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Theatre faculty

BACHELOR'S THESIS

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Experiencing humour in performance

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Prožívání humoru v představení

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Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my **Bachelor's Thesis** independently on the following topic:

Experiencing humour in performance

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date:

Signature

Warning

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Key words

Authorial presentation, Incongruity, Irony, Distancing, Subjectivity, Clown, Absurdity, Satire, Authorial actors, Reflection, Playfulness.

Abstract in English

Experiencing humour in performance

The following thesis focuses on how humour is used in the selected performances to evoke and influence audience and performer's self-reflection. The theoretical part of my thesis is based on the existing research of humour made by authors such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Jean-Paul, and Ivan Vyskocil. The practical part of my thesis applies the findings from the theoretical part on particular theater plays of Aristophanes, William Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, and a film by Bong Joon-Ho. The outcome of my research will underline how humour emphasizes the core self-reflective message focused on analysing society and human nature in general depicted in the selected performances. In the last part of my thesis, I analyse interviews given by students at DAMU KATaP, where they speak about their experience of how humour, which was incorporated in their authorial performances, enabled them to self-reflect. The thesis is finished by providing a conclusion about the role of humour in performance and its influence on audience and performer.

Abstract in Czech

Prožívání humoru použitého v představení

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na to, jak humor vybraných představení vyvolává sebereflexi diváků i herců. Teoretická část vychází z dosavadního výzkumu humoru autorů Aristotela, Immanuela Kanta, Arthura Schopenhauera, Jeana Paula a Ivana Vyskočila. Praktická část aplikuje poznatky z teoretické části na konkrétní divadelní hry starověkého Řecka, Williama Shakespeara, žánru absurdního divadla a filmu. Závěr shrne, jak humor těchto představení zdůrazňuje hlavní sebereflexivní poselství zaměřené na analýzu společnosti a lidské povahy obecně. V poslední části analyzuji rozhovory poskytnuté studenty DAMU KATaP, ve kterých hovoří o svých zkušenostech s tím, jak jim humor, který byl součástí jejich autorských výstupů, umožnil dosáhnout sebereflexe. Závěrem nabízím svůj pohled na roli humoru v představení a jeho možné působení na diváky i herce.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

1. Previous research on humour

- 1.1. Aristotle
- 1.2. Immanuel Kant
- 1.3. Schopenhauer
- 1.4. Humour and Irony
- 1.5. Jean-Paul Richter
- 1.6. Ivan Vyskocil
- 1.7. Humour's distancing effect

2. Humour in various performances

- 2.1. Aristophanes' comedy
- 2.2. Shakespeare's clown
- 2.3. Samuel Beckett's absurd play
- 2.4. Parasite by Bong Joon-ho

3. Experiencing humour as a performer and author

- 3.1. The performer dares to speak out about their problems and the audience laughs with the performer.
- 3.2. There is subjectivity in every humorous situation.

Conclusion

Humour is the last stage in existential awareness before faith.¹

Kierkegaard

Introduction

David Greig's *The Cosmonaut's Last Message* (Original title: *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman he once Loved in the Former Soviet Union*) story progressed in the cosmopolitan scene, Scotland, London, Oslo, Provence, and even the cosmos. In the play, between characters, there is physical and psychological distance. Foreign figures in the play have strange language accents, and the astronaut who leaves the last message is anxious that the message will not be delivered on earth. Conversations or connections attempted in the play are always fragmented and fail repeatedly. Each figure's self-expression does not reach another. *The Cosmonaut's Last Message* presents a metaphor for the alienation of people in the city. Author David Greig was born in Scotland and grew up in Nigeria because of his father's work. As a foreigner in the Nigerian native community, he was a stranger linguistically and ideologically. Even though we have not lived the same life with him or tried to have any conversations with him, we can understand his loneliness and pain by watching the drama he wrote. The play writer talks about their pain of loneliness indirectly on stage. Then, the audience sees and listens to his loneliness on stage. The audience sits face to face with performers and shares time and space to experience. The audience watches the scenes of alienation and loneliness created by the playwright. To meet face to face is the same as to 'listen'; listening carefully is to comfort someone's wound.

In the winter of 2021, all human beings, regardless of nationality and gender, felt isolated due to the pandemic. At the time, under Czech government regulations, People were staring at the number of people who were sick and died that were posted online every day, and everyone was waiting for the government's action. Georges Agamben said, 'A country that decides to renounce its face, to cover with masks the faces of its citizens everywhere is, then, a country that has purged itself of any political dimension.'

¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1946). *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, A Kierkegaard Anthology 1. Edited and trans. H. Hong and E. Hong, Princeton, 1992, April 15. (pp. 291).

² In such confusion, I was afraid that Asian discrimination would get worse.

I read the news that several Koreans were killed in America³. I am more atrophied as an Asian person living in the Czech Republic. Once when I was in the Butcher shop, I asked for 500 grams of pork in the Czech language as usual. After hearing my words, the sales clerk asked me several times what I wanted, gave me a displeased expression, and then yelled at me that the clerk did not sell such a small amount. On the way home, I was half-panic. It did not make sense that 500 grams were too small to sell. After the unpleasant greeting, I had doubts about the racism issues. I constantly thought that members of European society might hate me just because of my race. When I told my boyfriend about it, he answered without hesitation, "Your Czech accent must have been weird." I thought that no matter how much I loved the culture of these people, no matter how hard I tried to get along with the people of this group, I was in a situation where I had to keep thinking about whether or not the group would accept me. It was painful to think I could not be accepted forever.

