

Reviews

Schwanebeck, Wieland. 2022. *Comedy on Stage and Screen: An Introduction*. Tübingen: Narr Studienbücher.

240 pp. €26.99. ISBN: 978-3-8233-8533-2.

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Wieland Schwanebeck, a German researcher in literary and cultural studies, has published and edited numerous studies on films such as *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) or *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Minghella 1999), on directors like Alfred Hitchcock, on movie characters like James Bond, on authors adapted for the screen like Patricia Highsmith and on more transversal topics, whether it be literary twinship, crime literature, masculinity or impostors in fiction.

His latest title, *Comedy on Stage and Screen: An Introduction* (2022), is part of the *Narr Studienbücher* (Studybooks) series of Narr Publishing. The aim of the collection is to reflect on research subjects and issues in literary studies and make them accessible to students. The didactic purpose of the book, underlined by its subtitle *An Introduction*, is reflected in its very clear layout: each of the fourteen chapters ends with a synthetic summary and further reading recommendations (three titles each), an overall structure that, surprisingly, misses a final conclusion. Important terms are highlighted in bold types, special paragraphs about valuable quotes from authors and/or primary sources are offered in boxes, other paragraphs, outlining the main points of the preceding pages or useful definitions of basic terms, come highlighted in grey frames or backgrounds, all with icons pointing to them in the margins to attract the readers' attention. The readers will also find tables and graphs, among thirty-four illustrations (although, incidentally, one may regret their very small format) and a very useful paratext including a seventeen-page list of references and a fifteen-page index.

Chapter one introduces the author's project and plan in their full scope. The latter follows a more or less diachronic structure, starting with Ancient Classical authors to reach the twenty-first century, travelling through Shakespeare's era or the Restoration times on the way. In doing so, Schwanebeck wants to show the outstanding stability of the genre over the years, especially regarding the main patterns or plots followed. He also intends to explore "modes and subgenres" (2022, 11): those include tragicomedy, carnivals, satire, the absurd, the grotesque, farce, slapstick, the working-class comedy, nonsense, cringe humour, to name but a few. All share a common feature: they are intended to provoke laughter in the audience, a goal for which they rely on "techniques, motifs, and character types" (13). This is consistent with David Lodge's definition of the genre: "comedy in fiction would appear to have two primary sources, though they are intimately connected: situation (which entails character [...]) and style" (1992, 110). These are presented throughout the chapters and instantiated by numerous excerpts from theatre, literature and cinema, many of them from English-speaking cultural

areas. While stressing the importance of structure and of the “smallest unit of comedy,” i.e., the gag (Schwanebeck 2022, 14), the author delves into comique techniques and provides an overview of theoretical debates about humour and laughter, ranging from Aristotle and Plato to Nietzsche, Hobbes, Hegel, Bergson, Freud, Butler and Cixous, among others. Humour has indeed been much studied by philosophers, but sociology, anthropology, stylistics and linguistics are called for too, so works by Jakobson, Habermas, Goffman, Eco, Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Lévi-Strauss, Koestler are also drawn upon.

Chapter two is dedicated to Old Comedy, mainly from Greece, first of all Aristophanes’s plays and their “bawdy humour” (Schwanebeck 2022, 22), then to New Comedy, with authors like Theophrastus—whose stereotypical characters are interestingly put in parallel with the *Home Alone* movie protagonists (Columbus 1990) or with Roman playwrights Terence and Plautus, whose tropes are correlated to Sondheim’s musicals and to *A Fish Called Wanda* (Crichton 1988). The master/servant pairing and the slapstick gag are discussed along the way, to explain how violence and the resolution of conflicts have been used since Classical Antiquity to trigger laughter. This synthetic way of proceeding is one of the remarkable qualities of the book, as it relates historical considerations to modern forms of comedy and manages to surprise the readers with very accurate and stimulating digressions, which ultimately prove not so digressive.

Chapter three explores the relationship between comedy and tragedy and the inferior status that has always been ascribed to the former, tracing it back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*; comedy authors have nevertheless repeatedly used dramatic plots and characters to address very serious issues. Black humour and the “laughter of despair” (Schwanebeck 2022, 38) often have to do with death or mortality, as shown by the very appropriate example of *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959), with its carefully built plot where suspense increases the comic power of gags and punchlines that work as tools to release tension. This mix of “thrill and laughter” (Schwanebeck 2022, 40) is also spotted in Alfred Hitchcock’s movies. Schwanebeck argues that comedy and tragedy are complementary rather than antithetical and may even interplay: one just has to look at the subgenre known as tragicomedy, as Shakespeare had well understood in his day. It is no surprise then that chapter four opens up with a review of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies and their place in the Elizabethan theatre context. The link is made with the screwball comedy conventions of the 1930s and 1940s: the split in the social contract based on patriarchal hierarchy and the play on sexual innuendos are often found in both genres, which conclude, however, with a happy ending and a return to more conservative values and organisation (for further details, see Halbout 2013, 2022). On the contrary, the fool figure, a category of clowns, was designed to embody “anarchy and inversion” (Schwanebeck 2022, 65) and hint at political issues. Subsequently, inversion patterns are the object of chapter five and they can be dated back to the carnival tradition, where class barriers crumble (78). Cross-dressing and trickster characters are often resorted to there, prompting the author to analyse Bakhtin’s views on medieval culture. Schwanebeck also focuses on the functions that carnival is meant to fulfil in terms of libido and sexual release (a phenomenon famously described by Freud) and shows how modern cinema is prone to reproduce gender clichés, since carnivalesque scenarios are the backbone of many popular comedies on the screen.

