AUSTRALASIAN HUMOUR SCHOLARS NETWORK COLLOQUIUM

AT UNSW, SYDNEY

"The Politics of Humour and The Humour of Politics"

Monday, 27th November, 2000 (9.00a.m. – 4.00p.m.)
Room 327, 3rd Floor, Robert Webster Building at UNSW
School of Theatre, Film and Dance, Tel: (02) 9385.4856

TIMETABLE

9.00 - 9.30   **Registration and arrival tea/coffee**

9.30 – 10.00   "Humour in War", by Dr Carmen Moran and Margaret Massam, Social Work, UNSW.

10.00 – 10.30 "Australian Cartoonists' Caricatures of Women Politicians During 1990's", by Dr Haydon Manning, Political and International Studies, Flinders University.

10.30 – 11.00 "Laughing on the Inside: Humour and Internal Politics in the Workplace", by Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

11.00 – 11.30   **Morning tea** (after which Session A is in Room 305 and Session B in 306)

11.30 – 12.00   **Session A:** "Australian Political Satire: *Perverse Acts*", by Dr Don Fletcher, Government, University of Queensland.
               Session B: "Tragedy Tomorrow! Comedy Tonight!" by Alison White, Speaker/Trainer.

12.00 – 12.30   **Session A:** "When a Joke can end up Being Flat or Offensive; When a Satire can be nothing but an Insult", by Moses Bainy, author.
               Session B: "Stand-up Performance with Rhetorical Overview", by Neville Nickels, Business/ Communication, Queensland University of Technology

12.30 - 1.00   **Session A**: "Is it okay to laugh at God, please?", by Graham English, Religious Education, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, cartoonist.
               Session B: "Unsettling the sand at the bottom of the fishbowl: a function of humour in the learning context", Dr Ruth Wajnryb, Applied Linguistics/Education consultant

1.00 -- 2.00   **Lunch**

2.00 – 2.30   "The Politics of Humour in Shakespeare", by Prof. Bob White, English, UWA.

2.30 -- 3.00   "FARCE/FARTS: The Political Dynamics of Comedy in Medieval France", by Em.Prof. Ken Dutton, University of Newcastle.

3.00 - 3.20   **Afternoon tea**

3.20 - 4.00   Discussion, and Briefing on 2000 International Humor Conference in Osaka, Japan.

CLOSE

ABSTRACTS

Dr Carmen Moran, Head, School of Social Work, UNSW and Ms Margaret Massam MPH, School of Social Work, UNSW.

Humour in War
Humour has been conceptualised as a pathway to truth. Truth, it has been argued, is the first casualty of war. This paper examines the role of humour in World War 2 in Australia, contrasting two propositions: (1) humour presented a more truthful account of soldiers' experiences than found elsewhere and (2) humour contributed to the heroic mythologising of the Australian Soldier. There is surprisingly little empirical research evaluating the role humour served during WW2. While there is a vast literature on war and humour, frequently this literature is limited to anthologies of war jokes and cartoons with minimal analysis of the meaning behind the humour. Postwar writers have criticised reported accounts of humour as part of a national propaganda about the Australian soldier that generalised from his ability to laugh at danger to his ability to thrive under threat. This criticism is usually accompanied by the assertion that the basis of the humour was a denial of circumstances or was a simplistic response of soldiers ignorant of the horror of their surroundings. In contrast, postwar novels often related humour to coping with the absurdity war, often verging on surreal and certainly farcical. This paper is concerned with humour occurring during war, rather than humour originating in the postwar period. It examines cartoons from WW2 as presented in annual publications written and prepared by members of the Australian armed services (AIF, 'HMAS', RAAF) from 1941-1945. The content of those cartoons is contrasted with the heroic mythologising of the Australian soldier in the same documents and other sources. It is argued that the humour demonstrated an awareness of negative circumstances of war and provided a contrast rather than contribution to the heroic mythologising of the individual soldier and his reaction to war. In this way, it is argued, humour contributed to a 'truer' account of experiences of the Australian soldier.

