Western Kentucky University
TopSCHOLAR®

Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects
Honors College at WKU

Spring 5-16-2014

Make 'Em Laugh: Examining the Role of Humor in Dance

Jordan Jones
Western Kentucky University, jordan.jones418@topper.wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses

Part of the Dance Commons

Recommended Citation
Jones, Jordan, "Make 'Em Laugh: Examining the Role of Humor in Dance" (2014). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects.* Paper 476.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/476

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

MAKE ‘EM LAUGH: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN DANCE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Jordan Jones

*****

Western Kentucky University
2014

CE/T Committee:

Amanda Clark, Advisor

Eric Rivera

Dr. Jianjun He

Approved by

____
Advisor
Department of Theater & Dance

Copyright by
Jordan Jones
2014

ABSTRACT

As a dancer, choreographer, and naturally sarcastic person, humor has always been a tool that I recognize and appreciate. I was specifically drawn to the role of humor in dance choreography and performance when I was responsible for creating my own dance works, and I realized the complexity behind making even the simplest joke in dance. This thesis explores humor, from its biological and psychological origins in our brains, to an evaluation of what constitutes "humor" (in past and present American society), to a discussion on how to create humor within dance using the traditionally defined elements of choreography. Contained in this discussion, I also review examples of different types of humor in dance, noting how each has achieved comedic success through different approaches. Finally, my research into this topic comes back to my own practical application, through an analysis of my choreography, and how I created (or attempted to create) comedy through movement.

Keywords: Dance, humor, choreography, funny, movement

Dedicated to my family and friends, and anyone who has ever made me laugh.

You are my unofficial research; thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first extend a heartfelt "thank you" to my advisor on this project, Amanda Clark. I wouldn't have been able to complete this project without your encouragement, guidance, and help. I appreciate all the time you have put into reading my countless drafts, listening to my proposals, and not kicking me out of your office when I won't stop talking. You have been indispensable. I also want to recognize Eric Rivera for being an interested and active second reader. Your enthusiasm to review my work encourages me to do a better job, and I appreciate the time and effort you have put into helping me. To all the Dance faculty and to the Honors College, thank you for the opportunity to pursue this research and assistance in making it a cohesive project. Finally, to my dancers, thank you for putting up with me and spending your time in extra rehearsals, and thank you for your willingness to be ridiculous on stage.

VITA

May 18, 1992 ....Born—Covington, Kentucky

2010..Gatton Academy of
Mathematics and Science,
Western Kentucky University

Summers of 2010 & 2012 ....Western Kentucky University
Study Abroad: Dance in Italy

2011-2014 ....Regent's Scholar,
Western Kentucky University

2010-2014 ....Member of
Western Kentucky University
Dance Company

2012..Cincinnati Ballet Summer
Intensive/Administrative
Assistant Intern,
Cincinnati, Ohio

2013..American Dance Festival
Summer Intensive,
Durham, North Carolina

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major field 1: Dance

Major field 2: Biology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract ii

Dedication iii

Acknowledgements iv

Vita v

List of Figures vii

Chapters:

1. Introduction 1
2. Science behind laughter 5
3. Humor 18
4. History 24
5. Personal work 39
6. Conclusion 48

Work Cited 50

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure | Page

1. Anterior Supplementary Motor Area 11

2. Broca's/Wernicke's Areas 12

3. Dorsolateral Frontal Cortex 13

4. Ventral Striatum 13

5. Involuntary Pathway 14

6. Mesolimbic Dopaminergic Reward System 15

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Dance is an expressive art form; it is a vehicle for delivering messages of practically any content to its audience. It can range anywhere from the most uplifted, joyous celebrations, to the darkest, most melancholy and morose. This is not limited to only one style of dance, either. Often there is a stereotype associated with each style of dance—jazz is thought of as sassy, powerful and flashy, modern is abstract or "heavy," while ballet is reserved for the fluffy and airy concepts. However, these stereotypes don't hold, under closer investigation. For example, ballet doesn't always have to be pretty and light; in fact, many of the storylines behind the famous classical ballets have very dark elements (take *Giselle*, as an example, which features the spirits of jilted women, who force their male victims to dance until they die). Jazz and modern dance have the same emotional range, despite the differences in technique between the forms. General audiences may be more able to identify to this idea, with help from popular television shows about dance, such as *So You Think You Can Dance* or *Dancing With the Stars*. The point here is that, in any dance technique or style, choreography can be produced with any sort of emotion or message.

Throughout my own performance experience and exposure to concert dance, I noticed a trend towards serious and heavy concepts. There seemed to be a lot of angst in performances, and I wondered if an audience only viewed a dance piece as "powerful" or

“moving” if the piece was serious. Are the somber dance works the deeply touching ones, and everything else is just superficial entertainment? My initial reaction, and the conclusion that I reached through this experience, was that this is not the case. There are many other emotions that can be used in dance that will be just as impactful and useful, besides sad, worried, distraught, tortured, etc. Considering all these other emotions, I decided to focus on one element that would offer contrast to the austere, dramatic performances we often see, and that simultaneously enhances these serious moments through its own levity—humor.

Humor, and our response to it, is an idea that we learn at a young age. From our first giggles as infants, we are shaping our reactions to “funny” prompts. Certainly, our life experiences, backgrounds, and surroundings affect how we perceive humor, but biology—levels of brain chemicals, interactions in neural circuits—also plays a role. How, then, with all these different factors, does comedy appeal to broad audiences? Beneath all the variables that contribute to our individual senses of humor, there must be a generally encompassing component, something that crosses boundaries and unites us in laughter. This component (or components), along with the other factors previously mentioned, provides a loose set of guidelines for “successful” humor—that is, humor that elicits the desired response from the listener or receiver.

Understanding humor is the foundation for producing it on stage. Dance, especially, poses the added challenge of not being able to rely on words to deliver a punch line. For the most part, conveying a message is restricted to using the body. Therefore, it is even more imperative to have a thought-out plan for crafting humor for dance to give it a greater likelihood for succeeding in front of an audience. Beyond

having a plan, putting theory into action is a vital part of the process. That said, a component of this project will examine real applications of humor on stage in my own work, including how research in this field has shaped my approach to the subject. Leading up to that, though, will be an investigation of humor and its role in dance.

In Chapter Two, I will present the science behind laughter and humor; that is, what processes occur in our brains when we respond to something funny, and how do those reactions make laughter an enjoyable experience? Following that, in Chapter Three, I will examine the facets of humor: the criteria we use to identify it, the different types of humor, and how our reactions to humor can be affected and shaped by our emotional states. After establishing a researched background, I will move on to the application of the ideas presented in Chapter Four; how to make dance funny, and what elements are involved in making funny choreography relatable and readable. Along with that discussion, I will review other notable humorous dance works, as well as choreographers and companies who are well known for their use of humor in dance. This will also lead into identifying the different avenues for humor in dance, beyond the obvious, traditional joke. Finally, as mentioned above, Chapter Five will go into my own work—how I approached using humor in dance, and how this research has shaped my approach to it now, as well as how my own sense of humor has evolved in the couple of years I have been incorporating it into my choreography.

Regardless of a background in dance, everyone can appreciate the value of humor. We have all laughed at something, found something else to be not at all funny, made other people laugh, or told a joke that fell completely flat with our audience. As I have extensive experience in the lattermost category, I have a particular interest in decoding

humor, both for my own benefit, and for the benefit of those individuals who are the unfortunate subjects of my attempted jokes. Anybody who appreciates humor might be surprised to discover its application in dance, and those who are interested in dance can relate to portraying these ideas through choreography. Either way, reviewing this project should at least provide a couple of laughs along the way.

CHAPTER TWO

SCIENCE BEHIND LAUGHTER

Laughter is not merely a vocal emission that can be taken for granted as a given natural companion to humor. Laughter, in fact, is widely recognized in sciences as a division of language, with communicative properties all its own. These sounds are part of a human vocabulary that is able to cross boundaries created by different dialects or languages, as they represent a natural, instinctive behavior of our species (Provine 2000). As instinctual as laughter may be, though, its high degree of variance in impetus and context makes it a powerful social tool. It ranks near the top on the scale of natural importance—the factors used to quantify laughter help us to establish its social, psychological, and physiological implications for humans (Provine 2000). Beyond being a natural reaction, laughter can also be a powerful manipulative tool, used to ostracize, isolate, or to express and maintain conformation to an established standard (Cox 1880, Provine 200). Furthermore, it is hardly fair to suggest that laughter only occurs in response to humorous prompts—"funny" and "laughter" define each other no more than do "paper cut" and "pain". Surely, in both cases, the latter is recognized as a response to the former, but there are a myriad of other prompts that will elicit the latter reaction, even in varying degrees and intensities (Provine 2000). So, then, we should also recognize the wide range of non-humorous circumstances under which laughter arises,

though certainly they are more numerous than our exploration could encompass. The point here, then, is that our examination of humor must start with an investigation into the behavior that we recognize as a hallmark of the humorous. Through understanding the psychological, physiological, and biological factors that shape laughter, we should have a better grasp on laughter that can be attributed to humor, and laughter that is derived from another source.

