

“ENTER LAUGHING”

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“THE KING OF COMEDY”

Words by Lauren Mattice

In a collaboration that many have deemed the best of its kind, director Martin Scorsese and leading man Robert De Niro created a terror-inducing, skin-crawling, presciently funny marvel in *The King of Comedy* (1983).

The King of Comedy was a lot of things in its infancy. It was a script developed by *Newsweek* journalist Paul D. Zimmerman in the 1970s, inspired by a real story in *Esquire* about an obsessed fan of long-time talk show host Johnny Carson. The man kept a detailed diary documenting his thoughts on each of Carson’s shows, with one such entry reading: “Johnny disappointed me tonight.”

“The talk shows were the biggest shows on television at the time,” Zimmerman remembered. “I started to think about connections between autograph-hunters and assassins. Both stalked the famous—one with a pen and one with a gun.”

The transition from pen to gun is the main tension in *The King of Comedy*, where local nobody Rupert Pupkin (De Niro) is determined to convince esteemed talk show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis) that he deserves a spot on his program.

De Niro wasn’t originally attached to the project, and Lewis was also not the ideal casting for the host. Zimmerman initially worked with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* director Milos Forman on first drafts, who ultimately dropped out after a few years. De Niro came across it and brought it to Scorsese in 1974, who turned it down for not “quite get[ting] it.” After another of their collaborations, *Raging Bull*, came and went, De Niro brought the script back, and Scorsese, now older, wiser, and a bit more famous, started to understand its relevance.

We get to know Rupert through the elaborate creations of his psyche. He initially makes contact with Jerry (who Johnny Carson did *not* want to play) among a crowd of fans as he tries to distinguish himself as a peer rather than a groupie. Scenes of Jerry growing increasingly uncomfortable with Rupert’s insistence to get on the show are spliced with staged sets in Rupert’s mom’s basement — imagined rehearsals of his set with Jerry and other celebrity cardboard cutouts. Scorsese’s longtime editor Thelma Schoonmaker makes the transition from reality to fantasy seamless and purposeful.

The ease with which De Niro plays this maniac is what makes each scene as uncomfortable as it can be. His suaveness manages to convince high school sweetheart Rita Keane (Diahnne Abbott) that his relationship with Jerry is real enough to the point that a weekend at his country home seems plausible; a mounting step in an increasingly hostile identity takeover.

Fellow groupie and East Side rich girl Masha (Sandra Bernhard) is the sounding board to which Rupert tries to convince himself of his “normalness.” Whereas it seems Rupert has a purpose in his madness, Masha is more erratic, stalking Jerry because of a misplaced love and longing to share her otherwise lonely life with him. Her compulsivity and jealousy of Rupert’s “closeness” makes her the ideal partner for a last-chance gambit at fame: a kidnapping by The King himself.

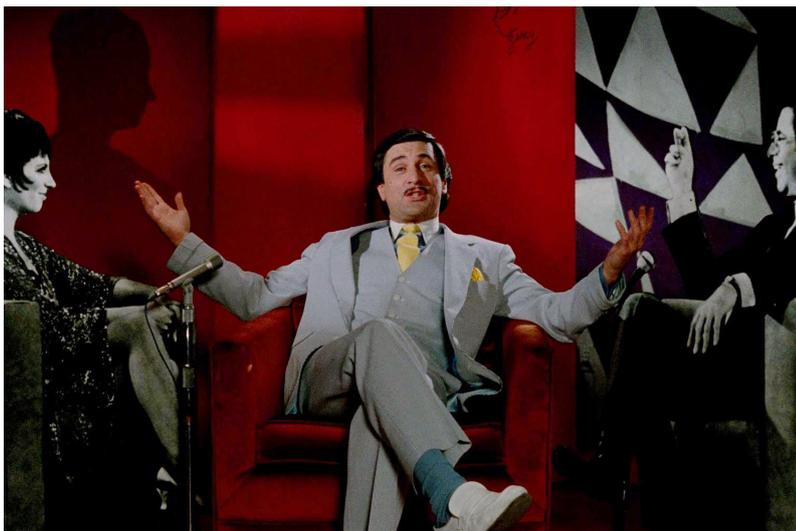
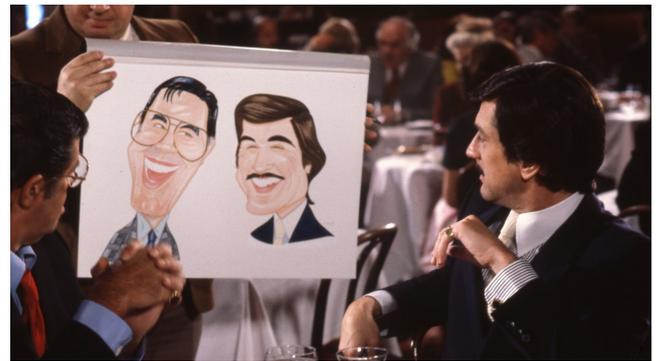
The horrific possibility of Rupert’s actions is revealed subtly, such as a comment within the hostage situation that he knows the sounds when a phone call is being traced, his rancorous laugh with his inanimate talk show guests, and his ease with a gun. In exchange for Jerry’s life, he asks TV execs for one shot on the show, one chance to prove it all.