I decided to make my experience into an Authorial presentation. At the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy⁴. The students draw on their experience in performance from the psychosomatic disciplines. Students were always in a position to create their show and to be evaluated by the audience after the show. I was afraid that if the audience thought about my work critically, for example, It's too sensitive to be understood.

Nevertheless, I wanted to share my feelings with someone. While playing my authorial presentation, I somehow encountered an unexpected result. The entire audience burst into laughter at the stories I was describing. They understood the absurdity of the unfair situation. Through laughter, people accepted my pain without any repulsion. After the performance, the audience began to discuss casual rudeness and unkindness. In that unexpected reaction, I realised that humour in performance has the power to allow others to accept the message. It gave me, as a performer, the strength to overcome personal wounds. With this performance experience, I would like to research humour in the play.

² Agamben, G. (2021). *Where are we now? The Epidemic as Politics*. Trans. V Dani. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield. (pp. 104).

³ Courtney, V. (2021, March 19). *What we know about the Atlanta spa shootings that killed 8, including 6 Asian women* PBS news hour.
<<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/what-we-know-about-the-atlanta-spa-shootings-that-killed-8-including-6-asian-women>>

⁴ DAMU. *Authorial acting study plan*. <<https://sp.amu.cz/cs/program26958748005.html>>

My interest in humour as a performer started when I created a politically meaningful performance for an unspecified majority in a public place in Korea. Humour was essential to intuitively understand the message to people from various environments and conditions and to keep audience feeling closer to the performer. All performance members tacitly understood that humour is important to show how ridiculous the social situation is and to break the border between the performer and the audience. So, our team plays with funny masks and behaviour mimicking politicians and influential people to twist authority.

This thesis focuses on the effect of humour in performance for the audience and performer. Also study conducted existing research on philosophers from ancient Greece, Shakespeare's play, absurd play, to modern theatre and film. Research would develop how humour effectively emphasises the message of the performance. And then interview students studying at KATaP — Authorial acting department of DAMU academy of performing art in Prague⁵ to find their self-reflection about humour.

The limitation of this research is that the actors and audience interviewed were the 'Authorial actors' of the KATaP program, a Prague performing art academy. Those interviewees have comprehended KATaP's psychosomatic disciplines and educational process. Therefore, it may be insufficient to generalise or objectify a specific group discussion. However, the value of good performances and acting, and the performance effect generated through humour, could be a common point of view of other audiences and performers, not only for KATaP.

1. Previous research on humour

1.1. Aristotle

Aristotle is one of the most valuable researchers in the theatre's history. In his poetics research, Aristotle insisted that humour generates from innocuous disagreements. "What Theodorus calls "novel expressions" arise when what follows is paradoxical and, as he puts it, not following our previous expectations."⁶ Funniness implied through innocent mistakes. The

⁵ DAMU. *Authorial acting study plan*. <<https://sp.amu.cz/en/program26958748005.html>>

⁶ Aristotle. (1924). *Rhetoric*. Trans. John Henry Freese, Loeb Classical Library. 2020. (Book 3, Chapter 11).

Greek term "hamartia."⁷ "means a weakness or lack, a simple mistake; an ignorance that is powerless and insinuates naive innocence. Aristotle gives an example of a ridiculously distorted mask that does not harm anyone. Thus, Aristotle defines humour as harmless but connotes contradiction.

1.2. Immanuel Kant

In Chapter 54 of *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant defines laughter: "Laughter is the intense excitement that comes from the abrupt turn of tense expectations into nothing." According to him, humour is conjured from contradictions where the calculated expectation was betrayed. There is an example⁸. One day, An Indian guy visited to a British family living in Surat⁹ The host offered beer for a get-together and during casual snacks and drinks time. When the host opened the beer bottle, all the beer became foam and came out instantly. Indian guy saw that and was surprised by this sudden incident. Britisher questions him, "What are you so surprised about?" He replied, "I'm not surprised that the beer is out of the bottle. I'm surprised how you managed the foam in it?" Therefore, humour occurs in this example as the intense expectation of the beer vanishes into nothingness.

1.3 Schopenhauer

According to Schopenhauer's *On the theory of the Ludicrous*¹⁰ Also known as an incongruity theory, humour originates in the relationship between perception and rational knowledge. Concepts strive to replace perceptions, but at the same time, they fail. That process results in incongruity. Humour occurs from the inconsistency of perception between abstract concepts and actual objects. In other words, the more the object's incongruity encompasses, the effect of humour gets more robust with its contrast. Humour has paradoxical factors, whether expressed in words or action.

⁷ Hamartia: Hamartia arose from the Greek verb hamartin, meaning "to miss the mark" or "to err." Merriam-Webster dictionary <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hamartia>>

⁸ Immanuel Kant. (1790). *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. Lee Seok-yoon, Park Young-Sa. 2017. (pp. 201~202)

⁹ City in the state of Gujarat, western India. Merriam-Webster dictionary. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Surat>>

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, A. (1818). *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 2*. Chapter VIII On the theory of the Ludicrous. Trans. E. F. J. Payne, Dove publications. 2012.

