

Comic Sounds in Contemporary Theatre Performances: Marthaler, Pollesch, Fritsch and Gotscheff

Katharina Rost

Volume 35, Number 2-3, 2015

La sémiotique du son : vers une architecture de l'acoustique et de l'auralité dans le théâtre post-dramatique. Tome I
Semiotics of Sound: Toward an Architecture of Acoustics and Aurality in Postdramatic Theatre. Tome I

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051074ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051074ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (print)

1923-9920 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rost, K. (2015). Comic Sounds in Contemporary Theatre Performances: Marthaler, Pollesch, Fritsch and Gotscheff. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 35(2-3), 163–180. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051074ar>

Article abstract

At the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in central Berlin, directors René Pollesch, Christoph Marthaler, Herbert Fritsch, and Dimiter Gotscheff employ comical elements of slapstick, irony, black humour, exaggeration, bluntness, vulgarity, and absurdity. Sound often proves to be significant to the comical effect of the performances as the use of music, sound effects and a specific way of speaking are characteristic for each of their individual directing styles. Even though their styles are comparable in that they all use of a vast array of acoustic elements, they nevertheless differ greatly from each other. The aim of my article is to categorize their use of comical sounds by considering *how* and *to what* effect they are employed. The comical aspect of sounds, situations or actions is not necessarily universal or trans-historical, but rather always depends on the specific cultural and historical context that also coins the specific contemporary theatre practice. The article focusses on these connections and on the shifts of attention that are mainly caused by the comical effects of sound and can cause further comical effects.

Comic Sounds in Contemporary Theatre Performances: Marthaler, Pollesch, Fritsch and Gotscheff

Katharina Rost
University of Bayreuth

“Hence our attention nods, until we are suddenly aroused by the absurdity of the meaning”.
- Henri Bergson (1914 [1900] : 114)

Over the past years much laughter could be heard at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in central Berlin as several productions in the repertoire were comical. However they're not so much comedies in a classical sense, but rather composed multimedia works in which the plot plays a subordinate role to the situations, gags, rhythms and atmospheres. Directors René Pollesch, Christoph Marthaler, Herbert Fritsch and, in a few productions, Dimiter Gotscheff, all use amusing elements of slapstick, irony, black humour, exaggeration, bluntness, vulgarity, absurdity, etc. to provoke laughter. Sound is often an important component for the production of comical effect in the performances, with the use of music, sound effects and a specific way of speaking characterizing each of the director's individual styles. Even though these styles are comparable in that they all bring together a vast array of acoustic elements, they nevertheless differ greatly from each other. In order to analyse them in detail, the central question of this paper is : “*How* are the sounds employed in each case in order to create the comical effect?” The answers to this question lead to assumptions as to *why* these sounds might seem comical, and these assumptions can then be interpreted in relation to theories of humour and of the comic. The overarching aim is to categorize the diverse ways in which comical

effects can be created through sound as well as to gain insight into how actual sounds function in specific scenes and as part of the different aesthetic approaches of the chosen directors. For this purpose, references will be made to philosophical theories of the comic, to film-sound scholars' preoccupations with comedy and sound, and to sound-design handbooks for theatre.¹ In my research, I did not come across any detailed study of comical sounds in theatre performances, so there is much to do in this area of theatre studies.² Whatever research exists in this field is aimed chiefly at studying styles of speech and ignores for the most part the potential for comical effects in sounds, noises and silence on stage. The following discussion of four examples from German-speaking contemporary theatre is meant as a first step in filling this gap in scholarship. The comical aspect of sounds, situations or actions is not universal or trans-historical, for it always relies on the specific cultural and historical context, which in turn always reflects the individual form of contemporary theatrical practice. In most of the available handbooks on theatre-sound design since the 1990s (including Deena Kaye and James LeBrecht's *Sound and Music for the Theatre* [1992], John Bracewell's *Sound Design in the Theatre* [1993], John A. Leonard's *Theatre Sound* [2001], Tony Gibbs's *The Fundamentals of Sonic Art & Sound Design* [2007] and David Collison's *The Sound of Theatre* [2008]), the priority lies in explaining the technical possibilities and challenges that are part of the task of creating and using music in the theatre. Descriptions of technical equipment and recording and playback techniques take up more space in these books than do considerations for the aesthetic potential of theatre-sound designs. Most authors of these handbooks emphasize that directors should avoid 'disturbing' or 'exaggerated' sounds that destroy the intended impact of the performance, and it quickly becomes clear that their conception of sound design limits itself to provide an adequate support for the representation of the dramatic plot, *i.e.*, the fictional narrative and the characters. But what happens when theatre performances do not follow the parameters of fictional illusion for which the creation of a coherent, realistic 'world' is necessary? The handbooks mentioned above seem out-dated not only because of their elaborate descriptions of technical equipment and methods that are now old-fashioned, but also because entire cross sections of theatrical practice have shifted towards different aesthetics – and such a fundamental shift also requires change and adjustment in sound-design practice. For further analysis and systematisation of sounds, sound effects and ambiances in theatre, it would be necessary to elaborate on what Bracewell only briefly mentions in his short final chapter where he emphasises the relationship between a director's choice of aesthetic concept and the sound-design possibilities made available through musicians. In my opinion, it is this relationship that motivates the sonic effects in theatre performances. The connections between context, frame and convention on the one hand, and expecta-

tion, impression and affect on the other have yet to be fully analysed, thereby following up on Jean-François Augoyard and Henri Torgue's fundamental book on "sonic experience" (Augoyard/Torgue 2006). Since the 1960s and again since the 1990s, technological developments in audio media have led to making huge steps in increasing possibilities for complex sound design. Powerful sonic ambiances now envelop the bodies of spectators, they can generate vibrations throughout the entire theatre space and trigger emotions thanks to endless loops of melodic sequences and multi-dimensional layers of sound that create invisible, but audible, scenographic spaces. Such sound designs can be experienced, for example, in Romeo Castellucci's *The Four Seasons Restaurant* (guest performance in Berlin on 26 October 2012), in Michael Thalheimer's *Die Ratten* (premiered at the Deutsches Theater Berlin on 6 October 2007) or in Falk Richter and Anouk van Dijk's TRUST (premiered on 10 October 2009 at the Schaubühne Berlin).

