

“Harmless” Laughter and Bitter Laughter



Literature & Arts

Keywords: laughter, comic action, comic, irony, humor.

Anila Vogli

Lecturer at the Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Tirana, Albania

Abstract

The complexity that characterizes the interrelation between “comic” and “laughter”, in life as well as in art, has attracted the attention of many scholars and art critics, during different eras and periods of time. Their findings differ from one another, at times welcomed or criticized, but nevertheless totally agreed upon or completely proved as true. This entire situation was created from the very specific nature of these notions on one side, and on the other from their renewed functioning in life and in art on the other, especially in scenic creative art. This is the scope of my essay as well, exactly to aim to enlighten the factors that will help us to better compare both kinds of laughter: “the harmless one” (the laughter caused by the situations of everyday life), and “the bitter one” (with a clear function).

Introduction

Comic and laughter are two different notions and categories closely related like “cause” and “effect”, and therefore they should not be treated the same, as well as not be separated from each other. The overwhelming majority of comic phenomena and characters in life are followed by laughter and with laughter as “cause” and “effect”, but not all comic characters and phenomena are followed by laughter and with laughter; on the contrary, we have very little desire to laugh. More frequently, other reactions are provoked and instigated which verge on laughter, but not exactly are such for instance chuckle, irony, disgust, disdain, contempt, etc.

The interrelation between laughter and comic is not necessarily an interdependent one. It is not indispensable that there should not be some perceived comic action to make us laugh, nor do we inevitably laugh when we face a comic phenomenon. Thus, neither the former nor the latter (in specific cases) converge providing a key to the explanation and exact understanding of the exiting relation between comic and laughter.

Laughter is a physiological reflex and for people to laugh it’s not necessary for them to perceive a gesture, a word, an action, a comic phenomenon or performance. There are a lot of cases when sick people or in extremely low spirits, before or during intense crises, frequently laugh almost hysterically, or they pretend to laugh full-heartedly when in fact the whole thing is a game, a trick, a trap or a disguise. This does not mean that the phenomenon, in this case, is comic. It can be dramatic as well as tragic. Pretending to laugh when suffering inside, but terrorized by anxiety. Insecurity and fear have nothing at all to do with the comic.

Shallow thinking by the naive or moron, stupidity and paradoxical off-topic reasoning, cause mirth and laughter. Mirth and laughter can be caused when some particular body tissues are tickled or aimlessly sometimes by drinking, drugs, getting tipsy, loss of control, hallucinations

deformed images sights of both things and people, distortion and disproportions, the crippled, an ugly or comic face getting smeared in muddling stone or dirty water, falling into a pit or when rolling down slopes, when a body is dyed or smeared in paint, paste cream, when you are dressed-up and someone drops a bucketful of water over your head, when you're knocked off your bike or motorcycle, although the consequence of all these could be serious or death.

Hundreds of family video clips are shown on television screens featuring various episodes and scenes with which you can split your sides with laughter. Such psychic conditions or consequences of neutral disorders, or consequences of horrible situations, when the truth has to be concealed are endless in life as well as in literature and arts with a different character's reactions. But all these reactions and episodes are not regarded as comic. The comic was something "low" in the concept of Dionysian rituals and the first theater performances, because of crowds of peasants and feasts and drinking. Comos, a Dorian celebration of songs and dances in all four seasons especially in spring, was a collective peasant joy when people drank and got intoxicated, when anecdotes, games and teasing especially those to do with fertility, people teased and made fun of each other using a think wand kept between their legs as a metaphor to stand for the masculine organ, "phallus" namely sexuality reproduction, and attached each other playing and imitating the sexual action. This primitive ritual of a society in a nearly primitive stage coded as part of the comic by the term of such Dorian celebrations with the name "Comos".

In this way, the comic was viewed as a vulgar action with sexual content which excites merrymaking and laughter. But laughter is not arguably only the comic, but the latter means much more than that and transcends laughter.

Let's consider highly successful comedy of the early '90s when the communist dictatorship had been overthrown and the satire towards all phenomena decaying and ridiculing it particularly attacked its renowned representatives, the leadership. This comedy is entitled "the forbidden hunting" by Filip Cakuli, set on stage by the Variety show of Tirana 1995 and later made into a film. The central figure is Enver Hoxha, called "He", masterfully acted by Vasillaq Vangjeli, in terms of plastics, speech intonation and being a close resemblance to the dictator's statue. Enver Hoxha's figure is retained, by both the writer and actor, in reliable tones, although the form of comedy is. Through contemptuous attitude, the dictator's fake grandeur is evidently, revealed. It is his pretend popular nature, his policy of sitting down on his knees with the people which are embodied by two poor villagers like xha Braho, or Nafia, the former is clever but scared, while the latter is stupid but daring. The leader's bright humble figure is discredited by the contradictory act of the comedy. Both the reader and the spectator, instead of inferring that this is an inspiring, orator-leader, on the contrary, come across empty rhetoric and slogans, converted into tedious, hackneyed clichés. Instead of sharp wit and energetic action, we're presented with a total befuddling, sleepiness, aging and stupidity, which in lead to the demise and actual aging of the communist leader (fitful sleepiness, urination, napping over meals or advising etc).