1.4 Humour and irony

Aristotle, Kant, and Schopenhauer, these philosophers pointed out 'humour' as the idea of violation of "normal mental patterns and normal expectations." Incongruity theory posits that people feel amused when they experience sudden disruption in their regular order of thing and understanding. As I understand from the research above, humour occurs in contrast between concepts and reality. It suggests that this contrast gives rise to 'Irony.' In Merriam-Webster's dictionary, irony means that situation is strange or funny because it differs from what you expected¹¹. Irony changes perception, whether less or more, and naturally penetrates cognition and emotional recognition. Attributes of irony such as 'play of the object itself, 'detain of the final meaning,' and 'discordance between being itself (Sein) and beings (Seiendes)' are linked to the essence of laughter.

1.5 Jean Paul Richter

Paul Jean's research further expands the concept of humour into the scope of 'subjectivity' and 'insight.' In opposition to defining laughter as objective theory, Jean Paul Friedrich Richter explained the subjective moment of the comedy effect. Jean-Paul refutes Aristotle's insistence that laughter generates from the inconsistency of harmless subjects. Jean-Paul said that harmless animals or mad people are not comical at all¹². Also, Jean-Paul insisted that despite Kant's definition of laughter as excitement resulting from the abrupt change of tense expectations to nothing, people laugh when expectations are deconstructed into something significant. Responding to any kind of expectation remains in a humorous depiction¹³. Jean-Paul attaches great importance to the point of view of the individual observer. That is, humour occurs from subjectivity. In other words, for him, subjectivity triggers play a decisive role in the comic effect. Each audience's emotional observations evoke subjective contrasts. According to Jean-Paul, the effect of humour is to "borrow" better

¹¹ "Irony" Merriam-Webster dictionary. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/irony>>

¹² Jong Yung Ryu. (2005). *Jean Pauls subjektive Lachtheorie und deren Einfluss*. DOGIL MUNHAK (pp. 25).

¹³ Abid., 24.

insight. Better insight is to recognise the potential contradictions in the play.¹⁴ When the 'contradiction' is recognised, one's intelligence and reflection intervene; this self-contradiction causes irony. Humour makes us realise that the reality we live in is tentative. Also, that existence and the world are uncertain.

1.6 Ivan Vyskočil

Humour not only uses personal insight but also interprets the subjective aspect of its character. One must use critical intellect and reason to understand to accept humour properly. Actor and playwright Ivan Vyskočil introduced humour in his book *Chvála přednesu*

"Smysl pro humor je základním a výrazným projevem músičnosti. (Není snad třeba říkat, leč řeknu to a zdůrazním to, že smysl pro humor má pramálo co společného s planým vtipkováním, s rozjiveným blbnutím, s „děláním legrace“, s výsměchem a posměchem, s komikováním, s pitvořením a s exhibováním vůbec. Neboť smysl pro humor je věci inteligence)" ¹⁵

He believes humour has little to do with vain jokes, flirtation, "making fun," ridicule, antics, dissection, and exhibitions. Humour repositions target social norms or authority. To understand humour, the reader or audience should be able to appreciate it using the intellect as much as possible. Thus, I suggest we can get vital insight instantaneously through humour. Humour is an effective way to draw or analyse differently, enabling objective perception and accepting intense pain. Ivan Vyskočil described humour as an intelligent response.

1.7 Humour's distancing effect

As a result of the research above, we found one thing in common. That is, humour gave the performer and audience a new perspective. It is because we call it 'humorous' when the situation contains absurdity. Absurdity has the characteristic of 'distancing.' Watching someone is inadequate action and situation has a ridiculous impression. The attribute of humour goes beyond empathising with a funny situation and brings another awareness and

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵ Ivan Vyskočil. *Chvála přednesu*. Unpublished.

<https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/podzim2007/DVT053/um/Chvala_prednesu.pdf>

insight. Humour could harmonise with laughter and joy even in any painful situation. Satire and humour presuppose a joyous discovery that overcomes the hardships. Laughter liberates people from pain, fear, and contradictions in life, even for a moment. Satire and humour are the starting point for approaching critical questions.

2. *Humour in various performances.*

2.1 Aristophanes' comedy

It is well-known that ancient Greek tragedies and comedies dealt with the politics of the polis. The main characteristics of ancient Greek political thought are: the pursuit of excellence (arete), happiness (eudaimonia), and sufficiency (autarkeia); Fourth, there is a link between politics and education (paideia).¹⁶ The political satire of Aristophanes' comedy is an essential text with the basis of the political reality of ancient Greece. Drama play in ancient Greece was one of the ways to educate citizens. Among the citizens, comedy was a means of criticising the power of the corrupt political society of the 5th century BC. Play writers have an artistic vocation to represent actual society. The audience could communicate each other their perception through the plays. In addition, writers could find better solutions along with the audiences for situations faced. Amongst many playwrights, Aristophanes distorted the concept of authorities and social values that the public never dreamt of or dared to doubt.

The overall plot of *Cloud* is as follows — In ancient Greece, debate was an essential part of life. Those good at debate had the power to become politicians. Strepsiades asked his son Pheidippides to be Socrates' student. Pheidippides recently acquired rhetorical skills from Socrates, which resulted in Pheidippides' return as a perfect Sophist. Furthermore, he finally meets his father with the rhetoric debating skill he learned and acquired. On the contrary, Strepsiades' expectations were shattered by Pheidippides' rhetoric and debating skills, as Pheidippides shamelessly admitted to assaulting his father. Strepsiades formally sues his son in court for the same. Pheidippides declared that he would justify his act of assault on his father as acceptable in court.

