

J. B. Priestley

'Particular Pleasures' in Performance

The recent death of J. B. Priestley, in the same year as that of the finest exponent of his plays, Sir Ralph Richardson, seems to signal the close of an era. We had hoped in an early issue of *New Theatre Quarterly* to arrange an interview with the playwright to coincide with his ninetieth birthday, and although generous tributes have been paid to Priestley's work in the theatre, two aspects of this work (incidentally of crucial importance to the policy of this journal) have been somewhat neglected. After the end of the Second World War, during the discussions and plans for building the new Britain (and by extension Europe) from the ruins of the old, Priestley stood for a particular kind of integrity in the British theatre: and his role in the creation of the International Theatre Institute and his own conception of the British Theatre Conference of 1947 raised many interesting questions about the social, national, and international role that theatre could play. If the intervening years have not seen developments to match that vision, our theatre nevertheless owes a great deal to the various reforms that have followed from such initiatives, and in future issues we intend to return to those ideals and ideas – to see what basis they constitute for a critique of our own time, and to assess what continuing relevance they have for our future. Any theatre journal today also owes a debt to Priestley for his pioneering championship and criticism of the various forms of popular entertainment in which he so delighted, and in which he discerned strong social values – essentially, the inspiration for a line of criticism carried forward brilliantly by Raymond Williams and others over the last three decades. Tragically, two of the great comedians who earned his admiration, Tommy Cooper and Eric Morecambe, departed before him, too far short of his own fullness of years. The world's stock of laughter has slumped since their passing and, as Priestley showed us, we have lost two innovators in the art of theatre. Tommy Cooper's deconstruction, if not demolition, of the stage was a masterly exposure of the polished sales techniques of showbusiness, and his exploitation of the art of anti-climax showed new ways through which to hold an audience and relate to them. Eric Morecambe, equally ruthless and proficient at puncturing the pretensions and posturings of glib naturalism and pseudo-aestheticism, had also the self-deflating wisdom of the true philosopher. One day, when we have grown over-familiar with the reruns of the reruns of the shows he has left behind, a retrospective examination of all the work of Morecambe and Wise will surely show that, underlying the technical brilliance of the comic playing, there is also a serious progression through the process of ageing, as brash optimism is tempered by the disillusionment of experience in the struggle to survive and extract what advantages one can from life. We learned a great deal about theatre from Tommy Cooper, and a lot about living and growing older from Eric Morecambe: they have gone leaving that education unfinished, but to commemorate them in the power of their effect, and to remind us of our debt to Priestley, we reproduce here the two pieces he wrote about them as living performers in the collection of essays *Particular Pleasures*, published in 1975 by Heinemann (to whom our grateful acknowledgements are extended).

Tommy Cooper: the Zany Giant

I wonder if Tommy Cooper is old enough to have seen, even as a young boy, the wildly original act of the American, van Hoven. This man appeared as a conventional conjurer, solemn and immaculately dressed, but all his

tricks went wrong. He was assisted by three sullen urchins, holding eggs and blocks of ice. By the end of the act, now deep in despair, his voice was almost gone, his clothes were a wreck, eggs were falling, blocks of ice melting, the three

urchins were hating him, and we were laughing until it hurt. I bring in van Hoven because I seem to remember that when I first saw Tommy Cooper he depended to some extent on conjuring tricks that were not coming off. Since then, however, his act has taken its own wild course, and he is an original too – there is none like him, none.

His appeal, though wide enough to bring him into television (but he is better on the stage, very much *in person*), is more limited than most contemporary clowns and comedians. I have an idea – and if I am wrong I apologize to Mr. Cooper – that many women did not warm to his act, which is altogether too daft for them. On the stage or in cabaret, where he might be even closer to them, he alarms them, for a reason we shall discover. But if the *idea* of him amuses you, as it always does me, then he can't fail to make you laugh – and your laughter can be nearly as wild as his performance.

Perhaps the best brief description of Tommy Cooper would be that he is a giant zany. He is a big man, adding to his height by the tall red fez he wears, and he has a large-featured craggy face, suggesting the boss of some construction gang rather than any kind of entertainer. Seemingly he is never at ease. It is as if he is giving a trial performance in an amateur hour. At times he can be quiet and still, perhaps holding a short length of white rope, waiting for it to do something that it refuses to do for this bungling conjurer. Usually, however, he is very restless indeed, trying some gadget that fails him or hurrying off to bring on some bit of nonsense

that he hopes will amuse us, all the while almost terrifying us with a half-mad high giggle, out of all proportion to his size and weight. He will do a sketch of sorts, playing all the characters by rapidly changing hats, and finally, desperately failing to keep it up. He may have one trick that works, a simple gadget, so he hurriedly includes this just to console himself and us. And, surprising as it may seem to anybody who does not know his act, he makes us laugh and laugh and multiplies his audiences.