We could, in this case, mention Cant's words in his book "Criticism of Judgment" saying that:

the comic appears to be the relation or release from a previous tension, overt or covert. The comic implies an intellectual assimilation of the aesthetic object, even a poetical presence, accompanied by meditation and intellectual pleasure"¹.

Even in the comedy "Forbidden Hunt" while considering the actions and reactions of the leader, his figure conveys a high degree of comic reaction. In terms of literary accomplishment (Filip Cakuli) and artistic-acting performance (Vasillaq Vangjeli), despite containing quite a few ordinary, vulgar elements, the banal and trivial approach has nothing to do with the comedy.

Satire is both beautiful and witty with sudden pinpointing in the form of paradox. We have obviously come to what Aristotle called "an ugliness that does not embitter". Thus, what happens is the serious comic treatment of comic events; the evil, the ugliness in life has naturally turned into an artistic literary object, in both effect and impact on the aesthetic awareness of the reader and viewer as well as, on the other hand, the outcome of the literary artistic interpretation of this by both the writer and actor consist in a healthy, hilarious reaction with freeing and catharsis power (out of the fear this tyrannical figure once aroused).

Returning to Cant's thesis, the approach to and the interpretation of the dictator's abominable figure by both the writer and actor neither embitters us nor adds any fear, danger, desperation which ones we could have felt. This happens just because the comic is not devalued through inappropriate, weightless and meaningless laughter.

This work performed on stage is exposed by the two sides of the comic contents; the normal in the form of the refusing idea and art in the form of the comic expression of the character already invented. In this way the moral idea is not out of place, is not disgusting as it is not stated through political rhetoric etc. On the contrary, it is artistically clad stemming from the dictator's inner character and our perception. The latter provides the moral idea with a beautifully artistic expressiveness. Satire, sarcasm in the form of both irony and teasing has brought about "His" figure, namely the leader (Enver Hoxha), in purely comic.

One of the most impressive characters in "Forbidden hunt" through which denial and denunciation of violent police structures come alive through satire, is a stale security officer Sillo, who attends to the political activity of the "big" when he goes to the base to meet the people. The actor Koco Devole has performed a rather interesting figure, the man who knows and gets into every cranny, manipulates everything by conjuring up illusions attends to the welfare of the leader's agenda, the arrangement of the meeting with the two villagers Nafie and xha Braho,

meals, accommodation, especially in the hunting scene. This character, Sillo, reminds you of the actions of the abominable state security people, that is, the lowly and ugly dictatorial occurrence.

Self-sacrifice, subservience to the leader, harshness on subordinates, abuse of power, fraud, which are all lower and ugly in this man, are all comic properties more closely of satire. If this man arouses a feeling of disgust and hatred to the reader and viewer to refuse him, to distance themselves from his danger, to counteract spiritually, the other two characters are more “easily” perceived. Xha Braho is more acceptable for us, he is a victim, villagers who what others say or else he will be punished. The comic element arises from the refusal of the acceptance through words and conscious contradiction and that’s why many retorts are used in the dialogue with Sillo. By the way, when Sillo asks him if there is any milk, initially he says that there is not even a drop for kids, but then when he senses that he has gone wrong and fears punishments, he replies: “Yes, there is plenty, the cooperative farm has lots”. Contrary to the popular compromising, ironic peasant character embodied in xha Braho, the blade of satire and sarcasm is honed further in Nafije (actress Mariana Kondi), although as far as comic form is concerned, it is to do with a burlesque element targeting the sense of compromise and acceptance by separating self-deception on the grotesque boundaries in xha Braho’s statements before Sillo who is even happy to have slaughtered the only lamb left to satisfy “the big” who had stepped into his house, whereas Sillo provides the big with other meat for lunch, specially ordered from the government kitchen, thus wasting his lamb. Therefore, going to meet the people and sitting down with them is nothing but a deception, a lie. The comic contradiction is defined in the antinomy; differently body.