As theatrical conventions and aesthetic trends tend to change over the course of centuries, there may be contemporary comical sounds that are specifically connected with the various aesthetic dimensions of a given period. In many contemporary works, sounds are not merely used to illustrate or to enhance the action on stage, but are also used in stylised, formalised or abstract ways that foreground their material, sonic qualities. According to Bracewell, a stylised sound design maintains "a reasonable resemblance to the real object from which they are derived" (1993 : 209) and the sounds may be processed and arranged in specific ways, whereas in formalised and abstract sound designs the degree of realism is reduced to a minimum. While the single sounds in a formalised context can still remain realistic, they are arranged "according to ordered patterns of rhythmic and tonal balance" (*ibid.*), and in the overall sound design these series and clusters take priority over any other sonic quality or function. Finally, in abstract contexts, the sounds are used as pure sonic material reduced "to its simplest form" and therefore, as Bracewell states, they are "often not very interesting" (*ibid.*). In contrast to Bracewell's pejorative view, a discussion of comical sounds may well demonstrate the opposite, *i.e.*, that simple abstract sounds can be fascinating, as the audience's lively reactions suggest. However, this does not rule out a potentially symbolic or narrative dimension to certain sounds, and I believe it is sometimes the combination of the affective and signifying aspects of sound in particular that produces their powerful – and potentially comical – impact. Accordingly, the following examples demonstrate the comical effect of sound designs that play with and subvert communicational or illustrative strategies. In fact, a central hypothesis of this article is that the comical dimension of sounds is essentially based on a tension that is created between signification and affect.

In the following, four productions directed by the aforementioned directors will be described and analysed in order to highlight the spe-

cific functions of sound in the comical aspects of the performances. The starting point for the analyses is both my personal experience of these productions as well as a detailed description of them. I attended the performances of Pollesch's *Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen* on 1 June 2014, Marthaler's *Tessa Blomstedt gibt nicht auf* on 10 January 2015, Fritsch's *OHNE TITEL NR. 1* on 23 January 2014 and Gotscheff's *Ubukönig* on 22 May 2008. I will begin by describing and analysing a work by Christoph Marthaler whose aesthetic style has been noted by the theatre scholar Ingrid Hentschel as being "exemplary for the contemporary form of the comical". (2005 : 219; tr. KR)

I. Magnification and Ironic Distance in Christoph Marthaler's *Tessa Blomstedt gibt nicht auf*

The Swiss director Christoph Marthaler is well known for his aesthetics of humorous undertone, "musicalization" (Roesner 2003), slowness, repetitiveness, irony and love of quirky characters and odd settings. In his production *Tessa Blomstedt gibt nicht auf* (EN : *Tessa Blomstedt doesn't give up*), which premiered on 15 October 2014 at the Volksbühne in Berlin, music and rhythm played a central role.³ The evening's music was arranged and partly composed by Clemens Sienknecht who was visible on stage during the performance, making music and performing the role of Helfried. In addition to its presentation of a strict plot, the production revolved around a person named Tessa Blomstedt, a single woman of a certain age who is looking for someone special. The production consisted of some spoken and mostly sung passages of pop songs as well as Baroque music, romantic *Lieder*, newly composed synthesiser pop, country music, opera arias and voice-over. The actor Josef Ostendorf was only present on stage acousmatically, via his voice : he never appeared on stage himself and it was unclear whether he was actually in the theatre or whether his voice had been pre-recorded – the latter being most likely. Ostendorf's voice was played back during the performance and gave instructions to the actors on stage.

There are two aspects of this production that can be highlighted as sonically comical : firstly, the voice-over evoked laughter almost every time it was heard, and it was quite obvious that the comical effect stemmed mainly from the way the characters's names were announced, which was funny not only because of the constant repetition of the names but even more so because of the particular articulation of the four names and the way they sounded as a sequence : "Kekke, Frauuke, Heike and Silke". The way Ostendorf intoned these words – quickly and with accentuation on the second syllable "-ke" – emphasised the sonic qualities and rhythmic patterns of the names, so that the "ke, ke, ke, ke" sound was much more prominent than any function it otherwise served within the context of the action on stage (*i.e.*, as part of an order to do something). I believe this was why the sound had such a comical impact on the audience : the repetition and alignment of similar sounds

within a context that was intended to be perceived as meaningful suddenly shifted to a more sensual dimension in auditory perception. The musicality and rhythm of the words became the centre of attention while their name-signifying purpose receded to the background.

The second aspect of comical sounds in this production was the parodic enactment of recognisable pop songs, particularly German *Schlager* (easy-listening pop songs) by domestic artists. One of these was the top-ten hit *Atemlos durch die Nacht* (*Breathless through the Night*) by Helene Fischer, a popular singer in Germany. It was performed in an extremely slow tempo by Kekke, Frauke, Heike and Silke (the actresses Tora Augestad, Altea Garrido, Olivia Grigolli and Lilith Stangenberg respectively) and by “the retro virus” (the actor Ulrich Voss). It caused outbursts of loud laughter, clapping and singing in the audience. The context and venue of the performance are also important factors for this comical effect : presented at a popular theatre, this song might have been taken more seriously by the audience, but at the Volksbühne, a high-brow theatre with a critical, intellectual audience yet also familiar in pop culture, it could only be received as a camp parody of the *Schlager* genre and its glittering but false promise of “a happy ending”. The way the song was presented in this performance – especially the sonic qualities and the exaggerated gestures that functioned as parodic quotations from a genre-typical repertoire of sounds, poses and movements – prompts a particular perceptual attitude, namely one of amused irony. Even though the song was slightly altered by the change in tempo, it was nevertheless easily recognisable and the comical effect was based both on the audience’s familiarity with this song and its modification. It was the sonic change that demonstrated a certain attitude towards the song : by emphasising certain melodic sequences via extreme slowness and by exaggerating the emotional accentuation of certain words, the *kitsch* character of the melody came to the fore. The way it was performed produced a remote (singing and listening) mode as well as laughter, which expressed and evoked the audience’s collective knowledge about not having to take these sounds too seriously.

