

*This is an author's accepted manuscript for 'Crisis & Critique'.*

Black, Jack. 2023. "Success in failure: from the destruction of the tragic to the self-negation of the comic." *Crisis & Critique* 10, no. 2 (2023): 30—54.

**Success in failure: from the destruction of the tragic to the self-negation of the comic**

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## **Success in failure: from the destruction of the tragic to the self-negation of the comic**

### **Abstract**

This essay explores the interrelationship between tragedy and comedy, with specific focus given to the potential that comedy can provide in transforming the most tragic of situations. In building this claim, the very dynamics and distinctions that divide the tragic from the comic are considered in view of the self-negation that the comic posits. That is, while tragedy requires a certain acceptance of the finite, from which destiny and circumstance come to certify the hero's tragic predicament, in comedy, what succeeds is that which functions through an act of self-negation. This, it is argued, offers a subversive redefining of tragedy, one that proves constitutive of a comic fatalism that does not mourn one's tragic predicament or fated end, but, instead, fully identifies with our comic predicament. Going beyond the pitfalls of political nicety and moral condemnation, which seek easy gratification or cynical distance, the conclusion examines the conceptual artist, Vanessa Place, and her performance of rape jokes.

### **Keywords**

Comic fatalism; concrete universal; enunciation/enunciated; repetition; self-relating negativity

Whether viewed through analysis, critique, or reinterpretation, the interplay between tragedy and comedy—including the potential transition from tragedy to comedy as frameworks for historical development—suggests a level of permeability, tension, and ambiguity that proves constitutive of each genre. Though examples of tragedy have been subject to transformation (Greek or Roman tragedy, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, revenge tragedy, tragicomedy), it was Hegel who first sought to locate the significance of comedy as residing beyond the tragic. Given that comedy does not function by relieving us of the tragedy of existence, and the horrors of the 'real world', it can, in a

decidedly dialectical form, locate our own role in the tragic itself.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the purgative, and in full view of Marx's first as tragedy, then as farce, it is comedy that avers a retroactive position on the very impasses and tensions that the tragic evokes.

In what follows, attention is given to examining the very dynamics and distinctions that divide the tragic from the comic, focusing specifically on the act of self-negation that the latter posits. By distinguishing the effects of repetition in both tragic and comic performances, as well as its relation to the tragic and comic hero, the importance of approaching a Hegelian reconciliation in tragedy and comedy is discussed.<sup>2</sup> This is supported with reference to the subject of enunciation and enunciated, the concrete universal,<sup>3</sup> and the freedom that can be achieved through our own 'comic fatalism'.<sup>4</sup> To conclude, the division between tragedy and comedy is explored in relation to the conceptual artist, Vanessa Place, and her performance of rape jokes.

## I.

In drawing a distinction between tragedy and comedy, it is helpful to remember that what can be considered tragic, can be viewed as comic, and what may be perceived comic, can very easily be conceived as tragic. As Zupancic notes, 'The same passions that are the subject of comedy (love, jealousy, greed, ambition, and so on) can also be subjects of tragedy or of serious drama'.<sup>5</sup> To explore this entwinement, however, we must first identify some important distinctions.

First, for the tragic hero, there is an underlying sense that they remain driven by a purported destiny or unrelenting passion, which, during the course of their actions, leads to their eventual downfall. In the search for truth or some other

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<sup>1</sup> Black 2021a.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, such a Hegelian reconciliation should not be read as proposing a synthesis, but, instead, a confirmation of alienation as constitutive for both the subject and reality.

<sup>3</sup> Zupancic 2008a.

<sup>4</sup> Ruda 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 194.

intriguing discovery, it is in confrontation with this endeavour that the tragic hero's complicity is disclosed. What is revealed 'behind the curtain is [... the tragic hero] as *subject*, his own passion, and it is this confrontation that finally brings him down'.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, for the comic hero there is no revelation, or, at least, there is nothing exposed behind the curtain, except the appearance of the curtain itself. It is for this reason that the comic hero fails, yet picks themselves up, and returns to carry on.

Though the comic hero is endowed with a vitality that sees them return, unaffected to the same scenarios time and time again, the delineation of the comic can also be found in certain tragic scenarios where the effort to define or comprehend a tragedy proves ineffective. Here, the ability 'to experience a situation as "tragic" is possible only when a victim retains a minimum of dignity'.<sup>7</sup> As a result, 'it is not only wrong but also ethically obscene to designate a *Muselmann* in the concentration camp or a victim of a Stalinist show-trial as tragic—their predicament is simply too terrible to deserve this designation'.<sup>8</sup> It is for this reason that the turn to comedy provides, arguably, the best response to tragedy. In the wake of catastrophe, the very horrors of the world, and the tragedies it entails, cannot be approached directly; instead, it is only through comedy and 'its very inadequacy to the actual situation' that the turn to jokes provide an appropriate response to the tragic.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, what the "Comic" ... stands for [is] a domain which emerges when the horror of a situation outgrows the confines of the tragic'.<sup>10</sup>

Second, we can go further here and make the important clarification that the 'emergence' of the 'comic' is not a simple revision of tragedy—a happy ending that merely negates the previous horror. Equally, comedy is not an exemplar of "positive thinking," the ability to find something positive and satisfactory even in the worst situations'.<sup>11</sup> Following a path that echoes Žižek's account of the

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<sup>6</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Žižek 2006, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Žižek 2006, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek 2022b.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek 2006, 111.

<sup>11</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 130.

parallax view, Zupancic notes that what underscores the tragic and the comic is that they 'spring from two different points inherent to the same configuration'.<sup>12</sup> That is, 'Not only are they both true—they are both true because they are both “partial” and “partisan”'.<sup>13</sup> This lends the significance of tragedy and comedy a structural importance: one in which each genre functions to delimit the very antagonism upon which they emerge. Certainly, this antagonism is frequently approached through the form of tragedy: where, in an attempt to break from such antagonism, one is left with the profundity of the act. What is revealed is the importance of the impasse, which finds its return in the defiance and resistance of the tragic hero.