The deliberate exaggerations, and caricature, especially in the treatment of Nafije and later the hunting scene with the security officers who play the role of hounds followed by the pig which must go to the aim for the leader to kill it (he even shoots at them risking their lives, because he can’t see, he is blind), cause laughter for both the reader and the viewer as in essence they represent the degree of the disintegration of their personalities, obedient servants to self-sacrifice toward the leader and dictatorship.

As regards the humorous power of a literary work, which rises above the concrete aspect of a living phenomenon providing an aesthetically synthesized and elaborate approach, profess. Alfred Uçi states:

“Literary works, being aesthetic concentrations, are singled out from other aesthetic non-artistic phenomena of the reality, as literary works are the focused, concentrated approach of aesthetic assimilation because they are presented as new aesthetic values, that is, create in themselves ‘a second aesthetic reality’, composed by an artist. This renders art the highest form of aesthetic assimilation. That’s where its crucial specific lies.”²

Or the following:

“Art in its entirety is not a passive photographic copy of objects but it is transformed aesthetic recognition.”³

Humorous literature, mostly predetermined to fill up the repertoires of professional variety shows in the country prior to 90, beyond known restrictions imposed by the rigid requirements of Marxist aesthetics, has brought forth acute problems of the Albanian society. At times, it avoided as much as it could “Procrust’s said, differently done. The comic contradiction in Nafija appears as both awareness and unawareness. Nafija is aware of the desolate condition in the village, but indoctrinated as she is, not only accepts this condition but regards it as a necessary, normal and reasonable; she ever goes further in her mounting irrationality by swearing before Sillo and the leader with brainwashing memorized slogans. On the other hand, the connotation of a physical action churning due to Sillo’s dual understanding turns into the expected immoral attitude of this cooperative militant who can donate anything for the party, even her bed”, self-restriction and strict party censure.

The extraordinary amount of literary production in the short types of drama intended for the variety shows, some of them published as separate books as well as in the “variety show” bulletin of the central house for folk creativity alongside the need that 16 professional theatres had for repertoire for the 4 compulsory annual premieres, we must also add hundreds of variety show groups in production lines and built-up areas, schools and other institutions. Out of this immeasurable amount of literary materials, most of it was weak and to be discarded. But out of the huge pile of them, it can be assumed that a part, however, small has been fruitful and useful, and therefore an object of research to spot and pinpoint the positive qualities and achievements, which has served us as a reference point for our research and propositions.

It is already well known that comedy lives in actuality in the present, in the latest and is rapidly consumed and it loses its comic effect when the phenomenon has disappeared. This is more than time for some genres of humor, which as part of the type of comic face self-consumption within an extremely short time frame. This happens because in other types of drama time server as an identification mark for a number of tangible and datable phenomena which are even rather concrete. When we talk of drainage taking place in winter instead of in summer, when there is no rainfall, the problem has been real and cannot stand the test of time. The same applies to the non-use of “citjane” (think woolen baggy trousers) by Albanian women. The 1960-s phenomena have come to a close and have no more comic functions, such as laughing at a priest, muezzin who crafts amulets and magic. The daily, the latest treatment of such phenomena is their characteristic. The problem has already been solved and does not carry the same effect or importance as it used to when it was a real wound for the society and needed immediate treatment. On the other hand, the short literary dramatic materials do not carry the same power as the complete materials to accomplish a social political economic and philosophical syntheses so as to transcend the specific time frame. It is the other bigger literary genres such as comedy which

enable such a thing. Even such genres are conditional in their success due to their relevance to time and performance. Very few geniuses like Aristophanes, Moliere, and Shakespeare, whose work feature a universal breath reading the contemporary audience.

Owing to its characteristics and nature of communication, comedies and other short forms has a self-confining sense in relations to its recipient or perceiver. It is self-confining not in the sense of the impact it has or the importance it bears, but in the aspect of recycling. The latter rarely functions as in cases of shorts forms the researched matter made into a literary work is closely linked to the latest development, current events which are self-consumed within the above-mentioned time frame. Their recipient is the contemporary man when it was written. That's why the insinuated provocation is more perceptible and effective. In time this effect weakens or totally disappears. It is necessary for imminent human events and existential problems to be regarded as symptomatic comic phenomena and qualities, which synthesis and delegate comic events and characters to future time frames, thus securing the succession and ability of recycling which implies extending the limited time and space in which they are set.

