

**Humour's critical capacity in the context of South
African dance, with two related analyses**

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Abstract

This thesis spans two fields – South African dance and the philosophy of humour – and attempts to link them through an understanding of their formal mechanisms. I attempt to establish two main ideas: that there is a need for a critical praxis in South African dance, and that humour in dance can be part of this process.

In Chapter One, I discuss elements of the South African dance and theatre industries pre- and post-1994 towards arguing my first point (that South African dance would benefit from a critical praxis). I probe some of the challenges facing artists and describe how choreographers are dealing thematically and stylistically (but not formally) with the concept of the ‘New’ South Africa. Through an investigation of concerns voiced by critics regarding choreographic form in the country, I argue that South African dance would benefit from critical formal investigations in dance-making. Finally, I discuss traditional views of humour in South African dance/theatre and in philosophy, which suggest that humour is predominantly seen as frivolous and unworthy of serious attention.

In Chapter Two, I offer a defence for humour’s more profound critical aspects, suggesting that humour can in fact be seen as critical ‘thinking in action’. A discussion of theories about humour reveals that the basis for humour is the incongruous. A subsequent discussion of form in theatre and dance shows how the incongruous might work within dance form to create meta-dance. In this way, I attempt to link the two fields of humour and South African dance and to make the connection between the critical capacities of meta-dance and those of humour. I suggest, in other words, that humour in dance can create a critical awareness, of the likes advocated in Chapter One.

In Chapter Three, I discuss aspects of two works: my own *This part should be uncomfortable* (2008) and Nelisiwe Xaba’s *Plasticization* (2004). The two analyses differ from each other as does the humour in both works. Despite the differences, I argue that humour in both works is operating on a critical level that includes a meta-level of signification.

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Make your own notes.
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Introduction

My main aim in this thesis is to establish two points. The first is that there is a need for a critical praxis in South African dance; and the second is that humour in dance, perhaps surprisingly, can be part of this process.

In Chapter One, I describe elements of the South African dance and theatre industries pre- and post-1994 towards arguing my first point (that South African dance would benefit from a critical praxis). My description includes aspects of state funding and commercial opportunities for artists and argues that choreographers are maintaining relevancy in the 'New South Africa' through content and frequently through a particular technique in creating dance language. In discussing content, I describe how artists deal thematically with issues of the country's history (such as the injustices of Apartheid) and present concerns (such as HIV/AIDS). In the discussion of dance language, I argue that certain aesthetic elements can be seen as prominent features of what could be called a national aesthetic in that they are both ubiquitous within the South African choreographic industry and replicate the 'Proudly South African' and 'unity through diversity' discourses. I describe these aesthetic elements as 'fusion' and 'vitality'. Through a discussion of concerns voiced by critics regarding choreographic form in the country, I argue in favour of critical formal investigations in dance-making. Finally, I discuss traditional views of humour in South African dance/theatre and in philosophy, which suggest that humour is predominantly seen as frivolous.

In Chapter Two, I contest the idea that humour is (only) frivolous by offering a defence for humour as critical 'thinking in action'. A discussion of theories about humour reveals that the basis for humour is the incongruous. A subsequent discussion of form in theatre and dance shows how the incongruous might work within dance form to create meta-dance. The link between the critical capacities of meta-dance and those of humour are drawn to suggest that humour in dance can create a critical awareness, of the likes advocated in Chapter One.

In Chapter Three, I analyse aspects of two works: my own *This part should be uncomfortable* (2008, abbreviated to *This part*) and Nelisiwe Xaba's *Plasticization* (2004). In the two analyses, which differ from each other, I argue that the humour in the works is operating on a critical level that includes a meta-level of signification. In different ways, the works use humour to create critical meta-dance. In the discussion of *This part*, I argue that the work questions dance's assumed ontology, while *Plasticization*, I argue, can be seen as critically incongruous within the broader context of South African dance.

Methodology

There are two main concerns that I wish to raise regarding the construction and process of this research. The first is my position as a white, middle class, twenty-six year old, South African woman. The second is my position as choreographer of one of the two works analysed. I also briefly outline the practical aspects of the research.

In the process of this research, I have become increasingly aware of my position as a white, middle class, South African, who, thanks to personal circumstances, has, in many ways, been spared the brutality of Apartheid and its legacy. I realise that, in favouring formal experimentation in choreography over thematic concerns of, for instance, the country's historical and social realities, I may be seen as simplifying the intentions and indeed the necessity of the latter's investigations (which, however, is not my aim). In addition, the fact that I rely on criticisms of mostly white South Africans and the European choreographer Emio Greco may suggest a Eurocentric bias. I wish to state that I am aware of these factors and that I intend my argument regarding South African dance to be read as speculative and not as exhaustive.

As I mention in Chapter Three, I am in a comparably different position in relation to the two works analysed. My only live experience of *Plasticization* was during the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2006; while my experience as creator of *This part should be uncomfortable* was obviously far more involved. My analysis of Xaba's work is clearly from the 'outside'. My position in analysing my own work is not as clear. In making the work, I relate to it from the 'inside'; however, in the analysis, I have approached it as a finished product, from the 'outside'. An in-depth analysis of the differences of these positions would be interesting but has not been explored in this thesis, which has focused on the concerns outlined in the introduction.

The methodology consisted of reading and analysing a broad range of sources from published books, journal articles, reviews and internet sources. Personal communications

with relevant individuals also informed my argument. In addition, the project involved analysing recordings of the two works.

A personal interview with Gary Gordon, an external examiner's report by Jay Pather, and a transcript of *This part* to aid DVD viewing have been provided as appendices. A DVD consisting of two recordings of *This part*¹ and one of *Plasticization*² has also been provided. The thesis assumes that the reader has seen (a recording of) the works.

¹ While I refer mainly to *This part* as it was during the first run (Grahamstown, 2008), the quality of the recording of the Oudtshoorn run (under the translated title *Hierdie gedeelte gaan ongemaklik wees*, 2009) was better. While there are differences between the two runs (such as language, some spatial dynamics, quality of performance, etc), readers may refer to either version. It should be noted, however, that the venue parameters were different: The Box venue (Grahamstown) had audience seated on two sides ('L-shape') and had a larger performance area than the Jack Hinden venue (Oudtshoorn), which was a converted lecture hall, with the audience on one side of the small performance area.

² Despite considerable effort, I have been unable to ascertain the exact performance date and venue of the provided recording of *Plasticization*. In its recorded form, it seems exactly as I remember it when I saw it live in Grahamstown (2006).

Chapter 1: The need for critical meta-dance in South African dance and current perceptions of humour

Introduction

In order to establish the first point (that South African dance would benefit from a critical praxis), it is necessary to discuss the current state of dance in the country. This does not aim to be an exhaustive account. Rather, I attempt to make sense of what I see to be certain dominant aesthetic elements that have emerged since 1994, highlighting, for the most part, formal or stylistic aspects (as opposed to aspects of content, for instance).

In the first section, I discuss aspects of the dance industry which have, I believe, influenced certain aesthetic developments. In light of these factors, in the second section, I discuss in particular the popular contemporary choreographic technique of ‘fusing’ movements from different and distinct codified dance forms, and a performance quality which I describe as ‘vital’. I suggest that fusion and vitality are so popular and widespread as to be significant aspects of contemporary dance aesthetics in the country in the transition period between Apartheid and democracy and, in many ways, continuing into the new century. In the third section, I discuss concerns voiced by critics relating to the elements of South African dance, which form the context for my argument in favour of a critical formal choreographic praxis. In the last section of this chapter, I consider how humour is being perceived in dance and theatre.

1.1 Contributing factors to South African dance aesthetics

The poststructuralist argument in dance discourse is that all dance is political (Copeland 1990). For the poststructuralists, as Roger Copeland summarises, “all art, not matter how forcefully it aspires towards absolute purity, is always implicated in the world beyond its formal boundaries” (6). This is especially true of art in South Africa, in which, due to the fraught history of oppression and segregation, all acts seem to be politically heightened. Indeed, Richard Schechner’s observation in 1991 that “everything one does in South Africa

is political” (9) still rings true today. To what extent this may be seen as positive or negative in terms of choreographic innovation is one of the subjects of this chapter. I consider several major factors which I believe have contributed to South African choreographic decisions: the first is funding and the necessity of making art that can be deemed ‘relevant’ in a politically-charged context.

The arts during the Apartheid era were funded according to the Government’s policies of the time, which strongly privileged conservative, Eurocentric arts over indigenous culture. The state subsidised five Provincial Performing Arts Councils (commonly abbreviated as PACs), which were “well-resourced centres with state of the art facilities, and permanent resident companies within those institutions for drama, ballet and opera, with their own orchestras” (Meersman 2007: 295), and were largely for white audiences only as late as 1988 (Loukes 2000: 13). There was no funding for indigenous culture, except for heavily-censored Afrikaans artists (Meersman 2007: 295). In terms of dance, this meant that ballet companies – and eventually two contemporary companies (Hagemann in Garske 1992: 1)³ – had sufficient funding to employ dancers full-time and to create impressively professional, if conservative, work. Non-subsidised companies, in townships and cities, which “worked towards not only a multicultural concept of dance but also that the dancers themselves should represent the different cultures”, received no financial assistance from the state (1). Denied funding from the government, these companies occasionally received sponsorship from other bodies, such as banks, but it was usually a once-off subsidy (1). With the uncertainty of project-to-project funding, as was the case for non-state subsidised companies, little can be done in terms of articulating a sustained and mature aesthetic.

The PACs were the government’s attempt to replicate European tastes (Hagemann in Garske 1992: 2). However, largely due to censorship and the isolation due to the cultural boycotts, in general the art of the PACs was very conservative during the Apartheid years (Meersman 2007: 293). They “were perceived as undemocratic institutions that played a role in cultural oppression” (295) and their work was largely outdated (Louw 1989): “With

³ Pages of Garske are unknown. For reference purposes, I call the first page ‘p.1’, the second ‘p.2’, and so on.

few exceptions, these places ... were white elephants playing it safe for the most part” (Meersman 2007: 296). Some attempts were made by the PACs to engage with local culture through, for instance, the production of ballets with indigenous flavours.⁴ These were poorly-received by the white ballet-viewing public who preferred the standard European canon (Hagemann 1990: 3). Indeed, critics largely saw them as token efforts: the narrative used local names (such as ‘vlei’) but nothing in the form or ideology attempted to transcend or shift traditional ballet values (Glasser 1990: 9; Hagemann 1990: 3). On the whole these companies espoused 19th century European values and were associated with oppression and white elitism in the South African context (Hagemann in Garske 1992; Louw 1989; Steinberg 1993). As Eric Louw (1989) criticises, the PACs and their ‘whites-only’ audiences “live[d] in a culturally-incestuous world which in no way challenge[d] them to consider the world view of others” (110).

Separate to the state-sponsored arts, indigenous dance forms often carried overt political significance. Fred Hagemann notes that these dance forms became a “very, very powerful tool in the resistance movement both in terms of disseminating information – like in the Toyi-Toyi dancing – as well as creating a national resistance identity” (Hagemann in Garske 1992: 2). Indigenous dance became intertwined with activities of the anti-apartheid movement. As Hagemann describes, within the protest movement,

Dance is something that happens all day; it happens at funerals ... at weddings ... at births ... at every protest meeting. Most protest meetings are started with ... [the] singing of protest songs, and with dancing wherever you might be. You just push the chairs aside, in order that a common identity be created within the group of people in that room, at that moment in time and to remind people of where they are within the liberation struggle (Ibid).

Thus, due to the extraordinary political circumstances of the country, dance, both Eurocentric and indigenous, during the apartheid era, carried political connotations even beyond the poststructuralist notion of the politics of form. I turn now to the post-apartheid era, and suggest that the funding changes that happened in the early years of democracy

⁴ For example, The Cape Town PAC (CAPAB) produced the indigenously-themed “Raka” in 1967 (which was subsequently revived in the eighties and nineties), based on the poem of the same name by South African N.P. van Wyk Louw (1941).

(along with audience tastes and commercial opportunity) sustained the necessity for overt socio-political relevance, albeit from a different angle.

Funding agendas shifted dramatically in the 1990's, contributing to a greater commercial thrust in theatre making. As Brent Meersman (2007) outlines, in theory, the new dispensation offered significantly greater opportunities for artists (293). Not only was there a constitution that enshrined the right of "freedom of artistic creativity" (Ibid), but the National Arts Council (NAC) replaced the PACs with the idea that funding for artistic endeavours should now be available to all (296).

To this newly resourced body [the NAC] all artists could now apply. [...] In theory, therefore, the five major theatres in the country – buildings like Artscape, the Civic Theatre and the State Theatre – became the cultural infrastructure to be accessed by all. They were to convert into 'receiving houses' to allow equal opportunity for artists not in the resident companies. These performance spaces were to be made available for those previously excluded. In other words, artists anywhere in the country could apply to the NAC, receive funds, then hire the opera house or theatre and perform their work there (Ibid).

These changes were initially received with optimism (see Maree 1996: 17; Sulcas 1996: 47). Despite high ideals, however, South Africa was in a deep economic crisis (Meersman 2007: 293), and, from 1996, funding for the arts diminished. Similarly, the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR), which was largely based on overseas models, seemed a poor fit to the South African economy and was a factor in the lack of fund availability (298). In addition, there was mismanagement and a lack of vision.

The NACs funding has been arbitrary and bureaucratic. There seems to be no logic to their decisions. It funds mostly on a project-to-project basis, making it impossible to plan. Projects are usually under-funded and often the funding is bungled or tied up in red tape. It has caused dozens of productions to fail. In this environment theatre companies cannot risk guaranteeing employment (302).

The project-to-project nature of opportunities basically means that artists have to start each project from the beginning each time (Mkefa 2009). Training cannot be sustained and artists generally cannot afford to take artistic risks (Gilder 2000). For, a result of perceived failure is a diminished chance at future funding. Artists, playing it safe, cannot refine their

concerns or achieve their potential of innovation (Sichel 2004). Lynn Maree (1996), who joined the staff of the Kwa-Zulu Natal PAC as it negotiated its transition into the new dispensation, reflects the uncertainty that I think many (not just former PAC)⁵ artists felt:

Right now it is unclear whether our survival depends on a readiness to offer our skills and our resources to the community, or a willingness to do *Giselle* or *Swan Lake* and persuade lovers of high culture to sponsor us, or to tour all over the country so as to qualify as a national organisation, or to tour diligently in our region so as to be seen as a regional resource. And until policies settle down, and become practical reality, we think we had better do it all! (17).

While there may have been uncertainty with regards to arts funding, the concepts upon which the democracy was being built were – and are – in common parlance: The ‘New’ South Africa with its ‘rainbow nation’ founded on the goals of inclusiveness and respect vastly contrast the segregation and oppression of the apartheid regime. The discourse of ‘unity through diversity’ reflects the ‘New’ South African ideal of ‘one nation, many peoples’. In light of these concepts, where funding is available it has been primarily concerned with “representivity” and “relevance” in the context of “social reconstruction and the development of a non-racial and non-sexist society” (Scholtz 2008: 8). It has seemed that artists have, to a large extent, had to fend for themselves in the new dispensation (Krouse 2008; Maree 1996: 17), as is reflected in a comment by Matthew Krouse (2008):

No one would ever have thought that it would be the theatre practitioners who would become the stale veterans of cultural struggle, given the lively role that political theatre played in conquering the evils of old (29).