¹⁶ Rhim Sung-chul. (2016). *Aristophanes' Comedy and His Critique of Society -A Study of the Concept of the 'Ridiculous' (geloion) in Aristophanes's Literature-.mediterranean research.* <<https://www.riss.kr/index.do>> (pp. 2).

STREPSIADES

Help! Help! Your neighbours, relatives,
fellow citizens, help me—I'm begging you!
I'm being beaten up! Owww, I'm in such pain—
my head... my jaw.

[To Pheidippides]

You good for nothing,
Are you hitting your own father?

PHEIDIPPIDES

Yes, dad, I am.

STREPSIADES

See that! He admits he's beating me.

1690

PHEIDIPPIDES

I do indeed.

STREPSIADES

you scoundrel, criminal—
a man who abuses his own father!

PHEIDIPPIDES

Go on—keep calling me those very names—
the same ones many times. Don't you realise
I just love hearing streams of such abuse.

STREPSIADES

You perverted asshole!

PHEIDIPPIDES

Ah, some roses!

[1330]

Keep pelting me with roses!!

STREPSIADES

You'd hit your father?

PHEIDIPPIDES

Yes, and by the gods I'll now demonstrate
how I was right to hit you.

STREPSIADES

You total wretch,
 how can it be right to strike one's father? 1700

PHEIDIPPIDES

I'll prove that to you—and win the argument.

STREPSIADES

You'll beat me on this point?

PHEIDIPPIDES

Indeed, I will.

It's easy. So of the two arguments
 choose which one you want.

STREPSIADES

What two arguments?

PHEIDIPPIDES

The Better or the Worse.

STREPSIADES

By god, my lad,

I really did have you taught to argue
 against what's just, if you succeed in this—
 and make the case it's fine and justified
 for a father to be beaten by his son.

PHEIDIPPIDES

Well, I think I'll manage to convince you, 1710
 so that once you've heard my arguments,
 you won't say a word.

STREPSIADES

Well, to tell the truth,

I do want to hear what you have to say.

17

Above scripts are the lines of Pheidippides assaulting his father after returning from training under Socrates. In Pheidippides's line, logical principle and analysis collide and process into irrational and irrelevant conclusions exist. The coherence and the relevance are baloney and hardly connect and prove the point of his argument. Aristophanes satires

¹⁷ Aristophanes. (BC 423). *Cloud*. Trans. Hickie, W. J, Project Gutenberg, 2001, March 1. (1680-1720)
 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2562>>

advocate old education and the sophists. Aristophanes criticises the education of the society at the time, pointing out the corrupt and immoral way of education in Athens. In *Cloud*, amongst the philosophers, Socrates representing Greece and having the noblest authority is deconstructed with humour.

SOCRATES

So think about it—

if your small gut can make a fart like that,

why can't the air, which goes on forever,

produce tremendous thunder. Then there's this— 530

consider how alike these phrases sound,

"thunder clap" and "fart and crap."

STREPSIADES

All right, but then explain this to me—

Where does lightning come from, that fiery blaze,

which, when it hits, sometimes burns us up,

sometimes just singes us and lets us live?

Clearly Zeus is hurling that at perjurers.

SOCRATES

You stupid driveling idiot, you stink

of olden times, the age of Cronos! If Zeus

is really striking at the perjurers, 540

how come he's not burned Simon down to ash,

or else Cleonymos or Theorus?

They perjure themselves more than anyone. [400]

No. Instead he strikes at his own temple

at Sunium, our Athenian headland,

and at his massive oak trees there. Why?

What's his plan? Oak trees can't be perjured.¹⁸

Socrates had the noble title of the father of philosophy. However, in *Cloud*, Socrates is described as a person speaking ridiculous words at length, and his actions downgrade to an

¹⁸ Abid., 520-550.

absurd figure. Even if the audience does not have much disagreement against Socrates, they will still burst into laughter seeing the funny figures of Socrates in *Cloud*, and the audience will readily accept the topic with humour. Thus, the audience can understand the author's critical viewpoint while accepting the humour live in play. Aristophanes illustrated a new perspective about Socrates and eventually challenged the irrational political power, philosophers, and intellectuals parasitic on power. This play was an experimental stage that changed the consciousness of the citizens of Athens. Aristophanes' exceptional interest in topics like war and peace was also a pressing issue for the Athenian people. The author satirised Sophists' famous speeches about war at that time. The audience equally responds to this humour by bursting into laughter as an expression of acceptance. Therefore, hilarity helped the public accept and agree with Greek drama's educational and political meaning.

The problem with his piece *Cloud* is that it was performed daily as a play in the centre of Athens, Piazza Dionysus. Therefore, the negative image of Socrates depicted in *Cloud* might transfer to Athens's citizens without intellectual contemplation and filtering, regardless of its truth. Thus, we must use critical reasoning while receiving humour.