Christoph Marthaler’s overall strategy is one of exaggeration, which is often mentioned as a central parameter of the comical. The philosopher Theodor Lipps understood the latter as the effect of misjudgement : something small seems to be tremendously big and is suddenly recognised in its minimal size or significance (Lipps 1922 [1898] : 90). In this sense, the short syllable “-ke” can be evaluated as the small something “puffed up” by Ostendorf’s articulation. By highlighting the particular sonic qualities of the syllable “-ke” and its potential for rhythm expressed through repetition and the specific intonation of the voice-over, the audience’s auditory attention is drawn to its musical rather than its semantic dimension. The shift that takes place in the comical effect could be described as a move from meaning to nonsense and sound, or from speaking names to creating musical rhythms, and laughter is

evoked when the audience realizes that these connections are based on one syllable only, a detail that often goes unnoticed.

The manner of singing, *i.e.*, in an exaggerated, over-emphasised way, is also a form of magnification in the way it exposes the popular song for its simple harmonies and its *kitsch* character. The mode of presentation is one of distance in parody, in contrast to the notion of “true, authentic expression” that is often intentionally created by pop singers. The aesthetic means of Marthaler’s strategy of “magnifying” something “small” are musicality and parodic exaggeration. Here, magnification does not mean an actual enlargement of objects but rather processes of emphasis and indication that re-focus the perceptive and attentive attitude of the audience to alternative and otherwise overheard dimensions of sound designs in theatre.

II. Acoustic Stereotypes and Disappointed Expectations in René Pollesch’s *Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen*

In René Pollesch’s *Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen*, loosely based on the characters of Honoré de Balzac’s novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* and mixed with philosophical text fragments as well as elements of pop culture, five actors stand and dance on stage performing a variety of characters and identities. The stage is wide and empty: only the back and floor are covered with a huge silver glitter curtain and carpet. Similar to the work of Marthaler, the comical effects of this work also derive mainly from two sonic aspects: firstly, from the specific use of language and speech, and secondly, from the atmosphere and impact of the music used in certain scenes.

The dialogues of author-director Pollesch are composed in such a way that any communication based on mutual comprehension becomes difficult. The characters mostly express themselves through fragmented or paraphrased quotations from philosophers – e.g. Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway or Richard Sennett – that have been turned into everyday-speech (“What is this actually about? It deals with the beauty of the gesture in public space!”). They often shout statements or ask questions to which given answers don’t make complete sense (Hentschel 2005: 223-24). Ingrid Hentschel emphasises the absurd mix of terminologies from diverse contexts, professional domains and everyday language. According to Hentschel, the comical effect is derived from the performative character of the actions: abstract texts are articulated with a passionate tone of voice that suggests inappropriateness or disproportion, an important factor in the comic.

There is a constant subtle shift in the subject matter of the dialogues and actions, which makes it more difficult for the audience to understand the scenes. In fact, their listening habits are challenged by the necessity to listen to the quick sequence of theoretical statements articulated in an everyday tone of voice, with actors expressing strong

emotions of astonishment or excitement. The audience's loud laughter, which can be heard in almost every Pollesch performance, often erupts when the contrast between the content and the intonation pattern of the spoken words becomes most noticeable. The shifting in topic and context comes so unexpectedly that the audience might only become aware of it moments later when another actor answers and when this answer heralds a completely new perspective. Central notions are often used in an ambiguous way so that the possible attribution of several meanings initiates cyclic processes of interpretation among spectators. The '(non-)dialogues' that René Pollesch usually creates for his plays are a key part of their comical aspect, but the comical effect does not derive from words alone : most notably, it results from the *relationship* and *tension* between the words and their – seemingly inappropriate – intonation. Three modes of intonation are predominantly heard on stage : excited babbling, questioning bewilderment, and laconic irony. None of them match the traditional, cultural speech patterns of theoretical statements, which are usually spoken with more *gravitas*, in a low-pitched, calm and more serious tone of voice. Breaking with traditional, cultural expectations takes the audience by surprise and creates a contrast between what is actually said and the seemingly inappropriate way it is said, and it is this that causes laughter.

The characters have trouble articulating themselves as they get tangled up in a series of diverse personal pronouns : “*M* : Me? I mean, you? Or rather him? That's him? – *Tr* : Strange. How did you know that it's me? I mean, him. You. Her. Him over there” (Pollesch 2013 : 52; tr. KR). Talking to each other is hampered by the complicated use of correct pronouns, making it almost impossible to address each other or to express oneself. During the scene quoted above, one of constantly interrupted and shifting dialogue, many spectators often laughed out loud. Not only does the sequence of personal pronouns contain its own rhythmic musicality (comparable to the “kekekeke” sound in *Tessa Blomstedt*), it also prohibits any possibility for the audience to fully grasp what is going on. The confusion of the characters on stage is echoed by cluelessness on the side of the recipients, which is an integral component of the aesthetic experience of Pollesch's works. By challenging the audience's comprehension, the intention to understand is made evident : the spectators become aware of their own attitude of *wanting-to-comprehend*. In my opinion this plays a major part in why the sequences were perceived as comical. In this sense, it could be assumed that the spectators were actually laughing about themselves as they realized their own failing devotion.