Artists, on the whole, have had few options: Either, they comply to the best of their ability with funding prerogatives and put up with the uncertainty of project-to-project support; they look outside of South Africa (I think of Vincent Mantsoe, Robyn Orlin and

⁵Indeed, Gregory Maqoma’s Vuyani Dance Theatre (VDT) (which, foregrounding previously-disadvantaged individuals, among other aspects, is arguably successful in the aspects of sustainability, representivity and artistic relevance) had to downscale their projects due to reduced funding in 2006, “despite overwhelming demand for them locally and abroad” (Mkefa 2009: 13). Nonku Thabede of VDT told me, “[Since 2006], we [have] not close[d] our offices as we have managed to sustain ourselves through performance fees generated abroad. We have not fully recovered since then to [be able to] contract people on a yearly basis as we did prior [to] 2006, [and] we now work on a project basis” (pers comm. 2010). According to Maqoma, “the company should be saving [the money generated from overseas projects] for future projects, [the money should not] be used to keep the company [going] from day to day” (Maqoma in Mkefa 2009: 13).

Boyzie Cekwana, for instance); they engage in corporate work; they attempt to rely on box office; or they earn money elsewhere. Specifically in dance, the commercial world of cruise liners and popular musicals has opened up and it has become a necessary means for artists to earn money (Sichel 2004 & 2006). The overseas market, meanwhile, draws others away from the country (Ronge 2009; Fleischman in Willoughby 2003). Regarding the impressive number of South African-trained artists holding notable positions on London's stages, columnist Barry Ronge (2009) bemoans our loss:

If actors and directors trained in South Africa can flourish in one of the most competitive and highly regarded theatrical industries in the world, why do we not have a theatre industry that is good and rewarding enough – in terms of both cash and personal growth – to keep them here? (1).

According to Meersman (2007), this lack of state funding has had negative effects on the industry. "Capitalism and globalisation go hand in hand, reducing indigenous arts to copycat commercial formulas, impoverishing local culture and producing results that lack integrity" (302). Simply put, with a loss of funding, the risk of artistic innovation is too great, and artists are often forced to subscribe to popular formulae that are guaranteed to draw an audience (Scholtz 2008: 10).

Popular tastes are thus a major factor in artistic development in South Africa and several factors influence South African audiences' preferences, including what they were exposed to regarding imported art. As mentioned, the art that the apartheid government allowed into the country was conservative – even images of nudes (such as Michelangelo's *David*) were censored (Meersman 2007: 293). This, combined with the cultural boycott (and, after the boycotts, the unappealing low value of the rand [Scimone 1992: 55]), meant that South African paying audiences (largely the white population) were not versed in the trends that were and are inspiring some of our most exciting artists. In 1994, artist and academic Gary Gordon states, "I think that, historically in this country, we have a sense of art with a capital A and that there are only certain kinds of ways that you can perform and make works" (in Frege 1995: 99). Choreographer Robyn Orlin, for example, while being celebrated abroad, took a long time to develop a local following: "In 2003 she was awarded the Lawrence Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance; concurrently, she was labelled locally as 'a permanent irritation'" (Sassen 2008: 26). A similar example is the

ironic situation of The Handspring Puppet Company, whose works “are generated in South Africa, out of a South African ethos, but can only play overseas” (Fleishman in Willoughby 2003). As Fleishman says, “Our industry here can’t deal with [Handspring’s] degree of depth” (Ibid).

Concerns raised regarding the ‘dangers’ of artistic development being controlled by audiences’ tastes, are, I believe, valid. When a similar situation occurred with British ballet companies in the mid-2000’s, resulting in an increase in ballet adaptations of novels, drawing an audience that included fans of the story, Judith Mackrell (2006), widely-respected British dance critic, was forthright in her criticism:

There are real dangers for dance in this trend. Firstly, that the quality of the choreography takes second place to the requirements of getting crowd pleasing costumes and characters onto the stage. Second, that the ballet fails to tell the story as clearly or as vividly as it first appeared in book form. And third, that dance comes across as a dumb, parasitic form of playacting (para. 3).

In other words, dance is not really given the opportunity it deserves to develop. It is ‘kept in the wings’, so to speak, while narrative and/or spectacle take centre stage.

Indeed, narrative is prevalent in South African dance. When asked to reflect on South African choreography, Gordon (2009) responded,

The main drive of most choreographers is with content. I am sure the political history of the country can account for this. We, as South Africans, are so aware of our violent and unfair past history. But it is not only an awareness of past struggles but an involvement with present struggles concerning health, economics, employment, well being and, of course, safety (pers. interview).

Dance has sought to maintain relevance by taking part in the movement to ‘unpack’ the issues of the past, specifically apartheid, and to comment on issues of the present. Thus, while the commercial factor in the industry should not be overlooked, artists have managed to engage with the ‘New’ South Africa on a meaningful level through content and narrative. In this way, dance takes part in the structure negotiating the issues of the ‘New’ South Africa. As choreographer PJ Sabbagha asserts poetically in a programme note,

Dancing bodies are seen as a site of struggle personal, artistic and political a struggle between the physical urges of the body and the demands of a western technocratic society a struggle between the need to be viewed as part of an international community, in the late 20th century and our commitment to a very specific cultural and political heritage (Sabbagha in Sichel 1997: para.6).

Festivals such as “the week-long HIV and Aids awareness initiative When Life Happens”, “an art and culture festival, [which] uses entertainment to deal with pressing social issues, so raising awareness and leading to debate” (JoNews 2007: para.1), attest to this trend. In 2007, the festival featured Sylvia Glasser’s highly-acclaimed *Blankets of Shame*, which, according to its publicity material,

explores the concept of stigma and denial through imagery relating to the abuse of women and children, rape, paedophilia, Aids and healing. It symbolically lifts the ‘blankets’ of silence surrounding these issues through a ritualistic journey interweaving dance, music, the human voice and fabric (JoNews 2007: para.8).

Indeed, as Sabbagha states, the importance of dealing with these issues in South Africa cannot be belittled:

If one considers that a human tragedy equivalent to that of the Twin Towers terror attack [on New York in 2001] unfolds weekly in South Africa alone, why are we failing at all levels of government and society to respond? ... The When Life Happens HIV and Aids arts and culture festival continues in its commitment [that art is] a powerful vehicle for social mobilisation and dynamic social change (Sabbagha in JoNews 2007: para. 5).

In this way, dance harnesses a powerful social relevance.

In addition to harnessing content and social issues, dance has responded in aesthetic and stylistic ways to the ‘New’ South Africa, too. This is the topic of the next section.

1.2 Significant features of the South African dance aesthetic(s) post-1994: Fusion and vitality

Pulled by the desire – and the need – to be relevant, there has been a thrust towards articulating a ‘South African’ aesthetic (Gordon in Frege 1995: 101). The question of what

that aesthetic might be is challenging, as is evidenced by a debate at the first Dance Umbrella forum (1989), which centred on this topic:

One of the most provocative issues is how should Western, Eurocentric dance techniques be integrated into indigenous traditions or expression towards a democratic, non-racial culture. Or should they be discarded altogether? (Sichel 1990: 13).

The search has been for an aesthetic that would enable participation in the discourses of the new dispensation, which espouses 'unity through diversity'. This means engaging in intercultural conversations, while respectfully keeping cultural integrity intact. As dance in the country was linked strongly to culture, dance was set up to play a major role.

Indeed, dance being so overtly political during Apartheid means that dance styles have strong ties with distinct cultural groups. Via dance, cultures were articulating themselves consistently during Apartheid; however, in the new dispensation, these articulations become much more visible to the public eye.⁶ The discourse of 'unity through diversity' has been picked up by choreographers as they attempt to engage in each other's cultural heritage by 'fusing' different dance languages – and in doing so, different cultures – together. The terms 'fusion' and 'interculturalism' have been used interchangeably in dance discourse (see Govender 1994: 2) and "generally [refer] to any piece of art which may result from the creator's decision to present different cultural forms together in a single performance" (Ibid). Artists doing this have been seen to be "consciously or unconsciously pursuing the singular aim of identifying and redefining a South African art form" (2-3). Fusion has been seen as interculturalism in action. Indeed, the claim that "the dancing body possesses a creative space where cultures and codes meet and mingle to enhance their individual performance languages" (Hemphill 2007: para. 38) seems still to be perceived as true. Hence, the stage becomes a political space to represent cultural exchange. During Apartheid, cultures were prohibited from intermingling. Post-1994, on almost every stage at the Dance Umbrella (and elsewhere in the country), cultures have been intermingling constantly. Not only has it been through racially integrated casts, or through works in different styles occupying the same stage (Gordon pers. interview 2009)

⁶ South African Indian culture, for example, was rendered largely invisible during Apartheid when the focus was uniformly on 'black' and 'white'.

but it has also occurred in dance vocabulary: a Zulu *umsino* kick may appear right before a balletic *pirouette*, and right after a Kathakali hand gesture or a jazz ‘ball-change’ in dance phrases. Such a technique can be seen to ‘symbolise many different cultural systems brought together in the dancing body while keeping their integrity intact. What better way to reflect the ‘unity through diversity’ ideal?

In mainstream dance, fusion has been the style of the time: a fusion dance piece (featuring Indian classical dance Bharata Natyam closely interpreting Zulu and English lyrics being performed live)⁷ was presented, for example, at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela (Govender 1994: 3), the first president of the democracy. In addition, it is in fusion that dance finds its popular market. I remember, for instance, watching *African Footprint* (2000), which reflects South Africa’s cultural diversity through a variety of dance styles, sometimes fused, presented in spectacle, and hearing a (white) acquaintance rave about how the show “made one proud to be African”. Indeed, *African Footprint* was officially included in the “Proudly South African” campaign in 2002 (Peak Performances 2003: para.12).

Coupled with the fusion technique is a performance style that is best described as ‘vital’ or ‘expressive’.⁸ Perhaps in reaction to the extreme ideological oppression that primarily the black body was subjected to under the apartheid system, post-struggle dance can be seen to exhibit the body’s expressive, ‘liberated’ qualities – it seems to aim to be enacted freedom. The fusion language is expressed with hyperbole: dancers leap, dive, turn, gesture, shake and roll with intensity and to the maximum of their ability. They show off. The body as vital and alive becomes proof of the freedom the new dispensation promises.

Ballet is particularly interesting within the fusion dynamic. When a black body performs balletic movement language amongst movement sourced from other dance forms (such as indigenous dance forms), there is an almost inevitable sense of pride. The black

⁷ This is not a typical idea of fusion as the dance language remained within the Indian classical dance paradigm but the entire project resulted in a fusion of different culturally-based performance styles (Govender 1994: 3).

⁸ Gordon comments on the general youthfulness of dancers and an element of “high energy” at the Dance Umbrella in an interview in 1994 (Gordon in Frege 1995: 100).

body is suddenly in a position to 'own' this other culture, which, in recent history, was oppressive and to which he or she was denied access. In addition, the parameters of the technique are stretched. There is no real right or wrong in fusion – rather we watch the dancing body interfacing with the technique. The dancer might interpret the classical steps in his own way, changing a leg in an 'attitude' position from 'turned out' to 'turned in'⁹ or allowing a *jetée* to take him rolling onto the floor.

It is treacherous territory to generalise about 'the black dancing body' and 'the white dancing body', especially in post-apartheid South Africa. Nonetheless, I am compelled by the following discussion by Krouse, as it reflects what I have been discussing regarding the vibrancy of the fusion aesthetic in, particularly (but, of course, not exclusively), the black dancing body. Krouse argues that, post-1994, dancers became the "harbingers of a new idiom" in the following manner:

[T]he white dancer's body went from pristine to rotten, via the classical form [... while] the black dancer's body went from rotten to pristine via the traditional form. [...] Black choreographers embraced the world of their fathers and mothers. It was an exercise in sanitation. [...] With newfound freedom black dancers generally behaved well while white dancers behaved very badly. [...] It is fair ... to characterise black dance as a fledgling of a national culture, forever asserting its own importance and independence (Krouse 2008: 29).¹⁰

A current example of this kind of black dancing body is the Johannesburg-based dancer-choreographer Dada Masilo. Still in her early twenties, she is most widely known as a choreographer for her interpretation of classical Western texts, *Romeo and Juliet* (2008) and *Carmen* (2009). In both works, casting herself as the female protagonist, Masilo delivered the narrative through a fusion of contemporary and classical influences. *Romeo and Juliet* presented known and unique contemporary dance language in the classical balletic form, with a significant portion of the dancing happening centre stage in chorus lines, solos or duets. In the programme note, she states, "[the work] originated with my

⁹ 'Attitude' refers to certain position of the limb in ballet vocabulary; 'turned out/in' refers to an angle of the hip in the joint ('turned out' is the standard in much ballet vocabulary).

¹⁰ Krouse (2008) offers examples of black dancers behaving "well": "Gregory Maqoma ... who calls himself 'Soweto backyard boy', showed how the township could spawn a well turned out, enterprising drag"; and white dancers behaving "badly": "[Steven] Cohen took to the auditorium rafters on a swing, depositing a stool on his lover Elu's head while shit eating German pornography was projected like Imax on a cyclorama" (29).

experiments in creating a unique fusion of Ballet and Contemporary techniques” (Masilo 2008). For the flamenco-inspired *Carmen*, the programme note explains, “Masilo is a creator of contemporary dance, but is always intrigued with referencing other dance techniques. This time it’s flamenco” (National Arts Festival 2009: 43). Once again, the balletic narrative form and spatial dynamics are infused with a language of her own combination of flamenco, ballet and contemporary vocabularies. As a performer, she epitomises vibrancy. Feisty, powerful, black and female, her performance explodes with passion and energy. As critic Diane De Beer writes,

Dada Masilo ... simply blowing everyone away with her sassy, sexy and oh-so confidently African Carmen ... says she dances because she loves it. That’s obvious when you experience her exuberance on stage ... I found her extraordinary creativity mesmerising and magical (De Beer in Newtown News 2009: para.3).

I argue that, apart from the thrill of watching her move so fast and so dextrously, there is also a celebration in watching her interpret classical Western texts with South African references (present in both works) and contemporary dance language (instead of classical language). Watching all these influences come together in her vibrant (black) body, provides South Africans who are hopeful about the ‘New’ South Africa with a sense of triumph. In the transaction of watching her blaze – multicultural but distinctly South African – across the stage, with powerful vibrancy, we (South Africans) take ownership of our eclectic cultural heritage.

But, some critics, particularly in the transition period of the early to mid 1990’s, argue that fusion can go wrong when the emphasis is on product or content and not on process or form (Gordon in Frege 1995: 101). The new aesthetic, it is suggested, should not be predetermined by design or codified language but should be the outcome of transgressing our deeply entrenched cultural and racial, self/other boundaries in a profound, rather than a superficial, way. Stringing together disparate codified movements is seen as simply not enough.¹¹ As Hagemann (1990) argues, “Dance practitioners, irrespective of

¹¹ Ilona Frege (1995) describes the results of some choreographic training in the country, “A new work is often a stringing together of different classroom combinations as the outer expression of how a choreographer is feeling or likes to move” (100).

their affiliations, need to rigorously de-construct the practices and principles on which they create dances, in order to discover inter-cultural meaning” (4). Suria Govender (1994) articulates an important question, “when is an experiment in interculturalism merely a fashion statement?” (10). “Fusion artists”, she says, “can easily be accused of [shallow] cultural appropriation if a ritual is taken out of context and performed merely for the physical action” (12).

As with all cultural exchanges, fusion is not a value-free transaction (Hagemann 1990: 2). As the above-mentioned comments have evidenced, it has been felt that movements, like cultures, should not be borrowed and displayed without a real sense of exchange or interconnection. As Jay Pather (1991) says, in superficial exchanges the ‘self’ remains intact with no true boundary crossing towards the ‘other’ (2). During the process of transition in the early 1990’s, Pather warned against this superficial ‘reaching out’:

‘We must reach out’, the advertising jingle of the new South Africa goes. Self in these instances is still paramount. The commonality we seek out of fear perhaps, guilt, desperation, we seek to wear this commonality like a cloak that may reasonably hide the scars and the not yet dry pus of prejudice. Our search besides being divisive is full of motive. It is hail and hearty and an illusion. We are still talking from our dividing lines, our constituencies, our form is still intact ... (Ibid).

