

# **Clowning in the Brechtian Tradition**

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**The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own work and that appropriate  
credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others**

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## **Abstract: Clowning in the Brechtian Tradition**

This thesis examines how far clowning can be used to augment the aims and effects of a Brechtian theatricality. To do so, it first establishes a series of characteristic processes for the identification and analysis of clowning, based on the author's own clown training with John Wright and Philippe Gaulier. It then explores the nature of Brecht's interest in the clowns Charlie Chaplin and Karl Valentin and their influence on his thinking. Next, it examines how far Brecht's interest in clowns and clowning can be seen inscribed in the texts of his plays and how far that clowning enables the aims of his theatre to be realised. Then it looks at a specific example of Brecht production, the author's production of *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*, to examine how far what has been seen in theory in fact works in practice. And finally, it moves beyond Brecht but remains in the Brechtian tradition, by examining the show *Can of Worms*, directed by the author for Strange Bedfellows theatre company and asking how far a pure clown show can achieve Brechtian effects.

Throughout, the thesis is concerned to establish how far the specific incidences of clowning examined accord with particular effects of the Brechtian theatre, most significantly *Gestus*, dialectics and the *Verfremdungseffekt*. It concludes that clowning is a form particularly well suited to the pursuit of these processes.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *i. Key Research Questions and General Overview – What is a “tradition”?*

In order to establish the key questions explored in this thesis it will be useful to unpack some of the terminology used in its title, *Clowning in the Brechtian Tradition*. What do we mean by that phrase? None of its components, “clowning”, “Brechtian”, or even “tradition” are susceptible to unproblematic definition, so it will be part of the task of this Introduction to attempt an account of how each will be used and developed. None of them will remain stable throughout the thesis, but we can at least trace the major controversies surrounding each, in order that we might arrive at a useful starting point.

Of these three, “tradition” might appear the least problematic, denoting an accumulation of influence and development within a particular field – in the case of this thesis, the field of Brechtian theatre. Unfortunately it is not quite so simple. Raymond Williams, in his book *Keywords*, ascribes four senses to the Latin root of the word: “delivery”, “handing down knowledge”, “passing on a doctrine” and “surrender or betrayal”.<sup>1</sup> The fourth of these should make it clear that the accumulations of influence and development that constitute the processes of tradition are by no means simple and deferential. Williams observes that the conventional use of the word contains “a very strong and often predominant sense of respect and duty”,<sup>2</sup> but nonetheless the development of one aspect of a tradition must very often entail the surrender or even the betrayal of some other aspect. For example, we shall see that Brecht inherited, in the form of influence, several aspects of a clowning tradition from Charlie Chaplin and from Karl Valentin. He then turned them to his own ends, arguably resulting in the surrender or betrayal of some of their key aspects. Does this mean these practices are no longer clowning? No longer traditional clowning? Or does it simply mean that traditions are plural and unstable, even despite the word’s apparent sense of the orderly and the stable? This thesis will proceed on the latter assumption, that tradition is not a straightforward handing-down or a linear

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1983), pp.318-9

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.319



progress, but rather a dialectical tussle much in the manner, as we shall see, of some of the processes engaged in Brecht's theatre.

The title places "the Brechtian tradition" alongside "clowning" as the twin foci of the thesis. We may therefore usefully go on to note that clowning is by no means a stable entity to be placed alongside a constantly mutating tradition of Brechtian theory and practice, but is itself a tradition – or even many traditions. Dario Fo observes, "clowns can be found at all times and in all countries".<sup>3</sup> Such a widespread phenomenon cannot be easily contained by one tradition. This thesis therefore focuses on one clown tradition – the contemporary European clowning taught by Jacques Lecoq, John Wright and Philippe Gaulier, among others. With a view to the cultural pervasiveness of clowning, however, it shall be noted that many of the aspects of clowning we examine in this tradition have corollaries in others.

Thus it becomes immediately clear that this thesis is concerned with not one tradition, but two, running in parallel and occasionally intersecting. The principal concern of this thesis is those points of intersection. Could the title then not equally easily have been "Brecht in the Clowning Tradition"? It could not. That the thesis bears its present title is due to its primary focus, which is on how clowning can be used as a means to achieve the perceived ends of a Brechtian theatre - rather than on how Brecht's theories can be used as a means to achieve the ends of clowning – whatever they may be. Nonetheless we must keep sight of the fact that the clowning tradition is as varied as the Brechtian tradition – given its longer history, perhaps even more so.

Thus Chapter One explores what we will mean by "clowning" through the rest of the thesis, focusing on one tradition within the wider performance practice – contemporary clowning of the Jacques Lecoq school – but drawing on several others for comparison and elucidation. In particular, it identifies several characteristic tropes and processes and a terminology for their discussion. Chapter Two examines some clowns who are known to have influenced Brecht, whose traditions he might be said to have inherited. Chapter

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<sup>3</sup> Dario Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade* (trans. Joe Farrell) (London: Methuen, 1991), p.178

Three examines some of Brecht's work and explores the uses, whether homage or betrayal, to which he appears to have put those traditions. Chapter Four gives an account of a Brecht play in a production that heavily utilises the tools of contemporary clowning, exploring how this intersection between two traditions develops and perhaps betrays the Brechtian tradition. Finally, Chapter Five gives an account of a clown production that may be seen as Brechtian, and explores how broad and deep the Brechtian tradition may be seen to run.

Principally at stake throughout is therefore the question of whether clowning supports the aims of a Brechtian theatre. In particular, how does it enable Brechtian techniques such as the *Verfremdungseffekt* to carry their political weight? Subsidiary questions include: if it does support those aims, in what ways does it do so? And are there any ways in which clowning cannot be or is not used in support of those aims? It will be the business of later sections of this introduction to elucidate a working understanding of such Brechtian terms and concepts as will be utilised throughout. This Introduction to the thesis will, further give a picture of how and why this research has been done – that is, what gaps in knowledge it seeks to fill, to what purpose and by what means. It will also give a more detailed overview of the shape of the thesis and a brief picture of Brecht's interest in clowning.



## ii. Literature Review and Detailed Overview

Very little literature yet exists in order to support the exploration of clowning that will constitute this thesis' first chapter: no practical or theoretical framework has existed for the examination of clowning beyond those posited by studies of individual clowns. Niccolls' Chaplin is one example,<sup>4</sup> Richard Findlater's Grimaldi another,<sup>5</sup> and David Wiles' Kemp a third.<sup>6</sup> All of these studies are strong in their analysis of the effects created by their subject, yet none of them either produces or draws on any sort of pre-existing framework for the explication how such effects are produced. They are largely written from the point of view of the audience, seldom from on stage. As a result we have a series of characteristics that can be observed as specific to individual clowns, but little that is either generally applicable, or that goes beneath the surface of production to explore the depth of process.

This may well be because, as has already been observed, the tradition of clowning is multiple and may well contain many contradictions. In his books on both literary theory and tragedy, Terry Eagleton comes very close to asserting that no definition of literature of tragedy is possible beyond "that which is called literature/tragedy".<sup>7</sup> It may be that clowning is a similar category, in which a figure is a clown simply because a sufficient number of people say so. Nonetheless, Chapter One of this thesis attempts to work towards an understanding of what we mean by clowning in many of its differing guises. Moreover, it presents for the first time a detailed outline of key characteristics by which we may tend to recognise clowning. Most of these characteristics are active, that is, they are tropes of performance and thus could be seen as "characteristic processes" rather than the more fixed quantity of "characteristics". This detailed consideration of the characteristic processes of clowning, the means by which clowning is produced rather

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Thomas Niccolls, *Man On the Boundary: The Nature and Significance of the Image of the Clown in the Art of Charles Chaplin, Georges Roualt, and Samuel Beckett* (unpublished PhD thesis, Ohio University, 1970)

<sup>5</sup> Richard Findlater, *Grimaldi, King of Clowns* (London: MacGibbon and Key, 1955)

<sup>6</sup> David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983)

Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003)



than the results of that production is, as has been intimated, one of this thesis' key contributions to knowledge.

That this is now possible is due to the fact that in recent years the practical pedagogical work of Jacques Lecoq has begun to filter through into the academy, thanks in part to the great success of companies like Complicite.<sup>8</sup> Two texts by Lecoq himself, *The Moving Body* and *Theatre of Movement and Gesture*,<sup>9</sup> provide significant insights into his work and philosophy, not merely regarding clowning, but the theatre as a whole. Reference will be made throughout this chapter to these writings of Lecoq. However, partly for deliberate pedagogic purposes, he has a tendency towards abstract statements with no easily identifiable practical outcome. So we have reason to be grateful for Simon Murray's study,<sup>10</sup> which provides a more practical insight to Lecoq's pedagogy and practice.

It would perhaps be possible to construct a framework for clowning based solely on these texts. However often Lecoq resisted making definitive statements, we will be able to see throughout his work sufficient consistency to draw some firm lessons. However, it would be a mistake to neglect the work of Lecoq's followers in maintaining and developing his work since his death in 1999. Chapter One focuses on the particular tradition of clowning that has emerged from the work of Jacques Lecoq, but that tradition by no means ends with his death. In particular, John Wright and Philippe Gaulier, both former students of Lecoq and sometime teachers at his school, have become widely respected pedagogues in their own right. Each teaches a version of clowning subtly different from Lecoq's and one another's, developing Lecoq's tradition in distinct directions. The written work both by and about Wright and Gaulier is even more limited than that about Lecoq. Wright published his first book, *Why is that So Funny?*,<sup>11</sup> in 2006 and it has three detailed

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<sup>8</sup> A Lecoq-trained company of international repute. More information on the company can be found on their website: <http://www.complicite.org>

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (London: Methuen, 2000); Jacques Lecoq, *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Simon Murray, *Jacques Lecoq* (London: Routledge, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> John Wright, *Why is That So Funny?* (London: Nick Hern, 2006)



chapters on clowning, but there is nothing published about him by any other author. Gaulier's published work is limited to the occasional celebratory newsletter produced by his school.

However, when looking at practical work for the theatre, practical primary research is of especial use. My own background is in theatre practice and I have trained as a clown with both Wright and Gaulier. Having attended Gaulier's school in the first half of 2004,<sup>12</sup> and Wright's both in the second half of 2003,<sup>13</sup> and in the second half of 2004,<sup>14</sup> I am thus in a position to draw throughout Chapter One on my practical experience of the pedagogy of both and to observe in some detail how they view clowning and its creation by the performer. By looking at what and how they teach, we can learn a considerable amount about clowning, as not only can we observe the characteristic processes of clowning in operation, but we can also learn something about the means by which they are produced by the performer. This is perhaps the most valuable piece of original primary research in this thesis, as the tools for analysis it provides go beyond the development of a framework for the better understanding of the characteristic processes of clowning, but will subsequently allow us to examine clowning in the work of Brecht with a level of detail and nuance that has not hitherto been undertaken.

Reference will also be made in Chapter One to the work of Keith Johnstone. Johnstone is best known for his book *Impro*,<sup>15</sup> a text that draws most of its lessons from observations of the status dynamic between characters or performers. His work on clowning grows out of a very different tradition to that of Wright, Gaulier and Lecoq. Most of his examples are drawn from silent cinematic clowns such as Laurel and Hardy, and Chaplin, whom we shall ourselves study in due course. It is therefore noteworthy that despite growing from different roots, Johnstone's observations on clowning overlap significantly with the teachings of Wright in particular. This seems to lend credence to the notion that there may be, if not universal or essential characteristics in clowning, at least some

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<sup>12</sup> Philippe Gaulier, "Clown", workshop, Paris, March-April 2004.

<sup>13</sup> John Wright, "The Way of the Idiot", workshop, London, September 2003

<sup>14</sup> John Wright, "The Gentle Art of Idiocy", workshop, London, December 2004

<sup>15</sup> Keith Johnstone, *Impro* (London: Methuen, 2001)



characteristic processes that are very widely seen. Some examples from other clowning traditions, such as that of Dario Fo, add to this impression. Johnstone's work is used here simply to help explicate a particular area of Wright's work in a way that Wright does not quite do himself. But as we shall see, he also helps foreshadow several significant strands in our subsequent investigation of these clown tropes in the work of Brecht.

Brecht himself has been very well served by scholarship and many texts exist on almost every aspect of his theatre. Fredric Jameson's view of Brechtian irony,<sup>16</sup> and Walter Benjamin's understanding of the epic theatre have been particularly influential on the thinking behind this study,<sup>17</sup> although the latter is referred to only briefly. Martin Esslin,<sup>18</sup> Margaret Eddershaw,<sup>19</sup> and Jan Needle and Peter Thomson,<sup>20</sup> are among many authors whose analyses of Brecht's theatrical work and ideas have helped shape the Brechtian background to this study. Perhaps even more importantly, Raymond Williams' work on Brecht in books such as *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* and *Modern Tragedy* has been of great value, especially in the context of Williams' wider work.

Brecht's use of clowning is relatively under-researched, however, and certainly has never been explored in any detail. Peter Arnds recently wrote a short essay concluding that "Brecht's clowns remained politically ineffective".<sup>21</sup> The more common approach to Brecht's clowns in scholarly works is to indicate his indebtedness to Charlie Chaplin and Karl Valentin and to suggest that they were very important in the development of his aesthetic, without any significant attention to how this indebtedness manifests itself in his work. Martin Esslin, for example, is able to say that Brecht joked, "that he considered himself the greatest producer in the world – with the single exception of Charlie

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<sup>16</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998)

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (translated by Anna Bostock) (London: NLB, 1973)

<sup>18</sup> Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Heinemann, 1959)

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht* (London: Routledge, 1996)

<sup>20</sup> Jan Needle and Peter Thomson, *Brecht* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981)

<sup>21</sup> Peter Arnds, "Brecht's Clowns and the Nazis' Officialisation of Popular Culture", from *Communications from the International Brecht Society* Vol. 32, June 2003, pp.55-61. The quotation appears on p.55

Chaplin”, yet include in his book no discussion of Chaplin at all.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, he can include on Valentin only the famous story about his intervention in rehearsals for *Edward II*,<sup>23</sup> and a two-paragraph sequence concluding that Brecht’s “language drew much of its vigour and force from the earthy speech of clowns who never failed to call a spade a spade”.<sup>24</sup> Jan Needle and Peter Thomson’s book contains no reference to either figure.<sup>25</sup> These are extreme examples, but almost all of the examples tend towards this extreme. There is much work to be done to make up this shortfall, and that work forms a major part of this thesis.

Still, it would be wrong to suggest that no detail exists at all in support of the thesis that Brecht was heavily influenced by clowning. The work of Joel Schechter - his book *Durov’s Pig*,<sup>26</sup> and his essay “Brecht’s Clowns: *Man is Man* and after”,<sup>27</sup> have been of use to this thesis in beginning a consideration of how clowning augments a Brechtian theatre. However, Schechter’s concerns are principally theoretical: he makes little attempt to examine clowning in terms of its practical processes. Thus when he talks about how clowning works in Brecht’s plays, his lack of detail on the first principle of how clowning works in any context prevents his analysis from achieving a level of detail that would be of practical use. He is, finally, more concerned with the political effects of the clowns he considers than he is concerned with what it is in the process of clowning that enables these political effects.

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Heinemann, 1959), p.83

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.16. The story is of Valentin solving Brecht’s problem of how to stage the battle sequence by suggesting the soldiers appear in white-face, in order to communicate their fear.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.95

<sup>25</sup> Needle and Thomson, *op cit*

<sup>26</sup> Joel Schechter, *Durov’s Pig* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985)

<sup>27</sup> Joel Schechter, “Brecht’s Clowns: *Man is Man* and after”, from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.90-100.



Oliver Double and Michael Wilson have written two important essays on Brecht's relationship with Karl Valentin.<sup>28</sup> Both will be used extensively in this thesis and their work on the documentary evidence synthesises almost all that is known about the relationship between these two men. Double's own background in stand-up comedy gives their work a useful practical perspective that is missing from much of this kind of work, an understanding of the nature of live performance and the ways it affects an audience in practice rather than in theory. However, they are ultimately more concerned with Valentin as a cabaret artist than as a clown, and once again the lack of any basis from which to discuss clowning itself means that they do not develop a detailed understanding of the nature of Valentin's clowning, from which to consider how that in particular was an influence on Brecht.

Charlie Chaplin has been the subject of a great many biographies and monographs, as well as producing some writing of his own. His autobiography,<sup>29</sup> and his article "What People Laugh At",<sup>30</sup> will be of particular use to the discussion of his work that we will come to in Chapter Two. Kenneth S. Lynn's recent, thorough biography of him is also of use in that discussion.<sup>31</sup> But missing, again, is any detail on Brecht's engagement with him despite regular acknowledgements of Brecht's great admiration for Chaplin's work.

Chapter Two of this thesis will address the shortfall in our understanding of Brecht's engagement with Chaplin and Valentin, using the texts indicated above among others, but proceeding principally from Brecht's own writings: his diaries, journals and letters, as well as his other writings on theatre. Working from the knowledge gained from these primary sources, we can engage with the work of Chaplin and Valentin that we know

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<sup>28</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, "Karl Valentin's Illogical Subversion: Stand-Up Comedy and Alienation Effect" (from *New Theatre Quarterly* 79, Vol. XX part 3, August 2004), pp.207-215 and

Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, "Brecht and Cabaret", from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006) pp.40-61

<sup>29</sup> Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1964)

<sup>30</sup> Charlie Chaplin, "What People Laugh At", from *American Magazine* 86 (November 1918): 34, pp.134-37

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth S. Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and his times* (London: Aurum Press, 1997)



Brecht to have seen, and analyse it in some detail using the understanding developed in Chapter One, without which such detail has not been possible. We can place this in the context of Brecht's developing project and note where their work seems in accord with his. We will thus be in a position, when we come to examine Brecht's own work for the theatre, to observe not only where clowning's characteristic processes can be observed, but where they can be seen to develop – or betray – the traditions engaged by Chaplin or Valentin.

The principal author employed in this thesis, though, is of course Brecht himself, and Chapter Three will be principally concerned with his playtexts. At issue in this chapter will be how far the influences we have detected in Chapter Two can be seen inscribed in the texts of his plays. Thus at this point we will avoid discussion of the plays in production except where it can be seen to particularly illuminate Brecht's writing. Brecht's plays lend themselves to production in such a variety of differing ways that a focus on one or another at this stage might obscure what is to be found in the texts. Thus it is in this chapter that the scholars named above, as well as others such as John Willett and Ronald Gray, will be drawn on most extensively. This is because the principal activity of Brecht scholars has been to illuminate the texts themselves, and there is a great deal in their work that will be of use to us in our exploration of what theatrical effects appear to be written into those texts. An analysis in this detail, and from this perspective, is yet to be undertaken and can add a great deal to our broader understanding of Brechtian theatricality.

Throughout this thesis, references to the works of Brecht will be to translations already available in English. It is not the purpose of this thesis to add to any of the controversies surrounding the translation of Brecht and translations have been chosen for reasons of availability and quality alone. Brecht's first-person prose writings are generally available in only one translation, so that dictates to what reference is made here. His plays, however, are generally available in at least three or four differing translations and so a little more needs to be said about why the selected translations have been used.

The most controversial of these selections will be the use of Eric Bentley's translation of *Mann ist Mann*, referred to hereafter by Bentley's version of the title, *A Man's a Man*.<sup>32</sup> In his "adaptor's note", Bentley discusses the alterations and interpolations he has made and makes a useful observation on the text: "if it remains eccentric, I tried to make its eccentricity more and more Brechtian".<sup>33</sup> Although the translation feels a little dated now, its eccentricity does indeed feel "Brechtian", for reasons that will hopefully become clear in the discussion of the play in Chapter Three. And where Bentley has made notable interpolations or alterations, they are for the most part avoided entirely in the development of this thesis's argument. If they cannot be avoided entirely due to their proximity to other key points, this will be drawn attention to, and arguments will certainly not be made about Brecht's writing where that writing is very largely the property of Eric Bentley.

John Willett, not entirely unfairly, criticises the "softness" and "soppiness" of some of Bentley's translations,<sup>34</sup> though his own by contrast appear to place too much emphasis on the cold and the hard. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate to use a range of translations in order to see whether whatever clowning there is in Brecht largely seems to survive regardless of whose version we use. Thus when we come to *Mother Courage and Her Children*,<sup>35</sup> Willett's translation will be used, and when we come to a *Lehrstück*, *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, we will use Geoffrey Skelton's translation from Willett's edition of *Collected Plays: Three*.<sup>36</sup> Finally, in our attention to *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, we will use Ralph Mannheim's rightly celebrated translation,<sup>37</sup> which won the 1976 Schlegel-Tieck prize and also received generous praise from, among

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<sup>32</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, translated by Eric Bentley in the edition *Baal, A Man's a Man & The Elephant Calf* (New York: Grove, 1964).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp.113-15. The quotation is from p.113

<sup>34</sup> John Willett "Ups and downs of British Brecht", from Pia Kleber and Colin Visser (eds), *Re-Interpreting Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1990), pp.76-89

<sup>35</sup> BB, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1983)

<sup>36</sup> BB, *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, (trans. Geoffrey Skelton) in BB, *Collected Plays: Three* (ed. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.21-43. The "clown number" is on pp.27-31; it is named "the Clown Number" on p.31

<sup>37</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (trans. Ralph Mannheim) (London: Methuen, 1981)



others, Peter Thomson and Jan Needle,<sup>38</sup> and is therefore probably the most generally accepted of the available translations.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the production of Brechtian clown theatre and once again have little literature in their support, focusing instead directly on the productions concerned. Both productions were directed by the author of this thesis, with the aim of exploring its questions in a practical context. The first, explored in Chapter Four, is a production of Brecht's play *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti*, and explores how far it is possible to take clowning in Brecht production. The second, explored in Chapter Five, is a new work entitled *Can of Worms*, by the clown and physical theatre company Strange Bedfellows. By developing our understanding of Brecht's clowning out of his playtexts, through one of his plays in production, and into a new Brechtian piece of theatre, we can gain a detailed understanding of how far clowning enables us to augment a Brechtian theatre – throughout the Brechtian tradition.

It will be worth pausing at this point to consider briefly what we mean when we use the phrase “political” – political effects, political theatre, political statements in theatre, troubled phrases all. Surely all that is mediated by such a social form as theatre is political? As Terry Eagleton says of literary theory, “I mean by the political no more than the way we organise our social life together, and the power-relations which this involves; [...] the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch [...] Literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so”.<sup>39</sup> This is no less true of theatre, so what do we mean when singling something out as having a particular political slant? For the purposes of this thesis, and informed by Brecht's own approach as we shall see, we mean something along the lines of “uncovering the underlying political workings of the social process” – and very possibly, indicating commentary thereon. So when an element of Brecht's work, in this thesis, is said to be “politically motivated” or “politically effective”, this is meant as more than a mere statement of the obvious. The phrase is a

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<sup>38</sup> Needle and Thomson, *op cit*, p.116n

<sup>39</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, *op cit*, pp.194-5

cue to the unravelling of what that *particular* political motive might be, and how the theatrical process furthers that motive. Likewise, when questions are asked about the extent to which the work of artists such as Chaplin or Valentin is politicised, this is an attempt to discover to what extent that work's political engagement is *effective* in uncovering social processes and perhaps indicating commentary thereon. Of course their work is political – how could it not be? But that politicisation can be controlled to greater or lesser effect, and that is what we are concerned with here.

### *iii. Methodological statement*

It is impossible to separate the results of a piece of research from the process by which those results are produced. In a piece of research like this, which is chiefly concerned with the effects of a theatrical method and the processes by which they are produced, that separation is made increasingly difficult by the lack of any reliable means by which to support an impression of a piece of theatre now finished. Any individual author's viewpoint on an artistic production will be necessarily subjective, which is to say, a product itself of that author's socially accumulated knowledge and experiences. Since it seems impossible to escape this absolutely, it seems as well to declare it at the outset. Pierre Bourdieu has observed that any research into practice and emergent means of production will have a strategy which emerges not in advance of the research process but as a product of "being in the game" – a strategy emerges in response to the changing conditions of the developing process.<sup>40</sup> That, to some extent, characterises the methodology of this research, which can perhaps be therefore more thoroughly understood as an historical process.

This research seeks to bring a level of practice- and process-derived knowledge to a field that has been principally based on observation of products and effects. This represents a move from the external in the direction of the internal. In order to derive that practical, process-based knowledge, it has concomitantly sought to bring a level of analytical and historical rigour to a field that can tend too heavily towards subjectivism and ahistorical

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<sup>40</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990)



essentialisms. This represents a move from the internal to the external. It always tries to balance the experiential with the evidential, the impressionistic with the historical. It does not pretend to be the first piece of research to attempt to straddle the practical and the theoretical in this way. It does claim to be of original value in being the first to do so in precisely this field.

What does this mean in practice? Any given segment of this research will necessarily lean heavily towards one or other of these extremes of practical and theoretical, and elements of the other are in every case introduced as a corrective to the potential problems that thus arise. For example Chapter One, on clowning, is principally practice-based and seeks to develop a practical understanding of what we mean by clowning. Therefore to minimise the dangers of excessive subjectivism, this chapter seeks wherever possible to draw on historical examples of what has been discovered by practical these practical means. This contextualises the results of the research. Moreover, several interviews were conducted with graduates of Wright and Gaulier to lend further support. Though these are little cited in the text, they form an important basis to the underlying understanding of the teaching of these men.

Conversely, Chapter Three, on clowning in Brecht's playtexts, draws heavily on textual analysis and secondary commentary. It is the practical knowledge derived in the earlier work, which forms the basis of the claim to originality underlying this chapter. That practical knowledge enables us to explore one particular aspect of the texts, that of the level of clowning employed, in far greater detail than has hitherto been possible. More can be said about the process of textual and supporting research. How have sources been selected? Brecht's own works have been read in German (although the editions cited are all English translations as the existing versions are better than anything I could essay), but almost all of the supporting texts are in English. This means that in effect we are focusing on an Anglo-centric Brechtian tradition that differs from the German and differs again from, for example, the Brazilian. This decision has been made partly because of my own limitations in the German language, but for two further reasons. There is a great deal of value in English-language Brecht criticism. And it is in the British theatre that the two

productions constituting the explorations in Chapters Four and Five took place. This study is written from within the traditions of British theatre and criticism, as well as the Brechtian and clowning traditions explored. The critics who lend support reflect that.

When we come to examine theatre in production, new problems arise, not least because the author of this thesis directed the productions in question. In the case of *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti*, (Chapter Four), the production was created at least partly to explore the questions of the thesis. This means there was an awareness throughout of the processes being deployed, the effects sought, and responding to these formed an explicit part of the project in rehearsal. Nonetheless, it would be senseless to ignore the fact that in making a piece of theatre one inevitably becomes concerned by the pragmatic wish to not bore the audience as much as with the theoretical question of whether ones *Verfremdungseffekte* are sufficiently forceful. It is to be hoped that success in this did not come at the expense of success in the underlying purpose of the production. In the case of *Can of Worms* (Chapter Five) the production was created with the (in one sense) simpler objective of making this production – with, that is to say, the pragmatic concern uppermost. However, *Can of Worms* was also motivated by the wish to make a particular *kind* of theatre that might be described as Brechtian clown theatre. It would be wrong to claim that the questions of Brechtian methodology raised in Chapter Five formed a consistent and explicit part of the project in the rehearsal room, although these did arise on occasion. The concern was much more with the clown methodology and the political effect. However, despite not considering the address of questions of Brechtian tradition germane to the pragmatic demands at hand while in rehearsal, these questions were part of the directorial and dramaturgical approach to and preparation for the project. And in any case, we will be most extensively discussing the product, the show and its effects. In the case of *Can of Worms*, an MP4 file is attached as an appendix so that the claims made can, as far as is possible with a single camera document of a theatrical event, be verified. In order to lend further support to the contentions made in this chapter, as well as part of the company's ongoing efforts towards improving their work, audience feedback was also sought.



#### iv. Brecht and Clowning

Before proceeding any further it will be worth briefly adducing some of the evidence for Brecht's interest in clowns in general terms, before we investigate the details of his interest in Chaplin and Valentin in Chapter Two. Attention to some of this evidence will enable us to raise some of the issues that will be at stake as we continue, and to begin to advance some of the potential ways in which clowning might be of use in a Brechtian theatre. In an early diary entry, Brecht says:

I saw an eccentric clown of immense stature who shot at the lights with a little pistol, banged himself on the head, developed a large bump, sawed it off and ate it. I was enchanted: there's more wit and style in that than in the entire contemporary theatre.<sup>41</sup>

Thanks to diary entries such as this, Brecht's interest in clowning is a matter of record. There is no equivocation in a phrase like "there's more wit and style in that than in the entire contemporary theatre". We can also see in this some of the characteristics we will come to see in Karl Valentin, another eccentric clown of considerable height, as well as noting the motif of a large clown having parts of himself sawn off, which we will come to see repeated in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*. The early Brecht is absorbing some material that would later reappear in his plays.

Only a little later, he also says:

Once I get my hooks on a theatre I shall hire 2 clowns. They will perform in the interval and pretend to be spectators. They will bandy opinions about the play and about the members of the audience. Make bets on the outcome. [...] They'll say of David 'Why doesn't he wash more often?' And of Baal, the last period, 'He's in love with that dirty tramp'. The idea would be to bring reality back to the things on stage. For God's sake, it's the *things* that need to be criticised – the action, words, Gestures – not their execution.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> BB, *Diaries 1920-22* (ed. Herta Ramthun; trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen 1997), p32

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, pp32-3

Clowning was a recurrent topic for the early Brecht. And the notion of using clowns to effect a shift of focus away from the process of creating theatrical illusion, and instead towards the thing that is being presented for criticism suggests immediately how useful the processes of clowning can be in a theatre of *Verfremdungseffekte*, where anything that can rupture an easy belief in the truth of the theatrical spectacle is to be welcomed. It will be the business of this thesis to see firstly how far Brecht took such devices in his theatre, and secondly how far such devices can be taken in a theatre in his tradition. So first we must attempt to define some of the key terms that will be used in connection with that tradition.

#### v. The *Verfremdungseffekt*

The term *Verfremdungseffekt* itself would not be used until 1936, the first instance almost certainly being in “*Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst*”, translated by John Willett as “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting”<sup>43</sup>. Meg Mumford’s entry in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance tells us that the term “has been translated variously as ‘disillusion’, ‘alienation’, ‘de-alienation’, ‘distanciation’, ‘estrangement’ and ‘defamiliarisation’, each of which alludes to a relevant feature of his concept”.<sup>44</sup> This thesis will follow Fredric Jameson’s convention of leaving the term untranslated, as none of these translations adequately covers the full range of the term’s meanings.

Brecht’s earliest English-language champions, Eric Bentley and John Willett, both opted for the translation “alienation effect”, which certainly provides the most accurate literal translation of the term. When thus rendered literally it also has the advantage of an allusion to Marx, whose theory of alienation was important in the development of Brecht’s social and political thinking as well as to his aesthetic. Marx uses the term to explain the disenfranchisement of the worker, whom he describes as “alienated” from the

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<sup>43</sup> BB, *Brecht on Theatre* (ed. and trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen 1964), pp.91-99

<sup>44</sup> Meg Mumford, “Verfremdung”, from Dennis Kennedy (ed) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre & Performance* Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford, 2003), pp.1404-1405



fruits of his labour by working for the gain of someone other than himself.<sup>45</sup> This leads to a kind of alienation from himself, so that the social man, the worker, is separate from the true man. It seems very clear that at least in part the root of Brecht's theatrical device lies in the desire to animate this disjunction.

However, it is essential to note that although in English translation both words appear the same, in the original German this is not the case. Marx uses the word *Entfremdung*, whereas Brecht chooses *Verfremdung*. That Brecht chose a word other than Marx's to illustrate something containing some similar shades of meaning must demonstrate a deliberate distinction between Brecht's "alienation" and Marx's. Though there are overlaps between Brecht's term and Marx's, there are therefore also some important distinctions to be drawn. For the English word "alienation" contains at least one shade of nuance absent from *Verfremdung* but arguably present in *Entfremdung*. It seems implicit in English that one initiating a process of alienation must do so out of ill-will towards the alienated party and use of the term in the theatre would therefore seem to suggest therefore that it is the audience who are being alienated. A similar problem exists with another alternative translation, "estrangement"; although rather than ill will it carries with it a suggestion of relationship breakdown. "Estranged family members" and "estranged wife" are the contexts in which it is most often to be found. "Distancing" has a similar set of problems; Brecht's term carries with it none of the implications of distance that so many of these translations imply.

Rather, it indicates a disjunction between what is presented and the means of its presentation, a wedge driven between image and reality. It is for this reason that, in my essay "Brecht's Interpretation of the Chinese Theatre",<sup>46</sup> I suggested "disjunction" as the best available English word. Like the "defamiliarisation" of Russian Formalists such as

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<sup>45</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (edited and introduced by Gareth Steadman Jones) (London: Penguin, 1967), p.65

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Bye, "Brecht's Interpretation of the Chinese Theatre", from *Studies in Theatre and Performance* Vol. 22 No. 2 (2002)

Viktor Schklovsky,<sup>47</sup> this is useful in so far as it carries with it the technical meaning of the term, implying a jolt of surprise and a splitting into two something it had hitherto appeared natural to consider as one whole. The performance and the reality it represents are too easily considered identical, and the *Verfremdungseffekt* seeks to emphasise their separateness, to emphasise the process by which the performance represents and signifies reality without ever allowing the illusion to be fostered that the performance *is* reality. Jan Needle and Peter Thomson say, “the *Verfremdungseffekte* were designed to expose the familiar, to combat its unobtrusiveness”.<sup>48</sup>

However, both “disjunction” and “defamiliarisation” are ultimately unsatisfactory because they fail to carry with them the political implications of the term. For what is important is not only that there is a disjunction between performance and reality, but that this disjunction defamiliarises the *social* aspect of reality and encourages us to see it afresh. In particular, the device’s aim is to strip away the illusions of necessity and justice Brecht considered to be fostered by capitalism,<sup>49</sup> to do which it is likewise necessary to strip away the illusions of truth and emotional purgation too often fostered by the form of illusionist theatre: if we cannot see with clear eyes in the theatre, we certainly cannot see with clear eyes in reality. “The task of the *V-Effekt*”, Peter Brooker says, “ is to reveal a

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<sup>47</sup> Viktor Schklovsky, “Art as Technique”, from Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (eds.) *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) pp.3-24.

<sup>48</sup> Needle and Thomson, *op cit*, p.129

<sup>49</sup> It is important to distinguish at this point between the industrial capitalism treated by Marx and contemporary consumer capitalism. Capitalism for Brecht was something subtly different again. Capitalism, like so many other concepts addressed in this thesis, is once more not a stable entity but a dynamic process; it is not a means but a process of ordering society. However, it will not be useful for this thesis to attempt a detailed disquisition on what is meant by capitalism – or indeed communism, another concept key to Brecht. It is important simply to note that we will usually be referring to Brecht’s capitalism, i.e. capitalism as it was in the early- to mid-twentieth century. We will also very often simply inherit Brecht’s view of capitalism – for the purposes of this discussion it is therefore necessary to note that he saw capitalism as fostering an illusion of necessity and justice, not to examine whether or not this view is accurate.



suppressed or unconsidered alternative; to show the possibilities for change implicit in difference and contradiction”.<sup>50</sup>

It is vital to note at this point that *Verfremdungseffekt* is not necessarily a simple act of undermining of theatrical illusion. Driving a wedge between performer and character certainly renders belief in a character more difficult, but it does not necessarily render it impossible. Fredric Jameson indicates a desire to “rescue Brecht” from a particular kind of “stable irony”,<sup>51</sup> by which he means to question the notion of Brecht’s work as employing the simple ironical undermining of one, stated, viewpoint by another, implied, viewpoint. He sees instead in Brecht’s method a Hegelian desire to place two viewpoints in dialectical tension with one another in the hope that the audience will engage productively in an attempt to resolve this tension. If the audience has one particular viewpoint forced upon them, they are unlikely to engage critically. If, however, they are presented with an apparent contradiction, for example between two levels of reality, or between one method of ordering society and another, they are very likely to engage critically in an attempt to resolve that contradiction, to bridge the disjunction and find the dialectical point of progression. The *Verfremdungseffekt* is therefore not an effect, but a process.

#### vi. *The Epic Theatre and the Role of Pathos*

The most common reference point for Brecht’s theory of the Epic Theatre is his “Notes on the Opera *Mahagonny*”,<sup>52</sup> in which a table sets out on one side the qualities of the “dramatic theatre”, which he derives from Aristotle’s *Poetics*,<sup>53</sup> and on the other side those of the epic theatre. This simple table is perhaps more culpable than any other document in the misunderstandings of Brecht that have arisen in the fifty years since his

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Brooker, “Key words in Brecht’s theory and practice of theatre”, from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006), pp.209-224. The quotation is from p.218

<sup>51</sup> Jameson, *op cit*, p.21

<sup>52</sup> BB, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre”, from *BoT*, pp.33-42, p:37

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (translated and introduced by Malcolm Heath) (London: Penguin, 1996)

death. On opposite sides of the table, for example, we see “feeling” and “reason”, leading the unwary to suspect that Brecht’s was a theatre that excluded feeling, Aristotle’s one that excluded reason. It is not even necessary to consult Brecht’s work to oppose this point of view: the work of the Athenian dramatist most nearly Aristotle’s contemporary, Euripides, has a political pointedness not dissimilar to Brecht’s own which, coupled with the Greek convention of having the major dramatic events occur offstage, demonstrates a theatre not simply devoted to the purgation of negative emotions.<sup>54</sup> Yet there can be few teachers of Brecht to undergraduates who have not had to point with exasperation to Brecht’s footnote, “This table does not show absolute antitheses, but mere shifts of accent”,<sup>55</sup> as a corrective to the simplifications of A-level.

The key distinction between the epic and the dramatic theatres as Brecht delineates them is that in the epic theatre, the spectator is not to be swept away by a tide of emotion, or completely hypnotised by an illusion. There is no suggestion that emotion, and even illusion, are not used in their proper place. But Brecht is concerned to consistently re-assert reality, by means of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. This does not mean that pathos plays no part; it simply means that the spectator is “made to face something” rather than becoming “involved in something”.<sup>56</sup> So long as the pathetic is not used to shield us from what is rational, there is no problem with it. On the contrary, in view of what we have learned from Jameson it might appear that the pathetic and the comic can usefully be placed in tension, to engage the reason in attempting to resolve contradictions. Kenneth Tynan observed, “At every turn emotion floods through that celebrated dam, the ‘alienation-effect’. More and more one sees Brecht as a man whose feelings were so violent that he needed a theory to curb them”.<sup>57</sup> The epic theatre prevents us from being swept away by this flood of emotion, but it does not preclude the feeling of that emotion at any cost. So long as we are enabled to be objective about our emotions, there should be

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<sup>54</sup> See for example, Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*, which was written at a time when the Athenians were brutally prosecuting a war with a scorched earth policy. The play shows the women of the Trojan royal family awaiting their fate at the hands of the victorious Greeks. Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, (trans. Neil Curry) (Cambridge: CUP, 1981)

<sup>55</sup> BB, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre”, *op cit*, p.37

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage* (London: Methuen, 1975), p.184



no reason we cannot feel them. Moreover, if those emotions are placed in dialectical tension with something else, they might be positively encouraged.

Even a sense of the tragic may not be inimical to Brecht's theatre, despite Raymond Williams' subtitling of his chapter on Brecht in *Modern Tragedy* "A Rejection of Tragedy".<sup>58</sup> If the purpose of tragedy is, as Aristotle says, to engage our emotions fully in order that they may be purged, then certainly Brecht's theatre has no place for it. But if tragedy is a theatrical event in which a protagonist is brought low in a conflict with seemingly unalterable, circumstances, then this is in no way a contradiction of Brecht's thought. So long as those circumstances are social, are only *seemingly* unalterable, not actually pre-ordained, and through the course of the play they are revealed to have been alterable, then this model fits Brecht's theatre very well. Williams sees Brecht's theatre as anti-tragic precisely because of this open-ness, this lack of fatedness. However, Terry Eagleton challenges this view: "If Brecht is anti-tragic because he believes that tragedy can be avoided, then so are a great many tragedies".<sup>59</sup> A play like *Mother Courage* is all the more tragic because choices existed which might have averted the tragedy. If, on the other hand, the protagonist is brought low because of the workings of a teleological fate, then Brecht, with his desire to emphasise the spectator's capacity to act, would challenge the model. But where the theatre of Aeschylus and Sophocles might be held up in support of such a reading of Aristotle, that of Euripides sees human protagonists brought low not by the workings of the Gods, but by the cruelty and idiocy of their own kind. They make the wrong choices.

Indeed, an example of the kind of acting Brecht was looking for can be found in an account of a performance of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*, in which: "an actress of this new sort [...] announced the death of her mistress [...] in a wholly unemotional and penetrating voice [...] without any sorrow but so firmly and definitely that the bare fact of her mistress's death carried more weight at that precise moment than could have been

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<sup>58</sup> Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, *op cit*, pp.190-204

<sup>59</sup> Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, *op cit*, p.127

generated by any grief of her own”.<sup>60</sup> Neither pathos nor tragedy are denied by acting of this sort, but neither are they indulged. Indeed, it is worth speculating that perhaps Brecht’s theories of acting have taken greater hold in Britain than is generally thought, as it now appears axiomatic in contemporary mainstream theatre practice that the restraint of an emotion by the actor is, if anything, more effective and affecting than its untrammelled release.

The classic Brechtian exercise designed to achieve this effect is the couching of the character’s speech in a structure that separates them from the performer: “said the man”, “said the woman”. Peter Thomson describes the effect of this kind of exercise as “not designed to obstruct emotional engagement, but to show that the actor’s emotional engagement does not need to coincide with that of the character”.<sup>61</sup> A theatre that permits the pathetic and the tragic yet does not want to be overwhelmed by them requires an effective antidote, or point of opposition. This thesis will explore how far clowning provides that point of opposition.

### vii. *Gestus*

Walter Benjamin says that “epic theatre is Gestural. Strictly speaking, the Gesture is the material and epic theatre is its practical utilisation”.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere he talks about “the quotable Gesture” as the material of the epic theatre.<sup>63</sup> *Gestus* is particularly important to this study, as, although an understanding of it proceeds from an understanding of *Verfremdungseffekt* and of the epic theatre, it is *Gestus* that is principally exhibited by the performer in Brecht’s theatre and therefore it is *Gestus* - and its manner of creating *Verfremdungseffekte* - with which we will be most concerned here. A clown can exist in

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<sup>60</sup> BB, *BoT*, p.28

<sup>61</sup> Peter Thomson, “Brecht and Actor Training: On |Whose Behalf do we Act?”, from Alison Hodge (ed), *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.98-112, p.107

<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, *op cit*, p.23

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p.19



the epic theatre, and can create *Verfremdungseffekte*, only through a process of *Gestic* acting. So what does that mean?

As Peter Thomson observes of the concept of *Gestus*, “it is a pity for those who would like to systematise Brechtian practice that Brecht himself used the word so loosely”,<sup>64</sup> and certainly there is no easy way to define the term. Shomit Mitter perhaps puts it most simply when he describes *Gestus* as “a compound term which intrinsically harnesses both content and opinion”.<sup>65</sup> Simple as it is, this requires some unpacking. What it means is that in a *Gestic* performance, the actor is capable not only of presenting the attitude of the character but also her own attitude, so dramatising not only the play but also a series of critical commentaries. In support of this reading, Mitter quotes Helene Weigel:

How, for example, am I as Courage at the end of the play, when my business dealings have cost me the last of my children, to deliver the sentence: ‘I have to get back to business’ unless I am *not* personally shattered by the fact that this person I am playing does not possess the capacity to learn?<sup>66</sup>

Thus Weigel is able to present both Courage, and Weigel’s attitude to Courage, both content and opinion.

A good example can be found in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, when Azdak teaches the Old Beggar, who turns out to be the Grand Duke, how to eat cheese like a poor man.

The box is the table. Put your elbows on the table and now surround the plate with your arms as though you expected the cheese to be snatched from you at any moment. What right have you to be safe? Now hold the knife as if it were a small sickle; and don’t look so greedily at your cheese, look at it mournfully – because it’s already disappearing – like all good things.<sup>67</sup>

Azdak explains not only the habitual gestures that constitute the behaviour of a poor man while eating, but also decodes those gestures and lays bare the social interactions that lie

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<sup>64</sup> Thomson, *op cit*, p.109

<sup>65</sup> Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.48

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p.48

<sup>67</sup> BB, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (trans. James and Tania Stern with W.H. Auden) (London: Methuen, 1984), p.63)

underneath them. The gesture contains both content and opinion – and, due to the process by which it is delineated, it becomes eminently quotable. Indeed, in Brecht's plays we repeatedly see characters assuming particular modes of behaviour in order to assume a new social role. Shen Te, in *The Good Person of Szechuan*, becomes Shui Ta by presenting the gestures and behaviours of a man, but by unveiling this presentation as an act in the play's closing sequence, those gestures invite critique.

Galileo provides a particularly useful example, in his analogy between science and ideal social attitude.

Our new art of doubting delighted the masses. They tore the telescope out of our hands and trained it on their tormentors, the princes, landlords and priests. [...] The movements of the heavenly bodies have become more comprehensible, but the peoples are as far as ever from calculating the moves of their rulers. The battle for a measurable heaven has been won thanks to doubt; but thanks to credulity the Rome housewife's battle for milk will be lost time and time again.<sup>68</sup>

He proposes a model of social behaviour modelled on scientific method. The actions of rulers should be subjected to the same radical doubt that characterises the trained scientist's view of the unsupported hypothesis. This is not just a model social attitude - it is *Gestus*. It contains both content and what might be seen as opinion, but could more accurately be viewed as a means of arriving at that opinion. Vitally therefore, it is not frozen in time, it is *active*. Gesture is not freeze-frame, but movement, and that movement communicates something likewise not fixed but mutable.

As Peter Brooker emphasises, it is vital, as with *Verfremdungseffekt*, that the *Gestus* be compiled from the social point of view.<sup>69</sup> That is to say, the basic actions and Gestures that together make a performance and on which the performer is able to comment must reveal not simply the character, but also the imprints on that character made by the sociological groupings to which that character belongs. Any given Gesture or action made by a performer presenting a member of the aristocracy, for example, must show not

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<sup>68</sup> BB, *Life of Galileo* (trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1986), p.108)

<sup>69</sup> Brooker, *op cit*, p.219



only how their character behaves, but how social realities have informed that behaviour and caused it to develop in certain directions and not in others. In theory, every action on stage therefore becomes imprinted with a whole nexus of social and political commentaries with which the audience are invited to engage: “it’s the *things* that need to be criticised - the action, words, Gestures – not their execution”.<sup>70</sup>

#### *viii. The Aims of This Thesis*

This thesis therefore aims to answer the key question of how far clowning can augment a Brechtian theatre, by establishing several things that have not been established in any detail before. These are: a framework for the discussion and identification of clowning and its effects; an understanding of the nature of Brecht’s engagement with Charlie Chaplin and Karl Valentin and their impact on his thinking; and an analysis of how far clowning, whether owing antecedence to these men or others, is inscribed into the texts of some of Brecht’s major plays. From here we will be well equipped to move back towards clowning and explore in further detail whether what we have explored in theory works in practice. A production of *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti* will enable us to explore the practicalities of clowning in Brecht production. And a new piece, *Can of Worms*, enables us to explore clowning in the Brechtian tradition that, finally, moves beyond the work of Brecht himself.

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<sup>70</sup> BB, *Diaries 1920-22*, p32

## Chapter One: What is Clowning?

### *i. Introduction*

Before examining the work of Brecht in any detail, it is essential to consider and delineate the nature of what we are searching for therein. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a functional answer to the question “what is clowning?” Such an answer is by no means straightforwardly arrived at. As we saw in the Introduction to this thesis, there have been numerous attempts to identify the qualities and characteristics that constitute “clowning”, but as I have suggested, the world of clowning is sufficiently plural to render this task more problematic than it may first appear. Perhaps because there is no agreed definition or set of characteristics, authors such as those discussed in the Introduction have too often placed the emphasis on those identifying features that allow the focus of their own investigations to become the definitive clown. To take one such example: by dwelling on the quality of “innocence”, Samuel Thomas Niccolls makes Chaplin the definitive clown.<sup>71</sup> he uses Chaplin’s characteristics to enumerate and exemplify the defining characteristics of a clown, and having done so uses those criteria to explore clowning in other contexts. This might be posited as a definitive example of begging the question, but it does not help us to constitute clowning. Niccolls’ category barely allows entry to Buster Keaton and certainly excludes the anarchic Karl Valentin whose work we shall come to in Chapter Two. Like Terry Eagleton on literature or tragedy, we might observe that definitions tend either to be so narrow as to exclude obvious examples, such as the above, or so broad as to be meaningless.

As indicated in the Introduction, no practical or theoretical framework exists for the examination of clowning beyond those posited by studies of individual clowns. Almost all of the work that is of value to us is being done in the context of professional theatre practice. In this field three men, Jacques Lecoq, Philippe Gaulier and John Wright are particularly noteworthy European teachers of the form. Very few contemporary

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<sup>71</sup> Samuel Thomas Niccolls, *Man On the Boundary: The Nature and Significance of the Image of the Clown in the Art of Charles Chaplin, Georges Roualt, and Samuel Beckett* (unpublished PhD thesis, Ohio University, 1970)



practitioners working in this area exist who did not train with one or more of them. Drawing on primary practical research undertaken by the present author through training at the schools of both of the latter two men, as outlined in the Introduction, this chapter seeks to delineate in some detail precisely what is meant by the term “clowning” in contemporary theatre practice. Unlike Niccolls et al, we will therefore proceed from practice rather than from observation, learning about clowning by learning about how it is produced. This will produce a depth of analysis that is seldom possible from external observation, akin to the difference in understanding between the mechanic and the car club member. Further, secondary support will be drawn from the books of John Wright and Jacques Lecoq, Simon Murray and Keith Johnstone.<sup>72</sup>

The chapter will proceed by means of an analysis of the chief characteristics and tropes of clowning as taught by Wright and Gaulier, each of which overlap in several ways, in order to establish a framework for the investigation of Brecht’s own use of clowning. As far as possible, each characteristic will be examined by means of the exercises used to teach them, utilising practical examples from across clowning traditions, in an attempt to see beyond the specific tradition in which this training takes place and test whether its lessons are more generally applicable. The chapter will conclude with an attempt to denote those ways in which we might see the practice of clowning to be in harmony with the kind of Brechtian theatricality adumbrated in the introduction.

It is worth noting at this stage that John Wright posits four different kinds of clown: simple clowns, boss clowns, pathetic clowns and tragic clowns,<sup>73</sup> an instantaneous demonstration of the plurality of clowning even within one tradition. We will focus principally on simple clowning, as there is much in that category that is applicable to the others and it is also the kind of clowning most directly related to other clown traditions

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<sup>72</sup> John Wright, *Why is That So Funny?* (London: Nick Hern, 2006); Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (London: Methuen, 2000); Jacques Lecoq, *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (London: Routledge, 2006); Simon Murray, *Jacques Lecoq* (London: Routledge, 2003); Keith Johnstone, *Impro* (London: Methuen, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Wright, *op cit*, pp.179-238. Boss clown is discussed under ‘Simple Clown’: pp.208-211

such as those out of which grew Grimaldi, Kemp and Fo. Although Gaulier and Lecoq make no similar subdivisions, their “clown” relates directly to Wright’s “simple clown”.<sup>74</sup> However, towards the close of this chapter we shall also look at “pathetic clown”,<sup>75</sup> which has great significance in relation to the complexities of emotional engagement in Brecht’s work. From the very fact that Wright feels it necessary to posit a separate category for the clown of pathos, it can be seen that simple clowning is not a form that conventionally tugs on the emotions. But it will prove worth asking just how different these two categories are. Wright’s “boss clown” is essentially a simple clown in a position of some authority,<sup>76</sup> a category that will prove to be of especial significance in relation to the *Gestic* conveyance of social status. We shall also, finally, come to “tragic clown”,<sup>77</sup> a form which is not necessarily even funny but which has great relevance to the way emotions are mediated in Brecht’s theatre, in the light of the discussion of Aristotelian tragedy in the Introduction to this thesis.