Another scene also has a contrast between expectations based on cultural acoustic habits and the actual events, again leading to a comical effect, but this time the discrepancy is between the audible and the visible dimensions of the performance.⁴ At one point, when all the actors have left the stage, the curtain closes, but only for a few moments

until it slowly re-opens, exposing the empty dark stage and “something else”, a glimpse of a moving object : a huge hot-air balloon floating down from above the stage and then back up again. After a short moment of silence, a sequence of quick piano sounds is heard. The tones build up to a sinister melody full of tension, accompanied by loud blows of synthesizer trumpets in a staccato rhythm, speeding up gradually and overlaid with synthesizer violins, which themselves dramatically increase in volume to several crescendos and climaxes, each one louder than the one before. As the music gets louder and reaches its dramatic peak, the balloon begins to swirl sideways and around itself. Two or three actors come back on stage and observe the action of the balloon with interest, but not with overly great excitement. At the back of the stage, the lower ends of the curtain are lit up in red and yellow, as if on fire, and the balloon is covered with green light. The green light could be read as a reference to the movie *The Matrix* (the Wachowskis 1999) as its central sign is an image of a computer screen with cascades of green signs streaming downwards.

Finally, the balloon ascends and disappears behind the proscenium while the music fades out and all actors enter the stage again. During the performance, the drive, power and tension of the music immediately evoked associations with Hollywood film music, in particular those typical of *action film* music. In fact, it is a musical sequence taken from the song *Trinity / Infinity* by Don Davis from the soundtrack to *The Matrix*.⁵

In his study on the relationship between film genres and music, Mark Brownrigg emphasises the “principles of driving rhythm, energy, contrast of instrumental texture and modulation” (Brownrigg 2003 : 239)⁶ as characteristic of the action-film genre. “Tension is cranked up by ascending patterns and deflated by descending ones” (*ibid.* : 236), says Brownrigg, and his discussion of a specific example, the central musical pattern of “clutter of frantic strings and blaring brass” (*ibid.*) also applies to the music sequence heard in Pollesch’s theatre production. The hot-air balloon scene makes use of (pop) cultural acoustic stereotypes and thereby evokes the audience’s expectations for the scene. As Kathryn Kalinak emphasises, “Musical conventions which become ingrained and universal in a culture function as a type of collective experience, activating particular and predictable responses” (Kalinak 1992 : 12). While the music raises specific imagery in spectators’ imaginations – imagery that stems from the visual and auditory formation of a memorised (pop) cultural repertoire, *i.e.*, car chases, racing ships, helicopters, jets, jumps, stunts or fights – the actual stage action does not fulfil these expectations. In fact, the exaggerated dramatic character of the music is in stark contrast to the “harmless” dance of the hot-air balloon. The comical effect of this scene, which is manifest in the audience’s laughter, results from a contrast between the dramatic character of the music and the less-than dramatic action onstage. This contrast can be described as a comical effect in the sense of Immanuel Kant’s as a “strained expectation

being suddenly reduced to nothing” or, even more so, of Theodor Lipps’s aforementioned “sudden substitution of one value by another of minor relevance or size” (Kant 1952 [1790] : § 54 : 332; Lipps 1922 [1898] : 59). Specifying Lipps’s theory, Bohdan Dziemidok states :

What Lipps seems to have in mind here is not so much the actual transition from the great to the small as the transition from what is appropriate in the given situation and therefore interesting for us at the given moment to what is out of place and is therefore indifferent to us. The thing which is out of place is in this sense indeed too “small” when compared with its purpose. (Dziemidok 1993 : 19)

Dziemidok emphasises that the contrast causing comical effects derives from the degree of appropriateness in a certain context. In Pollesch’s production, the music functions as context, which establishes expectations sonically that are not fulfilled by the visual presentation. The dissonance between the acoustic and the visual dimensions produces the comical impact of this scene. This can be interpreted as a process of comical “media-crossing” (a phrase coined by the theatre scholar Kati Röttger) which is described as the “caricaturing effect that results from the crossing of familiar images from the illusionary worlds of film and TV with the defamiliarized images on stage” (Röttger 2005 : 247). This comical strategy mostly works through deficiency – what is actually shown is somewhat *lesser* than memorised mediatic cultural images. Röttger’s notion is aimed primarily at visual media-crossing, and the deficiency of the actors’ bodies and actions can be transposed to the acoustic dimension and action on stage, as highlighted in my previous remarks on Pollesch’s work. In contrast to Marthaler’s work, which tends to make small things bigger, in *Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen* big dramatic things are revealed in their superficiality and plainness.

III. Slapstick Sound in Herbert Fritsch’s *OHNE TITEL NR. 1*

In Herbert Fritsch’s ‘opera’ *OHNE TITEL NR. 1*, which premiered in 2014 at the Volksbühne in Berlin, sounds have a comedic effect but they work differently than the examples given above.⁷ Although the central sonic element is music, there is also a sound effect that is heard almost throughout the entire performance and which emphasizes the single prop that fills the stage : an oversized old-fashioned couch made of paperboard, about four metres long and two metres high. In front of the stage is an orchestra pit where the musician Ingo Günther performs and sometimes also the actors. Four aspects of this production remind me of the aesthetics of *Tessa Blomstedt* : the spatial set-up that highlights the stage as a “stage”, the presence and persona of the musician, the predominant use of easy-listening music and songs, and the particular “tone” of presentation, namely seriousness that becomes comical through exaggeration. But there are other aspects that differ from the Marthaler production and are the reason for varying comical effects. First of all, the use of slapstick is characteristic of Fritsch’s aesthetics.