Attempting to explain the psychological basis of laughter is hardly a new idea. For centuries, scientists have developed theories to explain this behavior. The earliest recorded idea, from Plato, suggested that we laugh at those who are subject to vices, especially that of a lack of self-awareness. Plato also warned against the dangers associated with abandoning oneself to violent laughter (Provine 2000). It would be safe to suggest that he would be alarmed by present day conversations, in which participants not only "LOL," but go as far as to "ROFL"—are we already living in a society that Plato warned against? Another notable philosopher of Plato's era, Aristotle, proposed that those things we find laughable fall under a broad category of the "ugly," only in a fashion of ugly that does not cause pain (Provine 2000). It is worthwhile to notice here that neither of these theories mentions humor as the machine driving the generation of laughter. In fairness, it has been reported through research that most laughter is not a response to jokes or other formal attempts at humor (Provine 2000). However, considering the subject of this investigation is, in fact, humor, we should suspend the now-nagging notion that we are exploring the less prominent source of laughter and continue to reveal why attempts at comedy trigger chuckles, giggles, and guffaws.

For one of the most thorough documentations on the science behind humor, we turn to the founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and his detailed work, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Another distinction to make before proceeding is Freud's focus on "jokes," not "humor." While definitions and interpretations of humor may change and differ across time and cultures, Freud defines a joke as "a playful judgment…which produces a comic contrast," continuing to suggest that joking is the act of finding hidden similarities in apparently dissimilar things (Freud 1960). Similarly, Kuno Fischer, also asserted that jokes must reveal something hidden, not readily evident. At the core of Freud's theory on jokes is the principle of economy—that is, economy as it pertains to "psychical expenditure" (Freud 1960). This refers to the idea that we respond to jokes due to a release of mental effort achieved in understanding or recognizing them. In many cases, this release of mental effort arises as a realization of something that was, up to a certain point, unclear or nonsensical. If we realize a contrast between what we expect and what is revealed to us, we laugh at the mismatch—though, this is still with respect to the context of jokes. Certainly, if we were expecting a glass of milk, only to drink it and discover it to be rancid, laughter would probably not be our immediate reaction. This idea is more eloquently expressed in the Incongruity Theory, which asserts that "laughter arises from the perceived mismatch between the physical perception and abstract representation of some thing, person, or action," (Provine 2000) and again by Immanuel Kant, who stated, "laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Provine 2000). Take, as an example of these ideas, the following joke:

> "There are two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and says, 'do you know how to drive this thing?" (LaughLab 2014)

From the setup, our expectation is that the two fish are in an aquarium tank. When the punch line is delivered, we are initially confused, because our expectation of an aquarium doesn't match with something that could be driven. An instant later, we realize that "tank" refers to the military vehicle, not a bowl full of colorful rocks and water. Having resolved this incongruity, our psychical expenditure is released, and we laugh. This joke employs a double meaning, one of the three categories of joke techniques discussed by Freud: the other two are condensation, as formation of a composite word or modification of a word, and multiple use of the same material (Freud 1960). We might recognize an instance of condensation in current politics. When Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California, the nickname "the Governator" quickly surfaced, a combination of his political office and his popular role in film (Sullivan et. al. 2013). As for the multiple use category, see a statement by Richard Whatley:

> "Why can a man never starve in the Great Desert? Because he can eat the sand which is there. But what brought the sandwiches there? Why, Noah sent Ham, and his descendants mustered and bred." (Tartakovsky 2009)

Surely, there is some overlap between these categories, and they are not intended to be hard-and-fast boxes in which to force jokes, only guidelines by which to understand the joking mechanisms employed. Additionally, all of the aforementioned jokes at this point fall under the category of puns, which Freud recognized as "the lowest form of

verbal joke…which can be made with the least trouble" (Freud 1960). Such jokes, which are innocent and/or playful in their context, are regarded as non-tendentious. On the other hand, there remains another realm of jokes reported by Freud, which we have yet to explore—tendentious jokes.

Tendentious jokes are decidedly riskier than their innocent counterparts. By Freud's definition, they are either hostile or obscene, serving aggressiveness, hostility, or exposure; and through this riskiness is reward. Tendentious jokes have the potential to access pleasure that abstract jokes cannot (Freud 1960). Such jokes ignore social restrictions, resulting in a pleasure that otherwise would not have occurred—this is why this form of humor is so much more satisfying than a cheap pun. Therefore, the resultant laughter from a tendentious joke is due to a release of an unstable suppression of inhibited instincts (Freud 1960). A more thorough explanation of this type of humor will be provided in the following chapter.

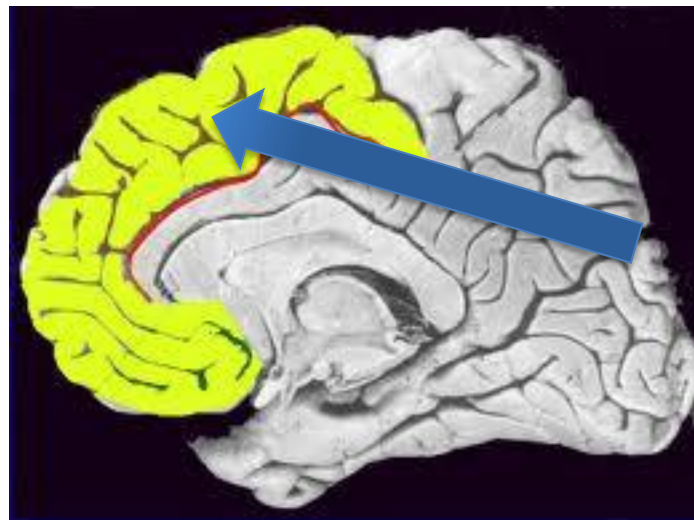
We have established a collection of psychological perspectives on why we laugh, but what other physiological processes take place during laughter? From a cursory view, laughter is "a movement that produces a sound" (Provine 2000). This movement is controlled through contraction of the abdominal muscles and diaphragm, contraction of the lungs, forcing air over the vocal cords, exiting through the nose and mouth. There is also a physiological hierarchy to recognize when discussing the actions involved in laughter. Author Herbert Spencer remarks that the convulsive movements associated with laughter do not serve the same purpose as, say, the movements elicited when struggling to escape a danger or protect oneself from physical harm. That said, these laughter movements are then recognized as being the manifestation of discharged energy

(think back to the release of psychical energy expressed by Freud). The first muscles to be affected by this release are the jaws, tongue, lips, and muscles that surround the mouth—essentially, the muscles we use constantly for expressing our emotions through speech. Following those muscles, additional energy is directed to the respiratory organs, then to muscles of the upper body. If there is still such a surplus of discharged energy, opisthotonos manifests to a slight degree; and while we may not recognize the term, we can surely recognize the action, as the spine bends slightly inwards and the head gets thrown back (Spencer 1860).

It isn't difficult for us to relate these principles to our own experiences. We can likely recall the differences between when we have found something only mildly amusing, to which we responded by smirking, and when something has been so humorous to us that we have felt our whole bodies shake with laughter while we clap our hands or slap our knees, letting our bellows escape skyward. In this way, we can equate the amount of psychical energy that has been spared with the physical reaction we produce. Beyond these muscular efforts, there exists an entire suite of neurological processes in the brain, an area that is still the subject of considerable research, which we will examine next.

The frontal lobe in the brain is often referenced as a central site in humor recognition and processing. Studies involving stimulation of the left frontal cortex (more specifically, the anterior supplementary motor area) caused the subjects to recognize and report more material presented to them as "funny" (as compared to a control group) (Fig. 1) (Provine 2000). However, in an experiment concerning patients with unilateral lesions to either the left or right frontal lobes, those with right-sided lesions made more errors in

comprehending humor, prompting those researchers to identify the frontal lobe as the right hemisphere location for humor recognition (Provine 2000). Another study corroborated these results, also noting that, while the right frontal lobe is an ideal site for humor response, as it integrates information, episodic memory, and self-awareness, it is still not the sole site involved. It is widely agreed that the ability to recognize, process, appreciate, and respond to humor involved multiple areas of cognition, dispersed throughout the brain, including those areas concerned with pattern recognition, categorization, and emotionality (Fry 2002).



Anterior

Supplementary Motor Area

Figure 1: Here, the frontal lobe is highlighted, with additional pointers to the Anterior Supplementary Motor Area that was stimulated to produce recognition of and reaction to "funny" material.

One fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) study asserted that there is no common frontal lobe area for all humor. This experiment identified different networks that are activated in the brain, depending on what type of humor is being presented. For "semantic juxtaposition" (incongruity-based), a bilateral temporal network was involved, but for "phonological juxtaposition" (puns), the most activity occurred in a left hemisphere network centered on speech production regions (Fig. 2) (Fry 2002). For semantic juxtaposition, the study identified the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex as the site for active maintenance of information used in prediction (Fig. 3), the ventral striatum as the monitor for the reliability of these predictions (Fig. 4), and the hippocampus for its role in memory (Fig. 5), also working to detect incongruities between what is remembered and what has been predicted (Fry 2002).