## II.

In recognition of the tragedy that can befall such an act, Ruti lays claim to the 'the agency of the signifier' and the counterhegemonic transformations that the act can achieve.<sup>14</sup> With reference to the paradigmatic heroine of Greek tragedy, Ruti notes that, 'Antigone is a heroine because she does not give ground relative to her desire, but rather pursues this desire beyond social limits', adding, 'tragic heroes are often isolated in this fashion, in one way or another separated from the structure that surrounds them'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, as Ruti alludes to, there is perhaps a deeper ambiguity to be explored in this separation. That is, while 'Antigone's desire remains the desire of the Other—not of the social Other (law of the city) embodied in Creon but of the Other of immemorial Laws—it is definitely not directly “her own” desire', and, as a result, 'Her act expresses the unconditional fidelity to a deep law, not its transgression—in short, she unconditionally insists on her demand—to bury properly her brother; there is no metonymic desire here, no compromise'.<sup>16</sup> That

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<sup>12</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 130. The effects of a parallax between comedy and tragedy is also considered by Dolar (2019).

<sup>13</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Ruti 2012, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Ruti 2012, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek 2023, 284 & 285. There is not the space to do justice to the intricacies between Lacan's desire and drive in this article. However, where Žižek acknowledges that 'The best case of the porosity of the distinction between desire and drive is the case of Antigone', what

Antigone does not give ground relative to *her* desire is itself echoed in the various examples of self-sacrifice that underwrite Greek tragedy (albeit, in the case of Antigone, a self-sacrifice brought on by Creon's order of execution). What is often ignored in such accounts, however, is the posterity it reveals—the very fact that one's sacrifice remains at the behest of an Other, for whom one's sacrifice will be recognised from some future position.<sup>17</sup> As a result, in the end, Antigone demands the Cause to which she adheres. Butler notes:

we can see Antigone's 'unconditional' insistence on the Cause here not as something that reroutes the Symbolic but as what allows or entrenches it. We can understand her 'act' not as what breaks with the Symbolic but as that 'inherent transgression' necessary for it. For, in a sense, Antigone protests against the system only in the name of the system itself.<sup>18</sup>

Acting in spite of Creon's Law, Antigone's protest—indeed, her very demand—is to uphold the burial rites of the immemorial Law and the recognition of her dead brother; an act that is performed in full view of the Other's presiding gaze.

Accordingly, if the result of the act affords a transgressive attempt to reassert the authority of the Other, it is the failure of the Other—that is, its inherent lack—which proves inherent to tragedy. The Other's lack functions to maintain the tragic hero's interpellation, thus constituting the very course they seek to follow, or, in the case of the revenge tragedy, restoring that which is believed to have been lost.

Set against the tragedy of the act, and the lack in the Other, such examples are indicative of the very way in which tragedy can become stuck in a restorative attempt to maintain the current symbolic order through either 'filling in' or 'fixing'

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proves significant is 'why Lacan's formula of ethics (do not compromise your desire) is pronounced only once, it never returns, in clear contrast with Lacan's other formulas to which he always returns in new variations?' (2023, 285).

<sup>17</sup> Do we not detect an element of transcendentalism in the tragedy of such an act? As opposed to an accepted nihilism, and in the face of one's own fated end, we see the posthumous as an escape from the material towards a transcendent 'beyond'.

<sup>18</sup> Butler 2005, 102.

the Other's lack. Moreover, such attempts are, according to Žižek, reflected in 'the desperate attempts to reverse tragedy into triumphant comedy', such as that seen in Todd Phillips's, *Joker* (2019).<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, by the film's end, 'Joker doesn't go "too far" in the destruction of the existing order, he remains stuck in what Hegel called "abstract negativity," unable as he is to propose its concrete negation'.<sup>20</sup> In examples of comedy, it is in positing the concrete negation that the effects of repetition and its relation to self-negation are asserted.

### III.

The very act of repetition works counter to the epic narratives that sustain the tragic form. This is not to say that a tragedy cannot repeat, nor does it suggest that the move from tragedy to comedy occurs due to repetition. Instead, it is in accordance with such repetition that we can begin to identify how the tragicomedy involves the affirmation of obscenity in order to elicit the tragedy at its heart. For example, 'compulsive jesters tend to identify with the "real" (hidden, obscene) truth of a situation, they like to put themselves (or a part of their body) forward as the embodiment of this obscene underside as the locus of truth'.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, such 'truths' are asserted so as to highlight the obscenities that underpin the tragic form, repeating not the passion and grandeur that enlivens the tragic hero, but the everyday reality of its inconsequential endeavour. Though such attempts seek to go past the tragic, they go no further than eliciting a comic gesture that fails to move beyond its very debasement. This is not to ignore the fact that the tragicomedy can be enjoyed, so much so that the very 'enjoyment that tragedy produces in the spectator occurs through the repetition of sacrifice'—a 'self-inflicted loss'.<sup>22</sup> Instead, what sits at the crux of the tragic hero is that such sacrifice must be endlessly sought, unceasingly 'confront[ing] us with the Real'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek 2022a, 326.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek 2022a, 326.

<sup>21</sup> Župancic 2008a, 102.

<sup>22</sup> McGowan 2013, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Župancic 2008a, 179.