Dr Haydon Manning, School of Political and International Studies, Flinders University

Australian Cartoonists' Caricatures of Women Politicians During 1990s
Recently Australian cartoonists were criticised for using sexist stereotypes in their caricatures of women politicians. In particular, Labor shadow minister Jenny Macklin criticised the way cartoonists depicted Meg Lees during her negotiations with Prime Minister Howard over the passage of the GST and the defection of Cheryl Kernot to the ALP. A number of cartoons, particularly those by Bill Leake and Mark Knight, implied that it was Lees and Kernot's *sexual* persona rather than her capacity for rational argument that won over the male politicians with whom they dealt. This paper focusses on this issue and major daily newspaper cartoonists' caricatures, during the 1990's, of seven senior Australian women politicians at times of triumph, crisis and trauma in their parliamentary lives. It asks whether sexist stereoptypes predominate and whether there exists, as Macklin argues, a failure of imagination on the part of cartoonists when confronted with depicting the relatively recent phenomenon of women occupying powerful parliamentary and party positions.

Prof Janet Holmes and Ms Meredith Marra, Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington *(presented by Meredith Marra)*

Laughing on the Inside: Humour and Internal Politics in the Workplace
In our lives we are continually "politicking", manoeuvring for our own objectives. One of the ways we do this is by allying ourselves with different groups. Appearing to "belong" has privileges, whether it is inside knowledge or the ability to influence those in power.

Within organisations, workers regularly emphasise different aspects of their identity in their discourse, aligning and realigning themselves with the 'right' group(s) for their particular purpose. At any point in a given interaction they may accentuate a particular social identity such as manager, female, Maori, or one of the team. As a social setting, the workplace is full of such ingroup/outgroup dichotomies: groups are constantly formed and reformed in terms of status, gender, ethnicity and the organisation, and participants' discourse orients them towards many different groups even within a single interaction.

One of the important and recognised functions of humour in the workplace is to build ingroup solidarity. As such it is also an effective discursive strategy for highlighting the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. Using examples drawn from Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project, this paper will illustrate how those in the workplace use humour to create and manipulate us/them boundaries in their interactions.

Dr Don Fletcher, Dept of Government, University of Queensland
Australian Political Satire: "Perverse Acts"

Although Australian authors have produced political satire that deals broadly with Australian political culture, there is little Australian satire that focuses specifically on formal political institutions. A recent exception is Camille Nelson's *Perverse Acts* (1998). This novel is politically well informed and topical, and its lively style sets it apart from other recent examples of the genre. It also uses traditional satirical techniques effectively. Nelson's focus is the Australian federal parliament, and her overall framing device is the equation of sex with politics, politics with sex. Prominent satirical techniques include stereotypical characters, the ironic juxtaposition of perspectives, and bawdy and bodily references to deflate the exalted or serious. In this essay, I identify the political procedures, policies and stances satirised in *Perverse Acts* as they relate to contemporary Australian politics and analyse the manner in which Nelson employs traditional satirical techniques.

Ms Alison White, Speaker/Trainer

Tragedy Tomorrow! Comedy Tonight!
A workshop discussion on creating and using comedy.

Mr Moses Bainy, author,

When a Joke can end up Being Flat or Offensive; When a Satire can be Nothing but an Insult
The perception of humour depends very much on one's *value system*. A humorous situation perceived through our human value system is essentially subjective, therefore its interpretation differs between individuals.

Each human being has a distinctive value system which has been acquired partly through genetic inheritance and partly through learned experience.

A Joke may be perceived by an audience to be in good humour if the value system of *the author (*by author I mean a joke-teller, comedian…) can convey - almost simultaneously - both the negative values and the positive values *to the percipients'* (audience's) value system -taking into account individual differences. An intended joke can fail to become humorous or funny if any of its primary or secondary elements is omitted. If the negative element is missing, it may become 'flat' or uninteresting. If the positive element is missing, the joke may become offensive.

Similarly, a Satire can be considered to be a good satire if, (a) it presents the *target* as being, initially, a bearer of high positive values, (b) and this is followed by a stinging negative value intended to hold up to the target to ridicule, and [c] the whole picture conveys to the *percipients* (spectators, readers) a sense of pleasant satisfaction. An intended satire directed at a target, without its positive (humorous) element, will end up being nothing but an insult.

Mr Neville Nickels, Post-graduate Student in Business/Communications, Queensland University of Technology

Stand-up Performance with Rhetorical Overview
This paper will commence with a short stand-up comedy routine. As I like to comment on current social and political issues the topic will be something to do with Post Olympic Games problems. If we have time I will do a three minute, one person *Manzai*, which is a popular comic form in Japan. Following this I will then discuss the rhetorical significance in terms of the persuasive elements present. Rhetoric has often been an ignored aspect of comedy and therefore analysis could become a valuable tool for researchers. The speaker develops a psychological unity with his audience. The mechanics of this exercise will be the thrust of this part of the paper. I will draw on Aristotle, Burke and others who have
theorised on rhetoric to develop the rhetorical model.