## ii. *Bafflement*

Let us begin with Niccolls’ concept of innocence, by which he means a naïve view of the world that enables the performer to remain untouched by hardship and degradation. It is a compelling quality and we might easily see in it, for example, the “vulnerability” lauded by Philippe Gaulier.<sup>78</sup> If we were to take Chaplin as our archetypal clown then we would have to take this to be a central defining quality. As we shall see in the next chapter, the admiration of Chaplin’s character, Charlie, for his female leads is always pure and earnest, his quest often simply to fit in, to avoid betraying his outsider quality. Yet neither Wright nor Gaulier make any emphasis on this quality in these terms, because as has already been observed, a focus thereon would quickly lead to the exclusion of several significant clown figures such as Buster Keaton and much of the work of Dario Fo.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, pp.179-218

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, pp.219-35

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, pp.208-11

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, pp.236-48

<sup>78</sup> Philippe Gaulier, “Clown”, workshop, Paris, March-April 2004



What John Wright labels “bafflement”, though, is related to this quality.<sup>79</sup> The word “innocence” has implications of moral worth that are not appropriate to all clowns. Sixteenth-century clowns such as Kemp and Tarleton grew out of the Vice figure in the medieval Morality plays and the Festival Lord of Misrule.<sup>80</sup> They were far from “innocent”, rather their effects were drawn from a compact between them and their audience in which knowledge of the rules and a breaking of those rules was central. Crucially, though, the successful among such clowns, like Tarleton, would often play as though not knowing the rules. Rules would be broken, but seemingly accidentally, and the laughter comes in part at the transgression and in part at the idea that one might not know the rules well enough to avoid transgression. Such clowns perform actions many might perform were they unaware that such actions are forbidden by written or unwritten codes. “Innocence” is not the right word for this.

A better word might be “unknowing”. John Wright, however, chooses the word “bafflement”, a term of which we can work towards a better understanding by examining how it is taught. Bafflement is a particular state of unknowing, perhaps most instructively taught through the game “amnesiac”.<sup>81</sup> Working in pairs, one partner provokes the other with a series of insinuations that the other ‘just get on with it’,<sup>82</sup> ‘get started in your own time’, ‘do your act’, without any indication or clue as to what the task required might be. The partner being provoked, stuck in a state of unknowing but required to be active in some way, finds that two options are available. The first, stalling, simply makes the provoking partner more irate and impatient, although it is possible to sustain it for some time provided the methods of stalling are sufficiently creative. For example, vocal or physical warm-ups that quickly escalate into ridiculous self-parody as the pressure

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<sup>79</sup> Wright, *op cit*, pp.194-200

<sup>80</sup> See Wiles, *op cit*, Chapters One and Two, pp. 1-23

<sup>81</sup> John Wright, “The Gentle Art of Idiocy”, workshop, London, December 2004

<sup>82</sup> While not quite a technical term, both Wright and Gaulier use “provocation” sufficiently often for it to come near that status, with Wright using the word specifically and frequently when working. Its meaning is self-explanatory: it is any phrase, action, or behaviour designed to provoke a performer into one of any number of possible behaviours, but certainly to catch them off-guard and usually to force them to move in a different direction. Wright uses it in all of his workshops and it appears in his book frequently, for example on p.41

exerted by the provoking partner becomes greater. The second, guessing at what the activity required might be – singing a song, reciting verse, doing impressions of motor vehicles – makes the provoking partner yet more irate and the clown more desperate to get it right.

The exercise inculcates in the performer a sense of utter bafflement that, as we shall see, Wright considers essential to all clowning. The exercise itself is also a clown trope: the clown knows that something specific is required, but does not know what that might be. A good example can be seen in Simon McBurney's performance in Complicite's *A Minute Too Late*, in which his bumbling, duffle-coat wearing Englishman is ignorant of the social codes that govern behaviour around death and grieving, as a result at one point in the show causing huge disruption at a funeral service by not knowing when to stand or sit. His bafflement gives rise to his inability to follow the rules.

As this work with John Wright develops, he encourages clowns, informed by this "point of bafflement", into recognisable scenarios, and from so doing we can see how central is this characteristic to the form. In one exercise a performer, along with the audience, establishes a situation and a character set, whereupon a second performer, the clown, enters with no knowledge of the role he is supposed to be playing. A fine example from training with Wright saw one performer committing quite earnestly to a First World War trenches drama in which his performance beautifully *pastiched* the world of *Journey's End*. Meanwhile the clown wandered around the trenches utterly bewildered as to why his compatriot was getting so worked up whenever he got to his feet and strolled around the barricades looking for a cup of tea. The bafflement was utterly credible. The first performer's alone might have had the sketch identified as *pastiche*, a form whose success derives from knowingness on the part of a performer who has a clear target in mind.<sup>83</sup> With the addition of the second performer, the sketch became clearly distinguishable as clowning, a form whose success rests on the performer radiating this sense of unknowing.

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<sup>83</sup> See Wright, *op cit*, pp.270-76



We might equally think of a play such as *Romeo and Juliet*,<sup>84</sup> which in Act Two Scene Three, for example, has a predominantly comic register characterised by witty word play. Then when Peter, the clown, speaks, he can only register bafflement and confusion heavily and even disruptively at odds with the rest of the scene. His intervention momentarily shifts the performance into a different register. In *Romeo and Juliet* such interventions are relatively brief and infrequent (although perhaps less so than is conventional in contemporary production, which, perhaps because they are unable to support the disruptive nature of the clown, tend to cut Peter heavily), but in the *Journey's End* pastiche above, or any piece formed around a central clown figure, the clown's bafflement can easily set the tenor of the piece.

### iii. *Gameplay*

One of John Wright's tools for the teaching of clowning is the playing of games. A simple game such as "slaps" or "knee tag" is played by two clowns.<sup>85</sup> Their playing must be credible, that is we must be convinced of the earnestness of their pursuit of victory. The deeper objective is not to win the game, but to play the game for the purpose of entertaining an audience. It quickly becomes clear that what is satisfying for an audience is not necessarily the same as what is effective strategically in the game. In knee tag, for example, it is strategically effective to play a defensive game by keeping one's knees covered and counterattacking one's opponent's uncovered knees whenever an attack is made. It is, though, immeasurably more entertaining for the audience to watch a gung-ho game where each player recklessly invites attacks by uncovering the knees and inventing preposterous strategies and ruses in order to trick the opponent. The audience enjoys an out-of-control high-wire act. Wright frequently instructs players to "be more audacious" in these situations, to take great chances and raise the stakes as much as possible. There

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<sup>84</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare* (eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

<sup>85</sup> "Slaps" is a game where two players each put their own hands palm to palm as if in prayer, then touch fingers with the similarly joined hands of their opponent. The objective is to slap the opponent on the back of one of their hands. "Knee tag" is a game where each player covers their knees with the palms of their hands, the objective being to tag their opponent's knee.

are unwritten codes governing the playing of any game that go beyond the simple rules of that game, those codes teaching us what is likely to be strategically effective, what is reckless and so on. The clown, as we have seen, has no conception of such codes and so plays games with more concern for pleasure than victory. Gaulier teaches an exercise in which a group of clowns play “Grandmother’s Footsteps” with a twist. They have observed another group playing the game and decided that it looks great fun. Unfortunately a pillar in their sightline meant that they could not see “grandmother”. So their game is one of creeping, freezing and occasionally heading back to the start with a heavy sigh. The game is objectiveless, or, more accurately, the objective is simply the game itself.<sup>86</sup> Wright says “everything is a game to the clown”.<sup>87</sup> Gaulier says “to play is at the centre of everything the clown does”.<sup>88</sup> Life is not serious, it is a game.

For Wright’s clowns in particular, this leads to the clown playing the game in a reckless and high-stakes manner. This question of the stakes is a key one both for our discussion of clowning and for the light it will subsequently cast on our discussion of Brecht. As a direct result of the clown’s unknowing bafflement, it is difficult for anything to be at stake for him beyond the approval of the audience. This is his only measure of success. Philippe Gaulier characterises a clown as “someone who is paid to make the audience laugh. That’s it”.<sup>89</sup> So if the audience is not laughing, the clown is not a success. Yet, in the exercise we are currently examining, victory or defeat in the game would also appear to be at stake.

These two motivations are in constant tension, and a successful clown is able to find ways of combining the two by, in Wright’s phrase “attacking the fabric of the game”.<sup>90</sup> Again due to his bafflement, the clown has very little sense of strategy. All he has to go on are the rules of the game. So we will see him going to preposterous lengths to tag his

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<sup>86</sup> Gaulier, *op cit*

<sup>87</sup> Wright, “The Gentle art of Idiocy”, *op cit*

<sup>88</sup> Gaulier, *op cit*

<sup>89</sup> Gaulier, *op cit*

<sup>90</sup> John Wright, “The Way of the Idiot”, workshop, London, September 2003; John Wright, “The Gentle Art of Idiocy”, workshop, London, December 2004



opponent's knees. The present author's training saw, for example, exercises in which one player dragged himself, face down on the floor, reaching for his opponent's knees while "protecting" his own. It is an inefficient and ridiculous way of playing the game, but it possesses an internal logic nonetheless. And it provides tremendous opportunity for the opponent to be equally ludicrous, clambering over his prostrate adversary and getting completely tangled. In such situations as this, the game itself is often all but forgotten amid the need to disentangle oneself from one's opponent, and the more difficult the players make it for themselves to succeed, while all the time appearing in earnest pursuit of this success, the more successful as clowning their game becomes. Wright describes this as "attacking the fabric of the game" because such an approach follows the logic of the game to extremes, rendering it almost unplayable.

Richard Tarleton again provides a useful example. After performances he would set up a game in which members of the audience would feed him a couplet, to which he would respond with another on a similar theme. Those of his responses that have survived are notable for their crudity, yet they undoubtedly had their effect. For example, David Wiles tells us of one performance in Worcester after which an audience member hinted in rhyme at Tarleton's inability to control his wife:

Methinks it is a thing unfit

To see a gridiron turn the spit

The audience laughed, thinking Tarleton unable to respond to this, whereupon he retorted:

Methinks it is a thing unfit

To see an ass have any wit<sup>91</sup>

Once again, the audience is said to have laughed uproariously, but this is hardly great wit – and that is precisely the point. Tarleton has set up a game whose objective is to triumph in a battle of wits. He stays within the rules, but attacks the fabric of the game by winning through crudity, rather than finesse. Wiles says Tarleton "crushes his victim [...] yet

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<sup>91</sup> Wiles, *op cit*, p.16

continues to present himself as one so stupid that anybody ought to outwit him.”<sup>92</sup> His apparent bafflement is what enables him to attack the fabric of the game.

Even more satisfying is when the clown is able to lose the thread of the game entirely, by becoming distracted by a different game altogether. For example, in knee tag it is not uncommon to see accomplished clown players segue into mock bullfighting, fencing, or contemporary dance. They play these games with the same earnestness as the knee tag until they come to a natural end, for example with the “death” of the bull, or with the sudden re-instatement of knee tag by one of the players. Even the death of the bull is likely to be succeeded by a sudden strike by one of the players; when one game ends another must begin immediately, otherwise nothing will be at stake and the scene will start to flop. There is great delight to be had in the audience by a sudden re-instatement of the game of knee tag by a performer, just an instant before we ourselves remember that that is what is supposed to be going on. The performances of clown and physical comedy company Peepolykus are particularly notable for such digressive gameplay, their show *Goose Nights* featuring one section performed in the style of a high-energy computer game for little apparent reason beyond the presence of a powerful impulse to do so.<sup>93</sup>

Our enjoyment of these diversions as an audience arises from two things. Firstly, we enjoy the invention and virtuosity with which the clown is able to contrive yet another means of failure at his supposed objective of winning the game. This can be as simple as the clown sowing his own destruction by sharing with the audience his delight at a skilful attempt on his opponent, thus becoming distracted enough for the opponent to score a successful strike. Or it can be as elaborate as, on the brink of scoring the decisive strike, entering instead into a gladiatorial mime in which the audience are asked to give thumbs up or thumbs down, as a result of which, again his opponent is able to strike instead. The clown very frequently sows the seeds of his own failure. But secondly, as intimated in the reference to *Goose Nights* above, the audience should recognise the impulse from which

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p.17

<sup>93</sup> Peepolykus, *Goose Nights*. See <http://www.peepolykus.com/> for more information on the Gaulier-trained company.



the new game has sprung. The bullfighting never comes out of nowhere, but from the performers' joint realisation that something of their posture and manner is reminiscent of that seen in the bullring. The computer game in *Goose Nights* arose likewise because something in the manner and posture of the performers was observed to be reminiscent of the Super Mario Brothers. The audience recognises the observation, but would never normally act on it. The pleasure derived from such games therefore consists in very large part of seeing someone obey those impulses so supposedly ridiculous that society has taught us to quell or ignore them, as contrary to accepted codes of behaviour. In Bakhtinian terms, the clown creates a context of carnival, in which rules of convention are temporarily suspended.<sup>94</sup> The rules of the game are themselves subjected to the attitude of gameplay.

Finding new games is key to successful clowning, such that it is almost possible to analyse the whole of clowning from the point of view of gameplay. It links also to an important characteristic of clowning identified by Joel Schechter, with an awareness of Galy Gay in *A Man's a Man*: "Both Galy Gay and the little tramp are meek and compliant when first seen, and both 'cannot say no'".<sup>95</sup> This inability to refuse an impulse is a characteristic operation of clowning. The leading clown Angela de Castro describes clowns as dwelling in "the land of 'why not?'" , naming her school for clowns The Why Not? Institute.<sup>96</sup> Again, this is a consequence of the state of bafflement. The baffled clown will always say "yes" to any new offer made to him, being in no position to contradict it. This notion of an "offer" derives from Keith Johnstone and includes anything a performer does that requires a response from another performer.<sup>97</sup> An offer can either be accepted, or blocked. A clown will almost always accept an offer, even if it

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<sup>94</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Hélène Iswolsky) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)

<sup>95</sup> Joel Schechter, "Brecht's Clowns: *Man is Man* and after", from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.90-100. The quote is from p.94.

<sup>96</sup> Nothing is published about De Castro, but she has an informative website at <http://www.contemporaryclowningprojects.com>. The Why Not Institute has a separate website, at <http://www.thewhynotinstitute.com>. Both websites were, at the time of writing, very out of date, but the general overview is useful and has not changed.

<sup>97</sup> Johnstone, *op cit*, p.97



is something as bizarre or potentially exposing as, for example, “are you here to audition for the ballet?” A clown will accept these offers, and play along with them as though they were games, because he has no information which might contradict the view of his world that he is being invited to share – and because, like Grandmother’s Footsteps, he might take pleasure in the game of auditioning for the ballet. If a game is offered, he will play it until he finds another, more compelling game. Of particular importance is the observation that for the clown, *everything* is a game. He will not act the role of a soldier; he will play the game of being a soldier. And the rules of that game, its governing mores, have at best been imperfectly absorbed.

#### *iv. Debunking and Improvisation*

Finding a new game is a very good way of attacking the fabric of the original game. But the further away we get from the “core” game, the greater must be our virtuosity. Audiences cannot be distracted from the task in hand indefinitely and ultimately the clown must return to the plot. It is therefore worth explicating the very close relationship between gameplay and dramatic situation. Placing a clown in a conventional dramatic situation presents obvious difficulties because the clown will continually subjugate the demands of what is at stake in that situation to the demands of his own high-stakes game of gaining audience approval. Witness the theory, expounded by David Wiles, that Kemp was fired from Shakespeare’s company, in part for just such extemporisation.<sup>98</sup> And *Hamlet*, a play of the same year as Kemp’s departure, 1599, sees the leading character advise the players, amid a lengthy tirade about clowns, “let not your clowns speak more than is set down for them”.<sup>99</sup> With Kemp as with contemporary clown, this is not simply a matter of going off-text, but a refusal to respect the governing conventions of the performance. The earlier Shakespeare concedes to this by giving Kemp’s characters English names, such as Peter, even in plays set in Italy. Any narrative arc or attempt at verisimilitude will be disrupted by the presence of a clown, who happily steps outside of its frame simply in order to provoke laughter in the audience. He will find a game that

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<sup>98</sup> See Wiles, *op cit*

<sup>99</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare, op cit*, p.671



disrupts the narrative frame entirely. Moreover, that game can very easily arise directly from the clown's pleasure at "playing the game" of acting in a play.

John Wright labels this process of stepping outside the frame "debunking".<sup>100</sup> He observes that an actor in the role of Hamlet will embrace Horatio and commit to that action's credibility, whereas a clown will very likely, in the process of performing the action, turn to the audience and announce verbally or facially "I'm hugging Horatio", breaking the frame of the theatrical action and drawing attention to its artificiality. Neither a wilful anarchy on the part of the clown, nor the revelation of a deliberately destructive streak, this characteristic action is simply a function of the fact that, when clowning, playing Hamlet is a game the enjoyment of which the clown wishes to share with the audience to whose pleasure he is devoted. By thus declaring the game, he happens to attack its fabric and thus contrive his failure at it. Because performance is nothing more than a game, the clown constantly debunks the "reality" of that performance where an actor's quest is to preserve it.

This tension between reality and performance becomes even greater when the context is the performance of an extant dramatic text such as one of Brecht's plays. The instinct to say "yes" to everything includes the unplanned. A disturbance in the audience such as a latecomer, which might be tremendously distracting to an actor in a fourth-wall drama, is a gift to the clown. He is able to debunk the idea of a fourth wall and of the actor's total commitment to his role by waving delightedly to the latecomer and shepherding him to his seat. Rather than ignoring the disturbance and thus saying "no" to it, he accepts it, planned or not, as part of the unfolding theatrical event, thus saying "yes" to it. These obviously unplanned interpolations in clown-based theatre and performance very often get much bigger laughs than the scripted and prepared sections. The work of the theatre company Improbable, which uses clowning among elements of many other traditions, very often uses a significant proportion of improvisation in performance. Company member Lee Simpson speaks of the process of creating work as creating "a framework

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<sup>100</sup> Wright, "The Way of the Idiot", *op cit.*

within which you can be irresponsible".<sup>101</sup> Yet such extemporisations contain the very real danger of too-completely debunking what might have been a carefully planned performance.

The preparation for performance of any clown piece, or any theatre piece featuring elements of clowning, will usually feature a large amount of improvisation, the material developed from which is gradually rehearsed into the finished piece. The aim of this rehearsal will be to retain the sense of spontaneity that produced the original improvisation while simultaneously attempting to take control, as fully as possible, of the effect being created. The most successful clown shows are often those in which it is virtually impossible to distinguish the genuinely spontaneous elements from those which have been rehearsed into the piece and which therefore debunk with great frequency the "reality" of what is being presented. A show like Improbable's *The Hanging Man*, which dramatises the process of its own improvisation, is a very fine example.<sup>102</sup>

#### v. *The Flop*

Gaulier's conception of the clown's relationship to the audience will repay further discussion. Central to that conception is the performance trope of the "flop", the moment of performance catastrophe. Gaulier puts a group of trainee clowns on stage and informs them that they will be performing the great classical drama "King Louis and the Lion".<sup>103</sup> They are given no preparation time but simply required to perform the play as though they are seasoned professionals. Being clowns, with in any case no knowledge of this (obviously fictitious) play, things quickly start to go wrong. Their acting is based on half-remembered clichés of great classical actors of the past, executed with great conviction and utter ineptitude. The plot quickly becomes nonsense. They are "playing the game" of being great classical actors performing King Louis and the Lion, with great commitment and gusto but no success whatever. Inevitably, at some point, despite all their invention

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<sup>101</sup> The interview can be found on Improbable's website:

[http://www.improbable.co.uk/article.asp?article\\_id=4](http://www.improbable.co.uk/article.asp?article_id=4)

<sup>102</sup> Improbable, *The Hanging Man* (seen at West Yorkshire Playhouse, April 2003)

<sup>103</sup> Gaulier, *op cit.*



and all their diversionary games, their ability to hide the fact that they are simply baffled as to precisely what they ought to be doing will be ruthlessly exposed by a spectacular failure.

This moment, when the performers turn to the audience, seemingly declaring “well, that was a total disaster”, is the “flop”, the ruthless exposure of a point of total bafflement that the clown continually strives to disguise by finding new games. For Gaulier, this is the moment when we see pure clowning, what John Wright calls “simple clown”, a clown without any character other than that of the performer left totally stranded. It is Gaulier’s contention that the performance of clown constitutes a “dance” with the flop. The clown is continually in danger of getting it all disastrously wrong and exposing his bafflement in this way. The very best clown performance is that which sails extremely close to the flop a great deal of the time in a manner comparable with the high-wire act. A clown in no danger of falling is not a clown. The clown spends much of the time hanging on by his fingertips and we are excited by the spectacle of seeing him almost fall. The stakes are always high. Wright describes this situation as being “in the shit”, which is where the clown should almost always be. The job of the clown performer is to “put yourself in the shit”; Wright’s other dictum on this subject being “if it’s bad, make it worse”: the clown hanging on by his fingertips will always eventually fall.<sup>104</sup> Crucially, though, this does not represent his failure to delight the audience any longer, but his complete and apparently final failure to maintain the pretence that “King Louis and the Lion” is going well. This admission, this sudden moment of honesty represented by the performers stranded and lost on stage, can be the most potently delightful weapon in the clown’s arsenal. In part this derives simply from a complete change of rhythm, from frenetic to almost or completely stationary, but it also derives from the ultimate act of debunking. The clown, temporarily at least, abandons the game because it has become impossible to sustain any longer.

The flop described here is almost as powerful as flops can get, but it is of course not a binary switch from “flop” to “success”. By describing the clown as performing a dance

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<sup>104</sup> Wright, “The Gentle Art of Idiocy”, *op cit.*

with the flop, Gaulier indicates that the flop is a constant presence, and small flops frequently occur en route to more complete ones. For example, when the players of knee tag segue into bullfighting, it is the flop of that game that pushes them back to playing knee tag. Only when a flop can be contrived in the knee tag itself is the device at its most powerful, but it is important to note that the very act of bullfighting can bring about that flop. Likewise, if the performers of “King Louis and the Lion” were to become distracted by bullfighting, it is highly likely that this could bring about the destruction of the whole edifice and effect a very powerful flop indeed.

Still, the clown always manages to rescue himself. A powerful flop can be sustained for some time on stage, but will eventually become tiresome if we do not see the clown attempt to negotiate his way out of it, to continue the pretence that everything is perfectly under control. Thus it is important to note that the flop of a game can be enjoyable for the audience, as it is not necessarily synonymous with the flop of an entire act. Only when we sense that the performer is failing to clown successfully, as distinct from the clown failing to play King Louis successfully, does the act itself begin to flop. So in “King Louis and the Lion”, after a total disaster has been enjoyed sufficiently by the audience, it is necessary for the performers to attempt to get the game back on track. There are almost no limits to the ways in which this might be done. Bringing back a character that has been successful earlier, for example the lion, would be one approach, but it rarely needs linking with any real rigour to the direct demands of the dramatic situation so much as to the demands of gaining audience approval. One version of this exercise witnessed at Gaulier’s school featured a clown dressed as a Scotsman performing a Highland Fling whenever he felt under pressure. Not only did this provoke a great deal of laughter, it became a powerful way of acknowledging the flop as well as negotiating a way out of it; the effect is of an incompetent actor trying to buy time. The clown thinks he is delighting the audience with his dance, when in fact what delights us is the acknowledgement it represents of his growing failure as a serious actor in “King Louis and the Lion”. It is also an exceptionally vivid depiction of the notion of “dancing” with the flop.



*vi. Wright's Clowning and Gaulier's Clowning*

The “King Louis and the Lion” exercise is an instructive one for another reason. In it, we see a group of clowns attempting to convince the audience that they are serious actors and that they are intimately familiar with the text in question. Their success as clowns is predicated on their failure as actors, on the extent to which they provoke laughter by flopping in their performance. This is different to the John Wright clown exercise that produced the WWI scene, as in Gaulier’s exercise all of the clowns are aware of what is expected of them. Wright’s exercise is designed to help the performer locate the point of bafflement; Gaulier’s to negotiate the flop. This distinction helps delineate the subtle difference between the work of the two men. Wright addresses the idea of the flop in his teaching, and Gaulier does not deny that what is exposed by the flop is the point of bafflement. But whereas Wright’s teaching focuses on discovering the point of bafflement as a state of the clown’s being, Gaulier uses the flop to discover it as a product of circumstance. This leads subsequently to a subtle difference in the type of clowning emerging from their respective academies. Wright focuses on locating a state of being, Gaulier on producing a particular effect. Wright’s state of being often leads to the production of Gaulier’s effect, while Gaulier’s effect often produces Wright’s state of being. Nonetheless it is worth noting the differing emphases.

There is no doubt that these distinctions arise in part not simply due to the differing emphases of the two men’s training methods, but in their pedagogical styles themselves. Wright is supportive, encouraging, happy to explain and to help students understand, when exercises have not been successful and why that is the case. His aim is to foster an atmosphere that enables students to gradually find the clown’s point of bafflement for themselves. As the work develops he gradually increases the pressure and asks that the sensibility that has been developed become more robust.

Gaulier, by contrast, is famously tyrannical and is well known for insulting his students in extravagant terms, raising the probability of the flop among new students by some considerable margin. When students are attempting exercises, he sits in the audience with

a tambourine. If the exercise is a success, he continues watching. When it starts to fail, he hits his tambourine (a sound dreaded by his students), insults the performer copiously, ensures the group agrees with him, then demands they sit down.<sup>105</sup> Although cutting, he is never wrong when deeming a performance to be failing – even if it has been succeeding for fifteen minutes or more prior to its failure. What this inculcates, particularly in the early stages of training, is an exaggerated fear of the audience, a desperate need to avoid the flop. As the work develops, students become more comfortable with the risk of failure and the robustness of their work gradually develops a greater sensitivity.

No judgements will be made here about whose results are preferable; students of both have gone on to produce work of considerable distinction<sup>106</sup>. Both men having trained with Lecoq and taught for a time at his school, it is hardly surprising that their very different methods should nevertheless tend towards similar ends. They exist within the same tradition. Though they have very distinct processes, those processes are used to develop similar effects, with the flop and the point of bafflement seeming increasingly central - not only in this but in many clown traditions.

### *vii. Vulnerability and the Joy of Being Present*

For Gaulier, the clown's vulnerability is a vital component and it is no coincidence that his pedagogical style inculcates a feeling of precarious vulnerability in those performing in front of him. A vulnerable clown is one continually aware of the danger of the flop and honestly afraid of it. For Gaulier's clown, as has been seen, there is no failure worse than the failure to win approval from the audience.

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<sup>105</sup> His insults, though extreme, are usually very funny. The first time the present author performed in front of Gaulier, he was finally told, "I have never killed an Englishman. But today, I think I might." A performance by a student from Barcelona was the same day greeted with the response, "Franco, he killed a lot of Catalans. Who thinks he missed one out?" whereupon some poor member of the group was corralled into agreeing, "yes Philippe, he missed one out."

<sup>106</sup> To give some examples: Wright trainees include the companies Told by an Idiot and Trestle; Cal McCrystal and Alex Byrne of NIE both trained with Gaulier.



Yet, in almost direct contradiction, perhaps the most significant area of Gaulier's teaching is that of the clown's pleasure in performance. The clown loves the opportunity to delight the audience. In fact, a clown cannot really exist without an audience, so an opportunity to perform is an opportunity to exist. The clown and teacher Angela de Castro, who has worked a great deal with both Wright and Gaulier, speaks of this as "the joy of being present".<sup>107</sup> When Gaulier feels a performer is not exhibiting sufficient pleasure he has them repeat an exercise while being kissed on the neck by two members of the opposite sex. This usually has the desired effect. In Gaulier's school this happens fairly frequently, as the fear he inculcates makes it very difficult to take pleasure. But the lesson is a very valuable and exhilarating one, the pleasure of clowning in front of Gaulier being somewhat comparable to the pleasure of hurtling downhill without brakes. It is exciting, and it is also terrifying.

John Wright has a highly instructive exercise one of many effects of which is to reinforce the clown's pleasure in performance. Called "the clapping game", it begins with the performer outside the room, while the rest of the group decides what task must be performed by them, using a random assortment of items strewn about the performance area. Common tasks include such things as riding a broomstick like a horse, using a scarf as a whip. The performer enters to a huge ovation and from that point forth is rewarded by applause for every action that brings them closer to achieving the overall objective. Along the way, it is their responsibility to keep the audience entertained for as long as it takes to guess what the task might be. This game is particularly useful in teaching clowning as it removes from the performer a great deal of the burden of generating material: the dramatic situation and the game are one and the same thing, and it is possible to have a total flop entirely through genuine mistake. It is not necessary to manufacture bafflement as your task is a real mystery, and it is not necessary to contrive failure, simply to make spirited attempts at success and to take failure, when it succeeds

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<sup>107</sup> De Castro's course, entitled "How to be a Stupid", is one I have not taken myself, so references to her work are taken from conversations with several people who have, as well as from John Wright, who occasionally makes reference to her himself.

in entertaining the audience, as a different kind of success. The constant rewards from the audience help to inculcate a real pleasure in performing this role and the sense of honest bafflement and occasional uncontrived flop are very instructive in helping to find these qualities for later repetition.

This game also provides a useful reminder of the importance of taking risks. Those performers who drift about the space waiting for applause on the basis of their having got near to one of the items needed for their task are not particularly enjoyable to watch. This is like a defensive game of knee tag, not daring to expose to your opponent the opportunity to score a point. Much more satisfying are those performers who make spirited attempts to find a new game with every object in the space, in the very probably vain hope that it is the correct one. This gung ho attitude almost certainly means it will take longer to successfully complete the task, but it also invariably means that the journey to that task's completion is a much more satisfying one for those watching. This more successful version of the game is much more concerned with the underlying objective – satisfying the audience – than the apparent one of playing the game successfully. And the successful performers discover that their pleasure and that of the audience often coincide.

Yet no matter how much pleasure the performer takes in this game, they are still extremely vulnerable. They have no idea what they are meant to achieve and whether or not they are capable of it. Their bafflement is completely genuine and they are not cushioned from it by the knowledge that it is performed. Only bafflement that has real credibility entertains in this game and audiences for clowning have an unerring instinct for the manufactured and the artificial. So the performer must reveal his vulnerability as well as his pleasure – and this vulnerability can itself give great pleasure. Gaulier says that “we love a clown because he is ridiculous and he has a beautiful humanity”.<sup>108</sup> He is not interested in clowns that are faked, in manufactured bafflement and over-egged pratfalls, but in a real, ridiculous human being whose failure can credibly be seen as genuine.

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<sup>108</sup> Gaulier, *op cit*



### *viii. Earnestness and Optimism*

The clown's vulnerability is also derived from his earnest optimism. No matter how many times he flops, he will always be robust enough to pick up the pieces and attempt to rescue the situation. The successful clown will never for long be at a loss for something to do. Indeed, one result of Gaulier's terror-inspiring pedagogical style is that no audience can ever be quite as daunting again. His training is something of a baptism of fire, making clowning as difficult as possible in order that it might become easy. The only thing from which there is no recovery is the striking of the tambourine and audiences do not have those, the result of which knowledge is a tremendous sense of liberation: the situation is always available for rescue. Coupled with his constant dancing with the flop, the clown must be by nature an optimist, otherwise he would simply leave the stage. Yet this optimism renders him vulnerable once more as he is constantly putting himself in the way of failure, rendering further flops not just likely, but certain.

Related to the clown's optimism is his "earnestness", a word that has already been used several times in the above sections. The clown always does his best, always commits fully to the task in hand and never has any doubt that he is equal to it. In the First World War scenario, or King Louis and the Lion, he may not always fully understand the task in hand, but he will do his best nonetheless to accomplish it. Yet he will always manage to contrive failure, no matter how auspicious the circumstances. Earnestness is very closely linked to bafflement and, indeed, helps to produce it. It is precisely because the clown is so honestly committed to, for example, playing the game of being a soldier, that he is so unable to understand that it is declaring this as a game that has produced his failure. He will also overplay "being a soldier", out of a declared commitment to doing it extremely well, but with the result that his performance is utterly artificial and completely inadequate. The clown's failure is a direct result of his earnest, optimistic belief in his ability to produce success, and no matter how many failures he endures this optimism will not be dented.

*ix. The Drop*

Another noteworthy trope is John Wright's figure of the "drop". This is the moment when the clown stops even attempting to be Hamlet in order to turn to the audience and demonstrate his pride in his excellent performance as Hamlet. It is, once again, a complete abandonment of the theatrical reality in favour of the concrete reality of the here-and-now. Most effective when most inappropriate, it is thus at its best when its effect is to destroy utterly a moment of rather high dramatic stakes – the climax of a love scene, for example, or the latter stages of a fight to the death. Although he does not use the term, Dario Fo gives a very strong idea of this process in action in his account of "Lazarus Taken Apart".<sup>109</sup> He describes a performance of the story of Lazarus in which the performer repeatedly undermines the story he is telling by addressing the audience. "He destroys the image of the graveyard by addressing the audience directly".<sup>110</sup> It is worth restating that the clown does not "drop" the scene out of a malign wish to destroy it, but due to his desire to share with the audience how well he feels it is going. For the drop to be successful, the clown's pride in the scene must be credible, the joke effectively being that in displaying his pride the clown has destroyed the object of that pride and thereby removed the right to feel pride in the first place. Fo further details the way a performer using this technique can develop a strong, almost conspiratorial relationship with the audience, the force of which relationship forms a large part of the love audiences can hold for clowns.

If a player has just performed an action of immense skill, or at least an action on which he, in his optimistic view of his own capacities, is capable of putting such a construction, the clown might then "drop" by turning to the audience and sharing his pride, his sense of superiority, even while the game is still in progress. This renders his pride redundant since the very act of expressing it constitutes a gross negligence of his responsibility to the game, and he is likely to have his knees tagged as a result of it. The result is woefully incompetent gameplay, but extremely satisfying clowning. And for Wright, the clown is

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<sup>109</sup> Fo, *op cit*, pp.93-7

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, p.96



playing a game all of the time: the game of being Hamlet, or the game of being a soldier in the trenches of the Somme. He commits to playing that game because he believes that to be the route to winning approval from the audience, but the fact that he has this ulterior motive throughout leads to his frequent dropping of the game in order to check the audience is still on his side.

Like the flop, the drop can vary in length a great deal, from a momentary flick of the head and eyes out front, which Wright calls a “clock”, to a complete, whole body abandonment of what is in process in favour of fully engaging the audience. The higher the dramatic stakes, or the closer to the decisive point of the game, the more difficult it is to carry off a complete drop and the more infrequently can this be justified. But if that drop is successful, its audacity will only add to its success.

#### *x. Finding One's Own Clown, and Costume*

In Lecoq's teaching, much is made of the notion of finding one's own clown. In his book *The Moving Body*, of twelve pages on clowns eight are under the title “finding one's own clown”.<sup>111</sup> Gaulier likewise explicitly gears his training towards this goal. Wright conversely describes the notion of each performer having their own clown as “a bit wanky”,<sup>112</sup> an opinion we will look at with more seriousness than its flippancy demands after we have examined the arguments for the notion of a clown unique to each performer. Gaulier talks about clown performers employing “what is ridiculous about them”<sup>113</sup> - spindly legs, big noses and so on - for comic effect. In his course he gives each performer a character, and requires that they provide a costume befitting that character. From that point forth when attempting exercises, they do so while “playing the game” of being their character. This character is a direct provocation to the performer's instincts and physical characteristics. The clown Scotsman mentioned earlier was a performer very English in manner and sensibility, with little physical robustness. His clownish attempts

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<sup>111</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, *op cit*, pp.143-55

<sup>112</sup> Wright, “The Way of the Idiot”, *op cit*

<sup>113</sup> Gaulier, *op cit*

to leave behind this natural demeanour only served to make him look ridiculous, so clearly unfitted was he to this role. The author of this study, a small, skinny, bespectacled figure, was given the character of a rugby player. His attempts to pretend to be physically imposing were understandably ludicrous. Conversely, performers with manifest physical strength would be asked to play ballet dancers; performers with strong physical instincts were asked to play professors; those with strong verbal instincts to play Scooby Doo or Marilyn Monroe.

Costume is of great significance in this attempt to emphasise physical idiosyncracies. Yet it would be far too easy to imagine that a clown can be identified by costume alone. John Wright does not use red noses in his teaching of clowning, and the use of white face or enormous red or green wigs is absent from the work of both men. These are conventions that have grown up around circus clowning, the ridiculous features of which need to be exaggerated for impact on very large audiences. In Britain at least, they owe some antecedence to Joseph Grimaldi, who, at Drury Lane, was again playing to very large audiences.<sup>114</sup> Contemporary theatrical clowning of the sort taught by Gaulier and Wright, exhibits a slightly more subtle use of costume – the costume may not in itself be subtle, but the word is used relatively. A tall person will choose trousers just slightly too short, a jacket just slightly too long, perhaps with vertical stripes, all to draw attention to his tallness. A fat person might wear horizontal stripes and a tight T-shirt. Similar principles can be observed at work in cinematic clowning. Laurel and Hardy wear suits of a similar type, each tailored to accentuate their own physical eccentricities – Stan Laurel’s thinness and height, Oliver Hardy’s plumpness.

Of most iconic significance throughout clowning is the red nose, which Lecoq calls “the smallest mask in the world”.<sup>115</sup> This item of costume cannot help but make the wearer look ridiculous, but the advice given by Gaulier (and Wright, in discussion on the topic) is not to “play” the red nose. Do not touch it, do not draw attention to it, but play as though it is not there. Likewise the tall person must play as though unaware of his height,

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<sup>114</sup> Richard Findlater, *Grimaldi, King of Clowns*, *op cit*.

<sup>115</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, *op cit*, p.145



the fat person as though unaware of his weight. Bafflement comes through the audience's laughter at characteristics to which the clown appears oblivious.

Inherent in this is the observation that another characteristic process throughout clowning is that of failure. A successful high-wire act, or a sound strategy at knee-tag, is of no use to the clown. Attempts to play the game of being a Scotsman, or a rugby player, must be constantly on the verge of flopping. So if a clown is attempting to portray a character, it is likely to be a character he is fundamentally unfitted to play: he equips himself in order to flop. This does not mean he approaches his performances without skill. Dario Fo repeatedly emphasises the importance of physical skill in the clown, using as an example the story of a performance in which the clown falls in love with a high-wire performer and pursues her onto the tightrope. He plays as though he is continually in danger and off-balance, but of course for the performer to play this successfully he in fact needs at least as much skill as the genuine high-wire performer if he is to fail with *élan* and in safety.<sup>116</sup> For it to be successful clowning, though, the performer needs to continually give the appearance of failure, of being out of control, of being unsuited to the task he finds himself performing.

Thus one finds one's own clown by coming to realise in which roles one is least plausible, and working accordingly. By working in this way, one learns to always take one's clown in certain directions – those that appear least likely to be successes. In this sense each clown is unique to its performer, as it is tailored directly to the persona presented by that performer. Chaplin is physically unprepossessing, so his clown frequently finds himself in physical scrapes. Kemp presented his clown as shiftless and so his characters were frequently required to perform physically arduous tasks or go on long journeys. John Wright does not deny this relationship between persona and performance, but he stops short of describing the results of these explorations as “one's clown” because that creates an almost mystical impression of another person existing within oneself; a parallel self composed of one's shortcomings and idiosyncrasies. Perhaps it is the

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<sup>116</sup> Fo, *op cit*, p.176

principle of Ockham's Razor that causes him to stop short of this interpretation,<sup>117</sup> preferring to see clowning as one area of performance to which the versatile performer has access, comparable to the performance of a difficult role in a play, rather than as a unique, transcendental experience of access to one's deepest self. It is certainly questionable whether the simple fact that the performer uses his own physical characteristics in the performance of clowning in itself renders it qualitatively different from, say, playing the lead role in *Hamlet*. Surely all performers are mandated to use their own physical characteristics unless their performance takes place on radio (and even then, the voice has certain physical characteristics)? Furthermore, the method school of acting requires that its proponents draw on their own experiences, their own hopes and fears, in the preparation of a role, the suggestion being that only in such a connection with one's innermost self can a truthful performance be given. So yes, the performer may find his own clown, but no more so than he may find his own Hamlet. Just as clowning is multiple, containing many traditions, so it overlaps in many places with other performance traditions, including straight acting.

#### *xi. Status and "Boss-Clown"*

It is very often observed that clowns tend to be low-status characters. Kemp's characters were almost always the lowest-status characters in the play. Chaplin plays a tramp. An attention to this will be useful in seeking to understand how clowns operate. It is addressed by John Wright in the notion of the "boss clown" a useful category. In the game "the amnesiac" described above, the boss clown is the figure insisting the clown "get on with it"; in the first world war sequence he is the one aware of the scene he is in and attempting to play it properly and keep the performance on track. The boss clown is constantly thwarted and frustrated by his companion, the simple clown, to the extent that it would be possible to argue that the two are completely co-dependent. It would be

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<sup>117</sup> The principle that the simplest explanation for a phenomenon is most likely to be the correct one and therefore one should shave away unnecessary assumptions when attempting to postulate a theory. The classical formulation is "entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity". See for example, Antony Flew (ed), *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Pan, 1979)



difficult to imagine Laurel without Hardy, or Harpo without Groucho, and though Chaplin is thought of as a one-man-band, many of his routines involve him in skirmishes with authority figures which allow his performance to flourish. What Wright calls “boss clown” can be easily observed in other traditions. Dario Fo describes clowns with very similar functions as Louis (boss clown) and Auguste (simple clown).<sup>118</sup> In some traditions, this relationship becomes Joey and Auguste,<sup>119</sup> the “Joey” deriving directly from Joseph Grimaldi. In the *commedia dell’arte*, *Brighella* corresponds roughly to boss clown, while *Zanni* and *Arlecchino* are variants of simple clown.<sup>120</sup> This status relationship seems to crop up in almost every post-medieval clown tradition. And even before then, much of the clowning we know of existed in roles such as the licensed truth-teller or the Lord of Misrule, explicitly and with permission subverting conventional status relationships. We have seen that clowns typically disobey or misapply conventional rules. We shall see now that very many of those rules are status-based. Indeed, many of the games we have already examined can be seen to have some element of status-relationship at their centre. Jacques Lecoq says “a pecking order is a necessary part of any clown situation”.<sup>121</sup>

In his chapter on status, Keith Johnstone describes a game, derived from a *commedia dell’arte lazzo*, in which a series of performers in a strict hierarchy demonstrate their status by hitting one another with long balloons, or removing one another’s hats and throwing them to the floor.<sup>122</sup> Those lower in the pecking order brazenly attempt to mock their superiors by pulling faces behind their backs, and also consistently fail to understand instructions when they are given. Johnstone arrives at the description of this game as the culmination of his description of master-servant status relationships, and it is almost incidental that he mentions the usefulness of such relationships in the teaching of

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<sup>118</sup> Fo, *op cit.*, p.172

<sup>119</sup> For example Sue Morrison’s native American clown teaching. No published account exists, but a useful website is <http://www.canadianclowning.com/sue.html>. Note that Morrison trained with Keith Johnstone.

<sup>120</sup> See John Rudlin, *Commedia dell’Arte: An Actor’s Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.67-90. *Zanni* also functions as a generic term covering these three types.

<sup>121</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, *op cit*, p.148

<sup>122</sup> Johnstone, *op cit*, pp.67-68



clowning. But this is precisely what Wright does in such games as “the amnesiac” and many other, simpler games, which involve the boss clown barking instructions and the simple clown failing to satisfactorily obey them. The relationship between the two figures in the *Journey’s End* is a straightforward boss-clown/simple-clown dynamic. Even knee-tag can be viewed as a battle for status. The clown master-servant dynamic is the parodic epitome and culmination of all such dynamics. There is no attempt to deny the authority of the boss clown, who has absolute power, but this authority is consistently undermined. Stan Laurel continually attempts to do the bidding of Oliver Hardy, but continually fails and in failing makes not himself but Hardy look ridiculous.<sup>123</sup> John Wright frequently returns for illustration to the example of Basil Fawlty and Manuel, from the television programme *Fawlty Towers*. Manuel rarely directly disobeys Basil, but nor does he regularly succeed in his task. And with status comes responsibility, so when Manuel brings out the wrong soup or takes the luggage to the wrong room, it is Basil who ends up looking the fool.<sup>124</sup> And where the simple clown “endures hardships as if they are pratfalls”,<sup>125</sup> the boss-clown feels a need to justify or excuse his failures to the audience, or to other characters. His status is at stake.

This persistent, and often mistaken, needling of authority is the essence of the dynamic, and moreover provides key insights into both figures separately. Wright’s simple clown never challenges authority directly, but simply fails to live up to the boss clown’s expectations. As a result, the boss clown is gradually driven into paroxysms of rage and despair. The simple clown only tries harder to please, although if particularly riled by an insult or a dressing-down, may go so far as to pull a face behind the boss clown’s back – however, it is very unlikely that he will get away with this for long. And although simple clown can exist in an isolated relationship with the audience, boss clown cannot exist without something to challenge the authority by which he is defined. He can never lose

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, William A. Seiter (dir.), *Sons of the Desert*, (Hal Roach Studios, 1933). There is also an early Laurel and Hardy picture, *The Home Wrecker*, in which Stan Laurel takes the boss clown role, its relative lack of comic success serving to illustrate the reason they tended to stay the other way around.

<sup>124</sup> John Cleese and Connie Booth (writers), *Fawlty Towers*, (BBC, 1975-1979)

<sup>125</sup> Schechter, “Brecht’s Clowns: *Man is Man* and after”, *op cit*, p.94



this authority, but nor can he ever exercise it effectively. In his attempts to enforce it, he loses his temper and thus that very authority he is trying to enforce. He is “playing the game” of being in control, and by playing that game to the hilt, fails at it.

In other teaching traditions this dynamic is rendered as that between Joey and Auguste, but Wright’s boss clown-simple clown rendition is useful because it gives the status relationship a definitive role. It is noteworthy that Gaulier never addresses this status relationship when teaching clowning, although the reason may be implicitly found in Wright’s book. Wright states, “When I teach clown, I become a provocateur. In other words, I assume a role, a sort of ‘boss-clown’”.<sup>126</sup> He barks out cantankerous instructions and wrong-foots his charges by demanding answers to obviously nonsensical questions such as “where’s your brain?” But between exercises he steps out of this role and resumes the supportive, instructive attitude described above, enabling students to see that this is just a role, and that it is all part of the game of discovering how to perform as a clown. Gaulier never drops the mask, so it is easy to feel that this hectoring figure, despite all its comic worth, is the real Philippe Gaulier, and one never quite feels safe with him. For Gaulier, this sense of danger is vital to making the flop feel significantly weighty, but for Wright the result of this teaching style, “via negativa”, “has more in common with bullying than teaching, with the result that clowning is often seen as an ordeal to put yourself through, in the vague notion that it’s going to be good for you in the end. It’s not. To play clown you have to love being on stage in front of that audience more than anything else in the world, and you can’t find that openness and that degree of pleasure if you’re terrified.”<sup>127</sup> This is not the experience of many successful Gaulier graduates, but for those who prefer Wright’s approach the simple fear of performing unsuccessfully is sufficient spur to the necessary adrenaline. An unappreciative audience is punishment enough without additional blandishments.

This can give us a further useful window through which to view the clown, whose incompetence is never simple. As has already been observed, the clown does not wilfully

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<sup>126</sup> Wright, *Why Is That So Funny?*, *op cit*, p.187

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, pp.186-7

misunderstand, nor does it wilfully disobey. Rather, the clown contrives to manufacture misunderstanding and disobedience out of an earnest desire to get it right. If told to sit down, the clown will sit on the floor despite the availability of a chair. If then told to sit “over there”, the boss clown indicating the chair as he speaks, the simple clown will sit over there on the floor. And so on. Part of the skill in playing boss clown involves giving instructions with sufficient space for misunderstanding (which space need not be great). A great deal of the skill involved in playing simple clown involves finding misunderstandings wherever they are available, and playing them to the hilt. But the misunderstandings must always follow an internal logic. They must always be comprehensible to the audience. If the audience does not recognise the possibility of a misunderstanding, it will be very unlikely to get a laugh. The biggest laughs greet those misunderstandings that the audience cannot predict and does not expect, but which they recognise the logic behind when it arrives. Successful clowning is very seldom simply surreal. It is always driven by a fierce over-application of logic – as we saw earlier, a large part of the pleasure in watching clowning comes from watching someone obey the impulses we have learned that we are supposed to deny.

### *xii. Pathetic Clowns and Tragic Clowns*

One final notion we must address is that of the audience’s sympathy for the clown. One reason we enjoy watching clowning, it has been observed, is because the clown follows the impulses we would ordinarily resist – playing every game, being utterly idiotic but always obeying that ferocious internal logic. When watching the simple clown alongside a boss clown, it is clear, as Keith Johnstone suggests, that much of the pleasure comes from seeing the underdog humiliate the top dog by undermining his status. However accurate, this carries with it the unfortunate implication that we might sympathise with the simple clown precisely because of his underdog status. Keith Johnstone elegantly answers this. “Chaplin being sucked into the machine is funny because his style absolves us of the need for sympathy”.<sup>128</sup> We are allowed to laugh *at* the simple clown making the mistakes we know better than to make. We laugh *at* the simple clown undermining the

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<sup>128</sup> Johnstone, *op cit*, p.40



boss clown, and we then laugh *at* the boss clown attempting to reinstate his authority. But we seldom if ever laugh *with* the simple clown, who is not knowing enough to share the joke. The *commedia dell'arte* introduces the figures of the lovers in order that there might be someone with whom the audience can sympathise – a convention adopted in most films by the Marx Brothers.

It is not, however, impossible that we might sympathise with the clown. The clown for whom we have sympathy is the figure John Wright calls the “pathetic clown”, one of the most important characteristics of which, somewhat paradoxically is that the pathetic clown never asks the audience for sympathy. The simple clown, conversely, might well ask for sympathy, but in doing so is rather more likely to receive ridicule. Beyond this distinction, the difference between a simple and a pathetic clown is largely one of context. Pathetic clowning is simple clowning in a situation where one might ordinarily expect emotion to be felt. Simon McBurney’s performance in *A Minute too Late* as a man recently bereaved is an excellent example. In the lengthy final scene of the piece he attempts using scissors to cut a picture of his late wife to fit a picture frame, making a terrible mess of the picture as a result. Rather than expressing sorrow, he appears proud of his work. Nothing about this distinguishes his performance as pathetic rather than simple clowning except the audience’s knowledge of his loss. It is deeply moving.

John Wright describes the show *The Egg and I* by Julian Chagrin, in which a young man cracking open an egg befriends the resulting chick for a time until it learns to fly and leaves him. The final image of the show saw Chagrin cracking open egg after egg in the naïve hope of finding another chick.<sup>129</sup> What for the performer is giddy optimism and a baffled failure to understand the emotional reality of his effective bereavement, becomes for the audience profound pathos. In effect, the audience feels the sadness the clown ought to feel and anticipates the sadness we sense the clown will feel should his bafflement subside. But it does not subside, at least not while the audience is still watching. Sadness can be created, and can become especially powerful, by resisting the playing of sadness. Bafflement is key to this.

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<sup>129</sup> Wright, *Why Is That So Funny?*, *op cit*, pp.219-221

Tragic clown is a form much more profoundly distinct from simple clown, though it is posited only by Wright and very little understood or performed. Its key is, again, bafflement, and in tragic clown this bafflement derives from a failure to comprehend the momentous and shattering events that have been visited upon the performer. The result is an almost wild, distracted performance given to sudden acts of caprice. But due to the focus of this bafflement being offstage, and specific, the clown's powerful presence is of a very different kind. Rather than, as with simple clown, being directed towards the performance in the present moment, it is directed away from the performance and towards a recent cataclysmic event. In this sense, the event forces upon the character a clown-like relationship with the world – defined by bafflement, a failure to comprehend – where the character was not necessarily a clown before. Where the simple clown's bafflement relates to the context of performance, the tragic clown's relates to the context of the drama. This is also true of the pathetic clown, but the tragic clown feels the weight of events where the pathetic clown does not.

### *xiii. Conclusion*

It can be clearly seen, then, that of all these characteristics, bafflement is the definitive one. Without bafflement, the performance is not clowning. It cannot become too knowing, too sly, too cynical. Yet all of these are characteristics we might instinctively associate with Brecht's theatre – take for example Martin Esslin's characterisation. “His calculated, cunning and indirect approach, [...] his horror of all sentiment and phrase-making, his love of irony and parody”.<sup>130</sup> In very large part, it is the work of the remainder of this thesis to see if we might reconcile the peculiar knowingness of Brecht's work with the peculiar unknowingness of the clown. If we cannot, then we must answer our key research question – can clowning be used to augment a Brechtian theatre? – with a no.

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<sup>130</sup> Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Heinemann, 1965), p.5



The key to this reconciliation between knowingness and unknowingness, between bafflement and certainty, lies in a refusal to accept that this is a binary distinction at all, any more than is that between the comic and the tragic, between performance and reality. Instead, we shall see how clowning allows us to place in productive tension these apparent opposites, in the way we saw Jameson asking that a Brechtian theatre do in the Introduction. But that is for Chapter Three. We might begin, then, by concluding this chapter with an attention to how some of the performance processes characteristic to clowning, as delineated above, might most usefully and directly relate to the model of Brechtian theatre adumbrated in the introduction.