In the case of comedy, ‘Comedy, ... does not confront us with the Real, it repeats it’.<sup>24</sup> This repetition is reflected in those excessive elements and fantasy formations, which, in trying to mask and obfuscate an inherent lack, repeatedly encounter the same underlying Real in often surprising ways.<sup>25</sup> If we consider the formal logic of this suggestion, then, rather than ‘Repetition [... being] the recontextualization of any positive content’, of something that is novel and therefore ‘surprising’, *comic repetition* can be used to reveal that it ‘is the repetition of a Real antagonism or negativity that is left out of (repressed from) the symbolic order’.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, ‘Because that which is repressed always returns’, then to ‘repeat’ is to draw attention to the underlying antagonisms that perform ‘the same unrepresentable X’—something always-already there.<sup>27</sup>

The act of repeating what is always-already there, occurs in the emergence of the ‘minimal difference’ (read also as a constitutive gap or split).<sup>28</sup> This minimal difference does not necessarily provide anything new, but, through the act of repetition, creates something new in what *is*. We can thus locate the act of repetition in the comic surprise, which offers something different to novelty. That is, by highlighting how ‘We can be surprised at something that we know very well, even expect[,] yet when it happens [again], it surprises us’, then, we are able to laugh at comedy’s ability to surprise us with what we already expect, but in an unexpected way.<sup>29</sup>

We can see this ‘surprise’ in comic sequences, such as mistaken identities, where the notion of repetition plays an important role. Here, it is ‘us’—the audience—who are often aware of the ‘mistake’ and subsequently it is the repeated performance of this mistake which makes a particular sequence comical. Such repetition is also visible in examples of hyperbole, slapstick, and double entendre. Certainly, this is not to deny a level of conservatism in the comic performance. As Zupancic highlights, comedy which centres on

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<sup>24</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 179.

<sup>25</sup> McGowan 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Wood 2012, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Wood 2012, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Succinctly put, this ‘minimal difference’ refers to ‘the difference of an entity with itself’ (Žižek 2003, 80).

<sup>29</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 181, parenthesis removed.



'mistaken identities' is frequently denounced as being conservative due to the fact that by the end of the sequence, the mistaken identities are rectified and everything returns to normal: 'it turns the world order upside-down only in order ultimately to reestablish it in its full force, with no cracks to speak of'.<sup>30</sup> Instead, if we consider that, for Zupancic (and Lacan), the Real is impossible (the unrepresentable X), then, in her words, 'The Real as impossible means that there is no right time or place for it'.<sup>31</sup> The significance of comedy is that it is this impossibility which is laid bare.

Such impossibility is reflected in the surprise that occurs when hearing the punchline of a joke. All jokes require a certain element of surprise—a retroactive fixing of the punchline—from which the joke's narrative is given 'a new, unexpected, surprising perspective'.<sup>32</sup> If we consider, for example, the scenes from the second Austin Powers film where variations of the word 'penis' are repeated by several individuals—notably, 'as "Willie" in a clip of Willie Nelson, as "Woody" in the presence of Woody Harrelson, and as "Johnson," the last name of the air traffic controller tracking the penis-shaped aircraft of Dr. Evil'—then what we observe 'in such scenes is both the humor of the play on the word "penis," and the fact that it can indeed be played with through language'.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, though each variation produces a different reference to the word penis, what we encounter is not necessarily anything different, but 'a sameness where we expect difference'.<sup>34</sup> It is this 'sameness' which Zupancic locates in relation to comedy. Here, 'the Real is the register of repetition as coincidence, rupture, surprise (one could also say: of sameness as novelty)'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 90.

<sup>31</sup> Zupancic 2003, 177. What proves integral to examining comedy's subversive significance, is the extent to which we can 'use the Real to reconfigure our symbolic order' (Kunkle 2014, 5). It is in this way that comedy can help 'radicalise' societal norms and values through confronting the Real and 'traversing' the fantasies that structure and frame our social interactions.

<sup>32</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Kunkle 2013, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek 2006, 109. This is further supported by the fact that the same comic sequence is re-used (repeated) in the second and third Austin Powers films.

<sup>35</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 163.

It is for this reason that comedy can be seen to provide a unique take on success. This is not necessarily a success where something is achieved or where a reward is received, but one in which the production of the same, when we expect something different, nonetheless succeeds. In other words, the repetition of the minimal difference allows us to conceive how success in the form of comedy functions through an act of internal self-negation.<sup>36</sup>

What is important here is that such success can never be found in the tragic hero, for whom destiny and circumstance come to certify their tragic predicament. Where tragedy requires a certain acceptance of the finite, there exists no comedy and no self-negating function. In accordance with the 'compulsive jester', what so often underlies the tragic form is the fact that we should accept the banality of our failure through the subject's confrontation with destiny. Such self-destitution underwrites Critchley's account of ethics, which he mistakenly aligns with the comic form. In fact, it is in accordance with such human finitude that Critchley seeks to move past any 'tragic affirmation' towards a 'comic acknowledgment' of the subject's very contingency and finitude.<sup>37</sup> Examples of self-depreciating humour are subsequently claimed as opportunities for the subject to combat the superego, presenting an ethical self-distance that mitigates against the subject's interpellation. The problem here is the *distance* it conveys.<sup>38</sup> Ethically and politically, Critchley argues that such distance can prove conducive for achieving a radical non-self-coincidence of the ego; an ego that 'does not only become an object, [... but] becomes what we might call an abject object'.<sup>39</sup> However, whereas Critchley's task focuses primarily on an ethics steered towards dislodging or overcoming the subject's subjectivization, what is ignored is the very gap that constitutes the subject—that which exists before the hail of interpellation.

Taking an alternative path to Critchley's self-deprecating humour, Delpech-Ramey proposes 'a comic view of human rights'.<sup>40</sup> It is this which:

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<sup>36</sup> Hegel 1977.

<sup>37</sup> Critchley 2008, 82.

<sup>38</sup> Black 2021a.

<sup>39</sup> Critchley 2002, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Delpech-Ramey 2010, 136.

allow[s] us to see that in the backdrop of politics there is never simply a poor, weak, all too-human essence violently caught in the grips of some terrible destiny, interpellation, or abjection. Rather, the comic vision would imply that a certain inhuman excess is always already the essence of humanity—and of politics—itself. Comically considered, humanity simply is an inhuman drive to exist beyond every limitation, even beyond death.<sup>41</sup>

There is, therefore, an excess which is performed in the comic performance; an excess that stands opposed to examples of tragedy and ‘the hypocritical altruism that is ultimately rooted in the tragic world-view’.<sup>42</sup> In accordance with the death drive, it is the subject’s inability to settle with the excess of being—it’s very infinity—which proves so troubling for the subject, but which is subsequently ‘played with’ and performed in comedy.