Slapstick has also been used by Marthaler in many productions, for instance, in the famous *Murx den Europäer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn!* (1993), but it was always a more aestheticized version of slapstick, seemingly choreographed and composed or “musicalized”, as David Roesner has suggested for when “principles of music are applied to the expressive means of the theatre” (Roesner 2010 : 294). In Fritsch’s works, however, slapstick is *the* central element of the performance and it is also taken up acoustically, in Ingo Günther’s sound design and music. Fritsch’s productions are often ensemble performances in the sense that there are many group scenes and every single character has their own major scene. Following Gerald Mast’s typology, this comedic style could be categorised as that of *riffing films* with a “series of gags that revolve around [a] central situation” (Mast 1979 : 7), as typical of many of Chaplin’s films. Secondly, specific sound effects are of major importance.⁸ Single sound effects are employed that can even become a trademark for each production – in fact, it becomes possible to create “intertextual”, or rather “interperformative” relations between them. This happens in *OHNE TITEL NR. 1* when all of a sudden the loud noise of a buzzing fly is heard – a sound effect used prominently by Fritsch in an older popular production, *Die (s)panische Fliege (The (S)panish Panicking Fly)* – and the character, trying to catch the “fly”, makes a noise that sounds like “Fritschhhhhh”, mentioning the director’s name and thus making the reference overtly clear to the audience. In the performance that I attended, the audience laughed out loud at this point, a response that could be related to the interplay of visual and acoustic elements on stage : the slapstick movements aimed at catching the fly and the buzz of the small insect always escaping its persecutor. But laughter might furthermore derive from the act of referring to a preceding work.

The predominant sound effect in *OHNE TITEL NR. 1* is the shrill squeaking and raspy groaning of an old wooden sofa, played in a high volume over the loudspeakers throughout the entire performance. As well as being loud, the sounds are also arranged spatially so that they fill the entire space of the theatre. Whenever these sounds are heard, the couch attracts the attention of the ensemble who, often behaving like a group of excited children, hide behind each other in fear, observe the large object for any signs of life or, later in the show, come closer, gain confidence and start to play with this new “toy”, jumping over it, sitting on it squeezed next to each other, and chasing around it.

Every facial expression and gesture is highly exaggerated. The movements are always performed with a bit too much energy, too much drive, so that the intended action slightly misses its target and causes the performers to whirl around, stumble and fall, often even off the stage; they shiver and shake, bend and crouch, jump into the air or run into each other, the prop or the proscenium walls to the left and right. Not being able to stop or to reduce their speed and power to an appropriate level, their bodies and movements show a peculiar stiffness that, as

Henri Bergson has shown, is the central factor of comical actions : “The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living liableness of a human being”. (Bergson 1914 [1900] : 10) These actions correspond to certain qualities of the music and sound effects : the songs often possess strict rhythms – of a cha-cha-cha, for example – and the tones of the melody seem to run, whirl and fall chaotically just like their partners onstage. The tempo is quick, the range of sequential tones is large and there are often a lot of trills. The music thus adds to the comical effect of the visual dimension, as it acoustically *echoes* the stiff and clumsy or chaotic movement patterns of the actors.

By contrast, another sound effect, namely of creaking wood, is used. The musician Ingo Günther pre-recorded the noises of the old wooden floor in his apartment and then arranged a complex sound collage of this material. The collage is played back by the theatre sound technicians during the performance. In an interview, Günther said that “using some noises onstage is immediately understood as *musique concrète*. Everything I do is automatically coded, this is a real dilemma”, and he further elaborates that one of Fritsch’s goals was to “free the gestures from their semantic potential” (2014 : onlive interview).⁹ In fact, the noises are electronically *enlarged* and composed. They are still recognisable as coming from an old wooden object, but at the same time they are defamiliarised sonically, as every single detail, every crack and groan, can be heard in its distinct character and abstract musicality.

Scholars of film comedy have highlighted the relationship between the comical effect of a scene and its accompanying sound effects. In her study on slapstick and comic performance, Louise Peacock refers to the powerful impact of sound for film comedy (Peacock 2014 : 34). Slapstick is often accompanied by specific sound effects, and their strong impact derives from a discrepancy between the actions and the sounds, as the volume of the sound effects is increased so that they are heard much louder than would be the case in reality. Peacock states that the exaggerated volume gives the impression that the filmic slapstick actions are carried out with an extreme amount of energy, which contrasts with the reactions of the “victim”, as they are “much lesser than what would be expected” (*ibid.*). It thus underlines the impression of vehemence and violence of the observed action – crashes, hits, falls, slips and similarly typical slapstick twists – by simultaneously creating a comic effect through lack of adequacy. The exaggerated volume also creates “distance from reality” (*ibid.* : 34) by highlighting its highly artificial character. I think that this is the same effect that also happens in *OHNE TITEL NR. 1*. The sounds of the everyday piece of furniture are created and arranged in a musical way that highlights their aesthetic rather than realistic character. They are “enlarged” by use of audio technology – as a kind of auditory magnifying glass – so that every sonic detail can be heard. At the same time, the source of the sounds remains obvious to

the ears – the creaking and groaning is directly ascribed to the sofa, even though this does not illustrate the action of someone actually sitting down on the furniture. The noises possess a life of their own; they are not necessarily connected to the actors' actions but follow their own rules, which leads to the comical impression of the couch also being animate.

IV. Anthropomorphism and Alienation in Dimiter Gotscheff's *Ubukönig*

In Dimiter Gotscheff's production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubukönig* (*King Ubu*), many different synthesizer sounds and a certain type of fun-fair music are used to accentuate the grotesque, surreal character of the perfidious, cruel stage actions by giving them comedic appeal. The electronic sounds produced and deployed during the performance seemed to "speak". To my ears they sounded either like a strange, incomprehensible language spoken by characters on stage, or they seemed to function as a meta-commentary by someone external to the stage action on what is taking place.¹⁰ In the former case, the sounds communicate with the characters on stage, and in the latter case the communication is directed at the audience.