Govender (1994) agrees,

If interculturalism is born through the meeting of the self and the ‘other’, the real challenge is to maintain the reciprocity of this dynamic. All too often, the self or more precisely, the ego, dominates over the ‘other’ culture, and words (and all gesture) become a mere extension of one’s own ethos (14).

What is needed, as is evidenced in these critiques, are new ways of working which will effect the desired ‘transculturalism’, a means to reflect the “genuine attempt to go beyond both the ‘home’ and the foreign cultures or specific elements of them” (Hagemann 1990: 2-3).¹²

¹² Notably in the early 1990’s, there were substantial efforts at transculturalism. For instance, Pather, Alfred Hinkel and the members of Jazzart Dance Theatre engaged practically and theoretically with the debate of how to proceed in the aesthetic. See, for instance, Pather (1991).

I will be so bold as to say that what was desired in the early years of democracy was a new paradigm of dance expression: new ideas about what dance can be or is in order to attempt to match the ethos of the transforming, profoundly unknown, 'New' South Africa. The fusion body in general is the body spectacular, the body of certainty; not the body becoming, or the questioning, unknown body. The next section examines criticisms of South African choreography more closely. I give the last word to Gordon as a summary of this section and an introduction to the next:

I know that people are looking for a South African aesthetic. I don't know what it is. Is it me as a white South African or is it Boyzie Cekwana who's a black man in ballet? [...] I always think, to really deal with an aesthetic, you need to go more into form than into content. It is very easy to take a South African story and say this is South African, but you could be using a Western format in the structure. Perhaps you have to work democratically, through process, through incorporating people, but that's not necessarily South African – that could be American. ['What is the South African aesthetic?'] is an impossible question to answer, but I do feel that people [who] are looking for it, tend to go for superficial things – some traditional African dance steps combined with jazz (Gordon in Frege 1995: 101).

1.3 South African dance in need of a critical praxis

As I hope to show, broad criticism of the South African dance scene reflects a need for finding new concepts of what dance is or can be, which is, essentially, an investigation-into form. However, there is also praise for what theatre practitioners are doing with physical images in the country. On the one hand, as I will argue, the paradigms of dance performance can be seen as in need of critical reflection,¹³ and on the other hand, when physically-based performance is subsumed under a theatrical paradigm, it is seen as at the forefront of new aesthetics in the country.

Let me consider how dance can be seen to be offering the theatrical paradigm new innovations. In fact, it is not dance *per se* but the physical image. Indeed, what I shall now

¹³ Of course, there are many examples to contradict this claim, especially from what is considered avant-garde physical theatre and dance from the likes of Gary Gordon and Jay Pather, whose reflections are included in my argument. The critique is mainly levelled at mainstream dance, which is dominated by the fusion aesthetic.

describe is how the physical image – which, being physically-based, is linked to dance – offers the form of theatre new potential for meaning-making.

With the disintegration of the binary oppositions of apartheid (Samin 2005) – and the ‘loss’ of the accompanying enemy object – theatre is attempting to reflect a multiplicity as opposed to a binary. As Richard Samin (2005) asserts, in literature,

in coming to grips with the ambivalence and complexity of today’s changing reality, contemporary fiction is trying to create new modes of representation which provide discursive room for contradictory voices to exist. [... T]he time has come to abandon an aesthetic of conviction for one which is prepared to cope with the interdeterminacy and elusiveness of new meanings (87-88).

This is true in theatre too. The vibrant and powerful protest theatre of the apartheid era, in the new dispensation, did not simply need new topics, but needed new forms (Jamal 2003; Fleishman 1997). As Adrienne Sichel notes, “Drama, as we’ve known it, has died. It’s a whole new era” (Sichel in Loukes 2000: 12-13). Fleishman argues for the relevance of the physical image: “The physical image is multi-valent, ambiguous and complex. It leads to the proliferation of meaning which demands an imaginative response from the spectator” (Fleishman 1997: 207). He continues,

What we need now is the opening up of alternatives and options, the promotion of dialogue ... Physical images are essentially dialogical: a double-voiced play of opposites. [... P]recisely because they do not reduce to simple single meanings, they demand that the audience be actively involved in making individual choices (208).

In other words, the ambiguous nature of the physical image is being used for its political resonance, its ability to say several things at once and to keep the play between these meanings fluid. This is not always seen as positive, and Fleishman (1997) notes the critics:

There are those that would argue that such open-ended images are inappropriate for a country struggling to deal with the uncertainties of a changing reality. They would have clarity, single meanings, a narrowing down of options in a manner designed to appeal to the audience’s need for stability and certainty of understanding (207).

However, argues Fleishman, in the new South Africa, 'proliferating', not fixed, meaning is desirable. In this way, he suggests, dance is leading the way in the 1990's in Europe and America. Sichel detects the occurrence in South Africa, "In many ways, dance at the moment is definitely setting trends for theatre in this country" (Sichel in Loukes 2000: 13). It amounts to a "narrowing of the gap between what has been traditionally accepted as theatre and what has been traditionally accepted as dance" (Fleishman 1997: 208). Indeed, the excitement has been for physical theatre, which has been occurring most significantly in drama departments, where the attempt is primarily, as Gordon reflects,

to weave together the various theatrical strands rather than [to] separate them. [...] In this way, physicality developed alongside conceptual inquiry which included the creating of meaning, metaphor, intentionality, iconography and/or a mythology (pers. interview 2009).

The reasons for this 'total theatre' reflect how politically-charged each decision was and is: "Division in the arts was a bit like viewing the enforced racial separation of the Nationalist government" (Ibid).

Indeed, regarding the influential First Physical Theatre Company, which was started in 1993 with a group of talented postgraduate students from Rhodes University under the artistic directorship of Gordon, Loukes (2000) notes the company's 'total theatre' epistemology, "The company is widely seen as one of the templates for physical theatre in the country, and their style draws heavily on dance, but also employs voice and sound" (13).

This trend reflects a global postmodern concern which, "attempts to resist the containing, stabilising effect of any single perspective by multiplying different frames of understanding and levels of performance" (Connor 1996: 114). This hybridity and promiscuity is especially important for theatre in South Africa:

In our pluralist and diversified culture there can be no autonomous forms; no pure genres, only transformations, mutations and contaminations. Both forms, dance and theatre, have in common the presence of the physical body in front of the audience and it is the physical body that should be the canvas on which new images are created; the physical body as a metaphor for the social body we are in the process of creating with its multilingual and multicultural characteristics (Fleishman 1997: 209).

Theatre is thus harnessing the ambiguity of the moving body to find new meanings and new ways of making-meaning.

I argue that while this represents innovations in the theatrical paradigm, it has a negative effect on dance, as it contributes to the South African tendency to read excessive meaning into stage actions – a practice which can reduce dance to overly simplistic meanings. Whether the dancing body is seen to represent the ‘unity’ of the ‘New’ South Africa through its vibrant interculturalism or whether it is unpacking the issues of the past and the present, the body simply cannot move without a plethora of (frequently, as we shall see, poorly-ascribed) meanings being ascribed to it. Regardless of what the form or dance vocabulary is articulating, culturally- or issues-based meanings seem unavoidable in much dance in South Africa.

While the aesthetic of vibrancy and eclecticism is a powerful (South) African aesthetic, and might represent something that, to a certain extent, has been lost in Europe and North America,¹⁴ there is a sense in which South African choreographers do not know what to do with the aesthetic. The issue is not ‘what’ but ‘how’. As Acty Tang (2004) notes:

Previously, dance writer Andrew Gilder wrote about some choreographers’ inability to turn ideas into textured dance works. At last week’s Dance Umbrella many pieces claimed to deal with issues: abuse, genocide and even the struggle. Sincerity of intentions aside, life’s tragedies simply become excuses for spectacles of flowing movements and extensions of limbs, in styles traditional or contemporary. Images like toyi-toying were thrown in to justify the theme (9).

Tang thus reflects a need for innovation in dance language and in how meaning is constructed through dance. While the physical image acts as a resonating chamber, amplifying and proliferating meaning for theatre, the image in dance seems crudely pasted onto meaning (or the other way around), reducing meaning to stereotypes or cliché, and dance to often conceptually-simplistic shows of virtuosity.

¹⁴ In a way, the aesthetic represents a niche in the global market for South Africans to fill. Hagemann notes that there are cases in which “the international community invites South African performers to their country because they have a great deal of vitality, because they are young, because they represent a tremendous physicality (which I think Europe is losing)” (Hagemann in Garske 1992: 2).

Frequently, to echo Tang, many South African choreographers seem uninterested or unskilled in the dynamics between form and content. As Gordon reflects,

This concern for content amongst choreographers is reflected in numerous programme notes with long explanations involving identity issues, culture, politics and gender. What is interesting for me, is that many of these works are constructed according to formalist principles so there is a discrepancy between what they purport to be about and the perceived dance form (pers. interview 2009).

Reviewing the Dance Umbrella's New Moves programme for up-and-coming choreographers, Sichel (2000) articulates a similar concern:

Even relatively experienced dancers treat choreography as if it is merely a case of flinging together some (often derivative) steps to a piece of music. [...] General lack of knowledge of choreographic composition and dynamics is an old South African problem which is now turning into a life-threatening faultline (para. 14).

Echoing the call for a formal revolution, Samantha Pienaar (1999) argues that in South African contemporary dance, the dominant performance space is the western stage with its proscenium arch. She laments,

theatre designers, choreographers and directors (specifically in mainstream theatre) still tend to perceive space as a framed, static, finite, entity, unable to change or to transform [in] order to encompass all re-presentations of material objects (136).

Looking specifically at the idea of space both physically/literally and metaphorically, Pienaar argues that

space ... seems capable of yielding unlimited potential for the holding, creating, moving and expressing of bodies. But *do* we dance anywhere? Or are we still dancing in the same physical, and therefore emotional and mental, spaces? (137, emphasis in the original).

She continues, arguing that form is lagging behind content: while practitioners have begun exploring different thematic 'spaces'

in terms of redefining inner landscapes, discovering cultural vistas, representing original movement material in inventive ways on-stage ... performances are still predominantly presented on *stages* where they are framed and trapped behind the proscenium arch, with audiences sitting comforted and sheltered in a darkened auditorium (Ibid).

In a similar vein, Italian, Amsterdam-based choreographer Emio Greco reflects on what he experienced on his second visit to South Africa and the Dance Umbrella in 2006. He refers to South African dance makers:

When I came to [Johannesburg] I saw there's a strong, real need [amongst South Africans] to do something to change the situation [in the country]. [For choreographers], there's a need to involve their reality, in the dance scene, or maybe in the whole society through dance. There's a need to make dance independent and really exciting to the whole world. But I think, also, that the history of South Africa sometimes influences their way of thinking a bit too heavily. It holds the dance back from being completely free to express the power that is contained in the culture. Sometimes the need of the choreographer to talk about the social aspect and the political aspect slows the process down. [...] The term 'free' doesn't mean a denial of things, a denial of where you came from because you are a result of circumstances, that is undeniable. But it is important that freedom must be used to put forward another way of thinking so that things are not just clearly present, not literally present (Greco in Krouse, 2006: 3).

He continues, to say, "All this cultural background would get strength from being a little more abstract. It would bring another energy – there would be huge potential and things would really move. It could change the world" (Ibid).

What I read from Greco and Tang is that dance will benefit from a gentle discarding of the necessity of meaning. What I read from Sichel is the longing for innovation in dance language. Pienaar, and critics in her camp, reflect the necessity of an understanding of form. What is needed, in other words is a critical praxis in which dance – as a form, as a discourse of meaning – is scrutinised.

So far, I have outlined some of the pressing issues confronting South African choreographers and have highlighted form as a pertinent area. The rest of the thesis will examine in more detail how dance in South Africa might benefit from a critical praxis and how humour might be able to be involved in the process. Before continuing, however, it is worthwhile to examine how humour is standardly being perceived in the South African theatre and dance industries.

1.4 Traditional views of humour: funny is frivolous, serious is important

I proceed from a suspicion that humorous choreography is often underappreciated as an object of serious enquiry and as a form or strategy in ‘serious’ dance making. I further suspect that choreography that is serious in tone is seen as noteworthy and important. Humorous choreography, on the other hand, is possibly seen as frivolous, something to ‘lighten the load’, to decorate one’s life but not to change it. I think, for instance, of the Modern dancer-choreographer Martha Graham, who is known predominantly for her heroic narratives of epic proportions, while the humorous aspects of her works have been largely overlooked (Bannerman 2000). If the audience is laughing, they’re not thinking or being challenged – or so the idea goes. This is not necessarily true, of course. While certainly much could be said for humorous content and the power of, for example, parody, this chapter argues that humour, in its *formal* capacity, can be seen to have a critical capacity in dance. Specifically, the formal aspects of humour can play a major role in raising questions about the medium in which it is being delivered, in this case, dance. In other words, humour (can form a part of the process that) creates meta-dance.

Funny is frivolous, serious is important ... in South African theatre and dance

In order to substantiate my argument that humour is frequently considered to be frivolous entertainment, I will now briefly consider humour in South African theatre since 1994. As humour in theatre is more prevalent than humour in dance, I first consider this.

It would appear that, understandably, humour is used in much South African theatre for entertainment purposes. Emerging from the constraints and horrors of the apartheid regime, South Africans to a large degree have shown an aversion to theatre that is perceived as ‘serious’ and have shown a preference for “light, undemanding entertainment” (Scholtz 2008: 12). In the early years of democracy,

people opted for very light farcical entertainment values. That was all they were interested in ... after twenty years of struggle – in whatever form you saw it – people were just tired of it, and they felt they would like relief (Hauptfleisch in Solberg 2003: 47).

In theatre circles, “a common perception is still that audiences primarily want to laugh” (Scholtz 2008: 12).

This has affected theatre to an enormous degree. As we have seen, diminished funding from the state has forced theatre to rely increasingly on commercial avenues (Scholtz 2008: 13). The result is that, on the commercially-driven festival circuit, “there is an array of light and fairly formulaic comedies that return year upon year and unfailingly draw audiences” (Ibid). Indeed, the humour that is most prevalent in South African theatre *is* frivolous humour. Keith Bain (2003) laments that in South Africa “provoking parody has descended into “penis, pussy and ‘pomp’” jokes” (145).

As I hope to show, however, while South African theatre may, to a large degree, use humour for frivolous intent, this should not stop us from appreciating humour’s critical potential.

While humour, in whatever form, is prevalent in theatre, humour and dance are relatively uncommon companions. When humour is used, however, typically in a light-hearted, cheeky or playful fashion, it too is appreciated for its entertainment value, and not for its critical potential. Indeed, humour has not been seen to play a major role in the emerging South African post-1994 dance aesthetics (Gordon pers. interview 2009). Gordon offers a few possible reasons for this:

One obvious point concerns the political history of the country and the urgent social and economic needs of the majority of South Africans. I think it is also allied to choreography in many other parts of the world where contemporary choreography emerged as a reaction to other dance and art forms and so presented a felt personal commitment with intense and meaningful individual expressions. It is probably when an art form is relaxed and comfortable, that choreographers can begin to employ humorous tactics, comic situations, wit, pastiche, irony and self reflexivity. Perhaps the comic interruption can happen when the choreographic stasis is ‘at home’ and needs to be reconfigured and realigned (Ibid).

In other words, Gordon suggests that the urgent social, political and economic position of South Africa does not lend itself to provocative comic intervention within art; that the personal element of contemporary choreography inspires an intensity which also tends not

to be expressed humorously; and that humour frequently develops when an art form has 'settled', which, it could be argued, is not currently the case in South African dance. These suggestions reflect the notions that humour in dance does not, cannot or should not deal with 'serious' issues or ideas; and that humour requires an established framework as a reference point (the latter claim will be supported in Chapter Two).