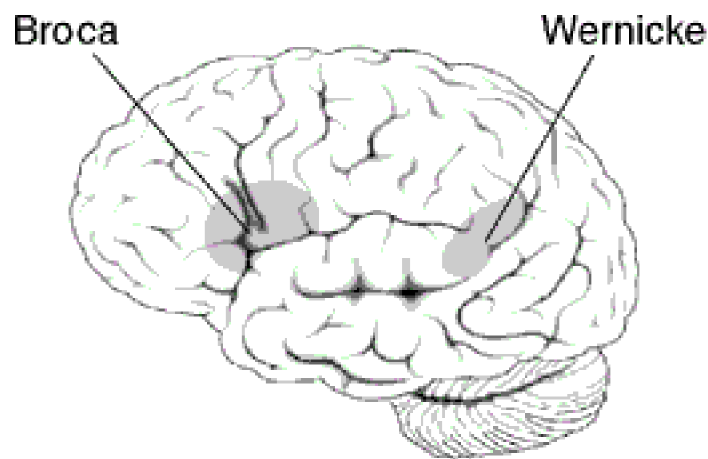


Figure 2: Pictured are the speech regions of the left hemisphere, referred to as Broca's area (speech production) and Wernicke's area (understanding speech)

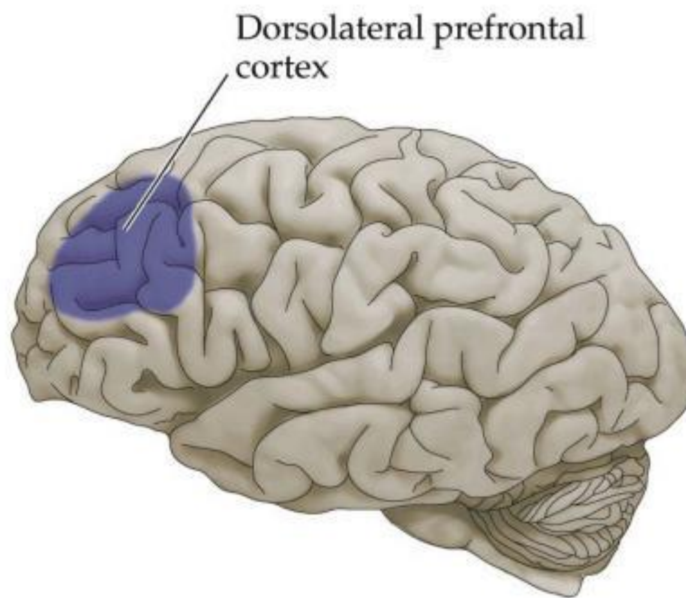


Figure 3. Pictured above is the left dorsolateral frontal cortex; the right dorsolateral frontal cortex mirrors this position on the right hemisphere.

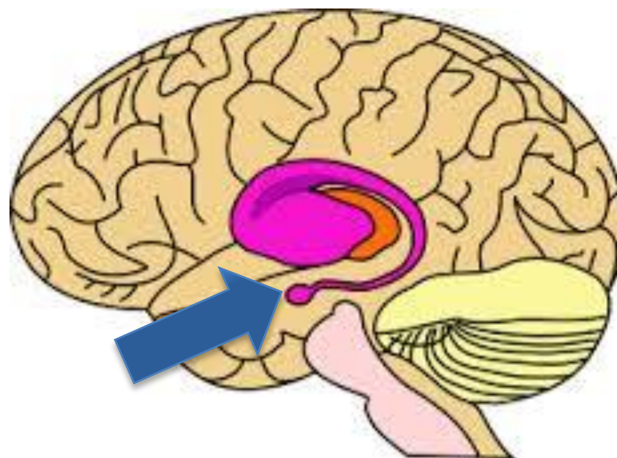


Figure 4: The ventral striatum is the lower left portion of the highlighted structures (caudate and putamen), as indicated by the arrow.

The idea of separate pathways/networks has been reported in additional studies, too, though usually with slight modifications. In a study considering neural activity in laughter and humor, two partially independent neural pathways were reported: one involuntary/emotional, and one voluntary. The involuntary pathway involved activity in the amygdala, thalamus, the hypo- and sub thalamic and dorsal/tegmental brainstem (Fig. 5). The voluntary pathway consisted of the premotor/frontal opercular areas, the motor cortex, and the pyramidal tracts to the ventral brainstem. Despite these seemingly separate structures involved, though, these systems showed coordination through the activity of the dorsal upper pons (Wild et. al. 2003). Feelings of mirth and laughter, though, were produced by stimulation of the parahippocampal gyrus (along with feelings of dizziness, in some), and by stimulation of the left superior frontal gyrus (Wild et. al. 2003). So, again, the generalized finding was that laugher (emotion-based) was able to come to fruition through a loss of inhibition through decreased frontal cortex action.

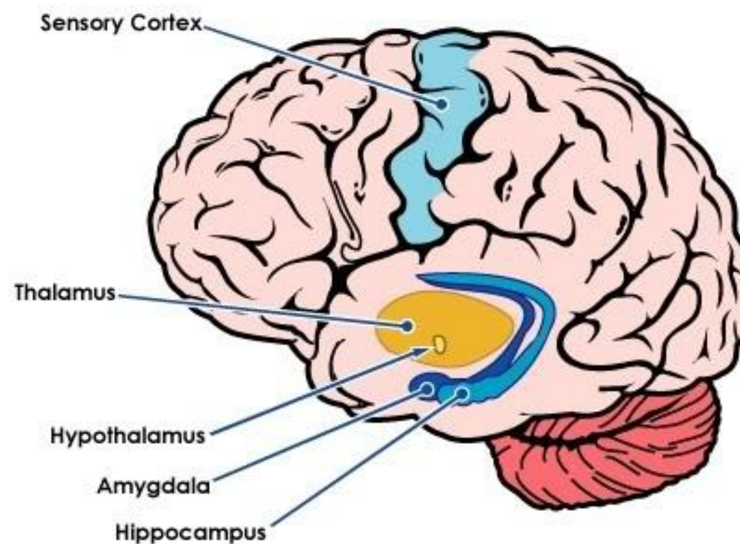


Figure 5. Labeled are the hippocampus (memory), thalamus, hypothalamus, and amygdala, which are involved in the "involuntary" pathway.

Beyond the noted cortical structures, there are at least a few subcortical components that are worthwhile to mention here. Humor has been shown to specifically engage the ventral tegmentum area (VTA), nucleus accumbens (NAcc), and amygdala—all components of the mesolimbic dopaminergic reward system (Fig. 6) (Mobbs et. al. 2003). The core of this system also includes the ventral striatum (mentioned earlier as a site used for monitoring reliability of predictions), the anterior thalamus, and subadjacent thalamus. The VTA houses the cell bodies of dopamine-producing neurons (dopamine is a neurotransmitter involved in pleasure response and reward seeking). This connectivity in the mesolimbic dopaminergic system has also been witnessed in oral amphetamine and cocaine infusion subjects (Mobbs et. al. 2003). The significance here, then, is the reward associated with laughter. It is not necessarily as strictly addictive as these drugs, but through activation of the same pathway, we are given a pleasurable response while laughing that stimulates us to seek more of the same gratification.

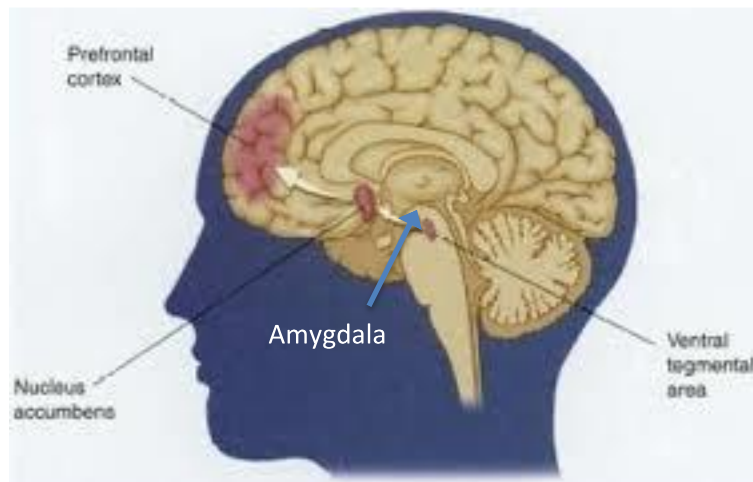


Figure 6. The mesolimbic dopaminergic reward system

Since we have thoroughly investigated laughter that is shaped as a response to humor or emotion, it is appropriate now to briefly distinguish circumstances under which

non-humorous laughter may exist. Charles Darwin, in 1872, speculated that the evolutionary basis of laughter was a function of the expression of happiness in a social context and, subsequently, a group survival advantage (Wild et. al. 2003). That said, laughter that does not serve as such an expression might have serious personal and social implications. Take, for instance, laughter that arises from subtypes of schizophrenia. This "parathymia" is characterized by abnormal laughter or sorrow, certainly not humorous laughter, and likely something that will become a disadvantage to cohesion in a social group (Provine 2000).

