



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

19 | 2019

Rethinking Laughter in Contemporary Anglophone
Theatre

Hand to God: The Irreverent Laughter of Robert Askins - “Laugh, motherfuckers, that shit’s funny” (Askins 31)

Marianne Dugeon



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/19986>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.19986

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Printed version

Date of publication: 7 October 2019

Electronic reference

Marianne Dugeon, “*Hand to God: The Irreverent Laughter of Robert Askins - “Laugh, motherfuckers, that shit’s funny” (Askins 31)*”, *Miranda* [Online], 19 | 2019, Online since 09 October 2019, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/19986> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.19986>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Hand to God: The Irreverent Laughter of Robert Askins - "Laugh, motherfuckers, that shit's funny" (Askins 31)

Marianne Dugeon

- ¹ *Hand to God* was written by Robert Askins in 2011 and first produced off Broadway in 2011 and 2014, then on Broadway in 2015, the latter production receiving five Tony Awards nominations, including for Best New Play. It subsequently opened in London at the Vaudeville Theatre in 2016, and was also adapted in French as *Oh My God!* and produced in Paris at the Théâtre Tristan-Bernard in the summer of 2017.
- ² The play takes place in a quiet small town in Texas where Margery, a recently widowed mother, tries to find a new goal to her life. She has accepted Pastor Greg's offer to run a puppet club. From the start, the context is defined as that of a traditionalist Christian congregation, a congregation which, as often happens in the United States, uses puppets to teach children how to follow the teachings of the Bible and avoid Satan. The teenage members of the puppet club are Margery's son Jason, Jessica, a girl to whom Jason is attracted, and Timothy, the neighbourhood troublemaker. Violence and sexual tension are building up throughout the play as the teenagers are discovering and then giving vent to their wildest desires, wreaking havoc on the community. But the puppets themselves progressively come to life and take part in what turns into a destructive carnival. The couple formed by Jason and his puppet Tyrone takes centre stage, with the latter guiding the former on a path of violence and devastation. In a prelude, Tyrone introduces the main themes of the play as well as its tone, decidedly provocative and obscene and, as the play develops, he cuts himself off from his puppeteer, announces that he is Satan, expresses the dark secrets that everyone would have preferred untold, and becomes more and more physically violent. In the press, the play was variously described as an "irreverent puppet comedy" by Adam Hetrick in *Playbill*¹, an "acrid comedy that will turn goose bumps into guffaws" by Charles

Isherwood in *The New York Times*², or "a scabrously funny scenario that steadily darkens into suspense and Grand Guignol horror" by David Rooney in *The Hollywood Reporter*³. In *The New York Daily News*, Joe Dziemianowicz commented on it in those contradictory terms: "*Hand to God* is so ridiculously raunchy, irreverent and funny it's bound to leave you sore from laughing. Ah, hurts so good."⁴

- 3 This paper aims at looking deeper into the reasons why this play was at the same time considered very funny, and definitely ranked as a comedy, but also very disturbing; why spectators often cringed and felt ill-at-ease, some trying to cower out of the theatre, and why, at the same time, they shook with uncontrollable laughter (Isherwood). It will first explore *Hand to God* in the light of Bergson's famous essay on laughter, as the play literalizes Bergson's metaphor of the use of the puppet for comic relief. But Bergson's analysis cannot explain the other reactions of unease, fear and shock which the play also provoked. Here, Mireille Losco-Lena's study of the intricate relation between laughter and pain will help us define the very particular kind of dark comedy that *Hand to God* is. Indeed, the play is not only funny but also painful, for the characters and for the spectators who witness extreme psychological violence (in the vein of Edward Albee) but also physical violence. Our contention is that the play relies on the same tactics as in-*yer-face* drama, not merely evoking mental disorder but also showing physical pain, and in both cases triggering nerve-racking laughter among the audience who might feel physically assaulted. Finally, we will analyse to what extent the choices which are external to the text of the play itself may create a different relation between audience and actors. Depending on the various production teams, the staging in particular theatre buildings and the organization of space in the auditorium, the play may be received either as a mere vulgar comedy or as a disturbingly and painfully efficient in-*yer-face* dark comedy."

***Hand to God* through the lens of Bergson and Losco-Lena**

- 4 In his famous essay, Bergson outlines one of the first definitions of the comical as a mechanical and automatic behaviour. This explains why repetition, being mechanical and unnatural, is comical. It may in turn explain why imitation, which is a repetition of the same, or caricature, an exaggerated imitation, are all effective comical devices. In Bergson's own words: "Imiter quelqu'un, c'est dégager la part d'automatisme qu'il a laissée s'introduire dans sa personne. C'est donc, par définition même, le rendre comique, et il n'est pas étonnant que l'imitation fasse rire." (Bergson 80) In *Hand to God*, the puppets can often be seen as the duplication, the *doppelgänger* of their puppeteers, but also as their caricature. This is obviously the case with Tyrone, the depraved, foul-mouthed and ultra-violent puppet of a solitary, introverted and awkward teenager. The play thus echoes the dichotomy at the heart of works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. But the stage directions describing the actors at the beginning of the play show that all the characters should in fact be felt to be grotesque and excessive: "The kids are played by actors that look young. But by no means the 15-17-year-olds that they are intended to be." (Askins 6) There is no attempt at verisimilitude. On the contrary, theatricality is underlined. The play defines itself as a comedy about awkward teenagers as seen from an adult's point of view. The teenagers are imitated, their way of speaking is turned to ridicule, their behaviour is

exaggerated. It is clearly a satire. To that effect, the adults of the play are turned into puppets as well: this is the case in one of the first dialogues, between Margery and Pastor Greg, who tries to seduce the widow and plays the part of the manipulating puppeteer, putting the words into her mouth:

PASTOR GREG. Try me you'll like me. Least gimme a "we'll see"?