This research contests the view that humour is (only) frivolous. In order to appreciate the more profound aspects of humour, one needs to focus on appropriate examples. My focus excludes, for instance, stand up comedy; for, while stand-up often uses very powerful transgressive or subversive humour in pursuit of social engagement and transformation, the humour in stand-up is concerned with the content. My primary interest is in how humour and formal innovation are connected. In order to see this, we need to appreciate the critical function of humour (which is the subject of Chapter Two).

Funny is frivolous, serious is important ... in Philosophy

Perhaps unfortunately, but perhaps understandably, humour's critical aspects have also largely not been appreciated by philosophers. John Morreall (1983) points out that humour and laughter¹⁵ have been strangely and unjustly ignored by philosophers because they are widely (and wrongly) seen as unacceptable, frivolous phenomena and as such unsuited for serious academic study. In 1983, he noted,

[U]ntil a few years ago, the study of laughter was treated in academic circles as frivolous. Because laughter is not a serious activity, the unstated argument seemed to run, it is not possible to take a serious interest in it; and so anyone proclaiming an interest in studying it probably just wants to goof off. This argument is invalid, of course (ix).

The basis for this idea can be traced back to ancient Greece. Plato and Aristotle associated laughter with what is base (5). As the philosopher's aim is always to attempt to better himself and his¹⁶ mind, he is warned against engaging too frequently in laughter and

¹⁵ While I focus my study on humour, some of the theories I discuss use the words 'laughter' and 'humour' interchangeably. I will make a distinction between these two ideas later.

¹⁶ Philosophy and thinking were considered male practices, of course.

amusement. These ideas have possibly infiltrated our modern understanding and might be a factor in why humour is seen as trivial subject matter unsuited for serious inquiry.

In both theatre/dance and philosophy, therefore, there is a strong tendency to misperceive humour's more profound aspects. Both fields engage in many other ways with humanity and the world around them, yet humour – a very human practice – is not seen to be worthy of serious or critical attention. In theatre/dance it can associate the work with frivolity, and in philosophy, traditionally, with baseness. I now turn, therefore, to an analysis of the nature and functions of humour, from which it will hopefully become clear how humour can indeed have critical effect.

Summary and conclusion of Chapter One

I have argued that, due to several factors including funding, dance in South Africa is restricted by a felt necessity to deal thematically and stylistically with 'South African' concerns of the past and of the present. South African dance, I have argued, would benefit from the re-conceptualisations of what dance is and can be that are involved in experiments within form. We have also seen that humour is traditionally considered frivolous. In order to see how humour can be a part of a critical process, we need to understand what humour is and how it works. In turning to humour's critical capacities, I aim to establish my second major point, which is that humour in dance can be a part of a critical meta-dance praxis.

Chapter 2: The nature and functions of humour

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine theories of humour to ascertain what humour is and the functions it serves in society. We shall see that the basis of humour is the incongruous and that humour plays a part in social cohesion through encouraging partiality and social bonding. It can also be used in a subversive capacity to destabilise accepted norms and oppressive power structures. The discussion of humour's social functions leads to an understanding of how humour can afford one the opportunity of gaining a critical detachment on one's life and on one's world. At its best, humour can suggest how one might change one's situation by prefiguring actual change with symbolic change in one's conceptual understanding of the world.

I then turn to dance form and suggest that the incongruous can create meta-dance, leading to a discussion of how humour can be a medium through which dance can critically reflect upon itself.

2.1 What is humour: a difficulty in classification

Humans laugh for many different reasons, some humorous and others non-humorous. Not all instances of laughter are humorous. For example, we might laugh with relief (not humour) after being rescued from almost drowning in a strong current. Morreall's (1983: 1-2) list of non-humorous laughter includes babies laughing at 'peekaboo' and being tossed in the air; tickling; regaining safety after being in danger; solving a puzzle or problem; winning a contest; winning the lottery; seeing an old friend unexpectedly; anticipating some enjoyable activity; embarrassment; hysteria, and breathing nitrous oxide. Under humorous laughter, we laugh when we hear a joke; when someone ruins a joke; when watching someone not get a joke; when watching a practical joke played on someone. We also laugh on seeing someone strangely dressed or "adult twins dressed alike" (1). We laugh listening to exaggerated tales, wordplay or hearing children use adult phrases

correctly. In fact, we cannot exclude “simply feeling in a silly mood and laughing at just about anything” (2). As these comments suggest, humour and laughter are not necessarily the same thing. One might laugh in triumph or relief and likewise might find something humorous, but not actually laugh.

Despite the prevalence of humour and laughter, they are difficult to classify and understand. Philosophical attempts to understand them can be grouped under three main headings: the Superiority Theory, the Relief from Restraint Theory and the Incongruity Theory. These theories to a greater or lesser degree, aim to explain humour and laughter. In examining them, we will see that while the Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory can account for some instances of laughter, only the Incongruity Theory can account for all instances of humour.

2.2 Theories of Humour and Laughter

The Superiority Theory

The Superiority Theory, the oldest known theory, was initiated by Plato and Aristotle (Morreall 1983: 4) and was later developed further by Thomas Hobbes in the nineteenth century (Morreall 1987: 19). For Hobbes, when someone laughs it is an expression of “sudden glory ... and it is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (Hobbes in Morreall 1987: 19). In essence, the theory maintains that laughter is an expression of feelings of superiority.

The theory finds resonance in evolution theory. Laughter, it is suggested, evolved from the aggressive gestures of animals (such as the baring of teeth) and, even if it might today seem benign, can still carry hostility (Morreall 1983: 6). Another evolutionary connection states that laughter is the modern equivalent of “the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel” (Rapp in Morreall 1983: 7). According to Albert Rapp, in modern times, all jokes are based on ridicule but have been tempered with kindness and affection: it

is a gentle tease, which nonetheless still emphasises one's superiority. The final stage of the evolution to laughter as we now know it is laughing at oneself (Ibid). According to Rapp, we differentiate between our inferior self (a "picture of [one]self in a certain predicament") from the position of our superior self (8). Nonetheless, whether one is laughing at others or at oneself, according to the Superiority Theory, "laughter equals winning" (Gruner 2000: 8).

The obvious critique against the theory is that, while there are certainly instances in which we do laugh with superiority or ridicule, there are many instances in which we do not. We certainly do laugh at others. Early on as children, we learn the joy of pointing and laughing, which hopefully, in line with modern sensibilities, gets tempered as we mature. Nonetheless, there are many instances of humorous laughter which do not seem based on superiority. Take for example, meta-jokes such as the following:

What do you call the three hairs at the end of a dog's tail?
Dog hairs.

It seems plausible to say that the joke is funny because of its lack of a punchline. If I find the joke funny, it is because I expected a punchline and it did not arrive (Jones 2010: 3); not because I feel somehow superior.

In other words, the superiority theory goes some of the way to explain some of what we call humour and laughter – such as laughing at others – but it is not an exhaustive account.

The Relief from Restraint Theory

The basic framework for the Relief Theory is that laughter releases pent-up nervous energy (Morreall 1983: 21). The energy is either pre-existing or it is generated in the laughter situation itself. Pre-existing nervous energy is normally a result of a prohibition of some kind, such as the societal restrictions of speech or etiquette, sexual restrictions, and so on. When a situation arises in which the prohibition or its symbol can be the object of laughter, the pent-up energy is released. As Morreall (1983) states, "the release of this energy, according to the simplest version of the relief theory, is laughter" (22). I agree with

Morreall, however, that, while in certain scenarios (such as regaining safety after being in danger), laughter might be a release, it is implausible that most instances of humorous laughter are solely driven by inner energy needing an escape (37). Take, for instance, the following version of a well-known joke:

A man walks into a bar and orders a drink. The drink is served but, before he can drink it, a monkey, who had been sitting on the piano, leaps over to the bar, grabs the drink and runs off.

Annoyed, the man walks over to the pianist and asks him, "Do you know your monkey ran off with my drink?"

The pianist thinks for a moment before replying, "No, but if you hum a few bars, I'll play it."

If I am amused by this joke, it is most likely because the pianist's response reveals a different, unexpected but justified understanding of the phrase "do you know", and not because of any suppressed feelings I might have towards pianists, bars, bar patrons or monkeys. Thus, the Relief from Restraint Theory cannot account for all instances of humour.

The Incongruity Theory

The idea that we laugh at the incongruous can be traced to Aristotle and the position was revived in the modern era by Francis Hutcheson in the eighteenth century (Jones 2010: 2). In essence, the theory suggests that we laugh at the unexpected:

We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns (Morreall 1983: 15-16).

What we find humorous *depends on* the conceptual pattern we have of the world. A child, Morreall explains, has a simple conceptual system, or picture of the world. She can differentiate between people and animals, for instance; and knows that speaking is a capacity of the former but not of the latter. She knows that women might wear dresses but men usually do not, and so on. When the conceptual system is relatively orderly so as to have expectations of how things 'normally' are, she can start to appreciate humour when

things are presented differently: she can be amused by things. With a simple conceptual system, simple conceptual incongruities are humorous, such as a man wearing a dress, or a person with the head of a dog. If the strange incongruous juxtaposition of concepts (person and dog) is pleasant and not threatening, the child is likely to laugh. As adults, we have normally encountered many unlikely juxtaposition of concepts, so simple combinations such as person-dog have little effect on us. In adults, the conceptual pattern takes on a more complex form, as it is intertwined with the personalised and intricate networks of opinions about the world: "Amusement is ... both dependent upon and intertwined with an agent's beliefs or pretenses" (Jones 2010: 2).

Kant suggests that if we are amused our expectations of the world have dissolved "into nothing" (Kant in Morreall 1983: 16) but Schopenhauer makes a good correction in stating that the incongruous twist is not nothing but is "something [else] that we were not expecting" (Schopenhauer in Morreall 1983: 17). What we are expecting, Schopenhauer argues, is our concept of how things are. When the reality differs from the concept, there is incongruity, producing amusement. Whether or not this state finds expression in the external behaviour of laughing, smiling, giggling, and so on, is a separate question. Importantly, whether or not the object is in fact incongruous in itself (whatever that might mean) is irrelevant; it simply needs to be perceived as incongruous in order for it to be a source of amusement (Clark 1970).

An important part of laughter and humour is the suddenness of the perception of incongruity.¹⁷ The child is less likely to laugh if she sees the man putting on the dog-head costume – thus seeing the two separate concepts slowly combine – than if the man in costume appears suddenly. Similarly, a joke explained is a joke killed; and comedians know the value of timing a word or gesture just right to make the audience laugh.¹⁸

¹⁷ Indeed, timing, speed or duration are mentioned in all the theories of laughter and humour with the general consensus that sharpness, suddenness, swiftness are necessary conditions if laughter is to occur. As Simon Critchley (2002) states, "Both brevity and speed are the soul of wit" (6).

¹⁸ However, there is also a case for the growing appreciation of incongruity: Say for instance I am standing at one end of a street and I look along it and I notice house after identical house has a façade containing a front door and two windows, except for the second-last house in the row, which has only one window. The more I think about the fact that all the houses seem to be identical except for one missing window, the more I am

This theory accounts for the instances of humorous laughter that the other theories could not explain. For instance, let us return to the joke about the dog hairs. The joke's humour lies in one expecting a joke-like answer in accordance with the norms of joke telling, rather than the literal response of "dog hairs" (Jones 2010: 3). It is a meta-joke, for it is a joke about jokes: one expects a more typical joke structure and one is amused when a different, atypical pattern is in its place. Similarly, what one finds amusing in the joke about the thieving monkey is the way of interpreting the line "Do you know your monkey ran off with my drink". The pianist interprets it in an incongruous or atypical way.

As Ward Jones (2010) states, the Incongruity Theory does remarkably well in apparently managing to explain all instances of humour (3), and it is safe to say that when we appreciate an incongruous phenomenon, we are likely to be amused.¹⁹ This could be by chance, such as chuckling at a cloud that bears a likeness to the president; or it could be through what one could call humour rituals – practices *with the purpose of* creating humour – such as joke telling. Why might we as human beings wish to engage in intentional humour? There are several reasons for the humour rituals of jokes, and, in turning now to an analysis of the 'functions' of humour, we will see why and how humour can have a critical effect on our lives.

2.3 Some functions of humour: partiality, social bonding and subversive humour

In Western social practices, those listening to a joke engage in a tacit agreement to have their attention caught at the outset of a joke.

There has to be a sort of tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking 'for us', as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking. That is, in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and

likely to be amused. If I do not linger on the thought, the amusement might miss me completely. This is interesting when compared to *This part* and *Plasticization*, which consciously work away from sharp rhythm.

¹⁹ Jones (2010) also notes, however, that there is still much work to be done in this arena; for, not all incongruities produce amusement, but rather curiosity or fear, for instance (4-5). Indeed, the incongruity of finding an angry lion in one's bedroom is not likely to lead to humour, for instance.

social structure – no social congruity, no comic incongruity (Critchley 2002: 4).

In other words, in most joke telling, I recognise that a joke is being told, I agree to have my attention caught, and I share a sense that my conceptual system matches, or is similar to, the joke teller's.

Jones (2010) takes this a step further: In engaging in joke telling, agreeing to have my attention caught and opening myself up to the effect of the ensuing incongruity, I must be partial to the joke teller. Indeed, he offers a general rule called the “Principle of Partiality in Humor”: “amusement and partiality – and their magnitudes – *generally* correspond with each other” (12-13, emphasis in the original). The more I like the joke teller, the more I will like the joke. Of course, it works in the other direction too: when someone makes me laugh by telling a joke, I am more inclined to like them.²⁰

This leads us to the idea that joke telling is a form of social bonding; it helps us to form a social identity. If I can share a conceptual scheme with someone, and if joke telling increases partiality, a sense of shared identity, of a group bond, is encouraged. Critchley (2002) argues that “[h]umour is local and a sense of humour is usually highly context-specific” (67). Jokes are notoriously hard to translate, as they rely so strongly on a shared conceptual system. Consider telling this joke to a non-South African (perhaps it is even Cape-Town specific):

Satan visits Cape Town and meets Gatiep.
“Do you know who I am?” Satan asks.
“Nay,” says Gatiep, “Give me a hint”.
“I am the Prince of Darkness.”
“O *vok*, jy’s die CEO van Eskom!”

It is likely that only Capetonians, who understand and enjoy the cultural locality (Cape Flats so-called “coloured” culture) of a character named “Gatiep” who speaks in a mixture of Afrikaans and English, will understand and appreciate the joke. In addition, the joke is

²⁰ Former US President Richard Nixon was, to my knowledge, the first US presidential candidate to appear on a comedy television show as part of his campaign. These days, the success of such appearances in generating popularity has made it practically required as part of campaigning. George W Bush, Al Gore, Hilary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama are just some of the politicians to have appeared on the popular satirical sketch television show *Saturday Night Live*.

on the subject of the lengthy power cuts that Cape Town and the rest of South Africa endured in 2008, due to the national electricity company Eskom's alleged mismanagement. Your enjoyment of the joke identifies you as Capetonian or South African (or, at least, as having enough understanding of the local situation as to be considered a member of the group). Simon Critchely (2002) explains,

Humour is a form of cultural insider-knowledge ... Its ostensive untranslatability endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness or even superiority. In a sense, having a common sense of humour is like having a secret code. [... Humour] returns us to *locality*, to a specific and circumscribed *ethos*. It takes us back to the place we are from, whether this is the concreteness of a neighbourhood or the abstraction of a nation state (67-68, emphasis in the original).

According to Critchley, we can experience this 'returning home' in two ways. It can give us a warm feeling of homecoming, as in encountering someone from home in a foreign place. Or, it can remind us of who we would rather *not* be. The jokes we laugh at – humour being so much a part of our identity as to be often a fact not a choice – might offend our current, mature sensibilities.