2.2 Shakespeare's Clown

What is a Fool? The early antics of the Middle Ages were like singing bards or comedians telling stories. In the Middle Ages and Europe, a clown meant a naive person with physical or mental discomfort. The aristocrats hired clowns to make aristocrats laugh at their (clowns') stupid mistakes and funny behaviours. The nobility did not regard clowns as equal human beings. That is why the clown's humour, although rude at times, did not offend the nobles. Clowns were allowed to create chaos or comically exaggerate life. The clown was able to pinpoint the dark side of nobles effectively. Russian critic Michael Bakhtin described the role of the clown in his *Dialogic imagination* as follows: "The clown has the right to satirise others in conversation, has the right not to take what they said literally, and does not have to be themselves. The right to live in an interlude or the spatiotemporal space of the theatre, the right to live life as a comedy, the right to treat others as actors, the right to unmask others, the right to show near-primitive anger toward others, and the right to reveal your

personal life to the public, even if it is a personal and obscene little secret."¹⁹ Clowns were usually physically flawed. Taking their story seriously and complaining would make the aristocratic authority foolish. Thus, the role of the clown disrupted the class system and the conventions of language openly.

The clown in *King Lear* is one of the wisest clowns. However, the name of the clown is not even mentioned. He serves as a companion to help King Lear during troubles, comforts him, and shares his sufferings. Also, the clown has intuitive insight into predicting future events. King Lear's foolish clown was responsible in the play, speaking wisely while being comical with wisdom. On stage, the clowns are strongly emphasised because of their absurd lines, exaggerated actions, and the prominence of their costumes. The audience recognises the theatricality of the play due to the clown's existence and critically understands the dramatic situation through another perspective clowns represent.

Enter GONERIL

KING LEAR: How now, daughter! What makes that front leton? I think you are too much flatei' the frown.

Fool: Thou was a pretty fellow when thou had stones to care for her frowning; now thou art an O without a figure: I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing.

(To GONERIL)

Yes, forsooth, I Will Hold My tongue; so your face bids me, though you say nothing. Mum, mum, He that keeps nor crust nor crum, Weary of all, shall want some. (Pointing to KING LEAR) That's Shelled Peascod.²⁰ (I . iv .184-195)

Fool: Canst Tell How an oyster makes its shell?

KING LEAR: No.

Fool: Nor am I neither, but I can tell why a snail has a house.

KING LEAR: Why?

Fool: Why, to put his head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.²¹(I . v .19-25).

¹⁹ M.M. Bakhtin. (1982.) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. University of Texas Press Slavic Series (pp. 163).

²⁰ Shakespeare. (1605). *King Lear*. Project Gutenberg, 1998, November. (I . iv .184-195).
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1532/1532-h/1532-h.htm>>

²¹ Abid., I . v .19-25.

The clown boldly shows his perspective of the King's situation and talks about the Shelled Peascod or the hiding snail, which provokes laughter and makes the audience distance themselves from assimilating too much into King Lear's situation. Therefore, it is one of the crucial roles of humour. As the King listens more to the sincere advice of the committed clown, the King gets to acknowledge his true nature more, his pain intensifies. Hence, making it possible for King Lear to accept the situation with a sane mind. Only when King can realise his foolish action can he find his true self. The clown supports standing by to protect the King and help him to face reality. Humour helps not only the character Lear but also the audience to see the present reality. We laugh at the clown's words with action and objectively evaluate the character's behaviour. Clown's humour helps the audience to be involved in the story and makes Lear's silly story apply to everyone. Humour helps the audience consume the story in their voice.

King Lear's clown helps the protagonist face a problematic situation and becomes his (protagonist) comforter. The clown motif is a comic concept of imbalance found in distortion or exaggeration of human temperament and manners. As a result, his folly behaviour effectively shows gaps between seriousness and hilarity, insight and insanity, and the sacred and the unsanctified. The play's dramatic distance makes the audience feel emotional purification with laughter.

In Shakespeare's play, the clown plays the fundamental role of a humorist and a commentator at the same time. Clowns model funny situations and represent a situation's various forms of outlook. Thus, the clown evaluates various perspectives of a problem in a play, comically serving his unique insight. The clown's parables Goneril and Lear in *King Lear* are Shakespeare's direct messages of his thoughts.

2.3 Samuel Beckett's absurd play

Samuel Beckett desired to capture the world of despair and suffering society experienced after the World War ended. In turn, this pain led to the birth of the play of the absurd. This absurd play has rhetorical questions about the meaning and meaninglessness of human existence. Beckett's play of absurdity inherently contains heavy themes such as the tragic nature of human existence, the meaninglessness of civilisation, and the absurdity of life.

He formed his unique theatrical style to reproduce the confusion and loss of modern people on the stage. Beckett's play is considered a 'Tragicomedy', where comicalness is expressed in a dark and tragic situation. In the play of the absurd, abstract perspectives such as hope, problem-solving and painful pessimism reveals. This silliness of life creates bizarre humour that comes on the scene in a unique form.

One of the distinct characteristics of modern theatre is the presence of many dramas or play works not classified as complete tragedy or comedy. The humour found in the absurd situation recognises that the figures present on the stage are an unidentified meaningless existence. In other words, as the characters turn out to be non-existent, the tension and curiosity of the audience, with an expectation towards the characters, are shattered, creating a sense of humour. Furthermore, this humour plays a role in reinforcing the character's anonymity and its tragic nature. No one listens to the other person thoughtfully while spitting out meaningless words. This action further shows the phase where language is deconstructed itself. Beckett judges that the anatomising of the language shown in the play of the absurd is the breakdown of the modern definition of human beings and that language is only a loud noise that has lost its meaning.