MARGERY. It hasn't been but six months...

PASTOR GREG. Just a "we'll see"

MARGERY. (*Sigh*) We'll see. (Askins 10)

- 5 This metatheatrical situation, presenting Pastor Greg as the stage director and Margery as the actor, is recurrent throughout the play, which is based on comical repetitions. All the characters act at some point like puppets: they are shown as unable to think freely and to speak for themselves and the consequent frustration which they experience is at the heart of the plot. But they also all – even the actual puppets – turn into puppeteers, or manipulators, and dictate the behaviour of others, thus illustrating another metatheatrical aspect of the play, the mutability and instability of defined roles.
- 6 When Bergson only uses the image of the puppet to describe comical characters (Bergson 81), Askins literalizes the metaphor to activate humour. In his play humans act like puppets, and puppets reveal their power as puppeteers. What is more, Tyrone progressively turns into a devilish variant of himself, suggesting yet another repetition, or duplication, or exaggeration, so that three versions of the same teenager interact on stage: the introverted Jason, who is described in the stage directions as "Aspergersy" (Askins 11), the good puppet, and the devilish puppet who discovers, or uncovers, his personality at the end of the first act. Little by little the attention of the audience is drawn to him, as if he could live without the actor who holds him, not merely as an extension of his arm but as a separate being. The situation becomes particularly comical when Jason and Tyrone wrestle physically: the spectators laugh at the vision of a split body whose divided halves fight one another. This might be seen as an inversion of the plot of *My Arm*, in which Tim Crouch imagines that part of the body of his character becomes inanimate and open to all kinds of projections from the spectators. In his play, Askins suggests that Jason's arm takes more life and meaning than Jason himself, because Jason's personality has been stifled by the Christian congregation to which he belongs. Tyrone comes to express all the frustrations of teenagers whose sexual drives are being ignored or silenced by force. The sexual innuendoes are rife, and the imagery behind the puppet, an extension of the self which is brandished as a powerful – and manly – attribute, is quite effective. This tactic is named by Bergson as one of the roots of comedy: exaggeration is not comical as such, but becomes comical as it reveals a message, in this case, showing the relations of power between the characters and, more generally, their hypocrisy. For Bergson: "Pour que l'exagération soit comique, il faut qu'elle n'apparaisse pas comme le but, mais comme un simple moyen dont le dessinateur se sert pour rendre manifestes à nos yeux les contorsions qu'il voit se préparer dans la nature." (Bergson 76-77) Askins uses the puppet to show physically and materially the extent of the teenager's mental strife. In the case of *Hand to God*, the hypocrisy of the Christian congregation as a whole is also demonstrated by Askins, all the more potently as its ritualization of all human interactions, made blatant by the puppet show, is also a comical device as such, according to Bergson (Bergson 87-88). The religious context of *Hand to God* is here

expedient as the solemnity and unnaturalness of its rituals defeat its humanistic messages. Bergson explains the process:

Dès que nous oublions l'objet grave d'une solennité ou d'une cérémonie, ceux qui y prennent part nous font l'effet de s'y mouvoir comme des marionnettes. Leur mobilité se règle sur l'immobilité d'une formule. C'est de l'automatisme. (Bergson 88)

- 7 As Bergson demonstrates, by dwelling on the body and the physical needs of a person, comedy makes the person laughable, whatever his or her status in society. This is the case with Pastor Greg, whose sexual drives completely erase the respect that his position and his dress, or costume, as a member of the clergy should earn him. Moreover, his stereotypical answers to the distressed members of the congregation who seek his help underline his insincerity: everything he says is mechanical, learnt by heart and recited without feeling, as when he tries to soothe the distraught Margery: "I know you're a wounded thing that needs to be cared for [...] I'mma go [...] You'll figure something out Margery. [...] I hope you find what you're looking for." (Askins 14) Deflecting expectations, he does not really provide comfort or offer solutions, but merely states and repeats the obvious. Robert Askins' dark comedy thus springs out of the discrepancy between the expected respect that a Christian congregation should muster, the values it is supposed to uphold, and the ungodly way in which the representatives of the Church behave in front of the spectators. At best the pastor is unsympathetic and hypocritical. His replies to Margery's deep distress are insensitive and automatic and amount to canned messages reminding the spectators of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*: "PASTOR GREG. Have a blessed day. MARGERY. I am daily being taught lessons of patience and forgiveness." (Askins 9) Once more, the use of puppets underlines that hypocrisy, as Margery, for instance, recites the litany of Christian values turned meaningless through repetition: "MARGERY. (*through her puppet*) Hey y'all my name is Rita and I love Jesus! [...] (*She looks around the room. Nobody seems to love Jesus.*)" (Askins 7) Moreover, those empty words hardly hide the real obsession of all the characters, be they human or puppets: an obsession with sex. In the play, violent sex is liberating, it enables the characters to overcome their frustrations. The obscene is put in the spotlight, and the audience partakes, through laughter, in the freedom of the carnival and in the tradition of the farce. Indeed, following Patrice Pavis' definition of farce⁵ rather than that of the *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*⁶ or that of the American *International Dictionary of Theatre Language*⁷ for instance, one finds in the play a progressive concentration on the body, as language is shown to be repetitive, inadequate and ineffective. Indeed, if we cannot say there is a lack of logic (Trapido) as those grotesque scenes do follow a progression in the plot, and if there is nothing really absurd (Hartnoll) in the situations presented either, Askins constantly exaggerates the consequences when characters' bodies meet, collude and collide: Pastor Greig cannot touch Margery but he grabs her, love-making is never tender but always violent and extreme, and arguments turn into physical fights to the death, just as insults pervade the dialogue and stifle progressively the smooth and bland dialogues between good Christians. The play is grotesque, and the laughter produced is uncouth rather than sophisticated.
- 8 But the farce soon turns bitter, and the comedy darker, as the violent energy reveals disturbing situations of power. Jason, when he accuses (rightly) his mother of having had sex with an underage teenager, is cut short by the very same clichés and set phrases used so far in quite an innocent, or at least innocuous, way. This time though,

the laughter in the audience is tainted with unease and disgust, as spectators are reminded of the all-too-real Catholic Church sex abuse cases:

[This] puppet [is] possessed by the devil. [...] The devil is in that puppet and we are going to exorcise him right out and have everyone back home by midnight. That's what I want and that's what Jesus wants and that's what's gonna happen. Right? (Askins 21)

- 9 Margery's puerile vocabulary, made even more ridiculous by the alliteration in -p-, and the simplicity of her reasoning which equates her wish with that of God through the diacope on "that's what", itself repeated three times, make *her* sound like the possessed one. The scene finally closes with Timothy's facetious answer: "Who you gonna call? Ghostbusters" (Askins 21) which, once more, plays on the mechanisation of behaviours, reactions and language, through a caricature of reality and intertextual allusions as potent sources of laughter. But by mixing that very light and innocent humour and dark comedy, and constantly wavering between the two, with the second progressively pervading the play, Askins creates unbalance, which is another characteristic of the grotesque (Pavis 154) and extreme unease for the audience. This works on many levels: the play as a whole, as its title suggests, may indeed be taken, to a certain point, at face value, with its characters and its author all swearing to God that their words should be taken seriously. But the hand of the title is also that of the puppeteer, the manipulator who, from the wings, twists the faces and the faith of his characters for mere comical effect. The whole work oscillates between a hysterical farce and a rather chilling representation of life in an American Christian congregation. In the words of Sarrazin in *Le Rire et le Sacré*, it is difficult to decide whether the laughter produced is liberating or agonizing (Sarrazin 36). The play is at the same time grotesque, not resolving anything, and politically committed, denouncing the violence of the Church.
- 10 To try and understand how the comedy turns sour, and how laughter in the audience is consequently also tainted with unease, the study of the links between comedy and unhappiness by Mireille Losco-Lena is very helpful. Interestingly, she observes that the Christian tradition, condemning laughter, considers it as the sign of the devil, which also may help us read the behaviour of the Christian congregation in Askins' play:

La tradition chrétienne [...] considère que le rire est lié à la conscience du "mal" ou du "péché", de la chute : de tout ce qui entame la joie pure. [...] Le rire s'invente à partir du moment où l'homme a précisément perdu la béatitude édenique, où il commence à souffrir, à manquer, à être nostalgique. [...] Pour que le rire advienne, il lui faut une conscience douloureuse. La drôlerie est tissée de souffrance, et, à ce titre, la comédie est tout le contraire d'un jeu innocent. (Losco-Lena 15)
- 11 Losco-Lena indeed notes that though some themes are defined traditionally as comical while others are deemed tragic, it is possible to write a comedy about human suffering, one that will not necessarily end with a return to order, one that will constantly play with the danger of chaos, and one which will leave the spectators perhaps dissatisfied and certainly uneasy (Losco-Lena 12-13). She concludes:

Les pièces comiques qui s'écrivent aujourd'hui explorent si franchement cette ambiguïté qu'elles en deviennent troublantes. Elles se risquent à traiter de la violence politique ou intime la plus exacerbée, et les dommages y sont d'autant plus effectifs qu'ils peuvent référer à la réalité historique la plus terrible. (Losco-Lena 14)
- 12 The spectators of *Hand to God* thus find themselves in the uncomfortable position of mocking the intimate distress of suffering victims. From the first, they laugh at, rather than with, Jason or his mother. Thanks to his choice of writing in a comic vein, Askins

effectively prevents any sense of empathy with the characters. Here a parallel with Beckett's *Endgame* may be enlightening: Beckett's plays do not definitely fall in the category of comedy, but they do make the spectators laugh, in an uncomfortable way, by emphasizing the physicality of the pain and the suffering embodied by the characters. The audience laughs at Clov who scratches himself because of a flea, or at Ham who is stuck in a wheelchair, in much the same way as they laugh at Tyrone who tears off Timothy's ear. The violence is forced on the audience, and it materializes a psychological pain. Beckett also resorts to puppet-like characters, who paradoxically are obsessed with the slow decay of their bodies and are metaphors for existential anguish: Nagg and Nell, let out of their boxes from time to time, make for clownish comic relief and are clear references for Askins' Tyrone. When Nell exclaims "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that" (Beckett 14), she voices the same idea: why not laugh at unhappiness? May comedy actually be more effective in confronting the spectators with uncomfortable truths?

