

## **Women performing masculine clumsiness: Lea Anderson's *Double Take*.**

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This paper discusses Lea Anderson's dance piece *Greetings* which was initially performed by two male dancers in 1990 but revived in 2004 by two female dancers. *Greetings* takes a humorous look at the way men greet one another. Like many of Anderson's pieces for her two dance companies The Cholmondeleys (who are all women) and their male counterpart the Featherstonehaughs, it draws on imagery from popular entertainment, in this case from the Marx Brothers, Morecambe and Wise and other male comedy acts. When initially performed in 1990 by Frank Bock and Carl Smith, the latter an untrained and unskilful dancer, part of its humour depended on a potential for embarrassment when men touch one another through shaking hands and slapping each other on the back. There is something endearing about the clumsy way the men in *Greetings* find their embarrassment turning this ritualised behaviour into something increasingly eccentric and complicated. As this happens, the men's ability to laugh at themselves betrays the extent to which many men fail to live up to what are in effect unattainable norms of masculine behaviour. The piece seems to create a gap in which these norms are temporarily suspended and any infringement of them has no consequences. Its later revival by Anna Pons Carrera and Mary Herbert as part of the programme *Double Take* further complicates this, but I will suggest it also creates a humorous space in which it becomes temporally possible for women dancers to escape social norms and perform alternative identities.

As we find ourselves laughing with others, we discover that we have things in common with them, and this can sometimes be things we hadn't yet consciously recognised or been able to put into words. Humour, as Simon Critchley has noted, is local and 'a sense of humour is usually highly context-specific' (2002: 67). He suggests that because verbal humour sometimes depends on inside information, it can be untranslatable. This might suggest that the humour of works like *Greetings* that use corporeal expressiveness rather than words is in some way universal. This, I suggest, is not the case. If people all over the world laugh at Mr Bean, Jacques Tati, and Jackie Chan, this is because their films are produced for an international market. Some corporeally expressive work, however, can be context-specific.

It is also necessary to recognise certain key aspects that verbally and corporeally expressive humour have in common. I once followed at a distance a guided party of French women round the Musée Carnavalet in Paris. Afterwards as I queued for my coat and bag at the vestiare, the guide came up to me and asked, in English, how much I'd understood. But how had she known I was English, as I hadn't spoken? Perhaps she'd guessed because I hadn't laughed at any of her jokes. Reflecting on this later I realised I'd known a joke was coming because her delivery accelerated towards the punch line, and she broke her rhythm to give added surprise to key words and phrases. Her jokes and the choreographed humour of *Greetings* both depend on manipulating the beholder's lived experience of time. *Greetings* often prolongs feelings of embarrassment, and sometimes speeds up suddenly so as to confound expectations. It thus exploits the virtual aspect of performance -- the fact that we are always anticipating what is not yet but about to become.

The sense of embarrassment concerning physical contact that I am arguing *Greetings* generates is also virtual. In *Politics of Touch*, Erin Manning suggests that touching can be violent. Her argument is that there is a momentary realisation of the potential implications of touch that occurs before contact actually takes place. Entering into someone else's personal space and touching them is an infringement of the social and ideological structures that construct privacy. Masculine power depends on the maintenance of status within a hierarchy of known differences. The dancers in *Greetings* seem embarrassed and can embarrass us who are beholding them because of the fear they may be about to lose status through being touched. This is of course a reading in a British context. The piece might have a very different impact in a Mediterranean country where there is more public physical contact between men. The humorous structure of its choreography seems to suspend the social consequences so that embarrassment is never allowed to turn into shame. By this I mean that embarrassment is a minor, momentary feeling of awkwardness while shame is durational and implies social stigma.

The humorous contact in *Greetings* subverts social hierarchy. Manning argues that when two people reach towards one another, they are reaching towards something that will be unknowable. The violence of this kind of contact, Manning argues, is non-hierarchical and thus different from a violence that pretends that 'the unknowable could simply be unknown and therefore potentially conquerable through comprehension and domination' (2007: 53). Two people reaching towards one another, Manning writes, 'can undermine the hierarchical opposition between self and other, reducing the exchange to a moment of sharing that potentially exceeds the two individuals' (2007: 54). The humorous comic routine, that the two dancers in *Greetings* perform, allows its beholders to imagine an alternative, non-hierarchical way of relating to others. Anderson, in a Guardian weekend mini-interview in 2005, asked which person she most despised replied: 'anyone who abuses their power' (2005: 10). [show dvd]

The structure of *Greetings* is one of gradual disintegration and increasing improbability. The two dancers initially come on stage, stepping and pausing in a waltz rhythm, and when they begin to bow and shake hands, their rhythmical actions are perfectly synchronised and symmetrical. A hint of anxiety creeps in when the handshakes, blown kisses and side slapping seem to be going on a bit, and when one of them seems to hang onto the other's hand a bit too long. After a while they become less coordinated with one another and seem to be cautiously responding to each other's lead. They are soon out of sequence with one another, each inserting moves in between those of the other. By the time they're shaking hands from behind by reaching through the other's armpit, or bowing formally to one another despite the fact that only one of them is standing while the other is flat on the ground, any pretence of ordinary behaviour has completely disappeared. Their straight-faced formality, however, makes all this seem unexceptionally masculine. Even when one of them kisses the other's knee or plants a kiss on the crown of his head, it just seems a bit of horseplay.