The plot of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is as follows: Two men, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for a man named Godot by a small tree. They are waiting for Godot knowing nothing about him - origin, race, colour, attitude, nor their intrinsic purpose of meeting Godot. Moreover, Godot's existence is also questionable. The two men babbling without an exchanged conversation look superficial, as if shouting at each other at the wall. Figures in the play expressed absurdity by pursuing meaning or purpose even though meanings to the conversation are just absent.

Vladimir: Did you ever read the Bible?

Estragon: The Bible...(He reflects.) I must have taken a look at It.

Vladimir: Do You Remember the Gospels?

Estragon: I remember the map of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go. I used to say, that's where we'll find our honeymoon. We'll

swim. We'll Be Happy.²²

It is bizarre to recognise the Bible as not the most sacred book in the world but as a secular picture. An idea like this generates a sense of humour by disappointing the audience by converting the meaningful substance into meaningless thought.

Beckett deviates from traditional thinking by transferring it to the abnormality. These twists cause abnormal situations and soon become the origin of humour. He puts humour in a place where he can overcome taboos and transcend them. In the absurd play, a peal of tragic laughter emerges when the old world view is dismantled, and a new world view is introduced. Those humour makes people understand the existential frustration of unreasonable life in play. Humour can intuitively twist beliefs and perceptions and show new insights into the world.

Waiting for Godot characters are irrational, self-contradictory, and perplexed. They use vague language leading to feelings of anxiousness and isolation. The flow of the absurd perception was accompanied by widespread scepticism amongst Western European artists who appeared immediately after World War II. It would be challenging to accept human beings' existential despair without a pinch of human humour. Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi's book *Persepolis*, Marjane recounts the memories of meeting her friend who lost his arm and legs during the war and became speechless. The writer and her friend interacted with each other recalling the past beautiful memories in silence, and their silence was imbued with humour that helped them together brave the memories of hardship they faced. She says in her book: "We can only feel sorry for ourselves when our misfortunes are still supportable. Once this limit is crossed, the only way to bear the unbearable is to laugh at it."²³ Humour is the most effective means to face it and accept it even in a painful situation. Samuel Beckett's performance gives emptiness and the ensuing grief but leaves room for us to accept this absurdity by laughing away.

2.4 Movie *Parasite* by Bong Joon-ho

²² Samuel Beckett. (1953). *Waiting for Godot*. The Anglo - Egyptian bookshop. 2007, October 11. (pp. 18).

²³ Marjane Satrapi. (2003). *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, Trans. Joo-Hyun Choi, Sae - comics. 2008, April 15 (pp. 275).

American sociologist Robert Merton pointed out that in a society like the United States and Korea, where the standard of success is measured by the money and power people have; only a tiny percentage of individuals succeed and the majority of the population remain unsuccessful losers, not by choice is the biggest problem. On the contrary, the politicians, schools, education, and mass media colloquy show 'success myths' encouraging the American & Korean dream by emphasising that 'you can succeed if you put in enough effort. According to Merton, in a contradictory society like this, values collapse due to a 'mismatch of goals and means.' norms disappear, resulting in social chaos.²⁴ People fall into a state of social and personal instability 'anomie.'²⁵

One of the significant problems of Education in Korean society is that education with the sole purpose of success is overheated. Additionally, discrimination based on the class structure of high-educated people over low-educated people is seen at the corporate as well as social level — a phenomenon seen around the globe quite often. In the meantime, the discrimination in Korea based on education is getting worse for the regular corporate and social class bias perception. People in the country are already conditioned to have a prejudice against low-educated people. This class system has given way to excessive competition among young Koreans, making them vulnerable to becoming fearful, jealous, and aggressive without believing in themselves and lacking self-confidence. Human beings today are living in fierce competition now and then. In this circumstance, relatives, neighbours, schoolmates, and families often discussed comparison, ignorance, and spat offensive content. Director Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* is a film about the gap between education and wealth.

The narrative of Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, which features three families in different classes, is divided into two sets — the semi-basement and the basement. The wealthy Dong-ik family offered the Ki-tek family a job opportunity. Ki-woo pretends to be a Yonsei university student and teaches English to Dong-ik's daughter Da-hye, and Ki-jung pretends to be Jessica who majored in applied art at Illinois State University and teaches art to Dong-ik's son Da-song. Ki-tek pretends to be a driver with a long career and works as Dong-ik's driver, and Chung-suk pretends to be a housekeeper for a professional company that runs exclusively for the upper-class system. During the hiring process, Ki-tek's family

²⁴ Pyo Chang-won (2020, April. 11) *Why isn't there a 'rebellious figure' in 'Parasite' that depicts Korean anomie?* The Hankyoreh news <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/936627.html>

²⁵ A state of no moral or social principles in a person or society, Cambridge dictionary, "Anomie" <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anomie>>

members lied and pretended to be experts in their field of work. Also, Ki-tek and Chung-sook took jobs because they conspired and expelled other employed people. The below conversation is between Ki-woo and Ki-jeong while they are planning to fake college graduation certificates to get a job in a wealthy family.

INT. INTERNET CAFÉ - DAY

Ki-Jung is working at the computer, clicking the mouse and tapping various keyboard shortcuts with dizzying speed. She's like a magician. On the monitor is a document -- "Certificate of Enrollment."