While Jerry is taped down to a chair, Masha singing him the sweet nothings of Ray Charles’

“Come Rain or Come Shine,” much of which was improvised, Rupert makes his way to the studio for his big debut. Unfazed by the FBI, head of police, and security notifying him of his imminent arrest, he responds, “I need to be made up.”

All of this build-up, leading us to believe the worst is yet to happen, comes to a head with the debut of Rupert’s set. His obliviousness, awkwardness, and lack of nerve lend themselves to knockout comedy. The audience stays with him all the way, through his admittance to the kidnapping plot, getting himself and newfound supporters to believe: “Better to be king for a night than a schmuck for a lifetime.”

The film forces Rupert’s lack of regard for boundaries or morality down our throats; it is both a satire and a warning of what the allure of fame and success can conjure. Rupert’s stunt made him even more famous than Jerry, earning him a book deal, movie adaptation, and agent along with six years in prison. What was a flop in the box office is an evermore heedance to the suspension of lines separating private and public life, gradually making its way to the title of comedic masterpiece.





“PEPI, LUCI, BOM Y OTRAS CHICAS DEL MONTÓN”

CAMPING COMEDY: EARLY ALMODÓVAR AND THE QUEER AESTHETIC

Words by Giulia Tronconi

The films of idiosyncratic Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar have frequently been referred to as ‘exercises in camp’ – his oeuvre being recognised for its peculiar sensibility to the kitsch of everyday life. On his eccentric affiliation with camp, Almodóvar has remarked: “Camp makes you look at our human situation with irony”. The camp sensibility has been proper to Almodóvar’s aesthetic since the director’s very first cinematic efforts in the early 1980s. This historical moment proved rich and ripe for emerging Spanish artists: tentatively recovering from the political jolts of the 20th century – the disastrous Civil War of 1936-39, Franco’s totalitarian regime and the following decades of social unrest –, the Spanish youth finally returned into the streets of recently reawakened metropolitan cities such as Madrid. Francisco Franco’s military regime was established in 1937 and carried through for

over 35 years. Fascist ideology had planted its roots so deep into Spanish society that its marks were still well evident years after the collapse of the regime: Franco had instilled a cultural ideology founded on gender segregation, machismo, female subordination and allowed no space for exhibition of sexual desire or sexual deviance. Almodóvar, ‘the *enfant terrible*’ of the so-called *Móvida Madrileña*, shared with many the urge to discover new artistic means to question this *status quo* – where observing the world through spoofy camp lenses represented more than an aesthetic tendency.

The notion of ‘Camp’ entered critical discourse upon the publication of Susan Sontag’s seminal article, *Notes on Camp*. Here, Sontag states: “It goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized - or at last apolitical.”

This brief analysis of the most iconic scenes of *Pepi, Luci, Bom y Otras Chicas del Montón* (1980) will reveal how camp comedy in early Almodóvar, often read *à la* Sontag - disengaged, apolitical - is rather an attempt at a subversive reworking of a traumatic past.

Susan Sontag argued for a camp aesthetic sensibility which 'converts the serious into the frivolous' and 'sees everything in quotation marks' Camp's resistance to a proper critical definition has made it unmanageable to reduce its evanescent essence to a singular concept. Nonetheless, there exists a somewhat implicit agreement that camp recognises itself. Critic Jack Babuscio claims camp as an ironic perception of the world, where humour is a tool for reestablishing social trauma and establishing a strong familiar bond among individuals. All the while, it is a strategy of protection from the hurt of what is mainstream, normative, outside its own circle of safety. Camp, therefore, is the product of a peculiar sense of fear and protection - 'a bitter-wit' - founded on the urge to redefine the terms of one's oppression through satire. Babuscio states: "Camp can thus be a means of undercutting rage by its derision of concentrated bitterness. Its vision of the world is comic. Laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society".