- 13 But if *Hand to God* is defined as comedy, it is also constantly described as a very violent play. In that regard, it clearly echoes Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). Indeed, in an interview published online, Askins mentions this particular work as having had a deep influence on his writing⁸. The frustration and mental distress expressed physically through violent games, the suggestion that the characters find refuge in illusion and that they have to go through a public exorcism to come back to reality, are themes which the two works share. The final choice that the characters face is also common to both plays: in the words of C.W.E. Bigsby in his study of the theatre of Albee, "either they must break the logic of the fantasy or surrender to it. Whichever option they choose will necessarily transform their lives" (Bigsby 131). When Albee attacks the false optimism of American society and the ideal of the perfect nuclear family, Askins mocks the hypocrisy of Christian teachings. Bigsby also notes Beckett's influence on Albee: "Albee has been increasingly drawn to Beckett's minimalism. [...] His, too, are characters for whom habit has become a substitute for being." (Bigsby 133) But if there are common points between Beckett, Albee and Askins, and if *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* has influenced *Hand to God*, the two plays differ on two main aspects: Askins' work is defined from the start as a comedy, and it also goes further in staging a violence that does not remain psychological. While Martha dodges George's bullet, blood is spilled onstage by Jason, Margery and Timothy. In that regard, in-*yer-face* theatre, though it is a British movement which has no equivalent in the United States, seems an unavoidable reference: Askins has achieved the strange association of sheer violence and comedy.
- 14 For Mireille Losco-Lena nevertheless, the two movements are at odds with each other:
- Les pièces à tonalité comique qui s'écrivent depuis une vingtaine d'années constituent [...] une voix concurrentielle, mineure mais insistante, au mouvement *in yer face* impulsé par le théâtre anglo-saxon, et qui a fasciné toute l'Europe autour des années 2000 ; ce théâtre met en scène un monde « post-humain », un monde d'où l'homme a déjà disparu. Parfois non moins tragiques que lui, les pièces comiques sont en quête d'une joie vitale qui continue coûte que coûte à miser sur la vie et sur l'homme, malgré la prolifération des signes de mort et de désastre dans le paysage contemporain. (Losco-Lena 18-19)
- 15 Our view, on the contrary, is that *Hand to God* is an instance of in-*yer-face* dark comedy, resorting as it does to grotesque situations, but also forcing the spectators to witness

the physical disintegration of humanity while making them laugh throughout the process.

An American In-Yer-Face Dark Comedy

- 16 For Bergson, laughter is possible only if the heart is anaesthetized, it addresses solely our intelligence (Bergson 63). Mireille Losco-Lena qualifies slightly that statement:

Le comique, surgi d'un grand écart entre réflexion et tempérament, est un phénomène fondamentalement contradictoire. Il l'a toujours été. Il semblerait toutefois que la modernité se soit attachée à le redécouvrir et à le penser avec une acuité nouvelle. (Losco-Lena 15)

- 17 Indeed, in the case of *Hand to God*, laughter may also be the consequence of strong feelings and deep emotional unease. It is comic relief in the midst of tragedy, or, in this case, dark comedy, offloading, releasing the tensions of ultraviolence. It is the laughter that might seem out of place when it comes as an answer to shock, the laughter of the spectators of *Fargo*, the dark comedy crime film written by Joel and Ethan Cohen. It is laughter facing the Holocaust, which was explored by playwright George Tabori in his play *Le Courage de ma mère*, where he writes about his mother's arrest and deportation by the Nazis in 1944 (Losco-Lena 24-33). It may be explained as a coping mechanism, the only way for the spectators to bear violence. In the same interview where Askins names *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* as "the play that changed [his] life"⁹, he also mentions Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill as important influences for his work. Here, turning to Aleks Sierz' analysis and definition of the relatively short-lived theatrical movement of in-yer-face, one is struck by how relevant it is to describe *Hand to God*:

How can you tell if a play is in-yer-face? It really isn't difficult: the language is usually filthy; characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each other, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent. (Sierz 5)

- 18 In Askins' play, characters fight, make love violently, and use foul language in abundance, especially to talk about religion, which is a taboo in the United States. The foul language is not only banter: it puts into question the foundations of the American moral standards and the Western definitions of right and wrong. In the play, Tyrone is the character who uses the most innovative insults, and he is also the one who challenges most efficiently the established dogmas of the Church. If, representing the devil as he does, he sometimes may bring to mind cheap horror movies such as *Chucky* ["I want you to go back to church. I want you to get up in front of the puppet club. I want you to tell them all what assholes they are. I want you to make Timmy bleed. I want you to fuck Jessica. I want you to toughen the fuck up." (Askins 16)], he also quite believably gives voice and shape to the fantasies and frustrations of a depressed character, which was one of the functions of theatre for Sarah Kane. While the British playwright explored depression, self-mutilation and suicide in *4.48 Psychosis*, Askins' *Hand to God* centres on an introverted young man who mirrors the experience of the author himself, growing up as a maladjusted teenager in Texas, after his father's death, with a mother who also ran a puppet ministry.
- 19 But foul language is not the only element which connects this play with in-yer-face drama. Physical violence also prevails progressively over all other kinds of intercourse between the characters. Indeed, the most striking characteristic of plays written by

Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill are their pervading physical cruelty: rapes, mutilation, gory murders and cannibalism are not laughing matter...or are they? They are also present in the comedy *Hand to God*: Tyrone bites Jason's finger and tears off Timothy's ear, both actions projecting blood throughout the auditorium. Of course, this violence finds its roots in the grotesque and the farce, but I would argue that it creates in the spectators not only laughter, be it coarse and vulgar, but also deep unease and disgust, which they will also feel when presented with plays such as *Shopping and Fucking* or *Blasted*. Moreover, violence escalates in Askins' play: Tyrone's ear, after being torn, is sewn back by Margery, onstage, with the needle and thread of her puppet ministry. Margery and Timothy are seen having sex, biting and punching each other sadistically. Jason, who wants to get rid of his puppet, accidentally sticks a hammer in his mother's hand. Most certainly, this violence does, to take up Sierz's words "tap into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort." It also "takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message." (Sierz 4) But the tactics of this comedy are poised between extreme violence and caricature, like a spoof horror movie. Thus, after blood has been splashed everywhere when Tyrone tears off Timothy's ear, act one closes with a parody of a horror movie: "Tyrone loses his shit. Everyone stands struck. At the height of his tantrum the demonic puppet makes an awful noise and the lightbulb bursts. Everybody screams and turns to the door." (Askins 20) The choice of words, though they are only used in stage directions, is telling: the puppet is a spoiled child, in the middle of his tantrum, rather than a real devil, and here Askins once more oscillates, and falls back on the safer grounds of a more traditional black farce¹⁰. But another scene, in which Margery, in a fit of anger, starts throwing furniture around, is quite representative of Askins' particular style of in-her-face comedy:

TIMOTHY. What do you want.