In *Politics of Touch*, Manning discusses a scene from Wong Kar Wai's 1997 film *Happy Together* when the two gay male Hong Kong Chinese protagonists dance a tango together. This tango, she suggests, exemplifies 'a friendship-to-come, an uncanny and strange friendship that does not bind them as individuals but instead allows them to sense one another, to listen, to hear, to touch, to make con-tact' (2007: 43). By the end of *Greetings*, the two dancers are exploring a similar friendship-to-

come. While neither seems to quite know what the other is about to do, the bizarre but ingenious ways they keep rhythmically touching and patting each other fit so smoothly and harmoniously together that they seem no longer worried about how to respond. They are focusing outwards now and their last movement is to bow to us in the audience before walking off stage, not waiting to acknowledge any applause. The humorous suspension of social conventions in *Greetings* has created an impossible space outside normative gender ideologies in which to relate to another in a non-hierarchical way. This is a relationship that does not bind but enables a sharing that, as Manning puts it, 'potentially exceeds the two individuals, the two bodies in motion' (ibid.: 54).

At one point the dancers momentarily pass through an iconic 'Morecambe and Wise' position with elbows stuck out sideways and one leg bent awkwardly sticking out behind. At another moment their palms move towards each others' and almost touch as if feeling an imaginary mirror between them. This, Anderson has explained, is a reference to the mirror routine in the Marx Brother's 1933 film *Duck Soup*. In this Harpo is, for some reason, disguised as Groucho and both are wearing long white nightshirts and nightcaps. Having broken a full length mirror behind which there is another room, Harpo tries to reproduce Groucho's movements as the latter supposedly looks at himself in the mirror so that the breakage will remain undetected. Like Anderson's *Greetings*, any pretence of reality is quickly abandoned as Groucho tries through increasingly elaborate tricks to catch his virtual double out. Both *Greetings* and *Duck Soup*'s mirror sequence playfully exploit a temporary suspension of normality. Even if one doesn't pick up these precise references while watching *Greetings*, there is nevertheless something familiar about a situation in which two men are seriously silly together. There is a long tradition of this kind of humour, including not only the Marx Brothers and Morecambe and Wise but other comic duos such as Laurel and Hardy, Flanagan and Allen, and Wilson Kepple and Betty. A quick trawl of the internet attests to their continuing appeal. Holidaymakers often pose for photographs alongside the statue of Eric Morecambe on the promenade at Morecambe Bay. Not only is the mirror routine from *Duck Soup* posted on YouTube but a flickr site shows people dressed up as Groucho and Harpo in nightgowns and nightcaps for a fancy dress party. Many of these images show women mimicking these iconic male comedians.

Around the time Lea Anderson made *Greetings* with Frank Bock and Carl Smith, I was writing about the Featherstonehaughs as part of my PhD thesis. In 2004 with a grant from the AHRC I joined rehearsals while Anderson was reviving six old pieces by the Featherstonehaughs, including *Greetings*, with female dancers for *Double Take*. The women dancers' identities in this are rather ambiguous. Their short hair, leather soled men's brogues, and pin striped suits denote masculinity. But the suits are tailored around the bust and hips, and even the Mighty Boosh's Vince Noir never had such an elaborate coiffure as Mary Herbert's extravagantly gelled curl. These are not women disguised as men. Drag King Diane Torr a.k.a. Danny King, in his Man for a Day workshops shows women how to flatten their breasts, deepen their voices and tone down their reactions so as to behave in an impassively threatening way. This is a performance of masculinity as an absence of feminine characteristics. For the women in *Double Take*, however, masculinity is supplementary. They make no attempt to suppress their femininity as they perform movements created by and for male dancers and which therefore extend their expressive repertoire. Women in Britain aren't embarrassed by any public displays of same sex intimacy in the way men are. As we

watch the women dancing *Greetings*, I suggest we can catch glimpses of Bock and Smith's masculine embarrassment. This is the motivation behind gestures like the expansive patting of a jacket pocket or the slightly stiff way they swing their legs. The women are fully engaged in the process of performing dance steps and gestures but nevertheless at the same time seem to be looking from outside and enjoying observing themselves as they do it.

In my memories of 1990, the men seemed to be finding the piece's complex, unpredictable sequence of movements challenging whereas the women have brought a greater neatness and polish to its execution. They put a swing into composer Steve Blake humorous waltz. Anderson recalls dramatic incidents during the 1990 rehearsals with dancers losing their balance and falling over and a bleeding nose when the dancer whose leg was being kissed raised it up too enthusiastically. Needless to say nothing like this happened in 2004. I remember the women were very enthusiastic about the opportunity to dance these cool male pieces, just as many of the photos I found on the web show women enjoying mimicking male comedians. The relatively few men who enter the dance industry have a disproportionately easy time compared with the much larger number of women despite the fact that the latter are almost always much better dancers. The Featherstonehaughs received far more bookings than The Cholmondeleys in the early 1990s. To a certain extent *Double Take* might be seen as the women getting their own back. There is something slightly uncomfortable when someone tells jokes at someone else's expense. If that edge is present in Herbert and Pons Carrera's performance of *Greetings*, I feel they are also smiling humorously at themselves. In 1990 the men were showing that they could smile at themselves while revealing truths about male male relationships that we hadn't yet consciously recognised or been able to put into words. In 2004 the women were able to laugh at their mischievous appropriation of masculinities even if they couldn't quite get the clumsiness right. In both cases humour was allowing them to imagine a potential for open, non-hierarchical relationships with others. Either way, *Greetings* allows us to anticipate what is not yet but we can go on hoping might be about to become.

### *references*

- Anderson, Lea. 2005 'Q&A' *The Guardian Weekend*, April 2nd. p.10.  
Critchley, Simon. 2002 *On Humour*. London: Routledge  
Manning, Erin. 2007 *The Politics of Touch*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.