

Book Review

Eli Rozik, *Comedy: A Critical Introduction*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011

Leah Gilula¹

Comedy is a serious enterprise. To compose a comic work, to elicit successfully hearty laughter from spectators or readers, calls for skills, wisdom, precision and timing. It is no laughing matter. Indeed, Eli Rozik in his book approaches comedy with due seriousness, effectively leading the reader through the complexities of the genre.

Rozik discusses the genre of Comedy in 14 concise chapters, unfolds the development of comedy throughout the ages (Greece and Rome, commedia dell'arte, carnivals, The Middle Ages, Purim-Shpil, Shakespeare, Moliere, Modern and Contemporary Age), and clarifies the contributions of each period to the genre. He analyzes the components of comedy (structure, characters, jokes), and its sub-genres (romantic comedy, farce, satiric drama, grotesque drama, theatre of the absurd). Not only the literary text but also its performance in theatre is discussed, as well as in other arts and media, including, for example, cinema, puppet theatre, opera, ballet, pantomime, fine arts, animation, comics and television sitcoms. The point of departure of the book is theory, Rozik's specialization. Finally, after 'deconstructing' the genre into its various components, Rozik gathers them together again in an inclusive analytic examination.

The book's structure reminds a university course, but it intends to reach out not only to students, university teachers or theatre scholars, but also to a wider audience interested in theatre art. Indeed, each chapter is devoted to one aspect of comedy, described concisely and clearly, not in the convoluted discourse characteristic of theories' discussions. A considerable achievement, not to be taken for granted, since the main difficulty of understanding theories are not the ideas themselves, but their presentation in an obscure language that ennobles the writer but baffles the reader. Whereas Rozik, interested in the discussion itself, strives to share his views and to lead his readers gradually to his conclusions.

In his discussion of theories Rozik cites passages from original works, underlining the importance of unmediated acquaintance with their style and content. Attempting to ease

¹ **Leah Gilula**, PhD, Associate Editor, *Humor Mekuva* Journal, Editor of the theater Section.

the anxieties of apprehensive readers, Rozik chooses the most important and central passages, cites and interprets them, explains his own approach and adds examples for further clarifications. The principal theories discussed are the theories of William Hazlitt, Henri Bergson, Northrop Frye, Sigmund Freud and Eric Bentley. In such a way, the reader is acquainted with the central points of the theories. If he desires more he would find his way to the original works.

Rozik suggests several terms to clarify the discussion of comedy's components, such as 'mode', that relates to the behaviour of characters (lofty mode relates to traits common in tragedy, lowly mode to traits found in comedy), and 'mood' that describes the tone of the fictional world (serious in tragedy and light-hearted in comedy) that conditions the perception of readers and spectators and influences their reception of diverse fictional worlds. A large part of the theoretic discussion is devoted to creators and spectators: what are the means that creators have and use, and what influences their choices; what conditions the spectators' attitudes and elicits their laughter. Here Rozik turns to theories of neurology. Gradually the discussion leaves the examination of comedy and becomes purely theoretic. Nevertheless, the comedies themselves are not forgotten and frequently used as examples for illustration. Sometimes a comedy is just mentioned, sometimes described and explained, usually the plot is detailed and the point illustrated is underlined. Central to the discussion are plays and their performance in theatre, but various well known works from other media are not overlooked. Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night* is a fine example of a work created in different media – theatre, paintings, cinema – that Rozik uses to point out the distinct possibilities of each medium to create a fictional comic world, underlining the difference of interpretation of the same work generated in a different medium. The variety and multiplicity of works mentioned and discussed, chiefly plays, introduces the reader, especially the student, to the treasures of Western civilization.

In his book, Rozik generously and pleasantly shares with the readers his extensive knowledge and broad perspectives on theatre art, theatre theories and contemporary research, opening before them the world he loves.

A pleasant surprise is to find on the book's cover a picture of an Israeli actor, Yehoyachin Friedlander from The Jerusalem Khan Theatre. Rozik, a member of The Khan's directing committee, choose to adorn his book only with pictures of The Khan's performances, a

beautiful homage and a great service to Israeli theatre. Readers from abroad meet The Khan and realize that Israeli theatre is not inferior to theatres of the world, and that it performs a wide range of plays from the classic European and universal repertoire, works discussed and interpreted in the book.