MARGERY. You know what I want.

TIMOTHY. I do, but I want you to say it.

MARGERY. You want me to say it.

TIMOTHY. Yeah.

MARGERY. Yeah.

TIMOTHY. Yeah.

MARGERY. Break it for me Timmy.

TIMOTHY. Yes ma'am. (He takes the picture off the wall. He rips it in two.)

MARGERY. Yeah. Rip it up. (Then in four.)

TIMOTHY. Like that.

MARGERY. Yeah Timmy, tear it to pieces. (Then again.)

TIMOTHY. You like this.

MARGERY. Smaller and smaller. (Rip.)

TIMOTHY. Tell me what you want. (Rippy rip rip.)

MARGERY. I want...

TIMOTHY. What.

MARGERY. I want...

TIMOTHY. Tell me (Hands fulla pieces.)

MARGERY. I want you to eat it. (He doesn't even think. He just crams the poster into his mouth.) Eat is for me Timmy. (He does. He crams more and more of the ripped-up poster into his mouth. She starts to walk towards him.)

TIMOTHY. (Through a full mouth). Yesh maam.

MARGERY. Eat it all for me Tim-Tim. (He gives it a dry swallow.)

TIMOTHY. I'm doing my best.

MARGERY. Do better. (He chokes a piece down.)

TIMOTHY. Yesh maaam.

MARGERY. You're missing pieces. There and there. (She bends down and picks up a piece of the poster off the ground.)

TIMOTHY. I'm tryin'.

MARGERY. Open your mouth. (He does. It is not pretty.)

TIMOTHY. Ahhhh. (She shoves it in his mouth. He maybe chokes a little bit. He steps back.)

MARGERY. You're one stupid piece of trash ain't you little Tim.

TIMOTHY. You're one crazy fucked-up bitch ain't you Mrs. Stevens. (Askins 14-15)

- 20 The dialogue is of course farcical, playing on low comedy, buffoonery, deflating the intensity of the sexual tension by displacing it onto a poster and resulting in Timothy's half smothered onomatopoeias. But it also shows on stage the violent rape of an underage and vulnerable teenager by an adult, which puts the audience in a very delicate position. The whole play thus swings between comedy and disturbing violence, constantly working on discrepancy, displacement, inappropriateness, indecency and bad taste, so as to effectively indict the unforgivable behaviour of violent adults. Interestingly, as we have seen in the various reviews mentioned at the beginning of this article, the reactions of the audience are also divided. This is another characteristic of in-yer-face drama which Aleks Sierz explains: "either they feel like fleeing the building or they are suddenly convinced that it is the best thing they have ever seen, and want all their friends to see it too." (Sierz 5) The performance is indeed at least as much on the stage as it is in the auditorium (Sierz 3). Almost twenty years later, audiences are certainly more accustomed to violence and sex on the stage, even on Broadway or in the West End, but the reviews of *Hand to God* all describe similar reactions to those witnessed by Sierz in 1998. Charles Isherwood sums up:

Hand to God popped open on Tuesday at the Booth Theatre like a cackling jack-in-the-box, scaring away (really) a couple of audience members at the performance I caught, but bringing peals of joy to most everyone else. (Isherwood)

- 21 Mark Shenton, echoing the mood of the play and its literalization of metaphors, describes it graphically as "a show that is going to divide people right down the middle"¹¹, while Michael Billington states: "My objection to the play is that using violence and hysteria as a way of combating hard-sell religion and hypocrisy plays into the enemy's hands."¹² Surprisingly, the British specialist seems to think that taking the audience "by the scruff of the neck and shak[ing] it" is not effective anymore. Generally, the play was indeed less successful in the United Kingdom than it had been in the United States, for several reasons that are illuminating to look into.

Places of Performance

- 22 Comedy today is often considered as a lower form of theatre. As Mireille Losco-Lena describes for France, but this would also fit American drama, theatre is divided between innovative avant-garde and traditional popular culture, with the latter endorsing comedy as its form of choice:

Dans la plupart des cas on laisse le comique aux cafés-théâtres, aux théâtres privés parisiens, aux salles spécialisées dans le "one man show", voire aux studios de télévision, qui y présentent un art souvent médiocre. C'est là une façon de se dessaisir de l'art comique et d'accepter d'en faire un produit de consommation de plus. (Losco-Lena 11)

- 23 The history of *Hand to God*'s varied productions, both in the United States and abroad, both in avant-gardist studio theatres and in popular private theatres on Broadway and

in the West End, enables to understand how the conditions, stakes and choices of a production are going to influence the reception of a play. This is true of all plays, but even more so of such a protean comedy.

- 24 In the United States, the play was produced in very different places, but by the same stage director, Moritz von Stuelpnagel, first off Broadway, at the Ensemble Studio Theatre in 2011 and at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in 2014, then on Broadway at the Booth Theatre in 2015. When the play was transferred to London in 2016, it was produced by the same stage director, at the Vaudeville Theatre in the West End. For one thing those different venues will necessarily attract different kinds of spectators: in New York the theatres are located in different neighbourhoods, and their outer appearance also creates specific expectations¹³. As Marvin Carlson explains about such smaller, experimental theatres as the Ensemble Studio, "[t]he basis of its audience is not the same as that of the standard commercial theatres of Broadway and the West End but rather a more specialized public often involved with or strongly interested in experimentation in the other arts as well." (Carlson 116) What is more, the space in the auditorium is not only of a different size but also of a different shape. Indeed the capacity of the Ensemble Studio Theatre is between 50 and 150 spectators, the stage is on the same level as the seats and the spectators are seated on at least two sides of it. On the other hand, the more traditional Booth Theatre, or for that matter the Vaudeville in the West End, have horseshoe-shaped auditoriums where the capacity is between 600 and 800 spectators and where the illusion of the fourth wall is more difficult to break, as there is a clear separation between the stage and the auditorium, with the orchestra situated lower. This organisation of space will have a direct impact on the relation created between actors and spectators, and, in the case of *Hand to God*, it will define a specific type of comedy and a specific type of laughter. Theatre is confrontational if its provocation is impossible to ignore or avoid, if the spectators are being forced to see the play close up, and if they feel their personal space is being invaded. Sierz is once more very helpful here, when he describes different versions of in-*yer-face* plays, not according to their texts but according to the conditions of their production:

A useful distinction can be made between the hot and cool versions of in-*yer-face* theatre. The hot version – often performed in small studio theatres with audiences of between fifty and two hundred people – uses the aesthetics of extremism. The language is blatant, the actions explicit, the emotions heightened. Here the aggression is open and the intention is to make the experience unforgettable. Cooler versions mediate the disturbing power of extreme emotions by using a number of distancing devices: larger auditoriums, a more naturalistic style or a more traditional structure. (Sierz 5-6)

- 25 One may thus infer that *Hand to God* had a hot version in experimental spaces, and a cool version in the more traditional spaces of Broadway and the West End, which may explain Billington's cool reaction, when he saw the play at the Vaudeville. Of course, many other aspects have influenced the reception of the play, including a different religious context, and a settled tradition of in-*yer-face* drama on the British stage which had prepared the audience for decades. The play, for all those reasons, will have appeared more grotesque and exaggerated to Londoners.
- 26 It thus seems that space does matter particularly for *Hand to God*, and that only certain productions are able to do justice to Askins' dark comedy. Indeed, some experimental companies may go much further to create a particular atmosphere which will induce a

disturbed laughter. It was the case of a production by stage director Joanie Schultz in Washington, at the Studio Theatre in the summer of 2016. From the outside, the building did not advertise the presence of a theatre at all. As Marvin Carlson explains:

[T]he absence of external signs reinforces the feeling of intimacy, exclusiveness, and focus on the internal event, and creates, as a result of all of this, a conscious and striking contrast to the traditional commercial house with its flashing lights, billboards, and lavish displays of quotes from favourable reviews. (Carlson 127)

- 27 After taking an elevator where the tickets were controlled, spectators were ushered in a rectangular room by someone dressed as a parson. The room was meant to look like a church basement, with no single stage but several dedicated spaces surrounded by long tables around which the spectators were invited to sit, one hour before the beginning of the performance, to create their own puppets, thus sharing the experience of the puppet club and getting to know each other in a festive though expectant mood. The play was afterwards performed among them, with actors sharing the same space as the audience, and circulating between the tables to reach their dedicated spaces. The boundaries between stage and auditorium were thus erased, and the graphic violence of the scenes was inescapable, as was the very concrete physicality of the interaction between the characters. The set designed by Dan Conway is described on the site of the theatre:

Not only is the audience seated at round tables instead of traditional seats, but the production team has created an alley stage so that the audience is on the same level as the action: there is no divide between actor and audience, us and them. This total immersion will continue at intermission by inviting the audience to the functioning church canteen for refreshment without stepping out of the world of the play¹⁴.

- 28 That organization of the performance and of the relation between the stage and the audience is clearly influenced by what Richard Schechner called environmental theatre:

Environmental theatre encourages give-and-take throughout a globally organized space in which the areas occupied by the audience are a kind of sea through which the performers swim; and the performance areas are kinds of islands or continents in the midst of the audience. The audience does not sit in regularly arranged rows; there is one whole space rather than two opposing spaces. The environmental use of space is fundamentally collaborative; the action flows in many directions sustained only by the cooperation of performers and spectators. Environmental theatre design is a reflection of the communal nature of this kind of theatre. The design encourages participation; it is also a reflection of the wish for participation. There are no settled sides automatically dividing the audience off against the performers. (Schechner 39)

- 29 But, in the case of *Hand to God*, the participation of the audience and the sense of a community thus created are meant to be disturbed by the jarring notes of the text: what is shared is not communion, whether it be social or religious, but unease, anxiety and misgiving. The laughter of comedy turns sour, as the aim of the stage director is not to entertain the audience, but to make them aware of the distress of Askins's characters and take responsibility for it, as Taylor Gaines explains on the theatre's website: "*Hand to God* is an intensely funny play, but Schultz's ultimate concern is to let Askins's humor open a door to his characters, who are desperately seeking community and relief from their daily pain."¹⁵ This exemplifies how humour can be used quite effectively, and counters the traditional division between committed theatre, which should remain serious and may, if necessary, use violence to get its point across, and comedy which is reduced to entertainment and which, when it uses violence, is merely

a grotesque farce. As a final instance of the impact of production choices on the reception of this particular play, one may turn to its adaptation by Sébastien Azzopardi (who was also stage director) and Sacha Danino for the French public in the summer of 2017. The choices made by the adaptors completely changed, if not betrayed, the atmosphere of the original text, toning down its corrosive and provocative content. The play was set in Vendée, creating an altogether different situation when the Catholic priest, who cannot marry, is sexually attracted to the widowed mother, whereas the American play had Pastor Greg asking Margery to marry him. Moreover, the play was produced at the Théâtre Tristan-Bernard, which specializes in light comedy and French-style vaudeville: the spirit was thus more that of a very traditional entertainment, turning sometimes into farce through exaggeration, but with the same burlesque situations, misunderstandings, typical characters and bawdy humour as any other comedy representing the genre of Boulevard Theatre¹⁶. The result was very far from the tone of biting and disturbing in-her-face dark comedy of the Washington production.