Why is this? His jokes aren't witty, just silly; his tricks don't work; he is wasting his energy and our time running off and then on again to show us something nonsensical; and he never suggests anybody we have ever known. But he is, I repeat, a giant zany, not relating to commonsense at all, except in one particular: that he is playing a man, and a very large man at that, desperately anxious to entertain us but apparently shockingly equipped to do so. And there is something else. That craggy convulsed face, the sudden daft grin, those rolling eyes, and, perhaps above all, that almost insane high giggle, together make us feel, in some dark corner of the mind, that we might have here a dangerous lunatic capable of something appalling. Fear stirs and quivers in that dark corner, but then in the lighted places of the mind we realize we are watching the performance of a well-known comic – and so we laugh and laugh. Is Tommy Cooper a depth psychologist? The odds are heavily against it. But even so either he or somebody masterminding his act has gone to work with some valuable intuitions.

A Higher Dimension of Comedy: the Art of Morecambe and Wise

During the years when I saw a lot of variety shows I also saw a lot of two-men crosstalk acts. If I thought it worth while I could probably recall a dozen of them. There would be a blundering or wildly daft comic man and his 'feed' or 'straight man', who would soon begin to lose his temper and start shouting, which would give the comic a chance to score off him. They never seemed as funny to me as they must have done to agents, managers, and most audiences. I may

have laughed but there was no delight, no joy, in my laughter, at the sight and sound of these routine entertainers. They never illuminated human nature as the great clowns and comedians could do. Perhaps I ought to make an exception of Flanagan and Allen, chiefly because there was a larger-than-life quality about Bud Flanagan, whose bulk, hoarse remnant of a voice, huge ruin of a face, should have taken him much further into clowndom



than they actually did, Crazy Gang stuff not really being good enough for him. But if I mention these routine crosstalk acts it is because I am under the impression that Morecambe and Wise began by toiling in that galley and remained in it, still toiling away, for some years.

They are well out of it, now, of course, delighting millions of viewers. They deserve their success because of the way in which they have developed their act and have taken immense pains with it. But though I enjoy them, there are two sharp points I must make. First, the competition they have to face is pitiful. They are bringing water into a desert. Had they been performing fifty years ago, up against some of the clowns and comedians of those times, they would have had to fight like tigers. Secondly, I don't admire and delight in all their act, only a certain part of it. The sketches, for example, only rate a few giggles with me, if only because I have seen too many of such sketches, from way back. Again, it seems to me just a showbiz weakness when they decorate their act with well-known names and then fool around with rather embarrassed distinguished visitors. All this merely offers us the watered milk of what we

might call Morecambeness and Wisery. It is only the pure milk of it that refreshes me. And this is to be found – and nowhere else I will swear – only in their apparently offhand exchanges with each other. Here they have lifted the old routine crosstalk act out of its rut. They might be said to have taken it into a higher dimension of comedy, creating something precious that is all their own.

The old formula – the sensible man trying to talk to a fool – has gone. Ernie, once the indignant straight man, is now another fool. He may be the straighter fool of the two; he may sometimes return to indignation; but his huge innocent vanity belongs to Clown Number Two. Now Eric Morecambe can play it three ways. He can, if necessary, still be the comic against the straight man. He can reverse the roles, rejecting Ernie's gigantic daft vanity and so becoming a kind of straight man himself. Or he can accept and admire Ernie's rubbish and turn comic-to-straight-man on the edge of complete imbecility. And there are variations even within this shifting pattern. There are times when Ernie, back to straight man (who is also a fool), plays the highbrow, the intellectual, the thinker, disgusted with his partner's lack of interest in higher things and appalling mental indolence. But Eric in his turn has a special role of his own that bounces in and out of the talk. At these moments he is the North Country know-all, loud voiced, ruthlessly dogmatic and quite silly; and I must have overheard men just like him in scores of pubs in the North. Again, just when we feel that Ernie is being insufferable in his conceit of himself, and that Eric will have to sink once more into comic-on-the-edge-of-complete-imbecility, Eric refuses to do this, turns sceptical and rebellious, and mutters to us, the audience, that Ernie is a fool.

All this is not easy to describe, but it is certainly no easier to perform. It demands in its complexity very rapid but sure changes of expression, glances, tones of voice, and infallible timing. Just as it is easily the best part of their act it also requires the highest professional and carefully rehearsed skill, delighting any connoisseur of comedy. Yes indeed, Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise have come a long way from the old routine crosstalk act. They deserve their ample rewards.



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