Another disease in which inappropriate laughter presents as a symptom is Kuru disease, a fatal degenerative neurological condition often characterized in the early stages by euphoric laughter (Provine 2000). Here, though the laughter may sound authentic, it is merely a hallmark of a grim and certain death. In subjects with manganese poisoning, there is often a pleasant, but fixed and rigid facial expression, accompanied by spastic laughter, referred to as *masque manganique*. Other instances of condition- or disease-related laugher include gelastic epilepsy, strychnine poisoning, and tetanus poisoning. Relating back to the neural mechanisms we reviewed, damage to the frontal cortex has been shown to result in inappropriate facetiousness, tasteless humor, silly behavior, wild emotional mood swings, or sometimes dulled emotional experience (the failure to respond favorably to humor in a group can be just as socially isolating as excessive laughter at inappropriate times) (Provine 2000).

Though this list is not by any means comprehensive, it serves the purpose of exposing ways in which laughter presents as a function of humorless circumstances. And with a greater understanding of the distinctions between emotional/humor spurned

laughter, and laughter that is symptomatic of some malady or affliction, we may continue to explore the subject at the root of this study, the widely interpreted and continually evolving entity that is humor.

CHAPTER THREE

HUMOR

Attempting to quantify what constitutes humor, as if it can be broken up into discrete entities and definitively placed into either "funny" or "not funny" categories is an arguably impossible task. Individual senses of humor vary infinitely, so what are the commonalities that appeal to broad audiences? While the results of this query may not turn out to be entirely conclusive, hopefully they will reveal a few themes in humor techniques and cultural trends.

In the previous chapter, we delved into the causes and mechanisms behind laughter. While our review of humor focuses more on different ideas on what constitutes it instead of why we respond to it by laughing, the two are inextricably linked, and some mention of laughter is bound to surface in this discussion.

Concerning innocent puns, arguably some of the easiest and most common jokes, we have revealed that our laughter arises as a release of "dammed up" psychical energy (Freud 1960). Besides this release occurring through resolving an incongruity, we also take pleasure in recognizing what is familiar (rediscovery of past knowledge), and in absurdity. With absurd jokes, the humor surfaces from a subconscious understanding that the joke provides a sort of barrier, a protection from criticism (Freud 1960). This barrier is the same type that exists surrounding tendentious jokes, which will be revealed in more

detail later, but first, still with respect to innocent jokes, we can note a technique that is pervasive in a wide range of comic venues. When we view slapstick comedy, or any physical joke of that nature, we perceive it as humorous because we implicitly understand that the movements are excessive and inexpedient. We recognize, through this, that if we were in the same position, we would be more economical with our behavior. Similarly, we find animals comical when they perform movements that we can't imitate ourselves, and children humorous when they act uncharacteristically in an adult manner (Freud 1960). All of these incongruities that we recognize remain innocent enough, until the jokes pass into the realm of the more dangerous—the tendentious.

Tendentious jokes are more than jokes that might fall unfavorably upon the listeners' ears—they can be used as weapons of social destruction. In the courts of Louis XVI, humor and laughter were the currency among the elite, and used as tools for isolating and degrading the cripples, mental defectives, and fools, relegating them to the bottom rung of the social ladder (Provine 2000). Humor of this nature is centered on control and dominance. Thomas Hobbes noted that "laughter is associated with superiority over others" (Morreall 1982); and not only in Renaissance courts, either. In a more modern context, we refer to a comedian's success by saying that they "killed" the audience and "owned" the crowd with their delivery of their routine (Provine 2000). Furthermore, the isolation of cripples, mental defects, etc. hardly stopped with Louis XIV's era, either. American humor has been a mill of group-specific joke cycles, each negatively targeting some subset of the larger population: the drunken Irishman, greedy Jew, thieving black farmer, idiot Slav, greasy Italian—all of these stereotypes (and more) have made their rounds in our culture (Boskin 1997). With ties to dance and the role of

humor on stage (which will be explored in greater detail later), minstrel shows made use of “blackface,” making the African American population the subject of significant ridicule. Minorities were not the only targets; the “upper class” took their turn with the circulation of “WASP” jokes and humor targeting women, fueling the belief that the entire gender lacked a sense of humor, intelligence, or independence (Boskin 1997).

These examples of tendentious humor were so popular because they allowed people to participate in thoughts that, in any other arena, would not have been appropriate to express. They provide the opportunity to take pleasure in something that otherwise would not have been possible. The insult takes place through the joke, which, if it is successful, overcomes an inhibition in both the speaker and audience, and the enjoyment obtained is significantly greater when compared to what could be expected from even the greatest puns (Freud 1960). The inhibitions that are overcome are critical judgment, suppression, and logic—hurdling these obstacles creates the barrier that was previously referenced.

While it may seem, on a cursory glance, that the joke cycles that fueled negative stereotypes were only dark spots on American humor’s past, these jokes actually allowed the groups in question to gain more power through their degradation. By developing a certain ability to mock themselves, minorities grabbed the reigns on their own jokes, and so achieved a degree of empowerment and freedom through pioneering the laughter (Boskin 1997). George Meredith summarized this concept most succinctly:

> “Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusions when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society. After we recognize the

> misdoings, the blunders, we can liberate ourselves by a confident, wise laughter that brings a catharsis to our discontent…unflinching and undaunting we see where we are." (Boskin 1997)

Through tendentious jokes, taboo topics can be brought into a more open arena, questioning the norm, and providing an opportunity for greater liberation. As Malcom Muggeridge suggested, "Humor is an aspect of freedom, without which it cannot exist at all." (Boskin 1997).

Our discourse on what constitutes humor would not be complete without examining the factors that influence how we respond to humor at a given moment. Take, for instance, the first time hearing a funny joke, or seeing a humorous commercial on television—the likely consequence is that you will laugh. However, how will you respond the second time upon hearing or seeing it? What about the third and fourth? How many repeated exposures to the same prompt will you be able to receive before you no longer respond to it with laughter? While there is no magic number for this obtuse equation, there is some explanation in this pattern. Jokes typically only strike us as funny if they are new to us; that is, if we are hearing them for the first time (Freud 1960). If we know the resolution of the joke going into it, there is not the same psychical damming up, and we don't receive the full effect of the jest. In an effort to compensate for that loss of enjoyment upon hearing the same joke multiple times, we often assume our position as the joke-teller and relay it to another party, to whom it will hopefully be new. The reaction we receive from this other listener reflects back on us, and we are able to obtain some pleasure second-hand through their enjoyment of the joke, while we are simultaneously reminded of our first exposure to hearing it. Thus, telling a joke that we

did not create ourselves serves more to fulfill our desire to regain what joy we have lost than it does to purely entertain another listener (Freud 1960).

Another factor to consider is our mood upon hearing a joke. If we are preoccupied by serious, dark, sad, or angry thoughts, we are not predisposed to respond favorably to a jest. At the least, we should be in an ambivalent sort of mood if the joke is to have much of a chance of being successful. Ideally, there would be pleasurable circumstances surrounding the delivery of the joke, as these will generate more feelings of benevolence in the listener, a sort of contagious happiness that could spread throughout an audience (Freud 1960). After all, we laugh more when we hear others laugh, specifically, thirty times more when we are around others versus when we are alone—it is part of a neurological process that responds to the vocal chain reaction, duplicating the laughter we hear in our own bodies (Provine 2000). Furthermore, it is extremely helpful if the audience to the joke does not have any emotions or thoughts that will conflict with the content or nature of the joke. This, in simpler terms, might be stated as "know your audience". A major part of successful humor is simply being able to anticipate what the audience will respond to best, or if they will respond at all; small audiences are prone to be laughless ones (Provine 2000). Along with knowing your audience is the indispensible piece of advice known as "keep it simple". The audience must be able to fill in the blanks of the joke and come to their resolutions without too much mental effort; if they are forced to think too much about the prompt, they will likely awaken their conscious thoughts, which will undoubtedly conflict with the effect of the joke on the unconscious mind (Freud 1960).

So, returning to our initial query, what is humor? We could cite a textbook definition, but in this scenario it seems more appropriate to compile our own assessment through the examples we have covered. From this, we can interpret that humor is always subjective, heavily relying on circumstances and audiences. It is constantly morphing, sometimes unifying, but often ostracizing. In essence, humor is an ever-present facet of our lives, serving as the thread that is woven throughout our cultures and histories.

CHAPTER FOUR

HISTORY

Up to this point, we have delved into the aspects of humor, joke theory, and the science backing those ideas, all to develop a better idea of what elements are in successful comedy, along with the individual factors that may shape how an audience receives those ideas. However, the main distinction between what we have discussed up to now and what we will investigate from this point forward is that the former is based on a perspective of verbal humor—stand up comedy, verbal jokes, and written humor, while what we are now considering is nonverbal—dance and performance. Producing humor in dance choreography eliminates the very direct delivery of jokes. Instead of telling the audience a set up and punch line in very specific words, a codified language that the audience all understands in a mostly objective manner, the language of dance—movement—is not nearly as concrete. There is no objective way to observe dance; everything about choreography allows for individual interpretation. Herein lies the challenge: how do we take what we know about effective humor and joke presentation and apply it to a venue where we use bodies instead of words to tell a story?