Most obviously productive for a Brechtian theatre is the tendency towards debunking, which lends itself very easily to a reading as *Verfremdungseffekt*, an enforced disjunction between the “reality” of the stage conceit and the concrete physical reality of performers in a theatre space. The clown playing Hamlet - or the First World War soldier - is unable to prioritise any reality over that of the here-and-now-before-an-audience, so the demands of any dramatic situation, however pressing, will be lost on him. For the audience this leads to a very satisfying fissure in reality. We enjoy the clown’s baffled failure to apprehend the urgency of the dramatic situation when wandering the trenches, in part because his skirting of a supposedly dangerous situation is dramatically exciting, and also because his reaction is at odds with what we see as appropriate behaviour in such a situation. Furthermore, we particularly enjoy the debunking of the notion that the situation is at all dangerous, perhaps again in part because challenging the conventions of dramatic tension feels like a risky thing to do: if the situation is debunked too completely, why would we continue watching it? Audiences are thus able to keep two things in mind at once – a sense of high stakes in the drama, and a knowledge that those stakes are manufactured. It is precisely the productive tension imagined by Jameson. Both points in tension are created by the same point of bafflement, the same act of debunking by declaring the game to the audience. The clown undermines his own game, but he does not necessarily stop playing it.

The related actions of the flop and the drop all provide the potential for the gap between performer and character, between stage and reality, to be emphasised. Much of clowning, indeed, takes place within that gap, a clown not so much inhabiting his character as displaying it. The flop comes when that display goes disastrously wrong and can easily be exploited too often, particularly when clowning in text-based theatre. Absolute and apparently final crises must be kept to a minimum in the same way as a play can have too many climaxes. The drop, by contrast, might be seen as a momentary blip in an otherwise committed performance, but it would be more useful to read it as a symptom of the fact that the clown's commitment is to the performance and not to the character. A flop is a huge *Verfremdungseffekt*; a drop is a small one, but both are symptoms of the same, *Gestic* approach to performance.

Gameplay can also very usefully be read in the context of *Gestus*. A clown playing the game, for example, of being Horatio, is required to display his idea of the basic behaviours and gestures that constitute Horatio, without ever fully inhabiting them as might an actor in Stanislavski's early theatre. It is the fact that his performance is a game, rather than being "serious", that enables him to drop and debunk it whenever he pleases. However, this does not immediately appear to contain the social element that would seem to be essential to a Brechtian *Gestus* - but it very easily might. A clown in a Brechtian theatre could play the game of being Horatio by emphasising Horatio's membership of the wealthy classes, for example, and therefore his behavioural distinctions from the very probably working-class soldiers he meets in the first scene. In doing so he could find what is ridiculous about Horatio and play that game to great comic effect, thanks to his emphasis on performing clown in a way that is particularly compatible with Brecht's theatre. The same might be true of, for example, Azdak in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, who, though of the peasantry, is playing the game of being a judge.<sup>131</sup>

When seeking to explore clowns in Brecht's world of deeply rooted class-consciousness, the performance of status is a characteristic we cannot afford to ignore. Thus the category

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<sup>131</sup> BB, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in *Parables for the Theatre, Two Plays by Bertolt Brecht* (trans. Eric Bentley) (London: Penguin, 1966)



of boss clown will become of especial significance when we turn our attention to Brecht's work. The boss clown is, as has been said, a simple clown for whom some little status is at stake. He will often be petty and irrational in relation to his perceived inferiors. He will cling on to his status at all costs. In him can be seen an almost ready-made *Gestic* performance as one of the many landowners, aristocrats and senior army figures found in Brecht's plays.

We have emphasised that both simple and pathetic clowns avoid playing for sympathy. As Keith Johnstone said of Chaplin, "his style absolves us of the need for sympathy". We are able to laugh at his misfortunes because he plays in such a way that this is permissible. We can see very clearly the potential appeal to Brecht of a figure that seems effectively to have removed the clouding effect of pathos. Yet even the pathetic clown is potentially of great relevance. As we know, a circumstance that might in another theatre see a request for sympathy is more likely in Brecht's to see the emphasis placed elsewhere. Yet this does not necessarily prevent us from feeling that sympathy. In pathetic clown it is precisely the refusal to ask for it that heightens the audience's feeling of sadness. Might it not likewise be the case that in Brecht's theatre a shift of emphasis from "feeling" to "reason" causes that feeling to be heightened – and uses that heightening to render more emphatic the engagement with reason? By this logic, pathetic clown is an instructive analogy, although it cannot be said with certainty whether Brecht fully employs the form himself. But we shall certainly see that in this dialectic between feeling and reason, the comic has an important mediating role to play. And even tragic clown will have some relevance when we come to discuss *Mother Courage*. We will see that a figure who fails to understand also fails to learn. Thus a figure whose bafflement relates to her own tragic situation, when in tension with an audience's understanding of that situation, interrupts a simple reading of it as tragedy in Aristotle's terms, and gives us instead something less cathartic and more engaging of the reason.

Improvisation, as has been intimated, might seem to be at odds with the idea of a writer-driven theatre. Yet there is an abundance of evidence that Brecht delighted in improvisation. A film he made, *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, was almost completely



unscripted.<sup>132</sup> According to Erwin Faber, one of the actors who appeared in the film alongside the clown Karl Valentin, Brecht never produced any text and “wanted us to improvise to improve the whole thing, because he loved the improvisations of Valentin and Chaplin”.<sup>133</sup> The young Brecht was experimenting with devised theatre decades before the term was coined, thanks to his love of improvisational clowning. The strongest hint that this made its way into his theatre work can be found in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*:

Spoiling the illusion, moreover, was something the Augsburger judged leniently. He was against illusion. On his stage there were private jokes, improvisations and extemporisations such as would have been unthinkable in the old theatre.<sup>134</sup>

Oliver Double and Michael Wilson build an extremely strong case for the idea that Brecht’s love of improvisation stems from his love of the cabaret,<sup>135</sup> and that a key result of this kind of work is an intense and direct relationship between performer and audience. They cite Brecht’s assertion that “a theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense”.<sup>136</sup> The reason for this is quite simple. Aside from the level of audience contact it permits, this freedom to permit “private jokes, improvisations and extemporisations”, this is the simplest route to pleasure. Double and Wilson conclude:

One of the things Brecht loathed about the theatre of emotion and empathy was that it did not contain ‘five pennyworth of *fun*’ (*Brecht on Theatre*, p.7). By contrast, cabaret with its smoky atmosphere, its lively, satirical songs, its evocation of sexuality, its topical jokes, and above all its rapport between energetic performers and noisy, powerful audiences, had fun in abundance. In bringing these qualities to

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<sup>132</sup> Bertolt Brecht and Erich Engel (dir.) *Mysterien eines Frisiersalons*, (Germany: Dr Koch, 1923)

<sup>133</sup> W. Stuart McDowell, “Actors on Brecht: The Munich Years”, in Carol Martin and Henry Bial (eds), *Brecht Sourcebook*, pp.76-77. Embedded in this is the assumption that Chaplin’s work on camera was improvised, when in fact it was meticulously rehearsed and prepared from an improvisational root.

<sup>134</sup> BB, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, (trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1965), p.71

<sup>135</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, “Brecht and Cabaret”, from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006) pp.40-61

<sup>136</sup> BB, *Brecht on Theatre*, p.7



theatre, he was fulfilling its fundamental purpose: 'From the first it has been the theatre's business to entertain people.' This was, he believed, even more important than instruction because 'nothing needs less justification than pleasure' (*Brecht on Theatre*, pp.180-81).<sup>137</sup>

Yet what Double and Wilson fail to emphasise is that this tendency in Brecht stems not simply from his love of cabaret – although this is important – but specifically from his love of clowning.

We shall come to an examination of how Brecht's plays appear to be inscribed with traces of this love of clowning in Chapter Three. First, though, in Chapter Two, we will look at those clowns by whom we know him to have been influenced, exploring both how their work fits into this framework, and how Brecht may have related to that work. Thus when we come to examine his work in theory and in practice, we now have a rich set of clowning traditions to aid our analysis.

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<sup>137</sup> Double and Wilson, *op cit*, pp.60-61

## Chapter Two: Brecht's Clown Influences

If Brecht used techniques derived from clowning, it seems probable that he learned them from somewhere. His interest in the work of the clowns Charlie Chaplin and Karl Valentin has been adumbrated by scholars before, though, as I argue in the Introduction, never to a significant level of practical detail. This chapter examines the nature of that interest in order to see if we might regard it as an influence. It places that work of Chaplin and Valentin that we know Brecht to have seen in the context of his thought on theatre, and examines the potential appeal of their work in the context of his broader theatrical projects. Using the framework established in the previous chapter, it also analyses the characteristics of their work in order to identify how far, if at all, Brecht learned his clown techniques from them. Thus we can begin to establish if clowning can be seen to have played a significant role in the development of Brechtian theatricality, in order to see how far it augments such a theatre.

We will also, in this chapter, begin to turn our attention to the clown's engagement with political and social realities, such an engagement having been seen in the Introduction as intrinsic to the Brechtian techniques discussed there. However, despite considerable support for readings of both Valentin and Chaplin as political artists, there are fundamental problems with such an approach and in the final analysis the work of both men resists being read in such a way. How far then can their work be of use to Brecht? It is in addressing these problems that we may begin to see a recognisably Brechtian theatre taking shape, as Brecht's engagement with both artists is as significant for what it alters of their style as for what it absorbs; for what it rejects as much as for what it adopts. What Brecht absorbs, he absorbs for his own ends; what he does not, he rejects for not serving those ends. As we shall see, he absorbs a considerable amount.



## Part One: Karl Valentin

### *i. Brecht's relationship with Valentin*

In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, Brecht says, "I learnt most of all from the clown Karl Valentin".<sup>138</sup> *The Messingkauf Dialogues* is a difficult text from which to adduce evidence about Brecht's preferences and interests, as that work is composed of many voices, none of which can be directly identified with Brecht any more than Hamlet's opinions can be identified directly as those of Shakespeare. Still, this statement is important not simply because we might draw from it some preliminary evidence of admiration for Valentin, but because the designation granted him is that of "the clown". It seems unequivocal on the subject of the inter-war Munich comedian's character as a performer. It would have been perfectly possible for the chosen noun to be "comedian", "entertainer" or even "cabaret artist", and the fact that Brecht chooses "clown" indicates the particular quality of Valentin's that, as Frederic Ewen puts it, "appealed to Brecht with imperishable force".<sup>139</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson have said, "Brecht's admiration for Valentin is not in doubt".<sup>140</sup> So is it really necessary to adduce all the evidence for this admiration before moving on to assess its effect on Brecht's work? It is. The evidence itself gives us valuable insights into Brecht's mode of thinking.

Thus this section will proceed by first identifying references to Valentin in Brecht's own writings, along with the existing evidence surrounding their relationship. These will be used to explicate the extent of Valentin's influence on Brecht. Then we will attempt to arrive at an understanding of the nature of Valentin's clowning, before finally addressing the question of how far Valentin's work can be considered political. Having performed these tasks, it will be clear what of Valentin can be seen as useful to Brecht, and what

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<sup>138</sup> BB, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 69.

<sup>139</sup> Frederic Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, His Times* (London: Calder and Boyars Ltd., 1970), p.65

<sup>140</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, "Karl Valentin's Illogical Subversion: Stand-up Comedy and Alienation Effect", from *New Theatre Quarterly* 20:3 (August 2004), p.213

cannot; what might be used to augment a Brechtian theatricality, what seems unlikely to be of such a use.

In June 1920 Brecht writes in his diary: "I sketched out an operetta with words, *The Fleshboat*, also a piece on the comedian Karl Valentin".<sup>141</sup> First of all, it is worth noting the contrast between his use here of the word "comedian" to identify Valentin, with his later use of the word "clown" in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. What might initially seem to be uncertainty about how to define Valentin as a performer seems more likely to be the contrast between a youthful Brecht applying to Valentin the word usual for performers in the cabarets, and a more mature Brecht applying that which seems to him more appropriate to Valentin's mode of performance. At this stage, Valentin does not appeal simply because he is a clown, but later, when he is acknowledged as an influence, this is the term by which Brecht chooses to define him.

By this stage it is possible that the two had already met, although it seems unlikely that they had thus far formed a close bond: Brecht was in the habit of referring to his intimates in his diary by nicknames and certainly did not identify them with epithets. We find "Cas" rather than "the designer Caspar Neher", for example. Brecht's language here implies a lack of acquaintance, at least of any depth. But as Double and Wilson acknowledge, the precise date of Brecht and Valentin's meeting is unclear: "sometime between 1918 and 1922".<sup>142</sup> Still, we know for certain they had met by the latter date, because in October of that year they were collaborating on the scenario for "an improvisation in two scenes by Bert Brecht and Karl Valentin", at *Die Rote Zibebe* (The Red Grape), a cabaret night at the Munich Kammerspiele. Hans Otto Münsterer describes this as "an attempt to exploit the theatrical space for a literary cabaret".<sup>143</sup> It opened at the Kammerspiele the day after the premiere of *Drums in the Night* and in it "Max Schreck in the character of Glubb, the landlord of *Die Rote Zibebe*, the tavern in

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<sup>141</sup> BB, *Diaries 1920-22* (ed. Herta Ramthun; trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1997), p.4

<sup>142</sup> Double and Wilson, "Karl Valentin's Illogical Subversion: Stand-Up Comedy and Alienation Effect", *op cit*, p.213

<sup>143</sup> Hans Otto Münsterer, *The Young Brecht*, (Libris: London, 1992), p.106



*Drums in the Night*, introduced a series of performers”.<sup>144</sup> These included Brecht singing some of his own songs, and actors from the show reading some of his own poems. Most importantly, the second half consisted of two pieces performed by Valentin and Karlstadt, one of which, *Das Christbaumbrettl* (The Christmas Tree Stand), is a terrific clown routine featuring the destruction of an entire living room by Valentin clumsily wielding two unfeasibly long planks of wood, along with a child played by a dwarf and a chimney sweep played by a giant. The scenario was written in collaboration with Brecht, but heavily improvised.

Brecht and Valentin collaborated on several further occasions. One of the most reprinted photographs of Brecht shows him playing the clarinet alongside Valentin on tuba in the background of an act at the Munich Oktoberfest. And at around the same time they made a short film together, *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, which, as indicated in the previous chapter, was also heavily improvised. Brecht encouraged his actors to improvise around the scenario, in which Valentin, as the barber, ends up accidentally severing the head of one of his customers. It is a typical piece of clown gameplay and for Double and Wilson demonstrates the seriousness of Brecht’s interest in the form of cabaret.<sup>145</sup> This it certainly does, but if anything it demonstrates even more fully his interest in clowning, with Double and Wilson themselves citing Erich Faber’s assertion that his desire to make this film in this way was itself motivated by his love of Valentin’s improvisation.<sup>146</sup>

Most famously, Valentin attended rehearsals for Brecht’s adaptation of Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*, making a noteworthy contribution to the process. Walter Benjamin relates the story, as told to him in an interview with Brecht:

The battle in the play is supposed to occupy the stage for three-quarters of an hour. Brecht couldn’t stage-manage the soldiers, and neither could Asya [Lacis] his production assistant. Finally he turned in despair to Karl Valentin, at that time one

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<sup>144</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, “Brecht and Cabaret”, from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006) pp.40-61

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, pp.46-7

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, p.46

of his closest friends, who was attending rehearsal, and asked him: 'Well, what is it? What's the truth about these soldiers? What *about* them?' Valentin: 'They're pale, they're scared, that's what!' The remark settled the issue, Brecht adding: 'They're tired.' Whereupon the soldiers' faces were thickly made up with chalk, and that was the day the production's style was determined.<sup>147</sup>

Valentin had an impact on Brecht not only in terms of his own performance, but also in terms of his instincts about performance more generally. What we see here is a production that plays the game of presenting terrified soldiers, but does not engage with full realism in that respect. However, of most interest for our purposes is the nature of Valentin's clown persona itself, and how that influenced Brecht.

## *ii. What is the nature of Valentin's Clowning?*

It is somewhat remarkable that the young, relatively untested radical playwright was suddenly this artistically intimate with the older, considerably more successful performer. Brecht, although famed for his irascibility as much as his charm, clearly inspired confidence in the older man as much as in his peers and although we will unfortunately never know the precise nature of their collaboration, we can begin to piece together the nature of Valentin's influence on Brecht. The piece Brecht sketched out on Valentin in 1920 does not survive, but it may form the basis for his 1922 notes on Valentin, from where we get a strong sense of what qualities Brecht perceived in the clown. As Joel Schechter says:

Brecht attributed to him a combination of "*Dummheit*", "*Gelassenheit*" and "*Lebengenuss*": stupidity along with self-possession and a sense of pleasure in life. Valentin's "pleasure in life", visible in a cabaret atmosphere where one could smoke and drink, inspired or at least confirmed Brecht's early theories of theatre. The emphasis was on sport and fun.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (trans. Anna Bostock) (London: NLB, 1973), p.115

<sup>148</sup> Joel Schechter, *Durov's Pig* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), p.26



It is notable that at this stage any emphasis on the political is absent from Schechter's assessment. Emergent, though, is a strong sense of Brecht's insistence on a more dynamic relationship between audience and performance in which, like the audience at a boxing match, those present can galvanise and ultimately impact upon the spectacle.<sup>149</sup> The first part of this dynamisation requires the performers to allow an awareness of the audience and, as an inevitable consequence, the fact that they are pretending, playing a game. If this can be made fun, if they can take joy in this being present, so much the better, but either way it seems clear that Brecht's early theories are deeply rooted in the work of Valentin.

These qualities of Valentin's can be seen as directly analogous with those we have delineated as characteristic throughout clowning. Most straightforwardly, "a sense of pleasure in life", when explicitly denoted as a quality inherent in performance, correlates directly to "the joy of being present", the pleasure of performance. Whether or not Valentin had in real life genuine *joie de vivre* is irrelevant. He would not be the first or the last comedian to be a secret depressive were this so. Much more important is the fact that "the clown Karl Valentin" is seen as having this quality on stage. *Dummheit* and *Gelassenheit* have less instantaneously obvious correlations to clown tropes, but there are correlations nonetheless. *Dummheit*, "stupidity", relates fairly directly to bafflement, as bafflement is an inevitable result of stupidity. This is not so direct a correlation, but when we come to examine Valentin's work we will be able to see with more clarity that Valentin does indeed exhibit bafflement, and that this is directly linked to what Brecht thinks of as his stupidity – which is, by the definitions advanced in the previous chapter, in fact an over-application of logic. And finally *Gelassenheit*, self-possession, might be seen as a variant on earnest optimism – the clown is so sure things will turn out just fine that he possesses an admirable certainty and clarity of purpose, however misplaced. Or it might qualify him as a kind of boss clown. We shall see.

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<sup>149</sup> See for example BB, "Emphasis on Sport", *Brecht on Theatre* (ed. and trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1964), pp.6-9

Having indicated Brecht's view of Valentin's style, Schechter works quickly outward to a general sense of Brecht's early theatre, drawn from the atmosphere of the cabaret context in which Valentin performed. But an admiration for the cabaret atmosphere is not sufficient to explain the particular appeal of Valentin. Something of that appeal surely lies in the specific combination of characteristics exhibited by Valentin, with their impact perhaps more specifically on Brecht's view of acting. Schechter comes closer to this point when he goes on to say that "when an epic actor steps out of character to show his consciousness of the character's persona, at the same time criticising and distancing himself from the naïve character, the moment is reminiscent of Valentin's behaviour."<sup>150</sup> But to get a fuller sense of the stylistic relationship between the two men, we must turn back to Brecht:

Valentin always impersonated someone who was just playing for the money, with a minimum of energy, so that he barely filled his obligation. But on top of that he would suddenly have tiny amusements not really for the public, but for himself, for instance, when he would sing a song and at the same time parody the content of the song and at the same time criticise it.<sup>151</sup>

This combination of commitment and distance is as good a description of "epic" acting as any we might posit in its place.

It may even be that Brecht here has in mind Valentin on an occasion much remarked upon, most recently by Double and Wilson:

At the very beginning of the First World War, theatre directors ordered acts to present only serious, patriotic performances. Valentin found himself forced to sing a war morality song 'in dead seriousness'. But his subversive outlook was so well known that this made audiences laugh.<sup>152</sup>

It may be that at the beginning of the First World War, the sixteen-year-old Brecht was too young to be attending the Munich cabarets. Either way, it seems likely that this

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<sup>150</sup> Schechter, *Durov's Pig*, *op cit*, p. 27

<sup>151</sup> Letter to Giorgio Strehler, cited by Schechter, *Ibid*, p.217

<sup>152</sup> Double and Wilson, *op cit*, p.210



moment was repeated, that at this point Valentin discovered part of what Double describes as the comedian's "attitude",<sup>153</sup> and that having struck gold by chance, Valentin proceeded to mine the seam deliberately. Hence, Brecht speaks of this part of Valentin's act as more than a one-off: the phrase "he would [behave in a certain way]" implies a certain habituation, where "he did [...]" would imply an isolated incident.

This instance of performance also provides us with a useful example of debunking, which seems to have played a significant role in Valentin's act. Even when (supposedly, at least) trying to play seriously, he was unable to do so and instead undermined that seriousness simply by presenting his usual stage clowning persona. People expected him to debunk pomposity and seriousness, and that is precisely what he did. Likewise in the earlier example of Brecht's, he would "play" a performer not really interested in the contents of his act, but quickly undermine this game by suddenly becoming amused by something that might easily have been totally irrelevant. Thus there are two layers of performance: the words, and the behavioural commentary on those words, a commentary we might very easily see as *Gestic*. A very similar strategy was used by the Berliner Ensemble, on their visit to Britain in 1956, as documented by Kenneth Tynan: "the clearest illustration of the 'A-effect' comes in the national anthem, which the Berliner Ensemble have so arranged that it provokes, instead of patriotic ardour, laughter. The melody is backed by a trumpet *obbligato* so feeble and pompous that it suggests a boy bugler on a rapidly sinking ship. The orchestration is a criticism of the lyrics, and a double flavour results, the ironic flavour which is the 'A-effect'".<sup>154</sup> We cannot know for certain that this device of the Berliner Ensemble's was directly imported from Valentin, of course, but the correlation is nonetheless noteworthy and certainly, they were debunking the sort of patriotism one might normally associate with the playing of a national anthem. Noteworthy also is Tynan's sensitivity to the *Verfremdungseffekt*'s quality not as a simple undermining of one viewpoint with another, but as an engagement of the two in a tension he calls ironic.

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<sup>153</sup> Oliver Double, *Stand Up: On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen, 1997)

<sup>154</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage* (London: Methuen, 1975)

This example from Valentin's performance is still further useful in helping to support the identification of him as a clown. John Wright posits the distinct performance mode of parody, which takes a clear target and undermines it, and that is what Valentin might be seen as doing when playing lazily. He is parodying those performers who are interested in nothing but the money. Wright sees parody as a form distinct from clown because it has very clear parameters,<sup>155</sup> whereas when a clown spots parameters he will break them down, debunk them, with alacrity. So his "little amusements" are a noteworthy characteristic because they show Valentin as not quite contained within the realm of parody, not quite able to play the game of parody successfully. According to Wright, parody has "too much to say" to have "a trace of bafflement";<sup>156</sup> he distinguishes between parody's "target" and clown's "theme".<sup>157</sup> Drawing on an example of Max Wall clowning the role of a classical musician, he says that "we still came away laughing at Max Wall rather than at the pretensions of a classical musician". Likewise, the routine of Valentin's enjoyed by Brecht would appear to be as much about him, as it is about lazy performers.

Yet this area of Valentin's performance style is also notable precisely because of what else it might be seen to be about. It is the first indication that he might be considered a political artist, and therefore of yet further interest to Brecht, who saw Valentin here as criticising the song. It is one thing to borrow an idea for your theatre company, quite another to be influenced by a whole stylistic approach. For in parodying a patriotic song, there is little question that a political statement is made. But it is perfectly possible for a clown's work to be political in effect without any awareness on the part of the clown *character* of this effect. This is an important discovery, tying in very significantly with our ongoing question about how an unknowing clown can thrive in a form that would seem to require knowingness. The writer or director who would use clowning to engage with political or social realities must be in control of the material put in front of the clown in a way that the clown must appear not to be. This is the case even if that writer-director

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<sup>155</sup> John Wright, *Why is That So Funny?* (London: Nick Hern, 2006), p.252-3

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, p.252

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, pp.252-3



happens to double as the clown himself, as of course is the case with both Valentin and Chaplin. But the clown is simply debunking whatever is put in front of him. If what is put in front of him happens to be a political song, then his act becomes political; if it is not, then it does not.

In the case of Valentin, the question then becomes whether that political statement was deliberate provocation or simply a clown's instinctive debunking. Was it anti-militarism or was it frivolity with side effects? Double and Wilson allow the whole episode to appear like an accident, which does not support their argument that Valentin's work was instinctively political. But they also quote J.M. Ritchie's statement that Valentin "was an outspoken pacifist, anti-militarist, and anti-capitalist and was able despite censorship and police control to express these sentiments in his amusing sketches, though even he had trouble with the authorities because of his stage utterances".<sup>158</sup> It is not clear how much evidence exists for this assertion, although it is clear at least that the work of a comedian "also counting Hitler among his fans",<sup>159</sup> and who "never joined the party, although he later admitted that he would have done so – out of fear – if he had been asked", was susceptible to varying interpretations.<sup>160</sup> It is generous of Double and Wilson to include these facts in their essay, given how little they help the argument that Valentin's work contained implicit but powerful assaults on authority structures of all sorts. Given his well-known thoughts on the work of Igor Stravinsky or Pablo Picasso, it is clear that Hitler was not a fan of attacks on authority, whether formal or textual. So can Valentin really be considered a political artist? Certainly, if what he happens to be debunking is political, then the performance will take on a political element. But does his performance focus on the social consistently enough for this to be considered an integral feature? Valentin seems to perform bafflement well enough to be considered a clown; is he sufficiently in control of the context in which he puts his clowning for his work to be considered political?

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<sup>158</sup> Double and Wilson, *op cit*, p.204

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, p.203

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, p.204

### iii. How political is Valentin's Clowning?

Double and Wilson's argument is a convincing one. They quote Mary Douglas's position on the inherent anti-establishment qualities of the joke, which "affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective".<sup>161</sup> However, Douglas goes on to accept that the subversive potential in this is limited, as the joker is invariably subject to hierarchically imposed social control. We might think of the court jester, the licensed truth-teller who was able to criticise the monarch's decisions, but who was permitted to do so precisely because what he said was a joke. However, Double and Wilson challenge the notion that illogic cannot be subversive, citing the Dutch Provos as examples of humour as effective non-violent resistance.<sup>162</sup> The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), who use clowning techniques derived from the Lecoq tradition as a means to the creation of non-violent protest at events such as the G8 conference, might also be cited in support of this argument.<sup>163</sup>

With a very persuasive analysis of *Das Aquarium*, one of Valentin's routines, as the centrepiece of their essay, they demonstrate how this process works. To quote the opening of the routine:

Talking of aquariums, earlier – I don't mean earlier today, of course – earlier when I lived in the High Street – well, I didn't live *in* the High Street, of course, that would be ridiculous, nobody could live *in* the High Street, because of all the trams – I lived in the houses in the High Street. Well, not in all the houses, just in one of them, the one that's crammed in between the others, you probably know the one I mean. And that's where I lived.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Mary Douglas, "Jokes" in Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.150

<sup>162</sup> Although it might equally be argued that liberalising the drug laws was a less formidable task than resisting the Nazis.

<sup>163</sup> As of July 2008, their website, which can be found at <http://www.clownarmy.org/>, contains no news more recent than a year ago, and their failure to respond to communications seems to suggest that they have lapsed.

<sup>164</sup> Double and Wilson, *op cit*, p.207



Double and Wilson argue that this kind of material establishes Valentin as a “celebrator of illogic”,<sup>165</sup> because “even the simplest, most basic linguistic and logical assumptions are challenged”.<sup>166</sup> This seems plausible. Valentin’s tortuous explication of his place of residence is absurd in the extreme and has at best only a tenuous grasp of conventional logic. Better, there is a real *pleasure* in the illogic, a savouring of the absurd that is no doubt what made Valentin’s name and lends further credence to our assessment of him as exhibiting pleasure in performance. Although it might seem inane, with the right performer this material clearly has the potential to be very funny indeed. Double himself raised a lot of laughter with it at the Queen’s University, Belfast conference where this paper was first presented.

But does Valentin really *challenge* linguistic and logical assumptions? If we look more closely, it becomes less than obvious that this is the case. At the end of this extract, it has been established that the speaker lives in a perfectly ordinary house on the High Street. Nothing peculiar about that. And all of the absurd possibilities – that he might live *in* the High Street itself, that he might live in *all* the houses in the High Street – have been rejected. So certainly he *tests* these assumptions. The scrutiny to which he subjects them is, from a logical point of view, rigorous and admirable. But they are ultimately found sound. And in surviving these tests, it seems probable that they are reinforced, not weakened. This is the sort of socially sanctioned illogic Douglas speaks of, not the genuinely subversive kind Double and Wilson wish to see. And so Valentin is not so much a celebrator of illogic as a pioneer exploring the frontiers of logic, always returning home in the end. It seems likely that at the end of such a routine, audiences feel a certain relief, almost akin to catharsis, when familiar values are reasserted, rather than being unsettled due to their world being painted afresh, as is the case with edgier political comedy such as Chris Morris’ television series *Brass Eye*, or the earlier *Mary Whitehouse Experience*.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p.208

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, p.208

<sup>167</sup> Chris Morris *et al* (writers), *Brass Eye* (UK: Talkback Productions, 1997); David Baddiel, Hugh Dennis, Rob Newman & Steve Punt (writers), *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* (UK: BBC, 1990-1992). It is noteworthy that in contemporary Britain the



It should be clear by now that what Valentin is actually doing here is not illogic at all. Quite the opposite. It is that over-application of logic we have already seen as a key characteristic of the clown's approach to gameplay. With each new and excessive refinement of sense, we can clearly recognise the linguistic impulse to clarify, as the potential basis of misunderstanding is made fully evident. Our delight comes from someone keenly essaying a simple story, but in his eagerness to tell it with full clarity, failing to tell it at all well. There is a clear point of bafflement in here. For this material to be spoken with full comic effect, it is necessary to create a sense of the performer feeling honestly that it is possible for everyone to misunderstand what he is saying. Yet as we are all perfectly capable of comprehending his words, it becomes clear that the only person in the room who might be a little baffled is Valentin himself, as he struggles to keep his story on track. It is as though he is playing the game of telling a story, in which someone has told him it is important to be as clear as possible, which rule he then over-applies to the near-destruction of his game. This, then is how his self-possession and his stupidity reconcile themselves. His self-possession is a pretence, papering over his bafflement. His words make it clear that he is not fully in control, that he is baffled, even though he works hard to pretend otherwise. So his self-possession might be played extremely hard, and he might appear very sure of himself, authoritative even. But the absurdity of his verbal diarrhoea ultimately renders this pose moot. However self-possessed, he remains an idiot trying to hide his idiocy.

He is, in short, something of a boss clown. By explaining away this series of non-misunderstandings he reveals an assumption that we are stupid, when in fact it is he that is stupid. Were a simple clown to be placed on stage alongside him, that simple clown would undoubtedly succeed in making the misunderstandings Valentin assumes the audience are making. But in the absence of a simple clown, Valentin contrives ways to reveal his own simplicity. Examples of solo boss clown are extremely difficult to come by, and this makes Valentin's work noteworthy in itself, to say little of its impact on

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most daring and challenging political comedy seems to take place on television, rather than in the theatre. This point will be addressed further in Chapter Five.



Brecht. For what could be more potent in a Brechtian theatre than a performance mode that enables an authority figure to undermine itself? As we shall see, Brecht's authority figures all retain characteristics that can be traced from Valentin.

Yet this does not make Valentin's work in itself politically driven. We can see very clearly how the performance style we are identifying might undermine the content of a patriotic song with quite hilarious results. He knows exactly how one is *supposed* to behave and plays the game of doing so with gusto, sharing it with the audience so that we can all see how confident he is in the game. But perhaps he adjusts his posture, attempts a salute, waves a flag, all as attempts to demonstrate a seriousness of intent, a certainty about his effect, that he is not quite capable of projecting with simplicity. And all of these qualities themselves undermine the seriousness he is so keen to maintain. He sows the seeds of his own failure. This is, of course, speculation, but it gives a sense of how a boss clown with characteristics like Valentin's might go about traducing a serious song, whether deliberately or not.

To return, finally, to Double and Wilson, there is something tremendously appealing about the notion that a challenge to logic is a political act. But it is virtually impossible to credit. Being silly is not in itself a political act. It is simply being silly. Certainly, being silly with a patriotic song is a political act, even if only as a side effect of the silliness. The frivolity is front and centre, not the politics. It is about Valentin, not about his theatre management's enforcement of government guidelines. It is theme, not target. But it is still a political act. So if Valentin's material habitually engaged with political and social realities and managed to debunk them in a similar way, then he would be a political clown. But as his work engages principally in wrestling with sense as a means of telling – however funny – ultimately inane stories about such matters as goldfish, it is difficult to see it in the final analysis as politically driven.

For example, Double and Wilson claim that

His description of where he lives (in the High Street/in der Sendlingerstrasse), which might normally be passed by without further comment, becomes a tortuous

wrestling match with the linguistic logic of the sentence, which ultimately gives us an insight into the character's housing conditions and, therefore, his social status. An ordinary, throwaway line becomes something extraordinary which allows us greater insight.<sup>168</sup>

This seems rather far-fetched. The insight accorded is slight at best and difficult to define. All we learn is that he describes his house as "crammed in between the others". This may be an admission of slum conditions. It may be a linguistic flourish. Certainly, this is not Valentin at his most directly political. Accidentally or otherwise, the patriotic song more closely fits that description, along with the occasion he was banned from performing for six weeks for performing a satirical monologue about King Ludwig III of Bavaria. But apart from these incidents, no evidence exists that he got any more politically engaged than when hinting at the size of his house, which suggests that those two occasions are isolated. The former we have dealt with, the latter is just as likely to have been inspired by the King's funny voice or physical characteristics as his policies.<sup>169</sup> In the light of what we have learned about Valentin, this seems the overwhelming likelihood.

#### *iv. Conclusion*

Ultimately, if illogic were a political act in itself, N.F. Simpson's work as a playwright would be as politically effective a playwright as Brecht's. This is palpably not the case. It is clear that Brecht admired Valentin not so much for his political achievements as, firstly, his performative achievements and, secondly, the political potential such a performance style might have offered for his own work. For a Brechtian theatre, though, there may be a way of retaining many of the qualities of Valentin's performance, while moving the politics closer to its centre: the clowning can be used to augment the particulars of a Brechtian theatricality even where Valentin appears to fall short of some requirements of such a theatre. Where Valentin did not appear to consistently maintain

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<sup>168</sup> Double and Wilson, *op cit*, p.214

<sup>169</sup> cf. Peter Cook's send-up of Harold MacMillan in *Beyond the Fringe*. Peter Cook, "TVPM" in *Beyond the Fringe* by Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore (writers) (UK: EMI Records, 1996). Recorded Fortune Theatre, London, 1961.



the context in which he performed his clowning as that of an engagement with social and political realities, Brecht could do precisely that.

To recap, therefore, in Valentin we have a boss clown whose status is constantly threatened by his own stupidity, but whose ability to constantly stop short of complete bafflement – of total flop – gives him the appearance of self-possession. Even if Valentin's own work did not fully exploit the political possibilities of this persona, Brecht's use of versions of that persona might do precisely that. For this is a figure presenting a rich range of possibilities moving far beyond the surreal contexts in which Valentin most often placed it. The potential for this figure to undercut authority, pomposity, irrationality, small-mindedness and numerous other characteristics running contrary to Brecht's project, is considerable. Thus in Chapter Three we shall see that there are echoes of this figure to be found in several of Brecht's plays, to a remarkable range of theatrical and political uses. But before we look to Brecht's own work, we must look to his other major clown influence: Charlie Chaplin.

## **Part Two: Charlie Chaplin**

### *i. Introduction*

Of the clowns by whom Brecht was influenced, none come in for greater discussion and dissection in the diaries and writings than Charlie Chaplin. Furthermore, notwithstanding his impact on Brecht, it is pertinent to note that Chaplin might with reasonable confidence be named as the most influential clown of all time, given his longstanding status as a global icon. Brecht, devourer of popular genre works such as detective fiction, was clearly open to Chaplin's appeal. However, there is another reason for Brecht's admiration. There are solid grounds for believing him to be in more than just artistic sympathy with Chaplin, who, as Kenneth Lynn demonstrates in his exhaustive biography, was as much of a Communist as Brecht.<sup>170</sup> He frequently spoke on political themes and

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<sup>170</sup> Kenneth S. Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and his times* (London: Aurum Press, 1997). For details of Chaplin's pro-Communist sympathies, see eg pp.225-228, 258, 348, 419-23,

even allowed himself to be influenced, when making his films, by the political feedback of Communists such as Hanns Eisler – also a frequent collaborator of Brecht’s – and indeed Brecht himself.<sup>171</sup> For example, *Modern Times* opens with a worker (Chaplin) driven to a breakdown by the monotony of his factory job and his sub-human treatment in the workplace. Later sequences feature a worker’s march, complete with red flag,<sup>172</sup> and various disillusioned and depressed members of the unemployed.

So Brecht may well have been drawn to Chaplin on the basis of the political content of the latter’s work, not only because of the work’s artistic quality. But none would dispute that Chaplin’s politics are less central to his work than are Brecht’s. One of the aims of this section will be to attempt the articulation of the relationship between Chaplin’s work and his politics. Thus we may examine not only Brecht’s debt to Charlie, the clown, but to Chaplin the creator of socially directed clown work, controller of the context in which he places his clowning.<sup>173</sup> The section will proceed chronologically, analysing in detail first references to Chaplin made by Brecht in his writings, to establish the nature of Brecht’s interest in this figure, moving on then to encompass films by Chaplin we know, from Brecht’s writings, that he saw: *Face on the Bar Room Floor*, *The Gold Rush* and *City Lights*.<sup>174</sup> It might be objected that, for example, *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator* give much greater material to a Brechtian reading, as they more obviously

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460-71. Brecht’s own complex relationship with Communism has been amply discussed elsewhere; for the purposes of this discussion it is necessary to note simply that he became a Marxist after his first encounter with Chaplin and at around the time of writing the first play we shall discuss in the next chapter – and as we shall see, when he did so, he indicated that it answered a pre-existing need.

<sup>171</sup> Lynn, *Ibid*, p.440

<sup>172</sup> Although the film is in black and white, from the context it is impossible to conclude that a single-tone flag is anything other than red. Commentaries on the sequence do not differ from identifying the flag as a red one.

<sup>173</sup> Please note that from this point Chaplin the writer-director-actor will be distinguished from his on-screen creation by reference to the latter as “Charlie”.

<sup>174</sup> Charles Chaplin (dir.), *The Face on the Bar Room Floor* (USA: Keystone, 1914); Charles Chaplin (dir.), *The Gold Rush* (USA: Charles Chaplin Productions, 1925); Charles Chaplin (dir.), *City Lights* (USA: Charles Chaplin Productions, 1931).



engage with political realities.<sup>175</sup> The selected films have been chosen very simply because we have certain knowledge Brecht saw them - evidence we shall consider as we go along. It seems very likely, given his admiration for Chaplin's work, that he saw the others, too, but we cannot know this for sure. Thus it seems prudent to focus in detail on those indicated above.

Before going any further we must pause to note some of the discontinuities between stage and screen clowning. At several points in our discussion in Chapter One we noted the centrality of the presence of the live audience to the creation of clown performance. Does the absence of such an audience, indeed, the absence of an irreducible presence in which the clown can take pleasure, not indicate that screen clowning falls short of being true clowning? Several of the characteristic processes already discussed must at the very least lose their force in the absence of a live audience. However, as we have indicated at numerous points, we must remain continually aware that there are several differing traditions in clowning. To deny Chaplin the title of clown on the basis of an over-precise definition would clearly be absurd. As we shall see, many of Chaplin's characteristics fit the terms of the preceding discussion extremely neatly. Where they do not, as in this case, we should not attempt to pretend that they do. But as our discussion will very shortly show, Chaplin does indeed show a very profound awareness of the role of the audience in the unfolding cinematic event, one that befits his theatrical origins and forms a powerful part of his appeal to Brecht. We should not seek to slot Chaplin's work into categories it does not fit and we should remain alive to the discontinuities between stage and screen clowning. Nonetheless, we shall see that the continuities are greater than perhaps we might expect.

In analysing these films we can examine closely the nature of Chaplin's clowning in the light of the exploration in Chapter One. Thus we can also, finally, establish how far Chaplin the director is in control of the contexts in which he places Charlie, the clown. Then, when we come to examine Brecht's work, we will be in a position to identify

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<sup>175</sup> Charles Chaplin (dir.), *Modern Times* (USA: Charles Chaplin Productions, 1936); Charles Chaplin (dir.), *The Great Dictator* (USA: Charles Chaplin Productions, 1940)

where continuities and influences are apparent and to begin assessing the place of clowning in Brecht's own work, in order to finally see how far clowning augments his theatricality.

*ii: Brecht's early Chaplin references*

Brecht first mentions Charlie Chaplin in a diary entry made in October 1921, at which point he was 23. This is only very shortly after many of Chaplin's films were cleared for showing in Weimar Germany,<sup>176</sup> but it is long enough after for Chaplin to have swept the nation and become a household name, an instantly recognisable icon; much in the way he had swept the rest of the world some six years before.

I saw a little one-acter of Charlie Chaplin's. It's called *The Face on the Bar-Room Floor* and is the most profoundly moving thing I've ever seen in the cinema: utterly simple. It's about a punter who enters a bar, has a drink and "because you folks have been so good to me" narrates the story of his own downfall, which is that of a girl who has gone off with a bloated plutocrat. [...]

Chaplin's face is always impassive, as though waxed over, a single expressive twitch rips it apart, very simple, strong, worried. A pallid clown's face, complete with thick moustache, long artist's hair and a clown's tricks. [...] But nothing could be more profoundly moving, it's unadulterated art. Children and grown-ups laugh at him and he knows it: this nonstop laughter in the auditorium is an integral part of the film, which is itself deadly earnest and of a quite alarming objectivity and sadness. The film owes (part of) its effectiveness to the brutality of its audience.<sup>177</sup>

This extract will repay close attention. It is notable for many things, not least its signs of Brecht's emerging pre-occupations. It is remarkable most of all for its tone and length. Brecht's typical diary entry (if he can be said to have such a thing) is half a dozen to a dozen lines in length and consists primarily of moneymaking schemes, romantic

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<sup>176</sup> Chaplin's comedies with the studio Keystone, with whom he made thirty-five films of mostly one reel each in 1914, were cleared for showing in Weimar Germany in 1921 (Lynn, p.131)

<sup>177</sup> BB, *Diaries 1920-22* (ed. Herta Ramthun; trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1997), entry for 29 October 1921, pp.140-41



entanglements and doomed ambitious ideas for films. By comparison, the above entry is sustained at some length and almost completely free of the young diarist's trademark sardonic quality. We can be sure, in short, that Brecht has been considerably struck by the film: even out of context, as here, the tone of admiration is unmistakable; in the context of the rest of his diary we can make assurance doubly sure. Moreover, given Brecht's iconoclastic, contrarian tendencies, this adherence to current fashion appears all the more remarkable.

We can identify, in this entry, several key concerns beginning to take shape. The first of these is his delight in the film's "quite alarming objectivity" in contrast with the unbridled hilarity in the auditorium, objectivity being, as we saw in the Introduction, a quality Brecht calls for again and again in the epic theatre. From his very earliest writings on theatre he can be found demanding that theatre be produced "for an audience of the scientific age";<sup>178</sup> as opposed to the present audience that "hangs its brains up in the cloakroom with its hat".<sup>179</sup> When he finds an actor achieving this objectivity, he delights in it. This extract stands as a good example but perhaps a better-known one is the account of Helene Weigel's performance in *Oedipus* discussed in the Introduction. In his later twenties and early thirties Brecht was to be associated with an artistic movement entitled *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which most literally translates as "New Sobriety", but is frequently and fairly uncontentiously rendered "New Objectivity".<sup>180</sup> Moreover, objectivity can be seen as a key principle of *Gestic* acting, in its emphasis on the actor's need to hold back from complete identification with the role.

It would be highly contentious to claim that Brecht's concern with objectivity sprang entirely from his admiration of Chaplin, at least without a great deal more evidence. The obverse is more likely the case. Brecht, a young, budding artist with strong ideas about the need for art to exhibit this quality, saw in Chaplin a potential fellow figure, an artist

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<sup>178</sup> BB, "A Dialogue about Acting" from *Brecht on Theatre* (ed. and trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1964), p.26

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, p.27

<sup>180</sup> For example, in various essays in Thomson and Sacks (eds.), *op cit*: pp.14, 80, 225, 226

achieving this quality. But was Brecht's impression accurate? It might be contended that what Charlie exhibits is a deadpan version of the bafflement discussed in the previous chapter. Charlie is able to appear "objective" because of this earnest bafflement, a state in which he is unclear about precisely what is expected of him. He tells a story in which he has a central role, but divorces his own feelings and impressions from the telling of that story. He does this not because he has an objective view on it but because, as a clown, he is earnestly attempting to tell a story he feels will please his audience and, in his state of bafflement, mistakenly goes about telling a story that is likely to have the opposite effect. His failure to please the audience in the bar room results in his pleasing the audience in the cinema.

Nevertheless, what concerns us most directly here is not what we perceive Chaplin to have been doing, but what Brecht perceived. Whether or not Chaplin himself was striving directly for "objectivity" is neither here nor there; Brecht perceived him to have attained it and on this basis built his admiration. It has been observed before now that artists have a tendency to see in the work of others qualities they seek to achieve in their own. It seems not unlikely that Brecht here is performing just such an analytical sleight-of-hand. It might be added that what is therefore at issue in this chapter is not so much what Chaplin achieved or did not achieve, but what Brecht saw him to have achieved, that is, a comic mode that manages to sidestep the clouding effects of pathos. To borrow Keith Johnstone's phrase once more, Chaplin's style succeeds in absolving us from the need for sympathy.<sup>181</sup>

It is worth pausing at this point to note something that in 1921 went without saying but may now escape notice - we are discussing a silent movie. So when Charlie "narrates" his story, he does so entirely in pantomime - this is an artist of supreme technical virtuosity. No doubt part of Brecht's admiration springs from this. But what he appears most interested in is the achievement of Chaplin the director, who has apparently succeeded in writing into his film the reactions of an audience halfway across the globe: "the nonstop laughter in the auditorium is an integral part of the film [...] which owes (part of) its

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<sup>181</sup> Johnstone, *op cit*, p.40



effectiveness to the brutality of its audience". Without the audience's live response, the implication goes, the film would not be fully realised, not assume all of its meaning. Chaplin has apparently succeeded in overcoming the limitations of cinematic clown discussed earlier. And while it is in a sense meaningless to say that the artistic event is attenuated without an audience when it would be more proper to say that in such circumstances it does not exist, we have here a particularly striking example of its completion by the vocal presence of an audience. The film's professed seriousness, its deadpan veneer, requires undermining loudly and audibly as a kind of mutual acknowledgement, on the part of the work and its audience, of the shared secret that is its underlying comic purpose. If this shared secret is not acknowledged in this way, the work will have failed, or, to put it more simply, if the audience does not laugh, the comedy has failed. A clown who does not provoke laughter is arguably not simply a poor clown, but not a clown at all. But more than that, the work will end up looking like a serious love story undermined by its own crudity. Without laughter neither the serious nor the comic aims can be realised; as with a *Verfremdungseffekt*, the two are placed in a tension without which neither could be fully realised and which cannot be simply resolved.

These observations by Brecht mark the emergence of another characteristic concern, the role of the audience in the artistic event. It is only a little later than this that Brecht began arguing that theatre audiences should be more like those at sporting events such as boxing matches, freely voicing their excitements and frustrations; at liberty to smoke and leave on their hats.<sup>182</sup> In clowning, as we have seen, the audience is an essential part of the event; without an audience the clown does not exist. Philippe Gaulier defines a clown as "someone paid to make the audience laugh. That's it".<sup>183</sup> If they do not laugh, the clown piece is not simply incomplete, but a failure. Chaplin's achievement in writing into his film the reactions of an audience on the other side of the globe is an impressive one, but more pertinently it is one Brecht knew to be much more easily reproducible in the theatre, where the performers can gauge the audience's reactions and adjust their performances accordingly. Cinema is not the natural home of clowning. In a theatre, the audience's

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<sup>182</sup> BB, "Emphasis on Sport", from *Brecht on Theatre, op cit*, pp.6-9

<sup>183</sup> Philippe Gaulier, "Clown", *op cit*



reactions not only complete, but influence the course of the event, much as can a home crowd at a football match. The unfolding event is not only dependent on both sides of the footlights, but is constantly being negotiated across the increasingly wrecked fourth wall. If Brecht could likewise write in the audience, and the clown-inspired performer's irreducible presence before that audience, then he could ensure their active participation.

We must tread carefully here. By writing in an audience response, it could be that one predetermines it, rather than ensuring its objective and active participation in the unfolding event. In effect, this would be to replace the hypnotism of the audience by the illusionist means of forcing their empathy with the protagonists, with a new form of coercion in which the audience are rendered dull by laughter and remain just as free of agency. But there is another way of looking at it. There is something piquant about the way Brecht shows the comic and the deadly serious to be interacting here, an almost complete disjunction between them. The comic is depicted as confined to the auditorium, while the seriousness is all played out in the film, each utterly dependent on and utterly unaware of the other. But they are, of course, wholly mutually aware, as Brecht indicates when he says that "children and grown-ups laugh at the poor man *and he knows it*" (my italics). Chaplin (as distinct from Charlie) knows that the audience will laugh just as well as the audience knows that what it laughs at is serious; they thrive on the illusion of mutual unawareness, the shared secret. It is a vivid enacting of the simple observation that an audience will very rarely find a comedian funny if the comedian does so himself. At least in so far as his comic effects are concerned, Chaplin exerts a high degree of control over the contexts in which he presents his clowning. It is this apparent but wholly fictitious disjunction between comic effects and serious intents that seems to fascinate Brecht so. In technique at least, it is nothing less than a comic execution of what Brecht would come to call *Verfremdungseffekt*. But in control of his comic material as he may be, we have yet to see whether Chaplin can be considered in control of the political effects of that material.

We can be sure, though, that Brecht learned something about how to execute the comic *Verfremdungseffekt* from his attention to Chaplin, even if here at least they do so for



different ends. Chaplin induces laughter that the sadness may be felt the more (“nothing could be more profoundly moving”); Brecht has been shown the idea of inducing laughter that the injustice may be felt the more. Although he is still five years away from his discovery of Marxism, his sense of discontent with the world exists already. Marxism for Brecht answered a pre-existing need, the need to formulate in coherent terms what precisely was wrong and what could be done to change it. Clowning and comedy might not seem the most obvious means to the end of addressing that urge for change, but as we shall learn from an attention to the films of Chaplin we know Brecht to have seen, it is a means with considerable force and appeal.

### iii: The Gold Rush

If there remains any doubt that Chaplin’s work was influential in the developing theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, a reference to Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush*, which Brecht saw in Spring 1926 shortly before he began his reading of Marx,<sup>184</sup> should dispel it. It is contained in an article entitled “*V-effects* of Chaplin” and is a short list of some such effects Brecht detected at work in *The Gold Rush*.<sup>185</sup> “Eating the boot” tops the list, “with proper table manners, removing the nail like a bone, the index finger pointing outward.” This refers to one of the most celebrated scenes in the film, in which a starving Charlie cooks one of his boots and eats it together with his friend Big Jim. It seems from this that what struck Brecht most of all was the detail with which Chaplin invested this scene, all of which is a delicious send-up of genteel table manners. Realistic detail is known to be a pre-occupation of Brecht’s, perhaps most famously in his insistence that the actors playing hangmen in *Edward II* had to “do it like experts. The audience had to get pleasure from seeing them put the noose round the fellow’s neck.”<sup>186</sup> But in this section of comedy it is the contrast between Chaplin’s earnest behaviour and the context in which

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<sup>184</sup> “According to a note by Brecht’s secretary Elizabeth Hauptmann, he saw the film in March 1926”: BB, *Brecht on Film and Radio* (ed. and trans. Marc Silberman) (London: Methuen, 2000), p.6 – editor’s note.

Charles Chaplin, *The Gold Rush* (1925), available on DVD (2003)

<sup>185</sup> “*V-effects* of Chaplin”, in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, *ibid*, p.10

<sup>186</sup> Bernhard Reich, *Erinnerungen an Brecht*; in *Studien*, supplement to *Theater der Zeit*, vol. 14, Berlin, 1966

he exhibits it that creates the laughter. Chaplin himself, in “What People Laugh At”, identifies as a key facet of his comedy the contrast between behaviour and predicament. “No matter how desperate the predicament is, I am always very much in earnest, clutching my cane, straightening my derby hat, and fixing my tie, even though I have just landed on my head.”<sup>187</sup> This accords with what we know of clowning from Chapter One. No matter how apparently desperate the situation, the clown never abandons his earnestness and optimism, for to do so would require a leap of understanding that a clown’s bafflement cannot permit. It also accords with what we have seen from *Face on the Bar-Room Floor*: it is the disjunction between serious behaviour and comic context, the placing of familiar behaviours in absurd situations, which for Brecht renders it a *Verfremdungseffekt*. It could equally be considered an example of what Brecht would later term *Gestic* acting.