Certainly, such excess is not meant to emphasise the ‘burden’ of existence—a burden that would simply require an acceptance of the subject’s tragic finitude. Of greater concern is that such a tragic predicament, which the burden evokes, is often found in examples of comedy, whereupon the effects of the comic realization is predicated on the fact that one should accept one’s fate and one’s own human finitude. We can draw out the problems with this approach when we consider the difference between the tragic and comic performance.

#### IV.

For most tragedies, there remains a distance between the individual and the universal. That is, if we consider a tragic performance, there is the actor and then there is the essence which they seek to perform: ‘the “birth of tragedy” presents us with real human beings, the actors, who put on their *masks* and represent the essence with the help of the mask’.<sup>43</sup> The function of the mask is

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<sup>41</sup> Delpech-Ramey 2010, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Delpech-Ramey 2010, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 25.

that the 'essence' which is represented and performed is fused in the actor's performance; or 'When the actor puts on the mask, he is no longer himself; in the mask, he brings to life the (universal) essence he represents'.<sup>44</sup> What tragedy reveals, therefore, is a clear distinction *between* the actor (themselves) and the essence—the actor remains separated from the performance they give through their representation of the performance itself. As a result, 'the essence ultimately exists only as the universal moment, separated by the mask from the concrete and actual self, and that as such this essence is still not actual. The self appears merely as *assigned* to the characters'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, such performances are 'a fusion of ... two', with the credited actor performing the universal (the 'tragic' character) so that the actor and the universal are brought together through a fused coincidence.<sup>46</sup> Here, the actor's performance is measured by their ability to represent ('perform') the universal.

For comedy, there is no fusion: the actor 'in a comedy ... immediately *is* this character'.<sup>47</sup> This reveals how 'The comic work takes the hero's position seriously, accepts it, and follows it to the point where it reveals its own absurdity and so destroys itself'.<sup>48</sup> The inconsistencies of the universal are repeatedly performed in the comic persona, so that in the case of comedy, 'some universality ("tramp," "worker," "misanthrope"... ) has to let a subject in all his concreteness shine through it'.<sup>49</sup> It is the concrete subject which immediately *is* the universal.

In contrast, the tragic often requires the depiction of the universal *through* the tragic hero. Despite the fact that the tragic hero will fail in meeting this universal principle, the very characteristics of tragedy serve as the lynchpin to the ideal ego, whereupon the 'imagination makes the subject a tragic hero', driven by 'egotistical fascination', and 'leading unhappy people to fancy themselves in the

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<sup>44</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Žižek 2005, italics added.

<sup>48</sup> Roche 2002, 415.

<sup>49</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 37. See Black (2021) for a detailed discussion of the true and false comic character.

role of the tragic hero'.<sup>50</sup> Such individuality underscores the tragic hero's failure to meet the universal ideal. Where comedy differs is in the 'types and generalities' that it performs;<sup>51</sup> generalities that require the inclusion of the comic subject in order to be enacted. It is in this way that, in comedy, the subject changes its relationship with the representation. Rather than the actor representing a character, as in tragedy, in comedy, the gap between the actor and character is transposed into the character itself. In so doing, 'the subject-actor appears as that gap through which the character relates to itself, "representing itself".<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, following Zupancic's application of the concrete universal, we can conceive how rather than simply performing or representing the universal through tragedy, it is instead 'in comedy [... that] the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute'.<sup>53</sup> No longer is the universal an abstract representation that the tragic hero seeks to achieve, rather, it is the very imperfections of the universal ideal that are concretely performed in the comic character. It is in this way that the comic character remains funny. In its very excess, in its capacity to get up and try again, it is the imperfections of the universal ideal that are brought to light. There is thus always something comical in how the comic subject is attached to the universal, how it's very position successfully enacts and exposes the universal's failure.

Importantly, the comic hero is not one who simply defies a certain symbolic order or whose very actions function merely to highlight the impasses and contradictions inherent to a particular symbolic order. This, as Zupancic makes clear, would be the work of tragedy. Instead, 'Comic characters ... are not subjects as opposed to the structure, they are subjectivized points of the structure itself. They are the sensitive, problematic points of the structure

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<sup>50</sup> Pfaller 2014, 222 & 248.

<sup>51</sup> Dolar 2017, 585.

<sup>52</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 28. As Zupancic notes, 'This is why, for Hegel, comedy is not simply a turn from the universal (from universal values of the beautiful, the just, the good, the moral . . .) towards the individual or the particular (as always and necessarily imperfect, limited and always slightly idiotic), but corresponds instead to the very speculative passage from the abstract universal to the concrete universal' (2008a, 37-38).

running wild, and running around on their own—that is, independently of the rest of the structure'.<sup>54</sup> The comic character is thus completely serious, with their very position revealing the absurdity of the symbolic titles that they are provided. Thus, it is never the comic hero that is 'transformed by experience'; instead, 'the "experience" in question is transformed by the triumph of his sheer presumptuousness, his belief in himself'.<sup>55</sup>

This point of subversive potential in comedy is given further elucidation in Žižek's account of mourning and melancholy. In mourning, the narcissistic images that abound in tragedy are attributed to the lost object, so that in the act of mourning the tragic subject mourns the loss of their own image. For the melancholic, the strategy is not to mourn the loss of the object (the narcissistic image), an object which the mourner never had, but to act as if this object was already lost: 'In so far as the melancholic mourns what he has not yet lost, there is an inherent comic subversion of the tragic procedure of mourning at work in melancholy'.<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, what the melancholic, 'comic' subject reveals is a certain recognition: one in which their very imbrication in the symbolic order and the impasses of the universal are made clear. Rather than succumb to the tragic failure, the lost object, obstacle, or impasse functions as a comic resource. To this extent, while examples of tragicomedy and other forms of derision (the 'compulsive jester') remain within the constellation of tragedy, underwritten by an ignorance of the fact that the lost object was always lost, it is in comedy that the failure of ignorance is performed.