With laser focus, Ki-Jung refines the edges of the red certification seal.

KI-WOO : This is amazing. How come you keep failing the art school exam?

KI-JUNG : Shut up, dickwad.

The siblings work discreetly in the corner of the large internet café.

KI-WOO : Take your time. (looking around) We should hold off on the printing until the place clears out.

KI-TEK : Look at this. There should be a major for document forgery at Seoul National University. Ki-Jung would be top of the class.

KI-WOO : I don't consider this a crime. No. Because I plan on going to this school next year.

KI-TEK : That's my son. Man with a plan.²⁶

In *Parasite*, Ki-woo manipulates his education qualification by creating a false document to take advantage of it. Though the humorous situation amuses Audiences, the scene poignantly captures the absurdity of Korean society. In a society like South Korea, where education is essential, one of the ways to justify academic qualification is simply by forging a document of enrolment proof, which is easily created by manipulating education facts. In this humorous scene, the meaning of good academic ability through dedication and overcoming obstacles transfers to 'nothingness.' This irony delivered a strong message about criticism of the education system in the story.

The scene below happens after Ki-tek family secretly parties at Dong-ik's fancy house while Dong-ik's family is away from home. When Dong-ik's family enter home unexpectedly, Ki-tek family hurriedly hides under the table in the living room.

²⁶ Bong Joon-ho, Jin Won Han. (2019). *Parasite script* (pp. 7). Scriptslug <<https://www.scriptslug.com/script/parasite-2019>>

DONG-IK : Let's just sleep here on the sofa tonight. We'll be able to see the tent from here.

YON-KYO : That sounds good. That way we can keep an eye on Da-Song.

Ki-Tek, Ki-Woo, and Ki-Jung turn ashen. They're fucked. ²⁷

DONG-IK : This is Mr. Kim's smell.

YON-KYO : Mr. Kim? Are you sure? (sniffs) I don't know what you're talking about.

Dong-Ik and Yon-Kyo both sniff the air. Ki-Tek becomes nervous. He smells his T-shirt.

YON-KYO : Like poor people smell?

DONG-IK : No. It's not that strong. It's more like a subtle aroma that seeps into the air--

DONG-IK : Do you have a pair of really cheap panties?

YON-KYO : Cheap panties?

DONG-IK : Those panties that Yun left behind. Something like that. Real cheap and tacky.

YON-KYO : No, I don't have-- something so crude.

DONG-IK : I must be a pervert. I get hard thinking about those cheap, trashy pairs of underpants.²⁸

The descriptions of smell and cheap panties from Dong-Ik's family show that 'poverty' is a ridiculous joke for people who do not experience it. Behind the audience's laughter, the audience understands the bitter reality. Thus, *Parasite* uses the expressions of irony and dark humour to depict the problem of class discrimination in the 21st century till today. The movie *Parasite*, an Oscar-award-winning film, premiered in the year 2020²⁹, and brought the attention of a global audience to the film. In the film, humour has the power to describe the culture, reconstructing the meaning of the culture within the system. In consequence, humour can effectively deliver the message to people who are not part of the culture.

3. Experiencing humour as a performer and author.

²⁷ Abid., 100.

²⁸ Abid., 102.

²⁹ BBC entertainment, (2020, February 10) Oscars 2020: South Korea's Parasite makes history by winning best picture <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-51440241>>

I have researched how to accept humour in play as a reader or an audience's cognition. In this chapter, I would like to talk about performers' or writers' use of humour to turn a photographic experience into a finished performance. I asked colleague students producing and acting out their performances from their experiences, "How do you reflect the moment humour emerged in your performance?" Performers were answering about expectations of their performance and the actual result. The opinion is various and exciting. I would like to write about my experiences with humour based on interviews with students who created their performances from KATaP program. This chapter not only includes interviews with students but also contains my appreciation of their performances as a viewer.

3.1. The performer dares to speak out about their problems, and the audience laughs with the performer.

Student A presented his fear in two authorial presentations. He cannot use a terrifying experience as it was, so he has to find instruments such as metaphors that help him to create a form of play. His first performance was a written performance based on the fear of darkness. He once boarded a train when he was young. Sudden power off on the train darkened, and he experienced great fear. He wrote the horror story of his experience and read it in an Authorial reading class — The student reads his or her text aloud in front of the class (group of people). The purpose is to authorise or verify the text; thus, the student must read clearly and comprehensively. That is how he realised the potential aspects of his story. He transformed his text into a fairytale base, synergised the thoughts from his authorial text and dialogical acting — Exploring a double existence of an actor in the role and the ability to identify with the role or distance from it. He wrote approximately 15 pages of texts, played with his perspective, and put on a fictional character about a young boy who is a hero. He positioned his hero character in the horrible dark train situation and allowed his character to have a completely different reaction from what he experienced. Thus, the whole enactment helped the author overcome the fear by distancing from the situation and portraying the real experience he could have experienced vividly from many perspectives. In his performance, humour is induced by the distance he puts. Incongruity is visible in the situation of the young warrior who considers darkness in the train a horror to fight. As a result, people could laugh with him.