Almodóvar brought his experimental camp aesthetic to the big screen with *Pepi, Luci, Bom* in 1980. The film features camp elements which are scattered all across the director's early oeuvre: unconventional female characters, pornographic imagery, careless use of drugs, crossdressers and taboo fetishes, mashed with an over-the-top, all-colourful, cluttered *mise-en-scène*. *Pepi, Luci, Bom* is a story of female kinship which follows three seemingly incompatible women as they navigate the Spanish punk subculture of the '80s. Pepi (Carmen Maura) is violated by Luci's policeman husband; she befriends the woman to avenge herself and the money she was hoping to gain by selling her virginity. Luci (Eva Siva), an apparently conventional housewife, is domestically oppressed according to Fascist standards. Yet, her verbally abusive husband is incapable of satisfying her fantasies of masochist submission. Luci finds fulfilment in a homosexual, S&M relationship with 16 year-old punk rock singer Bom (Olvido Gara), Pepi's

closest friend. The film revolves around this peculiar threesome, establishing a system of unusual hetero- and homo-sexual desires.

Some memorable moments in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* include: a lesbian 'golden shower', the 'General Erections' competition, a TV ad for 'PUTON Panties' and several crossdressing performances. The 'General Erections' sequence constitutes a moment of nonsensical narrative suspension, simultaneously satirising Spain's unsteady quest for democracy upon the collapse of Franco's regime and the traditional 'heterosexual couple' placed at the centre of fascist ideology. Pepi, Luci and Bom attend a typical *movida* party - with numerous transvestites, homosexuals and male prostitutes - in the back garden of a building where, a few floors above, a couple is caught amid a heated argument. The girl laments her boyfriend's inattentiveness, disappointed at the lack of intimacy between them. Soon after, we will find out that he is, actually, a closeted homosexual: he can only climax when observing, through a pair of binoculars, the 'elections' taking place downstairs. The elections, in fact, see the male attendees exposing, measuring and comparing their penises. The campness of the sequence rests in its absurdity, as the parallel editing alternates between the two scenes which initially appear completely unrelated. The audience is plunged in the middle of the couple's unintelligible argument, rendered even more bizarre by the fact that the girl, introduced first by the sound of her squeaking feminine voice, is in truth bearded.

The campness of the General Erections reverberates consistently throughout the film. Later on, the diegesis is halted to give space to a moment of disconnected metatextuality with Pepi's fantasy TV advertisement for a new business idea. Almodóvar 'Ponte Bragas' television segment is the cinematic homologous of Warhol's 1962 '32 Campbell's Soup Cans' illustration. The spot makes absurd and vulgar claims about an innovative pair of 'all-purpose panties' and adopts television conventions - quick editing, voiceover and large written text - to create the feeling of an infomercial. The commercial is a playful depiction of the state of consumerist culture, where buyers are easily tricked into acquiring useless objects: Almodóvar proposes a 'camp' version of a TV advertisement to achieve a comic effect, while

also maintaining an underlying sense of social commentary.

Almodóvar's early filmmaking experimentations flirted with the camp aesthetic to queer narrative and formal conventions of the melodrama genre, to voice the stories of the subalterns of Spanish society – tales of unhinged female desire, sexual perversion, homosexuality and gender-nonconformity – while contributing to craft the

director's unique, kaleidoscopic, satirical style. Simultaneously committed to the pursuit of 'immediate and visceral pleasure' and 'a culture of political amnesia', the early works of Almodóvar respond to a camp sensibility which is both aesthetically and politically concerned.



On the left – the film's opening credits, a cartoonish reference to Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes D'Avignon* (1907) which marked a turning point in art history. On the right – 'the golden shower' scene. Luci represents the satirical embodiment of the fascist housewife – she wears no make-up, does not coif her hair and dresses in a range of hand-sewn faded and felted jumpers. She embarks on a S&M relationship with Bom – a punk teenager who wears fishnet tights, space-buns and black lipstick. Irreverent and vulgar, the scene depicts women as never seen before.



You taught me that having a beard isn't so bad, and I'm grateful.



On the left – a comic, nonsensical line of dialogue during the couple's fight scene, a camp representation of the figure of 'the bearded woman' in an apparently traditional relationship. On the right – On the left – a drag appearance in the film: gender-bending elements such as the wig, the sequined bodysuit, the tacky choker necklace, contribute to the excess of the performance.