## V.

Indeed, it is often the case that ignorance (a lack of knowledge; a failure to know; or a desire not to know an intolerable certainty) plays its part in the hero's downfall. Take, for example, Oedipus, and the fact that he acts without knowing

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<sup>54</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 194.

<sup>55</sup> Kottman 2008, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek 2000, 661.

his paternal relation (notably, it is his parents who were in knowledge of the impending catastrophe and sought to prevent it from occurring). In the case of comedy, however, it is the character's knowledge that is uniquely positioned: while the comic character may be in full knowledge of their failings, or the inadequacy of their actions, they nonetheless continue to function in the face of such conflicting doubt. Instead, for the comic character, there exists a surplus-knowledge, or rather, an excess of knowledge, that ambiguously characterises their relation to this very knowledge; demonstrating not only the problems that this entails, but also, more importantly, the comedy therein. Given that 'Our acts are never self-transparent' so that 'we never fully know what we are doing or what the effects will be',<sup>57</sup> for the comic character, their knowledge is assured, and what is more, it is this assurance that endows them their comic charm.

Certainly, if 'Oedipus's tragedy of destiny touches us because it depicts how it is attempting to avoid your own destiny that brings this destiny about', that is, despite any action on our behalf, 'our own fate is determined',<sup>58</sup> what the comic suggests is that we do not need to resort to the fatalism that tragedy evokes. Instead, Ruda distinguishes between examples of tragic fatalism and his proposed comic fatalism, noting that for the former:

*Tragic fatalism* claims that tragic conflict is unavoidable, that it is even mostly unavoidably produced in the very attempt of avoiding it, and that the (social and political) human condition therefore entails a conflict that one cannot but try to resolve, which thereby, first of all, constitutes the conflict as conflict.<sup>59</sup>

In opposition to this, it is only in examples of comic fatalism that we assert a new relation to the unavoidable; a relation which echoes the ambiguity of the comic character's relation to knowledge. Indeed, 'Comic fatalism ... asserts against tragic fatalism that only one thing is unavoidable: we cannot avoid the insight [or the knowledge] that everything is always already lost and that our

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<sup>57</sup> Žižek 2020, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Ruda 2016, 154 & 155.

<sup>59</sup> Ruda 2016, 170.

endeavors to do so are actually comic'.<sup>60</sup> Through a Hegelian reconciliation, Ruda's comic fatalism redefines the very tragedy at the heart of our activity. Indeed, it is this acceptance which does not mourn one's tragic predicament or fated end, but, instead, fully identifies with the comic predicament.<sup>61</sup> It is for this reason that the comic character manages to act in full recognition of their knowledge, thus exposing the comic fatalism that they actively perform.

To make sense of this exposition, we must remember that, for Ruda, 'Comic fatalism follows one ultimate—paradoxically foundational—rule', from which 'the paradoxical structure of this rule is also what makes it comic[:] ... *there is no there is*'.<sup>62</sup> Implicit here is that it is in the self-negation inherent to the rule's contradiction that the comic position can be found. That is:

'There is no there is' assumes a position of articulation that the proposition itself consequently invalidates. One is within the movement of this proposition thrown back to its very beginning that will have been altered due to this very move. After reaching the predicate, we are thrown back to the very place of its articulation, which will have become different, always already lost within the movement of the proposition itself.<sup>63</sup>

Essentially, what knowledge this articulation assumes is itself invalidated in the proclamation of this very knowledge. It is this same movement which constitutes the comic character's relation to itself. In representing itself, the full force of the universal is concretely performed in the comic character—a performance which actively plays on the character's knowledge. Accordingly, it is not ignorance that functions to reveal the comic, but the decision to act in full knowledge of one's failure that proves comical. In both cases, the content is included in the form itself. Ruda elaborates on this point, via Hegel, when he notes that 'when the realization of an end coincides with its own relinquishment

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<sup>60</sup> Ruda 2016, 170.

<sup>61</sup> Certain aspects of this comic fatalism can be read alongside an account of 'subjective destitution'. See Black (2022).

<sup>62</sup> Ruda 2016, 171.

<sup>63</sup> Ruda 2016, 171-172.



and destruction, there appears a peculiar Nothing that makes us laugh'.<sup>64</sup> In a return to comedy's self-negation, Ruda adds:

Therefore we are not only dealing with an act of self-negation (of ends by means of their realization), but it is precisely this self-negating act that produces something, that is not something, that makes us laugh. ... In comedy there is no bitter conflict because in the very frustration of one's aims and achievements, there is an achievement of a different kind. Comedy demonstrates that if nothing is achieved, it is precisely Nothing that is achieved—and although this may sound comical, it is quite hard to achieve (maybe just because it is somehow always already there).<sup>65</sup>

It is this same 'materialization of nothing' that underwrites the comic pun.<sup>66</sup> In examples, such as: 'Always trust a glue salesman, they tend to stick to their word', or Mark Twain's, 'Denial ain't just a river in Egypt', it is not simply the fact that two disparate orders are brought together (trust and sticking, denial and the Nile) but that the gap which separates them is suddenly brought to bear—'it is this eliminated *gap*, which normally functions as a negative condition of "making sense," that now appears as something substantial, albeit spectral'.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, there is sense in nonsense, and what is more, we are not necessarily any better off after hearing the pun, beyond the fact that we find it funny.

Again, it is important not to confuse this 'nothing' with a false elevation of negativity.<sup>68</sup> This is what befalls the various examples of political correctness, where, in denouncing their identity—in becoming 'nothing' important—the politically correct subject maintains their very position as the universal arbitrar of what constitutes the politically correct outlook. In other words, it is the position

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<sup>64</sup> Ruda 2016, 168.

<sup>65</sup> Ruda 2016, 168 & 169.

<sup>66</sup> Zupancic 2008b, 44.

<sup>67</sup> Zupancic 2008b, 44. For McGowan (2017), the pun reveals the coincidence of lack and excess in language.

