subjects: Actualité de la recherche

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