Perhaps one laughs at jokes one would rather *not* laugh at. [... O]ur sense of humour can often unconsciously pull us up short in front of ourselves, showing how prejudices that one would rather not hold can continue to have a grip on one's sense of who one is (74).

Consider what you found funny when you were growing up. Critchley predicts that, often, jokes that one appreciated in the past are either not funny now, or are uncomfortably riddled with racist or sexist slurs, for instance, which perhaps one now wishes to avoid.

For better or worse, then, humour, functions as a reminder of who we are as well as a tool to enhance a sense of belonging.

If humour allows us to share conceptual norms, it can also allow us to subvert them. Subversive humour is essentially humour which undermines oppressive power structures. In situations in which there is a cultural or political imbalance of power, humour can be a powerful tool in affecting change, by working obliquely in cultural conflicts. By making a

symbol of the oppression the butt of the joke, the symbol is de-valued and, however slightly, loses its grip (Erichsen 2005).²¹

By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed (Critchley 2002: 11).

While no serious theorist would suggest that telling a few jokes affects actual change in one's life, there is an important connection between humour, freedom and social change. Building on the ideas explored in this section, the following argument pursues how this connection works by offering a defence for humour as being intrinsically philosophical.

2.4 Why humour is philosophical and humour's 'new world'

Humour relies on an understanding of a specific conceptual system, or picture of the world, as background to the joke. Introducing an incongruity into that conceptual system offers the possibility for the system to change: we see things in a new way. Humour, due to its structural nature, presents us with a different point of view of the world.

Critchley (2002) argues for a notion of 'true' humour. A 'true' joke is a joke that suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal [... True] jokes are a play upon form, where what is played with are the accepted practices of a given society. The incongruities of humour both speak out of a massive congruence between joke structure and social structure, and speak against those structures by showing that they have no necessity (10).

This is the "critical task of humour" (15). Critchley's two-fold claim is the following (the first part has been explained in the previous section):

- (i) ... the tiny explosions of humour that we call jokes return us to a common, familiar world of shared practices, the background meanings implicit in culture; and (ii) [such jokes] indicate how those practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise (16).

²¹ See Ron Jenkins' (1994) chapter "Ridiculing Racism in South Africa" for an account of South African subversive humour under the apartheid regime.

'True' jokes are about 'us' – not about 'them' – and how we might change our world. Take for instance this simple joke:

Nurse to uncooperative patient, "Be still, I just want to see if you have a temperature."

Patient, "Don't be ridiculous – everybody has a temperature."

This joke works through a play upon the phrase 'to have a temperature'. The nurse's intended meaning is 'an abnormally high temperature'. The patient's response (to the literal, not the intended, meaning) casts the phrase in a new light. It functions as a 'true' joke because it throws our everyday assumptions about the world into critical question, requiring (however slight) a revision. Consider, too, this joke:²²

There is a great flood in the city, driving stranded residents onto their rooftops, or leaving them clinging to branches of trees. A neighbour with a small rescue boat approaches the rabbi's house and calls to him where he is in the upper storey of his two-storey house (for the water has already flooded the ground floor), "Rabbi, come quickly, before the waters engulf you!"

"No," says the rabbi, "God will protect me."

The waters rises and the rabbi is forced to go onto the roof of his house, and now the rescue mission comes in a motor launch.

"Come quickly, rabbi, there isn't much time!"

"No," says the rabbi, "God will keep me from harm."

Finally as the rabbi is balancing on his chimney, the National Guard arrives in a large boat. The rabbi again sends them away, saying, "All my life I have been a man of faith and I will stay now, and trust in God."

Finally the water engulfs him and the rabbi drowns. When he arrives in heaven, he angrily approaches God, saying, "How can You have let this happen to me? For all my life I have been faithful. I have done what you asked and now you let me down in this way. Why?"

God replies, "You schmuck – how many boats do I have to send?"

Through appreciating this joke, one must initially understand or possess the conceptual scheme that states that "God" works only through mysterious ways and not through the

²² Based on Ted Cohen's (1999: 19-20).

dealings of the material world. If one enjoys the punchline, it is because the unexpectedness of God's response and the new insight attained about the significance of the boats causes one's conceptual scheme to shift. One realises, perhaps, that one's notion of God is perhaps not the only understanding available. Is this not a critique – albeit a very small one – of the manner of certain religious beliefs? “By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a *critical* function with respect to society” (Critchley 2002: 10, emphasis in the original).

Let us examine this process in more detail. For Critchley, the process works thus: humour reveals our world and holds it up for critical reflection. But, crucially, humour's messianic power is not to enable us to transcend to a *different* world. Instead, humour grounds us securely in *this* world, as imperfect as it may be:

The consolations of humour come from acknowledging that this is the only world and, imperfect as it is and we are, it is only here that we can make a difference. [...] Humour ... calls on us to face the folly of the world and change the situation in which we find ourselves (2002: 17-18).

It is a vision, if you will, of how things *could* be different; a vision of a 'new world' that relies on us changing the world we find ourselves in today. It inspires change, if change is necessary; it does not act out change. In her discussion of the “aesthetics of transformation”, in which she advocates new reading strategies for South African theatre post-1994, Miki Flockemann (2001) could be referring to Critchley's 'new world' when she postulates that such a vision of a new, better world – an utopia – can prefigure change:

[S]uch utopian glimpses of an alternative world can be associated with a counter-discursive strategy that refuses the separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics common to the contemporary western world. [...] Needless to say, however, such utopian aesthetics are not to be equated with actual acts of political transformation or social transition, but could symbolically prefigure such processes. [...] S]uch an utopian aesthetic draws attention to ways in which dominant codes can be displaced (30).

In other words, a symbolic re-ordering of the world is the necessary first step towards actual change. Humour thus grounds us securely in the known world, but also can have the ability to suggest a refiguring.

Humour is about 'us' and our place in the world. Indeed, humour is quintessentially human. Appreciating the incongruities that allow for humour necessitates a distancing from our essential ontology, of which only humans, to our knowledge, are capable. It is this critical distancing that is a necessary part of both humour and philosophy (or critical thinking). As Morreall (1987) suggests, both

involve a certain detachment from the practical aspects of life. [...] There is ... a conceptual flexibility, an imaginative use of unusual perspectives, that characterizes both philosophy and humor. [...] In both philosophy and humor we shift mental gears and look at things in new ways. [...] Nothing is to be taken for granted; everything can be looked at with a questioning, experimental, even irreverent eye (2-3).

It is now, I hope, clearer how humour is critical "thinking in action".²³ By appreciating humour and thus incongruity, one opens oneself up to the idea that things could be different. In engaging in humour, one is rooted in the familiarity of a known world only to be suddenly distanced from it. One sees one's world in a new light. Indeed, one may see a new logic one failed to see before. An irrevocable shift takes place. The familiar is now unfamiliar. This is the potential power of humour.

We have seen that the basis for humour is a known world. With its network of familiar conceptual patterns, it is 'home'. In sharing a sense of humour with other people, one forms or strengthens bonds, establishing a sense of 'us'. In appreciating humour, one taps into something that is incongruous within the relevant conceptual structures that make up the known world. At its best, the humorous appreciation of an incongruity can make one aware of how things could be different in one's known world. It affords one a moment of alienation or detachment from 'home' that allows one to see things from a new perspective, and, hopefully, to provide, on a conceptual level, a way forward to this 'new' world. I will now attempt to relate humour, the incongruous and the concept of a 'new world' to dance. As I hope to show, meta-dance and the formal structures of humour can be seen as connected through their mutual use of the incongruous. Just as the incongruous is the means towards the end of humour, I suggest that it is similarly the medium through which dance can critique itself.

²³ The title of Critchley's (2002) book is *On Humour: Thinking in Action*.

2.5 Humour and dance that critiques itself

I will begin this section by examining the connection between incongruity and meta-dance in general, and why this might be valuable, before turning to the connection between meta-dance and humorous incongruity in particular.

In the same way that humour reveals and challenges our conceptual patterns, when incongruity occurs in dance, a similar process takes place. This claim presupposes that performance dance in our society has an effect on our lives. To substantiate this idea, I employ a poststructuralist view on how form interacts with – indeed, constructs – our view of the world.

Theatrical form and dance performance can be cast as neutral: just as one might think that one's own conceptual pattern is universal, so one might assume that what one considers theatre practice is universally accepted as such.²⁴ Within a poststructuralist understanding, however, any form is revealed as a complex set of power structures which privilege certain modes of representation over others. These modes of representation, in turn, have great influence on how we see and make sense of the world. What we understand as theatre or dance is thus in a mutually-constructing relationship with conceptual structures that govern our lives. For example, consider Western culture's 'ethnic' dance of ballet (Kealliinohomoku 1983) reflecting and encouraging the qualities of grace, harmony, and 'liftedness' or elevation; and the values of uniformity (*corps de ballet*) and heterosexuality (*pas de deux*), for example. These ideas are in a mutually-constructing relationship with Western culture. In order to understand the performance event (a play, an initiation ritual) or societal practice (a family meal, playing a game or sport), I need to understand the conceptual scheme. In similar terms, in theatre practices, I need to have "theatrical competence"; knowledge that "is based on a shared set of culturally learned rules" (Aronson 2000: 8) in order to make sense of the experience. A similar pattern is reflected in successful joke-telling: I need to share a conceptual scheme with the joker in

²⁴ Joann Kealliinohomoku (1983), for instance, exposes and contests a widely-held, and possibly unconscious, Western viewpoint which suggests that ballet is universal while other dance forms are 'ethnic'.

order to appreciate when the conceptual scheme shifts in the punchline. Someone who has not experienced Western theatrical practices might be confused by the darkened auditorium, the quiet audience sitting passively in their seats, the lighting and set representing a different world. They may be equally confused by the tutus and the *pointe* shoes of ballet, the highly formalised arm gestures, the leaping and prancing of the performers.²⁵

When art experiences a revolution, therefore, there is a ripple effect, shifting the concepts that govern everyday life. Dance as a formal, rehearsed performance can therefore affect change by constructing itself in new ways, hence introducing new conceptual patterns into the network of constructed representations. In other words, all dance performance has political and conceptual agency (which is also to say that all art, however abstract, is political [Kershaw 1996] and conceptual). The power of dance performance is, thus, great, in the manner in which it exposes constructs of power:

When the conventions of performance and representation are exposed, it is like seeing everything in inverted commas. What has previously been seen as 'natural' or 'real' is exposed as 'cultural' or socially constructed, revealing the ideologically grounded status of representation (Brigginshaw 1996: 127).

Exposing the ideologies involved in representation exposes performance and our world as, in some sense, constructed. The positive side of this is its freeing effect: if everything is constructed, then one is not tied down by things 'innate' or 'natural' – one is free to construct oneself as one wishes. The negative side is steeped in cynicism: if we are only constructs, then we ourselves have no agency. We are adrift in a sea of relativism. However, if we can acknowledge that the construct is also subject to change, then agency, in some sense, is restored. But, for this agency to occur, dance must be aware of itself: how it is framed, what modes of representation it privileges, etc, or else it may unwittingly

²⁵ I witnessed my friend's first time watching of a live philharmonic orchestra. Intimidated by the grand setting, he was made even more unsure of himself by the fact that sometimes the audience applauded when the orchestra stopped playing and sometimes they did not. I explained that it is not appropriate to applaud between 'movements' but only at the end of the complete work. He noticed that when one lone audience member made the mistake of applauding after a movement, a subtle but tangible smirk wafted over the experienced audience members who seemed to feel somehow superior in knowing the correct etiquette for listening to classical music. This is an example of a shared conceptual scheme, the knowledge of which associates an individual within (or out of) a certain group.

privilege oppressive dominant power structures, reinforcing the norm and having little effect in challenging the status quo.

In other words, there is value in dance that is self-aware and self-critiquing. One name for this is meta-dance. Meta-dance, at the very moment of becoming, is already critiquing itself. This quality of self-critique or self-reflexiveness is described as a significant aspect of works that could be called “postmodern” (Brigginshaw 1996; Connor 1996; Kershaw 1996). Indeed,

The political potential of some postmodern texts resides in the glimpses they can give of how power systems operate [...] The operation of power can be exposed and challenged in postmodern dance, through self-reflexive representation devices ... (Brigginshaw 1996: 125).

In other words, through exposing and challenging power structures, dance that critiques itself is politically active. According to Connor (1996), postmodern performance

involves an exploration of the nature of performance itself. Such works neither determine the nature of performance by reference to stable distinctions between the work and its enactment, nor simply set performance ‘free’ from predetermining models. [...] ‘Performance’ ... marks the point at which theatre opens out beyond itself, marks theatre as the very movement of opening beyond itself (123).

Connor further claims that “[t]o explore the limits of performance in this way is to investigate nothing less than the possibility of truth and knowledge about ourselves” (120).

Meta-form is the moment when one’s own expected or assumed forms are brought into relief in such a way as to open them to critique and question. There is a distancing between the self and the concepts that make up the conceptual scheme. Meta-dance is a critical dance; a dance that transgresses notions of what it should, could or is expected to be.

This suggests a radical intent – but does this necessarily mean it must be radical in style? As a defence for subtlety in what can be considered as radical or ‘transgressive’, Karmen MacKendrick (2004) notes that the term “transgressive” has come to refer to the obviously rebellious: “Only what is conspicuously novel, committedly marginal and deliberately disturbing could lay claim ... to this oddly coveted label” (140). In fact, she

states, ideas can be shifted not only by contesting the opposition but by beguiling it, working within it, in order for change to occur. When art is operating in this more subtle manner,

if things are not the same afterward, it is not because the artwork has smashed things to bits but because it has pushed them into new and constantly mobile admixture with those forces that seem to oppose them (Ibid).

The revolution is thus not a break with the past but a fluid transition towards new conceptualisations.

On this theme, dance theorist André Lepecki (2006) notes a trend: some North American and European choreographers²⁶ are engaging “in dismantling a certain notion of dance” (2). The notion that they are dismantling, Lepecki argues, is the assumption that in order for something to be classified as a dance, it must involve movement. He detects an implied assumption in certain dance critics that “describes, reifies, and reproduces a whole ontology of dance that can be summarized as follows: dance ontologically imbricates itself with, is isomorphic to, movement” (Ibid). The works of these choreographers – often employing, as they do, stillness, task, pedestrian movement, etc, that do not lend themselves to dance’s tradition of virtuosity, technique and abstraction – reject any fixed notion of what can or should be called dance. The fact that this has widely been regarded as a “betrayal” of dance is evidence for the strength of the assumptions of what dance is and is not (Ibid). In this trend, the incongruity is a lack of movement within the broader idea that dance and movement are isomorphic.²⁷

Instead of contesting the boundary, transgressive art, of which Lepecki’s examples are instances, dissolves it. Like humour, the transgressive act, rather than a harsh opposition to law, works within known conceptual structures and frequently “may arise as a fluid and highly desirous response” (Mackendrick 2004: 140).

²⁶ He writes about Jérôme Bel, Trisha Brown, Juan Domingez, Xavier Le Roy, Vera Mantero, among others.

²⁷ I return to these ideas in Chapter Three.

In this way, meta-form is not necessarily a brash attack on fixed (notions of) form. Through a post-modern lens, form is not fixed, but a fluid process of meaning-making (Allsop 2005). In other words, meta-dance need not be seen as focusing on, or constantly referring back to, the rules of pre-established genres (1), thereby reinforcing the established norm. It is not (necessarily) pastiche. Acknowledging the constructed nature of form through meta-form can – and perhaps should – lead us to how we can use meaning-making structures to find new ideas and to challenge repressive concepts. Ric Allsop (2005) summarises how the term ‘form’ is now allied to the future:

The association of the term ‘form’ ... has shifted. Form and its relation to time – to the ‘yet-to-come’ – its relationship to politics, to space, to cultural environment, is perhaps no longer to be used in its more conventional association with the imposition of fixed organizational frameworks on the materials and contexts of performance, but in an active sense of processes of formation ... (1).