<sup>68</sup> Such a false elevation of 'nothing' ignores the recognition of lack that such nothing must imply.

of enunciation (one of privileged universality) that undermines the enunciated content (the sacrifice of their very privilege).<sup>69</sup>

Instead, to ask ‘what, precisely, is the thin line that divides tragedy from comedy, the final tragic insight from the final twist of a joke?’, is, for Žižek, given its answer in ‘the unexpected final twist [that] occurs when the position of enunciation *itself falls into* the enunciated content’.<sup>70</sup> Here, we can assume that it is in accordance with this ‘fall’ that the comic enacts its subversion over tragedy. Echoing that of the ‘self-negation’, which characterises Ruda’s comic fatalism, the universality that comedy avails points not to the content of the enunciated, but to its place of enunciation. Consequently, in the case of the comic character, ‘the place of enunciation does not undermine the universality of the statement but becomes its very internal gap, that which alone generates the only (possible) universality of the statement’.<sup>71</sup> It is here that Zupancic’s adoption of the concrete universal works analogous to Ruda’s comic fatalism, with both approaches offering concurrent positions on the comedy at play in Hegelian reconciliation. That is, in the impasse between tragedy and comedy, there is ‘not ... an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but ... the re-doubling of the gap or antagonism’ so that ‘the two opposed moments are “reconciled” when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms’.<sup>72</sup>

It is for this reason that we can confirm the conclusion that ‘Comedy emerges precisely at the point where tragedy is pushed beyond its own limits’.<sup>73</sup> In the same way that tragedy relies upon an Other, for whom the act of tragedy is performed for (and, thus, recognized by), it is in attempts to define the human condition as tragic which reveals that ‘it is at least this very [tragic] condition that we can nonetheless and always rely on’.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to the tragic narrative, it is comedy that goes further in eliciting a collapse upon the tragic:

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<sup>69</sup> Žižek elaborates, ‘In the very act of emptying the white-male-heterosexual position of all positive content, it retains it as a universal form of subjectivity’ (2007, 24).

<sup>70</sup> Žižek 2012, 53, italics added.

<sup>71</sup> Zupancic 2008a, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Žižek 2006, 106.

<sup>73</sup> Ruda 2020, fn.11.

<sup>74</sup> Ruda 2020, fn.11.

Comedy begins when we arrive at a point where this latent structural optimism of tragedy breaks down, a point where its transcendental form of tragedy itself cracks by being internally related back onto itself, a point where historicity proper arises.<sup>75</sup>

With such optimism founded upon the proclivity for self-destruction in tragedy (either through annihilation or renunciation), it is in the act of being ‘related back onto itself’ that comedy avails the self-negation of the tragic.

## VI.

By way of conclusion, the final part of this discussion will examine the U.S. writer and criminal attorney, Vanessa Place, and, specifically, her conceptual art performance, ‘If I Wanted Your Opinion, I’d Remove the Duct Tape’ (2016).<sup>76</sup> The controversial performance sees Place recite a number of graphic rape jokes to a seated audience for 45-minutes. Aside from the banal, almost methodical, manner in which Place delivers the jokes—impersonally recited; excessively performed, one after the other; with no facial expression or intonation—it is the monotony of the performance that helps draw out its significance. This significance is compounded by Place asking: ‘What if instead of being the passive woman who’s afraid of rape, who either cannot speak or can only speak through victimization [my own], I became the offender?’<sup>77</sup>

It is for this reason that Place firmly disassociates her performance from a traditional ‘stand-up’ performance, noting that:

The stand-up comic acts as a performance of the close-natural: the routine is memorized, recited off-script as if impromptu; there’s typically a partially improvised banter with the audience before and during the set

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<sup>75</sup> Ruda 2020, fn.11.

<sup>76</sup> In order to watch a version of the performance, see Artforum (n.d.); and Place (2017), for a written selection.

<sup>77</sup> Place cited in Kohn 2019, parenthesis in original.

to create an intimacy; there are often pauses between bits for a sip of something; there is an ongoing engagement with the audience's response, a performed reaction to their laughter or lack thereof. Heckling is an overt prompt; comedy in this way acts as call and response. None of this appears in my work. I do not engage at all with my audience beyond watching them, I am always clearly reading from a scripted text, I do not react to any reaction, and need no drink. The stand-up comic asserts their humanity or the humanity pinkening their comedy. I stress the blankness of its violence.<sup>78</sup>

Consequently, the formal structure of the performance presents several notable distinctions to a typical stand-up routine: namely, there is no direct audience reaction and no response from them is required (no conversation with the audience, no desire to be laughed at, and no thanking them for listening). Of greater concern, is that the performance does not make fun of nor seek to ridicule the tragedy of rape. Instead:

Rape is part of the world we live in. Part of engaging with this world is to think through these things and not just sit passively by and nod and then go out to dinner. Humor, like art, like philosophy, is a form of engagement.<sup>79</sup>

The underlying approach that guides Place's performance echoes the sentiments that were made earlier: primarily, that it is through the path of humour that the true horror of tragedy can be confronted. Indeed, it is clear that such horror cannot be approached through some 'true-to-life' depiction of tragic dignity, which serves only to undermine the tragedy of the act itself. Instead, while tragedy 'harmonizes' and 'unifies', what a true comedic engagement entails—one open to the comic fatalism at its heart—is 'a frictive structural

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<sup>78</sup> Seltman and Place 2019, 264.

<sup>79</sup> Place cited in Kohn 2019.

engagement [... and] a refusal of reconciliation'.<sup>80</sup> As Place confirms: 'what is a rape joke if not a work of friction?'.<sup>81</sup>

On this basis, the criticisms against Place are easily made. The fact that Place, a woman, recites the jokes, as part of an artistic performance, in no way dislodges the fact that the premise of the joke relies upon a graphic act of violence. As a matter of comparison, those in authority frequently make jokes at their own expense, which, due to their position as joke-teller, never challenges the position of enunciation, the position from which the joke is made.<sup>82</sup> In addition, there is also the suggestion that as soon as the joke's meaning needs to be explained or clarified, then, 'a certain retrospective suspicion concerning its politics' can be expressed.<sup>83</sup> In either case, it is the comic relief which is used to build a critical reflection. While such relief can certainly prove critical of popular stereotypes and obscene occurrences, all with the hope of challenging hegemonic discourses, the very rebellion it seeks to achieve goes no further than eliciting a simple transgression.