“COPACABANA MON AMOUR”

By Carolina Azevedo

Rogério Sganzerla was a revolutionary, a rebel who saw in cinema a way to make reality visible to the eyes of the people, blinded by the hands of censorship. His films were made during the years of military dictatorship in Brazil, a time of political turmoil and extreme violence against anyone who tried to go against it – crimes kept undisclosed with the help of the American Government and the national elites.

Despite the lack of freedom of expression and the recurrent threats on the lives of artists, the 1960s and 1970s were a time of cultural insurgence in the country. Cinematographers, painters, poets, and musicians saw it as their duty to show the people what went on behind the doors of the torture rooms – whilst having some fun getting around senseless censors.

Censorship was easily fooled by witty metaphors, chaotic scenery, and, above all, sex – and that’s exactly what filmmakers such as

Sganzerla used to make the most absurd and obvious complaints about the government. One of his most important, humorous, and memorable movies is *Copacabana Mon Amour*, his odyssey on the life of the Rio de Janeiro masses in a sun-kissed paradise of poverty and political, social, and moral disorder.

It tells the story of Sônia Silk and her brother Vidimar, whose lives are torn between the slums and hills of Rio’s outskirts and the middle-class streets where they work – she, as a sex worker, and him, as a doctor’s housekeeper. They roam the streets and bedrooms of the city; a prostitute who repeatedly screams “I am disgusted by poor people” as she looks for food inside trash cans on the streets, and a gay man whose mother thinks he’s possessed by the devil.

Copacabana Mon Amour is a comic remark on the catastrophe that was 1970s Brazil. Its title is a reference to Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), a parodic procedure that connects the image of Copacabana after the AI-5 – a law passed in 1969 which opened the doors to all forms of barbarism by the State, from open torture and murder to the worst of disclosed censorships – to the image of Japan after the nuclear bombings.

On the one hand, the film serves as a representation of the asphyxiating life lived by the restrained masses of an underdeveloped country whose story is simply that of misery, the aesthetics of poverty, scum, and filth. On the other hand, *Copacabana Mon Amour* is a ludicrous parody of itself: colorful shots of the cinematographic beaches of Rio followed by characters who roam drunkenly in the middle of

the trash, repeatedly screaming nonsense, and dancing to the sounds of the city.

As Sônia spits beer on the sidewalks and Vidimar falls in love with his employee, we see the ordinary lives of people living under their own fantasy worlds, roaming around in the sun, which, as said within the film, doesn't even let them think. A sun of beautiful misery, a restless metropole of people who have no choice but to get lost in the chaos, filth, and fun of Copacabana. *Copacabana Mon Amour* is an amusing and comic tale of repression and poverty: as Sganzerla laughs in the face of censorship, cinema is turned into an instrument of the social uprising of those forgotten on the shores of Brazil.





“INTO GREAT SILENCE”

Words by Jonny Rogers

In 1984, Philip Gröning first approached the Carthusian Order with the intention of making a film. 16 years later, they gave him permission to enter the Grande Chartreuse monastery in the French Alps, allowing him to film every corner and crevice of its medieval architecture.

The documentary is, as you might expect, just as gentle and unhurried as the way of life it depicts. And yet, *Into Great Silence* finds as much beauty in the ephemera of the monastery grounds as in the virtue of its saintly residents: the camera often lingers on snow resting on flowers in the gardens, cats sheltering from rain in the cloisters, and dappled shadows cast onto wooden floors by drifting sunlight. Bookended by the repeated image of a monk kneeling in prayer, the film is a nearly 3-hour audiovisual meditation, offering a quiet retreat for world-weary souls.

Aside from the occasional sign of the modern technologized world -- a distant plane flies overhead, a chainsaw heard in the distance -- viewers are transported into a realm of experience unfamiliar to much of modern life; a world of solitude and silence suppressed beneath the mundane busyness of the day-to-day corporate grind.