- 30 Comparing the French production and that in the studio in Washington may finally help define the different kinds of laughter the two plays have provoked. Indeed, one may go as far as defining them as two different plays. In the first, laughter is hollow, the result of pure and simple entertainment. In the second, laughter provokes feelings but also intelligence. The spectators are forced to ask themselves why they laugh and even if they should laugh. The first is regressive and inoffensive, the second is potentially subversive and, in the words of Mireille Lena-Losco, regenerating. Most of all, it may be the only way for comedy to escape futility:

La farce est un détour certes puissant pour évoquer les corps ubuesques et monstrueux du pouvoir ; mais, si elle veut retrouver son potentiel régénérant, elle doit retrouver sa propre minorité, sa vocation de contre-culture à inventer. (Losco-Lena 205)

- 31 In the interview published online, Askins explains how he first viewed his writing as "Western surreal tragedy", adding that it took him "a long time to figure out that it wasn't tragedy; it was comedy"¹⁷. The playwright, wavering between the two genres, seems to have discovered the power of comedy to move audiences to tears and to make them sore with laughter at the same time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage, 2001.
- Askins, Robert. *Hand to God*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc, 2016.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Vintage Classics, 1985
- Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame*. London: Faber and Faber, 1958, 2006.
- Bergson, Henri. *Le Rire*. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2013.

- Bigsby, C.W.E. *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, 1993.
- Crouch, Tim. *My Arm*. In *Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
- Hartnoll, Phyllis, (ed.). *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*. Oxford: OUP, 1972, 1987.
- Kane, Sarah. *4.48 Psychosis and Blasted*. In *Complete Plays*. London: Methuen, 2000.
- Losco-Lena, Mireille. « Rien n'est plus drôle que le malheur » *Du Comique et de la douleur dans les écritures dramatiques contemporaines*. Rennes: PUR, 2011.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. Paris: Dunod, 1996.
- Sarrazin, Bernard. *Le Rire et le Sacré*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991
- Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theater, An Expanded New Edition including Six Axioms For Environmental Theater*. New York: The Applause Acting Series, 1973, 1994.
- Sierz, Aleks. *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Tabori, George. *Le Courage de ma mère; Weisman et Copperface*. Paris: Théâtrales, 1995.
- Trapido, Joel, (ed.). *An International Dictionary of Theatre Language*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Internet sources**
- Billington, Michael. "Hand to God review – satanic sock-puppet satire gives in to temptation." *The Guardian*. 16 February 2016. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/16/hand-to-god-review-vaudeville-london> >
- Booth Theatre. 25 September 2018. < <http://shubert.nyc/theatres/booth/> > (last visit 25 September 2018).
- Dziemianowicz, Joe. "Hand to God review: Steven Boyer devilishly good in Robert Askins' smart, funny, foul-mouthed comedy." *The New York Daily News*. 7 April 2015. 25 September 2018. < <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/theater-arts/hand-god-devilish-comedy-burns-bright-broadway-article-1.2175377> >
- Ensemble Studio Theatre. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.ensemblestudiotheatre.org/history/> >
- Gaines, Taylor, "Environmental Design." *Hand to God*. Studio Theatre. August 2016. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.studiotheatre.org/plays/play-detail/hand-to-god> >
- Hetrick, Adam. "Robert Askins' Puppet Comedy *Hand to God* Opens Off-Broadway March 10." *Playbill*. 10 March 2014. 25 September 2018. < <http://www.playbill.com/article/robert-askins-puppet-comedy-hand-to-god-opens-off-broadway-march-10-com-215546> >
- Isherwood, Charles. "Review: *Hand to God* Features a Foul-Talking Puppet." *The New York Times*. 7 April 2015. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/theater/review-hand-to-god-features-a-foul-talking-puppet.html> >
- Rooney, David. "Hand to God: Theatre Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 4 July 2015. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/hand-god-theater-review-786761> >
- Shenton, Mark. "Hand to God review of Broadway's naughty puppet play." *London Theatre*. 16 February 2016. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/hand-to-god-review-of-broadways-naughty-puppet-play> >

Stephens, Beth. "Hand to God Playwright Robert Askins on Being a Title Fetishist, Losing the Texas Tragedy and What Opens Doors", *Broadway Buzz*. 14 April 2015. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/180396/hand-to-god-playwright-robert-askins-on-being-a-title-fetishist-losing-the-texas-tragedy-what-opens-doors/> >

Théâtres parisiens associés, spectacle *Oh my God!*. 10 August 2018. 25 September 2018. < <https://www.theatresparisiensassocies.com/pieces-theatre-paris/oh-my-god--2942.html> >

Trailer of *Hand to God*, Youtube. 16 February 2017. 25 September 2018. < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOeTGd_Aw5k >