Frequently, in discussions on comedy, confrontations with certain topics and the deliberate discussion of particular taboos, through the breaching of social etiquettes, are found to be justified in the context of 'jokes'. Nevertheless, while functioning as forms of inherent transgression, satirical performances, acts of irony, and the telling of offensive jokes can end-up constituting the very Law that one seeks to upend. In this respect, Miller elucidates that Place's work 'crave[s] the narcissistic pleasure of being naughty', from which 'The Korean-American artist Cathy Park Hong identified the fundamental hollowness of Place's shock value'.<sup>84</sup> Hong commented that 'we are called upon to respond, to react. I am sick of reacting because yet again, we have been relegated to the

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<sup>80</sup> Seltman and Place 2019, 267.

<sup>81</sup> Seltman and Place 2019, 267.

<sup>82</sup> In other instances, both the content and target of a joke can be shared and expressed by those whose very marginalization in society constitutes the joke's content: a Jew, for example, telling an antisemitic joke.

<sup>83</sup> Mentinis 2023, 26.

<sup>84</sup> Miller 2019.

role of chorus'.<sup>85</sup> The fact that 'Place must have a false piety to rebel against',<sup>86</sup> serves only to 'locat[e] [her] attempts at humor in the transgression of what is acceptable to laugh about'.<sup>87</sup> There is, in these cases, no dismantling of the structures that uphold and maintain the social implications that such transgression seek to dislodge. Instead, Place's performance remains reactionary, not revolutionary.

On this level, I argue that Place's use of the rape joke does not detract from the tragedy it depicts. Rape can cause severe physical, psychological, and emotional harm to the survivor, violating a person's autonomy, dignity, and bodily integrity. In addition, references to rape continue to constitute a normalised part of our cultural discourse. Yet, in light of Place's performance, we can also ask 'at what point is a joke inherently transgressive or truly transgressive?'.<sup>88</sup> Pound elaborates upon these distinctions, noting that:

The former implies a joke which is transgressive of a situation but which nonetheless helps confers stability on that situation—for example, the libidinal joke employed to release the tension of a situation and hence maintain the situation. The latter implies a joke which is able to offer an entirely new perspective on the given situation.<sup>89</sup>

We can elucidate on Pound's account of the 'truly transgressive' by returning to the collapse in tragedy; a collapse encountered in the self-negation of the comic form, itself encapsulated in the comic fatalism that Ruda asserts. Here, the 'the comic affirmative dimension of freedom' is presented in the very 'nothing' that Place's performance provides.<sup>90</sup> In provoking the discomfort inherent to the performance, we proceed through a movement that acknowledges, or rather, confronts us with, the joke's obscenity, while also alluding to its very meaningless: a meaningless, which, like most jokes, bears no inherent

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<sup>85</sup> Hong cited in Miller 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Miller 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Fitzpatrick 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Pound 2015, 180.

<sup>89</sup> Pound 2015, 180.

<sup>90</sup> Ruda 2020, fn.11.

meaning, beyond the fact that it's very meaninglessness presents a profound reflection on the nothing it evokes—the very act of self-relating negativity.

Though we receive no immediate transformation in the performance of the rape joke, it would be wrong to suggest that nothing changes. Instead, the dislodgement of an Other to fall back on, the very exposure of its lack, left unfulfilled by some tragic explanation, is clearly reflected in the performance of the piece. When performing the jokes live, Place makes no acknowledgment of the audience, with the spotlight shining not on her but the audience itself. Place comments upon the effect this has:

My audience is thrown back on itself ... Of course, I am also the audience in this site specificity, which is why we watch each other, to see what each other will do. We are performers on both sides of the stage, signified as such in the rape joke performance when the lighting source shifts direction from me (the traditional performer's position) to them (I am backlit, becoming only a black silhouette, and they are now in the spotlight).<sup>91</sup>

Upon watching the live performance, the audience are immediately placed in a position where one's very actions (one's potential laughter), as well as those sharing in the live performance, are put under the spotlight, literally (in its live form, there is no distance between Place, the audience, and the performance).<sup>92</sup> Far outside a Brechtian *Verfremdung*, and the nullity of being shocked by one's self-awareness, the audience or reader is left with nothing more than the reality of the joke.<sup>93</sup> This is why there exists no therapeutic

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<sup>91</sup> Seltman and Place 2019, 264.

<sup>92</sup> Notably, for Elkind, the set-up of the live performance provides 'an apt analogy for a book in which readers are both in control of turning the pages and forced to participate in their own discomfort as they do so, particularly in an era in which "aren't we all complicit?" has become a dinner party cliché' (2019).

<sup>93</sup> Equally, there is not some 'return to the Real', an approach adopted in both literature and theatre, where the aim is 'to remind the spectator (or reader) that he is perceiving a fiction, to awaken him from the sweet dream' (Zizek 2014, 79). As Zizek notes, 'Instead of reading these gestures as attempts to break the spell of illusions and confront us with the bare Real, one should rather denounce them for what they are: the exact opposite of what they claim to be—*escapes from the Real*, desperate attempts to avoid the Real that transpires in (or through) the illusion itself' (2014, 79).

impulse in the performance and no opportunity for the tension or anxiety to be alleviated. Instead, the performance elicits an anxiety that posits one to question one's very knowledge: a questioning that stands apart from the security of one's self-conscious reflection (*I know this joke is wrong, but is it funny? Should I laugh? Is anyone else laughing?*).<sup>94</sup> Far outside any tragic constellation, the subject is, instead, immediately located in the ambiguous position of the comic character, acting in full recognition of a knowledge that they know to be true, but which is subsequently contradicted when they either hear or read one of the jokes... and, perhaps, when they laugh at them too.