Another early fragment on *The Gold Rush* raises the notion that Brecht saw in Chaplin not just an artist working by means of *Verfremdungseffekte* (whether Chaplin knew it or not) but a political artist to boot. Entitled “Less Certainty!!!”,<sup>188</sup> it states “I do not hold the view that what this film achieves cannot be done today in the theatre because it is incapable of it. Rather I believe that it cannot be done anywhere – in the theatre, in vaudeville, in the cinema – without Charlie Chaplin. This artist is a document that today already works by the power of historical events”.<sup>189</sup> For Brecht, the emergent Marxist, to be historically aware is to be politically engaged; historical events are staging posts in the political struggle between the classes. More, Chaplin is granted such exemplary status as an artist that Brecht considers no one else to be capable of working in such a way.

Watching *The Gold Rush*, it is clear, at least at first, how Brecht felt it could be fitted into his project; how he felt Chaplin works “by the power of historical events”, and as the first full-length film of Chaplin’s we know him to have seen, it is worth analysing in some detail. It addresses the question of how humans acquire value in the developing capitalist

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<sup>187</sup> Charlie Chaplin, “What People Laugh At”, from *American Magazine* 86 (November 1918): 34, pp.134-37

<sup>188</sup> BB, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, *op cit*, pp.5-6

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, p.5



economy of gold rush-era America. The question is answered with the thesis that in such an economy, human value is financial value; that is, humans acquire value according to the sum of their assets. It is concerned principally, as are all of Chaplin's silent films, with a character not blessed with material assets: the little tramp, Charlie. It looks at the human effects of his low social value. At its climax, it looks at what happens when that value becomes strikingly reversed and the tramp strikes gold. Such, at least, might be Brecht's analysis and we shall see that it stands up to a certain amount of scrutiny. We shall also see that all of its achievements are reliant on Chaplin's clowning. Several sections of the film cause difficulties for a reading of it as a straightforwardly political document, some of which are so striking that it is difficult to imagine they went unnoticed by Brecht. Furthermore, it is highly significant that several of these problematic sections exhibit a different style of performance from Chaplin.

The film opens with a social panorama. Thousands of men trooping in single file over a glacial mountain pass. The shot anticipates the opening of *Modern Times* eleven years later, where a flock of charging sheep quickly cuts to bodies streaming out of a subway station during the morning rush hour. Though both less direct and less cinematically audacious, even here the point is made. This mass of individual men trooping one by one in search of individual wealth and glory, is a community united by mutual disregard. Almost all of these men will be disappointed. Some will die in the process. An audience in 1920s America would be powerfully aware of this, and this is what Brecht means when he speaks of Chaplin working "by means of the power of historical events". The hostility of the environment for the men hoping to conquer it for financial gain is emphasised, in an extreme long shot, by the strident contrast between a vast expanse of white and the single dots of black. The men are outnumbered not just by their fellows, but by the landscape.

The point is well made. Chaplin cuts repeatedly between the panoramic long shot and several medium shots that manage to individualise the men while eliding any real distinctions between them. Then a caption appears, "Three days from anywhere; a lone prospector." Cut to Charlie, slipping and sliding along an impossible crevasse, twirling



his cane occasionally as though he were strolling along Oxford Street. Here we have a genuine individual, not because he has chosen not to follow the pack (he is, after all, a prospector), but because he has somehow, as he always will, managed to get divorced from his fellows, to get lost, to go wrong somewhere. He is the eternal *étranger*, the clown, in his bafflement, out of step with social norms - while earnestly attempting to observe them. It is in this attempt at the observation of regular behaviour, at playing the game of normality and respectability, that we may see those norms subjected to critique. This is emphasised some way beyond the simple disjunction between behaviour and location. For several shots he is followed by a large bear, rendering his quotidian cane-twirling all the more ridiculous. In a 'talkie', he might be whistling nonchalantly. Only when the bear has turned in another direction does Charlie pause momentarily, registering that something may not be quite as it should be, before turning on his way again. His earnest attempt to pose as socially normal is momentarily troubled, but instantaneously restored, in a game in which Chaplin the director is aware of what is at stake, while Charlie the clown fails to fully intuit the danger he is in, the lurking threat that renders his pose of respectability not merely moot but entirely ridiculous. He is playing the wrong game.

During a bitter storm, Charlie takes refuge in a log cabin, along with Big Jim (Mack Swain) and Black Larsen (Tom Murray). In the cabin, two sequences take place that are idiomatic of Chaplin's clowning. The first takes place when Black Larsen, who either owns the cabin or is at least its current occupant, finds the other two and attempts to eject them. Both doors are opened, resulting in a wind tunnel straight down the middle of the cabin, catching anyone passing between the doors in its slipstream and impelling them violently towards the door on the right of the viewer's screen. The shot is very simple, taken from a single stationary camera, giving the scene some of the character of a stage set. As Larsen attempts to evict the other two, in a tightly choreographed routine, he is repeatedly thwarted by the wind, each character taking turns to dance like a poor ice-skater in the face of the wind. None of the characters is able to learn, from his experience in the "wind tunnel", either to avoid it or to close a door, so through a baffled failure to understand their predicament, they succeed only in repeating it and their attempts to



pursue their objective thus repeatedly flop. Again, the characters are victims of a game of which they remain largely unaware.

Shortly after this sequence follows an even more sublimely choreographed one in which Larsen and Jim fight over a loaded gun. Charlie does his level best to get out of the way but wherever he goes – on the bed, under the table – the barrel of the gun inexorably follows him. The punchline comes when the gun goes off and Charlie thinks he has been shot. Earnestly committed to their struggle, Jim and Larsen are totally unaware of the way in which it endangers Charlie, whose clowning is given full rein by the absurdity of this situation in which the barrel of a gun appears magnetically attracted to his person by the malignant workings of the fate which dictates, after John Wright, “if it’s bad, make it worse”.

Yet neither of these sequences has any overt political content whatever. It is always possible to foist an analysis on a piece if one tries hard enough, and no doubt the same is possible here, but it really would be invidious to view these sequences as anything more than superb extended gags, sublimely executed. Chaplin’s best material often comes, as here, when he places his characters in extreme physical danger. Like a high-wire act, a pratfall is always more exhilarating if there is no net, if there is a clear and present danger. As John Wright puts it, success comes when characters are “in the shit”. So while his toying with the lives of his characters might at a stretch be seen to inspire meditations on death, it does not inspire any meditations of note on the speciousness of the ascendant social model. One therefore wonders what Brecht made of this section of the film. Perhaps he simply thought of it as irrelevant. But it is more likely, given his avowed admiration of Chaplin the performer, that he saw in it examples of a unique and inspired comic model that was eminently compatible with his own project, even where that compatibility is not as directly apparent as when Chaplin is himself engaging with political and social realities.

There follows the boot-eating section. The political possibilities of this section, unlike the previous, are many. Put simply, Charlie appears absurd by attempting to play the game of

being a bourgeois diner in a fine restaurant, when both his dilapidation and the derisory dish he is eating with such refinement undermine that game powerfully and immediately. There is a tension both comic and *Verfremdung* between the behaviour and the context in which it is exhibited. What does it mean? It may be that it simply underlines the absurdity of the manners themselves. By taking such tics as pointing the index finger outward out of the context of a well-to-do dining room, they are exposed for the pretensions they really are. This would no doubt be a political act, as is any revelation of the significations we take to be “natural” but are in fact socially and culturally loaded. This revelation, in fact, is the very essence of *Gestic* acting and it is no doubt in part for this reason that Brecht sees this scene as significant. However, there is more to be had from the boot-eating. It could also be read as an indictment of the fact that the kind of people who behave in this way are not usually those who find themselves reduced to eating boots, the class system having as it does ways of perpetuating itself and looking after its own. Alternatively, perhaps it is an indictment of those members of the working classes who choose to ape bourgeois behaviours. In Charlie’s hands they are no more than empty signifiers, yet by aspiring to the appearances of the bourgeoisie, and by implication, their status, Charlie is surely contributing to the maintenance of the system that excludes him. Brecht considered Charlie to be “the typical *lumpenproletariat*”.<sup>190</sup>

It is perhaps going too far to say that by exhibiting the table manners of the bourgeoisie, Charlie is contributing to his own oppression. But those manners are significant of a whole mode of thought, to which we can also demonstrate Charlie as subscribing. For what is he doing as a prospector but hoping to find individual wealth and fortune that will enable him to acquire the respectability he has hitherto only simulated? It may be that he will use any wealth he acquires to alleviate poverty and suffering wherever he finds it, but even at this stage in the film that seems unlikely. Moreover, this potential paternalist liberalism is the most radical construction we can plausibly put on Charlie’s intentions. We have seen nothing to suggest that, having acquired his wealth, he will use it to further the cause of world revolution. What we must therefore decide is what attitude the film

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<sup>190</sup> BB, *Journals 1934-1955* (trans. Hugh Rorrison, ed. John Willett) (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.344



takes to Charlie's aspirations; that is, whether Brecht might have considered it coolly objective in its look at this little bit of the class system, or whether he would rather have thought of it as reinforcing Charlie's aspirations. Do we, the question becomes, identify with Charlie in his hope to attain the status he has hitherto only pretended? Or does Chaplin the director place Charlie's pretensions and gameplay within a context that enables him to maintain a level of tension between Charlie's behaviour and our reactions to it?

That the comedy in this section derives from that simple disjunction between behaviour and context which has been identified as key to Chaplin's method, has already been observed, but there is more to be said on the implications for the status of the performer, his relationship with authority. The disjunction is directly comparable with the genteel Englishman playing a robust Scotsman, or the nine-stone weakling playing a member of the All-Blacks rugby team, in that the sorry figure cut by the performer renders the presumed grandiosity of the behaviour ridiculous. Charlie's failure at the game of pretending gentility is written into his very being as a clown. As an audience we expect him to fail and the skill with which the failure is executed correlates directly with the extent to which we consider the performance a success. However, because the expectation of failure is thus gradually written into any clown performance, this troubles the question of with whom, if anyone, we identify. Charlie being a low-status clown, we are likely to root for him in any conflict with authority. However, any tasks about which he sets as an individual are loaded down with the expectation of failure for the gratification of the audience. It seems probable, therefore, that we are not being asked to identify with his desire for gold. As his style absolves us of the need for sympathy, we expect instead to laugh at his failure to find gold and his earnest, optimistic belief that he might. Support for someone in one conflict does not extrapolate into support for them in any: perhaps there is a distinction between rooting for him in his conflicts with authority and fully identifying with him in any given plight.

Shortly after the boot-eating, we see Charlie's lack of social value in action, in an extended ballroom scene in which the romantic plot is introduced. Charlie spots Georgia



(Georgia Hale), as is traditional, across a crowded ballroom, when he sees her waving in his direction. He waves back, at first hesitantly, then more boldly. She runs towards him with open arms, and he opens his arms to receive her. She runs straight past him into the arms of another, without so much as noticing he is there. The laughs come partly at the “slight”,<sup>191</sup> but mostly at the sight of the discomfited Charlie feebly attempting to regain his composure by pretending nothing has happened. This moment is a flop, a moment when his pretence to be a respectable member of society is suddenly and alarmingly exposed. He must negotiate his way out of it, but the comedy comes from his inability to do so effectively, from his dance with the flop. For out-and-out comedy it may be true that Chaplin is at his best when toying with the lives of his characters, but his enduring reputation is built on scenes such as this, where the gap between the little tramp’s optimistic self-image and the realistic view others have of him suddenly becomes a huge gulf. Teetering, baffled, on the brink of this gulf, he is perhaps less strikingly ingenious than in his physical comedy set-pieces, but he is much more fully and satisfyingly a clown.

Moreover, we see here for the first time that in these circumstances, he is something very close to a pathetic clown. For yes, it is moving. Charlie is ridiculous because his earnest, optimistic belief that Georgia could love him is impossibly naïve given his dilapidated appearance. Charlie at no point asks for sympathy, he does not attempt to coerce the audience into empathising with him; he simply attempts to straighten out his discomfiture and re-assert his normality. In the very act of refusing to ask for sympathy, in the very stoicism that act implies, he receives sympathy and pathos is felt. All of this takes place without the least diminishment of the comic elements of the sequence.

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<sup>191</sup> John Wright’s term for a comic moment in which a character makes a fool of himself by interacting with another character who, it subsequently transpires, is in fact communicating with the third. It is difficult to imagine a better example than the one above. Wright uses the “Slight” in his teaching of physical comedy, a form that significantly overlaps with clown: in broad terms, clowns can play physical comedy and physical comedy can contain elements of clown, but physical comedy is the broader category, covering several other performance modes which all, like clown, have their own distinguishing characteristics. For more on physical comedy, see Wright’s book, *Why Is That So Funny?* (London: Nick Hern, 2006): he discusses the slight on p.157.



The scene goes on with more confirmation of the gap between Charlie's optimistic belief in his worth and the more realistic, objective view of that worth. In a caption, Georgia announces her boredom, that she wants to meet "someone worthwhile". Charlie stands by hopefully, but like a gentleman never thrusting himself forward, as she turns, slowly, through 360°, as though looking for this "someone". Despite appearing to look everywhere, she somehow manages not to light her gaze on Charlie, standing mere inches away from her. It is a remarkable feat of spatial arrangement and again, both funny and very touching. Charlie, to her, is invisible; he has so little social value that it is not even worth her registering his existence. And again, we sympathise with him, while also laughing at him.

However, there is a problem with this reading of both these sequences. Certainly, Charlie the pathetic clown never asks for our sympathy, and in our reading of his performances we would be justified in seeing the comic and the pathetic working alongside one another in productive tension. And in his arrangement of the physical comedy set-pieces, Chaplin the director does not require sympathy from us for his creation. Yet in these sequences that touch on romantic love, Chaplin the director – and, more pertinently, Chaplin the composer of emotive incidental music – does ask for our sympathy. The music in particular creates an emotional sub-text that the style of acting alone does not present, an effect augmented the sudden use of close-ups on Charlie's baffled face.

We must be careful here. The film's first release in 1925 predated the widespread use of continuous sound, and it would have been soundtracked by a different pianist or band in each picture house. Chaplin added the soundtrack on the current version of the film in 1942 for a re-release, and that is what we hear on the contemporary DVD recordings. It may therefore be that the older Chaplin felt more drawn to requesting sympathy for his character than the younger. However, the cinematography is not the only reason for doubting this assessment. There is no sense of an outwardly directed social critique in this sequence, or in any featuring Georgia. If Georgia were being critiqued, there would come a point in the film where she became less fully invested with the admiration of

every character. It is clear that the object of laughter, the figure being ridiculed, is not her social myopia but his hope that she might be cured of it. It is a remarkable feat of performance, a wonderful example of comic disjunction comparable to that of *The Face on the Bar-Room Floor*. But it is not a disjunction whose tensions might be resolved with politically progressive results; the disjunction is not a *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Thus part of what makes Charlie difficult to support as a model proletarian with whom we can either identify outright or, as Brecht might prefer, make a rational choice to consider the character whose behaviour we can most firmly endorse, is that he has so little dignity in his poverty. If anything, Charlie's status as a clown begins from this point in the narrative to render it increasingly difficult to discern a serious engagement with the ideas raised. Like Valentin it begins to seem that Chaplin is more in love with his medium than his message – seldom the case with Brecht. For example, a short while later Georgia dances with Charlie in order to spite another character, Jack Cameron. Charlie spends much of his time struggling to keep his trousers from falling down. When he finds a rope with which to keep them up, it turns out to have attached to it a dog, which in turn spots a cat, chases after it, and pulls Charlie down. It would be going too far to suggest that our attention here is being focused on Georgia's unjust valuation of Charlie based on his appearance rather than his qualities, when everything he does draws our attention to his lack of any of the qualities one might look for in a romantic partner. It is hard to imagine that even Brecht managed to see the film as one making an effective call for social equity very far beyond this point in the narrative.

As it goes on, the film places increasing focus on this romantic tug of war at the expense of any social considerations. In a scene very shortly after the one in the ballroom, Georgia and some friends chance by the cabin in which Charlie is staying. They tease him, not too gently, although he appears not to notice. Then Georgia finds under his pillow a photograph of herself that was dropped during the ball. Her attitude and behaviour to him warm noticeably and she quiets some of the excesses of her friends. When he invites them round for dinner on New Year's Eve and she accepts, it is in the context of these short exchanges not implausible that she genuinely intends to attend;



certainly we do not instantly dismiss it as a joke. Even so, while feeling sorry for Charlie we would still find it difficult to blame her for taking up a better offer. Chaplin's major achievement in these scenes lies precisely in his ability to balance the disjunction between our constant sympathy for Charlie with our laughter at his ludicrous behaviour. It is as fine an example as there is of what Philippe Gaulier means when he says that we love a clown "because he is ridiculous *and* he has a beautiful humanity"<sup>192</sup> (my italics.) This love for him is in part founded on pathos. Although his versions are exaggerated, we are all invited to share his pain when he does something embarrassing in the sight of the woman he loves. We laugh at him, and we simultaneously feel sorry for doing so. This is a perfect model of the ironic tension required by *Verfremdungseffekt*, with one key facet missing - the social element.

Finally the film returns to its depiction of the world outside of its romantic bubble. In one of the finest stand-alone gags in the film, a sequence entitled "Snow-Shovelling", we quickly see that Charlie is as rapacious as any industrial capitalist chasing profit regardless of the human cost. Armed with a shovel, Charlie tells a householder he will clear the snow from his front door, and raises one finger to indicate the cost. The job done, a restaurateur next door is furious, because Charlie has piled all the snow in front of his door, and the resulting snowdrift is even bigger than the last, leaving the restaurateur completely housebound. Charlie raises five fingers. The restaurateur reluctantly acquiesces and Charlie once more sets to work, again shovelling the snow over his shoulder and allowing it to pile up before the next door along. Just as we begin to imagine that the gag will go on all day, the clown's inability to triumph in any scheme catches up with him and we see the sign in front of the next door along reads "jail". In disgust, Charlie throws aside his shovel and moves on, leaving us no illusions about whether his progress along the street was merely a happy accident.

Brecht would perhaps be among the first to point out that the depiction of the working class as just as rapacious as their masters does not one whit diminish a work's commitment to their emancipation. As James K. Lyon notes, "he was fond of saying that

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<sup>192</sup> Philippe Gaulier, "Clown", Paris, March-April 2004



in a capitalistic society, if one fights a tiger, one becomes a tiger, i.e. that one assumes the characteristics of one's oppressors".<sup>193</sup> Galy Gay in *A Man's a Man* is a very fine example of this principle, as we shall see in the next chapter. Thus, Chaplin seems to imply that in attempting to triumph in capitalist society one inevitably resorts to the sort of skulduggery that the system supports. However, in order for this sequence to be construed as a real attack on the capitalism of which we know Chaplin disapproved ideologically, it must do more than simply open the possibility of the interpretation we have just suggested. It must also go some way to endorsing that interpretation; the director must to some extent be in control of the nature of our engagement with the material. Unfortunately the sense given when Charlie plays the game of being a capitalist is not of a commentary on the rapacious nature of that system. Instead we seem to see a brilliant scheme thwarted by events; Charlie's flop, his failure at the game, is a failure of himself, not of the present method of ordering society. Like Max Wall's classical pianist, capitalism is taken as a theme, rather than a target. This is fine for Charlie. However, for Chaplin the director to be considered a Brechtian precursor in his status as a political artist, he must be able to treat as a target what his characters only treat as a theme.

Back at the romantic plot, we are given a very fine illustration of the qualities Brecht so admired in Chaplin the actor. Preparing dinner on New Year's Eve is a sober, serious, industrious Charlie, not at all comic. Even when he burns his hand on the stove he does so quietly and without fuss, always just missing the beat on which he could have played the moment for a big laugh. What Chaplin achieves here is a complete withdrawal of the qualities of clowning for which he is known, without in any way diminishing the totality of his characterisation. The difference between this and the idiot we are more accustomed to is very slight, located again in the relation between character and situation. The clown always succeeds in making the situation worse by misunderstanding it or reacting inappropriately, whereas difficulties such as the stove-burning are simply moved on from. Yet it affords us a glimpse of a master at work. By seeing Charlie without the clowning we can fully appreciate the art that goes into playing him for laughs, we can see how close comedy always is to not being funny. Of course, if we were to say that this was

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<sup>193</sup> James K Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (London: Methuen, 1992), p.195



Chaplin's sole aim in playing this scene in this way we would essentially be accusing him of showing off. But the purpose of this scene goes beyond that; it marks an important tonal shift. In allowing us to take Charlie seriously, Chaplin is preparing the ground for his disappointment when Georgia and her friends do not turn up. The more seriously we take him at this point, the more we will be able to feel his disappointment is justified. So when, inevitably, they do not turn up, he re-instates the clown mode and we laugh not only at his ridiculousness in dozing off and dreaming of modestly charming them all, but also at our own credulity for believing, however briefly, that it was a real possibility, that he really was a viable partner for Georgia. The flop is not just Charlie's, but ours, and the subject of our laughter is our own belief in the possibility of such a progressive marriage. Clowning is then re-instated at precisely the moment we might have expected most pathos to be extracted from the scene, lending further credence to the idea that Brecht might have been attracted to the possibility of using precisely the same device himself. Once again we are shown that laughter need not be in binary opposition to empathy, that by refusing to ask for pathos we do not necessarily fail to receive it. This is one of the more successful sections of the latter part of the film precisely because here Chaplin the director appears to be in control of the mitigation of pathos at precisely the moment it might peak, in strong contrast with those earlier sequences with Georgia. It might even be said that the use of some pathos in those sequences prepares us to expect even more in this one, in which case the withdrawal of that pathos at the last moment is particularly disorientating and powerfully *Verfremdung*.

Shortly before the scene in the cabin, Big Jim struck gold nearby. In the storm he lost his way to the cabin and so now cannot remember the location of his claim. As someone who was also in the cabin, we learn, Charlie is the only man who can lead him back there and thus help him locate his claim. Unfortunately when Big Jim emerges desperately from the recorder's office where this information was relayed, and we see Charlie strolling in the same direction, our anticipation of a happy ending on its way is turned on its head when Charlie hesitates, changes his mind, and turns in the other direction only inches short of where Jim would have seen him. "In this moment", Brecht says in "Less certainty!!!", "something happens that on the stage would irreparably destroy any audience's



confidence in the author's ability to resolve a plot with vigour ".<sup>194</sup> The distinction here is principally between what one can get away with on the stage and what in the cinema, but it is also between what can be achieved with and without Charlie Chaplin. This, Brecht believes, is a moment only Chaplin, with his supreme skill, could achieve convincingly, and it stands in this film among several other such moments, such as Georgia's 360° head turn in the ballroom and the sequence with the pointed gun. It begins to appear increasingly likely that Brecht admires Chaplin not for his political art, but for his technical virtuosity. It is also clear that on the basis of *The Gold Rush* at least, admiration for the political achievements, however strong Chaplin may have avowed his Communism to be, is very difficult. There is little evidence here of a considered follower of Marx applying those theories to his work.

Charlie and Jim are eventually reunited and they find and share Jim's claim. The next time we see them they are dressed in plush – and well-fitting - outfits, travelling on a luxury steamer and smoking large cigars. It is in this transformation that Chaplin firmly renounces any claim he might have to be making a politically motivated film. For what he shows us in this moment is a man made good according to the terms of the capitalist American dream.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, he himself has completely changed inwardly as well as outwardly. Gone is the bafflement, replaced instead by an avuncular confidence. Charlie is not "playing the game" of being the wealthy man at ease with himself and the world, he has *become* that man; and there is little space provided for us to question the notion that this new Charlie is a man of great value. If we were in any doubt that Chaplin is indicating that a man's gravitas is located in the kind of clothes he can afford to wear, it is soon dispelled. Some newspapermen arrive, wanting to write a story about the rise to wealth of the two men, for which purpose they ask Charlie to don his tramp costume for

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<sup>194</sup> BB, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, *op cit*, p.6

<sup>195</sup> It might be protested that this message is itself a political one. This is perfectly true. As was indicated in the Introduction to this thesis, it is difficult, if not impossible, to truly consider any work as totally devoid of political content. What is at issue, then, is not whether any given work has political content - on these terms it unquestionably has - but whether that political content can be seen as a dynamic interaction with political realities that raises specific questions or prescribes specific action, or simply a tacit endorsement of the status quo.



photographs. Why he still has it we are not told; perhaps it is for sentimental reasons. As soon as he has the costume on, he falls over several times and is mistaken for a stowaway. It is as though his very idiocy is located in the costume itself and as soon as he can afford a better costume, he can afford not to be an idiot. The endorsement of the prevailing view that financial value and personal value are equivalent is difficult to avoid and makes the closing scenes of this film somewhat disturbing. Chaplin has stopped clowning.

It goes on. During his sojourn in the tramp costume Charlie encounters a soulful-looking Georgia. Just at that moment, his 'people' come along and correct the misapprehension that he is a stowaway, pointing out with a sense of the much parodied phrase "do you know who I am?", that he is a millionaire. Instantly he is accorded the respect and deference proper to a millionaire. Without even asking Georgia, he whispers to one of the reporters that they are engaged, an action that creates the sense of a newfound ruthlessness accompanying his wealth. Yet it is unlikely that this is the intention here, as Georgia quickly endorses the engagement by kissing Charlie for the photograph. The politically minded viewer is afforded an ironic smile by the photographer's reaction to this spontaneous display of affection: "Oh! You've spoilt the picture". Seeming to agree with his own final frame, Chaplin later altered this mawkish ending, nuanced with politics contrary to those Chaplin avowed, to make it more in keeping with the bittersweet tone preceding it.

This must surely also be a good decision from the point of view of style. As we observed earlier, part of our enjoyment in watching clowning lies in laughing at the clown's failure. This section jars extremely with the rest of the film because we suddenly see the character succeeding, and rather than being delighted for him, the result is disappointment that he is not providing for us the kind of comedy we have enjoyed hitherto. If our clowns are to succeed in their endeavours, it must always be by mistake, as in the example given by Jacques Lecoq of a clown repeatedly failing to turn a somersault until someone kicks him in the backside, whereupon he performs a somersault

entirely by accident.<sup>196</sup> And they must subsequently contrive to grasp defeat from the jaws of victory. Most of all, they must not suddenly stop being clowns. In the finale of the film Chaplin removes from the audience everything that has been delighting us about it. Why? It can only be because he presumes us to have identified with Charlie and to have been hoping for his success all along. Yet the failure of this section to work convincingly shows us that however much pathos we may have felt on occasion through the film, we have not been fully identifying with Charlie. The pathos that does exist has been mitigated by clowning so that its effect is not to distract us from the issues being raised. It is in this ability to combine the comic and the pathetic that Brecht may have seen his ideal epic actor.

Nonetheless, it is scarcely surprising that Brecht concluded: “from the point of view of content, what *The Gold Rush* achieves would be insufficient for any stage and for any theatre audience”.<sup>197</sup> Despite this, his admiration for Chaplin the performer cannot be doubted, and the disjunctions Chaplin achieves between comedy and pathos, as we shall see, still contain the kernel of something Brecht might subsequently turn towards a more meaningfully controlled political engagement. Moreover, Chaplin himself would continue making films that attempt to engage politically, attempts which would, in his later film *City Lights*, meet with much greater success.

#### iv. City Lights

From this point forward, a marked shift takes place in Brecht’s writing about Chaplin. Hitherto, he has striven to fit Chaplin’s work into the context of his own project, attempts which, as we have seen, strain at the leash of Chaplin’s actual achievements. Only in the above note do we see him beginning to indicate that perhaps Chaplin’s significance lies not in his production of objective works of art laying bare the workings of historical processes, but in his quality as a performer. From this point we see that Chaplin’s true significance for Brecht lies in his development of a clown-based style of acting that helps

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<sup>196</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, *op cit*, p.146

<sup>197</sup> BB, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, *op cit*, p.6



make Brecht's theatre possible, whether or not Chaplin uses it for political purposes himself. This realisation comes into play first of all with another acknowledgement of tendencies in Chaplin that Brecht is not altogether happy to endorse. It occurs in section 6 of his essay on "The *Threepenny Lawsuit*", which is entitled 'In the Cinema Human Interest Must Play a Role'. Like all of the chapter headings in this piece, this is not so much an expression of Brecht's viewpoint as a straw man he sets up in order to shoot down.

Chaplin knows perfectly well that he must be 'human', that is, philistine, if he is to be permitted to do anything different and to this end changes his style in a pretty unscrupulous way (viz. the famous close-up of the hangdog look which concludes *City Lights*).<sup>198</sup>

In singling out this moment Brecht criticises Chaplin for departing from the acting style he had come to admire and for allowing empathy to run riot over detachment. It is with this film that it becomes amply clear that Brecht admires Chaplin the actor – when he behaves as Brecht feels he should – much more than Chaplin the director. But it is worth asking how far it is all that easy, or even possible to separate the two. It is also worth noting that Brecht continues to consider Chaplin as engaged in trying to do something "different". What is this, exactly?

Like *The Gold Rush*, *City Lights* (1931) is a film with two narrative strands, one romantic comedy and one that we might broadly term social comedy, which interlink and overlap.<sup>199</sup> Yet unlike *The Gold Rush*, that social element at least initially appears to be much more firmly directed, a critique definitely invited rather than merely incidental. When the film opens the emphasis is firmly on the social. The opening caption reads "To the people of this city we donate this monument; Peace and Prosperity." We then see taking place a ceremony of some magnitude. Several dignitaries stand on a platform, watched by a large crowd. The canvas is swept off the promised monument to reveal Charlie lying atop, sound asleep. His presence as a tramp immediately problematises that

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<sup>198</sup> BB, "The Threepenny Lawsuit", from *Brecht on Film and Radio*, *ibid.*, (pp.147-99), p.171

<sup>199</sup> Charles Chaplin, *City Lights* (1931), *op cit.*

opening caption. He is the fly in the ointment of this trumpeted “prosperity”, the dark underbelly concealed by any civic society that wants to keep up appearances. He also becomes the spur to a breach of the supposed “peace”, as the assorted dignitaries shed all dignity in a moment and yell at him intemperately to get down. In the contrast between this caption and what this society actually contains we are introduced to the film’s major theme of the contrast between appearance and reality, here unquestionably used to political ends; as Kenneth Lynn observes “The covering that has concealed him from view is one of the more literal veils of illusion that get stripped away in *City Lights*.”<sup>200</sup> Were there any doubt of Chaplin’s lack of sympathy with the pompous bureaucrats, it is dispelled by that fact that, experimenting for the first time with continuous sound, where we might expect to hear their voices, instead he gives us kazoos. Awoken by the rumpus, Charlie earnestly does his best to get down but is continually thwarted by his own ineptitude. During this bout of warm-hearted pratfalling, the poor man repeatedly tips his hat deferentially to the dignitaries and even, more than once, to the figures in the statue. He succeeds only in getting the sword on one of these statues stuck in his trousers, at which point the Star-Spangled Banner strikes up. The audience stands to attention and Charlie dutifully attempts the same. Throughout, he is concerned to preserve his respectability with deferential hat tips and politesse, playing as though nothing particularly untoward is occurring while rendering this pretence ridiculous as he finds himself increasingly “in the shit”. Finally, he makes his escape.

One might well expect Brecht’s appetite to have been whetted by this opening. It is a gutsy custard pie in the face of establishment cant, made all the more powerful by its appearance a mere two years after the Wall Street crash.<sup>201</sup> It goes much further than the previous film to establish itself within the locus of social and political power relations. The tramp is an aberration because he does not fit the image of prosperity that America is attempting to manufacture for itself; here at last we see an example of clowning whose very presence is immediately freighted with political significance. The ironic use of the

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<sup>200</sup> Kenneth Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and His Times*, *op cit*, p.329

<sup>201</sup> Chaplin in fact shot this scene before the crash, although the caption was not added until afterwards – Kenneth Lynn, *op cit*, pp.328-9



Star-Spangled Banner serves to underline the cynicism about the American dream, an attack made all the more remarkable in that it comes from an émigré who owes his own fame and fortune entirely to the model of individual enterprise offered by American capitalism. From no other standpoint could he have found sufficient leverage to move the world in the way he did. Despite this apparent contradiction between his life and his politics, Chaplin stuck to his guns. When this film (and subsequently *Modern Times* [1936]) came in for substantial criticism on the grounds of (correctly) suspected Communist sympathies, he refused to change a single frame, despite the inevitable and resultant box-office losses. Although he refused to publicly discuss his politics, he shared with Brecht (in the latter's appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee) a remarkable ability to avoid fully answering the question.<sup>202</sup> Chaplin's work, it might seem, was becoming more political.

None of it would be possible without the methods and processes of clowning. In this sequence Chaplin is the archetypal simple clown, kowtowing to the assembled boss clowns and earnestly striving to do what they ask. The clown himself could scarcely be less politically engaged. No anarchist or protestor is he, rather a poor unfortunate in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet as an audience we are fully able to see the political implications of this simple creature who does not fit the picture the bourgeoisie wishes to paint, and so must be edited out of it. The ruthlessness of the powers that be is always foregrounded by Chaplin; the authority figures seen here are utterly typical boss clowns in their bullying lack of sympathetic characteristics. Despite this brutishness of authority in his films, notable throughout is a correspondingly total lack of deliberate mischief from Charlie. All of his brushes with authority come by accident rather than design, allowing us to see how Niccolls could view his innocence as a defining characteristic.<sup>203</sup> The political picture painted therefore is of an innocent underclass who simply cannot do good by the rules of this society, no matter how hard they may try.

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<sup>202</sup> For an account of Brecht's skilful obfuscation before HUAC, read Lyon's account thereof in Lyon, *op cit*, pp.314-337. For examples of Chaplin's obfuscation see Kenneth Lynn, *ibid*, p.319, p.462 and especially pp.463-71.

<sup>203</sup> See our discussion of Niccolls in the Introduction and Chapter One.

Chaplin the director thus appears by now to be much more in control of his political engagement than he was in making *The Gold Rush*. In the earlier film we invariably laughed at the failure of Charlie to meet some standard or other, but never at the setters of that standard. Here we see at last that it is possible for the clown, through his very attempt to obey the dictates of his society, to satirise those dictates. He can expose what is ridiculous in himself and in the same moment, what is ridiculous in his society. For the Brechtian critic, it is a promising development.

Then the film shifts gear into romantic mode. Entranced by a girl selling flowers (Virginia Cherrill) on a street corner, Charlie delves deep into his pocket to be able to buy one. He realises she is blind when she drops some money and has to grope around on the floor for it as if in the dark. At this point a millionaire walks by into his waiting car and is driven off; the flower girl mistakenly assumes this is Charlie and calls after him (in a caption) "Wait! You forgot your change." Realising her mistake, he neglects to correct it and instead sits by to admire her. She feels her way along to a water fountain to get some water for the flowers, then throws the remainder right into the (to her) invisible Charlie's face.

Although not especially funny until the punchline – and certainly not designed to be – this sequence serves as an inimitable example of Chaplin's artistry, as well as of the *Gestic* style of his acting. Lesser silent filmmakers would have used a dozen captions to convey the information Chaplin gets across here with just one, alongside a welter of gestural detail. The dropping of the coins, for example, not only allows us to glean that the girl has no sight but also provides an opportunity for Charlie and her to be shown in extreme proximity. The resulting close-up allows us to register the romantic dream at that moment being planted in Charlie's head, thanks to little more on his part than a dreamy gaze and a watery smile. Even more subtle, but certainly just as crucial, is the slamming of the car door and its driving away. Chaplin avers that it took him a fortnight of anguish to conceive of this one small detail that would allow Charlie to be taken for a millionaire. Its success derives from the fact that he has found *auditory* gestural details that hint at a member of the wealthy classes. In the distinction between Charlie's condition and the



condition for which he has been mistaken, we have an invitation to the comparison. Unlike in *The Gold Rush*, where he became a millionaire by striking success, in this film he becomes a millionaire by *Gest* only. For from this point he feels himself forced to play, for the benefit of the flower girl, the game of being a millionaire.

Charlie is very soon given the opportunity to pursue this game in some earnest, with an attendant promise of social satire. Wandering by the canal he comes across a drunken millionaire (Harry Myers) attempting to commit suicide by drowning. Horrified, he sets about persuading the unfortunate inebriate to step back from the brink, employing a series of clichés of comic proportions such as “Tomorrow the birds will sing!” These clichés are very obviously drawn from previous films we imagine the tramp to have watched. A clown playing the game of saving someone’s life, but doing so on the basis of an imperfect observation of how this process might work. Yet astonishingly, it does work, and after an extended sequence in which both are nearly drowned several times over, the drunken millionaire pronounces his eternal gratitude, pledges friendship, and takes Charlie out on the town. For this purpose, both get dressed up. But unlike in *The Gold Rush*, Charlie remains as clownish as before, regardless of costume, perhaps signifying recognition that, like many things in this film, costume is an illusion that does nothing to change the reality of the human being underneath it. Having said that, it is also important to note that although not as ill-fitting as his tramp costume, the smart suit he is got up in remains in the same way a little pinched in the jacket and a little baggy in the trouser. He remains a clown in part because his costume continues to accentuate his physical ridiculousness.

Some superb examples follow of Charlie’s clowning, ranking among the most intricately constructed and well-observed – and susceptible to the reading of being politically-motivated - of his comic routines, in the succeeding scene in a nightclub. First of all he repeatedly lights, mistakenly in place of his own, the cigar of his friend the millionaire, then puffs fruitlessly on his own. After doing this several times, with a masterclass in simple bafflement, he throws it away in disgust – but the wrong cigar again, leaving the millionaire puffing desperately on an inexplicably unlit cigar. The lit cigar lands on a



woman's chair and with extraordinary speed sets her dress on fire. Ever the gentleman, Charlie rushes to her aid, first of all manfully attempting to beat out the fire, then trying to spray it out. She takes kindly to neither of these attentions and her male protector makes aggressive overtures to Charlie, whereupon the protective millionaire steps forward, making to take off his coat, as if for a fight. Charlie successfully pacifies him but in this split second interval someone else has got hold of his seat and is about to sit on it. Without looking, the millionaire takes it back and sits, causing the other gentleman to fall. Getting up, this gentleman taps on the shoulder of the millionaire, who stands and immediately begins taking his coat off once again. Once again, Charlie pacifies him and they hug briefly before the millionaire absentmindedly takes Charlie's seat. Charlie falls and – the punchline – begins aggressively to take off *his* coat. The millionaire pacifies him and two waiters run in with chairs to prevent any further mayhem. All of this takes less than two minutes.

Transcribing the sequence thus on the page does justice only to its conception, not its execution. As the latter is where the true comedy lies – we saw in the New Year's Eve scene of *The Gold Rush* how thin can be the line between comic and serious – then it may seem that such transcription is a relatively empty exercise. Indeed, much of this sort of writing on comedy has a way of quickly making its subject appear very dull. The above is perhaps no exception, but the purpose of this sort of exercise, it is worth pausing to remember, is not to make the audience laugh but to examine why they laugh. It is not the mechanic's job to drive the car. So, here we can see the intricacies of Chaplin's comedy reduced to their constituent nuts and bolts and again attend to the detail in which he works. Not for him the broad stroke of an impressionist; this is the very finest of brushwork. It hinges upon a recognisable social *Gest*. When the millionaire takes off his coat it is because he intends a fight, though there is no sensible reason why this should be so. This is clown gameplay perfectly placed in a social context. Not only does the gesture carry recognisable meaning, but the gesture itself is mocked. And it is a quintessentially *bourgeois* gesture. An ordinary tramp would not bother to take off his coat for a fight, as the worry that it might get dirty is not really a consideration. So we see again a "natural" gesture revealed as a product of the social circumstances in which it arises. The greater



part of the pleasure of this scene, therefore, though it stems from the simple observation and imitation of one *Gestic* action, is in watching Charlie playing the game of being wealthy. All of his attempts, however earnestly and coolly endeavoured, serve only to exacerbate an already worsening situation that renders increasingly slim his chances of passing for a genuine member of the wealthy classes. It exemplifies Charlie's ability at *Gestic* acting. By focusing on socially characteristic gestures, he is able to produce a commentary on the stratum of society of whom those gestures are typical.

The next morning the millionaire is a very different man. Sober, he has none of the previous night's largesse; so far gone is the *bon vivant* that he fails even to recognise Charlie, who is unceremoniously thrown out by an uppity butler. In this dual personality, it is difficult not to notice shades of Brecht's Mr. Puntila, who would be created some six years later. In both cases drunken bouts of open-handedness and heartfelt friendship give way to sober miserliness and misanthropy. But although more will be said on Puntila in Chapter Four, it is worth pointing out that Brecht certainly did not lift the concept straight from here. The source material for *Mr. Puntila and his Man, Matti* was a series of Finnish folk tales told to Brecht by Hella Wuolijuki, with whom he collaborated on the play during his stay at her home. However, it is also difficult to resist the conclusion that Brecht had in mind Harry Myers' performance while writing the part; there are some significant correlations.

Leaving the millionaire's mansion, Charlie hops straight into the Rolls Royce, without an apparent thought about whether his friend's drunken donation thereof the previous night will be honoured, or even recalled. Charlie may now be in a much smarter suit, but we see shortly that the illusion penetrates not very far at all. Seeing a man go by smoking, Charlie conceives of the idea that he himself would like to smoke. Very shortly afterwards a man goes by puffing on a cigar and Charlie follows him in the Rolls. When he drops the butt, Charlie pounces, snatching the nearly spent cigar from the very clutches of another tramp, who looks on aghast as Charlie hops back into the Rolls and sails off. It is possible to read in the tramp's face an astonished horror at the brazenness of wealth. Charlie in his Rolls Royce and borrowed suit has been continuing the game of

being rich, but by snatching this cigar he causes the game to collapse. We are left with a dual impression of the laugh at Charlie's own flop, and the implied belief about the rapacity of wealth. Although Charlie himself may not be wealthy and could no more buy his own cigar than make one appear out of the air, the audience is left to tease out these multiple tensions between the laugh and the political point, between what Charlie plays and what he is, in a very neat example of *Verfremdungseffekt*.

On a visit to the flower girl in her home, where it has become his habit to read her the newspaper, Charlie discovers the headline "Vienna doctor has cure for blindness". Still playing the millionaire, he promises to pay. He then discovers the more pressing problem, which the girl's grandmother has hitherto kept from her: a final demand for rent payment – due tomorrow – on penalty of eviction. So he must find the money by tomorrow. He immediately returns to his job as a roadsweeper (where we see him in an uncharacteristic white outfit) despite the impossibility of this paying him \$20, much less \$2000, by tomorrow.

After a sequence of pratfalls including a doomed attempt to win the money in a prize-fight – another superb example of Chaplin's tightly-choreographed physical comedy - Charlie is lucky enough to bump into the millionaire, drunk again, for the third and final time. Back at the mansion, Charlie explains his problem and the open-fisted inebriate brings out his wallet immediately. However, there are burglars in the mansion. They succeed in knocking out the millionaire, but Charlie keeps them at bay and manages to call the police. They escape. When the police arrive the uppity butler alerts them to some money missing from his master's wallet, suspicion for which crime immediately falls upon Charlie. He wriggles free, then evades the reinforcements by helpfully pointing them in completely the wrong direction. Then he strolls off to give the money to his beloved, knowing all the time that he cannot evade capture for long.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> It is interesting to note that when he hands the money over to her, he keeps back a note for himself, a trick that may have given Helene Weigel an idea when she was searching for a way to withdraw a little more sympathy from her portrayal of Mother Courage. Though not in the stage directions, Weigel's action has become immortalised as an



From this point forward in the film, there is very little comedy, the film taking on the emphatically melancholic, bittersweet tone that led Brecht to accuse Chaplin of “chang[ing] his style in a pretty unscrupulous way”.<sup>205</sup> But unlike in the concluding sequence of *The Gold Rush*, Charlie has not ceased clowning. Rather, he has shifted fully into pathetic clowning. In support of that, Chaplin the director – this time in full control of the cinematic score – has written music clearly constructed with a maximisation of the emotional effect in mind. Charlie never asks for our sympathy, but Chaplin does not hesitate to dramatise the emotional subtext in the score. The final sequences of the film ultimately direct the audience’s attention away from the political and social problems he has concerned himself with throughout and towards the romantic plot, whose powerful pathos effectively clouds whatever rational engagement there might earlier have been with those social problems. The final sequence of this film, and in particular the final shot, have come in for as much discussion as the rest of it combined, not least by Brecht, who condemned the “hangdog look” of that final shot as his evidence of Chaplin having change his style. Certainly, the highly emotive quality of this finale is a far cry from the political overtures that largely precede it. It may even be said that pathetic clowning in John Wright’s sense is abandoned, as it seems very clear that Charlie makes an appeal for sympathy here. But we have seen already that Brecht has no absolute bar on emotion. What is his problem here?

Let us examine the sequence in detail. Some months later,<sup>206</sup> released from a prison sentence for burglary, an even-more down-at-heel Charlie is relentlessly ragged by a couple of newsboys, an exchange watched with amusement by the newly-sighted flower girl from her new flower shop. He attempts to pick up a flower from the gutter and is attacked from behind by the newsboys, who pull out a handkerchief from through a hole

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integral part of the performance tradition. (It is referenced in the *Mutter Courage Modelbuch*).

<sup>205</sup> BB, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, *op cit*, p.171

<sup>206</sup> The passage of Charlie’s time in jail is signified by wind blowing the pages off a calendar. Beginning in January, the camera blurs before we see what month the jail term ends, but a caption at this point in the narrative tells us it is “Autumn”.

in his now impressively ragged trousers. He sends them packing, blows his nose on the handkerchief, then catches sight of the flower girl and is mesmerised. “I’ve made a conquest”, she says to her grandmother and goes out to give him a flower. He attempts to flee but finally takes the flower at a safe arm’s length. She takes his hand to put a coin in it and as she does so the music stops, a sharp intake of breath – she has recognised him. She feels her way up his arm and the music swells up again. She puts her hand to her face. “You?” The shot cuts back to him, so nervous he is chewing his fingers. Then it comes back to her, a shot from over his shoulder, as she moves her hand from her mouth to her chest. It moves back to him and he points to his eyes. “You can see now?” He is now biting his nails. The shot moves back to her and in the corner of the shot we can see her taking his hand in hers again. “Yes, I can see now”. At this point she appears to be fighting back tears. She takes his hand to her chest. Finally, the shot cuts back to him for the famous “hangdog look”. With his hand still at his mouth his features are somewhere between puppydog (Brecht’s word, in fact, has been translated as “puppydog” rather than “hangdog” in the past) ingratiation and desolation. THE END.

In the main, it seems probably that what Brecht objects to is this shot’s status as pure emotional adrenaline, with no intellectual strings attached whatsoever. It is of course difficult to quantify emotional content, but the writer of this study is not alone in being unable to watch the scene without tears: “during the final scene”, Chaplin wrote of the premiere, “I noticed Einstein wiping his eyes”.<sup>207</sup> The only outlet for thought finds expression in the question “will she reject him?”. The answer to this is by no means as straightforward as is sometimes assumed. If Chaplin had meant it to be so, we can be sure that he would not have added such complicating details as her bringing his hand to her chest. No, it is deeply ambiguous. But if we did not at least *expect* a rejection at some level – expect the clown to fail - the scene would not be so heartbreaking. As in the Julian Chagrin *The Egg and I*, we do not see disillusionment so much as hope, but our pathos is felt because we sense the inevitability of that disillusionment. What distinguishes Chaplin’s hope is that it is coloured with an equal amount of fear regarding what the

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<sup>207</sup> Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1964), p.332



flower girl might say to him, or how she will react to the realisation that he is not who he claimed. The amount of hope in there enables him to hold on to his status as pathetic clown, but the fear means this status is held only tenuously.

What is not at issue is that this scene contains very little by way of intellectual stimulation unless we endeavour to undertake a shot-by-shot analysis and once more become the mechanic dismantling the car to see how it works. From this point of view it is certainly at least worth noting that all shots of Virginia Cherrill in this sequence are taken from over Chaplin's shoulder, whereas all shots of Charlie show him absolutely alone in shot. We are thus subtly aligned with his point of view on the scene; this may not be identification, but it is certainly a nudge towards a specific viewpoint on the scene.

In terms of clowning, perhaps what Brecht objects to is Chaplin's shift from simple clown, earnestly but ineffectually trying to do his best in the world around him and continuing unbowed when he fails, to something slightly beyond even a clown of pathos, a figure who can be hurt by failure and who produces emotional effects as a result. It may even be susceptible to analysis as tragic clown, as a figure baffled by specific events, rather than by the simple fact of his existence. Charlie appears here to have lost some of his clown spirit, some of his simple bafflement. Instead of remaining earnestly unbowed by hardships – enduring them as if they were pratfalls – Charlie seems to have become somewhat disillusioned, thanks to the romantic plot. This is what Brecht objects to. Yet, Charlie's "hangdog look" is sufficiently ambiguous for us to be required at least to ask: *could* it be optimism, a hope against hope, we see in his eyes? The finale of this film is troubling precisely because it is so deeply ambiguous. These final frames are certainly susceptible to a reading within the context of the sort of productive irony we have been discussing. Most importantly for our present purposes, though, Brecht did not see them that way. Their emphatic privileging of the domestic over the social, with string orchestration attached, is a betrayal of what he felt Chaplin ought to stand for: "the typical *lumpenproletariat*", "an artist [...] that [...] works by the power of historical

events”.<sup>208</sup> Chaplin’s films, despite promising beginnings, always end up privileging the domestic over the social. The contrast between a beginning that exposes the hollowness of the American dream, and an ending which exposes the beauty and tragedy of love, reveals very different priorities to those of Brecht. Chaplin the actor he admires unreservedly, but Chaplin the director has once again slid off a promising road and ended up making the ‘wrong’ film. From now on in Brecht’s writing, Chaplin is frequently used as an example of the ‘right’ kind of acting, but no longer of the ‘right’ kind of film.

#### v. *Later references*

From this point forth Chaplin is mentioned by Brecht a great deal less. He crops up again several times, but more in passing than in substance. It is noteworthy that this decreased incidence of references to Chaplin in Brecht’s writing coincides roughly with Brecht’s arrival in America, where Brecht and Chaplin met several times. James K. Lyon indicates that the pair probably first met at the salon of Salka Viertel, wife of the actor Berthold Viertel (with whom Brecht had worked several times in Germany), and a highly successful screenwriter in her own right. Later, Lyon tells us that Brecht and Chaplin “saw each other frequently at Eisler’s home, at Salka Viertel’s salon, in Chaplin’s own home, and at Hollywood gatherings”.<sup>209</sup> They often spent a great deal of time together: “whenever they spent evenings together, [Eisler] or Brecht would start Chaplin talking by relating details they remembered from a scene in one of the actor’s films – ‘that was enough for three hours entertainment’”.<sup>210</sup> Joel Schechter speculates that “it is possible that in this period Brecht influenced the comic film-maker”.<sup>211</sup> But there is no evidence for this in Chaplin’s work, which continues along the same lines as before the two men met. James K. Lyon, on the other hand, says that despite their spending many hours

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<sup>208</sup> BB, *Journals 1934-1955* (trans. Hugh Rorrison, ed. John Willett) (New York: Routledge, 1993)

<sup>209</sup> James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, *op cit*, p.75. “Eisler” is Hanns, the composer with whom Brecht worked on several short operas, a Communist and a close friend of Chaplin. His brother Gerhart, also a friend of Chaplin “was accepted by German Communists in America as their political commissar” (*ibid*, p.279)

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, p.84

<sup>211</sup> Schechter, “Brecht’s Clowns”, *op cit*, p.94



together, “they failed to ‘connect’”.<sup>212</sup> This is certainly borne out by the terseness of Chaplin’s only account of their acquaintance, in his autobiography: “At the Hanns Eisler’s we used to meet Bertolt Brecht, who looked decidedly vigorous with his cropped head, and, as I remember, was always smoking a cigar. Months later I showed him the script of *Monsieur Verdoux*, which he thumbed through. His only comment: ‘Oh, you write a script Chinese fashion.’”<sup>213</sup> This is no evidence of influence. Surely two men with such concerns in sympathy ought to have more to say about one another than this?

Brecht is less terse, but he never recovers his former volubility on the subject of Chaplin. His first mention of the other man after his arrival in America comes in a journal entry of March 1942. It is one sentence, and it concerns Chaplin the artist, not Chaplin the man (it is quite likely they had not yet at this stage met). In a discussion of the lack of artistic longevity enjoyed by film, he compares Russian films (thinking no doubt primarily of Eisenstein, director of *The Battleship Potemkin*, whom he knew) favourably to American films: “The USSR is much likelier to produce films that can still be taken seriously when they are 5 years old. chaplin too uses a style that historicises his subjects so that they are still enjoyable years later”.<sup>214</sup> Here Brecht equates artistic longevity and the historical approach characteristic of epic theatre. He also implicitly privileges Chaplin’s films over those of other American artists. It is amply clear that Brecht has not lost his esteem for Chaplin the director, although it is noteworthy that he chooses the epithet “enjoyable” as opposed to, for example, “potent”. There is nothing derogatory in this remark, but it is notable for what it falls short of saying. Brecht, as has already been surmised, rates Chaplin as highly as ever in terms of his ability to construct and perform entertainment of the highest quality, but he has nothing further to say in terms of the work’s political impact.