Meta-form, therefore, is about creating new spaces, or new worlds – as Allsop says, the ‘yet-to-come’. It is not about the past but about the future. Attempting to be innovative in form in this way amounts to attempting to create new concepts of what performance is, and what it could become. If performance is as interconnected with its environment as post-structuralism suggests, then it is also about creating new concepts in the world. For, how we construct theatrical events tells us something about what we consider meaningful. It is a framing device, a “point of visibility (rather than a fixed repeatable framework)” (Ibid), to use Allsop’s term, which is a gateway for critique and change. Forms or structures of meaning-making can therefore be fluid, ever-changing and malleable processes. Existing within, as a result of, and challenging conceptual patterns, meta-form is an opportunity to re-evaluate the conceptual structures that construct our world.

As I relate this to the humour theory, the connections start to make sense. Setting up a known form, a pattern that is in mutual or communal knowledge between those participating in the event (such as the presentation of a ballet) and the incorporation of something incongruous into that pattern (such as an unexplained gestural sequence performed by just one of the chorus line) can lead to humour. The sense that the dance is incongruous is amusing if one can recognise it as incongruous – in other words, if one

understands the pre-existing conceptual pattern of the ballet frame. If the incongruity is such that it makes one aware of the pre-existing conceptual pattern (a meta level of understanding) in a way of which one was not previously aware, then it can lead to a new concept. If concepts are how we construct the world, then this process leads, in however small or great a way, to a new world. In other words, using a humorous incongruity within a pattern can be a tool to discover new patterns within conceptual schemes.

Incongruity brings out meta-dance, and some incongruities, as we have seen, are inherently humorous. Just as in humour, we are made aware of our (sometimes hidden) conceptual patterns by an incongruity within them, in dance we are made aware of the expected or known pattern of dance and dance-making by an incongruity within it. If humour is thinking in action, then meta-dance is thinking in dancing. Both involve the incongruous, which may lead to humour. Thus, it seems fair to say that humour in dance has the potential to be a critical praxis with respect to dance form.

Summary and conclusion of Chapter Two

The analysis of humour suggests that it can be seen to be intrinsically philosophical or critical through its ability to point to a 'new world' and reveals the central property of humour, the incongruous. In dance, incongruity can lead to meta-dance, which, like humour, can have a powerful effect on conceptual schemes. With the poststructuralist notion that formal performance is a 'point of visibility' in a mutually-constructing relationship with interconnecting webs of representations of our lives, meta-dance (or, indeed, the meta-level in any symbolic structure) is highlighted as an opportunity for critique and agency within the structure. Humour in dance and theatre, therefore, is not necessarily an artistic sell-out but can lead to a critical praxis.

In the next and final chapter, I apply these and other related ideas to the selected works.

Chapter 3: Humour's critical capacity in *This part* and *Plasticization*

This part and *Plasticization*, in different ways, are instances of meta-dance and use humour in what I shall argue is a critical capacity. As they are, in many ways, very different works, these two analyses are very different. This is also due to the fact that the author is the creator of one and only a viewer of the other. I begin with *This part*.

3.1. *This part should be uncomfortable*

[This section assumes that the reader has seen (a recording of) the work]

The project of *This part* was my final coursework exam for my Masters degree in Drama (Choreography). It should therefore be noted that there were few financial constraints as the project was not for profit. My budget (from Rhodes University, as stipulated by the course) was sufficient for the practical necessities and I did not initially²⁸ have to be concerned with selling tickets, or with making the production attractive to potential viewers, except to ensure that I had an audience. The task was to create a stand-alone work, of between thirty and forty-five minutes, on which I would be examined by internal and external examiners. Beyond the duration guidelines and the fact that the course is 'choreography' and not some other discipline ('directing' or 'contemporary performance', for instance), there were no further stipulations. All these factors granted me the sort of freedom in choreographic decision-making that could be considered a luxury in the context of South African dance-making.

²⁸ When the work toured to the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (the KKNK, a predominantly Afrikaans arts festival in Oudshoorn) in April 2009, this element changed as the work was now in the commercial sphere. However, with basic financial assistance from Rhodes and the festival, and with little expectation of making a profit – given that the festival patrons traditionally have little interest in dance productions – our concern was to expose the work to a larger audience, rather than in its commercial value. Indeed, the only changes I made to the work were some spatial dynamics to adapt to the new space and the translation of aspects of the text from English to Afrikaans, which, as will be discussed, added to the concerns of the work, rather than detracting from them. The changes were thus artistically-driven decisions rather than commercially-driven ones.

Ironically, the work is not obviously humorous. This is perhaps because my intentions were not to entertain but to deconstruct. The humour came about as a part of the deconstructing process, further enabling it.

In this section, I examine how humour facilitates meta-dance.

Presence and dance's ontology in *This part*

Pather (2008) writes of *This part*:

[Elliott] realizes in this work a powerful sense of the meta-theatre. [...] The work stands as metaphor for a great deal about construction, not just about choreography. It impinges on constructs of language and culture and evokes these with clarity, precision, wit and humour (para. 1).

The humour in *This part* is frequently derived from the process of refocusing the audience's attention from a level of representational meaning onto the 'here and now', as we will see. This refocusing is incongruous within the frame of representational meaning. The incongruity creates humour, which in this case reveals a critical reflection on dance in general. To see how this works, I first discuss Lepecki's notions of dance ontology.

Lepecki (2006) argues that notions of dance are constructed by dance's relationship to movement (1-2). As was previously discussed,²⁹ Lepecki argues that a certain movement quality that disrupts or negates the flow of dance movement can be seen to question dance's assumed relationship to movement: "Perceptions of a hiccupping in choreographed movement produces critical anxiety; it is dance's very future that appears menaced by the eruption of kinesthetic stuttering" (1). Thus, the stop-and-go quality of the works he describes holds the notion of dance-as-movement up for critique. They also question the notion of dance-as-representation. *This part* can be seen to function in this way.

Dance-as-representation is a major factor in the reading of dance language and can be seen in the almost inevitable question from so many audience members after watching a performance: "What did it mean?" For whatever reason, the gaze of the audience is

²⁹ See pp.44-45 of this thesis.

frequently trained on a layer of representational meaning. This may be desirable for narrative choreography – such as narrative ballets – but is frequently ill-placed for much contemporary dance. It seems, the question we should rather be asking is not “What does it mean?” but rather “How does it work?” (Allsop 2005: 1).

Indeed, the question of “how does it work?” is brought strongly to the fore in *This part* through the absence of, and search for, representation and meaning. This is felt throughout the work, not least through the constant practice of reasserting, with ambivalence, that there is no other level of signification than what is already present in the room. Consider the section, called “Lucy’s solo” on the transcript, in which ‘Lolo’³⁰ repeats the words “where” and “Lucy”; and the others reply, “On the diagonal ... on stage ... in the Box”. These are the spatial and locational facts of where ‘Lucy’ is: indeed, she *is* on the diagonal, she *is* on the stage, and she *is* in the venue of the Box Theatre. The work refuses to indulge a representational level of signification. In this sense it casts the space of performance as an actual, rather than an imaginary space (see Connor 1996), and the work as, as Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg (2000) say in another context, a “system of operations, not a system of representation” (181).

Within the ontology of dance, Lepecki further notes a “gap between body and presence in the history of modern Western subjectivity”, which is reflected in “modern Western dance” (Lepecki 2004: 3). Indeed, the “gap” is the basis for many Western dance practices. He postulates, “It is nothing else than the positing of an interval between one and the other that allows choreography to announce and enforce its project of regimentation and inscription of bodily movements” (Ibid). In other words, codified dance is based on the absence of presence: one has to look ‘through’ the performer in order to see the representation; the performer him or herself disappears, leaving the reified body behind. If (Western codified) dance is based on the absence of presence, then *This part* critiques this notion by obstinately reinstating presence as the dominant performance medium within the

³⁰ I use the single quotation marks to highlight the difference between the performers (for instance, Robin-Neil Williams) and their performances of themselves during the work (‘Robin’). This is to emphasise and to remind the reader that the postmodern notion that all identities in life constitute a performance is particularly pertinent to this work.

work. It does this by tempting the gaze towards representation only to draw it back again onto the performer as himself/herself. Again and again, as the 'choreographer' searches for meaning (and draws the audience after her), the focus returns to the performers themselves, their physical dimensions ("one of them weighs 64kgs"; "I'm wearing skinny jeans"), their personalities ("one of them drinks tequila"), names (the first words spoken in the work are "Lolo, Robin, Lucy"), preferences ("one of them hates this piece"), and real time and space ("Lucy ... on stage, on the diagonal, in the Box"). The general rhythm of the work corroborates this sense of the 'now' with a consciously 'flat' rhythm, including long pauses in which 'nothing' (or, no obvious action) happens on stage. But, while doing this, there is a contradictory sense which suggests that, while the spoken text, the bare space of the stage, the emphasis on 'flat' real time assert that there is nothing more than what is 'really' there (that is, there is no level of representation), the presence of the performers – their anxiety and confusion – in fact suggest that much more than the physical reality is 'there'. There *is* narrative, meaning, active connotations and allusions. In other words, a layer of representation *is* active, and casts doubt onto the surety of the pure formalist, unsignifying presence.

The section entitled "Robin speaks" demonstrates this notion. The performance of 'Robin', is set up as bullied (in "Probing"), inhibited and wanting to express something, as is suggested, for instance, by his mouthing words during the "Lane" section. After "Lolo's solo", his entrance into the vacated space might be read as him finally gathering the courage to present something. But what comes out is inane rather than profound: it is nothing we do not already know simply by looking at him. Expecting meaningful verbal text, which would grant the viewer more insight into his inner world, the audience receives the following:

I weigh fifty-five kilograms;
I'm wearing skinny jeans;
I'm short;
I have curly hair.

The laugh that this incongruity might receive is complicated by the felt sense that through these obvious facts, 'Robin' is communicating – or, more importantly, is failing to communicate – something much more profound. He goes on to assert – with relief but not

without regret – that “All I need to know about this dance is one, two, three ...”, “All we need to know about this dance is one, two, three, four, five, six, seven ...”, accompanying the numbers with moves from a recurring phrase in the work. Again, the sense is that there exists more than ‘simply’ the structure of movement: is ‘all we need to know’ simply the pure formalist movement? Surely not. As Pather (2008) notes, in *This part*,

There is ... a thin line between what is and what is being represented. [...] The work ultimately evokes a very real sense of probing the construction of meaning because the performers themselves project a palpable perplexity that sometimes comes across as real anxiety: the enigma as real and as representation (para. 3).

It is in the pull between ‘what is’ and ‘what is being represented’ that humour functions as a critical praxis. The audience expects the meaning to be located on a level of representation (this duet is ‘about’ such-and-such): that is the shared conceptual pattern that is set up at the outset through framing the work and everything in it as dance. When something incongruous is inserted into the expected, shared pattern of representational meaning (such as when ‘Robin’ and ‘Lucy’ say “On the diagonal, on stage, in the Box”) the gaze is brought back from the representation to the what’s-really-there and there is a conceptual shift, causing humour.³¹ In this conceptual shift, a level of critical self-awareness is activated.

It is in its constant, determined search for meaning, that the work “turns on itself” by denying that meaning (Pather 2008).

It is a work that not only evokes an intellectual unpacking of construction and deconstruction. The work also evokes a sense of sadness in the recognition of the vulnerability that comes with the intense subjectivities involved in the creation and assembling of elements that evoke any kind of meaning. [...] Bodies dance with each other and abandon each other, sentences falter, words come and go, make sense and then whither,

³¹By using the word ‘shared’, I do not mean to assume that everyone in the audience shared an understanding or a reading. However, in the case of the humour in *This part*, a shared notion of dance’s ontology is necessary to get the joke. It was strongly evident to all the cast members, for instance, that during the run at Rhodes University (2008), the audience was laughing loudly, while during the KKNK run (2009), the audience was silent. In general, the audience members at the Rhodes run were much more dance literate than the viewers at the KKNK. As the humour is ‘about’ dance, it requires a fairly complex and vast conceptual pattern about dance to appreciate them.

fragments of movement are performed, analysed, discarded and included in turns. There are moments of devastating emptiness (para. 1-2).

Lepecki argues,

One may say that dance emerges as a critical theory precisely from its uncanny foregrounding of the split between body and presence. One may even add that dance as critical praxis may draw its force precisely by a creative, if not altogether subversive, occupation of this gap (Lepecki 2004: 3).

The humorous pull (and the ‘devastating emptiness’) between real and representation evident in *This part* is an occupation of Lepecki’s ‘gap’ between presence (the real) and body (the medium for representation). As a critical praxis, the notion of body and presence is critiqued:

Dance as critical theory and critical praxis proposes a body that is less an empty signifier (executing preordained steps as it obeys blindly to structures of command) than a material, socially inscribed agent, a non-univocal body, an open potentiality, a force-field constantly negotiating its position in the powerful struggle for its appropriation and control (6).

These are the bodies in *This part*, who are amusing for their struggle, failure and persistence in their pursuit of personal expression and agency, and in their attempts to access and articulate a layer of meaning represented by the choreographic language. Indeed, if we laugh, it is because dance’s ontological ground, its conceptual pattern, is, in Lepecki’s terms, shaking and, in Morreall’s, shifting.

The politics and potential of the ‘real’

The politics of the ‘here and now’, to which *This part* determinedly returns, are, for Copeland, emancipatory, in a similar way in which Critchley’s humour is messianic. By returning us to the ‘real’, the humour in *This part* refuses an indulgence in structures of representation, insisting instead on gazing at what is ‘really’ there. I shall explain this idea via Copeland’s “defence of formalism”; for, formalism, as it is argued, “is an exercise in seeing what’s *really there*, right in front of your eyes” (Copeland 1990: 38, emphasis in the original), as opposed to referring to a representational layer of meaning.

Copeland suggests that formalism “can function as an aesthetic declaration of independence” (38). It is the aesthetics of freeing the body from the political, meaning-making gaze. Copeland suggests that if we are able to train ourselves against our habitual meaning-making processes, formalism can offer us new concepts.

[T]he post-structuralists no doubt will tell us that all we ever see is what we’ve been conditioned to see, what the language we speak and the culture we inhabit will permit us to see. But the function (or one possible function) of formalism is to draw us out of ourselves, to encourage us to transcend responses that are merely habitual or conditioned (Ibid).

In other words, when I watch dance and I apply representational meaning to everything I see, I am simply returning to patterns of meaning that I already have. A duet, in which the dancers caress and support each other makes me think of romantic love (for, I was brought up in a Western tradition and understand these signs in this manner), and so I draw on my conceptual patterns that relate to love and connect what I am seeing (moving bodies and movement language) with those patterns. The politics of culture inform my reading of the work. The suggestion is that those patterns largely remain fixed. I do not learn anything ‘new’ about my conceptual patterns that govern how I see, interact with, and construct the world. However, when one is ‘free’ from the habit of reading *every* movement as representative of something else, then, the thought process goes, one is open to allow new ideas, new concepts in.³² Thus, by returning the gaze to “what’s really there, right in front of your eyes”, *This part* participates in a formalist practice which encourages the dismantling of known conceptual patterns and the construction of new ones.

Thus, by occupying the space between the real and the representational (Lepecki 2004), and by returning to the what’s-really-there (Copeland 1990), *This part* is a critical praxis. As Pather (2008) states, “The work constantly (and merely) asks for presence, mainly from the audience. And this is its ultimate success” (para. 5).