At the beginning of the performance, the stage is pitch-black and a cheerful sounding melody and a deep male voice are heard through the speakers. The voice reads the title and the names of the cast of characters in the drama. Laughter can be heard in the audience when, after many names have been mentioned, "the *entire* financial department", "the *entire* Russian army" and "the *entire* Polish army" are suddenly mentioned as characters. The comical effect of the voice-over differs from that in Marthaler's *Tessa Blomstedt gibt nicht auf* insofar as it does not involve a shift from meaning to sensual impressions, but rather a shift from making sense to the absurd and the farcical – in this case through an evocation of highly exaggerated images in the audience's imagination. According to Patrice Pavis, a farce can be characterised by its highly physical, grotesque and ribald sense of comedy (Pavis 1980 : 175; see also Siegmund 2005 : 257-262 on the 'post-dramatical farce'). In fact, Gotscheff's *Ubukönig* keeps – and sonically accentuates – the grotesque and brutal comedy of its textual reference, the absurd drama *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry (1896). In the opening scene, the entire stage is covered with over-sized balloons of different colours and, when they are pushed aside by the performers, they begin floating around the stage and, later on, even into the auditorium, inviting the spectators to push them upwards or back onto the stage. Sirens are heard when two silhouettes appear at the rear end of the stage, behind a huge lit-up balloon, moving forward towards the stage ramp. The movements are accompanied by electronically produced vibrations, along with dark and disquieting sounds. These sounds are not comical in themselves, but when combined with the onstage action – the silhouettes of two naked men hiding behind a huge balloon – they take on an extra comedic dimension. Later the balloon explodes with a loud noise, leaving the two

men standing naked in front of the spectators – looking scared upon being discovered, they stare into the darkened audience space and then at the balloons around them.

The action in the scene cannot be taken seriously : it is rather absurd. The sounds, therefore, do not seem appropriate in their suggestion of danger and dramatic climax. They seem to be *intended* to signify something scary, but combined with the visual setting they somehow miss that point. It is an effect of disproportion and of wrongful association comparable to that of the balloon scene in Pollesch's *Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen*. However, two major differences are worthy of mention : firstly, the sinister undertone of the sounds turns out to be justified in the course of the following action, as Father and Mother Ubu pursue their cruel plans; and secondly, the specific *sound* of this dark tune has something comical about it. Rather than being music actually taken from an action or horror-movie context, these are sounds explicitly composed for this production by the musician Sir Henry. In an interview, he told me that the question was how to create sarcasm and absurdity *in* music and one solution was to look for music "without reference".¹¹ In order to avoid any cultural associations with established rhythms or sounds – in the sense that the sound of a cello would evoke certain ascriptions of context and meaning, for example – his composition techniques focused on escaping patterns and well-known sound sources. He created a sonic landscape of arbitrary sounds mixed with particular sounds similar to the movement of balloons, the sonic pattern of the sounds designed to resemble the elliptical shape of these objects. They sound *curvy*, as their pitch is rising or falling; the sounds are melted instead of concrete chords; and their sonic colour is highly artificial. Furthermore, similar to the balloons floating through the theatre space, single synthesizer sounds can be heard which seem to be lost in the *ocean* of silence they only momentarily interrupt. The sounds seem to hang in the air like the big balloons that float around above the stage and audience space. Not only do both characters, who are still carefully exploring their surroundings, react to the sounds insofar as they wince each time such a sound becomes audible, but it seems as if the sounds are connected to the balloons – this "world" is inhabited by seemingly "living", strange, abstract objects and sounds. It seems as though the sounds heard are noise produced by the balloons, not only in the way they result from their floating movements or their contact with other objects, but as their "language", as if the balloons were trying to communicate with the newly arrived creatures. By carefully moving aside, bending or chasing the balloons away with soft hand movements, the two characters try to avoid any physical contact with the them as they float slowly about. Much laughter from the audience can be heard in these moments, as the balloons seem to be "curious" as to their new companions and come closer, while the characters themselves appear not to want to get involved. Throughout the entire one-and-a-half-hour

performance, the balloons are the only props used and they frequently interfere with the onstage action, often causing laughter in the audience. They do so not only visually but also acoustically, as they mark the presence of strangely animate objects. As the critic Simone Kaempf has written, the sound designer's psychedelically distorted sounds seem to express the balloons' 'little cries' (see Kaempf 2008).¹² Despite their abstract sonic qualities, the sounds create the impression of animate beings, and this impression has a comical effect, but not in the sense of being "funny" so much as in being "odd" and "curious" (see Thomson 2008). This effect can be seen as a process of discovering something "human" in an object, animal or action. Henri Bergson has defined the comic as the anthropomorphic detection of a "human attitude or expression" (Bergson 1914 [1900] : 3), and the comical in *Ubukönig* could in this sense be defined as a self-referential, ironic and amusing take on human nature.

V. Conclusion

As a multimodal art form, theatre always produces its impact on audiences' senses, so that the spectators' laughter often depends on the interplay between what is seen and heard. There can be a wide variety of comical sounds and many online sound libraries contain an extra section focused on "funny sounds". These boings, pings, springs and whirls demonstrate the spectrum of historically developed acoustic archetypes of the comic.¹³ There are specific, comical auditory patterns and listening habits that are frequently repeated – for example, the sound of a kazoo seems highly familiar in the context of a clownish or cartoonish comedy.¹⁴ But sounds mostly do not possess comical effects in and by themselves. They achieve this impact as a result of cultural habits and within certain specific situations and contexts. The acoustic memory of sounds is often connected to visual memories of associated movements and actions, *i.e.*, typical slapstick actions of tripping, slipping, sliding or falling. The four directors mentioned here all make effective use of these associations. While in Marthaler's production magnification predominates, Pollesch works with shifts and contrasts; and Fritsch's central element is slapstick and exaggeration. Gotscheff's production *Ubukönig* differs most notably from the others insofar as it is a cynical farce – its humour is mainly effective by inviting spectators to share a facetious attitude rather than making them laugh out loud. In each of their Volksbühne's productions all kinds of acoustic elements are employed to create comic effects, using music, electronically reproduced abstract sounds as well as concrete noises. Whereas the pieces by Fritsch, Pollesch and Marthaler emphasise the comical dimension of music, Gotscheff's work – and also partly Fritsch's productions – mostly use electronically produced synthesizer sounds and noises. The sounds are heard as being both an expression of certain emotions, attitudes or moods, which might be received by the audience as a commentary