Before diving directly into humor on stage, we should establish the basics of choreography. That is, what elements and tools are expected for well-constructed choreography? Just as a car needs an engine, transmission, and fuel supply system to run properly, certain components are implied in designing a dance. The internal features of a

car wouldn't function independently, separate from each other, and the elements of choreography wouldn't constitute choreography on their own. They must be combined in a thoughtful, structured manner to create a cohesive, functioning work. Just as a mechanic would mindfully construct a car, with a blueprint or map dictating which specific parts to use and where to place them, a trained choreographer uses the mental sketch of the dance, influenced by the intent for the piece, to determine how each element is used.

Choreography teaches the fundamentals of sensible movement construction, so that the audience, who isn't privy to the thought processes that provide the impetus behind the dance, will understand what is happening. This impetus develops into the *intent*, the driving purpose behind the dance. Intent must have clarity and specificity. The clearer the intent, the more probable it is that the audience will "get it". The danger in a broad intent is in an even broader audience understanding—audiences often find a meaning in work that the choreographer didn't plan for or anticipate (Blom & Chaplin 1982). While this isn't an inherently bad thing, speaking to humor specifically, the audience needs to have a clear direction on how to understand the joke, or it will be lost or misinterpreted. This, in turn, means that the choreographer must have a very clear knowledge of the joke, and a thorough plan that will portray the message logically.

The three most basic "elements" of choreography, those that will be drilled in any beginning choreography class, are space, time, and energy. Within these categories are many subcategories that provide the structure for creating movement. Considering space, there are many different components that can be addressed. There is the physical space on the stage—where the dancer is located, which could be center stage, downstage,

upstage right, etc. There is also the use of positive and negative space. Positive space is what the dancers body occupies, the shapes they make with their own extremities. Negative space is what the dancer's movement shapes—for example, a dancer with their arms lifted in a "touchdown" football gesture would be showcasing negative space in the area between their uplifted arms. Still with space, we can consider the levels of the body in a vertical plane; a high level might be achieved through jumping, medium by standing straight up, and low by lying on the ground. With respect to time, there is the understanding of tempo, momentum, accents, and rhythms, and how the duration of movements can be altered to reflect these components, as well as the knowledge that these all exist in the music (and the music itself often serves as another factor in shaping a dance). Finally, energy entails the force behind movements, along with movement qualities and dynamics that an audience member might observe—harsh, stiff, slashing motions (which imply a quick timing), versus smooth, lethargic, pressing motions (which generally imply a certain slowness). Even if someone unfamiliar with the dance world doesn't know these elements by name, they recognize them at some level when they are able to compare different dances and even different dancers, and they are all things that must be considered when creating choreography. Other aspects to keep in mind, as a choreographer, include phrasing of movement—rise, fall, and high points—transitions between phrases, sequencing (how the phrases logically fit together), potential props, the number of bodies on stage, music or live musical accompaniment, and the performance venue (and the associated audience) in which a piece will be performed (Blom & Chaplin 1982).

Clearly, there is plenty to consider when creating a piece of choreography, regardless of concept or content. Add to that the pressure of producing a successful joke, and there is even more importance of paying attention to the choreographic process. For instance, humor in dance is best served when it is downstage, closer to the audience. Imagine sitting in the back of a theater and trying to interpret facial gestures or small interactions between dancers at the back of a stage—you are likely to miss something that has importance to the joke, and the strain you have to put forth simply to see the performance will hinder your enjoyment of any comedic attempt. Yet, keeping an entire piece downstage because it is generally humorous isn't a good idea, either. Making use of the stage space is an important element, so the most crucial moments to perpetuating the joke should be kept closer to the audience, but not every movement needs to be completely downstage.

Besides knowing that humor is best served closer to the audience, what do all the elements of choreography tell us about expressing comedy on stage? Frankly, the answer is not much. Not explicitly, at least. There is not a specific timing, level, shape, force, quality, etc. that automatically reads as "humor". Rather, knowing what type of joke you want to express will lend it to designs that support the idea. The intent shapes the movement more than anything else. Given that, since the elements of choreography alone don't tell us how to present humor in dance, we can look beyond concert dance, and take a more theatrical approach.

One assertion is that the "funniest" actors are the ones who take the most risks; they are willing to do the most bizarre, to do what is shocking, vulnerable, and honest (Wright 2007). This makes sense—watching an actor play it safe on stage, behave

perfectly normally, completely without drama or exaggeration, isn't humorous to viewers. We don't go to a show to see the people on stage act exactly as we do in our day-to-day activities. The comedy is in the larger-than-life quality and the overdone expressions of thoughts and emotions. When actors do what is "shocking, vulnerable, and honest," they play out our unconscious thoughts, in the same manner that a verbal joke releases our unconscious tensions (think back to Freud). With theater or dance, we are only adding more layers to the joke—actors or dancers, a script, a setting, other interactions between characters, etc.

The need for honesty in theatrical comedy is also true for dancers and choreographers. Beneath all the choreography, there needs to be a genuine impetus for the comedy; something that audiences will recognize from their everyday lives or histories. It is much easier to deliver a punch line based on information an audience can easily recall and to which they can easily draw comparisons than it is to conclude a joke when the audience has hardly any basis for understanding the content. In this way, we note that forcing a joke parallels overly contrived movement in comedic dance. An audience needs to be able to resolve the set up of the joke on their own, without the resolution being thrust upon them prematurely. Choreographers should trust in their audience's ability to understand movement. For example, if you expect that an audience can follow a dancer's focus on stage, it frees the choreography from needing excessive gestures to a specific point in space. Allowing the audience to follow the dancers' movement is a more natural way of telling the joke, whereas trying to force-feed them every line of the set up will probably kill the humor more than enhance it.

Consider someone who sets up a joke too much—they promise hilarity, they assure that it is the best joke you have ever heard, and when it is revealed, the build up has been so great that the punch line cannot satisfy. Choreography can fall victim to the same thing. If an idea is funny to only the choreographer, the movement will not read to an audience; they won't get the joke. Another part of successful humor choreography is knowing what an audience will respond to—this draws on the elements of humor that we have previously mentioned in the first two chapters. College audiences will laugh at different jokes than will an audience of 3rd graders or a group of monks. Jokes should be designed and presented with thoughtfulness towards the recipients and how they will perceive humor. At the same time, though, while it is crucial to understand the differences between groups and how they approach comedy, it is just as useful to find similarities. Jokes that appeal to broader groups will have more longevity and overall success than jokes that are ultra-specific to a certain sub-group.

Now we are entering a cyclical logic—to present effective humor on stage, we need to understand humor, and once we understand humor, we need to understand how to produce effectual choreography. At the core of this choreography, running through all the elements, must be the humorous intent, which develops from an understanding of humor and its components. This goes to say that there is not a standardized checklist of steps to follow to ensure that humor will always read on stage. There are certainly tips and guidelines, as far as positioning the number of bodies on stage, changing how they face the audience to make their expressions and movements more readable, even the choice of music or maybe lighting and costuming, not to mention the importance of the performance produced by the dancers, but there isn't an equation that describes exactly

how to choreograph humor. It is a constant gamble in trying to predict what will make an audience respond, and experimenting with movements that will convey the joke.

While not as direct as verbal humor, choreography can be just as effective in eliciting a response, as we will see in the following examples of comedic choreography. This will hopefully help to elucidate any confusion that was created in this discussion; often, in dance, the best way to understand something is to try it, and to observe others who have tried it before you. In this case, the "something" is humor, and as we will see, many have tried it before, paving the way for exploration and development of this nonverbal joke telling.

Some of the earliest comedic dance in America (that is, dance that was intended at the time to be humorous, not dance that we may perceive now as funny, as we reflect on dances of earlier cultures) wasn't strictly dancing—it was movement that played a role in the larger act of storytelling and entertainment. These traveling acts, with their famous character portrayals, were a major source of amusement and, simultaneously, a primary source of stereotype propagation in the early 19th century: they were the minstrel shows, and they were popular for their put-downs of African-Americans, putting musicians painted in blackface on stage as caricatures of blacks and slaves (American Masters 1999). The concept of these performances, a "song and dance" act that could travel and appeal to broad audiences, laid the foundation for other similar acts to emerge, which would incorporate movement and dance into their storytelling more and more.