Chaplin is not mentioned again for two and a half years, which seems remarkable given that they met frequently in this time. In November 1944 Brecht makes the following

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<sup>212</sup> Lyon, *op cit*, p.84

<sup>213</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, *op cit*, p.471

<sup>214</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, *op cit*, p.214, entry for 27 March 1942. In his journal Brecht seldom capitalises, a convention I have followed here.

journal entry: "Roosevelt is being elected again. At Pascal's in the evening with Laughton (Barbara was there too in a black evening dress). Groucho Marx and Chaplin there. Helli, Chaplin and I were the only ones by the radio".<sup>215</sup> After two years of occasional meetings and frequent lengthy conversations (albeit usually accompanied by Hanns Eisler), the first mention Brecht makes of this man who had been a great influence on his work is not of anything said or done directly by the actor, but of the fact that he joined Brecht and his wife in listening to a political broadcast on the radio. There is the hint of a vestige of hope that perhaps after all Chaplin will go on to be the politically engaged artist he so nearly was. Why else mention this above two year's worth of Chaplin's famous conversation?

In an entry in March 1945, Brecht makes a longer entry about Chaplin, who has been telling a group of plans for his next film:

party at the Eislers' place [...]. he told us about a Bluebeard film he is planning. a middle-aged man, a rather stuffy family man, murders women because it is hard for a middle-aged man to make a living. chaplin intends to abandon the charlie of the classic films. It is not just a question of how charlie should speak now that all films are talkies. charlie was in every sense speechless. the typical lumpenproletariat has fallen victim to the *new deal*. *the new deal took care of him.*"<sup>216</sup>

Part of the spur behind this diary entry must lie in the excitement of being privy to privileged information. Few people can have known about this film (which would become *Monsieur Verdoux*) at this time. Once again Brecht casts Chaplin in a political light, summarising the film idea as one about a man forced for economic reasons into murder. What can unfortunately never be known about this entry is to what extent Chaplin practised this politicisation himself. It is very likely that the reason Brecht gives the final sentence in English is because it is a direct quotation of Chaplin. If this is the case, it would seem that we are once again witnessing Brecht hanging on to the political Chaplin whenever he appears. The likelihood of Chaplin speaking in starkly political

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, p.334, entry for 7 November 1944

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid*, p.344, entry for 4 March 1945. The italicised text is in English in the original.



terms is increased by the fact that this party took place at the Eislers', most of whose friends were in political sympathy.

The final reference to Chaplin in the journal is very brief: "very impressed by two films I saw in recent weeks: *Storm Over Asia* and Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*: the latter was to have been called *the provider*."<sup>217</sup> (The alternative title is in English in the original). Brecht saw *Monsieur Verdoux* at a pre-release screening: "In the presence of 200 celebrities, including the bankers who had financed the film, Brecht and Eisler laughed in the wrong places, e.g., when bankers jumped out of skyscraper windows during the depression."<sup>218</sup> Just as in the ironic alternative title, which he draws attention to as though it were part of the film rather than an idea thought better of, so in the film itself Brecht misunderstands Chaplin for his own purposes. This is not to imply that Chaplin's film is completely lacking in political thrust. Chaplin intended it to be a political diatribe, and to some extent it is. But it is no more successful in this regard than *City Lights*, slipping once again into mawkishness. It has also no elements of the clowning for which Chaplin is best known. He prefers an attempt at sparring wit that is delivered with sharpness but bluntly written.

There are no further references to Chaplin of any note for the remaining nine years of Brecht's life. Perhaps this is in part because once he had returned to Germany he dedicated himself to the Berliner Ensemble and did relatively little writing of any sort. But it does seem odd that two men with so much in common should have seen each other so often and remarked on it so little. The answer is simple. They did not get on. James K. Lyon says that "Eisler perceived Brecht's attitude toward Chaplin [...] one of attentive, cordial respect".<sup>219</sup> But when Chaplin went to see Brecht's *Life of Galileo* "he did not understand Brecht's theatre enough to respond intelligently to it".<sup>220</sup> Brecht, never the most tolerant of those less intellectually brilliant than himself, no doubt quickly perceived – if he had not already done so from the films – that Chaplin was no thinker. Yet in the

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<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, p.365, entry for 24 March 1947

<sup>218</sup> James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, *op cit*, p.84

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, p.84

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*, pp.84-5

rare cases of people for whom he had great admiration, if not respect, he would tolerate their shortcomings. This was certainly the case with Eisler's teacher, the composer Arnold Schönberg, whose work he considered "too melodious, too sweet",<sup>221</sup> yet for whose seventieth birthday he wrote a commemorative poem and whom he esteemed very highly as a craftsman and thinker about music.<sup>222</sup> Such was undoubtedly the case with Chaplin. As an artist Brecht esteemed him very highly, but the work he produced, it might be said, was similarly too melodious, too sweet: not politically committed enough. He went beyond the simple clowning Brecht admired, even through pathetic clowning, and ended up somewhere else. In the final analysis, or at least, in the final frames of his films, Chaplin insistently ceases to be clowning at all.

## Conclusion

Brecht clearly engaged a great deal with the work of both Karl Valentin and Charlie Chaplin, enjoying their work and seeing in it much that was relevant to his own project. He saw means of creating *Verfremdungseffekte*, he saw *Gestic* acting and he saw epic theatre – all through effects these figures achieved through clowning. Gameplay, in particular, enables *Gestic* acting, and bafflement and debunking enable *Verfremdungseffekte*. Martin Esslin, at the end of a discussion of Valentin and other clowns, concludes that "[Brecht's] language drew much of its vigour and force from the earthy speech of clowns who never failed to call a spade a spade".<sup>223</sup> Valentin succeeds in calling a spade a spade, but is never quite satisfied with that designation, pulling him into tangles with logic that leave him constantly on the verge of the flop. Although it may not be quite right to term his speech "earthy", we shall certainly see, in the next chapter, that Valentin's peculiar speech did have an influence on Brecht. The same can be said for Chaplin's particular brand of earnest bafflement. The antecedence of both figures can be seen in the first play we will analyse in the next chapter, *A Man's a Man*. We have seen

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<sup>221</sup> quoted by Hanns Eisler in "Bertolt Brecht and Music", from Hubert Witt (ed.), *Brecht As They Knew Him* (trans. John Peet) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p.94

<sup>222</sup> See Klaus Völker, *Brecht: A Biography* (trans. John Nowell) (London: Marian Boyars, 1979), p.287

<sup>223</sup> Esslin, *op cit*, p.95



how significantly Valentin and Chaplin impact on Brecht's thinking, but this does not quite enable us to answer the question of how far their clowning, among others, can augment a Brechtian theatre, unless we look, finally, at some of the principal writings for that theatre.

## CHAPTER THREE: CLOWNING IN BRECHT'S PLAYTEXTS

### Introduction

A great many of Brecht's plays might be adduced at this point as support for the growing thesis that he was heavily influenced by clowning, but we will focus on just four, each illuminating a different aspect of his use of the form and its relationship to his theatrical exploration of politics. First, though, a note of caution. Having established clear evidence of a keen interest in clowning and having seen strong links between Brecht's thinking and the practical work of two clowns in particular, it would be very easy to proceed on the assumption that we will see clowning wherever we choose to look. We must be careful not to designate something in his plays as clowning simply because we wish to see it there. So, having established the nature of Brecht's interest and its impact on his theoretical work, part of the work of this chapter will be to attempt to illuminate with some precision the extent to which clowning penetrated Brecht's playtexts and show how far his plays are inscribed with traces of the kind of clowning we have so far examined.

The other main aim will be to ascertain in what ways, if any, clowning is used as a vehicle for political argument in the plays selected. We have seen already that clowning, when placed in the appropriate context, can be used as a means toward meaningful engagement with social and political realities. The clowning of both Valentin and Chaplin often sees such an engagement, but the critic seeking out this particular use of clowning becomes frustrated by the failure, for whatever reason, of either Chaplin or Valentin to control their material with sufficient rigour to enable a consistent reading of them as political artists. In Valentin's case this may simply stem from a lack of interest in making political work; in Chaplin's a lack of interest in doing so if it involves the expense of entertainment. Whatever the reason, it seems unlikely that they saw their lack of political rigour as a shortcoming in the way that Brecht might have done. This chapter shows how Brecht takes elements from the clowning of both men and refines its uses within the context of his own project. It shows how he uses their clowning to augment his own theatrical project, to carry his political themes.



We have also seen the potential use for clowning in pulling the audience away from pathos, and seen that Chaplin on occasion worked in this way. The over-indulgence of pathos, however, seems to be a major criticism Brecht has of Chaplin, especially in the final sequence of *City Lights*. We will examine the relationship between clowning and pathos in Brecht's playtexts, to see if he succeeds where Chaplin seems to have failed. In particular, we will see that the *Verfremdung* tension between the comic and the pathetic may be seen as a key tool in moving the emphasis of a scene from feeling to reason – in other words, we will see that clowning can be a valuable tool in achieving the aims of Brecht's epic theatre.

As indicated in the Introduction to this thesis, this chapter focuses very closely on the texts of the plays considered, drawing on relevant critical and biographical works for support where appropriate. In Chapter Four, we will come to examine some of the practical applications of clowning – in particular, contemporary clowning – to Brecht's plays, so for the moment we are concerned to discover where clown influences may be seen to have been clearly inscribed into the fabric of the text. This necessitates a certain amount of speculation about how certain sequences might be performed (which is hardly unusual when dealing with playtexts), but such speculation is always firmly rooted in the textual evidence and has been kept to a minimum. It is, of course, the business of this chapter to consider in what ways we might see these texts as enabling clowning in their performance. Nonetheless, mindful of the note of caution sounded at the beginning of this introduction, where there is an obvious alternative to clowning, another way of drawing out the text's potential, this will be noted.

First we will examine key sequences in *A Man's a Man*,<sup>224</sup> whose central figure, Galy Gay, is generally and uncontroversially regarded as a clown figure and which deals explicitly with issues of imperialism, mobilisation and pacifism. In looking more closely

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<sup>224</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, translated by Eric Bentley in the edition *Baal, A Man's a Man & The Elephant Calf* (New York: Grove, 1964). See the Introduction for the reasons behind the selection of this particular translation.

into what aspects of clowning Galy Gay practices, and to which of Brecht's influences these processes might owe their antecedence, we can come a little nearer to understanding some of the theatrical effects implied in the text. But how far are these effects political? By the same means, we can develop a deeper understanding of the clown *Verfremdungseffekt* and its effectiveness or otherwise in carrying or provoking arguments on the themes indicated. We will ask to what extent the clown and the politics in the play can be seen as inter-reliant or even symbiotic and examine how heavily they rely upon one another for their effects.

This exploration will continue into a consideration of Brecht's most explicit use of clowning, the "clown number" from *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*,<sup>225</sup> two of whose characters are named Clown One and Clown Two. This piece, a *Lehrstück*, shows a particularly high level of influence by Valentin. Perhaps because of its status as *Lehrstück*, and therefore an even more than usually explicit political project, it also allows us to see clowning taken to a particular extreme, revealing something very important about the morality of the clown figure and its significance for Brecht as representative of the unthinking everyman, saying 'yes' to capitalist indoctrinations.

Next we will move to *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*,<sup>226</sup> which, as we shall see, is widely and justly acknowledged as having been written under the influence of Chaplin. The nature of this influence will be delineated, along with the ways in which Brecht adapts Chaplin's style for his own ends. It will be seen that Brecht develops from both the simple clowning of *A Man's a Man* and the extreme clown effects of *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, achieving an uneasy synthesis between the two. But as with *A Man's a Man*, there are, ultimately, difficulties with a consideration of the play's performance style as straightforward clowning.

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<sup>225</sup> BB, *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, translated by Geoffrey Skelton in BB, *Collected Plays: Three* (ed. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.21-43. The "clown number" is on pp.27-31; it is named "the Clown Number" on p.31

<sup>226</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1981)



Finally, we will come to examine three key scenes from *Mother Courage and Her Children*.<sup>227</sup> This play, not usually seen as a comedy, is used here to demonstrate how Brecht deployed clowning even more widely than we may have hitherto suspected, and with even greater force. Also in this section we see tragic clowning used for the first time and consider its effects. Thus by the end of the chapter we will have a thoroughgoing sense of the breadth, depth and nature of Brecht's use of clowning in his playwriting and of how far that is used to strengthen his political theatre – and where it is unable to do so.

### Part One: *A Man's A Man*

#### *i.*

Klaus Völker, in his biography of Brecht, says that “Valentin's off-beat thinking and, later on, Chaplin's slapstick comedy became the basis of Brecht's ‘epic theatre’, at any rate in the form in which we see it in a play like *Mann ist Mann*”.<sup>228</sup> Ronald Speirs describes the play as “a Chaplinesque farce”.<sup>229</sup> That Brecht was influenced by both Valentin and Chaplin in this play also forms the basis of Joel Schechter's argument in his essay “Brecht's clowns: *Man is Man* and after”.<sup>230</sup> And Margaret Eddershaw notes that Peter Lorre, who played the part of Galy Gay in Brecht's 1931 production, was “not physically unlike Chaplin”.<sup>231</sup> Yet an analysis of the play's clowning, and an articulation of the nature of this influence that goes beyond the superficial, is yet to be produced. This chapter aims to fill that gap and ascertain in some detail in what way the work of these two men in particular, and clowning in general, might be seen to form the basis of epic theatre.

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<sup>227</sup> BB, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1983)

<sup>228</sup> Klaus Völker, *Brecht: A Biography* (trans. John Nowell) (London: Marion Boyars, 1979)

<sup>229</sup> Ronald Speirs, *Bertolt Brecht* (London: MacMillan, 1987)

<sup>230</sup> Joel Schechter, “Brecht's Clowns: *Man is Man* and after”, from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.90-100.

<sup>231</sup> Margaret Eddershaw, *Performing Brecht* (London: Routledge, 1996)

Brecht began writing *A Man's a Man* in 1921, when he was in regular attendance at Valentin's cabaret, at which time the work-in-progress was called *Galgei*.<sup>232</sup> He made little headway with it and did not begin work in earnest until 1924,<sup>233</sup> around the time of his move from Munich to Berlin, and was "putting the finishing touches" to it in 1926.<sup>234</sup> It was during this period that he first used the term 'epic theatre' for the first time,<sup>235</sup> and it was also around this time that his interest in the work of Karl Marx began to flourish. Martin Esslin tells us that "after the first night of *Mann ist Mann* Brecht took a holiday which he spent studying *Das Kapital*".<sup>236</sup> So though we must be careful about attributing to Brecht a Marxism which at the time of writing this play he did not have, we may still find in it significant antecedence for this subsequent formalisation of his political beliefs. As he wrote in a subsequent note, "Needless to say I did not discover that I had written a whole pile of Marxist plays without knowing it. But this man Marx was the only audience for my plays I had ever come across. [...] They provided illustrative material for him."<sup>237</sup> So while establishing in detail the nature of Brecht's clowning in this play, we can also begin to examine in what way they enable him to present political arguments.

The influence of Valentin is immediately palpable in the vocal delivery of Galy Gay, who has, like Valentin, an idiom so circumlocutory as to approach the surreal. Both also exhibit a facility for misunderstandings that continuously get them into trouble. But where Valentin's tone, particularly in sketches such as *Das Aquarium*, tends towards the conversational, Galy Gay's rhetoric is more inflated, as we see from his very first utterance in the play:

GALY GAY: My dearest wife, I have come to a conclusion: I am going out to buy a fish. Such a purchase, after all, is not beyond the means of a waterfront porter

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, p.43

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid*, p.74

<sup>234</sup> Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (London: Heinemann, 1959) p.30

<sup>235</sup> Jan Needle and Peter Thomson, *Brecht* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981)

<sup>236</sup> Esslin, *op cit*, p.31

<sup>237</sup> Quoted in Klaus Völker, *op cit*, pp.110-11



who doesn't drink, smokes very little and has very few vices. Now: shall I buy a big fish, or will a little one do?<sup>238</sup>

There is a grandeur to Galy Gay's announcement at bathetic odds with the banality of its content, a combination immediately redolent of the stupidity and self-possession Brecht observed in Valentin. A man expressing a desire to buy a fish in such inflated language is ridiculous, just as Chaplin's bourgeois behaviour while eating his own boot is ridiculous. Galy Gay plays the game of being a rhetorician, but his game cannot succeed while the subject of his rhetoric is the question of what kind of fish to buy for dinner. Nonetheless, his rhetoric is underpinned by a very clear sense of purpose, even pre-emptively addressing potential counter arguments before any interlocutor can raise them with him. This is a man, like Valentin, self-possessed thanks to his apparent assumption that those to whom he speaks (primarily his wife, but also the audience) are less intelligent than him; and stupid in the pompous way he speaks as a result.

Just as we observed with Valentin, the self-possession is a mask, a game played to paper over the bafflement. By the end of this speech, Galy Gay's game of authoritative self-possession is already starting to flop, when he asks his wife's advice on the size of fish required. "A little one will do",<sup>239</sup> she replies with a succinctness that, by contrast with her husband's verbosity, indicates genuine self-possession. Galy Gay replies with another question: "What kind of fish shall I buy?"<sup>240</sup> His pretence at authority and self-possession is by now entirely punctured by the fact that, having conjured a fine piece of rhetoric proceeding on the basis of his having made a decision, he is nevertheless flummoxed by the need to make even the smallest further decision. Just as Valentin affects a register grander than is entirely within his control, and loses himself in illogic by trying to maintain it, so Galy Gay likewise affects a grandiose register and undermines it at the last turn. In his tortuous attempts to retain his status, Valentin seems to be a boss clown; Galy Gay surrenders his status all-too-easily and is thus a simple clown. Despite this key

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<sup>238</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, *op cit*, p.123

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, p.123

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, p.123

distinction in terms of their ability to retain status, they remain in many other respects similar.

Even Galy Gay's sentence structure supports a reading of him as a simple clown playing a game. The first sentence, in the grandest oratorical fashion, begins with an address to the listener. Other examples of this mode include "Friends, Romans, countrymen" in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a locution explicitly located within its own context as fine oratory.<sup>241</sup> It is unusual to thus address one's wife over breakfast. Galy Gay's sentence proceeds to advertise his decision with a firmly unequivocal tone. The first two sentences are calculated to add rational support to the proposition "I will buy a fish", to dismiss counter arguments and to convince all hearers that this is the sensible course. And the second sentence builds up to the classic oratorical trick of a three-part list and also includes an advertisement of the unassailable reasonableness of the proposition ("not beyond the means of a waterfront porter"). It is an exquisite piece of oratorical technique, entirely worthy of Seneca were it not for the banality of the proposition. It is as though, like the clowns playing Grandmother's Footsteps, Galy Gay has seen someone giving a grand speech and been impressed, but failed to comprehend the importance of topic in such displays. Thus he reveals his inner bafflement.

This piece of text could easily be seen as pastiche or parody designed to puncture the pretensions of those who would habitually speak in this manner, were it not for that final sentence. Rather than clowning, the first part could easily be played as a targeted assault on a politician whose rhetoric is inflated, to show how preposterous such rhetoric would be when taken out of its usual context. But with that final sentence, it is clearly simple clowning, as the game is dropped and bafflement instated in its place. This does not mean there is no latent political content in this opening section, not even that there is no potential for a direct attack. It simply means that Galy Gay is not playing an attack on

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<sup>241</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* (eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.615. Mark Anthony's speech is located as fine oratory by contrast with Brutus' "Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear" (*ibid*, p.614) which precedes it.



rhetoricians. Rhetoric is at most his theme, not his target. Nonetheless, the context in which his rhetoric is displayed could place his unknowingness in tension with a knowingness on the part of the audience – a shared secret between producer and audience of the sort Chaplin demonstrated in *The Face on the Bar Room Floor*. Rhetoric, even political rhetoric, may thus be a target for Brecht where it is merely a theme for Galy Gay.

As the initial motor of the plot comes from Galy Gay's attempt to have himself taken seriously by his wife – and, perhaps, the audience – the action of the play begins to be explicitly located in the tension between his inherent bafflement and his wish to cover over that bafflement, to assume the control and responsibility that bring respect. His wife expresses fears that Galy Gay is unsuited to going out alone, that he is likely to get lost, seduced, or attacked by soldiers. Stung by this lack of faith in his own self-assessment, Galy Gay once more builds up to heights of bathetic self-aggrandisement and oratorical flourish:

GALY GAY: Your husband is a match for any soldier.

MRS GAY: Yes, for one. Maybe even for two. And by a little stretch of the imagination, for three. But, husband, these fellows go around in fours.

GALY GAY: That's enough. I came to a conclusion and I'll stick to it. Put the water on for the fish: I'm working up an appetite. I'll be back in ten minutes. (*he leaves*).<sup>242</sup>

Speaking in the third person is a strategy for making oneself appear impartial and authoritative, which is what makes it the mode of choice for essays and scholarly work. In written work the author can even refer to himself in the third person; in speech it appears odd at best and here, extremely odd. Galy Gay clearly feels the need to win back some status from his wife and to do so attempts to borrow for the spoken word a strategy that conveys authority in the written. Again, his game cannot succeed because he plays it in the wrong context. Nevertheless his wife, (with how much of a raised eyebrow each individual production must decide) accordingly grants him some of the status he craves, by allowing with increasing reluctance that he could handle himself in a fight with

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<sup>242</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, *op cit*, p.124

anywhere up to three soldiers - however unlikely this may by now seem to the audience. In response, Galy Gay re-asserts his self-possession, with brisk sentences and imperatives, refusing to brook any further impediment to this by now greatly aggrandised quest for a fish. That his wife is unwilling to trust him to leave the house for ten minutes and return with a fish tells us all we need to know about Galy Gay. This once more locates him within the field of clowning, the character producing which we know to be unlikely to succeed at anything he attempts, unless perhaps by mistake.

Galy Gay's language in this sequence falls into the category of what J.L. Austin would call "performative utterances",<sup>243</sup> speech acts that not only make a statement but also attempt to *do* something. In this case, Galy Gay's speech act represents an attempt to *be* something, but his failure in that attempt highlights the process of *becoming*. What Galy Gay is doing with his speech act, in short, is acting. The audience has been mentioned in passing in this section so far, but to understand Galy Gay more fully we must turn our attention to it more fully. It seems reasonable, in the first instance, to posit that Mrs Gay acts here as a conduit for the audience, her reactions being similar to ours, if tempered by tact. By the same measure, it is plausible that Galy Gay's attempts to effectively play the game of being the dashing, masterful, oratorically gifted figure he so comically falls short of are not directed solely at his wife, but also at us the audience. The audience is so central to the clown figure that it is difficult to imagine a clown acknowledging a fourth wall in any case, especially when we consider Brecht's own disavowals of the pretence at a performance hermetically sealed-off from its audience. Galy Gay's behaviour here is so much more compelling if we consider him aware of the audience. His attempts to convince his wife to allow him to go out become much more pathetic and ridiculous if we imagine he is aware of a crowd of people and considers them to be judging him on how well he plays the role of a strong husband. His attempts to win back status from her become much more compelling if that status is not just in her eyes but in ours also. The tussle between husband and wife becomes, instead of a domestic quarrel, an instance of *Verfremdung* theatre through clown if we the audience are involved. We are thus

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<sup>243</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to do things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. (Ed. J. O. Urmson). (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962)



implicitly asked to form a judgement on the situation, on whose arguments are the stronger. While Mrs Gay, the more measured, may therefore be the more convincing, there is something beguiling about Galy Gay's naive optimism that renders him, if not convincing, at the very least appealing.

ii

Scene two of the play situates *A Man's a Man* more explicitly within its dramatic context of British imperial India and its parodic one of the work of Rudyard Kipling.<sup>244</sup> Particularly given this parodic quality, we might discount the notion that there are any clowns in the play but Galy Gay. However, as we shall see, we might more profitably see many of the subsidiary characters as presenting at the very least some qualities of clowning, and that Kipling is not parodied but played with as another clown played with *Journey's End*. Prime examples of this are the four soldiers Jesse, Jip, Polly and Uriah. Here is a short extract from their first scene, the second scene of the play:

JESSE: Just as the mighty tanks of our King must be filled with gasoline, so they can be seen riding the goddamned roads of this all-too-endless Eldorado, even so indispensable, to the British soldier, is the drinking of whisky.

JIP: How much whisky have we got left?<sup>245</sup>

Much of what we observed about the previous scene is also true here. Witness again the absurdly pompous rhetoric, taken here to even greater extremes – perhaps because, just marginally, these characters are brighter than Galy Gay. Witness again the attempts to be seen as rational, as in control and witness the unwitting undermining of these attempts by every actor.

Of particular note is the construction of Jesse's first line, whose interaction with the Kiplingesque is highly apparent. It bears comparison with perhaps Kipling's most famous

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<sup>244</sup> For example, Martin Esslin (*op cit*) twice describes the setting as "Kiplingesque" (pp.98 & 214) and John Willett includes a whole chapter on Kipling's influence on Brecht, focusing particularly on *A Man's a Man*, in his book *Brecht in Context* (London: Methuen, 1984)

<sup>245</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, *op cit*, pp.126-7

poem, “If”, which is structured around a long series of conditionals such as “if you can keep your head when all those about you are losing theirs”, before resolving these conditionals on its relatively brief concluding line, “then you’ll be a man, my son.”<sup>246</sup> Similarly, Jesse’s line indicates a comparison, then spends a sizeable majority of its time on the first part of the comparative pair, before resolving suddenly and somewhat bathetically on “the drinking of whisky”, the final four words of thirty-eight. This is, of course, a central feature of the German language, whose grammar often enforces the withholding of key information until the end of the sentence. Here we see Brecht delaying the release of that information even longer than is necessary, for comic effect. Bentley’s English version faithfully echoes the structure of Brecht’s German. Beyond its construction, echoes of Kipling can also be found in the tone. Referring to India as an “endless Eldorado” interacts with Kipling’s tendency to romanticise India and Africa as places of wild beauty, unspoiled paradises. Simultaneously, it undermines that view with the insertion of the two words “all-too” before “endless” – the sublimity of the landscape is as wearying as it is awesome. Moreover, the Kiplingesque view of the civilising force of Western culture on the colonies is forcefully undermined by this view of four dissolute and drunken soldiers who, in the lines immediately following, plot the robbery of a temple to raise money with which to buy more whisky.

Thus far we have parody and pastiche from the soldiers, but no obvious clowning. Indeed, their interaction with Kipling may not be knowing any more than is Galy Gay’s with the rhetoricians he nonetheless undermines. Their attitude, though, by comparison with Galy Gay’s, is one of knowingness. The “all-too” before “endless Eldorado” indicates at least to some degree a reflexive critical mind in deliberate interaction with an idea. There is an illuminating comparison between the bathos of Jesse’s line here and that we saw in Galy Gay’s first speech. In both, highly florid oratory is revealed as concerned with nothing grander than a wish to meet some basic appetite, and in the final moments the attempt at grandeur thus undermines itself. But Galy Gay’s game is undermined by his inability to maintain it, whereas Jesse’s is undermined by an irony of which he

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<sup>246</sup> See Rudyard Kipling, *Rewards and Fairies* (London: Wordsworth, 1995) for this poem and others that form a basis for Brecht’s approach.



appears fully in control. His whole locution consists of one complete sentence, whose ending completes the main clause begun at the very start: in other words, unlike Galy Gay, he knows what he is going to say. His circumlocution is not a product of bafflement, but of control. Jesse is not merely playing the game of rhetoric on the basis of imperfect observation and understanding; he understands the rules of the performative game and is able to manipulate them knowingly rather than mistakenly. In short, there is little obvious bafflement here and Jesse does not look like much of a clown.

This analysis, useful though it may be, overlooks at least one major factor in this scene. The soldiers are drunk. Given this fact, their posturing can easily be seen as that of the inebriated protesting their sobriety. This, again, can be compared directly to Galy Gay, whose speech acts represent an attempt to present one sort of character, an attempt which fails, revealing another sort of character altogether. We may further surmise that a proportion of the humour may come from their attempting to convince not just one another but also the audience that they remain sober – and thus they can become clowns, aware of the audience, though unaware that any laughter is not endorsement of success, but rather enjoyment of failure. Charlie Chaplin observes the great comedy that can be got from “the intoxicated man who, though his tongue and walk give him away, attempts in a dignified manner to convince you that he is quite sober. He is much funnier than the man who, wildly hilarious, is frankly drunk and doesn’t care a whoop who knows it”.<sup>247</sup> Chaplin considers this tension between the performance of dignity and the impossibility of that performance’s success to be integral to his own method, which as we have seen, is simple clowning. These soldiers are as much clowns as Galy Gay.

Polly, perhaps, remains an exception. Clearly either the soberest or the brightest of the group, to him falls the weight of decision-making and the initiation of action throughout the play. As we go on he repeatedly gets the others out of trouble through ingenuity and cunning, never by mistake. Where the other three make idiotic mistakes and render themselves ridiculous, Polly never does. The *de facto* leader of the group, despite Uriah’s status as supposedly in charge, perhaps Polly could be read as some sort of boss clown.

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<sup>247</sup> Chaplin, “What People Laugh At”, *op cit*, p.48

Throughout drama we find many examples of the higher-status character in the lower-status job.<sup>248</sup> Yet he is not even a boss clown. He seems to place no significant premium on his dignity or his status, at least in part because they are never seriously endangered. He is too cool, his intelligence too analytical and ultimately too *reliable* to be a clown's native wit tempered with the luck of the underdog. He, at least, is of a different character. It is noteworthy therefore that his is the role with comfortably the greatest number of lines, not just out of these four, but in the entire play, even outstripping the central figure of Galy Gay, whose utter bafflement contrasts powerfully with Polly's cunning.

*iii*

Scene three begins with Galy Gay's much-cited location as a man "who can't say no", a quality directly in keeping with the clown's instinct to say "yes" to everything. It is in this scene that the social and political concerns of the play begin to emerge, in convergence with this key clown quality. It begins with Galy Gay being gulled by Widow Begbick into buying a cucumber.

GALY GAY: I certainly mustn't disappoint you. If you still want to let the cucumber go for less, the money will be found.

URIAH (to JESSE and POLLY): This is a man who can't say no.<sup>249</sup>

We can already see in here the potentially harmful effects of Galy Gay's eagerness to please by saying "yes". By assenting to buy a cucumber he doesn't want in an attempt to please someone he doesn't know and who clearly does not have his interests at heart, he defers yet further the attempt to buy a fish that has already (and entirely without explanation) led to him wandering away from Kilkoa entirely, when all he needed to do was walk ten minutes to the docks. Such endless deferrals can only lead to his failure ever to return home, with or without the requisite fish. More to the point, this sequence

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<sup>248</sup> Examples of subordinates who nonetheless play higher status than their masters range from Nigel Hawthorne's Sir Humphrey Appleby in the television programme *Yes Minister* (alongside Paul Eddington's James Hacker), Terry Thomas's Sir Hiss in the cartoon film of *Robin Hood* alongside Peter Ustinov's Prince John, Wallace from the *Wallace and Gromit* series of short and feature films – and Matti and Puntila, to whom we will come in Chapter Four.

<sup>249</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, *op cit*, p.132



between Galy Gay and Begbick shows us something of the ways the market capitalist might be seen to work on the unwary, Begbick employing in turn seduction, flattery, the desire to make a saving, and the individual's good nature. It is noteworthy that Galy Gay sidesteps the first three simply by misunderstanding them. But when it is clear that a certain mode of behaviour is expected of him, and that he will be considered a disappointment if he fails to fall in with expectation, then he suddenly changes his mind. Capitalism, it is suggested, works not simply by trickery, but also by social pressures to which, by failing to say "no", we all of us become aligned with clowns.

Martin Esslin considers this quality in Galy Gay "passivity",<sup>250</sup> but this is not entirely accurate. The first scene shows us that Galy Gay is capable of sudden decisive action, on however trivial a level. The genuinely passive would find a way of saying neither yes nor no. Galy Gay's problem is that he instinctively accepts the offers of others, instinctively takes a situation at the valuation of anyone who cares to present him with one. Brecht himself says of Galy Gay "he can fit in with anything, almost without difficulty".<sup>251</sup> He is conformist, not passive. There is a comparison with Charlie Chaplin who, in *City Lights*, is mistaken by the flower girl for a millionaire and accepts the situation at her valuation, forcing him to play a millionaire for much of the rest of the film, at considerable personal cost. The clown is not passive. He performs actions imperfectly and at the behest of others, but performs them with commitment and gusto.

And this instinctive yes-saying soon gets the plot moving in earnest, when Galy Gay accepts Polly's strenuous presentation of the following conversation as one in which Polly is making a series of uncannily accurate guesses:

POLLY: Look, it's a very remarkable idea, sir, but I can't get the idea out of my head that you must be from Kilkoa.

GALY GAY: Kilkoa? Of course. There stands my little hut, so to speak.

POLLY: I'm very, very happy to hear it, Mister...

GALY GAY: Galy Gay.

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<sup>250</sup> Esslin, *op cit*, p.214

<sup>251</sup> BB "A Radio Speech", in *Brecht on Theatre, op cit*, p.19

POLLY: Yes, you have a little hut there, haven't you?

GALY GAY: And that's how you happen to know me? Or maybe you know my wife?

POLLY: Your name, yes, your name is, just a moment, Galy Gay.

GALY GAY: Quite right. That *is* my name.

POLLY: I knew it. That's me all over. For instance, I'll take a bet you're married.<sup>252</sup>

Every line of Polly's here includes a direct reference to something Galy Gay told him immediately before, phrased in such a way that indicates he already knew, or just made a good guess. Each time Galy Gay is amazed, even though he could easily say "but I just told you that". Instead he chooses to accept Polly's valuation of the situation, in which he has not given away the information Polly seizes on and therefore, in effect, never spoke his last line – a valuation that happens to be entirely mendacious. By identifying Galy's Gay's behaviours as those of a clown, Polly has initiated the process of changing everything about him. It is from this point that we can see the argument of the play start to take shape. Galy Gay is a useful idiot, a clown with recognisable pretensions and stupidities, gulled in recognisable ways by the social system in which he operates. Next we see how quickly his useful idiocy can enable him to be moulded by that social system into something even more useful.

*iv*

In several subsequent exchanges we see in detail just how far Galy Gay's clownish instinct to say yes to everything can make him go, and precisely what that means. He sticks to his game in the face of everyone and everything that might try to stop him, because for a clown nothing is of greater importance than a game. But over the course of the next few scenes, his clowning causes some highly noteworthy effects.

In scene four, Galy Gay is given a costume, which makes him even more of a clown and thus even more likely to say 'yes' to the changes that the machine-gun unit now begin the

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<sup>252</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, *op cit*, p.133



process of making to his identity. The text announces no less than four times that the soldier's costume is "too small", not to mention extraneous assertions that "he'll never get into it" and "the shoes pinch terribly".<sup>253</sup> Rarely was there a clown with a well-fitted costume and too small is certainly the choice Chaplin made for his jacket to emphasise his physical characteristics. So Galy Gay is taken that small step further into clowning by being costumed as one, and Brecht considers it of sufficient importance to make it worth specifying it in the text. Brecht himself misses a trick in his reference to the shoes. That shoes are too small is only obvious in so far as a performer walks painfully in them, whereas large shoes are obvious to everyone to the extent that circus clowns of all sizes have worn them down the ages.

Thus costumed, he begins the process of saying 'yes' to the name Jeraiah Jip. He stands up at roll-call and successfully pretends to be Jip despite the pressure exerted by the Sergeant, Bloody Five. He then gets drunk with the rest of 'his' unit, celebrating his own good nature: "I'm drinking whisky like it was water and saying to myself: I did these gentlemen a good turn. Isn't that what really matters in this world? You send up a little balloon – "Jeraiah Jip" is no harder to say than "Good evening" – and you're just the man people wish you to be – easy!"<sup>254</sup> But the moment of real significance comes when he successfully says 'no' to widow Begbick. She makes a trio of assertions - that they met earlier, that his name is Galy Gay and that he is the person who carried her cucumber basket. In response, he first shakes his head, then does so again, then categorically replies "no. I am not."<sup>255</sup> This thrice-denial (whose Biblical reference is probably rhetorical rather than allegorical) could easily do away with the whole theory that a clown, and Galy Gay, is someone who simply can't say 'no'. It certainly poses a strong challenge. How can this be resolved?

Galy Gay may be saying 'no' to Widow Begbick, but he does so because he is insistently saying 'yes' to the game that he is Jeraiah Jip. He can say 'no', so long as the 'no' is the

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<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*, p.138

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid*, p.141

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, p.141

result of an emphatic 'yes' to something else. It is significant that this takes place while the other three members of the machine gun unit are offstage, in that it confirms the importance Galy Gay attaches to success in this game. In terms of clowning, it is from this moment, and not the roll-call or the costuming, that we should date the beginning of Galy Gay's transformation. Until now he has been acting as instructed. Here, he begins to show initiative and attempt to work out how to play the game of being Jip convincingly, how to assume the *Gestus* of a career soldier. The stakes of the game are getting higher.

Galy Gay's transformation starts to reach tipping point just a few scenes later when, becoming habituated to playing the game of being Jeraiah Jip for the soldiering authorities and their associates, his game is presented with its first major challenge: the arrival of his wife:

MRS. GAY: Ah, so there you are, Galy Gay! But can it really be you – in uniform!

GALY GAY: No.<sup>256</sup>

Just like with Widow Begbick, Galy Gay succeeds in saying 'no' to his wife. But after this initial denial he begins to struggle, remaining silent for several lines. The game is beginning to flop; Galy Gay is baffled. Uriah is required to prompt him, to support him in his game, with repeated suggestions that Mrs Gay is out of her mind. And the difficulties he is in, the bafflement he feels, are revealed to comic effect when he finally does manage to speak: "You're confusing me with someone else. And what you're saying about him is stupid and not right".<sup>257</sup> He manages to stick to his game, but cannot resist defending the integrity of the man he claims he is not. Were this anything other than a clown show, his manifest failure to play the game with success would be picked up by the other characters. Instead, it is picked up only by the audience, a knowingness in the auditorium that sits in profound tension with the great bafflement everywhere on stage.

This tension between the knowledge of the audience and the innocence of the performers is what is often termed "dramatic irony" and the success of *A Man's a Man* in using

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, p.157

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, p.157



clowning to engage with social and political realities turns on it. Yet it is distinct from simple irony in that the audience's knowledge does not undermine the characters' innocence. Instead, the two force one another into relief. The laughter is caused by the gap between the reality of the situation as we see it, and as those participating in it see it. The laughter draws attention to that gap and thrusts us into a role of understanding, of rationalism, that forces an engagement with the process of de-individuation being shown to us. Yet our laughter places us in a further tension with that process. We laugh at a man who submits to de-individuation, and we do so as part of a mass of people laughing at the same moment. If the show is working successfully, we cannot help but laugh – and every time we do, we are forced to interrogate that laugh and the matter that gave rise to it. This is the truly dialectical in theatre, animating the ongoing tension between reason and instinct that Esslin sees as a key characteristic of Brecht's work.<sup>258</sup> Our instinct is to laugh, yet our reason tells us we are laughing at ourselves. The laugh itself causes a *Verfremdungseffekt* and forces us to interrogate what gave rise to it.

v.

Next there comes a rite of passage presenting an even sterner challenge for Galy Gay's gameplay and our relationship to it: the "execution" and burial of "Galy Gay". Directly after his wife leaves, it is announced that war has broken out and that the company must head to "the ice-bound frontiers of ancient Tibet".<sup>259</sup> The machine-gun unit must therefore work quickly. If they do not convince Galy Gay to stop being Galy Gay once and for all, he will abandon them, revealing that they have been a man short all along. Now that the company is moving on it is abundantly clear to him that the time has come to head home, despite his recent altercation with his wife. After all, he has only been playing a game. So the unit come up with a scheme whereby he will be incentivised to cease being Galy Gay, freeing him up to continue being Jeraiah Jip. The scheme turns on a fact we have already intuited when he agreed to buy Begbick's cucumber. Galy Gay is

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<sup>258</sup> Chapter ten of Esslin's book (*op cit*, pp.211-27) is entitled "Reason Versus Instinct" and explores this tension as a theme throughout Brecht's work. At no point, though, does he discuss the theatre audience as illustrative of this dynamic.

<sup>259</sup> BB, *A Man's a Man*, *op cit*, p.158

in thrall to capitalist society, even if only because, like so many people, endorsing capitalism is a mode of behaviour to which he is expected to say 'yes'.

The scheme turns on the sale of an elephant: "For if this Galy Gay makes a deal with an elephant, and there's something wrong about this deal, he will prefer being Jeraiah Jip the Soldier to being Galy Gay the Crook."<sup>260</sup> So they construct an artificial elephant with a view to having him sell it, whereupon he will be arrested for selling an artificial elephant in place of a real one. When some scepticism is expressed about the feasibility of this scheme, Uriah snaps "He *will* take that for an elephant. Because he's interested in buying and selling. I tell you he'd take this whisky bottle for an elephant if someone pointed at it and said: sell me that elephant".<sup>261</sup> This revelation is important because it takes him closer to some of what we have seen of Charlie, "the typical *Lumpenproletariat*" who is so thoroughly beguiled by market forces that he gives no thought to the notion that it might be they that are responsible for his deprivation. He fails to register the merest possibility that the social order might be changed. Galy Gay's willingness to become embroiled in the scheme with the elephant is directly comparable with Charlie's willingness to charge people money for clearing the snow he himself put in front of their doors. Where the two differ is that Chaplin's shortcoming was that, however radical he may have been in his political beliefs, he did not successfully challenge ascendant orthodoxies in his work: the snow-shovelling scheme in *The Gold Rush* is good comedy but poor political opposition. Brecht presents a comparable character and situation, but as we shall see, has far greater political effect.

Galy Gay quickly says 'yes' to the proposition that he sign his name as the owner of the elephant in order that he might be permitted to sell it. He is playing the game of market capitalism, and by explicitly locating it as a game Brecht renders this process much more open for critique than the equivalent section in *The Gold Rush*. For in playing this game, Galy Gay adopts the *Gest* of a rapacious capitalist and invites us not to cheer him on in

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<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, p.161

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, p.162



the game, but to critique that *Gest*. “But my name must be kept out of it”,<sup>262</sup> he says, a requirement that has several available meanings. It might be that we see him here adopting the *Gest* of a capitalist, and that he sees their behaviour as shady and underhand. But this direct targeting of a class would not fully accord with his status as a clown; more likely he plays as though he has seen people behaving in this way and, feeling that “this is what capitalists do”, resolves to play the game as well as he can. This might be particularly the case at the time of writing in the nineteen-twenties when the world economy was strong but there was nonetheless significant poverty in a Weimar Germany still suffering the after-effects of war. Brecht could see people making money while others suffered. But this line could also be read as a suggestion that Galy Gay still has not become comfortable with his new identity as Jeraiah Jip, nor fully abandoned his old. In this reading, the line also betrays a bafflement on the part of Galy Gay about precisely what might be entailed by the process of signing one’s name. To anyone but a clown it is obvious that keeping one’s name out of such a process ought to be impossible. Still, their purpose rendering them unflustered by the unorthodoxy of allowing a man to sign his name while keeping his name out of it, the machine-gun unit allow Galy Gay to take possession of the elephant and sell it to Widow Begbick. So in insisting that his name be kept out of it, Galy Gay takes a cheque from Begbick made out to “the man who wants his name kept out of it”.<sup>263</sup> The fact that no bank would cash this cheque does not stop the machine gun unit immediately arresting him for illegally selling the elephant. “I don’t know the elephant”,<sup>264</sup> he lies, but it is no use: he has played the game of being a rapacious capitalist altogether too effectively, but unfortunately he is not so effective as the more usual run of capitalist when it comes to covering his tracks with clever accounting. A cheque without his name on is not sufficient smokescreen. Like Charlie shovelling snow, he is not good enough at this game; unlike that sequence of Chaplin’s film, Brecht enables us to place Galy Gay’s behaviour in a social and theatrical context that encourages critique of this behaviour, rather than sympathy for the failure of the scheme.

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<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, p.163

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, p.166

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*, p.166

There follows a trumped-up trial of “the man who wants his name kept out of it”, in which the indeterminacy of Galy Gay’s identity has become so marked that it is clear that this marks a transitional phase for that identity. He is not happy to commit to being Galy Gay any longer, but nor does he yet want to abandon Galy Gay entirely. He is stuck in a state of bafflement in which he no longer has any idea who he is supposed to be. Like the simple clown in the exercise set in the trenches, or the clowns performing “King Louis and the Lion”, the relationship between the game and reality has become fractured for him and he can no longer remember where one ends and the other begins.

The machine gun unit trick Galy Gay into admitting that a man called Galy Gay sold the elephant: “I can testify to that”, he says, “*lifting his hand as witness, just as the SOLDIERS had done*”.<sup>265</sup> He is here playing the game of being a witness in court, going through a sequence of observed behaviours and locutions as a mask for his bafflement, a mask which becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as the stakes continue to rise, as he continues to be put “in the shit”. So his gameplay becomes erratic and characterised by abject, hilarious failure, as in the line “At first it was a real elephant, later it was a fake, and it’s very hard to sort everything out, High Court of Justice”.<sup>266</sup> He gets lost in his lie, tries to wheedle his way out of it, and then ineffectively attempts sycophancy by addressing the judge as though he were the entire court. That the judge is in fact Uriah, a soldier with no judicial powers or qualifications, does not occur to Galy Gay, whose baffled confusion of game and reality is increasingly characterised by desperation. He is dancing with the flop, but he is so baffled he has no idea how to avoid it.

Having forced Galy Gay to incriminate himself, Uriah offers him the get-out clause of claiming the identity of Jip, but perhaps because he senses that saying ‘yes’ to things is what caused all this trouble, Galy Gay refuses to confirm this as his identity. So Uriah is forced to go ahead with the “execution”, conferring with the rest of the unit: “He’s willing not to be Galy Gay now, but I think we’ll need to threaten him with the death

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<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, p.169

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, p.169



penalty a little more before he'll be Jeraiah Jip".<sup>267</sup> Sure enough, when confronted with the apparent certainty that he will be shot, Galy Gay breaks down, crying "My name is Jip, I swear it. What is an elephant compared to a man?"<sup>268</sup> He is prepared to say 'yes' to whatever identity they please in the face of a threat to remove the possibility of any.

They press on with the sentence, staging a march to the execution ground, where he breaks down completely, but not before attempting to construe the whole thing as a joke:

URIAH. I'm going to count up to three. One!

GALY GAY. That will be enough, Uriah. The elephants have arrived, haven't they? Am I to stay on now, Uriah? Why are you all so terribly quiet?

URIAH. Two!

GALY GAY (*laughs*). You're funny, Uriah. I can't see you but your voice sounds dead serious.

URIAH. And one more makes –

GALY GAY. Stop! Don't say three, or you'll be sorry. If you shoot now, you'll hit me. Listen! I confess. I confess I don't know what happened to me. Believe me, I'm a man – now don't laugh – who doesn't know who he is. But I'm Galy Gay, that I do know. The man that's to be shot, I'm not him. But who am I? I've forgotten.<sup>269</sup>

Just as the stakes reach their peak, Galy Gay attempts to play the game that this is all a game. But he is given no encouragement in this endeavour, and so instead desperately tries to work through his bafflement, to no avail. He is here in a state of total flop, none of his impulses can be trusted and he has no ideas left. What we are witnessing is the failure of clowning. Such catastrophic failure, if played with enormous skill, can still be very funny. The performer is enabled to play for big laughs here due to the dramatic irony of the situation. We know something Galy Gay does not, namely that this is all a ruse and that he will not in fact be shot. He can play the high stakes of the situation and we can

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<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, p.170

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid*, p.171

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, p.174

laugh because we know that ultimately, he is safe. Just as Chaplin's style absolves us of the need for sympathy, here our knowledge of Galy Gay's situation does the same.

So worked up has he become, that when Uriah finally calls "Fire!!", Galy Gay collapses in a faint.<sup>270</sup> When he awakes, the soldiers are carrying a crate on their shoulders and singing Chopin's *Funeral March*.<sup>271</sup> The unit finally capitalise on Galy Gay's total bafflement by presenting to him some certainty:

POLLY.        Isn't that Jip? Jip, you must get up and speak at the burial of Galy Gay. For you knew him – better than we did maybe.

GALY GAY. Yes.<sup>272</sup>

The dull monosyllable tells us all we need to know. Galy Gay is acquiescing, but not yet with enthusiasm or certainty. However, Polly has cleverly found the way through Galy Gay's confusion. By acknowledging that he, Jeraiah Jip, knew Galy Gay, he answers Galy Gay's question about why that name appears so familiar. In order to continue nursing him through this final transition, to assuage this confusion, Polly and Jesse stay with Galy Gay right up until the oration is to take place, regaling him with supposedly shared memories and mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar:

POLLY.        Remember losing your tobacco pouch at Hyderabad? You said:  
                  "One time is no time."

JESSE.        And the episode with the tip?

POLLY.        The time you stole the lady's fish and tricked her into thinking you were her husband?<sup>273</sup>

By these means is he given no opportunity to renege on the deal they have implicitly made. He is now, finally, Jeraiah Jip, a fact confirmed when he speaks the funeral oration of Galy Gay.

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, p.175

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, p.181. Chopin's funeral march is also used by Brecht in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid*, p.181

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, p.181



Indeed, he is not the same man as he was, for he becomes for this section a pathetic clown, no longer a simple one. His oration still plays for laughs in a variety of ways, by the sort of bathos we have seen – “here lies Galy Gay, a man who was shot” - by jarring juxtapositions - “It was a great crime that he committed, this very good man” – and by completely losing his thread and nearly forgetting his role: “Well, people can say what they want, but actually it was only an oversight, and I was far too drunk gentlemen, but a man’s just a man, so he had to be shot.”<sup>274</sup> But the laughs are not of the same character and the oration is laced throughout with a barely submerged poignancy, reaching its climax as the oration drifts away from reaching one itself:

“And now the wind is considerably cooler, as always toward morning, and we’ll be going on a long journey and it may not be any too comfortable”.<sup>275</sup>

As John Wright sets out in his guidelines for pathetic clown, Galy Gay does not make an active play for sympathy, talking instead about the weather and the journey ahead. Still, the more poetic register of talk of cold winds blowing, coupled with the understatement of “it may not be any too comfortable” when applied to a journey to the front line, renders this unmistakably a scene of pathos. Galy Gay is no more. His transformation is almost complete.

vi.

That transformation is completed in the final scene, when Galy Gay insists, backed up by the rest of the unit, to Jeraiah Jip himself that he is Jeraiah Jip, and when he does so without a trace of bafflement. In an apparent act of generosity, he gives the bereft Jip “the papers of that fellow you used to tease me about: Galy Gay”.<sup>276</sup> There is a real distance implied between his current and former identities here, a sense of some considerable time having passed since this “Galy Gay” was an issue in his life. Simply by the act of making that phrase he announces how far he has come. He may still be playing the game of being Jeraiah Jip, but he is not doing so for pleasure, but to win. The clown is barely

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<sup>274</sup> *Ibid*, p.184

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid*, p.184

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*, p.194

discernible, if it is present at all. For there is no bafflement exhibited here, only certainty and control. Granted, a skilled performer could find bafflement in the character and continue playing it through this scene. When even his sentence structure has changed from the mock-pomposity of the early scenes, and even from the circumlocutory excesses of bafflement of the more recent scenes, to the clipped tones of authority and surety, it is clear that the actor would be playing against the text:

GALY GAY. (*going over to JIP, plate in hand*). You're making some mistake. (*To himself*) He's a bit cracked. (*To JIP*) Maybe you haven't eaten for days? Like a glass of water? (*Back*) We mustn't irritate him. You don't know where you belong? That doesn't matter. Just sit down over there until we've won the battle. And don't get too near the noise of the cannon, or you'll need great strength of soul.<sup>277</sup>

He shows great kindness and pity towards Jip, but does not appear to falter for even a moment in his conviction that this is not Jip. There is no clown here at all. Even the stage directions describe him as "irresistible as a war elephant".<sup>278</sup> He is firm of purpose; he is no longer playing the game of being a hardened soldier, he *is* a hardened soldier. Simply by repeating the performative speech act of saying 'yes' to the idea of being Jeraiah Jip, he has become Jeraiah Jip. Even the existence of a 'real' Jeraiah Jip cannot confound that.