on the staged action. They can also have an impact on a specific sonic materiality, which affects the audience on a subconscious, physical level, and directs their attention to a different layer of signification beyond the stage action and scenery presented merely visually. In this sense, the comical sounds in these works expose their own materiality and theatricality, and thereby emphasize these dimensions in the overall performance process.

Comical sounds also broaden the mentioned philosophical theories of the comic insofar as they manifest particular comical effects of shifting movements and tension : the shifting from sense to the sensual, from the appropriate to the inadequate, from the logical to the absurd, and the tension between the well-known and the strange, the human and the other, dramatic escalation and the non-spectacular or between expectation and disappointment. From the analyses of comical sounds, a specific form of “sonic humour” can thus be emphasized which might broaden the existing theories of the comical. Future analyses in this domain will have to study this phenomenon further.

Notes

1. In philosophy and cultural studies, there is a broad body of literature on comedy and the comic. The theories of Henri Bergson, Theodor Lipps, Immanuel Kant have been especially relevant for my research. In addition, general theories on sound design for film and theatre – e.g. Barbara Flückiger, David Sonnenschein and Theo Van Leeuwen (film); John Bracewell, Deena Kaye and James LeBrecht, and John A. Leonard (theatre) – have been very useful. Works on film sound and comedy that I have found invaluable include studies by Louise Peacock on slapstick; studies on the use of sound by Chaplin by Andrew Horton and Joanna Rapf (contrasting Chaplin with the Three Stooges); Gerald Mast’s essay on comedy and the beginning of the sound film; Selma Alic’s study on the comic dimension of the acoustic; and Laura Lazarescu’s work on sound design and animated film.
2. In the context of Theatre Studies, a key starting point for the following remarks are the essays collected in *Komik : Ästhetik, Theorien, Strategien, Maske & Kostüm*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2005). Articles on theatre works by Christoph Marthaler and René Pollesch often note their comical aspect and in this context highlight the particular use of music and speech for this purpose. David Roesner claims that the effect of musicalization can enhance the comical dimension of performances, and Marthaler’s theatre is mentioned as an example (cf. David Roesner : *Theater als Musik. Verfahren der Musikalisierung in chorischen Theaterformen bei Christoph Marthaler, Einar Schleef und Robert Wilson*, Tübingen : Gunter Narr 2003 : 278.)
3. A short video excerpt is available on the Volksbühne’s website at https://volksbuehne.adk.de/praxis/tessa_bloomstedt_gibt_nicht_auf/index.html, last accessed on 23 August 2017.
4. The one-and-a-half-hour long production *Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen* by the director René Pollesch after Balzac, premiered at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin on 6 September 2013. Information and a short video excerpt (containing the balloon scene at 1:03) is available online at the theatre’s website at https://volksbuehne.adk.de/praxis/glanz_und_elend_der_kurtisanen/index.html, last accessed on 23 August 2017.

5. See Jeff Smith (2014 : 281-283) for a description of the historical development of filmic genres and their specific sound design in the 1990s.
6. Brownrigg does not explicitly focus on *The Matrix* but rather on films that were produced in the 1990s and around 2000. Of course, *The Matrix* is also from this era.
7. Information on the production is available at the Volksbühne's website at https://volksbuehne.adk.de/praxis/ohne_titel_nr_1_eine_oper_von_herbert_fritsch/index.html, last accessed on 23 August 2017; a trailer from the Wiener Festwochen from 5 March 2015 can be found online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTULO-boc-I>, as well as a second video excerpt at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRcR4xUtrks>, last accessed on 23 August 2017.
8. Sometimes Foley art is used instead of sound effects, i.e. the Foley artist Urs Bruderer produced noises live and offstage for *Die Physiker*, which premiered at the Schauspielhaus Zürich in 2013.
9. Günther, Ingo, in : <http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur-und-freizeit-theater-und-buehne/theatermusiker-ingo-gunther-uber-ohne-titel-nr-1> (accessed 31 January 2014).
10. A report on Dimiter Gotscheff's works and a short video excerpt of *Ubukönig* is available at <http://www.arte.tv/de/ich-komme-wieder-theater-co/2229028,CmC=2329522.html>, (accessed on 18 October 2015). Some of the scenes I discuss can be found at 3:23 min.
11. Interview with the author, 9 September 2015.
12. The critic determines the balloons' ambivalence between the status of stage props and of 'co-actors': "The numerous balloons, large and small, colored and black, still or floating, that fill out Katrin Brack's stage always take on new roles throughout the play : at times respected players, neglected objects that are pushed back (sometimes kicked), at other times toys, or even lethal weapons". ("So wie die vielen kleinen und großen, bunten und schwarzen, ruhenden und schwebenden Ballons, die die Bühne von Katrin Brack füllen, im Laufe der Inszenierung immer neue Rollen annehmen : Mal respektierte Mitspieler, mal achtlos weggekickte Objekte; mal Spielzeug, mal Mordinstrument").
13. Cf. <http://soundbible.com/tags-funny.html>, <http://www.audiomicro.com/free-sound-effects/free-cartoons-and-comic-effects> (accessed on 1 October 2015).
14. There is a whole kazoo sound library at www.soundsnap.com/search/audio/kazoo/score (accessed on 1 October 2015).