Chapter six turns to the Restoration times and their raunchy plays staging cuckold husbands and sexualised female protagonists in satirical and ribald performances. However, adultery comedies are not limited to obscene farces and often play on witticism, via one-liners or asides. The genre is not restricted to the seventeenth century and still appeals to mass audiences: the rake character, for instance, with his frequent subtext of misogyny and homophobia, can be observed in contemporary long-feature films like the *American Pie* series (Weitz, 1999; Rogers 2001; Dylan 2003; Schlossberg and Hurwitz 2012). This brings us to chapter seven about the comedy of humours depicting laughable human weaknesses at their utmost and the comedy of manners with “wider social implications” (Schwanebeck 2022, 93)—this is also true of political sitcoms—open to satire and the “art of the insult” (96) dear to Irish authors. The chapter presents dandies on stage and the drawing-room comedy subgenre, with its taste for “masquerade and fiction” (99), where identity and reputation are usually at stake. Schwanebeck draws an interesting parallel here with “existential sitcoms” like *Blackadder* (Curtis and Atkinson 1983-1989) or *Seinfeld* (David and Seinfeld 1989-1998), which are not so far removed from the Theatre of the Absurd discussed in the following chapter. Chapter eight explains the philosophy of the absurd and correlates it to the incongruity theory of humour, which conceives humour as induced by a discrepancy or ambiguity which disturbs its addressees to the point that they will laugh to shake off the unease thus produced. On a wider scale, it informs the study of “existentialism on stage” (Schwanebeck 2022, 110), with its bathos and patterns of repetition and circularity (111). These may be at work in highbrow plays such as Samuel Beckett’s or Harold Pinter’s, but are met in popular culture too, the most famous examples being Charlie Chaplin’s tramp series and Laurel and Hardy’s shows, and, more recently, the *Seinfeld* sitcom previously mentioned.

Chapter nine is focused on the history of the grotesque from Nero’s reign on: it puts the emphasis on the aesthetics of the unruly body as a sign of “decadence and over-indulgence” (121) bordering on the horror genre. This has been a laughing matter for centuries, right up to the British Monty Python anarchic, nearly cartoonish sketches, regarded by the author as models of “alternative comedy” (130). Next, chapter ten addresses the social dimension of comedy with its exclusion-inclusion parameters underlying the concept of laughers as a community (which paved the way for the canned laughter heard on TV sitcoms). Laughter depends on shared norms and conventions, a paradigm well exploited by the post-war Ealing Comedy; this British genre of films played on “sympathy for outsiders and eccentrics” (141) and their rebellious spirit. These somewhat survived in the working-class comedies of the 1990s, among others the highly successful *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo 1997), which also provides an opportunity to re-examine gender politics. Chapter eleven moves on to farce, an underrated subgenre that Schwanebeck defines as “a type of comedy full of unlikely plot developments and thoroughly confused characters” (2022, 147). It often relies on slapstick or bedroom stories, appealing to the releasing power of laughter, with well-documented mechanisms such as repetition, inversion and the objectification of characters (158); farcical moments are to be found even in sophisticated comedies, a relevant example being the Coen Brothers filmography. Farce dialogues are rich in Freudian slips, double entendres and puns.

Chapter twelve, quite appropriately, is then devoted to nonsense, a subgenre that has always promoted that same form of “linguistic anarchy” (169). The author cites writers Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, of course, as literary predecessors of the Monty Python sketches or the Marx Brothers’ movies. However, nonsense is not limited to dialogues and it makes great use of visual gags as well to create a feeling of “comic anarchy” (178). It also works well with parody, as shown on screen by Will Ferrell and Mel Brooks. Chapter thirteen, not unsurprisingly, then turns to mockumentary and cringe comedies, “where painful laughter and mechanisms of social exclusion take priority” (179) to provoke the viewers’ embarrassment and question the “acceptable self” (182), which is quite similar to the reactions induced by the neurotic and awkward *schlemiel* character of Jewish origin. Schwanebeck states, very correctly, that the main protagonists of cringe comedies enjoy an ambiguous status as the audience may wonder whether “to laugh *at* or *with*” them (187), as is the case with the iconic *Bridget Jones* (Maguire 2001, 2016; Kidron 2004; Morris 2025) or *Borat* (Charles 2006) heroes, and, on TV, Larry in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David 2000-2024). Responses to cringe humour can be influenced by political correctness, as taboo topics are often at the heart of those comedies, but they have an undeniable cathartic quality (Schwanebeck 2022, 188), which may explain their success.

To conclude, the author dedicates chapter fourteen to a still insufficiently debated issue, i.e., gender and comedy. Given the importance taken by gender studies nowadays, this insight in the part that it plays within the field of comedy is most welcome. Deconstructing stereotypes imposed by the establishment about men and women helps understand the minor place devoted to female comedians: scripts are gender-marked, and the overall marginalisation of women in society, as well as the sexual undertones remarked upon in previous chapters, reflect on stage and screen; either they turn women into a laughing stock, owing to the superiority theory of humour, where the laughers deemed themselves superior to the persons targeted, or they deny women a comic ability, for lack of aggressiveness or, on the contrary, because of the unease induced by the transgressive power shown in comic performances. The author has many examples to quote, ranging from the Medusa figure analysed by Hélène Cixous to the fate of modern actresses such as Greta Garbo or Katharine Hepburn, and that of female sketch writers and comedians, first of all Elaine May.

This book, designed as an introduction, as stated in its title, is aimed primarily at students, yet it will be very useful as a sound synthesis for all scholars interested in comedy, humour, stage and screen. A most solid work in those fields, it can nevertheless appeal to a less specialised readership, thanks to its many up-to-date details and references to popular culture and its very clear style and structure. Schwanebeck has indeed succeeded in making his academic research both entertaining and erudite in this very stimulating monograph.

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