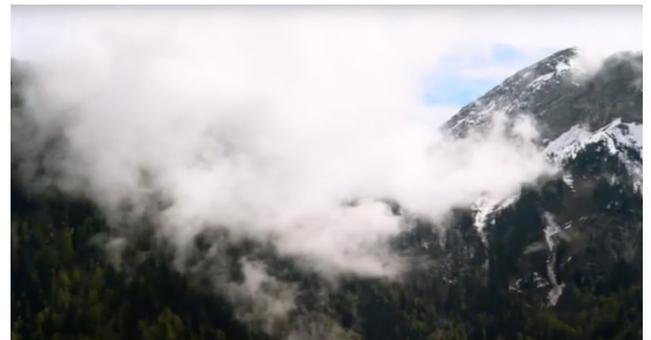
While one would be hard-pressed to label the film a comedy, one sequence near the end offers a surprisingly uplifting relief to an otherwise austere and rigorous aesthetic form. In their allocated weekly trip outside the monastery, some of the younger residents venture into the mountains to play on the snow-covered slopes. From a distance, we see white-robed monks attempting to maintain their balance as they slide down the hill, bursting out in laughter as they watch their brothers fall to the floor.

Although this sequence marks an interruption to the otherwise sombre formality of the monastic timetable, it is frequently highlighted in the film's small body of criticism -- perhaps because, as Matthew Boudway describes, it is Gröning's "most surprising scene." Maybe the humour is only accented by the film's prior dearth of emotional stimulation; silent portraits of the monks dispersed throughout otherwise show little expression, and only one resident ever speaks to the camera.

Nevertheless, this vital injection of humour reframes, with subtlety, the tone of the entire documentary. The monks are shown to find liberation not purely in their ascetic sobriety -- though their faith is, assuredly, sincere -- but in their choice to approach life with renewed

innocence. Through sacrificing the pleasures of this world in view of their hope for the one to come, they have found a form of life that is more essentially embodied, integrative and playful than our (or, at least, my) own, finding joy in the simple fact of their being in the world.

Absent are the fears and anxieties that consume much of my attention -- a need to perform, impress, and excel -- and in their place remains a childish wisdom; a refusal to conflate pleasure with luxury, or joy with wealth. Watching monks having a laugh reminds me not to take the wrong things too seriously. Creation affords enough beauty and joy to console, if temporarily, even the most cynical heart.





“AHNEN ahnen”

Words by Isabelle Bucklow

Broom/Banana
Julie and the can of coke
...Sombreros

The above list is suggestive of prompts and props for comedy sketches, and I suppose that this resemblance is not wholly untrue. Actually, it is a list of scenes from *Ahnen*, a 1987 work of dance-theatre by the German choreographer Pina Bausch. *Ahnen* is a collage of comedic moments and refined choreographic improvisations. It is at times funny but also disturbing. It is absurd, and it is tender. I can't really explain what it is about other than joy, cruelty and humanity, played out amidst a surreal landscape of cactuses. And anyway, Bausch didn't want her work explained or understood; she just wanted you to pay attention.

Her audience's attention is further honed (and tested) when watching *Ahnen's* cinematic counterpart; *AHNEN Ahnen*. Directed by Bausch, *AHNEN Ahnen* might be described as a documentary that follows the making of *Ahnen*, however rather than explicitly reveal the meaning behind the choreography or shed light on the personal lives of the performers – as is *de rigour* with most documentaries – Bausch's enigmatic and oblique film dwells closely on the mental stamina of her company, and specifically the exhaustive labour and precarious dialectic of forming (and performing) a joke.

AHNEN Ahnen begins in a rehearsal studio. The camera cuts between shots of dancers warming up, putting on their costumes and walking through scenes. A man is sitting at a small round table, like those found in traditional cafes, he has large fake breasts protruding from

beneath his knitted navy jumper. On the table is a rectangular silver tray upon which sits a coffee pot and a china cup. The man with the protruding breasts mimes the action of stirring, followed by drinking, although he does not drink from the cup but some invisible object held between his thumb and forefinger. 'It was lovely the way she ate the soup, wasn't it? Unfortunately I haven't got a soup bowl here but it was amazing how she did it' he muses. Cut to dancers changing in and out of costume. Cut to a tall lithe figure in a striped fuschia pink balaclava mask, their face is entirely obscured but the long brown hair trailing from the nape of the neck to the small of the back betrays them as Bausch. She goes and takes up her directorial position behind a long table and writes on a pad of paper, she is still wearing the balaclava. Cut to extreme close-ups of dancers watching rehearsals.

For quite some time we don't see any dance, just the reactions of those watching; some of the company watch alertly, some observe from behind their hands, some chew upon their cuticles, sometimes they get distracted and chatter amongst themselves 'That's why I won't go to bed with Melanie', some are asleep. In *AHNEN Ahnen* the development of *Ahnen* is revealed primarily through responses; boredom, laughter, tears. And, from the sheer variety of responses it's hard to know if performers are watching the same thing - is this a comedy show or funereal procession?