Vaudeville developed after minstrel shows, and instead of targeting just one specific race, it exploited any number of races, portraying stereotypes from a myriad of ethnic groups (which, while not politically correct, did allow for cultural exposure across different groups that may not have otherwise happened) (American Masters 1999). In a vaudeville performance, you would likely see jugglers, acrobats, musicians, magicians, and contortionists, but above all that, the focus was on comedy. Comedic standup acts also incorporated a significant amount of physical comedy, which then transferred into silent films. Silent films, though aided by captions, faced a similar issue to dance in presenting comedy without an audible component, and they found a solution in slapstick. While not a silent film, a popular example that blends these ideas is the "Make 'Em Laugh" scene from the 1952 movie, *Singin' in the Rain*. In this musical dance number, Donald O'Connor's character performs a series of extremely physical slapstick moves and stunts as part of a choreographed routine designed to, as the name implies, humor the audience. Sill effective today, this scene is a good reminder of the timeless nature of physical comedy—some jokes come in and out of favor with cultural shifts and time, but slapstick appeals to a more base human instinct, registering with groups otherwise separated by cultural differences.

Also appearing near the end of the 19th century was burlesque, sometimes classified as vaudeville's "upscale cousin". Whereas other forms of performance entertainment tried to portray more of a sense of community, uniting the audiences through shared ambitions or experiences, burlesque thrived on featuring dissimilarities between social groups. This was a hallmark of a transition from rural to urban comedy, from humor that laughed *with*, to humor that laughed *at* others (Boskin 1997). Still,

burlesque featured a good deal of slapstick humor, and as mentioned before, the use of physicality to convey a joke fed itself through the pipelines of entertainment, from traveling acts to movies and theaters, to evolve into the humorous dance we recognize now.

It would be impractical and nearly impossible to list all of the examples of humorous choreography in concert dance, and there isn't a clear record of who was the irrefutable first choreographer to put comedy in their work. Therefore, to examine examples of humorous dance, we will note a couple of big names in dance history, along with works that I have seen live and to which I can attest.

Paul Taylor is a famous name in modern dance; he studied under Martha Graham, José Limon, and Doris Humphrey, founders of the modern dance movement with rich histories all their own. In his extensive repertory, Taylor has created many "funny" works. One in particular that stood out to me, because of my choreographic work, was *Gossamer Gallants*, which portrayed the mating rituals of insects, where the female is a predatory partner (PTDC 2011). In this piece, Taylor features fast, staccato, almost frenetic movements to mimic the hyperactivity of bugs. This reads as humorous to an audience because the dancers are portraying non-human characters, a principle that was discussed by Freud in an earlier chapter. Furthermore, the viewers find comedy in the premise of the dance—Taylor uses showy, "macho" moves to establish the male bug characters as overconfident, goofy, and mostly harebrained, and then he brings in the female bugs, with their sensual, very feminine qualities. When the females turn from their "come hither" movements to more aggressive, predatory, and devious actions, the audience laughs at the triumph of female trickery over male ego. However, it might be

worthwhile to question if this piece would have the same comedic success if the gender roles were reversed: would audiences respond the same way if the males turned out to be the dominant partners? I suspect it would not be the case. We only find as much humor in this set up as we do because, on some level, we still recognize the archetype of male-dominated relationships. We expect the men to be the aggressors, the dictators of the encounters, so when that expectation is not met, we are pleasantly surprised. If Taylor had reversed the roles of the male and female bugs in his piece, it likely would have turned from a humorous piece to a social commentary.

Another renowned modern dancer is Twyla Tharp, a choreographer and dancer known for her quirky and tenacious nature. Tharp studied under Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham and joined Paul Taylor's company for two years before leaving to start her own. In considering Tharp's collection of over 135 works, there are certainly pieces that stand out as more "funny" in a traditional sense, but she also uses humor in a different way. She takes humor as a tool and perspective for approaching all her work. Sometimes it may be more crass or dry humor, but it is still infused throughout her body of work (Twyla Tharp 2014). I was able to see the premiere of one of her pieces, *Treefrog in Stonehenge* (2013), and the humor was not overt, but definitely present. She used mainly choreography that was taken directly from exercises used in her technique classes, but placed it against an electronic hoedown setting. Choreographing technical elements, forceful and powerful, utilizing obvious physical control, against the simplistic "swing your partner 'round and 'round" movements that seem very carefree and light, opposite in dynamics from the rest of the choreography, is the juxtaposition that adds humor. In a way, Tharp almost seems to be mocking the seriousness of concert dance,

and the expectation that everything must be innovative or revolutionary, with her flippant incorporation of hoedown dance. Timing is a crucial element here—just when the audience expects another phrase of modern movement, Tharp features an entire section of tumbling passes, or a faux ending, complete with a music fade and blackout. The “unexpected” element of humor is, generally speaking, one of Tharp’s strong points.

Bob Fosse is a name most often associated with his work in musicals. He choreographed for *The Pajama Game, Damn Yankees, Sweet Charity, Cabaret, Pippin,* and *Chicago*. His movement style was very sexualized, but also lighthearted. In “Rich Man’s Frug,” a dance scene in *Sweet Charity*, Fosse’s use of isolations of body parts provides most of the (if not unintentional) humor. The dancers all appear to be very serious, and the choreography is very slinky, with the pelvis pushed forward, and the rest of the body moving in slow, controlled synchronization. Contrasted against that, the quick, isolated movements of the wrists and neck give almost an impression of a pecking bird, which adds levity to the choreography. Additionally, in this piece, the slow and placed movements are sharply contrasted by moments of wild, swinging, nearly flailing movement, which comes off as humorous in its unexpected timing and polarity compared to the dynamics of the majority of the dance. In other works, Fosse sometimes incorporated a more cynical perspective, but cynicism is an element of humor nonetheless. Fosse was inspired throughout his choreography by the dark humor of vaudeville (Zaremba 2003), an example of how the early variety acts of the 19th century have imbued their colors into the tapestry of modern dance.

While studying at the American Dance Festival, a modern dance intensive, in Summer 2013, I attended many dance concerts and gained a lot of exposure to the role of

humor in dance. This experience broadened my perspective of the concept and intrigued me to discover more on the topic. Again, the artists I saw represent only a fraction of the current choreographers who are featuring comedy in their works, but these are the examples with which I have primary experience.

605 Collective is a small company from Canada that specializes in high energy, extremely physically demanding fusions of hip-hop/modern dance/martial arts type movement. They presented *Audible*, a piece that explores social relationships and connections in a digital world of online networking and communication. Here, the humor is provided by the dancers' ability to move seamlessly, until they attempt to make physical contact, at which point their interaction becomes a wrestling tango. While ballroom music plays, a song that inspires ideas of very upright, placed dancing, the audience watches a very low-to-the-ground, clumsy, grappling match unfold, a contrast in level and dynamics that strictly opposes expectations. The comedy is both in the realization of expectation versus reality and in the audience's ability to relate to the struggling relationship that they witness on stage—a couple who just doesn't seem to be able to connect, no matter how much of an effort they put forth.

In terms of structure, there is a sort of spectrum to approaching modern dance, which we can compare to a more relatable topic—food. On one end, we have a parfait; this is the very structured dance, with clear phrasing in the choreography, complete thoughts expressed sequentially through movement, and all the elements come together like the layers of the parfait to create a fully constructed dance. Here, the planning is evident in the final product, where you can see each component as part of the whole. On the other end of the spectrum, we have dance that is more akin to a smoothie—some

combination of the elements we used in the parfait are present here, but they are all combined and blended together. No longer distinct from each other, they are fused to create an entirely new entity that can't be identified solely by any one of its components. This "smoothie" type of dance is the abstract, postmodern work. These dances usually lack phrases of choreography that characterize traditional dance, and the structure can seem very scattered and obscure. While the elements of dance are still present in some permutation, they are blended in unique combinations, which masks the obvious form that we learned to recognize in other forms of modern dance. One example that represents the latter end of the spectrum is a work by Faye Driscoll and Jesse Zarritt—*YOU'RE ME*—that bordered on performance art in its absurdity and abstraction. Throughout this two-person production, the audience watches the pair mimic birds feeding each other, slather paint all over their clothes and the stage, disrobe from elaborately overdone and ridiculous costumes, and make a general mess. As part of the group that witnessed the premiere of this piece, I'm not sure if the entire audience was laughing at some implied joke in this performance, or if only a select few understood the subtle humor, and the rest voiced consent as a precaution against being the ignorant non-laughers. This performance in particular made me question what constitutes humor, because I sat, silent as a stone, throughout the spectacle, trying to understand if being weird for weird's sake has enough substance to be a justification for a two hour dance performance.

A final example, one which opened my eyes to another approach to humor, and one that comes almost full circle in our discussion, is *MR. TOL E. RAncE* by Camille A. Brown, a dancer and choreographer who is known for her ability to use music and

movement to create captivating stories on stage. This particular work looks at black stereotypes, from minstrel shows, to roles in television, to pop culture and the stereotypes that still exist. It presents, at first, as funny—the dancers recited a bit from "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," much to the pleasure of the audience, who joined in, and when they got extremely raucous on stage, running around and yelling at each other, a la "Jerry Springer," they were met with consistent giggles and cheers. As an audience, we laughed—and it wasn't a white audience laughing at black dancers, it was an extremely diverse audience, with members from across this nation and many others, laughing at the stereotypes presented. After a while, though, it became apparent that the work wasn't meant to be just one big joke. Yes, we were supposed to laugh, but only so we could realize *why* we were laughing. In a time when we are fully knowledgeable about our nation's darker history and about the significance of stereotypes, in a group where we are considered "more educated" or "more aware", we still laugh at the same tactics presented in minstrel shows centuries ago. This use of humor to provoke thought was especially compelling to me. It was the idea that you don't have to create a piece drenched in despair and cloaked in melancholy to make an audience "feel" something. Humor can be just as powerful a tool as any other emotion.