Mr Graham English, Dept of Religious Education, Australian Catholic University, Mary Campus, Strathfield, Sydney, and cartoonist

"Is it okay to laugh at God, please?"
I grew up in a Labor voting orthodox Catholic working class family in a NSW country town in the 1950s. Our lives revolved around the church, the Catholic schools, rugby league, alcohol, never ever even thinking about sex; and trying to explain how, despite what Father was saying at mass, Mr Santamaria didn't know what he was talking about and we were still going to vote for Freddy Cahill because Monsignor Hennessy had picked him to be the local Labor member and we knew neither of them was a communist.

Remaining sane in this milieu was not easy. Recovering from it has been a life's work. Fortunately, while it took a lot longer to laugh at politics, I learnt early that most of the funniest things I experienced happened around religion. Eventually I found myself drawing cartoons about religion.

This paper is a meditation with some cartoons on why I need to laugh at God and such things.

Dr Ruth Wajnryb, Applied Linguistics/Education Consultant

Unsettling the sand at the bottom of the fishbowl: a function of humour in the learning context
This paper has to do with the role of humour in the learning context. One of the worst aspects of teaching is the fact that the decision to learn is the learner's not the teacher's. A key question all teachers and trainers face is: how to get the learner to the point of making the decision to learn. When this happens, we have an alignment of teaching and learning energies and the potential for positive outcomes. Of course, many of the variables that contribute to learner receptivity are outside the teacher's power to influence. That is why, perhaps, teachers need to maximise those resources that are within their sphere of influence. I suspect that humour has a place here.
Indeed, I would like to know more about the connection between humour and receptivity, in particular the role played by laughter. I sense that laughter – that is, shared communal laughter – serves to break down learners' natural resistance and construct receptivity. If this happens at the 'forming' stage of social processes, it can create alignment and serve pedagogic goals.

Prof. Robert White, Dept of English, UWA

The Politics of Humour in Shakespeare
"Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." (E. B. White)
After some opening remarks about my experiences of teaching comedy to undergraduates, raising questions of 'authority' in the field (eg the intimidating authority of Freud and Nietzsche), I shall look at how humour operates in political contexts in Shakespeare's plays - mainly the diversionary humour of 'the witty prince' Hamlet and the use of ridicule in the Henry IV plays. Finally, some thoughts about how Shakespeare sometimes uses a specific kind of sense of humour to characterise and individualise each of his dramatic personages.

Em. Prof. Ken Dutton, School of French Studies, University of Newcastle

FARCE/FARTS: The Political Dynamics of Comedy in Medieval France
The expulsion of the Feast of Fools from the church is usually cited as the origin of the farce in medieval France. This paper argues that the Feast of Fools was at the origin of *two* types of performance, both of which have had a significant effect on the development of the comic tradition. Both types contain an important political aspect, in that they enact a reversal of the established social order (as well as the established religious order, closely aligned in the Middle Ages with the social order).

The first type of performance, the farce, is characterised by the use of words. Taken up by groups of players calling themselves Confraternities of Fools (*confréries des sots*) and with names such as *la Basoche* and *Les Enfants sans souci*, the performance is usually based on dialogue. It may be

concerned with domestic politics (idle husbands or nagging wives), but local officials or ecclesiastics may also be pilloried. These works are political in the sense that they present a world in which the oppressors are themselves oppressed. The farce genre becomes increasingly sophisticated as the medieval period continues; the emphasis on situation is gradually augmented by the development of character, until with the piece generally recognised as the finest of medieval farces, *La Farce de Maistre Pierre Pathelin*, character development has progressed to the point where the play is arguably not a farce at all but the first example of a new French genre – *comédie* – prefiguring by two centuries the work of Molière.

The other type of medieval performance arising from the Feast of Fools is characteristic of the Carnival (including Mardi Gras) rather than of the stage farce. This performance type is marked by actions rather than words. At a superficial level, its "politics" (still, as in the case of farce, concerned with the reversal of the established order) is seen in such features as cross-dressing and fart jokes; but at a deeper level, it can be seen to reflect the need for release from the constriction of an oppressive socio-religious order (the fart as a reverse image of divine afflatus) which was the original focus of the Feast of Fools. This second tradition was maintained over the centuries, both in the Carnival (and the Court) and on the vaudeville stage in performances such as those of Le Pétomane; it can be observed today in manifestations as diverse as the *Footy Show* and the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Its origin, significance and history have not always been fully recognised.