Eventually we return back to rehearsal scenes where narrative vignettes complete with props and costumes are beginning to take shape and accumulate. A woman carries two black stilettos in her mouth and lowers herself to the ground, men in sunglasses and tutus prance and pose, a man pricks himself with acupuncture needles whilst his companion peels an orange, a woman tapes cans of coke to the soles of her pink satin shoes, then teeters on her makeshift stilts (Julie and the can of coke), a man runs his lips across a bunch of bananas (wind pipes) as he pursues a woman sweeping the floor (Broom/Banana), a man in his underwear carries a chalkboard - from stage left to right - that reads 'Die 3 Sombreros' (Sombreros).

Some of these scenes are tried out with different performers or music, sped up or slowed down. Bausch's calm controlled whisper frequently

interrupts the action; 'Could you try again...?', 'Yes, a bit like that', 'That doesn't work with that music does it?', 'No, I think it's odd, isn't it?', 'This part isn't really clear'... But for the viewer, no part ever seems really clear. Just when you start to piece together a movement sequence it is denied, untied, retried, cut to the next. It's rather hard to make sense of it all.

Freud wrote that the pleasure of the joke 'is derived from its simultaneous sense and nonsense', it seems *AHNEN Ahnen* (and *Ahen*) are charged with this dialectical energy too. When a scene starts to make sense it flips into non-sense. If the joke operates between sense and non-sense, then it also balances between pleasure and displeasure. Cultural theorist and scholar Laurent Berlant confirmed 'the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it'. Now *that* is very Bausch.

Pina Bausch sourced her choreographic material from the world around her. Bausch's curiosity was directed toward human relations and whilst compassionate she was also confrontational; lifting movements from daily life to expose ideological structures of daily life. Bausch said 'the time in which we live, the time with all its anxieties is very much with me. This is the source of my pieces'. Her predilection for the violent and anxiety inducing has been interpreted as nihilistic, reinforcing power-dynamics between victim and aggressor. Well surely there is nothing funny about that? Not necessarily, but as Slavoj Zizek explains, a joke is 'a little piece of reality . . . related to 'dirty' topics', such topics encompass death, violence, humiliation, degrading sex acts, racism or sexism where 'the whole enjoyment of a joke is that there must be someone who is hurt, humiliated'. Bausch set these 'dirty topics' in motion (often through relentless repetition) not to reaffirm dominant and submissive sexual politics but rather challenge her audience to interrogate the fragile boundaries of the gesture; the context-dependent transformations of humour into humiliation. In *AHNEN Ahnen* we witness a man take hold of a woman by her hair and thrust her face into a (soft) wall, over and over and over again until they both casually walk away. The act is indeed violent but its mechanical repetition combined with both performers' accepting placidity drains the gesture of

expected aggressive theatrics leading it into the terrain of absurdist satire.

Bausch was attentive to the axiological (and indeed anxiogenic) nature of gestures, that they contain within them the potential to provoke multiple, opposing affects. She was concerned with the relationship between opposites and explained of her choreography 'I always went with the extreme, always the opposite... a sort of complete back and forth'. Similarly the action of comedy, as Berlant has noted 'as both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure'. Bausch does not hope for her audience to reach a general consensus as to whether a scene is funny or not-funny, rather the action revels in being 'epistemically troubling', in confronting the audience with the confusion of either-or. The comedy act is thus a test-site for the relation between pleasure, danger and authority, emotional proximity and moral detachment.

Near the end of *AHNEN Ahnen* Bausch says to her performers 'Jokes are also poems'. This statement touches on something very important about the nature of jokes, poems and indeed dance – they are all phenomena that perish if they are explained away. They can be felt and known but never imprisoned in explanation. And, just like the poem, the joke and the dance - if they are to speak to the human condition - must be meticulously composed and timed. If the comedian or dancer misses the beat, if they drag it out, or rush to the punch-line too soon, then the affective charge goes stale. Bausch's cool voice interrupts; 'I'm sorry it's far too long now... so that part before Francis begins, that would have been enough. Let's try it again'. Cut to black.



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EDITOR
Jessica Moore

WRITERS
Lauren Mattice
Giulia Tronconi
Carolina Azevedo
Jonny Rogers
Isabelle Bucklow

DESIGNER
Charlotte Mansfield