NOTES

1. Adam Hetrick, "Robert Askins' Puppet Comedy *Hand to God* Opens Off-Broadway March 10." *Playbill*, 10 March 2014
< <http://www.playbill.com/article/robert-askins-puppet-comedy-hand-to-god-opens-off-broadway-march-10-com-215546> > (last visit 25 September 2018)
2. Charles Isherwood, "Review: *Hand to God* Features a Foul-Talking Puppet." *The New York Times*, 7 April 2015
< <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/theater/review-hand-to-god-features-a-foul-talking-puppet.html> > (last visit 25 September 2018).
3. David Rooney, "*Hand to God*: Theater Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 July 2015
< <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/hand-god-theater-review-786761> > (last visit 25 September 2018).
4. Joe Dziemianowicz, "*Hand to God* review: Steven Boyer devilishly good in Robert Askins' smart, funny, foul-mouthed comedy." *The New York Daily News*, 7 April 2015
< <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/theater-arts/hand-god-devilish-comedy-burns-bright-broadway-article-1.2175377> > (last visit 25 September 2018).
5. "A la farce, on associe d'ordinaire un comique grotesque et bouffon, un rire grossier et un style peu raffiné" (Pavis. 138).
6. "an extreme form of comedy in which laughter is raised at the expense of probability, particularly by horseplay and bodily assault. (...) In modern usage the word farce is applied to a full-length play dealing with some absurd situations, generally based on extra-marital adventures - hence the term 'bedroom farce'." (Hartnoll 170).
7. "Fast-paced, broad comedy written to excite laughter, often with little regard for logic in plot or depth of characterization, but with plenty of physical action, notably mishaps, surprises, and reversals." (Trapido 290).
8. Beth Stevens, "*Hand to God* Playwright Robert Askins on Being a Title Fetishist, Losing the Texas Tragedy and What Opens Doors", *Broadway Buzz*, 14 April 2015
< <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/180396/hand-to-god-playwright-robert-askins-on-being-a-title-fetishist-losing-the-texas-tragedy-what-opens-doors/> > (last visit 25 September 2018).
9. Beth Stevens, "*Hand to God* Playwright Robert Askins on Being a Title Fetishist, Losing the Texas Tragedy and What Opens Doors", *Broadway Buzz*, 14 April 2015
< <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/180396/hand-to-god-playwright-robert-askins-on-being-a-title-fetishist-losing-the-texas-tragedy-what-opens-doors/> > (last visit 25 September 2018).
10. Black farce is defined as "a form that both provokes and undercuts laughter by making audiences, as they laugh, perceive the bleakness of a character's situation or of his/her existence in an irrational universe." (Trapido 83).
11. Mark Shenton, "*Hand to God* review of Broadway's naughty puppet play." *London Theatre*, 16 February 2016

< <https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/hand-to-god-review-of-broadways-naughty-puppet-play> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

12. Michael Billington, "Hand to God review – satanic sock-puppet satire gives in to temptation." *The Guardian*, 16 February 2016

< <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/16/hand-to-god-review-vaudeville-london> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

13. One may compare the photographs of the façades and auditoriums of these theatres on their websites, or on google maps:

< <https://www.ensemblestudiotheatre.org/history/> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

< https://www.google.fr/maps/place/Ensemble+Studio+Theatre/@40.7669463,-73.9929678,2a,75y,47.76h,90t/data=!3m8!1e1!3m6!1saFpRnxiR_udrxUHUFp_ZPA!2e0!3e2!6s%2F%2Fgeo1.ggpht.com%2Fcbk%3Fpanoid%3DaFpRnxiR_udrxUHUFp_ZPA%26output%3Dthumbnail%26cb_client%3Dsearch.TACTILE,7i13312!8i6656!4m5!3m4!1s0x89c2585a99a9b3ad:0xa65be6cb924e079e!8m2!3d40.766961!4d-73.992873 > (last visit 25 September 2018).

< <http://shubert.nyc/theatres/booth/> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

14. Taylor Gaines, "Environmental Design", website of the Studio Theatre

< <https://www.studiotheatre.org/plays/play-detail/hand-to-god> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

15. Taylor Gaines, "Environmental Design", website of the Studio Theatre

< <https://www.studiotheatre.org/plays/play-detail/hand-to-god> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

16. To have an idea of the atmosphere created at the Théâtre Tristan-Bernard, one may watch the short promotional video on the website of Théâtres parisiens associés:

< <https://www.theatresparisiensassocies.com/pieces-theatre-paris/oh-my-god--2942.html> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

One may also compare that video with the official trailer of the play in the United States:

< https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOeTGd_Aw5k > (last visit 25 September 2018).

17. Beth Stevens, "Hand to God Playwright Robert Askins on Being a Title Fetishist, Losing the Texas Tragedy and What Opens Doors", *Broadway Buzz*, 14 April 2015

< <https://www.broadway.com/buzz/180396/hand-to-god-playwright-robert-askins-on-being-a-title-fetishist-losing-the-texas-tragedy-what-opens-doors/> > (last visit 25 September 2018).

ABSTRACTS

This article aims at defining the laughter provoked by the play *Hand to God* written by American playwright Robert Askins in 2011. This dark comedy uses the classical tools of humour, as analysed by Henri Bergson in his essay on laughter, but it creates a desperate atmosphere of mental and physical violence, which reminds of the tactics of British in-ye-face theatre. Askins aims at displaying the taboos and denouncing the hypocrisy of the American society in general, and more particularly that of Christian congregations faced to the sexuality of teenagers. The spectators' reactions are a complex combination of laughter and unease, as Askins dares them to laugh as they cringe. But those reactions also depend on the conditions of production, which have greatly varied from Off-Broadway to Broadway, and from New York to London and Paris.

Cet article tente de définir le rire provoqué par la pièce écrite par le dramaturge américain Robert Askins, *Hand to God* en 2011. Cette comédie noire mêle en effet les effets comiques classiques, tels que Bergson les analyse dans son essai sur le rire, et une atmosphère désespérée

de violence mentale et physique, qui n'est pas sans rappeler le mouvement britannique du théâtre *In-Yer-Face*. Askins cherche ainsi à exposer les tabous pour dénoncer l'hypocrisie de la société américaine dans son ensemble, et des communautés chrétiennes en particulier, face à la sexualité des adolescents. Entre le rire franc et le malaise, les réactions des spectateurs sont très complexes, et dépendent aussi des conditions de représentation de la pièce : rit-on de la même façon à Broadway que dans les petits théâtres expérimentaux, à New York, Londres ou Paris ?

INDEX

Mots-clés: théâtre In-Yer-Face, comédie noire, Broadway, Off-Broadway, le West End, marionnette, adaptation, rire, malaise

Keywords: In-yer-Face theatre, dark comedy, Broadway, Off-Broadway, West End, puppet, adaptation, laughter, unease

AUTHORS

MARIANNE DRUGEON

Maîtresse de conférences

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Marianne.drugon@univ-montp3.fr