By the end of the play, Galy Gay has thoroughly identified himself with the role of Jeraiah Jip and Jeraiah Jip has become a ruthless killing machine, destroying in five shots the supposedly impenetrable Tibetan fortress and becoming hailed as "the greatest soldier in His Majesty's army".<sup>279</sup> He has played the game of being Jeraiah Jip so successfully that he has forgotten it is a game. The machine gun unit have succeeded in moulding him, far beyond their intentions. The unthinking, silent majority, Brecht seems to imply, are to some degree clowns in their failure to examine what is said to them by the political class, in their total inability to say "no".

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid*, p.194

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, p.192

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, p.197



We laugh at him, until this final scene, but we also laugh at ourselves, each laugh forcing us to interrogate it. And in this final scene, we stop laughing, as we realise that our laughter has been us saying 'yes', and now, in this final scene, we realise what that means. Galy Gay, in the final act of transformation, loses his bafflement, ceases to be a clown, and does something successfully, something we could never endorse. "He wins",<sup>280</sup> says Brecht. He wins in the context of a capitalist-imperialist society, and when the idiot becomes a useful idiot, we lose. The clown is a deeply appealing figure, but when he ceases to be a clown he becomes dangerous.

It is this simple fact that makes *A Man's A Man* less than complete as a clown show. A pure clown show does not leave clowning behind. In a pure clown show Galy Gay would perhaps, purely by accident, find a fish on the Tibetan border and remember everything about his quest, before taking it home to his wife. Brecht is using clowning for politico-theatrical ends and does not serve the form to the hilt, only taking it as far as it is useful. The Tibetan border fortress in the play serves as a useful metaphor for the boundary between pure clowning and a more hybrid form. Once he has targeted it successfully, Galy Gay the clown is no more; Brecht by this stage seems to think that in order to seal his serious intentions it is necessary to abandon the comic form. Can a serious political point be made and driven home without abandoning clowning?

### **Part Two: *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent***

In the "clown number" from the *Lehrstück* entitled *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*,<sup>281</sup> Brecht goes considerably further than anywhere else in his use of clowning, and provides us with a very useful place to look for an exploration of political realities that does not abandon clowning in order to make its point. Yet Jan Needle and Peter Thomson consider that this play "sets the tone of Brecht's failure as a propagandist more

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<sup>280</sup> BB, *Brecht on Theatre, op cit*, p.19

<sup>281</sup> BB, *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, translated by Geoffrey Skelton in BB, *Collected Plays: Three* (ed. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1997), pp.21-43. The "clown number" is on pp.27-31; it is named "the Clown Number" on p.31

than adequately; it is dense and ambiguous to the point where one may be forgiven for deciding it is merely confused”.<sup>282</sup> This is an understandable critical response to a piece that experiments with some extremely strident effects, including the projection onto a screen of numerous images of dead bodies, none of which seems especially helpful to the piece’s thesis that “no man helps another”. Taken alone, though, the “clown number” not only powerfully illustrates this thesis, but does so by using clowning in a particularly striking way that gives the *Verfremdung* laugh considerable new force. Moreover, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, the kind of clowning we see in this piece has been little developed by practitioners in the Brechtian or clown traditions in nearly eighty years since the piece was premiered.

The piece was first presented in 1929 at the Baden-Baden *Neue Musik* Festival, with a score by Paul Hindemith. At the Festival, Applied Music and Community Music – as opposed to music for consumers – were the focus,<sup>283</sup> suggesting immediately that a scepticism about mainstream cultural production and its mutually supportive relationship with the prevailing political system were written into the context of this work’s initial production.<sup>284</sup> In the clown number, two clowns saw several limbs and finally the head off a third, giant clown, all the while purporting to be helping him. Thus as well as the very direct engagement with the political dictum “no man helps another”, with which the scene is bookmarked,<sup>285</sup> we also see the most obvious example of Valentin’s antecedence. This is clear not least if we draw a comparison with *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, in which there was also a beheading. It is also evident, as we shall see, from both vocal and visual signifiers reminiscent of Valentin. As well as Valentin, we can see shades of that “eccentric clown of immense stature” we encountered at the very beginning of the Introduction to this thesis, who sawed a bump off his head and ate it. With both these antecedents Brecht takes their style and puts it at the service of

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<sup>282</sup> Needle and Thomson, *op cit*, p.63

<sup>283</sup> See John Willet in *BB: Collected Plays: Three, op. cit.*, introduction p.xi

<sup>284</sup> For more on the relationship between the cultural output of a society and its prevailing political orthodoxies, see Raymond Williams, eg. *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958)

<sup>285</sup> *BB, Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent, op cit*, p.27 & p.31



considerably different ends. The laughter in this piece is of a character we have not seen before.

In analysing this sequence, we must have several key questions in mind, on which, because of the sequence's brevity, we can focus with greater clarity than when attending to the sundry issues raised by consideration of the trajectory of a full-length play. Firstly, how heavy is the debt owed to Valentin in this scene? Secondly, what uses are made of Valentin's style and approach that differ in key respects from Valentin's own work? And thirdly, how effective is the medium of clowning in carrying a political message? In considering this final question, we must also remain alert to the possibility that what we are considering, despite Brecht's labelling of it as such, is not clowning at all. Dressing someone as a clown and labelling him or her "clown" may not necessarily make them a clown. It may be necessary for that person to behave as a clown, before that label becomes appropriate.

In the stage direction at the beginning of the sequence, Brecht tells us that "three clowns mount the platform", although thereafter they are referred to as "clown 1", "clown 2" and "Smith". This is our first and simplest indication that we have at least two clowns. The naming of Smith does, not, however, appear to make him any less of a clown than the other two, and in the first of several indications that he shares many characteristics with Valentin and the "eccentric clown of immense stature", he is described as "a giant". The logic of the dialogue is reminiscent of Valentin's own device of pursuing the logic of a situation to breaking point:

SMITH: I don't think I can be cheered up any more. How does my complexion look?

CLOWN 1: Rosy, Mr Smith, nice and rosy.

SMITH: Really? And I thought I was looking rather pale.

CLOWN 1: How extraordinary! You say you think you are looking rather pale. Now I come to look at you, I must say I think you do look a little pale.

Just as in Galy Gay's conversation with Widow Begbick about her cucumber in *A Man's a Man*, so here the clown says yes to what he is given by Smith despite its direct contradiction of what he said before. The indication in this very early exchange seems to be of an archetypal boss clown/simple clown arrangement in which Clown 1 goes to preposterous lengths in order to satisfy the whims of Smith. If this is what we are seeing, we can expect the actions of Clown 1 in support of his objective of maintaining Smith's status and deferring to his leadership, to lead instead to the accidental diminishing of that status.

Clown 2 appears to fit into the same role as Clown 1, when the exchange above is immediately followed by this one:

CLOWN 2: In that case you should take a seat, Mr Smith, looking as you do.

SMITH: I don't feel like sitting today.

CLOWN 2: No, no – no sitting. Whatever you do, don't sit. Better remain standing.

Like Clown 1, Clown 2 says yes to what Mr Smith gives him, again despite its direct contradiction of his foregoing suggestion. More, he endorses Smith's lack of enthusiasm for sitting with an excess of gusto, an eagerness that further strengthens the case for him as a simple clown. In his bafflement, he is happy to directly contradict himself. However, in order to disguise that contradiction, he will commit to his new position with an earnestness and an enthusiasm that seem to refuse any possibility that anyone will notice his attempted cover-up. The audience laugh at a character so apparently well-intentioned that even his lies appear guileless. Like Valentin, his attempts to dig himself out of a contradiction only make him look more ridiculous.

Smith thus far has merely provided the set-ups for the two clowns to demonstrate their idiocy, so all we know about him is that he is feeling unwell, the surmise that he is a boss clown being based simply on the presence of two simple clowns deferring to him. For that analysis to be confirmed, he would have to begin exerting some authority over them, to which they would defer while accidentally undermining. But this is not what we see.



Instead, in the section immediately following, he defers to them, and their apparent expertise:

**SMITH:** Why do you think I should remain standing?

**CLOWN 1 to Clown 2:** He mustn't sit down today, otherwise he'll never be able to get up again.

**SMITH:** Oh God!

**CLOWN1:** See? He knows it himself. That's why Mr Smith prefers to remain standing.

Where a boss clown might well see through the idiocy of his subordinate and attempt to correct it, instead Smith is troubled by their comments and asks them to elucidate. Having their behaviour endorsed in this way only causes them to say an even more enthusiastic "yes" to the idea that Smith mustn't sit down, to the extent that his supposed pallor has now become a symptom of something terminal. Rather than questioning their credentials, Smith simply accepts their diagnosis, which acceptance seems to them its confirmation: "he knows it himself". It is a masterful piece of writing for clown performers, in which all three figures exhibit a high level of bafflement masked by an even higher tendency to say "yes" to everything and thus escalate the situation rapidly into absurdity. The status dynamic is extremely fluid. Smith, although apparently in a position of sufficient authority to cause the others to defer to him, does not fulfil the boss clown criterion of strenuously exerting that authority. Instead he asks the advice of his subordinates, his reaction to it revealing him to be a third simple clown.

In the next section several things that have become accepted by the group as "facts" come back to force them, through another piece of extreme logic worthy of Valentin, into an even more ridiculous situation. Clown 2 has already opined that Mr Smith, "looking as you do", really ought to sit down. Despite having revised that opinion immediately after delivering it, he nonetheless now reminds us of it, in a phrase designed to reinforce the wisdom it contains: "that's what comes of standing". Where earlier one character feeling unwell was advised to sit as a remedial effort and then advised to remain standing to avoid the danger that he might never get up again, now sitting has become a necessary practice to avoid the perils of standing. Yet the earlier proscription on sitting remains:

“we must avoid that at all costs”. Both sitting and standing are to be avoided; both sitting and standing are necessary to avoid the other. It is quite clear that nobody knows why either practice should be so strenuously avoided, except that everybody is enthusiastically saying “yes” to their proscription. Like Valentin, the performers must retroactively justify and clarify every statement they make, always appealing to logic of the most convoluted kind and always failing to either justify or clarify what they just said, in the process revealing their bafflement.

Trapped in this paradox, the clowns are forced to recommend a new approach to Smith, which having said ‘yes’ to, Smith enables this clown number to become something quite unlike our experience of Brecht’s use of clowning in *A Man’s a Man*:<sup>286</sup>

CLOWN 2: When your left foot starts hurting you, there’s only one way:  
off with the left foot.

CLOWN 1: And the sooner the better.

SMITH: Well, if you think –

CLOWN 2: No doubt about it.

*They saw off his left foot.*

Jan Needle and Peter Thomson quote Hanns Eisler on the topic of this sequence’s original reception: “This rough joke appalled many spectators. Some fainted, although only wood was being sawed and the performance was not naturalistic. I sat next to a well-known music critic who fainted”.<sup>287</sup> Responses to the scene have continually returned to its shock value, its grotesquery, particularly in the wider context of a piece that at one point requires the projection of images of dead bodies onto a screen. Martin Esslin perceptively notes the scene’s “reminiscence of Brecht’s experiences in the Augsburg military hospital”,<sup>288</sup> No mention is made by any reports of whether any members of the

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<sup>286</sup> It may be suggested that the violence of the foot-sawing could be compared to Bloody Five’s self-castration in *A Man’s a Man*. There are several reasons this thesis avoids that comparison. Most important among them is that the castration takes place offstage and thus cannot be directly used as a vehicle for clowning.

<sup>287</sup> Needle and Thomson, *op cit*, p.65

<sup>288</sup> Esslin, *op cit*, p.42. Esslin considers this experience of Brecht’s to have been a formative one – see p.7 of his book.



audience continued to laugh, and given the tenor of the responses this seems highly unlikely.

Nonetheless, and despite its obviously graphic effects on its premiere, it is possible that this scene could be used to provoke laughter. Jacques Lecoq's interest in the *bouffon*,<sup>289</sup> a form of grotesque clowning, demonstrates the potential for laughter at the deeply disturbing. There are many antecedents for humour arising out of situations of deep discomfort and unpleasantness,<sup>290</sup> and this scene is no exception. Up to this point, it is funny; from this point it continues to be funny but that laughter becomes a symbol of its own inappropriateness, drawing a *Verfremdung* attention to itself. With their laughter, the audience, like that in *A Man's a Man*, signify their consent to being shown the events before them, and are forced to interrogate that consent. Just as with *A Man's a Man* the audience are forced to interrogate the meaning of their own laughter. Perhaps Brecht was expecting from his own audience something like the "brutality" he observed in the audience for Chaplin's *Face on the Bar Room Floor*.

This time, however, the challenge to the audience is much starker than in *A Man's a Man*. To continue laughing is more difficult as the stakes continue to get higher, the violence more grotesque. Being forced to stand on one leg, Smith finds that leg quickly becomes painful, whereupon the two clowns offer to saw that off, also. Subjecting an audience a second time to the spectacle that just caused several of them to pass out is a bold move, but of course Brecht cannot have known that this would be the sequence's effect. Looked at now, it appears much more likely that the effect is of challenging the audience to continue laughing, having seen the effects of this behaviour once already. By becoming entangled in a logical game reminiscent of that played by Valentin in *Das Aquarium*, it is clear that the sequence is continuing to attempt the provocation of laughter.

SMITH:        Now I'll never be able to stand again.

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<sup>289</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, *op cit*, p.117

<sup>290</sup> The human willingness to laugh at the disturbing is testified to by the success of Chris Morris' early radio work, not to mention the infamous episode of his series *Brass Eye* on the subject of paedophilia. Chris Morris *et al* (writers), *Brass Eye* (UK: Talkback Productions, 1997).

**CLOWN 1:** That's terrible, and just when we didn't want you to sit down at any price.

**SMITH:** What?!

**CLOWN 2:** You can't stand up any more, Mr Smith.

**SMITH:** Don't say that, I can't bear it.

In order to assuage Smith's pain at hearing this dreadful news spoken, they helpfully unscrew his left ear. He begins to get angry with them, as they seem to have taken possession of his body parts and when they give him them back he wonders why his arm has started to hurt. "It's because of all that useless junk you're carrying around with you", replies Clown 2, and rather than helping him with the "junk", his dismembered limbs, they remove his arm. The logic of it all is impeccable, but just as with Karl Valentin, it is the sort of logic one would never normally choose to pursue.

Throughout this clown number, as Hanns Eisler noted, nothing is realistic. It is abundantly clear that what we are watching is not a real dismemberment, its very unreality insisted on in the fact that all of Smith's "body parts" are made of wood. So when Clown 2 describes them as "junk", that is essentially what they are. The dismemberment, therefore, is representational, rather than actual and thus effectively "absolves us of the need for sympathy". Nonetheless, what we are seeing *represents* something quite horrific, even if not itself horrific and so the laughter is coloured with discomfort; the laughter creates a tension because we are not sure we ought to be laughing. Unreality makes the laughter possible, but the tension between that unreality and the reality it seems to represent makes that laughter very difficult.

In the coming sequences the appearance of laughter on stage makes it even more difficult. Smith announces that "my head's full of unpleasant thoughts". We are left to guess as to what these are, with two possibilities appearing as very strong contenders. The first is a repressed anger at the two clowns for depriving him of his limbs, which due to his bafflement he is unable to express. Although he may feel this anger, the surface narrative of the situation thus far has been that they are acting in assistance of him and to assuage his problems. So he represses these feelings and they surface only as confusion.



Alternatively, the unpleasant thoughts could be seen as fears for his future life, now that he has been deprived of both legs, one arm and one ear. So he asks Clown 1 to “say something nice”. Clown 1 tells an awful and fairly unpleasant joke, all eagerness to please, but entirely lacking in judgement and good taste. Clown 2 laughs, but Smith does not even appear to recognise it as a joke. This could be read as a direct challenge to the audience, to consider carefully what is appropriate to laugh at, and what is not. This simply would not work without the audience’s laughter continuing up to this point.

Even from this point, Smith continues in his readiness to accept the situation at the valuation of the two clowns - to say ‘yes’ to the idea that they are trying to help him – despite the fact that their help is causing him to be gradually dismembered. This rather nasty attempt at a joke ought, in the context of his distress, to make him realise that they have not got his best interests at heart at all, as where they before appeared foolish they now begin to appear positively cruel. Yet he continues to eagerly accept their advice:

CLOWN 2: But we could of course saw off the top of your head, to let those stupid thoughts out.

SMITH: Yes please, maybe that will help.

*They saw off the upper part of his head.*

The more their ‘help’ renders him in difficulties, the more he needs their help. By now he appears very much the simple clown and a fairly definitive status shift seems to have taken place. As he surrenders limb after limb, so he surrenders status with them until he is rendered totally helpless, especially as some of his initial status must have been conveyed purely physically, by his giantism. Nonetheless, his eagerness for their help, his utter, baffled inability to learn from what is happening to him, renders him a clown and thus we are permitted to laugh despite ourselves.

Simultaneously, it is possible to detect in the two clowns a gleefulness that begins to approach the sadistic in the sections leading up to the removal of the top of Smith’s head. After initially sawing off his foot, they gave him a stick. When he asked for his foot back, he was forced to give up the stick in order to hold on to the foot:

SMITH: Now I’ve lost my stick.

CLOWN 2: But you've got your foot back.

*Both laugh loudly*

This laugh is jarring in the context of their apparent demeanour of helpfulness at this point. Every time they laugh, it is difficult for us to share their laughter, and the fact that their laughs fail to coincide with ours places us at a distance from them. It is a *Verfremdung* moment reminding us of our own cruel and inappropriate laughter. It thus becomes difficult to continue to believe that for them helping Smith is a powerful objective. No, they are simply playing the game of helping him. And where Galy Gay plays the game of being Jeraiah Jip and begins to confuse it with reality, these clowns play the game of helping Smith and never seem to intuit that it is anything other than a game.

The powerful irony in play here, of course, is that this *is* a game. There is no giant in front of us, no limbs are being severed, no heads removed. Part of the joke is at the expense of those who would take this for reality. We are allowed to laugh because it is not real, but the sense that it refers to something real is nonetheless deeply discomfiting.

It is clear by this point that clowns are by no means necessarily benign, no matter how attractive their lack of cynicism. Very often they are simply driven by their appetites and can behave with spectacular disregard for others as a result, by which measure they are if anything entirely amoral. Likewise, a clown's bafflement could very easily lead, for example, to his witnessing someone writhing in extreme pain and in need of urgent assistance, yet to mistake their actions for a newfangled dance with which they attempt to join in. Brecht clearly intuited this in *A Man's a Man*, making Galy Gay the clown susceptible to gradual remodelling by the prevailing forces in society. Like *A Man's a Man*, this clown number is about someone who consents to being dismantled. But this play sees no re-assembly. Smith does not "win".

In this context, it seems likely that the newly and increasingly committed Marxist, Brecht, was attempting to make a statement about how, in a social system predicated on competition, the help of one man for another is a contradiction in terms. The clown's



attitude to life is an appealing one, but its potential consequences are strenuously to be avoided. Individual man is, sheeplike, easily forced by social pressure into saying ‘yes’ to situations which are clearly contrary to his self-interest, often by an appeal to that self-same self-interest. Under capitalism no man helps another. He simply allows that man to feel that he is being helped. For Brecht, it seems, it is difficult to make any statement about the hypnotisms effected by capitalist society without using the clown figure and the particular *Verfremdung* laughter it provokes.

It is a sign of Brecht’s increasing skill as a dramatist that in this short piece he is able to push home his political message with powerful force, while retaining a significant element of clowning. It is particularly noteworthy that the exceptionally strident, almost aggressive, clown effects wrought by this piece, go far beyond anything in *A Man’s a Man*, and that such usage of clowning remains relatively rare even now – which conundrum we shall examine in Chapter Five. Perhaps Brecht is able to do this precisely because the piece is such a short one. Can clowning be sustained for a full-length piece, without sacrificing political effect?

### **Part Three: *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui***

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John Willett notes “the echoes of Chaplin that can be observed” in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.<sup>291</sup> In a *Times* review of the original Berliner Ensemble production of the play, Ekkehard Schall in the role of Ui was described as having “a strange Chaplinesque quality”.<sup>292</sup> Ralph Mannheim conjectures, in his introduction to his translation of the

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<sup>291</sup> Willett, *Brecht in Context*, *op cit*, p.119

<sup>292</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,60-1769644,00.html>. We should be careful about ascribing too much weight to this given the production opened two years after Brecht’s death, but the Ensemble was artistically at this stage still entirely under the influence of its creator, his legacy being continued by the new director, his wife Helene Weigel. It is also noteworthy that Martin Wuttke, Artistic Director of the Berliner Ensemble between 1996 and 1999 and probably best known for his 1995 portrayal of Ui in a production directed by then Artistic Director Heiner Müller, during his time as Artistic Director also played Verdoux in a stage adaptation of Chaplin’s *Monsieur Verdoux*.

play, that Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator*, released in 1940, the year before the play was written, not only influenced Brecht, but also enabled Brecht to take on the project at all: "if the war removed much of the daring and outrage of Chaplin's original conception it also made it a lot easier to get such satires shown."<sup>293</sup> That Ui is a Chaplin figure is, thanks to these scholars and others, not at issue, and many of those qualities of Chaplin's which we examined in Chapter Two will also be seen in Arturo Ui in this section. There is, however, space for considerably greater elucidation than has yet been attempted of the ways in which Brecht adapts the clowning of that figure to his own ends. In particular, we will examine how he uses such clowning to create *Verfremdungseffekte* that enable him to develop the political meanings within the play.

Brecht wrote *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in the space of three weeks while in Finnish exile, shortly before his departure for the United States,<sup>294</sup> and the broad political point of the play could hardly be missed. It describes allegorically the rise of the Nazis, likening them to Chicago gangsters. However, it should be asked right at the outset whether it is possible for a deliberately allegorical form, which therefore has a very definite "target", to support the bafflement that is necessary to clowning. Moreover, the play's principal literary mode is mock-heroic blank verse, termed by Brecht "the grand style",<sup>295</sup> in which a development of Galy Gay's oratorical style can be clearly seen. However, in this play almost all of the characters perform in blank verse, a form that interacts with Shakespearean antecedents – particularly *Richard III* – in a way alternating between pastiche and parody. This once again requires us to explore whether the style employed can be considered to support clowning. We have seen how the character of Galy Gay can be performed through clowning because his style is so much a function of his character, and is used to mask his bafflement. When every character in a play utilises a style that draws attention to itself in this way, though, clowning is surely considerably

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<sup>293</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, (trans. Ralph Manheim) (London: Methuen, 1981). Quote is from the introduction by Ralph Mannheim p.xi

<sup>294</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, (trans. Ralph Manheim) (London: Methuen, 1981). Quote is from the introduction by Ralph Mannheim p.xi

<sup>295</sup> BB, *Journals 1934-1955* (trans. Hugh Rorrison, ed. John Willett) (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.136



harder to conceive. How can a clown perform within a verse structure that is never debunked? How can a clown appear baffled while having to know precisely how many beats there are before the end of his line of text? It will be the first task of this section to demonstrate how we may consider *Arturo Ui* a clown play at all, before going on to show how Chaplin's influence is in evidence, and how clown techniques are used to powerful political purpose.

The opening scene of the play provides abundant evidence of "the grand style" and allows us to consider how far this style provides space for clowning. The first twenty lines feature a heavy preponderance of imagery highly uncharacteristic of Brecht's style and tone. Roughly seven and a half lines out of this twenty consist of imagery of one sort or another. This varies between the simple – "it's like darkness at high noon" – to the more elaborate – "It looks as if Chicago / The dear old girl, while on her way to market / Had found her pocket torn and now she's starting / To scabble in the gutter for her pennies".<sup>296</sup> Brecht, famed for his dramatic terseness, troubled even while editing *Ui* by the fact that Wedekind, according to Margarete Steffin, "could get his meaning into *one* line",<sup>297</sup> was not a writer to slow down the movement of action with one third illustrative imagery to two thirds plain text. In short, this is uncharacteristic enough to be considered a careful and deliberate stylistic choice.

Yet just as with Galy Gay, the effect of this stylistic choice is bathetic. In the nineteenth line, Clark, after a pause, attempts a summation and says "in short, the Cauliflower / Trade in this town is through".<sup>298</sup> After such impressive rhetoric, a pause builds expectation of yet greater heights, yet instead we get a sentence that is monosyllabic but for its salient word and, more importantly, that admits the subject of this rhetoric to have been cauliflower. This is directly comparable to Galy Gay's speech on the subject of fish. These Chicago businessmen are "playing the game" of statesmanlike elegy, and as soon as the audience is allowed to realise that they are doing so on the subject of cauliflower,

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<sup>296</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, p.9

<sup>297</sup> BB, *Journals 1934-1955*, *op cit*, p.138

<sup>298</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, p.10

they appear ridiculous in the disjunction between the scale of their rhetoric and the importance of its subject. This sets up a dramatic strategy of *reductio ad absurdum* with regard to the historical figures – the Prussian Jünkers<sup>299</sup> – represented, whose insistence on their own importance through the linguistic choices they make is undermined by the bathos insistently inscribed by their choice of subject.

Is their clowning, then, of a similar nature to Galy Gay's? Certainly, they are attempting to perform a higher status than their choice of subject allows them to achieve, rendering them ridiculous. However Galy Gay's clowning, as we observed in the previous section, owes a great deal to Karl Valentin's linguistic strategies. These Chicago businessmen clearly owe less in that direction, as they do not appear to become baffled by their tangles with logic or cause the game to flop with sudden deference. Unlike Galy Gay with his wife, they do not have a "straight man" figure. Nonetheless it is possible to play this section through clowning. Each of the businessmen, baffled into inactivity by the failure of their trade, makes an attempt to sum it up, playing the game both of rhetorician and, more importantly, of participant in a Shakespeare play. They have some understanding of the rudiments of Shakespearean delivery – iambic pentameter and dominant strains of imagery are key among these – but, like the clowns playing grandmother's footsteps in the absence of grandmother, they have failed to comprehend that the choice of subject is another vital consideration. By attempting to speak of this subject in this vein, they immediately reveal their bafflement and thus become clowns. Brecht seems to have realised that it is not necessary to have a straight man, or to have the performers undermine themselves with a powerful flop this early in the play. Their attempts to play the game in front of the audience are sufficient, when their understanding of the game is sufficiently flawed. They have more control over their status than Galy Gay, which fact clearly makes them boss clowns, each of them attempting to gain a status advantage over the other by playing the game more effectively.

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<sup>299</sup> See Brecht's own chronological table to confirm the parallels with history he is drawing in this play. BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, pp.101-2



Thus we can quickly see how it is possible to fit clowning into both allegorical and verse structures. The clowns themselves do not need to be aware of the allegory; what matters is the context in which the piece places their clowning. They are aware of the verse structure simply as a game to be played, a game they do not fully comprehend. It is clearly possible to play this scene using methods other than clowning, but by revealing the bafflement beneath it, clowning maximises disjunction between style and content in the businessmen's language. Thus, although these characters need not be aware of their status as allegorical figures, the more they are played as clowns, the greater the Prussian Jüнкers are revealed as pompous and self-regarding fools and the more forcefully the allegorical point can be made. Far from restricting clowning, the allegory is enhanced by it.

ii.

The Arturo Ui we finally meet in scene three of the play initially does little to confirm the thesis that this character is based on Chaplin. Certainly, there is the physical resemblance to go on. Any character made to look like Hitler will also bear a passing resemblance to Chaplin – even the short stature and the moustache are sufficient. But if anything the bitter, moody figure we see bemoaning the lack of openings for gangsterism bypasses Chaplin altogether and reminds us solely of his other antecedent, Adolf Hitler. The allegory appears to be to the fore, not the clowning. Alan Bullock writes of the black moods that would afflict Hitler when things were not going his way, a mixture of pessimism and defiance,<sup>300</sup> and that, heightened for effect, is exactly what we see here:

UI:                      Two months without  
A murder and a man's forgotten. When  
The rod falls silent, silence strikes the press.  
Even when I deliver murders by the  
Dozen, I'm never sure they'll print them.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962)

<sup>301</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, p.21

It is remarkable that Brecht has so accurately hit the private character of Hitler, given the extreme unlikelihood of his having had any reliable information on which to base his caricature. There is still a disjunction between tone and content. That Ui is concerned to achieve with his murders not influence, nor money, but publicity, is a striking departure from the stereotype. But Chaplinesque it is not and there is little of the appearance of clowning in this rant.

However, there is another potential reading of this piece of text. Ui's tone is not necessarily black pessimistic rant, so much as doleful lament. Phrases like "Two months without / A murder and a man's forgotten" and "I'm never sure they'll print them" lend themselves to this more sorrowful Ui much more than to ranting. The latter phrase especially, expressive of uncertainty and self-doubt, is difficult to imagine as the product of rage and considerably easier to conceive of as a lament. This more delicate note very easily calls to mind Chaplin in pathetic mode, in relation to Georgia in *The Gold Rush*, or the flower seller in *City Lights*. Brecht, however, attempts to provoke pathos for a man saddened that his killing sprees have not had the desired effect, rather than for a man saddened that he remains unloved. If anything, Brecht goes considerably further than Chaplin in his request for pathos, but this is because it is so much harder to feel pathos for a killer. It is worth noting that we do not necessarily feel that pathos. If John Wright is to be believed, the very fact of the pathos having been asked for renders it less likely that we do. Nonetheless, the context is one of pathos. It is in the disjunction between this sorrow and its subject that we can see clowning beginning to emerge. A mass killer asking for sympathy, like a cauliflower salesman asking for respect, clearly does not understand the implications of what he is saying. In this fissure, bafflement, and thus clowning, becomes possible – partly because we are not able to grant that sympathy.

The use of pathos here is comparable to the clowning in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*. Just as in that play the audience is made to laugh despite itself, then forced to interrogate that laughter, here the audience is asked to feel pathos and encouraged to laugh at that feeling. The notion of feeling sorry for a gangster, or of a gangster feeling sorry for himself, is a ridiculous one given the tough-guy image such people must be seen



to project, and the only appropriate response is laughter. This is doubly true when we consider that gangster as an allegorical figure for Adolf Hitler. Pathos for Hitler is disconcerting, laughter at Hitler is disconcerting, and here we are asked to provide both. It is in this disconcertment that the *Verfremdungseffekt* takes place, as we are forced to interrogate our reactions. The more Ui asks for pathos, the more ridiculous he becomes; the more ridiculous he becomes, the more pungent is the attack on Hitler. Thus once again we can see that clowning enables a particularly forceful means of achieving the ends of the piece.

*iii.*

We see Ui the clown much more clearly three scenes later, when he hires an actor to teach him mannerisms suitable to speaking in public. The actor Antony Sher, who played the role of Ui at the National Theatre, sees this as a key scene in Ui's development: "he doesn't just learn a few Hitler Gestures. He transforms."<sup>302</sup> It is immediately clear that the actor hired to teach him these mannerisms is a hopeless old ham, partly from his rambling monologue on the subject of himself as a tragic figure ("ruined by Shakespeare"), and partly from Givola's description of him as "out of date".<sup>303</sup> So from the very beginning we have a clear opportunity for the actor playing the Actor to clown, playing the game of being a grand old actor in the tradition of Olivier and Gielgud. Ui's attempts to ape this behaviour make him appear even more ludicrous:

UI: Walk around like they do in this Shakespeare.

*The actor walks around.*

UI: Good!

GIVOLA: You can't walk like that in front of cauliflower men. It ain't natural.

UI: What do you mean it ain't natural? Nobody's natural in this day and age. When I walk I want people to know I'm walking.

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<sup>302</sup> Margaret Eddershaw, "Actors on Brecht", from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: CUP) pp.278-96, p.293

<sup>303</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, p.44

*He copies the actor's gait.*<sup>304</sup>

There is a great deal at play in this extract. First of all, it excuses, even demands ludicrous behaviour on the part of the performers. We are explicitly told that “natural” behaviour is not what is required, but rather the sort of theatrical behaviour an “out of date” ham actor might exhibit in “this Shakespeare”. It is essential that the actor playing Ui “play the game” of Shakespearean performance and very probable that he, at least at first, does not make a great success of it. It is noteworthy that while the actor playing the Actor may not be a clown, as he has a very clear target in ham actors, Ui here clearly is a clown, for taking this pomposity seriously and attempting to emulate it. He has the earnestness of Chaplin twirling his cane while pursued by a bear in *The Gold Rush*, and this disjunction between behaviour and context makes him ridiculous.

Moreover, there is also a strong political strand to what we see here, making direct reference to contemporary events. Brecht was aware of a rumour that Hitler took elocution lessons in order to augment his ability in public speaking: “An actor told me years ago that Hitler even took lessons with Fritz Basil, an actor at the court theatre in Munich, not only in elocution but in comportment. He learned, for example, how to step out on stage, the hero's walk, for which you straighten your knee and set the whole sole of your foot on the ground in order to appear more majestic. [...] There's something ridiculous about that, isn't there? [...] He was imitating an actor who, when he himself appeared on stage, provoked amusement amongst the younger spectators because of his affectation and pomposity.”<sup>305</sup> Brecht is directly responding to this popular myth in order to make Hitler appear as a clown. The more ridiculous the performer playing Ui in this scene, the more ridiculous Hitler appears to the audience. Then on the following page Brecht widens his attack slightly to include Mussolini:

*[Ui] takes a stance, his arms crossed over his chest.*

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<sup>304</sup> *Ibid*, p.44

<sup>305</sup> BB, *Brecht on Art and Politics* (ed Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles) (London: Methuen, 2003), p.195. Like *Messingkauf*, this extract is written in dialogue form, the speakers being named Karl and Thomas. The above quotation is from Karl; Thomas going on to usefully clarify that “the man's general intention, to improve himself by copying others, is not ridiculous – even if his choice of models was.”



THE ACTOR: A possible solution. But common. You don't want to look like a barber, Mr Ui. Fold your arms like this. *He folds his arms in such a way that the backs of his hands remain visible. His palms are resting on his arms not far from the shoulder.* A trifling change, but the difference is incalculable.<sup>306</sup>

This is a direct quote of Mussolini's gestural language, one of the many bizarre poses he was wont to strike for emphasis when speaking in public. It is certainly true that he did not look like a barber. There is also a Chaplin reference here, in that the plot of *The Great Dictator* turns on the extraordinary physical resemblance between Adenoid Hynkel, Chaplin's Hitler character, and a Jewish barber also played by Chaplin. Brecht may well be calling on his intended American audience's presumed knowledge of Chaplin's film.

Also latent in this section is a comment on Brecht's theatricality itself. For Givola, naturalness is at stake; for Ui this is irrelevant and what is more important is effect. "When I walk I want people to know I'm walking",<sup>307</sup> he says, a line which bears comparison with Brecht's own earlier, "if I choose to see Richard III I don't want to feel myself to be Richard III, but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility."<sup>308</sup> In other words, the truth of the action is of less importance than what is remarkable about it. Ui deliberately chooses to cultivate an image that is larger than life, that in the wrong context will appear ridiculous. Just such a context is the performance of this cultivation in front of an audience. If Hitler's extravagant oratorical style is something calculated for effect, rather than something spontaneously stemming from genuine passion, then individual gestures become highlighted in a way that can render them absurd. We saw earlier how Brecht considered Chaplin's acting to be a forerunner of his own *Gestic* style, and nowhere is that style more clear than in this scene. We see a character deliberately selecting a series of gestures to be performed and calculating the effect they will have on an audience. It is a quite brilliant set-up of a *Verfremdungseffekt* that will be felt throughout the play. Whenever Ui stands up to speak

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<sup>306</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, p.45

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*, p.44

<sup>308</sup> BB, "A Dialogue About Acting" from *Brecht on Theatre*, *op cit*, p.27

in front of an audience, he will use the same tricks, and we will be fully armed with an awareness of their status as tricks. Nonetheless, we are not fully armed against the effectiveness of those tricks.

At the end of this scene, at first guided and corrected by the actor, then subsequently alone, Ui recites Mark Anthony's funeral oration from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The only guidance Brecht gives us to how this should be delivered is that "now and then the actor corrects him, but in the main Ui keeps his rough staccato delivery", presumably being thus sparse in direction due to an assumption that he would himself direct the premiere, or at the very least be involved in the production. We have already discussed this speech briefly in relation to *A Man's a Man*. It is a powerful piece of political rhetoric, calculated to change the minds of its audience from one pole to another. Thus we see Ui/Hitler borrowing not only the *Gestus* of the classical theatre, but also its language.

The key to the success of this speech lies in the Chaplinesque comic Gesture discussed above. If Ui has spent the body of the scene establishing a basis of preposterous oratorical Gestures, then this speech clearly functions as his opportunity to test them out. So when the actor stops correcting Ui and he "continues by himself" this is because Ui has hit his stride, has found what Oliver Double calls his performance "attitude" and is exhibiting it with sufficient skill for the actor to let him continue without assistance. That the actor is himself a ham tells us all we need to know about how understated and natural this performance needs to be. It is an agglomeration of gestures "in the grand style" designed to inflate rhetoric with pomposity. The message is clear: Hitler himself, in public at least, is a performance, reducible to a collection of easily lampooned gestural tics. Chaplin does the same as Adenoid Hynkel in *The Great Dictator* and it could be there is little justification for expecting anything other of the actor playing Ui. He is a clown playing the game of effective oratory with minimal success. What is terrifying is that the real-life equivalent for this clown had great success with just such a set of easily lampooned tics.



This process of watching a preposterous figure learn how to play the game of power is terrifying, but like *Baden-Baden*, it remains very funny. As Needle and Thomson observe, “Brecht shows us the great soul of evil and makes us laugh at it, with increasing revulsion and nervousness.”<sup>309</sup> That is to say that so long as we laugh *and* sense the horror, we are not fully swept up in the moment, are critically aware. The laughter, in fact, serves to jolt us out of the conventional response to depictions of Hitler, that is, simple abhorrence. By placing laughter and abhorrence alongside one another, Brecht asks us to choose between the two, or to accept that the two co-exist. He places them in a tension that we the audience are required to resolve.

*iv.*

The following scene, scene seven, a grotesque parody of one of Hitler’s public meetings led by the newly trained demagogue Ui, carries on where he left off. Rhetorically, he promises the earth and threatens fire and brimstone. At one point he chucks a baby under the chin. It is a clear swipe at the self-serving nature of public discourse. Having spent the previous scene establishing a persona for Ui to inhabit while delivering this oratory, this is a magnificent opportunity for the actor to capitalise on what he has set up in the previous scene, by behaving just as absurdly as he did then, but this time in front of a larger audience. It is noteworthy that his audience of vegetable dealers (representing the petty bourgeoisie) at this stage give scant encouragement in the form of only scattered applause to Ui’s efforts, suggesting that he remains for the most part very close to the flop. However, at the end of the scene, when it is announced that a warehouse has been burned down and the gasoline used was taken from the site of this meeting, as a group they tellingly fail to denounce Ui’s men, who left with the gasoline moments before. Ui and his men have succeeded in bullying them with a rhetoric of fear:

UI, *bellowing*: Murder! Extortion! Highway robbery!  
Machine-guns sputtering on our city streets!  
People going about their business, law-abiding  
Citizens on their way to City Hall

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<sup>309</sup> Jan Needle and Peter Thomson, *Brecht* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p.118

To make a statement, murdered in broad daylight!

[...]

If I don't shoot, the other fellow will.<sup>310</sup>

Of course all of the murder, extortion and highway robbery practiced is entirely the doing of Ui's men, the same men who now offer the vegetable dealers protection from such behaviour. By trumpeting the Communist threat and sowing widespread dissent, the argument of the play runs, the Nazis are no better than a gang running up a protection racket. The audience is invited to laugh at Ui's game of being an outraged statesman, when we know very well that he is the instigator of these outrages.

Even more insidious than the rhetoric of fear is the game of sentimental patriotism contained in the singing of a "song in which the word 'home' occurs frequently". Yet even this appears ridiculous because of the context in which it occurs. Again, we cannot take its sentiment at face value and be absorbed in it, because we are too fully aware of its status as a propaganda tool to be moved. So we are once again given a performance, a group of people playing the game of being moved in a cynical bid to move others.

Ui's wounded statesman act, and this performance of patriotism, present strong challenges to a reading of this play as clown-based, for both are undertaken with clear purposes in mind and do not obviously support bafflement. However, there is nothing to suggest a clown cannot have an objective, so long as the manner in which he pursues that objective remains clownlike. So for Ui this manner is contained in his recently-acquired *Gestus* of Chaplinesque and Hitleresque mannerisms. In the disjunction between the powerful effect he believes he is having and the limited effect he is in fact having, his bafflement remains intact. It is his men, their stage management of the exhibition and their murder and arson, who are actually getting the job done by inculcating fear in the public. Even they can be seen as clowns in the light of certain aspects of their behaviour. Giri's habit of collecting the hats of his murder victims, for example, quickly develops into a function of the theatrical language, such that all he is required to do is enter wearing a particular character's hat in order for us to learn that he has killed them. This

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<sup>310</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, pp.48-49



habit is sinister, yet it is also a curious affectation comparable to Karl Valentin's tendency to have "tiny amusements, not really for the public, but for himself".<sup>311</sup> These amusements play against a reading of the character as a simple villain and provide a *Verfremdung* challenge to that reading. They are not necessarily clowning, but in the space between outright villainy and a pleasure in collecting hats, it is possible to see a clown playing the game of villainy and – like in *Baden-Baden* – not realising the seriousness of that game.

It begins to be possible to imagine how Ekkehard Schall was described as having "a strange Chaplinesque quality", tracing the growth of Ui "from the despicably hesitant pariah into the all-conquering demagogue, with a histrionic insight which earns our profoundest admiration."<sup>312</sup> The more outlandish the behaviour, the more clownlike and Chaplinesque he becomes; the more extreme the demagoguery, the more terrifying and Hitleresque he becomes. The two are inextricably linked. Without extreme, ridiculous behaviour on the part of the actor playing Ui, this is a dull, dry exercise in historical analogy. With that behaviour, it is the horror of recent history set before us "in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility." We are thus forced to try to understand it, rather than to simply accept it.

v.

The next time we see Ui, in scene ten, he presents us with a considerable puzzle if we are to continue viewing him as a clown. Brecht describes him as "slumped in a deep chair, staring into space."<sup>313</sup> He speaks little in the scene, and when he does his lines are frequently prefaced with delivery indications such as "morosely", "as though waking up", "indifferently". None of the pompous idiot puffed up by his own oratorical power, here we have a borderline depressive slumped in moribund thought. Even when Roma has Giri and Givola at gunpoint with their bodyguards, Ui cannot manage to summon any vigour:

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<sup>311</sup> Letter to Giorgio Strehler, cited in Joel Schechter, *Durov's Pig* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), p.217

<sup>312</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,60-1769644,00.html>, *op cit.*

<sup>313</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *op cit*, p.65

UI, *indifferently*:      What is all this?

Ernesto, don't make them nervous.

Only when they demand he takes sides in their dispute does he suddenly come to life:

UI *jumps up*: [...]

I'm a quiet man. But

I won't be threatened. Either trust me blindly

Or go your way. I owe you no accounting.

[...]

What I demand of you is trust. You lack

Faith, and where faith is lacking, all is lost.

How do you think I got this far? By faith!

Because of my fanatical, my unflinching

Faith in the cause.<sup>314</sup>

This is more reminiscent of the orator we have seen before, a sudden passion borne of a desperate need to change minds, but it by no means necessarily appears clownish. He knows great speech is called for, and he attempts great speech. There is no obvious bafflement.

However, we cannot forget the ridiculous figure Ui cuts when he attempts rhetoric. The bafflement is there, and it emerges from the fact that, however high-flown his speech, however passionate his attempt to change the minds of his listeners, he is utterly ineffectual. "Ernesto, put that rod away",<sup>315</sup> he pleads, but Roma completely ignores him. "I've got / Bigger and better projects", he tells Giri and Givola. "Fuck your projects", retorts Giri.<sup>316</sup> Ui's attempts to interfere in a serious, violent squabble, reveal him to be a long way out of his depth and render his grandiloquence both moot and consequently preposterous. He demands blind fanatical faith, when he is not even receiving attention. He is playing the game of being the inspiring leader, and playing it to the hilt, but his failure is absolute. He clearly cuts a very sorry figure indeed and could very easily drift

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<sup>314</sup> *Ibid*, pp.68-9

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid*, p.68

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid*, p.68



towards the pathetic, were it not that, like Chaplin, “his style absolves us of the need for sympathy” – if the fact that he represents Hitler had not absolved us sufficiently from this need already.

If Ui’s weak and ineffectual leadership were in any doubt after this episode, it is removed quickly. By the end of this scene he has pledged his confidence in Ernesto Roma, even preparing a speech to be delivered to Roma’s followers. He has insisted to Giri, Clark and Mrs Dullfeet that “I don’t let anybody tell me who to pal with”.<sup>317</sup> So when the following scene he is giving orders at an ambush on Roma’s faction which culminates in the machine-gunning down of all Roma’s men and the non-fatal shooting of Roma himself, there might be some room for surprise were we not already convinced of Ui’s complete lack of personal will.

There is some precedent for the simple clown taking the position of apparent authority and the boss clown(s) being of ostensibly lower rank, and when this combination occurs it is very often to show the subordinate as having some sinister or nefarious purpose in mind.<sup>318</sup> Certainly here, Ui’s subordinates seem to view him as a useful figurehead – for what reason we cannot know – but bypass him on almost all matters of decision-making and change his mind very easily on those rare occasions when he is consulted.

vi.

Yet Ui continues to be impossible to pin down. Just as he seems to have settled into one mode of behaviour, he lurches again into another. In the following scene with Dullfeet no longer is he an ineffectual idiot spraying rhetoric wherever he feels a need. Instead he is insidious, charming and entirely in control, doing an excellent job of persuading Dullfeet of his honourable intentions in expanding his protection business into Cicero (for which read Austria). Whereas earlier in the play a line like Ui’s “No one, unless he has to, tolerates / Coercion” might have been taken as a clownish flop, here there is no support

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<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, p,75

<sup>318</sup> See footnote to p.124

for this interpretation in the context of his otherwise masterful coaxing of Dullfeet, in which he tells him precisely what he wants to hear without a slip. That line instead appears as a moment of dramatic irony of which Dullfeet is sadly unaware.

Ui's sudden wielding of real power is doubly felt when this scene ends with his saying "I don't like that man" of Dullfeet, and the scene which follows immediately afterwards is Dullfeet's funeral. When did he stop being a clown and start being someone effective? Disconcertingly, Brecht gives us no gradual progression as in *A Man's A Man*, but instead seems to have removed the clowning from one scene to the next. Of the two possible interpretations, the first is that this is simply inconsistent characterisation. Ui changes a great deal from scene to scene, with little reason beyond that it seems to serve what Brecht most wants to say about the historical events he is allegorising.

Undoubtedly, it is inconsistent characterisation. Nonetheless, it is telling that as the play drives towards its climax we have once again retreated from clowning. Ui's rhetoric in the final scene, in which the city of Cicero accepts his protection, is too knowing to feature any bafflement:

What I demand

Is one unanimous and joyful 'Yes'

Succinct and, men of Cicero, expressive.

[...] And just in passing let me add: If anyone's

Not for me he's against me and has only

Himself to blame for anything that happens.

Now you may vote.<sup>319</sup>

Several times in this play it has seemed difficult to discern clowning. Through the literary style, the allegory, the tone of Ui's speech, it has been difficult to see the bafflement. But Ui's behaviour has always been, at root, ridiculous in the disjunction between its manner and its effect. Now, however, the figure that has been created is the one Ui's men have been attempting to create all along: a man who does not just attempt to terrify, but who terrifies. It is entirely plausible, if not likely, that Ui is performing in almost precisely the

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<sup>319</sup> BB, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, op cit, p.97



same manner as before. The rhetoric is as preposterous, the gestural language the same agglomeration of theatrical tics. Yet he is no longer a clown, simply because this performance has become *effective*, people have begun to be convinced by it.

The message is clear. If we consent to being bullied by a clown, it is us who will ultimately look like fools, just like the Cauliflower Trust gentlemen, the Jünkers of Prussia who thought they could manipulate Hitler to their own ends. A clown is dangerous precisely because he cannot be controlled; even when he succeeds in recognising authority he will fail to obey it. Just because he is playing a game does not mean that he considers it any less important than reality. So there is always the danger that what we took to be a game will suddenly become deadly serious. By not taking Hitler seriously enough the appeasers, the Jünkers and perhaps even Brecht himself, who wrote satirical poems ridiculing Hitler, allowed Hitler's resistible rise to become irresistible. The play mirrors that process by finally showing a ridiculous figure in absolute power, terrifying absolutely.

So in this play clowning is an essential tool, but just like in *A Man's a Man*, Brecht cannot sustain the form for a full play. Where Chaplin tended to abandon his political effect in order to sustain his form, Brecht tends to abandon his form in order to sustain his political effect. It is becoming clear that, just as he used Chaplin's project to serve his own, so he uses clowning where it suits his project. Clowning serves his purpose, never the other way around. His use of clowning in this play is considerably more sophisticated than in either of the two plays we have looked at already. It has much more force than the simple clowning seen in *A Man's a Man* and much more subtlety than the brutal effects deployed in *Baden-Baden*. It has its own brutality, but that emanates from the audience's knowledge of the allegorical frame of the play, thus meaning that it also engages the rational mind of the spectator to a much greater extent. Moreover, the play achieves a synthesis between the simple clown seen in *A Man's a Man* and the violent effects of *Baden-Baden*, as Ui, for a long time at least, is a simple clown who represents one of the most hated figures who has ever lived. Where can clowning be taken from here?

#### Part Four: *Mother Courage and Her Children*

It will be useful to examine what possibilities are presented by clowning in the context of a play whose primary mode is not obviously comic. Even of those studies which have acknowledged the place of the comic in Brecht's more serious plays, few have acknowledged how far its possibilities stretch. Through an examination of key scenes from *Mother Courage and Her Children*, we shall attempt to broaden those possibilities and see that, even when Brecht's work makes use of elements from tragedy, nonetheless there is space for clowning. Moreover, the use of clowning in such places can be seen to augment both the tragic effects of the play and also its engagement of the reason toward political ends. We shall see that the clowning does this by enabling a comic *Verfremdungseffekt* that, in Walter Benjamin's term, interrupts the tragic action.

Christopher McCullough notes the comic possibilities of one of the most tragic and moving scenes in Brecht's *oeuvre*, scene eleven from *Mother Courage*:

This is the scene where dumb Kattrin attempts to warn the city of impending attack by drumming from a rooftop. There is a tedious inevitability in most readings of this scene that seeks out proof that Brecht did, in the final analysis, write a tragedy. [...] A straightforward analysis of the *Gestic* moments when the soldiers attempt to be quiet in their heavy armour and simultaneously shoot Kattrin (which of course they do in the end) is as much a series of pratfalls as the four soldiers in *Man Equals Man* or Charlie Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*.<sup>320</sup>

Not only is this sequence performable as a series of pratfalls, it is performable as clowning. Moreover, reading it as such provides a version of the scene that considerably broadens the range of effects had by it upon the audience, even beyond those seen in the three plays examined hitherto. The majority of this section will be concerned to analyse

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<sup>320</sup> Christopher McCullough, "Peter Lorre (and his Friend Bert Brecht)", from Martin Banham and Jane Milling (eds), *Extraordinary Actors* (Exeter, EUP, 2004), pp.164-175, p.170



in detail this scene and those effects, in order to show how far Brecht's scene can be seen to use clowning to augment a range of other modes.

Immediately noteworthy about the construction of scene eleven is the quantity of stage direction. In the first two pages there are twenty-three cues to speak and fifteen stage directions, not including the initial setting of the scene and indications of to whom a speaker addresses his line. Take, for example, the following two-line sequence:

THE ENSIGN *to the second soldier*: Stick your pike in his ribs

THE YOUNG PEASANT *forced to his knees, with the pike threatening him*: I won't do it, not to save my life.<sup>321</sup>

The italicised note to the Ensign's line has not been included in the count of stage directions, whereas the Young Peasant's has. This is, broadly speaking, because the former is a simple aid to sense on stage, whereas the latter produces a clear physical action that we might call *Gestic*. And the sheer quantity of *Gestic* action in the opening sequence of this scene is considerable, at a ratio of three stage directions to every four and a half cues. Clearly Brecht is deeply concerned with the visual effects of this scene, in accordance with his own advice that "*Gestus*, when properly applied, would enable an audience to understand both the story of a play and its implications even if it were separated from the actors by a soundproof glass wall."<sup>322</sup> How might this *Gestus* give us space for clowning?

The first clue is contained right at the beginning of the scene:

*An ensign and three soldiers in heavy armour step out of the wood.*

ENSIGN: I want no noise now. Anyone shouts, shove your pike into him.<sup>323</sup>

As McCullough observes, the potential for comedy presented by three men in heavy armour attempting to remain silent is considerable. If all a clown needs is a task to go

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<sup>321</sup> BB, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1983), p.81

<sup>322</sup> Peter Thomson, "Brecht and Actor Training: On whose behalf do we act?", from Alison Hodge (ed.), *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.98-112

<sup>323</sup> BB, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *op cit*, p.80

about failing at, then we have here ample material for clowning. Even before another line is spoken, it is possible to imagine a group of performers “playing the game” of attempting to be quiet, each new attempt at silence being met with ever-more creative failures, each new noise raising the stakes yet further and increasing the pressure on the Ensign, whom we can see, for the purpose of this investigation, as the boss clown. Then the first soldier realises that it will be necessary to make some noise: “have to knock them up, though, if we’re to find a guide”, he says. The anxiety about making noise has reached such a level that the soldiers are afraid to knock on a door for fear of alerting a nearby town to attack, and the first soldier’s realisation is a nervous over-application of the logic dictating their behaviour in this scene. His line both reveals a flaw in this logic and asks how that flaw is to be resolved; a skilled clown could play the first soldier as either deeply troubled or beamingly smug about his discovery of this flaw, and either way could draw considerable laughter. In either case his underlying bafflement shines through.