³² I am not claiming that representational theatre does not allow us to discover new ideas or complexities about life, which would be to say that, for instance, plays (Shakespeare, Beckett, etc.) only re-hash ideas that the audience already knows, an idea I do not hold true. What I am arguing against, via Copeland, is the excessive reading of meaning into all forms of art.

The language of dance

A further sense in which *This part* is critical meta-dance is the humour derived from the question of what, from amongst the real and the representational, is dance-worthy for the 'choreographer' who is seen to be struggling on the terrain of dance's ontology.

The 'choreographer' can be seen to be battling with the following problem. On the one hand, is the postmodern notion that by framing something as a dance it becomes a dance. On the other hand, as soon as the frame is present, the terrain of dance-ontology is activated, bringing with it a myriad of associations with other dance forms, styles, works and history (making choreographing much more complicated). This necessitates the tug-of-war between the action itself and the generated meaning, which, for the 'choreographer', raises the question "What movement for what meaning?" and its reverse, "What meaning for what movement?" This dilemma is a source of humour in the work. The audience watches her sincere attempts at profound meaning and laughs when the material for meaning is revealed as ordinary.

Consider the following example. In the section entitled "Lolo's solo", 'Lolo' and the 'choreographer' dance a simple phrase together in unison. He then whispers into her ear. She gets up, fetches her viola and attempts to accompany him as he dances. The others, following her lead, assemble with a guitar for 'Lucy' and a tambourine for 'Robin', making up a band of sorts. One of the possible readings is that 'Lolo' is suggesting an activity: he is not simply following instructions but is in fact taking initiative and agency in terms of what occurs on stage. The 'choreographer', trying to create something meaningful, follows this lead. Instead of taking the movement language from the previous phrase, he mimes and abstracts lyrics to a popular song, LeAnn Rimes' *Dancing in the Moonlight* (which, incidentally, does not have a very exciting tune, not giving the 'choreographer' much to 'play' with, in both senses of the word). What is set up as a moment of 'serious' significance, is revealed as frivolous, empty of grand-scale meaning. The 'high art' aspirations of the choreographer are subverted by the popular social dance 'Lolo' performs. Hence, the humour: the audience appreciates the conceptual pattern of a 'meaningful solo'

and laughs at the incongruity of the made-up mime gestures, the ‘un-artistic’ push-ups, the repetitive, popular song. To top this off, ‘Lolo’ ends the performance not with inspiring flourish or even a bow to the audience (with whom he animatedly engages during his dance), but elects to lie down, seemingly exhausted after his efforts.³³

Through exposing the dilemma in this manner, the work reflects on itself and on the ontological terrain of dance. For, the question of appropriate dance language is central to the discourse. Humour not only releases us momentarily, in the manner of entertainment, from the difficulty of the search for ‘authentic’ language and ‘relevant’ meaning but also hopefully enables a conceptual shift which may not only expose the terrain but also realign it in some new way.

I turn now to *Plasticization* for a different analysis of humour and meta-dance.

3.2. *Plasticization*

[Although a description of the work is provided, this chapter assumes that the reader has seen (a recording of) the work].

I chose to analyse this work for several reasons. While it was humorous, I felt that the slow awkwardness of Xaba’s movements made the humour rather uncanny. It seemed not to aim to be funny, which made me suspect that the humour was functioning as a result of some other intent, rather than the traditional aim of good entertainment. Secondly, in the context of the energy and vitality of South African dance, I found it interesting that Xaba underplayed technical virtuosity, especially considering her impressive training credentials (Rambert Ballet School). As my argument started to develop, I realised that *Plasticization* as a whole can be seen as incongruous within the context of South African dance. Beyond that, the humour within the work itself is based on a parody of dance. In this sense, the dance parodies other dances, with which it also identifies, and in this parody its meta-dance

³³ The bizarre positioning of his chosen nap place (slightly off centre stage) further supports the sense of a real not a symbolic space and the notion that the movement/stillness of the resting body is just as dance-worthy as any other dance language.

is more playful than the heavy concerns of *This part*. Further still, an element of Critchley's humour analysis which I have not previously mentioned – namely his concept of humour's "outlandish animal" – while surely not intended by Xaba, illuminates this strange bunny creature's fascinating appeal.

At the outset, I feel it important to say that much of what I write in this chapter could well be applied to Robyn Orlin's aesthetic. Indeed, Xaba has worked extensively with Orlin in the past and it could justifiably be said that her aesthetic draws much from Orlin's, and should be reviewed in this light. However, my purpose in this chapter is not to determine levels of inventiveness, but to place the work within the discursive fields laid out in Chapters One and Two. Within these fields, Xaba's black trained dancing body exists incongruously, humorously and uncannily, as I aim to show. The minimalism created by Xaba's negation of movement is arresting within the context of black vitality and fusion virtuosity. Crucially, I do not believe that Xaba intended many of the readings I apply. In this I proceed from an understanding of dance scholarship that does not exclusively privilege the intention of the dance-maker.³⁴ Beyond the fact that I have argued that South African dance is dominated by certain aesthetics and choreographic devices which make Xaba's work somewhat different, I do not deny that other works exist that could be considered in the same light as I am considering *Plasticization*.

The following biography and artistic intention is provided by the Jomba! programme note at which she performed both *Plasticization* and another of her choreographies *They look at me and that's all they think* (which is based on the life of Saartjie Baartman).

Born in Soweto, and trained with the Johannesburg Dance Foundation and the Rambert ballet in London, Nelisiwe Xaba has performed widely in Africa, the US, and Europe. She has worked extensively with Robin Orlin, as well as with a wide range of theatre directors (for instance, in Sophie Loukachevsky's production of Copi's *The Homosexual and the Difficulty of Expression*), with fashion designers (*Strangelove in Saint Etienne*), and visual artists. Xaba sees herself as belonging to a new generation of post-

³⁴ As Gordon (1999) argues, "the intentionality of the choreographer or performer is not the only way to engage in meanings or readings" (77).

Apartheid African artists for whom building their art is also a way to challenge enduring forms of voyeurism (Jomba! publicity 2006: para. 6).

As I will argue, *Plasticization* achieves a critical meta-dance through humour strategies, which, in a sense, is another means of ‘challenging enduring forms of voyeurism’.

What follows is a condensed description of the work (readers familiar with the work might wish to proceed to the next paragraph): Xaba starts amongst the audience. On one foot, she wears a red high heel to complement a red stocking and on the other a ballet *pointe* shoe. She also wears a plastic mini-dress, surgical gloves and has a plastic mask, offering a permanent, sweet smile. Thin bunny ears flop quizzically from the top of the mask.³⁵ With care, she unfolds a square plastic handkerchief of sorts from a public lavatory sanitary bag (which she tucks away again in her bra), holding it up to her face before kissing an audience member through it. She unfolds a plastic toilet seat cover, placing it on someone’s lap before seating herself there for a moment. Carefully and awkwardly, on *pointe* and high heel, she descends the seating and reaches the stage. House lights fade down and the music – Borodin’s “Polovtsian Dances” from *Prince Igor* – fades up as she carefully and demurely (the ballet leg tilted in sweetly), places the plastic square and the surgical gloves on the floor between herself and the audience. As the music swells, she slowly rotates on the spot, unwinding the mini-dress to reveal it as a large ‘Chinese’ bag, her head and shoulders protruding through the zip and her legs through two holes cut into the bottom. After being fully unwound and fixing the zips, she sinks to the floor, concealing herself in the rectangle of the bag, in which she seems to move about as the music ends. The second track starts with the lyrical flowing melody of Bach’s *Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring*. The movements of her legs slowly protruding from the bag is followed by a sequence of leg circles as she lies on her back. The sequence takes her through ‘the splits’ to sitting, and through a long writhing sequence to end, with the music, with the smiling bunny face protruding again from the bag. The third track, Verdi’s “Anvil Chorus” from *Il Trovatore*, begins and Xaba ‘mickey mouses’ the music with simple head gestures. Two more shoes appear from the bag – a plastic gumboot and a worn ‘takkie’ – one on each hand. Continuing to ‘mickey mouse’ the music, the shoes now dance to the music with

³⁵ Costume design by Strangelove.

'cancans' and balletic steps. She ends the track by re-submerging herself in the bag. The fourth and final track is the lyrical waltz, Mozart's "Lacrimosa" from *Requiem*. Lying on her back with her legs over her head, Xaba places a white stocking over the 'ballet' leg and kisses and caresses it. The 'cabaret' leg emerges and the two legs rub against one another, and quiver with the music. The other shoes emerge and they all rub and quiver together. As the track climactically ends, the legs flop and Xaba sighs. Xaba rolls off the stocking and, after tying a knot, discards it. She unties the ballet shoe and gets up. Whimsically, she meanders off stage, leaving an untidy pile of shoes and bits of plastic.

Xaba offers this publicity and programme note:

Plasticization is a solo work which examines how society has become increasingly plastic and materialistic; intimacy happens through barriers, and we have lost our sense of touch. In Africa, the church refuses to face the tragic facts, and discourages the use of 'plastic' condoms. Yet, even if it breaks, we need plastic to protect ourselves, but in the long run is it not more dangerous than our need for it? (Jomba! publicity 2006: para. 3).

This note supports a particular reading of the representational layer of signification. I do not feel the reading is the most interesting or even particularly coherent: Due to HIV/AIDS and other diseases, people need to use a protective layer of plastic to keep from becoming infected (such as condoms during intercourse, surgical gloves in dealing with blood, and so on). Religious groups ("the church") have spoken out against condom use as it conflicts with certain views about conception and contraception. Xaba performs a dance, wrapped in plastic, to music with some religious connotations. With the programme note in mind, I think that her intended reading is meant to be a comment on how the "plasticization" of our bodies in society has led to an inability to be fully human with the use of all of our expressive capacities. Thea Nerissa Barnes (2007) describes the work as "a reaction to the consequences of [the HIV/AIDS] epidemic" (para. unknown). After a post-performance discussion with Xaba, she writes,

Xaba's dance is an activist's interpretation of the status quo; her reaction to the dreadfulness of the [HIV] predicament. Audience members are encouraged to be open minded and view this dance and thus the pandemics of AIDS from an alternate perspective (Barnes 2008: 18).

Diniz Cie Lua (2007) writes that *Plasticization*

is ... [a]n accurate critical view of the contemporary body, that becomes plastic, not only in an aesthetical way, but also in the manner of how contemporary humans interact: not touching, not showing their bodies (unless it is in a fashion socially accepted usage [*sic*]), isolating their 'body of diseases and imperfections' away from the joy of just being ('natural?'). A body that only touches others through plastic protection (kissing is a beautiful metaphor) and that becomes a big plastic bag from [which] arms and legs (protected by shoes) come out to touch the outside 'dangerous' world ... (para. 1).

In other words, the 'plasticization' in the work is symbolic of how society has become less 'natural'. The big plastic bag is thus industry, fashion and technology, and society hides away within it.

I do not deny that the work may have some such connotations, but my interest is in its critical meta-dance and how humour functions in this process. Earlier in her article, Barnes (2008) describes works by several African choreographers (including Xaba's *Plasticization*), taking such a formal reading of the works' compositional aspects:

[T]hese dance works illustrate their place in the genealogy of dance by incorporating recognisable compositional structures and devices. Their use of these strategies challenges expectations and sensibilities of what dance from the African continent supposedly represents (16).

It is in line with such readings that I write.

I shall first consider *Plasticization*'s amusing incongruity within the broader context of South African dance. As I have argued, fusion choreography and a vital, energetic performing style is popular in South African dance. What is evident in *Plasticization* is a break from this practice. Instead of leaps, pirouettes and rolls – or indeed, 'pleasing' dance language of any kind – we see tasks carried out in an awkward manner by a body restricted by its costume. Instead of the costumes catching and continuing the movement and sculpting the body, there is stiff woven plastic, uneven shoes and a mask to complicate Xaba's vision, which is perhaps a factor in the tentative, slow and simplified sequence of actions. This reflects on the dance discourse precisely because it is clear that Xaba's body *can* do so much more. Starting on *pointe* on the one foot and later progressing through a variety of contortions (including 'the splits') in and through the bag, Xaba's is clearly a

trained dancing body. Why then, one might ask, is she not 'dancing'? Again, I am reminded of Lepecki's (2006) analysis of choreographers of the likes of Portuguese Vera Mantero, American Trisha Brown and French Jérôme Bel, among others. In his terms, they question dance's assumed ontology by disassociating it with what is normally considered its necessary companion, movement. Dancing as she is (without moving much) on the terrain of dance-as-movement throws this terrain into ontological anxiety. It is the absence-of-movement-where-movement-should-be (the absence of identifiable dance language in a trained dancing body) that makes us reflect on dance-as-movement. Thus, if Xaba's body were not obviously capable of so-deemed dance-worthy movement, the effect of missing such movement would be absent. It is also the absence of movement which causes the humour, being, as it is, incongruous within the structure of dance-as-movement.

There is a series of tasks: kiss audience members through a tissue cloth; rotate while untying the bag-dress; perform the 'cancan' with the four shoes, and so on. Largely covered up by her costume, Xaba is alienated from the audience. We cannot see her face to read her experience as she performs. All we have to read are the movements of her limbs, which carefully carry out tasks to do with the objects at her disposal or move laboriously in a parody of the dance style to which they refer. Because of the mask, these movements are not seen to have any purpose other than for themselves. *Why*, we wonder, is she dancing? If the language is not beautiful in itself (if it is not, in other words, a show of virtuosity from this virtuosic body), if there is no timing of spectacle (such as a 'ta-da' effect when she produces the extra shoes, like a magician drawing a rabbit from a hat) then what is the intention of this strange bunny creature? Earlier, I used the term 'uncanny' purposefully. What draws our attention is not line or flow but watching tasks be completed without access to inner expression. The performance – or aspects of it – lacks obvious purpose and function. This strange sequence of actions draws our attention because of its lack: lack of movement, lack of purpose, lack of virtuosity. Unpacking Freud's notion of the uncanny as "motion happening where it should not happen", Lepecki (2006) postulates, "What is uncanny in movement then, what turns any movement uncanny, is its apparent lack of purpose, efficiency and function" (108-109). In the context of South African dance, Xaba's

performance is arresting because of its uncanny lack of appropriate “purpose” on the terrain of South African dance discourse.

Let me elaborate with an example. When Masilo dances the role of ‘Carmen’, we are watching the spectacle of her powerful body in the dynamics of full expression; and we are watching different texts (dance languages, Western narrative) combine and collide. We are watching virtuosity and perhaps being moved by the story represented by the actions on stage. When we watch Xaba’s performance, we see neither the overt virtuosity nor the representation (at least, not until the stocking/‘condom’ appearance). The tasks carried out comment on discourse, but do not represent meaning. In this sense, the uncanny is the incongruity in this situation – that is, within the broader context of dance discourse – and it is this which holds our amused attention. If, “in the uncanny, movement always happens for the sake of movement” (Lepecki 2006: 109), then the movements involved in Xaba’s tasks take on a reified quality under the gaze of the audience. The movements involved in the tasks, in other words, become dance language. Just as in the performances Lepecki describes, in Xaba’s, we see ordinary or simple movements framed as a dance, which questions dance’s assumed virtuosic ontology. This is *Plasticization*’s curious and playful meta-dance.

As I have mentioned, with the bunny mask concealing her face, Xaba is inaccessible on an emotional level. Her movements laborious and her expressions masked, we read her as we read a puppet: anthropomorphically, searching for traces of human expression from solipsistic action. In light of this statement, it is interesting that Critchley (2002) writes of humour as often derived from the crossover point between what is human and what is animal.

[H]umour explores what it means to be human by moving back and forth across the frontier that separates humanity from animality, thereby making it unstable. [... W]hat makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human (29).