Such suspension of knowledge draws back to the nothing that our comic fatalism provides. This nothing is confirmed when, during each joke, the subject is confronted with their knowledge of the tragedy and the suspension of an Other 'supposed to know'. With the jokes' recipients confronting the failure of the Other to offer any guidance beyond 'the irreducible singularity of the individual listening',<sup>95</sup> we can go so far as to suggest that it is the Other's knowledge—the knowledge of the tragedy and its representation as a joke—that appears on stage. Ultimately, there is no rationalisation or legitimatisation of the jokes provided in Place's monotonous performance, where she pays no adherence to the discourse of the master. Instead, beyond the joke itself, we are left with nothing, yet a nothing which is undoubtedly something—a something reflected in the very change that it elicits for the listener.

We can finish here with a final precise of the joke. One must, in the case of jokes, pay equal attention not just to the content of the joke, but also its form. Echoing McGowan's account of Žižek's use of jokes, we can suggest that what Place provides in her performance is a serious reflection on the rape joke itself. Here, 'Seriousness does not require simply ignoring humor and the comic but taking it seriously and including it within one's theoretical approach'.<sup>96</sup> By extension, we can, in Place's performance, link the seriousness of the rape joke to such an approach. Indeed, as Kohn asserts:

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<sup>94</sup> Holmes 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Seltman and Place 2019, 269.

<sup>96</sup> McGowan 2007, 66.



The act of rape itself is never what's funny. Rape jokes are, because they're not supposed to be. Good ones have clever word play, a twist in the story. Like any joke, there's a setup, and then a reveal. There's some sophistication to how they're crafted.<sup>97</sup>

What is apparent in Place's craft, however, is not necessarily found in the crafting of the joke itself, but from the position she occupies in its performance.

As previously touched upon, Place's role remains deliberately ambiguous in the performance (is she a victim, a narrator, a simple performer, the audience?). Her presence on stage is lit only by a back-light and her position as the joke teller places her immediately outside the role of recipient or victim. Here, Place elaborates:

So when I did the rape jokes performance, part of it for me was that I'm telling these jokes. Most of these jokes are from the point of view of a perpetrator, a rapist, a child molester. But I'm telling them. I'm a woman, and I'm also a lawyer. So I'm representing, in another way, the voices of this kind of unmanageable desire, that for the purposes of the joke is on a much lower scale than the actual event.<sup>98</sup>

It is only when read alongside the suspension of the Other that Place's position reveals its importance. In fact, we can argue that it is primarily due to the Other's suspension that the performance's positions are dislodged, something that is compounded by an audience who have the spotlight on them. Similar to Chaplin's Tramp, who frequently appears in a place that is not his own, it is this suspension that allows Place to occupy a position that is not her own. On-stage, Place is not removed from the joke's performance, she essentially is the performance, but rather than dramatically representing the tragedy of rape (her

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<sup>97</sup> Kohn 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Place cited in Holmes 2018.

own tragedy?), Place's enunciated content (the rape) finds its enunciation in an ambiguous confrontation with the joke teller (herself).

Perhaps, it is for this reason that the difference between 'everyday common jokes, and the reason why every dialectician likes to envelop his/her theory within jokes' can be found in the fact that 'a dialectician ultimately laughs at him/herself'.<sup>99</sup> Accordingly, it is hard not to see the comic in Place's performance: the bare lighting; the dull, almost tiresome manner in which Place recites each joke, without any expression or intonation, where, much like the comic hero, each joke is told with the same conviction as the last. What the performance reveals is the 'minimal difference', a 'pure' difference, which comedy enacts: a revelation that does not produce anything new, but which nonetheless produces something that was not necessarily apparent before.<sup>100</sup> In fact, such a minimal difference makes nothing, as something, *appear* where there was previously nothing.

To this end, there is no secret to be uncovered in the tragedy that Place recites and repeats, and there is nothing of her to be revealed; instead, it is in the performance itself that we experience this minimal difference: a difference grounded upon the fact that our only reference is Place's reference to herself—the very certainty of the unavoided joke. Such certainty can allow us to rewrite the famous Marx Brothers quip: 'if this joke sounds like a rape joke and reads like a rape joke; this should not deceive you... it is a rape joke!'

There is much that can be garnered from Place's performance. Here, the focus of the above discussion has been to explore how the tragedy of rape is not necessarily lost but afforded a level of dignity in the comic form. The position

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<sup>99</sup> Zizek 2022, 336. It is for this reason that Zizek admits to 'compulsively' reciting jokes in his work. To explain, Zizek notes the following: 'A meme circulating now on the web gives a correct hint: it tells of an Oak Hill couple sitting at home on Saturday evening—they discover there is a thief in their home after the man tells his wife a joke and they hear a laugh coming from upstairs. So the point is not just to amuse the public but to make the "thief" (the ideological enemy) among them betray himself by his laughter—how? The enemy is not a stupid guy who doesn't get a joke: he gets it and he laughs at the right moment for the wrong reason—in order to reassert his sexist, racist, etc. prejudices. In short, the enemy laughs at others' (2022, 336).

<sup>100</sup> Black 2021a.

that Place occupies in the performance, and the excessive repetition in which each joke is told, offers a depiction of tragedy that proves constitutive of comedy's self-negation and our own comic fatalism. As Place explains, 'Rape is so comically absurd, so driven by the irrational, which is always cruel, that it has to be addressed with the same level of absurdity'.<sup>101</sup> In so doing, Place navigates the pitfalls of political nicety and moral condemnation, which seek easy gratification or cynical distance, introducing, instead, comedy's self-negation of the tragic—a space in which the true art of comedy can be pursued and confronted. This break or collapse *within* the tragic form bears no guide or point of action, but, through the performance itself, positions tragedy in the comically impossible. Though nothing is achieved by the end of Place's performance, this does not mean that nothing changes. Instead, by renting apart the tragic in order to reveal the insoluble antagonisms and contradictions that constitute the human condition, we are left with a less than nothing... and it is at this point that we can begin.

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<sup>101</sup> Place cited in Kohn 2019.

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