The Ensign replies: “Knocking sounds natural. Could be a cow bumping the stable wall.”<sup>324</sup> He says “yes” to the First Soldier’s version of the situation – that knocking on this door could wake up the townsfolk – but dampens down his fears with a ridiculous explanation. There is nothing about knocking on a door that sounds like a cow bumping into a stable wall. In any case, under most constructions knocking on a door is as innocent as the Ensign suggests it sounds. It is unlikely that an individual awoken by some knocking on a door would be troubled by it, only to conclude its innocence on the grounds that it was probably a cow bumping into a stable wall. Yet this is the preposterous version of events implied by the Ensign’s reply, which gives great credence to the notion of him as a boss clown, the ridiculous authority figure. The First Soldier’s doubts appear to be quelled by the Ensign’s line – certainly the soldiers immediately proceed to knock on the door – but it is difficult to see why anyone other than a simple clown, with his exaggerated respect for his boss’s authority, would be convinced by this bizarre argument.

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid*, p.80



For the next page and a half, while the soldiers bully the peasant family into showing them the path to the town, opportunities for clowning seem much scarcer. Their behaviour is brutish and cruel and far from obviously comic, until, just as they are leaving, the first soldier says: "I knew the ox was what they minded about most, was I right?"<sup>325</sup> Given that threats to the ox are what have persuaded the peasants to help the soldiers find the town, it ought to be perfectly obvious that he was right. No other explanation for his behaviour seems apparent other than that he is an idiot. This viewpoint is strengthened if we again consider him as in thrall to the good opinion of his boss, the Ensign. It is clear the Ensign wants to persuade the peasants to show them the path to the town, and the First Soldier joins in with this attempt not because he himself is interested in the town, but because he is interested in receiving praise from the Ensign. Success in cajoling the peasants is no reward for his efforts as he was not interested in this as an end in itself, merely as a means to the end of exacting praise. That praise not being forthcoming, with all earnest optimism, he must ask for it.

The soldiers set off on their way only to return two pages later when Kattrin has started loudly drumming, in an attempt to awaken and warn the town, to which her mother, Courage, has gone for supplies. It is here that the soldiers' idiocy really starts to become manifest, the first instance being a simple attempt by the Ensign to exert his authority: "I order you, throw that drum down."<sup>326</sup> Quite clearly Kattrin is not prepared to do this, and an appeal to his own authority with the words "I order you", when her very actions represent a profound defiance of that authority and that of his superiors, sees it yet further diminished. This leaves him looking ineffectual and ridiculous and reduces him to wheedling as his next tactic: after the First Soldier has offered to take her into the town and ensure her mother's safety, the Ensign says "Suppose I gave you my word? I can give you my word of honour as an officer."<sup>327</sup> Having attempted to order her into coming down only three lines previously, to attempt bargaining in this way only succeeds in diminishing his status still further, like Galy Gay suddenly asking his wife what kind of

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<sup>325</sup> *Ibid*, p.81

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid*, p.84

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid*, p.84

fish he should buy. In his rapid removal from one set of tactics to another – a trend that continues throughout the scene - his bafflement about what to do is revealed and his status continually diminished.

So the soldiers are reduced to attempting to disguise the noise Kattrin makes by covering it up. “Thought we weren’t s’posed to make no noise”, points out the baffled First Soldier. “A harmless one, you fool. A peaceful one.”<sup>328</sup> With this in mind they cajole a peasant into energetically chopping wood. The disjunction between intent and effect is enormous, and provides plenty of space for successful clowning. In their desperate attempt to minimise the amount of noise being made, they are succeeding only in adding to the cacophony. Like all the best clowns, when the situation is bad, they succeed only in making it worse. “Chop harder! Harder! You’re chopping for your life! Not loud enough.”<sup>329</sup> What is more, the series of exclamation marks suggests strongly that the Ensign is shouting.

Next the enraged Ensign suggests burning down the farm building in order to “smoke her out”, as if the sight of burning buildings is less likely to alarm the townspeople than the sound of drumming. That suggestion scotched, he decides to shoot her. Gunfire is certainly the most effective way of warning a nearby town that there are soldiers in the area, but this does not occur to the Ensign, too busy following his instructions to minimise noise - so as not to warn the nearby town that there are soldiers in the area. It is a classic clownish misapplication of logic, borne of a situation in which his status as a boss clown is under serious threat from an unseen bigger boss. As if there weren’t already enough noise, he then instructs the Young Peasant to go about smashing Courage’s cart in the hope that that will shut Kattrin up – which of course it does not. So the soldiers return with the harquebus and Kattrin is shot dead. Then in the distance we hear the sound of the town’s cannon, and the First Soldier says “She’s made it.”<sup>330</sup> The soldiers’

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<sup>328</sup> *Ibid*, p.84

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*, p.84

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid*, p.86



efforts have been futile, and given the nature of those efforts, we cannot be surprised by that.

Taking hold of this aspect of the soldiers' characters if anything acts to strengthen the *Gestic* moments in this scene. For what do their actions show us? In the simplest possible terms, we see a group of men attempting to follow orders. And we see that attempt by those men, in a related attempt to ensure a third party follows the same orders, comprehensively failing. In an attempt to minimise noise, they maximise noise. The challenge in staging this scene would be how not to play it for laughs. These soldiers are so rooted in failure and bafflement that playing them as anything other than clowns would require the production to de-emphasise the sense that they are responsible for their own failure – thus moving us from a Brechtian theatre of cause-and-effect and back to an Aristotelian one of inevitability which, as we saw in the Introduction, is precisely the opposite of the aims of epic theatre.

It is well worth noting that this by no means necessarily lessens the emotional impact of Kattrin's murder. In a tragic theatre hers is a brave sacrifice; in an anti-tragic theatre it is no less so. But in a tragic theatre that sacrifice is a necessity, enforced and unavoidable due to the machinations of circumstance. In Brecht's theatre, that sacrifice is made necessary only by the stupidity of those in power. There might perhaps be something the soldiers could do to stop Kattrin drumming, but their attempts at negotiation are hopeless and their only subsequent ideas bound to exacerbate the situation. Kattrin's death is the result of a clearly observable series of choices, knots in the narrative string. Her own choices form part of that. She does not have to sacrifice herself, that sacrifice is not necessary in the teleological sense. We even witness some of these choices: when the Young Peasant is exhorted to smash up the cart, Kattrin, "*desperately looking towards the cart, [...] emits pitiful noises. But she goes on drumming.*"<sup>331</sup> She does not want to continue drumming, as she is aware of what is at stake. But she chooses to. Again when the Young Peasant gives up smashing the cart and instead shouts encouragement to Kattrin: "*The soldier knocks him down and beats him with his pike. Kattrin starts to cry,*

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid*, p.85

*but she goes on drumming*".<sup>332</sup> She is aware that she must weigh the life of this individual in front of her against those of many, many more in the town. The choice is a difficult one and causes her to weep, but she makes it nonetheless. It is difficult to think of a better counter-argument than this scene to those who would see in Brecht's work a theatre without laughter or emotion. Moreover, the laughter provided in this scene can be seen to be provided by clowning. We laugh at the idiocy of those in power while simultaneously weeping at the tragic incident caused by their idiocy. As Brecht put it in "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction", "The epic theatre's spectator says: [...] that's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh".<sup>333</sup>

In this meeting of clowning and tragedy we have two forms, and two sets of effects, working simultaneously, but nonetheless in profound tension. That we can laugh at the same sequence as could make us cry creates a very powerful *Verfremdungseffekt* that forces us to consider rationally our reaction to what we are being shown. In an attempt to resolve the tension between clowning and tragedy, we are forced to consider the meaning of the scene that has been put before us, to attempt to understand what we are being shown.

This seems some distance from the main argument of *Mother Courage* which, written in the months before the outbreak of World War Two, is principally concerned with an attempt to show how no-one benefits from war but cynical profiteers like Courage. This is squarely in line with the orthodox Marxist viewpoint on both world wars. Beyond that, the play shows the human cost of war paid even by the profiteers. In the final analysis, no-one benefits. Yet from this, the climactic scene, with all its exuberant comedy and pathos, is absent any sense of the profit motive.

For that, we must look to the very brief final scene, which opens with Courage squatting by her dead daughter singing a lullaby. It seems unlikely that here, either, can the workings of pathos be prevented. It seems that at last Courage has intuited the tragedy of

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<sup>332</sup> *Ibid*, p.85

<sup>333</sup> BB, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction", from *BoT*, pp.69-77, p.73



war. Her responses to the peasants are curt, monosyllabic, and passive: “Aye”; “Aye, one left. Eilif.”<sup>334</sup> She volunteers money for funeral expenses where before she might have haggled. But then: “Got to get back into business again.” She has failed to realise that it is the war’s profitability that ensures its continuation, that by profiting from it herself she contributes to social circumstances, which ensure more women lose their children. By noting that she volunteers funeral expenses, we have neglected to observe perhaps the most famous bit of stage business in theatre history, that, as Willett says, “Courage, in Brecht’s production carefully retained one coin as she handed over the contents of her bag to pay for the burial, businesswoman to the last. The later line ‘Got to get back into business again’ was also a late addition, intended to alienate our sympathies from Courage.”<sup>335</sup>

It could be argued that it would take more than the retention of one coin from several and an expressed intention to go on as normal to alienate our sympathies from a bereaved mother. Indeed, pivotal in John Wright’s account of pathetic clown is that the performer should not ask for sympathy, but instead attempt to go about business as usual. I do not mean to suggest that Courage is a clown. Wright’s account is sufficiently acute to be applicable to other modes of extracting pathos. So by refusing to play for pathos, it seems in fact perfectly possible that the performer playing Courage might get more, a sense heightened by our knowledge that the challenges facing her, going back into business with no remaining helpers, an empty and damaged cart, and but one coin to her name, are considerable. Her failure to realise that it is her own choices that have led to her pitiable condition might if anything heighten the pity that condition arouses. And she closes the play singing a song of determination to continue against the odds: “Wherever life has not died out / It staggers to its feet again”.<sup>336</sup> In many plays, and particularly in films, this determination would represent a simple and fortifying triumph of the human spirit, like Charlie Chaplin walking off into the sunset in *Modern Times*, girl in tow. Filtered through the lens of Brecht’s already-noted irony, there is a bitter humour at play at Courage’s

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<sup>334</sup> *Ibid*, p.87

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid*, p.101

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

expense: her failure to learn despite degradations akin to those visited upon Job demands either obtuseness or a baffled failure to comprehend.

So might not, after all, Courage be viewed as a clown, albeit perhaps tragic rather than simple or pathetic? Certainly in this scene her monosyllabism would lend itself to playing a bafflement brought about by the incomprehensibility of her situation. (It is notable that Raymond Williams uses the word “baffled” to describe a response to personal tragedy on the first page of his book *Modern Tragedy*.<sup>337</sup>) Initially, her behaviour seems much more like dulled, unthinking acceptance of her situation, rather than outright bafflement. But in fact the two are perfectly commensurable. The clown always says “yes”, accepts its situation without managing to comprehend its implications. Courage is just like John Wright’s tragic clown,<sup>338</sup> pursuing objectives with sudden vigour but spending much of the time deeply preoccupied. We have just seen Courage determinedly pursue a course of action that is precisely the reason she is in such desperate straits. As well as being a guaranteed way of turning bad into worse, there might be viewed in here a misguided but earnest implied optimism that things might turn out alright. There is little that is funny about tragic clowning, but clowning it remains. Just at the moment when, in other plays, Brecht has turned away from clowning, here he turns towards a form of it.

For much of the play, however, the tenor of Courage’s character is clearly incommensurable with clowning. She is too cynical, too knowing, to admit of any bafflement and her tragedy, if such it is, is that her cynicism and her certainty can be ground away without preventing her from continuing with the actions that cause this erosion. The seeds for this have already been sown. In scene nine Courage refuses to go and live with the cook in Utrecht largely because Katrin does not want to go, but she also refuses to acknowledge that this is her reason: “Don’t you start thinking it’s on your account I given him the push. It was cart, that’s it. Catch me leaving my cart I’m used to,

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<sup>337</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, *op cit*, p.13. (This is the first page of the book proper, after title pages and acknowledgements, etc)

<sup>338</sup> John Wright, *Why Is That So Funny?*, (London: Nick Hern, 2006), pp.236-48



it ain't you, it's for cart."<sup>339</sup> Brecht scholars determined to find a rejection of pathos have consistently taken Courage at her word, when the force in any drama lies as often beneath the surface as upon on. The force here comes from the fact that Courage, as a self-styled tough businesswoman, is constrained to avoid showing her feelings even to her daughter, but if we were in any doubt that Kattrin's emotional well-being is really what is at stake for Courage here, it is dispelled when she says "and I ain't having nobody else in, ever. You and me'll carry on, now," adding the poetic "This winter'll pass, same as all the others" to drive home the pathos for which she is refusing to play.<sup>340</sup>

This refusal to acknowledge to her daughter her true motives for refusing the cook's offer also has an element of comedy to it. She admonishes Kattrin for suspecting that she might have acted out of sentiment, when her daughter does not obviously harbour any such suspicion and is if anything giving the opposite impression. So what causes this thought to occur to Courage, if not the sentiment itself? By speaking against the idea that her behaviour has at its root sentiment, and continually stressing the alternative construction she wishes to be placed on her behaviour, that of simple habit, she serves only to reveal the sentiment more clearly. Her action achieves precisely the opposite of her stated objective, a failure that is clownlike in its scope.

Still, it is too much to see Courage as out-and-out clown, as there remains a good deal of native wit and cunning that cannot admit of bafflement. This knowingness is confounded by a plot whose crux is that she fails to learn a lesson. The scenes of the play, says Fredric Jameson, "constitute the stages of a great lesson, which Mother Courage fails to learn".<sup>341</sup> Her knowingness has been a kind of armour, covering over a powerful strain of unknowing – of bafflement. The armour has been a good one, as for much of the play it has kept us in the dark, but where pathos is concerned, she has a weak spot, seeking solace instead in ideas of habit, in a personal comfort zone, rather than admit to feeling sentiment. So when the climax of the play comes and she finally picks up the cart, it is

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<sup>339</sup> BB, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *op cit*, p.78

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid*, p.78

<sup>341</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), p.91

impossible to avoid feeling both pathos and bittersweet comedy as this tension has come to define her. In the final analysis at least, she has become a kind of clown.

So it would seem that the first play we examine that does not have comedy as its primary vehicle is the first to use clowning with full effect. Whereas in his less mature works Brecht used the tools of clowning in the earlier scenes before abandoning them when the time came to strike home the serious political point, here he seems to have picked up those tools at the same point. The earlier scenes of this play admit laughter, and occasionally even admit clowning, but the overall sense is of a fragile moral universe in which everyone is sharpening their wits in order to get what they can. As the play goes on and the stakes get higher, it is no longer possible to be formally quite so cool. So in this play the greater the level of pathos, the greater the level of clowning that accompanies it. As we saw in the Introduction, Kenneth Tynan said that “At every turn emotion floods through that celebrated dam, the ‘alienation effect’. More and more one sees him as a man whose feelings were so violent that he needed a theory to curb them. Human sympathy, time and again, smashes his self-imposed dyke”.<sup>342</sup> It does, and it is with a comedy drawn from clowning that he attempts to build that dam. But pathetic clowning shows us something Brecht did not, perhaps, realise. In attempting to play against pathos, there is every possibility that it is redoubled.

## Conclusion

So in this final playtext of our study in this chapter we see clowning used more sparingly – no central figure is a clown in the way Galy Gay or Arturo Ui is a clown – but nonetheless with greater effect. Here it not only forces attention on the political argument, but does so by interrupting and simultaneously augmenting emotional engagement. In the creation of that tension, our focus is directed towards a rational engagement with the political concerns of the play. So it seems very clear that clowning can be used to augment a Brechtian theatricality – even where it seems most unlikely, clowning can be found and is working towards the aims of the epic theatre.

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<sup>342</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage* (London: Methuen, 1975), p.184



In *A Man's a Man*, we saw a simple clown bearing traces of both Chaplin and Valentin. In *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, we saw clowning that owed some antecedence to Valentin taking laughter to new, confrontational heights. In *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, we saw this confrontational laughter used with greater subtlety and to greater political effect, this time in a mould closer to Chaplin's. In both the former and latter cases clowning was not sustainable when the time came to drive the political point home. But finally, in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, we saw clowns of both kinds and more, in a play whose primary mode was not comic, being used at climactic moments to drive home those political points. We have seen simple clowns, boss clowns, pathetic clowns and a tragic clown in Brecht's work. We have seen each of those used to develop political points through *Verfremdungseffekt*. We have seen a *Gestic* approach to character enabled by clownish gameplay. All of this has been based purely on what we have been able to discern in the text. Now we must ask, following Brecht's dictum of "the inflexible rule that the proof of the pudding is in the eating":<sup>343</sup> does it work in production?

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<sup>343</sup> Used by Willett as the epigraph to *Brecht on Theatre, op cit*, p.v.

## CHAPTER FOUR: BRECHT'S CLOWNS IN PRODUCTION - *MR PUNTILA AND HIS MAN, MATTI*

### *i. Introduction*

We have looked in some detail at how the clowning we have examined can be discerned in Brecht's playtexts, and have found that Brecht used a range of clown-based strategies as means to his theatrical and political ends. However, we have not yet examined the practical application of any of this in production. The exploration in Chapter One has given us a sense of the production of clowning, but its application to Brecht's work thus far has been purely theoretical. It is the work of the present chapter to address that and ask several questions. Does Brecht's work lend itself to clowning in the way the previous chapter suggests? Does clowning enable a *Gestic* performance, does it create *Verfremdungseffekt*? Does it, finally and in practice, augment a Brechtian theatricality? Or is clowning, as Chaplin's work seems to show, impossible to control, impossible to retain within any political context that seeks to direct its meanings? Does the clown, ultimately, debunk too much?

To investigate this problem, a production of Brecht's play *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti* was directed by the present author,<sup>344</sup> using as fully as possible the principles of clowning learned during his training with John Wright and Philippe Gaulier and set out in Chapter One. It should be observed right from the outset that in this production the clown techniques used were developed to the fullest possible extent; and the use of clowning certainly went far beyond anything we have yet seen in Brecht's work. A new adaptation of the text was prepared from clown-based games and improvisations, framing devices were introduced to foreground the status of the performers as precisely that, and the interpolation of new improvised material, developing from games arising in the moment

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<sup>344</sup> The author will continue to refer to himself in the third person throughout the next two chapters, both of which concern his own practice. Though this may appear unnecessary at times, it seems to enable a useful critical perspective on the work. This emphasis on critical distance from the work also lies behind the decision to describe this production, and that described in the next chapter, in the past tense.



of performance, was positively encouraged. Commitment to the clown-based *Verfremdungseffekt* was absolute, and designed to test the limits of the hypothesis that Brecht's work can both support and be augmented by the use of clowning throughout. As a result of this, the focus of this chapter will be slightly changed from the previous two. We are no longer looking solely at Brecht's work, as in Chapter Three, or at Brecht's attitudes to the work of others, as in Chapter Two. We are looking at how the techniques and processes seen in Chapter One can be applied to a text we have not yet examined, and thus our focus will be on the performance as much as on the text, the performers as much as on the characters. The principal guiding decision in this production was to develop the clowning as far as possible in order to see what effect this would have on Brecht's work – rather than to be motivated throughout by a sense of faithfulness to Brecht's intentions, which intentions we cannot certainly know. We are now beginning to develop beyond Brecht, to address the titular concern of this thesis, Clowning in the Brechtian Tradition. How far is the clowning of this production in keeping with Brecht's tradition?

In synthesising the concerns of the first three chapters, therefore, we must be careful not to lose sight of the deeper objective of a Brechtian theatre, to effect a rational, critical engagement with the social and political realities represented in the play. The production in question certainly emphasised the use of clowning over the development of political ideas. Was it sufficiently in control of the context in which this clowning took place to allow the political ideas to develop as fully as a Brechtian theatre requires? Or were the audience as baffled as the clowns? As well as the questions from the beginning of the first paragraph, we have to ask how far application of the clown-based *Verfremdungseffekt* supports and encourages the audience's engagement with the political concerns of the piece. In other words, does this clown-based *Verfremdungseffekt* actually work? In order to answer these questions, we will examine several key scenes from the production, in each case focusing on a particular aspect of its clowning and investigating how that enables, or inhibits, the development of a Brechtian theatricality of the sort we have been looking towards in the previous chapter.

ii. Framing the production: framing the *Verfremdungseffekt*

The *mise-en-scene* of the production paid instantly recognisable homage to several tropes of *Verfremdung* theatre in order to enable the kind of clowning that was to take place. The performances were not in a theatre but in a nightclub, seating was arranged cabaret-style with stools and tables, and audience members were encouraged to bring their drinks into the performance area. Audience members were not encouraged to smoke, as envisaged by Brecht (although, the production predating the smoking ban, this choice was available), partly because social attitudes to smoking were, even before the smoking ban, very different in Britain in 2005 to those in Bavaria in the 1920s. The *Verfremdungseffekt* of smoking derives very largely from the engagement in a physical action that separates the individual from the group. Even if everyone is smoking, they do not all inhale at the same time, so the action focuses the spectator on her own individual presence and draws them back from the action. The action of taking a drink performs precisely the same function (though the fact that the bar did not remain open throughout the performance means that spectators were unable to become so drunk as to lose their ability to critically engage).

The cabaret-style seating further emphasised the spectator's individuality in a way that serves to place them at a greater-than-usual distance from the material of performance. In a theatre, spectators are arranged neatly in rows, and in large theatres very rarely even afforded a choice as to which seat they take. The environment is ordered and controlled very carefully. In a cabaret, seats and even tables can very easily be moved around enabling spectators to sit in whatever relationship to the performance they choose. The lack of backs to the seats makes spectators unable to sit comfortably back as they very often would in a theatre, refusing them permission to relax and forget, as far as possible, their own physical being in favour of becoming absorbed in the performance. There is a danger that this becomes a eulogy to the *Verfremdung* qualities of uncomfortable seats, but if the seats are positively uncomfortable then spectators are unlikely to engage with the performance very much at all, much less critically. The seats in this performance space were not uncomfortable, but the kind of seating provided differed radically from



what would normally be on offer in a theatrical space, and caused spectators to enter into a different relationship with the performance as a result, perhaps something comparable with the relationship a Munich audience would have had with Karl Valentin.

The piece began with a framing device designed to maximise the potential for clowning and improvisation, a device that, on several levels, drove a firm wedge between the performers on stage and the characters they were to portray and led to a basic level of debunking being written into the fabric of the production. In a cameo role as a boss clown version of himself, the director took the stage and engaged with the convention of the pre-show apology for unforeseen circumstances that prevent the show going ahead in the form originally envisaged. This convention is seen relatively rarely in the theatre, except when a major star is unable to appear and an understudy is forced to take the role instead, but it very frequently happens in opera. When a singer is unwell, but not so unwell as to be unable to perform there will be an acknowledgement of this before the show. Simon McBurney also used the device, to great comic effect, in his production for Complicite of *The Elephant Vanishes*, in which a performer apologised for technical problems and, “in order to fill in time while the problem was addressed”, gave the audience a comic lecture on the nature of electricity.<sup>345</sup> Such devices focus the audience’s attention on what they expect from a piece of theatre, and debunk the conventional theatrical pretence that everything is firmly under control – they emphasise its liveness, its presence, where these qualities are more often de-emphasised. In this debunking and this revelation of and revelling in liveness, these devices owe a great deal to clowning.

In this production, the device was not only developed through clowning, but also used to enable it. The following three problems were announced: the costumes and props had been destroyed by flooding, the entire cast had come down with food poisoning, and the lighting and sound designer had been severely injured in a nasty accident “involving a hamster”. The first “problem” was addressed by asking the audience to contribute any

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<sup>345</sup> Complicite, *The Elephant Vanishes*, London, Barbican, 2004. Directed by Simon McBurney. For further information on the show see Complicite’s web page: <http://www.complicite.org/productions/detail.html?id=32>

items they may have with them in their bags – “give us some props and we’ll do our best”. This enabled not only a high degree of improvisation but, as we shall see, the foregrounding of the process of improvisation. For the lighting designer, “our stand-in, Lionel, who has never operated or designed lighting before but is feeling pretty confident” was introduced, and the director announced that he would operate sound himself, from his laptop. Again, this meant that through making clownlike “mistakes” the director and “Lionel” could draw attention to the process of theatrical creation. The entire cast were introduced, one by one, encouraging applause and support from the audience, as the understudies, who all came on clutching bottles of water as if fresh from the rehearsal room: “we’ve had a couple of days rehearsal and we’re feeling pretty good about it”. The director sought constantly to reassure the audience that all was under control and as such his attitude was that typical of the boss clown, playing the game of being absolutely authoritative, in a context carefully contrived to undermine that authority at every opportunity.

Certainly, the attitudes of the rest of the company on entering the stage tended to roundly undermine this assertion of confidence. Andrew Hogan, who played Puntila, entered carefully studying a script and immediately got a big laugh for suddenly showing great fear upon sight of the audience. It might be objected that this plays against the clown’s supposed joy of being present before an audience. This is certainly true, but as we shall see, Hogan’s performance displayed this quality in many other ways as the piece progressed. The emphasis at this point, though, was firmly on presenting and foregrounding bafflement. Thus, having entered, Hogan immediately approached the director and proceeded to try to engage a whispered conference about the text, getting further big laughs by putting the director “in the shit”. Hogan’s obvious bafflement rendered extremely precarious any pretence by the director that all would be well with the performance, threatening to reveal the director’s own better-concealed but still evident bafflement. Under pressure, the stakes rising, the director loudly told Hogan to “just get on with it”. The big laugh here confirmed a rising suspicion that the audience were delighted by any suggestion that the performance was out of control, and by any obvious failure of the authority figure to convincingly retain that authority. Such suggestions were



made by heavily foregrounding the clown's bafflement through the framing devices used and were, despite strenuous appearances to the contrary, at this stage firmly under control.

Not all of the cast entered without confidence, though their attitudes nonetheless continued to radiate bafflement in their differing ways. Rich Wall, who was to play The Attaché among other roles, entered with an enormous confidence and pleasure redolent of a rock star taking the stage. His preposterous costume, too-obviously calculated without success to make him look like a rock star, undermined this completely and to great comic effect, revealing the bafflement beneath his game of stardom. Becca Morris, in a variety of roles, entered with a comparable confidence that was completely dashed when she "discovered" she was playing one role more than she had prepared for. Each of them found a particular route to presenting bafflement, these being only three from a company that in total constituted eight performers, plus the director and "Lionel".

The collection of props served, in contrast with the bafflement demonstrated by the company's entrances, to emphasise the absolute liveness and joy of being present that was pivotal in the show's success. The cast were sent out into the audience to collect props, so if there was any residual sense of division between performance space and audience space, it was finally disrupted now. They engaged the audience in banter and attempted to cajole them into handing over props for use. This section was useful in that it subtly demonstrated that the company were comfortable with an audience, rather than being so baffled and afraid that the audience could have no confidence in the skill of the people they had paid to see. Moreover, this section emphasised that this was a performance that could take place anywhere in the room and which would not, even for a moment, pretend that the audience were anything less than completely present. The *Verfremdung* gap between performance and reality was being made as wide as possible even before the start of the play proper.

It is worth saying more about the use of props. In rehearsal the company had improvised extensively with a series of random objects, some of which improvisations were so

successful that it seemed wasteful to leave them behind once rehearsals were over. However, for the most part the categories of object garnered from the audience meant that many of the improvisations developed in rehearsal could be retained, lightly adapted. Chocolate bars, pieces of fruit, stationery and magazines were expected to turn up and indeed they consistently did. In one case, a wheelchair was found in the rehearsal room and, after improvising with it for a day, a series of sequences were developed that, as we shall see, ran throughout the fabric of the show. However, it was impossible to imagine this opportunity presenting itself in performance and this was the one concession made to “planting” objects in the audience.

The “planting” of objects raises an ideological question about the preparation of the piece. If an improvisation is prepared in this way, it is no longer an improvisation, merely the pretence of one. Thus are the audience not deceived into believing in a false “reality” much in the same way as in the illusionist theatre? Probably they are – but the effect of this illusion is very different to that of the illusionist theatre. As indicated in the “debunking and improvisation” section of Chapter One, most clown shows are created through extensive improvisation – as was this one – and the successful improvisations are refined and kept in the show. In practical terms, then, in this case whenever something unexpected happened in rehearsal that raised a laugh from those present, the director would call out “keep it”. This is not unusual in developing this sort of work. By its very nature it must be developed by gameplay and improvisation and the most successful of those improvisations must be kept. The audience, of course, knows that much of the material is prepared, just as they know the sound designer was not really involved in an accident involving a hamster. But as indicated in Chapter One, this work is at its most successful when the audience cannot tell what is being created here and now and what is not. So far, so illusionist. Unlike in the illusionist theatre, the creative process is being foregrounded rather than disguised. The audience are being asked to disbelieve, not to believe. And by the frequently improvisation of material that responds to obviously unexpected events in the course of a performance, audience attention becomes focused on the disjunction between the performance and the performers, between illusion and reality.



Even if the debunking is rehearsed, it remains a debunking – and therefore remains a *Verfremdungseffekt*.

The wheelchair was significant for one further reason, which relates to the nature of Brecht's clowning in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* and *Arturo Ui*. Paul Whickman, the performer who retrieved it from our planted audience member, was gradually being set up in these early exchanges as a kind of *bouffon* figure,<sup>346</sup> an aberrant clown who speaks deeply uncomfortable, even offensive, truths and fails to observe the codes of appropriate speech and behaviour learned by most ordinary members of society. This was first set up when, on his entrance, Will Railton, who played Matti, expressed disgust that Whickman was even allowed to be in the show. "But he's a freak", said Railton. The other performers conspicuously retained a safe physical distance from Whickman, and he was quickly established in these early exchanges as someone who could do just about anything. Whickman's was not quite a true *bouffon* because his aberrant behaviour was not borne of cruelty or spite, but simply of a lack of awareness of appropriate codes of behaviour. He was thus a simple clown whose particular characteristic is a tendency towards the horrendously non-politically-correct. His bafflement comes through in response to other people's reactions to his behaviour. He is simply playing innocently and cannot understand why he draws such opprobrium. This proved a useful device for interrogating these codes of behaviour most of us will never transgress, by provoking the sort of "brutal" laughter we have discussed in previous chapters. This requires the audience to interrogate their laughter, which was provoked by something they may not feel comfortable laughing at.

By all the means discussed above, the clown-based *Verfremdungseffekte* that would run throughout the show were foregrounded from the outset. There was one further device included to this end, and also to locate this clowning clearly within "the Brechtian tradition". Rich Wall and the director provided the audience with "a demonstration of Brecht's theories, so you know what kind of play you're watching". This was a crude and pompous attempt on the part of the boss clown to explain to the audience the notion of

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<sup>346</sup> Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (London: Methuen, 2000), p.117

the *Verfremdungseffekt*. To do this, the two performers stood at opposite ends of the stage and the director swung a punch. Wall then played as though he had been struck by the director, and as the director tried to explain how this demonstrates the *Verfremdung* disjunction between performance and reality, Wall garnered lots of laughter by explaining that the moment was successful due to his convincing acting: “you believe that”, he informed them, much to the boss clown’s annoyance. The laughter here came from a recognition of Wall’s baffled failure to comprehend the theory he was meant to be demonstrating, a healthy early indication that the audience did indeed know what kind of play they were watching.

*iii. The first scene and the rehearsal process: finding the game; finding the Gest*

Finally, after fifteen minutes of preamble and introduction, the company announced “Scene One: In a Bar” and, to the accompaniment of Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* from laptop speakers, the performers took their positions for the opening scene. The choice of music here was important as it further emphasised the pomposity and pretensions of the director’s boss clown, while being distinctly at odds with the character of the scene being prepared. In the opening tableau, five performers were sprawled on chairs and the floor, blind drunk, in stark contrast with the spirit of adventure and boldness conjured by the music. Once again presenting a gap between intention and effect serves to emphasise the gap between performance and reality, revealing in that gap the bafflement of those who believe their intention to have been achieved. Most significantly, this gap between intention and effect allowed the foregrounding of a the company’s process of finding games and using them to reveal the *Gestus* of each character.

In order to explore how the rehearsal process led to the discovery of games that revealed the *Gestus* of each character, it is first necessary to understand a little more about how the production was created. The first two weeks of a six-week process were entirely given over to a series of clowning exercises designed to give the performers a practical understanding of the framework set out in Chapter One, which was, in effect, clown



training. From a starting point of improvisation and clown games, development of the production proper then began, using a new selection of random objects for each rehearsal. Having improvised around the situation and plot events of each scene, the director guided this into a structure dictated by the Brecht's text and specifically by the actions performed by each character. Thus a very basic *Gestus* was interpolated into the developing scene, gradually narrowing the scope for improvisations that would alter the narrative and encouraging that which was in keeping with the original text. The improvisations were thus increasingly dictated by the given circumstances of Brecht's text and as they developed through the play, the improvisation of actions directly comparable to those in the play became a frequent occurrence, indicating that the actor playing each part had adopted the appropriate *Gestus*.

After it had developed through this process, a written adaptation of a scene was prepared, working from several of the current translations as well as from the work done in improvisation. Thus the events that might effect the plot, and the great majority of the text spoken in character were derived directly from Brecht, while diversions, debunkings and games that were layered on top of this were derived from improvisations, along, very often, with idiomatic language for each character.<sup>347</sup> This text was rehearsed, but never fixed so firmly as to block out all impulses to create new material.

To give a more concrete series of examples: preparation of scene one for performance saw us finding a series of *Gestic* actions for each of the characters quite quickly. For Puntila, for example, the scene is driven by the contrast between his own, extreme, drunkenness, and his profession of appalled disgust at the drunkenness of everyone else. We found that the drunker he was, the funnier his admonishments became and of course the more hypocritical. This effect was redoubled when the decision was taken to have Andrew Hogan, who played Puntila, announce the scene title at the top in as flat and simple a way as possible. The marked disjunction between that delivery as the performer, and his first blurted declaration as the character – “you're all drunk!” – foregrounded the

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<sup>347</sup> See Lee Hall's translation (Lee Hall, *Plays: 2* [London: Methuen, 2003]) for another very successful translation that draws heavily on idiomatic language.

fact that this was a clown playing the game of being drunk and implied a criticism of the character's *Gest* of which the performer was not obviously aware but that invited further critique from the audience.

That this gameplay belonged to the performer, rather than the character, was of central importance in this production and ensured the audience's constant awareness of the potential for the performer to emerge at any moment and disrupt an illusion of character. Yet the main actions of the scene having been improvised and the text prepared, it was still missing a real sense of the disjunction between performer and character. However much the performer "played the game" of his *Gestus*, it was difficult to foreground this process, and there was an increasing danger that for all the *Verfremdung* promises of the introduction and preamble, the play would then be presented without delivering on them. In rehearsals for this scene the performers were consistently encouraged to find new games, yet for some time nothing significant emerged. Then came a day when, by coincidence, many of the performers had brought with them identical bottles of Evian water. These were added to the pile of props and Charlie Dodd, playing the waiter, was encouraged to present them to Puntila whenever he demanded drink. The game in mind was one of Dodd challenging Hogan to drink what he has ordered, to put him "in the shit" by forcing him to drink half a dozen bottles of water and forcing a disjunction between Puntila's *Gestic* drive to increased drunkenness and Hogan's understandable reluctance to drink six bottles of water.

This game emerged, and was also in keeping with the waiter's *Gestus* of haughty disapproval for Puntila's drunken antics, but Hogan developed from it a considerably more successful game. Having drunk one bottle, he decided that "he wants a drink, too", and squirted a bottle of water over one of the slumped performers, thus neatly avoiding drinking it himself while also avoiding spoiling the game. Then "And he wants a drink. And him. And him" until all four slumped performers were completely soaked. When this first happened in rehearsal, the hilarity was considerable simply because, if there had been codes of rehearsal behaviour prior to this moment, this certainly transgressed them and the clown's relationship to appropriate behaviours is, as we know, a loose one.



Because we had been working from a prepared and rehearsed text, the sense that this was Hogan the performer transgressing, rather than Puntila the character, was complete. Added to this was the shock of the first few slumped performers upon being doused with cold water, in sharp contrast to their need to remain “in character”, i.e., unconscious, and the sense of preparing oneself for the inevitable that was exhibited by the last two in the same situation. In every case, the *Verfremdung* wedge driven between performer and character was complete, and a game had been found which maintained the *Gestus* of the character while also emphasising its separateness from the performer.

However, as such a sequence becomes absorbed by the rehearsed action, it becomes clear that it is much harder to create in an audience a sense that this sequence is being initiated by the performer, and not the character. No matter how thoroughly the set-up establishes *Verfremdung* conventions, audiences still tend, wherever remotely possible, to read action as belonging to character. This may be because, as audiences, we are well-trained in watching the theatre of illusion and thus have an ingrained tendency towards the suspension of disbelief, willing or otherwise. Whatever the reason, it makes the disruption of illusion a considerably more difficult business than simply putting up some signs and having a curtain at half the usual height. As was argued in the previous chapter, pathos and empathy tend to creep through no matter how well-built the dam. But it was important for our clown-based *Verfremdungseffekt* that this game of squirting the company with water be initiated by Hogan, and that it cut right through a belief in Puntila. How could this effect be made certain?

It had initially been decided to cut Dodd’s game of forcing Hogan to drink bottle after bottle of water, and get straight to Hogan’s own game, not so much because it was not successful as because it was felt that the digression was becoming too long. It became clear that only by having Dodd’s game reveal Hogan the performer, could it be clear that it was Hogan, and not Puntila, who initiated Hogan’s game. Hogan’s game emerges because the performer is “in the shit”, forcing him to devise a brilliant means of digging himself out. Without that challenge it remains a brilliant comic *Gestus* for Puntila, but can easily be absorbed by character. In other words, it is much easier for a performer to

be forced out of character than it is for them to deliberately drop that character – in the latter case the audience is just as likely to read the drop as being the character momentarily stepping outside the frame of the scene, as the performer stepping outside the frame of the character. So by reinstating Dodd’s game, the required *Verfremdungseffekt* was extracted from Hogan’s. The sheer anarchy of the sequence raised considerable laughter and represented an excellent sequence of clowning, while also remaining in keeping with the aim of presenting a piece of clown-based *Verfremdung* theatre. While not overtly political, this sequence and others like it helped undermine any potential authority Puntila might later accrue, and made possible later sequences that could be used to foreground the political concerns of the play.

One such sequence that played directly to the political concerns of the play was a discovery made in the same rehearsal as that in which the water games were initiated. Shortly after Matti’s entrance, the following sequence occurred:

PUNTILA.        So Matti, what wind of fortune blew you my way?

MATTI.            The wind of unemployment, sir. I complained about the food in my last job, so they fired me for being a Marxist.

PUNTILA.        Well, you won’t get that at Puntila Hall, my fine fellow. What should I care if you’re a Marxist, so long as you can drive in a straight line?

In rehearsal, Hogan, still at the early stages of memorising the text, followed this last line directly with a repeat of the first one. Will Railton, playing Matti, could not question the boss’s authority, so repeated his own line, but with a dubious tone, as though unconvinced of his boss’s sanity – he accepted the game, but was baffled by the need to do so. Hogan then said “*déjà vu*”, before jumping ahead to the correct text: “I’m marrying my daughter off to...” at which point he couldn’t remember the name of the Attaché (a fact rendered even more amusing in rehearsal by the fact that, in the text, he simply had to say “an Attaché”) and so flopped. In order to rescue the flop, he returned once more to the text above, and Railton once more dutifully spoke his own line with an attitude of bafflement and frustration. The effect was of two performers desperately trying to keep a grip on their characters, but because the process of line-learning had been



foregrounded there was no possibility that this slip could be assimilated into a reading of character. Particularly pleasing was the happy accident that the lines foregrounded by this clownish debunking of theatrical process were especially pertinent to the play's central political point that fortune, like choice, is not a luxury afforded to the proletariat. Puntila's romantic view of a teleological fate is punctured by Matti's cold appraisal of economic realities.

Thus not only does this text contain within it a tension between two opposing viewpoints, but it also illuminates the *Gestus* of both central characters. Puntila, at least when drunk, has a romanticism which is deeply appealing but profoundly contrary to both his own interests and to economic realities. Matti has a realism that is perhaps less appealing to the instincts, but considerably more convincing rationally. These attitudes and the varying appeals they hold to the audience are susceptible to consideration as *Gestic* because they are directly functional of the social background of the characters. Puntila's wealth enables him to disregard economic reality, Matti's need to work for a living condemns him to realism. Each time this piece of text was repeated – and during the course of a performance, it was repeated at least three or four times – attention was refocused on this central *Gestic* tension. Each time this happened, it was enabled by a clown's failure to successfully play the game this *Gestus* required.

#### iv. Scenes two and three: improvisation, flop, *Verfremdungseffekt*

Despite all of the generation of material discussed above, Scene One was almost completely free of genuine improvisations created live in performance. Scene Two, by contrast, began with a sequence that differed greatly each night and enabled the presentation of powerful *Verfremdungseffekte* thereby. Beginning from the plot point that Eva and the Attaché have been largely alone together for two days waiting for Puntila to return from his drinking binge, the company began rehearsal of this scene by playing games to speculate about what they might have been doing to fill in the time. The game eventually used derived from Eva's manifest wish to arouse a spark of passion in the Attaché, and his failure to recognise her overtures, or indeed to comprehend any hint or

any statement delivered to him in anything but the most direct possible language. In this production, Amy Draper, playing Eva, read to Rich Wall, playing the Attaché, an improvised narrative of almost pornographic explicitness, laced with *Mills and Boon*-style euphemisms such as “manhood”. She held a book in front of her as though reading from it, but it was always clear that she was improvising, for two reasons. Firstly, she took great and deliberate care over the selection of each word, and was clearly not referring to the book while doing so. Secondly, Wall had a peculiar weakness for this game that rendered him completely unable to avoid corpsing and rendering his game of being the Attaché constantly on the verge of flop. In most productions of any play this would be unforgivable in a performer and he would be required to quickly gain control. In this production, which placed such a high premium on finding ways of allowing the performance to disrupt character and plot, Wall was encouraged to *try* to gain control, but never quite to succeed. Draper had sufficient comic skill to be able to cause Wall to begin laughing almost as soon as he had managed to stop. At the end of this sequence, Draper would always ask Wall some lurid question about the likely direction of the plot, often employing a prop found from the audience. We would then watch Wall and the Attaché fighting for control of the scene, until he managed to gain control for long enough to speak the Attaché’s line: “I have no strong feelings one way or the other.” The preceding section made it very hard to invest belief in Wall’s portrayal of a composed Attaché - once again, the scene begins in such a way as to preclude any possibility of wholesale belief in its characters, in this case thanks to the *Verfremdungseffekt* of debunking of character through gameplay that manifestly belongs to the performers.

It is noteworthy that this firm rebuttal of belief renders playing the game of composure all the more enjoyable. We do not believe in the Attaché, Wall does not convince us that he has become the Attaché, but we do “glimpse this phenomenon [the Attaché] in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility.”<sup>348</sup> This clown-based approach allows magnification of the *Gestus* to almost cartoonish proportions, without losing the core of

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<sup>348</sup> Paraphrase of *Brecht on Theatre*, p.27: “I don’t want to feel myself to be Richard III, but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility.” BB, *Brecht on Theatre* (ed. and trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1964)



that *Gestus*. The process of creation is rendered transparent at all times, meaning that the comment being made is in its turn rendered as clear as can be. This is not a character, but the presentation of a set of behaviours associated with a particular social type. This is directly in accordance with the concept of *Gestus* as outlined by the introduction to this thesis, and the clown-based *Verfremdungseffekt* highlights it.

Without this constant near-flop that allowed the revelation of the performer beneath the character, the mode used by this production would not have been clowning, and nor would they have been *Verfremdung*. A further example, in Scene Three, will serve to further elucidate this. When introducing the performers at the outset, it was announced which character they would be playing. Sometimes they played as though this was a surprise, such as Becca Morris discovering her extra character, Surkala. On one occasion, they even corrected their introduction. Charlie Dodd insisted at that stage on being recognised for her portrayal of a telegraph pole as well as for the waiter and Serafina – the telegraph pole into which, at the start of scene three, Mr Puntila crashes his car. When Scene Three came along, she assumed her upright position centre stage with great ceremony, holding aloft a small stick, ruler, or some similar object garnered from the audience. Her demonstration of pleasure, her joy at being present, was tremendous. Nonetheless, the game of being a telegraph pole was one at which she could never succeed; indeed, only a clown would attempt it at all, much less with such commitment. Dodd in position, Hogan sat on a chair and began simulating car noises. Dodd stood in anticipation of the crash whose likelihood, given the cast of characters on stage, was equally anticipated in the audience. Hogan continuing simulating car noises, working up and down the gearbox as he did so, apparently oblivious to Dodd's anticipation. Before long, she was "in the shit". She could not sustain her pleasure at portraying a telegraph pole for this long and as soon as it began to pall, she immediately appeared baffled – the thought process appeared to be "what the hell am I doing here?" No sooner had the thought occurred to her than she energetically re-instated her commitment – which sooner began to waver once more. It was the archetypal "dance with the flop", which she had to sustain for as long as it took for Hogan to give her the necessary cue for the car crash. However, soon his car noise simulation began to segue into the humming of "Daisy,

Daisy”, and it became apparent that he too was baffled. Neither performer had any idea how to simulate a car crash given a stick and a chair, apparently neither performer knew what was supposed to happen next.

When the car crash came, it was a further example of clown-based *Verfremdung*. Dodd threw the stick at Hogan, catching him off-guard every time. As a presentation of a car crash, it was an utter flop and so Hogan, amid cries of “Carnage. Utter carnage”, kicked his chair across the stage to try to make the crash look messier. So as a performance of the presentation of a car crash, it was very successful. No audience member doubts what is supposed to have occurred, yet no audience member believes in the reality of what they are witnessing. Thanks to the total bafflement of both performers, and an elegant and effective dance with the flop throughout the sequence, it is certainly clowning, and it is certainly *Verfremdung*.

#### *v. Exploring challenging laughter*

In the following scene, the wheelchair was used for the first time and provided an opportunity of exploring the sort of challenging laughter found in both *Baden-Baden* and *Ui*. The scene is set at a hiring fair, where Puntila hopes to recruit some men to work his forest. At the opening of it, the company played as though they had no idea of what was expected of them and had not prepared for this scene at all. Thus they were told by the increasingly irate director to “just grab a prop and be that kind of worker”. There followed a section in which Hogan as Puntila interacted with a range of bizarre and unsuitable workers, from sex slaves to Tory party researchers – and Paul Whickman, in his wheelchair.

The company quickly and clearly dissociated themselves from Whickman’s non-politically correct behaviour. Not only did he sit in the wheelchair, but he attempted to act as though severely physically disabled – and took great pleasure in playing this game. The rest of the company responded by hissing his name, attempting to get him to stop and get another prop, even attempting to manhandle him out of the wheelchair. Hogan



frequently broke off from his text and dropped his character, provoked by Whickman's sudden adoption of some new pose, apparently refusing to go on. But the irate director insisted they "get on with it", so in an attempt to stop the "show" from being spoiled, placed it under its greatest strain yet. The company's attitudes clearly signalled to the audience that Whickman's behaviour was worthy of strong disapproval. But Whickman's pleasure in his game, no doubt coupled with the sense of transgression, gained some of the loudest laughter the show had yet received.

The audience cannot have been unaware of the inappropriate nature of their laughter, as it was heavily signalled from on stage, yet they laughed nonetheless. But the laughter was of a different character to that seen so far, registering a slightly higher pitch. This kind of laughter expresses surprise at what the company have been able to do and get away with, yet written into it is an awareness that they are "getting away with it", that is, that it is not an appropriate subject for laughter. Thus in the disjunction between the fact of laughter and an awareness of the problems raised by that laughter, it is hoped that there is a tension that the audience attempt to resolve. Therefore this laughter forced the audience to interrogate certain social attitudes towards disability, revealing them as social, rather than "natural" codes of behaviour. It is very likely that in interrogating these attitudes the audience will decide to reinforce them. But it is not only 'correct' modes of behaviour that are submitted to *Verfremdungseffekte*. All behaviours are social and can be revealed as such by a Brechtian theatre, allowing the audience to consider which behaviours they wish to continue adopting. Most important is that there is revealed to be a choice, which, by making the wrong choice, is exactly what Paul Whickman's clown did.

*vi. For whom do we feel sympathy?*

In the hiring fair scene Puntila styles himself a friend of the proletariat and with his freewheeling *bonhomie*, presents by far a more attractive figure than Matti, who is all earnest insistence on the sorting out of contractual minutiae. The group of unsuitable workers are all hired by Puntila, who refuses to draw up contracts for them on the grounds that it would not be friendly. Through this we begin to see the impossible

position in which Matti is being placed. In an economy where he has so few rights that he can be sacked as a Marxist for complaining about the food, he has to remain for his own self-preservation on Puntila's good side. As a result he is forced to counsel Puntila against hiring several of them and risk drawing their ire. An audience operating purely on instinctive empathy would no doubt find in Puntila the more sympathetic character. An examination of the contrasting styles of Will Railton as Matti and Andrew Hogan as Puntila will help to illuminate this contrast, and demonstrate further that with these two characters there are not only *Gestic* approaches in tension, but also systems of ideology and their relation to the world.

Hogan, as has been seen from, for example, the water-squirting scene, exhibited a highly energetic gameplay, with bafflement very near to the surface at all times. That the character is usually drunk helped to buy permission for such extravagant behaviour, but the pleasure Hogan took in being allowed to behave in such a manner was a large part of his success. He was a boss clown in the sense that he had some authority over others, but, when drunk at least, he wore that authority lightly and did not seem to feel his status threatened. People were simply expected to obey. When sober his status still felt unassailable, but his attitude to his subordinates was one of expectation that he would be challenged. In fact, at no point was his authority challenged and at no point did he feel the need to re-assert a fragile status, all of which places in doubt the classification of him as a boss clown. He was, rather, a simple clown who happened to be in a position of authority, like Arturo Ui in that respect if in few others.

Will Railton as Matti shared many characteristics with Karl Valentin. He performed his jobs for Puntila with Valentin's air of working only for the money. Whenever Puntila initiated a game, Matti would say "yes" to it out of deference to his employer, but with little conviction, like Valentin singing the patriotic song. But his noncommittal attitude was in tension with his employer's exuberance and he would often share with the audience his astonishment at Puntila/Hogan's inanity. The section above in which Hogan repeatedly forgot his lines provides a good example of this. Through this process and others like it, Puntila/Hogan was delineated as the joyful idiot, Matti/Railton as wearied



and worldly wise. Yet Railton would also, like Valentin, have sudden amusements, as much for his own enjoyment as for others'. He was exhorted, in the first scene, to help Puntila make sure everyone had a drink. Proceeding initially with caution, apparently afraid he would get himself into trouble, he soon realised he was permitted to squirt water all over people and suddenly approached the task with great vigour and glee – also wetting several members of the audience. It was such moments of sudden delight that kept Railton's performance identifiably in the area of clowning, when so much of his performance was more laconic, more knowing, than the form would usually allow.

So in scenes like the hiring fair, Matti was very largely the less sympathetic character, his greater knowingness sitting in tension with Puntila's joyous innocence. The source of these differing attitudes, as has been discussed, is very largely social. Puntila/Hogan can play with exuberance because Puntila is a landowner and need pay little heed to propriety. Matti/Railton must be constantly on guard because economic realities place him in thrall to his employer. The performers were cast in these roles because their own style of clowning suited the character they were playing, so in this sense there was significant slippage between the two which the framing devices and frequent flops were required to drive a wedge between. But as well as this tension, at all times there was a tension between the *Gestic* attitudes of the two leads: at all times the production sought to make Puntila likeable in his mad pursuit of inappropriate behaviours such as proposing to four different women in one morning, or being colossally rude to the Attaché, while at all times Matti was there suggesting the more advisable course of action. Puntila was more appealing to the instincts of the audience and perhaps to their sympathy, Matti more appealing to the reason. This *Gestic* contrast was always before the audience, pushing them to resolve the tensions.