One of the less-conclusive conclusions of this review is that there isn't a straightforward, mathematical formula to putting humor in dance, and as much as we can liken modern dance works to food, there isn't a recipe to follow that will always produce successful choreography. Humor is, ultimately, subjective, and even if every guideline is followed and all the odds point to comedy, the dance still might not resonate with an audience. This is the reality and risk of any joke and, furthermore, of any dance. The

more examples of comedic dance that we can review, the more ways we can expand our view of humor in dance. True, there may not be one equation for producing comedic choreography, but there also isn't one type of comedy that can be produced. Humorous dance has a myriad of outlets and expressions, which can only be explored with experience and time.

CHAPTER FIVE

PERSONAL WORK

The examples of professional choreography provided in the previous chapter served to illustrate some of the principles we mentioned in our discussion of humor in dance, and hopefully they offered some clarity to the ideas and theories we have investigated. However, as helpful as those examples may have been, they have only furthered our discussion as far as I have been able to analyze them and comment on what I have witnessed. On the other hand, by reviewing my own choreography—the inspiration, processes, and lessons learned—we will have personal insight and thus a more conclusive discourse on the practical application of the principles we have examined.

My relationship with humorous dance began during my first semester of formal choreography classes in my sophomore year of college. It was the first training I had ever received in choreography, and I was overwhelmed with all the principles, guidelines, and details involved in creating a dance. Coupled with the anxiety of wanting to have a thoroughly designed piece, I was faced with the pressure of developing a "good" idea to serve as the spine, or inspiration and guiding force, behind the movement. Before I knew what I wanted to do, I knew what I would avoid at all costs—being serious. I had seen too many melancholy, morose dances from other beginning choreographers that reminded me of emotionally overwrought excerpts from my teenage journal, and I

couldn't entertain the idea of creating my own work that fell in the same category. So, since I didn't trust myself with being able to handle any sort of depth with choreographic dexterity, I realized that I would have to aim for levity and humor—something that I felt might be within the realm of capability for a beginning choreographer. This is not to say that humorous choreography is easy, though; I simply felt more comfortable and less vulnerable approaching humor than I would have with a more "serious" idea.

Once my sights were set on humor, a concept developed shortly thereafter. I found the music for my first full piece before I had an idea, but once I listened to the song, a jazzy saxophone cover of "Spend My Life With You," my thoughts went immediately to the relationships that we create with food, especially food that we know isn't the best for us. From this, the spine of my dance was born—it was going to be a duet of sorts between a girl and a cupcake, with the music setting the background for the sexualized dancing, which wouldn't be as humorous if it wasn't directed at an inanimate food item on a crystal cake platter. Most audience members can relate to this idea in some form or fashion, which makes it more humorous to them. If someone can recall a time when they have felt almost physically drawn to food, tempted as if by a siren song, then they understand what is happening on stage in this dance. The humor comes not only from the juxtaposition of seduction and bakery items, but also from the audience relating to the dancer's position: they laugh because it is an expression of something that they have felt but haven't acted out so boldly. The title of this piece, *Friday Night, 1 A.M.*, is intended to help the audience place themselves in the position of the dancer, possibly drawing on prior similar experiences.

The concept behind this piece readily lent itself to the development of movement to describe it. That is, I didn't have to put the majority of my effort into creating the movement—I simply drew from memories of "sexy" or "sultry" that I've seen on stage, in movies, on television, and adapted that to dance. The larger problem I encountered in making this piece humorous was in the pacing of the choreography, or in sustaining the joke so that it stays funny to the audience for four minutes. In the first couple of movements, the audience understands the joke—they see the cupcake, they can hear the R&B-esque music, and they see the type of movement that will be developed. At this point, they have already processed the material, and maybe they have laughed. The challenge for me was in giving them material that would keep them laughing at essentially the same joke after the initial punch line. I experimented with isolating different body parts to make it appear as if the dancer's body is drawing her to the cupcake against her will. In what I have seen, the audience seems to respond most favorably to movements where the dancer's backside is the body part that has a mind of its own. This might be a combination of the derrière's already slightly elevated comedic status in our society and the audience recalling memories of "a moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips"—either way, adding movements of that nature into the choreography helped to keep the laughter up throughout the dance. The other tactic I employed was switching between the dancer desiring the cupcake and fighting her lust; at times she would be seducing the sweet, and the next moment she would be trying to deny her desire. This back-and-forth added some interest and mystery to the story line; would she succumb to the cupcake, or would her willpower win out over her hunger? These moments of trial and struggle drew laughter from the audience—again, maybe they were

sympathizing with the dancer, recalling on their own late-night snack encounters. Through interspersing these different elements throughout the piece, I received the reaction I was hoping for from the audience. They laughed multiple times during the piece, which indicated to me that the choreography was successful, at least in maintaining humor throughout.

As I approached my second semester of choreography class, I knew that I wanted to stick with what I knew would work—jokes. I still wanted to avoid creating overly angst-y or emotionally contrived work, so I directed my attention towards incorporating more humor into choreography. I developed the concept for my second piece during an assigned choreographic study on the use of space and direction. My guidelines indicated that I had to use one pathway on stage for the duration of the piece, and in experimenting with that, I was inspired by the behaviors of bugs and their interactions with bug zappers. With that idea, I created a piece about a bug couple that encounters a bug zapper and struggles to resist the temptation that they know will be ultimately deadly. This piece got less of a reaction from the audience throughout, in comparison with the cupcake piece, partially because it had a different joke structure. The cupcake dance revealed the joke at the onset of the piece and restated it throughout in slight variations. The bug piece, on the other hand, didn't come right out with the punch line. For the first portion of the dance, the audience only sees the two "bugs" interacting playfully, to the jaunty "Tritsch-Tratsch Polka" by Vienna Opera Orchestra. The joke is set up about half way through the first section of the piece, when the audience recognizes that the bugs are interacting with a zapper light in the corner. The resolution of the joke comes in phases—at first, only one bug succumbs to the temptation of the light and suffers death-by-strobe light.

This typically gets a reaction from the audience; laughter mixed with a little bit of sadness. Then, as they watch the bug die a slow and twitchy bug death, to an operatic backdrop provided by Luciano Pavarotti's "Nessun Dorma", a few more chuckles are shared: the same type of chuckle you would expect from watching a baby running into a glass door or a baby deer on a sheet of ice. That is, the audience is laughing in spite of their mild sadness and pity, which is the reaction that I was hoping for in creating this piece. The second phase of the punch line happens when the surviving bug, realizing that he can't spend another moment separated from his departed companion, throws himself into the light, taking his own bug life—hence the title of the piece, *Fatal Attraction*. In short, this piece is Romeo and Juliet as bugs, without the feuding families or fake deaths. This is the ultimate resolution of the joke. The audience laughs, having finally resolved the five-minute long set up, and from an understanding that they recognize the story, even on an unconscious level.

Beyond the music and choreography that made these pieces "funny," the performances and nuances provided by the dancers themselves cannot be minimized or ignored. I was very fortunate to work with dancers who not only understood the intention behind the movement, but that weren't afraid to take a few liberties on stage and add their own interpretation to the pieces. Another factor that likely played at least some part in the audience's reaction was the relationship between the dancers and the audience members. A significant portion of each audience for both of the pieces consisted of members of our Theater & Dance Department, along with family and friends of the dancers. The implication here is that the viewers already knew the dancers to some extent, so they were not only laughing at the choreography, but also laughing at their

friends doing something so ludicrous or out of character. Certainly, there were audience members who were complete strangers to the performers, but there isn't much of a way to know if they laughed at the dance, or if they were just joining the laugher of the group. Either way, I owe much of the success of my pieces to the dancers who were completely committed to embarrassing themselves on stage for the sake of performance.

While I can note two instances in my own choreography where my attempts at humor panned out, I could note twice as many that didn't make it far enough to grace a stage. As I have noted earlier, humor is not quite as formulaic as textbooks might lead one to believe. I struggled with using music that contained lyrics in one piece—I found that it was difficult to balance my own ideas of what story the movement should tell against the story being told my the lyrics, and often those opposing forces made the choreography seem more confused than funny. In that same attempt, I learned that it is much more difficult for me to produce "thought-provoking" humor than it is to make the obvious, "slapstick" type joke. Dark humor, or any sort of comedy with a more serious underpinning is significantly more complex than a face-value joke, such as my cupcake dance. I wasn't prepared to balance the humorous elements with the message I was trying to send, and the choreography suffered from an identity crisis as a result. The intent became muddled, and consequently, there was no obvious purpose for the movement from a viewer's perspective.

