

DRAMA

“It is funny to watch other people suffer.”

Black comedy is a form of humour that regards human suffering as absurd rather than pitiable or that considers human existence as ironic and pointless but somehow comic. One of the key aspects of black comedy is its ability to provide a cathartic experience, that is, the release of tension in the audience. This is why it is funny to watch other people suffer; the audience are unsure of how to react to what is happening onstage, so they laugh. The suffering of others is explored through trivial subject matters, violence and the inability to resolve suffering in Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and Neil LaBute’s *The Shape of Things*. McDonagh uses farcical, slap-stick and in-yer-face theatre to examine the mentality of political violence whereas LaBute asks the question, “What is art?”

It is funny to watch other people suffer over trivial subject matters. In both plays, the trivial becomes deadly serious and the element of dramatic tension heightens the action onstage and makes the audience laugh. In Scene Eight of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, the audience could hear Donny’s heavy breathing and could see his chest rise and fall as he waited on his knees, downstage centre for Padraic to make him confess. This convinced the audience that Donny was guilty of a serious crime. When Padraic pushed his gun up to Donny’s head, dramatic tension was created in the audience through the use of dramatic pause and strong facial expression that emphasised Donny’s desperation. When Donny blurted out, “I confess, so, to feeding him Frosties now and then,” the audience laughed because of the sudden loss of dramatic tension due to an undesirable brand of cat food. This was funny because the audience considered the confession of cat food at gunpoint as ridiculous and therefore Donny’s suffering because of the cat food as ridiculous.

Similarly, Adam’s suffering in the lawn scene in *The Shape of Things* was funny to watch because of the dramatic element of situation. As Philip sauntered offstage, he froze and swivelled around to study Adam who was putting on a jacket. Philip’s quizzical expression at the unsuspecting Adam for no apparent reason made the audience snigger. When Philip dumped his bag on the ground, strode over to Adam and started pulling at Adam’s jacket and fluffing up Adam’s hair saying, “... let’s not pretend that the jacket and the, ahh, weight and the Jon Bon Jovi hair are no big deal,” the audience laughed at Adam’s suffering because Philip made such a big deal out of the jacket. The audience thought, like Adam that the jacket was, “really no big deal”. Laughter of others’ suffering over trivial subject matters was enhanced by dramatic tension and situation.

It is funny to watch other people suffer because of violence. It is the cathartic nature of black comedy that makes the audience laugh at the characters’ desperation and shock. In the torture scene in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Padraic’s language is controlled, calm and taunting, “James? (Pause) James?” and this is contrasted to a sobbing James who is lying helplessly upside down. The audience laughed at this because Padraic was enjoying watching James suffer and they thought it was pathetic that a fully grown man and drug dealer was crying. Padraic’s strong, quick movement towards James with a razor in his hand created dramatic tension in the audience. The audience really thought James’ nipple was going to be cut off. However the audience’s fear quickly disappeared as James’ was prompted to decide which nipple he wanted to lose, “The right one! The right one!” Although the idea of cutting off a nipple was morbid, the audience laughed at James’ for wanting one of his nipples to be cut off, rather than both of them.

Likewise, in the bedroom scene in *The Shape of Things*, the audience laughed at Adam’s reaction to Evelyn’s extreme hatred of Philip. Adam and Evelyn were snuggled up close together in the bed when Evelyn sneered, “The only thing that would help him is a fucking knife through his throat...” This created an awkward atmosphere in the audience and because the audience didn’t know what to do, they laughed. What made the scene funnier was Adam’s shock through his wide-eyed expression and gaping mouth at the audience during the awkward silence as he had no idea what

to say next. It was clear than Adam desperately wanted to move away from Evelyn but was too mortified to do so. Through the dramatic elements of language and atmosphere, it is funny to watch others suffer because of violence.

The inability of others to resolve their suffering is funny to watch. The audience are able to foreshadow the events that will happen next and this makes them laugh at the hopelessness of it. In the first scene of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Davey realised that the dead cat was Padraic's cat. He paced across the stage, stuttering, "Not your... Not your...", because he was afraid to confirm that the cat belonged to Padraic as he began to think about the consequences that would have for him if Padraic believed he killed the cat. When Donny replied directly and immediately, "Aye," Davey dropped onto his knees in front of Donny with fear in his eyes. He knew Padraic was going to be furious and would punish anyone who might have the slightest association with his dead cat. Davey's frantic and desperate use of the theatre space was representative of his inability to prevent the suffering he might suffer by Padraic and this was funny to watch.

Similarly, in the coffee shop scene in *The Shape of Things*, Adam's inability to end his suffering in a public place made the scene funny to watch. When I played Adam in this scene, I recoiled when I saw Evelyn and Jenny sitting side-by-side because I felt guilty about the kiss I had with Jenny. When Evelyn shouted out loud, "I just wanna talk about the kiss. Why can't we do that?" I froze because I had been "caught" and I felt uncomfortable as I didn't know how much Evelyn knew. I also felt embarrassed because I was aware of the people in the café staring and listening to our conversation. When this happened, I heard the audience laugh. However, I had to remain calm and controlled because I didn't want my personal life to go public. Through the dramatic element of space and place, the uncontrollable suffering of others was funny to watch.

Black comedy provides a cathartic experience that makes the suffering of others funny. In both plays the suffering of others over trivial subject matters was enhanced by dramatic tension and situation, the suffering because of violence portrayed through language and atmosphere and the inability to resolve suffering demonstrated through space and place. Although torture, death and violence are taken very seriously in reality, black comedy is staged in such a way that it is funny to watch other people suffer.