An examination of Scene Ten, in which Matti and Puntila climb an imaginary mountain, provides the most striking example of the contrast between the two characters and also witnesses its turning point. Enormously drunk, Puntila insists Matti build him a mountain out of smashed furniture and that they then climb it together. Railton went about this with initial reserve, as the request was clearly contrary to Puntila's interests and it was

necessary to show Matti's feeling that he would be in trouble tomorrow for obeying. But after some insistence from Hogan, Railton went about the task of smashing furniture to build a mountain with demonic glee. In the text, this scene sees the final example of Matti obeying Puntila's orders before he finally decides to leave his service. With this in mind, the company made Matti obey this order with a huge and sudden release of inhibition, smashing Puntila's property on Puntila's orders, but going considerably above and beyond the call of duty, an almost revolutionary fervour. He says in the next and final scene, when Serafina attempts to persuade him to stay, "when he sees what we were up to last night he'll call the National Guard", and at the point of smashing the furniture Railton played as though aware that this was his final act in Puntila's service. He gained huge laughter for the extraordinary commitment and energy he gave to the task, playing what he knew would be his final game in Puntila's employment.

This sense of finality also finally brought some sympathy to Matti, who had hitherto neither asked for nor received any. So when the two stood atop "Mount Hatelma" and Puntila sang a hymn to Tavastland, exhorting Matti and the other servants to join in, his behaviour finally appeared as destructive and irrational as Matti's attitude had told us it was all along. We continued to laugh at Puntila's exuberant gameplay, we continued to laugh at Matti's semi-committed playing along, and the laughter still came as much from the tension between these two attitudes as from the attitudes themselves. Yet whereas earlier, sympathy seemed slightly weighted towards Puntila simply due to the enormous pleasure shown in the performance – of which the character was, of course, a part – now it seemed weighted towards Matti, who had reached breaking point and broken, his intolerance for Puntila's idiocy now barely disguised at all. Puntila's encomium to Tavastland ends with his saying to Matti, "Tell me your heart swells at it all." Matti replies "My heart swells at the sight of your forests, Mr Puntila", a line coloured with a powerful sadness at Puntila's inability to see that his appreciation for beauty is enabled by his ownership of that whose praises he sings. Once again, and conclusively, Puntila's idealism is contrasted with Matti's realism and this time it is clear who is in the right. Railton played the line straight to the audience, with very little gloss, not forcing the commentary contained in the line but allowing the audience to find the way it ironised



Puntila's text. In doing so, perhaps the company abandoned clowning just as do so many of Brecht's other clown shows, in order to drive home the final point.

The very last scene bears out this analysis. There was a powerful pathos felt during Railton/Matti's departure through the audience, although Railton asked for none. This pathos may have been enabled by the gameplay earlier in the show creating the possibility of sympathy. That is to say, if we enjoy watching performers have fun, then we are saddened to see that fun withdrawn. Clowning made the pathos possible, but it was the withdrawal of clowning that finally created pathos. But if we understand the reasons for that withdrawal of fun, then the pathos is not a simple blast of feeling of the sort we warned against in the Introduction. It is balanced with the use of reason, of an understanding of what choices made by the characters led to this conclusion.

### *vii. Conclusion*

This production of *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti* used many of the clowning processes and effects we have examined thus far, and showed that they are compatible with an effective Brechtian theatre. As we have already seen in theory, both *Verfremdungseffekt* and *Gestic* performance are enabled by a use of clowning, and though this production stretched its use of clowning a long way beyond what is inscribed in the text, the political concerns remained powerfully intact. Yet it is highly noteworthy that it still seems impossible to maintain clowning right through to the final moments of a show while retaining political efficacy. Can clowning conclusively be said to have an important place in the Brechtian tradition if it must be withdrawn for such a show to make its political points? To answer that question, we must finally go beyond Brecht and examine a new piece of contemporary clowning that locates itself within the Brechtian tradition.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CLOWNING IN THE BRECHTIAN TRADITION – *CAN OF WORMS*

### *i. Introduction – The Brechtian tradition today*

It is well-documented that Brecht's work is a key influence on a number of highly significant playwrights in Britain alone. Considerable scholarship exists on the links between Brecht and, for example, Edward Bond, John Arden and Howard Brenton. Bond's relationship with Brecht has also been explicated by the author himself, in developing the Brechtian *V-Effekt* into his own conception of the *A-effect*, or "aggro-effect".<sup>349</sup> The German-language theatre has also seen a very strong movement of post-Brechtian playwrights such as Peter Handke, Peter Weiss and Friedrich Dürrenmatt. The epic style and its followers are currently less fashionable in Germany,<sup>350</sup> and despite a resurgent interest in political theatre in Britain we are yet to see a notable revivification of interest in this particular stylistic school. In the USA, conversely, there have been five major Brecht revivals in the past year in New York alone, to the extent that New York playwright George Hunka is able to predict that "one of the most influential playwrights of the twentieth century may turn out to be one of the most influential playwrights of the twenty-first as well".<sup>351</sup> And in Britain although Brecht's influence is not at its strongest, revivals continue to be mounted in the major houses at the rate of one or two a year.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Although Bond couches this theory in such a way as to present it as a departure from Brecht, it is in fact simply a particular kind of *V-Effekt*, albeit one little used by Brecht himself. The aim of this effect is to shock the audience out of their illusion by depicting strong scenes of violence and aggression. Undoubtedly theatrically effective, it is questionable whether it is so in the desired way. But that discussion is for elsewhere: for more on Bond's relationship to Brecht's work, see Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p.53

<sup>350</sup> With the fiftieth anniversary of Brecht's death in 2006, there were more productions than usual, and *The Threepenny Opera* actually topped the list as the most performed play in 2006, with 199308 visitors in total (*Die Deutsche Buehne*, 09/07, p. 7). However, this bucks the trends for previous years, where there were usually only two or three a year contrasting with the seventies, which period often saw three or four times as many.

<sup>351</sup> See George Hunka, [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/2007/12/bertolt\\_brecht.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/2007/12/bertolt_brecht.html)

<sup>352</sup> 2007, for example, saw the Belgrade, Coventry's revival of *Mr Puntila* and last year saw Eclipse's major touring version of *Mother Courage*. The past few years have also



From this we might deduce that the Anglophone Brechtian tradition is healthy, albeit not surpassingly so. But the model for measuring that influence might be widened considerably beyond productions of his plays and writers influenced by his work: what about work created in non-text-based traditions that nonetheless exhibits Brecht's influence? Simon McBurney's *Complicite* would seem to offer a fine place to start the search. In their early show *A Minute Too Late*, revived in 2005 at the National Theatre, their preamble featured the "late" arrival of Simon McBurney, before which point the other two performers, Jos Houben and Marcello Magni, filled in time by giving a demonstration of the "Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*" that would be seen in the show.<sup>353</sup> This involved Houben walking on the spot while Magni crunched gravel to create sound effects, in a clowned version of the *V-effekt* comparable with that earlier used in the *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti* discussed in the previous chapter. And throughout the show such clowning strategies were employed to disrupt an easy identification with the characters in a show that was, by its climax, perhaps the finest demonstration of pathetic clown I have seen. So when McBurney turned to Brecht for the first time in 1997, directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in a co-production between his company and the National Theatre, it was only surprising that he didn't employ more of these devices. Even his own performance as Azdak, bravura comic demonstration though it undoubtedly was, would be much more accurately identified as character comedy than as clowning.<sup>354</sup>

There are a great number of Lecoq, Wright and Gaulier-trained companies creating work in the clowning tradition, several of them engaging with forms and ideas that make their work's purpose greater than simple entertainment. Told by an Idiot have attempted to

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seen *Arturo Ui* and *The Good Woman of Szechuan* at the Citizens, Glasgow, another *Good Person of Sichuan* (presumably in a different translation, given the different rendering of the title) at the Drum, Birmingham, *The Life of Galileo* at the National Theatre, along with numerous drama school productions such as Mark Ravenhill's *Baal* at LAMDA.

<sup>353</sup> *Complicite*, *A Minute Too Late*, London, National Theatre, 2005. Original production (1984) devised by Jozef Houben, Simon McBurney and Marcello Magni with Annabel Arden. 2005 production redirected by Simon McBurney.

<sup>354</sup> BB, *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, London, National Theatre / *Complicite*, 1997. Directed by Simon McBurney.



engage with both tragedy and theatre of the absurd, while Kneehigh's engagements with myth, folk tale and tragedy have produced some of the most successful theatre, with both critics and audiences, of the first part of the twenty-first century. Gaulier-trained Cal McCrystal maintains an incredibly high level of productivity. And every August the Edinburgh Fringe programme features several companies who advertise their show by referencing their training with these three men. The popularity of this work is not in doubt, nor is its theatrical success. Yet as we observed in the introduction, and despite the frequent employment of clown-based processes of disrupting the theatrical illusion, none of these companies seem with any frequency to employ their clown strategies to political ends. That is to say, this disruption never becomes *Verfremdung*, if we insist that *Verfremdung* must contain a political element.

Only Dario Fo in recent theatre history has been of notable significance in his attempt to combine clowning and political action. His significance as a writer is attested to by his Nobel Laureateship and his friendship with Lecoq, though occasionally the two were at odds, was built on their sharing a number of common principles. Nevertheless, his two most frequently revived plays in Britain, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Can't Pay? Won't Pay*, despite a production of the former by Paul Hunter of Told by an Idiot at the Bolton Octagon, tend to be staged by directors working firmly within the conventions of text-based theatre. Clowning is seldom as fully indulged as it might be – and, as this thesis has been arguing, as would augment rather than diminish the political effects of the piece.

There are, however, very many creditable examples of political comedy, albeit far more commonly appearing on mainstream television than in the theatre. Beginning with *Beyond the Fringe*, we can trace a line through *Yes Minister* to *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* and Chris Morris's work on both *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye* to the recent *The Thick of It*.<sup>355</sup> But none of these could be said to be engaging with clowning in any

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<sup>355</sup> Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore (writers), *Beyond The Fringe* (UK: EMI Records, 1996 – recordings from 1961); Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn (writers), *Yes Minister* (UK: BBC, 1980); John Bird, John Fortune *et al* (writers),



significant way. Certainly, a programme like *Brass Eye* engages the reason as well as creating laughter, but even if this is *Verfremdung* laughter, it is very clearly coming from a source other than clowning. There is something about the particular innocence of a clown's bafflement that is very rarely combined with the particular knowingness brought about by a *Verfremdung* engagement of the reason in the world of contemporary theatre and television, despite both having reasonable health independently. Yet as we shall see in this final chapter, in this disjunction between knowingness and unknowingness, *Verfremdung* can reach perhaps further than in a clash between different forms of knowingness – and clowning can augment a Brechtian theatre that, on the surface at least, appears to owe relatively little to Brecht.

ii. *The founding of Strange Bedfellows and the aims of Can of Worms*

It is with this missing link partly in mind that in 2006 the present author and performers Nick Jesper and Paul Mundell founded the theatre company Strange Bedfellows. The company set themselves the task of “taking clowning and physical comedy to places those forms shouldn't reach”;<sup>356</sup> that is, they aimed to take them into areas which would appear taboo, areas in which it would seem inappropriate to raise laughter, comparable with the kind identified in the *Baden-Baden Lehrstück* and the clown production of *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti*. In doing so it was hoped the work would engage directly with the political issues that rendered those areas taboo or hard for clowning to tackle effectively. Mindful also of the strategy we have seen occasionally in Brecht, and which will be familiar to the reader from elsewhere, of simply ceasing to be funny when the time comes to drive home the serious point, or to garner the pathos, we wanted to attempt to stick firmly to clowning throughout the piece. Pinter said “*The Caretaker* is funny, up

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*Bremner, Bird and Fortune* (John Bird, John Fortune *et al* (writers), *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* (UK: BBC – not available on DVD); Chris Morris *et al* (writers), *Brass Eye* (UK: Talkback Productions, 1997); *The Day Today* (UK: BBC, 2004); Graeme Mearns, Tim Bentinck, Richard Betts, Tony Gardner (writers), *The Thick of It* (UK: BBC, 2005)  
<sup>356</sup> All quotations of Strange Bedfellows aims and philosophy are taken from rehearsal notes.

to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny and it was because of that point that I wrote it.”<sup>357</sup> Strange Bedfellows considered that “it is the easiest thing in the world, to not be funny” and decided to refuse to “simply turn off the tap”.<sup>358</sup> This work would remain clowning right to the end, unlike much of the other work we have examined.

The aim, therefore, was to create a clown theatre piece that engaged at a deep level with political realities, without ever pulling away from its initiating practice of clowning. The aim was to use this clowning as the means to *Verfremdungseffekte* that would force the audience to confront their own relationships to the issues with which we engaged. And in the process of exploration and development of the piece, reference was made to the early parts of this study, without which the piece could perhaps not have been created. In practical terms this is particularly true of the experience gained in creating the production of *Mr Puntilla*, but the whole theoretical framework was of great value also. And while it is true that the company consistently remained, through development and rehearsal, first and foremost practitioners concerned with the pragmatic problems involved in mounting a production, the process became an unusually reflective one, informed to a rare degree by the dramaturgical research underpinning the work, of which this thesis is in one sense a document.

Specifically, the show sought to engage with a particular set of political debates ongoing around the time of its making and indeed even now. These debates revolved around two specific aspects of the so-called “war on terror”:<sup>359</sup> the gathering of intelligence, and the treatment of suspects and incarcerated. The emergence of photographs from Abu Ghraib prison had shown prisoners being subjected to humiliating and degrading treatment at around the same time as controversy arose over the issue of “rendition” flights on which terror suspects were alleged to be flown to sympathetic regimes with looser legislation on

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<sup>357</sup> Quoted in Peter Raby (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p.39. The quotation originally appeared in a letter to the *Sunday Times*.

<sup>358</sup> Strange Bedfellows rehearsal notes.

<sup>359</sup> As Louise Richardson has pointed out in *What Terrorists Want*, war on an abstract noun is a literal absurdity. The book is extremely useful as a guide to the policy issues, both current and historical, surrounding terrorism.



interrogation techniques, in order to subject them to torture. Former diplomat Craig Murray has written about the poor quality of intelligence resulting from such methods,<sup>360</sup> an argument which also surfaced in the theatre piece *Talking to Terrorists*.<sup>361</sup> The ongoing existence of Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba continues to provide a steady stream of news stories about dehumanising treatment of inmates.

The show itself broke into two distinct halves. The first half, *473*, engaged directly with these issues of torture of terror suspects and dehumanising treatment. At its climax a trainee intelligence officer accidentally killed a suspect through torture techniques. The piece sought to provoke inappropriate laughter at these processes, with the aim of producing a *Verfremdung* tension between the laughter and its subject. The second half, *Civil Servants*, turned its attention to a pair of civil servants attempting to cover-up the events of *473*. The focus of the critique here was the circumlocutory language used to mask rather nasty prejudices and fears about suspected Arab terrorists. The more the language sought to cover, the more it revealed – a classic clown failure at what is attempted.

The aim, in short, was to produce *Verfremdungseffekte* that would be left to the audience to unravel. We hypothesised that the clash between innocence and experience, bafflement and knowingness indicated above would result in the sort of productive irony of which Fredric Jameson has been seen to be in search. Critically and commercially, the show was a success. But is it an example of Brechtian clowning? Throughout the discussion of *Can of Worms*, reference will be made to the accompanying MP4 video file appendix, which is a digital video recording taken from the front row on 12 August. The show begins at 5.40 and timecodes will be used to refer the reader to the relevant sections. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that the discussion can be followed with or without direct reference to the video.

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<sup>360</sup> See Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand*.

<sup>361</sup> Robin Soans, *Talking to Terrorists*. Royal Court / UK tour 2005. Directed by Max Stafford-Clark.

### *iii. - Analysis of 473*

After a voiceover, the piece opens with an immediate act of audience engagement (6.40). Jesper takes the stage, carrying a clipboard, as the senior torturer of 473. He begins writing furiously on the top sheet of paper on his clipboard, with such psychotic commitment that his lip begins to twitch with increasing violence. Writing in an uninterrupted line, as though fitting as much as possible into a tiny box on a form, his twitch escalates to a ludicrous level until, finally, he goes off the edge of the page and almost drops his clipboard (7.10). The resulting flop, although brief, features a complete drop of the character and shows us that what we have before us is not a psychotic, but a performer playing the game of being a psychotic. We found that Jesper gave his most successful performances when he entered the stage with a sense that he might possibly play any game today, only selecting to play a psychotic torturer when he saw the audience and felt they might enjoy it. This worked well perhaps in part because it revealed his bafflement and his joy at being present: the bafflement because he started with a sense of uncertainty about what he might do, the joy because when he realised the audience were enjoying his performance, he was able to exaggerate his mannerisms yet further. It also emphasises the element of choice an individual has regarding their actions, a key emphasis in any Brechtian theatre. This allows us to indicate ahead to a key thematic concern of the piece – why one would decide to engage in behaviours that involve the degradation and torture of another human being.

After this opening gambit, Jesper engages eye contact with several members of the audience before noting one of them particularly by pointing at him or her with his pen (7.30). He skims through a list on his piece of paper and makes it clear he has found the audience member in question on that list. He pulls a deeply offensive face, drawn from school playground impressions of the disabled, at them while violently scribbling out their name, radiating joy and satisfaction to the rest of the audience at this implied killing. He does this twice before coming to a third audience member, and performing the same routine with a twist: instead of crossing them out, he puts a tick next to their name and skips away beaming. The *Gest* of this figure as a violent psychopath becomes established



along with his tendency to treat his acts as a game, without any moral seriousness. The laughter provoked, again, forces one to consider whether it is appropriate to laugh at such behaviour.

It might be objected that this routine sounds more akin to one of Edward Bond's Aggro-Effects than to Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*. On those occasions when it was less than completely successful at producing laughter, this was because it had become so. Only when it was clear that Jesper was not "being" a mass-murdering psychopath, but "playing the game" could this section be funny. If he inhabits that role fully, the audience are simply being abused. If he is playing a game, then the audience are being invited to become part of that game. It is clearly a game which probably should not be played in polite society, but by laughing, the audience give permission to do so and our embarkation with the game became a collective endeavour, akin to the "shared secret" identified in the discussion of Chaplin's *Face on the Bar Room Floor*. Thus began the enlisting of audience complicity in the unforgivable, which would pay off as the piece progressed.

After this opening section, Mundell enters wearing blue overalls (8.35), carrying a shopping bag and eating a bagel. Initially he responds with total bafflement to Jesper's addressing him as "473" and shows no willingness to continue the transaction. He smiles nervously, revealing bagel between his teeth, and cuts a decidedly simple figure (8.50). But when Jesper announces that "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Top marks in every unit. Recommended by every tutor", Mundell brightens (9.10). He straightens his posture and radiates pride, playing the game of being the model pupil. He does not want to be mistaken for just anyone, but if he is to be mistaken for someone impressive, then he is prepared to play along. Mundell's simple clown *Gest* is quickly established and is directly comparable to that of Galy Gay. He can't say "no". And as a result of that inability he will become culpable for crimes at least as serious as those of Galy Gay, without even having to be persuaded particularly hard. He simply does it to please, like, the show will ultimately suggest, the silent majority of people who likewise can't say no.

As 473, Mundell never speaks. This did not begin as a deliberate homage to great silent clowns like Chaplin or Buster Keaton, rather as an instinctive decision made by Mundell and heavily endorsed by the other company member. However, those clowns quickly became useful reference points for Mundell's performance, although for the most part we chose to stay away from pathos. The instinctive optimism of Chaplin was a particular reference point, along with the physical robustness of both performers – Mundell shares with those performers a huge ability to initiate and develop physical games, and indeed a British Theatre Guide reviewer compares him favourably to both performers, as well as Harpo Marx and Norman Wisdom: “The piece owes much to all of them, but Mundell brings a lot more besides. I have never seen such a winning performance”.<sup>362</sup> Like Brecht's view of Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*, there is much that would be unachievable in this show without Mundell's great ability as a clown.

After a further series of games establishing the boss clown/simple clown dynamic, Jesper asks Mundell to “hurt me” (13.37). The sudden and unexpected nature of the request, coupled with Jesper's serene pose, arms-outstretched and ready to be hurt, all contribute to the laughter at this point, which at its root comes from a sudden and burgeoning recognition of what sort of game Jesper is playing. Laughter also comes from Mundell's recognition of the same fact, and for the first time we see him refuse to play a game: he checks an imaginary watch, making an excuse, and makes to leave. Jesper insists, becoming increasingly aggressive until Mundell appears to have no option. Mundell consents to play this game and begins to work himself up into a violent frenzy, before charging at Jesper with his carrier bag and making almost no impact. He tries again, with little more effect. Jesper becomes irate, appealing to his authority: “when I give an order I expect to be obeyed. I'm asking you to hurt me, 473, now – *ow!*”. At this point Mundell strikes him, hard, with the contents of the carrier bag on the back of his head. This develops back into a sequence of games that culminates in Jesper being “killed” by Mundell in a gladiatorial contest (14.25-16.15). (in the MP4 we also see an example of in-the-moment improvisation, when the shopping bag splits and is worked into the game).

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<sup>362</sup> <http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/canworms-rev.htm>



It is a fairly graphic undermining of the authority figure and it consistently delights audiences. And although for Mundell it is merely a game, it is also the first sign that he has no sense of how far it is appropriate to go in his games, part of the laughter coming from the absurd lengths his mime goes to: smearing “blood” on his face, drinking it, all with a tremendous sense of pleasure and the total innocence of one who is merely playing. But his play is increasingly not safe, just as the two clowns in the *Baden-Baden Lehrstück* become increasingly unsafe. These moments when the audience’s laughter is in questionable taste become increasingly important in the piece, as the stakes keep getting higher. For the moment, it *is* merely a game, and the laughter is relatively safe. Still, the purpose of this laughter is for it to become increasingly challenging, so that it is never comfortable, and so that the audience are consistently forced, by the very fact of their own laughter, to interrogate the appropriateness of what they are seeing. The laughter creates the *Verfremdungseffekt*. At its root, this is little different to some of the programmes discussed above, for example *Brass Eye*. But its basis in clowning means that a disruption of the reality of what we are seeing runs alongside whatever else is going on. Just as Brecht’s audiences for the *Baden-Baden Lehrstück* were able to faint despite the legs of Smith clearly being made of wood, so here audiences are able to sustain shock and laughter at the same time.

After this section, it ceases to be merely a game. “Now I’m going to hurt you”, says Jesper (16.34). He demonstrates to Mundell a method of torture using a pressure point on the back of the neck (17.50). Mundell is not playing games here. Although his bafflement remains, he plays as though in genuine pain. But the performance continues to ask for laughter, as Jesper’s tone of banal scientific explanation of what is happening to Mundell contrasts so sharply with the apparent reality of his pain that the disjunction is comic. It is not Mundell’s style here that absolves them of the need for sympathy; it is the style of the piece as a whole. The disjunction between the intensity of the two performers also forcibly confronts the audience with a reminder that Mundell’s pain is not real, but performed. Nonetheless it is clear from this point on that the show is making reference to the reality of acts of torture outside the theatre, that do cause genuine and horrific pain. An example might be the application of electrodes to sensitive parts of the body in

several cases in prisons in Iraq. In several of these cases it is not even obvious that information was sought.

Mundell soon himself further absolves us of the need for sympathy, by struggling through his torture-induced numbness to perform a Riverdance-style jig (18.50). This draws some laughter, but the payoff comes when he begins using his right arm to swing around his “incapacitated” left arm (19.05). The audience would appear now to be laughing at a man disabled by torture. His style may have absolved them of the need for sympathy, but there is by now a definite sense that a turning point has been passed, that we are emphatically operating within a transgressive area.

The logic of violence and disgust escalates, until Jesper leaves the stage, temporarily leaving Mundell alone (24.00). This enables him to introduce (25.04) a key prop – a camera. This will become of central significance towards the end of this section and throughout *Civil Servants*, but which, in the context of military use of torture; immediately appeals to imagery of Abu Ghraib. At this point, though, it is merely a game. Mundell strikes an amusing pose and is photographed in situ (25.20) with few of the sinister implications of the comparable games played and photographed at Abu Ghraib beyond the context. Nonetheless, a question must arise at this point: is this how it escalates? Do the appalling acts that have taken place at Abu Ghraib and other similar institutions begin as innocent games?

With the final section of this piece, the stakes are raised as high as they can go. Jesper returns with a third performer, an anonymous victim with a bag over his head (25.33). Now it is clear to the audience that a “real” act of torture will be effected upon a victim who is not himself clowning. Yet the other two performers continue to clown. When Jesper says “you’ve seen the photos, you know what to do” (25.43; another photography reference), Mundell prepares to perform oral sex on the victim. This again appeals to the sexual humiliation of the prisoners in Abu Ghraib, although the moment is sufficiently ambiguous to be susceptible to an interpretation in which Mundell is simply thinking of the wrong set of photographs. Nonetheless, the laugh is at the revelation of a *Gest*. This is



what has been known to happen in such places, this is how people have been known to behave. And it is the very presence of a critical awareness that allows us to laugh at this. Such behaviour is outrageous, it is absurd, the laughter says. It does not become less so simply because it is true.

When Jesper demands that Mundell “make him beg” (27.45), Mundell performs an elaborate game which involves pushing the victim to his knees, stretching out his hands and tossing a copper coin into them, before exhibiting delight at having performed the task so well. This emphasises the degradation of the prisoner yet further, draws further attention to his helplessness. It is an appalling degradation to be visited upon a prisoner, and yet the more outrageous the behaviour grew, the greater became the audience’s laughter.

The stakes have been raised by this point through a slight shift in Jesper’s attitude. He is still “playing the game” of being a senior torturer, but now whenever Mundell introduces games, Jesper does not accept them. Each of Mundell’s inventions above is met with increasing frustration from Jesper, unlike the numerous games in the earlier sections of the piece. Jesper’s commitment to the game of torturing this victim is greater than anything Mundell can come up with, and so Mundell’s games flop much more quickly than before. The pace has become higher and Jesper’s refusal to play along has become a little like the drumming of Katrin in *Mother Courage*: an insistent push towards a climax, an insistent raising of the dramatic stakes, consistently interrupted by games unsuccessful in their apparent objective of getting results in the dramatic context, but successful in their secondary objective of raising laughter that problematises the professed seriousness of that dramatic context.

Is it possible that the audience at this point simply revel in the permission to laugh at the taboo, and that no *Verfremdungseffekte* are in fact taking place? Certainly it is true, because it was clear from the outset that these performers were simply playing a series of games, that the audience were permitted to laugh at material that, were it played for real, would not be funny. So it is the unreality of the material that made it comically effective,

an unreality that was achieved by clowning. But just because what is presented on stage disrupts the process of illusion-creating, does not mean that reflection is thereby enforced on the real equivalents of what is being presented. By that measure, simple bad acting would be sufficient to create *Verfremdungseffekte*.

This problem was avoided by having frequent referents to the possibility and facticity of real pain, induced by real torture. The torture of 473 in the “hurt me” section is preposterous because of both the manner of its enactment and the attitude of the torturer. So we are permitted to laugh – yet the pain is played for real, disrupting our relationship to a hitherto simple process of game-playing and unreality. Once the victim is brought on stage, his presence is deeply troubling as the performer appears to be playing the situation for real, yet we are consistently deflected from a direct attention to that emergent reality by a clown gameplay that refuses to allow such an interpretation. Just as Brecht, for example in *Mother Courage*, goes some way towards a theatre of pathos while simultaneously placing *Verfremdungseffekte* both comic and otherwise in the way of an easy immersion in that pathos, so the company felt it necessary to approach the reality of torture increasingly closely. To clown around torture without a sense of its full horror would take us no further than many Cal McCrystal shows which play in taboo areas with the primary purpose of creating laughter, not of provoking reflection. *Strange Bedfellows* did not want to make it easy for people to condemn torture, a position it is, of course, very easy to hold. They wanted people to arrive at that position thinkingly, by teasing out a series of ironies in their presentation of torture: the torture is both real and unreal, both comic and serious, both wrong and right.

This series of dialectics reaches its climax in the final minutes of the show, when Mundell finally realises what is being asked of him, and produces his thumb for action (28.45) in an echo of Jesper’s earlier behaviour when torturing him. He applies it to a pressure point on the back of the victim’s neck (29.07), as Jesper did to him earlier. The victim begins to writhe and beat the floor, in obvious and tremendous pain, as Mundell did earlier. Yet Mundell’s face shows great pleasure: for him, it is still a game. Like *Mother Courage*, he has failed to learn the lesson of his pain. Instead, like Gaulier’s



students playing Grandmother's Footsteps, he is a simple clown manifesting learned behaviours without fully comprehending their meaning. The audience continues to laugh, but it is more muted at this point: this is the most troubling section of the show, as we are confronted with the consequences of innocence in a world that turns on knowledge. Like Galy Gay, Mundell is "he who says yes", a quality that is initially deeply attractive. But as the propositions to which he assents become increasingly disturbing, our attraction to this figure surely cannot hold? Yet unlike Brecht with Galy Gay, we made strenuous efforts not to alter the character of Mundell's performance at all. Like Mother Courage, he learns nothing, even as his victim falls lifeless to the ground (29.32).

The victim dead, Jesper becomes alarmed and although trying not to berate Mundell too heavily, is clearly troubled (29.35). The implication is that torture is fine, but death by torture is a breach of protocol too far, and he begins trying to resuscitate the victim. Mundell, though, is disinterested, continuing, fascinated, to investigate his still upturned thumb, before applying it to the back of Jesper's neck, and despite his anguished protestations, killing him, too (30.30). He then plays a few games threatening the audience with his thumbs and in the clearest Abu Ghraib reference yet, has his photograph taken, grinning and with his thumbs up, with the corpses at his knees. This is a direct quote of the gestural language exhibited by convicted abuser of prisoners Lynndie England, in a photograph taken at Abu Ghraib.<sup>363</sup> Politically aware members of the audience cannot have failed to spot this reference. Less aware members will still surely have discerned the critique of a system in which members of the rank-and-file can torture and humiliate without obvious reprisal. And it is this systemic critique that is of significance. Lynndie England was successfully court-martialled, but none of her superiors were arraigned for creating an environment in which it was possible for her and several of her colleagues to learn that such behaviours were appropriate. This is precisely what happens to Mundell's clown figure in 473.

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<sup>363</sup> The photograph can be seen on the Wikipedia page on England: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynndie\\_England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynndie_England)

Mundell then spots Jesper's clipboard and pen. The piece ends with him playing exactly the same series of games with these that Jesper played at the beginning. By failing to say "no" to a series of "games" initiated by a morally reprehensible figure, he becomes aligned with, and in some ways worse than, that figure. That this critique is presented fairly explicitly by the show by this point is undeniable. Importantly, though, it is presented by an ironic counterpoint between the laughter and its subject, which creates *Verfremdung* theatre. The laughter forces our reason to engage and develop a perspective of the subject of that laughter. A laugh at torture cannot be a simple laugh.

This is borne out by audience feedback. These final sections provoke at least as much laughter as the earlier ones, but audiences report something very different occurring at the same time. The shallowing out of breathing and an awareness of the pulse were reported by a considerable number of audience members in post-show discussions (effects sought, under very different circumstances, by Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*).<sup>364</sup> People reported feeling "a kind of terror" that their laughter did nothing to assuage,<sup>365</sup> but which it in fact seemed to heighten. This may be what Howard Barker meant by referring to laughter as "a rattle of fear":<sup>366</sup> we hope that laughter will console us, help us escape from the deeply discomfiting, but it only serves to focus attention on our immediate, even on our physical, reality. We are laughing at a man pretending to torture two other men to death. We fear it is likely that such events are really taking place throughout the world. Laughter, a recognition of the disjunction between the reality of what is being presented and the unreality of its presentation, does not feel appropriate because the reality being referred to feels very immediate. But the very fact of that laughter forces us to interrogate a very complex issue in a way that simple pathos and condemnation cannot. By insisting on laughter in inappropriate circumstances, it is left to the audience to determine what would be the appropriate response. The irony is not resolved in the performance; only, if at all, in the minds of the audience. This is *Verfremdung* theatre; this is Brechtian clowning.

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<sup>364</sup> Peter Handke, *Offending the Audience* (London: Methuen, 1997)

<sup>365</sup> Audience feedback to 473.

<sup>366</sup> Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p.17



iv. - *Analysis of Civil Servants*

There are as many similarities as there are differences between *473* and *Civil Servants*. Again, there is a boss clown figure and a simple clown figure, this time the other way around: Mundell plays senior civil servant “Sir Roger Comely-Duff-Middleton III” and Jesper plays his under-secretary, who is never given the same name twice by Mundell, but who was referred to in rehearsals as “Timothy”, simply because that tended to be the first name Mundell gave him. Again there is an emphasis on improvisation, if anything more so than the first time, as Mundell carries the bulk of the text and he is the more instinctive improviser. And again there is a focus on torture: the civil servants are here to give a press conference trying to explain away the events shown in *473*, and particularly, to ensure that no-one learns about the photograph taken at the end of that sequence, which is not yet in the public domain.

The key difference is that in this scene, the audience is characterised as the press corps (35.55) for whose benefit this conference is being delivered. Immediately, then, we are cast in a role whose very purpose is to detect the lies and obfuscations presented by Mundell. Our rational engagement with what is presented to us is insistently foregrounded. Our laughter comes both at the brazenness of his attempts to deceive us and our satisfaction at seeing through those attempts. We see, in effect, a civil servant “playing the game” of not being deceitful, and we enjoy that game for the questions it raises about civil servants and other political operatives involved in such issues in reality. The appeal here is to the “dodgy dossier” and similar alleged political subterfuges practiced at around the time of the Iraq war’s commencement, where, it could be argued, the political process appears to have been manipulated in order to serve a pre-ordained conclusion.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Whether or not the “dodgy dossier” was, in fact, dodgy, is beyond the scope of this project. Of most significance is the fact that an audience would pick up on this reference to the political process, in which obfuscation and deceit appears to be the norm. This is easy to perceive but difficult to substantiate, precisely because of the nature of that process.

Choice of language is key to this deceit of the public. For example, Mundell gives Jesper a list of “banned words”, which includes “torture”, “coerce”, “manacle” and a number of other things associated with torture (38.55). He wishes to show us that such practices are unacceptable, but succeeds only in showing us that they are not to be referred to. If something is not spoken of, he implies, it will cease to exist. As the press corps, we in the audience enjoy teasing out the ironies of his position. And when Jesper concludes the list with “photograph” (39.15) - a word he announces with great flourish, as befits one who remembers this thing that he is not supposed to talk about, just as he finds himself in the process of listing things that are not supposed to be talked about – we enjoy Mundell’s flop, as he realises his game has failed.

Mundell performs a clearly recognisable *Gestus* of the English civil servant. Drawing from characters such as Sir Humphrey Appleby from *Yes, Minister* and the political characters performed by John Bird and John Fortune in *Bremner, Bird and Fortune*, but adding a significant element of physical clowning on top of that, Mundell found a series of actions clearly redolent of this archetype, yet detailed enough to go beyond caricature. The ingratiating smile was a key *Gestic* action, along with the ability to produce immensely complex sentences that appear to become lost in their own syntax, with the aim of obfuscation. As has been indicated above, the use of language to deceive is a key focus of the critique contained within his *Gest*. For example, introducing the topic of the report, Mundell asks:

If there were an incident - such as the alleged incident - would that incident really be worth making all that much of a bally-hoo-hah about? In other words, how much pressure should those in a position of authority exert, in order to glean information from those who would be unwilling to part with said information? (38.20-38.43)

He goes to great length to avoid using words such as “torture”, which makes it all the more amusing when Jesper “helpfully” spoils his game by translating his obfuscations into comprehensible English: “what is *too much* torture?” (38.44)



Jesper as the simple clown was not silent, but attempted to support Mundell as much as possible by emulating him. Much of the hilarity produced by Jesper's performance came from his attempts, whenever it became clear that speech was expected of him, to find a voice appropriate to the situation. No less than 473, he is in the wrong room and is baffled by the unfolding events. No less than 473, he wishes to do well in the eyes of his newfound boss, but seldom succeeds. And this was never more clear than in his attempts to produce text, which saw him very clearly attempting to play the game of being a civil servant, but also very clearly and completely failing. The combination of Mundell's attempts to present a good face to the press corps, and Jesper's much less polished attempts to help his boss, resulted in a very clear ridiculing of the mode of political discourse.

Under the gaze of the characterised audience, the pressure on Mundell not to fail in his task is higher than was the pressure on Jesper in 473. The role of Jesper, therefore, becomes much more one of putting the boss clown "in the shit". Almost everything he says or does is an attempt to help Mundell in his task and to stick to his instructions not to mention the photograph. Yet almost everything he says or does sees him failing in this attempt and causing trouble for Mundell. As the piece progresses, Mundell is forced to ever-more extreme lengths to dig himself out of holes prepared by Jesper until his linguistic strategies start to break down. In a climactic section (47.50-50.30) he explains precisely what are his prejudices and precisely how Government policy leads to their being enacted, all of it phrased in the negative: "it's not as if we...". Under pressure, he is reduced to simple denial of things of which, in several cases, he is yet to be accused. This section becomes increasingly outrageous, with Mundell's character lapsing into out-and-out racism (49.55) and describing the process of rounding-up and torturing terror suspects "until they'll tell us anything and everything we want to know" (50.30). Much of the force of this section, however outrageous, derives from the fact that it is merely a satirical distortion of what incidents such as the Forest Hill anti-terror raid or the shooting of Jean-Paul de Menezes lead many to suspect may be occurring behind the closed doors of power.

Is not the construction “it’s not as if we...” a very simplistic irony of the kind the company sought to avoid? Mundell’s text is characterised by a disjunction between his stated innocence on the charges he recounts and his manifest guilt on the same charges, made obvious by the detail in which he recounts the activities and by the relish with which he does so. That Mundell’s character is guilty is in very little doubt for an audience who have been cast in the role of a group of people whose task is to see through Mundell’s lies. We have been charged with using our reason, and we use it to pronounce a guilty verdict: the case is clear-cut. Yet there is no productive irony here, simply a round condemnation of the character and the type he represents. This may be a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* by one measure, but we have begun to look for something more sophisticated than simple undermining.

The more productive irony comes as a result of the clowning. At the end of his diatribe, Mundell realises what he has said, and flops, staring out at the audience like a rabbit caught in headlights, unable to decide what to do, and utterly baffled. Weakly, he repeats, “it’s not as if we would do any of that”, and the audience laughs at his lie, attempted against all reason, and containing in its tone an admission of its untruth. Yet somehow it was easier to undermine him when he was speaking with conviction. His uncertainty now becomes more deeply troubling. It becomes a question. Are there real Sir Rogers out there, hiding real atrocities of this sort?

Realising that he is caught, Mundell makes a confession: “so there is a photograph”. Jesper finally produces the photograph, blown up to A1 size, of Mundell as 473, grinning and holding his thumbs up over the corpses of his two victims. And the presence of Mundell in the picture, albeit in a different costume, again produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*. What he says from now on, performed in front of a photograph of himself in a different role, cannot be considered to come from any real character. And what he produces next, having found he cannot lie any longer, is an impassioned justification of state-sponsored torture, on the grounds that the public must be kept safe. This is the final section of the show, and played underneath the two-minute speech is a



rousing section of Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1, best known as "Land of Hope and Glory" (55.00 to end). Everything is designed to make Mundell's speech appear as inspiring, as full of conviction, as any speech we might endorse. The selection of such a well-known and jingoistic piece ironises this process, but we had no intention of undermining his text completely. On the contrary, a significant part of the effect of this piece is to lend a piece of text a rousing patriotic fervour. The audience leaves the theatre having just listened to a rousing defence of torture. They may not agree with it – it would be surprising if they did – but it is necessary for them to articulate and rationalise their own objections. They leave the theatre with a richly productive irony not fully resolved.

v. – *Conclusion – is this a Brechtian piece?*

The critical responses to *Can of Worms* on its Edinburgh run fell broadly into two categories. The former contains generous four-star reviews commenting favourably on the combination of slapstick clowning and serious political intent, several of which make a special point of noting how different the show is from other work on offer.<sup>368</sup> The second category contains two-star reviews that dismiss the material as weak, derivative, or inappropriate, while conceding the abilities of the performers themselves. The former category contained seven reviews, the latter, two. Most importantly, though, the critical response discerned several things in accordance with the company's aims, as stated above, in making the piece. The *Scotsman* review, for example, observed that the political ideas of the show are addressed in a way that is "bold, refreshing and different. This gives the ideas themselves a new lease of life and avoids the danger that they'll become ignored due to the sheer volume of artists tackling them."<sup>369</sup> That the show was successful in addressing its political ideas in a way unlike other theatre companies was a theme running throughout the positive reviews: [www.chortle.co.uk](http://www.chortle.co.uk), a leading site for comedy reviews considered the show "a hugely original slapstick satire"; *The Stage* considered it to be "irony-laden", and although appearing uncomfortable with the failure

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<sup>368</sup> All reviews are cited in the bibliography.

<sup>369</sup> <http://www.edinburgh-festivals.com/reviews.cfm?id=1238892007&keywords=can%20of%20worms>

to resolve these ironies, noted approvingly some “moments of genius”. Meanwhile, *Three Weeks*, the Edinburgh Festival newspaper, noted that “the ability to reflect on serious subjects without actually being serious is a gift, one that makes this show stand out.” Coupled with responses along similar lines from respected industry professionals such as John Nicholson of Peepolykus, Alex Byrne of NIE, and Sue Broadway, the company had very good grounds for considering the show to have been a success on the terms intended.

However, there is a lack of detail in these critical responses, perhaps inevitably given the constraints of journalism. Although it seems clear that the show was a success in regarding its intention to combine clowning and political engagement, this does not mean it was so in Brechtian terms. None of the critics, positive or negative, used the name of Brecht. *Verfremdungseffekt* and *Gestus* were never mentioned. None of the audience responses in post-show discussions or on feedback sheets mentioned Brecht, either. Could the show have any serious claim to be Brechtian in the context of this much critical silence on the subject?

The answer could lie in the public perception of Brecht. If Brecht’s fondness for the work of clowns such as Charlie Chaplin and Karl Valentin were well-known, and the comic potential of even his better-known plays more fully understood, then this study would not need to be written. Despite an overwhelming amount of evidence, his best-known and most-performed works remain the more overtly “serious” ones, such as *Mother Courage* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. When the comedies are performed, they are very often unsuccessful, as in the 2007 Belgrade Theatre, Coventry production of *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti*.<sup>370</sup> And so called upon to characterise a show that successfully blends clown and politics, people are unlikely to consider it “Brechtian”.

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<sup>370</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti*, Coventry, Belgrade Theatre, 2007. Directed by Hamish Glen. See <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/theatre/drama/reviews/story/0,,2177685,00.html> for an example of the negative critical response.



In fact, there are very good grounds for considering the show Brechtian. Characters are created by an agglomeration of *Gestic* actions that reveal their social type, not by an illusionist attempt to “become” the character. The clown’s processes are employed not simply for their own sake, but to serve the unfolding of contemporary political questions surrounding the use of politically motivated torture and the use of political language to disguise this. The clown’s processes are used to problematise an easy identification between performer and character, between stage reality and external reality, between signifier and signified. The laughter they provoke draws further attention to the tension between these two states and demands of the spectator an active involvement in the process of creating meaning. That meaning carries clear and direct reference to the contemporary political world. But it is for the spectator to decide how that meaning is to be resolved out of ironic tensions in the piece – and how that meaning is to be used. The emphasis is on a theatre of fun, but productive fun, that revels in irony and contradiction, placing those contradictions in the lap of the spectator for resolution long after the lights have gone down. *Can of Worms*, then, is clowning in the Brechtian tradition, and it uses clowning to augment the aims of Brechtian theatre.

## CONCLUSION

### *i. Overview of Research Findings*

In the Introduction to this thesis we asked whether clowning could be used to augment a Brechtian theatricality, and observed two main obstacles in the route to answering this question. The first of these was an insufficient understanding of what in practical terms constitutes clowning, a difficulty we tackled in Chapter One by using a study of the work of the pedagogical work of John Wright and Philippe Gaulier to delineate details for the development of that understanding. The second was an insufficiently detailed analysis, at the same level of practical understanding of clowning, of Brecht's engagement with those clown figures by whom we know him to have been influenced: Karl Valentin and Charlie Chaplin. We tackled that problem in Chapter Two by exploring those influences in detail and indicating where they can be seen to have been in accord with Brecht's theatrical project. In particular, we noted that although both figures appealed to Brecht with "imperishable force",<sup>371</sup> this appeal was due to what they were able to achieve with their performance style, rather than because they were fully-realised Brechtian artists whose artistic successes were political as much as comic.

We further noted in the Introduction that the appeal of these two figures is well-known, but the traces of their influence to be found in the plays has been insufficiently researched, at least in part due to the two difficulties noted above not having been overcome. Thus having done some work to give detail to our understanding of clowning, and our understanding of Brecht's engagement with these two clowns in particular, we were able in Chapter Three to approach Brecht's plays and add detail to the knowledge of Chaplin and Valentin's influence found there along with other traces of clowning. We found considerable evidence of clowning.

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<sup>371</sup> Frederic Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, His Times* (London: Calder and Boyars Ltd, 1970), p.65



More significantly, we found considerable support for the idea that clowning, as used by Brecht in his plays, gives real augmentation to a Brechtian theatrical project - exemplified by the use of techniques such as *Gestus* and *Verfremdungseffekt* to achieve a rational engagement with social and political realities. In cases such as the use of clown gameplay to perform *Gestus*, it became clear that clown processes and practices, and Brechtian ones, often run closely in parallel. Although we found it problematic that Brecht seemed to feel a need to pull away from clowning in the climactic moments in order to finally drive home his political themes, we also noted that in *Mother Courage*, clown processes are used to pull us away from tragedy in order to achieve the same goal.

Having seen these techniques appearing to work in theory in an engagement with Brecht's playtexts, in Chapter Four we moved to an examination of one of his plays in production, *Mr Puntila and His Man, Matti*, to see whether the techniques seem to work in practice. Everything we saw there bore out what had been found by examining the texts. *Verfremdungseffekt* and *Gestus* run parallel with debunking and gameplay, and the tension between the clown's bafflement and the audience's knowingness forces a powerful focus on the material under discussion in the play. We also found that, once again, it was difficult to maintain clowning right through the final moments of the piece while also managing to maintain a focus on the social and political realities under discussion.

In Chapter Five we moved, finally, to an examination of a new piece of clown theatre in the Brechtian tradition, to see whether clowning could not only augment a Brechtian theatricality, but do so right through the piece, whether, in the end, clowning and epic theatre can only support one another so far. We found that it was possible for clowns, using techniques such as those discussed in Chapters One and Two, to create Brechtian effects that were politically potent. So in conclusion, we can see that clowning can augment a Brechtian theatricality, was a strong influence on Brecht, is a powerful presence in his plays and can be used to create Brechtian theatre today, whether using his own material or creating new material.

## ii. Refining an understanding of Gestus

It should be noted at this stage that, as has been intimated earlier, clowning could appear to fail one test of the *Gestic* performance. Helene Weigel, in the quotation discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, asked:

How, for example, am I as Courage at the end of the play, when my business dealings have cost me the last of my children, to deliver the sentence: 'I have to get back to business' unless I am *not* personally shattered by the fact that this person I am playing does not possess the capacity to learn?<sup>372</sup>

For her performance to be truly *Gestic*, it would seem, she must not only present a separation between herself and her character that enables a critique of her character as separate from her performance. She must also present her own critique of the character. She must animate her character's actions alongside her own commentary on those actions, because as Shomit Mitter says, *Gestus* "is not merely a matter of generating a space adjacent to the text; Brecht requires in addition that it be filled with a critical discussion designed to displace the concurrently active momentum of the drama".<sup>373</sup>

Throughout this study, we have seen a critical discussion taking place in the space between performance and reality, and we have seen it enabled by the use of clowning techniques – but the clown himself has not been engaged in that critical discussion. Indeed, it is the very quality that makes him a clown, his bafflement, which forbids his productive participation in such a discussion. Yet it is also that same quality which we have seen throughout this study to be enabling that discussion to take place in the audience, as a result of which we have called it *Gestic*. Is it the case, nonetheless, that if the performer does not personally engage in that discussion, then what we are witnessing cannot fully be said to be a *Gestic* performance?

The critical discussion that takes place in the gap between performance and reality is, through clowning, being seen exclusively in the audience, never on stage. This is

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<sup>372</sup> Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.48

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid*, p.48



certainly what we witnessed taking place in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* and *A Man's a Man*, as well as in *Can of Worms* and *The Face on the Bar Room Floor*. Yet in this latter case Brecht was able to say “the film owes (part of) its effectiveness to the brutality of its audience” and describe it as “of quite alarming objectivity”,<sup>374</sup> despite Charlie's own manifest bafflement. We have seen repeatedly that it is in just this sort of disjunction between the performer's apparent bafflement and the predicament of the character that critique can take place and we have seen from Brecht's antecedents and from his own work that such disjunction is well-suited to giving rise to such critique. Must we now concede that this is not, after all, *Gestus*, despite Brecht's admiration for Chaplin the epic actor? There is very possibly some truth in this, in which case it might be more accurate to say that clowning, when pursued as fully as has been advocated here, fits within the Brechtian tradition but also develops it in a particular direction. Perhaps we might even say that it betrays the Brechtian tradition, but as we saw at the beginning of the introduction, betrayal of traditions is one way of developing them.

This demands a refinement of our understanding of *Gestus*. Brecht talks, in the “Short Organum”,<sup>375</sup> for example, and “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting”,<sup>376</sup> of the effects he hopes actors will achieve, and in that process he makes very frequent reference to enabling critical discussion in the audience, but only fleeting reference to the performers' own engagement in that discussion. Of much greater importance, if we can judge by the amount of emphasis and space dedicated to it, is to ensure a separation between performer and character, for the performer to present behaviour rather than inhabit it, and to ensure that those aspects of behaviour that are presented are social. All of these can be achieved by clowning – so long as, like Brecht and unlike Chaplin, that clown is placed in a context which enables it. To return, finally, to Mitter's useful articulation of the term, “Brecht requires [...] that [the space between performance and

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<sup>374</sup> BB, *Diaries 1920-22* (ed. Herta Ramthun; trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1997), entry for 29 October 1921, pp.140-41

<sup>375</sup> BB, *Brecht on Theatre* (ed. and trans. John Willett) (London: Methuen, 1964), pp.179-205

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid*, pp.136-147

reality] be filled with a critical discussion".<sup>377</sup> The more doctrinaire Brecht scholars may finally argue that clowning cannot be *Gestic* because it enables, rather than participates in, that critical discussion. And certainly, we have seen that clowning requires very careful control over the contexts in which it operates if it is to fulfil *Gestic* and epic objectives. But fulfil those objectives, as this study hopes to have shown, it most certainly can do.

### *iii. Outlook*

Unlike cabaret,<sup>378</sup> for example, or Kipling,<sup>379</sup> there has been before now no detailed study of the influence of clowning on Brecht and its potential uses in a dramaturgy that remains within his tradition. It is to be hoped that this study repairs some of that shortfall and that it will be of use to scholars and practitioners alike who are working in this field. The study being of fairly broad sweep, however, it reveals yet more potential areas of further research that would be of great specialist interest. For example, archival research and interviews might be repaid for those interested in precisely to what extent Brecht's theatre really employed improvisation. No research area of genuine interest is ever exhausted.

Beyond academia, however, there is much work to be done by practitioners in both the clown and the Brechtian traditions. Brechtian production in this country seldom evinces a consideration even of Brecht's own thoughts on how it should be produced, let alone the work of scholars. Nonetheless, it is to be hoped that work such as that in this thesis, along with that, for example, of Joel Schechter and Double and Wilson, might go some way to combating the perception diagnosed by Norman Roessler: "according to this line of thought Brecht is a grim Teutonic Marxist, too intent on changing the world to have given serious attention to anything as mundane as laughter. An examination of such order

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<sup>377</sup> Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, *op cit*, p.48

<sup>378</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, "Brecht and Cabaret", from Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) pp.40-61

<sup>379</sup> John Willett, *Brecht in Context* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.44-58



is not worthy of mention, except for the fact that all too many scholars tacitly pursue it".<sup>380</sup> Scholarship seems not to pursue this viewpoint (except by omission) so much as practice, which too often gives us Brecht the grim Marxist and too rarely Brecht the lover of Chaplin and Valentin; perhaps we may hope that the work currently being done in the academy will soon start to filter through. However, the related – the equal and opposite – problem in theatre practice is that, as we noted at the beginning of Chapter Five, clown-based work from the Lecoq, Gaulier and Wright schools in almost every case stays far away from political engagement. Both the Brechtian tradition and the clown tradition, as this study hopes to have shown, have enough common ground to have a great deal to learn from each other.

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<sup>380</sup> Norman Roessler, "Brechtian Laughter? The Philosophy of Laughter and the Limits of Dialectical Theatre", in *Communications from the International Brecht Society* Vol 32 June 2003 pp.55-61. The quotation is from p.55

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Alex Ferguson

Rachel Mars

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