Another of his performance was about a birthday cake. One day he read a terrible article on the cake. The cake had more sugar and gluten than he had imagined, slowly killing people. He was controlling himself not to eat any kind of cake. Later, he decided to transform this experience into a text. He does not want to write about his dreadful experience in a natural form. He tried to convert his fear into a likeable symbol of guitar, balloon, and birthday song. The play was about the audience preparing a cake for him, but he was not able to eat the cake. He framed this entire story into an act full of playfulness. He creates a situation where everyone celebrates his birthday, but he transforms the cake into something else to avoid eating cake. People burst into laughter as he continued to escape eating it. Thanks to the framework, he could pleasantly talk about fear out loud in front of many audiences. By this presentation, he would have already detached himself from the anxiety associated with the cake.

Nevertheless, he cannot say it is a psychotherapeutic experience because when he started to create those performances, he had already overcome most of his fears. However, while distancing himself from experiences that could only have been fear, the play reveals contradictions, which evoked laughter. It means he can see many angles of the situation.

Student B has a topic that she is hesitant to speak about in front of the public. The topic was that she was looking for a boyfriend immediately, but finding a partner was not easy at all. She suspects the story is too private. It would not be interesting for the audience. She does not want the story seems desperate or miserable as if she needs help. She intends to share the feeling of finding a partner by touching on those emotions everyone should have felt at least once in their lives. She distanced herself from these concerns and tried to communicate with people. The audience laughed while watching a spirited and energetic performer in many playful situations. She explained what kind of boyfriend she wants, what she wants to do with her boyfriend, and how her mother is forcing her to have a boyfriend. As a result, she concluded that even without a boyfriend, it is okay to be alone.

In a unique situation where performers have to make their own story, such as an authorial presentation, playfulness helps performers greatly, and it has the following effects. It helps to face the performer's situation positively, gives the performer the courage to express it, and helps to communicate with the audience as a performative story. Although student B did

not intend to make people laugh like standing-up comedy, her goal to connect and communicate with the audience made this performance humorous. All KATaP students have to tell their own stories on stage. The way she could confidently express her weaknesses would have given courage to other performer students to speak out their stories.

3.2. There is subjectivity in every humorous situation.

Student C made an authorial presentation based on the Japanese animation *Death Note*. This authorial presentation is about communicating with audiences and playing one role, 'Ryuk' who is Death God, by writing the audience's name in a death note. As one of the audience members, I am used to anime-related online jokes. Therefore even though this performer tried to write my name on a death note as a part of the performance, I could see the ironic situation and enjoy it. Nonetheless, I did not realise that writing people's names in the note to kill people would trigger somebody's death, which is brutal. Some viewers did not accustomed enough to Japanese anime culture, its brutal literalism and logic. As a result, they perceived her 'Death note.'³⁰ as literally killing someone, not as humour. I noticed that many audiences are surprised and even offended by the description of writing their name on the death note.

Humour could arise by creating contradictory conditions. However, it can be perceived differently depending on the environment in which people live and what kind of life they go through. Jean-Paul explained that humour occurs from subjectivity to individual observers of the comedy. Humour may not be accepted depending on personal reflexivity. For the performer to achieve the desired effect, it must be a considerate operation. Performers need to be aware of appropriation. In addition, if the performer makes others laughable while using sensitive topics in the performance, it could unintentionally offend someone or make them unsafe. To avoid this problem, I recommend that performers make themselves clowns. By doing that, audiences could understand the performer's intentions with humour much easier.

³⁰ Tsugumi Ohba, Takeshi Obata (2003) *Death Note*, Weekly Shonen Jump.

Conclusion

I experienced the Czech theatre culture, which loves humour, and I was educated in KATaP and produced performances, including authorial presentations. KATaP is a department that focuses on creating the experiences of each actor in performance. Every student had to study how to express their personal stories persuasively to others. As I was preparing for my authorial presentation about my issues with racism, I saw unexpected laughter from the audience. I realised that people in other situations talked and sympathised with my pain through laughter. This experience developed my interest deeply about humour in performances. "In what situations and conditions does humour evoke? What role does humour play in a performance?"

I started researching humour and could understand that a wide variety of philosophers have tried to define humour. Philosophers, including Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, Jean-Paul, and Ivan Vyskočil, have argued that humour is revealed through irony and contradiction, using the effect of distance and personal insight. Through these philosophers' definitions of humour, I could understand that humour is an intellectual activity that observes the contradictions of the world. I also researched the works of various playwrights such as Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, and Bong Joon-ho. They use the paradox of the story, and it induces humour. The humorous scenes in the performance not only emphasised the story's main topic but also showed the author's intentions hidden in the story. Spirit also made the stories more endearing and friendlier.

My interest in humour reached the students who made performances in the same academic program as me. I conducted Interviews to listen to the authorial acting students' first-hand experiences. Many authorial actors felt pressure to tell their unpleasant experiences directly, so actors tried to express their stories in various ways. They used distance or playfulness and brought a delightful contradiction to the situation. I learned from performers on stage that being a clown is not just folly and funny, but a strong person who can see the world with distance, the ridiculous side of it, and laugh at their suffering. Despite the performer talking about their problems, people responded to the performer immediately by bursting out laughing. The audience could accept life's irony, such as the gap between life and expectations. Studying humour allowed me to realise that spirit does not exist as a tool for a

performer but instead occurs naturally in the situation story shows. The process of researching humour gave me not only enjoyment but also the courage to face a rough life. The humour in the performance can transform an individual's pain into strength. I believe that life and the world often seem just ridiculous, but confronting it and being able to laugh at it is evidence that humans are strong.

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