As I approached developing a third piece to present in conjunction with this research, I often struggled more with simply developing a concept for a piece than I did with the movement for it. The more I researched humor, and the more facts I gathered and guidelines I generated, the more difficult it became to settle on my own idea for a

humorous piece. Every joke I considered seemed forced or too contrived, too similar to something I had already done or something I had seen in another performance. I jumped from concept to concept almost weekly; coming up with a new idea, finding music, and starting on movement, only to decide that the humor wasn't going to read.

Unlike my past work, I went into this project knowing that I wanted to create a group piece, which is very different from choreographing a solo or a duet. The concept alone must have a different dynamic—while it was easy for me to think of humorous situations that are awkward or funny for one or two people, it was more difficult to imagine similar scenarios for a group of people that could be readily portrayed through movement. For the first part of the semester, I intended to do a piece on the secret life teachers lead in the teacher's lounge; that became too much of an obstacle to create based on the number of props and items I wanted to set the scene, and so I discarded that idea. Moving on from that, I was prompted to consider using elderly people as the subject of my dance. Inspired by that, I decided that the piece should be about a group of octogenarians at an assisted living facility, rushing to get to the bingo hall. Conveniently, I was able to borrow a walker and a cane from my grandmother to incorporate as props (disclaimer: said grandmother was not using the cane/walker, they were only in her basement. I did not leave her without walking support). As I worked with the props, though, I found that my movement was limited based on the stability of the prop. Beyond being unsure that the walker would support a 6'4" male dancer, it didn't make sense to me that I could have a group of elderly people, walking feebly with canes and walkers, and then sporadically burst into grand leaps and turns. Thus, the "old folks" piece joined the discard pile. Ultimately, I think that, by spending so much attention on

the theory and research behind humor, I neglected the spontaneity and freedom that must also be present for humor to be successful.

After weeks of contemplation, and delaying my progress with my own doubts and second-guesses, I simply picked a concept and jumped into working on it. Drawing on my own memories of horribly awkward middle school and high school dances, I based the piece on the interactions and dynamics between hormonal boys and the girls who often end up the unwilling objects of their affections. Set to the R&B Boyz II Men song, “I’ll Make Love to You,” the message is not at all abstract or obtuse. I wanted the music to be as blatant as the boys are in their pursuit of the girls, while the girls provide the contrast by expressing no desire to be seduced in such a brazen manner. My hope for this piece was that the audience would relate to the situations that they see on stage—there wasn’t a hidden joke or deeper meaning, or anything more for the audience to take from it beyond a few laughs and maybe flashbacks to middle school. However, as I’m sure many choreographers can relate, there are times when a piece has to be let go before it reaches the stage. As I worked on this final piece, I couldn’t escape the feeling that everything was too forced. My ideas were cluttered and rushed, jumbled and contrived. With the time constraints I was working under, I felt that anything I produced wouldn’t exceed the quality of my previous works, and I didn’t want to produce something that was supposed to represent the culmination of my choreographic experience if it wasn’t up to snuff. With that, I made the decision to not proceed with the third piece. I believe that there are salvageable ideas in my intent, and perhaps with more time and clarity, I could make that concept a reality. Ultimately, through all my analyzing, attempts, and reflections, what I can offer from this exploration in choreography is that, no matter how

many choreographic “rules” or researched guidelines there are, creating dance is an art above all else, and passion ultimately guides the process.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This exploration of humor has encompassed a broad range of topics, all centered on the idea of "funny". Initially, we investigated from a more scientific perspective, looking at the ideas on humor from psychology and human biology and neuroanatomy. We can recall the idea that laughter arises from a release of pent up psychical energy, and that jokes usually accomplish this through an incongruity that is resolved in the receiver's unconscious. From a physiological standpoint, we established how different intensities of laughter (representing varying degrees of how "funny" something is perceived as) manifest through the activation of different muscle groups, triggering reactions that we can see and feel. Paying specific attention to the way humor is processed in the brain, we saw how the information travels through different neural connections and lobes of the brain. While the frontal lobe is one of the most frequently referenced sites with regard to humor, more research revealed that there isn't only one site that serves as the central processing center. Instead, multiple areas of the brain and various pathways are triggered when we are presented with and react to something funny.

Departing from a causative explanation of laughter, we moved on to what humor content provokes laughter, and how that content has evolved throughout the past few centuries in America. As a gross generalization, we could say that the most successful

jokes are the risky ones—those that have the potential to offend or upset. However, what is viewed as potentially offensive changes with different cultural, socioeconomic, and age groups, so one of the most crucial parts of presenting humor is knowing your audience, and being able to predict to what they will respond.

After a mostly theoretical examination of humor in the first chapters, we delved into the application of humor in choreography. By addressing the elements of choreography that are taught in any theory class, we developed an understanding of how to incorporate jokes into planned movement. Additionally, we took note of humorous dance examples from renowned choreographers, as well as some more recent and emerging artists. Coming full circle, from the inspiration that started this project, to the culmination of all my research, we finished with a review of my own choreography, and how my work on this topic shaped my approach to creating dance pieces.

As multi-faceted as this study of humor in dance may have been, I believe it is nowhere near comprehensive or exhaustive. Analyzing any use of humor from every choreographer who has ever created a dance would be a Herculean task in and of itself, not to mention all the other components of humor we considered, apart from choreography. With that in mind, I consider my study of humor to be still "in progress;" something that I will continue to examine in my everyday life and in my future dance endeavors. After all, humor is as much a part of existence as is breathing or talking, and its influence and power, after this exploration, cannot be denied.

WORK CITED

American Masters. 1999. "Vaudeville." Accessed April 14, 2014. http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/vaudeville/about-vaudeville/721/.

Beiswanger, George. 1962. "Chance and Design in Choreography." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21:1. doi: 10.2307/427633.

Blom, Lynne Anne and L. Tarin Chaplin. 1982. *The Intimate Act of Choreography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Boskin, Joseph. 1997. *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Cox, Samuel S. 1880. *Why We Laugh*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Eitland, Kris. "Humor & Wit: Their dances make us laugh." *CultureBuzz*, February 5, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2014. http://culturebuzzsd.org/humor-wit-dances-make-us-laugh/.

Freud, Sigmund. 1960. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated and edited by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Fry, William F. 2002. "Humor and the Brain: A Selective Review." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15:3, 305-333. Accessed April 20, 2014.

http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.libsrv.wku.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=543a29d8-1dc6-416f-a533-d31f4977d4c1%40sessionmgr113&vid=1&hid=101#.

LaughLab. 2014. "Incongruity Theory." Accessed April 14. http://www.richardwiseman.com/LaughLab/incon.html.

Martin, Rod A. 2002. "Is Laughter the Best Medicine? Humor, Laughter, and Physical Health." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11:6, 216-220. doi: 10.1111/1467-8721.00204.

Mobbs, Greicius, Abdel-Azim, Menon, and Allan L Reiss. 2003. "Humor Modulates the Mesolimbic Reward Centers." *Neuron* 40:5, 1041-1048. doi: 10.1016/S0896-6273(03)00751-7.

Mobbs, Hagan, Azim, Menon, and Allan L Reiss. 2005. "Personality Predicts Activity in Reward and Emotional Regions Associated with Humor." *PNAS* 102: 45, 16502-16506. doi: 10.1073/pnas.0408457102.

Morreall, John. 1982. "A New Theory of Laughter." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 42:2, 243-254. Accessed April 20, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4319555.

Paul Taylor Dance Company. 2014. "Repertoire." Accessed April 14, 2014. http://ptdc.org/artists-dances/taylor-repertoire/.

Pendergast, T., and Sara Pendergast. 2000. *St. James encyclopedia of popular culture, Volume 5*. Farmington Hills: St. James Press.

Provine, Robert R. 2000. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. New York: Penguin.

Spencer, Herbert. "The Physiology of Laughter." *Macmillan's Magazine*, March 1860.

Sullivan, Sean, and Aaron Blake. "The Fix's 10 best political nicknames." *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2013. Accessed April 14, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/08/30/the-fixs-10-best-political-nicknames/.

Tartakovsky, Joseph. "Pun for the Ages." *The New York Times*, March 28, 2009. Accessed April 14, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/28/opinion/28Tartakovsky.html?_r=1&.

Twyla Tharp. 2014. "Twyla Tharp." Accessed April 14, 2014. http://www.twylatharp.org/.

Wallis, Wilson D. 1922. "Why Do We Laugh?." *The Scientific Monthly* 15:4, 343-347. http://www.jstor.org/stable/6903.

Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, M., and Steven Booth-Butterfield. 2009. "The funny people: A source-orientation to the communication of humor." *Communication Quarterly* 43:2, 142-154. doi: 10.1080/01463379509369965.

Wild, Rodden, Grodd, and Willibald Ruch. 2003. "Neural Correlates of Laughter and Humor." *Brain* 126:10, 2121-2138. doi: 10.1093/brain/awg226.

Wright, John. 2007. *Why is that So Funny?: A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*. New York: Limelight Editions.

Zaremba, DFernando. 2003. “Fosse: An Introduction.” Accessed April 20, 2014. http://www.fosse.com/features/fosse_an_introduction.html.