I would like to draw your attention to highly successful monolog of the 1970-s "Do you need more about Belul" written as a story by Qamil Buxheli and acted on stage by the talented actor of the Fieri variety show Fuat Boci. A working range of sketches and comedies are written about concert and concerted as an ugly personality trait of many people. The phenomenon in itself does not have a time limit, it is permanent, it repeats from time to time and from one moral anthropological space to another. The way it appears, especially its bearer, its type and character and the way it is conveyed to others do not change. They vary from one (type, character) to another (form, appearance, presentation). The efficiency of Qamil Buxheli lies in the fact that he casts light on the essence that the comic phenomenon of the arrogant represents. And therefore it defies time limits and its various recipients. We still read avidly their excellent meaningful monolog as well as Buxheli's story. The question is; why? Because the gist of the identified phenomenon is a successive recycling in both time and space which apparently in terms of vanity and ugliness. They are unalterable traits of human nature. Beluli is a timeless arrogant, past, present and future. Generally, the comic character, in this case, converts into an arched type. This inner self-recycles, but the way he appears adapts to his social circles, times when he is set in, spaces where he breathes, specific action, concrete and unique, speech, ambition, relationships, situations and circumstances to which he adapts. This story, changed into an exquisite monolog, outstandingly performed by the actor Fuat Boci, defies the usual readers' and spectators' forgetfulness in a specific period. The reaction it provokes in the recipient does not wane the curiosity, which stems primarily from comic unexpectedness, original observation aesthetic and artistic surveillance, which originally present the phenomenon and character. The writer has used self-conceit, giving rise to the comic contradiction between what is pretended and fake and what in fact genuinely reveals during the speech(or and the actor's action). Belul is an honest, dare person who risks his life to save the common propriety. This morally laudable and socially act is related in front of others by a comic character played by Fuat Boci. There is a kind of contradiction or

bravery and daring actually praises himself by showing off as brave and more daring than the one who committed the act. Therefore “the narrator” turns into “the narrated”; instead of talking about Belul and his moral act, they speak about themselves converting the objective of speech into simply a pretext for themselves. This “overtun” of relations is not just formal - the narrator and the narrated - but a content relation where the comic character is targeted indirectly, through auto denunciation who supposedly was “the brave and the daring” who helped Belul out, in which Belul would have done nothing without his support. So the arrogant substitutes the real brave and daring.

Belul’s act diminishes almost vanishes, but through exaggeration the narrator’s act, namely the arrogant, with his tricks already exposed continues to boast himself to annoyance until at the end the actor, as a counterpoint, utters; “Do you need more about Belul?” as if to say; clear off, we have had enough!

The story “Do you need more about Belul?” contains in itself a phenomenon which essentially remains unchanged and recyclable, which resist the tide of time. However, as it was mentioned above the short comedy and other comic materials are predetermined for a certain period of time, specific circumstances, or public and as such are self-consumed. This does not raise the issue of low quality of materials within a timeframe, as it has usually happened with comic literature and other short dramas either published or used by our variety shows. The issue lies in the essence, function, destination and aesthetical “anthology” of this kind of literature. You cannot avoid the direct and the straightforward characteristic of its literary consumption. Anything “ages” is forgotten, everything lives within the moment of provocation and promotion out of a warm living matter of stimulating the audience with ideas, attitudes, and experiences which stem from the spur of that moment, of that situation, relationship or circumstance. In a sense, you cannot even avoid the freshness and the originality of both the phenomenon and a comic character which do not happen again in concrete social circumstances. The passage of time renders the comic effect to nothing as it has stemmed from a limited concrete social, political or economic process.

Time changes not only the essence of the phenomenon but even its manifestation, and therefore its relation to future time recipient and his way of communication with it. In a metaphorical sense, the comic literature of short forms is a movable medium which captures time in segments marking its performance as a process. The positive and the negative are in a continual contradiction, and it stands to reason that the moral, the beauty, the positive triumph represented by this or that actor (bearer of humor jokes, provocation, irony) or mostly by our emotional and mental presence while comic action and speech bearing the ugly, the bad, the risk is being conveyed. We could refer to a witty remark of a well know aesthetician Suzanne Langer that states;

“Guilt converted into happiness reflects and presents the matter of comedy. Comedy develops through comic action which is disorder and the balancing of the protagonist, his race with the world and his triumph by means of his agility, happiness, strength and his acceptance of ironic or physiological targeting of problems and plights. Whatever the theme, serious or lyrical, elaborate social premeditated satire and harsh targeting the straightforward feeling of life is the essential feeling of comedy and it imposes its rhythmic unity, that is, its organic form.”⁴

References

1. Caushi Tefik. *Aesthetics dictionary* OMBRA GVG, 2005, pp. 240-244.
2. Uçi Alfred “*Metatheoretical aesthetics on art-Classic or neoclassic?*”, Vol.1, Albanian Academy of Sciences, Tirana 2008, p. 174, 206.
3. Laugh Suzana, *Comic Rhythm*, from the book *Theatrology producing and acting, text anthology* by Fadil Hysaj, 2006, p. 174.