The jokes about bestial humans are frequently of the scatological, sexual type: the physicality of our existence.³⁶ The humane animals are about just that: anthropomorphic animals engaging in human actions.³⁷ Fundamental to the detachment that is part of humour (when we stand outside of, and reflect upon, ourselves) is that humans occupy an “eccentric” position in relation to themselves. Citing Plessner, Critchley (2002) argues,

[T]he animal simply lives and experiences ... By contrast, the human being not only lives and experiences, he or she experiences those experiences ... That is, the human being has a reflective attitude towards its experiences and towards itself (28).³⁸

Thus, I experience the world *and* I think about my experiences. Human beings both *have* and *are* their bodies (Critchley 2002: 42). “If being human means being humorous, then being humorous often seems to mean becoming an animal. But, paradoxically, what becoming an animal confirms is the fact that humans are *incapable* of becoming animals” (34) because of their detached reflective stance on themselves. This self-reflection casts us as “outlandish animals” (34); we see ourselves as if through the eyes of aliens, our behaviour curious. Thus, Xaba, in donning the bunny mask, which strips her of human emotional expression, becomes that hybrid animal-human, which fuels so much of our humorous and self-reflective mechanisms. We watch her with traces of our childhood delight in the surprising combination of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ concepts occurring when a person wears an animal costume. In addition, she is a sweet, smiling animal – a quality that surely led Cie Lua (2007) to describe as “a conscious naivety that enchants the spectator” (para. 1). The nostalgic childhood humour is accompanied by an interest in what the actions of this strange hybrid creature mean. By being a hybrid human-animal, Xaba occupies the position of crossover: the position of humour of the type that reflects on our humanity. She becomes the outlandish animal of whom Critchley writes.

³⁶ As Critchley (2002) reflects, “the body ... is the butt of so much humour” (42).

³⁷ Consider this joke, provided by Peter Berger: “A bear is charging this hunter in the woods. The hunter fires, and misses. The bear breaks his rifle in two, sodomizes the hunter, then walks away. The hunter is furious. The next day he is back in the woods, with a new rifle. Again the bear charges, again the hunter misses, again he is sodomized. The hunter is now beside himself. He is going to get that bear if it’s the last thing he does. He gets himself an AK-47 assault rifle, and goes back into the woods. Again the bear charges and, believe it or not, again the hunter misses. The bear breaks the assault rifle, gently puts his paws around the hunter and says, ‘Ok, come clean now. This isn’t really about hunting is it?’” (in Critchley 2002: 31-32).

³⁸ Critchley (2002) espouses this position not without skepticism: “Do [animals] – even the cleverest of them – always fail to take up an eccentric position with regard to their life, not even when they seem to *know* that they are going to die? In a word, are all animals incapable of reflection? I simply do not know ...” (28-29).

As the outlandish *dancing* animal, everything she does has the potential to reflect humorously – that is to say, to offer a critical distancing – on humans and dance. She is most powerfully set up as the (specifically) dancing animal by the shoes: a *pointe* shoe, a red high-heel, a gumboot and a ‘takkie’. Barnes (2007) suggests that the appearance of these shoes is Xaba emphasising that the HIV/AIDS epidemic affects people from all classes; that every person’s body is susceptible to the disease despite race of class. While this is a possible reading, it is also possible to see the shoes as representing certain styles of codified dance language: Ballet, perhaps Cabaret, Gumboot and Mapantsula, respectively.³⁹ The reference of these largely codified performance languages constantly highlights the terrain of dance-as-movement and dance-as-codified-language. A relevant (in terms of my argument) but also fairly obscure (in terms of Xaba’s probable intentions) reading of the final ‘orgy’ is that it reflects the fusion aesthetic: all the styles ‘in bed’ together in hedonistic pleasure.

I have argued that humour works in the work in two major ways. The first way is that the work is humorously incongruous within the greater context of dance in South Africa, which privileges physical, grandscale virtuosity. The second is how Xaba occupies the position of the ‘outlandish animal’, through costume and movement. My reading of the work is drawn from the layer of dance’s ontology. In this reading, *Plasticization* critiques dance codes as limited, restrictive, simplistic forms of movement expression. Indeed, it thus reads that it is the forms themselves which are ‘plastic’. In this way, Xaba’s solo is part of a critical praxis within the South African dance discourse.

³⁹ See, for instance, Sichel in National Arts Festival, 2006.

Conclusion

In Chapter One, I discussed elements of the South African dance and theatre industries pre- and post-1994. I argued that overt political connotations were an inevitable part of Apartheid-era dance, and that subsequently, in the post-1994 period, there has been an emphasis on dance that unpacks issues from the past or addresses social concerns of the present. On an aesthetic level, there has been an interest in engaging with the 'New' South Africa through the technique of fusion. Critics, as we saw, questioned the successfulness of these efforts, which sometimes result in 'pretty' works with no substance. I also discussed the quality of 'vitality' as being both widespread and related to the 'Proudly South African' discourse. In Chapter One, I thus offered a defence for the need for critical thinking in dance form in the South African dance context; and ended the chapter with a discussion of perceptions of humour in dance/theatre and in philosophy with the conclusion that humour is frequently seen as frivolous.

In Chapter Two, I offered a defence for humour as critical 'thinking in action', which revealed that the basis for humour, the incongruous, can offer symbolic change in the way we conceptualise the world. In examining form in dance and theatre, the position of the incongruous to illuminate the structures of meaning-making was made evident. In other words, I have argued that the incongruous can function humorously in dance (with the relevant potential effect of critical thinking) and can also create meta-dance. In this way, the link between the critical capacities of meta-dance and those of humour are drawn to suggest that humour in dance can create a critical awareness, of the likes advocated in Chapter One.

In Chapter Three, I argued that the humour in the two selected works functions in such a critical manner. In the discussion of *This part*, I argued that the work questions dance's assumed ontology. In the discussion of *Plasticization*, I argued that the terrain of South African dance was brought into humorous and critical relief via its cheeky minimalism.

I hope that, in this way, I have proved my two points; namely, that there is a need for a critical praxis in South African dance; and, secondly, that humour in dance can be part of this process. I further hope that I have made easily-plausible the idea that humour can offer South African choreographers ways of transcending habitual meaning-making patterns; that, via humour, dance as a structure in itself can be critically reviewed.

Appendix A

**RHODES UNIVERSITY MASTERS EXAM
REPORT 2008: Associate Professor Jay Pather
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE AND CONTEMPORARY
CHOREOGRAPHY
NICOLA ELLIOTT: This part should be uncomfortable**

The candidate realizes in this work a powerful sense of the meta-theatre. It is a work that not only evokes an intellectual unpacking of construction and deconstruction. The work also evokes a sense of sadness in the recognition of the vulnerability that comes with the intense subjectivities involved in the creation and assembling of elements that evoke any kind of meaning. The work stands as metaphor for a great deal about construction, not just about choreography. It impinges on constructs of language and culture and evokes these with clarity, precision, wit and humour.

Bodies dance with each other and abandon each other, sentences falter, words come and go, make sense and then whither, fragments of movement are performed analysed, discarded and included in turns. There are moments of devastating emptiness. The humour and ease in the work contain some meticulous choices and changes in both temporal and spatial rhythm that in turn invite reflection and introspection.

The use of space and light are particularly assured and serve as mature frames within which the work turns on itself and its own construction. There is an alarming honesty and a thin line between what is and what is being represented. At times the verbalized, fragmented biographic details are both funny and disturbing and when combined with accumulations of phrases of movement, the result is extremely enlivening and enlightening.

History and memory are particularly well evoked and in a manner that is without overt design and pretentiousness. The lack of pretentiousness is evoked in the very different bodies on stage, each trying to connect in some way and serve the choreographer and hanging onto the seemingly random, arbitrary bits of information.

The work ultimately evokes a very real sense of probing the construction of meaning because the performers themselves project a palpable perplexity that sometimes comes across as real anxiety: The enigma as real and as representation presented with a sense of risk and immediacy and above all courage.

The work constantly (and merely) asks for presence, mainly from the audience. And this is its ultimate success.

Appendix B

Email interview with Gary Gordon by Nicola Elliott, 10 November 2009.

1) What do you think was/is the dominant dance aesthetic(s) of the country post-1994? And, in what way did this/these aesthetic(s) interact with the emerging discourse(s) of the 'New South Africa'?

I am always worried with questions like these as it can provide an answer that would appear as reductionist. There is one sense that soon after the political transformation, many people were concerned with what might happen with what were perceived as primarily western dance forms: contemporary dance, ballet, Spanish, tap ... the list goes on. But what did work was that "afro fusion" seemed to make the strongest impact as it attempted aesthetic, ideological and kinetic connections between contemporary dance (which was seen to be essentially western in its formation) and what was then called "African dance". I think what is important here is that fusion allowed two contrasting dance forms to sit side by side, to merge and interplay and through this combination offer a new and different language – arguably specifically South African in its kinetics, dynamics and politics.

But there is another way of looking at this. If I think about programming of the Dance Umbrella and the dance component of the National Arts Festival, it allowed for all kinds of dance. So in a programme you might get ballet with gumboot dancing, some Spanish dance with Broadway numbers, and then a Pantsula intervention. Anything goes! – and even performance artists were included and were winning "Best Choreography". I remember a number of established choreographers were so concerned with issues like professionalism in dancers, appropriate training and audience behaviour. What was difficult was to compare works and many people in the dance community questioned assessment procedures for categories like "Best Dancer". But it was clear here that the idea of the "rainbow nation" was reflected in this call for diversity in choreographic platforms.

2) To what degree is humour appreciated within dance? Is it considered, for example, merely 'light' entertainment or subversive activism? What role has humour played in post-1994 South African choreography (if any)?

I am not sure if I can give a pertinent answer here.

To my knowledge, comedy has not played a pivotal role in emerging South African contemporary choreography. I'm sure there are a number of factors that could explain this. One obvious point concerns the political history of the country and the urgent social and economic needs of the majority of South Africans. I think it is also allied to choreography in many other parts of the world where contemporary choreography emerged as a reaction to other dance and art forms and so presented a felt personal commitment with intense and meaningful individual expressions. It is probably when an art form is relaxed and comfortable, that choreographers can begin to employ humorous tactics, comic situations, wit, pastiche, irony and self reflexivity. Perhaps the comic interruption can happen when

the choreographic stasis is “at home” and needs to be reconfigured and realigned. And the comic interruption allows us to contemplate tried or old habits and to re-fashion some alternative visions.

3) Has there been a difference between studio-based and university-based dance and choreography in South Africa?

Definitely – I think that one of the ways that contemporary dance developed in the country was in the University context and within drama departments. This gave it an edge in that theatrical considerations were as important as training issues. Courses looked at theatrical innovation, experimentation, collaboration, tradition and deviance, theatrical language, cultural difference and diversity. At Rhodes we worked on both the making and performing of theatre in its various manifestations and possibilities. So dance could step in time to word play, and silence was as evocative as the ordered notes of a classical string quartet. Scenic devices were seen as another text ... We tried to weave together the various theatrical strands rather than separate them. Division in the arts was a bit like viewing the enforced racial separation of the Nationalist government.

So technique at university centres was never the focus of the inquiry. In this way, physicality developed alongside conceptual inquiry which included the creating of meaning, metaphor, intentionality, iconography and/or a mythology. And so the aim was to search for the connections between ideas and dance language. Educating theatre-makers and choreographers meant a focus on creative and conceptual encounters with source material and then re-figuring those inspirational sources into unusual visions.

4) To what degree do South African choreographers engage with form?

The main drive of most choreographers is with content. I am sure the political history of the country can account for this. We, as South Africans, are so aware of our violent and unfair past history. But it is not only an awareness of past struggles but an involvement with present struggles concerning health, economics, employment, well being and of course safety.

This concern for content amongst choreographers is reflected in numerous programme notes with long explanations involving identity issues, culture, politics and gender. What is interesting for me, is that many of these works are constructed according to formalist principles so there is a discrepancy between what they purport to be about and the perceived dance form.

A play with form is probably the most inventive choreographers can get especially if we take Cunningham as a role model. Right until his recent death this year at 90, he was re- envisioning the way we make, perceive and view dance. His play with form has altered the way so many choreographers invent, construct and craft a choreographic vision. A play with form can lead to alternative shiftings, perceptions and even transformations. Content can be truly disturbing if it is played out through disruptive forms. We need to see new, to

see afresh, and to see differently. It is not possible to do this without encountering form in choreographic interventions.

Appendix C

This part should be uncomfortable

Abbreviated transcript to aid DVD viewing of the Grahamstown recorded performance:

Venue: The Box Theatre, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

Please note that the audience is arranged in an L-shape and that the camera angle is from stage left of the audience:

Cast: Nicola Elliott (choreographer, on stage, woman wearing trousers)
Lucy Kruger (performer, woman wearing dress)
Mpumelelo "Lolo" Malumo (performer, darker-skinned man)
Robin-Neil Williams (performer, lighter-skinned man)

Start dvd: preset:

Elliott awkwardly arranges her body around a chair. Kruger holds a mirror for her. Others watch, leaning against back wall. Audience enters.

Scene 1: "Square" (starts at about 7mins into tape)

With difficulty, Elliott says the names of performers ("Rob...in ... Lu...cy ... Lo...lo"). While Elliott shines the mirror at them, the performers dance detailed but simple steps in a square-shaped spot, gazing at themselves in the mirror. Elliott quietly relates details about the performers to herself: "One of the weighs 55kgs, lighter than me... One of them is 20 years old, 5 years younger than me... One of them drinks tequila, same as me... One of them is afraid of failure... One of them hates their costume..." etc.

Scene 2: "Probing" (at about 12.30mins)

Williams attempts to complete a phrase of checking his body parts before Kruger interrupts him by grabbing at his midriff. They tussle. Elliott quietly speaks her stream-of-consciousness: "Perhaps if I lift head...glove...perhaps Beckett...perhaps meaning...perhaps run..." etc.

Scene 3: "Lane" (at about 16.30mins)

Elliott exits theatre and re-enters through a back door. Performers dance within a corridor of light. Williams tries to speak.

Scene 4: "Lucy's solo" (at about 20mins)

Kruger performs an accumulating (mostly gestural) phrase. The other two respond to her. Spoken text: Malumo plays with the word "where". Williams plays with the word "Lucy". Kruger and Williams say, "On the diagonal; on stage; in the Box". Elliott examines herself in the mirror.

Scene 5: "Lucy runs" (at about 23.15mins) and "Opposites duet"

Kruger runs and performs parts of the choreography until she is exhausted. With the guidance of Elliott, Malumo and Williams perform a strange stilted duet based on opposing shapes/ideas in the body.

Scene 6: “Lolo’s solo” (at about 26.50mins)

Elliott and Malumo do a phrase in unison. Elliott gets her viola and attempts to accompany Malumo as he dances. The other two do a vigorous phrase in unison. Malumo suggests a popular tune. Elliott on viola, Kruger on guitar and Williams on tambourine make a small band and accompany an enthusiastic Malumo until he takes over with an ‘air’ drum solo and then lies down, tired. Others then pack away the instruments.

Scene 7: “Robin speaks” (at about 31.50mins)

With extreme difficulty, Williams finally speaks: “I weigh 55kgs. I’m wearing skinny jeans. I have black curly hair. I’m short. I have brown eyes. [Pause. With exaggerated pronunciation] When I start this dance I start with [with steps from the piece] one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. And that’s all you need to know! [Pause] All you need to know about this piece is [with actions] one, two...” etc. The other two join him.

Scene 8: “Circling” (at about 35mins)

Blindfolded, Elliott enters, the performers adjust her body and she shuffles forward. Performers dance a short sequence before copying her circling.

Scene 9: “Chair solo” (at about 40.20mins)

Blindfolded with a chair strapped to her back, Elliott performs a solo in the square-shaped light. The others clap and click in changing rhythms. Lights fade and then illuminate just the chair on an empty stage. End of work.

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