Bibliography

- AUGOYARD, J.-F. & TORQUE, H. (2005) *Sonic Experience. A Guide to Everyday Sounds*. Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press.
- BERGSON, H. (1914 [1900]) *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*. C. Brereton & F. Rothwell (trans.), New York : The Macmillan Company.
- BRACEWELL, J. (1993) *Sound Design in the Theatre*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice Hall.
- BROWNRIGG, M. (2003) *Film Music and Film Genre*. Ph.D. diss., University of Stirling.
- COLLISON, D. (2008) *The Sound of Theatre – A History*. Eastbourne : Plasa.
- DZIEMIDOK, B. (1993) *The Comical*. M. Janiak (trans.), Dordrecht : Kluwer.
- GIBBS, T. (2007) *The Fundamentals of Sonic Art & Sound Design*. Lausanne : AVA Publishing.
- HENTSCHHEL, I. (2005) "Spielen mit der Performanz – Transformationen des Komischen im Gegenwartstheater". In *Maske & Kothurn* (51) 4 : 214-226.
- KAEMPF, S. (2008) "Der ungeheuerliche Mensch". http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1395&Itemid=0 (accessed, October

- 1st 2015).
- KALINAK, K. (1992) *Settling the Score : Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*. Madison : University of Wisconsin Press.
- KANT, I. (1952 [1790]) *Critique of Judgment*. J. C. Meredith (trans.), Oxford : Clarendon Press.
- KAYE, D. & LEBRECHT, J. (1992) *Sound and Music for the Theatre. The Art and Technique of Design*. New York : Backstage Books.
- LAZARESCU, L. (2013) *Sound Design in the American Animated Film*. Berlin : wvb.
- LEONARD, J. A. (2001) *Theatre Sound*. New York : Routledge.
- LIPPS, T. (1922 [1898]) *Komik und Humor*. Leipzig : Voss.
- MAST, G. (1979) *The Comic Mind : Comedy and the Movies*. 2nd Edition, Chicago : The University of Chicago Press.
- PAVIS, P. (1980) *Dictionnaire du théâtre. Termes et concepts de l'analyse théâtrale*. Paris : Éditions Sociales.
- PEACOCK, L. (2014) *Slapstick and Comic Performance*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.
- POLLESCH, R. (2013) "Glanz und Elend der Kurtisanen". In *Theater der Zeit* (11) : 48-58.
- ROESNER, D. (2010) "Musicality as a Paradigm for the Theatre : A Kind of Manifesto". In *Studies in Musical Theatre* (4) 3 : 293-306.
- RÖTTGER, K. (2005) "Zur Komik des Eros : No body is perfect. Endstation Amerika". In *Maske & Kothurn* (51) 4 : 237-248.
- SIEGMUND, G. (2005) "Der Skandal des Körpers : Zum Verhältnis von Körper und Sprache in der Farce bei Feydau und René Pollesch". In *Maske & Kothurn* (51) 4 : 249-262.
- SMITH, J. (2014) "The Tunes They Are A-changing' : Moments of Historical Rupture and Reconfiguration in the Production and Commerce of Music in Film". In *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*. D. Neumeyer (ed.), Oxford : Oxford University Press : 281-282.
- THOMSON, H. (2008) "Gotscheff-Premiere in Berlin : Ein Schwanz als Herz". <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/gotscheff-premiere-in-berlin-ein-schwanz-als-herz-a-554927.html> (accessed, October 1st 2015).

Abstract

At the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in central Berlin, directors René Pollesch, Christoph Marthaler, Herbert Fritsch, and Dimiter Gotscheff employ comical elements of slapstick, irony, black humour, exaggeration, bluntness, vulgarity, and absurdity. Sound often proves to be significant to the comical effect of the performances as the use of music, sound effects and a specific way of speaking are characteristic for each of their individual directing styles. Even though their styles are comparable in that they all use of a vast array of acoustic elements, they nevertheless differ greatly from each other. The aim of my article is to categorize their use of comical sounds by considering *how* and *to what* effect they are employed. The comical aspect of sounds, situations or actions is not necessarily universal or trans-historical, but rather always depends on the specific cultural and historical context that also coins the specific contemporary theatre practice. The article focusses on these connections and on the shifts of attention that are mainly caused by the comical effects of sound and can cause further comical effects.

Keywords : Sound Design; Listening; Sonic Humour.

Résumé

Au théâtre Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz de Berlin les spectacles montés

par les metteurs en scène René Pollesch, Christoph Marthaler, Herbert Fritsch, et Dimiter Gotscheff usent d'effets comiques propres au *slapstick*, à l'ironie, à l'humour noir, à l'exagération, à la vulgarité et à l'absurde. Le son est une dimension importante de l'effet recherché, que ce soit par la musique, les effets sonores, ou encore à cause de l'élocution des personnages, et chaque metteur en scène intègre ces éléments dans un style qui lui est propre. Cet article vise à examiner ce qui à la fois unit et différencie l'usage du son chez ces metteurs en scène et à étudier les effets comiques qu'il produit. Le comique d'un son n'est pas un trait universel ou transhistorique, mais repose sur une contextualisation historique et culturelle dans laquelle s'inscrit le présent d'une œuvre théâtrale. Nous mettons l'emphase sur ce lien contextuel et sur la façon dont l'usage comique du son permet des déplacements d'attention lesquels peuvent être la cause d'autres effets comiques.

Mots-clés : design sonore; écoute; humour sonore.

KATHARINA ROST is a scholar at the department of Theatre Studies at the University of Bayreuth. She is currently working on gender performance in pop music. Her Ph.D. thesis (*Sounds that Matter* 2017) deals with listening and attention dynamics in contemporary theatre productions in Germany. Her main research interests are sound and listening in theatre performances, gender and queer theory, pop music and star images, performance theory, phenomenology, and methodological questions of Theatre Studies.